

Horrors of the healers

By Lawrence Segel, MD

“THOU SHALT NOT SUFFER A WITCH TO live.”

Exodus 22:18

Who would have guessed a simple eight-word passage from the Bible could be a harbinger of mass world hysteria, and lead to one of history’s greatest episodes of violence against women?

“The Burning Times” was a period of history spanning more than 500 years, from the 13th to 18th centuries. During this time there were trials for both heresy and witchcraft, but there were fundamental differences between the two.

The aim of a heresy trial was to eliminate heterodox ideas. Torture and execution were not inevitable. A good example was the trial of Joan of Arc, who was charged with a variety of crimes, including witchcraft, but never tortured. Joan was eventually convicted and burned in 1431 for the crime of wearing men’s clothes, and for the cut of her hair—clearly behaviour that showed a lack of submission to the church. In comparison, although witches were considered heretics, the aim of a witch trial was straightforward—exterminate the witches. Mob justice was the rule and no mercy was ever shown. Torture and execution were deemed proper and necessary.

“The Great Witch Hunt” started in the 15th century and did not end until Anna Goldi, the last “witch” to be executed, was hung in Switzerland, in 1782. Although the actual numbers are debatable, victim quotes range from tens of thousands to millions. It is likely that about 100,000 people were killed; 85% of them women.



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Sold, to the devil

Of what were these people really guilty?

In 1484, Pope Innocent VIII, in a Papal Bull declared: “Many persons of both sexes, heedless of their own salvation and forsaking the Catholic faith, give themselves over to devils male and female, and by their incantations, charms and conjurings... ruin and cause to perish the offspring of women, the foals of animals, the products of the earth...”

In order to carry out his charge, Innocent appointed two Dominican inquisitors; Jakob Sprenger and Heinrich Kramer. It was these two men who created the *Malleus Maleficarum*, also known as the *Hammer of Witches*, or the professional witchhunter’s manual. Within its misguided pages lie instruction on the purpose and acts of witchcraft, how to recognize a witch, and the proper judicial proceedings for examination, trial, torture and sentencing. Close inspection of this manual reveals that many of the examples of the witches described are midwives, and/or women and men simply knowledgeable in the use of herbs and medical procedures.

Remedies

Many of the herbal remedies used by women healers often had a basis in fact, and would one day be proven by modern pharmacologists.

These “wise” women used ergot to hasten labour, belladonna to inhibit miscarriage, hyssop as a purgative, parsley as a diuretic and spearmint oil as an antispasmodic. What becomes clear to the medical historian is that being a healer dealing in herbs and potions, assisting at deliveries, and performing abortions, could be a dangerous business and often a no-win proposition. Denied the exalted role of clergy, or the evolving one of physician, women drew on information and skills passed down through maternal generations, and served as a poor man’s general practitioner. Not only did this give them purpose and recognition in their community, but power that women usually were not accorded.

Still, healing was often perceived as magic — creating not only fear, but jealousy. The work dangerously overlapped with that of the priesthood. Ironically, many women would be suspected of witchcraft, not because they were powerless, but because they were perceived by the church in those patriarchal societies as having too much power. Magic is a double-edged sword. It is neutral by nature; its use for good or bad simply a question of motive. “Who knows how to heal, knows how to destroy,” was a fearful indictment seized upon in many witch trials.

Women were targeted

With time, women healers became more and more vulnerable. As an example, in his book *Demonolatrie* (1595), Nicolas Remy wrote of a witch and plague-ridden named Nicolaea. When a prominent man's wife became ill, Nicolaea was placed in a quandary. If her cure was successful, it could be attributed to Satan. Townsfolk believed that such sickness could hardly be cured or assuaged except by the witch who caused them. Then again, if she was unsuccessful, she would be blamed for the death. In contrast, few men were ever executed for witchcraft or sorcery — many of them were simply relatives, or trying to come to the aid of women charged as witches.



There were other important compendiums for witch hunters, besides the *Malleus Maleficarum*.

Some of these included the *Discours Des Sourciers* (1580) by Henry Bouget, *Compendium Maleficarum* (1608) by Francesco Guazzo, *Guide to Grand Jurymen* (1627) by Richard Bernard, and *Confirmation and Discovery of Witchcraft* (1648) by John Stearne. A common theme throughout was how to discover a witch. This brought into prominence a bogus medical marker for witchcraft — the so-called “Devil’s” or “Witch’s” mark. This theory purported that witches could be identified by a special mark on their bodies, which represented a seal signifying their pact with the devil. The mark was often a supernumerary nipple from which the devil would supposedly suck milk, or blood. The witch’s mark was, unfortunately, considered to be a particularly damning piece of evidence. Worse yet, this dermatological lesion is frequently hereditary, thus, exposing other female members of the family to a similar fate. Not content with one marker, other lesions were also accepted as a witch’s mark. These included moles, nevi, hemangiomas, warts, old scars, and even hemorrhoids. Poverty provided a particularly deadly combination with the witch’s mark since there was no opportunity to buy favours.

The witch’s mark

Witch prickers

The search for the witch's mark spawned a whole new guild of para-medical craftsmen called "witch prickers."

None were more successful than the Englishman, Mathew Hopkins, a former clerk who killed more witches in two years than had been killed in the preceding 20. Witch pricking subjected the suspect to a ruthless and shameless inspection. Any mark found was pricked because a "true" witch's mark was not supposed to bleed. Prickers were on commission and so became an ingenious lot. They might prick lesions until they found an old bloodless fibrous scar. False-pricking instruments also appeared. They had retractable blades — ensuring a bloodless procedure — and guaranteed that charges of witchcraft could be laid.



Besides the witch's mark, there was other evidence of a medical nature that

Satan was here

could be used to convict these women. It was widely held that witches could only cure if the patient believed in the healer, and that witches achieved this healing through Satan. In other words, without a belief that the witch will cure, the patient could not recover. It was a modern medical axiom twisted into corruption. In addition, there was the "tear test." It was believed that witches and sorcerers could shed no more than three tears from their right eye, and physicians deemed this to be one of the strongest tests of sorcery. Other evidence included the possession of certain powders or ointments. Finally, medical signs of the devil's possession included great vomiting from the stomach, a face the colour of cedar wood, dry cough, swollen throat, and blisters raised upon the tongue. Sickness could be deadly, but not necessarily from the illness itself.

Torture and death

Witch trials often departed from proper legal procedures. The outcome was rarely ever in doubt. Death was warranted — even if normal evidence was lacking — because contrary to our current justice system, it was better to kill innocent persons than allow a witch to live. In these cases, the means justified the ends. There were many forms of torture to ensure confession, including the gresilons, which crushed the tips of fingers and toes; the echelle — a rack which violently stretched the body; the strappado — a pulley which jerked the body violently into mid-air; the Spanish boot, which broke the shin bone into pieces; the witch chair — a seat of heated spikes; the ducking stool, which slowly drowned its victims; knotting, which tied a woman's hair and twisted it until the scalp was torn off; the Oven of Neisse — a forerunner of Nazis-style atrocity; and the bed of nails.

A particularly gruesome style of torture was that used on the German witch Anna Pappenheimer. Both her breasts were cut off and pieces of them were forced into her mouth. Perhaps the most effective torture to exact confession was *tormentum insomniae*, or, artificial sleeplessness — a form of brainwashing. When the inquisitors were finally satisfied, common methods of execution included the hangman's noose and burning at the stake.

Home grown hunts

North America was not immune to witch hunts. The earliest laws of colonial America judged witchcraft to be punishable by death, but there had only been a few isolated cases in New England. This was all to change at Salem, Massachusetts, in 1692. The hysteria was initially triggered by a series of children's experiments in sorcery and magic, but grew into an epidemic of horror and bitter courtroom battles. At its end, there were 32 convictions of which 19 led to a hanging. Four "witches" died in prison and one was killed by *peine forte et dure* (pressing to death by heavy stones). Of the 24 killed, 18 were women.

The dangers of being a woman healer were again demonstrated at Salem. Jeremiah Neal, testifying against Ann Pudeator, said, "And since my wife has been sick of the smallpox, this woman has come to my house pretending kindness and I was glad to see it." When Neal's wife died, Ann's interrogation included questions as to what she was doing with so many ointments in her house. The legal records show that Ann Pudeator was guilty of causing the death of sick women and of possessing jars of magic oils and ointments.



Then and now

Today, we take for granted our reliance on our physician's care. In times gone by, much of the populace similarly would turn to an experienced woman's help as a source of healing and midwifery. Unfortunately, it was a fine line that separated the turn-to from the turn-against. As a further injustice, the knowledge belonging to the noble practice of medicine itself was defamed in the guise of witch prickers — the symptoms and signs used to discover witches — and the depraved art of torture. The modern Wiccan rede states, "Do what thou wilt, an' in it harm none." Unfortunately, such tolerance was not reciprocated by state and church during the burning times. [Dx](#)

Suggested Reading

1. Kramer H, Sprenger J: *The Malleus Maleficarum*. Translated by Montague Summers. Dover Publications, New York, 1971.
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6. Scot GR: *A History of Torture*. Senate Publications, London, 1995.
7. Flotte TJ and BellRole DA: *Of Skin Lesions in the Salem Witchcraft Trials*. The American Journal of Dermatopathology, 1989; 11(6): 582-87.