Witches both mad and bad: a loaded word with an ugly history

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Over the weekend, Immigration Minister Peter Dutton inadvertently sent a text message calling journalist Samantha Maiden a “mad f—ing witch” to Maiden herself, rather than his intended recipient, fellow MP Jamie Briggs.

After the subsequent media furore, a Facebook community called “Mad F—ing Witches” has attracted thousands of likes. On Twitter, women have been posting photographs with the hashtag #putyourbroomout.

Deputy Nationals Leader Barnaby Joyce has expressed concern that politics might become too “sterile” if MP comments are subject to such intense scrutiny. He argues that this kind of language is part of the political landscape:

If I got upset about every time I have been abused on Twitter or in the newspaper or in text messages, I would be a case for an asylum.

But Dutton’s text trades on enduring stereotypes about women’s mental instability and irrationality. It is embedded in the history of labelling women who pose any perceived threat to men’s power as unhinged or evil.

Hysterical history

Being “crazy” is an insult that can be levelled at men or women, yet there are distinct cultural attempts to categorise “madness” as a uniquely feminine trait.
Women are frequently described as “hysterical” when engaging in passionate debate or responding to a distressing situation. The word is used far less often for men and there is good reason for that imbalance. The term “hysteria” derives from the word “hystera”, relating to the uterus, or “belonging to the womb”.

For several thousand years, the very condition of having a womb and giving birth to children or, conversely, failing to bear children or have sex, were thought to cause a disease unique to women. An entirely imagined disorder lead to women being institutionalised, treated with hysterectomies, or, as Rachel P. Maines details, subject to “pelvic massage” by a doctor until they experienced orgasm.

When women are flippantly labelled as “mad”, it is not a gender neutral sleight. The very state of being a woman has been long associated with mental illness. Similarly, women are also more commonly linked with supernatural evil. As June Leishman and Catherine DiDomenico propose, groups who hold a weak position in society are “simultaneously feared”. Cultures that socially disempower women are more likely to fear them as “evil” and accuse them “of employing witchcraft”.

During the Salem witchcraft trials and witch hunts that took place over centuries in Early Modern Europe, women were burned, hanged, and drowned on suspicion of their ability to cause illness or death through magic. These murders show the baseless fear of women wielding power that transcended that of the men who controlled the societies in which they lived.

**Bewitching women**

Throughout Western history, women have typically been denied the right to own property, become literate or educated, pursue careers, participate in politics, or make decisions independently of their husbands. Within this context of men’s control over women, the one limited power that women possessed was their ability to be sexually attractive to men. It is therefore no surprise that beauty is linked with witchcraft in language.

A number of terms that relate to women’s ability to appear desirable have magical connotations. Most obviously, a woman can be “bewitching” in her power to lure men. In addition, the word “glamour”, which we associate with stylish women, originally referred to the occult and a spell that made the viewer see an object or person differently to its actual appearance.

Cultural stereotypes of witches as old, ugly, and childless situate the witch as the antithesis of everything a desirable woman should be. Nevertheless Diana Purkiss has shown that the Early Modern witch was not only a patriarchal creation. She explains that women, in some ways like those who are now embracing the “Mad F—king Witches” title,

> invested heavily in the figure as a fantasy which allowed them to express and manage otherwise unspeakable fears and desires.
Similar to how the gay and lesbian community has “reclaimed” the once pejorative term “queer”, women in this case have begun to show how they can also take back the word “witch” and transform the qualities it connotes into positive traits.

Samantha Maiden found the humour in the insult, adding “Totally mad witch” to her Twitter biography, and temporarily changing her profile page to include an image from the 1960s TV series Bewitched.
Other women have also sent up Dutton’s text, sharing photos of household brooms on their doorsteps as well as images of witches in popular culture. It even won international attention, with a tweet from the account of American TV superhero Jessica Jones.

While Maiden and others have embraced the term “mad witch”, there’s little doubt that it was intended as an insult.

Labelling a woman a “mad witch” brings with it unmistakable discomfort and hatred. It is a name that was applied to former Prime Minister Julia Gillard on the infamous “Ditch the witch” placard, providing a clear instance of how the word continues to be evoked for strong women who do not embrace traditional feminine roles in the home.

Dutton’s errant text is a further example of how antiquated beliefs about women are embedded in our language.