

Reviews in History

Published on *Reviews in History* (<http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews>)

The Witch in History: Early Modern and Twentieth-Century Representations.

Review Number:

16

Publish date:

Sunday, 1 December, 1996

Author:

Diane Purkiss

ISBN:

9780415087612

Date of Publication:

1996

Price:

£70.00

Pages:

304pp.

Publisher:

Routledge

Publisher url:

<http://www.routledge.com/books/The-Witch-in-History-isbn9780415087612>

Place of Publication:

London

Reviewer:

Ronald Hutton

The dust-jacket of this book defines Diane Purkiss as a Lecturer in English; within its pages she prefers to describe herself as a feminist literary critic. It is a potent combination, and has resulted in a thoroughly individual and very important book. Its preoccupation is with the manner in which images of English witches have been formed and manipulated during two distinct periods of history, that of Elizabeth and the early Stuarts, and the late twentieth century. In tackling the job, the first half of Dr Purkiss's identity has given her an instinctual love of texts and of language, reflected in her own exuberant and often very funny use of words. The other half has reinforced both an attachment to current critical fashions and ideologies and a style which might be politely described as pugnacious, although I suspect that she herself might prefer the expression 'feisty'. A reader is given little option other than to applaud or to fight back; this one, perhaps unsurprisingly, is going to do both.

The book opens with a firework display of destructive polemic, in three bursts. The first attacks radical feminist views of early modern witchcraft, the second the views taken by modern witches, and the third the treatment of the subject by English historians. Of these the first is the most effective, because the target is

most compact and Dr Purkiss is writing with real understanding of the issues. She is not primarily concerned to demonstrate, as other academics have done before, that the radical feminist notion of the Witch Hunt is wildly unhistorical, but to show how and why it evolved and to argue against its message in feminist terms.

The result is devastating, and the more so because of Dr Purkiss's genius for aphorism. The myth of 'The Burning Times' is shown to have evolved as part of the feminist concern with domestic and sexual violence during the 1970s. It is damned for reducing the victims of the Hunt to suffering bodies, never allowed to speak for themselves, for destroying the historical specificity of both the Hunt and the Nazi Holocaust with which the myth associates it, and for portraying women as merely the helpless victims of patriarchy. The writers with whom she takes issue are the major figures of the genre- Mary Daly, Andrea Dworkin, and Starhawk- and although the first two have hardly been immune from feminist criticism since the 1980s, their stature in itself enhances the importance of the intellectual demolition carried out in these pages. My only reservation concerning it is a difference of emphasis, that she tends to view the feminist community in its own terms, as a seamlessly international one, whereas I am more inclined to perceive the myth of The Burning Times as a specifically American discourse, rooted in the culture of the modern United States. This does nothing, however, to vitiate her comments.

The treatment of modern pagan witchcraft, by contrast, suffers from the fundamental weakness that Diane Purkiss does not understand the phenomenon with which she is finding fault. She constructs an image of it which it is itself a myth, a mashing together of three different genuine entities. One is American feminist witchcraft, based upon the idea that the witch figure and its divine complement, the Goddess, can be evoked by any woman bent upon personal liberation. The second is Wicca, a mystery religion developed in England and based upon a rigorous process of training and initiation and a cosmos polarized between equal female and male forces. The third is hedge witchcraft, the modern version of cunning folk, featured here in its commercialized form of individual practitioners offering occult services for money. The sources from which she creates this confusion are a themselves a medley, of influential writers (like Starhawk), authors who have had no impact in Britain (such as Elisabeth Brooke), advertisements, and conversations with individual witches who are quite rightly kept anonymous but who are also left completely unlocated within the complex society of present-day witchcraft. All this material is vaguely considered to be normative.

The problems with the result include straightforward errors; Sir James Frazer was an opponent, not a proponent, of the idea of ancient matriarchy, and relatively few modern witches worship a Mother Goddess. Gerald Gardner, the publicist (and perhaps creator) of Wicca, did not fail to acknowledge the contributions of his pupil Doreen Valiente because of gender bias, but for the simple reason that not until after his death did Valiente wish her identity as a witch to be known; the distortion of the facts here itself suggests a hint of such bias. When these misunderstandings are cleared away, Dr Purkiss proves to be most effective once again on her home ground, when revealing the woolliness, nostalgia, and impracticality of the thought of American feminist witches and the supercharging of the same qualities by crass commercialism. The creation myth of Wicca is efficiently knocked to pieces; but then it has been disintegrating amongst Wiccans themselves ever since the 1970s. The joie de vivre of the chapter makes it another marvellous read, and this reader only wishes that it had been based upon better information.

The section upon academic treatment of the Hunt suffers from a similar lack of instinctive understanding, combined with sheer bad luck. As Dr Purkiss notes, professional study of witch trials has apparently languished in English universities since the celebrated socio-economic analyses of Keith Thomas and Alan Macfarlane in the early 1970s. What she apparently did not realise at the time of writing was that this is largely because for about ten years historians have been awaiting the completion of major research projects in different areas of the field, by Robin Briggs, James Sharpe, and Stuart Clark. Since she completed her book, two of these have reached publication and the third has been submitted. All have in common a rejection of the functionalism of their predecessors, an emphasis on the need to reconstruct holistically the mental world of the participants in the trials, and a perception of the enhanced importance of folklore studies and psychology in the interpretation of the Hunt. These are exactly the approaches taken by Diane Purkiss herself. Such a pattern demonstrates vividly how much scholars work within common intellectual atmospheres at given moments, while weakening Dr Purkiss's claim that her feminism provides her with a

dramatically different perspective.

This said, to some extent the claim stands up. She is novel and convincing in her demonstration that the sceptical writers upon witchcraft in the early modern period were if anything even more misogynist than the demonologists. There is truth and justice in her assault upon the neglect by most English historians of recent theorisations of childbirth, maternity and the body by feminist writers. The obvious defence against the latter, however, is that the writers concerned are locked in an ongoing debate, and that scholars not expert in the issues at stake would like to see it resolved before they employ the latest contributions to it as worthwhile theoretical constructions; the formulations favoured by Dr Purkiss, notably those of Helene Cixous, have themselves since been challenged as misleading by other feminists.

Likewise, she is accurate in her criticisms of the sceptical and rationalist discourse which has prevailed among historians of the Witch Hunt ever since the Enlightenment. What she seems not to appreciate is the context of that discourse, at least until the mid-twentieth century; that it was the product not of a smug cultural hegemony but of liberals terrified of the potential for irrational violence in human society. It was certainly blinkered and sexist, but it was applied to a specific purpose, of hammering home the folly and pointlessness of the Witch Hunt until there was absolutely no danger that it could break out again. We certainly need to move beyond it now- and for thirty years scholars have been doing so- but it should be granted some virtues in its time.

A similar blindness to context weakens the force of Dr Purkiss's comments upon Margaret Murray's characterization of the Witch Hunt as the destruction of a surviving pagan religion. She accuses the historians who attacked it in the 1970s of savaging a soft target with motivations of gender prejudice, with the assertion that the faults of the Murray thesis had been agreed upon by experts ever since it was first aired in 1921. What she plainly does not realise is that Margaret Murray's books only became best-sellers during the 1950s and 1960s. During that time they not only made a huge impact upon the general public and a host of popular writers, but their main argument was repeated by leading historians such as Christopher Hill, Sir Stephen Runciman, and Sir George Clark, as well as archaeologists, folklorists and pioneers of oral history. The intensity of the attack in the '70s derived from the realisation that fifty years of criticism within the small body of experts upon the subject had apparently been unavailing, and that the Murray thesis had to be stopped once and for all.

After all this sustained finding of fault with others, the natural reaction of a reviewer is to feel that whatever Diane Purkiss now has to say upon her own account, it had better be damned good. The delightful discovery which follows is that it actually is so. First, she uses trial records to reconstruct the experience of encounters with a presumed witch from the point of view of successive female witnesses. The result is to draw us, convincingly, into a symbolic world in which the witch-figure operates as antihousewife, antimother, and antimidwife, a screen onto which are projected a set of specifically female fears and worries. Then she links beliefs about witches and their familiars to prevailing theories concerning the nature of the human body, and of the female body in particular. At a time when medical opinion had long held that bodies flowed with substances which threatened to get out of hand, a woman was seen as especially leaky and permeable, and a witch as effectively boundless and so dangerously intrusive. This insight is illustrated repeatedly from popular sayings and customs. An especially effective case-study takes its starting point from the contemporary medical belief that a mother's milk was the blood which had nourished the foetus, and which after birth was purified through the heart before being pumped into the breasts. Within this system of thought, the suckling of the animal familiar with blood, generally from a teat concealed in the groin, was the use of a polluted organ in a polluted place, a nurturing with poison of an entity created to do evil.

The final part of this central section is devoted to considering the defences provided by accused witches, and displaying the range of very different strategies which they adopted. Some actively sought an identity as users of good magic, others created counter-tales about themselves using materials provided by the accusers, and yet others created their own materials. Virtually all struggled hard to reassert control over the meaning of their lives. Looking at the mass of information which Dr Purkiss has assembled to illustrate this point, one of the most striking aspects of it is that it is derived from accounts of trials in which the defendant was found

guilty; her analysis of it helps us to understand what must have gone on in the (naturally much more sketchily recorded) majority of witchcraft cases, in which the defence was successful

In this fashion, Diane Purkiss provides a set of genuinely new and valuable perceptions of the subject, accessible to her as a feminist writer. She proceeds in the final third of the book to pull off the same trick, but this time with a heavier emphasis upon her skill as a textual critic, by analysing the representations of witches in Elizabethan and early Stuart drama. The present reviewer was quite prepared to be overawed by her sparkling reinterpretation of the famous set of canonical texts, although it must be admitted that here she is most firmly upon her home ground and he is furthest from his own. A historian's range is, however, quite wide enough to assess the worth of her comments upon the relationship of the stage with wider culture, and these again seem to be both accurate and important.

More than anybody before, she brings home not merely the diversity of early modern opinion concerning witches, but the sheer variety of channels through which it could be mediated- parents, neighbours, sermons, ballads, pamphlets, learned literature, and plays. She is also a pioneer in the way in which she emphasises how complex that relationship between drama and the complex matrix of wider culture actually was. The stage was very far from being a mirror for society; rather, it was a world with a dynamic of its own and an equivalent variety of ideas. For one thing, trials of witches (at least in the Home Counties) and plays about witches did not follow the same trajectory; the former had passed their peak and were in decline when the latter were most fashionable. For another, stage representations did not depend upon stories from trials, or the beliefs in which they were rooted. Not only did they draw upon alternative sources, notably the classics and the handy trove of material made by the sceptic Reginald Scot, but produced witch-figures far more flamboyant, more theatrical, and more essentially ridiculous; and in the process may actually have helped to foster scepticism about witchcraft in metropolitan (and thus national) culture.

Not even a review with as generous a word-limit as this can do real justice to the mass of insights, suggestions, and provocations provided by so rich and combative a work. In its author's eyes, it appears to function mainly as a battering- ram, driven first against the errors of contemporary feminist mythology and then against those of a male-centred academic historiography which is itself based in patriarchal culture. It is to congratulate rather than to diminish her that this reviewer sees it more as an important and unanticipated addition to a set of innovative new publications by English scholars upon early modern beliefs and trials concerning witchcraft; not so much a stone hurled into a stagnant pond, as part of a wave of exciting research, in a subject which seems finally to be coming of age.

Other reviews:

King's College

http://departments.kings.edu/womens_history/oldpgs/wrevpurkiss.html [2]

Source URL: <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/16>

Links:

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/204>

[2] http://departments.kings.edu/womens_history/oldpgs/wrevpurkiss.html