



WITCH-CRAFT

In many cases, the witches who were burned in the great era of English witch-hunts were often merely unpopular village crones. The magic arts of which they were accused were in fact frequently based on no more than circumstantial evidence or multiple witness by enemies. But once established as a crime in the eyes of both Church and State, the practice of witchcraft carried the penalty of death
Alan Macfarlane

Above: A malevolent demon. Right: The title-page of a book on witchcraft, with an account of a witch's trial

Witches Apprehended, Examined and Executed, for notable villanies by them committed both by Land and Water.

With a strange and most true triall how to know whether a woman be a Witch or not.



Printed at London for Edward Marchant, and are to

Between 1450 and 1700 many thousands of people were burned or hanged throughout Europe for practising "witchcraft". English witchcraft beliefs were an offshoot of this wide-scale art, yet they also had their special differences. Unlike Scotland or the Continent there were few organised witch-hunts in England, only occasionally was physical torture used, and suspected witches were hanged, not burned.

The beliefs were less extreme in England: "witches" were not accused of feasting on their murdered infants, or of flying to midnight meetings (sabbats) where they took part in sexual orgies with the Devil and each other. The most important characteristic of English witches was that they were believed to have a "familiar", or animal-shaped spirit, usually in the shape of a mouse, toad, or small bird, which the witches fed with their own blood. Such feeding produced a spot or nipple, usually in some private part of the body. Seeing the evil spirit and finding its mark on the suspect's body

were two of the legal "proofs" that a person was a witch. Witchcraft was often believed to be inherited - it was an internal force, increasing as the "witch" grew older. It was active when a person felt envy and a desire for revenge; there was no need for a ritualised act such as sticking pins into an image - malicious muttering was enough. The Devil, with whom the witch had entered into an implicit or explicit compact, then inflicted loss of livestock, crippling illness, or death on the victim. Thus "witchcraft" was primarily a supernatural activity, through power coming from the Devil, resulting in the injury of the victim.

Witchcraft was an ecclesiastical offence in England in the Middle Ages, but only became a civil one by an Act of Parliament in 1542 which was elaborated in 1563. The law was made more severe in 1604 and finally repealed in 1736. The major offences were injuring people or property, causing human death, and conjuring evil spirits. Death was the punishment for all these offences from 1604

onwards. The lawyers wrote text books setting out the "sufficient proofs", any one of which was grounds for execution: accusation by another "witch"; an unnatural mark on the body supposedly caused by the Devil or a familiar; two witnesses who claimed that they had seen the accused make a contract with the Devil or feed her familiars. The type of evidence most often brought forward at trials is illustrated by the contemporary lawyer Richard Bernard, who urged that if a woman gave a child an apple and the receiver became ill soon afterwards, as long as there was known malice between them, this was proof enough for execution. Physical torture was not to be used, but judges could threaten and bribe, or keep suspects awake night after night - theoretically to see if their familiars came to them. The majority of English witchcraft cases were tried at the Assize courts, before juries of minor gentry and judges of great reputation and skill. The records of these courts, contemporary pamphlet accounts, and

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Matthew Hopkins, the notorious "witch-finder" of the eastern counties

archives reveal the broad features of the accusations.

The era of witch-hunts

Though there had been occasional trials of magicians before 1563, it was after that date that the vast majority of the English witchcraft accusations occurred. Between 1563 and 1700, approximately two thousand men and women were tried at the English Assize courts and roughly half that number at the ecclesiastical courts. Between three and four hundred of the Assize victims were executed and many others died of disease and neglect in gaol. Bringing a court accusation was only the last stage in the process of dealing with a suspected witch; the majority of suspicions did not reach the courts and are therefore not recorded.

Surviving written records are the tip of the iceberg. Gaps in available records make it difficult to be certain of the chronology of witchcraft accusations, but in south-east England the worst period for supposed witches was the reign of Elizabeth. In the north and far west of England the twenty years after 1660 were particularly prolific in accusations. The years 1645 to 1647 are the one exception, for during this time some professional witch-hunters toured East Anglia and the number of accusations was very high. The reigns of James I and Charles I saw a considerable decline in the number of accusations; the reputation of James I as a witch-hunting monarch, at least when in England, is unfounded. There were few trials for witchcraft after 1680; the last famous one occurred in Leicestershire in 1717, well before the Witchcraft Act was repealed in 1736.

Almost every county in England had its trials; Westmorland is the only one for which no trial records have yet been found. Records of the number of persons accused at the Assize courts in the Home Counties between 1560 and 1700 show how much variation there could be between different, though adjacent, regions. Seventeen people were accused from Sussex, fifty-four from Surrey, fifty-two from Hertford, ninety-one from Kent,

and two hundred and ninety-nine from Essex. Even within a county there might be considerable geographical variation: for instance, in Essex there were few accused witches in the north-west, but many in the centre and north-east.

The power of witches was so greatly feared that there were a multitude of ways in which people tried to combat them. Informally a villager might try to protect himself by magical means, tying charms and amulets round himself – a holed stone, communion wafer, or chapter from the Bible. He could bury anti-witchcraft devices, perhaps a bottle with nails in it, under his doorstep. Simultaneously he could try to avoid the malice of a witch by being polite and charitable. If both failed he often resorted to a widespread group of practitioners known variously as witch-finders, wisemen, or "cunning folk". There were hundreds of such people throughout England. With the aid of local gossip and their magical divining instruments they helped people to decide whether they were bewitched, by whom, and what should be done about it. People went many miles to consult them. As one clergyman admitted, "*as the Ministers of God doe give resolution to the conscience so. . . . Wisemen, and Wise-women, are at hand. . . . to resolve, direct and helpe ignorant and unsettled persons, in cases of distraction, losse, or other outward calamities*". Their power was still great in Victorian England.

The vast majority of witchcraft accusations occurred within the normal framework of village life; year after year a few suspects became so feared or hated that they were sent to the courts. The major exception to this pattern, and the one equivalent to continental witch-hunts, occurred between 1645 and 1647, when the witch-finders Matthew Hopkins and John Stearne toured Essex, Suffolk, Norfolk, Cambridgeshire, Northamptonshire, Huntingdonshire, and the Isle of Ely. They focused long-dormant local suspicions and rounded up several hundred suspected witches. In Essex alone some thirty-six suspects were tried at the 1645 Assizes and nineteen of them were executed. Though the panic would never have occurred without Hopkins's direction in combination with unsettled conditions after the Civil War, he cannot be used as a scapegoat for the whole episode. He encouraged new forms of trial, keeping suspects awake for many nights or ducking them to see whether they floated, but his methods were merely designed to prove or disprove fears already embedded in local communities. At first, at least, he does not seem to have been motivated by desire for financial gain, nor was he at any time driven by religious zeal. He felt himself to be a public benefactor, dealing with a menace which soon astonished him by its huge proportions. The results of his campaign were, however, horrific.

Court records reveal to what extent witchcraft accusations were interrelated with the social and economic problems of seventeenth century England. The very considerable population growth of the period provided the background of economic competition in which accusations

flourished. Yet there was no direct correlation, for prosecutions were not always more frequent in areas of highest population pressure. Nor do they seem to have been directly correlated to years of harvest failure or a slump in prices; for example, the difficult years of trade recession in the 1620s were not marked by a rise in accusations. Conflicts arising from the introduction of new industries did not often get projected into witchcraft accusations. It does seem, however, that there was an economic difference between witches and their accusers; the former were from the lower, labouring, groups in villages while their accusers were usually yeomen or small tradesmen. Witchcraft accusations occurred throughout the year and do not seem to have been limited to seasons of unemployment or want. Though little is known about this topic yet, it is possible that inheritance customs and accusations may have been connected.

In theory, witches were ugly. John Gaule wrote that "every old woman with a wrinkled face, a furr'd brow, a hairy lip, a gobber tooth, a squint eye, a squeaking voyce, or a scolding tongue" was accused as a witch. In reality it seems to have been their "social ugliness" – their bad temper and irritating requests for small gifts and loans – that identified them. Men could be "witches", but less than one in ten of those accused were male. Their victims and accusers were, however, almost equally men and women. There is no evidence that hostility between the sexes, or sexual frustration on the part of males, lay behind the accusations. Contemporaries thought that women were temperamentally weak and vicious and thus susceptible to the wiles of Satan. Certainly they were often in a precarious economic position as poor wives or widows and it was they, rather than men, who tried to maintain themselves by the neighbourly expedients of borrowing and begging small sums. The accused were usually middle-aged or old; few were under forty and the majority between fifty and seventy years old. Their accusers were usually a generation younger. The evidence suggests that a woman only gradually became a witch, both in her neighbours', and sometimes her own, eyes. Approximately two-thirds of those believed to be suffering death or illness from witchcraft were adults; mortality at birth or during the first year of life was seldom blamed on witches. The accused were nearly always wives or widows, probably in about an equal proportion.

Witchcraft accusations seldom occurred over long distances; accusers and accused knew each other well. They lived on the same manor, in the same village street, or went to the same church. Accusations do not seem principally to have occurred between close kin. It was neighbourly bonds which linked witch and victim: witches were unwanted neighbours – people who enquired too solicitously after a person's health, or lent and borrowed small objects, when such activities were not wanted by their victim. Their motives

An eager customer seeks a witch's philtre – a sleeping-drug, aphrodisiac, or poison



were most commonly believed to be discontent and anger after being denied neighbourly support. Their victim refused aid and they bewitched in return. The objects of dispute were often trivial, the victim asked for a few pennies to be returned to him or refused to lend a hay rake. But what was involved was the total relationship between two people who lived close together, yet who had conflicting views on the meaning of their mutual relationship. Expanding guilt and anxiety could be generated by such a situation.

It has sometimes been suggested that witchcraft beliefs merely reflect a high rate of illness, high infant mortality, and lack of medical knowledge. Such an explanation does not help to explain why accusations grew in England in the sixteenth century or declined in the late seventeenth, since there were no known significant changes in medical knowledge

or disease at the village level. Furthermore, it is clear that the majority of illnesses and deaths were, and could be, explained without reference to witchcraft at that period. Years of plague epidemics, for instance, were not the same as those of witchcraft accusations, nor, as we have already seen, was infant mortality often blamed on witches. It appears that it was lingering and painful disease, and death after several months of illness, that were most often blamed on witches. The symptoms were so diverse that it is impossible to say that only certain illnesses were attributed to them. Likewise mental illness was not often blamed on witches.

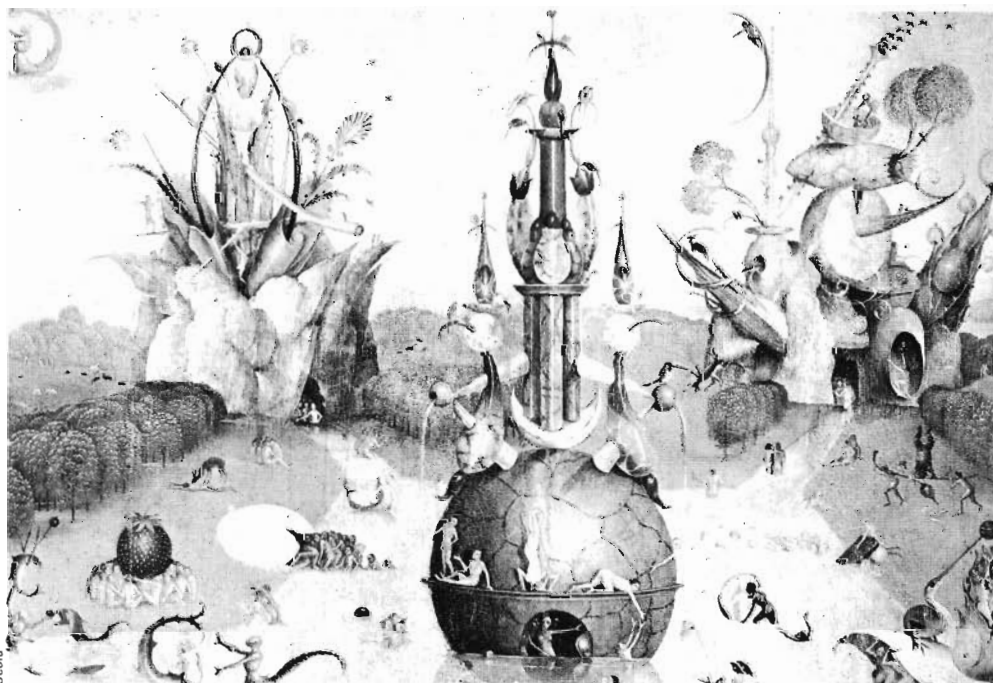
To a certain extent witchcraft beliefs, based on the illicit use of supernatural power received by the help of the Devil, appear to be connected with the religious upheavals of Reformation and Puritan England. Yet the enthusiasm with which

both Protestant and Roman Catholic states on the Continent hunted down witches shows that it is impossible to blame any particular religious creed for such massacres. There is little evidence in England that religious zeal played a major part in witch-hunting. It is true that the Elizabethan enactments against magical practices were partly inspired by a fear of lingering "popish" spells, and the worst purge of witches occurred in Puritan East Anglia, but detailed study of those who wrote about, or were involved in, accusations shows that there were no clear-cut correlations between extreme religious views and accusations. For instance, the Essex villages which are known to have had militantly Puritan ministers did not have a higher incidence of accusations than other villages. Nor is there evidence that lay Puritans were particularly interested in witch-hunting.



Bodleian Library Filmstrip: MS. Rawlt. D. 140

Above: *Witches on broomsticks – the traditional view.* Left: *A grotesque picture of a witches' "sabbat" by Goya.* Below: *The Garden of Delight by Hieronimus Bosch.* Such a vision might be induced by a hallucinatory drug concocted by a witch



Scala

Witchcraft beliefs seem to have had two main functions for seventeenth century villagers. They helped to explain and give relief in a number of cases of illness and misfortune. Pain was made less random and hope was offered by the magical practitioners. Furthermore, in a society where great social and economic changes were straining traditional methods of poor relief, in which Christian ideals of neighbourly conduct conflicted with the new ethic of "possessive individualism", witchcraft both reflected anxiety and justified change. The witch was more culpable than any other bad neighbour for she resorted to evil supernatural means and her revenge was out of proportion to the supposed injury. Witchcraft beliefs thus contributed to the emergence of a narrowed sphere of obligations arising as village society became divided into the rich and poor.