

The Woman-as-witch stereotype in Early Modern England, Continental Europe and New England

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Abstract

Witchcraft is construed by many historians and anthropologists as the most extreme expression of female deviance and empowerment. Charges of the crime of witchcraft were time and again levied against women who were imagined as eluding or subverting the social conventions of patriarchal control. Besides this, more than mere inherited medieval superstitions, witchcraft beliefs were also ideas that evolved, varied from cultural context to cultural context and ended up undergoing their biggest changes and pervasiveness during the Early Modern Period – both in the Old and in the New World. Thus, the Early Modern Period's stereotype of the witch is viewed by many scholars as the ultimate representation of society's misogynistic fear of female deviance and evil.

The verbal and visual discourses and the practices surrounding the persecution of witches are contended as being the result of a dialectical interaction between the different levels of early modern society, more precisely between the orthodox views of the learned Christian religious and secular scholarly authorities, and the heterodox non-Christian beliefs at the folk level. Unfortunately, the frenzy of witchcraft trials in seventeenth-century England, Continental Europe and New England was chiefly fuelled by the hegemony of Christian theological and demonological speculations and treatises, therefore targeting to greater extent women: women-as-witches.

Nevertheless, the dynamics was not homogeneous. In fact, different cultural contexts traced miscellaneous stereotypical aspects of the composite image of the early modern-period witch. As the specific conditions of the English context differ considerably from the ones of Continental Europe and Colonial New England, three types of witches can be identified: the English Popular Witch, mostly seen as the old crone or the village healer that resorted to maleficent magic; the Continental Demonic Witch, who was burnt to death, after admitting under torture having signed a pact with the Devil; and the Colonial Puritan witch, the heretic Satan worshipper, whose spectre tormented the neighbours. It is then our intention with this paper to systematize and present an outline of their defining aspects in relation to the prevailing stereotype, as argued by several leading witchcraft scholars.

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1. The Early Modern Europe Witch Stereotype: more women-as-witches?

In a predominantly patriarchal society, European women have not only been omitted from most of the historical narratives, but their experiences were further deemed inconsequential or presented in a distorted manner so as to fit the Western cultural frame of mind. It comes then as no surprise, that up to the seventeenth-century the orthodox religious views, namely Jewish and ultimately Christian, stripped women from their Pagan cultural importance, just to have them demonized as witches.¹

Though it has been pointed out to be an exaggeration to state that the crime of witchcraft was sex-specific and solely attributable to women, it remains quite undeniable and quite compelling the role of gendered structures of power in the European witch-hunts: misogyny, though not the only explanation, pervaded every aspect of early modern society. As Linda C. Hulst clearly puts,

The discourses and practices surrounding the persecution of witches were linked to men's efforts to gain power and status, which were informed, after all, by contemporary ideals of masculinity; the social forces that came into play as witches were accused, tried and executed were informed by gender at every level (the village, the local court, the state); and the psychological and social impact of this extraordinarily negative female stereotype, although difficult to isolate, was surely enormous.²

Thus, while most of the accused witches were female, many of their accusers and those who confessed guilty of witchcraft, were also female. As surprising as this might seem at first, one must not forget that early modern women did not exist outside the patriarchal ideology and also assimilated the well-established notions of female vulnerability to succumbing to evil, in all its forms. The genesis of such gender bias notions appear to be traceable as far back as the Pre-Christian period, when a gradual transition from an essentially nomadic matriarchal society gives way to a sedentary patriarchy. Women lose their ancestral power to their first born males along with the progressive decline in power of the Great Goddess. The Sacred Feminine and women's priesthood falls into obscurity with the subsequent establishment of the Hebrew, Greco-Roman and Celtic-German societies. These became the backbone of our later Western European culture and indeed in such

early written sources as the Old Testament, Homer and Hesiod, the outlines of the seventeenth-century women-as-witch, can already be established.³

In spite of the attempt of eradication of priestesses and the cult of the Pagan female Deities and the Goddess by the early Catholic Church, the belief in their supernatural powers remained the underlying in popular culture.⁴ The female knowledge of healing, herbal medicine, midwifery, divination, prophecy and the mastery of magic spells, incantations and sorcery continued to be passed on mainly by oral tradition and were carried out by women as folk magic.⁵ Seemingly they did not think of themselves as witches but came to be viewed as such. They were known to exist, were accepted and in many cases even revered. In fact, women-as-witches and “Witchcraft was, quite simply, part of the everyday popular culture of the period.”⁶

Only between 1100 and 1300, the features that were later to build the witch stereotype, emerged in the European thought. But there were no witch trials as such during this period. After 1300, explicit accusations of witchcraft began to appear. For the following two centuries the image of the witch grew in complexity and in fearful immediacy and by 1500, most features of the established witchcraft theory provided the foundation for the massive witch hunt craze in Europe from about 1560 to 1680.⁷ We find it relevant here to point out that in recent years the witchcraft scholarship has taken care in making clear that the ‘witch-hunts’ were in fact outbreaks concentrated in a relatively few specific territories⁸, with quite disparaging cultural contexts, as we will try to illustrate at a later stage in our work.

By now it is safe to say that witches and witchcraft were undeniably very real phenomena not only to the people in the villages but to the learned minds of the 17th-century Europe, as well. The many writings⁹ of the time portray the numerous misconceptions about witches and witchcraft, built on established accounts of folk beliefs about witches and on the widely accepted confessions obtained under physical torture, and conveyed as academic, fact-based theories. Most of the texts in *Demonology*¹⁰ were written mainly between 1400 and 1750 and comprise biblical and classical literary texts, treatises by theologians and lawyers, manuals for inquisitors, trial records, sermons, narratives of cases of demonic possession, laws regarding the practice of magic and witchcraft and even dramas about witches.¹¹ Nonetheless, when the execution of people for the crime of witchcraft in the secular and ecclesiastical European courts reached unprecedented numbers “the main pressures for prosecutions came ‘from below’ [i.e.] the charges and accusations [were] brought by ordinary people against their neighbours (...)”¹²

Early Modern witch persecuting societies had a culturally based rationality quite converse to our own driven by the turbulent cultural context of a Religious Reformation and a Scientific Revolution.¹³ Magic and witchcraft in mid-sixteenth-

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century Europe was considered a serious intellectual pursuit and the orthodox concept of witchcraft diverged when it came down to Catholic demonology vs. Protestant demonology;¹⁴ and Inquisitorial vs. Accusatorial trial procedures¹⁵, along with the heterodox Pagan beliefs of popular culture. Hence, we argue that women were preferably targeted both by their neighbours and/or the secular and ecclesiastical authorities, if they were too outspoken, not compliant enough, defiant of the established Knowledge by mastering natural magic and alternative forms of medicine; a burden to the village economy, or very simply because they were of the female gender and therefore ridden of failings and handicaps. To name just a few, women were

the devil's preferred target [because] Weak understanding and frail belief meant that women were more likely to turn to superstition, more easily deceived by demonic illusions and promises, and sooner persuaded, in the end, to abjure even their faith. Inconstancy was a trait that women and devils had in common; so were ambitiousness and lustfulness [...] were both curious and loquacious [...] mendacious, proud, vain and greedy, weakness that the devil could exploit in the early stages of his campaign to secure them.¹⁶

In our view, all these beliefs and experiences both encouraged and inhibited the persecution and prosecution of women-as-witches and the practice of magic during this period. Moreover, we find it pertinent the distinction of three perspectives on the witch's perceived power within the geographical context of Early Modern England, Continental Europe and New England, namely the Continental (Europe) demonic witch, the English popular witch¹⁷ and the New England puritan witch.

2. **The Continental Demonic Witch**

The dominant Catholic religious authority underlaid all social and political structures, the hierarchical order in the family, the state and the cosmos. Thus, any form of religious dissidence implied political and social subversion and the crime of witchcraft was viewed as working in a double level: secular and spiritual. Those who were accused of practising any form of witchcraft were also heretics, and therefore traitors to God, and associates of the Lord's major enemy, Satan.¹⁸ This biblical entity and his demons had been since the Middle Ages, progressively empowered and began to be believed as perilous tempters and destroyers of the body and the soul. In clerical accounts, the devil murdered the innocent, lured people into renouncing their allegiance to God, caused destruction, induced

possession and copulated with either humans or animals, and had also metamorphic and shape shifting abilities. These attributes were initially ascribed to the heretic sects but later they characterised, to a great extent, the demonic Continental witch. This relatively novel typecast of witch emerged as being an heretic who had entered into a formal pact with the Devil¹⁹, practised murder, infanticide, cannibalism, sodomy and bestiality during the course of Satanic meetings and orgies – known as Sabbaths – and who deliberately surrendered to the demands of apostasy. As we can see the demonic witch is more closely related to the demonological preconceptions of scholarly Continental writers about harmful magic and religious dissent or heresy, a theme of minor importance in the English popular discourse on witchcraft.

3. The English Popular Witch

In what refers to the popular English witch, on the turn from the fourteenth century to the fifteenth century, a series of beliefs and practices of ritual and popular magic became common, these being vestiges of the Pagan heritage.²⁰ It was believed that some people, mostly women, could manipulate the natural and supernatural worlds by means of good and harmful magic deeds. The frequent practice of midwifery and the knowledge of ancient herbal medicine were other features that characterised the witch or cunning woman. As a result, a woman-as-witch or cunning woman was believed to have the power to heal sick and injured people and animals, to bring about love, to exercise divination, to find buried treasures, and to conjure the spirits, to obstruct reproductive processes, either by preventing conceptions or by inducing miscarriages, childbirth fatalities or deformed babies; to meddle in domestic processes, such as beer brewing; all this by means of incantations or potions. This power²¹ at times was vindictive and could even be used to kill, by the simple use of the evil-eyed curse²² or by touch.

In other words, a witch was thought to interfere with nature. Since ancient times spells, charms and imitative or deceptive magic were used to overcome the mystifying adversities of life. These features are closely related to the so-called English witch or archetypal popular witch, peculiar to the English folk narratives. Moreover, these witches are habitually portrayed (but not exclusively) as being old, lonely, spiteful, cursing, poor village women, with some creepy abnormal physical trait.

4. The New England Puritan Witch

One cannot begin to understand the New England witch, without being given some insight into the religious culture of the Puritan settlers. These Europeans who

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emigrated to the New World, saw themselves as the equivalent of God's chosen people, the Israelites, and were determined to found a NEW England. So upon arrival they proceeded to plan and establish an essentially godly, patriarchal society in which women were expected to be submissive and follow the female role models of the Bible of chastity and patience.²³

Puritans were the Calvinist sect of the Protestant reformers. According to the Reformed theology men and women alike, were unworthy and predestined to either be saved or damned by God and Him alone. So, achieving grace had no necessary connection with individual merit. In addition to this providentialist perspective, all supernatural catholic claims were rejected.²⁴

Nevertheless, for them magic and witchcraft were very real, blasphemous and diabolical and despite clerical opposition, the use of folk magic in Early New England was common. The resort to magic seems to have offered the colonists a means of comfort in the face of their distress or an effective means of taking revenge for the wrongs they might have suffered. This comes as no surprise if you keep in mind that magic and witchcraft had its root in the villages and towns of England and was brought with the settlers. They knew quite well how witches, magicians and cunning folk operated.²⁵ What's more, "perhaps the strongest link between witchcraft in England and in New England was the special association of this crime with woman and womanhood."²⁶

In seventeenth-century New England and despite of their shared roots with England, where *maleficium* was the chief crime of witchcraft,

Puritan belief held that a witch was someone (in practice usually a woman) who had covenanted with the devil rather than with God, thus allowing the devil to use her shape to torment others in his war against the godly. The devil thus played a central role. In order for a woman to become a witch, Puritans believed, she was required to pledge to him her soul. Upon receipt of this promise, the devil granted the woman extraordinary powers to terrify the godly and to recruit other into the devil's service.²⁷

Hence, many of the accused women would indeed accept and confess not to so much to dealings in the magical arts – though some actually did – but to being possessed by the devil, as they had felt doubt or had failed to curb certain sinful thoughts. Moreover, the New England woman-as-witch, conversely to the previous ones, was quite often not a social outcast but an outspoken, financially and/or socially powerful pious woman.

Lastly, the accusatorial procedures were also similar to the ones in Old England, with possibly one noteworthy exception: the majority of the accusers were other women who also saw themselves as being possessed, i.e. tormented by the spectrum of a certain witch: “accusers denounced witches for behaviours and emotions that were widespread among the colonists, not least of all among the accusers themselves.”²⁸

6. Brief conclusion

With this paper I have attempted to merely illustrate, that the seventeenth-century woman-as-witch stereotype is perceivable heterogeneous in Continental Europe, England and New-England; and can only be comprehensively understood by means of a synchronic study of why, from a particular male cultural perspective, women were conceived of being witches. In the words of Stuart Clark – one of the leading witchcraft scholars – the woman-as-witch became “a powerful symbolic vehicle capable of evoking the negative poles of many other hierarchically paired opposites in a particular classification system.”²⁹

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Notes

- ¹ Maria Zina Gonçalves Abreu, *O Sagrado Feminino – Da Pré-História à Idade Média* (Lisboa: Edições Colibri, 2007), 17-18.
- ² Linda C. Hulst, *The Witch as Muse – Art, Gender, and Power in Early Modern Europe* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005), 13.
- ³ Abreu, *O Sagrado Feminino – Da Pré-História à Idade Média* (Lisboa: Edições Colibri, 2007), 28-29
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, 50
- ⁵ Anne Llewellyn Barstow, *Witchcraze – A New History of the European Witch Hunts* (London: Harper Collins Publishers, 1994), chapter 6
- ⁶ James Sharp, *Instruments of Darkness – Witchcraft in Early Modern England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996), 58
- ⁷ Joseph Klaits, *Servants of Satan – The Age of the Witch Hunts* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1985), chapter 2
- ⁸ Bengt Ankarloo and Stuart Clark (eds.), *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe – The Period of the Witch Trials* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), xiii
- ⁹ Among many other influential witchcraft treatises, the most acclaimed at this time was the *Malleus Malleficarum* (1486) authored by the Dominican inquisitors Heinrich Krämer (1430-1505) and Jacob Spenger (ca. 1436-1495). Familiarly called the “Hammer of Witches”, it was a compilation of witch beliefs that had been extracted under torture. Its ideas were so widespread that many of the details appeared in later confessions and learned treatises in England. It is important to point out that underlying the entire structure of this work are three beliefs: witchcraft is real and it is heresy to maintain the opposite; evil spirits interfere in human affairs; and both witchcraft and demonic activity are permitted by God.
- ¹⁰ “the expression in print of theories about witchcraft, magic and diabolism” Ankarloo and Clark (eds.), *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe – The Period of the Witch Trials* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), xii
- ¹¹ Brian P. Levack (ed.), *The Witchcraft Sourcebook* (USA and Canada: Routledge, 2004), 1
- ¹² *Ibid.*, xiii
- ¹³ Ankarloo and Clark (eds.), *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe – The Period of the Witch Trials* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), “Introduction”
- ¹⁴ Stuart Clark, *Thinking with Demons – The idea of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe* (London: Oxford University Press, 1997), chap 35.
- ¹⁵ Ankarloo and Clark (eds.), *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe – The Period of the Witch Trials* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), “Introduction”
- ¹⁶ Clark, *Thinking with Demons – The idea of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe* (London: Oxford University Press, 1997), chap 8.
- ¹⁷ This terminology is coined by Owen Davies in his work *Witchcraft, Magic and Culture 1736-1951* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1999).
- ¹⁸ “The word devil enters the picture in the third century with the Septuagint translation of the Old Testament into Greek [...] The Greek word *diabolos* – accuser – was at that time chosen as a fitting translation for the Hebrew Satan. [...] Jerome restored the word Satan to the vulgate, except for psalm 109. [...] in the New [Testament] Satan had become a different sort of figure, an opponent of God rather than God-appointed opponent of man.” Charles Hoyt, *Witchcraft*, 2nd ed., (Carbondale and Edwardsville, Southern Illinois: University Press, 1989), chap 2
- ¹⁹ Barstow, *Witchcraze – A New History of the European Witch Hunts* (London: Harper Collins Publishers, 1994), chap 1
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, chap 1; P. G. Maxwell-Stuart, *Witchcraft in Europe and the New World, 1400-1800* (New York: Palgrave, 2001) chaps. 1 and 2.
- ²¹ ‘*maleficium*’ “is the simplest and most basic form of witchcraft. It can include [...] physical manipulation of objects and/or incantation of words and [...] harming through the release of power activated by hatred” Christina Larner, *Witchcraft and Religion – The Politics of Popular Belief* (New York: Blackwell, 1984), chap 5.
- ²² It was widely believed, among the learned and the people, that the influence and the use of the evil eye (*fascinatio*) was so physically powerful that anyone possessed of such a characteristic had only to look at someone or something to effect a transfer of malevolence or envy which would usually manifest itself in the form of disease or loss of power. Cursing was also not an uncommon practice. Early Catholic priests cursed, from the pulpit, the enemies of God, while villagers, especially women, reacted by cursing any neighbour that was unwilling, in any way, to render the assistance they pleaded for. Maxwell-Stuart, *Witchcraft in Europe and the New World, 1400-1800* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 7.
- ²³ Maxwell-Stuart, *Witchcraft in Europe and the New World, 1400-1800* (New York: Palgrave, 2001) chap 7.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, 27.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*, chap 7.
- ²⁶ Carol F. Karlsen, *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman – Witchcraft in Colonial New England* (London and New York: W.W.Norton & Company, 1998), 3.
- ²⁷ Elizabeth Reis (ed.), *Speelbound – Women and Witchcraft in America* (USA: Scholarly Resources In., 1998), xiii.

²⁸ Karlsen, *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman – Witchcraft in Colonial New England* (London and New York: W.W.Norton & Company, 1998), 225.

²⁹ Clark, *Thinking with Demons – The idea of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe* (London: Oxford University Press, 1997), 133.