Getting It Wrong: The Problems with Reinventing the Past

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Abstract

This article is an examination of recent best-selling fictions and television adaptations which portray the history of witchcraft, often using outmoded historical theses, and often falsifying the known life histories of actual convicted witches. This article argues that these fictions, marked by problematically eugenicist ideas of magic, and in one case by a very uncomfortable appropriation of the Holocaust, are ultimately unhelpful to Pagans because they falsify history and deny the real needs of the contemporary Pagan communities.

Keywords

Witches; Contemporary Pagans; Television; Reinvention; Antisemitism.

It's generally agreed that witchcraft is having a moment. But what kind of moment is it having? Is it okay for everybody interested in the subject of witchcraft to make up their own history of the witch craze, very often a fantasy narrative of empowerment alongside an equally fantastical narrative of victimisation? I would like to address the problem of the historicity of witchcraft in relation to recent representations, particularly in television series but also in popular print. The large question is whether *any* representation is better than none. The smaller question is how far it is legitimate grossly to misrepresent history in the interests of creating stories frequently understood to be enabling for women in general, and for modern Pagan practitioners in particular. I will be looking especially at *A Discovery of Witches*, the first in a series of books by Deborah Harkness (herself an academic historian, though not of witchcraft but alchemy) and subsequently a television series, and at *The Mists of Avalon*, originally a book by Marion Bradley, now also a television series. I will also hazard a rapid glance at *Outlander*. All three are based on fictions by women. Throughout, my major concern will be with the idea of enabling or empowering women; I will be arguing that despite good intentions, much of the enabling and empowering simply pushes contemporary Paganism into the safe but relatively ineffectual space of self-help, also marking practitioners as the acme of middle-class white privilege, while sidelining the genuine strangeness of witches and magic users in all periods and cultures. This, I will claim, leaves actually transgressive women stranded; the negative witch stereotype can still be deployed against them. It's important to be clear that I'm not trying to set up an opposition between rational history and irrational beliefs; still less between supernatural believers and rational sceptics.

Any form of twenty-first-century witchcraft practice will seek to ground itself in a past of what is usually framed as traditional language, rites and symbolism. Hence the vast majority of modern Paganisms present themselves as the rediscovery of ancient but

suppressed or persecuted traditions. This narrative is fundamental to their appeal, especially when such traditions are understood to be part of a female history occluded by male-dominated religions. This narrative has become solidly embedded in fantasy fiction of every kind, including materials understood as Christian such as J. R. R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, C. S. Lewis's Chronicles of Narnia, or J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter books, all of which concern visits to secret worlds of magic that were always already present but not available. It is because it fits a generic model that the utterly embarrassing thesis of Margaret Murray is still surprisingly active, albeit in new and in some cases much more rigorous forms. Inevitably, practitioners warm to the idea that they are doing what they have always been doing; following darkness like a dream, making associations, visiting the ancient sites, conducting ancient rituals, saying ancient words.

Yet Lewis, Rowling and Tolkien offer a much more comfortable idea of what such hidden worlds would be like were we to encounter them than do the witch trial materials distorted by Murray. Early modern witches are stranger and much more disconcerting than anything likely to be found at Hogwarts or in Narnia or Rivendell. Take, for example, one of the Maidstone witches of 1652:

> The said *Anne Ashby* further confessed, that the Divell had given them a piece of flesh, which whensoever they should touch, they should thereby affect their desires… this flesh lay hid amongst grasse, in a certain place which she named, where upon search it was found accordingly. This flesh was of a sinnewy substance, and scorched, and was seen and felt by this Observator, and reserved for publique view, at the sign of the Swan in *Maidstone.*[1]

We know she used a dried? salted? piece of flesh. We don't know how she used it. All we know is that she hid it in the grass. The lack of explanation is far more chilling than any mythology we could construct is likely to be. Similarly disturbing is Islamic traveller Ibn Fadlan's account of the ceremonies surrounding the Viking funeral of a chieftain: I quote this at length:

> When the man … died, they said to his slave girls:
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> 'Who will die with him?'
>
> One of them answered:
>
> 'I will.'
>
> Then they appointed two young slave girls to watch over her and follow her everywhere….
>
> Meanwhile, the slave girl spends each day drinking and singing, happily and joyfully….

[1] *A prodigious & tragicall history of the arraignment, tryall, confession, and condemnation of six witches at Maidstone, in Kent, at the assizes there held in July, Fryday 30. this present year* (London, 1652), 4; https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebo/A85451.0001.001/1:2?rgn=div1;view=fulltext.

> Then they brought a bed and placed it on [the boat and covered it with a mattress] and cushions of Byzantine silk brocade. Then came [an old woman whom they call] the 'Angel of Death' and she spread the bed with coverings….
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> Meanwhile, the slave girl … came and went, entering in turn each of the pavilions…, and the master of each … had intercourse with her, saying:
>
> 'Tell your master that I only did this for your love of him.'
>
> On Friday, when the time had come for the evening prayer, they led the slave girl towards something which they had constructed and which looked like the frame of a door. She placed her feet on the palms of the hands of the men, until she could look over this frame….
>
> 'The first time they lifted her up, she said:
>
> '"There I see my father and my mother."
>
> 'The second time, she said:
>
> '"There [I see] all my dead relatives [sitting.]"
>
> 'And the third time she said:
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> '"There [I see my master sitting in] Paradise and [Paradise is green and beautiful.] There are men with him, and [young people, and he is calling me.] Take [me to him."' They went off with her] towards the boat…. Then the men lifted her on to the boat, but did not let her enter [the pavilion].
>
> She sang a song…, and drank … bidding all her female companions farewell. Then they gave her another cup…. Then the old woman … made her enter the pavilion and went in with her. The men began to bang on their shields with staves, to drown her cries…. Next, six men entered the pavilion and [lay with] the girl, one after another, after which they laid her beside her master. Two seized her feet and two others her hands. The old woman called the Angel of Death came and put a cord round her neck…. She gave the ends to two of the men…. Then she herself approached the girl holding in her hand a dagger with a broad blade and [plunged it again and again between the girl's ribs], while the two men strangled her with the cord until she was dead.[2]

Female empowerment? A suitable subject for an historical novel? Perhaps not. Admittedly, archaeologists disagree about how to interpret this text. Where some – Timothy Taylor, for example – see the vicious degradation of the slave girl so that her inability to enter the afterlife symbolises by opposition the Lord's entry, others – Neil Price and also Jenny Blain – see the rite as about preventing something from coming out of the dead man and into the body of the one sent to tend his corpse. In both cases, the dead man is a danger, and the complex rite is not so much a question of honouring him, as of ensuring that he has genuinely

[2] Ibn Fadlān, *Ibn Fadlān and the Land of Darkness*, trans. Paul Lunde and Caroline Stone (London: Penguin, 2012), 50-53. The square brackets indicate where blanks in the Mashhad manuscript have been filled in from the parallel account in Yāqūt's *Lexicon*: *Ibn Fadlān*, 229, note 84, and xxxiv-xxxvi.

gone, and gone completely.[3] If it is really the case that repeated rapes serve to safeguard a priest class, or at any rate an individual priest, then we should probably be uncomfortable with the extent to which this religion can be understood as helpful even to the imagination.

I'm not suggesting that modern Pagans embrace slave rape and human sacrifice. However, I am suggesting that the version of Paganism which they reconstruct is *far* more anodyne than the Pagan cultures on which they draw. While they may not have known the above account, they would certainly have known Tacitus's account of juridical sacrifices, and Julius Caesar's account of druid groves dappled with blood. The claim that such sources are unreliable or biased misses the point I'm striving to make; they are among our only sources. It would be well worth considering what is at stake in a ritual like this one. Is it necessarily the case that sacred space can only be delineated by exclusion, for example? (Catholics will be familiar with the idea that only the celibate may mount the altar steps, while observant Jews will be conscious of the various kinds of pollution that can impede ceremonial.) What if there is something in us that requires witnessing acts of violent excision? What if our sense of self is contingent on our willingness completely to lose ourselves in a logic of extirpation now carried out only in the most secular terms, through self-mutilation on the grounds of the cusp of beauty versus ugliness? I'm thinking of self-harm among teenage girls, and wondering if its current prevalence has to do with the suppression and privatisation of rites of femininity, the loss of independent gender queer girlhood in the development of the reproductive female body.

Dianic Paganism set out to address such things. Perhaps it did so with blinkers on; the fact is that puberty, adult sexuality, and pregnancy can be experienced as violations of the self which require very strong rites to manage them. Back massages and scented candles probably won't do it. In creating anodyne and harmless religions, we risk creating powerless religions, religions that cannot address the overpowering emotions that accompany human life. By contrast, our Pagan ancestors understood only too well just how vicious and uncomfortable the relation between the self, time, and nature truly is.

I've been writing as though modern Pagans are historical novelists, doing lots of research, and then going on with the construction of a coherent alternative world. (I'm completely comfortable with that, though I know not all practitioners will be. Indeed, to me one of the delights of seeing modern Paganism take shape is appreciating the creative energy in it; this is not the same as bowdlerisation or censorship.) For this reason, it seems appropriate to examine the actual historical fictions of modern Paganism currently in circulation in popular culture. And here, the news is bad. It's especially problematic when we consider the television series *A Discovery of Witches*, a program that at once broaches and at the same time seeks to paper over the problem of the witch. The series is full of gestures at political correctness. It has same-sex couples. It has a few token non-white characters (see below). It has a protagonist who is a powerful magic user, though she is initially unaware of the fact. However, it also collapses limply into a cliché of wish fulfilment in which historical

[3] Timothy Taylor, *The Buried Soul: How Humans Invented Death* (London: Fourth Estate, 2002); Neil Price, *The Viking Way: Magic and Mind in Late Iron Age Scandinavia*, revised edn (Oxford: Oxbow, 2019); Jenny Blain, *Nine Worlds of Seid-Magic* (London: Routledge, 2001).

research itself is fetishised as an attribute of the very thoroughly Mary Sued main character. As *Urban Dictionary* points out, "A Mary Sue can destroy a piece of writing or media, since the characters existence will often forcibly make the world and people around them defy logic to simply display how amazingly radiant they are." It turns out, however, that history only matters if it allows witches to practice their alchemical craft – and, of course, attract dashing vampires, who themselves embody history in its poshest and most exclusive form.[4] The very presence of Matthew Clairmont renders history itself redundant. Like the Ark of the Covenant according to Steven Spielberg, he *is* history. He can *already* answer any question.

Young, pretty Diana Bishop gets an offer of a professorship in Oxford after giving just one (extremely dull and obvious) lecture on alchemy to an all-white audience in what looks like a college chapel. (That's not how this works! That's not how any of this works!) Other Diana privileges materialise, indulging the viewer's fantasy of the way in which magic connects to intellectual authority. (Really? Working on witchcraft and fairies is a short route to career disparagement.) The television series also gives Diana unrestricted access to the almost empty Bodleian library, also known to us all as Hogwarts library, not on the grounds that she sat any difficult exams or is curious and excited about the past but because of some *other* aspect of her identity, something *hereditary*. One is *born* to the Bodleian. Diana's success is not based on hard work or perseverance, since it is instantaneous. Rather, the manuscript she needs and the job she wants literally fall into her lap.

This goes along with and vindicates the problematic idea that Diana's magic is heritable. At the very moment when the political right is picking up a narrative of inheritance to explain the enormous and growing disparity between rich and poor, the logic here is frightening.[5] It is also lazy, a reprise of Harry Potter, in which despite a willingness to confront prejudice, magic is genetically transmissible.[6] Repeated and perfectly justified rows about Oxford access policies illustrate the problem, one that the story of blonde, blue-eyed, improbably successful Diana fails to acknowledge. The new generation of African-American and Black witches might (rightly) feel that the Bodleian is *their* natural home, but are

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[4] Mary Sue – sometimes just Sue: (originally in fan fiction) a type of female character who is depicted as unrealistically lacking in flaws or weaknesses: "she was not a 'strong woman' so much as an insufferable Mary Sue;" "They also might have an impossible bloodline. Such as a half werewolf or half fairy," adds *Urban Dictionary* (https://www.urbandictionary.com/). For a defence, see *Who is Mary Sue?*, by Sophie Collins (London: Faber & Faber, 2018), which argues that calling characters Mary Sue is a way of policing women's writing, in the same fashion as calling women's fiction "romance."

[5] See for example Angela Saini, *Superior: The Return of Race Science* (London: Fourth Estate, 2019), 128-30. Her work shows that the idea of heritable intelligence and racial differentiation of intelligence is critical to emerging eugenic thinking.

[6] There is enormous and slightly uncomfortable emphasis on Harry's parents, though Rowling also insists that Hermione has magical talent and muggle parents. Of late, Rowling has also claimed that Hermione might not be white, having said nothing in the books proper to indicate that. Still, at least she is trying.

unlikely to find themselves made to *feel* at home in it as visiting scholars from the Ivy League.[7]

To be sure, *Discovery of Witches* provides us with many Oxford non-whites. Unfortunately, these are mostly in servile roles; the library assistant who hands the white, blonde, would-be professor her books, the assistant to the vampire professor of genetics in his rather strange laboratory that much resembles a Porters' Lodge, and the aunt's lesbian lover back home in Salem. That's where they belong. Helping others. White others. The help. There is also a single black character whose main functions appears to be dreamy prophecy and reproductivity. She is there to be the antithesis of Diana. Rather than nitpick the various minor errors in the book and the show in traditional blogging fashion, I interrogate the way that history itself and how history affects the present are the main topics of *A Discovery of Witches*. Like other mythmakers, Harkness and her television adapters want to suggest that all of history is leading up to the story of their characters. There is a hidden world at the heart of decision-making in the "real" world. It explains everything, as all good conspiracy theories must. It is why the destination of those characters matters.

It goes without saying that history has to endure significant deformations in order to become Diana's story. The Salem witches were banged to rights. They were guilty. No, they weren't accused of a completely imaginary crime by a paranoid group of girls. For Harkness, Mother Shipton is a real person. Walter Ralegh was entangled with the occult and the School of Night was real. Henry Percy, the wizard earl, was in fact a whizz at maths, not magic, but hey, the two were easily confused back in those days. Every misguided theory about sixteenth and seventeenth century history gets an airing and endorsement. Fiction writing and reading can be a great relief to the academic weary of struggling to find sources for what works well in imagination but is sadly lacking in evidential support.

It's not as entertaining, however, when Issobel Gowdie makes an appearance. Gowdie, as historians of witchcraft will know, was one of the bases for Margaret Murray's conjectures about witches practising an ancient religion. It is uncomfortable when we hear from Harkness that

> shortly prior to being tried for witchcraft, Isobel Gowdie had a passionate affair with the vampire Benjamin de Claremont and gave birth to the Bright Born child Janet Gowdie. During the trial Isobel reported having had sex with the devil; for anyone acquainted with Benjamin de Claremont, her mistake is understandable.[8]

Again, we see that the witchcraft accusers were *right*. Gowdie *did* have sex with a kind of demon. It wasn't that she was asked a leading question, and nodded her head. We can all understand the magical realism at stake here; this is analogous to Philip Larkin's famous statement that we believe so Hugo Drax will blow up London with the Moonraker rocket because he wears a Patek Philippe watch and has red hair in his nose and ears; borrowed bits

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[7] Sigal Samuel, "The Witches of Baltimore," *The Atlantic*, November 5, 2018, https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/11/black-millennials-african-witchcraft-christianity/574393/.

[8] Deborah Harkness, *The World of All Souls* (London: Headline, 2018), 98.

of reality make the unreal seem true. But it is downright offensive to insist that witches were guilty. Gowdie may have thought she was guilty herself, for any number of reasons, but this does not make it acceptable to *portray* her as guilty of diabolic sex and a devil baby. Matters worsen when we turn to Bridget Bishop. In Harkness's world, Bishop is important because she is the ancestor of Diana Bishop, the protagonist. It is therefore important that Bridget was, truly, a witch. It is significant that Bridget Bishop is one of the very few accused at Salem who was *not* a strong Puritan. Bridget Bishop fits a twenty-first-century idea of liberated femininity – assertive, prone to hanging around in pubs and bars, sexual. By contrast, Rebecca Nurse, another of the accused executed during the Salem trials, was a staunch church member. We hear little of her from Harkness.

In all these ways, historical knowledge is *monetised* to construct fiction. Indeed, by the end of the first series of the television programme, the main point of historical knowledge is to allow access to the world of the fiction. Diana's story shows that Ivy League professors don't need magic. They don't need to take revenge on patriarchy, because it has *already* welcomed them with flowers. They already have as much cultural prestige as they are ever likely to get. It is outsiders that require what the Bodleian represents – meritocracy and universal access to learning, in the great liberal tradition that largely postdates the library's foundation and therefore doesn't really fit with Harkness's mythos.

All these assumptions about the heritability of magic and the embodiment of the past in the ridiculously well-acquainted vampire Matthew, become much more troubling when we look at the extent to which the books include some problematic anti-Semitism. Matthew, the inevitable hot vampire, is a practising Catholic. That is ironic because of the Gothic prestige on which the entire mythology draws; unfortunately, it comes complete with the anti-Semitism that we associate with medieval Catholicism, as my friend Elizabeth Schwartz wrote in a lively Facebook discussion of the book series, rather than the television show. The villain of the entire trilogy is Benjamin Fuchs made a vampire by Matthew back when the Clairmonts thought a Jew could help them in Jerusalem during the Crusades (yeah, I know). Benjamin is so evil and bloodthirsty that the vampires disavow him, leaving him to wander eternally.… Yes, really…. Matters become more uncomfortable when Benjamin is given the Majdanek concentration camp to run. And Benjamin drains his little victim… then tosses her corpse onto the pile of all the other children's corpses he has drained of blood. A Jew draining the blood of little Christian children???[9] When I said that Pagans should be conscious of their wish to exclude, this is not what I had in mind. Harkness is so starry-eyed about the Middle Ages that she is even willing to pick up anti-Semitism. I suspect Harkness knows little about the situation in Majdanek, because nobody knows much; there are relatively few surviving memoirs since it was a very small camp. However, those there are depict a camp in which the guards did whatever they liked, throwing prisoners on fires for entertainment.

This is not the same as torture. Harkness's eerie preoccupation with torture, rather than pain, means that she wants to make her villain responsible not just for genocide, but for sexualised acts performed on the body, irrespective of the actual suffering that took place at that camp endured by real people. The silence around Majdanek has prompted other fantasies

[9] Elizabeth Schwartz, personal communication.

masquerading as truth. The best-known instance is the Holocaust 'memoir' of Binjamin Wilkomirski, later published as *Fragments*, which won acclaim and prizes until it was revealed that Wilkomirski was not in fact a Holocaust survivor, but a fantasist who truly believed that he was a Jewish child in the camps, but was actually a Swiss orphan whose mother had abandoned him. Something not completely dissimilar seems to be at stake in Harkness's uncomfortable narrative. Like J. K. Rowling's recent reinventions (Grindelwald), Harkness uses the Holocaust to add weight and seriousness to her narrative. This becomes very difficult at precisely the point at which the sufferings of the victims are equated with the sufferings endured by the non-Jewish characters in the novel, and becomes even more problematic when a Jewish perpetrator is imagined as the source of the violence.

In this context, twenty-first-century women reviving Paganism through this troubled fiction might want to reflect on the possibility that their interpretation of witchcraft has a famous historical precedent, though not one I would expect them to embrace. If we must bring Nazi thought into it, let's understand its true role. Many of those at the top of the Nazi hierarchy were enthusiastic defenders of witches, and in particular of the idea that witches were Pagans persecuted by (Jewish) Christians, especially Roman Catholics. Heinrich Himmler believed strongly that the German witches condemned to death in the years of European witch hunting were actually German Pagans persecuted by Christians corrupted by Judaism and Jewish elements in their religion. He set up a special archive staffed by an SS unit to record evidence that this was true. The archive has survived, and is now housed in the Polish city of Poznan. Himmler strongly believed that the witches had been attacked solely because of their Germanic Pagan strength and in particular because the Jews resented their German femininity. German filmmaker Leni Riefenstahl also paid tribute to these ideas in her 1932 film *The Blue Light*, in which bigoted villagers persecute a young girl as a witch because she understands the beauty of the mountains.[10] Why were these ideas so popular with Nazis? They were anti-Christian, and reinstated the particular idea of the occult that appealed to the Nazis in the first place, an idea that focuses on the occult as an expression of the history of a people. This allowed them to define themselves in opposition to the modernity that Hitler despised: left-wing politics, experimentation in art, urban living, feminism, gayness – all these were intrusions into the true selves recovered in Paganism. And all were attributed to Jewish influence. Acts of resistance to globalised economics can tip easily into vicious opposition to everything the Enlightenment added, even representative democracy itself, always under threat from populism. In this context, it is not insignificant that Harkness equips her magical world with an unpleasant ruling council – the Congregation – who are usually an obstacle to justice. The same might be said of the Ministry of Magic. Like Rowling's, Harkness's world celebrates the individuated liberal subject.

There is a risk that everything I've just said can be dismissed because it doesn't contribute to well-being. And I'm fully aware that it never sounds good to criticise human pleasure. Paganism in its modern forms has not yet completely shed self-help discourses. Even highly sophisticated Pagans like Jenny Blain sometimes collapse into self-help; in her

[10] William Badger and Diane Purkiss, "English Witches and SS Academics: Evaluating Sources for the English Witch Trials in Himmler's *Hexenkartothek*," *Preternature* 6 (2017): 125-53.

book *Nine Worlds of Seid-Magic*, she offers a sophisticated account of the rites of northern European Paganism, but ends her account by saying "I am transformed by the experience".[11] The actual appropriation of the history of real people, whether the victims of cruelty and genocide in Majdanek, or real witches who were really tried, makes strategies like this problematic not only because they are over-simplifications, but because they are outright distortions of reality. *Outlander's* appropriation of Gillis Duncan exemplifies the problems: "This is the grimoire of the witch, Geillis. It is a witch's name, and I take it for my own; what I was born does not matter, only what I will make of myself, only what I will become."[12]

The historical Gillis Duncan didn't own a grimoire. She may not have been able to read. This does not diminish her importance. Her knowledge was probably transmitted orally, and that was precisely what frightened James VI, for orally transmitted knowledge cannot be controlled. By moving her to the eighteenth century, Diana Gabaldon probably hoped to defray the kind of criticism I am offering here. But why not create a witch of your own, with her own name? Because in that way you would lose the ridiculous idea of inherited craft, which seems vital to many of the writers of these fictions. Also vital is grotesque exaggeration of the cruelty of the persecutors. In the *Outlander* books, protagonist Claire is flogged by an angry crowd. This wasn't a feature of witch persecution. It's obviously and overtly sexualised, too. In describing Gillis, a frightening number of adjectives are deployed to make her sound as sexual as possible:

> In *Outlander*, Geillis Duncan is a tall young woman, perhaps a few years older than Claire. She has fair hair and skin and beautiful green eyes, with a generous bosom and swell of hip.[13]

Most of the women accused during the witch persecutions were elderly. As if to emphasise the difference between modern science and silly old superstition, *Outlander's* Gillis pretends that her smallpox vaccination scar is a witch mark. It's on her arm, of course; witch marks were usually found on the vulva and anus. This was about mangled reproductivity; from Aristotle's time, it was understood that excess blood generated by pregnancy was drawn up by maternal love and purified into white breastmilk, or fell down laden with filth to the lower body. It is this dirty milk that demons seek. *Outlander* is far too prudish to show midwives searching Gillis for witch marks on her bits, but far too salacious to make Gillis an elderly woman.

In both *A Discovery of Witches* and *Outlander*, witches are burned. In English-speaking lands, the punishment for witchcraft was hanging, as for any felony. The only cases in which witches are burned are those which happen to involve petty treason – husband murder – as well. Nor was torture of suspects normal in English jurisprudence. Admittedly, during the lawless years of the English Civil War, Matthew Hopkins implemented a practice of "watching," readable as a way to break the will of the suspect under interrogation. But this is very far removed from torture; to be sure, this took place in French and German lands, and

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[11] Blain, *Nine Worlds*, 7.

[12] Diana Gabaldon, *Drums of Autumn* (London: Arrow, 2018).

[13] "Geillis Duncan", *Outlander* Wiki, https://outlander.fandom.com/wiki/Geillis_Duncan.

also in parts of Eastern Europe, and in all those places torture was equated with truth. But hurling Diana to the ground again and again is not usual practice anywhere. It happens so that she can suddenly access her power. This has the effect of making her ancestors look extremely stupid. If they shared her might, why were they so unable to defend themselves?

This question arises even more ferociously in both the book and the television adaptation of Marion Bradley's *The Mists of Avalon*. Bradley has become an exceptionally problematic figure of late because of her alleged complicity in her husband's child sexual abuse; there are one or two passages in *The Mists of Avalon* that appear to reflect that in a very troubling fashion.[14] However, that issue will not be my focus here. Rather, I want to pay attention to the fact that this entirely historical novel and its not particularly faithful television adaptation is almost entirely a fantasy about the past, taken as history by those who passionately wish to believe its tireless erroneous claims. It has become central to ways of imagining what witchcraft is, in that its portrayal of Morgaine and the Isle of Avalon as centres of matriarchal Paganism destroyed by bigoted Christians reflect without reflecting upon Margaret Murray's original thesis,[15] effectively putting that thesis into new circulation. Sabina Magliocco points out, Murray did not argue that witches were a matriarchy centred on a goddess figure. Indeed, she was far more interested in the role of the Horned God, the male figure in Paganism than she was in any goddess figures; Bradley devotes herself to that figure too.[16] Where then did the idea of the goddess come from? Not from history, but from J. J. Bachofen'a 1861 volume *Das Mutterrecht*, filtered through Robert Graves's book *The White Goddess*, enormously influential in academic circles and especially at Cambridge. More recently, Marija Gimbutas and Jean Markale have been instrumental in promulgating the idea, though the latter is not respected in scholarly circles and the former has been much criticised. The idea of a Celtic religion based on the figure of the triple goddess, maiden, mother, and crone is still deeply desired, though nobody now believes it.[17]

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[14] Alyssa Rosenberg, "Re-reading feminist author Marion Zimmer Bradley in the wake of sexual assault allegations," *Washington Post*, June 27, 2014: https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/act-four/wp/2014/06/27/re-reading-feminist-author-marion-zimmer-bradley-in-the-wake-of-sexual-assault-allegations/?utm_term=.9b1d9b9854fb; also Alison Flood, "SFF community reeling after Marion Zimmer Bradley's daughter accuses her of abuse," *The Guardian*, 22 June 2014: https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/jun/27/sff-community-marion-zimmer-bradley-daughter-accuses-abuse: "Walter was a serial rapist with many, many, many victims (I named 22 to the cops) but Marion was far, far worse."

[15] Jacqueline Simpson, "Margaret Murray: Who Believed Her, and Why?" *Folklore* 105 (1994): 89-96.

[16] Sabina Magliocco, *Witching Culture: Folklore and Neo-Paganism in America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 47.

[17] Cynthia Eller, *The Myth of Matriarchal Prehistory* (Boston, MA: Beacon, 2000); Mark Williams, *Ireland's Immortals* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016). Even the term 'Celtic' has been shown to be really problematic: "Celts: Art and Identity," British Museum Exhibition, 2015-16.

Bradley's principal source is actually the work of Starhawk, Miriam Simos, and in particular her book *The Spiral Dance*. This influential work is fictional but presents itself as fact. It contains the following claims: witchcraft is "perhaps the oldest religion extant in the West" and began "more than thirty-five thousand years ago," during the last Ice Age. The religion's earliest adherents worshipped two deities, one of each sex: "the Mother Goddess, the birthgiver, who brings into existence all life," and the "Horned God." And that's not all: starting in the fourteenth century, Starhawk claims, religious and secular authorities began a 400-year campaign to eradicate the Old Religion by exterminating suspected adherents, whom they accused of being in league with the devil. Most of the persecuted were women, generally those outside the social norm – not only the elderly and mentally ill but also midwives, herbal healers, and natural leaders, those women whose independent ways were seen as a threat. During "the Burning Times," Starhawk wrote, some nine million were executed.

These claims are out of line with history, which means that *The Mists of Avalon* is drifting away from the historical mainstream too. There is little to no evidence that any such matriarchy ever existed in the British Isles in the form created by Bradley.[18] Many of her assumptions derive from Murray, notably her use of the term coven, which in fact occurs only in one trial, the fascinating and aberrant trial of Isobel Gowdie also referenced by Harkness. Gowdie's confessions are riveting reading, but they are also completely unrepresentative. Another aspect of Murray's thesis that directly inhabits *The Mists of Avalon* is the use of the so-called Celtic calendar, with its wheel of the solar year, including the feasts of Beltane and Samhain. It's perfectly true that both 1 May and 31 October were important in the British Isles during the period romanticised by Gabaldon and Harkness, but it's much more of a stretch to suppose that this continued a tradition that dated from the time romanticised by Bradley; Halloween/All Saints is mostly important in early modern Scotland because it was a pale today, when debts were collected and bills and rent due. This drearily pragmatic realisation never features in any accounts that want to be historical. And yet it is powerfully relevant to the ballad of Tam Lin, in which Tam dreads the coming of the night of Halloween because that's when the fairies are due to pay their bill to Hell. The very idea of a hellish underworld predates Christianity by many centuries. Among other things starkly missing from these fictionalisations of witchcraft is fear. The world of the shaman is a world of disease and death, in which power derives from really sinking into death through mortal illness and surviving. I've yet to come across a replication of that in modern witchcraft rites. These increasingly resemble the magic in Harry Potter – absolutely limitless power, magical

[18] Only a few articles are critical; most endorse Bradley's vision. See Aili Bindberg, "King Stags and Fairy Queens Modern religious myth in Marion Zimmer Bradley's *The Mists of Avalon*," http://lup.lub.lu.se/luur/download?func=downloadFile&recordOId=1321941&fileOId=1321942; Carrol L. Fry, "The Goddess Ascending: Feminist Neo-Pagan Witchcraft in Marian Zimmer Bradley's Novels," *Journal of Popular Culture*, 27 (1993): 67-80; Charlotte Allen, "The Scholars and the Goddess," *Atlantic Monthly*, 287: 1 (2001): 26, offers a more critical reading.

platinum credit card style, with absolutely no costs. Of course, this is uncomfortably close to the fantasy of consumer power, in its simplest form a pretence of choice.

Bravely pointing out the short if tumultuous history of contemporary Paganism has earned Ronald Hutton an enormous amount of disapprobation, and responses to any criticism of Murray can be equally intemperate. In her *Encyclopedia of Witchcraft*, Judika Illes claims that Murray's positive attitude to witchcraft is the (sole) reason she has been criticised. This position admits of no nuance. What if taking the side of the accused means being concerned that they are grossly misrepresented? What if Murray's crass and misguided approach excludes the possibility of finding the kinds of genuine traces of supernatural beliefs carefully established by scholars like Carlo Ginzburg and Emma Wilby?[19]

There is now widespread consensus among historians that Catholicism thoroughly permeated the mental world of medieval Europe, introducing a robust popular culture of saints' shrines, devotions, and even charms and spells. The idea that medieval revels were Pagan in origin is a legacy of the Protestant Reformation. The old religion – centred on female figures with strong emphasis on their maternity and physicality – is actually medieval Catholicism. Obviously, this does not mean that everybody interested in maypoles, Christmas and morris dancing is a Catholic. It's entirely feasible to pick and choose from the entire panoply of history, and to weld together your choices into a coherent mythic system. But that is not the same as writing history. Many Wiccans now describe those who take certain elements of the movement's narrative literally as "Wiccan fundamentalists."[20]

Lynn Meskell, an archaeologist at Columbia University who has published detailed critiques of Gimbutas's work, complains that Gimbutas and her devotees have promoted a romanticized "essentialist" view of women, defining them primarily in terms of fecundity and maternal gentleness. "You have people saying that Çatalhöyük was this peaceful, vegetarian society," says Meskell. "It's ludicrous. Neolithic settlements were not utopias in any sense at all." When I last met Meskell, we discussed the Egyptian goddess Sekhmet, the savage embodiment of the desert itself, and commented on contemporary Pagans' apparent lack of interest in her.[21] We want goddesses with moral characteristics derived from Christianity and from the enlightenment, and matriarchal societies with characteristics derived from Christian socialism and even Marxism. All this excludes the bitter truths embodied in Pagan myths and ideology.

Why then do people invest so heavily in Bradley's work? The answer might be that it offers an enabling and even cheering myth in a landscape hostile to the very idea of self-assertive women now, in the twenty-first century. The televised version of Bradley's novel changes her Christian opponents of the old religion to invading Saxons, over-running Britain with fire and the sword. It probably feels like that to some women in the southern states, or to women from fundamentalist families who genuinely believe in satanic witchcraft. However, it should be clear that Bradley is not offering history, but a form of therapy – and at a price.

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[19] Carlo Ginzburg, *The Night Battles* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983); Emma Wilby, *The Visions of Isobel Gowdie* (Brighton: Sussex Academic, 2010).

[20] See, for example: Ben Gruagach, "Wiccan Fundamentalism," Witch Grotto, June 18, 2006, http://www.witchgrotto.com/2006/06/wiccan-fundamentalism/; Trae Dorn, "Wiccan Fundamentalists," September 16, 2008, http://www.trhonline.com/article.pl?1221577703.

[21] Allen, "Scholars"; and personal communication from Meskell.

There's nothing at all wrong with going to Glastonbury and engaging in some fantasies. Thousands of people do it every year. It could be done in the spirit of visiting Northern Ireland to experience the universe of *Game of Thrones*, or New Zealand to experience the landscape of *Lord of the Rings*. Both those sets of fantasy novels are comfortable with being both fictional and true to the mythic and storytelling needs of the heart. Bradley's fantasy works in the same way – or should. The problems arise when it is taken to be even remotely historically accurate. You might reasonably say that you can make up whatever you like about fifth-century Britain, because the paucity of sources mean that it just about might be true. But matters become far less clear-cut when the recovery of "history" is seen as a response to a conspiracy to conceal "the truth." At this point, and without any other similarities, Bradley's fiction and its true believers begin to resemble the fictions created by Heinrich Himmler, of race occlusion. We need to ask, why we need to believe? Why do we need a religion relentlessly oppressed by Christianity, rather than one also mocked and appropriated? Why do we need to see witches as vulnerable victims, rather than as the successful blackmailers of their neighbours? What if we saw them instead as trickster figures – an image of considerable antiquity that goes better with the historical record than the goddess image? What if more fiction about witches in the past was willing to be funny? Even if darkly funny?

Bradley's daughter Moira Greyland's recent testimony does nothing to resolve these matters. Encouraged by the support of the Christian community, the narrative she is now offering suggests that her sexual abuse was the direct outcome of sexual liberation, and in particular of the removal of the stigma on homosexual sex. She claims "It is about how being raised by gay people who have a sex-positive philosophy affected my life, and that of the other children in their orbit." For her, "Gay marriage puts children into a situation where normalizing non-mainstream forms of sex is the basis for the relationship. It denies children a normal model of male-female relationships, and puts undue pressure on them to imitate their parents. Even if the pressure is tacit, it can be nearly impossible to avoid. The children of gays I have spoken with have *almost invariably been molested, and have tried to become either gay or trans themselves*" [my emphasis]. Of her mother, she says, "Her descriptions of edgy, perverted sexuality appealed to those eager to throw off the rigid moral structure and narrow ideas about sexuality which prevailed in her day." She also blames Paganism: "Paganism seeks to reinterpret sin, and in so doing, to out-shout our own consciences. We are meant to regard promiscuous sex as being holy and Christianity as being evil, because it "judges and blames."[22] This is a familiar kind of story. In its own way, it is just as mythic as *The Mists of Avalon*, and perhaps better authenticated in the history of the witch trials. It's the story of Christian repentance as a method of teen rebellion. There is an uncanny resemblance between Moira's claims and the assertions of Salem accuser Abigail Williams. I do not want to dismiss her claims, but they are not disinterested. They are a familiar narrative, a disavowal of the birth family in favour of the new Christian family. It would be richly ironic

[22] Matthew Cullinan Hoffman, "INTERVIEW: Daughter of famed sci-fi author explains mother's gay pedophile worldview," LifeSiteNews, May 7, 2018, https://www.lifesitenews.com/news/interview-daughter-of-famed-sci-fi-author-explains-mothers-gay-pedophile-wo.

if only Marion Zimmer Bradley's daughter believed her fiction: Pagan sexuality versus Christian control.

One of the problems with these assertions is *The Mists of Avalon* itself. While it is true that sex is fully incorporated into one of the rites described, the Beltane choice of King Arthur as Horned King, there is actual surprisingly little successful sex in the book.[23] Throughout the story, Morgaine wants to have sex with Lancelet, who repudiates her in favour of the feminine Gwenhyfar and a threesome with Arthur. Eventually, Morgaine finds a lesser figure who looks just like Lancelet, and there is some tentative friends-with-benefits same-sex activity at the dark of the moon. On the whole, however, Morgaine is profoundly unsatisfied, just like she is in Malory's Christian version of the story. The only reason she comes over as sex-positive, to borrow the awkward phrase used by Bradley's daughter, is because the story is richly supplied with Christian strawmen who do not approve of sex at all, and these also influence Queen Gwenhyfar. One of the oddest rewritings is that Bradley retains the notion that the fall of Camelot is Gwenhyfar's fault, that her sexuality is the problem. It is still problematic in Bradley's version, but now it's because Gwenhyfar is a Christian so her sexuality does not contribute to the well-being of the kingdom. But Morgaine's sexual acts are so dutiful that they could almost be described as drudgery. As a character, she very rarely gets what she wants. In this way, Bradley suggests that powerful women are not the same as successful women. Perhaps this is implied by the cover illustration, which shows Morgaine clutching the blade of a sword. Often read as a powerful image, it also looks extremely painful. And it looks as though she is claiming the phallus rather than rejecting it.

Another problem is that Morgaine's magic is extremely confined and therefore confining. Whenever she actually performs a magical action, such as giving Gwenhyfar a fertility charm, it is hedged with awkward caveats that prevent it from doing its job. She completely fails to kill Arthur and replace him with a properly Pagan king. The only fully successful magic is Nimue's enchantment of the Merlin, which kills Nimue. Otherwise, Morgaine's main accomplishment is to summon up Avalon and its barge transportation system from the mists, and even that ability dwindles. By contrast, Malory's sorceresses and enchantresses are genuinely scary. An interesting omission from Bradley's retelling is the enchantress Hallewes, who inhabits the Chapel Perilous. She is hoping to turn Lancelot into a kind of undead sexual relic that she can clip and kiss every day – without his consent, of course. This is more mojo than anybody in Bradley's world can command. It is also significantly more transgressive in its violent reversal of the politics of desire, in which the woman is the object and the man the desiring subject. Hallewes will have none of that. Of course, she is unsuccessful, and of course, the story is meant to be an awful warning, but at

[23] I also note that this rite is about being overwhelmed by the power of sexuality, so that consent no longer applies? "The little blue-painted girl who had borne the fertilizing blood was drawn down into the arms of a sinewy old hunter, and Morgaine saw her briefly struggle and cry out, go down under his body, her legs opening to the irresistible force of nature in them." Marion Zimmer Bradley, *The Mists of Avalon* (London: Penguin, 1993), cited in Rosenberg, "Re-reading". I am reminded of the idea that men suffer from uncontrollable sexual urges that cannot be contained.

least she is genuinely powerful. One of the reasons for abandoning Hallowes and dialling down the power of Morgaine's magic is the pervasive gloom that goes along with second age feminism. Tending to endow patriarchy and therefore Christianity with ridiculous amounts of power rather than searching for the places where that power does not fully operate, or does not operate oppressively, second age feminism is very much a child of the Cold War era in its absolutism. But as a feminist who grew up in its essentialist and separatist heyday, I remember well that its fundamentalism undercut its political usefulness. That fundamentalism, ironically Calvinist in character, is thoroughly built into Bradley's vision of goddess worship. Everyone who is not a goddess worshipper is a horrible antisex obstacle to pleasure.

The problem with this kind of feminist rewriting is that the original maintains a presence. While it is a wonderful idea to retell the late Arthuriad from the point of view of its women characters, Bradley wants to give them particular significance by attaching them to a non-existent religion, and a religion that creates more problems than it solves in the form she provides. The whole idea of maiden, mother, and crone is not only unhistorical but also extraordinarily essentialist, vesting women's natures in their reproductive organs in a manner reminiscent of the claims of transphobic feminists of the same generation. In the second decade of the twenty-first century, this reads as a retrograde step. Of course, body positivity should be part of any halfway decent religion, and younger women reading Bradley's fiction were empowered by its willingness even to mention menstruation and menopause, but to insist that these are the defining events of women's lives is to insist on the biological determinism of gender so profoundly loved by Bradley's generation of feminists. If we are going to invent a contemporary Paganism, we need it to empower women who do not see their bodies in rigidly determinist terms. And there are many alternative models that are better attested than Bradley's for a more flexible and mutable idea of gender.

Ronald Hutton's research has shown definitively that if there was an old religion, it was medieval Catholicism. As Alexandra Walsham's work has demonstrated, medieval Catholicism was richly endowed with residuary Pagan customs, spaces, and calendrical rites, and rather than abandoning these, the church successfully incorporated them into itself in a way that was not criticised until the advent of the Reformation made it useful to insist that Pagan ideas had infected Christmas and Easter.[24] The tender and scarcely visible traces of Paganism in that old religion were then led into captivity by Victorian folklorists, who were inclined to agree with the Reformers. There never was a moment of pure Paganism of the Rousseauan kind that Bradley and her fans seek. Instead, then as now, and by then I mean when the Arthuriad was first written down, little fragile traces of the Pagan world were woven into a predominantly Christian fabric. Rather than repudiating that idea, as Bradley

[24] Alexandra Walsham, *The Reformation of the Landscape: Religion, Identity, and Memory in Early Modern Britain and Ireland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); Ronald Hutton, *The Stations of the Sun: A History of the Ritual Year in Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998); Ronald Hutton, *The Triumph of the Moon: A History of Modern Pagan Witchcraft* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

wishes us to do, we should actually embrace it as a model for the way contemporary Pagans live now. For can there be any Paganism that discards Christian society entirely? Rather, is not twenty-first-century Paganism intrinsically post-Christian? Riffling through tarot packs marked by the hierarchies of church and state – Christian church and state at that – and describing itself as Pagan in the first place illustrates that nobody is free to return to a world before Christendom. To pretend that we can, even in imagination, is to falsify the complexity of our own history. Worse, we deny ourselves the history to which we can lay claim, including the history of the accused witches who trod the same spiderweb path as we tread, barefoot, over nettles and thorns, to world-building.

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