Opening her book, *The Witch in History*, Diane Purkiss argues “that in Early Modern England, the witch was a woman’s fantasy and not simply a male nightmare” (1), suggesting the possibility that witchcraft served to grant a modicum of power and a possible voice to a few of the women swept up in what became known as the “witch-craze.” Given the intense persecution of witches in Early Modern Europe, and the numerous books and pamphlets insisting on their malevolent intentions, Purkiss’s claim is hard to swallow. It seems easy to believe that witches were simply the unfortunate victims of a misogynist woman-hunt or of an oppressive patriarchal religion, but to ignore the subcurrents of evidence pointing towards the possibility of witchcraft constructed as an empowering aspiration during the witch-hunts is to ignore the possibility that things stand not in the perfect dichotomy of victim/aggressor or good-guy/bad-guy. However, the practice — or the presumed practice — of witchcraft and the witch trials of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries actually disrupted the prevalent gender hierarchies, afforded women unconventional power, and allowed for the increase of power in villages.

The paranoia that a witch could use her power for the benefit of the destruction of her community was widespread in Europe during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and it was

this popular view of the witch as a powerful woman [that] reminds us that although the witch was often a scapegoat for the ills of society and a victim, many of her neighbours viewed her as powerful and threatening. (Levack 141)

There was a real belief in a witch’s power, “and also a willingness to act on that belief by killing her” (Purkiss 276).

The academic study of the “witch-craze” has become a medium through which the understanding of women in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries has been enhanced; women’s desires during this time are illuminated primarily and maybe exclusively in witchcraft studies because, as Diane Purkiss writes, “witches” is one of the few categories of women given space in pre-feminist history. Though their voices were largely filtered through the ink of magistrates and male court attendants, they are among the only women in Early Modern history whose fantasies have been written down for us to read hundreds of years later. Images of witches mirror and invert stereotypes of
typical female domestic roles, and some women would voluntarily choose to identify with the figure which was causing fear and alarm in their society, as witch trials were often the only way that women's issues were given a stage and a public outlet.

This inversion of the gender hierarchy and the fear of chaos in the political order appear in the connection between woman and divinity among the images surrounding witchcraft. These same connections illustrate how the self-identification of “Witch” helped impoverished women gain power and respect in their community; all the while witchcraft trials simultaneously were bringing women and women's issues into the courtroom and the spotlight for perhaps the first time in history. In controversies about traditional values, property rights, and power, witchcraft could become “a central signifier” in rural England (Purkiss 93).

James I of Scotland, himself an avid believer in the connection between witchcraft and female power, claims in his Daemonologie that women are the weaker sex “so it is easier to be intrapped in these grosse snares of the Deuill, as was ouer well proued to be true, by the Serpents deceiting of Eua at the beginning, which makes him the homelieer with that sexe sensine” (43-44). This connection between Eve, the Serpent, and witchcraft is picked up by Stuart Clark who explains that some “even called Eve the first witch, an association that, more than any other, makes intelligible the gender link that they relied on” (113).

The mixture of politics and the demonic is clear in James’s writings, which connect witchcraft to an inversion of the prevailing power structures as nothing “has been more familiar than this concept of witchcraft as an anti-religion” (Clark 86).

For demonic inversion was inseparable, in the first instance, from notions of archetypal rebellion and pseudo-monarchy. The devil’s original presumption prefigured every subsequent act of resistance; he was Belial, ‘which means’, wrote the authors of Malleus maleficarum, ‘Without Yoke or Master.’ (86)

In the inverted world, “itself turned upside down”, the king’s subjects replace “for religion superstition, for true worshippe detestable idolatrie: and to be shorter, for God Satan, for Christ Antichrist” (James 1, Workes, 307; Goodman, 9-10). This exchange of the holy for the unholy occurs in both witchcraft and Judaism, as James explains that “the ‘aping’ of religious service in modern witchcraft was the same in form as the ‘counterfeiting’ of God among the gentiles of the Old Testament” (Clark 98).

In his Daemonologie James links the climb of the magus into celestial knowledge with the Fall of Man, inverting the rise into divine wisdom so that it becomes piety turned upside down; he also connects it with the Fall and Eve, linking Adam and Eve with the Magus and the Witch and with the inversion of obedience to the divine ruler (11, 43-4). Witchcraft and magic then become disobedience to the earthly authority of James as king, James ruled by Divine Right, and claimed to be chasing witches “not because I am James Stuard and can comannde so many thousands of men, but because God hath made me a King and judge to judge righteous judgement” (Calendar 524). He clearly connected his witch-hunts with his powers as king, and since the church “repeatedly badgered the secular power to take action” against these deviant magicians and witches, seeing black arts as “disease of the body politic comparable to [...] adultery,” James had no difficulty relating his divine absolutism to witchcraft and disobedience. James’s comparison between witchcraft and adultery demonstrates the connection between sexuality and the disruption of the hierarchy, and witchcraft became a central concern of James’s rule. He believed this chaotic rebellion to be satanic forces intent on disrupting his benign, god-sanctioned reign (Croft 26), and to be connected in a biblical precedent as treason: “For rebellion is as the sinne of witchcraft,” a passage that explicitly illustrates the connections between power-inversion and witchcraft (1 Sam.15:23 in Daemonologie). As early as 1605, James was proclaiming that God had given him divinatory powers that allowed him to discover the Gunpowder Plot (Clark 623), and during his accession he said “if the king was ‘Jacobum Dei, James by the Grace of God’ (621); then God was ‘Deum Jacobi, the gracious God of King James’” (Rawlinson 36).

Women and Witchcraft Trials

The witchcraft trials gave many women an entry into the legal system, and as Clive Holmes asserts, “the idea that witch-prosecutions reflected a war between the sexes must be discounted, not at least because the victims and witnesses were themselves as likely to be women as men” (45). Women and men both participated in the trials of witches, on both sides: accuser and accused. Diane Purkiss shows that the women’s depositions, which were often times volunteered by women who could neither read nor write, were copied down by a court clerk or scribe — always male. Purkiss then explains that because of this removal from the original source, what we read is the altered deposition with the “addition of legal jargon” and “other more substantial” appendages (92).
While what Purkiss writes is, unfortunately, probably true — though witnesses mostly seemed to concern themselves with *maleficia*, or magic with the intention to harm, what was recorded were the fantasies of the magistrates and clergy who often obsessed over ideas of the Satanic Sabbath and the hierarchical inversions of witchcraft as in the aforementioned “aping” of religious services — the fact remains that the court of the witch trial stood as one of the few places where women could voice their concerns about their neighbors. Examples survive of women recording their own fantasies in the framework of witchcraft lore, perhaps latching onto notions of witchcraft as a means to female power. Although the original testimony was probably altered, there are fragments of women’s voices that would not have existed otherwise.

Evidence also shows that women became increasingly involved in the witchcraft trials as their percentages grew from 38%, during the final years of Elizabeth’s reign, to 53% during the Restoration (Holmes 47). It seems that the nature of witchcraft put women in a better situation to assist in the prosecution of witches, as women attendants to the perceived victim could describe the effect of the curse upon the ill: “Women were simply better placed than men to describe the incidents and activities” of witchcraft (Holmes 49). Because women were thought to have better insight into the crimes of witchcraft, participation in the prosecution of witches opened the doors to the courtroom. Women’s issues and domestic complaints were given an attentive ear when wrapped up in the problem of the local witch population and in the possibility of widespread satanic anarchy, and women perhaps reinforced the stereotype of witch-as-rebel when giving their testimonies in order to have their claims listened to more attentively.

Infant mortality rate, loaning and spending among the female populations along with the tenuous position of midwives in the household were all concerns voiced in the courtroom, and such female populations previously had no outlet through which to vent frustrations. Mothers grieving for their deceased infant children had no medical explanation for the deaths; thus the midwives were an easy scapegoat, and allegations of witchcraft helped the mourning parents to place blame in a legal and official setting. And often if a woman refused another woman’s plea for aid or a loan, or if someone refused to repay money borrowed, and some accident or illness fell upon one of the two involved, accusations of black magic and witchcraft were taken to court where the women had the opportunity to discuss the matter publicly.

Once in the courtroom, women witnesses were met with a small female entourage. A woman witness, attesting to the great supernatural power of the alleged witch, would air her grievances about the accused, who was also often a woman. Then a “knowing woman” who would inspect the accused woman’s body for the “witches mark” often had the authority to save or condemn a suspected witch (Holmes 53; 66-7). This put some legal and political power into the hands of women, both as witnesses, experts, and even accused, who would have their version of events heard in an official setting.

This court participation had a profound effect on female contribution in non-witchcraft related trials of England. In a sample of all cases taken of the sessions of the Essex assizes between the years of 1596 and 1625, women only appeared as 10 percent of the witnesses. However, after the Restoration, the proportion of women involved as witnesses in trials more than doubled to 22 percent (Holmes 48). The evidence suggests that after women increased their participation in the female-(un)friendly English courtrooms of the witch-trials, the doors were opened for other women to engage themselves in other administrative and criminal courtroom matters.

The abundance of women witnesses in the homogeneously male legal system helped to demonstrate that the world of witchcraft was a world predominately of women, and the world of women was potentially a world filled with witchcraft. In Early Modern European villages, some women acted as healers and were often known as “wise women” who drew on a whole tradition of folk remedies of herbs and ointments in their treatment of their fellow townspeople. Most of these ingredients should be considered as magical, if only because the natural ingredients were often supplemented with superstitious prayers; “since wise women served a useful function in their communities, they were generally tolerated by their neighbours” (Levack 138). However, these women were vulnerable in their craft. If someone they had come into contact with contracted a disease, or fell ill, these wise women were open to accusations of witchcraft and *maleficia*. It is no coincidence that in images, the witch is often in the company of a cauldron, “for it was in such vessels that many agents of sorcery were in fact concocted” (138-9). The cauldron, which was a domestic tool for the creation of food and nourishment, could then become inverted within the legend of witchcraft as it would then become the vessel in which poison is brewed.

**The Physical Space of the Witch**

While the man’s domain existed in the public sphere, women were considered more often within the household, and often the domestic items of the household could be transformed into malicious tools for demonic magic. These items normally categorized within this domestic and private space of
the home were often attributed to witchcraft or to being exposed to witchcraft, and “domestic responsibilities were also invested with symbolic significance” (Purkiss 97). The cauldron, household pets, and, of course, the broomstick each figure prominently in the folklore of magic, and even “if women did not actually have the recourse to the magical arts for such purposes, they were naturally suspected of [using witchcraft]” (Levack 141). Women who worked in this domestic space were sometimes open to suspicions of sorcery, especially if they demonstrated behaviors thought to be unbecoming of a woman: a refusal to marry, senility, a harsh temper, or, and especially, promiscuity. A witch was identified through her visible rejection of a society’s moral code and her actions against commonly held standards for women; promiscuity was perhaps the most dangerous and subversive activity for women to engage in during the witch-hunts, as the most common attribute in portrayals of witches is their exaggerated sexuality, and perhaps more dangerously, their power over male-sexuality.

The fear of the witch’s power links directly to a fear of the witch’s sexuality, a fear which James I of Scotland outlines as growing from anxieties surrounding the possibility of an inversion of the gender hierarchy. The panic caused by the paranoia of witches inverting the patriarchal power dynamic manifests itself in a revealing turn of phrase in the preface to Daemonologie, in which James illustrates that a witch’s power is a sexual power. Witches can cast diseases and make men “unable for women” by “weakening the nature” of them (xiv). The fear that women could reduce men to impotence demonstrates that many anxieties surrounding gender hierarchy were related to sexual power and sexual surrender.

Magistrates and the theologians who wrote about the danger of witchcraft seemed to focus on the “Witch’s Sabbath,” and the presumed attendant orgies, with alarming intensity. This fixation upon the Sabbath is clarified when writers and scholars explained, at great length, the bizarre sexual occupations that involved the accused witches, along with demons and sometimes even animals. Often, the accused had relations with the Devil who “most often appeared as a cat or a goat, animals associated with perverted rituals of a sexual nature” (Silverblatt 163). Underlying these depictions was “a deep fear of the sexually experienced, sexually independent woman” (Levack 141). Wise women also had another kind of dangerous knowledge, not necessarily related to physical first-hand sexual experience: the knowledge of contraceptives and the woman’s reproductive system (Middleberg 5). Control over aspects of reproduction could have been viewed as an abuse of power, and meddling in such affairs may have been considered blasphemous; therefore the old misunderstood midwife who helped out a young woman — by either

promoting fertility, infertility or by aiding the termination of pregnancy — became a witch.

Witches were not only identifiable by their knowledge about the physical, but they were also physically identifiable by witchmarks, which were “incriminating marks found in very secret places” (Gaskill). James I lays out a description of the witch’s mark as a “mark upon some secret place of their body, which remains soare vnhealed” (38) — a description that reinforces the theory that women who were more sexually active or promiscuous were blamed for witchcraft. It is possible that what made men “unable for women” was a sexually transmitted disease, and in this way promiscuity was viewed as a form of witchcraft in itself. These “very secret places” normally resided in the genital region, and very frequently the symptoms of sexually transmitted diseases were mistaken for these diabolical markings. As a result, “blame [for diseases like genital warts] has been laid on origins like toads, witchcraft and God’s anger at promiscuous women” (McNeil). And of course the placement of the marks is very telling; witch-hunters could have suspected the marks to be on hands, which gathered herbs and made the “witch’s brew” and held potentially poisonous materials. Or they could have been on the witch’s mouth, which may have been believed physically disfigured by the diabolical prayers. The fact that these markings resided in the genital region, and most often emphasis was placed on the female gender of the suspected, underlines the anxieties surrounding the witches’/women’s sexuality. Magistrates and witch-hunters feared a promiscuous witch far more than a witch who may have been actually intent on doing harm.

The female witch as promiscuous poiser and rebellious anarchist stands in contrast to the vision of the male practitioner of magic the magician. Perhaps twenty percent of witchcraft trials involved men as the accused (Apps and Gow 25); however, the image of the witch is in many ways different from the image of the magician. Often, as in the case of more famous magical occultists, like John Dee, Edward Kelley or Cornelius Agrippa, they worked to reinforce the political order rather than disrupt it. John Dee was astrologer to Elizabeth I; Edward Kelley travelled to Bohemia to practice the occult with Emperor Rudolf II; and Agrippa was an accomplished lecturer and lawyer. However, with the transition from Elizabeth to James, John Dee’s status as natural philosopher and “good” magician fell into jeopardy as James had a less flexible view of witchcraft and magic, and the famous School of the Night — which included Christopher Marlowe, Henry Percy, and Simon Forman — was investigated by Robert Cecil, minister under James, for activities of blasphemy and treason (Deacon 268; Cook 64-66).
It seems then that the male version of magical practitioner was often more tolerated because it was practiced within the realm of the established order, either in the university or the government. Many were suspected and even investigated for black magic that would lead to harm, but in many cases the charges were dropped. The difference between the transmission of knowledge seems to be a key difference between “witchcraft” and “sorcery,” the sorcerer's or magician's knowledge was passed through an acceptably and more easily controllable form of textual transmission; meanwhile, the witch's knowledge was communicated orally, in a non-literate form, making it less tangible and perhaps more threatening.

**Visual Representation of Witchcraft**

This preoccupation with a witch's sexuality becomes more obvious in visual depictions of witches in the early modern period, as the image of the dangerous promiscuous witch “received strong visual reinforcement in the engravings of Hans Baldung Grien, who depicted witches as the embodiment of female sexual power” (Levack 138). Hans Baldung Grien, among the other painters, engravers, and woodcutters of this period, stressed the sexuality of witches along with their supernatural powers.

In the images of Hans Baldung Grien the witches are extremely sexualized and their nakedness draws less attention to their maleficia and more attention to the seductive nature of the exaggerated voluptuousness of the female form. The danger seems to lie in their sexualized beauty and in the temptation that beauty offers; this is especially true in the image of “Two Witches” (1523), where one of the two women catches the glance of the portrait's viewer. She is unsurprised and seems to invite the voyeurism. However, a warning appears to come from the background, behind the second witch: a surprised and seemingly frightened child crouches uncomfortably in the background, looking uncertain toward the viewer.

Here Grien paints the perfect contrast between the Virginal Mother-Figure and her inversion: the Sensual Witch-Figure. The Mother, who is clothed and enclosed within the household, is juxtaposed with the naked Witch standing out in the elements outside of the domestic sphere, creating a dichotomy between walled imprisonment and motherhood, and freedom and witchcraft. Furthermore, the child sends a grim reminder to the viewer, prompting the deep anxiety of cannibalistic infanticide, which was common in the folklore surrounding witchcraft and the Witch’s Sabbath. Children appear in both of the Baldung Grien images, and it seems that wherever a sexualized naked witch appears in early modern depictions, a child is hidden in the background as a dark warning to the viewer.

The old witch makes an appearance in Baldung Grien’s “Witches Departing the Sabbath” and, like the younger witches in the foreground, she is also naked. However, this does not negate the possibility of erotic interpretation. The prevailing notion of the aged and unattractive witch is not antithetical to the notion of witch as motivated by sexuality. In a world where the ideal woman was virginal and inexperienced, an older and more sexually experienced woman had the possibility of evoking great anxiety (Levack 143). The image of the Sabbath contains not just the sexual aspect of two women, but also those juxtaposed portrayals of the women. Again, the old midwife is engaged in maleficium instead of magical healing, and the beautiful young women are naked and exposed with the worrying placement of the child among the skulls. The household objects and pets are transformed into the witch’s cauldron and diabolic familiars.

If animals play a leading role in folkloric beliefs of witchcraft, they play an even more prevalent role in its images. Whether a witch is at the Sabbath or in her home, more often than not, she is either surrounded by animals or becomes them. The witch’s ability to communicate with, or even become animals is a testimony to her supernatural power. Joseph Glanvill wrote in the middle of the seventeenth century that a witch’s ability to become animal was related to a mother’s ability to control the fetus.

THE Transformation of Witches into the shapes of other Animals, upon the same supposal is very conceivable, since then 'tis easy enough to imagine, that the power of imagination may form those passive, and pliable vehicles [the witches themselves] into those shapes, with more ease than the fancy of the Mother can the stubborn matter of the Foetus in the womb, as we see it frequently doth in the instances that occur of [...] monstrous Singularities. (17)

Although many scholars have claimed that the witch’s relation to the animal makes her subhuman based on man’s superiority over animals, in many pre-Christian pagan faiths in Europe, a relation to the animal placed the witch among the sacred or divine — especially when considering that in both of the displayed figures the witches engage in supernatural activities: flying and raising storms. In Ulrich Molitor’s “Witches Riding to the Sabbath” (1489), the witches resemble the anthropomorphic Egyptian Gods. In Olaus Magnus’ plate “Witches Brewing up a storm” (1555), animals in the brush look on as a woman creates a storm so terrible that it endangers the sailors at sea, disrupting travel and commerce, an area of life with which women were not meant to be involved. This transformation of the human into animal enjoys a path of independence, and a line of escape, where the essence of the animal
lies in freedom (Deleuze and Guattari 13). In this way, images of women-animals act as a gateway through which women could pass in order to escape human and so-deemed “civilized” notions of domesticity and household duty, reverting to the primitive animal in all its aggressive emotional unchaining.

Yet, when witches practice their art within the realm of the domestic household they are the most dangerous, as this is the space traditionally associated with feminine power and authority. In an attempt perhaps to claim all human realms for masculine power, James I wrote that the household is like the state, and that there must be a strong male leader. James as head-of-state mirrors the father as head-of-household, denying women their traditional role as domestic authority. This desire could have been fueled by depictions of women witches using their domestic authority in a dangerous way.

Published in 1645, not long after the end of James’s reign, one of the very few cases in England of a witch being burned at the stake — witchcraft was usually punishable by hanging — was that of the “Professour of Religion,” Mother Lakeland, who used witchcraft to kill her husband (The laws against witches, and contempation 7-8). This inversion of the patriarchal household and community’s social hierarchy caused extreme unease. Previous to Mother Lakeland, the only crime in England punishable by burning was treason; therefore, since she was not simply hanged, her rebellion against her husband may have been conceived as a threat to the state. Any revolt against the existing hierarchy threatened the monarchy — since the king had believed that the male head-of-household is symbol for the head-of-state — and Mother Lakeland’s sentence of the stake is a testimony to her perceived rebellion, intentional or unintentional, against that hierarchy.

In Olaus Magnus’s “A Witch Conjuring up Demons,” a witch commits what is considered the most heinous of crimes, using witchcraft to kill a man. While the relation to the man is not specified, it can be assumed that the man is her husband or a close relation, since he is in the space of the house. A very similar image by Hans Baldung Grien portrays a witch practicing maleficium upon a man who is called the “groom,” drawing attention to the relationship of maternity. Both the Olaus Magnus and the Grien images illustrate the witch within the confines of the home, inverting the role of the housewife into that of the witch or usurper of domestic power (Purkiss 97).

It can be no coincidence that many queens and female rulers were accused of being witches. In fact, the accusation of witchcraft lingers around so many powerful women in the early modern period that the first tetralogy of Shakespeare focuses on the connection between witchcraft accusations and politically powerful women. Joan of Arc, Eleanor, Duchess of Gloucester, and other women in his plays are accused of witchcraft or use witchcraft for political gain (Willis 4). The idea of the state acts as a symbolic mother, to be ruled over by the King-Father. For those dependent on these allegorical mothers, feelings of anger or hostility could be as dangerous or internally threatening as for actual mothers, and this hostility found an outlet in the figure of the witch in Shakespeare’s plays (19).

Witchcraft and the Stage

Although James positioned himself as the father of a family politically and religiously unified, the reality was very different. He demanded to be viewed as divinely sanctioned authority with absolute powers, which caused problems among many of the English. His self-appointed position of father, king and god of the state opposed the opinions of his people, who viewed him as too Scottish, too stubborn, and too selfish to be able to understand or represent them (McDermott 1). Against the moral ambiguity of much of the Jacobean drama of playwrights like Shakespeare, court masques model the fantasies of the king or the patron because they were officially sponsored works of the court and are therefore key when attempting to understand the monarch’s mind. Masques could even have functioned as non-religious ritual, performed to reinforce the power of the court and lend weight to James’s view of himself as divine ruler (McDermott 3; Orgel 45). Against these regal mirrors, the plays of Shakespeare and Thomas Dekker represent a moral ambiguity. By placing court masques beside public performances of Shakespeare, Dekker, and Jonson, two patterns of deviance and political subversion emerge, which make use of the scholarship of James I, especially that of witchcraft, but often in a way that then presents a counter-argument and an alternative perspective.

Ben Jonson eagerly attempted to gain patronage, and some critics say that his desire for patronage was so obsessive that some believe that his writing suffered as a result (McDermott 7). Jonson’s obsessive desire to stay in royal favor might have influenced him even to mimic James’s 1617 return to Scotland as Jonson made a similar journey, walking from London to Edinburgh. His plays The Alchemist, the Masque of Queens and the Masque of Beauty, all exhibit his extensive knowledge of demonology and occult philosophy, drawing on classical learning and popular folklore to create plots that would interest both James and Anne.

In the Masque of Beauty and the Masque of Queens, Jonson brings Hecate — who amongst many roles assumed, was “queen” of the witches and goddess of the moon — into the foreground, describing her in the Masque of Beauty.
The Nights black charmes are flowne.
For being made unto their Goddesse knowne,
Bright Ethiopia, the Cullier Moorene,
As she was Hecate. (l. 87-90)

This fashioning of the moon as feminine, commonplace in European literature, would later reappear in Selden’s citation of Spartanus:

It is known to the learned, who received the tradition, that it is now especially held among the Carrendans, that he who shall believe that the moon is called by a female name and sex shall be addicted to women and always serve them; but he who shall believe that the moon is a male god shall rule over his wife, nor shall he suffer any from female wiles. (91)

Here, attributing a female gender to the moon condemns the speaker to always be subservient to his wife, while if the speaker were to assume the moon to be a male god, he would rule over his wife and not fall victim to any of her feminine wiles. The dominance of feminine over masculine in reference to Hecate is repeated in Jonson’s Masque of Queens when the witches describe raising a storm.

You that have seen me ride when Hecate
Durst not take chariot, when the boisterous sea
Without a breath of wind hath knocked the sky,
And that hath thundered, Jove not knowing why. (l. 222-25)

Many Jacobean plays refer back to this sea-storm conjured up by witches, which could allude to James’s voyage to Denmark for his wedding when witches supposedly attempted to disrupt his union with his bride-to-be (Kolb 338-9). Here the witches mention Hecate in the context of the sea-storm, which “hath thundered, Jove not knowing why.” Jove, being the king of heaven, represents James who had placed himself as earthly-divine sovereign. This inversion of power, from the masculine to the feminine, is typical within dramatic depictions of witches. The witches, in raising the storm and subverting the power of Jove, embody a threat to the state in the form of chaos. James I positioned himself as father of state and household within his court, and took on the role of moral authority. However, he was also potentially engaging in submissive homosexual relationships with younger men, which could have caused anxiety in regards to his sexual identity or the defendability of his professed morality. Causing further disorder and confusion was the confident and decided queen who pushed against James’s authoritarianism, throwing into chaos his model of virtuous hierarchy (McDermott 7).

In the masque, these subversive examples of feminine power in the witches are enacted in their promiscuity, as they unlace and untie their clothing, and in their bodies as reproductive agents; in their ritual they use “both milk and blood, the dew and the flood” (Jonson 249, 311) — a reference to menstrual

blood and breast milk — to raise demons, and mandrake root to have power over “male sexual potency” and achieve a “magic birth” (McDermott 113n, 118n). However, the blurred boundaries of the female body manifested in the witches are not met with convincing counter-forces to bring stability to the gender inversion, and to place the masculine again above the feminine. Although the witches’ knotted hair “folded with vipers” is met with the antithesis of the hero Perseus (Jonson, 98, 357), his power is only in reflection and castration, further de-masculinating the power balance. Jonson further shadowed the supposed counter-forces of the effeminizing witches into ambiguity when he includes Valasca of Bohemia amidst the House of Fame (399). Valasca seems more closely in line with the morality of the witches than a courtly system of female Fame (McDermott 125n), as Valasca used magic to blind the men whom she defeated in battle and dispossess them of their thumbs, perhaps another blinding and dismemberment symbolic of the reflection and castration of Medusa by Perseus, further demonstrating the link between witchcraft and the threat to the gender hierarchy.

Similarly, gender and magic play a forward role in Macbeth, and issues of control surround the prophecies of the three witches; if the witches foretell the future it is possible that they control the future actions of the protagonist, or by persuasion influence Macbeth to carry out their mysterious wills. Different productions of the play have given the witches varying level of control; one of the most notorious examples is Tyrone Guthrie’s Old Vic production in 1934, in which he began the play with the three witches — removing the first two scenes — by claiming that they were not written by Shakespeare. James Agate remarks in his Sunday Times review of the performance:

by making the Weird Sisters open the play, one cannot avoid the implication that they are a governing influence of the tragedy...Surely the grandeur of the tragedy lies in the fact that Macbeth and Lady Macbeth are ruined by precisely those qualities that make them great...All this is undermined by any suggestion that the Weird Sisters are in control of events. (qtd. in Braunmuller 32)

Perhaps when Agate wrote “governing” in reference to the witches, he was not too far off; the witches are involving themselves in affairs of state in suggesting that Macbeth will become the king. Furthermore, Shakespeare reconnects the murder of the king to James in a rambling aside by Lady Macbeth, as she says, “Had he not resembled my father as he slept” (II.i.13), and since James stressed the relationship between King and Father, the king’s murder breaches many of James’s laws and violates several of the principles in his writings. The power of witchcraft allows women to move from affairs of
household to affairs of state, aided by the connection between them, which was reinforced by the writings of James.

The father as head of household and king as head of state become inverted with power being seized by the witches and their prophecies. And with the influence of the female figures in the play — Lady Macbeth and the Weird Sisters, the former practicing a sort of domestic witchcraft within the home, while the latter represent the outdoor and more wild elements of witchcraft — rising, so their gender becomes more difficult to distinguish as they cast aside traditional roles and acquire new masculine, or anti-maternal, positions, and appearances. When Banquo first sees the witches, he is unsure of their gender: "You should be women/And yet your beards forbid me to interpret/that you are so" (I. iii. 45-7). And Lady Macbeth, just before or simultaneous to her demonic possession, conjures spirits.

Come, you spirits
That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here [...] Come to my woman's breasts; And take my milk for gall. (I. iv. 40-8)

Here Lady Macbeth demands to become un-gendered, un-feminized, and de-maternalized. Her milk, a traditional symbol of motherhood and fertility, becomes the food of demons, forsaking the possibility of human offspring and reproduction as she has become 'unsexed' and her breasts become promised to the possessing spirits.

The witch occupies the wicked opposite of the ideal mother/housewife, therefore operating as a figure of the "anti-housewife," "usurping household authority" (Purkiss 97). And the image of the breastfeeding mother, which caused apprehension because the boundary between child and mother becomes difficult to distinguish (99-100), is inverted into a Maternal Witch whose breasts give only sour or rancid blood, or in the case of Lady Macbeth, inconsumable gall (Shakespeare I. iv. 40-8). This corporeal inconsistancy leads the imagination to conjure up the supposition that what is nurturing and wholesome can be potentially and unexpectedly shifted into something dreadful and foul. However, it is also a conjuration of power, and the witch was representative of a female power that disturbs predominant societal norms.

The Self-Identification of the Witch

It was not unusual for accusations of witchcraft to follow women who were deemed to have too much power, whether domestic or political (Belsey 185-86). In the parliament buildings or in the small dwellings of the rural villages in the countryside, the identification of "witch" was an identification of relative power, and in most communities the position of "witch" was the highest position of respect attainable for women — especially unmarried women. Many women identified with the witch-figure because magic was one of the only ways for women (especially elderly and unmarried women) to gain respect and protection in their villages and communities (Holmes 52; Levack 13). Since women did not have the same political and physical strength of their male counterparts, a few of them decided to arm themselves with herbs. The power of these witch-figures in rural areas was such that in Knaresborough Forest, the residents lived side-by-side with various groups of witches that were so powerful that their rich, non-magical neighbors would bring them unrequested gifts and dared not to refuse them anything (Holmes 52). Such stories of women with power were doubtless appealing to other women who were poverty-stricken, looking for a means to better their situation. Many women, like the aforementioned "Professor of Religion" Lakeland, a self-proclaimed witch for twenty years, took the route of identifying themselves as sorcerers to gain a small modicum of local power.

When a woman named Anne Bodenham was brought to trial in 1653, she fashioned her identity not as the traditionally illiterate witch-figure, but as a learned magician; she was perhaps an example of a woman intentionally taking on the position of powerful practitioner of magic and witchcraft in order to gain respect (Purkiss 148). In an age when witches were so intensely persecuted, a woman might put herself in the dangerous position of identifying with the witch-figure, when the roles into which women were raised were very narrow by definition: woman as producer of children and the one who maintained the household and its economy. Folkloric beliefs that constructed stories of witchcraft "were caught up in this network of meanings. For women, a witch was a figure who could be read against and within her own social identity as housewife and mother" (Purkiss 94), allowing women temporarily or permanently to transcend the social roles that could seem, for some women, oppressive and limiting.

Outside of witchcraft, with its attendant legend, literature, and art, there was little space in early modern culture for women to even utter their anxieties about these roles they were bound into playing; therefore, their fantasies were funneled into stories of the witch: the witch who refused to marry, who defied her children, and who had the power over her village; the “witch is the dark other of the early modern woman, expressing and acting on desires the other women must repress to construct their identities as mothers” (Purkiss 100). Stories of abandoning their inhibitions and society's heavy standards and of turning to magic trickled down off the stage and into the
villages, luring many women into rediscovering, or reinventing, themselves as those very figures that seemed to promise so much power and influence. Thus witchcraft offered a way to gain respect by capitalizing on the fear of a political upheaval, allowing increased political and domestic influence within villages, towns, and even on the stages, the courtrooms, and the courts.

Notes

1. For more information on the phenomenon of “canibalistic infanticide,” see Jan Zrânko, “The Witches’ Banquet.” Also see John Cotta, The infallible true and assured witch.

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