

Epistemic Injustice and the Witch Hunts: Suppression of Knowledge and Marginalized Voices in Early Modern Europe

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Abstract

The witch hunts of the early modern period were not only a tragic episode of mass persecution but also a profound case of epistemic injustice. Thousands of individuals, primarily women, were accused, tortured, and executed based on deeply ingrained biases and flawed evidentiary practices. This paper examines the witch trials through the lens of epistemic injustice, particularly testimonial and hermeneutical injustice, as conceptualized by Miranda Fricker. It explores how societal structures systematically silenced the accused and erased their knowledge, particularly in the domains of medicine and spirituality. The study also highlights how religious and legal institutions manipulated epistemic authority, suppressing dissenting voices and alternative knowledge systems. By analyzing these historical injustices, this paper underscores the enduring consequences of credibility denial and interpretive exclusion, drawing parallels to modern issues of marginalized knowledge.

Keywords: Witch trials, epistemic injustice, testimonial injustice, hermeneutical injustice, suppression of knowledge, religious persecution, gender bias, historical epistemology, inquisition, marginalization of knowledge.

The Inquisition and the Witch Hunts: A Dark Chapter in European History

Even today, opinions differ regarding the causes of the terrifying witch hunts in Europe—an era of persecution that spanned over three centuries, from the 14th to the 17th century. It is hard to believe that the last "witch" was burned in Britain in the 17th century and that in Germany, such executions continued even during the lifetime of Johann Sebastian Bach. In Russia, the last "witch" was burned in 1813. The witch hunts were essentially a systematic and distressing effort by both the Catholic and Protestant Churches to eradicate the last remnants of paganism in Europe.

The so-called "witches" of that time were mostly poor mothers who used medicinal herbs to treat their sick children in an era when medicine was practically nonexistent, as matters of life and death were believed to be dictated by divine will. A visit to any Inquisition Museum in Europe is enough to shock anyone, as it reveals the horrifying torture instruments used to extract confessions from these unfortunate "witches." The mere sight of execution wheels, nail-studded chairs, tongs, and devices designed to gouge out eyes or disembowel victims is enough to instill terror (Levack B. P., 1987, 1991).

During trials, those accused of heresy or witchcraft who did not confess during interrogation were

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taken to a torture chamber before being returned to the courtroom. If they still refused to confess, the torture resumed. The witch hunts provided an opportunity for people to turn against those they disliked or whose property they coveted. For instance, the mother of astronomer Johannes Kepler was accused of witchcraft and spent six months in prison. Had her son not been a respected scientist of his time, he might not have been able to use his influence to save her from the stake. Most of the Inquisition's victims were women, as during the Dark Ages, women were considered naturally promiscuous and therefore susceptible to making pacts with the Devil. However, this does not mean that men and even children were not also convicted (Levack B. P., 1987, 1991).

This grim reality was reflected in European culture through various works, with the most famous example being *Faust* by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. Moreover, the horrors of the witch hunts continue to serve as political metaphors even today. The medieval Christian world was despised by the Nazis, who viewed medieval societies as inferior beings willing to burn people alive. Of course, the Nazis ultimately opted for more "civilized" methods: the crematorium ovens. Interestingly, Heinrich Himmler, upon discovering that one of his ancestors had been a witch burned at the stake, felt a sense of pride, as noted by Breuer. Because of this, he ordered a thorough investigation into historical records, compiling a list of all those executed for witchcraft over the three centuries of the Inquisition's power. Ironically, thanks to this research, we now have detailed records of those condemned and the precise dates of their executions, despite the destruction of most public archives—especially in Germany—during World War II, with the exception of those in the Vatican.

The two leading inquisitors in Germany, Dominican monks Heinrich Institoris and Jakob Sprenger, authored *Malleus Maleficarum* (1486), a book detailing, through texts and illustrations, the alleged acts of witches. First published in 1486 in Speyer, it was reprinted multiple times over the next two or three centuries. By the 17th century, it had been published 29 times, making it one of the most popular books of its era. Sprenger later denied his involvement in its writing, claiming that Insti-



Title page of the *Malleus Maleficarum* (1669 edition). This notorious treatise, whose name means "Hammer of Witches," exemplified the institutional suppression of women's knowledge. Written by clergymen Kramer and Sprenger, it compiled misogynistic lore and prescribed the prosecution of alleged witches. By vilifying midwives and folk healers, works like this helped destroy traditional medical wisdom and elevate male "learned" medicine.

toris (real name Kramer) had arbitrarily credited him as co-author. However, given their recognition as inquisitors, it is likely that their disagreement stemmed from disputes over profits from book sales and confiscated properties of the accused.

According to *Malleus Maleficarum*, witches engaged in sexual promiscuity, made pacts with Satan at secret gatherings (sabbaths), and even flew on broomsticks. The imaginary figure of Satan, borrowed from Judaism, had become a central element in European life. Witches were believed to wield "satanic powers," influencing weather patterns, causing torrential rains, hailstorms, unexpected snowfalls, droughts, and lowering water levels in rivers and lakes. They were also accused of transforming humans into animals, destroying homes with thunder, spreading deadly diseases,

and causing male infertility, among other alleged crimes. Essentially, any misfortune in daily life was attributed to witches.

Over the decades, inquisitors began distinguishing between cases tried by ecclesiastical courts as purely heretical and cases of witchcraft, which fell under civil jurisdiction. False accusations were rampant, often based on coerced confessions. Many rulers issued decrees requiring citizens to report any suspicious activities related to witchcraft. Those who failed to do so were considered accomplices, leading to widespread false allegations driven by personal vendettas or religious fanaticism.

Investigations often began with anonymous denunciations, and witnesses were typically envious neighbors seeking revenge or devout individuals convinced they were fulfilling a religious duty. The punishments left little chance of acquittal. Those accused of direct communication with Satan were burned at the stake, while those with "indirect" connections also faced execution. The accused, in their desperation, sometimes falsely implicated family members or neighbors to temporarily escape torture, thus expanding the network of accusations and condemnations.

The methods of determining guilt were grotesque. Suspects were thrown into rivers or lakes—if they knew how to swim and floated, it was proof of their pact with Satan (therefore "even the river wouldn't accept them"), and they were burned at the stake; if they drowned, they were deemed innocent, though already dead. Another infamous test involved throwing suspects off a cliff; if they miraculously survived, they were declared witches and executed.

Public executions were held in central squares, serving as both a deterrent and entertainment for the masses. Even those who died before execution due to natural causes or torture were posthumously burned to "purify" them. Historical records suggest that approximately 80% of those executed were women, but men and even children were not spared. During the 16th century, over 700 witches were executed in the city of Trier alone, and from the 15th until the 18th century, more than 25,000 witches were burned alive across Germany (Behringer, W. 2004).

Both Catholic and Protestant regions were equally brutal in their persecution. Martin Luther and John Calvin were staunch enemies of witchcraft, advocating for the extermination of witches and heretics. The Spanish naturalist Miguel Servetus, a scholar with a liberal mind who conducted various investigations and studies, was threatened by the Inquisition and had to flee to Geneva, thinking he would be safe there. Calvin testified as an expert in the city's religious court where Servetus was arrested and demanded his death sentence for questioning the Trinity (Servetus M., 1531) and for criticizing infant baptism. Servetus was ultimately executed at the stake in 1553. Although, in general, the Spanish and Portuguese Inquisitions focused less on witch hunts and more on suppressing indigenous religions in their American colonies.

By the late 17th century, hysteria over witches reached the American colonies, most famously in Salem, where fabricated stories of "possessed" girls led to trials and executions. Years later, one survivor admitted that she had deceived the puritan society of Salem, plunging it into collective hysteria. These events were immortalized by Arthur Miller in *The Crucible* (1953).

Some enlightened minds of the time—doctors, researchers, philosophers, and even clergymen—opposed the witch hunts. Cornelius Loos, a Dutch professor, denounced the trials in his writings but was imprisoned until he repented before ecclesiastical authorities. At the end of the 16th century, in the Netherlands, the works of university professor Cornelius Loos, who questioned the existence of "witches" and the "sexual relations" between the accused and Satan, were confiscated. He called the leaders of the anti-"witch" movement "tyrants." Loos remained imprisoned until he knelt to ask for forgiveness from ecclesiastical authorities (a declaration of repentance). Loos's colleague, Professor Dietrich Flade, a chief judge, was suspected of leniency towards accused witches, tortured into confessing allegiance to Satan, and executed. Friedrich von Spee Langenfeld, a monk, openly opposed the trials, documenting their atrocities in *Cautio Criminalis*, 1631 (Von Langenfeld, 2003). Though sentenced to death, an unexpected war in Germany interrupted the Inquisition's activities.

Four years later, he succumbed to the plague, but his writings contributed to the eventual abolition of witch trials in German-speaking regions.

Unfortunately, the image of witches as evil women persists even in children's literature, perpetuating the very myths propagated by the Church. Fairy tales continue to depict witches as malevolent beings, reinforcing a long-standing cultural fear.

Beyond the historical tragedy of the witch hunts, these events also exemplify deep epistemic injustices that shaped societal attitudes toward knowledge, truth, and marginalized groups. By analyzing these trials through the lens of epistemology, we can better understand how credibility and interpretive authority were systematically denied to certain individuals, particularly women and folk healers.



Woodcut from 1720 depicting witches delivering wax dolls to the Devil – an example of how women's actions were interpreted within a demonological framework. In reality, such "witches' dolls" might have been folk healing charms or innocuous poppets, but the period's hermeneutical frame cast them as tools of Satan.

Epistemic Injustice and the Suppression of Knowledge During the Witch Hunts

These persecutions were not only a social and moral tragedy but also an epistemic catastrophe, as fear and prejudice led to the silencing of voices and the suppression of knowledge. We shall examine the witch hunts through the lens of epistemic injustice, a concept describing how individuals can be wronged as knowers. It will explore

Miranda Fricker's theory of epistemic injustice and analyze how the dynamics of the witch trials exemplified the suppression of knowledge. In doing so, we highlight how biased credibility judgments and a hostile interpretive climate during the witch hunts undermined truth and justice.

Epistemic Injustice: A Conceptual Framework

Epistemic injustice refers to a wrong done to someone "specifically in their capacity as a knower" (Fricker, 2007, p. 1). In other words, people suffer harm when their voice, knowledge, or ability to communicate is unfairly diminished. Fricker's influential work identifies two primary forms of epistemic injustice:

1. **Testimonial injustice**—This occurs when prejudice causes a listener to give less credibility to a speaker's testimony than it deserves. In such cases, stereotypes or biases about the speaker's identity lead others to dismiss or discount what the speaker says (Fricker, 2007). The speaker suffers a credibility deficit due to factors unrelated to the truth of their statements, thus being unfairly disbelieved or silenced.

2. **Hermeneutical injustice**—This arises from a gap in collective interpretive resources that leaves someone's experiences or knowledge unintelligible to others (Fricker, 2007). When a community lacks the concepts or frameworks to understand a marginalized group's perspective, members of that group are unable to effectively communicate or make sense of their experiences. This creates an unfair disadvantage in participation in knowledge—what they know or experience is not properly heard or understood.

Both forms involve the interplay of knowledge, power, and prejudice. Testimonial injustice is often direct and interpersonal (one's word is not trusted), while hermeneutical injustice is structural, reflecting how society's understanding (or misunderstanding) can obscure the truth. During the witch hunts, both types of epistemic injustice were at play, as we will see. Prejudices against the accused ensured their testimonies were dismissed, and prevailing interpretive frameworks (steeped in superstition and misogyny) prevented a fair understanding of events. Before turning to those trials, it is useful to outline the historical context in which these injustices unfolded.

Witch Hunts in Historical Context

Between the 15th and 17th centuries, European societies were gripped by periodic witch hunts fueled by superstition and religious zeal. Modern scholarly estimates indicate that roughly 40,000–50,000 people were executed for witchcraft in Europe during this era. Witch-hunts in early modern Europe circa 1450-1750, according to gendercide.org. The victims were overwhelmingly female—over 75–80% of those accused and killed were women Briggs, 1996; Goodare, 2016. These women were often older, widowed, or held roles such as midwives and healers in their communities. The gender imbalance was not coincidental; it reflected deep-seated biases about women's credibility and capacity for evil. Prejudice and fear shaped who was labeled a "witch" and whose knowledge was dismissed.

A key influence on the era's mindset was the infamous treatise *Malleus Maleficarum* 1487 by inquisitors Heinrich Institoris and Jakob Sprenger (Kosar 2024). This widely circulated manual provided theological and legal justification for prosecuting witches. It portrayed women as especially prone to witchcraft due to their purported moral and intellectual weaknesses. In *Malleus Maleficarum*, women are depicted as naturally deceitful and carnal, more susceptible to the Devil's temptations than men. The authors conclude, "all witchcraft comes from carnal lust, which is in women insatiable" (Institoris & Sprenger, 1487/1970, p. 47.) Such statements exemplify the identity prejudice that underpinned the witch hunts. By characterizing women as inherently untrustworthy and wicked, the treatise primed society to doubt women's testimonies and view their knowledge with suspicion. Religious authorities and courts across Protestant and Catholic regions alike drew on these ideas to legitimize witch persecutions. This created an environment in which epistemic injustice could thrive, as discussed below.

Epistemic Injustice in the Witch Trials

During the witch trials, accused individuals—predominantly women—suffered severe testimonial injustice. From the outset, they faced a credibili-

ty deficit: whatever they said in their own defense was often dismissed due to who they were. Judges and neighbors were influenced by the stereotype of the "deceitful witch," so an accused woman's pleas of innocence fell on deaf ears. For example, if a woman denied practicing witchcraft, authorities might interpret her denial as proof of the Devil's influence (since it was assumed a witch would lie). Under the prejudiced logic of the time, the words of the accused carried little weight, whereas even dubious accusations against them were readily believed. Confessions extracted under duress were considered credible "proof," while sincere proclamations of innocence were ignored. This one-sided credibility gap is a hallmark of testimonial injustice (Fricker, 2007). The accused were systematically silenced as knowers: their knowledge of their own innocence or of alternative explanations was not taken seriously.

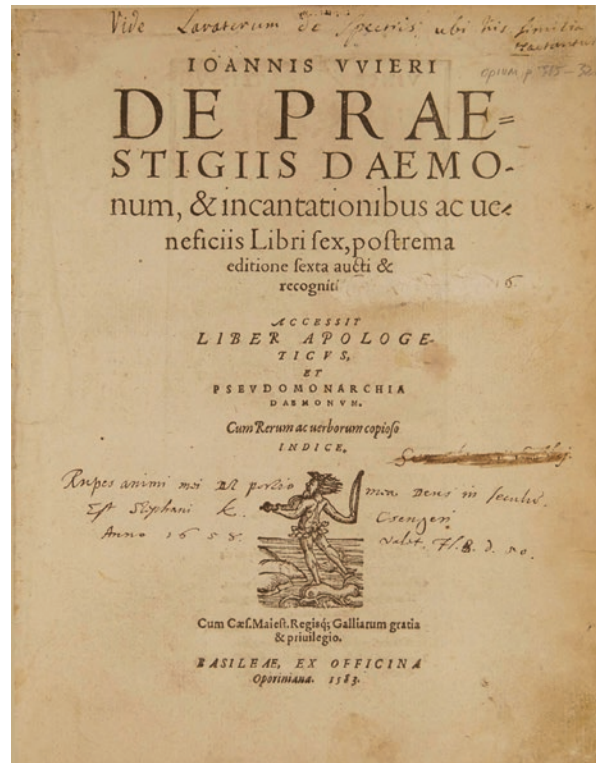
The trial procedures themselves magnified this injustice. Witch suspects were often subjected to coercive interrogation and torture to force confessions. Under extreme pain, many confessed to imaginary crimes or implicated others, producing false testimony that reinforced the witch-hunt narrative. These forced confessions illustrate how the powerful imposed their version of truth while negating the victim's actual knowledge. In effect, torture and leading questioning supplanted the accused's genuine testimony with a script that authorities wanted to hear (McKinney, 2016). Through such means, the witch trials "manufactured" evidence of witchcraft at the expense of truth. The epistemic harm was twofold: the accused were not believed as credible witnesses of their own lives, and the official record was filled with misinformation.

Prejudice also meant that hermeneutical injustice affected those caught up in the witch hunts. Because the prevailing worldview was dominated by notions of demonology, people lacked concepts to interpret unusual events in secular or scientific terms. For instance, a woman suffering from seizures or mental illness might, in a later era, be understood as a medical patient; but in the 1600s, communities could only frame her condition as demonic possession or witchcraft. The collective interpretive resources were deficient – natural

explanations (such as illness, crop failure, or coincidence) were often rejected in favor of supernatural ones. This left accused individuals without the means to make it society see their experiences as anything other than witchcraft. Their actions or misfortunes were forced into the *witch narrative*. In essence, there was a structural inability to comprehend the perspective of the accused in any other way. This hermeneutical gap meant that a woman healer's herbal knowledge, for example, might be interpreted as occult sorcery rather than medicine, or her personal grievances as a pact with the Devil rather than legitimate emotions. Such misinterpretations severely disadvantaged the accused, "unfairly disadvantaging someone in terms of understanding their own social experiences" (Fricker, 2007, p. 6). They were denied not just credibility, but even the conceptual framework that could validate their innocence or insight.

Suppression of Knowledge and Dissent

Beyond the courtroom injustices, the witch-hunt era more broadly saw a deliberate suppression of knowledge that challenged the dominant orthodoxies. Authorities worked to discredit or eliminate sources of information that did not fit the witch-hunting paradigm. One target was the traditional folk knowledge held by women. Many so-called "witches" were in fact midwives, herbal healers, or wise women who possessed practical knowledge of medicine and remedies. Their skills and autonomy posed a challenge to established male-dominated institutions (such as university-trained physicians or the Church). Historian Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English (1973) argue that the witch hunts functioned in part to undermine women's healing practices and transfer medical authority to men. By branding midwives and herbalists as witches, the authorities not only silenced those women but also devalued and eradicated their knowledge. Treatments and cures that had been orally transmitted through generations were abruptly curtailed as their practitioners were killed or driven into hiding. In this way, the witch hunts extinguished a body of empirical knowledge about health and nature, considering it heretical or diabolical. What might have been early contribu-



Cover of *De Praestigiis Daemonum* (*On the Tricks of Demons*, 1563) by Johann Weyer. This work criticized witch hunts, arguing that accused witches were often mentally ill rather than supernatural agents.

tions to medicine were instead lost, as the label of "witch" disqualified women healers from being seen as legitimate knowers.

At the same time, intellectual dissent and skepticism toward the hunts were forcefully suppressed. A few brave contemporaries questioned the logic of witch hunts and offered more rational explanations. For example, Dutch physician Johann Weyer in 1563 published *De Praestigiis Daemonum*, arguing that alleged witches were not servants of Satan but people suffering from mental illness or delusions. Likewise, English author Reginald Scot wrote *The Discoverie of Witchcraft* in 1584, a treatise debunking magical beliefs and criticizing the persecution of supposed witches. These early critics provided logical, evidence-based arguments against the witch craze, effectively challenging the dominant narrative. However, their efforts were largely met with hostility. Their works were condemned and often censored by authorities who were deeply invested in the witch-hunt ideology. King James I of England who himself penned a pro-witch-hunting text, *Daemonologie* was report-

edly so incensed by Scot's skepticism that he ordered *The Discoverie of Witchcraft* to be burned upon his ascension to the English throne. *The Discoverie of Witchcraft* by Reginald Scot in 1584. Whether or not the decree was fully carried out, the message was clear: open opposition to the witch trials would not be tolerated. Consequently, rational voices were marginalized. The dominance of the witch-hunting worldview went unchallenged in the public sphere, reinforcing a collective *epistemic closure*. Alternative interpretations—be they medical, scientific, or humanistic—were denied a platform, and the populace was discouraged from questioning the legitimacy of the hunts.

This suppression of dissenting knowledge had lasting effects. It prolonged the witch hunts by insulating them from critique. It also stalled the development of more enlightened understandings of natural phenomena. Only toward the end of the 17th century did changing intellectual currents (the Enlightenment, advances in science, etc.) finally dismantle the belief in witchcraft. But during the height of the witch hunts, the partnership of fear and power ensured that knowledge opposing the hunts was systematically stifled. In sum, the authorities not only refused to listen to those on trial; they also silenced anyone who spoke against the trials. This represents an extensive campaign of epistemic suppression: knowledge that could have saved lives and advanced understanding was actively pushed underground.

Conclusion

The witch hunts of the early modern era can be understood as a stark case of epistemic injustice and knowledge suppression. Biased assumptions about gender and evil created an environment where accused “witches” were denied credibility and a fair hearing, suffering testimonial injustice at the moment their lives hung in the balance. Society's lack of interpretive tools to explain misfortune in non-supernatural terms meant that the accused also endured hermeneutical injustice—their reality could not be recognized within prevailing narratives. Together, these injustices ensured that truth was a casualty of the witch hunts: innocent people's testimonies were dismissed, and false

confessions and fantastical explanations were embraced as truth. Moreover, the period saw an active suppression of challenging knowledge, from the wisdom of women healers to the protoscientific arguments of early skeptics. The machinery of the witch hunts thus extinguished or discredited valuable knowledge in order to preserve a fearful social order.

In academic terms, the witch hunts show how *unchecked prejudice and power can corrupt the processes by which a community validates knowledge*. Voices that should have been heard were silenced, and ignorance was elevated to official “knowledge.” This historical episode underscores the importance of epistemic justice in our own time. Ensuring that people are heard and understood in their capacity as knowers is crucial to preventing the kinds of grievous wrongs that occurred during the witch trials. The legacy of the witch hunts is a cautionary tale: when societies allow fear and bias to suppress knowledge and devalue certain knowers, the result can be tragic injustice.

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