Historians as Demonologists: The Myth of the Midwife-witch

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SUMMARY. The belief that midwives were commonly prosecuted 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.


Though there be numerous company of Authors that have written of Magick, Witchcraft, Sorcery, Incantament, Spirits, and Apparitions, in Sundry ages, of divers Countries, 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 asportioning 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 Witches (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 Heis, 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.1

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 1471, 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 feats. Whereas Jews supposedly had to kidnap Christian infants for their sacrifices, witches could obtain them more easily through the agency of midwives.4

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3 V. J. Newall, 'The Jew as Witch Figure', in The Witch Figure (London, 1973), 95-124.

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Such explanations also neglect to investigate the extent to which the supposed popular suspicion really existed or the clerical antagonism led to actual prosecution, 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 fall during the Reformation. Mazolini, writing in 1575 under the name 'Silvester Prietias', bases his discussions of midwives and infantical 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 Cadronchius of midwives obtaining infants to make flying ointments; although the latter also refers to Prietias and others. Delrio hardly mentions abortion and infanticide in his compendious work, contenting himself with Nicer's example and heavy borrowings from Sprenger.5 Bouget cites Porta and Cardan, the Neoplatonist authors, on witches' ointments but, when he treats the topic of midwife-witches, he only discusses infantical 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 curious 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 Landre 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' sabbath by Zianiko, including their cannibalistic feast:

Voila les Connuus de l'assemblee, ayant chacune un Demon pres d'elle: Et ce en festin, ne se sert autre viande, que charognes, chair de pendus, coeurs d'enfants non baptises, & autres animaux immodes, du tout hors de commerce et usage des Christiens, le tout insipide & sans sel.

(There are 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

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That de Lancer 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 Ackerman noted 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 16th, 17th, 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 Maléus, 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, & Picaatrix 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

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10. N. Rémy, Daemonolatrivia (Leyden, 1603), bk. 2, ch. 3, pp. 209–12; E. Delambre, La Concept de la Soullente dans le Duché de Lorraine au XVIIe et au XVIIIe siècle, vol. 3 (Nancy, 1931), pp. 203–10. 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, 1986), pp. 7–103. E. Haquin, de l'Art de les Accusements en Lorraine des temoins anciens au XXe siecle (St Nicolas-de-Port, 1979), pp. 36–8, 48.
11. Good account of the selection of a Languedoc midwife is provided by the diary of a parish priest, Michel Lalande, quoted by W. Gebson, Women in Seventeenth-Century France (Basingstoke, 1989), pp. 118–19.
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 ‘Artzin’, although this may mean little more than the English term ‘cunning woman’. The many cases in which the official investigation viewed the midwife as the main suspect, although this may mean little more than the English term ‘cunning woman’. 15 The many cases in which the accused midwife was alleged eating the flesh of unchristened infants at the sabbats, or using it for magical purposes, do not generally include midwives among the accused. 16 Thus the fact that the 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 1601 of a group of women, including a midwife, for murdering a child and using its 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. 1 This case clearly shows the sharp divide between the midwife’s neighbours and the magistrate, versed in demonological theory. If precautions were initiated by zealous authorities, then the normal process of cumulative suspicion and accusation was subverted. The good 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 as it seemed.

Walpurga Haussmann of Dillingen was elaborately executed in 1287, having confessed under torture to fornication with the Devil, apostasy, blasphemy, and dishonouring the font. She admitted killing forty-three unchristened 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 denigration of the image of prominent officials suggest that the case is more complex than the bare story reported in the Fogger-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 case, 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 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 husbands 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 those 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 Gueuchi through a botched abortion. She defended herself vigorously but was convicted 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 people’ 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 Théopile 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 Hansen, Quellen, pp. 120, 433, 460, 462, 481, 497, 500, 543, 557, 570, 591.


19 P. Binsfeld, Traictés de Conception des Maléédormes et Saganon (Tours, 1591), p. 571; J. Graillemeau, De l’heureux Accouchement des Femmes (Paris, 1650), 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. 450.

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 sporercherie 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, deplored 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 maleficient 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


21 S. Mercier, La Commune e Rasseggiere (Verona, 1642), bk. 1, ch. 18; bk. 2, ch. 17-21, pp. 31-4, 147-51, 208. Id. De gli Eserci Popolari d'Italia (Venetia, 1663), bk. 6, ch. 2, fos. 262-3.

22 [Fernando de Rojas], Tragicomedia de Calisto y Melibea (Seville, 1502), sig. d: j. B. Le, A Comedy concerning these ladies, of nature Moss & Chrest, corrupt by the Sodomyes, Phariseys and Pagantises (1518), sig. B: ir and v: B. Barnes's Injunctions to the Clergy of the Diocese of Durham, in Reprints of Rare Treats and Imprints of Ancient Manuscripts, vol. 6 (Newcastle, 1848), p. 17; J. Dempsie Douglas, 'Calvin's Use of Metaphorical Language for God: God as Enemy and God as Mother' Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte lviii (1966), pp. 131, 133.

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

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. The Malheu 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 Oytntment indispensably necessary for their transportation to their Field-Conventicles).’ 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 false 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

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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 I 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 enemors for she knew both but exccssencies like to bigges with nipples which seemd as if they had been frequently sucked.

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.

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, well respected as the three Skipton midwives whose burials were specially noted in 1632, 1662, and 1694. 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 testimonial letters 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
different from their licensed sisters except that they might well be Quakers, Catholics, or charitable women who practised infrequently.10

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 Waller 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.11 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 pharmacology that led to prosecutions but failed magical medicine. Mrs. Pepper’s description as a midwife is irrelevant to the case.12 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.


15 C. Lerner et al., A Source-Book of Scottish Witchcraft (Glasgow, 1977).
constitutes a suggestive over-representation. 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 offenses, 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 ‘until the Duke marke was found upon her privities, then she confessed whatsoever was demanded 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 Maistrie said they were all extreme lyars’. There was no mention of midwifery in this trial of ‘the wyse wyff of Keth’, who seems first to have been described as a midwife by David Calderwood, a Presbyterian author writing in the early seventeenth century. Dalzell 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.17

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 ground that they had innocently consorted her in her capacity as midwife.18 Not only men were believed to be vulnerable to this form of attack. Ehe 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 thare were some, the bones to the fire, and the soul to the detrill’ and layed them on another woman, who straight dyed thereof.19 The victim was Helen Park, another midwife.20

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 witchcraft1 and Helen Beattie, midwife in Menmer, 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 1678.21 Like other prominent people, midwives appear to have been vulnerable to accusation during major outbreaks of witch-hunting such as the Trantane hunts of 1659, when Marion Lynn was a central figure, and the Dalkeith hunt of 1661, when Beatrice Leslie was accused of the evil eye and relieving the pains of childbirth. Her guilt was ascertained by a successful hier-richt, despite her praying to God, conducted over the bodies of two pt-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.

Midwives accused 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 possession 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.22

Inevitably, some accused witches died in prison, especially when judges had lost interest in the speed of their execution. Witchcraft cases. According to a correspondent of Robert Wardrow in 1727, Margaret Nin-Gilbert alias Gilbertson was midwife to a great lady in Caithness but, after confesing in 1718,

20 Carter, ed., Memorials, or the memorable things that fell out within this island of Britain from 1658 to 1684; By the Rev. Mr. Robert Lawe (Edinburgh, 1818), pp. 116–17; The Register of the Privy Council of Scotland, 2nd ser., vol. 3 (1903), pp. 133–4; Selected Juristic Cases, 1643–50, ed. S. A. Gillon, The Star Society xvii (1953), pp. 219–11.
she was murdered by those whom she had implicated. She had confessed that her purifying 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.

The case of Bessie Atten 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.

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 aec powr woman that was dravelling 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.

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 antimammon heretic, Anne Hutchinson. Her less educated follower, Jane

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 ininfirmities, 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. 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.

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 his association with Hawkins 'gave cause of suspicion of witchcraft'. 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 punish those monstrous wretches with a monstrous fruit, sprung from their wombs, as had before sprung from their brains'. This was not the same as calling them witches, deliberate agents of the Devil. Robert Baille, 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 abortion, which to me seems strange, That the Midwives, to their most zealous women, should not only have familiarly

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43 Trials for witchcraft, sorcery, and superstition, in Orkney in Miscellany of the Abbotford Club, vol. 1 (1837), pp. 152, 158-9; Larner, Enemies; R. A. Houston, Scottish Literacy and the Scottish Identity, 1560-1600 (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 1660-1760 (Oxford, 1989).


46 Winthrop, Short Story, pp. 11-41, 43, 48-64; Winthrop's Journal, vol. 1, pp. 266-8; vol. 2, pp. 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 devil; 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 Country.’ 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.\footnote{Elphraim Pergit, Heresiography, 2nd edn. (London, 1645), pp. 106-7; R. Baylce, A Discourse from the Errors of the Time (London, 1645), pp. 61-4, 72-4; J. Cotton, The Way of the Congregational Churches Cleared (London, 1645), p. 91; E. Johnson, A History of New-England (London, 1644), p. 100; Samuel Groomel, A Glass for the People of New-England (London, 1679), p. 11.}

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 reprove or the preceding poltergeist phenomena does anyone appear to have attributed midwifery or any other medical activities to her.\footnote{Winthrop’s Journal, vol. 2, pp. 344-5; the references for Jones given by R. Wenman, Witchcraft, Magic and Religion in 17th-Century Massachusetts (Amherst, 1964), p. 187; J. Cottin, A Sketch of the History of Newbury (Boston, 1845), pp. 122-34; S. G. Drake, Annals of Witchcraft in New England (Boston, 1869), pp. 141-9, 258-9; Boston Public Library, MS Am. 1502, v. 3, p. 45; Massachusetts State Archive, File 115, nos. 18-19.}

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 gospill, placing her in a group of ‘midwives and magical healers’ without ever documenting her ‘reputation as a magical healer’.\footnote{S. G. Drake, Annals, p. 281; G. Lincoln Burr, Narratives of the Witchcraft Cases, 1648-1706 (New York, 1914), p. 11 n.; Wenman, Witchcraft, Magic and Religion, pp. 86, 88, 111; for a discussion of the gospills, see A. Wilson, ‘Participant or Patient? Seventeenth-Century Chilthborst 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.}

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 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 Malleson, 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 seventeenth 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 Malleson 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.\footnote{M. Murray, The Witch-Cult in Western Europe (Oxford, 1921), p. 170; id., The God of the Witches, 2nd edn. (London, 1952), p. 145.}

Although Murray’s general thesis, based on her distortion of the Scottish confessions, continued to be 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
to go far beyond the earlier apologists for the rise of mid-wife/midwife 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'.

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 1976, 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. 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 Mal lens 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.15

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


of American medicine turns her into a midwife. The success of the campaign against midwives in America had destroyed the memory of childbirth 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 co-opting 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 portrait 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 introduction. 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 furor can be explained without reference to midwifery and more recently religious historians have merely mentioned her supposed midwifery in passing. 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 Mallois 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 Klats for example. 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 influence position of midwives, examining women accused of witchcraft, infanticide, and antenupital 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 be made between New Englanders and ‘their European contemporaries’, at which point Hawkins, Hutchinson, and Elizabeth Morse are provided as examples of midwife-witches. 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 polemestigen 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


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 Klats in support of the stereotype. 61

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 Engels. 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. 62

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 with craft suspicion. 63 'Fortunat is the hunter of straw men in the field of witchcraft', wrote Erik Middelfort. 'Nothing would be easier than to line up a number of nimble-penned authors and knock them down with footnotes blending dust with acid.' 64 A fewashes with Ockham's razor are unlikely to demolish such a deep-rooted myth which serves the purposes of historians and polemists 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. 65 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 Mallens 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 caulds or corpses. 66

The Mallens 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 one French demonologist, when men such as Reimy 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 case of proof must lie with those assessing the reality of extensive prosecutions of midwives. 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

63 J. Towler and J. Brannell, Midwives in History and Society (London, 1986), pp. 21-42; Klats, 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.
64 Middelfort, Witch Hunting, p. 164.

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.