

A. THE HISTORY OF WITCHCRAFT*Haley Bowen, Assistant Professor, History***Tuesdays, 9:30 - 11:00 a.m. Norris University Center**

The great witch trials of the early modern era peaked in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, leading to the executions of an estimated 40,000 individuals throughout Europe and North America. This course contextualizes the witch trials within religious, cultural, and social perspectives, offering a multifaceted account of why Europeans turned on their neighbors – a large majority of them women – and accused them of fraternizing with the devil, poisoning livestock, brewing love potions, and consorting with animal familiars. Towards the end of the course, we will discuss how modern ideologies of witchcraft – in fairy tales, films, and politics – continue to draw upon these earlier European cultural and intellectual legacies.

Jan. 13 The Wicked Witch of the West: An Introduction

Most of us can easily conjure up the stereotypical image of a witch in our mind: a grotesque older woman with a misshapen nose, a pointy hat, a broomstick, and perhaps a black cat. This singular vision of a witch, however, is misleading: in the medieval and early modern period, an enormous variety of individuals practiced magic, including male priests and learned mages who performed magic within court societies. This lecture will provide a lineage for the modern stereotypical image of the witch and illuminate a vast spectrum of popular and elite magical practices from the early modern period, from charms and love spells to artful necromancy.

Jan. 20 Anatomy of a Witch Hunt

The great witch hunts of early modern Europe, which reached their apex between 1575 and 1700, killed an estimated 40,000 individuals and involved many times that number in a pitiless cycle of accusations and torture. Why did European elites, who had treated magic with relative indifference centuries earlier, come to fear the witch so deeply at this particular moment in history? This lecture will trace how early modern demonologists within the Christian church began to define witchcraft as a pact with the Devil, amplifying fears about magic to new heights.

Jan. 27 The Legal and Social Dimensions of the Witch Hunts

Witch hunts in Europe could spring remarkably out of control, gobbling up huge numbers of suspects. This lecture will explore the role that the use of torture played in amplifying the terrifying scale of the hunts in certain European regions. We will also discuss what kinds of individuals within a community tended to be accused of witchcraft by their neighbors, and why these individuals drew such intense scrutiny.

Feb. 3 Crones: Inventing the Female Witch

Although roughly ten to twenty percent of those accused in the European witch trials were men, women were the main targets of most hunts. Why was this the case? Early modern Europeans were convinced that women possessed intellectual and bodily weaknesses which made them particularly susceptible to the Devil's temptations, and thus to the practice of witchcraft. Our class this week will describe these beliefs and connect them to modern portrayals of female witches in classic movies like *Snow White* (1937) and *The Little Mermaid* (1989).

Feb. 10 Disenchantment: The Decline of the Witch Trials

Most people assume that the witch hunts died out as the "superstitious" belief in witchcraft came to be replaced by more "rational" scientific thinking in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The actual story of the hunts' decline is far more complicated. This lecture will use a case study of the most famous witch trial in Spain – the Basque Country hunt of 1609-14 – to argue that intellectual skepticism about the reality of magic actually had very little to do with the end of the hunts in Europe.

**Feb. 17 A Colonial Witches' Brew: The Trials of
Salem, Massachusetts**

In this class we will move across the Atlantic to the nascent American colonies, where the witch hunts were taking their own terrifying turn. What was different about the American trials? This class narrates the events of the 1692-3 witch hunt in Salem, Massachusetts, suggesting that the American trials reflected distinctively Puritan anxieties about both the powerful Native American presence in the region and the possibilities of religious salvation.

Feb. 24 America Possessed

Salem in 1692 was a hub of demonic activity: young female accusers complained that witches in the town were instructing demons to pinch, poke, and strangle them, and they engaged in elaborate courthouse performances that demonstrated the perfidiousness of these devilish figures. For pious viewers, the spectacle confirmed what they had always known: that America was the “Devil’s kingdom.” This class situates the bizarre demonic obsessions of the Salem trials within a larger cultural and geopolitical context, connecting them to contemporary fears regarding the presence of Native Americans and to a longer history of demonic possession in the West.

Mar. 3 Abracadabra! The Transformation of Witchcraft

Witchcraft never died out entirely, but has instead been continuously reincarnated over the last two centuries under various guises. This class will consider two twentieth-century iterations of the witchcraft phenomenon. The first – the satanic ritual abuse scandals of the 1980s and 90s – constitutes a shocking example of a modern “witch hunt.” The second – the rise of the neopagan and modern witchcraft movements in the second half of the twentieth century – demonstrates the continued relevance of witchcraft in modern Western culture.

Mar. 10 The Witch Goes to Hollywood

The popular movies and books we consume today are replete with magic, (bespectacled) wizards, and (apple green) witches. American politicians, too, still regularly invoke the metaphor of the “witch hunt” and demonize their opponents as practitioners of the occult. Our final class will consider what factors have made the witch such an important pop culture icon for the twenty-first century, and question what her deployment conveys about modern American perceptions of gender, power, and the supernatural.