Why Are Witches Called Witches?

by Johanna-Hypatia Cybeleia

Why do we call Witches Witches? What else could they be called? What did the word witch mean originally?

Debate continues to surge over the question of what a Witch is. Leaving aside that identity issue as too large to be contained in an article of this length, I took an interest in a side issue kicked up in the course of this debate: how the word witch got into our vocabulary in the first place, and what does it say that equivalent words don’t say.

The etymology of witch has never been settled to everyone’s satisfaction, although I favor one theory, discussed below, as most likely to be the real one. Different etymologists have promoted several different theories and it does not look like they will reach consensus any time soon.

First, one of the most popular theories circulating in the Witch community is that the word comes from an Old English root meaning “to bend.” In this light, a Witch is an adept at bending forces to her will, at bending the course of reality which she shapes by her mastery. It’s easy to see why this explanation is widely accepted. It confirms our preference for how we wish to see ourselves. There is in fact a Proto-Indo-European root *weig- or *weik- which combines related meanings including “to change,” “to turn,” “to bend,” and “to weaken.” Both forms probably came from a more basic form *we-, “to twist, weave, braid.” Latin vicis “turn, change” and German Wechsel “change” show the first sense. The two senses of bending and weakness are found in, for example, willow osiers and withy weirs made of thin, pliable tree branches. From this concept is derived the word wicker, something made of osiers; and weak, originally something that could be bent easily, like a willow branch.

Another sister word branched from this same root is the witch in witch hazel. In an article about the witch-word, witch hazel (Hamamelis virginiana) deserves a passing mention to clarify its origin in relation to the “magick woman” meaning of witch. Was it named “witch hazel” because of wise women’s use of such healing herbs? Sorry, romantic as that sounds—no. Witch hazel is called that because of its plant branches, from Old English wice. Still, given that Hazel is also a girlname, the temptation to name comical cartoon feel, a stronger case to be made for another etymology.

Eric Partridge, in Origins, connects witch with the Latin word victima, referring to ritual sacrifice, and he says these both derive from Proto-Indo-European (PIE) *weg- “to sacrifice.” The Germanic origin of witch refers to the concept of sacredness connected with the ancient religious use of sacrifice. Partridge connects it with Old High German wihan, German weihen “to consecrate,” and OHG wið, Middle High German wîch, “holy.”

John Ayto’s Dictionary of Word Origins and Joseph T. Shipley’s Dictionary of Word Origins both echo Partridge in connecting witch with victima “sacrificial offering” and weihen “consecrate.” What this suggests to me is that the name of Wicca comes from the very concept of religion itself. Shipley also relates the idea of victim to the root of victory.

The etymology in the American Heritage Dictionary, 4th ed., cites “Old English wicc, witch and wicca, wizard, sorcerer.” These are derived from Proto-Indo-European *weg- “to be strong, be lively.” Derivatives include wake, watch, wait, vigilante, reveille, vegetable, and velocity.

Specifically, the AHD connects wicca with the concept of being awake, and traces it back to the suffixed form *weg-yo- (the Germanic *wickjaz necromancer, “one who wakes the dead”).

The AHD does not corroborate Partridge’s etymology connecting wicca with victim; it does not even trace a PIE root for victima, but stops at Latin without going any further back.

But note that the fourth edition of the AHD, published in 2000, disagrees with its witch-etymology from its first

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pioneer of the sacred
the ages, across the shadows of time.

In Italian, the female meaning of strega is primary, the reverse of usual gendered patterns in languages where the word for the male magician takes the unmarked, hence more important, form. Here the feminine form is unmarked, while the word for warlock, stregone, is derived by adding a masculine ending. In this sense, strega is a close match with English witch, derived from the Old English feminine form wicce.

That the feminine definition of witch is primary is shown by the definition of warlock as “a male Witch,” not the other way around. This focus on the feminine is two-edged: Witchcraft or stregheria got a special name to mark it as a specifically feminine type of magick. This may have been because male domination set it apart to denigrate it as inferior to male-controlled magick. But that in turn, taking it further back, attests to women’s original mastery of the Craft, their independent female power which had to be suppressed.

Both genders of Spanish bruja and brujo are apparently equal, with precedence given to neither, as a simple vowel switch at the end is enough to change gender. Bruja comes from a similar semantic origin as the English words heathen and pagan. The source of bruja is Latin brucus “heather.” The English word brier, from French bryère “heath,” also originates in this Latin

word. The implication is that brujas were pagans of the rural areas where heath and heather grow.

But the Latin word itself was borrowed from an ancient Celtic word, *bruiko in Proto-Celtic. This is, for example, the source of Irish faoach “heather.” The Celtic word derives from—and this is where it gets interesting—the Proto-Indo-European root *wer- “turn, twist, bend.” This is an extension of the more basic root *wer- “to turn, bend,” which has produced many daughter words including worth, weird, verse, vertex, wreath, wring, wrench, verge, wrist, wrestle, ribald, warp, to name a few. Somehow these two Proto-Indo-European roots *we- and *wer-, with the suffixed –k making them *weik- and *werk-, both produced words for Witch in English and Spanish. It’s downright uncanny. We even find an etymological connection to the Weird Sisters!

German Hexe is another woman-specific Witchword, and goes back to the same Germanic root that apparently produced English hag. Old High German hagzisse and Old English hagtesse are clearly both from the same Common Germanic origin, said to have referred to a terrifying female spirit, perhaps along the lines of Lilith. It literally means “hedge rider” or “hedge straddler,” i.e. one with a foot in both worlds, between the worlds as a Witch. The later development of English hag into a pejorative synonym for crone is part of a well-known syndrome associating wise women with cronehood. For a further discussion on the history of the word hag, see the entry in Womanwords: A Dictionary of Words About Women by Jane Mills.

BENDING AND SHAPING ENERGY

To sum up my feelings on the question of where the English word witch came from: while my research has inclined me to think that witch can be traced back to the root *weig- referring to the sacred, I also feel attracted by the derivation from *weig- or *weik- meaning “bend.”

I feel like speculating on an even deeper connection linking these two concepts, one rooted in women’s early shamanism, perhaps inspired by some entheogenic mushroom. The shamanic realm of the sacred is where energies flow, swirl, bend, twist, and writhe like the totemic serpents of wisdom.

The adept who can bend and shape these swirling energies is the original magician, the original Witch, pioneer of the sacred.

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Photo by Michael Starkman