

# Witchcraft and Scepticism in England: A Comparison of Key Texts by Reginald Scot, John Webster and Francis Hutchinson

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## Abstract

The aim of this thesis is to examine the writing on witchcraft of three important authors from the Early Modern period: Reginald Scot, John Webster and Francis Hutchinson, who all wrote about witchcraft in different centuries ie from the late 16th century to the early 18th-century. By examining their views and ideas on key common themes such as the role of the law, the use of the Bible as evidence and the powers that witches were said to have, it can be seen that these three writers expressed scepticism about the widespread belief in witchcraft in highly specific areas. Through a detailed examination of their works on witchcraft and the influence of those works, it will be evident that these writers developed a coherent trajectory of scepticism, which combined with other features of the period to steer the governing authorities towards abandoning their previous policies towards witchcraft and witches. The works of these three writers are indicators of the changing thinking of the elites about witchcraft, especially the judiciary and the church, in the period under consideration.

## Introduction

This thesis is based on three key early modern printed texts by Reginald Scot, John Webster and Francis Hutchinson published between 1584 and 1718, which were influential in bringing about an end to the widespread beliefs in witchcraft and magic. These texts are Reginald Scot's *The Discoverie of Witchcraft* first published in 1584, John Webster's *The Displaying of Supposed Witchcraft* first published in 1677 and Francis Hutchinson's *Historical Essay Concerning Witchcraft* first published in 1718. These publications stand as both singularly important as well as collectively significant in their efforts to challenge elements of commonly accepted views on witches and witchcraft. These three wrote in defence of those wrongly accused of witchcraft by what they saw as witch mongers. During the period of Scot, Webster and Hutchinson's works a witch monger was someone who dealt in the ideas of witchcraft creating a social and religious market for these ideas and in some cases profiting from them in book sales. This definition included those who, according to Nicholas Gyer in 1592,

"..are daily and houely without just cause conuenting before Maigistrates, and haling to the halter (if the Maigistrates dexterity in the administration of iustice did not moderate their malice in murdering) poore, plaine, seely and simple innocents, and olde women: whom by frivulous evidences, incredible proofes, vaynghesses, prejudicate presumptions, mere impossibility, yes they would haue condemned and executed for witches".<sup>1</sup> By 1655 the term had changed little. Thomas Ady referred to witch mongers as those who looked for " ..privie

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<sup>1</sup> Nicholas Gyer, *The English phlebotomy: or, Method and way of healing by letting of blood Very profitable in this springtime for the preseruatiue intention, and most needful al the whole yeare beside, for the curatiue intention of phisick. Collected out of good & approved authors at times of leasure from his other studies, and compiled in that order that it is*, (1592) piii

Marks upon such as have been accused to be Witches... many an honest man or woman have such excrescences growing upon their bodies, as these Witchmongers do call, *the Devils Biggs*<sup>2</sup>

This thesis will examine the scepticism displayed by Scot, Webster and Hutchinson in relation to particular aspects of witchcraft and consider the relationship between their works, which has not been systematically undertaken by previous writers. The intention is to trace a clear understanding of each author's individual scepticism and to demonstrate the development of doubts about witchcraft as a crime in England from the late 16<sup>th</sup> century to the early 18<sup>th</sup> century. In addition to providing a clearer understanding of each individual's scepticism about witchcraft this thesis will trace the progression in opinion regarding the genuine nature of witchcraft and magic that took during the period covered by the works of Scot, Webster and Hutchinson.

Yet all three writers, to varying degrees, believed in witches and witchcraft. Scot himself believed that he had been bewitched at one point in his life, Webster believed that there were elements of genuine witchcraft in many of the cases he read about. These three authors were sceptical though about certain elements of witchcraft. Before analysing their work it is necessary to define what is meant by the term scepticism here and to note that this thesis is not a specific history of scepticism, which is beyond the scope of a MRes thesis. The starting point for any study of the influence of early modern scepticism is the writing of Richard Popkin<sup>3</sup>. In particular his work on the history of scepticism was published in 1960 and revised in 2003 and has informed this thesis. We first encounter the wide use of the word scepticism in the years and decades after the Reformation with especial reference to heresy and non-conformism because the perceived danger for some was that it was as dangerous as atheism. The Warwickshire minister, Samuel Clarke, writing in 1659 on matters of conscience

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<sup>2</sup> Thomas Ady, *A Candle in the Dark shewing the divine cause of the distractions of the whole nation of England and of the Christian world*, (1655) p 127

<sup>3</sup> Richard H. Popkin, *The History of Scepticism: From Savonarola to Bayle*, (Oxford University Press, Revised edition 2003)

surrounding heresies and divisions within the Protestant church stated, "Wee see this amongst our selves; what multitudes, unsettled by unsound doctrine, have changed their faith, either to Scepticisme, to doubt of every thing; or Atheisme, to beleieve nothing?"<sup>4</sup>

He believed that the splintering of the Protestant church, the conflict between the Catholic and Protestant churches the was work of heretics, who made people question their faith and led people to become sceptical, or worse become atheist. The definition of scepticism changes during the period under consideration, taking on both wider meanings as shown in the writings later discussed of Scot, Webster and Hutchinson and a more specific meaning to others such as Dillingham, Master of Emmanuel College and stalwart supporter of the Restoration who stated in 1655,

'Have recourse unto the Scriptures that you may know what is good, have recourse unto Scriptures that you may believe it: for, haec scripta sunt ut credatis (are they not written that you may believe), the ensuring of our faith was the end of the writing of the Scriptures. This then condemns Scepticisme, and the Academicks. Again, prove all things that you may practise that which is good, not that you may entertain your selves with jejune and idle speculations; the end and fruit and perfection of knowledge is practise: knowledge is a precious talent, which is given unto us not to be hidden in a napkin, but that we should, trade or work with it."<sup>5</sup>

Dillingham is asking his readers to put their faith in the Bible and argues that those who question the Bible such as sceptics and academics should be ignored. The knowledge that the Bible gives should not be hidden away, which is what the academics are doing but we should work with the knowledge that the Bible tells us. In fact, all three of our writers regard the Bible as a very important reference work for their scepticism. The Bible is an

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<sup>4</sup> Samuel Clarke T, *Golden apples, or, Seasonable and serious counsel from the sanctuary to the rulers of the earth*, (1659), p 94

<sup>5</sup> William Dillingham, *Prove all things, hold fast that which is good, I Thess. 5.21 handled in two sermons at S. Maries in Cambridge, the first on the Commencement-Sabbath*, (1655)

important thread that runs throughout the work of Scot, Webster and Hutchinson. It will be argued here that the scepticism that they show in their work does not fall under the philosophical doctrine of the Sceptics. According to the Oxford English Dictionary philosophically scepticism is defined as , “The doctrine of the Sceptics; the opinion that real knowledge of any kind is unattainable.”<sup>6</sup>

During the later 16<sup>th</sup> century there was a renewed interest in ancient philosophical scepticism which, according to Popkin, was kickstarted by the first printed Latin edition of Sextus Empiricus’ *Hypotyposes* in Paris in 1562. This work led many Early Modern thinkers to question the reliability of knowledge and intellectual searching. Figures such as Montaigne concluded that doubt clears away all false views allowing God to fill in gaps in our knowledge. The threats to the established church were clear to members of the church, even when there was no intention to question the church and its dogma. For example, Hobbes’s *Leviathan* (1651) was considered by the author to be a political and social work. Yet Hobbes was seen at the time as having written about two of the central features of religious scepticism, “Those of the denial of the Mosaic authorship and the political and physiological explanation of religion.”<sup>7</sup>

To express doubts of any kind and to any extent that challenged the traditional authorities of either church or state could lead to very serious consequences. Thus, as will be seen later it is no surprise that Scot self-published his book, no doubt fearing censorship or worse. Webster’s work was denied a licence to print by the ecclesiastical authorities but was authorised by The Royal Society. Hutchinson delayed the publication of his book following the advice of friends who warned of possible sanctions from the state.

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<sup>6</sup> Oed.com. 2021. *Home: Oxford English Dictionary*. [online] Available at: <<https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/172253?redirectedFrom=Scepticism#eid>> [Accessed 13 July 2021]

<sup>7</sup> T. Hobbes, *Leviathan* <https://socialsciences.mcmaster.ca/~econ/ugcm/3ll3/hobbes/Leviathan.pdf> (Accessed July 2020)

The Oxford English Dictionary provides a further definition that is more relevant for our purposes here and more accurately describes the scepticism exhibited in these works. It defines scepticism as a, “Sceptical attitude in relation to some particular branch of science; doubt or incredulity as to the truth of some assertion or supposed fact.”<sup>8</sup>

This will provide a working definition for this thesis, but there is a third definition of scepticism as, “..(having) doubt or unbelief with regard to the Christian religion.”<sup>9</sup>

Whilst this final definition is widely accepted as coming to prominence with the growth of atheism in the 19<sup>th</sup> century in Great Britain it is worth noting that atheism is often associated with scepticism during the time of these three writers. These definitions are useful in helping us to understand how these three key texts are important within the tradition of scepticism whilst not thinking that the three authors were Sceptics in the philosophical sense.

The chapters in this thesis will focus on the following key research questions. The first question will address what particular elements of witchcraft and magic each writer was sceptical or doubtful about. The second question will consider how these writers looked to prove their scepticism and the third question will be consider the extent of their sceptical influence. By asking these three questions my aim is to show that both the influence of the arguments made by these three writers as well as the body of evidence grew through this period and significantly contributed towards the end of a widespread belief in witchcraft and magic.

Before looking at these texts in detail, it is necessary to consider their publication history and the editions used for this thesis. The intended audiences for these works will also be briefly considered through an

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<sup>8</sup> Oed.com. 2021. *Home: Oxford English Dictionary*. [online] Available at: <<https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/172253?redirectedFrom=Scepticism#eid>> [Accessed 13 July 2021].

<sup>9</sup> Ibid



examination of the dedications made by the authors. This thesis predominantly uses the first edition of Scot's *Discoverie of Witchcraft (1584)* as it contains the original ideas and themes that Scot wanted to portray. It was dedicated to a small number of Scot's prominent contacts in Kent including his near neighbour Sir Roger Manwood, who at the time of publication was the Chief Baron of the Exchequer. Manwood was both an influential local figure and a highly influential figure at court. Manwood's political prominence began in the mid-1550s when he was elected as the MP for Hastings. His hard work paid off with elevation in 1567 to Sergeant at Law. His work on commissions against Anabaptists was one of the reasons for his elevation to Chief Baron of the Exchequer, and his knighthood, in 1578. At the time of the publication of Scot's work Manwood was a member of the Star Chamber, most notable for his part in the verdict against Mary, Queen of Scots.

The second dedication was to Sir Thomas Scot, Reginald's cousin. We know that Reginald stayed at Thomas's house and was in some part supported by him. We also know that they worked together on local projects in Dover and the surrounding areas. This dedication was the most personal of the four dedications made and it clearly indicates a debt, of some form, to his cousin.

The third dedication was jointly made to John Coldwell and William Redman. Coldwell was at the time of the publication of Scot's work both the Rector of Saltwood and the Dean of Rochester Cathedral, both of which are in Kent. Redman was the Archdeacon of Canterbury from 1576. Scot would have known both of these men well and by his dedication no doubt would have hoped to calm any perceived criticism against the church that readers may have detected and also to give his work the Church's authority and approval.

The fourth dedication was to "the readers." Scot, knowing the potential for controversy his work was going to create was likely to want to give the impression of providing a service against the wrongdoings of witch mongers and the charlatan practices of magicians.

The *Discoverie* sparked interest on the Continent and was translated into Dutch in 1609 by an English

stationer living in Leiden, Thomas Basson, who dedicated his edition to the University curators and the Burgomaster of Leiden. The book was reprinted a second time in 1637 in Amsterdam by Basson's son. In 1651 the English original was reissued in quarto in London and in 1654 it was reissued once more. A third full edition, dated 1665, was the first edition with significant amendments. Nine new chapters and a second book, *The Discourse on Devils and Spirits*, were added. The third edition was published with two different imprints in 1665. It wasn't until 1886 that Brinsley Nicholson edited a reprint of the first edition which included the changes of the 1665 edition. The 1886 edition is also used here - primarily the nine new chapters, but also the comments and notes that Nicholson made about Scot's life and influence in the preface. In comparing the various editions from 1584, 1665 and 1886 Nicholson has remained true to the original editions, including reproducing all the marginal notes.

The first edition of John Webster's *The Displaying of Supposed Witchcraft* (1677) printed in London is used in this thesis and it should be noted that the dedication is a subject of some historical debate. The dedication in the first edition is to a group of Yorkshire Justices of the Peace. Webster justifies this by stating that they would be the ones who would have to clear up the debates that his work generated. However, work by M. Hall <sup>10</sup> has also discovered a dedication to the Royal Society. Interestingly, one would expect a dedication to the Royal Society as it was the Royal Society who published his work. Hunter tells us that this is the only time that the Royal Society granted an imprimatur to a book that has already been refused elsewhere.

It is also interesting to note that the topic of the book is one not normally associated with the Royal Society at this time. Hunter puts forward a number of reasons as to why the book was published by the Royal Society. Factionalism within the society at the time may have created an opening for Webster's work to be published,

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<sup>10</sup> Hall, Marie Boas. "The Early Years of the Royal Society." *Notes and Records of the Royal Society of London*, vol. 44, no. 2, The Royal Society, 1990, pp. 265–68, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/531611>. (Accessed Sept 2021)

the fact that the Vice President granted permission for the publication when normally the President of the Royal Society was the sole member of the Royal Society who would grant permission may also help us to understand why the work was published.

Webster's book was translated into German in 1719 in Saxony by the German philosopher and jurist Christian Thomasius. The work was later used by Thomasius to defend the reputation of the mathematician, astronomer, astrologer, teacher, occultist, and alchemist John Dee. There were no further editions published despite the renewed interest in its arguments after the posthumous publication of Joseph Glanvill's *Sadducismus Triumphatus* in 1681.

The first edition of Hutchinson's *Historical Essay Concerning Witchcraft* (1718) is used here, although it was published a second time in 1720 when a chapter entitled 'A Defence of the Compassionate Address to Papists' was removed and the print was made larger and some illustrations were added, but no other additions were made to the contents. Hutchinson's dedications in the first edition are threefold. The first was to Lord Thomas Parker, Lord Chief Justice of England at the time of the publication of this book in 1718. Since 1714 Parker had been acting as one of the regents of Great Britain following the death of Queen Anne. He was a Whig and had been heavily involved in the prosecution of Dr Henry Sacheverell. By dedicating his work to such a powerful political figure Webster may have hoped to have brought himself some protection from critics as well as indicating that Parker shared his views.

The second dedication was to Sir Peter King, Lord Chief Justice of Common Pleas and it seems that Webster was prudent in dedicating his work to another powerful political and judicial figure. The final dedication was to Sir Thomas Bury, Lord Chief Baron of the Exchequer. Again, a powerful political figure but also interestingly he had strong ties with the Royal Society and in the year of publication of Webster's work he was made a Fellow of the Royal Society. This may have had some influence on the book being published.

According to David Wootton in the ODNB Reginald Scot (*d.* 1599), writer on witchcraft, was the first son of Richard Scot (*d.* before 1544), and his wife, Mary (*d.* 1582). Scot was educated at the University of Oxford, probably at Hart Hall, but he did not obtain a degree<sup>11</sup>

Two works by Scot survive, in addition to *The Discoverie of Witchcraft* he wrote *A Perfite Platforme of a Hoppe Garden* which was published in 1574 with reprints in 1576, 1578, 1640, 1654, and 1659. Wootton tells us that Scot was widely read in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries—Gabriel Harvey and Thomas Nashe refer to him, and William Shakespeare and Thomas Middleton were evidently familiar with the *Discoverie*. He was attacked at length by James VI of Scotland in his *Daemonology* (1597) and referred to by almost all the Tudor and early Stuart authors on witchcraft (Henry Holland in 1590, George Gifford in 1593, John Deacon and John Walker in 1601, William Perkins in 1608, John Cotta in 1616, and Richard Bernard in 1627). Thomas Ady's *Candle in the Dark* (1655) and John Webster's *Displaying of Supposed Witchcraft* (1677) were the first works to defend Scot's uncompromising scepticism directly, and he was still an indispensable reference point for Francis Hutchinson in his *Historical Essay Concerning Witchcraft* (1718). Scot also had a significant influence on Samuel Harsnett, later archbishop of York, and, through him, on two important witchcraft cases, in which the supposed victims were Mary Glover (1602) and Anne Gunter (1604). Nicholas Gyer's *English Phlebotomy* (1592) is also dedicated to Scot.

According to the ODNB entry by Antonio Clericuzio John Webster, (1611–1682) was a schoolmaster and polemicist, was born on 3 February 1611 at Thornton on the Hill in the parish of Coxwold, Yorkshire, the son of Edward Webster. Claims that he was a student at Cambridge appear to be without foundation. In the early

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<sup>11</sup> David Wootton, Reginald Scot (Scot), Francis, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (2019) <https://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-24905> (Accessed August 2021)

1630s he studied chemistry under the Hungarian Johannes Banfi Hunyades (1576–1646), chemist to the earl of Pembroke. Chemistry and medicine, together with teaching, were to be his lifelong occupations. In 1632 he was ordained as a minister by Thomas Morton, bishop of Durham, and was appointed curate to the parish of Kildwick, near Skipton, in Yorkshire.<sup>12</sup>

He published *The Saints Guide* (1653) in which he rejected the current curriculum taught at universities as having no spiritual value. In 1654 he published his most widely received book, *The Academiarum Examen* which detailed proposals for university reform. Webster wrote his biography of William Erbery in 1658, *The Testimony of William Erbery*. A chemical work, *Metallographia* (1671) was his penultimate work which was *The Displaying of Supposed Witchcraft* in 1677.

In 1643 Webster was appointed master of the grammar school of Clitheroe. He left his post for two periods: in 1647, when he was minister in the village of Mitton, apparently with no income from the parish, and in 1648, when he served as surgeon in the parliamentary regiment of Colonel Shuttleworth.

*The most notable reaction to Websters work came from opponents of his expressed views. The Displaying of Supposed Witchcraft* was attacked by Glanville and by Henry More<sup>13</sup> who asserted the real existence of witches. Webster's demonological views were also attacked by Benjamin Camfield, a Leicester cleric, who accused him of denying the existence of spiritual substances.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> <https://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-28944?rskey=9TMtr8&result=3> (Accessed August 2021)

<sup>13</sup> Joseph Glanvill, *Sadducismus triumphatus.; Full and plain evidence concerning witches and apparitions.; Blow at modern sadducism.; Continuation of the collection, or, An addition of some few more remarks and true stories of apparitions and witchcraft.; Account of what happen'd in the kingdom of Sweden in the years,* (1689)

<sup>14</sup> B. Camfield, *A theological discourse of angels and their ministries : wherein their existence, nature, number, order and offices, are modestly treated of ; with the character of those, for whose benefit especially they are commissioned, and such practical inferences*

Francis Hutchinson mentions Webster in his *Historical Essay Concerning Witchcraft*, referring to the work that Webster undertook about the Pendle witch hunt. Sneddon argues that whilst Hutchinson may have regarded witchcraft as a form of religious enthusiasm, the structure of his book owes rather more to the work of sceptical witchcraft theories such as Webster.<sup>15</sup>

Tony Barnard's article on the ODNB tells us that Francis Hutchinson, (1660–1739) was the second son of Edward Hitchinson (*bap.* 1625) and was born on 2 January 1660 at Carsington, Derbyshire. His mother was Mary Tallents, sister of Francis Tallents (1619–1708), the ejected minister. He matriculated as a pensioner on 4 July 1678 at St Catharine's College, Cambridge, and graduated BA (1680) and MA (1684). On 3 July 1698 he commenced DD at Cambridge. Hutchinson died on 23 June 1739 at Portglenone and was buried in the chapel there on 25 June.<sup>16</sup>

Whilst Hutchinson was a well-regarded and high-ranking member of the church his reluctance to publish was well known. *An Essay Concerning Witchcraft* received a mixed response, according to Sneddon.<sup>17</sup> Hutchinson himself seemed ready to distance himself from his work if the levels of criticism became unbearable. In a letter to Arthur Charlett, master of University College, Oxford he wrote, "I think that the principles that I lay down... are... Very right as well as safe and prudential, I am apt to think that time will confirm them, if ever experience

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*deduced, as are most proper to the premises, also an appendix containing some reflections upon Mr. Webster's Displaying supposed witchcraft.* (1678).

<sup>15</sup> Andrew Sneddon, *Witchcraft and Whigs. The Life of Bishop Francis Hutchinson, 1662-1739*, Manchester (2008) p 104

<sup>16</sup> Toby Barnard, Hutchinson, Francis, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (2019)  
<https://www.oxforddnb.com/abstract/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-14282?rskey=8u4phl>, 2019 (Accessed August 2021)

<sup>17</sup> Andrew Sneddon, *Witchcraft and Whigs. The Life of Bishop Francis Hutchinson, 1662-1739*, p 121

does shew the contrary, I have no interest to tempt me to shut my eyes against it, I hope in such a case I should have virtue enough to make me... Change motions... But at present I am of the same mind with my book <sup>18</sup>

Hutchinson's work, published in 1718 was in direct response to Boulton's pro – witchcraft book.<sup>19</sup> However, Boulton's death two years later probably negated Hutchinson's need for further literary response. It was also by this year that Hutchinson was made the Bishop of Down and Connor. His elevation was primarily for his written work on behalf of the Whig party as well as the church. He moved to Ireland where he attempted to bring about reforms that aimed at benefiting the poorest in his bishopric.

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<sup>18</sup> Hutchinson to Charlett, 17 July 1718 (Bodleian, Oxford, Ballard, MS 38, fo. 27) cited in Andrew Sneddon, *Witchcraft and Whigs. The Life of Bishop Francis Hutchinson, 1662-1739*

<sup>19</sup> R. Boulton, *A Compleat History of Magick, Sorcery, and Witchcraft Containing I. The Most Authentick and Best Attested Relations of Magicians, Sorcerers, Witches, Apparitions, Spectres, Ghosts, Dæmons, and Other Preternatural Appearances. II. A Collection of Several Scarce and Valuable Trials of Witches ... III. An Account of the First Rise of the Magicians and Witches ... IV. A Full Confutation of All the Arguments that Have Ever Been Produced Against the Belief of Apparitions, Witches, &c. with a Judgment Concerning Spirits, by the Late Learned Mr. John Locke (1715) did receive a literary response from Boulton. The Possibility and Reality of Magick, Sorcery, and Witchcraft, Demonstrated. Or, a Vindication of a Compleat History of Magick, Sorcery, and Witchcraft. In Answer to Dr. Hutchinson's Historical Essay, ... In Two Parts, 1722.*

## Chapter 2

### Recent Historiography and the Role of the Law in English Witchcraft Trials

The progressive scepticism surrounding the beliefs in witchcraft and magic shown by our three writers was firmly rooted in law and its role in witchcraft theory. These three writers have never been examined in detail in this way before, in the light of the role of law's clear trajectory and increasing move away from sole reliance on the law of God to the law of man. This section will examine the legal setting in which accusations, prosecutions, imprisonments and executions took place. before doing so , it is necessary though look at the approaches taken by recent historians of witchcraft , who have been very influenced by anthropology and the social sciences, although their work is bounded by the changing legislation regarding witchcraft , most historians have not been concerned with attacks on the operations of these laws by commentators including most notably Scot, Webster and Hutchinson.

Major contributions to the study of witchcraft were made by both Keith Thomas and Alan Macfarlane. Whilst they can be seen collectively to be approaching the subject from a more anthropological view than Hugh Trevor-Roper, with a greater use of primary source material (the bibliography on primary sources runs to eight pages in Keith Thomas's most acclaimed work).<sup>20</sup> Keith Thomas and Alan Macfarlane are considered the best studies for understanding this phenomenon from the late 1960s and the 1970s. They are also amongst the first, especially Thomas to dedicate considerable thought to the decline and implicitly to the scepticism surrounding witchcraft and magic.<sup>21</sup>

Thomas continued Trevor-Roper's idea in linking the accusations to the Protestant Reformation and its detrimental effect on the market economies emerging and developing in many western European countries.

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<sup>20</sup> H. Trevor-Roper, *The European Witch-craze of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries, and Other Essays* Manchester (1969)

<sup>21</sup> K. Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, London (1971)



His views were more eco-political than religious as he dismissed both Margaret Murray's Dianic pagan cult and the idea that witchcraft was a heretical (and by association anti-church) activity thus diverging from Trevor-Roper on this point. Wide-ranging in his scope Thomas, and Macfarlane, have come under scrutiny. Norman Cohn criticised Thomas and argued that the timing of the witch hunts was not clearly explained as it went against his own ideas of the witch hunts being organised by political authority and so followed a clear timeline mirroring the shifts in political authority during the 16th and 17th centuries

Thomas and Macfarlane argued that witch hunting was a wealthy versus poor process of prosecution caused by neighbourly tensions. They argue that when wealthier neighbours breached common standards of neighbourly charity (such as refusing to loan poorer neighbour money or goods) they would become consumed by guilt. Common tragedies such as sickness, cattle death, and fruitless labour then seemed to become punishments for their breach of charity and they turned on their poorer neighbours, accusing them of using witchcraft as revenge.

Keith Thomas thought that witchcraft trials, rose in frequency as the population of poor people increased due to the process of social polarisation.<sup>22</sup> Thomas and Macfarlane also argued against the religious model which was used to explain the rise in witchcraft persecutions. This model explains that popular and elite views of witchcraft in the Middle Ages were largely concerned with maleficarum, the ability of a witch to do harm, and did not think magic was, itself, worthy of punishment. Then, during the Protestant Reformation, elites began to accept continental views of witchcraft. This continental view argued that all witchcraft, not just maleficarum, was evil, because all magic was the result of a contract with the Devil. Thus, all witches were engaged in false religion, Satan worship, and the denial of Christ. The decline in witch hunts, according to Thomas, was an intellectual challenge to the aforementioned reasons why witch hunts took hold. Together

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid p 624

with the shifting elite attitudes, Thomas believes that new technologies leading to greater improvements in communications and improvements in financial areas such as personal insurance brought about less of a need to believe in magic and witchcraft.<sup>23</sup>

Rachael MacLean, more recently in 2005 found the Thomas/Macfarlane model problematic, however, because it does not explain why some neighbourly tensions led to witchcraft allegations and others did not.<sup>24</sup>

Tension between rich and poor neighbours was quite common, as is exhibited by the routine withholding of communion from quarrelling neighbours and, in the most extreme cases, riots in which lower class neighbours organised protests against upper class mistreatment. Few of these cases led to witchcraft charges as the Thomas/Macfarlane model would suggest. The model also neglects the question of gender, failing to explain why the vast majority of accused witches were women. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the model simply does not seem to align with facts concerning the socioeconomic distribution of accusers. Although it is true that poor people were more likely to be accused of witchcraft than the elite, it is not the case that witches were always or even predominantly accused by upper class neighbours, nor were upper class people immune to accusations of witchcraft.

Thomas and Macfarlane though are still essential reading, even though their work is now 50 years old.

Historians such as Brian Levack also made a significant contribution in the late 1990s analysing the relationship between intense witch persecutions and political tensions and crises arising from early modern state-building processes<sup>25</sup> This view was supported a few years later by Behringer's *Witches and Witch-hunts: A Global*

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid p 777

<sup>24</sup> MacLean, Rachael, "Witch Hunting in Seventeenth-Century England: a Historiographical Review," *Pursuit - The Journal of Undergraduate Research at the University of Tennessee*: Vol. 6 : Iss. 1 , Article 15, p24

<sup>25</sup> B. Levack, *The Witch-Hunt in Early Modern Europe* (Oxford, 1987)

*History* (2004). Between them they point out that the discussion of geographical patterns reveals that many of the theories about state power and mass witch prosecutions are not applicable to other cultural contexts. Scandinavia, for example, had absolutist governments, but witch-hunts were very few. They were also rare in England. More importantly, the meanings of witchcraft varied widely and not all judicial authorities even believed in demonological literature or the communal nature of witch conspiracy, such was the case in the Netherlands where authorities were very cautious and sceptical.

Brian Levack, in his own words,

“adopts a multi-causal approach which sees the emergence of new ideas about witches and a series of fundamental changes in the criminal law, the necessary preconditions of the witch-hunt, and both religious and social tensions as its more immediate causes.”<sup>26</sup> With the extensive use of legal records and in later editions reviews of contemporary secondary literature, Levack is regarded as having accomplished an excellent example of a micro study approach. A more revisionist view championed by Malcolm Gaskill, who has more recently revisited Trevor-Roper’s work and puts forward the view using Trevor-Roper’s own words, that, ‘..he was challenging this interpretation as well, underlining both the credulous component of seventeenth century scepticism and the scepticism of medieval credulity.’<sup>27</sup>

Gaskill explains Trevor-Roper’s theories as being based in his own war experiences (he worked in the intelligence services decrypting and was a convinced internationalist) and on his unwillingness to agree with a solely anthropological view that disregarded the competing ideologies he had witnessed. This contribution must be noted for his numerous texts on the subject.<sup>28</sup> Whilst narrative in the main, which limits any

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid p 3

<sup>27</sup> Malcolm Gaskill, *Witchcraft and Evidence in Early Modern England, Past & Present, No. 198* (2008) p 42

<sup>28</sup> Ibid p 44

analytical discussion, it gives a valuable insight into the seventeenth century mentality and anxieties that gave rise to such cruelties as the witch hunts. Gaskill has also contributed to popularising academic research on witchcraft as well as writing and working on the evidence and methodologies.

This historiography is indicative of the approach in which the evidence is under increasingly greater scrutiny and debate about how the processing of the evidence has an influence on the historian's view. An example of this within the historiography of witchcraft comes from feminist historians of witchcraft, such as Lyndal Roper who in *Oedipus and the Devil: Witchcraft, Religion and Sexuality in Early Modern Europe* (1994) discusses women's complex social interactions with both other women and men, the psychological and social aspects of motherhood, the regulation of female sexuality and the psychological dimensions of torture, possession, women's bodies and prophecy, healing, exchange of body fluids, women's work, household roles and the control of borders to name just a few.

Historians such as James Sharpe<sup>29</sup> and Stuart Clark<sup>30</sup> agree with Gaskill's main arguments, but Sharpe also argues that the decline of witchcraft trials in the late 17<sup>th</sup> century occurred decades before the widespread decline in belief in witchcraft from the early decades of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, because the judiciary, who for the most part still believed in witchcraft, became even more reluctant than they had been earlier to convict on the proofs of witchcraft brought before them as part of the superstitious belief system of the lower classes.<sup>31</sup>

From reviewing the recent secondary literature, it can be seen that most historians are concerned with explaining the causes of the belief in witchcraft rather than the growth of scepticism and the decline in the trials. The background to this decline is clearly reflected in the changing legislation of the period. The three main pieces

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<sup>29</sup> James Sharpe, *Witchcraft in Early Modern England*, (2001)

<sup>30</sup> Stuart Clark, *Languages of Witchcraft: Narrative, Ideology and Meaning in Early Modern Culture*, (2017)

<sup>31</sup> Andrew Sneddon, *Witchcraft and Whigs. The Life of Bishop Francis Hutchinson, 1662 1739*, (Manchester, 2008), p 97

of witchcraft legislation that were passed during the period were passed for different reasons and were interpreted in even more ways. It is the myriad interpretations that come under the scrutiny of Scot, Webster and Hutchinson. They question the uses and abuses of the law across the country from the royal court to the local church. Their scepticism runs through from how the law is used against those who need the protection of the law the most to the deliberately biased procedures that were used in the accusation and prosecution of witches.

Scot lists those who, being dishonest, were the only people who could give testimony against witches. Opening the Second Book he states that, "Excommunicant persons, partakers of the falt, infants, wicked servants, and runnawaies are to be admitted to bear witness against the dames in this matter of witchcraft: because (saith Bodin the champion of witch mongers) none that to be honest are able to detect them"<sup>32</sup>

Webster echoes Scot's concerns, "Let them produce any two witnesses that are of honesty and integrity, sound understanding and ability, ever were present, and ear and eyewitnesses of a visible, vocal and corporeal League made betwixt the Devil and witch... We must assert that never any such could be produced yet: and therefore cannot but wonder at the shameless impudence of such persons, that dear affirm these things that never were, nor can be proved, and yet have not blushed to vent and trumpet forth such abominable lies to the world."<sup>33</sup>

What is of interest is that each writer places different emphasis on the concept of law, so for Scot the law of God is more important because it was more important for Scot's contemporaries in the last part of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Webster believes that the law of man should be upheld more, this is more in keeping with his view that many accused of witchcraft are frauds and flawed and so should be accountable to man's law.

Hutchinson's amalgamation of the two is shown by his use of both a clergyman who upholds God's laws and an

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<sup>32</sup> J. Webster, *The Displaying of...*, p 65

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid* p 68

advocate who represents secular law. We mustn't forget that the writing, debating and drafting of laws are subject to the society in which they are being written. The society in which Scot wrote was not as secure as the context for both Webster and Hutchinson.

There were three main pieces of legislation that defined witchcraft in the period 1541-1604. The first was passed in 1541/2 during the reign of Henry VIII. Entitled An Act against Conjuracion, Witchcraft, Sorcery, and Enchantments. This act of Parliament was the first to clearly define witchcraft as a serious crime, known as a felony. It was concerned with all manner of magical activity, from magical harming to treasure hunting. The death penalty was imposed for all of these acts. This piece of legislation was repealed in 1547 by an Act of Edward VI, so that by the time Elizabeth I (from 1558) was on the throne there was no legal means of imposing penalties for witchcraft and associated activities. In 1563, An Act against Conjuracions, Enchantments and Witchcraft was passed. The context for this piece of legislation is easier to understand with the succession of the Protestant Elizabeth following the reign of her Catholic half-sister Mary I. In one respect this piece of legislation was more merciful than the previous act, imposing a prison term rather than execution for offences causing harm short of death. Non-harmful magical activities such as treasure hunting continued to also be prohibited. Of particular interest is the clause against prophesies, especially those of the political nature. This clause gives a view into the concerned world of Elizabeth I. Philip Almond believes that the legislation came about as a reaction against a Catholic group based in Essex who attempted to use sorcery against the Queen in 1561. The passing of this piece of legislation would have helped to create stability in Elizabethan England.

According to the preamble of the legislation, since the repeal of the 1547 law,

“Many fantastical and devilish persons have devised and practised invocations, and conjurors of evil and wicked spirits, and have used and practised witchcraft, enchantments, charms and sorceries, to the destruction of the persons and groups of their neighbours and other subjects of this realm, and for other lewdintents and

purposes contrary to the laws of Almighty God, to the peril of their own souls, and the great infamy and disquiet of this realm.”<sup>34</sup>

It was not until 1604 and the reign of King James I that a new piece of legislation was passed. An Act against Conjuratation, Witchcraft and Dealing with Evil and Wicked Spirits changed the definition of witchcraft. In terms of the punitive nature of this piece of legislation it fell between that of 1542 and that passed in 1563. It extended the death penalty to acts of witchcraft causing harm short of death to the victim and prescribes death for all second offences whatsoever. Provisions were added for the keeping of evil spirits, as opposed to merely casting spells and the use of dead bodies and magic. It was also made it easier to prosecute witches, since theoretically all that was needed was a witness to assert that the witch kept spirits or the suspect to confess that they did so.<sup>35</sup>

Whilst this seems to make prosecutions easier surviving records to show a continued decline in prosecutions from a peak in the 1580s, with the exception of the English Civil War (1642–1651). This legislation was a clear signpost of the changes in elite beliefs in the powers of witches, which we will discuss shortly, the second strike approach was a clear attempt to curtail unnecessary accusations and prosecutions.

Whilst Hutchinson’s work was published in 1718, it is worth noting that the final witchcraft act was passed in 1736 in the reign of George II. Less than 20 years after the publication of his work there was enough influential weight behind the opinion that witchcraft did not exist, and the 1736 Act repealed the 1604 Act.

This law replaced penalties for the actual practice of witchcraft with penalties for the pretence of witchcraft. People who claimed to be conjurers, dealers with spirits and so on would be prosecuted for their pretence and for the financial fraud usually believed to be involved. This law saw the sceptical, rational and reasonable

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<sup>34</sup> [The Statutes Project \(2019\) https://statutes.org.uk/site/the-statutes/sixteenth-century/1563-5-elizabeth-1-c-16-an-act-against-conjurations-inchantments-and-witchcraft/](https://statutes.org.uk/site/the-statutes/sixteenth-century/1563-5-elizabeth-1-c-16-an-act-against-conjurations-inchantments-and-witchcraft/) (Accessed October 2021)

<sup>35</sup> Marion Gibson, *Witchcraft and Society in England and America, 1515-1750*, (London 2003), pp 1-3

triumph over the superstitious.<sup>36</sup>

We can see from this very brief survey of legislation that the law was very much on the side of those who feared witches. During the reign of Henry VIII, the church was the key prosecutor of witches, the 1563 and 1604 laws moved prosecutions from church courts to secular courts.

The aim of the legislation was to create a deterrent against witches and to allay fears that the public may have had against the work of the Devil and his earthly agents. Integral to the effective use of the legislation was the use of capital punishment. Hanging was the main form of execution for those found guilty of the crimes of witchcraft. By 1688 witchcraft was one of 50 capital crimes, all punishable by death.

There are difficulties for historians trying to understand the motives why legislation was passed during the early modern period as records are scant but there must have been enough worry amongst the people, the gentry and the Royal Courts for initial legislation to be passed in 1541. As well as having a knowledge of the laws used by both religious and secular courts against accused witches, Scot's experience of the law in action influenced him and was responsible for his writing of the book. We know that Scot was familiar with prosecutions that had taken place after the Elizabethan law was passed. It was the 1582 prosecution and execution of witches at St Osyth in Essex which had the most profound effect on Scot.

While Scot traces the vehemence shown by Brian Darcy, the presiding magistrate in the trials, back to the witch mongering ripples sent out by Jean Bodin and his influence on the Duc d'Alencon's visits to the Queen in 1581 to 1582. The Duc was a close friend and adviser to the Queen and the Duc was known to be a strong believer in witchcraft. Darcy's imagination was fueled by both the favour to be gained from the Queen as well as the reward he would find in heaven, "Now, how *Brian Darcies* he spirits and shee spirits, Tittie ans Tiffin, Suckin and Pidgin, Liard and Robin: his white spirits and black spirits , graie spirits and red spirits, divell tode...., agree

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid p 4



herewithall, or can stand constant with the word of GOD, or true philosophie, let heaven and earth judge.”<sup>37</sup>

Darcy is accused by Scot of the type of religious enthusiasm that Hutchinson was to aim at in his work decades later.

In many respects the legal process was followed but in other aspects the so-called spirit of the law was open to interpretation. The legal process by which witchcraft was prosecuted was the same for any other serious crime. A formal accusation made by the victim (or someone on behalf of the victim) to a local magistrate known as the Justice of the Peace was made. The magistrate was obliged to undertake an ‘examination’ in the hope of getting a confession. If gained then the accused was committed for trial at the Assizes. At least one, preferably two judges, together with a jury of jury sizes were still flexible at this stage. Ten men would hear the case finding the accused either guilty or not guilty. The verdict would be recorded on the indictment which is then filed with the court records. Whilst this process was followed mostly across the country throughout this period, the interpretation by individuals of how to go about securing the ‘information’ and creating an examination in dealing with the accused in court was wide and varied. Scot argued that the interpretation by many witch mongers was immoral and unlawful. They used many techniques that Scot believed to be unfair but due to the nature of who was being prosecuted and interrogated a blind eye was turned.<sup>38</sup>

Webster attempts to counter this biased system, “it is one thing barely to affirm, and another thing to prove sufficiently and fully: although they boldly allege, that these things are sufficiently proved by Authors of unquestionable credit and verity, we must return a flat negative, and that these reasons.”<sup>39</sup>

Scot believed that one part that was of particular concern was the allowance of single witnesses, as was the

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<sup>37</sup> Scot, *The Discoverie of Witchcraft*, 1584, p 542

<sup>38</sup> Scot, *The Discoverie of..* p 54

<sup>39</sup> John Webster, *The Disposed Displaying...* p 65

allowed testimony of criminals,

“And though by law, single witnesses are not admissible; yet if one depose she/hath bewitched her cow; another, her sow; and the third, her butter: these saith are no single witnesses; because they agree that she is a witch.”<sup>40</sup>

There was no opportunity for bail either as the fear of reprisal by the witch was too great. This combined with the methods of obtaining the ‘information’ created an environment in which confessions came readily. Everything was weighted against the accused from the encouragement by the church and the state for individuals to accuse an individual of witchcraft to the fact that witches who confessed and detected others were always promised impunity. Even the children of the accused were brought in to ensure convictions, “Item, the little children of witches, which will not confess, must be attached; who (if they be craftily handled saith Bodin) will confess against their own mothers.”<sup>41</sup>

The role of the interrogation is also questioned by Scot. He is unable to question the legality of the practises that he criticises , but is drawing the attention of the reader to these with the hope that the reader will agree with Scot’s criticism and help bring about a change in the acceptance of these methods. England had a more cautious attitude to the use of torture than most of continental Europe. Criticisms of the continental system of torture can be found in the work of Sir John Fortescue’s *De Laudibus Legum Angliae* (c. 1465), which incidentally also contains the earliest criticisms of torture in England in terms of questioning the reliability of its results,

“But who is so hardy that, having once passed through this atrocious torment, would not rather, though

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<sup>40</sup> Scot, *The Discoverie of* .. p 15

<sup>41</sup> Cited in Ibid p 16

innocent, confessed to every kind of crime, and submit again to the agony of torture already suffered, and preferred to die once, if only death be the end of it, then to die so many times and to suffer hellish torments more bitter than death?<sup>42</sup>

More contemporaneous to Scot was Sir Thomas Smith who in the *Commonwealth of England* (1584) argued that although torture was used according to the civil law the custom of other countries, it was not used in England whereas it was considered heinous,

“... That if any goaler shall put any prisoner being in his custody to any torment, to the intent to make him an approver, that is to say an accuser or index of his accomplices, the goaler shall die therefore as a felon.”<sup>43</sup>

By the time Scot published his work, torture had been illegal under common law since the 1540s and the use of torture was only allowed if a warrant was issued by the Privy Council.<sup>44</sup> There was no set process for the creation of the ‘information’ and so Scot describes some of the more common methods used in the name of the law. According to the law it is enough to condemn an accused whereby somebody has died who was touched by the accused. There was no time limit on the length of time between being touched and the person dying. To reinforce the ridiculous interpretation of the law Scot wrote,

“If any coming, or depart out of the chamber or house, the doors been shut; it is an apparent sufficient evidence to a witch’s condemnation, without further trial.”<sup>45</sup>

The ability of a witch to travel through solid doors and walls, something never witnessed by the greatest of the witch mongers Jean Bodin, would result in immediate execution. Other ways in which the law is ignored or

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<sup>42</sup> Sir John Fortescue, *De Laudibus Legum Angliae*, (London c.1465), p 47

<sup>43</sup> Sir John Smith, *De Republica Anglorum, a Discourse on the Commonwealth of England*, (London 1584), p 105

<sup>44</sup> Justice Student Network (2001), <https://justice.org.uk/torture-uk-law/> (Accessed July 2019)

<sup>45</sup> Scot, *The Discoverie of ...* p 18

interpreted to help facilitate the prosecution of witches is also shown by Scot,

“The depositions of many women at one instant are disabled, as insufficient in law; because of the imbecility and frailty of their nature or sex.”<sup>46</sup> Scot ends this chapter with one of the most damning aspects of the law against those accused, “Item, the law saith, at an uncertain presumption is sufficient, when a certain presumption fails.”<sup>47</sup> It is enough to condemn somebody with uncertain facts. When the truth fails, lies are accepted. And it was much easier to lie against predominantly, poor indefensible women and it was they who fell foul of the law so easily and so quickly. The following scenario Scot argues is typical; the widow, an argument with someone close or in the locality, an unprovable (and equally difficult to find the cause from other means) accusation, the lack of a defence and the fear of witchcraft guiding the jury to condemn her.

Scot adds a short chapter entitled *Presumptions, whereby witches are condemned* in Book One. He argued here that the idea that people could lose their lives based on unproven presumptions is indicative of the biased law system that existed during this period.

The law by the 16th century was a mix of Germanic customs, Roman law, canon law of the Catholic Church and the idea of the law of the land. The reality was that the justice system favoured the wealthy and powerful leaving the poor defenceless.<sup>48</sup>

John Webster in his work does not refer in any significant detail directly about the role of the law, the uses and abuses of the law by those apprehending and prosecuting witches or any other legislation mentioned above in the same way that Scot does. As his arguments are primarily based on use of Scripture and sound

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid p 18

<sup>47</sup> Ibid p 19

<sup>48</sup> S. Newman, *Law in the Middle Ages*, 2014, <https://www.thefinertimes.com/Middle-Ages/law-in-the-middle-ages.html>, (Accessed Nov 2019)

reasoning much of the refutation that Webster undertakes is focused on cases. Chapter 14 provides several examples where Webster uses particular cases of, "...strange and prodigious cheats and impostures from late and unquestionable authorities."<sup>49</sup>

Webster, unlike Scot who refers to the law and the processes of the law in great detail, is focusing much more on deceit and fraud carried out by people pretending to be possessed rather than the abuse made of the law. Scot writes about the injustice of the law, and how the law is exploited by some individuals, and how it deals with people who have been accused of witchcraft, Webster, at the beginning of Chapter 1, writes about witchcraft as an expression of 'vulgar opinion'. Webster was setting out to change people's minds whilst at the same time telling his readers that he is a brave, resolute and magnanimous man by writing the book. An inflated self-opinion aside however it is more to do with the approach of Webster and how it differs from that of Scot that is of interest when looking at the role of the law. The cases used by Webster in Chapter 14 were well known contemporary cases such as the Boy of Burton (1603), the Boy of Bilson (1612) and the case of Thompson Southworth in Lancaster in 1612. In each of these cases Webster retells the role and the actions of the law as being undertaken by individuals, in many of the cases wise religious individuals, he also refers to the case of Elizabeth Barton, known as the Nun of Kent, who had been arrested and imprisoned in the Tower of London by Archbishop Thomas Cranmer in 1533 after she had prophesied that Henry VIII would die within a month if he married Anne Boleyn. This case formed a centerpiece for Scot's arguments against imposters as well and may have been derived from Webster's reading of Scot. As Webster states

"But the truth discovered by God's true ministers, this oracle gave place as all other such did, when Christ by his death stopped their lying mouth: for herself and seven of her disciples were executed for treason at

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<sup>49</sup> Webster, *The Displaying of ...* p 271

Tyburn, and the other six but to their fines and imprisonment.”<sup>50</sup>

Barton, together with six others, was executed in 1534 even though she had admitted to fabricating the prophecies. The reason why Webster highlights the individual as the discoverer and bringer of justice in such cases of imposture is to further his argument that sound reasoning was the key to fully understanding and challenging widespread belief in witchcraft. This is a continuation of Scot’s plea for clear thinking. Scot believed that Elizabeth Barton was a Pythonist and Ventriloquist whose oracles were empty and without meaning, “... The Pythonists spake hollowe ; as in the bottom of their bellies, whereby they are aptly in Latin called Ventriloqui: of which sought was Elizabeth Barton, the Holy Maid of Kent.”<sup>51</sup>

Both men were seeking to explain Elizabeth Barton’s abilities with their own sceptical interpretation. Webster believes that superstition has been superseded by reasoning and all the advances in progressive changes that have taken place in years beforehand all served to create a popular mindset that believed that inductive reasoning would find the truth,

“But we affirm that a general conclusion drawn from an inductive argument is good and sound, where no instance can be clearly made out to the contrary. But as yet no true instance, really and faithfully tested, have ever been brought to prove that any of these things that we deny, or ever affected by diabolical powers.”<sup>52</sup>

Unlike Scot, Webster does not blame the law explicitly for creating a legal framework that disadvantages those people who have been accused of witchcraft, he focuses on the deceitfulness of some people whose fraud is bettered by the wisdom and sound reasoning of others. Yet the law is still treating those accused of witchcraft in a very similar manner. Both Scot and Webster are arguing a similar point, that the law is letting

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid p 272

<sup>51</sup> Scot, The Discoverie.. p 101

<sup>52</sup> Webster, The Displaying of... p 346

down the victims who had been exploited by men. Hutchinson takes a different approach when referring to the role of the law. In Chapter 13 he discusses the laws of man, having previously considered the Laws of God in the preceding chapter. He refers to the laws of man as, "Experience and Judgement of the World through Ages."<sup>53</sup>

Hutchinson then gives a chronological history of laws passed against witchcraft and magic. He starts with the 12 Tablets of the Romans and then makes his way through the laws of King Athelstan, Charles V and various papal bulls. In an attack on the Catholic Church, Hutchinson describes the reasons why the papacy was such a long time considered an authority on all matters pertaining to witchcraft and sorcery with that,

"...their heads were full of Romances, and Legends, and Spirits, and superstitious melancholy Notions."<sup>54</sup> Hutchinson criticises the use of (legal on the continent of Europe) torture by the Catholic Church from previous established writers on the topic of witchcraft for examples,

"The casting Evidence in most Trials was, the Confession of the Parties, and the Confessions were drawn from them by cruel Tortures. Weyer says, he saw them pour hot Oil upon the legs of some; others were burnt with Candles under their Armholes."<sup>55</sup>

These criticisms of torture and the Catholic Church were voiced in Hutchinson's work by the character of the clergyman. The clergyman is pushed on the matter of evidence and the law by the juryman to which the clergyman towards the end of the chapter reels off a list of well-known and lesser-known writers on the subject. Yet to fully understand what Hutchinson believed the role of the law to be regarding witchcraft at the turn of the 18th-century we need to look at the next chapter in which the advocate questions the clergyman

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<sup>53</sup> Hutchinson, *An Historical Essay...*, p 198

<sup>54</sup> Ibid p 210

<sup>55</sup> Ibid p 212

on his views of the current legislation against witchcraft. It is here that we can scratch beneath the surface of Hutchinson's words to more fully understand his motives. The clergyman replies to the advocate that the laws were made purely for political reasons. The first law made at the time of Henry VIII in 1542 was passed by Henry VIII to convince the papists,

"... That though he had cast off the Pope's supremacy, he was a papist still, and would have laws in England that should do the same things that the Popes Paul did in popish countries.... And that this law againstwitchcraft was brought in by the popish party for a side blow to the Protestants."<sup>56</sup>

Across much of continental Europe, especially the Catholic countries such as France and Spain, legislation had been brought in around this time to combat the growing threat of witchcraft. Hutchinson therefore believed that the law was brought in for political rather than religious reasons. Hutchinson believes that the law passed during the reign of Elizabeth I was primarily for the same reasons,

"When we hear of so many laws of this sort in so wide a range as Queen Elizabeth was; we must consider, that the Reformation had been made but a few years before; and therefore the nation was not got clear from the influence of popery and ignorance."<sup>57</sup>

Legislation passed during the first year of the reign of King James I of England was primarily due, according to Hutchinson, to the King's own experiences of witchcraft when he was living in Scotland and the publication of the King's book *Daemonologia* (1597), Hutchinson states that,

"And our statute being made in the very first Parliament that he held in England, I cannot forbear thinking that it was the King's book and judgement, more than any increase of witches, that influence the parliament to the

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid p 218

<sup>57</sup> Ibid p 221



changing their old law.”<sup>58</sup>

Hutchinson is dismissing the legislation passed during the reigns of Henry VIII, Elizabeth I and James I as politically motivated and agrees with Webster when describing how best those reading his work should judge witchcraft,

“We are free for all that to use our own reason in judging, which notion of witchcraft agrees best with the nature of things, as we see them before our faces: and if the more cautious notions be the more probable and safe, we are free to take them, though our statute be grounded upon superstition of the vulgar. I have heard, that King James himself came off very much from these notions in his elder years; but when laws and translations are fixed, it is a difficult thing to change these notions.”<sup>59</sup>

The juryman with whom the clergyman is having this particular conversation in Hutchinson’s book is worried that if people begin to use reason, not superstition, which the clergyman is asking them to use when considering cases of witchcraft then the number of prosecutions will go down and people will not be safe, as witches will run free throughout the country. In response the clergyman states that those people who are deceivers and cheats such as fortune tellers, jugglers and pretend conjurers should be punished, but not old women like the many who have been tried before. The clergyman suggests that a bar be placed upon such trials against old women for witchcraft in order to prevent them from happening again. Hutchinson here is referring to the spike in the number of prosecutions and executions that took place during the English Civil War. During the 14 months of their crusade Matthew Hopkins and John Sterne sent more people accused of being a witch to the gallows in England than in the previous 160 years.<sup>60</sup> By way of summing up his thoughts

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid p 224

<sup>59</sup> Ibid p 224

<sup>60</sup> W. Notestein, *A History of Witchcraft in England from 1558 to 1718*, (USA 1909), p 115

on the role of the law in witchcraft, Hutchinson puts the following words into the mouth of the clergyman, "Our present freedom from these evils are no security at such a time may not turn up in one revolution or another; and it may be worth our consideration, whether in such a juncture, the lives of men would not be better secured under the sense of our wise and well considered law, rather than under a superstitious, though well-meant statute."<sup>61</sup>

The need for reforming the law is never explicitly written by any of the writers. We can see the first time by looking at these three writers that the law, whilst obviously punitive, was being exploited. The three writers have differing causes for this exploitation. Scot believes it more the act of the papacy and Catholics. When referring to the power of the Devil Scot writes, "... It is neither in the power of which not Devil so to do, but in God only. Though (besides Bodin, and all the published writers in general)... To conclude otherwise."<sup>62</sup>

In describing when people see 'petie juggling feats'<sup>63</sup> papists believe what they see because they themselves, as Catholics, uphold the idea that witchcraft is true. Webster believes the law as being exploited by fraudulent people, he lists many examples in Chapter 14, for example he writes of Agnes Bridges and Rachel Pinder "... both of them had counterfeited to be possessed by the Devil (whereby they had not only marvellously deluded many people both men and women, but also diverse such persons, as otherwise seemed of good wit and understanding) and Hutchinson believes the laws are being exploited for primarily political reasons. When Hutchinson writes about Elizabeth Barton his interpretation is designed for us to believe that her abilities were being exploited for religious and political reasons, "...The priest having a mind to raise the reputation of an image of the Blessed virgin which was in a chapel within his parish... Instructed

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<sup>61</sup> Hutchinson, *An Historical Essay* ... p 228

<sup>62</sup> Scot, *The Discoverie*..p 3

her to say in her counterfeited trances that the Blessed virgin had appeared to her, and told her she could never recover.”<sup>64</sup> However, the law is central to these and it is a thread that runs through all three works. Whether it is their Christian humility, the need to get their work recognised by the wider public and not seen as a radical publication or in some cases to get past the censors, all three hoped that their works would change people’s minds, and of that there can be little doubt. It is worth remembering that the scepticism of these three men varied according to the degree of and the elements of witchcraft that existed in their periods. They expressed criticism of the law as they understood it and sought to make the law equitable and less in favour of the accuser than the accused.

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<sup>64</sup> Hutchinson, *An Historical Essay* p 234

## Chapter 3

### Witches and Their Powers

This section will examine the three writers' approach to the different powers attributed to witches. All three authors have very clear ideas about the powers that witches had, many of these powers were commonly shared by the writers in their descriptions. The powers that witches had ranged from the demonic power of the witch through to the ability to strike somebody down dead with a single look. Different witches had different powers and the times in which witches lived also affected the types of powers that the witches allegedly had.

These powers ranged from finding lost goods to causing ships to sink but for many people the power of the witch was the ability to harm somebody or something that belonged to them such as an animal. Witches had the power to destroy lives and the fact that they were agents of the Devil only made them more feared. The scepticism shown first by Scot, and then many subsequent sceptical publications, focuses a great deal on the powers that witches had. Sceptical writers focused on debunking these ideas that witches had such powers and that such powers came from the Devil.

In Book One of Chapter 1 of his *Discoverie of Witchcraft* Reginald Scot sets out very clearly the supposed powers of witches. Scot's scepticism runs deep from the beginning and many of his points regarding the assumed power of witches are set against the context of the fact that only God, and usually only through God's providence, can these particular things be done. For example, God can make bad weather, not the Devil or witches. God can make good weather. Only Jesus can heal, witches cannot. As Scot says in Chapter 2, "Though in the 10th (verse) of St John's Gospel it be written, that the Devil cannot open the eyes of the

blind.”<sup>65</sup> Scot gives an example of a Margaret Simons, a woman accused of witchcraft in 1581 in Rochester. Rochester was close to where Scot lived and there is little doubt that he would have known of the case. Margaret Simons was accused of bewitching the son of a John Ferrall, vicar of the parish. The vicar accused Margaret Simons of bewitching both his son, who had fallen sick within a few days of an encounter with her, as well as affecting the vicar’s voice. Interestingly Scot interviewed this woman and found that Ferrall was suffering from French pox and had shown his congregation a certificate from a doctor in London that he was healthy and excused of the shame of the disease, being now cured. Scot surmises that the word witch was so repugnant to the people that they did not need that much convincing in order to find her guilty, “The name of a witch is so odious and her power so feared among the common people, that if their honestest body living chance to be arraigned thereupon, she shall hardly escape condemnation.”<sup>66</sup>

Like Hutchinson who wrote over 100 years later, Scot categorises witches into different types. It is interesting that each of these types have different supposed powers. The first sort can hurt and not help, the second can help and not hurt and the third can both help and hurt. There is one more sort that is more beastly than any kind of beasts, saving wolves; these usually devour young children and infants of their own kind.

“These they say can raise hail, tempests and hurtful weather: the lightning, thunder, etc.”<sup>67</sup>

The book most referred to by Scot throughout his own work is that of the *Malleus Maleficarum* (1486). Written as a guide to witch-hunting by H. Kramer and J Sprenger. The book was commissioned by the Catholic church as part of its attacks on heresy throughout Europe. Although there was no English version of the book until 1929, between 1487 and 1520, twenty continental editions of the *Malleus Maleficarum* were published, and another

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<sup>65</sup> Scot, *The Discoverie ...*, p 3

<sup>66</sup> Ibid p 5

<sup>67</sup> Ibid p 7

sixteen between 1574 and 1669.<sup>68</sup> Its main purpose was to challenge all arguments against the existence of witchcraft and to instruct magistrates on how to identify, interrogate and convict witches.<sup>69</sup> Scot continues to quote from the *Malleus Maleficarum* stating that witches are able to procure barrenness in man, woman and beast. They can throw children into water, as they walk with their mothers and not be seen. They can make horses kick until they cast off the riders. They can pass from place to place in the air. They can so alter the mind of judges that they can have no power to hurt them. They can bring trembling to the hand, and strike terror into the minds of those that apprehend them. They can manifest unto others, things hidden and lost, and foresee things to come; and see them as though they were present. They can alter the minds of men in order to love or hate. These can kill whom they like with lightning and thunder. These can take away man's courage, and the power of generation. These can make a woman miscarry in childbirth, and destroyed a child in the mother's womb, without any sensible means either inwardly or outwardly applied. These can with their looks secure either man or beast.<sup>70</sup> The power of the witch was such that they could bewitch a person with just a look or cast a spell to harm someone. This supposed power led to the creation of the making and sale of amulets and talismans to protect against the witches look or evil eye as it was sometimes referred to. Scot makes it very clear that he does not believe that these descriptions are true and spends the next chapters refuting these commonly conceived opinions of witches and witchcraft. Similarly, Webster states in his Epistle the basis of his scepticism regarding witchcraft, "... For many, thoughts of merely deluded fantasy, envious mind, ignorance and superstition do attribute natural diseases, distempers, and accidents to witches and witchcraft, when in truth there is no such matter at all." The witches that Webster describes are very much like those we find in Scot. In Chapter 5, Webster lists four particulars, these are widely held views on the powers of witches he is about to

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<sup>68</sup> Russell, *Witchcraft in the Middle Ages* Cornell, 1972 p 44

<sup>69</sup> Heinrich Kramer , *The Malleus Maleficarum* (1999), <http://www.malleusmaleficarum.org> (Accessed June 2019)

<sup>70</sup> Scot, *The Discoverie of..* p 7

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refute, "Firstly that the Devil does not make a visible or corporal league and covenant with the supposed witches. Secondly, that the Devil does not suck upon their bodies. Thirdly, that the Devil has not carnal copulation with them and fourthly that they are not really changed into cats, dogs, wolves, or the like."<sup>71</sup> Like much of the canon of witchcraft theory, these particulars were based on decades of superstition and anecdotal evidence. The accumulation of these stories became fact and the fear produced by these so-called facts required a response by the elite. These responses came in many forms. From the Catholic Church in the form of the *Malleus Malificarium* in the 15th century (although there is some academic debate as to the extent of the church's direct mandate to the authors James Sprenger and Henry Kramer) to the mid-16th century peak of legal persecutions against witches. In Chapter 2, Webster tells us of some of the supposed powers that witches had. Poisoning is identified as a widespread power attributed to witches, other attributes include bewitching, also referred to as fascinating; the ability to cast an evil eye as well as incantations and the use of charms. Webster agrees with, and quotes from Thomas Ady's *Candle in the Dark* (1655),

" (A)Witch is a man or woman that practiseth Devillish crafts of seducing the people for gain, from the knowledge and worship of God, and from the truth, to vain credulity (or believeing of lyes) or to the worshipping of idols."<sup>72</sup> What concerns Webster the most, from the amount he writes about it, is the power they have to draw people away from God towards the worship of idols. He is concerned, not for the reality of the power which he knows to be false but the fact that it is the biggest sin. Ady's pronounced anti - Catholicism, which he shares with Scot, Webster and Hutchinson, accounts for his use of the word idol. As a God fearing Christian he would have tried to uphold the second commandment written in the Bible in Exodus 20:3, Matt 4:10, Luke 4:8 and elsewhere,

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<sup>71</sup> Webster, *The Displaying of* ..... p 67

<sup>72</sup> Thomas Ady, *A Candle in the Dark shewing the divine cause of the distractions of the whole nation of England and of the Christian world*, (London 1655), p 12-13

e.g.: Ye shall make you no idols nor graven image, neither rear you up a standing image, neither shall ye set up any image of stone in your land, to bow down unto it: for I am the Lord your God.<sup>73</sup>

It is interesting that Ady refers to witches in the first instance as men. First published in 1656, Ady's view was marked by the horrors of the English Civil War (1642–1651) which Ady believed was God's wrath against the evil of men. This may explain his reference to agents of the Devil as men. It may also be connected to Ady's primary use of the Bible in his work. In Exodus 22:18, he explains that the word witch meant 'juggler', a fraud who deploys "false Miracles, to delude and seduce the people to Idolatry" who should not be suffered to live (not 'witch' or 'sorceress'). Most of these conjurors were men. Thirdly, Ady's explains that the confessions extracted from witches are due to the melancholic nature of the accused. Ady expresses deep disdain for the work of Matthew Hopkins, the self-proclaimed Witchfinder General who was responsible for at least 250 people being tried as witches during the 1640s, of which number at least 100 were executed during the opening stages of the first English Civil War, and his methodology again could be seen as another part of the element into understanding the reasons why Ady expressed men first in his description of a witch. Webster does mention the woman (deliberately not using the word witch) of Endor and her supposed powers to raise whoever Samuel desired from the dead and also mentions Simon Magus. Simon was written about in Acts 8 in the Bible. "But there was a certain man, called Simon, which before time in the same city used sorcery, and bewitched the people of Samaria, giving out that himself was some great one: to whom they all gave heed, from the least to the greatest, saying, This man is the great power of God. And to him they had regard, because that of long time he had bewitched them with sorceries."<sup>74</sup> It is worth noting here that because of Webster's reference to the witch as female it serves to further highlight Ady's different approach.

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<sup>73</sup> Terrance Shaw, *The Shaw's Revised King James Holy Bible*, (Indianapolis 2010), p 74.

<sup>74</sup> J. Harding, *The Holy Bible: Containing the Old and New Testaments, According to the Authorized Version; with Explanatory Notes, Practical Observations, and Copious Marginal References, Volume 4*, (Philadelphia 1846), Acts VIII



Webster also quotes a definition of a witch and their powers by William Perkins.

“That a witch is a such a person to whom the Devil doth appear in some visible shape, with whom the witch maketh a league or covenant, sometimes by bond signed with the witches blood, and that thereby he doth after suck upon some part of their bodies, and that they have carnal copulation together, and that by virtue of that league the witch can be changed into a hare, dog, cat, wolf or such like creatures; that they can fly in the air, raise storms or tempests, kill men or cattle and such like wonders.”<sup>75</sup>

William Perkins (1558-1602) was a Calvinist minister and theologian who was one of the most prolific and widely read leaders of the Puritan movement in the Church of England.<sup>76</sup>

Working from the text of Exodus 22:18, “Thou shalt not suffer a Witch to live,” Perkins wrote *A Discourse on the Damned Art of Witchcraft* (1608) one of the most popular discourses on the subject of the devil, witchcraft and the occult in its various forms. He sets forth his treatise showing that witchcraft was a common sin. He demonstrated the diverse ways that Satan uses witchcraft in its various forms and shows how people of all kinds can be involved in the occult, either by entering into a covenant with Satan wilfully, or they may enter into a league with Satan unintentionally, through superstition. He was a moderate puritan who had a great deal of influence on a generation of theologians. Yet Webster considered Perkins a witch monger and quoted him to make the point that the many witch-mongers all wrote similarly. Perkins was a man, “...who have one from one to another lickt up the vomit of the first broacher of this vain and false opinion.”<sup>77</sup>

Webster, like Hutchinson, categorises witches into passive and active witches. He also mirrors Scot by identifying

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<sup>75</sup> William Perkins, *A discourse of the damned art of witchcraft so farre forth as it is reuealed in the Scriptures, and manifest by true experience. Framed and deliuered by M. William Perkins, in his ordinarie course of preaching, and now published by Tho. Pickering Batchelour of Diuinitie, and minister of Finchingfield in Essex. Whereunto is adioyned a twofold table; one of the order and heades of the treatise; another of the texts of Scripture explained, or vindicated from the corrupt interpretation of the aduersarie*, (1610), p 101

<sup>76</sup> <https://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-21973?rskey=DjmTVi&result=6>, William Perkins, (Accessed Jan 2020)

<sup>77</sup> Ibid p 12

melancholia as a cause for the abuse of passive witches by the Devil. In *An Historical essay Concerning Witchcraft*, Francis Hutchinson's main narrative structure comes in the form of a dialogue between a Scottish advocate, a clergyman and a juryman. The juryman has come to the clergyman seeking advice on a witch trial that he must attend. The advocate takes up the case for active belief in witchcraft, while the clergyman argues for caution in such beliefs<sup>78</sup>.

Hutchinson uses this narrative structure as it had become a popular form of writing, especially in instructing the public about witchcraft. A book by George Gifford, *A Dialogue Concerning Witches and Witchcraft* (1593) which had been very critical of those who believed in witchcraft had used this method successfully as well as mirroring Hutchinson's Latitudinarian beliefs. The first question that the juryman asks of the clergyman is to explain one of the most widely believed powers of a witch, the power to induce fits. Hutchinson refers specifically to the case of the Nuns of Loudon in 1634. The nuns, "had brought great Wealth to their Nunnery by those Counterfeit Possessions, for which they have been famous ever since."<sup>79</sup>

The three characters discuss the veracity of possession. A power that manifests itself also as soon as the accused witch is brought into the room where the afflicted lay.

The clergyman argues that the fits come from the supposedly possessed person's imagination rather than from the power of the witch,

"For an ill grounded fear has the same effect upon the imagination, that they fear hath which is reasonable."<sup>80</sup>

The advocate counters the clergyman's argument by suggesting that, "but many afflicted persons fall into

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<sup>78</sup> Hutchinson, *An Historical Essay....*, p 120

<sup>79</sup> Ibid p 10

<sup>80</sup> Ibid p 3

fits, when the supposed witch had been brought in, so the party have not seen her.<sup>81</sup> The advocate also argues that there can be some diabolical communication between the witch and the afflicted person, the advocate argues this in order to prove that witches have the power to induce fits and people. Following this line of argument regarding people counterfeiting symptoms the jurymen asks the clergyman that, "Sure none can be so desperately wicked, as to add counterfeit tricks to a real distemper, that puts them into pain in danger."<sup>82</sup>

Again, we see the clergyman refute witches and the powers they supposedly have by describing the methods by which people can give themselves fits, the clergyman also recounts a story of, "a very honest man, not long since my own parish," who was able to prick himself with a needle and not draw blood. The clergyman also talks of ventriloquism with the intention of a counterfeit. He goes on to give academic evidence from the University of Montpellier in France. The university had been asked to come to a judgement on a number of signs of possession given to them regarding the case of the nuns of Loudon in 1634. The nuns had brought great wealth to the nunnery through this 'cancer of' possessions according to the clergyman and had drawn suspect attention from Cardinal Mazarin who had got the University of Montpellier involved. The university had concluded with a resolute yes, it was possible for people to counterfeit such actions as ventriloquism."<sup>83</sup>

Later in Chapter 4, we find the clergyman making the point that the abundance of witches relates directly to the particular principles of the age. The clergyman says, "... It is from these observations that I ground my rule, that witchcraft follows principles. A number of witches increases or decreases, according as these principles which prevail or are exploded: and therefore, it seems to me, that if not altogether, yet the

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid p 3

<sup>82</sup> Ibid p 4

<sup>83</sup> Hutchinson, *An Historical Essay...* p 39

greatest part, they are made by the imaginations of men.”<sup>84</sup> The supposed power of the witch is the clergyman points out is related to the principles of the age while the number of prosecutions of is a direct reflection of the extent of the belief in witchcraft at any particular time. This writing approach by Hutchinson is indicative of both the aims of his arguments and the political environment of his time. Using the mouthpiece of the clergyman, Hutchinson sets out a list of 18 principles which he calls a, “Catalogue of the principles of those times that have been troubled with and have hanged great numbers.”

From this extensive list we can see some clear examples such as number nine, “That the Devil can do more when he hath the commission of the witch, then he can do without it.”<sup>85</sup>

The principles described by Hutchinson govern the many kinds of witches and the powers they supposedly have. For example, the cursing witch, the blessing witch; the witch by art and the witch by compact. Hutchinson also points out that there are active witches and passive witches. An observation made earlier by Webster. Hutchinson believes that witches were believed to have had supposedly great powers in ancient times because of the superstitions of the age. Hutchinson is not denying that the Devil exists and uses people, he suggests that passive witches are those most commonly possessed, but he does question their supposed powers in the light of the fact that many of these accused witches did not have a sound mind. Scepticism regarding the powers of witches is reinforced as Hutchinson suggests that there should be some degree of acceptance regarding the possibility of a witch’s confessions being real.<sup>86</sup>

In Chapters 4, 5, 6, 7, 10 and 15, Hutchinson gives accounts, narratives in his own wording, of witchcraft

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid p 68

<sup>85</sup> Richard Baxter, *The certainty of the worlds of spirits and, consequently, of the immortality of souls of the malice and misery of the devils and the damned : and of the blessedness of the justified, fully evinced by the unquestionable histories of apparitions, operations, witchcrafts, voices &c. / written, as an addition to many other treatises for the conviction of Sadduces and infidels*, (London 1691), p 34

<sup>86</sup> Hutchinson, *An Historical Essay...* p 82

accusations with a view to showing how those accused were in fact innocent. Some of the cases he refers to directly are the Suffolk witches of 1645 and 1646: the Salem witch hunts of 1692, the witches of Warbois in 1589 and the case of Jane Wenham in 1712. Hutchinson's work is the most wide-ranging of the three writers. The advocate is attempting to disprove the clergyman's line of argument of fact against notion. The advocate describes the clergyman's arguments thus far as too general and so begins the chapter by quoting from Richard Baxter once again. Baxter (1615 to 1691) was a religious writer and ejected Minister. Baxter had an unorthodox early education in comparison to many educated men and was predominantly self-taught. He served with the parliamentarians during the English Civil War and argued throughout his sermons for reform of the Protestant doctrine. Although wary of any form of religious radicalism Baxter was equally sensitive to more disturbing supernatural phenomena, belief in witchcraft and inghosts. His beliefs were clearly shown in *The Certainty of the Worlds of Spirits* (1691).<sup>87</sup>

The case of an old Parson from Reading named Lowis is quoted by the advocate. The Parson is accused of having two imps one of which he sent out to sink a ship and he is also accused of tempting a nearby woman whose mother lay sick with money in exchange for permission for his imps to suck her blood. The clergyman counters the advocate's observations with a number of points. The clergyman begins by stating there was no 'tolerable proof'<sup>88</sup> to support the claims about the imps of Parson Lowis. The clergyman puts forward a list of missing evidence that is needed, '...we have no corroborating circumstances of time, or place, or the name of the ship, or any witnesses, in a case that requires such vast numbers, that could depose, that at such a time, that very ship by name, or at least a ship particularly described, did sink miraculously, when it had a calm sea

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<sup>87</sup> Michael Jinkins, William Perkins, Francis, Oxford Dictionary of National Biography (2019)  
<https://www.oxforddnb.com/abstract/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-14282?rskey=8u4phl>.  
(Accessed Jan 2020)

<sup>88</sup> Hutchinson, *An Historical Essay* .. p 88

and a fair wind without either rock or tempest.<sup>89</sup>

Further evidence used by the clergyman in his arguments regarding the supposed power of witches comes in Chapter 5 entitled *The Witchcraft at Salem, Boston, and Andover in New England*. Referring to the Salem witch trials of 1692, the clergyman, again in response to the advocate's suggestion that genuine daemonic possession was taking place amongst the young girls and some of the women of Salem village and town, uses Cotton Mather's own observations to make his point. This related to observations made by Mr Mather regarding a young woman who he took home to observe. She was thought to be suffering from daemonic possession,

"The witches brought her an invisible horse: and then she would skip into a chair, and seat herself in a riding posture: and after that, she would be moved as if ambling, and trotting and galloping. She talked with invisible company that seemed to go with her, listened for their answers. After two or three minutes, she would seem to think herself at a rendezvous with witches a great way off, and soon after return back upon her imaginary horse, and then come to herself; and once she told Mr Mather of three that she said had been there and what they had said."<sup>90</sup> The clergyman uses Cotton Mather, one of the most prominent Puritan clerics in America in his day, to shed doubt on the idea that these accused women were witches. Although Mather was not directly involved in the proceedings of the Salem witch trials, he wrote a letter to one of the magistrates in the trials, John Richards of Boston, urging caution in the use of spectral evidence. Mather was also the author of the "Return of the Several Ministers," a report sent to the judges of the Salem court. This carefully-worded document advised caution in the use of spectral evidence, saying that the devil could indeed assume the shape of an innocent person, and decrying the use of spectral evidence in the trials, their, "noise, company,

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid p 88

<sup>90</sup> Ibid p 100

and openness", and the utilisation of witch tests such as the recitation of the Lord's Prayer.<sup>91</sup> Mr Mather himself wrote that those who fancy that they may take journeys with witches may not necessarily be witches. He did not consider this young woman a witch but a religious person, afflicted by others, a counterfeit, or perhaps a daemonic i.e. possessed by a demon.

Secondly, he observed himself that these journeys and rendezvous are not real but are fantastic, like dreams. Thirdly, he says that if Courts of Justice are willing to murder (his word) people for the fancy that they do in their trances then they should also hang people for the murders they think they are committing in their dreams. Finally, he states that it will be even harder to hang other people for what these sick persons think that they see them do. Whilst events in America seemed very far away to many people in England at the time this case is of great importance to people like Hutchinson. The fact that at the end of the Salem witch trials jurors sought forgiveness was a clear indicator to those people who believed that witchcraft was not true and that common sense and rationality was becoming much more widespread even amongst the more religiously fervent such as the Puritans in New England in the late 17th century. Hutchinson publishes a copy of a post-trial paper signed by the jurors.<sup>92</sup> The jurors wrote, "We do hereby declare, that we justly fear, that we were sadly deluded and mistaken, for which we are much disquieted, and distressed in our minds: and do therefore humbly beg forgiveness, first of God, for Christ's sake, but this our error: and pray, that God will not impute the guilt of it to ourselves, nor others. And we also pray that we may be considered candidly, and alight, by the living sufferers, has been under the power of a strong and general delusion, utterly unacquainted with, and not experienced in matters of that nature."<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> Rachel Walker, Salem Witch Trials, (2001) [http://saalem.lib.virginia.edu/people/c\\_mather.html](http://saalem.lib.virginia.edu/people/c_mather.html) (Accessed June 2019)

<sup>92</sup> S.Schiff, *The Witches Salem, 1692 A History*, 2015 p 332

<sup>93</sup> Hutchinson, *An Historical Essay...*, p 113

This is a powerful statement of contemporaneous scepticism by people immediately and directly involved in sending a large number of people to death. Whilst the emotions and myriad motives behind this letter may never be fully understood, the fact that this was publicly written is indicative of the political climate in the aftermath of the Salem witch trials.

Hutchinson goes on to add the reasons why the jury believed that they had gone too far. These included that the numbers sentenced to death were greater than the number that could be imagined to be really guilty; the religious quality of those people accused was such that it seems very unlikely that they would have succumbed to the Devil; all 19 people who were executed denied the crime right up until their deaths; once the prosecutions had finished everything went back to normal. Hutchinson is clearly making the point here, pointedly, that politically and religiously society was in conflict. That people got caught up in the witch hunt and witch trial hysteria and were deluded into thinking others were deluded by the Devil. Moving on from the seemingly reflective jurors at Salem that help Hutchinson to reinforce scepticism about witchcraft accusations, the conversation between the advocates, journeyman and clergyman move to events in Mohra, Sweden in 1669 when over 500 people were either executed or punished in another way for the crimes of witchcraft, these included men, women and children. The clergyman calls a number of points in the narrative into question in order to further his own argument about the lack of facts and the appalling treatment given to those accused. For example, the clergyman asks the advocate and juryman to,

“Observe the monstrous absurdity of these supposedly facts. Women and children, they say, rode to Blockula upon men; and those men when they came back, were reared against the wall asleep. Then again, they rode upon posts, or upon capes with spits stuck into their backsides. They flew through chimneys and windows, without breaking glass. When they were there, they lay with the Devil, and had sons and daughters;



and those children again were married and brought forth toads and serpents. Then they build houses, and the walls fall upon them, and make them black and blue. They are beaten and abused and laughed at; and yet when they thought the Devil had been dead, they made great lamentation.”<sup>94</sup>

To highlight the ridiculousness of the account the clergyman asked the advocate that if this is true then why do we not believe that Jason and the Argonauts is a real story. It is clear that Hutchinson has chosen to put the events in Sweden into this account for two reasons. Firstly, it is a contemporary event that many people who read Hutchinson’s work would have known about, and secondly it was an exaggerated and unfortunately very costly incident in terms of the number of human lives lost to the European witch hunts. The clergyman goes on to make a number of points showing the illogical nature of the narrative at Mohra despite the advocate trying to say that these details should be believed, because they come from confessions. By the end of the chapter it is clear that the strength of the clergyman’s arguments are such that both the advocate and juryman are convinced. Hutchinson, as the conversation between the three men continues, is creating momentum for the clergyman and by proxy for himself and his views.

The case of Alice Samuels who was arrested, charged and hanged alongside her husband and daughter in 1593 in the town of Warboys in Huntingdonshire is again used as a narrative by the clergyman to illustrate the supposed powers that witches had. The lack of real evidence against such witches means that now he and his contemporaries believed that all of these accusations are false. Alice was ultimately accused of murdering Lady Cromwell who died in 1592. The case was well known throughout the country and beyond, and Hutchinson’s readers would have been well aware of the fact that Alice was accused of witchcraft and bewitching a dozen maids who lived in the Throckmorton household. Throckmorton was a squire of Warboys and a close friend of Lord Cromwell, the paternal grandfather of the Lord Protector Oliver Cromwell. The

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid p 126

power that Alice Samuels was accused of having in relation to the murder of Lady Cromwell was that she had nine spirits that did her bidding. Various named Pluck, Catch, Blew and three of them were named Smac. According to the accusations levelled against Alice she used the spirits to bewitch the maids at the Throckmorton household and when Lady Cromwell cut off some of Alice's hair to burn it (a well-known way to weaken a witch at the time was to burn their hair) Alice was alleged to have said, "Madam, why do you use me thus? I never did you any harm as yet." That was good enough to get Alice, her husband and her daughter hanged. It is interesting to note that the case of Alice Samuels or The Witch of Warboys as it was also referred to was only six years after Scot and 85 years prior to the publication of Webster.

It is interesting that the advocate's resistance to the clergyman's arguments appears to weaken as the book goes on. The only response he has, as the clergyman recounts the narratives and puts forward his arguments as to the incredulous evidence used, was that the old woman had confessed. These are the five words that the advocate says in response to a dozen pages of the clergyman's arguments and recounting of the key points of the narrative. It was the powers of the witches that people fear the most and it was the alleged power of the witches that our three writers try to undermine most vociferously. Sceptically all three writers did not believe that witches had the powers that they were said to have had. Different writers have given us different reasons for why witches were believed to have these powers by people. The increasing credulity at the witch's powers are reflected chronologically by the three writers. Scot believed that witches had such powers and a large part of his book was focusing on the conjuring and fraudulent trickery that witches were alleged to have performed. He believed that witches had powers and he had heard of people who had been bewitched but he did not believe that they had the extensive powers that they were said to have.

“All what needed such preparation of wars, or such trouble, or charge in that behalf? No Prince should be able to reign or live in the land.... So would our witches (if they could) destroy all our magistrates.”<sup>95</sup>

Likewise, Webster increasingly believed that it was people's willingness to believe that witches had powers and fraudulent people took advantage of such beliefs. Likewise, Hutchinson believed that the time of witches and their powers had passed. All three of the writers are aiming to undermine the exaggerated powers of witches which was an important aspect of the undermining of the belief in witches. During a time when superstitious beliefs were ubiquitous to varying degrees all three writers are atypical to question them to the extent that they did, especially Scot back in 1584. However, we are looking at the impact of these sceptical writers and they strongly influenced and encouraged people to think about witchcraft and the accusations being made against the victims. They are talking specifically about those who have been victimised and targeted for political and religious reasons.

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<sup>95</sup> Scot, *The Discoverie* p 49

## Chapter 4

### What the Bible says about Witches

The intimacy that everybody shared with religion is a defining feature of this period, and the Bible was the key text from which religion was taught.

It is no surprise therefore that the Bible was a main source of information and reference by all three writers. By referring to the Bible these sceptical writers were referring to knowledge that the people they were trying to convince already possessed. The choice of the Bible as a main source must not have been coincidental. Not only are the three authors referring to stories from and references in the Bible as a way to prove their point but they are couching their arguments within a familiar framework. The use of the Bible by Scot, Webster and Hutchinson does differ and it is interesting to set their work against the developments in rationalism and science as a way of further understanding their interpretations of the Bible.

In 1543 the Copernican system was published, placing the sun at the centre of the universe. Between the publication of Scot's work and the work of Webster both Francis Bacon and Thomas Hobbes had made considerable contributions in the world of natural philosophy.<sup>96</sup>

Scot's analysis of the Bible is extensive, and he challenges the widely accepted uses and references to witches made in the Bible. Webster uses the Bible and what it says about witches in a more systematic manner than Scot. Hutchinson shows the progressive move further away from the use of the Bible solely to counter the claims of witch mongers and his use of the clergyman as the voice of reason against witchcraft theory is both a clever narrative device and a statement against witchcraft in itself.

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<sup>96</sup> D.Wootton, *The Invention of Science* p 154

Questioning what the Bible said about witches was a potentially dangerous thing to do and so the use of biblical references had to be carried out with caution. No writer could openly criticise the Bible. Many of those who our writers would call witch mongers used the Bible as a source of evidence and it is this fact together with the religiosity of the public that brings about an inevitability of the Bible being used by sceptical writers. Of the three key texts it is Scot's that uses the Bible the most. He uses the few areas of both the new and old Testament that referred to witches. Scot does refer to these time and time again, especially the book of Samuel. However, the book of Samuel is just one small part of the Bible and it is worth putting the references of the three key writers into context. Witches are referred to very infrequently in the Bible and because of this these same contested areas, such as the book of Samuel, were used by both the so called witch mongers and sceptical writers to make their arguments. The three key writers do use the Bible in slightly different ways. Scot uses the Bible as evidence to prove that the Devil does not have the power that many witch mongers suggest that he has. He also uses the Bible to prove that there have been mistakes in translating relevant words from the Bible into English. Webster refers to the Bible in a more allegorical manner. Webster's references to the book of Samuel focuses more on the witch as a fraudulent conjurer, this is more in keeping with Webster's overall thoughts on witches and their powers.

Webster explains how the fraudulent conjurer would have been able to trick people into thinking that Samuel had been raised from the dead, "Because Samuel's Body had lain too long in the grave, some count it near two years, and therefore must needs in a great part be corrupted, wasted and disfigured, but none could have certainly known that it was Samuel."<sup>97</sup>

Scot argues that "if it were true, that Samuel himself were raised... It maketh rather to the disproof into the

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<sup>97</sup> J. Webster, *The Displaying of...* p 172

proof of our witches, which can either do that kind of miracle, or any other, in any such place or company.”<sup>98</sup>

At the very heart of the widespread belief in witchcraft was the battle between good and evil. People wanted to live good lives with the hoped-for eternity in heaven (depending on one’s beliefs) and one of the main obstacles to people trying to live a good and godly life was the work of the Devil. The Devil and his acolytes, which included witches, were there to carry out the Devil’s evil deeds and to undo the good work of God and his followers. It is unsurprising therefore that the Bible, and what the Bible says about witches and witchcraft, are at the very heart of all works on witchcraft. It is important to have some religious context of the three works in order for us to fully understand the desired and resultant understanding and use of the Bible at the time in which these works were written. Throughout the crisis of the Reformation and the CounterReformation, the intensity from both sides was due to their genuine religiosity. In the late 18th century and beyond, we see theories of witchcraft and religious enthusiasm against it used for more party-political means as illustrated in the work of Bishop Francis Hutchinson. Whether one considers Martin Luther’s 1517 publication of the 95 theses or the 1521 edict of Worms as the starting point of the Reformation in Europe, in England under Henry VIII the Reformation began in the 1530s and thus, there were just two generations during which England underwent a highly significant and long-lasting religious revolution before Scot’s work was published in 1584. Between the death of Henry VIII in 1547 and the publication of the *Discoverie of Witchcraft* the English monarchy had gone through a number of significant religious changes. The six-year reign of Edward VI followed by the nine-day reign of Lady Jane Grey was followed by the return to Catholicism by Mary I. Reigning as Queen of England from 1553 to 1558 Mary I returned England to the Catholic fold, sanctioned by Pope Paul IV who in 1555 issued a papal bull recognising Mary and her husband, Philip I the King of Spain as the rightful King and Queen.<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> Scot, *The Discoverie*.... p 121

<sup>99</sup> <https://www.english-heritage.org.uk/learn/story-of-england/tudors/religion/> (Accessed Sept 2021)

Born c.1538, Reginald Scot truly was a child of the Reformation and religion and politics would have been one and the same for his family and for Reginald himself. With so many religious changes taking place during Scot's childhood and adulthood, he and his family, alongside all the other families of worth and wealth, would have had to consider their religious leanings as part of their political positions. If a gentleman held a position of political power during the reign of Edward VI as a Protestant, he would have had to seriously consider changing his religion if he wanted to keep his post once Mary I had come to power. Likewise, monarchs such as Mary I would have had to consider the political loyalty of a very large range of advisers and ministers based on their religion as well as their political allegiances.

In 1570, Pope Pius V excommunicated Elizabeth I and released her subjects from their allegiance to her. The Ridolfi plot in 1571 followed and anti-Catholic feelings escalated throughout England in the next decade. The excommunication was rescinded in 1580 as it had created an upsurge of support for Elizabeth against the interference of a foreign power and made the situation of Catholics in England almost impossible, as they had to choose between their country and their religion.<sup>100</sup> What this meant for Scot was the increasingly clear connection between witchcraft practices, beliefs and anti-Catholic feelings. Anything that was bad, or evil came from Rome. In this respect he picks up the baton from Johan Weyer who wrote in his *De Praestigiis Daemonum*,

'So as you may understand, that the papists do not only by their doctrine, in books and sermons teach and publish considerations, and the order thereof, whereby they may induce men to bestow, or other cast away their money upon masses for their souls; but they make it also a parcel of the sacrament of old orders (of the which number a country is one) and insert many forms of conjurations into their divine service, and not only

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<sup>100</sup> J. W. O'Malley, 2004, *Excommunicating Politicians: Some cautionary tales from history*, <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2004/09/27/excommunicating-politicians-some-cautionary-tales-history> (Accessed Nov 2019)

into their pontificals, but into their mass books; yea into the very canon of the mass'<sup>101</sup>.

The anti-Catholic element in Scot's book was clearly a driving force. Scot believed that witch-mongering was a Catholic doctrine and activity and an important aspect of his work was to expose those who were Catholic, and therefore help to perpetuate the true belief in God and the Gospels. There has been some work on Scot's doctrinal position and Leland Estes believed Scot to be an Erasmian.<sup>102</sup> Erasmus embraced the humanistic belief in an individual's capacity for self-improvement and the fundamental role of education in raising human beings above the level of brute animals<sup>103</sup>. Although he seems to be alone in these assumptions. This may well be due to the dominance of the Thomas (*Religion and the Decline of Magic: Studies in Popular Beliefs in Sixteenth and Seventeenth-Century England* (1971) and McFarlane (*Witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart England* (1970) thesis or the lack of evidence within Scot's work. To many historians the fact that Scot was anti-Catholic was simply a result of his Protestantism. Philip Almond, one of the most recent historians to work on the subject of Scot wrote,

“As for most of his Elizabethan Protestant contemporaries, to be Protestant was to be above all a vehemently anti-Catholic and anticlerical.”<sup>104</sup>

Scot does little to hide his anti-papist sympathies, “The incivilitie and cruell sacrifices of Popish preest do yet exceed both the Jew and the Gentile: these take upon them to sacrifice Christ himself.”<sup>105</sup> Other historians have attempted to pin down Scot and identify his motives, especially his religious beliefs. Philip Almond writes that Scot was driven by a theology of the Holy Spirit, this idea is based on the final parts of Scot's

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<sup>101</sup> Johan Weyer, *De Praestigiis Daemonum*, (Basel 1563)

<sup>102</sup> L. L. Estes, 'Strange, Incredible and Impossible Things: The Early Anthropology of Reginald Scot', *Transcultural Psychiatry*, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1363461509105824>, June 2009, p 9, (Accessed September 2019)

<sup>103</sup> Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/erasmus/> (Accessed September 2021)

<sup>104</sup> Philip C Almond, *England's First Demonologist; Reginald Scot and the Discovery of Witchcraft*, (Ontario 2004), p 190

<sup>105</sup> Scot, *The Discoverie...* p 153



treatise, but subsequent research has discovered that this was copied almost verbatim from Josias Simmler (1530-1576), a Swiss Theologian and humanist scholar. There is also some thought, put forward by David Wootton that Scot was a member of the Family of Love. However, this somewhat tenuous supposition is based on the fact that in the 17th century Scot's work was translated into Dutch by a printer who was a member of the Family of Love. To further backup his point, Wootton argues that Scot, by attacking the Family of Love, is in fact protecting his sectarian views,

“But although I abhor that lewd interpretation of the Family of Love, and such other heretics, as would reduce the whole Bible into allegories: yet (methinks) the creeping there is rather metaphorical or significantly spoken, and literal.”<sup>106</sup>

These diverse opinions on Scot's religious position illustrate that during this period one's religion was never as simple as being a Protestant or a Catholic. The numerous nuances within the Protestant movement, together with the potential political fallout from the clash of divisions within the Protestant religion meant that for people of political influence, like the Scot family, it may not have been an easy task to openly adhere to just one Protestant branch. It equally may have been the case that Reginald Scot, like many people, made up his religion with tenets from various different aspects of the Protestant movement.

What is clear however from reading his work is that his belief in the Bible and the truth within the Bible helped him to illustrate his scepticism regarding the beliefs in witchcraft. Scot uses the Bible extensively as evidence in his work against a widespread belief in witchcraft. With the exception of a few, everybody in England would have either a first-hand knowledge of the Bible through their attendance at services or increasingly by reading it themselves or having it read or quoted to them.

Scot references the Old Testament 142 times in his book and the New Testament 82 times. Comparing his use

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<sup>106</sup> David Wootton, 'Politics and Culture in Early Modern Europe' in S. Clark (ed) *Languages of Witchcraft: Narrative, Ideology and Meaning in Early Modern Culture*, (London 1987), p 36

of the Bible to that of Webster who uses the Old Testament 76 times and the New Testament 66 times we can see that Scot has relied a great deal more on biblical referencing than his fellow sceptical writer of just under 100 years later. This does not make Scot any more or less convincing than Webster, but is interesting when we look at the particular books from the Holy Scriptures used by Scot, we are able to draw conclusions as to his intentions in using the Bible so extensively. The majority of Scot's references come from the first book of Samuel. The 25 references made by Scot are matched with an 11-reference tally by Webster. The book of Job followed closely by the book of Psalms and the book of Genesis are all referenced over 10 times. From the New Testament Scot predominantly uses Matthew, John and Luke. They respectively feature heavily with 15, 11 and 12 references each respectively. The only comparable work of the New Testament used by Scot is Acts with 14 references. These figures need to be compared against his non-biblical reference library in order to give us some context. The *Malleus Maleficarum*, the most referenced book used by Scot is referenced 33 times. In total the number of non-biblical works referred to by Scot is 229, the vast majority of these works are referred to once or possibly twice. Thus, we can see how important the Bible was to Scot.

The 25 references made by Scot to the first book of Samuel surround the summoning of Samuel's spirit by Saul. Saul, following the death of Samuel, is the King of Israel and is facing the assembled forces of the Philistines. Receiving no guidance from the prophets or his dreams and having driven out all the necromancers and magicians from Israel, Saul secretly set about looking for a witch to help him. The most common version of the story states that the woman of Endor claims that she can see the ghost of Samuel rising from the abode of the dead.<sup>107</sup> Samuel's voice frightens the Witch of Endor, and after complaining of being disturbed from his eternal sleep, Samuel berates Saul for disobeying God by raising his spirit and

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<sup>107</sup> Samuel 28 12-14 This is the version used throughout this thesis.

predicts Saul's downfall.<sup>108</sup>

Predictably Saul dies the next day in battle having been fatally wounded and is forced to commit suicide by using his own sword. The witch, seeing that Saul has been made upset by Samuel's words, comforts him and feeds him before he leaves.

This passage was one of the most controversial and hotly contested passages regarding witchcraft and witches in the Bible. The main controversy is regarding the etymology of the word witch, but also the fact that the passage never says that the witch was responsible for summoning Samuel's spirit and it also says that the witch made a loud cry in fear when she saw Samuel's spirit, which most scholars even at the time of Scot would have thought unlikely an act of a medium or a witch. Scot sets much of Book Seven to an examination of the Witch of Endor. He begins the seventh book with, in his own opinion, clearing up the problem of the translation of the Hebrew word Ob, as it appears in the Bible. According to Scot this has been mistranslated by ancient scholars and in fact a witch should be more aptly called Ventriloqui,

"These are such as take upon them to give oracles, to tell where things lost have become, and finally to appeach others of mischiefs, which they themselves most commonly have brought to pass: whereby many times they overthrow the good frame of honest women, and of such others of their neighbours, with whom they are displeased."<sup>109</sup>

Scot then writes about the Nun of Kent. This was a case from 1536. A poor woman who began to have prophetic visions which grew in popularity. Within the space of three years Elizabeth Barton had become a nun and had met with Henry VIII on several occasions, only falling victim herself to the charge of treason. Her life ended in a hanging and the ignominy of being the only woman to have her head displayed on a spike on

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<sup>108</sup> Samuel 28 12-14

<sup>109</sup> Scot, *The Discoverie of..*, p 101

London Bridge. Scot uses the Nun of Kent story because he believes that the same devices to trick people were used by both Barton and the witch to similar ends,

“Now compare this wench (the Maid of Kent) with the Witch of Endor, and you will see that both the couzenages may be done by one art.”<sup>110</sup>

By Chapter 8 of Book Seven, Scot is focusing on the Witch of Endor, and whether she accomplished the raising of Samuel truly, or by deceit. Scot disputes the fact that the woman of Endor (notice that he refers to her as the woman, not witch, of Endor) as he calls her was able to raise Samuel because, “The souls of the righteous are in the hands of God... Souls are in a certain place expecting judgement and cannot remove from events. Neither is it God’s will, that the living should be taught by the dead.”<sup>111</sup>

Scot then goes on to use the example of Lazarus as only Jesus was able to raise him from the dead. In the following chapter Scot details his argument that the Devil cannot raise the dead. Otherwise argues Scot we would be overrun. Scot delicately agrees to disagree (with reverence) with established church voices such as St Augustine over the matter of whether Samuel had been risen from the dead. Scot believes that it was the Devil in the likeness of Samuel that spoke to Saul. But Scot has trouble with this because Samuel was said to have slept before being summoned, but the Devil does not sleep or die according to Scot so logically,

“... We may gather, that it was neither the Devil in person, nor Samuel: but a circumstance is here described, according to the deceived opinion and imagination of Saul.”<sup>112</sup>

If it had been a Devil said Scot then surely it would have said so in the Bible that it was the Devil and also that in that passage in which Saul and Samuel communicate the name of Jehovah is repeated five times, the name the Devil cannot abide to hear. Scot then goes on to explain how the deceit was done. Scot describes

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<sup>110, 111 and 112</sup> | *ibid* p 105, 106 and 107

the manner in which Saul could have been fooled into believing that she was a witch. Scot describes how the woman would have hidden herself to see who came into the room and knowing that the Philistines were outside the city gates and that Saul was looking for counsel, she could have easily surmised what Saul was after. She could have cold read Saul to use a more modern term and Scot even explains how through a combination of open and closed questionings the woman would have led Saul to tell her that it was Samuel who he sought. The role of Samuel was played, according to Scot, by the witch herself or by a confederate. As for the motives and the likely responses of Samuel,

“Whereby the witch, or her confederate priest might easily conjecture that his heart failed (Saul’s), and direct the Oracle or prophecy accordingly: especially understanding by his present talk, and also by former prophecies and doings that were passed, that God had forsaken him, and that his people were declining from him.”<sup>113</sup>

The Witch of Endor was able to disguise her voice to sound like Samuel because she was a Ventriloqui, “Speaking as it were from the bottom of her belly, did cast herself into a trance, and so abused Saul, answering to Saul in Samuel’s name, in her counterfeit hollow voice: as the wench of Westwell (Kent) spake, whose history I have rehearsed before at large and this is right Ventriloqui.”<sup>114</sup>

Scot’s deconstruction of the Witch of Endor is surprisingly modern in describing how the hoax was carried out and we can see the importance of the book of Samuel, and the large number of references by Scot, as this particular passage encapsulates many aspects of Scot’s scepticism. It is equally interesting that when we look in Chapter Eight of Webster’s work, he uses much of the same arguments regarding the Witch of Endor as Scot does. The main difference being in the narrative structure that Webster is using. In opposition to his

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<sup>113</sup> Ibid p 107

<sup>114</sup> Ibid p 108

arguments Webster uses his literary opponent Mr Glanville as the voice of the witch monger. Webster mentions Glanville as, "... A fresh espoused so bad a cause, and taken the quarrel upon them; And to that purpose have newly furnished up the old Weapons, and rake up the old arguments, force of the Popish Sink and Dunhill's, and put them into a new dress."<sup>115</sup>

Webster tells us that upon reading Glanville's publication of *A blow at modern Sadducism* (1668)<sup>116</sup> he was, "stirred up to answer their supposedly strong arguments, and invincible instances, which I have done "I confess" without fear, or any great regard to their Titles, Places, or Worldly Dignities, but only considered the strength or weaknesses of their arguments, proofs, and reason."<sup>117</sup>

Webster reiterates the fact that Saul was in a desperate situation and susceptible to the words and actions of a known deceiver. Webster produces a numerical list laying out the different reasons why the Witch of Endor was no witch. The reasons given by Webster included: It was well known that Saul had been rejected by God; that the woman was a mere imposter and lying cheat and used nothing but imposture; the woman was an active deceiver and one that intended to cheat and lie because Saul was in a condition to be deluded; the authorship of the first book of Samuel is questioned, if Saul had anything to do with the writing of the recording of the events surrounding the resurrection or summoning of Samuel, then the account we read in the first book of Samuel would not be so vague and finally that Saul must have been in a different room from the woman and her confederate was pretending to be Samuel. Finally, Webster suggests that there is some disagreement over what happened. Webster put forward three suggestions,

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<sup>115</sup> Webster, *The Displaying of ....* Introduction

<sup>116</sup> Glanville, *A blow at modern Sadducism in some philosophical considerations about witchcraft. To which is added, the relation of the fam'd disturbance by the drummer, in the house of Mr. John Mompesson, with some reflections on drollery and atheisme. / By a member of the Royal Society*, 1668

<sup>117</sup> Webster, *The Displaying of ....* Introduction

- “ 1. Some do conceive that it was the Body of Samuel that was raised up and acted by his soul or by Satan.
2. Some hold that it was Samuel’s Soul that appeared in the shape and habit, that he had living.
3. Others do positively affirm that it was the Devil that assumed the shape of Samuel, and so acted the whole business, by acompact betwixt him and the Woman.”<sup>118</sup>

Here again Webster uses many of the same arguments and ideas that Scot uses. The main argument used in this instance is the omnipotence of God and his power. It is particularly interesting that writing nearly 100 years later that the Witch of Endor was still a highly contentious issue for both the sceptics and believers. In order to complete this survey, we will consider Hutchinson’s use of the Witch of Endor, although he makes very little reference to it. It appears as part of his chronological table of some trials and executions that make up Chapter Two in his work. When Webster wrote his *Displaying of Supposed Witchcraft*, the religious environment had not changed a great deal. Just a year after the publication of his work, England was rocked by attempts to kill Charles II in 1683 a supposed plot by the Jesuits, with the blessing of the Pope. Its aims were to replace Charles II with his catholic brother and heir, James, Duke of York, in order to re-establish Catholicism in England. The Popish plot, as it is known, was the culmination of a rise of anti-Catholic feeling throughout the 1670s and undoubtedly would have had an influence on Webster and his work. The rise of anti-Catholic feeling was not necessarily due to the domestic fears of the Protestant majority within England. The Catholic minority were peaceful and anti-Catholic feeling, which crossed all social boundaries, was based on the growing strength of the French. Louis XIV was the champion of political absolutism and had led the successful Counter Reformation in Europe during the 1670s. Many in England feared a repeat of the Spanish Armada (1588), but this time led by the French. Therefore, religion and politics were closely connected.

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<sup>118</sup> Webster, *The Displaying of...* p 171

The Popish plot of 1678 was just the latest in a thread of Catholic threats to the Protestant establishment. Fears of Catholic influence also extended into the Stuart court as the Queen, Catherine of Braganza was a Portuguese Catholic. Whilst not as overt in her evangelicalism as her predecessor, Henrietta Maria, the wife of Charles I, Catherine had many Catholics in her employ. She had 28 Catholic priests and her physician, Sir George Wakeman, and her private secretary, Sir Richard Bellings, were both Catholics.<sup>119</sup>

It is also worth considering that whilst Webster's book focused on witchcraft, it was published at a time when a great deal of anti-Catholic literature was being consumed by the public. Not only did influential books such as John Foxe's *The Book of Martyrs* continue to be reprinted since its first publication in 1563, but more recent books such as Andrew Marvell's *An Account of the Growth of Popery and Arbitrary Government (1678)*<sup>120</sup> were popular as they associated popery with tyranny,

"There has now for divers years a design been carried on to change the lawful government of England into absolute tyranny and to convert the established church into downright Popery."<sup>121</sup>

It is also necessary to draw attention to the fact that, unlike Scot who uses the Bible solely as his source of information, Webster in the introduction to Chapter 4 writes,

"That the scriptures and sound reason offer true and proper mediums to prove the actions attributed unto witches by, and not other improper ways that many authors have used."<sup>122</sup>

A key feature of Webster's arguments against witchcraft is that of reason and rationalism. Scot's literalism

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<sup>119</sup> Cited in K.D. Haley, "No Popery" in the Reign of Charles II" in *Britain and the Netherlands*, (ed). J.S. Bromley and E.H.Kossmann (The Hague 1975) Volume 5, p.107-08

<sup>120</sup> Andrew Marvell, *An Account of the Growth of Popery and Arbitrary Government*, (Amsterdam 1678)

<sup>121</sup> Cited in David Ogg, *England in the Reign of Charles II* Second Edition, (OUP, 1984), p 541

<sup>122</sup> Webster, *The Displaying of ...*, p 43



in comparison to Webster's use of the Bible in a more metaphorical sense is illustrative of both the writers' approach to the subject and the times in which they lived and wrote. Born in 1610, Webster would have been witness to a significant number of scientific discoveries, many of which were seen as challenging to the established ways of understanding the world. The development of the mechanistic view created in part by inventions by Blaise Pascal and Pierre de Fermat alongside the work of members of the Royal Society such as Robert Hooke and Robert Boyle, were both instrumental in the development of deductive reasoning.

Webster therefore views his scepticism surrounding the belief in witchcraft through two lenses: that of reason and of the scriptures. In Chapter 4 Webster states that the Bible is the only source to decide the power of Demons and witches. Here we find great similarity with Scot's arguments. The reasoning line of argument is used throughout by Webster. Using his ongoing war of words with Glanville, Webster writes that Glanville argues that omission does not mean denial. Therefore, according to Glanville if the Bible does not talk about the power of witches that does not mean that the power of witches is not real. Webster argues against this assumption by Glanville. He argues that by Glanville saying that the information is missing from the Bible, Glanville is saying that no 'silence' from the Bible is argumentative. Webster states however that, "... we cannot universally say, and nothing have a being but what is mentioned in Scripture: but we may very well affirm, that some things have no being, or truth of existence, because not declared in Scripture."<sup>123</sup>

Unlike Scot, what Webster is doing is inferring from Scripture as well as quoting directly from it and using the assumptions written by his predecessors regarding what the Bible does and does not say about witches and witchcraft. Webster, for example, writes that the Bible does not mention America.<sup>124</sup> By Glanvillian logic then, argues Webster, America would not exist. The Bible, states Webster, is about how to live a good life and just

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<sup>123</sup> Ibid p 43

<sup>124</sup> Ibid p 44

because the Bible does not tell us what not to do explicitly that does not mean the Bible is not worth reading and learning from. Webster does question some of the validity of the stories, but he does not deny them outright. Reflecting the scientific views of his age Webster calls for stories to be verified and calls to question certain legal aspects such as the unquestioning belief in witness statements for example. He echoes the challenge against the use of single person witness statements that is made by Scot. Webster is not claiming that we should not believe the stories from the Bible, but he is asking for them to be looked at, examined with sound reasoning and subsequently with implications for the idea of and the belief in witchcraft.<sup>125</sup>

With regards to the widespread belief that it was possible to seal a pact with the Devil by copulating with him, Webster states that the Bible does not say one way or the other so therefore those people who put forward the idea that this is true cannot use it as a way of promoting the idea that witchcraft exists. Webster suggests that sex with the Devil is unlikely because the Bible does not provide a remedy for it, nor does it mention it as a type of sex when the Bible mentions many different types of sex in various parts of the Bible, "And if faith must stumble, where the authority of the scriptures is wanting, then surely the belief of all rational men must needs be staggering, to believe what these, witch mongers affirm of the witches visible league and carnal copulation with the Devil, when there is no authority of Scripture at all to strengthen or countenance any such matter."<sup>126</sup>

Webster also states that if sex with the Devil were true then Moses, God's lawgiver, would have made a commandment against it.<sup>127</sup> This is an interesting passage as it shows that Webster is not, like many of the other sceptical writers both before and after him, suggesting that the world of spirits and angels does exist and he is also willing to provide the witch mongers with as much support from the Bible as he claims for his

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<sup>125</sup> Ibid p 44

<sup>126</sup> Leviticus 18:22-24, *Holy Bible*: King James version.

<sup>127</sup> Webster, *The Displaying of ....* P 47

own views in this particular instance. Webster also uses the Bible, quoting from both Corinthians and Timothy stating that the war against the Devil is a spiritual not a corporeal one. He also suggests that Jesus, in the Bible, warned us about many of the threats that the Devil poses<sup>128</sup> but that Jesus never mentioned the threat of witches at any point throughout the Bible. In the same way that there is no mention in the Bible of anyone who has made a covenant with the Devil. The witches that are mentioned in the Bible such as Simon<sup>129</sup>, Elymus<sup>130</sup> and the Jewish exorcists<sup>131</sup> are not said to have made any covenant with the Devil. Therefore, argues Webster, the idea of making a covenant with the Devil cannot be true. By 1718, when Bishop Francis Hutchinson published his historical essay concerning witchcraft, the religious background had not shifted a great deal from that of the era when Webster was published 41 years earlier. When one compares the structure and the arguments used by Webster and Hutchinson, the development and progression in the arguments surrounding sceptical thought is, primarily for chronological reasons, not as great in range as when one compares Scot and Hutchinson. However, there are several comparisons that can be made of value between Scot and Hutchinson, and one of those is the use of the Holy Scriptures in describing and dismissing widespread belief in witches and witchcraft.

As far as the progressive nature of sceptical publications is concerned, Hutchinson is the ideal final publication to study. Hutchinson himself was a clergyman, a well-respected clergyman at the end of his days as the Bishop of Down in Ireland. Hutchinson also uses the character of the clergyman as the voice of reason and rationalism. Thus, Hutchinson is a member of the state religion and uses a fictional member of the state

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<sup>128</sup> Timothy 3:7 *Holy Bible*: King James Version

<sup>129</sup> John 12:1-8, *Holy Bible*: King James Version

<sup>130</sup> Acts 13:8, *Holy Bible*: King James Version

<sup>131</sup> Acts 19:13, *Holy Bible*: King James Version

religion to argue against the existence of witches and witchcraft as well as to quell the religious enthusiasm that worried Hutchinson and his Whiggish friends. It is true that there is a deeper political aspect to Hutchinson's work, but nonetheless the religious aspect is prominent. Religiously, there was not as much to fear during Hutchinson's time as there was during Webster's and indeed during the time that Scot was writing. Protestantism was still the majority religion in the country. According to statistics produced on the British Religion in Numbers website in 2012, Clive Field illustrated through a synthesis of a wide range of primary and secondary sources, and some extrapolation, that as a percentage of the population, Nominal Anglicans made up 92.0% of the population in 1718. This was a slight drop from the 1680 percentage of 94.4% and slightly less than the 1760 93.6%.<sup>132</sup>

However, according to Field's calculations, the next biggest group in 1718 was a mere 6.2% of a group Field calls Old Dissenters. This did not mean that by the time Hutchinson was considering and writing his book in the first decade of the 18th-century that the fear of Popish plots as seen in the time of Webster had dissipated. Concerns over James II's (1685-1688) attempts of securing the freedom of worship for Catholics and also the removal of the Test and Corporation Acts so that Catholics could occupy public office was one of the main reasons that led to James II dissolving Parliament in 1687. Hutchinson's use of the Bible, in a similar vein to Webster's, is as a significant supporting source of direct evidence, but it is interesting that at the beginning of Chapter 12, (subtitled *What kind of Witchcraft are there that are spoken of in the Holy Scriptures*) the clergyman quotes judicial law before the laws of the old Testament. Whereas Scot put forward the idea that divine law was over and above everything, an idea not totally dispensed with by Hutchinson, but man's judicial laws come before the laws of God according to the clergyman. However, Hutchinson does not say this

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<sup>132</sup> Clive D. Field, 'Counting Religion in England and Wales: The Long Eighteenth Century, c. 1680-c. 1840' in *The Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, Vol. 63, No. 4, October 2012, p 693-720

out right, he states instead that the laws of the Old Testament are vague,

“The Laws of the Old Testament in this point, are mostly grounded upon Names, without Definitions along with them: and therefore, though they might be sufficiently known then, they can hardly be determined now so certainly, estimate the Rule by which we may take away our Neighbours Lives.”<sup>133</sup>

Hutchinson then spends time in explaining the many different names used within the Bible that have been used by witch mongers to describe witches. Hutchinson, in a similar vein to Scot looks at the etymology of the word used to describe witches and he calls them a range of different names, “Poisoner... Juggler... Sorcerer... Diviner... Inchanter.. Charmer.. Necromancer..Wizzard and finally Astrologer.”<sup>134</sup> He does this at length in order to support his conclusion regarding the use of names in the Holy Scriptures,

“And therefore, I conceive, we cannot, without Danger, take upon us from the Names, to define either the Nature of their Works, or the Extent of their Power. We must remember it is a Case of Life or Death that is before us; and therefore, our Judgement must be founded upon surer ground is then doubtful Names.”<sup>135</sup>

When prompted by the advocate to explain what he believes witches were in the Bible the clergyman replies that they were those who were involved in divination and false prophecies. The connection is clear here between the general legal position of witchcraft by the turn of the 18th century and Hutchinson’s use of divination and prophecy as describing witchcraft. The contents of the 1604 Witchcraft Act, passed in the time of James I of England and VI of Scotland, An Act against Conjurat[i]on Witchcraft and Dealing with Evil and Wicked Spirits, made it clear from the start that it was a felony if anyone was harmed in any way. But it is clear from studying the text of the statute that one of the focuses of the law was that practices such as divination

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<sup>133</sup> Hutchinson, *An Historical Essay ...* p 182

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid* p 187

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid* p 184

were still considered problematic and worthy of prosecution,

“That if any person or persons shall, from and after the said Feast of St Michael the Archangel next coming, take upon him or them by witchcraft, enchantment, charm, or sorcery, to tell or declare in what place any treasure of gold or silver should or might be found or had, in the earth or other secret places, or where goods things lost or stolen should be found or become...”<sup>136</sup>

Hutchinson quotes extensively from the 1604 Act regarding divination which he links to the cases of Samuel and Saul. Using the example of Samuel, Hutchinson makes the point that if you disobeyed God then you may as well practice divination, which is the same as witchcraft,

“We see under the name of Witchcraft, the Prophet expresses those Divinations, by the Credit of which the Heathens drew away the People from the true God to false ones.”<sup>137</sup>

Hutchinson also refers to the story of Jezebel who was a prophet but labelled a witch. In the Book of Revelations, she was said to have had four hundred false prophets that were fed at her table: and though her works were called witchcraft, her admirers honoured her as a prophetess.<sup>138</sup>

Hutchinson writes at some length about prophets and how they found themselves in popular demand. He uses these stories from the Bible to build a picture of religious enthusiasm, a concern that Hutchinson addresses throughout his work. The people become dependent on these false prophets and ignore God because of this. As far as Hutchinson is concerned, religious enthusiasts are the same as false prophets. In the Bible, false prophets replaced God and so Hutchinson's concern is that the same thing may happen again.

Hutchinson's concern of a godless world only strengthened his desire for toleration and the need to

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<sup>136</sup> An Act against Conjurat[i]on Witchcraft and Dealing with Evil and Wicked Spirits, (1604)

<sup>137</sup> Hutchinson, *An Historical Essay...* p 186

<sup>138</sup> Revelations 2: 20 Holy Bible King James version

marginalise witchcraft as an old and outdated. Another reason why Hutchinson refers to divination and prophecy at length is to illustrate that things since the Bible have not really changed a great deal. The need to worship a loving God was more than a matter of faith, it was a matter of spiritual survival for Hutchinson.<sup>139</sup>

The advocate moves the clergyman on from the Old Testament into the New Testament and asks him to identify figures from the New Testament who were considered witches. The Clergyman says that the Bible tells us that there were witches who were pretenders to the apostles and then in the New Testament there were sorcerers who pretended to have the powers of real apostles,

“Now I ask, By what Ways to transform themselves into the Apostles of Christ? It was by pretending to do as the Apostles did, when they were Liars and deceitful Workers who did nothing that was really like them. They had their feigned visions, revelations and counterfeit inspirations.<sup>140</sup>

The clergyman makes the point that whether it was the witches copying the work of the diviners outside the temple or particular people like Simon the Magician<sup>141</sup>, they were all fraudsters. Simon lived in Samaria and the people there believed that he could perform magic. Once the apostle Phillip arrived, Simon followed Phillip and was baptised. Simon was blinded by the ‘magic’ of Phillip and the other apostles and according to Acts 8 he never fully opened his heart to God as he was interested only in the signs and wonders of Phillip.

When pushed by the advocate as to whether there were evil spirits behind these people or these people were simply bad people, the clergyman states, “... The Devil was their God and Leader in Reality, and all their Works were Sacrifices to him: For whoever opposes and corrupts gods truth, whoever promotes Principles that give

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<sup>139</sup> Hutchinson, *An Historical Essay...* p 189

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid* p 189

<sup>141</sup> Acts 8:9-24

liberty to be Seen; whoever disturbs the happiness of mankind by breaking the Peace and good Order of Churches and States, to serve themselves and their own Pride and Pleasures... May very justly be called the Devils Works.<sup>142</sup>

Hutchinson, with his identification of the relationship between all people who do bad things and the Devil, is echoing Scot and Webster as well as the clause in the 1604 Witchcraft Act that states a covenant between the Devil and people to be a felony. Hutchinson is also making the same point about the limits to the Devil's power as he states that God only allows the Devil power when God wants him to have power. The majority of the time however it is religious enthusiasm that most people believed to be responsible for witchcraft. A significant shift away from the positions of Scot and Webster and a reflection of the thinking of the political elites of the time. For Hutchinson and those in the earlier decades of the long 18th century, the Bible has much to say about witchcraft, but we should be always looking onwards as well, "But in later ages that have made greater Improvements in Philosophy, are more likely to judge right then they (those who wrote the Bible), and therefore do not much want their Authorities in this Matter."<sup>143</sup>

The importance of the Bible, and what it says about witches, does change over the period in which the three writers are published. All three of our writers show the Bible reverence and use it as an important source. The Bible was a very important part of the early modern society. It had been claimed as defining evidence of righteousness by all sides in the Reformation and the Counter Reformation, by witch mongers, sceptics and all those in between. Therefore, this analysis of the methods used by our three writers is very important aspect of this work.

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<sup>142</sup> Hutchinson, An Historical Essay... p 194

<sup>143</sup> Ibid p 198



## Chapter 5

### Conclusion

The aim of this thesis has been to trace the development and growing influence of sceptical publications in England through three key texts by looking at the work of Scot, Webster and Hutchinson and the development of the arguments used by sceptics against witch mongers and those who agreed with the witch mongers. This original contribution to this field of study has been to show the progressive development in the arguments being used by these sceptical writers as well as showing the influence that the writers had individually and collectively. I have shown that there are many aspects of Scot's work that were used by Webster and Hutchinson. The criticisms of the legal systems, the anti-Catholic element to their ideas and the role of fraudulent and evil people taking advantage of predominantly socially weaker victims are examples that run through the three works. The influence that Scot had on both Webster and Hutchinson and how Webster influenced Hutchinson in both style and content will be examined here followed by a wider look at their influence on the decline in the widespread belief in witchcraft.

Rather than analysing individual trials, as Hutchinson does, Webster defended the intellectual position and reasoning adopted by Scot, Ady and earlier continental writers, who challenged the supposed powers of witches.

Webster praised Scot's intellect, including his ability to read classical languages:

"And that he was no wretched person, is apparent, being a man of a good Family, a considerable Estate, a man of a very commendable government, and a very godly and zealous Protestant, as I have been informed by persons of worth and credit, and is sufficiently proved by his Writing."<sup>144</sup>

He Continued:

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<sup>144</sup> John Webster, *The Displaying of ...*, p12

“For Mr. *Scot* was a learned and diligent person, as the whole Treatise will bear witness; he understood the Latine Tongue, and something of the Greek, and for the Hebrew, if he knew nothing of it, yet he had procured very good helps, as appeareth in his expounding the several words that are used in the Scriptures for supposed Witches and Witchcraft: as also his quoting of divers of the Fathers, the reformed Ministers, and many other Authors besides, which sufficiently prove that he was not illiterate”<sup>145</sup>

Webster argues that Scot never denied the existence of supernatural powers, but did challenge the popular image of the power of witches, “..it was no evil piece of service, that Master *Scot* did in his book of the discovery of Witchcraft, when he laid open all the several tricks of Legierdemain and sleight of hand, thereby to undeceive the ignorant multitude;”<sup>146</sup>

Webster is also very keen to defend Scot against charges of atheism and Sadducism, ensuring that Scot’s reputation remained intact. These were charges which could discredit him both socially and intellectually. Webster states that, “to deny that a horse has fins like a fish, or wings like a bird, does not in further denying of the being of a horse. Therefore, it is injurious and scandalous in Dr Casaubon and Mr Glanville, to charge Dr Wierus and Mr Scot with Atheism and Sadducism.”<sup>147</sup>

Webster also argues that, “... if the tales that Scot tells are old and silly, they are the most of them taken from those pitiful lying Witchmongers.”<sup>148</sup> Thus, for men like Glanville to accuse Scot of making up lies about things that are silly shows their own accounts to be untrue.

Webster also praises Scot’s work on the translation of the word witch from the Bible. Webster argues that the word has been mis-translated in order to, “...uphold these tenants by those translators had imbibed these

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2,3, 4 and 5 Ibid p 12;269.39 and 11

opinions, and so instead of following the true and genuine signification of the words, they hailed them to make good a preconceived opinion, and did not simply and plainly render them as they ought to have been. Which have been observed by diverse.... which was followed by Mr Scot.”<sup>149</sup>

Hutchinson draws heavily from Scot for cases to reinforce his own arguments and clearly held Scot in high regard, as a scholar and also as a Protestant.

Scot features in Chapter 2 where Hutchinson refers to Mildred Norrington, referencing Scot and also Harsnett who took the case from Scot. Mildred was a 17 year old from Westwell in Kent who was possessed by the Devil and charged by the local minister, to speak with such a voice as they might understand, and to declare from whence he came, the Devil would not speak, but roared and cried mightily. And though we did command him many times, in the name of God, and of his son Jesus Christ, and in his mighty power to speak; yet he would not: until he had gone through all his delaies, as roaring, crying, striving, and gnashing of teeth; and otherwhile with mowing, and other terrible countenances, and was so strong in the maid, that four men could scarce hold her down.<sup>150</sup> Hutchinson agrees with Scot’s opinion that the trial of Mildred, in which, “... The fraud was found, and the cozenage confessed, and she received condign punishment,”<sup>151</sup> can be considered, “wise and perfect trial of every circumstance.”<sup>152</sup>

In an entry in A Chronological Table, the second chapter in his book Hutchinson writes about an event in 1584 he called “A Dreadful Discourse of the Dispossessing of one Margaret Cowper, at Dichet, from a Devil in the Likeness of a headless Bear, Scot says it was a Cheat.”<sup>153</sup> If Scot believes this to be untrue then Hutchinson is clearly willing to go along with Scot. Hutchinson refers to Scot’s explanation of the consequences of an epistle from

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<sup>149</sup> Ibid p 106

<sup>150</sup> Hutchinson, *An Historical Essay...* p236

<sup>8 and 9</sup> Ibid p 241

<sup>11,12,13 and 14,</sup> Ibid p 219

Adrian VI (Pope from 1489 to 1523). The epistle described witches as a, “a sect deviating from the Catholic faith and denying their baptism, and showing contempt of the ecclesiastical sacraments...,”<sup>154</sup> Hutchison believed that this was, “.. A trap that would catch a Protestant as well as a wizzard, and take him off without ever letting the world know what he died for. Scot saith, they melted away many Protestants by this means.”<sup>155</sup> Despite the 136-year gap between Scot’s work and Hutchinson’s books being published, Hutchinson believed that Scot was correct that Protestantism continues to be under attack, under the guise of witchcraft, by the Catholic Church. Hutchinson also draws upon Webster to support his arguments. Hutchinson echoes Webster’s anti-Catholicism and agrees with Webster that the continental definition of witchcraft is unacceptable due to the lack of biblical reference. Hutchinson clearly admires and was influenced by Webster’s approach to witchcraft.

For example, Hutchinson praised Webster’s keen questioning of Edmund Robinson of Pendle.

“Mr Webster went to the house where they were, and desired to have examined the boy in private, the two men that were with him refused it. Then he asked the boy to tell him truly, whether somebody did not teach him to say such things of himself: but the two men plucked the boy from him, and said, he had been examined before two Justices of Peace, and they had never asked him such a question.”<sup>156</sup>

Once the father was separated from his son the boy soon confessed. Hutchinson ends the section on the Pendle trials by reinforcing Webster’s role as a godly but sceptical questioner , “Mr Webster adds, that he himself had had the whole story from Edmund Robinson’s own mouth, more than once.”<sup>157</sup>

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<sup>11,12,13 and 14</sup>, *Ibid* p 219

Hutchinson also refers to Webster's views on the fact that charms did not work. Hutchinson quotes a story from Webster recalling in which two people had used charms instead of using a physician, resulting in the death of one of them,

"He had a charm for vipers, of which he was so confident, that he ventured a wager with his fellow, that he would take it up without harm ; the Viper bit him by the finger, and he sucking it to take out the venom, poisoned himself, and died in a few days."<sup>158</sup>

Both authors have chapters at the beginning of their books focusing on those accused wrongly of witchcraft. Hutchinson taking the lead from Webster by ensuring that the readers of his work fully understand the direction of his arguments. Hutchinson focuses the majority of his work in looking at particular cases. It is clear that Hutchinson's work is a continuation of Scot's arguments regarding witchcraft. Webster clearly builds on Scot's arguments by moving the discourse surrounding widespread belief in witchcraft away from the Devil being directly involved, giving agency to Hutchinson's thesis that belief in witchcraft is no longer a belief of the truly educated and truly religious.

Hutchinson's use of The Lancashire Witches, as Hutchinson referred to them, was one of seven cases in a chapter that was a collection of "notorious imposters detected"<sup>159</sup>

Webster's focused on witchcraft not being caused by the Devil but by, "Envy, Revenge, and hope of Gain,"<sup>160</sup>

Whilst Webster references the cardinal sins as inherent in all men Hutchinson places accusations with a more nuanced approach through the use of three characters who each had differing degrees of belief in witchcraft. Ultimately, the reasons for believing in witches are the same for Webster and Hutchinson.

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<sup>158</sup> Ibid p178

<sup>159</sup> Ibid, The Contents

<sup>160</sup> Hutchinson, *An Essay Concerning..*, p 271

The majority of historians of witchcraft mentioned in the literature review would agree that Hutchinson's work was the final nail in the coffin of the widespread belief in witchcraft, but cases of it and the persecution of it did continue well into the 19th century and beyond. Keith Thomas cases the increasing difficulty that many had with the logical difficulties involved in the making of witchcraft accusations the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Thomas quotes from a London lawyers diary from 1603 who pointed out that diabolical possession can never be confidently identified,

“Because they cannot be assigned any proper token or sign to know that Annie is essentially possessed, which sign must be apparent in all such as are so possessed and not in any others.”<sup>161</sup>

Yet Thomas also notes that witchcraft cases and the persecution of suspected witches did continue well into the 19<sup>th</sup> century and beyond.

“Long before the repeal of the Witchcraft Act of 1736 it had become increasingly difficult to mount and sustain a successful prosecution in the courts.”<sup>162</sup> But he does argue later that,

“After 1736 when the possibility of formal persecution was no longer open villagers turned to informal violence, counter-magic and the occasional lynching.”<sup>163</sup>

Writing in the 1940s R. T. Davies, in *Four Centuries of Witch Beliefs* (1947) informs us that he wrote his book for two reasons. The first reason is to make widely available lesser-known and harder to access works on witchcraft and secondly to examine the function of beliefs in witchcraft in provoking hostility to the early Stuarts, culminating in the Great Rebellion and the establishment of the Commonwealth Protectorate. The

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<sup>161</sup> K. Thomas, *Religion and The Decline of Magic..* p258

<sup>162</sup> Ibid, p 681

<sup>163</sup> Ibid p 696

factors mentioned give context to Davies' concluding remarks. In his conclusion, Davies provides evidence of the discussion surrounding the continuation of these beliefs well into the first half of the 19th century. He reasons that there were a number of officials of the Commonwealth and Protectorate who continued to hold office under the restored Stuarts.<sup>164</sup> This would have kept the Puritan spirit alive and well. Davies gives examples of individuals actions to illustrate his point,

“Amongst them were several judges, or barristers subsequently promoted to the Bench, such as John Arthur, who condemned Julian Cox for witchcraft at Taunton in 1663; Sir Matthew Hale who passed sentence upon Amy Duny and Rose Cullendar at Bury St Edmunds in 1664...and Sir Thomas Raymond, who condemned Temperance Lloyd at Exeter as late as August 1682.”<sup>165</sup>

This witch-mania died hard. Nevertheless, with the revival of Stuart royalism and the notable decline of Calvinism it rapidly relaxed its hold upon the more educated classes.<sup>166</sup>

All three writers were aiming their work at the influential elite who could use their secular and religious powers to take action on the arguments of our three writers.

In his prefatory letter to Sir Roger Manwood, Scot describes his work as on, “... behalfe of the poor, the aged and the simple.”<sup>167</sup>

Scot thus referred to the poor and the powerless, and poor old women in particular as needing the help of those who were able to give help. It is no coincidence that Scot's three prefaces are all aimed at influential local Kentish men. Roger Manwood was considered a godly magistrate by Reginald Scot and was at the time of

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<sup>164</sup> Davies, R. T, *Four Centuries of Witch Beliefs*, (London/New York 1990), p 181

<sup>165</sup> Ibid p 182

<sup>166</sup> Ibid p 182

<sup>167</sup> Scot, *The Discoverie of ...*, p viii

publication the Chief Baron of the Exchequer. Scot describes Manwood as,  
“By nature wholly inclined, and in purpose earnestly bent to relieve the poor, and that not only with hospitality and alms, but by diverse other devices and ways tending to their comfort... Even as a very father to the poor.”<sup>168</sup>  
If Scot were able to convince Sir Roger Manwood to help those who Scot believed to be wrongly accused then it would be hoped that Sir Roger would use his influence, both locally in Kent and at court, to spread these ideas amongst his contemporaries with a hope of securing Scot’s aims in helping these poor women. Scot also dedicates his prefaces to the Dean of Rochester (later Bishop of Salisbury), John Coldwell and William Redmon, the Archdeacon of Canterbury (later Bishop of Norwich). It was to support further Scot’s philosophy and divinity that he looked to these two men. As Scot put it himself, his divinity and philosophy were, “... The groundworke of (which) my book is laid.”<sup>169</sup>

Sir Roger Manwood served Queen Elizabeth I until 1592 and was an MP for both Hastings and Sandwich between 1555 and 1572. He is recorded by some as a notable philanthropist having provided the majority of the money for the foundation in 1563 of a free school to educate those who could not afford it in Sandwich, Kent and by others as, “... a corrupt judge. Some instances of bribery and oppression are recorded of him, and there were at last so many complaints against him, that he was removed from his place.”<sup>170</sup>

Given his financial contributions to educate the less well off in his local area and the alleged dubious legal activities, it may be fairest to associate Sir Roger with the following,

“(He was) an exceptionally corrupt lawyer who gave vast sums to Kentish charities.”<sup>171</sup>

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<sup>168</sup> Ibid sig.A.2.r

<sup>169</sup> Ibid sig.A.8.r

<sup>170</sup> Edward Foss, ‘Legal Celebrities of Kent’, <https://kentarchaeology.org.uk/research/archaeologia-cantiana>, 2017, (Accessed June 2019)

<sup>171</sup> Roger Manwood, R.J. Knecht, <http://historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1604-1629/member/manwood-roger-1591-1623>, (Accessed Oct 2019)



Sir Roger would have had a significant influence in and around the Royal Court as well as the Inner Temple. And whilst it is difficult to quantify or qualify how much influence Sir Roger had in promoting Reginald Scot, the fact that he allowed his name to be associated with such a controversial book does tell us that at the very least Sir Roger supported Scot. *The Discovery of Witchcraft* indeed had many more critics than it had friends. English writers who supported Scot's work included Thomas Ady who wrote in his dedication that, "Mr. Scot published a Book, called his Discovery of Witchcraft, in the beginning of the Reign of Queen *Elizabeth*, for the instruction of all Iudges, and Iustices of those times; which Book did for a time take great impression in the Magistracy, and also in the Clergy, but since that time *England* hath shamefully fallen from the Truth which they began to receive,"<sup>172</sup> later the poet Gabriel Harvey declared in his *Pierce's Supererogation* (1593), "Scot's Discovery of Witchcraft dismasketh sundry the egrarious impostures, and in certain principal chapters, and special passages, hitteth the nail on the head with a witness."<sup>173</sup>

Although the book was not reprinted until 1651 there is evidence to suggest it had a considerable influence. The Kentish sceptic, Henry Oxinden rehearsed some of its arguments fluently in a private letter of 1641, "that certaine creatures here in earth, called witches, must needs be the authors of men's miseries, as though they themselves were innocents and had deserved no such punishments."<sup>174</sup>

Scot's work continued to attract an audience with its new editions and after the Restoration a Canterbury Cathedral canon, Meric Casaubon, noted that he had seen several copies of Scot's work when, "I found it by chance, where I have been, in friends' homes, or Book-seller shops."<sup>175</sup>

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<sup>172</sup> Ady, *A Candle in the Dark*. Dedication

<sup>173</sup> Alexander Grosart, *The Works of Gabriel Harvey*, (London 2015), p 291

<sup>174</sup> D Gardiner, *The Oxinden Letters 1607 to 1642*, (Edinburgh, 1933), p 221

<sup>175</sup> Meric Casaubon, *A treatise proving spirits, witches, and supernatural operations, by pregnant instances and evidences together with other things worthy of note* (1672), p 40

Some interesting work is also being undertaken by Pierre Kapitaniak. In his contribution to *Spectacular Science, Technology and Superstition in the Age of Shakespeare* (2017) Kapitaniak draws a parallel between the actions seen in *Macbeth* and ideas put forward by Scot.<sup>176</sup> For example, in Act One, Scene Three, Line 11, the witches evoke their power to create winds,

“I give thee a wind.”<sup>177</sup>

This supposed ability written about by Shakespeare is one of the first faculties that Scot mentions about witches,

“Such faithless people (I say) are also persuaded, that neither hail nor snow, Thunder nor lightning, rain nor tempestuous wins come from the heavens at the commandment of God: but are raised by the cunning and power of witches and countries.”<sup>178</sup>

The reason for the inclusion of these links between Scot and Shakespeare is to show that the influence of Scot’s work was wide ranging. He had the ear and the support from the higher-ranking nobility and his ideas also found traction amongst the general public. Shakespeare’s use of witches and spirits, especially in *Macbeth* or other potential parallels such as some characters from *A Midsummer’s Night’s Dream*, was more to do with creating characters that the audience could recognise rather than putting forward any sceptical ideas. However, they are exactly the type of people that Scot and other sceptical writers believed were being victimised. The works of Shakespeare, most notably in *Macbeth*’s three witches and their prophesies who used the ideas of Scot were, despite their literary intentions, contributing to the debate in their own way. Therefore,

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<sup>176</sup> Ed. S. Chiari and M. Popelard, *Science, Technology and Superstition in the Age of Shakespeare* (2017) p44

<sup>177</sup> W. Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, (London 1980), Act 1.3 line 11

<sup>178</sup> Scot, *The Discoverie of...*, p 2

Scot's influence must be counted as being resonant in helping to bring about the decline in the widespread belief of witchcraft. Using Holinshed's *Chronicles* as his source, Shakespeare wrote *Macbeth* in 1605 or 1606, to please his King.

The inaugural performance of the play took place during a visit by James' wife, Queen Anne's brother, the King of Denmark in 1606 which is significant given that it was James's voyage to his wife's native land that had prompted his obsession with witchcraft. This was no coincidence, and nor would it have been a further coincidence, that as King James began to consider the belief in witchcraft as something unbecoming to a civilised society such as England. During his reign, *Macbeth*, became a less popular play and associated less with the arts in general.

Some contemporaries regarded Scot's work as denying the reality of spirits or the possibility of supernatural intervention being the same as denying God. Keith Thomas in *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (1971) describes Scot's position as that of a self-conscious minority.

Scot's work began the debate about scepticism in the English language which prepared the intellectual framework for the work of Webster and Hutchinson.

When assessing the influence of John Webster on the decline of the widespread belief in witchcraft, it is necessary to widen our lens. As *The Displaying of Supposed Witchcraft* came towards the end of Webster's literary career it is necessary to illustrate the extent of his influence prior to *The Displaying of Supposed Witchcraft* so that we can gauge this work's impact. Webster's work does differ from that of Reginald Scot in some respects, but it can be seen as a clear development. So where Scot identifies human frailties on both the side of the accused and the accuser, Webster places fraudulent human behaviour at the core of his work. When referring to people taking advantage of witchcraft beliefs he wrote that, "Further we are to consider, that there are many notorious impostures, frauds and cheats committed upon the poor ignorant, credulous

and silly common people.”<sup>179</sup> Later, Hutchinson takes the idea to its conclusion arguing that human frailty is what allows people to believe in witchcraft, and only those who are frail of mind believe in witchcraft,” that I may speak, saith he, the very Truth, an universal Superstition through all Nations hath enslaved the Minds almost of all Men, and overbore our human Frailty”<sup>180</sup> Hutchinson continues, “I think I could do nothing better either for myself or Countrymen, then to pull out Mischief by the Roots.”<sup>181</sup>

John Webster is known to historians primarily for two issues. The first is his contribution to the debate surrounding the reform of education and the second was his somewhat combative relationship with some members of the Royal Society including Joseph Glanville.

Webster had long been interested in witchcraft having been the Minister at Kildwick church in Yorkshire at the time of the Pendle witch trials and during an afternoon service in 1634 a boy called Edmund Robinson was brought in before the congregation with the aim of identifying witches. Webster had now finally got the opportunity to question Edmund Robinson after been denied the opportunity by Edmund’s father and uncle when Webster had visited their house. Webster thought that Robinson had responded very poorly when cross questioned. It was also Webster’s personal interest in the Demon Drummer of Tedworth case in 1662 and the ensuing exchanges between Webster and Glanville (who wrote that there was a Demon drummer in Tedworth amongst other places) that promoted his scepticism. In this case, the local JP, John Mompesson had confiscated a drum from an illegal beggar who was then imprisoned. The drum was heard to make noises in Mompesson’s house along with strange lights and odious smells throughout the house. Webster believed that it was the work of either Mompesson himself, raising

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<sup>179</sup> Webster, *The Displaying of.....* p 331

<sup>180</sup> Hutchinson, *An Historical Essay...* p 197

<sup>181</sup> *Ibid* p 197

funds from visitors to his house or Mompesson's servants who were taking advantage of Mompesson. When we are considering the significance of Webster's work, unlike Scot and Hutchinson, it does not fall as deeply within the framework of Protestant fundamentalism in which many of the leading sceptical writers conduct their work. Webster continues the core Protestant idea that devil worship is unacceptable because it had no biblical justification. As he stated,

"What the scriptures have not revealed the power of the kingdom of Satan is to be rejected and not to be believed."<sup>182</sup>

One of the motives for Webster to write *The Displaying of Supposed Witchcraft* was in response to a new scientific demonology associated with Joseph Glanville, one of the members of the Royal Society who was aiming to prove the need for rational scientific research and progress through a strong belief in God. If there were no witches, then there could be no Devil and if there was no Devil, there can be no God and that would lead to atheism. The relationship between the Royal Society and demonology was complex in this community, illustrated by the fact that it was the Royal Society that published John Webster's work when church and state authorities refused. One of the reasons no doubt that the law society licensed his book was that Webster does not dispute the existence of witchcraft, but its nature. Webster acknowledges that there was, "a spiritual and mental League betwixt the Witch and the Devil."<sup>183</sup>

Like Scot, Webster refrained from denying the existence of witches and many of the cases he uses in his book focus on fraudulent people and their activities linked to witchcraft, some of the cases he would have been able to explain in a purely natural way.

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<sup>182</sup> Webster, *The Displaying of ....* p 47

<sup>183</sup> Ibid p 75

Webster himself said that he did not believe that new arguments are needed. He had argued that, “The impious and published opinions of the too much magnified powers of Daemons and Witches, in this Nation were pretty well quashed and silenced.”<sup>184</sup>

However, it was the words of Joseph Glanville and Meric Casaubon<sup>185</sup> who argued in favour of the existence of witches that had stirred him to put pen to paper.

Directed against Glanville’s own arguments, Webster stated that if the powers of nature are as yet totally unknown, then it, ‘ must needs be folly, madness, and derogative against God’s power in Nature’ to attribute the effect supposedly due to witchcraft to ‘wicked, fallen and degenerate Daemons’. No powers beyond those found in nature need be supposed by the rational philosopher.<sup>186</sup>

To further his point, Bostridge points out the elements of Webster’s work that he shares with previous writers of sceptical publications such as the denial of the Devil’s power. Whilst Webster dismisses the wilderstories of copulation and the raising of tempests, he points out that many witch mongers have also disowned such stories. Bostridge points out that Webster’s view on witchcraft is confusingly double edged.<sup>187</sup> Witchcraft is not a special crime but merely posturing instigated by the Devil. Yet on the other hand all crime is witchcraft, in that all crime involves a covenant with the Devil.<sup>188</sup>

A similarly complex view of witchcraft was clearly reflected amongst the members of the Royal Society.

Membership of the Royal Society was no guarantee of disbelief in witchcraft.<sup>189</sup>

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<sup>184</sup> Webster, *The Displaying of...* p 38

<sup>185</sup> Meric Casaubon, *A treatise proving spirits, witches, and supernatural operations, by pregnant instances and evidences together with other things worthy of note* 1672

<sup>186</sup> Brian Easlea, *Witch Hunting, Magic and the New Philosophy: An Introduction to Debates of the Scientific Revolution 1450 to 1750*, (Sussex 1980), p 206

<sup>187</sup> Ian Bostridge in *Witchcraft*, p72

<sup>188</sup> *Ibid*, p72

<sup>189</sup> Theodore Hoppen, ‘The Nature of the Early Royal Society’ in *The British Journal for the History of Science*, Volume 9, 1976, p 1-24

Sir Isaac Newton thought that even spirits emanated from mere desires of the mind as well as his posthumously revealed belief in a secret biblical code of the Bible. The work by Thomas Spratt, *The History of the Royal Society of London, for the Improving of Knowledge* (1667) gave the readers an insight into the beliefs and aspirations that the founding members of the Royal Society thought it was in their interests to have publicly proclaimed. Spratt's work clearly displays an excessive degree of confidence that belief in witchcraft is effectively banished.<sup>190</sup> Spratt argued through the lives and thoughts of the pre-eminent scientists and thinkers that it was absurd to consider experimental philosophy the enemy of religion. It would have been within this combative, discursive and progressive (in the early modern historical context) debate that Webster's work would have been received.

Despite the lack of cutting-edge argument in Webster's work his contribution is without doubt valuable.

It was clear that he had read the key sceptical authors that preceded him including Scot and Weyer, as he defends both authors throughout his book. In this way, Webster was bringing Scot's ideas of melancholia and the implausibility of a corporeal demonic to a new readership and into a new political environment. The fact that Webster's work, initially published in 1677, was published in German in 1719 is also further evidence of its continued influence not only in Britain, but across parts of Europe.

One should also consider the fact that contemporary to Webster there were other writers writing on a similar theme. Yet it is Webster, who is widely considered the primary sceptical publication from the second half of the 17th century. One example of a contemporary of Webster, who wrote with some authority, but who was superseded as a work of choice is John Brinsley who published in 1680 *A Discovery of the Impostures of Witches*

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<sup>190</sup> T. Spratt, *The History of the Royal-Society of London for the improving of natural knowledge*, 1667

*and Astrologers* which is considered to have many good points and ideas by both his contemporaries and more modern historians. Yet it is Webster, not Brinsley whose work is considered the more important.

Yet the frequency of popular outbursts of witch-mania in many parts of Great Britain showed few signs of decrease for several generations after his time.<sup>191</sup>

Whilst the case of Jane Wenham in 1712 is widely considered to be the last trial of an accused witch, records exist of later examples of strong beliefs in witchcraft. Davies recalls a resident at Bridgwater in Somerset who wrote in 1853: — I was lately informed by a member of my congregation that two children living near his house were bewitched. I made enquiries into the matter, and found that witchcraft is by far less uncommon than I had imagined ... A cottager who does not live five minutes' walk from my house, found his pig seized with a strange and unaccountable disorder. He ... immediately went to a white witch.<sup>192</sup> The cottager followed a series of elaborate rituals which resulted in his pig's recovery.

To conclude that Francis Hutchinson's work was an unnecessary final say on the death of widespread belief in witchcraft would therefore be too easy. It is true that Hutchinson's work was published at a time when ideas and beliefs in witchcraft were changing, and there is little doubt that Hutchinson played a role in solidifying changing opinions in many people, but the influence that Hutchinson's book had must be placed within the context of the man himself, his arguments and the responses to his work. We can see a continuance of Webster's work in the manner in which Hutchinson explicitly relates the decline of witchcraft to the work of the Royal Society, the link clearly shown by the friendship that Hutchinson had with the future president of the Royal Society, Sir Hans Sloane. Indeed, Hutchinson had exchanged letters with Sloane about the Wenham trial in 1712 where he expressed that,

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<sup>191</sup> Davies, R. T, *Four Centuries of Witch Beliefs*, p 195-196

<sup>192</sup> *Ibid* p 196



“He was troubled by the excess of superstition that he had witnessed.”<sup>193</sup>

It must be remembered however that Richard Boulton, Hutchinson’s literary opponent in the area of witchcraft was also closely connected to the Royal Society. The relationship between witchcraft and the Royal Society explored above with Webster was complex and as Mark Knights suggests in his book, *The Devil in Disguise* (2011), “the correlation (between progressive scientific methodology and a belief in witchcraft) was by no means a straightforward one.”<sup>194</sup>

Hutchinson’s position as a Whig Cleric adds a new dimension to our understanding of his work. It is also evidence of the fact that the argument that it was the elites and the educated who decided that witchcraft beliefs were ridiculous, and the poor illiterate general public followed suit is too generalised an assumption. Hutchinson was clearly influenced by the events at Bury St Edmunds as well as the Jane Wenham case and he saw both as earlier examples of the oppression of poor people by both their peers and their so-called betters. In 1662 two women from Lowestoft, Suffolk, were hanged after being found guilty on 13 counts of witchcraft. The case, presided over by Judge Matthew Hale, became the topic of a 60-page pamphlet by titled, *A Tryal of Witches, at the Assizes held at Bury St. Edmonds for the County of Suffolk; on the Tenth Day of March, 1664* which was used as precedent evidence for decades later most famously at Salem, Massachusetts.

We know that Hutchinson wanted to publish his anti-witchcraft ideas almost a decade earlier than he did, but was dissuaded as the political climate was not considered ready for his ideas. We also know that the work of Richard Boulton, the author of *A Complete History of Magick, Sorcery and Witchcraft* (1715) prompted Hutchinson’s response. Hutchinson believed that this work was no better than one of the numerous witchcraft pamphlets that poison the minds of the common people with detailed descriptions of

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<sup>193</sup> L. Smith, *The Tale of Jane Wenham: an Eighteenth century Hertfordshire Witch?*, <http://sloaneletters.com/tag/francis-hutchinson/>, Sloanletters.com, (Accessed Dec 2012)

<sup>194</sup> Mark Knights, *The Devil in Disguise, Deception, Delusion and Fanaticism in the Early English Enlightenment* (Oxford 2011) p 102

witchcraft cases, thus encouraging their credulity, which in turn led to accusations, prosecutions, and executions.<sup>195</sup>

Hutchinson was motivated to write his work by events that he had witnessed and works that he was opposed to. Therefore, his intended audience would have been those whom he wished to convince that witchcraft was merely popish superstition and to refute the work of those, who still believed in witchcraft. As previously discussed, Hutchinson's self-professed Newtonian Latitudinarianism helps us to understand who he would be aiming his work at. Hutchinson believed that reason and science, rather than outdated church dogma, should be the model upon which to view and act within God's world. Progressives, believers in the scientific revolution and the legal establishment were the mainstay of his audience, together with Whig grandees. We have statistical evidence to suggest that the numbers of dissenters decreased as the 18th century progressed. Clive Field undertook a statistical analysis of religion in England and Wales from the period 1682-1840 in 2012 and suggested that 250,000 would be a reasonable guess for all Nonconformity in the 1750s.<sup>196</sup>

When set against an estimated population of England, Wales and Scotland of 7.8 million, a figure of 3% of active opponents against the established church, Hutchinson, whilst not single-handedly responsible for this, clearly contributed in his own way by challenging more radical religious enthusiasm.

The reception by the clerical profession was mixed. Hutchinson in conversation with the Archbishop of Canterbury in 1718 said that he had received thanks for his book from individuals of both high and low social standing although he did also admit to being,

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<sup>195</sup> Sneddon, *Witchcraft and Whigs*, p 114

<sup>196</sup> Clive Field, 'Counting Religion in England and Wales: the Long 18th century c.1680-c.1840' in *The Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, Volume 63, p 695

“... forced to provoke many ingenious men still living”.<sup>197</sup>

Making a judgement of the extent of influence that Hutchinson’s work had on the legal profession, and the decisions made by judges in witchcraft cases needs to be placed in the context of the fact that the number of witchcraft persecutions had been in decline for a number of years prior to the publication of Hutchinson’s work. It is clear from his use of characters such as the advocate and the clergyman what Hutchinson wanted to happen in real life, that the clergyman and the advocate were expected to work together to persuade the jury member that the suspected witch should be acquitted. Andrew Sneddon argues that Hutchinson appropriated the structure of his *Essay* from a very popular 1593 book by George Gifford entitled *A Dialogue Concerning Witches and Witchcraft (1593)*.

This structure based on dialogue helped Hutchinson to tailor his work to be read by the increasingly literate lower classes, a point Sneddon backs up with the observation that Hutchinson provided translations of all of his Latin references.

In a letter to a fellow Royal Chaplain, Arthur Charlett in July 1718 Hutchinson commented,

“Having ventured to write upon so dark and unpopular a subject... It was great satisfaction to hear so good a judge approving what I had done”.<sup>198</sup> Hutchinson is clearly glad of such positive feedback.

By the time of the second edition, Hutchinson was the Bishop of Down in Ireland where his book also received a mixed reception. Witchcraft accusations and trials in Ireland were incredibly rare and criticism came from the Protestant elite through the voice of the then Church of Ireland Bishop of Kilmore and future

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<sup>197</sup> Francis Hutchinson to William Wake, 14th of April 1718, (Christ Church Library Oxford) Wake Letters, Volume 21, Oxford number 215 cited in A. Sneddon, *Witchcraft and Whigs. The Life of Bishop Francis Hutchinson, 1662 1739*, (London 2008), p 112

<sup>198</sup> Hutchinson to Charlett, 17 July 1718, Hutchinson Letters, folio 27, cited in A. Sneddon, *Witchcraft and Whigs. The Life of Bishop Francis Hutchinson, 1662 1739*, (London 2008), p 113

Archbishop of Cashel, Timothy Godwin, who said,

“He (Francis Hutchinson) must expect to be attacked by his Grace the Archbishop of Dublin William King, for his book about witchcraft, but I suppose he would keep as much he can out of his way”.<sup>199</sup>

In 1718 Hutchinson was both a Royal Chaplain and courtier and one indicator of the influence that Hutchinson’s work can be assessed by looking at those who accepted his dedication. The Lord Chief Justice of England, Sir Thomas Parker, the Lord Chief Baron of the Exchequer, Sir Peter King and the Lord Chief Justice of the Common Pleas, Sir Thomas Bury. These were some of the most influential lawyers in the country and Hutchinson hoped that their support for his work would add weight to his arguments amongst those lower down the judicial ladder. Beliefs like those of Hutchinson, Roy Porter argues, ‘Grew amongst the educated elite, capitalising upon snobberies against the benighted and rank or towards priest craft’.<sup>200</sup>

Hutchinson was also aiming his work at the lower classes, partly as part of his Latitudinarianism, but also, he believed that they were the ones who suffered the most. Hutchinson stated that the credulous masses were ever,

“...ready to try their tricks, and swim the old women, and wonder at and magnify every unaccountable symptom and odd accident.”<sup>201</sup>

However, Hutchinson himself did not think that his work was merely the final say. The beginning of his book is a section listing the substantial number of works supporting witch beliefs that were published in the decades

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<sup>199</sup> Timothy Godwin to William Wake, 28th of December 1718, (Christ Church Library Oxford) Wake Letters, volume 13, number 216 cited in A. Sneddon, *Witchcraft and Whigs. The Life of Bishop Francis Hutchinson, 1662 1739*, (London 2008), p 113

<sup>200</sup> Roy Porter, *Enlightenment*, (London 2001), page 222

<sup>201</sup> Hutchinson, *An Historical Essay...* p viii

before his own, and as we noted earlier, Hutchinson warned that events like the English Civil War or a rise in Tory power could happen again. The Pittenweem Witch Scare had preceded the Scottish union by only three years. What would have been considered the norm in the preceding two hundred years in that one of the accused died in prison and another was hanged by a lynch mob in a small town in Scotland was challenged by the Privy Council and led to Acts of Indemnity by Queen Anne and monetary compensation for another accused woman. Jane Wenham could easily have found herself executed for witchcraft had it not been for the intervention of Judge Powell. Hutchinson, of course, was not to know that his book would go on to be widely considered as the last word on the subject. The stability of the Walpole government and the work of Edmund Gibson, Bishop of London had a much more obvious and direct impact on the decline of witchcraft persecutions and the belief in witchcraft theories from the House of Commons and the pulpit. Two decades later the publication of William Warburton's *Alliance between Church and State* (1736) and Bishop Gibson's own work, the *Codex Juris Ecclesiae Anglicanae* (1713) put these ideas on paper. Later the belief in witchcraft became seen as a preposterous idea amongst the elite. In 1827 John Stuart Mill wrote, "No evidence can prove witchcraft; since there can never be any evidence of it, good or bad, trustworthy or the reverse". In the context of his work, John Stuart Mill was writing to affirm the victory of rationality, however, it is interesting to note that his comment implied that victory was not achieved by empirical argument in the abstract, or an appeal to the facts. The decision to not believe in witchcraft is more about a way of seeing than one of ultimately about evidence.<sup>202</sup> Stuart Mill appears to be allowing the individual the choice of what to believe which is a greater reflection of his political views on individualism than on beliefs surrounding witches and witchcraft.

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<sup>202</sup> Jeremy Bentham, 'Rationale of Judicial Evidence' (1827) in Miscellaneous Writings, volume 21 of *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, 1989, p 30

In Sir Walter Scot's *Letters on Demonology and Witchcraft* (1830), Scot tells us that, "Even the present fashion of the world seems to be ill suited for studies of this fantastic nature; and the most ordinary mechanic has learning sufficient to laugh at the figments which in former times were believed by persons far advanced in the deepest knowledge of the age."<sup>203</sup>

It is difficult to suggest that without the works of Scot, Webster and Hutchinson the scepticism that challenged the widespread beliefs in witchcraft would not have influenced the elite and the educated. However, they gave a voice to reason whilst not challenging the established institutions such as the church. This work has shown that these three writers constructed progressive and successive arguments against the any elements of witchcraft and magic that people feared and were persecuted for. Each of them was acutely aware of the need to place their arguments within the parameters of the Bible and the law. It was this combination of rationality and detailed use of evidence that could be easily understood and accepted that made these three writers so influential in the growth of scepticism in England. The clear line of enlightened argument by the three worked alongside the marvels and discoveries of the Scientific Revolution and contributed towards an understanding of the world where the persecution of witches did not need to take place to combat the Devil.

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<sup>203</sup> Sir Walter Scot's *Letters on Demonology and Witchcraft* (London 1830), p 401

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