

Witchcraft in the elizabethan era



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The Elizabethan Era lasted from 1558 to 1603, during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I. This period was a time of growth and expansion in the areas of poetry, music, and theatre. Because of this, and the peace throughout England at the time, the Elizabethan Era was often referred to as the Golden Age of history (Elizabethan England Era Life).

Even though there was a small expansion of knowledge during the period, there was still the belief in supernatural beings, such as witches at the time. The Majority of witches accused were women, and often poor, old, sick, or widowed. There was not much knowledge of medicine during the era, so women were expected to create cures as part of their job of taking care of the household. Those who used herbs for ointments were known as 'wise women'. However, the Catholic Church as the time defined witchcraft as any knowledge of herbs, which was associated as the work of the devil (Elizabethan Witchcraft and Witches).

People of the Elizabethan Era seemed to take interest in knowledge and learning such as sciences and inventions, but the belief in superstitions were still there. Most superstitions developed from old traditions or beliefs. The reason for the arise of superstitions was because of ignorance. Many also feared what they did not know. Some common superstitions that came to be in the Elizabethan Era included leaving the door open behind you, spilling salt, and a lunar eclipse. These were all associated with bad luck. The most common superstition, and the most feared by the Elizabethans, was the existence of witches (Superstitions of the Elizabethan Era).

Witchcraft originated from people's misconceptions of the causes of everyday troubles. Witches were thought to be those who prayed to spirits and performed rituals to resolve problems. These rituals were referred to as magic. Witches were a way to make sense of the unexplained for the people all of Europe during this time. This is also why many blamed seemingly unexplainable events such as fires, floods, droughts, bad harvests, and epidemics, on witches. One of these epidemics, the Bubonic Plague, or the Black Plague, was blamed on witches because of the lack of knowledge of medicine.

Men during this period had greater importance than women of the Elizabethan Era. Because of the male dominated society, more women were accused of witchcraft than men. Out of 270 tried, 247 were women and only 23 were men. The women who were accused were usually and most often poor, elderly, sick, or widowed. Besides the fact that men were held higher in society, those who had power or wealth were exempt from most accusations (Witchcraft in the Elizabethan Age).

Wise women at the time were often helpful members of Elizabethan society, even though they were considered witches by the Catholic Church. Black witches were much different from white witches. Black magic was practiced to inflict harm onto others. White witches were also known as 'cunning folk' or healers. White magic was just the use of herbs and potions that were thought to have healing powers. However, during the Renaissance this distinction between the two was lost through the witch hunts.

Queen Elizabeth I passed a new law in 1562. This Law did not define sorcery as harecy. In France and Spain the punishment inflicted upon the convicted witches was burning at the stake, which is an agonizing way to be put to death. The new law established in 1562 only called for the witches who were convicted of murder by witchcraft were to be hanged. The less severe crimes committed by witchcraft meant they were to be pilloried or to be attacked, ridiculed , and publicly humiliated.

Queen Elizabeth I was considered to be more lenient towards witches. Some assume the reason for this is because Elizabeth's mother, Anne Boleyn, had been accused of witchcraft and was later put to death. Elizabeth was also highly intelligent for a woman of the time. She had John Dee, an English mathematician and astronomer, as an advisor. Elizabeth herself took an interest in astrology, which some think explained her leniency towards witchcraft (Elizabethan Witchcraft and Witches).

Before the Elizabethan Era, in 1486, the *Malleus Maleficarum* was written by Heinrich Kramer and Jacob Sprenger. The *Malleus Maleficarum*, which means " The Hammer of Witches" in Latin, was one of the most well known medieval treaties on witchcraft. The treaty was written to help interrogate and convict witches as well as to argue against the beliefs that witchcraft did not exist (The *Malleus Maleficarum*).

In 1566 a woman, Agen Waterhouse, was put on trial in Chelmsford, Essex. She was accused of causing William Fynne to become ill. Fynne later died from his illness. She was also accused of using black magic to kill livestock. She was then blamed for the death of her husband. Agnes was found guilty,

and she was hanged. She became the first woman to be executed for witchcraft in England.

Elizabeth Francis had been accused of witchcraft at the same time as Agnes but she was not found guilty until 1579 when she and several other women were put on trial and found guilty.

In 1882, fourteen women were convicted after being put on trial for witchcraft in St. Osyth, Essex, which seemed to be a common place for accounts of witchcraft at the time.

In 1884, a man named Reginald Scot published a book called, *The Discoverie of Witchcraft*. In this, he stated his beliefs about those who were accused of witchcraft. Scot felt that the punishments were un-christian and he blamed the Roman Church.

In 1589, three women were convicted of the practice of witchcraft, Joan Cony, Joan Upney, and Joan Prentice. Cony was a worshiper of satan and was convicted of the murder of Elizabeth Finch. Upney was convicted of murdering Alice Foster and Joan Harwood. Prentice was accused of speaking with satan and murdering a little girl by the name of Sara Glascock.

An old woman Alice Samuel was accused of being the reason for the Throckmortan children throwing fits. Then in 1590, when Lady Cramwell, an extremely wealthy woman came to visit Warboys, she claimed that she was being tormented by Alice Samuel in her dreams.

In 1593, George Gifford published a book called *A Dialogue Concerning Witches and Witchcraft*. In this he wrote about the ministerial challenges. He
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brought attention to the challenges brought by witch beliefs (The Beliefs in the Devil During the Elizabethan Times).

Witchcraft is something that has been practiced since the beginning of time. It has been a way for humans, in their own mind, to make sense of what they do not understand, or the unknown.

Before society knew anything about medicine, or science, they would make up their own reasoning and share their ideas. Sadly, because of our fear of the unknown, many innocent people may have died in the witch trials and witch hunts.

Though now we do not have witch hunts and witch trials, some of the superstitions still stick with us. We also have many more religions and much more diversity in religions.

Now we know that the reason for the Black Plague and so many illnesses were related to the lack of cleanliness and knowledge of common medicine of the time, and not because of supernatural beings or witches.

The existence of witchcraft in today's day and age depends on how you define it. In the Elizabethan Era it was considered witchcraft just to have knowledge of herbs, which we still use today for many different things including using herbs to make natural healing remedies (Elizabethan Era England Life).

There are some people in parts of the world who still identify as witches as part of their religion. However, this is much different than the way witches were perceived in medieval times and in the Elizabethan Era. Those who

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identify themselves as witches (Pagan or Wiccan) do not, in any way, worship the devil.

In the early 20th century a new religious movement developed known as Pagan Witchcraft. Pagan witchcraft is also known as Wicca. Wicca was introduced by a man named Gerald Gardner. There have been books about the core meanings and rules of this religion but Wicca has changed over time. There are many versions of how Wicca is structured. Because of this, Wicca is divided into sects known as traditions. Normally those who follow the Wiccan religion worship a God and Goddess. However, there are others that have very different beliefs. Some believe in duotheism, monotheism, monism, polytheism, or pantheism. Wicca is a form of modern Paganism. Wiccans perform ceremonies and rituals that they refer to as magic. They also believe the work of magic is through nature and senses and that it is misunderstood by science.

Even though in most of today's societies witchcraft is not part of daily life, the witch trials and witch hunts were still a big part of history (Witchcraft in the Elizabethan Age). There were many deaths caused by the Bubonic Plague at the time and because of that more deaths were caused from witch executions. The Bubonic Plague became such an epidemic was because the plague was spread by rats that were infested with fleas that carried the disease. However, during the time of the witch hunts, people thought that cats were associated with witches and their black magic, because of this they also began killing the cats as well as the witches. The problem that came from the decrease in the cat population was an increase in the rat population. This is why some people think that the reason that the plague

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became a huge epidemic was because people blamed the witches for the plague and killed many witches as well as cats.

The witch hunts eventually ended but the effects of witchcraft made an impact on history, in different ways. Many still take an interest in witchcraft. Some even still believe in magic. Superstitions however, are still alive as ever. They have changed throughout time by being passed down through generations (Superstitions of the Elizabethan Era).

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