Discrimination of Women During the Witch Trials in Southern Germany, 1649 – 1709

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During the early-modern period in Europe, it was commonplace for people to harbor supernatural beliefs. This is reflected in the widespread adaptation of Christianity across the continent. While witch-hunting has its origins in Medieval Europe – and some might argue the ancient period as well – the world would see a significant increase in these trials between 1559 and the 1620s. Many new sciences emerged and were developed during this timespan, and they would be conflated with ideas of religion and magic. This gave rise to new authority figures; some belonging to the church, and some belonging to local politics; all of whom claimed to possess ultimate knowledge of the human body and its ailments. A consequence of the increase in new medical science is the displacement of those who practiced traditional medicine like midwives and village healers – positions predominantly occupied by women. While these new, more "modern" medical practices gained popularity and began to overshadow more "old-fashioned" techniques, accusations of fraud would become increasingly frequent. Furthermore, because the Church supported these 'men of science', a large subset of these accusations would be directed toward those who practiced traditional methods of healing. Thus, we see the emergence of large-scale witch-hunts which disproportionately targeted women. The misogynistic nature of these accusations and subsequent trials is highlighted in the witch-hunts of early modern Germany, specifically the southern cities of Rothenburg and Augsburg. Within this period there would officially be fifty-six trials, but the fact that there were fewer cases means that there is a richer documentation for each individual who was accused. Discussing the nature of discrimination towards women during this period of witch-trials would have been made clearer if all cases involved women, but this was not the case. However, most accusations – eighty-five percent – were targeting women.[1] This is a much higher proportion of crimes

[1] A.L. Barstow, *Witchcraze: A New History of the European Witch-Hunts* (London, 1994), 7-8.

involving women, so it calls for explanation. Those most often accused were aging post-menopausal women, poorer women, widowed women, and women aiding the nurturing of a new-born.

Early modern Europe was a period of tremendous religious upheaval, and in this time Christian doctrines regulated our behaviours and enforced our hierarchies. To be a woman in this period meant one must fulfill a specific role: being a wife and bearing children. If a woman was incapable of occupying this position it was seen as a disability – similar to being blind or deaf – and a disability, in the eyes of the church, is God's way of punishing sin. Additionally, contemporary writers have attributed these accusations of older women to mental instability associated with the aging female body. We know now that as women age, their bodies undergo many changes associated with varying levels of hormones while the male body's hormones remain more or less consistent after puberty. This phenomenon has since been dubbed "menopause", and its physical and psychological symptoms are very much manageable. In this time-period, though, this instability (being specifically exhibited by women) was seen as suspicious and gave way to accusations of witchcraft. In 1563, Johann Weyer published *De praestigiis daemonum,* and in it he argues that older women were, "by reason of their sex inconstant and uncertain in faith, and by their age not sufficiently settled in their minds," and it is in this way that they are, "much more subject to the devil's deceits." [2] The argument of the time according to Weyer is that the aging female form is inherently susceptible to witchcraft, however given that most accused women were aged between forty and eighty, it is unlikely that these suspects could have been exhibiting advanced forms of senility. Examining the cases of Appolonia Glaitter and Anna Maas of Rothenburg, aged fifty-six and eighty-eight respectively,

[2] Stuart Clark, *Thinking with Demons: The Idea of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe* (Oxford, 1999), 198.

both of these aging women were subject to extended periods of time in prison, torture, and hostile questioning. However, both women would remain resolute in maintaining their innocence.[3] This Rothenburg evidence suggests that as women aged, they became more confident in their identity and the likelihood that accusations and trials would break them lessened. Furthermore, in analyzing artistic representations of women and witches from early modern Germany two commonalities arise: sagging breasts, and shrivelled wombs to suggest that their child-bearing days are over. This misogynistic perspective helps explain the disproportionate number of older women being accused.

These depictions of women and witches would mobilize as fear of the aging female form, unbridled sexuality, and an isolation from patriarchal control. These fears would be played out in the Augsburg witch-trials which gained traction as newly delivered mothers made accusations towards these older, poorer, often widowed women who had been working as lying-in maids. As infant deaths and miscarriages in this period were not uncommon, new mothers often would attempt to blame those 'other' mothers around them to assuage their own fears of the aging female body.[4] This gave these newly grief-stricken mothers a third party in which to lay the blame of the loss. Accusing these lying-in maids of being responsible of the deaths of their children could also have aided in alleviating the fear of being infertile in a time-period where a woman's sole duty was to bear healthy children. In Lyndal Roper's analysis of these trials she suggests that these lying-in maids were predestined in their role as the evil witch because her body is the inverse of that of a healthy mother; dried up, no breast milk, no menstrual blood, these fluids instead of being purged from the body are internalized and act as a poison. Thus, it

[3] Edward Peters and Alan Charles, *Witchcraft in Europe 400-1700: A Documentary History* (Philadelphia, 2001), 360-71
[4] Lyndal Roper, *Oedipus and the Devil: Witchcraft, Sexuality, and Religion in Early Modern Europe* (London, 1994), 208-9

was understood that it was in her nature to use witchcraft to attack fertility. In Augsburg, 1669, Anna Ebeler had been accused of murdering the woman who she had been working for as a lying-in maid. As word spread of the accusation other women came forward claiming Ebeler had also been responsible for their children's deaths. Anna had been the lying-in maid for all of these women, and after being interrogated six times she confessed. On March 23rd, 1669, At sixty-seven years-of-age, Ebeler was executed and her body was burned. Ebeler's case is representative of all eighteen witchcraft cases resulting in execution which took place in Augsburg. Although it is the case that in southern Germany most cases of witchcraft involved older women in the care of newborns, Allison Rowlands argues that too strong an emphasis on the association between post-menopausal women and evil would blind us to the other possibilities. Rowlands suggests that it is the perceived unmaternal behaviour exhibited by these women that allowed contemporaries to link them to witchcraft, regardless of age.[5]

In the early 1970's it was suggested, by the forefront of witchcraft scholars, that in addition to her advanced age, her status as single or windowed made a woman much more susceptible to the temptations of witchcraft. One such thinker, Keith Thomas, makes the point that older women who had been widows would be more dependant on their neighbours and the people of their villages for assistance. This form of charity would have made them more likely to become involved in the problematic exchanges with their wealthier compatriots from which accusations were likely to arise. Thomas argues that in addition to being viewed as bothersome, it was their isolated and problematic status in a patriarchal society which rendered them more susceptible to witchcraft accusations. Being unmarried made a woman more vulnerable to accusations because 'persons without families were automatically peculiar, unprotected and

[5] Alison Rowlands, "Witchcraft and Old Women in Early Modern Germany" *Past & Present,* no. 173 (2001), 60.

suspect'.[6] This becomes especially dangerous in a time where the number of unmarried women in society is increasing due to demographic changes. Problems regarding accusations would be exacerbated by old age, however it is not the case that all observed widows were old. Appolonia Glaitter, mentioned previously, had been approximately twenty-six years-old at the time of her first trial, and married as well. At the time of her death, she was noted as being a widow.[7] This evidence suggests that a key factor explaining a widow's vulnerability to accusations is the loss of her husband's protection. Appolonia had been a reputed witch at age twenty-two, and before her marriage to a man named Hans Kern, evidence from her subsequent trials indicates that she had made it a condition that Hans refute any cases of witchcraft. While in custody Appolonia confirms that she told her husband, 'If anyone accused her of anything evil, he must take this on himself…so that no one could make a witch out of her by force'.[8] Appolonia's case highlights the inherent discrimination of the witch-trials. It was often the case that the first accusations of witchcraft would occur when a woman was married, and decades later a formal investigation would be launched after their husbands had died. A husband, therefore, might be willing to refute claims of witchcraft on his wife's behalf, but without a man a woman is subject to accusations and would lack the means to pursue legal or quasi-legal methods of resolution.

Being a widow, as mentioned previously, often leads to a loss of income as men were meant to be the primary source of income in a family or marriage. This relative poverty that afflicted these women lead to them becoming more reliant on their neighbours and fellow villagers. During this period of economic pressure in Germany, charity was hard to come by, and continual pestering from poor women would cause problems for the bourgeoisie of the time.

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[6] Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (London, 1971), 669-79.
[7] Edward Peters and Alan Charles, *Witchcraft in Europe 400-1700: A Documentary History* (Philadelphia, 2001), 366
[8] Ibid, 367

Alison Rowlands suggests that when this request for help is denied, which is likely, this can invoke feelings of guilt in those who refused to provide aid. Rowlands states that accusations following this denial serves to project the wealthy neighbours' feelings of guilt onto the poor woman. In the German regions of Saar, the county of Pflaz-Zweibrucken, and Trier, ninety-six percent of witchcraft accusations were directed towards women who owned either very little or no property at all, while only approximately four percent of all accusations involved upper-class women.[9] The act of begging in early modern Germany was one of several forms of anti-social behaviour, so naturally this produces a certain amount of suspicion. Therefor, it would be folly to assume that accusations only originated from the guilt of those who refused neighbourly assistance. Moreover, in the same vein as being a widow, the act of begging alienates a woman from the rest of the patriarchal society in which she lives, and this is seen as witch-like behaviour. This problem of poverty is also exacerbated as a woman ages, due to the fact she would be less likely to be capable of working for an income. It is also pertinent to mention that any pre-existing reputation or suspicions of witchcraft can make requests for charity appear more sinister than what may have been intended. Malcolm Gaskill argues that being poor, and actively seeking charity, is not reason enough to pursue a formal investigation. Gaskill continues to argue that it is equally likely that wealthy women may have also been the target for accusations because of the tensions that arise when one competes for wealth in a community. This is highlighted in the electoral region of Trier, during which higher ranking men vying for political power would pursue accusations of witchcraft against the wives of their competition. However, because it was rare for early modern German women to be independently wealthy, it was very

[9] Briggs, *Witches and Neighbours*, (New York, 1996), 263-4

uncommon for them to be the target of witchcraft accusations – this also explains the earlier cited statistic.

Witchcraft in early modern Germany, and the rest of Europe, was a multi-faceted issue that disproportionately targeted women. People accused of being a witch were often subject to extensive interrogations involving varying methods of torture, from being burned alive to having nails driven through the hand.[10] The nature of these accusations is such that to avoid this torture a potential witch was encouraged to provide names of the other members of their coven. Thus, accusations snowballed, creating a legal topology that promoted panic. This fact helps to explain the large death tolls, however in this essay we examined why exactly women were the primary recipient of accusations. First, post-menopausal women were viewed as unable to fulfill their role as a mother. A woman's aging body no longer produced menstrual blood and breast milk, thus they were unable to expel these "poisons" that their female bodies naturally produced. This change in one's physiology was viewed as a disability by society, manifested from sin, and therefor evidence of evil. Next, lying-in maids, a vocation mostly occupied by aged and lower-class women, were vulnerable to accusations. Mothers who had a newborn die often faced a tremendous amount of anxiety regarding their own capability, or lack thereof, to foster a child, and projecting these feelings toward the lying-in maid was used as an escape to shield them from the shame of not embodying the very specific definition of womanhood. Next, widowed, and single women were often labelled as outcasts or shut-ins due to the natural isolation that comes with, and forms from, these situations. This made them especially vulnerable to accusations, seeing as how the refusal to conform to a societal standard was inherently viewed as suspicious

[10] Christopher Mackay, and Heinrich Institoris. *The Hammer of the Witches: Complete Translation of the Malleus Maleficarum* (Cambridge, 2009), 481

behaviour. In addition to this, widowed or single women were often poor. Because of this they would need to rely on their neighbours or fellow villagers for charity. The act of begging would cause both annoyance for their wealthy neighbours, and suspicion as begging for charity was also viewed as anti-social behaviour. Lastly, once a woman is accused, her reputation as a witch is exacerbated by all the above factors. This is reflected in the fact that most women who were executed in southern Germany between 1649 and 1709 were poverty-stricken widows. Additionally, the first accusations towards them occurred decades prior to their death, thus over time the naturally aging body, and possibly the death of their husband, were viewed as evidence of witchcraft. Therefor, because of factors outside of their control women were unjustly targeted and victimized during the witch-trials of early modern Germany. The accusations often began a chain reaction, forcing an initially accused woman to disclose names of other women in their "coven" to escape the brutal torture being inflicted on them.

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