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THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE WITCH STEREOTYPE IN LORRAINE, FRANCE
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ABSTRACT

The following is a study of the witch trials that took place in the region of Lorraine, France between 1200 AD and 1700 AD. This paper performs a content analysis on 20 trial transcripts, 5 from each class those being labeled as Destitute, Poor, Comfortable, and Wealthy. Areas of interest for this paper also include gender, age, the application of torture during interrogation, as well as the mention of Satan or Satanic practices during the interrogation process.

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INTRODUCTION

The medieval era of Europe's history provides a challenging view of how social change can deeply effect community standards and practices. The Protestant Reformation, a movement that moved Christianity from being in the hands of the church to creating an individualistic approach to one's relationship with god created a time of turmoil that was not only religious but also social and political (Deane,2011). A strife between the many differing sects of Christianity began which evolved from sub groups of a Christian based faith to Christians and heretics (Deane,2011). Creating Christian unity at this time was of the utmost importance as it would ensure a central ruling body of the population rather than allowing for smaller, less powerful groups to roam the land. One method that was used to ensure unity was demonizing these subgroups and making examples of these individuals to the community at large and thus creating the "us and them" mentality of this time period.

While the topic of religious persecution during this time period is vast, this paper will hone its focus to a particular group of heretics more commonly known as witches. More so this paper will focus on smaller communities in the region of Lorraine in southern France, an area well known for trials and rich with a structured view of "us and them." Although it can be argued that the data is skewed due to the weather and wear of the documents lasting for hundreds of years "this region was in any case the center of the most intense persecution...when the number of trials is measured against the population" (Briggs, 2007, p.293). While the overarching structural and political changes of Christianity are key to setting the stage for witch trials, the focus of this paper will be on individual trials within smaller communities, seeking to better understand how victims were selected, how they were tried, and how trials contributed to maintain the community as a whole. To examine this further, the theoretical principals by which

Henri Tajfel built his understanding of intergroup conflict will be examined: “1. Individuals strive to achieve or to maintain positive social identity. 2. Positive social identity is based to a large extent on favorable comparisons that can be made between the in-group and some relevant out- groups: the in-group must be perceived as positively differentiated or distinct from the relevant out-groups. 3. When social identity is unsatisfactory, individuals will strive either to leave their existing group and join some more positively distinct group and/or to make their existing group more positively distinct” (Tajfel, 284). These ideals can be applied directly to the persecution of witches by viewing trials as a tool through which the in-group is starkly defined by the accusations against the out-group. In other words, we can see what white is based on knowing what black is.

To begin our discussion, let us first look at the social geography of the region of Lorraine at this time. Life was harsh for many during the Medieval era due in large part to a lack of scientific and technological advancement. Although agricultural techniques had “advanced significantly since Roman times... crop yields were still only a fraction of their modern equivalents, and mechanization of agricultural processes was virtually nonexistent, so that a very high proportion of the population—probably around 90 percent—was needed to raise food” (Singman, 65). Most of the population was positioned to grow the majority of their own food or raise livestock. The source of food also presented differing social structures as agricultural pursuits required more hands for physical labor and thus a great tie to community. In “less-fertile regions, where animal husbandry played a larger role, communities tended to be smaller and less collaborative, in some places consisting only of isolated homesteads” (Singman, 65). It is also important to note that many of those working in agriculture were, as expected, located in the county. In the city of Nancy, “apart from modest groups of officials, clerks, lawyers, and substantial merchants, their populations were made up of small traders, artisans, and agricultural

workers who frequently had relatives in the countryside” (Briggs, 294). Innovation was far more prevalent in cities which may be a key factor in why so many trials in Lorraine took place in the country rather than in cities. As Briggs shows, out of the 800,000 that made up the population in the Ducall Lorraine and Bar Lorraine regions, approximately 4,500 individuals, or .56% of that population, were executed with witchcraft in comparison to all of France which as a whole experience .06% (52).

This is an indication that the communal effect of an agricultural territory had an impact on the formation of the in-group out-group dynamic which took hold of smaller villages and communities. In fact, “Nancy itself saw few witchcraft trials...at least 43 persons may have been tried for witchcraft at Nancy between 1578 and 1645, of whom no more than twelve (and probably less) came from the city itself” (Briggs, 295). Being that the majority of the trials took place in the smaller townships which were heavily agricultural and collaborative, we can quickly see the opportunity for individuals to form a group mentality to seeks to protect its self, both in resources and in faith identity. The “derogation of the black sheep might be functional in its protection of the ingroup stereotype. According to this rationale, a clear disapproval of the bad and anti-norm ingroup member by the rest of the group goes hand in hand with a strong affirmation of the fact that the ingroup as a whole is living up to its standard, say its stereotype.” (Castano 376). As mentioned earlier, Lorraine was a hotbed for trials and maintaining a solid, Christian identity was key for survival as execution was often the outcome of a trial. With the possibility of torture or execution for people within a community looming “it is reasonable to assume that they will adopt a series of strategies to establish and maintain as positive an image as possible” (Castano, 366). Having a comparison point between the majority of the community and a deviant was a protective measure not only from the authorities who perpetrated the trials but also from unexplainable tragedy that often befall communities.

Unexplained death, especially among infants and children, was another crucial issue facing the population at this time. The average mother in Europe “had 7-8 live births over 15 years...unidentifiable fevers, and the following list of diseases, killed perhaps 30% of... children before the age of 15- the bloody flux (dysentery), scarlatina (scarlet fever), whooping cough, influenza, smallpox, and pneumonia.” (Payne, np). Living in an era of unexplainable tragedy was the perfect breeding ground for developing myths about witches that focused on them being the overall causes of a community’s hardships. As these individuals became nearly sought after to bring justice and peace to these communities, a “set of lurid and remarkably enduring stereotypes of heretics as not only hypocritical and secretive foes but even as orgiastic, bestial, murderous baby eaters—ludicrous and baseless accusations that would nonetheless reach painfully across medieval centuries” (Deane, 9).

The inclusive nature of these stereotypes came forth from the development of a centralized Christianity was well underway and the “process of establishing the Christian authority...was lengthy, controversial” (Deane, 9). To help promote this authority, the use of heresy was utilized to help people outside of the clergy, mainly peasants, understand the differences between Christian authority and the sub-groups of Christianity. Heretics were needed in order to act as a contrast for orthodoxy. Witches served as both a way to bond individuals to the burgeoning Christian authority and also to act as the explanation for pain.

While we have a basic picture of the setting of these trials, that being a confusing time where survival depended on agriculture and community, we have yet to discuss who the witches themselves were. As Horsely discussed “each [of the studies he reviewed] confirms the now familiar generalization that the vast majority of witches were poor, elderly women” (Horsely 698). Part of his research focused on the distinction between the “official theory and the popular realities” of what happened at these trials as much of the previous literature focused on

examining the documents as though the accused were guilty based on the theory of witchcraft rather than how the lifestyle and culture of those persecuting the witches affected these trials (Garrett 690). In order to explore this topic, I reviewed the published literature on the topic to gain an understanding of the time period.

Religious Influence and Authority:

Understanding the religious geography of the time is crucial to understanding the point of the trials. Earlier in this time period, Christianity was broken up into subsections of the faith with various groups having similar beliefs but practicing their faith in different ways. For example, the Cathars were individuals who believed there were two gods, one good and one evil. The god they worshiped was derived from the New Testament and was an entity outside of our physical realm where as the other god, their version of Satan, was believed to have created all physical entities, including their flesh, and thus believed they were born of sin and to participate in basic needs was sinful (Haliczer np). This group in particular helps to highlight the struggle the Roman Catholic Church was facing at this time as they sought to become a unified power. As Jennifer Deane explains, the “process of establishing the Christian authority...was lengthy, controversial” (Deane 9). To help promote this authority, the use of heresy was utilized to help people outside of the clergy, mainly peasants, understand the differences between Christian authority and the sub-groups of Christianity. Heretics were needed in order to act as a contrast for orthodoxy.

The Cathars served as an instrumental component to creating this heretic dichotomy that was needed in order to establish legitimacy. The Cathars “rejected the Roman Catholic, the entire church structure...they said they were the only true Christians...they developed an alternative religion, an alternative hierarchy, an alternative priesthood that attracted many adherents in that

period, which is why the Cathar heresy above all occasioned the founding of the inquisition” (Haliczer, np). From the beginning of the Christian church becoming an authority in the third and fourth centuries, the idea of witches was planted as a “set of lurid and remarkably enduring stereotypes of heretics as not only hypocritical and secretive foes but even as orgiastic, bestial, murderous baby eaters—ludicrous and baseless accusations that would nonetheless reach painfully across medieval centuries” (9). Deane’s study outlines the roots of the witch trials by examining the war on heretics as a means to gain support for the burgeoning Christian authority. Garret also explains that the stereotype of the witch was not a random occurrence. It had in fact been developed over a number of centuries and had reached its climax in the 16th and 17th centuries. The publication of the *Maleficium* helped to cement what a witch was for those who hunted witches (463).

The book described acts such as pacts with the devil, participating in “sabbats,” sexually deviant acts such as orgies, and the consumption of human flesh, typically that of a baby (Garret 690). These key elements of the witch were deeply rooted in the fears that plagued Medieval Europe such as rebelling against organized religion through alternative worship, social and sexual deviance, and the mockery of life itself. For example, the consumption of infant flesh was particularly offensive not merely because it is considered taboo to be cannibalistic, but also because people during this time period were ravaged by disease and infertility. If one was lucky enough to have a healthy baby and then murder it, it was a slap in the face so to speak to the community. Demonizing those who did not subscribe to the Roman Catholic Church served as a swift and effective maneuver to solidify their institution. Haliczer explains that “referring to Western Europe, the world of Christendom was a world of monarchies that were developing, but were as yet poorly organized...every sovereign took upon himself the protection of the Roman Catholic Church in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. ... the sovereign and sovereign power

was closely identified with Roman Catholicism and the maintenance of Roman Catholicism... heretical movement therefore in seeking to undermine Roman Catholicism also could be seen as a direct threat to the State” (np). Heretic was a name that developed into “witch” in later use of the trials which focused on presumed enemies of the church and thus the state. As we will discuss later, those identified as witches may have started as individuals with differing views of religion however quickly evolved to be anyone who threatened the lifestyle of the community at hand.

Community Lifestyle and its Effect on the Trials:

A key aspect understanding of the witch trials would be to gain an understanding of individual and community lifestyles. Though the literature on the witch trials of Medieval Europe often examine the historical transcripts and documents that survived time through the lens of the accused being guilty based on the dominate theory of witch craft during the time period, the literature available on the topic includes insight into the lives of those both accused and accusing. Life in the Medieval era was not only harsh but often unpredictable. Famine, disease, community dispute, war; any of these issues could arise at any time. The prospect of unity and a common belief system was a survival technique that allowed for security within a village. That paired with a belief that many tragedies could be explained with magic helped to set the stage for the trials.

Garrett subscribes to the theory that trials acted as a “means for explaining, and also, through counter magic and persecution, for dealing with the misfortunes of village life...it provided an outlet for the functional generation by the isolation and constriction of face-to-face village life—tensions exacerbated by the disappearance after the Protestant Reformation of the outlets formerly provided by the Roman Catholic Ritual” (Garrett 462). The major religious

shift from Roman Catholic traditions that were typically based on community to the transition of the protestant reformation, a movement which inspired individuality through the personal communication between man and his god without the need of a priest, created tension within communities. As someone who shares a collective consciousness with their neighbors that includes witchcraft and magic as true threats to their livelihood and survival “the community often became a focus for conflict instead of cooperation’ (Briggs, 24). This shift added yet another unknown to the daily lives of peasants. People were already living in a world of unexplainable tragedy and now their sense of community that was provided through their religion was stripped from them as well. The new-found individualism played a large role in the trials as the victims were mainly people who could not provide for themselves and had grown up during a time when community values still help true.

Socioeconomic Status:

Though witch persecutions effected people in varying socioeconomic statuses, we find that there is a disproportionate number of death occurring in lower classes as will be discussed in the results section. This is pertinent to understanding the witch trial victims as promises of financial gain from the devil were considered a key part of the investigations and trials. Remy’s book “The Devil’s Mark” details to witch hunters how to catch a suspected witch and what signs to look for when persecuting the accused. He writes that people are tempted by the Devil through “some large and ample promise of riches...Satan assails mankind not only through their secret and domestic affections and (if I may so express) by burrowing into their hearts, but also openly and in declared welfare” (Levack 83). Remy writes this as a way to exemplify how the devil takes hold of people but also creates a stereotype for the witch. The previous passages assume that riches and love can be key to tempting people to become witches. This is highly

biased for the time period and reflects on the victims heavily because during this time period marriages were still arranged to promote the most financial security possible between two families. Those who could not provide this security were typically impoverished. The issue of being tempted by riches also creates a bias against the poor as this was a time period where being poor meant fighting for one's survival. That paired with an individualistic approach to community life created by the protestant reformation lead to the victimization of those who could not fend for themselves. Horsley writes that "each study confirms the now familiar generalization that the vast majority of witches were poor, elderly women" (698). It was typical for unmarried, elderly women to be accused of witchcraft. As will be reviewed in the results section, the number of fights occurring between individual community members and elderly women of the community are numerous and they are also more likely to confess to witchcraft prior to torture.

Gender:

Gender also plays a significant role in the witch trials. The previous section discusses how many of those accused were elderly, unmarried women. Even in Medieval times women were likely to outlive their husbands. Once their spouse died that typically cut off any income the women had been relying on to survive which lead to desperate and aggressive attitudes towards other members of the community who were not as charitable as in previous years. The text written by Nicholas Remy in this time period also created a bias against women as he writes "all kinds of persons attend the nocturnal assemblies of demons in large numbers; but the majority of these are women, since that sex is the more susceptible to evil councils" (Levack 86). When looking through the transcripts of the trials, the majority of those tried and put to death were indeed women, typically those who were elderly, widowed, and impoverished.

As Garrett explains, the victims were “women [who] were in some fashion social deviants... they were poor, they were old and powerless, they were quarrelsome and difficult for their neighbors to deal with...in the most typical pattern of accusation, an old woman had come to a female neighbor’s door begging something, was turned away, and was heard to grumble or curse those who had refused her...then misfortune had befallen the neighbors. They blamed her” (462). This was usually what started a person’s reputation as a witch and as an elderly woman would reach out to other neighbors and would be turned down followed by the neighbor experiencing misfortune, it is not a surprise that people would associate their misfortune.

METHODS:

In order to explore this topic, I chose to focus on the available, translated transcripts from the trials perused in Lorraine, France. The reason for this was that the data base of transcripts I found had an ample sample of cases that crossed over classes, the transcripts were translated to English, so they could be coded, and Lorraine is famous for being a center for witch trials even as the trend for the trials began to dissipate. Lorraine is a unique place in that it offers a researcher such as myself a close look how confessions were obtained, how torture affected the interrogations, and the cases here are able to give perspective on how classes differed in the pursuit of witches during the same time periods.

My sample include 20 transcripts. Most of the defendants in the transcripts are female (put in the numbers of females and males). In terms of socio-economic class, 5 would be considered extremely poor, 5 poor, 5 are what we would consider middle class, and 5 were the wealthy and elite. Class distinction turned out to be a key element in the content analysis performed as the greatest differences in the how individuals were prosecuted and whether or not they were put to death.

The qualitative data were analyzed using constant comparative analysis from grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). This allows the findings to emerge from the data themselves rather than using the data to test already formed ideas. The author reviewed each transcript and noted common themes. The data was then coded according to those themes. Those themes are identified and reported on table 1.

Results:

The themes found in the content analysis of the trial transcripts included gender and socioeconomic status however the pattern of the trials was also of note. When reviewing the data presented in the Table 1, we find that 85% of those accused were women and of those women 60% were 50 years old and up noting that three transcripts did not disclose age. The majority of the transcripts did not record marital status though of the 9 recorded we do see that 5 were married and 4 of these individuals were 50 or lower in age.

The second main finding was that an overwhelming number of them are not first-hand account of seeing any magical activity but rather hearing rumor in the village that the accused is a witch or quarreling with the accused at some point and then later on separate occasion having misfortune befall them such as the death of a loved one or damage to property in the form of crop failure or livestock death. While there was no distinct pattern for how many witnesses were first hand versus second hand meaning they testified based on the reputation of the accused, we do see that 80% of the cases had both first and second hand testimony. It is also important to note the occurrence of the accused mentioning Satan before interrogation versus post. While we do see instances of pre-interrogation confessions the majority is after the interrogation and closely follows what is described in the Demonology by Nicolas Remy, a known authority on the matter of witches and trials at the time. In the Destitute group, 60% of those tried made mention

of Satan before torture and after torture the number moves to 80%. The Poor group shows 20% before torture and 100% after. The Comfortable group shows 0% mentioning Satan before torture and 80% mentioning him after. And the Wealthy individuals show 20% before torture and 80% after. In all groups we see an increase on discussing Satan and witchcraft after torture had been administered.

We must also look at whether or not execution took place after the trial. As shown in Table 1, execution was a common outcome. Lastly, we must address the rates of execution. In the Destitute and Poor population, we find that 100% of the individuals were sentenced to death. The Comfortable group shows a rate of 80% and the Wealthy show 60%. In all classes the rate of execution is over half however the perfect goes down as socioeconomic status increases.

Socioeconomic Status	Gender	Accused's Age	Marital Status	Number of witnesses	References to Satan or witch craft before interrogation	References to Satan or witch craft after interrogation	Execution
Destitute	Female	67	Widow	11 4 first hand (36%) 7 second hand (64%)	no	Yes	Yes
Destitute	Female	60	Widow	1, only first-hand (100%)	yes	yes	Yes
Destitute	Female	70	Married	11 6 first hand (54%) 5 second hand (48%)	yes	yes	yes
Destitute	Female	70	Widow	1, only first-hand (100%)	yes	No torture	Sentenced to death but died prior to execution
Destitute	Female	60	Widow	12 7 first hand (58%) 5 reputations (42%)	no	yes	yes
					60%	80%	100%
Poor	Female	Not Disclosed	Not Disclosed	7 3 first hand (42%)	no	yes	yes

				4 reputation (58%)			
Poor	Female	Not Disclosed	Not Disclosed	23 7 first hand (30%) 16 reputation (70%)	no	yes	yes
Poor	Female	60	Not Disclosed	5, all first-hand (100%)	no	yes	yes
Poor	Female	46	Not Disclosed	7, all first-hand (100%)	no	yes	yes
Poor	Female	50	Married	19 10 first hand (52%) 9 reputation (48%)	yes	yes	yes
					20%	100%	100%
Comfortable	Female	70	Not Disclosed	13 11 first hand (84%) 2 reputation (16%)	no	yes	yes
Comfortable	Male	46	Married	12 7 first hand (58%) 5 reputation (42%)	no	yes	yes
Comfortable	Female	50	Not Disclosed	12 6 first hand (50%) 6 reputation (50%)	no	yes	yes

Comfortable	Female	35	Married	8 3 first hand (38%) 5 reputation (62%)	no	yes	yes
Comfortable	Female	40	Married	30 2 first hand (7%) 28 reputation (93%)	No	No torture	no
					0%	80%	80%
Wealthy	Female	60	Not Disclosed	16 4 first hand (25%) 12 reputation (75%)	no	yes	yes
Wealthy	Female	Not Disclosed	Not Disclosed	11 5 first hand (45%) 6 reputation (55%)	no	yes	yes
Wealthy	Male	Not Disclosed	Not Disclosed	6 4 first hand (66%) 2 reputation (34%)	There was not a report of non- torture interrogation	no	no
Wealthy	Female	50	Not Disclosed	12 8 first hand (67%) 4 reputation (33%)	yes	yes	yes
Wealthy	Male	80	Not Disclosed	17 15 first hand (88%) 2 reputation (12%)	no	yes	No
					20%	80%	60%

During the course of my review of the 20 transcripts chosen I found that in the lower classes the interrogations were far more brutal and more methodological meaning they followed a basic pattern that eventually led to conviction. With the Destitute group, I found that in the five cases selected all of the victims were elderly, widowed women who had typically been caught begging for food or services from their neighbors or had been caught stealing. Within these cases there were far fewer witnesses to testify against the accused yet in all of these cases the women were executed with the exception of one in which she committed suicide in prison. It is apparent from these cases that the confession was brought about either in fear of torture or after having been in prison for at least a month before the interrogation began.

In the case of Barbe Mallebarbe, a 60-year-old woman who was living in extreme poverty the majority of her life with her husband, had confessed to acts of witchcraft on July 8, 1596. However, on July 10, 1596 it was revealed that she “had tried to hang herself in her prison previous night, because she was afraid she would be tortured; asked to be put to death, but not to feel the fire, as she had harmed no-one.” In this and one other case in which the victim had been classified as extremely poor. There were no formal witness testimonies. Instead the interrogation was based on rumor that the victim was a witch. This differs greatly from the other classes as the “poor,” “comfortable,” and “wealthy” cases all had an abundant amount of witness testimony that was recorded. In these classes witnesses who claimed they had even heard rumor that the accused was a witch was recorded. However, in the extremely poor or “destitute” cases three of the five had witness testimony. The majority of the testimony recorded discussed the person

accused of witchcraft as having stolen from the witness or having quarreled over an received payment or food donation to the accused.

In the case of Collatte Lorette, a 67-year-old woman who had been widowed for eight years, of the eleven witness accounts, four had reported that the victim was rumored to be a witch and seven had claimed she had stolen items from their property such as logs and food. During her initial interrogation, she had confessed to quarreling with her neighbors but mentioned nothing of witchcraft. When torture was utilized she began telling a fantastical tale about being seduced by a demon and had been promised money. It is when torture is applied that the confession, as with many of the cases reviewed, suddenly begins to follow a prescription; they accused is seduced by a demon, promised money in exchange for using a powder to commit malice only to find that the money has turned into either leaves or another valueless piece of organic matter.

Discussion and Conclusion:

Like prior research, the vast majority of the defendants tried in the transcripts analyzed for this paper were female and elderly (Garret, 1977; Horsley, 1979). The application of torture during interrogation increased the number of confessions admitting a relationship with Satan and many of the accused were put to death.

While this is a piece based in history we cannot help but draw parallels to our own era. The victimization of individuals within a specific group continues as does physically harmful questioning. We look at this event in history as a shocking and barbaric time, something we feel detached from in our everyday lives. Yet when we look to draw comparisons between the witch trials of Medieval Europe and the current war practices we use is there truly a difference? Sociological exploration of historical events is an important way to analyze and record the

history of humans on this earth because without our past, how can we look to our present and future with understanding?

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