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## The Middle Ages as a Conducive Period to the Witch Craze

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Elizabeth Foster-Feigenbaum

Witchcraft has been documented throughout history as a fascinating piece of numerous cultures. From Haitian Voodoo to modern Wicca, magic and witchcraft have made a stake in both premodern and modern societies. The Middle Ages was characterized by a variety of oddities, but the presence of witches and their craft remains one of the most clearly identifiable. The Middle Ages is an era of mystery, a colorful collection of citizens in the dark, gloomy times of Europe. The culture of magic, specifically witchcraft, finds its home in several chapters of the medieval story. The precursor to the highly popularized Salem witch trials of the 17th century United States was the witch craze of medieval Europe. The witch craze, or witch hunt, as it is also known, is commonly regarded as the time between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries in medieval Europe where thousands of citizens were persecuted for the crime of witchcraft, with most of the accused being women, and nearly half being murdered as a result of their supposed crime.<sup>1</sup> The climate of the Middle Ages unfolds to reveal a time period conducive to the mass persecution of witches as a result of religious and societal factors.

The *Malleus Maleficarum*, a text published in 1487 by German inquisitor and clergyman Heinrich Kramer along with Jacobus Sprenger, manifested the public distaste for witches, while intensifying their social ostracization. The book consists of three sections, each addressing a unique aspect of witches and their culture, be it magic, a witch's origin, or the appropriate punishment. Kramer breaks down the offenses of witches into three distinct levels: "(i) slight (ii) great, and (iii) very great."<sup>2</sup> Slight offenses constitute something as simple as small groups meeting secretly in order to practice the craft, whereas very great, or violent, offenses included respecting and admiring heretics.<sup>3</sup> With such a broad spectrum of infractions, accusing anyone of practicing the craft was possible. This, in conjunction with the broad spectrum of who could be a witch, pushed the witch craze to its apex.

Kramer's work created a tangible means of distinguishing and punishing witches. The magic acts performed by witches were explicitly different from the miracles of saints or even of God himself. In fact, Kramer defines the difference as miracles being "done in accordance with the power of Him,"<sup>4</sup> relaying the importance of God as the primary figure in a supernatural act. Magic, however, is done through private contracts, "[operated] through an evil spirit who...is able to do something contrary to the regular scheme of created nature,"<sup>5</sup> illustrating the maleficent nature of magic. The spirits involved in the witch's magic are not comparable to the good, pure entity of God, but rather a negative, threatening force. The work of witchcraft is also defined as something

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<sup>1</sup> Brian P. Levack, *The Witch-Hunt in Early Modern Europe* (Harlow, United Kingdom: Pearson Education Limited, 1987), 3.

<sup>2</sup> Heinrich Kramer, *Malleus Maleficarum* (Speyer, Germany, 1487), 238.

<sup>3</sup> Kramer, 238.

<sup>4</sup> Kramer, 71.

<sup>5</sup> Kramer, 72.

that cannot occur on its own, such one developing a loss of sight or movement, further separating the craft from miracles.<sup>6</sup> Something that can naturally materialize is not magic. Through this, one can define witchcraft not as natural magic but as its more notorious counterpart: demonic magic.<sup>7</sup>

The demonization of witches emerged in connection with the expansion of the *Malleus Maleficarum*. The book was published nearly thirty times between the years 1487 and 1669 throughout Europe, providing the literate community with a more fully realized depiction of a witch.<sup>8</sup> Kramer's intention, to characterize, demonize, and then punish these witches, came to fruition throughout the progression of the Middle Ages.<sup>9</sup> He created the idea of the new medieval witch: an evil woman-- an image that would survive to the modern day. By spreading his depiction of the witch through the *Malleus Maleficarum* and the subsequent discourse about the text, Kramer helped transform the public perception of witchcraft from harmless to demonic.

The evolution of witchcraft from a seemingly harmless, nearly useless practice to that of a malicious act is a product of fourteenth and fifteenth century developments. Witchcraft, prior to its explosion in the latter half of the Middle Ages, was a mere pseudoscience, appearing to produce no legitimate results.<sup>10</sup> The publication of the *Malleus Maleficarum* shaped the ideation of a witch, but beyond Kramer's anti-witch agenda, multiple texts and notable figures further created the malicious sorceress. After a sermon by Bernardino of Siena in 1427, one can find more examples of punishable witchcraft; acts like divination and charms were no longer ignorable but rather viewed as the Devil worshipping crimes.<sup>11</sup> This attitude shift posed a threat to anyone who may be vulnerable to accusations, as Bernardino's claims placed guilt not just upon those who practiced the craft, but "those who know of such practitioners"<sup>12</sup> as well. The demonization of witchcraft created a tumultuous landscape that weaponized a communal fear of the Devil's work. Witches warranted an association with the Devil as they were regarded as enemies of the Church, but also through their nighttime sabbats.<sup>13</sup> These sabbats earned a reputation for Devil-worshipping, furthering connecting Lucifer and witches, eliminating the group's chance at social acceptance.<sup>14</sup> Demonic association othered witches from society, eliminating one's chance at being a casual, well-intentioned magician.

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<sup>6</sup> Kramer, 111.

<sup>7</sup> Richard Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 1.

<sup>8</sup> Karen Jolly, Catharina Raudvere, and Edward Peters, *History of Witchcraft and Magic in Europe* (London, England: The Athlone Press, 2001), 240.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Kimberly B. Stratton, "'Magic, Discourse, and Ideology,'" in *Naming the Witch: Magic, Ideology, and Stereotype in the Ancient World* (New York, New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 5.

<sup>11</sup> Jolly, Raudvere, and Peters, *History of Witchcraft and Magic in Europe*, 24.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Joseph Klaits, *Servants of Satan: The Age of the Witch Hunts* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1985), 22.

<sup>14</sup> Klaits, 16.

The witchcraft of the Middle Ages was characterized by the individual's possession of power, rather than a greater being.<sup>15</sup> It was the witches' own ability that allowed them to perform acts of magic. Whereas religious practices recognize God or multiple gods as the almighty figures of power, the magic of a witch stems from the Devil but is materialized into the world by the witch. The practice was almost always seen as harmful, regardless of if a witch claimed otherwise. Even witches with seemingly harmless intentions such as the niche group of the Italian Benandanti, who claimed to "prevent 'evil' while other witches 'commit it,'"<sup>16</sup> were victim to judgment and persecution. Magic as a whole was not necessarily evil, given that members of the clergy practiced crafts such as necromancy, but many regarded magic as inherently demonic.<sup>17</sup> The backlash witches faced was inevitable given their collective negative image; however, the intensity with which the medieval European society criticized witches remains notable.

Witches exist as a missing piece of the social puzzle. The climate of the Middle Ages was conducive to excluding members of society who did not fit neatly into the Catholic construction maintained by the Church. Witches were used as a scapegoat, following the traditional Western pattern of "explain[ing] catastrophe as the result of some group distinct from the majority."<sup>18</sup> The rejection of "differing beliefs...became one of the defining characteristics of late medieval Europe,"<sup>19</sup> illustrating that as the society of the Middle Ages progressed, so did its intolerance for difference. The social ostracization of witches, however, differs from other persecuted minorities of the time period. Witches, unlike others, were "not physically identifiable, so that the number of whom guilt and fear could be projected was almost unlimited."<sup>20</sup> The singular identifier of a witch was that of the Devil's mark, a scar that could be anywhere on the body, presumably given to the witch by the Devil.<sup>21</sup> However, the mark was not significant enough where one could spot a witch from a far distance, but rather it required a thorough examination. Due to this lack of distinguishing, obvious features, nearly anyone could be a witch in the eyes of both common people and more serious powers such as inquisitors. This flexibility enabled witches to expand as a phenomenon, a danger that could be lurking within anyone, anywhere.

Religion was an integral part of the Middle Ages' culture. In the early sixteenth century, the Catholic Church faced a conflict separate from witches: the Protestant Reformation. Yet, as a result of this religious fervor, one is able to find deeper causation for the witch hunt. Notable reformers, such as Martin Luther, sought change in the Catholic Church, which they believed was straying from its roots and falling into corruption.<sup>22</sup> Protestantism encouraged the individual himself to read the Bible, connect

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<sup>15</sup> Levack, *The Witch-Hunt in Early Modern Europe*, 4.

<sup>16</sup> Carlo Ginzburg, *The Night Battles: Witchcraft and Agrarian Cults in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Baltimore, Maryland: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013), 2.

<sup>17</sup> Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages*, 184.; Kieckhefer, 153.

<sup>18</sup> John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century* (Chicago, Illinois: University of Chicago, 2005), 38.

<sup>19</sup> Klaitz, *Servants of Satan: The Age of the Witch Hunts*, 21.

<sup>20</sup> Jeffrey Burton Russell, *Witchcraft in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University, 1972), 269.

<sup>21</sup> Russell, 218.

<sup>22</sup> Levack, *The Witch-Hunt in Early Modern Europe*, 109.

with God, and pray, rather than rely upon the Church and its many structures.<sup>23</sup> Where Catholics and Protestants shared the same Devil, just as they shared the same God, Protestants placed a stronger emphasis upon the fear of the Devil.<sup>24</sup> This fear of the Devil was constructive to the witch hunt, as witches were known to work with as the Devil's servants. Protestants and Catholics could unite over this joint superstition, creating a dynamic that separated religious differences in favor of the persecution of witches. With both groups in fear of witches, their craft, and their supreme power: the Devil, the Middle Ages became increasingly more conducive to the witch craze.

The expansion of Christianity throughout Europe continued, along with the attempted “[eradication of] superstitious beliefs and practices...suppressing magic in all forms,”<sup>25</sup> showcases a religiously motivated desire to erase witches and their craft. A compulsion to destroy witches and their culture developed into a destructive climate that encouraged the persecution of assumed witches and their contemporaries. Fifteenth century popes, working with the Inquisition, mandated witchcraft as a legitimate crime, thus creating a valid means to accuse, persecute, and then hold trial for witches.<sup>26</sup> The image of the witch was one that was “malignant opposite of the benign magician and Christian saint,”<sup>27</sup> presenting as an evil counterpart to harmless, positive magicians and miracle-producers. The practice of witchcraft was not simple magic, but rather explicit heresy that denied the Christian ideals of the time period.

While the practice of witchcraft itself is unholy in the eyes of the Church, the idea of one choosing to be a witch falls neatly into the Catholic construction of free will. If God were to steer an aspiring witch away from the craft, solely because the act is against Him, that would eliminate the individual's free will. In the *Malleus Maleficarum*, Kramer argues that “God allows evil so that the universe may be perfected,”<sup>28</sup> demonstrating the idea that God may permit one's practicing of witchcraft but not condone it. He allows the bad only so the good can reign triumphant. As the highest being of true goodness in the world, God holds the ultimate moral compass. Yet, Kramer conflicts this argument as he states that “He cannot allow an evil to be done which He can stop [from being done.],”<sup>29</sup> showcasing that God is, in fact, either powerless to the craft, or simply allowing the practice to continue. Because magic was not a product of God's work, the “Church consequently held that there was no good magic,”<sup>30</sup> emphasizing the societal view of witches as ill intentioned evildoers. Rejecting the image of good witches in favor of a malicious ideation secured these sorceresses a position amongst fellow sinners of societies.

The importance of religion in the Middle Ages encouraged the communal distaste for witches and further explains their persecution. If one were to dissent from Catholicism, he was “a heretic deemed to have turned his back on humanity and divinity

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<sup>23</sup> Levack, 110.

<sup>24</sup> Levack, 112.

<sup>25</sup> Levack, 117.

<sup>26</sup> Russell, *Witchcraft in the Middle Ages*, 229.

<sup>27</sup> Klaitz, *Servants of Satan: The Age of the Witch Hunts*, 15.

<sup>28</sup> Kramer, *Malleus Maleficarum*, 111.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Russell, *Witchcraft in the Middle Ages*, 13.

both,”<sup>31</sup> showcasing the importance of religion, and moreover the importance of maintaining and following the creed. If one were to reject Catholic ideals, and instead choose to stray from the beaten path, he would be isolating himself not only from God but society as a whole. Witches, a typically non-Catholic group, were therefore viewed as sinners and outcasts. They fit the role of heretics and were treated as such. The climate of blasphemy was essential to witches as places in time “where heresy was absent, witchcraft...was either wholly absent or appeared only in rare and peculiar cases,”<sup>32</sup> illustrating the connection between religion and the oppression of witches. As the antithesis to Christianity, witchcraft was an obvious nightmare to a notoriously devout Christian society.<sup>33</sup>

Heresy in the Middle Ages became an egregious crime, warranting severe punishment. While witches were often assigned the title of heretics, groups of actual heretics emerged in the fourteenth century with different names.<sup>34</sup> These groups were distinct, but shared the same pattern of rejecting the Church and God. The image of these heretics grew to form the stereotype of the witch, as the notable qualities of the two groups are remarkably similar. The heretics saw corruption in the Church and failed to believe in God.<sup>35</sup> They worshipped Lucifer, seeking the day he and other fallen angels would be restored to Heaven.<sup>36</sup> Additionally, these individuals participated in “sexual orgies underground at night,”<sup>37</sup> an image, which is remarkably similar to the infamous witches’ sabbat, a piece of the witch’s culture that would emerge as a staple. The striking similarity between the fourteenth century heretics and the collective of medieval witches contributes to the rejection of witches. In fact, the witch stereotype emerged as a result of “educated people [connecting] such sorcery with heretical activities,”<sup>38</sup> connecting the rejection of Christianity with the practice of the craft. By reflecting the beliefs and behaviors of an anti-Catholic, denounced social group, witches were regarded as the same as heretics, resulting in their persecution, often on this exact charge.

By punishing witches, the Catholic church was able to command control over the common people in an effort to reassert their power and maintain traditional religious authority.<sup>39</sup> After the effects of the Reformation, Catholic officials sought a return to the religion’s acclaimed title as one of the more influential forces in the landscape. As witchcraft established a threatening reputation as the corrupt work of Devil-worshipping witches, there was an increase in accusations, persecutions and executions for those committing, or thought to be, these crimes. As the end of the fifteenth century approached “judges would urge the people...to seek out as many suspects as possible,”<sup>40</sup> displaying a newfound enthusiasm for accusation that enabled common people to rid their

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<sup>31</sup> Klaits, *Servants of Satan: The Age of the Witch Hunts*, 22.

<sup>32</sup> Russell, *Witchcraft in the Middle Ages*, 269.

<sup>33</sup> Russell, 267.

<sup>34</sup> Russell, 178.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Klaits, *Servants of Satan: The Age of the Witch Hunts*, 16.

<sup>39</sup> Ben-Yehuda, Nachman “The European Witch Craze of the 14th to 17th Centuries: A Sociologist’s Perspective,” *American Journal of Sociology* 86, no. 1 (1980): 14.

<sup>40</sup> Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages*, 194.

population of not just personal enemies but any enemy of the Church. Creating a fear of witches, and thus encouraging their persecution, leveraged power back into the hands of the Church, rather than creating a more liberated, diverse populace. Displacing witchcraft allowed for judges and clergymen to return Catholicism to its self assumed rightful position, dismantling a growing community that would have remained a presumptuous threat as its size grew.

The persecution of accused witches throughout the Middle Ages in Europe reflects upon a time period that was, perhaps, frantic with panic, but more likely one brimming with general religious fervor, a communal fear of the Devil, and a power hungry Catholic Church. In conjunction with *Malleus Maleficarum* and its detailed, aggressive agenda for the destruction of the witch, the conditions of the Middle Ages was conducive to the witch craze. The witch hunt could have exploded in other time periods, such as in the United States where it blossomed most notably at the tail end of the seventeenth century, but instead nestled itself amongst knights, saints, and monarchy. What this mass persecution, arguably one neighboring on genocide, reflects within the greater human consciousness is a concept begging for exploration by historians, sociologists, and psychologists. The witch craze, like the devastating Holocaust and the tension filled Red Scare several centuries later, depicts a landscape where a societal hive mind unites against a distinguished minority. The witch hunt's position as a mere piece of a massive historical pattern of the Catholic Church's mission to eliminate its enemies further illuminates a religious superiority complex that has disenfranchised millions throughout the past millennia. Humanity's continued maltreatment of minority populations throughout history reveals a deeper issue, one that cannot be banished by hexes, charms, or spells.

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