

Witchcraft and demonology in europe



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The witch-hunts were one of the most important events in the history of early modern Europe, taking place from the mid-15th century and ending in the mid-18th century. The view of witchcraft evolved throughout the period, with the Canon Episcopi calling the belief in witches a heresy, to Pope Innocent VIII issuing a bull in 1484 to denounce the practice of witchcraft as a heresy – all in a span of about 500 years. On the topic of witchcraft, it is unavoidable that the issue of gender would be discussed. The central question of this report would be how historians account for the persecution of more women than men in the witch-hunts in early modern Europe. The report will first outline the stereotype of a witch and discuss how this stereotype was promulgated. It will be concerned with two possible explanations that attempt to account for the persecution of more women than men – firstly, how the persecutions may be a results of a misogynistic and patriarchal culture, and secondly, how the hunts may be been a result of the lack of tolerance for social deviance of women.

The Stereotype Of A Witch

A collection of statistics indicate that a majority of accused witches were women, with most estimates pointing to about 80% of all victims being women (Ross, 1995: 334). Levack (1987: 142) provides a list of statistics indicating that in most regions in Europe, about three-quarters of the accused were women, with the figures being 90% in regions in Poland and England. Very evidently, the predominant notion of a witch is that it is foremost a woman.

In discussing the stereotype of a witch it is difficult not to make reference to the cumulative concept of witchcraft (Levack, 1987: 32-51), which points to

certain factors that would help in the identification of a witch. These include a witch's association with the Devil, the pact with the Devil, the Sabbath, nightflying and metamorphosis. Reginald Scot in 1584 described witches as women who were "commonly old, lame, blearie-eyed, pale, fowle, and full of wrinkles, poore, sullen, and superstitious". This stereotype was promulgated by both genders. Women in early modern Europe were viewed as the weaker gender that was dependent on men in many ways, including for livelihood (Larner, 1984: 86). Since the society was heavily patriarchal, women who did not fit in to the mould of a normal woman threatened the idea of females behaving in a particular manner. These women were nonconformists, and therefore put the livelihoods of other women at risk. Hence, they were ostracised by normal women. In behaving in a manner that was different, these women also threatened male domination and therefore had to be condemned by men. Both genders fed the idea that a woman who looked and behaved in a certain manner was a witch, hence allowing the stereotype to persist and spread.

In addition, the stereotype of a domestic witch could have been said to be reinforced by a vicious cycle. This is evident in some cases, such as in that of Anna Schwayhofer, who confessed to stealing the Consecrated Host but still bothered to sweep up the crumbs after she had done so (Barry, Hester and Roberts, 1996: 230). The association of witches and broomsticks or distaffs used for spinning also fed the stereotype. Women were mostly restricted to the confines of their allotted spaces, and those practicing harmful magic would most likely be found in those spaces (Blécourt, 2000: 303). Hence, it

was not surprising that witchcraft was associated with the women and their domestic activities.

Gendered Witchcraft And Misogyny

The elite perception of women pointed to how they tended to be intellectually weaker than men, yet have more insatiable sexual appetites and a higher tendency to pursue the occult, a view propounded by 16th century friar Martin de Castañega and in the Malleus itself by Kramer and Sprenger. Hence, historical literature tended to point towards how women were the more inferior of the two genders, and therefore had the larger propensity to be driven towards becoming a witch. Without a doubt, the society in Europe at that point of time was one that was highly patriarchal in nature (Hufton, 1983, 125-141). While the society was essentially patriarchal in nature, there are arguments as to whether this can be extended to be characterised as being misogynistic. Anderson and Gordon (1978) point to the innate inferiority that women possessed in the eyes of the Roman Catholic Church, the dominant religious authority in that time, saying that the Church saw women as more “ amenable to the allures of Satan” (Anderson and Gordon, 1978: 174). The paper also highlights the role of the Malleus Maleficarum (1486), that was anti-feminist and very popular, reprinting fourteen editions. The Malleus essentially highlights women as creatures possessing insatiable lust, yet not having the strength of mind to counter the temptations of the Devil.

However, statistics also show that women were not the only ones who were victims of the witch-hunts. In several regions, men were the ones who were heavily persecuted instead. Regions such as Finland show a relatively even

number of male and female persecutions, while in areas such as Normandy and Iceland, the number of accused male witches far exceeded the number of female ones. This clearly shows that if there had been a culture of misogyny, it was not uniformed throughout Europe. Monter (1964: 563) points out that the stereotypical witch in the French province of Normandy was not a poor, old woman, but a shepherd who may be a youth or an old man. Similarly, in Iceland, only 8% of all the accused witches were women (Levack, 1987: 142). The analysis and discussion of these statistics seem to point to the fact that there were differences in societal perspectives towards women and the differences in questioning techniques (Monter, 1964: 588). Monter (1964: 589) suggests that women were treated with leniency during the trial, and some were kept in prison alive for interrogation, even while the men were being executed. The reasons behind why men were more persecuted in some societies and women in others are unclear, but most historians point to the fact that it was impossible to pinpoint a particular reason in every society why this was so. Much of the reasons behind the gender imbalances must be attributed to the culture and views of the society itself, but what can be certain is that the witch-hunt was not strictly gender-specific. Without a doubt, a society that places emphasis on patriarchal values cannot be dismissed as misogynistic simply based on statistics alone.

At this point it is relevant to note that there were differences between the elite and peasant conceptions of witchcraft, and this extended to the persecution of women. For the peasantry, the persecution of witches was less of the pact with the Devil and more of practical concerns such as the failure of crops or the death of livestock (Laurence, 1995: 216-218).

Similarly, with the persecution of women, the concerns circled around the fact that babies and young children were being “victims” of maleficia, rather than the witch being a Devil-worshipper per se. Unsurprisingly, therefore, a large number of women who were accused of being witches were the lying-in maids for more privileged families, who looked after the newborns and had direct contact with them, as in the case of Anna Ebeler of Augsburg (Roper, 1991: 19). Roper (1991: 23) also points to how this may be a result of the association of femineity and maternity. Normal women were able to have children, yet witches were unable to, leading to a sense of envy that bred the feeling of hatred towards mothers and their babies.

Strands Of Deviance

One of the central themes occurring in the witch-hunts would have to be the fact that the society in early modern Europe had very little tolerance for those who were different from them. Jews and homosexuals were persecuted, and the society was predominantly peasant, poor and part of the Roman Catholic Church. Those who were different were frowned upon. Women generally married and had children at a young age, were uneducated and viewed as weak. Their primary purpose was to be subservient to their husbands and serve their families, keeping the household. This view of women can be contrasted to the stereotype of a witch, as mentioned above. Being old and unmarried, as well as being socially isolated, these alleged witches were evidently different from the general conception of a woman in society.

Larner (1981: 92) puts forward the idea that witches were persecuted not because they were women, but because they were “non-women” who did

not fit into the societal view of a woman. While a typical woman was maternal, witches were unable to have children; where typical women stayed home at nights, witches flew to remote locations to join Sabbaths. This fit in with the elite conceptions that the reality in which witches lived in was essentially one that was an anti-society. Blécourt (2000: 300) explains that God was a “ guardian of social norms”, while the Devil was just the very opposite. These “ non-women” were persecuted for disobeying the social norms, and some historians even argue that women accused other women of being witches because they felt threatened by an individual who did not conform to the male image of them (Larner, 1981: 102). The role of the Roman Church was also not to be ignored in the reinforcement of this stereotype. Women had an increased likelihood to practice love magic as compared to men (Blécourt, 2000: 303), and since only priests of the Church could legally practice magic, they were more likely to be persecuted as a result.

Remote Possibilities

While the possible presence of a repressive patriarchy or a societal aversion to deviant behaviour have often been cited as the reasons behind the gender imbalance during the witch-hunts, there are a few other remote possibilities that will be mentioned in the passing. Scully (1995: 857-858) points to how Venetian witches could choose witchcraft as a career option as opposed to being married or forced into prostitution, and this could be an escape from a possibly malevolent life, thereby proving to be a popular alternative for women in the region at that time. In his paper, Goodare (1991: 291-292) argues that economic factors could have been one of the reasons for the

witch-hunts. Since the people had fallen upon hard times, those dependent upon charity handouts were hostile to others who were their competition – and these were mainly women. Another article by Ross (Ross, 1995: 333-337) draws an interesting correlation between the outbreak of syphilis in the 16th century and the persecution of more women than men. He posits that women, being the symbols of fertility, could be shunned due to syphilis as they would be spreading the venereal disease. Further, much of the witch's behaviour, he says, could be attributed to the madness that is a symptom of the disease.

While fascinating, these observations by historians seem to be unique suggestions that do not appear in the literature as main causes for the increased persecution of women.

Conclusion

To conclude, this report has outlined the stereotype of a witch and what perpetrated this stereotype throughout early modern Europe. It seems persuasive to argue that although there was a strong patriarchal society in those days, this culture did not amount to being misogynistic in nature. The stereotype of the witch that emerge during this period and that was adopted by most modern historians emphasise a few features of witches that generally seem to be a result of the lack of tolerance for social deviant behaviour, and simply reinforced time and again in a vicious cycle. The trend points to the fact that there are a variety of factors that resulted in more women being persecuted than men. Often, this phenomenon can only be attributed to the differences in the various societies in Europe, and the

culture of the region or country. Ultimately, it can be concluded that a combination of factors led to more women being persecuted than men.

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The practice of harmful magic