Studies in European History

GEOFFREY SCARRE & JOHN CALLOW

Witchcraft and Magic
Sixteenth- and
enteenth-Century Europe

Over Night

Second Edition

WITCHCRAFT AND MAGIC IN SIXTEENTH- AND SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY EUROPE

Studies in European History

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Witchcraft and Magic in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century Europe

Second Edition

Geoffrey Scarre and John Callow

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Contents

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Geoffrey Scarre, 1987

Note on References

References in the text within square brackets relate to items in the Select Bibliography, with page numbers in italics, for example [76: *122*].

Tables

Editor's Preface

The main purpose of this new series of Palgrave studies is to make available to teacher and student alike developments in a field of history that has become increasingly specialised with the sheer volume of new research and literature now produced. These studies are designed to present the 'state of the debate' on important themes and episodes in European history since the sixteenth century, presented in a clear and critical way by someone who is closely concerned himself with the debate in question.

The studies are not intended to be read as extended bibliographical essays, though each will contain a detailed guide to further reading which will lead students and the general reader quickly to key publications. Each book carries its own interpretation and conclusions, while locating the discussion firmly in the centre of the current issues as historians see them. It is intended that the series will introduce students to historical approaches which are in some cases very new and which, in the normal course of things, would take many years to filter down into the textbooks and school histories. I hope it will demonstrate some of the excitement historians, like scientists, feel as they work away in the vanguard of their subject.

The format of the series conforms closely with that of the companion volumes of studies in economic and social history which has already established a major reputation since its inception in 1968. Both series have an important contribution to make in publicising what it is that historians are doing and in making history more open and accessible. It is vital for history to communicate if it is to survive.

R. J. OVERY

1 Witchcraft and Magic

At the dawning of the third millennium, a belief in the reality and efficacy of witchcraft and magic is no longer an integral component of mainstream Western culture. When misfortune strikes at us, our family or a close neighbour, we do not automatically seek to locate the source of all our ills and ailments in the operation of occult forces, nor scour the local community for the elderly woman who maliciously harnessed them and so bewitched us. Nor do we believe that knowledge, love or power can be ours for the taking if only we employ the correct rites, charms or incantations to bring them within our grasp. Despite the interest in the modern pagan movement, the figures of the witch and the magician are conspicuously absent from the national stage and remain, for most people at least, simply the stuff of storybooks, firmly relegated in the popular consciousness to the realm of the late-night movie and the pages of fantastic fiction.

However, this has not always been so; and even now in parts of the non-Western world, where technology has failed to achieve total dominance over the traditional rhythms of agrarian life or to guarantee material prosperity and social justice, beliefs in witches and sorcerers are still firmly retained which bear significant and striking similarities to those held by Europeans throughout the early modern period. This said, there is still something peculiarly tragic and poignant about the history of the witch belief in Europe. In a span of roughly 200 years, beginning in the later fifteenth century, a great many people, most of them women, were prosecuted for witchcraft. Of those found guilty some 40 000 suffered a capital penalty, at the stake, gallows, or by the headsman's sword, while an unknown number of additional victims received a more random form of justice at the hands of their neighbours, through common assaults, lynchings and social

ostracism. Among those accused were, without doubt, individuals who had attempted to harm their enemies by occult means and who were thus guilty of witchcraft, at least in intention. Yet we now recognise that the alleged crimes of the witches were mostly impossible – a witch could conceivably invoke the Devil, but she could not fly through the air to meet him, give succour to shape-changing spirits or harm her neighbours by curses or magic.

Although historians have long taken an interest in early modern beliefs in witchcraft and magic, and their terrible consequences for those accused of the crime, the past 30 years have witnessed an enormous explosion of scholarly enthusiasm for the subject. A wealth of radical new interpretations and many conflicting theories have been advanced to account for the survival of this often disastrous aspect of popular culture, and the rise and fall of the many judicial measures designed to combat it. One important feature of much of this recent writing has been the substantial use of techniques and expertise drawn from across discipline boundaries. Anthropologists, sociologists and feminist theorists have all brought their different skills, talents and insights to bear on our understanding of the historical phenomena [9, 37, 59, 95, 128]. Research into witchcraft has been conducted in every European country, in the Americas and in Africa, while international conferences have proliferated and leading scholars have undertaken painstaking analysis of court records and other archival material relating to the social and economic status of both accusers and accused [141, 142]. As a result of this broadening and deepening of the range of study, an altogether more sophisticated picture of the intellectual and social basis for witch theory and belief has begun to emerge, replacing many of the previously held assumptions about the nature of witchcraft and the rationale behind its proscription and prosecution. Few writers today would be inclined to echo the views of such rationalist historians as Hansen and Lea, who regarded the beliefs of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century people in witchcraft as wholly irrational superstitions, and thundered with moral indignation against the cruelty and credulity of witch hunters and judges. 'There are no pages of human history more filled with horror than those which record the witch-madness of three centuries, from the fifteenth to the eighteenth', wrote Lea in his early groundbreaking study of the trials, while Russell Hope Robbins thought that the prosecutions represented nothing less than a 'shocking nightmare, the foulest crime

and deepest shame of modern civilization, the black-out of everything that ... reasoning man has ever upheld' [90: *xxx*; and 128: *3*]. Today, in an age characterised by the faltering of elite intellectual self-confidence – as typified by the growth of postmodernism – and the erosion of faith in human 'progress' – symbolised by the apparent failures of science and socialism – modern historians and commentators are even less likely to accept Voltaire, that arch-apostle of the Enlightenment, as their guide to the inversions and illogicalities inherent in the acceptance of witchcraft and magical beliefs. For Voltaire, it was the intellectual weakness of those accused, when combined with judicial gullibility and clerical fanaticism, that led to a great wave of 'legal murders committed by indolence, stupidity and superstition'. The late twentieth-century rejection of rationalism, and the unhelpful distinctions between 'modern' and 'archaic' forms of thought and behaviour which often accompanied it, is particularly useful in relation to our evolving conception of witchcraft, and the dynamic social forces which shaped it and brought it to prominence relatively late in its existence. The advance of research has done nothing to mitigate the sense of horror one feels on reading the grim records of trials, tortures and executions, but it has done much to remove the impression that the only proper explanation of witch prosecution is to be found in the madness, or the badness, of the prosecutors themselves. In this light, the past may not be such an unfamiliar place as it was even 20 years ago and the modern author may be closer, and more sympathetic, to his counterparts in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries than at almost any time since those days [72].

There were, indeed, isolated figures even in the sixteenth century who voiced scepticism about the prosecution of witchcraft. The essayist Montaigne observed that: 'It is putting a very high price on one's conjectures to roast a man alive for them.' In England, Reginald Scot wrote in 1584 that those who regarded themselves as able to do harm by occult means were merely deluded, whilst Johann Weyer, physician to the Duke of Cleves, argued that old women who believed themselves to be witches were suffering from over-active imaginations – though he qualified his conclusions by adding that their abnormal mental states were caused by the Devil. Such views, however, were those of a minority of writers and even these sceptics – as we shall see – chose to phrase their criticisms within the framework of contem-

porary religious and demonological orthodoxy, firmly defying all later attempts to neatly categorise them as recognisably 'modern' rationalists. For the overwhelming majority of educated men around the year 1600, the problem was worryingly simple: witchcraft was not only real but was daily multiplying and increasing in its seriousness. King James VI of Scotland complained bitterly in 1597 of the 'fearefull abounding at this time [and] in this Countrey, of these detestable slaves of the Divel, the Witches or enchaunters', who were 'never so rife in these parts, as they are now'. Henri Boguet, the Chief Justice of Saint-Claude, declared around the year 1590 that 'there are witches by the thousand everywhere' and likened their ability to reproduce to that of garden worms, or vermin, infecting many districts with their odious presence. In 1613, Pierre de Lancre, who had burnt about 80 people for witchcraft in the French-Spanish border region, expressed the view that the progress of witchcraft in that area was now unstoppable, and that the sect of witches had infiltrated itself into the Basque population at large, while some years earlier, in 1580, Jean Bodin, one of the most formidable intellects of his day, had declared that sorcerers were driven by a veritable 'demonmania' to run after devils and to do their bidding. Such crimes, he believed, which were both atrocious and widespread, needed to be energetically met with the most grievous of punishments [see 14, 15, 74, 138].

But just what are witchcraft, sorcery and magic? If a discussion of these central themes in their sixteenth- and seventeenth-century context is to be fruitful, it is first necessary to characterise them with some precision.

(i) Witchcraft and Sorcery

Witchcraft and sorcery are clearly closely related in that both involve occult causality – that is, they are taken to operate not through the familiar cause and effect mechanisms of everyday life, but through certain hidden, mystical means. However, many anthropologists, following on from Evans-Pritchard's seminal work among the Azande tribe of the Sudan [49], believe that a distinction should be drawn between them. Witchcraft, in their conception, is an internal power that some people possess, an

inborn property which they inherit, just as they might inherit the properties of being right-handed or snub-nosed. Witches can harm other human beings, their animals or crops, without performing any special acts; they can cause damage merely by a look or a malicious thought, and sometimes may even do so involuntarily. Sorcerers, on the other hand, have no such innate capacity for occult harm, but employ magical operations, such as the chanting of spells or the performance of certain ritual operations, to accomplish their ends. In principle, anyone can become a sorcerer by learning the appropriate techniques, whereas to be a witch it is necessary to have been born one. A sorcerer wishing to hurt someone might use a verbal formula whilst damaging something belonging to the intended victim, such as a piece of their clothing, or some hair or nail parings, relying on the mystical relationships between those objects and their owner magically to transfer the harm to them; but a witch can achieve a similar objective without so much as lifting a finger.

Historians, however, have become increasingly dubious as to whether this distinction has much application to the European scene. There was, as Thomas has pointed out, some belief in the existence of people who had the 'evil eye', the power to harm men or animals simply by looking at them [150: *553*]. Moreover, Henningsen has suggested that Evans-Pritchard's contrast was captured in the Spanish distinction between *hechicería* (sorcery) and *brujería* (witchcraft) [68: *10*]. Yet trial records provide little evidence that two distinct classes of offenders were singled out on these lines; the *modus operandi* of the accused witch seems normally to have been of little interest to accusers or court officials. French historians would thus seem to be justified in using the one term *sorcier* to cover all of those charged with causing harm – or *maleficium*, as it was termed – by occult means. In England, courts were more concerned to determine what brand of *maleficia* the defendant was guilty of, rather than how she had produced them, while on the Continent and in Scotland, the focus of attention tended to centre upon the defendant's relationship with the Devil. It remains possible that in some parts of Europe a greater measure of distinction was drawn between witchcraft and sorcery at the popular level than is apparent from the surviving records; but on the basis of the available evidence, it is of little assistance to the historian to hold the two terms sharply apart.

Typical *maleficia* which figure in European trials include procuring the deaths and sickness of people and animals, spoiling crops, causing sexual impotence, raising bad weather, and interfering with the manufacture of butter, cheese and beer. Such maleficia had been feared in rural areas of Europe from immemorial antiquity, and while there was nothing in principle to limit the practice of black magic to the countryside, it appears on the whole to have loomed less large in the perspective of urban dwellers. But occult forces could also be enlisted to serve non-malicious ends. 'White witches' and wizards – in England often called 'cunning folk' or 'blessing witches', and in France *devins-guérisseurs* – existed in many communities, and would for a fee attempt the magical curing of diseases, counter malign sorcery, identify one's enemies, foretell the future, and locate treasure or lost property. It is likely that such practitioners of 'white' witchcraft often satisfied their clients by purely non-occult means, though to attract custom they may have deliberately cultivated an air of personal mystique. In an age when formal medical treatment, however rudimentary, was well beyond the reach of the vast majority of the population, many of these figures were undoubtedly familiar with folk-remedies and herbal lore, and fulfilled a genuine healing function within their localities. Reputations might also be made or further enhanced by such divinatory tasks as the identification of enemies, which would not have proved insuperable to someone with an acute ear for local gossip, or who was well provided with suitable informants. 'White' witches could cure sick children and animals and were adept at pinpointing the roots of village discord; 'black' witches inflicted death and sickness at will, and delighted in exacerbating local tensions to breaking point. Often, indeed, one man's white witch might have been another man's black. Muchembled has suggested that while clients might confidently approach a *guérisseuse* in a distant village, those who lived in her vicinity may have feared her powers and, if occasion arose, denounced her as a maleficent witch [115: 112–15]. It is likely, too, that some of these consultants genuinely believed they had the power to do either good or ill by occult means.

But for many educated people of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, these characterisations of white and black witchcraft would unquestionably seem to have left out the most important element. Orthodox learned opinion, promoted by religious, and increasingly accepted by secular, authorities, held that witches or

sorcerers were in league with that great foe of God and mankind, the Devil, and were utilising his superhuman powers for their own operations. This concept of witchcraft as a manifestation of diabolical power seems to have had considerably less grip on the popular than on the learned mind. Examinations of court records over the last few years have amassed much support for the view that unlearned people were not especially concerned with witchcraft as a devilish thing; like many people today in non-Western cultures, they accepted that the world contained hidden forces which knowing individuals can tap, just as anyone can tap the more familiar forces of everyday life, without speculating as to their origin. The typical peasant who laid an accusation of witchcraft did so because he believed he had suffered injury from a witch, not because he looked on her as a servant of the Devil.

Following Larner [87: 7], we may describe as 'primary witchcraft' the witchcraft or sorcery of *maleficium* which frightened the European peasant and which continues to frighten people in many societies at the present day. But it was much less the notion of *maleficium* than a concept of the witch as a follower of the Devil that had the foremost place in the minds of theologians and many witch judges. Therefore, it is inevitable that the term 'witch' in the present study will often bear this extra demonological connotation. A *sorcier*, wrote Bodin, 'is one who by diabolical means knowingly attempts to accomplish some end'. This overlay of a demonological content on the idea of primary witchcraft is distinctively European, and is possible only within a Christian culture.

(ii) Low Magic and High Magic

Using spells and rituals to kill or maim a man or his beasts, to spoil a neighbour's butter-making, to cause the water from a well to be foul, to produce good or bad weather, to make Jack fall in love with Jill – all these are examples of low magic, which is closely associated with Larner's definition of 'primary witchcraft' and with what anthropologists call 'sorcery', though it was not necessarily directed to evil ends. Low magic, essentially practical in intention, was the magic of uneducated 'white' and 'black' village witches or sorcerers, and of their often only slightly more cultivated urban counterparts. Theoretically unsophisticated, it was a

magic primarily rooted in folk traditions orally transmitted from one generation to the next, with many of its spells and prescriptions having their origin in half-remembered learning and pseudo-science gleaned from the most distant antiquity.

Yet in early modern Europe, magic was by no means the exclusive preserve of ill-educated low magicians. Far removed from low magic in its theoretical and operational sophistication was the high magic of the Renaissance magus, a learned and visionary figure combining elements of the scientist and the priest, and entranced by the noble prospect of man controlling the cosmos by magical means. For such men as Marsilio Ficino (1433–1499) and Pico della Mirandola (1463–1494), it was through magic that humanity could realise its highest aspirations to understand and to compel the forces that govern the universe, and to make its nearest approach to divinity. Renaissance high magic rested firmly on the quasi-mystical philosophy of Neoplatonism, which had originated in third-century Alexandrian speculation on the meaning of certain strands in the thought of Plato. Influential, too, were the so-called Hermetic writings, themselves actually a product of the Neoplatonist tradition, which were believed – before they were correctly dated in the seventeenth century – to be the works of an Egyptian sage contemporary with Moses, named Hermes Trismegistus. Medieval magicians had had some knowledge of the Neoplatonist-Hermetic tradition, largely filtered through Arab sources or the pages of the Jewish mystical Cabala, but high magic received a considerable boost during the Renaissance from the rediscovery of Hermetic manuscripts, and from the new enthusiam for reading the works of the ancients.

High magic depended on a complex theory, in which astrological and alchemical notions were mingled, of the world as a mystically interconnected system, and the magician believed that this interconnectedness (the 'concord of the world', as Ficino termed it) could be exploited to produce results on earth by certain ceremonies and incantations. Crucial to this conception was the Neoplatonist idea of the *spiritus mundi*, the spirit of the world, which infuses all things and which is the medium through which the influence of the stars is drawn down to earth. The purpose of magic then becomes that of attracting benign stellar influences and hindering malign ones; and the magician must study how to compel these forces by carving images on stones (talismans),

chanting and singing mystical songs, making certain gestures and producing appropriate odours, all at the astrologically propitious times. The spiritual unity of the world is the ground of the 'sympathies' among its parts which are the magician's concern. To illustrate the nature of this unity, Ficino cited the well-known phenomenon of sympathetic vibration: just as plucking one taut string of a lyre will cause a second string to vibrate in sympathy with it, so are all parts of the universe linked together in a single harmonious rhythm, which enables the magician who performs the correct actions to capture and use the powers of the heavenly bodies. For instance, to fight a fever, according to Ficino, 'one sculpts Mercury in marble, in the hour of Mercury, when Mercury is rising, in the form of a man who bears arrows' [56: 75].

There was much debate about the extent to which high magic relied on demons. Even St Thomas Aquinas, the arbiter of orthodoxy, had not forbidden the use of natural substances which, by virtue of astral correspondences, might have a certain efficacy – occult certainly, yet still strictly within the bounds of the natural – to produce some result; for example a particular plain stone, placed on the skin, might in this manner help to cure some disease. However, Renaissance high magic, with its acceptance of the Hermetic doctrine of a universe animated in all its parts, and with the tendency of some of its exponents in their more poetical flights to talk of 'planetary deities', invited the charge that it was not really a natural magic, but rather a demonically facilitated one, and as such reprehensible. Some influential theorists, such as the much emulated magus Henry Cornelius Agrippa (1486–1535), were actually willing to admit that their magic in some of its aspects employed demonic power, but insisted that only good demons, or 'angels', were involved. Whatever the sincerity of this plea, high magic was understandably greatly suspect in the eyes of the ecclesiastical authorities.

Through its avowed sense of optimism, intense curiosity and willingness to seek for ultimate knowledge, Renaissance Neoplatonism was able to offer attractive and highly plausible intellectual defences for magic which were accepted by many members of the educated classes throughout the early modern period, until the concept of an animistic universe, whose organic power could be harnessed and channelled, was finally eclipsed, late in the seventeenth century, by that of a mechanistic one

subject to immutable physical and mathematical laws. Meanwhile, popular low magic continued to thrive as it had always done, seemingly little indebted to the writings of the learned practitioners, even though more or less garbled echoes of the thought of Mirandola or Agrippa might occasionally surface in manuscript manuals of practical magic. Some of the men and women who plied the magic trade professionally undoubtedly had some smattering of learning, yet there can have been few 'white' wizards and wise women even among the urban practitioners who had much grasp of the subtleties of the Neoplatonist cosmology. In England, as Thomas has shown, wizards were generally artisans, or sometimes farmers, merchants or clerics, and practised magic only in their spare time [150: *295–6*]; for the most part they can have taken little interest in the theoretical basis of magic, though presumably few were inclined to attribute its efficacy to the Devil. Some of these consultants built up considerable practices and charged high fees. Their clients were not confined exclusively to the commonalty: high-ranking members of society, too, sometimes required a magic cure to ward off the sudden onset of illness or sought to learn their future by divination. Magical remedies were, in fact, available for an enormous range of problems. In 1544, Lord Neville was promised the assistance of magic in his attempts to become proficient on the lute and virginals, while in the late seventeenth century the antiquary Elias Ashmole employed astrological talismans to rid his house of rats and mice [150: *275, 759*].

2 Witchcraft, Magic and the Law

(i) Development of the Learned Stereotype of the Witch

The concept of the witch held by many churchmen and literate lay-people in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was a synthesis of several elements, some of them with a cultural and intellectual pedigree stretching back to distant antiquity. The oldest ingredient to be found in the early modern definition of the witch was the notion of harmful magic, which can be traced to the remotest historical times. Practitioners of evil magic attracted heavy legal penalties in the Greek and Roman worlds, when motifs common in our period of interest were already very much apparent. According to Horace and Virgil, the witch needed to reap her magic herbs at midnight by use of a bronze sickle, while Persius, writing on the techniques of midwifery, described the activities of old wives who were skilled in averting the 'burning eye' by anointing new-born babes with their spittle. Tales abounded of witches able to draw down the moon by the use of spells, or to wreak revenge upon unwitting households by blowing open doors and felling supporting timbers. In Homer's *Odyssey* the enchantress Circe – perhaps the greatest and most enduring witch figure of them all – transforms Odysseus's hapless sailors into a herd of gluttonous swine [64: *32, 35 and 54*; 81: *19–20*].

Leaden tablets bearing curses, thrown into graves or attached to the walls of a tomb, have been excavated from across the Roman Empire, while Tacitus suspected that witchcraft had played a part in the premature death of the imperial heir-apparent Germanicus in AD 17. There were several traditions of women who flew by night on wicked, or at least on mysterious, errands. The Roman strix was thought to be a woman who could transform herself into a bird of owl-like form and delighted to feast on human flesh;

there is a famous description of a flying strix in Apuleius's satirical novel *The Golden Ass* [64, 75]. Somewhat less sinister were popular and long-lasting beliefs in women who rode out at night with a goddess, variously referred to as Diana, Herodias, Holda, Perchta and by a host of other local names. Such aerial cavalcades, often taken to be composed of the souls of the dead as well as of living women, were believed in some parts of Europe to be concerned with punishing wrong-doers, protecting the harvest and rewarding the virtuous, but they were naturally the object of some fear to the peasantry, and it is likely that there was a tendency for these 'ladies of the night' to become confused with the strix variety of night-flyer. The Church was certainly keen to condemn all such counter-traditions as essentially superstitious and pagan. A key document in this context, because for several centuries regarded as having conciliar authority, was the so-called *Canon Episcopi*, which though believed to have issued from the Council of Ancyra (314), was probably no older than the ninth century and may have been part of a lost capitulary. The *Canon Episcopi* denied the reality of the night-ride with Diana, and declared that those women who believed that they rode with her were the victims of a devilish delusion. Whatever its actual origins, the *Canon Episcopi* was a typical product of the official Church policy of placing a demonological interpretation on beliefs that it held to be pagan; in a similar way, in the centuries following the fall of Rome, there was a marked tendency for leading churchmen to identify all of those pagan deities which they could not fully co-opt into their own value system with demons.

The 'science' of demons, or demonology, was largely a medieval creation, though it looked to the Bible to sanction its basic claims. King Saul consulted with the 'witch' of Endor before going into battle, Omri sacrificed on wild mountainsides to pagan gods and Aaron shook the resolve of Pharaoh and his magicians by changing his staff into a snake, which promptly devoured all of its rivals which had been conjured up by the invocation of weaker spirits. Most significantly of all, the Book of Exodus (22: *18*), amongst its list of proscriptions to the still tribal Israelites, admonished them that 'You shall not permit a sorceress to live.' Later reinterpreted to proscribe the figure not of the Eastern seer, but of the fully formed and westernised archetype of the 'witch', this passage did much to legitimise the later European persecutions. Though the

figure of the Devil emerged only gradually in the Old Testament, appearing first in the Book of Job as a kind of chief prosecutor to the heavenly court and later, in the prophets Isaiah and Zechariah, as a tempter and tormentor of the Jewish people in times of adversity and exile, the New Testament firmly cast his figure as the reality – rather than as an abstract personification – of evil, and was more acutely concerned with the workings of magic and the physical presence of demons in everyday life. Jesus was tempted in the wilderness by Satan himself; he also conducted exorcisms and announced that 'if it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you' (Mt. 12: *28*; Lk. 11: *30*). St Paul spoke extensively in his letters of the malevolent and predatory nature of Satan, while St Peter required divine aid to counter the deeds of the demon-assisted magician from Samaria, Simon Magus.

In the early modern period, when all academic learning was based upon the dual authorities of scripture and classical texts, an outright rejection of the operation of malevolent and ungodly forces was scarcely an option for the majority of Europe's intellectual elite. As Stuart Clark's masterly studies of the language and thought-world of the demonological authors of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries make very clear, beliefs in witchcraft were regarded by the educated classes as anything but superstitious [26, 28, 29]. Yet it was not generally thought that demons – and consequently the human beings who practised magic by their aid – were capable by their own powers of working true miracles beyond the course of nature, which only God could perform. But if demons were restriced to operating by natural forces, they could none the less, through their great knowledge and abilities, create effects far beyond anything that unaided human beings could manage; as Alexander of Hales put it in the thirteenth century, demons could not work *miracula* (miracles), but they could work *mira* (wonders). In effect, the Devil was the consummate natural magician; by contrast his tools, the witches, could produce their effects only with his assistance. Witches might delude themselves into thinking that it was they who exercised real power, but their rituals served only to reinforce the terms of their demonic pacts and their utter subjection to the Devil [see 29].

As we have seen, early twentieth-century writers usually condemned the beliefs that sustained the witch trials as absurd

and unjustifiable, and those who held them as either credulous, superstitious or fanatical. There was a marked tendency to reject all that which is foreign, strange or 'arcane', and to search instead for a comforting and recognisable source of 'modernity' in the conduct of allegations, trial proceedings and learned debate. If there is now considerable recognition that this attitude was both simplistic and unfair, then this radical change of outlook should also compel the historian to think philosophically about the conditions under which a belief system qualifies as being rational. A belief need not be irrational simply because it is false; it is untrue, for instance, to believe that the sun goes round the earth, but it was not irrational to accept this before the evidence for heliocentrism was available. Similarly, people believed in witchcraft when they believed, as we do not, in a universe pervaded by a variety of spiritual forces of a personal kind, both good and evil in intent. In this light, the opprobrium heaped upon such authorities as Jean Bodin and King James VI and I can be seen to have been largely misplaced. Furthermore, the apparent conflicts and contradictions inherent in their calls for greater religious toleration, which have been rightly applauded, and their appeals to magistrates to work unflinchingly for the extirpation of witchcraft, which have been roundly condemned, are neither so great nor so inexplicable as was once thought [26: *668–82*; 27]. It is no longer satisfactory to dismiss their formidable writings on demonology as embarrassing aberrations from the 'modernity' to be found in the main body of their published works. These were not isolated or unpalatable interests to their contemporaries; King James and the lawyer Bodin wrote upon witchcraft not only because they had a special interest in the subject, but because authors who sought to express a comprehensive philosophy of nature could not exclude what was a necessary, if not a particularly edifying, extension of it [29].

However, the problem remained for anyone attempting to rationalise and codify witchcraft that biblical demonology was both obscure and doubtfully consistent [see 78]. There was thus much scope for the patristic fathers, along with successive popes, monks from the mendicant orders, and the later servants of both Protestant and Roman Catholic states, to reinterpret the basic source material. Demonology was an evolving science, constantly mutating to encompass new strains and variations of magical belief, and concepts of witchcraft changed in tandem. But one question

remained urgent, and baffling, from the beginning. Given that it was the Devil's aim to spite God and to procure the damnation of mankind, why did God allow him to exercise his evil powers? A standard, if not wholly satisfactory, answer was that God wished to give men a chance to use their free will to choose between virtue and vice; and so he permitted Satan, as the Pseudo-Bernardus said, *tentare servos Dei* – to tempt the servants of God. According to this thinking, to abandon God and to throw in one's lot with demons, in return for the opportunity to utilise their marvellous powers for one's own ends, was supremely wicked, whilst being one of the greatest temptations that Satan could offer.

Even though demons were held to be constrained by natural laws, their command of natural forces, together with their cunning and power to deceive, made them greatly feared by medieval and early modern people. A person who strove to save his soul from damnation was engaged in a chess match with a much cleverer opponent, and he could only hope to win if he threw himself upon divine protection. 'The Devil', wrote the late fifteenth-century preacher Paulus Wann, voicing widespread contemporary anxiety, 'is most subtle in intellect, highly astute in his malice, most swift in his motion, unremitting in doing harm, insatiable in damning, implacable, invisible, horrible to think upon and impossible to restrain.' Against such a subtle and insidious foe, the Church needed to mobilise all of its forces. With salvation the ultimate goal of human life, anything which prevented its attainment was to be regarded as the most horrific and abominable form of crime imaginable. The practice of witchcraft effectively consigned the soul to damnation, and the corrupting effect of its propagation threatened to deprive untold numbers of innocents of their chance of paradise, making it a far worse crime than any mere theft, common assault or even murder could ever be. It was, put quite simply, the very worst outrage that might be committed by a human being and should be judged accordingly by the secular and ecclesiastical courts. As Nicholas Remy, a lawyer, bibliophile and counsellor to the Duke of Lorraine, had it: on account of their 'flagrant crimes ... I have no hesitation in saying that they are justly to be subjected to every torture and put to death in the flames; both that they may expiate their crimes with a fitting punishment, and that its very awfulness may serve as an example and a warning to others' [127: *188*].

Charges of heresy against other brands of religious dissent could be similarly conceived, and just as stringently prosecuted, since the Church's fear and loathing of heterodoxy led it to equate any challenge to its central authority, however mildly expressed, with an attempt to weaken its power effectively to combat the Devil. Moreover, in frustrating the Church's campaign to bring salvation to souls, dissenters could be seen to be acting – albeit at times unwittingly – as the servants of the great enemy of mankind. It is significant that a more co-ordinated and repressive policy towards heresy began in the High Middle Ages, simultaneously with a growth in concern with the Devil and his power upon earth. At the first burning for heresy, at Orleans in 1022, the charges included those of holding secret orgies at night and worshipping the Devil in the form of a black man [135: *87*]. Naturally enough, the conviction that all heresy stemmed from demonic inspiration led to a certain uniformity in the accusations levelled against all those branded as heretics, whether Knights Templar, Cathars, Waldensians, Fraticelli or Reformists. Eventually, in the fifteenth century, these same formulaic charges were to reappear, little altered, in the trials of those other deviants and threats to society, the witches. Thus the learned stereotype of the witch that the early modern era inherited from the late Middle Ages incorporated many of the horrific features that had previously been ascribed to other heretics. Witches, like the Cathars and Templars before them, were accused of meeting together at night in secret places, of feasting on the flesh of infants, of holding orgiastic revels (often involving sexual intercourse with demons) and of actively worshipping Satan [30]. Above all, they were held to be guilty of making a pact with him, whereby they promised to become his creatures and to do his bidding in return for temporal goods or demonic assistance in their evil schemes. In one important respect, however, the stereotype of the witch was innovatory: while heretics could be of either sex and of any age, it became normal to expect witches to be women, generally elderly or past the prime of life.

Scholars are generally agreed that the major components of the learned conception of the witch, whilst they had been known much earlier, converged to define this new enemy of God only in the fifteenth century. The new synthesis encountered objections from those who claimed that it ran counter to the authority of the *Canon*

Episcopi, but an increasingly standard response was that what the *Canon* forbade was the belief in the reality of the night-flight with a goddess, not the belief in the flying activities of witches. The witch's heretic-like allegiance to Satan was what explained her capacity for maleficent sorcery, and it also marked her out in the Church's eyes as someone with a quite universal hatred for all Christian people. As such, and as a potential 'killer of souls', she merited far harsher treatment than had normally been meted out to magicians in the Middle Ages who, while being subject to secular penalties if they attempted *maleficium*, were not in general regarded as being the implacable foes of both God and mankind. In his *Summa Contra Gentiles*, Thomas Aquinas had taught that high magic must normally involve an explicit or implicit pact with the Devil, and in 1326 the papal Bull *Super Illius Specula* was issued against the very suspect practice of ritual magic; but magicians were mostly thought of, and probably thought of themselves, as attempting to coerce demons while remaining good Christians, rather than as recruits to the Satanic army. The influential Hugh of St Victor in the twelfth century considered that the appropriate treatment for magicians was not death, but expulsion from the community of the faithful. Some magicians, such as the famous Cecco d'Ascoli in Florence in 1322, were executed; but for the discreet magician the chances of survival, particularly before the fifteenth century, remained reasonably good.

The formation of the concept of demonic witchcraft owed much to the writings and practices of Inquisitors. The papal Inquisition had developed gradually from the twelfth century, and was directed primarily at the suppression of heresy. In pursuit of this objective, it adopted special legal procedures including the withholding of the identity of the witnesses from the accused, the admission of evidence from those not normally thought fit to testify, the refusal to allow the accused legal representation, and torture. Whilst there was some debate about the meaning of the term 'heresy' (did it cover only beliefs, or did it extend to actions too?), in the course of the fourteenth century it became largely accepted that the making of demonic pacts fell within the jurisdiction of the Inquisition. This brought magic within its purview, and in the fifteenth century, by a consistent if novel development of their theory of magic, Inquisitors began to press the charge of diabolic pact even against unsophisticated village practitioners of

maleficent magic – against those, in other words, characterised by Larner as 'primary witches'. Secular jurisdictions in some areas took up the concept of demonic witchcraft, and likewise systematic inquisitorial methods for dealing with it.

Kieckhefer has ably explored the manner in which, in the fifteenth century, learned notions were superimposed on popular, traditional ideas at trials for maleficent magic. Thus in trials at Todi (1428) and Cologne (1456), the emphasis was diverted from the original charges, respectively, of love magic and weather magic, to fresh ones of using an ointment made from dead infants and of diabolism [80: *73–4*]. Inquisitorial technique, with its set formularies of interrogation, tended to make it difficult for accused persons to be seen in any other light than that in which their judges had already determined to regard them. As such case studies as those drawn from the later trial records of the Venetian Republic and the Prince Bishopric of Augsburg tend to show, there is little exaggeration in Russell's statement that 'The Inquisitors were taught what to look for, and they almost always found it, whether it existed or not' [11, 101, 135: *159*].

Maleficent sorcery, as a secular offence, was subject to legal proceedings throughout the medieval period and, as in any crime of violence, the penalty was generally in proportion to the severity of the harm the defendant was believed to have caused. However, the fully-fledged stereotype of the demonic witch, that was to prove so catastrophic to so many, was not in operation in trials before the fifteenth century: Cohn has suggested that it can first be perceived in trials in the Swiss canton of Valais in 1428 [30: *225*]. In the next few years, trials for witchcraft run by the Inquisition in the French Alps, which had initially been seeking out Waldensian heretics, reinforced the connection between the stereotypes of witchcraft and of heresy (in fact, one French term for witchcraft is 'vauderie', which originally signified the Waldensian heresy). The devil-worshipping, cannibalistic, evil-doing witch was now to be revealed in her full horror; and, as Cohn has rightly said, the addition of rapid nocturnal flight to her range of abilities meant that there now opened up the prospect of great conventions of witches drawn from far and wide [30: *227–9*]. The concept of the witch at this time was predominantly that of a gregarious creature, apt to swarm together at a moment's notice with her – or his – fellows. There was little place,

in the medieval and early modern mind, for the picture of the witch as the solitary and socially isolated figure which has come down to us through more recent traditions and the pages of the brothers Grimm [162]. It was the vision of a recognisable, well-organised, and maleficent witch sect, numerically strong, highly mobile and capable of prolonged covert activity, dedicated to securing the overthrow of Christendom, which obsessed the Inquisition and secular judiciary. [11: *103*; 14: *36, 40 and 126*; 127: *47–56*; 147: *10*].

Similar conceptual distortions and deformations had indeed already been routinely practised in Christian Western Europe, by Church, people and state, in regard to the continent's substantial Jewish minorities. In 1321, rumours that lepers and Jews had conspired to poison the water supply with a magical concoction made from blood, herbs, urine, and wafers stolen from the consecrated host were enough to trigger fierce persecution in Aquitaine, while a century earlier the disappearance of two young children in Fulda had led to allegations that they had been forcibly abducted and ritually murdered by the town's Jewish population, in a savage parody of Christ's passion. The wise counsel of Frederick II that there was absolutely no foundation for these allegations against the Jews in either scripture or law failed to impress the crowd and the local authorities, with the result that dozens of innocent men and women were rounded up and executed. Subsequent enquiry into the causes of the fire that had killed the children revealed their deaths to be a tragic accident as the result of parental negligence, but did little to dispel the image of the Jew, in the German lands, as one who sought to 'slay diverse Christian children, injuring them in all their limbs ... cruelly drinking their blood' [12: *482*]. If the characteristics of the elderly crone and child murderer were eventually to be fastened upon the witch, then the parallel figure of the fully demonised Jew – the hook-nosed 'Christ killer' who committed infanticide as part of complex demonic rituals – was already well defined. In a climate of widespread popular anti-Semitism, sacred Hebrew terms were co-opted and corrupted beyond all recognition. Thus, the great gatherings of witches came to be commonly designated as 'synagogues', and later as 'sabbats' (or 'sabbaths') [6, 153].

The fifteenth century saw the first rash of theoretical disquisitions on witchcraft and its appropriate treatment – a genre that

was to burgeon in the two succeeding centuries. Such works as Nider's *Formicarius* (*c.* 1435), the *Errores Gazariorum* (*c.* 1450), Jacquier's *Flagellum Haereticorum Fascinariorum* (1450s), Molitor's *De Lamiis* (1489); and, most famous of all, the lubricious *Malleus Maleficarum* or 'Hammer of Witches' (1487), by the Dominican Inquisitors Kramer (also known by his Latin name, Institoris) and Sprenger, helped to disseminate the new ideas about witchcraft, a process facilitated by the invention of printing in the middle of the century [85]. The availability of printed treatises on witchcraft no doubt played a part in stimulating the interest of literate people in the subject and in rapidly developing a coherent intellectual approach to dealing with a problem which was believed to exist throughout Western Europe. But it would be unreasonable to lay too much responsibility on the printing press for the witch prosecutions of early modern times. The course of the trials remained of primary importance in promoting or retarding witchcraft beliefs, and had the press not existed the new demonological theories would doubtless have been transmitted in time-honoured fashion in manuscript or by word of mouth. There is scant evidence to suggest that the impact of printing resulted in a dramatic sea-change in elite opinion concerning witchcraft. But printing diminished the time it took for ideas to be reproduced, transmitted and debated, and it provided a dynamic propaganda tool for the elites, both secular and clerical, to reach out to classes and interest groups which had not previously been touched directly by popular and accessible prose. The printing press created a whole new market for literature of all kinds, while pressure from below generated a steady demand for fresh stories with topical or salacious themes. Easily recognisable motifs, incorporating elements of folklore, sold well as did the transcripts of notorious witch trials and accounts of *maleficia*. In Germany, the *Teufelsbücher* (or 'Devil's Books') which told in simple language of the havoc inflicted on ordinary people by demons, appeared in the late sixteenth century as literacy rates began their halting and uneasy ascent. In England from the mid-seventeenth century onwards chapbooks – cheaply printed narratives, ballads, rhymes and romances sold by pedlars in the marketplace or upon the highway – drew upon interest in, and fear of, the occult, to reinforce popular stereotypes with their shocking revelations of demonic pacts in Kent and the discovery

of witches in Stepney. They also injected new strains of thought with tales of Dr Faustus, 'The Necromancer', imported from Germany and culled directly from the elite Renaissance tradition of the magus. Print allowed for the learned and common traditions of witchcraft and sorcery to intersect, and to an extent to cross-fertilise, with factual trial accounts and purely imaginative works of fiction providing positive reinforcement for one another and combining to frame the context for future accusations of the crime [92: *53–4*; 150: *346–7*].

(ii) Witch Prosecution: Regional Survey

It will never be possible to know with complete certainty how many people in Europe were prosecuted for witchcraft, or how many suffered death or some lesser penalty after conviction. Scrupulous records of court proceedings were not kept in all localities, and of those which were, many have been subsequently lost. However, meticulous archival work conducted over recent years plainly indicates that earlier guesses at the number of deaths for witchcraft (often based on the reading of sensational pamphlet accounts of trials rather than on solid forensic research) have been wildly exaggerated. It is no longer believed that many hundreds of thousands – or even by some estimates, millions – died for the crime of witchcraft [9, 41]. In so far as the sporadic nature of witch prosecution permits inductive extrapolation from those statistics which are known, it seems reasonable to accept the maximum figure of 40 000 executions, conducted across Europe from 1428 to 1782, which has been consistently advanced – and agreed upon – by such leading authorities as Behringer, Briggs, Hutton and Sharpe [18: *8*; 72: *132 and 436 fn. 1*; 142: *65*]. This total does not, of course, include the figures for unofficial lynchings of suspected witches within their local communities, for the simple reason that such figures are quite unknowable. During a mob action, or a streetfight, allegations of witchcraft might be hurled about, but these were often accompanied by a score of other curses and were motivated by a multitude of different causes. If these affrays escaped the notice of the authorities and failed to result in a prosecution, then at best we are left with hearsay and conjecture rather than hard

empirical evidence. It is these gaps in our knowledge which have resulted, upon occasion, in the advancement of enormously inflated figures based solely on the unprovable – and unattested – assumption that popular persecution had naturally run at a far higher level than judicial.

Whilst prosecutions for witchcraft were an endemic feature of life in large parts of Europe for many years, it is wrong to envisage the sudden occurrence of a 'witch-craze' which swept uniformly across the length and breadth of the continent, and which abated just as swiftly as it had begun. Though many regions remained relatively untroubled by accusations of serious *maleficia*, from time to time certain areas – often in close geographical proximity to those unaffected – experienced witch hunts of greatly increased ferocity and intensity. The primary explanation for these periodic upsurges is to be found in the changing responses of society's elites, most notably the judiciary but also the clergy and local authorities, to the problem and its perceived seriousness. At times of acute social strain, when harvests failed, plagues ravaged and the state was at war, local government could often find itself enjoying far greater autonomous powers while, paradoxically, at the same time feeling more isolated and threatened, from both within and without. In these tense circumstances, the authorities, who as we have already seen were culturally attuned to accept the possibility of magical or marvellous occurrences, might become more susceptible to persuasion that a dangerous sect of witches existed like a cancer in the body politic. The ensuing scares or panics (which were mostly, though not exclusively, an urban phenomenon) were commonly made worse by the use of torture to extract from luckless suspects the names of their 'accomplices'. Since the forms of torture employed were frequently extremely severe, it took a spirit of rare endurance to resist the pressure to accuse other innocent people of witchcraft, who could then be arrested and tortured in their turn, thus creating a snowball effect. A curious fact about these witch scares, and one that historians are still trying to explain, is that they are rare in the first century or so after the stereotype of demonic witchcraft had reached its final form. Despite having its conceptual roots in the Middle Ages, witch prosecution is an early modern and not a medieval phenomenon, with some of the worst panics datable to the 1590s, and the years around 1630 and the 1660s.

While, as Christina Larner has pointed out, it would be quite wrong to think of a 'national witch-hunt' in Germanic lands (Germany did not yet exist as a political entity and the Holy Roman Empire was unable to impose substantial central control over the patchwork of states which comprised its territories), many of these areas were particularly badly affected by outbreaks of persecution. Midelfort's detailed research in southwestern Germany (modern Baden-Wurttemberg) has uncovered records of 3229 executions of witches between 1561 and 1670, with trials of up to ten people a year accounting for 31 per cent of this total, and large panic trials of more than 20 people per annum accounting for a further 40 per cent [107: *32*, 71–2]. There were over 1000 recorded executions in Lotharingia, 800 in Westphalia and more than 500 in Schaumburg-Lippe, while in the heaviest single persecution of European witches, the zeal of Archbishop Ferdinand of Bavaria accounted for some 2000 victims in his patrimony of Cologne [137]. A German town in the grip of a witch scare was the scene of terrifying spectacles and atrocities; thus a chronicler could write of Wolfenbüttel in Brunswick, in 1590, that 'The place of execution looked like a small wood from the number of stakes' planted in it. However, these outrages were not general and some parts of Germany, such as southern Bavaria and the Lower Rhine region, had relatively few scares with the vast majority of trials resulting in a less serious sentence or even in the punishment of the accuser [10]. It would seem, therefore, that, as Gerhard Schormann has claimed, large territories with increasingly centralised administrations and stable forms of government were far less likely to succumb to these scares, and that their rulers, whether Catholic or Protestant, were better able to put a brake on proceedings once panic had set in [137]. By contrast, pocket states, baronies and prince bishoprics were more prone to give vent to prolonged campaigns of witch-hunting, as they were less protected from the enthusiasms of their rulers and far more vulnerable to pressures generated from below by an angry and frightened populace [7: *77*].

At the western edge of the Empire, the frequently disputed territories of Lorraine and Franche-Comté suffered some severe bouts of witch prosecution. The judge and demonologist Nicolas Remy claimed to have burnt 900 witches in Lorraine in the 1580s and 1590s, though whether that figure may have been unduly

exaggerated in order to achieve the 'right' literary and cautionary effects is still a matter for dispute [26: *377*; 127: *iii*]. In Franche-Comté another judge-cum-demonologist, Henri Boguet, provided the stimulus for a severe policy towards witches at the beginning of the seventeenth century, and there were bad panics in 1628–29 and again in 1657–59 [see 15, 113]. Waves of panic occurred in the Duchy of Luxembourg, then under Spanish rule, in the periods 1580–1600 and 1615–30; 358 people are known to have been executed for witchcraft in those parts of the Duchy for which records have survived [see 39]. Namur in the Low Countries is known to have contributed close on 200 victims between 1509 and 1646 [according to 116], and the experience of the Empire taken as a whole would seem to demonstrate that once the habit of energetic witch prosecution had taken hold of an area, it could easily spread (though it did not always) to neighbouring territories. The zeal for prosecuting witches was nothing if not infectious.

In France, if one excludes Lorraine and Franche-Comté (which only became permanently subject to the French crown after 1660, during the expansionist wars of Louis XIV), the areas most badly affected by witch trials were the Pyrenees, Languedoc, the Alps and the North East. Muchembled has located the climax of prosecuting zeal in the years 1580–1610, when the Pyrenees in particular suffered very badly, and further waves of trials occurred in the late 1630s in Burgundy, Champagne and Languedoc, and around 1670 in Normandy, Béarn and Guyenne [115: *290–5*]; the trials of the third wave were, significantly, ended by royal intervention [100: *457–8*]. On the whole, and always excepting Lorraine, France suffered less severely than did Germany, and there were fewer trials involving large numbers of defendants. Statistics for France are frequently uncertain; in one area investigated in detail, corresponding to the modern Département of the Nord, and known to have had a relatively large number of trials for witchcraft and related magical offences, around 140 people are believed to have been executed, most of these in the peak periods 1591–1600, 1611–20 and 1651–60 [see 116]. A striking feature of the French experience of witchcraft was a spate of accusations centring around bewitched convents, the most famous instances being at Aix (1611), Loudun (1634) and Louvais (1633–44). In all these cases, a priest was burnt for having caused devils to enter

the bodies of nuns or young girls, though there was much contemporary debate as to whether the 'victims' were really possessed, merely feigning their symptoms or severely mentally ill. It seems likely that in these enclosed, single-sex communities, hysteria, sexual repression and jealousy played a decisive part in the formulation of the original allegations of witchcraft. Moreover, for such an unfortunate and deeply disturbed figure as Soeur Jeanne des Anges at Loudun, there may have been little distance between ecstatic religious vision and simple sexual frenzy [73, 100, 126].

Both Italy and Spain, the heartlands of the Inquisition, saw surprisingly few witchcraft trials, with the peak of prosecutions being over as early as 1550. What trials there were tended to take place in the northern parts of these countries, close to borders with other witch-hunting regions, possibly indicating a heightened popular consciousness of witchcraft there. Thus although Venetian territory witnessed a considerable number of trials, there were no mass executions, capital punishment or committal to the galleys was rare and whipping remained the chief punishment for the crime of witchcraft [101: *32–3*]. There were sharp persecutions in the Spanish Basque country in 1507, 1517, the 1520s and (as a result of a spillover from the concurrent bad scare on the French side of the Pyrenees) in 1610. However, these outbreaks should be more properly conceived of as having their roots in problems caused by weak central government, and the survival of strong regional cultural identities and loyalties that cut across the geographical borders of states, rather than in specifically Spanish conditions or in the particular zeal and vigilance of the Inquisition as an institution in stamping out this form of dissent. In both Spain and Italy, the Inquisitions had become exceedingly painstaking in their legal procedures and seem to have grasped, earlier than most other jurisdictions, the sheer difficulty of obtaining satisfactory proof that an accused person was indeed a witch. They were also doubtful as to whether witchcraft was actually a common, or worsening crime. The task of systematically extirpating the 'heresy' of Protestantism – and, in the case of Spain, of additionally expelling Judaism – from within their jurisdictions had made the Inquisitors well-practised in sifting through evidence, in developing a logical framework for prosecution and in prioritising the nature of their campaign against dissent.

Accordingly, they acted with great circumspection in response to accusations of witchcraft, and made efforts to ensure that local secular authorities did the same [68, 101].

Official enthusiasm for the prosecution and extermination of witches had largely evaporated in Spain and Italy before it had even begun to appear in certain other European lands. Poland had its worst period of witch panics as late as 1675–1720, and mass trials continued for many years afterwards. Hungary, too, suffered badly in the eighteenth century, and one contemporary report speaks of 34 people being burnt for storm-raising in 1728–29 [see 90: *1252–3*]. In the north, Sweden's greatest scares took place after 1650, the most notorious incident occurring at Mohra in Dalecarlia in 1668–69, when several children accused a number of women of taking them to the sabbat; their charges resulted in a sizeable, though uncertain, number of women being burned at the stake [seventy, according to 5: *207–8*]. Swedish-speaking areas of Finland knew some trouble in the same period, but, by and large, other parts of Scandinavia were free of large-scale trials.

Also largely unscathed by witch prosecution were Roman Catholic Ireland and Calvinist Holland, the former remote from the main currents of European thought and affairs, the latter in their very forefront. Ireland knew a mere handful of trials for witchcraft, and these without pronounced demonic elements, while Holland burnt its last witch as early as 1610 [68: *22*]. Muscovite Russia was likewise apparently free of major witch panics, though Zguta has shown that a fear of primary witchcraft was strong in all ranks of society from the Tsar downwards, and has uncovered records of the trials of 99 persons for this offence in Moscow between 1622 and 1700 [169]. In only one of the Moscow trials is there any reference to the accused rejecting God and accepting Satan as master [169: *1204*]; and, indeed, the Western concept of demonic witchcraft scarcely penetrated to the world of Orthodox Christianity.

England's experience of witch prosecution was, in several important respects, quite different from that of the greater part of Continental Europe. In English trials, the emphasis of the charge normally fell on the *maleficia* allegedly performed by the supposed witch, rather than on any contract with the Devil, even though invoking demons was forbidden by statute in 1563, and the

making of a diabolic pact was prohibited in 1604. The sabbat at which the Devil was held to preside was virtually unheard of before the Essex trials of 1645 promoted by the witch-finder Matthew Hopkins and his colleague John Stearne; while the meetings that the witches of Pendle in Lancashire were said to have attended in 1612 were merely feasts, without the presence of Satan. In a similar manner, there was less emphasis on weather magic – the raising of storms and the destruction of crops – than on the Continent, and accusations of meddling with natural reproductive functions (causing male impotence and female sterility) were absent. But a common charge against English witches, though much less often raised against their European counterparts, was that they kept 'familiars' – imps or demons usually in the form of small animals such as dogs, cats, mice and toads, which did their bidding in return for nourishment from a special nipple concealed on the witch's body, and known as her 'witch-mark'. (This 'witch-mark' is not to be confused with the 'Devil's mark' of Continental witches, an insensitive point in the body produced by Satan as a sign of compact.) Normally an accused witch was searched carefully for any mole, spot or blemish that could be identified as her witch-mark, and, unsurprisingly, such a mark was often found.

Multiple trials were considerably less common in England than in mainland Europe, probably because of the absence of the notion of witches gathering in large sociable groups at the sabbats, and the non-employment of torture to extract from accused people the names of accomplices. The Church of England focused its attention primarily upon exorcists rather than witches, with the result that prosecutions for the misuse of magic had a wider base and more heterogeneous nature than their counterparts on the continent. Although, strictly speaking, acts of white witchcraft were subject to punishment by the secular courts, the 'cunning folk' who performed them ran a greater risk of being presented before ecclesiastical courts, which could impose a variety of penances. Most cases of witchcraft which came before the assizes or quarter sessions concerned more or less serious *maleficia*, as distinct from other brands of magic. The work of Ewen, Kittredge, Macfarlane and, most recently, Sharpe has shown that the later years of Elizabeth's reign marked the climax of witchcraft prosecutions at assizes and quarter sessions. In Essex,

which Macfarlane has studied in detail, the 1580s and 1590s saw the rate of indictments rise to its peak, and between 1560 and 1680 overall, 5 per cent of all criminal proceedings at Essex Assizes were for witchcraft – a high figure probably reflecting an unusual degree of concern in that county with witchcraft [95: *28–30*]. As Sharpe has pointed out, acquittals were relatively common in English trials for witchcraft, and while the number of executions for the crime in England as a whole is not known, owing to incomplete or missing court records, it is very unlikely to have much exceeded 500 [141: *112*]. (This is the figure independently arrived at by Sharpe and Larner; Macfarlane proposes an even lower total of just 300 deaths [95: *62*; 141: *125*].)

In strong contrast to England, Scotland – or, to be more precise, the lowland areas of Scotland – pursued witches with a ferocity scarcely surpassed in any Continental centre. In Scotland, as in Germany or France, the witch was regarded as a monstrous criminal who had committed the ultimate treason by rejecting God and entering into a compact with the Devil; consequently secular and religious authorities alike were keen to hunt her down. According to Larner's seminal and authoritative research, the bulk of prosecutions in Scotland occurred between 1590 and 1662, with peaks in 1590–91, 1597, 1629–30, 1649 and 1661–62 [87: *60*]. Fife and the Lothians were the most badly affected areas, while some centres of population, such as Prestonpans, Inverkeithing and, further south, Dumfries, repeatedly suffered witch scares. With a much smaller population than England's, Scotland nevertheless executed far more people for witchcraft: Larner estimates the figure at somewhere between 1000 and 1600 executions up until 1706 [87: *73*].

New England, it is interesting to note, had proportionately fewer executions for witchcraft than even Old England had. The famous panic at Salem, Massachusetts, in 1692, which resulted in 19 executions, has haunted the American consciousness ever since, but in fact was quite exceptional. Witch prosecution was not a feature of life in the New England colonies, and it is unlikely that the total number of executions for the offence was much above 30 [62: *235–42*].

(iii) Witch Prosecution: The Victims

Women were accused of witchcraft far more commonly than men, as they were held to be particularly susceptible to the wiles of the Devil. William Perkins, the author of the first full-scale English work directed against witches, published in London in 1608, declared that 'woman being the weaker sex is sooner entangled by the Devil's illusions with this damnable art than the man ... [and] in all ages ... the Devil hath more easily and oftener prevailed with woman than with man.' King James VI and I thought that there were 20 female witches to every male 'given to that craft'. Returning to biblical precedents, he attempted to justify his position through the claim that women were 'more easily ensnared because they are more frail than men' and because the Devil's seduction of Eve, the original embodiment of womanhood in the Garden of Eden, had made him 'the homelier with that sex' ever since [74: *43–4*]. The exact reasons why the stereotypical witch should be female remain elusive. To what extent misogyny, or at least a low estimate of women's power to resist evil, was responsible for stimulating the prosecution of women as witches is a matter which we shall investigate more fully in the next chapter. It may be that the mysteries of conception, child-bearing and menstruation had acquired a semi-occult status in the male consciousness. But in an age in which women's mental and moral instability, their insatiable lusts and their supposed position as 'the weaker vessel' were common themes, deeply embedded in almost every aspect of culture, we should not be unduly surprised to discover that in most parts of Europe the stereotypical witch was a woman, and usually an old and poor one.

Records suggest that in Europe, as a whole, about 80 per cent of trial defendants were women, though the ratio of women to men charged with the offence varied from place to place and often, too, in one place over time. Neglecting temporal variations, Table 1 presents the percentage of women among persons tried for witchcraft at a number of sample locations.

It can be seen from Table 1 that while in some places a far from negligible proportion of defendants were men, for the most part the stereotype of the female witch held up fairly well. The most striking exception to the general pattern is provided in the seventeenth-century Moscow trials analysed by Zguta, where two-thirds of

Table 1 The Proportion of Women among Defendants at Witchcraft Trials

Location	*Women tried (%)*	*Location*	*Women tried (%)*
Basel	95	Geneva	76
Essex	92	Franche-Comté	76
Namur (Belgium)	92	Saarland	72
S.W. Germany	82	Castile (Inquisition)	71
Dépt. du Nord	82	Freiburg (Switzerland)	64
Venice (Inquisition)	78	Waadtland (Switzerland)	58
Ostrobothnia (Finland)	78	Estonia	40
New England	78	Moscow (17th century)	33

Sources: [92, 107, 113, 116, 137, 169].

the defendants were men; here, clearly, there was no disposition to look on witchcraft as essentially a woman's crime.

In most of Europe, witches were not merely generally expected to be women: they were also thought most likely to be middle-aged or elderly. Defendants against witchcraft charges were typically over rather than under 50 years of age. Thus in Essex, women between 50 and 70 appear most commonly in court records, while Monter has shown that in the Geneva trials of 1571–72 the median age of the accused was 60 [95: *162*; 113: *122*]. An often noticed feature of the records is the large number of widows among the defendants; for example, in Neuchâtel 44 per cent, in Essex 42 per cent and in Toul (Lorraine) 58 per cent of accused women were widows. This high proportion of widows may to some extent indicate the increased chance that a solitary woman ran of being suspected of witchcraft, but it is also a reflection of the fact that male mortality rates were significantly higher than female [see 108: *47*], so that many women within the most likely age range for accusation had already outlived their husbands. Spinsters, another category of often solitary women, also appear with some frequency among defendants. It has been suggested [for instance, in 9: *138–9*; 107: *184–5*] that spinsters, like widows, were at risk partly because they appeared to offer a threat to the patriarchal family; but it should be noted that in early modern Europe as many as 15 per cent of women remained permanently unmarried [108: *70*], and there were therefore many spinsters in

most communities. Moreover, unmarried women, who had avoided the hazard and stress of multiple child-bearing, had a higher chance than married women of living to the age at which the danger of accusation became greatest.

Poverty was a further hallmark of the witch. Except during some of the large Continental panics when customary notions of who might be a witch tended to disintegrate, people accused of witchcraft came mainly from the lower socioeconomic groups. Moralists believed that those without wealth were the most likely to succumb to the devilish temptations of witchcraft, which offered them an irresistible prospect of avenging their wrongs, becoming rich and obtaining power over their neighbours. Interestingly, there is evidence that accused witches were less commonly at the bottom of the social heap than a little way above it; often they belonged to families that were on their way down through the social structure, and they may have embarrassed and annoyed their more successful neighbours by their complaints and demands for assistance [95, 150]. The typical witch was the wife or widow of an agricultural labourer or small tenant farmer, and she was well known for a quarrelsome and aggressive nature. In addition, in some parts of Europe that prosecuted witches with great vigour, particularly the Holy Roman Empire, various other kinds of low-status people at the margins of society and perceived as moral derelicts occasionally attracted accusations of witchcraft, such as thieves and highway robbers, fornicators and homosexuals. Evidently, the guiding thought here was that someone who was guilty of one gross moral crime might well be guilty of the grossest of all, and have made a compact with Satan.

In times of severe panic, however, the usual limitations could be breached, and all manner of men and women be accused of witchcraft, including high-ranking (though rarely noble) members of society. Where torture was used, as it commonly was, to force accused witches to provide the names of others who had been with them at the sabbat, a chain reaction was set in motion that could deliver into the hands of the witch-judges persons of considerable social prominence and respectability. Such was the terrible experience of the city of Ellwangen in southwestern Germany in 1611–12. Starting with a woman of 70 who was tortured into confessing to witchcraft, many people were condemned and executed after being forced into naming accomplices in a savage process

which reached further and further up the social ladder. Once some priests had been condemned, it was no longer clear who could and who could not be a witch; some people even seem to have made spontaneous confessions of their own guilt. In 1611 some 100 were executed, then a further 160 in the following year. A judge, who protested after his wife was accused and executed, was himself tortured and executed in November 1611. One observer commented in that year that if condemnations went on at the same rate, the city would soon be depopulated. After 1612, trials continued at a somewhat lower tempo until 1618, when they ceased. (For the panic at Ellwangen and others in southwestern Germany see [107].)

It is incontrovertible that the use of torture played a large role in the genesis and escalation of panics. Witchcraft being regarded as an essentially secret crime as well as a very serious one, authorities felt justified in employing the strappado, the heated chair, vices for the arms and legs, thumbscrews and other painful devices to uncover the truth. A sustained refusal to admit one's guilt normally led to the dropping of charges, but few were able to withstand severe and prolonged torture without confessing to what they thought their interrogators wanted to hear. A woman at Nördlingen who refused to confess through 56 sessions of torture perhaps set a record for endurance; happily, she was finally released at the insistence of the authorities at Ulm [90: *1087*]. Not so ultimately fortunate was a 57-year-old woman of Styria in 1673, who died insane after being forced to kneel on a sharp-pronged torture stool for 11 days and nights, with burning sulphur applied to her feet, in order to make her confess to a demonic pact [128: *32*]. The desperate plight of such victims is movingly expressed in a passage from a letter to his daughter which Johannes Junius, the former bürgermeister of Bamberg, smuggled out of his prison in that city after his arrest for witchcraft in 1628: 'Innocent have I come into prison, innocent have I been tortured, innocent must I die. For whoever comes into the witch prison must become a witch or be tortured until he invents something out of his head and – God pity him – bethinks him of something' [for the full text of the letter, see 109].

Sometimes the dissolution of the conventional notion of the witch as an elderly woman proceeded so far that even children were punished for witchcraft. Rather more commonly, children

accused other people of bewitching them, and there are well-known cases from several countries of prosecutions for witchcraft originating in the evidence of disturbed or attention-seeking children. But sometimes children became the objects rather than the initiators of accusations, or they incriminated themselves, perhaps unintentionally, by claiming that certain adults had led them into witchcraft. When children at Mohra in Sweden declared in the late 1660s that some women had taken them to the sabbat, their charges resulted not just in the burning of many women, but also in the execution of 15 boys aged over 16 and the whipping of 40 younger children [5: *207–8*]. Probably the most extreme example of children being punished for witchcraft is offered by the Würzburg scare of 1629. This was a particularly bad example of its species, claiming a total of 160 victims by the close of the year, but it began conventionally enough: only adults were executed in the first few burnings, and of these most were women. The pattern then changed dramatically, and for a time, children made up more than 60 per cent of the victims, though this fell back to 17 per cent at the end of the year; it is further noteworthy that in the later stages of this panic men came to outnumber women among the adults burned [107: *182*].

In most parts of Europe witches condemned to death were executed at the stake, though in England they were hanged. Jean Bodin recommended that witches, for the gravity of their offences, should be slowly roasted alive over a fire of green wood, but in practice such extreme rigour was uncommon, and many of the condemned were granted the mercy of strangulation before the fire was well alight. While some authorities took their stand on a reading of Exodus 22:18 (in the King James Bible, 'Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live' – though the sense of the Hebrew word translated as 'witch' is actually uncertain), some courts were inclined towards greater lenience. The rate of execution of those on trial tended to reach a peak during panics; at other times it was generally rather lower, and even during the panics themselves not everyone who was accused of witchcraft was necessarily brought to trial: Midelfort has discovered that during the panic at Mergentheim in southwestern Germany in 1628, only one-third of those denounced as witches were tried [107: *147*]. Table 2 shows the rates of execution of witchcraft defendants in a number of localities.

Table 2 The Percentage of Defendants at Witchcraft Trials Executed

Location	*Executed (%)*	*Location*	*Executed (%)*
Mergentheim (1628 panic)	93	Channel Islands	46
Pays de Vaud	90	Poland (1701–50)	46
German-speaking areas of Luxembourg	90	Walloon-speaking areas of Luxembourg	41
Neuchatel	63	Moscow (17th century)	32
Namur	54	Essex	26
Scotland	54	Geneva	21
Imperial Free Cities (average)	<50	Finland	16
Dépt. du Nord	49	England (Ewen's estimate)	15
Hungary	48	Poland (16th century)	4

Sources: [39, 92, 95, 107, 111, 116, 169].

Defendants found guilty, but escaping sentence of death, could be punished by imprisonment, flogging, fines or exile; the first of these was often equivalent to a death sentence given the deplorable state of prison conditions prevailing in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Acquittal rates varied greatly through space and time. Where torture was used ferociously, as at the height of many scares, acquittal was rare, though occasionally a defendant might be released where the evidence was deemed insufficient to establish a verdict, the court retaining the right to restart the trial if new facts came to light. In more normal circumstances of witch prosecution, acquittal was much less unusual. At Essex Assizes, 52 per cent of defendants were acquitted or had their cases dismissed, and a similar statistic is suggested by the limited information available about trials in seventeenth-century Moscow [95: *57*; 169: *1196*]. The acquittal rate at trials in the High Court of Scotland ran at around 50 per cent, and it could reach this figure in a locality in the final stages of a panic, as at Mergentheim in 1630–31 [87: *119*; 107: *149*]. Defendants' chances of acquittal naturally reached a maximum when the jurisdictions trying them or reviewing their cases became sceptical about the reality of the crime of witchcraft. In England, for instance, Sir John Holt, Chief Justice of the King's Bench from 1682 to 1710, acquitted all those accused of witchcraft who came before him – probably between 12 and 20 persons [82: *365*]. Given a continuing high rate of acquittal, the practice of prosecution

inevitably fell into a decline followed, after a greater or lesser interval, by the formal repeal of anti-witch legislation. Thus before the 1604 witchcraft statute was repealed in 1736, no witch trial had been held in England for 19 years, and no one had been executed as a witch for 43.

Elizabethan astrologer and magician John Dee, who was asked to name an astrologically auspicious day for the Queen's coronation, later journeyed to Prague to consult with the Emperor Rudolf II, a keen student of the occult sciences. Nor was it only secular rulers who exhibited a favourable interest in magic. Even popes, on occasion, relaxed their opposition to it. In 1493 Alexander VI absolved Pico della Mirandola from the condemnation of his views on magic issued by the preceding pope, Innocent VIII, while in the seventeenth century Pope Urban VIII seems, himself, to have practised high magic in the company of the philosopher and magus Tommaso Campanella [162: *206–7*].

However, magic involving the raising of evil spirits or the spirits of the dead continued to attract general disapproval, whatever its ends and whosoever its practitioner. Occasionally, a magician might be punished for attempting to raise bad demons, as was Edmund Hartley, executed in 1597, or Dr John Lambe, protegé of the Duke of Buckingham, who, despite the protection of a bodyguard, was cornered in a London street in 1628 and stoned to death by an angry mob; but it is unlikely that many felt much motivation to make such perilous and difficult experiments. While conjuring spirits was 'a fashionable temptation for undergraduates' at Oxford in the earlier seventeenth century [150: *268–9*], it was left mainly to such charlatans and showmen as the notorious Doctor Faustus to make large boasts of having spirits at their command [on Faustus and the Faust legend, see 23].

Yet if overtly demonic magic was rare, orthodox ecclesiastical opinion persisted in seeing the Devil's hand in magical operations in general, and urged their suppression. In reponse to pressure from both Roman Catholic and Protestant authorities, laws against magic were strengthened in many countries during the course of the sixteenth century, and white magic became a crime where hitherto it had not been one. In 1532 the Constitutio Criminalis Carolina, the law code of the Empire, regarded white magic as an offence, but not a capital one. The Saxon code of 1572 was harsher, laying down death as the penalty for white as

well as black witchcraft. But even where death or long terms of imprisonment were the statutory punishments for white forms of magic, the full rigour of the law was rarely applied, and Europe saw very few executions for white witchcraft [cf. 113: *171*]. In England, where death was the technical penalty after 1604 for those found guilty a second time of practising white magic, there is no evidence of harshness being the rule in practice, and cunning men and women ran a much greater risk of incurring light penalties in the Church courts than heavy ones in the secular [see 150: *292–5*].

3 The Dynamics of Witch Prosecution

(i) The Explanatory Task

There is a natural tendency, when contemplating the very real horrors of witch prosecution in Europe, to consider it to have been a monstrous aberration from the forward progress of Western civilisation, and an extraordinary collective departure from sanity. Phrases like 'witch-madness' (Lea) and 'witch-craze' (Trevor-Roper and, more recently, Barstow) come readily to the tongue, and have become firmly rooted in modern popular consciousness. In this way, the injustices and outrages of the past have often come to be equated with the social tensions – such as those that artificially limited the role of women and left them open to systematic abuse, and the racial stereotyping and dehumanisation of minority groups that resulted in the Nazi death camps and the 'ethnic cleansing' of the former Yugoslavia – which so blighted the course of the twentieth century [128: *3*]. Yet such responses, while completely understandable and laudable in their intent, actually hinder rather than help in our conception of the early modern preoccupation with witchcraft. Historians neglect at their peril the somewhat obvious, if troubling, fact that human beings at different times and places see the world in markedly different ways. The possibility remains, and demands our serious consideration, that the prosecution of witches was a rational activity given the complex of ideas and circumstances obtaining in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Most recent historians of witchcraft have been less concerned to pass adverse judgements on the intelligence or integrity of witch judges and prosecutors, than to analyse the social and intellectual conditions that provided the essential dynamic of prosecution

[26, 141]. There is a host of questions needing to be answered here. Why did the prosecution of witches reach a climax in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and what caused some areas of Europe to be more badly affected than others? Why were those prosecuted drawn mainly from the lower ranks of society, and why were most of these women? How important to the initiation, form and outcome of trials were ecclesiastical, legal and governmental institutions? What degree of popular support was there for prosecution? How significant in starting and sustaining prosecutions and panics were such socially disruptive forces as confessional strife, class tensions, wars, famines and plagues? To what extent did some people genuinely think of themselves as witches and attempt to practise black witchcraft, and what made them do so? These, and other, questions have received much attention in recent years, though many of the answers proposed have proved highly contentious.

If historians are still some way from consensus about the driving forces behind witch prosecution, the progress of research has at least made some once popular views increasingly untenable. It is, for instance, very unlikely that financial greed played much of a part in stimulating prosecutions, as the influential German scholar Soldan suggested at the end of the last century [145], and several noted subsequent writers have believed. It is true that in some places a convicted witch's possessions were subject to confiscation by the state or civic authorities, and that fees were payable to judges and other court officials, torturers and executioners; and occasionally, too, a professional witch-hunter like the notorious Balthasar Ross at Fulda was motivated by the hope of gain. However, on the whole accused witches were too poor to provide rich pickings, and those who accused them were not generally in any position to benefit from confiscations, though they might have to stand the high costs of the legal process. Even when in the course of panics wealthier persons came to be prosecuted, authorities seem to have been remarkably restrained in seizing their goods, and some cities that held panic trials rejected confiscation altogether [107: *165–77*; cf. 87: *115–16*; 100: *113*; 137: *81–9*].

Other casualties of recent scholarship are some highly speculative interpretations of witchcraft and its prosecution that have been shown to be wholly devoid of proper evidential backing.

One such is Jules Michelet's mid-nineteenth-century thesis that beleaguered peasants, in protest against repressive social conditions, formed a Devil-worshipping sect and celebrated black masses, thus inviting stern measures of control from the authorities [104]. Another, and even more discredited, interpretation is that of the Egyptologist Margaret Murray, who proposed, with staggering disregard of the requirements of proof, that witchcraft was the true religion of the people until after the Reformation, that the Roman fertility god Janus or Dianus was at the centre of this cult, and that the deaths of such figures as William Rufus and Joan of Arc were, in reality, ritual sacrifices in order to ensure the renewal of the crops [117]. The manipulation of evidence that underlies the fantastic structure of Murray's theory has been well exposed [in 30, 71, 72, 144], but this concept of the survival of an ancient fertility cult, ostensibly pagan and once universal throughout the continent of Europe, which continued to function as an underground tradition on the periphery of early modern societies, has recently found some support in the researches of Ginzburg and Behringer [61, 11]. However, despite their in-depth studies of peasant shamanism and the imagery of dreams, there is no concrete proof of a consistent survival of recognisably pagan beliefs and goddess worship from late antiquity. Moreover, rather than an attachment to a clearly articulated set of magical beliefs running counter to the dominant religious practices of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the defining characteristic revealed by the testimony of the southern European subsistence farmers and herdsmen quoted by these authorities was their unambiguous primary commitment to Christianity. Fragmentary survivals, or local cults, certainly did exist but these appear to have run parallel to the observance of Christian rites and liturgy. Ginzburg's peasant *benandanti*, who strove to save their crops in their sleep or in trance-like states, believed themselves to be fighting under the banner of Christ and actually sought to drive away the evil witches from their communities [61: *6*]. Believing themselves to be genuine and God-fearing Christians, those who were brought before the courts were bemused and appalled to be confronted with a catalogue of their 'errors' and branded as witches and devil worshippers. It was the preconceptions of their judges which brought about this

transformation, and modern historians should be wary of committing the same fundamental mistakes.

A view along different lines to that of Murray, but likewise based on a cavalier and partial reading of the evidence, is that originally tendered quite recently by Ehrenreich and English, who regarded the suppression of witchcraft as, above all, the male suppression of women healers [42]. It was women, they argued, who had traditionally been healers among the peasantry; but Church and state increasingly held that only men should be allowed to practise medicine, and accordingly took extreme measures to extirpate their female rivals. Sabbats, at which hundreds or thousands of women met, were real enough, but were merely 'occasions for trading herbal lore and passing on the news' [42: *28*]. This theory, while far from unreasonable in claiming that misogyny played a role in the prosecution of witchcraft, falls down on a number of serious counts. It cannot explain why the pressure for prosecution often came from the peasantry itself, and it is silent about the fear of *maleficium* which is well documented by the surviving records of peasant testimony at trials; nor can it account for the prosecution of a substantial minority of men as witches. Like Michelet and Murray, Ehrenreich and English have tailored the evidence to fit their favoured theory.

Fortunately, there have been several more illuminating theories about the dynamics of witch prosecution. Some of these have been delivered in the course of regional studies of witchcraft, and offer suggestions as to why patterns of prosecution varied from place to place – why, for instance, some areas saw epidemics of witch-hunting whereas others experienced endemic prosecution, but few or no panics. A problem with some of the proffered explanations is that they display insufficient sensitivity to the distinction between the intended and the non-intended effects of prosecution, with the result that they leave the motives that underlay it unclear. It may be true, for example, that a community that prosecutes witches in its midst clarifies and reinforces its moral boundaries, by exhibiting in a singularly dramatic manner what it considers to be unacceptably deviant behaviour; and a community which behaves in this way may thereby achieve a stronger sense of its own identity [13, 44]. Yet it does not follow that an intention to attain this end, socially beneficial though it may be, provided the conscious motive for prosecuting witches – the peasant who

accused a woman of maleficent sorcery against him, or the judge who tried her for illicit dealings with the devil, were probably thinking of other things than the improved definition of their community's moral norms.

A possible counter to this response is to suggest that the systems of ideas on which both peasant and judge drew may themselves have been created as a result of the society's need to clarify its own identity by defining its moral limits. But such claims are notoriously difficult to evaluate, and an adequate investigation of the view that belief systems arise primarily to serve social imperatives would take us far from our present subject into deep and controversial areas of sociological theory. It is a reasonable principle, however, that authors who offer hypotheses about the effects of witch prosecution in sustaining, reinforcing or assisting in the evolution of social rules or arrangements are not entitled to assume without argument that such effects were intended ones, and that their attainment provided the motivation for prosecution. Those who claim to explain the dynamics of prosecution by reference to certain social functions it allegedly served need to show in detail how such social objectives could become translated into the ostensibly quite different rationales which peasants, prosecutors and judges would themselves have offered for their activities.

(ii) Some Explanations of Witch Prosecution

Among the numerous approaches to explaining the stimulating conditions of witch prosecution, four merit some special consideration here.

(a) Witch Prosecution as a Reaction to Disaster

Few if any writers have argued that all prosecutions for witchcraft are to be seen as responses to disaster: the implausibility of such a thesis is clear from the experience of England and other regions, which had trials in periods entirely free from war, famine or pestilence. Yet historians have sometimes been struck by the rough coincidence between energetic phases of witch prosecution and

natural or man-made disasters. We have already noted that peaks of prosecution were reached in the last years of the sixteenth century, the period around, and especially just before, 1630, and the 1660s. It is therefore interesting to note that the 1590s and 1620s saw particularly poor harvests, that bubonic plague made a devastating assault on Europe in the years about 1630, and that war, and the fear of war, troubled the Continent in the last decade of the sixteenth century, the 1620s and the 1660s. Intriguing though these simultaneities are, it has not proved possible to discern any significant causal relationships between disaster and witch prosecution. Occasionally, it is true, sorcery was blamed for the incidence of plague; Geneva executed as many as 80 people in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries for spreading plague by this method [113: *44–9*]. To blame a witch for the onset of a sickness is to follow a pattern familiar to anthropologists, who have recognised the function of witch beliefs in providing an explanation of evil and suffering [see, for instance, 99: *ch. 1*]. But there are limits to the responsibility for trouble which can reasonably be placed on witches, and there is no evidence that people looked to witchcraft to explain a rise in the price of bread, or the arrival of an invading army.

Furthermore, a careful scrutiny of the records reveals that the coincidence of disaster and the busiest phases of witch-hunting is not quite as close as it first appears. It may be, as Midelfort suggests, that in southwestern Germany war and famine had a destabilising effect that encouraged witch prosecution in the 1620s; but the same author also notes that in the 1630s witch-hunting was declining here, though that decade saw the worst onslaughts on this region of the Thirty Years' War, coupled with plague, famine and economic hardship [107: *121–5*; cf. 137: *89–95*]. Franche-Comté, similarly, had very few trials in the years 1635–44 when it was most badly affected by the war: 'peacetime pursuits like witch-hunting', Monter has remarked, decreased greatly here, as elsewhere in the Empire, during the worst war years [113: *81*]. The case for any direct causal link between disaster and witch prosecution therefore remains weak; major catastrophes may sometimes have exacerbated the kinds of socially tense situations within which accusations of witchcraft were found convincing, but there is insufficient basis for claiming that witch prosecution was a method of responding to disaster. This said, the *fear* of war or

crop failure was often as potent as the reality. At times of social collapse it is survival rather than scapegoating which takes precedence. Thus it is conceivable that the after-shocks of great upheavals, or the desire to ensure that they do not happen again, are every bit as important in defining periods of witch prosecution as the events themselves. Subsistence economies and small homogeneous communities face a problem in coping with misfits or subcultures. Where famine is an ever-present reality, social cohesion is at a premium and is likely to take priority over individual human rights. In this context, allegations of tampering with the weather or the health of livestock may assume a threatening resonance which they would not have otherwise enjoyed, and command more serious attention in the wider community, with the corresponding effect that elites in both church and state might have been far more willing to acquiesce in the prosecution of the crime.

(b) Witch Prosecution as a Weapon of Confessional Conflict

A different explanation of prosecution is that it was above all a device employed by parties to the savage confessional disputes of the early modern era for quelling religious opposition. The chief protagonist for this view is Trevor-Roper, who, in a work which did more than any other to bring the subject of witchcraft into the sphere of scholarly historical debate, has argued that both Roman Catholics and Protestants found it useful to tar their opponents with the brush of witchcraft in order to demonstrate their own godliness. In particular: 'Whenever the missionaries of one Church are recovering a society from their rivals, "witchcraft" is discovered beneath the thin surface of "heresy"' [155: *119*]. To be a Protestant in a Roman Catholic territory, or a Roman Catholic in a Protestant one, placed the individual at risk of being charged with witchcraft in the no-holds-barred struggle between the opposed confessions.

This view has found few supporters. While, as we shall see, there are some grounds for associating witch prosecution with the concerns of church and state to establish their authority over the populace, there is an absence of evidence that Roman Catholics normally prosecuted Protestants, or conversely. It cannot be denied that the fracturing of religious unity in the West after 1517

ushered in a long period of doctrinal uncertainty and confessional strife; and it is certainly conceivable that prosecution for theological dissent could on occasions have played the role ascribed to it by Trevor-Roper, but there is no evidence that it always, or even often, did so. Trevor-Roper notes in support of his thesis that witch prosecution increased in the Empire in the late 1620s, coincidentally with the ascendancy of the Roman Catholic forces; yet the records provide no basis for concluding that the prosecutions of those years constituted a direct or conscious attack on Protestantism [155: *82–3*; cf. 137: *93–4*]. Witch trials happened in many places where there was no, or little, interdenominational strife, and where the dominance of one church was stable and assured (e.g., Essex, lowland Scotland, Geneva, Venice and the Spanish Basque country). Cases are even known, for instance in the Empire, of adjacent Roman Catholic and Protestant lands exchanging information about putative local witchcraft activities, and extraditing fugitives who had crossed the border to avoid standing trial in their own country. Similarly, the absence of serious and prolonged bouts of witchcraft prosecution in territories at the opposite ends of the doctrinal spectrum (e.g. Ireland and Holland) would seem to demonstrate that this was not the exclusive preserve of either Roman Catholic or Protestant creeds. Both faiths developed their demonological priorities along different lines, which reflected the importance they accorded to different readings of Christian liturgy and the orders of service. Thus, while the role or the diabolical perversion of the mass figured strongly in Roman Catholic thought, it was the covenant or demonic pact which was central to its Protestant counterpart. The importance of the Reformation, therefore, lies in its introduction of doubt, conflict and 'grey areas' into mainstream Christian theology, which would seem to be fully born out by Behringer's work on Counter-Reformation Bavaria [10]. The Wars of Religion also helped to establish the conditions in which persecution might take root: destruction, despair and political uncertainty (not to mention the higher incidence of plague and disease which often came in their wake). By producing a climate ripe for already existing tensions to flourish, they were a catalyst rather than the cause of renewed witch hunts.

The final significant flaw in the Trevor-Roper thesis is that it ignores the fact that many prosecutions were stimulated not by

religious or secular authorities, but by popular demands for action against maleficent magic. The peasant who accused an old woman of harming him by witchcraft was not engaged in the business of confessional strife, and can have cared little to what religious denomination his alleged witch belonged.

(c) Functional Explanations

Some historians, inspired by work in anthropology, have sought to throw new light on European witch prosecution by identifying the social functions that it played in the communities in which it occurred. When offered as explanations of why witch prosecution took place, views on its social benefits face, as we have seen, the task of showing that the achievement of such benefits was really a motivating objective, and not merely a fortuitous consequence of prosecution. Functional explanations of witch prosecution in Europe are most convincing when they relate prosecution to social or psychological needs of a sort that could hardly have been better satisfied by other means, and that can therefore with some plausibility be regarded as among its stimulating conditions.

Fieldwork in twentieth-century non-Western societies has indicated that witchcraft accusations can sometimes be instrumental in releasing dangerous social tensions, or facilitating the ending of personal relationships which have, for some reason or other, become insupportable. Mayer has suggested that accusations often arise when people find that they ought to feel well disposed to others but do not, and require a means of breaking an unbearable relationship [103: *62–3*]. Kluckhohn's researches among the Navaho Indians show that the making of witchcraft allegations can serve to crystallise, and so release, a variety of social anxieties and uncertainties, and that the very threat of accusation can play a regulatory role, by keeping 'agitators' under control, or by inhibiting people from trying to become too wealthy at the expense of their neighbours [83: *255–7*]. Even the fear of witchcraft can play a useful role in some settings. The worry that a neglected old person may take revenge by sorcery may secure him, or her, better care and attention in many societies. Among the Effutu of Ghana, women often accuse themselves of witchcraft in order, apparently, to gain greater respect from their communities [52: *132–9*].

It is an intrinsically cogent hypothesis that witchcraft lore and witchcraft accusations sometimes served similar functions on the European scene. The work of Thomas and Macfarlane on English witchcraft has been important in revealing the stresses and anxieties at village level which typically underlay the making of accusations [150, 95]. Those who invited the charge were generally unpopular on account of their loud and aggressive natures, their inability to get on with their neighbours, and their constant begging – in short, they were the kind of people with whom the average villager would seek to have as little to do as possible. The breaking point in relations with such folk often seems to have been reached when they had demanded, and been refused, charity, and had gone away cursing. In these circumstances there was probably often a very real conviction that any misfortune subsequently occurring to the objects of their anger was due to their witchcraft, though Thomas and Macfarlane have also suggested that those with a guilty conscience for refusing assistance may often have sought relief by trying to convince themselves that the refused beggar was a wicked witch, unworthy of charity [150: *673–4*; 95: *196*]. When in 1645 Mary Edwards of Framlingham, Suffolk, asked Marianne May for some milk and was given less than she wanted, she departed muttering; later a child of the house became lame and died. Mary Edwards was charged with murdering him by witchcraft. Similarly, Emma Gaskin of Newcastle-upon-Tyne in 1667 was refused charity by the maid of Margaret Sherburne, and expressed the wish that 'either she would break her neck or hang herself before night'. Unfortunately for Emma Gaskin, the maid was seized that night with fits, and had a vision of the beggar woman going out through the door – a classic illustration of bad conscience leading to a witchcraft accusation [47: *287, 403*].

Thomas and Macfarlane think that such accusations assisted the transition from a state of society in which neighbourly values were highly ranked, to one in which the dispensation of charity became more institutionalised and impersonal, and individual begging grew to be frowned upon [150: *672ff*; 95: *chs. 11, 16*]. Even if the making of accusations did, in fact, perform this function, it is hard to establish that this was its underlying purpose; to show that witch prosecution occurred mainly in order to promote a certain kind of social change, we would have to show that in the absence

of that dynamic, there would have been no (or much less) prosecution. Besides the general difficulties involved in proving such counterfactual conditionals, there are numerous examples of accusation that do not fit the pattern regarded by Thomas and Macfarlane as normal, and which have no obvious bearing on any processes of social change. In a period when people looked for personal explanations of accident or illness (as many still do in non-Western cultures), it was natural to seek for a witch when trouble arose. When John Soam's harvesting cart overturned two or three times on the same day in 1664 as it had collided with the window of Rose Cullender's house, Soam suspected Cullender of bewitching it in a spirit of revenge. In like manner, Richard Edwardes of Suffolk in 1644 lost a child and two cows by mysterious illnesses, and inferred that they had died by the black arts of two women, Anne Leach and Elizabeth Gooding, who dwelt near the places where the illnesses struck [47: *274, 351*]. Such cases as these were common, and show that by no means all accusations arose from circumstances in which charity had been requested and refused.

The ideas of writers like Thomas and Macfarlane, and the anthropological models that they have employed, have recently been re-examined and challenged upon a number of counts [see 8]. The collective, rather than the individual, experience of witchcraft is now more strongly emphasised, while explanations based upon class analysis and the struggles between different sections of society have fallen from academic fashion and favour. Karlsen has suggested that in trying to pinpoint those elements which opened up the accused to prosecution, Thomas and those who followed his interpretative lead almost appeared to excuse the authorities and to make the witch culpable in her plight [76]. However, if we have accepted the case for a level of rationality underpinning the witchcraft beliefs of the judiciary and social elites, we need also to recognise the equally – if not more – rational basis on which these beliefs operated within popular culture. Europe's peasantry were, for the most part, denied any form of social and economic power, and language remained for them the primary outlet for the expression of their discontent. Appeals to an authority which was higher than their earthly masters (temporal or spiritual) – to God himself, but also to an array of saints, spirits and other helpful intermediaries, which

could conceivably include imps and demons – carried with it the possibility of redress, and also the circumvention of existing man-made power structures. Thus, the curse or whispered appeal for other-world or demonic assistance afforded, for the physically weak and the economically disadvantaged, a defence or a counter against their masters which otherwise would have been absent. In this context, the weapon was the word, which could be used to send warning signals to those in power aimed at moderating their behaviour, and at securing or renegotiating their provision of charity. Rather than casting the witch figure as a helpless victim, worthy only of our pity, the anthropological approach charted by Thomas and Macfarlane shows the accused as a far more vigorous, defiant and altogether more calculating individual. While some of their emphases may be questioned, their work has been salutary in directing historians' attention to a hitherto somewhat neglected topic, the popular experience of witchcraft and the role of the lower orders, and of the poor, in particular, in stimulating prosecutions. Granted the considerable difficulties in the way of recovering the nature and content of popular consciousness, the drives, ambitions, hopes, fears and anxieties of ordinary folk in the early modern period (for peasants do not write books), the Thomas-Macfarlane approach provides a useful reminder that witch prosecution was not simply the preserve of the elite, literate classes. The reconstruction of the psychology of the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century peasantry, while it will inevitably remain to a degree tentative and impressionistic, drawing upon such intangibles as oral culture, remains an indispensable ingredient in a general theory of European witchcraft.

Functional accounts which represent witchcraft accusation as aiding in the readjustment of relationships, the releasing of anxieties, or the regulation of social positions, show that accusation could have positive benefits for a community, however dire its effects on the unfortunate accused. Nevertheless, much witch prosecution in Europe was evidently quite dysfunctional: the witch scares which beset many localities in Continental Europe and Scotland were socially damaging not just in causing the deaths of many innocent people, but also by creating extensive public fear and mistrust. A reasonably typical example is the scare at North Berwick near Edinburgh in 1590/91. This began when

Geillis Duncane, a servant girl, was suspected of witchcraft, and under torture implicated a large number of people as being associated with her in a covert society of witches. Most of those arrested came from the outwardly respectable Presbyterian lower-middle classes, and included among their number some women of hitherto unblemished reputation, a schoolteacher named John Fian and Robert Grierson, a sea captain. However, as the investigation widened with 'the sniffing out of them that were guilty', women of superior education and high-ranking family, such as Euphemia Macalzean, the daughter of Judge Lord Clifton-Hall, and Barbara Napier, the wife of a burgess of Edinburgh, were also arraigned for trial, while Francis, Earl of Bothwell, a powerful and turbulent nobleman and cousin to the King, was named as the ringleader in their plots. In the course of the interrogations, fantastic tales emerged of three or more organised covens working together to prevent the marriage of King James VI and I and to pull him down from his throne. The witches confessed that they had danced with the Devil in the churchyard at North Berwick, and that they had thrown cats bound to the severed joints of corpses into the sea in an attempt to raise storms to drown the King and his new Danish bride during their voyage back from the Continent. More than a hundred suspects were examined and although not all of their fates are known, it is clear that several were executed, while Bothwell, who was arrested but escaped from his imprisonment, was forced to flee abroad to exile and eventual political obscurity [27, 166]. Here an affair which was originally the product of local tensions and a reaction against the overwhelming and restrictive power of the Kirk quickly transformed itself into a major plot against the state, and helped to bring down a significant national statesman. It may be concluded that whatever functional roles witch prosecution could sometimes play, it was patently an activity that could get out of hand when taken up enthusiastically by a literate elite armed with the stereotype of the Devil-serving witch, and willing to employ torture to obtain confessions.

(d) Witchcraft and Social Control

Some writers, impressed by the part played by religious and secular authorities in the staging of witch trials, have argued that

witch prosecution was largely an instrument of social control, a method employed by the powerful to extend or consolidate their hold over the weak. In a Europe racked by religious disagreements which often spilled over into war, the preservation of popular obedience and loyalty was of urgent concern to states and churches alike, and no measures were spared to secure a religious conformity that seemed to many to be an essential bulwark against social disintegration. Secular rulers found themselves invariably drawn into the contending churches' struggle for dominance, and lent their weight to energetic campaigns to instruct the populace in the principles of the church of their choice, and to suppress, by violence if necessary, anything that smacked of deviation from the prescribed norm. In such circumstances, the practice of village witchcraft, which had for centuries seemed too insignificant a phenomenon to merit much official concern, came to appear as an unsightly and intolerable blemish on the landscape of rural life, and a clear target for extirpation.

This view of witch prosecution has been suggested by, among others, Larner and Elliott [87: *195–6*; 43: *94*], but it has been developed in most depth by Muchembled [115]. Following Delumeau, who had argued that the true Christianisation of the European peasantry did not antedate the Reformation and Counter-Reformation [36; cf. 150: *chs. 2, 3*], Muchembled describes the suppression of sorcery as one aspect of a vigorous programme by the authorities to discipline the faith and morals of the people into conformity with a strict Christian blueprint [115: *208ff*]. The 'submission of souls' aimed at in this campaign was a step towards the centralisation of power and absolutism, and where resisted, or felt to be progressing too tardily, was liable to be pressed forward by drastic means. At local level, Muchembled agrees that pressures such as those described by Thomas and Macfarlane could sometimes stimulate accusations of witchcraft; but he suggests that better-off villagers who were shrewd enough to realise in which way the wind was blowing would denounce witches in order to demonstrate their allegiance to the officially approved virtues of their society, and thus win favour from the authorities [115: *327*].

There is much that seems plausible about this theory of witch prosecution. The rival churches' struggle for the hearts and

minds of the people, and their insistent claims to be the sole avenue to salvation, sustained a climate in which any dubious dealings in the occult would have been viewed with disfavour. Moreover secular rulers, whether as sincere adherents to a particular church, or as opportunists with an eye to the political advantage to be derived from their subjects being of a single religious persuasion, were naturally keen to assist in the imposition of conformity. Yet there are problems with the social control theory as it stands. It does not, for one thing, cope well with the fact that magic of the white variety was, in general, dealt with in a relatively mild way by the authorities. Nor does it make it easy to understand why witchcraft had not attracted much more repressive treatment during the Middle Ages, when the medieval Church had hotly and effectively pursued religious deviation on many fronts, with or without the active co-operation of secular princes. If conformity and obedience mattered to the ecclesiastical authorities as much in the medieval as in the early modern era, why had village witchcraft been largely left alone for many centuries? A likely answer to both these difficulties is that it was only at the close of the Middle Ages that the horrendous stereotype of the Devil-worshipping, sabbat-attending witch appeared, and that it was witchcraft conceived in this new way that attracted the strong repressive measures. However, Muchembled is prevented from making this response by his belief that it was traditional witchcraft, rather than demonic witchcraft, that was actually under attack in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and by his apparent reluctance to ascribe to the authorities a sincere belief in the reality of the demonised witch. In his view, the claim to be engaged in a battle with the kingdom of Satan was no more than a device employed by the authorities for reinforcing religious conformity and absolute government [see, e.g., 115: *308*].

Muchembled, in fact, gives the impression that witch prosecution was a thoroughly cynical and insincere affair, whether promoted by the religious and secular elites eager to control the bodies and souls of the populace, or by the richer peasants concerned to establish their economic and social dominance over their poorer neighbours. Not only does this perspective leave it obscure why witch trials should be specifically an early modern phenomenon: it also paints an excessively black portrait of human

nature not supported by the historical evidence. The surviving records suggest that people did not prosecute others as witches without really believing in witchcraft. There are other theories which share Muchembled's pessimism: Trevor-Roper's, for instance, or the view that witches were prosecuted for financial gain or to boost the self-importance of the local officials, or Harris's extreme form of the social control theory that portrays witches as nothing other than scapegoats selected by a corrupt clergy and a rapacious nobility to take the blame for their own misdeeds and depredations, while the real offenders posed as the indispensable defenders of the popular interest [66]. These variants on the theme find a powerful echo in recent work by feminist scholars who have sought to locate the origins of the witch hunts in a deep-seated male animus towards expressions of female independence or self-sufficiency [9, 41]. Common to all these explanations is a preparedness to discount the avowed justifications of those responsible for prosecutions, and to allege darker, more dishonourable motives, cynically pursued.

It is possible, of course, that an individual's motives for accusing someone of witchcraft were not always as pure and just as he believed. Psychologists are aware that people's real motives are not always what they think they are and that someone can be driven by unconscious or subconscious desires that an internal censoring mechanism prevents him from admitting even to himself. Some functional explanations seem, indeed, committed to acknowledging the existence of such unrecognised grounds of action. Thomas and Macfarlane's suggestion that a charge of witchcraft might be levelled against an importunate beggar by someone with a guilty conscience to discharge after he has refused her charity falls into this category. Similarly, Boyer and Nissenbaum's interpretation of the Salem witch accusations as arising from the resentment against the more fortunate members of that community felt by some of the less successful, ascribes disgraceful motivations to those who laid the charges which they were unlikely to have consciously entertained [16]. The accounts of endemic possessions in French convents seem to speak clearly, to modern sensibilities, of systematic, institutionalised sexual repression, while elite males may have been moved by an unacknowledged sense of disgust when confronted by destitute and wanton old women, who seemed to represent a clear inversion of

the feminine role within the 'natural' order of society. Yet such explanations do not imply that witch prosecution was a dishonest exercise pursued by people who exploited the existence of beliefs they did not personally share. Rather, they suggest that genuine beliefs were capable on occasion of being utilised in the service of ulterior motives by persons who were unaware of the element of self-deception involved. Even so, such individuals would still have been sincere in the accusations they made; but their wish to find the charges plausible no doubt assisted their ability to do so. It is important to see that admitting that witch prosecution may sometimes have had such grounds is very different from asserting that it was invariably the product of bald self-interest, insincerely masquerading as piety or public concern.

(iii) The Genuineness of Belief

It may be because witch beliefs are no longer generally held to be possible for educated Westerners that some historians have tended to underrate their role in stimulating prosecution in early modern Europe, and have sought to explain it instead in terms of less time-bound, and more universal reasons for human behaviour. Yet most educated people in the sixteenth, and for much of the seventeenth, century did believe in demons and sorcery, which they thought to be well attested by scripture and the most prestigious ancient writers. Bodin was particularly impressed by the fact that poor and ignorant people accused of magical practices confessed to performing the same sorts of rite, and uttering the same kinds of incantation, as were reported by Plutarch, Herodotus, Philostratus and other classical authors whom they could not have known. It seemed, therefore, that Satan in all ages had incited men to dishonour God, to harm their neighbours and to damn themselves by engaging in anti-social activities and abominable practices. Pious Christians needed to maintain constant vigilance against the Devil's recruitment of new allies, and to check his formation of witch sects, which grew like cancers in the hearts of communities.

That the ostensible motives for trying witches were real ones is a virtually inescapable conclusion from a scrutiny of the more detailed trial records. In this connection Delcambre's studies of the

psychology of judges and suspects in the Lorraine trials are of considerable interest [34, 35]. The judges in the province of Lorraine appear to have been men of high principle, motivated by a sincere desire for the spiritual welfare of the accused, and willing to use torture partly, at least, from a conviction that by confessing, a witch took the first step on the road to repentance and salvation. These judges believed that they were 'performing a duty, not only of justice and public good, but also of charity and brotherly correction' [35: *95*]. The accused individuals who listened to their sermon-like exhortations to confess and repent were of mixed character. Many were people of bad reputation, and some seem to have taken the opportunity to denounce enemies and rivals, involving them in their own destruction.

However, an interesting category of suspects made voluntary confessions of witchcraft, while others apparently came to believe that they were witches in the course of the judicial process, possibly persuaded by the homiletic style of the judges and the influence of their surroundings; in some particularly striking cases, suspects who had successfully withstood torture without confessing owned to being witches afterwards. While most of the accused would probably not have confessed had they not been tortured, several seem to have believed sincerely in their guilt, beseeching their judges to pray for their souls, and thanking them for the trouble they had taken in trying them. Though this may reflect no more than a common desire to please those in authority, to conform to established social norms by giving the answers required of them and, in extreme circumstances, of even identifying with their persecutors, there would seem to be little doubt that the defendants at the trials were operating on the same broad acceptance of the possibility and, indeed, of the reality of magical agency in human affairs. In Lorraine, then, a belief in the reality of witchcraft was critical to sustaining the momentum of the trials [17, 18]. There is no reason to think that Lorraine was atypical in these respects, as the trial records from the German pocket states and the Inquisitions of Italy and Spain display markedly similar traits. Learned and unlearned people normally had different grounds for concern about witchcraft: the peasantry, small-scale farmers and artisans were most worried by witches' maleficent magic, the educated classes by their relations with the Devil, though there is evidence that learned ideas could

sometimes percolate through to the popular consciousness, and elements of the learned interpretation become incorporated in the popular view [cf. 60, 61]. What all classes shared was a belief that witches existed, detestable and threatening creatures bent on harm and full of hatred for decent people. When pressure for witch trials came from both above and below, as it often did, the results were inevitably deadly.

Once the genuineness of belief is properly recognised, it becomes easier to explain why witch trials were a phenomenon of early modern rather than of medieval times. We have seen that the stereotype of the demonic witch was a product of the late Middle Ages, and that it involved the notion of her flying by night to meet with others of her kind at great assemblies presided over by the Devil. But only when such a stereotype was in being did it make sense to worry about witchcraft as an alternative, anti-Christian religion. The medieval Church believed in the existence of white and black sorcery, but it did not perceive this as a threat to its own position because it did not see this traditional witchcraft in terms of an organised, pernicious and violently anti-Christian sect. A conspiracy of flying witches, acting under the orders of Satan and dedicated to the hurt and harassment of the Christian flock, presented a challenge of an altogether different magnitude. The religious authorities of the early modern period, while they disagreed about many things, were at least unanimous about the need to respond to this Satanic threat with urgency, and secular powers gladly assisted in the suppression of a sect believed to delight in doing what harm it could to civil society.

To view the prosecution of witches as a form of social control is therefore to this extent, at least, correct: religious and secular leaders perceived organised, demonic witchcraft as a threat to their own authority over the people, and took stern measures in order to protect their positions. But the mistake lies in thinking that states and churches consciously utilised witch prosecution, in the first instance, as a cynical and surgical device for retaining their control over a rapidly changing society. Instead, they promoted the prosecution of witches because they sincerely believed that only by asserting their power in this way could they protect religion and the existing social structures from the destructive onslaughts of the great enemy of God and mankind. The peril of witchcraft could be

kept at bay only if the people were maintained in their allegiance to true religion and state authority; and there could be no compromise in the power struggle to be waged against the wily and resourceful master of the witches.

Countries such as England and Russia, in which the fully developed concept of the demonic witch obtained no firm rooting, were spared the worst witch-hunting frenzies that happened in places where witches were held to be a Devil-led sect. Even so, any state which gave legal recognition to the notion of the demonic pact, as England and Russia did, could hardly escape altogether from what Larner has described as ripples from the European cataclysm [87: *22*]. All over Europe beliefs in the Devil and his dealings with witches gave rise to new legal machinery for responding to the perceived threat. In many places witchcraft was treated as a *crimen exceptum*: that is, as a crime tried according to a modified procedure that permitted torture to extract confessions, and accepted evidence from persons not normally deemed suitable to testify before a court of law [88]. Furthermore, the disappearance from all jurisdictions by early modern times of the ancient talion, which involved an accuser who failed to prove his charge suffering the same penalty as the accused would have suffered if found guilty, made it much safer to level charges, such as that of witchcraft, that were difficult to prove by normal means of evidence [on the talion see 30: *161–3*].

Any legal system reflects the sense of reality of its operators. In early modern Europe, courts were able to find people guilty of witchcraft because the law-makers and judges firmly believed in the existence of witches. Belief systems are anchored in time, and are the products of the general intellectual, social and cultural features of the societies which give birth to them. To divorce them from their particular circumstances renders analysis of them, and of the close parallels extrapolatable from them, meaningless and often grossly misleading. However, the concept of a recognisable, if covert, 'enemy within' – a minority or subculture which has infiltrated the wider civil society with the aim of corrupting and destroying it – is a common and potent fear, most readily sustained by people who live in a period of insecurity or rapid transition, in which the reassuring solidity of the familiar social or cultural institutions seems under threat. Such was the

period of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, with their religious and political upheavals, the threat of sudden and unpredictable famines and the suffering wrought upon the civilian population by the advent of total war. Such, too, has been the twentieth century, which has seen many people in supposedly rational, literate and highly urbanised societies afflicted in a similar manner with groundless fears of the subversive activities of the Communist, the Gypsy or the Jew. 'He will stop at nothing. His utterly low-down conduct is so appalling that one really cannot be surprised if in the imagination of our people [he] is pictured as the incarnation of Satan and the symbol of evil.' That is not Bodin or Remy or the authors of the *Malleus Maleficarum* talking about the Devil-serving witch, though it is a description in their vein: it is, rather, Adolf Hitler, in *Mein Kampf*, presenting his conception of the Jew. *Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose.*

(iv) Women as Witches

Women formed, as we saw, some 80 per cent of the defendants at witch trials. The reasons behind the preponderance of women among those accused of the crime has, since the late 1960s, increasingly come to the fore in academic debate as gender studies and a feminist critique of history have developed and flourished. The debt owed to feminist writers for pioneering new modes of enquiry and opening up broad new interpretative perspectives on the past is very great: yet while their methods and use of terms have passed into the mainstream, a large gulf still separates the verdicts of those writers who have approached witchcraft from a predominantly historical or anthropological background, and those who have conceived of it primarily in relation to the wider pattern of gender and cultural studies. As a result, writers using the same basic source materials have come to very different conclusions about the nature, motivation and extent of the witch hunts.

If Great Britain and Germany have become the main centres for historical research into trial records and the social underpinnings of witch belief, then the USA has been chiefly instrumental in

promoting a radical feminist critique of the rationale behind the prosecutions. In this version of events, the witch hunts were the product of a concerted and bloody campaign by men to break the spirit and independence of women and to drive them from those spheres of economic and social life in which they had been influential, ultimately relegating them to a position of mute dependency and domestic labour [9, 32, 41, 42]. The witch is now seen as a proto-feminist figure, a woman steeped in the traditional women's arts of healing and midwifery, who counsels and protects her sisters from misfortune, and ultimately leads the resistance movement against the encroachment of male power and influence into these spheres. The witch hunts are the final cataclysmic events which mark the destruction of the 'Old Religion' of goddess worship and the triumph of a particular brutal brand of muscular Christianity. Crucial to this interpretation is an explicitly drawn parallel with the Holocaust, with a figure of some nine million deaths (eerily reminiscent of the combined number of Jews, Soviet and Polish citizens murdered by the Nazis in the death camps) being advanced for those condemned by the Europe-wide tribunals [9: *21*; 41: *ch. 7*]. The woman, like the Jew, is a consistent victim of history and as much deserving of our respect and pity as any of those who suffered in the gas chambers of Treblinka, or who fell in the defence of the Warsaw Ghetto. Indeed, Dworkin even goes so far as to coin the term 'gynocide' to describe the outcome of the witch trials and the pathological male hatred of the female which inspired them [41: *ch. 7*].

However, the equation of witch prosecution with the Holocaust is both tendentious and misleading, while the vast over-inflation of the numbers of women condemned for witchcraft and the tendency to extrapolate wildly from the discredited thesis of Murray, has tended to obscure and to undermine the more pertinent contributions of feminist critics and scholars to the debate. Yet the undeniable fact remains, and needs explanation, that women bore the brunt of witchcraft prosecutions and suffered disproportionately for the crime. It is not enough simply to say that more women than men were tried for witchcraft because the stereotypical witch was a woman; the question is why people found it more natural to associate witchcraft with the female than with the male sex, and to accept the stereotype as realistic.

It has been suggested that clerical celibacy lay at the roots of witch hunting. Trethowan has argued that 'sexual desires when inhibited have a strong and sadistic tendency to become a force of destruction', and that a 'fear-laden rejection of woman rose to a raging campaign of revenge and annihilation against her' [154: *343*]. Although this hypothesis might conceivably fit the violent anti-feminism of the clerical writers of the *Malleus Maleficarum*, it is less plausible as an explanation of the general expectation that witches should be women. Not all charges of witchcraft were laid by frustrated celibate Catholic clerics, nor were most treatises on the subject of witchcraft written by them. It was the secular judiciary, the married lawyers and magistrates, who dominated court proceedings against witches in early modern Europe and who became the movement's chief and most persuasive propagandists.

There were, however, long-established and influential traditions (of male origin) of the mental and moral inferiority of women. A host of biblical passages proclaimed this message, from the example of Lot's wife to Jezebel, from Delilah to Salome. Aristotle, too, had held that women were inferior to men, blaming this on a defect in the process of their generation, and Nicholas Remy cited Fabius and Pliny in support of his contention that women were more prone to believe in witchcraft and more skilful practitioners of the diabolical arts [127: *56*]. It was even questioned by some writers whether women were really human beings at all, or whether they belonged to some lesser species. Luther, more magnanimously, praised woman as the most beautiful of God's creations, but thought her, in respect of more significant properties, as being as inferior to man as the moon is to the sun [for other views of women in the Renaissance period, see 98]. Women were considered to be less rational than men, and less able to restrain their passions. Consequently, they were thought to be more easily persuaded into witchcraft by the Devil, once they had been crossed and were intent upon revenge. They were believed, in addition, to have more taste than men for the vile and orgiastic activities of the sabbat. Their magical powers and diabolical predilections were thought by many theorists to be heritable by their daughters; hence some girls might be innately tainted with the heresy of witchcraft. Such, at least, were the views of men about women; how fully women

themselves accepted these ideas is uncertain, particularly as female writers of the period belonged predominantly to the higher social classes and all too rarely recorded the mentality and self-conception of their counterparts further down the social scale. Social status, in this light, would seem to have been every bit as discriminatory, divisive and as defining a feature as was gender; though the practice of dissent by women does seem to have taken on particular forms which were unique to, and strikingly effective for, them.

As Heide Wunder, Ingrid Batori and Eva Labouvie have pointed out, women are often more highly verbal and articulate than men, who are better equipped to settle disputes by means of physical force [see 7: *94*]. Argument, mocking satire and slander can all be effective in humbling a stronger or a richer opponent of slower wits. However, a woman who adopted such weapons could in the long term stimulate a dangerous resentment against her. The pain of a blow from the local 'tough' might subside and be forgotten far more easily than the sting of a personal insult from a shrewish woman. Further, the fear that women could be readily persuaded into witchcraft may have sometimes been joined with an uneasy consciousness that many women in economically or socially dependent positions – those who were advanced in age, solitary or poverty-stricken – had ample reason to place themselves under Satan's patronage, for the sake of revenge or advantage. If it is implausible to suggest that communities unscrupulously removed their unwanted members by fabricating witchcraft charges against them, it is not unreasonable to suppose that such charges were frequently found believable against people, and especially women, perceived as occupying marginal positions in society. Nor can it be ruled out that women in this predicament sometimes did resort to attempting black magic, or cultivated a reputation for possessing magical powers, to improve their lot by frightening others into a more respectful manner towards them [cf. 150: *674*] or in a spirit of otherwise impotent rage against those who had refused them charity. The complaints of a man against harsh or uncharitable treatment might have been listened to, just because he was a man, more sympathetically than were those of a woman. Women may have felt forced to turn to more oblique means to obtain what they felt to be theirs by right. It is certainly conceivable that witchcraft may have held more appeal for women than for men not because,

as contemporaries thought, women were more wicked and more easily led than men, but because their social and economic position imposed greater constraints on their possibilities of action and self-defence.

However, there is a distinction between hating women and having a poor opinion of them, and while the lowly reputation they enjoyed may have made it easier for women to be suspected of witchcraft, it is not quite so clear that misogyny proper had much direct responsibility for actual witch prosecution. Disliking women simply as women, and carrying this to the point of wanting to see them burned alive, can hardly have been very common. But an opinion of women as overly passionate, wanton, cantankerous and unpredictable creatures was prevalent enough to create a widespread fear of their being easily recruited by the Devil.

Traditional and predominantly agrarian-based societies, such as those of early modern Europe, were often rigidly segregated according to gender. Private misfortune was, therefore, all too often associated with areas of female responsibility: the running of the household or the health and raising of children. Those affected by inexplicable mishaps in the home (the curdling of milk or the failure of bread to rise), or sudden misfortunes in the family (stillbirths, or infants seized by fevers and fits) would be more likely to seek out the guilty in the setting in which those troubles had occurred. Since that setting was one in which women predominated, it was only to be expected that they should be the usual suspects. Witchcraft was thought to be largely a female crime in the same way that offences such as highway robbery, the theft of livestock or poaching were taken to be the criminal preserves of men [18: *270–1*; 19; 141: *169–89*]. While magistrates and lawyers were always male, many cases arose from accusations levelled by women against women. Lyndal Roper has persuasively suggested that many allegations had their roots deep in the envious or hostile fantasies of rival groups of women and often centred on issues of maternity and female fertility; significantly, midwives were not only themselves popular targets of accusations, but were frequently the source of charges against others [130, 131]. It seems reasonable, therefore, to concur with Christina Larner's view that the persecution of witches was not the persecution of women as women, and that any model which represents accusations of witchcraft as being a purely male-generated affair is

too simplistic to hold generally [88]. Yet if there is some objective grounding for the identification of witchcraft as primarily a woman's activity, there is still much to find fault with in the male-dominated societies that drove women to such desperate measures through their relegation of them to the outermost extremities of political and economic power.

4 Why Did Witch Trials Cease?

With the advent of the eighteenth century, the days of witch trials in Western Europe were drawing to a close, though many years were to elapse before the last convicted witch went to the stake in the lands east of the Rhine. Indicative of the changing attitudes among social elites was Louis XIV's royal ordinance of 1682 which brought prosecution for *sorcellerie* to an end in France, and substituted new offences of pretending to have magical powers, to deal with demons or to divine the future. In 1600 most educated Western Europeans believed that witches existed in considerable numbers and formed a dangerous, Devil-led sect. By 1700 many could have been found in broad agreement with Thomas Hobbes's opinion that, 'as for Witches, I think not that their witchcraft is any reall power'. Even those whose scepticism did not lead them as far as denying that witchcraft might, in principle, be a 'reall power' often doubted whether it was, in practice, very common. A true witch deserved death, wrote the philosopher Malebranche in 1674, but most folk who fancied themselves to be witches were simply deluded by their own imaginations, and were best treated as insane.

In the new climate of opinion, prosecution for witchcraft, as it required the co-operation of the literate classes, became increasingly rare, despite a continuing clamour for it from the peasantry [92: *250–2*; 141: *213–4 and 286–90*]. After 1700 a suspected witch in Western Europe stood more in peril of a popular lynch mob than of a judicial process followed by execution. Yet the reasons for the changing attitudes of the literate classes are not easy to determine. It has often been observed that between 1600 and 1700, there was little major change in the arguments for and against the existence of a threatening sub-society of witches; what altered were people's estimates of the

worth of these arguments. To see why witch prosecution was in decline in 1700, we need to explain a subtle shift in the prevailing educated world view.

(i) Changing Beliefs

For those historians of a past generation who saw witch beliefs as products of the most benighted superstition, the end of the trials represented the re-emergence of common-sense opposition to the hysterical ravings of demonologists and witch judges. But this was unhistorical history; there was no 'common-sense' basis on which the Europeans of 1600 could have assured themselves of the non-existence of demonic witchcraft. If we do not believe today in witches and the active presence of the Devil among us, that is because such beliefs do not cohere at all well with the overall picture of the world we now hold, a picture determined in large part by the natural sciences. Our contemporary concepts of 'common sense' are a fruit of this natural science tradition, which was in its infancy in 1600, when the dominating characterisation of reality was still provided by theology. This older outlook differed from our modern by assigning a much larger place in the scheme of things to forces of a personal nature – divine, demonic, angelic – and by picturing the universe as an eternal battleground between good and evil. Within such a frame, the belief in a devilish sect of witches was no offence to reason but, on the contrary, a consistent extension of the accepted ideas.

In an age when there was no street lighting to illuminate the way home after dark, and every call and screech of a wild animal that went unseen might be the chattering of a devil intent on mischief, the natural environment could appear to be a hostile and frightening place, full of forces – both good and evil – which needed either to be propitiated or controlled. Much of the continent of Europe was still heavily forested or rendered inaccessible by the poor and limited state of the road network, and at the close of the fifteenth century learned citizens such as Albrecht Dürer were no less inclined to attribute the 'blood rain' which fell upon Nuremberg (probably a deposit of wind-swept sand from the Sahara) to occult agency and the onset of the Apocalypse, as were the peasant families who eked out their existence in small communities far

beyond the city walls. It was similarly possible for Martin Luther to teach biblical scholarship at the Universty of Wittenberg, and to excel as a translator of Greek, and yet to retain the firm peasant beliefs in a Germanic folklore populated by trolls and hobgoblins in which he had been raised. His decision to enter a monastery had been taken after he was caught in a terrible storm and narrowly escaped being struck by lightning; at a later date he thought he heard devils throwing walnut husks at his window in Wartburg Castle, and pitched an inkpot at Satan himself when the tempter appeared in the corner of his room.

A century later, Rudolf II could still pore over his horoscopes, James VI and I could unmask demonic conspiracies against his rule in Scotland and England, and the death of Ferdinando, Lord Stanley could be popularly ascribed to black magic following that nobleman's refusal to give charity to the poor. But as the seventeenth century advanced, the old paradigms were gradually giving way to new. By 1700 most literate people saw the world in a much less personalised way than their ancestors had done, and they had abandoned medieval man's anxious sense of being surrounded by invisible spiritual presences. The seventeenth century saw a steady growth in man's confidence in his own abilities to fashion his world. Limited enclosure, fen and sea drainage, the steady introduction of better communications and increased urbanisation helped to show that human beings could control their own physical and social environment and were not the helpless playthings of beings more powerful than themselves. It is important to remember that 'traditional' beliefs and cultures were not themselves static. To survive they needed continually to evolve and adapt. Therefore, at both elite and popular levels, changing intellectual, scientific and technological climates threatened either to mutate prior wisdoms or else render them redundant. Thus, to use a much later example, the introduction of cooking stoves into the English Lake District displaced, and made irrelevant, the cycle of stories, tales and folklore which had grown up about the open hearth. The fire was no longer the symbol of the home, and the pictures that could be read into the flames were now kept safely behind an iron grill [125]. In the same way, the retreat of the invisible world gathered momentum – though at times unevenly and unsurely – as the seventeenth century proceeded and sounded the death knell of many of the older beliefs. Ideas about witchcraft and beliefs in the potency of magic,

which once had been held generally throughout society, became increasingly class-, or even age-specific.

If there were no demons, as the elites increasingly came to believe, then it followed that there could be no demonic witchcraft. Indeed, without demons there could be no demonic magic of any level, and the elegant ceremonies and rites of the Renaissance high magician that were aimed at capturing the assistance of good spirits were as futile as the vulgar performances of the village witch. The tenets of learned Neoplatonism ceased to carry conviction in the face of the growing naturalisation of outlook; not only could demons and planetary deities no longer be taken seriously, but belief evaporated in the quintessential notion of a *spiritus mundi* through which stellar influences were transmitted to earth. If God survived in the new picture, he did so in a modified guise. A new orthodoxy arose which portrayed God as acting through natural forces rather than by supernatural interventions (miracles); he was the divine clockmaker, operating via the natural laws he had imposed on the mechanism he had set in motion.

It would be tempting to suppose that witch prosecution received its death blow from the developing scientific revolution of the seventeenth century that, in the work of such giant figures as Galileo, Descartes, Kepler, Huyghens, Boyle and Newton, was to change so fundamentally the way in which men saw the world. Such a view certainly did have some currency even among contemporary writers: thus Christian Thomasius, in an influential treatise published in 1701, praised Descartes for disturbing the 'nest of scholastic fantasies' that had kept the witch hunt alive. Yet the responsibility of the new science for ending the witch trials can be exaggerated. The theories of the scientific revolutionaries did not obtain a firm basis in educated consciousness until the age of witch trials was past. The courts that in the second half of the seventeenth century became increasingly reluctant to return guilty verdicts against accused witches were not hotbeds of enthusiasm for the new science; many judges and jurors must have been quite unaware that any scientific revolution was taking place, and there is no good reason to suppose that the ideas of Descartes or of Newton influenced their decisions in any substantial way.

Even to some of the most informed advocates of the new science, it was not obvious that mechanistic naturalism was the whole story of things; it was not easy to shrug off all vestiges of

older thought patterns, and alchemy, astrology and natural magic for a time continued to exist side by side with the new theories – and often less uneasily than we might have imagined [cf. 157: *99*]). The great Sir Isaac Newton himself, discoverer of the law of universal gravitation (itself at first regarded by many as just another occult sympathy), spent much of his time pursuing alchemical researches. Joseph Glanvil, an early member of the Royal Society and an able apologist of empiricist methodology, published a book in 1681 to urge that experience justified the belief in spirits, and that witches, who consorted with evil spirits, merited condign punishment. Later still, Ezekiel Chambers, editor of the *Cyclopaedia: or an Universal Dictionary of Arts and Sciences* (1728), remained willing to countenance the possibility of witchcraft by the evil eye [150: *772*]. Many of the protagonists of the new mechanistic scheme of things admittedly disbelieved in the activity of spirits, but they were often reluctant to reject the existence of such traditional marvels as sympathetic cures, or the power of amulets to ward off diseases.

It is a reasonable supposition that both the new directions in science and the changing attitudes of witch courts in the seventeenth century had a common source in the decreasing inclination of the literate classes to see reality as permeated by personal and spiritual forces. The scientific revolution was itself a symptom, rather than the cause, of a very general change in perspective which occurred in that century. This profound evolution in outlook represented less the consequence of novel reasoning or newly discovered evidence, than of a shift of temperament towards a fresh confidence that man had the capacity to be master of his own destiny.

Underlying this more optimistic vision of man and his possibilities were several, causally interacting, factors. One of the most crucial of these was the greater stress laid on personal responsibility for action by both Roman Catholic and Protestant churches from the sixteenth century; higher moral standards of behaviour became expected from both men and women, and as the individual's own power to choose to act well or badly was more fully acknowledged, the visibility of the Devil's role as tempter to sin proportionately declined.

Significant, too, in this period was the changing relationship of the individual within society. The comparison of the personal

works of Francis Bacon and Samuel Pepys – drawn from the first and second halves of the century, respectively – accurately reflects the growth of a greater degree of self-conception, identity and cynicism among the ranks of the elite. The relative cultural and religious uniformity of the Middle Ages had been fractured beyond repair by the Reformation and, while in the short term this led to the exacerbation of social tensions of the sort which could provide the stimulus for witch hunts, in the long term it made it possible for Western European society to develop along more heterogeneous and personal lines. The ability of man to modify and better the conditions of his existence, through the combination of individual thought and co-operative activity, in turn helped to bolster the mood of confidence in purely human capacities. In a society which is secure and at ease with itself, rigid conformity to the established norms of behaviour is at far less of a premium. Similarly, a world which could be shaped so effectively to human desires by men enjoying a new sense of their natural powers, and a conviction of their status as autonomous moral agents, appeared less and less to be a world shared with angels and demons of superhuman abilities. The Middle Ages had believed in the total poverty of human resources, and the utter helplessness of men in a hostile world through which the Devil wandered, seeking whom he might devour (cf. 1 Pet. 5:8). When the eighteenth century dawned, such a sense of the ubiquitous menace of Satan was no longer possible for educated people, and it was increasingly common to regard talk of the Devil as a symbolic expression of the evil tendencies lodged within human beings. In this environment the scientific study of nature flourished; witch prosecution did not.

Total disbelief in Satan and the classic stereotype of the demonic witch was not essential to the termination of the trials – it sufficed that the old ideas should lose their grip on the imagination to the point that doubt became possible. Late seventeenth-century courts were generally reluctant to convict people as witches not because they were sure that witchcraft was an impossible crime, but because they no longer felt convinced that they could prove beyond all doubt that it actually took place. As doubts grew, it was normal for jurisdictions to increase their demand for conclusive proof of an accused person's guilt, and to question the efficacy of torture as a means of coming by the truth;

finally, nothing at all was judged to be adequate evidence that genuine, Devil-assisted witchcraft had taken place. The case of the Parlement of Paris illustrates the degree of caution which a court might exercise when its confidence in the real occurrence of witchcraft was dying, but not quite dead. From 1624 there was a right of appeal to this court against all sentences for witchcraft handed down in lower courts within its jurisdiction, and the Parlement generally acquitted the appellants, or reduced their sentences. Relying little on torture itself, it frowned on its use by lower courts, and in 1639 even condemned to death three lower court officials who had acted with rough justice against two suspected witches [100: *355*; 146: *38*]. In the 1640s the Parlement ceased to prosecute witches itself, and confirmed guilty verdicts from its subordinate courts only where the evidence was of the weightiest [100: *362*].

The possibility that justice might miscarry, especially where torture was employed to secure confessions, seems normally not to have been seriously entertained except where belief in the occurrence of witchcraft was already waning. For long it was a standard belief, as King James VI and I put it in his *Daemonologie*, that 'God will not permit that any innocent persons shall be slandered with that vile defection: for then the divell would find waies anew, to calumniate the best'. Consequently, though James could take a pride in exposing several clearly false accusations of witchcraft (as at Leicester in 1616, where he compelled a young boy to retract accusations which had already cost the lives of nine women), he would not hesitate, in his capacity as God's magistrate on earth, to apply torture when he felt himself to be threatened by a genuine, and murderous, demonic plot in 1620 [141: *49–50, 166*].

Those who believed that real witches abounded, and were an insult to God, trusted, not unreasonably, that the legal process would receive divine assistance, and that God, who presumably wanted witches to be punished, would protect the innocent from false accusation, or at the very least prevent them from giving way under torture and making false confessions of guilt. The sceptics about witchcraft had no such confidence; in their view torture almost invariably produced the wrong answers. 'Oh cruel tyrants, blood-thirsty judges', Weyer apostrophised the magistrates and executioners in 1563, bitterly protesting against the torture of

innocent people beyond the limits of human endurance. Seventy years later the German Jesuit Friedrich von Spee, confessor to many persons accused of witchcraft, urged the same theme, at a considerable risk to his own personal safety. Of every 50 burnt as witches after admitting the crime under torture, wrote Spee, it was doubtful whether even two were really guilty; and several condemned people had told him that they would rather suffer ten deaths than undergo such torments again. However, Weyer and Spee already doubted whether the Devil really needed to seek the alliance of poor and elderly women in pursuance of his nefarious ends. As a rule, the evaporation of trust in the efficacy of torture seems to have followed rather than preceded the onset of scepticism about witchcraft.

If there were an exception to this generalisation, we might expect to find it in the experience of those communities that suffered severe witch scares, where the expanding circle of accusations extracted under torture seriously threatened all social cohesion. Midelfort has argued that faith in the legal process could be lost, and trials brought to an end, once people arrived at 'the shattering realization that witch hunts could destroy all sense of community, and all inhabitants as well' [107: *191*; cf. 158]. Yet the evidence for such a loss of faith in the legal machinery under these circumstances is lacking. The records do not support the thesis that communities in the final stages of a witch panic had generally formed substantial doubts about their legal procedures; and many centres suffered repeated scares, which would be hard to explain if trust in the reliability of torture had once broken down. Even the accusation of highly placed people at the climax of witch scares need not logically have compelled doubts, despite Midelfort's suggestion to the contrary, given that on the generally accepted theory that the Devil sought out human allies, prominent people would make especially desirable satanic recruits, being in the best positions to influence affairs.

It may be that witch scares did sometimes come to an end because their disruptive effects became intolerable, and the social cost of mounting further pursuits of witches appeared too high a price to pay for the elimination of practices that, however reprehensible, were still a lesser threat to the community than a continued hunt. The dislocation of social relationships, the loss of mutual trust among citizens and the disruption of commerce

resulting from the enthusiastic pursuit of witches could be considerable, and – at times – great enough to motivate the abandonment of the hunt, even when no doubts had formed about the efficacy of the procedures used for the uncovering of witchcraft. But on many occasions witch scares must have stopped simply because the supply of suspects dried up. This could happen when, as a scare developed, new suspects tortured for the names of accomplices could more readily satisfy their interrogators by naming people already under suspicion than by accusing others whose innocence had not yet been questioned. Thus persons accused of witchcraft, looking for plausible names to supply to their tormentors, would naturally tend to accuse one another; and the momentum of a scare would decline when the authorities began to find that few new accusations were forthcoming. The North Berwick panic is one that seems to have ended in this manner: several of the accused are recorded as having implicated each other, and this appears finally to have led the authorities to believe that the conspiracy had been broken [27, 166].

(ii) Conclusion

The death of Satan was not a sudden event in the history of European culture; it was a process protracted over many decades, in which the Devil gradually faded from sight, unable to retain a significant niche in a view of the world with thoroughly depersonalised foundations [7: *309–34*; 78]. If the scientific revolution was not the cause of the virtual disappearance of witchcraft trials in Western Europe by the early eighteenth century, it was science, as it became more and more deeply absorbed into the fabric of European consciousness, that was finally to convert scepticism about Satan and the reality of witchcraft into firm disbelief. However, as Owen Davies among others has shown, popular culture lagged some way behind the learned in the adoption of the new naturalism and in abandoning the tendency to seek explanations of evil in personal terms. The decline in English prosecutions for witchcraft after the 1680s was not matched by a decline in belief among rural dwellers. Suspected witches were still subjected to identification ordeals long after the statutes against witchcraft were repealed in 1736. Davies highlights the case of Ruth Osborne, who

drowned in 1751 after being 'swum' in front of an angry mob said to consist of several thousand people; plainly belief in maleficent witchcraft was alive and thriving in such rural corners as Tring and Longmarston in Hertfordshire. [33]. It may be that popular beliefs in witchcraft only broke down finally with the introduction of the New Poor Law in the nineteenth century, and welfare reform and the provision of the old age pension at the beginning of the twentieth. The disappearance of the social inequalities which had, in part, given rise to the stereotypical witch figure thus served to remove the 'witch' herself from the local community. Slowly killed by a mix of social and cultural changes, village white and black witchcraft were near to extinction by the nineteenth century. When in the 1880s the child Laura in Flora Thompson's autobiographical *Lark Rise to Candleford* asked her mother whether there were any witches, she received the answer: 'They seem to have all died out. There haven't been any in my time; but when I was your age there were plenty of old people alive who had known or even been ill-wished by one' [151: *252*].

If demonic magic is no longer something that we in the Western world can accept, then neither can we believe in the working of any form of non-demonic magic, high or low. The theoretical basis of magic which operates through the hidden forces of nature is, at its most minimal, a conception of the universe as a system of harmonious relationships among its constituent parts, of such a sort that the performance of certain kinds of symbolic action in one place is able, by calling these harmonies into operation, to create sympathetic effects elsewhere. Such a conception is incompatible with the mechanistic naturalism that is the legacy of the seventeenth-century scientific revolution. For those in 1700 who did not see nature in personal and mystical terms, who were unimpressed by the practice of citing ancient authorities in support of beliefs, and who were increasingly disposed to insist that theories not readily capable of experimental testing should be discarded, magic was a baseless and misguided affair; and while popular magicians continued for some time longer to find a clientele, there were, by the close of the seventeenth century, few educated people who were inclined to take seriously the traditional claims made for magic.

It is easy, but unjust, to condemn early modern beliefs in witchcraft and magic as the ridiculous creations of disordered

imaginations, wholly devoid of any proper grounding in experience. Such condemnation is inappropriate because it ignores the relatively recent consolidation of those concepts of nature, and of the methods of scientific enquiry, which enable us to see what was wrong with the beliefs at issue. If someone from an industrially developed society in the twentieth century claims to practise magic, we may justly question his sincerity or his sanity; we do not merely refuse to believe that his magic could work, but wonder how he could genuinely think that it might. But to apply the same attitudes to a sixteenth-century magician or witch is to employ our standards of rationality anachronistically. Past worlds and mentalities were guided by their own sets of rules, which, however harsh and brutal their applications might be, were nonetheless the internally consistent product of generations of learned reflection and debate. In judging our forebears, therefore, we should aim to view them as they were and not as how we might wish them to have been.

A recognition of the changed baseline from which we now think about reality should guard us, too, from succumbing to the temptation to bridle with moral indignation at the deeds of those responsible for judging, torturing and executing accused witches. Among those men there were doubtless some who took a sadistic pleasure in their dreadful duties, yet the majority seem to have acted as they did from a spirit of duty and a concern for the public welfare. The prosecution of witches was a tragically misguided business, but it was motivated, in general, neither by stupidity nor by a liking for violence for its own sake. There was, properly speaking, no European 'witch-craze', for witch prosecution was a rational enough activity given the mistaken presuppositions that underpinned it. Furthermore, the outstanding savagery with which it was so often conducted is, by a bitter irony, a testimony to the purity of intention of the judges and other officials: for people are least attentive to any restraining voice of conscience precisely when they feel compelled to be ferocious by their principles. Those who scapegoat minorities in our own time, or who seek to perpetrate genocide, have no such defence or cloak of legitimacy. Advances in empirical scientific and intellectual techiques have swept away the foundations on which the stereotyping and demonisation of the 'other', or the 'alien', within society was based, just as surely as once John Aubrey had

lamented that the consolidation of Protestant doctrine and a great 'many good books ... have put all the old Fables out of doors, [while] the divine art of printing and gunpowder have frightened away Robin Goodfellow and the fairies'. When compared to the insidiousness of McCarthyism and the horrors of fascism in recent – and supposedly more enlightened – times, witch prosecution cannot be seen as 'the foulest crime, the deepest shame of western civilization' [128: *3*], but it was something even more depressing: a frightful example of how morally motivated action can lead to massive suffering, and good intentions produce the direst consequences.

Select Bibliography

The literature on witchcraft is as vast as it is diverse. There has been no other area of early modern scholarship which, over the past 30 years, has bloomed so suddenly, excited quite so much passion or given rise to so many conflicting theories. The writings referred to in the text are listed below, together with a selection of further recent works of interest and a representative sample of those major sixteenth- and seventeenth-century witchcraft treatises which are readily available in current reprinted editions.

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and, despite recent criticisms and qualifications [see 8], has never been equalled in its scope and impact. The basic core text for anyone wanting to understand and explore the mindset of those times.

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Index

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The figure of the witch still has the ability to exert a powerful fascination on the modern mind. The vision of the elderly crone begging for charity at the crossroads, an object of fear and revulsion to her local community, has combined with the memory of prolonged judicial persecution and oppression to inspire contemporary movements as far removed from each other as Wiccans and women's liberation. In tackling such an emotive subject, where misogyny and violence combine with superstition and the basest of human instincts, Scarre and Callow chart a clear and refreshingly level-headed approach to the subject. Distinguishing between fact and fiction, they set the witch trials firmly back within the context of their own times and, without seeking to exonerate those responsible, demonstrate how it was possible for judiciaries and social elites to believe wholeheartedly in the reality and efficacy of witchcraft and see it as a dangerous threat to the fabric of society.

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John Callow is Lecturer in Early Modern History at Goldsmit e, University of London.

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