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Claiming the Domains of the Natural and the Supernatural in Netflix's Occult Series *The Chilling Adventures of Sabrina*

Shreyashi Mandal

Netflix's recent adaptation of the *Sabrina the Teenage Witch* comic-book series,¹ *The Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* (2018),² reached immense popularity not just because of magic spells, but also the politics of power and gender. Sabrina Spellman, the titular character, is the half-witch, half-mortal daughter of the late rebel priest Edward Spellman (warlock father) and Diana Regina Sawyer Spellman (mortal mother). The twenty-first-century witch is reimagined as a powerful figure who has carried the aggression faced by her community through the ages.³ She has gathered enough strength to withstand the social isolation that led to the suppression of her emotions and diminishment of her power.

Sabrina is introduced as a reimagined teenage witch seeking solutions to end gendered violence at Baxter High (the school she attends) as well as her coven.

*Sabrina: I have got this club started at school. Of Women protecting women. Sort of like a coven.*⁴

Meanwhile, Sabrina's family is preparing for her "dark baptism" on the night of the Halloween eclipse, which also happens to be her sixteenth birthday. Dark baptism is an initiation ritual where the body has to be given up to the Dark Lord in exchange for youth, supernatural power, and immortality. Sabrina has questions about granting another person the right to control and possess her body; these reservations are dismissed by adults as mere adolescent behavioural problems.

*Sabrina: I admit I have reservations about saving myself for the Dark Lord. Why does he get to decide what I do or do not do with my body?*⁵

The adults believe that although the ritual may jeopardize the witch's personal interest or happiness, and the greater good must be assured by her sacrifice. The agents in charge of manipulating Sabrina into changing her mind are also important rank holders in the coven's hierarchy. They are the High Priest and the Dark Lord, positions monopolized by men. The Dark Lord will assign a position to Sabrina where her primary role would be to answer him whenever he summons her and perform perilous tasks as instructed by him.

Although Sabrina's desire to remain partly in the mortal domain is justified, is her desire a result of mortal conditioning? As another reflection of patriarchal control, the Dark Lord has ordered the mother of demons, Miss Wardwell, to emotionally manipulate Sabrina into agreeing to his terms. She plays upon the narrative that "women are taught to fear power,"⁶ using it as a prod to exploit Sabrina. In the tenth episode, when her scheming fails, Miss Wardwell brings the town of Greendale close to annihilation by summoning the thirteen

witches who were hunted by mortals and betrayed by their own community as a sacrifice to appease the town's lust for witch-blood. Sabrina is forced by her conscience to give up her mortal life in exchange of becoming the most powerful witch who alone is capable of saving the town.

In the end, Sabrina receives only what the Dark Lord was willing to grant; she gains the status of the most powerful witch at the cost of killing her mortal-self. The loss is beautifully portrayed in a scene where her mother bemoans the death of her baby after the dark baptism. Surrendering her body unto the Lord is suggestive of fulfilling his sexual desire—her dizziness post signing *The Book of the Beast* hints at the moment of consummation. The title of the book adequately defines that Sabrina has to devote herself entirely to her Lord and her essential reality will be that of a domesticated animal; she cannot question his will. Furthermore, he has control of her sexuality and reproductivity. This oppression of her spirit is political in nature, likely to dominate Sabrina's actions in the future.⁷⁷

The High Priest: In signing his book, The Book of the Beast, you swear to obey without any question any order you may receive from the Dark Lord...⁸

The transformation to a complete supernatural being informs her that one cannot truly belong to another domain unless ties with the dominant, pre-existing domain are eliminated. Will Sabrina stop questioning the coven's fundamentalism? Her past dissent indicates that her actions may enable her to defeat the Dark Lord much to his dismay. First, she challenged the cannibalistic practice referred to as "the feast of the feast." Later, her trial in front of her coven for a breach of promise (broken when she ran away from her first dark baptism in the night of her sixteenth birthday), was won to secure an admission at Academy of Unseen Arts while preserving her bodily rights. The overall focus of the series on gendered violence translates to Sabrina's mortal and witch roles and threads the stories together for the viewer in an effective way.

Notes

¹ Sabrina first appeared as a character in George Gladir and Dan De-Carlo, "Archie's Madhouse" *Archie Comics* 22, Archie Comics Publishing Group (October 1962). The television series is based on the more recent comic series, Roberto Aguirre-Sacasa and Robert Hack, *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina*, Archie Horror (October 2014).

² *The Chilling Adventures of Sabrina*, Season 1 (October 26, 2018), directed by Lee Toland Krieger, Netflix.

³ Berger Helen A and Douglas Ezzy, "Mass Media and Religious Identity: A Case Study of Young Witches," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 48, no. 3 (2009): 501-14.

⁴ *The Chilling Adventures of Sabrina*, “Chapter One: October Country,” Season 1, Episode 1 (October 26, 2018), directed by Lee Toland Krieger, Netflix.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ *The Chilling Adventures of Sabrina*, “Chapter Ten: The Witching Hour,” Season 1, Episode 10 (October 26, 2018), directed by Lee Toland Krieger, Netflix.

⁷ Simone De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier (New York: Vintage, 2011).

⁸ *The Chilling Adventures of Sabrina*, “Chapter Two: The Dark Baptism,” season 1, episode 2 (October 26, 2018), directed by Lee Toland Krieger, Netflix.