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**Witchy Politics:
Witches and Witchcraft as Political Tropes
from *Malleus Maleficarum* (1487) to *Les Sorcières de la République* (2016) and
The Mercies (2020)**

by

Mallaury Gauthier
B.A. in Anglophone studies (2018)
Maîtrise in French as a Foreign Language (2021)

THESIS

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Requirements for the Degree of

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DEDICATION

A ma grand-mère, avec qui je partageais de précieux moments de lecture de poèmes.

A ma famille, qui m'a constamment encouragée et soutenue dans ma poursuite d'études, malgré les difficultés rencontrées.

A mes amis et collègues, qui m'ont apporté un soutien précieux tout au long de l'écriture de ce mémoire.

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ABSTRACT

The focus of this thesis are two recent novels featuring witches: Chloé Delaume's *Les Sorcières de la République* (The Witches of the Republic, 2016) and Kiran Millwood Hargrave's *The Mercies* (2020). The first is a futuristic dystopia set in 2062, during the witch trial of the Sibyl of Cumae. The second is a work of historical fiction based on witch trial records and set in seventeenth-century Finnmark (Norway). Both are feminist novels, and both emphasize the political valence of the witch as a gendered figure. This figure emerged from the misogyny of early modern demonology but acquired its contemporary contours through second-wave feminism, which seized on the witch as an emblem of feminine power and solidarity against patriarchal oppression. Delaume's *Les Sorcières de la République* and Hargrave's *The Mercies* engage directly with this complex historical legacy, either by "correcting" the documentary record left behind by demonologists, or by underscoring the shortcomings of the political ideals embraced by second-wave feminists.

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Chapter One

Acknowledging the past to understand the present

Because of the polysemic significations they can achieve, witches are difficult to define. Whether as healers using their knowledge of plants, mages in pursuit of knowledge, or tricksters capable of deceiving the public, they often denote what cannot be easily explained or readily understood. In spite of this (or perhaps because of it) witches have long occupied a prominent place in the popular imagination, terrifying some and bringing hope to others.

Much has been said about witches: scholars have analyzed their place in society, tried to reconstruct their beliefs, and dissected the ways people perceived them. In the early modern period—the apex of what Gerald Gardner described as the “Burning Times”—witches were hunted, imprisoned, tortured, and executed.¹ Even today, witchcraft still elicits strong emotions in some quarters, as the debates that followed the release of the *Harry Potter* series readily indicate. Since 1997, when *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* first appeared in print, J. K. Rowling’s books have been repeatedly burned or removed from school curricula for fear that they might introduce children to witchcraft and Satanism.²

The concerns expressed in these debates are a legacy of the early modern period. Between the fifteenth century and early eighteenth, the witch came to represent not only an individual capable of tapping the supernatural for practical purposes, but also a Satanist, someone who worshipped the devil instead of God. This made it impossible to think of the witch in positive or even neutral terms. Before the early modern period, it

had been at least possible to distinguish between *beneficia* or beneficial magic (such as curing an illness or protecting one from robbers) and *maleficia* or maleficent magic (such as causing storms or killing cattle). In the early modern period, this distinction became harder to make, since any good thing a witch might do was nevertheless satanic in origin (and therefore evil). Moreover, at a time when being a good Christian also meant being a good citizen, a good neighbor, and a good person, it was inevitable that a satanic heretic should evoke fear and loathing.

Much has changed since then. For one, the steady rise of Wicca or pagan witchcraft in recent decades means that witches are not automatically thought of as Satanists. Many people now willingly identify as witches, and the general public no longer reacts violently to witches, at least in the West. In literature and the arts, modern-day witches no longer evoke fear and loathing; instead, they arouse curiosity and even sympathy. Countless novels, films, and television shows could be used to illustrate this trend, from young adult fiction like Sarah Rees Brennan's *Season of the Witch* (2019) to films like Robert Eggers' *The Witch* (2015) and TV series like *Charmed* (1998-2006) or *The Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* (2018-2020).

The focus of this thesis are two recent novels featuring witches: *Les Sorcières de la République* (The Witches of the Republic), written by French author Chloé Delaume and published in 2016; and *The Mercies*, written by British author Kiran Millwood Hargrave and published in 2020. Delaume's *Les Sorcières de la République* is openly feminist and openly political; the novel as a whole can be understood as a complex reflection on the challenges and possibilities of feminist radicalism. Hargrave's *The Mercies* can still be described as feminist but is less openly political: the novel seeks rather to give voice to the women who suffered during the "Burning

Times” while also discussing contemporary matters such as maternity and queer relationships.

Despite their differences, these novels have a great deal in common. Both imagine situations in which women find themselves in charge of their communities, temporarily free from patriarchal authority. And both place witches (real or imagined) at the very center of these social experiments. As such, both novels also engage with a complex tradition that has not only gendered witches as female, but also associated witchcraft with feminism. Broadly speaking, this tradition began late in the fifteenth century—when the figure of the witch first became to emerge as a recognizable category of persons—and received new impetus in the second half of the twentieth century, when second-wave feminists used the figure of the witch (as handed down by early modern demonologists) to emblemize women’s resistance to patriarchal oppression.

In this first chapter, I focus on early modern demonological constructions of the witch as well as second-wave feminist appropriations of those constructions in order to understand the tradition with which Hargrave and Delaume engage. My discussion is divided into three sections: in the first section, which deals with early modern demonology, I describe how witches came to be imagined as female, even though males were also accused of and prosecuted for witchcraft. Among the twenty-five victims of the Salem witchcraft trials, for instance, no less than six were men—almost one quarter of the total.³ In countries like Iceland, Russia, and Finland, early modern witchcraft was overwhelmingly gendered male; in France, half of the people executed for witchcraft were men; and in Normandy, about three quarters of all accused witches were male shepherds.⁴

In part, witches came to be gendered female because early modern demonological theory was misogynist and heavily focused on women's supposed evils. Women's bodies in general, and witches' bodies in particular, became the place where the many political problems of the early modern period—wars and mass migrations, famines and diseases—could be conveniently displaced. In part, however, witches came to be gendered female for reasons that have less to do with the early modern period and more with the second half of the twentieth century, when revisionist historiography and second-wave feminism converged in establishing a particular idea of who witches were and what they stood for.

In the second section, I focus on the late 1960s and early 1970s to show how second-wave feminism appropriated and refurbished the early modern witch, using this figure as a means to symbolize feminine power and project sisterly solidarity against patriarchal oppression. While they understood the witch as a heroine rather than as a villain, second-wave feminists effectively depended on the stereotypes crystallized during the early modern period. As a result, they could not fully transcend the limitations of the repressively patriarchal discourse they had inherited.

In the third and final section, I introduce Chloé Delaume's *Les Sorcières de la République* (2016) and Kiran Millwood Hargrave's *The Mercies* (2020) as two contemporary works that engage with the tradition described above. While both deploy the witch as an emblem of empowerment, they also underscore the limitations implicit in this figure.

Gendering the Witch

Scholars often date the beginnings of modern witch discourse to Heinrich Kramer and Jacob Sprenger's *Malleus Maleficarum* (The Hammer of Witches, 1487) which built on folklore and pre-existing beliefs to define "the witch" as a socially recognizable category of persons. Conceived as a sort of manual for witch-hunters and prosecutors, Kramer and Sprenger's book is divided into three parts. The first part establishes the context in which the existence of witches is possible: the devil exists and thus so do witches. The second part is more practical, providing numerous examples of witchcraft practices. The third part describes the judicial procedures to be followed in the prosecution and investigation of accused witches.

The book is organized as "a series of scholastic *quaestiones*" providing answers to different questions that are at times taken directly from case studies.⁵ This format would have been attractive to readers because it would have allowed them to consult the book piecemeal, depending on what they were interested in, rather than reading it cover to cover. For this reason, *Malleus Maleficarum* is sometimes described as "the first printed encyclopedia of magic and witchcraft."⁶

Arguably, the importance of *Malleus Maleficarum* to contemporary representations of witchcraft stems largely from its misogyny. First, the book propounds the idea that witches are most likely to be women. One of the *quaestiones* explicitly asks "why are there more workers of harmful magic found in the female sex, which is so frail and unstable, than among men?" and concludes that this is because women are both physically and intellectually inferior to men.⁷ Thus, Kramer and Sprenger effectively gender the witch as female. In one passage, for instance, they introduce a false etymology of the Latin word *foemina* (i.e., female) to explain why

women are especially easy targets for the devil: simply put, they have less faith than men. In another passage, they mix Aristotelian and Galenic theories on the physical imperfection of women with the Biblical account of Genesis: “[o]ne notices this weakness in the way the first woman was moulded, because she was formed from a curved rib, that is, from a chest-rib, which is bent and [curves] as it were in the opposite direction from [that in] a man; and from this weakness one concludes that, since she is an unfinished animal, she is always being deceptive.”⁸

The figure of Eve—and especially the image of Eve reaching for the apple in the Garden of Eden—subtends much of Kramer and Sprenger’s representation of witchcraft. Just like Eve was tempted by Lucifer, the witch is tempted by demons. And just like Eve seduced Adam into eating the apple—thus causing him to be thrown out of the Garden of Eden along with her—witches seduce others into worshipping the devil, bringing God’s wrath onto the community. The image of Eve reaching for the apple also connects witchcraft with unchecked female sexuality; after all, it was the apple that first made human beings ashamed of their own nakedness and aware of their own sexuality. As Kramer and Sprenger explained, one of the reasons why witches were mostly women was that women naturally tended toward carnality: “[A woman] is more given to fleshy lusts than a man, as is clear from her many carnal filthiness,” they wrote.⁹

The effects of this carnality were imagined as devastating, especially for those men who happened to be victimized by witches. As *Malleus Maleficarum* explains, witches could steal or conceal male sexual organs.¹⁰ In a famous passage, Kramer and Sprenger recount how witches “collect male organs in great numbers, as many as twenty or thirty members together, and put them in a bird’s nest, or shut them up in a

box, where they move like living members, and eat oats and corn.”¹¹ Impotence and infertility were poorly understood as medical issues at the time; in linking them with witchcraft, Kramer and Sprenger were simply echoing popular beliefs. Still, the figure of the witch as a penis-thief emphasized the connection between unrestrained female sexuality and emasculation. Indeed, the witch as penis-thief amplified women’s sexual threat by tying it directly to male impotence and loss of virility.

While *Malleus Maleficarum* was very influential, it was not well-received at first. This continued to be the case even when copies of the Papal Bull *Summis desiderantes affectibus*, which gave credit to Kramer and Sprenger’s work, began to be tacked on to the work.¹² During the Basque witch panic of 1608–12, for instance, the bishop of Pamplona, Antonio Venegas de Figueroa, urged the Inquisition to reject the authority of the *Malleus Maleficarum*, because, according to him, much of the book’s content was unreliable. The Inquisition agreed, noting that the practices advocated by Kramer and Sprenger did not lead to definitive conclusions and that torture was especially unreliable as a means to elicit the truth.¹³

Still, most early modern demonologists, from Jean Bodin and James VI of Scotland to Martin Del Río and Pierre de Lancre, built on the foundations established by *Malleus Maleficarum*, especially when it came to the connection between gender and witchcraft. In *De la Démonomanie des Sorciers (On the Demon-mania of Witches*, 1580), the French lawyer and political theorist Jean Bodin faithfully followed in Kramer and Sprenger’s footsteps when he referred to women’s sexuality as a “bestial cupidity.”¹⁴ He also claimed that women were “fifty times more likely than men to succumb to the temptation of witchcraft” and included data showing this to be the case in England.¹⁵ Likewise, the French judge Pierre de Lancre sexualized witches by

emphasizing “the erotic content of their dances and their promiscuous sexual activity at the sabbath.”¹⁶ Despite the disagreements concerning the value of Kramer and Sprenger’s work, *Malleus Maleficarum* was successful not only in gendering the witch, but also in defining her as a sexually threatening woman.

The corporeality of the witch played an important part in early modern politics. It helped displace political and social anxieties onto bodies that could be stripped naked, made to reveal their secrets, and ritually destroyed in highly choreographed ceremonials. Both collective crises (the Iberian conquest of Navarra, the Wars of Religion in France between, the Kalmar War between Denmark-Norway and Sweden, etc.) and individual ones (a bad harvest, a miscarriage, a sudden illness, etc.) could be alleviated by witchcraft persecutions. From this perspective, witches were political tools whose function was to distract attention from military failures, reassure a frightened populace, silence emerging dissent, and crush the opposition. By concentrating onto itself every social and political ill, the body of the witch provided early modern people with a semblance of agency and thus with the illusion of being in control.

The Witch and Second-Wave Feminism

As we have seen, early modern demonologists repeatedly advanced the idea that women were more likely than men to engage in witchcraft due to the combined effect of their physical and intellectual weaknesses. In this, they were merely building on widely shared stereotypes ranking women as second-class human beings. First-wave feminism (1848-1920) achieved women’s suffrage, but barely began the work of dismantling these stereotypes. This work was picked up in earnest by second-wave

feminism, which aimed to achieve gender equality. One of the key struggles of second-wave feminism was the achievement of bodily autonomy and reproductive rights, such as the legalization of abortion. This was largely successful: in England, Scotland, and Wales, abortion was legalized in 1967; in 1973, *Roe vs Wade* made abortion legal in the United States; in France, abortion was decriminalized in 1975 with “la loi Veil” (the Veil law). More broadly, second-wave feminism concerned itself with patriarchal oppression, in hopes of changing or dismantling all practices that discriminated against women in both public and private life. The corporeality of the witch’s body became a crucial tool in this struggle; as a result, the “Burning Times” came to represent everything that second-wave feminism stood against.

A particular understanding of the witch was thus elaborated. Although the phrase “Burning Times” already existed—Gerald Gardner, the founder of Gardnerian Wicca, had already used it in 1954 to refer to the persecution of witches that occurred in Europe and North America between the fifteenth century and the eighteenth—it was in the 1970s that the phrase acquired some of its contemporary resonances. In particular, second-wave feminists used the “Burning Times” as an emblematic representation of patriarchal oppression.¹⁷ In their view, the witch hunts of the early modern period were just the most spectacular expression of a larger system that routinely disempowered and abused women. This turned witches into protofeminists, persecuted only because they did not live within the strict confines of their societies. In short, second-wave feminists saw in the early modern witch (always imagined as female) a mirror image of themselves: oppressed by patriarchal society, alienated from the mainstream, persecuted as dangerous and immoral.

It is not uncommon for marginalized communities to re-appropriate derogatory words and images once used against them. By reclaiming and reappropriating the terms that sanction their marginal status, these communities find means to whittle down their power and protect themselves from oppression. The African American community, for instance, has reappropriated the “N-word” from racist discourse, while the LGBTQ+ community has reclaimed the “F-word” from homophobes. In the second half of the twentieth century, feminists began to reclaim the label of witches, turning it into a badge of honor. This happened, for instance, with the Women's International Terrorist Conspiracy from Hell (WITCH) a radical feminist group that emerged in the late 1960s and early 1970s.¹⁸ An offshoot of the Women’s Liberation’s Movement, WITCH was born—pointedly and deliberately—on Halloween 1968, when women equipped with brooms, black robes, and witch hats, gathered in New York City’s Financial District to protest against the “Imperialist Phallic Society.”¹⁹

Robin Morgan, one of WITCH’s founders, dwelled on the relation between witches and feminism in her book *Going too Far: The Personal Chronicle of a Feminist* (1978). In this book, Morgan wrote that while “some sisters continue[d] to battle away at some discrimination from within the patriarchal religion (those dear uppity nuns, those intrepid women ministers, and rabbis and priests),” others were searching for “the original matriarchal faith” and finding good promise in the practices of “Wicca, or the Craft of the Wise.”²⁰ In this regard, Morgan notes that witchcraft is “not the satanic weirdo fringe that the patriarchy would have us *believe* it is” but rather a “highly sophisticated and lyrical nature philosophy.”²¹

As Morgan explains it, witchcraft is a matriarchal faith connected with nature and opposed to the patriarchalism of the Judeo-Christian tradition. As practitioners of

that matriarchal faith, witches represented the social order that feminism worked to create—and represented that order not as something to be invented, but rather as something to be *restored*. Thus, second-wave feminism turned the witch not only in an emblem of patriarchal oppression but also into a promise of matriarchal triumph, or at least into a figure of anti-patriarchal resistance. To put it in other words, the figure of the witch offered second-wave feminism both an alternative past and an alternative future: a past that was rooted in paganism rather than in Judeo-Christian belief, and a future built not on the terrain of patriarchy but from a radically feminist standpoint.

By latching onto the witch as an emblem of their political commitment, second-wave feminists also turned the “Burning Times” into a unifying narrative. Its purpose was to serve as a reminder that all women are witches (potentially, at least) and are therefore similarly exposed to marginalization and violent repression. In so doing, feminists implicitly and explicitly proposed the coven—the gathering or covenant of witches—as an ideal form of female collectivity. Covens symbolized sisterhood because they brought women together to share knowledge, support one another, and work to overcome the obstacles in their paths. Imagined as radically separatist organizations, covens could also express utopian visions of all-women societies in which non-patriarchal values and perspectives were dominant. Insofar as they allowed women to embrace spiritual and supernatural practices that exceeded the bounds of Christianity, moreover, covens could also stand for an alternative religious tradition with its own history and its own practices. As such, covens offered a space of empowerment, a place where women could regain control of their bodies and lives while also working to construct a more just society.

Witches and Covens Today

Today, witches are virtually everywhere, as I have mentioned in the introductory section of this chapter. In this thesis, I focus on two recent novels featuring witches: *Les Sorcières de la République* (2016), by Chloé Delaume and *The Mercies* (2020), by Kiran Millwood Hargrave. The first is a futurist dystopia set in 2062. It recounts what happened to the country of France when a feminist political party founded by Olympian goddesses rose to the French presidency and put witches in charge. The second is a work of historical fiction set in seventeenth-century Norway. It recounts what happened to the remote seaside village of Vardø when a sudden storm accidentally turned it into an-all female community.

Of the two, *Les Sorcières de la République* is more upfront in terms of feminist purchase. The novel can in fact be described as a political intervention that directly engages with second-wave feminist in general and with the witch as a feminist emblem in particular. As I have already mentioned, second-wave feminism used the witch both as a mirror and a figure of prospected empowerment. This makes it possible for later feminists such as Chloé Delaume use the witch both to address some of feminism's long-standing concerns *and* to reflect on the legacies of twentieth-century political activism. *Les Sorcières de la République* engages with issues approached by second-wave feminism, such as questioning gender norms and querying the power imbalance between men and women. The novel provides many examples of gender inequality—from the gender pay gap to rape and domestic violence—and contributes thereby to an ongoing dialogue started by second-wave feminists. At the same time, *Les Sorcières de la République* ponders the failures of a feminist project which, even in its most radical

expressions, failed to develop a nonhierarchical and antiauthoritarian approach to politics and organization.

By comparison with Delaume's *Les Sorcières de la République*, Hargrave's *The Mercies* is not as openly political. However, both novels engage some of the same questions: i.e., the challenges and possibilities a society in which women are "on top." From this perspective, it does not matter that *The Mercies* and *Les Sorcières de la République* were written in different countries and in different languages, belong to different genres, and are set in different time periods and places. Both engage in a similar thought experiment, asking what happens when patriarchal authority is suddenly suspended. Both are interested in intersectionality, the many different ways that of women experience discrimination based on their racial identity, sexual orientation, and class position. Finally, both choose witches as their focus. Given the emblematic position that the witch occupies in the feminist tradition, it is not surprising that feminist novels such as *The Mercies* and *Les Sorcières de la République* should prominently feature witches. As we will see, however, neither Delaume nor Hargrave take the witch in the direction second-wave feminists auspicated. While they acknowledge the significance of the witch, they also underscore the limits and contradictions implicit in its figure.

In conclusion, the figure of the witch inaugurated by demonologists during the early modern period continues to influence the way we understand witches today. In past centuries, this figure served not only to marginalize women who did not conform to patriarchal norms, but also to control and oppress all women. Women's alleged penchant for witchcraft allowed predominantly white, male authorities to limit their freedoms and curtail their rights. In the twentieth century, second-wave feminists

reappropriated the figure of the witch and turned it into an emblem of empowerment. Thus, witches and witchcraft became political tropes to be used in the struggles against gender inequality and for the promotion of female solidarity. *The Mercies* and *Les Sorcières de la République* recapitulate this history. In the first novel, the sudden death of the male villages marks the beginning of a massive witch hunt. In the second novel, witches are at the forefront of a radical political change that will eventually lead to the trial of the Cumaean Sibyl for witchcraft. In both cases, there is one aspect that is still anchored in the representation of witchcraft over five centuries after *Malleus Maleficarum* was written: women are still the ones most likely to be witches.

¹ The reasons for this increase in witchcraft prosecutions are not altogether clear. The period's cultural and political crises—most notably the Reformation and Counterreformation—were certainly a factor. According to some, climatic factors such as the “Little Ice Age” (a period of widespread cooling from 1300 to around 1850) were also important. See Teresa Kwiatkowska. “The Light Was Retreating before Darkness: Tales of the Witch Hunt and Climate Change.” *Medievalia*, 42 (2010): 30–37. The phrase “Burning Times” seems to have been first used in Gerald Gardner's *Witchcraft Today* (1954).

² Daniel Schwartz, “The Books Have Been Burning.” *CBC News*. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/world/the-books-have-been-burning-1.887172>; Clarisse Loughrey, “Religious parents offended by Harry Potter on school syllabus as it ‘trivialises magic’,” *The Independent*, <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/news/religious-parents-offended-by-harry-potter-on-school-syllabus-as-it-trivialises-magic-a6775516.html>

³ Lara Apps and Andrew Gow observe that four of the men executed in Salem were relatives of accused women, and thus “their cases support the generalization that men were secondary targets of accusations.” Two of them, however, were not related to any of the accused women. Lara Apps and Andrew Gow, *Male Witches in Early Modern Europe* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018), 57.

⁴ William Monter, “Witch Trials in Continental Europe, 1550-1660,” in Bengt Ankarloo, Stuart Clark, and William Monter, *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe*, vol. 4. *The Period of the Witch Trials* (London: Athlone Press, 2002), 1-52, 42; Valerie A. Kivelson, “Male Witches and Gendered Categories in Seventeenth-Century Russia,” *Comparative Studies Society and History* vol. 45. no. 3 (2003): 606-31.

⁵ Edward Peters, *The Magician, the Witch and the Law* (Sussex: Harvester Press, 1978), 173. Peters notes that while the book’s structure may be “scholastic,” *Malleus Maleficarum* is hardly a scholastic textbook.

⁶ Peters, 173.

⁷ Heinrich Kramer and Jacob Sprenger, *Malleus Maleficarum*. Trans. P.G Maxwell-Stuart (Manchester: Manchester University Press: 2007), 74. Note that the question is phrased in such a way as to anticipate the answer: Kramer and Sprenger deploy the adjectives “frail” and “unstable” to indicate that the “female sex” is both intellectually limited (and therefore easily influenced) and physically vulnerable (and therefore needful of male protection). In short, women are more likely to be victims of the devil because they are already victims of their sex.

⁸ Kramer and Sprenger, 75.

⁹ Kramer and Sprenger, 74.

¹⁰ Kramer and Sprenger, 150.

¹¹ Kramer and Sprenger, 153.

¹² Montague Summers, "Introduction to the 1928 Editions" to Heinrich Kramer and Jacob Sprenger, *Malleus Maleficarum*. Trans. Montague Summers (New York: Dover, 1971), xi- xlv.

¹³ Gustav Henningsen, *The Salazar Documents: Inquisitor Alonso de Salazar Frías and Others on the Basque Witch Persecution* (Boston: Brill, 2004), 340.

¹⁴ Brian P. Levack, *The Witch-Hunt in Early Modern Europe* (Harlow England: Pearson Longman, 2006), 145.

¹⁵ ---, *The Oxford Handbook of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe and Colonial America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 449.

¹⁶ ---, *The Witch-Hunt in Early Modern Europe* (Harlow England: Pearson Longman, 2006), 145.

¹⁷ Justyna Sempruch, *Fantasies of Gender and the Witch in Feminist Theory and Literature* (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 2008), 14.

¹⁸ Robin Morgan, *Going Too Far: The Personal Chronicle of a Feminist* (New York: Vintage Books, 1978), 65.

¹⁹ Morgan, 75.

²⁰ Morgan, 11.

²¹ Morgan, 11.

Chapter Two

The Mercies as Feminist Testimony

Kiran Millwood Hargrave's *The Mercies* (2020) is a recent novel featuring early modern witchcraft. Set in seventeenth-century Finnmark (Norway's northernmost county), it imagines what happens to a remote fishing village when a violent storm kills all the men of reproductive age and leaves the women to fend for themselves.

Much of *The Mercies*'s narrative—including the violent storm with which the novel opens—is based on real events, a series of witch trials held in Vardø, a fishing village located on Vardøya Island, between 1621 and 1663. Although several dozen people were burned as witches as a result, the Vardø trials have received very little attention compared to similar historical events such as the Salem witch craze of 1692-1693. During the seventeenth century, witchcraft was a matter of high concern throughout Europe, and Scandinavian countries were no exception. A turning point in Norway was 1617, when King Christian IV issued “The Sorcery Ordinance.” This decree accommodated church doctrine by associating magic with devil worship, abolishing the distinction between white and black magic, and criminalizing practices thought until then as “harmless activit[ies] used to cure illness in people and livestock.”¹ It was this decree that created the conditions for the Vardø trials to take place.

Historian Liv Helene Willumsen has located the Finnmark trials in two overlapping crises. The first is the religious, intellectual, and cultural upheaval known as the Protestant Reformation, which established Lutheranism as the state religion of

Denmark-Norway in 1537.² The second was the competition between Denmark-Norway and Sweden for control of the Arctic regions of which Finnmark was part. Violent clashes resulted in Denmark-Norway's victory and the Peace Treaty of Knäred (1613), which recognized Christian IV's sovereignty over Finnmark and its indigenous people, the Sámis.³ Although the latter accepted their new condition as Danish-Norwegian subjects, they did so begrudgingly and largely remained a distinct ethnic group, with their own language, their own rites, and their own beliefs. Within a few years, Finnmark split into two camps: Danish-Norwegian Christians and Sámi "pagans."

Gwendolyn Kai Hostetter has argued that "The Sorcery Ordinance" of 1617 was in part a reaction to these political and cultural crises—and that its implementation resulted in the systematic oppression of Finnmark's Sámi communities. Thus, the witch hunts of 1621-1663 were due to a combination of factors, including religious extremism, monarchic absolutism, gender prejudice, and racial bigotry.⁴ Another significant factor seems to have been Scottish influence: not only did Norwegian courts rely on King James's *Of Daemonology* (1597) to identify and prosecute witches, they also operated under the supervision of Governor John Cunningham (c. 1575–1651), a Scottish nobleman presumably familiar with the great Scottish witch hunts of the late sixteenth century.⁵ Between 1619, the year in which he was first appointed Governor of Finnmark, and 1651, the year in which he died, Cunningham presided over 52 witch trials, at least nine of which targeted Sámi communities.⁶

As I have mentioned before, witches and witchcraft are common tropes in works that deal with gender, sexuality, and power. However, this is not the reason that pushed Hargrave to write about the witch trials of Vardø. In a 2020 interview,

Hargrave noted that she wrote *The Mercies* “in early 2018, [when]... the word *witch-hunt* was being thrown around a lot by... the president of the United States and it was just being entirely misappropriated and it felt like a real insult to these women and men... who lost their lives in witch trials like this. Because they weren't witches. They were just ordinary people. And... what made these people targets is that they were different.”⁷ Hargrave’s comment is important in two respects: first, it underlines the political context in which Hargrave wrote her novel—a context in which Donald Trump’s misogyny and sexual abuse weighted heavily. Second, it underscores the crucial role *difference* (whether of gender, class, race, religion, or sexual orientation) played in witchcraft accusations and prosecutions.

In another interview, Hargrave explained that she wrote *The Mercies* to understand not only the Vardø trials but also the circumstances that preceded them. “I think all novels begin with a question and my question was what happened,” Hargrave said. “How did these women survive without the majority of their men on this tiny bleak remote harsh place? How did they survive those three years only to... be [ultimately] burned [as witches]? [T]he novel was... a way to answer those questions for me.”⁸ *The Mercies* thus seeks to grapple with the past from a perspective that is not easily accessible. It focuses not on the trials but on the three years in which the women of Vardø experienced the challenges and possibilities of living in an all-female (or at least mostly female) community. It emphasizes resilience and agency rather than disempowerment and victimization.

The Mercies imaginatively reconstructs the circumstances that led to the first major Vardø witch trial. It begins on Christmas Eve 1617, when a sudden storm drowned forty men who were out at sea fishing, and ends with the witch trials of 1621, perhaps the largest witch-hunt in the history of Norway. In so doing, the novel

seeks not only to understand “what happened”—i.e., to explore the power dynamics that would eventually bring people to the stake—but also to give voice to those who have been consistently silenced and marginalized⁹. Indeed, it is my argument in this chapter that *The Mercies* challenges history as a privileged mode of understanding the past.

Much of history’s privilege comes from the fact that it is an evidence-based account of past events. But when it comes to witches, the evidence at our disposal is the legacy of a system that effectively created witchcraft, set up the code under which it could be investigated and prosecuted, formulated the questions to be asked of the accused, recorded their answers, and archived or disseminated the narratives thereby produced. While this evidence does at times yield glimpses of the actual people who burned at the stake, or of the communities ravaged by witchcraft accusations and prosecutions, these are merely glimpses.

If we want to challenge the narrative that the documentary evidence affords, it is important to look at past events from a different perspective—even if that perspective has not been preserved in the historical record. It is important to look at the accused witches not as the state and the church saw them but rather as they saw themselves and each other. Hargrave’s *The Mercies* seeks to do just that. It reclaims the witches of Vardø by looking at the events that led to the trial from their perspective, from their diverse points of view as rivals, neighbors, friends, relatives, and lovers. Thus, fiction comes to the aid of history; it provides a corrective to a historical record that is necessarily partial and biased.

This chapter is divided into three sections. In the first section, I discuss Hargrave’s authorial choices, most notably her decision to tell the story from the perspective of two women, Maren Magnusdatter and Ursa (Ursula) Cornet. The first

one is a native of Vardø; the second is the wife of Scottish witch-hunter Absalom Cornet (a character loosely based on John Cunningham). Maren and Ursa find each other strange at first, but eventually become friends. As Ursa's husband begins arresting people and sending them to the stake, the bond between the friends deepens, until their friendship turns into romance.

In the second section, I explore Hargrave's use of (and departure from) the historical records. While the novel does not dispense with historical accuracy, it also does what historical accounts cannot easily do: it gives pride of place to the agency and power of those who stood trial and burned at the stake. It allows accused witches to speak—and to speak not as witches, but as ordinary people faced by extraordinary difficulties. From this perspective, the novel seems to suggest that fiction has at least the potential to complement (perhaps even correct) the story of “what happened.”

In the third and final section, I discuss the relationship between *The Mercies* and second-wave feminism. It is a commonplace of second-wave feminism that the women who were accused as witches during the early modern period were persecuted because they were deemed a threat to the patriarchy. This particular understanding of witchcraft seems crucial to Hargrave's narrative: it is not a coincidence that the first characters to be accused of witchcraft are exactly those who most openly contravene the social norms of seventeenth-century Norway. However, the novel goes beyond the limits of second-wave feminism in at least two ways: it underscores the differences that exist among women and hints at the way that men, too, can be oppressed by the patriarchy.

Reclaiming the witches of Vardø

In *The Mercies*, Kiran Millwood Hargrave uses an internal third-person point of view but focuses on two main characters, Maren and Ursa, shifting perspectives from one to the other. This narrative choice helps readers develop a deep sense of empathy for the characters; by hearing their thoughts and sensing their feelings, we can learn to appreciate their struggles. By shifting perspectives between Ursa and Maren, moreover, Hargrave can depict the social landscape of seventeenth-century Norway, where urban and rural populations were world apart, and where the indigenous Sámi people were eyed with suspicion. As I have already mentioned, even though the Sámis were subject to the crown of Norway, they were a distinct ethnic group, with their own language, rites, and beliefs. In the eyes of the authorities, they were “pagans” likely to consort with the devil.

Ursa and Maren have significantly different backgrounds. Maren is a poor Vardø woman whose life once revolved around her family—her mother, her father, her brother Eric, and Eric’s Sámi wife, Diina. Ursa is from the city of Bergen and comes from a ship-owning family; although illiterate, she has always led a sheltered life and can speak both Norwegian and English (58). Ursa’s and Maren’s different backgrounds allow Hargrave to highlight the diversity of experiences, circumstances, and knowledges to which women were exposed in the early modern period. In so doing, Hargrave also highlights the extent to which social standing could affect patterns of witchcraft prosecutions: those with privilege (such as Ursa) were less likely to attract the authorities’ attention, whereas those without privilege (such as Maren) were more likely to be accused of *maleficium* (harmful magic).

Through Maren, Hargrave gives voice to the women of Vardø, describing village life as they would have seen it. Before the storm, life was organized according

to a rigid separation between men and women: the men would fish, and the women would process the catch; the men would lay the fire, and the women would tend it. At one point, Maren describes her mother's hands as being "speckled with the tiny starts of fish scales, flesh hung out to salt and dry like white drapes of baby's swaddling" (19)—that is, made dry and rough from her constant handling of fish. Two days after the storm, when the fire in her home goes out, Maren notes that "Pappa always laid it," and women only tended it, "keeping banked at night and breaking its crust each morning to let the hot heart of it breathe" (15).

Through Maren, Hargrave also provides insights into the trauma experienced by the community when its able-bodied men are suddenly killed. Early in the novel, Maren has a dream that foreshadows not just the physical storm that will drown her father, brother, and fiancé, but also the metaphorical storm that these drownings will eventually unleash on the community. In her dream, Maren sees a whale that has "beached itself against her house" (12). Desperate to help it, she embraces it. But the embrace is cut short by the arrival of men with "blades and scythes" (12) who hack the whale to pieces. The dream sequence ends with Maren slowly sinking to the bottom of the sea, drowning in grief and exhaustion. The beached whale represents the women of Vardø, trapped in the village and exposed to hunger and violence; Maren's drowning foreshadows the deaths of the men of Vardø, but it also signifies helplessness more broadly.

Life in Vardø is harsh, as the novel's beginning makes clear. While the storm capsizes ships and tosses the men overboard, a thick cover of snow cuts off the village from the rest of Vardøya Island (14). This means that the women of Vardø must face not only the consequences of their tragic loss, but also the consequences of especially unfavorable environmental conditions. Without easy access to the outside world, they

have no choice but to step beyond the limits of seventeenth-century gender norms. At the same time, their geographical isolation is precisely what allows them to step beyond these limits; it is not easy for authorities to intervene and put them back in their place. At least for a while, the women of Vardø are left to their own devices and allowed to claim a level of agency they had not enjoyed before.

The day after the storm, when the women gather in the village church, they realize that none of the men has made it back ashore: “[t]here once were fifty-three men, and now they have but thirteen left: two babes in arms, three elders, and the rest boys too small for the boats” (18). Tensions grow as the group begins to understand that their able-bodied men are not coming back, and that none of the males still alive can help provide for the community. Even the church minister has drowned. A new minister arrives from another village, but he is an outsider “unused to life by the sea” with no compassion for or understanding of the survivors’ plight (30). The prospect of ministering to a female-only community clearly makes him uneasy; as soon as church service is done, he flees home and away from his flock.

The lack of male leadership leaves spaces for women to step up. Kirsten Sørensdatter and Toril Knudsdatter are the first ones to emerge as charismatic (if oppositional) figures. After the storm, Kirsten takes on male clothing and performs male tasks, demonstrating to the rest of the community that moving forward is possible. As she puts it, “[t]here have been wrecks before,” and women have always managed to go on (16). When the fire in Maren’s house goes out, Kirsten lights it again; and when Sunday comes, she gathers all the women in the church. In short, Kirsten quickly assumes a masculine role. As Maren notes, although Kirsten never stood “behind the pulpit,” “she may as well [have],” since she displayed “a minister’s consideration” toward the other survivors (17).

If Kirsten Sørensdatter takes on a man's role, Toril Knudsdatter yearns for male authority and feels overjoyed when a new minister arrives: "[p]raise God we are not forgotten," she exclaims (30). She dislikes Kirsten and resents her attitude, which she understands as deviant. She also dislikes the Sámis, whose native rituals she misinterprets as witches' sabbaths. Unsurprisingly, Toril is the first Vardø villager to suspect the presence of witches and the first person to spread rumors to this effect. Also unsurprisingly, her primary target is Kirstin.

In between the two extremes represented by Kirsten and Toril stands the vast majority of the women of Vardø, Maren and Ursa included. For these women, adjusting to their new reality is a long and disorienting process. The storm has killed not only Maren's brother and father, but also her fiancé Dag, thus depriving her of the only social pattern she knows. When her sister-in-law leaves and her family unit starts to fall apart, Maren cannot simply marry and establish a household of her own. Alienated, she begins to search for a new pattern, and finds one in Kirsten Sørensdatter: as a result, Maren is among the first Vardø women to go out fishing and experience the satisfaction of self-reliance.

Ursa goes through a different but equally difficult experience. After the sudden death of her mother, she is married off to Absalom Cornet—a man she does not know or love—and forced to leave her comfortable city life behind. She does not know how to run a household without servants, feels lonely, and has trouble coping with the isolation of Vardø. She also feels pressured by her husband to get pregnant and produce an heir. Searching for a new pattern, she finds one in the company of Maren. With Maren's help, Ursa begins to adjust to Vardø life, learns how to run a household, and eventually gains enough confidence to stand up to her husband. In turn, Ursa helps Maren escape prosecution when the latter is accused of witchcraft. Thus, the

relationship between Ursa and Maren serves as a counterpoint to the historical record; even in the midst of the worst persecution, Hargrave seems to say, women can find love and strength in one other. Despite internal conflict, they can come together across divides of upbringing and status.

However, the novel also underscores the limits of this coming together. As Willumsen as noted, seventeenth-century Finnmark was a place where Christian European and “pagan” Sámis lived side by side.¹⁰ In *The Mercies*, this historical reality finds representation in the marriage between Diina, who is Sámi, and Maren’s brother Eric. The union hints at the possibility that the two communities might come together, but this possibility is undercut when Eric drowns. After his body is recovered, Diina seeks out a Sámi shaman to perform his funerary rites. Her initiative shocks many of the village women, and Toril even insists that her son’s corpse be separated from Eric’s for the duration of the ritual (24). Rejected and marginalized, Diina stops participating in village life and progressively withdraws from the community.

Rejection goes both ways. When Maren tries to participate in her brother’s funeral, the shaman rebuffs her because she is not Sámi. Something similar occurs when Maren hears Diina singing in her native language to her newborn baby. Upon learning that what Diina is singing is a song composed especially for the baby and that everyone in the Sámi community has one such song, Maren asks if she, too, has a special song. When Diina tells her that she does not, Maren feels hurt and rejected, even if she understands that this is simply because she is not Sámi. These reciprocal rejections demonstrate how differences of race and ethnicity contradict simplistic vision of gender solidarity.

Between history and fiction

In *The Mercies*, Kiran Millwood Hargrave uses historical fiction to narrate and explore events from the past. Although both history and historical fiction construct stories about the past, historians and novelists do not approach their work in the same way. Broadly speaking, historical accounts are accepted as accurate insofar as they tell stories that are based on primary sources such as legal documents, diaries, letters, and the like. In the case of witchcraft, the most fundamental sources are often trial records, including arrest warrants, confessions, and witness testimonies.

While these sources provide a sense of “what happened,” they can only do so in a partial and incomplete way, since they were produced and collected by the very system that invented witches and organized their persecution. Trial records, in particular, do not tell us much about the social world in which the accused witches lived, and tell us even less about what they thought or how they experienced the circumstances that brought them in front of the judges. And while it is always possible to read primary sources “against the grain,” it is not possible to make those sources say more than what they can possibly say.¹¹

By contrast, historical fiction can go beyond what the primary sources say. Writers of historical fiction often rely on the same primary documents used by historians but push beyond the boundaries that those documents prescribe. Novelists can add, merge, or subtract characters, imagine dialogues and thoughts, tweak chronologies, add details, and provide alternative perspectives. This is exactly what Kiran Millwood Hargrave does in *The Mercies*. Although part of the narrative is based on the Finnmark trial records, the novel ignores the trials themselves, focusing instead on the circumstances that led to the first witch hunting wave. Thus, Hargrave gives readers a perspective that is usually absent from historical accounts: it depicts

the grief, fears, and hopes experienced by a group of women amid mundane tasks like salting fish, making bread, and tending hearths. For instance, the novel describes in great detail the suffering that the women of Vardø experience as they deal first with the uncertainty of their loved ones' return, then with the trauma of seeing their corpses scorched by lightning and macerated by salt water, and finally with the labor of retrieving and storing all corpses away because the ground is too frozen for them to dig graves. The novel also provides thorough information about rural life in seventeenth-century Norway, thus allowing readers to develop a good understanding of the lives these women lived.

By focusing on female characters—and on female characters only—*The Mercies* attempts to give agency back to Vardø's accused witches. The novel suggests the possibility that the sudden disappearance of men might lead to the emergence of a sisterly society founded on women's solidarity. The feminist author and activist bell hooks has noted how in times of crisis sisterhood is a powerful force that effects social change.¹² In Hargrave's novel, women successfully work together to fill the gap left by the loss of their men. Despite the many difficulties they experience—and despite the authorities' indifference to their plight—they remain committed to their village. It does not dawn on them that they could simply relocate to another community. And while the social experiment they engage in ultimately fails, Hargrave's choice to focus on the three-year interval between the storm and the trials changes the game in the sense that, through fiction, we can immerse ourselves in the world of the accused witches and learn about their lives through their own, uncompelled, words.

By underscoring the possibilities of fiction, I do not mean to say that Hargrave's novel dispenses with historical accuracy. *The Mercies* is a scrupulously

researched book: several characters and plot events are based on historical evidence. The storm with which the novel opens, for one, exactly mimics the storm of Christmas Eve 1617, which killed forty fishermen and led to the first large witch trial held in Finnmark. The character of Absalom Cornet is loosely based on John Cunningham, the Scotsman who brought Scottish demonology to the region. Likewise, the character of Kirsten is based on Kirsti Sørensdatter, who was tried for witchcraft at Vardøhus Fortress and burned at the stake in April 1621.

Hargrave's interest in historical accuracy is also evident from the novel's emphasis on the politics of prosecution. As historians have noted, a prosecutor's ambitions have much to do with the fate of the accused. A famous example is that of Pierre Cauchon, the bishop who made sure that Joan of Arc was convicted of heresy. Cauchon had personal motives for being so actively involved in the trial: he was hoping to secure his place on the English side.¹³ In *The Mercies*, Absalom Cornet burns with a similar desire to secure his place and make a name for himself (112). In prosecuting witchcraft, Absalom also hopes to transcend his modest origins: Vardøya Island, where Vardø village is located, reminds him of the remote Scottish place where he was born. "I grew up in a house like this," he observes bitterly. "I got out as soon as I could, went to the city. There I made something of myself. [...] But here I am back again" (112). It is this bitterness that fuels his mission to investigate *maleficium* and restore the patriarchal order.

Second-Wave Feminism and Beyond

In recent years, there has been a surge of interest in the Vardø trials. In 2006, the city of Vardø commissioned a "Witches' Monument" (the Steilneset Memorial, inaugurated in 2011) to commemorate the ninety-one people (seventy-seven women

and fourteen men) who were convicted and burned at the stake between 1621 and 1663. In 2015, an opera inspired by the Vardø trials, Jeff Myers' *Maren of Vardø: Satan's Bride*, premiered at the Prince Theater in Philadelphia. A new novel based on the 1662-1663 trials, Anya Bergman's *The Witches of Vardø* (2023) has just appeared in print but is already being hailed as one of the best fiction books of 2023. In some ways, *The Mercies* is just a part of this larger surge, which seeks to redress the evils of the past while also capitalizing on the popular interest in witchcraft and witches. In other ways, however, *The Mercies* stands apart as a reflection on the relevance of the witch in feminist political thinking. As such, Hargrave's novel builds on the legacies of second-wave feminism while also pondering its blind spots and limitations.

Second-wave feminists often assumed women to be the only victims of witchcraft prosecutions, which is historically inaccurate.¹⁴ However, their objective was not to provide accurate information. Rather, second wave feminists saw in the witch an emblematic figure they could use to regain agency and power. This was based on the realization that, whether one chooses to believe in magic or not, witches are (and always have been) political figures. In the early modern period, witches were convenient tools for the state and the church to explain and justify social and political crises. Nowadays, witches are convenient tools to challenge the patriarchal status quo in all its forms, including the repression of women's sexuality.

Part of Hargrave's novel is clearly indebted to second-wave feminism. For one, all of the characters accused and prosecuted for witchcraft are women, even though several men were also involved according to the records. Indeed, Hargrave's implicit argument seems to be that Norwegian authorities deployed accusations of witchcraft as a way to explain Vardø women's survival. Storms were the stereotypical preserve of witches, so the drowning of the men was a suspicious event. Nevertheless,

state and church authorities remain uninterested in the village and its inhabitants. It is not the storm that invites demonological inquiry; instead, it is the demonstration that women can live on their own, without male supervision and protection, without dying of hunger or turning against one another.

Another aspect that seems indebted to second-wave feminism is the association between accusations of witchcraft and the fear of women's sexuality, as can be seen, for instance, in the *Malleus Maleficarum*'s contention that "[witchcraft happens] because of fleshly lust, which in [women] is never satisfied."¹⁵ Hargrave makes this association evident when she ties Absalom's suspicions toward Maren to the budding romance between the latter and his wife. Unable to imagine that Ursa might have actually fallen in love with Maren, he concludes that Ursa must be bewitched, and that Maren must therefore be a witch.

Part of Hargrave's novel, however, pushes beyond the legacies of second-wave feminism. First, *The Mercies* makes clear that women's experiences differ widely, and that it is not easy for women of different backgrounds, social class, and ethnicity to come together. Ursa and Maren might overcome their mutual wariness and bridge the gap between their respective upbringings, but Maren and Diina are unable to surmount their differences, no matter how hard they try. Second, old-school feminism often postulated a rigid distinction between women and men: the first were victims, the second victimizers. In *The Mercies*, female characters such as Toril Knudsdatter are among the victimizers, thereby muddling any rigid distinction between men and women. And while none of the male characters are portrayed as victims, not all of them are portrayed as victimizers, either. It is Kirstin's husband, for instance, who shows her how to sail and kindle a fire, thus paving the way for her independence. And while Pastor Kurtsson does not do anything to stop Absalom, he

does not approve of the trials (240). There are two ways of reading this behavior: on the one hand, Kurtsson may just be a coward; on the other hand, he may be a man trapped in a social structure that does not leave much space for independent thought. In this manner, *The Mercies* shows that women are not the only ones who suffer from patriarchal oppressions, even though they might suffer the most.

¹ Treasure in Archives, “Royal Decree Regarding Witch Hunt,” 2021, <https://www.treasuresinarchives.com/digital-catalogue-page-2/royal-decree-regarding-witch-hunt>.

² Helene Liv Willumsen, *Witches of the North: Scotland and Finnmark* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 235.

³ Willumsen, 230.

⁴ Gwendolyn Kai Hostetter, “The Finnmark, Norway Witchcraft Trials: Discerning Patterns From the Archives,” MA thesis (Bucknell University, 2020), 21.

⁵ Hostetter, 43.

⁶ Rune Hagen, “At the Edge of Civilization: John Cunningham, Lensmann of Finnmark, 1619-51,” in *Military Governors and Imperial Frontiers, c. 1600–1800*, ed. Andrew MacKillop and Steve Murdoch (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 29-52, 45.

⁷ BookTastic BookFest, “WATCH Kiran Millwood Hargrave at BookTastic Book Festival 2020 with The Mercies,” Youtube video, 24 May 2020, 14:54, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UZ4x_todzNk&ab_channel=BookTasticBookFest.

⁸ Writers’ League of Texas, “Reading & Conversation with Kiran Millwood Hargrave WLT 2020 UnConference,” Youtube video, 27 June 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pbbqHiZBc&ab_channel=Writers%27LeagueofTexas.

⁹ See the work of Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the past : power and the production of history* (Boston MA: Beacon Press, 2012) who mentioned the work of historical events and who gets to discuss these historical events and posses the power of narration.

¹⁰ Willumsen, 224

¹¹ I borrow the phrase “reading against the grain” from David Bartholomae, Anthony Petrosky, and Stacey Witey, who define it as “to read critically, to turn back... against [an author’s] project, to look for the limits of her vision, to provide alternate readings of her examples, to find examples that challenge her argument—to engage her, in other words, in dialogue.” See Bartholomae, Petrosky, and Witey, *Ways of Reading: An Anthology for Writers* (Boston: St. Martin’s Press, 2019), 15.

¹² bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (Boston: South End Press, 2000), 63.

¹³ Daniel Hobbins, *The Trial of Joan of Arc* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 17.

¹⁴ For a more recent example, see Mona Chollet, *Sorcières, la puissance invaincue des femmes* (Paris: Zones, 2018).

¹⁵ Heinrich Kramer and Jacob Sprenger, *Malleus Maleficarum*. Trans. P.G Maxwell-Stuart (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), 76.

Chapter Three

Les Sorcières de la République as a Feminist Grimoire

Chloé Delaume's *Les Sorcières de la République* (The Witches of The Republic) is a dystopian novel about the hopes and failures of female solidarity as a political ideal. The story opens in 2062 with the televised trial of the Cumean Sibyl, the sole survivor of a 2017 revolution that brought witches to power and a feminist politician, Élisabeth Ambrose, to the French presidency. The new regime lasted only a brief time but produced untold horror and chaos. As a result, in 2020 a popular referendum voted for "le Grand Blanc" (the Great Blank; 10), a "démence collective d'envergure" (collective large-scale dementia; 11) that completely erased from the nation's memory the three years in which women ruled France.¹

Given Delaume's well-known engagement with the feminist movement, it may seem strange that *Les Sorcières de la République* should emphasize failure rather than success; indeed, it is somewhat counterintuitive that a feminist writer should depict political matriarchy in distinctly dystopian terms. However, Delaume's goal is not to portray a utopian, egalitarian, and inclusive society led by women. Instead, she aims to illustrate why such a society cannot be realized in our present moment. The novel seeks to achieve this aim by mapping not only the barriers that keep women from thriving but also the limitation of modern-day feminism as a political liberation project.

In a 2016 interview for the French talk show "La Grande Librairie," Delaume claimed to believe deeply in the promise of female solidarity to rebalance power between men and women. She defines this female solidarity as a "sororité"

(sisterhood/sorority), “une absence totale de rivalité” (a total absence of rivalry), and “une compréhension spontanée” (a spontaneous comprehension) women can reach when they engage in “une forme de lutte similaire” (a similar form of struggle). In other words, when women have a similar understanding of their life experiences—and of the obstacles and difficulties they encounter—they need not be rivals in order to prove themselves and be successful. After centuries of patriarchal oppression, however, women have grown accustomed to rivalry and competition. And since most of them do not even understand what “sororité” might do for them, female solidarity “ne peut pas marcher avec la société actuelle” (cannot work in current society).²

The French language has only one word to designate the kind of female solidarity Delaume has in mind—“sororité.” The English language, by contrast, has two—“sisterhood” and “sorority.” Although these two terms are often used interchangeably, I make a distinction between them. When I use the term “sisterhood,” I seek to emphasize relationships between women that are horizontal rather than vertical, and that eschew hierarchical implications. When I use the term “sorority,” I refer to a social or political organization that promotes bonds between women but does not necessarily produce the horizontal relationships implicit in sisterhood. In short, sisterhood traffics in female solidarity but often lacks in political intentionality; by contrast, sorority traffics in political intentionality but often lacks in female solidarity.

At first blush, Delaume’s understanding of “sororité” closely resembles my definition of sisterhood as a horizontal relationship founded on equality, encouragement, and assistance. However, in *Les Sorcières de la République* “sororité” turns out to be less about sisterhood than about sorority. While the initial goal of the 2017 revolution is to mobilize female solidarity against male oppression, it does not

take long for the revolutionaries to realize that the fight against patriarchy can only be won through organized political action.

In the novel, organized action involves not only the intervention of six Greek goddesses (aided by the Sibyl of Cumae), but also the transformation of witches' covens into a political party fighting oppression by way of black magic. This development is crucial to the revolution's eventual success, yet it spells disaster for sisterhood, underscoring thereby the contradictions between sorority and sisterhood. Instead of cultivating mutual understanding and reciprocal support, women turn against one another with the same animus once reserved for their male oppressors. As one of the novel's characters puts it, "[l]es femmes ne devenaient pas lucides au contact de la lumière. D'une manière ou d'une autre, la vérité leur faisait fondre une partie des neurones, altérant... le nom de leur ennemi" ([w]omen did not become lucid in contact with light. Somehow, the truth melted part of their neurons, altering... the name of their enemy; 251).

To the best of my knowledge, Delaume has not addressed the role witchcraft plays in her novel. And yet, the presence of witches in *Les Sorcières de la République* is hardly coincidental. As I have shown in Chapter One, witches have played a crucial role in radical feminism, serving as both an emblem of feminine power and a trope for female solidarity against patriarchal oppression. Indeed, second-wave feminism routinely put witchy sisterhood at the center of its political projects: the Women's International Terrorist Conspiracy from Hell (WITCH), for one, "urged modern women to form covens" in anticipation of an antipatriarchal revolution.³

Les Sorcières de la République exposes the limitations of this political program by imagining a world in which witches' covens have become a full-fledged political party and the antipatriarchal revolution auspicated by WITCH has been

achieved. From this perspective, the novel underscores the ways that second-wave feminism papered over the difficulties of achieving female solidarity. Even if women ruled and a matriarchy replaced patriarchy, Delaume seems to say, women would still be divided along racial and class divides, competing against one another for status and resources.

This chapter is divided into four sections. In the first section, I explore the novel's feminist commitments. *Les Sorcières de la République* advances several issues central to feminist liberation thinking, most notably women's invisibility, marginalization, and objectification. Delaume suggestively describes these issues as the outcome of a magical spell cast on women by "sorcellerie mâle" (male sorcery; 84).

The second section explores the tensions between sorority and sisterhood, as embodied, respectively, by witches and "femmes de pouvoir" (women of power; 252). On the one hand, the novel suggests that no feminist liberation can occur unless we reconcile sisterhood with sorority. On the one hand, it insists on the difficulty of bringing the two together. In so doing, *Les Sorcières de la République* highlights the limits of the political projects typical of second-wave feminism.

The third section discusses the link between witchcraft and performativity, drawing both on Judith Butler's idea of gender as performance and John Langshaw Austin's speech act theory. The reason why *Les Sorcières de la République* is so interested in witches, I suggest, it is because witchcraft embraces the capacity of the performative to effect social and political change.

The chapter's fourth and final section deals with Delaume's choice to dwell on feminist failure, which the novel ascribes to the misuse of magic, internecine division,

the use of violence, and more generally to women's inability to break free from patriarchal structures and patterns.

In pondering the witch figure as a symbol of empowerment, Delaume engages directly with second-wave feminism, and specifically with the political effectiveness of a structured sisterhood (which results in sorority). While the Party of the Circle comes to power with the goal of achieving “freedom” through “sisterhood” and “equality”—as Hera puts it in an exchange with Artemis, “Sororité, égalité. Ensuite viendra la liberté (Sisterhood, equality. Then will come freedom; 138)—its actions while in power radically contradict this program.⁴

Les Sorcières de la République suggests that no feminist liberation can occur unless we succeed at reconciling “sisterhood” with “sorority.” I conclude by suggesting that for Delaume the political project of feminist liberation requires not only “égalité” (equality) but also “parité” (parity)—that, is the implementation of a society in which hierarchical thinking is abolished.

Before the Revolution: Delaume's Feminist Commitments

In a 2016 interview for “Rentrée Littéraire” of the French publishing house *Éditions du Seuil*, Delaume explains that in *Les Sorcières de la république* she wanted to highlight the “problème d’invisibilité des femmes” (problem of women's invisibility).⁵ She illustrates this point by reference to the “Ministère de la Famille, de l'Enfance et des Droits des femmes” (Ministry of Family, Children and Women's Rights) created by the Hollande government in 2016. She laments the absence of a ministry devoted exclusively to women and complains that the government put “[le] droit des femmes, de la famille et de l'enfance dans le même package” ([the] rights of women, family and childhood in the same package).⁶ According to Delaume, political

power rarely recognizes women *qua* women; in order to become legible, they also have to be wives (as the reference to “Family” in the Ministry’s name implies) and mothers (as the reference to “Children” in the Ministry’s name implies).

Women’s invisibility is not a new subject: early in the twentieth century, Virginia Woolf explored the topic in *A Room of One’s Own*, where she advocated for women’s education and financial independence. Today, these goals have been reached in many places, at least nominally. Yet women still inhabit a man’s world, as a recent essay by the British journalist Caroline Criado Perez demonstrates. Using quantitative data from a range of settings (daily life, workplace, healthcare, transportation, etc.) across the industrialized world (USA, India, UK etc.), Criado Perez shows that women’s needs and preferences are routinely overlooked; patriarchal bias does not only make women invisible, but also perpetuates their invisibility as if it were a natural and irreversible condition. In medical and pharmaceutical research, for instance, men’s anatomy always serves as the standard, even though this puts women at a considerable disadvantage. Likewise, public transportation tends to be organized according to men’s needs, even though women are more likely to make use of it.⁷ Thus, even though many women can now access education and achieve the financial independence Virginia Woolf only dreamed about, they still exist in a world where there is little space for them to flourish. Their invisibility is so entrenched as to be effectively normative.

It is precisely this world that Delaume depicts at the beginning of the novel, as the news reporter Marjolaine Pithiviers—a character as ridiculous as it is terrifying—explains in sensationalist terms what is happening. It is 2062, and President Barnabé Plougastel-Castelain has decided that France must face its past; to this end, he has organized a televised trial of the Cumean Sibyl, “[*m*]étier: *Prophétesse*, conseillère

des déesses de l'Olympe" (prophetess by profession, [and] counselor to the Olympian goddesses; 27). For five days and five nights, the Sibyl recounts in great detail how the feminist revolution came about. But her narrative also speaks volumes about the violence and objectification suffered by women in the patriarchal society of twenty-first-century France.

The Sibyl's own story perfectly illustrates this legacy of violence. As she mentions in one of her monologues, her mother was a Vestal virgin, and her father the unidentified rapist who attacked and made her mother pregnant. The event marks the Sibyl's origin as one of violence and suffering, conditioning her existence into incessant melancholy. This peculiar history is not a coincidence. As *Les Sorcières de la République* points out, "une femme sur cinq est victime de viol ou de tentative de viol au cours de sa vie" (one woman in five is a victim of rape or attempted rape during her lifetime; 133). The story of the Sibyl's origin is thus the hypothetical story of a large segment of the French population.

The treatment the Sibyl receives during her mediatic trial also emphasizes the objectification suffered by women. Barbara Fredrickson and Tomi-Ann Roberts describe objectification as the process by which women are reduced to their bodies or some of their body parts, usually for the use and pleasure of men.⁸ In the novel, the Sibyl is reduced to her hair, feet, and body frame, all of which are measured or described: "[e]nchaînée, pieds nus, en robe blanche, pareille à ses cheveux. 194 centimètres, la longueur de ses cheveux, ça lui fait comme une petite traîne. Voyez-vous la mousse poudreuse, une oréole de neige, un écrin de coton" ([c]hained, barefoot, in a white dress, like her hair. 194 centimeters, the length of her hair, acts like a small train. Do you see the powdery foam, a snowy halo, a cotton frame; 20).

As a supernatural creature, moreover, the Sibyl is objectified through an increasingly intrusive medical examination of her body for “scientific” purposes: “J’ai fibroscopie à 3 heures du matin, biopsie des glandes salivaires à 4 heures” (I have a fibroscopy at 3 am, and a salivary glands biopsy at 4 am; 161). This objectification leads to her eventual rape by a male nurse. TV audiences are dutifully made aware of this rape, yet no comment or reaction on their part is ever mentioned. Everyone continues to watch passively, indifferent to the violence that the Sibyl suffers.

The same indifference to women’s suffering characterizes Zeus’ reaction to Hades’ rape of Persephone, as recounted by the Sibyl on the first day of her trial. When Demeter realizes that her daughter Persephone has been abducted by Hades, she pleads with her brother Zeus to return her home. Instead, Zeus decrees that Persephone will stay with her abductor half of every year and return home for the other half. For Delaume, this is a perfect example of the injustice reserved for women, whether human or divine. She criticizes not only Hades’ violence but also Zeus’ callous indifference to Persephone’s and Demeter’s mistreatment, which normalizes violence and turns it into the status quo.

In highlighting the continued plight of women—stretching all way from the mythical past of Persephone’s unredressed abduction to the imaginary future of the Sibyl’s unaddressed rape—*Les sorcières de la république* also underscores the urgent need for what Delaume describes as “un féminisme actif, le retour de sorcières d’autant plus dangereuses qu’elles ont appris le sortilège d’unité” (an active feminism, the return of even more dangerous witches who have learned the spell of unity).⁹ Hence the important part that witches play both in Delaume’s larger project and in the body of the novel.

Witchcraft and Revolution

In *Les Sorcières de la République*, when the Greek goddesses come down from Olympus, they realize how much women are still hurt by the legacy of early modern witch-hunts. They decide that the time has come to stop the violence and launch a feminist party, a witchy alliance whose political slogan morphs the French national motto—“Liberté, égalité, fraternité” (liberty, equality, fraternity)—into “liberté, parité, sororité” (liberty, parity, sorority; 332). The new party comes to power through democratic means during the French elections of May 2017, having obtained a majority of votes.

They name their political party is the “Parti du Cercle” (the Party of the Circle)—presumably a reference to the magic circle drawn by practitioners of ritual magic to define a sacred space or protect themselves from occult forces. Indeed, the novel makes it a point to note that the Party of the Circle was formed in order to “neutraliser le sort d’invisibilité que des siècles de sorcellerie mâle avaient jeté sur les sujets dotés d’un uterus” (neutralize the spell of invisibility that centuries of male sorcery had cast upon the subjects having a uterus; 84). This makes the involvement of witches in the plot of Delaume’s novel but a logical response to misogynist oppression.

By “male sorcery” Delaume clearly means a patriarchal system that has rendered women marginal and invisible; the phrasing, however, is worth parsing. First, Delaume does not mention women but rather individuals who are possessed of a uterus, thereby suggesting that “women” as a category could just be an effect of patriarchal spells. Second, by referencing “male sorcery,” she not only inverts the stereotype of the witch as the enemy of the patriarchal order but also suggests that the establishment and maintenance of the patriarchy is *maleficium* (i.e., harmful magic).

Finally, in linking the birth of the Party of the Circle to the need to neutralize the spell cast by male sorcery, it identifies witchcraft as a crucial political force.

As I have noted in Chapter One, the witch has long functioned as a key symbol of antipatriarchal struggle. In *Les Sorcières de la République*, however, witches function primarily as a representation of true sisterhood; as such, they embody a horizontal collectivity and play a collective function. In the novel, witches differ from all other female characters (such as the Sibyl, the six Greek goddesses, or Marjolaine Pithiviers) insofar as they lack individual histories and identities. Instead, they form a collective figure—a “mass,” if you will, unpossessed of personal traits and even personal names. Their power and freedom arise precisely from this lack of individuality: their anonymity ensures their safety and preserves the continuity of their magical practice.

Central to Delaume’s representation of witches are two collective spaces. The first is a place where they can gather informally, “un café-galerie décalé et arty” (an artsy and offbeat café-gallery; 253) named “le club Lilith” (Lilith’s club; 254) in an obvious homage to the mythical figure variously identified as Adam’s first wife, a she-demon, and a witch. The club holds workshops, hosts marathon readings of feminist texts, and supports the publication of “textes fondateurs” (founding texts; 259) housed in the club’s library along with Monique Wittig, Noémie Klein, Judith Butler, Hélène Cixous, and many other “écrivaines énervées” (angry writers; 254). Above all, the club provides a space where congregants can feel comfortable, exchange ideas, and learn the true meaning of female solidarity.

It is in this context that Delaume’s makes a crucial distinction between “sorcières” (witches) and mere “femmes de pouvoir” (women of power; 256). As the Sibyl puts it, “La *sororité*, c’est le socle. C’est ce qui différencie les sorcières des

femmes de pouvoir” (*Sisterhood* is the foundation. It’s what differentiates witches from women of power; 256). Women of power may hold authority, influence, and responsibility, but can only do so by embracing individualism and competition, which limits their ability to practice sisterhood. By contrast, witches may be feared and loathed, but their embrace of the collective makes them uniquely suited to the practice of sisterhood.

Delaume’s distinction between witches and women of power can be easily mapped onto my distinction between sisterhood and sorority. Witches embody sisterhood, whereas women of power align with sorority. At the same time, the distinction emphasizes the political problem implicit in the novel. Women of power cannot be witches, since the privileges they enjoy inevitably limit their ability to know true sisterhood. By the same token, witches cannot be women of power, for true sisterhood inevitably comes in the way of the very privileges that distinguish women of power. And yet, both witches and women of power are arguably encompassed within Delaume’s “sororité,” since both would be needed for the revolution that the novel envisions to be successful. For things to change, witches and women of power must find common ground and reach a mutual understanding.

The second collective space central to Delaume’s representation of witches is the Party of the Circle, which is where witches come to possess political agency. The Party of the Circle is defined in the novel as “une cellule d’activistes pagano-féministes, qui pratiquaient la magie à des fins politiques” (a cell of pagan-feminist activists who practiced magic for political purposes; 16). This definition is telling: in *La Jeune Née* (1975, translated as *The Newly Born Woman* in 1986), Catherine Clément and Hélène Cixous singled out the witch as the emblem of an emergent feminist subjectivity in part because it “incarnate[d] the reinscriptions of the traces of

paganism that triumphant Christianity repressed.”¹⁰ Feminism has long associated Judeo-Christian monotheism with patriarchal oppression, and the polytheism of paganism with a socio-political alternative founded on inclusivity and a more balanced distribution of power. Hence the relevance of Wicca—perhaps the best-known form of modern pagan, or neo-pagan religion—to some feminist thinking.¹¹ In an “ALERTE ENVOUTÈMENT” (ENCHANTMENT ALERT; 140) Delaume humorously warns that the publications issued by the Party of the Circle may spellbind younger readers, pushing them toward paganism. The novel’s message, however, is entirely serious: women need to know what the world looked like “avant le lancement par Trinité Corp de la carrière de Jésus-Christ” (before Trinity Inc. launched Jesus Christ’s career; 267)

Witchcraft and Performativity

In the novel, Delaume mentions many feminist theorists, from Hélène Cixous and Starhawk to Monique Wittig and Clotilde Mélièse. The name most frequently invoked, however, is that of Judith Butler. Delaume’s interest in Butler is inextricably linked to her interest in gender performativity, a concept to which *Les sorcières de la République* alludes repeatedly. Butler has famously defined gender not “as a *role* which either expresses or disguises an interior ‘self’ [but rather as]... an ‘act’... which constructs the social fiction of its own psychological interiority.”¹² In other words, gender is not an ontology; instead, it is a set of performances that appear natural only insofar as they are constantly repeated.

It is important to note that performativity is not the same as performance. Butler themselves drew a clear distinction between the two when they noted that performance presupposes the existence of a subject, whereas performativity contests

the very idea of a preexisting subject.¹³ From this perspective, Butler's notion of performativity comes very close to the speech act theory of J. L. Austin. In *How to Do Things with Words* (1962), Austin proposed that language does not merely name reality but also produces the reality it names. Uttered in the appropriate ritual or institutional contexts, formulas such as "I now pronounce you man and wife" or "I bet you sixpence" effectively create the reality to which they refer.¹⁴ Just like the phrase "I now pronounce you man and wife" sanctions the formation of a married couple, the phrase "I bet you sixpence" establishes a real-life wager.

Scholars have repeatedly noted the extent to which Austin's speech acts could be understood as "magical" or "witchy."¹⁵ Indeed, the belief that language (or at least some languages) did things—that words could create the reality they named—was fundamental to the practice of ritual magic. In *De Occulta Philosophia, Libri Tres* (*Three Books of Occult Philosophy*, 1533), for instance, the Renaissance magus Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa (1486-1535) noted that certain words and phrases had the power to affect reality and change not only the minds and bodies of the people who heard them, but also "other bodies and things that [had] no life."¹⁶

In *Les Sorcières de la République*, when the Sibyl refers to Judith Butler not just as a mere philosopher, but rather as a witch-philosopher— "C'est une philosophe importante, mais elle est également sorcière" (She is an important philosopher, but she is also a witch"; 133)—she underscores the importance of gender performativity in the struggle against the "male sorcery" of patriarchy.¹⁷ By questioning the ontologies of "man" and "woman," Butler offers both an escape from gender norm and a promise of different social structure. This is precisely what makes Butler a witch: the ideas expressed in books such as *Gender Trouble* (1990) and *Excitable*

Speech (1997)—both of which the Sibyl references explicitly—hold for Delaume a power that is close to magic.

In *Les Sorcières de la République*, Delaume eagerly embraces the capacity of the performative to effect social and political change. The objective, as described by the Sibyl, is “d’utiliser la puissance de la langue pour se réapproprier sa capacité d’action (to use the power of language to reclaim its capacity for action; 263). This can be done first and foremost by taking charge of the utterances that shape women’s existences, changing them until they become capable “de conjurer votre moi comme vous le souhaitez” (of conjuring yourself as you wish; 263). By modifying words, women can modify the world.

Conjuring oneself as one wishes does not mean, however, that any spell will do. The novel is careful to point out while “en magie, demander c’est obtenir” (in magic, asking is receiving; 262) it is necessary that the ask be properly formulated. For “[s]i la demande est mal définie, le résultat peut-être pénible, les regrets nombreux, indélébiles” ([i]f the request is poorly defined, the result can be painful, the regrets numerous, and indelible; 262). In other words, for women to reclaim social and political power through the magical force of language, it is necessary that they first learn how to wield that power appropriately. This makes imperative that witches be properly trained through a humorously trademarked “verbothérapie®” (verbothérapie®; 262), a healing method founded on the ability of persuasive speech to remedy physical and mental illness. Thus, the revolutionary work of witches begins when women learn to know themselves, understand, and accept themselves, and accept themselves. Only at that point they become ready to formulate the right ask—or better yet, what the novel calls “la demande juste, adaptée à l’attente réelle, à ce qui

manque pour s'accomplir" (the right request, adapted to the real expectation, to what is missing to fulfill oneself; 263).

In conclusion, in *Les Sorcières de la République* performativity, witchcraft, and feminist liberation are intimately connected. Delaume's objective is to use the power of language to reclaim women's agency, which makes witchcraft—a domain in which words have the ability not just to manipulate the natural environment and influence people but to create new knowledges and practices—an especially promising metaphor. This is why witches are so central to Delaume's novel; they understand both the power of language and the promise that this power affords. At the same time, Delaume's insistence on "verbothérapie®" as a necessary preliminary to witchcraft practice emphasizes the potential pitfalls of this vision. For spells can be easily cast before the right requests are formulated.

Why Did the Revolution Fail?

As it turns out, the sororal society briefly achieved in Delaume's novel is one of such miscast spells. Several aspects of the feminist project that bring witches to power quickly prove lethal to its political implementation. There are aspects of repetition: unable to escape mythical and historical precedent, women engage in the same pattern of violence typical of men's revolutions. Then, there is internecine division, whether in the form of intergenerational tension, personal rivalries, or social splintering.

The very Greek pantheon to which Aphrodite, Artemis, Athena, Demeter, Hera, and Hestia belong is the result of not just one but rather *two* political revolutions. As the story goes, before the Olympians there were the Titans (the brothers Oceanus, Coeus, Crius, Hyperion, Iapetus, and Cronus and the sisters Thea, Rhea, Themis, Mnemosyne, Phoebe, and Tethys). These had established their power

by rebelling against and presumably killing their father Uranos, replacing him with Cronos. In turn, Cronos' children (the brothers Zeus, Hades and Poseidon and the sisters Hera, Demeter, and Hestia) established their power by rebelling against their father and hurling the Titans into the underworld. In the novel, when the goddesses first set the wheels of their project in motion, it is this sanguinolent pattern that they follow: they get together and kill all the male Olympians.

From this perspective, the project of "sororité" outlined in the novel tends to repeat the errors of earlier "fraternités"—especially those of the French Revolution. When the Greek goddesses kill their male counterparts, they invoke not just mythological precedent but also the historical experience of "la Terreur" (the Reign of Terror) that followed the creation of the First French Republic. Likewise, when the witches of the Party of the Circle achieve power, they immediately use black magic to punish their political opponents: they turn the executives of the French National Front into "Maltese Bichons" (Maltese dogs; 126) and male Republicans into "succulents chapons rôtis" (succulent roasted capons; 126).

Delaume's choice of metamorphoses is humorously satirical, of course. It seems especially appropriate that French National Front executives should be turned into Maltese dogs, for the latter are known for barking at strangers and the former are deservedly infamous for "barking" at immigrant populations—strangers they would rather keep beyond France's national borders. Likewise, it seems especially appropriate that Delaume (who skewers socialist) should picture male Republicans as capons, as if to underscore both their distance from and their obeisance to the *coq gaulois* or Gallic rooster (a French national symbol).

Part of what makes these metamorphoses humorous is the disempowering they imply. Maltese dogs might bark and snap at strangers, but they are also small,

dependent on their masters, and largely inoffensive. As for capons, they are male chickens gelded or castrated at a young age, before they have a chance to become roosters; while they make delicious food, they tend to be less assertive than their ungelded counterparts, rarely crow, and cannot fertilize eggs. In both cases, metamorphosis involves a loss, whether a decline in social status, a drop in agential power, or both. In the case of male Republicans who turn into capons, this loss can also be understood not only as symbolic emasculation but also as a physical castration. Seen in this light, the magical metamorphoses willed by the Party of the Circle seem to invoke the legacy of Heinrich Kramer and Jacob Sprenger's *Malleus Maleficarum*, which attributed to witches the ability of making penises vanish.¹⁸

While the objective of these transformations is to reclaim justice and equality, males are clearly being targeted at the very beginning of the revolution, they are now the victims, rather than the perpetrators of political violence. By transforming the political opponent into dogs and capons, the witches of the Party of the Circle violently disrupt what we have come to know as the political order. Disturbing conceptions of witchcraft as *maleficium*, and traditional depictions of the witch as a figure of fear and revulsion begin to enter the picture.

Another problematic aspect of the feminist revolution depicted in *Les Sorcières de la République* is the strife that arises among the Greek goddesses. This is fully described in an email exchange between the goddess Artemis and Jesus Christ. First, there is intense competition for power and no agreement as to who should lead the group: in her emails, Artemis complains bitterly not only about the inadequacy of her tiny quarters in Paris but also about the arrogance and self-conceit of Hera, who fancies herself “la Diva du Powerpoint” (a Powerpoint diva; 181) and insists on leading the group. Second, there are personal jealousies and antagonisms, such as

those between Hera (Zeus' sister-wife) and Artemis (Zeus' illegitimate daughter by the Titan goddess Leto). Third, there is intergenerational conflict: Artemis, who is somewhat younger than Hera, Hestia, and Demeter, complains that she's treated by them like "une gamine" (a child; 185).¹⁹ The language Artemis uses further emphasizes the distance between different generations. Jesus and Artemis both belong to a younger generation (Artemis is the daughter of Zeus just like Jesus is the son of God) and use the language typical of French youth. When Artemis talks about Hera, she refers to her as "la ieuve" (the old woman; 181). This is the same as "la vieille" (the old woman) but in *verlan*, an argot invented by French youth as a secret language to rebel against their parents.²⁰

Intimately related to the strife arising among the goddesses is the stratification of the revolutionary enterprise as a whole. While the Sibyl's account generally suggests the forging of sisterly bonds between and across different constituencies—women in power, witches, goddesses, and so forth—parts of her recollections also indicate that sisters with more power (i.e., the goddesses) have often imposed their visions on sisters with less power (i.e., women politicians). We quickly learn, for instance, that Élisabeth Ambrose was merely a ventriloquist's marionette, her voice merely an echo of either Hera's or the Cumean Sibyl's ideas. "J'ai pris beaucoup de plaisir à parler en public (I took great pleasure in speaking in public), the Sibyl admits at one point, "à faire bouger les lèvres d'Élisabeth Ambroise, même si avec Héra, souvent on se relayait" (to make Élisabeth Ambrose's lips move, even if with Hera we often took turns; 327).

If the goddesses and the Sibyl can manipulate Élisabeth Ambrose for their own purposes, it becomes unclear how the feminist society born in the wake of the 2017 election differs from the patriarchal society that preceded it. In both cases, those who

have power end up imposing their view of the world on those who do not. This raises questions about the political effectiveness of sorority in the absence of genuine sisterhood.

Delaume's English translator, Dawn Cornelio, understands this absence as the root cause of the political failure depicted in *Les Sorcières de la République*. Building on Delaume's contention that patriarchy has socially conditioned women to be rivals—engaged in constant comparison and competition rather than in mutual acceptance and reciprocal support—Cornelio reads the novel as a comment on the ways that our society prevents solidarity and cooperation. Quoting psychologist Carol Gilligan, she observes that patriarchy, “although frequently understood as the oppression of women by men, literally means a hierarchy, a rule of priests, in which the priest, the hieros, is a father.”²¹ This means that society's current shortcomings cannot be overcome by simply replacing the hierarchy of the father (patriarchy) with its inversion, i.e., the hierarchy of the mother (matriarchy). While it is necessary to challenge the patriarchy—for placing men atop the social hierarchy impedes the recognition that women are autonomous creatures endowed with fundamental rights and freedoms—it is also necessary to challenge the logic on which all hierarchies rest. In other words, it is not enough for women to fight against their own oppression; for real change to occur, they must join with men to fight against all forms of oppression.

Cornelio does not address the role that witchcraft plays in Delaume's political scheme. Yet it is important to remember that witches have been often understood as figures of symbolic inversion.²² According to Stuart Clark, for instance, demologists routinely depicted witchcraft as an upside-down model that was diametrically opposed not only to the Church but also to the political order that the Church

sanctioned. The witches' sabbath as described by Pierre de *Lancre's Tableau de l'inconstance des mauvais anges et demons* (1612) or Francesco Maria Guazzo's *Compendium maleficarum* (1626) is a perfect case in point, as the gathering parodied the Christian Mass and engaged in taboo behavior: Satan was worshipped in lieu of God, poisons distributed in place of the Eucharist, dances performed backward, human flesh consumed, and incestuous couplings engaged in with abandon. Thus witchcraft implied "the reversal of [normative] relationships of authority, sexuality and status"; it placed women over men, sons over fathers, and subjects over lords.²³

Most scholars agree that symbolic inversion represents a critical response to the status quo, insofar as it "inverts, contradicts, abrogates or... presents an alternative to commonly held cultural codes, values and norms, be they linguistic, literary or artistic, religious, or social and political."²⁴ As such, symbolic inversion constitutes an important challenge to dominant discourses: in the upside-world it creates, the asymmetries of power embedded in binaries such as man/woman, master/slave, black/white are neatly reversed. It is precisely this inversion that has driven much of feminism's interest in witches: from the earliest stages of the movement, witches have been used "to demonstrate both the power of women's resistance to patriarchal norms and [the] patriarchal fear... of feminist transgressions."²⁵

But while symbolic inversion represents an important critique of the status quo, it is not at all clear that it can be effective in political practice. This is because symbolic inversion is generally trapped in the same binaries which it seeks to reverse. As such, it rarely offers truly innovative formulations of how things could or should be. For true change to occur, it is not enough to invert the bifurcations typical of patriarchal culture; the binary oppositions on which that culture rests must be deconstructed.

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, Delaume's interest in witchcraft is intimately related to her embrace of performativity as an engine of social and political change. Language has the power to change the world, but we only experience this power at its weakest: as political sloganeering, news discourse, social media communication. Journalists, politicians and activists promise and herald change, but they rarely understand such change as dismantling the binary opposition between "word" (logos) and "deed" (ergon). As I see it, it is this opposition that performativity tries to undo—and it is this undoing that drives Delaume's interest in witchcraft. Indeed, it might not be too much of a stretch to say that the French novelist believes in the transformative power of her fiction just as much as practitioners of ceremonial magic believe in the transformative power of the spells they cast or the incantations they recite.

In *Les Sorcières de la République*, performativity fails to change society in part because the binary between word and deed is maintained. Just like the Sibyl's efforts to forge lasting change through verbotherapy® fail, the attempt to deploy ceremonial magic on a mass-scale reduces witchcraft to a consumer-oriented product. The shift occurs just as soon as the Party of the Circle comes to power: grimoires are sold in bookstores as if they were mere recipe books, and the casting of spells turns into a relatively meaningless occurrence, as the banality of the grimoires' titles indicate: "55 sortillèges pour gentiment changer ce monde, [...] L'Exorcisme pour les nul ; L'envoûtement, c'est maintenant" (55 spells to slowly change the world [...] exorcism for dummies [...] enchantment in movement; 261).

By normalizing spells and turning grimoires into commodities, Delaume seems to challenge old negative stereotypes about witches, suggesting that ceremonial magic is just another aspect of human culture. At the same time, the banalization of

spellcrafting implicit in mass-market grimoires suggests that the language of witchcraft has been largely deprived of its transformative, truly revolutionary potential. As a result, Delaume's novel at once appropriates witches and rejects them. It appropriates witches as "sisters" "qu'... ont appris le sortilège d'unité" (who have learned the spell of unity) as well as practitioners of ceremonial magic who understand the power of language to create reality.²⁶ It rejects witches as second-wave emblems of female empowerment—which is to say, as mere inversions of social binaries such as gender and ethnicity.

The dystopian vision put forth in *Les Sorcières de la République* does not mean that women are doomed to repeating the errors of men. Rather, it means that creating a more equitable society requires us to rethink our strategies and approaches. The project of feminist liberation is both recent and incomplete: in France, women only got the right to vote only in 1944, the right to establish a bank account without the approval of their husband in 1965, and the right to have an abortion in 1975. In some countries, women have none of these rights; in others, some of these rights are currently being rolled back.

Even in places where the project of feminist liberation is more advanced, the binaries that keep social and political hierarchies in place are largely untouched—in part because feminism has been thus far unable to dislodge them. Achieving this end requires a shift in attitude, one that understands patriarchy not as the oppression of women by men, but as the oppression of the powerless by the powerful, no matter their gender. To the extent that *Les Sorcières de la République* seeks to facilitate this shift in attitude, it is itself an example of "verbothérapie®"—part of the revolutionary work that begins when women learn to cast the right spells.

¹ All French quotations are from Chloé Delaume, *Les Sorcières de la République* (Paris : Seuil, 2016). Unless otherwise noted, all English translations are my own.

² La Grande Librairie, "Chloé Delaume donne le pouvoir aux femmes dans sa fiction Les Sorcières de la République," YouTube video, 28 October 2016, 13:21, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pYwenJ6URmA>.

³ Katherine K. Young and Paul Nathanson, *Sanctifying Misandry: Goddess Ideology and the Fall of Man*, (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2010), 132.

⁴ On this topic, see Dawn Cornelio, "Transgresser Les Limites Du Patriarcat : Les Clés de La Révolution Féministe d'après Chloé Delaume," *Transgression(s) in Twenty-First-Century Women's Writing in French* (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 251–66.

⁵ La Grande Librairie, 13:21.

⁶ La Grande Librairie, 13 :21.

⁷ Caroline Criado Perez, *Invisible Women: Data Bias in a World Designed for Men* (London: Penguin Books, 2019).

⁸ Barbara Fredrickson and Tomi-Ann Roberts, "Objectification Theory: Toward Understanding Women's Lived Experiences and Mental Health Risks," *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 21.2 (1997): 173–206.

⁹ Chloé Delaume, *Mes Bien Chères Sœurs* (Paris: Seuil, 2019), 46.

¹⁰ Catherine Clément and Hélène Cixous, *The Newly Born Woman* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1975), 5.

¹¹ The intersection of feminism and Wicca is hard to chart exactly. The best-known case I am aware of is Dianic Wicca, a neo-pagan religion in which the divine is exclusively feminine.

¹² Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," *Performing Feminisms: Feminist Critical*

Theory and Theatre, ed. Sue-Ellen Case (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 279.

¹³ Peter Osborne and Lynne S. Segal, “Gender as Performance: An Interview with Judith Butler,” *Radical Philosophy: A Journal of Socialist and Feminist Philosophy* 67 (1994): 32–9, 33.

¹⁴ J. L. Austin, J. O. Urmson, and Marina Sbisa. *How to Do Things with Words*. 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975), 32. Austin does not use the phrase “I now pronounce you man and wife,” although many of his commentators do.

¹⁵ David Frankfurter, “Spell and Speech Act: The Magic of the Spoken Word,” *Guide to the Study of Ancient Magic*, ed. David Frankfurter (Boston: Brill, 2019), 609-625. See also Daniel J. Waller, “Transferring Performativity from Speech to Writing: Illocutionary Acts and Incantation Bowls,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 82.2 (2019): 233-44.

¹⁶ Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa, *Three Books of Occult Philosophy Translated Out of the Latin into the English Tongue by J.F.* (London, 1651), 151-152.

¹⁷ Although Butler’s preferred pronouns are “they/their,” Delaume uses “she/her.” My translation merely reflects the French original.

¹⁸ Heinrich Kramer and Jacob Sprenger, *Malleus Maleficarum*. Trans. P.G Maxwell-Stuart (Manchester: Manchester University Press: 2007), 150.

¹⁹ The term “gamine” means “(female) child.” When used to describe an adult, however, it has negative connotations, suggesting that the person described is “childish” and immature.

²⁰ Verlan works by separating the syllables of the word and reversing them, or by reversing the entire French word. In both cases, a new word is obtained.

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- ²¹ Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 101. Qtd. in Cornelio, "Transgresser les limites du patriarcat," 262.
- ²² Stuart Clark, "Inversion, Misrule and the Meaning of Witchcraft," *Past & Present*, 87 (1980): 98-127.
- ²³ Jonathan Dollimore, *Radical Tragedy: Religion, Ideology, and Power in the Drama of Shakespeare and His Contemporaries* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 26.
- ²⁴ Barbara A. Babcock, *The Reversible World: Symbolic Inversion in Art and Society* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press 1978), 14.
- ²⁵ Stephanie N. Scheurich, "Hex the Kyriarchy: The Resignification of the Witch in Feminist Discourse from the Suffrage Era to the Present Day," PhD diss., (Bowling Green State University, 2008), 1.
- ²⁶ Chloé Delaume, *Mes Bien Chères Sœurs* (Paris: Seuil, 2019), 46.

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