

The Choice between Norm and Freedom: Women and Witchcraft in the Late Middle Ages

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Abstract: Many women were targeted by the juridical system for practising witchcraft in the late Middle Ages, but their motivation and interest in practising witchcraft haven't been widely analyzed. Thus, the analysis generally focuses on the social context of late medieval women that make them more interested in witchcraft by analyzing the social roles given and feminine consciousness in the practice of heresy. This work proposes two questions: How does witchcraft reflect women's roles and social expectations in medieval society? Did the practice of heresy arouse feminine consciousness in the Middle Ages? This work chooses *The Hammer of Witches* by the 15th-century Dominican friars Jacob Sprenger and Heinrich Kramer as primary sources to analyze and found that hatred and loss of possession are the main motivations for women to involve with witchcraft. These motivations reflect women's dissatisfaction and the restriction of being a housewife. There are different opinions toward the feminine consciousness in the practice of heresy. It is found that the practice of heresy helps women exert their great influence on their family and community by sharing their heresy, which is a part of the indication of feminine consciousness. But contrary opinions suggest that women's act in heresy didn't derive from their self-willingness, and instead their behaviours are generally from the devil's intention.

Keywords: Witchcraft, Women, Late middle ages

1. Introduction

During the Late Middle Ages, there were frequent witch trials conducted by people, mainly women involved. Why is witchcraft so closely related to women? Based on this, the author takes the social norms and gender roles in that period as the starting point and explores the conflict between women's motivation to do this and their social expectations, to explain the relationship between witchcraft and women's social behaviours. Besides, the author applied Feminine Consciousness, an awakening of power that is aligned with feminine energy or yin energy[1], to dialectically study the significance of this relevance to modern value. Therefore, two research issues were proposed: How does witchcraft reflect women's roles and social expectations in medieval society? Did the practice of heresy arouse feminine consciousness in the Middle Ages? Noticed that the research focuses on the late Middle Ages between 1250 and 1500 AD.

2. How does witchcraft reflect women's roles and social expectation in medieval society?

Witchcraft is an activity that violated the social norm in medieval society. The author aims at analyzing how different motivations indicate women's needs and desires and thus, how these demands reversely embodied the given gender norms and roles of women in the Middle Ages. Several motivations are mentioned: Hatred, Loss of Possessions and Sexuality.

2.1 Hatred

Hatred is one of the significant motivations for women to follow the heresy. Maxwell-Stuart describes hatred as "(a) matter for the will which is rooted in the soul." [2]. Two specific sources of hatred were jealousy and resistance. Jealousy applied to women is commonly derived from another woman who involved or blocked her original romance relationship. A classical case can be shown from *The Malleus Maleficarum*. These cases stressed the inadaptability, which always happens when one's psychological state is mismatched with what he or she has now. It also relates to one's demand and his or her status and roles. When personal desire outweighs his or her roles, jealousy would thus appear. One thing needs to notice is that we should not put modern value judgment for concubines in the medieval context since we

are in different times. Overall, executing witchcraft with the motivation of jealousy reversely embodies some women's social role and indicates their internal conflicts.

2.2 Loss of Possessions

Another motivation is the loss of possessions. The *Malleus Maleficarum* recorded a case: A man's horses suffered from diseases. His wife felt depressed, so she asked witches to help cure the horses. Wives in the family usually take a submissive role in the medieval and fewer opportunities to make a living for themselves, so they have to get remarried after their husband died. The property, specifically heritage and dowry, acts as financial support for widows to raise children and more importantly to consider possible remarriage. Back to the case, asking for witches' help is now understandable.

2.3 Sexuality

Ancient scholars like Sprenger, one of the authors of *The Malleus Maleficarum*, defined that the bond between witches and the devil is fundamentally strengthened by sexual intercourse. Although nowadays some scholars criticize the definition is biased from femininity, one can be certain that many women, before they became witches, were lured by the devil or other witches for sex and adolescence girls are more likely to be seduced.[2] If we look through the history of the Middle Ages, we could find that social manners were strongly affected by religious doctrine and laws. Such as the idea of folks whose bodies were not controlled by the spirit is contempt for God and only in marriage can people have sexual intercourse. Even though society gives sexual code, sexual desire is a human instinct, which cannot be exactly inhibited. Thus, for those whose spirit is defeated by the flesh, they would ultimately choose the one who controls their body and set them free to release their sexual desire. In conclusion, the motivation of sexuality provides a microcosmic of how some women's demand for sex clash the sexual norm and how they deviate from the norm.

3. Did the practice of heresy arouse feminine consciousness in the Middle Ages?

Discussions regarding the interaction between heresy and feminine consciousness derive from females' scale involvement in heresy practice. No matter who were heretics and witches, they all experienced and realized the restrictions of orthodox religion and then chose to follow the heresy that allows them to exert their greater influence or possess more rights. The motivations reflect the appearance of females' consciousness. However, some opinions argued that following heresy was a forced-choice since the orthodox religion excluded them. Also, many incidents proved that the theoretical freedom in heresy was not effectively applied to the practice. Based on different positions, the feminine consciousness between witches and other heretics were discussed.

3.1 Witches

Feminine consciousness in witches can be represented by their use of magic to influence others. The motivations of females' willingness to change the current situation is a way of reflection for feminine consciousness. From the standpoint of practice, the ability of witchcraft made witches convince their influence on others and achieve a sense of value from their contribution. Women had less religious power as men unless they were abbesses, who were the most scholarly nuns. Furthermore, most of the nuns were required to experience lifelong enclosure, while witches can move freely by sitting on their brooms[3]. Being a wife allowed women to influence the family, but the effects they exerted was lack of self-willingness compared with witches. Alberti's famous treatise 'The Family' indicated that among North Italian nobles, the work of housewives was generally followed the expectation of their husbands. Giannozzo, one of the participants, trained her wife to do the house management, and all the instructions were matched with his preference[3]. With strong personal intentions and willingness to change and execute their work and more flexible activity space, feminine consciousness was imperceptibly formed.

Arguments negated the feminine consciousness in witches stress the obedience towards the devil and the passivity. To be specific, all acts of devil worship and witchcrafts were from the intentions of the devil but not the women themselves. The great voluntariness and willingness witches displayed result from the tricky means of the devil for luring, which can be inferred from a case of the *Malleus Maleficarum*. Though some benefits gained, women were still acted as an accepted and guiding role.

3.2 Women in other Christian heresies

Different from witches, women in other heresies displayed their feminine consciousness by their expanding power in the family and household roles. They acted as an influential character to spread the heretic belief to the family members or even the community. The Cathar Heresy provides women with greater opportunity for individual actions and also awarded them to administer the Cathar sacrament of the consolamentum, which is known as hereticon to its Catholic opponents[4]. According to Women in Medieval Europe (1200-1500), girls who had received Cathar education from an early age spread the heresy to a certain community through the marriage. Furthermore, the mother's influence they exerted would significantly affect the next generation, taking the wife of Guillaume-Roger de Mirepoix Furneria as an example[3]. The way of representation of feminine consciousness is somewhat similar to the Liberal Feminism held by Mary Wollstonecraft, who advocated valuing the distinctive female nature and talents. By exploring the value of existing roles, women gained self-identity and thus creates their value.

But from another perspective, women's practice in heresy as a housewife made no distinction with the orthodox religion. Theoretically, their power was greater, but most of their activities were similar to the women in the Roman Church. Therefore, following the heresy means to behave similarly in another religious system, which cannot change the individual consciousness of women.

4. Conclusion

Motivations of hatred, loss of possessions, and sexuality for executing witchcraft reversely embodied the social norms and roles of women in the Late Middle Ages by displaying the conflict and mismatching status between the personal demands and the given roles. In the second part, feminine consciousness was displayed between witches and other female heretics by different ways of exerting influence. For witches and women in other heretics, they both exerted great influence on others, which implies it promotes the evocation of feminine consciousness. Opposite arguments focus on whether their behaviours were deriving from their self-willingness and whether their roles remained the same compared with the roles in the Roman Church. They hold the view that the devil bewitched all witches and devil's followers, and thus, what they behave is generally from the devil's intentions. Women were still restricted in certain roles. Overall, studying the relationship between witchcraft system and females provides a conceptual field to understand the interrelationship between the social roles and social disorder forces and how they interact to impact the social behaviours of women.

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