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Editorial: Persecution of Witches

Today in England, as we are nearing the end to the 16th century, there is an increase in persecution of witches. Witchcraft is the power to do harm and is believed to be a combination of sinfulness and influence by the devil. Witches are often blamed for unexplainable events, perhaps because many people think that they have “made a pact or covenant with the devil” (Sommerville). There are even those who believe that Satan “gave the witch the power to cause illness and sometimes even death in humans and animals, bring on bad weather, and destroy fertility in humans or plants” (Zophy 196). Citizens also believe that “old, poor, single women or widows” (Alchin) are most likely to be witches. As a result of being accused of being a witch, these women become unpopular, disliked and feared in their community. Because of their association with the devil and dark arts, the Church has become unwilling to help these women, who are often so poor that they must then resort to begging for alms (Sommerville). Ultimately, once the community decides that a woman is a witch, she is put on trial. There are many ways to catch a witch, but there seems to be problems with these tactics. To me, it seems that we must look much more closely at how we are putting these women on trial.

Some people believe that it is acceptable to kill suspected witches without giving her a trial in front of an assizes court judge. People believe that going to the assizes court is costly. It involves “the time, trouble and expense needed to go from one’s home to the town where the court [is] held” (Sharpe 106). Instead, citizens believe that there are certain tests that can be performed to determine whether she is guilty or not. For example, “swimming the witch” involves tying the accused woman’s hands to her feet

and putting her in a pond. If she floats, she is considered to be a witch, but if she sinks, she is presumed innocent (Sharpe, 102). Another test for a witch is “the Bible test.” The Bible test is when the accused woman is weighed against the weight of the Bible—literally. If the woman weighs less than the Bible she is considered to be a witch and therefore executed immediately. If an accused witch fails either of these tests, she is sentence to death; that is, of course, if the test itself did not already kill her.

If my tone has not made it evident already, I believe that this method of testing witches is completely ridiculous. The tests are clearly not fair, reliable, or scientific. In fact, the statute of 1563 states that the penalty for witchcraft should vary depending on the harm done by the offender. Only those who killed someone or harmed after a first offense were subject to die. Yet, both methods of testing a witch—by swimming and by weighing—would leave the witch dead, regardless of anything she could ever say or do. Yet, witches continue to be put on trial unfairly. Perhaps it is because witchcraft represents “a threat to Church authority” (Anderson 35), but if we are going to continue accusing someone of being a witch, we ought to go to the courts, and let unbiased judges deliver more just verdicts.

My point is this: everyone should get a fair trial at the assizes. To start, everyone should be considered innocent until proven guilty. What I have seen in my life is that when people are given a fair trial “many of those accused of witchcraft failed to qualify as such when scrutinized by experienced inquisitors” (Zophy 196). A lot of people accused of being witches are found to be innocent. Some people who are killed by mobs in their communities might not have been found guilty in the assizes courts. Also, it should be left to judges, not ordinary citizens, to determine guilt. Judges are “agents of central government, who [are] trained in the law and sensitive to contemporary notions of standards of proof in criminal cases and who normally [have] little knowledge of and little interest in the local pressures which so often underlay a witchcraft accusation” (Sharpe 92). Judges are trained to determine guilt and are not part of the local community so they are not obliged to please the community. They are in a better position

to judge trials than local residents. A friend of mine, Johann Weyer, simply believes that witches are “really harmless and confused old women” (Zophy 196). Given some doubts about their existence, we have to be certain to give the accused an opportunity to defend themselves. Everyone, including those accused of being witches, are entitled to a fair trial.

It is perhaps inevitable that people will question the actual existence of witches. After all, there is always a part of us that wants to explain what we cannot understand. But, as Christians, if we “ascribe to witches the powers they [are] thought to possess that in itself is to commit blaspheme by attributing to them powers which [are] limited to God” (Sharpe 53). Only God can do supernatural things, and so the accusation of the witch actually challenges God’s powers. Let’s act on the safe side and not take matters of life-and-death into our own hands. Leave those decisions to God, and if not to God, judges and courts which are trained to handle the enormity of such decisions.