Witchcraft: Crash Course European History #10

Crash Course: European History
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Hi I'm John Green and this is Crash Course European History.

So, in the first episode of this series, we talked about the significance of the year 1431. Remember, that was the year Joan of Arc was burned to death for heresy and witchcraft because the English were so bewildered that a teenage peasant girl could lead the French army to victory that they decided she had to be a witch and a heretic.

And, you know, it was pretty bewildering that a random peasant girl somehow basically became for a time the most important general in the most important war of the fifteenth century. That said, just to state the obvious: Joan of Arc was not a witch. But just as she benefited from superstitions and prophecies about mystically powerful women, she was ultimately destroyed by fears of witchcraft and dark magic.

For the past four episodes, the world has been turned upside down in the century after Joan's trial and execution. The Reformation, Commercial and Agricultural Revolutions, and Counter-Reformation were each in their own way shaking social, and economic, and political, and religious structures. Perhaps some witches could explain that turmoil.

INTRO So, for most of European history, and indeed for most of world history, people believed in unseen powers that operated across their world and in their individual lives. Objects from nature could be healing or poisonous, working in unknown ways. Like, Queen Elizabeth once received a ring that was supposed to protect her from the plague.

Most towns had shamans, a "wise" man or woman, a wizard, a sorcerer, or another resident who knew about potions, and poultices, and charms. And look, Queen Elizabeth never got the plague, so it was easy to conclude that sometimes, at least, this stuff worked! As one bishop wrote in 1552, "When we be in trouble, or sickness, or lose anything, we run hither and thither to witches or sorcerers, whom we call wise men, . . . seeking aid and comfort at their hands." Other wise men could use eclipses, or sunspots, or comets and various natural phenomena to predict momentous future events.

Like, earthquake tremors in Istanbul in 1648 for instance, were said to foretell the murder of the sultan two months later, All these shamans, and fortune tellers, and special healers were widely depicted in the many books now streaming from the printing press—with stories that often strayed from reality. The reading public seemed to revel in tales of witches: their special witches' rites, their antics and adventures, their sexual perversions, and their attacks on (and corruption of) the innocent. Jean Bodin was a famed and influential jurist who wrote about sovereignty—that is, the nature of state power and authority—in this age of new monarchy and governmental consolidation.

He also famously wrote about witches and demonology in the vernacular so that a large group would have access to his pieces. And I think it's important to note Bodin because his work underscores that in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries high-minded political theory of government and the everyday world of witches co-existed. I think this can be one of the great empathy barriers in history--it can be hard for some of us to imagine a world where it was almost universally assumed that the hand of God and the hand of the Devil were constantly shaping events both large and small.

But one of the discomforting things about humanity is the role luck or fate or however you consider it plays in our lives, and we all have a desire for life to be a story that makes sense. Saying "Everything happens for a reason" is one way of doing that; saying, "Witches did it" is another. In some ways, history itself is an attempt to tell a story that makes sense--we're trying to find narratives amid an endlessly complicated web of forces and choices and luck.

So I hope thinking about that can help you empathize a bit. But back to witches: Art is another place we see a lot of witchcraft. In grand baroque paintings, you can find devils, serpents, old hags, and other signs of evil filtering across society.

Like, in Rubens' massive painting "Madonna on the Crescent Moon," featured at the altar of the Cathedral of Freising, the entire left third displays devils, and demons, and the serpent of sin for parishioners. And "Council of the Gods," one of Rubens' celebratory works on the life of Marie de Medici, depicts a witch-like figure at the extreme right. And it's important to note that Rubens was working from images that had already been around for a long time, in the form of black and white engravings of the devil and witches in broadsheets and books.

So we know ideas about witches were plentiful. But where did they actually originate? The Bible doesn't say much about them, though there is this prominent statement in Exodus 22:18: "Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live." Popular culture, however, drew on pagan mythology, full of wily sorceresses and enchantresses using love potions and charms to work their magic.

And people saw woodcuts of witches in flight or they heard about magicians on flying coats or carpets or they went to healers and unexpectedly died. But again, we look for stories that make sense, and it makes sense that a healer with their medicinal potions, might also have access to poisonous or other dangerous potions. So there were a few lines from the Bible, a growing collection of scary stories through the Middle Ages, and then came Heinrich Kramer's Witches' Hammer (Malleus Malificarum) in 1487.

Kramer was a Dominican monk whose book was amazingly popular--for over a century, it was the second bestselling book in Europe behind only the Bible, and the book argues that Satan, due to the fact the Apocalypse is coming, has "caused a certain unusual heretical perversity to grow up in the land of the Lord--a heresy, I say, of Sorceresses, since it is to be designated by the particular gender of which he [Satan] is known to have power." The book goes on to describe in detail the many evils of these mostly female practitioners of witchcraft, and to advocate all-out war against them. These days, Kramer's book reads like aggressively misogynistic fantasy fiction--he writes that women are "defective in all the powers of both soul and body" and claims that witches were, among many other things, practicing cannibalism and causing male impotence. Because of course if you have magical powers, that's how you're going to use them.

But at the time, Witches' Hammer was tremendously influential. The book was first approved, then disapproved by religious authorities. But as Europeans engaged with pagan practices, Kramer's witchcraft manifesto gave them a new context.

Amid the religious, economic, and social challenges of these stressful centuries, the hunt for witches accelerated and became lethal. It's really important to understand that the idea of witchcraft felt to many Christians in the sixteenth century like a real threat. Did the center of the world just open?

Is there a black cat in there? Oh, it must be time for a PSA. Hi!

I'm John Green. This is not an evil cat! It's just a regular nice cat that happens to have one color of fur.

Don't be mean to these cats. These are great cats! This one happens to be fake because Stan said I couldn't put a real cat

inside the globe.

Stan! But that's not the point. The point is that this cat is not bad luck.

It is not involved in witchcraft. It is a great cat. Or, it would have been a great cat if Stan had let me use a real cat.

So, beginning in 1560 in villages and cities across Europe, a stream of supposedly demonic incidents took place and a raft of persecutions followed. Between 1560 and 1800, between 50,000 to 100,000 people were tried for witchcraft in the European world. Unlike Joan of Arc, most purported witches had little to do with the grand and tumultuous events of those years.

Like Joan, the vast majority—approximately 80 percent--were women. And like Joan, many were executed. Almost all major works of demonology during these years were published in German or in Latin with a German publisher—the Holy Roman Empire therefore was one major center of the hunt for witches.

In 1564, judges for the town council of Augsberg, a city in the south of the German empire, questioned the healer Anna Megerler when a boy she had cared for died of a wound. While being intensely grilled, Megerler said that she had taught secret knowledge to the mighty Anton Fugger, who was headquartered in Augsberg. Fugger was financier to the Habsburgs and others.

Megerler said her supernatural knowledge had helped him prosper in finance, and that he in turn had taught her about crystal ball-gazing. The judges determined that it would create "complications" should they proceed further with the inquiry, and her life was spared. But many women were executed after being tortured into confessing--and Witches' Hammer strenuously argued that torture was an appropriate interrogation technique for potential witches.

Let's go to the Thought Bubble. In around 1624, for instance, the slave and healer Paula de Eguiluz was tried in Spanish Cuba for witchcraft. It was reported that she had killed a child by sucking on her navel; she had also used other skills to devise a potion to help cure her master's illness.

Simultaneously Paula de Eguiluz knew the Lord's Prayer and Ten Commandments, went regularly to Sunday mass, and faithfully made her confession even as she gained popularity for her shamanistic healing of people. The lines between Christianity and paganism have never been bright or clear. The inquisitors in her first hearing condemned her to 200 lashes and ordered her to perform charitable work.

In her third hearing, she fully confessed to being in league with the devil and a witch even as she continued to frame the use of her African healing knowledge as a Christian act. By that time she had been convicted and ordered to be sent to government officials for execution in a move that was cancelled only because she had popular support. But most women accused of witchcraft didn't have the public on their side.

Famously, nineteen convicted witches were hanged in the English colony of Salem, Massachusetts, having initially been accused by young girls of causing their "fits." Others died of torture and imprisonment in the Americas, but the majority of trials and executions took place in Europe, where, historians believe, tens of thousands of women were executed for witchcraft in the 16th and 17th centuries. Thanks, Thought Bubble.

[[TV: Midwife]] So, A lying-in-nurse--who took care of mothers and children in the post-partum period--was a common target for the accusation, because she dealt with especially vulnerable people: a mother who had just given birth and her newborn infant. Both had high mortality rates. And the accused were often older women, those who had gone through menopause and who were sometimes marginalized because they could no longer give birth to new community members. Many were also widowed, perhaps isolated and without a strong network of support.

Once a person was seen as a viable suspect, she was turned over for torture, which was usually carried out by the local hangman, who would also hang the suspect if she were ultimately found guilty. The suspect was stripped of clothing, shaved of bodily hair, so that the torturer could minutely examine the body for all the diabolical signs that had come down in lore and then been codified in various manuals and books of demonology. Warts, moles, skin tags, hardened nipples, sagging breasts, and any purportedly diabolical deformations were seen as important evidence. And I just want to note that these are all things that happen to human bodies naturally over time, so everyone who was older and female could be construed as a witch.

The hangman then applied torture at the direction of a council of examiners. Knowing the accused person's body intimately, he came to know it better by observing and noting the kinds of torture and the victim's reaction to each type. Then as now, many tortured people would make false confessions, which in turn often led to execution.

The widespread torture and execution are horrifying, and they speak to how profoundly afraid people were of the devil and his influence. In 1587, the story of Faust, a scholar who sells his soul to the devil, was first published. And its themes were relevant to popular and high culture. Because if a /scholar/ would sell his soul to the devil, who could be immune? It was common knowledge that the devil was a trickster and a supreme illusionist, cloaked in all kinds of magic that was difficult to detect or to separate from the normal, good magic of the unseen world.

So in towns and cities, councils examined suspects often over a period of years, with interrogations interspersed with torture and deliberations. They would examine a suspect's words, the stories she told, and the contradictions within those stories. They tried to discern who was in league with the devil and who was simply mentally disturbed or a helpful healer or, you know, a victim of torture. And these councils of notable men always had the last word, leading some historians to believe that in times of difficulty and disorder, like the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, men asserted control.

Other historians point to the concentrated focus on women and conclude that the accused were the most vulnerable and often the most disrespected in society. Moreover, women such as lying-in-nurses dealt with the most intimate matters of human existence, especially new life, which was then fraught with danger--around half of all infants born died before their fifth birthday, many in the first few days of life, and childbirth was among the greatest threats to women's lives.

Finally, others point out that women were the main victims because religious scripture referred to the female body as the most impure and most vulnerable to evil. Being seen as the most unclean, they were also seen as the most like the devil--tricksters and agents of disorder. The Witches' Hammer makes this comparison explicit many, many times. But no matter what conclusions you draw, it's important to understand that sexism isn't just, like, bad in the abstract. It is a system of power that oppresses people, and in these cases, many times kills them.

Between 1700 and 1750, the persecution of witches diminished, as the tide started to turn against the practice. French courts ordered

the arrest of witch-hunters and the release of suspected witches. In 1682, a French royal decree treated witchcraft as a fraud. Perhaps the state had taken seriously Michel de Montaigne's pronouncement from a century earlier—almost unique at the time, by the way: "it is taking one's conjectures rather seriously to roast someone alive for them." By 1700, people had a more positive view of the divine and had relaxed their view that the Devil's hand was at work in everyday life or in natural disasters.

Although some religious authorities might still see misfortune as the work of the Devil, others had a better understanding that there were scientific laws behind the operations of nature. More than that, the worst of the multifaceted religious and political turmoil was over and questions of political order seemed less menacing. We'll discuss how these new understandings came about in the next few episodes. Thanks for watching. I'll see you then.