

## Comment on the Papers by Luke Rylander and Rhi Johnson

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Hello everyone. Good morning. My name is Rebekah Sheldon. I'm an Associate Professor of English and Director of Cultural Studies and I'm really honored to be included in this panel this morning and to have the opportunity to learn from you all this weekend. It has already been very useful to me for my current project on magic and the occult. As an interloper from the contemporary period, and as a bit of a dunderhead generally about things like pronunciations and chronologies, I'll have to ask your indulgence. Seriously, feel free to openly groan and heckle, but please don't let my failures distract you from these two really brilliant and engaging essays—"Hexenküche" by Luke Rylander and "Your Girlfriend is a Witch" by Rhi Johnson, which I have the pleasure to discuss today. Let me introduce their writers and then I'll begin our conversation with a few questions.

Luke Rylander is a PhD candidate in Germanic Studies here at IU and a recipient of the Seidlin dissertation fellowship. He is currently writing a dissertation on abortion and the dead children in German literature, law, science, and philosophy around 1800, which builds on his MA work from Florida State University on adoption in 20<sup>th</sup>-century literature. He has recently presented work on related topics (such as the Monstrous Maternal and Unproductive Reproductions) at the MLA, Germanic Studies Association annual conference, and at the Southeast Conference for Languages, Literatures, and Film, as well as at various meetings here at IU, where he has also contributed significantly as a co-organizer of workshops and lectures.

Rhi Johnson is Assistant Professor of Spanish and Portuguese here at IU. She is currently working on a manuscript entitled *Women and Water: Fluxes of the Feminine in the 19<sup>th</sup>-century*, under contract with University of Toronto Press, and which builds on her dissertation in Spanish Literature from the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. She is also a translator and has recently prepared the English translation for a critical edition of Feliciano Castro's *Tears and Flowers: A Poet of Migration in Old Key West* (due from Florida University Press next October) as well as published Rosalia de Castro's *Because I want to See the Sea*, which came out from Valparaíso in 2021.

Johnson's essay considers the multiplex rhetorical purposes to which Spanish poets, painters, and intellectuals across the 80 or so years of her investigation put the figure of the witch. This figural mutability, what she calls the "polyvalence of the eighteenth-century witch," she argues, has a lot to show us about Enlightenment critiques of systems of power, particularly of religion and superstition, but also of political corruption, and most centrally the serious and didactic purpose of poetry. The title of her essay – "Your Girlfriend is a Witch!"— refers to the central object of her analysis, the poem "Jovino to his Friends of Salamanca" (or JAS for short), in which he condemns his friends for dating witches, or in other words (if I understand it correctly) for not taking the task of poetry seriously enough and dallying instead with the fanciful. Johnson reads the somewhat-surprising figure of the witch as she emerges in the poem as a kind of transformative re-working of the tropes of the witchcraft: where the genre might lead us to expect the Devil and various sorcerous actions, we find instead only women and drugs and sex and sleep. In other words, as Johnson writes, the poet demonstrates that "the spooky thrill of the occult (which, as we have seen, runs through the century) ... can be broken down by reason and knowledge; reason can, at risk of being glib, destroy monsters" (21).

I can't help but hear in Johnson's cheeky title, however, another second person title, that is that of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's essay "Paranoid Reading, Reparative Reading: Or, You're So Paranoid You Probably Think This Essay is About You." Your Girlfriend's a Witch," in other words, may be an explicit reference to JAS but it is also more generally true of Johnson's reading of the period. It is an accusation that can be leveled in general because it is almost certainly true, at least as a wish. To be somewhat glib about it and to echo some of the concerns of the lecture last night, everyone is dating a witch, or wants to be, even if it is in the closeted and phobic form of a moral panic. As Johnson writes, "While the century may be bathed in the light of reason, interest in the occult and the supernatural doesn't go anywhere. Indeed, it seems to have been increasing, rather than ceding to rationalism" (12). Or, as she implies, such ceding may be structurally impossible since there is a "the problem with doing away with superstitious beliefs when their existence is necessary to structures of power" (12).

Luke Rylander's "Hexenküche" moves in what I might want to call the inverse direction, but to similarly transformative end. In his reading of Goethe's *Faust*, the witches are not the patriarchal grotesqueries of the Inquisition nor simply figures of liberated sexuality for contemporary inspiration but rather an undoing of the property relationship which Rylander, picking up on Sylvia Federici, sees as central to the shift in the economic dominant from feudalism to capitalism. In his reading of the kitchen scene, Rylander shows us the way the depiction deliberately inverts the developing terms of that shift. In the "witch's one-plus-one" ritual, for example, Rylander shows us how the scene uses "a series of seemingly absurd mathematical propositions" in order to make a powerful potion. This strange numerology parodies the counting, the arithmetic, that is at the heart of capitalist accumulation and creates instead a kind of community of those who recognize the groundless play of capitalism's strange rituals. Where personal property begins, of course, with the privatized, interior, and self-same self, the "plasticity and otherness" of Mephistopheles and the witches "resists market logic" and insists on the "the porousness of privately owned and personal property." Finally, in refusing even the logic of gift exchange with Satan, the witch insists on abundance and profligacy over individual increase under conditions of scarcity and competition.

Rylander ends his essay with a clarion call: "A feminist valorization of the witch," he writes, "must go beyond the choice-feminism of individuated bodily autonomy and grapple with conceptualizing collective bodily autonomy, the right to embrace sexuality and gender as earnest modes of play and a political framework commensurate to the magic and aesthetics of the commons." So, the first question writes itself. If the witch is such a flexible, polyvalent figure that it can be conscripted as the monstrous irrational and as the monster against the irrational, as the object of persecution by structures of power and the necessary constitutive exclusion for that power, then can and should it be fixed into a single position. More speculatively, if the occult and the Enlightenment are travelling companions, what happens when the anti-rational seems much the dominant, as it does today? Or is the fact/myth binary itself one of the products of the structural necessity of the supernatural to structures of power in a way that suggests we should not be taken in by their apparent struggle?

Related to the problem of flexible, reversible binaries: One of the issues that I struggle with in my own thinking is what to do with the effective and apparently longstanding tactic of killing off the monster of superstition with scientific realities, or discovering behind a mystical or supernatural event a more reasonable, material explanation, such as the Johnson suggests that herbology does for the witches sabbath in JAS. Clearly, though, this does disenchant as we still all want to date witches.

Finally, I've been thinking about the subject-object enchantment that Tili discussed yesterday in relation to Anne Anlin Cheng's *Orientalism*. The most central example of the purposefully porous and ambivalent boundary between personhood and property is the condition of chattel slavery. Rylander makes use of Federici's book *Caliban and the Witch*, which argues for the important roles of enclosure, witch-persecutions, and the Atlantic slave trade in the transition from feudalism and to capitalism. It is a comparative analysis, but it (in my mind) is not very good at braiding together its three strands. Thinking about your two texts, do you see any mutual illumination between the witch and the enslaved?

In this connection, Richard makes a really interesting point, I think, about the importance of the public/private binary. Perhaps what witches can do for us is figure for us a moment before the institution of that boundary, so integral to capitalist subjecthood and modes of accumulation, in which the operative distinction was not public/private but rather communal/esoteric. I would be really interested to know how that speculation lands with you.