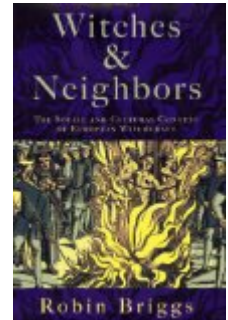


Robin Briggs. *Witches and Neighbors: the Social and Cultural Context of European Witchcraft.* New York: Viking, 1996. xviii + 457 pp. \$32.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-670-83589-8.



Reviewed by Charlotte C. Wells

Published on H-France (February, 1998)

Robin Briggs offers his readers a striking proposition: most efforts to understand the "witch craze" which frightened and fascinated early modern Europe have been misdirected, for they worked from the standpoint of the elite judges who conducted the trials and the learned demonologists who wrote about them. Few scholars have attempted to penetrate to the level of society where fear of a neighbor could lead to accusations of witchcraft, which could, perhaps, lead to trial. What needs to be understood is not how the trials operated, but why there were trials in the first place; Briggs thinks the answer can be found in the mental worlds of early modern villagers. He contends that the witch hunts were not imposed by the ruling classes, but generated by the tensions and conflicts of peasants engaged in a desperate struggle for survival. In *Witches and Neighbors* he sets out to prove his case, and to a very considerable extent, he succeeds. Along the way he manages to correct a number of modern beliefs about the witch hunts and to offer a new theory about why belief in witches is such a widespread and enduring phenomenon.

Briggs bases much of his deep analysis on the records of over four hundred witch trials from the duchy of Lorraine, an area politically part of the Holy Roman Empire for a good part of the early modern period and incorporated into France in the late seventeenth century. Even while politically independent, Lorraine was largely French in language and culture. His work thus has considerable pertinence to the social history of early modern France. The author tells us that the testimony in these trials, if handled with appropriate caution, offers an unparalleled window into the lives of ordinary people in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The reader who peers through it will make a number of interesting discoveries.

Perhaps the most immediately striking of these is that our modern image of the typical witch has little in common with the people actually tried and executed as witches. Not all witches were women; Briggs indicates that an average twenty to twenty-five percent of those executed were men, with the proportion rising as high as ninety percent in some parts of northern and eastern Europe, most notably in Finland. Not all

witches were old; those executed were of all ages, including quite young children. And most of the older women put to death had been building sorcerous reputations for fifteen or twenty years before their neighbors took the final step of denouncing them to the authorities.

Rather than age or gender, says Briggs, the real mark of a witch was a bad attitude. The quarrelsome, spiteful, aggressive individual who stood apart from the rest of the community most often attracted suspicion. As Briggs notes, "at any one time a particular community probably had a small group of suspects, to whom misfortune could be credited" (p. 28). If a train of disasters went on long enough, one or more of the suspect group could be denounced, arrested, and tortured until they confessed. And even the confessions are quite clearly elaborations of the individual's separation from his or her community. Almost all confessions present the Devil as seducing his victims when they are lonely, hungry, grieving, or otherwise alienated. What he offers them is the power of vengeance on the people who have done them harm. This pattern is everywhere the same: in England, where the Devil seldom appears, the witch's familiar spirit, who usually appeared in the shape of an animal, plays the same role.

In all cases, the tensions and hostilities of village life are personified in the Devil and his agents. The same is true of the other common element of the confessions, the Witches' Sabbath, a supposed gathering where witches worshiped the devil. Briggs draws on the work of Carlos Ginzburg to trace belief in this diabolical festival to its first appearance in the Valais region of the Swiss-Italian Alps around 1430. Apparently the Valais folk beliefs in wandering fairies and other nocturnal spirits combined with learned expectations that if Satan created a sort of anti-religion, in which he was adored instead of God, it would be bound to have a worship ceremony, or anti-Mass, where his adoration would be acted out. The resulting cluster of beliefs produced a fantas-

tic theater in which witches could verbally act out their sense of separation from their fellows. The ways they did so ranged from the petty--dancing back to back, so the partner's identity could not be seen--to the colossal--damaging the crops on which everyone's survival depended. The Lorraine records show that the accused considered crop damage their worst sin: it heads the list of *maleficia*, hurtful acts, to which the witches admitted.

Briggs goes on to consider how tales of the Sabbath must have been told and retold in social situations and among children, until it passed into the genuine folklore of their regions. Indeed, well-developed Sabbath stories generally came from children supposedly taken there by their elders. For them, in particular, the Sabbath story "was often mediated through personal fantasy and dreams to relate to the personal conflicts of the individual" (p. 49). Through such stories children became particularly prominent as accusers in the Swedish hunts, and in Salem, Massachusetts, but some sort of Sabbath stories appeared in all the areas where persecutions took place. The most elaborate versions come from the sites of the most intense witch hunts, the small prince-bishoprics of the western fringes of the Holy Roman Empire. Elaborate Sabbath stories also coincided with the accusation of many people from elite social categories, who might have picked up the details from the learned treatises on demonology. Conversely, Sabbath stories played relatively minor roles in the frontier areas of the persecutions, England and Holland in the west, Hungary in the east, and Aragon in the south of Europe.

Sabbats and Satanic pacts were not very important in peasants' understanding of witchcraft. What they knew, and feared, was the witch's power to harm by occult means. Belief in spells and curses could in itself do harm. Briggs notes repeated instances of the efficacious curse in Haitian voodoo, and even in contemporary France. The afflicted person becomes so anxious

that the fear can affect health, even to the point of causing death. Assuming, as Briggs does, that the same psychological mechanisms operated in early modern people, it is easy to see why they so often preferred to avoid openly accusing the person they thought was a witch. If the witch remained free, he or she might be persuaded or pressured to lift the curse by some public gesture of reconciliation with the victim. This would, in turn, lift the victim's anxiety and quite probably bring about a recovery. Once arrested, the witch lost his or her powers, in general belief, and thus could no longer cure anyone. This is why denunciation was almost always a very last resort. Villagers preferred to induce or force the witch to resolve a problem themselves.

Witchcraft could be invoked to explain any of the many misfortunes that afflicted village life; everything from family quarrels to crop failure could be blamed on the hidden malice of an enemy with magic power. When this happened, the victim usually had some idea of who the culprit might be. However, picking a single individual out of the group of those with bad reputations was the job of a specialist. This was the role played by the *devins*, the same people who figure as "cunning folk" in Keith Thomas' ground breaking *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (Oxford, 1971). Such witch doctors were well-known throughout early modern Europe. In addition to witch finding, they practiced such relatively innocuous "white magic" as finding lost objects, identifying thieves, and compounding love potions. Although the learned authorities, especially the Protestant ones, thought white magic also came from the devil, *devins* were seldom brought to trial as witches. Briggs finds them in this role in less than ten percent of the cases he has studied (p. 127). This would seem to support his contention that the real motor driving the persecutions ran at the village level. To the peasants, magic itself was morally neutral. Only magic used to harm might bring ultimate recourse to the law.

Most *devins* seem to have believed in their own power and obligation to do good. Their fees were small, and they tended to practice magic as a second, part-time career. They seldom betrayed witches to the authorities, and only a few of them became full time travelling witch finders, and so involved in persecution. Those who did so trod a precarious path, for they themselves could attract the notice of the more usual leaders of the persecutions, individuals who set out to mobilize and activate the fears of hostile magic. These true witch finders ran the gamut from adolescents to adult clergymen, jurists, and nobles, but they all operated with extensive local support, and only where higher authorities were in disarray or lacking entirely. They were not agents of growing absolutist government, as has been suggested by earlier students of the problem. In England, witch-finding climaxed during the closing phases of the Civil War (approximately 1645-1649). In France episodes of witch frenzy coincided with periods of civil war or economic disturbances, and they were confined to relatively restricted areas. Higher magistrates, both civil and ecclesiastical, often had serious qualms about witchcraft, and they were always eager to keep the witch hunters from taking the law into their own hands. Only in small independent states, such as those which made up the Holy Roman Empire, did the frenzy rage unchecked, and even there it tended eventually to collapse when the higher ranks of society began to be implicated. In Briggs' opinion, had either church or state thrown itself wholeheartedly into the business of exterminating witches, persecution would have been far more uniform and the levels of death far higher.

Having thus disposed of one standard explanation of the witch hunts, Briggs begins to probe what he thinks is their real origin, interpersonal conflicts on the village level. "One cannot," he writes, "understand how the nexus of belief and practice worked without relating them to the familial context... the endless dramas played out on this semi-public stage fed into witchcraft, both di-

rectly and through the inner psychic worlds they shaped" (pp. 225-26). Hostility between husband and wife often took a major role, as in the case of Jean Aulbry, accused after his repeated violence to his wife drove her to give evidence against him, or that of Marguitte Laurent, who admitted putting the devil's powder into her husband's soup after he beat her with the fire irons (p. 229). Children likewise could be crucial actors, both as accusers and as victims. The sudden illness or death of a beloved son or daughter often drove their parents to action against a suspected witch.

Step families were the most frequent sites of witchcraft accusations. Echoing Robert Darnton's seminal essay "Peasants Tell Tales: the Meaning of Mother Goose,"[1] Briggs notes that "the folkloric commonplace of the wicked stepmother was an exaggeration of a well-known phenomenon" (p. 237). The hostility of adult stepchildren could damn a replacement wife, so that Briggs think quarrels over inheritance lay behind many witchcraft accusations. Likewise, mistreatment by an unkind stepmother could lead to a generalized fear of older women and thus a readiness to believe they were witches.

The children of those who were convicted of witchcraft suffered even heavier burdens, since as the period of persecution wore on they were increasingly likely to be thought to have inherited evil powers. Such was the case of a woman named Georgeatte Pelisson, whose parents had both been executed as witches. Pelisson grew so tired of being asked to make reconciliation visits to those she supposedly had bewitched that she announced she wished all those who asked her to do so might burst. Her trial and execution followed soon after (pp. 248-50).

Yet for all the risks posed by family, those without kin were in greater danger. Women not infrequently outlived their husbands and all their offspring. Add to these widows the women who never married at all, and "between a quarter and a third of the old women in a community would

have had no direct descendants alive; most of these would have been at least partially dependent on formal or informal charity for even basic subsistence" (p. 255). The competition for aid sometimes led older women to accuse each other; more accusations arose from the expressed resentment of those denied charity and the guilt and fear of those who refused them. Indeed, Briggs credits the peak period of witch hunting, 1580-1630, to the anxieties caused by severe food shortages in western Europe. The lack of food resulted both from natural causes and the religious wars of the period. War, starvation, epidemic disease, and scarce fuel naturally fed the fears of hidden supernatural enemies working to destroy resources. All sorts of economic issues surfaced in the witch trials; Briggs notes accusations were more common between parties closely matched in economic resources. They seem to have arisen from competition for scant supplies of food or wealth.

Why so many people in early modern Europe believed their competitors had the secret advantage of diabolical powers is a question Briggs takes up in his final chapter. While accepting that "the particular ways people thought about witchcraft were powerfully influenced, at any given time or place, by an outer world of language and ideas" (p. 373), Briggs relies more heavily on the ideas of evolutionary psychology, arguing that belief in witchcraft has been so widespread across such a wide span of space and time that it strongly suggests a persisting structure in the human psyche. Evolutionary psychology holds that people are born "equipped with multiple frames or grids which structure our responses and include complex modes of interaction with other people" (p. 376). One such grid, Briggs thinks, disposes humans to look for the existence of hidden malevolence, awareness of which might prove vital for survival. Evolutionary psychology also suggests human emotions change over time very slowly, if at all. He thus thinks it valid to apply modern models of emotional functioning to analyze witch-

craft beliefs. He draws on psychoanalysis for the concepts of splitting and projection, wherein unacceptable feelings and desires are separated from the conscious self and attributed to others, who become the object of fear and hatred. This phenomenon, says Briggs, can be observed in the witch trials both individually and communally. The constantly stressed peasants of early modern Europe maintained the cohesion their communities needed to survive by projecting their rivalries and hatreds onto people whose own hostility and aggression had already separated them from their neighbors. From one angle of vision, then, witches died so that their neighbors might live.

This book is quite unlike any other witchcraft study the reviewer has encountered. Certainly it is rooted in the recent scholarship that has allowed English-speaking historians a broader view than did the older concentration on England and America. Briggs acknowledges his debts to works like Bengt Ankarloo and G. Henningsen's *Early Modern European Witchcraft, Centres and Peripheries* (Oxford, 1990) and to the older British scholarship of Alan MacFarlane and Keith Thomas, who pioneered the application of anthropological insights to the historical study of European witchcraft. *Witches and Neighbors* approaches most closely the work of Robert Muchembled, especially *La Sorciere au village, XVe-XVIe siecles* (Paris, 1993). Generally speaking, however, Muchembled associates the witch trials with the repression of traditional beliefs and practices by the forces of the Reformation, both Catholic and Protestant, and the absolutist monarchies of Europe. Briggs, as we have seen, ties them to the dynamics of life in the farming communities of Europe.

Above all, *Witches and Neighbors* is a valuable corrective to the works of writers like Anne Llewellyn Barstow (*Witchcraze: A New History of the European Witchhunts* [San Francisco, 1995]), who presents the hunts purely and simply as the persecution of women healers by a male-dominated society, and to the myth of the nine million vic-

tims, which the reviewer recently encountered on the Internet. Briggs never denies the element of misogyny in the situation, and his estimate of fifty thousand victims is still no inconsiderable number. But he presents a picture far more nuanced and subtle than that enshrined in current popular beliefs about the witch hunts. In this respect, the author's choice of a commercial, rather than academic publisher for this U.S. edition of his work seems particularly apt. *Witches and Neighbors* belongs in the hands of the general reading public as well as those of scholars. Viking Penguin may well place it there.

In sum, *Witches and Neighbors* has something to offer any scholar interested in the social history of the early modern period, French or otherwise. Here are the stories, told largely in their own voices, of the men and women who toiled, feared, and suffered through one of the more unpleasant periods in the history of European civilization. Briggs' presentation brings them very near, and whether one accepts the tenets of evolutionary psychology or not, their emotions seem immediately recognizable as very like our own. Perhaps not all readers will be as impressed as this one was, but no one will be able to deny that *Witches and Neighbors* is a notable achievement, one likely to influence research into the witch persecutions for years to come.

Notes:

[1]. *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History* (New York, 1985), pp. 27-29.

Copyright (c) 1998 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@H-Net.MSU.EDU.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <http://www.uakron.edu/hfrance/>

Citation: Charlotte C. Wells. Review of Briggs, Robin. *Witches and Neighbors: the Social and Cultural Context of European Witchcraft*. H-France, H-Net Reviews. February, 1998.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=1723>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.