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Historians as Demonologists: The Myth of the Midwife-witch

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SUMMARY. The belief that midwives were commonly persecuted as witches is widespread in the history of witchcraft and the history of medicine. Although the midwife-witch can be found in the writings of some demonologists, influenced by the *Malleus Maleficarum*, in few of the vast numbers of trials were midwives accused. The practice of midwifery required them to be respectable and trustworthy. Those who dabbled in medicine were occasionally accused but midwives were generally immune from witchcraft prosecution unless they fell foul of a zealous magistrate or there was some special local belief. Historians have been led astray by a tradition that derives from the discredited work of Margaret Murray. A few spectacular cases have been mistaken for a general pattern and midwife-witches have been seen where none exist. The history of witchcraft has been distorted but the history of midwifery has been completely unbalanced by this modern stereotype, which has served either to justify the rise of the men-midwives or to create a multitude of imaginary martyrs for the modern women's health movement. The myth of the midwife-witch is an obstacle to serious study of the history of midwives, women's health and the relationship between popular medicine and religion.

KEYWORDS: midwives, witchcraft, magical medicine, Europe, England, Scotland, New England, historiography.

Though there be numerous company of Authors that have written of Magick, Witchcraft, Sorcery, Inchantment, Spirits, and Apparitions, in Sundry ages, of divers Countrys, and in various languages: yet have they for the most but borrowed one from another, or have transcribed what others had written before them. So that thereby there hath been no right progress made truly to discover the theory or ground of these dark and abstruse matters, nor no precise care taken to instance in matters of fact, that have been warrantably and sufficiently attested.[1]

John Webster, writing towards the end of European witchcraft prosecutions, was justifiably annoyed that demonologists simply took their anecdotes and arguments from previous authorities without checking the facts. Since the existence of the phenomena was generally accepted, discussion turned mainly on the precise details of apportioning blame and identifying culprits. Unfortunately, modern historians of witchcraft tend to behave in precisely the same way.

One of the few things about late medieval and early modern midwives that almost everyone knows is that they were ignorant old crones. Moreover, it is a truth universally acknowledged, that midwives were frequently prosecuted for witchcraft. It is asserted by those who approve of the rise of the men-

[1] J. Webster, *The Displaying of Supposed Witchcraft* (London, 1677) sig. A2. This essay arises from the encouragement of Margaret Pelling and Charles Webster and has benefited from discussions with Bob Bliss, Robin Briggs, Audrey Eccles, Ann Hess, Michael MacDonald, Lyndal Roper, and Adrian Wilson.

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midwives and those who deplore the decline of the midwives. It is asserted by those who believe witchcraft to have been the remnant of a pagan religion and those who believe its prosecution to have been the expression of social tension. It has become as much a part of popular historical knowledge as the hunchback of Richard III, yet it hardly ever features in the work of scholars who have engaged in detailed archival research. True or false, the belief that midwives were prosecuted as witches is clearly a powerful myth and worthy of examination in its own right, since it shapes much discussion of both midwifery and witchcraft. If it is as false as the assertion that midwives were universally poor and illiterate, one must consider why historians continue to propagate it.[2]

There can be no question that references to the existence of midwife-witches occur in the writings of demonologists. The *Formicarius* of Johannes Nider, printed in about 1473, 40 years after its composition, mentions an example and this was elaborated by Sprenger and Kramer, the authors of the notorious *Malleus Maleficarum* in 1487, into a full-blown explanatory theory. The midwives obtained the bodies of infants for magical purposes. It has been suggested that the obsession of the *Malleus* with children, impotence and infanticide arose from either deep-seated fear of the power of women or concern about the widespread medieval practice of family limitation. To those possible motives for the authors' hostility to midwives, a recent writer on the *Malleus* added the suggestion that a high level of abortion and still births, caused by social conditions, led to popular suspicion of the midwife.[3] Like many other attempts to explain witchcraft beliefs, such suggestions are helpful but rather overlook the extent to which the target of witch-hunters and the demonologists was the Devil himself and his minions on earth. Historians have a tendency to wish to explain away theological aspects of past society as though one can simply transmute them into social and political conflicts. In singling out elements of witchcraft belief that lend themselves to such explanation, the separate power of ideology is neglected. Much of the force of the *Malleus* and its successors derives from the appropriation of the alleged crimes of the Jews by authors who sought to build up the fantasy of demonic feasts. Whereas Jews supposedly had to kidnap Christian infants for their sacrifices, witches could obtain them more easily through the agency of midwives.[4]

[2] For a discussion of the literacy and affluence of English provincial midwives, see D. N. Harley, 'Ignorant Midwives: a Persistent Stereotype', *Bulletin of the Society for the Social History of Medicine* xxvii (1981) 6–9. It is not necessary in this context to consider their technical expertise, as challenged by A. Wilson, 'Ignorant Midwives: a Rejoinder', *Bull. SSHM* xxxi (1983) pp. 46–9. For a detailed study of Nuremberg midwives, see M. E. Wiesner, 'Early modern midwifery: a case study', in B. A. Hanawalt (ed.), *Woman and Work in Pre-industrial Europe* (Bloomington, 1986), pp. 94–119; id., *Working Women in Renaissance Germany* (New Brunswick, NJ, 1986), pp. 55–73.

[3] L. Dresen-Coenders, 'Witches as Devils' Concubines: on the Origin of Fear of Witches and Protection Against Witchcraft', in *Saints and She-devils: Images of women in the 15th and 16th centuries* (London, 1987), 59–63; M. Nelson, 'Why Witches Were Women', in J. Freeman (ed.), *Women: a Feminist Perspective*, 2nd edn. (Palo Alto, Calif., 1979), 463–4; E. Camerlynck, 'Feminité et sorcellerie chez les théoriciens de la démonologie à la fin du Moyen Age: Etude du *Malleus Maleficarum*', *Renaissance and Reformation*, ns 7/1 (1983), 13–25.

[4] V. J. Newall, 'The Jew as Witch Figure', in *The Witch Figure* (London, 1973), 95–124.

Such explanations also neglect to investigate the extent to which the supposed popular suspicion really existed or the clerical antagonism led to actual persecution, preferring to assume such phenomena on the evidence of a single text. The publication of the *Malleus* and other demonological works did not lead immediately to large-scale witch hunts, which mostly occurred in a later period. The influence of the *Malleus* on popular belief is very doubtful but it became a potent authority for later demonologists, especially when it began to be frequently republished in the late sixteenth century, as a response to the resurgence of prosecutions after the lull during the Reformation. Mazolini, writing in 1575 under the name 'Silvester Prierias', bases his discussions of midwives and infanticidal witches entirely on the *Malleus* and the work of Nider, generally published with it. Bodin's reference to a midwife sacrificing infants to Satan is taken from Sprenger, as is the discussion by Codronchius of midwives obtaining infants to make flying ointment, although the latter also refers to Prierias and others. Delrio hardly mentions abortion and infanticide in his compendious work, contenting himself with Nider's example and heavy borrowings from Sprenger.[5] Boguet cites Porta and Cardan, the Neoplatonist authors, on witches' ointments but, when he treats the topic of midwife-witches, he only discusses infanticidal parents, apart from quoting Bodin, Sprenger, and Nider. Although Guazzo cites Porta and Pliny on the magical use of infants' bodies, his only direct reference to midwives comes when he quotes from the *Malleus*. It is very noticeable that although seventeenth-century authors made efforts to broaden the scope of their citations, responding to the growth of classical scholarship and Neoplatonist writings, they produce no new examples of prosecuted midwives.[6]

If there was no debate about the authority of the *Malleus* on the guilt of midwives, there was some discussion on the efficacy of using children's bodies for magic. The Neoplatonist discussion of the reality of natural magic was one influence, as was the sceptical suggestion that witches were merely deluded. Pierre de Lancre argues that the fat of infants is not functional, being rather used by the Devil to dupe the witches into murder. His book contains a lurid depiction of the witches' sabbat by Ziarnko, including their cannibalistic feast:

> Voila les Conuiues de l'assemblee, ayant chacune un Demon pres d'elle: Et en ce festin, ne se sert autre viande, que charoignes, chair de pendus, coeurs d'enfants non baptisez, & autres animaux immondes, du tout hors de commerce & usage des Chrestiens, le tout incipide & sans sel.

> (There are the merry-makers of the gathering, having each a demon near her: and in this festival, no other meat is served apart from corpses, flesh of hanged men, hearts of unbaptized infants, and unclean animals, totally outside the trade and usage of Christians, the whole insipid and without salt.)[7]

[5] S. Prierias, *De Strigimagarum, Daemonumque Mirandis* (Rome, 1575), pp. 154–6, 172–4; J. Bodin, *De la Daemonomanie des Sorciers* (Paris, 1580), bk. 2, ch. 5, p. 93; G. B. Codronchius, *De Morbis Veneficis ac Veneficiis* (Venice, 1595), bk. 3, ch. 8, pp. 130, 132; M. Delrio, *Magicarum Disquisitionum*, vol. 2 (Louvain, 1600), pp. 38, 70–3.

[6] H. Boguet, *Discours des Sorciers*, 2nd edn. (Lyon, 1608), ch. 5 and 33, pp. 165, 204–8; F. M. Guazzo, *Compendium Maleficarum* (Milan, 1608), bk. 2, ch. 2 and 3, pp. 105–9.

[7] P. de Lancre, *Tableau de l'Inconstance des Mauvais Anges et Demons* (Paris, 1613), p. 107 and illustration between pp. 118 and 119.

That de Lancre and his contemporaries should describe such nocturnal meetings of witches and demons as 'sabbats' or 'synagogues' indicates the extent to which they are employing traditional myths of Jewish ritual murder. Persecutions of Jews based on the blood libel are documented from the twelfth century onwards, predating the organized witch-hunt by two centuries. When midwives were involved in such outbreaks, it was as representatives of respectable society. Thus when ritual murder was suspected in 1584, after a Worms midwife had delivered twins in the ghetto hospital, she gave expert testimony suggesting infanticide.[8] This role as expert witness, in a wide range of court proceedings, suggests an apparent paradox. As Erwin Ackerknecht remarked when discussing the forensic activities of midwives,

> in the late Middle Ages, midwives have attained an ambivalent position: on the one hand, they enjoy a number of privileges such as state salaries; on the other hand, they are favored victims of the witch-hunting craze of the 15th, 16th, and 17th centuries.[9]

Since midwives were trusted to give reliable evidence in cases of rape, bastardy, and infanticide, and even in cases of witchcraft itself, why should they be suspected of being in league with the Devil? It might be that demonologists had a logical need to see them as the source of flesh for the sabbat that was not shared by the general populace. One needs to establish how often they were prosecuted and under what circumstances.

Contemporary accounts by practising witch-hunters, apart from the *Malleus*, are rather disappointing on this point. Nicolas Rémy, the energetic Lorraine witch-hunter, discusses the vile uses made of foetal or newborn flesh by witches, citing classical and Neoplatonist authors such as Pliny and della Porta. He is indignant that directions for such preparations are to be found in the Neoplatonist works of 'Agrippa, Petrus de Abano, & Picatrix tres damnatae Magiae' (three damned witches). He provides examples from his own examination of accused witches in the period 1586–90, insisting that the practice is common in Lorraine, but none of the cases appear to involve midwives. His only reference to midwives occurs when he cites Pliny. Although Rémy abstracted the records he used, the surviving material suggests that, while the theologians and lawyers of Lorraine confused magical healers with witches, midwives did not feature prominently among those prosecuted. Since the custom of electing midwives was widespread in Lorraine, this is perhaps what one should expect.[10]

[8] R. Po-Chia Hsia, *The Myth of Ritual Murder: Jews and Magic in Reformation Germany* (New Haven, 1988), p. 206.

[9] E. H. Ackernecht, 'Midwives as Expert in Court', *Bulletin of the New York Academy of Medicine* lii (1976), 124–8; cf. Wiesner, *Working Women*, pp. 61, 70–1.

[10] N. Rémy, *Daemonolatreiae* (Leyden, 1595), bk. 2, ch. 3, pp. 209–12; E. Delcambre, *La Concept de la Sorcellerie dans le Duché de Lorraine au XVIe et au XVIIe siècle*, vol. 3 (Nancy, 1951), pp. 205–19. I am grateful to Robin Briggs for confirming my impression. He has examined hundreds of Lorraine cases without finding a single midwife prosecuted for witchcraft. For an excellent account of the social dynamics of Lorraine prosecutions, see R. Briggs, *Communities of Belief: Cultural and Social Tensions in Early Modern France* (Oxford, 1989), pp. 7–105. F. Hacquin, *Histoire de l'Art des Accouchements en Lorraine des temps anciens au XXe siècle* (St Nicolas-de-Port, 1979), pp. 36–8, 48. A good account of the selection of a Languedoc midwife is provided by the diary of a parish priest, Michel Lalande, quoted by W. Gibson, *Women in Seventeenth-Century France* (Basingstoke, 1989), pp. 118–19.

In the absence of much detailed contemporary discussion, one must turn to reputable modern historians for an assessment of the frequency of midwives being prosecuted. Erik Midelfort, in his classic study of German witch-hunting, published in 1972, identifies two vulnerable groups, the notorious and the well known. In his first group, the early victims of a panic, he places 'widows, spinsters, and midwives'. In the second group, drawn into the full-blown panic by the chains of confessions and accusations brought about by the use of torture, he places 'magistrates, teachers, innkeepers, wealthy merchants, and their wives'. Since he provides no examples of midwives being prosecuted, it is difficult to know how much weight to place on this assertion, especially in view of his failure elsewhere to differentiate between the reasons for accusing innkeepers and midwives. Herbert Pohl's recent study of Mainz trials offers some confirmation of Midelfort's identification of innkeepers and midwives as especially prone to accusation, the latter group providing some two per cent of suspects, although he suggests that midwives were accused because of their supposedly low social status, which he does not suggest in the case of other occupational groups. A more likely explanation is provided by a student of Bavarian cases who suggests that all those trades associated with food preparation or magical medicine were at risk, regardless of status.[11]

Richard Kieckhefer, in an excellent study of the early trials, suggests that 'many of the women prosecuted had curing as their occupation: they were beneficent magicians, practitioners of folk medicine, or perhaps midwives'. Unfortunately, he provides no examples of the last group. Norman Cohn, in *Europe's Inner Demons*, listed the various types of suspect: 'Finally there were the midwives and the practitioners of folk medicine. Infant mortality was very high—and who had better opportunities than midwives for killing babies? No doubt they often did kill them, through ignorance or ineptitude. But that was not the explanation that came to people's minds; and it is striking how often the village midwife figures as the accused in a witchcraft trial'. It would be even more striking had he provided a single example of a prosecuted midwife. Although there undoubtedly were cases of midwives being prosecuted in various parts of Germany, it is notable that German midwifery ordinances make no reference to magic or witchcraft. Especially after the Reformation, the main anxiety felt about German midwives focussed on their traditional practices of emergency baptism and the possible contamination of the young with superstition.[12]

[11] H. C. E. Midelfort, *Witch Hunting in Southwestern Germany, 1562–1684* (Stanford, 1972), pp. 172, 187, 195. H. Pohl, *Hexenglaube und Hexenverfolgung im Kurfürstentum Mainz*, Geschichtliche Landeskunde, vol. 32 (Stuttgart, 1988), pp. 222–3, 298; W. Behringer, *Hexenverfolgung in Bayern* (Munich, 1987), p. 201; cf. Behringer's article in *Hexenwelten. Magie und Imagination* ed. R. van Dulmen (Frankfurt, 1987). I am grateful to Lyndal Roper for advice and references.

[12] R. Kieckhefer, *European Witch Trials: Their Foundations in Popular and Learned Culture, 1300–1500* (London, 1976), p. 56; N. Cohn, *Europe's Inner Demons* (London, 1975), p. 249; Weisner, *Working Women*, pp. 64, 69; L. Roper, *The Holy Household: Women and Morals in Reformation Augsburg* (Oxford, 1989), pp. 264–5.

It is far from easy to find large numbers of accused midwives whereas there are plenty of cases where the accused was described as 'medica' or 'Ärtzin', although this may mean little more than the English term 'cunning woman'.[13] The many cases that involved witches allegedly eating the flesh of unbaptized infants at sabbats, or using it for magical purposes, do not generally include midwives among the accused.[14] Thus the factual case for the existence of midwife-witches in Europe rests largely on a handful of sensational cases. They cannot be regarded as typical and, when examined in detail, they appear to be the work of a zealous prosecutor rather than the result of popular outrage. The execution at Lindheim in 1661 of a group of women, including a midwife, for killing a child and using the body for magical purposes, led to a bitter feud between magistrate and community. The parents believed in the midwife's innocence and exhumed the body; the magistrate accused the parents; the father and some other prisoners escaped to accuse the magistrate before the imperial court at Speier. Although he had succeeded in executing a large number of those involved, including the infant's mother, Amtmann Geiss had to flee the town.[15] This case clearly shows the sharp divide between the midwife's neighbours and the magistrate, versed in demonological theory. If prosecutions were initiated by zealous authorities, then the normal process of cumulative suspicion and accusation was subverted. The good reputation of a midwife was essential in her trade since it was her best credential and her only advertisement. The evil reputation of a supposed witch was very different in nature. A midwife could only convincingly be recategorized through the use of torture and confession to persuade her neighbours that all had not been what it seemed.

Walpurga Haussmannin of Dillingen was elaborately executed in 1587, having confessed under torture to fornication with the Devil, apostasy, blaspheming the sacrament and cross, and dishonouring the font. She admitted killing forty-three unbaptized infants, often with the aid of her demonic salve, as well as cannibalism and the creation of hail. Hers is an apparently clear-cut case but her tenure of the office of licensed midwife for 19 years and her delivery of the infants of prominent officials suggest that the case is more complex than the bare story reported in the *Fugger-Zeitungen*. For such a local notable to be prosecuted, the likely explanation would be severe religious controversy within the town, coupled with political faction-fighting. A similarly political explanation probably underlies the even more famous case of the La Voisin poisoning and abortion group, arrested in Paris in 1679, having supposedly collected the remains of 2,500 infants for diabolical purposes. The normality of this case needs to be questioned not only because of the scale of

[13] P. Guerrini, *Le Cronache Bresciane Inedite dei secoli XV-XIX*, Vol. 1. (Brescia, 1922), pp. 182–3; J. Hansen, *Quellen und Untersuchungen zur Geschichte des Hexenwahns und der Hexenverfolgung im Mittelalter* (Bonn, 1901), pp. 527, 561.

[14] Hansen, *Quellen*, pp. 120, 453, 460, 462, 481, 497, 500, 542, 557, 570, 591.

[15] K. Baschwitz, *Hexen und Hexenprozesse* (Munich, 1963), pp. 302–4.

the alleged crime but also because the only substantial evidence was provided by the midwife herself and her daughter, no bodies being ever produced.[16]

The La Voisin case is also striking because the Paris midwives probably had more skill and status than their equivalents anywhere else in Europe. At *l'Hôtel-Dieu* in Paris, most of the midwives came from prosperous families and several had prominent surgeons as fathers or brothers, 'la dame Charonne' being a case in point since she was the daughter of Paré and a close friend of Jacques Guillemeau.[17] Recent attempts to assimilate individual disputes, such as that between the royal midwife, Louise Bourgeois, and the royal surgeon, Charles Guillemeau, to the received model, as 'an instance of the old enmity between doctors and midwives', tend to perpetuate misunderstandings. Whereas witch-hunters such as Peter Binsfeld regarded the term 'sage femme' as rather sinister, the Paris surgeons saw it in a more humorous light. Jacques Guillemeau joked about the term without suggesting anything detrimental to the integrity of women who since antiquity had specialized in obstetrics and gynaecology except a largely laudable desire to excel over men. Although in a medico-legal context he was concerned that judges and the common people too readily accepted the evidence of midwives on technical matters, this can hardly be taken as indicating an association with witchcraft.[18] This is not to say that Paris midwives were altogether immune from suspicion, of course. In 1660, 'la dame Constantin' was accused of causing the death of Mlle de Guerchi through a botched abortion. She defended herself vigorously but was tortured and condemned whereas a surgeon who was also implicated appears to have escaped serious punishment. Nevertheless, there was no suggestion that this was anything more than a straightforward crime and there were no generalized reflections on the moral standing of Paris midwives as a whole.[19]

The high status of Paris midwives was not perhaps reproduced elsewhere in France. Natalie Zemon Davis sees the provincial midwives as drawn from the 'menu peuple' and the artisans but their frequent Protestantism might suggest that they were literate and respectable. Even outside Paris, French medical authors generally adopted the attitude displayed by Théophile Bonet, being sympathetic to the difficulties of midwives and attentive to the utility of their remedies, despite cautioning against unduly vigorous methods of delivery. Local communities in France, as elsewhere in Europe, had to have midwives

[16] *Fugger-Zeitungen*, ed. V. Klarwill (Vienna, 1923), pp. 103–10; F. Ravaisson-Mollien, *Archives de la Bastille*, vol. 6 (Paris, 1873), pp. 38–9, 164–6, 178, 180, 194–8.

[17] H. Carrier, *Origines de la Maternité de Paris* (Paris, 1888), pp. 3–23; A. Delacoux, *Biographe des Sages-Femmes Célèbres* (Paris, 1834), pp. 56–7; W. Perkins, 'Midwives v. doctors: the Case of Louise Bourgeois', *The Seventeenth Century*, iii (1988), 135–57. For a more useful if modest study, cf. id. 'The Relationship Between Midwife and Client in the Works of Louise Bourgeois', *Seventeenth Century French Studies*, xi (1989), 28–45.

[18] P. Binsfeld, *Tractatus de Confessionibus Maleficorum et Sagarum* (Treves, 1591), p. 371; J. Guillemeau, *De l'heureux Accouchement des Femmes* (Paris, 1609), pp. 147–8 (the contemporary English translation inevitably loses the joke by translating the term as 'cunning woman', a confusion that did not arise in French usage); id., *Oeuvres de Chirurgie* (Paris, 1649), p. 480.

[19] *Lettres de Gui Patin*, ed. J.-H. Reveillé-Parise (Paris, 1846), vol. 3, pp. 225–6, 229, 232, 238–9.

whom they could trust and medical practitioners had to be able to collaborate amicably with them. An academic physician like Laurent Joubert might castigate village midwives as the main repository of popular errors but practical ones like James Primrose were markedly less hostile.[20]

The concern of Joubert in Montpellier about the ignorance of some midwives should alert the historian to the likelihood of different attitudes co-existing in the same period and even the same author. Midwives were not socially and educationally uniform and authors might well stress different aspects of midwives' behaviour depending on their audience and intentions. Thus the Roman physician, Scipion Mercurio, seems to have been relatively unconcerned about the dangers of witchcraft when he discussed the qualities needed in a midwife and the perils of abortion, in his book on midwifery first published in 1596. Only when he treats the topic of incubi and succubi does he cite the *Malleus*, 'dove è una frotta di questa sporcherie del diavolo' (where there is a collection of this filthy business of the Devil). On the other hand, in his book on popular errors published in 1603, he appears more concerned about the dangers of the midwife-witch, as befitted his changed audience and intentions in writing the later book.[21]

To some extent, the midwife-witch was a literary convention which passed from the demonologists into other kinds of writing without often influencing perceptions about the actual midwives who delivered one's own children. Thus the remark by Fernando de Rojas's famous character, La Celestina, that her friend, Parmeno's mother, had been both witch and midwife for 16 years, is unlikely to have led to any prosecutions before the Inquisition. John Bale, in a didactic comedy of 1538, depicted Sodomismus describing Idolatria's range of sorcerous services and she herself admits that she protected the children whom she delivered with Papist charms. This says more about the attitude of early Protestants towards the birthing room as a haven of popular superstition than indicating any desire to persecute midwives generally. Historians who have considered this question have been too quick to confuse concern about domestic sorcery with the hunt for maleficent witches, a confusion derived in part from demonological writers rather than actual practice. Ecclesiastical regulations concerning midwives were certainly concerned to prevent them from using charms but there is no suggestion that inhibitions on their practice of baptism in emergencies, at the 1577 Durham synod for example, were motivated by anything other than a desire to promote Protestant sacerdotalism and extirpate popular beliefs about the magical efficacy of baptism. After all, Calvin himself discussed the image of God as midwife and it is surely

[20] N. Z. Davis, *Society and Culture in Early Modern France* (Stanford, 1965), pp. 70, 81, 224, 258–64; T. Bonet, *Mercurius Compitalitius, sive Index Medico-Practicus* (Geneva, 1682), pp. 526–30; L. Joubert, *Erreurs Populaires au fait de le Medecine* (Bordeaux, 1578–9; Paris, 1580); J. Primrose, *De Vulgi in Medicina Erroribus* (London, 1638), pp. 176–9. The various excellent studies of childbirth and midwifery in France by Jacques Gélis and Mireille Laget mostly deal with a later period but see J. Gélis, *La Sage-femme ou le Médecin: une nouvelle conception de la vie* (Paris, 1988), pp. 15–64.

[21] S. Mercurio, *La Commare o Raccoglitrice* (Verona, 1642), bk. 1, ch. 18; bk. 2, ch. 17–21, pp. 71–4, 141–51, 208; id. *De gli Errori Popolari d'Italia* (Venice, 1603), bk. 6, ch. 2, fos. 262–3.

anachronistic to suggest that his transition to discussion of God as providential father was influenced by 'the fact that in the early modern period male doctors were beginning to take over the work of traditionally female midwives'. Calvin is unlikely to have been swayed by developments that took place after his death.[22]

The European Inquisitions were certainly eager to monitor popular medical superstitions and secure repentance but they were not misled by the supposed authority of the *Malleus*. Occasional midwives may have been investigated, such as the impoverished cloth worker Diamente de Bisa delli Axcari della Mota who was tried at Modena in 1595, but midwifery as such did not normally feature in the depositions. Rather, they were denounced as practising *maleficium* when they unsuccessfully employed irregular healing methods. Folk-healers, frequently foreigners, were drawn into the processes of the Inquisition when they dabbled in magic, especially if it involved abuse of the sacramentals. One place where literary models could have exercised a disproportionate influence on practical policy was Spanish America, the subject of an intense theological and ethnological debate, as Anthony Pagden has shown. The colonizing missionaries, bringing their European demonology, lumped native midwives together with other indigenous healers as witches and tools of the Devil, although the mestizo aristocrat, Garcilaso de la Vega, gave a more sympathetic picture of their skills.[23] It is possible that demonology had a disproportionate influence on the Inquisition in New Spain, leading to the persecution of native midwives, but this is not easy to establish as it was rare for a native *curandera* to appear before the ordinary tribunal. Like other occupying authorities, the Inquisition in New Spain appears to have dismissed accusations of witchcraft as mere superstition. Such action against magical healing as occurred was simply part of the campaign against all forms of native religion. It is possible to find midwives punished by the Inquisition in Mexico, from the Negro *partera* incarcerated in a monastery in 1537, for incantations and illegal operations on newly delivered women, to the midwife sentenced to 200 lashes and banished from Puebla for ever in 1648. At present, however,

[22] [Fernando de Rojas], *Tragicomedia de Calisto y Melibea* (Seville, 1502), sig. d4v; J. Bale, *A Comedy concernynge thre lawes, of nature Moses & Christ, corrupted by the Sodomytes, Pharysees and Papystes* (1538), sig. B3r and v; 'Bishop Barnes's Injunctions to the Clergy of the Diocese of Durham', in *Reprints of Rare Tracts and Imprints of Antient Manuscripts*, vol. 6 (Newcastle, 1848), p. 17; J. Dempsey Douglas, 'Calvin's Use of Metaphorical Language for God: God as Enemy and God as Mother' *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte* lxxvii (1986), pp. 131, 133.

[23] M. O'Neil, 'Magical healing, love magic and the Inquisition in late sixteenth-century Modena', in S. Haliczer (ed.), *Inquisition and Society in Early Modern Europe* (London, 1987), pp. 88–114; R. Martin, *Witchcraft and the Inquisition in Venice, 1550–1650* (Oxford, 1989), pp. 139–47, 180–9; A. Pagden, *The Fall of Natural Man* (Cambridge, 1982); M. de Murúa, *Historia del Origen y Genealogía real de los Reyes Incas del Perú*, ed. C. Bayle (Madrid, 1946), p. 320; id., *Historia General de Perú*, vol. 2 (Madrid, 1964), p. 101; G. de la Vega, *Commentarios Reales*, vol. 1 (Lisbon, 1609), p. 50. Some translations of Garcilaso have assimilated his account to the midwife-witch tradition, misleading unwary scholars. For a recent discussion of the complexity of this text, see M. Zamora, *Language, Authority, and Indigenous History in the 'Comentarios reales de los incas'*, (Cambridge, 1988).

it seems easier to find graduate physicians and theologians falling foul of the Inquisition for magical practices.[24]

If European midwives were indeed rarely prosecuted, despite the existence of a justifying theory, it is necessary to ask how often they fell foul of the law in countries where prosecution principally depended on accusation by victims of witchcraft rather than on the obsessions of powerful individuals. Those historians who assert the existence of persecution draw their examples from a wide range of times and countries. It seems desirable to single some out for closer examination. England is probably the most straightforward example available. Medieval English writers discussed midwives without feeling obliged to mention sorcery, a connection made more readily by modern historians. The later English demonologists rarely mention midwives and, when they do, the examples are rather exotic, as in the references of Alexander Roberts of King's Lynn to Constantinople and St. John Chrysostom.[25] The *Malleus* was never fully authoritative in England and Robert Plot, no sceptic, clearly regarded the midwife-witch as an altogether foreign phenomenon when he cited Bodin and Codronchius on 'the sacrifices of young Children (which are frequently offered by Midwife-Witches in some Countries, their fat being the chief ingredient wherewith they make the Oyntment indispensably necessary for their transportation to their Field-Conventicles)'.[26] The absence from England of an inquisitorial system of justice meant that witchcraft accusations remained firmly rooted in popular belief, which did not suspect midwives or concern itself with the sabbat, and the absence of torture meant that long chains of accusations were not created, dragging in prominent local people.

Before the eighteenth century, English midwives certainly were prominent within their communities, regardless of their wealth and education. Although childbed was an occasion for suspicions of witchcraft in England, as in the case of a Huntingdonshire shepherd who made an accusation over 20 years after his wife had died in labour, it was not midwives who were accused of the crime. They were more likely to be involved in checking the alleged witch for signs of the Devil's mark, as in the famous case of 1634 when a panel was chosen by the royal surgeons, Baker and Clowes, to investigate a group of Lancashire witches in a manner to be determined by William Harvey. Informally, such searches can be found operating as late as 1699, when an Essex

[24] A. Quirós Rodiles, 'Breve historia de la obstetricia en México', *Obstetricia y ginecología latino-americanas*, iii (1945) pp. 692–3; R. E. Greenleaf, *Zumárraga and the Mexican Inquisition, 1536–1543* (Washington, 1961), pp. 57–8, 114–15, 117–20; id., *The Mexican Inquisition of the Sixteenth Century* (Albuquerque, 1969), pp. 103–7. For an attempt to assess the trivial number of popular healers prosecuted before the regular tribunal, see S. Alberto, *La Actividad del Santo Oficio de la Inquisicíon en Nueva Espana, 1571–1700* (Mexico City, 1981), pp. 81–2. Angela Thompson informs me that the work of Ruth Bejar is likely to throw light on this issue.

[25] M. C. Seymour (ed.), *On the Properties of Things: John Trevisa's translation of Bartholomaeus Anglicus De Proprietatibus Rerum*, vol. 1 (Oxford, 1975), p. 305; *Ludus Conventriae; or, The Plaie Called Corpus Christi*, ed. K. S. Block (Early English Text Society, vol. 120, 1922), pp. 139–40; P. Biller, 'Childbirth in the Middle Ages', *History Today* xxxvi (Aug. 1986), pp. 42–9; A. Roberts, *A Treatise of Witchcraft* (London, 1616), p. 66.

[26] R. Plot, *The Natural History of Stafford-shire* (Oxford, 1686), p. 14. Scot and Webster do not mention the concept and John Aubrey fails to record any popular beliefs on the subject.

midwife was asked by a clergyman to examine the corpse of a deranged woman who had confessed to witchcraft:

> Upon her death I requested Becke the midwife to search her body in the presence of some sober women which she did and assured me that she never saw the like in her life that her fundament was open like a mouse hole and that in it were two long bigges out of which being pressed issued blood that they were neither piles nor emrods for she knew both but excressencies like to biggs with nipples wich seemd as if they had been frequently sucked.[27]

Midwives might also be asked to confirm stories of providential monstrous births, as in the case of a Lancashire clergyman's widow who attended the children of a Catholic family. The wife had been cursed with the birth of a headless child as a judgement for saying she would rather bear a child with no head than a future Roundhead. Where midwives appear in such accounts, it is always in the role of agent of respectability.[28]

The midwife in England, as elsewhere in Europe, was firmly fixed in this position by her duty to investigate rape, bastardy, and infanticide, as well as by the highly moral behaviour expected by clients and enjoined by the midwife's oath. There were occasionally rumours in London that midwives were accomplices to infanticide, these fears giving rise to a famous ghost story in 1680 and being repeated in 1728 by Daniel Defoe. Nevertheless, such stories merely serve to emphasize the behaviour normally expected of midwives who were, for the most part, as well respected as the three Skipton midwives whose burials were specially noted in 1632, 1662, and 1694.[29] Prior to that distancing of respectable women from paid work and close contact with the poor which, together with the rise of the men-midwives, led to a decline in the status of midwives, the urban midwives of provincial England were often highly affluent and literate. An ecclesiastical lawyer proudly noted in his diary that his wife was delivered by the Mayoress of Chester. Southampton even provides an example of a man gaining his status as a freeman in 1601 by virtue of being married to a distinguished midwife. Even the poorest village midwife, if licensed, had been given testimonials by her patients, by the local clergyman and parish officers, or by medical practitioners. Regarded not as evidence of technical expertise, but as proof of acceptability among respectable neighbours, the process of ecclesiastical licensing clearly sets midwives apart from the marginal women suspected of witchcraft. Yet unlicensed midwives too required the confidence of patients and neighbours, they too had to give evidence in court cases, and there is no indication that they were fundamentally

[27] *The Witches of Huntingdon: Their Examination and Confessions* (London, 1646), p. 6; PRO: SP 16/270, fo. 137; SP 16/271, fo. 15; W. Gilbert, 'Witchcraft in Essex', *Transactions of the Essex Archaeological Society*, NS, xi (1909–10), p. 216.

[28] *Five Wonders Seene in England* (London, 1646), pp. 2–5; *The Ranters Monster* (London, 1652) reprinted in J. C. Davis, *Fear, Myth and History: The Ranters and the Historians* (Cambridge, 1986), pp. 190–4; H. Jessey, *The Lords Loud Call to England* (London, 1660), pp. 29–30.

[29] *Great News from Middle-Row in Holbourn: or true relation of a dreadful ghost* (London, 1679/80); Daniel Defoe, *Augusta Triumphans* (London, 1728), p. 9; *The Parish Register of Skipton-in-Craven*, ed. W. J. Stavert (Skipton, 1814–16), vol. 1, pp. 151, 288; vol. 2, p. 75.

different from their licensed sisters except that they might well be Quakers, Catholics, or charitable women who practised infrequently.[30]

Given this respectability, it is unsurprising that the case for the existence of English midwife-witches rests on only two famous examples. The earlier one is the case of Ursley Kempe, an Essex witch of 1582. Historians have relied on the casual assertion of Wallace Notestein in 1911 that Kempe was a midwife, which cannot be supported by reference to the original source, described at the time by Reginald Scot as 'a foolish pamphlet dedicated to the Lord Darcy'. Kempe is there depicted as confessing to a variety of improbable crimes in response to unfulfilled promises of mercy, a point scathingly noticed by Scot. Yet her accusers, who included her brother and her bastard son, at no point suggested she was a midwife, although wet nursing was involved in the tortuous tale.[31] The second case is that of Mrs. Pepper of Newcastle upon Tyne, an example of a woman who was identified by her accusers as a midwife but midwifery as such was not involved in the case. She rashly diagnosed a sick man as being either possessed or bewitched and, when he failed to improve after she had administered magical remedies, worsening instead, she fell under suspicion of having caused his bewitchment. This was the usual course of events when a would-be healer was accused. It was not unlicensed pragmatic medicine that led to prosecutions but failed magical medicine. Mrs. Pepper's description as a midwife is irrelevant to the case.[32] Clearly, some midwives did practice charms but these would be expected by the other women attending the children. Few would expose themselves to accusation by offering the kind of treatment that lay outside their established expertise. It would seem incautious to blur the distinction between midwife and wise woman, even at the village level, without stronger evidence than has yet been advanced. In any event, few cunning folk were persecuted in England for witchcraft, as opposed to sorcery.

One may safely assume that practice of midwifery would have been mentioned in witchcraft cases, because of the sensational implications. Midwives are identified as such, whether regular practitioners or not, in those legal records for which the identification is relevant, such as bastardy documents or poor law petitions, and not where it is not, as in most wills and parish registers.

[30] *The Diary of Henry Prescott, LL.B., Deputy Registrar of Chester Diocese*, ed. J. Addy, vol. 1 (Lancashire and Cheshire Record Society, vol. 127, 1987), p. 15; *The Assembly Books of Southampton*, ed. J. W. Horrocks, vol. 1 (Southampton Record Society, vol. 2, 1917), p. ix; Harley, 'Ignorant Midwives'.

[31] W. Notestein, *The History of English Witchcraft*, (Washington, American Historical Association, 1911), pp. 41, 542–3; W. W., *A True and Just Recorde of the Information, Examination and Confession of all the Witches taken at S. Oses in the countie of Essex* (London, 1584); R. Scot, *The Discovery of Witchcraft* (London, 1584), pp. 17, 49.

[32] PRO: ASSI 45/7/2/62/103. An inaccurate transcription is published in *Depositions from York Castle*, Surtees Society, lx (1861), p. 127. For a fuller discussion of this case and its magical context, see D. N. Harley, 'Mental Illness, Magical Medicine and the Devil in Northern England, 1650–1700', in A. Wear and R. K. French (eds.) *The Medical Revolution of the 17th Century* (Cambridge, 1989), p. 131.

It would be ridiculous, for example, to suppose that there was only one midwife, Mistress Blake of St. Magnus the Martyr, living within the walls of London in 1695, but midwifery was often a skill rather than a trade and sole source of income and status.[33] Since Mrs. Pepper appears to be the only known midwife accused of witchcraft in England, as far as one can tell from surviving records, it is clear that midwives were not prosecuted as witches in English courts, although the ecclesiastical authorities occasionally worried about child-bed charms. Despite less pious midwives using charms to reassure patients and protect against evil, they were not the kind of marginal magical practitioners who ended up before courts, poor and illiterate women who incompetently treated bewitchments they had diagnosed themselves. English diaries and letters indicate no association between midwives and witches. Popular ballads and chapbooks display no interest in retailing what was clearly a very foreign notion. Even slander cases brought by midwives in the English church courts do not involve suggestions of witchcraft, being rather concerned with rumours of technical incompetence or moral turpitude.

Scotland provides a better test than England for the reality of the midwife-witch for a variety of reasons, some purely fortuitous. Outside the towns, the distribution of wealth and education was very different from the English provincial structure. This should provide larger numbers of midwives whom the authorities would regard as dubious, especially in the absence of widespread licensing. Witch-hunting was more organized and less spontaneous than in England, so there are better records and the chains of structured confessions, produced by torture and interrogation, should yield more accusations of midwives. Moreover, Scottish authorities appear to have conflated black and white magic, to an extent unknown in England outside the works of demonologists, so that healers were dragged into major hunts.[34] This may, of course, simply reflect the dynamics of a major hunt anywhere, largely unknown in England.

By chance, the Scottish cases are unusually well documented because antiquarians were sufficiently interested to publish case-histories and because the records have been systematically searched by a team led by the late Christina Larner.[35] The resulting figure of twelve 'midwife/healers' is cited by Joseph Klaits, in his chapter 'Classic Witches: The Beggar and the Midwife', without mentioning that it was exceeded by such groups as the nobility, burgesses, craftsmen, and 'ministers/teachers'. Larner is cautious about the midwife-witch and describes the figures as 'extremely misleading' because status was only described where it was seen as noteworthy. Nevertheless, two of Larner's collaborators claim that the presence of six midwives among over 3,000 accused

[33] *London Inhabitants within the Walls, 1695*, ed. D. V. Glass (London Record Society, vol. 2, 1966), p. 31.

[34] C. Larner, *Enemies of God: the Witch-Hunt in Scotland* (Oxford, 1981), p. 9.

[35] C. Larner *et al.*, *A Source-Book of Scottish Witchcraft* (Glasgow, 1977).

constitutes a suggestive over-representation.[36] Since it would be dangerous to establish a stereotype on the basis of one in every 500 accused, or every 400 women accused, which seems to be rather low relative to the number of midwives in the community, one must return to the sources to examine the cases in detail, wherever possible, and search for additional examples.

Probably the most famous of the Scottish witches is Agnes Sampson, often identified as a midwife because she admitted, among a wide range of offences, administering magical medicines to take away the pains of women in childbirth. She was first named by an accused servant girl, during the political panic of 1590. James VI was personally involved in her interrogation but she did not confess under torture 'untill the Diuels marke was found upon her priuities, then she confessed whatsoeuer was demaunded of her', although the King attributed this change of heart to 'his especiall travell'. According to a contemporary report, her admissions 'were so miraculous and strange, as that his Maiestie said they were all extreame lyars'. There was no mention of midwifery in this trial of 'the wyse wyff of Keyth', who seems first to have been described as a midwife by David Calderwood, a Presbyterian author writing in the early seventeenth century. Dalyell picked up this reference from the unpublished manuscript while researching his 1834 book on *The Darker Superstitions of Scotland* and this is probably the ultimate source for most later writers.[37]

Taking away the pains of childbirth occurs in the trials of women who certainly were midwives where it can be seen to be not some innocent analgesia but a distinctly menacing Scottish magical belief. Margaret Clerk alias Bain, a midwife not listed by Larner, was accused in 1597 of transferring the pains of childbirth from patients to such effect that the husband of one woman was driven mad for several years until he died, although another man recovered. More significant to contemporary investigators, however, was the conspiracy to commit various devilish crimes, especially the destruction of one Thomas Forbes. His wife and daughter were only saved from the wave of prosecutions that followed Bain's confession by the intervention of James VI on the grounds that they had innocently consulted her in her capacity as midwife.[38] Not only men were believed to be vulnerable to this form of attack. Elie or Alison Nisbit, a Hilton midwife arrested by the Sheriff of Berwick in 1630, confessed to adultery but not that 'she tooke the paines off a woman in travell, by some charmes and horrible words; among which thir ware some, *the bones to the fire,*

[36] Larner, *Enemies*, pp. 89, 101; J. Klaits, *Servants of Satan: the Age of the Witch Hunts* (Bloomington, 1985), p. 187, nn. 23 and 30; H. V. McLachlan and J. K. Swales, 'Stereotypes and Scottish Witchcraft', *Contemporary Review* ccxxxiv (Feb. 1979), p. 89.

[37] *Newes from Scotland, Declaring the Damnable life and death of Doctor Fian* (London, 1592), sig. A2v–A3r, A4r; *Calendar of the State Papers relating to Scotland*, 10 (1936), p. 430; R. Pitcairn, *Ancient Criminal Trials in Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1833), vol. 1, pt. 3, pp. 230–41, 247–57; D. Calderwood, *The History of the Kirk of Scotland*, ed. T. Thompson (Edinburgh, Wodrow Society, 1844), vol. 5, p. 115; J. Graham Dalyell, *The Darker Superstitutions of Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1834), p. 26; C. Hole, *Witchcraft in Britain* (London, 1977), p. 13.

[38] 'Trials for witchcraft, MDXCVI–MDXCVII', in *Miscellany of the Spalding Club*, vol. 1 (Aberdeen, 1841), pp. 157–8, 163–4.

and the soull to the devill! and layed them on another woman, who straight died thereof . . ' The victim was Helen Park, another midwife.[39]

Many Scottish cases appear to have left little in the way of detailed records and even the verdict has been lost in the case of two midwives arrested in 1629, 'Janet Melros, midwife in Chattil, who has long been suspected of witchcraft' and Helen Beattie, midwife in Menner, who was one of a large group reported by the Moderator of the presbytery of Peebles. Bessie Gourdie, a midwife in Midlothian, seems to have left little trace except the fact of her execution in 1678.[40] Like other prominent people, midwives appear to have been vulnerable to accusation during major outbreaks of witch-hunting such as the Tranent hunts of 1659, when Marion Lynn was a central figure, and the Dalkeith hunt of 1661, when Beatrix Leslie was accused of the evil eye and relieving the pains of childbirth. Her guilt was ascertained by a successful *bier-richt*, despite her praying to God, conducted over the bodies of two pit-girls destroyed after killing her cat. Both midwives were executed during outbreaks when large numbers of women confessed real copulation with the devil and renunciation of their baptism.[41]

Midwives entangled in Scottish witchcraft allegations were not necessarily so unfortunate. Nothing seems to have been done to punish Margaret Reid, a Larnarkshire midwife who admitted using magical medicines after being accused by a confessed witch in 1644. It appears to have been fairly hard to convict a midwife for murdering an infant if witchcraft was mentioned, as it was in the case of a Corstorphine widow and her midwife, Margaret Wylie, tried and acquitted in 1661. By contrast, a midwife and her serving woman were condemned to be hung for the straightforward murder of a bastard infant in 1679. One of the accused in the case of two Glasgow girls afflicted with demonic obsession in 1699 was a midwife, Margaret Duncan, who is described as a merchant's widow in Larner's list. The girls recovered, the case did not proceed and the accused were acquitted.[42]

Inevitably, some accused witches died in prison, especially when judges had lost interest in the speedy prosecution of witchcraft cases. According to a correspondent of Robert Wodrow in 1727, Margaret Nin-Gilbert alias Gilbertson was midwife to a great lady in Caithness but, after confessing in 1718,

[39] C. K. Sharpe (ed.), *Memorials; or the memorable things that fell out within this island of Brittain from 1638 to 1684. By the Rev. Mr. Robert Law* (Edinburgh, 1818), pp. lvi–lvii; *The Register of the Privy Council of Scotland*, 2nd ser., vol. 3 (1901), pp. 583–4; *Selected Justiciary Cases, 1624–30*, ed. S. A. Gillon, The Stair Society xvi (1953), pp. 210–13.

[40] *Reg. P. C. Scotland*, 2nd ser., vol. 3 (1901), pp. 98, 170; Larner *et al.*, *Source-Book*, pp. 44, 86, 90, 244.

[41] Larner, *Enemies*, p. 106; *The Records of the Proceedings of the Justiciary Court, Edinburgh, 1661–1678*, ed. W. G. Scott-Moncrieff, vol. 1 (Scottish History Society, vol. 48, 1905), p. 5; J. G. Dalyell, *Darker Superstitions*, pp. 8, 36–7, 133–4; J. Nicoll, *A Diary of Public Transactions* (Edinburgh, 1836), pp. 233, 343.

[42] *Reg. P. C. Scotland*, 2nd ser., vol. 8 (Edinburgh, 1908), p. 157; *Records . . . of the Justiciary Court*, pp. 2–4; Sir John Lauder, Lord Fountainhall, *The Decisions of the Lords of Council and Session* (Edinburgh, 1749), p. 47; Larner *et al.*, *Source-Book*, p. 244; *Early Letters of Robert Wodrow, 1698–1709*, ed. L. W. Sharp (Scottish History Society, 3rd ser., vol. 24, 1937), pp. 5–6, 8, 18.

she was murdered by those whom she had implicated. She had confessed that her putrefying leg had fallen off after one William Montgomerie had attacked her while she was in the form of a cat. Another woman, who died of cold and poverty in prison at Christmas 1684, should be discounted although Larner describes her as a destitute former midwife. The original source reads 'once a milk-wife', rather a different occupation.[43]

The case of Bessie Aitken of Leith, also one of Larner's midwives, may be somewhat doubtful too, since midwifery was not attributed to her at the trial and she appears rather to have been both a consumer and purveyor of the magical healing of women's diseases among the Edinburgh poor. She did, however, advise the husband of a woman harmed by a midwife and she was accused when the cure succeeded, but she escaped with mere banishment after pleading her belly. She should probably be included in a list of accused midwife-witches, as should the two who were implicated by the confession in 1677 of Elizabeth Moodie of Haddington, East Lothian, according to Lord Fountainhall.[44]

By dint of such accretions, it has proved possible to bring the total of accused midwives to fourteen, almost as many as the members of the nobility. It may be that detailed local research, into Kirk Sessions papers for example, would link other witches to the regular practice of midwifery, such as the Orkney women in whose house, some 13 years before her trial, 'thair was ane powr woman that was travelling of child'. However fruitful such research might prove, in supplying additional names and details, it is unlikely that it would provide a total number of midwives much exceeding one per cent. Scottish circumstances were relatively favourable to the prosecution of midwives since the initiative was frequently in the hands of the Kirk, many accusations derived from confessions under torture, and there was a local belief concerning the potentially murderous transfer of pain in childbirth. The rather different social structure of Scotland may also have led to a more lowly group of women being recruited into midwifery than was the case in England. Thus it is not surprising that there were more prosecutions of midwives in Scotland than in England yet it is notable that there were still very few.[45]

No work on the position of women in early New England is complete without a reference to the midwife-witch. Four examples are commonly used to demonstrate the persecution of colonial midwives. The most celebrated is the antinomian heretic, Anne Hutchinson. Her less educated follower, Jane

[43] *Law's Memorials*, pp. xcvi–civ; Larner *et al.*, *Source-Book*, p. 247; Larner, *Enemies*, p. 90; Sir John Lauder, Lord Fountainhall, *Historical Notices of Scottish Affairs*, vol. 2 (Edinburgh, 1848), p. 561.

[44] Pitcairn, *Ancient Criminal Trials*, vol. 2, pt. 1, pp. 25–9; Larner *et al.*, *Source-Book*, p. 242; *Law's Memorials*, p. 131 n.

[45] 'Trials for witchcraft, sorcery, and superstition, in Orkney' in *Miscellany of the Abbotsford Club*, vol. 1 (1837), pp. 152, 158–9; Larner, *Enemies*; R. A. Houston, *Scottish Literacy and the Scottish Identity, 1600–1800* (Cambridge, 1985). The history of women in early modern Scotland has been somewhat neglected although an admirable start has been made by R. Mitchison and L. Leneman, *Sexuality and Social Control; Scotland 1660–1780* (Oxford, 1989).

Hawkins, and two other women, Margaret Jones and Elizabeth Morse, are also cited. Hutchinson provides the most interesting case since her identification as a midwife rests solely on a remark by her bitter enemy, John Winthrop, that she was 'a woman very helpfull in the times of child-birth, and other occasions of bodily infirmities, and well furnished with means for those purposes', and on the fact that she was present when Jane Hawkins delivered the monstrous birth of Mary Dyer.[46] It is clear that she practised charitable domestic medicine, of the kind frequently dispensed in England by a parson's wife. She would have been present at births in the capacity of 'gossip'.

Jane Hawkins, by contrast, was clearly a midwife who dabbled in magical medicines such as oil of mandrakes. At the time, opinion about her was divided, Wheelwright describing her as 'a poore silly woman' who followed Hutchinson only to be fed and Winthrop saying she was 'notorious for her familiarity with the Devill'. Apart from her association with heresy and the monstrous birth, it was her magic that aroused suspicion because she required patients to have faith in her cures. Nevertheless, both in 1637 and 1641, the Massachusetts magistrates seem to have been unwilling to press matters to a conclusion, preferring to prevent her from practising medicine within the community by court order or banishment. She later petitioned to be allowed to rejoin her sons for comfort in her old age.[47]

Anne Hutchinson's reputation for witchcraft derives from her association with Hawkins. At the time of her trial, neither Winthrop nor anyone else suggested that Hutchinson was either a midwife or a witch although he later recorded his belief that her influence over a young man and her association with Hawkins 'gave cause of suspicion of witchcraft'.[48] The monstrous births, first from Mary Dyer and then from the banished Anne Hutchinson, did lead to some scandal, with suggestions that this was a judgement on their heresies. They became something of a model for English narratives. Ephraim Pagitt wrote that 'god punisht those monstrous wretches with a monstrous fruit, sprung from their wombs, as had before sprung from their braines'. This was not the same as calling them witches, deliberate agents of the Devil. Robert Baillie, the prominent Glaswegian Presbyterian who was highly critical of Congregational church discipline, writing in 1645, noted the monstrous births as signs from God but did not associate them with witchcraft. He did notice, in Winthrop's book, 'one abomination, which to me seems strange, That the Midwives, to their most zealous women, should not onely have familiarity

[46] [J. Winthrop] *A Short Story of the Rise, reign, and ruin of the Antinomians, Familists & Libertines* (London, 1644), p. 31.

[47] J. Wheelwright, *Mercurius Americanus, Mr. Welds his Antitype* (London, 1645), p. 7; Winthrop, *Short Story*, p. 44; J. K. Hosmer (ed.) *Winthrop's Journal: 'History of New England'* (New York, 1908), vol. 1, pp. 266–8; N. B. Shurtleff (ed.) *Records of the Governor and Company of the Massachusetts Bay*, vol. 1 (Boston, 1853), pp. 244, 329; Massachusetts State Archives, vol. 10, nos. 309, 310.

[48] Winthrop, *Short Story*, pp. 31–41, 45, 59–64; *Winthrop's Journal*, vol. 1, pp. 266–8; vol. 2, p. 8; *Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society*, 4th ser., vol. 6 (1863), pp. 156, 227; 5th ser., vol. 1 (1871), pp. 96–7.

with the divel; but also in that very service, should commit divelish Malefices, which, so far as they tell us, were not onely past over without punishment, but never so much as inquired after'. The notes to this paragraph, if traced back to their sources, indicate that Baillie was thinking of Hutchinson as well as Hawkins, even though neither had been accused of *maleficium*. Since none of her New England contemporaries thought of Hutchinson as either a midwife or a witch, John Cotton's reply deals only with Hawkins, pointing out that as a non-member she could not be disciplined by the Church. 'But though no familiarity with the Devill could be proved against her; yet because of some other offences in dealing with young women, she was forbidden to stay in the Countrey.' Later writers in the controversy disagreed about the reputation of Hawkins and Hutchinson but it is clear that the former, although a midwife, was actually banished for magical medicine, probably because of her heresy, and the latter, although a herbalist and a heretic, was neither a midwife nor a witchcraft suspect.[49]

Margaret Jones of Charleston, executed in 1648, was accused of inflicting illness and of magical medicine but there was no reference to midwifery. Her case has been assimilated to the midwife-witch tradition through association with Jane Hawkins in secondary sources written this century. The last example, Elizabeth Morse, is often cited despite the fact that at no point during her trial and reprieve or the preceding poltergeist phenomena does anyone appear to have attributed midwifery or any other medical activities to her.[50] The misunderstanding appears to have arisen because her husband was reported as having been surprised 'that she should be both a healing and a destroying Witch' because she had been present at the successful delivery of her next-door neighbour. G. L. Burr in 1914 took this as a reference to midwifery and he has been followed by scholars unfamiliar with the role of a gossip, placing her in a group of 'midwives and magical healers' without ever documenting her 'reputation as a magical healer'.[51]

If there is so little evidence for the prosecution of midwives, how did the belief become so widely accepted? It did not feature in the old histories of midwifery which justified the rise of the men-midwives. Its main source is undoubtedly the works of Margaret Murray, an Egyptologist who was

[49] E[phraim] Pagitt, *Heresiography*, 2nd edn. (London, 1645), pp. 106–7; R. Baylie, *A Dissuasive from the Errours of the Time* (London, 1645), pp. 63–4, 73–4; J. Cotton, *The Way of the Congregational Churches Cleared* (London, 1648), p. 91; E. Johnson *A History of New-England*, (London, 1654), p. 100; S[amuel] G[roome], *A Glass for the People of New-England* (London, 1676), p. 11.

[50] *Winthrop's Journal*, vol. 2, pp. 344–5, and the references for Jones given by R. Weisman, *Witchcraft, Magic and Religion in 17th-Century Massachusetts* (Amherst, 1984), p. 197; J. Coffin, *A Sketch of the History of Newbury* (Boston, 1845), pp. 122–34; S. G. Drake, *Annals of Witchraft in New England* (Boston, 1869), pp. 141–9, 258–96; Boston Public Library, MS Am. 1502, v. 5, p. 45; Massachusetts State Archive, File 135, nos. 18–19.

[51] S. G. Drake, Annals, p. 281; G. Lincoln Burr, *Narratives of the Witchcraft Cases, 1648–1706* (New York, 1914), p. 31 n.; Weisman, *Witchcraft, Magic and Religion*, pp. 86, 88, 111. For a discussion of the gossips, see A. Wilson, 'Participant or Patient? Seventeenth Century Childbirth from the Mother's Point of View', in R. Porter (ed.) *Patients and Practitioners: lay perceptions of medicine in pre-industrial society* (Cambridge, 1985) 129–144.

determined to show that the isolated women prosecuted for witchcraft were really members of a pagan cult that had survived from pre-Christian times. Clearly both European popular beliefs and the learned writings of demonologists contain pagan elements but, to prove her case, she took literally the trial evidence and the statements of witch-hunters about the sabbat, while omitting such supernatural elements as the flying of witches to their meetings. All her quotations from obscure sources were carefully mangled to support her case. Although the midwife-witch idea, which she took from the *Malleus*, was peripheral to her thesis, her remarks were to prove highly influential. In her 1921 book, *The Witch-Cult in Western Europe*, she merely commented that 'in the sixteenth and seventheenth centuries, the better the midwife the better the witch'. This notion of effective midwifery as a reason for prosecution was novel and unsubstantiated. In her next book, *The God of the Witches*, first published in 1933, she performed a notable sleight of hand to equate the witch with the midwife:

> Throughout the country the witch or wise-woman, the sage-femme, was always called in at child-birth; many of these women were highly skilled, and it is on record that some could perform the Caesarian operation with complete success for both mother and child.

To this improbable statement, she added the assertion that they also eased birth pains, which was an impious act. This comment is derived from a deliberate misreading of her Scottish sources but it has been repeated by scores of authors ever since. Finally, she linked the *Malleus* to the men-midwives of the eighteenth century as if they were engaged in the same project:

> Religion and medical science united against the witches and when the law could no longer be enforced against them, they were vilified in every way that tongue or pen could invent.

Since medical authors in all periods since the Middle Ages have been concerned to attack quackery and popular errors, and have frequently been guilty of varying degrees of misogyny, there is just enough truth in this remark to convince the unwary that 'witch' is a synonym for 'midwife', both being attacked as dangerous illiterates.[52]

Although Murray's general thesis, based on her distortion of the Scottish confessions, continued to be a influential into the 1960s, it came under increasing attack, first from Elliot Rose in his book *Razor for a Goat*, published in 1962, and its authority dwindled to being the main prop for those who wished to believe in the existence of an 'old religion' of Satanism or witchcraft. At the same time, however, her slight comments about the midwife-witch took a side-step into medical historiography when the American medical historian, Thomas Forbes, published his article, 'Midwifery and Witchcraft', later incorporated into a widely cited book, *The Midwife and the Witch*. Forbes was able

[52] M. Murray, *The Witch-Cult in Western Europe* (Oxford, 1921), p. 170; id., *The God of the Witches*, 2nd edn. (London, 1952), p. 145.

to go far beyond the earlier apologists for the rise of man-midwifery by arguing that midwives had been not only ignorant but evil. Apart from a handful of cases, he relied for his unflattering identification of midwives on the writings of the demonologists and the work of Murray, whom he saw as 'a leading contemporary authority on the subject'.[53]

While it was Forbes who made the notion of the midwife-witch respectable in academic circles, the real impetus for the idea's dissemination came in the early 1970s. The critic of institutional psychiatry, Thomas Szasz, published *The Manufacture of Madness* in 1970, in which he was mainly concerned to show that defining madness was a social process of stigmatization, like witch-hunting, but he also suggested a role in the witch craze for the struggle between orthodox and unorthodox medicine. This was an idea whose time had come. Szasz was followed in 1973 by the trail-blazing work of Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English, *Witches, Midwives and Nurses: a history of women healers*. This pamphlet, which asserts a continuity between attacks on witches and the difficulties experienced by modern women health workers, has been widely criticized even by authors sympathetic to its general polemical purpose, but it continues to be cited in the notes of academic works, despite its dependence on the discredited ideas of Margaret Murray, and it shapes much of popular perception.[54] Their position, unrepentantly summarized by Ehrenreich and English in 1978, was that millions of women were killed in the witch-hunts and they were predominantly pragmatic female healers whose main crimes were 'providing contraceptive measures, performing abortions, offering drugs to ease the pain of labour'. The *Malleus* is cited to prove the witch/wise woman/sage femme/midwife link made by Murray and the witches are portrayed as the only real medical scientists of their day:

> It was witches who developed an extensive understanding of bones and muscles, herbs and drugs, while physicians were still deriving their prognoses from astrology and alchemists were trying to turn lead into gold.[55]

The purpose of Ehrenreich and English was the entirely laudable one of campaigning for greater access for women to the management of their own health. Their work has been extensively used for this and related polemical

[53] E. Rose, *Razor for a Goat: A Discussion of Certain Problems in the History of Witchcraft and Diabolism* (Toronto, 1962); T. M. Luhrmann, *Persuasions of the Witch's Craft: Ritual Magic and Witchcraft in Present-day England* (Oxford, 1989), pp. 43–4; T. Forbes, 'Midwifery and Witchcraft', *Journal of the History of Medicine* xvii (1962), 264–83; id., *The Midwife and the Witch* (New Haven, 1966).

[54] T. Szasz, *The Manufacture of Madness* (New York, 1970); B. Ehrenreich and D. English, *Witches, Midwives and Nurses* (New York, 1973); ibid., introduction to 1976 English edition; V. V. and D. Ozonoff, 'Steps Towards a Radical Analysis of Health Care Problems and Prospects', *International Journal of Health Services*, v (1975), 299–314; M. Connor Versluysen, 'Old Wives' Tales? Women Healers in English History' in C. Davies (ed.) *Rewriting Nursing History* (London, 1980), 189–97; Larner, *Witchcraft and Religion: The Politics of Popular Belief* (Oxford, 1984), pp. 149–52.

[55] B. Ehrenreich and D. English, *For Her Own Good: 150 Years of the Experts' Advice to Women* (New York, 1978), pp. 31–3.

purposes. The sabbat has been portrayed as a physicians' conference, the witch hunt as a campaign to exclude women from science, the execution of witches as an attempt to eradicate the old wives' remedies that constituted 'a female-controlled reproductive care system', as Ann Oakley puts it.[56] Such polemicists would probably be better served by a real history of midwifery and womens' health care in early modern society. Such a history needs to be painstakingly constructed but the truth is likely to be more liberating than any romantic mythology of martyrs. Its creation is hindered rather than helped by the myth of the midwife-witch.

Distinguished historians casually identify midwives as the key targets of witchcraft prosecution. Undergraduate textbooks on witchcraft cite Forbes or Ehrenreich and English while thoughtlessly repeating outmoded prejudices about the murderous character of early modern midwifery. Even a careful author like Carolyn Merchant, who avoids reiterating the myth in her book *The Death of Nature*, published in 1980, carries it implicitly embedded in text and notes.[57] If historians can be so grievously misled, they have no grounds for complaint when polemicists are cavalier with the historical data. What is the process by which such a myth becomes so firmly entrenched despite being largely counter-factual? The American example is instructive, partly because the influence of Forbes or Ehrenreich and English has been at least as strong there as anywhere else but mainly because, as the detailed quality of much New England historiography demonstrates, more can be known about relatively obscure colonists than is likely ever to be known about the life of witchcraft suspects in most European countries. Since the facts about the American midwife-witch, as presented above, should have been readily available, the persistence of the myth is an intriguing historiographical problem.

The myth gathered momentum slowly in America. Two women who published biographies of Anne Hutchinson in 1930 took Winthrop's statement at face value and depict her as a charitable herbalist but Packard's 1931 history

[56] I. Strobl, 'Wir Hexen: das Matriarchat im Untergrund vom Mittelalter bis heute', *Neues Forum* xxiii, hft. 269/70 (May/June 1976), 59–60; J. Feldman, 'The Savant and the Midwife', *Impact of Science on Society*, 25/2 (UNESCO, 1975), p. 129; A. Oakley, 'Wisewoman and Medicine Man: Changes in the Management of Childbirth', in J. Mitchell and A. Oakley (eds.) *The Rights and Wrongs of Women* (Harmondsworth, 1976), pp. 26–30; M. Chamberlain, *Old Wives' Tales: Their History, Remedies and Spells* (London, 1981), pp. 31–66; B. G. Walker, *The Crone: Woman of Age, Wisdom and Power* (San Francisco, 1985), pp. 128–9; G. Heinsohn and O. Steiner, 'The Elimination of Medieval Birth Control and the Witch Trials of Modern Times', *International Journal of Women's Studies* V, pt. 3 (1982) 38–42.

[57] C. Hill, 'Science and Magic in Seventeenth-Century England', in R. Samuel and G. S. Jones (eds.) *Culture, Ideology and Politics* (London, 1982), 182; D. Hoak, 'The Great European Witch-Hunts: a Historical Perspective', *American Journal of Sociology* lxxxviii (1983), 1273; G. R. Quaife, *Godly Zeal and Furious Rage: the Witch in Early Modern Europe* (London, 1987), p. 93; B. P. Levack, *The Witch Hunt in Early Modern Europe* (London, 1987), pp. 127–8; C. Merchant, *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution* (London, 1982), pp. 155, 311 n. 15, 313 n. 2. It would require a separate study to trace the European influence of Ehrenreich and English, through translation into German, for example: H. Schmolzer, *Phänomen Hexe* (Vienna, 1986), pp. 84–91.

of American medicine turns her into a midwife. The success of the campaign against midwives in America had destroyed the memory of childbed as a social occasion. Although generally favourable to colonial midwives, Packard may have been influenced by Haggard's book of 1929, *Devils, Drugs, and Doctors*, which identifies early midwives with the Dickensian character, Mrs. Gamp. Packard also mentions Jane Hawkins as a midwife, physician, and reputed witch and Margaret Jones as a 'doctress'. The inclusion of Jones in the midwifery chapter may have been responsible for later confusion. Herbert Thoms, in 1933, uniquely succeeded in completely confusing Hutchinson and Hawkins. Hurd-Mead was more sympathetic than most to the difficulties experienced by early modern midwives and, despite all the examples she provided of their skill and high repute, she believed them to have been in danger of prosecution for witchcraft. She followed Packard in seeing Hutchinson as a midwife and added midwifery to her laudatory portrayal of Margaret Jones, who thus joined Hawkins, mysteriously transported to Connecticut, as a midwife-witch. Hurd-Mead expressed astonishment at how few New England medical women were prosecuted. Harvey Graham's book, *Eternal Eve*, named Jones as a midwife and this was followed by Cutter and Viets in their 1964 history of midwifery. They followed Packard in seeing Hutchinson as a midwife but not as a witch. Meanwhile, a 1962 biography of Hutchinson portrayed her as a midwife only in its index, not in its text.[58]

In the first issue of *Feminist Studies* in 1972, Ben Barker-Benfield published a stimulating article on Hutchinson as a sexual threat to Puritan authority, but identified this with her role as a midwife. This is unfortunate, since Winthrop's comments clearly mean exactly what they say, that she was helpful and possessed medicines. Writing after her death, he saw danger in the confidence which families had placed in her skills, but he never said she had been a midwife. It was her pretensions as a spiritual mentor that aroused his hostility. As the first Quaker women missionaries were to discover, New England leaders regarded any active role undertaken by women as decidedly monstrous. Hutchinson's banishment and the surrounding furore can be explained without

[58] H. Augur, *An American Jezebel: the Life of Anne Hutchinson* (New York, 1930), p. 79; W. King Rugg, *Unafraid: a life of Anne Hutchinson* (Boston, 1930), p. 87; F. R. Packard, *History of Medicine in the United States*, vol. I (New York, 1931), pp. 44–50; H. Thoms, *Chapters in American Obstetrics* (Springfield, Ill., 1933), pp. 3–5; K. C. Hurd-Mead, *A History of Women in Medicine* (Haddam, Conn., 1938), pp. 313, 410–16, 487. Her source, equally enthusiastic about Jones as a progressive practitioner and victim of medical persecution, did not call her a midwife: J. Fiske, *New England and New France* (London, 1902), p. 145. H. Graham [Isaac Harvey Flack], *Eternal Eve* (London, 1950), p. 303; I. S. Cutter and H. R. Viets, *A Short History of Midwifery* (Philadelphia, 1964), p. 144; E. Battis, *Saints and Sectaries; Anne Hutchinson and the Antinomian Controversy in the Massachusetts Bay* (Chapel Hill, 1962), pp. 83–4, 177–9. The development of American ideas concerning the history of midwifery is best understood in the context of specifically American attitudes towards modern midwives: F. E. Kobrin, 'The American Midwife Controversy; a Crisis of Professionalization', *Bulletin of the History of Medicine*, xl (1966), 350–63; J. Barrett Litoff, *American Midwives, 1860 to the present* (Westport, Conn., 1978); id., *The American Midwife Debate: a Sourcebook on its Modern Origins* (Westport, Conn., 1986); J. Walzer Leavitt, *Brought to Bed: Childbearing in America, 1750 to 1950* (New York, 1986).

reference to midwifery and more recently religious historians have merely mentioned her supposed midwifery in passing.[59]

Although some medical historians have adhered to the tradition of seeing Hutchinson as only a midwife, while citing sources that make no such error, the new tradition requires her to be identified as a midwife-witch. Jane Donegan's valuable study of the rise of man-midwifery in America is led, by the authority of the *Malleus*, of Thomas Forbes, and Ehrenreich and English, into the association of midwifery with witchcraft. Despite providing examples of the high esteem in which the early midwives were held, by both English and Dutch settlers, she identifies Hawkins, Jones and, for what seems to be the first time, Hutchinson as midwives prosecuted for witchcraft, citing Packard, Cutter and Viets, and Haggard as her sources. Her account of these three cases is usually taken to be authoritative, by Joseph Klaits for example.[60] The power of the myth over the historical judgement of recent writers on New England history is so great that it is repeated even when it is contradicted by the evidence produced. Like Donegan, Lyke Koehler, in a book on the power of women in early colonial society, describes the influential position of midwives, examining women accused of witchcraft, infanticide, and antenuptial fornication. As in England, their evidence was crucial and they were well respected and necessarily respectable. Nevertheless, Thomas Forbes is cited so that an artificial link can be made between New Englanders and 'their European contemporaries', at which point Hawkins, Hutchinson, and Elizabeth Morse are provided as examples of midwife-witches.[61]

Almost inevitably, the weight of assertion built upon such slight foundations has begun to totter. John Demos has proved to be the most cautious of New England historians, at least on this subject. He can find only two suspects who 'can be plausibly associated with the regular practice of midwifery', Jane Hawkins of Boston and Hannah Jones of Portsmouth. It is not clear why he should identify Goodwife Jones as a midwife, in which he is unique. He may have had access to some relevant local records but the two sources that relate to the poltergeist phenomena blamed on her by a neighbour do not describe her as a midwife. In any event, her case is of minor importance since she was only bound over to keep the peace. Demos firmly dismisses the myth. Although

[59] B. Barker-Benfield, 'Ann Hutchinson and the Puritan Attitude Towards Women', *Feminist Studies*, i (1972), 65–96; C. Gardina Pestana, 'The City Upon a Hill: the Puritan Perception of the Quaker Threat to Massachusetts Bay, 1656–1661', *New England Quarterly* lvi (1983), 323–53; W. K. B. Stoever, *'A Fair and Easie Way to Heaven': Covenant Theory and Antinomianism in Early Massachusetts* (Middletown, Conn., 1978), p. 24; D. S. Lovejoy, *Religious Enthusiasm in the New World: Heresy to Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass., 1985), p. 69; C. Lloyd Cohen, *God's Caress: the Psychology of Puritan Religious Experience* (New York, 1986), p. 262.

[60] H. Brock and E. Christianson, in *Medicine in Colonial Massachusetts, 1620–1820* (Publications of the Colonial Society of Massachusetts 57, 1980), p. 130, citing S. Abbott Green, *History of Medicine in Massachusetts* (Boston, 1881), pp. 27–9, 53–4; J. Donegan, *Women and Men Midwives: Medicine, Morality, and Misogyny in Early America* (Westport, Conn., 1978), pp. 22–3, 35–6 nn., 89–91; Klaits, *Servants of Satan*, p. 98.

[61] L. Koehler, *A Search for Power: the 'Weaker Sex' in Seventeenth-Century New England* (Urbana, 1980), pp. 85, 117–18, 132 n., 200, 219, 269–70.

childbed was an anxious time, leading to occasional accusations against hostile participants, such as Elizabeth Morse, it was not midwives who were blamed for incomprehensible ailments but those who sought to cure them by highly dubious means. Yet so firmly implanted is the myth that even the rebuttal by Demos is cited by Klaits in support of the stereotype.[62]

Although the myth is perhaps beginning to fade from New England historiography, its usefulness makes it difficult to dispense with altogether. The thesis of Carol F. Karlsen, submitted in 1980, was markedly more emphatic in discussing midwife-witches than is the published version of 1987, but the argument of Demos is still not fully assimilated. Unsupported assertions are made that derive from the work of Ehrenreich and English. Karlsen continues to insist that 'women who healed people or relieved symptoms which doctors had unsuccessfully treated could come under suspicion of using magic in their medical practice. Similarly, a woman who safely delivered infants that were not expected to survive might find herself accused of witchcraft'. Karlsen retains Hutchinson and Margaret Jones as midwives, although Elizabeth Morse is classified as a paid healer. Such distinctions are not important to Karlsen's argument since her basic category is 'midwife/healer', enabling her to ignore the sinister character of some of the healing practices and blur the difference between magical healing and respectable midwifery or herbalism. An otherwise excellent study is thus marred by the persistent failure of New England historians, apart from Demos, to take note of the fact that not one New England midwife was tried for witchcraft and only one was suspected, for largely unrelated reasons.[63]

Since historians working with primary sources are misled by the myth, it is hardly surprising that textbook writers perpetrate it. Midwifery students are told that their predecessors were ignorant witches and history students are told that midwives were marginal members of society like beggars, natural witchcraft suspects.[64] 'Fortunate is the hunter of straw men in the field of witchcraft', wrote Erik Midelfort. 'Nothing would be easier than to line up a number of nimble-penned authors and knock them down with footnotes blending dust with acid.'[65] A few slashes with Ockham's razor are unlikely to demolish such a deep-rooted myth which serves the purposes of historians and

[62] J. Demos, *Entertaining Satan: Witchcraft and the Culture of Early New England* (New York, 1982), pp. 80–4, 430 n. 75; *Collections of the New-Hampshire Historical Society*, viii (1886), pp. 99–100; R[ichard] C[hamberlayn], *Lithobolia: or, the Stone-Throwing Devil* (London, 1698); Klaits, *Servants of Satan*, p. 187 n. 31.

[63] C. F. Karlsen, 'The Devil in the Shape of a Woman: the Witch in Seventeenth-Century New England' (Yale Ph.D. thesis, 1980), pp. 11, 18–20, 22–4, 176–81, 220–5, 245, 254, 310; *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman: Witchcraft in Colonial New England* (New York, 1987), pp. 9, 16, 19–21, 142–4.

[64] J. Towler and J. Bramall, *Midwives in History and Society* (London, 1986), pp. 21–42; Klaits, *Servants of Satan*. Professional beggars were actually too marginal to be commonly accused. Impoverished members of the community were more likely targets, thanks to the gradual accumulation of resentment.

[65] Midelfort, *Witch Hunting*, p. 164.

polemicists of widely varying persuasions. The existence of the myth, although only mildly disabling for the study of witchcraft, has pre-empted serious attention to the lives of midwives or the relationship between popular medical practices and religious authority. An assault on the myth may open up such projects, which might usefully start with the problem of why, despite the beliefs of demonologists, midwives were not generally persecuted as witches, participating instead in the prosecution as experts in the definition of the unnatural, and why they did sometimes become victims of the witch hunts, under certain unusual circumstances, as did other prominent people.[66] Perhaps the myth of the midwife-witch should be seen as simply one among the long list of inversions, from sodomy to salt-free food, most of which are ignored by historians. It certainly is not sufficient to simply accept the authority of the *Malleus* and assert, 'Obviously midwives had ready access to certain human remains much sought after by practitioners of witchcraft', without making clear whether one is referring to cauls or corpses.[67]

The *Malleus* is the main authority on this subject for historians yet its influence, outside the technical discussions of demonologists, is doubtful, especially in most Protestant countries and the lands under the Mediterranean Inquisitions. Even where it can be shown to have had an influence, as on the French demonologists, when men such as Rémy actually prosecuted witchcraft cases it seems mainly to have influenced their interrogation of suspects. Midwives were not accused in significant numbers because they were the wrong kind of women, respected and influential members of their local communities, more likely to be guilty of a strong will and a sharp tongue than the evil eye. Moreover, popular belief does not appear to have generalized from the handful of cases in any one jurisdiction and ascribed demonic connections even to distant midwives. The midwife-witch is a stereotype that has passed straight from the works of the demonologists into the works of historians with barely a glancing impact on the lives of real midwives. A few cases can be substantiated, in Cologne for example, but the onus of proof must lie with those asserting the reality of extensive prosecutions of midwives. No one has yet shown that there was a disproportionately high number accused. Historians treating this subject have behaved like demonologists, repeating old stories without checking their sources and making assertions without producing data to substantiate them. They have tortured a few facts to fit the Procrustean bed of an obsolete theory. That historians who casually accept the stereotype of

[66] R. A. Horsley, 'Who Were the Witches? The Social Roles of the Accused in the European Witch Trials', *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* ix (1979), 709–10; P. E. Tibbetts, 'The Weighted Coherence Theory of Rationality and Justification: a Critique and an Alternative', *Philosophy of the Social Sciences* x (1980), 271; L. L. Estes, 'The Medical Origins of the European Witch Craze: a Hypothesis', *Journal of Social History* xvi (1983), 271–84.

[67] Hansen, *Quellen*, *passim*; S. Clark, 'Inversion, Misrule and the Meaning of Witchcraft', *Past and Present* lxxxvi (1980), 98–127; V. J. Newall, *The Encyclopedia of Witchcraft and Magic* (London, 1974), p. 122.

midwives as ignorant crones should assume them to be victims of the witch-hunt is unsurprising but this myth also mars some excellent work in women's history. Campaigners on behalf of women's access to health care would be well advised to abandon this double-edged weapon since, like most myths, it ultimately produces only mystification.