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*Kevin Talmer
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Ripon College
United States*

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IS SHE A GOOD WITCH OR A BAD WITCH?: A SOCIAL HISTORY OF WATERHOUSE'S CIRCE OFFERING THE CUP TO ODYSSEUS

Kevin Talmer Whiteneir

ABSTRACT

Historically, witches have been portrayed as people, most commonly women, who command supernatural forces to manipulate the natural order of the world, usually for nefarious ends as evidenced by witch hunting manuals, fairy tales, and Classical mythology. This is certainly the case in John William Waterhouse's painting *Circe Offering the Cup to Odysseus*, from 1891, in which a sorceress manipulates the ancient Greek hero. However, in 21st century visual culture, witches are often portrayed using their control of magic to battle evil and better the lives of innocent bystanders. Because of this shift, many Americans will no longer identify the witch as exclusively evil. This presentation will undertake a close reading of the Waterhouse painting and use a mixed methodology, including insights from anthropology, religious studies, and art history to interrogate this shift in morality regarding witches in Western culture. As a counterpoint to Waterhouse's *Circe*, a comparative case study of the

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character Prue Halliwell from the 1998-2006 show *Charmed*, thus showing the transition from dangerous femme fatales to empowered figures of heroiness. Components researched and discussed will be the qualities associated with historical witches, such as Circe, compared to the contemporary television counterpart in an attempt to interpret this transition in culture. Ultimately, in this presentation, the argument that a shift in Western spiritual and popular values has caused a change in the perception of witches in 21st century popular and visual culture has inverted contemporary viewers' understanding of images depicting sorceresses, such as Circe in Waterhouse's painting, will be discussed.

KEYWORDS

Witches; Witchcraft; Art History; Circe; John William Waterhouse

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