

*Male Maleficium: Sex, Power, and Male Witchcraft in Early Modern Germany*

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From 1626-1631, amidst the chaos of the Thirty Years War, the prince-bishop Philipp Adolf von Ehrenberg of Würzburg beheaded and burned at the stake nearly a thousand of his countrymen. Women, children, and men of all ranks in society—including von Ehrenberg's nephew—were seemingly arbitrarily sent to their deaths for the crime of witchcraft.<sup>1</sup> Yet the city of Würzburg was not the only place gripped with hunts and executions; witch trials were happening in Trier, Bamberg, Fulda, and in other towns on a smaller scale throughout the Holy Roman Empire.<sup>2</sup> To the modern eye, the indiscriminate nature of these killings counters the traditional view of what type of person would be considered a witch. After all, the traditional witch is a sexualized woman; she copulates with a demon to gain powers and perform harmful magic (*maleficium*). However, while early modern German men primarily acted as observers, judges, or witch-hunters in trials, a not insignificant 20-25 percent of accused witches were male.<sup>3</sup>

During this period, the Holy Roman Empire experienced the highest number of witch trials in all of Europe, with 4,575 men accused.<sup>4</sup> Men appeared in all positions of power in trials, making witchcraft a fascinating lens for investigating the masculinity and sexuality of early modern German men. As this paper will elucidate, men used magic to construct their manhood in

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<sup>1</sup> The Prosecutions at Würzburg (1629) in *Witchcraft in Europe, 400-1700: A Documentary History*, ed. Alan Charles Kors and Edward Peters (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), 353-355

<sup>2</sup> Rolf Schulte, *Man as Witch: Male Witches in Central Europe*, trans. Linda Froome-Döring (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 3-16.

<sup>3</sup> Gary K. Waite, *Heresy, Magic, and Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 7.

<sup>4</sup> Brian P. Levack, *The Witch-Hunt in Early Modern Europe*, (Harlow, UK: Pearson Education Limited, 2006), 142.

order to rise above other men and define themselves in opposition to women, often through sexual methods. Magic was used to externalize anxieties around impotence or feminization to maintaining masculinity. Men also used witchcraft to dominate women and reassert their power, sexual dominance, and the patriarchal structure of early modern German society.

Until recently, the historiography of witchcraft primarily focused on female experiences along with class and societal explanations of witch-hunts, often disregarding the elements of gender and sexuality.<sup>5</sup> Early radical feminist perspectives on trials emerged in the twentieth century and incorporated gender analysis by arguing that the witch-hunts were tantamount to gynocide.<sup>6</sup> However, this view was ridiculed by mainstream historians who saw it as oversimplification and an “ahistorical” application of ideas of patriarchy and misogyny.<sup>7</sup> In the mid-2000s, a group of historians sought to provide a more nuanced investigation into the sex-specific nature of witchcraft by incorporating both male and female witch perspectives into their theories.<sup>8</sup> Alison Rowlands, a key figure in this movement and male witch historian, notes that the wide variety in age and rank of men persecuted defied typification.<sup>9</sup> Hence, a regionally-specific analysis is necessary.

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<sup>5</sup> Elspeth Whitney, “The Witch “She”/The Historian “He””: Gender and the Historiography of the European Witch-Hunts,” *Journal of Women’s History* 7 (3) 1995: 77-78.

<sup>6</sup> Alison Rowlands, “Witchcraft and Gender in Early Modern Europe,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Witchcraft* ed. Brian P. Levack, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 451.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Christine Larner, *Enemies of God: The Witch-Hunt in Scotland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 92.

<sup>9</sup> Alison Rowlands, “Not ‘the Usual Suspects’? Male Witches, Witchcraft, and Masculinities in Early Modern Europe,” in *Witchcraft and Masculinities in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Alison Rowlands (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 13-17.

Even within Germany, no stereotype for male witches exists so a debate surrounding their masculinities has developed. Early modern German historian Rolf Schulte categorizes male witches as ‘feminized men’ who carry female attributes.<sup>10</sup> Lara Apps and Andrew Gow assert that this feminization of male witches represents a period of crisis in masculinity associated with the Protestant Reformation.<sup>11</sup> Robert Walinski-Kiehl and Rita Voltmer deviate slightly from this view by emphasizing that male witches violate masculinity norms by displaying negative social and moral attributes and contravening sexual behavior by committing adultery and bigamy.<sup>12</sup> Whether these men were feminized or sexually deviant is up for debate but their sexuality remains a dominant feature of the trials. Rowlands adds that when trials do not explicitly mention sex, men still metamorphose into animals which act as metaphors for deviant sexuality; the sexual aspects of witchcraft are always omnipresent.<sup>13</sup>

In contrast to negative attributes of male magic that the majority of scholars investigate, Frances Timbers argues that “ritual magic” reflects the transformation in masculinity from ‘ancient martial’ to ‘modern gentlemen’ roles. Ritual magic was seen as an alchemic science different from the magic of female witches and was used by a man to assert his manhood through his industry. It reinforced distinctions and gender ideologies, along with a man’s reputation and

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<sup>10</sup> Schulte, *Man as Witch*, 148.

<sup>11</sup> Lara Apps and Andrew Colin Gow, *Gender at Stake: Male Witches in Early Modern Europe* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), 5.

<sup>12</sup> Robert Walkinski-Kiehl, “Males, ‘Masculine Honour,’ and Witch-hunting in Seventeenth-Century Germany,” *Men and Masculinities*, 6 (2004), 265; Rita Voltmer, “Witch-Finders, Witch-Hunters or Kings of the Sabbath? The Prominent Role of Men in the Mass Persecutions of the Rhine-Meuse Area (Sixteenth-Seventeenth Centuries),” in *Witchcraft and Masculinities in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Alison Rowlands (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 93.

<sup>13</sup> Rowlands, “Not ‘the Usual Suspects’?,” 208.

honor.<sup>14</sup> Eva Labouvie also notes that witchcraft reinforced gender roles; male magic was tied to wealth and labor while female magic was almost exclusively *maleficium*, tied to childbirth, love, and death.<sup>15</sup>

Along with the debate around what type of man was accused of witchcraft and how historians understand the intersection of witchcraft and gender roles, a view into the psychological underpinnings of male witches is necessary. Lyndal Roper proposes psychological causations for female witch persecutions which include sadism and sexual violence on behalf of witch-hunters and prosecutors.<sup>16</sup> However, the role of sexuality in witch-hunts has been primarily focused on witch-hunters and female witches. To add to this recent research, this paper will analyze the sexual aspects of witchcraft as they intersect with masculinity in early modern Germany. This will further our understanding of how men asserted their sexual dominance at this time.

Themes of masculinity from both demonological texts and witch trials will be analyzed to determine attributes of male witches and witch-hunters. As maleness is often defined in opposition to an ‘other,’ language and symbolism which feminize men or describe them as lesser beasts will be examined. Additionally, features of trials which reaffirm hegemonic male

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<sup>14</sup> Frances Timbers, *Magic and Masculinity: Ritual Magic and Gender in the Early Modern Period* (London: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd. 2014), 1-2, 34-36.

<sup>15</sup> Eva Labouvie, “Men in Witchcraft Trials: Towards a social anthropology of “male” understandings of magic and witchcraft,” in *Gender in Early Modern German History*, ed. U. Rublack (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 49-68.

<sup>16</sup> Lyndal Roper, *Witch Craze: Terror and Fantasy in Baroque Germany*, (Yale: Yale University Press, 2004), 59.

structures will be used to illustrate the prevalence of masculine anxieties and the importance of sexual power in German manhood during this period.

Religious developments following the Reformation in 1517 and the Catholic counter-reformation especially “encouraged the growth of witch-hunting,” leading to the highest number of hunts in Germany from 1520-1650.<sup>17</sup> While the link between the Reformation and witch-hunting is not directly causal, historian Brian Levack argues that increased emphasis by reformers on a fear of the devil, personal sanctity and piety, and attacks on magic and paganism with an aim to purify Christian society ultimately encouraged witch-hunts.<sup>18</sup> The high numbers of male witches in Catholic regions instead of Protestant towns is largely attributable to the translation of Exodus 22:18 “thou shalt not suffer a witch to live.”<sup>19</sup> When Protestant reformers wrote the bible in the vernacular, the word “witch” became a feminine noun. However, the translation of the bible into German was blasphemous to Catholics who read “witch” in Latin as either male or female.<sup>20</sup> Hence, Protestant regions had primarily female witches, but Catholic regions had witches of both genders. As the Reformation contributed to increased witch-hunts and societal anxieties in Catholic regions, this research analyzes trials in Catholic or re-Catholicized towns along with demonological texts by Catholic preachers which influenced trials in those regions.

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<sup>17</sup> Levack, *Witch-Hunt*, 109.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.* 110-120.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.* 120.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

While campaigning against witchcraft with the aim of producing an ideal Christian community, Catholic preachers argued that women should be considered suspect as they lure men away from the path of heavenly perfection, away from the masculine ideal.<sup>21</sup> To the Church, the female witch acts as the inverse of the idealized virginal woman who had formed a mystical marriage with Christ, through the psychosexual connotations of the practice of witchcraft.<sup>22</sup> The sexual nature of women alone was dangerous, but female witches posed a greater threat to manhood because their sexuality was definitively tied to damnation.<sup>23</sup> Despite their accusations, preachers believed witches needed to exist to help stabilize the Church's power and the masculinity of the men who developed their manhood by ecclesiastical standards. This is because, from a theological perspective, demons needed to exist for angels to exist as well, and the presence of demons was proven through claiming witches were present to engage with them carnally.<sup>24</sup>

This feminine threat to masculinity transforms over time within demonological texts. In the first depictions of witchcraft, men and women are equally cited but this changed in the fifteenth-century when supernatural acts became almost exclusively reserved for women. Johannes Nider wrote in *The Formicarius* in 1435 that both men and women formed pacts with

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<sup>21</sup> Jeffrey Burton Russell, *Witchcraft in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1972), 283.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 284-285.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> Katherine Crawford, *European Sexualities, 1400-1800*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 91.

the devil, acted like beasts, and murdered infants.<sup>25</sup> A few decades later, Heinrich Kramer and Jacob Sprenger theorized in their *Malleus Maleficarum*, that dark magic was solely produced by women through their sexual bonds with demons, stating: “there are more workers of harmful magic found in the female sex, which is so frail and unstable, than among men,” and “it is common to all of them to practice carnal copulation with devils.”<sup>26</sup> The *Malleus Maleficarum* insists that the reason there are many female witches is due to a woman having “more fleshly lusts than a man, as is clear from her many acts of carnal filthiness.”<sup>27</sup>

These texts spread throughout Germany, reaching theologians including the Archbishop of Trier, Peter Binsfeld. In his *Tractus de Confessionibus Melficorum et Sagarum*, he pointed to the “weakness of understanding” that women possess. He argued that if men possessed similar emotional and intellectual instability, they would be vulnerable to the seductions of Satan. Binsfeld believed that all humans had a personal demon, an inverse guardian angel, which could lead them to the devil at any time.<sup>28</sup> To him, men could be drawn into witchcraft through sexual desire and alcohol.<sup>29</sup> After all, witchcraft presented to men attributes they should avoid: frailty, femininity, and a loss of autonomy and control of the body and mind. By succumbing to sinful

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<sup>25</sup> Johannes Nider, “The Formicarius” in *Witchcraft in Europe 400-1700: A Documentary History*, ed. Alan Charles Kors and Edward Peters, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), 157.

<sup>26</sup> Heinrich Kramer and Jacob Sprenger, *The Malleus Maleficarum*, trans. P.G. Maxwell-Stuart (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), 74.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*, 75.

<sup>28</sup> William E. Burns, *Witch-hunts in Europe and America: An Encyclopedia*, (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2003), 33.

<sup>29</sup> Schulte, *Man as Witch*, 148.

urges, men were feminized and performed “unchaste deeds with the devil.”<sup>30</sup> This transformation in demonology indicates that, over time, German men became accused of a largely feminine crime. Binsfeld built upon concepts of demonic seduction illustrated in the *Malleus* and incorporated the idea that men could also be vulnerable to demonic control. In doing so, he and other German demonologists knowingly threatened male security and forced men to meet *their* masculine standards of honorability in society. Because there was a possibility they could be tried for witchcraft, men were required to regulate their sexuality in accordance with standards set by other men who were not meant to engage in sexual activities at all.

Unsurprisingly, this climate led to considerable anxiety around male sexuality in Germany. Men were already aware of their requirement to be sexual in an appropriate fashion and channel their energies into reproduction. A man needed to provide evidence of his virility as his masculinity required a visible performance within society.<sup>31</sup> If he did not produce children, he deviated from that role and when no natural reason could account for his impotence, blame often shifted to the external. One potential explanation for impotence was witchcraft as demonological texts asserted that witches could “cause sterility in men and animals.”<sup>32</sup> The *Malleus* also stated that witches tied knots of threads to symbolize tying knots in a man’s seminal vessels.<sup>33</sup> Hence,

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<sup>30</sup> Peter Binsfeld, “Tractus de Confessionibus Maleficorum et Sagarum” in *Man as Witch: Male Witches in Central Europe*, trans. Linda Froome-Döring (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 120.

<sup>31</sup> Susan Broomhall and Jacqueline Van Gent, *Governing Masculinities in the Early Modern Period*, (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2011), 18.

<sup>32</sup> Kramer and Sprenger, *The Malleus Maleficarum*, 148.

<sup>33</sup> Catherine Rider, *Magic and Impotence in the Middle Ages*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 198.

when a “plague of sterility” hit the town of Trier, Archbishop Binsfeld drew upon this earlier demonological knowledge and preached that the cause of their misfortune was witchcraft.<sup>34</sup> He subsequently sent hundreds of men and women to their deaths.<sup>35</sup> Male anxieties around masculinity sometimes required external, supernatural causes for their failure to meet ideals of manhood. To maintain sexual dominance in society, witchcraft was used as a scapegoat, even when individual male witches paid the price of this distorted belief.

Male anxieties around sex and witchcraft were amplified by a fear of becoming feminized, changing their sexuality, or becoming sexually possessed by women. This anxiety is reflected in demonological texts and trials. Three instances of penis theft are mentioned in the *Malleus*, where women can “glamour” away a man’s genitals and keep a nest of penises.<sup>36</sup> A trial of a boy in Trier in 1585 included a testimony that the boy had a knotted cord with the *Agnus Dei* around his neck. He claimed that the devil transformed into a goat and led him to a witch Sabbath.<sup>37</sup> Knotted rope and goats are mentioned in many witch trials in Germany; the former symbolizes impotence and the latter is the beast the devil transforms into after a sexual deed.<sup>38</sup> Magic was also a cause of homosexuality according to Jacques Despars, who attributed the

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<sup>34</sup> Voltmer, “Witch-Finders, Witch-Hunters or Kings of the Sabbath?,” 77.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> Moira Smith, “The Flying Phallus and the Laughing Inquisitor: Penis Theft in the ‘Malleus Maleficarum’,” *Journal of Folklore Research* 39, no. 1. (2002): 85.

<sup>37</sup> “The Prosecutions at Trier (1581-93),” *Witchcraft in Europe, 400-1700: A Documentary History*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., ed. Alan Charles Kors and Edward Peters (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), 311.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 353-354; “The Prosecutions at Bamberg (1628),” in *Witchcraft in Europe, 400-1700: A Documentary History*, ed. Alan Charles Kors and Edward Peters (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), 350.

impotence of men with their wives to the *arte maligna*.<sup>39</sup> Through magical means, women were accused of metaphorically and literally castrating men.<sup>40</sup> Witchcraft could, therefore, be a means to deprive men of their manhood and thus a threat to male sexual dominance.

Along with feminization, seduction by witches raised the prospect of a loss of a key masculine attribute: autonomy. After all, the carnal quality of witchcraft is connected to a loss of control. The sexual possession aspect of witch trials is evident in themes repeated in confessional statements. Confessions tend to begin with details of sexual intercourse with the devil and end with an act of sacrilege, such as the submission of a holy wafer to a demon lover as the mayor of Bamberg, Johannes Junius, claimed.<sup>41</sup> In Junius' confession, he laid with a demon paramour and submitted to her will almost completely. This pattern displays anxieties around bodily submission, sexual misconduct, and renouncement of God. These were all unacceptable to concepts of masculinity which demand personal control, outward reputation, and piety. As anthropologist David Gilmore states: "There is indeed no greater fear among men than the loss of this personal autonomy to a dominant woman."<sup>42</sup> Female entrapment through magic could cause a man to forget his manhood and societal role, making the action punishable by death. By eliminating the "witches" in society, men could eradicate this threat of feminization or loss of autonomy and reassert their sexual status and power.

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid, 199.

<sup>40</sup> Rider, *Magic and Impotence in the Middle Ages*, 187.

<sup>41</sup> "The Prosecutions at Bamberg (1628)", in *Witchcraft in Europe, 400-1700*, 350.

<sup>42</sup> David D. Gilmore, *Manhood in the Making* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 50.

Another way men used witchcraft to assert their virility and superiority was to increase male power in comparison to women and reaffirm patriarchal structures. The differences between types of magic – male sorcery and female *maleficium* – illustrate that patriarchal structures would not attribute the positive power of sorcery to women. Sorcery in the form of alchemic magic could be used to ward off demons and could provide a man with a significant livelihood.<sup>43</sup> This male ritual magic (not *maleficium*), was perhaps a validation of male power as some used it for personal gain.<sup>44</sup> Historian Frances Timbers argues that “the practice of magic allowed some men to rise above their natal social position and thereby enhance their masculinity. In addition to augmenting income, magic offered men power and control over others, honor and prestige in the community, and the opportunity to act on inner desires.”<sup>45</sup>

Yet, even when men engaged in *maleficium*, the sexual exchange they made with the devil was seen to provide them with increased income and thus, still bolstered their masculinity and dominance.<sup>46</sup> Historian Jonathan Durrant notes that “the Devil claimed he could supply a significant need [usually for money] in exchange for the person’s soul, a transaction sealed through sexual intercourse.”<sup>47</sup> Interestingly, many men who were accused of witchcraft had violated norms of masculinity through non-conforming sexual encounters like bigamy or adultery, and yet in their trial confessions, they were also required to invent a sexual encounter

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<sup>43</sup> Timbers, *Magic and Masculinity*, 34-36.

<sup>44</sup> Rowlands, “Not ‘the Usual Suspects’?,” 3.

<sup>45</sup> Timbers, *Magic and Masculinity*, 34.

<sup>46</sup> Jonathan B. Durrant, *Witchcraft, Gender and Society in Early Modern Germany* (Leiden: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2007), 154.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

with a demon.<sup>48</sup> This reveals an interesting dichotomy: societal sexual non-conformity can result in a man's persecution as a witch, damaging his masculinity. Yet a man's defense of his actions include descriptions of a sexual act which then affirms his masculinity.

In contrast to male alchemic magic and *maleficium*, the magic of female witches has no agency. Women did not have the power to curse men on their own; they required the assistance of demons. The reformer Gabriel Biel insisted that female magicians had a "pact with a demon" and that "women do not do these things by their own natural power...but through the operation of demons who use pacts and sacraments which deceive men in this way."<sup>49</sup> Thus, when men committed acts of *maleficium* rather than ritual magic, they were adopting feminine attributes, damaging their masculinity, and were persecuted.<sup>50</sup> Yet, even when on trial, male witches were sometimes described as the leaders of the witch sabbath, as "sabbath kings" who led the bacchanalian evening of rites and sexual orgies.<sup>51</sup> The sexual dominance of men was present not only in the real world but also in the spirit realm.

Male witches were required to have full control over spirits for, according to Timbers, "control of the spirit world was an extension of the patriarchal and hierarchical obedience required of inferiors."<sup>52</sup> This hierarchical dominance was exploited by some men who used the

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<sup>48</sup> Walkinski-Kiehl, "Males, "Masculine Honour," and Witch-hunting in Seventeenth-Century Germany," 265.

<sup>49</sup> Gabriel Biel, *Supplementum in XXVII Distinctiones Ultimas Quarti Sententiarum* (Paris, 1521), 34.2, 107v. Cf. In Catherine Rider *Magic and Impotence in the Middle Ages* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 192-194.

<sup>50</sup> Timbers, *Magic and Masculinity*, 7-14.

<sup>51</sup> Voltmer, "Witch-Finders, Witch-Hunters or Kings of the Sabbath?," 93.

<sup>52</sup> Timbers, *Magic and Masculinity*, 37.

guise of magic to commit sexual violence. Lyndal Roper argues that a key psychological motivation for male prosecutors, along with religious fervour, was sadism. This is evidenced by inquisitors who stripped and tortured women in the trials in Würzburg and Augsburg.<sup>53</sup>

Voyeurism is discernible through the excited language of prisoner accounts. Reports of swollen genitals and explicit accounts of rape and sexual assault of female witches in the prisons of Eichstätt indicate the extent to which this power dynamic was taken advantage.<sup>54</sup> Men remain sexually dominant in all roles, no matter if they are the witch on trial, the prison guard, or the judge.

Sexuality was initially linked to witchcraft because early modern German society could not tolerate socially or sexually deviant women. Over time, this largely female crime became tied to both genders and witch-hunts turned into a method to remove attributes in society deemed unfit by both those in power and by ordinary men and women. When viewed from the lens of understanding this patriarchal society, it seems that regardless of where men stood in court – as the accuser or the accused – they remained in a higher position than women. The mental gymnastics required to assert male power in all aspects of witchcraft is particularly noticeable in Early Modern Germany. An accusation used to punish women transformed into a way for men to exert power, externalize their sexual anxieties, gain money and prominence, and even retain their manhood when punished for the same crime. While it is important to incorporate large number of male witches into the history of witch trials in Germany, excluding the critical aspect of sex from this narrative is unwise. Sexuality seems to have played a large role in persecutions of both men

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<sup>53</sup> Roper, *Witch Craze*, 59.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

and women. After all, the tumultuous Reformation era disrupted the certainty of salvation. This new malleability generated anxiety over sexuality and female power which manifested itself in witchcraft. To many, the only way to destroy this force that threatened the sanctity of manhood itself was to burn it to the ground.

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