First Four Paragraphs of the Paper

Today, the word ‘witch’ implies an old, warty woman dressed in black and riding a broomstick, and we often hear the word used to describe a woman who is unkind and conniving. However, prior to the 16th century in Europe, witches were venerated healers, known for their wisdom and skill. This was the time when time political and religious officials instigated surges of massive witch hunts, invading villages throughout Germany, Poland, Hungary and Britain and burning accused women at the stake. Surprisingly, witch hunts were relatively non-existent in other parts of the continent. This variance is very instructive in helping to explain the phenomenon of witchhunts, because it provides a religious and social context in which to understand it. Although there are a number of contributing factors, the search for demonic witches has its primary roots in the belief that women were inferior and carnal. A focus on Germany, where many witches were tried and executed between 1562 and 1684, confirms that gender ideology was responsible for the death of vast numbers of women—perhaps as many as 100,000.[1]

When investigating the phenomenon of witchcraft, it is first essential to consider the economic climate of the Early Modern period in Germany. Throughout the sixteenth century, Germany experienced dramatic inflation, waves of famine resulting from bad harvests, and death and destruction in the course of religious wars.[2] Furthermore, a new fear of “vagrants and transients” accompanied the commercialization of agriculture, because it required people to move around more, unsettling villages that had previously been close knit.[3] If friends had wanted to assist their neighbors during these hard economic times, they were for the most part unable to do so because of their own instability. Keith Thomas noted that initial accusations of witchcraft often came from people who had refused to help another villager and felt guilty because of it. In this respect, "witchcraft accusations were used as a way of assuaging guilt over uncharitable conduct."[4] In other words, witches were given the blame for hard times, and this in turn made communities vulnerable to political and religious perspective that endorsed witch hunting. Furthermore, accusing women of being witches could also be used to gain economic advantage. Women that accused other women could gain a piece of their land and "some powerful men sometimes tried to destroy other powerful men through their wives."[5]

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[1] Merry E. Weisner, Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe (2nd ed) (New York, 2000), 265.
[2] Weisner, Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe, 268.
[3] Weisner, Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe, 268.

Religious beliefs in Germany played a pivotal role in establishing gender norms that involved positioning witches as an enemy. Both the Protestant and Catholic churches supported the notion of the female witch, and backed up its accusations against women with references to the Bible.[6] During this time and for many centuries before, the church "equated women and their bodies with sin, carnality, and spiritual death."[7] The witch hunts seemed to decrease in intensity during the first few decades following the Protestant Reformation, when the two groups were at war; however, their numbers increased rapidly again in about 1560.[8] The first large hunt of twenty or more consecutive witches in Germany occurred in 1562, at Weisensteig. The last large hunt transpired in Esslingen, between 1662 and 1665.[9]

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[4] Weisner, Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe, 268.

[5] Anne L. Barstow, Witchcraze: A New History of the European Witch Hunts (Pandora, 1994), 26.

[6] Erik Midelfort, Witch Hunting in Southwest Germany 1562-1684: The Social and Intellectual Foundations, (California, 1972), 11.

[7] Sigrid Brauner, Fearless Wives and Frightened Shrews: The Construction of the Witch in Early Modern Germany. Amherst, 1995, 12.

[8] Weisner, Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe, 266.

Regardless of how insidious the beliefs and attitudes that developed about women in 16th century were, men would not have been able to hunt, try and execute so many women without the support of the legal system. In Germany and other regions, a switch from the accusatorial legal procedure (*lex talionis)* to an inquisitorial one allowed for the mass trials to be conducted within an organized state legal system.[10] The change made it easier for people to accuse others of witchcraft because they did not have to assume personal responsibility for the accusation or make restitution to the accused's family[11] Accusing another of witchcraft often had its advantages, including the definitive destruction of a women's reputation, her death, and in some cases even a part of her property.[12] Furthermore, once witchcraft became an established heresy, execution became common because cannon law already stated it as a penalty for heresy.[13] Torture was frequently used, the accused was not permitted to use defense or seek council, and names of accomplices were sought. Justice thus became a impersonal system directed by judges and magistrates in far-off cities.[14] (Midelfort, 19) Additionally, because superstition and magical beliefs were extremely common among German residents in both cities and villages, hunts could easily result in a great number of people because accused of a vague and undefined offense (Midelfort, 18). "Witchcraft in other words, was a *crimen exceptum*, a crime distinct from all others." However, this same legal system did not in itself provoke the witch hunts. Countries such as Spain, Portugal, and Italy were able to resist taking advantage of the loopholes in this system, and adopted a policy of educating people about superstition, instead of exterminating of demonic witches.[15] Do you mean they education people about the potential dangers of witchcraft, or that they educated them about the superstition of witchcraft being wrong? Explain a bit more here—brings your focus back to Germany and its difference from other parts of Europe.

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[9] Midelfort, Witch Hunting in Southwest Germany 1562-1684, 179.
[10] Midelfort, Witch Hunting in Southwest Germany 1562-1684, 19.
[11] Weisner, Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe, 267.
[12] Barstow, Witchcraze, 31.
[13] Midelfort, Witch Hunting in Southwest Germany 1562-1684, 18.
[14] Midelfort, Witch Hunting in Southwest Germany 1562-1684, 19.

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[15] Weisner, Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe, 268.