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Witches and Witchbusters

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In a recent article (Simpson 1994), I argued that British folklorists had remained unconvinced by Margaret Murray's ill-founded claim that witchcraft was a survival of paganism, and had wisely ignored it. Unfortunately, however, they have also largely ignored witchcraft itself for the past fifty or sixty years, in spite of the upsurge of public interest in it. Very few books or articles about it have been written by British folklorists. Those few are either broad popular surveys (Hole 1945; Maple 1965); or else they approach the topic indirectly. Thus Katharine Briggs viewed it only as reflected in literature (Briggs 1962), while contributors to Newall 1973 (including the present writer) avoided areas and periods of the main witch-hunts.

In contrast, historians, cultural anthropologists and sociologists, both in Britain and elsewhere, have been producing major works on witchcraft in all its contexts—throughout medieval and early modern Europe, in England and Scotland, and in America. Yet only a few items of this research have been offered for publication in *Folklore* in recent years, and these came from abroad (Henningsen 1982; Vukanović 1989; Hickey 1990); few of the major books were sent to *Folklore* for review. This is a serious breakdown in communication between what should be co-operating disciplines; the time is surely ripe for some bridge-building.

Scholars have disentangled many levels of meaning within the word "witch," and there is still lively debate whether certain traits are "learned" or "popular," whether explanations should be sought in large-scale cultural situations or in local political feuds or in purely personal conflicts. The data are usually heavily mediated; trial records are dominated by the preconceptions of the interrogators, which may affect the depositions of witnesses and will certainly be reflected in the confessions, the verdicts and the subsequent written accounts. Folklore of later centuries is also partly shaped by memories of the dramatic allegations made at the time of the witch-hunts.

The topic is so vast and many-sided, raising so many distinct yet interlocking problems, that no single book, let alone a paper, could do it justice. Quaife 1987 summarises all major theories; Ankarloo and Henningsen 1993 contains a range of excellent papers; Levack 1995 is the latest general synthesis. New interpretations and information are constantly being presented, controversies are lively; one writer remarks ruefully that "the topic generates new questions faster than one can resolve the initial ones" (Briggs 1989, 104). All I can do here is to pick out themes from certain books of the past twenty-five years, and allude more briefly to oth-

ers, in the hope that this may rekindle the curiosity of British folklorists about a subject which surely has a strong claim on our attention.

Terminology

English being rich in near-synonyms, there are many partly overlapping terms such as witch/wizard/warlock/sorcerer/magician/conjurer, with or without qualifying adjectives, both in older writers and in our own times. I will here keep to the simple term "witch" for the person alleged to do harm by magic—i.e., I will not be using the anthropological distinction between "witch" and "sorcerer" according to whether the power is innate or externally acquired. It would be too cumbersome to insert a sceptical adjective ("alleged," "supposed," "suspected") before every single occurrence of the word "witch," but its omission should not be taken to imply that I consider that the person(s) mentioned had actually performed any magical procedure; the records very rarely testify to anything more than angry words. As in most periods and regions, at least eighty percent of the accused persons were women, I will normally use female pronouns in reference to a typical witch.

English has several traditional names for the specialist who uses magic to break the supposed witch's spells. He or she may be called the cunning man/woman, wise man/woman, white witch, good witch, conjurer, wizard, sorcerer. But none is completely satisfactory. The first four are too broad, as they are also used for a specialist using traditional magic for other helpful purposes, for example healing or detecting thieves. The last three are ambiguous, as they are also often applied to harmful magicians. There are two old compounds, "witch-finder" and "witch-doctor," but the first is constantly applied to Matthew Hopkins, who was not a folk practitioner at all, while the second is now associated with Africa, not England. James Murrell, a famous Essex cunning man (d. 1860), used to refer to himself as a "Master of Witches," but this, too, is confusing, as it could be misinterpreted as a claim to be their leader, not their destroyer (I am indebted to Alan Smith for this information).

I will therefore alternate between "cunning man/woman," these being the most widespread and least ambiguous traditional terms, and two neologisms—the precise but rather artificial "anti-witch," and my own colloquial coinage, "witchbuster," inspired by the American terms "crimebuster" and "ghostbuster," which pinpoints the function accurately. For the French

material I follow the usages of Judith Devlin and the translator of Jeanne Favret-Saada, namely “counter-sorcerer” and “unwitcher” respectively (below pp. 9–12).

English Trials: The Social Historians’ Approach

I will start in 1970 with Alan Macfarlane’s *Witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart England*, a major pioneering work which combines a close study of local sources with the functionalist analysis of an anthropologist or sociologist in a way no previous writer had attempted. Macfarlane’s chosen area is Essex from 1560 to 1650 and, within this, a more detailed scrutiny of three villages for some forty years. Thanks to the ample legal records, this narrowly focused investigation reveals clear social patterns concerning the characteristics of those accused of witchcraft and their relations with their alleged victims, and enables Macfarlane to trace in rich detail the whole process of suspicion, diagnosis, identification and accusation preceding a trial. He also assesses the applicability in Essex of certain general theories on social functions of belief in witchcraft, for example as an explanation for misfortune or an outlet for social tensions.

Macfarlane establishes some important facts. Firstly, theories about the satanic pact, devil worship and nocturnal gatherings of witches were almost wholly absent from Essex; the only source that mentions them is a *post facto* pamphlet about the multiple trials of 1645—the episode involving the witch-finders Matthew Hopkins and John Stearne, who were influenced by continental ideas. Secondly, despite the notoriety of Hopkins, it was most unusual for an outsider to hunt for witches and initiate accusations; normally, suspicions arose spontaneously within the community. Thirdly, Macfarlane highlights the crucial role of the cunning folk, the village experts on the diagnosis of witchcraft and the use of counter-magic. It was they whom the victims consulted, who confirmed and crystallised their suspicions, and who encouraged the accusations which eventually led to legal prosecutions, but no previous scholar had taken them into account.

Finally, Macfarlane offers a plausible socio-economic explanation of the underlying rationale for the suspicions. He demonstrates that the “witch” and her “victim” were always neighbours, but not equals. The victim would be relatively well off, the witch poor. The witch had asked her neighbour for some small loan or friendly service, but this had been refused, and she had shown anger. The better-off neighbour, feeling anxious and guilty at having failed in his or her social obligations, would later interpret any misfortune as due to the offended woman’s curse. Macfarlane thought that such episodes must have been particularly common at this period because of a clash between an older Catholic ideal of open-handed charity and the newer, more restrictive, Protestant attitude of cautiously selective almsgiving—one aspect of a general shift from a communal to an individualistic ethos.

The year after Alan Macfarlane’s book appeared, there came Keith Thomas’s magisterial work *Religion and the Decline of Magic*. This has five chapters on witch beliefs and trials in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England, and an equally important one on “Magic and Religion”; it covers a broad spectrum of cultural history, from the sophisticated debates of theologians and lawyers to the minute particulars of trial records. This being a nationwide picture, it is drawn on a much larger scale than Macfarlane’s and includes far more on the role of the élite. However, the analysis of local trial reports confirms that Macfarlane’s Essex material is quite typical of England as a whole. While intellectuals were absorbing or debating continental notions about devil-worship, villagers were motivated by older and simpler fears. People thought that a witch could harm the health of humans and of animals (a process called *maleficium*), and accusations and trials centred upon this. Animal familiars and the marks and “teats” supposedly used to suckle them were also mentioned in some trials, but magical flight and transformations were hardly ever featured.

The functional analysis proposed by Macfarlane for the Essex cases is echoed in Thomas’s survey of the rest of the English material. Here, too, we find the pattern of help asked for and refused, followed by anger and guilty anxiety; then comes a misfortune attributed to witchcraft; then, frequently, a consultation with a “cunning man” or “wise woman” who confirms the victim’s pre-existing suspicions. Thomas frames this picture within a broad context of the Tudor and Stuart mentality at every social level. He discusses, for instance, the belief in the efficacy of a righteous curse; beliefs about the devil, possession and exorcism; the pressures for conformity in rural communities; the functions of witch-beliefs in accounting for misfortune and reinforcing moral standards. But it was the focus upon the personal interactions between the alleged witch, the supposed victim and the local community which was strikingly innovative in the 1970s and is a direct clue to understanding what happened at the village level. It is a monumental achievement; this book, together with Macfarlane’s, produced a sober, realistic, convincing explanation for English witch trials, and made a major contribution to the understanding of this aspect of history when considered “from below.” Yet this picture represents only one facet of witchcraft. As Thomas himself noted, “there is still much about the fantasy side of witch beliefs which cries out for explanation” (Thomas 1971, 569). Various further refinements of socio-historical analysis will be discussed below.

Scottish Trials

Scottish witch-hunting is the subject of Christina Larner’s *Enemies of God* (1981) and *Witchcraft and Religion* (1984). There are many similarities between her findings and those of Macfarlane and Thomas—for in-

stance, the typical Scottish suspect was an elderly woman “with a sharp tongue and a filthy temper,” fairly low in the social scale (though not in deep poverty, as her English counterpart often was) and unpopular; she, too, had made some request from a neighbour, been refused, and shown her anger. But in several vital respects the Scottish situation was unlike that in England. In Scotland, the demand for prosecution came from the ruling classes, not the peasantry: often it was in response to a Government instruction that witches were to be eradicated. This she sees as a process of repression of deviants typical of an age of faith (Larner 1984, 113–39). The actual level of judicial activity depended on local courts controlled by the nobility and gentry and was erratically distributed, for reasons so far unexplained; many regions had no witch trials at all, others very few, while others (Fife, the Lothians, the Aberdeen area) were swept by repeated hunts. Larner estimates the number of executions at somewhere over a thousand, plus an unknown number of suicides and deaths in prison; this is low compared with most European countries, but noticeably higher than the English figure—approximately five hundred executions, in a much larger population.

Scottish elite classes not only controlled the frequency of trials but brought into them an awareness of continental ideas about diabolical pacts, Satan-worship, orgiastic gatherings, flight, cannibalism, and similar elements of “fantasy” usually lacking in England. Indeed, Larner thinks it probable that these ideas were introduced by one person, James VI, who would have encountered them at the Danish court in 1590. When he was nearly shipwrecked on the homeward voyage, he blamed it on storm-raising witches allegedly working for the Earl of Bothwell. The ensuing trials (in which James personally urged the jury to convict) gave wide publicity to the idea of devils, witches and traitors plotting to destroy the King; by presenting himself as a victim of attempted witchcraft, James was of course reinforcing the God-given legitimacy of his own rule and the devilish wickedness of his political enemies (Larner 1984, 9–15; Monter 1993, 430–1). As Scottish law required a confession from the accused, and allowed the threat or the use of torture to obtain it, these “fantasy” elements duly appeared in the confessions as well as the indictments and verdicts, not only in 1590 but in later trials too.

The main one was the pact, which followed a stereotyped pattern: the witch would say that she had met Satan in the form of a man or a dog, and had renounced her baptism and sworn allegiance to him; he had then set a mark on her body and had had sex with her, promising her future prosperity. Nocturnal gatherings of witches are only occasionally mentioned, usually in multiple trials; orgies and group worship of Satan are even rarer. The number of such elements incorporated into the confessions varies greatly, with those of Isobel Gowdie and the Forfar witches being particularly rich in sensational impossibilities. Larner sees this process

as something more subtle than merely agreeing to leading questions under threat of torture. She writes:

Witch confessions represent an agreed story between the witch and the inquisitor, in which the witch drew, through hallucination or imagination, on a common store of myth, fantasy and nightmare, to respond to the inquisitor’s questions (Larner 1981, 36).

Larner also pays particular attention to the question of gender in relation to accusations, a topic currently attracting lively international debate. In Scotland, the ratio averaged 80% women to 20% men—far more men than in England, where they only made up 7% of the total. These male suspects were generally the husbands or brothers of accused women, drawn into the net of a multiple trial (this was also the case for eleven out of twenty-three men accused in Essex [Macfarlane 1970, 160]). Contemporary commentators were well aware of this preponderance of female witches, but thought it quite natural, as women were more easily tempted to sin than men, more resentful, more spiteful in word and deed. Moreover, as Larner points out, scientific opinion from Pliny onwards held that menstrual blood could harm crops and food, kill bees, and so on, which made it easy to slip into thinking that there was some form of dangerous magic inherent in all women.

Those accused of witchcraft, Larner believes, were usually those “who do not fulfil the male view of how women should conduct themselves”; their position was made worse by social and economic dependence, and by the increased demands for piety and moral conformity imposed by both the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation, women being then regarded for the first time as fully responsible for their own spiritual salvation. Larner’s work is an important contribution to two of the ongoing debates about witch persecutions in general: how far they were orchestrated by the state as a means of imposing centralised order (Briggs 1989, 7–65; Levack 1995, 98–9 and 198–9), and the relevance of gender (Karlsen 1987; Hester 1994).

English Trials: A Continuing Discussion

The work of Macfarlane and Thomas, though highly influential both in Britain and abroad, has not remained unmodified or unchallenged. Macfarlane himself has since withdrawn his suggestion that there was a special crisis of conscience over almsgiving in Tudor and Stuart times, his later research leading him to believe that the transition from a communal ethos to an individualistic one had occurred several generations earlier (Macfarlane 1978). In more general terms, however, the link between quarrels caused by begging or borrowing and accusations of witchcraft is confirmed by data from several other countries (see below), and can be seen as “a sub-set within a more general aggression-guilt model” (Briggs 1989, 33 and 69–74). Of course, a psychological mechanism of guilt projection

can only serve to explain why a particular accusation occurred, not why there was a previous readiness to believe in the possibility of bewitchment.

The peculiarities which both these authors see as sharply differentiating English witchcraft from continental beliefs are now known to be part of an alternative pattern which can be traced over many areas of northern Europe—areas which were “peripheries” rather than “centres” (Ankarloo and Henningsen 1993, 10–14; Burke 1993, 440). This pattern preceded the period of the great hunts and re-emerged at the level of folk belief once the hunts were over. The British evidence will need reassessment with this factor in mind. Meanwhile, Robert Rowland has succeeded in linking the differing phenomena of “English”-style, African, and diabolic “continental”-style witch beliefs into a single model, modified according to the level of complexity in the society where it operated (Rowland 1993).

It has also been pointed out that Thomas had undervalued the coherence of popular beliefs and practices and overstressed their *ad hoc* functionalism; and that, though the distinction between élite and popular beliefs is important, in practice there was more mutual influence and interpenetration than he had implied, and also considerable differentiation within each social level (Geertz 1975; Holmes 1984). Clive Holmes has stressed that popular opinion manifested itself both in accusations and in verdicts. He picks out three beliefs as being clearly “popular”—the preponderance of women as witches; the idea that their powers were hereditary, especially in the female line; the animal familiars. Additionally, certain élite notions (including the pact) were diffused through sermons, tracts, chapbooks and ballads, and thus affected popular belief for a while, though the only one that persisted to later centuries was the water ordeal.

Bearing in mind the disagreement between Lerner’s emphasis on the role of the ruling classes and that of Macfarlane and Thomas on interaction between neighbours, Annabel Gregory has explored in great detail the unusually well documented prosecutions at Rye, Sussex, in 1607 (Gregory 1991). Of the two accused women, one practised as a healer and interpreted visions about fairies and treasures, while the other had consulted her. Yet this “wise woman” did not conform to stereotype, being financially prosperous and socially advantaged. Gregory explains the situation as a political one, arising from feuds between commercial factions in the town under economic stress; this breakdown in good neighbourliness was considered spiritually dangerous, and a woman prominent in one faction was scapegoated by the other. This approach resembles the concern with local power politics in the work of Paul Boyer and Stephen Nissenbaum on Salem, or Robert Muchembled’s on certain trials in Flanders (Boyer and Nissenbaum 1974; Muchembled 1981).

Debates and Comparisons

A currently vigorous area of debate is the issue of gender. Until the rise of feminism in the 1970s, scholars had not given much thought to the well-known fact that (except in the most remote countries: Iceland, Finland, Estonia) most of the accused were women, and that of these, many were past the menopause. Feminists seized on this as evidence of gross patriarchal oppression, and though their arguments were crude and inadequately based, they spurred historians into serious consideration of the point. Internationally, it has usually been seen as an echo of religious stereotyping of women as morally weak, credulous and lustful (Quaife 1987, 79–95), and it has been further suggested that their tasks “as cooks, healers and midwives” easily led to suspicions of using magic (Levack 1995, 137–40). In support of this latter point, one could add how frequently cattle and dairy-work featured in the accusations in many countries. Carol Karlsen strongly argues that in America most accused women were not under the control of male relatives and were, or were about to become, economically independent; they were usually above childbearing age, and had in several cases broken gender norms by sexual misbehaviour, by pride, or by unusual religious views. The accusations reflected a struggle to claw back control of property into male hands and force women to accept their “proper” role (Karlsen 1987, 111–19 and 127). Francisco Bethencourt has interestingly linked the issues of sex and age by commenting that in medical theory in seventeenth-century Portugal, the Evil Eye was attributed to the emission of “foul, fetid and malignant fluids” from the eyes of a woman who was *mal menstruada*, i.e. menstruating irregularly at her menopause (Bethencourt 1993, 415).

A similar discussion is taking place in Britain. Lerner’s interpretation of the Scottish evidence has been mentioned above; English material is discussed in articles by J.A. Sharpe and Clive Holmes, and a book by Marianne Hester. Using depositions (i.e. witness statements) from Yorkshire assizes in the 1640s, Sharpe highlights the fact that a substantial proportion of witnesses were women, driven by fear of the supposed witch’s verbal power, and that suspicions arose out of conflicts between women (Sharpe 1991). It was primarily women who decided whether an illness was due to a spell, whether a particular woman was a witch, and whether their menfolk should be asked to set legal processes in motion. To see witch-hunts purely as misogyny and patriarchy in action is an oversimplification. In reply, Holmes argues that it was primarily local men who controlled the process whereby suspicions became formal accusations; women appeared as witnesses when the charges concerned sickness or death, because of their role in nursing. Also, adolescent girls testified as victims of possession, and older women as examiners for “witch marks.” The possessed were subject to social pressures from their families and clergy, and framed their accusations accordingly; the women who con-

ducted physical examinations of suspects were expected to confirm élite assumptions, but often failed to do so. Men, he argues, were the prime movers in prosecutions, women the ancillaries; the issue of gender, Holmes concludes, cannot be eliminated (Holmes 1993).

For Hester, gender—and indeed sexuality—is central (Hester 1994, 107–204). From the viewpoint of “revolutionary feminism” she re-examines the Essex trial records Macfarlane had studied earlier, and especially five pamphlets giving more detailed accounts of some of these events. Factually, she adds little to Macfarlane’s work; her economic contextualisation differs from his chiefly in pointing out that widows and spinsters who tried to support themselves by a craft (e.g. brewing, weaving) threatened men’s livelihoods by their competition, and therefore were just as much a social “problem” as those who became dependent on charity. She concedes that women often accused or denounced one another, and seems ready to believe that at least some of the alleged witches shared the communal belief in their own powers and tried to use it to intimidate others and gain benefits for themselves, as the pamphlets described (*ibid.*, 166–70 and 201). But the main thrust of her interpretation is to argue that witch-hunting rested on assumptions of male social, sexual and moral supremacy and was used to reinforce these: the relation between the sexes was one of conflict and violence, in which witchcraft accusations were a weapon for ensuring the subordination of women. Sexual elements are less explicit in English trials than in continental writings, but not entirely absent; familiars were said to suckle from the witch’s genital area, the pamphlet on the Essex trials of 1645 alludes to intercourse with Satan, one witch was alleged to have tempted her own son to incest, and evidence against another might imply a lesbian relationship with one of her accusers. Witch-hunting, Hester concludes, was a form of sexual violence against women.

Another problem concerns attitudes towards “white” or “good” witches, i.e. village healers and midwives. Several writers have said that such women were especially liable to be persecuted because their “ancient” and “natural” methods were seen (by men) as suspect (Forbes, 1966; Ehrenreich and English, 1973; Horsley 1979), but their arguments have been severely questioned (Harley 1990; de Blécourt 1994, 288–92). There certainly were plenty of clerical writers everywhere (both Catholic and Protestant) who declared it sinful to seek help from charmers; Protestant pastors in particular struggled to persuade their people that this constituted a grave mistrust of God’s Providence (Clark 1993, 62–74). There were Scottish cases where a woman in her confession referred to her healing powers as derived from suspect sources (fairies, the dead); at the popular level, there was sometimes a lurking fear that anyone who had power to heal the sick might also harm them (Klaniczay 1993, 25–55). In America there were cases of accused midwives (Karlsen 1987, 9 and 142–4); in Hungary, some cases arose from mutual accusa-

tions by women healers (Klaniczay 1990, 157); the evidence from France is disputed (Horsley 1979, 705; Briggs 1989, 16 and 60–75; de Blécourt 1994, 289–90). Yet Macfarlane and Hester both think it uncommon for English “wise women” to be denounced as witches (Macfarlane 1970, 128; Hester 1994, 116), though occasional examples do occur (Gregory 1991); the topic needs further investigation.

In recent years there have been several books and articles focusing on the trials and / or beliefs of precisely defined regions and periods within Europe (Midelfort 1972; Henningsen 1988; Briggs 1989; Pócs 1989; Klaniczay 1990, 129–88; Gijswijt-Hofstra and Frijhoff 1991; Johansen 1991; *Acta Ethnologica Hungarica* 1991–2; Ankarloo and Henningsen 1993), and also discussion of broader zones (Levack 1995, 191–229); these have revealed many useful differentiations. British trials should now be compared not merely with a general background of “the European witch craze” but with specific features of specific areas, in order to refine our awareness of what is and is not peculiar to ourselves; a simple dichotomy between “British” and “continental” concepts or practices is far too blunt a tool.

There have also been many studies of the New England trials, especially the famous prosecutions at Salem in 1692 (including Boyer and Nissenbaum 1974; Demos 1982; Karlsen 1987; Rosenthal 1993); and of the general interaction of religious and magical beliefs in early American society (Weisman 1984; Hall 1989; Butler 1990; Goodbeer 1994). American witch-beliefs were descended from British folklore, though overlaid with religious theories of possession; the counterspells, for example, are identical, though cunning men are not mentioned (Goodbeer 1994, 42–6, 63 and 82). Comparisons are illuminating, but for reasons of space I cannot discuss them here.

Nineteenth-Century France

To observe the role of witchcraft in folk beliefs nearer to the present time, we can turn first to French peasants of the nineteenth century, whose ideas about it are well described in chapter 4 of Judith Devlin’s *The Superstitious Mind* (1987): their background in earlier centuries can be found in Robin Briggs (1989, 7–105).

The situations described by Devlin are practically identical with those in Britain three hundred years before. A victim attributes a misfortune to a spell, which he or she blames on somebody with a bad reputation, and / or somebody he or she has recently offended—someone who has been refused charity or hospitality, a rejected lover, a servant unjustly dismissed. The victim discusses these suspicions with friends, and often visits a “counter-sorcerer” (*contre-sorcier*, the equivalent of our “cunning man”) who confirms and legitimises the identification of the witch that the victim was already predisposed to make, often by using the technique of scrying in water or a mirror. The counter-sorcerer often recommends ways of removing the spell, reminis-

cent of those in British folklore: roasting an animal's heart or liver stuck with nails, or boiling a chicken with nails in a pot. Anyone who comes to the house while this is being done is identified as the witch, and it is thought that the pain the process inflicts will force the witch to lift the original spell. It is worth mentioning that these techniques were often accompanied by devout prayers; here, as so often in peasant cultures, magic and religion were seen as allies, not rivals. Devlin does not discuss the issue of gender; judging from the examples she cites, men were suspected of witchcraft more commonly than in Britain, while the counter-sorcerer was always a man.

So far, the picture is much the same as in Macfarlane, Thomas or Larner. But Devlin's view of the social function of witch beliefs is grimmer than theirs. Thomas and Macfarlane agreed that accusations of witchcraft were a clever way of transferring guilt onto the weaker party in a quarrel; Macfarlane additionally thought them a useful means of facilitating the transition from a communitarian society to an individualistic one (Macfarlane 1970, 197), while Thomas thought it socially beneficial that fear of witchcraft maintained the older ethos of charity, and fear of being accused deterred people from expressing anger openly (Thomas 1971, 564–7). Larner argued, even more optimistically, that provided the law was not called in to persecute and prosecute, the mere existence of suspected witches could be beneficial; the witch, she wrote:

fulfils the function of defining the normal standards and boundaries of the local society by being placed on its margins. She explains evil events, but she does not threaten the community's well-being to the extent of needing to be eliminated (Larner 1984, 46).

The cases cited by Devlin from nineteenth-century France show that there, on the contrary, the witch was perceived as deeply threatening, and the effects of accusations were disruptive in the extreme. When counterspells had failed, those who believed themselves victims of spells commonly turned to physical assault—attacking the suspect by beating or burning her, setting fire to her house—or sometimes to murder, not to mention slander, ostracism and general ill-will. Peasant communities regarded all this as thoroughly justified; if the assaults came to court, judges were sometimes lenient to the perpetrators. In one case in 1834, a mayor refused to prosecute members of a crowd which had lynched a beggar-woman suspected as a witch (Devlin 1987, 113–18 and 247–8). Clearly, French peasants in the nineteenth century would gladly have “eliminated” all their witches if they could have got away with it. No longer being able to call upon Church or state to protect them from the perceived danger, they took the law into their own hands—as indeed commonly happened elsewhere, too, once the witchcraft laws had fallen into disuse.

Germany 1930–50

There is evidence from the present century to confirm this. In 1951 a German writer, Johann Kruse, published *Hexen unter uns*, a book which seems little known to historians and folklorists. It is remarkable for the mass of detailed and unbowdlerised information it includes, but even more for the passionate indignation which inspires every page. Here, in the rural areas of Schleswig-Holstein in northern Germany between about 1930 and 1950, Kruse found a world of fear, suspicion and cruelty. There was, of course, no legal prosecution of witches, no threat of prison, gallows or the stake, yet what there was, was enough to break hearts and ruin lives.

Here, too, three individuals were involved: a victim who believes himself or herself to be bewitched; the person (usually a woman) suspected of being the witch; and, crucially, the *Hexenbanner*—a man, or more rarely a woman, whose role corresponds to that of the English “cunning man.” The term *Hexenbanner* means “someone who drives out, conjures away or exorcises witches”; it could be colloquially rendered as “witchbuster.” Kruse was outraged at the power these people wielded and the methods they used; his book is a fierce attack on the whole belief-system which sustained them, no matter how ancient and folk-rooted it might be. His sources included the grateful letters from clients which the *Hexenbanner* proudly displayed as advertisements, the libel actions brought by alleged witches desperately trying to clear their names, assault cases arising from attacks on witches, and many pathetic letters written to him by the so-called witches themselves, once his interest in the subject became known, describing the misery the rumours had caused them.

Like all anti-witches, the *Hexenbanner* was expected to diagnose whether the sickness or misfortune was caused by a spell, to identify the culprit, and to either advise the victim what counterspells to perform or to perform them himself. Diagnosis involved searching the victim's house and land for “magic” items such as knotted rags, tangled feathers, buttons threaded with human or animal hairs; Kruse says that these were often planted by the witchbuster himself. To identify the witch, victims were sometimes told to scry in a bowl of water till they saw a face they recognised, or various divinations could be used; but the favourite method was fumigation. The *Hexenbanner* would tell the victim to burn the stinking weed *asafoetida* (“Devil's dung”) all night in every room of the house, with doors and windows shut, after which the witch would be bound to visit the house within three days. It was almost inevitable that some neighbour or tradesman would call, and so become labelled as the witch; if nobody did come, the witchbuster would ask whether there had been any odd noises or gusts of wind during the night, and say that that had been the witch, invisible.

The counterspells described by Kruse are based on

similar principles to those in British folklore but are coarser, more brutal, more openly aggressive. It may of course be that the difference is more apparent than real; informants may have been cautiously selective in what they told middle-class British folklorists in the nineteenth century, and the folklorists themselves were apt to censor their material. In the 1930s and 40s, however, Germans did not merely bury dead calves or burn their hearts to stop outbreaks of cattle disease, as some British farmers did in the previous century, but whipped sick cows till they bled copiously. As in Britain, they boiled bottles of the victim's urine, but they also sprinkled it round the house as a protective charm; they used his or her faeces as an ointment (occasionally causing blood-poisoning), or smeared them all over the suspected witch's doorstep, in order to transfer the illness back to her. They whipped their sick children in an attempt to break the spells on them. They would maim a dog or cat (ideally, one belonging to the witch), and drag it round the bewitched person or cow till it died. If these counterspells failed, the witchbusters would hold impressive cursing ceremonies, beating, burning or tearing clothes belonging to the sick person or, better still, something stolen from the witch's house. They might advise the victim to attack the witch and draw her blood. They took large fees for their work, and claimed the authority of God and the Bible for what they did; anyone who doubted their power was no true Christian. And whenever some old woman in the village fell ill, the local witchbuster claimed the credit.

Suspected witches led miserable lives. They were ostracised and insulted; their homes were vandalised and their pets injured; their husbands and sons might lose their jobs; their daughters were assumed to have inherited their powers, and were similarly treated. Threatening letters, assaults and arson were not uncommon; Kruse gives details of several murders in the 1920s and 1930s. Not surprisingly, some reputed witches killed themselves, which was taken as clear proof of their guilt. If they fell ill, no one was willing to nurse them, as it was believed that a dying witch would pass her power into anyone who was holding her hand. Even after death, the persecution continued; anyone whose illness persisted might urinate or defecate on the grave of the witch who was believed to have caused it.

Kruse's indignation led him to attack German education in general and academic folklorists in particular for naively presenting fairytales and rhymes about witches as part of the glorious German *Volk* heritage, never admitting that there might be anything unpleasant, ignorant or dangerous in the ideas they contained. In this way, fears and superstitions passed on to new generations; furthermore, since the popular press printed bits of academic folklore without comment, uncritical readers found their own views confirmed—"Look, even university professors know that witches really exist!"

There may well still be witchbusters active in Germany, though I have unfortunately not been able to see J.F. Baumhauer's (1984) updated comments on Kruse's work. Kruse himself estimated that despite his lifelong campaign there were still "several thousand" in business in the 1970s, and Inge Schöck reported similar beliefs from the south-western regions at about the same time (Schöck 1978, 132–53). But Hans Sebald found that episodes of violence against suspects were getting rarer (though there had been a bad case of arson in 1976), and that most children did not know of the old beliefs (Sebald 1978, 223). In the area of Sebald's particular research, the Jura mountains of Franconia, peasants who thought themselves bewitched had a choice of actions. They could either go to someone who was already known as a witch and pay him or her to use countercurses against the attacking witch to force her to withdraw the curse (a process Sebald usefully calls "justice magic"); or, more commonly, they would consult a wholly benevolent and devoutly Christian type of female healer who would cure the trouble and recommend protective but non-aggressive charms. The function of "witchbuster" in this community was thus divided between contrasted figures (Sebald 1984, 127).

France 1969–75

An equally recent picture, but presented from a different point of view, can be found in French ethnographer Jeanne Favret-Saada's *Deadly Words: Witchcraft in the Bocage* (1980). Favret-Saada worked in a rural area of western France between 1969 and 1975. Her study is based on participant observation—on a quite remarkable degree of participation, in fact, since she became deeply involved in the beliefs she was studying, and at one point began to fear that witchcraft was being directed against herself. This experience won her the confidence of a handful of informants who perceived themselves as victims of witchcraft attacks and interpreted their misfortunes in this way. Her key interpretative concept is the power of the word. "A set of words spoken in a crisis situation" is retrospectively identified as the cause of harm, and their speaker as a witch. "In witchcraft words wage war" (Favret-Saada 1980, 10).

Like Kruse, she learned a lot about what she calls the "unwitchers" (*les désensorcelleurs*), but unlike him she accepts them at their own valuation as brave champions who put themselves magically at risk by pitting their power against that of the witch. "The unwitcher takes upon himself these words originally spoken to his client, and turns them back onto their original sender, the witch" (ibid., 9). Two types of counter-magic are used in the ensuing power struggle. The first is simply to teach the victim methods of self-protection, the main ones being to keep the house locked, to avoid even the slightest contact with the witch, and to discuss the trouble with nobody but the unwitcher. The second is "to return evil for evil," i.e. to make a magical counter-

attack to send illness or death to the alleged witch. Favret-Saada was told about some specific instances where this had worked, and noticed that her informants sometimes seemed to feel rather guilty about having authorised the unwitcher to do it. She does not mention the possibility that the counter-attack forces the witch to lift the spell, so it seems that the procedure is regarded as sheer revenge.

Unlike Kruse, Favret-Saada was unable to make contact with anyone suspected of witchcraft, and eventually came to doubt whether anybody ever actually initiated black magic; perhaps it was only the unwitchers who performed aggressive rituals, either in retaliation on behalf of a victim, or possibly sometimes to advertise their own powers (*ibid.*, 133–6). Logically, as she points out, an unwitcher performing counter-magic to bring illness or death to a witch is taking on the role of witch towards that witch. But nobody sees it that way; the unwitcher is regarded as a brave, selfless protector and avenger, the only person the victim can trust. The emotional bond between them is very strong. Favret-Saada stresses the subjective psychological aspects of the whole process, in which the victim, counselled by the unwitcher, constructs a diagnosis of his/her misfortune and reinterprets events to fit it, until at length a therapeutic “cure” is achieved.

An interesting feature in this French material is its intensely private nature, in contrast to the communal build-up of tension and suspicion seen in earlier periods and in Kruse’s and Sebald’s German data. The French victims are ordered by their unwitchers to keep silent about their troubles; the magic and counter-magic is regarded as a secret vendetta. Favret-Saada reported no cases where unrelated victims agree in blaming the same witch, and consequently has nothing to tell about large-scale ostracism, though of course the “victimised” family break off all contact with the person they call “their” witch. If this is indeed the case, and not merely due to the small number of informants interviewed, it might mean that the belief-system is crumbling in France and that believers feel they would not get communal support if they discussed their problems openly.

Problems of History

Having brought the story almost to the present day, let us return to history and to the debate on the origins of European witch-beliefs and witch-hunters, on which much has been written in recent years (for excellent surveys with full bibliographies, see: Monter 1983; Klaitis 1985; Quaife 1987; and Levack 1995). One argument centres on questions of élite versus popular culture. Was belief in witchcraft artificially constructed by medieval intellectuals and only imposed on the population at large through pressure from rulers, sermons, books, trial reports, and, above all, through confessions forced from the suspects? Was this part of a deliberate policy of “acculturation” enforcing conformity on “backward” populations? Or did certain aspects of

these beliefs originate in popular culture—in traditional folkloric fears and fantasies—and if so, which were they and where did they come from?

There are four components in the stereotype of a witch, which may or may not be present simultaneously in a particular social group.

(1) A witch is someone who inflicts harm (*maleficium*) by magical means; this is a virtually universal and very ancient concept and has nothing learned about it.

(2) A witch is someone who gets magical power from the devil; obviously, this definition depends on a prior belief in a well developed religion which includes the concept of a personal devil (or a sinister deity such as Hecate), but it, too, is simple and widespread, and many historians would be content to call it part of popular culture.

(3) A witch is a member of a secret sect of Satan-worshippers who meet regularly and practise ritual murder, cannibalism and sexual orgies.

(4) A witch is not entirely human; he or she can fly by night, ride on strange animals or objects, and turn into an animal.

It is these last two definitions that need investigation. In trial records and books on demonology such as the *Malleus Maleficarum* they are closely intertwined, but in recent years historians have tended to separate them. The idea of the satanic sect performing cruel and disgusting rituals is generally now agreed to be an invention of the medieval educated élite, not of the lower strata of the population. As Norman Cohn so brilliantly demonstrated in *Europe’s Inner Demons* (1975), it has its own prehistory as an accusation flung by dominant religious groups against allegedly dangerous minorities since the days of the Roman Empire; he argues that the Church used it against several groups of heretics during the Middle Ages and later transferred it to witches. But Richard Kieckhefer’s study of *European Witch Trials* (1976) showed that after about 1500 sophisticated concepts such as the demonic pact and the sabbath had filtered down to the popular level; they began appearing in the accusations brought by a witch’s neighbours, whereas before that date the neighbours spoke only of *maleficium*, though judges in their verdicts spoke of devil-worship. On the other hand, it has now been realised that the extreme demonology of the *Malleus* met criticism from within the Church itself, and should not be regarded as a universal expression of the élitist viewpoint, since the latter was capable of variation (Henningsen 1980, 347; Sharpe 1991, 180–1).

Christina Lerner’s study of Scottish data has led her to conclude that there were different layers of popular belief by the late sixteenth century: “Everyday belief was concerned with malice, but peasants could share with their rulers and indeed transmit to them communal fantasies of secret meetings and the night-flying witch” (Lerner 1981, 24). In Jutland, where trials were concentrated in the years 1617 to 1627, Johansen has found that the accusations (which arose in much the same way as the Essex ones studied by Macfarlane)

were based on allegations of *maleficium*, but that the confessions often included allusions to the diabolic pact and similar demonic elements. He suggests a rather unusual route by which elite concepts could have reached the peasantry, namely church frescos, which in Scandinavia sometimes included such themes as witches stealing milk with the help of demons (Johansen 1991). In assessing such interactions, each region requires special investigation, and detailed regional studies are appearing in increasing numbers.

Sixteenth-Century Italy

Fantasies concerning flight, animal riding, and animal transformation fascinate those scholars who are concerned with origins rather than social functions. Once they have been separated from the Church-inspired concept of the satanic sabbath meeting, they can be further broken down into individual motifs, and analogues to each motif can be hunted far and wide through the folklore of European Christian societies and the religions of non-Christian ones. One scholar zealously pursuing this line is Carlo Ginzburg; his recent and very complex book *Ecstasies* (1990) argues that belief in gatherings of night-flying witches is not, after all, the creation of an ecclesiastical elite, but derives from the mingling of two ancient ideas: one, that groups of superhuman female beings travel the world by night, usually for benevolent purposes; the other, that certain humans can send their souls out in trances to watch, or even to accompany, these benevolent spirits. He identifies elements from this pattern in folklore from various places and periods in Europe, in Celtic religion, and ultimately in prehistoric shamanism.

The starting-point for Ginzburg's vast odyssey was his discovery (Ginzburg 1983) of an unusual type of witchbuster in the Friuli region of north-eastern Italy in the late sixteenth century. The people concerned called themselves *benandanti*, "those who do good"; there can be no doubt that their beliefs and behaviour belonged to popular culture, for the Church and the law have never approved of "cunning folk" and similar self-appointed experts on the supernatural, and in fact these particular practitioners were being interrogated in Church courts because of their unorthodox beliefs.

These *benandanti* saw themselves as soldiers of Christ in a spiritual fight against evil. Like the witch-busters of other societies, they were consulted over mysterious illnesses, and practised healing by counter-attack. One described how to heal a sick child; it must be weighed on three successive Thursdays, and "while the child is weighed on the scale, the captain of the *benandanti* uses the scale to torment the witch who has caused the injury, even to the point of killing him" (ibid., 27 and 162).

So far, so normal. What is remarkable about the *benandanti* is that in addition to healing they also claimed to take part in magic battles on behalf of the

whole community. While their bodies lay in a trance at home, their souls went out by night to join an army that fought against an army of witches; they also took part in games and dances in the spirit world, and secretly drank wine in people's cellars on their homeward journey. The weapons in their fights were plant stalks—fennel and viburnum for the *benandanti*, sorghum for the witches. Both armies contained both men and women, led by a male captain. According to some witnesses, the battles took place frequently, usually on Thursdays, and were to prevent witches entering people's houses to do harm there, particularly to the wine, for witches not only drank magically in the cellars, but urinated into the barrels (ibid., 3 and 150–1). But according to others, the battles were seasonal, occurring only on the four sets of Ember Days, and the point at issue was the safety of the harvests:

"If we are the victors," said one *benandante*, "that year there is abundance, but if we lose there is famine ... One time we fight over the wheat and all the other grains, another time over the livestock, and also other times over the vineyards. And so, on four occasions we fight over all the fruits of the earth, and for those things won by the *benandanti* that year there is abundance" (ibid., 6, 153 and 155).

The notion of psychic group warfare is striking. The *benandanti* said that they were marked out at birth by being born with cauls, and at the age of twenty would be enlisted and "summoned by means of a drum, the same as soldiers"; they served till the age of forty. Their army had a captain, a banner and a standard-bearer, and could number five thousand or more; the army of the witches was similarly organised.

Was all this mere fantasy, or did groups of *benandanti* meet in real waking life to carry out anti-witch rituals on certain dates? Counter-magic performed by a group is not recorded in west-European folklore, as far as I know, but there are examples from eastern Europe and the Balkans. The trial records are no help on this point; the interrogators were chiefly interested in what the *benandanti* said about their out-of-body experiences, not in their real-life activities. They did try to get some information about the identities of other *benandanti*, and especially of the "captain," but the men on trial gave contradictory replies, whether through confusion or as a deliberate smokescreen: the captain was a stranger—a German—a man called Battista—an angel made of gold—"a certain invisible thing ... which had the form of a man"—a man called Zan de Micon, since dead—maybe a devil, after all (ibid., 7–10, 12, 154, 156 and 160). One emerges with the impression that some *benandanti* did know one another, but it is impossible to tell if they ever met as a group.

Ginzburg noted some Catholic elements in their beliefs: the angel leader; the importance of Ember Days; the use of viburnum branches such as were carried in Rogation processions; and, of course, their insistence that they were soldiers of God. The cauls they carried

had been blessed at Mass. One might add that their banner was white and gold, the Papal colours, and that some said their battles took place on "the field of Josaphat," where Armageddon will be fought. This linkage of magic and religion is a regular feature in the work of folk healers and witchbusters, as indeed it is for protective charms in general. Ginzburg comments that the trances of the *benandanti* at Embertide were "in tacit competition" with the Church's prayers and processions at Rogationtide, both being aimed at protecting the crops (ibid., 23); this assessment is logical, and no doubt the clergy would have concurred, but the *benandanti* probably viewed their situation differently. People who use magic for helpful or protective reasons usually see their actions as complementary to their Christian faith, not in rivalry with it, as has been pointed out in connection with New Englanders (Goodbeer 1994, 15–17) and is widely observable. The relation of the *benandanti* to their church was rather like that of a posse of vigilantes to the police—the method officially unapproved, but the aim the same.

The inquisitors found these men baffling, but not particularly alarming. Their belief in soul-journeys was certainly heretical, and their talk of seeing witches at night raised suspicion that they might be witches themselves, however much they denied it. But the enquiries were only halfhearted, and many cases were dropped. The first two suspects received very light sentences in 1580; they were ordered to renounce their belief in soul-journeys, to hand over their cauls, and to perform some mild prayers and penances. They were also sentenced to six months in prison, but this was immediately commuted to a mere fourteen days confined to their own town limits. And they were forbidden ever to carry viburnum branches in Rogation processions again. Such leniency was the general attitude of inquisitors in Italy and Spain towards witchcraft, which they handled with impressive patience and moderation, their aim being to induce repentance, not to punish (Henningsen 1980; Monter 1983, 61–77; Tedeschi 1993).

When Ginzburg's work first appeared in Italy in 1966, some scholars thought it showed that the *benandanti* held actual fights against real-life "members of a witch cult," and that here at last was some supporting evidence for the Margaret Murray theory of witchcraft as a pagan fertility cult. This, of course, was not what Ginzburg had said, and he has since explicitly denied it (Ginzburg 1990, 10). Like other witchbusters, the *benandanti* did identify individuals as witches who had caused illnesses, but there is nothing in the records of their trials to suggest that the hosts of witches supposedly threatening the harvests and spoiling the wine were anything other than imaginary. Analogy with certain Balkan data (see below) suggests that they could either have been envisaged as akin to storm demons or, if envisaged as human, would have been identified with whatever equivalents of the *benandanti* were thought to be active in other districts.

Eastern Europe, the Balkans and Corsica

Ginzburg mentions various parallels to his *benandanti* in the beliefs and customs of Eastern Europe and the Balkans, and more information about these can be found in Pócs (1989, 53–66) and Klaniczay (1990; 1993, 244–55). An old man named Thiess, on trial as a werewolf in 1692 in Livonia, said that all werewolves went three times a year to a Hell beyond the sea to fight witches there and recapture the livestock, corn and fruit they had stolen; werewolves were therefore "the hounds of God," and would be rewarded in Heaven (Ginzburg 1983, 29–30). Recent folk traditions from Istria, Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia, Herzegovina, Montenegro and Hungary include the figure of a good shamanistic magician (the *kresnik*, *mogut*, *zmej*, *negromat*, *zhudač* or *táltos*) who has, among other powers, the ability to drive witches and vampires away. He is usually born with a caul or (less frequently) with teeth, a little tail or extra fingers; he falls into trances and may fight in the sky in animal form (Ginzburg 1990, 160–6; Klaniczay 1990; 1993). In Yugoslavian and Hungarian tradition he is seen as an implacable enemy of witches, even if the legal authorities sometimes accused him of black magic (Dömötör 1980; Ginzburg 1990, 161; Klaniczay 1990, 138–43). Sometimes famine or abundance, or "the domination of the sky" (i.e. the power to control weather) are at stake in his combats. Ossetian tradition in the late nineteenth century described men called *burkudzäutä* whose souls travelled at midwinter to the land of the dead to bring back seeds of wheat and fruit, at great risk to themselves, and sometimes only after battles with rival magicians (Pócs 1989, 59; Ginzburg 1990, 165–6). The Hungarian *zmej* would send his soul into the sky in the form of a snake or lizard to drive the dragon-like storm demons away from the crops of his community (Pócs 1989, 53–6 and 81 n. 234).

But the adversary can be human, not demonic; in Serbian, Croatian and Slovene belief, as recently as the beginning of this century, wizards called *zduhačes* were thought to rise into the air to do battle against rival wizards of neighbouring areas to win the weather and good crops for their own tribes; they fought in large bands organised in military style, but their weapons were torn-off tree-trunks and boughs, and their mounts were benches, brooms etc. (Pócs 1989, 83 n. 254; Klaniczay 1990, 136–7 and 227–8). *Táltosok* were great fighters too, though their combats were directed against one another and often explained as struggles to win good crops and avert drought or storms by defeating those from other villages; there are signs, however, that originally they were initiations. The concept can even be transferred to the witches themselves—in some regions of Hungary, it was witches from rival villages who fought on certain nights, apparently to win control of cows and crops (Klaniczay 1990, 141–3 and 147).

In parts of Corsica there still are men and women known as *mazzeri*, probably meaning "killers," whose main function is to go out hunting in trance; the ani-

mals they kill or wound are spectral doubles of people who will soon die in real life. *Mazzeri* of different villages are enemies. In some places it is said that those of one village gather once a year, on the night between 31 July and 1 August, and form a militia led by a captain; they go in trance to some mountain pass which separates their land from that of the next village, and there fight the neighbouring village's *mazzeri*. They generally use guns or knives, but human bones and stalks of asphodel are sometimes mentioned. What is at stake is life itself; the village whose *mazzeri* lose will suffer more deaths during the coming year, and an individual *mazzere* may also be "killed" there. The first of August, formerly the Feast of the Maccabees in the Roman Catholic calendar of saints, was a Day of the Dead (Carrington 1995, 68–72).

These trance combats had their real-life equivalents in the ritual behaviour of certain Balkan groups in their seasonal customs. The famous Romanian *călușari* dancers protected their communities, though against hostile fairies, not against witches, and also acted as healers; they formed fraternities organised on semi-military lines with a leader and a flag; if one band happened to meet another from a neighbouring village during their Whitsun rounds, they would fight, and victory would mean abundant crops (Ginzburg 1990, 187–91; Kligman 1981; Pócs 1989, 50–3 and 64–5). Similarly, at Midsummer, groups of Romanian girls impersonating fairies would go dancing from house to house; should they meet another group at the boundary between two villages, they might fight (Pócs 1989, 52). In all these situations, the underlying assumption is the concept of "limited good" (Foster 1965); there is only so much prosperity, fine weather, good crops and so on available, so those seeking to draw it to their own community are necessarily hostile to their counterparts in neighbouring areas; village A's "good wizard" is a "witch" to B, and vice versa.

To these examples should be added some Balkan customs mentioned by T.P. Vukanović, in which groups of young men jointly perform magical actions to protect their villages from witchcraft. In Dalmatia on the Saturday before Lent, groups of youths would fill a gourd with water, cork it up, and carry it round their village after dark; this was expected to cause agony to local witches by preventing them from urinating, so they would have to come and beg the young men to uncork the gourd, and promise to do no harm in the village that year. In Bosnia, the same thing was done during the night before St George's Day, using an inflated black goatskin (Vukanović 1989a, 19; 1989b, 222). No trances or spirit-journeys were involved; these were acts of material counter-magic, just as much so as an English witch-bottle heated by the fireside, but they were acted out by a group, at a fixed season, and were meant to protect a whole community. It is unfortunately not clear from Vukanović's account whether these counterspells were directed against witches from outside the community or from within it.

The Importance of the Witchbusters

Striving to understand the past, we encounter a clamour of conflicting voices, each offering its own definition of a "witch": theologians, judges, writers on civil or ecclesiastical law, pamphleteers, politicians, persons believing themselves bewitched, persons accused of witchcraft, rumour-mongers, storytellers—all affected, in varying degrees, by emotional or social pressures, prejudices, stereotypes. In this maze, it is useful to follow the trail of the witchbusters, by whatever name they are locally known.

Such people were rarely approved of by the religious and legal establishment—indeed, in some places they remained liable to prosecution (as slanderers or as frauds) long after the witch-trials themselves had ended. What they said and did was intended to meet the needs of their clients alone—they knew what was going on, and what to do about it. They may well represent that elusive target, the purely "popular," non-élite, concept of witchcraft; certainly they played a great part in shaping public opinion on the topic. Further research might also show them to be relevant to gender stereotyping, if it was predominantly cunning *men*, not wise *women*, who were called upon to unmask witches and break spells; this may have been the case in some areas, but not in all. Other topics needing consideration are how far they themselves were suspected or accused of using their powers for evil; whether they were identified with or contrasted with the figure of the benevolent "healer" and/or "charmer." Such matters will certainly be found to vary from one region to another. Witchbusters were not admirable people; they had a vested interest in keeping the belief alive, and, by encouraging rumour and suspicion, they brought suffering to many. But if we want to understand what witchcraft meant in daily life in the villages of England or Scotland, France, Germany, Holland, Italy or the Balkans, whatever can be discovered about witchbusters will be valuable evidence.

A Challenge to Folklorists

It is time to ask whether the social historians, who have already so brilliantly illuminated many aspects of British witchcraft, should be considered to have a monopoly on the topic, or whether there are still problems for folklorists to explore. I am convinced that there are areas which we could and should examine, using our expertise at detecting recurrent story patterns and our understanding of the way legends are formed and spread. Using our customary tools of Tale and Motif Indexes, we should be able to pinpoint the folk elements in that "common store of myth and fantasy" of which Lerner wrote; there are certainly international migratory legends to be found in the confessions, and probably in the statements of witnesses too, and we are well placed to identify them objectively. The pamphlets describing trials should also be scanned for legend material.

It might be possible to decode a symbolic "language" in traditional counterspells and thus obtain new insight into the perceived workings of witchcraft, as Alan Dundes has done for the Evil Eye (Dundes 1980). What records are there of words being used to accompany the symbolic actions of the counterspells (boiling, burning, cutting etc.), and do these words introduce a religious dimension, as Gaelic charms against the Evil Eye often do? As things stand, the actions on their own apparently imply a mechanistic, non-diabolical view of magic, but there is one mention of a Yorkshire "wise man" reciting psalms while the countercharm is in progress (Smith 1977, 33); this could imply that popular counter-magic here, as often abroad, was combined with religious beliefs.

It would be worth re-examining the links between our witch-beliefs and fairy-beliefs. Their existence has long been recognised, but only on the level of individual motifs. In the light of work recently done in Hungary, Rumania and south-east Europe, and in Sicily, the overlaps assume more importance, as possibly showing a fundamental relationship between the two systems. Balkan scholars argue that in the late Middle Ages "demonic" powers previously associated with destructive supernatural figures (including some types of fairy) were transferred on to witches (Pócs 1989; Klaniczay 1990). In seventeenth-century Sicily women healers claimed that they regularly travelled in companies, in trance or dream, to share the feasts of fairies from whom they obtained their healing skills; this is probably a deep-rooted popular cult which escaped assimilation to a witches' sabbath (Henningsen 1993). With this in mind, the claims of certain Scottish "witches" to have learnt healing from the fairies assume new significance. It is also fascinating to read of a "self-appointed shaman" in the Orkneys "who lived under a hundred years ago," who would rush out on certain nights to fight physically against evil fairies and trows, coming home cut and bruised (Bruford 1991, 117 and 136)—a clear parallel to the anti-witch behaviour of Balkan "cunning men." We should also be asking, as Richard Jenkins did for Ireland, how far a society which believed in both fairies and witches as explanations for misfortunes discriminated between the circumstances involving the one or the other (Jenkins 1991).

There are a good many items of belief, memorates and legends about witchcraft and "cunning folk" to be found in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century folklore collections, and these too could profitably be re-evaluated, though our lack of archives will prevent us from obtaining as rich and systematic results as, say, those derived by Ton Dekker from legends and memorates recorded in the Netherlands in a survey from 1962 to 1977 (Dekker 1991, 183–95). Nevertheless, it has proved possible to study a few individual cunning men (Maple 1960; Smith 1977); more such data could be found. The importance of this neglected aspect of the field has been recently stressed (de Blécourt 1994). Henningsen obtained revealing results by scanning Danish press reports and court proceedings for

the period after witch trials had ended but when attempted lynchings, defamation suits, and cases of counter-magic showed the belief-system to be still active till very recent times (Henningsen 1988); a similar investigation might prove fruitful in Britain.

Moreover, there is enough information available now for useful comparisons to be made between British and European oral traditions about such things as animal familiars, milk stealing, transformation to animal shape, flight, methods of detecting witches, counterspells, and so forth. Wherever communal fears and fantasies are involved, there is a place for the folklorist alongside the historian and the anthropologist.

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