

Witchcraft in the Early Modern West

Larry Gragg
lgragg@mst.edu

In 1617, on the Channel Island of Guernsey just off the northern French coast, a woman named Collette Du Mont confessed to practicing witchcraft. She told a court:

That the Devil having come to fetch her that she might go to the Sabbath, called for her without anyone perceiving it: and gave her a certain black ointment with which (after having stripped herself), she rubbed her back, belly and stomach: and then having again put on her clothes, she went out of her door, when she was immediately carried through the air at a great speed: and she found herself in an instant at the place of the Sabbath, which was sometimes near the parochial burial-ground: and at other times near the seashore in the neighbourhood of Rocquaine Castle: where, upon arrival, she met often fifteen or sixteen Wizards and Witches with the Devils who were there in the form of dogs, cats and hares: which Wizards and Witches she was unable to recognize, because they were all blackened and disfigured: it was true, however, that she had heard the Devil summon them by their names.¹

Du Mont was only one of at least 100,000 people tried on charges of practicing witchcraft between 1500 and 1700 in Western Europe. Of that number, authorities likely executed over 40,000.² Historians have offered a variety of reasons for the emergence of the large witch hunts of the period. They have variously “been attributed, in whole or in large part, to the Reformation, the Counter-Reformation, the Inquisition, the use of judicial torture, the wars of religion, the religious zeal of the clergy, the rise of the modern state, the development of capitalism, the widespread use of narcotics, changes in medical thought, social and cultural conflict, an attempt to wipe out paganism, the need of the ruling class to distract the masses, and the hatred of women.”³ In this complicated pursuit of answers to the question of how such a profoundly horrific death toll could have occurred in early modern Europe it is essential to examine the context in which beliefs about witchcraft developed.

To the modern skeptical mind, the case of Collette Du Mont which involved diabolical witchcraft, magical powers, and familiar spirits seems irrational and remarkably superstitious.

Yet, people in the early modern West lived in a mental world dominated by the supernatural. They sought meaning for their lives in an intriguing mix of pagan relics, Christianity, “wonder” stories, and witchcraft. Historians over the past few decades who have investigated witchcraft beliefs in Europe and in the European colonies in the Americas have

¹ Brian P. Levack, *The Witch-Hunt in Early Modern Europe* (London: Longman, 1987), 14.

² John Demos, *The Enemy Within: 2,000 Years of Witch-Hunting in the Western World* (New York: Viking, 2008), 38 and Merry E. Wiesner, *Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2007), 1.

³ Levack, *The Witch-Hunt*, 2-3.

discovered an almost universal belief “from intellectuals to peasants,” as Joseph Klaits has explained, “in the reality of invisible spirits, both angelic and demonic.”⁴

An examination of their “invisible world” helps the twenty-first century observer better understand not only the stunning outbreak of witchcraft trials in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in Western Europe, but also it provides another window through which one can view the social relations, values, and attitudes of the people who populated the continent’s villages.

To begin, it is important to note the sources that historians have drawn upon to investigate the beliefs of people who largely have left no personal paper trail. There are, for example, few diaries or letters of ordinary folk from the early modern era. Instead, historians have tended to rely upon court records, wills, sermons, the accounts of church wardens, and “what contemporary observers said people thought and did.”⁵

Increasingly, however, scholars also have examined what people may have read as an indicator of their beliefs. Beyond the proliferation of Bibles (there were about a half million copies of Luther’s German Bible by 1574 and 600,000 Bibles available in England six decades later), inexpensive publications became increasingly popular in the early seventeenth century. Broadsides, pamphlets, almanacs, catechisms, chapbooks, ballads, and penny “godlies” were readily available in urban book stalls, and in the countryside, peddlers became a common presence hawking the latest “little books.”⁶

Even those who could not read, and estimates for literate Europeans in the seventeenth century range only from a quarter to half of adults, had a chance to discuss the publications with the literate in churches, coffee houses, taverns, and town squares. For the diligent researcher, as Margaret Spufford has shown, these publications offer “valuable clues” in the quest to “reconstruct the mental world” of early modern Europeans.⁷

Drawing upon all these types of sources, it is evident that in both Roman Catholic and Protestant areas, most people were at least superficially Christian. However, parishioners

⁴ Joseph Klaits, *Servants of Satan: The Age of the Witch Hunts* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 3.

⁵ Christopher Haigh, *The Plain Man’s Pathways to Heaven: Kinds of Christianity in Post-Reformation England, 1570-1640* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 6-7.

⁶ Geoffrey Parker, *Success is Never Final: Empire, War, and Faith in Early Modern Europe* (New York: Basic Books, 2002), 231; Larry Gragg, *The Quaker Community on Barbados: Challenging the Culture of the Planter Class* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2009), 13; Margaret Spufford, “Portraits of Society: Popular Fiction in 17th-Century England,” *History Today*, 32 (February 1982), 11-12; Margaret Spufford, “The Pedlar, the Historian and the Folklorist: Seventeenth Century Communications,” *Folklore*, 105 (1994), 14; and David D. Hall, *Worlds of Wonder, Days of Judgment: Popular Religious Belief in Early New England* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1989), 72-73.

⁷ Parker, *Success is Never Final*, 232 and Spufford, “Portraits of Society,” 12.

regularly frustrated their spiritual leaders with their shallow understanding of the faith. To be sure, they exhibited a belief in God and in a heaven and a hell, but often little understanding of Christianity beyond that. For example, Martin Luther in the 1520s claimed the “common man” in Saxony villages knew “absolutely nothing about Christian doctrine.” A sixteenth-century English observer wrote that many in the parish “let the Preacher speake never so plaine, although they sit and looke him in the face, yet if ye enquire of them so soone as they be out at the church dores, ye shall easily perceive that (as the common saying is) it went in at the one eare, and out at the other.”⁸ A minister in Kent, England, in the early seventeenth century wrote that only about one in ten of his parishioners “knew the basics of Protestant doctrine.”

As late as the mid-seventeenth century, Geoffrey Parker has written, “Protestant leaders, from almost all countries, execrated in similar terms the ‘incorrigible profanity of the multitude’ who seemed totally, almost congenitally, incapable of learning and remembering Christian doctrine.”⁹ To be sure, there was much hyperbole in the critiques offered by frustrated clergymen, but through the seventeenth century, such comments were common.

Poor attendance at worship exacerbated the situation. There were instances of excellent attendance, most often in urban areas, but in most parishes, packed pews were uncommon. One English clergyman in 1572 noted, for example, “A man may find the churches empty, saving the minister and two or four lame, and old folke.”¹⁰ Six decades later, another clergyman complained that parishioners went “ten times to an Alehouse before they goe once to a church.” The worst attendance was among the poorest parishioners who seldom were present except to marry, baptize their children, and bury family members.¹¹

Englishman Arthur Dent spoke for many whether they faithfully attended or rarely attended worship services when he wrote in his *The Plaine Man’s Path-way to Heaven* of the ease of attaining salvation: “If a man say his Lords prayer, his tenne Commaundements, and his beleefe, and keepe them, and say no body no harme, nor doo no bodie no harme, and doo as he would bee done too, have a good faith to Godward, and be a man of Gods beleefe, no doubt he shall be saved.”¹²

For the largely rural population, beyond their generally limited understanding of the Christian faith and the challenges of understanding salvation, there was a long oral tradition, often embellished with each generation, about creatures that could affect their lives. There

⁸ Quoted in Patrick Collinson, *The Religion of Protestants: The Church in English Society, 1559-1625* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 201.

⁹ Parker, *Success is Never Final*, 226 and 238 and Susan Doran and Christopher Dunston, *Princes, Pastors, and People: The Church and Religion in England, 1529-1689* (London: Routledge, 1991), 82.

¹⁰ Jon Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People*, paperback edition (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 19.

¹¹ Keith Wrightson, *English Society, 1580-1680* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1982), 213 and 220.

¹² Quoted in Barry Reay, *Popular Cultures in England 1550-1750* (London: Longman, 1998), 97-98.

appeared to be a near “universal” belief in elves and fairies, non-human creatures that could be, in turn, malicious or helpful. They might abduct babies, intimidate travelers, or sicken domestic animals or, on the other hand, they might bring riches to the fortunate. As Brian Moynahan has shown, “Country lore was rich in hobgoblins, imps, fairies, pixies, and elves. Animal ‘familiars’ were held to be able to divine the future.”¹³

“Wonder stories,” as historians Alexandra Walsham and David Hall have discussed, were another tool used by the people of the early modern era to understand their world. The stories were “wondrous” because they often were based upon apparitions people saw in the heavens. “Phantom armies,” Walsham has written, “appeared high above hundreds of continental cities in the course of the period. Charging cavalry were discerned in the firmament near Nuremberg in 1554 and over Croatia in 1605, while a vision above Poland in January 1581 incorporated an ominous funeral procession of hooded black figures.”

But what did the myriad apparitions mean? To the clergy and their devout followers, the extraordinary images represented “sermons inscribed by the finger of God in the sky.” Clergymen drew upon these “signs” to explain God’s plan for his earthly followers and to emphasize God’s sovereignty.¹⁴ This divine order in the universe rather than occult forces, the clergy told their parishioners, explained the seemingly capricious events in humans’ lives. Whether it was poor harvests, the survival of a child in a village decimated by a plague, or the destruction of an earthquake, these were results of the intervention of a just God – not demons, other gods, or magicians.¹⁵

Yet the men of the cloth remained frustrated by a population who rejected their sermons about a sovereign God and who turned instead to a wide array of practitioners of magic.

English clergyman Robert Burton complained, “Sorcerers are too common.” One could find “cunning men, wizards and white witches...in every village.” The Puritan minister William Perkins agreed. “As the ministers of God do give resolution to the conscience, in matters doubtful and difficult,” he wrote, “so the ministers of Satan, under the name of wise-men, and wise-women, are at hand...to resolve, direct and help ignorant and unsettled persons in cases of distraction, loss, or other outward calamities.”¹⁶

Across the Atlantic, in Puritan Massachusetts, many people went to fortune tellers, used charms, and practiced astrology. The Boston minister Cotton Mather complained that too

¹³ Brian Moynahan, *The Faith: A History of Christianity* (New York: Doubleday, 2002), 492. Jacqueline Simpson is excellent in discussing the folklore of this era. See her “Rural Folklore,” in Jerome Blum, ed., *Our Forgotten Past: Seven Centuries on the Land* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1982), 157-172.

¹⁴ Alexandra Walsham, “Sermons in the Sky: Apparitions in Early Modern Europe,” *History Today*, 51 (April 2001), 57-59 and Hall, *Worlds of Wonder*, 71.

¹⁵ John Walter, “The Commons and Their Mental Worlds,” in John Morrill, ed. *The Oxford Illustrated History of Tudor and Stuart Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 192 and Alexandra Walsham, *Providence in Early Modern England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 21.

¹⁶ Quoted in Larry Gragg, *The Salem Witch Crisis* (New York: Praeger, 1992), 8.

many of his fellow colonists “would often cure hurts with spells, and practice detestable conjurations with sieves and keys, and peas, and nails...to learn the things for which they had a forbidden and impious curiosity.” Because of these experiments, he concluded, “the minds of many had been so poisoned” that they turned to the practice of witchcraft.¹⁷

Ordinary folks in Europe most often identified witchcraft with *maleficia*, or malice toward individuals, their families, or their property. They worried about neighbors who might be using occult powers to destroy their crops, kill their livestock, or sicken their children. It was a commonly held belief that practitioners of *maleficia* could torment someone by sticking pins or needles into the wax image of someone. There is little evidence that they saw some Satanic plot against Christianity in the instances of malice, let alone that they believed they were crossing an unacceptable line in resorting to counter magic or charms to ward off the malice. “For human sickness,” Jacqueline Simpson found, “one should make a ‘witch bottle’ by filling a bottle with the victim’s urine plus pins or thread, or boiling it.” This technique allegedly prompted a witch to lift her spell because of the pain she endured from the counter magic.¹⁸

This widespread resort to the occult carried significant negative implications for clergymen. It reflected more than religious indifference; rather, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, they struggled to eliminate popular religious beliefs, particularly about magic and *maleficia* that suggested Satan and his earthly agents could intrude upon God’s sovereignty. “It is simply impossible,” English author John Webster wrote, “for either the devil or witches to change or alter the course that god hath set in nature.”¹⁹

New England Puritan Samuel Willard offered a variation on that theme, one that acknowledged that Satan could play havoc with the divinely ordered universe, but only if God permitted it. “God is the Supream Governour over the whole World,” he wrote, “and though the Devils are risen up in rebellion against him, yet he holds them in his hands, curbs in their rage, and lets it out as and when he pleaseth.”²⁰

Against this backdrop of conflicting views of the forces in control of the “Invisible World,” a wide-ranging assault on witchcraft developed in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. For most of the Christian era, witchcraft had actually posed little threat to the Church. While Christian leaders condemned all magic including witchcraft, most of their focus was upon explaining its “illusory nature.”²¹

¹⁷ Quoted in Ibid, 9.

¹⁸ Simpson, “Rural Folklore,” 163.

¹⁹ Quoted in Edward Bever, “Witchcraft Prosecutions and the Decline of Magic,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 40 (Autumn, 2009), 276.

²⁰ Quoted in Richard Weisman, “Witchcraft and Puritan Beliefs,” in Elaine G. Breslaw, ed., *Witches of the Atlantic World: A Historical Reader & Primary Sourcebook* (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 79.

²¹ Bever, “Witchcraft Prosecutions,” 265.

Indeed, the Church did not issue its first important statement on witchcraft until around 900 A.D. The *Canon Episcopi*, which was a letter of instructions to bishops on how to deal with witches, acknowledged that some people believed in witchcraft, but dismissed its reality while acknowledging the reality of Satan and other demons. It noted that there were “some wicked women” who had “been seduced by the illusions and phantasms of demons” and believed that in the night “they ride upon certain beasts with Diana, the goddess of pagans, and an innumerable multitude of women.” Yet it was just that, only an illusion. Such people should be punished, but not through a trial. Instead, if a bishop were to “find a man or woman follower of this wicked sect” the Church instructed them “to eject them foully disgraced from their parishes.”²²

However, religious and secular leaders, beginning in the late fifteenth century, began to worry about an organized cult of witches, a heretical threat to Christianity. Indeed, in 1484, Pope Innocent VIII condemned witchcraft as heresy.

Within two years, Heinrich Kramer and Jacob Sprenger, Dominican inquisitors, published a manual for fellow inquisitors. Their *Malleus Maleficarum* (*The Hammer of Witches*), endorsed by Innocent VIII, was the first major treatise on witchcraft. Over the next four decades, the *Malleus Maleficarum* was reprinted often and other books on witchcraft soon followed.

By the early 1600s, a remarkable collective new picture had emerged about witchcraft.

Rather than simply performing random acts of malice toward their neighbors, witches and wizards, in this new narrative accepted by many religious and secular leaders across the continent, rejected Christianity and made league with Satan. They flew to mass meetings, often called sabbats, where they “parodied the mass” and stole “communion wafers and unbaptized babies to use in their rituals” before signing a pact with Satan, copulating with their new master, and pledging to do evil in a campaign to destroy Christianity.²³

As Brian Levack and other scholars have made clear, “We still do not have any evidence that either a witch cult or a group of persons performing some ritual that was interpreted as witchcraft actually existed.”²⁴ Nonetheless, authorities believed that such a force was threatening their society, and from the late 1500s, governments across the continent passed laws making the practice of witchcraft a capital crime, and many of those laws allowed the use of torture.

²² “Regino of Prum: A Warning to Bishops, the *Canon Episcopi* (ca. 906),” in Alan Charles Kors and Edward Peters, eds., *Witchcraft in Europe, 400-1700: A Documentary History*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000), 60-62.

²³ Klaitis, *Servants of Satan*, 2 and Wiesner, *Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe*, 1.

²⁴ Levack, *The Witch-Hunt*, 18.

To be sure, there were skeptics who challenged this continent-wide rush to criminalize an age-old practice. Two Germans, Jesuit priest Friedrich Spee and physician Johann Weyer; French essayist and Renaissance philosopher Michael Montaigne; and English gentleman Reginald Scot all wrote about their concerns with witchcraft prosecutions. Weyer's publications, *De Praestigiss Daemonum* (1563) and *De Lamiis* (1582), were among the earliest challenges to the legal proceedings against the accused. Although he acknowledged that the Devil was real, Weyer argued that the accused were deluded people who only believed that they had signed a pact with the Prince of Darkness. As a consequence, people should not be prosecuted for an evil that only existed in their imagination. They needed treatment for their delusions, not prosecution.²⁵

Spee, who published *Cautio Criminalis seu de processibus contra sagas liber* in 1631, was appalled at the credulity of the population when it came to matters of the occult.

"It is incredible," he wrote, "what superstitions, jealousies, lies, slurs, mutterings, and the like there are among the common people in Germany." It seemed "God no longer does anything, nor nature, but everything is done by witches." And he found the leaders no better. He declares: when "everyone shouts with great passion" about the threat posed by occult forces, "the princes therefore command their judges and counselors to begin to try witches."

Particularly pernicious in Spee's view was the use of judicial torture.²⁶

Montaigne, after questioning an accused witch, concluded, "It is putting a high price on one's conjectures to have a man roasted alive because of them."²⁷ Indeed, the French skeptic ridiculed authorities who vigorously promoted witchcraft prosecutions. "The witches of my neighborhood," he wrote, "are in mortal danger every time some new author comes along and attests to the reality of their visions."²⁸ Reginald Scot explained that he wrote *Discoverie of Witchcraft* (1584) on "behalf of the poore, the aged and the simple."²⁹

He viewed the women accused of practicing witchcraft as "old, lame, bleary-eyed, pale, foul, and full of wrinkles; poor, sullen, superstitious, and papists, or such as know no religion." More importantly, similar to Montaigne, Scot argued that most of the evidence

²⁵ Ibid, 56 and Robin Briggs, *Witches & Neighbors: The Social and Cultural Context of European Witchcraft*, paperback ed. (New York: Viking, 1996), 104.

²⁶ "Friedrich Spee: A Condemnation of Torture, 1631," in Brian P. Levack, ed., *The Witchcraft Sourcebook* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 145-152 and Gunter Jerouschek, "Friedrich Spee, 1591-1635," in Richard M. Golden, ed., *Encyclopedia of Witchcraft: The Western Tradition* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2006), IV, 1076.

²⁷ Quoted in Edward Peters, *Inquisition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 160.

²⁸ Jonathan L. Pearl, "Michel de Montaigne, 1533-1592," in Golden, ed., *Encyclopedia of Witchcraft*, III, 780 and "Michel de Montaigne: 'Concerning Cripples,' (1588)," in Kors and Peters, eds., *Witchcraft in Europe*, 404.

²⁹ Quoted in Philip C. Almond, *England's First Demonologist: Reginald Scot and 'The Discoverie of Witchcraft'* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2011), 9

brought against the accused was “frivolous,” largely “guesses, presumptions, and impossibilities contrary to reason, scripture, and nature.”³⁰

Over time more critics emerged, including materialist and political philosopher Thomas Hobbes who in his major work *Leviathan* (1651) challenged all assertions of spiritual or supernatural causation and criticized “rude people” for their beliefs in “fairies, ghosts, and goblins, and of the power of witches.”³¹ In 1692, Thomas Brattle, a Boston, Massachusetts merchant and member of the British Royal Society, echoed Weyer’s arguments when he asserted that those who confessed in the Salem witch prosecutions largely were “distracted, crazed women” and their contentions that they attended sabbats, with their “mock sacraments” truly reflected no “reality.”³²

Yet the early skeptics had little impact on the secular and religious leaders pursuing the campaign against the Devil and his agents on earth. Indeed, they too became targets of attack. In 1597, King James VI of Scotland even took the time to write a book entitled *Daemonologie* in response to Reginald Scot’s views.

Ironically, the scores of tragic witchcraft cases have given historians remarkably helpful material in their quest to understand social relations in early modern Europe.

Most of those accused of witchcraft lived in small villages where people interacted with neighbors on a daily basis. They were face-to-face communities where most knew everyone else. Living in close proximity accentuated the likelihood of conflict. Arguments over trespassing and begging and disputes over boundaries, livestock, or even insults often created long-standing ill will among neighbors. These disputes frequently played a role in charges of *maleficia*.³³

Two examples from the 1692 Salem, Massachusetts, episode demonstrate the link between disputes and witchcraft charges.

Samuel and Mary Abbey testified that they had boarded a poor woman named Sarah Good “out of charity.” However, they told prosecutors that Good was so “spiteful” and “maliciously bent” that they forced her to leave their home. Over two years later, the Abbeys’ livestock began dying in “an unusual manner” and they believed that a vindictive Sarah Good had used witchcraft to get her revenge against the Abbeys for casting her aside.

In the case of Bridget Bishop, a man named John Londer testified that about eight years earlier he “had some controversy” with Bishop “about her fowls that used to come into our orchards or garden.” Not long after their confrontations he claimed that he was awakened

³⁰ Quoted in “Reginald Scot: The Unreality of Witchcraft, 1584,” in Levack, ed., *Witchcraft Sourcebook*, 286 and Briggs, *Witches & Neighbors*, 20.

³¹ Edward Peters, “Thomas Hobbes,” in Golden, ed., *Encyclopedia of Witchcraft*, II, 498-499 and “Thomas Hobbes: The Nature of Demons, 1651,” in Levack, ed., *Witchcraft Sourcebook*, 300.

³² Thomas Brattle, “A Multitude of Errors,” in Breslaw, ed., *Witches of the Atlantic World*, 418.

³³ Levack, *The Witch-Hunt*, 120 and Walter, “The Commons,” 194.

one night by “a great weight” on his chest and he saw the “likeness” of Bishop. Bishop’s specter choked Londer who claimed that he “had no strength or power . . . to resist.”³⁴

These two examples illustrate one of the most significant facts discovered about the witchcraft prosecutions. Women were much more vulnerable targets than men when people began hurling accusations of witchcraft. There were a few places like Finland, Estonia, Iceland, Russia, and Normandy where men were a majority of the accused. Overall, however, more than seventy-five percent of the accused were women. Indeed, in a few German villages, all the adult women were accused of practicing witchcraft.³⁵

In the last three decades of the twentieth-century several radical feminists concluded that such a disproportionate number of women among the accused surely represented, as Anne Llewellyn Barstow wrote in 1994, “an intentional mass murder of women.”³⁶

For many of these authors, the late fifteenth-century publication of the *Malleus Maleficarum* was an important point of departure.

The book truly is a misogynistic rant.

Authors Kramer and Sprenger argued that “there was a defect in the formation of the first woman, since she was formed from a bent rib.” This made them necessarily “more superstitious” and “more impressionable” than men. Moreover, “they are feebler both in mind and body” with “weak memories.” Because of these inherent weaknesses, the authors claimed “a wicked woman is by her nature quicker to waver in her faith and, consequently, quicker to abjure the faith, which is the root of witchcraft.” To make matters worse, “all witchcraft comes from carnal lust, which is in women insatiable” and “for the sake of fulfilling their lusts they consort even with devils.”³⁷

Building upon the bile they discovered in the *Malleus*, radical feminists have gone on to argue that witchcraft prosecutions were, in part, an effort to stop women who were challenging their patriarchal society particularly “independent women...who had spiritual knowledge or were midwives, herbalists, or healers.”³⁸

³⁴ Paul Boyer and Stephen Nissenbaum, eds., *Salem-Village Witchcraft: A Documentary Record of Local Conflict in Colonial New England*, second ed. (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1993), 14, 15, and 45.

³⁵ Alison Rowlands, “Witchcraft and Gender in Early Modern Europe,” in Brian Levack, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe and Colonial America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 449 and Merry Wiesner-Hanks, “Gender,” Golden, ed., *Encyclopedia of Witchcraft*, II, 407

³⁶ Anne Llewellyn Barstow, *Witchcraze: A New History of the European Witch Hunts* (San Francisco: Pandora, 1994), 26. Also, see Andrea Dworkin, “Gynocide: The Witches,” in *Woman Hating* (New York: Dutton, 1974), 118-150; Marianne Hester, *Lewd Women and Wicked Witches: A Study of the Dynamics of Male Domination* (London: Routledge, 1992); and Selma R. Williams, *Riding the Nightmare: Women & Witchcraft from the Old World to Colonial Salem* (New York: Atheneum, 1978).

³⁷ Heinrich Kramer and Jacob Sprenger, “Why Women are Chiefly Addicted to Evil Superstitions,” in Breslaw, ed., *Witches of the Atlantic World*, 290-293

³⁸ Wiesner-Hanks, “Gender,” 407.

In recent years, scholars have become increasingly critical of this narrative. As Alison Rowlands has explained, “Academic historians...are dismissive of such interpretations, criticizing radical feminists for their assumption that witch-hunting was ‘woman-hunting,’ their over-reliance on the *Malleus*, their unwillingness to engage with manuscript records of witch trials, and their ahistorical use of the terms misogyny and patriarchy.” For example, there is not good evidence that authorities specifically targeted healers and mid-wives in their witchcraft prosecutions.³⁹ It is also true that negative characterizations of women predated the large witch hunts and continued to prevail in the era after the decline of widespread witch prosecutions.

Still, feminist accounts have been helpful particularly in making the unmistakable case of male domination in the drafting, implementing, and enforcing of laws dealing with witchcraft. After all, even though women often were among the accusers in witchcraft trials, the legislators, prosecutors, judges, inquisitors, juries and executioners were all men.⁴⁰

It is also true that women, particularly widows, who had inherited land, seemed to be a challenge to a society that had an expectation that property would always remain under male control and sometimes that made them vulnerable to charges of witchcraft, especially if they failed to defer to men or had particularly aggressive personalities.⁴¹

One intriguing line of inquiry has to do with other areas of life where women faced a “general criminalization of female behavior.” As Merry Wiesner-Hanks has explained, “along with witchcraft, accusations of women for other types of crimes also increased during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, particularly gender-related ones such as prostitution or infanticide.” Some scholars have seen this trend as another indicator of the efforts of men to control women.⁴²

Historians have struggled, however, to explain why older women were more vulnerable to accusations of practicing witchcraft than younger women.

For a generation, many accepted the view offered by Alan Macfarlane and Keith Thomas who argued, as the case of Sarah Good above illustrated, that Englishmen believed that older poor women were becoming increasingly marginalized by a capitalist economic system that was displacing a more communitarian ethos. Their kind had once been able to rely upon the assistance of their more fortunate neighbors, but now those neighbors increasingly rejected their pleas for alms and many assumed that the poor would be tempted to use the occult to gain revenge against their wealthier neighbors.

³⁹ Rowlands, “Witchcraft and Gender in Early Modern Europe,” 451-452.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 453 and Wiesner-Hanks, “Gender,” 407.

⁴¹ Richard Godbeer, *The Salem Witch Hunt: A Brief History with Documents* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martins, 2011), 12. Carol F. Karlson has developed this line of argument the best. See her *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman: Witchcraft in Colonial New England* (New York: Norton, 1987).

⁴² Wiesner-Hanks, “Gender,” 411.

Some in France agreed. Magistrate Nicholas Remy, for example, argued in his 1595 work *Daemonolatreiae libri tres*, that witches by and large were “beggars, who support life on the alms they receive.” Yet, other interpretations have modified that view. “Older people,” Brian Levack has observed, “especially if they were senile, often manifested signs of eccentric or anti-social behavior” and such actions made them targets of accusations.⁴³

It is also likely that it took several years for women to develop a reputation for dabbling in the occult and necessarily did not face accusations until later in life. Since wives usually out-lived their husbands, elderly widows often had no spouse to defend them in court against charges of practicing magic or witchcraft.

Over time, the aging spinster or widowed witch became a caricature, one that put many women at risk. In Chelmsford, England, for example, during a witch hunt many villagers were willing to suspect “every old woman with a wrinkled face, a furred brow, a hairy lip, a squint eye, a squeaking voice, or a scolding tongue, a skull cap on her head, a spindle in her hand, a dog or cat by her side.”⁴⁴

The work of historians in the past couple of generations, then, has given us a prototype of the most vulnerable to witchcraft accusations during the early modern era in Europe. Brian Levack has summarized it well: A witch was “hardly a typical villager. Older and poorer than average, and more often than not unmarried, she did not adhere to the traditional behavioural standards of her community or of her sex. Cranky, acerbic and often angry about her plight, she attracted attention, hostility, suspicion and fear.”⁴⁵

After almost two centuries of prosecutions, the witch hunts in Europe ended in the late 1600s. Most people still believed in witchcraft. The intellectual elite became ever-more skeptical if not dismissive, but some prominent late eighteenth-century Englishmen like Dr. Samuel Johnson and jurist William Blackstone still acknowledged a belief in witchcraft. Further, Owen Davies has pointed out “there is no evidence to suggest that there was a decrease in the number of complaints to justices.”⁴⁶ However, judges and other secular leaders increasingly became skeptical of the excesses evident in so many of the large witch hunts.

As Edward Bever has shown, a sufficient number of leaders “in Western and Central Europe . . . had lost their certainty about the prevalence, if not the potency, of maleficium; the danger, if not the existence, of a diabolical conspiracy; and the practicality, if not the possibility, of identifying and punishing those involved in either pursuit.”⁴⁷ After

⁴³ Rowlands, “Witchcraft and Gender in Early Modern Europe,” 460 and Levack, *The Witch-Hunt*, 129 and 134.

⁴⁴ Quoted in Gragg, *Witch Crisis*, 12.

⁴⁵ Levack, *The Witch-Hunt*, 139.

⁴⁶ Owen Davies, “Witchcraft: The Spell That Didn’t Break,” *History Today*, 49 (August 1999), 8.

⁴⁷ Bever, “Witchcraft Prosecutions,” 263.

generations of trying to eradicate witchcraft, secular leaders in Europe simply concluded that there was no reasonable way to try witches and repealed the statutes prohibiting its practice.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.