

ELCS0014:
Witches in History, Fiction and Scholarship

Professor Susanne Kord

I. Course Description: This course focuses on three aspects of witches and the witch persecutions:

- **historical:** the "Burning Times" in early modern Europe and witch-hunting in Colonial America;
- **literary:** the depiction of the witch in fairy tales (the Grimm-tradition) and in 'serious' literature and film, particularly literature that purports to rely on historical sources (from Hans Sachs to Arthur Miller);
- and **scholarly:** the explanations that scholars have sought for one of the most horrific instances of mass destruction in world history.



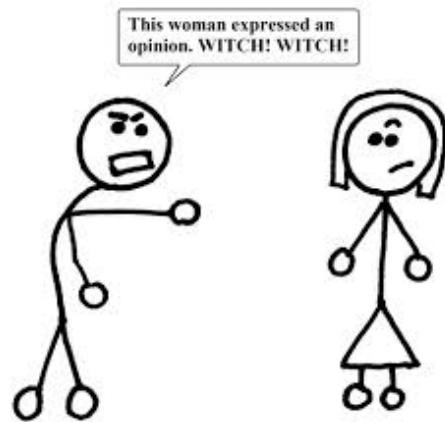
II. Course Goals: Unlike the Holocaust, to which the witch-hunts are frequently compared, the persecution of witches cannot be viewed as a relatively brief and unusually violent historical anomaly, since it continued over several hundred years; they cannot be explained in the context of national specificity since they spanned almost the entire European continent and migrated to early America; nor can these events be blamed on any single "madman" (Hitler). As a historical phenomenon, the witch persecution defies simplistic explanations and thus lends itself particularly well to the kinds of investigation this course intends.



Students will be exposed to a variety of text types (historical, theological/ philosophical, fictional, cinematic and scholarly) spanning several hundreds of years, with the goal of gaining a broad historical background of the witch-hunts and the historical representation of witches. The variety of the readings, from trial records to religious tracts to representations in literature, pop culture and scholarship, will expose students to historical sources as well as scholarly criticism and, more importantly, a variety of argumentation styles and authorial 'positionailities' with regard to the representation of witches. Reading for representation as well as information, students will be encouraged to critique historical as well as fictional sources and investigate the truth-claims of both (what are the underlying assumptions of historical accounts; which historical accounts are more credible, which less, and why; to what extent can fiction claim to represent any empirical 'truth'; what purposes does each kind of narrative serve?).

Knowledge of original/contemporary writings on the witch-hunts, by both hunters and defenders, is designed not only to expose students to unmediated historical source material,

but also to encourage them to think of themselves as scholars and to enable them to critique secondary sources. Central to the discussion will be questions of perception and reception of witches, as a literary topos as well as a historical reality interpreted by the author: the question how and why the witch and the witch-hunt became 'art,' which historical aspects may have inspired writers to take up this theme, how history shaped imagination in some instances (and how history, in turn, was re-imagined in other instances) and what symbolic value was (and is) attached to witches in literature throughout the ages.



The course thus aims to

- hone students' critical and interpretive skills by exposing them to a variety of materials (historical, theological/philosophical, literary, cinematic, documentary and scholarly sources)
- encourage students to work in an interdisciplinary fashion by engaging both history and aesthetics. The benefit for students will be to examine the underlying assumptions and methodologies of a discipline in comparison with those of another. The course attempts to branch out, to some degree, beyond history into historiography and beyond literature into literary criticism, in an effort to raise students' awareness of the assumptions behind the writing of others and thus to become as conscious of their own assumptions while writing as possible.

III. Course Assessment: There will be one 3 hr. desk examination (100% of final mark, to be scheduled during Term III). You will be asked to address all three subject areas listed below in the exam, and you may not write in any area more than once:

- Assessment of original historical sources and trial records; critical evaluation of contemporary arguments both in favour of and opposed to the witch-hunts.
- Critical assessment of literary or cinematic sources, or of how historical material relating to the witch-hunts, including trial records, was adapted in literary or cinematic texts (1-2 of students' choice).
- Critical analysis of an argument presented in one secondary source, focusing on scholarly attempts to 'explain' the witch-hunts as a historical occurrence. Assessment of usage of historical sources (which are used and how, which are ignored and why, how scholarly argumentation adapts, represents, deviates from, or contradicts its source materials).



Weekly Syllabus:

1 Introduction (Lecture): Witches in History and Art

2 Trial and Interrogation Records of Witch Trials:

The Confessions of the Chelmsford Witches (Essex, 1566)
The Prosecutions at Trier (Germany, 1581-93)
The Prosecutions at Bamberg (Germany, 1628)
The Prosecutions at Würzburg (Germany, 1629)
The Trial of Suzanne Gaudry (France, 1652)
Trial Records of Tituba the Indian (Salem, Massachusetts, 1691-92)
The Recantation of the Salem Village Jurors (Salem, Massachusetts, 1693)

3 Texts by Witchhunters:

Pope Innocent VIII, 'Summis desiderantis affectibus' (1484)
Heinrich Kramer and Jacob Sprenger, *The Malleus Maleficarum (The Hammer of Witches*, 1487, excerpts)
Cotton Mather, 'A Discourse on Witches' (1689, excerpts)

4 Texts by Doubters and Sceptics:

Reginald Scot, 'Discoverie of Witchcraft' (1584, excerpts)
Alonzo de Salazar Frias, 'Dissenting Verdict in a Witch Trial' (1610)
Friedrich Spee von Lengenfeld, *Cautio Criminalis* (1631, excerpts)
Balthasar Bekker, *The Enchanted World* (1690, excerpts)
Robert Calef, *More Wonders of the Invisible World* (1700, excerpts)

5 Witches in Early Literature:

Hans Sachs, 'Witchfinding' (1556)
William Shakespeare, *Macbeth* (1607, excerpt)
Jakob and Wilhelm Grimm: 'Hansel and Gretel' (1st and 3rd ed.); 'Brier Rose'; 'Snow White'

Reading Week

6 Witches in Twentieth-Century Drama and Film:

Arthur Miller, *The Crucible* (1953)
Julia Klein, 'Pale Fire of a New Crucible' (review, 2002)
Arthur Miller, 'Looking for the Conscience' (commentary, 2003)

7 Witches in Twentieth-Century Drama and Film:

Caryl Churchill, *Vinegar Tom* (1976)
Film: *The Blair Witch Project* (1999)

8 Witches in Scholarly Debate:

Cohn, 'The Myth of Satan and His Human Servants' (1970)

Karlsen, 'Handmaidens of the Devil' (1989)

Barstow, 'The Structure of a Witchhunt' (1994)

9 Witches in Scholarly Debate:

Starhawk, 'The Burning Times' (1982)

Purkiss, 'A Holocaust of One's Own' (1996)

Bovenschen, 'The Contemporary Witch, the Historical Witch, and the Witch Myth' (1978)

10 Conclusions



Witches in History, Myth and Fiction: Selected Bibliography

Sources marked in yellow are in languages other than English



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