

PREFACE

When I first began my research into the Pendle witches in 1984 it proved exceedingly difficult to unearth any serious literature on the subject. Like many Lancastrians I first heard of the witches through the oral tradition of local myths and legends which had been passed down through the centuries but trying to discover the reality behind the folklore was, at the time, a struggle. The handful of local guide books available tended to cloak uncomfortable reality with cartoon images of haggish women with pointy hats, pointy noses and broomsticks; the template witch so beloved by children. Harsh facts were tagged on or sketchily embedded in the jokey safety of harum-scarum fantasy and consumer-friendly witchery.

The complex reality of these unlucky hill people caught up in their time, belief systems, religious persecution and the ambitions of petty officials is infinitely more disturbing and compelling than the clichéd merchandise of the Halloween circus served up by today's supermarkets or the trite albeit entertaining motifs of Hammer Horror films. It became increasingly obvious that the truth behind this sad and messy episode from our past was an inconvenience few wanted to deal with.

Collusion and reinforcement of the oblique misogyny and class snobbery that ran through many of these narratives suggested that the octogenarian matriarchs Anne Whittle (Chattox) and Elizabeth Southern (Demdike) were indisputably witches because they were elderly peasant women whereas the gentlewoman Alice Nutter was almost always excused and explained away as being a Roman Catholic. This type of ill-considered value judgment was meted out and made more depressing by an unquestioning reiteration of such notions.

When I finally tracked down a dog-eared transcript of Thomas Potts' account of the witch trials in my local reference library (so rare at the time I was not allowed to borrow it) it was a revelation to read an eyewitness account. A real version of reality rather than a version of fantasy. So piece by piece, year by year I gathered as much information as I could for my series of poems on the Pendle witches and in 1994 it was published by Creation Books under the title *Interregnum*.



Geraldine Monk

The original version of *Interregnum* contained one section based on autobiographical material and one concerned with people who had special connections to Pendle such as the founder of the Quaker movement George Fox, who had his vision on Pendle Hill and was also incarcerated in Lancaster Castle, and the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins who taught at Stonyhurst college in the shadow of Pendle. There was also a scattering of contemporary references and quotes from, for example, the Birmingham Six (tried at Lancaster Castle) and the wrongfully imprisoned Stefan Kiszko.

For this 400th commemorative edition I am reproducing the two sets of monologues, retaining the original idea of having one monologue under the popular folklore name, e.g. Squintin Lizzie, and the second under the birth name, e.g. Elizabeth Device. I have however altered the presentation so that the monologues are in pairs rather than in two different sections as in the original. I have also included three additional 'Chantcasters' monologues. It is worth noting that all the words in these three poems, bar three lines, are reworkings of poems which Gerard Manley Hopkins wrote whilst he was in residence at Stonyhurst College. I was spurred on to do this reworking by one of the guide book authors who had reproduced the rather fine three lined 'witches spell' and dismissed it as 'gobbledegook'. There was no recognition that the caprice of circumstance which can make the difference between being condemned to die as a witch or being celebrated as Jesuit poet-priest could be one of time, gender and class.



Since I wrote *Interregnum* the study of the Pendle witches has changed beyond recognition, propelled by more serious research and by the advent of women's studies, with its revisionism of women's history. This is however counterbalanced, perhaps even more strongly than ever before, by the caricature witches now promoted by the tourist industry. The flesh and blood reality of the Pendle witches will always be mired in myth and legend but essentially they were ordinary people caught up in extraordinary circumstance from which there was no escape.

Geraldine Monk 2012

CHARTCASTERS

DEMDIKE SINGS

Wild air,
world-mothering air,
nestling me everywhere,
that's fairly mixed
with riddles
and is rife
in every least things life
and nursing element.

(Welcome in womb and breast
birth-milk draw like breath)

Do but stand
where you can lift your hand
skywards;
round four fingergaps
it laps
such sapphire-shot
charged, steeped sky will not
stain light.

Mark you this:

It does not prejudice
the glass-blue days
when every colour glows.

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Each shape and shadow shows.

The seven or seven times seven
hued sunbeam will transmit.

Perfect.

Not alter it.

CHATTOX SINGS

What we have lighthanded left
will have waked
and have waxed
and have walked
with the wind.

This side
that side hurling
while we slumbered.
Oh then
weary then why should we tread?
O why
are we so haggard at the heart
so care-coiled
care-killed
is there no frowning of these wrinkles
ranked wrinkles deep.

Down?

No waving off these most
mournful messengers
still messengers
sad and stealing.

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(Hush there – only
not within seeing of the sun)

Resign them
sign them
seal them
send them
motion them with breath.

Whatever's prized and passes of us
everything that's fresh and
fast flying of us
seems to us sweet of us
and swiftly away with
done away with
undone.

So beginning
be beginning to despair.

O there's none, no no there's none:
with sighs soaring
soaring sighs deliver.

Them:

Beauty-in-the-ghost.

ÆLL SING

Three biters bitten:

Earth's eye. Earth's tongue. Earth's heart.

Our counterparts cleaved. Wreathed. Cloven.

This age and era's evil ills

dearly and dangerously sweet

delights buried deep.

Tell us where?

A wild web.

A wondrous robe.

Tell us where?

Our lungs must draw and draw

a hair

an eyelash

a care kept.

Where kept?

Where?

Tell us where?

Around the beating heart.

b-boom b-boom b-boom

In the fine flood.

In the deathdance in the blood.

OUT-THOUGHTS & REPLIES

...of CHATTOX...

As the hill imperceptibly steepened
and dimmed
the invisible squadrons
multiplied to
fever
pitch beating
deep and
crammed
against themselves and each
pitched
at the plagued
inner roof of my skull
browning
bruised with the spray
of ceaseless distress
trying to
out
to be aired and wing-ing.

It is the way of words –
to leave yet
to remain:
to breed in
absence:
in the immaculate
space of decay.