Plague and Persecution: The Black Death and Early Modern Witch-Hunts

History 480: Major Seminar II   Helen Christian
Professor Laura Beers   April 27, 2011

Abstract

The century or so from approximately 1550 to 1650 is a period during which witch-hunts reached unprecedented frequency and intensity. The circumstances that fomented the witch-hunts—persistent warfare, religious conflict, and harvest failures—had occurred before, but witch-hunts had never been so ubiquitous or severe. This paper argues that the intensity of the Early Modern witch-hunts can be traced back to the plague of 1348, and argues that the plague was a factor in three ways. First, the plague's devastation and the particularly unpleasant nature of the disease traumatized the European psyche, meaning that any potential recurrence of plague was a motivation to search for scapegoats. Second, the population depletion set off a chain of events that destabilized Europe. Finally, witch-hunters looked to the example set by the interrogators of suspected "plague-spreaders" and copied many of their interrogation and trial procedures.

Table of Contents

Introduction

The Black Death of 1348 had tremendous political, social, economic, and psychological impact on Europe and the trajectory of European history. By various estimates, the plague wiped out between one-third and one-half of the population in only a few years. The socioeconomic effects of the plague are well documented and many historians have explored how the population depletion and subsequent shortage of labor enabled peasants to demand higher wages, leading to a wave of many social and political changes. The plague is therefore often portrayed as the catalyst for positive transformations in Europe. The social instability that followed the plague created the circumstances in which the Reformation and the Renaissance later flourished.

However, the turmoil and instability that led to eventual improvements also fueled an environment of often violent upheaval. The reforms that provided the working class with increased rights and the possibility of social mobility were not won peacefully. In the centuries following the Black Death, the potential return of the plague was a constant source of paranoia. Sporadic breakouts of weakened recurrent plague reinforced this fear. European populations in general handled this worry by seeking to remove heretics and sinners, whom they believed to be the reasons for the plague. There was a general belief that the plague had been one of the harbingers of the apocalypse, and that in order to prepare for this event (or just to prevent additional outbreaks of plague) society needed to be purged. These circumstances, in combination with the tremendous political and religious upheaval in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries that partially resulted from the plague, fomented inquisitions and witch-hunts.

My particular interest is in exploring the connection between the plague and the witch-hunting craze of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. This paper aims to provide a cogent

explanation of the causal relationship between the plague and the severity of early modern witch-hunts. The plague was such a huge factor in the other major societal, economic, and political shifts that reason indicates that it also must have played a role in Europe's increasing fear of witchcraft and paranoid witch-hunting. The lawlessness, destruction, and turn to disturbing religious practices such as flagellation during the plague have been established and researched; and a relationship between the plague and concurrent witch-hunts has been made. However, to me it seems that the connection between the plague and subsequent witch-hunts, or at least the intensity of subsequent witch-hunts, has been relatively unexplored. Several sources mention the plague in passing as an event that traumatized the European psyche, and briefly describe how witch-hunters drew on the interrogation and torture methods used on suspected "plague-spreaders," but they do not thoroughly explain the extent of the plague's influence.

This paper intends to provide a general overview of the effects of the plague and the direct and indirect ways in which the plague is linked to the witch hunts. It is beyond the scope of this paper to analyze in-depth specific instances of persecution, except to establish larger patterns. This paper also will not go into the recent debate over whether the Black Death was actually bubonic plague. Many medical historians have claimed that the accounts of the plague indicate a disease with characteristics that are inconsistent with more modern episodes of bubonic plague. Some have suggested that that the virulence and swift mortality bear greater resemblance to Ebola, or perhaps anthrax.[1] This paper uses the term "bubonic plague" because this moniker is in accordance with the contemporary descriptions that emphasized the buboes as the distinguishing symptom of the Black Death. This paper is also not meant to be an analysis of the elements of sexism and ageism that were arguably present in early modern witch-hunts.

---

[1] Samuel K. Cohn, Jr., *The Black Death Transformed: Disease and Culture in Early Renaissance Europe* (London: Arnold, 2002), 1-53. This theory is also covered by historians Graham Twigg, Susan Scott and Christopher Duncan, and Norman Cantor.

Countless historians have examined the role of gender in accusations of witchcraft, and this paper will not attempt to cover the same ground.[2] This paper acknowledges that sexism and ageism were factors in the witch-hunts, but focuses on the idea that these methods of discrimination were indicative of a larger trend of seeking to reestablish firm social, political, economic, and gender boundaries as a result of the uncertainty of the time period.

From my research, it appears that the plague affected witch-hunts in three diverse ways. The first connection is the causal relationship: the population depletion set off a chain of events that eventually created the social turmoil that enabled witch-hunts to take place, and contributed to the development of other factors, such as the Reformation, that exacerbated the upheaval. Secondly, the paranoia left behind by the Black Death made witch-hunts seem necessary. It created the impetus for witch-hunts to be carried out whenever circumstances became particularly terrible—there is a noted correlation between episodes of war or religious persecution, and a spike in witch hunts—or whenever plague returned. Finally, the persecution of suspected plague-spreaders during the Black Death provided later witch-hunters with a model of interrogation and trial procedures. The theory of a secret, widespread conspiracy and the idea of a trial system based entirely on confessions obtained by torture were not inventions of the plague era, but they were two elements of scapegoating that gained new finesse during this time.

Historiography

---

[2] As an introduction, Elizabeth Reis' *Damned Women: Sinners and Witches in Puritan New England*, Bengt Ankarloo's multivolume *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe*, and Brian P. Levack's *Articles on Witchcraft, Magic and Demonology: Witchcraft, Women and Society* discuss the role of gender in the witch-hunts.

The plague and early modern witch-hunts are hardly unexplored areas of history. Individually, each topic has been analyzed thoroughly by historians. Research on the witch-hunts has focused on trying to understand the circumstances that fostered their development. In keeping with the relatively recent trend of examining the role of gender in history, scholarship in the last thirty years or so has focused on explaining the witch-hunts as an extreme manifestation of sexism. If the reader wishes to explore this topic, the books of Elizabeth Reis, Raisa Maria Toivo, Brian P. Levack, Kimberly Stratton, and Bengt Ankarloo are an excellent introduction. Levack stands out as a scholar who has contributed to or edited nearly every major volume on early modern witch-hunts, and his work has been extremely helpful in writing this thesis. His multivolume work *New Perspectives on Witchcraft, Magic, and Demonology* is an exhaustive overview of essentially every aspect of the history of witchcraft and witch-hunting history.

Historians of the plague have generally explored the relationship between the plague and subsequent sweeping political, social, and economic changes in Europe. Opinions have been divided over whether the plague was the absolute catalyst for the transformation of Europe from a feudal society to a continent of relatively liberal constitutional monarchies; or if the plague was simply an accelerant of changes that were already gradually taking place. However, the plague's role in affecting the trajectory of European history remains undisputed. Recent scholarship has examined the plague from more of a social history perspective, in exploring how the plague affected various demographics, instead of focusing on the society-wide political and economic transformations. Samuel K. Cohn and Joseph Byrne are two historians whose efforts to reframe the plague in a social and cultural context are prolific and authoritative, and I have relied greatly on their writings. Cohn's *The Black Death Transformed* examines how the generations following the plague contributed to the memory of it as such a cataclysmic and apocalyptic

event, which informed the paranoia of later centuries. For a more traditional approach that treats the plague as the catalyst for large-scale changes, I have referred to George Huppert's *After the Black Death*, John Aberth's *The Black Death: The Great Mortality of 1348*, and Norman Cantor's *In the Wake of the Plague*.

Despite the thorough research that has been conducted on each topic, there is no major research linking the two events. At best, historians of the witch-hunts acknowledge the possible influence of the plague in a few brief sentences. They refer to the psychological impact of the plague and the way in which it made Europe hypersensitive to the need for scapegoats, or to how the witch-hunters drew on many of the methods used by the persecutors of suspected plague-spreaders. However, no thorough examination of how the plague could be related to events nearly two hundred years later has yet been written. This paper hopes to fill in the holes left by previous research, and to contribute a new dimension of understanding the causes behind the intensity of early modern witch-hunts.

The Plague and "Plague-Spreaders"

In order to grasp the Black Death's causal relationship to the witch-hunts of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, it is necessary to first understand the magnitude of the plague and the extent to which it transformed Europe. It was quite possibly the most traumatic and devastating event to ever take place. The disease originated in Central Asia, and moved west along the many well-traveled trade routes connecting Asia with the West. By 1347, the plague had moved to Constantinople and the Mediterranean; and by 1348, had reached France and England. The plague was carried by fleas that easily found transport on rats, and their ubiquity facilitated the rapid spread of the disease.

The plague itself was terrifying in both nature and fatality. In the most common form of the disease, a person would be infected via fleabite or inhalation of another infected person's bacteria-filled cough; then develop painful buboes in the areas of the groin, armpits, or behind the ears. Fever and delirium followed, and death could occur within a few weeks, or as soon as three days. Depending on the amount of bacteria transferred in the initial infecting bite, and the immune system of the victim, death could occur so rapidly that buboes did not even develop. The mortality rate was high and only a small percentage of people recovered.[3] In his introduction to *The Decameron*, a collection of stories about a group of young men and women who retreated to the Italian countryside during the plague, Giovanni Boccaccio describes the scarily rapid onset of the disease, and the ease with which it transferred between people:

 "[W]hat made this pestilence even more severe was that whenever those suffering from it mixed with people who were still unaffected, it would rush upon these with the speed of a fire racing through dry or oily substances that happened to be placed within its reach […] not only did it infect healthy persons who conversed or had any dealings with the sick […] but it also seemed to transfer the

---

[3] John P. Byrne, *Daily Life During the Black Death* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2004), 4-9.

sickness to anyone touching the clothes or other objects which had been handled or used by the victims."[4] Boccaccio also famously says that victims of the plague "had breakfast in the morning with their relatives, companions, or friends, and had dinner that evening in another world with their ancestors."[5]

According to contemporary records, as much as one-third of Europe's population died as a result of the plague; conservatively, twenty-five to thirty-five million people. The actual demographic information is not available, not only for the lack of regular or complete censuses, but also because of the inability to keep track of the number of casualties. For example, the clerics of Siena who were supposed to record burials either died or ran for the hills in June of 1348, when the plague was strongest, and recordkeeping did not resume until August of that year.[6] Deaths amounted so quickly that towns were hard-pressed to properly bury all of the dead. The Pope was forced to consecrate the River Rhône in order to dispose of the glut of corpses.[7] An account of the plague in Strasbourg in 1349 describes the plague as the "greatest epidemic that ever happened," where "Death went from one end of the earth to the other." There were scenes of ghoulishness—ships found "on the sea laden with wares; the crew had all died and no one had guided the ship"—and religious anarchy because of the Pope's decision to stop all court sessions and lock himself in a room with "a fire burning before him all the time," to

[4] John Aberth, *The Black Death: The Great Mortality of 1348-1350, A Brief History with Documents* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005), 32.

[5] Giovanni Boccaccio, *The Decameron*, translated by M. Rigg, Vol. 1, 5-11(London: David Campbell, 1921), found in Internet Medieval Source Book, Fordham University http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/boccacio2.html (accessed March 12, 2011).

[6] Samuel K. Cohn, Jr., "Epidemiology of the Black Death and Successive Waves of Plague," found in PubMed Central Open Access, American University Bender Library http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/sites/entrez?cmd=Search& db=pmc&term=0950-5571[jour]%20AND%202008 [dp]%20AND%2027[issue]%20AND%2074[page] (accessed March 12, 2011), 86.

[7] Byrne, *Daily Life During the Black Death*, 117.

stave off infection.[8] Even 150 years later, Europe's population had still not returned to its medieval level.[9] This magnitude of population devastation is all the more remarkable when one considers that the plague was relatively short-lived, for the most part relinquishing its hold on Europe by 1352.

The plague was bewildering for its absolute lack of pattern. Most other diseases, even with rudimentary medieval medicine and medical theories that are now known to be inaccurate, were still more likely to pose the most risk to the elderly and infirm. The plague struck indiscriminately, and "illustrious physicians predicted that many would die, who unexpectedly escaped entirely from suffering shortly afterwards, and […] declared that many would be saved, who were destined to be carried off almost immediately."[10] The plague defied understanding and surprised medieval observers for its haphazard attitude towards both confirmed sinners and the men and women who strove to lead virtuous lives, as the general attitude had been that God would spare the righteous.

It is necessary to qualify the stereotype that medieval humans were entirely superstitious beings, with a lack of basic reason. However, despite the logic demonstrated in Galenic medical theory—the reasoning that led to theories was sound, even if initial assumptions about the way the body functioned were incorrect— "few if any physicians were arrogant enough to deny that God could and did play a role in the health and sickness of individuals and entire societies."[11] In this context, the medieval population for the most part agreed that the plague was a visitation

---

[8] "The Black Death and the Jews 1348-1349 CE," found in Internet Jewish History Sourcebook, Fordham University, http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/jewish/1348-jewsblackdeath.html (accessed March 12, 2011).
[9] George Huppert, *After the Black Death: A Social History of Early Modern Europe* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 11.
[10] Procopius, *History of the Wars*, translated by H.B. Dewing (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1914), 451-473, found in Internet Medieval Source Book, Fordham University http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/542procopius-plague.html (accessed March 12, 2011). *Note: although the text is about the plague of 542, historians have concluded that the plagues were most likely caused by the same bacterium and are almost identical in symptoms and mortality rate.*
[11] Byrne, *Daily Life During the Black Death*, 22.

from God as punishment for mankind's sins. The Bible was full of examples of God's wrath

being turned on sinful humans in the form of pestilence or other natural disasters. William

Langland wrote in *Piers Plowman* that

> "Nature killed many through corruptions,
>
> Death came driving after her and dashed all to dust,
>
> Kings and knights, emperors and popes,
>
> He left no man standing, whether learned or ignorant;
>
> Whatever he hit stirred never afterwards,
>
> Many a lovely lady and their lover-knights
>
> Swooned and died in sorrow of Death's blows…
>
> For God is deaf nowadays and will not hear us,
>
> And for our guilt he grinds good men to dust."[12]

Physicians were powerless in the face of the plague, and medical theory was unhelpful.

In the absence of any way to understand or manage the plague's spread, people

turned to alternative explanations and strategies. During plague episodes, despite the

dangers of traveling, many Catholics set out on pilgrimages to local shrines in order to

increase the chances of their prayers being heard. A more violent movement emerged in

the form of the cult of the flagellants, a group that originated in Central or Eastern

Europe. The male penitents marched for thirty-three days, whipping themselves and

praying, in an imitation of Christ's Passion. The practice was extremely bloody and

disturbing, but it gave inspiration to many. Only laymen were allowed to participate,

which might help to explain the movement's popularity with the masses—they saw the

efforts of people like themselves as more efficient than the preaching of the clergy.[13] The

---

[12] Norman F. Cantor, *In the Wake of the Plague: The Black Death and the World It Made* (New York: The Free Press, 2001), 6.

[13] A.W. Sloan, "The Black Death in England," *History of Medicine Vol. 59 Iss. 18* (1981), found in South African Medical Journal, American University Bender Library, http://www.samj.org.za/index.php/samj/index (accessed December 15, 2011), 2.

controversial nature of the practice also incited critics, and in 1349 Pope Clement VI condemned the practice.[14] However, this move did not force the disbanding of the flagellants, but simply forced them underground.

During the plague, a desperate Europe sought scapegoats, and the most common group that society blamed was the Jews. As early as 1348, there was panic over *pestis manufacta* (diabolically produced disease), and a rumor was already in circulation that Jews had created the plague as part of an international conspiracy to destroy Christendom. False confessions brought out by torture in Geneva in 1348 only further inflamed suspicions. Throughout Europe, Jews were expelled from towns, persecuted, tortured, and executed. Forty sleeping Jews in Toulon were murdered in their beds on Palm Sunday of 1348; the Jews of Carcassonne and Narbonne were exterminated in May; Zurich banned Jews forever, in January 1349, Basle burned 200 Jews after herding them into a barn; and in Strassburg, 900 Jews were burned and the rest expelled. This persecution did not always result purely from religious bigotry. In many instances, the town burghers and guild members who most strongly advocated for the Jews' expulsion were indebted to them for loans, or wanted to eliminate their economic competition.[15] Pope Clement VI issued an order to his bishops in 1348 condemning the persecution of Jews, on the basis that it was illogical to assume that the Jews had created the plague when many Jewish people had been killed by it. The Pope went on to specifically tell the bishops to command their parishioners "not to dare […] to capture, strike, wound, or kill any Jews." [16] However, this edict obviously went unheeded.

The Jews were nonetheless only one group of the many scapegoats. Gypsies, Turks, Muslims, and suspected witches were also blamed for poisoning water supplies and bringing the

---

[14] Byrne, *Daily Life During the Black Death*, 205.
[15] Byrne, *The Black Death*, 83-85.
[16] Byrne, *Daily Life During the Black Death*, 199.

pestilence. Different theories about the spread of the plague existed, but most people believed

that the transfer of the plague from one place to another (as opposed to one person from another,

where the theories of corrupted air and contamination prevailed) required a person to carry the

disease. Certainly, the spread of the plague followed the road systems and sea trading routes, so

there is validity to the idea. During the Black Death, many towns tried to prevent the entry of

outsiders, or quarantine infected arrivals, but this proved impossible for the usual logistical

reasons. In the absence of the knowledge that the plague was carried by fleas and rats, and

caused by invisible bacteria, the theory that individuals were responsible for transporting the

plague—the key idea being that they *deliberately* and malevolently did so—was incendiary.   The

notion of a conspiracy of plague-spreaders greatly influenced the later idea of a diabolical

organization of witches.[17] The plague represented one of the first instances where persecutors

were confronting the idea of a secret evil conspiracy of which there would never be any actual

evidence—the fabled instructional pamphlets on how to destroy Christendom and the vials

labeled "poison for the wells" never materialized. As I will discuss in greater detail, the methods

and practices of interrogators during the plague served as a model when the people of the

sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were faced with similar difficult, uncontrollable

circumstances and looked for a solution.

The Otherwise Calamitous Fourteenth Century

        The religious, political, and social turmoil of the fourteenth century contributed to the

severity of the witch-hunts of its own accord. The enormous political and social transformations

of Europe did not come about without their share of upheaval. The circumstances of the

---

[17] H. Sidky, *Witchcraft, Lycanthropy, Drugs and Disease* (New York: Peter Lang, 1997), 90-91.

fourteenth century also contributed to the severity of the plague, which, as I am arguing, bears a

strong causal relationship to the witch-hunts of the early modern period.

It is necessary to emphasize that because the plague had struck Europe at a time when

circumstances made it particularly devastating, the psychological trauma of the plague was even

more powerful. In the centuries leading up to the plague, land was overfarmed, the population

was too large, livestock herds were shrinking because of the need for land for crops instead of

grazing, and woods were deforested. The productivity of Europe was deadlocked—it was

necessary to either introduce more efficient farming techniques, or reduce the population. These

conditions augmented the severity of the plague. An already fragile environment had been

strained by repeated crop failures and regular bouts of other diseases. Scientists and historians

have noted that Europe was in the throes of a "mini ice age" of slightly colder than usual

temperatures, from approximately 1300 to 1700. In 1316, huge volcanic eruptions in Indonesia

had sent enormous clouds of ash into the atmosphere, which contributed to harvest failure.[18]

Chronic malnutrition weakened the population's ability to ward off new infections. The plague

was able to spread quickly in such conditions. Had the populations of Europe been healthier or

better fed, they might not have succumbed to the plague so quickly.

Paradoxical as it is, the plague's increased devastation because of Europe's susceptibility,

in fact proved to eliminate most of these negative circumstances. Following the extreme

population depletion, land was available, labor shortages enabled workers to demand higher

wages, forests were allowed to regrow, and crop yields were sufficient if not plentiful. People

became aware of the dangers of overpopulation, and were careful to avoid repeating the

Malthusian crisis. European peasantry began a new social custom of marrying at later ages, in

order to limit the number of offspring. By 1377, only thirty years after the plague, only 67% of

---

[18] Cantor, *In the Wake of the Plague,* 74.

English girls over 14 were married, a figure that decreased to 55% in the seventeenth century.[19] This development helped prevent a return to the strain of pre-plague years.

The labor shortages and availability of land were two of the most important factors in Europe's transition from a feudal society to the continent of the Renaissance, with its emphasis on humanism; and in Europe's eventual development as a continent with flourishing constitutional monarchies and a strong middle class. The years after the plague saw an increase in social unrest and two notable peasant revolts, the Jacquerie in France in 1358, and the Peasant Uprising in England in 1381. The peasant rebellions were motivated by a series of grievances, and anger that wages had not risen in keeping with the prices of food and goods was a factor. In both England and Aragon, the royal governments had passed edicts immediately following the plague attempting to put a ceiling on wages and to force workers to accept the wage limits.[20] Ultimately, the rebellions did not immediately lead to the gaining of rights or privileges, but they were fundamental in destabilizing the feudal system.

The fourteenth century was calamitous in sundry other ways. The Hundred Years' War between France and England sporadically reared its head after beginning in 1337, and lasted until 1420. Spain and Portugal vied for control of the Iberian Peninsula. In the Germanic countries, emperors struggled with the papacy to receive the title of Holy Roman Emperor, and various factions squabbled over the right to elect the emperor. The continent and the British Isles were therefore composed of delicate political balances that often turned into violent conflict.[21]

Perhaps the most radical and significant institutional event was the schism of 1378, which also came to be called the Babylonian Captivity. Following the death of Pope Gregory XI, the

---

[19] Huppert, *After the Black Death,* 12-13.
[20] Byrne, *After the Black Death,* 65.
[21] J. Thatcher and E.H. McNeal, *A Source Book for Medieval History* (New York: Charles Scribner's, 1905), 284-298, found in Internet Medieval Source Book, Fordham University http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/goldenbull.html (accessed March 12, 2011).

French and Roman cardinals disagreed over the legitimacy of the election of the next Pope, and ultimately each party elected their own. From 1378 until 1415, the Catholic Church had two seats of papal authority in Avignon and Rome. This situation was catastrophic for Catholics. The Pope was supposed to be the earthly manifestation of God's will and authority—having two of them threw the entire religion into disarray. The popes excommunicated each other. Each declared himself the true pope and leader of Catholicism. The kings of Europe were diplomatically and politically handicapped, as denouncing either pope could lead to their own excommunication and that of their countries' populations.

The religious confusion of the fourteenth century—two heads of the Church; the disgrace of squabbling popes; and the cost of maintaining two separate papal courts which, to recover from, led the Church to ramp up sales of indulgences—contributed to discontent with the Church. This growing discontent created the eventual Reformation, which was arguably the most defining event of the early modern period.

The Reformation

The Reformation was a development in western European history with long-reaching, calamitous ramifications. As for the Reformation's connection to witch-hunts, it is necessary to understand the political turmoil that Martin Luther created. The better term for Reformation is the German *die Glaubenspaltung*, literally "the division of faith."[22] The idea of a religion that

---

[22] Norman F. Cantor, *Inventing the Middle Ages: The Lives, Works, and Ideas of the Great Medievalists of the Twentieth Century* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc, 1991), 292.

operated in the vernacular, without the medium of a priest, and that did not require kings to share their power with the pope provided an opportunity for various principalities and kingdoms to break with Rome. Ultimately, approximately one-third of German-speaking peoples, ninety percent of the English-speaking, more than half of the Swiss, and nearly all of the Dutch and Scandinavian peoples withdrew from papal authority.[23] Protestantism provided a new pretense for religious wars, and the century or so after 1517 is full of bloody conflicts. Within France, the Huguenots and Catholics took turns massacring each other; in the Holy Roman Empire, the Catholic ruler sought to retain control over the Protestant Netherlands; civil war broke out in England; Spain tried to invade England; and the Thirty Years War between the Palatinate (nowadays, Germany north of Bavaria) and the Catholic League (made up of England, France, the Netherlands, and what is today southern Germany) tore up the continent. The religious and political chaos created the ideal environment of difficult circumstances that fostered witch-hunts.

The origins of the Reformation lie in the medieval era, and can in many ways be traced to the plague, both directly and indirectly. The dissatisfaction that many people felt with the clergy's response to the plague contributed to the increasing displeasure with the Catholic Church. The assertion that the plague was a visitation from God as punishment for sin did not satisfy everyone, particularly since it struck people down randomly regardless of sin. A common remedy was to search for scapegoats and punish the people believed to have brought on the disease, but others began to examine their own religious practices. A handful of outspoken critics, notably John Wycliffe and Jan Hus, advocated a return to the early purity of the church and a rejection of the corruption—married clergy, popes and bishops fathering multiple illegitimate children, and the amassing of enormous wealth—that had become part of the institution.

---

[23] Cantor, *Inventing the Middle Ages*, 293.

The practices of the church itself, in the centuries before and after the plague, were naturally the biggest contributors to the growing discontent and desire for change. However, the effects of the plague created a volatile environment. Samuel Cohn argues that it was actually the sudden decline in plague deaths between 1350 and 1400 that gave people "a new self-confidence and belief in the efficacy of social action to change current affairs and even the afterlife."[24] Compared to the despondency of plague years, the half-century or so afterward that was relatively free of plague engendered the population with the courage to effect change. The motivation for political reform extended to desire for religious restructuring, and often the same language was used. Insurgents against the church in 1375 in France made a banner saying "libertas," and proclaimed that they "would come to the aid of anyone who desired liberty and wished to be rid of the tyranny and subjugation of the Church's evil pastors."[25] It is also necessary to note that generally the ruling class and the church were closely related—on the abstract level, the monarch was an embodiment of the divine; but more practically, the church and monarchies supported each other politically and financially. The pope held the threat of excommunication and could utilize it to bring unsupportive rulers to heel, since excommunication of a ruler meant that an uprising would be legitimized with the pope's blessing.

Frederick Welfle offers an interpretation of the plague as a more direct cause of the Reformation, in that after the deaths of many clergy, finding recruits to fill the vacancies was incredibly difficult because

> "[t]he insistent demands for all kinds of laborers coupled with the prevailing moral
> conditions turned men's minds from the religious life. Hence, almost anyone who

---

[24] Samuel K. Cohn, Jr., "Popular Insurrection and the Black Death: A Comparative View," found in Project Muse Premium Collection, American University Bender Library http://sfx.wrlc.org/au?ctx_ver=Z39.88-2004&ctx_enc=info%3Aofi%2Fenc%3AUTF (accessed March 12, 2011).

[25] Cohn, "Popular Insurrection and the Black Death," 203.

offered himself as a candidate, no matter what his talents or condition, was accepted and hurried through the course of training. Illiterate men were ordained as long as they promised to learn the necessary amount of Latin and their duties in a given time. Ordinary laymen whose wives had died during the plague were accepted. Lacking the mental and spiritual training necessary for a sound priesthood, the secular clergy turned to loose living. In view of this fact it is not hard to understand why so many provincial and diocesan synods during the next century legislated so much against vanity in dress, frequenting of taverns, immorality, and non-residence among the clergy."[26]

If Welfle is to be believed, the indignities and corruption of the church only began after the plague, because of desperate need for priests to carry on the "necessary spiritual ministrations." In addition, the church's failings were not a product of its own corruption, but of extenuating circumstances that made it impossible to recruit well-trained priests. His theory has some validity, but history shows that the practices of the church with which Wycliffe, Hus, and Luther found fault had been ongoing for several decades by the time of the plague. Welfle is correct in stating that "if such a tidal wave as the Reformation were to break over the church, this was not the sort of men to stem it," and in that sense the plague-created shortage of properly trained clergy did contribute to the Reformation. The theory is interesting and should not be dismissed, but it must be taken with a grain of salt. Welfle describes Luther's nailing of the 95 Theses to the Wittenberg Cathedral as "the disaster that disrupted Christendom in 1517"—his bias for the Catholic Church is evident. A more accurate explanation of the plague's impact on the Reformation requires knowledge of the Babylonian Captivity, and awareness of the church's practice of selling indulgences to compensate for the enormous expense of maintaining two full papal courts. Or, the knowledge that the Church was one of the largest landowners in Europe, and used its leverage to

---

[26] Frederick Welfle, "The Black Death of 1348 and its Bearing on the Reformation," in *The Historical Bulletin* Vol.9 Iss. 1 (1930), 27-29.

keep wages low following the plague. Inept clergy certainly did not help the Church's cause, but they were not its main weakness. The Reformation may have been delayed by a better-trained clergy, but there is no doubt that it was inevitable.

The Reformation played an important role in fomenting the intense witch-hunts of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. It created an environment of extreme religious and political instability which, combined with multiple harvest failures and social changes, provided the ideal environment in which searching for scapegoats appeared necessary.

The Plague in the Early Modern Period

The plague created fear that the world was ending, and recurrent episodes of weakened plague throughout the fifteenth, sixteenth, and seventeenth centuries renewed this anxiety. As Pestilence is traditionally one of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse (along with War, Famine, and Conquest), many believed that such a virulent disease was a certain sign of the imminent Last Judgment. In the years immediately following the Black Death, the number of new chapel

constructions reached its peak as people sought to demonstrate their religiousness.[27] The art and literature of the fifteenth century is full of works that reflect the anxiety over disease and death. One of the most popular motifs is the *danse macabre*, where skeletons representing death came into the world and forced the living to dance with them. The plague is sometimes represented by the figure of a skeleton with an arrow or a scythe, but often the skeleton or corpse that represented Death was also meant to signify plague. The popularity of the *danse macabre* theme indicates that fear of the plague and general anxiety were nearly omnipresent in society following the plague. This theme, like many other medieval motifs, diminished in popularity following the Renaissance and the artistic embrace of secular, humanist themes that were generally a celebration of life; but its ubiquity had a long run before then. The popularity of the *danse macabre* as an artistic trope indicates an extreme preoccupation with death, a psychological development that is logically a result of the Black Death. Hans Holbein's *Danse Macabre*, printed in 1546, is the best-known version.[28]

---

[27] Samuel K. Cohn, Jr. and Pierre-Antoine Fabre, "Piété et Commande d'Oeuvres d'Art après la Peste Noire," *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales,* 51ème Année, No. 3, pp. 551-573, found in <u>JSTOR</u>, American University Bender Library http://www.jstor.org/stable/27585186 (accessed March 12, 2011), 558.
[28] Byrne, *Daily Life During the Black Death*, 103-104; 221.

The image on the right shows Death in the chamber of a nun, who seems to have admitted a lover to her room. Death is extinguishing the candles on the altar, "the painter hereby intimating the punishment which awaits on criminal love."[29] The image on the left shows Death with a newly married couple, forcing them to dance to the beat of his drum.[30] There are dozens of engravings in all, showing Death invading all ways of life, from the ploughman and peddler, to the abbot and the lady. Holbein shows that Death is indiscriminate and suggests that it is a meet punishment for sinful living.

The plague was still a major source of concern, even more than two centuries after the Black Death. Many books were written in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries that promised to teach readers how to avoid succumbing to the plague. A book written by Henry Holland, published first in 1593 and reissued in 1603, described spiritual remedies for dealing with the pestilence. Holland recommended turning to the 91st Psalm for instruction in how to

---

[29] *The dance of death; painted by H. Holbein, and engraved by W. Hollar* ([London]: [1794]), in Eighteenth Century Collections Online, American University Bender Library, http://find.galegroup.com.proxyau.wrlc.org/ecco/infomark.do? (accessed March 28, 2011), 56-57.

[30] *The dance of death; painted by H. Holbein, and engraved by W. Hollar*, 62-63.

forbear difficult circumstances, a verse which contains phrases such as "Who so resteth in the secret of the most high, shall abide in the Shadow of the Almightie," and "He will couer thee under his wings, and thou shalt be sure under his feathers."[31] A more practical approach written by a physician recommended that persons wishing to ward off the plague chew "the rote of Angelica," or take "Rue, Wormewood, and Scabias, steepe it in Ale a whole night, & drink it fasting euery morning."[32] The fact that these books were printed at all, and then subsequently reissued, demonstrates that the authors recognized public demand for guidance in the face of recurring episodes of the plague and that the books were purchased.

Of course, the plague was not solely responsible for the witch-hunts of the early modern period, but one cannot underestimate the plague's provocation of a chain of events that changed Europe's political and religious landscape, a process that required enormous upheaval and uncertainty. The lingering anxiety over the recurrence of plague was admittedly a small element of this disorder, but a very powerful one. This turmoil was reflected in all aspects of life—shifting territorial boundaries, changing gender identities, and fragile political balances. Brian Levack writes that this

> "breakdown of social, political, and religious consensus was paralleled by the
> collapse of traditional intellectual and scientific systems. Fascination with
> monsters, amazons, hermaphrodites, prodigies, apparitions, comets, and witches,
> in short with everything "unnatural," was indicative of the profound anxiety

[31] Holland, Henry. *Spirituall Preseruatiues against the Pestilence. Or seven Lectures on the 91. Psalme. First Printed in Anno. 1593. And now reuised, corrected, and published, as generally for the instruction of ignorant people: so specially for the confirmation of the weake seruants of Jesus Christ; describing the most divine and most soueraigne Preseruatiues against he pestilence* (London: T.C., 1603), found in Early English Books Online, American University Bender Library http://eebo.chadwyck.com.proxyau.wrlc.org/search/full_rec? (accessed January 5, 2011), 5, 31.

[32] *Present remedies against the plague Shewing sundry preseruatiues for the same, by holsome fumes, drinkes, vomits, and other inward receits: as also the perfect cure (by implaisture) of any that are therewith infected. Now necessary to bee obserued of euery housholder, to auoid the infection, lately begun in some places of this cittie. Written by a learned phisition, for the health of his country: and now newly inlarged by the same author, with remedies for the newe pestilent feuer* (London: J. Danter, 1594), found in Early English Books Online, American University Bender Library http://eebo.chadwyck.com.proxyau.wrlc.org/search/ (accessed January 12, 2011), 4-5.

awakened by the destruction of existing categories. New categories without

ambiguity had to be imposed or created. Dichotomies such as active versus

passive, dominant versus subordinate, reason versus sense, and public versus

private had to be reformulated for an increasingly centralized, commercialized

urban society."[33]

Witch-hunts were society's remedy for uncertainty and inability to control circumstances that

were in many ways either an indirect or direct result of the plague. Generally, new outbreaks of

the plague did not function as the reason for witch-hunts, but the charge of "plague-spreading"

resurfaced occasionally throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Notable instances of

accusations of plague-spreading took place in Geneva in 1530, 1545, 1567, 1571 and 1615; in

Chambéry in 1577; Vevey in 1613; and Milan in 1630.[34] The population depletion and

psychological trauma of the Black Death contributed to the circumstances of uncertainty that

fostered accusations of witchcraft, but fresh outbreaks of plague also served to incite witch-hunts.

The Witch-Hunting Craze

Historians have noted that the century from roughly 1550 to 1650 is the period of the most

---

[33] Allison P. Coudert, "The Myth of the Improved Status of Protestant Women: The Case of the Witchcraze," in *Articles on Witchcraft, Magic and Demonology* edited by Brian P. Levack (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1992), 89.
[34] Levack, *The Witch-Hunt in Early Modern Europe, 183.*

intense and fervent witch-hunting. H. Sidky explains that witch-hunting was

> "a movement to restore order in a time of profound crises. The process of
> detecting, exhibiting, and ceremoniously destroying Satan's baleful agents
> conveyed the message that society was not out of control after all, that the
> majesty of the law reigned supreme, and that the Almighty was indeed in
> heaven. Scapegoats offered easy answers and thus spared people from having to
> come to terms with the real reasons for their social, economic, and political
> woes. Those in power were all too eager to encourage accusations and even
> took the initiative in ferreting out the pernicious enemies of humankind, the
> devils in the midst of society, because this conveniently relieved them of having
> to bear responsibility for intolerable sociopolitical and economic conditions."[35]

The circumstances of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries created the ideal environment for

witch-hunting: political turmoil, religious upheaval, drawn-out wars, and the occasional fresh

outbreaks of plague that renewed paranoia that the Black Death had returned. Witch-hunting was

not only a popular response to chaos, but also a government-sanctioned means of controlling the

anxieties of the population.

The statistics concerning the numbers of prosecuted and executed witches are difficult to

ascertain. Many official records have been destroyed or lost, and not all trials were recorded to

begin with. The accounts of witch-hunters tend to be unreliable because of the tendency to

exaggerate their success. Estimates of the number of executed witches have ranged from in the

thousands to nine million, but recent scholarship has tended to lean towards more conservative

figures. Brian Levack estimates that the total number of Europeans who were prosecuted for

witchcraft likely did not exceed 90,000.[36] This number seems small, but the horror of the witch-

hunts stems from the percentage of people who were executed. Again, these figures are

---

[35] H. Sidky, *Witchcraft, Lycanthropy, Drugs and Disease*, 256.
[36] Brian P. Levack, *The Witch-Hunt in Early Modern Europe* (Harlow, England: Pearson Education Limited, 2006), 21.

estimates, but conservatively, the average percentage of accused that were convicted and executed was 47 percent.   In Finland, the execution rate was the lowest at sixteen percent; but in the Pays de Vaud in Switzerland, the execution rate reached 90 percent.

These reliable estimates seem diminutive, especially when one considers that the witch-hunts have been conflated in the general imagination. However, even though the number of executed witches was still surprisingly low despite the high percentages—115 executed out of 710 tried in Finland, and 90 out of 102 in the Pays de Vaud—one must remember that these figures are the total number of executions over the course of more than one hundred years.[37] Individual episodes of witch-hunting could take a much larger psychological toll. One account from 1645 describes that "at the last Assises in Norfolke there were 50 witches arraigned for their lives, and 20 executed."[38] In the lands of the convent of Quedlinburg, Germany, 133 witches were executed in a single day in 1589.[39] The number of accused tended to increase rapidly during a single witch-hunt, because one of the interrogators' goals was generally to force the accused to name additional conspirators. The overall numbers are relatively small, but the mental impact of having several members of a community be executed at once would have been much larger than the numbers indicate. Also, the numbers of witches who were prosecuted or executed does not begin to cover the Europeans who would have lived in fear of the accusation of witchcraft, or because they fell under suspicion. Because a charge of witchcraft could never be proved definitively, it could also never be disproved decisively. A person who had been accused of

---

[37] Levack, *The Witch-Hunt in Early Modern Europe*, 23.

[38] *Signes and wonders from heaven. With a true relation of a monster borne in Ratcliffe Highway, at the signe of the three Arrows, Mistris Bullock the midwife delivering here thereof. Also shewing how a cat kitned a monster in Lombard street in London. Likewise a new discovery of witches in Stepney parish. And how 20. witches more were executed in Suffoke this last assise. Also how the divell came to Soffam to a farmers house in the habit of a gentlewoman on horse-backe. With divers other strange remarkable passages* (London: I.H., [1645]), found in Early English Books Online, American University Bender Library http://eebo.chadwyck.com.proxyau.wrlc.org/search (accessed January 5, 2011), 4.

[39] Levack, *The Witch-Hunt in Early Modern Europe*, 24.

witchcraft generally had to live with the label if they were never brought to trial, or even if they were found innocent.

It is important to note that, as ridiculous as the idea may seem to us, many early modern Europeans believed in the existence of witches. Moreover, they believed in the legitimacy of the threat of witchcraft. Witches represented an unknown force that could potentially cause the downfall of Europe—accusations of witchcraft might have sometimes been partially motivated by political or financial machinations, but there was an underlying genuine fear. This belief is demonstrated in officials' estimates of the number of witches: in 1587, a French village judge claimed to have evidence of 7,760 witches in the duchy of Rethelois, an extremely small area. In 1602, demonologist Henri Boguet estimated that there were 1,800,000 witches in Europe, and wrote that there were witches "by the thousands everywhere, multiplying upon the earth even as worms in a garden."[40] Witches were not only a legitimate threat, but also an overwhelmingly large and seemingly omnipresent one.

Christopher Pfister, among others, has found that the period of the most intensive witch-hunting also coincided with a time of environmental difficulties, and claims that it is necessary to not underestimate the role of environmental deterioration in encouraging witch-hunts.[41] Many strong volcanic explosions took place around the globe between 1580 and 1600; and there was a Little Ice Age from 1569-1573, as well as general colder-than-usual temperatures throughout the century between 1550 and 1650.[42] These events created a series of harvest failures in Europe in the 1590s, leading to higher food prices and, in the case of Austria, large-scale peasant uprisings.

---

[40] Levack, *The Witch-Hunt in Early Modern Europe*, 24.

[41] Other notable historians whose work explores the role of the environment in history include Ellsworth Huntington, Kenneth Hsü, Robert Fogel, Fernand Braudel, and Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie.

[42] Christian Pfister, "Climatic Extremes, Recurrent Crises and Witch Hunts: Strategies of European Societies in Coping with Exogenous Shocks in the Late Sixteenth and Early Seventeenth Centuries," *The Medieval History Journal*, Vol. 10 Iss. 33 (Sage Publications, 2007), http://mhj.sagepub.com/content/10/1-2/33 (accessed March 12, 2011), 44-54.

Pfister points out that the most intense bouts of persecution were concurrent with climatic decline. The challenging circumstances contributed to the typical scenario for seeking scapegoats, and many accused witches were charged with being responsible for the bad weather and making the crops fail.[43]

Environmental stresses certainly contributed to the frenzy of witch-hunting. However, climatic deterioration alone did not create the unusually intense witch-hunts of the early modern period. It is important to understand that the witch-hunts were a product of multiple factors that developed over the course of several decades, and with this in mind, the plague is both directly and indirectly responsible for the witch-hunts.

Medieval Persecution in the Witch-Hunts

Perhaps the most direct and morbid way in which the plague relates to witch-hunts is in the trial and interrogation techniques that the witch-hunters used. There are many parallels between the methodology of handling plague-spreaders and the process of witch-hunting. The idea of

---

[43] Pfister, "Climatic Extremes, Recurrent Crises and Witch Hunts," 55.

"plague-spreaders," some historians have argued, may have inspired subsequent beliefs in the idea

of a "diabolical conspiracy of witches."[44] Certainly, the charges brought against plague-spreaders

and suspected witches of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were very similar: intention to

harm, with no ocular proof, and with confessions brought out by torture. The city of Geneva in

particular had considerable impact on witch-hunting protocol—witch-hunts during the plague and

the executions of plague-spreaders established the city as a leader in dealing with witches. Judges

from Lyons, Valais, Savoy, and several Swiss territories wrote to Geneva's government for advice

on dealing with their own witches.[45]

Witch-hunts, and leveling charges of witchcraft, were not nonexistent before the plague.

However, after 1375, it became common to charge suspected witches with diabolism; the act of

communing with the devil to realize evil ambitions.[46] This change reflects the influence of the

plague and the turbulence of the period. Charging someone with diabolism covered all of

society's possible ills, including the persistent warfare, environmental distress, harvest failures,

religious conflict, and general disorder.

The most brutal way in which the plague influenced witch-hunts is in the methods of

interrogation used by both plague-spreaders and witch-hunters. The techniques of the boot, the

rack, the *strappado*, and various other horrible torture devices were used before the plague, but

their use on plague-spreaders both refined their methods and established them as the official tools

in the repertoire of an interrogator trying to prove the existence of a conspiracy.[47] Essentially, the

plague was one of the first instances of European-wide medieval society seeking to rectify

uncontrollable circumstances by punishing scapegoats. It is logical to draw a connection between

---

[44] Sidky, *Witchcraft, Lycanthropy, Drugs and Disease,* 90.
[45] Sidky, *Witchcraft, Lycanthropy, Drugs and Disease,* 94.
[46] Brian Pavlac, *Witch-Hunts in the Western World: Persecution and Punishment from the Inquisition through the Salem Trials* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2009), 45.
[47] Sidky, *Witchcraft, Lycanthropy, Drugs and Disease,* general reference.

this initial event and subsequent episodes of almost the same circumstances. In the cases of both

plague-spreaders and suspected witches, the accused were being charged with a secret crime of

which there was never real conclusive evidence, like a bottle of poison for the wells or instruments

of sorcery. Torture was therefore necessary to elicit a confession—otherwise, there was no

evidence, and no way to justify a guilty verdict.

Accounts of early modern witch-hunts show that, according to modern standards of

evidence, there was no real proof of witches' guilt. A description of the trial of John Lambe states

that Lambe's guilt was confirmed by statements from other people who claimed to have heard

Lambe make incriminating statements. A Master Wayneman told the court that Lambe had

described his ability to "doe strange things, as intoxicate, poyson, and bewitch any man so as they

should be disabled from begetting of children. And that he had 4 spirits bound to his christall but

said (Benias) was his chiefe spirit."[48] The description of the trial is full of statements of people

who claimed to have seen Lambe behaving mysteriously or heard him say something suspicious,

but no actual proof—for example, the crystal that Lambe apparently bound spirits with was never

mentioned as having been found. The account of Elizabeth Fraunces' trial counts statements from

neighbors about strange apparitions and noises as the major proof of her guilt. One neighbor

described a strange occurrence that took place right after Fraunces departed from a conversation:

"sodenly in the waie she hard a greate noise, and presently there appeared unto her a Spirite of a

while colour in seemyng like to a little rugged Dogge, standyng neere her uppon the grounde, who

asked her whether she went."[49] The neighbor cannot prove that she saw a strange apparition, let

[48] *A briefe description of the notorious life of Iohn Lambe otherwise called Doctor Lambe. Together with his ignominious death* (Amsterdam: [G.Miller], 1628), found in <u>Early English Books Online</u>, American University Bender Library <u>http://eebo.chadwyck.com.proxyauwrlc.org/search</u> (accessed January 12, 2011), 4-5.

[49] *A detection of damnable driftes, practized by three vvitches arraigned at Chelmifforde in Essex, at the laste assises there holden, whiche were executed in Aprill. 1579 Set forthe to discouer the ambushementes of Sathan, whereby he would surprise vs lulled in securitie, and hardened with contempte of Gods vengeance threatened for*

alone that it was Fraunces' creation, but simply the statement is considered sufficient evidence. A woman was accused of witchcraft in Suffolk because when a pregnant woman offered her half of a cake, the witch replied that "As she had broken the Cake, so should the childe be broken in her body. And immediately the woman went home, and was delivered of two lumps of flesh."[50] A miscarriage is a horrible event, but there is no way to prove that the accused witch was actually responsible. The pattern of improvable accusations continues in text after text, where the witches are brought to trial purely on the unverifiable statement of another person. The trend shows that the proof of witchcraft was not nearly so important as the accusation.

In the light of medieval and early modern methods of torture, it is not hard to understand why many accused witches confessed to any crime that was thrown at them. Torturers intimidated the accused psychologically, by depriving them of sleep or giving them a tour of the torture room and a demonstration of the devices. They thrust needles under the fingernails, stretched people on the rack, used wooden boots to smash the shins, and hung the accused from the ceiling in a variety of positions that stressed the body and caused great pain.[51] Reading accounts of torture is enough to make this modern reader nauseous—it is unbelievable that a handful of accused held up under this torture and did not provide confessions.

One of the most infamous texts associated with torture and witch-hunting is the *Malleus Maleficarum*, by Jacob Sprenger and Heinrich Kramer, first published in 1486. The book is part treatise on the nature of witchcraft, and part instruction manual for witch-hunters.   Many historians see the publication of the *Malleus Maleficarum* as a significant event in the history of witch-hunts, because the writers managed to gain papal approval for the book. With papal

---

our offences, (London: J. Kingston, 1579), found in <u>Early English Books Online</u>, American University Bender Library <u>http://eebo.chadwyck.com.proxyau.wrlc.org/search</u> (accessed March 10, 2011), 7-8.

[50] *Signes and wonders from Heaven*, 4.

[51] Sidky, *Witchcraft, Lycanthropy, Drugs and Disease,* 130-137.

approval and with the detailed instructions that the book provides, the witch-hunts took off.[52] The

section of the book that deals with interrogation and trial methods covers all aspects of a trial,

down to "whether mortal enemies are allowed to give testimony" (they are not) and the "method

of passing sentence on a denounced woman who merely has a bad reputation."[53] It is designed to

address every possible variation of witch-hunting scenarios. The book is largely credited with

contributing an element of sexism to the witch-hunts. It specifically advocates the use of torture

in order to root out diabolism, even on females. The text is notably misogynist—even the title

indicates the author's belief that witchcraft was largely a female domain. The spelling of

malfic*a*rum in the title, as opposed to malefic*o*rum, feminizes the word according to Latin

grammatical rules and makes explicit the idea of witches as solely female.

In any study of witch-hunts it is necessary to acknowledge the element of gender, albeit

without embarking on a full analysis of gender relations. Many historians have discussed the

theory that the witch-hunts were motivated largely by sexism and ageism. Certainly, a central

tenet of witchcraft theory stated that women, as the weaker sex, were more liable to be overcome

by the devil and also more likely to be unable to resist the temptations of the devil.   However, it is

not within the scope of this paper to examine the reasoning and causes behind the misogynist

element of the witch-hunts. Rather, I point out this sexism as indicative of the feeling of needing

to reestablish proper boundaries of society in the face of disorder. Witch-hunts as a whole were a

reflection of this desperation to impose order on a world that was chaotic, and the aspect of sexism

is an additional manifestation of this desire, but in the sphere of gender. This element of sexism is

a notable difference between the witch-hunts and the persecution of plague-spreaders, but it

demonstrates that the feeling of anxiety in the early modern period extended to all areas of life.

---

[52] Pavlac, *Witch Hunts in the Western World*, 56-57.

[53] Heinricus Institoris and Jacobus Sprenger, *Malleus Maleficarum*, edited and translated by Christopher S. Mackay (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006) 464, 523.

The persecutors of plague-spreaders were seeking a way to remedy the plague, but witch-hunters

of the early modern period were attempting to assert control over all aspects of society.

Conclusion

   In any instance of widespread persecution, it is necessary for the analysts of later centuries

to fully understand the circumstances and motivations of the persecutors. Many historians, as I

have mentioned above, have conducted research intending to explain how the severe witch-hunts

of the early modern period could have developed. They have focused on the religious, political,

and social instability as the primary factors, and the theory that the witch-hunts were an extreme manifestation of sexism has been widely accepted. However, analyzing the relationship between the Black Death and the witch-hunts adds an additional dimension of understanding, and helps explain some of the desperation and urgency of the witch-hunts.

Residual paranoia that the plague had been a sign of the apocalypse, or that the plague would return, was a motivation to purge society of its sins. Occasional recurrences of plague fueled this paranoia. The population depletion caused by the plague accelerated the demise of feudalism and the established political system in Europe, and led to widespread political, economic, and social upheaval. It is necessary to remember that, while the developments created by the plague have generally been treated positively by history as the sources of Europe's transformation into a continent of constitutional monarchies and a strong middle class, these changes did not take place without great turmoil. Another consequence of the plague, new awareness of the Church's faults that contributed to the discontent that fueled the Reformation, brought with it persistent warfare and religious persecution. The creation of a belief in diabolical conspiracies of plague-spreaders influenced the perception of witchcraft as a secret widespread movement to destroy society. The methods of interrogation used on plague-spreaders provided a model for early modern witch-hunters, and the idea of a judicial process that relied entirely on torture to establish guilt. The accounts of witch trials demonstrate that there was very rarely any actual proof of guilt, indicating that the main issue was not proper administration of trial procedures or accurately investigating accusations. Rather, the most important element was feeling that progress was being made in fighting the overwhelming threat of witchcraft.

Europe had previously experienced uncontrollable circumstances that they sought to rectify by means of sacrificing scapegoats, but the witch-hunts of the early modern period marked

a new level in seeking to eliminate the persons who were believed to be the source of the

problems.

Bibliography

PRIMARY SOURCES

A Briefe Description of the Notorious Life of John Lambe, otherwise called Doctor Lambe.
   Together with his Ignominious Death. Amsterdam: 1628. In Early English Books Online,
   American University Bender Library, accessed November 4 2010.

A Detection of damnable driftes, practized by three Vvitches arraigned at Chelmissorde in Essex,
   at the laste Assises there holden, whiche were executed in Aprill 1579. London: 1579. In

Early English Books Online, American University Bender Library, accessed November 4 2010.

A Guide to Grand Jury Men, Divided into Two Bookes. London: 1627. In Early English Books Online, American University Bender Library, accessed November 4 2010.

A rehearsall both straung and true, of hainous and horrible actes committed by Elizabeth Stile, Alias Rockingham, Mother Dutten, Mother Deuell, Mother Margaret, Fower notious Witches, aprehended at winsore in the Countie of Barks, and at Abbington arraigned, condemned, and executed, on the 26 daye of Februarie laste Anno 1579. London: 1580. In Early English Books Online, American University Bender Library, accessed November 4 2010.

Boccaccio, Giovanni. *The Decameron*, translated by M. Rigg. David Campbell, 1921. In Internet Medieval Source Book, Fordham University, accessed March 12, 2011.

Holland, Henry. *Spirituall Preseruatiues against the Pestilence. Or seven Lectures on the 91. Psalme. First Printed in Anno. 1593. And now reuised, corrected, and published, as generally for the instruction of ignorant people: so specially for the confirmation of the weake seruants of Jesus Christ; describing the most divine and most soueraigne Preseruatiues against he pestilence.* London: T.C., 1603. In Early English Books Online, American University Bender Library, accessed January 5 2011.

Institoris, Heinrich and Jacob Sprenger. *Malleus Maleficarum: in tres di uisus partes, in quibus concurrentia ad maleficia, maleficiorum effectus, remedia aduersus maleficia, et modus procedendi, ac puniendi maleficos abundè continetur, praecipuè autem omnibus inquisitoribus, & diuini uerbi concionatoribus utilis…* Venice: 1576. Folger Shakespeare Library, Washington, D.C. September 23 2010.

— *Malleus Maleficarum*. Translated by P.G. Maxwell-Stuart. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007.

Present remedies against the plague Shewing sundry preseruatiues for the same, by holsome fumes, drinkes, vomits, and other inward receits: as also the perfect cure (by implaisture) of any that are therewith infected. Now necessary to bee obserued of euery housholder, to auoid the infection, lately begun in some places of this cittie. Written by a learned phisition, for the health of his country: and now newly inlarged by the same author, with remedies for the newe pestilent feuer. London: J. Danter, 1594. In Early English Books Online, American University Bender Library, accessed January 12 2011.

Procopius, *History of the Wars*, translated by H.B. Dewing. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1914. In Internet Medieval Source Book, Fordham University, accessed March 12 2011.

Scot, Reginald. *The Discovery of Witchcraft*. London: 1665. In Early English Books Online, American University Bender Library, accessed November 4 2010.

Signes and Wonders from Heaven. London. In <u>Early English Books Online</u>, American
    University Bender Library, accessed November 4 2010.

*The Apprehension and confession of three notorious Witches. Arreigned and by Justice
    condemned and executed at Chelmes-forde, in the Countye of Essex, the 5 day of Julye, last
    past 1589. With the manner of their diuelish practices and keeping of their spirits, whose
    formes are herin truelye proportioned.* London: 1590. In <u>Early English Books Online</u>,
    American University Bender Library, accessed November 4 2010.

"The Black Death and the Jews 1348-1349 CE." In <u>Internet Jewish History Sourcebook,</u>
    Fordham University, accessed March 12 2011.

The dance of death; painted by H. Holbein, and engraved by W. Hollar ([London]: [1794]), in
    <u>Eighteenth Century Collections Online</u>, American University Bender Library, accessed
    March 28 2011.

Bibliography

SECONDARY SOURCES

Aberth, John. *The Black Death: The Great Mortality of 1348-1350, A Brief History with
    Documents*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005.

Bagliani, Agostino Paravicini and Francesco Santi. *The Regulation of Evil: Social and Cultural
    Attitudes to Epidemics in the Late Middle Ages*. Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols Publishers,
    1998.

Byrne, Joseph P. *Daily Life During the Black Death*.   Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2006.

Cantor, Norman F. *In the Wake of the Plague: The Black Death and the World It Made*. New York: The Free Press, 2001.

— *Inventing the Middle Ages: The Lives, Works, and Ideas of the Great Medievalists of the Twentieth Century*. New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc, 1991.

Cohn, Jr., Samuel K. "Epidemiology of the Black Death and Successive Waves of Plague." In PubMed Central Open Access, American University Bender Library, accessed March 12 2011.

— "Popular Insurrection and the Black Death: A Comparative View." In Project Muse Premium Collection, American University Bender Library, accessed March 12 2011.

— *The Black Death Transformed: Disease and Culture in Early Renaissance Europe*. London: Arnold, 2002.

Cohn Jr., Samuel K. and Pierre-Antoine Fabre, "Piété et Commande d'Oeuvres d'Art après la Peste Noire," *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales,* 51ème Année, No. 3. In JSTOR, American University Bender Library, accessed March 12 2011.

Coudert, Allison P. "The Myth of the Improved Status of Protestant Women: The Case of the Witchcraze," in *Articles on Witchcraft, Magic and Demonology,* edited by Brian P. Levack. New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1992.

Huppert, George. *After the Black Death: A Social History of Early Modern Europe*. Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1998.

Levack, Brian P. *Articles on Witchcraft, Magic and Demonology: A Twelve Volume Anthology of Scholarly Articles. Volume 10: Witchcraft, Women and Society*. New York: Garland Publishing, 1992.

— *New Perspectives on Witchcraft, Magic and Demonology: Volume I, Demonology, Religion, and Witchcraft*. New York: Routledge, 2001.

— *The Witch-Hunt in Early Modern Europe*. Harlow, Great Britain: Pearson Education Limited, 2006.

— *The Witchcraft Sourcebook*. New York: Routledge, 2004.

— *Witch Hunts in the Western World: Persecution and Punishment from the Inquisition through the Salem Trials*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2009.

Maxwell-Stuart, P.G. *The Malleus Maleficarum.* Manchester, United Kingdom: Manchester University Press, 2007.

Pavlac, Brian. *Witch-Hunts in the Western World: Persecution and Punishment from the Inquisition through the Salem Trials.* Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2009.

Pfister, Christian. "Climatic Extremes, Recurrent Crises and Witch Hunts: Strategies of European Societies in Coping with Exogenous Shocks in the Late Sixteenth and Early Seventeenth Centuries," *The Medieval History Journal*, Vol. 10 Iss. 33. Sage Publications, 2007. Accessed March 12 2011.

Sidky, H. *Witchcraft, Lycanthropy, Drugs, and Disease: An Anthropological Study of the European Witch-Hunts.* New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 1997.

Sloan, A.W. "The Black Death in England," *History of Medicine Vol. 59 Iss. 18.* 1981. In South African Medical Journal, American University Bender Library, accessed December 15, 2011.

Thatcher, J. and E.H. McNeal, *A Source Book for Medieval History.* New York: Charles Scribner's, 1905. In Internet Medieval Source Book, Fordham University, accessed March 12 2011.

Welfle, Frederick. "The Black Death of 1348 and its Bearing on the Reformation" In *The Historical Bulletin* Vol.9 Iss. 1, 1930.