CHAPTER TWO

THE WITCHES

As I argued in the Introduction, the high proportion of women arrested and executed for witchcraft in Eichstätt between 1617 and 1631 was not the result of local social or political conflicts or panics about witches. The explanation for the predominance of women among the witch-defendants lies instead in the persecutors’ perceptions of what characteristics a witch-figure might possess, and the nature of the defendants’ responses to questions posed at particular points in the interrogation process. These same responses also led to two unexpected patterns of prosecution: the high proportion of witch-suspects drawn from the political craft elites of the town of Eichstätt; and the significant number of men denounced as witch-accomplices, but never arrested. In this chapter, I want to show how and why these patterns emerged. In doing so, I will also show in detail how interrogations were conducted, something which most historians of witchcraft episodes fail to do.

The authorities and the gender of the witch

The views of Westerstetten, the witch commissioners and the canons on the typical witch have to be reconstructed from a limited range of sources. If these authorities articulated their opinions on the characteristics they expected to find in the majority of witch-suspects who came before them, none survive. Gregory of Valencia’s opinion of 1590 provides the best general overview of the witch in the eyes of the Eichstätt authorities. The interrogatory drawn up by the witch commission and the commissioners’ handling of the denunciations of witch-accomplices reveal which individuals they found most plausible as witches.

In the previous chapter, I argued that Wilhelm V of Bavaria, to whom Gregory addressed his report, his sons Maximilian and Ferdinand, Westerstetten and other Catholic rulers, such as Ehrenberg, were linked to each other and the university in Ingolstadt by their patronage of the Society of Jesus, their Jesuit education and their witch-hunting activities. Among these advocates of witch persecution, the *Malleus Maleficarum*
and Binsfeld’s *Tractatus* assumed primary importance through the recommendation of Gregory and other jurists at the university. These demonologies were supplemented by later Jesuit texts such as Martín Del Río’s *Disquisitionum magicarum* (1599–1600).¹

Kramer argued in the *Malleus* that women were, by nature, more susceptible to attempts by the Devil to seduce them into the heresy of witchcraft. In his discussion of female witches, he drew on the authority of the Scriptures and the Apocrypha, citing such examples as Eve, Delilah and Jezebel, on patristic and classical authors, and on the stories of Cleopatra and Pelagia. Each citation served to impress upon the reader that women were weak, deceitful, unintelligent, jealous, vain and a general hindrance to man’s communion with God and his intellectual endeavours.² As Stuart Clark has observed, he was not stating anything original in his discussion of this disposition in women; it reflected the misogyny inherent in late medieval and early modern orthodox Catholic theology.³ Gender did, however, become the feature which distinguished the heresy of witchcraft from other heresies like Catharism or activities falsely attributed to other social groups such as lepers.⁴ Although male defendants formed a significant proportion, and in some cases the majority, of the ‘witches’ tried in the Friuli, Estonia and Finland, the authorities in each instance still subscribed to the fundamental demonological equation of woman with witch. In each case, the persecutors were able to impose their own stereotypes of the female witch-figure on a culture which had continued to adhere to a pre-Christian association of ‘low’ magic with men.⁵ It is not surprising therefore that in one of Binsfeld’s few comments on the gender of the witches, he claims (in Clark’s paraphrase) that women have ‘a greater despondency in tribulation and a more angry desire for revenge’ which

¹ In his attack on the Ingolstadt opinion of principle of 1601 which found ‘contra Binsfeldiium’, the Bavarian Court Chancellor, Johann Sigismund Wagnereck, quoted both Binsfeld and Del Río, Behringer, *Hexenverfolgung in Bayern*, pp. 270–1. Both Binsfeld and Del Río based their demonological tracts on the *Malleus*, ibid., p. 15.
³ Clark, *Thinking with Demons*, pp. 112–33.
⁴ On the beliefs and activities ascribed to lepers, Jews, Muslims, witches and other heretics, and how they were linked imaginatively by politicians and theologians, see Ginzburg, *Ecstasies*, Part One, pp. 33–86; cf. Cohn, *Europe’s Inner Demons*.
⁵ See the following articles in Ankarloo and Henningsen, *Early Modern European Witchcraft*: Ginzburg, “Deciphering the Sabbath” (pp. 121–37), Maia Madar, “Estonia I: Werewolves and Poisoners” (pp. 257–72), and Heikkinen and Kervinen, “Finland: The Male Domination”.