Witches, according to early modern demonologists, sold their soul to the Devil; flew at night to wild ceremonies where they worshipped him and engaged in orgies, infanticide, and cannibalism; and prepared magical potions and powders and learned spells that they used to work black magic against their neighbors back home. Not one credible example of this supposed sect has ever actually been found, but the myth of a diabolical sect of Devil-worshipping witches played a critical role in the early modern witch hunts. It provided the motive to scrutinize all magical activities, caused any individual suspected of witchcraft to be treated as the tip of an iceberg, and seemed to require exceptional measures to combat: torture was used extensively to obtain detailed confessions and the names of co-conspirators.

However, the demonological myth was a necessary condition for the early modern witch hunts, but it was not sufficient. Trials seldom started with an inquisitor riding into town, picking suspects at random, and torturing them into confessing. Some did start with an inquisitor riding into town, and tortured confessions did play a vital role, but hunts seldom started with a suspect picked at random. Instead, the suspect was almost always selected because somebody who knew them denounced them. Sometimes this denunciation was inspired by a fanatic outsider, but far more often it originated within the community. Once a hunt got going people were accused willy-nilly by suspects undergoing torture and neighbors caught up in mass hysteria, and the charge was sometimes hurled by religious zealots targeting deviant behavior or unscrupulous people in some mundane dispute, but initial accusations typically stemmed from long-standing suspicions that a person practiced witchcraft. Many people were suspected without actually ever being formally accused. This pool of local suspicions thus also played a critical role in the witch hunts.

Why did ordinary people in early modern Europe suspect their neighbors of witchcraft? Why were they ready to see them tortured and burned? To answer these questions, this chapter will explore what ordinary early modern people, common villagers and townsfolk, understood witchcraft to be, why they suspected certain people were witches, and how these suspicions fed into the witch hunts.
Witchcraft in the “magical universe”

The demonology only played a limited role in ordinary peoples’ understanding of witchcraft. Since it combined reports of local beliefs from many different places, ancient stories preserved in manuscripts, and carefully reasoned inferences, it was an alien notion everywhere, imported via broadsheets and books, word of mouth, sermons, decrees, and the higher education of local leaders. It gradually percolated into local cultures, but even when it was widely known, concern about diabolic pacts and wild orgies played far less of a role in popular concerns than maleficium, harmful magic.

Ordinary early modern people thought that others could harm them through magic because they believed the world is populated by spirits and connected by occult (from the Latin for “hidden”) forces. They imagined that the earth was the only world in the universe, the focal point of the cosmos. God in Heaven above watched to see the extent to which they obeyed His rules in order to decide whether they deserved to join him for eternity or be cast down into the fiery Hell which, they thought, lay beneath their feet. Angels and demons soared in the space between Heaven and earth, and through the same space the influence of the stars and planets radiated down into human affairs. Closer to the ground a host of spirits and monsters like elves and trolls, giants and ghosts lurked in the shadows. They inhabited specific places, appeared at specific times, and played specific roles, sometimes helping and sometimes hurting people, and sometimes simply indifferent to them. Mysterious forces governed the daily activities, yearly rhythms, and major points in the life cycles of human beings, requiring or prohibiting certain actions at specified times to achieve success and avoid misfortune.

The magical universe, or perhaps more properly the magico-religious dimension of the universe, was officially divided between the established religion, Christianity, and the diverse unsanctioned local supernatural beliefs and practices that flourished everywhere. At the beginning of the witch hunts, in Western Europe Christianity meant Catholicism. It had a complex spiritual hierarchy in which God was the ultimate, all-encompassing spirit, but he allowed autonomous spiritual entities, angels and demons, to exist. He also bestowed spiritual power on humans like the saints, the Virgin Mary, and ordained priests during mass. God could ignore the laws of nature and work miracles, but the primary focus of Christianity was not on tapping His power in this world, but on gaining salvation in the next. This was accomplished, or at least facilitated, by following His will and commandments. Few ordinary people understood all of this with the rigor of a theologian, but by the end of the Middle Ages most Europeans grasped the essence of it.

It was generally understood that in order to test people’s faith, God allowed the Devil to tempt them, and the Devil and his minions therefore operated widely in the world. The Protestant Reformation in northern Europe simplified this complex spiritual system by making the active agents in worldly affairs just God and the Devil, but the Catholic and Protestant clergy agreed that one of the Devil’s most powerful tools was his lordship over the other half of the magico-religious dimension of the universe: magic. Whether used for good or ill, magic was the Devil’s snare because it worked through demons and therefore involved worship of a false god. Black magic
Edward Bever

blatantly manifested evil by causing harm; white magic enticed people to put their faith in the Devil instead of God.

This was the official line, but for most ordinary Christians the situation was not so clear cut. To begin with, they hoped that religion would deliver material rewards as well as salvation. Even if they understood that rituals can’t make God grant material benefits – He only does this to serve His own purposes – they still prayed, worshipped, and deployed symbols in hopes of getting help from Him. The Catholic clergy actively participated in such activities, while Protestantism’s rejection of all but prayer left many ordinary people unsatisfied.

On the other side of the magico-religious divide, by the early modern period magical practices were generally clothed in Christian symbolism. Healing incantations commonly called upon God or the saints for help, for example, and incorporated liturgical elements like “in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.” So too, did magical treasure-hunting rituals. The line between religion and magic was less clear in practice than in theory.

Supernatural forces took two forms: conscious spirits and automatic occult processes. Officially, God was the ultimate source of spiritual power and the only One capable of causing truly supernatural effects, miracles. All other magic was illusory “preternatural” tricks performed by demons or the Devil based on their understanding of human nature and obscure natural processes. God might occasionally allow the Devil to accomplish truly supernatural effects, but it was ultimately His power granted for His purposes.

Ordinary people generally did not make such fine distinctions between God-given and autonomous spiritual power or supernatural and preternatural effects. They often did not worry about whether magic was produced by conscious spirits or simply manifested occult mechanical processes either. Many rituals did invoke spirits, and some magic, like astrology, involved purely occult forces, but the source of much magical power was undefined.

Of more concern to ordinary people was whether magic was helpful or harmful. Where it fit into the official theology was less important than its intent and effects, although this changed over the early modern period due to individual internalization of religious morals and collective assimilation of official values into popular culture. Some forms of magic were ambivalent, like love magic, which could be used to bring back a wayward husband or seduce an innocent virgin, and one person’s righteous retribution might seem like malicious aggression to another. Nevertheless, most magic was regarded as either benign, like healing sicknesses, bringing good fortune, or foretelling the future, or malign, like fairies substituting a “changeling” for a newborn baby, the heavens entering an unfavorable conjunction, or a witch casting a malevolent spell.

Magical beliefs, practices, and effects were a pervasive part of everyday life everywhere in Europe, but their specific forms varied enormously from place to place. In general, though, magical beliefs included the spirits and forces that interacted with humans according to their own whims or logic, and things people could do to learn from, influence, or harness them. The spirits and forces included those governing activities in daily life that required people to do or not do certain things, like starting to sew the fields or not washing clothes on certain days; phenomena that served as omens and portents, like an owl’s call portending a death; and entities like fairies and
trolls that existed in on the margins of human society, interacting with people when they violated their space, encountered them by accident, or enjoyed their help or fell victim to them because of some act, failure to act, or vulnerability, like childbirth.\(^7\)

Human magical activities included both passive and active measures that served both protective and assertive purposes. Passive and protective measures designed to ward off the undesirable influence of autonomous occult forces, spirits, and other peoples’ magic were the most common. Assertive measures attempting to tap into or project magical power were employed occasionally by many people and routinely by some. Most of those who used magic assertively used it for benign purposes, but some used it malevolently, to cause harm.

Witchcraft understood most broadly was magic used by people to harm others. The means by which this harm was inflicted included both sorcery, rituals acts and utterances learned and practiced consciously, and sheer malice, one person’s bile spontaneously manifested as another’s bad fortune. However, it was understood that some people might uncharacteristically resort to sorcery or manifest traumatizing rage in a fit of anger, but that did not necessarily make them a witch. A witch was someone who was thought to employ witchcraft routinely. The early modern witch hunts did not occur simply because people believed in witchcraft, but because they believed some of their neighbors were witches.

**Witchcraft in this world**

There was in many parts of Europe belief in a “night witch,” a shadowy figure barely distinguishable from the completely disembodied evil spirits that were thought to hover above the human world and swoop down to afflict people in moments of vulnerability.\(^8\) However, far more common were ordinary “village” witches, known members of the community reputedly responsible for a series of specific harms to specific neighbors. If witchcraft was part of the magical dimension of the universe, the magical dimension of the universe was inextricably entwined with the mundane physical and social worlds, and it was in these that the animosities, rivalries, and struggles for advantage manifested in witchcraft and fears of witchcraft arose.

**Conditions of life in early modern communities**

Why were early modern communities home to such intense animosities that some people attempted to harm their neighbors through witchcraft and others accused their neighbors of it knowing they would be tortured and burned? To begin with the physical setting, the overwhelming majority of early modern people, roughly nine out of ten, lived in farming villages, and most of the rest lived in small towns that were not much bigger. This meant that they lived in a natural environment that took its shape and changed according to processes that humans could scarcely understand and only marginally influence. Magic, the belief that the universe is animated by implacable occult processes and filled with willful conscious entities corresponded to their immediate surroundings and experience. So too did the belief that those processes and entities were as likely to harm as to help human beings.

Furthermore, living in villages and small towns meant living in intimate and constant contact with a small circle of people: family, other household members, and
neighbors. Most houses had only a few, and sometimes no, separate rooms, and most of those housed, and the beds within them often slept, several people. Consequently, most people lived in the almost constant presence of others. Even prosperous farmers, merchants, and nobles lived in close and sustained proximity to other members of their large households, which included members of their immediate and often extended families, and servants. These varied in number from one or two for a prosperous farmer to many for nobles. They generally lived in close proximity to their employers and even closer proximity to other servants.

Going out-of-doors offered at most limited relief. Towns and cities were crowded with people, and even in villages houses and out-buildings were generally closely packed. The countryside did contain vast, thinly populated stretches, but these contained predators both human and animal, so people tended to stay close to their communities. Neighbors, seen or unseen, were a constant presence. Their right, and indeed responsibility, to observe, report on, and intervene in others’ behavior was enshrined in local practice and legal structures.¹

Some people may have enjoyed some anonymity in the crowds in the major cities, and some others lived in relative isolation in scattered farmhouses and tiny hamlets, but even in the cities, neighborhoods formed relatively stable and tight-knit communities, and in tiny hamlets people lived in tight proximity to their immediate family and neighbors. A few may have lived in stark solitude, but they were a small minority. A limited number of people moved about routinely – there was some mobility in normal times as armies and merchants plied their trades and individuals moved to find employment or land – and occasional upheavals like wars uprooted entire regions, but the great majority of people were born into, lived in, and died within face-to-face communities of a few hundred people to whom they were bound over the course of their lives.

We moderns tend to romanticize this simple village and small town life, with its close personal ties, interdependent households, and communal rituals and support, but the reality was far more complex. To begin with, even villages were often divided between a small number of dominant families and a larger number of subordinate clans.¹² Villages as well as towns had formal divisions between citizens, who owned houses and land and were full members of the community, and cotters and boarders, who rented their land or quarters and hired themselves out part or full-time to their more prosperous neighbors. Agrarian communities contained additional subgroups, like herders, who formed networks that bound them more to their compatriots in other villages than to the villagers in their own communities, even while they could be strongly divided by things like what type of animal they tended. Towns were even more subdivided between various craft guilds, artisans and merchants, rich and poor, longstanding and new residents, and numerous family lineages. Within all households there were divides among and between family members and servants; close and more distant relatives; adults, children, and the aged; males and females; and step-children, step-parents, and half-siblings. Closeness was a double-edged sword: while it created a sense of comfortable familiarity and mutual support, it also bred bitter rivalries and intense hatreds.

Naturally, most people enjoyed some close friendships and many maintained amicable relations with their households and neighborhoods on the whole, but most communities were riven by factions and most people were at odds with at least a
few others. Some were in conflict with most. Communal institutions actually did a remarkable job of coordinating peoples’ efforts and managing their disputes, but their very success meant that angers and resentments festered.

**Witchcraft and interpersonal conflict**

When conflicts erupted, they could be pursued viciously. Verbal abuse, malicious gossip, physical violence, and legal action were often employed pitilessly. People openly chided, chastised, insulted, harangued, threatened, and cursed each other, and fights involving hitting, kicking, wrestling, biting, scratching, and pulling hair were not uncommon. Clubs and knives were often brandished and sometimes used. People covertly slandered others, sometimes vandalized their property, occasionally injured their animals, and in some cases employed poisons, arson, and sorcery. Witchcraft and witch accusations alike were not aberrations from but extensions of neighborly conflict.

Witch-like behaviors could be blatant, but often they were ambiguous. Whether a curse was meant as harmless venting, an earnest warning, or a magical assault itself was often not clear, perhaps even to the person who hurled it. However, there was no question that physical threats could be followed by physical force, and in some cases curses were undoubtedly made with the intention that they would cause harm. Certainly, the society was rife with violence: men fought without restraint, and while women were less prone to fisticuffs on the whole, many would push, slap, and hit, and at least some used weapons, when provoked. When bodily strength or weaponry were mismatched, though, or social constraints imposed restraint, the weaker party might well have recourse to more discrete forms of attack: malicious gossip; vandalism; arson; surreptitious battery of animals or children; sorcery; or poison in gifts of food, dropped in a beer barrel, or served in a meal.

At times and places surreptitious assaults were clearly suspected all out of proportion to the extent that they can reasonably be assumed to have been practiced, but there can equally be no doubt that practiced they were. Historians have put little effort into determining how widespread such practices might have been, but the one study that has attempted to do so concluded that between 10 and 15 percent of the suspects in the Duchy of Württemberg had engaged in them.

While some of these practices may have been impotent expressions of rage, others could clearly inflict serious harm. Certainly vandalism, arson, battering animals or children, and poison could cause real damage to a person’s property, dependents, or self. Defamation was not a physical threat, but it could undermine a person’s standing in the community, and thereby their likelihood of getting help when in need, equal treatment in communal institutions, or even the comforts of simple friendship. Overt magical acts like explicit curses, obviously intent gaze (the evil eye), symbolic gestures, and inappropriate or hostile touching could trigger psychophysical reactions, which can cause or contribute to a wide variety of ailments, from aches and pains to cardiac arrest, especially when prolonged, as would easily be the case in the emotional hot-house of a small community. The hostility motivating covert magical rituals and confidence that they would take effect could also be communicated during subsequent encounters through body language, facial expression, and the implications of words, and thereby also trigger or sustain deleterious psychosomatic responses.
Whether witches and sorcerers could exert a baleful influence at a distance through paranormal powers is an intriguing question, but unfortunately more than a century of scientific research on such phenomena has not yielded a scientific consensus on whether they are possible. Fortunately, though, they were rarely mentioned in early modern accusations; most witchcraft involved some sort of face-to-face interaction or word-of-mouth connection. So, while not every witch-like act necessarily resulted in injury, their potential to cause harms ranging from disrupted relationships through destruction of property and illness to death was real and, for the people involved, consequential.

The misfortunes ordinary early moderns saw as possible consequences of witchcraft varied widely. Certain things were almost never ascribed to witches, in particular widespread calamities like plagues and wars, and things where a mundane cause seemed obvious. The most common type of problem that was ascribed to witchcraft by far was illness, both in people and animals. Other common ones were impotence in men and sterility in women, accidents, disruptions to domestic processes like churning butter and brewing beer, cows drying up, and hailstorms, and there was a miscellany of localized beliefs, like stormy weather and bad luck at fishing. Some, like hailstorms and elusive fish, seem to us impervious to human influence, baring paranormal forces, but the most common ones – illness and reproductive problems, in particular, but also accidents (which stress can make more probable) – can all plausibly, if not necessarily accurately in any particular case, be ascribed to physical, chemical, or psychological attack in our as well as their understanding of the world.

Early modern people recognized that these misfortunes could have ordinary causes as well, so what made them think a particular instance resulted from witchcraft? One clue was when it followed an explicit threat or curse. Other times, objects known to be implements of magic, like bundles with noxious objects or scraps of paper with written spells, were found secreted in buildings or on a suspect’s person. However, it was not always clear who had done what, or why, and in most cases there was no overt evidence of witchcraft at all. Instead, it was deduced backwards when something about a malady seemed strange: a disease came on suddenly or lingered inexplicably; a healthy cow stopped giving milk suddenly; or a building burned down when the owners were sure they’d put out the fire. When a suspicious misfortune occurred, the sufferer might think of a relationship or recent interaction with someone and decide that that person was responsible. While potentially accurate, this method was notoriously unreliable, vulnerable to unwarranted conviction that a chance misfortune was intended and misattribution of responsibility when it was, and was therefore responsible, along with torture, for the fact that the great majority of suspects were innocent of any form of maleficium at all.

Interpersonal conflict was thus at the core of witchcraft, both actual, in the sense of rituals conducted and injuries inflicted, and suspected. All sorts of social relationships could be the context of such conflicts: an old woman denied charity; neighbors disputing a boundary between fields; one person’s prosperity alongside another’s poverty; two women’s interested in the same man; a woman’s antipathy for her step-children. The list could go on, but not indefinitely, for witchcraft was generally recognized to be the weapon of the underdog. Those with superior physical or social power were likelier to utilize them. Those in subordinate positions were drawn to occult techniques both as the most potent method available and to avoid retribution.
Consequently, in early modern Europe women, and in particular older women, but also old men, poor people, and late in the period, children were far more likely to be suspected of witchcraft, or probably to have recourse to it, than well-to-do adult men. However, what particular relationships fostered witchcraft and witchcraft suspicions varied from place to place, reflecting the specifics of the local social structure and power relations. Social structures and relations did not create witchcraft beliefs, suspicions, accusations, or activities, but they did provide the context and motivation for them.

If it is hard for us to believe that ordinary people could be so angry, violent, and hard-hearted, we have to remember, first, that we are examining a particular aspect of life in early modern Europe, not life overall. Communal customs and institutions insured that interpersonal conflicts in most places were kept under control most of the time, and most people got along with most others. Nevertheless, we have to remember also that these people lived in hard and violent times. The majority of people were smallholders with barely enough land to support themselves and their families, or not enough, and therefore forced to rely on part-time work as well. In either case, they lived at the margins of subsistence, one harvest away from starvation. Armies occasionally marauded across the countryside and brigandage was a more limited but also more regular threat. And beyond sheer survival, life for most involved a constant struggle for limited material and social resources like land, jobs, patronage, and marriage opportunities.

Furthermore, at the time of the witch hunts, times were particularly hard and getting harder. The period of intense witch hunts, roughly 1550 to 1650, corresponds closely to what has been called the “Iron Century,” a period when Europe’s population grew while its economy stagnated or contracted and confessional conflicts led to vicious civil discord and widespread and protracted international wars. Contracting economic opportunities and bitter religious hostilities on top of the normal struggles and enmities in small agrarian communities fed rivalry, suspicion, anger, and callousness at all levels of society and set up the kind of interpersonal conflicts that led many people to fear witchcraft and some to act like witches.

Mediators between the two worlds
To the extent that there were people in early modern Europe who acted like witches, either routinely practicing sorcery or habitually behaving in ways that seemed to project a malevolent occult power, the witch was one of several roles in society that mediated between the everyday and magico-religious dimensions of the universe. Most ordinary people employed magical and religious rituals and artifacts on their own as part of their daily activities, praying to God and wearing crucifixes, reading omens and observing taboos, wearing amulets and incanting charms, but there were also several groups who specialized in interacting with the supernatural either as a service occupation or for their own purposes. Many were entirely benevolent; some were ambivalent, employing magic to help or harm depending on circumstances; a few were downright mean.

One group, the clergy, were by definition beneficent. Individual clerics might personally be corrupt or wicked, and the different confessions considered their rivals to be servants of the Devil, but Christianity itself championed benevolent spirituality.
The clergy mediated between humans and God through a combination of education and ritual. Education taught people what they should and should not do and believe to follow God’s will. Rituals embodied these beliefs. The different denominations disputed the supernatural power of rituals, with Catholics considering them necessary though not sufficient to gain eternal salvation and potentially helpful in countering supernatural afflictions, while Protestants generally held them to just be aids in cultivating proper beliefs and behaviors. Almost all, however, agreed that the Eucharist involved a supernatural event, the transformation of consecrated bread and wine into Christ’s flesh and blood during mass, although they could never agree on precisely what that meant.

The clergy were the only licit mediators with the magico-religious world, but most communities had illicit mediators as well. The specifics of what they were called and what they were thought to do varied enormously across Europe, but there were certain broad ranges of statuses and activities. First, they varied in status from ordinary people who occasionally helped out neighbors with an incantation or ritual they knew through part-time specialists who performed certain rituals like reciting blessings or employing magical stones for healing to full-time, full-service practitioners. Second, their compensation ranged from nothing but neighborly appreciation through voluntary gifts to set fees. Third, their most common service by far was healing, but they also helped locate lost objects, identify thieves and witches, report on the location or welfare of missing persons, teach incantations and dispense magical objects and potions to ward off evil or promote love or some other desired end, counter witchcraft, or foretell the future. Fourth, the ways they worked their magic ranged from mechanically reciting incantations and performing traditional rituals to lapsing into a trance state in which they experienced direct contact with the spirit world (with the former by far more common). Fifth, their moral orientation ranged from only working beneficial magic to occasionally performing harmful magic to featuring it.

Of course, in reality things were not so clear-cut, since a benevolent ritual like identifying the source of an illness could end up accusing a person of witchcraft, while even a malevolent person might use healing magic, divination, or protective amulets. Nevertheless, the distinction between benign and dangerous practitioners was far more important to most ordinary Europeans than the one between licit and illicit ones. The balance between the two did shift from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century, though, as the power of the state reduced the danger from malevolent practitioners while imposing penalties for patronizing benevolent ones.

What these specialists were called varied enormously, and historians have not settled on a term for them, but the closest they come is “cunning folk,” an English designation in which “cunning” means “knowing.” However, just as “cunning” in modern usage conveys a morally dubious craftiness, cunning folk were often regarded with a degree of suspicion by their neighbors because the power to heal was often thought to be complemented by the power to harm. Indeed, the counter-magic they employed against witches and thieves often involved harming the suspect, love magic could be used to exploit someone, and divination or other magic could be used to gain an unfair advantage. Furthermore, some cunning folk worked explicitly harmful magic on their own account or for clients. They were sometimes suspected of causing injuries they could then get paid to cure, and some ran veritable protection
When magical practitioners were thought to frequently use their arts to cause harm they came to be considered something different from a cunning person. Anthropologists call such practitioners sorcerers to differentiate them not only from beneficent magicians but also from witches, who exert a malign magical influence based on an inborn power rather than on learned magical practices. This is a rather different use of the term “witch” than that of early modern demonologists, for whom it meant someone who had made a formal pact with the Devil and worshipped him in blasphemous rites. They suspected sorcerers, and even cunning folk, did these things, but thought many other people who did not openly practice magic did as well.

What ordinary early moderns understood by “witch” seems to have involved all three definitions. Almost everywhere people assumed that some people used sorcery to cause harm, and if they thought someone did it frequently they considered them to be a witch. However, in most cases they exhibited little interest in how a suspected witch caused the harm, and in some cases they described incidents in which it seemed to clearly result from a spontaneous flash of anger. Finally, ordinary people became increasingly aware of the demonological definition of witchcraft over the early modern period, and increasingly mixed assumptions about the role of the Devil into their complaints. A witch was someone who seemed to frequently project a malign influence through sorcery, an innate ability, and/or by having given herself to the Devil.

**Coping with witchcraft: coexistence, counter-magic, and the courts**

Since witchcraft was just one of the myriad magical threats faced by early modern people, much of what they did about it overlapped with their ways of coping with the others.

The first line of defense was passive measures, things to avoid being afflicted in the first place. Many were general methods utilized against all manner of magical threats: secreting magical defenses at strategic places within buildings like under doors and windows, wearing protective talismans and amulets (including crosses and other religious paraphernalia), being cognizant of auspicious and inauspicious days and times in planning and carrying out activities, invoking the generalized protection of God or the saints through prayer and other observances, and observing local taboos and prescriptions to promote good fortune and avoid misfortune. In the case of witchcraft specifically, additional actions to keep from becoming a target included avoiding contact with reputed witches or troublesome neighbors or appeasing them with a friendly demeanor and actions, including bestowing favors and gifts.

If passive methods seemed to have failed, and a person suspected that they were the target of witchcraft, the identity of the culprit might seem obvious or easily inferred. If it was unclear whether witchcraft was at work, though, or the identity of the culprit was uncertain, divination could be employed, either on a self-help basis or by calling in a cunning person. Divinatory techniques used to identify witches (as well as thieves) included scrying, staring into a reflective surface until a recognizable face appeared; the “sieve and shears,” which involved balancing a sieve on the point...
of a pair of shears being held upright, which was expected to begin rotating when the name of the guilty party was called out in a series of possible suspects; a pendulum, which worked in a similar way; and innumerable local practices. Some of these divinatory techniques relied on essentially random events, like performing a ceremony and then noting the first person to come to visit. Others, like scrying and the “sieve and sheers” could be cynically faked, but they also could be used to “validate” hunches based on known animosity or even guilt in a way that was more culturally acceptable than a denunciation, which could be hard to substantiate and could be seen as a voluntary betrayal of communal bonds. They could also bring to the surface completely unconscious awareness of subtle expressions of latent animosity or deceptiveness. In a world without modern forensic tools and techniques, it was almost impossible to identify the perpetrator of a covert crime like theft unless she was caught in the act or with the stolen goods. Therefore techniques that exploited peoples’ unconscious awareness of others’ subliminal “tells” in a close-knit community offered a potentially useful, if not entirely reliable, means of identifying people who stole or committed other surreptitious misdeeds.

If witchcraft was considered confirmed and the witch identified, there were several ways that people could proceed. One was to simply utilize normal remedies to resolve the problem. If these didn’t work (or, as was often the case, witchcraft was only suspected when they failed), another approach was to try to get the witch to remove the spell by appealing to her good nature, buying her off, or threatening retaliation. Retaliation could take the form of direct physical violence or some sort of counter-magic. Counter-magic might involve an entirely new spell, but often it involved turning the original spell back on the witch, either in an attempt to persuade her to terminate it, or to relieve the target while getting revenge. It could also be shifted onto something or someone else. Sometimes counter-magic was conducted without even bothering to identify the witch, since it was assumed the spell knew or was connected to whoever cast it.

As an alternative to individual action, people who thought they were the victims of witchcraft sometimes enlisted the help of their communities. One way was to bring in a specialist, a priest or a cunning person, to conduct religious or magical countermeasures. Another was to get a small party of friends or a lynch mob to attack the suspect physically. A third was to instigate formal legal proceedings. The first two were integral parts of communal life, and generally ended once the malady had been cured and/or the specific suspect had been dealt with. In the third case, though, the process left the bounds of the community and passed into the hands of the judicial authorities.

Most trials remained confined to the immediate suspect or a small group of reputed malefic witches, but with the spread of the demonology and inquisitorial trial procedures the magistrates were increasingly likely to turn the persecution of one suspect into a hunt for all the local members of the supposed diabolical conspiracy. In certain times and places communal suspicions widened into hunts through popular initiative, or the authorities empowered local “witch committees” to solicit names and bring suspects from around the countryside to trial. For the most part, though, the relationship between communal suspicions and the mass trials was more distant: communities supplied initial suspects thought guilty of maleficium, and the authorities tortured them into confessing to diabolism and identifying additional
suspects. The role of communal suspicions decreased as the obvious candidates were implicated and the authorities still sought more names, leading increasingly to denunciations of people who were never suspected of anything by, let alone did anything to, their neighbors.

**Conclusion: the impact of the witch hunts on everyday life**

While the everyday witch fears and activities of villagers and townspeople fed into the early modern hunts, the hunts fed back into everyday life. The most obvious way was by throwing communities into upheaval, consigning people by the dozens or even the hundreds to torture and death. However, the campaign against the Devil’s supposed worshippers encompassed small as well as mass trials since it was what motivated the governments’ aggressive prosecution and harsh punishment of suspects even when trials did not metastasize.

In this sense the witch hunts constituted a single protracted witch hunt that had more widespread and longer lasting effects on everyday life. One was that by putting individuals’ malice and magical practices in the framework of a cosmic struggle between God and the Devil, good and evil, they helped broaden ordinary peoples’ moral horizons beyond the values and interests of their local communities.\(^\text{28}\) Second, by repressing surreptitious forms of violence they contributed to the “civilizing process” that transformed mores and behaviors in early modern Europe. Third, by penalizing any association with magic, they contributed to the “disenchantment of the world” by discouraging its practice and patronage of its practitioners. Fourth, by punishing women in particular for involvement with magic, they curbed their role as public practitioners, at least in some places for at least for some time. Fifth, by discouraging women from exhibiting any behaviors or attitudes that might draw suspicions, they contributed to the transformation of the presumed “natural” female character from the Medieval notion that they are more violent and lustful than men to the high modern notion that they are passive and asexual.

Historians traditionally ended their accounts of the witch hunts on a note of relieved discontinuity, assuming that because they were based on a myth, their only effect was helping discredit witchcraft beliefs and thereby contributing to the decline of magic. More recently, historians have emphasized the continuation of popular magic into the modern period, but these historians, like their predecessors, have assumed that maleficium was as illusory as diabolism, and so focus on the persistence of witch beliefs.\(^\text{29}\) We have seen, however, that the hunts had roots in actual behaviors and practices, and they affected as well as reflected these. Witch beliefs and fears did persist, and so, to some extent, did witch-like behaviors and practices, but the role of magic and its practitioners in everyday life after the hunts was substantially diminished. There were many causes of this change, but the witch hunts – protracted, brutal, and pervasive – played a critical part.

**Notes**


6 Wilson, *Magical*, esp. 467.

7 Ibid., 14, 54, 348.

8 Éva Pócs, *Between the Living and the Dead* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 1999), 11.

9 Bever, *Realities*, 262–266.


16 Stanley Krippner and Stanley Friedman, eds., *Debating Psychic Experience: Human Potential or Human Illusion?* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2010).


28 Ibid., 76, 403–413, 429–430.


**Bibliography (selection)**


