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Spellbound: Magic, Ritual and Witchcraft

Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, 31 August 2018 – 6 January 2019[1]

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'Could you stab the image of a loved one?' This is one of six questions posed by Sophie Page and Marina Wallace, the two lead curators of *Spellbound: Magic, Ritual and Witchcraft*, intended to prompt visitors to 'explore the place of magical thinking in our lives, and to connect this to magical thinking in the past'.[2] In drawing an emotive correspondence between a person and a surrogate, it is a question that strikes at the heart of one of the exhibition's key aims, an aim shared with the Leverhulme-funded project that enabled it: to historicize identity and subjectivity in light of emotional experience and supernatural belief.

Spellbound offers no shortage of opportunities to contemplate the relevance and importance of emotional experience in a period traversing 800 years of magic, the occult and the supernatural in Europe, and the Ashmolean is an appropriate home given that it was founded by an alchemist and astrologer, Elias Ashmole, and is currently under the directorship of Xa Sturgis, who has experience as a practising magician known as The Great Xa. 180 exhibits are ordered into three broad periods – the medieval cosmos, early-modern communities, and the modern household – and from the outset visitors are encouraged to reflect on present-day rituals and beliefs that resonate with these histories, from deciding whether or not to enter the exhibition by walking under a ladder, to reading the initials and markings on padlocks secured by lovers to Leeds Centenary Bridge.

The first section explores the medieval cosmos and includes some beautifully illustrated manuscripts depicting celestial spheres and their relationship to 'microcosmic man' or 'Zodiac man', and astrological tools and instruments designed to depict or measure the movements of the cosmos and its impact on health and destiny. Read together, they reveal a worldview that

conjoins cosmological forces with the viscera of a human body prone as much to the malign designs of demons as it is to the positive influence of angels and the pangs of love (this link between the cosmos and the body also underpins the commissioning of a slightly kitschy new-age artwork in this room by Ackroyd & Harvey, called *From Aether to Air*). Talismans, crystal reliquaries and beeswax votives provide an accessible portal to medieval belief in the supernatural given the prevalence of comparable practices today in cultures where Catholicism and Eastern Orthodox Christianity still holds sway, while reflective objects used in necromantic rituals – including a captivating obsidian mirror owned by the sixteenth-century magician John Dee – evoke a long-lasting fascination with the uncanniness of reflected images in the art and literature of diverse cultures.

The exhibition is not ordered linearly; rather, the second stage focuses on the modern household. This section is considerably more speculative in evidencing belief in magic, witchcraft and the supernatural, but it does much to situate such belief in more quotidian and familiar terrain. What comes across most clearly is an understanding of natural and manufactured things as animate and agentic, whether they be a bewitched cow's heart pierced with nails found lodged in a chimney, with the smoke and fire warding off further evil (clearly the inspiration behind Katherine Dowson's commissioned art installation), clothes imbued with the characteristics of a loved one, or a Bellarmine jar or 'witch bottle' filled with urine, pins and hair buried beneath the threshold of one's home to protect it from evil. Understanding these things as vibrant matter chimes with the current shift toward new materialism in the arts and humanities, whereby non-human 'things' are regarded as having agency, and does much to fulfil the curators' aim to connect different modes of magical thinking past and present.

The final section of the exhibition is likely to be the most familiar to visitors as it focuses, albeit not exclusively, on the persecution of witches from the mid-fifteenth century until the European Enlightenment, culminating in a dramatized recording of witch trial transcripts. It includes further material 'things' that reverberate strongly as vibrant matter, such as a witch's

scale and a 'Gown of humiliation', which are placed in proximity to more recent artefacts and documentation of animate objects, for instance evidence of 'ectoplasm' called forth by the spiritualist Helen Duncan, one of the last women to be convicted under the 1735 Witchcraft Act before it was replaced with the Fraudulent Mediums Act in 1951. However, early-modern depictions of witches in paintings and engravings dominate, most notably a famous illustration of Matthew Hopkins questioning witches at Manningtree in 1645, and a copy of Albrecht Dürer's *Witch Riding Backwards on a Goat* (1510). The latter in particular brings to light the dominant and fundamentally misogynist correlation of witchcraft with female elders who live alone, just as the sight of a witch forcefully grabbing a goat's horn while clutching an erect broomstick reveals a patriarchal fear of emasculation among the artists who produce these images, along with those who commissioned the work. This is a fear that echoes the perverse advice given by Heinrich Institoris in his infamous study of witchcraft, *Malleus Maleficarum* (1486), which includes chapters on whether or not witches trick men into thinking that their penises have fallen off, and the methods used for removing them.

The care taken in gathering such a range of both very rare and quotidian objects, texts and images is highly impressive, with some of these – in my case the obsidian mirror and illustrated manuscripts – making a deep and lasting impression. However, while the exhibition catalogue makes brief reference to a 'precarious domestic economy' as 'a plausible target for witches, male or female',[3] it is hard not to be reminded of Sylvia Federici's important book *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation* (2004), which offers a trenchant critique of the ostracization of women from paid labour in the height of witch persecution in Europe, and the devaluation of women's domestic work beyond the capacity to reproduce. More could have been done in the guidance accompanying representations of witches in the early modern period to critique the close imbrication of work, patriarchy and the persecution of female witches, using the misogynistic representation of 'unproductive' post-menopausal women in the otherwise well-selected and harrowing engravings, illustrations and paintings as cases in

point. This is also where the core concerns of this special issue of *Volupté* come into view most strongly. The 'decadence' of *Spellbound*'s rich array of weird, esoteric and potentially subversive objects rubs up against a more conventional view of witchcraft as a degenerate practice. In closing the exhibition with an array of paintings and artefacts predicated on ostracizing witches as a decadent subject feared more than they inspire, whose moral degeneracy is seen to corrupt the sacrosanct bonds of homogeneous Christian communities and heteronormative marital relationships, *Spellbound* risks muting a more captivating, more rewarding understanding of decadent practices as that which might *challenge* processes of victimization, rather than staging its worst excesses. Leaving the exhibition with the 'outing' of Helen Duncan as a fraud is particularly telling, laying bare the empirical evidence of her deception in ways that undermine the inspiring animistic worldview that had characterized the exhibition's earlier stages. Also, the emphasis that these stages place on animistic beliefs, quite appropriately, calls to mind ritual practices in South American and African countries that were once under European colonial rule. While the exhibition is clearly focused on Europe, there was a missed opportunity here to explore the unfortunate legacies of witch persecution in these countries, which resulted in profound suffering for non-white slaves and plantation workers who were unable to correlate occult animistic worldviews with the imposition of Christianity.

I am critical of these aspects of *Spellbound*. However, it remains a monumental achievement in celebrating another part of the story of witchcraft – particularly in the exhibition's earlier stages – that dominant narratives focusing solely on evil and suffering risk overlooking, a story that casts cultural histories of magic and the supernatural in more positive terms by exploring their links to love, healing, and in some important cases to empowerment as well. It draws together a wide range of evocative, captivating and inspirational artefacts, alongside harrowing reminders of the malevolence not just of spirits or demons in a cosmology that accommodated them, but also of those who demonized vulnerable subjects within their own communities in ways that failed or deliberately refused to acknowledge the value of diverse

strengths, insights and practices – an issue derived from emotional experience that still speaks volumes in such a precarious contemporary moment.

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[1] Curation led by Dr Sophie Page (UCL), with Professor Marina Wallace (Artakt). Associate curators: Professor Owen Davies (University of Hertfordshire), Professor Malcolm Gaskill (UEA) and Dr Ceri Houlbrook (University of Hertforshire).

[2] Sophie Page and Marina Wallace, 'Introduction', in Sophie Page, Marina Wallace, Owen Davies, Malcolm Gaskill and Ceri Houlbrook, *Spellbound: Magic, Ritual & Witchcraft* (Ashmolean Museum, Oxford: University of Oxford Press, 2018), pp. 9-11.

[3] Malcolm Gaskill, 'The Fear and Loathing of Wtiches', in *Spellbound: Magic, Ritual & Witchcraft*, p. 108.