



The Astronomer & the Witch: Kepler's Mother Professor Ulinka Rublack FBA

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Introduction

Johannes Kepler (1571-1630) is one of the most famous scientists who ever lived, and best known for defining the three laws of planetary motion. He defended Copernicus's sun-centred universe and discovered that planets move in ellipses.

Less well known is the fact that in 1615 his mother Katharina was accused of witchcraft when Kepler was aged forty-four and at the height of his career as he published his most important work, the *Harmony of the World*. The accusation turned into a trial in which Kepler took over the legal defence. Trial proceedings began in 1620 and brought the greatest experience of troubled dissonance to the life of a man trying to prove cosmic harmony. Kepler eventually moved back from Linz in Austria, where he lived at the time, to the South-West of Germany for one year to extensively visit his mother in prison. Katharina by then was in her early seventies, permanently chained to a stone floor and watched by two guards. The documentation is extensive and charts a six-year long process, in which Kepler and his siblings lived through the trauma of this ordeal and carried their complicated feelings towards the mother and towards each other with them. Katharina's trial ended exactly 400 years ago, in 1621.

In this lecture, I wish to argue that we should remember this great man of science in part through this defence of an old, illiterate mother. I furthermore argue that the European witchcraze needs to be thought of in relation to families. As I embarked on researching my book *The Astronomer and the Witch*, it turned out that witchcraft and the family as a subject presented uncharted territory. Yet every accusation and trial were thickly embedded in social relationships – with a community, of course, but also with relatives, who could decide to support or distance themselves from the accused. This change in perspective implies a major shift in how we approach the magnitude of the persecution of witches. We must multiply the tens of thousands of women and men who were accused during the witchcraze and recognize the profound and lasting effect accusations had on families and even on generations.

What emerges powerfully through the records was that relatives like Johannes Kepler carried a multiplicity of feelings, voices, and perspectives within them. They responded to accusations not only with compassion and love, but also uncertainty, fear, repudiation, and guilt, and could be overwhelmed by a sense of shame. Their emotions registered in their imagination, through their fantasies and dreams, as children of an alleged witch and as siblings who took different sides in the drama which unfolded.

The Witchcraze and the Early Modern Period

We often associated the witchcraze with the Middle Ages, and yet the persecution of witches seriously started off in the age of the printing press and scientific revolutions; in what historians call the "early modern" period. About 73,000 men and women were tried for witchcraft and 40,000-50,000 executed in Europe between 1500 and 1700. The geographies are stark. More than half of all victims, about 22,000-25,000, were executed in the German lands between 1560 and the end

of the persecution. These are remarkable figures. The Spanish, Portuguese and Roman Inquisition with their highly centralized bureaucracy are estimated to have carried out 300,000 trials against all kinds of heresy during the entire time of their activity, and to have executed c. 13,860 victims. That is to say that far more people died in Germany as witches than from the activities of the Inquisition in its centres. Three of every four witches executed during the height of European persecutions spoke some dialect of German. 75 per cent of those accused were women.

Early modern Europe was a haunted world in which almost everyone, simple or sophisticated, believed in the existence of witches and the devil. Ever since Keith Thomas's ground-breaking *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, published fifty years ago, studies of witchcraft have been written to explain the mental climate of societies which faced extraordinary challenges during the height of the witch-craze, from 1580 to 1650. In Germany, climatic changes led to repeated harvest failures; hailstorms could be so hard that they destroyed not just crops and cattle but church steeples and other buildings. Prices rose, hunger spread, plague and illness struck. Here as elsewhere in Europe, the population had constantly grown over the century, making resources scarcer and employment harder to get. Men and women had to negotiate the experience of the Reformations, which divided Germans into Catholics and Protestants. The Counter-Reformation gained force in Germany from the 1570s onwards, heightening religious and political anxiety.

Earlier in the century, images and sensationalist writing began to elaborate the scary figure of the witch as old, envious, super-heretical hag, keen to attack fertility and rave at the "Sabbath". The Sabbath was a demonic mass-gathering where witches feasted with male devils and mixed their deadly salves. Such fantasies fuelled rather than 'managed' fears. Witchcraft could be done by everyone. It was this horrific idea which corrupted social trust at its core. Harm could be spread through bad weather, touch, as well as gifts which were commonly exchanged: an apple, a cake, or a drink. Witches were neighbours, family and friends, or domestic employees, transported to the Sabbath once the devil had handed them an initial supply of his salve.

Old women, like Katharina, were more frequently demonised. Johannes Kepler himself thought that his mother was accused because old women were hunted down. We can track this disturbing process of how old women came to be defined as ugly and possibly demonic through images. As this German statuette from c.1530 shows, it was still possible at the beginning of the sixteenth century to attract collectors with images of old women, who were marked by childbirth, but nonetheless beautiful, dignified and erotic. This visualisation of women then disappeared for centuries. Typical for the early modern period were depictions of old women as envious and hateful, and as witches. The Nuremberg artist Albrecht Dürer pioneered in 1500 with a small woodcut of an old woman with grey hairs sprouting from her chin provoking a hailstorm to devastate the land. In 1510, his disciple Baldung Grien produced a coloured woodcut that showed an old witch with two young women she had lured into her crazed world, mixing their deadly potions at the sabbath. Witches were associated with goats and cats because they symbolized sexual lust, and we register their forceful bodies. Grien shows a pitchfork on which they have hung up penises from men they have emasculated, and dead skeletons of precious animals. These woodcuts show that fears of women's demonic power were real at the time, although many Lutheran pastors preached that women could not actually cause harm and unite themselves with the devil. They only imagined doing so, for which they still deserved to be burnt. The medical doctor Johann Weyer was one of the few to argue that women claiming to be witches were melancholic – or, as we would say, depressed - and deserved treatment. Jacques de Gheyn II in c.1610 illustrated this idea when he produced a large engraving about old women as witches. It abounds with energy. As Claudia Swan has shown, this engraving is likely to have come out a particularly intellectual milieu in Leiden, connected to the medical university faculty and to deGheyn's brother-in-law, who translated the Englishman Reginald Scot's *Discoverie of Witchcraft*, published in 1584. The women we see in the engraving are the "raving, simple,

useless, ignorant, vile, uneducated, gullible, toothless, decrepit, old” women who delude themselves to be witches. deGheyn shows them suspended in their fantasies of gaining power as they prepare their deadly salves. Women during this period were thought to be daughters of Eve and more sinful than men. They were ascribed less reason and more sexual lust. Of course, women could distance themselves from such stereotypes through their behaviour and demonstrated piety, for instance, but Katharina Kepler’s generation still received significantly less education than men, and many assumed that the older one was, the more corrupted one’s nature became. All of this made women like Katharina in the German lands vulnerable to be accused as witches.

Katharina Kepler

Katharina Kepler was around sixty-eight when she was accused in the South-West German town of Leonberg in 1615. Katharina vehemently denied the charge and her family were equally outraged. A former friend claimed that Katharina had poisoned her with a drink and caused her excruciating chronic pain. Soon, the schoolmaster claimed that Katharina had handed him a drink that made him lame.

I came across this trial in the Württemberg state archives many years ago. Unusually so, the whole file seemed complete. Finally, the archive in Leonberg turned out to be one of the best documented for this time. This made it possible to reconstruct the biography of an ordinary woman with an extraordinary history. Katharina was born as the daughter of a mayor in the village of Eltingen near Leonberg – exactly opposite of where the Leonberg archives are now housed. In her early twenties she married Heinrich Kepler of the nearby city of Weil der Stadt, whose family was more prestigious.

Yet Heinrich was a problematic husband who became a soldier and fought on the battlefields of Flanders while Katharina soon lived with his hostile parents and two boys she would mostly bring up on her own. The Keplers eventually moved to Leonberg and their status was middling. Johannes began his schooling aged seven and it was obvious that he was a very special child – he was picked up by boarding schools for gifted children and later gained a scholarship at Tübingen university. His brother, by contrast, suffered from epilepsy, was difficult to employ and would later turn into a bitter, angry man who was the first to publicly call his mother a witch when he returned to Katharina during winter 1615, demanded to be served meat and she could not find any. Katharina had two more children in her early forties who survived to adulthood when she became widowed – her son Christoph became a local craftsman, and a daughter married a Lutheran pastor. Reconstructing Katharina’s biography meant to be able to honour that even though she was a single parent for most of her life she had actively supported her children. In fact, her own life was more secure financially and emotionally just as she was accused in 1615 – her husband had finally died, she had inherited some money from her father, and her children were grown up. She was particularly proud of her daughter, whom she had sent to school, and who was married to that pastor.

Much of my motivation for writing the book was to counter the stereotype which is repeated in all Anglo-American writing about Katharina Kepler: that she was witch-like, an old crone. One novel about Kepler even includes a scene in which Katharina cooks bat-wings with three old hideous women friends and clearly is involved in making magic. Yet the documents prove that Katharina Kepler used herbal medicine just like everyone else in the community and never to make a living. Moreover, she was not known to be quarrelsome – her name never appears in any of Leonberg’s court-books.

Leonberg numbered 1,000 inhabitants and was tightly regulated. As you can see, its distinctive geographical position facilitated a sense of tightness. Yet a woman like Katharina Kepler was not

enclosed in her community. One of the most surprising facts to emerge was how frequently Katharina travelled long distances well into her old age – she independently travelled to Prague, Linz, or Ulm. In fact, she decided to shelter from the pressure of the accusations against her for prolonged periods through staying with Johannes Kepler, and just as he was working on his most important work ever – the *Harmony of the World*.

Johannes Kepler

Johannes Kepler was at the height of his career during these years. He certainly must rank among the most influential scientists ever who came from a disadvantaged background. Whereas Galileo's father was a noted scholar of music, Kepler's father was a soldier who kept running away from the family. Johannes Kepler, by contrast, soon emerged as an extremely talented boy. He was picked up by one of the most advanced Lutheran scholarship systems in Germany at the time and lived in boarding schools.

Soon, he gained the position of an Imperial Mathematician. By 1619, he lived in the Austrian town of Linz and was filled with extraordinary confidence of his unique ability to understand God's universe. Kepler believed he had the insight to understand God's building plans, his playfulness and jokes manifest in nature. Creation to him was about more than the laws of planetary motion he famously defined.

Once his mother had been imprisoned, Kepler stored up all his belongings to move his family from Austria to Germany. Kepler had no idea how long the trial would take or what its outcome might be. Before he left, he commissioned this portrait. Today, it presents us with our only clue as to what Kepler looked like as he entered his fifties, lived through the final phase of his mother's exceptional trial and travelled across lands ridden by the Thirty Years' War, disease, and destitution. With his right elbow assertively placed on one hip, the Imperial Mathematician in midlife exuded distinction, intellectual alertness, and an engaging personality. Kepler in fact somewhat obsessively thought of his mother as defaced by age. This painting showed Kepler as impressive man at the height of his powers.

Kepler's seemingly relaxed portrait was carefully considered as his mother stood accused and the scientist's own unorthodox religious views were under attack. His former professor of theology had reprimanded Kepler in 1619 that he suffered from a 'confused spirit'. Could the devil attack him? Kepler wanted to create a different image for himself – not as anxious, angry man, but as assured and composed.

His mother's trial nonetheless brought his professional ambitions into sharp relief. From the very beginning, his tone was highly emotive as he set out to defend his own reputation at all costs. At the heart of trial for Johannes Kepler thus lay an uncomfortable question he addressed in *The Harmony of the World*, published in 1619, as local witnesses testified against his mother in court. To what extent was he like his mother?

In Book Four, chapter seven, Kepler set out how different they were, despite the fact that they had been born under an almost identical astrological constellation and shared the same physical constitution. Kepler explained that Katharina had not had the opportunity to receive any formal education. While pregnant, he curiously alleged, his mother had begun to admire her mother-in-law and this woman's father, both of whom had been popular healers. Katharina's behaviour thus needed to be explained through her female nature, through circumstance, but also through her temperament, which Kepler judged "certainly very restless". He startlingly summarized: she "disturbs the whole of her town, and is the author of her on lamentable misfortune". Kepler at this point clearly felt resentful of his mother. Yet he did most to defend her and it is unlikely that she

would have survived if it had not been for him. Through the trial, he became closer to his mother and understood more of her world.

Imprisonment

On the 7th of August 1620, Katharina Kepler was first imprisoned in Stuttgart and then led to Leonberg for the beginning of a formal criminal trial. Her youngest son Christoph, a local pewterer, felt horrified. It seems that he could imagine only too easily the civic guard fetching seventy-three-year-old, now nearly toothless, small, white-haired Katharina from one of Leonberg's prison towers, to take her on a chain or rope to the town hall, right in front of his house on the market square.

His reaction showed that he could not bear to think of the shame. Every German execution was staged by local governments as a communal event, to admonish everyone and make them pray for a poor sinner's soul in eternity. Could he imagine being in the crowd to watch his mother's corpse being laid on tightly stacked wood? Christoph wrote to duke John Frederick of Württemberg at once, proudly relating that he had honourably learned his trade and even practised it with 'particular fame'. The past five years of investigations against his mother had already been 'extremely painful' to live through. Now he feared 'people's open contempt'. Christoph Kepler demanded that Katharina's trial should be conducted elsewhere. The ducal chancellery decided to transfer her to a small town called Güglingen, about 60 kilometres south of Leonberg, a place she had never been before.

Johannes Kepler now moved to Württemberg as quickly as he could. He took his family to a halfway point with him by boat, then rented a horse to ride on to Ulm, and travelled up north to Stuttgart. From there, he had to find his way up still further north and off the large trade-routes, asking for directions to Güglingen, near the town of Heilbronn, where he knew nobody and few knew of him.

He arrived by the end of September. The famous mathematician was led to his old mother in the Güglingen tower. After three weeks imprisonment, she complained 'bitterly' that she was cold, sad, and lonely, and bereft of comfort. Johannes Kepler knew that he was now the only one of Katharina's children capable and willing to stand by her. Following detailed conversations with his imprisoned mother, Kepler now swiftly prepared a powerful, concise, and clearly structured legal document in Katharina's defence.

The Defence

Kepler's scientific life, like that of all his successful colleagues, was marked by his robust ability to counter rivalling enmity and disputes by sticking to a powerful line of argument while meticulously attending to detailed point by point refutations. Coupled to this were his rhetorical skills that enabled him to discredit his opponents' deeper motives. These were the same strategies he brought to bear on his mother's trial. Rather than attending to the details of who witnesses were and the contents of their allegations, he dismissed the case through lines of argument so familiar from his scientific world: There was no solid argument, and the procedure which tried to turn allegations into reliable evidence was wrong.

Kepler's lengthy legal defence first attacked the ability of many witnesses who had been interrogated in January to testify reliably; they were simply too young to rely on anything other than hearsay about his mother's reputation. It was a strong legal requirement that a bad reputation needed to be well established before an accusation could be made. To establish factual evidence for his defence from superior male witnesses, Kepler had read the depositions closely. In a brilliant passage, he passionately argued:

“that the Reinbold woman suffers pains in her head, that Beitelspacher’s limbs are lame, that Bastian Mayer’s wife withered away and died, the tilemaker woman has an open wound on her thigh, the bathing-master’s apprentice felt sick to his stomach for many hours and vomited, that Tophier Frick had a pain in his thigh for a day or two, that the late pastor of Gebersheim’s daughter had a sore foot, that Daniel Schneider’s children died, that Haller’s little daughter had a sore arm, that Jergen Beltzen lost a sow and Osswald Zaanen a calf and that Michael Stahlen’s cow was restless and ailing but soon recovered. Nevertheless, taken together, these stories and facts do not necessarily constitute specific acts of witchcraft. ... Many persons both male and female die everyday of consumption, and still more children of other diseases. Many people are crooked or lame. ... There is no need to waste the judge’s time with the death of cattle and swine (which is an everyday occurrence). Among the indicators used to distinguish between natural and unnatural ailments, one of the most important is that when the harm is caused by witchcraft, the pain is worse at the beginning, and does not develop in a regular manner. This does not apply to the Reinbold woman, Beitelspacher, the tile-maker woman and Haller’s girl, whose illness waxed from day to day until reaching its height. Thus it is also believed that such harm is of no natural origin when it follows the moon and the weather, as in the case of Gobersheim’s daughter, and once again in that of the Reinbold woman. It also cannot be cured by natural remedies, although Haller’s girl recovered her health by common, ordinary means.”

Johannes Kepler argued that it was one thing to run into people’s houses (as his mother did), and another thing to be a witch. Any association between these two would make any old, garrulous, and frequently disliked woman vulnerable to this far-fetched accusation. This insistence that any general unease about a woman’s behaviour had to match with specific reasons for suspecting her of sorcery was a key legal argument for caution.

Kepler set out why it was paramount to distinguish between natural and unnatural illnesses, and went into considerable medical detail to make his statement as authoritative as possible. Its ingenious noting of details which could then be conclusively dismissed made this one of his rhetorical masterpieces. All these magical mystery diseases, Kepler argued, could be explained through medical knowledge and common sense. Kepler did not rule out that sorcery might inflict harm. But in these cases, the pain was immediate and severe from the start, rather than increasing gradually.

Kepler thus believed in magic, yet he tried to use his superior analytical skills to unpick the accusation against his mother. He never published his defence, nor did he try to defend any other woman charged with witchcraft. When his mother was finally acquitted, the scientist was utterly exhausted, and did not correspond with even his closest friends for months. Katharina was so frail after over a year of imprisonment that she died within six months.

Conclusion

The Keplers’ trial tells us that the victims of Germany’s witch craze were not just women. In a society in which reputation mattered so much, each accusation implied those she was related to and raised. In recent years Kepler and his family have appeared as dubious, even murderous people. In 2004, a team of American journalist alleged that Kepler systematically poisoned the man he succeeded at the court of Rudolf II in Prague: Tycho Brahe. It has become a commonplace in Anglo-American writing to depict Kepler’s mother as that difficult, bizarre and half-crazed old crone. Johannes Kepler and his mother lived through one of the most epic tragedies in the age of the witchcraze. It is high time to honour Kepler’s defence of his mother as well as Katharina’s ability to resist a false accusation.

Yet in doing so, we need to be mindful of the politics of past commemorations. Nothing quite prepared me for the moment when I first got off the bus at Eltingen, the village in which Katharina Kepler was born. Looking at rows of beautifully restored half-timbered houses with their pots of bright red geraniums outside, I recognised the village well. Then I spotted the monument for Katharina, which I knew about from a local history of the trial. The statue depicts a young, slender female reaper. It is a work by Jakob Fehrle (1884-1974), a professor of art passionate about sculpting elongated gothic girls. Fehrle held his post throughout the Third Reich and took on several Nazi commissions for public art, while some of his previous work was removed from collections as degenerate. Seeing the sculpture made me appreciate even more strongly its oddity in relation to what we know about the woman it represents.

This village street prides itself as the prettiest in south Germany. Eltingen's mayor Carl Schmincke held office from 1934-38, and the street is named after him up to this day. It was his project to demonstrate the 'new spirit' of the Nazi takeover in what had been an overwhelmingly Communist community.

A small space was created for Katharina Kepler's monument to serve as a symbol of this community of 'peasants and workers', a 'symbol of work and industriousness', as Schmincke explained in 1937, 'upright, proud, and strong'. The mayor's speech evoked the whole street as a site of memory, which had witnessed much hardship during many years of plague and war. Schmincke praised Katharina's combative nature, strength, her unique character, and love of truth. He even argued that her steadfast denial of the witchcraft charge had paved the way to end persecutions in Germany as a whole. 'People of Eltingen, be proud of this work, your village well, the landmark of your community', Schmincke emphatically exclaimed before unveiling the figure.

The Third Reich was fascinated by witches. Many publications turned their persecutions into a highly emotional topic. They used these emotions to attack the Catholic church, to re-establish Nordic religion and avenge past German sisters, whom they imagined as blond and blue-eyed protectors of the German race, rituals, and wisdom. In 1935, Heinrich Himmler even set up a special force to analyse witchcraft files gathered from archives, which operated until 1944. Witches could be presented as heroines.

Strikingly, the monument represents Katharina as a young woman. It is as if showing her as the old woman she was in 1615 remained unrepresentable. Nor was she a heroine, but why should we even now turn her into one? Today, the denigration of ageing in women persists through an obsession with bodily and mental decay. It is high time for another commemoration of Katharina Kepler in the village she was born in – not through an idealizing Nazi-monument, but through a sculpture that pays tribute to her achievements as a mother of an unusual, highly-gifted boy, her resistance to the notion that she was an ally of the devil, and to the suffering of her, and of many others, as old women.

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Further Reading

The story of Katharina and Johannes Kepler has been turned into an opera and a film script: please see <http://ulinkarublack.hist.cam.ac.uk/> for an interview with film director Michael Hoffman and <http://www.keplers-trial.com/> for full scores of the opera and further clips and interviews as well as resources including a translation of Kepler's defence.

Ulinka Rublack, *The Astronomer & the Witch: Johannes Kepler's Fight for His Mother*, Oxford University Press 2015.

Lyndal Roper, *Witch-Craze: Terror and Fantasy in Baroque Germany*, Yale University Press 2004.

Malcolm Gaskill, *Witchcraft: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford University Press 2010.