

***The Witch of Wapping, The Trial of Joan Peterson***

by Ellen Berridge, HTST 204

The primary source that I am analyzing is a printed pamphlet from the year 1652 concerning the witch trial of Jone Peterson, also known and referenced as the Witch of Wapping. The trial took place in Wapping, East London in the borough of Tower Hamlets on April 7, 1652, and she was later put to death on the charges of witchcraft on April 12, 1652. This document is important because it shows how the proceedings of a witch trial were typically built off of little evidence and an inability to explain an underlying cause of death.

This document is a printed account of the witch trial of Jone Peterson who was accused of using witchcraft to help kill community member, Lady Powel, who had died of another medical cause, according to the descriptions in the physicians notes on the second to last page of the document. Jone Peterson was accused of witchcraft, where the document states “ Then the court proceeded upon the first indictment which was for bewitching Lady Powel to death.”<sup>1</sup> The person who printed this document is not explicitly mentioned, however in the source there is mention of the person to who was recording the words of the trial as it was going on, which is what this source is based off of. This person is referenced multiple times throughout the source as Mr. Recorder. Although Mr. Recorder is never named it is possible that they authored the pamphlet due to how much they are mentioned. The reason that this source was created was because there were “several accounts of lying pamphlets concerning the witch of Wapping”.<sup>2</sup> From this, it can be figured that the intended audience was to the surrounding community who would have heard, read and possibly been spreading falsities about this trial. To place this source

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<sup>1</sup> “A declaration in answer to several lying pamphlets concerning the witch of Wapping,” 6.

<sup>2</sup> “The Witch of Wapping,” 4.

into some historical context, during the 1650's Charles II was leading an invasion into England in the third Civil War, the Anglo-Dutch War was starting in 1652, and the witchcraze was at its height in England.

In the document it is mentioned at the end that the judges Coll. Okey, Coll. Berkstead and other Justices of the Peace were not happy with the charge and trial of Jone Peterson, due to a lack of true evidence “did declare themselves that they were not satisfied either with the proceedings, or proof against this Peterson, that she was guilty of witchcraft.”<sup>3</sup> This quote is important because it demonstrates how the court and the people who were commencing the trial felt in regards to the account of witchcraft that Jone Peterson was accused of. From what the document states at the end that the other Justices of the Peace and Coll. Okey and Coll. Berkstead felt that on this account there were personal feelings that were the true attribute to this specific trial, “relating to the prejudice of Mrs. Levingstone, which they are ready to testify to the parliament.”<sup>4</sup>

In this document, the trial of Jone Peterson was stated by those who commenced the trial to not have enough evidence against the accused and that they were not satisfied by how it had proceeded. This becomes important because when looking at other witch trials and cases of witchcraft it is a theme that comes up often, not just in Europe but from all around the world. The sudden witch craze that Europe and the world experienced in the 1400's to the mid 1700's was fueled by war and religion. In England, the suddenness of the witch trials and the witchcraze can be pointed to the split of the Catholic and Protestant churches during and after the reformation.<sup>5</sup> During this period, the churches used witchcraft as a way to try and gain followers as stated in the article “Catholic and Protestant officials focused witch-trial activity in confessional battlegrounds during the Reformation and Counter-Reformation to

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<sup>3</sup> “The Witch of Wapping,” 11.

<sup>4</sup> “The Witch of Wapping,” 11.

<sup>5</sup> Peter T. Leeson, and Jacob W Russ, “Witch Trials,” *The Economic Journal London* 128 (2018): 2062.

attract the loyalty of undecided Christians.”<sup>6</sup> This can be seen as an important aspect of the sudden boom of witch trials and the grounds to which many of them are placed. A lot of witch trials are based on deaths of others in the community, sometimes the cause of death was not always explainable, so it was presumed that bewitching and witchcraft were playing a hand in the deaths.

Like in the primary document, there are other cases of supposed witchcraft that are based on a lack of understanding of medical problems. In other trials from this period and from around the world in general there are accounts of medically misunderstood deaths that have led to a surge in witch trials, and to many deaths of people believed to be witches. In another set of very important and prominent witch trials in North America were the Salem witch trials. The Salem witch trials show resemblance to Jone Peterson's trial as many women were to be charged with witchcraft on the account of misunderstood deaths of girls who had been poisoned.<sup>7</sup> It is also mentioned at the end of the document that the medical examination after the death of Lady Powel showed that she had swollen limbs, abdomen, yellow tinge and liquid in her lungs.

When all of these sources and the things that they highlight are put together it can be seen that they all share a common theme; in many articles of witch trials, whether they be actual accounts or an analysis, they are all connected. The trial of Jone Peterson and her death were based on little evidence of her actually being a witch, rather of prejudice, lack of knowledge and hearsay, as supported by the physician's report of the real cause of death of Lady Powel and the concerns of the Justices of the Peace.

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<sup>6</sup> Leeson and Russ, “Witch Trials,” 2062.

<sup>7</sup> Leela S. Mundra, and others, “The Salem Witch Trials- Bewitchment or Ergotism,” *JAMA Dermatology* (2016): 540.

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