

The Black Plague (which killed an estimated $\frac{1}{3}$ of Europe and brought untold suffering) and other disasters that struck Europe from the 1300s onwards caused Europeans to look towards others with distrust, as they blamed the Devil and his helpers on earth for their woes. This resulted in the persecution of alleged 'witches' for more than two centuries. Witches were persecuted from 1480 to 1700 out of a need to maintain social order, out of the fears of the general populace, and out of the Catholic Church's desire to reaffirm their authority.

Based on statistics presented by Alan Macfarlane, the vast majority of those tried for witchcraft were of the lower classes (Document 1), part of families who performed as laborers or farmers, and the vast majority of those tried for witchcraft were also women (Document 2). This implies that the upper-classes, seeking to alleviate the concerns of the masses, looked towards the more dispensable elements of society (lower-classes, women) as scapegoats to keep the masses pleased. An eyewitness to persecutions conducted provides further evidence in that "This movement was promoted by many in office, who hoped for wealth from the persecution" (Document 3) for the purposes of benefiting themselves and remaining secure. It is likely that individuals were accused of witchcraft in order to alleviate the unrest of the populace and maintain social order, either through fear or satisfaction.

Another likely reason for the witch trials that pervaded in Europe during this time period is the religious and social changes that occurred in Europe during this time period. The Protestant Reformation made everyone uncertain and fearful of the proper conduct of religion, and combined with the Plague of the 1300s and famines and natural disasters, everyone was on the lookout for the devil. Peasants most likely legitimately believed in these concerns, as evidenced by the account of one W. Fulbecke, who argued that the aged "being apt for contagion, and by the Devil whetted for such purpose" would lead to the vexation and destruction of others. The negative connotation that became associated with age and disease likely arose from the aged having naturally weaker immune systems and being more susceptible to disease, and the Black Plague's spread by the ill being associated with religious punishment. This led directly to fears of certain sectors of society and a willingness to search for any and all evidence to accuse one of devil's work or witchcraft, often out of a sincere fear of the individuals and a desire to protect themselves. The fear that was ever present in Europe helped to make accusations of witchcraft and desires for witch hunts more common.

The Church was also capable of utilizing the conditions of the era to its benefit. Following the Protestant Reformation by Martin Luther and King Henry VIII's defiant English Reformation, the Church was severely weakened. By establishing itself once again as a bastion of hope and a defense against the Devil and witchcraft, the Church was able to reaffirm its legitimacy. Playing off of social conditions, the Church could explain away such statistics as the majority of witches being women, as in the Inquisitions handbook (Document 7) which claimed that women were more carnal and impressionable and therefore susceptible to the devil's

influence. This not only reaffirmed Church power but also ensured that the Church's beliefs on social relations between men and women remained firmly in place by displaying women as weaker. The Inquisition gave the Church once again great authority over the religious operations in European countries, and by the order of the Church, European states were forced to give authority and freedom to the Papal Inquisitors (Document 6). Practices such as torture further reinforced the apparent legitimacy of the Church's actions; testimonies such as Walpurga Hausmannin's (Document 4) were not uncommon, as they were coerced into giving in to the Inquisitors, and had to admit to such heinous crimes as devil worship and the murder of infants. This fearmongering caused many to look towards the Church for security, and the Church appeared to them sincere in its efforts to provide such security.

Witchcraft trials conducted in Europe from 1480 to 1700 resulted from numerous issues, among which were the social chaos of the time, the fears of the people as the result of disease and disaster, and the Church's actions in strengthening itself. The false accusations were truly unfortunate, but understandable in their occurrence given the context of the time period and the actions of parties such as the upper-classes and members of the Catholic Church.