
The “Trouble” with Female Power: Witchcraft, Sexuality and Magic in the *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* (Netflix, 2018- 2020)

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TEXTE

- 1 “Being wicked never felt so good” announces the trailer for the second season¹ of the *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina*² (Netflix, 2018–2020)³, a fantasy and horror TV series about a high school student who is half-witch⁴ and half-mortal, and who belongs to a family and greater magical community of devil-worshipping, human-dissecting, cannibal witches. Sabrina is different from many other representations of TV witch heroines as she revels in her powers, which are associated with the Dark Lord (devil). Yet the figure of the witch on TV has always been linked to the representation and conception of female power and agency.
- 2 The *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* inscribes itself within streaming platforms’ production logic of creating innovative fare for diverse niche subscriber markets in order to offer something for everyone, which contrasts with the way in which traditional TV networks produce mainstream-acceptable media products in order to appeal to mass audiences to sell advertisements.⁵ A *Wall Street Journal* article more specifically confirms that the series is part of the streaming platform’s “young-adult push” (Jurgenson). It is also noteworthy that it is from the same creator, Roberto Aguirre-Sacasa, as the teen series *Riverdale* (CW 2017–). Both series focus on the lives of high-school students based on Archie Comics’ characters, and

contain dark, violent, and sexual content. However, as Netflix is unencumbered by network censorship, the *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* is gorier than *Riverdale*, and also able to explore teen sexuality much more explicitly, which can be seen as empowering but also troubling, especially to viewers and critics concerned about the young target audience (Flood).⁶

- 3 John Fiske notes television's potential as "a cultural agent, particularly as the provoker and circulator of meanings" (Fiske 1), and the *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* is notable for its revision of the transgressive figure of a powerful teenage witch, as well as a number of other significant innovative gender representations that can be found within, including many main characters with non-heteronormative sexual identities. Thus, it is very deliberately distinguishing itself as a "woke"⁷ series presenting non-traditional gender roles, and positioning itself as falling within the current "Fourth Wave of Feminism", of which key components are questions of social justice, LGBTQ+ rights, diversity, sex positivity, body positivity, internet activism, and inclusivity, as well as the examination of these questions through the lens of intersectionality, a theoretical framework developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw that allows for the analysis of the way in which power dynamics, race, gender, and social forces interlock and interact to create discrimination and oppression⁸.
- 4 The figure of the witch is a key symbol in the feminist movement, and of female empowerment, both on and off the screen. The first magical TV heroines appeared on screen in 1960s sitcoms like *I Dream of Jeannie* (NBC, 1965-1970) and *Bewitched* (ABC, 1964-1972) and were created in the wake of major shifts in consciousness about female roles and sexuality following the release of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* in 1963 (Douglas 123-148)⁹. Explaining the appeal of witches, second-waved feminist writer Erica Jong notes, "The more disempowered people are the more they long for magic, which explains why magic becomes the province of women in a sexist society" (Jong 36). And like its predecessors, the *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* was created during a particular cultural moment of striving for empowerment, and an increased awareness of the need for feminism in the wake of #MeToo. A critic writing about the release of the *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* highlights the renewed importance of the witch as a symbol in contemporary culture and feminist

narratives thus: “Witch narratives are not only in vogue thanks to #MeToo, but also natural metaphors for stories of marginalization and othering. Then there’s the history of witch persecution, all steeped in the intersectional nexus of sexism, racism, classism, and ethnocentrism that upholds patriarchy” (Joho). In this vein, the *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina*, positions the heroine as both oppressed—as a member of a group that was hunted and killed during the witch trials, a fact that is mentioned often in the series—but also as magically empowered. The overarching narrative opposes Sabrina to the patriarchal figure of The Dark Lord, and thus the series prominently features the fourth wave narrative trope of “reclaiming power from a toxic male” as identified by Valerie Frankel in her work on TV representations of fourth wave feminism (Frankel 2020).

- 5 The symbol of the witch is linked to conception, birth, life and death, and thus to sex and sexuality. Barbara Creed notes that in “patriarchal discourses” the witch is perceived as “an enemy of the symbolic order” (Creed 76) and thus representations of witches often embody a form of trouble on screen. The showrunners of the *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* appear to be embracing this particular form of “trouble”, using the kinkier, darker and more violent aspects of the symbol of the witch to explore sexuality and sexual identities, to fight patriarchal oppression and thus to transmit certain gender messages. This chapter will first explore how the series inscribes itself in a historical lineage of TV depictions of female witches that reflect feminist gains and participate in the negotiation of discourses concerning female empowerment, power, witches and witchcraft, while also breaking with certain conventions; I will then examine the gender and feminist messages in detail to determine if they are truly as progressive and intersectional as they would seem at first glance.

TV’s Good Witches: Empowerment Contained

- 6 In order to understand the significance of the *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina*, it is important to examine how the series both conforms to and departs from other series containing magical heroines, and the way that these series have reflected shifts in conceptions of gender and women’s roles in society. The character of Sabrina is

clearly inspired by and inscribed in a long lineage of pretty, magical TV heroines, starting with the 1960s series *I Dream of Jeannie* and *Bewitched* which debuted at the beginning of the women’s liberation movement. The lead characters in these series were magical, and thus they were more powerful than the men in their lives, but they were told not to use their powers. Therefore, Susan Douglas believes that, through these representations “a significant proportion of the pop culture moguls were trying to acknowledge the impending release of female sexual and political energy, while keeping it all safely in a straightjacket.” (Douglas 126) Moreover, she adds that:

In these shows, the potentially monstrous and grotesque was beautified and tamed; what we saw, in other words, was the containment of the threat posed by unleashed female sexuality, especially in the wake of Beatlemania and Helen Gurley Brown. Since viewers had been socialized to regard female sexuality as monstrous, TV producers addressed the anxieties about letting it loose by domesticating the monster, by making her pretty and sometimes slavish, by shrinking her and keeping her locked up in a bottle, and by playing the situation for laughs (Douglas 126).

- 7 Linda Baughman, Allison Burr-Miller, and Linda Manning note that *Bewitched* and its witches are part of our “media history” and that all the modern-day witches are viewed through our “media memory” of this show, which affects all current representations of witches through “intertextuality” (Baughman, Burr-Miller, Linda Manning 106-107). The 60s blond hair and retro-style clothing of the heroine of the *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* resemble that of Samantha, *Bewitched*’s beloved housewife, and seem to be deliberately co-opting this imagery and association, while simultaneously turning the convention of the pretty, ladylike good witch on its head through the series’ dark atmosphere, violent heroine, associations with the devil, and horror tropes. This distinguishes it from the series it is a reboot of, *Sabrina the Teenage Witch* (ABC/WB, 1996-2003). Like its magical predecessors, *Sabrina the Teenage Witch* played magic for laughs and placed its eponymous lead character firmly in a cheery domestic sphere.
- 8 *Sabrina the Teenage Witch*, and its offshoot, the *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina*, are part of a larger trend of associating messages of

empowerment with magical powers. In fact, *Sabrina the Teenage Witch* is part of the 90s-2000s phenomenon of Girl Power, which includes a number of supernaturally empowered heroines whose magical powers were used as a vehicle for feminist messages, like those of *Charmed* (WB, 1998-2006), and *Buffy, the Vampire Slayer* (The WB/UPB, 1997-2003). These sorts of shows, which issued from what many consider to be feminism’s third wave¹⁰, depicted witches and other magical heroines as main characters in a positive way. They were clearly influenced by the “Goddess Spirituality Movement” of the 70s, which, during the second wave of feminism, attempted to cast the figure of the witch in a good light as a political statement, reclaiming it from the figure of the “weird woman” (Sanders 79). Yet, even if these third-wave shows had undeniable feminist potential, in order not to alienate media consumers and advertisers alike, post-feminist series unequivocally featured young, attractive heroines who corresponded to the aspirational lifestyle products that TV advertisers were peddling. Of the link between commercial capitalism, young women and representations of empowerment, Valerie Frankel affirms, “This was the third wave, roughly synonymous with ‘girl power’, as young women emphasized assertiveness through attraction and even materialism” (Frankel 2)¹¹. And this is something from which the *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina*—distributed as it is on a lucrative streaming platform juggernaut—does not completely dissociate itself, featuring as it does a white, thin, blond, fashionably dressed heroine.

- 9 Yet the *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* breaks with previous representations in an important way. The supernatural powers of the *Charmed* sisters, as well as those of Buffy of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*¹² and her witch friend and fellow hero Willow (WB/UPN, 1997-2003), were “contained” and limited to being used for good and for the good of others and not for personal gain. For instance, Willow actually had to restrain herself from using her powers, as she was a magic addict whose unrestrained use of magic was shown as having serious and dark consequences. One of the witches of *Charmed* (Piper) often wears a cross necklace, as does the supernatural character Buffy of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, emphasizing the association of empowered magical female characters and their power with the forces of good. In contrast, the *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* re-associates the figure

of the witch with devil-worshipping and black magic, by unleashing the potential of a witch’s power and showing her reveling in it. In fact, Sabrina’s powers are revealed to be not only witch powers, but also demonic powers, as her true father is revealed to be the devil, or The Dark Lord himself. Despite the political prominence of the religious right in the US, interestingly enough, the devil seems to be getting somewhat of a reimagining in popular culture on TV, notably with the contemporary series *Lucifer* (Fox/Netflix, 2016-2021), in which the devil is essentially, a very attractive “good guy” whose well-sculpted body is an important visual spectacle. Likewise, The Dark Lord on the *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* is a very handsome fallen angel who serves as an important visual spectacle and sex object, as a well-muscled man who spends a significant amount of screen time mostly naked for the pleasure of the viewers’ gaze, even if he is still very much an antagonist. America has a very vocal conservative Christian right, and the *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* (as well as *Lucifer*) did receive some backlash from Christians, but that does not seem to have stopped the success of either, as both were renewed for several seasons¹³. In fact, the producers of the *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* even seem to be completely uninterested in Christians’ good opinions, as can be evidenced by the broadcast of a special Christmas-themed episode apart from the regular season in December 2018 that showcased the satanic traditions of Sabrina’s family as they celebrated the winter solstice with Christmas-like decorations.

- 10 The *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* is more graphically violent than many of its predecessors, or even *Riverdale*, which plays on a network in primetime. Netflix is unfettered by network censors and the network-TV imperative to attract large audiences for each series¹⁴. Thus, Sabrina can actually be quite openly violent, notably slitting the throat of one of her classmates and burying her in a garden where she will be reborn as part of a spell. Unlike many of her predecessors, Sabrina does not seem to completely be punished in the narrative for enjoying using magic and exercising power, or forbidden to use it like Samantha in *Bewitched*, even if certain uses of magic are shown to have consequences (like bringing back someone from the dead). Compared to many older series, the *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* would appear to be positioned as “woke”, intersectional and

unabashedly feminist, at least on the surface. For example, in the very first episode of the series, when Sabrina’s friend Susie gets bullied, Sabrina starts a club called WICCA (Women’s Intersectional Cultural and Creative Association) to empower the girls at Baxter High. WICCA’s purpose, her friend Roz emphasizes, is to be “a club to topple the white patriarchy”, while Sabrina underlines that the club will allow them “to mobilize and protest if we need to get political, to fight when we need to fight, to defend each other”¹⁵.

- 11 Thus, like her predecessors, Sabrina’s powers are often used in service of others, even if, due to the satanic origins of her power, she is more of an anti-hero than a hero. It is the obligation of care that Sarah Projansky and Leah R. Vande Berg note undermined and contained the power and feminist potential of Sabrina’s previous incarnation in *Sabrina the Teenage Witch*:

Nevertheless, despite providing many potential moments for particular kinds of feminist pleasure, the series’ affirmation of traditional patriarchal feminine concerns with physical beauty, acquisition of heterosexual male attention, and responsibility for others undermines Sabrina’s access to independence and contains her potential as a feminist role model (Projansky and Vande Berg 27).

- 12 Likewise, there is a duty of care incumbent on the current incarnation of Sabrina, and her active interest in boys somewhat undermines her good sense and decision-making at times. Her ultrafeminine, stylish, made-up appearance, represent a link with the consumerist discourses of third-wave or postfeminism that linked sartorial style to empowerment,¹⁶ and would seem at odds with the emphasis on “real” beauty associated with the body positivity movement of the fourth wave. Yet Sabrina, whose powers are rooted in dark magic—even if she is part human and was baptized in the Christian Church, in addition to belonging to the Satanic Church of Night—is freer in her use of magic than many of the pretty magical heroines who came before, and is unanchored from the absolute imperative to do good and to associate herself with the forces of the light. Moreover, as for its representation of violence, the *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* is freer in its exploration of sexuality and in its representation of violence than its predecessors.

Sex Positivity vs. Monstrous Sexuality

- 13 The series represents a site of negotiating discourses in terms of its representation of sexuality, which can be seen as innovative to some extent, but also troubling in some ways. The atmosphere in the *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina*, which is inspired by the 2014 Archie comic book version of Sabrina, is meant to be disturbing. Sabrina’s family runs a mortuary out of their home in the small town of Greendale, and the dead bodies they receive (and sometimes dissect) are stored in the basement of their gray Victorian house, which features its own cemetery and is reminiscent of the style of a classic haunted house, or house of horror. Her familiar, Salem, named after the city where witches were prosecuted in the 17th century, is not just a black cat, but a rather sinister shapeshifting goblin who can take the form of a feline. The landscape is bleak, and the sides of the shots are often blurry and out of focus, with Sabrina often wearing red, which contrasts with the dreariness. The color red is reminiscent of the fairy tale, *Little Red Riding Hood*, and much of the action—and magic—takes places in a dark forest near Sabrina’s house. The fact that Sabrina is often garbed in red is also highly symbolic, due to the color’s association with blood and horror. To wit, the series is filled with horror tropes, many of which, Barbara Creed notes, are associated with female sexuality and reproduction:

The witch is defined as an abject figure in that she is represented within patriarchal discourses as an implacable enemy of the symbolic order. She is thought to be dangerous and wily, capable of drawing on her powers to wreak destruction on the community. The witch sets out to unsettle boundaries between the rational and irrational, symbolic and imaginary. Her evil powers are seen as part of her “feminine” nature; she is closer to nature than man and can control forces in nature such as tempests, hurricanes and storms (Creed 76).

- 14 Interestingly, Sabrina can only fully express her powers when she comes of age and undergoes a dark baptism. Thus, her powers are tied to puberty and the beginning of her sexual awareness, as expressed through her relationship with her mortal boyfriend Harvey

Kinkle, and later with her witch boyfriend Nick Scratch. Yet, in order to receive her full powers, she must remain a virgin until she participates in the dark baptism, during which she wears white like a bride. Sabrina actually comes to the dark baptism wearing her mother's lacy white wedding dress, which looks a bit like a 60s, fit-and-flare, party dress and which she had actually donned as a costume for a Halloween/16th birthday party that she had attended just before. At the party, she seemed the very picture of an innocent young woman, a "girl", as she danced with her friend Roz who was also in costume. Yet, Halloween can be a moment for the narrative device of the masquerade, or "come as you aren't day"¹⁷, and once Sabrina arrives at the dark baptism, the dress turns black, reflecting Sabrina's true nature a Satan-worshipping practitioner of the dark arts. Her dress is then removed to reveal a white slip underneath. Sabrina is thus to receive her dark baptism in front of her coven whilst wearing a slinky, form-fitting white undergarment, which illustrates her vulnerability and disempowerment at this moment as well the sexual component to the dark baptism during which she is cut until she bleeds in order to sign the book of The Dark Lord with her own blood (i.e. make a pact with the devil). The *mise-en-scène* is highly symbolic. She is dressed in white, the color associated with purity and virginity, and the knife-cutting is symbolic of penetration and thus loss of innocence, as Sabrina makes a sound that could be interpreted as being quite sexual, and thus transgressive. The Dark Lord, who is positioned as a "groom" to whom, in a certain manner, she pledges her troth, is portrayed in this scene as a hairy, manly goat-like creature, with large horns, which alludes to bestiality.

- 15 Later in the series, the positioning of The Dark Lord, who turns out to be Sabrina's father, hints at incest. Not only is The Dark Lord positioned as a young¹⁸, handsome, male, sex object who spends a fare of amount of screen time unclothed, and whose bared muscled chest is an important visual spectacle, but he gazes at Sabrina in a way that is quite unsettling for a father. Moreover, after he is later imprisoned in Nick's body, Sabrina is taunted that her boyfriend still has part of her father inside him. The Dark Lord wants to possess her, for her to do his bidding, which raises the issue of male control over her body autonomy, as at one point, she seems possessed and imbibed with his power as she, his devil's spawn, becomes "The Dark Lord's Sword" (in

more phallic symbolism)—or his tool—an extension and an instrument of his power without self or agency.

- 16 The issue of “will she or won’t she lose her virginity” is a subplot of much of season two, as Sabrina’s sexuality continues to be connected to horror and horror tropes. Sabrina notably participates in a sex festival called Lupercalia, with her aunt Zelda’s approval, that ends in horror rather than in an orgasmic experience, with her chopping up her boyfriend Nick’s familiar Amalia (who looks like a humanized wolf) with an ax, whilst wearing a red cape over sexy white lingerie, the blood of the animal splattered all over her. Once again, this scene recalls *Little Red Riding Hood*, a fairytale that is correlated to the loss of virginity and innocence. Yet the coming-of-age and loss of innocence are Nick’s. He loses his only parent when Sabrina kills Amalia, who took the place of his mother when his parents died, and who had gone crazy with a murderous rage in a version of the “castrating mother”, one of the monstrous-feminine horror tropes defined by Creed (Creed 139-150).
- 17 In season three, a group of pagan witches who worship pagan gods, thus differentiating them from Sabrina’s coven of devil-worshipping witches, are depicted as genuinely evil characters, which places the audience in the position of rooting for devil-worshippers to survive the conflict as the “good guys”. The pagans go on a hunt for virgins, as killing one is the key to bringing “The Green God” to life on Earth, which will give them power. Sabrina’s friend Theo is shown losing his virginity to escape this fate. In an interesting role reversal, it is not a girl who is seen to be the virgin sacrifice, but Harvey, who is then tortured in a horrifically gory manner, penetrated by vines of The Green Man, as blood streams out of him. Then the flowers of The Green Man release their powdery seed to pollinate the Earth, as if they had “ejaculated” after Harvey’s penetration. If coming of age, and sexuality are linked to blood and horror, chastity would seem to be equally punished in his case.
- 18 If the fact that Sabrina’s sexuality remains connected to horror tropes undermines a possible feminist message of sex positivity and sexual empowerment in one respect, the series nevertheless pushes the envelope and posits intersectional and fourth-wave discourses on sex and gender issues in other respects. For example, it attempts to be

inclusive and intersectional by showcasing an ethnically diverse cast of characters of different sexual and gender identities¹⁹. It notably features a transgender character in the cast: Sabrina’s friend Susie who transitions to Theo and enters into a relationship with the male hobgoblin Robin. It also features other lead characters on the LGBTQ+ spectrum, notably her cousin Ambrose, who is shown as being in love with a man and then a woman, and who is also shown in a pansexual, polyamorous orgy with Sabrina’s second boyfriend, Nick. The orgy was a scene that shocked some viewers, and was seen as taking the empowerment of teen sexuality too far, given the youthful target of the series and featuring, as it did, characters that were technically enrolled at a sort of high school for witches, The Academy of Unseen Arts²⁰. The series also explores the sexuality of older women, showing both of Sabrina’s aunts (with whom she lives) in relationships: Zelda, who marries the Church of Night’s high priest for power, to become Lady Blackwood, but is also seen kissing the Voodoo Witch Marie; and, Hilda, who is in love with a man possessed by an incubus. It also promotes sex positivity, notably by revealing that Sabrina’s friend Roz is not a virgin without any judgement in the narrative. In fact, the conversation between Roz and Sabrina about this was even praised by *Teen Vogue* for the manner in which the series “gets the sex talk totally right” (Drucker).

- 19 Yet Sabrina’s sexuality is shown as being quite “contained”, as she is completely heteronormative, and is comfortable with her expressing her sexuality only when she is in a romantic relationship. She remains a virgin almost to the very end of the series (Lupercalia and an invitation to join the orgy notwithstanding). Sherrie Inness notes that “Typically, popular media genres go out of their way to emphasize the heterosexuality of the tough, heroic woman. Emphasizing a woman hero’s heterosexuality reassures the audience that she has not departed too far from a woman’s ‘normal’ sexual orientation, despite the other ways she might call into question gender stereotypes” (Inness 168-169). While Sabrina is, in many respects, more of an anti-hero than a hero, as the focal point for the series, the same logic may apply. As a strong, powerful female witch, she is a transgressive character, and so depicting her as unequivocally straight might therefore be a way to “normalize” her. Thus, even if the *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* depicts sexuality in many non-traditional ways, which

distinguishes it as a series trying to offer contemporary gender messages, it operates as a “site of negotiation” between traditional and non-traditional gender representations rather than completely challenging the status quo.

Patriarchy, Empowerment and the Queen of Hell

- 20 Deliberate messages of female empowerment run throughout the *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina*, as the producers seem very aware of the feminist potential of the female witch. The third season embraces the concepts of “sisterhood” and “The Goddess Spirituality Movement” of the second wave when Sabrina’s coven, now led by her Aunt Zelda, in order to empower themselves, call upon the assistance of non-Satanic witches (many of whom are older or otherwise marginalized women) and end up embracing worship of the triple goddess Hecate in place of The Dark Lord. As one critic writes, “*Sabrina* honors Hecate as a triple goddess, an expression of the totality of a woman’s life, and it’s her power that saves Hilda and empowers all the women of Greendale. I love that it’s now a powerful, unseen Goddess that these witches serve, free of male dominance” (Mason)²¹.
- 21 Moreover, not only is the word “patriarchy” actually used in the series, but Sabrina clearly and overtly opposes patriarchal figures, structures and roles, and engages in the fourth wave narrative trope Valerie Frankel describes as “reclaiming power from the toxic male” (or males) (Frankel 2020). For example, she joins forces with a group of young women from her coven called the “weird sisters” to sexually punish and torture some young, human, male high-school students who are bullies. She fights to be head girl of The Academy of Unseen Arts, shocked by the fact there have only ever been head boys. Moreover, many of the plotlines involve Sabrina opposing herself to the patriarchal forces of The Dark Lord, and the high-priest of the Church of Night (with his male disciples and favoritism for a male child) who would have power over her.
- 22 Sabrina is generally rather victorious in her defeat of male evil, and the second season notably finishes with these hegemonic patriarchal figures disempowered and with a message of female empowerment.

The evil and misogynistic high priest of the Church of Night, Sabrina’s patriarchal coven, leaves town. The Dark Lord is dethroned and contained within the body of Sabrina’s boyfriend Nick Scratch who is then condemned to hell. The Dark Lord’s lover Lilith (or Madame Satan) becomes the queen of hell, in a literal incarnation of the old adage that “Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned.” The third season involves Sabrina displacing Lilith — whose power as a former concubine to The Dark Lord is not recognized by the very masculine demons of hell — and taking her place as the queen of hell as The Dark Lord’s heir. Even though Sabrina says she does this in order to protect humans and the Earth, she is also seen as enjoying the power. This lead one critic to laud the series as “the feminist revenge fantasy we need right now” (Toomer). However, others took umbrage with Sabrina’s “intersectional feminist witchcraft” (Joho). Jess Joho for instance, underlines that the series fails its intersectional promise by focusing on a white feminist and white feminist issues, while positioning the lead character as the “white savior” of even more disempowered people, notably her less privileged friend group, noting that “she’s painted as the model of white feminist ally. And that savior complex is exactly where CAOS’ wokeness gets iffy real fast” (Joho). Thus, even if the *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* is inclusive and intersectional in some respects, by featuring a “white savior” on a quest for power, it would seem to not fully realize its fourth-wave intersectional potential.

- 23 The fact that Sabrina longs for power is something that is openly discussed and acknowledged in the narrative. Yet Sabrina’s quest to retain her place as queen of hell leaves the town of Greendale, and everyone in it, vulnerable to the pagans, who kill most of them. In order to save her family and friends, Sabrina goes back in time. Once she puts everything right, the future Sabrina realizes that she may possess the solution to her work-life balance problem: Sabrina-from-the-future takes her place at her aunts’ home to be a high-school student, leaving her power-hungry doppelganger, who did not witness her family’s demise, to take over ruling hell. In the coronation scene, Sabrina is dressed in a style similar to England’s Queen Elizabeth I, “The Virgin Queen”, with a freakish twist. She looks quite ghoulishly monstrous with white face paint, ribs on her golden corset, spikes on her collar, and blood red lips—the literal incarnation

of the “monstrous feminine.” Creed notes that “Women’s abjectification is crucial to the functioning of the patriarchal order” (Creed 166), and the coronation scene is representative of many of the ambiguities of feminist TV series. On the one hand, Sabrina challenges the patriarchal powers that be; on the other hand, taking their place renders her monstrous.

- 24 Tania Krzywinska notes of TV series that “splitting adds surprise and diversity to the shows, often inviting views to choose whether they like a character in good or bad guise. The split character strategy may also provide an important resonance and meaning for audiences, as it offers a way of symbolizing one’s own experience of conflicting character traits” (Krzywinska 181). Witches are often depicted as having a dual nature, as being good or bad, as “a descendant of ancient goddesses who embodied both birth and death, nurturing and destruction” (Jong 5). The *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* emphasizes “splitting” as a recurring motif, as Sabrina, up until the moment when she splits herself into two, continually struggles to choose between the path of light and the path of night; her everyday “real” life as a student at a human high school or her magical one as a witch at The Academy of Unseen Arts. Yet Sabrina’s literally splitting into two people only creates trouble for her family and herself, as it almost leads to the colliding of realms and the end of their existence as it breaks the rules of magic for there to be two.
- 25 Many 1990-2000s Girl Power heroines denied their power, and just wanted to be “normal”, and this desire to be normal was a form of containment. Thus, the manner in which the *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* handles this final-season “splitting” plot twist, where one Sabrina is a “normal” girl and the other is a queen, is telling in terms of its ultimate feminist messages concerning women, empowerment and power. The “good” Sabrina on Earth (Sabrina Spellman) is unhappy, lonely and not having any fun; the “evil” Queen of Hell Sabrina (Sabrina Morningstar) has a sexy husband and parties, as if to prove the old adage that “bad girls have more fun”. Yet it is the “good” Sabrina upon whom the series is hitherto centered, and it is she who saves everyone from the impending danger of the colliding realms. Even the Dark Lord (now out of Nick’s body) admits that the “good” Sabrina (Spellman)—who has renounced her throne (and her power)

to live a human life, who is contained, and full of abnegation—is the better of the two Sabrinas. Yet, for everyone to live, Sabrina must die.

26 While Sabrina Morningstar is essentially sacrificed to an alternate realm, and perishes trying to get back to her own, Sabrina Spellman sacrifices herself and lets herself die a heroic death (in a complicated plot twist, this is while her soul is in the resurrected dead body of Sabrina Morningstar whose soul remains dead). Thus, in the last season, her character does a 180-character arc. While her power has always been used to help her friends, she has always been a bit more anti-hero than hero, reveling in her power, rather than wallowing in sorrow. Yet her heroic sacrificial demise places her in a trend of “sacrificial heroines” in science fiction and fantasy series, as outlined by Sara Crosby, that dates back to the era of the third wave of feminism. These are powerful lead female characters like Xena of *Xena: Warrior Princess* (Syndicated, 1995-2001), Prue of *Charmed*, or Capitan Janeway of *Star Trek: Voyager* (UPN, 1995-2001) whose deaths are the ultimate patriarchal containment of their power and agency. Crosby notes that tough or powerful women are seen as threatening the patriarchal community and thus are often not allowed to achieve political agency or ascend to power in popular culture narratives, in contrast to the traditional trajectory for a male heroic character (Crosby 153-178). Patriarchal society must find a way to keep women from being in charge and punish transgressive women for their “sins”. Therefore, in popular culture narratives, powerful lead female characters often “snap”—or in other words, sacrifice themselves, renounce their heroism and/or die—so that women are discouraged from having political agency. She notes that this “snap” is accomplished in three ways: female characters feel guilty about having power or being heroic, patriarchy makes women want to give up their power and become “normal,” and the only true community is understood to be the patriarchal one (Crosby 155-156).

27 This “snap” leads female characters to sacrifice themselves because they feel it is the “right” thing for them to do, or for the “good” of others—or in other words for the good of the patriarchy and of the patriarchal community (Crosby 153-178). The sacrificial heroines have often managed to survive far worse situations than the ones that finally kill them, leading their deaths to often be rather unbelievable, incoherent, and incongruous patriarchal smackdowns. In this case,

for example, Sabrina’s aunts have a magical patch in their garden where they bury the dead to resurrect them, amongst various other supernatural means by which she could have been saved. Sabrina Spellman’s “snap” in this last and final season means, first, that she chooses to live her life as a “normal” girl on Earth, rather than as queen of hell, miserable and ridden with existential angst, until she then dies a passive sacrificial death, lying on a slab, and bleeding out as the world’s savior, and as atonement for her transgressions and her guilt over the inglorious death of “hellish” Sabrina Morningstar. The end of the series’ finale, after her demise, finds her possibly in the afterlife with Nick, who has also perished, or possibly in alternate universe, a theory which is given credence by her postmortem appearance in a rather convoluted alternate universe episode of *Riverdale*, set in “Rivervale,” in what is possibly a dream sequence in which she explains that witches never die. Nevertheless, it appears that the troubled terrestrial “normal” life of Sabrina Spellman is at an end.

Conclusion

- 28 The *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* sets out to create “trouble”, or to destabilize traditional gender boundaries and binaries and pushback against the patriarchal order. It seems to be offering a new conception of female power and teenage-girl agency, one where teenage girls can be unapologetically violent, magical feminist and powerful, but one which is not without its ethical and moral issues in terms of TV’s role as a cultural agent in particular as regards Netflix’s “young-adult push” that is targeting young viewers with extremely explicit violent and sexual content. Writing about the evolution of feminism, Valerie Frankel notes that if “the second and third wave were criticized for featuring middle-class white women’s struggles, the fourth wave showed a much more fiercely inclusive model” (Frankel 6, 2019). The *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina*’s emphasis on the issues of a white privileged feminist heroine with contained heteronormative sexuality would seem to undermine its purported “wokeness” and intersectional, fourth-wave discourses. Nevertheless, it is significant in terms of the overall TV series landscape, which is evolving, through streaming platforms, to feature representations of women that are increasingly subversive and transgressive, even if imperfectly

progressive, with shows like *Glow* (Netflix 2017-), *Orange is the New Black* (2013-2019), or even *Jessica Jones* (Netflix, 2015-2019). Even if, like the *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina*, the series all have in common a focal-point character who is a middle-class white woman, they nevertheless offer images of diversity and inclusivity, establishing themselves as fourth-wave feminist fare and as pushing the envelope on gender issues and discourses further than their second and third-wave precursors.

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NOTES

1 Entire seasons of the *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* are marketed as “parts”, which is very series-specific. As an episode or a season can also have many parts within a “part”, for the sake of clarity, and to avoid any confusion, the valid, and more typical terminology of “season” will be applied throughout and is also used when discussing the series in other formats, like on the IMDB: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt7569592/episodes?season=1>. Accessed 20 April 2020.

2 The official name of the series is *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina*, with no “the”, which is why “the” is not in italics here. However, for grammatical and stylistic reasons, it would seem more appropriate to add the “the” throughout.

3 Clip available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d8dLwiT2KOo>. Accessed 31 March 2019.

4 Later in the series, it is discovered that The Dark Lord is Sabrina’s father, which would technically make her half-devil. Yet, she is still considered part of the Spellman family of witches and her powers are witch-like powers. Moreover, she still belongs to a coven, and she practices the craft, by chanting spells and working with plants and potions, etc., and thus for all intents and purposes, even if she is half-devil, she can nevertheless be considered a practicing witch.

5 For further information on Netflix and other streaming platforms’ niche-targeting strategies and their programming production and logistics, see Lotz, *Portals*, which analyzes Netflix’s “mass customization”, or “conglomerated niche”, strategies.

6 Netflix does not regularly release viewership numbers for its programs (see, for example, Welch). However, statistics of user ratings on IMBD would seem to indicate that *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* is indeed watched by young viewers, including viewers under 18, see the data collected at <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt7569592/ratings>. Accessed 28 April 2020.

7 The term “woke” is applied to TV series (as well as people, ideas and cultural manifestations) that demonstrate or promote awareness of social and political issues inherent in exclusion, oppression, and social and racial injustice.

8 See for example, Frankel, or Sollee, for an analysis of components of the fourth wave of feminism.

9 See for example, Bartel, Douglas, or Sanders, for more on the witch as a feminist symbol in popular culture.

10 Some scholars also consider it the era of postfeminism, although the usefulness or validity of either term is debatable, see for example, Lotz who notably finds that these expressions are “too fraught with contradictory meanings to be useful” and applies the concept of “post second wave” to her analyses, as she considers that feminist popular culture representations have their origins in the second wave feminist movement (Lotz 23, 2014). Nevertheless, Frankel finds such terminologies helpful for understanding and categorizing different trends and eras of cultural productions (Frankel 1-8, 2019).

11 See also Miller and Sanders, for their analysis of *Charmed*, and the links between young female media consumers, consumer capitalism and

discourses of empowerment in the era of the third wave, also called the era of postfeminism.

12 Basti n notably sees the *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* being "deeply indebted to *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*" and its supernatural heroines, noting that "*Buffy* excelled at vacillating from interrogating gender politics to finding arch humor in the dark trappings of its fantastical world. Similarly, *Chilling Adventures* has its tongue firmly planted in its cheek, even in its dark consideration of witchcraft, to interrogate sexism and the way women's power has been circumscribed" (Basti n).

13 See, for example, Kelly, or Smith.

14 Many of the *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina*'s predecessors were also violent, especially the magical and supernatural Girl Power heroes, as their mission was to kill or destroy their enemies in every episode. The difference is that when the *Charmed* witches killed their enemies, for example, the deceased often just sort of vaporized, whereas when someone is killed in *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina*, there may be lots of blood and gore. Netflix allows the series to be very graphic, with shocking images like close-ups of dissected cadavers in the family's morgue, etc. The *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* is so gory as to be potentially upsetting and off-putting to some viewers, illustrating the difference between a network series' imperative to please censors and attract mass audiences, and Netflix's comparative creative freedom and strategy of producing content for various categories of niche subscribers (see, for example, Lotz, 2017)

15 The dialog is from the episode "Chapter 1: October County." *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina*, created by Roberto Aguirre-Sacasa, performance by Kiernan Shipka, season 1, episode 1, Netflix, 26 October 2018.

16 For more on postfeminist discourses in women-centered series, see, for example, Henry.

17 See, for example, Sweet

18 It is interesting to note that the actor who plays Lucifer, Luke Cook, was born in 1986, so is only a few years younger than Kiernan Shipka who plays Sabrina, who was born in 1999. Source: IMDB: https://www.imdb.com/name/nm2215143/?ref=tt_cl_t_1 and https://www.imdb.com/name/nm1981177/?ref=ttfc_fc_cl_t21. Accessed: 28 March 2022.

19 See also, Frankel (2019) and Frankel (2020).

20 See, for example, Sutton, for her collection and commentary of online viewer feedback, or Flood.

21 See also Mason or Schultz for any analysis of Paganism and ancient religious symbols in the *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina*.

RÉSUMÉS

English

The first magical TV heroines were those of 60s sitcoms like *I Dream of Jeannie* (NBC, 1965-1970) and *Bewitched* (ABC, 1964-1972). They were created in the wake of major shifts in consciousness about female roles and sexuality and Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963). Though possessing magical powers, the lead characters in these series were told not to use their powers, and Susan Douglas believes that through these representations “a significant proportion of the pop culture moguls were trying to acknowledge the impending release of female sexual and political energy, while keeping it all safely in a straightjacket.” Moreover, she adds that, since viewers had been socialized to regard female sexuality as monstrous, TV producers addressed concerns surrounding female sexuality by domesticating the monster, by making her pretty and sometimes wildly subservient, by shrinking her and keeping her locked up in a bottle, and by playing the situation for laughs. Linda Baughman, Allison Burr-Miller, and Linda Manning, note that *Bewitched* and its witches are part of our “media history” and that all the modern-day witches are viewed through our “media memory” of this show, which affects all current representations of witches through “intertextuality.” In contrast, the atmosphere in the *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* is meant to be disturbing. The landscape is bleak, and the sides of the shots are often blurry and out of focus. Sabrina's family runs a mortuary out of their home, and the series is filled with horror tropes, many of which, as Barbara Creed notes, are associated with female reproduction. How is women's power expressed and possibly also contained by the narrative, and what do these representations show about the evolution of gender roles on TV? What messages about women's power and agency could be conveyed by the series? At first, the narrative clearly opposes Sabrina and the patriarchal figure of the dark lord, whom she resists before ultimately signing his book, but will, Sabrina, like many of her predecessors, ultimately be punished in the narrative for enjoying using magic and thus exercising power? How does this new series both conform to and break with other TV representations of witches and witchcraft, and what is the significance of this new conception of female power?

Français

Cette étude analysera comment la figure de la sorcière dans les séries télévisées aux États-Unis est en train d'évoluer au XXI^e siècle d'une façon

souvent troublante. Initialement figures comiques, les sorcières des séries des années soixante et soixante-dix, telles Samantha dans *Bewitched* ou bien Jeanie dans *I Dream of Genie*, cherchaient surtout à se conformer aux codes de la femme au foyer idéale, niant ou cachant leurs pouvoirs en faveur d'un dévouement servile auprès de leurs maris. La série *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* mettra en question ce modèle, ainsi que celui des séries de « bonne » magie comme *Charmed* ou *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* en accentuant les liens troublants entre sexualité, pouvoir féminin et magie noire. Cette analyse cherchera à étudier comment la série brise certaines conventions genrées et télévisuelles, tout en se conformant à d'autres.

INDEX

Mots-clés

sorcières, télévision, agentivité féminine, pouvoir, féminisme, séries télévisée

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