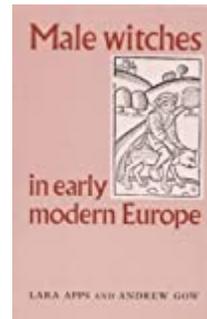
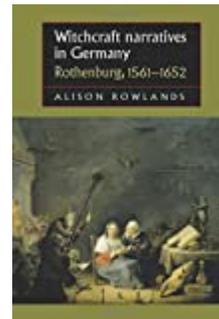




Andrew Colin Gow. *Male Witches in Early Modern Europe.* Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2003. ix + 190 pp. \$69.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7190-5708-3; \$26.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7190-5709-0.



Alison Rowlands. *Witchcraft Narratives in Germany, Rothenburg, 1561-1652.* Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003. ii + 248 pp. \$74.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7190-5259-0.



Reviewed by Kathryn Edwards (History Department, University of South Carolina)

Published on H-German (July, 2005)

Gender, Agency, and Early Modern Witchcraft

The books by Rowlands and Apps and Gow reviewed here initially seem quite different. Apps and Gow explicitly challenge the equation all too frequently made between witchcraft and women, while Rowlands relies on that paradigm to some extent for her analysis of witchcraft in early modern Rothenburg. Rowlands's book is a detailed archival study, while Apps and Gow primarily analyze demonologies and secondary literature. Apps and Gow focus on critiquing the historiography of early modern witchcraft, while Rowlands fills a gap in that historiography. Yet their commonalities

are equally striking. Aside from the obvious fact that they discuss witchcraft narratives, particularly those of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, they are also both books about agency and power. In the case of Apps and Gow it is the power of the dominant discourse about women and witchcraft and the distortions it gives to modern understandings of witchcraft. Underlying their passionate and at times polemical argument is an implicit statement about agency and historical authorship. Rowlands's engagement with agency is more traditional but equally persuasive. Rowlands tries to distance herself as

author, something Apps and Gow argue that historians do badly, and she focuses on the agency of those involved in the witch trials: the judges, the accused, and the accusers. Both are engaging, well-written, and, dare I say, entertaining works with strong authorial voices of their own. Read together, each well illustrates the strengths and weaknesses of the other authors' approach.

Although Rowlands concentrates on Rothenburg ob der Tauber between 1549 and 1709, during which time sixty-five people are "involved in witch trials" (p. vii), she is clearly working within the framework of the many German- and English-language witchcraft studies that have been published in the last twenty years. Her focus is archival, on trial records and case studies, rather than on demonologies, although the *Malleus Maleficarum* makes its obligatory appearance. When Rowlands analyzes the influence of demonological writings, however, she is quite careful to stick to those most likely to influence the clerics and jurists in Rothenburg, and these scholars are obscure to all but specialists today: Georg Zyrlein, Johann Schfer, and Georg Christoph Walther, among others. Particularly valuable to modern readers who are unfamiliar with Rothenburg's archives is her discussion of the sources available for her study and her appendix which includes a chart of Rothenburg's witch trials, 1548-1709. The chart includes 1) the date of the trial, 2) the name(s) of the alleged witch(es), status, and fate (if known), 3) age of alleged witch(es), 4) "trial evidence of pre-existing reputation as a witch," and 5) accuser(s) and fate of accuser(s) (if applicable) (pp. 213-228).

Rowlands states her goals immediately and clearly. She wants to ascertain why Rothenburg had relatively few trials given its location and the problems it faced during this era and, through a close reading of Rothenburg's sources, to analyze "the social and psychical tensions that lay behind the making of witchcraft accusations and confessions, the popular and elite reactions to these accusations and confessions, and the ways in which participants in witch-trials pursued strategies, expressed emotions, and negotiated conflicts" (p. 1). The six chapters of her book then provide a mix of case studies and contextualization in pursuit of these goals, a blend which involves the reader in the stories of the accused individuals. It matters that Paulus and Barbara Brosam are slandered and that Hans Gackstatt may or may not have attended a witches' dance. One of Rothenburg's distinctive characteristics is that only three individuals were executed for witchcraft during this period, and Rowlands develops a multifaceted explanation for this relative restraint. Rothenburg's councilors handled many of the witchcraft

accusations as slander cases and stuck to normal judicial procedures when handling them, two qualities which minimized potential for escalation. They feared the consequences to their own souls if they became too zealous and convicted individuals based on false or insufficient information, and even later in the seventeenth century when they were more troubled about witchcraft's dangers, they did not change their generally cautious behavior. Rothenburg's elites were, in the long run, more concerned about the instability of a witch panic than the instability of individuals accused of witchcraft. The other residents of Rothenburg and its hinterlands were not particularly enthusiastic in their pursuit of witches either, even though there was a "wide spectrum" of attitudes about them (pp. 206-209).

Rowlands's most dramatic cases and those to which she devotes her most thorough analyses involve women and children. They are also the areas in which her book best compares to Apps and Gow. Chapter 3 and parts of Chapter 4 focus on child witches and illustrate the complex layers of individual agency found in witchcraft trials. In 1587 a six-year-old boy, Hans Gackstatt, from one of the villages around Rothenburg told other local boys that he flew at night to attend a witches' dance. The boys told their parents, and the rumor reached Hans's mother, Magdalena. Understandably, she vehemently denied the charge and punished Hans, but the damage had been done. Rowlands rightly points out that Magdalena was now damned no matter what she did; if she went to the dances, she was a witch, but if she did not go to the dances, she was still a bad mother because her son felt able to create and tell such appalling lies. Authorities questioned Magdalena, Hans, and the local boys, and both Magdalena and Hans were eventually tortured. (Torturing of children was extremely unusual.) Despite, or perhaps because of, the rampant inconsistencies in Hans's stories, he and his mother were both released after approximately one month, but not before the judges had solicited a detailed opinion by one of the city jurists, Friedrich Prenninger, about the case. Rowlands's analysis of this case concentrates on the private motivations and qualities of the individuals involved: what were the personal connections between Magdalena and her neighbors, how did Hans relate to the local boys, and what were the assumptions Rothenburg's judges, as seen in Prenninger's opinion and the trial record, made about childhood innocence and vulnerability? The complexity of the case prevents straightforward explanations, and unfortunately Rowlands sometimes seems as frustrated as the judges as she posits idea after idea as a possible

motivation for the case and Hans's torture. Yet Rowlands is quite right to stress that these cases rarely had simple or direct explanations, that the motivations and attitudes of the people involved were complex and at times contradictory. Perhaps there truly were times when the resolution that best follows from a case was that such cases should be avoided in the future—the verdict of Rothenburg's councilors.

In the preceding case and many of the others analyzed by Rowland, gender is a key component. Rowlands notes that most people labeled “cunning folk” in the Rothenburg area were men, but most of these individuals were not prosecuted; men were also involved in witchcraft trials as attendees at sabbats, victims of seduction, maleficent cunning men (a very small group), and relatives of women accused of witchcraft. Despite these circumstances, when Rowlands discusses gender, she primarily discusses women. These trials will sound quite familiar to anyone versed in witchcraft history. Women are slandered as witches, impotent males blame their inadequacies on female witches, and women who have “failed” as mothers are accused of being witches. Her use of literary, anthropological, and psychoanalytical theories in these sections is more pervasive and, at times, not as persuasive as her real strength: deep, detailed description and contextualization. In these interpretations Rowlands emphasizes early modern idealization of good mothers and innocent children more than necessary and fails to prove that these ideas are really as embedded into the attitudes of early-seventeenth-century Rothenburg society as they would need to be to drive the accusations and prosecutions in the manner she proposes. As such, Rowlands's arguments about the subconscious impulses of Magdalena Drr, for example, seem somewhat forced despite her lucid descriptions of the circumstances surrounding Drr's trial.

These weaknesses in Rowlands's treatment of gender would have not been as obvious, however, if I had not just finished reading Apps and Gow's contentious and engaging work, *Male Witches in Early Modern Europe*. Apps and Gow argue that scholars have fundamentally distorted our understanding of witchcraft, particularly gender's place in it, by applying modern assumptions based in Enlightenment theories of rationalism to early modern witchcraft. In the introduction they trace their primary critiques and suggest some correctives: 1) “male witches have been excluded from witchcraft historiography and that this exclusion by modern scholars is not congruent with early modern understandings of witches”; 2) explanations of the dynamics of witchcraft

prosecutions should be applied equally to both female and male witches”; and 3) male witches could exist within the framework of early modern ideas about witches because they were implicitly feminized ... [but] this correlation was neither exact nor straightforward” (pp. 6-7). They provide a clear summary of the traditional perspectives about male witches (p. 43), a wonderful chart of “witchcraft prosecutions by sex” based on materials which should be well known to all historians of witchcraft but are too often ignored, a linguistic analysis of the exact terms used by demonologists (pp. 3-4, 7-9, 105-108), and a smart example of how close reading of primary sources leads to more accurate conclusions about male and female acquittal in witchcraft accusations (pp. 49-52). Apps and Gow also include a better and more complete translation of the letter by possibly the most famous male witch in early modern Europe, Julius Junius of Bamberg.

Apps and Gow cover many aspects of modern witchcraft historiography, but particularly telling is their criticism of the use of demonological studies in modern treatments of early modern witchcraft. Focusing on canonical texts, such as the *Malleus maleficarum*, Apps and Gow describe the actual, linguistic gender of the words used for witches. During this analysis, it becomes clear that Kramer and Sprenger were working with a more nuanced idea of witchcraft, one that clearly incorporated both men and women, than most scholars, who focus on their misogynistic diatribes, credit them. Apps and Gow also trace the classical and early Christian references found in several authoritative, representative demonologies and argue that the Christian image of a witch evolves over centuries and incorporates earlier, pre-Christian, and less gender-specific notions of witchcraft and magic, a challenge to Edward Peters's admonition that scholars should not confuse the ancient and early modern witch.

Despite their obvious knowledge of primary sources, this book is not a presentation of new research but a critique of previous interpretations. And what a critique! One of the most appealing, and entertaining, aspects of this book, at least for this reviewer, is its willingness to take on many major scholars who have published on gender and witchcraft. Among those jabbed and at times skewered by Apps and Gow are Robin Briggs, Willem de Blcourt, Stuart Clark, Malcolm Gaskill, Eric Midelfort, William Monter, Lyndal Roper, Merry Wiesner, and Gerhild Scholz Williams. Apps and Gow are rightly clear about their admiration for these scholars' studies, but they also have no hesitation in pointing out what they see

as implicit biases. For example, Apps and Gow challenge the emphasis Stuart Clark places on binary thinking in early modern Europe and the claim that male witches were literally “unthinkable” for people at that time. Despite their admiration for Clark’s work, Apps and Gow rightly point out that both linguistic analysis and the contents of trials and demonologies proved that early modern people could conceive of a witch as male, albeit a feminized male. As with most of the scholars named above, their criticism is not of his thesis as a whole. Rather they argue that the problem is with our modern, overly binary conception of male and female. A male witch can be, perhaps even must be feminized, but it was assuredly not female and it certainly did exist.

The forcefulness of Apps and Gow’s critiques make their book an engaging read but will also open them to criticism, some of it justifiable. For example, the book begins with an unnecessary series of definitions of “belief” versus “knowledge.” Apps and Gow claim that by describing early modern attitudes towards witches as witch “beliefs,” scholars imply that the early modern ideas are transitory and lesser than the true knowledge that, also implicitly, modern scholars share. The image that springs to mind is of a condescending in-club of scholars looking down its collective nose at the great unwashed. For this reason, they write, “We have omitted the word ‘belief’ from our vocabulary in order to present our subjects’ ideas without undue anachronism” (p. 2). As a scholar who sees belief as just as certain as knowledge and is convinced that many early modern people knew witches—as well as ghosts, fairies, and werewolves—were real, I found this assertion unnecessary and the tone in which the argument was presented itself somewhat petulant and condescending. Time, too, is blurred in the pursuit of bias. It’s somewhat disturbing to read that Margaret Murray and Montague Summers represent modern English scholarship on witchcraft, and to find Eric Midelfort, Keith Thomas, Alan Macfarlane, and Hugh Trevor-Roper condemned for their “insensitivity to women”; the uninitiated reader needs to study the footnotes to learn that these works were published in 1972, 1971, 1970, and 1967, respectively. As Apps and Gow are well aware, the scholarship on witchcraft has evolved greatly since those works were published, and many of the other authors to whom Apps and Gow refer also both criticize and admire these early studies. In fact, there are places in the book where it seems as if another scholar is almost being set up as a strawman to further Apps and Gow’s argument. For example, they note and apparently praise

Lisa Silverman’s argument that early modern witches approached torture from a different cultural context than modern people do, but their next sentence discounts this claim, beginning with a tell-tale “nevertheless” and by stressing that modern and early modern survivors of torture “all had certain things in common: pain, resulting from the torture of their body; fear, even horror, of further or more brutal torture ... a fierce desire to resist the force being practised upon them” (p. 76). Yet in her book, *Tortured Subjects: Pain, Truth and the Body in Early Modern France*, Silverman qualifies her statements about early modern torture in much the same way that Apps and Gow do.

Apps and Gow would also both praise and criticize Rowlands’s work on Rothenburg. While based on the deep, archival reading that they call for at the end of their book (pp. 151-153), she uses a tally of “cunning folk” in Rothenburg and its hinterlands that finds twice as many men as women to conclude that beneficent witchcraft is gendered male and maleficent witchcraft is female. Moreover, most of these “cunning folk” never come to the authorities’ attention, a situation that Apps and Gow’s work demands that scholars analyze. Elsewhere Rowlands claims that the Rothenburg councilors’ “engagement with these cases had the long-term effect of deepening their concern about witchcraft and of intensifying their hostility towards what they increasingly came to regard as the archetypal witch figure: the bad mother” (p. 81). After reading Apps and Gow, I could not help but wonder where in her sources Rowlands found quotations relating directly to motherhood.

All of these authors would agree on many of the qualities that make for a good study of gender, agency, and witchcraft. It must be grounded in close reading of primary sources. It must acknowledge the reality of torture—its pain and suffering, the physical and psychological damage it can cause—rather than pass it off as accepted procedure. It must accept that early modern understanding and treatment of witchcraft can seem ambiguous and contradictory and that the concern over its “inner logic” may speak more to modern than early modern sensibilities. Both of their books follow these precepts and attempt to correct biases in modern understandings of early modern witchcraft. For these reasons, although Rowlands and Apps and Gow deal with these concerns in very different ways, they have produced remarkably complementary works founded on a deep knowledge of primary and secondary sources. They are also just plain good reads.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-german>

Citation: Kathryn Edwards. Review of Gow, Andrew Colin, *Male Witches in Early Modern Europe* and Rowlands, Alison, *Witchcraft Narratives in Germany, Rothenburg, 1561-1652*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. July, 2005.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=10723>

Copyright © 2005 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.