

“When spotted deaths ran arm’d through every street”: Women-Healers and the Great Plague in Geraldine Brooks’ *Year of Wonders*

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Abstract

In the late 1600s, England was reeling under the recurrence of the pandemic that had swept continent-wide in the 14th century. However, it was not the only disease lurking around. At the heels of the scarlet-ringed Black Death, came the scarlet letter of witchcraft accusations, mostly geared towards Wise Women in the margins of society- women who exhibited knowledge and skill in medicine, herbal remedies and midwifery. Set in the time when religious fanaticism and Puritanical fear-mongering was at its height, *Year of Wonders* presents before us an opportunity to delve into the web of lies and life-threatening allegations that formed the bedrock of the English witch trials continuing in full swing since the incursion of Continental lore ever since James I came to power. Furthermore, with midwives and female herbalists in the area falling prey to targeted sexual and physical violence in the wake of the pandemic in the story, what needs to be inspected is the inescapable link between Church-backed patriarchy’s delusional fear, jealousy and consequent scapegoating of the economically and socio-sexually marginalized woman-healers in the countryside and the failure of the male-dominated medical field in effectively containing the spread of the virus. The paper investigates further the generational flow of biomedical wisdom in a female-oriented domain which becomes significant in the presentation of the two female leads inheriting the function of the Wise Women from the original holders of the position, thus solidifying the sense of found family and sisterhood standing against the mounting social pressure to bend to the will of the Church and the men in their lives.

Keywords: Witch, Wise Women, Black Death, Misogyny, Medicine, Women-healers

Introduction

Set in the historical Plague Village of Eyam, Derbyshire, *Year of Wonders* traverse the wounds left in the collective consciousness by a harrowing disease in the course of three years – negotiating the rapid and rabid concomitant growth of violent and life-threatening scapegoating of individuals already socially, economically, and sexually marginalized. As we dive into the remnants of life in the ravaged town post-Plague in the opening scenes of the novel, what awaits us is a recounting of the terrorized fringe-existence of 17th century female apothecaries fighting against both maladies of the body and the incurable misogyny of the fearful Puritan mind, set at a time of recurrent epidemics, famines, and widespread impoverishment and lack of medical infrastructure (Appleby, 1973).

The story and characterization hinge on documented authenticity of the experiences of Eyam villagers in the 1660s (Wallis, 2006), while imaginatively reconstructing the ordeal of women in particular at the tail-end of European witch trials based on superstitious allegations of diabolical associations, sexual deviancy and abnormalization of home-grown medical proficiency

of the archetypal Wise Women/cunning woman. They had been predominantly self-taught, their skill autodidactic, as a consequence of women being denied entry to formal University education (Allen, 1946). In opposition, city-bred male physicians and surgeons had the upper hand in positing accessible evidence of their expertise to the court owing to the mostly generationally oral (Abrams, 2012), unwritten testimonies (which had often been labeled with the frankly ageist and disdainfully reductive phrase- Old Wives' Tales) of the women-healer's knowledge. Like a vicious cycle, barring women from high literacy in the first place had already solved the problem of allowing them the opportunity of presenting and defending their capabilities in a way that could be considered legally convincing.

While the story follows Anna Frith who was never directly associated with the work of medicine and healing, we see the lives of three other female deuteragonists unfold through her eyes- Anys Gowdie, her aunt Mem Gowdie, and Elinor Mompellion, - all of whom die untimely, brutal deaths despite and definitely as a result of working as successful female practitioners of rural medicine. Each of them possess characteristics coinciding with the Continental lore about identifying a witch, the most unambiguous being simply their repository of knowledge about nature, natural remedies and illnesses which remain inaccessible to the rest of the villagers, and the university-educated male physicians during that time. Demonization of physical marks or specific behaviour followed later, as a frantic search for imaginary evidence to buttress and solidify the speculations. Anys and Mem Gowdie begin as two marginalized figures pushed to the outskirts of the village out of fear and doubts about their work, despite their consistent assistance in betterment of several illnesses (Brooks, 2001) afflicting their neighbours who could not afford to bring in doctors from the cities because of the severe disparity in wealth and social status.

The Female Plague-Doctors

Two events in the novel reflect the historically accurate workings of the hive-mind of patriarchy towards these local woman healers during their tireless effort in helping patients suffering plague symptoms; the reactions ranged from aloof exploitation to sadistic slaughter. Shortly after the news broke of physicians in plague-ridden London fleeing the city, and the fatal misdiagnosis of a young child's symptoms by a town doctor, Anys and Mem Gowdie bring in their repertoire of pharmacological ointments to treat Anna Frith's young son:

Anys Gowdie brought a cordial that she said was decocted from the tops of feverfew with a little wormwood in sugared sack [...] She had also brought a cooling salve, fragrant of mint, and she asked me if she might apply it to the child to lower his fever [...] Anys, I now see, knew well enough that her care would bring my boy but a brief respite. (Brooks, 2001, p. 37)

Clearly, their medications were typically anaesthetic and anti-inflammatory but proved more effective than the city-surgeon's prescription which included hack remedies like dried toads (p. 38) and leeches (p. 36) for blood-letting for reducing plague symptoms like lumps and knobs. The specific that had been previously prescribed to the young patient by Elinor Mompellion's friend from the College of Physicians in London included various poultices which had only served to counterproductively amplify the agony:

"Mr. Mompellion's friend had written out in detail a receipt from the College of Physicians, and with Mrs. Mompellion's help I tried this next. It called for the roasting in embers of a great onion, hollowed out and filled with a fig, chopped rue, and a dram of Venice treacle. Lucky for us, as I then thought, Mem Gowdie had both the dried figs and the treacle, which is honey mixed with a great number of rare ingredients, its making long

and exacting. I roasted those onions, one after the other, even though the discomfort of their pressure on the swollen place made my child scream and toss and run damp with pain-sweat.” (Brooks, 2001, p. 37-38)

The reference to Venice/Venetian treacle was significant, since it had found extensive application during Black Death by doctors who considered its antidotal property as a theriac that could emulate the mechanism of anti-venoms (Fabbri, 2007). While this immediately brings to mind the way a vaccine works, the treacle was not marketed as a preventive measure. It proved its high uselessness even further because of its exorbitant price which denied the poorer strata any access to it. Many physicians recorded its use as mostly therapeutic that could apparently purge the human body of sins that had germinated the plague, which was popularly believed by a Puritan society to be a punishment from God (Zuckerman, 2004). Medical professionalism continued to cower in terror before Puritan dogma.

The “Witch”-Hunt

The second climactically pivotal incident in the novel happens when the contagion had begun to spread too quickly and multiple people died before there was time for treatment, as a result of which the two healers found themselves becoming the victims of misplaced, targeted physical aggression. Mem Gowdie’s blood was extracted to be used as a balm (Brooks, 2001, p. 39) - in a ghastly perversion of both her occupation and medieval blood-letting therapy - before being lynched and forced to drown (p.40) - a well-established persecution tactic raved about by the Dominican inquisitors Heinrich Kramer and Jacob Sprenger in their infamous 15th century guidebook for identifying and executing witches - the *Malleus Maleficarum* (1487), or the Hammer of the Witch. While the aged woman ultimately succumbed to pneumonic lung disorders (p. 42) days after she was rescued, Anys herself was strangled to death (p. 41)- similar to the method of publicly executing alleged witches by hanging - but not before she used the mob’s tactic of vilifying her free spirit, intelligence and unabashed sexuality by turning it on them, accusing the murderers’ wives of adultery and coitus with the Devil and ridiculing her killers about their impotence, thus shattering their fragile masculine ego. This entire event reflected the era of witch-hunts which overlapped the issuance of stringent statutes about who should or should not be allowed to study medicine. “An Act for the Appointing of Physicians and Surgeons”, which had been outlined by the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of London, explicitly stated their displeasure and censure of whoever they considered as quacks, who would “use sorcery and Witchcraft [...] to the high displeasure of God, great infamy to the Faculty [...] most especially of them that cannot discern the uncunning from the cunning.” (Paris & Fonblanque, 2014, pp 3-4)

Even contemporary writers caught on to the trend of denigrating Wise Women. Daniel Defoe wrote in his *A Journal of the Plague Year* in 1665:

“The common people who [are] ignorant and stupid in their Reflections ... ran to Conjurers and Witches and all Sorts of Deceivers to know what should become of them; who fed their Fears and kept them always alarm’d and awake, on purpose to delude them and pick their Pockets. So they were as mad upon running after Quacks and Mountebanks and every practicing Old Woman for Medicines and Remedies.” (Defoe, 2004, p. 73)

Female Physicians and the Female Body

The existence of Wise Women wasn't an irregularity, neither were they localized. During the 14th to 15th century when the Great Death ravaged Continental Europe for the first documented time, evidence was found of female medical personnel even in high society who specialized in pharmacological treatment of plague symptoms. Leigh Whaley, in his book titled *Women and the Practice of Medical Care in Early Modern Europe, 1400-1800*, cites a few cases from Italy where we find relaxed regulations for women in medical field:

“Women received licences to treat specific ailments rather than to practise general medicine. Clarice di Durisio da Foggia was a specialist in diseases of the eyes and treated only women. Sibyl of Benevento received a licence to treat buboes (abscesses from the plague), while Margharita from Naples was a specialist in female problems such as breast abscesses (perhaps cancer) and womb ailments. Marguerite Saluzzi, licensed in 1460, was a popular doctor known for her medicinal knowledge of herbs. Although there are several examples of women like Francesca de Romana practicing medicine at this time in southern Italy, their numbers were still low in comparison to men: approximately three thousand to eighteen over a period of thirty-five years in Naples.” (Whaley, 2011, p. 15)

The mention of specialization in gynaecological health is perhaps best represented in the novel through Anys Gowdie's character who was shown to be the prototypical dietician when she offered the protagonist a draught made from stinging nettle (Brooks, 2001, p. 25) for blood fortification which had historically been considered a supplementary iron-rich “superfood”, and used to treat **anaemia** in women. (Kregiel, 2018)

In Brooks's novel, the Gowdie family's primary occupation was midwifery, by dint of which they supervised the safe deliveries of nearly a hundred newborns, and were proficient in not only local **anaesthesia**, but also in knowing the female body closely enough to successfully handle complicated pregnancies. This was unheard of among the male city doctors- very few deigned to procure the know-how of helping women during labour or gynaecological problems (Bicks, 2017), instead pedestalizing childbirth and motherhood as a miraculous, blessed event, thus washing their hands off of ever actively learning how to help women by leaving their fate in God's hands.

With the demise of both women, the task of helping pregnant mothers through labour during quarantine passed on to Anna Frith and her close friend and reverend's wife Elinor Mompellion. While the former had some training as a caregiver because of her experience with looking after multiple plague-affected people in her household, the latter possessed an unprecedented wealth of knowledge about herbal cures much like the Gowdies did. What followed was a graphic description of Anna and Elinor safely maneuvering a foetus out of a dangerous transverse or sideways intrauterine position (p. 53), which required high precision and care long before the advent of Cesarean surgery. Their dexterity upstaged the skill of the male barber-surgeon who had tried to deliver Anna's newborn sister using a pair of forceps (p.52)- inadvertently leading to both the mother and the child's gruesome deaths. One of the major reasons behind accusing midwives of witchcraft and devilry was their position as the original OB/GYN and their intimate understanding of childbirth and in extension the female body, something incomprehensible to an andro-centric society and paradoxically terrifying enough for its creative capabilities which the church and patriarchy wanted to dominate as a surefire way of controlling the woman as a whole.

Conclusion: The Legacy of Wisdom

The original female pharmacist/obstetricians were thus succeeded by women again- who went on to adopt the Gowdie’s treatment methods as well as two specific incantations they had used during administering the ointments. They went thus: “May the seven directions guide this work. May it be pleasing to my grandmothers, the ancient ones. So mote it be”, and “Out, fire! In, frost! By all the Mothers’ gentle ghosts.” (Brooks, 2001, p. 37) While these were often crooned to the patients possibly to calm their nerves, these were unsurprisingly diabolized as sorcery and spells, mostly because of their clear connection to pagan rituals and nature worship. What is even more significant in these particular instances is the reference to ancient, “gentle ghosts” of mothers and grandmothers, possibly connoting a homage to the memories of a long line of female ancestors who had honed their skills in medicine and passed down the knowledge to future generations, which had further caused alarm at the possible existence of an anti-hegemonic, non-normative, generationally matriarchal legacy of biomedical knowledge. One could argue that it is precisely because of the direct association of such knowledge to disproportionately underprivileged women that the spells were perfunctorily interpreted as invocation of female deities- a sacrilegious concept which was usually associated with witches.

In the novel, scientific inquiry and rational thinking is distinctively absent from well-read intellectuals of the city and the church, while the women healers seemingly possessed the in spades. Anna was the one who came to the realization that the plague would need medical intervention instead of appeasement of religious fervor, thus evincing her distance from the prevalent attitudes of that time. One would recall what Anys Gowdie had proclaimed while visiting Anna’s home where the first plague-victim, or “patient zero” – George Viccars- had died under the helpless watch of the town reverend: “A good infusion [of herbs] would have served George better than the empty mutterings of the priest.” (Brooks, 2001, p. 23) She had set herself up for the world’s caprice and cries of heresy, while simultaneously bringing to light how damaging and dangerous orthodoxy could be, which had destroyed any and all defiant, intelligent female presence whose existence had dared to question the assumed supremacy of the dominant religious and patriarchal ideologies.

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