

The male witch.

An essay on the meaning of seventeenth-century witchcraft insults

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In 1595, at the goorspraak in Emmen, the neighbours (*buren*) of that place brought forward that in the past year there were rumours of witchcraft (*toeverijje*) about Lambert Huizinge. This man showed up at the meeting in person and declared himself innocent of the crime. Five years or so ago, he told the neighbours and the sheriff, the same thing had happened to him. At that time he had ‘presented his neck body and goods’ and had filed request after request, but justice had been refused. (His case had in fact been referred to the ecclesiastical court, which can indeed be interpreted as a delaying tactic, since according to both the law and the judicial practice, witchcraft rumours should be brought before secular sessions). On this occasion he again ‘presented his neck, body and goods’ and, moreover, allowed the sheriff to have him examined - which he did not have to, as his opponents should collect sufficient indications before they could even demand an examination. But, as Huizinge said, people who are suspected of witchcraft ought to be examined, and if I am found to be guilty, my opponents are free, but if nothing is found, I leave it to the sheriff to consider about how justice should be applied. (Although he did not say it in so many words, in the latter case his opponents would get the punishment that went with the crime). The sheriff’s answer is not written down (it was not important anyway, since this official had an mainly executive task) and it sufficed for the scribe to note that Huizinge complained that Marten Wulveringe had insulted him. The latter exonerated himself by replying that he had been drunk at the time and had only repeated what others had said; he paid the sheriff the usual fine of one guilder.

This case can not only serve as an example of the praxis of the *talio* (cf. De Blécourt & De Waardt 1990: 187, 203), it also allows a glimpse of witchcraft accusations that were not drawn into the context of criminal prosecution. However, the main reason for selecting this case, is that it concerns a man. In the text that I have paraphrased, any explanation about the content and meaning of the witchcraft Huizinge was accused of, is missing. This goes for all the other forty cases involving witchcraft insults to males that I have extracted from sixteenth and seventeenth century sources from Drenthe, the province of the Netherlands I have especially researched on witchcraft (De Blécourt 1990). In this article I will present a small part of the results of this research, namely the sections that deal with male witches, that is to say, with people that were addressed as *tovenaar* or

weerwolf (or both).[1] The main question to be answered is: what did these terms mean for the people involved?

Historiography

Research into historical European witchcraft is still for the main part focussed on prosecutions (see for overviews: Levack 1987; Behringer 1989; Blauert 1990a), despite anthropological impulses to study the phenomenon on the level of the main participants, namely accuser and accused, insulters and insulted (cf. Macfarlane 1970; Thomas 1970). Studies which do pay attention to witchcraft on this level, are almost unvariably based on the records of criminal trials (cf. for instance Briggs 1989; Rummel 1990; Blauert 1990b). Especially where there are extensive depositions of witnesses, there is nothing against the use of such a source for the reconstruction of local witchcraft. But it must be considered that the information on witchcraft in criminal records could have undergone a severe selection. Criminal trials could have functioned as a sieve, in which only special people stayed behind - depending on the possibilities of the judicial system for defence. Also, on the opposite side of the European judicial spectrum, some unchecked, stripped judicial systems could increasingly produce new types of witches (cf. Midelfort 1972). One could even find different notions of witchcraft in different regions or among different groups (Monter 1972: 449). Witches' stereotypes are always academic constructions, whether stemming from the inquisitor's handbook or the modern textbook. This implies, among other things, that a general question as why women figured predominantly among the condemned, can only be answered for one jurisdiction at the time (cf. the lists in Unverhau 1987: 258-259), and only when at least the main components of a witch trial the content of witchcraft and the kind of procedure - are taken into consideration. Besides the historical records that are a result of criminal trials, the student of historical European witchcraft has also other sources at his or her disposal. Here I'd like to draw the attention to slander trials, a source that will be especially attractive for those who complain about the (presumed) absence of the witch's own view in the remaining records. After all, a trial for slander can be seen as a reversed witch trial; the witch herself (or himself) took the initiative and the influence of authorities, who could have used different witchcraft classifications, would have been fairly restricted (cf. Kieckhefer 1976: 29). Although this source has not been totally neglected in witchcraft historiography (cf. Muchembled 1981; Demos 1983), it has only scarcely been used and its possibilities have been underestimated.

Civil slander suits were conducted before, during and after the periods which saw the

criminal prosecution of witchcraft, they were also held in regions where no such prosecutions took place. By their analysis the temporal and geographical limits of the persecutions can be overcome. But the use of this source seems in a way also problematic. As financial accounts have often been overlooked as a source for the study of witch trials, records of slander trials and registers of fines have not been used in the study of witchcraft, since they only contain a few lines about crime or insult. Though in some cases of slander huge dossiers have indeed come down to us, the majority of them only gives the names of insulter and insulted and the insult used - at least in my experience with the archives of the eastern Netherlands. This source hardly invites a 'thick description', as has become popular among cultural historians. How then can it still supply other notions of witchcraft, which do not readily confirm the known stereotypes? Articles about insults, or verbal injuries as they were called in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, have been published sporadically - one article deals with witchcraft specifically (Kramer 1983; cf. Höck 1985). These publications point to the contents of slander trials and records of fines rather than analyse them. Questions about the social backgrounds of the accuser and accused are only answered generally (cf. Lorenzen Schmidt 1978; Sharpe 1983; Kramer 1984; Burke 1987; Garrioch 1987). A more precise analysis, in which the possible relations between the content of an insult and the social position of the participants are taken into account, could - as I intend to show in the following paragraphs - lead to more relevant results. Among other things, it could provide an answer to the anthropologically inspired problem of indigenous or local meaning of a particular insult.

The judicial and social context

In Drenthe, justice was administered in two regular meetings, the *goorspraak* and the *lotting*. In the seventeenth and eighteenth century twelve *goorspraken* a year were held in different parts of Drenthe, six in spring and six in autumn. It was compulsory to report all rumours about felonies which were liable to fines, such as fights, thefts, manslaughter, witchcraft, and injuries. Also cases about which some discord had arisen, usually concerning inheritances and transactions, could be brought before the *buren*, i.e. those locals who owned the land and had the right to use the common grounds. Until the middle of the seventeenth century they could pass a verdict, after that the *goorspraak* only functioned as an instance where fines were collected and suits were prepared; all litigations were referred to the highest judicial institution, the *Etstoel*. The meeting of this body, which consisted of twentyfour *etten* (*buren* from the different parts of Drenthe who

had sworn an oath) and the *drost* (sheriff), was called the *lotting*. It met twice a year and served justice in first and final instance. Most of the conflicts brought before it were about finance and ownership, cases of slander and assault also occurred regularly. According to the *Landrecht*, the common law of Drenthe in 1614, a person who called another person a thief, traitor, crook, murderer, werewolf, male or female witch (*toevenaer ofte toevenaersche*) and was not prepared to prove his allegation, had to pay a 25 guilder fine. He also had to revoke his words in public before the *Etstoel* and to reimburse his opponent's damages. Only by begging for mercy and showing remorse about his words within 24 hours, could an insulter abstain from public revocation. And only if he was able to prove his words, did he not have to pay the fine (*Landrecht* 1614, IV 23,24). This text marks a transition in slander proceedings; the above mentioned case of Huizinge in fact still belongs to an earlier type. In the seventeenth century revocation became more important than proof - which in cases of witchcraft no one could ever provide.

At that time Drenthe was not densely populated. It consisted of approx. 150 small villages, scattered around the inhabitable parts. In 1630, the first year for which there are concrete population figures, some 22,000 people lived in about 4200 households (Verduin 1982: 9). Although Drenthe could be classed as a peasant society, it was not a totally egalitarian society. There were social differences within the villages (or *buurschappen*, i.e. neighbourhoods), which - apart from the two small towns in the south - formed the main places of habitation. Mostly, these differences concerned the relations between men and women. In public, men held the power. By law men and women were equal in matters of succession. But in the seventeenth and eighteenth century it was custom to keep the estate within the male line (*Landrecht* 1614, III 16; 1712, III 21). Daughters were married off and usually ended up in another *buurschap* than the one in which they were raised; in anthropological kinship terms, a virilocal exogamy existed in Drenthe. The male influence in neighbourhood businesses depended on the possession of land and of users' rights. From the lists of taxes which were compiled from 1640 onwards, it can be deduced that the local social stratification roughly consisted of three categories: labourers, 'full' farmers, and 'half' farmers, depending on the local distribution of land and the amount of horses needed to plough it.

Unusual profits

Lambert Huizinge was regarded as a *tovenaar* during a large part of his life. In 1589 and also in 1595 he was scolded by Marten Wulveringe for a *toevenaer* and in 1596 the vicar

of Emmen let slip the words *toevenaer ende weerwolff* towards him. In 1609 (the records of the *goorspraken* show some gaps) he was a *waerwolf* according to a Walloon soldier and a scoundrel (*schelm*) according to some others. As late as 1620 he summoned another soldier before the *Etstoel* to account for the ‘enormous injuries’, which probably consisted of like expressions. He died some time around 1632.

His opponent Wulveringe was a respected man who represented his *dingspil* many times. But he was also known to have a ready, insulting tongue. Huizinge himself owned some land in the neighbourhood of Weeringe. In 1586 he had obtained the guardianship of the Elkinge estate, which he was prohibited to use by the *buren* of Emmen and Westenesch. This case was only decided in 1602, when the Elkinge heirs demanded that a sealed document be returned to them and Huizinge acquitted them in public of paying 300 thaler and 50 guilders. If he did not keep his word, he said, he would declare himself a crook and would not visit reasonable people anymore. Already some months earlier the *etten* had decided that, because he had promised to do so and had even drunk to it, he had to pay 100 thaler to the Elkinge heirs together with ten thaler to the poor of Emmen.

The simultaneousness of the last case and the witchcraft accusations uttered by a hot-tempered Wulveringe, shows the meaning of the insults. Ultimately, both cases had to do with Huizinge’s honour, that is, with his place in society. In this case, the inheritance question set the parameters for his social evaluation: he had enriched himself at the cost of others and was therefore considered a *tovenaar*.

Other cases seem to confirm this analysis. One of the *buren* of Erm, Hendrick Schroer was in 1598 blamed for being ‘able to witch’. Four years later, the rumour still went that this man was a *toeverer* (there was no standard spelling in those days), together with a complaint about his financial dealings. Against this background, the word *tovenaar* can be seen as an explanation of character within a conflict about more material business.

At first sight this aspect seems to be absent from the quarrel which took place around a century later between Hindrick Horstinge and Jan Martens Wulveringe, a descendant of Marten Wulveringe. Both were ‘full’ farmers at Erm. In Januar 1680 Wulveringe had said about Horstinge, among other things, that ‘he came to bite horses and colts’ (this is the only reference in my material to harmful activities of a *weerwolf*). Before the *Etstoel* Wulveringe played this down: Horstinge had given him a beating for his words and afterwards they had a drink together (which should have normalized their relationship). Horstinge, on the other hand, was not satisfied. His opponent had also declared that he (Wulveringe) could not make honest those who were not, and he (Horstinge) demanded public and financial reparation of his honour. After all, the insults referred to witchcraft

(*toverie*). As Horstinge was also an elderman in the local church, he could not digest Wulveringe's words. But Horstinge's demands were not met; the *etten* decided that a revocation before a small committee would be sufficient, upon which Horstinge turned to the church for help (local church records that might reveal the outcome of the case are missing). Although Wulveringe possessed a 'full' estate, he did not have as much standing as his forebear in the beginning of the century. Apart from being active in local church business, since 1669 Horstinge had been a representative at the provincial council, which made him rank higher in the local social constellation. In that position, he would have been liable to accusations of witchcraft.

Families

The term *tovenaar* was also used in the plural and then pointed to a (nuclear) family that lived on a farm, or to the successive male owners of a property. This was sometimes made explicit by the use of a word referring to lineage or folk. Usually, an insult directed at one member was felt to affect the honour of the whole family.

Towards the middle of the seventeenth century the amount of slander trials for witchcraft that came before the *Etstoel* increased (contrary to the registers of the *goorspraken*, the records of the *Etstoel* are complete).[2] At that time men specifically instigated trials against other men, because they were called *weerwolf* or *tovenaar* - these insults were exclusively exchanged by men, women only insulted members of their own sex (at least as far as witchcraft was concerned). Locally, these insults seem to have the same meaning as reconstructed above. Looking up the names of the participants in witchcraft cases in the files of taxes of that time, an overall pattern emerges: in each case the insulted owned more land than the insulter or his father or brother. Probably the insulted were also the better and more prosperous farmers.

The trials from the 1640's contain another element that might shed light on the meaning of the insults *tovenaar* and *weerwolf*. Most of the accusers had not reached adulthood (they were represented by a relative) and did not have their own farm, while the accused did. According to Arent Tijmens, who rented a farm at the hamlet of Rhee, Harmen Geerts had called him a *weerwolf* in 1641 and had added that all the inhabitants of Drenthe considered him to be one. In 1641 Geerts was still living at Rhee, but in 1643, when the case finally reached the *Etstoel*, he had moved to Loon, a place nearby. In those years he was involved in several other slander suits (none of which dealt with witchcraft). The confrontation with his neighbour from Rhee, however, dated from 1637, when Harmens lost a suit against Tijmens' daughter Toenisje, of whom he had demanded that

she should fulfill her promise of marriage to him.

That marriage - or rather the prevention of a marriage - can be linked to the notion of a witch family, can also be derived from a set of slander suits that deals with one family. These cases also call for an elaboration of the remarks on gender-related insults made above. While the conclusion still stands that women did not accuse men of witchcraft, they could be drawn into the male dominated witchcraft discourse. From the 1640's onwards, in Drenthe a special, and within the Dutch context fairly new expression was used for this purpose, namely the word *heks*.^[3] Most of the accusations directed against women were expressed by the word *toveres*. This would often point to a bewitchment, as can, among others, be deduced from the verbal form *betoveren* (which, by the way, was never directed against men). The verbal equivalent of *heks*, i.e. *beheksen*, only gained prevalence at the end of the seventeenth century, however, and from that time onwards it even became synonymous with *betoveren*. Eventually the noun *heks* could also refer to women who were suspected of bewitching, but in the seventeenth century this contamination had not yet occurred. Then, *heks* was used to denominate the female members of a male defined witch family.

In the seventeenth century the hamlet of Orvelte counted thirteen farms, of which that of the Wolbers family was one of the bigger. Jan Wolbers acted many times as a representative of his *buurschap* in provincial businesses, and after his death in 1631, his sons Barelt and Jan did likewise. In 1642 parts of the commons of Orvelte were divided, on which a transaction followed whereby Barelt Wolbers gained the rights to pasture his sheep. A year later Barelt demanded a measurement of the Orvelte commons because of a conflict about users rights and in 1645 the *buren* divided the greenlands (these divisions made individual use possible, in the case of the greenlands for the grazing of cattle). The Wolbers family seems to have emerged from these transactions even more prosperous and influential than they were before. Jan Wolbers filed a slander suit in 1648 against the son of the richest family of a nearby *buurschap*, because the latter had called him a *weerwolf*. Some months before, in 1647, his sister Hille Wolbers, who was married and lived in Westerbork, had been scolded for *hexe*. Barelt was considered a *weerwolf* too, although this only becomes clear from a deposition made by his daughter Geesje in 1665, when she complained that a boy from Holthe, a neighbouring hamlet, had told her that her father was a *weerwolf*. A few years later she married another boy from that place.

Male witchcraft insults could easily transgress the boundaries of a *buurschap* (accusations of bewitchment against women never did). This will not only be due to the fact that men frequently had business outside the *buurschap*, whether commercial or administrative, it

may also be connected with the prevailing marriage custom. Men, and especially the landowning *buren*, chose their wives from outside their own *buurschap*. Because the number of farms was more or less fixed within a hamlet (and in the following centuries the number of 'full' farmers even dwindled), there were always more candidates than places. One of the reasons for young men to label families as witches consisted, I think, of the wish to regulate the marriage and inheritance market, even though attempts did not always succeed.

Reconstructions

The histories I have presented above form examples within the narrative on the meaning of male witchcraft. They are reconstructions of historical events and above all of historical indigenous meanings. Since, as is usually the case in historiography, the participants are not able to step forward to give their own, perhaps different interpretation of the events, the value of my reconstruction is to be measured on current external criteria. In other words, would it be responsible towards the historical 'actors' to add the above meanings to their expressions? Why can it not be read directly from the - in many ways scarce and fragmentary texts - that a *tovenaar* was supposed to have enriched himself in a somewhat unusual and dubious way. Why was it also not written down that it was deemed unwise to marry a member of a witch family? Unlike the insults among men, those directed against women were elaborated on a little more; at least it is clear that they deal with bewitchments, that is to say, with harm presumed to have been done to people, animals or dairy processes. Concerning men, why are only the insults transmitted?

The seriousness of verbal injuries as *tovenaar* en *weerwolf* was without dispute at the time (this changed in the eighteenth century when these insults ceased to be brought before the *Etstoel*). Normatively, the articles in the *Landrecht* point to the importance of the terms, practically, it can be inferred from the attempts of the injured to obtain a formal revocation. Because they were written down, the verdicts of the *Etstoel* can be seen as an instrument for the solution of conflicts (even, as was often the case, when an amicable agreement was reached). To the insulted, it would not have been sensible to elaborate on the background of the insults. The accusers could have done so in an attempt at defence, but since witchcraft was, especially within the context of a civil suit, impossible to prove, they not even tried. Usually they pleaded drunkenness, as Wulveringe did. Explications will also have been superfluous because every participant will have known the meaning of the insults. After all, the records were not composed to please the ethnographer of a later day. Still, labelling by means of scolding can be considered as a fixing of attitude of the

insulter towards the insulted. In that way it must have fitted within the more general relations between men.

The way the sources were produced may explain their contents, it still does not clarify the differences between the witchcraft insults directed at men (and at their family) and those addressed at women. While I hold to the value of my reconstruction, I would suggest that a bewitchment was seen to produce at least more concrete material results (people who had fallen ill, milk that could not be churned), which could be hinted at in informal talk as well as in a formal suit. The witchcraft which men were thought to have practiced would have been much more difficult to concretize; power and good luck were hard things to get a grip on.

There is, of course, also a methodological side to my argument, which has largely remained hidden in the narrative. The pattern I have presented is based on an analysis of all the cases I have been able to delve from the archives. The examples given, though they are in some ways exceptional by their relative fullness, are precisely what I used them for. Other cases, which I have deleted from this article, at least do not show contradictory elements. The reconstruction, while presented through only a few cases, is nevertheless representative for all of them. It is moreover based on serial investigation. Also, by a second going over of the records of the *goorspraken* and the *Etstoel*, other informative remains of the participants in slander trials on witchcraft were gathered, while tax registers provided insights to their social economic statuses. The paucity of the verdicts has made this 'biographic' method necessary, but I suppose that it will also produce results in other cultural historical research.

On the basis of an unbroken serial source, interrelations between cultural expressions like insults and economic processes can be indicated. To underline my arguments, I will conclude with a description of the economic dimension.

Economy

Some people would carry the name of *tovenaar* for the greater part of their life, and even their descendants might not have been totally free of the label. Although hardly any cases have been discovered in which insults stuck to successive generations over a long period of time, the notion of witch families existed. Why then occurred insults like *tovenaar* and *weerwolf* only at particular times, and why is it even possible, on the basis of serial research in the archives of the *Etstoel*, to discern striking temporal concentrations? Of the fifteen suits concerning *tovenaar* and/ or *weerwolf* accusations brought before the *Etstoel* in the seventeenth century, six took place in the 1640's and five in the 1680's (cases from

other, discontinuous sources are discarded here).

The key to this particular distribution in time is, in my opinion, to be found in the (reconstructed) indigenous meaning of the terms. If the verbal injury *tovenaar* pointed to strange profits, it would specifically have been worded in circumstances that allowed people (and clearly some people more than others) to obtain these profits. During the course of the 1630's the prices of grain and cattle rose and the farms in the hamlets of Drenthe prospered. Between 1640-1650 the export of cattle to Holland and Groningen reached a peak (Bieleman 1985: 365-367). That decennium also saw the division of many common greens (Heringa 1982: 45-89). In the middle of the seventeenth century the economy dropped and reached a nadir during the raids of the prince-bishop of Münster in 1665-1666 and 1672. After that things improved a little. During the 1680's the prices of grain went up again and the number of livestock expanded (Bieleman 1987: 166, 309). The amount of 'full' farms increased between 1674 and 1692 (Ibid. 287) and there were also a few new divisions of local commons. This last upturn was only temporary. In the period 1690-1720 the farmers were 'sandwiched between falling prices and rising costs' (Ibid. 682). They had to specialize, to rationalize and to individualize.

It appears that the rise of rural economy was, most probably among other things, accompanied by suits about male witchcraft. People tried to understand situations which were initially beyond their control; the use of insults like *tovenaar* can be considered as an attempt to regain that control. Accusers applied the social and somewhat egalitarian norms to which honour was bound, to tell what they thought of their neighbours who valued individual gain above communal consensus.

Nevertheless, seen over the long term male witchcraft insults seem only superficially connected to periods of economic prosperity. They were above all produced by a society in transition. When, around 1700, the men of Drenthe were forced by the economic depression to reconsider their position and to exchange their communal way of life for a more individualistic outlook, they left witchcraft behind. In the eighteenth century mainly women transmitted the female, harmful variant of witchcraft. If men did appear before the *Etstoel* in slander cases about witchcraft, it was usually because their wives had been insulted by other women. Yet traces of the notion of prosperous witch families are still to be found in nineteenth century Drenthe. As an enlightened minister wrote: 'Generally it were those, who by special diligence and cleverness in fulfilling their trade, and by sensible use of their profits, managed to rise above their neighbours, and who less addicted to prejudice and ancestral habits, dared to provide themselves with a more comfortable life. Envy and jealousy attributed their increase in prosperity to witchcraft and

everyone avoided them or treated them with fear and hypocrisy, and on their descendants still rests the reminiscence of the undeserved reward that an earlier generation chose to give their forebears for their excellent industry and cleverness' (Benthem Reddingius 1841: 186).

Also the notion that one should not marry a member from a witch family had not completely died out in the nineteenth century. The decisive difference with the seventeenth century lies - apart from the general wane of 'full' farms - in the attitude of the families so depicted. While in the seventeenth century they still tried to repair their honour formally, later most of them will have refrained doing so. Through the tracing of the use of male witchcraft insults a growing social division within Drenthe's society can be made visible, together with processes of individualisation.

Further research

The idea that witchcraft could be linked with a 'mysterious rise in wealth and status' (Briggs 1989: 59-60) will not solely have occurred in Drenthe (cf. Alver & Selberg 1988: 29-32). Elsewhere, at least in other parts of the eastern Netherlands (De Blécourt Pereboom 1991: 126) and in parts of Germany, it has also been found that more men were accused of witchcraft than was to be suspected on the basis of the numbers in criminal proceedings (Kramer 1983: 223; Walz 1986: 15). Yet much more local 'biographical' research is needed before it will be possible to indicate more general interregional patterns. Such investigations might not only shed more light on the still largely unresolved question of the witchcraft accusations towards women, it might also add a totally new dimension to European witchcraft research.

NOTES

1. See for the full documentation of the case studies that follow De Blécourt 1990, especially pp. 262-279.
2. Only a few criminal witch trials have been unearthed from the archives in Drenthe, most of them dating from the middle of the sixteenth century. Although sources are missing to document prosecutions later than 1560, the common practice of law - people who were formally accused of a crime could compensate, produce a declaration of their innocence, and/or resort to the principles of the *ius talionis* (as Huizinge did) - will have prevented any severe witch hunting. See for a tentative overview of witch trials in the Netherlands: Gijswijt-Hofstra & Frijhoff (eds) 1991; cf. De Blécourt & De Waardt 1990.
3. Originally stemming from a Swiss dialect, the word *heks* penetrated daily speech in the

Netherlands and Northern Germany only towards the middle of the seventeenth century (Kramer 1983; De Blécourt & Pereboom 1991: 125).

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