

ACCOUNTS OF WITCHCRAFT IN 16TH CENTURY ENGLAND

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During the reign of Elizabeth I of England, hysteria about witchcraft frequently gripped the nation and many pamphlets appeared detailing the horrid wickedness of the witches. However, analysis of pamphlets published less than thirty years apart shows a number of important differences between the two that suggest important changes in the society that produced them.

Comparing the account of the 1566 and 1579 Chelmsford witch trials and the Warboys case of 1593 illustrates a clear change in style and tone over time. The earlier account is a rather crude and straightforward, even utilitarian, account enlivened only by very poor poetry. The author uses any and all evidence, predominantly the accounts of the trial itself, presenting it without comment. The story of the possession of the Throckmorton children and the trial and execution of the Samuels is conversely a more accomplished and cohesive narrative. Although the author utilizes trial accounts, these only occur near the end of the text as the culmination of the story. The bulk of the pamphlet instead relies upon personal accounts and detailed descriptions of the alleged crimes. This change would suggest a growing sensitivity to the audience for the pamphlets. They would have been predominantly middle-class, as only the middle classes would have the education to read the works and the money to purchase them. As their literary sophistication grew, so might the demand for erudition and complexity in their reading matter. In addition, as Rosen notes, the authors themselves changed. Those interested in reporting news veered away from domestic witchcraft accounts to be replaced by interested amateurs.¹

This awareness of audience may have also led to another important difference between the two accounts. Authorities accused the witches in Chelmsford of offences against multiple different victims. Elizabeth Francis caused

the death of one lover and her child and the lameness of her husband while her sister, Mother Waterhouse, killed her husband and a neighbor and destroyed property belonging to five of her neighbors.² It is notable that these many victims were villagers and neighbors of the accused. Although it is not clearly stated, they appeared to be of a similar or only slightly elevated socio-economic position to the witches themselves. In the Warboys account, however, despite the brief mention of troubling other of her neighbors, the thrust of the narrative concerns only one family, the Throckmortons. Robert Throckmorton, the *pater familias*, was an “esquire” with a large and mobile family, a brother-in-law a scholar at the university of Cambridge and friends among the local nobility, scholars and gentry.³ He was, like the potential readers of the pamphlets both prosperous and educated. Reading an account of the travails of his family would surely strike a more resonant chord with his peers than reading about the problems of the poor peasantry. This probably also explains the greatly increased emphasis upon the victims in the later narrative. While the earlier accounts mention the witches’ curses in one or two lines, the latter describes the fits of the Throckmorton children in vivid detail.⁴ Evoking sympathy in the reader and implying it could happen to them might only add to the drawing power of such accounts.

This emphasis upon the victim rather than the witch in the later account also has the effect of obfuscating the motives of Mother Samuel and her kin. In the Chelmsford trials, they are clearer. The impoverished peasants of Chelmsford frequently begged for alms and it was those who refused them aid that fell victim to their witchcraft.⁵ With the collapse of the safety net provided by the church in the wake of the dissolution of the monasteries, the poor

² *Ibid.*, 75–76.

³ *Ibid.*, 240, 245, 253, 255 and *passim*

⁴ *Ibid.*, 241, 244 and *passim*.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 76, 96–98.

¹ Barbara Rosen, ed., *Witchcraft in England 1558–1618* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1991) 214.

would have made increasing demands upon their less desperate neighbors. Traditionally, these village notables had been the source of much charity. However, with the great increases in population and the concomitant rapid decrease in standards of living among the peasantry, they would have been harder pressed themselves.⁶ Their reluctance then to give out alms and to blame the poorest is thus a potent undercurrent of the earlier accounts. However, the Samuels are not accused of begging. Their motive, mentioned only in passing, was merely that Robert Throckmorton had “dealt very roughly in speech” with Mother Samuel.⁷ Yet, the deemphasizing of begging as a motive not only be due to the emphasis upon the victim but may also be due to a short-lived but important easing of demographic pressures and the brief rise in living standards in the late 1580s.⁸ With less pressure on the gentry, begging might have appeared a less important issue to contemporaneous readers. Although anxieties about poverty would not have been completely erased, perhaps there were instead more pressing concerns that temporarily overshadowed them. With the aging of the Queen and the recent attack by the Spanish, anxieties about the realm itself among the gentry seem more prominent in the later accounts.⁹

This change in victim comes and brief alleviation of economic concerns appears alongside a change in the methods used by the witches. Although both the Chelmsford witches and the Samuels use familiar spirits, in the earlier cases, the witches send these animal spirits to plague their neighbors with ill animals, spoiled butter and beer, illness and death, reflecting perhaps the anxieties over the food and poverty.¹⁰ In Warboys, spirits possess the children causing fits. These fits, however, are finite and non-fatal. They end with the children feeling well.¹¹ Rosen posits that this change occurs due to the changes in religion, especially with respect to exorcism. Exorcism by

Protestants and puritans was a highly charged subject. To many it appeared to “popish” and they wanted it ended. Pressure grew during the 1590s until it was banned in 1603, except in special cases.¹² The author of the Warboys account presumably wrote it then to validate spirit possession and, by extension, to support the need for exorcism. This would seem a reasonable conclusion except that the Throckmortons did not attempt exorcism. Still, perhaps the author intends to suggest that their daughters’ troubles would have been much the less had they done so.

Despite the differences, some common threads are apparent in both accounts. In particular, the nature of the witches themselves remains the same. Witches are predominantly women, old or widows, and always poor. Mother Waterhouse and Mother Samuel were sixty-four and “near fourscore” respectively and Waterhouse was a widow (albeit because she murdered her husband).¹³ The surety of religion had once alleviated anxieties about living standards, religious upheaval and potential threats to the realm. With that no longer possible, the people of England seemed to have projected their fears onto the most vulnerable and powerless in society. In addition, many of the fears revolved around the domestic sphere, in particular where food would come from and the safety of children. As women were central to this realm, it is not unnatural they be charged most often with disrupting it.

The pamphlets describing the Chelmsford and Warboys cases and in particular the differences between the two suggest considerable changes occurring in Elizabeth society. While the perpetrators remained the same convenient and disempowered victims of an anxious society, their “victims,” their methods and motives all seemed to change over time. This, along with the sophisticated tone of the later pamphlets, suggests a growing awareness of middle class, educated interest in the pamphlets and in witches as well as a change in the emphasis of their fears from predominantly economic to a more complex mix of economic, religious and political, reflecting the uncertainties of the period.

⁶ John Guy, “The Tudor Age,” in *The Oxford History of Britain* ed. K.O. Morgan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001) 260.

⁷ Rosen 292.

⁸ Guy, 262.

⁹ Rosen 229.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 76, 96–98

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 262.

¹² *Ibid.*, 229.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 76 and 294.