

Lyndal Roper

## Witchcraft and Fantasy in Early Modern Germany



Born in 1956 in Melbourne, Australia. She graduated from the University of Melbourne, studied at the Universities of Tübingen and Augsburg and completed her Ph.D. at King's College, University of London. After a time as a Junior Research Fellow at Merton College Oxford, she taught at King's College London before moving to Royal Holloway, University of London where she has worked as a Lecturer since 1987. Publications: *The Holy Household: Religion and Morals in Reformation Augsburg*, Oxford 1989 (paperback 1991); with Jim Obelkevich and Raphael Samuel, ed., *Disciplines of Faith. Studies in Religion, Politics and Patriarchy*, (Routledge, paperback 1987); many essays. — Address: Department of History, Royal Holloway, University of London, Egham Hill, Egham Surrey TW20 OEX.

I came to Berlin with two projects, one to complete a collection of my essays on sexual identity and culture in early modern Germany; the other, to start a larger project on fantasy and witchcraft; and despite my best intentions, constantly found my attention wandering to the new work on imagination and witches. Here, the source material from seventeenth century Augsburg on which I was working dealt with extreme violence toward the old; with witch-smoking, a procedure by which an elderly woman was proved to be a witch by forcing her to defecate, with extreme hatred and fear of elderly, post-maternal women. This was a world where, as one witch put it, people did not like old women to give children food or gifts - presents meant harm. A central theme which emerged in this material, so it seems to me, is motherhood, and attitudes to post-menopausal women. When a young baby died, people might seek the cause of the death in the envy or hostility of old women toward the child or its parents. Breast-feeding and interruption of the flow of milk, poisoning by means of liquids given by older women, reversal of the direction of nourishing flows of liquid are some of the recurrent themes. Such images permit the expression and organization in narrative and imagery of unbearable feelings.

Witch cases, unlike almost any other contemporary source, offer us a

window onto the imaginative, psychic experience of early modern people; and I wanted to use this material not so much to develop an interpretation of witchcraft as to learn from it about early modern subjectivities. The questions which interested me were how far these motifs were historical at all, or how far concerns about mother-child relationships were simply perennial conflicts, at least in the Christian west. For, despite the historical specificity of witchcraft prosecutions, the material with which witch fantasies deal seemed to me to be oddly *not* historical. The time at the Wissenschaftskolleg enabled me to explore psychoanalytic literature, and to read the criminal records of witch trials with the kind of full absorption not otherwise possible. This was not a research strategy which I would ever have devised or recommended, and it entailed a much greater investment of feeling and imagination than is normal in historical research, where the exercise of historical discipline often consists in distancing oneself from the past by insisting on its otherness, on the ways human beings are historical products. I deliberately set out to suspend such assumptions, and this was a risk I would not have taken without such a year.

These ideas were further strengthened by additional material on which I worked during my stay in the archives at Nördlingen. This town experienced a brief but intense witchhunt between 1589 and 1594—8, with over thirty executions in a population of some 6,000. The archive is housed in the building where one of the witches most likely lived; on the square outside the archive, the witches allegedly danced; and it was in the parlours of the houses just around the corner, so their accusers said, that the witches boiled the flesh of babies which they had dug out of the local graveyard. Cannibalism is a staple of witchcraft accusations, but in this town, so it seemed to me, it provided the imaginative logic of the witchhunt, as each witch was forced to provide her own version of the narrative. Here again, maternal themes seem to be important: fear of the maternal figure who does not nourish but feeds on children, fear of groups of women who are believed to feast together in their parlours. These elements seem to play a greater role than, for example, diabolic themes: accounts of sex with the Devil, though these are also given, or reports of signing of the pact, are less elaborated. My aim here was to uncover the logic of fantasy revealed in the witchcraft trials, not to trace it back to earlier mythic strands, as Carlo Ginzburg has recently done, but to set it within the context of psychic conflicts and contemporary mental structures — undeniably Christian, it seemed to me.

The material has turned into about four or five chapters of a book; while the first project of the essay collection is nearly completed. In putting together the essay collection I was most preoccupied with re-thinking certain feminist positions about the social construction of gender identity;

and with historians' claims about the nature of subjectivity in early modern Europe. Talking with other scholars at the Wissenschaftskolleg helped me to think about these issues much more clearly; even more important perhaps, in thinking about bodies and how people in the past understood themselves as corporal beings, was the movement class which Amos Hertz ran at the Kolleg.

The year also gave me the chance to get to know my own generation of historians in Germany. I travelled to Tübingen, Saarbrücken, Bielefeld, Koblenz, Augsburg, Stuttgart, Munich, Hannover as well as to Florence and the UK, giving papers and lectures and meeting other historians. The benefit of this was incalculable: I now feel part of a community of early modernists in Germany as much as I do in Britain, and this is challenging and unexpected. The German language tuition given by Eva Hund enabled me to become much more confident of my written German. The experience of living in a city like Berlin, with its doubled culture and endless surprises, is addictive. Hearing Joachim Gauck on the problems of dealing with East Germany's Stasi legacy, or seeing the film *Der schwarze Kasten* about a Stasi official changed the ways we all thought about secrecy, moral controls and the state. It made me wonder about German culture and moralism since the Reformation, the nature of interrogation procedures and the kinds of documentation they produce, and the effects of secrecy.

Above all, the year in Berlin gave me time to think. This is easy to say, and yet the effects of the year have — and will — make a not always comfortable difference to both my work and my life.