Witchcraft In British History Essay, Research Paper

WITCHCRAFT IN BRITISH HISTORY

“European witchcraft was a unique phenomenon which differed from European high magic from the low magic or simple sorcery” (Russel 658). “High magic and simple sorcery differ however in methods and motivation” (658). High magic was astrology and alchemy (658). Sorcerers are usually people that are motivated by strong feelings of jealously, revenge, malice which are experienced by everyone (Marwich 3042). “More supernatural are witches who are slaves of aberration and addiction that are consideration weird” ( 3041). “The word witch derives from the Old English noun wicca ’sorcerer’, and the verb wiccian ‘to cast the spell’.” The term does not really have a sinister meaning to it. It comes from the adjective ‘white’ which means to help others. Throughout British history superstitions regarding witches have affected the lifestyle of the people and literature of the world.

One question that everyone wants to know, is if European witchcraft really exists. If it exists merely as a concept, a body of beliefs or whether it exists objectively is the question that baffles people. But whether witchcraft exist or not the concept of witchcraft dominated the period of the late Middle Ages through the Renaissance and the Reformation and down to the Eighteenth century. “Estimated over 100,000 to 200,000 people were executed and millions were tortured and terrified by the government” (Russel 658). Therefore, witchcraft brought the darkest periods in the European history.

The first witches knew about nature, they really helped perform remedies, in a time of need. Magic is what people started to beleive the witches were performing at first in their lives (Stallman 11). “They started to beleive they could start making people afraid, and so thats what they did ( 13). People also believed to became a witch, a seed in the mothers milf while breast fedding was placed in a little child during infantsy (Marwich 3042).

First the witches practiced sorcery (Eliade 417). Sorcery fills societal functions that merges from religion (416). Since the 1800’s a new kind of diabolic witchcraft evolved in medieval and early modern Europe (417). Sorcery demands no attributes and can be practiced by anyone who can receive necessary magical substances (Marwich 3042). “Sorcery may have a variety of social functions: to relieve social tension, to define and sustain social values; to explain or control terrified phenomena; to give a sense of power over death; to enhance the solidarity of a community against outsiders” (Eliade 416).

An other element in the development in witchcraft in Europe was Christian heresy. It had been established by the fifteenth century. Its chief elements were pact with the devil, formal repudiation of Christ, the secret nocturnal meeting, the ride by night, the desecration of the Eucharist and the crucifix, orgy, sacrificial infanticide and cannibalism (417). At the first formal trial in 1022 is were sorcery was linked with the Devil. “In this trial the accused was said to hold orges underground at night, to call up evil spirits, to kill and cremate children conceived at previous orgies and use their ashes in blasphous parody of the Eucharist, to renounce Christ and desecrate the crusifix, and to pay homage to the Devil” (417).

Ideas introduced by courts suggested the differences in witchcraft and in sorcery, that suppossed these two religions were alike. In deciding the laws against witchcraft than against sorcery in the prosecution of the witches the courts finalized the separation ,although in England that distinction was never made. In England, witchcraft remained a civil crime, so that convinced witches were hung ( Russel 661).

“Theology , then, made a logical connection between witchcraft and heresy. Heresy is any persistently held belief counter to orthodox doctrine” (Eliade 418). The worst imaginable heresy was if one used demons serves the Devil rather than God, and if one serves the devil, one acknowledges that correct theology involves serving the Devil rather than God (418).

The inquisition was another way to transform sorcery into witchcraft. The connection between them both, meant that sorcery could be prosecuted with much greater severity than before. Penalties for heresy were severe. In 1198, Innocent III ordered the execution of those who persisted in heresy after having been convicted and excommunicated. Gradually almost all sorcery came to be included under the heresy.

In the Middle Ages, pagan religion and folklore were the next elements in the formation of witchcraft ( Russel 660). “The Weld Hunt, and example was a model of the witches Sabbath” (660). It was about the spirits and ghosts who strayed around exposing and ruining everything (660). If anyone approached who was a human being would be killed (660). Pagan festivals of light and fertility were maintained in revised form. “One particular was “need fire” festivals on the 31 of October changed into Halloween by Christians on the Eve of All Saint’s Day. To the churches minor definition of minor demons were dwarves, fairies, trolls and other small nature spirts derived from the thoughts of witches (660).

In this time there were many famines and earthquakes. Warfare and plagues also increased. The witches were not blamed for these disasters. Rather, the tension of witches generated the disaster (663). The accompanied of general high levels of anxiety made people afraid of witches, so that made more people ready to lodge accusations at witches (663). They called it the beginning of the Old Religion also known as “the burning time” in the mid 1300’s (Revesz 24).

The number of executions for witchcraft measured in the hundreds. This time period from 1450 to 1700 was know as the witch craze ( Eliade 419). Women and men, put on trial once had a right to be innocent until proven guilty but when the trials of the witches started there was no doubt that every person that went on trial would be burned at the stake. The courts allowed to gossip and rumor stand as evidence. Many children even testified against their own parents. Lady Alice Kyteler lived in Ireland. People said she made her family rich by magic. When she swept the city streets she chanted. She was accused of witchcraft and went on trial. Two of her loyal servants went against their master and stated that they all made potions and worshiped the devil. Each one of the women were burned at the stake. Another women named Isoble Gowdie lived in Scotland on a farm. She was not happy. Isobel told people she met the Devil and flew on a piece of straw. She stated even that she turned into a black cat and saw fairies that tried to kill people. She was put on trial and also burned at the stake ( Stallman 17 – 20). Terror of witchcraft grew in both Catholic and Protestant religions between 1560 – 1660 while there was wars going on in the different regions (Eliade 419).

In the witch craze all incomes levels were represented among the accused, with a biased towered the poor because no one beleived what the poor had to say at this time period. Toward the end of the craze however, the rich and the powerful were accused more frequently than the poor. That is one of the reasons for the rapid decline of the craze in the seventeenth century.

There were many stereotypical ideas of witches. They were thought to be old, lame, pale, fowl, and full of wrinkles ( Revesz 4). They were thought to be old, between the ages of forty and sixty were accused of witchcraft because they would be wise and full of knowledge and be like hermits. Also anyone connected with medicine especially midwives, was prone to suspicion, because illness and death could do easily be blamed upon witchcraft. Children were seldom accused of witchcraft but were often believed to be the victims of witchcraft. People that were accused and convicted were either usually bad or usually had good reputations. They ranged from thieves and quarrels to magistrates and teachers. Although about one – third of the accused and convicted witches were males, the greatest majority were females ( Russel 664). A male witch was known as a warlock, sorcerer or a wizard. Women were considered to be inferior to men and more weaker and easily led stray by the forces of evil. The men were considered powerful and that is good to avoid prosecution of any kind. Women tended to live longer, even with the child birth death statistics they survived plagues and famines better. This meant women lived longer than men without their legal and social protection.

People used many kinds of tests to determine whether a women was a witch. They looked for moles, scars, birthmarks or other marks on a womens body where a pin could be stuck without causing pain. These were known as devil marks, telling where the devil touched her. In other tests, people tried the suspected woman’s arms and legs and threw her into deep water. If she floated, she was considered guilty of being a witch. If she sank she was innocent.

Interpretations of the meaning of European witchcraft have varied in the extreme. “Serious writings about witchcraft from the nineteenth century was limited to polemical attacks upon or defense of belief in witchcraft”( 658 – 659). In 1899 Charles Leland published Aradia: The Gospel of the Witches showed evidence that witchcraft was the survival of a fertility cult (658 – 659). This piece of work influenced Margret Murray, an antroropologists, that lead a school called Murrayite school to argument that witchcraft did exist as a ancient pagan religion centered on the worship of a honored god that was called Dianus (658 – 659). Having little historical basis the Murrayite theory is now rejected by scholars(Marwich 3043).

The first critical historical study of witchcraft by a writer in English was Henry Charles Lea’s History of the Inquisition of the Middle Ages in 1887 (Russel 659). He studied the context of its repression. Much the same view was taken by George Burr who with the assistance of others at Cornell University wrote The Encyclopedia of Witchcraft and Demonology in 1959.

Witchcraft did not just affect the people of the time period but it also affected the literature around the time period. The most famous witches live and die in fairy tales. These witches can change shape as in the tale of the witch cat, they can eat children in Hansel and Gretel, keep them in a castle like in Rapunzel, some witches just want power as in the white witch in the Lion and in the Witch and the Wardrobe. There are a few witches who are always on the good side as in The Wizard of Oz (Stallman 28 – 43).

One main writer who loved to write about witchcraft is William Shakespeare. He included witches in many of his poems and plays. In Macbeth he displays the stereotypical form of a witch as ugly, poor, wrinkly, fowl (Scot 4). In this story the witches give prophecies that mess with the characters mind and makes them react to their prophecies.

Though modern man may have given up the more specific beliefs in witchcraft, many writers have retained many of its associated concepts. The fables of witchcraft have taken to people so fast that the idea will probably never leave our culture. People will see the idea in many more books, poems and television.

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342