



Witchcraze: A New History of the European Witch Hunts

By Anne Llewellyn Barstow

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"In the sixteenth century, a rise in sexual violence in European society was exacerbated by pressure from church and state to change basic sexual customs...As the centuries since have shown escalating levels both of violence, general and sexual, and of state control, the witchcraze can be considered a portent, even a model, of some aspects of what modern Europe would be like."

Over three centuries, approximately one hundred thousand persons, most of whom were women, were put to death under the guise of "witch hunts", particularly in Reformation Europe. The shocking annihilation of women from all walks of life is explored in this brilliant, authoritative feminist history Anne Llewellyn Barstow. Barstow exposes an unrecognized holocaust -- the "ethnic cleansing" of independent women in Reformation Europe -- and examines the residual attitudes that continue to influence our culture.

Barstow argues that it is only with eyes sensitive to gender issues that we can discern what really happened in the persecution and murder of these women. Her sweeping chronicle examines the scapegoating of women from the ills of society, investigates how their subjugation to sexual violence and death sent a message of control to all women, and compares this persecution of women with the enslavement and slaughter of African slaves and Native Americans.

Ultimately Barstow traces the current backlash against women to its gynophobic torture-filled origins. In the process, she leaves an indelible mark on our growing understanding of the legacy of violence against women around the world.

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Editorial Review

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A definitive portrait of the witch-hunts that terrorized European women during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Though the persecution, torture, and execution of more than seven million women suspected of being witches during this period has been documented in other historical sources, Barstow is the first scholar to offer a convincing gender analysis of the Reformation-era witch craze. According to Barstow, independent and intelligent women often proved to be convenient targets for misogynists seeking scapegoats for every conceivable social ill. Most interesting is the author's credible assertion that the witch-hunts not only paralleled the emergence of a more patriarchal society, but also heralded the disturbing decline in the status of women that continued over the course of the next several centuries. A fascinating historical treatise that provides an evolutionary context for the contemporary proliferation and escalation of violence toward women. *Margaret Flanagan*

Review

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"Anne Llewellyn Barstow has thought long and hard about witchcraft. To *Witchcraze* she brings a rich historical understanding of Europe during the period of the persecution of witches....The book is a gold mine of information." -- *Ms.*

"Barstow's careful and committed scholarship gives us a new and important geography of this woman-hating persecution. She recognizes the sadism and terror of the witch hunts while scrutinizing the economic and sociological dynamics that may have been crucial factors in the murders. Surely we must know what happened to these women and why. *Witchcraze* brings us closer to the truth." -- *Andrea Dworkin, author of Intercourse*

"Serious scholarship and accessible style combine here for fascinating reading--and for an important contribution to the history of women (and men). This may well be the first--and best--work to dare view The Burning Time through unashamedly feminist, and truthful, eyes." -- *Robin Morgan*

"Thought-provoking....Gripping." -- *New York Times Book Review*

From the Author

"This is not a book for weak-stomached patriarchs. But the rest of us--historians of Christianity, feminist theorists, European social and economic historians, theologians, and ethicists--will find reason to be grateful

to Barstow for her wide-ranging and provocative comparative analysis of European witchcraze, witch hunters, and their female victims from the mid-sixteenth to the end of the seventeenth century."

"Barstow has reviewed the burgeoning literature on the persecution of women as witches with two purposes: first, to place the "fact" of gender (which she carefully establishes from the evidence) at the center of her argument, and second, from a rich if necessarily erratic (because of great gaps in the evidence) comparative analysis to uncover the preconditions apparently essential for a society to turn to intense persecutions of witches."

"We are all aware that most witches were women but, Barstow argues very convincingly, we have failed to take that fact seriously in our interpretations and analyses. Scholarly attention has focused on the witch hunters, all male, rather than on the historically silent victims (generally between 80 and 90 percent female). And because the descriptions of what was done to those women is so graphic and gruesome, we have turned aside rather than see clearly the terrifying hatred of women, women's bodies, and women's sexuality in the accusations, confessions, structures of inquiry and judgment, and forms of torture and ultimate execution."

"Why would European society turn against its own women, even the poor and marginal, developing a "theory" of women and a theology, if one can call it that, of the devil and of evil? The work of European male elites in suppressing the last remnants of a lively local folk culture, with its belief in magic, its receptivity to women healers, and its custom-based methods of conflict regulation within local communities, is part of Barstow's complex answer. The jurisdiction of secular courts (more willing to use torture than ecclesiastical officials), weak central authority (as in the regions of the Holy Roman Empire), the two Reformations of the period, and elite belief in diabolism seem to have been central factors. In the last chapter, several extremely interesting linkages are suggested between the persecution of witches and the rapid growth of colonialism, with its concomitant slaughter and enslavement of indigenous populations on several continents. Is witchcraze an early part of the story of the rapid development of the modern state and the spread of individualism (for elite European males only, of course) and market capitalism?"--*Church History*

"The Christian churches, then as in our own century, were not simply bystanders to this gratuitous violence against a class of people. Equally troubling in Barstow's analysis are the obvious parallels with the practices of Christian anti-Semitism. (Nazi rhetoric ridiculed Jewish men as "effeminate," an ancient and ominous "linkage," now perhaps more intelligible.) A fully adequate account of the history of European Christianity must somehow grapple with Barstow's questions."--Penny Gill, Mt.Holyoke College

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Judy Chisolm:

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