



Witchcraft and Magic in England, c. 1400–1920

Collection Summary

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The practice of witchcraft is centuries old, yet we continue to live in a world fascinated by the potential of magic. Witches have existed in many eras, and in many forms—**culturally significant and versatile figures who became the object of intense legal, religious, political, and social scrutiny**. There is a common misconception that witchcraft’s historical moment in England begins and ends with the widespread persecution and “witchcraze” of the early modern period. This interpretation is problematic, in that the victimisation and violence of this period tends to overshadow notable developments in the history of witchcraft and magic that occurred both before and afterwards.

This fascinating collection **charts the evolution of witchcraft and magic in England over five centuries**. It comprises documents sourced from The National Archives (UK), British Library, University College London Special Collections, and The Folklore Society. It incorporates a broad range of records and texts, thereby exploring an array of key topics and themes, such as **gender, medicine, politics, religion, and science**.

The collection **hones in on the concept of the witch in late medieval thought and literature**, when longstanding beliefs in ritual magic, superstition, religion, and theories of health and healing tended to compete, but were nevertheless largely co-existent. It then surveys the post-1450 period, when changing attitudes towards witchcraft, driven by shifts in religious thought and the circulation of important publications, such as *Malleus Maleficarum* (c. 1486), **led to legal and secular changes, alongside an increase in accusations against, and persecutions of, those perceived to be witches**. This trend was linked to religious upheaval, political change, and social tensions in English communities, whereby controversy, fear, and hatred were stoked by a growing print culture. Significantly, the collection features **assize records from witch trials of the early modern period** and examines some of the pamphlets and printed material that cast the accused (mainly women) as deviant social forces.

Witchcraft and Magic in England, c. 1400–1920, also spotlights groups who escaped suspicion: members of the elite or “cunning folk”, as well as medical practitioners

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who engaged in “respectable magic”. The collection is augmented by records relating to folklore and popular belief in the modern age. **The study of magic and witchcraft became a widespread scholarly pursuit in the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries.** Literature generated by the writers and thinkers who turned their attention to these subjects are included in the collection.

Interdisciplinary in ethos and expansive in terms of its chronological scope and the archival materials that it contains, *Witchcraft and Magic in England, c. 1400–1920*, will appeal to students, educators, and researchers working within a wide range of scholarly fields, including **anthropology, literary studies, philosophy, sociology, and women’s studies**. It will likewise interest those situated within various branches of historical study, such as the **history of ideas and the history of science, as well as social, cultural, and political history**.

Sources Include:



