

Persecution of witches during the renaissance history essay



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The Renaissance signaled the beginning of the persecution of witches and those who practiced witchcraft. Atypically, the Renaissance was a period of great learning that brought refreshed beliefs in the preternatural such as witches, witchcraft, and witch-hunts and trials. A thought that witches had been galvanized by Satan to act as his driving force on earth made Western witchcraft unique. Acts of witchcraft were frequently considered heretical, largely resulting in the execution of the accused.

The first books printed were usually either bibles or had religious themes and promoted ideas about witches and witchcraft that brought about witch-hunts during the 15th and 16th centuries. Roman Catholics and Protestants alike accepted the *Malleus Maleficarum*, first published in 1486, an authoritative source of information concerning Satanism and as a guide to Christian defense (*Malleus Maleficarum*). It was considered the handbook for witch-hunters throughout Europe, organizing the folklore of peasants. The aforementioned was ; devoted to the enactment of the bible statement, “ You will not allow a sorceress to live” (New Jerusalem Bible, Exodus 22: 17). The *Malleus Maleficarum* was divided into three parts condemning witchcraft as heresy and discussing the procedures to be followed during trials.

In its definition of witches, the church included anyone with knowledge of herbs as “ those who used herbs for cures did so only through a pact with the Devil, either explicit or implicit” (Elizabethan Witchcraft and Witches). More precisely, those accused of being witches were generally women. Predominantly, they were single or widowed, poor, old, and unprotected. Of the 270 Elizabethan witch trials, 247 were women and only twenty-three were men. During this period, men were far more powerful than women

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were. As well, women were fully dependent on the male members of the family; they were expected to obey men and had few rights. The elderly, destitute, and defenseless women of society were thought of as a burden. Because doctors were uncommon, women were counted upon to provide cures for most illnesses. Possession of many of the herbs used to bring about these cures was illegal and executable by burning.

On a related note, the most common penalty for convicted witches was death. Allegations took place in both apostolic and in secular courts and as such, the law played at least as important a role as religion in the witch-hunts. Provincial courts were usually more imprudent and likely to be more severe or even violent in the treatment of the accused than superior courts. At the local level, courts would resort to crude measures such as pricking witches to see whether the Devil had desensitized them to pain or throwing the accused into a pond to see if she would sink. If she did sink, she was innocent because the water had "accepted her" (witchcraft). In places where there was strong authority in the form of bishops, kings or the Inquisition, convictions were scarcer and sentences were more lenient. Authorities generally tried to curb witch trials and they rarely influenced witch-hunts in order to gain money or power.

As for laws on witchcraft, in 1562, Queen Elizabeth I passed a harsh witchcraft law that, despite its austerity, did not condemn witchcraft as heresy. As a result, religion was not involved in the prosecution of witches. If one was found guilty of murder by witchcraft, she was to be hanged while in many other European countries witches were burned at the stake. Smaller crimes pertaining to witchcraft resulted in the convicted witch being placed

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in the stocks. Possible reasons for Queen Elizabeth's leniency could be that her mother, Anne Boleyn had been accused of being a witch as well as the fact that Queen Elizabeth was known to consult John Dee, a noted mathematician, astronomer, astrologer, occultist, navigator, and imperialist (Elizabethan Witchcraft and Witches). He devoted much of his life to the study of Alchemy, divination, and Hermetic philosophy.

In short, there was an evident revival in the persecution of witches during the Renaissance. This could have been caused by the fact that the Renaissance saw the introduction of the printing press, revolutionizing the way people communicate and share ideas. At the time, many of the books printed discouraged and condemned witchcraft, bringing about much of the harry of witches. As many of these books were religious in nature, the church played an enormous part in such condemnations. During this time, the church also had a huge influence on almost all activities. Because of this, many convictions were on religious counts such as heresy. Overall, witch-hunts played a very important role in European history during the Renaissance. The fact that people were concerned with the supernatural to such an extent during the period of extreme enlightenment that is the Renaissance only serves to increase its importance.