

## **Journal Article Review - The Status of Witchcraft in the Modern World**

**(Ronald Hutton)**

“...the foundation myth of modern pagan witchcraft: the belief that it represents a modern regrowth of a surviving ancient religion which was persecuted in the witch trials of the early modern period. According to the myth, that religion was driven underground by the trials, to emerge intact in the mid-twentieth century. This myth has now largely been abandoned by modern witches themselves, and especially by the most highly visible and highly published of them.”<sup>1</sup>

Thus begins English historian Ronald Hutton’s “The Status of Witchcraft in the Modern World”. Well acquainted with the pagan community in England, the article is drawn from an address delivered to the Midnight Sun Witchcraft Conference in Varde, Norway in 2007. In the paper, Hutton reviews the history of that myth, at once refreshingly honest and also not well received by many of his colleagues in the neopagan world. While debunking the myth that witches today are the clear successors to pagans in the past, he reveals characteristics of the past that neopagans use to construct their beliefs and practices today.

The witch trials of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries occurred at a time when people really believed that certain individuals had power beyond that of mortal men and could do real harm to others. The witch trials stopped in the late 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries not because of the tolerance of the Enlightenment (the French Revolution was anything but tolerant) but because the leaders of European societies stopped believing that witchcraft worked. However, the witch trials became a useful tool to skeptics such as Voltaire who worked to delegitimize the church. Some such as Jules Michelet argued that witchcraft, far from being evil, was a positive good. It honored

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<sup>1</sup> Ronald Hutton, “The Status of Witchcraft in the Modern World,” *The Pomegranate* 9, no2 (2007): 121.

women and nature and supported political and religious freedom.<sup>2</sup> Michelet's view of paganism was adopted in England and America in the mid-twentieth century as a radical and liberal countercultural response to modernism and institutional Christianity.

Modern witches are predominately female and often believe that the witch trials were patriarchal assaults on women. However, while witches were seen as stereotypically female in ancient Greece and Rome and early Medieval Ireland, Germany and Wales, males were most often the targets in Iceland, Normandy, Estonia, and (initially) Finland.<sup>3</sup> While the feminist myth may be that institutional religion and patriarchal society systematically and brutally suppressed innocent women in the witch trials, the historical reality is different. There were certainly instances of abuse, but widespread slaughter, such as "The Burning Times" in which nine million witches (mostly women) were alleged to have been murdered in Europe from the 14<sup>th</sup> to the 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, is fiction. Even the reformed version, that only 100,000 died, is specious.

Modern witchcraft is also linked to nature, possibly because witches have stereotypically used plants and animals in their incantations. Witches appear prominently in the works of Shakespeare in contexts suggesting that they have special knowledge of the natural world. Consider the following passage from MacBeth, Act 4, Scene 1:<sup>4</sup>

All  
Double, double, toil and trouble;  
Fire burn, and cauldron bubble.

Second Witch  
Fillet of a fenny snake, In the cauldron boil and bake;  
Eye of newt and toe of frog, Wool of bat and tongue of dog,  
Adder's fork and blind-worm's sting, Lizard's leg and howlet's wing,

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<sup>2</sup> Ronald Hutton, "The Status of Witchcraft in the Modern World," *The Pomegranate* 9, no2 (2007): 122.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 123.

<sup>4</sup> William Shakespeare, "Double, Double, Toil and Trouble: Annotations for the Witches' Chants," accessed February 17, 2015, <http://www.shakespeare-online.com/plays/witcheschants.html>.

For a charm of powerful trouble, Like a hell-broth boil and bubble.

All

Double, double, toil and trouble; Fire burn and cauldron bubble.

Third Witch

Scale of dragon, tooth of wolf, Witches' mummy, maw and gulf  
Of the ravin'd salt-sea shark, Root of hemlock digg'd i' the dark,  
Liver of blaspheming Jew, Gall of goat, and slips of yew  
Silver'd in the moon's eclipse, Nose of Turk and Tartar's lips,  
Finger of birth-strangled babe Ditch-deliver'd by a drab,  
Make the gruel thick and slab: Add thereto a tiger's chaudron,  
For the ingredients of our cauldron.

All

Double, double, toil and trouble; Fire burn and cauldron bubble.

Modern witchcraft heavily associates itself with freedom of self-expression. Witches' activities in Medieval Europe were often depicted as licentious, and such a characterization informs witchcraft today.

Hutton writes that the core of the modern witch religion is to produce direct contact between a human celebrant and a deity, perhaps even a temporary union of the two. However, he notes a key distinction. "In religion, the human agent asks the supernatural for attention and aid, and then awaits a response. In magic, the human has some power to attract or compel the supernatural to respond in a certain way."<sup>5</sup> Everything rests on this distinction. The God of the Bible is the utterly sovereign creator and sustainer of the universe and everything in it. He cannot be "attracted or compelled" by anything humans can do. Every other god can be.

Modern witchcraft tends to blame Christians for the persecution of their forebears, but the execution of witches extends throughout history. Livy (64 BC to 17 AD) writes of witch trials under the Roman Republic. In the "swimming test", first mentioned under Hammurabi, a witch was bound and thrown weighted into water; those who drowned were innocent of witchcraft and

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<sup>5</sup> Ronald Hutton, "The Status of Witchcraft in the Modern World," *The Pomegranate* 9, no2 (2007): 125.

those who floated were guilty. In modern times, decolonization has occasioned a huge resumption of witch hunting in much of the post-colonial world. The Tanzanian Ministry of the Family estimated that 5,000 people were killed in witch hunts from 1994-1998.<sup>6</sup> If “Christian” Europe is unique, it is unique in that it stopped persecuting witches and apologized for doing so. The West has also generally rejected a belief in witchcraft.

Hutton provides five characteristics associated with witches in every continent, 1) they use apparently supernatural means for causing misfortune to others, 2) they harm neighbors and kin, 3) they do not work for material gain but from envy and malice, 4) they work in a tradition, either by inheritance, training or initiation, and 5) they can be opposed by counter-magic or death. Every other characteristic, such as gender or social status, varies locally.<sup>7</sup>

Does witches’ magic actually work? Walter Cannon’s work in 1942 among native peoples in colonial possessions injured in World War 2 suggested that witchcraft can actually harm people who believe in it<sup>8</sup>. This fact poses a modern problem; how to protect religious freedom for those involved in witchcraft while protecting witches (and others who believe in witchcraft) from the consequences of their art.

If witchcraft actually can harm others, then even the Salem Witch Trials become more understandable, because society has an obligation to help protect its members from harm. Witches should police themselves, and work with their communities to minimize harm to outsiders. If witchcraft does not have the ability to harm others, practitioners must make that clear.

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<sup>6</sup> Ronald Hutton, “The Status of Witchcraft in the Modern World,” *The Pomegranate* 9, no2 (2007): 127.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 129.

In summary, "The Status of Witchcraft in the Modern World" was a fascinating and well supported article logically and historically. It certainly reveals that the modern neopagan movement did not grow from history but instead used history to define itself. Hutton seems to be a fair observer of witchcraft and the social factors around it.

## **Bibliography**

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