

# LINE ON LIFE

10/25/89

## The Remnants of Witchcraft \*

David A. Gershaw, Ph.D.

In about a week, we will be celebrating Halloween with representations of goblins and witches. Beside the holiday festivities, it would be interesting to know how our current life is affected by the belief in witchcraft and our society's response to that belief.

In old Europe, when any tragedy occurred, the authorities suspected *sexuality*. Many of the common people shared these attitudes. In thirteenth century Hungary, a group of people believed that the great plagues then sweeping Europe were the products of lust and sin. Mobs marched from town to town, growing in size and fury. They sang hymns, bore wooden crosses, and publicly confessed and often reenacted their carnal sins. To display their penitence, mob members carried whips and *flagellated* (whipped) themselves with passion and abandon.

The seemingly anti-sexual fury of the mob may have been disguising their erotic motives. The orgy of suffering for the sin of lust sometimes turned into group sexual activities or rape. The crowds got carried away with the very acts they were supposed to be repenting! By the seventeenth century, many flagellant groups had become obviously sexual. Because of this, the practice of flagellants was strictly prohibited by Emperor Charles IV and Pope Clement.

The most notorious example of this anti-sexual fury that swept through most of Europe was transferred to the Americas in the fifteenth century. Remember, the medieval mind sought blame for every catastrophe. When there was a drought, often a locally unpopular person was believed responsible. When there was disease, minorities such as Huguenots, Jews or dissident Catholics became scapegoats.

Who was blamed for the unsavory carnal impulses of men? Women – it was women who stimulated the lowest and basest need of even the most decent man! (Wasn't Eve the one who tempted Adam in the Garden of Eden?) The medieval banner was "*Woman is a temple built over a sewer.*" Women stirred men's passions. Since lust was the work of the devil, it easily followed that women were in league with the devil – they were witches!

This distrust of women led to periodic outbreaks of mob torture and murder. Supposedly to bring order and sense to this persecution, two German monks, Johann Sprenger and Keinrich Kraemer, precisely described how to detect witches and how to deal with them. Their book, *Malleus Maleficarum* (*The Witches' Hammer*, 1487) was the official policy manual for many in the church and government for centuries.

*The Witches' Hammer* contains precise descriptions of the **incubi** – male demons who seduce women – and the **succubi** – devilish females who provide and stimulate men. Since women were held responsible for most carnal lust, the monks describe in graphic detail how to strip a woman and investigate all of her body openings. Thus, if the devil is hiding anywhere, it will be found.

Many women who were mentally ill were likely to be brought before the inquisition courts. Their hallucinations were accepted as valid proof of their conspiracy with demons. Still other women – whose only "crime" was that they were different – were tortured until they "*confessed*" to the most bizarre sexual acts. Over the centuries, *The Witches' Hammer* fanned a witchcraft hysteria that was responsible for many hundreds of thousands of women – and many men and children too – being accused, tortured and burned at the stake.

It did not take much to become a victim of the witchcraft paranoia. In most cases, any accusation of lust and sorcery – no matter how unsubstantiated – resulted in the death of the innocent person. The accusation alone was enough for torture and death to follow.

---

**If you are upset with the rights of the accused,  
it is helpful to remember when a mere accusation  
was enough to have you tortured and put to death.**

---

Outside of Halloween, how the witchcraft paranoia and those injustices affect us today? As humanity emerged from these injustices of the Middle Ages, laws protecting the rights of the accused were slowly and gradually developed. Cross-examination of the accuser, the need for concrete and confirming evidence of guilt, and the elimination of torture became part of the legal system of most advanced nations.

Unfortunately, those who now fight for the victims of other crimes – possibly unaware of the origins of these laws that protect the accused – bemoan the fact that accused criminals now have the rights they enjoy. Although *any* rights can be misused, the rights of the accused are greatly needed. They are there to protect thousands of potential victims. However, on the other hand, changes are still needed to protect current victims of crimes from the inadequacies of our legal system.

There is another, less serious, tradition from centuries of being obsessed with witchcraft. Our language still holds faded remnants that equate women with sex and witchcraft. Have you ever called a woman "*bewitching*," "*charming*" or "*spell-binding*"? If you have, in a small way you have unknowingly supported the medieval idea that women are in league with the devil.

---

\* Adapted from Kurt Haas and Adelaide Haas' *Understanding Sexuality*, Times Mirror/Mosby College Publishing, 1987, pages 12-13.