

Wicked Witches Were Invented by Frightened Men

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ABSTRACT

The act of communication, in this paper, will be understood as the way in which some part of the past is conveyed to us. Undoubtedly, the cultural importance of historical communication derives from its potential to influence thoughts and attitudes on and about particular events. Hence, the aim of this paper is first, to examine how insights from different disciplines have, this century, contributed to broaden and rectify historical accounts of and about witchcraft. From there, the subject will focus on why the female sex was more frequently accused of witchcraft, most cases of witchcraft being susceptible of natural explanations. In the final part of the paper, the analysis will centre more directly on verbal communication by exposing how the old misogynistic charges against "wicked witches" persist today in certain expressions.

KEY WORDS: *women's history. witchcraft*

RESUMEN

En este artículo entendemos como acción comunicativa el modo por el cual se nos transmite parte del pasado. La importancia cultural de la comunicación histórica deriva sin lugar a dudas de su potencial para influir sobre los pensamientos y las actitudes acerca de determinados acontecimientos. Por lo tanto, el propósito de este artículo será, en primer lugar, examinar como las aportaciones de diferentes disciplinas han contribuido en este siglo a ampliar y rectificar la visión histórica acerca de la brujería. Posteriormente, el análisis se centrará en los motivos por los que las acusaciones de brujería recaían con mayor frecuencia sobre el sexo femenino, teniendo en cuenta que gran parte de los casos eran susceptibles de una explicación natural. Por último, el estudio abordará de forma más directa la comunicación verbal mediante la exposición de como la antigua misoginia contra las "brujas perversas" persiste todavía en ciertas expresiones.

PALABRAS CLAVE: *historia de mujeres, brujería*

As an introduction to the last chapter of their work, *Riding the Nightmare*, Selma R. Williams and Pamela Williams Adelman describe one of Francisco Goya's famous caricatures of witchcraft in which he carefully includes all the details that had once frightened and fascinated society (1992: 204). The etching, titled "Linda Maestra," represents a witch - an old hag - passing on her secrets to a young, female apprentice as they fly through the air on a broomstick to, supposedly, meet with witch cronies.

Given that the very word "communication" implies the transmission of some kind of information or intelligence (Stanford, 1996: 80) then, from a cultural viewpoint, Goya's drawing undeniably represents a historical "document" that is sending out a non-verbal, yet unequivocal, historical communication (Fèbvre; 1953: 30). "Linda Maestra" can therefore be seen as illustrating how, in very real ways, *Communication* not only reflects but actually creates *Culture* for the etching implicitly carries with it the ability to direct our thinking by fixing the image of the "wicked witch" in our minds.

To the question of whether such superstition and folklore involving the practice of evil has been more easily applied to women than to men, the observable, historical answer is, without doubt, yes. The murderous war waged on European women in the 16th and 17th centuries has, since then, formed the theme of uncountable verbal and non-verbal "communications." However, another undeniable truth is that while chroniclers have, once and again, depicted the horrors of the mass killing of women they have, right up to the 20th century, mostly ignored the victims.

By linking these assertions to the opinion of a major historian of the witch craze, H.C.E Midefort, who noted that: "... the European witch craze ... displayed a burst of misogyny without parallel in Western history" (Ruth; 1992: 67), it very quickly becomes evident that "communication" and the forms of legitimisation of knowledge have, for long, amounted to a skewing of reality.

With this in mind, the aim of this paper is first, to examine a combination of insights from different disciplines that have, this century, contributed to broaden and rectify historical accounts of and about witchcraft. From there, the subject will be narrowed down to the question of why people found it more natural to associate witchcraft with the female sex rather than with the male sex and of why the fear-laden rejection of women rose to a sort of campaign of extermination against them. In the final part of the paper, I shall centre my analysis more directly on verbal communication by exposing how certain words, still currently in use today, somehow perpetuate age-long misgivings about those women whose allure somehow subjugates men.

For most of us, nowadays, the idea that human beings may have the power to harness occult forces in order to serve good or evil purposes is as defunct as the notion of a flat earth, and as unlikely to be ever revived¹. However, this has not always been so. For this reason, the premise for this paper is a very levelling thought: the great craze for persecuting witches that raged throughout Europe during the 16th and 17th centuries cannot be waved aside as simply an embarrassing episode in Western history, especially if we keep in mind more recent outbursts of brutality. This very century, the Nazi extermination of Jews and McCarthy's persecution of communists and homosexuals are good examples of how, at any time, panics of persecution may erupt with astonishing violence and subside just as suddenly, leaving everybody bewildered and confounded at the mania that has swept through society.

In the span of 200 years or so, beginning in the **later** fifteenth century, a great many people, most of them women, were prosecuted for witchcraft, **tortured** and executed. It is **difficult** to know how many people died in this 200 year **craze** but **some** scholars **have claimed** that the death toll of the Witch Hunts equals the sum total of casualties in **all** the European wars up to 1914 (Armstrong, 1986: 90).

Historians by the **hundred have, in all periods, documented** this mass killing. However, an **important** development of 20th century historical **research** has **been** how, **thanks** to the work of Marc Bloch and Lucien Fèbvre, **founders** of the new school, *Les Annales* (1929)², historical perspective has broadened its outlook by **incorporating** the investigation **undertaken** in other disciplines. Anthropology and **sociology**, for example, are **two** of the sciences that **have** produced new **understanding** of the contexts in which witchcraft was practised and accusations **laid**. By concentrating on the **SOCIAL environment** of witch trials, anthropological and **sociological modes of inquiry have unravelled** and **partly** set right the bias and presuppositions found in older historical writings about European witchcraft which tended to concentrate too exclusively on the ideas of contemporaneous **thinkers**.

Historians of witchcraft **have also** learnt from psychology - by that I mean modern knowledge of such disorders as hysteria and **schizophrenia** which help to explain why **some** people quite sincerely believed they attended witches' **sabbaths** or were possessed by **devils**. By **pooling** their knowledge, the historian and the psychologist **have thrown** considerable light on the mental **states** of **victims** in the witch-prosecuting centuries. According to Trevor Roper (1990: 50-51), many **written** accounts of the experience of accused women represent **straightforward** case-studies of sexual hysteria familiar to every 20th century psychiatrist - the only difference being that whereas today the psychopath's obsession is usually a **private** obsession - an obsession which may **vary** from patient to patient, **in** those days, the fixation **often** centred on the **Devil** - a figure which has **since** lost much of his cultural **importance**. Not only on the **devil** for, as Trevor-Roper **explains**: although, in the past, many neurotics and hysterics centralized their **illusions** around the figure of the **devil**, many others (**in** this case, saints **and** mystics) **centralized theirs** around the figure of God or Christ. So, whereas devout **maidens** would pledge themselves to God and **feel** themselves to be the brides of Christ, less **pious** witches not only **communicated** with, but **bound** themselves to Satan and felt themselves to be his **concubines**. It is a **well known** fact, for example, that St Teresa enjoyed **ecstasies** of **pleasure** as **she** clung to the **mystical** body of her Saviour. For their **part**, **hundreds** of witches who were **dragged** before their **judges**, **reported to have felt agonising pains** as they lay crushed **in the embrace** of that huge black figure of Satan. It is **interesting** to note how, **in** the case of St Teresa, **psychopathic experience** was sublimated to the point of **making** her a saint while - when the same **symptoms** were **interpreted** by **inquisitors** - the other women were **burnt** to death.

Likewise, **philosophy** has **been** of **great** assistance to modern historians. **Right** up to the 20th century, **writers** usually condemned the beliefs that **sustained** the witch trials as **absurd** and **unjustifiable** - **plain** (and **dangerous**) **superstitious fanaticism**. Nowadays, the historian who **thinks** philosophically **has** abandoned this old moralising stance and concentrates **instead** on why **and** how a system of beliefs WAS rational for the people at the time (Carr, 1983: 75-8). In other words, **contemporary historians have** come to see that a belief is not **necessarily** irrational simply **because** it is/was false: it is false, for **instance**, that the **sun goes** round the earth, but it was not irrational to **believe this** before the **contrary evidence** was available. The

same occurs with witchcraft. People believed in witchcraft when they believed, as we do not, in a universe pervaded by a variety of spirits and spiritual forces, good and bad. With this in mind, the inquisitors were therefore not involved in a cold manufacture of an untruth. Many learned and sophisticated men like Jacob Sprenger and Heinrich Institor, the Dominicans who, in 1486, wrote the first printed encyclopaedia of demonology, the famous *Malleus Maleficarum* (the Hammer of the witches), King James I or Jean Bodin (to cite only a few outstanding figures) passionately believed in witchcraft. Jean Bodin, was an expert in history, politics, philosophy and law but his deep convictions led him to write *Démonologie et sorciers* (1580), a book that also became a manual for inquisitors in Europe (Trevor-Roper, 1990: 47).

Lastly, the development of women's studies over the last few years has prompted some fresh thinking about why women constituted about 85 % of accused witches (Gittins, 1993: 42). Such studies as those by Selma Williams, Karen Armstrong and Diana Gittins help elucidate the status of women, in theory and in practice, in those early modern times.

As a means of approaching how these women have gone about changing perspectives in the field, a helpful starting point is, no doubt, a clear differentiation between the terms witch, witchcraft and sorcery.

Both witchcraft and sorcery operate through certain hidden, mystical procedures. Witchcraft, according to the anthropologist, Evans-Pritchard (Scarre, 1992: 3), is an internal power some people possess, an inborn property which they inherit, just as one may inherit being left-handed or snub-nosed. Witches have the power to cause harm without performing any particular act, just by a look or a malicious thought. Sorcerers, on the other hand, don't have this innate capacity for causing harm. They employ instead magical operations, such as chanting spells or verbal formula or performing ritual recipes to accomplish their ends. In other words, in principle, anyone can become a sorcerer by learning the appropriate techniques, whereas to be a witch it is necessary to be born one. It is interesting to note how Evans-Pritchard's contrast is somehow captured by Sherry Ortner in the distinction she establishes between women and men and nature and culture. In her article "Is Female to Male as Nature Is to Culture?" (Zimbalist Rosaldo & Lamphere, 1993: 67-87), Ortner suggests that the universal, culturally attributed secondary status of women has to do with something that is devalued in every culture. That something, she argues, is Nature, which, in general terms is contrasted with Culture or with technology and ideas. Women are linked with nature first, because of their bodily functions. While women are busy procreating, men are free to dedicate their time and energies to visible, lasting "projects of culture" (1993: 73) - the creation of new instruments or inventions in general, beneficial to the species (1993: 75). Secondly, women's physiological functions place her in more "private" roles (such as caring for, nursing, rearing children) - all these activities generally considered of less importance than men's universalistic "public" roles. And finally, woman's traditional social roles, imposed because of her body and functions, in turn give her a different psychic structure - that is, women develop the typical "feminine personality" that tends to be involved with concrete feelings, things and people rather than with abstractness and objectivity that are the domain of men (1993: 81). Ortner quotes Simone de Beauvoir to point out that "woman's consciousness - her membership... in culture - is evidenced in part by the fact that she accepts her own devaluation and takes culture's point of view" (1993: 76). Women therefore, become cultural beings only by accepting their subordinate, and inferior, role in society.

With this in mind and coming back to the subject of women and witchcraft, it is worth pointing out that both in English and in Spanish there remains, to this day, a clear differentiation between the terms sorcerer and witch/witchcraft and between *hechicería* and *brujería*. This said, trial records apparently provide little evidence that offenders were singled out according to whether they were innate - natural - witches, or whether these women wielded scientific knowledge - culture - to serve their malicious ends. It seems that the interest of inquisitors did not centre so much on how the women acquired their magical powers but rather on the harm they did or could do to society through their malignant spells and incantations (Scarre, 1992: 4). This generalised inclination is probably what led the French to put all accused women in the same bag, under the unique label: *sorcières*. This said, Sherry Ortner's theory proves useful in that it helps frame the scene from a novel perspective: orthodox learned opinion at the time had it that women's place was with nature and not with culture. Hence, whether the witches' obscure talents were inborn or hereditary or whether their skills and notions of the occult derived from the knowledge or culture reserved for men, these women were feared as un-natural and accordingly considered a menace to society. In their book, *Riding the Nightmare*, Selma Williams and Pamela Williams Adelman examine the changing status of women over centuries (1992: 3-16). For thousands of years, they explain, western cultures - whether Minoan, Greek, Roman or Germanic - had adored the Earth Mother or Mother Nature who provided the human species with food, water, clothing, children and, at times, peace. During the Middle Ages, however, the image of woman as kind and benevolent Mother Earth slowly but surely went downhill, until it broke down into the cliché of the wicked old witch. The explanation Williams and Williams Adelman forward for such a drastic change is that, as society moved from a rural, agricultural economy to a clustered, urban community, man and woman, little by little, stopped working together. As trade and commerce were becoming more important, agriculture - and with it Mother Nature - lost their ascendancy³. In other words, the urge for money-making began to replace reverence for earth. Parallely, anything to do with authority, organisation and power gradually slithered away from women into the hands of man alone. The witch hunt of the 16th and 17th centuries somehow consolidated this recently established asymmetry between the sexes for its aim was to purge society of any female that could somehow jeopardise the new social balance.

A lethal epidemic known as the Plague or Black Death hit Europe between 1347 and 1351 and killed one out of three Europeans precisely when the One Hundred Years War was raging between England and France (Bishop, 1978. 365-69). Throughout this same period, the authority of the Church was tottering, with the papacy forced to flee from Rome to Avignon (1308-78) and then, with the loyalty of Christendom divided between two rival popes, each denouncing the other as the anti-Christ (1378-1417) (Carter & Mears; 1968: 234). Moreover, whoever survived disease, war and natural disaster faced the threat of slow death by starvation. There was simply not enough food to feed everyone, especially as an unexplainable change in weather, throughout the 14th century, brought violent storms and crop-destroying rains that caused mass death by famine. The people could find no obvious reason for so many disasters and deaths, so surely some sinister force must be at work. The Middle Ages blamed first one sub-group, then another: Jews, beginning around 1100; and women, sometimes afterwards. Jews it was said, murdered babies to obtain blood for their annual spring feasts, while women, as the earthly personification of Mother Nature, were blamed for raising storms on land and sea, for causing droughts or floods, producing excessive heat or cold and for killing babies,

youngsters and **neighbours**. After 1500, the **primary emphasis** shifted on to witches - especially **since** most Jews **had been driven** to take refuge in Eastern Europe. According to Williams and Williams Alderman (1992:18), the connection between **anti-Christian** Jews and evil witches is pointedly stressed in the terms "synagogue" and "the sabbath" which, they explain, were both used from then on to describe the witches' sacrilegious meetings with the **devil**.

At a time when science and scientific **knowledge** was incipient⁴, superstition logically prevailed. Men therefore **acted** on what they had **been** told and taught - not on what they could **prove**. Consequently, to single out a witch was easy, even if she was never actually caught in her evil activities, and never **seen riding** on a broomstick..

First, even women's "natural" powers made them immediately suspect (Rowland, 1993: 10-14): there had always **been** (and still was) something **unfathomable** about women who had the ability to produce a live **human** being from within their own bodies, something no man, not even a **king** (time of absolute monarchies) could do.

Secondly, a witch's appearance **also** exposed her. At a time when most women died before the age of **forty** through hunger, overwork and, above all, **because** of continual **childbirths**, a **woman** who was **still** going strong in her **fifties** or **sixties** was **feared** rather than protected. Needless to say that behind the dread of old hags lay a more **prosaic** reality: in an age when food and **fuel** were so scarce, a woman too old to bear children, and **worse** still, if she suffered from **some** physical deficiency, was no longer **useful** to society. In *The Family in Question* (1993: 35-43), Diana Gittins **also offers** valuable **insight** on this point. In her view, western society **had**, from **time** immemorial, **been organised** around **the** concept of the paterfamilias, which meant that wives and children were invariably **in** a situation of dependence on their **husband/father**. These notions of **servitude** and dependence, Gittins **explains**, were bolstered by the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church to **justify** women's exclusion from positions of power. However, in the late medieval period, **economic** relations **changed** with the **growth** of wage labour and this posed a problem for **traditional** religious and **patriarchal** ideology, **hinged on** notions of dependency and **deference** to male authority. With **changing** economic relations **came** Protestantism. By stressing the **importance** of **individual** responsibility to **God** rather than to temporal delegates, Protestantism **contained** within it a **challenge** to **patriarchal** authority, for this new religious ideology **assumed** that men, women and children were equal in the eyes of God. If women were as good as men **in** God's eyes, why could they not **share** equal **access** to temporal wealth and power? The way **in** which this **dilemma** was **solved** was to argue that women and children were equal in God's eyes, but only in a spiritual **sense** and only if they **served** God through **servicing** a father or husband in a temporal **household**⁵. **Consequently**, from **then** on, women could **attain** salvation through good works and a devout life in the "**private**" spiritual **realm** of the family **while** men **had** to attain salvation thorough good works **in** the "public" sphere as well as **being responsible paterfamilias**. Women were therefore doubly **dependent** because their **means** of salvation was only really possible through dependence on a father's or husband's authority within a family household. On top of that, with **Protestantism**, **celibacy** and **convent** life were no longer considered **valid options** for women - a fact that put an added **importance** on **marriage** for (especially) the **female** sex. **This said**, many women - **spinsters**, widows, abandoned wives - could not live **in** a **patriarchal** household. Being "**outside marriage**", and therefore **outside** patriarchal control and authority, **made** such women **unnatural**, **dangerous** and **threatening** to

society. It was, in Gittins's view, the fear and suspicion of women in such situations that resulted in the massive persecution and execution of "witches".

Midwives made up another whole group of witches (Russell, 1983: 84; 112; 115). In this pre-scientific age when miscarriages, haemorrhaging and stillbirths were so frighteningly common, it was customary for expectant mothers to look beyond the Church for hope and salvation. They therefore anxiously sought any charm, elixir or superstitious ceremony that would, they believed, stave off viable death. Nor is there anything extraordinary about women helping sisters, daughters, cousins, and neighbours during pregnancy and delivery. However, in those credulous times, a woman acting as midwife inevitably exposed herself to suspicion: if she brought both mother and child safely through childbirth, she could be accused of calling on the supernatural. If, on the other hand, either mother or child, or both, died, this could also be interpreted as clear evidence of the midwife's evil powers.

As for women who dared to assert themselves, they certainly deserved execution for witchcraft for they were behaving contrary to history, the Bible, and the generally accepted inferiority of females to males in mental capacity and physical strength. The most famous example is, of course, Joan of Arc who, on her own, turned the tide of the Hundred Years War in favour of her native France and against the English invaders. Her success against the English was the underlying, and purely political, reason for her persecution. However, the accusations against her were couched in religious terms and she was finally executed for her evil dabbling with the supernatural (Bishop, 1978: 380-82).

In her book, *The Gospel According to Woman*, Karen Armstrong contends that the witch was a wholly Christian creation (1986: 88-116). Although witches and witch-lore had existed as pagan superstitions long before the 15th century, the essential ingredient for the transformation of witchcraft into a Christian heresy was, in her view, the Christian invention of Satan - a fearful monster which represented the sum total of all the evil people could not accept in themselves. Since sexuality was one of the evils that Christian men could not accept, they had first repressed it and then projected it on women. For centuries, Christian theologians and preachers had alienated and isolated women so that their contaminating and sinful sexuality should not draw men into sin. In the 15th century, with the introduction of the printed page, there appeared written - tangible - evidence that women were a wicked, malevolent form of the human species, as shown in the following passage from the Malleus: "What else is a woman but a foe to friendship, an inescapable punishment, a necessary evil, a natural temptation, a desirable calamity, a domestic danger, a delectable detriment, an evil of nature, painted with fair colours!" (Williams, 1992: 35).

Such expressions as "natural temptation, desirable calamity" or "delectable detriment" clearly point to the sexual neurosis that affected the Church: men believed themselves to be the unfortunate victims of women's devastating sexual allure. At the heart of such a formulation is, of course, the woman Eve who was the initial "cause" of all human beings wallowing in sin⁶. With the appearance of Satan in the Middle Ages, it was only a matter of time, Armstrong argues, before these two monstrous sexual projections of Medieval Christianity should come together. In this way, and not surprisingly, the demonology enshrined in such works as the Malleus *maleficarum* attributed the power of witches to their special links with the devil, especially their sexual relationships with him as "incubus" (embodiment in masculine form). Since it was through sexual intercourse with Satan that they acquired the supernatural powers to harm and even ruin mankind, witches suddenly became,

not only heretics of the most dangerous sort, but worse still: they were identified as Devil's whores, that is, as monstrous sexual beings who indulged in cannibalistic rites and perverted sexual orgies. Karen Armstrong's basic standpoint is therefore that the events of the 16th and 17th centuries mark a period when the long-standing terror of sexuality and hatred of women, impressed on all Christians by the Church, finally exploded: if Christians had been brain-washed into believing that women were sexually depraved beings and the enemies of man, with the appearance of Satan, sex now became diabolical and women the arch-enemies of society. The Malleus confirms this point by listing seven ways in which women who are in league with the Devil attack men, nearly all of them sexual:

Now there are, as it is said in the Papal Bull, seven methods by which they infect with witchcraft the venereal act and the conception of the womb: first by inclining the minds of men to inordinate passions; second by obstructing their generative force; third by removing the members accommodated to that act; fourth by changing men into beasts by their magic art; fifth by destroying the generative force in women; sixth by procuring abortion; seventh by offering children to devils (Armstrong, 1986: 95).

The implication in the Malleus is that women had acquired a new and sinister power which capacitated them to maim men sexually by diabolic magic: they could force sexuality on unwilling men by provoking uncontrollable sexual urges in them; they could render a man impotent by means of a spell or a curse or, worst of all, witches could actually castrate men: "a witch can take away the male organ, not indeed by actually despoiling the human body of it, but by concealing it with some glamour" (my emphasis) (98). An interesting point is that although authors like Trevor-Roper, Norman Cohn, Evans-Pritchard or Jeffrey B. Russell insist that the women who died in the holocaust were old and crazy (1990: 48; 1975: 225; Scarre, 1992: 3; 1983: 130)), there is nothing old and ugly about the witches in the Malleus. Indeed, the book is quite clear that part of a women's danger is precisely her beauty: "... a woman is beautiful to look upon, contaminating to the touch and deadly to keep" (Armstrong, 1986: 101). It is also worth noticing what has happened since then to the word "glamour." Nowadays, the term "glamour" still carries with it the meaning of magic, a spell, a charm (OED). For this reason, it is often used to refer to a type of feminine beauty that is powerfully alluring. However, bearing in mind that "glamour," according to Armstrong, originally signified the witch's ability, through magic, to castrate men (1986: 100), it would appear that "glamour" in a woman implies that she is beautiful and seductive but foul and dangerous all at the same time.

My point here, based on Karen Armstrong's theory, is that although women are no longer burned or hanged as witches, or synonymous with evil, the influence of the Witch Craze still lingers today in the myth of the castrating bitch. The castrating bitch is a "glamorous" woman who makes the most of her glossy, artificial beauty to enslave men. For this reason, she is called "a vamp" - a kind of monster, which is beautiful and seductive, foul and dangerous all at the same time. Shakespeare drew a portrait of a witch like this in Cleopatra who "unmans" Antony to the point of making him neglect his empire and even run out of the battle of Actium in pursuit of her. Such a femme fatale is literally fatal to man, not just because she can cause his death (as Cleopatra causes Antony's) but because, through her

castrating power, she can get at the very core of his Self: his virility. In **this** sense, Cleopatra is a secular version of the witch who was **persecuted** by the Church during Shakespeare's time.

The witch as the essence of woman - **cruel**, sensuous and dangerous, **constantly surfaces** in literature. The myth **continues** even in the 19th century, a period marked by its cult of the **sexless** woman, and **consequently**, not a time when one would expect to **find** many sexy witches. Becky **Sharp**, in Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*, is an example of the malevolent witch whose sexy charm even makes her a murderess and Rossetti's powerful portraits of erotic, **threatening** and dangerous women like **Pandora** or Lucrecia Borgia show that the witch continued to **exert** the same attraction over the **imagination**s of men. In our **own** century, the myth of the glamorous woman has actually **been** reinforced by the media. For **all** their sexiness, film **stars**, cover girls and models like Marilyn **Monroe**, Ursula Andress, **Kim** Basinger, **Uma Thurman**, **Demi Moore**, **Sharon Stone** or Claudia Schiffer, Naomi Campbell, **Judith Masco** and Linda Evangelista **have** the same **kind** of impenetrability as Cleopatra. Their very glamour - their beauty and eroticism - entraps and enslaves men even while the "touch me not" aura that surrounds them **warns** the common of **mortals** that they are untouchable and unconquerable. Hence, although men drool over the beauty of such women, they are, in a sense, **emotionally castrated** because they **know** that these **dazzling** modern witches are not for them.

It is interesting how many witchcraft **terms** have survived in language: words like "magical", "enchanting", "ravishing", "bewitching", "fascinating" **all** describe the way a sexy woman **gains** power over men. "Fascination", for instance, in the language of witchcraft, is the power of casting an evil spell or **inflicting** bad luck (*OED*). When today we say that a woman **is** fascinating we mean that she **is** irresistibly and mysteriously attractive. The fascinating look has therefore changed over the centuries but it still has a hostile edge to it: a woman who sets out to **fascinate** a man **wants** to **bring** him under her spell. Not **all** women can be **glamorous** or fascinating witches simply **because** most of us lack the potential for gloss in our **appearance**. However, if a woman cannot be Claudia **Schiffer** she can cultivate "charm". **Charm** is of **course** another of those witch words that has lost its **original** malevolent meaning **on the surface**. Nowadays, to **say** that a woman **is charming** is a **compliment**. We rarely think of the original **meaning** whereby to **charm somebody** is to put an evil spell on **her/him** (*OED*). Yet, to use charm - to set out to "**butter** up someone", in a way, can be as castrating as glamour, especially if one considers the act of, for instance, **charming** a snake: to charm a snake is to subdue it so that **it is** no longer dangerous, but completely under the charmer's power. Likewise, to charm a man can be **interpreted** as an attempt to subdue or **blunt** his power by **means** of a web of **sweetness** - just as Delilah **unmanned** and castrated **Samson** when she cut off his **hair** after **luring** him to sleep by her soft **flattery**.

To conclude, if we think more **carefully** about what **communication** really is, then it **becomes clear** that **although** historical **accounts** or records of the past are conveyed **mainly** in words, the **information transmitted** is not merely a set of words but a set of **ideas**. **Accordingly**, by **communicating** knowledge, **history carries** with it the **capacity** to **alter** beliefs, values, the **outlook** and the **understanding** of readers. Hence, the cultural **relevance** of historical **writings** is twofold. **On the one hand**, **history** as **communication** of knowledge **serves** to divulge past cultural practices while, on the other, **it** both reflects and gives shape to **present-day culture**. With **this in mind**, the **Witch Craze** of the 16th and 17th centuries **cannot** be discarded as an **unfortunate** - and never to be repeated - **historical** phenomenon. For its

impact to be rightly understood, it must be seen both in its social and in its intellectual context. The relatively recent contributions of scholars working in disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, psychology, philosophy and feminism have, in their different ways, amended or "redressed" the distorted accounts of this disturbing Western event known as the Witch Craze by revealing that, in those times of upheaval, society tried to stamp out those sub-groups whom it could not assimilate. When crisis and cataclysm occurred, someone had to be made responsible and woman, the weaker being and the conspicuous incarnation of evil, was the obvious scapegoat - especially if she disturbed the "natural" social set-up in any way. Once the witch had become the stereotype of the enemy, witchcraft - that innate capacity for causing harm - would be the universal accusation. It was an accusation difficult to rebut in those days of superstition and popular prejudice. Nor was it long before Satan should turn to this mentally and morally deficient being for his evil purposes: if woman had always been responsible for luring men to sin by her sexual power, her pact with the Devil now equipped her with the power to bewitch, incapacitate or even mutilate men by diabolic means. Lastly, although the persecution of wicked witches - these monstrous enemies of God and man died out by the end of the 17th century and even though we have chosen to "forget" such events as the Witch Holocaust, in some sense, it is still not totally over. It continues to affect language and attitudes. In other words, certain "complimentary" expressions evidence that men and women still choose to think about women sexually in terms of witchcraft, however thoroughly we think we have emptied the words of their original hostility.

NOTES

1. The belief only lingers in those underdeveloped, rural areas of, for instance, the Celtic regions where high levels of illiteracy and superstition still prevail.
2. See: Marc Bloch (1967) and Lucien Febvre (1953).
3. By highlighting the economic basis of the domination of woman by man, Selma Williams and Pamela Williams Alderman's analysis comes very close to Friedrich Engels's delineation of the family structure as the instrument for the exercise of male supremacy. See: (1884) 1986, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*.
4. It is significant that the beginning of the witch craze coincided with the first phase of the scientific revolution. In fact, the peak of the witch craze occurred precisely during the decades in which Francis Bacon, René Descartes, Johannes Kepler and Galileo Galilei made their revolutionary contributions. Brian Easlea (Ruth, 1992: 67) suggests that, in one of its aspects at least, the scientific revolution may be seen as a secularised version of the witch craze. He explains his point by specifying that Bacon: "likened the experimental investigation of the secrets of "female" nature to the inquisition of the witches and looked forward to the time when masculine science would shake "female" nature to her very foundations."
5. The division established between spiritual and temporal can be seen as the origin of the concepts of "public" and "private," stemming from the Protestant attempt to solve - somewhat artificially - a contradiction between individual equality and hierarchical patriarchal authority.
6. In the Dark Ages, it was Augustine's theology which dominated Christian thinking. According to Augustine's formulation of the doctrine of Original Sin, the first sin was not sex but disobedience - Adam took the apple even though God told him not to. The result of that sin is that Christians are continually plagued by what Augustine calls "concupiscence". Concupiscence means the desire man has, against all reason, to take pleasure in mere creatures or in things instead of in God. So, concupiscence is the essence of sin because it makes us lose our reason and irrationally choose things that are less than God. Nowhere is the loss of rational control more acutely felt than in sex and sexual desire. This is the reason why, for centuries, sex had been seen as evil and women as the enemies of man: woman is forever Eve, luring man to his doom.

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