

Witch-hunts during the Renaissance

(Adapted from Gale Tyler, "The European witch-hunt of the 15th to 17th century," *Status of Women Journal*, March 1966, pp. 31-33.)

In the fifteenth century, the focus of trials shifted from prosecuting heretics (persons who hold religious beliefs that are opposed to official doctrine) to prosecuting witches (persons who acquire magical powers by making a compact with the devil or with evil spirits). It was not during the Dark Ages, but during the Renaissance (15th to 17th century), the first phase of the Europe's so-called Age of Reason, that witch-hunt activity was greatest. From the period 1435 to 1750 it is estimated that between 100,000 and 300,000 individuals were put to death, and more than double these numbers were imprisoned or driven out of their communities. The overwhelming majority of those who were prosecuted for witchcraft were women. Particularly vulnerable were poor peasant women, over fifty years old, who were unmarried or widowed and who were midwives (who helped in child birth) or healers within the community.

One of the first twelve books ever printed, the *Malleus Maleficarum* (Hammer of Witches) played a significant role in the witch-hunts of this period. The book which was an encyclopedia of "information" about demons was written by two Dominican (Catholic) inquisitors—officials whose job is to investigate and question people. Pope Innocent VIII encouraged the two authors, who were his sons, to write the book through a formal papal authorization to end the spread of witchcraft in Germany. The *Maleficarum* became an immediate best seller among the learned of Europe, particularly among inquisitors, church officials, lawyers and the nobility. Between its first edition in 1487 and 1520 it was reprinted fourteen times. This book was influential for four reasons:

- it served as a reference source for all who wanted evidence about demons and witchcraft;
- it was widely circulated and therefore extended across Catholic Europe the Church's approval of witch-hunts;
- it encouraged non-religious authorities to actively join with inquisitors to stop witchcraft;
- it said that women were most likely to be witches: women were claimed to be "more stupid, fickle, lighter-headed, weaker and more carnal than men." In other words, it asserted that women were easier prey for the devil than were men. As a result, the stage was set for shifting the witch-hunts into a pursuit mainly of women.

The *Maleficarum* specifies that the peasant women who for centuries had performed such recognized and valued roles in the community as midwives, healers and wise women were now believed to be particularly likely to be doing the work of the devil. The *Maleficarum* refers to witches

who could cure and well as injure. Not surprisingly, many of the women who were prosecuted were very knowledgeable about herbs and healing practices.

Because of wars and the plague, which took the lives of four times the number of men as women, many regions in Europe had significantly larger female populations than male populations. At times the percentage of widows was as high as 30 percent and women who never married as high as 20 percent. Communities had trouble accommodating the increasing number of unmarried women. Compared to married women, a much higher percentage of unmarried and widowed women were accused of witchcraft. In other words, a woman with a husband was much less likely to be killed as a witch than a single woman. Poor women over fifty were the most likely to be prosecuted for witchcraft. In some communities, within one year ten percent of the population were executed for witchcraft. It is likely that most peasant women lived in constant fear that they would be the next to be accused.

Persons accused of being witches were typically subjected to extreme torture by inquisitors. The purpose in torturing an accused was to get her to confess and to name others who would then be accused of witchcraft. In the midst of the agony of torture people typically agreed to any question that was put before them. Often the very questions that were posed assumed the guilt of the person. For example, standard inquisition questions included: How long have you been a witch? Why did you become a witch?

The prosecution of witches served social and political purposes. Witches may have been convenient scapegoats, a phenomenon which occurs when public leaders blame and incite anger against a vulnerable group in order to gain public favour or deflect attention from other issues. Catholic and Protestants who historically had prosecuted each other for heresy now had a convenient common enemy. All state-sanctioned religions could unite in their efforts to end witchcraft. The legitimacy of the state and of the divine right of kings was greatly enhanced when both the king and the state could show that they had forces to fight the devil. The worst witch-hunts occurred in small religious states where the need to establish the state's authority was greatest. Uniting against witchcraft, as the embodiment of evil and disorder, encouraged the perception that the rulers were virtuous and had the support of God.

Causes of the witch-hunt

Hypothesis	Supporting evidence
Religious intolerance	
Superstition	
Gender discrimination	

Data Chart