

Why did early modern people accuse their neighbours of being witches?

On the 6th of May 1645 four women from St Osith in Essex were put on trial for the crime of witchcraft. They were accused of murdering Thomas Toakley's son, possessing the apprentice of Robert Turner, and killing the livestock of Richard Welch and Thomas Clynch. These women's accusers had previously been their neighbours within their communities, but they blamed them all the same. The evidence against these women came solely from strange marks found on their bodies, and yet this was enough to have them convicted and executed¹. This trial was no isolated incident, it was a small part of the trials within Essex, which were themselves part of an epidemic which led to the executions that are now synonymous with the period. It is difficult to ascertain an exact figure for the number of people executed for witchcraft, due to a lack of solid evidence, and the fact that many early historians overestimated the scale of the trials, Gottfried Christian Voigt for example estimated that 9,000,000 people had died. However, the generally agreed figure now rests between 40,000 and 60,000. The escalation of the persecution of those deemed to be witches may be partly attributed to the edicts of the Papacy, and the lack of scientific understanding regarding the climatic changes brought about by the Little ice age. Although there is some debate regarding the exact boundaries of the early modern period, the European witchcraft trials which this essay will examine, were at their height between 1580 and 1650 during the years when the climatic change was at its most severe, a period which rests firmly within the generally accepted boundaries of the era².

Within the accusations of witchcraft there were large regional and geographical differences. It is also notable that countries that were fully Catholic such as Spain and Italy did not suffer from accusations in the same way, as they were more focused on heresy, while in religiously divided countries such as France there was a vast amount of accusations. Around the British

¹https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=oJwrAQAAAMAJ&pg=PT440&lpg=PT440&dq=trial+of+rose+hallybread&source=bl&ots=bclSB1sQuX&sig=tO4K1oNKtZxALuuWBh89TKqzPeI&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwie19_OkcrSAhVsIMAKHfDYDkwQ6AEIJAC#v=onepage&q=%20rose%20hallybread&f=false

² <http://library.uvm.edu/~pmardeus/theat/earlymodernperiod.pdf>

Isles there were vast differences in the punishment and perception of witchcraft. In Ireland, the trials lacked the demonic element of trials on the continent, whereas in England the accusations lacked a demonic element, and had specific emphasis on the use of familiars³ (animals or imps used to carry out witchcraft), which explains why witches are associated with black cats, as the idea of the witch's familiar was combined with pre-existing superstitions regarding black cats, hence the image has endured in a way that the images of other familiars did not.

The 15th Century book *Malleus Maleficarum* contains many reasons why the witch craze occurred, at the time of writing and later. This book was published in 1487 by Dominican Inquisitor Heinrich Kramer at the behest of Pope Innocent VIII, and provided advice on how to detect and try witches. In writing the *Malleus*, Kramer redefined what had previously been a preternatural concept (The concept of witches had existed since its conception within early Mesopotamian religion, and had been changed as enhanced over time) into a concept that was comparatively modern for the period. Kramer also changed the concept of what a witch could be, from a purely supernatural being to a neighbour of ordinary member of the community who had been corrupted by Satan. However, there is some debate regarding the extent to which the *Malleus* ever influenced the courts directly as Kramer was notoriously inaccurate⁴, and the courts relied on other more attested works by Jean Bodin and Peter Binsfeld, such as Bodin's *Demonomanie* which was published after Bodin took part in a trial of a witch in April 1578. This book would most likely have had a greater effect on the trials than the *Malleus* as it was written far closer to their zenith, but the influence of the *Malleus* should not be underestimated as it was second only to the Bible in sales till 1678⁵.

A modern commentator on the topic, Wicasta Lovelace has argued that the people accused of witchcraft consisted primarily of “*suspicious persons, Old women. Midwives. Jews. Poets.*”

³ Scarre, G; Callow, J. Witchcraft and Magic in Sixteenth and Seventeenth-Century Europe, 2001, 26-28.

⁴ Purkiss, D. Witch-hunts in early modern society, Myths, and reality, 2014, 27.

⁵ Guiley, R. The Encyclopedia of Witches, Witchcraft and Wicca, 2008, 223.

Gypsies''⁶, (1987). Old women were both the object of accusations as well as being considered among those at risk from *maleficia*⁷, for example the German publication '*Erweyterte Unholden Zeytung*' stated that witches "*try hard to inflict illness on old people, by making them lame, imposing pain, and causing death*". However, the idea that midwives were typically accused is a misconception that stems from the writings of demonologists who were influenced by the *Malleus*⁸. Midwives were effectively protected from accusations due to their occupation, and were frequently involved in the trials to ascertain the guilt of the accused by examining the accused for 'devil's marks'⁹. Jews and Gypsies were already members of the community who were abhorred and distrusted prior to the witch hunts, and were considered to have the greatest motive for harming their neighbours using witchcraft.

Furthermore, the hierarchical nature of Europe in the early modern period meant that the social class of a person had a large effect on the likelihood of whether they could and would be accused of witchcraft, and since those who Lovelace mentioned were generally low within the hierarchy of their communities, it explains why they were typically accused. In general, a person would only be accused of witchcraft by someone who had a higher or equal social standing, it was exceedingly uncommon for a person to be accused by someone of a lower standing, purely due to the deferential nature of the society of the time, the view that social class was inherent within the accusations is corroborated by the theory presented by Scare and Callow (2001), which suggests that the trials were simply a device used by the socio-economic elites to control the poorer sections of the population¹⁰. There is a further, Marxist, view that the witchcraft trials were a form of social control used by the bourgeoisie to dominate the proletariat. However, the view presented by Scare and Callow is more thoroughly supported by evidence, as most people were accused by members of their own class, albeit with a higher socio-economic standing.

⁶ Kramer, H; Sprenger, J. *The Malleus Maleficarum*, translated by the Reverend Montague Summers, Introduction to the 1948 edition by Wicasta Lovelace.

⁷ H. Kramer and J. Sprenger, *The Malleus Maleficarum*, translated by the Reverend Montague Summers, 579.

⁸ <https://academic.oup.com/shm/article-abstract/3/1/1/1689119/Historians-as-Demonologists-The-Myth-of-the?redirectedFrom=fulltext>

⁹ Behringer, W. *Witchcraft Persecutions in Bavaria*, 1997, 85.

¹⁰ Scarre, G; Callow, J. *Witchcraft and Magic in Sixteenth and Seventeenth-Century Europe*, 2001, 49-50.

Thurston states that of the 45,000-people executed for witchcraft through the whole course of the trials, and around 75-80% of them were women¹¹, a chilling figure supported by other commentators on the topic. To this day, witches in popular culture are still usually depicted as wizened old women, even though the term witch was applicable to both genders. This gender bias within the accusations have led to claims by historians and writers such as Anne Llewelyn Barstow and Matilda Joslyn Gage that the witch hunts were a method used by the patriarchal governments of the time to suppress women¹², while Adam Jones, a Canadian writer stated that the witch trials and accusations bordered on attempted genocide of women by opportunistic misogynists¹³. However, this view is perceived to be inaccurate by many historians due to its dubious origins. The view presented by Barstow in her book '*Witch craze, A New History of European Witch Hunts*' for instance was heavily criticised by Scarre and Callow. Stuart Clark, author of '*Thinking with Demons*' stated that this view rose from the repetition and manipulation of certain quotes from the *Malleus* that supported that view. Furthermore, Clark's statement is further supported by the fact that within the *Malleus* there is specific reference to the fact that witches can be male or female¹⁴. Moreover, there are also exceptions to this 75% rule surrounding the gender of the accused, in Estonia for example, around 60% of those accused were male¹⁵, a statistic than is also found in other peripheral countries such as Iceland and Russia. Thus, the witchcraft trials cannot be said to be a tool of the patriarchy as the assumed gender of witches differed by location.

However, it can still be argued that sexism and misogyny were still significant elements in causing accusations. This is due predominantly to the link between the early modern perception of womanhood, the roles women played within societies and the idea of what it meant to be a witch and what they were perceived to do. Often the fact that the accused

¹¹ Thurston, R. W. *Witch, Wicce, Mother Goose: The rise and fall of the witch hunts in Europe and North America*, 2001, 42.

¹² Llewelyn Barstow, A. *Witch Craze, A New History of European Witch Hunts*, 1994, taken from Scarre and Callow, *Witchcraft and Magic in Sixteenth and Seventeenth-Century Europe*, 2001, 75.

¹³ Jones, A. *Genocide and Genocide*, Vanderbilt University Press, 2004. Case Study: The European Witch Hunts, www.genocide.org

¹⁴ Kramer, H; Sprenger, J. *The Malleus Maleficarum*, translated by the Reverend Montague Summers, 579.

¹⁵ Henningsen, G. *Early modern European witchcraft: centres and peripheries*, Clarendon, 1994.

were women was important, but not simply because they were woman, but because the role of women in society often led them into situations where they could easily be accused, due to the influence of the influence of the *Malleus* and the idea it gave of the crimes of witchcraft. Therefore, misogyny and sexism were both reasons that could have caused someone to accuse their neighbour, if revenge was sought against a woman, or the woman was simply disliked, the way that the courts and public perceived witchcraft made it particularly simple to create successful allegations against woman. The secondary role of women within early modern society was also a factor behind the accusations, as they were already considered to be untrustworthy, and to have a greater motive for witchcraft¹⁶

The early modern period coincided with a period of drastic climatic change known as the Little Ice Age, a period characterised by, cooling, wet weather, famine, serial epidemics, and chaos¹⁷. The severity of the cooling and its effects came to a peak between 1560 and 1650, the same period in which the amount of accusations reached their height, hence the five largest European witch trials took place at the same time¹⁸. The colder weather of this period, lead to crop failures and the death of livestock, while hailstorms caused by the colder weather, destroyed existing crops. In 1580, Jean Bodin wrote about two witches from Constance, who using *maleficia* had “ruined the fruit for four leagues around”. These women confessed under duress that they had used the power of the Devil to stir up a storm, to destroy the crops of the region. They were convicted and burned at the stake.¹⁹Events like these caused severe economic problems within early modern Europe, which were exacerbated by the political, social, and economic effects of the Thirty Years’ war.

Through works of literature such as the *Malleus* or the *Tractat von Bekantnuß der Zauberer und Hexen* witches were systematically blamed for the effects of the Little Ice Age, to the

¹⁶ Gaskill, M. *Witchcraft: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford University Press, 2010, 30-33.

¹⁷ Fagan, B. *The Little Ice Age*, 2002.

¹⁸ Thurston, R. W. *Witch, Wicce, Mother Goose: The rise and fall of the witch hunts in Europe and North America*, 2001, 79.

¹⁹https://books.google.co.uk/books?redir_esc=y&id=fdWqaXu4ZR8C&q=ruined+the+fruit#v=snippet&q=ruined%20the%20fruit&f=false

extent where witchcraft became the paradigmatic crime of the Little Ice Age, and witches replaced Jews as the scapegoats for societies problems. Historians Behringer and Niess have both stressed the relationship between crop failures and the persecution of witches²⁰, as the fear and anger of the farmers left destitute by the effects of the climatic change was directed into fear and anger of against witches, which drove them to accuse anyone that they believed was responsible for their misfortune, in the hope of gaining revenge, and in ending the *maleficia* that was plaguing them.

“*You may not feel homicidally competitive, but your genes tell a different story*”²¹. In the early modern period this idea would have been particularly apt, as the social climate of the time often brought people into direct competition with each other, particularly as within the economic structure of early modern communities, the principal of zero-sum game theory can be found. This theory stipulates that because resources are finite, prosperity of one party could only be achieved at the expense of another. This practice meant that when the economy was not prospering, all those involved in the system were not prospering. However, if through luck, or some superior method, one of the community was to do better than their competitors, the nature of the economic system implied to them that this person had achieved greater success through unnatural means, means that in this period were synonymous with witchcraft. Hence witches were often accused of stealing resources from their neighbours, through a form of *maleficia*, such as the theft of milk from neighbour's cows, which allowed the witch's cow to produce more milk²². For instance, in Lorraine on the 3rd of March 1625 Didier Martin dit Saulnier accused Margueritte Estienne of stealing milk from his cow as revenge for him refusing to give her milk fourteen years previously. She was tortured using thumbscrews and confessed to the crime of witchcraft, and thus on the 26th of April 1625 she was sentenced to death²³. The cow would have lost milk because of poor diet and illness, however, the lack of scientific understanding, and the fact that this happening was already

²⁰ Niess, W – (*Hexenprozesse in der Grafschaft Bidingen – 1982*) and Behringer, W – (*Hexenverfolgung in Bayern: Volksmagie. Glaubenseifer und Staatsrason in der Fruhen Neuzeit – 1987*)

²¹ Gaskill, M. *Witchcraft: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford University Press, 2010, 8.

²² Briggs, R. *Witches and Neighbours*, 2002, 73-74.

²³ <http://witchcraft.history.ox.ac.uk/pdf/w011.pdf>

associated with witchcraft meant that Margueritte was accused, as she was considered to have a motive. The reputation that preceded her also would have been a cause of the accusation, as a vast amount of the witches that were accused in Lorraine already had reputations for witchcraft²⁴, which meant that any unfortunate incident that they were involved in that could not be rationally explained was easily linked to witchcraft.

Furthermore, the effects of the Little Ice Age did not just affect food production, the period has also been described as an “*age of epidemic disease of a severity not seen since the Black Death*”²⁵. The epidemics were predominantly caused by the crop failures caused by the climatic changes, as people had been left with weaker immune systems due to their poorer diets. Although the population of Europe had recovered from the effects of the Black Death, the event was still recent enough to instil fear in the citizens of Europe, and since witches had been linked through works of literature to miasmatic theory, witches quickly became scapegoats for outbreaks of disease. This led to accusations and executions in areas where there had previously been few, such as Geneva, as the fear of a return of a pandemic and the way literature presented witches, led people to believe that this would save them from plague. A lack of sophisticated science once again led to accusations as witchcraft was the only accredited explanation behind the spread of illness and plague. In July 1612 in Lorraine, Claudon Bregeat was accused of having caused the illness of Chrestofle Austien’s wife and son, alongside causing the illness of many of her neighbours. In the face of an overwhelming case against her Claudon confessed, and on the 23rd of August 1612, she was sentenced to be strangled then burned²⁶. This would have most likely occurred as she was probably carrying the disease, however early modern miasmatic theory did not support this, and instead implied that she must be a witch. Therefore, the effects of the Little Ice Age must be considered a compelling reason behind the accusations, as in the early modern mind they provided physical evidence for the existence of witches. Furthermore, the effects of the climatic

²⁴ http://witchcraft.history.ox.ac.uk/search_trials.html

²⁵ Gaskill, M. *Witchcraft: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford University Press, 2010, 42.

²⁶ <http://witchcraft.history.ox.ac.uk/pdf/w003.pdf>

change on the economies and societies of the affected countries served to provide a substantial motive behind accusations.

Marvin Harris suggests that witches were made to be scapegoats by the Church, to answer questions that they could not, and to shift the blame for the poor economic state of Europe, from them and the ruling classes²⁷. Furthermore, it can be argued that without the influence of the Pope and the Catholic Church none of these reasons would have resulted in the persecution of witches, as it was what the Church accused the witches of that caused the fear that led to accusations. The instructions of Pope Innocent also made it impossible for any 'good Christian' to disagree with the Church's view on witchcraft, as it was stated by the Pope that anyone who did not believe in witches and their crimes, was committing heresy against the Church, and could be charged thus, Dietrich Flade for example, was head of the electoral court in Trier during the trials, but when it emerged that he opposed the persecutions, and the use of torture, he himself was arrested and burnt for crimes against the church. This statement meant that all Christians within communities supposedly had a duty to denounce those that they considered to be witches, which helps to explain why many people accused their neighbours of witchcraft, as they believed that they were doing both the Church and their communities a great service, which fits with the view presented by Scarre and Callow, that the trials were carried out by people worried about themselves and public welfare, rather than immoral sadists.

One of the most enduring elements of the witchcraft trials, is the use of torture and other barbaric methods to ascertain the guilt of the accused. Torture was a key way in getting the accused to confess everything that the courts wished to hear, and in rooting out other witches, as many people would simply accuse anyone they knew of witchcraft under the pressures of torture. The sheer amount of accusations that came from the method of torture were enough to fuel and create the states of hysteria that led to accusations. Prior to 1468 there were very few allegations of witchcraft. Although this was due in part to the fact that

²⁷ Harris, M. *Cows, Pigs, Wars, and Witches*, 1973.

the *Malleus* had not yet been printed (although there were other works of significance such as the *Formicarius* or *De Lamiis*), the predominant reason was that torture had not been authorised in the persecution of witches. However, in 1468 Pope Paul II stated that witchcraft was a '*crimen exceptum*' meaning that torture could be used to gain evidence in trials²⁸, and correspondingly witchcraft accusations increased as a result. In many cases the accused maintained their innocence prior to torture, and were only condemned after they confessed and gave evidence against themselves under duress. In 1596 Meline Gentilhomme from St Die was accused of witchcraft by her neighbours. She originally denied all allegations, however after she was wracked and then threatened with worse torture she confessed to her crimes. She not only confessed to her crimes but also implicated others which led to a greater amount of accusations. Therefore, the fact that the Church condoned the use of torture in hunting witches can be considered a convincing factor behind the accusations, as people would implicate others under duress, and people would seek to accuse others in the hope that they would not be accused themselves, which meant that there were more accusations overall. This method helped cause the hysteria that dominated the period of the witchcraft trials, which was a key element in causing people to accuse their neighbours of witchcraft.

*“Who did more to spread the epidemic [witch hunting], professional witch-hunters or concerned amateurs on a local level?”*²⁹. Arguably it was the witch-hunters and priests who did more to spread the epidemic, as although more accusations came from ordinary people the original accusations came from witch-hunters and priests, which created the hysteria that encouraged the 'concerned amateurs' to accuse people. An example of this can be found in the *Tractat von Bekantnuß der Zauberer und Hexen*, published in 1589 by a Jesuit priest from Trier named Peter Binsfeld. Within the treatise, he blamed the failing vineyards of Trier on *maleficia* brought upon them by witches. In doing this he further enhanced the

²⁸ Trevor-Roper, H.R. *The European Witch-Craze of The Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries and Other Essays*, 1969, 118.

²⁹ Lehmann, H. *The Persecution of Witches as Restoration of Order: The Case of Germany, 1590s-1650s*, Cambridge University Press, 1988, 2.

hysteria in the diocese of Trier, which led to an increased number of witchcraft trials within the area. The two men here blamed for causing the trials to begin are Archbishop Johann von Schoenberg and Binsfeld, as they like countless other people in positions of power, allowed or caused hysteria to spread through the areas they governed, which caused the accusations to begin. The fact that those in power advocated witchcraft accusations made normal people more likely to accuse their neighbours of witchcraft, as they knew that they would be supported by powerful men in their actions.

Even though all these reasons for accusations are significant causes, without the influence of the Church and the literature produced by its servants, the dangerous effects of the Little Ice Age and the ensuing agrarian and economic crises would not have been blamed on witches, therefore there would have been far fewer accusations, to a point where the early modern period would not have been associated with witchcraft. In this sense, although the Church cannot be seen to have created the accusations, the Church was a catalyst for the accusations to begin and continue. Psychologically the most important emotion behind the accusation of witchcraft was fear. Fear as a cause can be split into three different types; fear of what the witches could do, fear of being accused and what would happen if you were, and fear of what would happen if you did not accuse someone. Coupled with socio-economic tensions, this fear became hysteria, which then caused anyone who was considered suspicious to be accused. The actions of the Church surrounding the issue were almost directly responsible for the three types of fear. The redefinition of witchcraft was not only instrumental in increasing fears of witches because the crimes they were accused of were more likely to have a bearing on everyday life, it also changed the perceived character of a witch from the supernatural, to neighbours and friends within a community. Neighbours were accused as there needed to be an existing negative feeling between the accuser and the accused, be it anger or envy, or even an element of competition (an emotion that played a significant part in accusations within the nobility. All the previous reasons were facilitated by a lack of sophisticated science, as it meant that the only attested reason available to early modern people for the misfortunes that plagued them was the presence and *maleficia* of witches. The decline of the trials can be

attributed towards the decline of the power of the Papacy and with it the increase of scientific knowledge, alongside the end of the socio-economic traumas of the Thirty Years' War (1618-1648), the effects of which continued to the end of the 17th Century

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