

The Midwife-Witch on Trial: Historical Fact or Myth? *La sage-femme sorcière en jugement : un mythe ou un fait historique?*

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ABSTRACT

New developments in social history have generated scholarly work re-evaluating the history of the witch trials of early modern Europe. This paper explores the claim that the European witch trials of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries persecuted midwives. Multiple historical theories of the persecuted midwife-witch are discussed, including those that construct the midwife-witch as a skilled, respected member of a local female healing culture and alternately as a marginal figure in her community who was ignorant, disrespected, impoverished and therefore vulnerable. Medical histories of the midwife-witch have often relied on a construct of the marginal figure to champion the progress of medicine from earlier discredited and unscientific practices. Feminist analysis poses the witch trials as the suppression of women healers and the midwife-witch as symbolic of the threat of female control of reproduction to powerful patriarchal forces. Although these theories have been important to the revival of midwifery in North America specifically and to feminism more broadly, there is limited evidence to support these claims. The figure of the witch, like many myths, may tell us more about the interpreter of history than the witch herself.

KEYWORDS

midwives, witches, witchcraft, midwifery history, historiography, social movements

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RÉSUMÉ

De nouveaux développements dans l'histoire sociale ont généré des travaux académiques réévaluant l'histoire antérieure des procès de sorcières au début de la période de l'Europe moderne. Ce texte utilise le regard théorique de l'histoire en vue d'explorer l'affirmation que les procès intentés aux sorcières en Europe au 16^{ième} et 17^{ième} siècle ont persécuté les sages-femmes. On évoque plusieurs théories historiques à propos de la sage-femme sorcière persécutée, y compris celles qui dépeignent la sage-femme sorcière comme un membre respecté et compétent d'une culture féminine locale de guérison ou alternativement, comme une personne marginale perçue dans sa communauté comme ignorante, irrespectueuse et pauvre, donc vulnérable. Les livres d'histoire médicale sur la sage-femme sorcière utilise souvent l'analyse de la figure marginale pour discourir de la victoire de la médecine sur des pratiques antérieures non scientifiques et discréditées. L'analyse féministe propose que les procès de sorcières reflètent une répression des femmes guérisseuses et de la sage-femme sorcière, qui représentent le symbole de la menace du contrôle féminin de la reproduction sur les forces patriarcales. Même si ces théories ont été importantes pour la renaissance de la pratique sage-femme en Amérique du Nord spécifiquement et plus largement pour le féminisme, il y a peu d'évidence qui supporte ces dires. La figure de la sorcière, comme plusieurs mythes, nous parle souvent plus de l'interprète de l'histoire plutôt que l'histoire elle-même.

MOTS CLÉS

Sages-femmes, sorcières, sorcellerie, histoire de la pratique sage-femme, historiographie, mouvements sociaux

Cet article a été évalué par des pairs.

Introduction

Heroic and mythical figures play an important role in the development of a social movement's ideology and collective identity. One historical figure that was glorified in emerging North American women's health movements of the 1970s and 1980s was the traditional female healer. This female healer provided inspiration to a fledgling women's health movement that was organizing in response to a medicalized health care system, both as a symbol of power and of resistance. Feminist scholars, writers and activists in the early decades of second wave feminism constructed this figure as a "wise woman" – a skilled healer, herbalist and midwife – who played a valued role within a local female culture. In these discourses, the power of the wise woman is seen to have been eroded through suppression by a rising male medical profession, and persecution at the hands of church and state in the witchcraft trials of sixteenth and seventeenth century western Europeⁱ and later in eighteenth-century colonial American communities.

The North American midwifery movement claimed the persecuted European midwife-witch as part of its heritage. Since the 1970s when midwives emerged in parts of North America as lay health care providers in response to consumer dissatisfaction with the over-medicalization of childbirth, midwives identified with the image of a skilled, local midwife of sixteenth and seventeenth-century Europe victimized by patriarchal church and state, and a rising male medical profession. They identified commonality of experience with the scholarly and popular representations of the early modern European midwife, in her informal traditions of learning, neighbourly relationships with women, specialized knowledge and skill in normal childbearing, and in the inherent challenge her practice posed to professionalized medicine. Elizabeth Davis reflects imagery that was common in midwifery literature^{1,2,3} from this time in her 1981 manual for midwives, *A Guide to Midwifery: Heart and Hands*:

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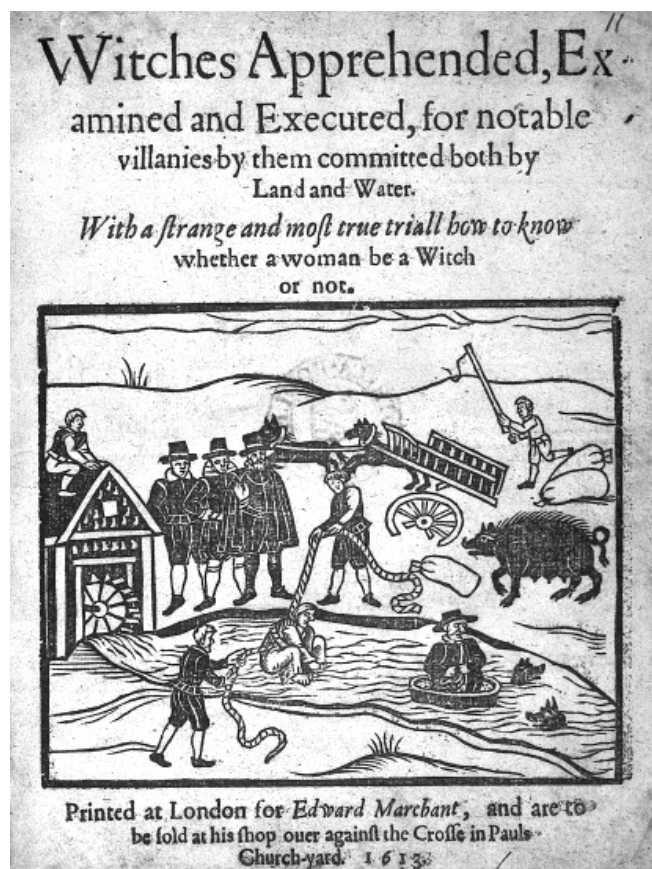
*Midwifery is probably the world's oldest helping profession. Since time immemorial these helping women have been around at birthing time. One who was particularly interested and attuned emerged as the local midwife, wielding the healing skills of her time and culture... However, midwives have a history of incredible persecution. Those practicing in Europe during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were tortured and burned at the stake as witches. The women healers were all lumped together in this convenient category, enabling the patriarchal medical profession to rise and conquer.*⁴(p. 3)

Where midwifery has since become legally recognized in Canada, the early modern midwife still offers a meaningful representation for midwives who remain on the margins of a well established health care system.ⁱⁱ

This historical construction of female healers and their suppression has come under scrutiny with new developments in the practice of history in the latter decades of the twentieth century and the early-twenty-first century. Many of the beliefs held by midwives and consumers about the history of women healers may be misinformed or unfounded. The idea of the persecuted midwife-witch is contested in historical scholarship, and there are multiple interpretations and polemical debates about why the midwife-witch may have been targeted in early modern European witchcraft accusations. Nevertheless, the midwife-witch remains a compelling and an enduring figure, both in popular imagination and academic discourses.

This paper will examine the historiographyⁱⁱⁱ of the midwife-witch of sixteenth and seventeenth-century western Europe from a feminist critical theory perspective. Scholarly work on the persecution of witches in early modern Europe has generated a wide range of theories about why the "witch craze" happened, who the witches were, and why those persecuted were predominately women. Early studies of the witch trials produced sweeping

Figure 1: Title page from *Witches apprehended, examined and executed for notable villanies by them committed both by land and water*. London: Edward Marchant, 1613. Courtesy of the Wellcome Library.



singular theories to explain this phenomenon. Historians later began to move away from these "grand narratives" as they recognized temporal and regional variations in the nature and scope of witchcraft persecutions. Historical studies are increasingly focused on archival study as historians attempt to reconstruct witchcraft accusations and persecutions within local communities.

This discussion of the midwife-witch is primarily limited to an analysis of secondary source literature, although several medieval and early modern European ecclesiastical and demonological documents that are still accessible in print will be discussed. Despite the limited ability of these texts to represent common beliefs about the midwife-witch or about the extent of midwife persecutions, some historians have depended on this "official viewpoint" in the development of their historical theories. Evidence of the "lived experience" of

midwives in sixteenth and seventeenth-century Europe is limited or absent. Surviving primary source material of the witch trials – court records, peasant trial court depositions, diaries or letters of the accused – potentially provide more accurate impressions of popular beliefs and individual experience. It is, however, beyond the scope of this research to directly review this archival evidence.

Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe

It is generally agreed among historians of European witchcraft that the persecution of witches was relatively unknown until the late Middle Ages in western Europe. Prominent scholars argue that the witch craze of sixteenth and seventeenth-century Europe was an extension and a magnification of earlier witch hunting, as magic and sorcery were transformed into the concept of "malevolent witchcraft" by Christian ideology.^{5,6} Witchcraft became associated with heresy and devil worship, and with the rejection of Christianity. The connections between witchcraft and criminality were formalized into canon law in 1484.⁷ Secular courts began to adopt the inquisitional system and coercive techniques in criminal law procedure.

Estimates of the number of victims in the witchcraft trials of early modern Europe range widely, from 10,000 to over six million.^{iv,v,8} It is generally accepted among historians that women were the primary victims of witchcraft accusations and persecutions, with estimates ranging from 65% to 95%. According to surviving medieval and early modern European ecclesiastical and demonological texts, witches were primarily women who derived their magical powers from pacts with the devil. Often witches' power was seen to be linked to women's functions as childbearers and childrearers. It was believed that the procreative, nurturing and nursing roles of women were perverted by witches. Prominent accusations made against witches included preventing conception, procuring abortions and performing infanticide – accusations that were associated with midwives.

Midwives and Witchcraft

The official Christian viewpoint attributed evil and satanic powers to midwives. A 1484 papal decree,

The Bull of Pope Innocent VIII, describes the "malefica" of witches as "slain[ing] infants yet in the mother's womb" and "hinder[ing]...women from conceiving."⁷ (p. xix) German Dominican inquisitors Heinrich Kramer and James Sprenger authored a manual for witchcraft inquisitors, *Malleus Maleficarum*, first published in 1486. This manual is thought to have been influential, and even instrumental, in the persecution of witches. It was reprinted numerous times in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. It offers a valuable fifteenth-century representation of Christian witchcraft ideology, although it is limited in its ability to represent popular beliefs and perhaps even widespread beliefs of the elite. Kramer and Sprenger provide detailed descriptions of witches and their crimes, and they detail the inquisitorial procedure used in ecclesiastical and secular courts. They identify the particular threat of midwives, who they state "surpass all others in wickedness." In their writings, the midwife-witch becomes the cannibalizer of infants, and the servant of the devil. Kramer and Sprenger describe how midwives "kill the child conceived in the womb" and make use of the body for satanic purposes, and how they offer the newborn to the devil.⁷ (p. 41, 66) Henry Bouquet, a demonologist who wrote *An Examen of Witches* in 1590, similarly remarks on the satanic tendencies of midwives:

... those midwives and wise women who are witches are in the habit of offering to Satan the little children which they deliver, and then of killing them, before they have been baptised, by thrusting a large pin into their brains. There have been those who confessed to having killed more than forty children in this way. They do even worse, for they kill them while they are in their mothers' wombs.⁹ (p. 51)

While demonologists and ecclesiastical authorities were convinced of the potential evil of midwives, we are left uncertain if midwives figured prominently in witchcraft trials, and whether the view of midwives' satanic evil was shared by the general population.

In their consideration of the social role of witches, Ritta Jo Horsley and Richard Horsley caution for the need to distinguish clearly between official theory and popular reality.¹⁰ They call for a comprehensive

interdisciplinary analysis of the witch hunts. They argue that the popular concept of witchcraft as sorcery is distinct from the official concept of witchcraft as diabolism. They assert that although the midwife was a social role highly relevant to official witch beliefs, it is not clear that it was a social role with any relevance to popular witch suspicions. They conclude that midwives are not as prominent as women in other social roles in the peasant trial depositions that record the charges brought by villagers against their neighbours, and that the peasantry did not share the elite belief that midwives were instruments of the devil.¹⁰

American medical historian Thomas Forbes argues that the purpose of the European witch trials was to persecute midwives. In one of the earliest studies of the midwife-witch, *The Midwife and the Witch* published in 1966, Forbes makes uncritical evidentiary use of the medieval and early modern ecclesiastical and demonological literature. He asserts that midwives participated in witchcraft which "at its roots...was essentially a pagan and debased religion – the worship of the devil: "It is well established that witchcraft was widely practiced in Europe, and we can be sure that some midwives were tempted to enjoy its forbidden delights. Undoubtedly there were opportunities for them to use witchcraft professionally."¹¹ (p. 132) He accepts this literature's construction of witchcraft and of midwives' participation in witches' gatherings, or "sabbats," and in the preparation of "flying ointments" made from the fat of slain babies. Forbes puts forward early modern European midwifery texts written by physicians, regulatory ordinances and oaths that cautioned midwives from engaging in superstitious practices and sorcery as further evidence that midwives practiced witchcraft.^{vi} He supports the demonological conceptualization of the midwife as "ignorant, unskilled and poverty-stricken" and the midwifery profession as "lowly" and disrespected. He suggests that, given midwives' ill repute, it is not surprising they "sometimes fell into evil ways" and that they were persecuted for practicing witchcraft.

Forbes' theories have been criticized by historians for their uncritical use of the demonological texts and the theories of Margaret Murray, one of the first

twentieth-century historians of the European witch trials.^{13,14} Murray in 1931 theorizes that women persecuted for witchcraft were members of a pagan cult that had survived from pre-Christian times. She asserts that midwives were persecuted as witches:

*The modern idea of the witch is founded entirely on the records of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when the Christian Church was still engaged in crushing out the remains of Paganism and was reinforced in this action by the medical profession, who recognized in the witches their most dangerous rivals in the economic field. Throughout the country the witch or wise-woman, the sage-femme, was always called in at child-birth, many of these women were highly skilled... Religion and medical science united against the witches, and when the law could no longer be enforced against them, they were vilified in every way that human tongue or pen could invent.*¹⁵ (p. 145)

In his exploration of the "midwife-witch myth," David Harley suggests that Murray's belief in the persecution of the midwife-witch, while unsubstantiated, remains highly influential in the widespread acceptance of this myth.¹⁴

Some feminist historians have theorized that the sixteenth and seventeenth-century witch trials were a misogynistic campaign to suppress women healers, particularly midwives.^{7,8,12,15} They attribute the persecution of midwives to a rising male medical profession. In contrast to the "meddlesome" ignorant practitioner constructed by Forbes and other historians,^{11,12} these feminist historians portray the midwife as a powerful and skilled healer whose knowledge is based on inherited wisdom handed down from mother to daughter:

Women have always been healers. They were the unlicensed doctors and anatomists of western history. They were abortionists, nurses and counselors. They were pharmacists, cultivating healing herbs and exchanging the secrets of their uses. They were midwives, traveling from home to home and village to village. For centuries women were doctors without degrees, barred from books and lectures, learning from each other, and passing on experience from neighbour to neighbour and mother to daughter. They were called 'wise women' by the people, witches or charlatans by the authorities. Medicine is part

*of our heritage as women, our history, our birthright.*⁸
(p. 3)

In their pamphlet *Witches, Midwives, and Nurses*, Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English theorize that the persecution of witches in sixteenth and seventeenth-century Europe was a "calculated ruling class campaign of terror" directed against the female peasant population. They argue that witches represented a political, religious and sexual threat to the church, and that witchcraft represented peasant collectivity and autonomy in the form of a "female led peasant rebellion." They suggest that "sabbats" were occasions for pagan religious worship and for sharing "herbal lore."

Ehrenreich and English focus their analysis of the witch trials on the persecution of women healers, especially midwives. They fundamentally portray the suppression of female healers by the medical profession as a political and class struggle:

*The stakes of the struggle were high: Political and economic monopolization of medicine meant control over its institutional organizations, its theory and practice, its profits and prestige.*⁸ (p. 4)

According to Ehrenreich and English, the witch persecutions were a critical phase in the "male takeover of health care." They assert that the "great majority" of accused witches were lay peasant healers who were part of a rebellious, underground social movement and whose beliefs and practices opposed the authority of the church and the male aristocracy. They contrast the empiricism of the midwife with the anti-empiricism of the church in order to argue that the church denounced non-professional healing as heresy. They further argue that "male upper class healing" was under the auspices of the church and was, therefore, acceptable. They state that the partnership between the church, the state and the medical profession was in "full bloom" during the period of the witch trials, and that the "new European medical profession" played a significant role in the witch hunts.

Witches, Midwives, and Nurses has been dismissed by critics as polemical and unsubstantiated.^{16, 17, 18} Two

central criticisms have been made of Ehrenreich and English's theories. The first criticism is that there is a lack of evidence for female pagan "secret societies." Second, it has been argued that the rise of the male medical profession occurred in the century following the witch persecutions. Margaret Connor Versluysen and Hilda Smith have proposed an alternate explanation for the decline of women healers. Both Connor Versluysen and Smith argue that women's exclusion from male "empirics guilds" shaped a division of labour that "paved the way for a rigid and formal sexual division of labour in healing." They argue that women's exclusion from formal medical training led to the devaluing of women healers as the demand for theoretical knowledge, in addition to practical experience, increased.^{18, 19}

Ehrenreich and English have been accused of appropriating the witch figure and reconstructing the witch persecutions in order to validate the goals and the politics of the modern women's health movement. There is no doubt that in *Witches, Midwives and Nurses* they make numerous references to the importance of looking to the past to "recapture our history as health workers:" "To know our history is to begin to see how to take up the struggle again."⁸(p. 5) They were writing at a time when the modern women's health movement was emerging in North America and women were seeking to reclaim control of reproduction. Connor Versluysen recognizes political value in Ehrenreich and English's thesis despite her criticisms:

*It...draw[s] attention to many neglected political aspects of the health care system, and especially to the way in which power differences between the sexes have permeated and shaped the health division of labour.*¹⁸(p. 197)

Ann Oakley provides a political analysis of the erosion of female control of reproduction that is similar to that of Ehrenreich and English.¹² She argues that the process of professionalization of health care in reproduction is accompanied by the transfer of control from untrained women in the community to control by formally trained men in the profession of medicine. Like Ehrenreich and English, Oakley connects midwifery and witchcraft: "Etymologically and historically, four words or roles have been closely related. These are woman, witch, midwife and healer."¹²(p.23) She attributes the suppression of the "traditional female healer" to the witch persecutions. She argues that the midwife-witch challenged three hierarchies church over laity, man over woman and landlord over peasant: "She represented a lay peasant subculture and she symbolized the actual or potential power that a minority group possesses: it is a threat to the established order."¹²(p. 26)

Anne Llewellyn Barstow, writing later in 1994, reinforces this narrative of the persecution of women healers.¹⁶ In her gender analysis of European witchcraft, Barstow theorizes that fear of the magical powers of midwives and healers led to a



Figure 2:
Woodcut depicting women practicing witchcraft.
Courtesy of the Wellcome Library.

demonization of women's curative skills. She states, "The role of the healer, long respected and even seen as essential, became suspect."¹⁶ (p. 109) Barstow is critical of the "narrow and misleading" categorization of women healers as midwives in witchcraft studies, arguing for a more complete conceptualization of women's healing roles to include their work as "gynecologists, barbers, surgeons, physicians and apothecaries."¹⁶ (p. 111) She suggests that the interpretation of midwife-witch persecutions resulting from professional rivalry should include rivalry with the local parish priest whose role in baptism midwives usurped.²⁰ (p. 113)

Gunnar Heinsohn and Otto Steiger propose an alternate theory that implicates the midwife-witch and focuses on the threat of female control of reproduction symbolized by midwives. They argue that the witch hunts were a dramatic expression of the eradication of birth control.^{22, 23} According to Heinsohn and Steiger, birth control, abortion and infanticide were tolerated practices for limiting family size in Medieval Europe; midwives were the holders of the knowledge of these reproductive strategies. This toleration was transformed in the age of the witch hunts, argue Heinsohn and Steiger, because of church and state concerns about population limitation. They assert that the persecution of midwives held political motives to "enforce production of human beings:

*The midwife/witch massacres only represent the most obvious means to a modern population policy... Parallel to the suppression of birth control a powerful police apparatus was created by authorities to permanently ensure the loss of medieval woman's control over their reproductive apparatus, thus giving way to the population revolution...*²² (p. 211)

Another theory of the persecuted midwife-witch is based on midwives as "scapegoats."^{16,24,25} Historians suggest that female healers' curative powers would have appeared magical in this era when the understanding of disease was limited, and that healers' powers would have been attributed to the influence of the devil. Knowledge about the process of childbirth was not well understood at this time

and thus would have been considered mysterious. Witchcraft would have provided a logical explanation for the "misfortunes" of childbirth. Because of the high maternal and infant mortality rates of this period and the association of misfortune with the work of Satan, it is argued that birth attendants would have been vulnerable to accusations of witchcraft when birth complications, particularly congenital conditions or death, occurred. In this theory, the link between witchcraft and midwifery is made more likely by the suggestion that it was common practice for neighbouring women to attend births. Christine Lerner argues that "unofficial healing" was experienced by the majority of the population until the 18th century. She suggests that professional midwifery was unusual and that all women were potentially birth attendants and could therefore be seen as midwives.¹⁸ Given the predominance of women among those accused of witchcraft, it would not be surprising that birth attendants would be among the victims of the persecutions.

Historians have increasingly questioned "grand narrative" theories providing singular explanations for the persecution of midwives as witches in early modern Europe. Evidentiary practice has shifted to a wide range of archival evidence as scholars from across disciplines have attempted to reconstruct the popular beliefs and realities for individuals within specific communities. Richard Horsley states, "a great deal remains to be done to determine the importance of midwives in the witch trials and the relationship between the midwife and the wise woman."¹³ (p. 710) He suggests there is a lack of available evidence to determine if the accused belonged to any particular social group. David Harley dismisses the persecuted midwife-witch, suggesting that historians have been "led astray" by the evidentiary use of *Malleus Maleficarum* and the work of Margaret Murray from 1931 that reinforced the midwife-witch link. He also argues that "a few spectacular cases have been mistaken for a general pattern and midwife-witches have been seen where none exist."¹⁴ (p. 1) Lyndal Roper has similarly found a lack of evidence for the persecution of the midwife-witch in her study of witchcraft in early modern Germany. She suggests a correlation between witchcraft accusations and early

motherhood, but argues it is the "lying-in-maid" – the woman helper in the early weeks following childbirth – who is the primary victim of witchcraft accusations, not the midwife.^{26,27} Adrian Wilson points to the importance of recognizing midwives as a group with tremendous variation rather than a uniform group, thereby making generalizations problematic.²⁸ Robin Briggs argues that witchcraft beliefs and persecutions are linked with human experience of pain and anxiety about the precarious nature of life. He argues witchcraft is not sufficiently explained by general causes but requires analysis of complex changes in society and the individual.²⁹ In her examination of early modern and twentieth-century representations of the witch, Purkiss argues that radical feminists, modern witches and academic historians have appropriated the figure of the witch, including the midwife-witch, to construct their own identities. Rather than victims in witchcraft accusations, Purkiss argues that midwives were "more likely helping witch hunters." She presents evidence that the church and the state relied on midwives' expertise in witch trials to identify "witch marks" on accused women.¹⁹

An analysis of the historiography of the early modern midwife-witch is a fascinating case study on developments in historical theory and practice. Historical interest in witchcraft persecutions in sixteenth and seventeenth-century Europe emerged within the growing discipline of social history in the 1960s. The evolution of the specialties of social history, women's history and later gender history, has led to extensive academic investigation into the predominance of women in witchcraft accusations and persecutions.

The midwife-witch figure has been used by historians writing from different, and in fact opposing, perspectives. Early medical and feminist histories of the midwife-witch that emerged in the 1960s and 1970s treat midwives as a static group and provide a single explanation for their persecution; midwife as marginal figure, either as impoverished incompetent or as powerful skilled healer. Forbes relies on a largely economic explanation; Ehrenreich and English on misogyny. They have built their theories of causation on limited evidence, and they draw a direct link in their writings from early modern to modern midwifery and its relationship to medicine. Their historical explanations rest on a "progressionist bias," a predictable sequence of antecedent events



Figures 3, 4 and 5: Woodcut figures depicting women as witches. Courtesy of the Wellcome Library.

leading to linear advance. Analysis of these histories provides a vivid example of what Stephen Jay Gould refers to as the "shoehorn theory" of history, where historical evidence is shaped and fitted by the historian into a framework bound by the historian's own preconceptions.³⁰ These histories raise the important question of who the historian is and implications for the historian's evidential selectivity and interpretative subjectivity. Historians, therefore, have used the midwife-witch in their own interests, to justify medical dominance^{11,17} or to critique medical power.^{7,8,12}

Historical studies of the midwife-witch since the 1980s generally reflect more sophisticated understandings of the methodological challenges of doing history "from below." Historians have increasingly focused their studies on local communities and have begun to delve into the fragmentary archival evidence of the witch trials that may more accurately represent individual experience. They have produced "micro-narratives" of witchcraft within a particular community, as in Lyndal Roper's study of the lying-in-maid in early modern period of the Lorraine district of Germany.²⁷ Rather than creating macro-theories for the persecution of the midwife-witch, these historians have concerned themselves with the meaning of variations and patterns in witchcraft popular beliefs and accusations. With the influence of postmodernism in the 1990s, historical scholarship recognizes the limitations of uncovering historical "truths" about the midwife-witch. More recent studies are characterized by increasing interdisciplinarity, ranging from anthropology to demography to literary theory to psychoanalysis, as scholars have begun to examine individual experience, popular witchcraft beliefs and contemporary representations of the witch figure.²⁹ And yet, debates about best historical practice continue. Gunnar Heinsohn and Otto Steiger revisit their 1982 study of the persecution of the midwife-witch as a means to eradicate birth control decades later in 2005.^{22,23} They express frustration with micro-theories on women in early modern witchcraft persecutions and argue for the importance of macro-theories in understanding this phenomenon.¹⁹

Conclusion

The weight of historical evidence does not seem to support the claim that large numbers of accused and persecuted witches were midwives. There also seems to be insufficient evidence to support the theory that the witch trials were a movement to wipe out midwifery per se. Yet, there is room for a theory that midwives were probably among those persecuted. Midwifery knowledge was likely common among women, and childbirth attendance was probably a common experience for the majority of women in sixteenth and seventeenth-century Europe. The activities that midwives, or birth attendants, engaged in may have resembled those associated with witchcraft if we accept that "official and unofficial" healing of this era relied on sorcery, magic and superstitious practices. If misfortune and mystery were suspect, then it may be likely that those involved in childbirth would be subject to witchcraft accusations, particularly if childbirth was viewed as a mysterious or dangerous process.

The study of witchcraft in early modern Europe remains problematic given the fragmentary nature of the evidence. The multiple discourses of the midwife-witch reveal the slipperiness of historical fact and interpretation. Even when we appear to have a large body of historical or factual evidence about prominent events or figures, the "truth" can be difficult to construct. Diane Purkiss' statement that the witch "offers opportunities for identification and elaborate fantasy"¹⁹ (p. 10) seems to be supported by an analysis of the historiography of the midwife-witch of early modern Europe.

The midwife-witch "myth" remains a powerful figure in popular imagination. A November 2009 Google search of the terms "midwives and witches" generated over 71,000 hits, with reference to a wide range of sources from academic papers and books on the victimization of women as witches, to neo-pagan newsletters glorifying the midwife-witch, to local North American childbirth consumer groups' calls to arms to save modern midwives from persecutions likened to the "burning times" of the early modern European midwife, to government publications. The burning of the midwife-witch appears in popular culture sites, in song lyrics,

literature and poetry, and in movies. The midwife-witch figure has also entered mainstream academic discourse. Her persecution is a topic in the curricula of academic disciplines internationally, in faculties of midwifery, nursing, medicine, history, English, anthropology, psychology. Ehrenreich and English's polemical pamphlet *Witches, Midwives, and Nurses*, which has been discredited by critics, commonly appears on academic course reading lists. While the midwife-witch appears to be more of a myth than a historical reality, she is an enduring symbol that transcends scholarly critiques. She survives even when her very reality is suspect.

The study of the historiography of the midwife-witch is of interest to students of midwifery and history, particularly for the selective use of evidence and the potential for multiple interpretations. It is also of interest to students of twentieth-century popular culture for the persistence of the midwife-witch figure in popular imagination. The midwife-witch figure is of interest to the midwifery profession in its consideration of the formation of professional ideologies and identities. As the midwifery profession becomes established across the Canadian health care landscape, we may want to reflect on the meaning of embracing a history of resistance – or of persecution – and the impact on the culture of midwifery that midwives are creating as individuals, and as a community.

To some midwives the midwife-witch figure may be a meaningful symbol of power and resistance, or even of persecution. As a western ideological construct that was influential in a predominately white, middle class North American revival of midwifery in the 1970s and 1980s, it may have no or little cultural or historical relevance to other midwives or students. And even though this symbolic figure may not have resonance for all in the midwifery profession, it may nevertheless impact us in our work within an interdisciplinary maternity care system, and within the larger community. Given the persistence of this figure in professional discourses and in popular imagination, midwives may bump up against the stereotypes of the midwife-witch in all her meanings,³¹ and midwives may have a role to play in confronting and dispelling these stereotypes.

ENDNOTES

- i Western European history of the 16th and 17th centuries is referred to as the early modern period.
- ii Marsden Wagner, MD, former director of the Office for Maternal and Child Health for the European office of the World Health Organization and a world-renowned expert on childbirth issues, sees the growing number of largely unfounded cases against midwives as the result of a modern-day witch hunt. 'This witch hunt,' he argues, 'is part of a global struggle for control of maternity services, the key underlying issues being money, power, sex and choice.' " In Prown K. *Becoming an Agent of Change: What to Do When Your Midwife Has Been Charged*. Midwifery Today [online] 2001[cited 2005 Nov 23]; [1 screen]. Available from: URL: <http://www.midwiferytoday.com/articles/charged.asp?a=1&r=1&e=1&q=katherine+prown>
- iii The Oxford English Dictionary defines historiography as "the study of the writing of history and of written histories." Compact Oxford English Dictionary [online]. 2009 [cited 2006 Jan 3]. Available from: URL: http://www.askoxford.com/concise_oed/historiography?view=uk
- iv Geoffrey Scarre suggests that the most accurate estimation varies between 10,000 and 100,000. He is critical of estimates that range over 100,000 which he claims are unsubstantiated. In Scarre G, Callow J. *Witchcraft and magic in sixteenth and seventeenth century Europe*. 2nd ed. Hampshire : Palgrave, 2001.
- v The estimation of millions appears in early feminist texts on the suppression of women healers. See Daly M. *European witch burnings: purifying the body of Christ*. In Daly M. *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1978. p. 178-222.
- vi It appears that ecclesiastical regulation of healing was not unique to midwifery. Ann Oakley argues that the early professionalization of medicine was strictly controlled by the Church. She also suggests that superstition and irrational beliefs played a greater part in male medicine than female medicine.

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