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# BOOK REVIEW:

# *WITCHY POWER: HEXING THE PATRIARCHY WITH FEMINIST MAGIC*[1]

ANDREA ABARQUERO-ALBA
Universidad de Huelva
andrea.abarquero@alu.uhu.es

Quilty, Emma. *Witchy Power: Hexing the Patriarchy with Feminist Magic*. Polity Press, 2025. 188 Pages. ISBN-13:978-1-5095-6446-0.

In *Witch Power: Hexing the Patriarchy with Feminist Magic* (2025), Emma Quilty offers a visionary and deeply personal contribution to contemporary feminist and cultural discourse. Her work situates the figure of the witch as both a political metaphor and a lived practice of resistance, reclaiming witchcraft as a language of empowerment, creativity, and social transformation. Through this framework, Quilty expands existing feminist theory by foregrounding embodied, spiritual, and affective forms of knowledge that challenge the rationalist and patriarchal foundations of Western culture.

At the very beginning of her book, Quilty confesses to finding "something revolutionary about a woman deciding to live her life in outright defiance of society." This statement encapsulates her fascination with the witch as a figure of conscious rebellion against patriarchal structures. *Witch Power* thus becomes not merely an academic study but a manifesto of feminist self-definition and autonomy.

The main objectives and guiding questions of Quilty's work can be summarised as follows. Firstly, the author seeks to analyse the figure of the witch through a feminist lens, in order to understand the recent resurgence of witch imagery in contemporary

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young adult fiction. Secondly, she examines the symbolic and political connections between the witch and the #MeToo movement, interrogating how both challenge systems of control and gendered oppression. Thirdly, the book raises a provocative question: does the world, in fact, need more feminist witches? Throughout, Quilty intertwines her own experiences of cultural in-betweenness, queerness, and feminist identity, using the witch as a site of belonging, resistance, and self-affirmation. This hybrid of memoir, theory, and cultural analysis positions *Witch Power* as a significant intervention in the ongoing reimagining of feminist subjectivity and cultural identity.

In order to provide a clearer understanding of Quilty's argument, I will briefly outline the structure of *Witch Power*. The book is divided into seven chapters, whose organization does not follow the conventional structure of an academic study. The introduction deserves particular attention, as it establishes the theoretical and cultural foundations of witchcraft that underpin the entire work. The subsequent chapters correspond to a witches' typology proposed by Quilty: *The White Witch* (2), *The Sex Witch* (3), *Witch* (5), *The Techno Witch* (6), and *The Reclaiming Witch* (7). However, this classification should not be understood as a rigid system; rather, it serves as a flexible framework through which the author narrates her own process of self-discovery. Throughout the book, Quilty interweaves personal reflection and theoretical commentary, offering an autobiographical journey of becoming a witch. At different stages of this journey, she aligns herself with specific archetypes from her own taxonomy. The opening chapter, *Catching Clouds*, marks what she calls "point zero" of this trajectory: a moment of initiation that takes place at a witchcamp she attended. The final chapter, *The Reclaiming Witch*, positions the witch as a feminist activist, synthesizing Quilty's exploration of identity, resistance, and empowerment, and can thus be read as the book's implicit conclusion.

In the introductory chapter of *Witch Power*, Quilty examines the historical, sociopolitical, and cultural roots of the witch as a gendered figure, framing her analysis within both feminist and anthropological perspectives. She traces the evolution of the term "witch" from a historically gender-neutral designation to its contemporary association primarily with women, often cast as practitioners of harmful magic (Quilty 5). According to Gibson (qtd.in Quilty 5) his gendering, she argues, was shaped by the European witch trials and the Church's efforts to consolidate power, which framed women's sexuality as potentially dangerous and in need of regulation. Quilty, following

Federeci and Ehrenreich (qtd.in Quilty 6) situates the persecution of women within broader dynamics of societal control, exploring how fear of women's knowledge, economic independence, and sexual agency contributed to their disproportionate prosecution. She also highlights earlier interpretations of witchcraft, such as the one proposed by Murray (qtd. in Quilty 7) as part of peaceful, community-oriented, fertility-focused pagan traditions, passed down through hereditary lines. These historical practices functioned as forms of underground resistance against patriarchal and religious authority, establishing a symbolic lineage that contemporary feminist movements have drawn upon (Quilty 7-8). This perspective aligns with Adlerian theory, as it frames the witch not as an isolated or inferior figure but as one whose marginality reflects social dynamics and the potential for individual empowerment and agency within a community (qtd. in Quilty 8). As Salomonsen (qtd. in Quilty 9-10) notes, the witchcraft tradition aims to empower women both socially and domestically, while also celebrating reproductive capacities, a practice that gained prominence during the second wave of feminism. At the same time, she acknowledges critiques of this tradition for reinforcing biological determinism and heteronormative boundaries (Quilty 10). Methodologically, Quilty (12-13) integrates autoethnography, blending her personal experiences with observations and interviews at contemporary pagan gatherings. Through this approach, she situates her journey toward becoming a feminist witch within broader discussions of witchcraft, power, and misogyny (Quilty 16). This introduction establishes both the historical context and the personal dimension that underpin the book, preparing the reader for the exploration of different witch archetypes and their significance within modern feminist praxis.

The opening chapter, *"Catching Clouds"* (Quilty 19–36), describes Quilty's first encounter with communal witchcraft during a Witchcamp held deep within the forest of Springbrook National Park, Australia. The chapter's evocative title captures both place and mood. The camp, situated in a volcanic caldera, is imagined as a space "scooping clouds from the sky," an image that mirrors the chapter's tone of mystical elevation and introspection. Witchcraft, as Susan Greenwood notes, "tends to be conducted outside [to emphasise] the connection with the land and its spirits" (Quilty 36). Quilty takes this observation further, treating nature not simply as a backdrop but as an active participant in feminist self-making.

Yet, the scene is also marked by unease. Quilty observes that she is the only person of colour in the camp (Quilty 22). This detail, presented with quiet precision, exposes one

of the book's central concerns: the persistence of racial exclusion within spaces that claim feminist inclusivity. Her discomfort is not anecdotal but analytical. It prompts her to ask how a movement dedicated to empowerment can still reproduce the same hierarchies it seeks to dismantle. The Witchcamp becomes a microcosm of this contradiction—at once liberatory and complicit.

A second thread concerns cultural appropriation. The event's theme, based on ancient Greek mythology, raises difficult questions about ownership, authenticity, and the ethics of borrowing. Quilty notes the irony of conducting rituals that celebrate foreign gods on Indigenous land while remaining largely silent about colonial history. Her critique is incisive but measured. She acknowledges the participants' good intentions yet insists that spirituality cannot be separated from the politics of land and identity. The Witchcamp, in her reading, inadvertently exposes the tension between the universalist aspirations of contemporary witchcraft and its embeddedness in whiteness and privilege.

Quilty's reflections move beyond critique to gesture toward alternative possibilities. She references the emergence of a Black feminist witch community devoted to decolonizing magical practice, one that reclaims ritual as both spiritual and political action. This recognition transforms the chapter from description into intervention. *"Catching Clouds"* thus becomes a mirror for feminist movements more broadly: an exploration of how even progressive spaces can unconsciously reproduce structures of exclusion. Quilty's tone remains generous but unflinching, and her self-awareness lends credibility to her broader argument that inclusivity must be enacted, not assumed. In doing so, she positions witchcraft as a field of ongoing negotiation—an imperfect yet necessary site of feminist struggle.

In *"The White Witch"* (Quilty 37–63), Quilty turns her attention to the paradoxes of solidarity within contemporary witchcraft, particularly among predominantly white feminist groups. Drawing from her experiences at *Red Tent* gatherings—rituals inspired by Anita Diamant's novel—she examines how spaces designed for women's healing and community can simultaneously replicate the hierarchies they aim to transcend. These gatherings reinterpret biblical stories such as that of Dinah, transforming domestic settings into sacred spaces where women menstruate, give birth, and share embodied knowledge (Quilty 40). Their stated goal is liberation; their practice, however, is more ambiguous.

Quilty approaches these rituals with both empathy and skepticism. She acknowledges their value in normalizing female bodily experience and reclaiming menstrual discourse from shame. Yet she also exposes their entanglement with consumer culture. The transformation of menstruation into a spiritual commodity—through the sale of ritual products, branded oils, and wellness paraphernalia—reveals the persistence of capitalist logic beneath a veneer of sisterhood. Quilty's voice here is sharply critical: she wonders whether such rituals truly empower women or merely repackage patriarchy in softer, more marketable forms (Quilty 61).

Her analysis situates the "white witch" archetype within a broader racial and economic critique. Drawing on Ezzy (Quilty 42), she characterizes the white witch as one who avoids challenging dominant structures—patriarchal, racial, or environmental—and instead adapts comfortably within them. Quilty extends this observation to address racial dynamics in spiritual spaces, linking the rise of New Age witchcraft to histories of colonial extraction. Practices like the commercialization of white sage, she argues, epitomize "racial plagiarism" (Quilty 55–57): the unacknowledged appropriation of Indigenous and non-Western spiritualities for white consumption. Her language here is forceful yet elegant; she names exploitation where it masquerades as enlightenment.

Quilty's personal narrative grounds these critiques. She recalls attending a Red Tent gathering where the hostess sold overpriced essential oils—a scene she likens to a "Tupperware party." The metaphor is devastating in its simplicity. It captures the dissonance between feminist ideals of empowerment and the transactional realities of neoliberal spirituality. What should be a space of communion becomes another node in the marketplace of self-care. Quilty's irritation is palpable but productive: it becomes the basis for a larger argument about how capitalism infiltrates even the most intimate feminist rituals.

The chapter closes with a discussion of moon-based ceremonies that align bodily and celestial cycles. Citing Grosz (1994, quoted in Quilty 2025:61), Quilty treats the female body as a site of creative flux—of blood, milk, and cyclical transformation. Yet she resists romanticization. For her, embodiment is not purity but process: a site of power entangled with social control. Throughout the chapter, Quilty weaves critique with admiration, acknowledging the transformative potential of white witchcraft while exposing its limitations. Her analysis is unapologetically feminist, intersectional, and self-aware. She concludes that if witchcraft is to serve as a true feminist praxis, it must

confront not only patriarchy but also its complicity with whiteness, capitalism, and exclusionary spiritual economies.

In *"The Sex Witch"* (Quilty 64–86), Quilty explores the integration of sexuality into contemporary witchcraft at the Sacred Kink Witchcamp, a community retreat inspired by ancient Greek Dionysian traditions. The camp, led by Dara, a self-identified Dionysian priestess, pursues three interrelated aims: to reconnect participants with their bodies, to transcend the limits of physicality, and to cultivate self-awareness through embodied experience. Quilty approaches this setting with the attentiveness of both ethnographer and participant, interrogating how Reclaiming witches weave sexual practices and BDSM techniques into their spiritual work. These ritualized forms of intimacy challenge conventional boundaries, destabilizing the moral binaries that have long regulated female sexuality.

Historically, Quilty reminds us, religion has confined sexuality to reproductive, heteronormative frameworks. By contrast, the Sacred Kink Witchcamp transforms eroticism into a medium of empowerment. Yet, Quilty's tone remains cautious; she does not romanticize these practices. Instead, she questions whether the radical potential of sex-positive witchcraft can truly escape the cultural legacies of patriarchy. She unpacks enduring stereotypes—the hypersexual witch, the aging crone, the asexual mystic—tracing their persistence from early modern demonology, notably the *Malleus Maleficarum*, into contemporary cultural imagination (Quilty 79–80). These myths, she suggests, continue to shape how female desire is perceived and policed.

Interwoven with observation is Quilty's self-reflection. She candidly examines the emotional friction that arose between her participation in the camp and her romantic relationship, revealing the complexities of negotiating autonomy, desire, and belonging. Her willingness to inhabit these contradictions—both intellectually and personally—underscores one of the book's greatest strengths: its insistence that feminist inquiry must also be self-implicating.

Ultimately, *"The Sex Witch"* positions erotic magic as a potentially transformative but ethically fraught space. Quilty celebrates its capacity to heal shame and generate communal intimacy, yet she remains alert to the ways in which even liberatory practices can echo patriarchal scripts or reproduce unequal power dynamics. Her critical stance exemplifies the delicate balance between affirmation and skepticism that characterizes *Witch Power* as a whole.

*"The Nature Witch"* (Quilty 87–108) shifts the focus from collective gatherings to individual, earth-centered practices. Here, Quilty examines the spiritual intimacy that arises from direct engagement with the natural world. She documents rituals involving hair, personal objects, and bodily materials—forms of what she calls "contagious magic"—where touch, scent, and organic matter are vehicles of intention. These acts, she argues, reassert the body's agency as both medium and message.

Drawing on anthropological theory, Quilty situates these rituals within Victor Turner's tripartite model of rites of passage: separation, liminality, and reincorporation (Quilty 95). Her descriptions of fairy cycles, mushroom rings, and sensory invocations evoke a liminal aesthetic that blurs the boundaries between self and environment. Yet Quilty resists idealization. She contextualizes these practices within a longer feminist genealogy, recalling Murray's theory of pre-Christian matriarchal religions and the historical persecution of women as witches (Quilty 101–102). She also references Ehrenreich and Deirdre's work to foreground the economic and political dimensions of that persecution.

Importantly, Quilty questions the assumption that nature-based witchcraft is inherently inclusive. She observes that some practitioners conflate "natural" with "female," inadvertently marginalizing trans and queer participants. Her critique is sharp but empathetic: she values the emotional authenticity of nature rituals while exposing their potential to reinforce essentialist thinking. Through this tension, Quilty reveals that the quest for harmony with nature must also confront the cultural hierarchies embedded within it.

By weaving personal narrative with ethnographic insight, Quilty crafts a nuanced meditation on the body's relationship to the earth. The chapter's strength lies in its refusal to separate spirituality from politics. In her hands, nature becomes a site of both belonging and contestation—a reminder that feminist practice must continually navigate the intersections of ecology, identity, and power.

In *"The Death Witch"* (Quilty 109–132), Quilty travels to New Orleans to explore witchcraft's intersections with death, ancestry, and Black feminist spiritual traditions. Guided by Camile, a Voodoo priestess, she immerses herself in the syncretic practices of Voodoo, where women act as conduits for the loa—spiritual entities bridging the realms of the living and the dead. Quilty's portrayal of Queen Marie Laveau, both historical

figure and spiritual icon, exemplifies non-familial transmission: knowledge passed through apprenticeship and devotion rather than bloodline.

Quilty's tone here is reverent but political. She denounces Hollywood's caricatures of Voodoo as sinister or primitive, revealing how such portrayals perpetuate racialized fears of Black female power. Against these distortions, she proposes "conjure feminism" (Quilty 114), a framework that honors folk wisdom as a form of resistance. Through this lens, ritual becomes not spectacle but survival.

The chapter's ethnographic depth is matched by its political urgency. Quilty contrasts ancestor offerings—based on reciprocity and gratitude—with Christian models of distant divinity. She argues that these intimate exchanges embody a feminist ethic of care, one rooted in memory and community. In tracing the sociopolitical resonance of women's gossip and storytelling, Quilty exposes how patriarchal systems have historically reframed female knowledge as transgression (Quilty 123–129). Her writing here is at once analytical and affective; she clearly admires the resilience encoded in these traditions.

Ultimately, *"The Death Witch"* redefines death as a generative force—a bridge between worlds, histories, and women's experiences. Quilty's engagement with Voodoo is both critical and respectful, acknowledging her position as an outsider while insisting on the importance of cross-cultural feminist solidarity.

In *"The Techno Witch"* (Quilty 133–153), Quilty turns to the digital sphere, examining how witchcraft evolves within online networks. She explores "cyber covens" and collective feminist hexes on platforms like TikTok, Instagram, and Facebook, where witches unite to curse misogynist figures such as Nick Fuentes and Donald Trump. These virtual rituals, Quilty argues, translate historical forms of feminist protest into twenty-first-century activism, transforming social media into a site of enchantment and resistance.

She situates digital witchcraft within a lineage of techno-paganism and the feminist group W.I.T.C.H., highlighting how online rituals draw from older traditions of symbolic defiance. Yet her analysis is ambivalent. While she acknowledges the empowering potential of online magic—its accessibility, immediacy, and global reach—she also notes its susceptibility to the same problems that plague digital culture more broadly: commodification, performance, and surveillance.

Quilty's prose is sharpest when she critiques how witchcraft imagery circulates in mainstream media. She observes that the term "witch hunt" remains a weapon of political rhetoric, often used by powerful men to cast themselves as victims. This ironic inversion, she argues, underscores how patriarchal culture continues to manipulate the language of persecution for its own ends. Through this analysis, Quilty invites readers to see digital witchcraft not merely as novelty but as a complex negotiation of empowerment, visibility, and historical memory.

The final chapter, *"Reclaiming Witch"* (Quilty 154–165), serves as both conclusion and culmination of Quilty's inquiry. It returns to the central theme of witchcraft as feminist reclamation—an embodied, political, and imaginative practice. Quilty focuses on tattoos as rites of passage, treating the skin as archive and altar. Each mark inscribed upon the body becomes testimony to trauma, endurance, and transformation. This motif of inscription mirrors the book's method: theory written upon experience, feminism etched into flesh.

Quilty revisits the book's guiding questions—why individuals choose to identify as witches and how this identity challenges colonial and patriarchal legacies. Her tone is assertive, almost manifesto-like. She argues that contemporary witchcraft functions as both activism and epistemology: it creates spaces, physical and symbolic, where resistance and self-definition converge. Altars, rituals, and everyday practices become micro-political acts that defy capitalist and patriarchal containment (Quilty 163).

Drawing together the insights of previous chapters, Quilty situates witchcraft within a broader feminist lineage that values embodiment, creativity, and collective care. Her dialogue with theorists and activists underscores witchcraft's intellectual credibility as well as its emotional resonance. The chapter closes with the book's most memorable declaration: *"In order to reshape the world, we need witchy feminists"* (Quilty 2025:165). This imperative crystallizes the project's central conviction—that witchcraft, far from an archaic superstition, is a living feminist praxis.

By ending on this visionary note, Quilty reaffirms her belief in the transformative power of magic as both metaphor and method. The final pages radiate conviction: witchcraft is not escape but engagement, a practice through which feminism reimagines its own future.

Structurally, *Witch Power* demonstrates Quilty's remarkable capacity to merge rigorous scholarship with creative experimentation. The book's circular "ring" composition — where chapters, subsections, and internal motifs mirror and echo one another — produces a sense of ritual rhythm. This formal design is more than aesthetic: it enacts the cyclical temporality and embodied consciousness that Quilty attributes to witchcraft itself. As a result, the reader experiences the book not only as a piece of cultural analysis but also as a performative act of feminist enchantment. The precision with which Quilty organizes her material, from the detailed typology of witches to the carefully calibrated balance of personal narrative and theoretical discussion, reflects a high degree of intellectual control and narrative vision.

Beyond its structural coherence, *Witch Power* stands out for its ambitious reconfiguration of feminist praxis. Quilty reframes witchcraft as both a symbolic and methodological tool — a way of knowing and resisting that embraces the irrational, the emotional, and the spiritual as legitimate sources of feminist insight. In doing so, she challenges the long-standing hierarchies of Western epistemology, which have historically privileged rationality, objectivity, and male-defined knowledge systems. Her notion of "feminist magic" does not retreat from academic rigor; rather, it expands its scope by reasserting the political significance of creativity, intuition, and affect. This approach represents a vital intervention in contemporary feminist thought, especially at a moment when intersectional and decolonial feminisms are demanding new, more holistic modes of engagement.

Nevertheless, the book's blending of autobiography and theory is not without its challenges. At times, Quilty's intensely personal reflections risk diluting the analytical focus, particularly when narrative momentum takes precedence over conceptual elaboration. Certain sections could benefit from a more explicit dialogue with existing feminist theorists — for instance, with scholars such as Silvia Federici, Rosi Braidotti, or Sara Ahmed — whose frameworks might further contextualize Quilty's own interventions. Yet even in these moments, the text's self-reflexive honesty and emotional candour become part of its critical force, illustrating how vulnerability and subjectivity can coexist with scholarly precision.

Ultimately, *Witch Power* emerges as a visionary, passionate, and profoundly generative contribution to feminist and cultural studies. Quilty succeeds in transforming witchcraft into a multifaceted metaphor for agency, rebellion, and self-creation. Her work

invites readers to reconceive feminism not merely as critique but as an imaginative practice of world-making — a politics grounded in creativity, care, and transformation. *Witch Power* is both a meticulously structured academic study and a bold political statement: a book that reclaims enchantment as a legitimate feminist strategy. In doing so, Quilty reminds us that resistance can be intellectual and magical at once — that to challenge patriarchy is also to conjure new forms of collective power and possibility.

## NOTES ON CONTRIBUTOR

ANDREA ABARQUERO-ALBA holds a Double Degree in English Studies and Hispanic Philology from the University of Huelva, where she received the Best Academic Record Award in both degrees and the Best Academic Record Award at the Faculty of Humanities. Her undergraduate thesis, The Iliad as a Prototext of Western Literature, was awarded an award for the Best Undergraduate Thesis of the Faculty. She is currently pursuing a MA in Contrastive Languages and Literatures. Her publications include a chapter in *Subjects and Discourses: Ideologies, Social Action, and Critical Proposals in Contemporary Culture and Education* (2024), as well as reviews. She has also held a collaboration grant with the Department of Philology, conducting research on language as a tool for social integration.
Contact: andrea.abarquero@alu.uhu.es
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0009-0008-4740-8165

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