



MALEVOLENT NURTURE

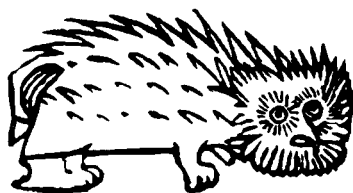
WITCH-HUNTING AND MATERNAL
POWER IN EARLY MODERN ENGLAND

DEBORAH WILLIS

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AND MATERNAL POWER
IN EARLY MODERN ENGLAND

DEBORAH WILLIS

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PREFACE

When I first began work on a book about witch-hunting and gender in early modern England, I did not know that it was also going to be about mothers. But as I began to look more closely at relevant documents, it became evident that the crime of witchcraft was often described in terms of the maternal. Witches were—or were believed to be—mothers “gone bad,” women past childbearing years who used their mothering powers against neighbors who had enraged them. To acquire their magic, women fed and cared for demonic imps as if they were children. In exchange, imps would bring sickness and death to other households—often the households of younger mothers.

Although most features of these beliefs have been known to scholars for some time, few have explored the implications of the witch as mother. That is in essence what I do here, in the hope of contributing to a better understanding of cultural practices that sent many innocent people to their deaths. I have concentrated on the period 1563–1611, examining a variety of nonliterary texts—state papers, trial records, pamphlets, religious tracts—as well as selected plays by William Shakespeare. In England, the establishment of a flourishing professional theater and the rise of secular prosecutions against the crime of witchcraft roughly coincided: statutes passed in 1563 led to a steady series of trials beginning in the 1570s, and the first playhouse was built just outside London in 1574. It is during these years that basic features of witch-hunting were established and that witchcraft emerged as a distinctively female crime—a crime often punished, on stage and in trial courts, as a perverse use of maternal power.

I am deeply grateful to the many teachers, students, friends, and family who have helped me bring this project to completion. I thank first and foremost my teachers at the University of California, Berkeley, Janet Adelman and Stephen Greenblatt, who unwittingly nurtured the beginnings of this project in a dissertation about Shakespeare. Their suggestions and support since then have been invaluable and their areas of disagreement inspiring. I am further indebted to the larger community of scholars at Berkeley in the 1970s and 1980s who made Renaissance studies seem a rich and welcoming field; in this regard, I remember Stephen Booth with special fondness.

Colleagues and students in the English Department at the University of California, Riverside, have also contributed generously and insightfully to the completion of this book. I thank especially John Ganim and Ralph Hanna, who read early versions of the manuscript and made many helpful suggestions, and Steven Axelrod, whose general encouragement was crucial. I am grateful also to the larger community of colleagues and friends who have made Riverside an intellectually stimulating place to live and work—to Rise Axelrod, Joe Childers, Geoff Cohen, Kim Devlin, Carole Fabricant, George Haggerty, Katherine Kinney, Parama Roy, Carole-Anne Tyler, and Alice Wexler, among many others; and to Greg Bredbeck, John Briggs, Milton Miller, Stan Stewart, and Margi Waller, who have helped to keep multiple Renaissances alive and well at UCR. Colleagues from the History Department helped to make this book genuinely interdisciplinary; I thank Sharon Salinger, Arch Getty, and especially Richard Godbeer for their insights and advice. So also did UCR's Center for Ideas and Society. A resident fellowship from the Center greatly aided the completion of this book.

Among students I thank Jeanie Moore, Leslie Bennett, René Breier, and Scott Crider for many valuable insights; I thank also Kathy Patterson and Donovan Cocas for their perceptive work on witchcraft and Shakespeare. Andrew Rempt wrote an undergraduate paper on Lady Macbeth that still seems to me better than most published work; he and Michael Heumann will be long remembered for their astonishing performance of scenes from *Macbeth* using puppets. Marcie Heid was a reliable, efficient, and accurate research assistant in the final stages.

Earlier versions of sections of Chapters 1 and 2 have appeared in Deborah Willis, "Shakespeare and the English Witch-Hunts: Enclosing the Maternal Body," included in *Enclosure Acts: Sexuality, Property, and Culture in Early Modern England*, edited by Richard Burt and John

Michael Archer (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994). Copyright © 1994 by Cornell University. I thank Cornell University Press for permission to use that material here. Portions of various chapters have also been presented as papers at meetings of the Modern Language Association, the Rocky Mountain MLA, the Renaissance Conference of Southern California, and the Shakespeare Association of America. I am indebted to the conveners of several SAA seminars for arranging fruitful scholarly encounters—in particular, to Frances Dolan and Gillian Kendall. Thanks are also due to many colleagues in the field who have provided helpful comments or general good cheer, Lynda Boose, Richard Burt, Judith Haber, Jeff Knapp, Barbara Bono, Michael Schoenfeldt, Linda Woodbridge, and various unknown readers of the manuscript among them. In addition, I am grateful to the staff of the Huntington Library and the Tomás Rivera Library at UC Riverside for their valuable assistance.

Finally, I thank family and friends for keeping my faith in a future “after the book” alive. Nancy Rettig was an important support in darkest hours. Kathy Teller, Stephen Phillips, Deborah Raphael, Gary Whitmer, Mona Simpson, and Ben and Margo Watson reminded me that there was a world elsewhere. Most especially, I thank Joseph Millard for his patience, self-reliance, and general encouragement during the years of work that went into little else but this book.

DEBORAH WILLIS

Riverside, California

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

According to two documents among the state papers of 1590, an unnamed London informer told the sheriff's office that a Mrs. Dewse had engaged the services of Robert Birche, by reputation a conjurer.¹ She sought through his magic art to revenge herself upon her enemies, the "theeves" and "villaynes" she believed were responsible for driving her husband, keeper of Newgate Prison, from office—an expulsion "which would bee both her and her childrens undoinges." The first document names several men; among them, "Mr Younge," "Sir Rowland Heyward," and "Sye." Mrs. Dewse asked Birche to make of these men wax images and then to "pricke" them "to the harte" to cause the men's death. Failing that, he was to use his art to make them perish "in a damp"—that is, of typhus—as had happened in Oxford at the Black Assize of 1577, when a number of judges, jurymen, and lawyers had abruptly died of that disease. In that incident, the "damp" was widely attributed to the sorcery of a bookseller, on trial for selling banned Catholic books.²

Birche was reluctant to accommodate Mrs. Dewse. He was "lame," he said, and therefore unable to make the images. According to the second document, he even piously lectured her: "She were beste to take good

1. *Calendar of State Papers Domestic—Elizabeth 2* (1581–1590): 644, reprinted in W. H. Hart, "Observations on Some Documents relating to Magic in the Reign of Queen Elizabeth," *Archaeologia; or, Miscellaneous Tracts relating to Antiquity* 40 (1866): 395–96.

2. A brief account and list of documents associated with this case can be found in George Lyman Kittredge, *Witchcraft in Old and New England* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1929), pp. 89, 419–20 n. 90.

heede how she dealte and whom she trusted in such matters. . . . The best meanes was to pray to God that hee would turne her enemies hartes." But the angry wife was determined to make the images herself if only Birche would stand by and correct her mistakes. After several visits from Birche, Mrs. Dewse completed three pictures under his guidance. She made "one for Mr Younge & put a pynne into his harte, another for Sir Rowland Heyward & putt a pynne to his harte & another under his ribbes, & the third picture for Sye & put two pynnes into his eyes." Mrs. Dewse was apparently satisfied by the results: "She thanked God that some of her pictures did work well." Birche was paid a sum of money, sent a sugar loaf and lemons, and asked to come again "divers times."

As it happened, Mrs. Dewse had indeed placed her trust in the wrong man. Birche himself, after his very first visit, reported on their dealings to her enemy, Mr. Young—Justice Young, that is, as he is termed in the second document. Birche's subsequent visits could be considered something of a "sting" operation, as, under Young's direction, he cleverly but deviously gathered more information about Mrs. Dewse's intentions while leading her to commit the acts of sorcery on her own. The first document closes with an account of the sheriff's search of her home, during which he found two pictures hidden in "a secret place" of her cupboard, "with pynnes sticked in them" just as the informant had said.

The second document is a statement taken from Birche himself after the sheriff's visit. Far from being discouraged, Mrs. Dewse now planned her revenge to extend up the social ladder to the Privy Council: she would add the sheriff, the recorder, the lord chamberlain, and even the lord chancellor to her list of intended victims. This ambition was apparently enough to prompt the sheriff to further action. She was apprehended that very day.

What happened to Mrs. Dewse? Was she charged and tried under the 1563 Act against witchcraft, which criminalized the use or practice of "anye Sorcery Enchantment Charme or Witchcrafte, to thintent . . . to hurte or destroye any person in his or her Body, Member or Goodes"?³ If so—assuming none of her victims actually fell ill or died—she would have been subject to a year's imprisonment, during which she would also be

3. C. L'Estrange Ewen, *Witch Hunting and Witch Trials* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner, 1929), p. 17. The first anti-witchcraft statute was passed in 1542, at the end of Henry VIII's reign, then repealed in 1547 under Edward VI. According to Ewen, only one case (which resulted in a pardon) has survived from this period. See Ewen, pp. 11, 13–18, for the texts of the 1542 and 1563 statutes.

placed in a pillory on four market days to “openly confesse” her error and offense. If her sorcery was successful, of course, she would have been subject to the death penalty, joining the many hundreds of others—almost all of them women—executed for witchcraft in England between 1563 and 1736, when the law was finally repealed.

Her name is missing from the exhaustive lists historians have compiled of persons tried under the witchcraft statutes in this period, but other documents allow us to piece together more of Mrs. Dewse’s story.⁴ In the period preceding her involvement with sorcery, one Humphrey Gunston had charged her husband, William Dewse, with “sundry abuses and misdemeanours . . . concerninge her Majestie.” Dewse, in response, had filed actions against Gunston for slander. But Gunston prevailed: the keeper of Newgate Prison was about to be charged and bound over for trial for “treason, murder, or felony” around the time Mrs. Dewse contacted the conjurer Birche. Among Gunston’s supporters were the three men targeted by Mrs. Dewse: Justice Young, a justice of the peace who frequently served as examiner and torturer in cases involving allegedly seditious Catholics; Sir Roland Heyward, also a justice of the peace and twice mayor of London; and Nicholas Sye, probably an underkeeper at Newgate Prison. These men had petitioned the lord chamberlain and other officials on Gunston’s behalf.

Mrs. Dewse herself named Gunston as one of her husband’s enemies, though the informant does not include him as one of the targets of her image magic. It appears, then, that at the time she was under investigation, her husband was on the verge of being forced out of the office of keeper by the collaboration of two influential justices of the peace and a prison underkeeper, who supported Gunston’s charges and blocked Dewse’s suits to the high officials who were formerly his patrons. That, at any rate, is what Mrs. Dewse believed: the “knaves” Heyward, Young, and Sye had “made the lord Chamberleyne that hee would not reade her husbandes petitions, and the Lord Chauncelor who was ever her husbandes frend would do nothing for her, & Mr Recorder whom she thought would not have bene her enemye, he likewise did now (as shee heard) take his parte that should have her husbandes office.”

Was Gunston angling for Dewse’s office, as Mrs. Dewse seems to have believed? Or were these men simply trying to remove from office a man

4. John R. Dasent, ed., *Acts of the Privy Council*, new series, 25 vols. (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1897), 16:388, 17:47–48, 19:111–12. In the documents, William Dewse’s name is spelled a variety of ways, among them Dews, Dyos, Dios, Devyes, and Devies.

they considered corrupt? Heyward and Young could have opposed Dewse because they suspected him or his wife of Catholic sympathies—undesirable especially in a prison keeper at Newgate, where many suspected Catholic conspirators were held. Mrs. Dewse reportedly told Birche that by helping her to achieve her revenge he would “greatly please God, for one of them was that thiefe Younge who lived by robbing papists.” God, apparently, would be pleased because they had punished an enemy of the Catholic church, despite their ungodly methods. Moreover, her fallback plan, to make these men die “as they did at the assises at Oxford” was modeled on the sorcery of a seditious Catholic bookseller.

Or were the charges against the keeper and Mrs. Dewse entirely made up? Perhaps Young and Heyward wanted their man in Dewse’s office for personal advantage, not for religious reasons at all; perhaps Young and Heyward cynically concocted a tale of attempted witchcraft in order further to discredit Dewse through his wife. As is true of most cases of witchcraft, we have only the accusers’ statements to go on; the accused witch can no longer speak for herself.

We may use these fragmentary documents to invent many “stories” about Mrs. Dewse. What is clear enough, however, is that the charge of witchcraft is embedded in a larger drama of intrigue, rivalry, and revenge, of power struggle over office and retaliation for its loss. Mrs. Dewse’s case, though it involves relatively minor players, resembles a type of politically motivated charge of witchcraft which seems to have especially interested William Shakespeare. Typically in such cases, a charge of witchcraft is made against someone believed to have designs against the monarch or some highly placed official. The charge is frequently combined with accusations of treason or conspiracy against the state. In fact, the charge—and perhaps also the actual practice of witchcraft—may emerge from factional struggle, may be part of one aristocratic group’s attempt to displace its rivals and remove them from power. Shakespeare’s first tetralogy—written around the time of Mrs. Dewse’s arrest—centers on a number of such politically embedded accusations: Joan of Arc, burned at the stake for her treasonous witchcraft against England; Eleanor, Duchess of Gloucester, who consulted with the witch Margery Jourdain and a male conjurer in a plot to advance her husband at the expense of King Henry VI’s life; Jane Shore and Queen Elizabeth, widow of Edward IV, accused of witchcraft by Richard III in an attempt to destroy his political enemies. Shakespeare, of course, most famously considers the intersection of witchcraft, treason, and ambition later in his career, in *Macbeth*.

The case of Mrs. Dewse and the cultural practices that helped to produce it provide an important context for Shakespeare's construction of witchcraft and treason; but Shakespeare's plays in their turn, I believe, also provide a context for "reading" the historical phenomenon of witch-hunting. Shakespeare is particularly suggestive on one issue. Why were the victims of the hunt overwhelmingly female? Why, for example, is Mrs. Dewse the object of this particular investigation and not the male conjurer whom she engaged?⁵ Why Mrs. Dewse and not the husband who paid for and apparently endorsed, however fearfully, her involvement with sorcery?

The documents concerning Mrs. Dewse do make it clear that she was caught in the cross fire of a power struggle between males over which she had little control. Assuming the charges against her to be at least partly true, she probably turned to sorcery as a last resort, when her husband's own attempts to defend his position had faltered. In so doing, she stepped out of place as a woman, in a sense usurping her husband's role, appropriating for herself an agency usually restricted to males. Yet, on the surface at least, it seems unlikely that the motives behind her arrest had much to do with her sex or with the perception that her behavior had violated gender norms. Such also appears to be the case more generally. According to the major historians of English witchcraft, witch-hunting was not a thinly disguised method of woman-hunting, nor were the hunts merely an excuse to wipe out midwives, female healers, widows with property, or women suspected of sexual transgression.⁶

5. If Birche turned informer for the authorities, he probably had been offered immunity from prosecution in exchange for his services: thus there may be a simple explanation for why he, and not Mrs. Dewse, escaped punishment. Yet so it went for most other male practitioners of magic: the conjurer, the sorcerer, the cunning man, the magus—for one reason or another, few ended up in court for the crime of witchcraft, fewer still were executed. Such male witches may have existed in great numbers, yet it appears that they were seldom suspected of practicing harmful magic, seldom truly feared as dangerous by their neighbors or by the authorities.

6. Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English, in *Witches, Midwives, and Nurses: A History of Women Healers* (New York: Feminist Press, 1973), first advanced the claim that witches were midwives or female healers persecuted because they threatened an emergent male medical establishment. They have been criticized by many for a partial reading of the evidence. See Geoffrey Scarre, *Witchcraft and Magic in 16th and 17th Century Europe* (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press International, 1987), p. 36; Leland Estes, "The Medical Origins of the European Witch Craze: A Hypothesis," *Journal of Social History* (Winter 1983): 271-84; G. R. Quaife, *Godly Zeal and Furious Rage: The Witch in Early Modern Europe* (London: Croom Helm, 1987), pp. 92-93; and especially David Harley, "Historians as Demonologists: The Myth of the Midwife-Witch," *Social History of Medi-*

Yet in Shakespeare's plays witchcraft is clearly intertwined not only with treason but also with gender transgression. Shakespeare's witches and the women associated with them, often endowed with masculine traits, regularly step out of place and become usurpers of the male role. Paradoxically, because they act like men, they also become associated with mothers: they recall that period of life when women dominate the lives of their male children, when the gender hierarchy of the adult world is inverted. Joan la Pucelle, the armed maid with a male warrior's strength, for example, is seemingly empowered by "God's mother" and turns English males from fierce dogs into "whelps" who run crying away (1 *Henry VI* 1.5.25–26). For Shakespeare, typically, the witch or witch-like woman is one who can make the adult male feel he has been turned back into a child again, vulnerable to a mother's malevolent power.

Witches were women, I believe, because women are mothers: witchcraft beliefs encode fantasies of maternal persecution. To readers of Shakespeare criticism or psychoanalytic commentary, this will not seem a surprising or particularly original claim.⁷ Nonetheless, in historians' analyses of the witch-hunts, the witch's relation to the maternal has seldom been explored. Though in the last twenty years historians have asked with increasing urgency why women formed the vast majority of

cine 3 (1990): 1–26. In England the midwife or village healer may have been somewhat more vulnerable to a charge of witchcraft than the average female, but many of the accused are neither; many, perhaps most, local healers were male; and there is little or no evidence that links the impetus for prosecution with male physicians. Quai's suggestion that the clergy were more likely to feel a rivalry with local healers is borne out in the attacks on "white" magic in many religious tracts.

Widows in some countries, including England, were represented among the accused in numbers above their proportion of the general population; see Scarre, *Witchcraft*, p. 26; and Alan Macfarlane, *Witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart England: A Regional and Comparative Study* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970), p. 64. Most of the accused were poor, however, and had little property to pass on; English officials did not have a financial incentive to prosecute as they did in some countries. See Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (New York: Scribner's, 1971), pp. 456–57.

Occasionally, but by no means regularly, the witch had a history of sexual transgression. See Macfarlane, *Witchcraft*, p. 160; and Thomas, *Religion*, p. 568.

7. See especially Janet Adelman, "'Born of Woman': Fantasies of Maternal Power in *Macbeth*," in *Cannibals, Witches, and Divorce: Estranging the Renaissance*, ed. Marjorie Garber (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), pp. 90–121, now reprinted with revisions in Adelman's book *Suffocating Mothers: Fantasies of Maternal Origin in Shakespeare's Plays, "Hamlet" to "The Tempest"* (New York: Routledge, 1992); my argument is indebted to Adelman's work at many points. Most psychoanalytically informed essays on *Macbeth* make a connection between the witches and maternal fantasy, and a number of them are cited in my chapter on that play.

those prosecuted under England's witchcraft statutes, they have not, by and large, focused on women's roles as mothers or caretakers of small children, or considered the psychological fallout of Renaissance mothering.⁸ The mother is absent from the most influential studies of English and Scottish witchcraft, those by Alan Macfarlane, Keith Thomas, and Christina Lerner.⁹ With some exceptions, the same is true of studies of witchcraft in Europe and the American colonies.¹⁰ Mrs. Dewse was a

8. Essays that explicitly take up the "woman question" include Alan Anderson and Raymond Gordon, "Witchcraft and the Status of Women—the Case of England," *British Journal of Sociology* 29 (June 1978): 171–84; and Clarke Garrett, "Women and Witches: Patterns of Analysis," *Signs* 3 (Winter 1977): 461–70. Both essays provoked subsequent commentary. See J. K. Swales and Hugh V. McClachlan, "Witchcraft and the Status of Women: a Comment," *British Journal of Sociology* 30 (September 1979): 349–57; and Alan Anderson and Raymond Gordon, "The Uniqueness of English Witchcraft: A Matter of Numbers?" *British Journal of Sociology* 30 (September 1979): 359–61; "Comments on Garrett's 'Women and Witches'" by Judith H. Balfe in *Signs* 4 (Autumn 1978): 201–2, and by Claudia Honegger, Nelly Moia, and Clarke Garrett in *Signs* 4 (1979): 792–98, 798–802, 802–4. Several books on European witch-hunting contain substantial treatments of the role of gender and appraisals of current research: among them, see Brian P. Levack, *The Witch-Hunt in Early Modern Europe* (London: Longman, 1987); Quaipe, *Godly Zeal*; and especially Merry E. Wiesner, *Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 218–38. Many "local studies" of English witchcraft also address the issue at least in passing; they are cited in Chapter 2.

9. Macfarlane, *Witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart England*; Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, pp. 437–583; Christina Lerner, *Enemies of God: The Witch-Hunt in Scotland* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1981) and *Witchcraft and Religion: The Politics of Popular Belief* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1984). After this book was substantially completed, I came across two essays by J. A. Sharpe that relate witches and mothers in ways that support aspects of my argument. See *Witchcraft in Seventeenth-Century Yorkshire: Accusations and Counter-Measures*, Borthwick Paper No. 81 (York: University of York, 1992), pp. 18–19, and especially "Witchcraft and Women in Seventeenth-Century England: Some Northern Evidence," *Continuity and Change* 6 (1991): 179–99. They stand as an important exception to my generalizations about the omission of mothers from historical studies of English witchcraft.

10. John Demos, in the context of a much larger, multidimensional study, discusses the witch as nurse and offers a psychoanalytic interpretation of aspects of accusers' responses to the witch, relating them to infantile fantasies about mothers; see *Entertaining Satan: Witchcraft and the Culture of Early New England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), pp. 172–210. Although Demos's psychoanalytic assumptions are somewhat different from mine, his argument has similarities to the one I offer in Chapter 2; I am indebted to his analysis. In *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman: Witchcraft in Colonial New England* (New York: Norton, 1987), Carol F. Karlsen discusses motherhood in a more restricted sense; her major focus is on women and patterns of inheritance. It is perhaps significant that both of these exceptions come from studies of colonial American witchcraft, which has close affinities with English witchcraft; at the same time, because fuller records survive for many American cases, the relationships and family histories of participants can be reconstructed in greater detail than in English cases. It may also be true that the role of mother is not as relevant in continental Europe, where witch-hunting was a far more virulent affair, and the

mother, and she apparently turned to sorcery in part *as* a mother: her husband's loss of office threatened to be the "undoing" of her children as well as herself. As mother and wife, dependent on her husband for economic security and social position, Mrs. Dewse had interests that intersected with his; her magical acts, designed to help and avenge him, implicate her in his treasonous activities. Those acts eerily encode a nightmare version of her maternal role; the doll-like wax images to be pierced by pins suggest children over whom a controlling but monstrous mother holds the power of life and death. In Shakespeare's first tetralogy and *Macbeth*, witches, wives, and mothers are endowed with similar nightmare powers; by both magical and nonmagical means, they manipulate men and make them feel as if they are dependent and powerless children. Like Mrs. Dewse, these women also use their powers to aid and abet "traitors" who threaten what other characters see as legitimate political authority. But whereas Mrs. Dewse's maternal role is glimpsed only briefly in the documents connected to her case, Shakespeare's plays foreground the links between the witch and the mother, making a malevolent, persecutory power associated with the mother's body, voice, or nurturant role a central feature of her ability to threaten order. In doing so, Shakespeare's texts invite us to think again about the significance of gender in the English witch-hunts. The maternal plays only a minor role in the case of Mrs. Dewse, but in other witchcraft cases of that day in England the connection between the figures of the witch and the mother is, I hope to show, undeniable.

Reading the English Witch-Hunts

Whereas historians have only recently begun to give sustained attention to gender in their analyses of the English witch-hunts, literary critics have been almost too ready to assume that gender is the only significant factor: for some writers, witch-hunting is, at its heart, woman-hunting. In many studies of early modern literature, witches—"real" as well as fictive—are routinely considered to be gender transgressors, punished primarily for their defiance of patriarchal norms. For Cather-

legal system, social practices, and psychological dynamics were significantly different from those in England; accordingly, the profile of the typical witch may also have been quite different. Among other things, continental witch stereotypes emphasized the sexual deviance of the witch.

ine Belsey, for example, the English witch-hunts involved “the demonization of women who were seen as voluble, unwomanly and possessed of an unauthorized power,” and “witches were . . . women who failed to conform to the patriarchal ideal of femininity.” For Karen Newman, “Witches threatened hegemonic patriarchal structures . . . as cultural producers, as spectacle, as *representatives* of an oppositional ‘femininity.’”¹¹ Such generalizations contain a partial truth; representations of the witch in early modern literary and dramatic texts often did register male anxieties about female unruliness or sexual power, and the language of witchcraft could be used to denigrate or otherwise discourage a variety of female behaviors. Thus in *The Winter’s Tale*, Leontes castigates Paulina as a “mankind witch” when she defies his commands, and Polixenes later accusingly comments on Perdita’s “excellent witchcraft” when he is dismayed by the power her beauty exerts over his son (2.3.67, 4.4.424).¹² Yet when we turn to look at specific cases in which women were accused of witchcraft, these generalizations do not seem to tell us very much about what convinced a community that a particular woman was a witch or what made her the object of legal prosecution. The woman accused as a witch may have implicitly violated patriarchal norms by her angry speech or assertive behavior, but so had many other women never associated with witchcraft. The gender implications of her actions seldom appear to have been her accusers’ major concern. Nor were accused women regularly associated with erotic power or sexual offenses in England. On the rare occasions when

11. Catherine Belsey, *The Subject of Tragedy: Identity and Difference in Renaissance Drama* (London: Methuen, 1985), pp. 185–86; Newman, *Fashioning Femininity and English Renaissance Drama* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), p. 69. Some critics perceive failure to conform to political norms as well as patriarchal ones. For Peter Stallybrass, “Witchcraft beliefs are one way of asserting distinctions . . . including definitions of political and familial roles. They can be used, for instance, to account for the ‘unnatural’ ambition of a rival or for the ‘unnatural’ power of a woman”; Lady Macbeth, he goes on to suggest, “implicitly subverts patriarchal authority in a manner typically connected with witchcraft” (“*Macbeth* and Witchcraft,” in *Focus on “Macbeth,”* ed. John Russell Brown [London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982], pp. 190, 197). According to Sarah Beckwith, “Witches then are those women who are fantasized as the simultaneous subverters of the family and the state” (“The Power of Devils and the Hearts of Men: Notes towards a Drama of Witchcraft,” in *Shakespeare in the Changing Curriculum*, ed. Lesley Aers and Nigel Wheale [London: Routledge, 1991], p. 151). My point here is not that these critics are entirely wrong; as will become clear in the course of the book, I agree with several of these statements when their context is more carefully specified.

12. William Shakespeare, *The Winter’s Tale*, ed. J. H. P. Pafford (Arden Edition; London: Methuen, 1973).

an accused woman was alleged to have caused male impotence, it was a side issue having little bearing on the case.¹³

Those literary critics who have associated the witch with fantasies about the mother, I believe, come closer to a central feature of actual witchcraft cases. Janet Adelman has written evocatively about Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and the imagery of maternal danger at the heart of constructions of the witch; Gail Paster has discerned the witch-hunter's fear of maternal power in "the almost obsessive attention that English authorities paid" to the witch's teat.¹⁴ Yet it remains to be demonstrated that fantasies about the mother played a significant role in witch-hunting outside of these limited contexts, nor have historians or literary critics shown how such fantasies may have informed the prosecution of specific cases. That is, in essence, what I try to do in this book. And in so doing, I try to clarify the relation of literary constructions of the witch to the very specific beliefs, attitudes, and social practices that made particular individuals subject not only to "the violence of representation" but also to physical violence and death at the hands of the state and of local communities. I have focused, therefore, on those textual practices that most immediately pertain to the legal prosecution of women and men for the crime of witchcraft as well as on selected literary texts.

The witch-hunts were, of course, a highly complex, multidetermined affair, involving the poor and the very poor at the village level as well as a "prosecuting class" made up of gentry-level and aristocratic judges, justices of the peace, clerics, magistrates, and kings. Peasant and elite, low, middle, and high, male and female—persons from diverse social backgrounds had different yet overlapping reasons to fear and loathe the witch. The historians Alan Macfarlane and Keith Thomas have offered the most powerful analysis of witchcraft at the village level; despite their relative lack of attention to gender issues, their detailed studies of individual witchcraft cases in the context of social and economic tensions and complex networks of popular magical belief are the starting point for any serious understanding of witch-hunting in England. Christina Lerner, exploring the Scottish witch-hunts, has integrated their approach with a closer examination of the role of the state apparatus and the ruling elites.

13. On male impotence, see Thomas, *Religion*, pp. 437, 538.

14. Adelman, *Suffocating Mothers*, pp. 130–47; Gail Kern Paster, *The Body Embarrassed: Drama and the Disciplines of Shame in Early Modern England* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), p. 247.

"Peasants left to themselves," she notes, "will identify individuals as witches and will resort to a variety of anti-witchcraft measures in self-defence; they cannot pursue these measures to the punishment, banishment, or official execution of even one witch, let alone a multiplicity of witches, without the administrative machinery and encouragement of their rulers."¹⁵

Although these historians have nothing to say about the relation of witches to mothers, they all take up the "woman question" at least briefly. For Keith Thomas, the preponderance of women among those accused of witchcraft is most plausibly explained "by economic and social considerations, for it was the women who were the most dependent members of the community, and thus the most vulnerable to accusation." For Alan Macfarlane, it was not women's dependence but a conservatism implicit in their social position that made them vulnerable; they were the "co-ordinating element" in village society, and "if witchcraft . . . reflected tensions between an ideal of neighborliness and the necessities of economic and social change, women were commonly thought of as witches because they were more resistant to such change." Thomas and Macfarlane agree that, as Thomas says, the "idea that witch-prosecutions reflected a war between the sexes must be discounted," chiefly because village-level accusers and victims were as likely to be female as male, if not more so.¹⁶ Considering that both conducted their research in the late 1960s, it is not surprising that neither employs gender or patriarchy as a category of analysis, and their discussions of witches as women takes up no more than a few pages.

Christina Larner, while stressing the political and religious factors involved in the hunts, has explored the "woman question" in somewhat more detail and found that the witch-hunts were "sex-related," though not "sex-specific." For elites and peasantry alike, the women who became targets of the hunts had clearly violated norms regarding appropriate behavior for women: they were angry and demanding, not meek, mild, and compliant. Larner does not believe that a "war between the sexes" can be discounted as an element in the hunts merely because a majority of accusers were women themselves, as Thomas and Macfarlane suggest. Patriarchal beliefs and practices often have the effect of dividing women against each other, Larner argues; because of their dependence on men,

15. Macfarlane, *Witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart England*; Thomas, *Religion*; Larner, *Enemies of God*, p. 2.

16. Thomas, *Religion*, p. 568; Macfarlane, *Witchcraft*, pp. 161, 160.

"most women will not only conform, but also attack women who by their nonconformity threaten the security of conformist women."¹⁷

Versions of Larner's argument have surfaced not only in literary criticism but also in a wide range of feminist accounts of the witch-hunts, the more polemical of which are likely to portray the witch as a heroic protofeminist resisting patriarchal oppression and a wholly innocent victim of a male-authored reign of terror designed to keep women in their place.¹⁸ If it is acknowledged at all that women also hunted witches, such women are represented as lackeys of patriarchy, conservative defenders of male-defined notions of women's roles, mere cogs in the phallocentric wheel. As Larner's own argument attests, even in more historically sensitive accounts, feminists have typically considered women who accused other women of witchcraft to be doing little more than mouthing a male script. Thus for one feminist historian, "the patriarchal system . . . explains why many women accused other females: if a woman displeased or threatened the men of her community, she would also be seen as dangerous by the women who depended on or identified with those men." These

17. Larner, *Witchcraft and Religion*, p. 86.

18. Some examples include Mary Daly, *Gyn/Ecology: The Meta-ethics of Radical Feminism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978); Andrea Dworkin, *Woman Hating* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1974), pp. 118–50; Robin Morgan, "The Network of the Imaginary Mother," in *Lady of the Beasts: Poems* (New York: Random House, 1970). WITCH was the acronym of a late 1960s women's liberation group, and the witch has continued to be a powerful symbol invoked by a wide range of feminist groups. See also Silvia Bovenschen, "The Contemporary Witch, the Historical Witch, and the Witch Myth: The Witch, Subject of the Appropriation of Nature and Object of the Domination of Nature," in *New German Critique* 15 (Fall 1978): 83–119. Bovenschen describes uses of the witch in European demonstrations by feminists; she celebrates the "anarchic" energies of the mythic impulse behind such uses while ridiculing the "rearguard" interest in the witch of "ivory tower" scholars, with their delusions of autonomy and their foot-dragging emphasis on historical accuracy. Her discussion, engaging as it is in its "bad girl" iconoclasm, reinscribes the notion of an autonomous "ivory tower," sealed off from politics, and masks the new feminist possibilities that careful attention to historical texts can open up. But Bovenschen's point about the "rearguard" nature of scholars' work on witchcraft is well taken. The feminist texts I have mentioned are all products of the 1970s; although scholarly witchcraft studies have a long history, for the most part, not until the 1980s did historians give sustained attention to the question of gender in the witch-hunts. Larner's essay first appeared in 1981. These feminist essays, moreover, do not concern themselves specifically with England, but generalize about the European hunts as a whole. In those countries where true "witch panics" took place, where torture was used and hundreds, even thousands, were killed at one time, it makes more sense to represent such practices as products of a misogynist "sado-torture" machine, as Mary Daly does. Nevertheless, it is disturbing to note the uncanny resemblance of Daly's rhetoric to that of Heinrich Kramer and Jacob Sprenger in the *Malleus Maleficarum* (Cologne, 1486) she so deprecates; her text puts a demonized male enemy in the place of the witch.

women, she goes on to suggest, may have been trying “to outdo their oppressors in scorning persons perceived as outsiders, in hope of being accepted, or tolerated, themselves.”¹⁹

Like other feminists, I am interested in understanding the relation of the witch-hunts to early modern gender constructions and to systems of male dominance. But such formulations, useful as they may be in some contexts, misleadingly represent the hunts as an all-male, univocally misogynist, top-down phenomenon, ascribing a monologic unity of self to the participants in the hunts which elides tensions and discontinuities in women’s relations with other women and in early modern culture more generally.²⁰ Instead, I attempt in this book to distinguish between different types of discourse about the witch and to demonstrate that representational strategies tended to vary according to the class and gender positions of their authors. In considering village-level constructions of the witch (crucial in determining the witch’s gender), I take issue especially with the widely held feminist view that assigns the woman accused of witchcraft to the role of rebellious protofeminist and the female accuser to that of patriarchal conformist. Village-level quarrels that led to witchcraft accusations often grew out of struggles to control household boundaries, feeding, child care, and other matters typically assigned to women’s sphere. In such quarrels, the woman accused of witchcraft was as likely to be the one urging conformity to a patriarchal standard. Her curses and insults were experienced not as violations of proper feminine conduct but as verbal assaults on the other woman’s reputation for “neighborly nurture,” assaults that might also cause harm to loved ones under her care. The accuser, in turn, defamed the witch as a perverse and destructive mother. Engaged in a complex struggle for survival and empowerment

19. Anne Llewellyn Barstow, “On Studying Witchcraft as Women’s History: A Historiography of the European Witch Persecutions,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 4 (1988): 17–18. Another study midway between history and polemic is Marianne Hester, *Lewd Women and Wicked Witches: A Study of the Dynamics of Male Domination* (London: Routledge, 1992). Hester, though she engages with Macfarlane’s and Thomas’s work and examines some primary sources, unconvincingly concludes that “overall, the witch-hunts were an instance of male sexual violence against women . . . [and] a part of the ‘dynamics of domination’ whereby men at the time maintained dominance over women” (p. 199). Like Barstow, she views female accusers as motivated by the need to avoid being stigmatized themselves: “The fact that many women incriminated each other must also be seen . . . as an indication of the pressures they felt to avoid being accused of witchcraft, or to attempt to lessen the accusation against them” (p. 201); such accusations may also reflect internalization of the pervasive misogyny of their society, she adds.

20. For some similar criticisms, see Sharpe, “Witchcraft and Women,” pp. 179–82.