



*Understanding the witch trials of the sixteenth and seventeenth century is a vital part of understanding the rise of capitalism, the family, women's roles and our relation to our bodies. Their deep importance and impact is too often neglected in even radical histories. This brief overview looks at the economic, social and ideological reasons for, and effects of, the massacre of women that took place during the rise of capitalism.*

# Burning Women

The European Witch Hunts,  
enclosure and the rise of capitalism



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**'The superior learning of witches was recognised in the widely extended belief of their ability to work miracles. The witch was in reality the profoundest thinker, the most advanced scientist of those ages ... As knowledge has ever been power, the church feared its use in women's hands, and levelled its deadliest blows at her.'**  
*Matilda Joslyn Gage, 1893<sup>1</sup>*

Lady Stardust, 2007  
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During the sixteenth and seventeenth century, all across Europe and in every town and village, women were killed en masse as witches. In some areas a few were killed every week; in others, hundreds were killed in one go. The killings went on for two centuries and touched everyone's lives. They spread fear, destroyed networks and resistance; and did not stop until the population was sufficiently subordinated and the emerging state, capitalist social relations and the Church had got their claws into the lives and psyches of the people. Not only is the deep significance of the witch trials glossed over in mainstream history, but it is glossed over in Marxist and anarchist history too. Where it is discussed, the gender implications of the trials are not brought to the fore. The account presented in this pamphlet is a small step towards redressing the balance. It includes a brief historical background and a description of the trials, followed by a discussion of some of their causes and effects.

## Introduction

"The number of witches and sorcerers has everywhere become enormous. This kind of people within these last few years are marvellously increased", wrote Bishop Jewel in 1559. And "The land is full of witches. They abound in all places and would in short time overrun the whole land", claimed Chief Justice Anderson in 1602.<sup>2</sup>

It is hard to get figures of exactly how many women were killed in Europe, but it is likely to have been hundreds of thousands, at a time when the population of Europe was smaller than it is now.<sup>3</sup> In England, about a quarter of all criminal trials from the early sixteenth to the end of the seventeenth century were witch trials, and most of those who were accused died. Neither witch trials, nor the idea of witches being evil, existed before this period. In England, witchcraft became punishable by death in 1532. Between 1066 and that date, there had been only six recorded executions of witches, and those were cases of treason. Witch trials died down again in the eighteenth century, with witchcraft no longer a crime in most of Europe by the mid-eighteenth century. The most intense phase was between 1580 and 1630 during the decline of feudal relations, the rise of mercantile capitalism, and increasing migration and day labouring. The trials were no hangover from medieval times, but part of the project of the rise of capitalism and the 'Enlightenment'.

Witch executions were used by sections of the ruling class across Europe to variously confiscate property, demonise beggars, control reproduction, enforce social control and gender roles, and exclude women from economic, political and social activity. The trials were used not only to break up old communal forms of life and to condemn some traditional practices, but were also a weapon with which resistance to social and economic restructuring could be defeated. The

phenomena was spread over so long a time period and such a huge area that there is no single explanation for the trials: there are various differing explanations, which, rather than contradicting one another, serve to show how widely the tool of the witch-hunt was used.

The witches were lower class. Most of the women accused were poor peasant women, and their accusers were either members of the clergy or wealthy members of the same community – often their employers or landlords.

The witches were women. There existed men practicing all sorts of magic and healing, but they were not killed. Jean Bodin, supposed figure of the 'Enlightenment', and the French author of a witch-finder's manual, set the ratio of women to men at 50 to 1. In England, ninety per cent of those killed were women, and most men killed were the husbands of accused women.

The phenomenon was Europe-wide; it represented a deep philosophical, social and political shift in society; and it was undeniably orchestrated by the authorities at the highest level. The actual trials, however, concerned matters of daily life and village-level issues. The accusation was of 'witchcraft'; but the crimes that constituted evidence for the accusation were things like causing milk to curdle, stealing apples, helping a neighbour to give birth, or making herbal remedies. The trials show how the deep and broad power shifts in European history were carried out at a village level, against the daily practices of peasant women. The effects were so fundamental that we can still feel their impact on gender and class relations today.

## Enclosures, and the rise of capitalism, the Church and the State

### The Middle Ages

During the Middle Ages (the period from the twelfth to the early fifteenth century, more or less), Europe was largely characterised, in the countryside, by a feudal system in which villagers worked their own subsistence plot of land and some common land, as well as having to work on their landlord's fields by way of rent and tax. There was also handicraft-making in the towns, with concentrations of thousands of day labourers in some trades. Women worked in all sorts of trades and crafts, and belonged to their respective guilds.

The plague of 1347–1350 killed a third of the European population, leading to a huge labour shortage.

### 1400–1499

During the fifteenth century, the first signs of change began with the exploration of the 'new world' and the consequent import of new goods into Europe. There were the beginnings of an explosion of new thought in science and philosophy. There were increasing schisms within the Church, and heretic sects such as the Anabaptists and the Taborites were challenging its dominance and gaining in popularity.<sup>4</sup> The Inquisition started up in this period, as a tool of power in the hands of the Church. There was an overall rise in the living conditions and power of the working and peasant classes: partly due to the labour shortage, people could drive a hard bargain for their labour, and they achieved 'a standard of living that remained unparalleled until the 19th century'<sup>5</sup>. The situation varied across Europe but in general, following a number of open and unified offensives by the peasants, wages rose or were introduced, peasants gained more autonomy, and serfdom was all but abolished in most areas. There was also a notable gender imbalance. Some statistics from the registers of births and deaths show women outnumbering men by between 110 and 120 women to each 100 men.

### 1500–1599

Many class uprisings were crushed during the sixteenth century: the Peasant Wars in Germany, for example, or the Agrarian Revolts in England. The battles going on within and around the Church intensified, including the Reformations, Protestant–Catholic splits and the rise of the Lutherans and various heretical or radical-Christian sects. Although—significantly—all branches of the official Christian church (Catholic, Protestant, Lutheran) were on the same side against the witches.<sup>6</sup> The State and the Church were becoming more interlinked and more powerful, and this coincided with the related rise of the universities and the professions. Women were inevitably excluded from these new areas of power. The Church's attempts to gain control over ideology, administrative functions and land took in not only the witch trials, but also the inquisitions that targeted radicals, Jews, Muslims, scientists opposing the Church, and anyone else seen as obstacles to Church power. There were many factions within the various branches of Christianity and the Church made various political enemies as well as political alliances. For example reformists such as Henry VIII took land and political power away from the Church.

During the sixteenth century, some of the building blocks of global capitalism became established and accepted. The colonies were exporting more raw materials and slaves, boosting the growth of mercantile capitalism and establishing the global north–south divide and the ideology of racism. The growth of cottage industries, migration and day labouring exacerbated both the town–country divide and the gender division of labour. Money also took on a greater role, both for the growing import/export companies and in people's daily lives. Partly fuelled

by the introduction of gold and silver from the colonies, inflation first occurred in the mid-sixteenth century, with consequent rises in food prices and starvation (and the first grain mountains, stored to keep food prices deliberately high).

### 1600–1699

In the seventeenth century, mercantile capitalism was booming, more and more land in Africa and the Americas was being colonised, and the cities were growing. There were huge shifts in science, medicine and philosophy, and physicians became established professionals ministering to the health needs of the ruling and middle classes.

Enclosure and the privatisation of land continued apace, along with increasing class battles as people lost their means of subsistence and their rights to the use of the commons for grazing animals or gathering wood or herbs.<sup>7</sup> The Enclosures were part of the rise of the capitalist mode of production in the sense that people were forced to work for money and had to sell their labour (i.e. their bodies and time) as a commodity. Land was being enclosed all over England from the fifteenth to the eighteenth century, due, in some parts, to the sheep industry's being more profitable than crops and needing more land and less labour.<sup>8</sup> Towns were growing in size, as were the migrant or vagrant communities that moved from one place to another, not always finding work, and engaging in a chaotic mixture of waged work, begging, and a significant amount of crime. These 'vagabonds' were harshly persecuted under various different laws, and subjected to a range of punishments including being publicly whipped or imprisoned. There was a criminalisation of 'the poor', created by the social changes. Within the vagabond, migrant communities criss-crossing Europe there was a large percentage of women, many of whom had been forced to leave their lands due to legal changes limiting women's rights to inherit land or property. Many moved to the towns to work in various manufacturing crafts, or as maids, prostitutes, dancers or nurses.

## How the witch-hunts were executed

The witch-hunts were organised, coordinated, multi-faceted, systemic attacks. The Church defined the problem with witches; the doctors examined, tortured and condemned them; the lawyers pressed charges and oversaw legal proceedings; and the State administrators organised the executions.

The first witch-finder's manual, the *Malleus Maleficarum* ('hammer of witches'), was published in 1484 by two Dominican monks, and it was distributed widely throughout Europe. The rise of the printing press led to more anti-witch pamphlets and manuals being printed, and many clerics, scholars and members of royal families—including, respectively, Jean Bodin and King James—also published their own texts.

The process of the trials began with a steady process of indoctrination by the authorities, which publicly expressed anxiety about the spread of witchcraft. The plays, paintings, poems and religious texts of the time all helped to build up the demonised stereotypes of witches, and to spread the fear. Witch-finders would travel from village to village carrying propaganda and notes on how to identify witches. Notes were pinned up announcing that the witch-finder was coming in, for

example, two weeks' time, and everyone was expected to start identifying who the local witches were. Refusal to cooperate could put your life in danger. Witches were accused in public, and anyone trying to assist the accused woman would immediately become a suspect themselves. This propaganda, together with a simple reign of terror lasting two hundred years, had an inestimable effect.<sup>9</sup>

The trials were a farce, with random evidence being presented and almost no chance of acquittal. Torture formed a huge part of the trials process. James I wrote: 'Loath they are to



confess without torture, which witnesses their guilt'. This torture was severe, and extremely sexually abusive. The crimes themselves were inexact, indefinable and vague in a way that parallels the use of the charge of 'terrorism' today—a vague but very powerful term that serves to put you beyond the rest of humanity, and beyond the expectation of humane treatment. As Silvia Frederici writes, 'The very vagueness of the charge—the fact that it was impossible to prove it, while at the same time it evoked the maximum of horror—meant that it could be used to punish any form of protest and generate suspicion even towards the most ordinary aspects of daily life'.<sup>10</sup>

In describing what the trials should be like, Jean Bodin states: 'The proof of such crimes is so obscure and so difficult that not one witch in a million would be accused or punished if the procedure were governed by the ordinary rules. He who is accused of sorcery should never be acquitted'.<sup>11</sup>

The trials and executions—hangings or burnings—were very public affairs, with the whole community forced to attend, including, and sometimes especially, the daughters of the witches. The witch-hunters would arrive in town along with doctors, administrators, members of the clergy and executioners. The whole village would be expected to turn out in the town square for a show trial—a grand affair, culminating in executions. Absence—or worse still, speaking against the trial or defending the accused—was taken as admission of guilt, and your life would be at risk. The spiral of fear created cannot be overestimated, when placed in the context of towns in which there were regular burnings of numbers of women over periods lasting for years and years and years. These people were neighbours, friends and family. Incidences of neighbours accusing each other, occurred as a reaction to the fear generated by these repeated public trials and executions. This is a very different story from the 'witch craze' or 'communal psychoses' explanation that is often given in mainstream history. The rest of this pamphlet looks at some of the causes of the witch-hunts, and their effects.

## Indigestible independent women

**As money, waged work, new professions and urbanisation grew, the witch-hunts were one of the mechanisms used to control and subordinate women whose social and economic independence was a threat to the then-emerging social order. Mary Daly claims that the accused witches were 'women whose physical, intellectual, economic, moral and spiritual independence and activity profoundly threatened the male monopoly in every sphere'.<sup>12</sup> As women were excluded from economic and political life, ridicule and violence were used to enforce and justify the new gender relations.**

Women who were too loud, too confident, or too angry were condemned. Reginald Scott declared in 1601, 'The chief fault of witches is that they are scolds. He is referring to women who speak back to their husbands or talk amongst themselves. A scold was defined as a woman who was 'a troublesome and angry woman who doth break the public peace ... and increase public discord'. Part of a campaign to exclude women from the workplace and from the developing professions, these stereotypes made it easier to attack women who fought this tendency and asserted their economic and social independence. It was a crime to be a busy woman of the tongue, a maker of rhymes or nicknames, or of libellous, lascivious ballads.

One poem from 1630 reads:

*Ill fares the hapless family that shows  
A cock that's silent and a hen that crows,  
I know not which live more unnatural lives,  
Obedient husbands or commanding wives.*

Another:

*But if, Amazon-like you attack your gallants,  
And put us in fear of our lives,  
You may do very well for your sisters and aunts,  
But believe me, you'll never be wives.<sup>13</sup>*

But behind these comic poems, a real and sinister gender war was taking place. Women's legal rights were being eroded to the point at which, across Europe, they lost the right to own property or conduct any other economic activity, to make independent legal contracts, and even, in some cases, to live alone. The ridiculing of independent women sometimes took the form of women being forced to wear a muzzle (or 'scold's bridle') in the streets.

This cultural campaign to ridicule and abuse independent women went along with the exclusion of women from waged work. This created a gender divide within the working class by offering men a better chance of finding work. In reality, the work that men took on was often partly done by women, as in the case of home-based handicraft work. Men took the wages for this women's work—even for that of wet-nurses.

Referring to both the way the authorities encouraged this exclusion of women from wage-earning, and the domestic and manufacturing work that women were indeed doing, Silvia Frederici explains: 'It was from this alliance between the crafts and the urban authorities, along with the continuing privatization of land, that a new sexual division of labor ... was forged, defining women in terms—mothers, wives, daughters, widows—that hid their status as workers, whilst giving men free access to women's bodies, their labor, and the bodies and labor of their children.'<sup>14</sup> She claims that the sexual division of labour was a power relation that was a

cornerstone of the process of primitive accumulation and the development of capitalism. The witch-hunts backed up this cultural and economic oppression with the ever-present threat of execution for non-compliers.

## Social control—from village to state

**The change from close-knit village life shifted patriarchal social control from village-level cultural oppression to state-level laws.**

Village life before the witch-hunts was not at all some kind of rural paradise. There was a lot of social control and many gender divisions; but the close-knit nature of the communities meant that the social control was an internal matter. Anti-social behaviour was dealt with by ostracism or ridicule, such as the playing of 'rough music' outside the houses of disruptive members of the community. There was very little tolerance of non-conformity, and all of life was played out in public. 'In England, every citizen is bound by oath to keep a sharp eye on his neighbour's house as to whether the married people live in harmony'.<sup>15</sup> The intense economic interdependence of the communities ensured a high level of social cohesion, and the landlord would often play the role of enforcer of the local status quo.

During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, communities were breaking up due to the Enclosures, migration, the rise of individual private property (exacerbated by the increase in the use of money as a means of exchange) and the rise of waged work. Women were increasingly excluded from economic and social life, and their role was increasingly defined within the domestic sphere. Social control moved away from the village and into the domain of the authorities. As people became more like isolated economic units, the need to conform on a social level decreased—and organised social control increased. This phase of history was the first time that Europe had experienced an organised, networked and far-reaching 'authority' with legal, economic, spiritual and moral arms.

Over this period, along with the physical enclosure of common land came a series of laws and changes in custom that hindered or forbade the old forms of communal social life, fun, entertainment and celebration that had often taken place on those commons. Old forms of communal celebration were replaced by the Church's rituals, transforming group festivals, parties, dances and orgies into hierarchical, dull, guilt- and duty-ridden affairs.

## Reconstructing women's sexuality

**One of the outcomes of the witch trials was a change in the view of women's sexuality and gender characteristics, from powerful to powerless. In more than half of the trials, women were accused of some sexual crime such as sex outside marriage, sex with the Devil, sex with animals, etc. The demonising of women's independent or non-procreative sexuality provided the construct for the development of the nuclear family, and the woman as the property of her husband.**

Some of the most bizarre material dealing with women's sexuality comes from the *Malleus Malificarum*, which includes passages such as: 'And what then is to be thought of those witches who collect male organs in great numbers 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 and is a matter of common report?' Or 'All witchcraft comes from carnal lust, which in women is insatiable'.<sup>16</sup>

The latter quote portrays women as sexually active and aggressive; and men could accuse women of bewitching them into sex, thereby justifying rape or providing an easy way out of unwanted affairs or pregnancies. This is in contrast to the later stereotype of submissive and weak women, which was fully developed by the end of the witch trials. Prior to this period, women were more equal actors in sexual relations and were represented as lusty, predatory and sexually powerful (if still often evil). The witch-hunts provoked a fear of the powerful woman, and then used the pact with the Devil to denigrate and ridicule that power. The process of the trials succeeded in transforming the idea of women's sexuality from dangerous but active and powerful, to weak and powerless. The Devil became the main sexual actor, seducing and controlling weak women and demoting their power to the status of being the servant of the single powerful male—the Devil.

The whole concept of the devil as an all-powerful entity was introduced at this time.<sup>17</sup> Prior to this, he was a sort of mischievous but relatively powerless troublemaker. The introduction of a male, singular dominating evil fitted the new image of women as submissive to male power: one husband, one God, one Devil. The power and agency of women was denied as they became mere servants of the Devil.

The construct of the submissive wife and mother developed during this period has lasted to this day, and it serves the capitalist mode of production very well, providing unpaid mothers, carers and workers—producing and reproducing labour power. The woman, her children and her work became the property of her husband.

All non-procreative forms of female sexuality were demonised, including post-menopausal female sexuality, lesbian sex, prostitution, sex between the young and old, collective sex (such as at the spring festivals), and sex using contraception. Frederici states: 'The witch-hunt condemned female sexuality as the source of every evil, but it was also the main vehicle of a broad reconstruction of sexual life that, conforming with the new capitalist work-discipline, criminalised any sexual activity that threatened procreation, the transmission of property within the family, or took time and energy away from work'.<sup>18</sup>

Prostitution became illegal for the first time during this period, and many prostitutes were burned as witches.<sup>19</sup> They were economically and sexually independent women who did not fit the new model of femininity. Adultery was made punishable by death, and giving birth out of wedlock was made illegal.

Post-menopausal women were often killed as witches, and the new stereotype of the old hag—desperate, horny, but repulsive—was constructed in stark contrast to the revered and cared-for wise woman or crone. With the breakdown of communal life and the beginnings of the nuclear family, the status of elderly relatives demoted. In the Middle Ages, both the wise woman and the prostitute were considered positive social figures; later they were demonised for their practice of non-procreative sex.

Lesbians were also accused. At the trial of Elizabeth Bennet, 'William Bonner saith, that Elizabeth Bennet and his wife were lovers and familiar friends and did accompanies much together'. When the wife died, Elizabeth was accused of 'clasping her in her arms and killing her'. Prior to this period, the word 'gossip' simply meant friend; but as women's relations with each other came to be seen as suspect, the word became an insult. In 1576, Margaret Belsed of Boreham was condemned for 'being a witch and not living with her husband'.<sup>20</sup>

In response to the rise in the policing of private and sexual behaviour, radical heretics such as the Taborites, the Brethren of the Free Spirit and the Anabaptists were often against the institutions of marriage, and declared that the love of people was an act and thing in and of itself, much as communion with God was.

## Wise women and healers

**Prior to this period, health was the domain of peasant-class women healers, and there were women within each community with huge amounts of knowledge and skills. The subject of health featured in many of the trials—for example, in instances of women curing someone and that person then becoming ill again, or indeed, becoming well. Magic was deemed to be the domain of the Church, and healing the domain of the medical establishment. The witch trials succeeded in effectively wiping out huge amounts of traditional knowledge, and thereby wrestling control over the human body from the poor communities.**<sup>21</sup>

The healers were skilled practitioners benefiting from generations of accumulated anatomical and herbal knowledge. The very fact of attempting to cure, or to affect health or the natural world, was viewed as witchcraft if practiced by women, whether it helped people or not. It was irrelevant whether the person got better, got worse or was not affected at all by the acts of the woman accused. In 1548, Reginald Scott said 'At this day it is indifferent to say in the English tongue, "she is a witch or she is a wise woman"'.<sup>22</sup>

All healing was considered a kind of miracle, and the female healers also used a superstitious spells and charms. Over the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, magic and miracles became the sole domain of God and the Church, or else of the Devil, and thus people's magic was denied or viewed as diabolical.<sup>23</sup> One witch-finding manual stated: 'in the same number we reckon all good Witches, which do no hurt but good, which do not spoil and destroy, but save and deliver ... It were a thousand times better for the land if all Witches, but especially the blessing Witch, might suffer death'.<sup>24</sup> The work of wise men and magicians was discredited or blamed, but they were not killed. Even now, the word 'wizard' means an expert in something (e.g. a 'financial wizard'), whereas 'witch' is seen as a derogatory term.

The Church found some equilibrium with the growing number of university-trained physicians who were increasingly employed by the ruling classes, enforcing certain conditions such as the presence of a priest.

This growing medical profession very purposefully excluded women, including urban-educated women healers, long before the witch-hunts began.<sup>25</sup> The male, university-taught physicians were on the increase, and some see the witch trials as attempts to wipe out the competition. The belief in witches also served to cover up for doctors' incompetence. For example, there was little knowledge of cancer or strokes, so it was easy for doctors to blame unexplainable deaths on

the work of a witch. The Church–doctor–witch dynamic is clearly explained by Ehrenreich and English:

‘The partnership between Church, State and medical profession reached full bloom in the witch trials. The doctor was held up as the medical “expert”, giving an aura of science to the whole proceeding. He was asked to make judgments about whether certain women were witches and whether certain afflictions had been caused by witchcraft. In the witch-hunts, the Church explicitly legitimised the doctors’ professionalism, denouncing non-professional healing as equivalent to heresy: “If a woman dare to cure without having studied she is a witch and must die.” The distinction between “female” superstition and “male” medicine was made final by the very roles of the doctor and the witch at the trial ... It placed him on the side of God and Law, a professional on par with lawyers and theologians, while it placed her on the side of darkness, evil and magic. He owed his new status not to medical or scientific achievements of his own, but to the Church and State he served so well ... Witch hunts did not eliminate the lower class woman healer, but they branded her forever as superstitious and possibly malevolent.’

## Birth and Midwives

**‘No-one does more harm to the Catholic Church than midwives’, stated the *Malleus Maleficarum*; and the Papal Bull of 1484 wrote, ‘Witches destroy the offspring of women ... They hinder men from generating and women from conceiving’. All sexual-health work—midwifery, contraception or the termination of pregnancies—was condemned. This was about control over the body—and especially over the female body and reproduction.**

At the time of the witch trials, capital and the State were particularly concerned with birth rates. They wanted labour, and they saw large populations as the sign of a wealthy nation. The population was low as a result of plagues and wars, and the authorities were worried about demographic collapse. Therefore they were anti-abortion and anti-contraception (fairy tales about witches killing babies and children stem from this campaign). Many of the first witches burned were engaged in contraception and abortion work, and there is plenty of evidence to show that women were indeed controlling the birth rates within their communities during the Middle Ages. The authorities didn’t want to leave the control of reproduction in the hands of lower-class women, and the witch trials were partly a battle to snatch control of this knowledge, which had previously been a ‘female mystery’. Women’s ability to control their own reproductivity was hugely diminished; and as midwives and groups of women were excluded from the birth process, the

communities were robbed of their traditions of knowledge. In so far as children are the products of women’s labour, control over reproduction meant alienating women from their own bodies and controlling how many children women had, and when and where they had them.

In fact, it would be another hundred years or more before the male doctors truly had a monopoly on attending births. In the seventeenth century, surgeons started delivering babies using forceps, and women were banned from practicing surgery. By the eighteenth century most births were attended by physicians, and when female midwives in England organised and charged the male intruders with commercialism and dangerous misuse of the forceps, they were easily put down as ignorant ‘old wives’, clinging to the superstitions of the past. It was the process of the witch trials had sown the seeds of this attitude.

In the sixteenth century, midwives in France and Germany became obliged to report all births to the State, including concealed births. Today, it is illegal not to register births in most of Europe, while across the world there is currently significant control of reproduction by the authorities, ranging from the Catholic prohibition on contraception and pregnancy termination to State-run birth-control programmes in China; and from enforced sterilisation in some export-processing zones to the aborting of female foetuses in the patriarchal society of India. The extent to which birth is medicalised and seen in terms of risk, and the faith we have in the magic-seeming powers of doctors and hospitals (despite our frequent disappointment with the medical establishment) is still testimony to this battle.<sup>26</sup>





## The rise and destruction of science

The destruction of the healers and midwives went hand-in-hand with the rise of the new 'rationality'. The new scientists were totally complicit in the witch trials, which, far from being a hangover from a time of magic and superstition, were largely part of a campaign carried out by these same men of the 'Enlightenment'. The context was the battle for 'truth', the concept of control over the natural world, the acceptance of hierarchy as 'natural', and the mind-body split so useful for capitalism.

Ironically, much of the healers' knowledge was empirical, gained using cause and effect and experimentation—which we are now told is the result of modern science, and represents progress from the supposedly superstitious belief systems of the Middle Ages.<sup>27</sup> A huge amount of knowledge of herbalism, passed down through generations of women, was lost during the trials. This was literally centuries' worth of developed knowledge and practice, and herbalists are now working hard in the attempt to reclaim and rediscover this knowledge. The male scientists and physicians of the fourteenth and fifteenth century based their knowledge on philosophy and clerical studies.<sup>28</sup> The healers, on the other hand, had knowledge of chemistry, botany, natural science, pharmacology and anatomy. Paracelsus, often claimed to be the father of modern medicine, said in 1527 that he 'learned from the sorceress all he knew'.<sup>29</sup> The myth of the Enlightenment as consisting of modern men bringing rationality and empiricism has to be criticised, when viewed through the lens of the witch-hunts.

Many men praised as the fathers of modern science were deeply involved in the witch-hunts—for example Robert Boyle and Thomas Hobbes, and Francis Bacon, who exposed the evil of witches alongside his more famous 'scientific rationality'.<sup>30</sup> Witchcraft and such texts as the *Malleus Maleficarum*, which seem so ludicrous now, were still being seriously discussed by these 'rational' men in academia right up until the end of the eighteenth century. The men advocating truly empirical science, such as Galileo and Copernicus, were accused of heresy. The Church's position was against lay healers and common magic, and against some of the new scientists: it was on faith alone that one should rely, since the 'senses were the Devil's playground', and only God's representatives could work miracles. Many scientists and philosophers, such as those in the Royal Society, managed both to appease the Church and to develop modern ideas, and it was these men who were most complicit in the witch-hunts.

More evidence of the brutality of the birth of modern science and medicine is witnessed in the torture chambers of the witch-hunts—which served as medical laboratories and were overseen by physicians—and in the human dissections.

Public hangings would be followed by a battle over the corpse as family members attempted to save it from the surgeons and their degrading public autopsies.<sup>31</sup>

Knowledge is power, and that power was in the hands of working- or peasant-class women. The monopoly on the treatment and theory—and therefore control of the body—was being contested. The new philosophies and sciences of the time were constructing a new view of the body as a machine to be controlled (by the mind, by work, by the State, or by the doctors). The new forms of work and social relations wanted to control bodies, especially those of females, who should produce the next generation from their bodies, be available for and controlled by their husbands, and make their bodies dispensable to the new systems by losing control of their knowledge of them. Waged labour introduced the divide between 'work' and other activity, making it clear that our bodies are at the boss's disposal during work time. Silvia Frederici writes, 'Just as the Enclosures expropriated the peasantry from the communal land, so the witch-hunt expropriated women from their bodies, which were thus "liberated" from any impediment preventing them functioning as machines for the production of labour. For the threat of the stake erected more formidable barriers around women's bodies than were ever erected by the fencing off of the commons'.<sup>32</sup>

## Older women and the rise of private property

**The witch trials were used to demonise begging women, thereby alleviating guilt amongst richer members of the same community; to expropriate the property of single women; and to deal with any resistance or crime committed in reaction to the increasing poverty.**

The economic situation was dire for many people by the mid-sixteenth century, as bread prices rose and people were forced off their subsistence plots and commons. Women were forced to beg or steal in order to provide for themselves and their children. The correlation between the Enclosures and the witch trials is shown by the fact that in England, the majority of the witch trials occurred in Essex, where most of the land had been enclosed, whereas in the Scottish Highlands where communal life continued, there is no evidence of witch-hunting. The increasing use of money exacerbated class divides, forcing some people off their land and making small entrepreneurs out of others. There is a clear correlation between the number of witch trials and the rise in food prices—a correlation that might be explained by the trials being a reaction to revolts against food prices, and/or the result of competition for scarce resources, as the accused were denied access to those resources.

Many of those murdered were widows. At around this time in England changes were made to the law regarding women and property, so that widows now got one-third of the husband's land, not all of it. In Italy, even this one-third was taken away from widows, forcing them to become vagrants and beggars. Rented property did not typically pass on to the widow. The English Poor Laws stigmatised the poor, banned begging without permission, and later dictated that each parish should be responsible for its own poor and that residency must be proved by birth, marriage or apprenticeship. Those who could not prove residency would be forcibly removed—often hundreds of miles away. This was much to the detriment of those forced to migrate, especially since the richer towns were stricter with their residency controls.

Women who were traditionally part of a close-knit community, were now forced to beg from their slightly more wealthy neighbours. As private property replaced the Commons the family became an isolated economic unit. Witches were accused of 'going from house to house for a pot full of milk, yeast, pottage or some other relief, without which they could hardly live'. Keith Thomas posits that accusing someone of being a witch could alleviate the guilt and the responsibility of providing for dependent neighbours<sup>33</sup>. The feeling of having a curse might, too, be the guilt and tension of having neglected and condemned members of your community. In many of the trials the accuser had actually wronged the woman previously, e.g. by refusing charity to her. For example, 'The old woman had passed by the door, where the girl was eating a new wheaten loaf. She looked earnestly upon Mary, but, speaking nothing, passed by; and yet instantly returned, and with the like look and silence departed. At which doing the bread which she was chewing fell out of Mary Glover's mouth, and she herself fell backwards off the stool where she sat, into a grievous fit'.<sup>34</sup>

The trials allowed for the development of the capitalist mentality of private property and wealth, since those who had previously been provided for as part of the whole become beggars dependent on charity. Widows being excluded from feasts and the like are the origin of fairy tales such as *Sleeping Beauty*. Women became the scapegoats for all sorts of ills—deaths, crop failure, animal disease, etc.—and a way in which the emerging middle class could ensure a greater share of scarce resources.

The trials could also be used to other ends, such as enabling the authorities to confiscate any property or wealth the women had—which might explain the number of economically independent women who were killed. Maria Mies claims that the money made in this way was much more significant than we assume, and cites this letter from Bailiff Geiss to Lord Lindheim: 'If only your lordship would be willing to start the burning, we would gladly provide the firewood and bear all

other costs, and your lordship would earn so much that the bridge and also the church could be well repaired. Moreover, you would get so much that you could pay your servants a better salary in the future, because one could confiscate whole houses and particularly the more well to do ones'.<sup>35</sup>

Witch-finding became a business - for example, the witch finders' taking bribes for not accusing people and the wages of the various executioners, hunters, administrators, etc. Documents detailing the expenses of the trials include the wood, the torture instruments, and the beer for the witch-trial team. In Ireland particularly, where some richer women were killed, the ruling class eventually got nervous and stopped supporting the trials.

## Organised women, organised resistance

**The trials targeted rebellious women and groups that were part of the general high level of class resistance to the economic restructuring, at a village or regional level. They also broke class resistance by creating a gender divide. The witch-hunts may have been, in part, a ruling-class offensive in response to the previous century's intense class struggles and the resulting crisis of accumulation for the ruling class.**

Women, of course, were part of groups and networks, sharing herbs, knowledge, skills, comradeship and friendship. One of the main accusations was that of being part of an organised rebellion; and to be sure, these women were. The infamous sabbats (nocturnal meetings, dances or feasts) were the meetings and festivals of these rebellious communities. Facing poverty and oppression, these networks also became politicised and organised—the women who 'cast down fences and hedges' in Lincolnshire in 1608, for example; or those women who 'took it upon themselves to assemble at night to dig up hedges and level the ditches' in Warwickshire; or the women who, after destroying an enclosure in York in 1624, 'enjoyed tobacco and ale after their feat'.<sup>36</sup> Women initiated revolts in Montpellier, France in 1645 and in Cordoba, Spain in 1652; women played a crucial role in the German Peasant Wars of the 1520s and 1530s, and many women were members of the various Heretic sects.

The details of the trials show many women being accused of rebellion against members of the local ruling class, such as those accused of rebelling against the village constable who was trying to get their sons to be soldiers; or against the overseer of the poor, who put their children into compulsory service. Joan Peachy was accused of witchcraft in 1582 after complaining that the poor-relief collector gave her inferior bread. At the trial of Margaret Harkett in 1585 it was reported

that: 'William Goodwin's servant denied her yeast, whereupon his brewing stand dried up. She was struck by a bailiff who had caught her taking wood from the master's grounds; the bailiff went mad ... A gentleman told his servant to refuse her buttermilk; after which they were unable to make butter'.<sup>37</sup>

Other women were accused after retaliating against the local tyrants, against the Enclosures, and against the shutting of rights of way. The real covens were not cultish religious devil worshippers, but dissident underground groups of women (or mixed groups)—pissed off, disenfranchised and angry.

The authorities were terrified of self-organised groups and networks. In 1920, Montague Summers, translator of the *Malleus Maleficarum*, wrote, 'The witches were a vast political movement, an organised society, which was anti-social and anarchical, a world wide plot against civilisations'.<sup>38</sup> Then—just as now—it was the witch-hunters who were in fact the architects of organised anti-social plots of terror: a 'calculated ruling class campaign of terrorisation ... well organised, initiated, financed and executed by Church and State'.<sup>39</sup>

The phase before the height of the witch trials was politically explosive all over Europe. The birth of the new order was, as ever, a bloody process. There were the peasant wars in Germany and the growth and crushing of the Heretical sects, or radical Christian groups. There were the battles against the Enclosures in England and the revolt of the Croquants against tithes, taxes and the price of bread in France. In all of these struggles, women played a central role. They were an integral part of the communities being attacked and an integral part of the struggle against those attacks. The trials were a 'class war carried out by other means. We cannot fail to see a connection between the fear of uprisings and the prosecutors' insistence on the witches Sabbat'.<sup>40</sup> Throughout this period, any peasant gathering, festival or dance was described by the authorities as a virtual sabbat. The witch-hunts crushed those who remembered the peasant wars, the struggles in defence of the commons, the riots and invasions against rising bread prices, who would have remained to carry on the resistance. As the trials continued, the communities were robbed of the independent, strong, radical, rebellious women who could have served as role models and led a fight back.

According to Silvia Frederici, 'What has not been recognised is that the witch-hunt was one of the most important events in the development of capitalist society and the formation of the modern proletariat. For the unleashing of a campaign of terror against women, unmatched by any other persecution, weakened the resistance of the European peasantry to the assault launched against it by the gentry and the state ... The witch-hunts deepened the division between women and men, teaching men to fear the power of women and destroyed a universe of practises, beliefs, and social subjects whose existence was incompatible with the capitalist work discipline...'.<sup>41</sup> The witch trials worked to divide the class along gender lines by spreading fear and mistrust: 'The years of propaganda and terror sowed amongst men the seeds of a deep psychological alienation from women, that broke class solidarity and undermined their own collective power ... just as today, by repressing women the ruling class more effectively repressed the entire proletariat .... If we consider the historical context in which the witch-hunt occurred, the gender and class of the accused, and the effects of the persecution, then we must conclude that the witch-hunting in Europe was an attack on women's resistance of the spread of capitalist relations and the power that women had gained by virtue of their sexuality, their control over reproduction and their ability to heal'.<sup>42</sup>



## Conclusion

The witch trials enabled the enforcement of the gender division of labour, the enclosure of land, and alienation from our bodies and especially from our reproductive bodies. They enabled the imposition of an assumed norm of women as the weaker sex, and the exclusion of women from social, economic, cultural and political spheres of influence. They introduced gender divides within the working and peasant classes, thereby helping to crush class resistance to emerging capitalism.

The tactic of the demonisation of women, backed up with gender violence, has been used across centuries and around the world. It has been used to break up communities or resistance to exploitation, and to foster class divides (gender divides and divisions between sections of the class). The demonisation of 'negros' during the first phase of colonisation fulfilled a similar function. Stereotypes are created and backed up by the terror of violence in order to enable the expropriation of land, resources, bodies or time. The resultant deep-rooted sexism or racism remains in our psyches to continue to justify ongoing exploitation and oppression. The social, economic, and political exclusion enforced during these phases echoes on in the present.

The story told in this pamphlet is that of the sixteenth-century European experience; but the same story is told of colonial times in North and South America and in Africa, both in colonial times and again recently. Gender stereotypes and gender violence still go hand-in-hand all over the world today — with the murder of women occurring at 'a dizzying rate'.<sup>43</sup> Any surprise we might feel about the complicity of other community members during the trials of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Europe should lead us to question the complicity of current society in the deaths caused by war, capitalism and patriarchy today - in everyday forms such as domestic violence killings, death due to poverty around the world (including on our doorsteps) or racist murders (including by the police).

We need to bring this subject to light in order to understand where we are today — in order to understand the gendered origins of capitalism, and the capitalist origins of this current form of patriarchy. We can use this knowledge to make us stronger in the fight against ongoing repression, and in celebration of those women who stay strong and fight back, past, present and future.

## Recommended further reading

Silvia Frederici (2004) *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation* (Autonomedia).

Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English (1973) *Witches, Midwives and Nurses: A History of Women Healers* (Consortium Book Sales and Dist).

Keith Thomas (1971) *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (Penguin).

Maria Mies (1986) *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale: Women in the Global Division of Labour* (Zed Books).

Rosalind Miles (1989) *The Women's History of the World* (Paladin).

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Gage, M. J. (1893) *Women, Church and State: The Original Exposé of Male Collaboration Against the Female Sex*.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Keith Thomas (1971) *Religion and the Decline of Magic*.

<sup>3</sup> Although there is much dispute about the number of women killed, 200,000 is a likely number. A lack of records and research projects makes it hard to be exact. For more discussion on this, see Silvia Frederici (2004) *Caliban and the Witch*, p. 208; and Anne L. Barstow (1994) *Witchcraze: A New History of the European Witch Hunts*. In any case, the numbers are significant enough to demonstrate a Europe-wide, centuries-long reign of terror amongst all communities, with deep social and physiological impacts. For some idea of population figures in 1600: Germany and Austria, 13 million; Italy, 11 million; Spain, 9 million; present-day UK, 9 million.

<sup>4</sup> These groups were also mercilessly persecuted, and have a whole fascinating story of their own. They were typically against private property, and were in many ways the first anarchists. Some claim that the heretic movement was the first 'Proletarian International', with sects reaching far and wide and having international networks including those of trade, pilgrimages and cross-border refugees.

For more on the fascinating history of this movement, see the recent novel *Q* by Luther Blisset (2004), which contains a history of the Anabaptists and other sects — but which, although a good book in many ways, does not make a single mention of the witch-hunts. "For a good overview of the history of the Taborites, see Howard Kaminsk, *A History of the Hussite Revolution*; and see H. C. Lea (1961) *The Inquisition of the Middle Ages* for information on many heretical sects. See also 'Neither mine nor thine: Communist experiments in Hussite Bohemia', See an article by Kenneth Rexroth, which also covers the Brethren of the Free Spirit and the Peasants Uprising, at <<http://www.bopsecrets.org/rexroth/communalism2.htm>>. There is also a section in Fredy Perlman's *Against His-tory, Against Leviathan* covering the Taborites.

The two articles mentioned above contain some inaccuracies and translation problems regarding the Adamites, but are still worth reading. The Perlman book goes the other

way and probably over-romanticises them—and he doesn't include sources—but it makes for good reading and gives a good sense of the context. Finally, an interesting book that specifically focuses on women is *Warring Maidens, Captive Wives and Hussite Queens: Women and Men at War and at Peace in Fifteenth-Century Bohemia*.” Thanks, Rosanne!

<sup>5</sup> Silvia Frederici (2004) *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation*, p. 47

<sup>6</sup> The Catholic Church has never apologised for this most horrendous massacre despite all the other things it has felt the need to apologise for over the years.

<sup>7</sup> See *Down With the Fences: Battles for the Commons in South London 2004* and *South London Histories, Mysteries, Mythologies*, at [www.past-tense.org.uk](http://www.past-tense.org.uk)

<sup>8</sup> On the hazards of converting farmland to pastureland, see Thomas Moore's account of the man-eating sheep in *Utopia*, published in 1516.

<sup>9</sup> Significantly, the only known example of men as a group defending the women in their community was a group of fishermen from St Jean-de-Luz in the Basque country, who were at sea during the months of the propaganda phase. They heard about the witch trials of their wives and sisters, and immediately returned to successfully stop the process.

<sup>10</sup> Frederici, p. 170.

<sup>11</sup> Jean Bodin (1580), quoted in Mary Daly (1978) *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism*, p. 182; and P. Hughes (1975) *Witchcraft*.

<sup>12</sup> Daly, p. 184.

<sup>13</sup> This and previous quotes from D. Underdown (1985) *The Taming of the Scold: Order and Disorder in Early Modern England*, p. 120 and elsewhere.

<sup>14</sup> Frederici, p. 97.

<sup>15</sup> D. Underdown (1985).

<sup>16</sup> Quoted in Marianne Hester (1992) *Lewd Women and Wicked Witches: A Study of the Dynamics of Male Domination*

<sup>17</sup> Devil beliefs tend to appear with shifts from one mode of production to another. Ironically, in the Dracula myths and in much of South America, the poor suspected the rich of devil-worshipping. Money relations and the commodity seemed diabolical and unnatural compared to the old subsistence ways of life. For more on this, see Michael T. Taussig (1980) *The Devil and Commodity Fetishism in South America*. Frederici has found echoes of this phenomenon in modern Africa—see Frederici, p. 239.

<sup>18</sup> Frederici, p. 194.

<sup>19</sup> The history of prostitution and its relations to capitalism, sexuality, religion, witch trials and urbanisation is fascinating and complex, and deserves a pamphlet of its own. The State encourages prostitution at one moment as a comfort for angry men, a cure for homosexuality and a job for single women—to the point of opening state brothels; then the next moment demonises it, and blames the prostitutes.

<sup>20</sup> This and previous quote from M. Hester (1992).

<sup>21</sup> See also B. Ehrenreich and D. English (1973) *Witches, Midwives and Nurses: A History of Women Healers*, for a more detailed overview of this aspect of the trials.

<sup>22</sup> Thomas, p. 518.

<sup>23</sup> See Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (1991).

<sup>24</sup> Quoted in Ehrenreich and English.

<sup>25</sup> For example, the English physicians sent a petition to Parliament requesting long imprisonments for 'worthless and presumptuous women who usurped the profession' and attempted to 'use the practyse of Fisyk'. See Ehrenreich and English.

<sup>26</sup> In the UK in recent years, a number of independent midwives have faced persecution by the medical establishment, with their case notes scrutinised with a fine toothcomb in the hope of finding some incriminating evidence against them. Insurance for independent midwives is set so high that it must be intended to discourage them from practicing outside of the control of the medical establishment. Midwives working within hospitals are covered by the hospital insurance. For more on current issues in midwifery in the UK, see the Association of Radical Midwives' website at <http://www.radmid.demon.co.uk>.

In 2006 in the USA, a woman was prosecuted for manslaughter after giving birth to a stillborn baby because she was a drug addict. The US government is starting a campaign to make all women of childbearing age see themselves as 'pre-pregnant', whether or not they are planning to have a baby. They are urged, for example, not to drink or smoke in case they become pregnant—a campaign that encourages a view of women as walking wombs.

<sup>27</sup> There were also many superstitious beliefs at the time, including a widespread belief in the efficacy of magic spells but this should not make us ignore or ridicule the serious botanical, chemical and anatomical knowledge the healers clearly had.

<sup>28</sup> The physician to Edward II—who held a bachelor's degree in theology and a doctorate in medicine from Oxford—prescribed, for toothache, writing on the jaws of the patient the words, 'In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, Amen', or touching a needle to a caterpillar and then to the tooth. A frequent treatment for leprosy was a broth made of the flesh of a black snake caught in a dry land among stones. See Ehrenreich and English.

<sup>29</sup> Quoted in Ehrenreich and English.

<sup>30</sup> For more on Bacon, contrast Thomas, p. 522 with the material at [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Francis\\_Bacon](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Francis_Bacon).

<sup>31</sup> Linebaugh (1975) *The Tyburn Riots against the Surgeons, and The London Hanged* (1992).

<sup>32</sup> Frederici, p. 184.

<sup>33</sup> Keith Thomas deals with this at length in *Religion and the Decline of Magic*

<sup>34</sup> Quoted in Thomas.

<sup>35</sup> Maria Mies (1986) *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale: Women in the Global Division of Labour*.

<sup>36</sup> Frederici, p. 73.

<sup>37</sup> Thomas, p. 556.

<sup>38</sup> Rosalind Miles (1989) *The Women's History of the World*.

<sup>39</sup> Ehrenreich and English.

<sup>40</sup> Frederici, p. 165.

<sup>41</sup> Frederici, p. 165.

<sup>42</sup> Frederici, p. 170.

<sup>43</sup> Lebohang Letsie talking about the domestic killings in Botswana, 2006. For more on witch-hunts in the colonies, see Frederici.

From  
or in

## Timeline

1347	1352	Bubonic plague pandemic claims a third of Europe's population—25 million people.
1381		Third Poll Tax and Peasants Revolt: Wat Tyler marches on London in protest against the poll tax.
1387		'Canterbury Tales' by Chaucer is published, containing the first description of a medical practitioner.
1401		Statute of Heresy: heretics were to be imprisoned and/or burned alive.
1429		Joan of Arc leads the French to victory against the English in the Hundred Years' War.
1434		Crushing of the Taborites.
1440		The technology of printing books is refined.
1463		The first import controls introduced. Woollen clothes, silk and embroidery, leather and metal goods, etc. are controlled.
1477		Printing press is set up in the precincts of Westminster Abbey.
1484		Malleus Maleficarum published
1492		After almost 800 years of thriving multiculturalism, Jews and Muslims are expelled from Southern Spain.
1492		Christopher Columbus reaches the Caribbean, and then South America in 1498.
1500	1660	Growth of London by 400% to 200,000
1500	1525	Peasant wars in Germany.
1500	1550	Price Revolution drops real wages by sixty percent.
1502		The pocket watch is invented.
1517		Lutherian Reformation in Germany.
1520	1550	Dramatic increase in rents in England.
1529		The Ottoman Empire reached as far as Vienna.
1531	1534	Anabaptists take over Munster and re-name it New Jerusalem.
1532		Witchcraft becomes punishable by death in England.
1532		Witchcraft a criminal offence punishable by burning throughout the Holy Roman Empire (including Germany) with Charles V's law, Constitutio Criminalis Carolina.
1534		King becomes supreme head of the Church of England.
1549		Agrarian revolts spread across England.

1552		Parishes in England began to register those considered 'poor'.
1556	1560	A bout of plague in England.
1564		William Shakespeare, English playwright and poet, born.
1568		Dutch independence from Spain.
1572		Augustus of Saxony imposes the penalty of burning for witchcraft of every kind, including fortune-telling.
1572		First local tax to fund poor relief in England.
1588		The Spanish Armada is defeated by Sir Francis Drake.
1589		Knitting Machine (stocking frame) is invented.
1601		Poor Law introduced. The poor would be provided for, but also forced to work, including Children.
1602		Dutch East India Company was created by Antwerp merchants, a new style of colonial expansion based on return on investment shareholders (as opposed to royal families).
1604		Official discovery of the circulation of blood.
1604		Witchcraft punishable by death in England, even if no damage has been done.
1605		Bacon publishes The Advancement of Learning.
1609		Invention of compound microscope
1618	1648	Europe was convulsed by the Thirty Years' War
1620		The Pilgrim Fathers sailed to America in the Mayflower.
1630	1750	40% of rural English population leaves the land to move to the cities.
1642	1651	The English Civil War
1649		The Diggers of St Georges Hill
1653	1660	Oliver Cromwell introduced the 'Instrument of Government', the Protectorate.
1662		The 'Settlement' or 'Poor Relief' Act introduced in England.
1680		First clock with minute hands invented.
1683		Discovery of bacteria.
1723		The Workhouse Test Act.
1736		Death penalty for witchcraft was abolished in England.
1749		The last trial for witchcraft in Germany at Würzburg,
1783		Last legal execution of a witch in Switzerland, in the Protestant Canton of Glarus.