

**UCLA**

**Comitatus: A Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies**

**Title**

Witchcraft in Europe 400-1700: A Documentary History 2nd ed. (review)

**Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/72s8m3qc>

**Journal**

Comitatus: A Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 32(1)

**ISSN**

0069-6412

**Author**

Turner, Wendy J.

**Publication Date**

2001-10-01

Peer reviewed

## REVIEWS

***Witchcraft in Europe 400–1700: A Documentary History*, 2nd ed. by Alan Charles Kors and Edward Peters, revised by Edward Peters (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press 2001) xiv + 451, ill.**

During the last years of the Middle Ages and throughout the Early Modern period, a strange phenomenon occurred which has captured the attention of historians and anthropologists, as well as that of contemporary feminists and occultists: the great “witch crazes.” The witch crazes, a horrific series of trials, tortures, and condemnations of supposedly magical and demonic persons, seem out of place in this period of scientific discoveries, global travels, educational opportunities, inventions, religious reforms, and a growing belief in the individual. The idea of an educated, scientific individual clashes with that of the witch: often a woman, but always a person with knowledge of magic, nature, old wisdom, or later the Devil. From about 1350 to 1700, the Catholic Church promoted the ideas that not only had some people fallen away from their faith into heretical views, but also that some were in league with Satan, possessed by demons, and countered the goodness of Christ with acts of black magic for the Devil. The church began to hunt witches actively in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries and, through the tortured and manipulated words of those accused, found, not surprisingly, similar tales of night meetings, flying on broomsticks, and perverse encounters with the Devil and his demons.

Alan Charles Kors and Edward Peters, in the second edition of their 1972 source book, *Witchcraft in Europe 1100–1700: A Documentary History*, now titled *400–1700*, offer a collection of primary sources in translation along with a set of illustrations for use in teaching or general research. In the second edition, Peters expands both the number of texts and the time period that they cover; however, he continues the core pursuit of the first edition: to examine the European view of “the nature, activities, and numbers of diabolical sorcerers and witches [that] became a major intellectual and juridical preoccupation of people from all walks of life.” Kors and Peters focus on the period from 1100 to 1750 that “culminated in the widespread fears, accusations, trials, and executions that so arrest our attention.” The obvious interest in the later period is justified; the issues became more intensely dichotomous as the church saw its authority questioned by scientists, religious reform-

ers and political leaders throughout the fifteenth century. The church struck out at what it deemed as the worst of the offenders, those perceived as followers of Satan. At the same time record keeping improved, providing historians with far more documents from which to study.

In the new volume, while Kors continues to be an active participant in the creative process behind the book, Peters made most of the additions and changes. In his quest to understand the process by which witches came to be a “preoccupation,” Peters inevitably spends a large portion of the volume looking at texts that examine heresy in all its forms. He organizes the book by focusing on the question of how the church could justify to itself the torturing and killing of innocents, children, the handicapped, not to mention men and women who often believed in the church. In the pursuit of offering insight into this question, Kors and Peters are brilliant. They include the writings of many of the great thinkers of the church from the medieval period: Augustine, Isidore of Seville, Burchard of Worms, Gratian, and Thomas Aquinas, to name a few. They also incorporate excerpts from several of the greatest Renaissance thinkers who challenged the church both from without and within: including Erasmus, Pico della Mirandola, Luther, Calvin, Bodin, Rémy, Mather, Montaigne, Spinoza, Hobbes, and Bayle. Peters also has added trial records, excerpts from many of the popes and other general records, including illustrations from both secular and sacred works. The arrangement of these sources is mostly chronological, but the sources for each section were chosen to concentrate on a particular idea. The sources are grouped into sections and labeled by a prevalent ideology—medieval Christendom, Renaissance Humanism, the Reformation, or Skepticism—or by a question particular to the study of witchcraft during a given time period, as in the section on Thomas Aquinas. Each of the ten sections may have as few as three passages or as many as ten. For example, there are eight sources by various writers included in section II on “Sorcery in Christendom,” while in “Thomas Aquinas on Sorcery and the Nature of Evil,” section III, four of the five excerpts are by Aquinas.

One of the most fascinating sections is “Witchcraft Prosecutions in the Seventeenth Century.” These selections come closest to providing a voice for the accused persons or self-proclaimed witches. Although their voices are filtered through the thoughts and accounts of their inquisitors, even their reported actions and second-hand comments pro-

vide insight into the practices of the time. Kors and Peters point out the interesting similarity between the letters of prosecution of Würzburg and Bonn, both of which describe the accusation and execution of important city and church officials, law and clergy students, and young children: "Children of three or four years have devils for their paramours." In the case of Suzanne Gandry, and many others, it is hard to say which words she actually employed, truly believed, was forced to say, or felt she had to say to avoid imprisonment, torture, or death. Her trial record is a painful moment-by-moment account of her trial and torture: "Feeling herself strapped down, she says she is not a witch, while struggling to cry." And later, still on the rack, "crying Jésus-Maria, that she is not a witch." In much of the rest of her testimony over the course of several days, she confessed openly her witch-like activities and encounters with "Petit-Grignon," her lover, the devil, and later was put to death for her confessions. The authors have chosen selections here that also offer ample evidence that the church and the inquisition accused and convicted many men as well, not just women.

The original 1972 book included forty-four primary sources; while the new version has sixty-nine texts and forty-one new illustrations. As Peters puts it, it is "essentially a new book with an older book wrapped up inside it." In the new edition, he has also corrected a few problems, including the removal of the "Inquisition of Toulouse," which two scholars independently proved in 1975 and 1976 to be a nineteenth-century forgery. A couple of the texts from the original volume have been expanded or altered, leaving forty-one of the original texts with twenty-eight new additions. Of these new additions, seventeen fall between 1400 and 1700, which means that forty-five, nearly two-thirds of the texts, are from the last two-hundred-year period, while only twenty-four are from the first one-thousand years, 400–1400. While Peters expanded the time frame of investigation by 700 years, only six of the added texts represent the expansion.

Granted, there are fewer sources found in this earlier time period than in later periods, but there are texts, albeit social history ones such as administrative records and literature. Peters makes no mention of the practices of magic by the Celtic remnant, those Germanic and Anglo-Saxon peoples who, although somewhat Christianized, continued the traditions of their ancestors such as the practice of magic. It is the connection between the old Celtic practices and the rituals later described by Sprenger and Kramer in the *Malleus Maleficarum* and other docu-

ments that is so important to the understanding of why the Catholics and some Protestants saw this group, those without a Christian background, as the most likely to be evil. Those persons who had other knowledge unknown to the Christian world—knowledge of nature and healing, of the forest and survival without farming—challenged the authority of the Catholic Church and the enthusiasm of the Reformation leaders. It is the separation of the wild, Celtic world from that of the educated, Renaissance individual that created a cultural and intellectual tension at the foundation of the “witch craze.” It might have been better for Peters to have added the earliest six texts as a precursor section to the main period of investigation, which remains 1100–1700. As it stands, Peters can only nominally justify the change in title.

The orientation of this collection is from the perspective of the establishment, primarily the church and its representatives, giving the reader a myopic view of magic in the Middle Ages and witchcraft in Early Modern Europe. Even though criticized by reviewers of the first book for not having some mention of the benandante, which originally was so eloquently researched by Carlo Ginzburg and now has been further explored by other scholars, Peters has chosen to continue his exclusion of this interesting group.

Kors’s and Peters’s collection covers mainly those sources from predominately Catholic regions, which is interesting but not the whole story. They include art, but leave out literary, medical, and social documents. Serious scholars of this subject would need to see the original sources and collections from which these selections come and augment their research with other, literary and social texts. Although Kors’s and Peters’s work is limited in scope, this body of texts and its commentary is scholarly enough for the undergraduate or anyone wanting some background on the history of witchcraft. The well-crafted introductions to each selection place the documents in their historic contexts and provide the reader with the background necessary to understand the passages. Every source book has a theme, and Kors’s and Peters’s is an intellectual one. With that in mind, this work will be a great addition to the classroom in courses on witchcraft or as a counterpoint to scientific, ecclesiastical, or women’s historical sources in courses on the social or intellectual history of late medieval and early modern Europe.

WENDY J. TURNER, History, Augusta State University, GA