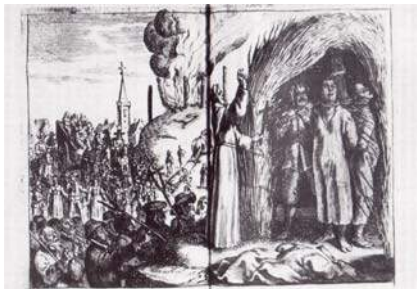


Accursed Charms

Judith Hoch, Ph.D.

My paintings in the series, *Accursed Charms*, refer to the longest holocaust in history: the witch trials and executions which took place between 1450 and 1750 in the British Isles, Scandinavia, Russia, and Europe. These violent centuries of European history destroyed the pagan past and defamed woman's character with many repercussions still felt in our contemporary world. If a primary role of art is to challenge, question authority and explode preconceived notions, then my painting, *Patriarchal Confessions*, has succeeded. This painting, part of my *Accursed Charms* series, has received complaints in two venues, causing its removal from solo exhibitions. No one wants to see priests portrayed as responsible for woman's oppression or to see a clergy member with a naked, tortured woman.



Many feel that we owe religions unquestioned respect as an intrinsic right (and tax exempt status!). This is despite the fact that religion is highly political and economic, as well as religious, and responsible for many human rights violations such as the torturing and execution of many innocent women during the witch inquisitions, the refusal to sanction women's own control over their bodies, and the creation of secondary status for women in theology and practice (not to mention the continuing overthrow of indigenous traditions throughout the world). Many can point to positive things about religion, especially in the personal lives of followers, but religions are powerful institutions quite separate from the daily practices of their followers' faith.

Accursed Charms refers specifically to the curse laid on women through a campaign of legalized terror, initiated and supported by both the Catholic and Protestant Churches in the early modern period of Europe. The paintings include images of clergy and the secular men who worked for them, torturing women and executing them by burning and hanging. The paintings in *Accursed Charms* also show women declaring an end to terror and oppression, crying out that it is time for a united Earth community to outlaw any religion, which does not observe a bill of rights for all genders and peoples.



In my paintings in *Accursed Charms*, I made large what is small and hidden: the tiny black and white woodcut illustrations by artists attending witch executions. There are selected witch images from this time scattered through these pages. To record the events of the day, artists sat in reserved front row seats capturing the barbaric actions of the executioners and the final, chilling moments of the victims. These artists' black and white works became illustrations in chapbooks sold as popular mementos. Chapbooks were important to rural people as entertainments, full of tantalizing misinformation about the heinous crimes of the witch in service to the devil. Chapbooks were mostly small paper-covered booklets, usually printed on a single sheet folded into books of 8, 12, 16 and 24 pages. Chapbooks were the National Enquirers of their age.

I've often wondered how the sight of these executions affected the artist. Maybe paper and pen helped to distance mind and emotion from the horrific scene in front of the artist's eyes, although, I imagine, that in a way, viewing an execution was normal entertainment in a society conditioned to violence and frequent cruel, prolonged and public, capital punishments. Spectators got together, often traveling far from their homes, to see



a sister human die painfully in public for a crime totally imaginary: witchcraft. Tortured women with broken limbs, breasts cut off, and faces shattered went to the hangman’s noose or the fire while onlookers jeered and cheered. There were so many executions at the stake that in some places only green wood remained. Green wood burns badly and builds weak fires, making death arrive agonizingly slowly. In some German villages, few women remained during the 17th century because so many had gone to the fires.

Officials reserved front row seats for the artists who sketched the execution for their publisher and for private collectors, later turning their drawings into woodcuts. Two hundred years later, these small images provide the only visual witness of what happened to perhaps 100,000 people over three centuries of infamous European and British inquisitions. Chapbooks and other literature containing artists’ renderings of witch executions still exist in libraries in America and Europe. I’ve looked at witch era literature held by Cornell University’s rare books library, which includes both witch finders’ manuals and chapbooks. There is something sinister and evil, in the cold black and white drawings and the accompanying ecclesiastical condemnations of women’s character and soul.



Although some men were tried and killed as witches, according to the latest research, at least 75% of witch execution deaths were women’s in Europe and Britain. Tens of thousands of women died at the stake and on the gallows over three centuries, with many more arrested, examined and tortured. I’ve seen bleak torture instruments in museums in Europe with hair raising names like the “breast pincher” and the “vaginal pear.”

¶ The Apprehension and conviction of the notorious Witch, of *Widdowson*, condemned and executed at *Widdowson*, in the County of *Widdowson*, in the Year 1697.



The holocaust of witches lasted three hundred years and affected every person alive. The stereotype of the witch, a more elaborate version of the stereotype of “wicked Eve,” that is, “the woman of weak character, seduced by Satan to ruin men,” became deeply entrenched in western culture. The witch had to confess to attending orgies with the devil, where together they planned attacks on society and the church. Many of the women’s forced, fantastical confessions, written by the men in charge, read that they stole penises at night to make men impotent, fouled crops or brought plagues of locusts, and created giant, whirling storms, which sank fishermen’s boats. However, the critical part of a confession was a witch’s link to the devil, which made her a heretic and subject to capital punishment. Witch trials were the thrilling serial killer trials of their day. Everyone knew about them and wanted to follow the footsteps of the witch on her way to the stake.



In many villages, people were encouraged to accuse women they knew of witchcraft, by placing an anonymous note, naming an unsuspecting victim, in a box in the center of the village. A victim’s property might be confiscated upon conviction, and in any case, her relatives had to pay for everything including her torture and the wood to burn her. What an amazing racket for the whole of the witch finding organization! A condemned woman seldom knew who her accuser was

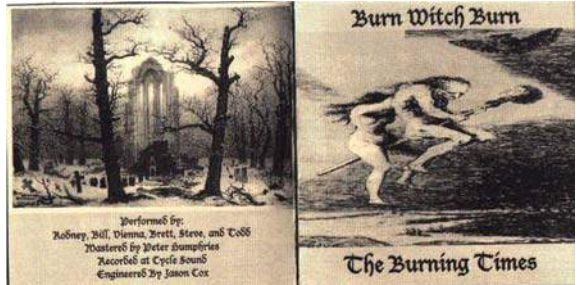
or what the accusations against her were. From the moment of arrest, innocent women were naked, humiliated and tortured in front of many powerful men, reminiscent of village rapes that take place today in Pakistan, India, and other countries. When a witch finder fingered a witch, she would be stripped-searched for an evil mark made by the devil to prove her blasphemy. In reality, this suspect “spot” was an innocent mole or bruise, which was “pricked” by the witch finder to see if it bled. Witch finders called “prickers” used retractable needles several inches long to ensure blood ran from the spot, because each witch brought a bounty to their coffers. These despicable “pricks” are also housed in European museums.

Witch confessions obtained under torture still rank as the most contrived in human history. Witches each signed the same confession after torture, declaring that they had conjoined with the devil to blaspheme Christianity. These male-penned confessions stated that the victim attended witch's masses to consort with the devil and profane the host, thereby bringing bad weather, ill health and misfortune to many. It is important to know that there is not a single shred of verifiable evidence that witch's covens, black masses or pacts with the devil ever existed among the accused. I repeat, there were no witch's covens with thirteen members meeting on a regular basis to conjure devils and damage villages, and this is well established by contemporary European scholars. The benign "witch" religion of Wicca is a modern invention that draws on folklore of the British Isles, but there certainly was no Wicca during early modern Europe. However, there *is* much evidence that Christian priests and monks, who wrote witch finder's manuals like the *Malleus Maleficarum* (Hammer of Evil), a witch manual on the desk of every jurist for three centuries and translated into five languages, invented the deeds which constituted the crime of heresy.



Witches died, not for conjuring or cursing, but for the capital crime of heresy. Anyone outside the Christian faith was a heretic, and witch trials tightened the noose around non-believers, especially country dwelling people who still followed old Earth centered religions, often called pagan. Although theology created the crime of witchcraft, for the most part, witches were remanded to secular governments for execution, meaning that the final death toll attributed to the Protestant or Catholic Churches was misleadingly small. However, clerics often worked side by side with secular authorities to interrogate and torture suspects. The largest number of executions took place in Germany and Scotland. Scholars' estimates of the number of women killed range from the tens to the hundreds of thousands. Although some villages kept records, many were lost or destroyed, and the available records have been well searched and documented by a new generation of European academics.

Witch trials and killings took place during the time when Europe was unifying into many of the countries we know today. Religion was of two varieties: that of the country and of the city. City folk were mainly Christian and country folk were a little Christian and a lot pagan. Country people believed that nature was sacred and that magic rites and ceremonies could bind together the spirits of nature with those of people and their communities. Women's status in the country was equal to that of men; rural women worked side by side with men in roles of importance, as they do in many subsistence economies. The religion of nature recognized a local feminine deity as well as a great feminine god in many parts of Europe.



Ceremonies and rituals marked agricultural and life cycles, established spirit protection over farmland, or sent gratitude to nature spirits for sustaining life. Local people used herbs to heal themselves and respected the energy of Earth, water, and sky upon which their livelihoods depended. They also honored their ancestors and the ceremonial sites that they'd inherited, especially the megalithic stone structures found in many places in Europe and the British Isles. Sacred groves of ancient trees were often meeting places for ritual and celebration, groves that the ancestors planted, protected to ensure water supplies, wood reserves and other ecological benefits recognized by horticulturalists. Urban Christian clerics envied the sacred power of these sites. The centuries of the Christian witch terror made it plain that there would be no more singing, dancing, herbal healing or night time meetings at the old standing stones or in the sacred groves of the forest, and accordingly, many of these sites were destroyed or commandeered for Christian use.





Many stereotyped ideas we hold today about men and women have roots in the witch holocaust. During this time, witch hunting manuals, defaming the character of women, were on every lawyer's, judge's and priest's desk, assisting them in persecuting and exposing the "evil" of women. Women were defamed by monks, like Sprenger and Kramer, authors of the *Malleus Malleficarum*, who described them as "sexual temptresses, idolaters, heretics and liars." "When a women thinks alone, she thinks evil"; she is "a liar by nature," and "If the world could be



rid of women, we should not be without God in our intercourse," are only a small example of what this nearly 300 page book has to say on the subject. (Dover Publications, NY, 1971, p.42, *passim*). I highly recommend the reading of this book by anyone who is complacent about women's rights today, when fundamentalists hover dangerously close to classifying "feminists" or "pro-choice" advocates as evil witches.



Women were routinely, falsely accused of having orgies with the devil and their imaginary sister covens of witches, of causing impotence in men, and stirring up storms to kill sailors at sea or destroy crops. The prosecutors also accused women of acquiring and performing abortions, and eating fetuses and children. However, it was the relationship with the Christian devil, which was the key to heresy and condemnation. A heretic was outside the fold, *an enemy of the state of reality* in this terrible time of persecution and ignorance. The message was that women could not be trusted; that they

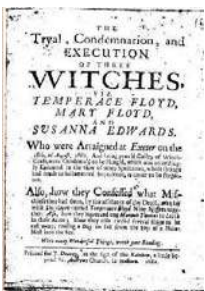
were a threat to their communities because their sexual powers were chaotic, harmful and attracted Satan. In short, women were heretical by nature and to protect itself, society excluded them from all authority and knowledge. In fact, it still continues to do a good job of this in many places today.

Even after the so-called "feminist revolution," it is almost unquestioned that women, not men, are "sexual tempters." Overwhelming visual propaganda, perpetrated by the enormous advertising, entertainment, and pornography industries, supports this stereotyping and libeling. These industries are founded on many of the ideas contained in Christian witch finding literature: women are materialistic, cunning, seductive, untrustworthy and underdressed, promiscuous



"whores" who enjoy being tied up, humiliated, taking part in orgies where they service several men, or having men watch them having sex with other women. This is how the Christian priests painted the character of woman centuries ago even when her modest dress and demeanor were far from "lustful."

Now, it is as if we women have all accepted what the priests believed so that we vie with one another to be the sexiest, wearing foot deforming shoes, short skirts, suffering breast implants, face lifts and other surgical alterations in order to look young and sexy forever. Teenage girls act like prostitutes in films and think it is a freedom. In fact, they are simply acting on the public images they've learned so well, enabling Christian governments to justify patriarchal control and oppression.



American courts still threaten reproductive choice at every chance, not allowing the "tempter witch" control over her body and life.

When men committed sexual crimes against women, it was often deemed the woman's fault, as it still is today in Muslim countries, and in Christian ones too where there is a judge who believes Christian propaganda. Men are not to blame because women—or their clothing—"made them do it." The image of woman as devilish tempter calls from every music video, news stand, billboard, advertisement and internet site. Car ads feature half naked women at



the wheel or lying on the hood, and film stars compete to show the maximum amount of flesh with the largest implanted breasts and lips. Even women business executives must look sexually appealing, and some wear shoes so pointed that they have operations to remove joints from their third toes in order to force their feet into the absurd needle toed, but “sexy” (sold as stylish) shoes. Women who long to “fit in and succeed,” comply with these crippling cultural dictates to procure more status for themselves, making it difficult to say “who is responsible.” It is hard for young women and men to find their true identities in this wasteland of commercial lust, seduction, and woman hating.



Why did witch hunting end, endowing us with this pornographic residue so virulently anti-woman? In fact, witch hunting did not end, and it still hasn't. The courts of law and legal experts at European universities decided there wasn't enough evidence to convict a witch. The court's evolving system of justice made it impossible to get a conviction based on the new rules of



jurisprudence. Witchcraft, a primarily “spiritual” crime, was impossible to prove through material testimony. The courts did not say “there is no such thing as a witch.” That would be like taking a legal position on the virgin birth; they just said they didn't have the means to prove or disprove it. In fact, there are still witch accusations made in many parts of the world including Europe and America, and many executions in Africa. However, when courts stopped convicting women as witches, they began convicting them instead for their “sexuality”. Prostitution, infanticide and abortion became illegal in many

European countries as they are in America. Women were arrested and convicted in large numbers for these sexual “crimes” rather than witchcraft.

Scholars now agree that the crime of witchcraft was essentially a *woman's crime*, so that in reality, courts executed women for the crime of *being women*. There was no proof of witchcraft, which could serve as evidence in a modern court of law. According to witch manuals, all women were capable of being witches and probably were. Cleric authors articulated this definition of witch as female. It was just a step away to use their arguments to convict a woman of being a witch in court, and that is exactly what happened before the courts changed their rules. Innocent women, accused of being witches, *ipso facto*, were witches, because all women were evil witches.



If women had tried and executed men in the tens of thousands for the crime of “being men” for over three centuries in Europe, would we not feel this had bearing on who we are as men and women today? What if the image of men in religious literature was: *weak minded pimps, lying Adams, impressionable, weak minded lovers of the devil?* Perhaps turning it around makes it easier to recognize how important it is for all of us to study and learn from these centuries during which cleric fantasies led to mass condemnation and persecution of women. *Accursed Charms* invites you to begin.

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