‘Witchcraft is a rife and common sinne in these our daies’:

The Powers of Witches in English Demonologies, 1580-1620

Elizabeth Carlson

An increasing concern over the criminality of witchcraft and the persecution of accused witches marked the early modern period of European history between 1450 and 1750. Scholars, both past and present, have been intrigued about this period during which witchcraft was defined as a secular crime and convicted witches were executed.¹ Early modern people were beset by concerns about political, religious, social, and economic disorder that stimulated their fears and anxieties to create a situation that I term a “climate of fear.”² This article examines English demonologies authored by Reginald Scot, William Perkins, George Gifford, and Alexander Roberts during the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries to identify both how a pervasive climate of fear helped shape early modern witchcraft beliefs and how demonological treatises contributed to the ongoing early modern dialogue about the connections between witchcraft and fear.³ I contend that a detailed textual analysis of these works displays the complexity of early

---

¹ Modern scholars have coined a number of terms for this time period, including the witch “craze” and the “Burning Times,” reflecting a certain modern perception of the early modern world as superstitious, backward, ignorant, and intolerant, traits revealed in part by the execution of individuals found guilty of witchcraft. For an historiographical overview, see James Sharpe, Witchcraft in Early Modern England (Harlow, UK: Pearson Education, 2001), “Introduction.”

² For a further examination of the influence of this climate of fear on how early modern people in England explained their world, especially in terms of the impact of supernatural powers on events, see Elizabeth Carlson, “Studying the ‘Damned Art’: Elite Demonologists and the Construction of Witchcraft in England, 1580-1620” (M.A. thesis, Western Illinois University, 2010).

³ Demonologists authored demonologies, tracts concerning beliefs about demons (including the Devil) and human agents of evil such as witches. Reginald Scot (1538-1599), published his Discoverie of Witchcraft without a license
modern witchcraft beliefs, as significant divergences among these authors’ arguments demonstrate that it is impossible to identify a single, “typical” English demonology, or to conclude that “elite” ideas about early modern witchcraft were homogeneous and hegemonic.\(^4\)

English demonologists did not begin writing on the subject of witchcraft until the second half of the sixteenth century, by which time witchcraft had been established as a criminal act in England. The most significant statute to define witchcraft as a crime passed in 1563 during the reign of Elizabeth I.\(^5\) Another witchcraft statute passed in 1604 under James I added to the acts of witchcraft classified as a capital felony in the Elizabethan statute. Most witchcraft cases were tried in the state’s assize circuit courts, held twice a year.\(^6\) At the assizes, juries presided over by professional judges with legal training, themselves elites with divergent opinions regarding witchcraft, evaluated the evidence presented and determined the guilt or innocence of the accused.\(^7\) England, the geographic focus of this article, experienced a relatively small number of

\(^{4}\) Based on an examination of trial records, modern historian Robin Briggs observes similarly that “there is no such thing as a ‘typical’ witchcraft case.” Robin Briggs, ‘‘Many Reasons Why’: Witchcraft and the Problem of Multiple Explanation,” in Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe: Studies in Culture and Belief, ed. Jonathan Barry, Marianne Hester, and Gareth Roberts (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 54. However, few scholars have addressed the divergent opinions among elite demonologists.

\(^{5}\) The first statute outlawing witchcraft passed in 1542 during the reign of Henry VIII, but this unenforced statute was repealed in 1547 under Edward VI. Sharpe, Witchcraft, 15-16.

\(^{6}\) England was divided into six assize circuit courts, and two judges traveled around these circuits twice a year, once in summer and once in winter. See James Sharpe, Crime in Early Modern England, 1550-1750 (London: Longman, 1999), 32-33. Ecclesiastical courts could also try cases of witchcraft, particularly when they were related to litigation concerning defamatory speech. England’s central justice system differed from other regions of Europe where trials were conducted by local authorities and local prejudices often influenced the outcomes.

\(^{7}\) Evidence in witchcraft trials typically consisted of testimony from witnesses and the accused. Judicial officials did not subject accused witches to torture as part of the questioning process in early modern England, a policy separating England from many continental states in terms of judicial practice.
executions for witchcraft, perhaps linked to the lack of consensus concerning witchcraft beliefs among elites.\(^8\)

According to scholars who have investigated primary sources such as trial documents and popular literature, early modern people, including elite demonologists, believed that witchcraft could be manifested in a variety of ways. One of these manifestations involved a witch perpetrating acts of *maleficia*, or harmful magic.\(^9\) A witch might also consort with evil spirits by making a pact with the Devil or keeping a familiar, an evil spirit thought to do a witch’s bidding in return for sucking her blood.\(^10\) Another manifestation of witchcraft could be engaging in beneficent magic, or magical acts not harmful in nature.\(^11\) Using supernatural powers to find lost or stolen goods and curing *maleficia* served as examples of this type of magic.

In this article I have turned to an alternative set of primary sources, demonologies, because such texts provide a broader sense of the conceptual framework within which early

\(^8\) The current scholarly consensus estimates that about 40,000 people were executed for witchcraft between about 1450 and 1750 throughout Europe. Sharpe, *Witchcraft*, 6. Sharpe notes that some commentators on witchcraft have placed the number of witches as high as nine million. Recent scholarship has re-evaluated this count based upon an increased survey of archival materials and more careful calculations based upon extant records which take the limitations of available source material into account. England experienced only one large-scale witch hunt during the turmoil of the English Civil War. See James Sharpe, “The Devil in East Anglia: The Matthew Hopkins Trials Reconsidered,” in *Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe: Studies in Culture and Belief*, ed. Jonathan Barry, Marianne Hester, and Gareth Roberts (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 237-54.

\(^9\) Another manifestation claimed that a witch participated in a sabbat, a nocturnal gathering of witches. Descriptions of sabbats are rare in English trial records and pamphlets, but more common in Scotland and some areas of continental Europe.


modern people understood witchcraft. In contrast to the descriptive works discussed above, demonological texts authored by literate elites are prescriptive pieces, focusing largely on the theory rather than the practice of witchcraft. Such prescriptive materials formed an important part of the intellectual milieu of early modern England. Since witchcraft beliefs, as they appear in descriptive (and often polemical) texts such as trial testimony and pamphlets, were an amalgamation of elite and popular beliefs, a study of elite beliefs as articulated in demonological treatises is a pivotal means of understanding the legal, religious, and cultural frameworks of early modern ideas about witchcraft. As Peter Elmer notes, “A close reading of the ideological significance of witchcraft in early modern thought” is necessary to contextualize witchcraft persecution, and demonological texts contribute to an understanding of this ideological significance.\textsuperscript{12} The writings of the English demonologists considered within this article form part of this corpus of elite beliefs since William Perkins, George Gifford, and Alexander Roberts were clergymen and theologians while Reginald Scot was an educated country gentleman.

Among the issues which formed a part of the underlying framework concerning witchcraft was how early modern people, including elite demonologists, understood the operation of supernatural power. English demonologists grappled in their texts with questions concerning the source of witches’ powers and the extent of their abilities to cause injury.\textsuperscript{13}


\textsuperscript{13} Current scholarship demonstrates that early modern people understood supernatural power in a manner that is foreign to modern mentalities, including supernatural interventions in everyday life, some of which centered on religious spirits, such as angels and demons, and others of which involved spirits such as fairies and imps, who had the power to shape daily events and interact with humans. This belief in these daily interactions prompted the practice of leaving gifts to encourage these spirits to be friendly rather than malicious. See Diane Purkiss, \textit{At the Bottom of the Garden: A Dark History of Fairies, Hobgoblins, and Other Troublesome Things} (New York: New York University Press, 2000) 132. See also, for example, Emma Wilby, \textit{Cunning Folk and Familiar Spirit}; Gary K. Waite, \textit{Heresy, Magic, and Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe} (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003); Carlo Ginzburg, \textit{The Night Battles: Witchcraft and Agrarian Cults in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries}, trans. John and Anne Tedeschi (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983).
Scholars contend that the main issue in understanding early modern witchcraft accusations and beliefs is not the factual reality of witchcraft, but people’s perceptions about its reality. Thus, if one seeks to understand the early modern witchcraft phenomenon, one must start by figuring out why early moderns, including demonologists from the educated elite, believed magical acts affected the world around them. For these reasons, this article considers three interrelated issues that received detailed treatment by English demonologists Scot, Perkins, Gifford, and Roberts in their texts on witchcraft: the ability of individuals to draw on supernatural power to do harm, the types of magical acts committed using this power, and the pact with the Devil as the source of this power.¹⁴

One potential explanation for the early modern belief that witches could practice harmful magic posits that belief in supernatural activity allowed people to explain events that were otherwise incomprehensible.¹⁵ This interpretation finds support from the writings of Scot, Perkins, Gifford, and Roberts. Despite disagreeing on the extent of supernatural powers able to be exerted by a witch, Scot and Gifford both maintained that people used witches as scapegoats to escape their own sense of guilt for unfortunate occurrences.¹⁶ Perkins noted that people’s curiosity to know more about the secret workings of the world led them to seek answers from the

---

¹⁴ Thus an examination of other points of convergence and divergence in these demonologies, including issues concerning gender, politics, and authority is outside the scope of this article. For an examination of these topics, see Carlson, “Studying the ‘Damned Art.’”

¹⁵ A broad overview of this topic is provided in Sharpe, Witchcraft, 45.

Devil. 17 Roberts’s text indicates the acceptance of witchcraft as an explanation for otherwise inexplicable events, notably mysterious illnesses and suspicious or unexpected deaths. 18

Another explanation offered by scholars for early modern beliefs in witchcraft stemmed from general, widespread fears concerning social, cultural, religious, economic, political, and even environmental disorder. This idea is linked, in part, to the inexplicability of the processes of the natural world in the pre-modern past. Martin Ingram notes that uncertainty surrounding the causes of events (particularly illnesses and death) led to “persistent, perhaps powerful, undercurrents of fears and beliefs about witchcraft.” 19 Likewise, Stuart Clark highlights the need for scholars to attend to these fears, noting that witchcraft prosecutions “become intelligible as soon as we pay attention to the ordinary fears and anxieties, and ordinary beliefs and prejudices, expressed by people in everyday situations.” 20 Thus ordinary fears about such issues as disease, economic crisis, and interpersonal tensions provided the groundwork for a belief in the existence of witchcraft. When combined with the belief in the presence of capricious supernatural spirits, these fears help explain how early modern people came to believe that malevolent neighbors could access magical power to cause them harm. 21


21 Emma Wilby notes that witches’ familiars and fairies could engage in both good and evil acts: “The majority of fairies … were considered to be morally ambivalent, capable of both virtue and evil in varying proportions.” Emma Wilby, “The Witch’s Familiar and the Fairy,” 297-98; Lauren Kassell asserts that supernatural beings widely categorized as fairies came in different types: “Wild ones lived in the woods and occasionally harmed (blasted) people who came across them, and could be enticed into performing magic or sharing their secrets. Domestic fairies were less powerful and less harmful, and punished people who did not keep their houses tidy and servants who
A study of early modern published literature on the subject of witchcraft indicates that elites, too, felt the effects of a pervasive climate of fear. In their evaluation of the ability of individuals to access supernatural power, the acts of harmful magic they committed, and their pact with the Devil, the four English demonologists examined here responded to underlying concerns and uncertainty that centered less on explaining misfortunes and more on articulating abstract ideas about God and the Devil. Perkins, Gifford, and Roberts, emphasized the power of the Devil to tempt and corrupt people and used their texts to urge others to guard against falling prey to the Devil. In his treatise on witchcraft, Reginald Scot, attempted to combat the fear of witchcraft encouraged by the theologians to convince people that belief in witches attributed divine power to a purported witch, a circumstance that angered God.

Commentary on the nature of God and the Devil thus formed a central component of these authors’ works. Each author devoted considerable energy to an explication of the exact nature of the relationships among God, the Devil, and humans, perhaps because they perceived a gap in the official teachings of the Church concerning such relationships. Establishing the official theology of the Church of England during the English Reformation constituted a lengthy process spanning the reigns of multiple monarchs, and because of this, English theologians (especially adherents to various expressions of Protestantism) attempted to augment and influence religious policy throughout the long English Reformation. A survey of the seminal literature of the Elizabethan Church reveals no clear statement about witches or witchcraft. The Book of Common Prayer (1559) included a number of prayers for a variety of sinners and exhortations against a variety of sins (adultery, drunkenness, and disobedience) without

---

mentioning harmful magic. The Thirty-Nine Articles (1562) emphasized the importance of homilies or sermon stories in teaching people faith. However, the Elizabethan Homilies (1623) included only one mention of witchcraft, in the Homily “Against Whoredom and Adultery”:

“And S. Iohn in his Reuelation saith, That whoremongers shall haue their part with murderers, sorcerers, enchauters, lyers, idolaters, and such other, in the lake which burneth with fire and brimstone, which is the second death.” The lack of a Homily dedicated to the sin of witchcraft probably alarmed preachers like Perkins, Gifford, and Roberts, whose works focus on the danger that witches posed to the state, religion, and society. Thus, their treatises on witchcraft sought to compensate for this omission from official doctrine.

Reginald Scot’s treatise demonstrates that an interest in theology was not confined to

---


24 “Homily Against Whoredom and Adultery,” Renaissance Electronic Texts 1.2, ed. Ian Lancashire (1623, repr., Toronto: University of Toronto, 1997): lines 441-444, http://www.library.utoronto.ca/utel/ret/homilies/bk2hom21.html (accessed May 27, 2010). The Elizabethan Homilies were sermons and prayers to be read during divine service as a means of providing theological instruction to parishioners as well as imparting a broader sense of morality designed to ensure social and political order. The Homilies were published as two separate books by 1571, but the first edition combining the two books with the complete Homilies was published in 1623 during the reign of James I. All references to the Homilies in this article come from the 1623 edition.

25 Both William Perkins and George Gifford wrote extensively on a variety of theological issues and witchcraft treatises formed a part of their broader attempts to establish a comprehensive articulation of religious doctrine. In addition to witchcraft, Perkins’s approximately three dozen texts included works on scriptural exegesis (explaining biblical passages), conscience, the Christian family, and how to live and die well. These works expressed his interest in promoting the role of ministers in shaping the faith of their (ignorant) flocks, the common folk. Donald Wing, Short-title catalogue of books printed in England, Scotland, Ireland, Wales, and British America, and of English books printed in other countries, 1641-1700, 3 vols. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1945-51), s.v., “Perkins, William.” Hereafter, the citations to this text will follow scholarly convention and refer to Wing’s collection as the STC. Gifford also demonstrated his concern with ministering to common people as his approximately twenty printed texts covered issues such as scriptural exegesis, heretics and papists, providence, and, of course, witchcraft. The choice to write both a learned treatise on witchcraft (his Discourse) and a work that would be accessible to a larger number of people (his Dialogue) suggests that he sought to influence both elites and ordinary people. STC, s.v., “Gifford, George.” Alexander Roberts’s sole publication was his treatise on witchcraft, so it is difficult to access his broader theological positions and concerns or to analyze how his ideas about witchcraft fit into his understandings of sin and temptation. STC, s.v., “Roberts, Alexander.”
theologians. Scot’s treatment of witchcraft rested on a decidedly unorthodox interpretation of the relationships among God, the Devil, and humans, since he forcefully denied the reality of early modern witchcraft, a position underpinned by his assertion that spirits could not assume corporeal forms or operate in the human world. This interpretation stood in direct contrast to the beliefs of most theologians that Devil and other spirits not only assumed physical forms but also intervened directly in people’s lives. Thus the concerns evident in Scot’s work differed from the concerns of Perkins, Gifford, and Roberts, who did subscribe to the belief that witchcraft was real. The first two grounded witchcraft within their broader religious beliefs in the attempt to create a comprehensive doctrine to prevent misinterpretations that could threaten religious authority and conformity. All four authors did, however, caution against assigning too much power to a human witch and sought to defend a proper distribution of authority and power, though they disagreed upon the exact nature of this distribution. Scot rejected the attribution of power to the Devil and spirits because he felt it risked denigrating God’s power, while the three theologians sought to emphasize the power of the Devil to work through witches, although acknowledging that the Devil’s authority was granted by God. A more detailed exploration of the divergences within these works concerning the allocation of power among God, the Devil, and human beings, as discussed below, provides support for the argument that no single “typical” demonology existed in early modern England.

**Possessing Supernatural Powers**

Modern scholars have devoted considerable attention to the question of early modern witches’ purported powers and their alleged relationship with the Devil as the source of those powers, as did their early modern predecessors. Deborah Willis argues that elite demonologists in early modern England sought to shape popular beliefs by establishing a new link between
witch and Devil. She contends that popular witchcraft beliefs held that witches sent out fearsome spirits, similar to imps and fairies, to do their bidding and in return mothered them, providing food and shelter. According to Willis, however, elite demonologists like Perkins and Gifford stripped the witch of her power over these spirits by linking such familiar spirits to the Devil. This arrangement altered the traditional popular understanding of authority involving practitioners of magic by asserting that the Devil commanded the witch to do his bidding.

In his Discoverie of Witchcraft, Reginald Scot denied that witches performed works of wonder attributed to them by both common folk and learned writers. Only God’s power (not a witch’s or the Devil’s) produced supernatural acts. Scot argued that contemporary witches could only practice cozening arts, which were essentially magic tricks. According to Scot, witchcraft beliefs usurped God’s power and granted it to the witch. He worried about the ramifications of this usurpation, specifically, that through belief in witchcraft, “the name of God is abused, prophaned [sic] and blasphemed, and his power attributed to a vile creature.” This conclusion

26 Deborah Willis, Malevolent Nurture: Witch-hunting and Maternal Power in Early Modern England (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), chap. 3. Willis also asserts that accusations of witchcraft among common people stemmed from concerns surrounding childbearing and childrearing. Accused witches were often suspected of harming children by causing their illness or death, providing poor care when called upon to be caregivers, and usurping the rightful place of a natural mother within the household. Thus, the most fearful characteristics and behaviors of witches recorded in trial documents and pamphlets exemplify those of a bad mother. Willis suggests that English demonologists, especially Perkins and Gifford, transformed the witch from a corrupted mother into a corrupted servant of the Devil. See Willis, Malevolent Nurture, chap. 3.

27 Edward Bever posits that a person with a reputation as a witch could actually inflict damage upon his or her neighbors through malicious words and intent, prompting the victim to suffer from psychosomatic disorders. Bever notes the impact that curses could have on an individual who believes in the power contained within such words. He asserts that purported witches wielded real psychological power against their victims. Edward Bever, The Realities of Witchcraft, passim.

28 Scot extended the arguments that a witch has supernatural power to what he perceived as its logical conclusion: “If either preests, divels, or witches could so doo, the divine power should be checked and outfaced by magickall cunning, and Gods creatures made servile to a witches pleasure.” Scot, Discoverie of Witchcraft, 176. He also accused witchcraft believers of similar crimes to those imputed to witches: “He that attributeth to a witch, such divine power, as dulle and onelie apperteineith unto God (which all witchmongers doo) is in hart a blasphem, an idolater, and full of grosse impietie.” Scot, Discoverie of Witchcraft, 9.

29 Scot, Discoverie of Witchcraft, 397. Quotations employed from the five demonologies considered in this article will maintain early modern spelling and punctuation.
seemed obvious to Scot since “all wisemen understand that witches miraculous enterprises, being contrarie to nature, … are void of truth or possibilitie,” and “all Christians see, that to confesse witches can doo as they saie, were to attribute to a creature the power of the Creator.”\textsuperscript{30} Those who did so incurred God’s wrath, since acts of witchcraft, like miracles, belonged to an earlier time in history. In other words, Scot believed that those identified as witches in early modern England were not the same as the ancient witches whose activities were recorded in the holy books describing the early Christian tradition.\textsuperscript{31} Past instances of witchcraft and miracles had been permitted by God in order to strengthen the foundations of Christian faith and therefore were no longer necessary, since the faith had become well-established.

Scot maintained that suffering and hardship served as punishment and trials sent from God, and attributing such acts to witches thus denied God this ability to correct people. When misfortunes occurred, either someone was at fault, or the afflicted had incurred God’s wrath. For Scot, there were no real alternative explanations.\textsuperscript{32} As he demonstrated in his work, however, people preferred to explain their misfortunes as the actions of witches as a means to escape their own sense of guilt and responsibility. Essentially, Scot argued that witchcraft provided people with a way to alleviate their fears that their own actions and decisions caused hardship. He declared, “The fables of Witchcraft have taken so fast hold … in the heart of man, that fewe … can (nowadaies) with patience indure the hand and correction of God. For if any adversitie …

\textsuperscript{30} Scot, \textit{Discoverie of Witchcraft}, 407.

\textsuperscript{31} Scot, \textit{Discoverie of Witchcraft}, 121-22. Scot used the Biblical witch of Endor as an example of an ancient witch whom God allowed to use witchcraft to strengthen people’s faith. He also cited apparitions of angels and Christ’s miracles as uses of supernatural power with the same purpose. Scot emphasized that all of these acts were no longer possible.

\textsuperscript{32} Sharpe, \textit{Witchcraft}, 45.
happen unto them … they exclaime upon witches.”

Belief in witchcraft thus supported an abdication of responsibility and a rejection of God’s will. This dangerous belief was encouraged by some ministers who “affirme that they have had in their parish … witches…. Whereby they manifested as well their infidelitiie and ignorance, in conceiving God’s word; as their negligence and error in instructing their flocks.” Thus Scot implicated clergymen like Perkins, Gifford, and Roberts in adding to the dangers of witchcraft by propagating a climate of fear that allowed for the abdication of personal responsibility.

While Scot rejected other writers’ claims about the power of witchcraft, he offered his own explanation for the acts apparently committed by witches. Witches could only create illusions through “the nimble conveiance of the hand.” This exposure of so-called juggling provided the heart of the discovery proclaimed in his title: Discoverie of Witchcraft; he explained such tricks and exposed the props used to create such illusions. Thus Scot insisted that witches could cleverly use natural powers to befuddle observers, who then might misinterpret such acts as magic. According to Scot, true supernatural power could only be used by God. Jugglers pretended to possess powers they could not have if they claimed to be using magic to perform their tricks. Scot did not condemn the use of such cozening tricks, rather the pretensions of those who claimed magical abilities. He condemned those who pretended to engage in magical acts because they encouraged misinterpretations of divine power by others.

In contrast to Scot, William Perkins accepted that witches possessed supernatural powers. Perkins argued that witches accomplished their works of wonder with the help of the Devil, since

33 Scot, Discoverie of Witchcraft, 1. This assertion perhaps offers the greatest evidence for Scot’s skepticism as he chided people for taking the easy way out of personal responsibility.

34 Scot, Discoverie of Witchcraft, 3.

35 Scot, Discoverie of Witchcraft, 263.
such magical acts could not be accomplished by a human witch alone. Perkins acknowledged, “Witchcraft is a rife and common sinne in these our daies, and very many are intangled with it, beeing either practitioners thereof in their owne persons, or at the least, yeelding to seeke for helpe and counsell of such as practise it.”\(^\text{36}\) Perkins defended this position against those, like Scot, who argued that witchcraft was not a genuine threat. He asserted that “there be sundry men who receive it for a truth, that Witchcraft is nothing else but a meere illusion, and … this opinion takes place not onely with the ignorant, but is holden and maintained by such as are learned … that there be no Witches.”\(^\text{37}\) For Perkins, the denial of witchcraft increased the likelihood of being deluded by the Devil, the figure at the core of the practice of witchcraft. Indeed, witchcraft required both the Devil’s aid and God’s permission: “Witchcraft is a wicked Art, serving for the working of wonders, by the assistance of the Devil, so farre forth as God shall … permit.”\(^\text{38}\) Witches entered into a bargain with the Devil whereby they obtained the power to commit acts of witchcraft.

Perkins contended that witchcraft thrived among people susceptible to the Devil’s temptations. The Devil preyed on people’s discontent to convince them to engage in witchcraft. Perkins attributed two main causes of witchcraft to original sin.\(^\text{39}\) He asserted that the first sin of man was not a singular event, rather it “contained in it the breach of every Commandment of the Morall Law.”\(^\text{40}\) Satan sought especially to encourage the sin of discontentment in man, and “this

\(^{36}\) Perkins, *Discourse of the Damned Art*, under “Page 9.” Perkins’s style of capitalizing the words “Witchcraft” and “Witch” throughout his treatise will be maintained in the quotations in this article.

\(^{37}\) Perkins, *Discourse of the Damned Art*, under “Page 9.” This may be a veiled reference to Scot.

\(^{38}\) Perkins, *Discourse of the Damned Art*, under “Page 9.”

\(^{39}\) Perkins’s association of witchcraft and original sin suggests a connection between witchcraft and the fall of Eve, and thus women.

\(^{40}\) Perkins, *Discourse of the Damned Art*, under “Page 10.”
sinne ... continually is derived from them to all their posterities, and now is become so common ...
that there is scarce a man to bee found, who is not originally tainted therewith as he is a
man.”

This sin manifested itself firstly “in mans [sic] outward estate,” especially when a
person’s impoverished material condition conflicted with his “love of himselle, and an high
conceit of his own deserving.”

The Devil exploited this attitude to convince a person to “bee his vassal … in this wicked art, supposing that … he may be able in time to relieve his
povertie.”

The second reason that people turned to the practice of witchcraft was “in the minde
and inward man; and that is curiositie.”

Perkins asserted that men desired to know more about the world around them than they were capable of knowing. The wonders practiced by witches offered the possibility to extend knowledge through supernatural means.

George Gifford cautiously balanced the ideas espoused by both Perkins and Scot. He asserted both that people incorrectly “believed that witches could do great wonders, ascribing such power unto devils as belongeth onely to God” and that “all witchcraft … is no more but either mere cosenage, or poisoning: so that in the opinion of these men, the devill hath never done, nor can do any thing by witches and sorcerers.” For Gifford, the temptations of the Devil ensnared people, especially witches. He observed that “many through ignorance … are greatly overreached by Satan, and so entangled and snared with errors that they fal into very foule and horrible sinnes.”

Gifford, like Perkins, feared the Devil’s power as the primary force driving

---

41 Perkins, Discourse of the Damned Art, under “Page 10.”
42 Perkins, Discourse of the Damned Art, under “Page 10.”
43 Perkins, Discourse of the Damned Art, under “Page 10.”
44 Perkins, Discourse of the Damned Art, under “Page 11.”
45 Gifford, Discourse, under “Page 5.”
46 Gifford, Discourse, under “Page 5.”
witchcraft. The Devil could make witches (and others) believe that they committed magical acts, but this was just deceit. Gifford emphasized that God permitted the Devil to work through witches to punish wicked people. Therefore, witches were “instrumentes of Gods [sic] vengance, and executioners of his wrath.”\footnote{Gifford, Discourse, under “Page 22.”} He reiterated this point in his Dialogue: “God is provoked by their sinnes to give the devil such instruments to work withal, but [they] rage against the witche, even as if she could do all.”\footnote{Gifford, Dialogue, D3 v.} Here Gifford echoed Scot’s argument that people used witchcraft as a means to shift responsibility for the consequences of their actions.

Alexander Roberts also emphasized the reality of witchcraft. According to Roberts, people like Scot “perswade themselues, and would induce others to be of the same minde, that there be no Witches at all,” and believed instead that supposed witches were “melancholique, aged, and ignorant Women, deluded in their imagination.”\footnote{Roberts, Treatise of Witchcraft, under “Page 11.”} Roberts, like Perkins and Gifford, stressed the importance of the Devil in witchcraft, and Roberts also argued that the Devil needed God’s permission to operate. Roberts asserted that “God giueth, both the diuell, and his seruants the witches, power sometimes to trouble his owne children.”\footnote{Roberts, Treatise of Witchcraft, under “Page 42.”} This permission from God was an important component of witchcraft for both Perkins and Roberts because it prevented unorthodox attacks on God’s power and religious authority that could surface through a consideration of witchcraft.

Theologians feared arguments such as Scot’s would lead people astray, especially in the absence of any official statement by the Church of England on the dangers of witches. Scot’s insistence that belief in witches’ ability to commit supernatural acts usurped God’s power...
frightened the theologians, who believed Scot’s ideas undermined the authority of religious leaders and God himself. For these clergymen, the greatest danger posed by witchcraft was that people would misinterpret the actions of witches, thereby turning away from God. Scot sought to counteract the fear of witchcraft, while the other three writers warned people against the grave consequences of rejecting its existence, demonstrating a major difference in the concerns underlying their works. This significant divergence among the four authors supports the notion that demonologies, which are often considered to represent elite opinions (and therefore often juxtaposed collectively against popular opinions), are as complex and varied as individual witch trials. No consensus existed among learned writers about the existence of witchcraft.\(^\text{51}\)

**Working Magic through the Devil’s Power**

After establishing whether or not a person could access supernatural powers, each demonologist considered both the source of those powers and the types of acts that could or could not be committed using them. Magical acts constituted any action that required the use of power beyond the bounds of nature. For the most part, these four demonologists focused on potential acts of *maleficia*, or harmful magic. Scot maintained that magical acts could not be committed by a witch. In general, the three theologians, Perkins, Gifford, and Roberts, agreed that such harmful magic could be practiced after a purported witch made a pact with the Devil, although they differed regarding the amount of power a witch could possess directly.

Reginald Scot denied the possibility that individuals could actually commit acts of magic including the ability to uncover “things hidden and lost, and foreshew / things to come,” “raise halie, tempests, and hurtfull weather,” “make a woman miscarrie in childbirth,” or even “with

their looks kill either man or beast.” Scot rejected the notion that supposed witches could engage in such magical acts following an agreement with the Devil, concluding that ordinary people wrongly believed that witches could use magic to afflict those around them. He asserted that “such maner of witchcrafts” were “false and fabulous” because “if all the witches in England [were] burnt or hanged; I warrant you we should not faile to have raine, haile, and tempests, as now we have.” Despite the falsity of witches’ acts, those who were thought to practice magic contributed to a false understanding of God’s power. In Scot’s view, “The illusions of witches … are offensive to the majestie … of God.” When witches either claimed to or were believed to possess supernatural powers, they infringed upon God’s power. Scot feared that such claims of witchcraft encouraged people to misapply God’s power to a human being, the purported witch. Thus, even untrue claims of witchcraft’s efficacy detracted from a proper understanding of the nature of the divine.

Another misunderstanding feared by Scot concerned the supposed source of a witch’s power: a bargain made with the Devil. Unlike the three theologians, Scot denied the possibility of such an agreement. Scot asserted that “in estimation of the vulgar people, it [the pact] is … contrived betweene a corporall old woman, and a spirituall devil,” although “there can be no

---

52 Scot, Discoverie of Witchcraft, 7. Scot also noted that witches were thought to “devoure and eate yong children and infants of their owne kind.” Scot, Discoverie of Witchcraft, 7. The eating of infants is not discussed by any of the other three English demonologists considered in this article and does not appear in the majority of accounts of English witchcraft. Continental demonologies do, however, feature this type of act, most notable in the Malleus Maleficarum. This suggests Scot’s acquaintance with and perhaps reliance on a wide variety of sources.

53 Scot, Discoverie of Witchcraft, 9; Scot, Discoverie of Witchcraft, 2; Scot also refuted acts of what Perkins termed juggling as means of challenging the veracity of the stereotypes attributed to witches. Regarding one example of juggling, Scot asserted that “if they [witches] could transfer corne … from their neighbors field into their owne, none of them would be poore, none other should be rich.” Since all of those accused as witches were not wealthy, they clearly could not accomplish this feat. This argument exemplifies Scot’s reliance on common sense and logic, usually identified as skepticism, to make his case against witchcraft. Scot, Discoverie of Witchcraft, 176.

54 Scot, Discoverie of Witchcraft, 176.
such conference between a spirituall divell and a corporall witch.”

Scot argued that a human being cannot converse with the Devil, who exists only as a spirit without physical form. He asserted “that the joining of hands with the divell, [and] the kissing of his bare buttocks … are absurd lies” since according to the Scriptures, “a spirit hath no flesh, bones, nor sinews, whereof hands, buttocks … and lips doo consist.”

Since the Devil could not physically interact with a human, a meeting between a witch and a Devil could not have actually taken place.

According to Scot, interrogators investigating charges of witchcraft had themselves created the idea of a pact between the witch and the Devil. Scot cautioned that witches’ confessions were untrustworthy and that the accounts of the pact with the Devil owed their existence to the persistent examinations and coercion of interrogators. Accused witches’ confessions could not be trusted because “their confessions are extorted” either through the use of torture or leading questions from the interrogator, “or else proceed from an unsound mind” when the confessed witch suffered from melancholy.

Despite their lack of credibility, these confessions were believed because “if the league be untrue…the witchmongers [sic] arguments fall to the ground.” For Scot, this situation reinforced his broader claim that witchcraft was not real.

Scot also attacked theologians’ reliance on Scriptural evidence for the Devil’s pact. He posed an effective rhetorical question: “How chanceth it that we heare not of this bargaine in the

---

55 Scot, Discoverie of Witchcraft, 397; Scot, Discoverie of Witchcraft, 407.

56 Scot, Discoverie of Witchcraft, 37.

57 Scot, Discoverie of Witchcraft, 46. Scot’s reference to torture likely stems from his response to continental demonologists and prosecutorial practices. In England, torture was not applied at the assize courts where most witchcraft indictments were held. Sharpe, Witchcraft, 24; Sharpe, Instruments of Darkness, 214. As Malcolm Gaskill comments, “In England plaintiffs had to gather their own evidence to persuade a jury; torture was irrelevant.” In Malcolm Gaskill, “Witchcraft and Evidence in Early Modern England,” Past and Present, no. 198 (February 2008): 51.

58 Scot, Discoverie of Witchcraft, 34.
scriptures?” Scot noted that other demonologists frequently cited the Temptations of Christ where the Devil transported Christ (Matthew 4:8 and Luke 3:9) as proof of the Devil’s power, to which Scot rejoined, “I hope they will not saie, that Christ had made anie ointments, or entred into anie league with the divell.” The focus of “the witchmongers” on the pact with the Devil allowed them to assert that the Devil’s temptations were powerful, thereby emphasizing the need for godly men (such as Perkins, Gifford, and Roberts) to combat that power.

In contrast to Scot, William Perkins asserted that witches could and did utilize supernatural power to produce magical effects. Perkins identified three types of maleficia: juggling (creating transformations or illusions), divining (divulging events in the past, present, or future), and enchanting (using spells to commit magical acts). Perkins argued that witches actually engaged in these acts through diabolical power. Through enchantments witches conjured storms, destroyed crops and livestock, caused and cured mysterious illnesses in people or animals, and performed exorcisms. Perkins displayed his anti-Catholicism by categorizing “popish remedies,” like exorcisms, as witchcraft. This attack on Catholicism demonstrates that the discourse on witchcraft was part of the larger debate over correct theology in early modern

---

59 Scot, Discoverie of Witchcraft, 37.
60 Scot, Discoverie of Witchcraft, 82.
63 Perkins, Discourse of the Damned Art, under "Page 31."
England.⁶⁵ Like many English divines, Perkins advocated for his particular type of reform.

Perkins responded to Scot’s assertion that only God’s power performed supernatural acts by emphasizing instead a pact between the Devil and the witch. According to him, this pact formalized the collusion between the witch and the Devil and granted the witch access to supernatural power.⁶⁶ Perkins noted that “it is the practise of the devil to offer to make bargains ... with man” to provide “the Ground of all the practises of Witchcraft ... a league or covenant made between the Witch and the Devil: wherein they doe mutually bind themselves each to other.”⁶⁷ People entered into this agreement because the Devil offered to alleviate their misfortunes since “the nature of man is exceeding impatient in … afflictions … that some … care not what means they use … to ease and helpe themselves.⁶⁸

According to Perkins, the Devil created these evil covenants out of anger. Satan sought to “draw them [witches] from the covenant of God, and disgrace the same.”⁶⁹ The Devil’s pact inverted God’s covenant with His people. Perkins elaborates on this inverted covenant: “as God hath made a Covenant with his Church …. requiring of them … faith and obedience; so doth Satan indent with his Subjects by mutuall confederacies … whereby they bind themselves … to

---

⁶⁵ Elmer notes, “Educated belief in witchcraft and the detailed theories of the demonologists ... was firmly rooted in the early modern preoccupation with order, authority and uniformity. In England, prior to the civil war, support for the godly commonwealth was thus reinforced by the recognition of its opposite, demonic disorder, which for true patriots took the form of devil-worshipping witches, aided and abetted by Catholic fifth columnists.” Elmer, “‘Saints or Sorcerers,’” 162-63; He also documents the appropriation of the label witchcraft for use against one’s enemies: “During the civil war itself, both sides habitually resorted to the language of witchcraft, most obviously as a form of crude propaganda, but equally as a valuable authorising agent in the struggle to establish the righteousness of one’s particular cause.” See “‘Saints or Sorcerers,’” 164.

⁶⁶ Perkins’s influence on this point is highlighted by Gaskill: “In the seventeenth century, partly due to Perkins’s ideas, the diabolical pact became the salient characteristic of the witch’s crime.” In Gaskill, “‘Witchcraft and Evidence,’” 45.

⁶⁷ Perkins, *Discourse of the Damned Art*, under "Page 16."

⁶⁸ Perkins, *Discourse of the Damned Art*, under "Page 17."

⁶⁹ Perkins, *Discourse of the Damned Art*, under "Page 17."
observe his Rules, and he … to accomplish their desires.”

Thus, Perkins attributed a double purpose to that inverted covenant: disgracing both people and God. He worried that denying the existence of witchcraft would increase the probability the people would be drawn into this disgrace through a pact with the Devil.

Perkins identified two types of pact with the Devil. He termed the first type of pact an open covenant. This open covenant differed from the closed, or secret, pact since it sometimes occurred in the presence of other witches. Perkins divulged his source of knowledge about these agreements: the confessions of accused witches. These witches “have confessed with one consent, that the very ground-work of all their practises in this wicked art, is their league with the devil.”

Therefore, Perkins knew that witches entered into a pact with the Devil because they openly declared so. In contrast to Scot, then, Perkins accepted the validity of these confessions so long as the accused which had freely confessed following the establishment of strong suspicions against him or her.

When considering the existence and source of harmful magic, George Gifford again balanced the ideas espoused in the texts of Perkins and Scot. Like Perkins and Roberts, he asserted that magical acts could occur, but, unlike them, he maintained that they were not caused by the witch. Like Scot, Gifford denied the ability of a human witch to commit magical acts. However, in contrast to Scot, he explained that the acts themselves were real; the Devil, rather than the witch, was the source of these acts. Like Scot, Gifford worried that people would incorrectly attribute supernatural power directly to a human witch. However, in contrast to Scot, Gifford also worried that people would fail to take magical acts seriously, leaving them easy

---

70 Perkins, *Discourse of the Damned Art*, under "Page 2."

71 Perkins, *Discourse of the Damned Art*, under "Page 17."
targets for the Devil’s temptations.

Gifford asserted, as Perkins did, that witches derived power from the Devil, although Gifford did not describe a physical ceremony through which this bargain was formalized. He noted that “it is so evident by the Scriptures, and in all experience, that there be witches which worke by the devil, or rather I may say, that devil worketh by them, that such as go about to prove the contrarie, doe shewe themselves but cavillers.”72 Thus Gifford emphasized that the Devil was the master and the witch was his servant, though many common people believed the opposite to be true. He argued that the Devil inflamed a witch’s malice against others, and so the witch appeared to commit magical acts.73 Gifford diverged from Scot in asserting that the Devil could appear to people in a physical form. The Devil or his agents must disguise themselves in order to be able to commune with humans “to cover and hide their mightinessse” in order “to inflames [sic] them unto wrath, malice, envy, and cruell murthers … [and] to entice them unto wantonnessse, and whordomes, and all uncleannesse.”74 This guise allowed the Devil to communicate with people and ensnare witches into his service. Gifford worried that people’s misconceptions about the nature of witchcraft led them away from God. In contrast to Perkins, Gifford did not directly acknowledge the pacts described in witches’ confessions, but like Perkins, did grant that witches’ confessions could be credible evidence.

On the issue of witches' powers, the ideas of Alexander Roberts once again most closely conformed to those of Perkins. He maintained that “they [witches] are permissiuely abled through the helpe of the Diuell their maister, to hurt Men and Beasts, and trouble the

---

72 Gifford, *Dialogue*, B4 v.

73 Gifford, *Dialogue*, D3 r. This position seems to give credence to Deborah Willis’s idea in *Malevolent Nuture* concerning an elite reconfiguration of the relationship between witch and Devil.

74 Gifford, *Dialogue*, C2 r.
Roberts described how witches could alter people’s mental states: “In minde, stirring vp men to lust, to hatred, to loue, and the like passions, and that by altering the inward and outward sences.”

Roberts provided specific examples of one accused witch’s magical acts in his treatise as he described the acts of witchcraft attributed to Mary Smith. Smith allegedly cursed John Orkton after he hit her son. After this physical attack, she allegedly “came foorth into the streete, cursing … him [Orkton] … and wished in a most earnest and bitter manner, that his fingers might rotte off; wherevpon presently … his fingers did corrupt, and were cut off; as also his toes putrified and consumed in a very strange … manner.”

Roberts also reported that Mary Smith caused Elizabeth Hancock to have a “torturing fit” which “so grieuously racked and tormented through all parts of her body, as if the very flesh had beene torne from the bones”

Roberts’s focus on the harm that a witch could cause, with the assistance of the Devil, supported his argument that people needed to take witchcraft seriously to avoid all of its perils. These perils included becoming the victim of a witch’s malice as well as becoming ensnared by the Devil’s treachery.

Similarly to both Perkins and Gifford, Roberts also emphasized the importance of the Devil to witchcraft. He declared, “Whatsoever the Witch doth, it receiueth his force from that society which she hath with the Diuell … and so they worke together as associates.” A human witch did not possess the power to engage in magical acts. If the witch possessed such power, God’s authority and power would have been challenged. Like Perkins, Roberts identified two

---

75 Roberts, Treatise of Witchcraft, under “Page 23-24.”

76 Roberts, Treatise of Witchcraft, under “Page 24.”

77 Roberts, Treatise of Witchcraft, under “Page 55.”

78 Roberts, Treatise of Witchcraft, under “Page 59.”

79 Roberts, Treatise of Witchcraft, under “Page 26.”
types of pact: secret and manifest. This secret pact was a tacit agreement for the Devil to lend his power to the witch, an interpretation reminiscent of Gifford’s treatment of the bargain. The manifest pact resembled Perkins’s open pact, “wherein consent is giuen …whereby they renounce God, and devote themselves slaves ... unto the Diuell, hee promising, that … they shall doe wonders.”80 Roberts asserted that information about witchcraft could be revealed through witches’ “owne voluntary confessions” and accepted the validity of the confession made by Mary Smith that confirmed the acts of witchcraft of which she had been accused and for which she was executed.81 Unlike Scot, Perkins, or Gifford, however, Roberts underscored the treachery of the Devil. He asserted that the Devil could not be counted upon to uphold his end of the bargain. Roberts admonished, “But herein these seduced wretches are deceiued: for these promises which he makes, are treacherous.”82 Thus people must be on their guard against the Devil’s deceptions.

Perkins, Gifford, and Roberts all argued that the Devil provided the source of a witch’s ability to access supernatural power. The witch gained this ability through the formation of a pact with the Devil whereby the witch pledged allegiance to the Devil, thus renouncing God and following the Devil into the sin of disobedience. The three theologians urged people to take witchcraft seriously and be on guard against the Devil’s temptations despite disagreeing on the exact nature of the allocation of power among God, the Devil and humans. In contrast, Reginald Scot asserted that purported witches could not commit magical acts because they could not in fact access supernatural power. Further, he stressed the impossibility of a pact between a witch and the Devil on the grounds that a spiritual being, such as the Devil, could not consort with a

80 Roberts, Treatise of Witchcraft, under “Page 34.”
81 Roberts, Treatise of Witchcraft, under “Page 10.”
82 Roberts, Treatise of Witchcraft, under “Page 36.”
physical human being. He feared that belief in witchcraft led people astray from God by attributing divine power to a human witch.

**Conclusion**

Each of these English demonologists responded to a climate of fear surrounding as well as contributing to early modern witchcraft beliefs. However, their responses reflected different concerns, as did their interpretations of the fears that drove contemporary ideas about witchcraft as well as the importance of combating it, indicating a lack of uniformity in the beliefs of the demonologists themselves. As Protestant theologians, William Perkins, George Gifford, and Alexander Roberts exhibited similar interpretations about the nature of the relationship among God, the Devil, and humans. Humans could yield to the Devil’s temptations and commit magical acts only to the extent that God granted permission to do so. These theologians worried that people would misinterpret this relationship, thus challenging God's power, and the lack of official Church of England doctrine regarding witchcraft exacerbated this fear. At the same time, they espoused the notion that a denial of the existence of witchcraft would leave people vulnerable to the power of the Devil. In contrast, Reginald Scot attempted to counteract the effects of the fear of witchcraft advocated by the theologians. Rather, he emphasized that the consequences of this climate of fear perpetrated by such men were more frightening than the prospect of witches causing harm. The theologians encouraged early moderns to be suspicious of their neighbors and potentially to accuse them of witchcraft. The consequences of belief in witchcraft and its resulting tensions included imbuing a witch with God’s power and denying God’s ability to inflict trials and punishments upon His followers.

These authors thus demonstrated a lack of consensus on the main issues considered in this article, especially the formation and operation of the pact with the Devil, an issue which is
frequently emphasized as a uniquely “elite” concern by modern scholars.\textsuperscript{83} Each of the four early modern authors addressed the establishment of religious authority and theological debates during the long English Reformation through a discussion of witchcraft, its dangers, and its associated theological implications. A study of their works reveals the negotiation of witchcraft beliefs among the educated elites in England, partially in response to the absence of a formal statement of proper belief concerning witchcraft from the Church of England.

**Bibliography**

**Primary Sources**


---

\textsuperscript{83} See, for example, Bostridge, *Witchcraft and its Transformations*, 139-54; and Clark, *Thinking With Demons*, 195-213.


Secondary Sources


