

The Witch in History

Early Modern and Twentieth-century
Representations

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1 A Holocaust of one's own The myth of the Burning Times

Popular history, and also the history taught in schools, is influenced by this Manichaean tendency, which shuns half-tints and complexities; it is prone to reduce the river of human occurrences to conflicts, and the conflicts to duels – we and they, the good guys and the bad guys respectively, because the good must prevail, else the world would be subverted.

Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*

Here is a story. Once upon a time, there was a woman who lived on the edge of a village. She lived alone, in her own house surrounded by her garden, in which she grew all manner of herbs and other healing plants. Though she was alone, she was never lonely; she had her garden and her animals for company, she took lovers when she wished, and she was always busy. The woman was a healer and midwife; she had practical knowledge taught her by her mother, and mystical knowledge derived from her closeness to nature, or from a half-submerged pagan religion. She helped women give birth, and she had healing hands; she used her knowledge of herbs and her common sense to help the sick. However, her peaceful existence was disrupted. Even though this woman was harmless, she posed a threat to the fearful. Her medical knowledge threatened the doctor. Her simple, true spiritual values threatened the superstitious nonsense of the Catholic church, as did her affirmation of the sensuous body. Her independence and freedom threatened men. So the Inquisition descended on her, and cruelly tortured her into confessing to lies about the devil. She was burned alive by men who hated women, along with millions of others just like her.

Do you believe this story? Thousands of women do. It is still being retold, in full or in part, by women who are academics, but also by poets, novelists, popular historians, theologians, dramatists.¹ It is compelling, even horrifying. However, in all essentials it is not true, or only partly true, as a history of what happened to the women called witches in the early modern period.¹