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## Women Behaving Badly: Dahl's Witches Meet the Women of the Eighties

David Rees, "Dahl's Chickens: Roald Dahl," pp. 143-155

Michele Landsberg, *World of Children's Books: A Guide to Choosing the Best*, p. 89

Catherine Itzin, "Bewitching the Boys," p. 13

Kramer and Sprenger, *Malleus Maleficarum* in Barstow, *Witchcraze*, passim

Much of the criticism leveled at Roald Dahl's *The Witches* (1983) focuses on his alleged misogyny (Rees, 1988; Landsberg, 1988); perhaps the most powerful reaction comes from Catherine Itzin (1985), who claims that Dahl's text bears

a striking similarity to Kramer and Sprenger's misogynistic text, *Malleus Maleficarum*. . . . Both texts, although separated by over 400 years, match the anxiety of the authors to reassure themselves that women, not men, could be witches. . . . *The Witches* is a dangerous publication . . . [it] re-enforces culturally conditioned misogyny.

However, Itzin's criticism would seem more appropriate to Nicolas Roeg's 1989 film adaptation, *The Witches*, which might seem more in line with traditional criticisms of witches, especially those outlined in the 1486 witch hunter's manual, *Malleus Maleficarum*, mentioned by Itzin:

All witchcraft comes from carnal lust, which is in women insatiable. . . . What else is a woman but a foe to friendship, a necessary evil, a natural temptation. . . . And what, then is to be thought of those witches who in this way sometimes collect male organs in great numbers?

Before investigating the issue of misogyny in Dahl's book and Roeg's film, it will be useful to look at some of the more general differences between both texts. Roeg's film is based upon Dahl's basic narrative: A child is orphaned, taken by his grandmother to a seaside hotel, where he encounters a coven of witches, is transformed into a mouse, and finally, after defeating these witches, returns home with his grand-

mother. Yet, while the film generally preserves much of Dahl's narrative, at times it radically reworks it with such interpolations as the comic subplot featuring the hotel manager's affair with the chambermaid, the Grand High Witch's cat, the chase scene involving a Potemkin-like runaway pram, and the invention of a new character, Miss Irvine (the "good" witch). The most explicit difference is in the ending of the film. In Dahl's text, the child narrator (whose experiences are the most important) is permitted to remain a mouse; a necessary act of wish fulfillment resolving what is arguably the greatest of childhood fears—namely, separation anxiety (a mouse's shorter life span being compatible with that of the narrator's aged, beloved Grand-mamma):

I'll be a very old mouse and you'll be a very old grandmother and soon after that we'll both die together. (p.196)

In the film, Luke (the equivalent of Dahl's nameless child narrator) is changed back into a boy, and is thus destined, in the not-too-distant future, to find himself bereaved all over again. This suggests that Luke's story, or more specifically its resolution, is not the major concern of the film. What must now be explored in more detail is the significance of the witch in the book and to what extent Roeg's film uses the implied connection between evil and gender.

#### **Woman as Witch: Dahl's Location of Evil**

The Grand High Witch in Dahl's text is relatively asexual. Dahl's description of her is couched in conventional "feminine," diminutive terms: "tiny . . . very pretty" (p. 65), and while the description of her without her mask is extremely horrifying—"foul and putrid and decayed . . . rotting . . . the skin all cankered and worm eaten" (p. 66)—the horror is somewhat mitigated by Blake's illustrations and Dahl's humor (especially the illustration of her kicking the child's pet mice: "She would have made a great football player" p. 91). The book therefore conveys some sense of duality (however slight) in that Dahl's Grand High Witch has connotations of "prettiness" and diminutiveness with the mask on, and abject horror after it is removed, whereas Roeg's Grand High Witch is a vision of uncompromising evil in both roles.

Certainly Dahl's text could be interpreted as misogynistic on a less explicit level as there are references that link the Grand High Witch with the Devil: "Nobody has ever seen the Devil . . . but we know he exists" (p. 41), and with the serpent (the Devil in disguise). The association of witch and serpent creates a powerful duo of diabolism with connotations of Eve, temptation, seduction, and the fall of humanity. Thus, the second child taken by witches, was, according to Grand-mamma, tempted by "a nice lady" who had given her an apple (p.

18). But far more explicit is the witch's approach to the child playing in his tree house: "I have a present for you" (p. 43), says the witch as she endeavors to tempt the child down from the tree (of innocence?) with the offer of a "small green snake" (p. 44). The association with serpents is again evident in the description of the Grand High Witch with her "look of serpents" and "brilliant snake's eyes" (pp. 66–68).

However, female sexuality is not introduced as a weapon or threat in Dahl's text; or, at least, not as overtly as in many other fairytales. And, while Dahl asserts that "all witches *are* women," he goes on to state that "a ghoul is always a male. So indeed is a barghest" (p. 9). Dahl clarifies this later: "Witches are not actually women at all . . . they are totally different animals" (p. 30). So, what must be emphasized is that, in Dahl's text, the child narrator's story is central; his relative powerlessness against the potential or actual threat issuing from the world of conspiratorial and "all-powerful" (p. 39) adults. Dahl's text exposes this unequal balance in power between the child, whose transformation into a mouse makes him a more identifiable symbol of the small and the weak, and the adult, who, in the guise of the witch (with her supernatural powers), becomes a much more potent symbol of adult power. The issue of female subjectivity is not raised in Dahl's text; evil is not gender specific but is located within the "all-powerful" threatening adult figure.

#### A "Roeg" Reworking of Dahl's Witches

The screen narrative is also constructed upon the premise that power and evil are synonymous; however, this premise is manipulated to different ends. Roeg's film does include an examination of the power relationship between the child and the adult, similar to that found in Dahl's text, but is, to a much larger degree, an exploration of a very different type of power relationship. Ostensibly centred around Luke, the fairytale narrative of the film has a crucial function: It is a convenient, or more accurately, an *acceptable* framework upon which to hang another narrative—one that does not prioritize the experiences and fears of childhood but the fantasies and fears of adulthood.

Before looking at Roeg's depiction of the witch in detail, it will be useful to remind ourselves how women are conventionally represented in the movies, regardless of genre: They are almost *always* defined in terms of their sexuality. The "good woman" (that is, virginal, passive, castrated, helpless, victim) is either young, blond, and attired in white, or she is old, like Grandma, epitomizing the loving, nurturing, and maternal side of "woman." The "bad woman," on the other hand (that is, sexually active, predatory, castrating), is usually dark-haired and dressed entirely in black, like Miss Ernst. Whereas the

"good woman" is compliant according to patriarchal definitions of what woman should signify, the "bad woman" threatens or transgresses the role assigned to her by the patriarchal order, and consequently, she must either be reformed (forced to comply) or punished. Roeg adheres strictly to these conventional systems of representation in that every aspect of what it "means" to be a "woman" is represented by Miss Ernst/The Grand High Witch, her assistant Miss Irvine, and Grandma.

The "adult agenda" of the film becomes obvious if we consider the visual representation of Miss Ernst. She is evil/monstrous (that is, sexual) before she even removes her mask; a *femme fatale*, she is a predatory vamp in her stiletto heels, tight, low-cut black dress, severe black hair, and blazing red lipstick, both alluring and frightening as she leers into the camera. Anjelica Huston's performance in this role was overtly sexual, especially noticeable in her seductive approaches to Bruno Jenkins: "You're in for a treat—we all are," she declares, as her power is instantly transformed into *sexual* power and excitement (her heavy breathing and thrusting hips could readily be construed as the buildup to some orgasmic release), creating a scene that is as frightening as it is erotic. The association of serpent and witch is much more muted in the book: Dahl's Grand High Witch is nameless—she has only a title: "The Grand High Witch of All the World" (p. 38)—whereas Roeg's Grand High Witch is named *Eva*, a derivative of Eve, whose gender-specific "sins" (seduction, temptation, and the fall of *man* from a state of innocence) she appears to have inherited.

The most striking difference therefore, between Dahl's description of witches and Roeg's visual depiction of them, resides in the notion of female sexuality as "other": the allure of the erotic and the terror of the monstrous or "unnatural" being synonymous with female sexuality. Thus, what began as a fantastic narrative in Dahl's text explodes into one of horror in the film, as evil is shown to be located in the foreign and highly sexualized figure of the witch. However, what must be borne in mind is that the representation of female sexuality across the whole spectrum from virgin to whore, or from angel to monster, is not dependent upon female sexuality as a biological given, but is dependent upon female sexuality as a construction of patriarchal society and the male-dominated film industry. Therefore, it would seem appropriate to explore this notion of woman as evil and to examine the constructed nature of the representation itself.

#### **Freudian Fears: The "site" of Lack and the Denial of Difference**

Traditional readings of films view women as castrated beings. This construction of woman as the negative of man, or "not male," is, ac-

Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in *The Sexual Subject, A Screen Reader in Sexuality*, pp. 22-33

Sigmund Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, pp. 123-246

Susan Lurie, "The Construction of the 'Castrated Woman' in Psychoanalysis and Cinema," in Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine*, p. 5

Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine*, p. 6

Karen Horney, "The Dread of Woman," in Kaplan, *Women and Film: Both Sides of the Camera*, p. 31

According to Laura Mulvey, present in virtually all mainstream cinema. Consequently, this representation of woman evokes castration anxiety in the male viewer (an anxiety defined in accordance with Freudian theory, as arising from woman's lack). Mulvey believes that since mainstream cinema is designed for male pleasure, the castration anxiety that woman evokes must be "masked" or covered over. Roeg's visual narrative "plays" very much on an unconscious level, appearing primarily to soothe the castration anxiety woman provokes. This takes the form of voyeurism as the camera investigates woman in order to "demystify" her body, making it familiar and hence less threatening (a response that has associations with sadism—or control). Filmmakers also use fetishistic images such as long hair, long nails, stiletto-heeled shoes, and so on, which serve to replace or "stand-in" for the absent phallus. Clearly, the Grand High Witch is introduced in this way, as Eva Ernst, an erotic object of desire with her black outfit, including long black gloves and stiletto shoes. In accordance with Mulvey's theory, she is displayed, fetishized, objectified, lulling the male—who has constructed this fantasy of sexual "sameness"—into a false sense of security.

#### *Unmasking the Real Fear, or What Freud Failed to Mention*

The alleviation of castration anxiety is only temporary, as the visual narrative of Roeg's film also represents woman in accordance with the conventional systems of representation found specifically within the contemporary horror film. Drawing on an article by Susan Lurie, Barbara Creed views the threat or danger of female sexuality as a major ideological project of the contemporary horror film, a genre she believes is responsive to the question of, or crisis of, sexual identity:

Lurie challenges the traditional Freudian position by arguing that men fear women, not because women are castrated but because they are *not* castrated . . . *not* mutilated like a man might be *if he were* castrated; woman is physically whole, intact and in possession of all her sexual powers.

In Roeg's film, it is not woman's "supposed" castration that is the major threat which renders her terrifying but rather her role as a castrator. Eva Ernst is constructed as a dualistic symbol of female sexuality as not only is she alluring, promising sexual bliss, but horrifying, a signifier of death. According to Karen Horney:

Men have never tired of fashioning expressions for the violent force by which man feels himself drawn to woman, and side by side with his longing, the dread that through her he might die and be undone.

Eva Ernst's duality as a signifier of both sex and death is evident in various sequences; for instance, Mr Jenkins is obviously attracted to

what he describes as "international clientele" (Eva Ernst is literally foreign, being German and, more significantly, "foreign" being female), but simultaneously he is frightened of her. His fear is evident when he politely stammers "good evening" to her immediately after Grandma has informed him of what the Grand High Witch has done "to Bruno [his son] and thousands of other children before him." These sequences have been invented for the film adaptation in order to foreground, not the dangers of female sexuality, but man's fear of it. Indeed, in Dahl's text, Mr Jenkins betrays no sign of fear, for his response to his son's transformation is: "By Gad, I'll have my lawyers on to her for this!" (p. 183). To identify with the film version of Mr Jenkins, or indeed Mr Stringer (the hotel manager), who is also attracted to, yet fearful of, Eva Ernst, is to be rendered *psychologically* impotent in the unconscious fear that one might be rendered *physically* impotent.

Thus, the protective fantasy constructed around her image crumbles, as images of the powerful castrator are foregrounded: the red lips and visible teeth of the witch—suggestive of the *vagina dentata* (a vagina with teeth being a powerful allegory of male fears)—render her a potential threat both physically and psychologically to male sexuality. The construction of predatory female sexuality is evident in the tree house sequence as the red lips and visible teeth of the witch are emphasized when she "hypnotizes" the snake. This is a contemporary version of Eve in that *she controls* the snakes: "they wriggle away quite quickly—unless you tell them not to." The suggestion of the *vagina dentata* is also evident as the camera lingers on the Grand High Witch's mouth when she leers at Bruno and Luke during their transformations; indeed, the camera's emphasis on the Grand High Witch's wide open-mouth is evident every time she maniacally cackles. Thus, if eating replaces sex in Dahl's narrative (Bruno's constant eating and the references to the witches "who make the grown-ups eat their own children" p. 38), eating or devouring in Roeg's narrative becomes synonymous with sex. The Grand High Witch is representative perhaps of the ultimate in male heterosexual sadomasochistic fantasy.

Of course, to interpret any powerful and potentially dangerous female character as a castrator is a popular, almost clichéd critical stance. However, this particular stance is unavoidable with regard to Roeg's film, as images suggestive of the castrating aspects of woman are too numerous to ignore. Furthermore, not only is the image of woman/witch herself suggestive of the power or ability to castrate but this suggestion is also conveyed through other images that subliminally connect with the *vagina dentata*. An explicit example is the Grand

High Witch's cat, "Liebchen," who poses the same threat as woman; as Grandma claims, to enter the Grand High Witch's room would be to enter "the jaws of death." This proves almost true for the mouse-child, and indeed for the audience, as we are confronted with a close-up of the cat's open jaws and sharp teeth. Other incidents suggestive of the threat of castration, also not present in Dahl's text, include the lift doors snapping shut on Bruno-mouse's tail, and the proliferation of mousetraps placed around the hotel. Thus, the comic episode of Luke-mouse in the chef's trousers, an empowering comic incident for the child in Dahl's text, could take on a more sinister meaning in the film: "It's running around in my bloody underpants . . . someone get it out before it bites me." Likewise, Dahl's reference to the nursery rhyme *Three Blind Mice*: "One of the cooks cut off my tail with a carving knife" (p. 176) is an intertextuality that has a deeper resonance in a film that contains a plethora of sharp and dangerous images.

Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, p. 4

Not only is woman presented as a castrator but also as an "abject" being. Julia Kristeva defines "the abject" as that which "disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules." In the film, the figure of the witch (both fascinating and repulsive at the same time) brings about a disturbance of, or confrontation with, the boundaries between the human and the nonhuman. Behind what Grandma refers to as the "human face mask" is an image of abject female sexuality, a grotesque being who not only rejects the Judeo-Christian construction of woman as a procreator but transgresses it totally in that she wishes to murder children. The Grand High Witch represents a being who is totally "other," her hideous appearance reflecting the magnitude of her transgression. Thus, the motif of masking and unmasking, while important in Dahl's narrative, becomes crucial in the film. The whole sexualized image of Eva Ernst is simply a mask, a construction courtesy of the Hollywood "dream factory," designed to encode woman as not only an erotic object for the pleasure of the male spectator but also as a dangerous *femme fatale*, thereby enhancing his sexual thrill. When she removes the mask, there is another mask, literally, serving to confront the spectator with the abject evil or *deformity* defined as "woman," which consequently serves to punish him for his voyeuristic activities. Thus, the film simultaneously attempts to disavow woman's sexual difference and while perversely it strives to unmask or emphasize it. It could be argued therefore that Roeg's film is a pictorial journey into the male psyche. The representation of women in mainstream films has been neatly summed up by Haskell who claims that woman is "the vehicle of men's fantasies, the 'anima' of the collective male unconscious, and the scapegoat of men's fears." In Roeg's film the overt connection between women

Molly Haskell, *From Reverence to Rape: The Treatment of Women in the Movies*, p. 207

and evil presents not a picture of the problems of female sexuality but the perceptible fragility of patriarchal power and control.

### **Women on Top**

This presentation of troubled masculinity is the symptomatic meaning of the film. If we consider that it was made at the end of a decade when women took a much more assertive and active role in the public sphere, the film could be interpreted as a reflection of the crisis of identity provoked by the female encroaching on what was traditionally perceived as male territory. Eva Ernst's arrival at the hotel signals the arrival of a sexually assertive, economically independent, power-dressed, successful career woman, with her own briefcase-carrying, mobile-phone-wielding personal assistant; or in phallogocentric discourse, she is the "castrating bitch" of the 1980s. In this respect she represents a psychological threat to the male in that she has cast herself in his traditional role as the power-hungry predator. There are no positive adult male characters in the film. Even the male doctor of Dahl's text has become female in a film in which power is depicted as residing in, and being wielded by, women. Hence, Luke's simple statement, "they're everywhere"—a statement he makes on glimpsing yet another purple-eyed witch working in the hotel kitchens (not in Dahl's text)—takes on a deeper meaning.

Women not only successfully infiltrated the male-dominated public sphere but sometimes held prominent or prestigious positions within it—a very intimidating prospect for the two men (seen only from the knee down) walking along the hotel corridor: "She's a very pleasant woman . . . question is, what's she like to work for?" And, what exactly is the female boss like to work for? The film depicts her as grossly unfair, an employer who not only mistreats her staff—"You are not here to enjoy yourself, you are here as my staff, go to your room"—but who also cannot brook any opposition to her plans without obliterating the unfortunate dissenter. If we are prepared to stretch the imagination further, this film, made by a British director, largely on location in England, may have an extra resonance to a British (adult) audience, being not only a social and sexual allegory of the eighties "power-woman" but also a political allegory of the eighties in Britain. In this reading the Grand High Witch becomes Margaret Thatcher, someone who was often depicted satirically in media cartoons as possessing the sharp facial attributes of the witch (and, of course, her extreme right-wing politics have been satirically aligned with Nazism). The film follows her arrival, amidst sycophantic admiration and applause, at the Conservative party's annual seaside conference. Here she eagerly anticipates a future generation made up of mice only (like her male Cabinet colleagues perhaps?), not only oppo-

sing dissent amongst her underlings—"Who dares to argue with me?"—but totally annihilating it: "A witch who dares to say I'm wrong, will not be with us very long."

Anne Llewellyn  
Barstow, *Witchcraze*,  
passim

Demonizing women who refuse to conform to patriarchal strictures is not a new phenomenon. An examination of the documented evidence of the witch hunts and trials from the fifteenth century to the eighteenth century reveals a connection between a woman's social status and her representation as evil. Accusations of witchcraft, arising from irrational but deeply felt fears and social anxieties, appear to have intensified in direct response to periods of social, economic, political, and sexual unrest among women. In these societies, any woman who was perceived to be deviant in some way—assertive, "too" successful, nonconformist—in short, any woman who challenged the patriarchal order—might be suspected of witchcraft. A contemporary female such as Mrs Thatcher attracted great public interest not simply because of her radical policies but primarily because she was the first female prime minister of a Western state. Patriarchy has a vested interest in dehumanizing successful women who threaten male subjectivity: On the one hand, this dehumanization represents an attempt to deflect attention from male insecurities, and on the other hand, it also justifies punishing the woman for her deviancy from the gender role assigned her by the patriarchal order. In fact, the sequence in the film when the witches are transformed into mice and subsequently destroyed by the hotel employees is an act of pure wish fulfillment, an act in which the balance of power begins to shift until it is restored to what is perceived to be its rightful place. In Dahl's text these scenes are not particularly dwelt upon; we are not told, for instance, who kills the Grand High Witch, whereas in the screen narrative we are shown Mr Stringer attacking and finally destroying her.

The resolution of the film emphasizes its priority; specifically, that the aberrant female must be brought back within ideological harness. The only witch who has not been destroyed is Miss Irvine, who, feeling piqued at her ill treatment, decides to "quit" her position, claiming that she "didn't want to be one of them anyway." Thus, she can be restored to her traditional, culturally defined position as "feminine." Having rejected her evil ways—these evil ways being synonymous with a high-powered career—she loses her abjectness; her "reward" is to be "normalized." This is evident in the shot of her watching Grandma and Luke-mouse leaving the hotel. In this sequence, Miss Irvine is shot in soft focus (emphasizing the attractiveness of softness/femininity), without her gloves, thus revealing her hands, now minus the witch's talons. The screen narrative therefore suggests, that not only can evil, or "powerful woman," be destroyed but in some instances reformed. Miss Irvine, by the closure of the narrative, has

embraced her "natural" role as a woman (maternal, procreative, nurturing), enabling Luke-mouse to be reborn as a human child. In this sequence, the camera angle creates a "tunnel" or birth canal with Miss Irvine at one end and Luke at the other. As the blue light issuing from her finger reaches him, he "breaks out" from his little house, is "born" naked and spinning through the air, with his head appearing disproportionately large, like that of a fetus.

Miss Irvine is therefore an important "invention" for the film narrative, having a dualistic (and connected) function: to transform Luke back into a human child and to restore the patriarchal meaning of "woman." Her arrival at Grandma's house signals that this is imminent. The canted framing of this shot is tilted in the opposite direction to that of the shot which put the world out of joint (the shot preceding the fatal accident), suggesting that the world will shortly be returned to normality not only for Luke but for patriarchy, whose power to ascribe gender definition or meaning is not only reaffirmed, but more importantly, given validity. Female power, like the figure of the witch itself, was only a fantasy, a temporary aberration.

### Conclusion

Dahl's text has been shown to be extremely susceptible to an adaptation that serves a different purpose. To an adult audience in the latter half of the 1980s, the dynamics of the adult-child relationship would not have been of such immediate interest as the gender politics of the time. Thus, the figure of the witch in the film serves to reflect and indeed confirm the myths perpetuated by patriarchal society with regard to the powerful "new woman." What Roeg succeeds in doing is to reassert the relevance of the witch (a figure who had, by the twentieth century, become totally irrelevant) to the prevailing social climate. Through this figure, Roeg gives cinematic shape to the anxiety of contemporary society, an anxiety that was inextricably bound up with a fear of social change. Applying the conventions of mainstream film narrative, specifically as regards the representation of women, to the horrific concept of bodily transformation, the film attempted to locate the crisis of identity that pervaded all aspects of life (political, sexual, economic, and social) in Britain in the 1980s.

The destruction of the disturbing elements—the witches, or more accurately, *the women*—provides a magical solution to what are perceived to be the collective ills of contemporary society. It is this shift in emphasis that renders the film a compensatory experience for society in general, rather than exclusively for the child. Indeed, from the vantage point of the nineties, the film could be construed as an appropriate epitaph to Britain in the 1980s.

Roald Dahl then is not so guilty of what Itzin claimed. Nicolas Roeg, in creating a subtext in which potential misogyny is explicit, is more so. But Itzin wrote her criticism of Dahl's book in the mid-eighties; perhaps she too was caught up in the eighties fear of women behaving badly.

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