History 291H: European witchcraft in comparative perspective

University of Massachusetts Amherst
Fall Semester 1999
TuTh 9:30-10:45, Herter 444

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This syllabus is also available on the World Wide Web:
<http://www-unix.oit.umass.edu/~ogilvie/courses/fall99/291H/>
(link available on the University Web-enhanced Courses page)

Brief description of course

Belief in witchcraft seems to be almost universal in human societies. In early modern Europe, this belief led to widespread persecutions in which thousands of Europeans, both women and men, were executed as witches. Ever since, historians have been trying to explain why.

This course will examine European witchcraft belief and the early modern witch-craze in comparative perspective. We will look at the origins of belief in witchcraft, reasons for believing that particular individuals were witches, and the causes and consequences of the waves of trials and executions that disrupted families and villages. By comparing the European persecutions with the Salem witch craze and with witchcraft beliefs in non-western societies, we will deepen our understanding of witchcraft as a universal phenomenon and our knowledge of the historical particularity of the early modern European witch-craze.

Our examination of witchcraft will raise some fundamental questions in the study of history: How do historians know about the past? How do they choose and interpret sources? Can modern science and psychological theory be used to understand the past? Why do historians choose particular events to study? We will also address more specific questions relating to witchcraft as a historical phenomenon: Were there really witches? Were witchcraft persecutions motivated by misogyny? Can we use trial records, evidence obtained by torture, and other biased sources to understand "what really happened"? Can one explanation really account for centuries of persecution, or were witch-crazes complex phenomena with multiple causes?

Seminar meetings will focus on exploring these questions through discussion of common readings; the course will be devoted to inquiry, not to presentation of fixed conclusions. Several short papers will allow students to practice the art of history and develop their own conclusions about the witch-craze and its causes. As a sophomore seminar, this course should teach not only the history of witchcraft but also skills that will help students in future history courses.

Course goals

This course has several different goals. By the end of the semester, you should be able to:

- Identify the leading modern explanations for the European witch-craze and assess their strengths and weaknesses.
- Find primary and secondary sources in the library.
- Interpret a primary source, including identifying possible sources of bias or inaccuracy.
- Identify the main point of a secondary source and its biases.

- Write a short, effective argumentative essay that (1) uses primary sources to (2) respond to arguments in secondary sources.

Your goals for the course

You have just read my goals for the course. You should now take the time to reflect on those goals and think about any others you might have. In the space below, you can write the reasons *you* are in this course and any goals on which you wish to concentrate during it.

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Course structure

This course is an honors seminar. In the seminar room, we will discuss the issues raised by reading assignments. You must come to class prepared to participate. My role is to choose readings, raise questions, answer points of information, and moderate the discussion; the quality of your classroom experience also depends on **you** and your classmates.

In order to have a productive discussion, you need to approach course readings and discussion sessions with questions in mind. The syllabus gives important questions to keep in mind as you read the assignments. If the readings raise other questions, by all means write them down and bring them to discussion.

The course schedule (below) lists topics, readings, and assignments for each day. As you approach the readings for each class meeting, keep the questions for the day in mind—but also keep your mind open to any other questions that the readings raise for you.

In addition to seminar meetings, an electronic discussion list has been established for the course. Students with e-mail accounts will be signed up for this list. The list will allow me to notify you quickly of any last-minute changes to the syllabus or course schedule (emergencies only) and will allow you to raise any questions that might occur without having to wait until the next seminar meeting. Active participation in the discussion list is optional.

Course requirements and grading

As an honors seminar, this course has high standards and demands a fair amount of work. You are expected to participate regularly; you will also be expected to do some reading beyond what is required on the syllabus, and you will write about 40 pages over the course of the semester.

There are seven basic requirements for this course:

1. Attendance and class participation

Attendance and participation are vital for a successful seminar. I expect you to attend each of the 25 meetings (after the initial day). You are allowed three absences; for each absence beyond the third, your participation grade will be lowered by one full letter grade. If you are called on to read your one-page essay (see #2, below), and you don't have it, you will be marked as absent.

If you must miss a class, you should inform me in advance of the reason, or provide documentation (such as a note from the doctor) afterwards. You may send e-mail or leave messages on voice mail (545-1599). Athletes should present a complete schedule of the days they will miss by September 23. If a religious holiday will prevent you from attending class, please inform me by September 23. Please note that *all* absences count against your limit, except those that are due to religious holidays, athletic events, or other University-related travel; exceptions will be made only for emergencies.

If you attend regularly and speak at least once in each seminar meeting, your attendance and participation grade will be a B or better. If you participate frequently (while showing that you have read and thought about the assigned reading and discussion questions), it will be an A.

2. Weekly one-page essays

Most weeks you will be required to write a one-page essay addressing one of the discussion questions for the day. Most of these essays will be due on Thursday (see the course schedule for specific dates). You will not be required to hand them in, but each day they are due, three students will be selected at random to read their essays in order to start the discussion. If you are called and do not have your essay, you will be marked as absent for that discussion. At the end of the semester, you will choose your three best essays for your course portfolio (see below, under "Grading").

3. Two annotated bibliographies

Early in the semester, you will be required to produce two annotated bibliographies, one of primary sources and one of secondary sources (we will discuss the difference in class). You will receive detailed instructions and grading criteria for these assignments. At the end of the semester, you will include these in your course portfolio.

4. Two primary source analyses

Over the course of the semester, you will be required to write two short (three-page) analyses of selected primary sources. You will receive detailed instructions and grading criteria for these assignments. At the end of the semester, you will include the better of the two in your course portfolio.

5. Two secondary source critiques

Over the course of the semester, you will be required to write two short (three-page) critiques of selected secondary sources. You will receive detailed instructions and grading criteria for these assignments. At the end of the semester, you will include the better of the two in your course portfolio.

6. Four peer critiques

Over the course of the semester, you will be required to write four brief (one-page) peer critiques of your fellow students' secondary source critiques and primary source analyses. You will receive detailed instructions and grading criteria for these assignments. At the end of the semester, you will include these in your course portfolio.

7. One ten-page argumentative essay

At the end of the semester, you will be required to hand in a ten-page (2500 word) minimum argumentative essay, which will use primary sources to address a problem raised by secondary sources. You will receive detailed instructions and grading criteria for this assignment; you will also discuss your essay topic and sources with me during office hours.

Grading for the course

You will receive detailed instructions and grading criteria for each assignment. Additionally, you will receive grades during the semester for assignments 3-6, and you will receive a midterm assessment of your attendance and participation grade to date. Here is how the final course grade will be determined:

Attendance and participation (requirement #1)	25% of final grade
Final course portfolio, consisting of:	
♦ Your best three one-page papers (requirement #2)	15% (5% each)
♦ Your two annotated bibliographies (requirement #3)	10% (5% each)
♦ Your better primary source analysis (requirement #4)	10%
♦ Your better secondary source critique (requirement #5)	10%
♦ Your four peer critiques (requirement #6)	10% (2.5% each)
♦ Your ten-page argumentative essay (requirement #7)	20%

You may rewrite the first four items in the portfolio (the one-page papers, annotated bibliographies, source critique, and source analysis) if you like; rewritten items will be regraded *if the original is also included*, and the *higher* grade used to calculate the final course grade. If the original is not included, the first grade will stand.

Policy on late assignments

Late assignments will have the maximum grade reduced by one-half letter grade for each working day they are late (weekends and holidays do not count). Exceptions will be made only when an extension is granted at least two days in advance of the due date, or in the case of a bona fide emergency (documentation from a medical professional or the dean of students may be required).

If an assignment is handed in late, the same penalties will apply to any rewrites that you do for the final course portfolio. For example, if your first bibliography is two days late, and you get a "C" on it, the maximum grade for the rewrite will also be "B."

Policy on academic honesty

Plagiarism is grounds for failure in the course. Plagiarism consists of either (a) copying the exact words of another work without both enclosing them in quotation marks and providing a reference, or (b) using information or ideas from another work without providing credit, in notes, to the source of the information or ideas. Submission of a paper copied from another work, or which contains fictitious or falsified notes, will result in automatic failure of the course. Please refer to the *Undergraduate Rights and Responsibilities* booklet for the University's full policy on academic honesty.

Why is plagiarism so bad? Learning depends on trust—the student trusts the teacher to know the subject and to teach about it clearly, and the teacher trusts the student to show evidence of learning through exams and other assignments. Plagiarizing a paper breaches that trust. It is also theft of someone else's intellectual property.

Books for course

The following books have been ordered through Food For Thought Books (106 N. Pleasant Street, Amherst, tel. 253-5432). They are also on reserve in the DuBois Library. I have given ISBN numbers in case you want to order them yourself; I encourage you to support local businesses. Bookstores begin to return unsold books around the beginning of November, so be sure to buy them while they're still available.

Benjamin, Jules R. *A student's guide to history*. 7th ed. Boston: Bedford Books, 1998. ISBN 0-312-14977-8. **Required**. Paper $12

Boyer, Paul, and Stephen Nissenbaum. *Salem possessed: The social origins of witchcraft*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1974. ISBN 0-674-78526-6. **Required**. Paper $16

Briggs, Robin. *Witches and neighbors: The social and cultural context of European witchcraft*. New York: Viking, 1996. ISBN 0-14-014438-2. **Required**. Paper $16

Ginzburg, Carlo. *The night battles: Witchcraft and agrarian cults in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983. ISBN: 0-8018-4386-3. **Required**. Paper $16

Kors, Alan C., and Edward Peters, eds. *Witchcraft in Europe, 1100-1700: A documentary history*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1972. ISBN 0-8122-1063-8. **Required**. Paper $22

Williams, Joseph M. *Style: Ten lessons in clarity and grace*. 5th ed. New York: Longman, 1997. ISBN 0-673-98243-2. **Suggested**. Paper $22.50

A note on readings

Books that are not on order at Food For Thought Books, and occasional articles and primary sources, will be distributed in class or available on reserve. They will be available at least one week before they are due to be read. Because this course follows a seminar format, you **must** bring copies of or extensive notes on the day's reading to class. If you use the books on reserve, you should bring photocopies or notes.

Joseph Williams's book on *Style* is the best book on the subject that I know. Anyone who wants to improve their expository writing should study this book, which is a *suggested* reading. You should also own a good collegiate dictionary; the *American Heritage Collegiate Dictionary* (ISBN 0-395-67161-2, $24) is the best, but there are several other good ones.

Course schedule with topics, readings, and assignments

Introduction

In these sessions we will discuss the course and its purpose, the methods and aims of history, and approaches to the study of witchcraft as a historical phenomenon.

Thurs. 9/9 **Introduction to the course**
Getting to know one another.
What is history?
Why study witchcraft?

Tues. 9/14 **Introduction to historiography and historical method**
Questions: Why do historians study the past? How do they approach it?
Reading: Benjamin, *Student's guide*, pp. 1-43.

Thurs. 9/16 **Introduction to library research methods for historians**
NOTE LOCATION: W.E.B. DuBois Library, Room 1620. This is a regular class meeting; I will be there and take attendance.
Reading: Benjamin, *Student's guide*, pp. 59-91.

Part I: Investigating European witchcraft

In these sessions, we will study sources and historians' overviews to establish a narrative for witchcraft traditions in Europe and gain familiarity with the important sources for studying witchcraft. Our main focus will be the first four "Ws": who, what, when, and where?

Tues. 9/21 **Introduction to the study of witchcraft**
Questions: How do Kors and Peters describe the history of witchcraft in Europe? How do you think this affects their choice of sources? Why are historians interested in witchcraft?
Reading: Kors & Peters, through p. 23; Briggs, through p. 13

Witchcraft belief in the High Middle Ages
Questions: How do the primary sources characterize witchcraft? Why do they think it is bad? Do they believe in it? What evidence do they have for it?
Reading: Kors & Peters, §§1-10 (pp. 25-74).

Assignment due: Annotated secondary source bibliography

Thurs. 9/23 **Witch-hunting from the thirteenth through the fifteenth centuries**
Questions: Why was the Inquisition placed in charge of witchcraft investigations? What was heretical about witchcraft? How was witchcraft related to other heresies?
Reading: Kors & Peters, §§11-17 (pp. 77-104); Benjamin, pp. 53-58 (in preparation for the one-page essay).

Assignment due: One-page essay

Tues. 9/28 **The *Malleus Maleficarum*: A demonological compendium**
Questions: How did Krämer and Sprenger characterize witchcraft? What elements did they emphasize that were not part of the earlier medieval tradition?
Reading: Kors & Peters, §§18-19 (pp. 105-154). Note: we will not discuss all of §19 this week.

Assignment due: Annotated primary source bibliography

Thurs. 9/30 **Popular witchcraft belief I**
Questions: How did the "popular" image of the witch differ from the learned view? Who are "the people" anyway?
Reading: Briggs, pp. 15-59, Kors & Peters, §34 (pp. 280-292).

Assignment due: One-page essay

Tues. 10/5 **Popular witchcraft belief II**
Questions: What did witches allegedly do to their victims? What sort of phenomena fell under the rubric of witchcraft?
Reading: Briggs, pp. 61-133; Kors & Peters, §27 (pp. 236-246).

Assignment due: Primary source analysis #1

Thurs. 10/7 **Witchcraft trials I**
Questions: What procedures were inquisitors supposed to use in investigating and trying suspected witches? Were these procedures fair? Why or why not?
Reading: Kors & Peters, §§19-20 (pp. 154-191).

Assignment due: One-page essay

Tues. 10/12 **Witchcraft trials II**

Questions: Did inquisitors and other officials follow the rules they were supposed to follow when trying witches? How did critics of witchcraft trials respond to them?

Reading: Kors & Peters, §§26, 32, 36-38 (pp. 229-235, 266-275, 314-339); Christina Larner, "*Crimen exceptum*? The crime of witchcraft in Europe," in *Crime and the law*, ed. V. A. C. Gatrell, Bruce Lenman, and Geoffrey Parker (London: Europa Publications, 1980), pp. 40-75. [RESERVE]

Assignment due: Peer critique #1

Tues. 10/12, Wed. 10/13, Thurs. 10/14: Meet with Prof. Ogilvie in office hours to discuss your final paper topic. I will schedule extra office hours to accommodate everyone's schedule.

Thurs. 10/14 **Witchcraft persecutions**

Questions: How many people were tried for witchcraft, and how many were killed? What patterns characterized witchcraft persecutions? Did these patterns vary by region?

Reading: Briggs, pp. 169-218; Kors & Peters, §§23-25, 28-30 (pp. 213-228, 249-259).

Assignment due: One-page essay

Tues. 10/19 **Witchcraft and the family**

Questions: How did family and other social relations affect witchcraft accusations?

Reading: Briggs, 219-256.

Assignment due: Secondary source critique #1

Tues. 10/19, Wed. 10/20, Thurs. 10/21: Meet with Prof. Ogilvie in office hours to discuss your final paper topic. I will schedule extra office hours to accommodate everyone's schedule.

Thurs. 10/21 **Did witchcraft exist?**

Questions: In what ways does it make sense to say that witchcraft existed in the early modern period? In what ways does it not make sense?

Reading: Ginzburg (entire book).

Assignment due: One-page essay

Part II: Explaining European witchcraft

In these sessions, we will turn to the fifth "W": why? After tackling whether witches really existed, we will explore different explanations for witchcraft belief, assessing their strengths and weaknesses.

Tues. 10/26 **Witchcraft and gender I**

Questions: What aspects of "female nature" were associated with witchcraft? Why did witches frighten men and women? Were witchcraft accusations a

way to keep women in their place?

Reading: Clarke Garrett, "Women and witches: Patterns of analysis," *Signs* 3 (1977): 461-470; Alan Anderson and Raymond Gordon, "Witchcraft and the status of women—the case of England," *British Journal of Sociology* 29 (1978): 171-184; J. K. Swales and Hugh V. McLachan, "Witchcraft and the status of women: A comment," *British Journal of Sociology* 30 (1979): 349-357; Carolyn Matalene, "Women as witches," *International Journal of Women's Studies* 1 (1978): 573-587; 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. Richard J. Evans (London: Routledge, 1988), pp. 57-74. [RESERVE]

Assignment due: Peer critique #2

Thurs. 10/28 **Witchcraft and gender II**

Questions: Were most witches women? How does the answer to this question affect our interpretation of witchcraft? Why have historians argued about this question?

Reading: Briggs, pp. 257-286.

Assignment due: One-page essay

Tues. 11/2 **Witchcraft and the Reformation**

Questions: Did Reformers and Catholics differ in their witchcraft beliefs? In the fervor or efficacy with which they persecuted alleged witches?

Reading: Kors & Peters, §§21-22, 31, 39, 41 (pp. 193-212, 260-265, 340-341, 351-357); Allison P. Coudert, "The myth of the improved status of Protestant women: The case of the witchcraze," in *The politics of gender in early modern Europe*, ed. Jean R. Brink, Allison P. Coudert, and Maryanne C. Horowitz, *Sixteenth Century Essays and Studies* 12 (1989): 61-89. [RESERVE]

Assignment due: Primary source analysis #2

Thurs. 11/4 **Witchcraft and science**

Questions: Did the rise of modern science bring about a decline in witchcraft belief? Can changes in what elites believe affect what "common people" believe?

Reading: Kors & Peters, §§35, 40, 43-44 (pp. 293-309, 342-350, 360-377); Stuart Clark, "The scientific status of demonology," in *Occult and scientific mentalities in the Renaissance*, ed. Brian Vickers (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), pp. 351-374. [RESERVE]

Assignment due: One-page essay

Tues. 11/9 **Persecution from below: village rivalries?**

Questions: Whom did villagers single out for accusations of witchcraft? Were these accusations part of a system for settling village rivalries?

Reading: Briggs, 135-169.

Assignment due: Peer critique #3

Thurs. 11/11 **NO CLASS (Veterans' Day Holiday)**
Please note: Next week's reading assignments are heavy; you might want to get an early start.

Mon. 11/15 **Persecution from below: economic hardships?**
(Thursday class schedule in effect)
Questions: What was the economic position of accused witches? Were accusations more common in bad times than in good?
Reading: Briggs, pp. 287-316.

Tues. 11/16 **Witchcraft and social control**
Questions: What did central authorities think about witchcraft? Did witchcraft trials or witch crazes serve to strengthen the state's control over its subjects?
Reading: Briggs, pp. 317-367; Joseph Klaits, "Witchcraft trials and absolute monarchy in Alsace," in *Church, state, and society under the Bourbon kings of France*, ed. Richard M. Golden (Lawrence, KS: Coronado Press, 1982), pp. 148-172. [HANDOUT]

Assignment due: Secondary source critique #2

Part III: Comparisons

In the last part of the course, we will examine a few comparative cases, in order to determine what was unique about early modern European witchcraft, and then we will discuss general issues about witchcraft, historical method, and the relation between the present and the past.

Thurs. 11/18 **Salem village witchcraft I**
Questions: How did the witch craze in Salem develop? How does its development compare to European witch crazes?
Reading: Boyer & Nissenbaum, pp. []; Kors & Peters, §33 (pp. 276-279).

Assignment due: One-page essay

Tues. 11/23 **Salem village witchcraft II**
Questions: Why did the Salem witch craze take place? Which of the explanations we have discussed seems most appropriate for this case? Why did witchcraft persecutions in Salem take place at a time when they had all but vanished in Europe?
Reading: Boyer & Nissenbaum, pp. []; Kors & Peters, §42 (pp. 358-359).

Assignment due: Peer critique #4

Thurs. 11/25 **NO CLASS (Thanksgiving Recess)**

Tues. 11/30 **Witchcraft among the Azande**
Questions: What role did *mangu* play in Azande society? How similar is it to European and early American witchcraft? How does Evans-Pritchard's approach to witchcraft differ from that taken by historians we have read?
Reading: E. E. Evans-Pritchard, "Witchcraft (*mangu*) amongst the A-Zande," *Sudan Notes and Records* 12 (1929): 163-249; read pp. 163-170, 178-210, 246-249. [RESERVE]

Thurs. 12/2 **Anthropological study of witchcraft**

Questions: How does witchcraft belief function in other societies? How is it connected to religious beliefs and practices? How do anthropological approaches to witchcraft differ from historical approaches?

Reading: M. G. Marwick, "The study of witchcraft," in *The craft of social anthropology*, ed. A. L. Epstein (New York and London: Tavistock, 1967), pp. 231-244; John Middleton, "Witchcraft and sorcery in Lugbara," in *Witchcraft and sorcery in East Africa*, ed. J.F.M. Middleton and E. H. Winters (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1963), pp. 257-275; Thomas J. Schoeneman, "The witch hunt as a culture change phenomenon," *Ethos* 3 (1975): 529-554. [RESERVE]

Assignment due: One-page essay

Tues. 12/7 **Concluding reflections on the witch-craze and historical method**

Questions: What is your overall impression of witchcraft belief and persecution? What can historians learn, and what can't we know?

Reading: Briggs, pp. 369-411.

Thurs. 12/9 **Witchcraft today?**

Questions: How do modern Wiccan and other "witch" movements compare with historical witchcraft? Does our society have any equivalents to the witch-hunt?

Reading: Christina Larner, "Witchcraft past and present," in *Witchcraft and religion*, ed. Christina Larner (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1984), pp. 79-91; Marilyn R. Pukilla, "The literature of contemporary Wicca: Formalists, feminists, and free spirits," *Choice* 36 (March 1999): 1215-1223; handouts TBA.

Assignment due: One-page essay

Thurs. 12/16 —Course Portfolio Due in Herter 617!