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ANG 553 – Women Writers

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The Witches in Brazil

No one knows the true origins of witches. It is reported that they existed since the beginning of humankind. Were witches really evil women? Oxford Wordpower defines the word “witch” as a woman who is thought to have magic powers. Whereas the word “witch” in Sanskrit means "wise woman". Neither of them refers to “witches” in a negative way.

Witches were called wise until the church determined that they were women dominated by lower instincts. With the arrival of Christianity and patriarchal power, these women were ignored and believed to be objects used by the devil to commit sins. “The witch could represent women’s fantasies, desires and fears,” says Diane Purkiss in the book titled *The Witch in History*. (119) Nevertheless, many women did not accept this identification and rebelled. These women, so-called witches, with their spiritual power, began to take back the prestige they had lost. In addition, they tried to take back power in order to disturb the religious people, that is, the Catholics. All the cases against witches were promoted by the religious power. However, this issue took a dramatic turn in the fourteenth century, when the Catholic Church established the courts of the Inquisition in order to suppress the spread of heretical sects, the practice of magic, and other behaviors considered sinful.

There was a serious issue against women accused of witchcraft. For nearly 300 years, the countries controlled by the Catholic Church lived under the rules of hunting

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and burning women accused of witchcraft. “Finally, by the use of sufficient torture,” says Gerald Pinciss and Roger Lockyer, “a confession and admission of guilt could usually be extracted.” (*Shakespeare’s World: Background Readings in the English Renaissance*; 73) After painful suffering, a confession was the step that would lead to death.

Several movies and books have dissected the subject of the persecution of witches by the Catholic Church. What few people know is that there was also a witch burning in Brazil. After all, Portugal was also an integral part of the Catholic power that dominated Europe for a long time. Therefore, this Catholic practice of hunting and burning witches was brought to Brazil by the Portuguese people. However, the witch hunt was not as popular as it was in Europe and in North America.

The city of São Paulo also had its witches which were burned in public in order to purify society and emphasize respect for the Catholic Church. One of the cases took place in 1754 when Ursulina de Jesus was burned as a heretic after being accused of practicing witchcraft by her own husband, Sebastian who was a man of some importance in the city of São Paulo. He reported that she was interfering with his fertility so that he would not be able to have children. Sebastian had an extramarital affair with a woman called Cesaria. Cesaria testified against Ursulina saying they were trying to have children but that it was impossible for them due to witchcraft. After Ursulina’s death, Sebastian married Cesaria. Nevertheless, no records prove that Sebastian ever had children. This case reinforces patriarchal power over women, showing that even if men were sterile,

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society would always consider women as infertile, as inferior human beings or even as witches.

Another incident of witch burning happened to Maria da Conceição, who was put to death near the São Bento Monastery in 1798, in the old town of São Paulo. Maria da Conceição was well known as a woman who prepared medicines to cure patients. For unknown reasons, she got into trouble with a priest known as Father Luis. Apparently, he was radically opposed to what she did and managed to take her to trial for witchcraft resulting in her death.

Witches were just women who knew and understood the use of herbs in order to cure diseases and put their knowledge into practice in the villages where they lived. As Diane Purkiss states in the book *The Witch in History*, “Even though this woman was harmless, she posed a threat to the fearful. Her medical knowledge threatened the doctor. Her simple, true spiritual values threatened the superstitious nonsense of the Catholic Church.” (06) Since these women were a real threat to patriarchal and religious power, the easiest way to get rid of them was to hunt them down and put them to death.

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