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WITCHCRAFT THE BASICS (2018) BY MARION GIBSON

Review by Fiona Wells-Lakeland

Gibson, Marion. *Witchcraft the Basics*. Routledge, 2018. 191pp.

In *Witchcrafts the Basics* (2018), Marion Gibson writes a brief, straightforward history of the literature of witchcraft in Britain and America from the sixteenth century to the present, providing a basic overview of the field of study and the literary portrayal of witches. English Literature students would find this work valuable as a first resource to understand the context in which the witches of William Shakespeare's *Macbeth* (1606), Thomas Dekker, John Ford and William Rowley's *The Witch of Edmonton* (1621), or Arthur Miller's play *The Crucible* (1953) were written. Likewise, History and Religion students will find this a good first reference to use when investigating witchcraft in their field. The book provides a concise overview of witchcraft studies, with detailed references to other academic work, which makes it a useful tool for accessing further research.

The format of Gibson's book is akin to a guide or student manual where each chapter starts with a simple overview and concludes with a basic summary, written with undergraduate scholars in mind. The inclusion of questions at the end of each chapter prompts the reader to form their own opinions based on the material presented. Gibson does an excellent job of bringing together the work of influential witchcraft studies scholars in an easily readable format. However, it is important to note from the outset that Gibson does not argue for any specific definition of witchcraft or witches. She carefully summarises the history and literature of witchcraft and its associated critical studies, but asks readers to consider the different attitudes to witchcraft and to do further research for themselves. Gibson is a perfect guide to this topic, a Professor of Renaissance and Magical Literature at the University of Exeter, UK, where she teaches Witchcraft and Magic in Literature as a specialist option. Her previous publications include *Witchcraft Myths in American Culture* (2007) and *Reading Witchcraft: Stories of Early English Witches* (1999).

As part of Routledge's "The Basics Series," the format and length of the book places limitations on the breadth of material that Gibson can use. She acknowledges that she cannot write a comprehensive summary of witchcraft history and literature within the given format. Therefore, she confines her work to an overview of witchcraft in Britain and America but recognises the importance of a wider world history. For those wanting a more in-depth history of witchcraft across Continental Europe and Britain I would recommend both Stuart Clark and Bengt Ankerloo's work *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe* (1999-2002, Volumes 1-6) as a commendable starting point; indeed, Gibson references both authors in the book. Throughout the book Gibson devotes separate explanatory paragraphs to topics such as "Justice in America" or "Was Scot a Religious Dissenter" (48, 67). These

summarise critical material on the subject or distil what is known from original sources, allowing the reader to understand differing opinions. In keeping with a historical account of witchcraft, Gibson does not attempt to promote a particular argument as to why witches were hunted in the Early Modern Era. She provides a summary of various theories in her fourth chapter and continually challenges readers to undertake further research.

Each chapter temporally builds on the previous one to bring the reader to the twentieth century. Chapter One focuses on witchcraft in Early Modern England and Scotland. Gibson starts with a discussion of several demonologies of the era and their contribution to the definition of a witch in that period of history. She highlights the many ways that witches were portrayed in the literature of this period, for example, in Calvinist Scotland witches were “anti-Christian,” whereas in England those accused of witchcraft were often scapegoats; someone to blame for illness, death, or spoilt crops (18). Similar definitions also existed in seventeenth century America. Gibson shows how pamphlets detailing the pre-trial examinations and reporting of witch trials contains similar language to the demonologies when describing the witchcraft practises of the accused. She outlines the cultural climate of Early Modern Britain giving context to the witch-hunts and trials that occurred in that era, but does not provide a particular argument as to why witches were accused and tried in this period of history. Instead, she highlights the fact that much of the printed material about witches was considered entertainment or propaganda. I concur with this definition of the printed material, much of it appeals to the reader with its salacious descriptions of witches, and in many cases this material had a profound effect on how we think about witches, an aspect which Gibson builds upon in following chapters.

Chapter Two moves to seventeenth and early eighteenth-century America where Gibson discusses the demonologies of Increase & Cotton Maher and their influence on how the American colonies of Massachusetts understood witchcraft. Both father and son subscribed to the notion that witchcraft was the province of the devil and that the colonists were God-fearing Christians living in what “once were the Devil’s Territories” (45). Gibson details how colonies in Virginia and Connecticut applied the law in witchcraft trials and she discusses the Salem witch trials with the subsequent myths that arose from them, such as the description of Tituba as a “black slave from Barbados” (55). This misrepresentation of Tituba has informed works like *The Crucible* and other twentieth century witch depictions. Gibson discusses this further in Chapters Four and Six detailing the influence of myths in modern witch depictions. Her work identifies that much of what we understand witch to mean is founded on mythical witches such as Erictho or Hecate, combined with, in many cases, the male oriented view of witches in the Early Modern Era. Gibson’s analysis of witch representation and misrepresentation helps us to understand how the word ‘witch’ builds a particular set of images and ideas in our imagination.

Chapter Three turns to witch literature, starting with Reginald Scot’s *Discoverie of Witchcraft* (1584) and his influence on the portrayal of witches in the theatre. From a literary perspective, this chapter provides an excellent base from which further study of the witch in Renaissance plays can be undertaken. She chooses *Macbeth* (1606), *The Mask of Queenes* (1609), *The Tempest* (1611), *The*

Witch (1613-15), and the *Witch of Edmonton* (1621) to discuss how playwrights envisage witches. These plays represent the various readings of witch as supernatural entities, servants of the devil, poor maligned old women, and mythical figures. Gibson analyses the way these witches are an amalgam of witch mythology and demonology and how they have influenced modern portrayal of witches. She concludes that witches in the plays often act as “metaphor or allegory [...] for different kinds of power”; indeed, Hecate in Thomas Middleton’s *The Witch* works as a repository for the immorality and evil deeds perpetuated by the gentry in the play (91). Gibson’s strength is her ability to combine her knowledge of witchcraft history and English literature, to provide an excellent analysis of the plays, for me this is one of the best chapters in the book.

Chapter Four details witchcraft studies from the eighteenth century onwards. The reader is chronologically led through the main ideas that informed witchcraft studies. Gibson starts with the Romantic era, when it was thought that witch trials were a manifestation of tyranny. She moves on to the work of Jules Michelet’s *La Sorciere* (1862) and Margaret Murray’s *The Witch-Cult in Western Europe* (1921), who both define a witch as someone who practises a pagan faith and is subsequently persecuted by the Christian clergy for their paganism. Their work was influential; however, it was based on opinion and not hard evidence. Michelet incorporated naturalist ideas, his belief that the demonologies recounted true events and his own “anticlerical views” into his work (123). Murray used her knowledge of Egyptian religious practices to suggest that “men and women” participated in “a pagan witch-cult” that mimicked or prefigured Christian ritual (131). Both blended their own assumptions and views with historical texts, creating definitions for witchcraft that said more about their own beliefs than providing sound evidence for their assumptions.

Later twentieth century witchcraft studies have suggested that witches were persecuted because of a perceived difference, such as outcast Jews, or heretics. Gibson covers a feminist approach to witchcraft studies, suggesting that women were primarily accused because of their gender. She deftly covers the main arguments for and against the gender specific accusations, summing up with “being a woman made one more likely to be accused of witchcraft” (107). In addition to gender, Gibson details academic work that shows how the culture of a particular historical era shapes the accusation of witchcraft; economics, politics, and war, coupled with a belief in witchcraft all had an impact on the accuser and the accused.

The last two chapters move on from historical representations of witches as victims of persecution or practitioners of evil and move to a focus on the redefining of witches within religious practice and framing the witch as ‘good.’ In Chapter Five Gibson provides a synopsis of the religious antecedents for witch “celebration or extermination” and details the varied ways that rediscovered religion, such as Paganism, and mainstream religion shape views about witchcraft (181). These are broadly separated into two opposing ideas; first, that witchcraft forms part of a revitalised pagan worship, where practitioners reclaim autonomy over their physicality, gender, and spirituality. The second is the continuing belief in witchcraft as an evil practice in non-Christian mainstream religions and the ensuing witch hunts. Of interest in this chapter is Gibson’s argument that witchcraft accusation is not necessarily misogynistic in origin, an opinion that I would have liked more discussion on,

unfortunately Gibson is constrained by the format of the book and the need to provide a concise synopsis of a nuanced topic.

Then in Chapter Six, in a similar vein to Chapter Three, she examines the portrayal of witches in twentieth century literature from *The Wizard of Oz* (1900) to *Harry Potter* (1997-2007). Films discussed include *I Married A Witch* (1942), and *Bell, Book and Candle* (1958), the television series *Bewitched* (1964-72), *Sabrina the Teenage Witch* (1996-2003), and *American Horror Stories: Coven* (2013-14). Along with Miller's *The Crucible*, these texts redefine witches, they shape how the public think about witchcraft, and often cast the witch in opposition to evil. *American Horror* is the one exception. Gibson's reading of the third season, *Coven*, highlights the way in which the show subverts the conservative norms about domestic life and sexuality. The format of the series also subverts the format of traditional television series, by killing off main characters early and refusing to follow storylines or characters sequentially. More importantly the series challenges the domestication and goodness of the witches of previous television and film media. Gibson discusses the influence of these narratives on the public, changing the historical viewpoint from horror to acceptance. Therefore, "in a surprising turn of events, witches are thus popular and beloved figures in fiction today" (168).

The book works well as a basic guide. Gibson's ability to weave together the many historical accounts of witchcraft with academic studies is testament to her knowledge of the subject. It is a light read, and while Gibson works hard to cover as much material as possible, the format does not allow for in-depth analysis and I would not recommend it to those looking for a definition of witchcraft or a specific argument about witchcraft accusations. However, as a first introduction to the field, I recommend the work to undergraduate students of English, History, and Religion. My own undergraduate studies would have benefited from access to this work and the valuable reference material it contains.

BIONOTE

Fiona Wells-Lakeland is an English Literature PhD candidate at the University of Waikato, New Zealand. Her thesis investigates the effects of the English Renaissance on how immortal characters are portrayed in several English Renaissance plays, twenty-first Century Fantasy and Science Fiction. She is interested in the performative function of words and has presented papers on *What Word is Witch* and *Immortal Identity* at the ANZSA conferences in 2016 and 2018. She was invited to present her work for the Shakespeare Summer School at the University of Montpellier in 2018.