

SPEAKING WITH SHADOWS

Transcript of Bonus Episode: Tracing the Origins of Witchcraft Beliefs

Josie: Hello! You've found a little bonus episode from our series Speaking with Shadows.

In our main programme we look at the stories that history forgot. I'm Josie Long and today you can hear a little more from our interview with Professor Diane Purkiss. In the main episode, we visited Pevensey Castle and learned about women, power and witchcraft in the Middle Ages. Here, Diane explains more about how the fiction of witchcraft crossed over into belief.

Oh and just a quick heads up – if you've got any younger listeners around, this episode gets a bit racy.

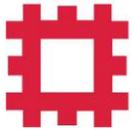
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Diane: Most people have a very clear sense of what they think a witch is, that derives mostly from places like children's literature and fantasy literature. In a way, that's a problem for historians because those ideas are very far removed from the reality of popular witch beliefs. So what you end up getting, and it's kind of reasonable, is this sort of constant process of crossing over from fantasy fiction into actual beliefs about real people.

The idea of the witch comes really from Roman pagan legislation where there's quite a hefty body of anxious legislation about a figure called the 'Strix', who's an evil sorceress, basically. So that Roman law, obviously, then influences European law codes. So there's never really a time when there isn't anti-sorcery legislation on the statute book if people want to draw on it. But on the whole they don't in the early Middle Ages. Instead, early Christians right up to the 11th or 12th century actually treat witchcraft as a giant joke. They're really sceptical about it. They're even rude about it and about people who believe in it, and they're sort of gently sceptical at times. So we have confession manuals where the confessor will be advised: 'Sometimes women will come to you and they'll say they've flown through the night and had sex with demonic powers – just tell them that it didn't happen and to calm down.'

When does all this change and why, you ask?

Really important theory: first one is the rise of scholasticism as a way of thinking. Scholasticism is an attempt to arrive at a really complicated empirical theory about everything, which is completely coherent, and covers every aspect of the universe. It's also developed, though, as a way of defeating heresy. So a lot of institutions, notably the universities, get created and essentially the Church runs out of heretics – there aren't any any more. They come across groups of people who genuinely believe themselves to have had out-of-body experiences involving a supernatural entity who's typically female.



What also happens is further attention in penitentials to monks having wet dreams. Accounts are then extracted from monks about exactly what the wet dream involved and of course, typically, it involves a dominant female figure – so being sat on. So the monks say, ‘Well a woman came and sat on me and bounced up and down!’ and because they’re the scholastics they come up with this elaborate narrative, whereby the monks are being accompanied to their dormitories by demons, disguised as monks, and they decide that the demons must be there to harvest the monks’ seed.

Now, this is also what they think women are doing. They actually think that women are sexually insatiable because their cold and moist natures mean that they constantly try to perfect themselves by acquiring as much male seed as they possibly can. And then they make the connection with these women who think they fly through the night with the aid of this supernatural being. Lo and behold, you have a pretty clear picture of the Witches’ Sabbath from those two ideas brought together. As soon as those ideas are brought together, the whole business of the legal and ecclesiastical prosecution of sorcery and witchcraft changes to being about that narrative.

The early to mid-14th century is the key moment when these ideas start coming together, and that’s an important date in another respect because it’s the moment when the Little Ice Age hits Europe. And that creates a climate crisis. Nobody can even sow their crops properly, let alone harvest them. So you’ve then got widespread starvation and that has a massive impact on the social networks of the period which probably has psychological effects, but which also makes them feel alienated from their community. Obviously, a good explanation for why my crops failed, and why my cow is doing poorly, and why my sheep have foot rot, is suddenly that there are witches in my village. And that’s obviously, in a way, a much more desirable set of beliefs than that it’s something I can’t contend with at all, like massive climate change. Much better to think that somehow it’s something I can fix by accusing Mother whoever it is, or by setting up witch marks around my house, or by performing counter magic and forcing her to come down my chimney and fall into my cooking pot.

We have to imagine a body that can, sort of, like, literally come in through your air conditioning vent or through a very narrow window – a body that can morph into a wide range of shapes. And that kind of goes with the inheritance threat that Joan of Navarre posed, but it also goes – and Joan is interesting in this respect – with this other, sort of massive, preoccupation of the period, which is poison. She’s actually accused of poison by witchcraft and of using necromancers to poison by witchcraft. It means you can kill without necessarily having to be there. And this kind of case, therefore, just keeps going right into the reign of Elizabeth I.

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Josie: Thanks for listening to this bonus episode of Speaking with Shadows. If you subscribe on your podcast app you’ll get the next one automatically. I’m Josie Long, and you can find out more about this, and other amazing stories, at english-heritage.org.uk/speakingwithshadows.