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GER 1501: World of Witches

Wise Women and Witch Trials - Abby

Description

Beginning in the early fifteenth century, there was a shift in Western Europe from obtaining reproductive healthcare through female healers, or “wise women”, within the community to being treated by more formally trained physicians. This change was caused, according to the theory posed by professors and feminist activists Drs. Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English in their 1973 book *Witches, Midwives and Nurses: A History of Women Healers*, by a combined effort from the Catholic Church and university-trained physicians. For the physicians the goal was mostly to take medical power out of the hands of women and put it into their own.

Meanwhile, for the Church, the intention was to morally cleanse the medical practice of so-called devil-worshiping, sinful women in positions of power. One way these groups discredited wise women was by accusing them of witchcraft. This shift in the makeup of the medical practice continues to this day and has fast-tracked much of the anti-reproductive healthcare legislation we are seeing today.

Main Body

Wise women played countless different medical roles within their communities. They were physicians, midwives, abortion providers and everything in between.¹ They did not learn their

trade through traditional universities but rather from other women in their communities. They possessed a vast knowledge of herbal remedies that they utilized to treat disease, pain, and control fertility. Herbs traditionally used by wise women included belladonna, ergot, pennyroyal, tansy, rue, and cotton-root. Specifically, pennyroyal continued to be used into the 20th century to trigger miscarriages by causing the uterus to contract.

The *Malleus Maleficarum* discusses the roles of female healers, albeit in a pessimistic and sexist light, at great length:

“Now there are, as it is said in the Papal Bull, seven methods by which they infect with witchcraft the venereal act and the conception of the womb: First, by inclining the minds of men to inordinate passion; second, by obstructing their generative force; third, by removing the members accommodated to that act; fourth, by changing men into beasts by their magic act; fifth, by destroying the generative force in women; sixth, by procuring abortion; seventh by offering children to the devils, besides other animals and fruits of the earth with which they work much charm ...”

The *Malleus Maleficarum* or *Hammer of Witches*, published in 1486 and written by Heinrich Kramer and Jacob Sprenger, exemplifies the viewpoints espoused by physicians and the Church in order to discredit and vilify healing women. According to Ehrenreich and English, “There is no historically consistent justification for the exclusion of women from healing roles. Witches were attacked for being pragmatic, empirical, and immoral”. By interweaving healing women with negative stereotypes about witches, they were dragged into the chaos and violence of the witch trials without a new justification having to be made for the prosecution of female healers

specifically. The reframing of wise women as evil witches was successful at causing a widespread shift to university-trained physicians that has lasted up to the present day. A male-dominated medical system has placed women in subservient positions both as healthcare workers and as patients. In the early 70s when Ehrenreich and English wrote their book they discussed how the majority of women working in healthcare were not doctors but, rather, nurses or in other positions where they were working under men. To a slightly lesser extent that is still the case today with only 36% of doctors being women as of 2021, according to reports from the Association of American Medical Colleges.² As for patient experiences, several research studies have found that women in pain are less likely to be believed and properly treated than men are.³ They are also viewed by many physicians as less capable of making their own reproductive healthcare decisions, evidenced by the difficulty women face in receiving tubal ligations compared to vasectomies.⁴ Our current medical culture that distrusts women's opinions began with the misogynist labeling of wise women as witches in the fifteenth century and could be a contributing factor to the current struggles women experience in gaining basic reproductive healthcare, especially in a post-Roe era.⁵

Witchcraft and Abortion in Antiquity- Flaviana

Intro

A modern understanding of the characterization of witches and their supposed link to abortions in early history heavily relies on the writings of prominent classical male figures. These men acted as social drivers in the war on women through their use of rhetoric and namely their defamatory remarks about women's appearances and morals. A general consensus in Roman literature is established through these works regarding which women fit into the category of witch based on appearance. Witches are almost always portrayed as hideous old hags due to the distaste of Roman men for women out of their childbearing years⁸. These women were a direct

threat to the already diminishing birth levels in Ancient Rome and abetted the newfound age of sexual deviance in women. Although Roman ideas of sexuality and sexual freedom did differ from contemporary views, this mostly benefitted the male population of the notably patriarchal society. Women were still expected to first and foremost be good housewives and mothers in order to carry on their husband's legacy. Because elderly women could no longer serve this purpose, they became the target of accusations of jealousy and malintent. Because they could no longer bear children themselves, these women were subsequently believed to cause harm to other infants or unborn children out of spite. This characterization of a witch's appearance as a vile assault to the senses carries over to the portrayal of their morals.

Main Body

The narrative built regarding women's morals in antiquity was founded in a fear from men regarding the promiscuity of women. The eradication of sexual deviance in women became a sort of witch trial in itself as Roman men did not believe in sexual acts as a form of pleasure for women outside of their childbearing age. Instead, a woman's willing pursuit of sex was seen as a masculine desire and a subsequent threat to the portrayal of male virility⁸. This established a fear in the male members of society regarding their own status and dominance. If a mere woman was more willing and able to engage in sexual acts than her male counterpart, what did that mean for his identity as a man? Because of this, witches in Roman literature are not only portrayed as sexually deviant, but sexually deviant to a gruesome extreme. They are portrayed as having a disregard for the living or dead while particularly targeting the genitals of male characters⁸. Through all examples of witchcraft used in this nature, there is a strong rhetorical appeal to the ethos of the reader in regard to the intent to the women behind the acts. These women were always out to cause intentional harm to their victims. There is no moral grey area in these stories

as the agents of witchcraft are always seen to go to the extreme even in cases of retribution. This same skewed moral compass is used as a weapon against abortifacient magic and abortion itself in antiquity.

Abortive magic was seen as one of the cruelest forms of magic as it specifically targeted unborn children and vehemently opposes the “natural” duties of a woman or midwife. These actions are portrayed to be taken out of anger and jealousy that the witches are no longer able to perform the same roles that they once were. This ties into the correlation between witch, woman, and midwife as midwives were responsible for the safe delivery of children. Midwives were already viewed as “dirty” due to their daily interaction with the bodily fluids associated with reproduction and childbirth^{8,9}. There is almost a sense of hesitation and questioning of the role of midwives in childbirth. Roman men did not see the need for midwives and moreover feared the implications of having a woman not personally connected to the infant be solely responsible for its delivery. In cases of accidental death or harm to a child, the midwife was always held responsible even if it was a result of natural causes⁹. This persecution of the field of midwifery naturally became another cause for women in the field to be targeted as witches. This link between midwifery and witchcraft only grows stronger throughout history.

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