Witch Panic: The Hunted [C1]

Accusate di stregoneria, molte donne sono state sottoposte a torture e a continue persecuzioni concluse con condanne ingiustificate. Speak Up ha intervistato Ben Paites, Curatore delle Collezioni del Museo di Colchester, che qualche mese fa ha organizzato l'esposizione "Wicked Spirits" per far luce sulle persone che hanno perso la vita a causa delle leggi contro la stregoneria.

Perhaps because they left their mark in print, so much more is known about the witch-hunters of 16th- and 17th-century England and Scotland, than about the women (and some men) who were their victims. The exhibition Wicked Spirits at Colchester Castle in the southeastern English county of Essex seeks **to redress** this balance. Colchester Castle was a key **landmark** in the Essex witch trials when hundreds of people suspected of witchcraft were imprisoned there. To find out more, Speak Up contacted Ben Paites, Collections and Learning Curator at Colchester Museums. As Paites explained, the exhibition starts with a book: the Malleus Maleficarum. **Ben Paites (English accent):** The exhibition takes you from the book, it starts with the book, all the way through to the different **acts**, and looks at different case studies of actual real people who lost their lives as a result of

these laws. And that was another big focus for us, in that often you see in museums the focus was on the people doing the hunting, on Matthew Hopkins, on James I, on all those people who were accusing and trying to hunt out these suspected witches. But actually we wanted **to flip** that and look at the people who suffered and lost their lives as a result of these laws. So we have seven or eight people with case studies within the exhibition. But in Essex alone there were about 760 people who were just accused, that we know of. These are people who we've found records of accusations. So the scale is absolutely phenomenal.

TORTURE

We asked Paites if the accused **underwent** torture, like the infamous **ducking stool**, a chair to which offenders were **strapped** and then immersed in water. **Ben Paites:** The vast majority of people didn't end up getting found **guilt**y. Those unfortunates who were found **guilt**y went through that process. Ducking was a very early practice. It sort of **died out** after a while, because they realised how ridiculous a concept it was. But things like **pricking**, where they look for marks on the body and used just ordinary tools like **needles** or things (you didn't need a special took or anything) to prick those marks and see if they **bled** or not. And the idea was that if they didn't bleed or didn't feel the pain, then they were **guilt**y because the Devil was protecting them.

FALSE CONFESSIONS

Another form of torture was 'watching', a form of **sleep deprivation**, where offenders were forced **to stand up** for days with the accusers taking turns to keep an eye on them. Naturally this led to false confessions, as Ben explains. **Ben Paites:** People would admit to **guilt** when there was none. And people would **blame** **relatives**. We have a case here in Colchester, the Manningtree witches, which is Rebecca and Anne West. Rebecca West was Anne's daughter, probably about nineteen maybe early twenties. She actually gave evidence against her mother and various other people. And Rebecca ended up, as far as we know, escaping conviction, because she wasn't listed on the

names of people who were executed. But her mother and the other people were hanged, based on this evidence. So, it's absolutely terrifying.

BLAMING OTHERS

And in times of division such as this, people were more likely to point the finger of **blame** at others, as Paites explains. **Ben Paites:** Periods like this where the level of fear going around meant that people would **turn on one another**. And it's interesting that this also comes at times where there's already conflict. One of the more famous local cases — that is Matthew Hopkins — happened during the English Civil War. So you've already got conflict, you've already got people being divided on opinions about Parliament and Monarchy and things like that. And so of course people are already polarised. This is another reason why we wanted to really do this exhibition now, is that those sorts of things are starting to happen again. We do see a lot of these **patterns** happening again and people are losing their rights, people are losing their lives because of this division within society. And division just **breeds** more division.

UNEQUAL TREATMENT

By far the majority of those accused were women. There were some men, but they were considered differently. **Ben Paites:** When you look at the cases of men, a lot of the time the men were accused of **consorting** with witches rather than using magic themselves. And we have examples of men who were openly practising magic, or what they believed was magic, alchemy, astrology… all those things, and never had any repercussions. John Dee, who's a famous example at Elizabeth the I's court. John Dee, eventually, when James I came in who was much more anti-magic, he finally ended up being kind of **kicked out** of court and ended his days in poverty. But, whilst under Elizabeth I, he was perfectly able to go around, saying he used magic. And this is the interesting thing: why were some people allowed to do this, whilst others lost their lives for exactly the same thing? It's really bizarre.

THE WEIRD SISTERS

By the 16th century, the word “weird” from the Old English “wyrd”, meaning **fate**, was extinct in English — but did survive in **Scots**. It was reintroduced into modern English by Shakespeare through the Weird Sisters in Scotland-set Macbeth (1606). The sense of weird as being “abnormal” or “strange” emerged with reinterpretations of the Weird Sisters. The word “weird”, however, does not actually appear in the authoritative text of the tragedy, that of the First Folio. In that edition, the sisters are “weyward”, an Old English word meaning perverse, **willful** and **wayward** (the modern word). In Shakespeare’s time modern English **spelling** was just starting to become fixed, it has been speculated that “weird” was replaced mistakenly when the text was copied out.

Glossary

- **spelling** = ortografia
- **ducking stool** = immersione dello sgabello (tortura)
- **turn on one another** = mettersi uno contro l'altro
- **strapped** = legare
- **sleep deprivation** = privazione del sonno
- **blame** = incolpare
- **patterns** = schemi, modelli
- **consorting** = frequentare
- **wayward** = caparbio
- **landmark** = riferimento
- **to flip** = rovesciare
- **pricking** = puntura
- **needles** = aghi
- **bled** = sanguinare
- **breeds** = generare
- **kicked out** = cacciare via (a calci)
- **Scots** = scozzese
- **underwent** = subire
- **died out** = sparire
- **to stand up** = stare in piedi
- **guilt** = colpa
- **relatives** = parenti
- **fate** = destino
- **willful** = capriccioso
- **to redress** = rettificare
- **acts** = leggi