LISS1006 Heretics, Witches and Conspirators: A History of Fear, 1500-1750

Module Syllabus

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Module summary
Who or what did the British really fear in the Early Modern period? Most students will be familiar the notorious witch-hunts that spread across Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, but few will have fully grasped the beliefs, perceptions and anxieties that led neighbours to persecute each other, children to accuse parents, or the ways in which other identities – Catholic, Jew, healer – were perceived to threaten or undermine the order of society. This course will allow you to diagnose the causes for cultures of suspicion and persecution, and open a route to understanding the logic behind it. We will look at the details of the alleged magic, heresy, cursing and plotting that these “criminals” were accused of, as well as analyse the cases where voices of toleration were heard. The course will allow students to get to grips with the actual writings circulating about these groups at the time across Britain and Europe, with particular attention to trials of “witches” and “heretics” within Yorkshire and Lancashire, including a visit to Pendle Hill and the surrounding area where Pendle witches lived.

Objectives
At the end of this module students will have gained:
- an understanding of the rhetoric and concerns of early modern people through examining different primary sources, including sermons, theological treatises, political writings and legislation;
- an understanding of the concepts of heresy, witchcraft and social transgression;
- insight into the popular cultures of toleration and persecution in local, regional and national contexts;
- an introduction to the historiography of concepts such as tolerance, persecution, charity, neighbourliness and conversion.
Learning outcomes
By the end of the module, students will have the:
- ability to analyse and interpret early modern sources;
- ability to commentate on dominant ideas in early modern elite and popular culture;
- ability to research and use textual, archive and electronic resources relating to the early modern period;
- ability to make connections between rhetoric and ideas from different early modern periods and contexts, making links (and charting differences) between time-periods, regions and nations;
- ability to survey, paraphrase and critique the historiography of the early modern period.

Teaching methods

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Delivery type</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Length hours</th>
<th>Student hours</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>On-line Learning</td>
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<td>15</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seminar</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fieldwork</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visit</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private study hours</td>
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<td>Total Contact hours</td>
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<td>Total hours (100hr per 10 credits)</td>
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<td>100</td>
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Private study
15 hours preparatory VLE work before the module starts. Private study: research and reading of primary and secondary material in preparation for seminars and assignments.

Methods of assessment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assessment type</th>
<th>Notes</th>
<th>% of formal assessment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Source Analysis</td>
<td>750 word analytical commentary on another primary source from the source pack</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presentation</td>
<td>Individual presentation; 10 minutes</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Source Analysis</td>
<td>500 word analytical commentary on a primary source from the source pack</td>
<td>30</td>
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Late Penalties
University rules on penalties for late submission of coursework require 5 full marks to be deducted for each calendar day that passes after the date of required submission. If coursework is not submitted by the end of 14 calendar days following the prescribed deadline, a grade/mark of zero will be returned for that component.
Module outline

Day 1: Introduction to the Early Modern Period
The first seminar of the course will be devoted to exploring the “early modern”: what does it mean, what characterised the period, and so on. We will also consider the particular characteristics of early modern Britain and Ireland. We will familiarise ourselves with the era through a close examination of primary sources from across the period, of various kinds, including images, letters, and literary sources. Students will be asked to arrive at the session having researched a key figure in the history of early modern Britain and Ireland and to talk briefly (for a couple of minutes, maximum) about their chosen person, and explain their choice.

Day 2: Concepts of Toleration and Persecution
The second session will begin with a historical overview of the meaning of concepts of toleration and persecution in the early modern and modern period. We will then introduce philosopher Susan Mendus’s article on the nuances and limitations of toleration as a modern idea, and historian Alexandra Walsham’s account of the status of toleration and persecution in early modern society. Students are invited to begin researching the early modern development of these ideas, and think about issues of toleration and persecution as we experience them today.

Day 3: Elite Visions of Witchcraft
The objective this session is the rigorous analysis of “elite” early modern writing on witchcraft. The discussion of witchcraft is set up through the close reading of two contesting explanations of witchcraft and witchcraft accusation: James I, Daemonologie (1597) and Reginald Scot, The Discoverie of Witchcraft (1584). Students are asked to place the texts in dialogue and examine the religious and social anxieties concerning the impact of witchcraft and witchcraft belief in these works. One of the interesting things about James and Scott’s works is that they debate the “scientific” possibility of witchcraft, as well as enmeshing their debates in theology and social commentary. The session will interrogate the religious, social and political reasons why witchcraft was believed in and propagated during this period. In the second part of the session, we will visit the university’s Special Collections to view some rare books relating to witchcraft in the early modern period.

Day 4: Witchcraft and the Community
Another way of recording the phenomenon of witchcraft is to focus on the belief and persecution of witchcraft on a local level. This involves the careful interpretation of trial reports, confessions and anecdotal material that emerges from specific controversies surrounding accusations and punishments of witchcraft in village communities. The aim of this session’s work is to challenge the historical stereotype of the wretched, marginal, female ‘witch’ and to look at the way in which different professions (midwife, doctor, scholar), roles and behaviour intrinsic to village society were vulnerable to accusations of witchcraft. Towards the end of the session, we will ask whether the witch-hunt “hysteria” that enveloped Europe at this time was a specific historical phenomenon or whether there are similar patterns of fear and victimisation in modern society.
Day 5: Field Trip to Pendle, Lancashire, site of the infamous Pendle Witch trials of 1612.
We will visit the Pendle Heritage centre before moving to Barley, the village closest to the area where the Pendle witches lived. From there, we will walk a Pendle Trail, taking in views of the Pendle Hill and Malkin Tower, alleged site of the witch-gatherings or “sabbaths”.

Reading for this session will include Thomas Potts’ 1612 report on the witch trials, Discovery of Witches.

Day 6: The Pendle Witches and “Dark Tourism”
Following on from our trip to Pendle, Lancashire, we will delve into the specific witch trial case-studies and evidence, and look in detail at the pattern of causes that led to the accusation, trial and conviction of these witches. We will consider the reputation and background of the accused (building on from our study of village witch trials in the previous session), the role of religious authorities and outside authorities, and look at the way these trials have caused a particular legacy in the landscape, in commemorative texts and even in the tourism that we have been part of.

Day 7: Anti-Semitism in Early Modern and Modern Europe
The session opens with a study of Martin Luther’s writing on Jewish religion and culture, documenting the changes in his attitudes towards the Jewish faith and towards the presence of Jews in Christian communities. This study sets up an investigation of the ideas and practice of anti-Semitism in early modern Europe, uncovering some of the archetypical fears and prejudices, as well as the theological differences, which set Christian against Jew during the period. To situate the issue in a British context, we will look at primary documents that record debates concerning the expulsion / admittance of Jews in England during the 17th century. The discussion will then open into a debate about how such ideas were resurrected in the anti-Semitism that blighted 20th century Europe so catastrophically.

Day 8: Treason and Plot: Catholic Conspiracy, Commemoration, and National Identity
In this session we will consider the uneasy relationship in early modern Britain and Ireland between Protestants and Catholics. During the reign of Elizabeth I, England was established once more as a Protestant power, and moved to suppress Catholicism. As a result, the queen and her country were subject to the plotting and threats of Catholics at home and abroad. Was this danger exaggerated for political ends? The secret scheming of English Catholics caused considerable anxiety for the advisers to Elizabeth and her successor, James I, and led to one of the most famous episodes in British history: the Gunpowder Plot of 1605. The plot was aimed at King James and other leaders of the government, and is commemorated to this day in Britain on November 5th with bonfires and fireworks. The seminar will explore the tense and secretive atmosphere of contemporary politics, the Gunpowder Plot itself, and the place that these events have in British national memory.

Day 9: Cultures of Tolerance? Philosophies and Practices of Toleration in Early Modern & Contemporary Britain
As a way of examining the beginnings of Britain’s (self-styled?) reputation for “toleration”, we will discuss the philosopher John Locke’s late 17th century writings on toleration. His work comes after 200 years of European history during which religious persecution and warfare had been morally and politically justified, so the logic and impact of his ‘Letter Concerning Toleration’ will be carefully unpacked. We will also consider to what extent early modern society could be a tolerant place – does
its apparent intolerance merely reflect the fact that it was deviations from the norm which are recorded and thus remembered and studied?

Acting as a retrospective for the module, and a chance for a more informal, open debate, we will examine some recent articles on the “essence” of “Britishness” and “British values”, and look at the way in which British writers, leaders and commentators describe the society they live in, and perceive its history. This will give class members a chance to comment on debates around multiculturalism, “the tradition of tolerance” and the politics of fear and internationalism that exist simultaneously in Britain today.

Pendle Hill, Lancashire, the destination of our field trip.