

Witches, Wives and Mothers: witchcraft persecution and women's confessions in seventeenth-century England

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ABSTRACT The confessions made by the Suffolk women charged with witchcraft in 1645 indicate that, in many cases, accused women were contextualising their own experiences within a wider demonological framework. Often they were judging themselves in their roles as wives and mothers – the witch, after all, was the behavioural opposite of the stereotypical role model of the ‘good wife’. There are noticeable references to infanticide, suicide and possible abuse. It could well be that women who possessed no other language to describe certain traumatic experiences took on the conceptual framework of demonology as a way of explaining events. Witch-hunting was a method of behavioural control in which women as victims (in many senses of the word) were themselves participating because they had no other framework of reference.

Introduction

In August 1645 Suffolk woman Anna Moats was judged guilty of witchcraft at a special court of Oyer and Terminer held in Bury St Edmunds. Magistrates were told she had confessed, within 2 hours of her arrest, to having ‘imps’ or evil spirits and that the devil had first appeared to her “when she was a lone in her howse and after she had been curseinge of her husband and her childering”.^[1] Branded as a scold and a witch, Anna had been persecuted for her failure to conform to the accepted norms of female behaviour – instead of fulfilling the expected role of a ‘good’ wife and mother she had been cursing and shouting at her husband and children. Anna was just one of over 100 individuals, mostly women, who were the

victims of the Suffolk witch-hunt carried out by self-styled ‘Witch Finder General’ Matthew Hopkins[2], the remaining details of whose cases I shall be examining here. I shall try to show, through my examination of the remaining source material, not only that witch-hunting was woman-hunting – a way of sifting out subversive females – but that the women accused, in their confessions, were judging themselves in their role as neighbours, wives and mothers. Indeed it seems to be the case that some accused witches were, within their court confessions, contextualising their own insecurities and experiences within the linguistic framework of demonology.

The main primary source for my investigation of the 1645 trials is a manuscript account of the Suffolk depositions, now in the British Library[3], and which was transcribed and published in full by historian C. L’Estrange Ewen in the 1920s.[4] Ewen wrote that these depositions “from their rough nature bear the appearance of having been taken down at the time of the examinations on three separate occasions or perhaps at their reading in the Court at the trials”. [5] The depositions name 91 accused witches and vary in length from a name, to a line to a paragraph. However, they are extremely useful, both qualitatively and quantitatively, since a large number contain details of what the witch was alleged to have told her confessors and how freely this information was given. These have been supplemented through the use of a tract written by Hopkins’s assistant, John Stearne, in 1648 which gives further names and details about execution.[6] Ewen has estimated that a total of 124 witches can be traced who appeared in the Suffolk court in 1645 and it seems that 68 of these were executed.[7] At least 80% of these ‘Suffolk witches’ were women.[8]

Many problems arise in using documents relating to witchcraft trials in general and these confessions in particular as source material. We have no records left directly by the women themselves. All written reports take the form of court records or pamphlets containing material selected by a male intermediary such as a court scribe. However, it is important to try to analyse the processes involved in the witchcraft confession because it can help lead us to a greater understanding of women’s subjectivities and experiences in early modern England. To ignore these would be to draw a complete blank which would serve little other function than perpetuating the exclusion of women from history. Moreover, if we look at the source material carefully we can indeed find hints and clues as to what was happening for the women themselves. The confession text is a layered one – leading questions were asked of the women, sleep deprivation was sometimes used as a method of physical coercion, and the influence of witnesses and accusers is very apparent. However, there is still some input from the women themselves as they speak about their lives within the context of witchcraft belief.

Most major studies of the phenomenon have tended to concentrate on the power dynamics of the witch-hunts and have given political or economic

analyses of the relationships between accusers and accused, church and state, or élite versus popular culture.[9] Most recently Marianne Hester has used a revolutionary feminist framework to analyse the witch-craze as part of the ongoing attempt to assert male supremacy over women through mechanisms of violence.[10] My aim is to approach the witch-hunts from a very different level: to try to examine what was happening from the perspective of the women who were themselves accused of being witches. This is not to say that the issue of power dynamics will not be taken into consideration, but that my central focus will be gauged at the level of the personal, and I will be mostly concerned with an attempt to put the experiences of the ‘witches’ themselves into our picture of events.

Suffolk Background

The 124 individuals accused of witchcraft in Suffolk in 1645 came from 44 different villages and three market towns, scattered around the county. Two witches were accused in the small market town of Stowmarket, eleven witches were accused in both Framlingham and Glemham, seven in Halesworth, six in Rattlesden and Bramford, five in Wickham and four each in Bacton, Hintlesham and Copdock. Members of the same family were linked together as witches in a few cases and occasionally accused individuals, in their confession, implicated other locals or persons in an adjacent village. Some 32 cases took the form of single cases in individual villages.

Suffolk was, at this time, one of the most intensively farmed areas in England, its agriculture based on a traditional specialisation in dairy produce.[11] It is worth noting that a significant number of the Suffolk cases (20%) refer to the bewitching of livestock, particularly cattle, as well as disputes over butter and cheese. Margaret Benet, for example, killed cows belonging to her neighbour Hoggard as well as “divers other cattell” and bewitched Goody Garnham’s cow so it would give her a “sound punch” because she had refused to let her have a pint of butter. In contrast there are but two references to arable farming – an alleged plot by three witches to blast Mr Mase’s corn, and an imp sent by two brothers to destroy another field of corn.

David Underdown, following Joan Thirsk, has traced two different patterns of rural community in the early modern period and has linked their pattern of settlement with social structure. “Arable parishes”, he writes, “tended to be smaller in area, with compact, nucleated village centres, often with resident squires and strong manorial institutions – effective mechanisms for social control ... they also tended to retain strong habits of neighbourliness and co-operation”. The second category, which he has mainly studied in Dorset and Somerset but which we see in Suffolk, is the

wood-pasture parish, “often larger in area, with scattered settlement patterns rather than nucleated centres”.

Manorial institutions were far weaker, concepts of neighbourliness less binding, and farming took place on “individually owned, enclosed farms rather than the more co-operative systems that prevailed in open-field villages”.^[12] Underdown suggests that, because official mechanisms of control were weaker in wood-pasture villages, there was more concern about disorder in all spheres, including gender relations, and that this was subsequently reflected by the greater incidence of persecution of witches and scolding women. In dairying areas too, women played a very active role in the farming economy, working in the dairy and often attending market to trade on a regular basis – Underdown suggests that their greater autonomy meant they could be seen as more of a threat than in arable areas where women tended to be less involved in the local economy.

Underdown’s thesis suggests that the community structure in dairying regions, whilst resting on a bedrock of economic strength, contained social tensions which burst to the forefront during the civil war period. A crisis of order had been created at the national level by the challenges to the monarch and religion. This was paralleled by very real fears at the local level – of disorder in the community, within the family and between husband and wife – which was felt more keenly in dairying areas where the bonds of community were substantially weaker.

A rigorous, long, and wide-ranging study of Suffolk villages would be necessary in order to show whether Underdown’s stereotype of the wood-pasture parish is an accurate description of the communities whose residents were accused of witchcraft in 1645. It is not possible to undertake this here. However, the details of the deposition records demonstrate, I believe, a concern about the expectations of neighbourliness, about the roles and behaviour patterns expected of men and (particularly) women, and an attempt by a community to regain control over the disorder it sensed right in its midst.

Questions must also be asked as to whether civil war and religious alignments had any direct bearing on the Suffolk witch trials of 1645. While the county has been labelled as intensely puritan and regarded as a parliamentarian stronghold through its participation in the Eastern Association, there were royalist sympathisers and indeed a pro-royalist rising occurred in 1642 in Bury St Edmunds.^[13] Although the witch-hunts obviously occurred at a time of great puritan activity in Suffolk, there are very few references in the trial material itself to partisan support of either a political or religious natures. Two cases alone mention witchcraft in relation to the army. Ann Smith of Glemham gave her son an imp to take into the army with him “and he resolved to go to the king’s party with it” – presumably to cause trouble in the royalist camp, but the aim is unclear. Nicholas Hempstead of Creting was alleged to have used witchcraft to kill a

horse of one of the constables who “pressed him for a soldier” as well as “five of the best horses in Colonel Rochester’s troop”.[14] Religious sectarianism is hardly ever cited although, of course, general references to God and the devil occur all the way through. Alan MacFarlane, in his study of the Essex witch trials, similarly found no evidence of an especial zeal among lay puritans to prosecute witches nor references to the accused as Catholics, heretics or ungodly; neither is there evidence of strong religious motivations on the part of Matthew Hopkins.[15] There are, however, two references I wish to draw attention to here – the case of Joan Balls of Wickham who “professed anabaptism” and was a “runner after the new sects” and, secondly, the case of Margery Spara of Mendam who was described as “a lewd woman seldom come to Church”. They appear to refer to very different patterns of behaviour; however, I would like to suggest that they have a common link, in that neither women attended the ordinary village church with her neighbours and that both were ‘doing their own thing’ in religious terms.

The Process of Confession

Christina Hole wrote that “the problem of voluntary confessions has troubled many who share the widely held modern belief that all condemned witches were innocent victims of credulity and ignorance”.[16] In other words, why on earth did some women condemn themselves to death through their own utterances? Of course confessions were, in many cases, the result of ill-treatment; however, it is undoubtedly the case that some of the alleged witches do seem to have been quite ready and prepared to make confessions and statements that they had bewitched their neighbours. Witch trial sceptic Reginald Scot, writing in 1584, was clearly bothered by the incidence of voluntary confession; he decided the women concerned must be suffering some form of madness or delusion. Using contemporary medical terminology, he suggested that their over-vivid imaginations were brought on by an excess of the humour ‘melancholy’ in their bodies: “If our witches phantasies were not corrupted, nor their wits confounded with this humor, they would not so voluntarilie and readilie confess that which calleth their life in question”.[17]

I do not believe pathology provides a sufficient explanation for the women’s behaviour – can there really have been that many mad women in Suffolk and why should they all have thought they were witches? Nor do I believe, like Margaret Murray, that the women who claimed they were witches were actually members of some highly organised Dianic cult inherited from a pagan past.[18] Although a few of the women implicate others whom they worked with as witches, most do not. Most of the women, as I shall show in my examination of the Suffolk material, seem to have been very isolated in their role as witches.

Witchcraft, throughout the period, was treated as a 'secret crime'; this meant that, similar to poisoning, it was likely to be committed in private or behind closed doors. No one except the witch herself, could know about her meetings or compacts with the Devil. From a rationalist twentieth-century viewpoint it was also an 'impossible' crime - the criminal potential of witchcraft was completely dependent upon a belief in the spirit-world which had to be shared by victim, witnesses, judge and jury alike. Demonic possession, for example, was only possible in a society which believed it could actually happen. The implications of all this for an alleged witch were that many forms of evidence were accepted as proofs which would, at a later date, fail to stand up in a court of law. It was accepted that the appearance of familiars, the presence of witch-marks, even the abatement of an affliction after an alleged witch had been 'scratched', were all clear signs of proof.

When a case came before the court, evidence was given by four different categories of witness - accusers (often neighbours who claimed they were the victims of witchcraft), interrogators (such as Stearne and Hopkins who questioned the accused), watchers, and searchers. The watchers were employed to observe the witch in her home or in prison to see if her imps appeared. The searchers checked the woman's body for witch's marks, teats or paps from which her imps suckled. Most of the watchers and searchers mentioned in the text are women and often the same individuals performed both functions. Prissilla Brigs, for example, was employed to search Thomazine Ratcliffe and she told the court she had found two teats on her body. Abigail Brigs (her sister?) told the court that Thomazine had been in custody for 6 days and that during this time she had confessed to Abigail that she had killed her husband; Stearne, who also questioned Thomazine, expanded on her statements. All in all a total of 13 women and 45 men are actually named as court witnesses in the manuscript depositions. This gender ratio of one female to every four male accusers appears to represent a totally different pattern to that discovered by Clive Holmes in his analysis of Home Circuit witch trials.[19] Holmes has discovered that nearly 50% of witnesses were women in the Home Circuit counties during the seventeenth century. However, rather than seeing this as evidence of an equal involvement of men and women in the witch trials, Holmes goes on to show that leading men in the community instigated the legal process of prosecution and then mobilised their neighbours, often women, into giving confirmatory testimonies. It was the male élite, therefore, who set the legal ball rolling. I do not think the picture in Suffolk was very different. Most of the 13 named women were watchers and searchers, involved in the court process, rather than individual informants. There are, however, several instances in which male witnesses refer to the 'bewitching' of their wives, to their comments and actions. It seems that in Suffolk, although women made informal allegations about other women in the

village, their husbands may well have acted alone as official informants when the matter came to court.

For judges and juries the clearest and most incontrovertible form of evidence was the confession. Michael Dalton wrote in *The Country Justice* in 1630 of “their own voluntary confession ... which exceeds all other evidence”.^[20] However if a witch did not choose to confess ‘voluntarily’ there were ways and means, some more covert than others, of forcing her to make a statement. Historians of the English witch trials agree that the extreme and macabre forms of torture used in Scotland and on the continent were not in use in England; but it is clear that the English confessions were often obtained by imposing physical and psychological pressures on the accused. An examination of the tract, written by Matthew Hopkins in 1647 to defend his methods, throws up the most common. Hopkins admitted that sleep-deprivation and ‘walking’ had been used in Suffolk and Essex; watchers kept accused witches awake, usually by making them walk round their cell, “because they being kept awake would be the more active to call their imps in open view”.^[21] Against the charge that alleged witches had been “extraordinarily walked till their feet were blistered, and so forced through that cruelty to confess”, Hopkins claimed he had “never had a hand in it” although it was a method used by “rusticall people”.^[22]

While sleep-deprivation and watching had been clearly used in Suffolk to precipitate confessions, the process was, however, not always necessary. In 12 (13%) of the Suffolk depositions it was reported that the confession had been made ‘freely’ or ‘without watching’. Rebecca Morris, for example, “confessed before any violence, watcheinge or other threats” that the devil came in the shape of a little boy to make a covenant with her. Alicia Warner of Rushmere “freely beeing at her liberty confessed that she had entertained certaine evill spirits”. In the case of Eliza Southerne of Dunage, questioned by minister Mr Browne, we are told that “the minister used no other argument to make her confes ... [only] sayinge doe wronge yor selfe but cleare your conscience”. Eliza was being asked to judge herself and her behaviour on Christian moral grounds as a way to producing confession.

Physical and mental pressures explain to a certain degree why a substantial number of women accused of witchcraft made the confessions they did; the amount of bullying and harsh treatment that was used against them must not be underestimated. However, this does not provide the whole picture. Some women clearly believed they had met the devil and he had persuaded them to use witchcraft; their motives for believing this can only be unravelled by working towards an understanding of their material and psychological experiences.

The confession records show a great attention to detail and an interesting mix of popular elements of witchcraft belief (the devil, imps) with localised, individualised aspects. There are interesting references in the

Suffolk depositions to local topography (meetings with the devil at named places in the neighbourhood)[23] and domestic objects and food items (apples, butter) within a broader symbolic framework of a widely accepted demonology. There is clearly an interaction taking place in the confession-making process; between the accused, her accusers and her interrogators; between a widespread witchcraft belief and individual experience. We need to treat the confession text as a palimpsest; it is made up of different layers of detail and interpretation, added one on top of another as different people became involved in the process of accusation and confession. An alleged witch may have told earlier versions of her story before she came into contact with the courts. At some point in her career she chose, for some reason, to take on the language of demonology to describe her actions and motives.

Thus production of a written confession was a very complicated and involved process. A real woman's life had been interpreted, altered and filtered through a linguistic system to become written words on a page. There are numerous stages in the process; but the common factor in each is the transforming power of language. Dale Spender has written that "language is our means of classifying and ordering the world, our means of manipulating reality".[24] Language is used to interpret and define experience and to give meaning to it. When I use the term 'experience' I am referring to physical and psychic events, how women reacted to them, and how women remembered them. Events become culturally organised experience when they have been labelled and examined within a set framework of belief. Lyndal Roper has written:

Narratives in which people try to make sense of their psychic conflicts usually involve borrowing from a language which is not at first the individual's own. We might find that coming to understand oneself can involve learning to recognise one's feelings in terms of theory, psychoanalytic or diabolic, which one might not have originally applied to oneself.[25]

Language can also be said to create experience since it constructs existence and identity. Once a woman was labelled 'witch', with her original experiences distorted and set within this context, this was what she became. Just as she had, with a strong input from others, constructed what ultimately became a written testimony, so that text would end up constructing her, both in terms of her identity within the community and of self-identity.[26] Of course, not all the women involved in the trials were found guilty but defendants who were acquitted could still find their reputations coloured by the trial and their destiny shaped by it.

Persecution and Gender

The witch trials are significant in the study of gender relations and women's oppression because they are a clear example of organised state violence against women.[27] Although a few men were accused (20% in the Suffolk sample), a significant number of these were associated with another female witch. The key to understanding the witch trials lies in their gender-specificity. The details of the cases refer directly to traditionally defined feminine space - the home, the kitchen, the sickroom, the nursery; to culturally defined female tasks or occupations and their direct opposites - feeding (poisoning), child-rearing (infanticide), healing (harming), birth (death). Given the involvement of women in the dairying economy of Suffolk, it is hardly surprising, therefore, that the Suffolk material contains many references to witchcraft in the dairy and the bewitching of cattle. When things went wrong in the domestic world or the farmhouse - the cream curdled, the butter would not set or the child fell ill, witchcraft might be suspected. Women were in a potentially extremely powerful position through their control over child-rearing and feeding; the witchcraft persecutions can be seen as an officially sanctioned bid to control this threat and to reassert male power over women.

The witch trials were not the only way of clamping down on women at this time. Laws against infanticide were reinforced in an attack on young single mothers whose behaviour was seen as deviant and suspect. Hoffer & Hull have shown there was a leap in the number of indictments for infanticide brought before the Home Circuit during the late Tudor and early Stuart period.[28] A statute of 1624 enacted that the concealment of birth of a bastard child would be taken as evidence of murder.[29] Martin Ingram's research has indicated that church court action against scolding women was not as widespread as David Underdown has suggested. However, it is undoubtedly true that the figure of the scolding woman, portrayed in ballads, prints and plays in this period - Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew* is an obvious example - presented a powerful image of the disorderly female whom, it was stressed, needed to be controlled.[30]

The witch trials pinpointed women as potentially threatening, violent and harmful; that threat being seen as particularly insidious because of the 'secret' nature of witchcraft itself. Women were portrayed as particularly vulnerable to the attentions of the devil because they were identified, through Christian scripture, as the lustful daughters of Eve, who had openly brought evil and sin into the world; they were described by demonologists as hot-headed, governed by passion rather than intellect. Continental texts such as the Catholic *Malleus Maleficarum* of 1486 had portrayed female sexuality as threatening, deviant and subversive and as such, strongly associated with witchcraft.[31] In England local communities seem to have been primarily

interested in the 'harming' activities of individual witches - there is little mention of the macabre and elaborate sabbats which captivated continental imaginations.[32] By 1645, however, some of the more elaborate notions were beginning to take hold (perhaps disseminated by Matthew Hopkins himself) and the Suffolk trials refer directly to the making of covenants and sexual activity with the devil. The relationship between the witch and her familiars was highly sexualised. Margaret Baytes confessed that "when she was at work she felt a thinge come upon her legs and go into her secret parts and nipped her in her secret parts where her marks were found". Goody Smith confessed that "her imps hange in her secret parts in a bag and her husband saw it". Female libido and sexual desire seem to have been associated with the temptings of the devil in Puritan as well as Catholic minds and this is reflected in the confessions. Hence Anne Usher confessed to making a covenant with a pole cat and that "she felt 2 things like butterflies in her secret parts with witchings dansings and suckinge & she felt them with her hands and rubbed them and killed them". The strong links which were made between witchcraft and female sexuality, the subsequent depiction of female desire as deviant, and the important prescriptive role of the witch trials in society, meant that the persecution of witches was an ideal mechanism for the control of women's sexual behaviour.

Women were faced with a basic set of role models against which to judge themselves - the good wife, the witch, and the scold.[33] As I shall show, women were very aware of these constructions; both those who were being accused and those women who were participating in watching or making allegations, desperate to prove they were on the side of virtue before someone also tried to label them as witch.

The witch was the stereotypical opposite of the good wife. She was the woman who was trying to act entirely independently of male control, asserting her own powers, sexual and otherwise, to gain financial reward or carry out revenge on her enemies. The witch was a warning to women as to what would happen if they behaved in a way which could be counted as subversive. As I have said, the type of activities associated with witchcraft were a direct inversion of the traditionally accepted roles for women. The position of the 'scold' was a 'halfway house' - she was the woman who was just beginning to break out of control and therefore must be kept in order through the bridle or the cucking stool.

In the production of confessions, coercion was as much cultural as it was physical. Frameworks of belief about women's roles, responsibilities and expectations would lead women to condemn themselves. It is important to remember that it was a popularly held belief during the seventeenth century that the devil existed as a material phenomenon and that any individual could meet him in a wood or on a country road. Chance meetings with strangers or animals could be explained in such a way. Explanations for

both macrocosmic and microcosmic events were similarly sought in terms of God and the devil. Hence, when Thomas Hudson fell lame and his doctor could find no cause for it he assumed that Ann Ellis of Metlingham had bewitched him; however, the deposition records that “lately changeing his surgeon he doth now begin to mend” – and Ann was found innocent. The devil also functioned in the psychological as well as the material world – on mind as well as body. Ann Laurence has shown that seventeenth-century women who gave testimonies to the civil war churches about their conversions referred to extremes of emotion in terms of religion:

A woman who was convinced that God had ceased to love her because of her transgressions reported that ‘I had temptation by Satan to drown myself in a Pond’, and another woman reported that it was only her unborn child which prevented her from destroying herself. Two other women mentioned suicide among the temptations offered by Satan, which they overcame thanks to God’s intervention.[34]

Personal life crises such as suicide attempts and depression were almost always seen as temptations from the devil; desire to carry out acts which were considered ‘morally bad’ was associated with evil. What we today might choose to call undesirable thoughts, impulses, or drives were in early modern England seen as external influences on the individual and were associated with the devil. In shorthand, Satan was everything you did not want to admit to.

The temptations of the devil were a particular feature of the conversion narratives produced by members of baptist and other sects. Presbyterian Hannah Allen described in her autobiography, which took the form of a religious testimony, how she had battled against the devil during the dark days of her melancholy to regain her faith and happiness in God: “12th May 1664 Still my time of great distress and sore trials continues. Sometimes the Devil tempts me woefully hard and strange thoughts of my dear Lord which, through his mercy, I dread and abhor the assenting to, more than hell itself”. She also recorded that the devil had suggested to her that she must die and be with him.[35] Baptist Sarah Davy, in her autobiographical account, *Heaven Realised*, described how her “distrustful heart” was “exercised with variety of temptations by the devil as to distrust the goodness of the Lord”. [36] The language Hannah Allen and Sarah Davy used to describe their emotional despair is not very different, as I will show, from the words attributed to the women of Suffolk in their witchcraft confessions.

Witches, Wives and Mothers

What I would like to suggest, by looking closely at some of the material in the Suffolk cases, is that women’s insecurities as wives and mothers as well

as traumas about experiences or events, were being played out through the framework of the witchcraft confession.

Susanna Stegold of Hintlesham was found guilty of using witchcraft to kill her husband. One of the inquisitors, John Easte, read out her confession in court. She had, he said, confessed that the devil had first come into her after her marriage and that she knew she had special powers because her greediest pig had died when she had wished it would stop eating. The marriage seems to have been an extremely unhappy one for Susanna; she may well have been beaten or ill-treated. She had allegedly confessed that her husband was a 'bad husband' and Susanna clearly hated him. Indeed her strength of feeling was so intense that, when he died mad, she seems to have believed she had killed him through her own evil thoughts:

Her husband being a bad husband she wished he might depart from her meaninge as she said that he should die and presently after he died mad ... she cryed out, oh! my deare husband, but being asked whither she bewitched him or noe and said she wished ill wishes to him and what so ever she wished came to pas.

In common law a man was entitled to beat his wife (so long as it was not fatal) and a woman was supposed to accept it as her due - only when a woman's life was actually in danger could the ecclesiastical court intervene.[37] Susanna's husband had obviously made her suffer in some way but it is she who was racked with guilt. She knew that sickness which had no obvious natural explanation was attributed to the devil. Hence the framework of belief about gender roles and about the association between witchcraft and illness caused her to feel his death might be her fault. She assumed she was a witch and went on to confess that she had three evil spirits or imps. For Susanna, belief in the devil seems to have been a way of coping with guilt or hiding the emotional trauma.

Susanna's case is not the only one in which it appears that a victim of abuse may have taken on the language of demonology to explain her feelings or experience. Margaret Benet confessed that "the divell in the shape of a man ... carried her body over a close into a thicket of bushes and there lay with her and after scratched her hand with the bushes". Jana Linstead "met with the devill in the shape of a man who wold have lyen with her but she denied him whereupon he threatened her but did her noe hyrt". Widow Thomazine Ratcliffe "confessed that a month after the death of her husband there came one to her in the shape of her husband and lay hevy upon her and she asked him if he wold kill her and he answered in the voice of her husband no I will be a loveing husband".

Belief in the devil could provide a framework to describe a situation in which a woman was frightened or felt threatened and which she was unable to articulate in any other way. With no other language available to describe or explain her feelings, belief in the devil became the only answer. Nazife Bashar has shown that, while rape legislation existed in early modern

England, prosecutions were very few.[38] It is likely that in many instances, women did not possess the vocabulary to describe a bad experience as rape. Furthermore, if these are cases of abuse it is very significant that the women should assume they themselves are actually guilty of witchcraft as a result of the experience. As victims they are seeing themselves at fault and blaming themselves for what has happened.

I have chosen to examine next the cases of Susanna Smith and Prissilla Collit since they both contain references to infanticide, a crime which has recently been associated with post-partum psychosis but which, in seventeenth-century England, was seen as the work of the devil. Again it was a subversion of the normal 'motherly' female role. Suicide, also referred to in these cases, was a great sin according to the church and canon law and was similarly the work of the devil.

Prissilla Collit of Dunage confessed, after she had been watched in custody for three nights, that the devil had appeared to her when she was sick some 12 years previously and tempted her to kill her children to escape poverty. She refused to make a covenant on this occasion but did place one of her children next to the fire to burn it. Fortunately another child pulled its sibling away from the fire:

In a sickness about 12 years since the divell tempted to make away with her children or else shold allways continue poore, and he then demanded a covenant of her which she did deny, but she carried one of her children and layed it close to the fyer to burne it, and went to bed again and the fier burnt the hare and the head lininge and she heard it cry but cold not have the power to helpe it, but one other of her children pulled it away.

Here the devil is performing both a practical and psychological function. Firstly, for poor women like Prissilla, who had no economic resources or means of bettering their lives, a pact with the devil could, they hoped, bring financial security. It was a common cultural belief that the devil could bring his servants money and other rewards and could help them against their enemies. Indeed Prissilla confessed the devil promised her 10 shillings for sealing the covenant although she never received it. Other women, in their confessions, mention similar unfulfilled promises. Elizabeth Hobert, for example, covenanted with the devil that, in return for her body and soul, she would be avenged of those who angered her and would be furnished with money; he never performed it, however. Women may well have 'turned to witchcraft', through conscious decision, as a solution to poverty and powerlessness. Some of them may even have been open about their activities as a way of achieving status in the village, status which for poor women was impossible to achieve in any other way. Marianne Hester, analysing the 1566 Chelmsford cases of Elizabeth Frauncis, Agnes and Joan Waterhouse, has suggested that all three women were using witchcraft as a "means of empowerment: to obtain a rich husband and various commodities, to get

their own back on their husbands or neighbours or to kill their husband with whom they quarrelled”.[39]

In Prissilla Collit’s case the devil came up with another practical suggestion – killing her children to escape poverty. The links between infanticide and poverty were strong throughout this period: Sharpe, in his study of Essex court cases, has shown that most women accused of infanticide were unmarried mothers, often domestic servants, who could not afford to bring up a child and were forced into the act out of desperation.[40] Of course it is impossible to tell whether prosecutions reflected the actual incidence of the crime – were single domestic servants simply more likely to be suspected than married women? However, although we cannot properly answer this question, it is undoubtedly true that infanticide was, for some women, a solution to poverty and desperation.

In discussing infanticide and the devil it is also important to consider the psychological role of demonic intervention as an explanation of behaviour. Wrightson has shown that certain assumptions were generally made as to what ‘normal’ maternal feelings consisted of; he quotes the writer William Gouge who, in 1622, praised the “tender care” of the mother for the child, and argued that God had “so fast fixed love in the hearts of parents as if there be any who it aboundeth not, he is counteth unnatural”.[41] Although the courts were just beginning to accept illness as mitigation for infanticide in the most exceptional cases[42], there was no discussion of what we would perhaps now term post-natal depression or post-partum psychosis. Unmarried servant girl Sinah Jones, tried at the Old Bailey in 1668, was sentenced to death for stifling her baby although she said “she knew nothing of the cloath in the mouth of the child, and that she had not her senses and was light-headed”.[43] Infanticide was considered a crime against God and nature; it was a deviant subversion of the role of the ‘godly’ mother and therefore likely to be associated with witchcraft. One has only to glance over the pages of *Malleus Maleficarum* to find many references to witches cutting up and eating babies, inducing abortions, and cutting off male reproductive organs.[44]

Murder and harm to children is a common feature of many of the witch trials and the Suffolk material is no exception – approximately 20% of the Suffolk ‘witches’ were accused of harming or killing children. It is interesting, however, that several of the Suffolk witches confessed to trying to kill their own children rather than someone else’s. Generally, as Thomas and Macfarlane have shown, the typical accused witch was the older woman in the village, usually a widow or spinster who lived on her own.[45] However, in the Suffolk material some 24 of the women named as witches are either specifically referred to as *uxor* (Latin, meaning married woman) or wife, or mention is made of a husband. One woman, Elizabeth Deekes, is described as “a silly young woman”.[46] We know that 10 of the women were widows, but in most cases marital status is not given. Although no ages

are given, by no means all the women are post-menopausal since mention is made of young offspring. It could well be that, as a result of the frenzied witch-hunting activity generated through the involvement of Matthew Hopkins, the concept of who was a likely suspect expanded to encompass younger women. Hoffer & Hull have described the growth in persecutions for infanticide and witchcraft at this time as attempts to control deviant young women and deviant old women respectively.[47] In Suffolk in 1645, however, it can be argued, the two crimes were no longer distinctive but were, rather, closely merged; younger women were accused of witchcraft and, furthermore, accused witches of different ages produced confessions of trying to kill their children at the suggestion of the devil.

Prissilla Collit had clearly been very ill when the devil appeared to her suggesting she kill her children to escape poverty; she may well have been feverish and confused, light-headed like Sinah Jones, or suffering from psychosis. Lyndal Roper has suggested that mothers who accused their lying-in-maids of bewitching their newborn children in Reformation Augsburg were projecting their own negative feelings towards their infants (perhaps a result of post-partum psychosis) on to others.[48] A similar process may have been taking place in Prissilla Collit's case – she, however, projected her 'evil' feelings against her children on to the devil, leaving herself in a dangerously complicitous position. It is important to emphasise that concepts of 'self' are historically and culturally specific, framed by structures of language and belief. In the seventeenth century undesirable thoughts, impulses or drives, instead of being seen as the subconscious or unconscious stirrings of the Freudian psyche, were viewed as something separate from and indeed alien from the self. In Prissilla's case the battle against what society told her were normal natural motherly feelings and her own 'sinful' impulses appears to be articulated in terms of God and the Devil. Speaking in terms of the devil could be a way of trying to exonerate herself from personal blame although of course this backfired and resulted in a witchcraft accusation.

Prissilla was not the only Suffolk woman who referred to infanticide in her confession. Mary Scrutton, a married woman, confessed that the "devill appeared to her twice, once like a beare, once like a cat, and that she tempted her in a hollow voyce to kill her child". It is worth noting that this is the only reference I have come across to the devil as a 'she' – one can only presume the change of gender occurred because the cat was seen as female. Susanna Smith confessed to Robert Mayhew the day after her arrest that 18 years previously the devil had appeared to her in the form of a shaggy red dog and tempted her to kill her children. We are told that "she strove with him 24 howers before he went fro her but she would not kill them". Just as the godly woman was supposed to nurture her offspring, so, in popular eyes, the witch figure destroyed them. If infanticide was the work

of the devil, a woman could be easily led to assume she had the devil in her if she even questioned her relationship with her children.

The case of Susanna Smith is particularly interesting because the rest of the deposition is based on incidents which took place while she was in prison and therefore tells us much about the state of mind of an accused witch awaiting her fate. Although she began confessing, the questioning had to stop because her throat was so swollen she could not speak, possibly for medical reasons and possibly through trauma. The deposition says that "being desired to relate further of her witchcraft there rise two swellings in her throat so that she cold not speake". When Mayhew returned the following day to complete the session Susanna told him the devil had appeared to her the day before her arrest and told her to fast:

She confessed that the divill ... appeared to her in likeness of a black bee and told her that she shold be attached [arrested] the next day and that if she confessed anything she shold die for it and beinge demanded why she wolde eat nothings there beinge good meate provided for her she said the divell told her she sholde never eate nor drink acgaine but they then provided and brought her meate and with much tremblinge she got some downe.

Susanna is now describing the traumas she is suffering as a result of imprisonment in terms of the devil because that is the language she has been given. Mayhew has, presumably, been questioning her for two days about her involvement with the devil and, in her disordered state, she turns to this frame of reference to describe her emotions. Susanna's personal experience is being shaped and created in terms of demonological language right before our eyes.

Susanna decides to refuse food, saying that the devil has told her to do so. We can, if we choose, read her fast as a desire to withdraw into herself, to separate her inner self from her body; in a similar way the swelling in her throat cut off all communication with the outside world since she could not speak. In rejecting the food brought to her by her enemies the gaolers, Susanna was perhaps aiming to gain more control of her situation; the interrogator was in a clear position of dominance and she may have been trying to take back some of that power for herself.

Susanna allegedly told her confessors on the next occasion that the devil had given her a knife so she could kill herself:

The divell had told her weare there a rusty knife in the room wheare with she might kill herselfe and they looked in that place and found such an old knife as she described but she said that she cold not kill herselfe because they wa ... in the next roome.

Hatred of her bodily existence and desperate fear of what will happen to her combine to make Susanna contemplate suicide. This is a theme which crops up several times in the Suffolk material and the conceptualisation of suicide

as the work of the devil is very interesting, particularly because of the close similarities in language between the witchcraft confession and the religious testimonies provided by ‘the godly’ of the civil war churches (as quoted above). Lidea Taylor confessed “that her imps counselled her to steale and that they counselled her to kill herself”. Ellen Greenelif confessed that her “mother did send her 3 imps that after she had them she oftene tempted to kill herself”. Elizabeth Fillet of Wetherden confessed that “the divell tempted her to kill herself to avoid the scandal of prosecution”. Suicidal tendencies, like those of infanticide, were conceptualised as an external force (the devil), acting on or overriding a woman’s will. Suicide was seen as a sin by the church, preventing proper Christian burial on sacred ground, and was a crime according to the law of the land. Michael Dalton described it in 1626 as “an offence against God, against the king and against Nature” (like infanticide it was ‘unnatural’).[49] Those who were alleged to have taken their own lives were tried posthumously by a coroner’s jury, and if found guilty of self-murder (as it was usually known) had their goods confiscated and as popular custom had it, were buried at a crossroads, face-down in the grave and with a stake driven through them to stop their malevolent souls from straying.[50]

In their search for personal or spiritual identity (both closely interconnected at this time) both the godly Puritans of the civil war sects and the women who ended up in court as accused witches spoke of battles against the devil. Both confession and testimony were personalised accounts of experience which followed a very standard stylised format.[51] Both spoke of the influence of the devil. It was a fine line between saint and witch. It was context which decided how that woman would be labelled – as Hopkins very visibly and openly hunted through Suffolk, it is likely that more and more women began to question their own behaviour in terms of witchcraft. The witch-hunts created the witch; the civil war churches created the mystic conversion of their members.

Although Susanna Smith threatens to commit suicide, she does not do it. Similarly she made a point of refusing food but then ate. To some extent she appears to be playing games with her interrogators. In both instances she is telling them that, although they have locked her in gaol and can ultimately dispense with her if they wish, she still has control over her own body in the meantime – she at least has the power to starve herself or take her own life if she chooses. Susanna is amazingly resilient and resourceful given the limited circumstances; for others it was not so easy.

Conclusion

While historians have, for the most part, concentrated on recreating the political and social agenda within which the witch-hunts were set, it is also important to look at the impact this had on women’s lives – particularly

those women who were involved in the trials. A couple of recent studies have opened up the discussion on the role of women in the witch-hunts – Roper’s analysis of the motivations of mothers as accusers, and Holmes’s study of women witnesses.[52] I have tried to add to this discussion by focusing on those women who were the direct targets of the persecution, and by showing that it is possible to carry out a productive examination of the different ‘meanings’ of their alleged confessions despite the complicated problems surrounding the use of such a source. I have tried to listen for their voices, however faint.

The standard formula of the witchcraft confession provided a set framework of meanings within which the accused witch presented and thereby defined her own experiences. It is important to stress that it has not been my intention to put clear labels on these experiences. Confession texts, as I hope I have demonstrated through my study of the Suffolk material, can be ‘read’ in a number of ways. However, it *is* possible to use these texts to open different windows on to the lives of the women who said they were witches.

Firstly, we can see that emotional responses to events and concerns were being articulated through the medium of the witchcraft confession; demonological language and the conventions of witchcraft belief were used to cover or explain personal traumas, insecurities or dilemmas. The references to sexual assault and abuse are veiled but present; those to suicide, and ‘bad’ husbands much easier to find.

Secondly, it is clear that the witchcraft confession was intricately connected with self-identity; it specifically required a woman to judge herself and her behaviour within the constraints of demonological language. For a few women self-definition as a witch could be a form of empowerment. For others, however, who refer to feelings of guilt, remorse and shame, it was very much a negative construct. Margaret Legat allegedly told an informant she was “a damned creature”; and Elisabeth Warne “confessed that pride and lustfulness had brought her to this and desired she might be walked apace for she had the devill within her”.

I have shown how the image or stereotype of the witch had been defined as the opposite of the good or godly woman (particularly in her roles as wife and mother). The Suffolk cases contain many references to nagging wives or lewd women, infanticide and child care. These cases clearly show that the accused women, in their confessions, were judging themselves as wives and mothers – they were judging their angers, their bitterness, their fears and their failures to live up to the expectation of others.

These conclusions also provide us with an answer to Christina Hole’s problem of “the voluntary confession”.[53] The Suffolk women who confessed that they were witches were also confessing that they were ‘bad’ mothers, ‘bad’ wives and ‘bad’ neighbours. The cultural, social and psychological impact of the county-wide witch-hunt cannot be over-estimated

– the knowledge that ‘witches’ existed and were rife at home and abroad may well have caused every woman to examine her life very closely, and some to come forward and confess. Women’s insecurities about their roles as wives and mothers were being played out within the context of the witchcraft confession.

Notes

- [1] C. L. Ewen (1929) *Witch Hunting and Witch Trials*, p. 305 (London: Kegan Paul).
- [2] See M. Summers (1928) *The Discovery of Witches. A Study of Master Matthew Hopkins* (London: The Cayme Press) for further biographical details.
- [3] British Museum Add., MS.27402, fos.104-121.
- [4] Ewen, *Witch Hunting and Witch Trials*, Appendix VI, pp. 291-313. Unless otherwise stated, all quotations in this paper are from this source.
- [5] C.L. Ewen (1933) *Witchcraft and Demonianism*, p. 302 (London: Heath Cranton).
- [6] J. Stearne (1648) *A Confirmation and Discovery of Witchcraft* (London: William Wilson).
- [7] Ewen, *Witchcraft and Demonianism*, p. 302.
- [8] It is not possible to attribute sex in cases where surname only is given. The 80% represents those accused known to be women.
- [9] See respectively: H. Trevor Roper (1969) *The European Witchcraze of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (London: Penguin); R. Keickhefer (1976) *European Witchtrials* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul); A. Macfarlane (1970) *Witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart England* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul).
- [10] M. Hester (1992) *Lewd Women and Wicked Witches: a study of the dynamics of male domination* (London: Routledge).
- [11] A. Everitt (1961) *Suffolk and the Great Rebellion 1640-60*, p. 17 (Ipswich: W. S. Cowell).
- [12] D. Underdown (1985) The taming of the scold, in A. Fletcher & J. Stevenson (Eds) *Order and Disorder in Early Modern England*, p. 125 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
- [13] See C. Holmes (1974) *The Eastern Association in the English Civil War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press) and Everitt, *Suffolk and the Great Rebellion*.
- [14] Stearne, *A Confirmation and Discovery of Witchcraft*, p. 18.
- [15] Macfarlane, *Witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart England*, p. 188.
- [16] C. Hole (1957) *A Mirror of Witchcraft*, p. 182 (London: Chatto & Windus).
- [17] R. Scot (1584) *The Discoverie of Witchcraft*, published with an introduction by Montague Summers, p. 33 (1972) (New York: Dover Publications).

- [18] M. Murray (1921) *The Witch-Cult in Western Europe* (Oxford: Clarendon Press).
- [19] C. Holmes (1993) Women: witnesses and witches, p. 47, *Past and Present*, 140, pp. 45-78. See this paper for a full discussion of women as witnesses.
- [20] Quoted in Hole, *A Mirror of Witchcraft*, p. 186.
- [21] M. Hopkins (1647) The Discovery of Witches, answer to question eight, reprinted in Summers, *The Discovery of Witches: a study of Master Matthew Hopkins*.
- [22] *Ibid.*, answer to question nine.
- [23] For example, Margaret Benet confessed that “the devil met her as she came from Newton” and Margaret Spara confessed that she met the devil in the wood at Mendam. Katherine Tooley sent her imp Jackly to meet the minister on the road from Celsol to Westleton to strike him and his horse dead.
- [24] D. Spender (1980) *Man-made Language*, p. 30 (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul).
- [25] L. Roper (1991) Witchcraft and fantasy in early modern Europe, p. 26, *History Workshop Journal*, 32, pp. 19-43.
- [26] As Malcolm Crick has written: “Legal actions are highly structured rituals involving the definition and redefinition of persons ... When a jury delivers a verdict it does not *state* that a man[or woman] is guilty, it *makes* him so”. M. Crick (1976) *Explorations in Language and Meaning* (London: Malaby Press).
- [27] See Hester, *Lewd Women and Wicked Witches*.
- [28] P. C. Hoffer & N. E. H. Hull (1981) *Murdering Mothers: infanticide in England and New England 1558-1803* (New York: New York University Press).
- [29] *Ibid.*, Introduction, p. X.
- [30] See M. Ingram (1994) Scolding women cucked or washed, in Kermodé & Walker (Eds) *Women, Crime and the Courts* (London: UCL) and Underdown, ‘The taming of the scold’. Underdown cited proceedings in the church courts, the commissioning of cucking stools for ducking scolds in the river, and the revival of scolds’ bridles in the north of England (which literally silenced a woman by holding her tongue down with an iron bar) as evidence of increased action against scolding women.
- [31] H. I. Kramer & J. Sprenger *Malleus Maleficarum* (1486) Translated with an Introduction, Bibliography and Notes by Rev. Montague Summers (1970), 1st edn. 1928 (New York: Benjamin Bloom).
- [32] See K. Thomas (1973) *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, p. 527 (London: Penguin).
- [33] See also S. Amussen (1985) Gender, family and social order 1560-1725, in Fletcher & Stevenson (Eds) *Order and Disorder in Early Modern England*.
- [34] A. Laurence (1989) Women’s psychological disorders in seventeenth century Britain in A. Angerman, G. Binnema, A. Keunen, V. Poels, J. Zirkzee (Eds) *Current Issues in Women’s History* (London: Routledge).

- [35] H. Allen (1683) *Satan his Methods and Malice Baffled*, extracts printed in E. Graham, H. Hinds, E. Hobby & H. Wilcox (Eds) (1989) *Her Own Life: autobiographical writings by seventeenth century women*, pp. 202-204 (London: Routledge).
- [36] S. Davy (1670) 'Heaven realised', extracts printed in Graham, Hinds, Hobby and Wilcox (Eds) *Her Own Life*.
- [37] M. Ingram (1987) *Church Courts, Sex and Marriage in England 1570-1640* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
- [38] N. Bashar (1983) Rape in England between 1500 and 1700, in London Feminist History Group (Eds) *The Sexual Dynamics of History: men's power, women's resistance* (London: Pluto Press).
- [39] Hester, *Lewd Women and Wicked Witches*, p. 163.
- [40] J. Sharpe (1983) *Crime in Seventeenth Century England*, p. 6 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
- [41] Quoted in K. Wrightson (1975) Infanticide in earlier seventeenth century England, p. 11, *Local Population Studies*, 15.
- [42] N. Walker (1968) *Crime and Insanity in England*, p. 126 (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press).
- [43] Ibid.
- [44] Kramer & Sprenger, *Malleus Maleficarum*.
- [45] Macfarlane, *Witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart England*, p. 161; Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, p. 671.
- [46] Stearne, *A Confirmation and Discovery of Witchcraft*, p. 12.
- [47] Hoffer & Hull, *Murdering Mothers*, p. 28.
- [48] Roper, 'Witchcraft and fantasy in early modern Europe'.
- [49] Quoted in M. Macdonald (1986) The secularization of suicide in England 1660-1800, p. 253, *Past and Present*, 111.
- [50] See Macdonald, 'The secularization of suicide in England'.
- [51] See Graham, Hinds, Hobby and Wilcox (Eds) *Her Own Life*, p. 165 for discussion of the structure of the conversion narrative. A woman would be required to examine her experiences, looking for "signs that God had destined her for heaven and to draw out broader theological lessons from things that happened to her".
- [52] L. Roper (1994) *Oedipus & The Devil* (London: Routledge); C. Holmes, 'Women: witnesses and witches'.
- [53] Hole, *A Mirror of Witchcraft*, p. 182.

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