

THE CAT AND THE CAULDRON

Witchcraft in the Low Countries, 14th - 20th century

by

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SUMMARY

The *Cat and the Cauldron* offers the first comprehensive cultural history of witchcraft in the north-western corner of the European continent. Rather than being constricted to witch trials in a single territory, it discusses witchcraft and witch trials in the present-day countries of the Netherlands, Belgium and the adjacent parts of Germany from the late medieval to the modern period with their contrasts, similarities and mutual influences. It shows the continuous importance of witchcraft in the lives of people; how in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries new interpretations paved the way for various kinds of witch prosecution; and how this was received in later times. Above all, the book offers a clear assessment of witchcraft itself in terms of conceptions of the female body and male power.

REVIEW OF PUBLICATIONS

In recent Anglo-Saxon witchcraft historiography the Low Countries are usually neglected or misrepresented. If there are attempts to explain the region's particular pattern of witch prosecution they are diametrically opposed to each other. Yet it is here where we find 'the only true confessional frontier about witch-hunting in Europe' (Monter). The above confusion is connected to the dearth of publications available to an English readership. The only work in English is the volume *Witchcraft in the Netherlands* (Gijswijt-Hofstra & Frijhoff eds, Rijswijk 1991), but this covers only part of the region. All other relevant publications are in German and Dutch; these are fragmented, narrowly focused and concentrate mostly on a particular jurisdiction and often ignore neighbouring areas.

Northwestern Germany is still best covered by Schormann in his *Hexenprozesse in Nordwestdeutschland* (Hildesheim 1977), although his methodology and presentation of material is now outdated. For Münster there is the monograph by Alfing, *Hexenjagd und Zaubereiprozesse in Münster* (Münster 1991); Münsterland is the subject of a series of articles by Gersmann (a book is planned for 2005); the area south of this has been described by Fuchs, *Hexenverfolgung an Ruhr und Lippe* (Münster 2002). The Rhineland and the Duchy of Jülich-Berg have recently been researched by Becker (in: *Hexenverfolgung im Rheinland*, Bensberg 1996) and Münster-Schröer (in: *Spee-Jahrbuch*, 2000); Cologne by Schwerhoff (cf. his *Köln im Kreuzverhör*, Bonn 1991), Kurköln by Heuser (four articles in *Rheinisch-Westfälische Zeitschrift für Volkskunde*) and Schormann, *Der Krieg gegen die Hexen* (Göttingen 1991; this is a highly contested work). The area further south, which my monograph will merely touch upon, is amply studied by the group of witchcraft scholars in Trier, see their series *Trierer Hexenprozesse. Quellen und Darstellungen*, of which volume 7 is in

preparation.

Witchcraft persecution in the Dutch-speaking areas of Belgium has been discussed, although rather superficially by Vanhemelryck, *Het gevecht met de duivel* (Leuven 1999), which compares badly with the meticulously researched series of articles by Monballyu on specific trials and jurisdictions in the former County of Flanders, e.g. his *Van hekserij beschuldigd* (Kortrijk 1996) and *Heksen en hun burenen in Frans-Vlaanderen* (Ieper 2004). Apart from some minor studies there are no recent publications on the history of witchcraft in present-day Wallonia. Articles on witchcraft in the Netherlands have appeared in *Kwade mensen* (De Blécourt & Gijswijt-Hofstra eds, Amsterdam 1986) and *Nederland betoverd* (Gijswijt-Hofstra & Frijhoff eds, Amsterdam 1987, a selection of which was translated in *Witchcraft in the Netherlands*). One of the most recent studies is still De Waardt's *Toverij en samenleving* (Den Haag 1991). The book proposed here will draw on the material mentioned in these works, as well as on a wealth of unpublished financial accounts, criminal trial records, depositions of witnesses, civil verdicts, church records, newspaper accounts, legend texts, and intellectual writings. It will provide a synthesis which in several aspects will go beyond the sum of previous publications.

AIMS AND APPROACH

The Netherlands is known for its tolerance in matters of morality. Since the early nineteenth century this 'enlightened attitude' has been put forward as the main reason why the witch trials in the Dutch Republic ceased at the relatively early period around 1600. However, a comparative perspective, taking into account the extremely late introduction of the trials in Flanders and Cologne, undermines this argument and yields more historically accurate explanations. The religious watershed implies indeed that from the end of the sixteenth century onwards the Protestant Dutch and North German towns and provinces stopped conducting witch trials for good, although this proces was not yet clear to contemporaries. Neither did this make all the trials in the Catholic areas similar as can be seen from the particular sabbat imagery that was applied by the prosecutors.

What distinguishes this book especially from other scholarly monographs on the subject is that it moves beyond the witch trials into the twentieth century. One of the main problems of witchcraft is that it has always depended on interpretation, whether by priests, ministers, lawyers and doctors, or by the bewitched themselves; those who were denounced as a 'witch' were usually convinced of their innocence and also had their particular views. Historians and folklorists subsequently added their own explanations to this mix. All these different representations will be untangled by focusing on witchcraft itself, in terms of accusations and stories, and of the social constellations formed by accuser, accused and expert in counter-magic. The title of the book refers to the tension between the bewitched and the accused of bewitchment: the cat symbolizes the witch and the cauldron the unwitchment ritual. Both are more than mere symbols as they also suggest notions of the material and immaterial body of the witch.



CHAPTER OUTLINE

Manipulating Time - Historiographies of Witchcraft

discusses the interdependence between a topic and its perceived historiography: the focus on witchcraft results in a slightly different ancestry than merely writing about witch trials. This is illustrated by the bibliography of Dutch witchcraft, featuring publications about witch trials next to articles on stories and accusations in the nineteenth and twentieth century (Matter et al., *Toverij in Nederland*, Amsterdam 1990; similar research tools for Germany or Belgium do not exist). In this chapter the suppositions of both folklorists and historians are discussed, ranging from the rationalism of Soldan, the patriotism of Scheltema, the catholicism of Cannaert and the romanticism of Grimm to the campaign against 'superstition'. As elsewhere in Europe, witchcraft was either situated in a romanticized, pre-Christian past, or in an 'irrational' and 'superstitious' Middle Ages. The historical actors, whether accused, accusers or prosecutors were negated their own proper time. Such a 'denial of coevalness' has resulted in distorted views on witchcraft as a cultural phenomenon. This old, but nevertheless still recognizable historiography will be contrasted with new approaches developed from the 1970s onwards (see: Barry & Davies eds., *Witchcraft Historiographies*, Basingstoke 2005). Here, a cultural approach is emphasized, concentrating on the use of witchcraft imagery in unequal power relations.

Traversing Space - how Witch Trials were Disseminated

starts by tracing various kinds of witchcraft (such as love magic or the bewitching of butter) which were current before the introduction of witch prosecution. The main part of this chapter, however, is dedicated to the different phases of the geographical distribution of the witch trials. From its 15th-century origin in the western Alpine valleys, the practice of prosecuting witchcraft as a form of apostasy took more than a century to reach the north-western corner of the European continent. The redefinition of the crime clashed with local practices aimed at avoiding criminal trials by composition or an oath of innocence. Other vestiges of indigenous law, such as the principle of the *talio* (where a public prosecutor did not replace the private accuser and where the latter faced the same punishment as the accused in case of lack of proof) survived into the 17th century and thus stayed in operation throughout the period of the trials. In the wake of Arras, witch trials were attempted at around 1470 (as in Brugge, Utrecht, Nijmegen, Twente). The more substantial introduction of the trials in the late fifteenth- and early sixteenth-century Rhineland and adjacent Guelders was usually preceded by a prosecution of fortune-tellers. The next stage saw maleficent witches prosecuted and interrogated with ecclesiastical paraphernalia. Only when these methods did not lead to confessions, the expertise of professional torturers was invoked. The spread of the trials north- and westwards can be followed by the communications between cities about how to best prosecute witches: only by the 1530s the new witch trials had reached the north German city of Bremen, albeit in a diminished form. Amsterdam and Haarlem followed still later, while the main cities in Flanders (Mechelen, Antwerp, Gent and Brugge) only took up serious prosecution at the very end of the sixteenth century.

Patterns of Prosecution - the Economy of Bewitchments

examines trial statistics and the relation between the two main temporal and geographical aspects of witch trials: internal developments within a town or region and regional clusters across administrative boundaries. Thus the evolution of trials in towns such as Mechelen, Nijmegen, Schiedam or Münster is compared with the concentration of trials in late sixteenth-century East Frisia and Groningen, in Brabant and Limburg at around the same time, between Maastricht and Aachen at around 1600, and those in Münsterland and east-Gueldern seigneuries around 1610. Later clusters invariably took place outside the Northern Netherlands, as in Liège during the early 1620s and in Cologne, Nassau and Westphalia at the end of the 1620s and the early 1630s - this is a partial redrawing of the maps shown by Briggs. Here the concept of 'waves of trials' is critically examined, as are the economic determinants which are usually connected with it. How does the notion of the 'little Ice Age' applied by Lehmann and Behringer relate to the widespread concentration of trials in the 1590s? Is it still possible to speak about 'waves' when trials stretched over a period of twenty years, as was the case in Flanders between 1595 and 1615? The general discussion here is between persecutions brought about by popular demand or instigated from above, especially by ruling bishops. The economic explanation ties in with pressure from below, but often ignores the subject of witchcraft itself which seem to have been operating on a much smaller scale. How great a power would have been ascribed to a witch when she caused economic crises?

Gendered Witchcraft - Bewitched Bodies and the Body of the Witch

focuses on the male and female images of witches. This is still a very contested issue: the obvious preponderance of women among witches is often ignored, or played down by pointing to low percentages in remote areas such as Iceland or Finland, or obscured by the observation that in every-day life witches were accused by other women. Of all the witches prosecuted in the area under scrutiny, only a very few were male (less than 5%). In contrast, 17th-century slander trials and accounts of fines from the eastern Netherlands and Schleswig show an equal number of men and women (this probably applies to the whole area between the lower reaches of the Ems and Elbe). This apparent paradox is resolved by distinguishing between the different ways in which accusations arose: during trials, as reactions to bewitchments, or in fights. As Heuser has shown, mass trials in Kurköln significantly raised the number of male witches in the course of a few generations. While notions of gender were partly subsumed under notions of family and lineage, there were also conceptual distinctions between female and male witchcraft; the latter, although detrimental to a man's honour, was not thought to cause much material harm. Female witchcraft was mostly located within the female domain; notions of boundaries play an important part here, especially the way they were transgressed by witches. This female witchcraft was also directed at harming human production and reproduction whereas the male variant primarily underlined male power. Separate labels were used to indicate women 'witches' in male defined witch families. Extended depositions of witnesses of Arnhem, Amersfoort, Haarlem, Brugge and Mechelen or Diepholz allow a yet closer examination of bewitchments and notions of the female body (also in animal shape), bringing to the fore the intimate relation between bewitchments and processes of negative maturation.

Politics of the Devil - Sabbats and the Struggle for Criminal Jurisdiction

returns to the opinions of the prosecutors by comparing different types of trials and by linking them to different judicial organisations on regional and local levels. All witch trials implied the accused's pact with the devil, yet this already constituted an élite explanation separated from bewitchments: it removed the woman's agency (even if only ascribed) by making her dependent on a preternatural power. Gatherings of witches show a different distribution than witch trials as a whole; witches' dances became evident only under particular circumstances and a fully developed black mass was even rarer. Johan Wier, for instance, reported the story of a cunning woman who went on a spirit journey with the 'holden' to a place where they had a big banquet presided over by the emperor, but he did not connect this to a witches' sabbat. In the first half of the sixteenth century, witches in the town and province of Utrecht did not confess visiting sabbats, nor did they in many other places. As a matter of fact the specific sabbat imagery primarily appeared in places where local lords contested the new judicial power of high courts. This throws a different light on the question of instrumentalization of trials for objectives other than containing the devil's influence. Stories about the sabbat as emerging from criminal trials more than anything else depend on the interplay between interrogator and interrogated: as a rule people suspected of witchcraft admitted anything, be it experiences or stories (for instance about dancing cats), they thought would satisfy their judges. Sometimes this amounted to inversion, on other occasions it signified wishful thinking or an account of festivities. The issue of disputed jurisdictions is now increasingly being put forward by witchcraft scholars.



The Debate That Never Was - Intellectual Responses to Witch Trials

occurred since the start of the demonic witch trials, at first to condone them. Especially in the Low Countries, however, a number of tracts were written which criticized persecution, starting with Johan Wier's *De Prestigiis Daemonum* (1563). This work, peppered with bawdy anecdotes, argued that both prosecutors and 'witches' were deceived by the devil. It also pointed to the pivotal role of cunning folk in producing accusations. Other learned works about witchcraft show a similar combination of arguments, observations and stories; what distinguishes opponents from supporters of prosecution is the value they attach to stories. However, discussions between them were largely absent - both merely stated their separate claims. Cornelis Loos, a Dutch Catholic priest, who at the end of the sixteenth century ridiculed supporters of witch trials in Trier, was designated as 'pastor of the witches' and silenced. Seventeenth-century works criticizing trials were published in the trial-free zone of the Republic of the Northern Netherlands, or, in the case of Münster, in trial-free Bremen; the anonymously authored *Cautio Criminalis* first appeared in the Protestant town Rinteln. Works in favour of witch trials were issued in contemporary hot spots of persecution, such as by Delrio (Southern Netherlands) and Schultheiß (Cologne). Dutch publications did not directly attack the conducting of trials elsewhere; they were written for a Dutch public, cautioning them against unwitchers and Catholic priests. Whereas the concentration of these works in 1638 and 1659

(including reprints and translations) may seem to indicate further instances of trial waves, it actually signals a number of warnings not to follow foreign instances of persecution which in those years were flaring up anew and dangerously close to the borders of the Republic.

Counter Witchcraft - Cunning Folk and the Churches

argues that from the perspective of the people bewitched it is vital to discern between magical experts (among them unwitchers) and ascribed witches. Cunning folk also need to be identified in trial statistics to allow for a better assessment of the interaction between popular demands for prosecution and its enforcement from above. Magical experts were regarded by the civil authorities as the cause of social unrest, by ecclesiastical dignitaries as being in league with the devil, and by the general populace as persons to turn to in (among other things) cases of bewitchment. The customary punishment meted out to them was banishment, although sometimes they were also caught up in the prosecution of witches. Their treatment is indicative of the society's general stance on witch prosecution, and it also reveals the specific policy of the various churches in matters of witchcraft. In fact, in the whole area under consideration the latter, invigorated by the Counter Reformation, was characterized by paying attention to cunning folk rather than to malicious witches. This attitude lasted until the beginning of the eighteenth century (and dissipated afterwards), including in regions without any prosecution. A closer look at the techniques of unwitchers shows them to be very similar to those adopted for religious rituals: holy words and writs were often used to ward off witches. Other methods related more to how the witch's body was conceived. Further issues discussed in this chapter are the extent of specialization of unwitchment experts, their gender, popularity and perseverance.

Assaulting the Witch - Blood, Water and Words

discusses the continuation of witchcraft from the perspective of the conflict between bewitched and witch. While the actions of the bewitched and their supporters were often verbal and physical, the question arises as to their magical connotations. When bewitchments were regarded as magical, how should we then interpret unwitchments targetting the witch's body? Since the early seventeenth century a number of cases are known to have involved lynchings of assumed witches, in towns with witch trials (e.g. Cologne, Essen, Münster, or Brugge) but also in those without them (Arnhem, Rotterdam, Amsterdam). Later on, more individually performed assaults prevailed, also on bodies perceived to be witches, for instance cats. In the Northern Netherlands the English technique of drawing the witch's blood was applied, although not beyond the seventeenth century. Collective actions could involve the swimming of witches: at the end of the sixteenth century water tests had been briefly used in judicial procedures but after the authorities had abandoned them they kept in fashion on a popular level, up to the early nineteenth century. This custom was especially vibrant in Lembeck (Münsterland), as Gersmann has recently shown. People suspected of witchcraft have also initiated this test themselves. Foremost, however, slander trials were the preferred means to defend one's honour. These, too, exhibit a much broader occurrence than the criminal witch trials, in space as in time.

Modern Witchcraft - Between Narratives and Experiences

takes the book up to the twentieth century. On the basis of the vast amount of folklore records (consisting of the older nineteenth-century German and the more recent Dutch and Flemish collections), of newspaper reports, and of the occasional criminal trial the most recent, sometimes very vibrant vestiges of witchcraft are analysed. In this way, most of the themes of the previous chapters are taken up again: from the changing views on the history of witch trials to the gendering of witchcraft, the occurrence and specialization of cunning folk, and violent and non-violent unwitchment rituals (such as the cooking of live chickens in cauldrons). Nineteenth- and twentieth-century witchcraft texts both show the reception of witch trials and the persistence of witchcraft in every-day life. Even stories about witches' meetings still circulated. While folklorists carried out their recordings mostly in the countryside and shunned the cities, newspapermen reported cases from towns such as Rotterdam and Utrecht till the end of the 19th century. In specific case studies from, e.g., Limburg and neighbouring Germany, the Kempen (province of Antwerp), Utrecht and Frisia, the relation between folklore reports, witchcraft repertoires and the influence of presumed witches will be discussed. Particular attention will be given to the reasons why witchcraft declined and why in specific instances it could still prosper.

Witchcraft Through Time - Magic, Bodies and Power

contemplates the continuities and discontinuities of bewitchments and unwitchments and the language of correspondence that can be discerned underneath. This concluding chapter will be set in a European context and argue that witch trials were possible because of a misunderstanding of the dynamics of popular bewitchments. Yet is it only through history from below that answers can be found, for instance why there was a prevalence of women.

COMPETING PUBLICATIONS

From a geographical point of view there are no books dealing in a similar way with the same kind of material. In a broader context Brigg's *Witches and Neighbours* (Oxford 1996) or Roper's *Witch Craze* (New Haven 2004) may be considered, although their readers will probably see *The Cat and the Cauldron* as a book they also want to purchase, rather than feeling they have to choose between them.

ILLUSTRATIONS

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THE AUTHOR

Historical anthropologist Willem de Blécourt is affiliated to the Huizinga Institute of Cultural History in Amsterdam. He has published widely and substantially about witchcraft in Dutch, Frisian, German and English. His book *Termen van toverij* (Words of Witchcraft, SUN 1990, also his Ph.D. thesis), which spans four centuries of witchcraft accusations in the north-eastern Netherlands has been termed 'the most interesting product of recent Dutch witchcraft research' (Gijswijt-Hofstra) and as 'innovative' (Davies). An English translation is scheduled for 2007 (Palgrave)

Among the author's publications is the co-authored book (with Ronald Hutton and Jean La Fontaine) *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe: The Twentieth Century* (Athlone 1999); he co-edited (with Owen Davies) two volumes of essays about witchcraft after the witch trials: *Beyond the Witch Trials* and *Witchcraft Continued* (MUP 2004). His thematical studies include: the introduction of witch trials in the late medieval Netherlands (in: Blauert ed., *Ketzer, Zauberer, Hexen*, Suhrkamp, 1990, with De Waardt); a critical appraisal of Carlo Ginzburg's work on witchcraft (in the German journal *Kea*, 1993 and in Barry & Davies, eds., *Witchcraft Historiographies*, to appear in 2005, Palgrave); the position of cunning folk in European witchcraft (*Social History* 1994); the relation between witchcraft and orthodox Calvinism (in: Barry e.a. eds, *Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe*, CUP 1996); the end of the witch trials in Dutch and Spanish Guelders (in: Lorenz & Bauer eds., *Das Ende der Hexenverfolgung*, Stuttgart, 1995); the gendering of witchcraft (*Gender & History* 2000) and a monograph on werewolves (Hambledon & London 2005, in press).