

Social perspectives on witch hunting



The Case that the witch-hunt was a woman-hunt is a strong one (Larner) discuss?

The witch-hunts across Europe saw the mass slaughter of nine million women who were thought to be witches. These women were killed over a period of three hundred years, with the most concentrated killings in places such as Germany, Spain and Italy.[1]The story of witchcraft is primarily the story of women and this has caused much fascination and a certain elusiveness when approaching the subject.[2]The organised persecution of the witches began officially on December 9th 1484 when Pope Innocent VIII asked Heinrich Kramer and James Sprenger to define witchcraft, isolate the modus operandi of the witches and to standardise the trial procedures and sentencing.[3]It was as a result that Kramer and Sprenger produced a text called “ Malleus Maleficarum” which would become a hugely influential text in the events of witch persecution and in these gender-specific views of witchcraft. Due to the gender-specificity that surrounds the subject of witchcraft we are confronted with ideas about women, fears about women and the place of women in society during these times. Scholars such as Carol Kerslen, Lyndal Roper and Christina Larner gradually moved gender, and to some extent sexuality, to the centre of the analysis of witchcraft, which influenced interests in artists such as Baldung, for whom gender and sexuality were critical themes.[4]Many feminists jump to conclusions of gender-specific genocide due to what they believe was a woman-hating crime. However, it is important also to focus on the socio-economic context in which these trials took place in order to make a fair judgement on the gender-specificity that is so often associated with witchcraft.

The *Malleus Maleficarum* is often the focus of many studies into witchcraft due to its important influence during the period. This demonological treatise was written by Kramer and Sprenger, it is often used as evidence by radical feminists of the misogyny among elites, who are seen as the driving force behind the top-down persecutions of witches.[5] The title of the work itself is female-specific, with the term *maleficarum* translating as women evil-doers. This feminine possessive in the Latin title shows its focus on the female gender, if the book were to have focused on both males and females then ‘*maleficarum*’ would have been replaced by ‘*maleficorum*’.[6] Throughout the text it is women who are specifically referred to, in the book men are most often described as accomplices rather than witches themselves. When asked why there is more harmful magic found in the female sex than in the male sex Kramer answered “ because of the fleshly lust, which in [women] is never satisfied.”[7] It is clear that there was a gender-bias or a gender-specificity around the notions of witchcraft, and this dominated its surrounding ideology and the main literature upon the subject. The *Malleus Maleficarum* was of great influence during the period, it was high Catholic theology and working catholic jurisprudence.[8] The work had been issued for creation by the Pope himself and so held great importance. In the dark ages few people could read and books were hard to come by, the printing press has only been developed 34 years previously in 1475 Germany. This meant that literacy rates and the availability of prints for those in the lower sectors of society were not still readily available or improved at this point. However, the *Malleus* was printed in numerous editions and had been read by almost every judge in Europe, it appeared that the *Malleus Maleficarum* had more currency than the bible.[9]

What made this piece of literature regarding the definitions of witchcraft so influential is the power and authority it held due to its lawful reinforcement. Anyone who challenged the *Malleus Maleficarum*, anyone who refuted its authority or questioned its credibility on any level was guilty of heresy, a capital crime.[10]The *Malleus Maleficarum* was probably the most influential piece written on witchcraft, it was the most widely spread, the most lawfully and religiously backed, but it was also extremely gender-specific towards women.

This literary work helped to instil a stereotype of the witch, the stereotype being woman. The definition of woman, in common with the pornographic definition, is her carnality; the essence of her character, in common with the fairy-tale definition, is her malice and avarice.[11]In fact the stereotype of a witch in Christian Europe has always been that of a woman. For example, in twelfth-century Russia the authorities in one district became so anxious about the prevalence of witchcraft that they began to round up the entire female population.[12]Ideas of female evil-doers as suggested in the title of the *Malleus Maleficarum* stemmed back to the religious creation of the world. A woman was believed to be more carnal than a man, this carnality originated from Eve's very own creation, she was formed from a bent rib, and also caused the fall of Eden.[13]As a result, women have suffered, forever being painted with the same religious brush of being a source of evil and carnality. A witch was seen as an independent adult woman who does not conform to the male idea of proper female behaviour.[14]However, it was not just female sexuality that made them evil, but also female knowledge, many feminists claim that anything that made a woman

something other than helpless was perceived as threatening and labelled evil.[15]

Perhaps a strong case for witch-hunting being parallel to women-hunting, is the idea that women were labelled witches, and could not prove themselves innocent by any means. This meant that women were doomed to persecution because of their gender and its gender-specific associated stereotypes. Women finds herself entirely defined by her sexuality. It was believed that sexuality makes women evil, therefore virginity/chastity is glorified in women as it is the opposite of sexuality.[16]However, it is ironic that while all witchcraft comes from carnal lust - which is in women insatiable - this carnal lust, this desire for sex, is what populates the world. If all women are evil-doers, if Eve is the basis for all women stereotypes then why is it that women are the exclusive holders of bearing life? Other indicators that are described in the Malleus Maleficarum also guide us to the interpretation that women were inevitably doomed to persecution. A women's virtue is seen to be silence, and yet in a witchcraft trial, if the women remains silence she is condemned for withholding her confession, yet it she confesses then she is condemning herself.[17]There is a similar paradox in the women's ability to bear pain, if she breaks down through pain of torture and confesses she is condemned, however if she remains strong and recovers she is condemn also. Still further, if a women weeps under torture it is interpreted as a sign of her sins and so condemns her, yet if her eyes do not weep she is condemned for witchcraft.[18]This suggests that once put to trial for partaking in witchcraft the women is entirely at the

mercy of the educated men who judge, torture and condemn her, almost without escape.

Feminists take this inescapability as evidence of patriarchy exerting its control over women in order to curb the perceived threat to men's dominance that is caused through women's allegedly rapacious sexuality.

[19]It is believed that as soon as a woman transitions from ' virgin' to ' sexual', there is a potential for power over a man[20], and so she becomes a symbol of demonology, of relations with the devil. Radical feminists also suggest that society believed that all women threaten male hegemony with their exclusive power to give life; and so social order depends on women conforming to male ideals of female behaviour.[21]Threats to social order, threats of women's sexuality are usually blamed for the persecutions of women during the witch-hunts in Europe. Most of the ideas put forward as to why women posed a threat to man, and why the witch-hunts could be seen as gender-specific are put forward by feminists. First wave feminists (such as the American Suffragist Matilda Joselyn Gage) asserted that nine million people were executed as witches, with old women, wise women and the priestesses of anti-Christian cults being particular targets.[22]However, second wave feminists further in their ideas of the witch-hunts, painting them as a ' gendercide', a female targeted death hunt. They believed that witch-hunting was an egregious example, not just of patriarchal oppression, but also of genocide and it was in fact the deliberate killing of women.

[23]This deliberate killing of women is made acceptable and almost encouraged by the *Malleus Maleficarum* due to its emphasis on the female gender and their witchcraft qualities. However, it is important to understand

that women were not just persecuted, they also acted as the accusers.

Women often accused other women of witchcraft and were often the 'chief witnesses in the courts'.^[24] This suggests that while witch-hunts were related to the female gender, they were not gender-exclusive. Women could accuse other women, and men could be persecuted. Yet, feminists disregard this evidence that goes against that misogyny of witch-hunting. Instead they believe that this line of reasoning is based on a failure to recognise that a patriarchal structure divides women, and that their livelihood is dependent on the goodwill of men.^[25] Therefore, women would accuse other women, not to satisfy themselves, but to protect the livelihood of conformist women against non-conformist women, they would also do so under the pressures of their husbands and fathers.

This huge split in the ideology of witch-hunting and its gender relations is caused by the lack of concrete evidence to support either side. Facts and figures from the period, from all over Europe, are at best good estimates of the real numbers of those persecuted. Figures range from thousands to millions when talking about the amount that died from persecutions, and the gender ratios are no more accurate. However, in spite of this, the evidence provided is used in the debate of gender-specificity surrounding the witch-hunts and therefore must be looked at and discussed.

Figures suggest that in areas at the centre of the witch-hunt, places such as Germany, France, Switzerland and Scotland, 80% of those persecuted were females, with figures reached an estimate of 95-100% in the areas on the periphery such as England and Russia.^[26] The ratio of women to men burned is variously estimated at 20 to 1 for women and 100 to 1 for men.^[27] Those

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men who were persecuted were often the family of convicted women witches, or were in positions of civil power with political ambitions that conflicted with those of the church or monarch.[28]In fact, witchcraft which is seen as the ultimate human evil was sex-specific in just the same proportion as sanctity which is seen as the ultimate human good was sex-specific to males during the ' sanctity epidemic' of the later Middle Ages.[29]

Most works conclude that witches were scapegoats for hostilities and tensions that had little to do with sex or gender.[30]Radical feminist writings have had a significant influence on the perceptions of witchcraft outside academia, its emphasis on witches being gender-specific to women had become a strong stereotype when one thinks of the witch-hunts. However, academic historians are dismissive of such interpretations, criticising radical feminists for their assumptions that witch-hunting was ' woman-hunting', their over reliance on the Malleus, their unwillingness to engage with manuscript records or witch trials and their ahistorical use of the terms misogyny and patriarchy which downplays the historical specificity of early modern culture and society.[31]Christina Lerner herself is reluctant to suggest that witch-hunting was gender-specific because of this academic dismissiveness. Instead she concludes that the witch-hunts were ' sex-related not sex-specific'[32], however she strongly backs the argument that witch-hunting was still in fact women-hunting because of this relation. This leaves the distinction between sex-related and sex-specific unclear, if both inevitably lead to the assumption that the hunt was still a hunt on women. This dismissiveness between historian and feminist is causing a problem when it comes to the clarity of sex relations between women and witchcraft.

The antipathy many academic historians feel towards feminism in general and radical feminism in particular can be counterproductive as it discourages them from engaging with any helpful insights feminism has to offer into the gendering of witchcraft prosecutions, particularly in relation to the analysis of patriarchy.[33] Those few historians who have seriously addressed the question of women and witchcraft only briefly discuss misogyny of the period, but focus more on the social and economic reasons for the high percentage of women that were persecuted. However, most radical feminist interpretation of witch-hunting emerged in the context of feminist's political activism outside academia, and were thus polemically and historically inaccurate.[34]

There is a huge correlation between women and witchcraft persecutions, and this is to do with the age-old stereotypes of women evildoers that stem from eve. Women were more likely to be persecuted because they were more likely to believe to be witches, had men been acting in the same way it is very much doubtful that they would have been accused to be a witch to the same majority in comparison. Therefore the witch-hunts were women-hunts in the sense that women were targeted substantially more than men, whether they were accused other women or not, they were still the distinct majority of the witch-hunts.

[1] Andrea Dworkin, *Our Blood : Prophecies and Discourses on Sexual Politics*, (New York : G. P Putnam Sons, 1967).

[2]Carol F. Karlsen, *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman* , (New York : W. W. Norton & Company, 1987).

[3]Andrea Dworkin, *Our Blood*.

[4]Brian P. Levack, *The Oxford Handbook of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe and Colonial America* , (Oxford : Oxford University Press, 2013).

[5]Ibid.

[6]Sister Trinity, ' *Gynocide : The Holocaust of Women* ' ,
<http://passtheflamingsword.wordpress.com/2013/01/31/gynocide-the-holocaust-of-women/>

[7]Brian P. Levack, *The Oxford Handbook of Witchcraft* .

[8]Andrea Dworkin, *Our Blood*.

[9]Andrea Dworkin, *Woman Hating*, (New York : Penguin Group, 1974).

[10]Andrea Dworkin, *Our Blood*.

[11]Andrea Dworkin, *Woman Hating*.

[12]Darren Oldridge, *The Witchcraft Reader* , (London : Routledge, 2002).

[13]Andrea Dworkin, *Our Blood*.

[14]Darren Oldridge, *The Witchcraft Reader*.

[15]Sister Trinity, ' *Gynocide : The Holocaust of Women* ' .

[16]Ibid.

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[17]Sister Prudence Allen, *The concept of Woman : The early humanist reformation 1250-1500*, (Cambridge: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing & Co, 2002),

[18]Ibid.

[19]Brian P. Levack, *The Oxford Handbook of Witchcraft*.

[20]Sister Trinity, ' Gynocide : *The Holocaust of Women*.

[21]Darren Oldridge, *The Witchcraft Reader*.

[22]Brian P. Levack, *The Oxford Handbook of Witchcraft*.

[23]Ibid.

[24]Darren Oldridge, *The Witchcraft Reader*.

[25]Ibid.

[26]Darren Oldridge, *The Witchcraft Reader* .

[27]Andrea Dworkin, *Our Blood*.

[28]Andrea Dworkin, *Woman Hating* .

[29]Darren Oldridge, *The Witchcraft Reader*.

[30]Carol F. Karlsen, *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman*.

[31]Brian P. Levack, *The Oxford Handbook of Witchcraft*.

[32]Darren Oldridge, *The Witchcraft Reader*.

[33]Brian P. Levack, *The Oxford Handbook of Witchcraft*.

[34]Brian P. Levack, *The Oxford Handbook of Witchcraft*.