

Conclusion

The witch trials enabled the enforcement of the gender division of labour, of the enclosures of land, of alienation from our bodies and especially our reproductive bodies, of the assumed norm of women as the weaker sex and the exclusion of women from social, economic, cultural and political spheres of influence. They introduced gender divides in the class, thereby helping crush class resistance to emerging capitalism.

The story in this pamphlet is the 16th century European one, but the same story is told in North and South America during colonial times, in Africa both in the colonial times and again recently.

Gender stereotypes and gender violence still go hand in hand all over the world today - with murder of women happening at "a dizzying rate". Any surprise about people's complicity in the trials of 16th and 17th century Europe should make us question the complicity of current society to the deaths caused by war, capitalism and patriarchy today.

We need to bring this subject to light in order to understand where we are today - the gendered origins of capitalism, and the capitalist origins of this current form of patriarchy. We can use the knowledge to make us stronger in the fight against on-going repression, and to celebrate those women staying strong and fighting back - past, present and future.

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Introduction

"The number of witches and sorcerers has everywhere become enormous. This kind of people within these last few years are marvellously increased", wrote Bishop Jewel in 1559. And "The land is full of witches. They abound in all places and would in short time overrun the whole land" claimed Chief Justice Anderson in 1602.

In England, about a quarter of all criminal trials from the early sixteenth to the end of the seventeenth century were witch trials, and most who were accused, died. It is hard to get figures of exactly how many women were killed, but likely hundreds of thousands, at a time when the population of Europe was smaller than it is now. Neither the witch trials, nor the idea of the witch being evil, existed before this phase. In the UK witchcraft became punishable by death in 1532. Between this date and 1066 there were only six recorded executions of witches and those were treason cases. It died down again in the 18th Century, with witchcraft no longer being a crime in most of Europe by the mid 17 hundreds. The most intense phase was 1580 to 1630 during the decline of feudal relations, the rise of 'mercantile capitalism', increasing migration and day labouring. The trials were no hang-over from medieval times, but part of the project of the rise of capitalism and the 'enlightenment'.

The witches were lower class. Most of the women accused were poor peasant women, and the accusers were either members of the clergy, or wealthy members of that same community - often their employers or landlords.



For the unleashing of a campaign of terror against women, unmatched by any other persecution, weakened the resistance of the European peasantry to the assault launched against it by the gentry and the state... The witch hunts deepened the division between women and men, destroying a universe of practises, beliefs, and social subjects whose existence was incompatible with the capitalist work discipline".

The witch trials worked to divide the class along gender lines by spreading fear and mistrust. "The years of propaganda and terror sowed amongst men the seeds of a deep psychological alienation from women, that broke class solidarity and undermined their own collective power... just as today, by repressing women the ruling class more effectively repressed the entire proletariat.... If we consider the historical context in which the witch-hunt occurred, the gender and class of the accused, and the effects of the persecution, then we must conclude that the witch hunting in Europe was an attack on women's resistance of the spread of capitalist relations and the power that women had gained by virtue of their sexuality, their control over reproduction and their ability to heal."



Then - just as now - it was the witch hunters who were the organised anti-social plots of terror; a "calculated ruling class campaign of terrorisation ... well organised, initiated, financed and executed by Church and State".

The phase before the height of the witch trials was politically explosive all over Europe. The birth of the new order was, as ever, a bloody process. There were the peasant wars in Germany, the growth and crushing of the Heretical sects or radical Christian groups. There were the battles against the enclosures in England, the revolt of the Croquants in France against tithes, taxes and the price of bread. In all these struggles women played a central role.

They were an integral part of the communities being attacked, and an integral part of the struggle against those attacks. The trials were a "class war carried out by other means. We cannot fail to see a connections between the fear of uprisings and the prosecutors insistence on the witches Sabbat..." Throughout this period any peasant gathering, festival or dance was described by the authorities as a virtual Sabbat. The witch hunts crushed those who remembered the peasant wars, the struggles in defence of the commons, the riots and invasions against rising bread prices and would have remained to carry on the resistance. As the trials continued, the communities were robbed of the independent, strong, radical, rebellious women who would have served as role models and led a fight back.

According to Silvia Federici: "What has not been recognised is that the witch hunt was one of the most important events in the development of capitalist society and the formation of the modern proletariat.

The witches were women. There existed men practicing all sorts of magic and healing, but they were not killed. Jean Bodin, supposed figure of the 'enlightenment' and a French author of a witch finder's manual set the ratio of women to men as 50 to 1. In England 90% of those killed were women, and most men killed were the husbands of accused women.

The phenomenon was Europe-wide; represents a deep philosophical, social and political shift in society; and was undeniably orchestrated by the authorities at the highest level. However - in seeming contrast to the scale and depth of the phenomenon, the actual trials concern daily life and village level issues. The accusation was witchcraft, but the crimes were causing milk to curdle, stealing apples, helping a neighbour give birth, or making certain herbal teas. The trials show how the deep and broad power shifts in European history were carried out on a village level, against the daily practices of peasant women. The effects were so fundamental that we feel their effects on our gender and class relations today.

How the trials were executed

The witch hunts were organised, coordinated, multi-faceted systemic attacks. The church defined the problem with the witches, the doctors examined, tortured and condemned them, the lawyers pressed charges and oversaw legal proceedings, the state administrators organised the executions.

The first witch finder's manual, the Malleus Maleficarum (hammer of witches) was published in 1484 by two Dominican monks and spread widely throughout Europe.

The rise of the printing press led to more anti-witch pamphlets and manuals being printed and many clerics, scholars and royalty also published their own texts, including King James and Jean Bodin.

The process of the trials started with a steady indoctrination by the authorities publicly expressing anxiety about the spread of witches. The plays, paintings, poems and religious texts of the time all help to build up the demonised stereotypes of the witches and spread the fear. Witch finders would travel from village to village with propaganda and notes on how to identify witches. Notes were pinned up that the witch finder was coming in, for example, two weeks and everyone was expected to start identifying who the local witches were. Refusing to cooperate could put your life in danger. Witches were accused in public and anyone trying to assist the woman would be immediately a suspect. This propaganda, together with a simple reign of terror lasting two hundred years, had an inestimable effect.

The trials were a farce with random evidence and almost no chance of acquittal. Torture was a huge part of the trials. James I: "Loath they are to confess without torture, which witnesses their guilt". This torture was severe and extremely sexually abusive. The crimes themselves were so inexact, indefinable and vague that we can see the parallels with 'terrorism' today. A vague, but very powerful, term that puts you beyond the rest of humanity and the expectation of humane treatment. Silvia Federici writes: "The very vagueness of the charge - the fact that it was impossible to prove it, while at the same time it evoked the maximum of horror - meant that it could be used to punish any form of protest and generate suspicion even towards the most ordinary aspects of daily life".

"enjoyed tobacco and ale after their feat". In France, women initiated revolts in Montpellier in 1645 and in Cordoba, Italy in 1652; women played a crucial role in the German Peasant wars in the 1520s and 30s and many women were part of the various Heretic sects.

The details of the trials show many women being accused of rebelling against members of the local ruling class. Such as those who were accused of rebelling against the village constable who was trying to get their sons to be soldiers; or against the overseer of the poor who put their children into compulsory service. Joan Peachy was accused of witchcraft in 1582 after complaining the poor relief collector gave her inferior bread. Or the trial of Margaret Harkett in 1585: "William Goodwin's servant denied her yeast, whereupon his brewing stand dried up. She was struck by a bailiff who had caught her taking wood from the master's grounds; the bailiff went mad... A gentleman told his servant to refuse her buttermilk; after which they were unable to make butter".

Other women were accused after retaliating against the local tyrants, against enclosures and shutting rights of way. The real covens were not cultish religious devil worship, but dissident underground groups of women (or mixed groups) - pissed off, disenfranchised and angry.

The authorities were terrified of self-organised groups and networks. In 1920 Montague Summers, translator of the Malleus Maleficarum, wrote "The witches were a vast political movement, an organised society, which was anti-social and anarchical, a world wide plot against civilisations".



Moreover, you would get so much that you could pay your servants a better salary in the future, because one could confiscate whole houses and particularly the more well to do ones".



Money was also made by the witch finders taking bribes to not accuse people, and the various executioners, hunters, administrators etc were all paid. The documents of the expenses of the trials include the wood, the torture instruments and the beer for the witch trial team. In Ireland particularly, some richer women were killed, and eventually the ruling class got nervous and stopped supporting the trials.



Organized women, organized resistance

The trials targeted rebellious women and groups that were part of the general high level of class resistance to the economic restructuring, at a village or regional level. They also broke class resistance by creating a gender divide.



Women, of course, were part of groups and networks; sharing herbs, knowledge, skills, comradeship and friendship. One of the main accusations was of being part of an organised rebellion; and to be sure these women were. And the infamous sabbats, (nocturnal meetings, dances or feasts), were the meetings and festivals of these rebellious communities. Facing poverty and oppression these networks also became politicised and organised such as the women who "cast down fences and hedges" in Lincolnshire in 1608; those women who "took it upon themselves to assemble at night to dig up hedges and level the ditches" in 1608 in Warwickshire or those women who after destroying an enclosure in York in 1624



In describing what the trials should be like Jean Bodin states: "The proof of such crimes is so obscure and so difficult that not one witch in a million would be accused or punished if the procedure were governed by the ordinary rules. He who is accused of sorcery should never be acquitted".

The trials and executions, hangings or burnings were very public affairs with the whole community forced to attend - including, and sometimes especially, the daughters of the witches. The witch hunters would arrive in town with doctors, administrators, members of the clergy and executioners. The whole village would be expected to turn out in the town square, for a show trial - a grand affair culminating in executions. Absence or worse still, speaking against the trial or defending an accused would be taken as admission of guilt and your life would be at risk. The spiral of fear cannot be overestimated in towns where there were regular burnings of numbers of women lasting for years and years and years. These people were neighbours, friends and family. Reports of neighbours accusing each other were a reaction to the fear. This is a very different story to the 'witch craze' or communal psychoses explanation that is often given in mainstream history.



The rest of this pamphlet looks at some causes for, and effects of, the witch-hunts. The witch-hunts were one of the mechanisms to control and subordinate women whose social and economic independence was a threat to the emerging social order. Mary Daly claims the witches were "women whose physical, intellectual, economic, moral and spiritual independence and activity profoundly threatened the male monopoly in every sphere".

As women were excluded from economic and political life, ridicule and violence was used to enforce and justify the new gender relations.

Indigestible independent women

Women who were too loud, too confident or too angry were condemned. Reginald Scott declared "The chief fault of witches is that they are scolds". He is referring to women who speak back to their husbands or talk amongst themselves. A scold was defined as a woman who was "a troublesome and angry woman who doth break the public peace... and increase public discord". Faced with a campaign to exclude women from the workplace and developing professions, these stereotypes made it easier to attack women who fought this tendency and asserted their economic and social independence. It was a crime to be: a busy woman of the tongue, a maker of rhymes or nicknames or libellous, lascivious ballads.

One poem from 1630 reads:

"Ill fares the hapless family that shows
A cock that's silent and a hen that crows.
I know not which live more unnatural lives,
Obedient husbands or commanding wives"

Or this one:

"But if, Amazon-like you attack your gallants,
And put us in fear of our lives,
You may do very well for your sisters and aunts,
But believe me, you'll never be wives"

Accusing someone as a witch could alleviate the guilt and responsibility to provide for dependant neighbours. The feeling of having a curse could be the guilt and tension of neglecting and condemning members of your community. In many of the trials the accuser had actually wronged the woman previously e.g. refusing charity to her. For example: "The old woman had passed by the door, where the girl was eating a new wheaten loaf. She looked earnestly upon Mary, but, speaking nothing, passed by; and yet instantly returned, and with the like look and silence departed. At which doing the bread which she was chewing fell out of Mary Glover's mouth, and she herself fell backwards off the stool where she sat, into a grievous fit".

The trials allowed for the development of the capitalist mentality of private property and wealth, as those previously provided for as part of the whole become beggars asking for charity. Widows being excluded from feasts and the like are the origin of fairy tales such as sleeping beauty. Women became the scapegoats for all sorts of ills - deaths, crop failure, animal disease etc. and a way of the emerging middle class ensuring a bigger share of scarce resources.

In other areas, the trials could also be used to other ends, such as enabling the authorities to confiscate any property or wealth the women had - explaining the numbers of economically independent women killed. Maria Mies claims that the money made was much more significant than we assume, and sites this letter from Bailiff Geiss to Lord Lindheim: "If only your lordship would be willing to start the burning, we would gladly provide the firewood and bear all other costs, and your lordship would earn so much that the bridge and also the church could be well repaired."

The economic situation was dire for many people by the mid 16th century as bread prices rose and people were forced off their subsistence plots and commons. Women were forced to beg or steal to provide for themselves and their children.

The correlation between the enclosures and the witch trials is shown by the fact that in England, most of the witch trials occurred in Essex where most of the land had been enclosed, whereas in the Scottish Highlands, where the communal life continued, there is no evidence of witch hunting. The increasing use of money exacerbated class divides, forcing some people off their land, and making small entrepreneurs out of others. There is a clear correlation between the number of witch trials and the rise in food prices - possible causes being the trials as a reaction to revolts against food prices, and/or competition for scarce resources.

Many of those murdered were widows. In England there were changes in the law around this time regarding women and property - widows now got one third of the husband's land, not all of it. In Italy even this one third was taken away from widows, forcing them to become vagrants and beggars. Rented property did not typically pass to the widow. The English Poor Laws stigmatised the poor, banned begging without permission and later said that each parish should be responsible for its own poor, and residency had to be proved by birth, marriage or apprenticeship. Those who could not prove residency would be forcibly removed - often 100s of miles. This was much to the detriment of those forced to migrate, especially as the richer towns were stricter on their residency controls.

Witches were accused of "going from house to house for a pot full of milk, yeast, pottage or some other relief, without which they could hardly live".

But behind these comic poems a real and sinister gender war was taking place. Women's legal rights were being eroded to the point where across Europe they lost the right to own property or conduct any other economic activity, make independent legal contracts, or even in some cases, live alone. The ridicule of independent women could take the form of women being forced to wear a muzzle (or 'scolds bridle') in the streets.

This cultural campaign to ridicule and accuse independent women went along with the exclusion of women from wage work. This created a gender divide within the working class by offering men a better chance of finding work. In reality the work the men took on was often partly done by women, from home-based handicraft and up to the extent that husbands would get the wage for their wives' work, even for wet-nurses.

Referring to both the way the authorities encouraged this exclusion of women from a wage, and the domestic and manufacturing work that women were indeed doing, Silvia Federici explains:

"It was from this alliance between the crafts and the urban authorities, along with the continuing privatization of land, that a new sexual division of labor...was forged, defining women in terms - mothers, wives, daughters, widows - that hid their status as workers, whilst giving men free access to women's bodies, their labor, and the bodies and labor of their children." She claims that the sexual division of labour was a power relation which was a cornerstone of the process of primitive accumulation and the development of capitalism.

The witch hunts backed up this cultural and economic oppression with the ever-present threat of execution for non-compliants.

Reconstructing women's sexuality

One of the outcomes of the witch trials was changing the view of women's sexuality and gender characteristic from powerful to powerless. Prior to this period women were more equal actors in the sexual relations, represented as lusty, predatory and sexually powerful (if still often evil). In over half the trials women are accused of some sexual crime such as sex outside marriage, sex with the devil, sex with animals etc. The demonising of women's independent or non-procreative sexuality provided the construct for the development of the nuclear family and the woman and the property of her husband.

Some of the most bizarre stuff on women's sexuality comes from the Malleus Malificarum, such as: "And what then is to be thought of those witches who collect male organs in great numbers together, and put them in a bird's nest, or shut them up in a box where they more themselves like living members and eat oats and corn as has been seen by many and is a matter of common report?" Or "All witchcraft comes from carnal lust, which in women is insatiable".

The last quote portrays women as sexually active and aggressive; men would accuse women of bewitching them into sex, thereby justifying rape or getting out of unwanted affairs or pregnancies. This is in contrast to the later stereotype of submissive and weak women, fully developed by the end of the witch trials.

Witchcraft and texts such as the Malleus Maleficarum which seem so ludicrous now, were still being seriously discussed by these 'rational' men in academia right up until the end of the 18th century. Those men advocating really empirical science such as Galileo or Copernicus were accused of heresy.

More evidence of the brutality of the birth of modern science and medicine is witnessed in the torture chambers of the witch hunts, which served as medical laboratories and were overseen by physicians, and in the human dissections. Public hangings would be followed by a battle over the corpse as family members attempted to save it from the surgeons and their degrading public autopsies.

Knowledge is power, and that power was in the hands of working- or peasant class women. The monopoly on the treatment and theory - and therefore control of the body - was being contested.

Silvia Federici writes, 'Just as the Enclosures expropriated the peasantry from the communal land, so the witch-hunt expropriated women from their bodies, which were thus "liberated" from any impediment preventing them functioning as machines for the production of labour. For the threat of the stake erected more formidable barriers around women's bodies than were ever erected by the fencing off of the commons'.

Older women and the rise of private property

The witch trials were used: to demonise begging women, thereby alleviating guilt amongst richer members of the same community; to expropriate the property of single women, and to deal with any resistance or crime that was a reaction to the increasing poverty.

The rise and destruction of science

The destruction of the healers and midwives went hand in hand with the rise of the new 'rationality'. These new scientists were totally complicit in the witch trials, which, far from being a hang-over from a time of magic and superstition, were largely a campaign carried out by these same men of the enlightenment. The context was a battle for 'truth', the concept of control over the natural world, the acceptance of hierarchy as 'natural' and the mind / body split so useful for capitalism. Ironically, much of the healers' knowledge was empirical, using cause and effect and experimentation, which we now are told is the result of modern science and represents progress from the supposedly superstitious belief systems of the Middle Ages. Huge amounts of knowledge of herbalism, passed on by generations of women was lost during the trials. This was literally centuries of developed knowledge and practice and herbalists are now working hard to reclaim and rediscover this knowledge. The male scientists at the time were basing their knowledge on philosophy and clerical studies. The healers on the other hand had a knowledge of chemistry, botany, natural science, pharmacology and anatomy. Paracelsus, often claimed to be the father of modern medicine, said in 1527 that he "learned from the sorceress all he knew". The myth of the enlightenment as modern men bringing rationality and empiricism has to be criticised when viewed through the lens of the witch hunts.

Many men so praised as the fathers of modern science were deeply involved in the witch-hunts, for example Richard Boyle, Thomas Hobbes and Francis Bacon - who exposed the evil of witches alongside his more famous 'scientific rationality'.

The witch-hunts provoked a fear of the powerful woman, then used the pact with the devil to ridicule that power. The process of the trials succeeded in transforming the idea of women's sexuality from dangerous - but active and powerful - to weak and powerless. The devil became the main sexual actor - seducing and controlling weak women and demoting their power to being the servant of the single powerful male, the devil.

The whole concept of the devil as an all-powerful entity was introduced at this time. Prior to that he was a sort of mischievous, but relatively powerless troublemaker. To introduce a male, singular dominating evil fitted the new image of women as submissive to male power; one husband, one god, one devil. The power and agency of women was denied as they became servants of the devil.

The construct developed during this period of the submissive wife and mother has lasted to this day and serves the capitalist mode of production providing unpaid mother, carer and worker - producing and reproducing labour power. The woman, her children and her work became the property of her husband. All non-procreative forms of female sexuality were demonised such as post-menopausal women's sexuality, lesbian and gay sex, prostitution, sex between young and old, collective sex (such as the spring festivals) or sex using contraception. Federici states: "The witch-hunt condemned female sexuality as the source of every evil, but it was also the main vehicle of a broad reconstruction of sexual life that, conforming with the new capitalist work-discipline, criminalised any sexual activity that threatened procreation, the transmission of property within the family, or took time and energy away from work".

Prostitution became illegal for the first time during this period and many prostitutes were burned as witches. They were economically and sexually independent women that did not fit the new model. Adultery was made punishable by death, and birth out of wedlock was made illegal.

Post-menopausal women were often killed as witches and the new stereotype of the old hag - desperate, horny, but repulsive, was constructed in stark contrast to the revered and cared-for wise woman or crone. With the breakdown of communal life and the beginnings of the nuclear family the status of the 'elderly relatives' were demoted. In the middle ages both the wise woman and the prostitute were considered positive social figures, but then demonised for their non-procreation sex.

Lesbians were also accused, such as the trial of Elizabeth Bennet: "William Bonner saith, that Elizabeth Bennet and his wife were lovers and familiar friends and did accompanys much together". When the wife dies, Elizabeth is accused of "clasping her in her arms and killing her". Prior to this phase the word 'gossip' simply meant friend, but as women's relations with each other were seen as suspect, the word became an insult. In 1576 Margaret Belsed of Boreham was condemned for "being a witch and not living with her husband".

Wise women and healers

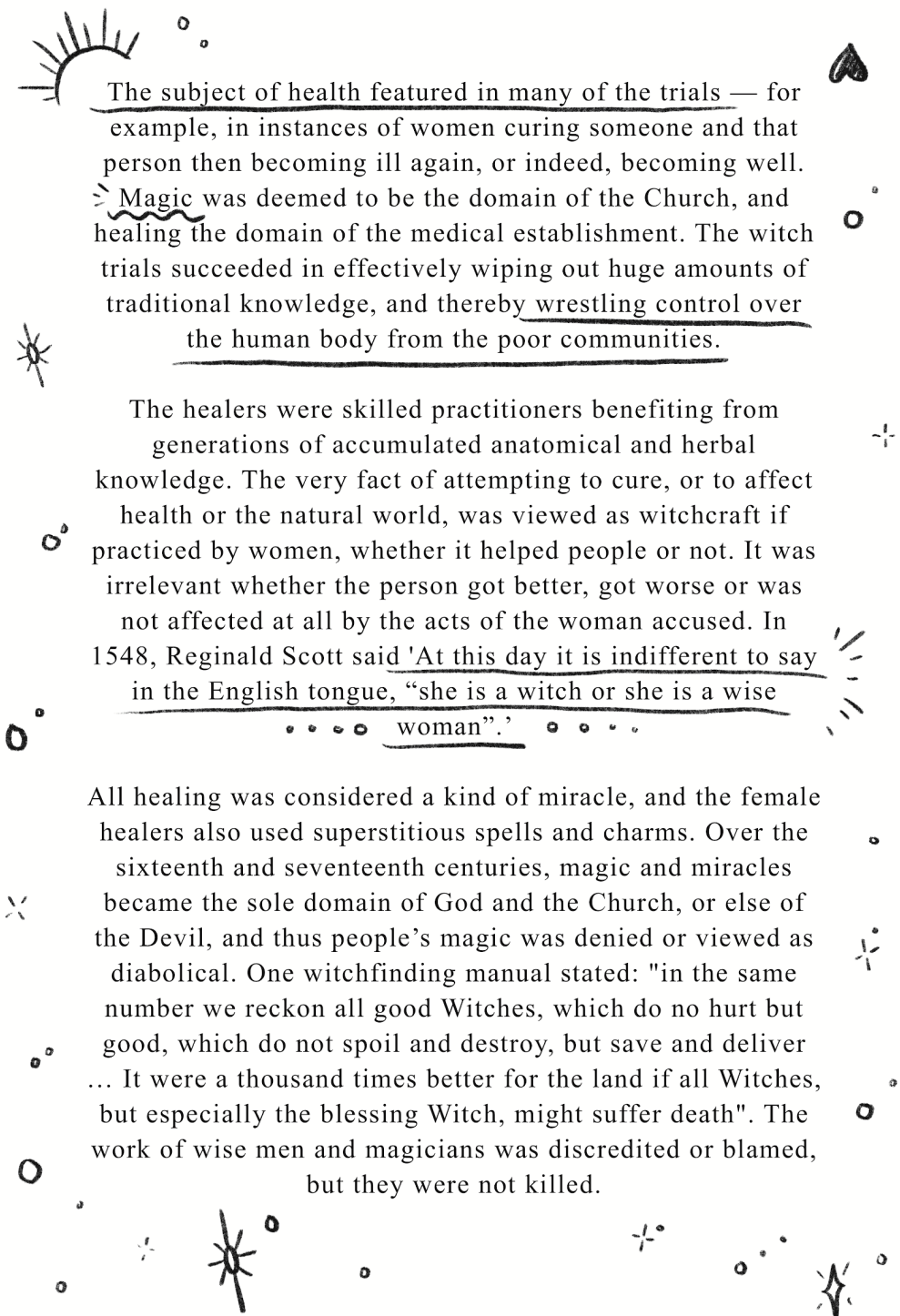
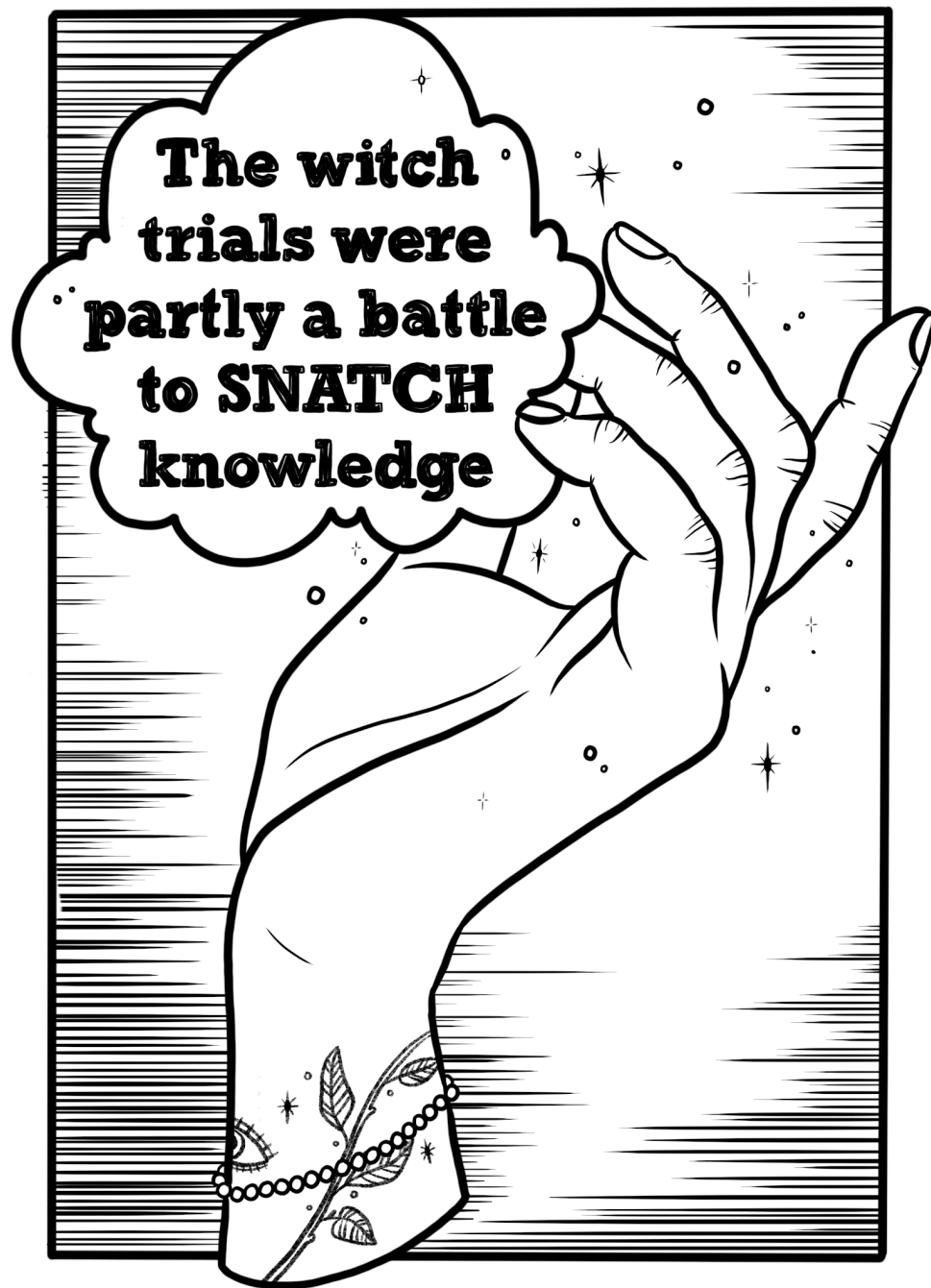
Prior to this period, health was the domain of peasant-class women healers, and there were women within each community with huge amounts of knowledge and skills.

Women's ability to control their reproduction was hugely diminished, and as midwives and groups of women were excluded from the birth process, the communities were robbed of their own tradition of knowledge. In so far as children are the products of women's labour - control over reproduction meant alienating women from their own bodies and controlling when, where and how many children women had, and when and where they had them.

In fact, it would be another hundred years or more before the male doctors truly had a monopoly on attending births.

In the seventeenth century, surgeons started delivering babies using forceps, and women were banned from practicing surgery. By the eighteenth century most births were attended by physicians, and when female midwives in England organised and charged the male intruders with commercialism and dangerous misuse of the forceps, they were easily put down as ignorant 'old wives', clinging to the superstitions of the past. It was the process of the witch trials that had sown the seeds of this attitude.

In 16th century France and Germany, midwives became obliged to report to the state all births, including concealed births. Today it is illegal not to register births in most of Europe. There is currently much control by the authorities over reproduction ranging from the Catholic prohibition on contraception and pregnancy terminations, to the state-run birth control programmes in China, to enforced sterilisation in some export processing zones, to the aborting of female foetuses in India. The extent to which birth is medicalised and seen in terms of risk and the faith we have in the magical-seeming powers of the doctor and hospital (despite our frequent disappointments in the medical establishment) is still testimony to this battle.



The subject of health featured in many of the trials — for example, in instances of women curing someone and that person then becoming ill again, or indeed, becoming well. Magic was deemed to be the domain of the Church, and healing the domain of the medical establishment. The witch trials succeeded in effectively wiping out huge amounts of traditional knowledge, and thereby wrestling control over the human body from the poor communities.

The healers were skilled practitioners benefiting from generations of accumulated anatomical and herbal knowledge. The very fact of attempting to cure, or to affect health or the natural world, was viewed as witchcraft if practiced by women, whether it helped people or not. It was irrelevant whether the person got better, got worse or was not affected at all by the acts of the woman accused. In 1548, Reginald Scott said 'At this day it is indifferent to say in the English tongue, "she is a witch or she is a wise woman".'

All healing was considered a kind of miracle, and the female healers also used superstitious spells and charms. Over the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, magic and miracles became the sole domain of God and the Church, or else of the Devil, and thus people's magic was denied or viewed as diabolical. One witchfinding manual stated: "in the same number we reckon all good Witches, which do no hurt but good, which do not spoil and destroy, but save and deliver ... It were a thousand times better for the land if all Witches, but especially the blessing Witch, might suffer death". The work of wise men and magicians was discredited or blamed, but they were not killed.

Even now, the word 'wizard' means an expert in something (e.g. a 'financial wizard'), whereas 'witch' is seen as a derogatory term.

The Church found some equilibrium with the growing number of university-trained physicians who were increasingly employed by the ruling classes, enforcing certain conditions such as the presence of a priest.

This growing medical profession very purposefully excluded women, including urban educated women healers, long before the witch-hunts began. The male, university taught physicians were on the increase, and some see the witch trials as attempts to wipe out the competition. The belief in witches also served to cover up for doctors' incompetence.

For example, there was little knowledge of cancer or strokes, so it was easy for doctors to blame unexplainable deaths on the work of a witch. The Church-doctor-witch dynamic is clearly explained by Ehrenreich and English:

'The partnership between Church, State and medical profession reached full bloom in the witch trials. The doctor was held up as the medical "expert", giving an aura of science to the whole proceeding. He was asked to make judgments about whether certain women were witches and whether certain afflictions had been caused by witchcraft. In the witch-hunts, the Church explicitly legitimised the doctors' professionalism, denouncing nonprofessional healing as equivalent to heresy: "If a woman dare to cure without having studied she is a witch and must die." The distinction between "female" superstition and "male" medicine was made final by the very roles of the doctor and the witch at the trial ... It placed him on the side of God and Law, a professional on par with lawyers and theologians, while it placed her on the side of darkness, evil and magic.

He owed his new status not to medical or scientific achievements of his own, but to the Church and State he served so well ... Witch hunts did not eliminate the lower class woman healer, but they branded her forever as superstitious and possibly malevolent.'

Birth and midwives

"No-one does more harm to the Catholic Church than midwives", stated the Malleus Maleficarum, and the Papal Bull of 1484 wrote "witches destroy the offspring of women... They hinder men from generating and women from conceiving". All sexual health work; midwifery, contraception or termination of pregnancies was condemned. This is again about control over the body - and especially the female body and reproduction.

At the time capital and the state were particularly concerned with birth rates. They wanted labour and saw big populations as the sign of a wealthy nation. The population was low due to the plagues and wars and the authorities were worried about demographic collapse. Therefore they were anti-abortion and anti-contraception (the fairy tales of witches killing children and babies stem from this campaign). Many of the first witches burned were engaged in this work and there is plenty of evidence that women were indeed controlling the birth rates within their communities during the middle ages. The authorities didn't want the control of reproduction in the hands of lower class women themselves, and the witch trials were partly a battle to snatch this knowledge, which had previously been a

'female mystery'.