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Witchcraft in France as a Form of Misogyny

The witch craze started in France in the 1300s when people were trying to find a cause for the plague. The use of herbal medicines in trying to cure it led to the belief in supernatural powers. Witches relied on spells and charms to perform functions such as curing headaches. It was assumed that these very healers were the ones who were actually causing the plague. Up until the outbreak of the black plague witchcraft had been “part of traditional village culture [in France] for centuries” (Speilvogel, 315.) Many people started to blame those individuals who were social outcasts for the troubles in their villages. They called these individuals witches. Two-thirds of the witchcraft cases dealt with women. This has led to the belief that misogyny, not supernatural activity, was the real cause of the witch-hunts.

“It [witchcraft] came to be viewed as both sinister and dangerous when the medieval church began to connect witches to the activities of the devil, thereby transforming witchcraft into a heresy that had to be extirpated” (Speilvogel 315). When the Pope heard of the problems that the French were having he sent two officials, Heinrich Kramer and Jacob Sprenger, to France. They were there for the purpose of investigating the origin of witchcraft and witches. The men then created a book, based on observations, called the *Malleus Maleficarum* (*The Hammer of [Female] Witches*), which was used by judges to determine who was a witch and who was not. It “served as

a guide for witch-hunters, advising them how to recognize and question a witch. It taught judges and lawyers over large parts of Northern Europe what to expect of witches and what questions to ask them. Similarities in answers they received helped convince people that witchcraft was an international conspiracy” (DiCaprio 224). After this, the witch craze only heightened, spreading throughout Europe and to the New World.

The biggest witch-hunts in France, however, took place from 1500-1700. Medical Science of the time supported the fact that women were more susceptible to witchcraft than a man, because the ending of the menstrual cycle was viewed as negative, as “a process whereby evil humors remained present in the body, capable of adding to that complex of female wickedness which could turn aging women into witches. According to one seventeenth-century French physician: ‘When seed and menstrual blood are retained in women besides [beyond] the intent of nature, they putrefie and are corrupt, and attain a malignant and venomous quality’ ” (Banner 192). Hence, elderly women were more likely to become witches.

Naturally, the ones who were accused of the crimes were typically spinsters, widows, elderly and poor women. All were members of a lower class that included peasants, servants, and milkmaids. According to Speilvogel, 80 percent of those accused of witchcraft in the trials of the sixteenth and seventeenth century were women (Speilvogel 315). The accused usually lived in rural cottages by themselves or with other female family members. “The panic of 1571 included forty five widows and fourteen spinsters among its victims as against thirty two women living with their husbands” (Monter 121). Society thought it unacceptable for women to run a household and take care of themselves. They found these women suspicious because they were capable of

taking care of themselves. This sort of stereotyping owed its origins to the criteria set forth by the *Malleus Maleficarum*, and these hunts were often seen as “a massive effort to keep women in their place” (King University 1). In addition, the punishments for crimes committed were not equal. “A woman who bewitches men or beasts or other things, if it is proved against her, shall be burned” (Wedek 257). Conversely, “If a man happens to be a magician, and it is proved against him; he shall be shaven in the form of a cross and scourged and banished” (Wedek 257). This is not surprising considering that women were viewed as “the more carnal and sexually indulgent members of the species” at the time (Levack 126). As a result, witch trials began to focus on women as sexual slaves of Satan. Once again, this is not surprising considering the first written record of a witch's copulation with the Devil dates back to 1335 in the testimony of the Toulouse trial of Anne-Marie de Georgel (Russell 1972 183). In the court records, Anne-Marie de Georgel said she “found a huge he-goat and after greeting him she submitted to his pleasure” (“Inquisition of Toulouse” 95). The fact that de Georgel sited copulation in her testimony supported the male beliefs that women were sexual creatures, rather the intellectual creatures. Incidentally, this case also marked one of the first known witch trials in which torture was employed.

In France, in the 1590's a judge, Nicolas Remy, ruled over a number of witch trials. He believed that it was “not unreasonable that this scum of humanity [witches] should be drawn chiefly from the feminine sex” (Speilvogel 418). He was a tough man and wanted to see these women suffer for their “crimes”, and sent many women to their deaths. It has been said that he beat the children of the convicted with rods while they

watched their mothers burn to death. Remy was responsible for the deaths of over eight thousand women.

Remy also wrote a book similar to the *Malleus Maleficarum*, called *Demonolatreiae*, which translated loosely means the study of the worship of demons. In it, he stated that women were morally weaker than men, making them more open and vulnerable to the temptations of Satan.

The most bizarre sexual crime a witch could be accused of was penis-thievery. Perhaps this is the very definition of gynophobia. This crime is extensively documented in the *Malleus Maleficarum*. Bewitchment could result in impotence, or in extreme examples, the disappearance of the penis itself. The *Malleus Maleficarum* cites two such examples. In the first, sexual assault of women is shown as a cure for impotence:

In the town of Ratisbon a certain young man who had an intrigue with a girl, wishing to leave her, lost his member; that is to say, some glamour was cast over it so that he could see or touch nothing but his smooth body. In his worry over this he went to a tavern to drink wine; and after he had sat there for a while he got into conversation with another woman who was there, and told her the cause of his sadness, explaining everything, and demonstrating in his body that it was so. The woman was astute, and asked whether he suspected anyone; and when he named such a one, unfolding the whole matter, she said: 'If persuasion is not enough, you must use some violence, to induce her to restore to you your health.' So in the evening the young man watched the way by which the witch was in the habit of going, and finding her, prayed her to restore to him the health of

his body. And when she maintained that she was innocent and knew nothing about it, he fell upon her, and winding a towel tightly round her neck, choked her, saying: 'Unless you give me back my health, you shall die at my hands.' Then she, being unable to cry out, and with her face already swelling and growing black, said: 'Let me go, and I will heal you.' And the young man, as he afterwards said, plainly felt, before he had verified it by looking or touching, that his member had been restored to him by the mere touch of the witch (Krämer & Sprenger 19).

The second example, which concentrates more on penis thievery itself may seem humorous. However, it is important to keep in mind that hundreds of women died because of this outrageous belief. In retrospect, clearly this is a form of misogyny, but at the time was considered a truth.

And what, then, is to be thought of those witches who in this way sometimes collect male organs in great numbers, as many as twenty or thirty members together, and put them in a bird's nest, or shut them up in a box, where they move themselves like living members, and eat oats and corn, as has been seen by many as is a matter of common report? It is to be said that it is all done by devil's work and illusion, for the senses of those who see them are deluded in the way we have said. For a certain man tells that, when he had lost his member, he approached a known witch to ask her to restore it to him. She told the afflicted man to

climb a certain tree, and that he might take which he liked out of a nest in which there were several members. And when he tried to take a big one, the witch said: You must not take that one; adding, because it belonged to a parish priest (Krämer & Sprenger 121).

There are countless crimes, which a witch could be charged with and those who were charged with practicing witchcraft were placed in prison. Officials then demanded confessions from the “witches”. Those who confessed were sent to trial immediately. Those who did not confess were tortured in order to extract a confession. Contraptions were designed to crush fingers and skulls until the accused confessed. Other “witches” were stoned, or placed in water with their hands and feet bound to see if they would float. “Everyone saw the torture as such an infallible test for recognizing the followers of Satan that many witchcraft suspects nourished no rancor toward the judge who submitted it” (Trevor-Roper 96).

In France, there were specific rules regarding torture. There were three goals for each torture. The first was to have the accused confess to her crime, second to determine the motive, and third to get her to incriminate accomplices. While one of the rules of French torture was that it could not last for more than one hour, there were ways to get around this. Often guards would stop torture after approximately fifty minutes in order to resume again later. As a result, the torture often went on for hours at a time. “Ankles were broken, breasts cut off, eyes gouged out, sulphur poured into hair on the head and other parts of the body and set on fire, limbs pulled out of the sockets, sinews twisted from joints, shoulder blades dislocated, red-hot needles thrust beneath fingernails and

toenails, and thumbs crushed in thumbscrews”, were among some of the tortures (Cabot, 75). There was a small number that did survive the torture and were set free, but most did not. The torture made some people talk, but a large percent died because of it. Those who still refused to talk were returned to their cells to await their trial.

Often the court would have a “witch” observed for a period of time to see if they partook in any activities that pointed to witchcraft. While in jail, many of these women were raped by their guards. The most stunning being that of Catharina Latomia of Lorraine, who had not even reached puberty. She was raped twice in her cell and nearly died from the attack (Barstow 32). This illustrates just how severe hatred of women had become. The guards said that women put a spell on them to make them have sex. “Weaker Sex” could not force a man into sex by using physical strength, so she undoubtedly relied upon supernatural powers to persuade the men.

While in jail victims were given scalding baths in water mixed with lime. They would hoist the women on ropes and then drop them suspended by their thumbs with weights attached to their ankles into the baths. As if this weren’t enough, the guards would spin the women round and round. These women were also singed with torches and raped with sharp objects. Ironically, Nicolas Remy noted that many of the witches he persecuted had a “strong desire for death”(Cabot, 75).

The trials themselves were very brutal. They lasted from few days to a few weeks. The trials typically interrogated the accused until they confessed to the crime. Many times the first witches that were tried in an area would give the names of others, hoping that their lives would be spared. The judges of the time, largely male, did not

spare their lives, however. Instead, they used it to further their ideas that women were weak. Rather than suffer death, they would implicate others to save themselves.

The body search was necessary during any witch trial. Two reasons why the accused witch's genitalia were important at all in witch trials were the sadistic desires of the men who oversaw the trials and the belief in the witches' mark. The witches' mark is the "supernumerary nipple or other spot where a witch suckled her familiar" (Masello 233). Although "any wart, mole, or other skin growth on the accused's body might be identified as a devil's mark or witch's tit", the genitalia were the parts of the body searched the most thoroughly (Klaits 56).

Mostly, however, the trials became mass slaughtering performed by the government to put women in their place. The executions took place in public and attracted large crowds of people. Many were hanged or burned at the stake. It was common to remove a woman's clothes and breasts and force them to bow before a cross to repent for their sins, just prior to their death. The most startling story of is that of Anna Pappeneimer. Barstow spoke of this demoralization,

"To a women, however, there was more: the bloody breasts were forced into her mouth and then into the mouths of her two grown sons. A contemporary torture manual recorded that "the female breasts are extremely sensitive, on account of the refinement of the veins. This fiendish punishment was thus used as a particular torment to women. But it was more than physical torture: by rubbing the severed breasts around her sons' lips, the executioner made a hideous parody of her role as mother and nurse, imposing an extreme humiliation upon her (144).

Demoralization has been a tactic used by misogynists throughout history.

Barstow had this to say about the demoralization of Pappenheimer.

Cutting off Anna's breast demoralized her, said that the most dangerous thing about this evil woman was her sexuality, that her only hope of salvation lay in becoming not a woman. The message to the females in the crowd was be not a woman yourself: be as invisible about your sexuality and your motherhood as you possibly can...women were being told, it is dangerous to show your breasts: don't even nurse your babies in public" (150).

As a result, most women in the crowd felt the same fear as the women being persecuted.

It is [this type of] torture and treatment, which must have shown women that if they valued their lives, they must hide their sexuality. In a time when men publicly flaunted their genitals by wearing codpieces, women "knew" that their own overt sexuality made them evil beings. "When a woman watched the public trials of witches and witnessed the stripping and mutilation of other women, she knew she was seeing her own possible future" (Barstow 150).

The most known of those persecuted was Joan of Arc. From about age 13, Joan would later claim, she began having visions of St. Michael who was the captain-general of the armies of Heaven, as well as St. Catherine and St. Margaret who were both early Christian martyrs. Joan believed these saints told her to drive the English away from Orleans and out of the country, and to take Charles VII to Reims to be crowned King of France. In 1429, after experiencing repeated visions, Joan went to the commander of the

French army at Vaucouleurs to explain her visions and what she thought they meant. He was doubtful at first, but finally sent her to Charles. However, he ordered her to dress in soldier's clothes. He felt that as a woman, she would never gain Charles' attention. He also didn't want her sexuality to detract from the goal of her mission.

While there, Joan was able to convince Charles that God had sent her to save France. It has been said that she did this by revealing to him secrets that he believed were known only to himself and to God. Later this would be misinterpreted as the work of the devil. Rather than having God aide her Joan had had the help of Satan.

Joan then led a group of French soldiers against the English at Orleans. Even though she was wounded, she continued to fight. Seeing her courage, her soldiers were inspired to drive the English from the city. Because of this victory, Joan became known as the Maid of Orleans.

After a few more battles in which her army cleared the English from the surrounding Loire valley, Joan brought Charles to Reims for his coronation on July 17, 1429. Nonetheless, Charles later decided that he wanted to negotiate with the English and the Burgundians, people of an independent state within France who were allies of the English. Joan, on the other hand, wanted to keep France for the French, and she fought on. However, without full support she began to lose her battles. In May of 1430, during the battle of Compiègne, the Burgundians captured Joan. She was then sold to the English for 10,000 pounds. They took her to the city of Rouen, were she was shackled to a dungeon wall.

The English were eager to prove that Joan could not have defeated them without using witchcraft. They brought her to trial for sorcery and heresy (the act of challenging

the authority of the Church). The representatives of the Church who tried her believed that God would speak only to priests. A woman could not possibly be holy enough for God to speak to her. The Church wanted her to deny that she had heard the voices of the saints and to remove the soldier's, or men's, clothes that she wore, since this was a violation of Church rules. Joan refused to do what they wanted believing that she would soon be rescued. Charles however, whom Joan had helped to be crowned, sent no one to rescue her.

After months in prison, now sick and weak from malnutrition, she finally gave in and signed a general statement of faults and put on women's clothes. The authorities had promised Joan that she could attend church and confession after she had signed this statement. Afterward, they would not let her leave the dungeon; they had lied to her.

In retaliation, Joan put on her soldier's clothes once more. For this, she was quickly sentenced to death, and on May 30, 1431, she was burned at the stake in the marketplace of Rouen. The shameful story of her death led everyone involved to try and place the blame on someone other than themselves. Even Charles tried twice after Joan's death to have the verdict against her overturned. In 1456, a mere 25 years later, Pope Calixtus III declared that Joan had not been guilty, and condemned the verdict against her.

Joan was a virgin, and therefore could not have been a witch because witches were licentious creatures. It was believed [witches] had sexual orgies and danced naked under the moon (Levack, 25). The only way women could combat their "evil sexuality" was through virginity or abstinence. Virginity became the ideal; the only way a woman

could free herself from sexual temptation and evil was by renouncing her sexuality. "All good women must emulate the virgin as far as their circumstances permitted. Even married women should avoid sex except for procreation. Women who did not conform exhibited their sensuality, their devotion to evil" (Quaiffe 85).

Another popular set of witch persecutions were those that took place in the Basque region of southwest France. These were one of only a few mass slaughtering that took place. Pierre de Lancre was sent by the French government to the Basque community of Pays de Labord in 1609. The government had heard complaints that Witchcraft was spreading very rapidly in this region. They sent de Lancre to investigate these charges. De Lancre was convinced that all the inhabitants in the region were witches. This was a total of nearly 30,000 people, including women, children, and even priests. He tried to execute all the inhabitants of the village and tortured and burned around 600 women and some men. Over the course of the next two years, de Lancre killed approximately 100 people. He was stopped only after their male relatives, who had been on a fishing expedition in what is presumed to be the coast of the Americas, returned. The men started a revolt, which Bishop Echauz of Bayonne intervened upon, putting an end to the chaos. Lancre later published a book, *Tableau de l'inconstance des mauvais anges, or Description of the inconsistency of evil angels and demons*, which is famous for its attack on women" (Klaits 53). His book catalogues the classic sexual perversions of witches. "The powerfully sexual nature of the dominant imagery begins with the broomstick ride, continues with exciting whippings, the fascinating close-up look at devilishly huge sexual organs, the baby-eating (possibly sublimated incest or infanticide?), and, finally, the frenzied orgy itself" Despite the horrific circumstances of

de Lancre's inquisition he was never tried for the murders of innocent people, nor was he imprisoned after this. He lived to an old age and was proud of his achievements. His hatred towards women was so intense that he was unable to see the wrong he had done.

In France, the trials didn't end until 1745. Still, over 10,500 people lost their lives during the witch-hunts. At the time, people were plagued with the ideas of superstition and the Church was filling their minds with the idea of daily devil worship. "Finally, by the end of the seventeenth and the beginning of the eighteenth centuries, more and more people were questioning altogether their old attitudes toward religion and found it especially contrary to the reason to believe in the old view of a world haunted by evil spirits" (Speilvogel 317).

Nonetheless, it wouldn't be until the post World War II era that misogyny began to curb. However, the effects of witchcraft have been an important learning tool for many. No longer do we believe that an independent woman is evil. A woman's sexuality is seen as something beautiful rather than a means of manipulation in order to achieve her own personal agenda. This is why many people now view the witch-hunters and inquisitors of The Great Witch Craze as misogynists.