

# Witchcraft: Marion Gibson [C1]

La docente dell'Università di Exeter esplora, a partire da tredici processi storici compresi tra l'Inghilterra medievale e l'America di Trump, l'evoluzione del concetto di stregoneria nel corso del tempo.

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Our fascination with **witchcraft** and the supernatural has **endured** through time. It can be seen in the abundance of films, TV series and books we produce about the subject in an age when, in many parts of the world, **spells** and **curses** have long ceased to be considered a serious **threat**. Most of us are familiar with the more sobering history behind these **tales**: a history of persecution and the execution of many women, and some men, accused of **consorting with** the devil. But who were the victims? What kind of lives did they lead? What troubling human impulse drove the **witch hunts**, and does this impulse still exist in society today?

## FORCES OF GOOD AND EVIL

Marion Gibson, professor of Renaissance and magical literatures at the University of Exeter in the UK, has investigated this aspect of the human psyche in her recent book *Witchcraft, a History in Thirteen Trials*. She believes that our preoccupation with the supernatural has something to do with the workings of the human brain. As many people believe there are good and bad forces shaping our lives and fortunes, she feels it's only a short step to believing that something can be done to counteract these forces; that some spell or **charm** can be found that will keep us safe and make the world a better place. What began as a history of witches and their persecution became an account of the way the human mind reacts, especially in times of religious or societal **upheaval**. To find out more, Speak Up spoke with Professor Gibson. We began by asking her why she had chosen to structure her book around thirteen trials. **Professor Marion Gibson (English accent):**I chose thirteen trials for the book because I wanted to focus on individual people. So, the people who were accused of **witchcraft** in one way or another primarily, but also the communities, the people around them who

did the accusing. And I thought that if I picked some dramatic moments from history, particularly a kind of **courtroom** drama, if you like. That would be a really good way of **hacking into** those communities and hearing from the people, but also, **wherever possible**, hearing from the people who were accused. Because often in court they would get to tell their stories and that was often the only place where anybody really listened to them. It's one of the few places that you get to hear the voices of people from the past.

## VOICES FROM THE PAST

Structuring her book around the trials and **courtroom** proceedings provided Professor Gibson with a rich source of historical documents. Part One of the book deals with the peak period of the witch trials, from 1480 to 1692, ending with the Salem Witch **Trials** that are familiar to many. Trial **accounts** exist from throughout the period, including **deposition** or witness statements. An in-depth study of these voices from history reveals not only the religious or political motivations behind many of the **witch hunts**, but also the ordinariness of the people accused of **witchcraft**. **Professor Marion Gibson:** One of the things I thought about most when I was writing the book was how this could happen to any of us, really. It became clearer and clearer, as I researched one trial after another, that this could be us. You didn't have to be anybody who was actually practising **witchcraft**, or even magic. You didn't have to be somebody who was particularly difficult **to get along** with, or who was a problem in your society or even perceived as a problem in your society, to get accused of **witchcraft**. It really could happen to anybody. All that was necessary, really, was a **cross word** with a neighbour. And of course **if you did happen also to** be somebody who believed in magic and practised it, or you were somebody who was actually quite assertive and who your neighbours had a bit of a problem with, well, you were all the more likely to get accused. So people who were really quite ordinary, yeah, just ordinary **trades people**, farmers' wives, people who did the shopping every week and looked after the children and sometimes read books and went to church and did the sort of things that people do in the world, they could very easily get accused of **witchcraft**. And I found that depressing as well as being fascinating.

## SOCIETAL MISFITS

In Part Two, Professor Gibson focused on people who had been accused of **witchcraft** in recent times, and she **unearthed** some surprisingly **colourful** characters. **Professor Marion Gibson:** There are some great characters. There's Monty Summers, an English Anglican priest who surprisingly is accused of satanism during the course of his life. And I think even more surprisingly may actually have **dabbled** in satanism. He was very, very interested in whether **demons could be raised** and whether one could interact with creatures like vampires and **werewolves** and witches, in all of which he believed. But I think he was picked upon in part because of his sexuality — he was openly gay. And this was the 1910s-1920s, when such things were not only illegal but also **frowned upon** in **wider society**. But Monty was a fascinating man who chose to be quite open about his sexuality and dressed in this very **flamboyant** manner. He wore essentially 18th-century **costumes**, lots of colours. He was a fascinating figure.

## DRAMA THERAPY

Another character Gibson features is the 1940s medium Nellie Duncan. Duncan was tried under the British Witchcraft **Act** of 1735, although not because people really believed she was a witch. Duncan appeared to believe she was actually in contact with spirits of one kind or another, but embellished this with **trickery**. She used papier-mâché **puppets** and **muslin gauze** in the darkened rooms where she held her **seances**, telling her clients that they were the spirits of the **departed** or ectoplasm, respectively. Although these **accoutrements** were quite obviously fake, Duncan may well have **brought closure** to many heartbroken people, especially those who had lost loved ones in World War Two. What was considered superstitious or dishonest at the time, we might call 'drama therapy' today.

## UNCONVENTIONAL

Above all, Gibson became interested in the way that people who did not conform to convention were treated by their societies. As she explains,

throughout history those who claimed some kind of arcane knowledge or magical identity were often subject to persecution. **Professor Marion Gibson:**I think it's one of the things the book does that's a bit different. This isn't just a history book about the ancient past; it's actually something about the present time, too. I found it quite empowering at times, too. These people were different and they were persecuted for being different, but my goodness, they fought back. It's actually quite a cheerful book in some ways, because they're very big characters and they just carry on.

## **WITCH HUNTS TODAY**

Perhaps one of the most fascinating aspects of Gibson's book is the connection she has made between the witch hunts of the past and certain tendencies in today's societies. In some parts of the world, people can still be accused of witchcraft and occasionally even killed for being a witch or demon-worshipper. While it may seem irrational, the impulse to find a depraved, demonic culprit for a more complex societal problem remains, as Professor Gibson explains. **Professor Marion Gibson:**I think modern times are actually quite like the 16th and 17th centuries when the witch trials flourished, 'cause we do live in these really polarised societies and it seems to be getting worse. We don't seem to be moving towards more tolerance and understanding, but actually rather in the opposite direction. And that reminds me really strongly of the period of the witch hunts where you have massive religious divisions between Catholics and Protestants across Europe and north America. You get the sense that people are under a lot of pressure from some of the things that we know about in the modern world, climate change, for example. There was a period called the Little Ice Age, when harvests were really bad and there was a lot of rain and there was a lot of snow in Europe, and historians have argued that feeds into people's sense of panic and dislocation with the world. And you know, on top of that there was plague, literally, you know, people were dying of the bubonic plague across Europe, and there were hundreds of other diseases, which they didn't know how to cure and seemed to come out of nowhere, and there was nothing anybody could do about them. So I think modern times, you know, with Covid, with conspiracy theories, with the polarisation

of politics, is actually quite like the period of the **witch hunts**. And you know, when somebody like Donald Trump comes along and starts using the word ‘witch hunt’, you’ve got to pay attention to that. And then when I discovered that his opponent, Stormy Daniels, actually self-identifies as a witch, as a Wiccan, as a pagan, as a **fortune-teller**, as a tarot-reader, I realised there was a lot more going on in that story . The last few chapters of the book deal with people all across the world who are still being accused of **witchcraft** but also who are self-identifying as witches in some way. And once you start looking, you realise that witches are absolutely everywhere.

## THE SALEM WITCH TRIALS

The Salem Witch **Trials** took place in Salem Village, Massachusetts in 1692. In January of that year two young girls, aged nine and eleven, fell ill. Their symptoms included violent contortions and uncontrollable **outbursts** of screaming. A local doctor diagnosed **witchcraft** and other girls in the community soon began to exhibit similar symptoms. A wave of hysteria spread throughout colonial Massachusetts and over 160 men, women and children were accused of **witchcraft**. A special court was set up in Salem **to hear the cases**. Nineteen were **hanged**, one was tortured to death, and at least five died in jail. The trials only lasted a few months but their painful memory tormented the Salem community for centuries. In 1976, a study published in Science magazine suggested that the fungus ergot, which is found in cereals such as **rye** and **wheat** and can cause delusions, vomiting and muscle spasms, may have been responsible for the girls’ symptoms.

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# Glossary

- **seances** = sedute spiritiche
- **accoutrements** = accessori
- **to hear the cases** = giudicare i casi
- **that feeds into** = incidere
- **tales** = racconti
- **accounts** = racconti
- **trades people** = commercianti
- **unearthed** = scavare
- **colourful** = stravaganti
- **my goodness** = santo cielo!
- **cheerful** = allegro
- **bubonic plague** = peste bubbonica
- **harvests** = raccolti
- **witchcraft** = stregoneria
- **endured** = resistere
- **consorting with** = associarsi con
- **Trials** = processi
- **demons could be raised** = evocare demoni
- **wider society** = a società in generale
- **puppets** = marionette
- **outbursts** = crisi di nervi
- **hanged** = impiccare
- **courtroom** = tribunale
- **cross word** = incrocio di parole
- **werewolves** = lupi mannari
- **worshipper** = adoratrici
- **hacking into** = accedere
- **to get along** = andare d'accordo
- **if you did happen also to** = se capita che tu
- **Act** = legge
- **trickery** = inganno
- **muslin gauze** = garze di mussola
- **fortune-teller** = indovina

- **curses** = maledizioni
- **threat** = minaccia
- **witch hunts** = cacce alle streghe
- **charm** = incantesimo
- **brought closure** = dare sollievo
- **rye** = segale
- **spells** = incantesimi
- **upheaval** = sconvolgimento
- **deposition** = deposizione
- **dabbled** = avventurarsi
- **flamboyant** = appariscente
- **costumes** = vestiti
- **departed** = i defunti
- **wherever possible** = là dove è possibile
- **frowned upon** = essere mal visto
- **culprit** = colpevole
- **on top of that** = oltre a ciò
- **wheat** = grano