

Ryan Moore  
Women's Literature  
Critical Roundtable  
Witches & The Maternal

***“Misogyny & Matrophobia in Cinematic Witchcraft”***

*The Crucible* (1996)

Directed by Nicholas Hytner

Essay: “Re(dis)covering the Witches in Arthur Miller’s *The Crucible*”

Written by Wendy Schissel

*The Blair Witch Project* (1999)

Directed by Daniel Myrick, Eduardo Sanchez

Essay: “Gendered Imagination in *The Blair Witch Project*”

Written by Deneka C. MacDonald

*Rosemary’s Baby* (1968)

Directed by Roman Polanski

Essay: “*Rosemary’s Baby*, Gothic Pregnancy, and Fetal Subjects”

Written by Karyn Valerius

Horror movies have certain antagonists that appear frequently in the genre. Examples of such antagonists include vampires, zombies, and the presence of the Antichrist through witches and black magic. There are three classic horror movies that feature one of the oldest and most well-known movie antagonists of all time: the age-old concept of the Satanic witch. *The Crucible*, *The Blair Witch Project*, and *Rosemary's Baby* all showcase witches as evil villains in some form or another. *The Crucible* details the violent madness of the witch hunts that took place in Puritan New England around the 1690s; *The Blair Witch Project* depicts a film crew running through a forest trying to hunt down and film an evil witch rumored to reside in the area; and *Rosemary's Baby* tells the story of a coven of witches seeking to impregnate an unsuspecting woman with the child of the Antichrist. To the untrained viewer, these movies seem to be a harmless cinematic rendition of a typical horror movie plot: the good guys look for the bad guys, the bad guys scare the daylights out of the good guys as well as the audience, and the good guys try to bring down the bad guys. This plot that we have watched unfold so many times before is just a scratch on the surface of what the movie is subconsciously portraying. Through further scrutiny, one can theorize that these witches in movies tend to perpetuate misogyny and matrophobia in the minds of viewers who are uneducated in areas like Women's Gender and Sexuality Studies.

*The Crucible* is a movie that tends to perpetuate misogyny and matrophobia through the concept of witchcraft because the main conflict of the movie lies in whether or not a few female characters are witches. The plot of the movie is entirely devoted to this conflict. Wendy Schissel writes that, "In forty years of criticism very little has been said about the ways in which *The Crucible* reinforces stereotypes of *femme fatales* and cold and unforgiving wives in order to

assert apparently universal virtues” (1). The idea of a *femme fatale* was originated in the movie genre called *film noir*; the *femme fatale* is a female character that is often cold, emotionless, and usually seduces the male protagonist, leading to the male protagonist’s downfall. This concept is damaging to women because it makes women seem like they’re not trustworthy, or just using their looks and charm to get ahead in life. In *The Crucible*, the character of John Proctor is viewed as a “tragically heroic common man” and “a just man in a universe gone mad” while the innocent character of Elizabeth does not receive nearly the same treatment (1). *The Crucible* accurately portrays the Puritan values of the movie’s time period, which held men in a higher position of respect than women, thus perpetuating more misogyny and mistrust. Schissel goes on to define a key term that relates to this movie: “Implicit in Puritan theology, in [Arthur] Miller’s version of the Salem witch trials, and all too frequent in the society which has produced Miller’s critics is gynecophobia - fear and distrust of women” (1). Similarly, in the *Malleus Maleficarum* written in 1486, it is written that “All witchcraft comes from carnal lust which in women is insatiable” (1). It seems that *The Crucible* portrays a pattern of woman-blaming for the problems of the society in which they live, possibly out of need for a scapegoat for that society’s problems. One of the big inequalities of the time period was marital unfaithfulness. Back then, if a man cheated on his wife, he would never receive the same brutal punishment that a woman would receive if she did the same thing. Schissel writes, “*The Crucible* is evidence that [Arthur] Miller partakes of similar fears about wicked, angry, or wise women; even if his complicity in such gynecophobia is unwitting” (1).

Another example of a film that promotes misogyny (but not necessarily matrophobia) is *The Blair Witch Project*. This film clearly portrays the image of the witch in a negative light,

programming us to think that “Witches are evil, they kill small children, they perform sacrifice and murderous rituals, and they live in the depths of the unknown places we surely do not want to enter” (2). This film follows a long line of age-old stories that portray a female protagonist who causes a great catastrophe due to her curiosity: Pandora opens the box, Eve eats the apple, and in the case of *Blair Witch*, the female protagonist Heather dies a gruesome death for her trespass in the witch’s territory. This also ties into the *Malleus Maleficarum* quote saying that “all witchcraft comes from carnal lust which in women is insatiable”, which implies that women are somehow inherently wrong for exploring their curiosity. It’s even more interesting when you look at the traditional religious values in Islam and Christianity that often forbid masturbation, the easiest and medically safest way to explore and develop your own sexuality. Men are known to explore the unknown as well, but due to the patriarchal society that we live in, they are somehow impervious to the same flack that women get for exploring, both in real life and in cinema. Deneka MacDonald writes, “Seeing, learning, and knowledge are a masculine prerogative; they belong to the realm of public space which men occupy and are free to move within; women who violate this rule are dangerous and threatening” (2).

The last movie of the three selected, *Rosemary’s Baby*, is a film about a coven of witches that impregnate the female protagonist with the child of the Antichrist against her will. The most interesting aspect of this movie is the year in which it was released: abortion was illegal at the time. Resultingly, it is quite common to find allusions to the issue of abortion throughout the film, as well as the ongoing theme of misogyny and matrophobia in cinematic witchcraft. This film seems to suggest that men are the masters of a woman’s destiny, and once a woman becomes pregnant, she is obligated to carry it to term. In the film, Rosemary is manipulated by

her secretly-Satanist husband and doctor into keeping the child despite the adverse effects that the vampire-like child has on her. Karyn Valerius writes that, “Her pregnancy involves not one but all three of the circumstances in which the American Law Institute’s moral penal code provided for legal abortion; not only was she raped, but pregnancy compromises her physical health, while potential birth defects is established through anachronism” (3). Despite the fact that her life is threatened by the pregnancy, she cannot legally get an abortion, which begs the following question: how many women in history have been forced to have life-threatening babies against their will due to abortion being illegal? Hundreds of thousands, possibly millions? This is a truly horrifying idea to grasp. Furthermore, abortion is a concept often associated with scandalous sexual activity of unmarried women. And once again, the *Malleus Maleficarum* quote has relevance here: “All witchcraft comes from carnal lust which in women is insatiable”. This further perpetuates the idea that women are to blame when they get “knocked up”. In the final scene, the supposed leader of the coven manipulates her even further into potentially nursing the child, asking her, “Aren’t you his mother?” *Rosemary’s Baby* portrays male characters dominating a female protagonist and shaping her destiny to their will, perpetuating ideas of misogyny and matrophobia in the audience.

There is a clear pattern here, a pattern that no one can deny, and that is a pattern of female suppression by males, woman-blaming, and misogyny. *The Crucible* and *Rosemary’s Baby* are clear examples of a misogynistic male-dominated society, while *The Blair Witch Project* poses the idea that women are to blame for exploring their curiosity. Witches in cinema are portrayed as evil ninety-nine percent of the time; in fact, the average person would assume you are referring to a female if you refer to a “witch”. What people don’t realize is that the

audiences watching these movies are slowly programming themselves to think a certain way. When you continue to watch horror movies featuring weak, helpless females being dominated by nefarious males, you have a higher chance of developing misogynistic ideas subconsciously. An example of this would be the age-old notion that women are physically or mentally weaker, because they are portrayed that way in the movies. Perhaps we wouldn't live in such a patriarchal society today if our movies featured more able-bodied, smart, and strong female protagonists. But alas, the image of the witch in modern cinema will continue to perpetuate misogyny and matrophobia until someone releases a successful movie featuring a benevolent witch. The thing is, not many people would go see a movie about a witch that heals people, and one movie certainly cannot change the timeless concepts that are unique to the genre. One can only hope that the horror genre will mature and grow into something new and different, something much more palatable to both men and women alike.

**Endnotes & Works Cited**  
***“Misogyny & Matrophobia in Cinematic Witchcraft”***

- 1) “Re(dis)covering the Witches in Arthur Miller’s *The Crucible*”  
Wendy Schissel
- 2) “Gendered Imagination in *The Blair Witch Project*”  
Deneka C. MacDonald
- 3) “*Rosemary’s Baby*, Gothic Pregnancy, and Fetal Subjects”  
Karyn Valerius