

### Why were Witches women?

For over three centuries, early modern Europe was largely dominated by witchcraft persecutions, the scale of which such atrocities had never been witnessed before. These persecutions arose from various significant instabilities of the times. Tens of thousands of executions were carried out, especially within Central Europe and the vast majority of deaths were attributed to women. This is what was most remarkable about this period; the fact that so many women were recognised as practitioners of witchcraft. I shall be closely following the reasons for such large-scale prosecutions within the early modern period. In particular, I shall be looking at the different sub-categories concerning reasons for such a rise in the nature of witch prosecutions. These categories will be broken up as follows; the Church's view on maleficia, whom the witches were, the effect society had on the arrival of witchcraft, literature's perspective, natural thought and freethinking, and the confessions of witches.

The Church was integral to the whole belief system within modern day Europe and was the main, driving component for social, economic and religious conformity. However, the Catholic Church as a unit had been threatened through 'The Reformation' and theological perceptions and ideas were changing. People's interpretations and prior beliefs were now being challenged, criticised and there was now total religious uncertainty and unbalance within society. 'This consequently led to the powerful 'Counter Reformation' in which the Catholic Church began an attempt to not only counter the Protestant Reformation, but also to eliminate corruption, educate clergy and inspire faith in the common people' - (B.P. Levack, 1995).

The combination of these two ecclesiastical revolutions induced the inevitable religious disorder, which in turn would spur the rise and development of more numerous and more extreme witch-hunts. In addition, these two reformed religions placed a renewed importance upon individual morals. 'This issued many with the desire to place the burden of sins upon someone else, and in effect to acquire a scapegoat' - (B.P. Levack, 1995). Throughout history, such scapegoats have generally been the rejects of society, the loners, the sick, and the poor. This age was no different and in their search for a victim, someone to hold responsible, they found the witches. This period of great religious, social and economic transformation combined with the prevalence of epidemics and natural disasters now had a target on whom to lay all the blame upon; a physical embodiment of the evil that had been endured.

Furthermore, as well as Martin Luther and Jean Calvin highlighting and condoning the burning of witches as 'whores of Satan', the Church as a whole was responsible for accepting witchcraft as part of society, essentially forming the moral backing needed for such large-scale atrocities. So then, in 1485 the Catholic inquisition authorities published '*Malleus Maleficarum*'. This was essentially a book, confirming women as those responsible for witchcraft, as those capable of evil and temptation.

*'Women are by nature instruments of Satan...they are by nature carnal, a structural defect rooted in the original creation'*

The bible also condemned witchcraft, or so people thought. Within Exodus 22:18 it orders, "Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live". It is then this mixture of Church and theological backing that gave the people of Europe the authority to act upon the 'witches' within society, and to destroy anyone suspected of witchcraft.

'It is interesting to note then that this period of witch-hunting was most intense within Germany, Switzerland, Poland, and Scotland, where the countries were

religiously heterogeneous' - (G. Geis, 1997), comprising a mix of numerous Protestant and Catholic believers. Moreover, the witch-hunts themselves have long been seen as part of a 'war against women', conducted overwhelmingly by men and particularly, by those in authority. Infact, Deborah Willis notes that "more polemical" feminist accounts "are likely to portray the witch as a heroic protofeminist resisting patriarchal oppression and a wholly innocent victim of a male-authored reign of terror designed to keep women in their place." – (D. Willis, 1995, in web page).

Holistically speaking, the Church's contribution to witchcraft fears and prosecutions led to the general belief within society that demons actively interfered upon the Earth and that witches were hugely prevalent concerning the interactions with and/or the dealings with such forces upon the Earth. In general, there was a greatly intensified and invigorated belief in the supernatural. For those who did not believe in such ideas, it still remained a plausible and effective tool for shifting the blame onto the women within society.

It is now important to fully recognise whom these witches were and to discern the types of women victimised for such 'crimes against humanity'. In general, it was the women from the lower sections of society who were seen as those who had the opportunity to commit harmful acts. Those who were widows and so were therefore able to conceal things and to hide within the cloak of darkness; to practice their magic and to meet with their familiars and even with the Devil himself, were often susceptible to prosecutions. In addition, these women were seen as 'vessels of nature' and much closer to the environment and conditions of nature than men, and so more able to dominate the elements. The number of unmarried women was also increasing and this was another cause for fear within society. These women were considered a burden on society. The other group vulnerable to witchcraft accusations were midwives. One of the ostensible practices of witches was the execution and cannibalism of infants, especially those who had not yet been baptised into the Christian faith. Therefore, it is of no surprise that this particular group was especially focused upon in terms of prosecutions. It was essentially a way for grieving families to be able to lay blame upon the midwife for the death of their child, particularly within times of increasing infant mortality and occasional infanticide. The general view however was that witches were often cited as those 'outsiders of society', reliant upon community relief and benefits, draining the land of it's wealth. Additionally, women were often cited with sorcery because of their traditional roles as cooks, nurses, midwives and keepers of the home.

Witches were often associated as those who were in league with the Devil and as those who would meet at 'Sabbats' to create spells, curses, practice killings and take part in lewd sexual acts with one another and with Satan himself. Single women were particularly focused upon for prosecutions concerning sexual abominations, as they were seen as more easily seductable and by far more sexual by nature. Indeed, the fact that the Devil was depicted as being the very form of a man highly extenuated the belief that women did take part in such acts. Society also saw women as being weaker in every sense of the word. They did not have the political power or physical capabilities to defend themselves. Therefore, they were thought to use magic to defend themselves and additionally make pacts with the Devil to achieve various things against their enemies. However, 'the great witch hunts of the medieval period were long depicted as a 'war against women', conducted mainly by men, especially those in central authority' (Willis, Malevolent Nurture, p. 12). The reason for this was ostensibly that men wanted to keep women in their rightful place within society,

largely pacified and subdued. This came with the great fear of feminist accounts, which started to take place within this period.

The subject of women projected as witches was widely held in belief within local communities and often formed the deciding factor in disputes within local communities. So if a particular person has had a bad harvest, or their child has dies in the night, the climate of Early Modern Europe was conducive to such accusations and provided the ammunition with which to prosecute. The times of the period were one of extreme economic turbulence and poverty. Across Western Europe in particular, the gulf between the rich and poor was consistently growing and there was a general decline also in the living standards of much of Europe. These conditions may however have persuaded people to contemplate using magic to help themselves and to achieve monetary or land gains, but on the other hand, it also maintained that accusations would be at a new high.

Below is a table showing the relevance of monetary/land/food disputes within local communities and the effect being a widow within society would have concerning such disputes and jealousies in Essex, 1564-89:

*Kinship Relationships*

|                            |   |   |
|----------------------------|---|---|
| Husband and Wife *         | 4 | Unspecified Quarrels (2)<br>Sexual Jealousy (1)<br>Broken Marriage Contract (1) |
| Stepfather and Stepchild   | 1 | Over Inheritance  |
| Grandmother and Grandchild | 1 | Obligation to collect wood  |
|                            |   | <b>Total 6</b>  |

*Neighbourly Relationships*

\* (Object of dispute) \*

|                   |                 |
|-------------------|-----------------|
| Food/Drink *      | 12              |
| Animals           | 4               |
| Money *           | 8               |
| Implements        | 4               |
| Unspecified loans | 3               |
| Boundaries/Land * | 4               |
| Children          | 3               |
|                   | <b>Total 48</b> |

The difference shown in number between kinship quarrels and disputes within the community is substantial. It demonstrates the heightened debates and tension with local communities and supports the view that widows were particularly attacked within these times as defenceless, unimportant people of the community.

Another crucial part of women being persecuted as witches, developed through another mind controlling and prevalent technique within this time period. This was the use of literature, so covering everything from the bible and Church readings to pamphlets and novels written within the time. It is not surprising that the 'Malleus maleficarum' had such an influential effect upon the rise of women as victims of mass witch prosecutions.

Shakespeare also wrote within this time period and included a wide range of texts, often shadowing events and topics within Europe at the time. One of the key texts he wrote was that of 'Macbeth', where Macbeth and his wife gradually murder

various people in line to the succession of Kingship for their own gratuitous ends. The central factor towards their warped ideals and evil dealings was that of the witches within the moors. These of course were depicted purely as women, with similar characteristics to those generally seen as witches within this same period.

The very fact that Lady Macbeth had to effectively become a man and get rid of her female characteristics in order to succeed, parallels the social view of women within this time and further extenuates the likelihood of women as victims. Indeed, it is the prophecies of the witches that initiate the murder, corruption, greed and lies that manifest with Macbeth. The famous line of *'is that a dagger I see before me'* spoken by that of Macbeth represents the conjuring of illusionary magic, produced by the witches of the time. Furthermore, the witches and his wife are inextricably linked together, in that they both influence Macbeth, and so the social view of women being manipulative, a natural temptation (as referred to in the *Malleus maleficarum*), a necessary evil etc is evidently shown within the literature of the time.

The Catholic Church concentrated specifically upon the natural sin and evil within the individual and as mentioned previously, people saw the 'witches' as scapegoats, a group to blame for their sinful nature. The bible in particular was another greatly recognised and taught book within society and the very story of creation within Genesis demonstrates the sinful, easily tempted and generally weak nature of women. Also, within Revelation (the concluding chapter of the Bible), the sinful woman of 'Babylon... the Great Prostitute', was also another indication of the weakness of women and showed this to be the case from the very beginning of creation to the very end. In general, the people of Europe saw the massacre of the 'witches' as a religious war of enacting justice on those directly against the will of God. One notion spread throughout literature was that of witches contacting and serving Diana, the 'Goddess of the Moon'. Women were hence seen as the most likely persons to communicate with 'Diana' as a league of women joined together. Some confessed to actually riding with Diana and taking part in various activities, however they were later recognised to be delusional.

Overall, the introduction of the printing press and the generally increasing availability of literature to the masses, allowed for more rapid transfers of elite beliefs in witchcraft and especially women as active participants. The trials of women within this period serve to reinforce and validate the beliefs transmitted through popular literature.

One of the most confusing and baffling aspects of the 'women as witches' theme is that many actually confessed to charges against them. This of course did not help the assumption that 'women were witches' and served to just heighten the prosecutions and fuel the killings. Many 'witches' claimed that their experiences had been worthwhile and showed virtually no remorse whatsoever for their supposed actions. This was the case all over Europe and not just England, even though the killings were much more prevalent and torture much more extreme on the continent than in England. However, P. Levack described this fact as less surprising when various other considerations were taken into account. Such as the 'women often being brought up to believe that they were indeed instruments of Satan and that they were the only imperfection within God's creation' (P.B. Levack, 1995). This however was simply society's effort to instil such beliefs so as to relieve the worry of female independence and to of course resume the scapegoat it had found within the period in question. It is particularly interesting to note that many women actually testified against others within the community. They made up 43 % of witnesses against other

women. 'Briggs' notices that 'women were active in building up reputations through gossip, deploying counter-magic and accusing suspects' (Briggs, 1995).

Women were completely surrounded by each sector of society and it was virtually impossible for them to escape punishment of some sort if they had first been accused of witchcraft. Ecclesiastically, the whole Church acknowledged the position of women as witches within society; and this simply gave the general public the opportunity to lay the blame for all the famine, disease, deaths and religious intolerance within previous years. The elite simply kept maintaining this strongly held belief in witchcraft and furthermore sustained the prosecutions and provided the literature and ethics with which to support these beliefs.

What is key to this topic is that most prosecution cases actually refer directly to traditionally female aspects, such as the home, the kitchen, and the nursery; and on 'culturally defined female tasks or occupations such as feeding (poisoning), child-rearing (infanticide), healing (harming), birth (death)' (Christina Hole, date unknown).

Furthermore, women within society were very much pacified throughout this time and this meant that they were easy targets for attack. These poor victims of attack simply existed within a delicate age of uncertainty, confusion and anger. Society believed in the existence of witchcraft and in the exponents of maleficia, the women of the times. On a more local scale too, communities widely looked to the accusation of witchcraft as a means to a specific end, whether it concerned land disputes or money disputes etc. These were very testing times, times of extreme economic struggles and religious disputes.

In conclusion, it is interesting to note that as standards of living vastly improved and religious irregularities disappeared, prosecutions decreased dramatically and people suddenly began to notice that most prosecutions were actually highly nonsensical and irrational. Society gradually came to accept that it had indeed made many mistakes.

#### **Sources Cited:**

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Alex Ewing- 03036224

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**Tables used:**

1. Types of dispute leading to witchcraft prosecutions in Essex, 1564-89 (Cited in 'A. Macfarlane, *Witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart England*'. Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1970'.