

10-1-2013

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Recommended Citation

Hanna, Sharon (2013) "Constructing the Wicked Witch: Discourses of Power in the Witch-Hunts of Early Modern Germany," *The Great Lakes Journal of Undergraduate History*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 1 , Article 5.

Available at: <https://scholar.uwindsor.ca/gljuh/vol1/iss1/5>

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Constructing the Wicked Witch: Discourses of Power in the Witch-Hunts of Early Modern Germany

Cover Page Footnote

Sharon Hanna was born and raised in Windsor, Ontario, and attended the University of Windsor pursuing a degree in Arts and Science. As an interdisciplinary student, Sharon focused on history but also enjoyed a minor in biological sciences. Influenced by undergraduate research into inner colonization and ethnic identity, Sharon will be pursuing a Masters in History beginning in Fall 2013 at the University of Windsor.

Constructing the Wicked Witch: Discourses of Power in the Witch-Hunts of Early Modern Germany

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For the people of early modern Germany, the witch was not the cackling menace of fairytales or myth, but a real-life scourge on society that needed to be purged from their lives. As humans who had succumbed to the devil's seduction, witches were the manifestation of demonic presence that had infiltrated everyday experience. It became society's mission to eradicate these insidious influences through aggressive witch-hunts, which at times reached such a furor that this period is remembered as a "witch-craze".¹ However, these hunts were not driven by indiscriminate mass hysteria. Instead, the female sex was systematically identified as the threat. In Germany, women made up over two-thirds of those prosecuted or executed.²

Thus, women's historians have argued that the witch-hunts cannot be understood without using gender as a category of analysis, in addition to other perspectives of race, class, or culture. Using this framework, it becomes obvious that these witch-hunts were less about magic or heresy and more the expression of a contested power relationship between the sexes.³ In a public display of male dominance, the witch-hunts turned female exertions of power into criminal behaviour – creating a social construction that exploited fears over the supernatural to ensure gender conformity.

I argue that the witch hunts of sixteenth and seventeenth-century Germany evolved into the manifestation of a gendered power struggle as the male hierarchy attempted to re-assert their authority in a context of religious upheaval and class conflict. Contemporary texts such as *Malleus Maleficarum*, trial records, and letters between religious elites demonstrate that women were targeted as witches due to the fact that their societal roles were perceived as threats to the established power relationship between the sexes. The portrayals of witches as malevolent mothers, heretics, and sexual deviants were accusations levied by an insecure patriarchal structure to subjugate women who were not conforming to increasingly conservative paradigms of femininity. I ground my arguments in historiographical context, followed by exploring the general atmosphere in which the witch-hunts started. I show that an anxious German male hierarchy used the pretext of the language and values around witchcraft as a way to exert social control over male-female power relationships and reinforce conventional domestic ideals in a context of socio-political uncertainty.

There is a significant body of literature on early modern witchcraft. Yet, as Anne Barstow and Elspeth Whitney argue, most historians have neglected to adopt gender as a category of analysis to

understand the witch-hunts until more recently. Barstow suggests that scholars have dismissed gender in favour of other analytical frameworks that explained the witch-hunts exclusively in terms of class, religious upheaval, or rising nationalism.⁴ Whitney further argues that these historians excused the fact that witches were women as “unproblematic” due to an ancient paradigm of misogyny that was prevalent in Western societies.⁵ She refutes this explanation by demonstrating that women in early modern Europe faced unprecedented persecution due to a newfound association of the female sex with deviance from the natural order.⁶ Early historians did not fully acknowledge the centrality of gender to witchcraft or explore women’s experiences within the socio-political context that created the hunts.

Due to the rising influence of women’s history, scholars in the mid-1980s began to examine the female characterization of the witch as a central component to the European witch-hunts.⁷ However, the exploration of the interaction between witchcraft, gender, and power is in its early stages and lacks in-depth analysis or focus. For example, Brian Levack’s work, *The Witch-Hunt in Early Modern Europe* only briefly discusses “male anxiety” over female sexual prowess.⁸ E. Monter’s study of French and Swiss witchcraft suggests that witchcraft accusations were the projections of male fears over the social capabilities of atypical women, but does not explore the concept further.⁹ Similarly, Robert Muchembled highlights women’s importance as transmitters of culture – a position that afford them societal influence, but fails to discuss its implications on male-female relationships in witchcraft.¹⁰ However, feminist historians like Marianne Hester are advancing research towards greater focus on power relationships as she sees the hunts as eroticized domination of men over women.¹¹ Scholars, like Hester, have begun to recognize that inter-gender power was an important dimension to the witch-hunts. I too follow suit, by examining

how the patriarchy constructed the character of the witch with the purpose of subordinating non-conformist women.

The witch-crazes of sixteenth and seventeenth-century Germany arose in a context of political flux and religious instability. Germany was not a unified state, but rather a loose conglomeration of independently ruled duchies and kingdoms with poorly defined political and legal boundaries. It was a violent era, with the German peasant's revolt in the early 1520s to the bloody Thirty Years War from 1618 to 1648.¹² Economically, society faced agricultural crisis, rising inflation, and disease epidemics which destabilized the workforce.¹³ This situation was exacerbated by high religious passions in the wake of the Reformation, as territories were divided between Catholic and Protestant factions. Clearly, this was a society in crisis. Historian Lyndal Roper argues that this "chaotic landscape" prompted a conservative backlash in the Counter-Reformation of the late sixteenth century. The lands with the most violent witch-crafts were ruled by Catholic prince-bishops, who were militantly trying to regain authority. Leaders recognized that their traditional bases of power were being challenged; thus, they sought to invent a tangible internal threat that would mobilize and unite citizens to protect society.¹⁴ The female witch was constructed as the enemy, but really she was the embodiment of male anxiety over their seceding grip on power.

Considering the destabilized political context, the dynamics within the male power structure itself had important implications for the witch-hunts. Letters between famous inquisitor Heinrich Institoris and monk Wolfgang Heimstöckl reveal that leaders of the male power structure were not immune to gender anxiety. After being commissioned to witch-hunting by his superiors Institoris and the Bishop, Heimstöckl acts upon his new holy vocation by rebuking his male subordinate, a local priest in Abensberg, for his lack of action

against female witches in his parish. Interestingly, Heimstöckl ridicules the priest, suggesting that he was intimidated by the witches' potential retaliations and berating him for being "more afraid of elderly women than God."¹⁵ Not only did the male hierarchy disseminate the female definition of the witch, but also they used accusations of deficient masculinity to motivate their members. I propose that the strongly gendered language within these texts support the idea that early modern men were experiencing a crisis of masculinity. An occurrence not uncommon in historical record, this 'crisis' saw the context of social change exacerbate inherent male insecurities over the definition of their sexuality and their gender roles in society. One result was the need to vilify the female sex as being more susceptible to witchcraft, as a way to reaffirm their paradigm of male gender superiority. It is interesting to note that one of the authors, Heinrich Institoris, is actually a pseudonym. His real name, Heinrich Kramer, reveals that he is a co-author of the infamous *Malleus Maleficarum*.¹⁶ This benchmark text defined witches as women and associated the female gender with negative sexuality. Thus, Kramer is important not only as a cultural disseminator in Europe but a key member of the German patriarchy whose chauvinistic views permeated down even to the local parish. The influence of leaders like Kramer and their sexually-charged messages further evidences an atmosphere of male sexual fear and female scapegoating.

In order to understand why the witch was seen as such a threat to society, I consider women's lived experience in early modern Germany. The roles for women were dictated by leading humanists, scientists, and religious thinkers who believed that women were biologically inferior, relegating them to a life of domesticity. Historian Margaret Sommerville calls this the "basis of subjection" that manifested in everyday relationships between husbands, wives, children,

and society at large, as well as in sex, marriage, and reproduction.¹⁷ Even in the private sphere, a man held ultimate authority which was a divine right given to his gender by God. Women were intended to be mothers and housewives; work outside the home was discouraged and devalued.¹⁸ However, not all women conformed to these values. Historian Eugene Bever argues that despite the oppressive context, some women began to make active assertions of power within their social realms by using poison, exacting revenge, or even resorting to domestic violence. While it is important to note that these acts were uncommon, Bever characterizes these were everyday forms of aggression. Women lacked real power or influence in the male-dominated legal system, leaving them within the domestic sphere to execute their own justice within their means.¹⁹ These disorderly women, though outliers of society, signaled a development that male authority feared. Women were breaking out of their conventional feminine roles, creating a potential challenge to their power monopoly.

The last important context to consider is that of witchcraft itself on the question of how women became witches. Scholar Sigrid Brauner claims that only after the watershed publication of the *Malleus Maleficarum* by papal inquisitors Heinrich Kramer and Jakob Sprenger in 1487 did witchcraft become gender-specific.²⁰ *Malleus* elevated the folk-based medieval narrative of witchcraft by Kramer's religious-charged claims to know the identity of the witch through his personal experiences with hunts and trials. In short, witchcraft was a sin of the female sex and the source of societal degradation. A widely read treatise on witchcraft, the *Malleus* asserted that all women had the potential to be witches due to their weak minds, "slippery tongues," feeble bodies, and innate moral failings. Most importantly, they concluded that "all witchcraft comes from carnal lust, which in women is insatiable."²¹ By arguing that *all* women had the potential to

be witches, men were encouraged to perceive women as the weaker sex and exert power over them if they appeared to be succumbing to their natural vice of witchcraft. It rationalized male domination over all women, witch or not. Furthermore, the text provides instructions for female witch trials, most notably details on strip searches, torture, and ways to recognize a witch – such as her inability to cry.²² It can be seen that the objective was to diminish the power of women through violence and humiliation, while establishing the male judiciary as the rightful supreme authority. The *Malleus Maleficarum* was a strongly misogynistic text that became the standard guide for witch-hunting and provided the ideological foundation for the patriarchy's actions towards women.

Each of the different portrayals of the witch indicates an area where the male hierarchy perceived a potential for female power that needed to be suppressed. First, discourses reinforcing the role of the witch as a malevolent mother were dominant in village trials. Changing religious paradigms had reinvigorated the idea of motherhood as women's "special vocation" from God. Thus, early modern society directly connected the health and wellbeing of children with the quality of the mother's care. This new social construction of motherhood led to renewed male fears over maternal power, particularly the possibility of "malevolent nurture" to corrupt or damage children.²³ They were alarmed at the fact that women had primary control over impressionable male youth, from suckling to early childhood. The male power structure portrayed the witch as the antithesis of a good Christian wife, as she would care for her demonic imps but murder human children at the bidding of the devil.²⁴ The witch as a mother became the fixation of many trials, as men tried to regulate the one area of life that women, by nature, had a role of power.

The fears of the patriarchal authority over this 'dangerous'

female responsibility is evidenced in the witch trials, as many witches were indicted on charges relating to motherhood. For example, a trial transcript from 1637 records the confessions, extracted by torture, of a woman identified as N.N. She admits to poisoning her own daughter at the bidding of the Devil. Furthermore, she exhumed her child's body many years later, taking the remains and having "stirred them for two days and nights...pounded them into a powder, and gave it to the Devil."²⁵ Other trials indicate an obsessive level of attention paid to the witch's teat, signaling male apprehension over the possibility of contaminated milk affecting vulnerable male infants.²⁶ This trial evidence indicates that the witch was the projection of male anxiety over female influence in child-bearing and mothering. Women were only supposed to be the vessel for men's seed. They were to bear his children without influence or interference. Though grinding up bones is extreme, these examples illustrate that men were propagating the message that women did not always act in their child's best interest. Overall, the witch as a mother was identified as a source of female power and the male hierarchy responded by using crime and punishment to warn good Christian mothers to fulfill their duties under the dominion of their husbands.

The second portrayal of the witch by the male hierarchy was the heretic. The *Malleus Maleficarum* introduced witchcraft as synonymous with heresy, claiming that the witch's primary sin was her renunciation of God as her master.²⁷ Thus, even on the spiritual level, female-male power relationships are obvious. Female witches were disrupting the established order by denying God himself, leading to the conclusion that they would also usurp divinely ordained male leadership on earth. However, a witch was paradoxically seen as both a weak woman seduced by the Devil's wiles and as a heretic who knowingly and deliberately entered into an active demonic pact.²⁸ In

the spiritual realm, the witch was powerless and powerful at the same time. Regardless, the male hierarchy took advantage of a context of heightened religious sensitivities by painting the witch as the enemy of God. For example, in the afore mentioned trial, N.N. is said to have stolen a consecrated wafer, and stabbed it until it bled.²⁹ This reported desecration would have horrified the faithful of Germany and in their minds, justified the brutal suppression of these supposed blasphemous witches. As evidenced by the letters between Institoris and Heimstöckl, witch-hunters presented themselves as acting as God's representatives to rid the earth of the power of the "ancient serpent" who had persuaded "those of the female sex" to worship him. Heimstöckl was given the full powers of religious law – even excommunication – to use against any suspected witch.³⁰ For the German people, this meant that male religious leaders had the power to punish them for witchcraft not only in this life but eternally. Since women could be branded as heretic witches for being non-submissive wives or using birth control methods, this was an especially effective form of social control.³¹ Thus, the male power structure used a context of religious anxiety and tensions to send mixed messages about female power and reinstate themselves as the divinely ordained leaders and punishers.

Lastly, witches were portrayed as sexual deviants who performed erotic acts with the devil and were slave to their wild sexual appetites. Historian Hans Broedel argues that the *Malleus Maleficarum* not only gendered witches as women, but set a societal precedent by constructing an explicitly sexualized female witch. For Kramer and Sprenger, it was not enough for the witch to just worship the devil; instead, their relationship had to be established through sexual intercourse.³² Consistent with their weak nature and propensity for carnality, female witches would "excite themselves with the devil for

the sake of quenching their lust.³³ As a result, Broedel proposes a power system where men viewed women strictly as sexual beings with a set hierarchy. Thus, any perception of feminine deviance was extrapolated to be a threat against the established social order.³⁴ As men portrayed the witch as a highly sexualized being, this advocated for the control of women's bodies. They concluded that due to the weakness of their bodies and minds, women were inevitably susceptible to seduction by the devil and unbridled promiscuity. As a result, it was deemed a man's responsibility, as the stronger sex, to control and punish women.³⁵ The sexual dominance of husband over wife was a microcosm of the larger social order with proper male-female power relationships.

Witches personified "bad sexuality."³⁶ Instead of submissive, matrimonial intercourse, these women had sex with the devil to fulfill their passions and gain demonic power over men. Witches were notoriously blamed for causing male impotence, not only by preventing erections but often by the entire disappearance of the member.³⁷ Historian Gerhild Williams suggests that this action held particular significance due to early modern scientific thinking. Many believed that without a sexual organ positioned externally, a man faced the terrifying prospect of having being turned into a woman.³⁸ Clearly, the eroticized power of the witch signifies male anxiety over their own sexuality. If it could be so easily disrupted by a woman's magic, it follows that masculine sexuality was fragile and easily disturbed. However, using the excuse of witches' perversion, men used the witch-trials to assert their dominion over women's bodies and compensate for their own sexual anxiety. For example, a common practice was to conduct a highly invasive, public strip search for the "witch's mark" – a teat where her imps would suck – which was usually located in private areas.³⁹ Through this humiliating sexual assault, men proved

their dominance over female sexuality. Thus, in this realm, women had no rights to privacy and no power, not even over their own bodies.

The purpose of the gendered witch-hunts in sixteenth and seventeenth-century Germany were for the patriarchal order to reaffirm their position of power in male-female relationships. Men and women faced an uncertain future, as their lives were fraught with religious conflict, bloody wars, and economic uncertainty. With their bases of power destabilized, the male power structure constructed the female witch as the scapegoat for societal problems. Nonconformist women were targeted due to male anxiety over the usurping of their traditional roles. In all her manifestations as a malevolent mother, a depraved heretic, or a sexual deviant, the witch was meant to represent the negative extremes of womanhood. In actuality, these were areas where women could exert some form of power. Yet, since by nature all women were susceptible to witchcraft, men could use the witch-hunts as a reign of terror over their female counterparts, weeding out atypical women and reinforcing male authority and traditional sex roles through fear of punishment. The people of early modern Germany were urged to view witches as more than the old hags of the folklore and legend, but as a threat to their way of life. In reality, witches were women who had threatened men's established power.

Notes

1. Anne Barstow, *Witchcraze: A New History of the European Witch Hunts* (San Francisco: Pandora, 1994), 2, 49.
2. Anne Barstow, "On Studying Witchcraft as Women's History: A Historiography of the European Witch Persecutions," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 4 (1988): 7.
3. See Barstow, *Witchcraze*; Sigrid Brauner, *Fearless Wives & Frightened Shrews: The Construction of the Witch in Early Modern Germany* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995), 5; Lyndal Roper, "Stealing Manhood: Capitalism and Magic in Early Modern Germany," *Gender & History* 3 (1991): 17; Charles Zika, "Fears of Flying: Representations of Witchcraft and Sexuality in Early Sixteenth-Century Germany," *Gender and Witchcraft* (2002).
4. Barstow, "On Studying Witchcraft as Women's History," 7, 9- 10, 12. See the work of C. L'Estrange Ewen, *Witchcraft and Demonism* (London: Heath, Cranton, 1933); Alan MacFarlane, *Witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart England: A Regional and Comparative Study* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970); Richard A. Horsley, "Who Were the Witches? The Social Roles of the Accused in the European Witch Trials," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 9 (1979); Erik Midlefort, *Witch-Hunting in South-Western Germany: 1562-1684 - The Social and Intellectual Foundations* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1972).
5. Elspeth Whitney, "The Witch 'She' / The Historian 'He': Gender and the Historiography of the European Witch-Hunts," *Journal of Women's History* 7, no. 3 (Fall 1995): 78-79.
6. Whitney, "The Witch 'She' / The Historian 'He,'" 78 -80
7. Barstow, "On Studying Witchcraft as Women's History," 9.
8. Whitney, "The Witch 'She' / The Historian 'He,'" 81-82.
9. E. William Monter, *Witchcraft in France and Switzerland: The Borderlands during the Reformation* (Ithaca, Cornell University Press,

1976).

10. Robert Muchembled, "Satanic Myths and Cultural Reality," in *Early Modern European Witchcraft: Centers and Peripheries*, ed. Bengt Ankarloo and Gustav Henningsen (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1990), 151, 153.
11. Whitney, "The Witch 'She'/'The Historian 'He'," 80-82, 86.
12. Lyndal Roper, *Witchcraze: Terror and Fantasy in Baroque Germany* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 15-17.
13. Jonathan B. Durrant, *Witchcraft, Gender, and Society in Early Modern Germany* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), xv.
14. Roper, *Witchcraze*, 16, 18, 29.
15. Heinrich Institoris and Wolfgang Heimstöckl, "Wolfgang Heimstöckl is Commissioned," in *Witch Beliefs and Witch Trials in the Middle Ages: Documents and Readings*, ed. and trans. P.G. Maxwell-Stuart (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2011), 168-170.
16. Martin Antoine Del Rio, *Investigations in Magic* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), vii.
17. Margaret Sommerville, *Sex and Subjection: Attitudes to Women in Early-Modern Society* (London: Arnold, 1995), 8.
18. Sommerville, *Sex and Subjection*, 11, 14, 23, 34. See also Brauner, *Fearless Wives and Frightened Shrews*; Merry E. Wiesner, *Working Women of Renaissance Germany* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1986); Lyndal Roper, *The Holy Household: Women and Morals in Reformation Augsburg* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989).
19. Eugene Bever, "Witchcraft, Female Aggression, and Power in the Early Modern Community," *Journal of Social History* 35 (2002): 959, 968-970.

20. Brauner, *Fearless Wives and Frightened Shrews*, 1, 31.
21. Heinrich Kramer and Jakob Sprenger, “Malleus Maleficarum,” in *Witchcraft in Europe, 1400-1700: A Documentary History*, ed. Alan Charles Kors and Edward Peters (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), 181, 183, 188.
22. Kramer and Sprenger, “Malleus Maleficarum,” 212- 213, 215-217.
23. Deborah Willis, *Malevolent Nurture: Witch-Hunting and Maternal Power in Early Modern England* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), 18-19.
24. “The Witch-Hunt at Eichstätt, 1637,” in *The Witchcraft Sourcebook*, ed. Brian Levack (New York: Routledge, 2004), 34.
25. “The Witch-Hunt at Eichstätt, 1637,” 206, 209.
26. Willis, *Malevolent Nurture*, 10.
27. Durrant, *Witchcraft, Gender, and Society in Early Modern Germany*, 50.
28. Willis, *Malevolent Nurture*, 74.
29. “The Witch-Hunt at Eichstätt, 1637,” 208.
30. Institoris and Heimstöckl, “Wolfgang Heimstöckl is Commissioned,” 168.
31. Barstow, *Witchcraze*, 60 – 64, 134 – 135.
32. Hans Peter Broedel, *The Malleus Maleficarum and the Construction of Witchcraft: Theology and Popular Belief* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), 183 – 184.
33. Broedel, *The Malleus Maleficarum and the Construction of Witchcraft*, 177.

34. Broedel, *The Malleus Maleficarum and the Construction of Witchcraft*, 178 – 179.
35. Barstow, *Witchcraze*, 130.
36. Broedel, *The Malleus Maleficarum and the Construction of Witchcraft*, 183.
37. Broedel, *The Malleus Maleficarum and the Construction of Witchcraft*, 177-178, 181 – 183.
38. Gerhild Scholz Williams, *Defining Dominion: The Discourses of Magic and Witchcraft in Early Modern France and Germany* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995). 73.
39. Barstow, *Witchcraze*, 129 – 131; Broedel, *The Malleus Maleficarum and the Construction of Witchcraft*, 181.

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