SOCIETY AND THE WITCH
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Course Description

Riding broomsticks and dancing in the woods at night, witches are often imagined to be outside society. But in these representations may be keys to understanding social norms, norms that get articulated through the witch's very violation of them. In this seminar, we ask what discourses about witches tell us about the societies that produce them. We begin by examining anthropologists' depictions of witchcraft among people who come to find magic believable: how do we understand others' beliefs in the seemingly irrational idea that magic is real? Closely considering evidence from classic ethnographic accounts, we critically examine other scholars' answers to questions such as this one by thinking across competing approaches to the study of magic. Next, we closely analyze the film *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* and the television sitcom *Bewitched*, bringing these pop-cultural phenomena into conversation with Mary Douglas's treatise on *Purity and Danger* and Pierre Bourdieu's critique of *Masculine Domination*. Using these theories, we examine the aesthetic and cultural significance of imaginative representations of witches. For the research paper, each student chooses their own example of witchcraft on which to conduct independent research. Sample topics include postmodern fairy tales like *Frozen* and *Maleficent*, Broadway musicals like *Into the Woods* and *Wicked*, historical witch-hunts and contemporary occult practices. What unites our diverse inquiries is a common interest in the social significance of this seemingly marginal figure: the witch.

What will you learn in an Expos course about witches?

In the first unit, students are introduced to [ethnography](#), and we try to make sense of how groups of people can and do take a belief in magic seriously. We look at [E.E. Evans-Pritchard's](#) classic account of the Azande, [Claude Lévi-Strauss's](#) influential theory of the "shamanistic complex" based on examples across the Americas, and Harvard alumna [Tanya Luhrmann's](#) important study of contemporary British witches in London. It's interesting to start with social science, because it unsettles our expectations. Most people tend to think of witches in terms of fiction or history. But we let ourselves off the hook, I think, if we imagine that these issues are relegated to the distant past or to the world of fantasy. Across the world, literal [witch hunts](#) are still happening, and even in the United States, the [Satanic Panic](#) is not that far removed from the present, where invocations of metaphorical [witch hunts](#) continue to haunt political discourse.

With this deeper appreciation of the real-world stakes and implications of witchcraft beliefs, we then turn our gaze back to imaginative representations of witchcraft in popular culture, looking at examples from two historical moments: the Civil Rights-era sitcom *[Bewitched](#)* and the Culture Wars-era series *[Harry Potter](#)*. Both of these examples reflect moments of cultural upheaval and transformation, and "witchcraft" becomes a lightning rod for these social issues to be taken up metaphorically. *Bewitched* centers on the marriage of all-powerful Samantha Stephens to her mortal husband Darrin, who expects her to repress her tremendous power and live as a "normal" housewife. We explore the sitcom's ambiguous relationship with [feminism](#), as well as potential

readings of the human-mortal relationship as a metaphor for [interracial marriage](), and Samantha's attempts at passing as an example of [gay allegory](). The drama of *Harry Potter* centers on the question of who has a right to an elite/magical education. While the heroic houses advocate different versions of meritocracy (bravery, intellect, teamwork), the villains espouse an aristocratic vision, where admission should be based on blood status (i.e. limited to those with a family history of magic). The series speaks to current ideas about [diversity and inclusion](), as well as critiques of [legacy admissions](). But, while it has been celebrated as in some ways progressive, it has also been [criticized]() for what and who is left out of its purportedly inclusive vision, a point that has recently been revitalized [in the wake of author JK Rowling's controversial comments]() about transgender issues.

From there, we turn to the research unit, a moment where you get to make the course your own. Because each student chooses their own topic, the final segment of the course always takes shape differently, but what unites us is a focus on developing [metadisciplinary awareness,]() as we craft our projects in relation to models of humanistic, social scientific, or scientific research papers.

Why do I teach an Expos course about witches?

I have always been fascinated by witches, magic, the occult, fantasy, and supernatural beliefs, and over the years my personal fascination morphed into an academic interest. As the anthropologist [Zora Neale Hurston]() wrote in her [autobiographical memoir](), "Research is formalized curiosity." As an anthropologist, I am very interested in understanding the beliefs and practices of others, as well as the ways in which expressive forms refract the sensibilities of the cultures in which they circulate. And recent resurgences in interests in witchcraft – as [spiritual practice](), as [political invocation](), as [pop-cultural phenomenon]() – say a lot about aspirations and anxieties about gender and power at a sociopolitical moment where so much is in flux. So, while witchcraft seems marginal or even trivial, it is, I think, symbolically central, and it reveals so much about our present predicaments.

But, beyond finding the material intellectually stimulating, I think that witchcraft is an excellent vehicle for teaching university writing skills, because witches appear in so many contexts, and so can be studied across so many disciplines, from [art]() and [music]() to [political science]() and [psychology](). Many students have gravitated toward postmodern retellings of the fairy tale – as in *[Frozen]()* and *[Maleficent]()*. Still others take anthropological approaches, examining phenomena like [body harvesting](), or historical approaches, looking at cases like [Salem](). Others have looked at related phenomena, such as [vampires]() and [zombies](), which take up the themes of marginality and cultural anxiety in different directions. The possibilities are endless! And that, really, is what I love most about the course.

Why should you take an Expos course about witches?

If you are fascinated by witches and witchcraft – whether that fascination comes from a love of pop culture, an enjoyment of fairy tales, a curiosity about supernatural spiritual beliefs, or an interest in histories of witchcraft accusations – this is an Expos class for you! One of my favorite [witches](), Mary Poppins, famously said: "A spoonful of sugar helps the medicine go down," and I

think she is right! Enthusiasm for the subject matter will make the hard work you'll do in this course, drafting and revising three academic essays, much more enjoyable and rewarding.

This course provides you with experience writing in both the social sciences and the humanities. Our first unit requires you to write a social science paper grounded in anthropology, and our second unit requires you to write a humanities paper grounded in studies of literature and film. In our third unit, centered on folklore and mythology, you may take either a humanities or social science track, as this discipline draws on both humanistic and social scientific methods. Some students select this course because they are interested in concentrating in one or more of these fields; others select this course because they concentrators in other fields who want the chance to do something unlike other courses they'll encounter in their academic programs. This diversity of interests makes the course exciting, especially in the third unit when students pursue their own topics.