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The Penguin Book of Witches

Edited by
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PENGUIN BOOKS

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Introduction

Marblehead, Massachusetts, is a bedroom community in suburban Boston, a comfortable seaside enclave of historic houses. It has good public schools, intermittent bus service, and a weekly newspaper that is read mainly for the juicy names-naming police log. It is not the sort of place where one would expect to find a witch.

But a witch did live there, though she is not buried there. Wilmot Redd, or sometimes Reed, was one of the more than one hundred people who was accused during the Salem witch crisis of 1692, and, like the other condemned witches, her body was thrown into a shallow ditch at the base of a rocky ledge to the west of Salem Town after being cut down from the gallows. At that time, the area at the foot of the hill where the gallows stood was flooded with brackish water at high tide, and so Wilmot Redd, after resting uneasily in the rocky earth of coastal Essex County, was most likely carried out to sea. Today the ditch she was thrown into is hidden under a pharmacy parking lot.

Redd, like the other North American witches who have left impressions—sometimes lasting, sometimes glancing—in the historical record, presents something of a conundrum. How can the English colonists who settled North America, who were relatively literate compared with their European cousins, who were reasonably thoughtful and self-examining, who lived in tightly interconnected communities dependent on collective effort for success, have believed in witches? And not just believed in witches, but also put them to death? The historical fact of witchcraft weighs uneasily in our current culture, particularly given how much symbolic, nation-building weight the colonists are required to bear in the realms of popular history.

Histories of witchcraft have often revealed more about the time

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WITCHES IN THE BIBLE

When thinking about witches today, a certain standard image comes to mind: she is an old crone with a warty nose, a black pointed hat, raggedy clothes, and a black cat by her side. Though our contemporary picture of the witch has evolved away from the Puritan conception, the American colonists too had a set of assumptions about who a witch was likely to be, and how she—for it was almost always a “she”—was able to conduct her devilish doings. But where did these assumptions come from? How did the colonists define what a witch was?

We might assume that the early modern conception of a witch derived from a description in the King James Bible. This version of the Bible, which was begun in 1604 in response to Puritan criticisms of earlier English translations, became the most widely read translation of the Bible in English during the early modern period. Printing was expensive, but then, as now, the most commonly available printed object was a Bible.

And yet the Bible is strangely quiet about witchcraft. It confirms that witches exist, but most of the telltale details—the identifying characteristics that set a witch apart from a run-of-the-mill person, and the powers that a witch is supposed to have—do not appear.

In fact, witches, as a category of their own, rather than as wizards or sorcerers, are mentioned fewer than a dozen times in the King James Bible. The first appearance comes early, in Exodus 22:18, “Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live.” This command forms the justification for capital punishment of witches, but it appears without any illumination or commentary, wedged between a guideline

about dowry payment and a prohibition against bestiality. Witches are declared not allowed, and yet all of Exodus 22 remains silent on the definition of what or who a witch is, or on what activities might constitute witchcraft. Even a witch's gender is, at least according to this translation, undefined.

A bit more detail emerges with the next mention, in Deuteronomy 18:10–12:

There shall not be found among you any one that maketh his son or his daughter to pass through the fire, or that useth divination, or an observer of times, or an enchanter, or a witch. Or a charmer, or a consulter with familiar spirits, or a wizard, or a necromancer. For all that do these things are an abomination unto the LORD: and because of these abominations the LORD thy God doth drive them out from before thee.

This passage appears as part of the advice to the tribe of Levi, so that their priests will not pick up any of the unsanctioned religious practices that they will encounter in the lands to which God will send them. Deuteronomy places witches in a context with other deviant forms of religion: “necromancers” who attempt to practice magic, astrologers, and diviners who claim to see the future.

The principal dangers of witchcraft in this context are twofold: first, witchcraft as a practice stands outside of sanctioned religious structure. Witchcraft is that which we, the chosen tribe of God, ought not to do. Defining witchcraft as a negative quality (that which we do not do) rather than by a set of affirmative qualities (divining, say, which is a concrete activity), Deuteronomy opens the possibility of a language to describe witchcraft that can be molded to suit any number of witch-hunters working within different contexts, and toward different goals. In this passage the signal quality of witchcraft is difference, specifically difference from those who hold religious power.

Deuteronomy does supply a few details about witch-like behavior that would be important in early modern

accusations against suspected witches, in particular the mention of “familiar spirits.” This obscure signifier will eventually morph into the Hollywood witch's black cat, but the idea of familiar spirits will come to play a substantial role in the thinking about, and prosecution of, early modern witchcraft in Europe and North America.

The proscription against witchcraft in Deuteronomy reappears in the story of Manasseh, in 2 Chronicles 33:6:

And he caused his children to pass through the fire in the valley of the son of Hinnom: also he observed times, and used enchantments, and used witchcraft, and dealt with a familiar spirit, and with wizards: he wrought much evil in the sight of the LORD, to provoke him to anger.¹

Manasseh makes himself worse than the heathens, for in theory he ought to know better than to question the practices that God has set forth for him. Fortunately Manasseh, in the course of his affliction, humbled himself before God and saw the error of his ways. Witchcraft in this context appears as more a question of adherence or rejection of orthodoxy, rather than as a specific set of deviant practices. The degree of God's disapproval becomes clarified, including what is truly at risk for a person practicing witchcraft, and yet we still have only the vaguest sense of what a “witch” really is.

If the Bible could not provide clarity on how to identify a witch, and how to deal with her once identified, academic theologians appointed themselves equal to the task. By the early modern period in England, the religious and intellectual landscape that would predominate in initial waves of North American settlement, there was no shortage of theologians willing to do just that.