

Literary Fiction and Historical Reality – Documenting Centuries of Incriminated Occult Practices

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ABSTRACT: The fifteenth century reflects the dawn of a canvas depicting a troublesome setting, inflicting vile retribution for actions that were feared and most often misinterpreted. Deeming witchcraft as an outrageous crime was a fact of existence, dictated by the influence of church and state intertwined and seen as a threat to the natural order. Rather than focusing on the fascination surrounding the practices associated with the occult, the main goal of the present paper is to provide an insight into the mechanism of past societies and how relevant literature and reality reach a convergence point on the matter of historical truth. Folklore and fantasy need to be overlooked in order to shed light on the accuracy of the entire phenomenon. The hysteria building around it and misconceptions related to esoteric pursuits led people to a distorted perception of those considered practitioners, thus sparking a long path of violence: empty, unfounded accusations and testimonies against humans with no privilege or way to defend themselves, implausible evidence of their actions, forced confessions and mass executions.

KEYWORDS: witchcraft, trials, indictment, misapprehension, facts

Introduction

Humankind’s tendency to adapt to the various challenges encountered throughout history, of environmental, social, political, or religious essence, might have often entailed a distressful toll in the evolutionary process. The hardest battles to overcome are those for the search of truth and awakening, since the mind is the sharpest weapon in need of constant upkeep, and if this weapon comes across an unknown path, it regards it as unfavorable. So instead of overcoming fear and basking in the limitlessness of knowledge, impulse is activated, turns to action, and becomes harmful beyond repair.

One great example of such esoteric situation, the occult was deemed a privilege of an inducted group of people whose main objective was to manipulate phenomena unbeknownst to common awareness. They carried on a tradition from ancient times, when the secrets of such an occupation were heavily guarded in order to maintain social status.

The uses of magic were for the greater good and people sought out their answers in mysterious practices since the earliest of days, from individuals who carried some degree of authority in front of the Gods and in their community.

Women were, in fact, most frequently worshiped in the Middle East as powerful ancient deities and women were also the ones trained to perform sacred rituals in their role of wise women; a hint of what can be regarded as an early manifestation of the “witch” (All That’s Interesting 2015).

Needless to say, that magic has always been intertwined with religious beliefs, either by virtue of Gods influencing the course of existence, or at the hand of so-called emissaries enforcing generations of practices in solving the world’s most enigmatic occurrences.

Magic was thus a science of sorts for when the human comprehension exceeded its limits and it applied to every aspect of reality: medicine took its cures and potions from herbs and other natural resources and alleviated health conditions, fertility of the land and of the body were aided through specific procedures, environmental anomalies were interpreted as signs of future events, dreams were given particular interpretations, practically everything beyond reason had a deeper meaning in the occult.

Despite the belief of future salvation as the ultimate goal of the passing life on earth, people were still touched by fears and desires, so they coped in their own way with dreams that required

solving, fate explored and illness expelled from the body, by means of magic (Madej-Stang 2015, 8). All this folk belief had a turning point in history, when people started to focus more on the dichotomy between good and evil, attributing the negative outcomes of any of the aforementioned practices to the failure of the practitioners' methods, as a pretext for life simply not going their way.

In a broader perspective, the bad of one becomes the bad of the many, and is precisely what religion fueled, a common fear of Satan as the root of all misfortune and evil, and of any of its alleged worshippers.

With the growth of literacy and reading of the Bible, so did the warnings of Satan's power spread terror and sparked the urgency to rid society of anything resembling him (Russell 2020).

And so emerged an instinctive scare of witches, believed to have formed a pact with the Devil in order to receive favors in exchange (Lindsay 2014, 1).

These women were believed to worship in nocturnal gatherings, where they performed forbidden acts such as promiscuous sex, naked dancing, and feasting on the flesh of human infants and where the Devil himself appeared at times (All That's Interesting 2015).

Perhaps one of the most compelling proofs of applying religious notions to the law of times past in the matter at hand can be found in The Hebrew *Bible*, defining witches and mentioning the punishment for witchcraft. The most famous of these is in Exodus (22:18) "thou shall not suffer a witch to live" and follows with Leviticus (20:27) "A man or woman who is a medium or spiritist must be put to death" (Lindsay 2014, 3). Centuries later, this frenzy spread all across the world via the Catholic Church's Inquisition, who was after punishing the Devil's servants.

The epitome of the outbreak; Malleus Maleficarum

The most ruthless demonstration of discrimination against women was convicting thousands for witchcraft over the course of three centuries.

More than 40,000 people were executed as witches, 75 percent of which were females (Rodker 1928). So while these "witch hunts" gained momentum as a validation of collective madness, they were actually rooted in the doctrine (Eschner 2017).

To point out the most influential work, two German inquisitors must be credited - Heinrich Kramer and Jacob Sprenger. Their "Malleus Maleficarum", or "The Hammer of Witches", written in 1486 and 1487, owed its success mostly due to its wide spread after Gutenberg's printing revolution and it became a bedrock of witchcraft convictions, blaming witchcraft on women's weak nature (Lewis 2020).

The book became at the time second to the Bible in terms of popularity (All That's Interesting 2015), consisting of three parts:

Part one deals with beliefs about witches practices and their relation with the Devil, as well as asserting that not believing in witchcraft is itself heresy (since the Bible speaks of the existence of witches) (Mount Holyoke, 2020).

This entire argument is dissected into eighteen questions related to the nature of witchcraft and wizardry, demonic influence and related abilities, towering over the idea that the special vice of a witch stands in her pact with the devil and his domination (Madej-Stang 2015, 17).

The second part details the harm that witches are able to cause and how it can be prevented, presenting stories of harmful sorcery (Mount Holyoke, 2020).

It emphasizes how witches can affect the innocent through their practices of casting impotence and infertility, illness and plague or acts of possessing or killing others (Madej-Stang 2015, 17).

The last part deals with the legal aspects of eliminating witches, through trials and executions, while employing procedures for testimonies, questionings and torture, considering first and foremost that magic was a reality and not merely superstition or coincidence (Lewis 2020).

It is extremely difficult to add up the actual number of convicted witches, both women and men, who were executed between the 15th and 18th centuries. Researchers rarely indicate more than 50,000 victims over the entire period, while testimonies sustain that witches existed in far greater numbers and were eliminated at a much higher rate (Kors 2001, 17).

The witch hunts met a gradual declining route due to lessened interest in religion and shifted focus on philosophy, literacy, mobility and evolution on a broader extent (Russell 2020).

Troublesome facts that might strike as fiction

One of the most documented witch hunts took place in Salem, Massachusetts, in 1692, at the end of which 19 women found their death by execution, four other accused witches died in prison and another man was pressed to death by heavy stones for refusing to stand for trial (Linder).

The social context that allowed this outrageous public hysteria was fueled by fear of the unknown, fear of death and experience of wars and territorial expansions, scarce resources, especially in medicine, where the lack of a cure meant a supernatural source had caused the ailment, and also by the disturbing blind trust in others simulating fear.

Hearing someone recount a far-fetched, never seen story such as neighbors flying, or even something as mundane as a not being able to eat or pray properly was proof enough of collusion with the Devil.

Any cases of misfortune were attributed to the influence of witches – miscarriages or dying babies had midwives charged with „marvelous and supernatural murder” (Miller 1954, 41), curses being placed to crops or animals.

An unproductive case of the imagination running wild, it forced false confessions of those indicated to be dabbling in witchcraft, based merely on potentially vengeful testimonies of a group of irresponsible young girls.

Since it was an invisible crime of sorts, between the witch and the alleged victim, it was surprising that the latter was not even suspected of being capable of lying or faking affliction. And if lying was ever mentioned by other parties daring to speak their minds, they would risk in turn being accused of overthrowing the court.

The accused person was thus taken into custody and examined by two or more Magistrates. If, after listening to testimony, the Magistrate believed in their guilt, the accused was sent to jail awaiting trial. The convicted defendant received their sentence from the Court.

For a witch to be executed, the court had to have a confession, usually obtained through torture. If no confession was dragged that way, they usually died in jail, since they could be held for as long as the Government officials deemed necessary (Lindsay 2014).

In each case at Salem, the convicted defendant was sentenced to be hanged on a pre-established date (Linder).

The deep connection of the Church and Court reflects perfectly in the following quote: “The law, based upon the Bible, and the Bible writ by Almighty God, forbid the practice of witchcraft, and describe death as the penalty thereof” (Miller 1954, 63).

In Europe there was also increased religious and political pressure on society, and while disasters unraveled, people also looked for answers at the hands of the occult.

Consequently, the leaders of the Germans for instance, used witch hunts and executions, which became popular in the 1570s (Robbins 1974, 219), as a means of distraction from the adversities of the time.

Since events of that magnitude could not be prevented, religion brought forth the motive that God is angry because of the sinners, and those who sinned, namely witches, who could have been basically everyone, had to be punished (Shen, 2).

Religious reforms also influenced England and Scotland, with a massive rise in witchcraft accusations, one of the most influential prosecution being The North Berwick Witch Trials in Scotland in 1590. What made this one stand out was that it implied fear for the life of royalty,

with the supposition that the life of the very King was in peril, thus enabling cruel methods applied in investigations, such as sleep deprivation or strangulation (Oxley 2015, 1).

In Sweden there were also particularities encountered in witchcraft trials from the late 17th century, which, aside from torture, involved child testimony, leading to an increased number of mass trials and a number of over 300 people executed (Geller 2012, 15).

Conclusion

Trying to find a rational explanation behind these episodes of profoundly misinterpreted beliefs of sorcery is futile, and the only way to grasp the reality of it all is to just take all the descriptive information in, and to accept that like any part of history, it is also a part of evolution.

While the irrational might have prevailed in those times, it is now common knowledge that the fantastical mirrored reality and society's deepest fears, but most importantly, was defined by religion and punished by law, throughout the entire world.

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