

Women's History

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Salem Witch Trials

Martha Stewart's treatment by the law and the press has been likened to a "bitch-hunt." Psychologist Beverly Valtierra says: "Our culture still has a hard time with hard, powerful women. We still live in a patriarchal society where men call all the shots."

In 1692 witchcraft prosecutions exploded in Salem, Massachusetts. Of the nearly 200 people accused, three-fourths were women. When data only on accused married women is considered, an economic pattern emerges that is entwined with inheritance and the transmission of wealth and property.

These women were either: (1) daughters of parents who had no sons (or whose sons had died); (2) women in marriages which brought forth only daughters (or in which the sons had died), or (3) women in marriages with no children at all.

Women who did inherit, who could have been economically independent, often were not because they did not receive their inheritance when they were accused of witchcraft in courts of law. They were women accused and tried by court officials who were men.

Anthropologists have long understood that communities define as witches people whose behavior enacts the things the community most fears. In a patriarchal community it was easy to condemn those who did not accept their place in it.

Available data shows clearly the particular vulnerability of women without brothers or sons. Even if all the unknown cases involved women from families with male heirs--a highly unlikely possibility--women from families without males to inherit would still form a majority of convicted and executed witches.

What seems especially significant here is that most accused witches whose husbands were still alive, like their counterparts who were widows and spinsters, were over forty years of age--and therefore unlikely if not unable to produce male heirs. Indeed, the fact that witchcraft accusations were rarely taken seriously by the community until the accused stopped bearing children takes on a special meaning when it is juxtaposed with the anomalous position of inheriting women or potentially inheriting women in New England's social structure.

Few of the women, however, accepted disinheritance with equanimity. Rather...they took their battles to court, casting themselves in the role of public challengers to the system of male inheritance. The rules of inheritance were not always followed. Occasionally, the magistrates themselves allowed the estate to be distributed in a fashion other than stated.

In most instances, the authorities sided with their antagonists...it indicates how reluctant magistrates were to leave property in the control of women... because it shows that the property of convicted witches was liable to seizure even without the benefit of an attainder law.

Looking back over the lives of these many women--most particularly those who did not have brothers or sons to inherit--one can begin to understand the complexity of the economic dimension of New England witchcraft. Only rarely does the actual trial testimony indicate that economic power was even at issue. Nevertheless it is there, recurring with a telling persistence once we look beyond what was explicitly said about these women as witches.

No matter how deeply entrenched the principle of male inheritance, no matter how carefully written the laws that protected it, it was impossible to insure that all families had male offspring. The women who stood to benefit from these demographic "accidents" account for most of New England's female witches.

Source

Women's America: Refocusing the Past, 4th Ed., Linda K. Kerber and Jane Sherron DeHart, Oxford University Press, 1995, pp 50-64.