

The image of witches.

From the Stake to the Barricade.

The RoSa-factsheets aim to familiarise you with the scope of equal opportunities in Flanders. Each factsheet probes the situation in a specific area. Broad themes as well as specific ones are put into the spotlight, depending on the relevance and/or availability of information and numerical data. We do not intend to offer exhaustive information, our primary aim is to sketch the position of women in Flanders in a surveyable and accessible way. Since its founding in 1978, RoSa is the place in Flanders to look for information and documentation about equal opportunities, emancipation policy and women's studies.

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Introduction

The image of women has always been charged with powerful symbols, full of contrast, reflecting both feelings of love and hate, admiration and horror, praise and fear. This duality appears to be present in most societies. Venus, Athena, or Maria symbolize fertility, the infinity of nature, divine wisdom, and are a source of grace or supreme kindness. But Eve, Pandora, Kali, or Medusa are the incarnation of sin, death and disaster.

In our society, one of the most famous examples related to the image of women is that of witches. Throughout history, witches have had a changing and often contradictory reputation. They were either seen as supernaturally gifted people, as a symbol of the self-determination of women, or as being possessed by the devil.

What is so interesting about these reactions? What does it take to be a witch? Are there any patterns? And what made people hunt witches massively in the seventeenth century? The following article outlines the evolution of the image of witches from antiquity to present, and focuses on 'Flemish witches'.

The history of the witches' image tells us more about the history of women. It shows the changing attitude towards women, their position and their role in society.

Diana's Servants: Witches in Antiquity

Image Building

In ancient history, witches were seen as servants of Diana, goddess of the hunt, the moon and birth, or of Hecate, goddess of the underworld and the new moon. They were said to be collecting herbs, were seen as poisoners, their bodies could take different forms, they preferred to live in absolute darkness, and were able to fly.

Witches were women selling magic mixtures, most often with a positive effect on love, and were able to predict the future. It was said that by

using their witchcraft they could seduce men, but that they took revenge on those who would not give in to their demands. Killing children was one of their most despicable activities.

This first description announced two of the most important ideas that would become related to the image of witches: a strong emphasis on female sexuality as well as on sorcery. It is interesting to know that, in the beginning, the image of witches was both good and bad. With the growing influence of Christianity, their good reputation would largely disappear.

Attitude towards witches

- **Secular law**

Roman law prohibited the use of sorcery for criminal purposes. White magic was allowed. Sanctions were moderate, and largely aimed at preventing abuses.

- **Canon law**

The introduction of Christianity led to fundamental changes in society. Pagan religion became satanic, and was considered as an expression of evil. Christian law condemned idolatry, and sorcery under any circumstance was punished with the death sentence.

- **Public opinion**

Despite some fear of their mysterious powers, witches were frequently consulted. They were seen as wise women. Even Roman emperors liked to make use of the supernatural powers of witches and magicians when at war or when facing sentimental difficulties.

Witches in France and Germany (4th - 12th Century)

Image building

In the fourth and fifth century, our region had to face massive migration of Germanic tribes. They introduced a completely new pagan world of gods, of utmost importance for the image of witches in Flanders. The Germanic people brought belief in witches and magicians, dwarfs and giants, elves and gnomes.

The law of the Visigoths (6th-7th century) defined witches as follows : "Witches create tempests, bring hail to the vineyards and crops by means of conjuration, and, by evoking the devil, they damage the human brain. At night, they make offerings to the devil, evoking him with evil words and by godless praise".

The final breakthrough of Christianity is responsible for the introduction of the demonic alliance between witches and the devil. This would have a large impact on public opinion, and would culminate in massive witchhunting in the seventeenth century.

Along with this demonic relationship, witches are described as having supernatural powers. Since the feudal community depended completely on the success of the harvest, this gave them an important and powerful reputation. The sexual aspects remained obvious. According to the guilt books of the early Middle Ages women had many sins : they initiated physical affection, they were able to stimulate or annihilate passion, they could make men impotent, they were practicing abortion, etc.

Religious writings brought about a changing attitude towards the image of women in

general. In the fifth century, church leaders started to look for a theological justification for the inferiority of women. This was not easy, for the original Bible story gave the evidence of absolute equality between men and women: God created them both according to his own image. Therefore, the Church created an alternative version of the Genesis, where God created woman from one of Adam's ribs. Sexual fear of women started to spread through religious tracts : Augustine (354-430 AD) wrote that the body of the woman is a permanent obstacle to the spiritual soul, the image of God.

Attitude towards witches

- **Secular law**

The old Frankish armies forbade only harmful sorcery. Women were watched very closely, and punishment went from simple fines to torture.

- **Canon law**

The early church leaders, like Augustine, confirm the existence of sorcery. Witchcraft, according to them, was practiced by lost angels. But the possibility of physical transformation was denied, since the church leaders saw this as merely the result of dreams and illusion, and not as a physical reality.

From the sixth century until the eleventh century, the Church remained generally sceptical. The measures that were taken were aimed at eradicating pagan religious beliefs. In 906, for example, canon law condemned those who believed in the fact that people were able to fly. Belief in witches and sorcery was explained as being generated by demons, who "talk to the soul, and capture it, while one is asleep... All of which only happens in the mind, even though the obedient soul is convinced that it is all for real".

On the other hand, Charles the Bold introduced the God's ordeal as proof of the contrary. In 873, he introduced the water proof : innocent people drown, witches float.

- **Public opinion**

Many people believed in witches and sorcery. The Church told priests to convince people of the fact that these ideas were false. They did not succeed, however, partly because the lower clergy accorded some belief to witchcraft itself. There was a large gap between the intellectual upper clergy, which considered witches as mentally ill women, suffering from delusion and hallucination, and the lower clergy, which was largely influenced by the people's beliefs.

The attitude towards witches was a mixture of fear and respect. They were often asked for their opinion on different matters, and people often refrained from any criticism towards witches, since they were afraid of a possible revenge.

The Satanic Myth (13th - 17th century)

Image Building

- **The satanic conspiracy**

In the thirteenth century, the idea of a satanic conspiracy became more and more popular. The Church changed its strategy completely, faced with the fact that superstition among the people and the lower clergy proved undestructible. Witchcraft was no longer seen as a fantasy, but as a reality that had to be taken care of. The Church therefore decided to

strengthen its action against witches, rather than trying to act against popular superstition. The satanic conspiracy between the devil and the witches became more and more evident. Witches became the devil's servants, according to this demonic myth. They were the incarnation of evil. Whereas, not so long before, they were seen as innocent victims of nightly demons, they now became willing servants of the devil.

- **Old women**

It is remarkable that most victims of persecution of witches in Flanders were elderly women. Most of them had already been known for many years as herbists. At a certain age, they became guilty of witchcraft. Image building at that time stimulated the idea of elderly women being the incarnation of evil. They were seen as the privileged partners of satan. The old, ugly woman was a symbol of death, her eyes being darkness, her body merely a skeleton of flesh and bones. This image was related to the neo-platonic idea of beauty, representing kindness, and ugliness, which represented evil.

- **Wicked women**

The importance of catholicism in our region has been decisive for the image of women. In the thirteenth century, fear of women as seducers became more and more apparent, and religious tracts became even more anti-feminist. The *planctu ecclesia* of 1330 mentioned not only sins of men and women, but also a number of exclusively female sins. These were subdivided into seven categories: women were the cause of human downfall and an instrument of the devil (Eve); women brought men into disarray with their lies; women were godless fortune-tellers practicing sorcery; women stimulated religious disbelief, they adored the body; women were foolish, they talked too much, they quarrelled, were hot-tempered and unstable; they brought misfortune to their husbands; women disturbed the activities of the Church (especially because many priests had mistresses).

Attitude towards witches

- **Secular law**

From the thirteenth until the sixteenth century, different sanctions existed against witches. The old Flemish criminal law of the thirteenth century mentioned the removal of the guts and witchburning as possible ways of punishment, but they were rarely called upon. In the beginning of the thirteenth century, witchcraft was still largely tolerated, and had no terrible consequences. But later on, punishment became more severe. The tough attitude of the seventeenth century was prepared by a growing distrust among public opinion, and most of all by a growing influence of canon law. In the seventeenth century, there was hardly any difference between canon and secular law.

- **Canon law**

The papal bull of 1484

The theoretical justification for the persecution of witches was written down for the first time in the bull published by Pope Innocence VII in 1484. This officially stated the new position of the Church. Witchcraft was no longer seen as something imaginary, but as a reality. Moreover, this bull introduced witchhunters, who could sentence and punish witches as they liked. These measures met a lot of resistance from local bishops, who preferred to organise trials against witches in their own way. This led to the publication of the witch hammer, a unique manual for witchhunting.

The witch hammer or 'malleus malificarum' (1486)

The witch hammer was a manual that gave instructions to both church leaders and state officials for the way in which witches should be judged. It remained an influential users guide for witchhunting until the end of the seventeenth century.

Some 'misunderstandings' that had existed due to earlier religious writings were cleared out. Witchcraft, according to the authors, was an evil reality that should be fought with evil. Those who doubted about the existence of witches or sorcery were seen as heretic people. The witch doctrine was based on four crucial ideas: copulation with the devil, transformation into animals, the cult of satan, and witchcraft (malificarum).

The witch hammer was important for the fact that it put together the different existing ideas from the doctrine into one single, 'logical' book. The fact that it got accepted very quickly was most likely due to the authors' power of conviction: parts of the existing popular belief was given a Christian context, to be translated into a coherent doctrine on witches.

- **Public opinion**

Public opinion on witches (and on women in general) was largely dependent on the catholic Church. Women were a real danger for the Church, since many priests had concubines . To prevent this, measures were taken to protect confessors against the dangerous seduction techniques of women. Confessionals were protected with bars, to prevent physical contact, and a minimum age for confessors was introduced. The confessional books were widely spread, stimulating distrust against women and anti-feminism.

Moreover, the very popular Mary adoration brought women even more into difficulties. The impossible ideal of the virgin mother gave all women a bad reputation. The innocence and purity of Mary were unreachable. The Mary idolatry made every woman a lost woman. The witch became more and more seen as the negative image of Mary: witches killed fertility, practiced abortion, and were outspoken sexual creatures.

The witch hammer was therefore directed especially against women. The female suffix '-arum' said it all: sorcery was specific to women. The strong emphasis on the sexuality of women in the witch hammer left no doubt about the despicable nature of women.

The seventeenth century: the climax of witch madness

Image Building

Strangely enough, the climax of the witch hunt did not occur in the dark Middle Ages. Its most extreme expression came along with, or because of the rise of rationalism and empirical science. The madness against witches separated two different worlds: the magical-theocentric world view was replaced by the modern, rational and personal world view of a new class of traders. The old determinism was replaced by an ever growing emphasis on personal responsibility. This new mentality was encouraged and largely distributed by the reformation. Science looked more and more for the rational, causal explanations of natural phenomena.

Empirical science was nevertheless still too new to resist nature. The unexplainable was attributed to satanic power. Witches, who had the 'unexplainable' knowledge of herbs

and plants, were ideal scapegoats for these satanic purposes.

Some women had an irrational, 'satanic' power over men. Icons and literature witnessed a growing fear for 'the power of women'. The influence of mistresses, midwives, matchmakers or brothel owners was distrusted mostly.

A freudian explanation for the fact that the witch hammer described sexuality in such detail could be the fear for castration: witches were supposed to cause impotence, were able to castrate men, they could prevent reproduction, orgasms, etc.

These writings were the starting point of a long tradition. The ideas were widely spread and became more and more commonplace. This resulted for example in the fact that, when tortured, witches expressed their feelings and their retained frustrations freely, stimulated by the suggesting questions of the judges. This strengthened public opinion, influenced the behavior of other witches, etc.

The larger community was extremely severe for all that opposed the common sexual moral. The 'declarations' made on trials against witches reflected the sexual frustrations of that community.

The sexual sins of the witches were extravagant: not only did they copulate with the devil, but the devil often appeared to them as an animal, which made witches guilty of sodomy and bestiality, crimes that lead in the sixteenth and seventeenth century to the stake.

Attitude against witches

In our region, many witches were sent to the stake in the sixteenth and seventeenth century. The slightest indication was enough to burn them: a failed cure, or harvest, an abortion, infertility, plagues, etc.

Influenced by the rise of rationalism, each case was put in strictly legal terms. Witches could only be sentenced if they were found guilty, i.e. if they admitted the fact that they were guilty. To make them admit this, they had to suffer two days of torture. The first day was meant to exhaust them completely. Then followed a day of rest, in order to kill any further resistance. On the morning of the second day of torture, the fear and pain were so intense that any possible crime was admitted immediately.

Looking at the amount of women that were condemned in our region, the witch hunt was clearly a hunt for women. In Namur, 87% of those who were sentenced were women, in the north of France there were 86.5% of them, in Furnes 67%, Nivelles 97%, Leuven and Tienen 100%, Brussels 95%, Tongeren 100%, Bruges 70%, and in Kortrijk 67%.

How many women really ended on the stake is difficult to tell. A large number of people died while being tortured, or committed suicide under detention, and for some people the sentence was transformed into life imprisonment.

Explanations

There is no sound and simple explanation for the madness that ruled against witches. The specific circumstances that lead to the massive witch hunt differed from region to region. What was decisive in one region, could be of no importance in another.

- **Hatred against women**

There are a number of reasons that influenced circumstances to a large extent. As mentioned earlier, the tradition of anti-feminism in the catholic Church was very important. Moreover, historical circumstances also played a crucial role: the abandonment of the feudal system, the rise of rationalism, the reformation and the contra-reformation.

- **Religious confusion**

The witch hunt took place in a time of religious confusion. The consequences of the religious wars were devastating. There was an important shortage of priests, and the quality of the clergy was very poor. The higher clergy largely lacked education, and alcohol abuses as well as sexual relations between priests and women were commonplace.

For the larger part of the population, there was a lack of good religious education. The absence of any religious framework lead to the fact that people got more and more possessed by the devil, hell and death. The Church elite reacted strongly against this religious confusion. Any dissidence became severely punished. The Church hierarchy strongly opposed anything that diverted from the rules.

The contradiction between the culture of the Christian elite and popular cults was striking: when common people looked for protection through the use of rites and by raising taboos, to realise their dreams or to fight against their fears, they were said to be using witchcraft. When the Church did the same, it was because God told them to do so.

- **Rise of empirical science**

As said earlier, the development of empirical science strenghtened the reaction against witches. Witchcraft was used as an excuse for the shortages of scientific research. Lacking any causal explanation, one supposed a satanic conspiracy. The pre-experimental experience of women was especially feared in medical science. Women knew the secrets of mentruation, they knew a lot about contraception and abortion, etc. All these matters were taboo for the Church.

- **Social and economic conditions**

Social and economic conditions also played a part in the witch hunt. The rise of a new middle class of traders lead to a further division of male and female tasks. Women spent more and more time on caring activities. The power of women was therefore limited to seduction, education and reproduction.

- **Psychological resistance**

Finally, psychological resistance also had its part. People tried to explain misery, frustration and conflict by looking for scapegoats among people with different habits. Fate could only be accepted when a reason was given for it. Moreover, a common enemy strenghtened the solidarity within the group, and this lead in turn to more chances of survival.

None of the reasons mentioned above leads to a plain explanation of the witch hunt. In some regions, the hunt reached its climax at a moment when these arguments were of no real importance. And there were times when economic, social, ethical or religious unrest did not lead to hatred against witches. Nevertheless, and although witches were present in many different cultures, the scale of the witch hunt in Western Europe was unique.

On 23 October 1684, Martha of Wetteren, a 38-year old widow, was burnt alive in Belsele. As far as we know, this was the last witch to be burnt in Flanders. Toward the end of the seventeenth century, the rage against witches disappeared. The changing attitude was largely due to the coming of rationalism. The modern scientific methods, based on facts and on research, gave results that could no longer be denied. The ideas of Galilei (1564-1642) and Newton (1642-1727) convinced more and more people in the intellectual upper layer of society. Science in Europe largely took over Descartes' methods as being the most reliable of all methods for scientific research. Medical research found out that many witches that had been condemned only suffered from hysteria, epilepsy or senility.

Scientific progress led to a large scale social debate. Following scientists and philosophers, lawmakers became more and more convinced of the fact that the witch hunt was pure madness. Witchcraft disappeared from criminal law. Popular belief in witches remained strong, however. Until the end of the eighteenth century, people were accused of sorcery, but there was no official persecution.

Fairies...

In the nineteenth century, romanticism reached its climax. Romantics loved to evoke mysticism and the beauty of nature. They focused on the dark and mysterious world of ghosts, who were supposed to be hidden behind reality. Old legends and pagan gods reappeared. Witches were among the favorite characters in romantic literature, painting and music. They were the ideal symbol of the original power of nature.

Romantic witches differed greatly from the old witches' image. There was a strong emphasis on the female, mysterious side of the witch, and negative elements were left out. The fairy witches were beautiful, sensual young women. They appeared as prisoners of their magic forces and their - for common people - fatal beauty. Nostalgic, they stared in front of them at an unreachable reality, like Keats' "Belle dame sans merci".

... and Shrews

These images belonged exclusively to the world of fiction. Along with the romantic aspirations, another modern version of the witch of the Middle Ages appeared: hysteria. The development of psycho-analysis led to the introduction of sexuality into science. Thus, science took over part of the role of the Church: it decided on what was to be called perverse, and what was normal. In his "Histoire de la sexualité", the French philosopher Michel Foucault defines four ways of determining sexuality: pedagogy, control of reproduction, psychiatric treatment of perverse obsession, and hysteria of women. Along with the medical science in the nineteenth century, this attitude led to the biological determinism of the ill, weak woman.

Medical science found out that some organs had enough energy to be transmitted to another, weaker organ. The most important function of the woman was reproduction. That led to the 'natural' consequence that the sexual organs of a woman retained all the energy. This forced women to remain inactive. Female organs asking for such an enormous amount of energy also caused damage to the (female) body. When resting, isolation or passivity did not help, her genital organs were removed. Such practices were supposed to cure any sadness, masturbation, suicide attempts or erotic desire, madness or stubbornness.

The stake was replaced by a more subtle mechanism: psycho-analysis. The burning of witches was replaced by the so more sophisticated taming of witches.

Many women's groups have taken over the metaphor of the witch in the twentieth century, and identified themselves with that image.

In the sixties, partly due to the influence of the second feminist movement, modern feminist witches appeared, out of the WICCA movement. They were created as a reaction against existing patriarchic religions. Within the feminist WICCA movement, the Goddess represented not only female spirituality, but also the 'empowerment of women'. Opposing the traditional WICCA, they focus on the political importance of their religion. In Flanders, the WICCA movement also had a - rather modest - succes.

The overtaking of the metaphor related to witches by different feminist movements, as a symbol for their struggle against the oppression of women, was very significant in the twentieth century. The witch became a positive symbol, representing the rediscovery of the power and the possibilities of women, that men had tried to oppress by persecuting witches.

The witches got a historical, political and symbolic significance. In history, the image of witches created a common background for women of all ages. The feminist identification of this negative image has been made possible, according to the German feminist and theoreticist Silvia Bovenschen, because the "structures of sexually specific oppression have remained unchanged". The historical conscience is therefore especially significant for feminist witches: "By using the image of the witch, they refer to the history and traditions of women, that have been wiped out by the patriarchic culture, religion and historical writings".

Moreover, feminists used the image to demistify myths of femininity (especially those concerning female sexuality). Brugman: "They want to show both the disgusting fantasies that existed about real women and how large the gap is between myths about women and reality. The term 'witch' allows feminists to move between historical accusation and utopical claim".

Feminist Witches

- Beginning of the seventies: American feminist movement WITCH: Women Inspired to Commit Herstory.
- Italy, 1977: In a reaction against the raping of a young girl (she died eventually) thousands of women took to the streets in Rome at night while screaming: "Tremble! Tremble! Witches are back". This slogan and the image of the witch returned later on in the struggle for the legalisation of abortion.
- Germany, 1977-1978: In different German cities, women took to the streets with the slogan: "Women take the power! They claim equal rights". After 1978, witches became an ideal, and the harm that was done to them was used to illustrate the oppressed situation of the modern woman.
- Belgium, end of the seventies: In Ghent, the radical lesbian movement, 'Liever Heks' (Rather Witch), opposed itself against heterosexual regulations: "We want to abolish those rules, the patriarchal society, to allow women to be lesbian without any restriction,

to allow women to express themselves freely”.

- The Netherlands, 1977: Using the slogan “Fear and tremble, witches are back!” women protested against physical and sexual violence. They accused the government and legislation of negligence.
- The seventies: Creation of women’s studies departments at different universities. Women claimed the right to lead their own research, accusing scientific ‘objective’ research of being sexist. At different universities, ‘witch colleges’ were created, where different subjects were treated in a polemic and scientific manner.
- Ghent, 1998: Witches walk through the city to claim their right for freedom and independence.

Along with these positive reasons for using the image of witches, the twentieth century also witnessed the negative use of the image. ‘Witch’ is still a word used for accusing ‘annoying’ or strange women. Witches in fairy tales remained false, old and badly intended women with warts on their nose, while motion pictures and commercials used the sensual romantic witch in a modern fashion.

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