Oedipus and the Devil
Witchcraft, sexuality and religion in early modern Europe

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9 Witchcraft and fantasy in early modern Germany

In January 1669, Anna Ebeler found herself accused of murdering the woman for whom she had worked as a lying-in-maid. The means were a bowl of soup. Instead of restoring the young mother’s strength, the soup, made of malmsey and brandy in place of Rhine wine, had increased her fever. The mother became delirious but, as the watchers at her deathbed claimed, she was of sound mind when she blamed the lying-in-maid for her death. As word spread, other women came forward stating that Ebeler had poisoned their young children too. The child of one had lost its baby flesh and its whole little body had become pitifully thin and dried out. Another’s child had been unable to suckle from its mother, even though it was greedy for milk and able to suck vigorously from other women: shortly after, it died in agony. In a third house, an infant had died after its body had suddenly become covered in hot, poisonous pustules and blisters which broke open. The baby’s 7-year-old brother suffered from aches and pains caused by sorcery and saw strange visions, his mother suffered from headaches and the whole household started to notice strange growths on their bodies. And a fourth woman found her infant covered with red splotches and blisters, her baby’s skin drying out until it could be peeled off like a shirt. The child died most piteously, and its mother’s menstruation ceased. All had employed Ebeler as their lying-in-maid. Anna Ebeler was interrogated six times and confessed at the end of the second interrogation, when torture was threatened. She was executed and her body burnt on 23 March 1669 – a ‘merciful’ punishment practised in place of burning in the humane city of Augsburg. She was aged 67. Just two months had elapsed since she was first accused.\(^1\)

Anna Ebeler was one of eighteen witches executed in Augsburg. As many more were interrogated by the authorities but cleared of witchcraft; others faced religious courts and yet further cases never reached the courts. Augsburg saw no witch-craze. Unlike its south German neighbours, it executed no witch before 1625 and its cases tended to
Plate 9.2 A: Anna Ebeler is abducted from a dance by the Devil and led to her house.

women, and that her victims were young infants aged up to about six weeks and women who had just given birth.

One dominant theme in witch-trials in Augsburg is motherhood. Relations between mothers, those occupying maternal roles and children, formed the stuff of most, though not all, witchcraft accusations in the town. To this extent, early feminist works which focused on birth and midwives in their explanations of witchcraft were making an important observation. But though the trials were concerned with the question of motherhood they were not, it seems to me, male attempts to destroy a female science of birth nor were they concerned with wresting control of reproduction from women. What is striking is that they were typically accusations brought by mothers, soon after giving birth, against women intimately concerned with the care of the child, most often the lying-in-maid and not the midwife.

Many investigations of witchcraft proceed by trying to explain why women should be scapegoated as witches or what other conflicts may have been at the root of the case – conflicts involving issues with which we are more comfortable, such as struggles over charity, property or political power. I want to argue that the cases need to be understood in their own terms by means of the themes they develop. As historians, I think we may best interpret them as psychic documents which recount particular predicaments. Witchcraft cases seem to epitomize the bizarre and irrational, exemplifying the distance that separates us from the past. What interests me, however, is the extent to which early modern subjectivities are different or similar to ours. I shall argue
that unless we attend to the imaginative themes of the interrogations themselves, we shall not understand witchcraft. This project has to investigate two sides of the story, the fears of those who accused, and the self-understanding of people who in the end, as I shall argue, came to see themselves as witches.

Our perplexity in dealing with witchcraft confessions derives in part from their epistemological status. In a profession used to assessing documents for their reliability, it is hard to know how to interpret documents which we do not believe to be factual. But witchcraft confessions and accusations are not products of realism, and they cannot be analysed with the methods of historical realism. This is not to say that they are meaningless: on the contrary, they are vivid, organized products of the mind. Our problem is that early modern people had a different ontology to our own, believing in a world populated by ghosts who walked at night, devils who might appear in the form of young journeymen, severed arms carrying needles or wandering souls inhabiting household dust. Rather, all phenomena in the early modern world, natural and fantastic, had a kind of hyper-reality which resided in their significance. Circumstantial details were ransacked for their meaning for the individual, and for what they might reveal about causation and destiny. Causation, which could involve divine or diabolic intervention in human affairs, was understood in terms both moral and religious. Consequently, we need to understand confessions and accusations as mental productions with an organization that is in itself significant. This means analysing the themes of witchcraft not to tell us about the genealogy of magical beliefs – the approach taken by Carlo Ginzburg in his recent book — but to tell us about the conflicts of the actors.

In the cases I have explored, witchcraft accusations centrally involved deep antagonisms between women, enmities so intense that neighbours could testify against a woman they had known for years in full knowledge that they were sending her ‘to a blood bath’ as one accused woman cried to her neighbours as they left the house for the chancellery. Their main motifs concern suckling, giving birth, food and feeding; the capacities of parturient women’s bodies and the vulnerability of infants. This was surprising, at least to me: I had expected to find in witchcraft a culmination of the sexual antagonism which I have discerned in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century German culture. The idea of flight astride a broom or pitchfork, the notions of a pact with the Devil sealed by intercourse, the sexual abandonment of the dance at the witches’ sabbath, all seemed to suggest that witchcraft had to do with sexual guilt and attraction between men and women, and that its explanation might lie in the moralism of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation years, when Catholics and Protestants sought to root out prostitution and adultery, shame women who became pregnant before marriage and impose a rigorous sexual code which cast the women as Eve, the temptress who was to blame for mankind’s fall.

Some of the cases I found certainly dealt with these themes, but the primary issue in what we might term a stereotypical case of witchcraft was maternity. The conflicts were not concerned with the social construction of gender but were related much more closely to the physical changes a woman’s body undergoes when she bears children. While these clearly have a social meaning and thus a history, the issues were so closely tied to the physical reality of the female sex and to sexual identity at the deepest level that they seemed to elude off-the-peg explanations in terms of female roles and gender conflict. The stuff of much of the accusations made by the mothers was not femininity or genital sexuality, but pre-Oedipal in content, turning on the relationship to the breast and to the mother in the period before the infant has a sense of sexual identity. The primary emotion of the witchcraft cases, envy, also originates in this early period of life. Witchcraft accusations followed a pattern with a psychic logic: the accusations were made by women who experienced childbirth and their most common type of target was a post-menopausal, infertile woman who was caring for the infant. Often, as in the case we have just explored, she was the lying-in-maid.

Here it might be objected that witchcraft interrogations and confessions cannot be used to give us insight into early modern psychic life in this way. They are stereotyped products, it might be argued, not of those interrogated but of the minds of the interrogators. These men wanted to know about witches’ sabbaths, sex with the Devil and cannibalism and they forced this information out of the women using leading questions and even outright promptings, resorting to torture to gain the confession they needed to convict the woman. However, such an objection does not recognize the cultural attitude to pain nor its place in the dynamic of interrogation in early modern society. Witches were women who could not feel pain as normal women could. They were unable to weep and they did not sense the witch-pricker’s needle. A measure of physical pain, so the interrogators believed, was a process of the body which enabled the witch to free herself from the Devil’s clutches, weakening her defences against the admission of guilt. The amount of pain had to be finely judged by the executioner, a scientist of the body. Using his knowledge of the victim’s frailty, and in consultation with the council, he calculated the precise grades required at each stage of the process (from exhibition of the equipment, stretching on the rack without attaching weights, through to attaching weights of increasing size) so that the witch’s integral, diabolic personality might be stripped away by the application of pain to uncover the truth. Like a kind of medicine of salvation, it assisted her travail to return to the Christian community in contrition so that she might die in a state of grace. Torture was part of an understanding, shared by the witch and her persecutors, of the
interrelation of body and soul: the skin of the outer person had to be flayed away to arrive at psychological truth. Those who did not crack under torture were set free despite the seriousness of the accusations against them, because they were said to have proven their innocence: they lacked a diabolic interiority of this kind.

Pain had a religious significance too. By experiencing the pain of flagellation, or participating in the procession of the Twelve Stations of the Cross, a ritual which reached its final form in the Counter-Reformation in Augsburg, one could come closer to Christ by physical imitation of His sufferings. Maternity involved pain. Mary herself had borne Jesus in suffering, and the seven swords of grief piercing the suffering Madonna were a powerful Baroque image. Luisa Acciai has written of the importance of the Madonna in agony to Baroque understandings of both Marian piety and motherhood. Soothsayers told of spells in which they appealed to ‘the suffering of Mary as she lay on her martyr-bed of straw’. The witch, the woman whose capacity to feel pain was impaired, was thus an unmaternal woman, alienated from the realm of pain so manifestly experienced by the new mothers who accused her of sorcery. Devoid of maternal affection, the witch was incapable of feeling pity for her victims.

Moreover, the system of confession also rested on a measure of collusion between witch and questioner. The witch had to freely affirm her confession after it had been given, in the absence of torture. This was a requirement of the Imperial Law Code of Charles V of 1532, and it was certainly not honoured all over the empire. But in a place like Augsburg which did not experience mass witch-hunts, the credibility of the phenomenon of witchcraft rested on the ultimate truth-telling of the witch. Witches could and did modify their confession: so, for instance, Anna Ebeler, who had confessed to having sex with the Devil a countless number of times, insisted at the last that she had only rarely had diabolic intercourse, a disclaimer incorporated in her final public condemnation. Witches were commonly supposed to have renounced God, Jesus, Mary and the saints, but Ebeler was able to maintain that she had never forsaken the Virgin, who had comforted her during diabolic assaults, and that she had never desecrated the Host as she had earlier confessed she had. Another who firmly denied that she was a witch was not described as such in her denunciation, even though she was executed for having used witchcraft.

This freedom was in some sense apparent rather than real: witches who confessed and then revoked their confession embarked on a long and hideous game of cat and mouse with their interrogators, as they were reinterviewed and tortured until their narrative was consistent. But interrogators knew when a confession was simply a result of torture or its fear, and they noted this. Crucial to their own understanding of their task was the belief that, by repetition and forcing the culprit to describe and redscribe the minutiae of the crime, checking with wit-

nesses, the truth would eventually be uncovered. That truth took on a kind of talismanic quality, as the witch was forced to tell and retell it in up to ten sessions of questioning, making it consistent. Her statements were then read out in full to the assembled council before condemnation could be agreed; a summary of her crimes was recorded in the Council’s Punishment Book and read out before her execution; and this material formed the basis for the broadsheets and pamphlets that were written about the case. The reiteration fixed the details until there could be no doubt about the narrative. It was a truth which the witch herself freely acknowledged and for which she alone had provided the material. For despite the power of the stereotypes in the witch’s confession, these do not explain the particular inflections individual witches gave to them, as they described how they went to a sabbath that was held just by the gallows outside Augsburg, or how the Devil appeared to them in a long black coat, dressed for all the world like a merchant.

There is a further collusive dynamic at work in interrogation, that between witch and torturer. Torture was carried out by the town hangman, who would eventually be responsible for the convicted witch’s execution. Justice in the early modern period was not impersonal: the act of execution involved two individuals who, by the time of execution, were well acquainted with each other. Particularly in witch-trials, torture and the long period of time it took for a conviction to be secured gave the executioner a unique knowledge of an individual’s capacity to withstand pain, and of their physiological and spiritual reactions to touch. In a society where nakedness was rare, he knew her body better than anyone else. He washed and shaved the witch, searching all the surfaces of her body for the tell-tale diabolic marks – sometimes hidden ‘in her shame’, her genitals. He bound up her wounds after the torture. On the other hand, he was a dishonurable member of society, excluded from civic intercourse and forced to intermarry among his own kind. His touch might pollute; yet his craft involved him in physically investigating the witch, a woman who if innocent was forbidden him. He advised on the mode of execution, assessing how much pain the witch might stand, a function he could potentially exploit to show mercy or practise cruelty. In consequence, a bond of intense personal dependence on the part of the witch on her persecutor might be established. Ephrosina Endriss was greatly agitated when a visiting executioner from nearby Memmingen inspected her. She pleaded that ‘this man should not execute her, she would rather that Hartman should execute her, for she knew him already’.

Once the torturer’s application of pain had brought the witch to confess, she knew she faced execution, and she knew her executioner. In the procedure of interrogation itself, carried out in the presence of council interrogators, scribes and executioner, there is an unmistakable sado-masochistic logic, as the witch, in response to pain, might reveal
details of her crimes only to deny them subsequently; or as she proffered scattered scraps of information about diabolic sex only then to tantalize her questioners with contradiction or silence. In this sadistic game of showing and concealing, the witch forced her persecutors to apply and reappry pain, prising her body apart to find her secret. Once it was found, she might herself identify with the aggressor: so, at the conclusion of her final confession as a witch, when it was plain she faced death, Anna Ebeler fell at her persecutors’ feet in tears, asking for a merciful execution. ‘She begged my lords for forgiveness for what she had done wrong. She thanked them for granting her such a good imprisonment and treatment.’ Masochism, however, has its twin in sadism. Even in death, the resolution of the game, the witch herself was believed able to retaliate against her tormentor. One hangman found his hands suddenly crippled after he executed two witches in 1685, and his colleague had to execute the third. Just before Barbara Fischer was executed, so one chronicler noted, a powerful rainstorm struck as if everything must drown: this witch, the writer observed, had shown no signs of contrition. At every stage, the trial progressed through a combustion of sadism, retaliation and masochism, in which each actor might in fantasy veer from persecutor to victim to tormentor.

How can the historian make use of material generated in such circumstances? In spite of the geographical specificity and precision of detail we noted earlier in the confession material, witchcraft confessions certainly do possess a stereotypical aspect. There are elements, like the diabolic pact, the sabbath, the powder the Devil gave them to do harm, which appear in most confessions. But the basic psychic images of any society are usually the stuff of cliché. It is their commonness which makes these images seem banal, yet enables them to give form to inchoate, shared fears and common predicaments. It is undoubtedly true that the pressures of interrogation and pain caused accused witches to shape their accounts of their own emotions and present a narrative of their psychic worlds in a particular way — the language of witchcraft forced them to present the Devil as their seducer and the ultimate cause of their fall. But narratives in which people try to make sense of their psychic conflicts usually involve borrowing from a language which is not at first the individual’s own. We might say that coming to understand oneself can involve learning to recognize one’s feelings in the terms of a theory, psychoanalytic or diabolic, which one might not originally have applied to oneself, and it can also entail a kind of violence.

What was the substance of the witches’ crime? The grief and terror of the witnesses concentrated on the bodies of those who were the victims of witchcraft. Their bodies bore the signs of their martyrdom. As one mother put it, her dead child was covered in sores so that he looked like a devotional image of a martyr. Strange signs were seen: nipples appeared all over the body of one infant, erupting into pussy sores. The legs of another were misshapen and bent. Repeatedly, witnesses stress the physical character of the victim’s agony, incomprehensible suffering which cannot be alleviated by the onlookers or by the mother, and which excite hatred, revenge and guilt feelings in part because of the sufferer’s innocence. In emotionally-laden language, the witnesses describe the ‘piteous’ way a child died, and their own failure to get the child to thrive. It is in this collective world of gossip and advice that the rumours of witchcraft first began, in the grief and guilt of the mother at the loss of the tiny baby, and as the women around them sought to identify the cause of this inexplicable, unbearable suffering. Such gossip could be deadly. It was her employer’s tongue, her ‘wicked gob’ as Barbara Fischer put it, using the term applied to animals’ mouths, which caused one lying-in-maid to retaliate against her maligner by poisoning her.

The themes of the injury are not only pitiful but frightening. These terrors circle around nourishment and oral satisfaction, evoking powerful pre-Oedipal feelings. The breast, milk and nourishment were its key images. The food the witch gave the mother was sprinkled with white or black diabolic powders or the soups she was fed were poisonous, and these of course influenced the milk the infant received in a very immediate way. Attacks on the mother’s food were thus attacks on her infant as well. When the witch killed, she often used poison, perverting the female capacity to nourish and heal. So one grandmother was interrogated three times and tortured because her young grandson suspected witchcraft when he felt queasy after drinking an anised water tonic she had given him. The witch could be a kind of evil mother who harmed instead of nourishing her charge. The flow of nourishment could be disrupted so that the child dried out and died. In one case, the witch was accused of literally reversing the flow of the maternal fluids, herself sucking the infant dry and feeding on it. Its mother described how its little breasts had been sucked out so that milk had been pressed out from the child’s little teats contrary to nature, ... and from this time on the child had lost weight so that it looked as if hardly a pound of flesh remained on it.

Another baby was found to be covered with a myriad of tiny teats as if it had become a mere drinking vessel for the thirsty witch; yet another baby’s teats produced ‘a little drop of white watery liquid’. The signs that sorcery was afoot were clearly written on the infant’s body. Its skin dried out for lack of fluid, or else erupted in sores as if evil fluids within its body were forcing their way out. Its entire little body might become ‘red and blue, all mixed up, and rigid and hard, like a plank of wood’. The infant might be unable to drink from its own mother, yet when given to another woman, be ‘so hearty in sucking that it made her weep’. (These themes could also emerge in cases which did not
and making him suffer pain. This motif is clearly taken from the older myth of Jewish ritual murder, the belief that Jews were stealing the Host and torturing it to make it bleed, and that they stole Christian children so that they could use their blood in secret rituals. Yet even this hoary fantasy was incorporated into the fabric of daily life: Anna Schwayhofer confessed to this crime in the apocalyptic year 1666, and described how, housewife to the fingertips, she had afterwards swept the crumbs of the desecrated Host off the floor of her lodgings with a broom.

Witches were women who did not feed others except to harm them. Failed exchanges of food typified a witch’s interactions with her neighbours. So one woman, suspected of being a witch, offered two sisters who lived in her house a dish of Bavarian carrots. Yet this was a two-edged peace offering. The woman insisted the sisters eat the food, and sat with them until it was all consumed. One of the two was pregnant, and the dish made her ill. The witch said the food would strengthen the child within her, yet this wish for the child’s health actually meant its opposite. Like the fairies of fairytale who are not invited to the baptism, the old woman’s evil ‘wishes’ for the infant’s future blighted its life. And this could happen in a trice, even without the witch’s intention: Maria Gogel explained how ‘if a person ate plain milk, peas, meat or cheese, and chanced upon a child and merely said “Oh, what a beautiful child” immediately it is bewitched’.

Witches’ other means of harming was by ‘trucken’, pressing down on the infant or its mother. The verb may also refer to the effort of pushing down in labour. In witchcraft it is used in at least three different contexts: to describe the way the Devil forces one woman to do evil, the smothering of an infant, and a mysterious kind of oppression felt by the woman who has just given birth. Georg Schmetzer’s wife complained of feeling that something was coming to her at night, lying on her and pressing her so that she suffered from pain down one side. She suspected the lying-in-maid of coming to her bed in the evening and lying on top of her – a fear strengthened by the maid’s unorthodox suggested remedy for her backache that she should undress and lie on top of her in a kind of all over massage. Anna Maria Cramer believed a witch was coming to her at night and lying on her, pressing down on her pregnant body. Another woman heard a mysterious voice crying ‘druckdich Madelin, druckdich’ (be pressed down, Maggie, be pressed down) and she felt something trying to bite her neck. Her lying-in-maid Euphrosina Endris was finally brought to confess that she had ‘pressed’ the baby she carried about with her, squashing its skull so that it died. The themes here do not appear to be directly sexual. Rather, what is described is a kind of heavy, deadly embrace, again typified by an ambiguous mixture of love and hatred which might kill the infant with a kind of excess of maternity. The mother’s feelings have more to do with extreme depression, immobility and passivity. In all these cases, the mother
maternal depression and to a mixture of feelings towards the infant which may extend to anger, envy or even to wishing harm to the child.

What seems to emerge from these cases, however, is a different set of historically formed psychic mechanisms for dealing with this predicament. The time of separation of mother and child was clearly marked in ritual terms. The mother's re-entry into society as a single being, uncontaminated by what can - if she bears a male child - seem to be the bisexuality of pregnancy, was celebrated in churching, a ritual which remained an important ceremony despite the Reformation's attempt to curtail it. These few weeks were also full of danger for mother and child.

According to English figures, a woman had a 6 to 7 per cent chance of dying in childbirth, and while this figure may seem low, it was an ever-present terror, doubtless added to by the stories passed around by her women visitors. In the first few weeks of life the child was at its most delicate, as feeding had to be established, either with the mother, a wet-nurse or else by hand. Interestingly, it was during this period or else immediately after the lying-in-maid's departure that the child began to ail. But instead of seeking the source of her ills in post-natal depression, within herself, as we would, the mother's anxieties about the child's fate and her own ability to nourish it were directed outwards, so that harm to either mother or baby was believed to have been caused by another. Here we might make use of what Melanie Klein says about splitting, which allows intolerable feelings of hostility and malice to be projected on to another, so that the mother recognizes only benevolence in herself, projecting the evil feelings about herself on to the 'other' mother. The lying-in-maid was thus destined for the role of the evil mother, because she could be seen to use her feminine power to give oral gratification to do the reverse - to suck the infant dry, poison the mother and her milk and, in the most extreme form of witch fantasies, to kill, dismember and eat the child at the witches' sabbath. At a time when the new mother's experience of giving birth and caring for an infant might raise memories of her own infancy, recalling the terrifying dependence on the maternal figure for whom she may have experienced unadmitted, intolerable feelings of hatred as well as love, there was another person playing the maternal role to hand. We might say that during the new mother's period of feeling complete inertia, 'pressed down upon', she finally gained the strength to retaliate, resolving her state by accusing the witch of harming her child.

In this sense, so far from being a simple expression of misogyny, early modern society can be said to have taken the fears of the mother seriously, supporting her search for the culprit instead of describing her as suffering from post-natal depression or attributing a kind of madness to her - women today may attempt to use the defence of post-partum psychosis to argue that they were not legally responsible for crimes committed during the first few weeks after giving birth.

The lying-in-maid was almost over-determined as the culprit, should
Witchcraft and fantasy

213

Witchcraft be suspected. Old, no longer capable of bearing a child herself and widowed, she was a woman who housed alone and was a transitory member of the households of others. No longer at the heart of a bustling household of her own, she was a hired member of the family for whom she worked, privy to the most intimate physical secrets of the bodies of those she tended. An interloper, she was never accorded a real place of her own – one even had to share a cramped bed with a servant which was so narrow that she fell out of it in the night. The lying-in-maid undermined the settled hierarchies of the household at a time when the new baby’s arrival overturned the workshop’s rhythm. For the six to eight weeks after the mother had given birth, she alone carried out the duties of a mother, dandling, washing and swaddling the baby, and caring for its mother, giving her nourishing soups. Just as she had no place in the house she might call her own, so also her work life left her humiliatingly dependent on others: on the midwife, who trained her, recommended her and from whom she might hear of her next job; on her employer, the mother, who might choose not to re-employ her and who could blacken or enhance her reputation by gossiping with other mothers about her. She lacked the midwife’s qualifications and official status as an employee of the council, nor did she have the luxury of the midwife’s official retainer to tide her over slack periods. Often, it was her very insecurity which was turned against her. One woman who went down on her knees to plead with her accusers only made them the more convinced that something was amiss; frightened people were likely to be caught in the Devil’s snares.

But she was also invested with awesome power. She had her particular recipes for strengthening soups, she had her methods for bringing up young infants, she ‘alone cared for the child, and it was in no one’s hand but hers’ as one lying-in-maid accused of witchcraft put it. She was strong at a time when the new mother was ill and weakened, and she was fulfilling her tasks. The new mother, sleeping alone in the marital bed, was not ‘mistress of the household’ in sexual terms: old, infertile and unhoused as the lying-in-maid was, she represented a double threat to the mother, standing both for the mother’s own future and sometimes representing a sexual threat as well. If the husband were ‘up to no good’, the lying-in-maid, who in many cases had borne illegitimate children, might be suspected.

The lying-in-maid dealt with the waste products of the body, she had access to the afterbirth and to caulds and she had the care of the infant’s body. One lying-in-maid was accused of purloining the afterbirth, burning it at night under her bed in a bid to harm mother and child, and it was only with great difficulty that she managed to persuade the judges that she had merely been attempting to clean a pewter bowl. Another was foolish enough to accuse the midwife of hiding a baby’s caul. Taking the ‘little net’ to the child’s father in the hope of gaining a handsome tip for her trouble, she not only antagonized the midwife but led people to suspect that she had her own nefarious purposes for the caul. Through the waste products of the body, things invested with their owner’s power – hair, nails, afterbirth – the sorcerer could control the individual to whom they had belonged. These substances could be used to direct the emotions, causing the bewitched person to fall in love, and they could be used to harm. In this cosmology, emotions were highly sensitive to manipulation of the body. Emotions, like physical pains, could be the result of external events and could readily be ascribed to other people, their source sought outside rather than in the self.

As any mother knew, to antagonize a lying-in-maid was to court disaster. ‘I gave her good words until she left the house’, so one young mother said. Many of the witnesses mention the time when the lying-in-maid was ‘out of the house’, a phrase which captures the element of menace the maid was thought to represent. Only then might an accusation be safely made, because then the maid could not revenge herself by bewitching the child. (One seer refused to help an ailing child until the maid had gone: then she succeeded in restoring its rosy flesh, but it began to waste away again when the maid returned shortly after to collect money she was owed.) So fraught was the moment of the maid’s departure that her formal relinquishing of responsibility could also become a test of whether the child had thrive. One woman repeated the ambiguous rhyme she had spoken on parting from the child:

My dear little treasure, now you are well recovered
Look master and mistress
Now I depart from the child
Whatever may happen to him now
I will not be held to blame

Such a jingle, with its careful divestment of responsibility, has a menacing tone. It is a double-edged wish. An attempt to free the speaker of blame, it carries the implied threat that something will happen to the infant, and it prophylactically points the finger at someone else, by implication the mother, who now assumes the maternal role alone. Indeed, harm often came to the child after the lying-in-maid had departed. ‘It was the first night . . . that the lying-in-maid was out of the house’, one mother remembered, that strange things began to happen; it was just after the maid had left, another mother noted, when her child had suddenly sickened. Something of the uncertain nature of the relationship between mother and lying-in-maid is caught in the way one maid kept referring to the presents she had received, listing them and naming their giver, in a fruitless attempt to determine the relationship as one of goodwill – yet even the mothers she thought had valued her care were now willing to testify against her conduct. Her behaviour was always indeterminate, its meaning open to a subsequent hostile reinterpretation.
Above all, it was the lying-in-maid’s maternal role which placed her in the role of suspect. Sometimes this might lead to straightforward conflicts over upbringing – Euphrosina Endris was blamed for mollycoddling a child, giving it too many warm cushions. Midwives and mothers suspected maids of bathing the child in water that was too hot, or of swaddling its limbs too tightly so that it might become deformed. Injuries inflicted in the first few weeks of the infant’s life might not manifest themselves for years: the failure of one child to speak, harm to one girl’s reproductive organs, were all blamed on the lying-in-maid. ‘Why must it always be the lying-in-maid who is to blame?’ asked one accused woman. A woman who could not be trusted, a woman unable to bear children herself, she was tailor-made for the role of the ultimate evil mother. The very intensity of the bonds between her and the child, as the person who enjoyed a primary attachment to the baby in its first weeks of life, were also the reason to suspect her. As with all witchcraft, it was the powerful ambivalence of feeling which nourished witchery: witchcraft was to be feared not from those indifferent to you, but from those whose relationship was close and whose intimate knowledge of your secrets could be turned to harm. Consequently, every good wish a suspected woman might make for the health and well-being of an infant was charged with its opposite. So one young mother feared the frequent visits the lying-in-maid made to her infant’s cradle, standing over it. She later discovered a knife underneath its crib.

And the lying-in-maid had a motive: envy. Envy was the motor of witchcraft as seventeenth-century people understood it. One of the seven deadly sins, it was a feeling which could have material force. It is also an emotion which, according to Melanie Klein, first develops in the early months of an infant’s life and is deeply connected to feelings of love and hate. Envy involves wishing harm towards an object. In the logic of sorcery, where emotions might be externalized on to things outside the person and where feelings had active force, the emotion itself was the wellspring of injury. Circumstances conspired to make the lying-in-maid appear a likely sufferer from envy and hatred. As seventeenth-century people saw it, she was poor and single; her employer had a workshop and was comfortably off. Infertile herself, she tended a mother who was surrounded by the love, attention and presents of other women, and who had a baby. By contrast her own children had been conceived illicitly or had died in infancy. So Barbara Fischer had been raped by her stepfather twenty years before she found herself accused of witchcraft. The child of their relationship had died just a few days after birth. At the time, she had begged the council to let her marry, blaming her stepfather’s refusal to let her wed for her own fall into sin with him. But the council had punished her by confining her inside the house for her shame, and, two decades later, she explained her fall into witchcraft as the consequence of not being allowed to marry and become a mother. Interestingly, her diabolic lover appeared to her in the form of a journeyman dyer, the trade her stepfather had followed. Admission of the envy she felt for the mother she tended was, in her case as in many others, the first step in her interrogation towards a full confession. The witch, too, fully believed that to feel envy for a woman was to wish to harm her, and in this emotional world, where things were invested with meaning, emotions could also act directly. Anna Schwayhofer explained she had summoned the Devil when, conscious of her own sins, she despaired of God’s mercy: she had taken communion without confession, and she felt ‘great envy, resentment and enmity to various persons’.

To this point I have been exploring the psychic world of those who made the accusation, arguing that it is best understood as invoking deep emotions from the early period of the mother’s own infant life. She and those around her are able to crystallize her own ambivalence towards her infant by projecting intolerable feelings on to the lying-in-maid. I am not arguing that this always happened: in the vast majority of cases, the childbed was concluded happily and the maid was dismissed with mutual goodwill. But I am claiming that the social organization of mothering practices allowed this to happen, so that a certain kind of psychic dramatic script was available should things go wrong. But the witch herself had an understanding of her own behaviour. Its main element concerned her own admission of envy. This was the breaking point which then catapulted her into a range of other confessions about the Devil. These form a distinct layer of testimony, elicited under torture and often given with a considerable degree of reluctance. In other contexts, however, where children were not the target of malice, the Devil could be a dominant theme: so the young Regina Schiller baffled authorities all over southern Germany for over a decade with
her bizarre physical contortions and extravagant confessions, telling the authorities about her lurid pacts with the Devil and showing the written contract for so many years and so many days, the number indicated with little strokes of blood because she could not count so far.67

By contrast, the witches whose fates we have considered here were chary of admitting even to flying or attending the witches’ sabbath, and when they did so they presented themselves as outsiders, women who hung at the edges of the wild assemblies, without finding friends among the fellow witches. One witch recalled that the others came from elsewhere, they wore masks and spoke with accents she could not understand, and they were well dressed, not of her class. She did not dance, and at the feast, few people sat at her table.68 This was certainly a means of cutting down their involvement and guilt and yet the strong sense of being outsiders which their words convey suggests that the fantasies mirrored their current experience of isolation, socially marginal and shorn of friends who might succour them. Their relations with the Devil were distant and unsatisfactory. Even when conviction was a certainty, these accused witches still tried to minimize the extent of their sexual involvement with the Devil, Dorothea Braun insisting at the last that, contrary to her earlier confessions, she had never had sex with the Devil and had always resisted him; Anna Ebeler saying that she had told the Devil she was too old for such things; Anna Schwayhofer firmly denying that intercourse had ever taken place.69 Indeed, Braun presents the Devil as a kind of peremptory employer, a master whose whims she was condemned never to satisfy. She was too slow learning the craft, she explained, and so the Devil beat her.70 Their accounts usually give only the merest description of the Devil – he came as a journeyman, or dressed in black, he was a disembodied arm – and they try to argue that their bodies remained intact. Diabolic invasion presents a taboo from which they wanted to shield themselves. But genital sexuality is seldom their own explanation of what they do, even though the sexual narrative would excuse their deeds with the culpability of Eve. Instead, dirt and degradation feature. This is most evident in the names of their diabolic lovers, which had names such as Hendritt, Gooseshit and the like, names which combine animality with excrement.71 Common to almost all is the acknowledgement of the feeling of hatred and the sense of being deserted by God, exiled from the community of fellow Christians. Yet their deeds are projected on to the Devil: he whispers what they should do, he gives them the powder, he forces them to harm the children. In this way their hostile emotions (apart from the first feelings of hatred) could be projected on to the Devil and dissociated from themselves, in a kind of splitting characteristic of witchcraft at every level.

But if I am right that witchcraft could involve conflicts between women that have to be understood in psychic terms, we still need to explain why such conflicts were open to expression through witchcraft at a particular historical moment. After all, even in the town we have been considering here, there were witchcraft cases which followed this pattern or drew on these motifs for only a little over a century, and they were concentrated in the years from 1650 to 1700. After 1700, we can notice a dramatic inversion of the pattern. Now, children rather than their mothers became the objects of suspicion. Between 1724 and 1730, thirty-one child witches were locked up,72 while after the death of one suspected witch in custody in 1699, no older women were condemned.73 This reversal suggests to me that the dynamics of much witch-hunting have to be sought in the relationship between mother and child which, after a certain point, switched to the child rather than its mother. I suspect that witch-hunting in the seventeenth century must in part be related to the idealization of motherhood in Baroque society. This is not simply a matter of misogyny: after all, it was because the state took the fears and accusations of suffering mothers seriously that cases could be prosecuted. Germany in the later seventeenth century was a society recovering from the ravages of the Thirty Years’ War. In Augsburg, the population had halved; small wonder that people feared attacks on fertility.74 Here the widow played a double role. On the one hand, attacks on old, post-menopausal women are a staple of misogynist tracts from the late sixteenth century onwards. But on the other, the widow, I have been suggesting, was merely the mother’s mirror image, a woman who could be the repository of all the fears about evil mothers. Maternal hostility and fears about evil mothers could not easily be expressed directly in a society where Mary was revered by both Catholics and Protestants, and where the image of the suffering Madonna was ubiquitous. Hence, too, the tendency in folklore to populate a story with evil stepmothers who alone can represent the bad mother, keeping pure the image of the good, dead mother.75 Here it is no coincidence that this period also saw a dramatic increase in executions of the ultimate evil mother, the woman who commits infanticide: such women had to be executed. This rise occurred from the early seventeenth century onwards, even though the Imperial Law Code of 1532 had paved the way for such executions three generations before. Together with witchcraft, this accounted for the vast bulk of women executed in Augsburg in the seventeenth century.76 The themes of much witchcraft, I would argue, are to be found not in a simple sexual antagonism between men and women, but in deeply conflicted feelings about motherhood. At this level, we can talk about misogyny: one trouble with modern psychoanalysis, I think, as with seventeenth-century witchcraft, is that in the end, a mother, or a figure in a maternal position, is made responsible for our psychic ills.

What I have been trying to do here is to explore the themes of early modern witchcraft not so much in order to explain that phenomenon, but in order to see, in the one area where we do have detailed documentation, whether early modern subjectivities were radically different from

3 Three of those executed were lying-in-maids, and a fourth was a failed midwife. Four of those heavily suspected were lying-in-maids and most were expelled from the town on other pretexts. Other cases were closely related. One executed witch killed her own child, another committed incest with her own son who later died, while a third had worked as a childminder. In seven further cases, themes were borrowed from the same paradigm: the executed witches had harmed children for whom they were in some sense responsible.

4 Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English, Witches, Midwives and Nurses. A history of women healers, New York and London 1973. See also, for a survey of feminist views of witchcraft, Dagmar Unverhau, 'Frauenbewegung und historische Hexenverfolgung', in Andreas Blauert (ed.), Ketzer, Zauberer, Hexen. Die Anfänge der europäischen Hexenverfolgungen, 2. Mainz 1993. Recently it has been argued that witchcraft accusations were an attempt to destroy a female science of birth control: Gunnar Heinsohn and Otto Steiger, Die Vernichtung der weisen Frauen. Beiträge zur Theorie und Geschichte von Bevölkerung und Kindheit (Part A, Hexenverfolgung, Kinderwelten, Menschenproduktion, Bevölkerungswissenschaft), Herbststein 1985. However, the cases the authors cite are actually about hostility to children, not about birth control: see, for example, pp. 149-56. For a critique of the Heinsohn-Steiger thesis, see Robert Jütte, 'Die Persistenz und Verhüttungswissenschaft in der Volkskultur. Sozial- und medizinhistorische Anmerkungen zur These von der 'Vernichtung der weisen Frauen', Medizinhistorisches Journal, 24, 1989, pp. 214-31. David Harley has argued that there is little evidence for the importance of midwives among those executed in England: 'Historians as Demonologists: the myth of the midwife-witch', Social History of Medicine, 3, no. 1, 1990, pp. 1-26; and for a similar argument, Peter Kriedte, 'Die Hexen und ihre Ankläger. Zu den lokalen Voraussetzungen der Hexenverfolgungen in der frühen Neuzeit - Ein Forschungsbericht', Zeitschrift für historische Forschung, 14, 1987, pp. 47-71, 60. While it may be true that the absolute figure of midwives accused or executed was small, they are none the less a recognizable occupational group in the German evidence where only a few other work patterns may be discerned. Their significance might be better related to the involvement of mothers, lying-in-maids and others connected with the care of mothers and infants.

5 Carlo Ginzburg, Ectasies. Deciphering the witches' sabbath, trans. Gregory Roberts, London 1990 (first published in Italian 1989): interestingly, one of the effects of Ginzburg's brilliant analysis is that women's predominance as victims in the witch-hunt tends to slip from the explanation.
hastitel conference 1991, forthcoming. Kathy Stuart has researched the role of executioners and dishonourable people in Augsburg in the early modern period, and she has a great deal to say about the executioner as an expert on the body and its capacity to withstand pain, knowledge which also made his skills as a healer greatly valued: Kathy Stuart, The Boundaries of Honor. “Dishonorable people” in Augustburg 1500–1800, Ph.D. diss., Yale University 1993.


17 StadtAA, Umg. 28 Jan. 1669, Anna Ebele, interrogations 28 Jan. to 23 March 1669; Verru, 32 March 1669; and Strafbuch Des Rats, 23 March 1669, pp. 312–14.

18 She also denied intercourse with the Devil. StadtAA, Umg. 20 Dec. 1685, Euphrosina Endriss, 4 March 1686, and condemnation, 16 March 1686; Strafbuch Des Rats, 1654–99, pp. 557–8.

19 The procedure is described in Staatsbibliothek München, Handschriftenabteilung, Cgm 2062, fol 1 v–r. For pamphlets describing the cases, see, for example, Hansvater Summarisch: ausführlicher Bericht und Erzählung. Was die in des Heiligten Röm. Reichsstat Augsburg etlich Wochen lang in verhaftt geleugt zwei Hexenbenanndich Barbara Frölin von Riedenenden Anna Schäferin von Etringen . . . Augsburg 1654; Relation Oder Beschreibung so Anno 1669 . . . von einer Weibs-Person . . . . Augsburg 1669.


21 In 1587 the ‘evil custom’ of allowing the hangman to carry out torture unsupervised had to be explicitly abolished in Augsburg: Behringer, Hexenprüfungen, p. 138.

22 StadtAA, Umg. 20 Dec. 1685, Euphrosina Endriss, report of Hans Adam Hartman, 5 Feb. 1686: Hans Adam Hartman, executioner of Donauwörth, was the son of the Augsburg executioner Matthias Hartman who had been crippled in both hands (see below).

23 In 1587 the ‘evil custom’ of allowing the hangman to carry out torture unsupervised had to be explicitly abolished in Augsburg: Behringer, Hexenprüfungen, p. 138.

24 In 1587 the ‘evil custom’ of allowing the hangman to carry out torture unsupervised had to be explicitly abolished in Augsburg: Behringer, Hexenprüfungen, p. 138.

25 In 1587 the ‘evil custom’ of allowing the hangman to carry out torture unsupervised had to be explicitly abolished in Augsburg: Behringer, Hexenprüfungen, p. 138.
222 Oedipus and the Devil


24 Staatsbibliothek München, Handschriftenabteilung, Cgm 2026, fol. 64 v–65 r, 61 r.


26 StaatBA, Urg., 15 July 1650, Ursula Neher, testimony of Susanna Custodis, 11 July 1650.


28 StaatBA, Urg., 13 May 1654, Anna Zoller.

29 StaatBA, Urg., 15 July 1650, Ursula Neher, testimony of Sabina Stoltz, 11 July 1650. See also Urg., 25 Jan. 1695, Barbara Melder, testimony of Judith Wolf, 23 Feb. 1695 who saw Melder, the suspected witch, suck her baby’s breast.

30 StaatBA, Urg., 15 July 1650, Ursula Neher, testimony of Anna Erhardt, 29 July 1650: at the time, she interpreted this naturallyistically and only considered sorcery when Stoltz and Vetter accused Neher.


34 See Fredericus Petrus Gayler, *Vierreichs Eheschätzlein*. Da ist: Die vier Gradus der Eheleute, Erfurt, Johann Beck 1602, esp. fos C iii r ff. on widows’ lust, D vii v ff. and E ii v where the writer warns that young men who marry old widows are likely to pine and die in their youth before their elderly wives do, because these old widows have concentrated impurities in them (presumably owing to the cessation of menstruation) and even have impure, poisonous breath.


37 StaatBA, Urg., 11 Feb. 1666, Anna Schwayhofer, interrogation 19 March 1666.

38 StaatBA, Urg., 11 Feb. 1666, Anna Schwayhofer, testimony of Anna Corona Cramer, 19 Feb. 1666; 25 Feb. 1666, Anna Maria Cramer; testimony Anna Maria Cramer and Anna Corona Cramer, 13 March 1666; and interrogations.

39 StaatBA, Urg., 15 July 1650, Ursula Neher, testimony of Maria Gogiel, 29 July 1650.


43 On churching, see Susan C. Karant-Nunn, ‘A Women’s Rite: Churching and the Lutheran Reformation’, Hsia and Scribner (eds.), *History and Anthropology*, forthcoming. See also, for example, Andreas Otianer d. A. *Gesamtausgabe*, eds Gerhard Müller and Gottfried Seebass, Gütersloh 1975–, vol. 5, Brandenburg-Nuremberg church ordinance 1533, p. 128: women who have just borne children should be instructed by the pastor and preacher that they are not under the power of the Devil, as had previously been believed: ‘das sie nicht in gewalt des teufels seien, wie mans bisbhere nicht auf sundern nacht hel der gewissen darfur gehalten und groeblich daran geyrert hat’.


46 See, for example, Melanie Klein, *Envy and Gratitude* (1957), ‘Some Theoretical Conclusions Regarding the Emotional Life of the Infant’ (1952), ‘On Identification’ (1955), in *idem, Envy and Gratitude and Other Works*.

47 StaatBA, Urg., 28 Jan. 1669, Anna Ebeler, testimony of Anna Maria Schmuckler, 1 Feb. 1669.


50 For example, Ursula Neher, StaatBA, Urg., 15 July 1650; Barbara Fischer, Strafbuch des Rats, 1615–32, p. 397, 13 May 1623; tried as a witch in 1650.


52 StaatBA, Urg., 15 July 1650, Ursula Neher, and testimony Hans and Jacobina Vetter, 11 July 1650.

53 StaatBA, Urg., 28 Jan. 1669, Anna Ebeler.

54 ‘immerdar gute worth gegeben, biss Sie aus dem haus kommen’, StaatBA, Urg., 29 Jan. 1669, Anna Ebeler, testimony of Eleonora Schmidt, 1 Feb. 1669.

55 StaatBA, Urg., 15 July 1650, Ursula Neher, testimony of Sabina Stoltz, 29 July 1650.

56 StaatBA, Urg., 20 Dec. 1685, Euphrosina Endriss, qu. 47, and testimony of Georg Schmetzer, 4 Dec. 1685: ‘mein Schätze du bist wohl auf, sehet Herr und Frau, iezo gehe ich Von dem Kind, es geschehe ihm was da wolle, so will ich entscheidet sein’. The next day, the child began to-sicken.

57 StaatBA, Urg., 28 Jan. 1669, Anna Ebeler, testimony of Juditha Schorr, 13 Feb. 1669; Euphrosina Hayd, 1 Feb. 1669.

58 StaatBA, Urg., 29 Jan. 1669, Anna Ebeler, and interrogation, 19 Feb. 1669.

59 StaatBA, Urg., 20 Dec. 1685, Euphrosina Endriss, qu. 50.

60 StaatBA, Urg., 15 July 1650, Ursula Neher, testimony of Jacobina Vetter, 29 July 1650; testimony of Susanna Custodis, 11 July 1650.

61 StaatBA, Urg., 15 July 1650, Ursula Neher, testimony of Adam Schuster, 11 July 1650; testimony of Anna Erhardt, 29 July 1650.
Witchcraft and fantasy

62 'was die kellerin vmb solche sachen red vmd antwort geben', StadtAA, Urg., 28 Jan. 1669, Anna Ebeler, interrogation, 19 Feb. 1669, qu. 49.
63 StadtAA, Urg., 11 Feb. 1666, Anna Schwayhofer, testimony of Euphrosina Sperl, 13 Feb. 1666: the knife was her husband's but it had been moved.
65 StadtAA, Urg., 14 June 1650, Barbara Fischer, see interrogation of 20 June 1650.
68 StadtAA, Urg., June 1625, Dorothea Braun, interrogation, 22 Aug. 1625.
70 StadtAA, Urg., June 1625, Dorothea Braun, interrogation, 22 Aug. 1625. An older witch also tried to teach her to fly on a cat, but the cat refused to carry her!
72 Behringer, Hexenverfolgung in Bayern, p. 466; Stadt- und Stadtbibliothek Augsburg, 2o Cod Aug. 289, Acta puncto malefici et tentationis diabolicae.
73 Wolfgang Behringer has noted a general rise in cases of child witches from the last quarter of the seventeenth century onwards. See his 'Kinderhexenprozesse. Zur Rolle von Kindern in der Geschichte der Hexenverfolgungen', Zeitschrift für historische Forschung, 16, 1989, pp. 31–47. StadtAA, Strafbuch des Rats, 1654–99, p. 722, Elisabeth Memminger: since she was considered to have been a witch, her corpse was publically carted out and buried under the gallows. There were two further similar cases: Christina Haber, a lying-in-maid, was interrogated and tortured, 12 Dec. 1699, but eventually let out on recall; Strafbuch des Rats, 1654–99, p. 725. Anna Maria Christeiner and her daughter were accused of abducting and harming children. Verbrecherbuch, 1700–1806, p. 31, 20 Aug. 1701; Urg., 3 Aug. 1701. They were severely tortured but eventually freed on recall. By contrast, a case of 1700 to 1703 concerns the plight of the daughter of Hans Georg Groninger, a suspected girl witch aged 14 in 1702, who ate lice and her own excrement: Stadt-