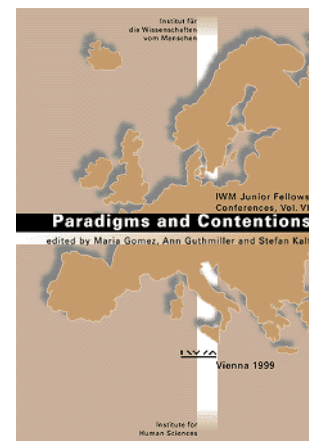


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Preferred Citation: Krampfl, Ulrike. "Particular" Remarks on "General" Problems. *Methodological Questions on the Appearance of False Witches in Eighteenth Century Paris*, in: *Paradigms and Contentions*, IWM Junior Visiting Fellows Conferences, Vol. 7: Vienna 1999



"Particular" Remarks on "General" Problems Methodological Questions on the Appearance of False Witches in Eighteenth Century Paris

Ulrike Krampfl

Witchcraft has a long history, as does its interpretation. What is more, the two cannot be separated from one another, as the reading and understanding of an object of interest are always part of its constitution. The history of witchcraft in early modern times, upon which my paper will concentrate, is but one telling example. In the following pages I would like to problematize two issues which are always "at stake" in the reading/understanding of magic and witchcraft: the power of identification by naming and the opposition between the general and the particular; or, in different terms, the problem of popular culture and a focus on women's relationship to the dominant order. The framework of these thoughts emerges from my dissertation project, "Faith and Credulity in Eighteenth Century Paris. The *False Witches and Wizards* between Magic and Fraudulence." After a brief survey of early modern demonology, I will sketch some crucial aspects of the situation in the eighteenth century as encountered in my research. In a third step, the above mentioned questions will be briefly discussed before returning to the problems which occur in the historicizing of witchcraft. The present paper might be considered the outline of a larger project (exceeding the limits of my dissertation)

problematizing social and feminist history through the angle of the figure of the witch.

1.

By the end of the Middle Ages, more homogenous thought on witchcraft started to be elaborated, transforming the presence of magic into a question of major concern related directly to the religious, social, political, and natural order of the world. These writings, keen on "knowing everything about the devil's powers,"¹ consolidated into a distinct genre² by the end of the 15th century before becoming more fragmented by the beginning of the 17th. One of the first treatises was the famous "*Malleus maleficarum*" or "Witch's Hammer," composed in 1486 by two Rhinean inquisitors, Sprenger and Institoris. The principal novelty of this work comes from its explicit articulation of the ancient belief in malefic powers and the idea of a subversive devil's pact laying the foundation stone to a dangerous counter-society, which is represented as a kind of sect coming together on the witches' Sabbath. The redescription of older elements through the prism of contemporary concerns, above all motivated by the fights against medieval heresies (e.g., the Waldensians) engendered the new figure of alterity of diabolic witchcraft, which opened up the way to persecutory violence.³ Nevertheless, the consolidation of this doctrine can be seen less as a sign of increasing certainty than as the manifestation of a profound doubt which came to settle on the very foundations of knowledge.⁴ During the late Mid-

¹ Sophie Houdard, *Les sciences du diable. Quatre discours sur la sorcellerie* (Paris, 1992), p. 17.

² Nicole Jacques-Chaquin, "La sorcellerie et ses discours. Essai de typologie du discours démonologique", *Frénésie*, summer 1990, p. 11-22.

³ Jean-Michel Sallmann, "Sorcière", in *Histoire des femmes en Occident*, vol. 3, ed. by Arlette Farge and Natalie Zemon Davis, (Paris, Plon, 1991), p. 455-467; Susanna Burghartz, "The Equation of Women and Witches: a Case Study of Witchcraft Trials in Lucerne and Lausanne in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries", in *The German Underworld*, ed. by Richard J. Evans, (London, Routledge, 1988), p. 57-74; Megan McLaughlin, "Gender Paradox and the Otherness of God", *Gender & History*, 3, 2, 1991, p. 147-159; Alain Boureau, "Le sabbat et la question scolastique de la personne", in *Le sabbat des sorcières en Europe (XVe-XVIIIe siècles)*, Actes du Colloque international E.N.S. Fontenay-Saint-Cloud (4-7 novembre 1992), ed. by Nicole Jacques-Chaquin and Maxime Préaud, (Grenoble, Jérôme Millon, 1993), p. 33-46; *Magie et sorcellerie en Europe du Moyen Age à nos jours*, ed. by Robert Muchembled, (Paris, Imago, 1994).

⁴ André Vauchez, "La nascita del sospetto", in *Finzione et santità tra medioevo ed età moderna*, ed. by Gabriella Zarrì, (Turin, Il Mulino, 1991), p. 39-51.

dle Ages, a fundamental crisis permeated the Christian world addressing problems of free will, the relation between the body and the soul, and the reformulation of gender differences, among other concerns.

In light of these developments, the devil's pact was viewed as an alliance between the outwitting, seducing demon and weak-willed humans, who thereby were transformable into witches and wizards. Humans were conceived of as seduced victims and simultaneously, as guilty sinners for deliberately turning away from the good, that is the God-given, community. Women were defined as particularly vulnerable to evil's action since they lacked, even more than men did, the necessary mental and physical strength to resist. At the same time, female witches were held to be extremely powerful, perhaps because the devil, acting through his human allies, was able to unfold his illusionist powers in a more efficient manner. However strong they might be, the demon's advances were never thought to exceed God's control completely. Therein lay the narrow and unsafe margin where religious and secular authorities, as well as demonologists who often were judges themselves, proceeded to establish laws in order to fight back against the threat of the counter-society.

This way of conceptualizing the presence of evil was intrinsically related to the history of persecution itself. It was constantly modified throughout the early modern period and can be considered one of the most influential views of the problem at least until the beginning of the 17th century. Then, parallel to the decreasing number of coercive measures taken against people said to be witches or wizards, the textual corpus dealing with the phenomenon became more fragmented, splitting into several literary genres and, thereby, no longer constituting a delimited domain.

In 1682, a legal act tried to establish new order in the disputed matter. The authors of this document not only criminalized astrology for the first time, but above all, tried to clearly separate magic and witchcraft from the harmful use of poison. It is the latter that remained severely punished (throughout the 18th century), whereas the former was reduced to the status of reprehensible inducement to worse behaviour (such as the previously mentioned use of poison, sacrilege, and blasphemy). The text came, in fact, at the conclusion of an enormous poison scandal which had destabilized the innermost circles of the Royal Court in France for several years. The (mis)use of poison had come to trouble the courtesans' passion for magical features, making even the king himself a potential victim (the very idea of attacking the king's physical integrity was virtually inconceivable).

2.

This was the situation at the beginning of the 18th century when the so-called "false witches and wizards" made their appearance on the stage of the Paris police. There were about 300 men and women who were accused, in one way or another, of having some special knowledge and/or performing an activity in this field. Most of the time the charges involved money and wealth, the remunerated but illegal distribution of products such as powders, liquors, charms and talismans (all of them called "secrets"), and the prediction of the future. Such activities were given various names by the police: "the search for treasure," "the philosopher's stone," "making horoscopes," "fortune-telling," "clairvoyants," "magicians," and "false witches" were the most frequent appellations, sometimes used in combination or completed by supplementary expressions (of up to five terms). Perhaps the most telling examples are: "crooks treasure searchers," "Philosopher's stone crooks," "false witches crooks". The police created the new syntagma of the "false witches," but the signification of the object oscillated in an indecisive manner between two poles. The starting point for every investigation seems to be much more of a profound and troubling doubt than a self-confident certainty. It is precisely this tension between the "falseness" of the witch/wizard and the "truth" of the crook that I would like to take seriously as an irreducible and therefore constitutive potential of reality. The police's task now consisted of establishing a neat separation between fraudulence and magic in order to crystallize and finally, to "unmask" the condemnable element: in a sense, to materialize the object.

In the course of 17th and 18th centuries, not only did the conception of witchcraft change, there were also transformations going on in several fields, on several levels. Let me just point out those which might shed some light on the topic of my research: the redefinition of the body by the natural sciences and medicine, the acceptance of religious attitudes, the legal status of women and men, the organization of the police force, and the conception of civic order and the "public."

3.

The two problems I would like to stress can now be formulated in a more specific way: a) the labeling by the term of "false witches and wizards," and b) the ascription of a particular, socially differentiated and gendered domain.

a) The people caught by the police are named and thereby identified as "false witches" and "false wizards." An identification which, as I have argued, is unclear in itself, referring to a long demonological tradition as well as to the more and more

central paradigm of (materially based) fraudulence. This is an external and powerful label, a kind of "burden" on the back of people which they are forced to identify with,⁵ for it is, of course, the police who have the power of naming. By adopting it without question we would be repeating the symbolic violence which is inherent in the act of repressive naming. But how, if at all, can we bridge this gap? After all, we do not have any "direct" documents produced by the "delinquents" themselves.

This is one of the main problems which social history, as well as women's and gender history (terms used here in a synonymous way because their differentiation would need a separate discussion), has been and still is confronted with. How can we get an idea of the possible perspectives (and experiences) of people, women and men, who have not left any written traces, who appear exclusively as objects in the writings of others, namely their persecutors, husbands, fathers, sons, men? How can the "simple folk" and the "simple woman" become, through the writing of history, subjects of history? Not only have women been exposed to the power of naming by their contemporaries, but what we can learn about them is almost exclusively a form of representation, their "being identified by contemporaries." What are at stake are not only the lack of sources (suggesting a certain mutism), but also women's ability to be actresses in historical reality - a central concern to the women's movement but also to the history of women and women's movements.⁶

Before I give an example, I would like to problematize the notion of the "actor," albeit in a simplistic way. The "actor" has become a central term in social history during the last twenty years and is still, undoubtedly, a concept of major concern not only for political movements such as the women's movement, but also for the writing of their histories.⁷ First, as a kind of counter-reaction to a deterministic structuralism, the "actor" and the "actress" appeared as almost autonomous beings in history, as well as in the social sciences, acting out, if not their free will, then at least their courageous resistance against oppression. But what can their action be founded upon? This seems to posit a partially independent scope, more or less detached from the structuring framework. In this paper, however, "actor" and

⁵ This expression is inspired by Jacques Rancière, *Les mots de l'histoire. Essai de poétique du savoir*, (Paris, Gallimard, 1992).

⁶ See Geneviève Fraisse, "Individue, actrice, sujet féministe", in Fraisse, *Les femmes et leur histoire*, (Paris, Gallimard/folio, 1998), p. 423-447. See also Michel Foucault, *Les mots et les choses*, (Paris, Gallimard, 1964)

⁷ *Frauen suchen ihre Geschichte, Historische Studien zum 19. und 20. Jahrhundert*, ed. by Karin Hausen, (München, Beck, 1983); Gerda Lerner, *The Majority Finds Its Past: Placing Women in History*, (Oxford UP, 1981).

"actress" shall be understood as a crossing point of a plural, complex, and dynamic network of relations, the latter constituting the range of possibilities for individual action while the individual remains, nevertheless, always unpredictable in its movements.

After all, if there does not seem to exist a way of eluding the problem of identification, could we conceive of a different way of confronting it? Let us take a closer look at a recent study on the status of women's words during the French Revolution by the French historian Dominique Godineau.⁸ Throughout the second half of the 18th century, popular women were often associated with verbal and physical violence and were said to be strongly attracted to violent acts, e.g. public executions. This trait was especially emphasized by contemporary commentators during the revolutionary period who blamed the political situation for this distortion of women's (clement) nature and their transformation into (political) monsters - as if they were betraying their very "female" nature. Women's participation in political action, therefore, was almost exclusively characterized as "noise," even though they were present in various ways (such as petitions, reunions, and rebellions, done alone or in conjunction with men). By questioning this ascription, Godineau manages to show how, in the revolutionary context, the emphasis on the ferocity of women's words is a way of denying them the capacity to express themselves in a "civilized," "political," "articulate" way, to appear as reasonable "speaking beings." Representing their articulation not as discursive competence but reducing it to animal-like noise means that participation in the political space is at stake: "presenting women's interventions in this way is also a means of chasing them from the political construction in order to banish them to barbarity, savagery, and informity."⁹

The contemporary construction of the political and the social space of democracy is in fact the construction of, as Geneviève Fraisse has called it, an "exclusive democracy." It was in this politically gendered space that the professionalization of the historical discipline took place. In this ascending academic field, "naturally" dominated by men, categories of analysis were developed, especially concerning political history, which were already gendered themselves: "democracy," the "Nation," "universal" suffrage, "general" interests

⁸ Dominique Godineau, "Citoyennes, boutefeux et furies de guillotine", in *De la violence et des femmes*, ed. by Cécile Dauphin and Arlette Farge, (Paris, Albin Michel, 1997), p. 33-49.

⁹ Godineau, p. 47: " (...) présenter ainsi les interventions des femmes est aussi moyen de les chasser de la construction politique pour les renvoyer à la barbarie, la sauvagerie, l'informe."

etc.¹⁰ The radical historicization of our analytical categories is therefore necessary in order to avoid perpetuating the biased vision our own language contains.¹¹

b) The gendering of history is a multifaceted process, emerging from a specific historical constellation and enhanced by historically shaped analytical tools. In this double movement, women as historical characters are confined to a "particular" sphere and subordinated to the "general" concern of political events.

Given the preceding considerations, it is anything but surprising that this dichotomy has also had consequences for the writing of women's history itself. If women are excluded from the relevant historical arena, what does it mean to write "their" histories? Are they to be considered synonymous with this "particular" sphere with which women have been identified? If so, how can they be related to the "general" history? This is how Italian historian Gianna Pomata has articulated the problem.¹² She establishes a parallel to the opposition between micro-level and macro-level inquiry. Following Krakauer's studies in film history, where he uses the terms "short cuts" and "long shots," she suggests a way of relating the two levels to one another, namely by the permanent shifting from one to the other, from the micro-level to the macro-level and vice versa, without privileging either of them. This actually bears a strong resemblance to the microhistorical approaches made by the French historian Jacques Revel, who called the procedure "jeux d'échelles" (playing with different analytical levels, their interplay).¹³

But despite the challenge of these methodological suggestions, there remains a crucial problem. Accepting the gendered division of the historically constituted opposition of the particular and the general is an *a priori* assumption that narrows our possibilities and risks perpetuating the problematized distinction. For example,

¹⁰ Karin Hausen, "Die Nicht-Einheit der Geschichte als historiographische Herausforderung. Zur historischen Relevanz und Anstößigkeit der Geschlechtergeschichte", in *Geschlechtergeschichte und Allgemeine Geschichte*, ed. by Hans Medick und Anne-Charlott Trepp, (Göttingen, Wallstein, 1998), p. 15-55.

¹¹ Reinhart Koselleck, *Vergangene Zukunft. Zur Semantik geschichtlicher Zeiten*, (Frankfurt, Suhrkamp, 1989); Ute Frevert, "Mann und Weib und Weib und Mann". *Geschlechter-Differenzen in der Moderne*, (München, Beck, 1995,=1992); Joan W. Scott, "Experience", in *Feminists Theorize the Political*, ed. by Judith Butler and Joan W. Scott (New York e.a., Routledge, 1992).

¹² Gianna Pomata, "Close-Ups and Long-Shots: Combining Particular and General in Writing the Histories of Women and Men, in: *Geschlechtergeschichte*, p. 57-97. See also Gianna Pomata, "History: Particular and Universal. On Reading Some Recent Women's History Textbooks", *Feminist Studies*, 19, 1993, p. 7-50.

¹³ *Jeux d'échelles. La micro-analyse à l'épreuve*, ed. by Jacques Revel, (Paris, Hautes Etudes/Gallimard, 1996), Introduction.

what about all the men who were also deprived of public expression on political issues and what about those women who were, at least in early modern times due to their social condition or economic wealth, not entirely excluded from public activity, sometimes not even from public office (on a local level)? The meaning of what is viewed as particular, as secondary in relevance, can shift as well and does not necessarily need to be identified with women. However, the question of which issues are relevant enough to be remembered and how this should be done is an eminently political one.¹⁴

4.

Let us return to the issue of witchcraft. In a certain way the historiography of witchcraft is marked by the problems just mentioned. Michelet, in his Romanticist vision of history, traced the shape of a mythical figure by denouncing the unjust persecution and extinction of originary female knowledge and culture.¹⁵ By contrast, the second women's movement has tried to articulate their own current oppression by giving voice to oppressed beings in the past.¹⁶ This was more than a simplistic identification with a mythical revocation of a lost female culture, but instead, one of several ways of reintroducing the excluded and banned into the historically and politically relevant realm instead of locking them in the timeless domain of myth. It is certainly no coincidence that the study of witchcraft has been one of the central concerns of the renewal of women's and gender history (especially in Germany) and also of social history since the late 1960s.¹⁷ Knowledge, as Donna Haraway puts it, is definitely always "situated."¹⁸

¹⁴ Hausen, Nicht-Einheit.

¹⁵ Jules Michelet, *La sorcière*, (Paris, Garnier-Flammarion, 1966, 1st ed. 1862).

¹⁶ Silvia Bovenschen, "Die aktuelle Hexe, die historische Hexe und der Hexenmythos. Die Hexe: Subjekt der Naturaneignung und Objekt der Naturbeherrschung", in *Aus der Zeit der Verzweiflung. Zur Genese und Aktualität des Hexenbildes* (Frankfurt, Suhrkamp, 1977), p. 259-312.

¹⁷ Robert Mandrou, *Magistrats et sorciers en France au XVIIe siècle*, Paris, Le Seuil, 1968; Robert Muchembled, *La sorcière au village, XVe-XVIIIe siècle*, (Paris, Gallimard/folio, 1991/=1975); Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic. Studies on Popular Beliefs in sixteenth and seventeenth century England*, (London, 1967).

¹⁸ Donna Haraway, "Situated Knowledge", in Haraway, *Primate visions: gender, race, and nature in the world of modern science* (New York, Routledge, 1989).

Whether rehabilitated victim or powerful identification, there is no "witch" in the singular.¹⁹ Not only women were persecuted and condemned to death and neither were the incriminated always condemned in the same way or to the same extent, chronologically and geographically speaking. The term "witch" itself appears first and foremost to be a name, a classifying label confining those named to a particular cultural territory (e.g. popular culture, female wisdom etc.), conferred by their contemporaries, as well as historians.

When it comes to describing the phenomenon of the "false witch," these same problems seem to reappear. The pioneer work by French social historian and scholar Robert Mandrou is a quite telling example. Studying the decriminalization of witchcraft during the 17th century, Mandrou represents this process as a result of the growing impact of "enlightened" thought, as well as the decreasing belief in the supernatural among social elite, in this case, men of science and of law. In its straight linearity of historical change and its dichotomous vision of society, Mandrou's position is problematic in itself. But let us concentrate upon the last pages of his book where he offers an interpretation of the appearance of the "false witches."

Above all, the novelty of the phenomenon seems to stem from the dimension of fraudulence. Mandrou distinguishes between "false wizards crooks" (*faux sorciers escrocs*) and "false witches clairvoyants" (*fausses sorcières devineresses*), differentiating between men and women by using different epithets. At the same time, he argues that these two groups performed the same kind of activity, depended on the same legal categories, and received more or less the same treatment by the police. According to Mandrou, the difference between men and women resided in the fact that women would be specialized primarily in fortune-telling/clairvoyance. When captured by the police, women would confess their guilt more easily and generally behave in a less "rebellious" way during interrogation. This view has at least two implications for the interpretation of gender and witchcraft in early eighteenth century Paris. The police frequently used the general term "false wizards" (*faux sorciers*) but according to Mandrou's reading, this reveals gendered meanings. The evolution from magic to fraudulence appears to be men's business, whereas women stick to "their" traditional tasks. However, he does not take into account that the very attention paid to the economic interaction might itself determine the object of investigation, i.e. witchcraft; neither does he question the police's terminology. His perspective clearly reflects Enlightenment discourse, itself based on the idea of an

¹⁹ See also Sallmann, Sorcière; Gerd Schwerhoff, "Vom Alltag zur Massenverfolgung. Neue deutsche Forschungen zum frühneuzeitlichen Hexenwesens", *Geschichte in Wissenschaft und Unterricht*, 46, 1995, p. 359-380.

apparently general "progress" which was, in fact, limited to men as political and therefore historical actors and excluded women by reducing them to their bodies and identifying them in a new way with the image of never-changing nature.²⁰ In any case, Mandrou sketches the historical evolution of the decentering of the belief in witchcraft, changing from cruel superstition to "enlightened" indulgence and in the process, leaving behind the "credulous folk," including women. In doing so, he contributes to not only the decentered territorialization of so-called "popular culture," but also to the specific assimilation of the female witch to a long, a-historical tradition of the world of oral, popular culture, more or less resistant to change.

The unity of history is as much a fiction as the unity of the woman, the man, or in this case, the "witch." In order to avoid the sort of shortcomings I have tried to point out in Mandrou's reading, we must change the reading itself. Instead of concentrating on clear distinctions, hierarchies, classifications, and linear processes of exclusion, the focus should shift to the unevenness, hesitations and uncertainties of these very distinctions, hierarchies, and classifications.²¹ The variety of possible and alternative positions would then become the center and the starting point of investigation. Variety does not entail doing away with the question of power but, on the contrary, could be a way of rendering the functioning of power more visible. It can also induce a synchronic reading that does not automatically organize everything into a diachronical perspective according to what came afterward, historically speaking. Recall how the example of revolutionary women showed that the emphasis on different perspectives, unequally coexisting at a given moment, is the very grounding of an analysis of the only apparent "particularity" of women, the first step toward rendering visible those processes which localize and fix moving historical characters. In this view, the appearance of some "false witches and wizards" in early eighteenth century Paris might be more than the mere aftermath of the terrifying witchcraze and the insignificant superstitions of insignificant people. Perhaps, on the contrary, the witches' and wizards' "falseness" just points to

²⁰ Claudia Honegger, *Die Ordnung der Geschlechter. Die Wissenschaften vom Menschen und das Weib, 1750-1850*, (München, dtv, 1996); Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex. Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud*, (Cambridge, Harvard UP, 1990).

²¹ Hausen, *Nicht-Einheit*, p. 35: "Nicht nur die Uneinheitlichkeit von Zeiten und Räumen, sondern auch die nach Herkunft und Lebenssituationen ausgeprägte Unterschiedlichkeit von jungen und alten Menschen, von Frauen und Männern zusammen mit der Vielfalt der Möglichkeiten und Interessen der im historischen Zeitlauf handelnden und sinnstiftenden Subjekte gilt es sehr viel entscheidender als bisher zum Zentrum wissenschaftlich fundierter Geschichtsdarstellung zu machen."

the crucial difficulty which contemporaries had to cope with of establishing a scientifically, publicly, and socially reliable "truth".