Certaine Wytches
fear, myth & magic  23 March – 6 May 2019

What is a witch? An outdated definition would be a witch is someone who causes harm to others by magical means, with a similarly outdated definition of witchcraft as a generic term for evil magic and sorcery.

It is difficult to come up with an all-purpose contemporary definition as, in common with spiritual or religious belief systems, it depends on who is doing the defining. In a modern context, witchcraft could be described as ‘practice involving magic and affinity with nature usually within a pagan tradition’.

Witchcraft definitions also differ according to location so any definition will be, partly, a generalisation; ‘Witchcraft often occupies a religious, divinatory or medicinal role, and is often present within societies and groups whose cultural framework includes a magical world view’.1

Witches and witchcraft resist definition by their magical nature and their many representations in art, history and religion. Often described as ugly, old and female, the classic hag or crone of fairy stories can be transformed into someone who is young, beautiful

1 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Witchcraft
and good, more of a fairy godmother than a malign troublemaker, but a witch nonetheless.

It doesn’t take an enormous leap of the imagination to perceive witchcraft and magic as a metaphor for that which we don’t understand and can’t control. Since the dawn of time, uncontrollable events like bad weather, famine and illness have been blamed on malign spirits and, in order to regain control or some sort of power over catastrophes, a scapegoat is required. Ancient Egypt and Babylonia had laws against malevolent sorcery, the Romans were enthusiastic witch-hunters at times, and sorcery, along with divination, spells, soothsaying and consulting ghosts or spirits, is explicitly condemned in the Hebrew Bible\(^2\). In the Early Middle Ages, Christianity took a softer approach and actively discouraged fanaticism but by the fifteenth century there were changes in Christian doctrine which included recognition of the existence of witchcraft. It was deemed to be a form of satanic influence and reclassified as heresy.

Curiously, until the late 15\(^\text{th}\) century, witchcraft had mostly been something that uneducated rural populations believed in while the better off and better educated did not. Then came a fairly radical shift possibly caused by the rising interest in Renaissance occultism among the educated classes of Europe, combined with

\(^2\) Deuteronomy 18:10 - 12
the doctrinal changes in the Church, which, together, gave ground to the theological belief that Satan was the source of all maleficium³

In 1486 a Dominican inquisitor, Heinrich Kramer, published *Malleus Maleficarum*, which translates as ‘Hammer of the Witches’, and expounds the idea that ‘demons must be condemned not just in print, but in the courts via their flesh-and-blood representatives: the witches.’⁴ Malcolm Gaskill⁵, an authority in the history of witchcraft, describes Kramer as a superstitious psychopath (although Gaskill does concede that this is not a very scholarly term). Unfortunately, the *Malleus*, although banned in its own time, was subsequently reprinted many times, feeding the idea that it was acceptable and necessary to hound witches, who were most likely to be female, to their deaths and that there was no need to worry about correct legal procedure. Kramer was of the opinion that witches offered unbaptized babies to the Devil, were not Catholics, and did extremely bad things with incubus and succubus demons.

³ An act of sorcery or witchcraft performed with the intention of causing damage, injury or death
⁴ Witchcraft, A Very Short Introduction, Malcolm Gaskill, 2010
⁵ Malcolm Gaskill, Associate Curator of the recent exhibition *Spellbound at the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford*
The sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in Britain were turbulent in the extreme; religious upheaval and persecution, full-blown civil war, plague and the recurrent crop failures that accompanied the so-called ‘little ice-age’ must count as one of the most difficult periods to survive. Perhaps turbulence, uncertainty and all-round hard times contributed to the almost universal belief in malevolent witchcraft which resulted in the Witchcraft Acts of 1542 and 1562 and, for Scotland, 1563. In 1604 a further act was passed which broadened the scope of existing legislation, allowing individuals such as the self-styled Witch Finder General, Matthew Hopkins, free rein for persecution.

Estimates of the number of executions for witchcraft in Europe vary greatly, some say 50,000 while others put it as high as 1,000,000. In Britain and Germany it was mainly women who were dispatched but Northern Europe and Russia accused more men than women and even children were not exempt.

And here we get to a significant, and very local, event. The last women hanged for witchcraft in England met their end in Exeter. Temperance Lloyd, Susannah Edwards and Mary Trembles, all from Bideford, were hanged at Heavitree on 25 August, 1682 after a trial at Exeter Castle. They were accused of making some of their neighbours ill and were brought to Exeter assizes ‘with as much noise and fury of the rabble against them as could be shewed on any occasion. The stories of their acts were in
everyone’s mouth, and they were not content to belie them in the country, but even in the city where they were to be tried miracles were fathered upon them, as that the judges’ coach was fixed on the castle bridge, and the like. All which the country believed, and accordingly persecuted the wretched old creatures. A less zeal in a city or kingdom hath been the overture of defection and revolution, and if these women had been acquitted, it was thought the country people would have committed some disorder.”

In fact the women were condemned not because the judges really believed they were guilty but because the judges were afraid that an acquittal would lead to an outbreak of civil disobedience.

Alice Molland, the fourth name on the plaque, was not hanged at the same time and very little is known about her but it is likely she died in prison, condemned, like the other three, for witchcraft.

The Devon Witches now have a permanent memorial, sited in Rougement Gardens in the centre of Exeter. The memorial plaque came into being through the efforts of six women, all knowledgeable in the field of women’s history and the history of witchcraft, who read *The Trial of the Bideford Witches* and decided that the event should be commemorated in a proper way: ‘We felt that such a sad instance of intolerance and

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6 An account of the trial written at the time by Roger North, the brother of Sir Francis North, one of the judges appointed to try the three women
7 Judith Noble, Emma Chopping, Andrea Sheller, Lynda Dobson, Clare Randall & Judy Molland
8 *The Trial of the Bideford Witches*, Frank J Gent, definitive account of the story, p.1982
persecution still has lessons for us today.”⁹ The Inscription at the foot of the plaque reads,

**In the hope of an end to persecution and intolerance**

When Anne Jackson came upon the memorial, and then the story of the Devon witches, this became her starting point for the entire body of work, The Witchcraft Series.

Anne Jackson is an artist who is knowledgeable in the areas of women’s history, medieval history and witchcraft. Her interest in the history of witchcraft began when an Exeter University professor showed her some woodcut images of witch trials. These days Anne chooses to work in a medium which differs from the academic written word; as Lesley Millar¹⁰ writes in the introduction to *Witch Hexe Sorciére*, Anne’s ‘research is materialised rather than written, her hands translating the evidence, the work bearing witness to, and celebrating, a shadowy history.’

There is more than one way to hunt a witch and, as Anne puts it, she works, ‘with scraps of folklore, mythology and, often, legal documentation reflecting the history of witch-persecution, in England and across Europe.’

Anne describes the process of translating an idea into a tapestry, or part of a tapestry:

*I come across a ‘voice’ from a historic witch-trial account. A defendant, a victim, a prosecutor, an observer. This becomes a strand which I can weave into a story, my own imagined,*

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¹⁰ Professor Lesley Millar, Director, International Textile Research Centre, University for the Creative Arts
mediated and revised account of what happened in a particular situation, filtered through my own prejudices, experiences and desire for self-expression. Having originally studied medieval history, I am always aware that we have almost no evidence of what ‘really’ happened in any series of events; only a variety of accounts generated from different points of view, with varying agendas. So this, my work, is my point of view, solidified through this improbable practice.’

Anne has been making tapestries for a long time and her making process is varied. It begins with an idea, as described above, and then images, collaged text from original stories and Anne’s own drawings become the base for the tapestry. She makes torn and irregular pieces of painted paper, using simple lines and odd shapes which add an element of unease. When the design is done, the whole is mapped out as a ‘cartoon’ – a technical term for a tapestry layout – which is attached to a board with pins. The knotting process is hugely time consuming but, in common with all repetitive making processes, it allows the mind freedom to rove, to settle as well as fly, as the work takes shape. Anne uses a hybrid technique, part knotting, part Gobelin tapestry, and her
yarns include cotton, linen, synthetic and sometimes silk, with up to nine blended strands in a hank.

In *Tempestarii: Storm-raisers*, Anne refers to knot-magic, a practice with many applications but once commonly used by sailors and witches, to bind, or raise, a wind. Three knots were generally the rule; the first, untied, would release a gentle wind, the second a strong wind and the third would release a hurricane. Who better to practice knot-magic than a maker of tapestries? In the imagery of *Certaine Wytches*, the two hangman’s nooses with their huge knots, are given centre-stage prominence illustrating most graphically that, in part, Anne’s work is homage to those who were sent to their deaths, condemned as witches. Anne gives us the stories, and often the names, of these women showing us all that we are fortunate to live in a society where such an inhuman practice has been consigned to history but the injustice and persecution has not, and should never be, forgotten.

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**Further Events associated with this exhibition:**

**Make a Witch’s Broomstick** with Andy Bailey
A drop-in workshop for children
Tuesday 9 April – 10.30, 11.15, 12 noon & 13.30, 14.15, 15.00 & 15.45. 5 makers per session Free - Please book your place by calling 01626832223

**Exploring the Vertues (and Vices) of Herbes,**
Saturday 13 April – 10.30am, 11.30am & 1pm
Free – not suitable for children
Wytches Conference – Persecution and Possibility
A day of artistic and academic discussion – Wednesday 24 April, 10am – 5pm, £35, Reed Hall, University of Exeter, for a full conference summary, booking and costs, please call 01626 832223 or see our website www.crafts.org.uk

A Way In
Sunday 28 April, 10.30am – 4pm
A workshop to extend your creative edges; devised and facilitated by printmaker, artist and teacher, Jess Davies, £50 including lunch and sketchbooks

Witch
Thursday 2 May, 7-9pm
Thought provoking dramatization by A Circle of Spears Productions
Suitable for adults and 11+ - £10/£8 concessions/£5 under 18s

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We encourage visits from schools, colleges and community groups. Let us know in advance and we can arrange an introductory talk & tour of a particular exhibition.