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## **Elizabethan Witchcraft: An Era of Persecution**

The reign of Elizabeth I, Queen of England during the late 1500s, marked an intellectual era of the Renaissance. Sadly, it also marked an era of intensified persecution of Witches, a persecution supported by the Queen who is said to have been a pious creature – always lending an ear to the clergy and heading their ill-advice. Perhaps she too was concerned about her own safety. Her mother, Anne Boleyn was accused of being a Witch. Being the daughter of a Witch in those days could very easily be misconstrued by rivals as hereditary, which would undoubtedly result in the loss of the throne and even the loss of life.

Witchcraft practiced during the reign of this Queen is referred to Elizabethan Witchcraft, ironically appearing to offer her the credit for its existence whereas in truth she was partly responsible for its near demise.

As indicated before, the Elizabethan era saw a revival in terms of belief in the supernatural. One would imagine that the intellectually enlightened minds of the late 1500's would view the world very differently to the views held by the likes of Pope Innocent VIII in the 1000's. Whilst, at first glance a contradiction in terms, the dynamics of the sudden availability of information (or misinformation if you like) caused by the commissioning of Johannes Gutenberg's printing press around 1456, explains this phenomenon. Copious amounts of books were printed – mostly Bibles or Books containing religious themes. Sadly these themes reinforced belief in the supernatural and the authors were mostly Christian protagonists – proponents of the theory that Witchcraft (and by definition Witches) was evil and that they were consorts of the Devil himself. Most of these so-called experts agreed that British Isles were overrun by Witches and that the scourge had to be dealt with without delay. This led to an increase in Witch hunts and concomitantly to an increase in executions. The fact that the printing press also enabled the publishing of books on Astrology, Alchemy and Magic, merely exacerbated an already burning issue. In 1562, Elizabeth I passed the Elizabethan Witchcraft





Act "against Conjurations, Enchantments and Witchcrafts". The Act was certainly more lenient than those in Italy and Spain. It did not combine acts of heresy with acts of Witchcraft. It also offered punishment by hanging, not burning and disallowed the torture of suspects.

But who were the Witches so hated and feared? This is their summarized tale. Once upon a time, before the burnings started, Witches were considered "Wise Ones" by all. They were the mid-wives, the healers, the advisers and the ones who worked magick when magick was needed in someone's life. They enabled discussions with departed loved ones and looked into the future for those who needed a light on their paths. They were honored and highly regarded. Traditionally an oral tradition, Witchcraft was passed on from Mother to Daughter or Witch to Apprentice – generation upon generation. The Burning Times all but destroyed this tradition. The Craft of the Wise had to resort to stealth to survive and after nearly 500 years of Burning Times, Elizabethan Witches were well underground.

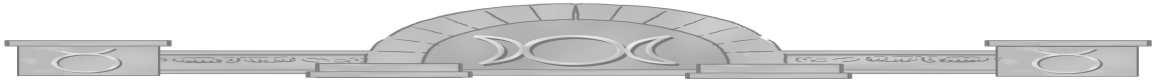
Fuelled by the hate campaigns against witches, ordinary people and nobility alike started blaming witches for every bit of misfortune that came about. Blame for everything ranging from bad harvests, to fires, to animal disease and even to the Bubonic Plague were ascribed to the evil powers of Witches. The problem was though, that not only Witches were targeted in this frenzy. Most of the victims of the ensuing genocide were not practitioners of the Craft at all, but ordinary Christian women, children and men. Because men were powerful and women were viewed as inherently sinful, they made up the bulk of the suspects and the bulk of the convicted. As a result of the ensuing Witch hunts, 270 Elizabethan witch trials were conducted. 247 of the suspects were women and only 23 were men. The women accused were mostly old, poor and unprotected. Many were single women or widows and many kept pets for company. These pets were said to be their 'familiars'. Most of them lacked beauty – at a time when ugliness was considered a sign of evil. In the trials for Maleficium, which is the use of diabolical power to cause harm, only 13% of those accused went free.

The hunts continued as did the trials beyond the reign of Elizabeth I. James I – a self proclaimed expert in identifying witches - saw to that. Fortunately and in spite of the fact that the laws on Witchcraft remained in place for a further century or more, by 1700 the frenzy had died down and most respectable people no longer paid attention to or believed in the existence of Witches anymore.

Sadly, it was too late. Much, if not most of the information on the practice of the Craft during the Elizabethan era, has been lost. Forever.

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