
Sorcery and Witchcraft in England (Modern Period)

During the early modern period in England, sorcery and witchcraft were crimes punishable by banishment and later on, death. Although men could also be accused of witchcraft, women, especially older women, were unfairly targeted by townspeople and witch hunters. They were seen as followers of the Devil and would cast spells on the town that caused illnesses that not even doctors could cure. Of course, later on, it was revealed that these women were not witches but just those accused by people because they did not fit in with the norms of the town or just accused by people who they had a dispute with and saying that the accused was a witch was just revenge on their part. There are even cases where those accused of witchcraft were just poor people or people who were Quakers. Once again, they were targeted because they were different and did not fit in. Regardless of the reason, those accused of this crime were tried, convicted, and put to death. There were exceptions to this but in all; this was the fate of many who were accused of witchcraft. As mentioned before, the punishment for being convicted of being a witch was banishment and not death until the law changed during the Elizabethan era. In early modern England, witchcraft was a religious crime before Parliament changed the law making it a secular crime. It was tried by the church before the cases were turned over to the secular courts. However, despite being a secular crime, it was still religious in nature and tried as such thus. This makes one wonder why Parliament changed the law in the first place. Given the time period when they changed the law, right before England severed ties with the Catholic Church and created the Church of England, on the surface it looks like this was another part of the Protestant Reformation. This paper will analyze the crimes and punishment of those accused of being witches in this era, the history behind the trials, and why the trials happened in the first place.

In the beginning, before the modern era in England, witchcraft and magic in general were first considered agents of good, helping the common man or king in their lives. Also, according to Heidi Brewer, that makes magic to real to others, even though it has been proven that it is not, is that "the allure of magic gives it power." It is mysterious, wonderful, and potentially dangerous, which is why humans in that time and in the early modern era were so fascinated with it and why some even believe that it is real. It was also during these eras that the concept of being a "good witch" or a "bad witch" came about. Magic was polarizing and there were only two sides of the spectrum: good or evil. This concept was mostly based on Christian views on morality and values. Good witches acquired their magic from divine sources and used it for good and to help others while bad witches were villainous and used their magic for evil and to cause disorder. Like Brewer mentions in her book, the understanding of magic from the people then and even in the present day is as two extremes and with no apparent middle ground. Even so, during this era practicing magic meant many different things to different people. One could call the brewing of herbs to create a cure for different illnesses and ailments magic or even believing in forest spirits and natural magic. Even that kind of so called magic could be seen as good or evil, depending on the person. This follows what Robin Briggs said about the same subject, "witchcraft was not an objective reality, but a set of interpretations which went on in the mind." She also stressed that this meant that witchcraft and what it was varied from person to person and place to place. What looks like witchcraft to one person does not to another. What is good magic to one person was evil magic to another. Also, it goes back to the question of what exactly is a witch and what counts as evil magic. Since, in early modern England, they followed

what the Christian bible thought witches were followers of the Devil who brought disorder and harm to people. But this leads to linguistic problems since what the Greek and Hebrew called witches in their language and culture was probably completely different than what the English thought what a witch was. What Briggs and Brewer both mention in their books was what was considered witchcraft and many people were not bothered by it. In fact, in England, when a healer or wise man or woman was taken to the church court for trial for witchcraft, the Catholic Church only fined them and sent them on their way. This shows that, even though the church would convict people of witchcraft, if the convicted did not use magic to hurt another person, then they were just fined and left alone until they were caught and brought to court again. The church itself even believed in the concept of good witches and magic and evil witches and magic, to an extent of course. When the Catholic Church was involved in the witch trials, it seems that they did not care about deterrence and preventing witchcraft but they did seem to care greatly about public opinion, especially if the witch on trial was a healer who had helped the townspeople many times over. To pass a harsh punishment on them would cause the townspeople to lash out against the church and they realized that would hurt them in the long run. This was even more evidence that the people believed in the spectrum of witches and witchcraft. However, this changed by the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. This was when the witch trials and persecutions began to rise and flourish not only in England but in other parts of Europe as well. Brewer hypothesized that the rise in the belief and study of demons and the recent economic and societal crises during that era made people change their initial understanding of magic and witchcraft. No longer was it split between good and evil but all magic was considered evil and something that came from the devil or from evil demons. Anyone who was seen practicing magic or doing something that could be considered magic, such as brewing herbs for cures, were considered evil and vile witches and agents from the Devil himself. The writer of "The Witch of Wapping" even says is there even such a thing as a "good witch?" This writer showed that attitudes had changed in England by 1652 and that the people themselves were against any kind of magic and considered all of it bad, even if there is such a thing as good witches. The spectrum of good or evil did not exist anymore in early modern England. The only thing they understood was that magic was pure evil thus those people needed to be tried and eliminated so that good and godliness could prevail. This is where the trials and persecutions come in.

During King Henry the VII's reign in 1542, the English Parliament passed an act stating that witchcraft was now a secular crime and stated exactly what witchcraft was and how to prove if the accused was a witch. During this time period, witchcraft was one of the most serious of crimes one could commit or be accused of. Because of this, there had to be guidelines for people to follow while gathering evidence of witchcraft. Failure to follow these guidelines and just form a mob to go kill a witch without a trial would lead to the death of those in the mob. It did not matter if the person or not was a witch. If someone killed another person accused of witchcraft before their trial, they would be convicted of murder and executed. This is what happened to Thomas Colley in 1751. He had led a mob to capture and torture a poor, elderly couple named John and Ruth Osborne. The Osbornes were believed to be witch and wizard who had thought to have committed a "number of acts of maleficium." They were accused of using magic to kill the cattle of livestock of farmers who refused to hire them. Thus, the people began to form a mob, led by Thomas Colley, to find the couple and administer their own kind of justice. They then caught the couple and Colley himself dunked Ruth Osborne in the water until she drowned. He was found guilty of murdering Mrs. Osborne and for forming a mob. However, there were still people that believed that she and her husband were evil witches, but Colley had broken the protocol and had killed her before she was able to go to court for her crime. The

trials and the guidelines for finding and trying a witch were very important and must be followed. According to Orna Darr, because witchcraft was secretive in nature and because physical evidence was hard to find, it was “extremely hard to discover witches.” Just saying that a person was witch was not enough. There had to be physical evidence on the accused body that proved that the person was a witch. This physical evidence was called the devil’s mark and that was considered to be the best physical evidence because it was easier to meet that guideline for the trial than others. However, this one guideline was easier to manipulate as well. To find the so-called devil’s mark, the accused had to be submitted to a full body search and examined for any kind of strange mark or growth on their body. The people that were used to examine these marks were midwives and doctors who were people that were supposed to be completely informed on the human body. They were to search for things that looked abnormal however, they were acting upon what they thought was normal. Also, these doctors and midwives were also biased since they knew that they were looking for evidence if a person was a witch or not. Thus, if they saw a mark on someone’s leg or if they noticed that a man or woman’s nipple was larger than the other side, they would say that was the devil’s mark and the person in question was a witch. They would not take into account that the bodies of people vary from person to person and that some people have deformities that they were born with. However, it was hard to dispute this because the courts took the opinion and findings of these doctors and midwives as true because of their professions. What also did not help the trials was the bullying, goading, and trickery that the judges and lawyers used to force the accused to self-incriminate themselves and confess to crimes they did not commit in the first place. For example, a person could be asked by the judge if they have any weird marks on their body. If they said yes, then they would really believe that they were a witch who sold their soul to the devil and confess to the most impossible of crimes. They saw themselves as horrible creatures and because of the crimes they had supposedly committed, they would willingly go to their deaths to pay for this crime. Others would just confess to the crime of witchcraft because they would realize that even though they believed they were not a witch, they could not convince the others, therefore they would say they were guilty just for it all to end. In all, these trials were very primitive legally and so was the evidence to prove that one was a witch. However, sometimes these guidelines worked in the favor of the accused. One example that these guidelines helped the accused was in the trial of Jane Kent. Kent was sixty years old and was indicted for witchcraft and using magic to kill a five year old girl. The evidence used against her was that, the girl’s father said that it was revenge for not selling Kent two pigs. Soon after that, his daughter fell ill and died and then his wife was supposedly bewitched. She was found not guilty because she “lived honestly, was a great pains-taker, and that she went to Church.” In this case, despite being the prime target for the witch hunts, Jane Kent was not convicted because she was a noble and godly woman. Also because the circumstances surrounding the incident were not clear and that it looked like the girl’s father wanted to blame someone for his daughter’s mysterious death. Also, no one has seen Ms. Kent practice any witchcraft or anything that could be seen as diabolical and devilish in nature. Thus, because of the strict guidelines set in place to find witches did work in Ms. Kent’s favor since they found her not guilty because of lack of evidence. Ms. Kent’s trial showed what many of the other witch trials mainly consisted of: an accusation by someone who they had a dispute with and trying to prove that the accused used witchcraft to bewitch or kill someone, most likely a child. Ms. Kent was lucky because the jury knew that she went to church and loved God and the story they were told was too unbelievable. However in other cases, this did not happen. In the case of the Witch of Wapping, the woman accused of being a witch, a Ms. Joan Peterson, was accused by various townspeople for causing mischief, bewitching various different people and causing many of them to fall ill for weeks at a time. One man claimed that he was struck with a headache for five weeks straight and the doctors could not do

anything about it. However, when Joan came to give him something to cure his headache, he was instantly cured. She also cured cows with illnesses and the farmer's wife believed that she used magic. However, it was not evil magic since it was said that all of her cures were "done in God's name." Ms. Peterson fit the definition of a "good witch." But, the writer goes on to say that Joan Peterson also used to magic for evil by causing the people she was curing to die such as in the case of a man she cured of his illness and when he refused to pay her for saving him. After he refused, Ms. Peterson said to him, "You had been better you given me my money for you shall be ten times worse then you ever were." After this, the man began acting like he was bewitched and insane around town before finally collapsing and dying. This convinced the townspeople that she was really an evil witch who would curse and kill the same people that she would help save. In all, despite being seen a good witch and had helped humans and animals with their illnesses, Joan Peterson was still tried, convicted, and finally, was hung for witchcraft on April 7, 1652. Joan Peterson's story was one of the common ones in the witch trials. Those women who were healers who still used natural herbs or called what they were doing magic, were targeted for the witch trials just as soon as they lost their temper and threaten another human being. Both Kent and Peterson disputed with people over two completely different issues; they were then accused as witches right afterwards, but only one of them lived. In Ms. Kent's case, it was because of the fact that she went to church and that the evidence against her was shaky at best. However in the case of Joan Peterson, it was clear that she used what looked like to the townspeople as magic when she healed people. It was common knowledge to them all so accusing her of using magic to do evil was not a stretch to them. Once again, during the era, good magic and evil magic were the same to the English common people. They were powers from the devil and that anyone who used them, regardless if it was the save the lives of different people, were considered evil witches that had to die.

To understand witches and witchcraft one must know exactly what was the criterion for being a witch and being tried and punished for it. This was very important however, once again the problem of what is witchcraft to one person may not be to another arises. Of course witches had to use magic and follow the devil but it was clear that there were exceptions to this. For example, during the fourteenth and to the end of sixteenth century, there were this so-called "Renaissance mages" that James Sharpe mentions in his book. These mages were scholarly men, educated in mathematics, philosophy, and science and were followers of Neo-Platonism. Neo-Platonism, focused on a "mystical view of the world...as a place full of magical powers." They believed in the ancient and natural powers of the world and that it and astronomy, along with math and science could work together. Many of these magically intellectual men gained position of power in England and elsewhere in Europe during this time. One such man, called John Dee, used his knowledge of astronomy to figure out a good date for Elizabeth to be crowned queen. He was even consulted to help cure the queen of illnesses and to help in an investigation of a supposed magical assassination attempt on her life. By all means, Dee would fit under the designation of being a witch or a sorcerer, under Elizabethan views, and he was accused of being one. However, unlike the poorer people accused of witchcraft, Dee never went to trial and had even asked King James that the accusations against for him witchcraft and sorcery to be dropped and they were. That example showed that those with power and influence, especially those who were in good favor in the royal court and the royal family, could argue and petition their way out of a witch accusation and trial. They believed what they were doing was mostly science with knowledge of the natural magic of the world and not practicing with the occult and alchemy. In fact, John Dee was involved with alchemic experiments to try to raise angels on Earth. But to some, this was overlooked as science. And it is true that the alchemic experiments that he and others participated in helped in the advancement of science

and medicine, to others this was magic and witchcraft but few of these men were ever persecuted for it. Many of them were reveled and as mentioned earlier, having influence and powerful friends help. What this example is getting at is that there is a clear bias between people sort of accepting these mages and their magical and scientific experiments to people's utter abhorrence of common people who were accused of witchcraft just because they were different or because they did not have powerful influence like the mages did. Of course this might be because of the mix between science and mysticism and many people could not distinguish between the two. Even doctors of this era used and practiced mysticism and natural magic in their cures and as they treated their patients of illnesses and diseases. These are the same doctors that would testify in witch trials about signs of witchcraft on a person or if witchcraft was the cause of an incurable or mysterious illness in the town or village. This seemed hypocritical of these doctors and scientists, but they believed that what they were doing was not sorcery but science with an understanding of the natural magic of the world. One can also argue and say that the gendering of magic also played a hand here since evil magic was seen as a female trait which is why these male Renaissance mages were able to use and believe in natural magic and not be persecuted for it by the masses like the older and poorer women and men in England at the time.

In all, the crime of witchcraft and magic in England has a very lucrative and interesting history. The people of England over the course of the centuries had various changing and evolving opinions on magic, witches, and witchcraft. These three things were mysterious and powerful to the people in this era. Some people saw that some witches and magic were good and helpful, like healers, doctors, and the Catholic Church, while others saw all witches as evil beings that needed to die and they would break the law to make sure that would happen. It was clear that even the English Parliament saw the seriousness of these trials since the outcome could lead to the person's banishment or death and saw that they needed guidelines and set rules so that they could be as fair as possible, even though they were not at times and were sometimes very biased. It was clear that in many cases that the poor and elderly were the targets for witchcraft or just those with weird jobs. Fairness for them in these trials was nearly non-existent and it was clear that if the accused did not have any influence, power, or some kind of credibility, then their fate was sealed.