

New Perspectives on Witchcraft, Magic and Demonology

Volume 4

Gender and Witchcraft

Edited by

Brian P. Levack



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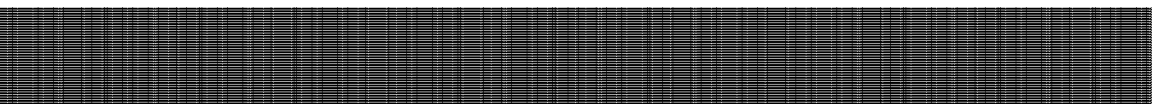
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**New Perspectives on Witchcraft,
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Volume 4
Gender and Witchcraft

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New Perspectives on Witchcraft, Magic and Demonology

Volume 4
Gender and Witchcraft

Edited with introductions by

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Introduction

The subject of gender remains one of the durable and important topics in the history of witchcraft. The overwhelming majority of people accused of witchcraft and executed for that crime were female. The percentages varied from country to country and from place to place, but approximately 80 percent of all witches tried between 1450 and 1750 were women. For many years historians attributed this overwhelming pattern of female prosecution to the misogyny of the judges, especially the clerical inquisitors who staffed the courts that prosecuted the witches. Statements from witchcraft manuals written by and for inquisitors regarding the moral weakness of women, especially their natural inclination to seek sexual satisfaction, supported this interpretation. The Dominican authors of the most famous witchcraft manual, the notorious *Malleus maleficarum* (1487), argued that carnal lust, which was insatiable in women, was the source of witchcraft because it drove women to make pacts with the Devil and have intercourse with him. On the basis of statements like this many historians concluded that clerical hatred of women was the main source of witch-hunting. The gradual recognition that most witches were prosecuted by lay rather than clerical judges did not change this interpretation. Lay judges may not have been as sexually frustrated as their clerical predecessors and colleagues, but they supposedly shared the same set of misogynistic attitudes, which were transmitted from the pulpit and internalized by the entire educated male population.

The proliferation of social studies of witchcraft during the last three decades has led to a somewhat different interpretation of female witchcraft. Recognizing that most accusations of witchcraft came “from below,” which means that they were initially brought by villagers rather than higher authorities, historians have sought to explain why poor illiterate villagers were identifying female members of their communities, rather than men, as being responsible for this crime. They probably suspected women more readily because women traditionally engaged in activities that could easily be combined with the exercise of magical power, such as the preparation of food and the healing of those who were ill. Other historians have stressed the poverty and isolation of the women who were accused of witchcraft. These women were usually the most marginal members of the community: poor, often unmarried, women who were dependent on the community for assistance and who were therefore the source of resentment in times of dearth. The fact that many women accused of witchcraft were reported to be sharp tongued and quarrelsome only served to reinforce this social interpretation of witchcraft accusations. The prosecution of women for witchcraft

therefore represented a mechanism by which communities purged themselves of their least desirable members.

The two historiographical traditions that have offered explanations for the preponderance of female witches, the clerical and the social, both have tended to treat women as victims of a male-dominated society. Either they were victims of clerical misogyny or of village hostility. In either case the hatred of women, or at the very least the determination to eliminate some of the morally or socially distasteful manifestations of female behavior, was considered to be central to the dynamics of witch-hunting. Some of the earlier miscalculations of the number of people executed as witches, which at least two feminist writers claimed was in the stratospheric range of nine million, only served to exaggerate the misogyny that was believed to lie at witch-hunting's base. According to these writers, the great European witch-hunt was analogous to the holocaust of the mid- twentieth century. It was, in their view, a massive assault on women. The insecurities of both educated and illiterate men regarding masculinity and social dominance led to a campaign, so it is claimed, to eliminate an entire segment of the female population, especially those who defied patriarchal norms or rejected the prevailing standards of feminine behavior.

The last two decades have produced a large body of scholarship from many disciplines that addresses the question of gender and witchcraft in different ways. Some of this literature is discussed in Anne Llewelley Barstow's essay, "On Studying Witchcraft as Women's History." A second historiographical essay by Elspeth Whitney, on gender and the historiography of the European witch-hunts, is devoted in large part to criticizing male "mainstream" witchcraft historians who in their efforts to see witch-hunting as a complex phenomenon have not given the question of gender the attention she believes it deserves. Whitney's essay does possess some historiographical value in identifying various contributions to the subject and in providing suggestions for future research. Robin Briggs presents a more constructive introduction to the problem in his essay on women as victims. He dismisses the clerical misogynist thesis as irrelevant on the grounds that virtually all prosecutions came almost entirely from villagers rather than judges, and he also challenges the thesis that witchcraft formed part of a plan to criminalize women. Stuart Clark gives more attention than Briggs to the demonologists, who demonstrated more of an interest in fitting men and women into a system of dual classification or polarity than in giving expression to deep-seated misogyny.

One of the sources of the new historiography on gender and witchcraft has been the recognition that significant numbers of men were accused of witchcraft. These cases of male witchcraft cannot all be explained away by the fact that many of the men accused were relatives or spouses of female witches. The high numbers of men accused in the early stages of the witch-hunt, especially in Alpine regions, has suggested that when witch-hunting was still associated with older forms of heresy, more men were likely to be accused of the crime than women. Even in the later stages of the hunt, women were not always the main target of accusations and prosecutions. In northern and eastern Europe a substantial portion, and in some cases a majority of witches, were men. The article by Valerie Kivelson explains why accusations of witchcraft in Russia, which were

directed at socially marginal individuals, resulted in the prosecution of more men than women. Even in England, where the great majority of witches were women, a study of individual cases reveals that gender cannot always provide the key to understanding the hunts. Malcolm Gaskill's investigation into the prosecution of a male English farmer for witchcraft in 1617 shows that conflicts with his neighbors and the content of their beliefs were the main factors leading to his trial.

A second source of the new historiography on gender and witchcraft is rooted in the recognition that the villagers and townspeople who brought the initial charges against witches were themselves witches. Women also served as witnesses in many witchcraft trials, and articles by Clive Holmes and J. A. Sharpe explore the implications of that judicial practice. These discoveries have led to a modification of the more simplistic theories of misogynistic prosecution. The women who brought charges against other women for witchcraft may have been acting on the basis of stereotypes of female conduct formulated by men, but they were also reflecting prevailing female views of their own gender. Lyndal Roper's article on Augsburg shows that some of the young mothers who brought accusations against women who assisted them after childbirth were responding to the real threat of women invading their space and threatening the control of their household and the health of their infants.

The third source of the new approaches to gender and witchcraft, closely related to the active participation of women in the prosecution of witches, has been a reevaluation of the argument that women charged with witchcraft were simply victims. Until recently the only agency assigned to witches was their occasional willingness to use the magical powers they were believed to possess to retaliate against those who had attacked them. These threats can be considered desperate efforts at self-defense by otherwise powerless women. More recent studies have expanded the range of female agency, showing how women accused of witchcraft made various conscious choices regarding their activities and their prosecution. Sally Scully's study of two half-sisters tried for witchcraft in Venice in the seventeenth century suggests that witchcraft, taken in this context to mean the practice of the magical arts, was a career that women could choose as a strategy for survival. Jane Kamensky shows how the "disorderly" speech attributed to women was central to the dynamics of witchcraft prosecution in colonial New England. Ruth Behar writes about the exercise of female power, which took the form of sexual witchcraft, in colonial Mexico. Sonia Weidner Maluf adds a contemporary perspective from Santa Catarina island off the southern coast of Brazil, where witch-beliefs that have their roots in early modern Europe survive today. In the villages of this island witches embodied female power, either to cause harm (mainly to young children) or to counteract the power of witches and cure various ailments.

Women were also influential in giving shape to their own confessions, which now can be viewed to some extent as genuine expressions of their own views rather than as statements of what their male inquisitors forced them to say under torture. Louise Jackson's study of witchcraft confessions by women in Suffolk, England, in 1645 supports the argument that the women who confessed were using the language of demonology to judge themselves as wives and mothers. These women were still victims, but they were active participants in the judicial

process that resulted in their own condemnation. Diane Purkiss studies the depositions of English female witnesses against other women accused of witchcraft. These narratives created fantasies about witches' activities that enabled women to cope with the fears and anxieties associated with running their households and caring for their children. The article by Louisa Accati, who studies accusations and confessions in the Friuli region of Italy, shows how witches' statements reflected perceptions of the female body and formed part of a long discourse with clerics on the subject.

Accati's article reveals that clerical and traditional male perceptions of the body continued to prevail throughout the period of prosecution. Other articles in the collection give new meaning to traditional fears of clerics and elites regarding demonic and female power. The article by Eric Ross represents the second attempt by a scholar to link the spread of syphilis throughout Europe in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries with the rise of witchcraft prosecutions, and in particular with the misogyny that accompanied those hunts. Like Stanislav Andreski, who suggested the same explanation in *Encounters* in 1982, Ross posits a single cause for a complex phenomenon. Much more valuable is Lyndal Roper's exploration of the connections between male fears of a loss of masculinity with witchcraft and magic, which she also relates to early modern capitalism in Germany. Charles Zika interprets sixteenth-century German artistic images of witches' flight as reflections of male fears regarding female power and disorder. Lène Dresen-Coenders also discusses artistic images of witchcraft and sexuality.

Two articles in this volume deal with issues of gender and witchcraft after the period of the witch-hunts. Nancy Rubinger argues that in eighteenth-century French novels, written in a period of enlightenment, borrowed from an earlier age the opposition between the witch and the saint in stories of seduction and disorder. Wendy Griffin writes about feminist witches in the 1970s, showing how they actually created myths and symbols as a means of providing a religious framework for their spirituality and redefining power and authority in their lives.

ON STUDYING WITCHCRAFT AS WOMEN'S HISTORY

A Historiography of the European Witch Persecutions

Anne Llewellyn Barstow

On average, witchcraft, the ultimate in human evil, was sex-related to women in much the same proportion as sanctity, the ultimate in human good, was sex-related to men.

—Christina Larner, *Witchcraft and Religion*

After years of being relegated to folkloric and esoteric studies, European witchcraft is beginning to emerge as an important chapter in early modern history. In particular, the persecutions of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries have become the subject of scholarly attention. One might assume that the persecutions have been seen as an integral part of women's history, but that is not the case. The witch craze has been interpreted by most historians as *not* a matter of gender.

Given that over 80 percent of the victims were women, this is a surprising and, I believe, a disturbing conclusion.¹ I will therefore examine what difference it makes when one subjects this material to the insights of women's history.

Historians have in fact interpreted the witch-craze as the result of religious upheaval, of the growth of the nation-state, of the isolation of mountain folk—of anything, in short, rather than of what women were doing or were perceived as being. When one focuses on the roles women played in

My thanks to the Feminist Scholars in Religion group of New York City for comments and encouragement; especial thanks to Carol Chambers and Beverly Harrison.

¹ Because many records are lost and those which survive are often vague about numbers, gender, and sentencing, we will never know how many persons were accused, were executed, were women or men. But enough is known to detect trends in these records. My estimate of total executions (perhaps one hundred thousand throughout Europe, 1300–1700) and gender breakdown (80 percent of those accused and 85 percent of those executed were female) are based on recent regional archival studies as well as on sixteenth- and seventeenth-century estimates. I will present detailed figures in chapter 1 of my forthcoming book.

The current trend among some feminist groups to claim 3 million, 6 million, or even 10 million female victims is sheer fantasy. The statistically based figure, while lower, still makes the same point, namely that this was an organized mass murder of women, and does so in a way that cannot be dismissed by historians.

early modern society, and how those roles changed in the sixteenth century, a different picture emerges. This approach enables one to see that women had served as healers, midwives, and counsellors, using an age-old combination of experience ("common sense") and magical techniques to cure and advise. Long respected for these skills, they began to be attacked for them at the end of the Middle Ages. Further, one must ask the economic question: How were women coping with the increasing gap between poor and rich that emerged in the sixteenth century? When one sees how women's basic options narrowed, then one is ready to ask about other changes in sixteenth-century society that affected them, such as legal shifts.²

One must remember that European women *as a group* were first subject to criminal persecutions on witchcraft charges. Having been kept out of the courts because they were seen by law as minors, women suddenly were held legally responsible for their actions, once witch allegations were made.³ Seen as a group of independent adults, women thus entered European legal history by being accused of witchcraft. And those accusations were heavily negative about female sexuality: women were blamed for preventing conception, causing miscarriage, abortion, and stillbirth, making men impotent, seducing men, having sex with the devil, giving birth to demons. Underlying these charges lay the fact that women healers were the authorities on sexuality, which led to a deadly professional rivalry between folk healers and priests and university-trained doctors. Added to this rivalry was the conviction that women were more strongly sexed than men, which led to deep-seated fears in some males.

I believe that the sudden rise in prosecutions for witchcraft that began in Europe c. 1560 was related in part to attempts to take away women's control of their sexual and reproductive lives. This fitted into the strongly patriarchal concept of family for which the sixteenth century is known, and into the attack by doctors on midwives and folk healers,⁴ and by Reformers, both Catholic and Protestant, on traditional sexual mores.

² For the legal background, see Edward Peters, *The Magician, The Witch, and the Law* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1978); on sixteenth- and seventeenth-century changes, begin with Alfred Soman, "The Parlement of Paris and the Great Witch Hunt (1565-1640)," *Sixteenth Century Journal* 9, no. 2 (1978): 31-44; and John Langbein, *Prosecuting Crime in the Renaissance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974).

³ Christina Larner, *Enemies of God: The Witch-hunt in Scotland* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press and London: Chatto & Windus, 1981), 3-4, 101-02.

⁴ On the family: Lawrence Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England, 1500-1800* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), part 3; Philippe Ariès, *Centuries of Childhood* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf 1965); John Demos, *A Little Commonwealth: Family Life in Plymouth Colony* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970); for modifications of these interpretations, see Steven Ozment, *When Fathers Ruled: Family Life in Reformation Europe* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983). On midwives, see the work of two German sociologists, Gunnar Heinsohn and Otto Steiger, "The Elimination of Medieval Birth Control and the Witch Trials of Modern Times," *International Journal of Women's Studies* 5, no. 3 (May-June, 1982): 193-214, and "Warum wurden Hexen verbrannt?" *Der*

Although men could be arraigned on the charge of witchcraft, and were prosecuted in small numbers, the craze was aimed mostly at women: 80 percent of the accused and 85 percent of those executed were female. Men were associated with witchcraft chiefly because they were related to women who were already suspect or because they had committed other crimes.⁵ And yet, although men "qualified," women were overwhelmingly singled out. The extent of the attack on women becomes clear when we recall that 92 percent of the accused in the English county of Essex were women, and that all but two of the female inhabitants of Langendorf in the Rhineland were arrested. In twelfth-century Kiev when periodic fears of witchcraft arose, all of the old women of the area were seized and subjected to the ordeal by cold water (thrown, bound hand and foot, into the Dnieper River). Christina Larner, the analyst of Scottish witchcraft, observed that there were periods "when no mature woman in Fife or East Lothian can have felt free from the fear of accusation."⁶ Given these cases, we see that the notorious examples of the two German villages left with only one female inhabitant apiece and of Rheinback, where one person, most often female, out of every two families was put to death, are not unbelievable.⁷ Christina Larner put the question precisely when she asked, "Was witch-hunting also woman-hunting?"

Despite such evidence, historians have for the most part not dealt with the persecutions as an attack on women. And yet the first major research published on witchcraft, the documents book and analysis brought out by Joseph Hansen at the turn of the century, had offered a promising beginning. Hansen recognized that women had been singled out as victims, and he gathered some of the more misogynist materials to illustrate this discrimination. Hansen's insights were not entirely lost on Wallace Notestein, who in 1911 devoted one paragraph of his study of English witchcraft to the subject. Observing that about six times as many women were indicted as men, he

Spiegel (1984, no. 43): 111–128 (my thanks to Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza for bringing their work to my attention); Anne Barstow, "Women as Healers, Women as Witches," *Old Westbury Review* 2 (1986).

⁵ Larner, *Enemies of God*, 91; Alan Macfarlane, *Witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart England* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), 160; E. William Monter, *Witchcraft in France and Switzerland: The Borderlands during the Reformation* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1976), 197.

⁶ Larner, *Enemies of God*, 197; Macfarlane, 160; Richard Kieckhefer, *European Witch Trials* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 145; Russell Zguta, "Witchcraft Trials in Seventeenth-Century Russia," *American Historical Review* 82, no. 2 (1977): 1189.

⁷ Rossell Hope Robbins, Introduction to *Catalog of the Witchcraft Collection in Cornell University Library* (Milwood, N.Y.: KTO Press, 1978), xxxiv; H. C. Erik Midelfort, "Heartland of the Witchcraze: Central and Northern Europe," *History Today* (February 1981): 27–31, esp. 28.

concluded that "this was to be expected." Implying that by nature women would be suspected of witchcraft, Notestein left it at that.⁸

Hansen's insights had no further influence on research for the next half century. While the issue of gender virtually dropped out of the discussions, what remained was a disturbing glimpse of how historians saw women in history.⁹ L'Estrange Ewen's first analysis of the English Home Counties trials, for example, provided plenty of information about misogyny in the courts, but he did not mention women as a category at all. Four years later, however, while publishing further trial documentation, he briefly stated his thoughts about the victims:

That many of the condemned women, although innocent of witchcraft, were really undesirable neighbours cannot be doubted. Mental institutes not being features of the social life, numbers of melancholics were at large, others again, mentally sound, ranked as thieves, cozeners, whores, blasphemers, blackmailers, abortionists, perhaps even poisoners. Mentally degraded, they allowed vermin and domestic animals to suck or lick their blood, although many of such recorded practices can have been nothing more than misunderstanding or hallucination.¹⁰

Not only condescending to the victims, Ewen went on to libel them:

At heart they were murderers, and morally as guilty as cutthroat or poisoner. But their confessions are not greatly to be relied upon, obtained as they were by deceit and duress, and, it may be supposed, sometimes coloured by vanity.¹¹

⁸ Joseph Hansen, *Zauberwahn, Inquisition und Hexenprozess im Mittelalter* (Munich: 1900) and *Quellen und Untersuchungen zur Geschichte des Hexenwahns . . .* (Bonn, 1901), 416–44. Wallace Notestein, *History of Witchcraft in England* (1911: reprint, New York: Crowell Co., 1968), 114–15.

⁹ French witchcraft studies of this period were silent about the issue of gender: Francis Bavoux, *La sorcellerie au pays de Quingey* (Besançon: Éditions Servir, 1947), *La sorcellerie en Franche-Comté* (Monaco: Editions du Rocher, 1954), *Hantises et diableries dans la terre abbatiale de Luxeuil d'un procès d'Inquisition, 1529 . . . et 1628–30* (Monaco: Editions du Rocher 1956); Etienne Delcambre, *Le concept de la sorcellerie dans le duchy de Lorraine*, 3 vols. (Nancy: Société d'Archéologie Lorraine 1948–51); Robert Mandrou, *Magistrats et Sorciers en France au XVIIe siècle* (Paris: Libraire Plon, 1968); Henri Hiegel, *Le Bailliage d'Allemagne de 1600 à 1632* (Sarreguemines: M. Pierron, 1961).

German studies also neglected gender: Kurt Baschwitz, *Hexen und Hexenprozesse: Die Geschichte eines Massenwahns*, 2nd edition (Munich: Rütten & Loening, 1963). The persecutions were much less severe south of the Alps and Pyrenees, because there the church courts kept control of these cases. For Italy, see Carlo Ginzburg, *The Night Battles: Witchcraft and Agrarian Cults in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, trans. John and Anne Tedeschi (New York: Penguin Books, 1985). For Spain, see Gustav Henningsen, *Witches' Advocate: Basque Witchcraft and the Spanish Inquisition* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1980).

¹⁰ C. L'Estrange Ewen, ed., *Witch Hunting and Witch Trials: Indictments for Witchcraft from the Records of 1,373 Assizes Held for the Home Circuit, 1559–1736* (New York: Dial Press, 1929); the quotation is from his *Witchcraft and Demonianism* (London: Heath, Cranton, 1933), 68.

¹¹ Ewen, *Witchcraft and Demonianism*, 68.

Although he conceded that "occasionally the witches did possess abnormal power," he had little awareness of the positive role they had filled in pre-modern society as healers and diviners; instead, he perpetuated the worst of the "hag" stereotype about these women.

In disparaging the very nature of women, writers such as Ewen had of course a long tradition to draw on. In the 1480s when Kramer and Sprenger, authors of the witch-hunters' manual, *Malleus Maleficarum*, described women as liars, unfaithful, immoderate, sexually insatiable, and downright evil, they quoted at length from biblical, classical, and medieval sources.¹² As Barbara Walker observes, "From Terrible Crone to castrating witch was not a large step. . . . She had many guises: she-demon, witch, sorceress, succubus, Hag."¹³ The witch-hunters of the sixteenth century had models of castrating, death-dealing female types with which to demonize their own women, and many twentieth-century historiographers of the witch-craze have not demythologized their own attitudes toward the women they write about.

In the same category is Julio Caro Baroja's brief mention, at the end of his 1965 book on Basque witchcraft, of the sick, "slightly mad, weird" old women who are his typical witches.¹⁴ Seeing them as pathetic outsiders "with an overdeveloped sense of their own importance," he concluded that "a woman usually becomes a witch after the initial failure of her life as a woman, after frustrated or illegitimate love affairs have left her with a sense of impotence or disgrace," and he regretted that "those unfortunate sick people" were put to death because their type of neurosis was not understood. I conclude from this that it is just as well that most historians did not attempt a gender analysis before we had the insights of women's history to guide us.

The 1967 essay which launched the recent revival of witchcraft studies, H. R. Trevor-Roper's "European Witch-Craze of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries," while utterly deficient in gender analysis, sheds some light on how historians were missing the point. While making an important analysis of how social tension was generated "by unassimilable social groups," he had a logical opening to discuss women and why some of them were seen as unassimilable. But he could not seem to think of "women" as a group, as a societal category. Sixty pages later, at the end of the essay, he finally identified the victims, calling them "hysterical women in a harsh rural world or in artificial communities—in ill-regulated nunneries . . . or in special regions like the Pays de Labourd, where . . . the fishermen's wives

¹² Heinrich Kramer and James Sprenger, *Malleus Maleficarum* (1486), trans. Montague Summers (1928; reprint, New York: Dover Publications, 1971).

¹³ Barbara G. Walker, *The Crone: Woman of Age, Wisdom and Power* (New York: Harper & Row, 1985), chap. 4, esp. 87, 95. Walker is especially useful in explaining the demonizing of older women.

¹⁴ Julio Caro Baroja, *The World of the Witches*, trans. O. Glendinning (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), 254–57.

were left deserted for months.”¹⁵ Again, we find the theory of the sexually deprived female. But for most of his essay, the victims have no identity. Trevor-Roper understood the dynamics of the medieval persecution of heretics, Jews, and Moors, and realized that the witch-craze was also a persecution of “unassimilable” groups—but thinking of women as either hysterical or as sex-starved individuals, he could not draw any conclusions about them as a group.

Trevor-Roper’s controversial essay inspired a series of archival studies of witch trials, written in order to refute him but all showing their debt to him nonetheless. Alan Macfarlane’s careful analysis of the Essex trials confirmed that 92 percent of the victims there were women, an extraordinarily high percentage, but he concluded that “there is no evidence that hostility between the sexes lay behind their prosecutions.” Keith Thomas in his influential study of English folk religion concurred with Macfarlane. While denying that either misogyny or psychological factors mattered, he made the useful point that economic and social considerations are valid, because women “were the most dependent members of the community, and thus the most vulnerable to accusation.”¹⁶ He also pointed out that charges of female sexual irregularities—illegitimacy, promiscuity, sexual voracity—figured in the trials, but he seemed not to realize that these are the stuff of which misogyny is made.

Both Macfarlane and Thomas said that the question of why women are singled out must be looked into—but neither of them did so. Succeeding works documented a vast amount of woman-hatred, making it all the more surprising that scholars still did not see gender as the central issue. Erik Midelfort’s research on southwestern Germany is a case in point. While analyzing massive witch panics such as Wiesensteig where sixty-three women were burned to death, and Quedlinburg, where 133 witches, mostly female, were executed in one day, Midelfort suggested that “women seemed . . . to provoke somehow an intense misogyny at times” and asked that we study “why that group *attracted to itself* the scapegoating mechanism.”¹⁷

¹⁵ “The European Witch-Craze of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries,” first published in *Encounter*, May and June 1967, then in Trevor-Roper, *Religion, Reformation, and Social Change* (London: Macmillan and Co., Ltd., 1967), 90–192; reprinted in *The European Witch-Craze of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries, and Other Essays* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1969), 90–192, esp. 126–28, 176–78, and 190–92.

¹⁶ Macfarlane, 160; Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (New York: Scribners, 1971), 568–69.

¹⁷ H. C. Erik Midelfort, *Witch Hunting in Southwestern Germany, 1562–1684: The Social and Intellectual Foundations* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1972), 184 (emphasis added); cf. 86–90, 183–84. Another historian whose material disproves his own rejection of patriarchal tensions, John Demos, in his study of New England witchcraft, *Entertaining Satan: Witchcraft and the Culture of Early New England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 62–64, asks if witch accusations were actual, as well as symbolic, ways of holding women down, and concludes not. Although he describes colonial witches

Not content with blaming the victims, Midelfort went on to deny that there had been a particular tradition of misogyny in the sixteenth century. Complaining that this alleged tradition had been documented "only in literary sources," he overlooked the fact that his own material was primary proof for it.

By this time in the development of witchcraft studies, a pattern of denial is clear. Historians were denying that misogyny and patriarchy are valid historical categories and were refusing to treat women as a recognizable historical group. Reading these works is like reading accounts of the Nazi holocaust in which everyone agrees that the majority of victims were Jewish, but no one mentions anti-Semitism or the history of violent persecution against Jews, implying that it was "natural" for Jews to be victims. Without mention of a tradition of oppression of women, the implication for the sixteenth century is that of course women would be attacked—and that it must somehow have been their fault. This is what historians conclude when they have no awareness of traditional misogyny or traditional oppression of women.

In 1948 in the work of the researcher of northern French witchcraft, Emile Brouette, misogyny was finally related again to the persecutions. Even if one believes that it is possible to be antifeminist without burning witches, he maintained, still it is theologically only one step from scorning a woman to believing that she is a servant of the devil. This perception was rejected by Brouette's successor there in witchcraft studies, Fr. Pierre Villette, who insisted that it was "psychologie féminine" and that alone which explained the large numbers of female victims; in other words, women do threaten men and drive them to attack. Villette even excused the virulent misogyny of the authors of the *Malleus Maleficarum*, in light of this frightening "female psychology."¹⁸

Working twenty years later in the same northern French area as Villette had covered in the 1950s, Robert Muchembled drew quite different conclusions. Ascribing the preponderance of female victims (82 percent) partly

as typically assertive and aggressive "beyond what the culture deemed proper," and although he documents many stormy Puritan marriages, he is convinced that there was no general conflict between the sexes. I suggest that he does not understand the limits on how a woman may rebel in a patriarchal society. Further, he finds the fact that women often accused women of witchcraft to rule out the possibility of misogyny as a factor, a point that I address below.

¹⁸ Emile Brouette, "La sorcellerie dans le Comté de Namur au début de l'époque moderne (1509-1646)," *Annales de la Société archéologique de Namur* 47 (1953-54): 354-55. "Si l'on déclare qu'on peut être antiféministe sans nécessairement brûler les sorcières, il faut bien reconnaître qu'il n'y a théologiquement qu'un pas entre le mépris de la femme et l'affirmation que celle-ci est l'intermédiaire entre l'homme et le diable." Pierre Villette, *La sorcellerie et sa répression dans le Nord de la France* (Paris: La Pensée Universelle, 1976), 148-49.

to traditional misogyny, literary as well as theological, lay as well as clerical, Muchembled moved the argument along by tying female oppression to the general sexual repression of the two Reformations. His proofs were the increased punishment for prenuptial pregnancy, bastardy, and adultery, with heavier penalties against women than men. He also documented the intrusion of the state into village life, which brought elite fantasies about witches and an impersonal bureaucratic form of justice that seriously disturbed traditional village relationships. As society became more repressive, the charges against alleged witches became wilder: while some of the accused had had reputations for lasciviousness, even women with good names were now accused of having sex with the devil or keeping a demon lover. Muchembled was right to broaden the scope and to see that the witch-hunt involved persecuting women for their sexuality.¹⁹

The years after 1972, when Midelfort's work was published, show a change in scholars' interpretations of this evidence, a change which must be credited to the nascent movement for women's history. Midelfort himself took a different position nine years later, claiming that "one cannot begin to understand the European witch-hunt without recognizing that it displayed a burst of misogyny without parallel in Western history," and he even suggested that future research should investigate the fantasies of the bishops and university professors who presided over the German trials.²⁰ This indicates a more sympathetic approach, one perhaps influenced by the work in women's history accomplished in the intervening decade.

In a general interpretation of early witchcraft up to 1500, Jeffrey Burton Russell made a major attempt to place women at the center of the problem.²¹ Russell understood one role of medieval women, namely their leadership in heretical groups; he appreciated the extent to which medieval heretical groups appealed to women by offering women roles from which they were excluded by the church. But he failed to see that folk religion (folk magic, witchcraft) was another valid alternative for women. Throughout, he accepted the demonologists' definitions of witchcraft, calling it a "violent form" of "feminine discontent" involving "criminal" activity. Because he insisted on associating witchcraft primarily with heresy, rather than with folk religion, and saw it as ultimately subversive, he was forced to conclude that the alleged witch engaged in violent, even criminal, activity, leaving the issue not far from the "woman as hag" position. In a more recent work, Russell connects suspected women with hags even more strongly: ". . . in Christian

¹⁹ Robert Muchembled, *La sorcière au village* (Paris: éditions Juillard-Gallimard, 1979), 148–49; "The Witches of the Cambrésis: The Acculturation of the World in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries," in *Religion and the People*, ed. James Obelkovich (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1978).

²⁰ Midelfort, "Heartland of the Witchcraze," 27–31, esp. 28, 30.

²¹ Jeffrey B. Russell, *Witchcraft in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1972), 78–81, 145–46, 183, 201–202, and esp. 279–84.

Europe, the hag image was projected upon human beings. The European witch, then, must be understood not just as a sorceress, but as the incarnation of the hag. She is a totally evil and depraved person under the domination and command of Satan."²²

Two new comprehensive studies that cover the entire witch-hunting period, go further in searching for gender factors. In Joseph Klaits's 1985 book, misogyny is dissected as part of theology, medical attitudes, law, art, ageism, and poverty. Woman-hatred is identified in familial attitudes and in sexual exploitation. That Klaits devotes half a chapter to "sexual politics," a discussion he placed early in the book, shows that he understands the institutional nature of the problem—that the social order felt threatened by nonconformist women, felt that church and family, and even the state, were threatened. And he is one of the few (Mucheblend is another) who has analyzed the sadistic impulse in the witch-hunt.²³

But Klaits sees not women but the Reformation (meaning both Protestant and Catholic) as the main factor in the persecutions, blaming both the religious upheaval and, chiefly, the antisexual reformism of the Reformation period for the extremes of the witch-craze, and in doing so he shifts the focus away from women. Women, after all, were not the main actors in the Reformation drama, so Klaits brings us back to looking at what men did. It matters little to witchcraft studies whether one explains witchcraft by what lawyers, judges, doctors, theologians, bishops or Reformers did—all of these explanations miss the central point, because all pull the focus away from the victims, from the women themselves. And Klaits states categorically that women are not the central issue.²⁴ Even his emphasis on them as sexual objects, true though it is to the trial material, has the effect of showing us the victims from the outside.

Brian Levack's study, intended like Klaits's to be used as a textbook, affirms at one point that witchcraft was sex related, and discusses the many ways in which women were more vulnerable than men to these charges.²⁵ But Levack seldom mentions gender in the rest of his book.

A model of gender analysis finally appeared in 1976, E. William

²² Russell, *A History of Witchcraft: Sorcerers, Heretics, and Pagans* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1980), 118. An example of Russell's confusion about women's roles in history: having admitted that the idealization of woman in the cult of the Virgin Mary had in fact "created the shadow image of the hag," Russell nevertheless laments the current decline of Mary's cult, which he sees as a step backwards for Christianity.

²³ Joseph Klaits, *Servants of Satan: The Age of the Witch Hunts* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), chap. 3: 48–75, 94–103.

²⁴ Klaits, comments at the American Historical Association panel on "Witches as Poisoners," New York, Dec. 28, 1985.

²⁵ Brian P. Levack, *The Witch-Hunt in Early Modern Europe* (London & New York: Longman, 1987), chap. 5, esp. 124–139.

Monter's study of the witch-craze in the Swiss-French borderlands.²⁶ Affirming the widespread use of black and white magic in preindustrial Europe, he is sympathetic to women's use of magic as a compensation for their legal and economic disadvantages. He lays their persecution to their gender and maintains unequivocally that sex was the crucial factor, more important than poverty, age, or any other. Defining misogyny as more than the usual woman-hatred in family and in theology, Monter adds the important observation that witch prosecutions rose and fell with legal action against two other sex-linked crimes: infanticide and sodomy. Infanticide was resorted to almost entirely by single women, and both infanticide and sodomy were seen by sixteenth-century society as "unnatural." Since witchcraft was seen as "unnatural," sinful, and a single woman's crime, it is not surprising that the sixteenth century became "interested in executing women as witches." Concluding that "women were the specially designated victims," that "witchcraft, as the demonologists had repeatedly insisted, was sex-linked," Monter set the stage for the type of gender analysis which must be done on the witchcraft materials, but he did not follow through on these insights.²⁷

The late Scottish sociologist Christina Larner produced the most thorough gender investigation to date.²⁸ Using her triple skills in sociology, history, and religion, Larner accepted the positive use of witchcraft by poor village females ("women embracing witchcraft"), saw the persecutions as motivated by a desire to control independent-minded (and -mouthed) women, and made male hatred of the female body into a real, believable factor in the craze. One expects her to conclude that gender is the central issue, and she does affirm that "all women were potential witches," that "the witch hunt was part of the sex war," and that "witch-hunting is woman-hunting." And yet she wasn't satisfied with these formulations, and repeatedly modified them: "the reasons why witches were hunted are not directly related to their being women, but to their being thought evil"; "the crime of witchcraft, while sex-related, was not sex specific"; the hunt was "no more a persecution of women than the prosecution of killers was a persecution of men." Finally concluding, that "witch-hunting is *not* woman-hunting," Larner maintained that at any rate the questions raised by the issue of

²⁶ Monter, *Witchcraft in France and Switzerland*, 118–24, 136–41. See also Monter's article, "Pedestal and Stake: Courtly Love and Witchcraft," in *Becoming Visible: Women in European History*, ed. Renate Bridenthal and Claudia Koonz (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1977). Another study that takes gender analysis seriously is Carol F. Karlsen's *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman: Witchcraft in Colonial New England* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1987). I regret that it was not published in time to be discussed in this article.

²⁷ Monter, *Witchcraft*, 196–98.

²⁸ Larner, *Enemies of God*, chap. 8, and 51–2, 197. See also Larner's essay "Witchcraft Past and Present," in *Witchcraft and Religion: The Politics of Popular Belief*, edited and with a foreword by Alan Macfarlane (London: Basil Blackwell, 1984), 79–91, esp. 84–88.

woman-hunting were too narrow. Recommending instead that we ask broader, presumably more important questions of the craze, questions about Christianity as a political ideology, about crises in law and order—that is, the more political questions—she turned away from the theory of persecution by gender, which she more than anyone had validated.²⁹

Once again women as a gender group are seen not to matter and the questions of women's history are considered too narrow. Larner's conclusions are the most disappointing of all, for she had a keen awareness of how the oppression of women works in history (see the epigraph to this article). She doesn't make clear why one must forego questions about woman-hunting in order to work on the political issues, nor does she see that the woman-hunting questions *are* political. Material that shows women as "threatening to patriarchal order," or religion as "relentlessly patriarchal" is neither narrow nor apolitical.

To sum up: the problems one faces in studying witchcraft as a persecution by gender are many. First one must acknowledge that folk healers and diviners were useful, sought-after members of society, pre-1500. Although they were re-perceived after that as suspect, even as evil, by elite groups, and eventually by villagers as well, the historian has no grounds to caricature them as hags. Second the distinction between folk religious practices and witchcraft accusations must be observed. The latter were the grotesque distortions made by the European elite of the actual, useful functions of folk healers and counsellors, made in order to discredit them. Finally, one must distinguish between sex and gender. Despite the emphasis on female sexuality in the trial records and procedures, the historian is ill advised to interpret the victims, no matter how sympathetically, as sex objects. Women were more than sex objects in sixteenth-century society; they served as midwives, healers, counsellors, farmers, alewives, spinners, domestic servants, assistants to their husbands in craft work, etc., and their productive, as well as reproductive, roles shaped how they were seen.³⁰ Only when the historian distinguishes between gender roles and sexuality can we properly evaluate why women were perceived as a threat.

A lack of understanding of patriarchy as a historical category and of how it functions in society is another weak point in most of the works cited here. Without this understanding one doesn't see that women were accused primarily by men, tried by male juries, searched by male prickers, sentenced by male judges, tortured by male jailers, burned to death by male executioners—while being prayed over by male pastors. The patriarchal system also explains why many women accused other females: if a woman displeased

²⁹ Larner, *Enemies*, 92, 197; "Witchcraft Past and Present," 85–87.

³⁰ Barbara A. Hanawalt, ed., *Women and Work in Preindustrial Europe* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986) and Lindsey Charles and Lorna Duffin, eds. *Women and Work in Preindustrial England* (London: Croom Helm, 1985).

or threatened the men of her community, she would also be seen as dangerous by the women who depended on or identified with those men. The internalization of “who is not acceptable” goes even deeper than that: women—and other oppressed groups—sometimes try to outdo their oppressors in scorning persons perceived as outsiders, in hope of being accepted, or tolerated, themselves. In the witchcraft trials, the poor attacked those even poorer; and poor women attacked those women even further out of power than they.

How misogyny, the hatred of women, in addition to patriarchy, the rule over women, caused females to be singled out, needs to be made clear. It was antiwoman theology that turned the attention of the inquisitional courts to women *as women*, a process that was quickly taken up by secular courts as early as c. 1400. This was not caused by something innately evil about women, nor any change in their nature; the cause was the specific connection that Dominican inquisitors and theologians (de Savigliano, Nider, Jacquier, Kramer, Sprenger) made between witchcraft and women, based on ancient Christian beliefs about the defective, evil nature of women. When historians deal with this tradition of misogyny, rather than blaming the victim for somehow “attracting” hatred, then the persecutions can be understood. Both patriarchy and misogyny are valid, and in this case essential, historical factors.³¹

Furthermore, this is not a one-issue topic. A number of false leads have been followed, and the concept of persecution by gender has been repeatedly denied, in order to narrow down the analysis to some one key factor: the Reformation(s), community tensions, proto-capitalist agriculture, more abstract forms of justice, demographic change (more single women), plague, etc. While all of the above are factors, none of them is *the* factor. I suggest that we stop looking for a central, unifying explanation for this very complex, messy, rich phenomenon. Witchcraft, far from being odd, esoteric, or disgusting, turns out to be a capital topic for studying the transition from medieval to early modern society. By forcing the historian to focus on women’s lives and how they were changed and limited by the greater power of the seventeenth-century churches and states, the witchcraft phenomenon illuminates the racism and imperialism that Europeans were beginning to export around the world. What European men and women did to the people whom they colonized, European men first did to European women. Traditional patriarchal structures and misogynistic attitudes were heightened by new legal, religious, and political arrangements. Women’s lives *were* changed; some of their old roles were challenged, and as they resisted, they were made the new scapegoats for an expanding but insecure society.³²

³¹ Both of these factors are addressed by Rosemary Ruether in *New Woman, New Earth: Sexist Ideologies and Human Liberation* (New York: Seabury, 1975), chap. 4 and Mary Daly, *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978), chap. 6.

³² What Elizabeth Fox-Genovese claims for American women’s religious history is

This dynamic history cannot be reduced to a central cause. It must be dealt with as multifaceted, as filled with internal change and contradiction. The thread that runs through it, the only constant, is the gender of the victims. It is from the beginning, and becomes even more emphatically, a persecution of women, which sheds light on the history of persecution, criminality, poverty, religious teaching, the family, and how men and women relate to each other.

equally true for European: that in moving beyond what patriarchal religion did to women and showing how women used religion to express their own values, women's history sheds light on "momentous changes in our society's view of nature and proper sanctions of morality, as well as the place of spirituality in our collective life. The changes cannot be understood without close attention to the role of gender." Essay review of Rosemary Ruether and Rosemary Keller, eds., *Women and Religion in America*, vols. 1 and 2, in *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 53, no. 3 (1985): 471.

INTERNATIONAL TRENDS:
THE WITCH "SHE" / THE HISTORIAN "HE":
*Gender and the Historiography of the European
Witch-Hunts*

Elspeth Whitney

The European witch-hunt of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries is one of those events, like the decline and fall of the Roman Empire, which is so complex and resonant that its historiography has almost become a field in itself. Once dismissed as an inexplicable outbreak of mass hysteria unworthy of serious scholarly attention, the witch-hunt is now more often seen as a central event in the formation of early modern Europe which illuminates larger social and cultural issues. Since Hugh Trevor-Roper inaugurated contemporary scholarship on the subject in 1967, the hunt has come to provide for many scholars a useful focus for analysis of, among other things, the shifting interactions of high and popular culture, the emergence of the modern state or a more "individualistic" ethos, the expansion of bureaucratic elites and the impact of newly empowered "experts," the magistrate and the priest, on village life. Curiously, however, there has been relatively little attention paid as yet to exploring the relationship between the witch-hunts and issues relating to gender, in particular the question of why witches were women. Although discussions of this topic have recently (since the late 1980s) become more common, this area of inquiry and others related to gender and the hunts remain surprisingly undeveloped. In the present essay I would like to examine the current state of scholarship on gender and the hunts and suggest some directions for further work.

Gender is clearly central in some way to the witch-hunts. That the vast majority of witches were women has been a commonplace of modern research as much as it was to sixteenth- and seventeenth-century treatises on demonology. Whether or not we wish to characterize witch-hunting simply as "woman-hunting," or to emphasize that accused witches were most often a particular *type* of woman, it remains clear that the witch was seen as inverting not only the natural order in general but specifically the image of the "good woman." Yet the questions "why were witches women?" or its converse, "why were women witches?" have received short shrift among historians of the European witch hunts.¹ While virtually every other aspect of the hunts has been debated, the central element that witches were believed to be women, has remained, for most scholars,

unproblematic. Explicitly or implicitly it is assumed that a sort of timeless, "natural" misogyny present in Western culture can adequately explain why the collective image of the witch was that of an ill-tempered, older woman. Conversely, it is argued that misogyny has been so permanent a characteristic of Western culture that it cannot be considered the cause of so specific an event as the witch-hunts. Yet leaving the question there in fact does little to explain why women were attacked in this way at this time. Nor does it help to illuminate the specific nature of witch beliefs and witch practices, even paradoxically the oft-repeated observation that some witches were male.

The extent to which gender has "fallen out" as a category of analysis among the majority of historians of the witch-hunts is quite startling. Despite the use of sophisticated methodologies borrowed from anthropology, sociology, and folkloric studies, the main lines of interpretation of the hunts have been constructed largely outside of work in women's history or gender studies. It is unlikely today to find such egregious stereotypical remarks as that of Trevor-Roper, who in 1967 described folk witch beliefs as "the mental rubbish of peasant credulity and feminine hysteria," or Julio Caro Baroja's suggestion that "a woman usually becomes a witch after the initial failure of her life as a woman, after frustrated or illegitimate love affairs have left her with a sense of impotence or disgrace."² Nevertheless, the bulk of published research on the European hunts at the present time either ignores gender or, even while taking note of the relevance of women's history and feminist analysis, tends to minimize its importance.

The absence of a genuine gender analysis in "mainstream" witch hunts studies is the more surprising in that much of this work in other ways reflects the increasing emphasis of historians on history "from below." One of the first areas to receive attention in the early 1970s, for example, was the disentanglement of folk beliefs from the more readily accessible and known beliefs of the political and cultural elite and the ways in which witch-beliefs and accusations functioned on the village level. Keith Thomas and Alan Macfarlane early suggested that witch accusations served as a channeling mechanism for economic stresses, in particular the erosion of traditional charitable practices within the village and the consequent dislocation of attitudes toward the poorest and most marginal members of the community.³ Neither, however, considered that the tensions between "elite" and "popular" culture might also reflect a dynamic between a male-dominated official culture and a female-dominated family and folk culture; instead, village conflicts were considered exclusively from the perspective of class and social stratification. Keith Thomas, for example, claims without further discussion that witches were often

women, especially widows, not because the trials represented a "war between the sexes," but because of women's economic dependence caused by decline in customary manorial support of the elderly.⁴ Similarly, Alan Macfarlane notes that witches were usually women but concludes that "there[does not] seem to have been any marked sexual element in Essex witchcraft" because women were also more slightly likely to be victims.⁵ Other historians have similarly painted a "gender-neutral" picture of witch beliefs and witch-hunting or simply ignored gender altogether. Richard Kieckhefer, whose work did much to disentangle popular and elite notions of witchcraft, takes little note of gender beyond saying that roughly two-thirds of the accused during the period from 1300 to 1500 were women.⁶ Gustav Henningsen's monumental and otherwise sensitive study of Basque witchcraft lists "wizards" but not "women" in the index and analyzes his data by age but not by sex. He characterizes two groups of people as typically accused of being witches—first, the weakest members of the community, including beggars, cripples, widows, the very old and orphans, and second, "those who had rejected the moral order of society: fawning, envious, thieving, aggressive, spiteful, promiscuous and odd people; in fact, all who were in any way unattractive," while taking no note of the gender implications of his chosen adjectives.⁷ Norman Cohn similarly notes without comment that peasants who almost always accused women, rather than men, of *maleficia* were simply following the "age-old, indeed archetypal" image of the witch as female, singling out individual women because they were old, ugly, or bad-tempered.⁸

Examples could be multiplied. The introduction to *Witchcraft in Europe 1100-1700: A Documentary History*, edited by Alan Kors and Edward Peters and first published in 1972, surveys the "problem of witchcraft" without discussing why the majority of witches were women.⁹ Richard A. Horsely in "Who Were the Witches? The Social Roles of the Accused in the European Witch Trials," again focuses on class rather than gender as decisive in the dynamics of the witch-hunts and accepts the categorization of the "wise woman" as deviant without question.¹⁰

Even when mainstream historians of the hunts have made a point of the fact that most accused witches were women, they have tended to undercut this observation by an underlying ambivalence. Erik Midelfort's work, for example, focused on the dynamics of the trials as spreading circles of "panics," catching up both magistrates and the local populace in a frenzy of denunciations. He makes an important observation by showing that in the trials he studied, individuals outside the stereotype of the "old hag" as witch (that is, men, young women, children, and the wealthy) were only accused during the largest of the hunts in which the dynamics of panic took on their own inner momentum.¹¹ He also insightfully looks

to demographic change as a possible factor in the witch-hunts, citing the presence of relatively large numbers of unmarried women as a plausible explanation of the witch-hunts. Yet he somewhat lamely concludes that "women seemed also to provoke somehow an intense misogyny at times" and argues that women attracted to themselves the scapegoating mechanism which resulted in their widespread executions.¹² Similarly, G. R. Quaife, who devotes two chapters to the topic of "gender, sex and misogyny" in his survey of the hunts, suggests that gender was not the most important element in the witch-hunts, or, perhaps, not a factor at all: "Misogyny was the negative side of man's attitude to women and in most cases did not dominate."¹³ Older women rather were accused of witchcraft because of their economic vulnerability and because they were liable to senility, depression, or both.¹⁴

Other scholars have taken the question of gender and the hunts more seriously but largely failed to pursue the issue in depth. E. William Monter as early as 1972 suggested that more attention be paid to the question of why witches were women.¹⁵ In his later book, *Witchcraft in France and Switzerland* (1976), he argued that witchcraft accusations could best be understood as projections of patriarchal social fears onto atypical women, that is, those who lived apart from the direct male control of husbands or fathers and were therefore defenseless, isolated, and unable to revenge themselves by the more normal means of physical violence or recourse to law courts.¹⁶ He also proposed a link between the witch trials and increased prosecution of young, single women for infanticide in the early modern period but had little to suggest about why this should be so.¹⁷

Christina Lerner pushed the analysis of gender as a factor in the hunts considerably further but also stopped short of making gender a central element in her analysis. Lerner, one of the prime architects of the view that witch-hunting was intimately linked to the rise of the modern nation-state, argued persuasively that the development of rival and mutually exclusive forms of Christianity meant that in the period of witch-hunting Christianity became a political ideology in a new way: religious deviance became the equivalent of treason and the prosecution of witches, whose pact with the Devil therefore represented the ultimate betrayal, became in Lerner's words, "a peculiarly economical way of attacking deviance."¹⁸ Among scholars of the hunts, Lerner was the first to provide at least a partial theoretical framework drawn from the insights of women's history to a consideration of gender. She points out, for example, that the witch-hunts, as well as early modern infanticide trials, constituted the first European criminalization of women and the fact that some women accused others only confirms the impression that the stereotype of the witch worked to

reinforce patriarchal norms of femininity. Yet Lerner, having raised the question of whether witch-hunting was women-hunting, concludes that it was not and does not explore links between gender, power, and political authority.¹⁹

Following Lerner's general line of approach, Robert Muchembled has characterized witch-hunting as not so much the product of religious beliefs on either the part of the accused or the accusers, as an aspect of a political movement tied to the increasing centralization and bureaucratization of the modern state-system. Muchembled suggests, for example, that "witch-hunting . . . is only one aspect of the penetration and opening-up of the countryside. The witch gives way to the priest, and private vengeance to public order; the authorities invade the heart of the village."²⁰ Muchembled's "acculturation model," which suggests that some local inhabitants of the village found the new standards of behavior a useful tool against others in the community, offers the advantage of suggesting a link between the state-initiated witch trials and accusations of witchcraft by neighbors against neighbors.²¹ Muchembled, who sees the witch-hunts in France as part of a much wider social movement to substitute official law and order for traditional methods of social control, including private vengeance and witch beliefs, suggests that the crux of women's involvement lies in their roles as transmitters of popular culture. Women, he argues, were the exact equivalent in their own culture as the demonologists and judges were in theirs: they brought up children and educated them in popular culture, the culture the elites were now trying to eradicate. Although the catalyst for the hunts was rooted in economic changes, especially increasing social and economic differentiation within the village community itself, the hunts did express a sadistic and virulent "antifeminism" on the part of male magistrates and other authorities.²² Yet the issue of how ideas about gender interacted with contemporary approaches to public order has remained to date marginal in Muchembled's work.

It is perhaps arguable that mainstream research done in the 1970s and early 1980s when women's history was still largely unknown territory would not be expected to incorporate gender into historical analysis. Yet a number of works published in the late 1980s and even 1990s when research on gender issues and early modern women was widely available do not do much better. Brian Levack's survey, *The Witch-Hunt in Early Modern Europe* (1987), for example, devotes several pages to sex and age as factors in determining who was accused of witchcraft, pointing to both the vulnerability of women, especially old women, as well as to "male anxiety" about the supposed sexually predatory nature of mature woman.²³ This material, however, is not integrated into the rest of his study, so that

possible changes in the status and condition of woman or changes in attitudes toward them are not included in discussion of possible factors influencing either the initiation or cessation of the hunts. Wolfgang Behringer, while citing "collective mentalities" as an important aspect of the witch-hunts, has nothing to say about gender beyond a brief suggestion that the image of the Virgin, the "immaculate symbol of fertility," served in some areas of Catholic Bavaria as a counter-symbol to the witch.²⁴ Again, despite its title, Clive Holmes's "Women: Witnesses and Witches" focuses more on the workings of the legal system and the impact of elite theological formulations than on the female witnesses against witches themselves and does little to explain the gender dynamics behind the testimony of women against women.²⁵

Another case in point is an important collection of articles on witchcraft published in 1990 by Oxford titled *Early Modern European Witchcraft: Centres and Peripheries*. It includes eighteen articles by many of the most important historians of the hunts. Only four deal even briefly with issues of gender beyond noting the sex of the accused and none make gender a central focus of discussion.²⁶ Interestingly, there is a tendency in this volume as elsewhere to use the generic male pronoun for everyone, that is, for the historian in the abstract, for the reader, the accusers, and the victims of witchcraft, except in the case of the witches themselves for whom the generic female pronoun is used.²⁷ Most tellingly, even the few authors who do consider gender rarely cite or otherwise make use of research in medieval or early modern women's history. Bengt Ankarloo, for example, writing on the seventeenth-century hunts in Sweden takes note in his conclusion that since Swedish witches typically were women, "an interpretation in terms of a conflict between the sexes seems highly appropriate."²⁸ This idea, he remarks, raises the "interesting and relevant" question whether in the early modern centuries there were any significant changes in the status and cultural role of European women, apparently unaware that this very question has been energetically addressed for more than two decades by historians of European women's history. In the brief discussion that follows, Ankarloo cites only Christina Lerner.²⁹

Even historians whom one might expect to show some awareness of women's history and its impact sometimes do not. Carlo Ginzburg, for example, who has argued forcefully for placing the persecuted as well as the persecutors at the center of the historian's attention, surprisingly shows little interest in exploring issues of gender. Beginning with *Nightbattles: Witchcraft and Agrarian Cult in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* and most recently with *Ecstasies: Deciphering the Witches Sabbath*, Ginzburg has brilliantly brought to light evidence of a still vital pre-Christian folk religion with its roots in an age-old pan-European shamanism

and blurred what had been perhaps overly-rigid distinctions between so-called "high" and "low" culture.³⁰ Yet, despite a suggestive and self-critical footnote in *Ecstasies* in which he says "overlooking the ecstatic specializations that distinguished male and female *benandanti* seems to me in retrospect a case of sex-blindness," he does not remedy this blindness in his later book.³¹ Although gender would seem to be central to the symbolic content of folk motifs, Ginzburg does not consider his material from this perspective in any systematic way. Despite an intriguing remark made in passing near the end of his book that women's marginality "reflected in a more or less obscure manner the perception of a proximity between those who generate life and the formless world of the dead and the non-born,"³² he tends to elide the issue of gender—first by consistently referring to witches as "male and female," or "men and women" and further by suggesting that the sex of the witch doesn't much matter.³³ Ecstatic experiences, predominantly female, tied to processions of the dead; ecstatic experiences, predominantly male, tied to nocturnal battles for the fertility of the fields; and male rituals tied to both, are all "isomorphic."³⁴ He alludes to the problem of how a folkloric tradition of male as well as female shamans was transformed into the European image of the witch as typically female only in a brief aside. Acknowledging that it was more common for witches to be female, he suggests first that the percentage of women witches varied greatly from place to place (implying it is often less than one might think), and secondly that to explain this phenomenon by misogyny would be not only simplistic but tautological.³⁵

The disavowal of "misogyny" as an important element in the hunts also shows up in two very recent articles (the products of a 1990 conference on French history) by Stuart Clarke and Robin Briggs, both scholars with a track record in mainstream research on the hunts. Both articles are among the small minority of works on the hunts by non-feminist historians which put the question of gender at the center. Both begin with the initial stance that the question of why witches were women should be taken seriously.³⁶ Yet each ultimately concludes that the femaleness of witchcraft was in the end incidental to the hunts. Stuart Clark, for example, in "The 'Gendering' of Witchcraft in French Demonology: Misogyny or Polarity?" argues that witches were accused not because they were women, but because they were witches.³⁷ Contemporary demonologists, he says, were not particularly concerned with the question of why witches were women, largely because they operated within a binary system of thought which celebrated polarity as part of the natural order of things. This dependence on polarity necessarily but inadvertently defined women as the polar opposite of good—we must blame the equation of women

with witches, therefore, not on misogyny but on the habit of seeing gender in terms of polarity, which Clark points out was shared by women's defenders as well as their detractors, and therefore was in itself gender-neutral.³⁸ Robin Briggs's argument is more straightforward. He too argues that the hunts hunted witches rather than women.³⁹ While he cites gender as one of a variety of psychological, sociological, and other motivations which fueled the hunts, much of the tone of his work displays a certain hostility toward women's history.⁴⁰ He begins, for example, with an attack on two assertions about the hunts which he explicitly associates with "feminist" interpretations but which have in fact rarely been questioned by historians, feminist and otherwise: that the number of executed reached nine million and that all of the executed were women.⁴¹ He rather oddly characterizes the argument that women were in some sense being scapegoated in the seventeenth century as "alarmingly close to the received wisdom among most early modern historians," while at the same time minimizing the damage caused by the hunts by contrasting the "serious and organized" campaigns against religious dissidents with the "rather casual and sporadic" persecution of witches. He concludes with a caveat against "grand theories" and by reminding us that men were usually a significant minority of accused witches and might in some cases be a majority.⁴²

The reluctance of many historians and other scholars working in what might be called "mainstream" witch-hunt studies to accord gender a truly significant place in the dynamics of the witch-hunts stands in stark contrast to the treatment of the hunts in fields which by definition regard gender as important. Feminist scholarship within women's studies, in marked difference from more traditional scholarly venues, has long focused on witches as female, seeing the hunts as an important example of the larger phenomenon of male domination of women under patriarchy, research not infrequently characterized by mainstream witch-hunt scholars as "extreme," simplistic and distorted.⁴³ An exception is Joseph Klaitz, who straight-forwardly asserts that the "witch craze's slaughter of women was the result of the spread of woman-hatred in the spiritually reformed elites and its application in the reformers' campaigns against folk religion."⁴⁴ Historians of Renaissance and early modern women's history have also incorporated the witch-hunts into an overall picture of women's experience in these periods.⁴⁵ Most often under the general rubric of women's studies and women's history, there are also an increasing number of more narrowly focused studies which examine aspects of gender and European witchcraft.⁴⁶ Finally, there have begun to appear a few large-scale studies, including Carol Karlsen's *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman: Witchcraft in Colonial New England* (1987), Marianne Hester's *Lewd*

Women and Wicked Witches (1992), and Anne Barstow's *Witchcraze: A New History of the European Witch Hunts* (1994), which make full use of the scholarly apparatus and material of women's history, feminist scholarship, and witch-hunt studies.⁴⁷

Although fragmentary in comparison to the much greater bulk of traditional scholarship on the hunt, these and other relevant studies suggest what the hunts might look like if the fact that witches were women were truly put at the center. Carol Karlsen's study of witchcraft in colonial New England, for example, admirably illustrates both how the witch-hunts were embedded in the particular cultural milieu of specific communities and the adaptability of misogynistic attitudes to varying cultural environments. According to Karlsen, the root of accusations in New England was the fear of economically and psychologically independent women who threatened in various ways to upset male control of property and the social order, in particular women who stood to inherit property because they had no brothers or sons.⁴⁸ These women, moreover, were perceived by the community to be "discontent," that is, as refusing to accept their "place" in the social hierarchy; discontent in turn brought in its wake the related sins of anger, envy, pride, maliciousness, lying, and seductiveness.⁴⁹ Forced to reject the notion that women were innately more evil than men by the emphasis Puritanism placed on the priesthood of all believers, Puritan men at the same time harbored a deep suspicion of women as potentially willing and able to disrupt the social and moral order—a hostility only partially resolved by the formulation of women's role as that of helpmate, chaste, submissive and deferential to the male heads of family and society. "The old view of woman was suppressed, but it made its presence known in the many faults and tensions that riddled Puritan formulations on woman,"⁵⁰ and in the witch trials.

Nothing comparable to Karlsen's work as yet exists for the various regions of Europe although individual studies look at parts of the European picture. Gerhild Scholz Williams, for example, demonstrates the continuing centrality and consistency of representations of women as evil and susceptible to satanic influence in intellectual treatises on dealing with magic and witchcraft by such disparate authors as Paracelsus, Weir, and Bodin.⁵¹ Linda Hults's study of Hans Baldung's famous drawings of witches similarly analyzes the misogynistic and often salacious jokes embedded in Baldung's use of visual symbols.⁵² In particular, Hults explores the paradoxical definition of the witch, who was both feared as the pawn of the Devil and denigrated by her weak and inferior nature as a woman: "Just as they [the witches] had to remain powerless yet feared, they had to be depicted as perennially lusting yet never satisfied. Their wants made them culpable; unrequited, these same desires made them

ludicrous. Seeking freedom and power above all, witches were the most enslaved of creatures.⁵³ Other studies have emphasized the degree to which the witch-hunts constituted a specifically sexual form of violence against women by men. Hester, writing from a radical feminist standpoint, locates the hunts as part of a continuum of conflictual male-female relations in which the power and domination of men over women is "erotized;" the hunts represented an important specific historical instance of the more general construction of sexuality around issues of power.⁵⁴ Barlow describes the hunts as "sexual terrorism" and, throughout her book, stresses the pain, sexual sadism, mutilation, and torture to which accused women were subject.⁵⁵ Both emphasize that while witches were almost always women, they were invariably tried, judged, jailed, examined, and executed by men.⁵⁶

These studies and women's history as a whole point up that whatever the continuities of Western misogyny, the female sex seems to have taken on new significance as a marker for "deviance" in the early modern period which it did not possess earlier. This point, well known to historians of early modern women's history, is reinforced by the prior history of perceived "deviance" in the West. By the sixteenth century, Europe had a well-developed tradition of persecution of outsider groups, including heretics, lepers, and Jews, defined according to well-established stereotypes which had much in common with that of the witch, in that, like witches these groups were accused of infanticide, cannibalism, and "unnatural" sexuality and, like witches, were demonized by their alleged association with the Devil.⁵⁷ The witch-hunts, therefore, were in many ways not a new phenomenon, but part of a continuing tradition—indeed, from this perspective the most distinctive facet of the witch-hunt is perhaps the fact that most witches were women. It is significant in this connection to note that none of the groups which figured most prominently in medieval conceptions of the deviant were primarily identified with women.⁵⁸ The continuing thread of accusations of sexual license, while routinely attributed to deviant groups and loosely associated with women in general, does not seem to have yet crystallized into a specific image of the sexually predatory deviant female who is also an enemy of society. Rather the focus of medieval conceptions of deviance appears to have centered on issues of religious authority and its accompaniments, power and money, about both of which medieval religious ethics were profoundly ambivalent.⁵⁹ The early modern period, however, was characterized by the intersection of a peculiarly political definition of Christianity in which apostasy to the Devil became the archetypal act of betrayal and a cultural atmosphere in which women as a category became the repository of a whole range of social and cultural fears. The witch, not only

as witch but also as woman, precisely encapsulated the nightmares of early modern Europe.

The reasons why women in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries became a newly potent source of social anxiety are, of course, the object of ongoing investigation. The increased emphasis on male control within the family characteristic of Reformation and Counter-Reformation culture, an intensification of sexual anxiety and guilt, an increased need and desire to control nature, long identified as female, which emerged with the Scientific Revolution, have all been suggested as part of what Joseph Klaitz has dubbed the "new misogyny."⁶⁰ Prompted by the demands of the "confessional age," the "unenclosed" woman, as well as other "masterless" people including the poor, the homeless, and the mad, were increasingly placed under formal institutional control in convents, asylums, prisons, or the newly invented halfway house for reformed prostitutes.⁶¹ As part of a campaign of "moral reform" as well, a wide range of popular customs and behavior, from popular festivities such as carnival, to premarital sex in preparation for marriage, came under attack as immoral and disruptive. Given women's traditional roles as mother, nurse, midwife, and preparer of food and her association with sexual matters, such an attack was in many ways directly and indirectly an attack on women in particular.⁶² As a variety of activities previously regarded as private became the object of public concern, women's sources of autonomy both within popular culture and within the family itself were increasingly truncated and made suspect.⁶³ Sexuality especially aroused anxiety and the sexual overtones present in the hunts, whether in the sexualized image of the witch (who was believed to cause impotence and indulge in perpetually unfulfilling forms of deviant sex); the general belief that women as a group were oversexed, congenitally unable to control their desires and therefore susceptible to seduction by the Devil; or the elements of sexual terrorism in the hunts themselves, suggest that the hunts were a more or less direct projection of sexual anxiety. In the early modern world, preoccupied with (male) hierarchical order and its converse, (female) unrestrained sexuality and disorder, the wandering or "loose" woman could not help being perceived as inherently subversive. On a literal level, the binding of women to the (male) Devil, that is the making of a witch, might be taken as an attempt to "enclose" women not obviously otherwise controlled by men. More generally, the hunting of witches, defined as the epitome of evil, reflected a sharpened fear and distrust of women as powerful sources of danger, disorder, and pollution. Misogyny—the cultural expression of patriarchy's distrust of women—is socially constructed. This is no surprise to students of women's history but is apparently unknown to many mainstream witch-hunt scholars, who have themselves constructed a

notion of misogyny as a monolithic, timeless force which they have rightly dismissed as a cause of witch-hunting. This is borne out by the fact that much of the material which suggests that witch hunting was in fact women-hunting is already part of mainstream witch research.

Much has been made of the fact, for example, that not all accused witches were women. That men or children were sometimes accused of witchcraft however does not necessarily contravene the idea that the witch hunts were directed specifically against women. The circumstances under which these atypical witches were accused can be shown to be in various ways reflections of the equation "witch = woman." In some cases, the men and children were relatives of already suspected or proven female witches and therefore demonstrated the powers of contamination that women were believed to possess.⁶⁴ Or, conversely, they were caught up in rapidly spreading panics. The very fact that men or children were accused was in many cases the signal that the hunts had gotten out of hand and should be stopped.⁶⁵ Nor should it surprise us that some of those who accused women of being witches were other women. It is now a commonplace of women's history that "patriarchy divides women," that is, patriarchy functions so as to encourage women to enforce patriarchal norms against other women in order to strengthen their own precarious position in that order. To conclude as some researchers have done that gender was not a significant factor in the hunts because women accused women of being witches (and men, men) is to reduce the subtle complexities of gender dynamics to an overly simple notion of a "war between the sexes."⁶⁶ Moreover, in the eyes of ecclesiastical and secular authorities all women were potential witches, just as in a phrase dating back to the third century and endlessly repeated thereafter, "every woman is an Eve," the Devil's gateway. In early modern France the term "witch" was a general term of abuse for women and, indeed, the failure of a woman to reply to this charge was used as evidence against her if she were later accused of witchcraft.⁶⁷ Whatever the profiles of actual accused and convicted witches, both the popular and elite mental image of the witch was invariably first that of a woman. And if the typical witch was old, poor, and isolated this was the likely future of most women, given demographic trends.

Mainstream historians of the hunts, largely but not entirely themselves male, have articulated interpretations of the hunts which have emphasized state-building, economic and social stresses, and the relationship of folk and elite culture with little regard for the role of gender in these and other historical processes. They have often paid little attention to either the theoretical apparatus provided by women's history or its empirical findings and on occasion have demonstrated the kind of misunder-

standing of gender dynamics which women's history has tried to correct. Making use of the insights of several decades work in the history of European women should provide new directions for approaching the hunts.

A gender analysis of the hunts would pay more attention to the women involved. At this point we have only just begun to accumulate more precise data on the socio-economic status of accused and convicted witches in different times and places in Europe and have only the vaguest understanding of how these women saw themselves and their situation. Although many of the answers to these questions may ultimately be unrecoverable because of the limitations of the source materials, certainly an effort can be made. Both Hester and Barlow point to as yet fragmentary evidence that the hunts served to make women in general more passive and submissive.⁶⁸ The "language of insult," which would provide clues as to differences in the ways in which female and male deviance was perceived, might also prove a fruitful area for further investigation.⁶⁹ An example of how attention to the roles of accused witches and accusers *as women* can widen our understanding of the hunts, as well as illustrating the variousness of women's experience is Lyndal Roper's study of witch trials in Augsburg in the late seventeenth century. Roper finds that in these trials, accusations of witchcraft were most often made by postpartum mothers against lying-in-maids who had been caring for an infant who had died. Witchcraft accusations, she suggests, involved "murderous antagonisms" having to do with psychosexual anxieties and rivalries about maternity and fertility between women, possibly intensified by the idealization of motherhood in the seventeenth century.⁷⁰ Elsewhere Roper argues more broadly that "psychic conflicts attendant on the feminine position," both Oedipal or related to motherhood, underlay at least some cases of witch accusations and that fantasies of witchcraft grew out of conscious and unconscious images of the female body.⁷¹

Another question which has implicitly emerged from recently published material on the hunts is the question of whether there were in fact two kinds of witchcraft, distinguished not only by the beliefs of the accused and accusers but by the gender of the practitioner. Willem de Blécourt has pointed out that more attention needs to be paid to contemporary views of cunning folk, accused witches, and clergy, all of whom were credited with the ability to affect the spiritual and physical health of their clients or victims.⁷² Recent work has shown that in many of the outlying areas of Europe in which the accusation rate was more equal for men and women, a more medieval pattern of belief persisted in which male sorcerers rather than female witches were thought to have access to the supernatural, a distinction with important implications for a gender

analysis of the hunts. It is well known that the mass trials of marginalized women believed to be servants of the Devil in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were preceded by trials in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries of a few highly placed male sorcerers believed to be in control of the spirits they conjured up. Recent studies of the peripheries of Europe suggest that this pattern of male sorcery and female witchcraft may have persisted in outlying areas of Europe including Iceland, Estonia, Finland, Romania, and Portugal.⁷³ In Finland, for example, the populace, which had a strong folk shamanistic tradition associating men but not women with access to the supernatural, had to be taught that witches were women. These highly regarded male practitioners of magical arts, moreover, were thought to conjure up spirits through their superior knowledge and wisdom, not as pawns of the Devil. The contrast between the respected male sorcerer who exerts power through his own knowledge and control and the feared and hated female witch perceived as harming others through her enslavement to the (male) Devil, is suggestive of deeply held, highly gendered belief systems. A somewhat different but analogous division of types of witchcraft by gender developed in Venice, where according to Ruth Martin, male "witches" concentrated on the more profitable branches of witchcraft, including treasure-hunting, which were linked with the learned tradition of necromancy or sorcery and with Venice's commercial economy while women concentrated on *maleficium* and especially love magic; she suggests, moreover, that men pursued witchcraft in an "acquisitive, almost adventurous" manner, while women were "very much on the defensive."⁷⁴ A parallel development of "masculine" magic depending on book-knowledge and often devoted to finding hidden riches, and a category of amorous magic dominated by women has been uncovered by María Helena Sánchez Ortega in Spain.⁷⁵ A similar pattern has been found in the folklore of the Netherlands into the twentieth century.⁷⁶

Although the usual caveats against uncritical cross-cultural comparison of witch beliefs are in order, a study of the witch beliefs held by an African tribe, the Gonja, by anthropologist Ellen Goody illuminates how ideas about proper gender roles might have influenced the development of a gendered view of witchcraft. The Gonja, according to Goody, make a clear distinction between male witches, whose standing in the community is enhanced by their use of witchcraft, and female witches, who are feared, hated, and punished for being witches.⁷⁷ Goody finds that among men aggression expressed both directly and through magic is seen as both desirable and legitimate within widely defined limits; among women, however, aggression is permissible only to defend herself and her children against violent attack and then only through direct physical retaliation

rather than witchcraft. Women who resorted to magical aggression were universally condemned as evil, by both women and men. Goody concludes that within this African society women "cannot be permitted to act aggressively without endangering the dominance of men, and throwing into doubt the benevolence of the affective relationships on which the domestic group centres," and that "it is because aggression is not permissible in women that Gonja women who are thought to have witchcraft powers are always condemned as evil."⁷⁸ Similarly, in medieval and early modern Europe, aggression through magic appears to have been perceived very differently according to whether it was regarded as a primarily male or female practice.

Another avenue in which gender analysis might be applied to witch beliefs is in distinguishing elite and popular ideas of witchcraft. Caroline Bynum has recently suggested that women and men, even within the same tradition, use religious symbols differently. "Women's symbols and myth tend to build from social and biological experiences; men's symbols and myths invert them. Women's mode of using symbols seems given to the muting of opposition, whether through paradox or through synthesis; men's mode seems characterized by emphasis on opposition, contradiction, inversion, and conversion."⁷⁹ Such a difference in female and male use of symbols seems particularly apt in comparing elite notions of diabolism, with its emphasis on the inversion of orthodox Christian ritual and the obeisance of the witch to Satan, and popular notions of witch activities with an emphasis on bodily functions and healing, festivities, and love magic.

Finally, I think it would be fruitful to compare the figure of the witch to that other transgressor against female norms, the woman saint, and look at the saint and witch as mirror images. It is well known that the later Middle Ages were a period of intense religiosity. Less obviously, it was also a period in which specifically female forms of piety flourished and in which there were unusual numbers of highly visible female saints.⁸⁰ Both saint and witch possess unusual powers derived from their closeness to the supernatural world of God and if the line between saint and heretic could be very fine, the line between the female saint and the witch was even finer.⁸¹ The abilities of the saint and witch were also strikingly similar. Both can fly or "levitate," control natural forces, find lost objects, tell the future, affect others' physical well-being, and in some cases have special relationships with animals and/or food. Both bore special marks on their bodies and appeared to be able to read minds.⁸² In the most highly charged area of activities, sexuality, the female saint and the witch appear as mirror opposites, the chaste, virginal saint opposed to the sexually insatiable witch. Yet as it has often been pointed out, the descriptions of saintly

visions of God are often highly eroticized and it has even been suggested that the image of the witches' sabbath owes something to the sexualized visions of late medieval mystics.⁸³

Both saint and witch symbolically embodied supernatural forces which might be either benevolent or dangerous. The lines between "white" magic, folk healing, and *maleficium* were fluid and at least sometimes overlapped. Although the distinctions between cunning men and women (or "witch-doctors") and witches themselves might be clearer to early modern villagers than to either seventeenth-century elites or twentieth-century scholars, specialized access to the supernatural was clearly at least potentially a double-edged sword.⁸⁴ Medieval popular religion, on the one hand, told stories of helpful and pious, as well as malicious, demons.⁸⁵ Conversely, saints in the interests of sanctity hurt, as well as helped, people. Studies of popular religion increasingly reveal the saint as an ambivalent figure, capable of apparently cruel and malicious behavior towards those who did not revere them adequately. According to one story, a mason, having mocked and laughed at the miracles which had occurred at the tomb of St. Thomas Becket, took a mouthful of food and said that if St. Thomas had any power he should choke or poison him. He thereupon fell speechless and helpless and would have died had he not drunk from a phial which had contained St. Thomas's blood.⁸⁶ In other cases, women and men who offended or otherwise crossed a saint were struck dumb, blinded, paralyzed, made ill, or swallowed up by the earth.⁸⁷ Such "miracles of vengeance" were particularly associated with the cult of the Madonna in Italy who apparently was not reluctant to kill those who did not actively promote her cult and was even believed to be a source of supernatural danger to her devotees.⁸⁸ Moreover, the popular notion of sainthood, unlike the official image, tended to emphasize the belief that a saint, like a witch, exerts supernatural power in the present here and now on a regular basis.⁸⁹

If both the saint and the witch might both protect and harm, the witch and the saint were also inversely related to each other in terms of gender. Christina Lerner pointed out that about 80 percent of saints in the medieval and early modern periods were male and 20 percent female, while about 80 percent of witches were female and 20 percent male.⁹⁰ Donald Weinstein and Rudolph Bell have shown that prior to the thirteenth century, however, female saints only amounted to less than 12% of the total number of saints. It is significant that in the centuries preceding the witch-hunts the proportion of female saints rose sharply, to a high in the fifteenth century of almost 28 percent.⁹¹ Female saints, moreover, according to Weinstein and Bell, were especially noted for their supernatural powers rather than for other functions of sainthood.⁹²

The similarities of these two groups of deviant females with access to the supernatural may be an important part of the witch-hunt puzzle. It seems plausible that the supernatural abilities of women saints not only attracted fear as well as admiration and awe, but perhaps provided a model for the later stereotype of the witch, immensely powerful yet enslaved by her own hostile impulses, "enclosed" only by the superior power of the male Devil. With the emergence of confessional discipline and an increasingly hierarchical and rigid view of "women's place" in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, women's independent access to the supernatural, already highly visible, could only be seen in negative terms as possession, not by God, but by Satan.

In many ways, the history of the historiography of gender and the witch-hunts recapitulates the relationship of women's history to the field of history itself: women were first ignored, then "added and stirred," and only after much delay begun to be integrated into historical research so as to demand a rethinking of traditional historical interpretations. While this in itself is perhaps unremarkable, the extent to which witch hunt studies, in other ways receptive to new currents in scholarship, have resisted the impact of women's history is surprising. Although the reasons for this resistance are unclear, it may be precisely because the witch hunts are so egregious an example of Western misogyny that many historians have repressed the importance of gender to understanding the hunts. In some ways the shadow of the hunts still lies over even its modern observers.

NOTES

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¹ Anne Llewellyn Barstow, "On Studying Witchcraft as Women's History: A Historiography of the European Witch Persecutions," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 4 (Fall 1988): 7-20. This point has often been remarked upon but rarely discussed in detail. See, for example, Barbara Becker-Cantarino, "'Feminist Consciousness' and 'Wicked Witches': Recent Studies on Women in Early Modern Europe," *Signs* 20 (Autumn 1994), 170, and the comment in Ute Frevert, Heide Wunder, and Christina Vanja, "Historical Research on Women in the Federal Republic of Germany," in *Writing Women's History: International Perspectives*, ed. Karen Offen, Ruth Roach Pierson and Jane Rendall (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1991): "In the meantime research on this topic [the witch trials] has become mainly a 'men's subject', as it deals with territory, collectivities, the creation of modern states and the consolidation of legal and juridical authority, and the development of theological and learned discourses. The original question of why it was women who were accused of magic has retreated into the background," 302.

² H. R. Trevor-Roper, "The European Witch-Craze," in *The European Witch-Craze of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries and Other Essays* (New York and Evanston: Harper and Row, 1967), 116; Julio Caro Baroja, *The World of the Witches*, trs. O. Glendinning (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), 256.

³ Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (New York: Scribner, 1971); Alan Macfarlane, *Witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart England* (London: Harper and Row, 1970).

⁴ Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, 568. In his discussion of cunning folk, Thomas, while recognizing the existence of cunning women, focuses almost entirely on "cunning men," 212-252.

⁵ Macfarlane, *Witchcraft*, 84. Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, 568, makes the same point.

⁶ Richard Kieckhefer, *European Witch Trials: Their Foundation in Popular and Learned Culture, 1300-1500* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 96.

⁷ Gustav Henningsen, *The Witches' Advocate: Basque Witchcraft and the Spanish Inquisition* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1980), 12.

⁸ Norman Cohn, *Europe's Inner Demons: An Inquiry Inspired by the Great Witch-hunt* (New York: New American Library, 1975), 248-249.

⁹ Alan Kors and Edward Peters, eds., *Witchcraft in Europe 1100-1700: A Documentary History* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1989).

¹⁰ Richard A. Horsley, "Who Were the Witches? The Social Roles of the Accused in the European Witch Trials," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 9, 4 (1979): 692, 712. A later article coauthored by Horsley and Ritta Jo Horsley, "On the Trail of the 'Witches': Wise Women, Midwives and the European Witch Hunts," *Women in Germany Yearbook* 3, ed. Marianne Burkhard and Edith Waldstein (Lanham, New York, and London: University Press of America, 1986), 1-28 places much more emphasis on witches as women.

¹¹ H. C. Erik Midelfort, *Witch Hunting in Southwestern Germany 1562-1684: The Social and Intellectual Foundations* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1972), 178-182.

¹² Midelfort, *Witch Hunting in Southwestern Germany*, 196, 183. Midelfort provides as an example of how women themselves provoked misogyny the case of a "mother-in-law problem that had got totally out of hand," 183. Occasionally, comments made by historians unversed in gender studies are stunning in their artless miscomprehension. Hugh V. McLachlan and J.K. Swales, "Witchcraft and Anti-Feminism," *The Scottish Journal of Sociology* 4, 2 (1980), 149 argue at one point that witchcraft accusations could not be construed as "legalized rape" because witches were not "generally the sexually more desirable members of society" but rather were old women.

¹³ G.R. Quaife, *Godly Zeal and Furious Rage: The Witch in Early Modern Europe* (New York: 1967), 106.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 94.

¹⁵ William E. Monter, "The Historiography of European Witchcraft: Progress and Prospects," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 2 (1972): 450.

¹⁶ Monter, *Witchcraft in France and Switzerland*, 119-124.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 197-198.

¹⁸ Larnier, *Witchcraft and Religion*, 65.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 60-63, 84-88.

²⁰ Robert Muchembled, "Satanic Myths and Cultural Reality," in *Early Modern European Witchcraft: Centres and Peripheries*, ed. Bengt Ankarloo and Gustav Henningsen (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), 160. See also his "The Witches of the Cambrésis," in *Religion and the People 600-1700*, ed., James Obelkevich (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1979), 221-276.

²¹ Muchembled, "Satanic Myths," 153-159. For criticism of the model posited by Muchembled, see Jean Wirth, "Against the Acculturation Thesis," in *Religion and Society in Early Modern Europe 1500-1800*, ed. Kasper von Gyerz (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1984), 66-78; and Robin Briggs, *Communities of Belief: Cultural and Social Tension in Early Modern France* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 53-57, 384-389.

²² Muchembled, "Satanic Myths and Cultural Reality," in *Peripheries*, 151, 153; see also his *Popular Culture and Elite Culture in France 1400-1750*, trs. Lydia Cochrane (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1985), 66-71.

²³ Brian P. Levack, *The Witch-Hunt in Early Modern Europe* (London and New York: Longman, 1987), 125-134.

²⁴ Wolfgang Behringer, "Weather, Hunger and Fear: Origins of the European Witch-Hunts in Climate, Society and Mentality," *German History* 13 (1995), 21.

²⁵ Clive Homes, "Women: Witnesses and Witches," *Past and Present* 140 (1993), 45-78.

²⁶ The authors who do consider gender include Robert Muchembled, "Satanic Myths and Cultural Reality," 139-160, who argues here as elsewhere that peasant women were the guardians and teachers of the popular culture under attack by the authorities under the guise of attacking "witchcraft;" he further suggests that attacking women was a way of avoiding the drastic demographic results of executing children, 150-151. The primary impulse behind the hunts, however, was the dual dynamic of an elite seeking to impose a new public order and the better-off members of rural communities seeking power over their neighbors. Antero Heikkinen and Timor Kervinen, "Finland: The Male Domination," 319-338, and Kirsten Hatrup, "Iceland: Sorcerers and Paganism," 383-401, briefly consider why the sex ratio of accused witches in Finland and Iceland was more evenly divided between men and women than in western Europe generally. Gábor Klaniczay, "Hungary: The Accusations and the Universe of Popular Magic," 219-255, briefly suggests a connection between late medieval female saints and early modern witches, 241.

²⁷ See, for example, Robert Rowland, " 'Fantasticall and Devilishe Persons': European Witch-beliefs in Comparative Perspective," in *Peripheries*, 161, 169, 188; Robert Muchembled, *Popular Culture and Elite Culture in France 1400-1750*, 3, 255 but cf. 242, and "Satanic Myths and Cultural Reality," 141, 142.

²⁸ Bengt Ankarloo, "Sweden: The Mass Burnings (1668-1676)," in *Peripheries*, 316.

²⁹ Ankarloo, "Sweden," 316.

³⁰ Carlo Ginzburg, *Nightbattles: Witchcraft and Agrarian Cult in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, trs. John Tedeschi and Anne Tedeschi (New York: Penguin Books, 1983); and *Ecstasies: Deciphering the Witches' Sabbath*, trs. Raymond Rosenthal (New York: Penguin, 1992).

³¹ Ginzberg, *Ecstasies*, p.26, n.42.

³² *Ibid.*, 301.

³³ *Ibid.*, 1, 9, 11, 70, 70, 72, 161.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 216. See also n. 42, p. 26

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 1-11, 301.

³⁶ Stuart Clark, "The 'Gendering' of Witchcraft in French Demonology: Misogyny or Polarity?," *French History* 5, 4 (1991): 426-437; Robin Briggs, "Women as Victims? Witches, Judges and the Community," *French History* 5, 4 (1991), 438-450.

³⁷ Clark, "Gendering of Witchcraft," 427.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 436-437. An earlier article by Clark, "Inversion, Misrule and the Meaning of Witchcraft," *Past and Present*, 87 (1980), despite its promising title, includes only one passing comment related to gender, 125.

³⁹ Briggs, "Women as Victims?" 443-445.

⁴⁰ Clark, "Gendering of Witchcraft," 432; Briggs, "Women as Victims?," 450.

⁴¹ Briggs, "Women as Victims?" 438-440.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 450.

⁴³ Some of the more important studies include Mary Nelson, "Why Witches Were Women," in *Women: A Feminist Perspective*, ed. Jo Freeman (Palo Alto, Calif.: Mayfield, 1975), 335-350; Carolyn Matalene, "Women as Witches," *International Journal of Women's Studies* 1 (1978), 573-587; Selma R. Williams and Pamela Williams Adelman, *Riding the Nightmare: Women and Witchcraft from the Old World to Colonial Salem* (New York: Atheneum, 1978); Barbara Ehrenreich and Dierdre English, "Witches, Midwives and Nurses: A History of Women Healers," *Glass Mountain Pamphlet* No. 1 (Old Westbury, N.Y.: The Feminist Press, 1973); Silvia Bovenschen, "The Contemporary Witch, the Historical Witch and the Witch Myth: The Witch, Subject of the Appropriation of Nature and Object of the Domination of Nature," *New German Critique* 15 (1978): 83-119; Mary Daly, *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978), 178-222; Rosemary Ruether, "The Persecution of Witches: A Case of Sexism and Agism?" *Christianity and Crisis* 34 (1974): 291-295. See also the more recent article by Martha Reineke, "The Devils are Come Down Upon Us: Myth, History, and the Witch as Scapegoat," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 44 (1990), 55-83 which seeks to revitalize feminist understanding of the hunts by focusing on the Christian myth of persecution and the death of the scapegoat. There is also a large body of material which shades over into contemporary feminist re-workings of the witch motif. For

examples of expressed hostility toward this work see, David Harley, "Historians as Demonologists: The Myth of the Midwife-Witch," *Social History of Medicine* 3, 1 (1990): 1-26; and Quaife, *Godly Zeal*, 109.

⁴⁴ Joseph Klaitis, *Servants of Satan: The Age of the Witch Hunts* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1985), 72. Barstow, "Studying Witchcraft," 15, however, criticizes Klaitis for ultimately placing the Reformation, rather than the women themselves, at the center of his interpretation.

⁴⁵ See, for example, Margaret L. King, *Women of the Renaissance* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1991); and Merry E. Weisner, *Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 218-238.

⁴⁶ For example, Gerhild Scholz Williams, "The Woman/ The Witch: Variations on a Sixteenth-Century Theme (Paracelsus, Wier, Bodin) in *The Crannied Wall: Women, Religion, and the Arts in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Craig A. Monson (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1990), 119-137; Linda Hults, "Baldung and the Witches of Freiburg: The Evidence of Images," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 18, 2 (1987): 249-276; *The Politics of Gender in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Jean Brink, Allison P. Coudert and Maryanne C. Horowitz (Kirksville, Mo.: Sixteenth Century Essays and Studies, 1989) which contains several relevant articles; William Monter, "Protestant Wives, Catholic Saints, and the Devil's Handmaid: Women in the Age of Reformations" in *Becoming Visible: Women in European History*, 2nd ed., ed. Renate Bridenthal, Claudia Koonz, and Susan Stuard (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1987), 203-220; Lyndal Roper, "Witchcraft and Fantasy in Early Modern Germany," *History Workshop Journal* 32 (1991): 19-43; and Roper, *Oedipus and the Devil: Witchcraft, Sexuality and Religion in Early Modern Europe* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994). The extent to which work which makes gender central to the hunts has appeared in venues explicitly oriented toward women's history and/or feminist scholarship is striking.

⁴⁷ Carol Karlsen, *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman: Witchcraft in Colonial New England* (New York: Vintage Books, 1987); Marianne Hester, *Lewd Women and Wicked Witches: A Study of the Dynamics of Male Domination* (London: Routledge, 1992); and Anne Llewellyn Barstow, *Witchcraze: A New History of the European Witch Hunts* (San Francisco and London: Pandora Books, 1994).

⁴⁸ Karlsen, *Devil In the Shape of a Woman*, 115-116.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 127-152.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 173.

⁵¹ Williams, "The Woman/The Witch," in *Crannied Wall*, 119-137. Williams's book, *Defining Dominion: The Discourses of Magic and Witchcraft in Early Modern France and Germany* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1995) appeared too late to be included in this article.

⁵² Hults, "Baldung and the Witches of Freiburg," 264, 269; see also Klaitis, *Servants of Satan*, 72-74, on misogyny in early modern art.

⁵³ Hults, "Baldung," 271.

⁵⁴ Hester, *Lewd Women*, 107ff.