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Diabolical or Masculine Men? Opposing Views of Male Witches in Early Modern England

Liana Mintiero

Studying Male Witches

Male witches have been a subject of great debate in recent years for witchcraft historians. A “definite minority,” but too “sizeable” to ignore, males accused of witchcraft in early modern England pose a significant issue for Charlotte-Rose Millar.¹ The central issue at stake is the role, if any, that gender played in witchcraft accusations against males. Historians’ approaches to this question have evolved over the years. Early histories from the 1990s ignored male witches, referring to them as “unimportant.”² When male witches finally started to gain attention from historians, they were then dismissed as anomalies, secondary to female witches, or as “feminized” men.³ Most recently, scholars have begun to reevaluate male witches, arguing that we should use the framework of “witch” as a category rather than dividing it up into “female witches” and “male witches.”⁴ These scholars are interested in what all witches had in common, regardless of their gender.

One such scholar is Charlotte-Rose Millar, a prominent witchcraft historian of sixteenth and seventeenth-century England who specializes in the Devil and popular print.⁵ Her recent article, “Diabolical Men: Reintegrating Male Witches into English Witchcraft,” explores male witches in terms of their relationship to the Devil. In this article from 2021, she engages with fellow witchcraft historian E. J. Kent’s “Masculinity and Male Witches in Old and New England, 1593–1680,” which was written in 2005 and examined the relationship between masculinity and male witches. Both Millar and Kent seek to answer the same question with their respective articles: how did ordinary people during the

³ Ibid.
English witchcraft trials of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries view males accused of witchcraft? Their answers are quite different.

This summary of argument essay compares the two articles by Millar and Kent to understand how scholars—asking the same question and drawing from the same evidentiary archive – can reach such opposing conclusions on male witches. I begin by highlighting the similar interests of the two authors in their respective articles. Next, I outline Millar’s article, which concludes that gender was unimportant to the way in which people viewed male witches in early modern England. Then, I summarize Kent’s article, which determines that gender was crucial to how male witches were viewed. Finally, I examine the differences in the frameworks each author uses to interpret their evidentiary archive. Millar and Kent arrive at diverging conclusions about the role of gender in male witchcraft accusations due to their differing ideas of which components of primary sources merit examination.

**Differing Views**

Both Millar and Kent seek to understand English male witches of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Of particular interest is the way these male witches were viewed by their peers. Kent writes, “This article concentrates on the way ordinary people in English communities represented male witches and male witchcraft when they accused men of criminal magic.”\(^6\) The general public’s understanding of witchcraft is also important to Millar, who draws from popular pamphlets because they grant “unique insight” into how the population “understood witchcraft.”\(^7\)

Millar’s article suggests that gender was not an essential factor, as male witches were portrayed similarly to female witches. Through the examination of the language and themes of popular English printed pamphlets, Millar concludes that “witches were defined primarily by their relationship with the Devil, not their sex.”\(^8\) Citing cases of male witches from these pamphlets, Millar shows that male

\(^6\) Kent, “Masculinity and Male Witches,” 70.
\(^7\) Millar, “Diabolical Men,” 694.
\(^8\) Millar, “Diabolical Men,” 693.
witches were primarily depicted as having “sold their souls to the Devil, entered into a pact with him, and used their newfound powers to harm their neighbours,” just like female witches. Furthermore, the pamphlets sexualized both male and female witches. Since male witches were portrayed in the same light as female witches—with a heavy emphasis on the ties to the Devil—Millar concludes that male witches’ gender was unimportant in the way people viewed them.

Unlike Millar, Kent concludes that gender is crucial to the way people understand male witches. She argues in her article that witchcraft accusations against men were “fundamentally shaped by the masculinity of the witch.” Kent begins by establishing a distinctly masculine form of witchcraft through data showing that female witches were only accused of malefic magic, while male witches could be accused of either malefic magic or learned magic. She further differentiates male witches from female witches by evidence of lengthy legal battles, writing that “male witches and their accusers operated within different economic and legal parameters.” Kent then uses court documents and popular pamphlets to demonstrate that male witches were disliked by much of their community and displayed behaviors that threatened masculine virtues.

Throughout, Kent argues that masculinity is a crucial component of the male witch and warns about the dangers of feminizing male witches.

How did Millar and Kent start with a shared question about male witches in early modern England and end up with two vastly different conclusions? Although Millar and Kent’s evidentiary archives do differ, it is not responsible for their diverging interpretations. Firstly, despite Millar’s lamentations that members of her discourse community—including Kent—have “hindered” scholarship with a “strong reliance on trial records and learned treatises at the expense of popular print,” Kent does, in fact, draw from multiple popular pamphlets in her. This means that the two authors are looking at a similar base of evidence. While Kent uses court documents to support her argument and Millar does not, it is

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10 Kent, “Masculinity and Male Witches,” 73.
11 Ibid.
12 Kent, “Masculinity and Male Witches,” 75.
unlikely that these differing primary sources have a significant impact on interpretations because the pamphlets draw upon these court documents. Therefore, popular printed pamphlets, albeit different in format, should be somewhat similar in content to the court documents from that same region and time period. These small differences in the types of evidence Millar and Kent use are not significant enough to account for the substantial difference in their conclusions.

The reason behind Millar and Kent’s opposing claims lies not in their respective evidentiary archives but in their choices on what merits examination. Right out of the gate, Millar establishes that she will be focusing heavily on the Devil. She writes that previous scholarship on witchcraft in early modern England falls short because of the “lack of focus on the role of the Devil in English witchcraft.”14 Her attempt to right this wrong is evident throughout the article as she only writes about the male witches in terms of their relationship to the Devil.

In her case studies, Millar neither delves into the individual male witches’ reputations nor the political, economic, or social contexts in which they are accused. She only includes details that link the male witches to demons because “the Devil played a crucial role in English witchcraft belief.”15 For instance, one of the case studies is of John Palmer, who was “accused of sucking familiar spirits and for being a witch for the previous sixty years.”16 The fact that Palmer was accused of being a witch for the sixty years prior to that particular accusation is notable because it raises questions about his reputation in the community, who has accused him, and what other acts he has been accused of. However, Millar pays no attention to that and focuses instead on Palmer’s familiar and the way that the pamphlet writes about Palmer in sexualized terms.

Palmer’s case is a prime example of the authors’ differing frameworks because if Kent had read about Palmer, she almost certainly would have had a different takeaway. Whereas Millar focuses on primary sources’ specific mentions of familiars, blood pacts, and the Devil in relation to male witches, Kent sees

male witches in broader terms. In the case of John Palmer, Kent would not emphasize his relationship with the Devil but his relationship with the community. She would consider his reputation—why do witchcraft accusations dog him for sixty years of his life? How does he compare to ideal masculine virtues? Does he deviate from these values in any way?

Unlike Millar, Kent rarely mentions the Devil in her article. In the case of John Lowes, she spends several paragraphs detailing his conflicts with the Church, his neighbors, and his parishioners. It is clear that the bits of information that Kent values the most are the ones that demonstrate the way other people felt about him and interacted with him. Of that full page of text, Kent only mentions Lowes’ relationship with the Devil at the end in one short sentence, writing that when tortured at age eighty, he “confessed to getting his familiars to wreck ships by raising storms at sea” and admitted that he had “preached sixty sermons after his covenant with the devil.” Based on how little time Kent spent on the aspect of the Devil, it is evident that she is not looking at evidence through the framework of English witchcraft, just being a diabolical crime.

The differences in Millar and Kent’s conclusions about the role gender plays in understanding male witchcraft result from their differences in frameworks. Millar, with her focus on witchcraft as a diabolical crime, picks and chooses her evidence solely based on whether or not it includes a mention of the Devil through the means of familiar spirits, blood pacts, suckling, and more. Conversely, Kent’s interest in masculinity’s influence over witchcraft means that she pays little attention to mentions of the Devil—instead focusing on the political, social, and economic contexts of each case.

**Conclusion**

In their respective articles, witchcraft historians Charlotte-Rose Millar and E. J. Kent both investigate how people viewed males accused of witchcraft in sixteenth and seventeenth-century England. However, Millar and Kent arrive at

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17 Kent, “Masculinity and Male Witches,” 76.
18 Kent, “Masculinity and Male Witches,” 77.
conflicting conclusions about the role of gender in male witchcraft accusations. Millar argues that male witches were not defined by their gender but by their association with the Devil, which suggests that gender is not important in understanding male witches. Conversely, Kent argues that it is, writing that male witches need to be understood in terms of their masculinity.

The departure between their two claims about the role of gender in understanding male witches is not due to their differing evidentiary archives but rather their ideas on which aspects of these primary sources deserve to be discussed. Millar highlights the importance of the Devil in English witchcraft, ignoring all of the social, political, and economic factors that point to the influence of masculinity on accusations of male witchcraft. On the other hand, Kent is so wrapped up in the social, political, and economic context of each male witchcraft case that she brushes over any mention of the Devil. Essentially, both authors are looking at the same document, but one is up close with a magnifying glass, and the other is standing twenty feet away.

Millar and Kent’s different approaches speak to the pluralities of the study of early modern English witchcraft. On the surface, Millar and Kent’s differing arguments seem to be in direct opposition to one another. However, looking closer, it is evident that both can be true at once. Perhaps Millar is correct in her claim that witches were viewed primarily in terms of their relationship to the Devil, not their gender. That in itself would not mean that Kent’s argument is incorrect. Instead, it suggests that masculinity was an instrumental yet invisible influence on witchcraft accusations against males—an influence that was often overshadowed by the male witch’s relationship with the Devil.

Whether or not Millar and Kent’s claims about the role of gender in witchcraft will hold up is to be determined in the coming years. Regardless, their respective articles demonstrate why there are so many divergent readings from scholars looking at the same time period, region, and body of evidence in this field. Witchcraft historians may share an evidentiary archive, but how they examine this evidence leads to wildly differing conclusions. The study of
witchcraft is a complex, multifaceted issue, and discourse among witchcraft historians is still only just beginning to scratch the surface.
Bibliography

