

Witches and Wicked Objects

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ABSTRACT

This article examines Frederick Sandys' and J.W. Waterhouse's depictions of sorceresses, through the objects surrounding the subjects. It argues that these objects can tell us something important not only about the figure of the witch, but about female roles and men's perception of them in Victorian Britain. Through exploration of myth and the occult, male gaze turns to female agency, an agency expressed through objects. Furthermore, the symbolism integral to the paintings invites us to explore similar gender relations in the ancient world. This article traces the witches back through their myths to the Greek texts in which they appear, and asks to what extent these objects, and their implications for female agency and male responses to it, have their roots in the Greek tradition. Women in Greek epic are treated as objects, caught up in a male-controlled network of exchange. They are characters with limited agency, in that they are not the conventionally spotlighted protagonists. This does not mean, however, that they do nothing behind the scenes. 'As much as men may define women as exchange objects, there is always the possibility that women will find a way to express their own agency' (Lyons 2012:19). That this female agency is often expressed through objects is therefore a subversion of the male viewpoint, as women enact their agency through the very form they themselves are thought by men to represent. In focusing in on the Pre-Raphaelites' presentation of objects, this article begins to peel away layers of reception and interpretation, showing that the eclectic clutter with which the artists surround their witches reflects the eclectic sources of the Victorian imagination.