Evil in the Shape of a Woman: Form and Function of Gender in the Witch Hunts of New England, 1620-1725

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Gender has shaped the conception of evil since the beginning of mythology. The archetypes of good and evil are easier to conceptualize when anthropomorphized in the shapes of men and women. Phillip Cole notes that one of the Devil's traditional appearances is in the form of a human: evil residing amongst us in our image (2006:2). Good and evil are concepts derived from attributions of moral judgments to patterns of human actions, although supernatural forces are often used as an explanation for extreme manifestations of "good" and "evil".

This paper is a brief exploration of the gendering of witchcraft in New England from 1620-1725. I will briefly compare the hunts of New England to the Witch Hunts in Europe (1450-1750), where witchcraft was also a "sex-related, but not a sex-specific crime" (Levack 1987:124), as well as the situational and systemic influences that influenced the association of women as the primary practitioners of witchcraft. Why was evil created in the shape of a woman?

A broad, cursory reading of literature examining the witch hunts of Medieval Europe attributes the genocide to the situational and systemic influences of the church. What of the Puritans? Among the Puritan settlers in New England there was no centralized Church[81] actively promoting widespread prosecution. Clearly, situational, dispositional, and systemic influences differed between European and New England

[81] Catholic – i.e. the Church organized in Vatican City (Rome)

witch hunts. I would imagine that both phenomena shared influences, such as the expression of long-standing tensions, prejudices and aversive discrimination (Fiske 2004) through actions rather than words. In his studies of passive bystandership, Ervin Staub interpolates that "passivity, and even more so, complicity (joining others in negative behavior)…greatly contributes to bullying" (2007:228). The complicit assent of passive bystanders described by Staub must have been present in both Europe and New England to allow the witch hunts to continue for over a hundred years. The social elements promoting witch hunts include maintaining ingroup and outgroup mentality (Fiske 2004) and groupthink (Zimbardo 2007).

Although both genders and all ages were "associated" with and accused of witchcraft, females, especially older females, were at higher risk of trial, conviction and execution during the witch hunts or "witch crazes". Brian Levack provides a table of the sex of accused witches in 17 regions that conducted witch hunts that includes data predating and coterminous to New England witch hunts. Accusations of female witchcraft outnumber male witchcraft by over 75% in 14 regions: in only one region did accusations against men outnumber those against women. Levack interprets this data as evidence that accusations of witchcraft were positively correlated with femaleness, although not exclusively so (1987:124). Carol Karlsen observes that during the Salem Witch Trials, "the single most salient characteristic of witches was their sex. At least 344 persons were accused…of the 342 who can be identified by sex, 267 (78 percent) were female…half the males accused were 'suspect by association'" (1987:47).

Age was also a risk factor for accusation of witchcraft. In Puritan New England, women under 40 were unlikely "witches". Only a quarter of women under 40 accused of witchcraft were officially indicted and few were convicted. Demographic evidence from Salem illustrates that once accused, older women were at a higher risk of trial, conviction

and execution than younger suspects. In the absence of reliable age statistics, it is hard to interpret data from Salem as an anomaly or a trend; however after 1680 when data became more reliable, it becomes clear that women above 60 were at a higher risk for accusal and prosecution. (Karlsen 1987:65).

Why was age a risk factor for accusation in witchcraft? Is there a basis in biology or evolutionary psychology for targeting older women, such as lack of reproductive capacity? The correlation of age with conviction and execution requires further examination. I speculate that one of the reasons that older women may have been targeted is because of their knowledge about herbs. It is well known that herb gardens were cultivated through Colonial New England for culinary and medicinal purposes through records kept by women. These notes were abbreviated, and the uses listed in modern herbals are often coy and euphemistic when referring to the application of certain herbs, employing the term "women's issues" with the contraindication to avoid during pregnancy. The application of "women's issues" is often shorthand for emmenagogue or abortifacient – herbs that stimulate menstruation or miscarriage. Older women especially would be more knowledgeable in the application of these herbs. Fertility awareness and birth control exemplifies female power and is a direct threat to the patriarchy – women are in control of whose baby they carry or do not carry. The survival of genetic fitness is at stake when birth control enters the equation.

Karlsen's list of accusations of grievances and crimes leveled at supposed witches were attributed to the "witch's" ability to perform *maleficium*, or causing harm through supernatural means. Witches and *maleficium* were accused of causing personal injury or illness; injury, illness or loss of livestock; crop damage; storms and fires (1987:6-7). The charges leveled at the women in the trials, such as spoiling food, killing livestock, and accidents that caused physical injury were often the cause of witchcraft

accusation. The former would be considered universally socially unacceptable, as they threaten survival and genetic fitness. Duntley and Buss propose that an "entity is more likely to be perceived as evil when it (1) engages in behaviors that inflict asymmetrically high levels of cost on a person relative to the benefits it receives, and (2) appears to desire to inflict harm" (2004:111). Personal dislikes or grudges may be used to construct a fictive agency for human evil and connect individuals to natural evil, creating a scapegoat (Cole 2006:5).

The medieval and Puritan association of women with evil, especially as witches, is open to religious interpretation. In addition to worldly crimes, witches "attempted to entice people away from their worship of God to the worship of the Devil." Both Karlsen and Levack note the implicit and explicit associations of witchcraft with sin (lust, malice, vice, temptation, etc.). The archetype of the female witch has much in common with the first woman – Eve. Eve is responsible for original sin and consorted with the Devil, albeit in serpentine form. Eve is responsible for the Fall – the loss of paradise the discovery of sin. In their literal interpretations and readings of scripture, the Puritans lived under the yoke of original sin, and to dabble in witchcraft was to dance with the Devil. The descriptions of possession behavior attributed to witches include erotic elements that highlight the sexual repression of Puritan society as well as the duality present in the social construction of the witch (Karlsen 1987:135). A witch may be an attractive young woman, brewing a love spell or potion from magical herbs for the purpose of "bewitchment", or an "ugly old hag" who spoils the crops and commits other evils.

Puritan society was staunchly patriarchal and male dominated thought and discourse comprised the "ingroup". Witchcraft and witches represented an outgroup. Consorting with the devil, paganism and power in the hands of women would threaten

the dominant paradigm, power structure and extant privilege of the male in-group. I believe that the second and fourth roots of the four roots of evil defined by Baumeister and Vohs, (response to threatened egotism and means of gaining sadistic pleasure) may have influenced the hunts (2004:91). Threatened egotism in particular supports my postulate that the ingroup (primarily men) used witch hunts as a method of keeping the outgroup (women) in control out of fear of losing power.

Men held the positions of power. Local governments, authorities, councils and juries were (almost certainly) male, and the accused were not likely to be judged by their peers. Perhaps the witch trials served as a warning to women that they were not in control. The witch hunts and trials may have served as social control mechanisms to maintain the staunch ingroups and outgroups in rigid Puritan society. The crazes forced women to rely on men, especially in the wake of an acquittal. The accusation was enough to permanently endanger a woman's safety, and she was forced to rely on someone with resources (presumably male) for support and protection. Witch hunts were a way for the weaker gender to be held responsible for the economic failings of the nascent New England colonies.

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