

Hallowe'en: An Examination of Witchcraft

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“There were eight watchers by the beacon on Pendle Hill...” Those are the opening words of a novel that was a great favourite of mine in my youth when I lived in Lancashire. Pendle Hill is in Lancashire, of course, and the book is Harrison Ainsworth’s classic of quasi-historical melodrama, ‘The Lancashire Witches’, first published in 1848.

The novel is based on events that took place in 1612 and 1613 and ended with the conviction, on charges of witchcraft, of eight women and one man from the Forest of Pendle, an area north of Burnley in the shadow of Pendle Hill. Another suspect, an old woman, died in the dungeons of Lancaster Castle awaiting trial. The nine Pendle ‘witches’ were all hanged – the usual method of execution for those convicted of witchcraft in England.

Perhaps significantly, in the light of something I shall say later, a child – a young girl – had originally been among the accused, but she was acquitted after giving evidence against the others. Twenty years later, though, she was accused again, and that time she was tried, convicted, and executed. It was an ignorant, pre-scientific age, fanned also by religious fanaticism. The Pendle ‘witches’ were accused of murdering no less than seventeen people by means of the ‘dark arts’. They were also accused of holding so-called witches’ sabbaths on the wild summit of Pendle Hill.

Shakespeare’s famous depiction of the three witches – the “weird sisters” – in ‘Macbeth’ had been written only a few years previously, in 1606. We may smile and their incantations:

*Round about the cauldron go;
In the poison’d entrails throw...*

*Double, double toil and trouble;
Fire, burn; and cauldron bubble...*

(Act IV, Scene 1)

but it was all deadly serious at the time. Audiences in the early 17th century would have believed in the reality of such things.

For Harrison Ainsworth and his readers two-hundred and fifty years later, when belief in witchcraft had been totally discredited in Britain, the story of the Pendle witches made for a great story, and nothing more. But the actual events, back in the 17th century, were testament to the cruelty and barbarism to which superstition can give rise.

But did any of the so-called ‘witches’ really believe that they could harm or heal others with their charms and potions? Maybe there were some that did, but could they? Maybe: when it came to herb-lore, which included poisons as well as medicines. And I suppose that someone who believed themselves to be bewitched might, by the power of fear and auto-suggestion, feel some ill-effects. But magic – black or white? I think we can safely say that there is no such thing, and never was. And that’s why witchcraft trials were abandoned during the course of the 17th and 18th centuries, even if popular superstition lasted a bit longer. A woman was ‘swum’ as a witch here in Suffolk, at Eye, as late as 1795.

So, we can enjoy a good yarn like Harrison Ainsworth’s, ‘Lancashire Witches’, because it is fiction, only loosely based on events and people all now safely in the past. But even so, something of the horror comes through when he writes about the, “thirteen wretched beings”, in the dungeons of Lancaster Castle awaiting, “execution on the morrow.” There weren’t actually thirteen Pendle ‘witches’, but Ainsworth may have wanted there to be a ‘coven’. He wasn’t one to let the facts get in the way of a good story! Nevertheless, the reality was grim enough.

The memory of the Lancashire witches remains strong in Pendle Forest to this day – they make for good business, after all! I well remember driving up there one Hallowe’en and meeting mounted ‘witches’ on the roads – mounted on horses, that is! People still climb Pendle Hill on Hallowe’en, where a great fire is lit and a good time is had by all. There are rather more than, “...eight watchers by the beacon on Pendle Hill,” these days!

The real Lancashire ‘witches’ were a pitiful group: infirm, half-blind old women; a half-witted youth; the innocent victims, in all likelihood, of fear, prejudice, and malicious gossip.

Evidence was, necessarily, in short supply, even by the standards of witchcraft trials, and some of those accused were actually acquitted.

So how could it all happen? Belief in witches and witchcraft is very ancient and near-universal in pre-scientific cultures. We find it in the Bible, so it was still very much a part of Church teaching in the early 17th century, even if some more humane and enlightened people were already questioning it. According to I Samuel 28, King Saul consulted a witch when threatened by a Philistine host, telling his servants: “Seek me a woman that hath a familiar spirit.” This was despite the fact that he had himself outlawed witchcraft! When Saul meets the woman - the “witch of Endor” - she raises a spirit “out of the earth” at his request. It turns out to be that of the dead Samuel, who is none too pleased at being disturbed.

What we see here is something very much associated with the beliefs surrounding Hallowe'en and its pre-Christian predecessors, like the Celtic Samhain. And that is the thinning of the veil between the living and the dead. In asking the ‘witch of Endor’ to raise the spirit of Samuel, Saul was violating the Mosaic Law. This not only forbade such divination, it also prescribed harsh penalties for anyone who practiced it. We find this in biblical texts that still held sway in early 17th-century England. In Deuteronomy we read:

There shall not be found among you...an enchanter, or a witch...or a consulter with familiar spirits, or a wizard, or a necromancer. (Deuteronomy 18: 10)

And most notorious of all are the words in Exodus (22: 18):

Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live.

That’s how they appear in the Authorised, or ‘King James’, Version of the Bible, which was brand new when the Pendle witches were brought to trial and executed. And those words weighed heavily at the time. King James I was a firm believer in the existence of witches and witchcraft (as Shakespeare must have known!), and had written a book on the subject called, ‘Demonology’. A number of Old Testament ‘villains’, like Queen Jezebel and King Manasseh, are said to have practised witchcraft. In the New Testament, the apostle Philip converts a man called Simon who, as the ‘King James’ Bible puts it: “...beforetimes...used

sorcery and bewitched the people of Samaria.” (Acts 8: 9). Even the “wise men” in Matthew’s Nativity account could just as easily have been called ‘sorcerers’ or ‘wizards’, which may explain why Christian tradition turned them into ‘kings’!

Does any of this mean anything now? Dressing up as witches on Hallowe’en is meaningless and harmless. And maybe the same can be said for those who believe – mistakenly, in my view – that witchcraft was (and is) the survival of some benign ‘old religion’ that amounted to nothing more than sanitised nature-worship. But that the whole nexus of beliefs surrounding witchcraft was, and is, not always so benign is suggested by that verse from Deuteronomy:

There shall not be found among you anyone that maketh his son or daughter pass through the fire. (Deuteronomy 18: 10)

What this is talking about is human sacrifice and, in particular, the sacrifice of children, to appease or get the help of the ‘spirits’. One of the ingredients in the witches’ brew in ‘Macbeth’ is especially chilling: “Finger of birth-strangled babe...” And although we now reject the notion that there are real witches with real magical powers, we surely endorse the rejection of human sacrifice as an unspeakable crime against God and humanity.

“Well,” you may be thinking, “of course we do! But surely that’s all in the remote past, and if it did ever happen in this country, it doesn’t any more!” Don’t be too sure!

In many parts of the world, where the influence of the Enlightenment has yet to penetrate the darkness of ignorance and superstition, witchcraft – or, rather, belief in it – is alive and well. And it seems to bear down particularly hard on children. Children are accused of witchcraft and murdered as a result. They are subjected to violent ‘exorcisms’ that may kill them or, at least, leave them traumatised and scarred – both physically and mentally. And children are used in supposedly magical ceremonies that involve rape and the use of their blood and body parts – in short, their murder.

There is strong evidence that, along with other superstitious practices, ritual murder – especially child sacrifice for the purposes of supposed ‘magic’ and malign, unreconstructed

witchcraft - is being imported here. The beliefs surrounding such 'witchcraft' and the activities of so-called 'witch-doctors' are as false as they ever were, but their capacity to cause harm, to promote real – rather than 'supernatural' – evil, remains potent.

What rid this country of belief in witchcraft was the advance of rational and scientific thought, and the realisation that religion had to accommodate it. Thus Christianity in a renewed and liberal form could take forward the gospel message of love and compassion but leave behind the superstitions of the past. Regrettably, in recent years, we have seen a weakening of confidence in rationalism and in liberal Christianity, and a revival of superstition and mumbo-jumbo. This sometimes hides behind our reluctance to examine critically the more questionable beliefs and practices of other cultures.

I can enjoy Harrison Ainsworth's novel – as I can those of J. K. Rowling! – because they are quite clearly fiction and fantasy. But real harm can be done by those who believe in the reality of witchcraft. We should be on our guard against such dangerous nonsense. We belong in the tradition of liberal, humane, and rational religion – and we shouldn't forget it!

Based on a sermon preached at Ipswich Unitarian Meeting House on 30th October 2011.