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Witch Hunting in Seventeenth-Century England: a Historiographical Review

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An explanation of witch hunting in seventeenth-century England must explain two principle facts: the rise in frequency of witch persecution during the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century, and the gender and socioeconomic distribution of those tried for witchcraft. Few arguments have managed to address the true complexity of English witch trials. While most tried witches were poor women, some were wealthy, active members of the community, and a significant minority of tried witches was male. I found current historiographical arguments about seventeenth-century England witch hunting only partially sufficient and not fully comprehensive. The Thomas/Macfarlane model presents too rigid a binary and doesn't explain the variation of accused witches, the religious model relies too heavily on a rigid distinction between popular and elite culture, and the psychological model does not manage to cover the full diversity of tried witches or the motives of the accuser. Only by considering elements of each theory can one reach a comprehensive picture of witch hunting that addresses all the evidence.



An explanation of witch hunting in seventeenth-century England must explain two principle facts: the rise in frequency of witch persecution during the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century, and the gender and socioeconomic distribution of those tried for witchcraft. These may seem to be easy criteria to meet if one only considers that the socioeconomic distribution of tried witches was overwhelmingly female and poor, but few arguments have managed to address the true complexity of English witch trials. In fact, many tried witches were not poor beggar women. Some were wealthy, active members of the community, and a significant minority of tried witches was male.¹ I found most arguments about seventeenth-century English witch hunting to be insufficient. The Thomas/Macfarlane model, describing a system in which wealthier turned on poorer neighbors, is too rigid a binary and does not explain the variation of accused witches or why some neighborly conflicts escalated to witch prosecutions and others did not. Similarly, the religious model describing the rise of devil-centric witchcraft persecutions relies too heavily on a rigid distinction between popular and elite culture, in which popular culture has little influence. Finally, the psychological model, which explains witchcraft confessions as the result of tensions in poor women's lives, does not manage to cover the full diversity of tried witches, nor does it focus sufficiently on the motives of the accuser. Only by considering elements of each theory can one reach a comprehensive picture of witch hunting that addresses all the evidence.

One model popularly used to explain witch hunting in seventeenth-century England is the Thomas/Macfarlane socioeconomic model. These historians have argued that witch hunting was a wealthy vs. poor process of prosecution caused by neighborly tensions. They argue that when wealthier neighbors breeched common standards of neighborly charity (such as refusing to loan poorer neighbor money or goods) they would become consumed by guilt. Common tragedies such as sickness, cattle death, and fruitless labor then seemed to become punishments for their breach of charity and they turned on their poorer neighbors, accusing them of using witchcraft as revenge.² Witchcraft trials, then, rose in frequency as the population of poor people increased due to the process of social polarization.³ This model's strength is that it addresses the fact that accused witches were predominantly of the lower class. It also takes into account the common framework of neighborly dispute and offers an easy explanation for the rise in frequency of witch trials.

The Thomas/Macfarlane model is problematic, however, because it does not explain why some neighborly tensions led to witchcraft allegations and others did not.⁴ It is clear that tension between rich and poor neighbors was quite common, as is exhibited by the routine withholding of communion from quarreling neighbors and, in the most extreme cases, riots in which lower class neighbors organized protests against upper class mistreatment.⁵ Few of these cases led to witchcraft charges as the Thomas/Macfarlane model would suggest. The model also neglects the question of gender, failing to explain why the vast majority of accused witches were women. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the model simply does not seem to align with facts concerning the socioeconomic distribution of accusers. Although it is true that poor people were more likely to be accused of witchcraft than the elite, it is not the case that witches were always or even predominantly accused by upper class neighbors, nor were upper class people immune to accusations of witchcraft. In the north county depositions of 1673, for example, Ann Armstrong, a spinster and servant, accused several of her neighbors of witchcraft. As in Thomas's model, it seems to be a case of neighborly dispute, stemming from a disagreement over the trade of eggs. However, unlike in Thomas's model, Anne Forester, the accused witch, was the party refusing to meet Ann Armstrong's price, not the beggar. Ann Armstrong's targets were also predominantly of her same social class or even of higher class. The accused include 3 men, 6 widows, 1 spinster like herself, and 3 married women, all presumably husbandmen or servants.⁶ The prevalence of these cases in which people of the same or very similar social class accused each other ultimately undermines Thomas's model.

A second common model used to explain the rise in witchcraft persecutions is a religious

model concerned with elite and popular views of witchcraft. This model explains that popular and elite views of witchcraft in the middle ages were largely concerned with *malificium*, the ability of a witch to do harm, and did not think magic was, itself, worthy of punishment. Then, during the Protestant Reformation, elites began to accept continental views of witchcraft. This continental view argued that all witchcraft, not just *malificium*, was evil because all magic was the result of a contract with the devil. Thus, all witches were engaged in false religion, Satan worship, and the denial of Christ. Some historians argue that the spread of the demonic view over the malificium view among the upper class during the early modern period created a religious zeal to purge the land of witches rather than a quest for social order.⁷ The strength of this argument is its attention to religious motivation. Protestants, especially puritans, who were mostly of the rising middle class, were deeply concerned with Satan and his influence on earth. Indeed, the topic was so often preached upon that the devil's power began to seem as great as God's.⁸ This helped forge a puritan view that cast the world in a series of binary conflicts where every interaction was a struggle between good and evil. It is no wonder, then, that deeply religious puritans were more likely to perceive threat in witchcraft than their English Catholic predecessors. This model also makes a compelling argument that the aim of the elite in prosecuting witchcraft was mainly religious, or at least in creating the appearance of religion. It is possible, for instance, that the witch statutes of the Tudor/Stuart period were an attempt to help religiously justify a monarchy that had been widely criticized for its "ungodly" Anglican policies; for how could a monarchy be "ungodly" if it was fighting god's mortal enemy, the devil, through his agents on earth, witches. A final strength of this argument is that it shows why people of lower class were more heavily persecuted than members of the upper class. It is conceivable that if lower and upper class people had differing views on witchcraft, the upper class might use their greater political power to enforce their views over the views of the lower class, leading to a greater number of poor convicted witches than rich ones.

Nonetheless, the elite/popular religious view of witch persecution has a series of problems. Firstly, the model ignores differences of opinion within the elite sphere. While it is true that elite puritans were likely to accept the continental model, many elites, especially conservative Anglicans, were skeptical of witchcraft prosecutions and indeed in witch belief in general. Filmer, a famous elite conservative and royalist, first argued against the methods used to try witches and then against the conception of witches themselves. "The Hebrew witch," Filmer argued, was not a being imbued with great demonic power but "a juggler," "a charmer," or "an Apothecary, a Druggister, one that compounds poisons."⁹ A true witch, then, was merely a trickster, and the English conception of a powerful, maleficent being was false and silly, perhaps even blasphemous. As well as differences between the elite, this view glosses over more complex interactions between elite and common views. Imps or familiars, for instance, were a purely popular English idea of witchcraft, absent from the Catholic demonologies that the elites drew their religious arguments from. Nonetheless, evidence of these creatures was widely used in witch prosecutions. Depositions under Hopkins, the most religiously zealous judge of them all, made frequent references to "imps" that "did suck twice or 3 a week" from devils' marks.¹⁰ This shows that interaction between elite and popular views of witchcraft was not merely a top-down process but a two-way conversation. Indeed, both Thomas and contemporaries of witch prosecutions have argued that witch trials were popularly-driven. Thomas argues that most English witch trials had to do *malificium* and that devil-deals, while present in depositions, were of secondary importance to the continued popular belief that witchcraft was punishable only when it was used to cause harm. White witches or cunning men (benevolent practitioners of magic) were rarely charged.¹¹ Rodger North even argued that elite judges were sometimes forced to bend to the will of popular juries and condemn witches they did not believe guilty, lest they be accused of godlessness.¹² Religion, then, was not merely the tool of the elite in witch prosecutions, but religious arguments were regularly used and shaped by lower class people. The increase in witch trials, then, cannot be accounted for merely by looking at the views of

elite puritans. Witch trials were impacted just as much, if not more, by popular forces. By breaking down the rigid binary of elite vs. popular views on witchcraft and showing that they were both more complicated and more similar than this model assumes, it also seems unlikely that the class distribution of tried witches had to do with elites trying to force a new religious opinion on the lower class. This model also fails to account in any way for gender.

Finally, a psychological model is often used to explain witch prosecutions and witch confessions. The model argues that witches were the ultimate social “other:” evil, irreligious, animalistic, female, and cruel to the innocent. Other women, then, especially ‘godly’ women anxious about their own salvation, could prove themselves to be godly housewives and mothers by posing themselves against a witch.¹³ This led to the increasing prosecution of witches by other women. Anxieties about masculinity, threatened by female power, could also be played out and assuaged during witch prosecutions, meaning men also had a psychological reason to prosecute witches.¹⁴ Confessions were caused, in this model, by the psychological trauma of poor women’s lives. Financially crippled by patriarchal and economic systems, women were forced to make incredibly difficult, socially taboo decisions. Reay cites that “Collit and Susannah Smith... had been tempted to kill their own children—‘or else so should allways continue poore.”¹⁵ Many women also desired to kill themselves in these times of despair. These desires were so horrifying and socially taboo that it was easier for women to accept that the devil had influence over them than to accept that they themselves had considered these options. In retrospect, when all confessions were made, accused witches may have genuinely seen Satan’s influence in their lives, especially if that belief was reinforced by their neighbors and by financial necessity.¹⁶ For, by using the fear of their neighbors, alleged witches could convince people to appease them with charity more easily than if their neighbors believed they had no power. With this constant reinforcement of neighbors’ belief, these “witches” could very well have come to trust their own supernatural powers.¹⁷ This argument’s strength lies in its ability to address gender and belief systems foreign to a modern observer. Of the three arguments addressed here, this is the only one that seeks to explain why women were the overwhelming target of witch trials. It convincingly outlines patriarchal anxieties that led to the need to define an “other.” It also effectively demonstrates the rationality of witch belief and explains otherwise hard to understand witch confessions without resorting to calling every woman in such a situation deluded or under coercion of torture.

The problem with this argument is it makes no attempt to explain the increase in witch prosecutions over the time period. While some increase may be explained by the mounting pressure on the “godly” to prove themselves against an “other,” the gender pressures it describes were certainly present in medieval times, meaning whatever increase puritan pressure caused was probably mild. It also largely ignores the diversity of accused witches. The majority were, indeed, poor women, but there was a significant minority of accused men and middle to upper class people, as well. Finally, it might over exaggerate accused witch’s belief in their own supernatural powers. While some women may very well have believed they were witches, others might have falsely “confessed” in hopes of a lighter punishment or an end to torture. As Reay explains, witches were under intense pressures to confess. If they did not they were subject to degrading searches for witch’s teats, sleep deprivation and social confinement torture, and prolonged confrontation with their angry close friends and neighbors accusing them of witchcraft.¹⁸

None of these systems of thought, then, are foolproof, but by looking at the three of them together and by considering their strongest points one might form a fairly comprehensive picture of witchcraft in early modern England. Neighborly conflicts were, indeed, the cause of many witch trials. Though the rigid class dynamics of Thomas’s theory are unsupported by the evidence, he is correct in supposing that social polarization did lead to an increase in poor people and this pressure probably did lead to more neighborly breeches and tension between neighbors, resulting in more witch trials. So long, then, as his argument is not taken too rigidly

in regards to its specific class dynamics, it can help to explain the rise in witch trials and why the majority of the accused were poor. The elite religion and popular *malificium* theory also has its merits in describing the intersection of two systems of thought regarding witches. It is correct in supposing the melding of two thought systems caused a greater fear of witches to emerge, although these systems of thought should not be too strictly applied to specific social classes, nor should the view of the elite be thought to preside over popular views. It also helps to explain why some men were accused of witchcraft, because, according to religious thought, all humans, regardless of gender, were sinning beings and thus possible candidates for a witch. Finally, the psychological theory of witch prosecutions and confessions provides an invaluable look into the rationality of witchcraft within the specific social framework of seventeenth century England and describes the gender politics that led to more women being accused than men. Considering these systems not as individual explanations, but as pieces of an argument including neighborly disputes, class, religion, gender, and mentality is extremely valuable. At the intersection of these three explanations, one can finally understand the rise in the frequency of witch persecution during the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century and the gender and socioeconomic distribution of those tried for witchcraft.

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