I don’t believe in witches or ghosts or things that go bump in the night. I’ve always thought that the Salem witch trials were a result of mass hysteria (on the part of the persecutors) rather than a phenomenon of dark forces at work. And seeing Arthur Miller’s The Crucible a few years ago, only confirmed my suspicions. So I was gratified to see Dr Quintanilla’s poster at this year’s meeting of the American Psychiatric Association. As a physician and researcher, she factually explains the fallacy of witchcraft. Looking at historical documents dating back to the 15th century, Dr Quintanilla was able to match the symptoms of people condemned as witches with associated neurological and psychiatric disorders, such as epilepsy and hysteria. [Editor’s Note: Natalie Timoshin]

Mental illness has been known throughout human history, and the symptoms have always been recognized as something different—an abnormal behavior. In ancient times, madness was considered a punishment of the gods but also as the distinctive characteristics of the chosen ones; the manifestation of the symptoms was seen as a sign of a divine message. Mental illness was considered by the Greeks to be an organic problem. However, this naturalistic point of view changed in the Middle Ages after the Black Plague epidemic that wiped out about 30 million people—half the population of Europe. After that devastation, disease was no longer seen as the result of natural causes but of supernatural forces or malignant spirits that physicians were not able to deal with. At the end of the Middle Ages, but more precisely, during the Renaissance, the blame fell on witches and diabolical possession. All the tragedies and calamities of humanity were the fault of witches because no one was capable of doing such things if not under the power of the devil. Therefore, these perpetrators should be severely punished.

Women were condemned as witches more frequently than men. The witch craze took place primarily in northern Europe. This mentality extended to the New World and witches were burned in Salem in the 17th century (1692-1693). Hysteria and epilepsy were the 2 illnesses that were most frequently confused with witchcraft or demonic possession, especially if they were accompanied by tremors, convulsions or of loss of consciousness.

Different treatises were written in order to instruct the people, especially doctors and priests, on how to recognize a witch or a possessed one. The Malleus Maleficarum (The Hammer of Witches) written by Kramer and Sprenger in 1487, was by far the most famous and its influence lasted for more than 200 years. Women were more prone to diabolical possession because they were weaker and imperfect in nature than men: “woman is an imperfect animal, inferior to men”, and a woman’s reproductive system was the proof of this, the uterus being the source of evil. Women were full of venom during menstruation, so that they were contaminated and capable of contaminate others. The uterus was also an unstable organ which could move from one place to another in the body, it could also press the diaphragm in order to impede respiration. Women, because of their uterus, were unstable human beings.

Another form of witchcraft was through imagination, a faculty that was believed to be able to produce physical changes in the body. Paracelsus (17th centruy) thought that women’s illnesses
were essentially imagined, but were not unreal. It was believed that the uterus received pathological images that even if they had started as immaterial images, would become real because indomitable imagination could not be submitted to will. He thought that the process had its origin in the spleen. Because there were 2 organs that were capable of producing pathogenic images, the uterus and the spleen, women had 2 sources of evil. That was why women were more powerful witches; however, men could also practice witchcraft through the evil of the spleen. The uterus could also make other organs ill by vicinity, sympathy, or vapors. 

Many women who suffered from hysteria or epilepsy were judged and condemned to die at the stake. The witch craze finally came to an end at the end of the 18th century. Little by little, epilepsy and hysteria became better known and understood, and the rationalistic point of view prevailed once again.

References

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