THE LINK BETWEEN AGRICULTURE AND MALEFICIUM IN MEDIEVAL AND EARLY MODERN EUROPE

Kaylin Peterson

Honors 401: Witchcraft, Gender and Society in Preindustrial Europe

April 13, 201

In the 17th century, Europe experienced what is known today as the ‘witch-craze’. Thousands of people were accused, tried, and executed for the crime of being a witch. Historians have speculated over what could have caused this phenomenon to occur. This is a difficult question, which doesn’t have an easy answer. However, one factor that played a big role in the witch-craze was agriculture. To understand this link, one must first understand the importance of agriculture during that time and its precariousness, how and why maleficium became associated with agriculture, and how weather played a role in triggering the witchcraft trials.

In an agrarian society, the economy is based on farming. This means that every aspect of a community is directly dependent upon agriculture. N. Neilson notes in his book, *Medieval Argarian Economy,* that “the life of the fields… [was] the biggest factor in medieval life, the base on which rested all medieval trade and town life, all the splendor of medieval art and architecture, all the life lived in the monasteries, all the curious learning of theologians and philosophers and lawyers, all the power of kings and statesmen.”1 A stable society was dependent upon a stable agricultural economy.

There were many different systems of agriculture in Europe during this time, but they were all based on the idea of the ‘haves’ and the ‘have-nots’. The ‘haves’ were the wealthy who owned the land, and the ‘have-nots’ were the peasants who worked for them and farmed the land. “Most people lived in villages and were forced to sell a good portion of their produce so they could pay rents, taxes, or merely buy what they could not produce.”2 These rents were to their landlords, and one of the taxes they had to pay was a tithe to the church. The tithe was the most importance source of income for the church, and it was usually a 10 percent share of the harvest.3 The system is set up in a way that if the harvest

was good, everyone was happy. The peasants got to eat, the landlords got their rent, and the church received their tithes. If they had a bad year, however, it was the peasant farmers who suffered the most. The landlords and the church might make less money than usual, but the peasants were the ones who would possibly have to go without food. Whenever this happened, “these ‘have-nots’ went hungry but they rarely starved because the ‘haves’ provided alms, while the church used the tithes to provide charity.”4 This means that one bad year every once in a while wouldn’t cause the downfall of the peasants’ lifestyle. As long as the next year was good, they could pick themselves up and continue living and working. However, if they had many bad years, they could be kicked off of the land. “The unlucky could end up as vagrants and beggars, despite the very real degree of charity and mutual help offered by the community.” 5 The life of the peasant wasn’t completely hopeless, but it was definitely precarious.

The link between agriculture and witchcraft is the idea of maleficium. In an agrarian society where magic was generally believed to be real, it makes sense that problems with the harvest could be linked to maleficium. The church was largely responsible for the spread of the idea that magic was real. They used this belief as a tool to spread Christianity and to extinguish heretical beliefs. All of the earliest witchcraft trials were started and encouraged by them. It wasn’t until the 1300s until the people started to catch on to the link between maleficium and agriculture. This usually came in the form of neighbors accusing their neighbors of using maleficium to harm their crops. Then in 1484, Pope Innocent VII clearly shows the link between agriculture and maleficium in a bull stating, “it has indeed lately come to our ears… many persons of both sexes… have blasted the produce of the earth, the grapes of the vine, the fruits of the trees… vineyards, orchards, meadows, pasture-land, corn, wheat, and all other cereals…”6

The fact that the Pope wrote about the threat of magic against agriculture shows that society was beginning to take maleficium very seriously.

The threat of maleficium against agriculture was taken so seriously, that the people started taking other superstitions and folklore as truth. A prime example of this would be the benandante. In the 16th century, a group of people called the benandante became known to the courts. These people claimed that they were enemies to witches. Ginzburg retells their story in his book, *The Night Battles,* “In the fighting that we do, one time we fight over the wheat and all the other grains, another time over the livestock, and at other times over the vineyards… and if we are the victors, that year there is abundance, but if we lose there is famine.”7 The perceived threat of maleficium to the harvest was so real to these people that they actually believed in their own superstitions. The threat of the witches was so pervasive that people came up with a way to balance the order of society. These people actually believed that they were actively fighting witches over the outcome of the harvest. This shows just how important agriculture is to these people. It also shows that they believed agriculture was being threatened not just by the maleficium of individuals, but by a collective witch cult.

Maleficium and witchcraft were believed in for hundreds of years before the witch-craze took place. There had to be a trigger for what caused society to actively start hunting and burning witches. This trigger was the weather, specifically a time period called the ‘Little Ice Age’. The Little Ice Age was a period of abnormal weather that started in the mid-16th century and ended in the early 18th century. According to Emily Oster, “the temperature over the period was about two degrees Fahrenheit

lower than it had been in previous centuries.”8 This may not seem like much, but Geoffrey Parker explains that “an overall decline in mean temperatures is normally associated with a greater frequency of severe weather events- such as flash floods, freak storms, prolonged droughts, and abnormal cold spells.”9 So not only was the overall temperature lower than normal, there were also many more natural disasters occurring.

These weather conditions had disastrous effects on the harvest. The drop in mean temperature led to shorter growing seasons, which led to diminished crop yields. Depending on the region, these yields could be lowered by 15 to 80 percent.10 As if that wasn’t enough, droughts, frosts, floods, and other natural disasters, which became more frequent during this time period, also wiped out entire fields. This was devastating not just for individual farms, but for entire farming communities. People were growing less or no produce compared to before, and they couldn’t afford to eat much less pay their rent or taxes. This put a lot of pressure on the landlords and the church. They just couldn’t afford to support all of their peasant workers who weren’t growing food and making money. Charity from the church could only help so many people before they began to run out of funds.

The widespread crop failures led to famine and food shortages. Due to inflation, food prices skyrocketed. “The high price of basic foodstuffs caused dire poverty.”11 Only the rich could afford to eat well, everyone else soon became malnourished. Malnutrition caused weakened immune systems, and diseases like the bubonic plague ran rampant. People started dying in great numbers, which reduced the total global population significantly.

Never before had the people of Europe experienced such a long run of terrible weather. This weather seemed ‘unnatural’ to people and they soon came to the conclusion that it was the result of magic. It is not a coincidence that the witch craze occurred at the same time as the Little Ice Age. “Witches became target for blame because there was an existing cultural framework that both allowed

their persecution and suggested that they could control the weather.”12 As the weather got worse and worse, witches were targeted more and more. Emily Oster shows in her research the correlation between temperature and number of witch craft trials. She notes that “temperature and trials moved in opposite directions in this period.”13 This means that as the temperature dropped, the number of witchcraft trials increased, and vice versa. People linked maleficium and witchcraft to the changes in the weather, which explains the link between the number of witchcraft trials and temperature.

Famine, death, and economic failure caused societal fear. The people were in a panic and needed a scapegoat for everything that was happening to them. They needed a way to fight back against the misfortunes that were happening to them. The witches were easy targets. “The witchcraft trials are a large-scale example of violence and scapegoating prompted by deterioration in economic conditions.”14 Parker also did research on this phenomenon. He studied individual witchcraft trials and how they related to weather events at that time. For example, he describes one instance in which a weather event sparked a witch hunt, “in southern Germany, a hailstorm in May 1626 followed by Arctic temperatures led to the arrest, torture, and execution of 900 men and women suspected of producing the calamity through witchcraft.”15 There are a multitude of examples similar to this one. Catastrophic weather events caused panic and fear in society, which caused people to go on widespread witch hunts. The people used the persecution of witches as a way to fight the tragedies of their lives.

The idea of magic may have been originally perpetuated by the church, but during the witch craze it was the people who were the driving force. “Because everyone generally believed that crop

failures over many years had been brought on by witches and malefactors out of devilish hatred, the whole land rose up to exterminate them.”16 The people found a common enemy in the witches, and they unified to fix their problem. “If the authorities refused to bend to popular pressure, communities occasionally responded with open unrest.”17 So in order to avoid a revolt, the authorities allowed the people to have their witch hunts. The church no longer had to encourage the persecution of witches and heretics; society was doing it all on its own now.

The witch-craze was a result of the gradual build-up of the fear of maleficium in an agrarian society, combined with the trigger of the Little Ice Age. The Little Ice Age led to a failing economy throughout Europe, famine, disease, and death. The people needed a scapegoat for their hardships, and blaming witches was the logical answer. The resulting widespread witch hunts were produced from widespread societal fear and anxiety.

Bibliography

Albala, Ken. *Food in Early Modern Europe*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2003.

Behringer, Wolfgang. "Weather, Hunger and Fear." In *The Witchcraft Reader*, 74-85. 2nd ed. New York: Routledge, 2008.

Briggs, Robin. "The Experience of Bewitchment." In *The Witchcraft Reader*, 53-63. 2nd ed. New York: Routledge, 2008.

Ginzburg, Carlo. *The Night Battles: Witchcraft & Agrarian Cults in the Sixteenth & Seventeenth Centuries*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983.

Neilson, N. *Medcieval Agrarian Economy*. New York, NY: Henry Holt and Company, 1936.

Oster, Emily. "Witchcraft, Weather And Economic Growth In Renaissance Europe." *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 18, no. 1 (2004): 215-28.

Parker, Geoffrey. *Global Crisis: War, Climate Change and Catastrophe in the Seventeenth Century*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2013.

Pope Innocent VII. "Summis Desiderantes Affectibus." In *Witchcraft in Europe*, 177-180. 2nd ed. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001.