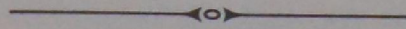


THE PROSPECT BEFORE HER



A HISTORY OF WOMEN IN
WESTERN EUROPE

VOLUME ONE 1500-1800

Olwen Hufton



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For Caroline and Clare Eliza

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Women and the Devil

Since witches are usually old women of melancholic nature and small brains (women who get easily depressed and have little trust in God), there is no doubt that the devil easily affects and deceives their minds by illusions and apparitions that so bewilder them that they confess to actions that they are very far from having committed.

JOHANN WIER, *De Praestigiis Daemonum*, 1563

THE DESIRE to regulate marriage, to promote chastity within marriage, to outlaw sexual irregularity or relations outside marriage, are concepts far from alien to twentieth-century thought even if the regulatory apparatus constructed in the sixteenth century has been conspicuously modified. The reformers' concerns are, in essence, central to our understanding. In one major respect, however, the intellectual climate of the early modern period differs from our experience: that is, it contained the notion of a world in which the Devil, demons and evil spirits were omnipresent.

In regard to extramarital sex, the reformers elected the body as the locus of sin. Furthermore, they were also legatees and perpetuators of the belief that the human body was a vehicle for spiritual evil since it was fully permeable by the Devil or evil spirits who could take possession and assert their will. This facility, if it may be so termed, accorded with the belief common to all Christians that the body and the soul were separate entities and that the second was the part that would count when it came to the final judgement which meted out eternal life or eternal damnation. Lyndal Roper has spoken of a "theology of the body" and suggested that this was particularly central to Roman Catholic thought, which believed in religious ecstasy, in the conversion of bread and wine into body and blood, in the efficacy of the image to arouse passion and in the celibacy of the priesthood to achieve nearness to God, as well as in demonic possession.¹ However, the last belief was also a part of Protestant thinking. Scripture

showed that Christ himself had cast out devils, and in one instance these had actually been transferred into a herd of pigs. What the new Protestant churches were not prepared to concede was the ability of a priest to assume Christ's role and to exorcize the possessed. Indeed, they believed that this celibate tool of the Pope of Rome could himself be an agent of the Devil and that the act of exorcism as practised by the Roman Catholic Church was an instance of collusion in which the Devil's agent could make evil spirits perform. Incantations and rituals, the summoning of Mary and the saints and the physical rites performed by the priest over the body of the possessed in front of credulous crowds in this view allied the performing priest with sorcerers, wizards and witches in a grisly, diabolic tragi-comedy.²

The Devil, however fictional, has to be conceded a large part in the history of the two Reformations, and by extension in the history of women, because his alleged influence created a number of personages, among them the possessed, the heretic and the witch. There was considerable lack of clarity in the relationship between these three, and they could easily overlap. Technically, the first was an innocent victim suddenly occupied by demons who contested the physical space of the body. The second adopted false views at the instigation of the Devil and was dangerous to others, and the third became the Devil's agent intent on harm on an extended scale. However, in some areas initially lost to and then regained by the Catholic church, exorcism of women possessed of Protestant devils became a great propaganda exercise reasserting the triumph of Rome over Protestant heresy and enhancing the public reputation of the exorcist—if not necessarily his standing among his colleagues. The Jesuit Peter Canisius in Augsburg in the 1570s carried out some notable expulsions of Protestant devils from the Fugger women, while Ignatius Loyola, legate of the scepticism of Erasmus on the subject of exorcism, remained unimpressed.³ In France after the "miracle of Laon," a piece of theatre in which a sixteen-year-old girl, Nicole Obry, was exorcized of Huguenot devils in the cathedral, the practice of exorcism became a weapon in the religious conflict of the ensuing decades. One Marthe Brossier was exorcized several times after the Edict of Nantes allegedly secured peace between the warring factions. Exorcism meant control of the devils but not necessarily their expulsion, so the act could be repeated, and garrulous devils could speak through the mouth of the one possessed individual several times to show they were Huguenot. The possessed girl would writhe and

turn, her tongue loll and eyes roll; parts of her body could be exposed and the whole incident could be made, in Sarah Ferber's words, into a kind of Punch and Judy show of dominance and submission. The possessed clearly developed a relationship with her cleric sponsor, who used her to effect on successive occasions.⁴

The "demoniacs" offering themselves for exorcism in these great spectacles were invariably women, and they were usually young. Though not numerous, some gained great renown. Marthe Brossier, for example, travelled France and afforded the credulous spectacles of Protestant devils torturing her body until she finally incurred the disapprobation of university theological faculties. Allegedly she ended her life sustained by alms. The Catholic church was not itself in agreement over the efficacy of exorcism, and the numbers of critics grew over the seventeenth century. But why were the demoniacs usually women? Eve, with her propensity to listen to the Devil and her gullibility, can be summoned as part explanation. In addition, woman's alleged lack of rationality, her lack of self-governance and her empty mind left a convenient space for evil spirits. At once symbol and metaphor for ignorance and folly, she could be manipulated in the name of the True Faith by the priest-cum-Svengali, who also gained fame from his expertise. We can only speculate on the baser instincts involved in the spectacle of a young girl writhing and exposing parts of her body.

Women in general, individually and collectively, were regarded as at risk. The collective possession of the nuns of Loudun showed that the Devil was capable of penetrating the convent wall and that diabolical possession could exist without a hint of Protestant heresy. Once allegations of witches began to affect a given area, demonic possession could spread to embrace the very young of both sexes as well as adult men and women, as it did at Zugaramurdi in the Basque provinces between 1609 and 1614. On such an occasion, the line between possession and witchcraft, as opposed to possession and heresy, became difficult to discern, since the witch became the Devil's agent to effect evil and evil spirits were in the air.⁵ Moreover, the fact that Protestants did not believe in exorcism did not mean that they did not believe in possession or release from possession. The issue was over priestly authority, not the active penetration of the body by the Devil.

The demoniac's essential innocence marked her off from those who colluded in or evoked evil or supernatural powers deliberately. The Devil and powers for evil (theoretically the same) were perceived

as immensely complex. The witch, or Devil's agent, was the product of an amalgam of popular beliefs and involute theories emanating from the pens of scholars, theologians and lawyers.

In Thomas Dekker's *The Witch of Edmonton* (1658), a fictive witch muses on how this label came to be attached to her.

Some call me witch,
And being ignorant of myself, they go
About to teach me how to be one; urging
That my bad tongue (by their bad language made so)
Forespeaks their cattle, doth bewitch their corn,
Themselves, their servants, and their babes at nurse.
This they enforce upon me; and in part
Make me to credit it.

Dekker's witch is worthy of contemplation. Although the creation of an author famed for satires involving women who wore the trousers and flouted the rules, she is subjected to a powerful and not unsympathetic psychological analysis and made the product of a belief system, a complex process in which characteristics are attributed to her. Thus "taught," she assimilates her ascribed role and comes to believe that her curses and invocations of the Devil can destroy cattle and crops and human beings.

Witches in this rendering were constructed from without, but they ultimately colluded in the process. The members of a community elect the label "witch" for someone they mistrust, credit her with evil powers and convince her that she is indeed what they say she is. What made this collusion possible was a common, deeply ingrained set of beliefs, in magic, in evil and in the ability of the Devil to win disciples to do his work. This set of ingrained beliefs co-existed with another set, of which Dekker showed himself in other plays also aware, of beliefs on the nature of womanhood and the particular relationship of this cultural figment with the chief architect of evil, the Devil.

Some of the most distinguished historians and anthropologists of our time have dedicated a great deal of effort to locating witchcraft within its social, political and religious environment, and have emphasized the complexity of the issues.⁶ Some have given most attention to an identification of the alleged witch and her real persecutors or those who accused her in court. Others have emphasized the continuity of popular belief concerning the forces of evil which predated and postdated the period of persecution. They have

concentrated on the discontinuity of élite attitudes towards the acknowledgement of powerful pagan occult forces and hence have shifted attention away from the witch to her persecutors. Others, in the process of presenting regional or national monographs, have discussed whether Catholic or Protestant secular and religious authorities differed in their approaches, and why certain areas produced more witch panics and trials than did others and what might trigger off such events. A series of feminist historians have used the witch to argue a sexual power struggle in which "powerful" women healers and others were crushed by men because of their standing in the community. Much of this work has not relied on empirical evidence. Very recently, however, particular case studies of trials, micro-histories using gender as an analytical tool and essaying methods of psychoanalysis have widened and enriched the discussion.⁷ The debate on the witch is not closed.

To do justice to all the important work which has appeared is beyond the scope of this chapter, and any attempt at synthesis is open to the accusation of over-simplification. No one, in fact, can offer a total explanation for phenomena lying in the realms of psychohistory. The most substantial historical reality is the alleged witch herself and her recorded fate before the courts, along with the concurrent theoretical debates and pronouncements of the persecuting establishment.

Belief in an evil force is probably as old as the history of humankind and certainly predates the witchcraft craze. Such a force was capable of malevolence at several levels. The most minor and trivial were events like the unexpected turning of milk, the spoiling of cheese, the presence of weevils in salt beef, the failure of dough to rise. Such troubles were frequently attributed to "little people," fairies, Puck, Joan the Wad, leprechauns and trolls, whose humours needed respecting and whose mischief was the basis of popular lore. Such activity was to be lamented but accepted as an everyday hazard. At a more major level, however, an evil force could engender total individual or collective disaster. Disease, whether confined to a single person or experienced by a community in the form of a sudden deadly epidemic such as plague, was the most obvious of these. Cattle could lose their milk or be collectively struck by murrain. Crops could be devastated by hailstorms, drought, mildew or locusts. A baby could be glowing and healthy one day, dead in its crib the next. To cope with the world in which they lived, peasants disposed of a whole

range of folk beliefs and panaceas. At their most practical was a herbal remedy to administer to a disease. There were incantations and rituals, pilgrimages and visits to shrines to invoke "saints," whose origins were in some cases pre-Christian, or to grottoes with waters to bathe afflicted limbs or ailing members of cattle, statues or rocks which could be touched, kissed or scratched and the dust drunk in a potion to promote a desired end. Such phenomena existed in profusion.

The medieval church had sought to substitute for these practices the power of prayer to its own pantheon of sanctity, but not with any degree of success. In default, it had reconciled itself at the popular level to a marriage with pagan beliefs, crowning menhirs (pagan holy stones) with crosses and incorporating local primitive beliefs in grottoes and shrines into the Christian tradition. In addition, it dealt abundantly in the "miraculous," with *scapulaires* to hang round the neck to ward off evil, girdles to help in childbirth, special prayers, incantations and rituals to cope with a variety of eventualities and a whole pantheon of saints and holy phenomena as a recourse for the afflicted. The conversion of bread and wine into body and blood was a "magic" or "miraculous" event performed daily by every priest. The populace believed the host itself possessed magical properties to assist in the war against evil and ill fortune; where magic ended and the miraculous began was far from clear.⁸

The pervasiveness of popular beliefs in an evil force was accompanied by one in which certain people, "wise" or "cunning" folk, were accredited with special knowledge of how to cope with a particular eventuality. They might dispense herbal or other like knowledge or claim they knew incantations, or mystic instructions which the afflicted must carry out if their sickness was to be assuaged. In societies which had neither a veterinary surgeon nor much medical assistance, such people had a power we can only surmise. English historians have estimated that no one in fifteenth-century England lived more than ten miles from a cunning man or woman. One or the other was the first natural resource of people who were victims of the germ-laden world in which they lived.

Society, then, acknowledged a range of people with special knowledge, but the extent of that knowledge was not necessarily confined to the purely medicinal. Eventualities might occur, aspirations exist of a purely innocuous nature, such as the desire of a young girl to win a particular husband, of a woman to be fertile, of a man or woman to

gain the favour of a certain individual, provoking a desire to invoke some supernatural aid by spell or by potion. At least from classical times there were women in the cities who dealt in love potions and fertility potions and who are the ancestors of Celestina-type women who were still to be found in medieval and early modern Europe.* Or there were people who could divine the future. The use of this kind of knowledge implied a desire to manipulate, to change or merely to improve someone's life through knowledge which could make contact with a force ordinary mortals could not touch. Such "white" magic stayed on the right side of a line demarcating the force for good (subjectively determined) from the power to do evil. The title "cunning folk" could be extended to those reputedly adept in coping with sick cattle, and there were indeed farm servant women who were more readily employed because recognized as knowing remedies to cure cows and pigs of disorders. Wise women of the villages, childbed helpers thought to know a trick or two to help in the case of a difficult delivery, are also placed in this broad generic group. These special gifts or skills were remunerated, if not very highly, and these women were often old (the most experienced) or poor.

In most instances this kind of skill or knowledge could be subsumed in that complex amalgam of small activities which made up the economy of many poor households in the past. Rarely did it represent a full-time activity. Some may have been suspected of charlatany. However, this was a society almost helpless in the face of disease. If a single cow could represent the difference between autonomy and dependence on charity, its threatened loss demanded action. A potion or incantation could always be worth a try. It was in this knowledge that every winter in poor areas of the Auvergne or the Pyrenees packages of mystic ingredients (sulphur etc.) were made to fill pedlars' trays with magic cures of all kinds. There were those for toothache and worms and boils and carbuncles and those for cattle. If nature remedied the situation, the purchaser had lost little; if it did not, then the pedlar had long moved on. The failure of a cure might provoke individual resentment, but the strategies were also accompanied by Christian prayer to specific saints, the use of holy water and recourse to relics, novenas and so on. Together, all such strategies constituted

*Celestina was a celebrated character in a Spanish play or novel of 1499, first prostitute, then procuress, who gave aphrodisiac potions for clients to take or administer to objects of their desire.

a package of hope for a reversal of fortune, or a manipulation of the course of events.

Not all the practitioners fell into the category of "cunning folk." The Renaissance had generated an interest among the learned in alchemy and all kinds of scientific "magic." In parts of northern Italy in the sixteenth century there existed priests who dabbled in white magic, potions and astrological consultations.

If some people knew how to invoke a force for good, perhaps they, or others, could also invoke one for evil. "Black" magic implied the recognition that someone had a key to unlocking this force with malice. They, or their agents, could then turn against an innocent individual or community. The person in possession of this key was the witch (either male or female). The line between cunning folk and sorcerer was one which pivoted on degrees of knowledge and differences of intent.⁹

To lend this degree of clarity to the mass of primitive beliefs which were part of the thought process of 99 per cent of any society in the early modern period is doubtless to over-simplify, but it helps us to appreciate the popular bedrock upon which the belief in the witch reposed. It also allows the delineation of three personages—cunning folk, sorceress dealing in potions or gazing in crystal balls, and malevolent witch—who could be combined in one individual. There were webs of relationships linking the demoniac, heretic and witch on the one hand and cunning folk (healer), magician (sorcerer, crystal ball gazer, seller of potions) and witch on the other, and all the webs crossed. An age-old belief in the supernatural was located in a new phase of religious change and in particular social and economic circumstances. Demographic growth produced pressures on food supplies; pestilence and local shortage also combined to multiply the poor. "The beggar," in Eileen Power's graphic phrase, "leapt into literature," and many of the beggars were very poor women lacking male support and forced onto the margins of the community.

To generate a witch persecution, however, in which individuals were marked out, prosecuted and convicted for collusion with the Devil needed something more than poverty and a bedrock of popular beliefs. It needed establishment sanction and, indeed, very often some active promotion. The establishment had two branches, ecclesiastical and lay, but there was a relationship between them. The successful ruler was capable of imposing a dominant religious orthodoxy upon

his subjects. Where this supreme orthodoxy did not pertain, vulnerability to witch panics was peculiarly intense. Between 1560 and 1660 it is estimated that about 100,000 witches were condemned, of whom about 30,000 were from Germany, with a particular emphasis on small states with a troubled religious record. Persecutions were most intense in the frontier regions of heresy, that is, where two confessions met. Parts of Germany, Switzerland and France (particularly, it would seem, a belt running from Flanders to Lorraine) seem to have had the highest numbers in about three waves of repression. Scotland, England, northern Italy, Spain and Portugal were also affected. In Spain, the struggle against the witch paled beside the drive to eliminate Jews, *conversos* and Moors in the great racist purity of blood movement. Ireland knew no witch-hunts at all, perhaps because of the fragmented clan system; by the time the English occupation was effected, England had abandoned witch-persecution and was concentrating upon other evils of popery. When the French abandoned witchcraft persecution in the 1690s, they turned immediately to more active repression of Protestantism, culminating in the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes. Viewing the situation overall shows that peaks of persecution were reached in the mid-fifteenth century and troughs occurred in the first half of the sixteenth century. Depending on the region, at any time from 1590 to 1690 the figures could suddenly shoot up and then subside without perfect correlation elsewhere. Then, beginning in France in 1682, legislation against witches enacted in the sixteenth century was repealed. The establishment, if not the populace, had lost interest in persecution.¹⁰

Witch persecutions, then, were geographically and chronologically circumscribed. If most Europeans believed in witches, most did not see a witch prosecuted in their village during their lifetime. However, in certain areas and at certain times, witch-hunts could be peculiarly intense, and there was always the possibility that a plausible offender would be found.

The belief in witches still troubled several societies into the nineteenth century. In England, Methodist communities with a heavy preponderance of women were particularly infected. John Wesley believed fervently in witches, to the ridicule of Hogarth. As late as 1819 a witchcraft scare at Portland in Dorset divided the Methodists: the Revd. Francis Derry interrogated each church member, and those who believed in witches were expelled from the society. Fifty or more of those thus expelled then founded a separate chapel. On this occa-

sion, to quell the witchcraft scare, the secular authorities arrested individuals who had incited the local inhabitants to believe in black magic and to take action against "witches" (old women, in this instance) who had "overlooked" (seen or touched) their cattle or children with positively harmful results.¹¹ It is plain that the ultimate demise of the witchcraft phenomena as manifest before the courts depended on changing establishment attitudes and the infiltration of Enlightenment rationalism and scepticism among the educated classes. Elite culture and popular culture were radically severed by the end of the seventeenth century.

The Catholic church's acknowledgement and condemnation of witchcraft grew out of its continued battle against heresy, which marked the late Middle Ages. This battle is manifest in a number of papal bulls, culminating with the *Summis desiderantes affectibus* of Innocent VII (1484). For most of the fifteenth century the essence of witchcraft was not the damage done to other people, but its heretical character. Witches were allied with Cathars, Waldenses and Béguines who, it was alleged, broke the traditions of the church, and the witches were defined as those who practised Devil worship or treated evil with respect. As the fifteenth century progressed, however, two works, the *Formicarius* (c. 1437) of Johannes Nider and the *Malleus Maleficarum* (1486) of two German Dominicans, Krämer and Sprenger, took witchcraft theory much further. The first gave women a role in Devil sects as makers of potions and stealers of children, who were subsequently eaten or made into ointments which gave supernatural powers to the wearers. The second accentuated still further women's roles. The credulity of women, based on the preparedness of Eve to listen to the snake, their inability to keep silent and hence their habit of dragging others into their conspiracies, their insatiable lust, which could prompt them even to accept the Devil as a lover, and their susceptibility to passion (hysteria), which made them vengeful, were all attributes which converted them into helpmates of the Devil.

Through women and their potions the Devil could inspire love or hate, render people impotent or incapable of sexual intercourse, or even cause them to believe they had been castrated. Witches could also change men into animals, possess them with devils, make them sicken and die, cause floods and hailstorms and fly mysteriously through the air. The two German Dominicans added a self-congratulatory postscript: "Blessed be the most high who has so far preserved the male sex from such crime."

The sexual obsessions of the friars are obvious to the twentieth-century reader, but many of their observations on the nature of witchcraft fit into established legends. They distilled many extant versions of the witch into one. The authors of *Malleus* also recommended a way for dealing with the witch. A denunciation or even a rumour could open a case, and evidence might be accepted from children or personal enemies of the accused. In Roman law the judge was for certain crimes *de facto* prosecutor and the witch was subjected to an inquisitorial procedure in which she did not necessarily have the right to defend herself. Torture could be used to extract a confession, but the witch's failure to confess did not necessarily proclaim her innocence, since this could be interpreted as a manifestation of the Devil's power.

The *Malleus* was very influential and served as inspiration for a spate of *Teufelbücher* (works about the Devil) which streamed from the early printing presses, particularly thick on the ground in Germany. Over the next twenty or thirty years, prints and woodcuts proliferated, some illustrating demonological treatises like Ulrich Molitor's *De Lamiis* (1489). The Freiburg drawings (1515–16) of Hans Baldung Grien were endlessly copied, and his later paintings—notably *The Weather Witches* (1523), in which the female nude is portrayed in unambiguously pornographic pose—were influential in disseminating a corporal notion of the witch. In his drawings a relentless misogyny, pornography, fear and crude humour coexist. Pots of ointment made of infant flesh and other scatological ingredients to permit flight, hints of masturbation, sexual positions, desecration of the rosary, exist pell-mell. Delusion, corruptibility and the Devil's business are made one in the naked female flesh. *The Three Witches* (1514), in which a young witch peers at the viewer from between her legs with her buttocks set for anal sex and which has as a caption *Der Cor Capein ein gut Jahr* (Happy New Year to the Priest), is not easy to interpret. Is it intended to remind the priest of the omnipresence of evil and hence his job in the New Year? Or is it intended to indicate the collusion of the priest in evil?¹² Whatever the answer, Germany more than any other country would seem to have had a visual education in the evils of the female witch and the printing presses must be numbered among the forces promoting these beliefs. The relevant question is how the visual and literary imagery corresponded or failed to correspond with those actually accused of being witches.

The *Malleus*, a German production from the upper Rhineland (later

a great centre of witch manufacture), went into several editions and translations, although no theologian used it unquestioningly after 1520. Indeed, the Spanish Inquisition rejected many of its definitions. It was not translated into English until the modern period. Several of the issues it raised were subsequently deemed debatable, such as the interesting questions could witches fly and did they have sexual relations with the Devil? However, it formed the crude base from which several generations of lawyers, theologians and scholars subsequently refined witchcraft theory.¹³ Writings on the theme proliferated and were debated in seminary, university and manor house. By 1580, when the great French lawyer Jean Bodin wrote his *Demonomanie*, he was able to present a fifteen-point schema. A witch was one guilty of any of the following crimes: denying God, cursing him, worshipping the Devil, dedicating children to him, murdering unbaptized children, pledging the unborn to Satan, telling others of the cult, honouring the Devil's oaths, committing incest, murdering men and little children to make broth, eating human flesh and drinking blood, killing people by spells and poison, killing cattle, causing infertility and famine, or having sexual relations with the Devil. The Devil was always male, but was not necessarily perceived as a man. In fifteenth-century Spain he was depicted as a goat. Before 1645 in Essex, he appeared as a cat or a ferret.

Luther and Calvin ceded little to developing Catholic orthodoxy on the witch and her works. Luther's views on witches are found in his *Commentary on the Epistle to the Galatians*. If anything, his interests shifted away from the witch as a product of heresy towards the pact between the witch as an individual and the Devil. In Geneva the emphasis on heresy remained high, and the pact was an expression of that heresy. The emphasis on the pact made a tardy entry into northern Europe, including England, although the idea that the witch turned to the Devil for support and renounced God was not in doubt. The Elizabethan witch was a heretic, but she was not usually said to be in direct contact with Satan. However, Keith Thomas found reference to an oral compact between the English witch and the Devil by 1612, and in the 1640s reference to a written covenant, and there are almost exact parallels of such a development throughout northern Europe.¹⁴

Catholic and Protestant orthodoxy alike condemned the convicted witch to death for collusion with the Devil. In northern Europe the emphasis was determined by actual *maleficium* or evidence of injury,

and degrees of injury were taken into consideration in determining the length of prison sentence or whether the death penalty should be imposed. The latter was not used for lesser injury. This distinction was considered lax by zealots who wanted death for all witches.

In short, with the few distinctions of degree, we can say that throughout sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century Christendom it was heresy *not* to believe in witches. Witchcraft sermons were preached from the pulpit so that evolving witchcraft theory was openly disseminated. Tracts and treatises multiplied. If the aim was to deter the activity, the information also had the effect of introducing a wide populace to complex notions which began to alter their notion of the standard witch. Children in particular were inducted in a fear that witches could be after them and, like Baba Yaga, interested in their flesh for consumption or their bodies for service. Children grew into men and women and carried their fears with them. In fact the religious establishment manufactured a "model" witch, and in continental Europe an inquisitorial procedure, backed by torture, framed questions (and hence answers) to conform to that model. In some areas the standard model witch created by the establishment begins to emerge quite distinctly in the legal dossiers. Furthermore, from the mid-fourteenth century the religious establishment was prepared to accept and to expect that the witch would usually be female. Secular authorities, who in fact handled most witchcraft trials, were intent on orthodoxy within their realms, and they followed the church's instructions.

Culturally, sixteenth-century élites concurred with the repression of the witch. Increasingly literate and tutored in church doctrine, they absorbed the debates of the day. They were also receptive, thanks to the Renaissance revival of Greek science and learning, to a misogynistic view of the female character which complemented the scriptural images of Eve, such as Aristotelian views of woman as "botched" male, colder and therefore more compliant to the cold Devil than was the warmer man. The view of woman's physical composition gave a quasi-scientific explanation to the witchcraft phenomenon. Eve the tempted was inherently amenable to the Devil's influence. When he tempted her, rather than Adam, he knew what he was doing.

If the religious and civil establishments put into motion a witchcraft persecution, its momentum was sustained from below. Indeed, so intense was popular response that the hierarchy could only with

difficulty contain it. Under a fifth of those accused of witchcraft by their neighbours in England were hanged. French, Belgian, German and Basque court judges recoiled before the volume of popular denunciations and sought to weed out fact from fiction.¹⁵ If élites feared the witch, and there is evidence to show that many educated individuals did so, they perhaps located her in rural ignorance, poverty and squalor, not among themselves, either sister, wife, widowed mother or neighbour. When the masses accused a witch, on the other hand, they did so through imminent fear and rumour about someone in their community of whom they were apprehensive and whom they interpreted as having power to harm them. Unlike the prosecuting establishment, the populace wanted to prevent evils which the alleged witch might commit and looked to the courts to rescue them. The failure of the courts to accept fear alone, without evidence of either *maleficium* or, on the Continent, a confession or pact with the Devil, meant that some communities felt themselves still exposed to the witch. Occasionally in France doubting judges acted against their better judgement to preserve peace in the community.¹⁶

The blend of the scriptural, Renaissance-science and misogynistic traditions emerges quite clearly when clerics and lawyers actually addressed themselves to the question of the sex of witches. When one Richard Barnard, a minister at Batcombe in Somerset, wrote *A Guide to Grand Jurymen about the Trial of Witches* in 1627, he stated:

There are more women witches than men and it may be for these reasons: First Satan his setting on these rather than men, since his unhappie outset and prevailing on Eve. Secondly, there more credulous nature, and apt to be misled and deceived. Thirdly, for that they are more superstitious and being displeased, more malicious, and so herein more fit instruments of the Devil. Fourthly, they are more tongue ripe, and less able to hide what they know from others: and therefore in this respect, are more ready to teachers of witchcraft to others, and to leave it to children, servants, or to some others than men. Fifthly and lastly, where they think they can command they are more proud in their rule, and more busy in setting such on worke whom they may command, than men, and therefore the Devil laboureth most to make them witches; because they, upon every light displeasure, will set him worke . . . which women will be ready enough to doe.

The instruction makes apparent how the differing elements in the cultural value system combined to create a model witch. The first four

come directly from the *Malleus*—the first is also purely biblical; the second and third repose on the view of the lack of reason in the physical composition, but also reflect some of the observations of great medieval churchmen such as Aquinas who thus sought to devalue female commitment to Christianity; the fourth picks up the Pauline injunction to silence and the tradition of the scold, the nagging wife, but also savours of neo-Platonic science; and the fifth one may be no more than the Revd. Mr. Barnard's private conviction.

The British historian and anthropologist Alan Macfarlane has insisted that it was the attributes of the witch rather than the attributes of her sex which condemned her, as evinced by the fact that about a fifth of British witches were men. Yet there can be no doubt that witchcraft philosophy encouraged the expectation of witchcraft as a female, not a male, attribute. Notice, for example, how easily Thomas Ady in 1656 slips into the female when he alleges that a person when hurt assumes himself to be bewitched.

For saith he, such an old man or woman came lately to my door and desired some relief, and I denied it and God forgive me, my heart did rise against *her* at that time, my mind gave me *she* looked like a witch and presently my Child, my Wife, my Self, my Horse . . . was thus and thus handled [my italics].¹⁷

A poor beggar at the door was three times likelier to be a woman than a man. Moreover, witchcraft was regarded as transmissible by matrilinear inheritance. A mother passed the knowledge on to a daughter—the witch's get (offspring) of Scottish parlance—though not necessarily to a son. Everything contrived to make women dominate in the witch statistics of most jurisdictions.

When we turn from theory to what actually happened in manorial and ecclesiastical courts, important national and regional differences are visible. In areas of Roman law torture could be used to elicit a confession. Words could be put into the witch's mouth. The judge was inquisitor. In areas of customary law individual denunciation was the rule and the judge had no special inquisitorial powers, nor was torture used. Hence in England and the Netherlands those accused of witchcraft appear with few trappings.¹⁸ Here is a simpler, more prosaic witch, one who could not fly or mysteriously transport herself to a hidden place for a coven or witches' sabbath. If she had familiars they were usually straight out of the farmyard, cat or dog, rat or toad, but not a crimson or blue toad specially bedecked for evil intent. Her

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alleged involvement with the Devil pivoted on the belief of her accusers that she could summon him to perform a malicious deed (*maleficium*) and may also have rested on allegations of a pact with the Devil symbolized by a "mark," such as an extra nipple or a patch insensitive to "pricking." However, the assertion of sexual orgies with the Devil, knowledge of the coldness of his body and details of grotesque fertility rites are almost unknown to the English courts. Here the witch trial was that of someone who was alleged to have committed *maleficium*, an evil deed, and had fallen foul of her neighbours, who sought to rid themselves of her presence by converting her into an enemy of God.

Such a figure exists in continental Europe as well, but could be outnumbered during phases of "witch panics" in which mass denunciations occurred and "possession" by the Devil on a large scale affecting village children (more rarely adults) was claimed.

The question "who were the witches?" is most easily answered for Britain. Here the witch was a poor (though in Scotland perhaps a little less poor) old woman (average age 60) who had in some way fallen foul of her neighbours and who had had recourse to a curse, a means of invoking the Devil, which had been followed by misfortune falling upon the accursed. The first time such an utterance fell from her lips with alleged evil consequences witchcraft was not established, but the incident passed into village memory to be used as confirmatory evidence on another occasion. The line between cursing and "scolding" (a malicious tongue) was a fine one. Their "chief fault," wrote Reginald Scot of witches, "is that they are scolds,"¹⁹ meaning that their tongues were the means whereby the suspicion of being a witch was aroused. If a woman was charged and acquitted of sorcery on a particular occasion, the suspicions of the community were not necessarily allayed but passed into the bank of folk memory until the next time her invocations were followed by disaster. In the interim she would be watched and debarred from public places.

After a woman was slandered as a witch at Devizes in 1653, local bakers refused to bake her dough (the association of witchery with bread that did not rise continued in Lancashire lore until the nineteenth century). Goodie Gilnot, similarly defamed in Kent in 1641, said, "if she be esteemed such a kind of creature everybody will be afraid of her, and nobody set her a-work, in as much as she will be utterly undone." Sarah Liffen of Great Yarmouth in 1719 "was so forlorn and wretched a person as she labour'd under the imputation

of being a witch, and the youth and other rude folks in the town . . . did often insult and affront her as she walk'd out her own house." (The last case suggests a distancing on the part of the lawyers from the conduct of the townspeople in favour of the woman in question.) Once a woman has acquired the reputation of being a witch she need no longer open her mouth. A glance became sufficient to transmit a curse. She "overlooked" cattle or children and they fell sick: she "overlooked" a haystack and it burst into flames during the night.²⁰

As well as being old and poor, in Britain two-thirds of the women accused were either widowed or spinsters. They might have children, but the majority were seeking to eke out a living *on their own*. They hence fell outside patriarchal protection or, perhaps equally pertinently, their situation of semi-dependence on the community exposed them to the imputation of witchcraft. Some were in receipt of poor relief; others were illegally pasturing a goat or other livestock, others arousing their neighbours' ire through thefts of fruit or firewood. The phenomenon is hence related to the predicament of women alone. If married, they had impecunious or disabled husbands. It should also perhaps be related to the economy of expedients. Those who uttered curses were likely to be physically powerless, economically disadvantaged women, trapped in a particular situation. Such women sought alms and were refused by a wealthier neighbour, who subsequently suffered a misfortune. Or they were women found in situations technically on the wrong side of the law wishing to deter legal action. When a woman uttered a curse, it was in furtherance either of a request—give me or I will do the following—or to express anger at refusal, or to prevent reprisals for an illegal action in which she had been apprehended. The curse viewed in this light lent power to the otherwise relatively powerless. For those tacking together a precarious livelihood it might have allowed them to pasture a cow or goat illegally or to steal a little hay without action. The efficacy of a curse depends on a belief system, and belief in witches in itself may have helped some women to survive. This may explain why many Scottish widows, charged outside the courts with being witches by those who had been cursed, returned, "Ye say that I am."²¹

In a period when witchcraft persecutions were to be feared, such a rejoinder seems at least foolish. Yet the odds on a prosecution for witchcraft occurring in one parish more than a couple of times in a century were low, and immediate survival may have been deemed much more important. Some Scottish women accused of witchcraft

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had lived with the reputation long enough to have titles. Walker the Witch was active in Inverkeithing in 1631; Janet Taylor at Stirling in 1634 responded to the title of the "Witch of Monza." Deafness could contribute to the reputation since it produced odd behaviour. The woman tried as Deiff Meg in Berwick in 1634 had had a longstanding reputation for oddity of which she was, for obvious reasons, unaware. Others, calculating on lending a degree of fear to their curses, used the preface "If I be a witch then . . ." Such insouciance, as it may seem, to the possible penalties for witchcraft either argues for the need to relieve pressing economic imperatives by the inculcation of fear, with a disregard for the imminence of such punishment, or it suggests a conviction that the Devil would look after his own. Of those Scottish women who confessed to a pact with the Devil (in many instances under torture, so it is impossible to estimate how many of them were really convinced they were witches), the Devil made them a single promise: *that they should not want*. How many poor women alone must have lived with the perpetual fear of want in mind?

It is perhaps significant that the witch phase is coincident with attempts to change or reform traditional charitable practice throughout Europe. Voluntary alms-giving, the recommended recourse of the Catholic church, buttressed by alms from ecclesiastical revenues, was under demographic pressure and economic change. European states faced with the problem sought to define the deserving and undeserving poor. In the case of England the poor became the responsibility of the parish, which was authorized to levy a local rate through which the domiciled poor could be aided. However, parishes responded with varying degrees of commitment. The poor were the burden of their neighbours. Help was grudgingly given. Furthermore, the Protestant ethic, particularly in its Calvinist and Puritan forms, associated prosperity with godliness and misfortune with sin. Keith Thomas relates how a female sectary during the Interregnum admitted that she fell into a religious depression when she saw her neighbours enjoy greater prosperity than she did, for it could only mean they prayed at home with greater assiduity. The careful line drawn between deserving and undeserving poor and the obligation to Christian charity coexisted with the belief that to be poor was a judgement from the Almighty: the poor had only themselves to blame for their idleness and improvidence. A failure to put their trust in God through the medium of prayer was responsible for their predicament.

In Nicolas Maes' paintings of old women alone, some sit with a spinning wheel; one, with eyes closed in silent prayer before a loaf and a herring. Virtue is rewarded by sufficiency. But where did this leave the poor woman who could spin all day and not earn enough for her upkeep and for whom a regular loaf and herring and a roof above her head were not assured?

A close look at individual witches reveals the precariousness of their lives. However, this was not readily perceivable to their accusers. They interpreted the witch as a power-figure able to harm at will, who held the community to a terrible ransom. Isabella de Moerloose reveals with frightening clarity how a belief in witches influenced her relationship with her mother, who feared that her child (born with a caul) was under the influence of the Devil and perhaps a witch in the making. Encouraged by the parish priest, she beat and closely watched the child, fearful of manifestations of devilry and with a view to protecting her daughter from the Devil's agents.²² That individuals and communities feared the witch and acted against her as a measure of self-protection we can have little doubt. That their fear was enhanced by individual or collective guilt following a mean or thoughtless action, a denial of charity or failure to overlook a misdemeanour, is equally apparent. The putative witch's only ally was the belief in the eternal quality of evil, that to harm her was to invite reprisal by the Devil, but this was not an infallible shield. Hence, the witch represented a social conundrum: she was there because society believed her to be there, and because it believed in her powers, she had a measure of power.

On the other hand, we cannot know how consciously an individual came to believe she was a witch and how far she was the product of her own beliefs or of exterior pressures which may have persuaded her she had some power. The women who screamed curses, the "tongue-ripe," the scolds, were perhaps reacting as positively as they could against their poverty and sense of social worth. Christian charity had proved frail support: the Devil perhaps could do no worse.

Such an approach must perforce be speculative, because the thought processes of those who lived with hunger and cold are not obvious and yield themselves with difficulty to the historian. Yet "He promised I should nae want . . .," "Je ne manquerais de rien . . .," the phrase occurs in every European language in the mouths of the