Nienke Wessel

s4598350

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Why burn the witches?

Looking for reasons behind early modern witch trials

Once a symbol of fear, the witch has sometimes become a symbol of feminism in recent popular culture. The subforum on the popular social media network Reddit called WitchesVsPatriarchy and both versions of the television show Charmed are recent examples of this. This change in connotation has been made possible by recent feminist readings on the subject. Women were branded witches for not fitting within the patriarchy, as goes the narrative in these cases. Witch trials are therefore a form of gendered violence, intended to oppress women. Yet, this feminist reading has also obtained critique; it does not take into account male witches and it reduces a complicated subject into a one dimensional problem. It is therefore useful to take a closer look at the different readings on the subject.

In this paper, I analyze different authors that try to answer the question: "why did the witch trials happen?" I will pay specific attention to the feminist readings and their critics, but will also touch upon other arguments. I argue that these need to be viewed together, because alone each theory only accounts for half of the picture.

I will first discuss the concept of a witch. Then I will sketch the relevant historical background. After that, the different answers to the question 'why?' will be discussed. In the conclusion, their value for understanding witch trials will be discussed.

What is witchcraft?

Even though we all have a general idea of what witchcraft entails, it is difficult to pinpoint exactly what was considered to be witch craft during the period under consideration (the sixteenth and seventeenth century). Horsley (1979, 690) identifies four different components of witchcraft:

- *Maleficium*, supernaturally causing harm to someone or something.
- Flying through the air for evil purposes. An example of such evil purpose is flying to find babies to eat.
- Participating in a sect or cult, which engages in Devil worshiping and orgies.
- Making pacts with the Devil.

All these components either directly or indirectly involve Satan, making it un-Christian for someone to participate in any of these activities. Because of this, for most definitions of witchcraft, it does not matter if someone intends well with their magic; it is still Demonic.

The exact definition of what was and was not witchcraft differed from place to place and time to time. For the present discussion, the definition provided above is sufficient to give the reader a general idea. They should however keep in mind that not all research discussed below utilizes the exact same definition.

Historical background

In this paper, I will mostly focus on the European witch trials, though sometimes drawing from examples of witch trials in the United States. The focus is on the witch trials in early modern Europe, meaning starting in the 16th century, ending with the end of the 18th century.

During this period, there was a general fear of witches. The term *witch hunt* refers in this case to determining who where witches, and not, in the modern sense of the word, to hunting down where they

resided. In a typical case (see (Levack 2006) for a more elaborate introduction), there were accusations by acquaintances or rumors in a town that someone was a witch. A judicial authority would then investigate this, often by arresting the person under investigation and trying to extract a confession from them. This was sometimes followed by an attempt to extract the names of accomplices. Then, they would be tried and then punished if found guilty. Punishment could be banishment, imprisonment or execution.

In cases of doubt, some sort of test would be applied. Examples of this include branding a suspected witch with a hot iron and then seeing whether God cured the burnt flesh or throwing them in the water to see whether they would float (guilty) or sink to the bottom (innocent) (75-6). Sometimes a duel would be thought with the party that was supposedly damaged by the witch. There were also all kinds of torture methods that were applied in order to extract a confession.

Some 40,000 people were killed, but it remains difficult to pinpoint the exact number (Gibbons 2012); the estimates range from 100,000 to 30,000. This difficulty arises because historians have to work with numerous records, which are scattered and incomplete. As witch trials were not a centralized endeavor but instead were organized locally, records from different places need to be combined to arrive at accurate estimates. Witch hunting was a local endeavor in that it was also carried out by local officials.

It is also difficult to explain why certain areas were more affected than others. For example, why did Ireland have only a handful of executions, while Germany had more than 20,000 according to some estimates (Deepwell 2019)?

It should be noted that most contemporary scholars believe that fear of witch craft did not originate in the lower classes of society, but was rather “the work of theolo- gians, philosophers and lawyers, and the men who subscribed to them were judges, clerics, magistrates and landlords” (Levack 2006, 31). Lower classes then followed and accepted the ideas proposed by higher classes.

Who was a witch

Besides general statistics on witch trials, there is also more detailed data on who exactly was considered a witch. While these statistics have the same problems as the statistics on the number of accused and executed people in total (scattered and incomplete records), they can still provide us with a general picture if we keep the shortcomings in mind.

Region	Years	Male	Female	% Female
Holy Roman Empire (1648 boundaries)	1530–1730	4,575	19,050	76
South-western Germany	1562–1684	238	1,050	82
Rothenburg ob der Tauber	1549–1709	19	46	71
Bishopric of Basel	1571–1670	9	181	95
Franche-Comté	1559–1667	49	153	76
Geneva	1537–1662	74	240	76
Pays de Vaud	1581–1620	325	624	66
County of Namur	1509–1646	29	337	92
Luxembourg	1519–1623	130	417	76
City of Toul	1584–1623	14	53	79
Dept of the Nord, France	1542–1679	54	232	81
Normandy	1564–1660	278	103	27
Castile	1540–1685	132	324	71
Aragon	1600–1650	69	90	57
Venice	1550–1650	224	490	69
Finland	1520–1699	316	325	51
Estonia	1520–1729	116	77	40
Wielkopolska, Poland	1500–1776	21	490	96
Russia	1622–1700	93	43	32
Hungary	1520–1777	160	1,482	90
County of Essex, England	1560–1675	23	290	93
New England	1620–1725	75	267	78
Iceland	1625–1685	110	10	8

Figure 1: Sex of accused witches in early modern Europe. Table from Levack (2006, 142).

For example, Figure 1 shows us the sex of the accused witches in early modern Europe. This table refutes

Region	Dates	Married	Widowed	Single	% Married
City of Toul	1584–1623	17	29	7	36
Basel	1571–1670	110	60	11	61
Montbéliard	1555–1661	31	25	11	50
County of Essex, England	1645 only	22	21	8	43
County of Kent, England	1560–1700	11	24	19	25
Scotland	1560–1727	245	67	7	70
Salem, Mass.	1692–1693	68	22	40	52
Sweden	1668–1676	49	19	32	49
Geneva	1537–1662	104	81	50	44
Venice	1550–1650	170	71	32	62

Figure 2: Marital status of accused female witches. Table from Levack (2006, 155).

Region	Years	Witches of known age	Number or over	% 50 or over
Geneva	1537–1662	95	71	75
Dept of the Nord, France	1542–1679	47	24	51
County of Essex, England	1645	15	13	87
Württemberg	1560–1701	29	16	55
Salem, Mass.	1692–1693	118	49	42
Scotland	1563–1736	166	68	41
Saarland	1575–1634			56
Rothenburg	1561–1652	48	17	40
Würzburg	1550–1650	190	112	59

Figure 3: Number and percentage of accused witches aged 50 or over. Table from Levack (2006, 149).

the popularly held belief that witches were exclusively women. In some of the places, the majority of the accused was men. Nonetheless, the average majority was female. Similarly, Figure 2 shows the marital status of the accused female witches, refuting the claim that witches are mostly single females. However, the percentage of accused unmarried females was greater among the accused than in the general population (Levack 2006, 155). Hence, there might still be some merit in the popular explanation that society feared unmarried women (156).

Looking at the ages of accused witches in Figure 3, we see that the bare statistics seem to support that the witch is old. However, some additional caution needs to be taken interpreting these numbers. There are certainly cases of children being accused of witchcraft (149). Also, the table only shows the age of the accused at time of accusation. People often waited for years after suspecting someone of being a witch before formally accusing them (151). Sometimes decades of incidents were brought up during a trial.

Witch trials in relation to religion

In principle, witch trials were often performed in the name of God, as witchcraft was considered the Devil's work. Now, would not the simplest explanation be that witchcraft was therefore caused by an increase in religiosity during that period? There are several arguments against this interpretation. First of all, the early modern period was not the most religious period of time in European history. Why did the trials not happen during the Middle Ages? Federici (2004) argues that witch persecution is not a medieval practice:

> It is well established that the "superstitious" Middle Ages did not persecute any witches; the very concept of "witchcraft" did not take shape until the late Middle Ages, and never, in the "Dark Ages," were there mass trials and executions, despite the fact that magic permeated daily life and, since the late Roman Empire, it had been feared by the ruling class as a tool of insubordination among the slaves. (Federici, 165)

The crime of witchcraft is also not new in the period that we are talking about. The crime of *maleficium* already existed in the 7th and 8th century, applying to magical acts that inflicted harm or damage to persons or things. Yet at that point there were no witch trials. It was even the case that the church criticized people who believed in this magic (Federici 2004, 165). From the 15th century onward, witch persecution started to take more shape, but Federici argues that it was still not the predominating intellectual climate. Especially in the renaissance, she argues, were people skeptical of anything supernatural. Hence, this is not a climate in which witch persecution is likely. The real persecution started in the mid-16th century, when the Spanish conquistadores were "subjugating the American populations" (166). First, in Carolina in the not yet United States a law was passed that established witchcraft as something that was to be punished by death (166). Later on, in Protestant England, similar laws were passed. After 1550, laws followed in the rest of Europe, such as Scotland, Switzerland, France and the Spanish Netherlands.

Federici hence makes a link between the Spanish conquest, the rise of modernity and witchcraft. Even if you disagree that such a link indeed exists, the point that witch trials could have happened centuries earlier, but did not, still holds water. That is not to say that magic and witchcraft arose during this period (for example, Bailey (2006) provides an extensive history of the role of magic in Europe from antiquity to the present), but rather that the extreme persecution was not as pronounced in earlier periods.

Another reason for being skeptical about seeing religious believes as the sole cause for the witch trials is that the question remains why these specific people were accused of witchcraft. As we saw above, witches in Europe are mostly older women, often unmarried. What made people in society suspect these groups of women of witchcraft? One can look for different answers here, depending on whether one believes the accusers really believed in witchcraft or simply saw it as a tool. In either case, a fear for the ungodly witchcraft is not enough to explain all facts.

Hence, the subject lends itself for a functionalist approach (see e.g. Martin (2017, 19-32)), where we

look at a religious practice and do not accept it as simply part of the religion, but rather try to find alternative explanations of why this specific practice is performed at that moment, often from a sociological or anthropological perspective.

An example of how this works is provided by Collins (2003) in his text on the use of the Bible in the legitimization of violence. He argues that appealing to the Bible gives a "God-like certainty" (20) that stops all debates : "[t]he Bible has contributed to violence in the world precisely because it has been taken to confer a degree of certitude that transcends human discussion and argumentation" (21). Hence, he does not see the Bible as inherently violence promoting, but rather tries to untangle how the Bible has been used in the promotion of violence[1]. Religious legitimization also provides for a discourse in which religious violence can be framed as a triumph of good over evil (see e.g. Janes and Houen (2014)).

In this paper, I take a similar approach in discussing witchcraft as a form of religious violence.

Why did the witch trials happen?

This section intends to answer the question: 'why?' Numerous different answers have been given to this question and it is impossible to give them all. To illustrate that, take a look at the answer Levack (2006) provides:

> During the past century the witch-hunt has been attributed, in whole or in large part, to the Reformation, the Counter-Reformation, the Inquisition, the use of judicial torture, the wars of religion, the religious zeal of the clergy, the rise of the modern state, the development of capitalism, a series of agricultural crises, the widespread use of narcotics, changes in medical thought, social and cultural conflict, an attempt to wipe out paganism, the need of ruling elites to distract the masses, opposition to birth control, the spread of syphilis, and the hatred of women. (Levack,

1. Obviously, the religious legitimization provided by the Bible have very likely also played a role in the witch trials.

2)

People have even argued that ergot poisoning caused the Salem witch trials, although this has not been supported and was even refuted by historical evidence (Spanos and Gottlieb 1976).

Hence, it is no easy feat to provide a comprehensive answer to the question. Yet, I will discuss a few of the prominent suggestions. The latest in Levack's list, the hatred of women, has become one of the most studied ones and most influential ones[2], and will therefore be discussed more extensively in the next section.

Feminist readings

In feminist readings witch trials are seen as gendered violence in some sort, often meant to further oppress women in the existing patriarchal structures.

One of the most outspoken academics in this group is Federici (2004), detailing her analysis in the book *Caliban and the Witch*. Her central point of view is that witch trials were used to oppress lower class women. Witch trials coincided with the rise of capitalism, and were therefore used to lower resistance to capitalism. Her argument can hence be summarized as follows: "If we consider the historical context in which the witch-hunt occurred, the gender and class of the accused, and the effects of the persecution, then we must conclude that witch-hunting in Europe was an attack on women's resistance to the spread of capitalist relations and the power that women had gained by virtue of their sexuality, their control over reproduction, and their ability to heal" (170).

Similarly, Deepwell (2019) argues that there is a strong patriarchal element to the witch hunts. "Although women, as well as men, did accuse other women of witchcraft, and men were also accused of witch-craft, it was men who were the torturers, the jurors, and the judges in these trials" (152). Hence, she argues that it were men who used their power in the trials. These two writers clearly see the patriarchy as a key element

2. See the examples in the introduction, among others.

in witch trials.

Against any feminist reading of witchcraft, Apps and Gow (2003) argue that one must not forget that a substantial part of the accused and executed witches were in fact male. They even argue that this makes any reading that considers the witch female difficult, at least when taken as a whole. The numbers presented above in Figure 1 make it unlikely for this to be merely attributed to them being associated with a female witch (as is often argued (29)). They also argue that the concept of a witch as female is a modern one and that language used at the time considered witches of both sexes or males (155).

They do however find that male witches that were executed were considered 'weak-minded', which was associated with femininity. The feminization does suggest that witch trials mostly affected femininized people (156). The strict gender binary as presented by authors such as the ones previously mentioned is too restrictive, however, according to Apps and Gow.

Another author that specifically pays attention to male witches is Olli (2018). She argues that this Devil's pact, which is usually considered a form of witchcraft (see also above), was mostly a male crime. The male and female contact with the devil differ significantly in the stereotypes: "Men desired and deliberately sought out Satan, whereas Satan sought out women either to seduce and beguile them into a relationship or to physically force them into accepting his presence. Women were viewed as the weaker sex, emotionally and morally, and consequently easier prey for the wiles of the Devil" (111). However, that women were perceived as weaker and more susceptible to the Devil does not make them any less dangerous. They were actually considered a greater threat: "A man who assigned himself to the Devil did so for personal gain but not at the expense of others, and only put his own soul in danger. Women, on the other hand, contracted with the Devil for anti-social purposes. The favours they gained from Satan were not concerned with personal aggrandisement, but were used to inflict misfortune on others, in particular to harm the production of milk and the breeding of cattle" (111). In short: a woman meant social harm when engaging with the Devil, a

man did not.

Levack (2006) also speculates about different reasons why women were more often thought to be witches. He similarly mentions that women were thought to be more susceptible to the devil (145). He also points out that women were supposed to be sexually passive, and that the Devil had sexual relations with the witches, while the witches had an unhealthy amount of lust (145-6). Women also performed duties in society in which witchcraft could be easily performed: "their customary roles in society gave them more opportunities to practise harmful magic. Women in early modern European communities generally served as the cooks, healers and midwives, and each of these functions made them vulnerable to the charge that they practised harmful magic" (146). Another possible explanation is that women "were believed to be able to use sorcery as an instrument of protection and revenge" (148), while men were physically stronger and thus able to protect themselves. This final narrative is also sometimes used to explain why more single women were accused; they had no man to protect them, and thus were thought to resort to witchcraft sooner (Deepwell 2019, 154).

Note that except for Federici's account, none of these explain why the witch trials happened, *when* they occurred and *where* they happened. The earlier Middle Ages can hardly be considered more female friendly. The next section discusses some hypotheses on that subject.

Control in uncertain situations

The second main category of explanations is more of the psychological kind; witch trials were meant as a way to feel more in control in uncertain situations. This can take more abstract or more concrete forms.

For example, Reed (2015) argues that a general feeling of lack of control and a struggle for cultural power provided the breeding grounds for the moral panic that instigated the Salem witch trials.

A very concrete example is how the Bad Weather hypothesis blames witches for a particularly cold period

of time. This hypothesis was proposed by Behringer (1995) in 1995. He argues that the cold weather and subsequent famine were blamed on witches, resulting in intensified persecution. He supports this by citing sources from that time talking about weather magic and by historians' work on the weather of the period. In his 1999 paper on the same topic he even uses the witch trials as an example of "how dangerous it is to discuss climatic change under the aspects of morality" (Behringer 1999, 335).

Oster (2004) supports this hypothesis with numerical data and statistical testing. She indeed finds significant effects pertaining to the weather in relation to the amount of witch trials. She concludes: "The witchcraft trials suggest that even when considering events and circumstances thought to be psychological or cultural, key underlying motivations can be closely related to economic circumstances." (226).

On the other hand, Leeson and Russ (2018) who performed a similar analysis on a different data set, did not find a statistically significant correlation. As an alternative, they propose to view witch trials as a mechanism to enlarge the 'religious market share' of Protestantism and Catholicism. They argue that by using the popular belief of witchcraft and marketing themselves as fighting against it, the different denominations of Christianity could advertise their beliefs. They provide support for their claim by providing data that shows that areas riddled with Protestant-Catholic conflict also had more witch trials. Problematic in their analysis is that it is not excluded that both the religious conflicts as well as the witch trials may be the result of something else, such as social unrest.

Social unrest is what Ben-Yehuda (1980) names as one of the main causes of witch trials in Europe. A new social order came up, while the old one was breaking down. This was further aggravated by the climatological and demographic changes. He also writes that the geographical discoveries added to a 'feeling of impeding doom' (24). He argues that witches specifically were the target because they threatened the legitimacy of Christianity. Relating to the previous section, women formed most of the targets because they were an easy target, because of their inferior status. They also stood symbol for many of the things the church

prohibited: prostitution, infanticide, and contraception. Ben-Yehuda supports his argument by arguing that history shows that all of these conditions were present when the trials started and that the trials stopped when the conditions no longer held.

Levack (2006) also sees multiple causes working together: "the emergence of new ideas about witches and a series of fundamental changes in the criminal law as the necessary preconditions of the witch-hunt, and both religious change and social tension as its more immediate causes" (3). He also stresses the importance of viewing the witch hunts not as one big hunt, but rather several localized trials and hunts, which each have their own circumstances and causes (3).

Out of all these different hypotheses, the final two seem the most appealing, because they tend to minimize simplification of the subject. However, in their complexity, they can be unwieldy to use in practice when talking about witch hunts.

Conclusion

Taking the previous discussion into account, we see that the question of 'Why did the witch trials happen?' is actually a composite of different smaller questions. Why did witch trials happen at the time they happened and in the place they happened? Why did specific groups get targeted more than other groups? Why was religion chosen as the main mobilizer in this case? And even to any one of those questions, it remains hard to find a definite answer.

In any case, there tends to be a tendency in academics and popular culture to either denigrate the female victims by painting them as social outcasts or erase the male victims by making it a purely gendered crime. Keeping this in mind, it seems desirable to not stray too far to either side, and remember the male witches[3]. It also seems that simply one explanation is not sufficient, despite claims made by many of the authors

3. Luckily the witches versus the patriarchy also accept the male allies.

mentioned above.

Word count: 3694

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