

The Witch Trials, Midwives and the Battle for the Body

During the 16th and 17th century, all across Europe, in every town and village, women were killed as witches; many of whom were midwives. How did this brutal period of our history affect midwifery?

The process of the witch trials started with a steady indoctrination by the authorities promoting negative stereotypes of witches and spreading fear by distributing plays, poems and religious texts. Notes were then pinned up announcing that the witch finder was coming and everyone should identify who the local witches were. Later the witch hunters would arrive with doctors, administrators, members of the clergy and executioners. The whole village was expected to turn out for a public show trial culminating in executions. Absence or defending an accused would entail risking your life. The spiral of fear cannot be overestimated in areas where there were regular executions of women over a period of years.

Most of the women accused and killed were poor peasant women; many were healers and midwives. "No-one does more harm to the Catholic Church than midwives" stated the *Malleus Maleficarum*, a 15th century witchfinders text. A Papal Bull of 1484 reads "Witches destroy the offspring of women... They hinder men from generating and women from conceiving". In 1548 Reginald Scott wrote "At this day it is indifferent to say in the English tongue, 'she is a witch or she is a wise woman'."

Prior to this period, health was the domain of peasant-class women healers; women integral to their communities with a huge amount of knowledge and skills, and provided for by that community. Many of the witch trials featured the topic of health, for example women curing someone, and that person becoming ill again. Or even women curing someone and that person becoming well.

This period saw the rise of male university-taught physicians and the witch trials partly functioned to discredit of her knowledge and stauts, in order to establish his own. The witch beliefs also covered up for the doctor's incompetence. For example there was little knowledge of cancer or strokes and so it was easy for the doctors to blame unexplainable deaths by accusing a witch.

The doctor / church / state / witch dynamic is 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 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 legitimized 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."*¹

It was still another hundred or more years until the male doctors truly had a monopoly over attending births, the process of the witch trials had firmly constructed the idea of women as ignorant "old wives" clinging to the superstitions of the past. For example when female midwives in England organized and charged 18th century physicians with commercialism and dangerous misuse of the forceps, those stereotypes were used to discredit them². We can see this today in the faith in the medicalised birth process and the magical-seeming powers of the doctor and hospital (despite our frequent disappointments). Many midwives today have been in the situation of trying to discuss a birth plan with a woman who shrugs as and she will just go for 'whatever is advised' as 'I'm sure they know best'.

The destruction of the healers and midwives went hand in hand with the rise of the new supposed 'rationality'. The context was a battle for 'truth' and control over the natural world. The trials were no hangover from the middle ages; the men of the Enlightenment were complicit in the witch trials. The healers had knowledge of botany, pharmacology, physiology and anatomy: empirical knowledge based on cause and effect and experimentation, gained over generations. The male scientists and physicians on the other hand had based their knowledge on philosophy and clerical studies. The myth of the enlightenment as modern men bringing rationality and empiricism has to be criticised when viewed through the lens of the witch-hunts. The 'fathers of modern science' including Boyle, Hobbes and Bacon expoused the evil of witches alongside thier more famous 'scientific rationality'³.

Knowledge is power, and that power was in the hands of working- or peasant-class women. The monopoly for the treatment, 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) and of a hiearchy of mind over body. Unfortualy this legacy lives on.

There is evidence that women were able to control their fertility and childbearing during the middle ages⁴. They authorities didn't want the control of reproduction in the hands of lower class women themselves, and the witch trials were partly a battle over this knowledge, this 'female mystery'. Control over reproduction meant alienating women from their own bodies and hindering them from controlling when and how many children they had. Needing labour power, the ruling class of the time saw big populations as the sign of a wealthy nation. The population was low due to the plagues and wars and the authorities were anti-abortion and anti-contraception (the fairy tales of witches killing children and stealing babies stem from this campaign).

The witch trials exacerbated the gender division of labour, and forced our alienation from our bodies and especially our reproductive bodies. They all but succeeded in wiping out the networks of female lay healers and birth workers, robbing women of their rightful legacy of knowledge and skills, thereby wrestling control of the body from the poor communities.

The midwives would have been part of groups and networks; sharing herbs, knowledge, skills, comradeship and friendship. One of the main witchcraft accusations was taking part in the infamous sabbats, which were likely gatherings of these midwives and healers.⁵ Birth workers and herbalists are now working to rediscover this knowledge and to bring a return to holistic practice whereby women feel a sense of control and integration with their bodies. We are meeting and learning from one another, sharing practical skills, knowledges and ideas. Every time a midwife guides a woman's own hand in an abdominal palpation to feel the fetal position she is a small part of giving that knowledge back to women. We are the daughters of witches they could not burn.

¹ Ehrenreich, B. and English, D., (1973). *Witches, midwives, and nurses: A history of women healers*. New York: Feminist Press

² Donnison, J. (1977). *Midwives and medical men: A history of inter-professional rivalries and women's rights*. London: Heinemann Educational.

³ Federici, S. (2004). *Caliban and the witch*. New York: Autonomedia.

⁴ Riddle, J M. (1997). *Eve's Herbs: A History of Contraception and Abortion in the West*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

⁵ Federici, S. (2004)