# This Musical "Witch" is NOT ONE

A Repo on the Original Chinese Musical *The Witch to Be*

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With Appendix: "Agatha-ing Abbey"

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# Prefatory Note: On Theater Criticism and Public Scholarship

## On the *Repo* Genre

In Chinese digital theater communities, the *repo* occupies a distinctive generic space.[1] Most repos range from 500 to 5,000 words and tend toward the personal and emotional—recording one's experience of a performance, favorite moments, and impressions of the cast. Sustained theoretical engagement is rare. The piece translated here is exceptional in this regard: it deploys dissertation-level feminist theory, comparative dramaturgy spanning Ibsen to Tennessee Williams, and Scottish witch trial historiography within a format designed for general theater-going audiences. It is public scholarship that significantly exceeds typical repo conventions—intellectually rigorous but stylistically accessible, written for the theater community rather than academic specialists.

## Why This Piece

I selected this work for inclusion in my portfolio for several reasons. It is my most recent published criticism (January 2026), demonstrating ongoing engagement with contemporary Chinese cultural production. It showcases Chinese-language scholarly writing at publication level, feminist theory applied in real-time cultural analysis, and participation in a mode of Chinese online intellectual culture to which Western scholars generally lack access. The piece reviews *The Witch to Be*, an original Chinese musical that premiered in Shanghai, set during the Scottish witch trials of 1661–1662.

## Context: The Chinese Musical Market and Its Feminist Turn

The Chinese musical theater market has in recent years undergone a striking feminist turn, breaking from the traditional dominance of male leads and male-centered narratives. A wave of productions built around dual female leads, all-female casts, and women's growth as a central dramatic engine has emerged—works such as the Chinese-language production of *Lizzie* among many others. These productions do not merely explore independence and awakening as themes; they have become new stages for female performers to demonstrate their range, and have made feminist subject matter a genuine market force.

The niche audience for Chinese musical theater is predominantly female and self-consciously so. The community's self-designation is "theater women"—a gender-independent term that applies

[1] The term *repo* (剧评 in Chinese, literally "play-review") derives from English "report" but has evolved into a specific genre of audience-produced criticism, primarily circulating on platforms like Douban (豆瓣, China's leading cultural review platform, analogous to a combination of Letterboxd, Goodreads, and theater criticism) and RedNote (小红书, Xiaohongshu, a social media platform emphasizing lifestyle and cultural content). The genre has no direct equivalent in Anglophone theater discourse.

to all audience members regardless of sex; male theatergoers are jokingly called "male theater women," reflecting the community's assertion that female is the first sex of this particular cultural niche.[2] This audience is not unfamiliar with feminist theory—many have read Beauvoir and Ueno Chizuko, at minimum—and they bring real theoretical expectations to productions that engage with gender.

## The Debate This Repo Enters

*The Witch to Be* generated intense and polarized discussion upon its premiere. I wrote this repo specifically to intervene in that conversation. The criticisms were substantial and wide-ranging: audiences found the narrative structure confusing, the timeline jumps disorienting, key plot information missing or requiring supplementary explanation outside the theater. The music was called unmemorable, the songs too conversational, the overall effect "half spoken drama, half musical." Abbey's characterization drew particular fire—critics described her as a naïve "little white flower" whose sudden awakening felt unearned, and her relationship with Margaret was reduced by some to a "CEO and ingénue" formula. Most pointedly, some argued that the production simplified systemic gender oppression into individual emotional choices, that the witchhunter's economic motivation (three gold pounds per witch) trivialized the weight of the witch-hunting apparatus, and that Abbey's final choice to embrace death was not rebellion but capitulation.

My repo does not dismiss these criticisms; it addresses them by proposing a different framework for understanding what the production is doing. This is the essay's core intervention: the suggestion that the difficulties audiences encounter may stem not from flaws in the script but from unfamiliarity with the dramatic—as opposed to commercial musical—paradigms the work employs.

## A Note on Censorship and Rhetorical Strategy

A reader attentive to the original Chinese text may notice that certain feminist arguments are presented obliquely—through analogy, historical parallel, and theoretical allusion rather than direct statement. This is navigation, not evasion. The repo was written for publication on Chinese platforms subject to content moderation, where explicit political language around feminism, systemic oppression, and institutional critique is routinely flagged or suppressed. Part of what this piece demonstrates, then, is a mode of radical argumentation developed within and against the constraints of the Chinese censorship system: how to present uncompromised feminist analysis in public speech without losing any argument, by routing it through dramaturgy, historiography, and comparative literature. The blurred or indirect passages are deliberate; the arguments they carry are not.

[2]The Chinese term is 剧女 (*jùnǚ*), literally "theater women," and its variant 男剧女 (*nán jùnǚ*), literally "male theater women." The humor is deliberate: it inverts the usual gendered default by making "woman" the unmarked category.

## Plot Summary of *The Witch to Be*

*The Witch to Be* follows three women across the landscape of the Scottish witch trials.[3]

**Elspeth McLemore** is a midwife who, together with her partner Margaret, secretly performs abortions for women in their community. Together, they hide the list of the women who came for abortions inside a hollowed-out Bible—a hiding place the witch hunters never think to check. When the operations are discovered, Elspeth urges Margaret to flee and promises to meet her at a tree marked with a purple ribbon. She never comes. Margaret is captured and sentenced to death by burning, but snow falls during the execution—interpreted as divine intervention by the Celtic goddess Morrigan—and Margaret escapes into the forest, where she becomes the "forest witch."

Years later, Elspeth is accused of witchcraft after the infants she delivers begin dying. Subjected to trial by water, she chooses to sink—to die as a Christian—so that her fifteen-year-old daughter **Abbey** can inherit her property and survive. Abbey, now orphaned and accused of witchcraft herself over a "devil's fruit" (a honey apple), is rescued by a witchhunter who offers her provisions and passage to the Highlands in exchange for infiltrating Margaret's home and obtaining the list of witches' names.

Abbey enters the forest and lives with **Margaret**, who recognizes her immediately by the rope knot Elspeth once tied around her neck. Over months, Margaret teaches Abbey to read, shares the stories of the pre-Christian goddesses Brigid and Morrigan, and the two form a bond. Abbey discovers the witches' list—hidden inside the hollowed-out Bible—and gives the witchhunter only the names of the dead. When the witchhunter threatens to harm a newborn Abbey helped deliver, Abbey goes to him alone, publicly declares herself a witch, and is sentenced to death by burning.

At the climax, Abbey is tied to a tree. Fire begins. Then: the wind carries a witch's hymn, and the flames are extinguished. The staging cuts away before showing her death. All three actresses—Abbey, Margaret, Elspeth—sing the final song together, a moment of transcendence or continuity whose literal meaning remains deliberately ambiguous.

**Central thematic statement**: "Some are destined to light fires; some are destined to guard the ashes"—spoken by Elspeth to young Abbey before her death.[4] Margaret lights fires: she breaks the system, refuses compliance. Elspeth guards ashes: she stays within the system to protect those still inside it.

[3] The musical premiered in Shanghai, written and directed by Hua An (华安 in Chinese), who also wrote the earlier Chinese musical *Metamorphosis* (蝶变 in Chinese). The production is an original Chinese work engaging with Scottish history, sung in Chinese.

[4] 有的人注定要点火，有的人注定要守着灰烬 in Chinese.

## On Translation

This translation prioritizes **literalism over fluency**. My goal is to preserve the texture of my Chinese-language scholarly voice—including logical leaps, theoretical asides, abrupt tonal shifts, and stylistic idiosyncrasies—rather than produce smoothly "Anglicized" academic prose. Readers encountering awkward phrasings or unexpected transitions are encountering my actual argumentative style, not translation artifacts.

A note on style: readers will observe a habit of borrowing terms promiscuously across disciplinary traditions—ontology in a theater review, path dependency in a discussion of Tennessee Williams, format brushes as metaphors for epistemology. This is the way I actually think and speak in intellectual conversation. It is a mode I have honestly inherited from my fondness for the older generation of critical theorists—Benjamin, Barthes, Irigaray—for whom the boundaries between philosophical, literary, and political vocabulary were porous by design. I preserve this register here because it is my register, and because the repo was written in it.

A note on the essay's experimental subtitles: I use titles of feminist theoretical works as section headers *without* explicit citation in the body text. These function as an intellectual constellation—activating theoretical frameworks for theory-literate readers while functioning as suggestive, poetic titles for general audiences. The footnotes explain these citational gestures.

A note on the footnote apparatus: the original Chinese text is fully comprehensible to its target audience without any footnotes. The extensive annotations in this translation are added for English-language readers who may lack familiarity with Chinese theater conventions, the specific audience culture, the production's historical context, or the theoretical traditions the essay draws upon. They serve as a bridge, not a crutch.

Chinese characters appear in footnotes where relevant. The original Chinese text is available at the Douban link on the title page.

# This Musical "Witch" is NOT ONE[5]

*Repo on the Musical* The Witch to Be

This repo is based on my first viewing experience on January 29, 2026. Approximately 6,500 characters; deep reading time around twenty minutes. It will likely also be published on RedNote.

From my personal experience and appreciation, I very much like *The Witch to Be*; I will skip the excessive praise and repetitive compliments, and instead discuss points I have not yet seen anyone raise in current conversations—offering humble thoughts to invite better ones.[6]

## "A Musical Created Through Dramatic Logic"

*The Witch to Be*'s script is tremendously weighty.[7] There has been much discussion of how faithfully it adheres to actual history, which I will not repeat here; its textual and plot volume is large, and its narrative structure is complex. Interestingly, the comprehension challenges that audiences report from their viewing experience broadly correspond to these three dimensions of additional information: historical knowledge, script content not present in the theater,[8] and the sorting-out of narrative structure. These three kinds of weightiness together give the script a direct feel of being a *theatrical* script—though of course, saying this is somewhat impressionistic. I originally wanted to say *The Witch to Be* is a "book musical,"[9] but explaining this concept is also terribly cumbersome;

[5]The title is an homage to Luce Irigaray's *This Sex Which Is Not One* (*Ce Sexe qui n'en est pas un*, 1977), a foundational text of French feminist philosophy. Irigaray argues that feminine sexuality and subjectivity cannot be reduced to "one"—to singularity, unity, or wholeness—but are inherently plural, dispersed, and resistant to patriarchal categorization. I apply this framework to the "witch" of the title: the witch is not one figure, one archetype, one narrative. The three protagonists embody irreducible multiplicity. See the closing paragraph for my explicit attribution.

[6]The Chinese idiom used here, 抛砖引玉 (*pāo zhuān yǐn yù*), literally means "throw out a brick to attract jade": to offer a humble opinion in hopes of eliciting better insights from others.

[7]厚重 (*hòuzhòng*) in Chinese, literally "thick and heavy," connoting substance, gravity, and accumulated depth. The term carries positive evaluative weight in Chinese literary criticism.

[8]That is, portions of the libretto's depth—backstory, thematic layering, intertextual references—that are *written into* the script but cannot be fully absorbed in real-time performance. This is a characteristic feature of "book-heavy" musicals and of spoken drama.

[9]A *book musical* is a term from American musical theater, referring to musicals where the spoken dialogue and dramatic structure ("the book") carry equal or greater weight than the songs, as opposed to revues, concept musicals, or jukebox musicals. The "golden age" book musicals—Rodgers and Hammerstein's *Oklahoma!*, *Carousel*—integrated story, character, and song organically. I reach for this term but find it insufficient: the concept still requires too many

on top of the concept you still cannot escape a pile of qualifiers and modifiers. So I might as well summarize it directly as "a musical created through dramatic logic."

One way to understand *The Witch to Be* as "a musical created through dramatic logic" is to imagine that in many of its important trade-offs, this production's choices were made through theatrical paradigms or experience rather than musical theater paradigms.

## Mirrors Within…

The first thing to mention, naturally, is the terrifyingly abundant symmetries and theatrical structures—encompassing story patterns (such as Margaret and Abbey each facing fire and their respective fates of life and death afterward),[10] event forms (such as burning and drowning, corresponding to red and blue, as well as purple—the script's thematic color symbolizing the author's presence and connection),[11] and ingenious minutiae (such as both Abbey and Margaret being people for whom "one's own birthday and one's mother's death day are the same day"). Symmetries can be layered upon symmetries, just as placing two mirrors in the same space produces countless paired reflections of objects, thereby stimulating perspectives that perhaps even the author did not imagine during initial creation. This is a quintessential theatrical creative tradition.[12]

qualifiers to capture the specific quality of *The Witch to Be*.

[10]Both Margaret and Abbey are sentenced to death by burning. Margaret survives when snow falls; Abbey's fire is extinguished by wind and hymn. The symmetry is structural: two fire trials, two different outcomes, two different meanings of survival.

[11]The color coding: red corresponds to the fire trial (Margaret's sentence, Abbey's sentence), blue to the water trial (Elspeth's death), purple to the blending of red and blue, associated with the author's or narrator's presence. The purple ribbon on the tree where Margaret and Elspeth were to meet is the play's spatial emblem of this authorial, connective dimension.

[12]The use of structural symmetry and mirroring as a generative device has deep roots in dramatic tradition: Greek tragedy's strophe and antistrophe, Shakespeare's doublings and substitution patterns, Racine's architectural balance. Chinese dramatic forms—particularly Yuan dynasty *zaju*—also employ sophisticated parallel structures. The claim here is that *The Witch to Be* uses symmetry not merely decoratively but architecturally: the structure itself produces meaning that exceeds authorial intention.

## Two Dabs of Rouge,[13]

Next, let us discuss two main elements that appropriately yield to "dramatic logic." The first is the music. *The Witch to Be*'s music is exquisite, but it clearly does not follow the commercial paradigm of "hit song priority."[14] Structurally, it does not insist on individual songs having complete internal arcs of rise and fall; it is not governed by verse-chorus structure, nor does it force melodic hooks—it stops at character motifs, and clearly was not written according to the principle of "can still be popular as a single when you walk out of the theater." In terms of coverage, there is clearly no attempt at the greatest-common-denominator audience checklist of song types—ideally including a bit of everything: lyrical, show-stopping, upbeat, rap. From a creative logic standpoint, songs should begin when emotion becomes too intense to express in words; song-first design inevitably squeezes out script expression (this has even become an important reason why many musical theater fans tolerate, or even *depend on*, scripts with low nutritional value). Someone might say: doesn't it feel like many musicals *don't* have the forcefully complete formats or forcefully assembled genre variety you describe? My answer is: inability leading to not having achieved it and deliberate creative choice not to do it are two different things.

The other element that appropriately yields to "dramatic logic" is character interaction and choreography design. This is a special offering within certain specific musical theater ecosystems;[15] the script designs characters' kinetic and emotional interactions so that audiences may specifically savor these moments full of tension and stage charisma. Sometimes, because this component takes up too much weight, it conversely—like the former—squeezes out the script's capacity.

[13] My own coinage: music and choreography are "rouge" (cosmetic enhancement) that should serve the "face" (the dramatic script), not overwhelm it. The following section header "and One Face" completes the image. Together, the split subtitle enacts the argument: the two elements are discussed separately before being united under the script.

[14] In the Chinese music industry, 打歌 (*dǎ gē*) refers to the aggressive promotion of singles on music programs and streaming platforms. Applied to musical theater, "hit song priority" means writing songs designed to succeed as standalone singles—catchy, structurally complete, with commercial potential independent of their dramatic context.

[15] I refer here to a tendency in some Chinese (and East Asian) musical theater productions to devote significant stage time to physical and emotional "moments" between characters—sustained eye contact, choreographed embraces, tableau arrangements—as a form of fan service or theatrical spectacle. This can be artistically effective but, when overemphasized, displaces narrative development.

## and One Face

Since the face is not generated from two dabs of rouge, *The Witch to Be* is a script-first production. In particular, this script is saturated with dramatic logic, and its dialogue and plot progression are strongly flavored with spoken drama.[16] Of course, for various reasons—whether because this is ultimately a musical, or because of other exemplary precedents regarding dance and choreographic design—the *The Witch to Be* we finally see mixes various genes in its specific trade-offs. Audiences familiar with the mainstream genres from which these genes derive may feel ecstatic; friends very familiar with or dependent on specific commercial musical patterns may encounter some challenges—though of course, departing from these challenges, we may see more issues worth deep consideration.

A typical example of switching between multiple paradigms or script registers is the characters' physical vocabulary. Let me give a few examples from relatively non-central positions on the paradigmatic spectrum: early in the script, there is a moment where Margaret and Abbey stand at some distance, Margaret raises her wrist, Abbey raises her head. The ideal shot for this image is mid-distance, impressionistic, theatrical—it is a metaphor for the characters' psychological distance and dynamic power relationship. When Margaret is receiving her fire trial on the tree, her struggling, trembling, facial language—the ideal shot here is an extreme close-up, realist. Another example, somewhat awkwardly added to this comparison, is the opening dance or the scene of Elspeth and Margaret gazing across the stage from lower-left to upper-right—this is full-frame, emphasizing overall composition. The specific subtext behind these physical vocabularies is governed by a bound system: each register carries predetermined conventions that determine whether the language of sorrow is clutching one's breast and wringing one's hands or two lines of quiet tears. And given *The Witch to Be*'s ambition to fuse multiple paradigms, these switches must be relatively seamless and smooth. Some productions might increase predictability by strongly binding different paradigms to specific songs and dance sequences, but a moment's consideration reveals this could destroy the original, deeply symmetrical dramatic structure—not a simple matter. Otherwise, the

[16] 话剧 (*huàjù*) in Chinese, literally "spoken play." *Huaju* is the Chinese term for modern spoken drama, a form imported from the West in the early twentieth century, emphasizing naturalistic dialogue, psychological realism, and textual density over music or spectacle. To say a musical has spoken drama flavor is to say it prioritizes text and acting over musical theater conventions—a compliment in some circles, a warning in others.

simplest way to industrialize *The Witch to Be* would be to cut three-quarters of the plot and give Abbey a solo on the burning stake.

This kind of dramatic insistence naturally also affects the staging choices. With a sweep of the hand, black crows form a storm—this scene cannot be cut, because the solitary white dove, closer to death, has already appeared once; there *must* then be a flock of birds in the burned-black color of fire, alive.[17] The staging in the performance I saw was, in my view, already quite good; earlier audience feedback mentioned this scene being held together purely by the performers' conviction, but regardless, the available choices exist only among specific methods of realization—in an era with neither crow husbandry nor stage lighting, one would still have to arrange an entire silent chorus dressed in black.

## Before the Mirror…

Let us return to a more fundamental question: what kind of preparation does the audience actually need before entering the theater for *The Witch to Be*? I think it is a heart prepared to watch *theater* rather than an assembly-line musical. I believe *The Witch to Be*'s script structure *is* designed for audiences who have not done preparatory reading: approximately thirty minutes (including the "Rope Knot" segment, which I think would be entirely reasonable to include—about forty minutes) constitutes a very good opening, and Abbey's motivation for cooperating with the witchhunter is introduced at this point, clearly as a design choice for audiences with absolutely no prior study. The current situation is somewhat like having both "watched all the preparatory materials and entered the theater still completely unable to enjoy it" audiences and "felt that watching without preparation presented no challenge at all" audiences. I suspect this split comes not from the quantity of information but from unfamiliarity with the paradigms of the art form. Would you advise audiences to reread *War and Peace* before watching *Natasha, Pierre, and the Great Comet of 1812*[18] and then have someone walk them through the libretto? Or would you tell the audience: I need to

[17] The play establishes a symbolic avian vocabulary: a lone white dove associated with death and solitude, and black crows or ravens associated with Margaret's power and the collective force of the "witch" tradition. Once the white dove appears, structural symmetry demands the black flock.

[18] *Natasha, Pierre, and the Great Comet of 1812* (2012 off-Broadway, 2016 Broadway) is an electropop opera by Dave Malloy, adapted from a 70-page section of Tolstoy's *War and Peace*. The rhetorical point: the solution for a complex, literary musical is not more homework—it is adjusting one's expectations of genre.

Figure 1: Electra and the chorus. *Electra* (1962, dir. Michael Cacoyannis). © Michael Cacoyannis Foundation. They disperse and converge, evoking circling crows.

give you a heads-up—this show, even though it's singing the whole time, is actually…a little more like spoken drama?

## Two Keys: God and Writing, Plus One Layer of Realistic Texture

This section wants to discuss the widespread incomprehension of Abbey's ending, but must begin elsewhere. In the director and writer Hua An's interview, two keywords were mentioned: one is stories or motifs belonging to women, the other is *writing*.

## ***She Who Is***[19]

Many people have the question "does Margaret actually know witchcraft?" This question is truly asked too strangely: why not ask instead whether Christ, or God, exists within this script? If the answer to that question is affirmative, then the answer to the former question seems not so necessary either. Without a doubt, God exists within this script—I am not promoting a religious viewpoint; I am saying that the figure of God occupies a certain epistemological or ontological position. Its image is established through the fact that we cannot help but attribute certain events to it: for instance, Elspeth sinking continuously, descending to the lake bottom; for instance, snow falling ceaselessly onto Margaret's shoulders; and for instance, what guides Abbey and Margaret to meet, and what enables the wolves that speak human language to hold absolute power over life and death?[20] (A small addition: the "theatrical language of God's presence" is very disciplined—it operates as a downward force and dynamic within the space, evoking the medieval warhammer of the *Malleus Maleficarum*,[21] and the opposing force—the one that comes from human beings—moves upward within the space. This is why the fire trial scene is positioned at the lower-left of the stage: because space must be left for Margaret to walk step by step upward toward stage center on her own. Textual and lyrical images such as "climbing," or the lying-down and rising-up of the birth scene, can all be read this way. The disciplinary consistency of the script's theatrical language is extremely strong.)

Personify this image, and you can see its dialogue with various characters—how it punishes the witchhunter with victories so hollow they become self-repeating, how it secures time for the witches to contemplate themselves through its one-eye-open, one-eye-closed contingencies.

It has all manner of names you are familiar with, though each one more or less carries the

[19] My subtitle references Elizabeth A. Johnson's *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (1992), a landmark of feminist theology that reimagines the divine as compatible with—and illuminated by—women's experience. Johnson's title riffs on the divine name revealed to Moses ("I Am Who I Am," Exodus 3:14), feminizing it. I deploy this reference to frame the discussion of God's presence within the play's narrative logic: the "God" of *The Witch to Be* is the structural force that feminist theology helps us name.

[20] The "wolves that speak human language" is metaphorical: the witchhunters and ecclesiastical authorities who use the language of law, Christianity, and reason to exercise lethal power. The wolves in the play are also literal—Margaret fights off a wolf pack—but the metaphor extends to the systemic predators.

[21] The *Malleus Maleficarum* ("Hammer of Witches," 1486) is the infamous witch-hunting manual. The title literally contains "hammer" (*malleus*), and I draw on this to describe how the play stages divine and patriarchal power as a downward, gravity-driven force. See the image below from *Freydal* (c. 1512–1515), showing that historical warhammer combat relied on gravity-driven overhead strikes.

flavor of a patriarchal story, making one frown: "fate," "history," "God"—call it whatever you like. But I must point out this: in this play, its name is "the witch narrative."[22] Without citing Hua An's original words here: going further from this point, the rules of this male-authored division are bound to "the witch," and when we want to look back at history, to look back at the legacy of real "witches" accompanied by real sacrifice, we find it very difficult to casually draw a clean line, walk out of the forest and say "from now on, the witch is no longer like this." We have a trail of footprints from the forest and the grooves where shackles were dragged along the ground. To avoid being too obscure: put simply, one might treat this entity—which on one hand strictly ensures the story remains within the "witch narrative" framework, and on the other manipulates all manner of contingencies, inheriting this drama-God's fondness for symmetrical structures—as another character. And then it would not be an exaggeration to say that *The Witch to Be*, having established its characters, simply lets them grow freely.[23] I had wanted to cite some more "old white male" works to illustrate this point, but actually, there is no need—how is *The Witch to Be* any whit less than *War and Peace*?[24]

## ***When We Dead Awaken***[25]

Following this thread necessarily leads to Abbey's ending and the role of the author. If this play had to choose one sentence to print on a six-story banner and hang at the entrance of the Shanghai Dramatic Arts Center, it would probably be "Some are destined to light fires; some are destined to guard the ashes." Three characters, two choices—that really is not neat enough, is it? But in fact the three protagonists correspond to three postures. In the final scene, Abbey's choice is to be the

[22]My key interpretive move. Rather than treating the play's metaphysical structure as "God" or "fate," I name it "the witch narrative"—the historically determined pattern by which women accused of witchcraft suffer, are silenced, and die. This narrative is the play's true antagonist: not any individual witchhunter, but the structural grammar of witch stories themselves.

[23]A dramaturgical claim: the "witch narrative" functions like the God of process theology or the Author-function of structuralist criticism—setting initial conditions, then allowing characters to develop according to their own internal logic.

[24]The comparison to Tolstoy concerns structural ambition and the author's relationship to characters who "grow freely" within a predetermined historical framework. The original Chinese employs the classical form 何遽不若, a deliberately archaic expression meaning "how is it in any wise inferior to"; I have matched the register with "any whit."

[25]My subtitle references Adrienne Rich's landmark essay "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision" (1972), which argues that feminist consciousness requires "re-vision"—"the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction." Rich's title itself alludes to Ibsen's final play *When We Dead Awaken* (1899). I deploy it to frame Abbey's choice as an act of *writing*—not just living or dying within the witch narrative, but *revising* it from within.

Figure 2: A plate from *Freydal* (c. 1512–1515). One can see that the warhammer is driven by gravity—overhead chopping and striking.

person who *writes*, or *speaks aloud*, that sentence. Her answer is not one of the two options; it is to *juxtapose* them, to *articulate the juxtaposition itself*—to recognize the juxtaposition as such.[26] Consider, too, that Abbey's relationship with her two predecessor-witches is precisely like that of authors or researchers—as daughters of witches, reopening these historical records. The freedom Abbey pursues is, concretely, possibility within this narrative—a possibility tiny and remote, and even stacked with every contingency, within the witch narrative, sacrifice and real-world gravity and tragedy are always present throughout. But we can still see the tender parts, not only from the tenderness of the author's presentation, but from history itself, from this scarred narrative: because as the daughters of witches—for whom there are still witchhunters and witch narratives to this day—when we open this book full of the names of the dead, listening to the un-Christianized stories of Brigid and Morrigan[27] (reconstructing the witches' lives beyond the trial verdicts, through

[26]This is the essay's most compressed and important argument. Elspeth chooses to "guard ashes" (stay, protect, preserve within the system). Margaret chooses to "light fires" (break free, resist, live outside the system). Abbey's third choice—which the binary formulation conceals—is to *name both choices aloud*, to become the voice that speaks the sentence. She is neither martyr nor revolutionary but narrator: the one who turns lived suffering into spoken testimony.

[27]Brigid and Morrigan: pre-Christian Celtic goddesses. Brigid is associated with healing, poetry, and smithcraft; Morrigan with fate, war, and the boundary between life and death. In the play, their story—read aloud by Margaret and Abbey—functions as a counter-mythology: a feminine sacred narrative that predates and resists the Christian framework that enables witch-hunting.

historical records and archaeological inference), we can see ourselves clearly. Or rather, in such a cruel story, there is one not-bad thing: this true and painful self-recognition keeps revealing itself through the cracks in history.

There are also some shallower possible correspondences: for example, the divergence between Elspeth and Margaret's paths is reminiscent of things within the last hundred years;[28] or consider that Abbey, carrying the memory of her mother's sacrifice for her, touching this narrative—is she not like the daughters of witches who, roughly knowing where they come from, discover how taboo the identity of "witch" becomes when they approach a particular history? And Abbey's remorse for having once betrayed her alliance—what does *that* reference?[29] Of course, we have said: symmetry is not always intentional. In a good drama full of symmetries, such correspondences will emerge. The telling, and what we see of *The Witch to Be*, is writing, is presentation, is the question of how to make this malice-filled, male-narrative-dominated "witch narrative" be told again from the perspective of the daughters of witches. It is Abbey's choice; it is the quoted "Some are destined to light fires; some are destined to guard the ashes." Those who are perfectionists about dramatic structure and pursue it rigorously write this way—you may say all of this is too rigid (or too formalist), but you really cannot say it lacks logic.

## ***Situated Knowledges***[30]

From this perspective, "does Margaret actually know witchcraft?" really is the product of our lifelong training in materialist epistemology—an unfortunately binarizing method of posing the question. But I must say, the related question of realism is not so easily answered. Thanks to the thorough research done during creation, *The Witch to Be*'s archaeological details are quite abundant

[28] A deliberately vague gesture toward modern feminist history: the strategic divide between reformist feminism (working within existing systems) and radical feminism (breaking from them). I leave the specific referent open, allowing readers to fill in their own historical parallels.

[29] Abbey cooperated with the witchhunter, providing names from the list—even if only names of the dead. The "betrayal" maps onto broader patterns in feminist history: moments when women participate in patriarchal systems that harm other women, whether through complicity, survival strategy, or coercion.

[30] My subtitle references Donna Haraway's "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective" (1988), a foundational essay in feminist epistemology. Haraway argues against both naive objectivism (the "God-trick" of seeing everything from nowhere) and total relativism, proposing instead that all knowledge is *situated*—produced from a specific embodied position. I deploy this to reframe the audience debate about whether *The Witch to Be* is "realistic enough": the question itself assumes a God's-eye view of what realism should look like.

and accurate (the overall accuracy was so extreme that I doubted myself and specifically went to check whether "centimeter" in the lyrics was actually an accurate unit of measurement for the period),[31] which makes the descriptions of motifs spanning four hundred years that remain vivid—motherhood, property rights, reproduction—terrifyingly precise. But this play's script has, taken as a whole, a very abstract, very metaphysical core. As we discussed above, it is the author—or the person poring over old documents—sparring with this personified "witch narrative." This realist concern is like a format brush: wherever it passes, the text becomes real, weighty. And then when you run it from start to finish, and it hits places where "the will of fate" is strong, it bumps a little—ravens and wolf packs can still be wrapped within it—but when it reaches moments of purely symbolic expression of plot, such as Abbey's choice at the ending, this format brush really is difficult to use. Because in the reality we now inhabit, we very rarely give such symbolic meaning a name. Perhaps in the era when Joan of Arc refused to recant, the daughters of witches could understand; but for those of us in the present who are rather attached to staying alive, it may feel somewhat distant. As a "witch history" enthusiast, I want to share a distinctive story (which I have not yet seen anyone mention): in Scotland in 1662 (a very fitting coincidence),[32] Isobel Gowdie, without having been subjected to torture, voluntarily confessed extremely detailed, lavish, and imaginatively rich "acts of witchcraft," describing how she transformed into a hare, how she danced with demons.[33] The reasons are much debated, but I always imagine a scenario of: "You say I'm a terrifying witch? That's right, I am—and I'm going to scare you to death!" As for cursing back at the tribunal and denouncing the absurdity of the proceedings—that is too common to count. A small easter egg: I always feel the names in the book of the dead should all be real historical persons. For instance, Agnes makes me think of Agnes Naismith from the Paisley witch trials.[34] To this day, many of us cannot comprehend "knowing full well one will be tortured to death

[31] In fact, the metric system was not established until the French Revolution; "centimeter" is the one anachronism I found in an otherwise scrupulously researched libretto. That this was the only inaccuracy I could identify speaks to the production's historical care.

[32] The play is set in 1661–1662. Isobel Gowdie's confession also dates to 1662—the same historical moment, in the same country.

[33] Isobel Gowdie's confessions (1662) are among the most extraordinary documents in Scottish witch trial history. Over four separate confessions, she described elaborate rituals, shapeshifting, fairy encounters, and coven meetings in vivid, almost literary detail. Scholars have debated for centuries whether she was mentally ill, performing a role, engaging in actual folk practice, or making a deliberate political statement. Her case is unique because no evidence of torture exists in the records.

[34] Agnes Naismith was a victim of the Paisley witch trials (1697), one of the last major witch trials in Scotland. The suggestion that names in the play's "book of the dead" reference real historical victims is my own scholarly inference,

or suffer greatly for it, yet still choosing to do so." But consider this: when Abbey confirmed that she was indeed a daughter of a witch, a witch herself, her certainty was as firm as her knowledge that loudly proclaiming this would mean her death. I like to imagine that inside that hollowed-out Bible full of names,[35] there might also be that line from the Song of Songs: "Love is as strong as death."[36] Perhaps Abbey had occasionally turned to it; perhaps Elspeth once had too. But the witchhunters would not have understood it. Of course, to the realist objection, there is also a cooler, simpler, more convenient answer: in a script, if one could have the freedom to choose one's own ending—or rather, if one could choose an ending that lets oneself be *seen* by everyone within the script—then obviously there is no ending cooler than this one.[37]

Regarding the current collective feedback and discussion, I want to make a small addendum: what exactly *is* realism? This question is not easily answered—it even feels like it would make a good nine-grid meme:[38] plot motivation based on reality / plot motivation defying reality; thinking consistent with reality / not defying reality / completely inconsistent with reality…*Hadestown* is perhaps as realistic as *Elisabeth*,[39] or even more so. But this also shows that the modes of expression for realist concerns are various. At such moments, perhaps what we need to set aside is the practice of taking whatever single paradigm of realism we have in our minds and applying it to every work—and particularly, the practice of keyword-identifying indicators like "motivation" and "conflict," classifying them, scoring them. In our discussion spaces, this keyword-identification often falls into an artificial-intelligence-style self-contradiction: feeling that "the realism isn't realistic enough,"

not confirmed by the production.

[35]The "book of the dead" in the play is a Bible with its pages hollowed out, the names of women who came for abortions written inside—the same hiding place Elspeth and Margaret devised together. Sacred text repurposed as secret memorial: the women's names survive *within* the very book used to justify their persecution. The witch hunters never found it precisely because they never thought to open the Bible.

[36]Song of Songs 8:6. This is my own imagination, not stated or shown in the play. I am proposing an interpretive possibility: that somewhere in that hollowed Bible, Elspeth or Abbey might have encountered this verse. The speculative mode is deliberate.

[37]A meta-theatrical argument: Abbey's choice makes sense *within the logic of drama itself*. If a character could choose how their story ends, choosing to be publicly witnessed—to be *seen*—is the most dramatically coherent choice.

[38]The nine-grid meme (九宫格, *jiǔgōnggé* in Chinese) is a popular Chinese social media format where a 3 by 3 grid creates humorous typologies or classification matrices, ubiquitous on Weibo and RedNote. The joke is that the question "what is realism?" could itself be taxonomized into a meme—demonstrating the absurdity of treating realism as a simple binary.

[39]*Hadestown* (Anaïs Mitchell, 2006/2019) retells the Orpheus and Eurydice myth in an American industrial and New Orleans setting. *Elisabeth* (Michael Kunze and Sylvester Levay, 1992) is an Austrian/German musical about Empress Elisabeth of Austria, with Death as a character. Both are "realistic" in their engagement with historical and material conditions and "unrealistic" in their metaphysical frameworks. The point: realism is a spectrum, not a category.

that "hunting witches for money" seems like an insufficiently realistic simplification of logic, as if the witchhunters needed to recite the line "Get ready, I'm about to implement systematic patriarchal oppression" for the work to possess profound realist observation. But obviously things do not work this way—systematic oppression operates precisely through economics, material conditions, and vast systems of ideological belief, does it not? I have also seen people arguing, based on other Western medieval-aesthetic adaptations, that *The Witch to Be* is not authentic enough. The thought that, at the very same time, Western scholars are criticizing these very adaptations for losing their connection to historical reality and retaining only consumerist "witchcore" aesthetics[40] or "Neomedievalism"[41] fashion items—well, that is rather grimly funny. *The Witch to Be* did *not* collect and display the shining fragments of Scottish witch history like a colonizer or a grave robber treating them as decorative objects. That should be something for us to be proud of. There is much research on the historical basis of *The Witch to Be*, which I will not elaborate on here. Imagining two metaphysical forces—"feminine power" and "patriarchal institutions"—governing all things, measuring their strength, treating the real historical struggles as these two entities conjuring soldiers from scattered beans[42]—mixed with a bit of local color and ancestral tradition—this would actually be more pre-modern than pre-Calvinist-Reformation Scottish Christianity. Speaking of which, it is worth mentioning that 1660s Scotland under Presbyterian leadership had economic and productive capacity still quite backward, yet possessed comparatively very advanced literacy rates and cultural development;[43] its specific practices were necessarily fused with Scotland's ancient folk beliefs, and the delicate position of "justification by faith" within Reformed theology[44]—one must say this is an excellent mirror for feminist discussions in certain contemporary spaces. I mention this

[40] Witchcore: a social media and consumer aesthetic that draws on witch imagery—crystals, herbs, dark fashion, moon phases—largely divorced from the historical reality of witch persecution.

[41] Neomedievalism: a term used in cultural studies for contemporary appropriations of medieval imagery that are more interested in fantasy and spectacle than historical accuracy.

[42] A classical Chinese idiom from Daoist mythology (撒豆成兵, *sā dòu chéng bīng* in Chinese, literally "scatter beans to conjure soldiers"): to summon armies from nothing. The sarcastic application: treating feminist history as a cosmic chess match between abstract "Feminine Power" and "Patriarchy" is more superstitious than the pre-Reformation Scottish Christianity the play depicts.

[43] The Church of Scotland's emphasis on universal education (the First Book of Discipline, 1560, called for a school in every parish) produced unusually high literacy rates relative to economic development—a literate populace capable of reading, and being controlled by, religious texts, while also producing the conditions for independent thought and resistance.

[44] "Justification by faith" (*sola fide*) occupies a complex position in Calvinist theology: individual conscience and direct relationship with God on one hand (potentially empowering), predestination on the other (potentially disempowering). This tension is directly relevant to Elspeth's choice to die "as a Christian."

because feminism-based realist discussions always inevitably arrive at this kind of crossroads. I want to be brief: apart from this, there is probably only the word "solidarity."

## More *Witch*!

*The Witch to Be* is so distinctive that I do not even want to make too many comparisons regarding content. But I do want to make a comparison regarding how we support the works we love. I very much admire the structure of *Metamorphosis*, and I believe everyone can imagine how an exquisite dramatic structure brings me pleasure and satisfaction. In an environment where a production might require multiple theater visits to discover something new each time (while actors freely improvise daily, unlike Broadway where you can see exactly the same blocking at exactly the same moment every time), this kind of exquisite yet substantial structure always delivers freshness. But if one truly must compare degrees, *The Witch to Be* has obviously taken a much larger step beyond *Metamorphosis* in this endeavor—no wonder some people who could accept the latter's narrative find the former not quite to their taste. If *Metamorphosis* is a linear-narrative one-way street with dazzling shop windows, where the paper-cuts in each household reveal patterns upon close inspection, *The Witch to Be* is already more like a skilled guide leading you through every landmark in a wilderness—along a route that misses no detail, but admittedly has some twists and turns. I think this may be related to the fact that Hua An, who was the scriptwriter for *Metamorphosis*, serves as both writer *and* director for *The Witch to Be*: not just the script, but the entire presentation can be placed under the planning of one grand production, one great play.

I apologize in advance to any academic laborers[45] for the displeasure the following analogy may cause due to excessive familiarity with its object of comparison: if we must always frame discussions of certain works within the category of "Chinese musical theater," then I think the distinctive thing worth mentioning is that we have a very vibrant musical theater market—there are still many people going to see shows. I often feel that the small theater,[46] with its fast development and iteration cycles, where audiences can tolerate more changes during a touring run, is somewhat like

[45] 学术民工 (*xuéshù míngōng*) in Chinese, literally "academic migrant workers"—self-deprecating slang for graduate students and junior academics, playing on the term for low-wage manual laborers.

[46] 小剧场 (*xiǎo jùchǎng*) in Chinese, literally "small theater." These are experimental or intimate venues, typically under 500 seats, with more flexible production models allowing for iteration during runs.

the academic world's "conference"—while the large-theater finished product, rigid once finalized for revival (like Broadway), is more like a journal or book. An art form with an active conference atmosphere is healthy and will keep getting better. I am glad to see our positive experimentation with these less conventional modes of presentation, and I hope that through our post-viewing feedback, we can let the production and investment side feel our anticipation for more diverse styles and bolder structural experiments.

The title of this essay pays homage to Luce Irigaray's *This Sex Which Is Not One* (*Ce Sexe qui n'en est pas un*).[47] I had originally wanted to say more about plurality, diffusion, and the refusal of "the one" (singularity, uniqueness, wholeness). But the brush is lifted and the words escape me—let this serve as a footnote. References hastily passed over; most worth mentioning have already appeared in the subtitles.

*Myouza, January 31, 2026*

[47] Luce Irigaray, *Ce Sexe qui n'en est pas un* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1977); English translation: *This Sex Which Is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985). Irigaray's central argument—that feminine sexuality and subjectivity are irreducibly plural, refusing the phallogocentric demand for unity and singularity—provides the theoretical spine of my reading of *The Witch to Be*.

# Appendix: Agatha-ing Abbey[48]

In the creative team's sharing about *The Witch to Be*, it was mentioned that Abbey is "a collection and retelling of two beloved female characters from classic dramatic works," but which two has not yet been revealed. With a detective's spirit, I attempt to find the clues that might answer this question.

In my earlier repo, "This Musical 'Witch' is NOT ONE," I argued that audiences should try to build the psychological expectation of appreciating *The Witch to Be* through the methods of theater, embracing the challenges posed by the paradigms of dramatic works.

This essay attempts to answer the following question: for audience members unfamiliar with dramatic works and their paradigms, which works would be the best starting points?

This essay will therefore mention multiple dramatic works. In the previous repo, I avoided mentioning any works by male authors—for some peace and quiet. In this essay, we must unavoidably revisit some male playwrights' works. Unsurprisingly, the works mentioned here all have, to varying degrees, the problematic elements one might expect.

I will not defend or excuse these, but rather share two perspectives: first, I invite everyone to consider whether the female characters I am about to discuss possess some agency that cannot be dissolved by the male-centered narrative; second, to experience a certain impulse—to imagine a method of rewriting that is unaffected by the aforementioned narrative.

This essay will discuss four female characters from four works: Nora from Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, Abigail from Miller's *The Crucible* (*The Salem Witch*), Joan from Shaw's *Saint Joan*, and Seraphina from Tennessee Williams's *The Rose Tattoo*.

[48] "Agatha" carries a double allusion. Agatha Christie names the detective game I am playing here: identifying Abbey's literary parents from the clues the production leaves. Saint Agatha—the early Christian martyr tortured and killed for refusing to renounce her faith, one of the most venerated female saints in the Western tradition—names what *The Witch to Be* is doing with the figure of Abigail: reclaiming a name that Miller's *Crucible* made synonymous with the femme fatale, and restoring it to the register of the sacred. The musical's Abbey is not Miller's scheming Abigail; she is an Agatha, a saint made by her own testimony.

## From the Mother's Name (*Matronymic*)

At the ending of *The Witch to Be*, what Abbey ultimately says is: "I am Abigail McLemore, daughter of Elspeth McLemore." Although this play treats the father's side of the family story with brevity, a moment's thought with basic historical awareness reveals that this practice of introducing oneself by one's mother's name was extremely rare at the time. This is a confirmation of the concept of "the matrilineal."

I open with this in order to guide everyone to think about "matrilineal inheritance" among female characters in dramatic works. In Abbey, what familiar figures can we see? Within *The Witch to Be*'s setting, Abbey's name seems to come from a maternal elder. In terms of scriptwriting, the origin of this name is perfectly clear: it comes from Abigail in Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*, who is cast as the villain.[49]

Whether it is the similar witch-trial-era setting, or the similarities in the plots of accusation and informing, one can clearly see *The Witch to Be*'s Abbey's narrative connection to the villain Abigail in *The Crucible*. *The Crucible*'s Abigail provides a typical template of the stigmatized "witch-informer"; *The Witch to Be*'s Abbey is clearly not such a character, but knowing what she is *not* is as important as knowing what she *is*.

We can see in *The Witch to Be*'s creation this kind of ambition: to imagine a possibility of an Abigail who has not been stigmatized. This act has two kinds of real-world justification: first, according to some scholarly research, the real historical Abigail was only one of the plaintiffs in the Salem case—what motivations, what circumstances were involved were largely Miller's own creative choices;[50] second, there is an experience all too familiar to us: certain gendered modes of writing, when describing, recording, or reproducing historical tragedies, always tend to write the girls as badly as possible wherever the record is ambiguous. The *femme fatale* theory exists across all times and cultures. Therefore, when we re-examine and rewrite, where it is reasonable, we should also try as much as possible in these uncertain places to think the best of these women who

[49] In Miller's *The Crucible* (1953), Abigail Williams is the primary antagonist—a young woman who initiates the Salem witch accusations, partly out of jealousy and sexual obsession with John Proctor. Miller based the character loosely on the historical Abigail Williams, but significantly altered her age, motivations, and role.

[50] Historical scholarship on the Salem trials (notably Mary Beth Norton's *In the Devil's Snare*, 2002) has significantly complicated the picture Miller presents. The real Abigail Williams was approximately eleven years old at the time of the trials—Miller aged her to seventeen for dramatic (and sexual) purposes.

were cast as villainesses—this is perhaps closer to historical truth than some fence-sitting rational neutrality.

On this basis, we can see the inevitability of *The Witch to Be*'s ending. In *The Crucible*, Abigail flees the trial, and then in Miller's epilogue notes he mentions a rumor that she became a prostitute in Boston. Even having escaped capital punishment, Abigail still cannot escape this fate of having the final word pronounced upon her by gendered discourse—after fleeing, one must always go into hiding, and can never again determine for oneself what the name "Abigail" will mean in history. In direct contrast, the male protagonist of *The Crucible*, John Proctor, refuses to sign his name on a forged confession: "Because it is my name! Because I cannot have another in my life!…I have given you my soul; leave me my name!" In *The Witch to Be*, Abbey seizes back this climactic moment—she is the one who speaks her own matrilineal name aloud.[51] This kind of contrapuntal rewriting pervades *The Witch to Be*'s script: for instance, the forest in *The Crucible* symbolizes sin and desire; in *The Witch to Be* it becomes a place of alliance, knowledge, and healing—which is also why it is worth devoting an entire song to describing the forest.

Friends interested in *The Crucible* can go read it. Miller is, on the whole, critical of the power structures that produce tragedy and of male violence, but the madonna/whore binary, the compression and simplification of female desire, and the design of female characters as functional mirrors for male growth rather than having narrative agency of their own—these are abundant.

## Before the Departure[52]

The symbolic reduction of *A Doll's House* in our context is quite severe. It seems more people are interested in what happens after Nora leaves than in what happened before, just as it seems far more people have read Lu Xun's "What Happens After Nora Leaves?" than have read the original play:[53]

[51] The essay's most pointed intertextual argument. Miller gives the heroic "name" speech to John Proctor; *The Witch to Be* transfers it to Abbey. The gesture is simultaneously a feminist revision of *The Crucible* and a claim about what the "climactic moment" of a witch-trial drama should actually be: not a man defending his honor, but a woman claiming her lineage.

[52] The subtitle alludes to Nora's famous exit at the end of *A Doll's House*—and to the Chinese critical tradition of asking what happens *after* she leaves (Lu Xun's famous lecture "What Happens After Nora Leaves?" 1923). I invert the focus: what happens *before*?

[53] Lu Xun, "What Happens After Nora Leaves?" (1923), a lecture delivered at Beijing Women's Normal College. Lu Xun argued that without economic independence, Nora's departure leads to only two outcomes: she returns, or she is "ruined." The lecture is canonical in Chinese feminist thought but has arguably *replaced* engagement with Ibsen's

*A Doll's House* is in danger of becoming a reference text for the latter rather than an independent work. But perhaps we should still look at what Nora experienced before her departure.

First, the most central plot correspondence: the recognition that "I am a doll." Abbey, through her cooperation and maneuvering with the witchhunter, finally arrives at the conclusion that "I am a doll of this system"—that it is impossible to win even the bargaining chips of freedom by depending on the conditions the witchhunter offers. This conclusion, so clear to us today, was at the time always one that required great cost to grasp: always thinking "it's just listening temporarily" or always fantasizing that one could still be treated with equal respect.

The correspondences in elements are also obvious. Secretly eating macarons and secretly eating honey apples. Forged signatures and a forged witch list. Nora's strategic—even infantilized—naïveté and Abbey's naïve resilience in many moments (if you do not understand performative survival behavior, you will think Abbey's naïveté is incompatible with her profound awareness of her mother's sacrifice and other matters).[54] The centrally important role of dance in both works. An ending that was at one point unknown (whether the abrupt cut at the end, or Elspeth's state of being alive or dead in Margaret's eyes for a time). When rereading *A Doll's House* across the span of time, "forging a signature" is easily reframed by today's popular procedural contract theory as a mark against one's integrity, but no one would say Abbey's invalid name list—a crime under the framework of the time—was morally wrong. On this point, *The Witch to Be* does it more brilliantly.

I strongly recommend everyone read the script of *A Doll's House* rather than watching performance recordings. Some performance treatments of Nora and Torvald seem easily misread—turning Nora's tactical naïveté or systemically cultivated innocence into "women are inherently childish," turning Torvald into "stupid" (reducing the problem to having chosen the wrong partner). Although there are some toxic elements by today's standards—for instance, female characters besides Nora are somewhat flat, though this is less a gender issue than the era's approach to primary versus secondary characters—and Nora's path to awakening proceeds through law, responsibility, and individualism without touching on motherhood, social networks, or survival, meaning she "awakens like a man"—though *The Witch to Be* fills in this piece of the puzzle beautifully. One

actual text.

[54] Abbey's naïveté is, like Nora's, partly strategic performance within a system that rewards apparent innocence. Both characters are more aware than they let on; their "childishness" is a survival tactic, not a character flaw.

especially elegant point is that Ibsen did not use gendered narrative to pass judgment on Nora's ending. But then this question was carried back by Lu Xun, who said "either she is ruined, or she returns"—which falls right back into Arthur Miller's framework, regrettably.[55] Nora is "a woman in the process of becoming," just as *The Witch to Be*'s English name declares—which is also why she can be reread by feminism again and again without being fixed.[56]

## Roses, Ashes, Freedom

Given the length, this section will be somewhat abbreviated. Discussing Shaw's *Saint Joan* is mainly about the Christian elements in the script, and the design whereby "the judged witch" is closer to the core of Christianity than "the judges." *The Witch to Be*'s handling of this aspect takes Shaw's conceptual brushstrokes a step further.[57] Another connection is the inheritance of *Saint Joan*'s concept of freedom: an affinity with natural forests, fields, flowers, and trees; and the calm and conviction when refusing to recant and facing death.

Tennessee Williams's *The Rose Tattoo* is a work rarely discussed in Chinese-language circles.[58] As central images, the rose (corresponding to a person who departed early) and an urn of ashes[59] pervade the work from start to finish. Food, icon-like guardianship, dance, and Seraphina's primal life force—derived not from morality, reason, or sacrifice but from sheer vitality—plus the "Some are destined to light fires; some are destined to guard the ashes" core sentence having such a strong Williams flavor that I can hardly avoid thinking of this work. It completes the final piece of *The Witch to Be*'s puzzle: corporeality.[60] (No advertisement:) This year, Shanghai Translation Publish-

[55] Lu Xun, the great progressive Chinese writer, inadvertently reproduces the same binary (virtue/ruin) that Miller applies to Abigail. Even sympathetic male writers tend to reduce women's choices to two patriarchally legible options.

[56] The official English title *The Witch to Be* carries multiple meanings—becoming, existing, the future tense of identity. Like Nora, Abbey is not a completed figure but an ongoing process of self-determination.

[57] In Shaw's *Saint Joan* (1923), Joan of Arc is portrayed as spiritually authentic in ways that expose the institutional Church's corruption. The play's epilogue makes this explicit: Joan, burned as a heretic, is eventually canonized—proving that the "witch" understood God better than her persecutors. *The Witch to Be* extends this principle: Elspeth's Christianity—rooted in care, sacrifice, and maternal love—is more genuinely "Christian" than the Christianity of the witch-hunting establishment.

[58] *The Rose Tattoo* (1951) centers on Seraphina delle Rose, a Sicilian-American widow whose deceased husband's body bore a rose tattoo. Seraphina guards his ashes and memory with fierce, embodied devotion. The play is a celebration of physical, sensual, non-intellectual vitality.

[59] The correspondence to *The Witch to Be*'s central images: roses correspond to Elspeth (the "Rose Lady" of Abbey's game, the name Elspeth said she would give a daughter); ashes are what remains after fire, what must be "guarded."

[60] *The Rose Tattoo* contributes the dimension of embodied, physical, sensual experience that the other three source-works lack. Nora's awakening is intellectual and legal; Abigail's is narrative; Joan's is spiritual. Seraphina's is of the

ing House released a new Williams translation series—this thing finally has a Chinese translation. I only learned this while writing this piece; it hasn't arrived yet, so I won't evaluate the translation quality. Applying formulaic criticism to Williams, it is easy to say his corporeal writing carries a heavy gaze. This is indeed not untrue, but I personally believe it is a matter of writing method producing path dependency: put simply, his own mental health was not good, and he was especially skilled at and inclined toward writing people on the verge of collapse—and historically, those most often in such circumstances were women.

"Agatha" refers to the detective game—part Christie, part martyr—that I have so enjoyed. I have a feeling that in a couple of days, once the first round of performances is done, the answer to "which two female characters" might be revealed. I want to finish this identification before then—to trace, in Abbey's bearing, the "old friend's poise," and discover with a thrill that she was all along the "old friend's child."[61]

*Myouza, February 1, 2026*

body.

[61] A wordplay in the original Chinese: 故人之姿 ("old friend's poise," recognizing a departed person's silhouette in someone new) and 故人之子 ("old friend's child," discovering the resemblance is literal kinship). Audiences joke that Margaret is drawn to Abbey because Abbey resembles Elspeth—and indeed Margaret does eventually discover that Abbey is Elspeth's daughter. My "Agatha" game operates the same way: identifying the dramatic "parents" of Abbey's character through family resemblance before the official lineage is revealed.