



### Witch Hunts



**Halloween** is often associated with the figure of the **witch**, typically wearing a black pointed hat, striped red-and-white stockings and Puritan buckle shoes. Why is the figure of the witch recurrent in American history and culture and why is it associated with Halloween? As **Ruth Edna Kelley** explains in ***The Book of Halloween*** (see the *Book of the Month*), the beginning of the darker half of the year has been marked by rituals about death and the fleetingness of life since ancient times, thus explaining the link with the **three Fates** and ancient **sibyls, prophetesses** and **seeresses**. These women had **religious roles of prestige and power**, often due to their **knowledge of plants** or of some other **healing or medical skill** – hence their frequent association with **midwifery**. The persecution of this type of ‘witchcraft’ or ‘sorcery’ began when the community started to fear that such knowledge and power may be used not to the advantage of the members of the community itself, but to their detriment. This phenomenon eventually led to increasing suspicions and mistrust against such women who – thanks to their knowledge and privileged role – had gained some independence and therefore led a more **isolated and independent lifestyle** than ‘common’ women did. This explains such historical events as the **Salem witch trials (1692-1693)** as well as such fictional figures of American literature as **Hester Prynne** from ***The Scarlet Letter*** by **Nathaniel Hawthorne**, published in 1850 but set in the Massachusetts Bay Colony in the 1640s. Historically speaking, witch hunts have not been exclusive to North America, but intermittently plagued Europe (especially **Switzerland** and **Germany**) between the 1300s and the late 1600s. One of the earliest and most famous cases was that of **Petronilla de Meath**, an Irish noblewoman burnt at the stake in 1324, aged 24, in Kilkenny, on charge of witchcraft, heresy and murder.

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