

E. J. Kent. *Cases of Male Witchcraft in Old and New England, 1592–1692*. Late Medieval and Early Modern Studies 13. Turnhout: Brepols, 2013. ix + 190 pp. €70. ISBN: 978-2-503-52474-0.

The crime of witchcraft has, perhaps, attracted more attention from the perspective of gender than any other criminal activity. This is hardly surprising, given that approximately three-quarters of accused witches were female — and this percentage rose considerably in the English-speaking world. Nonetheless, it is striking that other crimes with an equally marked gender profile — normally involving a heavy preponderance of men — have less frequently been subjected to this kind of analysis. Indeed, the jail populations in many Western countries today are overwhelmingly male, but this fact provokes surprisingly little comment.

This intelligent and sensibly cautious study by E. J. Kent hints at one possible explanation. Scholars of witchcraft have often elided gender with femininity; as a consequence, witchcraft appears to stand out as a special case that demands a gender-based explanation. Kent is rightly appreciative of the insights provided by this perspective, and seeks to incorporate these in her examination of witchcraft allegations in early modern England and colonial North America; but she also makes a strong case for the use of gender as an important category for understanding the minority of men who were arraigned for the crime. As she explains in her introduction, she seeks “a change in focus from the gender of female witches to the gendering of early modern witchcraft” as a whole.

Kent’s book is based on detailed case studies of six men accused of witchcraft in the late Elizabethan and Stuart period. By its nature, this microhistorical approach cannot provide a comprehensive theory of male witchcraft; and Kent is careful to eschew any such ambition. Rather, the lives of the men examined in these pages offer a thick description of the qualities associated with male witchcraft. These qualities were distinctively male: that is, they reflected the gendered expectations of the communities in which the suspects lived. The Suffolk clergyman John Lowes,

for example, was characterized by his supposed abuse of the power conferred on him by education; like Marlowe's Faust, he was corrupted by books and spread harm through the gift of learning. In a lurid analog of this idea, the "teats" by which Lowes allegedly suckled his imps were situated in his head and his tongue.

The male witches in Kent's study were potent and formidable figures. Indeed, these qualities derived in part from their masculinity, as they operated at the center of their communities rather than the margins of village life — a role more typically associated with female witches. As Kent observes, the image of John Lowes pacing the Suffolk coast and blasting ships with malefic magic conveys the particular menace of male witchcraft. It was this very public threat to communities, emanating from the centers of local power rather than the peripheries, that often characterized the accused men in this book.

Ultimately, Kent makes a nuanced and persuasive case for using gender as a category for understanding allegations of witchcraft against men. This contrasts to previous studies that have advocated a gender-neutral interpretation, or portrayed male witches as feminized men, and thereby preserved witchcraft as a peculiarly female crime. The question remains, of course, why women outnumbered men as suspects for this particular crime. Here Kent exercises intelligent caution, but hints that the answer may lie in the premodern association between women and spiritual wickedness. She recalls Christina Lerner's observation that men outnumbered women as saints in roughly the same proportion that women outnumbered men as witches; thus when communities felt threatened by supernatural evil — as was certainly the case in the early modern age — women seemed especially plausible as its agents.

This study reminds us that male witches were, nonetheless, a real and frightening possibility for early modern people. Kent's work sheds light on this important minority of suspects, and will prove extremely stimulating and valuable to future scholars in this field.

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