Gender and Witchcraft Beliefs Historical Analysis

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Witchcraft Definitions and the Gendered Pattern of Accusation

To start with, we shall first discuss the meaning of witchcraft. Several people have assigned witchcraft much meaning, but in real meaning, a witch is a person who possesses a supernatural power suspected of causing harm, misfortune or even injuries to others. Witches defined in this broad perspective had some characteristics, or they possessed a similar trait such as isolation from the community, the act of being malicious, or even inheritance of this witchcraft from another witch. Witchcraft was associated with both men and women, though in many communities, they associated it with women. In European history, the meaning of witch and witchcraft had a more detailed definition. A witch was a person who exercised maleficent power by having agreed with the of the devil. This meaning included both women and men, though, in many instances, a witch in many societies refers to a female and most who have identified as witches are women. This paper tries to elaborate on how women, as a female gender, are more closely linked with witchcraft than men. It also tries to bring into account different scholarly and their different perspective on witchcraft in European countries. [2]

IEstimatesin early modern witch trials claimed that about 80-90% of the population were women in the European countries. According to Barstow, he argued that though the witches possessed an abnormal power he had little faith in modern society as healers or even diviners. In fact, he associated the most stereotype of witchcraft with the women. According to Kramer and Sprenger, in their book of witches- Hunter, they described women as unfaithful and sexually insatiable, and they even quoted classical, biblical and medieval sources. However, in the same category, Julio Caro mentioned in his book Basque Witchcraft of the Sick that old women were his typical witches. He continues to say that a woman will become a witch in the initial failure of her [3] life as the woman, after frustrated love affairs, has to leave her with importance or disgrace. However, the scholarly Margret Murrays in her book the witch cult in Western Europe and also Mary Daly's book The Metaethics of Radical Feminism, among others, were the first to pose the question of gender and the center of witchcraft discourse.

Misogyny and Early Gender Interpretations of Witchcraft

In another circumstance, women are blamed for being the source of problems. According to Jeffrey Burton, he says that women are all the center of the problem in society. He argues that folk magic or witchcraft was another valid alternative for women. He accepted all concept definitions of witchcraft, terming it as violent, feminine discontent that involved criminal activity since he associated witchcraft with deviation rather than the traditional religion. According to his argument, he claims that European witchcraft was not just to be understood as a sorceress but as an incarnation of the hag.

Also, on women's witchcraft, William Monter's study of witchcraft affirms that the widespread use of magic in Europe is linked with women for the use of magic in need of compensation for the legal and economic disadvantages. He continues that he lays his persecution that sex was their crucial factor more important than even age, poverty or any other thing. He continues to say that single women were also designated victims of witchcraft. He concluded by stating that the females, according to gender analysis, were the most influenced by witchcraft and magic.

Also, on gender analysis, Christiana Larner, a sociologist, produced the most detailed investigation on witchcraft. Through his skills in sociology, history and also religion, he accepted the idea of the use of witchcraft by the poor village females. He found that gender was the central issue and that women were potential witches and were thought to be associated with thoughts of evil. The issue of witchcraft was [4] sex-linked and was the persecution of women such as the same thing could be associated with men on killers being persecuted of men as far as gender was concerned. [5]

Colonial Beliefs and the Emergence of Gender Scholarship

According to Cotton Mather of The Apocalypse of the Witches, the early generations during colonialism were susceptible to the influence of magic or the devil. However, through interpretation of the Bible, the life of the Puritan was characterized by a continuous struggle between good and devil. The devil, they believed, selected women and children since they were the easiest target and to continue to despise in his work. During the year 1688, still in colonial times, the children of Mason Goodwin contracted strange diseases that were symptoms of demonic possession. Mather, however, treated them with prayers while still fasting to express her spiritual realm. Later, in 1689, he published the whole incident, terming it as witchcraft and possessions by the devil.

In addition to witchcraft and gender, there were few scholarly studies engaged in gender and the question of why so many witches were women until the 1990s. According to Christina Larner in the book Witchcraft and Religion, the question many feminists were asking was whether hunting a witch

or a woman. Larner incorporated the idea of gender into the dominion of serious learning, hence encouraging other historians to be involved in the theme of witchcraft. However, without losing the significance of gender relations in the subject of witchcraft trial, Larner argued that Patriarchy and misogyny were not necessarily the root of the witch hunt but rather conditions that nurtured the hunts. Larner affirmed that witchcraft was associated with immoral-related crime rather than immoral-specific crime by exploring how sex-related predisposed the occurrences. However, Larner does not neglect the idea of the high number of accused women and concedes the deeply entrenched misogyny.

Critiques of the Woman-Hunt Thesis

In contemporary, the major criticism of the argument that a witch-hunt was a woman-hunt was that the witch oppression could not have been a thoughtful form of suppression against women because women also accused witches. In addition to Larner's argument, Clive Holmes suggested three ways in which women partake in proceedings against women. These ways included testifying about possessed women, reporting on physical searches on the witches and possessed women and also to testify their experience as the victims of the witchcraft attacks. However, to summarize his conclusion, both women and men believed in the reality and existence of witchcraft and feared witches; therefore, both men and women took part in the accusations of witches.

Also, Larner affirms that men viewed women as having life-bearing and menstruating abilities, which were mysterious and dangerous if uncontrolled, according to men. In his argument, Lyndal Roper supports Larner's argument that the witch-hunt was a witch-hunter rather than a concealed woman hunt since society, in the real sense, believes in supernatural and magic in everyday life. However, Roper was [6] more interested in a thing that made women more vulnerable to occasions and the position of women in Europe during the 16th century. She was also interested in the partiality of older women among the accused witches. In her conclusion, Ropers argues that the witch craze was about women. The witches could do mysterious things like killing Babies, ground their carcasses into powders and use that powder to add more power.

[7] A decade later, the idea of Larner was upheld and supported by Robbin Briggs and Stuart Clark. They claimed that the society was dominated by a verged binary, though. This meant that men were attributed to positive traits, then women must be attributed to negative counterparts. This means that if God is the embodiment of good things and the Devil, then automatically, the opposite polar men are closer to God, and women are closer to the devil. They proclaim that this incident is even clarified in the Bible by the act of Eve's original sin, where the devil cheated her in the book of Genesis in the Bible. Larner, Briggs, Clark, and Roper, among other scholars, affirm that a witch was someone whom establishments and neighbors viewed as socially divergent in some respect.

Feminist Historiography and Conclusion

Another scholar is Diane Purkiss, who also outlined the idea of witchcraft and gender. In her research also on how women are closer to witchcraft and witches, as well as how they are related to society, Diane examines female witnesses and characters at witch trials. She continues to add that the stories that were relayed on depositions were powerful fantasies through which the women exchanged their fears and concerns about housekeeping and motherhood. Furthermore, she expressed that despite the witches being anti-mother, they were anti-housewives, thus threatening women who were responsible for bearing and raising children.

In conclusion, despite the significant contribution these historians have made to the study of gender in history, they also failed to give any substantial attention to highlighting the witchcraft of men as a gender. However, some historians, such as Lara Apps, have been trying to consider male witches as the subject of witchcraft as far as gender is concerned. However, during the ancient period, people used to think of witchcraft as a female thing. But still, the aspect of male witchcraft has no detailed evidence to answer the question of whether the male regarded as a witch is effeminate and fits in the fantasy of a witchcraft figure.

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2. Goodare, 26. ↑
3. . Judika Illes, The Element Encyclopedia of Witchcraft: The Complete A-Z of the Entire Magical World (London: Harper Element, 2005), 340.
4. Julian. Goodare, “A Source-Book of Scottish Witchcraft (review),” The Scottish Historical Review 86, no. 2 (2007): 339, doi:10.1353/shr.2007.0078.
5. Liv Helene Willumsen, The witchcraft trials in Finnmark, Northern Norway (Bergen: Skald, 2010), 46.
6. Liv Helene Willumsen, The witchcraft trials in Finnmark, Northern Norway (Bergen: Skald, 2010), 46.