

Rational Witches? The Agency of Women on Trial for Supernatural Crimes in Early Modern Ghent

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Abstract

This essay examines the defence strategies of women accused of witchcraft in early modern Ghent, focusing on their agency within restrictive societal frameworks. Cases like that of Adriaene Schepens illustrate how accused women refuted supernatural accusations through rational explanations that exploited societal and gendered expectations. Rather than relying solely on emotional pleas, these women employed logical arguments and constructed personas that undermined the charges against them. Analysing trial records reveals how gender stereotypes were strategically used to appear non-threatening, reflecting broader social and cultural dynamics. The findings challenge traditional legal and demonological perspectives, emphasising the resilience and agency of accused women. The article advocates for an accessible database of accused individuals to trace defence strategies across cases, enriching the historiography of witchcraft in the Southern Low Countries and advancing understanding of gendered interactions in early modern legal history.

Keywords: witchcraft, gender, emotions, agency, defence strategies, trial records

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On 6 October 1601, Adriaene Schepens was questioned by the aldermen of the city of Ghent. Adriaene, thirty-two years old and married to a miller named Pieter Claes, was suspected of witchcraft. Although she denied every allegation, she nevertheless had to answer for a series of suspicious actions, ranging from arguing with her neighbours, entering houses on her street uninvited, causing the illness of another neighbour, handing out poisoned tripe to children, and trying to heal an unnamed woman's leg wound.¹

These accusations may have been typical of early modern witchcraft trials, but the reactions of the accused were much less so. Particularly striking is the clear and lucid impression Adriaene made while refuting these insinuations. She denied having had a threatening altercation with her neighbour, but argued she had merely set her own husband straight during a meeting with the neighbours. As usual, Adriaene's husband had drunk too much and consequently kept on babbling, much to Adriaene's embarrassment, upon which she had told him to keep quiet.² Hearing this reprimand, her neighbour felt that the drunk husband was being pushed around and, while saying goodbye at the end of the evening, he expressed the feeling that Adriaene was a witch. Adriaene thus implied that this neighbour had merely given his opinion about the state of their marriage, rather than making a fully-fledged accusation. Furthermore, Adriaene denied that she had entered the neighbours' houses at the instigation of the devil, as she merely meant to borrow a nail drill at the behest of her husband.³ When asked about her sick neighbour, she sarcastically wondered 'whether no one could fall ill without her having caused it, for God's sake?'⁴ By extension, she claimed that she did not know about any diseased children, but that she had handed out tripe very often without anyone getting sick. Adriaene refused to die as a witch, since she was 'a woman of honour'.⁵

1 Ghent, City Archives Ghent (hereafter CAG), Boeken van den crime 214.16, 6 October 1601, fols. 16v-18v.

2 CAG, Boeken van den crime 214.16, 6 October 1601, fol. 17r.

3 CAG, Boeken van den crime 214.16, 6 October 1601, fol. 17v.

4 CAG, Boeken van den crime 214.16, 6 October 1601, fol. 17r: 'macher niemant sieck syn of ic en sout moeten doen God almachtich'.

5 CAG, Boeken van den crime 214.16, 6 October 1601, fol. 19r: 'eene vrouwe van eeren'.

Nearly two months later, the executioner resorted to drastic measures. On 1 December, he examined Adriaene's body for devil's marks, yet she held her ground. When a mark on her left shoulder was discovered, she explained this was a scar caused by her stepmother who had beaten her with a distaff, a tool used in spinning.⁶ In turn, the scars on her right shoulder were the result of chickenpox, a disease she had contracted during her childhood 'like so many other people'.⁷ When Adriaene was confronted with the fact that the executioner had punctured these marks without her feeling any pain and without any blood coming out, she cleverly remarked that she had definitely felt the stitching awl but as she had been so focused on her prayers, she had not given a hoot.⁸ Lastly, she suggested that the marks could have been dirt, as she had recently suffered great poverty without receiving any help, causing her to 'perish in filth'.⁹

Although even the city surgeon concluded, after a physical examination, that there was nothing unusual about the marks on Adriaene's skin – 'many people bear these and similar marks underneath their clothes', he noted – the authorities still subjected her to torture.¹⁰ On 22 January 1602, Adriaene was placed naked on the rack, beaten with rods, and her face repeatedly covered with wet cloths, yet she 'persisted in denying every allegation'.¹¹ Ultimately, the aldermen had no other option but to release Adriaene due to lack of evidence. On 1 February, she was officially acquitted. She did have to pay a jail fee though, and had to promise to always appear before the bench of aldermen as soon as this was requested, under penalty of banishment. Finally, the aldermen strongly advised her to hold her peace when it came to her neighbours. This was advice she likely followed, as Adriaene would never again appear in the court records.

The grim case of Adriaene Schepens invites us to study early modern witchcraft from a different perspective, one that may seem obvious but is nonetheless surprisingly often overlooked in studies concerning witchcraft: the viewpoint of the female victims themselves.¹² Scholars have primarily focused on the formation of a demonological concept of witchcraft among early modern intellectuals and academics.¹³ The perception of witchcraft among witnesses and bystanders has also been studied, mainly to examine how these intellectual debates trickled down to the general population. However, less attention has been paid to the perspective of the accused themselves. Researchers often assume that witchcraft suspects – especially those who were tortured during their interrogation – simply told the authorities what they wanted to hear, which diminishes the importance their actual words and defence strategies hold in historical research. Recent scholarship, such as that of Laura Kounine or Jan Machielsen, not only considers the explicit content of witchcraft interrogations, but also their subtexts, silences, and performative elements.¹⁴

6 CAG, Boeken van den crime 214.16, 6 October 1601, fol. 19r.

7 CAG, Boeken van den crime 214.16, 6 October 1601, fol. 21r: 'gelyck andere doen'.

8 CAG, Boeken van den crime 214.16, 6 October 1601, fol. 21r.

9 CAG, Boeken van den crime 214.16, 1 December 1601, fol. 21v: 'zy bynae in vuylicheyte vergync'.

10 CAG, Boeken van den crime 214.16, 1 December 1601, fol. 20r: 'dat veel menschen zulcke ende diergelycke teekens onder de cleederen draeghen'.

11 CAG, Boeken van den crime 214.16, 22 January 1602, fol. 45v: 'blyft veel stercker by de selve loochenynghe'.

12 Voltmer, 'The Witch in the Courtroom', 98.

13 Clark, *Thinking with Demons; Stronks, Toverij, contramagie en bijgeloof*.

14 Kounine, 'The Gendering of Witchcraft'; Machielsen, *The Basque Witch-Hunt*.

Building on these recent developments, this essay takes the defence strategies of individuals accused of witchcraft in early modern Ghent as a starting point. This allows us to uncover how women could use their agency during their interrogations and trial, and what that agency consisted of. Individuals who succeeded in avoiding a death sentence did not necessarily appeal to their persecutors with emotional pleas for pity.¹⁵ Instead, they offered rational, non-supernatural explanations for the actions which had attracted accusations of demonic inspiration, explanations which sometimes challenged gendered expectations. In some cases, these rational explanations built on negative gendered stereotypes, possibly making them more plausible to their male interrogators. Suspects often knew how to use gendered expectations to their advantage, as several witch trials reveal that in early modern societies ‘there were no binary models of “good” women, and their negative “other”, just as there were not for men’.¹⁶ Shifting the perspective from that of the interrogators to that of the accused can provide insights into the broader social and cultural dynamics influencing witchcraft trials in the Southern Low Countries. These findings contribute to a nuanced understanding of how women accused of witchcraft asserted agency within early modern society.

Witchcraft Studies in the Low Countries

At first glance, the ‘witch craze’ in the Southern Low Countries seems to have been thoroughly researched. Numerous scholars and local historians have mined the archives to map out the dynamics of witchcraft persecution. The basic facts are clear: contrary to popular belief, prosecutions for witchcraft were very rare in the Middle Ages, and did not become a frequent occurrence until the end of the sixteenth century.¹⁷ From around 1596 onwards, witches were burned at the stake across almost the whole of the Southern Netherlands.¹⁸ According to recent estimates, 202 witches were executed in the County of Flanders between 1450 and 1685, while 57 were sentenced to death in the Duchy of Brabant during the same period. In other principalities, such as Hainaut, Namur, and Luxembourg, the death toll was even higher and increased to circa 1,150-1,250.¹⁹ Witchcraft turned out to be mainly a rural phenomenon, although cities such as Bruges or Ghent also had their ‘witch years’, namely 1595 and 1601 respectively.²⁰ In fact, Adriaene was just one of thirteen individuals in Ghent accused of witchcraft in 1601. During the seventeenth century, the Southern Netherlands became a central region for witchcraft persecution, as

¹⁵ Briggs, ‘Emotion and Affect in Lorraine Witchcraft Trials’, 150.

¹⁶ Kounine, ‘The Gendering of Witchcraft’, 314.

¹⁷ Roelens, ‘De middeleeuwen zijn vrouwonvriendelijk’, 165-167; Stokes, *Demons*, 176-177.

¹⁸ It has generally been assumed that this resulted from central government decrees issued by Philip II, but recent scholarship has stressed that central courts such as the Council of Flanders urged local courts to be cautious with witchcraft accusations. The theories of the Jesuit demonologist Martin del Rio may have had a much larger impact on the prosecuting authorities: Vanysacker, ‘Netherlands, Southern’, 817.

¹⁹ Vanysacker, ‘Witch Hunts’, 113.

²⁰ Vanysacker, *Hekserij in Brugge*, 69-81; ‘Eerherstel voor Gentse slachtoffers’.

Tab. 1 Punishments imposed for witchcraft in Ghent, 1364-1713.

Punishment	Women		Men		Total	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Banishment	6	13.63	7	43.75	13	21.66
Execution	11	25	1	6.25	12	20
Release	10	22.72	2	12.5	12	20
Corporal punishment	7	15.09	2	12.5	9	15
Died in prison/suicide	5	11.36	0	0	5	8.33
Other	1	2.27	4	25	5	8.33
Unknown	4	9.09	0	0	4	6.66
Total	44	100	16	100	60	100

Source: 'Eerherstel voor Gentse slachtoffers'.

opposed to the Northern Netherlands, where witchcraft trials hardly occurred in the early modern period.²¹

In spite of several inspiring studies that re-examine witchcraft trials within a gendered framework, this phenomenon has mainly been studied from a legal-historical perspective and by scholars whose primary concern was with legal procedures, such as the difference between preliminary investigations and criminal interrogations.²² Other points of interest for legal scholars include the difference between the intellectual concept of demonological witchcraft and the popular notion of harmful sorcery, and the legal consequences of that difference.²³ These legal studies were also occupied with the balance of power between different judicial courts in the region, such as the local benches of aldermen, the ecclesiastical courts, or central courts such as the Council of Flanders.²⁴ This dominant legal perspective focuses heavily on the outcome of witchcraft trials, in particular cases where a death sentence was pronounced. However, the example of Ghent shows that the majority of witch trials did not lead to such executions. Between 1364 and 1713, at least forty-four women and sixteen men (including one boy in his minority) were accused of witchcraft in Ghent. Most of these cases occurred at the end of the sixteenth and the beginning of the seventeenth century. Only twelve out of sixty individuals were executed, although the significant disparity between female and male victims is immediately noticeable (tab. 1). Additionally, five women died during their interrogation, or later in prison.

21 De Waardt, 'Netherlands, Northern, 810'. The popular belief in magic and witchcraft nonetheless remained strong in the Dutch Republic, as is evident from the commotion caused by the publication of Balthasar Bekker's *De Betoverde Weereld* (1691), which questioned the existence of witchcraft and the devil himself. Following the publication of his book, Bekker was deposed as a preacher. See for a recent translation: Leeuwenburgh, *De betoverde wereld*.

22 Rowlands, 'Witchcraft and Gender'; Durrant, *Witchcraft, Gender and Society*; Levack (ed.), *New Perspectives*.

23 Monballyu, *De heksen en hun burenen*; Monballyu, *Van hekserij beschuldigd*; Monballyu, 'De houding van de rechters', 12; Vanhemelryck, *Het gevecht*.

24 Roelants and Vanysacker, "'Tightrope Walkers'". The fact that these witch trials were conducted by so many different local authorities, along with the fact that these trials are kept in so many different local archives to this day, has encouraged the focus on legal scholarship: historians have mainly been concerned with verifying whether legal procedures were consistently followed throughout the Southern Netherlands. A national database of witchcraft trial records would allow for a more overarching analysis.

While the horrific experience of banishment or corporal punishment should not be downplayed, it is noticeable that these were the types of punishments handed down in the majority of cases instead of the death penalty. Furthermore, twelve individuals – the vast majority of whom were women – were released without punishment. To determine whether these women deliberately employed strategies to avoid the harshest penalties, we need to let these women speak for themselves and pay attention to their statements in these trial records.

Female Response to Supernatural Accusations

Although trial records were drawn up by the authorities with the intention to penalise the conduct discussed in the sources, and contained testimonies of defendants who often moulded their stories into narrative constructions and persuasive arguments, it is exactly the subjective nature of these sources that gives them such value.²⁵ These records reveal how ordinary men and women actively turned (gendered) societal expectations to their advantage during their pleas in court, and as such they offer us a unique resource from which we might examine contemporary social and cultural phenomena.²⁶ Moreover, the value added to historical research into crime and agency by considering emotions has recently been recognised by several researchers, including historians working on the Low Countries.²⁷ Current research themes include examining the access of elite women to civil justice through petitions and lawsuits, the ‘invisibility’ of women in criminal history, the specifics of male and female criminality, and emotions expressed by women in the early modern courtroom. For instance, late medieval and early modern women could assert legal agency in matters such as illegitimacy, elopement cases, instances of judicial separation, or same-sex acts.²⁸ These insights, however, have yet to be implemented into the research of witchcraft in the Low Countries. Several scholars have pointed out that individuals accused of witchcraft rationally ‘worked the law’ by incorporating their emotions in their own defence.²⁹ Others have claimed that emotions gave victims a language through which they might better describe traumatic experiences that were perceived by bystanders as acts of witchcraft.³⁰ In doing so, these studies move beyond stereotypes of the (female) witch and suggest new ways of thinking about early modern gender relations.

To what extent did women acquitted of witchcraft accusations in early modern Ghent use such gendered, emotional language to rationally explain these charges, thus exerting agency during their trial? Unfortunately, not every witchcraft case in Ghent contains

25 Stretton, ‘Women, Legal Records, and the Problem of the Lawyer’s Hand’; Rusthon, ‘Texts of Authority’, 22.

26 Zemon Davis, *Fiction in the Archives*, 4-5; Prevenier and Arnade, *Honor, Vengeance, and Social Trouble*, 4-6; Deceulaer, ‘Early Modern Case Records’, 14-15; Bailey, “‘Most Hevynesse and Sorowe’”.

27 Hofman, ‘The Tears of a Killer’; Naessens, ‘Sexuality in Court’; Warner, ‘Before the Law’, 233-234; Bailey, “‘Most Hevynesse and Sorowe’”.

28 Hage, *Eer tegen eer*; Delameillieure, *Abduction, Marriage, and Consent*; Vermeesch, ‘Facing Illegitimate Motherhood’; Van Melkebeek, ‘Self-divorce’; Roelens, ‘A Woman Like Any Other’.

29 Jackson, ‘Witches, Wives and Mothers’.

30 Millar, *Witchcraft, the Devil, and Emotions*; Kounine, *Imagining the Witch*.

sufficient information to determine why the accused was released, or whether they consciously pursued a strategy to obtain acquittal. In 1601, for instance, the trial records briefly mention that Lynken Bernaerts was released because she was considered ‘weak-minded’.³¹ In other cases, scribes simply noted that there was ‘insufficient evidence to support a conviction’.³² Other examples show that enduring multiple torture sessions without confessing, or shedding heartfelt tears of repentance, was often seen as proof of innocence.³³ Distinctions could still be made in such cases, however. Some suspects, like a woman named Pieryne, who was accused of attending the witches’ sabbath, were released *costeloos ende schadeloos*, meaning she did not have to reimburse legal expenses.³⁴ Others, like Adriaene Schepens, were forced to pay compensation for their imprisonment. It is not always clear, especially in these earlier, less well-documented cases, whether the paying of such compensation merely implies that these people had endured a prolonged, and therefore more expensive stay in prison, or that this indicates a remaining degree of doubt among the civic authorities.

There are some elaborate cases, however, in which the defence mechanisms of accused women can indeed be identified. In Adriaene’s case, it is noticeable how she consciously constructed an image of herself as a woman of honour who prays devoutly and obeys her husband. After all, it was at his instruction that she had ‘intruded’ into her neighbour’s houses. At the same time, the power dynamics at work within her marriage apparently raised enough suspicion to convince bystanders that an accusation of witchcraft was warranted. However, Adriaene convincingly dismissed the instances in which she publicly silenced her husband and called out his alcohol consumption as merely domestic disputes. In doing so, she upheld the narrative of a poor yet peaceful household that did not require further investigation, but should instead receive some civic aid in fighting poverty. Throughout her interrogation, Adriaene persisted in using rational arguments to avoid any association with the supernatural: illnesses were simply part of everyday life and her so-called devil’s marks were only the scars that resulted from childhood diseases and domestic violence.

The same strategy was employed by several other women in Ghent, although it was not always successful. When Elisabeth Vlamyncx was interrogated by the Council of Flanders in 1595, for example, she showed the same scepticism as Adriaene towards the charges laid against her. For instance, she insisted that neither butter nor cows could be bewitched and that she considered such ideas mere superstition. Like Adriaene, she offered rational explanations for the devil’s marks found on her body by the local hangman. Moreover, Elisabeth came from a family of notables and officials in the secular and ecclesiastical government. When she was accused, Elisabeth used her influential family circle to hide her

31 Ghent, State Archives Ghent (hereafter SAG), Sint-Pietersabdij (hereafter SP), Series 1, 21, Register of legal disputes regarding the abbey, 1606-1618, fol. 25r: ‘dat zy scheen somtyts weeck van hersenen te zyne’. On the ongoing debate whether early modern belief in magic and witchcraft had a natural affinity with mental illness, see: Ferber, ‘Psychotic Reactions?’, 232.

32 SAG, SP, Series 1, 21, Register of legal disputes regarding the abbey, 1606-1618, fol. 22r: ‘het welck niet sufficientelick en bleeck’.

33 Voltmer, ‘The Witch in the Courtroom’, 112; Kounine, “‘Not a drop of tears’”, 130.

34 SAG, SP, Series 1, 21, Register of legal disputes regarding the abbey, 1606-1618, fol. 24v.

from the authorities and even prevent any real efforts being made to arrest her. After a while, however, her co-defendants revolted against this unequal treatment, and Elisabeth was eventually interrogated. The rational defence strategy employed by Adriaene failed Elisabeth, and she was put to death on 23 December 1595.³⁵

Other women appear to have adopted a similar approach and – whether consciously or not – played on negative gendered stereotypes to achieve their acquittal. In 1639, Janneken Blaublomme presented herself as simply a talkative woman who meant no real harm. Everything she had said about the devil, she contended, had been uttered light-heartedly without ulterior motives or any real knowledge of what witchcraft was actually about.³⁶ In the same year, Mayken van de Velde used a similar strategy. When she was accused of having poisoned cakes, she pointed out that she had indeed noticed that these cakes – which she herself had not helped to make – had turned out badly. In fact, she had eagerly told several children how chewy the cakes made by some other women were, as if she took some delight in this culinary failure. By presenting herself as a gossiping woman who was no stranger to *schadenfreude*, she might have brought negative female stereotyping upon her person, but in doing so managed to release herself from supernatural associations.³⁷ Amidst magical suspicions, these women often opted for rational and worldly explanations to justify their behaviour.

Conclusion

In examining the trials of women accused of witchcraft in early modern Ghent, this essay has highlighted a dimension of female agency often overlooked in traditional legal and demonological analyses. By focusing on the rational, non-supernatural defences employed by women like Adriaene Schepens and others, this research underscores how these women strategically navigated societal and gendered expectations to refute accusations that could lead to their execution. Several of these women used reasoned arguments and carefully constructed personas to undermine the credibility of the charges laid against them. Some exploited gender stereotypes to cast themselves as harmless, while others adopted assertive yet rational defences that defied the supernatural associations tied to witchcraft. This approach sheds light on how accused women exercised agency within the constraints of a superstitious society. Their responses not only reflect individual resilience, but also reveal the broader social and cultural dynamics that influenced the outcomes of these trials.

Unfortunately, much of the source material on witchcraft trials in the Southern Netherlands remains fragmented and dispersed across municipal archives and several regional departments of the Belgian national archives. This fragmentation has encouraged a focus on legal scholarship and has limited scholars' ability to identify patterns in testimonials

35 SAG, Raad van Vlaanderen 9594, Registers of criminal sentences, 1585-1641, fols. 43v-44r.

36 Ghent, Ghent University Library (hereafter GUL), Ms. 13208, Copy of the Criminal Register, fol. 392; CAG, *Criminele adviezen* 1, 1623-1780, unfoliated.

37 GUL, Ms. 13208, Copy of the Criminal Register, fol. 388.

from the accused themselves. In order to stimulate future research on witchcraft that addresses the gaps and challenges in the existing historiography, it is necessary to establish an online, publicly accessible database documenting all individuals accused of witchcraft, including those who were acquitted. This will allow for a more nuanced understanding of the cultural and gendered dimensions of witchcraft accusations. In turn, we will be able to distinguish whether the rational responses of Adriaene to her accusers were truly exceptional or part of a larger defence strategy common among women in the early modern Southern Netherlands.

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