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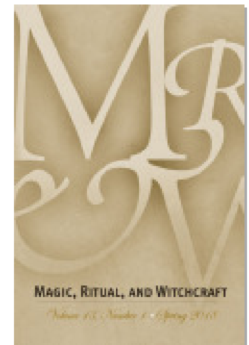
The Meaning of the Word "Witch"

Ronald Hutton



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The Meaning of the Word "Witch"

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I.

During the past few decades, a much expanded academic system, powered by more demanding expectations of productivity and standards of research, has resulted in a widespread reconsideration of the terms habitually used by historians. The relevance of traditional periodization, and of the names employed for those periods, has been called into question.[1] Particular attention has been paid to the changing use of key expressions over time, and the danger that they may not be appropriate for past ages in the senses which they are given at the present day.[2] Readers of this journal will probably be aware of the fierce debates conducted over the significance and relevance to scholars of the words "magic" and "ritual."[3]

Bibliographical note: Many works published before 1900 omit details of the publisher, giving only the place, and so I have had to follow that practice. Where a text exists in various different editions, I have provided a reference to the divisions of the original text, and not one to pages of a specific edition, to make location easier.

1. For "medieval" and "modern," see, *inter alia*, Marcus Bull, *Thinking Medieval* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005); Timothy Reuter, "Medieval," *Medieval History Journal* 1 (1998): 25–45; Randolph Starn, "The Early Modern Muddle," *Journal of Early Modern History* 6 (2002): 296–307; and *Medieval or Early Modern*, ed. Ronald Hutton (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2015).

2. For the early modern English period, such debates over particular terms are summed up in Phil Withington, *The Politics of Commonwealth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); *Society in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); and *Varieties of Seventeenth- and Early Eighteenth-Century English Radicalism in Context*, ed. Ariel Hessayon and David Finnegan (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011).

3. In both cases the controversies entered the discipline of history from that of anthropology and have produced a very large literature. For a selection of works which addressed them in the early stages, see Richard Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); H. S. Versnel, "Some Reflections on the Relationship Magic-Religion," *Numen* 38 (1991): 177–98; *Magika Hiera*, ed. Christopher Faraone and Dirk Oblink (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991);

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No such systematic scrutiny, however, seems yet to have been paid to the final word in its title, "witchcraft," or the component one of "witch," by historians of the early modern beliefs and trials which have been the most dynamic area of witchcraft studies. What follows is an attempt to encourage such a process.

A case could be made for the utility of this discussion in view of the actual manner in which the terms concerned have been employed by such historians in recent decades. One reason why no such debate has occurred over their usage may be that, in contrast to the situation with regard to the other terms "magic" and "ritual," anthropologists have not apparently regarded them as particularly problematic in themselves; although there are different problematic issues as to how far they can map onto equivalent terms in other cultures and languages. Rodney Needham summed up the standard definition of a witch employed by that discipline in 1977 as "somebody who causes harm to others by mystical means." He commented that no more rigorous one was generally accepted; and in this seems to have been correct into the present century.[4] Most scholars of the early modern trials, and the ideologies which fueled them, have not seen the need to explain what they mean by "witch," and their usage has suggested that they are referring to an alleged practitioner of harmful magic. Sometimes they have been explicit in this regard. Since the opening of the new century, and indeed in the past few years, that definition has been confidently repeated by, among others, Gunnar Knutsen, Malcolm Gaskill, Orna Alyagon Darr, Laura Stokes, and Valerie Kivelson, a list of academics which spans the Western world.[5] Sometimes it is asserted firmly against possible doubt: when Owen Davies and Timothy Easton co-authored an essay on early modern English acts of protective magic which involved turning back a curse on the perpetrator, they emphasized that although these were designed to inflict possible harm, they were still measures of

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Ronald L. Grimes, *Beginnings in Ritual Studies* (Washington D.C.: University Press of America, 1982); Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992); and Caroline Humphries and James Laidlaw, *The Archetypal Actions of Ritual* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).

4. Rodney Needham, *Primordial Characters* (Charlottesville: University of North Carolina Press, 1978), 26.

5. Gunnar W. Knutsen, *Servants of Satan and Masters of Demons* (Oslo: Oslo University Press, 2004), 7; Malcolm Gaskill, *Witchcraft* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 1; Orna Alyagon Darr, *Marks of an Absolute Witch* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), 7; Laura Stokes, *Demons of Urban Reform* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 3; Valerie Kivelson, *Desperate Magic* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013), 5.

counter-witchcraft, not witchcraft, because they were not "inspired by evil, spite and envy."[6]

Things are, however, not that simple, because there exists an equally flourishing tradition, among scholars in the same field, which defines witchcraft to cover all forms of magic, malevolent or benevolent, though this sometimes distinguishes practitioners of the latter kind as "good" or "white" witches. Since 2011 alone this has been represented by Jonathan Seitz, Liv Willumsen, Wanda Wyporska, and Steven Marrone.[7] There seems to be little if any dialogue between those who employ the different usages, and sometimes individual scholars apply a mixture of both. Thus, James Sharpe, E. J. Kent, and Michael Ostling have either explicitly acknowledged that witchcraft can have a broad meaning, which covers different forms of magic, but that it is most often used for the destructive kind, or used the term in practice in that fashion.[8] In one of the great foundational books of the recent surge of research into the early modern trials, Robin Briggs began by defining a witch as "an incarnation of the 'other,' a human being who has betrayed his or her natural allegiances to become an agent of evil," but later spoke of people who "seek healing from both white and black witches."[9] Conversely, Peter Maxwell-Stuart could commence a textbook by making clear that witches were people believed to work both good and bad magic, but a half-page later distinguish those who specialized in beneficial applications as cunning-folk, who are then contrasted with "witches."[10]

Ironically, one of the most influential intellectual developments in

6. Owen Davies and Timothy Easton, "Cunning-Folk and the Production of Magical Artefacts," in *Physical Evidence for Ritual Acts, Sorcery and Witchcraft in Christian Britain*, ed. Ronald Hutton (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 215.

7. Jonathan Seitz, *Witchcraft and the Inquisition in Venice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 12; Liv Helene Willumsen, *Witches of the North* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 3–7; Wanda Wyporska, *Witchcraft in Early Modern Poland* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 3, 177; Steven P. Marrone, *A History of Science, Magic and Belief* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 42.

8. James Sharpe, *Instruments of Darkness: Witchcraft in England 1550–1750* (London: Hamilton, 1996), 13; E. J. Kent, "Masculinity and Male Witches in Old and New England 1593–1680," *History Workshop Journal* 60 (2005): 69–92; Michael Ostling, *Between the Devil and the Host: Imagining Witchcraft in Early Modern Poland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 3 and passim.

9. Robin Briggs, *Witches and Neighbours* (London: HarperCollins, 1996), 3, 185.

10. P. G. Maxwell-Stuart, *Witchcraft in Europe and the New World 1400–1800* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), 10–11. Richard Suggett does something very similar in *A History of Magic and Witchcraft in Wales* (Stroud: History Press, 2008), 10–22.

witchcraft studies over the past thirty years has been the co-called "linguistic turn," which has concentrated attention on witchcraft as something culturally constructed and embodied in language. The irony is that even in the finest works inspired by this development, the interest in language, and in the resulting contested politics of identity and culture, has not extended to an examination of the key terms at stake. In Stuart Clark's magisterial survey of early modern demonology, he never interrogated the meaning of "witchcraft," but assumed that it meant the basic stereotype, which had inspired the early modern boom in trials, of a satanic religion; which was natural enough as his interest was in demons.[11] In his introduction to an important subsequent edition of essays, he assumed that it meant the working of harm.[12] Diane Purkiss's similarly celebrated book on the witch figure as a created myth likewise did not concern itself with definitions. It tended to take the term "witch" to mean whatever it did in the sources with which she dealt, which mainly made it signify an evil worker, but—when discussing modern attitudes—could also denote a healer or a practitioner of a Pagan religion. When dealing with early modern texts, however, she referred to workers of helpful magic as cunning-folk, without discussing the difference.[13] Marion Gibson's overview of the "linguistic turn" in witchcraft studies, published in 2007, likewise employed the term "witch" without discussion, to mean what the historians with whom she dealt meant by it, which in practice was a person accused of witchcraft in a criminal trial.[14] Most recently, Peter Elmer's valuable examination of English witchcraft as an idea and a crime inextricably bound up with the demands of contemporary religious and political debate, implicitly took it to mean whatever was prosecuted under that name in criminal courts. In practice, this therefore meant the causing of harm.[15]

At times scholars have been uneasily aware of the problem. When Brian Levack wrote his own famous survey volume on the early modern

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11. Stuart Clark, *Thinking with Demons* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), passim.

12. Stuart Clark (ed.), *Languages of Witchcraft* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2001), 1–18.

13. Diane Purkiss, *The Witch in History* (London: Routledge, 1996), passim.

14. Marion Gibson, "Thinking Witchcraft," in *Palgrave Advances in Witchcraft Historiography*, ed. Jonathan Barry and Owen Davies (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 164–81.

15. Peter Elmer, *Witchcraft, Witch-Hunting and Politics in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), passim.

trials, he stated that when early modern Europeans spoke of "witchcraft," they almost always meant harmful deeds performed by mysterious power and/or the making of a pact with the Devil.[16] When he edited a collection of essays on the subject, however, he conceded that while the association with harmful magic was the most common, it did not take "so-called good or white witches" into account.[17] In the 2000s Michael Bailey twice defined witchcraft as malevolent magic, but in a third work acknowledged that it could mean many different things.[18] Some historians have shown an awareness that such a diversity was already present in early modern England, and especially two who helped to pioneer the surge of interest in the witch trials of that period: Alan Macfarlane and Sir Keith Thomas. The former commented that words like "witchcraft" and "sorcery" were used in different senses in the seventeenth century, and settled himself on employing "witchcraft" in a double sense, both to mean all kinds of magic and to mean harmful magic in particular, which he contrasted with "white witchcraft," which sought helpful results.[19] Thomas concluded that the early modern English often lumped together every kind of magic, and some kinds of unacceptable religion, under the blanket title of "witchcraft." Nonetheless, he also thought that most of them tended to isolate harmful magicians as especially deserving of the name of witches, and to contrast them with the beneficial cunning-folk, though he himself sometimes employed the expression "white witches" for the latter.[20]

More recent experts have confronted the same problem. Emma Wilby has pointed out that in early modern Britain the same magical practitioner could be called a range of different names by different people, depending on her or his own activities and the location, education, religion, and attitude to magic of those bestowing the label. She herself

16. Brian Levack, *The Witch-Hunt in Early Modern Europe* (2nd ed., London: Longman, 1995), 4–11.

17. Brian Levack, ed. *The Oxford Handbook of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe and Colonial America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 3–4.

18. Michael Bailey, "The Meanings of Magic," *Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft* 1 (2006): 1–23; *Historical Dictionary of Witchcraft* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 144; "Diabolic Magic," in *The Cambridge History of Magic and Witchcraft in the West*, ed. David J. Collins (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 371.

19. Alan Macfarlane, *Witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart England* (London: Routledge, 1970), 3–4.

20. Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, 2nd ed. (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1997), 257–66, 435–49.

decided to distinguish maleficent "witches" from beneficent cunning-folk.[21] Julian Goodare, considering the Scottish evidence, noted that "witch" was almost always what others called you, not what you called yourself."[22] Owen Davies has noted that benevolent magicians were known by a range of terms at the popular level, of which cunning-folk was probably the most common, but that at that level they were rarely called "white witches," an expression more often used by the educated.[23] The conclusion seems inescapable that there is a real confusion of language here, which is not of the making of modern academic scholars, although they have not found a consensual solution to it. Instead, it goes to the roots of the English language. In this period of intellectual and semantic stock-taking, it may therefore be a timely exercise to attempt a systematic investigation of the meanings that have been attributed to the words "witch" and "witchcraft," from the earliest period to the early modern, and by whom and under what circumstances. In the process a better understanding may be achieved not only of the nature and status of these terms in previous epochs, but the historical context for our own use of them, and the assumptions that we build into them, as scholars.

II.

The word "witchcraft" undoubtedly derives from the Anglo-Saxon *wiccecraeft*, just as "witch" derives from the related nouns *wicce*, signifying a female worker of that "craft" (plural *wiccen*) and *wicca*, meaning a male one (plural *wiccan*). What exactly the "craft" concerned was, however, is a difficult matter. The early English had more than thirty terms for magical practices and practitioners. The meaning of some can be recovered, if vaguely, by association with known words that they embody: thus, *galdorcraeft* has connotations of song or incantation; *libcraeft* of potions; and *scincraeft* of delusion and phantasm.[24] *Wiccecraeft*, however, is not one of these, and can only be understood, if at all, from context. At first sight that is clear enough in the period, for churchmen used it confidently to describe (and condemn) all forms of magic.

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21. Emma Wilby, *Cunning Folk and Familiar Spirits* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2005), 26–27.

22. Julian Goodare, "Scottish Witchcraft in its European Context," in *Witchcraft and Belief in Early Modern Scotland*, ed. Julian Goodare (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 35.

23. Owen Davies, *Cunning-Folk* (London: Hambledon and London, 2003), vii–viii.

24. I have relied here on the three standard Anglo-Saxon dictionaries edited by Borden, Bosworth, and Wright.

The most famous of these was Aelfric of Eynsham, who employed it to include divination and magical healing of all kinds, urging good Christians instead to resort to prayer and blessings based on scripture and orthodox ecclesiastical liturgy. Following the mainstream medieval Christian tradition most influentially established by Augustine of Hippo, whom he quoted, Aelfric held that the works of *wiccan* could be effective, but that this was because they were achieved through the agency of demons, to sap the allegiance of humans to the true God. He furthermore accused *wiccan* of teaching people to make offerings to trees and stones to achieve their needs, in heathen fashion.[25] Likewise, in other Anglo-Saxon ecclesiastical texts, the words *wicca* and *wiccecraeft* were used to gloss a series of Latin terms signifying different kinds of diviner and divination.[26] No wonder modern scholars who have written on Anglo-Saxon attitudes to witchcraft have themselves tended to use the descendant word "witchcraft" to refer to magic in general, without sensing any problem in doing so.[27]

In the early English context, things may indeed be just as simple as that; but they may also not be, for two reasons. The first is that the late Roman Christians who functioned as the mentors and exemplars of churchmen like Aelfric had pulled a significant linguistic trick almost nine centuries before: they had extended the traditional Latin term for harmful magic, *maleficium*, to encompass, and so to smear and demonize, all forms of magic, including those such as healing spells and divination by oracles, which had formerly been generally considered acceptable or indeed admirable.[28] This opens the possibility that *wiccecraeft* had occupied a more disreputable position in the Anglo-Saxon lexicon than other terms for magic, a suggestion which is

25. Aelfric, *De Auguris*, lines 75–182, passim, in *Aelfric's Lives of Saints*, ed. Walter W. Skeat (London: Early English Text Society 76, 1881), 364–83; and *The Sermones Catholici, or Homilies*, ed. Benjamin Thorpe (London: Aelfric Society, 1844), Vol. 1, 476–77.

26. Joseph Bosworth, *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*, ed. T. Northcote Toller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1898), 1213.

27. E.g., Audrey Meaney, "Women, Witchcraft and Magic in Anglo-Saxon England"; and Anthony Davies, "Witches in Anglo-Saxon England," in *Superstition and Popular Medicine in Anglo-Saxon England*, ed. D. G. Scragg (Manchester: Centre for Anglo-Saxon Studies, 1989), 9–56.

28. This is first found in the *Theodosian Code*, 9.16.4. For general comments on this process of smearing and demonization, see Valerie Flint, "The Demonization of Magic in Late Antiquity," in *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe: Volume Two: Ancient Greece and Rome*, ed. Bengt Ankarloo and Stuart Clark (London: Athlone, 1999), 279; Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages*, 35–41; and Michael D. Bailey, *Magic and Superstition in Europe* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2007), 40–53.

strengthened, though not proved, by the second reason for not accepting unreservedly that people like Aelfric were using it in the universally accepted sense: it is the most common such term found in the criminal law codes.[29] The first of these was issued by Alfred the Great at the end of the ninth century, and paraphrased, as the work of an ostentatiously Christian monarch, the injunction in the biblical Book of Exodus which was to be famously translated in the seventeenth century as "thou shalt not suffer a witch to live."[30] He chose however to substitute three Anglo-Saxon words for the Hebrew, declaring that *galdorcraeftigan*, *scinlaecan*, and *wiccan*, and those who resorted to them, should not be allowed life. This seems to distinguish those who used songs or chants, and those who deceived the senses, from *wiccan*, but does not explain why or how. Things are much plainer in the ruling of Alfred's grandson Athelstan in the late 920s, which made death the penalty for killing people by *wiccecraeftum*, *lyblacum*, and *morðdaedum*; in other words, by the three dishonourable means which were alternatives to homicide committed in a "fair fight": magic, poison, and murder by stealth.

This set of provisions was further amplified by a series of law codes issued by successive regimes between 1000 and 1022, which all seemed to have been drafted by the same reforming churchman, an ally of Aelfric, Archbishop Wulfstan II of York. They prescribed banishment, or death on refusal to depart, for *wiccan* and *wigleras* (the latter being another term for magicians). The list of other offenders placed in the same clause consisted of perjurers, murderers by stealth, and either prostitutes or flagrant serial adulteresses; in other words, people guilty of dishonorable offences against the person. The clause was repeated, with some amendments such as the inclusion of *scincraeft* or *libcraeft*, in the other codes drafted by Wulfstan. What is striking about this pattern is the absence of other words for magic, found in the Anglo-Saxon sources, from the criminal context. A prominent example here is *drycraeft*, a direct English translation of *druidecht*, literally "druid-craft," the umbrella term for magic in early medieval Ireland, and so a loan between languages. This is used prominently and pejoratively in the same wide sense by Aelfric

29. These are successively the *Laws of Alfred*, Introduction, section 30; *Laws of Athelstan* 2, c. 6; (the so-called) *Laws of Edward and Guthrum*, c. 11; *Laws of Ethelred* 6, c. 6; and *Laws of Canute*, 5.1. Editions and translations can be found in *Ancient Laws and Institutes of England*, ed. Benjamin Thorpe (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1840); *The Laws of the Earliest English Kings*, ed. F. L. Attenborough (New York: Russell, 1963); and *Councils and Synods*, ed. Dorothy Whitelock et al. (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1981).

30. Exodus 22:18. Unhelpfully, the Hebrew word translated as "witch" here, *mekhashapa*, is as obscure as *wicce*, being a term for some kind of female magician.

and other authors, but never appears in the law codes.[31] All this may simply suggest that *wiccecraeft* had a broader currency and meaning than the other terms, but this is not obvious from the non-legal sources, and so the suspicion remains that it was associated more than the others with harmful acts. At any rate, there seems little chance now that a clear meaning for it will ever be recovered.

In the course of the remainder of the Middle Ages, *wiccecraeft* mutated into "witchcraft" and *wicce* and *wicca* into the (ungendered) "witch," a process made easier by the fact that the Anglo-Saxon "cc" was pronounced as a "ch." In the mid-fourteenth century the Benedictine monk Michael of Northgate translated a French moral treatise into a Kentish dialect of English. He included a denunciation of sinners who by *wicked creft* caused married people to hate each other or to fall in love with somebody to whom they were not married.[32] John Trevisa, translating Ranulf Higden's *Polychronicon* into English a few decades later, used *wicche-craft* as an equivalent to the Latin *ars magica*, to mean the general art of magic; *wicchecraft* for the reputed skill of Manx women in spells to obtain favorable winds for sailors; and *wichecraft* for the ability to turn men into beasts.[33] In *Piers Plowman*, written at about the same time, William Langland made a London man admit that at times he turned for healing not to prayer as he should but to a *wicche*, such as the cobbler of Southwark or "Dame Emma" of Shoreditch.[34] Another text from the same period, the poem "Purity," describes pagan sages as "wise of *wychecrafte*."[35] Probably contemporary or slightly later is John Mirk's *Instructions for Parish Priests*, which condemned *wychecrafte* as a snare of the Devil even when it saved people's lives.[36] Around the same time, the York mystery play cycle included a scene in which the priest Caiphas accused Christ of *wicche-crafte* and *wicche-crafte*.[37] Similarly, in the fifteenth century John Capgrave's *Life of Saint Katherine* had a pagan emperor call Christ a practitioner of *wycchecrafte* and Christianity (at last) "witchcraft."[38] *Dives and Pauper*, from the same century, also

31. See its use e.g. in Aelfric, *De Auguris*, lines 108–13; and *Scriftboc* (the Pseudo-Egbert Confessional 16.19e) (see www.anglo-saxon.net for editions).

32. *The ayenbite of inwyt*, ed. A. J. Wyatt (London, 1889), 35.

33. *Polychronicon*, Book 1 cc. 24, 44; Book II, c. 2.

34. William Langland, *Piers Plowman* (B Text), 13.336–37.

35. "Purity," fit 58.

36. John Mirk, *Instructions for Parish Priests*, ed. Edward Peacock (London, 1868), lines 360–71.

37. *Christ Before Pilate*, 29.58 and 30.443.

38. John Capgrave, *Life of Saint Katherine*, 4.1069 and 5.1613.

decreed that to have faith in a charm was "witchcraft."[39] Clearly, then, in these later medieval texts, the terms are being used, as by Anglo-Saxon clerics, to encompass all or most kinds of magic. On the other hand, the authors concerned were likewise certainly or probably churchmen intent on reforming the behavior of ordinary people by urging them to trust in piety as an aid to their ills and not to resort to magicians. It cannot therefore be concluded confidently that most of the population would have used the same terminology in the same way. For a range of sources that provide some indication of how language was used by a cross-section of society, it is necessary to wait until the early modern period.

III.

By the Elizabethan age sufficient texts of differing kinds were being generated to allow historians insight into attitudes held at different levels of the social order. In addition, the Reformation had induced a new intensity of interest in the Devil and his works, resulting in (among other consequences) the renewed criminalization of witchcraft, thereby further increasing the types of record available to the historian for beliefs concerning witchcraft and magic. In examining the results for the use of language, it makes sense to commence with elite texts, most produced by pious Christians, which represent a continuity of view with those surviving from the Middle Ages. The majority of these have become well known to scholars of early modern English witchcraft beliefs, and the main new element within them, in comparison with those before, is an emphasis on a specific compact between witch and Devil. Otherwise definitions remain the same, "witchcraft" being used to embrace the whole spectrum of magic. In 1584 the Kent gentleman Reginald Scot declared of it that "in the estimation of the vulgar people, it is a supernatural work contrived between a corporeal old woman and a spiritual devil." He also famously asserted that "at this day it is indifferent in the English tongue; She is a witch; or She is a wise woman."[40] Equally well known, but equally relevant, is the definition of the Essex clergyman George Gifford, three years later: "[A] witch is one that worketh by the Devil, or by some devilish or curious art, either hurting or healing, revealing things secret, or foretelling things to come."[41]In 1590 another cleric, Henry Holland, agreed that witchcraft encompassed all forms of magic, and this was also clearly the opinion of

39. *Dives and Pauper,* ed. Priscilla Heath Barnum (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), 157–58.

40. *The Discoverie of Witchcraft* (London, 1584), 5.9; 16.2.

41. *A Discourse of the Subtill Practices of Devilles by witches and sorcerers* (London, 1587), sig. B2.

the most socially elevated of British demonologists, King James VI of Scotland and I of England, in 1597.[42] In a work published posthumously in 1608 the eminent Cambridge theologian William Perkins delivered an opinion also much quoted by historians. He called a witch a magician who consciously consented to receive the help of Satan "in the working of wonders," thus excluding anybody who used charms and enchantments in the ignorant belief that they had intrinsic power. He divided witches into "two sorts: the bad witch and the good witch, for so they are commonly called." The latter type acquired the apparent ability to divine and heal by magic and were also "commonly called wisemen or wisewomen," and were the more detestable, as they menaced the soul, rather than the body which the "bad" kind harmed.[43]

All these elite writers, therefore, carried on the tradition of their medieval predecessors, of attacking in particular people who offered beneficial magical services. Like those predecessors, also, they hardly needed to condemn those who harmed with magic, because everyone was likely to be hostile to them, while on the other hand many people still resorted to magicians for aid. Some of these writers, however, as has been seen, also seemed to assert that the name of "witch" was applied by the population in general to the benevolent kind of magic-worker as well. This remained the pattern among this sort of author for the rest of the seventeenth century. Between 1617 and 1677 in England, John Cotta, Thomas Cooper, Michael Dalton, Richard Bernard, John Gaule, Thomas Ady, and John Webster all defined witches as workers of any kind of magic, usually specifying that such magic could only be worked with the Devil's aid. Though differing profoundly over whether it was correct to blame personal misfortune on malevolent magic, and to hunt the perpetrators, they were united in their dislike of "good" witches.[44] Cooper specified that the latter were also called "Blessers, Wise and Cunning-women" and worked in partnership with "Bad Witches," healing

42. Henry Holland, *A Treatise against Witchcraft* (Cambridge, 1590), B3; James VI, *Daemonologie* (Edinburgh, 1597), passim.

43. *A Discourse of the Damned Art of Witchcraft* (London, 1608), 41–42, 155–60, 167–85, 255.

44. John Cotta, *The Triall of Witch-craft* (London, 1616), 55–59; Thomas Cooper, *The Mystery of Witch-craft* (London, 1617), Epistle Dedicatory, 4, 30, 47, 128–29, 157–60, 177, 203–5; Michael Dalton, *The Country Justice* (London, 1618), 243; Richard Bernard, *A guide to grand-iury men* (London, 1627), 19, 95–99, 129–48, 155; John Gaule, *Select Cases of Conscience Touching Witches and Witchcrafts* (London, 1646), 22–38; Thomas Ady, *A Candle in the Dark* (London, 1656), 9–24, 44; John Webster, *The Displaying of Supposed Witchcraft* (London, 1677), passim.

the harm caused by the latter, and so seducing those healed from true religion.[45] Bernard warned against "the pestilent evil of seeking to a *white Witch and Wizard*" and went into detail to describe and denounce all forms of ostensibly benevolent magic as the work of such people. He grumbled that no witches were actually good, "but thus we distinguish them, after the vulgar speech."[46] Gaule agreed that "according to the vulgar conceit, distinction is usually made between the White and the Black Witch."[47] Ady condemned "our professed Wizards, or Witches, commonly called Cunning Men, or good Witches."[48] Bernard went further than Perkins in insisting that any use of spells or charms involved an implicit pact with Satan, conscious or not.[49]

The same claims were made in some of the pamphlets published during the same period, describing and defending particular witch trials. That on the Northampton cases of 1612 declared that "a Witch is one that worketh by the Devil, or by some Devillish or curious Art, either hurting or healing, revealing things secret or foretelling things to come."[50] John Stearne's defense of the big East Anglian witch hunt of the 1640s denounced "those called Wise-men, or Wise-women, called your White Witches," and referred to beneficent magicians constantly as "White Witches" thereafter.[51] In 1649 a pamphlet which spoke of "several kinds of witches" made a special target of a Dunstable man who "hath so long gratified the Country people with his conjurations, that time and ignorance styles him a good Witch, or a white Witch."[52] A tract on a London case of 1652, written to justify the execution for witchcraft of a notable healer and witchfinder at Wapping, asserted that "there are two sorts of Witches, which the vulgar people distinguish by the names of the good Witch (I wonder how that can be) and the Bad; by reason, when one bewitcheth a party, the other unwitcheth him again."[53] The same idea occasionally broke into stage plays, most immortally in William Shakespeare's *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, in the late 1590s. As part of the comedy, its anti-hero Falstaff is enabled to escape from the home of a wealthy citizen whom he has been trying to cuckold, disguised as "the Witch of Brainford

45. Cooper, *The Mystery of Witch-craft*, 203–5.

46. Bernard, *A guide to grand-iury men* (London, 1627), 19, 95–99.

47. Gaule, *Select Cases*, 30.

48. Ady, *A Candle in the Dark*, 44.

49. Bernard, *A guide to grand-iury men*, 124.

50. *The Witches of Northamptonshire* (London, 1612), sig. A42.

51. John Stearne, *A Confirmation and Discovery of Witch-Craft* (London, 1648), 39 and passim.

52. *The Divels Delusions* (London, 1649), 1–2.

53. *The Witch of Wapping* (London, 1652), 3–4.

[Brentford].” The householder beats the presumed old woman out of the door, calling her “a witch, a quean, an old cozening quean,” who works by “fortune-telling” and “by charms, by spells, by the figure,” and shouting “I’ll conjure you, I’ll fortune-tell you,” and “Hang her, witch!”[54] This “witch” is clearly a cunning-woman.

The same set of messages was put over by another genre of seventeenth-century publishing, the dictionary. That produced by Robert Cawdrey defined a “magician” as “one using witchcraft.”[55] Edward Phillips summed one up as a person “that professeth the Art Magick . . . i.e. Sorcery or Witchcraft.” To him “sorcery” was simply “a kind of witchcraft,” and witchcraft “a certain evil Art, whereby with the assistance of the Devil, or evil spirits, some wonders may be wrought.”[56] Thomas Blount described the classical term for a prophetess, “pythoness,” damningly, as meaning “a Woman possessed with a familiar, or Prophesying Spirit, a Sorceress or Witch.”[57] Similar attitudes were held by elite Scottish authors of the same century, including an opponent of witch trials such as Sir George Mackenzie: to him, all magicians were semantically still witches.[58] They were so likewise to the leaders of the national Scottish Kirk, or Church, meeting in its General Assembly, who forbade the consultation of “witches and charmers” by people beset with misfortune.[59] This concept imbued the Scottish criminal justice system as well: thus, the local court at Elgin termed all forms of benevolent folk magic “witchcraft” throughout the period between 1590 and 1700.[60] In England cases of such magic were more likely to be heard in ecclesiastical courts, but there the same attitude may be found, so that when a woman was tried in the Ely diocese in 1566, for claiming to heal humans and animals using Catholic prayers, she was sentenced to stand before her local congregation with a placard reading “for wicked witchcraft worthily I bid rebuke and shame.”[61] It may therefore be concluded safely that the political, social, cultural, and religious elites of early modern Britain shared a consensual opinion,

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54. *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, 4.2.

55. *A Table Alphabeticall* (London, 1604), sub “magician.”

56. *The New World of English Words* (London, 1658), under those words.

57. *Glossographia Anglicana Nova* (London, 1656), sub “pythoness.”

58. George Mackenzie, *A Treatise on Witchcraft* (Edinburgh, 1678).

59. The Acts are listed usefully in the anonymous *History of the Witches of Renfrewshire* (Paisley, 1809), 214–16.

60. William Cramond, *The Records of Elgin*, ed. Stephen Ree (Aberdeen: Spalding Club, 1908), Vol. 2, passim.

61. Cambridge University Library, Ely Diocesan Records B/215, 129–30, 215. From the Canterbury Cathedral Archive, see DCb/X.1.10, fol. 6, where a woman is

and language, which officially and publicly equated all forms of magic with witchcraft.

IV.

When this has been said, some refinements need to be made to the picture. First and most simply, not all elite writers observed the norm: in both England and Scotland there were a few who, without argument or reflection, used "witch" to mean somebody who used magic to harm.[62] It is also notable that the statutory laws of England did not spell out definitions, but listed all common expressions for magic end to end without clarifying them. That of 1541–1542 spoke of "witchcrafts, enchantments and sorceries"; that of 1563 prohibited "sorceries, enchantments, charms and witchcrafts"; and that of 1604 denounced "any Witchcraft, Enchantment, Charm or Sorcery."[63] Moreover, the actual provisions of these Acts of Parliament were not directed at all forms of magic, but trained their fire on two specific areas: deliberate dealings with evil spirits and the causing of magical harm. Neither of these would include much of the beneficial magical services which the authors just quoted included as witchcraft. The Scottish law was more broad-brush, the Act of 1563, the only one instituted, simply making death the penalty for anybody who made use of "witchcraft, sorcery or necromancy," and leaving the meaning of those to legal officers to decide.[64]

Moreover, in practice everyone seemed to make a distinction in practice between witches and learned ceremonial magicians (commonly called conjurors or conjurers), although in theological theory there should have been none. George Gifford quoted a view that the witch was a person who entered into the service of Satan, while the conjuror "bindeth him [Satan] with the names of God and by the virtue of Christ's passion and resurrection."[65] Gifford made plain his own opinion that all hopes of binding Satan, or any demon, were vain, and led to damnation, and the parliamentary statutes prescribed the death penalty for any attempt to summon a demon for any purpose. In practice, however, that penalty was not inflicted on learned

recorded as forbidden by her minister to visit "witches." I am grateful to Malcolm Gaskill for these references.

62. E.g. John Wagstaffe, *The Question of Witchcraft Debated* (London, 1669), passim; George Neilson, "A Sermon on Witchcraft in 1697," *Scottish Historical Review* 7 (1910): 390–99.

63. 33 Hen. VIII c.8; 5 Eliz. 1 c. 16; 1 Jas. 1 c.12.

64. *Acts of the Parliament of Scotland*, A11563/6/9.

65. George Gifford, *A Dialogue concerning Witches and Witchcraft* (London, 1593), 54.

magicians who tried to control spirits, and the semantic distinction between them and witches was a strong one. When an Elizabethan constable commissioned some Londoners to hunt for men reputed to be attempting to work magic, he directed them to find those "about the art of witchcraft or conjuring." When they captured one who had just made a circle set with parchments inscribed with crosses—classic ritual magic—they termed him a "conjuror."[66] James VI and I agreed that witches served the Devil while learned magicians deluded themselves into thinking that they became his masters, and his great English legal expert, Sir Edward Coke, declared that "[a] conjurer is he that by the holy and powerful names of God invokes and conjures the Devil to consult with him, or do some act. A Witch is a person, that hath a conference with the Devil, to consult with him or to do some act."[67]

This distinction was carried over into the theater. Learned ceremonial magicians were frequent figures on the Elizabethan and Jacobean stage, and in most of their incarnations there, from the most famous and potent, Marlowe's Faustus and Shakespeare's Prospero, to comic quacks, were never called witches.[68] Anthony Munday's mighty mage, John a Kent, was lauded by other characters as "man of skill," "man renowned for magic skill," and "rare magician," and abused as "vile sorcerer," "knave," and "sly magician," but the "w" word does not feature.[69] His humbler equivalent in *The Two Mery Milk-Maids*, from around 1610, is called a "Conjurer" or a "Magician," though the author cautioned his audience that "if there be discovery of the Conjuring words, you'll find the Witchcraft."[70] In one of his first plays, *Henry VI, Part Two*, Shakespeare distinguished "Bolingbroke, a conjurer" from

66. W. H. Hart, "Observations on Some Documents Relating to Magic in the Reign of Queen Elizabeth," *Archaeologia* 40 (1866): 389–97.

67. James VI and I, *Daemonologie*, Book I, c. 3; Edward Coke, *Third Part of the Institutes of the Lawes of England* (London, 1644), 44.

68. See, for example, Christopher Marlowe, *Doctor Faustus* (c. 1592); William Shakespeare, *The Tempest* (1612); Thomas Dekker, *Old Fortunatus* (1599); *The Birth of Merlin* (c. 1612), probably by Thomas Rowley; George Chapman, *Bussy D"Ambois* (1605); George Peele, *The Old Wives Tale* (c. 1593); *Sir Clymon and Sir Clamydes* (probably 1570s); Robert Greene, *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay* (pre-1590); *The Puritaine* (also *The Puritaine Widdow* or *The Widdow of Watling-streete*), probably by Thomas Middleton, 1606–1607); and John Fletcher, *The Chances* (c. 1617).

69. Anthony Munday, *John a Kent and John a Cumber* (1580s or 1590s, edited by the Malone Society, Oxford, 1923), passim.

70. I. C., *A Pleasant Comedy Called the Two Mery Milk-Maids* (London, 1661), Sig A2, Prologue and 1.1.

"Margery Jourdain, a Witch." Sure enough, when the former commands a spirit to appear, the reaction of the latter is to "grovel on the earth."[71] In another early work of his, *The Comedy of Errors*, "dark-working sorcerers that change the mind" are contrasted with "soul-killing witches that deform the body," though both are disparaged.[72]

V.

These considerations, however, still leave intact the general elite disposition to include under the label of witches both people who allegedly attempted to harm and the whole range of folk magicians who offered services for hire. It is time now to examine more closely the evidence that this was indeed shared by the population in general, and this task may commence with two powerful witnesses to the contrary. One is George Gifford again, this time as author of a dialogue in which two more educated men convince a simple villager not to resort to folk magic for remedies. The crucial point here is that the rustic is initially certain that witches are only people who lame and kill, and that he should seek help against them from "some cunning man." The other two slowly persuade him of Gifford's own view, that all magicians are kinds of witches, and to some extent deal with devils and so deserve death. Near the close, one local woman informs another that some might term her a witch for using a hot spit to rid her own cream of a curse that keeps it from churning to butter. The woman, so informed, exclaims angrily and incredulously "Is that witchcraft? Some scripture man hath told you."[73] It was indeed the "scripture men" who thought so. The other significant author is Edward Poeton, a physician probably writing in the late 1630s, forty years after Gifford but with the same intention, of demonizing popular magic, and especially that of healers, whom he termed "white witches." He made it clear from the start, however, that "in common account, none are reputed to be witches, but only such who are thought to have both will and skill to hurt man and beast." This viewpoint is represented with initial vehemence in the ensuing fictional dialogue by a country bumpkin called "Gregory Groshead," who like Gifford's rustic is slowly talked out of it by the arguments of the educated, in this case those of a doctor representing Poeton. For long Gregory stubbornly maintains his opinion (in his broad rural accent) that "noe witch can doo any good" and "zuch vokes as doo no

71. William Shakespeare, *Henry VI. Part Two*, 1.4.
72. William Shakespeare, *The Comedy of Errors*, 2.1.99–100.
73. Gifford, *Dialogue*, passim: quotations on sigs. B and M3.

harme, shud not be witches," but of course succumbs eventually to the wise medic's superior knowledge and logic.[74]

This portrait, of a society in which the great majority of the population—uneducated commoners—confined the term "witch" to presumed workers of harm, is reflected, often with great subtlety and skill, in much of the drama of the period. Most remarkable in this context is *Mother Bombie*, probably by John Lyly and probably from the late 1580s, because it is unique in the genre for delivering a wholly admiring portrait of a folk magician. This is largely because it consists of a transplantation of classical Roman comedy to Elizabethan Rochester, and the old woman Bombie fulfils the role of an ancient sibyl. Her only magic is to deliver predictions of the future, which she does by reading palms and gazing into eyes, and without requesting payment. Nonetheless, the semantic implications of her skill are carefully explored. When a female client tells her "they say you are a witch," she replies instantly, "They lie. I am a cunning woman." Those who mock her call her "weather-beaten witch" and "old hag," and those who consult her with private skepticism joke amongst themselves that she will turn them into apes, but greet her with the words "They say you are cunning, and are called the good woman of Rochester." The verdict is delivered on her at the end by a decent wealthy gentleman, who comments, "Indeed she is cunning and wise, never doing harm." She has proved herself no witch.[75]

A similar play of terminology is found in a much more hostile view of a magical practitioner, *The Wise-woman of Hogsdon*, probably by Thomas Heywood, and probably written around 1608. This time the protagonist is a charlatan and a bawd, living by confidence trickery and petty crime, and pretending to proficiency in the arts of divination, but the clash of language is the same. She calls herself "wise and cunning," "wise-woman," and "fortune-teller"; those who believe in her term her "the wise-woman" and "a cunning woman . . . famous for her skill"; while those who revile her use the names "witch," "beldame," "hag," "wizard," and "old trot." When a client asks her if she can "conjure" (spirits), she calls it "a foul word," emphasizing that practitioners like her, unlike conjurers, have no dealings with the Devil at all.[76] Much the same swirl of language occurs around a more famous stage charlatan of the age, Ben Jonson's *Alchemist*, who poses as a ritual magician, but is abused as "witch" by his accomplice in crime when they fall

74. Edward Poeton, *The Winnowing of White Witchcraft*, bound in British Library, Sloane MS, 1954: quotations in Foreword and on pp. 2 and 23.

75. John Lyly, *Mother Bombie* (London, 1594): quotations at 2.3–98–99, 3.1.52, 3.4.85–92, and 5.3.366–67.

76. *The Wise-woman of Hogsdon* (London, 1638), passim.

out.[77] In *West-ward Hoe*, from 1605, an old earl employs a servant whom he calls his "cunning woman," who fails in a plot to secure him the hand in marriage of the play's heroine, earning from the angry maid the name "witch" and the taunt "I break thy spells."[78]

Another fake magician, in *The Fair Maid of the Inn*, written in 1625, is described by a character wondering about the man's true nature as "a rare man of art," whom some say is a "witch," His servant immediately defends him as "one step of the ladder to preferment higher, he's a Conjurer," and provides the classic distinction: "[A] Conjurer is the Devil's Master, and commands him; whereas a witch is the Devil's Prentice and obeys him."[79] In Robert Greene's *Orlando Furioso*, from around 1590, an enchantress is first dismissed by the hero and his comrade as an "old witch" and "old trot," but as they gain respect for her powers and goodwill, she becomes "some Sybil or some goddess."[80] Another play of the 1620s, *The Prophetess*, is set in ancient Rome, where the eponymous lady is called "holy Druid" and "cunning" by admirers, and herself refers to her "powerful Art," while critics term her a "doting sorceress" and "keeper of tame devils" (which last charge is actually shown to be correct). A former supporter of hers finally admits total disillusion by accusing her of "witchcraft."[81]

VI.

The assertion of the educated critics of popular magic, that people in general referred to those who offered benevolent magical services as "good" or "white" witches, may therefore be seen now as deeply misleading. Indeed, the broader context makes it possible to reread some of those authors in different ways. Reginald Scot certainly claimed that it was "indifferent" to call somebody a witch or a wise woman, but went on immediately to qualify this by going through the list of magical services provided by "wise" people and stating that "sometimes" those who offered them were called witches. This was literally correct, and the point that he himself was making was that the word had in his time become applied to too many kinds of person.[82] William Perkins informed his readers both that witches were commonly called bad or good, and (very soon after) that "the unbinding" or good kind

77. Ben Jonson, *The Alchemist* (London, 1610), passim, but esp. 1.1.108–9.
78. Thomas Dekker and John Webster, *West-ward Hoe* (London, 1607), 2.2.
79. *The Fair Maid of the Inn* (London, 1647), esp. 2.3.1–11.
80. Robert Greene, *Orlando Furioso* (London, 1594), 4.2.
81. John Fletcher and Philip Massinger, *The Prophetess* (London, 1647), passim.
82. Scot, *Discoverie of Witchcraft*, 5.9.

were "commonly called wisemen or wisewomen."[83] He did not say which sort of person called them by which names, but it is clear now that the division mostly ran between the educated elites and the bulk of the population. John Gaule let slip the same truth when he said that witches were usually called white or black "according to the vulgar conceit," but later that a common excuse for consulting magicians was "It was not a witch that I went to, but a Wizard, a Wise man, or a Wise woman, as they call them."[84] The pamphlet which justified the execution of the healer and witchfinder at Wapping was answered by another, which described how the unfortunate woman concerned was framed by a group of men who had tried in vain to get her to support a false accusation of murder by witchcraft against another woman. It claimed that she had retorted that "she never used sorcery or witchcraft" and when she was searched, nothing was found on her to create suspicion "of being a witch." However, when former clients of hers testified in her favor, insisting that she had been a good healer, court officials taunted them with the words "are you for a witch?"[85] It seems that when authors claimed that all magicians were commonly called witches, they meant that they were commonly called so by people like themselves.

In this context it becomes clear that when Shakespeare's citizen of Windsor abused the presumed magician of Brentford as a witch, he was acting in character as a self-consciously (and pompously) respectable member of society. These distinctions run through other kinds of sources. In 1563 a physician from Kent wrote a pamphlet to condemn magical healers, as Poeton was later to do, and himself termed them "devilish witches and sorcerers." Every time, however, that he uses reported speech about these healers, and not his own, they are called "cunning" instead.[86] A pamphlet published to justify the execution of a Wiltshire woman for witchcraft in 1653 shows a similar linguistic dichotomy. The woman concerned had been a classic local magical practitioner, offering a variety of services including healing and location of lost or stolen goods, and identifies herself in the tract as one of the "cunning and wise people." The hostile author, however, calls her "Witch" from the start, though quoting the exclamation of another person, first hearing of the woman's reputation for magic, that she "was either a Witch or a woman of

83. Perkins, *Discourse*, 170–74.

84. Gaule, *Select Cases of Conscience*, 30, 161.

85. *A Declaration in Answer to several lying Pamphlets concerning the Witch of Wapping* (London, 1652), passim.

86. John Halle, *An Historicall Expostulation*, ed. by T. J. Pettigrew (Percy Society, Vol. 11, London, 1844), passim.

God." She made the mistake of offering magical protection to a family that had come to believe that relatives were trying to poison one of its members. As a result she got caught up in the family feud, and was denounced as an accomplice of the Devil; as clients turned against her she became simply a "Witch" to them too.[87] It is notable that the quite large number of pamphlets surviving from Tudor and Stuart England describing the trials and executions of people accused of harmful magic refer to those individuals as "witches" and their work as "witchcraft" unequivocally, without any need to qualify that with added terms such as "bad" or "black."

The same pattern is found in the legal records of the period: in a sample from both assizes and shire courts in the southeast, the most literate of English regions where language might have been expected to be most varied and sophisticated, "witchcraft" is used only to mean destructive magic. The only further label attached to it is the occasional expression "common witch," apparently signifying "straightforward" or "notorious."[88] The archives of ecclesiastical courts provide further evidence from a special kind of suit, that brought by ordinary people for defamation, against neighbors who had called them witches. Such cases are rare, and sampling for this essay has been restricted to those in the York diocese, and only turned up a few, but they show a significant and sustained pattern, which is supported by a previous study of Lowland Scottish material.[89] In both, the term "witch" was treated unequivocally by the plaintiff as a deadly insult, and never extenuated with additions like "good" or "white."[90]

Occasionally, a Yorkshire case shows a more complex semantic context, above all one in 1684, which started when a Leeds man resorted to someone in Horsforth "who could cure men or horses that were bewitched." He then told some others "of several strange things done by the said [Horsforth man]

87. Edmund Bower, *Doctor Lamb Revived* (London, 1653).

88. I have used here the assize records of the Home Circuit, calendared by J. S. Cockburn between 1975 and 1989; and *Middlesex County Records*, ed. J. C. Jeaffreson (Middlesex County Record Society, 1888–1892).

89. The York records are in the Borthwick Institute of Historical Research, while the Scottish study, using kirk sessions minutes, is by Anna Cordey, "Reputation and Witch-Hunting in Seventeenth-Century Dalkeith," in *Scottish Witches and Witch-Hunters*, ed. Julian Goodare (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2013), 103–20. I chose the York church court archives because the magic-related cases in them have been identified over previous decades in the work of Philip Tyler, James Sharpe, and Peter Rushton, though not with the present issue in mind.

90. Cordey, as above; plus Borthwick Institute, Cause Papers H1327, 2177, and 3335.

as if he were a wizard or witch and could cure persons bewitched." This could sound like evidence of somebody who consulted a magical practitioner who referred to that person as a witch, but the conversation was reported to the court by some of those others present. Among them a difference in attitudes to magic existed, because one of them had immediately expressed a complete disbelief in witches. That man also, however, said flippantly that if they existed, then the wife of the Horsforth healer himself was likely to be one, and when she heard this she sued him for libel.[91] Earlier trials in the Yorkshire records show a more straightforward clash of language, such as when in 1570 a Yedingham man admitted to his judges that he had called a woman "witch, because she used to heal cattle by charmings." He meant it as an insult, and compounded his offence by hurling a mug at her head.[92] Likewise, one Beverley woman prosecuted another for saying that she practiced "witchcraft and papistry" because of unspecified objects, called "certain toys," which she possessed; again, the words were clearly intended as defamatory.[93]

None of these reflections are intended to suggest a hard and fast boundary between elite and popular culture in this respect. Members of British social and cultural elites as defined here (professional men such as lawyers and clergy, and nobility and gentry) certainly consulted learned magicians at times, as is clear from court cases. The manner in which some of the prosperous middling sort, as well as regular working people, resorted to magical practitioners is one of the themes of the plays discussed above. Legal records and pamphlet literature, some of which, again, have been used here, testify also to the ambivalence with which people in general regarded many of those who claimed to offer magical abilities, and the manner in which the reputation of those practitioners, for good or evil, could both be disputed and move between such categories. Nor was a general and pejorative usage of the term "witch" for both those thought to harm by magic, and those who claimed to help by it, confined to elite writers of the sort featured above. It was employed also by authors from the middle ranks of society such as John Stearne, and fictional characters such as Shakespeare's householder at Windsor. Furthermore, as Peter Elmer has shown, whether or not a person was defined as a witch was the consequence as much of precise political and ideological contexts as of general semantic tradition. Nonetheless, it is still

91. Borthwick Institute, C.P. H3601.
92. Ibid., HC9, fol. 148v.
93. Ibid., C11, fol. 104.

argued here that such general traditions did exist, and that they bore some correspondence to social and educational status.

VII.

The conclusions to be drawn from this survey of different kinds of evidence should be clear enough by now: that the division among recent historians of the early modern period over the meaning of the words "witch" and "witchcraft" is indeed rooted in one which existed in the period concerned. That division was not, moreover, an arbitrary or random one, but usually related to a person's place in the social hierarchy. In general, and in public at least, members of the educated elite tended to use the words to signify any kind of magic, and usually did so as part of a deliberate and uncompromising attack on all forms of magic, and especially on those purportedly benevolent kinds which were offered to clients by magical practitioners working among the common sort of people. In this, they were following a tradition that had existed among churchmen attempting to reform popular behavior, and especially to eradicate the resort to magic, ever since Anglo-Saxon times. The use of the terms in that fashion, however, gained its potency as a slur in early modern times from the fact that the bulk of society, and especially those many members of it who resorted to magical services for aid in time of misfortune, reserved the words "witch" and "witchcraft" for the use of destructive magic. Deployed against others, therefore, they represented not neutral terms to be qualified by additives such as "good" or "bad," "white" or "black," but a serious and dangerous insult or accusation. It may always have been so, from the earliest epoch of the English language. The medieval records are not of a kind sufficient to enable such a possibility to be proved; but it may be suggested that it seems somewhat unlikely that popular parlance would have altered its sense so radically, and in such a narrowing manner, in the course of the Middle Ages.

None of this means that the scholars of the present day should feel any more constricted than before in the manner in which they themselves employ the words. Indeed, the semantic field of witchcraft is now more complex than ever before, as both the two traditional meanings are still current and have been joined in popular parlance by two more, which are distinctively modern: of a witch as an expression of individual self-realization and liberation, especially for women, and as a practitioner of a Pagan religion devoted to the forces of nature. This complexity is a large component of the excitement and value of current witchcraft studies. It may be of help to such, nonetheless, to appreciate more keenly the complexity of the semantics which already existed around these words in Tudor and Stuart Britain, and the cultural politics which were involved in the way in which the people of that age deployed them.