

The Invisibility of Male Witches in British Culture from the Early Modern Period to Modern Day

Erken Modern Dönemden Günümüze İngiliz Kültüründe Erkek Cadıların Görünmezliği

Alper TULGAR 

Department of Foreign Languages,
Atatürk University, School of
Foreign Languages, Erzurum,
Turkey



ABSTRACT

In popular literary works, films, and television series, the impression is given that all people accused, tried, and executed for witchcraft in early modern Europe between 1563 and 1736, as required by the Witchcraft Act, were women. As a result of this false impression, the existence of men accused of witchcraft and executed is ignored. In the historical texts, it is seen that there is no gender discrimination among the people accused of witchcraft. The pacts they make with evil spirits are more important than the gender of those accused of witchcraft. Although witchcraft accusations were not sex-specific in that era, studies later focusing on that period have created the idea that men were excluded from the trials. Especially feminist readings focusing on women's executions have created the false impression that, due to gender roles in that period, women suffered from male patriarchy. It is an undeniable fact that the vast majority of people executed were women and that men were in the minority group; however, dismissing the male executions altogether does not serve the purpose of condemning the trials. The fact that all the prosecutors in the British judicial system were men in early modern period and that women were not able to practice law plays an important role and has reshaped reality because while men were perceived as prosecutors of women's executions, women were merely the ones accused and oppressed.

Keywords: British culture, early modern period, witches, witchcraft law

Öz

Popüler edebi eserlerde, filmlerde ve TV dizilerinde, Cadılık Yasası'nın gerektirdiği şekilde, erken modern Avrupa'da 1563 ve 1736 yılları arasında cadılıkla suçlanan, yargılanan ve idam edilen herkesin kadın olduğu izlenimi verilir. Bu yanlış izlenim sonucunda büyücülükle suçlanan ve idam edilen erkeklerin varlığı göz ardı edilir. Tarihsel metinlerde büyücülükle suçlanan kişiler arasında cinsiyet ayrımı yapılmadığı görülmektedir. Kötü ruhlarla yaptıkları anlaşmalar, büyücülükle suçlananların cinsiyetinden daha önemlidir. O dönemde büyücülük suçlamaları cinsiyete özgü olmasa da, daha sonra o döneme odaklanan çalışmalar erkeklerin yargılamalardan dışlandığı fikrini doğurmuştur. Özellikle kadın infazlarına odaklanan feminist okumalar, o dönemde toplumsal cinsiyet rolleri nedeniyle kadınların erkek ataerkilliğinden mustarip olduğu yönünde yanlış bir izlenim yaratmıştır. İnfaz edilenlerin büyük çoğunluğunun kadın olduğu ve erkeklerin de azınlıkta olduğu yadsınmaz bir gerçektir; ancak erkek infazlarının topluca reddedilmesi yapılan bu yargılamaları kınama amacına hizmet etmemektedir. Erken modern dönemde İngiliz yargı sistemindeki tüm savcıların erkek olması ve kadınların yargı sistemine girememesi önemli bir rol oynamıştır ve gerçeği yeniden şekillendirmiştir; çünkü erkekler kadın infazlarının savcıları olarak algılanırken kadınlar sadece suçlanan ve ezilen kişiler olarak görülmüştür.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Cadılar, İngiliz kültürü, erken modern dönem, cadılık yasası

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Corresponding Author/Sorumlu Yazar:

Alper TULGAR

E-mail: alper.tulgar@atauni.edu.tr

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Introduction

Until recently, male witches have been neglected and underrepresented due to several reasons. It is assumed that only women in early modern Europe were accused of witchcraft and executed, and the reflections in literary works and in the media reinforce the stereotype. When the word "witch" is

mentioned, people instantly think of an old, eccentric woman who does not fit in with society. However, in the early modern period, men were also judged and executed on suspicion of the use of witchcraft to harm others. It is evident that people living in this era wished desperately to find a scapegoat for unfortunate events affecting their livelihood or the death of their loved ones. It is widely acknowledged that the overwhelming majority of people executed were women. It should nevertheless be noted that gender was not believed to be the main factor that caused people to act against evil deeds. There is, moreover, another cultural misapprehension that every person accused of witchcraft was instantly executed by burning. There was a legal process at the end of which some people were proved innocent. It is highlighted that, contrary to popular belief, not all the people who went on trial were found guilty.

The representations in fiction and the media possess the power to shape public opinion and create their own reality. People exposed to such stereotypes constantly may ignore the historical facts and accept those clichés as they are. This is one of the main reasons men accused of witchcraft in the 15th, 16th, and 17th centuries have so far been ignored. Charlotte-Rose Millar states that of all the witches mentioned in pamphlets between 1563 and 1735, about 15% of them were men (2021). In another study, this percentage is assumed to be higher. It is stated that 75%–80% of all the people accused and executed were women (Apps & Gow, 2003, p. 25). Alison Rowlands points out that the existence of male accusations in witch trials is trivialized, although they form 20%–25% of all accusations in Europe, and the rate is even higher in other parts (2009, p. 2). With such high percentages of executions, there is not a plausible reason behind the state of neglect male witches executed. Although they were in a minority group compared to the female execution rates, the rates aforementioned cannot be underestimated, let alone dismissed altogether.

The Witchcraft Act passed into law in 1542. After its repeal in 1547, witchcraft again became a criminal punishment in 1562. Between 1560 and 1700, 513 witches are reported to have been accused, 112 of whom were executed in England. In total, about 500 people are thought to have been executed for witchcraft accusations (UK Parliament, n.d.). In the British Isles, about 3000 people are believed to have been prosecuted, and half of them were in Scotland (Levack, 2006, p. 22). The numbers were significantly high in Scotland. Looking into the period between 1563 and 1736, the Survey of Scottish Witchcraft identified 3837 people, and 3212 of those people were named, and it is stressed that not every person appearing in court was executed (Martin & Miller, 2008, p. 56). The numbers are significantly higher in Scotland, contrary to other parts of the United Kingdom. In Ireland, however, the numbers are significantly lower in the other parts (Sneddon, 2012). There are seemingly noteworthy differences in shaping people's ideas about witches. James Sharpe states that Scotland, with about 2000 executions in total, has 12 times more witchcraft executions, proportionate to its population, while England has about 500 executions in total. Sharpe bases the grave difference in execution rates between England and Scotland on the judicial systems of the two countries and the fact that torture was not used in England to extort unlawful confessions (2020, p. 145). According to Sharpe, there are two main reasons behind the excessive rate of executions in Scotland: "unqualified judges immersed in local witch hunting cultures and the over-enthusiastic use of torture" (2020, p. 146). These two factors were missing in England, so there were fewer executions. Geographically speaking, there seem to be striking differences resulting from the attitudes of the judges then. Brian P. Levack analyzes one of the greatest witch hunts in history during 1661 and 1662 in Scotland and asserts that, according to historians, this hunt was the result of the end of English rule in Scotland. Since English judges were not willing to put witches on trial and eventually execute them, once Scottish judges seized power, the number of prosecutions and executions increased accordingly (1980, p. 91). Julian Goodare describes the Scottish witch-hunt as one of the harshest in Europe, approximately four times higher than the average execution rate in Europe. According to Goodare, nearly 2500 people were executed out of the 4000 accused (2009, p. 149). In addition to the different rates of execution in different parts of Europe, the role of gender in prosecutions attracts attention.

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Millar stressed that gender was irrelevant for the definition of witches in pamphlets. People were defined as witches solely due to their pacts with the Devil because they were considered to have a close relationship with the Devil (2021). While sex was not a definitive reason to be labeled as a witch in the early modern period, it seems today that being a woman is the first and most important factor to be called a witch. The frame of mind is definitely different in modern day in terms of witchcraft accusations; however, the representation is still intact. In Millar's article, harming the neighbors is stressed multiple times to determine the main reason to accuse someone of witchcraft. Community pressure is evident in that era since people tend to blame their neighbors for unfortunate events affecting their lives negatively. There appears to be no gender bias or stereotypes, jurally. People accused of witchcraft were believed to "have intimate, sometimes sexualized, relationships with their familiar spirits" (Millar, 2021, p. 706). These spirits were assumed to be evil and maleficent.

In England, the witchcraft act passed into law in 1563, the same year the Scottish act came into force. Goodare claims that the Scots may have been encouraged by the English, although there is no proof to support this claim (2005, p. 51). The Scottish Act prosecuted women accused of witchcraft in Scotland until its repeal in 1736. It punished only those who used maleficent and evil witchcraft instead of punishing those who used witchcraft in the public interest. Those were regarded to be "beneficent public practitioners" (Goodare, 2005, p. 66). It is clear that superstitious beliefs determined people's decision-making procedures. While various benevolent accounts of necromancy were accepted and cherished, the black magic resulting in tragedies was punished. It is worth mentioning that these distinctions were clearly arbitrary and irrational.

Let it be emphasized that the invisibility of male witches has been drawing the interest of scholars. This invisibility has been dealt with in Lara Apps and Andrew Gow's book titled *Gender at Stake: Male Witches in Early Modern Europe*. Even according to modern researchers, witches are principally women, and they are inclined not to recognize male witches (Apps & Gow, 2003, p. 26). In some studies, the executions of male witches are acknowledged but not necessarily compared to the executions of women. Women are portrayed as the rightful victims of witch-hunting:

men accused in mass panics were generally charged with different types of witchcraft than the women— of harming things in the male domain such as horses or crops rather than killing infants or spoiling bread— and only rarely accused of actions such as night-flying or pacts with the Devil (Wiesner, 2000, p. 281).

The degree of victimization experienced by men is deliberately overlooked since the moment their sufferings are accepted, the sufferings of the female witches are thought to be kept in the background. There seems to be a calculated intention of keeping male witches of secondary importance so that the executions of female witches could be highlighted. Merry E. Wiesner also notes that the men accused of witchcraft, thanks to their wealth, were able to hire successful lawyers to avoid a possible execution. The lower execution rates for men are thought to be the outcome of those men's ability to hire effective lawyers at court (2000, p. 282). Rolf Schulte draws attention to a similar situation, where most accused men were in a disadvantageous group (2009, p. 247). In the extract, it is strongly ascertained that the accusations brought against women were far more serious in nature; however, this perspective does not change the fact that there were also male witches executed during the witch hunts. Focusing on gender causes the main reasons behind these executions to go unnoticed. Furthermore, these studies aim to show that "male witches were rare exceptions to the rule and are less important and interesting, as historical subjects, than female witches" (Apps & Gow, 2003, p. 43). However, the numbers in historical studies show that male witches were not rare and sometimes dominated the prosecution rates.

The correlation built between women and witches seems to have arisen from the assumption that women are frail and thus more susceptible to using maleficent powers after making a pact with the Devil. The reason for the gender-based assumption that witchcraft is employed entirely by women is that contemporary writers try to explain it based on inferences on gender roles of society. Alan MacFarlane, for instance, expands on this view by stating that modern writers based the reason for the fact that female executions were in the majority on sex because they thought that women were frail and malicious at the same time by comparing women's attitudes towards both the Devil and humans. According to those writers, women were frail towards the Devil while they were malicious towards human beings (1999, p. 161). The belief that witches made pacts with the Devil emerged in the ninth century, and the use of these powers was believed to be diabolical (Santino, 1983). In the next century, the number of attributions even grew because "[i]n the 10th century, the list of such attributes grew to include the formalized pact, cannibalism, the sexual orgy, and the adoration of the devil" (Santino, 1983, p. 12). These attributions have their roots in the fall of man. In Genesis 2:4–3:24 (New International Version), Eve is tempted by the serpent to eat the forbidden fruit to gain wisdom:

When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it.

The same way Eve is tempted by the serpent, Adam is portrayed as a man whose fault was to follow Eve's wishes. Eve is described as a temptress. The message Genesis gives is that women, by their very natures, are prone to temptation and evil, thus allowing the Devil to mislead. Irrational reflexes in the early modern period and scholastic thought evidently caused the masses to derange. The mutual relations established by women and the Devil date back to ancient times. Adam falls from grace because of a woman. Adam turns into a disobedient sinner after Eve's temptation. Although in the early modern period, both men and women were accused of making a pact with the Devil, retrospective studies clearly do not reflect this fact. Demonologists supposed that men could not be attracted to the same temptations women naturally fall into, and "[i]t was just harder for them to imagine that men could be vulnerable to irrational temptations based on sex and money into which women were believed to fall" (Durrant & Bailey, 2012, p. 128). This line of thought clearly emerged from gender apartheid.

In history, more women were sentenced to death because "[t]he witch was thus by definition weak-minded, a trait that had been associated from antiquity with women. A man accused of being a witch was also, therefore, implicitly feminized" (Apps & Gow, 2003, pp. 118–119). Therefore, men accused of witchcraft were assumed to be feminine due to their tendencies to transgress. What is concerning and ironic is that demonologists and scholars in that period did not consider that only women could be accused of witchcraft and using maleficent powers, and "[s]pecialists in early modern witchcraft are aware that it was not sex-specific, even among the most misogynist demonologists. Modern scholars of various ideological and methodological leanings have excluded male witches from witchcraft historiography by either ignoring or 'declassifying' them" (Apps & Gow, 2003, p. 154). This sudden change from a total inclusion to a total exclusion can best be explained in terms of modern scholars' intentions to distort reality. It is stressed that in the history of English witchcraft, the executions of men were regarded to be unimportant and sometimes completely dismissed (Kent, 2005). It is also explained that before the 15th century, there were not any witch hunts, and witches were believed to go after the Devil (Durrant & Bailey, 2012, p. 18). However, the crime was never sex-specific. Witch hunts were apparently later reflected as a gender based persecution. This representation has stemmed from the close relationship between feminism and witchcraft. Durrant and Bailey assert that feminist theorists defined the witch hunt as merely women-hunting, dismissing the fact that male witches were also executed (2012, p. 81). Nevertheless, the reality was far from it. In early modern Europe, it is believed that about 6000 men were executed due to witchcraft accusations (Durrant & Bailey, 2012, p. 128). According to Sheriden Louise Morgan, in the pamphlets written in the 16th and 17th centuries, there is clearly not a statement indicating that sex is relevant to being a witch; however, their misogynist wordings may have led to the common belief that the executions were the results of the patriarchal system (2019, p. 215). The detachment from reality is overwhelming because, in this day and age, the representation is entirely the opposite. Halloween, the second largest commercial holiday, attracts masses of people. Looking into the origins of Halloween, it is believed to have been celebrated even 2000 years ago by the Celts on November 1, which was believed to be the beginning of the winter when the dead returned to Earth (History.com Editors, 2022). Witches, understandably, have become the symbol of Halloween:

Like fairies, witches are surrounded by a corpus of lore that is no related to Halloween per se, but, because of their alleged allegiance to the devil, it was thought that witches were most active on Halloween, that they met then and flew about through the night searching for hapless souls to steal (Santino, 1983, p. 13).

In modern day, witches are almost entirely believed to consist of women. Wearing witch hats and holding brooms—rarely do people think of the possibility that witchcraft is not gender based. This view clearly creates various stereotypes that damage women. Women are seemingly represented as vicious and ill-intentioned human beings who are inclined to go after the Devil, while men are characterized as adamant, strong-willed, spiritually moral human beings. Christopher Witcombe emphasizes that women are considered to be untrustworthy because they are always identified with Eve. Thus, they can neither trust themselves nor be trusted by others (2000). Thus, it is challenging to determine the reason why witch-hunting is desired to be strictly associated with women, especially by scholars. These attributions to women are wrong and hurtful and need to be dismissed. The aim to lay stress on women's sufferings during the early modern period has valid ground, but dismissing the male executions in that era and ignoring the fact that witchcraft was never sex-specific generate damaging stereotypes about femininity. According to Schulte, studies "perceived men's prime role as that of the persecutor and were largely oblivious to men as accused and executed victims" (2009, p. 2). Olwen Hufton expresses that a generalization about women's roles in early modern Europe cannot be made due to changing factors in occupations, countries, cultures, and classes (1983, p. 126). Hufton points out that women worked in preindustrial society, engaging in farm and family businesses and creating a cheap labor force (1983, p. 131). We can further add that women were nonexistent in the practice of law. Eliza Orme, for instance, received a degree in law in 1888, becoming the first woman with a degree in law in the Late-Victorian Period (Howsam, 1989). Leslie Howsam describes the practice of law as "the most masculine of professions" and stresses the discrimination Orme faced in that era (1989, p. 45). Thus, the prosecutors of the executions were all men, implying that women underwent terrible hardships due to patriarchy. The aim here is certainly not to dismiss the challenges women went through in history in the hands of patriarchy; however, it should be acknowledged that a retrospective look into witchcraft executions with a biased intention is hurtful.

As a minority group, men do not exist in fiction. Alan MacFarlane (1999) comments that in literary texts written in the 16th and 17th centuries, witches were portrayed as ugly and old women. Julian Goodare agrees and states that the typical witch was an old, poor woman living in the community (1998, p. 290). There are also shocking and distinctive geographical differences. In Normandy, for instance, between 1564 and 1660, the typical witch was not a woman but a shepherd who was either old or a teenager (Monter, 1997, p. 563). As it is clear, the typical witch that we assume in the modern world does not fit the mold. Even a male teenager was in danger of being accused of being a witch. In other areas, women accused and executed "were often old, alone, and merely very conventional 'wise women' of the villages" (Hufton, 1983, p. 138). In Iceland, however, the situation is entirely in contrast with the general assumptions and beliefs because "the most glaring exception to the formula 'witches = women' has been found in the most remote corner of all, namely seventeenth-century Iceland, where all but one of the twenty-one people known to have been executed as witches were men" (Monter, 1997, p. 564). The accepted opinion can be formulated in a very simple way, as Monter exhibited; however, as stressed multiple times, geography also plays an important role in determining what truly took place in history. In Iceland, men were in the majority, as opposed to other locations. Levack, for instance, states that male witches were not basically accused and executed due to their associations with female witches in a mass hysteria because, overall, in Europe, between one-fifth and one-quarter of all witches were men, and there was not a law that excluded men from trials since they were equally regarded as being able to use magic to affect others (2006, p. 141). The numbers are high enough not to be ignored; nevertheless, it was believed that men were generally accused and executed due to their affiliations with female witches instead of being accused of their own involvements. They are thus presented as collateral damages. Although the truth is clearly visible in historical writings, it is the opposite in modern days. The tendency to distort reality is inexplicable because there were men who appeared in court because of witchcraft accusations. People believed that male witches also used maleficent powers and made pacts with the Devil to execute destructive practices.

Ronald Hutton classifies the representations of witches in British literature into three categories: "evil-doers, victims, and heroes (or heroines)" (2018, p. 28). Hutton points out that the evil witch is the oldest representation of all (2018, p. 29). According to Hutton, representing a witch as a heroine was not possible due to the general assumption that witchcraft was used for evil purposes (2018, p. 36). Examining the span of 140 years, Hutton concludes that "the treatment of both witches and folk magicians clearly grew more benevolent with time." Representing witches solely as evil-doers was no longer sustained in literary works; however, defeating the evil witch continued to be used as a theme in fiction (2018, p. 44). The change in the representation of the witch from a healer that helps others to an ugly and ill-intentioned evil-doer reflects the views of society on witchcraft (Blomquist, 2011, p. 100). The witch was marginalized and placed as the other in literature for centuries, and they were always associated "with a deep fear of a disturbance, of a danger to the order of society" (Madej-Stang, 2015, p. 242). Although there was not a stereotype of the witch being female in the beginning, later women were frequently identified with witches (Madej-Stang, 2015, p. 242). Thus, sustaining the formula that the witch equals femininity is alarming and still exists in literary texts. In William Shakespeare's *Macbeth* (2020), for instance, the three witches (Weird Sisters) are used to determine the atmosphere of the play. Three female witches introduced terror and prophecy to the play. Taking the year (1606) it was first performed into consideration, the play gives a clear picture of how witches were perceived at the time as a form of evil and temptation. *Macbeth* is tempted by them with the false promise of power. This even justifies *Macbeth*'s own personal shortcomings.

Attributing evil features to women by implying that they are more inclined to follow the Devil and thus more prone to using maleficent powers is both damaging and unfair in terms of representation. Ignoring historical facts and shaping them in the direction of some scholars' interests are beneficial neither to men nor women. It is historically accepted that there were male executions, despite their being in the minority. The vast majority of those executions, especially in Scotland, were old and poor women; however, excluding the male executions from history altogether is worrying and causes unjust stereotypes. According to the multiple sources aforementioned, the male execution rates were not as low as people nowadays assume them to be. Nevertheless, today only women are believed to have suffered immensely from unjust witch trials. From the point of view of feminist studies, women were explicitly targeted and men were excluded. Contrary to historical facts, such a claim is not valid today. Further to that, the representation of women as witches is damaging because women are portrayed as evil and susceptible to the Devil. Maintaining such an argument that witch trials only included

women creates clichés that are challenging to remove. Literary representations in modern day continue to use the evil female witch that needs to be defeated. On the basis of historical sources, men's visibility in witchcraft trials needs to be acknowledged.

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