WS 301-4     Special Topic: Women & Persecution      Margaret Denike
The European Witchcraze: Genealogy, History, and Feminist Theory               Burnaby

Historical in perspective and interdisciplinary in scope, this course will examine the religious, judicial, and medical
debates that were implicated in the the European witchcraze. We will venture into the darker side of the
Renaissance to investigate the conditions that made possible two closely related phenomena: the subjugation of
women within inquisitorial and secular regimes of punishment and control, and the establishment and regulation of
modern medical practice and anatomical science.

In the wake of the invention of the movable type printing press, debates about the existence of witches, and the
nature, status, and “worth” of women engaged the Latin readership of popular pamphlets, judicial manuals and
medical treatises. Some of these treatises were evaluated by various feminists in the 1970's and 80's for their roles
in exacerbating what is now called “women's genocide”, they have been used to exemplify one of the tragedies of
patriarchal history, the dynamics of institutionalized violence, and the sexual politics of religion, law and psychiatry.

More recently, feminist historians and philosophers have attended to the “other voice” of these 16th century debates
- the once censored arguments of the “defenders” of witches and advocates of women’s equality or superiority.
Investigating these perspectives, we will look at differing notions of “woman” and “witch” in historical knowledge, and
we will examine the varying inscriptions of her figure and her language in contemporary feminist theory and feminist
critiques of medico-scientific knowledge and power. We will treat the “witchcraft debates” as an archive through
which we can evaluate contemporary strategies for re-reading and re-writing woman’s history and the history of
feminist thought. Our aim will be to understand and to conduct feminist genealogies - historical methodologies for
elucidating the “woman question” and the multiple relations of power, knowledge, and sex in the discourses of law,
religion, and medical science.

Required Texts:
Jean Bodin.  *On the Demon-Mania of Witches* [1560].  Toronto:  Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies,


Cornelius Agrippa.  *Declaration on the Nobility and Preeminence of the Female Sex* [1529].  Chicago:  University of

Custom Courseware Package: consisting of a compilation of contemporary articles, and some selections from
historical treatises, on the witchcraft debates and early medico-scientific inquiry will be available in the bookstore.

Grading Profile:
Brief Assignment on Readings (5 pages)  15%
Short Analytic Essay (5-7 pages)  25%
Research Essay (10-12 pages)  35%
Class Presentation on a Reading  15%
Participation  10%