

Sydney Oxendine

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If She Floats: An Examination of the Misogyny Present in Witch Hunts

Historically, women were persecuted when they challenged the norms put in place by a society that favored male dominance. One such example is the witch hunts that took place between the 17th and 18th centuries as a method of female subjugation and oppression. Women accused of witchcraft were tortured and killed because they derived their power from themselves and not men. Not only was this beneficial as women were kept in their subservient roles but lords and villagers profited by seizing the property of dead accused women or ridding themselves of her financial burden on the village. Witch hunts arose from a deep-rooted, religious misogyny laced with superstitions regarding what a woman could and could not do. To further the examination of the misogyny of witchcraft one can use Jane Wenham as a case study while exploring the dichotomy between male and female accused practitioners of witchcraft.

In Hertfordshire, England, 1712, a sixteen-year old girl named Anne Thorne was left alone in a room to rest while her leg healed after being set. Thorne felt a compulsion to run a mile from the home and gather sticks then return. Once Thorne returned, she was pulled to throw the sticks into the fireplace as she repeatedly thought the phrase, “burn the witch”. Thorne looked toward the door and saw Jane Wenham standing there and glaring at the girl. Thorne’s accusation created a platform for more villagers to come forward with claims that Wenham used Maleficium to hurt them and their property. Wenham did not have many people willing to defend her as she was quite the rude elderly woman. Wenham’s first husband had passed away while her

second refused to pay her debts, of which she had many. When tried at the local rectory, Wenham declared her innocence and volunteered to undergo any tests to prove it. The case against Wenham consisted largely of witnesses who had outlandish tales about the accused's power's from turning into animals to flying on a broomstick.¹

After Wenham was declared guilty and sentenced to execution her trial gained a large following. Wenham was eventually granted a full reprieve and allowed to live out the rest of her life in relative peace. Scholars came forward to defend or condemn her using Biblical logic as well as secular reasoning. An unknown author produced quite the defense for Wenham when he asked that the public reconsider the amount of faith that they placed in witness testimonies.² The author argued that the witnesses could have misremember the events or even lied. This argument was refuted by George A. M., one of the more popular writers against Wenham, who asked why the witnesses would lie, what could they possibly gain.³

While Wenham was acquitted, at least _____ women were not as lucky. To understand the systematic oppression of women as witches one must first consider three things: What qualities signified that a woman was a witch? Could there be any other value gained from the persecution of witches? Lastly, if this is systematic oppression of women, what of the men who were accused of witchcraft.

There are a few traits that could heightened a woman's chance of being accused of witchcraft. While this is not a definitive list the items listed raised the likelihood that a woman would be accused of witchcraft. A woman who was elderly, an herbalist or healer, had and

¹ Unknown, *The Case of the Hertfordshire Witchcraft Consider'd*, London, 1712

² *The Case of the Hertfordshire Witchcraft Consider'd*

³ George A. M., *The Belief of Witchcraft Vindicated*, London, 1712.

unpleasant demeanor, and/or was widowed were more likely to be accused. Elderly widows were the communities' burden as they could not support themselves without having a husband.⁴ They were considered burdens on society therefore to remove the widow from the village would also remove the obligation to feed and clothe her.⁵ In some cases, the widow felt entitled to the support of the village and were not grateful to their communities; their negative attitudes furthered the resentment that the villages had for them.⁶

Herbalists were a target as they derived their power by using their own knowledge, which was empowering and not linked to men.⁷ A powerful woman with no connection to men was threatening to villages. Villagers, male and female alike, would treat this woman with respect because it was important to them to maintain a good relationship with the herbalist as her talents could be required in the future. It is obvious women were not considered equals to men for the majority of human history, there was a power imbalance that was firmly kept in place by making examples of those who would dare step outside of its constraints. While townsfolk were comfortable with the local herbalist when she delivered their son, once their cow died she was a witch who hexed them.⁸ Villagers were poor, illiterate and used superstition to explain what they did not understand; when things went array, they blamed witchcraft then turned against the healers. Men often led these charges against the power-wielding women as there was no other explanation offered to them for their ailments.⁹ The power-wielding women were abnormal and

⁴ Schweidler, Abraham. "The Amber Wwitch", The Project Gutenberg EBook of The Amber Witch, by Wilhelm Meinhold. Accessed June 23, 2019.

⁵ The Case of the Hertfordshire Witchcraft Consider'd

⁶ "The Amber Witch"

⁷ George A. M., The Belief of Witchcraft Vindicated, London, 1712.

⁸ Clive Holmes, "Women: Witnesses and Witches." Past & Present, no. 140 (1993): 63.

⁹ Clive Holmes, "Women: Witnesses and Witches." Past & Present, no. 140 (1993): 55-58.

existed outside of the female sphere which led villagers to believe that the women were at fault for the ailments that the villagers experienced.

Another reason women were accused of witchcraft was ignorance. Physicians, who were always male, commonly diagnosed clients with witchcraft or bewitchment if they did not know what the ailment was.¹⁰ The physician was able to save face while acting under societal pressure to provide much sought-after answers to ailments. According to Michel Foucault, knowledge is defined as being a “truth” that is relative and agreed upon by those in power. In this circumstance, the physicians are the ones in power and dictate what societal norms are. When the physician declared an ailment was caused by bewitchment, he made it credible. The men who led the charges were encouraged by the physician’s diagnoses. Women who met the criteria for being a witch were harmlessly gossiped about until a man whose loved one was “bewitched” brought the women to court.

As alluded to in an earlier passage, monetary gain was a large motivation for accusing women of witchcraft as was discussed with village elderly women as burdens on society. Another aspect of monetary incentive was that the local nobility claimed property and possessions of the accused who were found guilty and executed.¹¹ Furthermore, witch hunters would receive a month’s wage for regular labor if they found a witch.¹² Men found monetary gain in the persecution of witches. Witch hunters were not likely to realize it, their trials and executions were rooted in misogyny and superstition. This is seen heavily in the writings of Mathew Hopkins, a popular 17th century witch hunter, who believed that he was doing what God

¹⁰ Clive Holmes, "Women: Witnesses and Witches." *Past & Present*, no. 140 (1993): 62-63.

¹¹ Schweidler, Abraham. "THE AMBER WITCH." *The Project Gutenberg EBook of The Amber Witch*, by Wilhelm Meinhold. Accessed June 23, 2019.

¹² Mathew Hopkins. *The Discovery of Witches*. London, 1647.

called on him to do, for a price of course.¹³ Whether the individuals realized it or if it were deep and internalized is of little consideration as it lends way to the same conclusion- women who held power that was not connected to men were more likely to be accused of witchcraft and witches were killed in an effort to keep women from undermining men.¹⁴

Feminist historians have overlooked men who were accused of witchcraft.¹⁵ While women make up the majority of people executed for witchcraft, this does not mean that men were not accused, in fact, men make up fifteen percent of those tried.¹⁶ The reason that more women were killed is that women were thought to have practiced Maleficium while men read scroll, texts, and were masters of devils. What men were suspected of doing was not considered harmful therefore they were merely fined while Maleficium was considered a dark magic enacted with the intent to cause harm and was punished with death. This is a substantial distinction as it offers a glimpse into the gender imbalance that existed between women and men. Men could control the devil but women were not a sensible which was why they were easily led astray by the devil.¹⁷ Men had the ability to control the devil while women were merely his servants; even in the accusations against women practicing Maleficium they subservient to male dominance as the devil in Christian ideology is male. Which is why men suspected of practicing dark arts were not tortured, imprisoned, or executed as their dabbling brought harm to no one. Males and females exist in two different spheres while some historians have argued that male witches were effeminate and existing in the female sphere, this simply is untrue.¹⁸ If it were the case, male

¹³ Mathew Hopkins. *The Discovery of Witches*. London, 1647.

¹⁴ Barstow, Anne. *Witchcraze: A New History of the European Witch Hunts*. New York City, NY: HarperOne, 1995.

¹⁵ Kent, E.J. "Masculinity and Male Witches in Old and New England, 1593-1680." *History Workshop Journal* 60, no. 1 (September 2005): 69.

¹⁶ Kent, E.J. "Masculinity and Male Witches in Old and New England, 1593-1680." *History Workshop Journal* 60, no. 1 (September 2005): 69–92.

¹⁷ Clive Holmes, "Women: Witnesses and Witches." *Past & Present*, no. 140 (1993): 46.

¹⁸ Knowledge is defined as being a "truth" that is relative and agreed upon by those in power.

witches would have met the same fate as their female counterparts. Male witches were described as “intelligent” while females were called “devil’s whore”. Male witches were masculine and as such when they were found guilty, they were allowed to live; a privilege that females were not allotted.

Jane Wenham was the last person found guilty of witchcraft. She existed at the end of the witch-craze where skeptics and theologians alike found the idea of witches to be ludicrous. Wenham was targeted by her community because she was elderly, a widow, and a burden. Even more so, Wenham wielded a power that other women within her village did not, she was sustained by her community therefore her power was derived from the community and not a singular male figure. While Wenham’s negative attitude about her power did not make her community more accommodating to her, they still maintained her. Wenham lived out the rest of her life as a widow in a different village.

Women were viewed as lesser than men, frail and passive. A woman who was considered abnormal because she wielded her own power was a threat to the system created by elites and enforced by men. The accusation of witchcraft was a method of controlling societal norms by suppressing women who were not reliant on males for their power. This manifested in witch hunts where women were executed because of the threat that they posed.

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