They're Burning All the Witches (Even If You Aren't One): So, Light Me Up

By Lyra Brown

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The witch hunts were not simply a historical anomaly—they were a calculated mechanism of control. Those accused of witchcraft were most often poor, elderly, widowed, or socially marginalized. Their rarity in terms of age, socioeconomic status, or marital independence made them socially atypical and vulnerable to scapegoating. In the documentary *The Burning Times* (1990), feminist writer Thea Jensen refers to the witch hunts as "the women's Holocaust," citing the deaths of nine million women over 300 years (Read, 14:20–14:42). As narrator Martha Henry observes, with the rise of Christianity, 'belief became a way of life'—a shift that redefined spiritual authority through domination rather than reverence. Pagan shrines were repurposed as churches; goddesses were rebranded as saints. Yet, as Henry states, "While the Christian Church allowed for saints, it offered no Divine Goddess to adore" (Read, 17:36–18:41). The Goddess that early converts found in Mary, mother of Jesus, was a sanitized alternative to the powerful, autonomous feminine figures that had once held spiritual authority.

The witch hunts can be understood through deviance theory, particularly the objectivist definition of deviance based on harm. Tami Bereska (2023) defines this as deviance "associated with physical, social, and ontological harm" (p. 5). Yet the women persecuted in the 16th and 17th centuries rarely caused actual harm. Instead, they were seen as dangerous because they diverged from social norms.

Joan of Arc is one such example. She led France to victory over England in 1429, yet just two years later, she was condemned by the Church as a heretic and witch. Ironically, the same institution that burned her would later canonize her. As historian Barbara Roberts argues in the film, “She was relying on individual inspiration, a direct pipeline. That wasn’t acceptable. If people could rely on direct pipelines, they wouldn’t need the Church Fathers anymore… it was a direct challenge to the most important structures of authority at that time.” (Read, 22:10–22:38)

These women violated dominant gender norms. As Bereska writes, normative violation refers to “people, behaviours, and characteristics that violate society’s norms” (p. 8). In an era when women were expected to be obedient and domestic, autonomous women who led, healed, or gathered others posed a symbolic threat. Pagan priestess and journalist Margot Adler articulates this shift in *The Burning Times*: “The understanding of ‘witch’ as healer, as strong woman, as visionary—that’s not how society sees it. They confuse ‘witch’ with ‘satanist’” (Read, 4:03–4:24). By the end of the Renaissance-era Witch Craze, women’s power had been equated with evil. As Adler puts it: “By the time it was over, women’s power had become associated with darkness and death” (Read, 4:43–4:49).

This aligns with the third objectivist definition of deviance: negative societal reaction. As Bereska explains, deviance often “refers to those people, characteristics, or behaviours that society’s masses respond to with fear, anger, or distrust” (p. 7). Despite their healing practices and ancestral wisdom, these women were demonized. Critics of the Church or alternative belief systems were dismissed as heretics. “Out of those religious persecutions came the witch hunts,” the documentary states. “Eighty-five percent of those killed for the crime of witchcraft were women” (Read, 13:45–13:56).

Yet not all accusations fit neatly into the objectivist lens. Many women were not statistically rare or dangerous—they deviated from societal or gendered expectations. Others were targeted for economic or political reasons. These accusations often reflected social tensions rather than actual harm.

This tension between perception and reality highlights the subjectivist approach to deviance. Federici's *Caliban and the Witch* provides crucial insight here. She reinterprets the witch hunts as a strategic response to class struggle and economic transition from feudalism to capitalism. In her 2013 lecture, she explains:

We are rarely told that there was a tremendous class struggle taking place in the feudal world... By the 14th and 15th centuries, feudalism entered a terminal crisis. The feudal class could not reproduce itself. (Federici, 11:40–12:10)

Federici argues that the Church helped manufacture the ideology of witchcraft to criminalize women's power, discipline reproduction, and ultimately prepare society for capitalist accumulation. In this system, bodies became a form of capital. "During the witch hunts, it was about the land and the bodies of the workers," she says (Federici, 33:00). Capitalism demanded bodies; controlling women's sexuality and fertility became essential to that system. Federici draws a powerful metaphor: The act of procreation, being the act by which the soul becomes entrapped into the body, is a metaphor for entrapment into societies where people were still enslaved. (Federici, 15:49–16:05).

Women labelled as "witches" were often those who challenged economic productivity: midwives, herbalists, or unmarried women without male oversight. Poverty, independence, and

resistance to Church doctrine were enough to draw accusations. Federici emphasizes that "people are not born beggars" (Federici, 36:54), yet mass poverty became a phenomenon during the transition to capitalism, and women became both targets and tools of economic restructuring.

Bereska's social typing process offers further context. Through *description*, individuals are labelled based on presumed traits (e.g., poor, old, single). Through *evaluation*, these traits are judged negatively. And through *prescription*, the categorized individual is treated in a way that reinforces stigma and marginalization (Bereska, pp. 19–20). Women labelled witches were seen not only as outsiders, but as dangers to social order, justifying their persecution and execution.

As Margo Adler notes, Pagan traditions emphasized action and experience, not dogma. "They really didn't have a lot to do with belief. They were based on action, celebration, and custom" (Read, 17:10–17:34). Yet this was incompatible with a rising Church intent on institutional authority. Once branded as "evil," these women were subject to public fear, moral condemnation, and legal violence.

The witch hunts were deeply tied to capitalism, patriarchy, and institutional control. Through poverty, religious doctrine, and the social typing of women as deviant, the Church and the emerging capitalist class used persecution as a tool of power. Female sexuality, autonomy, and even survival became threats to be eliminated. As historian Irving Smith states: "It is woman who introduces us to sin, who is the temptress. In a patriarchal society, women becoming independent is very difficult to come to grips with" (Read, 28:05–28:27).

This legacy is far from over. As Federici reminds us, witch hunts still occur today in parts of Africa, India, and Papua New Guinea. "Thousands upon thousands of women are being killed

and tortured for being witches," she says (Federici, 51:55-52:55). The demonization of women may go by another name today, but the fire still burns.

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