

What does the Pendle witch trial tell us about 17th century beliefs?

Teaching notes

Starter

- Ask students to draw their idea of a stereotypical witch.
- Next they should swap their picture with a partner who should label the features that help them to recognise that this picture is of a witch.
- Share the list at the top of the 'Information and task sheet' (pp.2-3) with students and ask them to tick any features that are present in their drawing of a witch. They could also add any features that are missing!

Follow-up questioning for a mini-plenary:

- Are you surprised that 90% of people accused of witchcraft between 1450 and 1750 were women?
- Can you think of any reasons why it was primarily women who were accused of witchcraft?

Task 1

As suggested at the bottom of the 'Information and task sheet' (p.2) students should create a pamphlet which details the kind of women that witch hunters should target.

Task 2

- As a class, read through the information about the Pendle witch trial which can be found in this BBC article: www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-14490790
- Individually or in pairs students should then read through the information about the individuals involved in the trial (p.5) and complete the table (p.6).

Task 3

In pairs or small groups, students should read through the 'Trial and punishment section' and then discuss the 'Key questions for discussion' on p.3.

Possible homework task

- Students could complete 'Task 4' as outlined on p.4
- Alternatively, they could create a title page for James I's book *Demonology* with an 'accurate' illustration of a witch.

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Information and task sheet

James I's list of witch signs:

- a woman, especially an old woman
- owning an animal, especially a cat
- a birth mark or any birth defect
- they have no shadow
- making models, having clay figures
- a woman who lives alone or only with other women and children
- holds ceremonies.

Why women?

- In the 17th century the role of women was very restricted, and women were expected to focus on practical domestic duties. Women who did not live up to this expectation were viewed suspiciously.
- Many of the women accused were 'wise women'. These women were often in positions of authority in society on health, pregnancy, etc. The authorities disliked these women having a respected position, so they attracted the attention of witch hunters.
- Single and poor women were viewed suspiciously and were easy targets for witch hunters.
- Some women were viewed as easily tempted by the devil.



This picture is from a 15th century illuminated manuscript and shows that the idea of witches flying on broomsticks is certainly not a modern one!

Riding witches / Credit: akg-images / Universal Images Group / Copyright © akg-images / For Education Use Only. This and millions of other educational images are available through Britannica Image Quest. For a free trial, please visit www.britannica.co.uk/trial

Task 1

Create a pamphlet encouraging witch hunters to seek out women. Give examples of the type of women who should be sought out.

Task 2

Case study: Pendle witch trial 1612

- Read the information sheet about the individuals in the Pendle witch trial.
- Fill out the table using James I's defining features of witches.



Task 3

Trial and punishment

The conditions in the dungeons of Lancaster Castle were grim and the Demdike died while she was waiting for the trial. The trial took place in August 1612 and Jennet was the star witness. They stood her on a table in the court and she said her entire family were witches. Her mother, sister and brother were all condemned to death because of her evidence plus Alice Nutter and the five other villagers, who were all found guilty.

The only evidence was the testimony of nine year old Jennet and the confessions of the Demdike and James Device. The convicted witches were hanged, at Lancaster Castle on 20 August 1612. After the executions were over, Roger Nowell bought Alice Nutter's land from her relatives, for a bargain price ...

Key questions for discussion

1. What do you think really happened to the peddler? (What might his symptoms have been?)
2. Why do you think that Alizon believed she had killed the peddler - what sort of education do you think she had had?
3. Why do you think the Demdike confessed to being a witch? What sort of understanding do you think that the Demdike had?
4. Why do you think that James Device may have admitted to the charges?
5. Why might Jennet Device have told the magistrate that her whole family were witches?
6. Why might Roger Nowell have asked Jennet to accuse Alice Nutter of being a witch?

Task 4

At the trial of the witches there was no one to speak on their behalf.

Imagine you can travel back in time and write a defence of the Pendle witches.

Think about the evidence against the witches and write down what is wrong with it and why the people should not be condemned to death.

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Elizabeth Southernns was also known as 'The Demdike'. She was 80 years old and blind. She was said to be confused in her mind and bent over with age. She had a birth-mark on her right side and owned a brown dog. She was also said to hold witches' ceremonies with her family. She lived with her daughter and grandchildren, who were all accused of being witches as well.

Alizon Device was Old Demdike's grand-daughter. She was eighteen years old with long, dirty hair. She had a big black dog that followed her everywhere and a birth-mark on her body. She was said to have cursed a peddler and killed him. She was also said to have attended a witches meeting with the other Pendle witches, and to have stuck pins into clay figures to make people fall ill.

James Device was Alizon's brother; he was 13 years old, thin and dirty with long hair. He had severe learning difficulties and was also physically disabled. After a woman accused him of stealing, he made a clay figure of her and crumbled it up. The woman became ill and died.

Alice Nutter was a rich woman of about 40 years old. The rest of the witches were very poor but Alice Nutter was a gentlewoman (which means she was from a rich family). Alice had land which Roger Nowell, the local Magistrate, wanted to buy, but Alice would not sell. Alice was accused of meeting up with the other Pendle witches.

Elizabeth Device was The Demdike's daughter. She was about fifty years old and a widow. Her nickname was 'Squinting Lizzie', because of her poor eyesight. She was supposed to have killed people by making clay models of them and then crumbling them up. She was also said to have attended witches meetings with the rest of the Pendle witches.

The Chattox's real name was Anne Whittle and she was about eighty years old. The Chattox was a widow, who lived with her daughter. She had a brown dog and a birth-mark on her right arm. She was said to have killed four people, by breaking clay models of them. She was also said to have cursed and killed four cows.

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	The Demdike	Alizon Device	James Device	Alice Nutter	Elizabeth Device	The Chattox
Gender						
Age						
Owned an animal?						
Distinguishing features						
Makes models?						
Holds ceremonies?						