GREEN MAGIC AND GENDERED KNOWLEDGE: WITCHES, HEALING, AND HERBAL RESISTANCE

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Abstract

This paper explores the connection between medicinal plants and witchcraft in literature and folklore. It begins with the historical link between witches and botanical knowledge, showing how plants served in healing and sparked accusations of sorcery. A literary reading of Shakespeare's Macbeth (1995[1623]) highlights how herbs symbolize power and subversion. The study draws from European folklore and early modern texts to show plants as both empowering and persecuted symbols. It then bridges folklore with science by examining the pharmacological basis of traditional remedies. Finally, it looks at how modern herbalists and neo-pagan witches reclaim this knowledge for holistic healing. Combining literary, historical, and scientific perspectives, the paper reveals the cultural depth of plant-based witchcraft.

Keywords: Witchcraft, Medicinal Plants, Folklore, Literary Analysis, Traditional Knowledge.

MAGIA VERDE Y SABERES FEMENINOS:
BRUJAS, SANACIÓN Y RESISTENCIA HERBARIA

Resumen

Este artículo explora la conexión entre las plantas medicinales y la brujería en la literatura y el folclore. Comienza con el vínculo histórico entre las brujas y el conocimiento botánico, mostrando cómo las plantas se utilizaban con fines curativos y provocaban acusaciones de brujería. Una lectura literaria de Macbeth (1995[1623]), de Shakespeare, destaca cómo las hierbas simbolizan el poder y la subversión. El estudio se basa en el folclore europeo y en textos de la Edad Moderna para mostrar las plantas como símbolos tanto empoderadores como perseguidos. A continuación, tiende un puente entre el folclore y la ciencia al examinar la base farmacológica de los remedios tradicionales. Por último, analiza cómo los herbolarios modernos y las brujas neopaganas recuperan este conocimiento para la curación holística. Combinando perspectivas literarias, históricas y científicas, el artículo revela la profundidad cultural de la brujería basada en las plantas.

Palabras clave: brujería, plantas medicinales, folclore, análisis literario, conocimientos tradicionales.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Witchcraft has long been a subject of fascination and intrigue in literature, with its associations with the mystical and supernatural. Indeed, one aspect that often features in these narratives is the use of medicinal plants. In this line, the aim of this paper is to explore the connection between witchcraft and medicinal plants, specifically examining their portrayal in literature. Historically, witchcraft has held a significant place in various cultures around the world, creating a "witchcraft phenotype" as stated by Peacey et al. (2024, 2-4). The practice dates back centuries, with different societies having their own interpretations and beliefs surrounding it. For example, in Europe during the Middle Ages, witchcraft was viewed as evil, and practitioners were persecuted, with "estimates of the number of victims in the witchcraft trials of early modern Europe range widely, from 10,000 to over six million" as posed by Allemang (2010, 11-12). Contrastingly, some indigenous cultures saw witches as healers who possessed knowledge of using natural remedies like medicinal plants for wellness. A good example of this is the Andean healers of Ecuador presented by Cavender and Albán (2009). As Calatrava says "recent historiography has highlighted the role of women as health care providers, especially for other women" (2012, 355).

With a focus on how the representation of medicinal plants in witchcraft-related literature reflects broader cultural and historical perceptions of gendered knowledge and power, the central hypothesis is that literary and folkloric depictions of witches and their botanical practices function as a symbolic site of resistance to patriarchal and institutional epistemologies. Drawing on Silvia Federici's argument that the witch hunts were a means of suppressing women embodied and communal knowledge (2004), and Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English's analysis of how the rise of professionalized medicine excluded female healers (1973), this study argues therefore that medicinal plants in witchcraft narratives are not merely folkloric elements but coded sites of feminist and ecological knowledge. In this context, the following research questions guide the study: How are medicinal plants represented in literary portrayals of witches? What historical and cultural dynamics underpin the association between botanical knowledge and accusations of witchcraft? How do these narratives reflect tensions between scientific and traditional knowledge systems, and in what ways are they being reclaimed today through feminist and ecological frameworks?

As it is well known, medicinal plants are essential components of traditional medicine systems across many cultures globally (Peacey *et al.* 2024, 1). These plants possess chemical compounds that can be used for therapeutic purposes, ranging from pain relief to treating diseases. In this vein, examples include chamomile for

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relaxation or lavender for promoting sleep, etc. as Ostling mentions (2014, 183). In witchcraft literature, medicinal plants are often portrayed as powerful tools used by witches for both beneficial and harmful purposes. For instance, Shakespeare's play *Macbeth* portrays three witches who gather herbs such as "root of hemlock digged i' th' dark" (act 4.1, 123) to concoct potions associated with dark magic. Similarly, J.K Rowling's *Harry Potter* (1997-2007) series depicts characters like Professor Snape brewing potions using ingredients like mandrake root or wolfsbane to create magical effects (72,110, 140). It is even said by Professor Sprout (the cheerful and knowledgeable Head of Hufflepuff House and Hogwarts' Herbology teacher in the series) that "Mandrake forms an essential part of most antidotes", thus highlighting the importance of this root (72).

Generally speaking, throughout early modern Europe, women were primary custodians of medical knowledge in their communities. They acted as midwives, herbalists, and caretakers, transmitting healing knowledge orally and through practice. To this regard, Silvia Federici exposes that this female-centered form of care was not only dismissed but violently suppressed during the rise of capitalism and state-controlled medicine (2004, 85-89). The witch hunts, in this reading, emerge as a violent purge of women embodied and communal wisdom. The 'healing witch' becomes not a figure of danger, but one of epistemic resistance –a bearer of ecological, social, and bodily knowledge that threatened the emerging medical establishment aligned with patriarchal and colonial power. Further explaining this point Federici states:

> With the marginalization of the midwife, the process began by which women lost the control they had exercised over procreation and were reduced to a passive role in child delivery, while male doctors came to be seen as the true «givers of life» (as in the alchemical dreams of the Renaissance magicians). (2004, 89)

In many cases, the same remedies used by so-called witches were absorbed into official pharmacopeias, stripped of their cultural and gendered contexts. Plants such as pennyroyal, mugwort, and rue, once used for menstrual regulation or childbirth, were demonized alongside their users (Federici 2004, 36). The branding of these women as witches functioned not only to eradicate alternative healing practices as such, but also to delegitimize women's authority over their own bodies and knowledge systems. Indeed, feminist scholars like Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English have emphasized that the transition from communal healing to professionalized medicine in Europe was accompanied by the exclusion of women and the rise of a male-dominated medical class (1973, 4). The image of the witch, then, becomes a political signifier: she is the woman who knew too much, the one who refused to surrender her knowledge to institutions that excluded her. In this sense, witches can be read as early scientists, experimenting with botanicals, observing cause and effect, and building collective knowledges long before the term scientific method came into vogue.

For this reason, witchcraft has long been a fascinating and often controversial topic, captivating audiences across centuries. In Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, the presence

of witches plays a significant role in driving the plot and exploring themes of power, fate, and deception (Spencer 2017, 3). They are presented as chaotic, evil entities. They represent the tragic fate of most of the characters and the subversion of the moral order. Their use of plants and substances is part of a dark and unnatural imaginary world: fantastic and grotesque ingredients that fuel suspicion and fear. They are figures outside the community, and their knowledge is not therapeutic, but threatening (Spencer 2017, 3-5).

The symbolic meaning behind certain plants associated with witches further deepens our understanding of their characters and actions. The mandrake root, for instance, symbolizes malevolent magic due to its association with witchcraft throughout history (Kiefer 2003, 78). Additionally, hemlock represents danger and death since it was traditionally used as an ingredient in deadly poisons (Romero 1980, 105). By incorporating these plant references into *Macbeth*'s narrative, Shakespeare invokes a sense of darkness that aligns with his portrayal of witchcraft. Moreover, analyzing these plant references enables us to better appreciate how Shakespeare employs them as tools for character development and plot advancement. That is, the use of specific herbs helps establish the witches' otherworldliness while also foreshadowing future events within the play.

This portrayal of medicinal plants in witchcraft literature is not limited to their practical uses but also –as seen– extends to symbolism and imagery associated with these botanicals. Medicinal plants are often depicted as sources of power or danger within these narratives (Ostling 2014, 180). Another example can be found in Nathaniel Hawthorne's novel *The Scarlet Letter* (1878 [1850]), in which Hester Prynne finds solace among wildflowers growing near a prison door symbolizing her ability to heal despite societal condemnation (106).

To these means, as it will be analysed in the next section, controversies surround portrayals or usage of medicinal plants within witchcraft literature. Critics such as Silvia Federici argue that "the branding of these women as witches functioned not only to eradicate alternative healing practices, but also to delegitimize women's authority over their own bodies and knowledge systems" (2004, 36), thus perpetuating stereotypes and inaccuracies about traditional healing practices and paving the way for their cultural appropriation or misrepresentation.

2. MEDICINAL PLANTS IN WITCH RELATED LITERATURE

The portrayal of witchcraft in literature has long been intertwined with the use of medicinal plants. These botanicals serve as essential components of traditional medicine systems across cultures and are often depicted as powerful tools used by witches in their mystical practices. The symbolism and imagery associated with these plants further enriches their representation in witchcraft narratives. While controversies may arise regarding the portrayal or usage within literature, it is crucial for authors to approach this subject matter with respect and accuracy. By doing so, they can shed light on the significance of medicinal plants within witchcraft literature while avoiding any potential harm or misrepresentation (Watt 1972, 65).

As it was already mentioned, one example of a historical reference that highlights this connection is found in Macbeth. The three witches known as the Weird Sisters are depicted as brewing a concoction that includes various plants such as "root of hemlock" and "scale of dragon." These ingredients not only serve to enhance the eerie atmosphere but also reflect the belief that witches possessed knowledge about potent herbs with mystical properties. Furthermore, Shakespeare's portrayal suggests a link between these magical plants and the witches' ability to manipulate fate. Also, historical accounts offer a fascinating insight into the intersection between herbal remedies and supernatural beliefs (Llanes 2022, 405). In ancient civilizations such as Egypt and Greece, the concept of witchcraft was deeply intertwined with the practice of herbal medicine. To these means, the *Ebers Papyrus*, an Egyptian medical text dating back to 1550 BCE, contains detailed descriptions of various plant-based remedies used by healers who were often associated with witchcraft (Bryan 1930, 110)

For example, a notable reference can be found in Johann Weyer's book *De Praestigiis Daemonum* ("On the Tricks of Demons") published in 1563. Weyer was a physician who sought to challenge prevailing beliefs about witchcraft during the Renaissance period. In his work, he argued that many so-called witches were knowledgeable healers who utilized medicinal plants for therapeutic purposes, as he wrote "multae autem sunt mulieres quae, accepto a matribus vel aliunde, simplicium herbarum usu ad medendum assuefactae sunt"[1] (198) or "similes mulierculae. (...) pro incantatricibus habitae sunt, cum nihil aliud quam simplicia remedia adhiberent"[2] (200). Weyer's writings shed light on how medicinal plants became entangled with accusations of witchcraft during this time. His position was radical for the era, especially given the intensity of witch hunts across Europe. The author's argument placed emphasis on mental illness, misogyny, and misinterpretation rather than demonic possession or malice. He posited that many accused women suffered from melancholia or delusions, and he advocated for compassion over persecution. By recognizing the therapeutic knowledge of these women, Weyer effectively challenged the moral panic that conflated healing with heresy. To this regard, his writings can be considered a proto-scientific defense of empirical observation over superstition, and they offer one of the earliest acknowledgments of the political motives behind witchcraft accusations. Furthermore, His work opened a discourse on the legitimacy of women's healing practices, subtly aligning with later feminist perspectives such as the view the witch as a symbol of persecuted knowledge and ecological wisdom.

Jumping in time to the 20th century, in Shirley Jackson's narrative, particularly in stories such as "The Daemon Lover" (1949) and "The Witch" (1949) an environment is constructed where the domestic and the natural merge with the ominous. In "The Daemon Lover" we can find the following example: "she looked carefully around the

[1] "There are many women who, having learned from their mothers or other sources, have become accustomed to using simple herbs for healing" (author's translation).

[2] "Such women (...) were considered enchantresses, though they employed nothing other than simple remedies" (author's translation).

one-room apartment (...). With sudden horror she realized that she had forgotten to put clean sheets on the bed" (14). Although Jackson does not explicitly depict witches, her work dialogues with the legacies of the marginalized feminine archetype and poses a veiled critique of the medicalization of the feminine and the repression of desire, which can be traced symbolically in the relationship with plants, poisons and enclosed spaces. In the case of the example, the scene takes the traditionally feminine-coded domestic space and subtly pervert it –turning it into a space of anxiety, anticipation, and betrayal.

In contrast to this demonizing vision, contemporary feminist literature has rehabilitated the figure of the witch as the bearer of forgotten knowledge and as a symbol of resistance. For example, in Jules Michelet's *The Witch* (2016 [1862]), a pioneering nineteenth-century academic text that combines history and lyricism, the witch is depicted as a "physician of the poor" (4), who preserves and transmits herbal knowledge persecuted by the Church and official medicine. Michelet writes: "Whatsoever may have been her sorceries, her spells, she was before all things the natural healer. At once doctor and sage, she strove with her poor simple means to assuage the sufferings that official science ignored or made worse" (2016, 4). This text, despite being idealized, marked a milestone in the revaluation of witches as heirs of a popular medical tradition and it can be claimed that Michelet's portrayal of the witch as a healer anticipates later feminist reinterpretations of the figure as a political and medical subversive.

Moreover, in the context of young adult literature, as in *Harry Potter* (1998) J.K. Rowling revitalizes the figure of the witch through a complex interplay of magical knowledge, botany, and healing arts. While the series modernizes the image of the witch, it also draws deeply from folkloric and historical associations between herbalism and feminine knowledge. Characters like Professor Snape, Madame Pomfrey, and even Neville Longbottom demonstrate that potion-making and herbology are not only central to magical education but are also direct continuations of the tradition of medicinal plant use in witchcraft (Rowling 1998, 72, 110). Rowling's depiction of witches reflects a rehabilitation of the herbalist figure through a contemporary lens, aligning with feminist reevaluations of persecuted women's knowledge (Ehrenreich & English 1973). The use of mandrake root to cure petrification in *The Chamber of Secrets* echoes historical beliefs in its supernatural and curative powers (Rowling 1998, 72). Similarly, wolfsbane and dittany reflect plants once feared or revered in herbal folklore (110). This botanical magic situates witches and wizards as custodians of a deep, nature-based wisdom –often gendered and marginal in historical contexts. Rather than depicting herbalism as irrational, Rowling elevates it as scientific within the magical world, thereby reclaiming a once-suppressed domain of knowledge. In doing so, the Harry Potter series subtly critiques the historical demonization of witches and reframes herbal knowledge as powerful, precise, and worthy of respect.

Similarly, in *Nuestra Parte de Noche (2019)*, Mariana Enriquez portrays a secret society called the Order, which practices ritual magic. While there are no witches in the traditional sense, the novel centers around mediums who occupy ambiguous, liminal spaces. These figures possess ancestral knowledge and engage in practices that blend the occult with inherited trauma. Set against the backdrop of Argentina's dictatorship, the narrative weaves together violence, spiritual invocation,

and alternative forms of power. A good example of this is the following quote, when referring to Rosario (female character, Juan's wife and Gaspar's mother, is a cold and enigmatic figure tied to the secret Order. She embodies both maternal distance and the dark legacy of ritual power.):

> El cuerpo de Rosario era como un mapa: tenía cicatrices, lunares, tatuajes hechos por ella misma, marcas de los rituales. También sabía usar plantas, pero nunca quiso enseñarle a su hijo.[3] (Enriquez 2019, 20)

This quote shows how Rosario's body preserves ancestral, embodied knowledge –linked to ritual and plant-based healing– but also reveals the silence and protection around passing it on. Another example would be:

> Las mujeres que cuidaban a los enfermos en la Orden usaban aceite de ruda, infusiones de jengibre y algo que llamaban 'agua de luna'. No estaba permitido, pero lo hacían igual.[4] (2019, 177)

Here, these figures, though relegated to the margins, are intimately linked to care, resistance, and the preservation of social and spiritual continuity. Their knowledge –rooted in the body, the earth, and memory– is criminalized by dominant institutions, yet the narrative reclaims and humanizes it as a form of ancestral feminine wisdom. In this context, plants do not signify transgression or danger, but rather alternative healing and dignity in the face of structural violence. The use of substances such as *ruda, jengibre*, or "agua de luna"[5] reflects a tradition of embodied practices, often passed down through generations of women, that exist outside the boundaries of official medical authority. As Silvia Federici argues, the suppression of these practices is not about their efficacy or risk, but about who controls knowledge and how that knowledge threatens systems of patriarchal and capitalist power. Their demonization had less to do with their actual toxicity and more to do with the social and political context of their use. As Silvia Federici argues, the rise of capitalist and patriarchal systems involved the violent suppression of women's embodied knowledge, especially in the realms of healing and reproduction (Federici 2004, 63). Similarly, Michel Foucault in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings* has shown that knowledge and power are deeply intertwined, and that institutional systems often seek to monopolize "legitimate" knowledge by repressing other forms, particularly those tied to the body and non-normative subjectivities (Foucault 1980, 89-92). Thus, the boundary between medicalization and demonization of plants reflects not

[3] "Rosario's body was like a map: it had scars, moles, tattoos she had made herself, and marks from the rituals. She also knew how to use plants, but she never wanted to teach her son" (author's translation).

[4] "The women who cared for the sick in the Order used rue oil, ginger infusions, and something they called "moon water." It was not allowed, but they did it anyway" (author's translation).

[5] Rue, ginger, or "moon water."

their pharmacological properties, but who uses them, for what purpose, and under what regime of power and control.

In light of these literary, historical, and philosophical perspectives, it becomes clear that medicinal plants function as more than mere narrative elements within witchcraft discourse –they operate as charged symbols of contested knowledge and social resistance. Whether invoked through Renaissance medical texts, modern feminist horror, or magical realist fiction, these botanicals carry the weight of tradition, repression, and resilience. Far from being neutral, the representation of plant-based healing reveals enduring tensions around authority, gender, and epistemology. By tracing how these themes intersect across time and genres, we can better understand how the figure of the witch –and her relationship to nature– embodies a struggle over who gets to heal, who gets to know, and who gets to speak.

3. MYTH AND FOLKLORE SURROUNDING WITCHES' USE OF MEDICINAL PLANTS

As we have seen, throughout history, witches have been depicted as mysterious and powerful figures with a deep knowledge of medicinal plants. The myth and folklore surrounding their use of these plants has captured the imagination of people for centuries. In ancient times, witches were believed to possess supernatural abilities that allowed them to harness the healing properties of various herbs and plants (Cf. Wilby 2005; Ostling 2014; Dafni *et al*. 2021). They were seen as intermediaries between the natural world and the spiritual realm, capable of communing with nature spirits to obtain secret knowledge about these medicinal plants or, as Wilby mentions, "the line between the witch and the cunning-person was always fine and frequently crossed in the minds of the populace" (2005, 11).

It is also crucial to recognize that the history of witchcraft and medicinal plants is not monolithic. Different cultures have developed unique relationships with plant medicine, and the figure of the witch varies widely across time and geography. For example, in Afro-Caribbean traditions such as Santería or Haitian Vodou, herbal knowledge is embedded within complex spiritual cosmologies (Brandon 1991, 55). Here, plants are sacred gifts from the Orishas or lwa,[6] and herbal baths, smokes, and offerings form an essential part of ritual healing. Similarly, Indigenous North American and Andean traditions include medicine women and shamans whose botanical knowledge is revered rather than reviled, as an example, Potawatomi writer Robin Wall Kimmerer presents Indigenous botanical knowledge not merely as pragmatic, but as a reciprocal, respectful relationship with plant life in her book

[6] The Orishas (or Iwa) are deities in the Yoruba pantheon who act as intermediaries between humans and the supreme god, Olodumare. Each Orisha represents natural forces, human traits, and cultural values, associated with specific rituals, colors, foods, and drums. They are central to Afro-Atlantic religions like Santería (Cuba), Candomblé (Brazil), and Ifá (Nigeria and the diaspora), where they are invoked for guidance, protection, and spiritual healing (Olupona 2014, 58-61).

Braiding Sweetgrass (2013, 24), tending a bridge between Indigenous wisdom and western science. Plants such as white sage, sweetgrass, tobacco, and ayahuasca are not merely medical –they are ceremonial, relational, and cosmological, as she explains "in the old times, our elders say, the trees talked to each other. They'd stand in their own council and craft a plan. But scientists decided long ago that plants were deaf and mute, locked in isolation without communication" (Kimmerer 2013, 24), example of this are the Kallawaya Healers from the Andes region presented by Kripner and Glenney (1997), of whom they say:

> Kallawaya healers mediate between the ill person's body and the environment, attempting to restore the balance that has been lost. These practitioners are not shamans, even though several shamanic traditions exist in Bolivia and other parts of the Andes. Unlike shamans, who alter their consciousness to obtain power and knowledge to help and to heal their clients Kallawaya practitioners are herbalists and ritualists. They recognize the importance of faith in their procedures, as well as the superiority of natural methods; artificial fertilizers and pharmaceutical drugs are seen as inconsistent with the indigenous relationship between persons and their environment. (1997, 218)

Despite these methods, the colonial suppression of such knowledge systems often mirrored European witch hunts, wherein indigenous healers were branded as sorcerers or heretics and persecuted accordingly. As anthropologist Emma Wilby suggests, the narratives of witches flying or communing with spirits may have preserved older shamanic elements that survived in European folk traditions despite Christianization (2005, 169-170). These stories should not be dismissed as delusions but understood as expressions of an alternative worldview that modernity has sought to erase. In European folklore, witches were believed to concoct "flying ointments" using herbs like belladonna, datura, and henbane –plants with hallucinogenic properties– enabling them to fly or enter altered states of consciousness (Willby 2005, 170). These practices reflect remnants of pre-Christian shamanic traditions, as Wilby argues, "while the physical and psychological effects of early modern living conditions were generally conducive to visionary experience, to these effects can be added one further factor, the burning taper which sets the whole pile of combustibles alight –a belief in the reality of spirits" (2005, 249). Similarly, in Nordic mythology, the völva –a female seer and practitioner of seiðr (a form of magic)– performed ritualistic trance journeys and wielded knowledge of herbs to influence fate and health; one such figure, Gróa, appears in the Prose Edda, using her incantations to heal the god Thor (Price 2019, 69).

Greek mythology also includes figures akin to witches, such as Circe and Medea, both skilled in *pharmaka* (potent herbs and poisons), and capable of transforming or healing through plant-based rituals –Circe, for example, famously used a potion to turn Odysseus's men into swine (Odyssey Book 10) as seen in Zografou (2023, 4). These mythical women exemplify ambivalent archetypes: feared for their power to harm yet sought after for their healing abilities. As Ostling (2014) emphasizes, the historical witch exists at the intersection of medicine, religion, and magic, often condemned not for her ignorance but for her dangerous wisdom.

Through these myths and traditions, we see not superstition but encoded systems of knowledge –particularly botanical and spiritual– marginalized by patriarchal and colonial structures yet resilient across time and geography.

One prevalent belief was that witches used certain plants to concoct potions and brews that could heal illnesses or cause harm. For example, it was said that they would gather mandrake roots under a full moon, believing this plant had potent magical qualities (Carter 2003, 144). They would carefully prepare ointments using ingredients like belladonna, henbane, or deadly nightshade –plants known for their toxic properties when ingested in large quantities. These poisonous substances were thought to enhance their mystical powers and enable them to communicate with spirits. Moreover, as previously mentioned, witches were often associated with flying ointments made from hallucinogenic herbs such as datura or fly agaric mushrooms. It was believed that these ointments would induce an altered state of consciousness in which witches could astral project or embark on journeys through the spirit world. This perception fueled fears about witchcraft and led to widespread persecution during the infamous witch trials. However, the imaginary of the witch and her relationship with medicinal plants has not only endured in oral tradition and inquisitorial records but has also found a fertile expression in literature. Despite the fantastic elements present in these myths and folklore, there is some truth behind them. Many medicinal plants commonly associated with witchcraft do indeed possess therapeutic properties recognized by modern science. For instance, belladonna contains atropine –a powerful antispasmodic agent used today in treating certain conditions like irritable bowel syndrome (M. Bnouham *et al.* 2006, 22).

The myth and folklore surrounding witches' use of medicinal plants is a captivating aspect of literature on this subject (Dafni et al 2021, 15). While some of these beliefs may seem far-fetched or even dangerous, they reflect a deep-rooted connection between humans and nature. Moreover, they shed light on the historical oppression faced by women healers who sought alternative paths to wellness (Mji 2020, 73). Exploring these myths can offer valuable insights into the cultural significance of medicinal plants in society's perception of witches throughout history.

Our memories also are rich with tales passed down through generations. These stories often depict witches utilizing specific herbs or concoctions to cure various illnesses or provide relief from pain. For instance, may witch-related folktales imply the use of these kinds of plants, a good example of such a spellcaster would be, as it was mentioned, Circe from Greco-Latin mythology. Such narratives emphasize the close relationship between witches and their understanding of herbal medicine.

Hence, it can be argued that witchcraft studies provide a fascinating glimpse into ancient beliefs surrounding the use of medicinal plants by witches. The historical context reveals how witches were regarded as healers who possessed extensive knowledge about herbal medicine. Mythology and folklore further emphasize this connection by showcasing stories of witches utilizing specific herbs for healing purposes. Plants traditionally associated with witches in myth and folklore continue to captivate modern practitioners, who draw on these ancient symbols in contemporary witchcraft and herbalism. Figures like Circe, Medea, and the völva exemplify the deep-rooted connection between feminine power, ritual, and botanical knowledge,

where herbs were not merely tools of healing or harm, but extensions of spiritual and cosmic order. Today, the enduring legacy of these mythic archetypes shapes how many view medicinal plants –not only through scientific inquiry into their therapeutic properties, but also through their symbolic and ritual significance. By revisiting these stories, we recognize how folklore preserves complex understandings of the natural world that still resonate in modern herbal and magical practices.

4. CONTEMPORARY SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH AND NEW WITCHES USES ON MEDICINAL PLANTS AND THEIR EFFICACY

While the belief in the magical properties of medicinal plants has persisted over centuries, scientific perspectives offer a different insight into their benefits. Indeed, scientific research has explored the potential therapeutic properties of the identified medicinal plants used by witches and has provided valuable insights into their efficacy. For instance, studies (such as the ones developed by Carter 2003, Kimmerer 2013 or Ostling 2014) have shown that lavender possesses sedative qualities that aid in promoting sleep and reducing anxiety levels. Similarly, chamomile has been found to have anti-inflammatory effects which can assist with digestion issues and alleviate menstrual cramps (Ostling 2014, 181-185). These scientific findings support some of the traditional beliefs associated with herbs here discussed.

What is more, contemporary scientific research on medicinal plants and their efficacy has shed new light on the ancient beliefs surrounding the use of these plants in witchcraft (Tanaka 2009,1-2). While historically associated with supernatural powers and mystical rituals, recent studies (Bnouham *et al.* 2006; Cavender & Albán 2009; Tanaka *et al.* 2009; Dafni, Lev, & Maul 2021; Llanes *et al.* 2022) have uncovered the tangible benefits of medicinal plants in treating various ailments. This burgeoning field of research has led to a reevaluation of traditional herbal remedies, challenging our preconceived notions about witches' potions and their effectiveness. Thus, the relationship between witches and plants was not merely utilitarian, but profoundly relational. Plants were more than ingredients; they were companions, witnesses, and participants in healing. This ecological intimacy is reflected in Indigenous and ecofeminist frameworks that view the land as an archive of memory and resistance. As Robin Wall Kimmerer suggests, to be native to a place is to live like if your ancestors are in the soil, as she explains "our lands were where our responsibility to the world was enacted, sacred ground. It belonged to itself; it was a gift, not a commodity, so it could never be bought or sold" (2013, 23). In this light, the witch's knowledge is not isolated but deeply embedded in a web of ecological reciprocity, making the criminalization of herbal knowledge also a criminalization of earth-based relationality. Witches and herbalists often cultivated deep familiarity with local plants, not through manuals or standardized training, but through immersion, observation, and oral transmission. Knowledge of when to harvest, how to dry, and which combinations enhanced or neutralized effects was shaped over generations of careful practice. The landscape itself became a co-teacher. Culturally, this relationship destabilized dominant logics that sought to divide nature from culture, mind from body, and knowledge from

spirit. In this sense, the land is more than a passive backdrop; it is a participant in the healing process. The violent uprooting of witches, then, symbolized not only the erasure of women, but also the dismemberment of a way of knowing that centered place, relation, and reciprocity. This perspective invites us to rethink witchcraft not as anti-science or superstition, but as an epistemology of interdependence. For instance, one such plant that has garnered significant attention is St. John's wort, commonly used by witches for its supposed ability to ward off evil spirits. Contrary to popular belief, modern scientific studies have demonstrated that St. John's wort possesses potent antidepressant properties due to its active compounds like hypericin and hyperforin (Zirak 2019, 8497). These compounds interact with neurotransmitters in the brain, boosting mood and alleviating symptoms of depression. The discovery of these pharmacological mechanisms not only validates the historical use of St. John's wort but also encourages further exploration into other mystical claims associated with medicinal plants.

Another intriguing example is foxglove, known for its association with witches' spells and potions in literature (McIndoe 2012, 4). Scientific investigations have revealed that this plant contains digitalis glycosides, which are powerful cardiac stimulants used today as medications for heart conditions like congestive heart failure and irregular heart rhythms (Hauptman 1999). The effectiveness of foxglove-derived drugs in modern medicine underscores the potential therapeutic value hidden within traditional folklore surrounding witches and their practices.

With that in mind, we can argue that numerous traditional medicinal plants have become synonymous with witchcraft due to their association with healing abilities. These examples, and other missing plants like mandrake, belladonna etc. as shown by Carter highlight how certain plants became entrenched within witchcraft practices and were believed to hold immense power (2003, 179). In contemporary witchcraft practices, there is a continued interest in incorporating medicinal plants for their spiritual and physical healing properties. Modern practitioners understand that these plants have an inherent energy or vibrational frequency that can be utilized for various purposes. They often create herbal remedies, teas, or potions using plant-based ingredients to address specific ailments or enhance personal well-being. The use of herbs such as sage for purification rituals or lavender for relaxation and stress relief are common examples of how witches incorporate medicinal plants into their practices (Netzer 2023, 7).

The ingestion or topical use of psychoactive plants by witches –whether through flying ointments or ritual teas– was more than a tool for escape or intoxication. These altered states often provided access to what anthropologist Michael Harner (1980) termed "non-ordinary realities." Within many pre-modern and Indigenous cosmologies, such states were not illusions, but legitimate modalities of insight. In this light, the visionary experiences of witches were not delusions but ways of engaging with spirit worlds, ancestral memories, or ecological consciousness –forms of knowing that threatened emerging scientific paradigms grounded in control, rationalism, and objectivity. Flying ointments were often composed of nightshades like belladonna, henbane, and datura, combined with animal fat to allow transdermal absorption. Descriptions of witches flying through the night sky may well be meta-

phorical expressions of hallucinatory journeys, where the body remained still while the mind entered a state of ecstatic vision. These accounts parallel shamanic practices around the world, from Siberia to the Amazon, where consciousness-altering plants facilitate spiritual travel, healing, and divination. All of this is stated by Wilby:

> This perceived link between shamanism and trance-induced visionary experience is now so strong that scholars in the field increasingly cite the ability to enter trance as one of the defining characteristics of the shaman. The anthropologist Michael Harner, for example, describes the shaman as a man or woman who enters an altered state of consciousness at will to contact and utilize an ordinarily hidden reality in order to acquire knowledge, power, and help other persons. These psychological perspectives on shamanism can be used to gain insight into the encounter-experiences of early modern cunning folk and witches. (2005, 167)

Rather than dismissing these narratives as fantasy, scholars like Wilby have argued that they encode surviving fragments of a visionary tradition (2005, 7, 124,167). The repression of these practices thus reflects not only religious zealotry, but a broader epistemological colonization –an effort to monopolize acceptable forms of knowledge and eliminate others deemed irrational, dangerous, or uncontainable, or as she writes, these narratives "were usually dismissed as derivative of... mental illness, prosecutorial coercion... or misapprehension" (2005, 5). Furthermore, contemporary research has also examined the antimicrobial properties of various herbs traditionally linked to witches' brews. Plants such as garlic, thyme, and sage have been found to possess potent antibacterial properties against a wide range of pathogens (Llanes *et al*. 2022, 408). For centuries, these plants were believed to possess magical powers capable of warding off evil spirits or protecting against infectious diseases –a notion dismissed as mere superstition until recent scientific findings corroborated their antimicrobial efficacy. This scientific research on medicinal plants and their efficacy has debunked the notion that witches' potions were purely mythical concoctions (Tanaka 2009; Ostling 2014). Hence, the discovery of pharmacologically active compounds within these plants, such as St. John's wort and foxglove, reveals a fascinating overlap between ancient beliefs and modern medicine. Moreover, the antimicrobial properties found in herbs traditionally associated with witchcraft highlight the potential for further exploration into the therapeutic value of these plants. As scientific understanding advances, it becomes increasingly clear that there is much to learn from the literature on witches and their use of medicinal plants.

5. CONCLUSIONS

This study set out to explore whether the traditional association between witches and medicinal plants (once dismissed as mere superstition) holds any contemporary scientific validity, and to what extent modern cultural and feminist reappraisals are reshaping our understanding of this legacy. Drawing from historical, ethnobotanical, literary, and cultural studies, the findings suggest that not only is

there a biochemical basis to many of the healing practices attributed to so-called witches, but that the figure of the witch itself is being reimagined in powerful ways across various academic and popular discourses. The literary portrayal of witches and medicinal plants reflects a rich interplay between imagination, historical reality, and contested systems of knowledge. To answer the first guiding question –how are medicinal plants represented in literary portrayals of witches? It is clear that such depictions extend far beyond fantasy or metaphor. In literature from antiquity to the present, witches are consistently shown as guardians of powerful herbal knowledge, often portrayed preparing potions, salves, or poisons. Classical figures such as Circe and Medea embody this dual role: they are both healers and threats, using plants to seduce, transform, or kill. Similarly, in Nordic mythology, völvas (female seers) practiced plant-based divination and healing rituals, reinforcing the link between femininity, nature, and spiritual authority. In these narratives, plants are not passive ingredients but active agents within a symbolic and spiritual ecosystem.

These portrayals are not accidental. They are deeply rooted in historical and cultural dynamics that associate women's herbal knowledge with both reverence and fear. This brings us to the second question: what dynamics underpinned the association between botanical knowledge and accusations of witchcraft? Throughout early modern Europe, midwives, healers, and cunning folk –many of whom were women– were often the primary custodians of plant-based medicine. Their embodied and orally transmitted knowledge posed a threat to the rising authority of institutional medicine and the Church. As documented by Emma Wilby (2005), such practitioners were frequently accused of communing with spirits or using forbidden knowledge, especially during times of social upheaval. The witch hunts, therefore, were not only about theology or superstition; they also reflected a systematic effort to suppress and delegitimize non-institutional knowledge systems, particularly those centered around women, nature, and community healing.

Moreover, this historical conflict exposes deeper epistemological tensions. As the article demonstrates, the botanical expertise attributed to witches was often based on real pharmacological effects. Modern scientific studies have confirmed the bioactivity of plants like mandrake or belladonna –all historically linked to witchcraft and trance-inducing rituals. Yet for centuries, this knowledge was labeled irrational, dangerous, or heretical simply because it existed outside sanctioned academic or clerical institutions. These historical narratives reflect a broader tendency to treat intuitive, relational, and spiritual knowledge as inferior to empirical science –a dynamic that persists in various forms to this day. However, as the analysis suggests, contemporary ethnobotanical and pharmacological research increasingly validates the efficacy of traditional plant use, indicating that the binary between "science" and "magic" is not only false, but also politically charged.

Finally, we find that the figure of the witch is undergoing a significant cultural revival. Drawing from thinkers like Robin Wall Kimmerer (2013), who advocates for a reciprocal relationship between humans and plants, these modern frameworks emphasize connection, care, and ethical interdependence over extraction and control. Feminist and decolonial scholars likewise reclaim the witch as a figure of resistance against patriarchal suppression of women's knowledge, celebrating her as

a conduit of ancestral wisdom and embodied agency. On top of that, literature and media continue to play a key role in this reimagining. Contemporary novels, films, and even herbalism manuals increasingly depict witches as complex, empowered figures who use plant knowledge for healing, justice, and transformation. This cultural resurgence not only restores dignity to previously marginalized practices but also invites us to rethink the ways in which we define valid knowledge. It asks us to imagine a world in which scientific inquiry and traditional wisdom are not in conflict, but in conversation –a vision urgently needed in an age of ecological crisis and medical disenchantment.

Hence, the literary and historical association between witches and medicinal plants reveals deep-rooted anxieties and aspirations around power, gender, and knowledge. These associations were historically weaponized to persecute women and suppress nonconforming worldviews. Yet today, they are being reclaimed to forge new understandings of healing, sustainability, and epistemological justice. By revisiting and reinterpreting these narratives, we not only restore a richer sense of the past but also open possibilities for more pluralistic and regenerative futures.

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