

## Witchcraft Historiography in the Twentieth Century

### Jon Burkhardt

Our evidence for witchcraft in Europe comes almost exclusively from hostile sources—from trials and confessions of witches documented by educated “witnesses.” In addressing the question of witchcraft in the Western tradition, historians have often disagreed as to its origins and essence. At least two major interpretations—along with several minor interpretations—of European witchcraft are present in witchcraft historiography. The first interpretation is known as the Murray-Ginzburg, or *folklorist* interpretation. This view sees European witchcraft as the survival of an ancient fertility religion. The second interpretation, currently the most influential, emphasizes the *social and cultural* history of witchcraft, especially the pattern of accusations. This approach can be further broken into several interpretations, the first of which is known as the Thomas-Macfarlane, or *functionalist* interpretation, which sees European witchcraft as the result of the feeling of guilt after refusing charity to someone. A variation within the social and cultural approach can be called the *social control* model. This model, represented here by Marianne Hester and David E. Underdown, sees witchcraft as a tool to maintain the male-dominated status quo. These studies have contributed much, but have continued to concentrate on persecution almost exclusively, paying little or no attention to attitudes and behaviors. Another interpretation within the social and cultural approach, however, looks at these *psychological* aspects and is represented here by Barry Reay and Robin Briggs. While holding some ideas in common concerning early modern witchcraft, each approach uses different presumptions and methodologies.

In 1921, Margaret Murray published *The Witch-Cult in Western Europe*, in which she argued that many of the practices associated with witch descriptions and witchcraft accusations in Western Europe were the ritual remains of an ancient agrarian cult. Murray claimed that this fertility religion had survived in

rural areas into the early modern period. Her ideas were completely rejected by other historians at the time, who viewed witchcraft rather as an example of early modern society’s superstitious nature and the intolerance of the Church. However, Carlo Ginzburg’s fascinating account of an isolated Italian peasant culture in *Night Battles: Witchcraft and Agrarian Cults in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, and his recent reconstruction of the witches’ Sabbath, conclusively demonstrate the survival of ancient agrarian cults in some parts of Western Europe.<sup>1</sup>

In *Night Battles*, Ginzburg studied the peasants in early modern Friuli, a mountainous region in northeast Italy, and uncovered a bizarre set of ancient beliefs. The peasants believed that those individuals born with a caul possessed strange powers.<sup>2</sup> These people were called *benandanti*, or “good walkers.” “On certain nights of the year” the *benandanti* “fell into a trance or deep sleep...while their souls (sometimes in the form of small animals) left their bodies so that they could do battle, armed with stalks of fennel, against analogous companies of male witches,” armed with stalks of sorghum, to determine “the fate of the season’s crops. They also performed cures and other kinds of benevolent magic.”<sup>3</sup> The *benandanti* claimed to have the ability to break the spells of witches. They could identify witches, and thus could denounce fellow villagers or make money by “blackmailing” them. Therefore, the inquisitors saw the *benandanti* as troublemakers—as bad as, if not actually, witches themselves.

The inquisitors, Ginzburg showed, often associated the “popular” ideas they encountered with their preconceived notions about witchcraft (so-called learned, or “elite,” ideas). Thus, the inquisitors, upon coming into contact with these peasants and their strange beliefs, immediately identified them as practicing

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<sup>1</sup> Carlo Ginzburg, *Night Battles: Witchcraft and Agrarian Cults in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, tr. John and Anne Tedeschi (New York: Penguin Books, 1985); Carlo Ginzburg, *Ecstasies: Deciphering the Witches’ Sabbath*, tr. Raymond Rosenthal (New York: Pantheon, 1991).

<sup>2</sup> The caul, or the amniotic membrane that sometimes covers a newborn baby’s head, is said in many cultures to mark an individual as having special psychic powers.

<sup>3</sup> Ginzburg, *Night Battles*, ix.

witchcraft in the service of the devil. The *benandanti* denied these charges at first, claiming that they were “good” witches—as well as good Christians—who fought against “bad” witches. The inquisitors, however, following the line of questioning established by the *Malleus Maleficarum* in 1486 that tied witchcraft to devil-worship, began interrogating the *benandanti*. After several decades of insistent questioning, the *benandanti* were forced to either admit to participating in the witches’ Sabbath, or that their nocturnal battles were merely fantasies and their accusations ploys to make money and spread dissension. Thus, the *benandanti* confirmed, by their admissions, the inquisitors’ suspicions. This view, then, spread throughout the village. Popular beliefs came to resemble the fantasies of the elite.

Ginzburg shed light on these beliefs through the investigations of the Inquisition. A sample of these records is included as an appendix, which form the basis of his book. By piecing together evidence from various trials, Ginzburg revealed that the *benandanti* really believed that they did these things while in a trance-like state, and—equally notable—so did their fellow villagers. Ginzburg’s book revealed a dramatic gap between popular culture and that of the educated elite. These ritualistic battles—at least the beliefs involved with them—clearly showed that witchcraft had everything to do with *maleficium* for the peasants. Ginzburg connected the witchcraft accusations to the filtering of ideas from the learned elite to the illiterate peasants. Within a short period of time, the peasants’ customs, which had seemed so natural to them, became unnatural acts that directly challenged the church.

In *Ecstasies: Deciphering the Witches’ Sabbath*, Ginzburg reconstructed the origins of these peasant beliefs, linking them to ancient cult practices. These beliefs had survived in Europe through the early modern period, Ginzburg argued, echoing Murray’s thesis. However, Ginzburg did not suggest that the accused witches were actually performing the behavior they described. Instead, he argued that they fantasized about performing the acts. In the first part of the book, Ginzburg revealed the gradual emergence of the stereotypical Sabbath in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. The rest of the book examines a variety of similar myths and rituals, seeking to establish a connection amongst them. However, Ginzburg’s arguments are

often too complex to comfortably concur with his final claim that “the documentation we have accumulated proves beyond all reasonable doubt the existence of an underlying Eurasian mythological unity, the fruit of cultural relations sedimented over millennia.”<sup>4</sup>

Ginzburg’s concern was with showing the interaction between popular and elite ideas. Although he was rather vague about much of the information, this book certainly shed light on an important component of early modern popular beliefs. Ginzburg’s methodology resembled the “structuralism” of anthropologist and ethnographer Claude Levi-Strauss, in that he was not interested so much in the particular instances as in the underlying structures of mythical thought which served to unite meaning within cultures.

Inspired by anthropological research, Alan Macfarlane and Keith Thomas have endeavored to identify the positive social functions that witchcraft played in the communities in which it occurred. Their work on English witchcraft revealed the underlying stresses and anxieties of the accusing villagers. From the evidence of the assizes in seventeenth-century Essex, Macfarlane put together a thorough statistical study of witchcraft beliefs.<sup>5</sup> Originating under the reign of Henry II, the assizes primarily made up England’s felony criminal courts. By the late sixteenth century, the assizes “had established a virtual monopoly [on trials] of crimes likely to lead to a sentence of death,” including homicide, rape, and witchcraft.<sup>6</sup> Condemned witches were usually older women beyond their childbearing years. Accusers—many of whom were in-laws of those they accused—were nearly evenly divided between women and men. The accused witches usually belonged to a lower social class than their accusers. The accused typically belonged to the lower classes caught in the middle of dramatic economic shifts. Those inviting the charge of witchcraft were generally unpopular—often engaging in lewd behavior, cursing, or begging. In short, acting as a supposed witch acted made one a target for accusations of witchcraft. Macfarlane suggested that the accusation would come

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<sup>4</sup> Ginzburg, *Ecstasies*, 267.

<sup>5</sup> Alan Macfarlane, *Witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart England: A Regional and Comparative Study* (Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press, 1991, c. 1970).

<sup>6</sup> J.A. Sharpe, *Crime in Early Modern England, 1550-1750* (New York: Longman, 1999), 33.

after such individuals had demanded, and been refused, charity. The individual would usually leave cursing and any subsequent misfortune experienced by the refuser would be attributed to the beggar's "witchcraft."<sup>7</sup> Thomas suggested the same, adding that those who refused to give assistance convinced themselves that the beggar was a witch—and therefore not worthy of charity—in order to relieve their guilt.

Thomas' main interest, however, unlike Macfarlane's, was to establish the functionality of witchcraft as plausible to an individual person rather than to society as a whole. Thomas believed that the overwhelming majority of fully documented cases supported his model of charity refusal. However, one problem with this interpretation was the emphasis on an individual's thought processes, rather than the social processes that brought about a trial. A trial took place after a lengthy period of rumors and accusations, usually from several sources. Also, Thomas' approach did not take into account the notion that feuds and consciously false accusations could be behind many cases of witchcraft. According to Jonathan Barry, Thomas' preoccupation with the personal plausibility of witchcraft accusations kept him from exploring the ways in which witchcraft would—or would not—enter the public sphere. "The removal of witchcraft from the public sphere," Barry argued, "resulted from and further intensified the 'feminization' of witchcraft."<sup>8</sup>

This brings us to the question of gender. Where Thomas' account of witchcraft served to explain gender variations in terms of dependence, Marianne Hester claimed that Thomas had overlooked the occasions where it was precisely women's power—not their weakness—that was at stake. Thus, she saw witchcraft accusations as stemming from the competition for resources in the new market economy. Hester looked at women brewers to show how they posed a threat to the increasingly male dominated trade and, as a result, were vulnerable to witchcraft accusations. According to Hester, "one of the most consistent yet least understood aspects of the early modern witch-hunts is how

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 196.

<sup>8</sup> Jonathan Barry, "Introduction: Keith Thomas and the Problem of Witchcraft," in *Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe: Studies in Culture and Belief*, ed. Jonathan Barry, Marianne Hester, and Gareth Roberts (Cambridge, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 35.

accusation and persecution for witchcraft came to be largely directed against women."<sup>9</sup> These accusations were not merely a reflection of a stereotype, but rather the mechanisms for "social control of women... as a means of recreating the male status quo in the emerging social order."<sup>10</sup>

Hester cited the *Malleus Maleficarum* as an obvious example of a double standard that presented female sexuality as inferior to male sexuality. She noted that, "during the period of the witch-hunts the patriarchal ideal for women was that they should be quiet (not scolds) and subservient to their husbands."<sup>11</sup> Thus, for Hester, witchcraft accusations "must be seen in the context of widespread fears that women were by no means complying with the ideal of the quiet compliant wife."<sup>12</sup> Witchcraft, she argued, must be viewed as a gendered ideology that served the material interests of men. "Overall," Hester concluded, "patriarchy was maintained within the developing economy, and women's relative dependence on men ensured."<sup>13</sup>

David E. Underdown similarly argued that in early modern England, as the breakdown of the social order seemed to loom ever closer, fear intensified into a "crisis of order" that ultimately led to a witch-hunt, of sorts.<sup>14</sup> The community bond which brought stability was no longer certain. According to local court records (ca. 1560—1640), women who posed what Underdown called a "visible threat" to patriarchal society—loud, unruly women—were increasingly noticed.<sup>15</sup> This is precisely the time, as Underdown pointed out, that witchcraft accusations reached their peak. These women tended to draw negative attention to themselves; either by cursing, or fighting with neighbors, or being seen as threatening due to their strangeness. More often it was the social outcasts, the poor, the widowed, or even strangers, that were

<sup>9</sup> Marianne Hester, "Patriarchal Reconstruction and Witch Hunting," in *Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe*, 288.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 289.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 294.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 295.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 302.

<sup>14</sup> David E. Underdown, "The Taming of the Scold: the Enforcement of Patriarchal Authority in Early Modern England," in *Order and Disorder in Early Modern England*, ed. Anthony Fletcher and John Stevenson (Cambridge, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1987, c. 1985), 116.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 119.

accused the most. Since they were alone, they had to fend for themselves. This often brought negative feelings from neighbors. They became witches because they drew the most negative attention.

Underdown attributed this focus on unruly women as a by-product of the transformation that was happening in England, both socially and economically; that is to say, neighborly charity and the habits that aided social harmony began to decline as capitalism brought a more competitive atmosphere in its wake. Capitalism, according to Underdown, helped to more firmly place women into a redefined social order. As the market economy emerged, women may have seemed a threat to the patriarchal system as they became more and more independent. Thus, as women began to assert themselves, a strain was created in gender relations. This strain, according to Underdown, was at the center of the “crisis of order” of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.<sup>16</sup>

In *Popular Cultures in England*, Barry Reay asserted that popular cultures in the past are best understood through “description and example, by the historically crafted fiction of experience, rather than by crude definition.”<sup>17</sup> Reay was interested in what he called the “structures of feeling” as systems of meaning; that is, he looked at the attitudes and values expressed in popular beliefs and behaviors. For Reay, the term “popular culture” is a “shared” culture. He did not use it to separate popular from elite, or learned from unlearned. “The key-words for this history,” Reay stated, “are: ambiguous... dynamic... gendered... multiple... over-lapping... and shared.”<sup>18</sup> Reay’s study reversed the traditional tendency in British social history to attempt to find a relation between a certain social group and its position in society by starting instead “with popular culture itself.”<sup>19</sup>

According to Reay, witchcraft beliefs had to do with *maleficium*—the causing of harm. The focus was predominantly on power, he argued, “the power of words, the power to change

form, the power to do bodily harm.”<sup>20</sup> For Reay, belief systems were the most important aspect in understanding witchcraft. Formal prosecution was the last measure villagers took when worried about witchcraft, Reay argued. First, one would practice “caution,” which could mean either avoiding a supposed witch or, at least, making sure not to offend her. If this did not work, the victim could try to bribe the witch. Counter-magic was the next step one could take to deal with witchcraft. Although considered temporary, scratching the alleged witch’s face was also a way to protect oneself. Thus, the villagers of early modern England attempted a variety of methods to deal with suspected witchcraft. “Violence and recourse to law (with the implied ultimate sanction of death),” Reay explained, “came at the end of a long process of negotiation.”<sup>21</sup>

Witchcraft was seen as “inherited” power; that is, it was in the blood and could be passed on from generation to generation. Sorcery, however, was seen as an acquired technique that could be learned. Despite the elite idea that all witchcraft was black witchcraft, the white witch, Reay stressed, “maintained an autonomy in popular culture.”<sup>22</sup> These so-called white, or “good” witches were mostly male, while the “bad,” maleficent witches were usually female. The reason for this view was that women were seen as more “tongue-ripe”—more likely to use words as weapons. Susan Dwyer Amussen referred to women’s “invisible violence”—meaning that men used physical force, but women used words.<sup>23</sup> Thus, they were seen as more likely to resort to witchcraft. Reay argued that the frictions of community life in the context of household and neighborhood interaction, where women played a crucial role, added to these notions—so much so that “sisters and daughters of ‘notorious’ witches were suspected.”<sup>24</sup>

English witches had “familiars,” as shown by Barry Reay, which were animals kept by the witch, fed with her blood, and

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 126-7.

<sup>17</sup> Barry Reay, *Popular Cultures in England, 1550-1750* (New York: Longman, 1998), 1.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 102.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 107.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 114.

<sup>23</sup> Susan Dwyer Amussen, “The Gendering of Popular Culture in Early Modern England,” in *Popular Culture in England, c. 1500-1850*, ed. Tim Harris (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1995), 63, 67.

<sup>24</sup> Reay, *Popular Cultures in England*, 111.

“sent out to perform maleficia.”<sup>25</sup> Reay argued that the devil was present early on in English discourses on witchcraft. What was significant about the English demonologies, however, was “their sheer variety rather than any consistency of representation.”<sup>26</sup> Witchcraft pamphlets and ballads served to bridge the gap between educated and partially literate cultures. In so doing, Reay argued, “the discourses of demonology could make mental inroads at a popular level and village beliefs influence learned doctrines.”<sup>27</sup> Thus, Reay crafted an image of cultural dynamism and malleability in early modern England.

Reay followed the Thomas-Macfarlane theory, which held that witchcraft accusations arose out of a breach in neighborly charity and the guilt associated with that breach. However, according to Reay, what made a particular request for charity potentially risky for the refuser, “was the character or reputation of the requester.”<sup>28</sup> He believed that it is likely that many of the so-called “innocent” old women used their reputation as a survival tool. “The majority of accused witches...were not random victims,” Reay argued.<sup>29</sup> Vengeance and material gain were important motives in the witchcraft fantasies and narratives. He argued that many of those individuals who were eventually formally charged with witchcraft had actually been suspected of being witches for years prior to the formal charges, if not decades.

Reay noted that Reginald Scot’s account of the social context of witchcraft allegations also referred to the “imprecations and desires” of the witch. Current historians, such as Robin Briggs, have started to explore this psychological aspect of witchcraft. There were a “multiplicity” of cultural divisions to take in to account when addressing the problem of witchcraft, including religious, gender, age, and occupation. “Cultural reform was always on the agenda,” Reay concluded, “from below as well as from above—and popular cultures were perpetually being reshaped and reshaping themselves.”<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 112.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 117.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 118.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 120.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 130.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 212.

In *Witches and Neighbors*, Robin Briggs analyzed the social, cultural, and psychological contexts of the European witch-hunts. One of the dangers Briggs saw in trying to make sense of witchcraft fears was that we can “over-explain” what happened. His unique contribution to witchcraft historiography was to show that the distinctions usually drawn between English and Continental witchcraft do not, under closer inspection, hold up. Although most Continental courts did place more emphasis on the satanic pact and the witches’ Sabbath than did the English courts, popular beliefs about the witch as being a spiteful neighbor were “just as firmly founded in local opinion...as those on the other side of the Channel.”<sup>31</sup> As in England, village witchcraft was “the basic type, the everyday reality around which everything else was built.”<sup>32</sup>

Briggs drew from some four hundred trials in Lorraine, which were augmented by numerous other examples from elsewhere in Europe. Briggs placed the trials in the broader social context of rural agricultural communities, where changing economic conditions are stressing the traditional neighborly values of mutual help. Briggs’ approach was to “focus on the lives and beliefs of the ordinary people who were at once the victims and the principle instigators of most prosecutions.”<sup>33</sup>

Usually, those who accused witches were also poor and had quarreled with the accused witch in the past. When left out of an important social event or refused charity, the accused witch reacted with curses or threats. These actions would often convince neighbors that she was a witch, especially when misfortunes—especially the sickness or death of family members—followed her threats. “Witchcraft was not an objective reality,” according to Briggs, “but a set of interpretations, something which went on in the mind.”<sup>34</sup>

Witchcraft, Briggs argued, provided “intuitively attractive ways of evading logic.”<sup>35</sup> He argued against two common assumptions in feminist scholarship on the early modern witch-

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<sup>31</sup> Robin Briggs, *Witches and Neighbors: The Social and Cultural Context of European Witchcraft* (New York: Viking Press, 1996), 12.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 398.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 9-10.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 409.

hunts. One was that the typical witch was actually a “good” witch, such as an astrologer, or an herbal healer, whose beliefs were interpreted by Church authorities as satanic. The second stance taken by feminist historians was the misogynistic stance. This school of thought suggested that those who accused witches did so to punish women who defied gender norms. Instead, Briggs emphasized that there were a variety of causes for witchcraft accusations:

Witchcraft was about envy, ill-will and the power to harm others, exercised in small face-to-face communities...Those involved relied heavily on the cunning folk and their counter-magic, alongside a range of social and familial pressures, to deal with suspect neighbors...Witches were people you lived with, however unhappily, until they goaded someone past endurance.<sup>36</sup>

Briggs concluded that while the witch may be seen as the “other,” “witchcraft beliefs are in ourselves.”<sup>37</sup>

Briggs’ analysis of the “confessions” given by so-called witches assumed that any account of such activities as the witches’ Sabbath is merely fantasy—statements given to please authorities while under stress of interrogation. This ignored the possibility that some of the so-called “witches” may have actually used various occult methods in order to harm their enemies.

Defining witchcraft is, therefore, not an easy task. Our understanding of witchcraft in Western culture must be grounded in the specific local discourse. It appears that there were two elements to European witchcraft in the early modern period. First, there was the belief held by most of society (especially peasant society) that witchcraft had to do with *maleficium*; that is, malevolent action—usually as a means to get even—intended to do harm. The other element was the notion, held by a scholarly minority, that witchcraft involved making a pact with the Devil. It was only when the learned elite’s idea of a satanic pact began to make its way into the peasantry that the persecution of witches began to spread. The idea of *maleficium* was reinterpreted and transformed—as seen in many witchcraft confessions—into part

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 398.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 411.

of the witches Sabbath. However, as J.A. Sharpe pointed out, this is not always the case. “It is obvious that plebian[s]...had their own concepts of order,” he argued, “and were willing to use the law to reinforce them in their own narrow sphere.”<sup>38</sup>

Ginzburg connected the witchcraft accusations to the filtering of ideas from the learned elite to the illiterate peasants, in which the peasants’ customs, which had seemed so natural to them, became unnatural acts that directly challenged the church. Macfarlane, Thomas, Hester, Underdown, and Reay, on the other hand, all pointed to social tensions as an ingredient in the rise of witch accusations at this time. However, where Macfarlane and Thomas saw guilty feelings, and where Underdown connected the rise of witchcraft accusations to strained gender relations brought about by a market economy, Hester saw the planned oppression of women by men. But to interpret high instances of women accused of witchcraft as a simple result of misogyny is to over-simplify the data. As Sharpe pointed out, “witchcraft accusations rather uncover issues of competition between women, of women’s disputes over reputation and the control of female social space.”<sup>39</sup> This, he argued, suggests the need for a reassessment of the role of gender in witchcraft studies. Indeed, one of Briggs’ most interesting findings is that, in France, men accounted for almost half of those accused of witchcraft.<sup>40</sup> Unfortunately, we find out little else about them.

One theme that is common throughout all of the interpretations is that the belief in witchcraft—that it was *real*—was common. It was real enough for Ginzburg’s peasants that they believed it enabled them to fly; it was real enough for Reay’s villagers that some were able to profit from it occasionally, while it caused others to be suspicious; and, it was real enough for Underdown’s society that it was used in law courts against unruly women. They were witches because they drew the most negative attention, or perhaps they drew the most negative attention because they were witches. Either way, belief relates to an overall theme of early modern European witchcraft. Despite its changing definition in different places across time, the belief that witchcraft

<sup>38</sup> Sharpe, *Crime in Early Modern England*, 214.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 157.

<sup>40</sup> Briggs, *Witches and Neighbors*, 260.

was real—at least at some level—persisted. Thus, it seems that Briggs' interpretation is the most accommodating for approaching the question of early modern witchcraft—it can be explained by a variety of ways. It all depends on what one expects to find.