

The Witch in History

Early Modern and Twentieth-century
Representations (1996)

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Chap.

I A Holocaust of one's own The myth of the Burning Times

Popular history, and also the history taught in schools, is influenced by this Manichaean tendency, which shuns half-tints and complexities; it is prone to reduce the river of human occurrences to conflicts, and the conflicts to duels – we and they, the good guys and the bad guys respectively, because the good must prevail, else the world would be subverted.

Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*

Here is a story. Once upon a time, there was a woman who lived on the edge of a village. She lived alone, in her own house surrounded by her garden, in which she grew all manner of herbs and other healing plants. Though she was alone, she was never lonely; she had her garden and her animals for company, she took lovers when she wished, and she was always busy. The woman was a healer and midwife; she had practical knowledge taught her by her mother, and mystical knowledge derived from her closeness to nature, or from a half-submerged pagan religion. She helped women give birth, and she had healing hands; she used her knowledge of herbs and her common sense to help the sick. However, her peaceful existence was disrupted. Even though this woman was harmless, she posed a threat to the fearful. Her medical knowledge threatened the doctor. Her simple, true spiritual values threatened the superstitious nonsense of the Catholic church, as did her affirmation of the sensuous body. Her independence and freedom threatened men. So the Inquisition descended on her, and cruelly tortured her into confessing to lies about the devil. She was burned alive by men who hated women, along with millions of others just like her.

Do you believe this story? Thousands of women do. It is still being retold, in full or in part, by women who are academics, but also by poets, novelists, popular historians, theologians, dramatists.¹ It is compelling, even horrifying. However, in all essentials it is not true, or only partly true, as a history of what happened to the women called witches in the early modern period. Thousands of women were executed as witches, and in some parts of Europe torture was used to extract a confession from them; certainly, their gender often had a great deal to do with it; certainly, their accusers and judges were sometimes misogynists; certainly, by our standards they were innocent, in that to a post-Enlightenment society their 'crime' does not exist. However, the women who died were not quite like the woman of the story, and they were not killed for quite the same reasons.

CHRONOLOGY & GENERAL BACKGROUND FOR EUROPEAN WITCH TRIALS COURSE
(BC = Before Christ / AD = After Christ (Anno Domini)
Refer to this outline during quarter for general chronological framework.

Classical World

Greece: 5th C. BC: Plato, Aristotle -- classical Greek philosophy
Rome: 313 AD conversion of Emperor Constantine, Christianity legalized
380 AD Christianity becomes official religion of Roman Empire
410 AD Sack of Rome by Alaric the Visigoth
St. Augustine City of God (Christian view of history)
476 AD Fall of Roman Empire in the West to Germanic invaders

Middle Ages (approx. 5th C to 15th C AD)

5-8th C. conversion of north European tribes to Christianity
800 Charlemagne crowned Holy Roman Emperor of German Nation
11-12th C. rise of towns, universities
13th C. heretical groups: Cathars & Waldensians
mendicant orders: Dominicans & Franciscans
medieval (episcopal) Inquisition founded
universities & scholasticism: Thomas Aquinas (1224-1270)
14th C. Black Death (bubonic plague): first struck in 1348
remains endemic in Europe through 17th C.

Renaissance (revival of Greek & Latin art, learning)

15th C. in Italy; 16th C. in northern Europe
1460's translation of Plato's Dialogues from Greek to Latin (Ficino)

Reformation 16th C.

1517 Luther's 95 Theses: start of German Reformation
1521 Luther excommunicated at Diet of Worms
1534 Henry VIII breaks with Rome; origin of Anglican church
1536 Calvin begins reform of Geneva, Switzerland
1555 Peace of Augsburg: political settlement of German Reformation

Scientific Revolution 16th - 17th C.

1543 Copernicus proposed heliocentric theory:
(On the Revolutions of the Heavenly Spheres)
1630 trial of Galileo by Roman Inquisition in Italy
on charges of Copernicanism
1687 Newton's Principia Mathematica: 3 laws of motion, gravity

Enlightenment 18th C. (Voltaire, Diderot, Encyclopedia)

cultural movement stressing reason, natural law, power of
man over nature through science & technology
Deists: believe in "clockmaker God" who creates universe but does not
interfere in his creation; permits it to run according to natural
mathematical laws, knowable by science; hostile to organized
religion & "superstition," including belief in witchcraft & miracles
1789 French Revolution: application of Enlightenment principles in
political sphere (e.g. Declaration of Rights of Man,
constitutional government)