



Witches

Margaret Hamilton's classic portrayal of Oz's Wicked Witch of the West captured the stereotype of the witch engrained in the popular consciousness. "The Wizard of Oz", MGM's film based on L. Frank Baum's 1900 novel, was released in 1939.

"Bring me the broomstick of the witch of the west" demands Emerald City's wizard. It was another impossible task in the quest of our naïve sweet innocent heroine, to be accomplished in the midst of an alien chaotic world. She and her hapless companions had to face and defeat the embodiment of evil before she could return to the familiar safety of home sweet home. What a triumphant, happy accident it was when in rescuing her scarecrow friend from the witch's fire, the saving water splashed on, melted, and destroyed the witch. Good had triumphed over evil.

The witch, who had no name in the film, had to have those powerful magic ruby slippers. Was she simply mourning her dead sister, and wishing to have a personal family heirloom to comfort her in her grief? No! Such an understandable human sentiment is not the motivation ascribed to this misanthropic crone. SHE'S A WITCH!

She is an old, ugly, childless, solitary, isolated, malevolent, and spiteful, woman. This sorceress has powers that must have come from her deal with an evil master outside of approval of Christendom. She can conjure, shape shift, control the weather, see into her magic crystal ball, create potions, impose curses and spells, destroy crops and animals, inflict illness, barrenness and impotency, command her familiars (winged monkeys, black cats, spiders and bats), suddenly appear or disappear, and even mount her broom and fly through the sky. "Double Double Toil and Trouble Fire Burn and Cauldron Bubble"; the incantations are recited. "Round about the cauldron, go. In: The poisoned Entrails throw." Trouble does emerge from her cauldron, filled with the secret black and midnight hag's ingredients: arcane psychotropic herbs and oils, minerals and salts, animal and human parts. These cannibals even kidnap innocent infants, and boil down baby fat used in concocting their flying ointments.

Is it any surprise, having invested humanity's deepest misogynistic fears into these archetypes that even ancient sacred script dictates to the faithful:
Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live. Exodus 22:18.

How convenient it was to invoke clerical authorization in the crazed witch hunts of Europe through the 300 years from 1450 to 1750. It is estimated by scholars that during that period 35,000 people were executed for witchcraft, 75 to 80 percent of whom were women. In colonial Massachusetts, 1692-1693, America had its own bout of insanity, now called the Salem witch trials resulting in the death by execution of 20, and the death in prison of 4. Prior to their deaths an additional 12 were executed for witchcraft in New England. On October 31, 2001 The Massachusetts House of Representatives issued a resolution, signed by the governor, Jane Swift, honoring those who died, all of whom were proclaimed innocent; a finding only over 300 years too late. There are some places in today's world where executions for the alleged practice of witchcraft still occur.

But let us return to Oz and recall that there was Glinda, the Good Witch of the North: the stunningly beautiful protector of the Munchkins, Dorothy and her friends. This angelic figure's powers were more than a match for the wicked witch. It was Glinda, who, at the end of the film, employed her benevolent magic to return Miss Gale to her "No Place Like Home" and loved ones in Kansas.

Apparently not all witches are ugly, mean and bad.

In the now decade-long running Broadway musical "Wicked: The Untold Story of the Witches of Oz", the green witch Elphaba (now named) is presented in an understandable, sympathetic and even romantic context, challenging our preconceived notions of her role in the story. The villainess now becomes the admired heroine, while Glinda is portrayed as a vain, shallow, popularity-seeking and selfish valley-girl ditz until her awakened sage insight at plays end. As in Salem, in The Land of Oz, the telling of the story depends on ones point of view.

Let us hope that our perspective remains securely grounded in reality and justice, and that no severe blow to the head sends us twisting backward through the times to a place where the preposterous question must be asked:
"Are You A Good Witch, Or A Bad Witch?"

