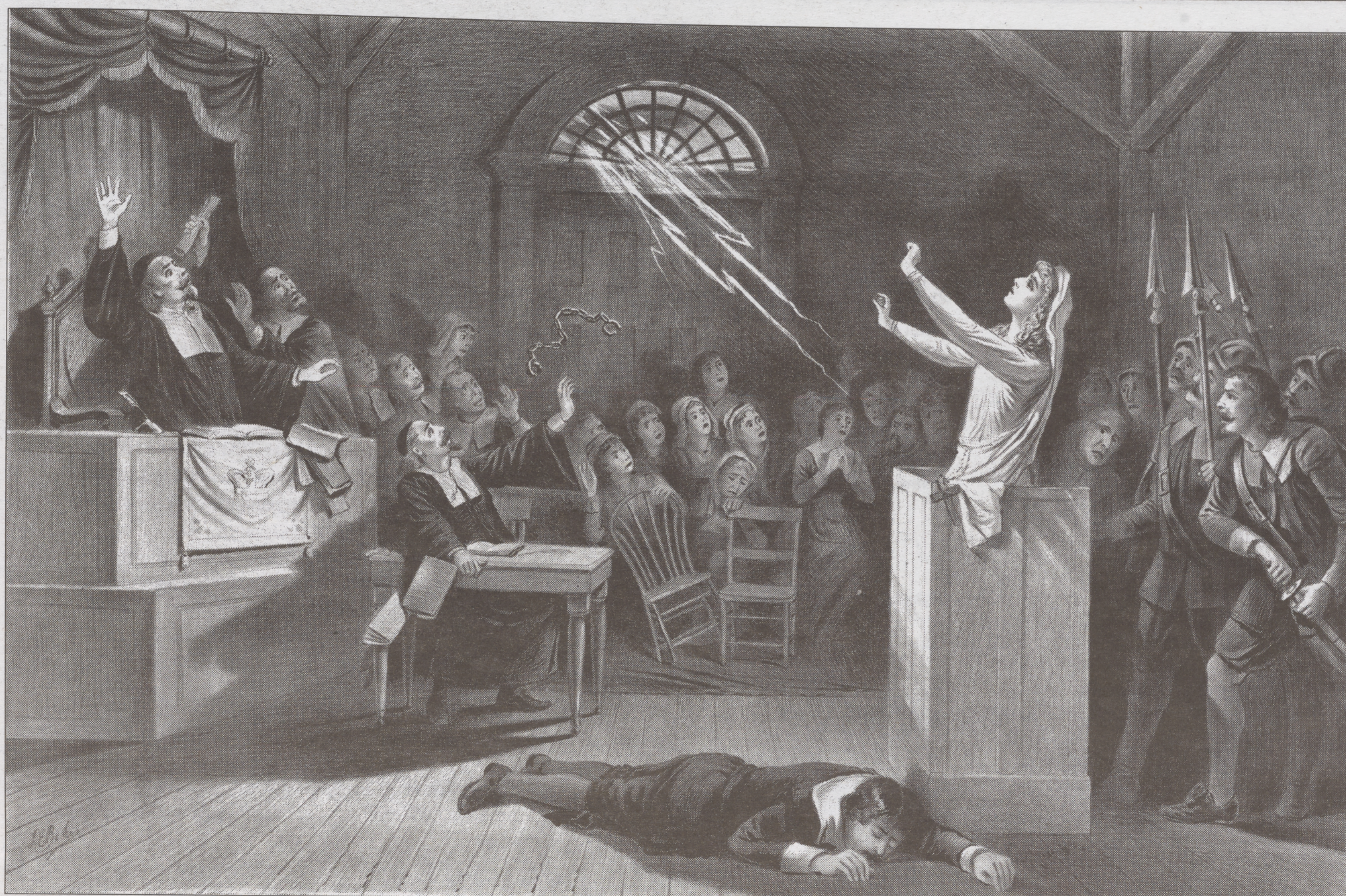

Joseph E. Baker's "Witch No. 1" from 1892 is a lithograph illustrating the mythological events of the Salem witch trials of the late 17th century.

WITCHES, from page 10

until now," Spooner said. "It became a story in which a lot of other concerns could be addressed, about marginalization, exclusion and persecution."

Both publications implied that the witches were a threat to the patriarchal institutions of the church and what passed for orthodox medicine, and they were brought down accordingly. Both also used the inflated claim that there were 9 million victims of the witch trials – an estimate made by German scholar Gottfried Christian Voigt in 1784 – and so have been condemned because of historical inaccuracy.

In conservative England and later in New England during the Salem witch trials of 1692-93, hanging was preferred to burning.

"The burning witch is not accurate of England at all," Spooner said. "It was a Protestant country, and that was not considered humane. ... Witchcraft is represented differently in different countries, so while (in Europe) it was much more sexualized, representations in Britain were not at all."

Witches in England and in the United States are characterized by the other type of Halloween costume you'll find on the shelves – the one with the pointy hat, broomstick and warty hooked nose – the hag.

At the center of the Pendle Witch coven trial of 1612 in Lancashire County, England – perhaps the best-known coven trial in English legal history – were two elderly widows in their 70s: Anne Whittle (aka Chattox) and Elizabeth Southerns (aka Demdike), both blind and appearing to come straight from the pages of a fairy tale.

The representations of the witch as sexy or hag-like are two sides of the same coin, metaphors for the two things society, both then and now, fears most in women – sexual liberation and aging.

"What's really disturbing about the hag is when she becomes sexual, and when the sexy one loses her youth, she becomes the hag," Spooner said. "The sexy one can be recuperated by patriarchal culture – why wouldn't it like a sexy witch? But when the hag becomes sexy, then that becomes threatening."

The representations of the witch as sexy or hag-like are two sides of the same coin, metaphors for the two things society, both then and now, fears most in women – sexual liberation and aging.

Uneducated and poor, Chattox and Demdike were most likely wise-women, common in isolated village life, making small sums as healers, using charms or ointments when doctors were not readily available. It's safe to assume that if they and their neighbors, believed they had powers for good, they would also believe those powers could be used for hexes and wrongdoing against those who aggrieved them.

Spooner pointed out that these women became obvious scapegoats during a time of religious and political upheaval. In remote areas like Pendle, Catholics continued to practice openly during the English Reformation, and stories from the town soon reached King James I, who had two intense interests – Protestant theology and, after a visit to Denmark where he'd attended a witch trial, witch hunting. His book "Daemonologie" instructed his followers to prosecute any practitioners, and in his native Scotland, witch hunting reached far more brutal extremes.

"Society chooses who it wants to exclude, and it finds reasons to exclude them," Spooner said. "To shore up their sense of self and consolidate their own identity, societies have to reject certain things – throw them off. So to deal with the social pressures that were fermenting at that time, they had to pick someone, dirty people outside of the community, that they could get rid of to bolster their own strength. It was arbitrary – it could have been anyone – but it was useful that those women were there and already were the object of social tensions."

One of the arguments against feminist interpretations of the witch trials is that women were often the accusers. But if Chattox and Demdike were both local wise-women, poor and marginalized and in competition, it is logical that they would be ready to accuse one another when the witch hunters began paying attention to Pendle. Their competition ultimately led to each other's, and to their associates', demise.

In addition to duplicity among the Lancashire witches, many believe they were coerced into confessions. Starved and sleep deprived when they stood before a court, they ended up saying what they thought they were supposed to say. But although that fits with the picture of the witch as oppressed victim, Spooner believes this isn't how we should remember them.

"We shouldn't get rid of the evil witch completely because for many of those women, that is how they thought of themselves. If you take that away from them, then they don't have anything – that was their way of reclaiming some power in horrible circumstances. You can see from some of the confessions, there's a real sense of enjoyment in it, like: 'Right, I'm just going to make up the most extravagant thing I can think of. Yes! I am going to ride off on a black beast!'"

In 2012, Spooner was involved in the 400th anniversary of the Lancashire witch trials. She was surprised to find how lively this history remains in Lancaster where the executions took place.

"Some people would want to merchandise it – sell pointy hats and brooms – and others just said, 'No. Absolutely not. This is not appropriate. People died. They were real people who were executed as a miscarriage of justice, and we have to be sensitive and respect that,'" she said.

As for Halloween, Spooner doesn't necessarily think we need to pay similar respect on that day.

"I think Halloween is slightly different because it's not linked to a particular event or specific set of historical circumstances. I love Halloween. There's something celebratory and joyful about it that we shouldn't ignore. That in itself can be positive and even political," Spooner said.

"It's a chance to raise up social fears and deal with them in a way that is comfortable. We can enjoy being scared, but it's not really scary. It's innocence. It's letting off steam, and that forms a really valuable social function."

Courtesy of Big Issue North / INSP.ngo