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20. Mothers of Invention (1985)

Rachel Hasted

For me, the issue of the Witchcraze has been central in raising questions about the possibility of feminist history. I was worried by the conflicts between my own work on the Lancashire witch trials and the very positive image of the witch I found in many feminist writings. Was my work intrinsically feminist at all? What did I think feminist history was for? How were feminist writers using history, and would my work contribute anything meaningful to the political debate? Was I, in fact, confusing the issue by concentrating on an incident in which women did not play an heroic role, or show themselves as admirable victims of patriarchy?

I am using the word 'witchcraze' to mean the period which seems to have begun in the 14th century and lasted until the late 17th century, when purges were carried out by male officials of Church or State against individuals — mainly women. They were accused of belonging to a secret society of witches, all of whom were said to have entered into a pact with the Devil. These purges occurred equally in Protestant and Catholic countries of continental Europe, in Scotland, and to a lesser degree in England where the terror never became as acute, because extreme physical torture was not used to extract confessions.

How has feminist thinking about the Witchcraze evolved? Reclaiming the Witch as a foremother is not an immediately obvious theme in 19th century feminist writing, and this is not surprising since some were Christians, and all belonged to a christian but science-worshipping society, in which to be linked with outdated superstition would be more of a political handicap than a strength. I believe that it was Jules Michelet, the French historian, who began the rehabilitation of witches as political figures with his book *La Sorcière* published in 1862. Michelet based his work on a wide study of archive material, but his interpretation was very personal. He accepted the records left by the witch-hunters and interpreted what he saw as a massive turning away from Christianity by the peasantry as a form of rebellion. For the anti-clerical Michelet the Church was a major weapon of class war, and he saw the witches as pagan priestesses leading a doomed peasants' revolt against the oppression of a christian ruling class. The 19th century American historian HC Lea meanwhile took up the cause of the witch as scientist, persecuted by religious fanatics who wished to keep the people in ignorant obedience.

Both of these ideas were taken up in turn by Matilda Joslyn Gage in her book *Woman, Church and State*, originally published in America in 1893. Gage was one of the more radical leaders of the US suffrage movement and a long-standing researcher into women's history. She seems to have been the first US feminist to suggest that in prehistory society had been matriarchal, egalitarian, and people had worshipped a female deity. She believed that witchcraft and the occult were forms of knowledge, once highly developed under the matriarchy, but later outlawed by a jealous patriarchy. She saw the Witchcraze as evidence for this thesis.

In her chapter on witchcraft, Gage refers the start of the Witchcraze to the increasing insistence of the Church on priestly celibacy, itself a sign of increased woman-hating according to her. Gage uncompromisingly identifies the Witch as Woman, and never addresses the problem of the men who were also accused. Although admitting that many people were executed who were in no way out of the ordinary, Gage claims that:

A vast amount of evidence exists, to show that the word 'witch' formerly signified a woman of superior knowledge. Many of the persons called witches doubtless possessed a super-abundance of the Pacinian corpuscles in hands and feet, enabling them to swim when cast into water bound, to rise in the air against the ordinary action of gravity, to heal by a touch, and in some instances to sink into a condition of catalepsy, perfectly unconscious of torture when applied.

Pacinian corpuscles are found in the sensory nerves of the hands and feet. Their discoverer referred to them as 'organs of animal magnetism', and this gave rise to the idea that they might hold a physical explanation for 'supernatural' phenomena such as witchcraft. Gage further claims that 'natural psychics formed a large proportion of the victims of this period'.

Her major thesis however is that 'The clergy fattened on the torture and burning of women'. She suggests that the Church consciously used witchcraft charges to discredit women in religious life by referring to pagan priestesses as witches, and by showing women to be easy prey of the Devil. Thus the Church kept women in subjection while confiscating their goods. The State was also active against witchcraft because of its need to suppress unauthorised sources of power and leadership, such as the witch/priestesses.

Gage was a phenomenal worker, organising conventions, making speeches, editing a newspaper, taking legal action over voting rights, writing articles, collaborating on *The History of Woman Suffrage*, and doing her own research.

I think it is unlikely that she ever had time to go back and check original documents — in any case the majority of those relating to the Witchcraze were still in Europe. She relied heavily on secondary sources, and did not question the interpretation of established authorities such as Michelet and Lea when these fitted with her own theories on matriarchal cults and women's special spiritual powers. They are her sources for many claims that witches were great scientists and healers.

In questioning previous male readings of history on other points, in making women visible and in indicating the role of patriarchy in shaping women's history, Gage was an important source of inspiration for feminists. The re-discovery of her work by Mary Daly and others in the 1970s, and the re-issue of *Woman, Church and State*, have been a major influence on our thinking about history. However, I am disturbed by the stamp of unqualified approval given to Gage's work by Mary Daly and Dale Spender. Both are deeply impressed by Gage's claim that the Witch was: '...in reality the profoundest thinker, the most advanced scientist of those ages...'. I, on the other hand, find Gage's views on witchcraft unhelpful. What evidence is there to show that witchcraft purges grew in direct relation to increased insistence on celibacy in the priesthood? Protestant Germany killed more witches than Catholic Spain. Appropriation of goods did not provide a motive for accusations against the poor, and in England it was never an issue, yet poor people were tried all over Europe.

Gage never deals with the reality of witch-beliefs amongst ordinary people, beliefs shared by some at least of the accused; nor does she back her claims for women's healing skills with evidence. What does it mean, to call the witch a scientist? How is 'scientific' research possible without benefit of scientific method, with no idea of cause and effect, an inaccurate system of medical diagnosis, and a profound belief in the supernatural cause of physical misfortunes?

Gage quotes statistics with immense confidence and gives no sources for them. She is the earliest source I have found for the claim that nine million women were executed for witchcraft, ('after 1484' she stipulates). This, I suspect, was her own calculation — she gives no references for it. There simply is no way of estimating how many were killed: guesses vary from 30,000 up. Obviously the figure would be appallingly large whatever it was, but we have nothing on which to base any calculation. The figure of nine million women executed has become an important part of a new mythology about the Witchcraze, and I will come back to it later.

However, before the rediscovery of Gage in the mid-1970s, American feminists were already interested in witches and the Witchcraze, and I want first to look at what they thought about these issues. Robin Morgan's collection of writings from the Movement, *Sisterhood is Powerful* (1970), contains documents from a

group calling itself WITCH (Women's International Conspiracy from Hell, or Women Inspired to Commit Herstory). Groups of this name popped up all over the States after Halloween 1968, when the 'mother coven' in New York did an action in Wall Street, and put out a leaflet explaining that:

...witches and gypsies were the original guerrillas and resistance fighters against oppression — particularly the oppression of women — down through the ages. Witches have always been women who dared to be: groovy, courageous, aggressive, intelligent, non-conformist, explorative, curious, independent, sexually liberated, revolutionary. (This possibly explains why 9 million of them have been burned)...

The initial emphasis on witches as resistance fighters is familiar as far back as Michelet, and the idea of the non-conforming explorer from Lea and other 19th century sources. The 1960s here adds its own vision of the 'groovy chick' to the composite picture. Even more attractive was the idea that any woman could join. The pamphlet went on: 'You are a Witch by saying aloud 'I am a witch' three times, and thinking about that'.

The Chicago WITCH Coven put out a more closely argued (undated) leaflet reclaiming the witches as an important part of women's history:

Like other oppressed groups women have not been allowed to develop a consciousness of their own history... We demand to learn about the history of women in the same way that we demand that history be the history of the people, not of the elite.

The brief outline history of the Witchcraze that follows is heavily influenced by Michelet and possibly also by Margaret Murray's works, *The Witch-Cult in Western Europe* (1921), and *The God of the Witches* (1931), both of which argue that witchcraft was an organised, pre-Christian religion surviving on amongst the peasantry, in whose rituals women played a prominent part. Here the Witchcraze is explained as the long struggle for supremacy between pagan and christian faiths. The witches are depicted as resisting the Church.

The pamphlet goes on:

...the witch was chosen as a revolutionary image for women because they did fight hard and in their fight they refused to accept the level of struggle which society deemed acceptable for their sex... as women today must assume positions of

leadership if radical politics are to relate to the real oppression of people, and mutually, if women are to gain true equality in a revolutionary movement.

This final paragraph, I think, comes close to the reasons why American women were interested in the witches in the early 1970s. These women were confronting a radical movement dominated by men, and attempting to argue for equality with the men on their own political terms. The appeal to historical precedent is very much in line with the left-wing political thinking from which WITCH emerged. Morgan notes that the group, and her own reports on its activities in the radical press, were intended to gain approval from the male left for women's liberation.

The historical identification between WITCH and the original witches always remained rather playful, a stance taken for effect, according to Morgan:

We in WITCH always *meant* to do the real research, to read the anthropological, religious, and mythographic studies on the subject — but we never got around to it. We were too busy doing actions.

As a result the group accepted ready-made 'facts' about the Witchcraze (such as the 9 million burned) which happened to fit their case, without questioning the sources too closely, and gave great publicity within the movement to the idea of the witch as revolutionary. I would argue however that this is a piece of myth-making based more on a dream of what they would have liked it to have been.

The publication, in 1971, of Thomas Szasz's book *The Manufacture of Madness*, which interprets the Witchcraze as a massive repression of non-conforming individuals by the Church, and makes a direct comparison with contemporary practices in psychiatry, added a further dimension to the picture of the witch as a woman in rebellion against the might of State power. 'The Burning Times' continue, but now with electric shock therapy.

To Szasz the witch is not a heroic resister so much as a victim. He takes up comparisons originally made by Hugh Trevor-Roper between the witch-hunts and the persecution of Jews in Nazi Germany. The emotive figure of 'nine million burned' (which in fact neither author gives credence to), has also been linked by feminist writers to the 6 million Jews who perished in the Holocaust. In a footnote to her account of the Witchcraze, Mary Daly writes:

The witch trials in Germany were characterised by extreme brutality combined with masterful meticulousness. Yet most authors... write about the massacre of the Jews as if such sadism were without historical precedent.

What is Daly saying here? European Christians had been massacring Jews on a grand scale long before the Church turned its attention to witches, and the two persecutions continued side by side for centuries. Gage, writing of the European Witchcraze, specifically mentions a place of execution in Madrid, known as the Quemadero de la Cruz. Here, she says, layers of ashes left by inquisitorial burnings lie feet deep, and implies that the victims were all convicted of witchcraft. In his book, however, Thomas Szasz, looking at the same evidence, comments that the Spanish Inquisition burned fewer witches than anywhere else in continental Europe — because it was too busy exterminating Spanish Jews. It was the Jews who refused forced conversion to Christianity who were burned at Quemadero de la Cruz.

Why have feminists insisted so strongly on the comparison between the Witchcraze and the Nazi persecutions? I would suggest that it has something to do with the moral status accorded to women as victims. Lynnette Mitchell has commented on the determination with which some women cling to the highest estimated death-rates they can find when discussing the Witchcraze. She points out the profoundly anti-feminist politics of glorifying Woman as Victim.

The moral authority of any argument which has several million murdered people behind it is obvious. As a weapon of debate it was unanswerable. It was a clear, dramatic proof that women had been oppressed in the past just for being women, but it put the blame for this on the institutions of Church and State, rather than on individual men. This left it open for men on the radical Left to recognise women's legitimate claim for liberation, without feeling personally attacked.

Meanwhile, in 1973 Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English published a pamphlet entitled *Witches, Midwives and Nurses* on the history of women's involvement in health care (the bibliography credits Jules Michelet and Thomas Szasz, along with Margaret Murray) which argues that

The great majority (of witches) were lay healers serving the peasant population...

The women's health movement today has ancient roots in the medieval coven, and its opponents have as their ancestors those who ruthlessly forced the elimination of the witches.

The emerging male medical profession, they argue, sought the suppression of female healers in competition with them. The witch was a practical scientist, experimenting with herbal drugs and learning from her results.

The idea of woman as especially suited to, and skilled in, the healing arts is taken up by other writers. Shuttle and Redgrove take it to extremes in *The Wise Wound*, where they argue that:

In the Middle Ages it has been estimated that nine million women were burned as witches for exercising their natural crafts of midwifery, hypnotism, healing, dowsing, dream-study and sexual fulfilment.

Mary Daly talks in *Gyn/Ecology* of the 'native talent and superiority of woman' in healing, and considers the Witchcraze as an attack by patriarchy on: '...a spiritual/moral/know-ing elite cross-section of the female population of Europe.'

Some of these authors make a claim for special female powers, which they say lay behind the witches' abilities. For Shuttle and Redgrove it is the power of menstruation: 'It seems likely' they conclude 'that the persecution of the Witches in the Middle Ages was one enormous menstrual taboo.' For Daly the Witches were: '...the possessors of (unlegitimated) higher learning, that is, spiritual wisdom.' The evidence for these claims is not given in any detail. I find them problematic, as I am unable to accept that women are biologically destined to be the healers and spiritual leaders of the human race, any more than I can accept the concept of 'maternal instinct'.

Looking at the literature that I have been discussing, one can find claims that the witches were revolutionaries, proto-feminists, lesbians, pagan priestesses, alternative medical practitioners, experimental scientists and general super-women. The Witchcraze is explained in terms of sexual politics, religious struggle, the control of knowledge, and class war. The historic basis for many of these interpretations seems to rest on a few 19th century sources. Does it matter? The image of the witch is very powerful, and a fertile source of inspiration for feminist writers. Surely it is legitimate to make what we want of it?

I think, however, that the authors I have referred to were interested in more than a folk-image. They refer back to the Witchcraze in order to prove something about the present. They are arguing upon historical precedent, implying that history has a sort of factual reality which makes it a touchstone against which to test their views. So it should matter to them that their historical evidence is as good as possible. Yet we find Mary Daly quoting with approval Monique Wittig's words: 'Make an effort to remember. Or, failing that, invent', as a motto for feminist researchers. Dale Spender meanwhile recommends a 'knowledge strike', and argues that feminist historians have a duty to write selectively, presenting only positive views of women's

achievements, because patriarchy makes '...valuable use of any negative evidence we may construct about other women'..

Should I not then gladly accept all the possible positive interpretations of the Witchcraze on offer? Does it matter that the small study I have made brings up a picture of women's lives in one obscure corner of 17th century Lancashire which conflicts with the claims made by these authors? Perhaps I have stumbled upon an exceptional case?

I am not at all sure of the answers, but I think the question matters. When we are arguing political conclusions from historical precedent our evidence ought to be investigated all along the line; if we come to believe in myths we may miss a more valuable insight into our own condition. It matters to me that as feminists we should share what we find out about women's history with other women honestly,

not over-simplifying and not glossing over our areas of ignorance. It is not in our interests to sell short the complex history we have — in fact we should be telling other historians that their level of awareness on women's history just isn't good enough.

It also seems extremely short-sighted to attempt any deliberate bias in handling the evidence we do find. In time such manipulations will be discovered, and feminism in general discredited through our work. The difference in a feminist analysis of historical evidence must lie elsewhere than in the subject matter itself. I would suggest it might be in the value placed on the subject, and the relative importance given to issues within it. In the case of the Witchcraze this might involve asking not: 'What did witches do?' but 'Why did men engage in a witch-hunt?' Initially it might seem that attention was being shifted away from women here, but in fact the answer to the second question might tell us more about the nature of women's oppression.

The witches have been described as revolutionaries and guerrilla fighters, but I have yet to see the evidence to convince me of this. Undoubtedly women were among the surgeons and healers of their day, but many practised medicine without being accused of witchcraft, while very poor and ignorant women (no threat to male doctors) were prosecuted. We do not even begin to have enough information on which to base an explanation of witch-hunting; but meanwhile a comforting belief in a group of super-women gets us nowhere, nor will a sentimental piety for 'the smoke of our nine million martyrs' bring the end of patriarchy one step nearer.

The literature I have been looking at seems to me often to imply a sense of choice and independence among women in the periods under discussion which is out of place. One gets the impression that many accused witches had made a clear choice to struggle against patriarchal society. The horrifying thing to me, by contrast, was to see witch persecution as something that happened to perfectly ordinary women, not because they chose to fight, but because they were powerless to stop it. To me witchcraft was a symptom of women's weak position in society, not of some special strength. I believe it is only by allowing ourselves to see the real nature and depth of oppression in the past and present that we can realistically hope to end it.

The victims and heroines approach will not help us here. I do not dispute the need to reclaim the names and deeds of women for the historical record, but the way in which individual women are ripped from their context to stand as models for uncritically accepted virtues such as being a powerful ruler, or even worse, for the extreme quality of their suffering. By concentrating on the victims and heroines we run the risk of missing valuable information about the ways in which women

have survived. We might look harder at women's strategies of resistance within a hostile society.

To some extent this is already happening. Christina Lerner's books on Scottish witchcraft trials are superb examples of detailed and critical attention to the evidence. There is, however, an immense amount of catching up to do, and meanwhile I would argue that we have a right to ask each other to take great care over the use of historical material in the service of political analysis. If there is to be a feminist history it will have to start from a profound distrust of accepted sources.

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