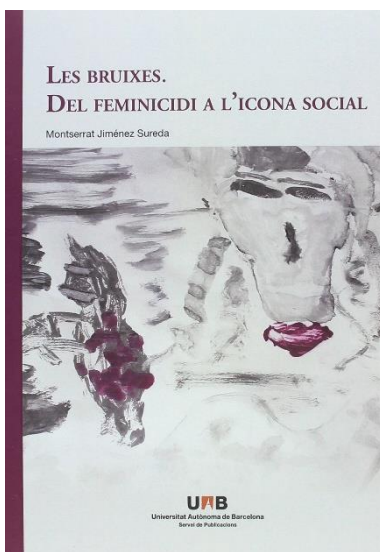


A WITCH STORY

Montserrat JIMÉNEZ SUREDA, *Les bruixes: del feminicidi històric a l'icona social* [The witches. From historic femicide to social icons]. Barcelona, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, 2017, 68 pp.



I was about eight years old when my siblings and I would sit in our living room and my father would hide behind one of the sofas and jump right out and shriek with his arms held up high and his fingers curved into claws and his eyebrows curved up high too. And his nose. His nose would twitch and his lips would curve downwards as he re-enacted a scene of *The Wizard of Oz* he played at school when he was only in fifth grade. He played the Wicked Witch of the West.

Within the plurality of recovered stories lies invisibility. The picking and choosing has led to a narrative which veiled their singings and conceived them as a single voice: history. Within any history lies the danger of a single story¹. History appears as a non-being with the ability to tell stories in a sort of horizontal direction establishing itself as intrinsically diachronic. At this stage, I would rather not enter the field of linguistics since I would much rather take into consideration the analytical notion of narrative levels by Genette to ponder on the place of history in itself. Within this sphere of study, history becomes an intra-heterodiegetic narrator. History as a storyteller, as a troubadour in a medieval court, giving shape to a woman without considering her existence. An entire network of social relationships —in this narrative, women are on the fringes of society, subject to the margins; they are isolated by omission or plainly disqualified. In any narrative, it is the woman as a witch.

Yet, what is a witch? And what has become of her?

The book covered in this review attempts to respond to this question with well-documented answers. The study that author Montserrat Jiménez Sureda has embarked on not only informs but reshapes our collective idea of this cultural icon that has always evolved in close relationship to specific events. These events have, in turn, found their way into ink and the author is able to succinctly trace the witch's collective unconscious script: that which allows us, in the present, to understand the multiplicity of the fragmented stories and the ability to evolve and adapt as if it were nothing but magic.

¹ Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2009). The danger of a single story [Video file]. Retrieved from https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story.

As a modern historian, Jiménez Sureda is aware of her place in history and, in *Les Bruixes: del feminocidi històric a l'icona social* [The witches. From historic femicide to social icon] (2017), just as the title suggests, she traces the story of women from the time when they were murdered to their vindication as a social icon: a documentation of the folly of the many and the fight of a few. The author describes the process which women have had to submit to in order to be recognised as a vital part in the development of prevailing ideologies and thus the thread of voices required to create a vast web of beliefs. The book can be clearly divided into two parts: the first part is a build-up to the turning point in history in which women became (somewhat) acknowledged leaders, whereas the second part is presented as an effect of the first as it gives examples of this transformation and the diversity of stories. The author skillfully intertwines academic research and documentation with popular culture knowledge and tales.

In the introduction, Jiménez Sureda depicts sensible anthropological notions regarding the origin of witches. She states that witches are an abstract creation of the human mind, also known as fiction, but that this fiction has had the ability to narrate fear, a fear that arises from our own otherness (9). Nevertheless, this fiction, as Aristotle has once suggested, does not lie within the narrative of truth but the narrative of verisimilitude. Hence, and bearing this in mind, the author comes to the conclusion that the history of the witches is nothing but a story of a fear.

In the first nine chapters the author portrays the role of the witch as inherent to upholding the power of a patriarchal Christian society: from the beginnings of Greek mythology to the witch hunt of the fifteenth century and the creation of the Inquisition in Spanish territory and its action in Spanish lands. During the latter time, she argues, witchcraft was regarded as a pagan superstition and religion (Christianity) had come to banish these unholy ways. Subjected to the Devil's will who is, also, paradoxically, a male dominant power of the subconscious, witches were in peril, bound to his whims and evil desires. Along two of these first chapters, the author focuses the study providing the reader with evidence as to why and how the collective imagery regarding the physical characteristics of the witch has been perpetuated. These descriptions have promoted a characterization that juxtaposes two universes: the real and the poetic. (It comes as no surprise that the manuals which belonged to the inquisitors have become a literary genre) (14).

Jiménez Sureda explains the inner workings —tales of suspicion and terror— for the patriarchal system to work. Many examples of this mechanism are given, mainly in Spanish territory, including a reflection upon the differences between wizards and witches in pre-Christian civilization —differences that we have become familiar with after J. K. Rowling's best-selling novels. Other examples show how madness, terror and horror were globalized and easily exported in order to solve political problems, social upheavals, economic distress and identity crises. Jerusalem and America are set as case studies for this phenomenon in a short yet on-point description of the problem, followed by case studies in Spain, England and United States follow, France and Joan of Arc.

After offering the reader a wide range of documents that have planted the seed for the collective unconscious to develop its own imagery and lead its own narrative, Jiménez Sureda highlights that,

even though each of the witches martyred is to be accounted for, the conflict was not against an individual but against a symbol (29) and this symbol could be found in every territory —chapter eighteen pinpoints at least five case studies. Wars against symbols are effortlessly waged, contrary to those against individuals. Symbols create fanatics, icons create leaders. Famous witch hunts are documented by the author with names, dates and estimated numbers of those who were haunted, hunted and killed. The author also provides the reader with primary sources for further evidence and information, specifying: book titles, context, publication dates and tools to understand the contents.

Jiménez Sureda understands the importance of narrative and the witch's place in the construction of a discourse and world representation. Bearing this in mind, she describes the role that certain art forms had in introducing the crisis in the representation which, in turn, allowed the metamorphosis of narrator and narration.

Theatre enters the scene as a vehicle of instruction, education but, above all, entertainment —and the appearance of the witch in a comic and topsy-turvy act allowed the terror to fade (36). Literature slowly became a place where the witch found its home and in its subversive nature, literature plunged the witch into society. Literature presented itself as the cathartic instrument through which the witch was now free of her negative connotation, at least in the western world. Interestingly enough, the author also discusses the skeptical voices of the early narrative embodied in characters, historical figures, like Alonso Salazar Frías, Reginald Scot or Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa (41). The last ones lived during a moment when rationalism was starting to take hold of an intellectual elite that defended the existence of God because it was logical to do so. In this conception of God, deism, witchcraft was simply impossible within the order of God because, as Diderot states in his *Philosophical Thoughts* what is truly fearful is that there is a God like the one that is portrayed to us by the religious institution². Eloquence at this point in history was vital to communicate, persuade and thus act according to well defended fundamentals. This is the critical moment when the time of the witches is ripe, or as an Argentine humourist used to say: it is the time of the monsters.

The author titles the twenty-fifth chapter «The time of the witches». An inflection point: both in her book and in history. The nineteenth century makes way for the subtle transformation of narrative that we have been aching for: an intra-homodiegetic narrator.

Thus the author embarks on a new crusade which will take her to constantly and swiftly change focus bringing new voices into the narrative and defense of witches, their relevance, and place in society's evolution —their ever-changing and mutable appearance and role but withstanding definition of being: being an Other, an Other which thinkers from Simone de Beauvoir to Judith Butler have fought to deconstruct.

Jiménez Sureda proceeds to sketch appearances of new narratives within popular culture such as TV, film, music, cults, videogames, adaptations of traditional children's fables and spells and she maintains that the positive image that the witch embodies has expanded and changed today's social

² Denis Diderot, «Pensamientos filosóficos», in *Pensamientos Filosóficos. El combate por la libertad*, trans. Judith Cobeña i Guàrdia. Capellades, Proteus, 2009.

configuration (61). The author claims recognition for the role witches have played in the construction of judgment, roles and ideology. Her contribution to making studies and primary sources available—and not mere myth and tale—should be understood within the frame of her effort to provide stepping stones for future witches. Each reader may provide this book with new perspectives and interests and may find it useful to understand the utmost importance of identifying storytellers in space, time and consciousness, for the work of one is food for thought for two.

In Spanish there is a saying that goes: *las brujas no existen, pero que las hay, las hay* (I don't believe in witches, but there are witches indeed).

Like my father in the fifth grade in an all-boys school theatre play.

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