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Misogynistic dehumanization

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Abstract: The idea that women qua women can be dehumanized has been dismissed by feminist philosophers, like Kate Manne, and by philosophers of dehumanization, like David Livingstone Smith. Against these skeptics, I argue that we can and should use dehumanization to explain an important strand of misogyny. When they are dehumanized, women are represented simultaneously as human and as inhuman embodiments of the natural world. They therefore appear as magical, contaminating, sexualized threats towards whom violence is acceptable or even necessary. Misogynistic dehumanization is important to understanding atrocities like the early modern European witch-hunts, but also contemporary phenomena like incel violence.

Keywords: dehumanization; demonization; misogyny; monster; witch-hunts; objectification; David Livingstone Smith; Simone de Beauvoir

In a 1999 essay reflecting on the brutality of violence against women worldwide, Catharine MacKinnon asked:

> If women were human (…). Would we be raped in genocide to terrorize and eject and destroy our ethnic communities, and raped again in that undeclared war that goes on every day in every country in the world in what is called peacetime? (…) And, if we were human, when these things happened, would virtually nothing be done about it? (2006: 41–42)

This is a familiar feminist question: are women human? There are several ways to understand it, but one natural interpretation is to see it as a question about the state of mind of perpetrators: do they see women as human? For MacKinnon, the answer seems to be a resounding 'no'.

But the idea that women qua women may be *dehumanized* in this "subjective" sense (Wackerhausen 2023: 551–556) — literally thought of as inhuman entities — remains highly controversial in contemporary philosophy. Feminists like Kate Manne have argued against explaining violence in terms of dehumanizing attitudes, citing ways in which perpetrators acknowledge women's humanity even as they victimize them (Manne 2018: 134–135). David Livingstone Smith, who has given a moral psychological account of dehumanization linked to genocidal and racist violence, has repeatedly maintained that this framework is not applicable to misogyny, understood here as hostility directed at women because of their gender. Although women may be seen as lesser people or as lacking certain human capacities, they are not cast out of humanity (2011: 26–27; 2016: 439; 2020: 179–181; 2021: 19–29).

I want to push back against these two forms of skepticism, from feminist philosophers and from philosophers of dehumanization, and argue that we *can* and *should* use the explanatory framework of dehumanization to capture a distinctive strand of hostility towards women qua women. *Misogynistic dehumanization* is a real and important moral psychological phenomenon that we should be invested in understanding, especially given its ties to extreme and mass violence. On my view, misogynistic dehumanization involves a contradictory conception of women as both human beings and as embodiments of natural forces. Because they are seen as both human and inhuman at the same time, women are experienced as unnatural creatures: impure and polluting, but also magical, and supernatural. This is then a form of what Smith calls "demonizing dehumanization" (2021: 251).

Misogynistic dehumanization is not mean to explain all forms of hostility towards women. There can be plenty of misogyny motivated by conceptions of women as inanimate objects or as obedient servants, for example. My claim is that misogyny fueled by dehumanization has a distinctive phenomenology that is not captured by other accounts. Misogynistic dehumanizers experience women as monstrous and demonic. When amplified and harnessed, this experience facilitates and motivates

extreme and mass violence, just like it does in the case of racist dehumanization, as Smith has argued at length (2016; 2020: 9–16; 2021: 35–49). The early modern European witch-hunts are, I suggest, an illustrative example of how mass atrocities can be fueled by misogynistic dehumanization. I use this historical case to make my argument against skeptical explanatory alternatives. That said, I do not take misogynistic dehumanization to be an exclusively historical reality. It is in fact alarmingly present in our own social world.

In section 1, I start by centering an influential feminist intellectual tradition that has been relatively neglected in contemporary philosophical debates and which sees misogyny as motivated by an experience of women as *essentially magical and contaminating sexual threats*. This phenomenology, articulated by authors like Andrea Dworkin, resonates with familiar aspects of our culture today — from enduring menstrual taboos to the association of women with magic in popular media. One of its clearest instantiations is the figure of 'the witch' that emerged in early modern Europe. As I argue in section 2, the early modern witch-hunts crystalize this misogynistic experience and show that it can be amplified and harnessed to make possible gendered mass violence.

So, why are women experienced as magical and contaminating in this threatening way? I argue in section 3 that attempts to answer this question without a notion of dehumanization fail, that we *need* dehumanization to make sense of this misogynistic mindset. Using the witch-hunts as a test case, I argue that objectification-based and 'socially situated' explanatory alternatives favored by contemporary feminists are inadequate.

Having shown that there is an explanatory gap to be filled, I then develop a positive account of misogynistic dehumanization that can fill it, while also overcoming other key skeptical challenges. In section 4, I address Manne's worry that alleged dehumanizers often behave towards their victims in ways that betray an awareness of their humanity. Drawing on Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* and on David Livingstone Smith's work on dehumanization, I claim that misogynistic dehumanization

involves a contradictory representation of women as human and inhuman which explains dehumanizers' contradictory attitudes as well as their experience of womanhood as a magical, impure, and sexualized threat. In section 5, I show that, contra Smith, understanding dehumanization in a way that encompasses racist and misogynistic dynamics is plausible and helps us to better capture historical continuities and intersectional dynamics involving race, gender, and sexuality. I conclude by suggesting that dehumanization also helps us to better understand our contemporary world: from phenomena like the continued popularity of harmful vaginal cleansing products, to the hatred behind incel attacks like the 2014 Isla Vista killings. Perhaps more surprisingly, misogynistic dehumanization forces us to critically rethink the current use of 'the witch' within feminist politics. If this is a dehumanizing figure, reclaiming it as empowering may be much more dangerous than we think.

1. Womanhood as a Magical and Polluting Threat

According to a historically influential view in feminist theory, the hatred of many misogynists is animated by their experience of women as essentially threatening. This danger is at times one of magical manipulation, at others one of pollution and contamination, and it is always highly sexual.

Andrea Dworkin's *Intercourse* provides a classic articulation of this misogynistic mindset.[1] Dworkin starts from a particular understanding of what women are for in the misogynistic mind: a being-for-sex (2007: 96). For the misogynist, women are synonymous with sexuality, and this makes them attractive but also dangerous. Woman-as-sex makes the misogynist "intoxicated, deranged, stupefied; he wants to call a policeman and have her put away" (Dworkin 2007: 19). In being identified with sex, "women [seemingly] achieve power over men" and this dominance "emerges as the reason for the wrath of the misogynist" (Dworkin 2007: 18). This 'power' is not held in virtue of anything women might do, but rather in virtue of *womanhood* itself. This is the logic behind the sexist

[1] Dworkin's work in *Intercourse* has been generally overlooked by contemporary feminist philosophers. For a notable exception see Jenkins (2018).

commonplace that women are always 'asking for it'. By simply existing, women exert this alleged power of attraction which is experienced as a *magical* disturbance: a hidden and unintelligible force of manipulation.

"[W]oman herself is magical and evil" in the misogynistic mind (Dworkin 2007: 82). She lures men into the corrupting abyss of sex: "[f]ucking her is the dirtiest, though it may not be as dirty as she herself is. Her genitals are dirty in the literal meaning: stink and blood and urine and mucous and slime. Her genitals are also dirty in the metaphoric sense: obscene" (Dworkin 2007: 214). According to Dworkin, misogynistic sexuality is then very much a "lust for immersion in dirt", characterized by a push-pull dynamic. Women are obscene and therefore desirable, but also genuinely horrifying for the misogynist who is "persistently traumatized by the filth of women" to which he cannot help but return (Dworkin 2007: 235). Dworkin points out that "self-disgust, feeling dirty, is an outcome of sex often remarked on" in literary works that try to convey this masculine perspective (2007: 230).[2] Women's magical manipulation is then even more alarming for the misogynist because it leads him to pollute himself against his own will.

Dworkin's characterization of misogynistic hatred is far from idiosyncratic. Similar themes about feminine filth, magic, and threat have been highlighted and explored in psychoanalytic theory (Grosz 1994; Kristeva 1982), film theory (Creed 1993), social psychology (Goldenberg and Roberts 2004), and some recent philosophical work. Berit Brogaard, for example, calls it a "contempt-based misogyny": a form of hatred that represents women as "inherently inferior" because of their "female essence", which is fundamentally filthy and manipulative (2020: 207). Women are filled with "inherent mischief, dishonesty, manipulative tendencies, or abilities to cause uncontrollable desire in men"

[2] Dworkin's main example is Leo Tolstoy's novella *The Kreutzer Sonata*, where disgust turns into murder. She also points to Graham Greene's *The Man Within*. Beauvoir too remarks on this association — "Odor, damp, fatigue, boredom: a whole literature describes this dreary passion of a consciousness become flesh. Desire often contains an element of disgust and returns to disgust when it is assuaged. '*Post coïtum homo animal triste*.' The flesh is sad" — citing as examples Faulkner's *Light in August* and Leiris' *Manhood* (2011: 182, 186–187).

(Borgaard 2020: 215). Brogaard points to Schopenhauer as illustrative. For him, women are repugnant — "the unaesthetic sex", honored by a foolish society like a "holy ape"— and manipulative — seeing "everything only as a means for conquering man" (Schopenhauer 1994: 140–142). Martha Nussbaum also identifies what she calls a "fear-disgust" strand of misogyny which characterizes women as "zones of disgusting liquid" (2018: 193). Like Dworkin, Nussbaum suggests that this disgust is "obviously" compatible with sexual desire, giving rise to the trope of masculine heterosexual repulsion: "often disgust follows gratified desire. As Adam Smith remarks (…), 'When we have dined, we order the covers to be removed.'" (2018: 194, see also 110). This sexual attraction is then always ambivalent: "woman is alluring for the very reason that she is disgusting" (Nussbaum 2018: 194).

This vision of women as manipulative and contaminating continues to have purchase today in our broader culture. Nussbaum suggests that it explains our enduring "taboos surrounding menstruation, birth, and sex" and why it is still so easy to shame women about breastfeeding or blood (2018: 194).[3] Our social anxiety about the contaminating power of women also fuels an ideal of the 'perfect woman' as transcending any sign of dirt or decay "omnipresent on Internet porn sites, which strip women of pubic hair, wrinkles, secretions, menstrual and other, and of course subtract all smell" (Nussbaum 2018: 107). Laura Kipnis sees this worry about filth as explaining social purity movements led by women bent on 'cleaning up' society, the proliferation of feminine cosmetic 'cleansing' rituals, and the fact that women continue to care more about a 'clean' home than men. After all, "if women are situated in the world as contaminated, staking out a social role as a cleansing force makes a certain dismal, convoluted sense" (Kipnis 2006: 119). We see the association of women with magic all over popular media: women-oriented 'witch lit' or 'witcherature' has recently seen a surge of mainstream popularity (Thorpe 2023); women's magazines have dedicated magic columns (Stardust 2023); and the

[3] Donald Trump's famous remarks about journalist Megyn Kelly are illustrative: "'You could see there was blood coming out of her eyes. Blood coming out of her wherever'" (Nussbaum 2018: 166).

teenage (female) witch is now a well-established trope (Moseley 2002). The idea of women as magical and contaminating is then still very much a part of our contemporary landscape.

2. Witches

When it is exploited and amplified, this misogynistic phenomenology can yield not just individual hostility and disgust towards women, but also extreme forms of mass violence. The witch-hunts that swept Europe between the fifteenth and the eighteenth centuries are a vivid example of this.

Witch-hunting is neither exclusively European, nor just an historical reality. Today, people are still exiled, tortured, and executed as witches across the world.[4] However, the European witch-hunts of the early modern period remain a particularly intense episode of violence. Statistics are contested and vary regionally, but conservative estimates place the number of victims at 60,000 and some go as high as 100,000 (Viallet 2022: 113; Barstow 1995: 21). In some parts of Germany, 10% of the population was wiped out (Rogozinski 2024: 12). Many more people were exiled, ostracized, and tortured (Viallet 2022: 144). Witch-hunting did not appear out of nowhere and was in many ways a continuation of earlier persecutions against heretics, Jews, and lepers (Rogozinski 2024; Douglas 2002). And yet, the accusation of witchcraft, as developed in the fifteenth century, was special: it constituted an exceptional crime, requiring exceptional measures, and made up of what were already thought to be the most unspeakable of violations (Viallet 2022: 30).

Witches were typically accused of having made a pact with the Devil, of flying at night to orgiastic 'sabbaths', of causing deaths, destroying cattle and crops through evil spells, and of killing and eating children (Viallet 2022: 29–30; Federici 2014: 203; Douglas 2002: 86). More importantly, they were accused of being part of a conspiracy bent on destroying society. Witch-hunting was framed as the revelation of a 'counter-society' hiding in plain sight that opposed clerical, social, and political

[4] On witch-hunting in contemporary Africa see Moore and Sanders (2001) and Miguel (2005). On South America see Van Cott (2000). On India see Kumari and Alam (2021). See also Federici (2018: 3–4), Douglas (2002), and Chollet (2022: 65).

order (Viallet 2022: 10, 61, 64). Torture and confession were central to these investigations and the accused were often made to denounce vast lists of accomplices, feeding an infernal persecutory machine (Rogozinski 2024: 88–89; Viallet 2022: 55, 139, 147).

Men, women, and even children were accused, tortured, and burned at the stake and the victims of the persecution varied regionally and over time (Douglas 2002: 92–93).[5] But, overall, 70% to 85% of the victims were women (Rochelandet 2022: 145; Rogozinski 2024: 29; Viallet 2022: 130). Feminists have often taken this to be a sign that the witch-hunts were fundamentally a "war against women" (Federici 2014: 14), but this is largely an oversimplification (Rochelandet 2022: 7, 158). The witch-hunts were made up of smaller political and religious persecutions sparked by crises of sovereignty and threats to religious orthodoxy, by processes of secularization and centralization, by the formation of modern states and legal systems, by economic crises and by socio-political turmoil (Douglas 2002: 93; Viallet 2022: 7, 42–43). And yet, even though there was never an absolute feminization of the witch-hunts, there was an undeniable feminization of the crime of witchcraft and, consequently, a clear "dimension of feminicide" to the persecution (Viallet 2022: 5, 132, my translation).

Why were women disproportionally targeted as witches? And why did the very figure of the witch become stereotypically feminine? A key explanatory factor was the way the crime of witchcraft fit with pre-existing misogynistic ideas about women (Rochelandet 2022: 46, 168; Rogozinski 2024: 212). Women were already associated with the "subordinated, impure and wicked side" of the cosmic order and fit the bill for a conspiracy bent on overthrowing society (Rogozinski 2024: 145). As the "instigators of the sexual Sin" in Christian doctrine, they were easily associated with the unspeakable sexual deviance that helped characterized witchcraft as the crime of crimes (Rogozinski 2024: 99; see

[5] For example, in many places, the trials started as a matter of courtly intrigue, targeting powerful and influent men, before becoming phenomena of mass violence (Rogozinski 2024: 162; Douglas 2002: 92).

also Viallet 2022: 94). Woman was already "the one who opened the door to the Devil" for theologians like Tertullian (1983: 78), so it did not take much for her to be seen as a full-blown demonic being. Demonologists, the ideologues of the witch trials, harnessed, elaborated and amplified these popular associations (Viallet 2022: 132). In the *Malleus Maleficarum* — the best-seller[6] witch-hunting manual, first published 1486 — the "natural reason" women were more likely to be witches was that a woman "is more carnal than a man, as is clear from her many carnal abominations". "All witchcraft comes from carnal lust, which is in women insatiable" (Kramer and Sprenger 1928: 44, 47). Similarly, in his influential *On the Demon-Mania of Witches*, Jean Bodin claimed that for each male witch, there were fifty female ones and blamed this on women's "bestial cupidity" and violent desires (Bodin cited in Viallet 2022: 71, my translation). It was women's deeply sexual nature that made them of a piece with the occult, the magical, and the impure (Rochelandet 2022: 46). In this demonological literature, witches acquired their familiar double face as both repulsive hags and sexually desirable temptresses (Rochelandet 2022: 163): "lovely to look at but contaminating to the touch; they attract men, but only to undermine them; they do everything to please them, but the pleasure they give is more bitter than death" (Federici 2014: 223).[7]

At the center of the witch-hunts we find then the same phenomenology that Dworkin described: women were experienced as essentially magical, contaminating, and sexualized in an ambivalent way (2007: 81–82). This misogynistic mindset can lead then not just to hostility and disgust, but also to mass atrocities. So, what explains this frightful experience of women? The very characterization of the witch as a demonic being suggests an answer: women were experienced in this way because they were seen not just as weak or sinful humans, but as inhuman. In other words, this seems to be *a phenomenology of misogynistic dehumanization.*

[6] Rochelandet identifies the *Malleus Maleficarum* as the turning point in the feminization of the persecution (2022: 46). The work has been analyzed in detail by many feminist writers including Dworkin (1974).
[7] The fact that witches were accused of stealing and hoarding penises exemplifies this attitude (Federici 2014: 223).

3. Feminist Skepticism About Misogynistic Dehumanization

However, the idea that misogynists may see women as demons faces significant resistance within contemporary feminist philosophy. Recent theorizing has favored explanations of violence against women in terms of objectification, rather than dehumanization. Some have also criticized any account that claims perpetrators do not see women as fully human. These skeptics would likely argue that women were disproportionally targeted as witches because they were seen as expendable 'things' unworthy of moral consideration, or as social nuisances in need of control. As I will show, these alternative stories are inadequate to explain historical and phenomenological reality. We still very much need a notion of dehumanization to make sense of this kind of misogyny.

The term 'dehumanization' is widely used by feminist philosophers, but not to capture a subjective conception of others as inhuman creatures. Sometimes, 'dehumanization' is meant to track an important kind of moral wrong (Killmister 2023; Mikkola 2016). In this sense, it is not something that can *explain* how violence erupts, but rather a normative concept that may be invoked in understanding the wrongness of certain forms of treatment. At other times, 'dehumanization' is used in a more explanatory fashion as a synonym for 'objectification': the idea that women are seen and/or treated as 'things' or objects lacking fundamental human capacities and undeserving of moral respect (Cudd 2006: 165; Langton 2009; LeMoncheck 1985; MacKinnon 1987: 176).

Objectification theory has arguably been the main tool used by contemporary feminist philosophy to capture the intuitive idea that women are somehow seen as not-quite-human by misogynists. At various points in *Intercourse*, Dworkin herself claims that the misogynistic mindset she describes is rooted in a representation of women as 'things'. In the eyes of the misogynist, a woman

> does not have a full humanity but must conform to the rituals and conventions of debasement as a sexual object. But this reduction of humanity into being an object for sex carries with it the power to dominate men because men want the object and the sex.

> The rage against women as a group is particularly located here: women manipulate men by manipulating men's sexual desire; (…). (Dworkin 2007: 17–18)[8]

Dworkin says that objectification is a way of treating women that *reduces* them from full humans to objects for sex in the misogynistic mind. It is because of this reduction that women come to be experienced as manipulative. But objects do not manipulate, people do (see also Mikkola 2021: 330). The misogynist's rage seems to convey then an awareness of women's recalcitrant humanity, not of their object-like status. Moreover, even if we think that objectifying treatment really reduces women to inanimate things in the eyes of the misogynist, this does explain why he fears them as magical and impure. Objects can be washed and cleaned, but womanhood is inherently contaminating. Objects can be magical, but not because they are objects: my kitchen knife is an object just like Excalibur, but it has none of its alleged power. In other words, saying that women are represented as 'things' does not actually help us explain the misogynistic phenomenology that Dworkin herself vividly described.

The idea that witch-hunters saw their victims as objects is also particularly implausible. Their treatment of these women and men presupposed that they had distinctively human capacities such as agency, intelligence, and the standing to be held to moral account. The 'sect of witches' was seen as conspiratorial, highly intelligent, and plotting to deceive the population. The legalistic aspects of the witch-hunts — the accusations, trials, confessions, the intervention of lawyers, the defenses — speak of a profoundly *human* relation. Even public executions, with spectacle confessions and their terrorizing effect on the community, suggest that perpetrators wanted to teach their victims a lesson. But you cannot punish a stone or wreak vengeance on a tree (Smith 2021: 23). All this counts against explaining this violence by appealing to objectification — but also by appealing to dehumanization, at

[8] Rae Langton expresses a similar thought: "Someone who views women reductively, as brutish creatures whose purpose is the satisfaction of men's lusts, may also manifest resentment towards women. Misogyny may sometimes present just this combination. And perhaps the connection between the resentment and the objectifying attitude is not coincidental. Perhaps it is caused by a horror that one's desires put one in the power of such contemptible creatures" (2009: 332).

least at first blush. As Kate Manne puts it, although perpetrators claim their victims are "nonhuman animals, supernatural beings (…), or even mindless objects", their "actions often betray the fact that their victims must seem human, all too human" (2018: 134–135)[9]. Call this challenge to both objectification and dehumanization the "problem of humanity" (Smith 2021: 225).

Manne goes on to argue that we should stop focusing on the psychology of perpetrators and favor instead what she calls a "socially situated" explanation of misogynistic violence (2018: 150–151).[10] On this model, misogyny is fundamentally a property of a social environment that functions to enforce patriarchal social relations by visiting hostility and adversity on women held as violating patriarchal norms and expectations (Manne 2018: 13, 19, 63). Misogyny is then best understood as the "'law enforcement' branch of a patriarchal order" and individuals, their behavior and attitudes, are derivatively misogynistic insofar as they reflect or perpetuate misogyny (Manne 2018: 78, 66). Consider the case of Elliot Rodger, the infamous 'incel' murderer who killed 7, including himself, in the 2014 Isla Vista killings. Rodger declared he was seeking vengeance on "hot blonde sluts" (Rodger cited in Manne 2018: 149) who failed "to give him the love, sex, affection and attention he craved" (Manne 2018: 149). Feminist commentors have often argued that men like Rodger are driven by a view of women as mere objects. But Manne points out that Rodger's violence "not only presuppose[s] but seem[s] to *hinge* on women's presumed humanity" (2018: 150). In his videos and writings, Rodger sees women as "human *givers*", bound to give men distinctively human goods, like love and sex (Manne 2018: xix). According to Manne, it is this representation of women as socially situated *humans* and the sense of entitlement that it generates that sets Rodger up for violence. When his expectations are frustrated, he decides to punish women for this perceived 'injustice'.

[9] For an earlier example of this argument see Appiah (2008: 144). For a discussion of other recent versions see Tarasenko-Struc (2023: 5).

[10] It is unclear whether Manne herself successfully avoids a focus on perpetrators' psychology. See Maitra (2019: 16) and Wrisley (2023: 198–201).

Mari Mikkola has suggested that a similarly socially situated analysis is best suited to illuminate mass atrocities like rape against women in war. According to Mikkola, we can only understand rape as a weapon of war if we think perpetrators see their victims as "genuinely and literally" human beings with life plans and social positions. Drawing on evidence from the Democratic Republic of Congo, Mikkola claims that women are often seen as "representatives of their communities and the facilitators of the communities' continuation". By targeting them for humiliation and harm, attackers ensure that it will be very hard to rebuild (Mikkola 2021: 333). On this socially situated model, misogyny is better explained by the overlaying of women's humanity with certain representations of their place in society.

Manne's and Mikkola's arguments are supposed to discredit explanations that invoke dehumanization. But they fail to do so because a socially situated account is not incompatible with a dehumanization-based one. It may even require it as a complement. To see this, consider Silvia Federici's feminist reading of the early modern witch-hunts. According to Federici, "witch-hunting in Europe was an attack on women's resistance to the spread of capitalist relations and the power that women had gained by virtue of their sexuality, their control over reproduction, and their ability to heal" (2014: 204). Similarly, in South America, "by persecuting women as witches, (…), the Spaniards targeted both the practitioners of the old religion and the instigators of anti-colonial revolt" (Federici 2014: 272). For Federici, witch-hunts in both the Old and New World targeted women because of their *social position* in relation to global capitalist expansion (2014: 204). Like Manne and Mikkola, she too wants to avoid "speculating on the intentions of the persecutors, and concentrate instead on the effect of the witch-hunt on the social position of woman" (2014: 219). This is clearly an example of a socially situated explanation. But even Federici thinks this is not the whole story: we need dehumanization to explain the scale and character of the witch-hunts.

Even under relatively strong patriarchal regimes, the public torture and execution of women from inside the community remains baffling. How could entire villages see their own women rounded

up and killed without intervening? How could accusers turn against family and neighbors, as they so often did (Rogozinski 2024: 27)? Episodes of organized resistance were rare, and the witch-hunts had a great deal of popular support — this was "a terror that comes from below" (Rogozinski 2024: 15).[11] According to Federici, to explain this popular acquiescence and even enthusiasm we need to appreciate that this was "the first persecution in Europe that made use of a multi-media propaganda to generate a mass psychosis among the population" (2014: 202). The newly invented printing press facilitated the wide circulation of pamphlets and illustrations which ramped up existing hatred to an unprecedented level. By being branded as witches, the victims were cast as "monstrous beings dedicated to the destruction of their communities, making them undeserving of any compassion and solidarity" (Federici 2018: 82; see also Frick 2021: 195; and Viallet 2022: 96). Even for Federici, dehumanization is an important piece of the explanatory puzzle.

It may be tempting to reply here, on behalf of Manne and Mikkola, that there is no great mystery about how communities could turn against these women once we get a better idea of who they were. Feminist accounts of the witch-hunts often depict the main targets as particularly powerful, knowledgeable, or independent women that were not properly submissive or that were socially marginal (Chollet 2022: 29; see also Viallet 2022: 5). If that is right, there is no need for a dehumanization-based story here. The witch-hunts can be seen as just a violent way of reestablishing patriarchal social order against 'problematic' members of the community. However, this view of the witch-hunts as a takedown of unruly women does not accurately capture historical reality. Although healers and midwives were at risk, this was because they were directly involved in spheres where disputes easily degenerated into witchcraft accusations — matters of life, death, birth, health, and fertility (Viallet 2022: 72) — and not because they were seen as 'unruly'. On the contrary, their work

[11] Federici notes the exception of the fishermen of the Basque village of Saint-Jean-de-Luz, who returned to land to liberate women taken to public execution (2014: 224). See Rogozinski (2024: 47-48) for other examples of resistance.

continued to be positively valued in rural communities. It is also worth noting that nuns and monks, arguably the real experts in medicinal herbs and healing at the end of the Middle Ages, were not especially targeted (Rochelandet 2022: 155–157). Those seen as hostile neighbors, bad wives, or effeminate husbands were often more exposed to accusation (Viallet 2022: 133–135). But it is crucial to stress that most victims were perfectly ordinary women, married and well-integrated into families and communities, caught in a web of false accusations and alleged confessions (Douglas 2002: 85; Rochelandet 2022: 151, 158, 167–168; Viallet 2022: 134). The horror of the witch-hunts was precisely their focus on the everyman and, especially, the everywoman.

Moreover, the idea that the witch-hunts were fundamentally about putting women back in their place cannot account for the scale of this "nuclear war against the Devil" (Viallet 2022: 212, my translation). Rather than reinforce social order, witch trials often threw communities into dysfunction. In the German town of Ellwagen, for example, the persecution had to be stopped in 1618 because the female population had been nearly decimated and the town could no longer function — 80% of the victims there were women (Viallet 2022: 83, 118). This kind of misogyny seems less about hostility towards 'bad women' than towards womanhood itself. Indeed, demonological discourse identified the very essence of women as the problem and created a generalized suspicion of all women.[12] No man could feel safe in his own house since his wife, daughter, or mother was in principle the source of all evil (Federici 2014: 223; see also Dworkin 1974: 130–134; and Rogozinski 2024: 29).

Federici's account of the witch-hunts has been strongly criticized by historians and I do not mean to defend it here.[13] But it is noteworthy that even a Marxist feminist like her sees the *dehumanizing* power of propaganda as crucial in convincing a wide swath of the population that their family and

[12] Even Federici says that it was "was not only the deviant woman, but the woman as such, particularly the woman of the lower classes, that was put on trial" (2014: 220).

[13] Critics point to factual inaccuracy, argumentative flaws, and a teleological view of history (Catherine Rideau-Kikuchi in Mediapart 2018; Darmangeat and Kindo 2017; Laibman 2006; Rochelandet 2022: 152). My argument does not depend on accepting Federici's account and I explicitly reject some of her central claims.

neighbors had to be cruelly tortured in the public square. On this point, historians agree with Federici. Ludovic Viallet, for instance, claims there was a "massively shared fantasy" that turned "the hunter into a savior, or at least a protector against a devastating scourge" (2022: 19, my translation). Although he too stresses the need for a multi-causal explanation, he claims that "unless we are prepared to think that, for centuries, people denounced their neighbors solely to settle scores (…) we must ultimately, confront the problem of belief. Or, to be more precise, try to get deeper into the springs and mechanisms of it" (Viallet 2022: 161, my translation). We cannot account for the popular support and for the scale of the witch-hunts by simply saying that they reflected social hierarchical dynamics. We must understand the psychological "springs and mechanisms" that made people believe witches were real.[14] This is where dehumanization comes in.

4. A Theory of Misogynistic Dehumanization

I have set out to show that we can and should use the framework of dehumanization to explain the distinctive strand of misogyny examined by Dworkin and illustrated by the witch-hunts. Drawing on that historical example, I suggested that what moves these misogynists is a conception of women as inhuman entities: that theirs is a phenomenology of misogynistic dehumanization.

In the last section, I considered whether we are better off understanding this hostility in terms of objectification or of socially situated dynamics rather than dehumanization. I argued that these alternative frameworks cannot capture the distinctive phenomenology of witch-hunting and, consequently, they cannot explain the character and scale of its violence. Unlike objectification-driven misogyny, there is no denial or disregard for women's human capacities in this form of hatred. And in contrast with Manne's conception, the misogyny of witch-hunting needs to be understood as a primarily psychological phenomenon. That does not mean it is independent of socio-cultural factors

[14] Jacob Rogozinski offers an analysis in this vein casting the witch-hunts as a political persecution sparked by crises of sovereignty and power, but which no causal story can fully explain — we also need a phenomenological analysis of the "logic of hatred" fueling it (2024: 3, 63). See also Wilshire (2006: xiv–xvii).

or "naïve" with respect to social power (Manne 2018: 49; see also Wrisley 2023). Rather, it means this is not fundamentally a way of policing social order. It is a generalized hatred of womanhood, not just of 'bad' women. Importantly, this strand of misogyny has a distinctive, complex phenomenology that both these accounts sidestep or leave unexplained: the sense of women as magical, polluting, and sexualized threats. As Samantha Pinson Wrisley has put it, what we need here is "a more comprehensive feminist understanding of misogyny — one that grapples with the interpersonal and affective depths and complexities of how misogyny emerges, circulates and self-perpetuates" (2023: 188).

In the following sections, I show that, not only is there an explanatory gap to be filled by misogynistic dehumanization, but that we can give a plausible moral psychological account to fill it. I start by tackling the 'problem of humanity', which remains a significant challenge: perpetrators' actions seem to betray an awareness of their victims' humanity. This is echoed in the perplexing logic of the witch-hunts. On the one hand, women were seen as 'natural witches'. On the other hand, witches were held responsible for making pacts with the Devil (Rogozinski 2024: 125–126). If witches were seen as demons, why were they brought to trial as human beings?

The approach to dehumanization developed by David Livingstone Smith addresses this issue head on. Smith claims that dehumanizers behave paradoxically towards their victims because they think of them in a contradictory way: as simultaneously subhuman creatures and as human beings. This may seem odd, but it is far from surprising — "people believe in contradictions *a lot*" (Smith 2020: 148; see also Tarasenko-Struc 2023). This particular contradiction is made possible by our tendency to think of the world in terms of natural kinds, each of which is "individuated by a unique, immutable *causal* essence" (Smith 2016: 423). Folk-essentialism makes it easy for us to understand that something may not be what it seems. For instance, after an expert tells me my golden ring is only cheap metal, I may still think it looks like gold, but I know that 'on the inside' it is cheap metal. The

same thing happens when we are convinced by political propaganda that some people are subhuman 'on the inside'. We see them as "counterfeit" humans whose inner essence is that of a rat, to cite a dehumanizing antisemitic trope (Smith 2021: 39). Because humans are hyper-social beings, Smith claims, it is much harder for us to stop thinking 'there is a human' when we look at someone's face, than it is to stop thinking 'this is gold' when we look at a ring.[15] This is why dehumanizers "cannot settle on either of the two mutually exclusive alternatives" — rat or human — and so their "consciousness oscillates between them, thereby giving rise to the problem of humanity" (Smith 2021: 248).

As human and subhuman at once, the dehumanized victim comes to be seen as what Smith calls a "metaphysical threat." "Something poses a metaphysical threat if it undermines your conception of the basic structure of reality. If everything that exists is in some sense 'natural,' then metaphysically threatening things are disturbingly unnatural. They are lesions in the orderly cosmos" (Smith 2020: 156). Dehumanized people are seen as challenging our very picture of reality because they appear to transgress the basic structure of our world. They therefore create a sense of profound unsettlement and a "special terror." "Think of it this way: If roses can sing or dogs can talk then *anything* can happen" (Smith 2020: 160). Like the singing rose, the human who is also a rat is disturbing and uncanny in a creepy way. This itself is enough to motivate hostility and aversion: "there is something about their very being that is threatening" and cannot be left unchecked (Smith 2016: 438). Drawing on the work of anthropologist Mary Douglas, Smith outlines several ways in which societies can respond to metaphysical threat including control and avoidance, labeling, and mastering through ritual practice (2021: 270–276). These strategies do not necessarily involve violence. But when political propaganda

[15] In earlier work, Smith had argued that "when we dehumanize others we conceive of them as *appearing* human when they are *really* subhuman". I am following here his revised view where he claims that "this story is not exactly right. What actually occurs when we dehumanize others is much stranger and more toxic" — we think of others as *wholly* human and *wholly* subhuman at the same time (Smith 2021: xiv).

adds a sense of physical threat to dehumanizing representation, when the man-rat is out to get you, then the dehumanized are experienced as horrific monsters against whom violence is not just appropriate but required (Smith 2016: 433). As criminals, terrorists, rapists, and enemies of the people, the dehumanized go from being like singing roses, to being like zombies, vampires, and witches.[16]

Metaphysical threat illuminates two other features of dehumanization relevant to the witch-hunts. First, it explains why "themes of dirt, disease, and disgust loom large in the rhetoric of dehumanization" (Smith 2020: 151). Drawing again on Douglas, Smith argues that cultural worries about contamination are fundamentally a "reaction which condemns any object or idea likely to confuse or contradict cherished classifications" (Douglas 2003: 45). The dehumanized are experienced as profoundly dirty since they violate a basic barrier of our folk ontology: the one between humans and subhumans. This explains why, for example, Nazi propaganda described Jews as disease-spreading rats unleashing "an insidious, underground destruction" (Smith 2020: 150; see also Wilshire 2006: xxiii, 99–100). Second, metaphysical threat also sheds light on why the dehumanized are often seen as having immense supernatural powers, even when they occupy the most fragile social positions. Jews were said to be "adept at the black arts" or "diabolically intelligent" by their persecutors; African Americans were cast as "preternaturally strong, sexually voracious, violent, insensitive to pain" even as they were enslaved (Smith 2021: 265–266). Like the singing rose, by defying the natural order the dehumanized cross over into the realm of magic.

Smith's account fits in remarkably well with the case of the witch-hunts. Demonologists, including Bodin, said that behind their human appearance witches had a demonic "hidden essence" that made them incorrigible (Rogozinski 2024: 122–124). As Jacob Rogozinski has noted, what was

[16] Similarly, Rogozinski suggests that witches are imagined as "neither human nor animal, both man and repulsive or ferocious beast, the enemy's body is always a hybrid, a mixture. It is therefore not surprising if he presents both masculine and feminine traits, as we shall see in the case of the devil; and if he is also an undead" (2024: 133). Rogozinski explicitly talks of the "erasure of the fundamental demarcation between man and animal, with all the angst that this indiferentiation provokes" as "dehumanization" (2024: 175).

terrifying and unsettling about witches was not their difference but their "disquieting proximity" to regular people (2024: 27–28, 31; see also Douglas 2002: 86). Witches' rituals were characterized as explicitly transgressive, as turning the political, religious, and cosmic order upside down. During the 'sabbath', witches ate children, signed contracts with their left hand, danced backwards, and "kiss[ed] the demon's anus" as a "parody [of] the feudal ritual of the kiss of homage to the suzerain" (Rogozinski 2024: 144–146, 176; see also Wilshire 2006: 11; and Viallet 2022: 64). And their spells brought death, disease and infertility, adding physical to metaphysical threat. Witches were both human and inhuman in a way that rendered them monstrous and made violence against them necessary for self-defense.

We might therefore be encouraged to use Smith's framework in analyzing the misogynistic dehumanization I suggested was an integral part of mass witch-hunting. However, Smith has denied repeatedly that his view applies to hostility against women as such. "[W]omen, *qua women* tend not to be excluded from the category of the human. They are more often regarded as defective, primitive, incomplete, or deformed human beings and are therefore relegated to an inferior rank *within the human category*" (Smith 2016: 439). When feminists talk of 'dehumanization', Smith says, they are often referring to something else, like 'objectification'. Misogyny, as he sees it, involves a view of women as being defective, malformed, or lesser humans, but not monsters or demons (Smith 2011: 26–27; see also Smith 2020: 179–181; Smith 2021: 19–29, 261). When women are dehumanized, "it's not because they are women. It's because of how they're racialized" (Smith 2020: 180). In fact, Smith claims that, because men are usually seen as more physically threatening than women, "human monsters are almost always male"[17] (2021: 255; 2022).

But Smith is here underestimating the power of his own approach, as well as the richness of the feminist theoretical tradition. In *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir gives an account of

[17] When racialized groups are dehumanized, "women are [usually] dehumanized as pets or as farm animals fit for breeding", a phenomenon Smith terms "enfeebling" dehumanization (2020: 179).

misogynistic dehumanization that has been largely overlooked,[18] but that resembles Smith's in crucial ways. According to Beauvoir, the misogynist also sees women as paradoxical entities: as simultaneously human beings and as embodiments of inhuman 'Nature' — the natural world of life and death, of geological and organic processes (2011: 163). Because women are thought to be more connected to sexuality and reproduction, womanhood is identified with these natural forces outside human logic (Beauvoir 2011: 262, 26, 78–79; see also Federici 2018: 27). "Nymphs, dryads, mermaids, water sprites, and fairies" are paradigmatic of this hybrid conception of women (Beauvoir 2011: 175).

As both human subjectivities and embodiments of Nature, women can be seen as radiant goddesses, embodying the bounty of Nature, but also as frightful things. Nature is after all a double-edged sword of fertility, abundance and life, but also finitude, mortality, and decay. If a man adopts a stance of "revolt against his carnal condition", if he does not accept this ambiguity in Nature, his anxiety about his own vulnerability as a natural being is likely to become an anxiety about womanhood (Beauvoir 2011: 164).[19] This is why "[i]n most folk representations, Death is woman, and women mourn the dead because death is their work. (…). (…) woman is the *Mare tenebrarum* dreaded by ancient navigators; it is night in the bowels of the earth" (Beauvoir 2011: 166). What makes women particularly horrifying, according to Beauvoir, is not just their identification with this dark side of Nature, but the fact that Nature is *lurking within them*. In other words, the misogynist is horrified of women because of their paradoxical and unnatural character. Like the 'diabolical' Jew or the black 'super-predator', Woman-as-Nature is seen as being "devoted to magic" because she too defies the natural order of things (Beauvoir 2011: 182). She is not just a symbol for death: she is death that grabs you with human arms, a truly supernatural "monster" (Beauvoir 2011: 217).

[18] For exceptions see Heinämaa and Jardine (2021) and Kruks (2012: 56–73). Beauvoir's work has often been construed in terms of 'objectification', but I am drawing here on a reading of the Myths section of *The Second Sex* as offering an alternative story about woman as "Other". For a more detailed version of this reading see Melo Lopes (2023).
[19] Nussbaum (2018: 167), and Goldenberg and Roberts (2004) make similar arguments. See also Heinämaa and Jardine (2021: 318, 320).

In Beauvoir's account, the tension between natural inhumanity and human subjectivity also explains why women are seen as polluting. Menstrual taboos, for example, can be understood as ways of managing a particularly contaminating event, a time when woman seems "part of the formidable workings that order the course of planets and the sun; she is prey to the cosmic forces that determine the destiny of stars and tides, while men are subjected to their worrisome radiation" (Beauvoir 2011: 170). Blood, often thought to carry the very causal essence of things in our folk theories (Smith 2021: 63, 186), carries here "the essence of femininity" escaping into the human world as an alien and "dangerous power" (Beauvoir 2011: 169).

Kate Manne has argued that if women were really seen as repulsively uncanny, certainly misogynists would avoid sexual contact with them — the reality of sexual violence tells us otherwise (2018: 166). However, there is nothing far-fetched about the idea of woman as uncanny *and* sexually appealing. Beauvoir explains that the alignment in the misogynistic mind between womanhood and Nature that makes woman monstrous also makes her the ultimate "desirable prey": "gazelle, doe, lilies and roses, downy peaches, fragrant raspberries; she is precious stones, mother-of-pearl, agate, pearls, silk, the blue of the sky, the freshness of springs, air, flame, earth, and water" (Beauvoir 2011 174–175). In having sex with Woman-as-Nature men "wants to conquer, take, and possess", not just her, but all these things: "through her, he makes his kingdom out of all nature" (Beauvoir 2011: 171). For Beauvoir, this misogynistic eroticism is marked by a "hesitation between fear and desire" (Beauvoir 2011: 172). Woman-as-Nature becomes then "the mermaid whose songs dashed the sailors against the rocks; she is Circe, who turned her lovers into animals, the water sprite that attracted the fisherman to the depths of the pools" (Beauvoir 2011: 182–183). Woman is experienced as uncanny, impure, and supernatural but is still very much sexualized.

Beauvoir's account is then remarkably similar in structure to Smith's. She too draws on folk-essentialism to claim that misogynists conceive of women as human beings under which an inhuman

threat lurks. This threat is womanhood itself: the causal essence of women, identified with Nature. As both human and inhuman, women can be punished and resented, but also identified with the oceans and with death. And it is this tension between humanity and inhumanity that explains the misogynistic experience of women as magical and impure, and as both sexually appealing and horrifying.[20] This Beauvoirian account of dehumanizing representation is then well suited to explaining the misogynistic phenomenology harnessed to produce the "mass psychosis" fueling the witch-hunts.

5. Gender and Race: Broadening the Scope of Dehumanization

Smith has claimed that women qua women are not usually dehumanized. But he has also made the stronger claim that women qua women cannot *in principle* be dehumanized because they do not share a racial essence. In this section, I want to address this stronger skepticism and, in the process, clarify some differences between Smith's view and my own approach.

Recall that, according to Smith, it is by harnessing our folk metaphysical belief in causal essences that propagandists can convince us that certain groups are 'really' rats or cockroaches. But not all causal essences can feature in a process of dehumanization, he says (2020: 181–182). In our folk metaphysics, humanity is a matter of descent, of having our essence passed down, in the blood or the genes, from parents to children. Therefore, to exclude a group from humanity you need to think their essence is determined by a different kind of lineage. Racial essences are descent-based and so they can be used to dehumanize others by impugning their parentage. But women cannot be dehumanized because gender essences are not passed down through descent: "nobody thinks a person is female because her parents were female" (Smith 2020: 181). So, although women can be dehumanized because of their racial essence, they cannot be dehumanized because they are women.

[20] Mikkola anticipates this possibility: "[m]aybe there is a way to see how women can be 'uncanny,' too, in the sense Smith's notion of dehumanization presupposes: women's sexuality is somehow a mysterious beast beyond understanding and comprehension; hence, it is seen as something dangerous." Mikkola dismisses this hypothesis as "too essentialist and essentializing" regarding "the male sexual psyche" and as "too psychologistic" (2021: 337). I take the Beauvoirian view to escape these problems by describing a *culturally situated* set of psycho-sexual dynamics.

Smith is right to identify a tight link between racialization and dehumanization. In the early modern witch-hunts, for example, witches were often seen as forming an evil "race" with "degenerated blood," leading to the horrifying execution of many small children whose parents had been convicted (Rogozinski 2024: 126–127 see also 151; Rochelandet 2022: 158; and Viallet 2022: 84). But hereditariness was only one of the signs that someone might be a witch. The presence of a hidden mark on the body worked just as well (Viallet 2022: 150). One of the standard procedures involved pricking the shaved body of the accused, including the genitals, in search of an abnormality or insensitive patch of skin. This mark was seen as a sign of the unknowable interior character of the witch: of their essence (Viallet 2022: 175). In the folk ontology of early modern Europe, inhuman essences were then not simply a matter of parentage — you could be born of humans and changed 'on the inside' by the Devil.

Smith might reply here that there is an additional reason to restrict dehumanization to racialized groups. "[M]any kinds of beings are labeled as 'nonhuman.' These include animals like snakes and rats, but also supernatural beings like God and angels." But the dehumanized are not seen as gods and angels. They are seen as cockroaches and rats so "they can be killed or exploited in ways that it is allowable to kill and exploit nonhuman animals" (Smith 2021: 100, 111). According to Smith, dehumanization involves conceiving of others, not just as human and nonhuman, but as *human and subhuman*, lower than us in the natural hierarchy that structures our folk ontologies and that is crystalized in the idea of a 'Great Chain of Being' (2021: 103). This, in turn, requires descent-based essences: you must come from a lineage of 'lower animals' to be subhuman. But why should we think only biological organisms occupy these lower rungs in our folk metaphysics? When we look at early modern conceptions of the Great Chain of Being, for instance, we see that below humans there are

minerals and rivers.[21] Our cultural record of use and abuse of these inorganic resources is arguably a vivid testament to their devaluation. Across cultures, humans contrast themselves, not just with animals and plants, but with mountains, oceans, and stars, none of which are descent-based kinds.

In my own account, I have intentionally not used the notion of subhumanity. I have suggested that women are seen by misogynists as embodiments of Nature and therefore as both human and *inhuman*. I use 'inhumanity' because Beauvoir's 'Nature' encompasses all aspects of the natural world, whether valued or devalued in our folk ontologies. As Heinämaa and Jardine put it, the idea of Woman-as-Nature always involves projecting something inhuman onto womanhood but these

> projections can operate both in the negative and positive registers. On the one hand, women are despised and rejected as oversensitive and driven creatures lacking in higher capacities of human intelligence and reason; on the other hand, they are praised and adored as creators and supporters of life and assimilated, in their powers, with the vital forces of water and earth that nourish the proliferation of animals and plants. (2021: 320)

The figure of Woman-as-Nature is particularly plastic and part of Beauvoir's broader project involves showing that its two registers are intertwined: patriarchal conceptions of women are deeply ambivalent, and it is easy for a life-giving goddess to turn into a frightening monster (Beauvoir 2011: 163–164, 208). Certain forms of reverence for women may then be dehumanizing or at least facilitate dehumanization. For example, historians have pointed out that the cult of female mystics as 'living saints' in the late Middle Ages was quickly transformed into its mirror opposite during the persecution of the feminized witch (Rogozinski 2024: 56; Viallet 2022: 165, 173, 134). The notion of inhumanity highlights this link between seeing women as divine and diabolical and leaves open the possibility of dehumanization in a 'positive' register which merits further investigation.

[21] For example, Fray Diego Valadés' sixteenth century illustration of the Great Chain of Being places mountains and rivers below animals and plants, just above the realm of hell (2013). Charles Bonnet's eighteenth century representation of the rank of natural kinds places rocks, salts, minerals, water, air, and fire below animals and plans (1745).

All this is compatible with the idea that mass violence is more clearly triggered by the identification of a group's essence with a degraded entity in our folk ontology. And early modern witches were often described in exactly this way: as subhuman animals. Woman-as-Nature appeared here under the guise of a degraded animality. Female witches were often charged with conspiring with their "imps" or "familiars", of living with them, suckling them from "special teats", and actually "shifting their shape and morphing into animals" (Federici 2014: 230; see also Rogozinski 2024: 131). Given the generalized suspicion of women as witches, we could say that "women were at a (slippery) crossroad between men and animals" (Federici 2014: 230). Indeed, a common theme in early modern (proto-)feminist texts was the need to distinguish women from animals and to affirm their superiority in the natural order (Broad 2019: 27). Today, there continues to be no shortage of animalizing representations in misogynistic discourse (Richardson-Self 2021: 92-95; Vaes, Paladino and Puvia 2011).

It is therefore not at all clear that misogynistic and racist dehumanization are "fundamentally different" phenomena and that understanding them requires a "different set of conceptual tools," as Smith has maintained (2011: 5-6). On the contrary, I suggest that we can capture these dynamics through a common framework: dehumanizers conceive of their victims as both human and inhuman at the same time. They do so by attributing to them an inhuman essence they share as a group, either in virtue of their race, sex, or even of being part of a grand diabolical conspiracy.[22] This tension between human and inhuman representation gives dehumanized victims the demonic and monstrous character that licenses and motivates mass violence. We should be attentive to the specificities of different varieties of dehumanization (Heinämaa and Jardine 2021: 322; Smith 2020: 176). But, as

[22] One case meriting further investigation is transphobia. Smith claims that, although trans people are often "experienced as metaphysically threatening" because they are seen as "straddling two distinct metaphysical [gender] kinds", "transgender people can't be dehumanized in my sense of the word" because gender essences are not transmitted by descent (2020: 182–183). I take my discussion to put pressure on this aspect of Smith's argument as well. See also Killmister (2023: 13).

other critics have pointed out, the narrow scope of Smith's account may obscure more than it clarifies (Jeshion 2018: 80; Kronfeldner 2021: 367). Looking at the common psychological structure of racist and gendered violence may help us notice important connections and better explain complex, intersectional dynamics.

For example, the misogynistic phase of the witch-hunts has clear historical continuities with the dehumanization and persecution of Jews and heretics in late medieval Europe. The very obsession of demonologists with the 'sabbath' or 'synagogue' of witches makes that clear (Ginzburg 1991: 63–86). Charges of devil-worship, ritual sacrifices, infanticide, and cannibalism had been used in antisemitic persecutions, as well as against heretics, before being used against witches (Federici 2014: 211, 214; Rogozinski 2024: 146; see also Smith 2021: 192, 232, 265). And it was only in the fifteenth century, when the idea of a 'race of witches' became prominent, that racialized antisemitism also appeared in the form of a new obsession with 'blood purity' (Rogozinski 2024: 127–129).[23] Understanding these connections requires us to reject a clear-cut separation between religious minorities, ethnic groups, and women. As targets of dehumanization, they all come to be seen as interchangeable monstrous enemies of humanity itself.

Insisting on a clear separation between racialized and gendered dehumanization is also misguided because racialized cases are always already gendered and vice-versa. For instance, Tommy J. Curry has recently highlighted the need to account for sexual violence against African American men in the United States and Jewish men during the Holocaust within Smith's framework: "how and why would genocidal or murderous regimes enact dehumanization as rape towards men and boys if these are truly monsters (…)?" (Curry 2023: 769). Why do perpetrators respond with *sexual* violence

[23] This link was later picked up by the Nazis, with Himmler taking an extensive interest in historical documentation about the witch-hunts (Rogozinski 2024: 6, 265). Federici has also argued that the importing of the rhetoric of the witch-hunts into the Americas gave rise to the depiction of indigenous populations as "filthy and demonic beings" and helped change colonial paternalism into exterminatory violence (2014: 261).

to those they see as monsters? And how can we understand the *misandric* character of that violence? It is impossible to start answering these questions without an appreciation of how sexualization works in dehumanization, including in misogynistic dehumanization.

Andrea Dworkin, drawing on James Baldwin and reflecting specifically on American anti-black violence, makes some relevant observations:

> Racially degraded people — women and men — are also devalued as dirt: experienced as deep-down filthy; sexualized as dirty; desired as dirty for fucking and for genocide. Racist ideology spells out how the degraded race is filthy and intensely sexed, dirty and sensual, contaminating. (2007: 218)

In this context, racialized women "are specially targeted for sexual abuse and exploitation" because, ideologically, "the dirt of race added to the dirt of sex makes them the most sexed creatures" (Dworkin 2007: 223). Racialized men too are sexualized as 'filth' even when they are, at the same time, understood as physically powerful monsters. They are both feared as "rapist[s] by nature" and targeted for sexual violence (Dworkin 2007: 220; see also Curry 2018; 2023: 9; and Fanon 2008: 120–121). And they become part of a broader process of cultural construction of dominant masculinity in relation to demonized femininity. Dworkin highlights that "to devalue a man as sexualized dirt at all is to unman him, feminize him", to lump him with what is already perceived as demonic: women (2007: 219). The sexualization of black men, against a misogynistic and racist cultural backdrop, constitutes then a misandric denigration. These are complicated dynamics that need further unpacking, but it is clearly a mistake to try to detach race and gender in their analysis.[24]

[24] These sexual dynamics are not exclusive to anti-black racism and show up in twentieth century antisemitism (Curry 2021; Dworkin 2007: 220–225). As Jean-Paul Sartre put it "one of the elements of [the anti-semite's] hatred is a profound sexual attraction toward Jews" (1976: 33, see also 34–35).

Seeing racist and misogynistic dehumanization as sharing basic psychological structures is not implausible. It is actually crucial to properly understand historical continuities between episodes of persecution and the logic of complex, oppressive psycho-sexual dynamics.

6. Misogynistic Dehumanization Today

We *can* and *should* use the framework of dehumanization to understand the strand of misogyny illustrated by the early modern witch-hunts. The phenomenological experience of womanhood as a magical and contaminating sexual threat that Dworkin characterized was at the heart of these complex persecutions. And what best explains it is a set of dehumanizing representations where women are seen simultaneously as human beings and inhuman embodiments of natural forces. It is because of the tension between their perceived humanity and their essential 'Nature' that women are experienced as demonic. This account connects scholarship on race and dehumanization to twentieth century feminist theory and enriches our toolkit for thinking about the moral psychology of mass atrocities.

Beyond the witch-hunts, misogynistic dehumanization is also a helpful tool to understand our contemporary world. As I highlighted in section 1, the experience of women as magical and polluting continues to be a part of our own socio-cultural landscape. For example, consider the social anxiety about the contaminating power of womanhood highlighted by Nussbaum, but also by Beauvoir. Look at the 'feminine hygiene' aisle in any supermarket and you will find endless wipes, washes and douches promising to cleanse and deodorize vulvas and vaginas. These are mostly unnecessary, harmful products that pose well-known health risks. But many women are willing to deal with pain, irritation and other hazards to achieve an idealized vagina that is "'contained' and free of odour and discharge" (Jenkins and O'Doherty 2022: 1). Objectification-based and socially situated explanations are inadequate to understand this phenomenon. As I argued, they cannot tell us why women would be seen as contaminating. But, if dehumanizing representations of women are still widespread in our culture — and one need only look to online comment sections to find a woman described as a "'witch',

'hag', 'banshee', 'harpy', 'succubus' and (…) 'creature"' (Richardson-Self 2021: 95–96) — then it is unsurprising that women continue to feel profoundly dirty, particularly in connection to sexuality and reproduction. Like menstrual taboos, vaginal wipes, douches and scents act as a cultural tool for (self-)managing the metaphysical threat created by misogynistic dehumanization.

Dehumanization also allows us to better understand contemporary forms of violent misogyny like incel violence. For Manne, the case of Elliot Rodger was an example of 'patriarchal law enforcement'. Rodger was seeking vengeance on those he perceived as insubordinate, who failed to give him the love and sex he was owed. However, this explanation ignores much of what we know about Rodger's picture of the world. His infamous manifesto ends with a vision of a "fair and pure world" where women have been rounded up and starved to death, sex has been outlawed, and only a few women are "kept and bred" in secret labs. For Rodger, women were not just lower humans: they were "vicious, evil, barbaric animals", "beasts", and "a plague" (2014: 136). "The ultimate evil behind sexuality is the human female", he said, and his first experiences with masturbation, pornography, and female nudity leave him "traumatized" (Rodger 2014: 30-31, 38–39, 46–47). And yet, Rodger is obsessed with sex and women. In Isla Vista, his central target were "the very girls who represent everything I hate in the female gender: the hottest sorority" on campus (Rodger 2014: 132). Like Dworkin's misogynist, Rodger sees Woman-as-sex as an all-powerful magical disturbance that keeps pulling him down to a filthy abyss. In previous work, I argued that accounts like Manne's cannot capture this strand of misogyny and suggested that Beauvoir's model of Woman-as-Nature better characterizes the vision of women driving incel violence (Melo Lopes 2023: 138–147). Because they are human, women are resented, but because they are simultaneously inhabited by inhuman Nature they are feared as uncanny, impure, and supernatural.

Finally, this account of misogynistic dehumanization calls into question representations of women today that are seemingly innocuous or are even taken to be empowering. As mentioned earlier,

there has been a surge of interest in mainstream 'witch lit' in the last decade. Much of this revival has a distinctively feminist flavor. Books like Federici's 2004 *Caliban and the Witch* and Mona Chollet's 2018 *In Defence of Witches* are wildly successful bestsellers. There is today a whole universe of women who admire witches as ideals of sexual liberation, empowerment, and resistance (Bièvre-Perrin 2018; Chollet 2022:17–24). One of their common assumptions is that the witch-hunts were fundamentally guided by a desire to keep powerful women down and that "the witch embodies woman free of all domination, all limitation" (Chollet 2022: 3–4). But if accusations of witchcraft were a way of dehumanizing ordinary people, this reclamation makes less sense.

Dehumanization makes its victims seem powerful and threatening when they are not. That alleged power becomes then an excuse to persecute and even exterminate them. In other words, dehumanization profoundly distorts its target. It can even make up a target, when it takes the form of a conspiracy theory — after all, there was no 'sect of witches.' Women's power crystalized in the figure of the witch is itself a fiction of this kind, an effect of demonization. Seeing the witch-hunts through the lens of dehumanization suggests then that the feminized witch is no more subversive than the 'demonic' Jew or the black 'super-predator'. In reclaiming it we may be holding on to a dangerous fantasy and siding more closely with the accusers than the victims of the early modern witch trials.

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