

# CONCLUSION AND AFTERWORD

## Historical ethics

Very few practising scholars today, except for a thin crust of aged historians in certain senior common rooms, in retirement-optional American universities, and a few young fogies in very old-fashioned departments, mourn the demise of ‘great-man’ history of the sort that concentrated on public figures (usually, but not exclusively, men – one must imagine Queen Elizabeth I, Catherine the Great and Maria Theresa as ‘great men’), assuming them to have been the proper objects of historical study due not merely to their position and influence, but due to their supposed status as the very motors of History. Whatever the manifold problems – political, ethnic, ideological, methodological, epistemological – inherent in that kind of history, it had the distinct ethical advantage of studying people who were, by any standard, including their own, in the public eye: people who acted, spoke and wrote for public consumption, and often enough, for posterity as well. Before historians thought to bother with the doings not of, say, Metternich, but of the people in the German-speaking world whose lives were touched and in some ways shaped by Metternich’s policies and by the ‘Congress system’ that dominated Europe after 1815, there was little reason to worry that historians might face the kind of ethical questions and conflicts of interest that cultural anthropologists, ethnologists, sociologists and a host of other students of contemporary people and cultures must confront, and in respect of which they must – very properly – perform ‘ethics reviews’, obtain waivers and clearances, allow their writing to be vetted by representatives of those studied, and remain accountable in some way to their subjects. Social historians and, more recently, historians of culture, labour, gender, women, folk medicine and the like – historians of everyday people and

their lives – have dodged exactly the same issues confronted by those who study living people by insisting, rather irrelevantly, on the deadness of historical subjects. They cannot, it is argued, with irrefutable but nonetheless faulty logic, sign waivers, review our descriptions of them and their motives, bring actions for libel, or defend themselves publicly. The incorrect conclusion often drawn from this line of reasoning is that historians have *carte blanche* in interpreting the traces of their subjects' lives, indeed even in speaking for them – or through them.

Yet human beings who are now dead surely possessed agency and voice just as our contemporaries do. Copyright laws, for instance, recognise this, at least for a few decades after one's death. We cannot, it is true, obtain signed forms from those we study granting permission to observe certain activities, read certain papers, and the like. It is all the more important, therefore, that we listen carefully to their self-understandings and self-described motivations before we import our categories into the past to study them. That we have a right to import our own questions to the past is, surely, beyond reasonable question: why else do we study history? But we must be much more careful than many practitioners of social-science-model historical research have been; and we must have the courage to say that even so celebrated, indeed, so sexy a book as Lyndal Roper's *Oedipus and the Devil* is, in places, simply wrong because it uses modernist theory (theory built to help 'correct' 'superceded' or 'toxic' cultural formations) to understand the pre-modern world and imports current understandings of psychosexual dynamics to what are, granted, potentially psychosexually charged situations, but which were played out for entirely different reasons quite sufficient to explain said situations. We have no objections to subtle and playful (Walter Ong<sup>1</sup>) interpellation of the materials in question with psychoanalytic or other 'modern' or even contemporary theories in order to tease out hidden possibilities, tensions, ideas, so long as the historian's primary tools for understanding the past are in some clear sense congruent with that past, and so long as the historian retains a clear idea of the relationship, and probably the hierarchy, between past

self-understandings and our attempts to understand the past using models we import. Brad Gregory has argued that psychoanalytic and similar kinds of general theories are never useful for trying to sort out past individuals' motivations;<sup>2</sup> while we are a bit less sceptical, we would first want to see sources that licence some such use.

Granted: germs, class loyalties and so on probably existed before Pasteur and Marx, and historians have good reasons to think about how plague spread and why, and what the dynamics of the Wat Tyler, Bundschuh or Peasants' War were. We can as historians acknowledge their existence and try to study them without betraying our subjects; but we must also be sympathetically aware of notions of miasma and estates to make sense of what they were up to in their terms. The latter concern has come far too short in the mainstream practice of history these last sixty or so years.

Then there are the complex cross-cutting problems presented by cultural-political agendas that need certain modernist tropes to validate their ascendancy. Roper's feminist account of male–female relations benefits a great deal from the discovery/existence of an oppressive, patriarchal psychosexual dynamic of sado-masochism in witch trials; in the case of modern analyses of martyrdom, modernist views of religion benefit even more by reducing martyrdom to psychological and perhaps even sado-masochistic aberrance. This is not to insist that those things were never there in the past; but they are not there in the sources Roper used, nor in the ones we have used, nor in the voluminous materials on martyrdom Brad Gregory amassed and analysed in his book *Salvation at Stake*.

### Summation

We began by posing several questions, which may be summed up, informally, as 'What are these male witches doing in these demonological texts?' and 'Why doesn't anyone talk about this?' Not every single question that arises in the course of a research project can be answered, and this volume leaves certain issues essentially untouched. We have

attempted, however, to address what we believe are the most fundamental questions.

Chapter 1 tackled the first of these, namely, why male witches are not more common subjects in witchcraft historiography. Specialists in early modern witchcraft are aware that it was not sex-specific, even among the most misogynist demonologists. Modern scholars of various ideological and methodological leanings have excluded male witches from witchcraft historiography by either ignoring or ‘declassifying’ them. This exclusion betrays the unreflexive nature of much witchcraft historiography, in which political/ideological agendas (not limited to feminist scholars) and *a priori* assumptions are permitted to predetermine how early modern evidence is read and what conclusions are drawn from it.

In the second chapter, we began the work of unpacking conventional wisdom about witchcraft and gender. First, we presented data, synthesised from other scholars’ archival research, that showed wide variation in the proportion of male to female witches. This data constituted part of a more general criticism of the way witchcraft historians use statistical information to mask regional diversity and present a monochromatic picture of witchcraft prosecution dynamics. Second, we presented two case studies of male witches in Essex and Germany. These case studies demonstrate that many generalisations about male witches, derived from specific regional studies, are not in fact suitable for Europe-wide application. For instance, the common generalisation that men were accused of witchcraft because they were related to a female witch, with the implication that there is a direct causal relationship, looks very shaky when examined closely in specific contexts. The notion that men were accused of practising different types of magic than women also appears dubious, although worthy of further investigation. In short, simplistic portrayals of the relationship between gender and witchcraft in early modern Europe do not reflect the complex and untidy state of affairs that even the briefest overview reveals.

In the third chapter, we examined issues of agency and resistance with an eye to placing witches’ own self-understandings and motivations,

as they professed them, at the centre of the debate regarding witchcraft confessions and their retraction. Rather than looking for psychosexual motives in witches' confessions, we emphasised the role of soteriological anxiety in the confessions and retractions made under torture by both female and male witches. We argued that while studies of female witches have an important role to play in balancing an unbalanced historical record, ideas about witches and especially learned witchcraft theory, and witch-hunting were gender-inclusive, and any scholar who purports to take witches as his or her primary subject would do well to remember this.

In the fourth chapter, we introduced the male witch as found in demonological literature. This chapter challenged directly Stuart Clark's position that male witches were conceptually impossible for early modern witchcraft theorists. We presented data from several demonological texts that show early modern authors using masculine terminology to describe witches in general and speaking directly about male witches. We also discussed demonological illustrations depicting male witches. This evidence establishes conclusively that there was no conceptual barrier to male witches in any period of the witch-hunting era. We addressed the issue of textual variation, and concluded that although demonological texts show signs of variation, they are stable enough to suggest that even if later readers and printers thought of witches as specifically female, they did not feel strongly enough about it to introduce changes in the original masculine terminology of the *Malleus*. We addressed the issue of language usage, illustrating that conceptual flexibility was built into early modern witchcraft theory and that the individual male witches described in the texts share many features with female witches. And finally, we briefly surveyed the literature on gendered ideas about witches outside, before or beyond the hegemony of the learned 'elaborated concept' of witchcraft, showing that although the evidence is slight, the common people of medieval and early modern Europe did not think that witches were necessarily women.

In chapter 5, we addressed the question of how early modern Europeans made sense of male witches within a conceptual framework that feminised witchcraft. We argued, first, that the ancient and medieval world provided stereotypes of the male witch. These prototypes were found in traditional ideas about heretics and magicians, which came together in ideas about the Sabbath and demonic agency in magic. Our second argument was that the essential characteristic of the witch – the thing that made a witch a witch – was weak-mindedness. This trait was associated with femininity, and its correlation with witches meant that male witches were implicitly feminised. Another set of associations, between witches and subservience, also feminised male witches. This feminisation suggests that interpretations of early modern gender in strictly binary terms are too restrictive, and do not take into account possibilities for shared gender attributes or hierarchical differentiation within genders.

This book tackles some complex problems, but it is also intentionally limited in scope. Our work on male witches does not, and cannot, explain why early modern Europeans were so eager to prosecute witches, nor does it explain the putative shift from a more or less gender-neutral concept of witchcraft to one that was associated closely with women. Indeed, it casts doubt on the validity of the second question: if, as we have attempted to show, male witches were in fact not considered anomalous by early modern Europeans, then we must ask ourselves whether a paradigm shift in the gendering of witchcraft actually occurred. Answering this question would involve exploring in more detail early modern male witches and ancient and medieval witches (or magic-users) of both sexes. Another question we have not addressed directly is whether ideas about male witches changed over the witch-hunting period. This is an issue that requires a much wider sample of sources and freedom from the need to justify studying male witches in the first place.

In the course of thinking through, researching and writing this book and its predecessor pieces (a number of seminar papers, a seminar readings packet, a Master's thesis, a scholarly paper, etc.), we were

both asked the inevitable question, ‘So what are you working on?’. Our answers generally elicited precisely the reaction one could have predicted given the questioner’s ideological and methodological positions. While to some, ‘studying witches’ meant ‘pursuing a [feminist] ideological or scholarly agenda’, to most, it was simply ‘women’s history’. When someone once replied ‘Oh, so you’re doing women’s history’, Lara Apps responded with some irritation that it was more like ‘anti-women’s history’. While that was not and is not an accurate description of our method or ideas, it turned out to be useful as a provocative ‘thinking point’ around which to articulate some final remarks.

Much of this book is devoted to constructing the male witch as a valid historical subject. This necessarily involves challenging the view that ‘the story of witchcraft is primarily the story of women’.<sup>3</sup> This view is on one hand the result of the exclusion of the male witch, and on another a primary cause of it. The female witch has become so heavily laden with gender-political meaning that any attempt to get her to share the starring role at historiographical centre stage is difficult. However, for methodological, ethical and, yes, ideological reasons it is both necessary and desirable. As we have endeavoured to show, male witches were relatively *significant* figures. Although far fewer male witches were prosecuted than female witches, the number of male witches who were accused, tried, tortured and executed should not be ignored or glossed over. Male subjects are not less important or interesting as human beings than female subjects, and should not be treated as if they were. Yet this is the general thrust of most current witchcraft historiography. It is in this sense that our work is opposed to women’s history, or rather, a particular type of women’s history exemplified by Anne Barstow’s book *Witchcraze*. Otherwise, we regard our work as a contribution to women’s history, or more precisely feminist history, in that we have brought to it certain feminist theoretical approaches. Most important of these, of course, are the ideas that gender is socially constructed and that it is a primary idiom of power. Without these concepts, this book could have offered little more than a mere enumeration of male witches.

We have attempted to do more than that, arguing that male witches were not necessarily different in essence from female witches, that there was no conceptual barrier to the idea of male witches, and that they ‘made sense’ thanks to a complex web of associations that feminised witchcraft and, by extension, male witches. We have also suggested that the male witch provides insight into early modern ideas about witches, witchcraft theory, constructions of gender, and the relationship between them.

The male witch indicates that rigidly structured interpretations of the link between gender and witchcraft do not do justice to the complexity of early modern ideas. Neither feminist analyses based on theories of patriarchy, nor Stuart Clark’s binary framework, adequately explain the demonological association of witchcraft with women. These interpretations do not even begin to elucidate the inclusion of male witches within that association, because they are predicated on an assumption that male witches do not, conceptually speaking, exist. The male witch is therefore extremely valuable as a device for unpacking interpretations: as soon as one attempts to reconcile them with the evidence of witch trials and demonological texts, it becomes obvious that the explanatory models are constructed from the outset in such a way that they cannot explain male witches. Like Stuart Clark’s demons, male witches, it turns out, are surprisingly ‘good to think with’.

## Notes

- 1 Walter Ong, *Fighting for Life: Contest, Sexuality, and Consciousness* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1981).
- 2 Comments on Andrew Gow’s paper ‘Witchcraft Confessions? Agency, Resistance and Selfhood at Stake’, presented 23 February, 2001 at the Graduate Theological Union, San Francisco, co-sponsored by the Department of History, UC Berkeley; also, more broadly, in Gregory’s book *Salvation at Stake*.
- 3 Karlsen, *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman*, xii.