

THEMATIC REVIEWS

Telling Witchcraft Stories: New Perspectives on Witchcraft and Witches in the Early Modern Period

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Robin Briggs, *Witches and Neighbours: The Social and Cultural Context of European Witchcraft* (HarperCollins, London, 1996), pp. xviii + 458, £25. ISBN 0 00 215844 2 (hb).

Wolfgang Behringer, *Witchcraft Persecutions in Bavaria: Popular Magic, Religious Zealotry and Reason of State in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1997), trans. J. C. Grayson and David Lederer, pp. xxiv + 476, £50. ISBN 0 521 48258 5 (hb). Originally published in German as *Hexenverfolgung in Bayern: Volksmagie, Glaubenseifer und Staatsräson in der Frühen Neuzeit* (R. Oldenbourg Verlag, Munich, 1987).

Diane Purkiss, *The Witch in History: Early Modern and Twentieth-Century Representations* (Routledge, London and New York, 1996), pp. viii + 296, £14.99. ISBN 0 415 08762 7 (pb).

Jonathan Barry, Marianne Hester and Gareth Roberts (eds) *Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe: Studies in Culture and Belief* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1996), pp. xiv + 372, £40. ISBN 0 521 55224 9 (hb).

James Sharpe, *Instruments of Darkness: Witchcraft in England 1550-1750* (Penguin Books, London, 1997), pp. xiv + 366, £9.99. ISBN 0 14 013065 9 (pb). (First published in hardback by Hamish Hamilton, 1996.)

Elaine G. Breslaw, *Tituba, Reluctant Witch of Salem: Devilish Indians and Puritan Fantasies* (New York University Press, New York and London, 1996), pp. xxvi + 244, \$24.95. ISBN 0 8147 1227 4 (hb).

Deborah Willis, *Malevolent Nurture: Witch-Hunting and Maternal Power in Early Modern England* (Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London, 1995), pp. ix + 264, £13.50/£30.95. ISBN 0 8014 8194 5 (pb) and 0 8014 3004 6 (hb).

Elizabeth Reis, *Damned Women: Sinners and Witches in Puritan New England* (Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London, 1997), pp. xxii + 212, \$25.50. ISBN 0 8014 2834 3 (hb).

As these seven monographs and one collection of essays illustrate, the subject of witchcraft continues to excite enormous interest amongst scholars of the early modern period. The authors of these works approach witchcraft from a variety of different perspectives, but share a willingness to ask new questions and to expose (surprisingly) long-lived misconceptions about the subject. While all the books under review have much of empirical and methodological merit to commend them, I will concentrate here on a few of the most important themes around which this recent research has clustered.

The first theme might usefully be entitled 'putting witch-crazes into perspective'. In the excellent *Witches and Neighbours*, Robin Briggs argues that the episodes of legal persecution of witches which were large-scale and dramatic enough to warrant the epithet 'witch-craze' were very much the exception rather than the rule in early modern Europe. Outside of these exceptional episodes which 'only touched the lives of a tiny fraction of Europeans' (p. 402), judicial authorities did not prosecute accused witches with scant regard for the law, but were often cautious and even sceptical in their treatment of cases, and quite capable of entertaining a general belief in witchcraft alongside the notion that it was very difficult to prove a specific individual guilty of the crime. Briggs suggests that the elites of early modern Europe were far more concerned with the threat of popular rebellion and religious division than they were with the idea that Satan and his minions were about to destroy Christianity. As a result, early modern demonologists were not preaching to the converted but seeking to convince a still largely sceptical audience about the 'benefits' of hunting witches. Many judicial authorities in areas which did experience large-scale witch-hunts realised that they were socially disruptive rather than otherwise and were less keen to prosecute cases of witchcraft thereafter. What is surprising about the early modern period, Briggs argues convincingly, was not that there were so many formal prosecutions for witchcraft but – given the fact that belief in witchcraft was so widespread – that there were so few, and that so few of them resulted in large-scale hunts; historians of witchcraft should be doing more to explain the system of checks and balances which helped account for the relative paucity of 'witch-crazes'.

Wolfgang Behringer argues along similar lines in *Witchcraft Persecutions in Bavaria*. This excellent study, at last available in translation, is based on all known prosecutions for witchcraft in south-eastern Germany between 1300 and 1800, and effectively debunks the much-cherished but unsubstantiated misconception that Counter-Reformation Bavaria was the heartland of German witch-hunting. 'The idea that there were long-lasting and wide-ranging persecutions of witches', Behringer points out, 'is shown by analysis of the serial sources to be a mere fantasy, especially if it is coupled with the assumption of massive executions' (p. 57). Behringer's research shows that trials for witchcraft in south-eastern Germany occurred patchily both geographically and chronologically. He suggests that the risk an accuser faced in bringing an accusation – most crucially the risk of punishment for slander – usually kept enthusiasm for starting legal proceedings against witches at a relatively low ebb. Moreover, once initiated, trials for witchcraft and sorcery were generally conducted by judicial authorities with relative caution and no more severity than for any other criminal offence. This is a point worth emphasising for anyone who still persists in the belief that a person accused of witchcraft in Germany was simply tortured mercilessly in a legal process which led inevitably to the stake.

Behringer shows that the wave of large-scale witchcraft persecutions in Bavaria and surrounding territories around 1590 was the result of an unusual coincidence of elite and popular priorities, and a particular combination of economic, demographic and judicial circumstances: the agrarian and mortality crises experienced by the lower orders; a greater emphasis on witchcraft as heresy (rather than maleficium) on the part of the elites, coupled with the passing of new laws against it in various territories; and the disproportionate influence of a group of 'witch-finding' executioner/torturers who helped spread the hunts in the manner of an epidemic. Almost as soon as the persecutions began, however, voices were raised in protest against them – and especially the legal procedures used to 'prove' guilt – and attempts were made to regulate them. It was only the 'exceptional' persecutions carried out in the Franconian bishoprics in the early seventeenth century, and particularly in Eichstätt, Bamberg and Würzburg, which 'realised the sombre dream of unconditional persecution, of persecution without regard for political, social or humanitarian obstacles, but only for the logic of the persecutions themselves' (p. 228).¹

My own witchcraft research focuses on an area of Germany which, for various reasons, experienced no 'witch-craze', relatively few witchcraft trials, and just two executions for witchcraft during the early modern period, so I have little problem with Briggs's idea that witch-hunting 'only gained momentum in relatively few exceptional cases' (p. 400). It is as important to explain why this did not happen in some areas as to explain why it did in others.² One likely reason why this has not hitherto been done on any significant scale is because those trials for witchcraft which ended in acquittal or non-capital punishment are harder to find in the sources than those which ended in execution or which triggered prosecutions on a wider scale. Another reason for this lacuna in the literature is because studies based on the former, less 'spectacular' sort of cases have been harder to sell to publishers. Attempts to contextualise – or to shift the emphasis away from – the 'barbarity' of witch-hunting would also find little favour with radical feminists. Their 'myth of the Burning Times' insists that witch-hunting was widespread, invariably brutal, and directed exclusively at women in a frenzy of misogyny; at its most extreme, it perpetuates the fiction that nine million women were executed as witches. However, as Diane Purkiss points out in her discussion of this myth and the political and emotional investments in it, radical feminists neither value nor feel inspired by academic histories of witchcraft and witch-hunting which are based on wide knowledge of trial records in manuscript, so it is doubtful whether they would read – or acknowledge the findings of – such studies anyway. Of course, trial records merely offer historians the best opportunity for understanding the complexities of what actually happened in the early modern period; it is a great deal easier for radical feminists to rehash the misogynistic *Malleus Maleficarum* continually, as if it contained all there ever was or is to know about witchcraft and witch-hunting.³

Linked to the feminist 'myth of the Burning Times' is another misconception, which holds that the persecution of witches was inspired and manipulated by ruling elites for their own cynical purposes. As the title suggests, one of Robin Briggs's main aims in *Witches and Neighbours* is to situate witchcraft accusations in the social and cultural context from which they almost invariably emanated: that of the early modern community. Witches were accused by their neighbours (male and female) who feared them because they were thought to possess the power to

harm others, and this was as true of Continental Europe as it was of England.⁴ Even then, however, there was usually no great rush to accuse them, nor any great enthusiasm for doing so. Individuals and communities could live for years – even decades – with suspected witches within a ‘closed’ system in which fear of reprisal, the power of popular magic to counteract bewitchment, and the customs of good neighbourliness prevented them from initiating formal prosecutions for witchcraft. It was this longstanding unwillingness to use the law, Briggs argues, which accounted for the advanced age of many prosecuted witches; it may well have been the case that their reputations as witches had been gained earlier.⁵ Most suspected witches were doubtless never taken to court at all.

New work is also emerging on the range of social conflicts within communities from which accusations of witchcraft might arise. This work is especially significant for England, where the study of witchcraft has long been dominated by the ‘charity-refused’ model expounded almost thirty years ago by Keith Thomas and Alan Macfarlane.⁶ For example, in chapter 4 of *The Witch in History*, Diane Purkiss examines the depositions of women witnesses from English, and particularly Essex, witch-trials to suggest that in certain cases bewitchment was thought to have occurred not after quarrels based on a householder’s refusal to give alms, but after failed or tension-laden exchanges around the themes of housewifery and motherhood between women neighbours who – at least initially – had been trying hard to cooperate with one another. In his contribution to the volume edited by Barry et al. Malcolm Gaskill uses court records from early modern Kent to show that both the witch stereotype of the old, poor, and often widowed woman, and the ‘charity-refused’ model postulated by Thomas and Macfarlane are too narrow. Gaskill shows that the women presented for both black and white witchcraft at Kent’s courts were twice as likely to be married as widowed, and that around a fifth of all those presented were men. Gaskill also shows that, while many of the women accused of witchcraft in Kent were elderly women reliant on alms, others were far from being such dependent figures. They were well-integrated and even assertive individuals, whose communal prominence put them at greater risk of accusation (either by those weaker than themselves or by their social and economic rivals), yet also gave them a greater chance of acquittal at trial because they were more likely to have the support of family and neighbours. Finally, Gaskill shows that a far more varied range of tensions and hostilities could form the background of witchcraft accusations than the Thomas/Macfarlane model allows: ‘the prosecution of witches could reflect every sort of communal disturbance’ (p. 285).⁷ This conclusion accords well with Purkiss’s emphasis on the instability and even malleability of the terms ‘witch’ and ‘witchcraft’, which could therefore be used by all manner of individuals in different ways and contexts.

One of the ideas encouraged by the seminal work of Thomas and Macfarlane is that English witchcraft constituted an exception to a Continental European model or norm which ought to be studied in an anthropological rather than a comparative historical context. Hopefully, the fact that Diane Purkiss’s work on the witches of early modern Essex has led her to similar conclusions – about the importance of concerns with motherhood and the maternal body – to those reached by Lyndal Roper in her essay on witchcraft in early modern Augsburg, and that Malcolm Gaskill’s conclusions about Kent echo those of Rainer Walz’s study of witchcraft in early modern Lippe and Walter Rummel’s in electoral Trier should lay this

misconception finally to rest.⁸ The conviction that 'it is now ... impossible to sustain the idea that there was a separate "English" witchcraft to be set against a monolithic "Continental" witchcraft' (p. 32), informs James Sharpe's comprehensive and splendidly detailed *Instruments of Darkness: Witchcraft in England 1550–1750* and especially the chapter on the mass trials in East Anglia of 1645–7. Sharpe argues that this 'major witch panic' was spread by the witch-finders Matthew Hopkins and John Stearne at a time when the legal restraints which usually contained popular pressure for witch-hunting and limited the success of particular prosecutions were lacking. It resulted in at least a hundred executions, showing that there was as great a potential for large-scale persecution in England as elsewhere in Europe. Sharpe also suggests that it is unhelpful to see the 'unusually marked' presence of the devil in the confessions produced in the course of the East Anglian trials as evidence of a 'temporary sully by continental ideas of the English witch's normally non-demonic nature' (p. 131). He argues rather that it was evidence of an 'evolving nexus of English demonological ideas' (p. 139), and the product of a complex interaction between the ideas of Hopkins and Stearne and the 'witches' they questioned.⁹

There is, then, a broad shift in witchcraft historiography away from attempts at all-encompassing explanations of witch-hunting, on the grounds that there is no single phenomenon (an 'early modern witch-craze', or 'typical' witch-trial) to explain, and that meaningful conclusions about the complexity and contingency of trials or their absence, based on an evaluation of a multiplicity of interdependent factors, are best reached at the level of the locality, or even the single trial. This shift from the general to the particular is exemplified by Elaine G. Breslaw's *Tituba, Reluctant Witch of Salem*, which offers a rereading of the confession narrative of the slave-woman who was one of the first three 'witches' to be accused in Salem, and the only one of this initial trio to confess. Having plausibly reconstructed Tituba's life story in the first part of the book, debunking the myths that she was African, or a voodoo priestess, Breslaw makes three key points about the slave-woman's confession. First, that in fashioning it Tituba drew creatively on a range of elements from her multi-cultural background as an Arawak Indian from present-day Venezuela, who had also lived in Barbados before being taken to Massachusetts by her master, the Reverend Samuel Parris. Second, Breslaw sees Tituba's confession as a deliberate 'idiom of resistance', by means of which this resourceful woman used her story-telling ability not only to save her own life but also, by means of her veiled references to elite men and women among the 'witches', to express defiance of Salem's social and power hierarchies. Third, Breslaw suggests that Tituba's increasingly detailed story of a witches' gathering outside Salem attended by people both known and unknown to her was crucial in accounting for the subsequent scale and scope of the witch-trials: it manipulated the magistrates' fears of a diabolic conspiracy, while providing other confessing witches, bewitched girls, and witnesses with material they could adapt and embellish in their own testimony. Breslaw offers a painstaking and intriguing account of Tituba's pivotal influence on the events of 1692, which raises fascinating questions about the scope accused witches had for shaping their own narratives strategically, even in defiance of the men who were questioning them.¹⁰

Diane Purkiss and Lyndal Roper place an even more explicit emphasis on the value of reading witchcraft narratives as texts. Carefully scrutinising how, as well as what, things were said, and how narratives were shaped by myriad forces,

conventions and constraints, they contend that women involved in legal prosecutions for witchcraft, as either accused and confessing witches, or as makers of witchcraft accusations, 'scripted their own stories, at least in part' (Purkiss, p. 170). In their readings of women's testimony in witchcraft trials in England and Augsburg respectively, both scholars draw on psychoanalytic as well as literary theory, particularly the work of Melanie Klein and Joyce MacDougall on envy, projection, and the ambivalence of the mother-child relationship. Both conclude that motherhood was a recurring motif of these women's narratives. For example, Purkiss suggests that certain women witnesses in England constructed figurations of the witch as a kind of 'anti-housewife' and 'anti-mother', who interfered especially in the processes of food production, childbearing and child-care. This reflected their anxieties about the need to establish and maintain their own social identities as 'good' housewives and mothers within their communities. She also suggests that the ways in which the witch's magical power over people and things was imagined 'reflected and reproduced a very specific fantasy about the female body in general and the [... huge, controlling, scattered, polluted, leaky ...] maternal body in particular' (p. 119). In her examination of cases involving lying-in maids as accused witches, Roper suggests that newly delivered mothers projected the anxiety and hostility they felt towards their babies onto their lying-in maids. As old, infertile women, occupying a socially and economically marginal position within the Augsburg community, these lying-in maids were 'almost over-determined' as the witches/evil mothers, who were thought to harm instead of caring for the infants in their charge (p. 225); whose dried-up, post-menopausal bodies were imagined as the poisonous inverse of the nurturing maternal body; and who gradually came to understand themselves as witches within the dynamic of the interrogation process.

Neither Roper nor Purkiss focus specifically on another of the 'big' questions of witchcraft historiography: that of why most witches were women. Roper is interested in interpreting witchcraft narratives 'as psychic documents which recount particular predicaments' in order to examine 'the extent to which early modern subjectivities are different or similar to ours' (p. 210). In her provocative book, *The Witch in History*, Purkiss is interested in examining the ways in which different people (radical feminists, modern witches, and academic historians in part one of the book, early modern women in part two, and dramatists in part three) have 'invested' differently in the figure of the witch in ways that, according to Purkiss, tell us a great deal more about their own fantasies and identities than they do about any objective reality we might care to label 'witchcraft'. The early modern parts of the book are a great deal more convincing than the initial, historiographical section, in which Purkiss seems so determinedly anti-empirical, and so apparently intent on emphasising an unhelpful dichotomy between an imaginative/creative/disruptive approach to the history of witchcraft as a good/feminine thing, and an empirical approach to it as a bad/masculine thing, that she will probably – and unfortunately – dissuade some historians from reading beyond chapter 3.¹¹ However, the work of both Purkiss and Roper implicitly contributes ideas to debates about the gendering of witchcraft accusations which are light years away from reductive feminist notions that witch-hunting was simply the result of misogyny. Their work points more profitably towards the importance of certain gendered social contexts (housewifery, childbearing, child-care) from which antagonisms amongst women might emerge and lead to witchcraft accusations in the early modern period. It also emphasises

the importance of integrating considerations of the psychic dimensions underlying accusations into any persuasive analysis of them.

Other scholars whose work is under review here approach the question of the gendering of witchcraft from both similar and different perspectives. Deborah Willis's even more explicitly Kleinian approach towards the early modern English witch-trial pamphlets, elite witchcraft tracts, and plays which she analyses in *Malevolent Nurture*, also leads her to emphasise the importance of fantasies of maternal persecution in the making of witchcraft accusations. But her assertion that 'Witches were women ... because women were mothers' (p. 6) is a great deal more sweeping than the conclusions reached by either Purkiss or Roper. Here Willis is arguably making the psychological do too much work; as Briggs points out, accusations of witchcraft are not necessarily 'caused' by the psychic conflicts surrounding the mother-child relationship '... so much as structured through them' (p. 282), and need 'always to be embedded in the surrounding *social* realities' (p. 286, my emphasis).¹² Staying in England, Marianne Hester provides the lone feminist voice in the debate in her contribution to the Barry et al. volume. She argues that witchcraft persecution was mainly directed at women in the early modern period because it served as a way of reaffirming the patriarchal status quo at a time when a variety of major changes appeared to be threatening social stability. She suggests that this effort to subordinate women focused particularly around material resources and their control, although her central argument – that there was a link between conflictual male-female relations, economic change and witchcraft accusations – is consistently assumed rather than proven.¹³ Moreover, it rests on an unwillingness to acknowledge that witchcraft cases were about witchcraft rather than gender conflict, and on a perception of women who accused other women of witchcraft as simply complicit with patriarchy. Historians who take seriously what people believed and said about witches in the early modern period will find this hard to accept.

In contrast to Hester, Robin Briggs aims to explain 'why women were particularly vulnerable to witchcraft accusations' in the early modern period, rather than 'why witchcraft was used as an excuse to attack women' (p. 263). He suggests that answers to the former question are to be found at the communal level in the complex interplay of myriad psychological, social, cultural, and economic factors and processes, all of which were gendered in ways that informed, yet did not directly motivate, the accusation of women. Briggs also stresses the need for more rigorous comparative analysis of the complicating factors of social, economic and marital status, and of age, when considering the gendering of witchcraft. Moreover, while Briggs acknowledges that most accused witches were women, he reminds us that about a quarter of the 40,000–50,000 people executed as witches in early modern Europe were men, and that some local studies show a preponderance of men amongst the accused. He suggests that a focus on areas such as England and North America, where female suspects predominated overwhelmingly, and an over-reliance on the discourses of demonologists, who 'took the link between women and witchcraft as a given' (p. 284), has deflected attention away from the problem of male witches, and that witchcraft historiography still lacks 'a meticulous study of a region where men comprised the majority of the accused' (p. 283).¹⁴

This review article has, inevitably, only managed to touch on some key themes and texts in detail. Elizabeth Reis's account – in *Damned Women: Sinners and*

Witches in Puritan New England – of the Salem witch-trials in the context of the gendered discourses of seventeenth-century New England Puritanism is also commendable.¹⁵ So are the attempts by Sharpe and Bostridge to complicate simplistic notions about the ‘decline’ of elite willingness to believe in and use the law against witchcraft,¹⁶ and by Sharpe and de Blecourt to stress the importance of the continuity of popular belief in witchcraft far beyond the period of the witch-hunts themselves.¹⁷ Bostridge’s point that ‘belief and discourse have to be methodologically disentangled from the process of persecution’ is extremely pertinent here (Barry et al., p. 313). Overall, the works under review represent the trend towards the study of witchcraft as a cultural phenomenon and resource – as a range of beliefs and a language that allowed early modern individuals to pursue strategies, express emotions, define identities and negotiate fantasies, and that offer present-day scholars unique opportunities for gaining access to otherwise-hidden social, cultural and imaginative worlds. As Robin Briggs points out in *Witches and Neighbours*, ‘witchcraft tells us as much about the context from which it sprung ... as that context helps us to understand witchcraft’ (p. 286).

Notes

1. Behringer’s ‘Weather, Hunger and Fear: Origins of the European Witch-Hunts in Climate, Society and Mentality’, *German History*, 13 (1995), pp. 1–27, explores the correlation between bad weather, agrarian crisis, inflationary pressures, and the waves of large-scale witchcraft persecution in Central Europe between c.1560 and 1660 in more depth.

2. See A. Rowlands, ‘Witchcraft and Popular Religion in Early Modern Rothenburg ob der Tauber’, in *Popular Religion in Germany and Central Europe, 1400–1800*, ed. Bob Scribner and Trevor Johnson (Macmillan, London, 1996), pp. 101–18, and *Narratives of Witchcraft in Early Modern Germany: Fabrication, Feud and Fantasy* (Manchester University Press, forthcoming).

3. The ‘myth of the Burning Times’ is discussed by Purkiss in chapter one of *The Witch in History*. Purkiss suggests that ‘Radical feminists are not deluded into thinking that the *Malleus* is central [to witch-beliefs] (although they do write as if it is)’ (p. 11); I disagree.

4. This is an important point to emphasise, as the idea that Continental European witchcraft accusations came ‘from above’ and were concerned with devil worship rather than maleficium is one of the main misconceptions which has helped foster the unhelpful divide between English and European witchcraft and witchcraft historiography discussed below.

5. This is another important point to emphasise, as certain writers (for example, Deborah Willis in *Malevolent Nurture*) appear unaware of the possibility that an accusation for witchcraft was often the end-result of a lengthy process of reputation-building. More work needs to be done on the relationship between reputation acquisition and age. Briggs’s study of the Lorraine witchcraft cases offers ‘signs that for women this transfer into the pool of suspects had a modest tendency to coincide with the menopause or the end of childbearing’ (*Witches and Neighbours*, p. 264), a correlation which offers additional support for the idea that witches were imagined as evil or inverted mothers in the early modern period. (See later discussion of the works by Roper, Purkiss and Willis for an exploration of this idea.)

6. Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1971); Alan Macfarlane, *Witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart England: a Regional and Comparative Study* (Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1970).

7. Gaskill’s work also reminds us of the possibility that many accusations of witchcraft were probably motivated by the sheer malice of inter-personal and inter-familial feuds; an important point which occasionally gets overlooked in those studies chiefly concerned with the psychic dimensions of witchcraft accusation.

8. Roper's essay 'Witchcraft and Fantasy in Early Modern Germany', in *Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Barry et al., pp. 207–36, is discussed below. Neither Rainer Walz, *Hexenglaube und magische Kommunikation im Dorf der Frühen Neuzeit. Die Verfolgungen in der Grafschaft Lippe* (Paderborn, 1993), nor Walter Rummel, *Bauern, Herren, Hexen. Studien zur Sozialgeschichte sponheimischer und kurtrierischer Hexenprozesse, 1574–1664* (Göttingen, 1991), are available in English. However, discussion of both is incorporated into Wolfgang Behringer's excellent summary of 'Witchcraft Studies in Austria, Germany and Switzerland', in *Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Barry et al., pp. 64–95.

9. For a fascinating reading of the confessions made by Suffolk women during the mass East Anglian trials as narratives constructed by women as a way of contextualising their own – often traumatic – experiences within a demonological frame of reference, see Louise Jackson, 'Witches, Wives and Mothers: Witchcraft Persecution and Women's Confessions in Seventeenth-Century England', *Women's History Review*, 4 (1995).

10. On this point, see also Purkiss, *The Witch in History*, 'Self Fashioning by Women: Choosing to be a Witch', chapter 6.

11. In chapter 3 ('The Witch in the Hands of Historians: a Tale of Prejudice and Fear'), Purkiss criticises (male) academic historians of English witchcraft for having 'created a narcissistic myth' of witchcraft 'which shapes them as sceptical empiricists, confirming their academic identities' (p. 60), and appears to hold them responsible for the relative torpor of English witchcraft studies since the early 1970s.

12. Willis's work is also over-reliant on the Thomas/Macfarlane 'charity-refused' model, which Gaskill suggests needs revision (see above discussion of Gaskill).

13. For example, Hester has only one example (taken from Macfarlane) to support her idea of a link between witchcraft accusations and the exclusion of women from brewing (p. 304). Hester would probably argue that the witch-trials themselves 'proved' the link between witchcraft accusation and male–female conflict over resources, but this seems to me to be a somewhat circular argument.

14. This will hardly prove popular with feminists. Briggs's point that demonologists tended to take the link between women and witchcraft as a given, even in the face of empirical evidence to the contrary (p. 284), and that sceptical writers on witchcraft such as Weyer and Scot tended to emphasise the stereotype of the witch as a pathetic old woman in order to ridicule their pro-witch-hunting opponents (p. 21), remind us of the dangers inherent in placing too much emphasis on elite discourse as a reflection of the social reality of witchcraft. Gaskill suggests that historians of English witchcraft should extend this caution to their use of pamphlets. He notes that 'Comparisons between first-hand legal accounts and second-hand literary versions of the same prosecution often produce discrepancies between the social characteristics of those actually tried and their sensational, popular and, therefore, saleable image' – the latter being that of the old, widowed woman, which was emphasised in the pamphlets at the expense of individuals who did not fit neatly into it (*Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe*, p. 261).

15. See Elizabeth Reis, *Damned Women: Sinners and Witches in Puritan New England*.

16. See Sharpe, *Instruments of Darkness*, especially part three; Ian Bostridge, 'Witchcraft Repealed', in *Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Barry et al., pp. 309–34.

17. See Sharpe, *Instruments of Darkness*, pp. 276–302; Willem de Blecourt, 'On the Continuation of Witchcraft', in *Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Barry et al., pp. 335–52.

The Origin of Witches. Early witches were people who practiced witchcraft, using magic spells and calling upon spirits for help or to bring about change. Most witches were thought to be pagans doing the Devil's work. Many, however, were simply natural healers or so-called "wise women" whose choice of profession was misunderstood. As witch hysteria decreased in Europe, it grew in the New World, which was reeling from wars between the French and British, a smallpox epidemic and the ongoing fear of attacks from neighboring native American tribes. The tense atmosphere was ripe for finding scapegoats. Modern-day witches of the Western World still struggle to shake their historical stereotype. Most practice Wicca, an official religion in the United States and Canada. It specifically named witchcraft or sorcery as a species of heresy and provided that, unless the accused witches abjured these beliefs, they were to be burnt at the stake. Further and broader Witchcraft Acts were passed by Queen Elizabeth I in 1563 and by King James I in 1604, making witchcraft a felony and removing the accused witches from the jurisdiction of the ecclesiastical courts to the courts of common law. Some defendants told investigators that they repeatedly kissed Satan's anus as a display of their loyalty, while others admitted to casting spells on neighbours, having sex with animals, or causing storms. In the early 16th Century, outbreaks of witchcraft hysteria, with subsequent mass executions, began to appear.