Narratives of the English Witch Craze

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Senior Thesis
History 400
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December 2014
Abstract

This thesis explores the event in Manningtree, a small town in Essex, in 1645 that began the two-year period that would come to be called England’s “Witch Craze” and the circumstances that lead to those events. The trials that took place in Chelmsford in July 1645 began months earlier with the arrest of Elizabeth Clark, an elderly widow with one leg, for witchcraft. Over the next several months 36 women were tried for witchcraft by witchfinders Matthew Hopkins and John Stearne and on July 25th 1645 19 of those women were executed. Before the end of the “witch craze” more than 200 accused witches had been executed.

The Chelmsford trial came two years into a civil war that would eventually result in the beheading of a king. The chaos caused by the war had a destabilizing effect on communities throughout the country. Popular belief in witchcraft meant that there was always an underlying anxiety surrounding witches that may or may not exist in a community. When these anxieties reached the degree to which a community decided to do something about it, the incidents tended to be isolated and the trials tended to include no more that a few accused. In the case of the Chelmsford trial these anxieties were exacerbated by anxiety around the changes cause by the English Civil War and exploited by Matthew Hopkins.

The pamphlets and journal entries that remain from the time of the trial contain the testimony of many townspeople as well as the confessions of many of the witches. These pieces of evidence show that fear of witches was about fear of the devil gaining entrance into the community through the witch and thus causing God to abandon the community.
The Information of Prudence Hart, the wife of Thomas Hart of Lawford, taken upon oath before us the 23 of April, 1645.

This informant saith, that about eight weeks since, being at her Parish Church, on the Sabbath day, half a mile distant from her house, and being about twenty weeks gone with childe, and to her thinking, very well and healthful, upon the sudden she was taken with great pains, and miscarried before she could be got home... And this informant further saith, that she verily believeth, that Rebecca West, and Anne West her mother, were the cause of her pains; for that the said Rebecca hath in part of her confession expressed, that she had much malice this informant, because the said Rebecca West ever thought this informant to be her greatest enemy.1

Introduction

Given our modern understanding of science and magic - science explains events, magic does not – it is easy to dismiss witchcraft accusations as malicious attempts to control groups (women, the poor, the outspoken, etc.) and it is easy to dismiss subsequent confession as the result of leading questions and torture. What would happen if we chose not to do that? What would happen if, instead, we allowed both the accusations and confessions to act as pieces of evidence towards understanding what was going on in England, and more specifically Essex, in 1645? Instead of asking, “How could someone possibly believe that an event was caused by a witch’s curse?” let us ask instead about the conditions that could drive someone to accuse their longtime neighbor or even mother or wife of being a witch. Rather than look at confessions for evidence of a witch-finder’s prompting, this paper will

attempt to read printed versions of confessions for what they can tell us about their authors and their objectives.

It is nothing new or noteworthy to assert that, for people living in England in the mid seventeenth century, witches and the magic they practiced was real. It is difficult however to write about it without trying to explain the belief in magic. Often scholars of 17th century witchcraft attempt to explain what was “really going on” when describing a phenomenon attributed to witchcraft. This essay will try not to do that. Instead it will attempt to understand the conditions in which, given a strong belief and fear in witchcraft, people were willing to accuse their neighbors/mothers/wives/friends of being witches and why those women were willing to confess.

The majority of scholarship on witchcraft focuses on confessions because, simply put, those are the records we have. Witchcraft was an un-witness-able crime, meaning that even those who called themselves witnesses probably had not seen the witch do anything. Harming others through magical means meant that, unlike almost every other crime in the 17th century, the perpetrator did not have to be present for the crime to occur. A curse could be cast from miles away or a familiar could be sent to do the witch’s bidding without her having to leave home. This meant that prosecutors relied on the witches themselves to construct the narrative of the case. Without a witch’s confession there was no case, so why would women be willing to self-incriminate? Several of the scholars that will be discussed later will argue that witches who confessed were compelled or coerced into doing so. This
essay will attempt to let the confessors speak for themselves through their confessions.

Scholars of English witchcraft often study trials that took place between 1645 and 1647, the period known as England’s “witch craze”. It is known as a witch craze, because of the number and proximity of the accusations and persecutions.

Between the years 1645 and 1647 East Anglia experienced an unprecedented witch craze both in the number of trials and the number of executions. At least 250 witches were tried by authorities in the Essex and the surrounding counties and somewhere between 100 and 200 were executed. The second characteristic that made the 1645 trials exceptional was the presence of two self-styled “professional” Witchfinders, Matthew Hopkins and John Stearne. Their presence dictated the geographical parameters of the trials as well as significantly impacting the number of witches tried.

This thesis will focus on the first of the 1645 trials. The trial took place in a town in Essex called Chelmsford in which 36 witches were tried and 19 executed. Matthew Hopkins made this trial his first endeavor into a profession as a witchfinder. The conditions for the Chelmsford trial were unique because it came two years into a civil war that would eventually result in the beheading of a king. The chaos caused by the war had a destabilizing effect on communities throughout the country. These communities functioned with a popular belief in witchcraft and the occult, which meant that there was always an underlying anxiety surrounding witches that may or may not exist there. When these anxieties reach the degree to witch a community decided to do something about it, the incidents tended to be
isolated and the trials tended to include no more that a few accused. Fear of witches was about fear of the devil gaining entrance into the community through the witch and thus causing God to abandon the community. This fear was exacerbated by anxiety around the changes cause by the English Civil War and exploited by Matthew Hopkins.

**Critical Review of Literature**

James Sharpe’s *Instruments of Darkness* is the broadest study of the East Anglia witch craze. His work looks closely at the content of confessions in which they came about. The confessions were surprising, according to Sharpe, for two reasons: they had incredible consistency, and had a distinctly demonic component that was more often than not missing from earlier English witch confessions.\(^2\) The consistency of witch confessions both over time and through different people (i.e. several witches confessing to the same things despite being questioned separately) has long been a conundrum for scholars given the tendency to try to explain away any evidence that would point to witchcraft having been a concrete phenomenon.

Sharpe attributes this uniformity to the presence of the two witchfinders Hopkins and Stearne. They deployed interrogation practices reminiscent, for Sharpe, to “torture and inquisitorial procedures so familiar in Continental Trials.”\(^3\) The technique that Hopkins used in particular of “watching” witches entailed the accused witch being forced to sit on a stool in a room, often a jail cell, without sleep,\

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\(^2\) Sharpe, 129  
\(^3\) Sharpe, 130
food or drink for anywhere from two to five days. These conditions of imposing physical and emotional distress are where Sharpe finds his parallels to continental interrogation practices. The witches were “watched” by various observers, sometimes Hopkins himself or other authorities involved in the trial or simply townspeople who wished to question her. The idea was that if she did in fact have familiars they would come to her during the period in which she was being watched.

Almost all of the witches eventually confessed during this watching period. Sharpe contends that “the sleep deprivation that was the by-product of this process, along with general rough-handling and psychological pressure, allied with leading questions, helps explain why witches were so prone to confess during Hopkins' trials.” Whether Hopkins knew it or not Sharpe believes he was partially the cause of these confessions in that lack of food and sleep cause cognitive abnormalities which would likely lead to women confessing to something less than true either because she had come to believe it due to strain or believed that confession would end her time in interrogation.

If we assume that these confessions were based in desperation rather than fact, how then do we account for the similarities across so many of them? Sharpe contends that they were the result of leading questions by Matthew Hopkins. If he (Hopkins) entered the interrogation with a set theory in his mind of what these witches had done then he would have asked them questions that, under sufficient strain, they would have answered “correctly”. Or else, he would have continued to push them until they came up with sufficient answers. Denial, for Hopkins was

4 Sharpe, 131
simply stalling and the “truth” would follow eventually. The method of a-historically rationalizing witch confessions used by Sharpe and others tells us that Hopkins came upon a lot of accidental success. The conditions under which he put the accused along with the questions he asked and the popular knowledge of witches came together to create these confessions.

In *Witchfinders* by Malcolm Gaskill, the blame for the rise of this witch craze was even more heavily placed on Matthew Hopkins and John Stearne. While Sharpe focused predominantly on the content of the confessions at the trial, Gaskill begins by situating the trials contextually within the social and political environment of England. “By spring 1645,” he says, “two years of civil war had exacted a dreadful toll upon England. People lived in terror as disease and poverty spread, and the nation grew ever more politically divided.” Though using the English Civil War to explain the particular timing and scale of this witch craze is not Gaskill’s project in *Witchfinders*, he does acknowledge that it is an important factor to understand. Gaskill’s project is to explore Matthew Hopkins and John Stearne’s roles and specifically the amount of influence they held in the witchcraft trials. While Sharpe’s focuses on the content of confessions Gaskill concerns himself more with the role of the witchfinders.

Like Sharpe, Gaskill thesis claims that Hopkins was responsible in part for both the existence of the confessions and the content. The isolation of the surveillance they were put under had a profound effect on the accused’s mental state, says Gaskill. “After several nights awake suspects entered a void between

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waking and sleep, their eyes open but their brains dreaming.”

“This half waking, half dreamlike state could have easily morphed into a hallucination asserts Gaskill.

“Neither [the accused] nor their examiners considered the possibility of any natural explanations for the phenomena they described in such detail and with such conviction... fact fused with fantasy: nothing was too mundane to be elevated to supernatural significance, no suggestions from the witchfinders too outlandish to harden into truth.”

The perceived reality of the hallucination would have been such that an accused witch would have confessed to what she thought she was seeing as witchcraft instead of a product of her imagination. Implicit in Gaskill’s argument is his disbelief in the presence of witchcraft and his effort to explain away the content of the confessions. For Gaskill, reported magical occurrences were more likely the result of hallucination than not.

Lyndal Roper, too, looks at the methods of extracting confessions. Her project is to look into the possibility/probability that a confession did no necessarily reflect reality. By making a case study of a 1595 trial Roper argues for the role of desperation felt by the accused in the advent of confessions. Roper’s work offers a perspective on confessions that Sharpe and Gaskill do not. Instead of crediting interrogators with the content of confessions she gives that authorship back to the witches.

Gertautra Conrad was accused of witchcraft in south-central Germany in 1595 along with several other women. Roper uses the notes taken by her interrogator’s scribe to understand the processes of interrogation and of confession. She was subjected to several harsh interrogation sessions – Ropers says she was not

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6 Gaskill, 90
7 Gaskill, 90
unique in this – and maintained her innocence through all but the last few of these sessions. The one Roper focuses on in particular would have been something of a breakthrough for her questioners. The scribe’s notes say that she was left hanging in the rack (a practice in which a person’s hands are tied behind their back with rope and then suspended by that rope) for more than five hours. At 1:00 pm she told her interrogators “she had learned to fly.” Roper believes that while the scribe and others probably believed that this was an admission of interaction with the devil, she was probably referring to the fact that she had been hanging suspended by her hands for so long that she felt as though she was flying. She continued, wrote the scribe, to ask that the interrogators read her the confession of another of the witches we was accused with so that she can confess to those acts.

Roper, like Sharpe portrays confessions as acts of desperation. In her study however the similarities between confessions come from the witches themselves. We see that Conrad resorted to asking for what would essentially be her script because she did not know how to make the torture stop but she did know that after her companion’s confession, that torture had stopped. While the interrogator would have supplied the text of the confession of Conrad, it is important to note here that the original confession came from another witch. Roper believes that the interrogator would have seen this admission as his own success; his torture techniques had finally broken through the devil’s hold on Conrad and allowed her to make her confession.

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With this anecdote and others, Roper asks the questions explored by James Sharpe in England about the interrogators role in the confession. Sharpe looks at confessions as the product of sleep deprivation and leading questions. Roper views confessions as the result of more active torture at the hands of the interrogators. Roper’s interrogators physically harmed their “witches” with the rack and thumbscrews, whips, and other weapons of torture. On the other hand, Sharpe’s interrogators deprived their accused of sleep and food and water. Sharpe’s group was less active than Roper’s but no less psychologically damaging, or in their words successful. For each, Roper, Gaskill, and Sharpe, confessions are drawn out by slightly different methods and come about for slightly different reasons, but common among them is the idea that the confessions did not come about by the witch’s choice or because she had actually committed the act that she was admitting to.

Other scholars focus not on the role of Witchfinders in bringing about the rash of witch trials in 1645 but on the popular belief in magic. Emma Wilby’s central question of her chapter “The Freedom of Magic” is: “were the descriptions (confessions) of encounters with familiar spirits given by magical practitioners (accused witches) fictions, or were they descriptions of genuine experiences?”

Unlike scholars like Roper and Gaskill, Wilby is willing to at least explore the reality of the confessions rather than dismiss them. She asks, if these are fictions, why and how were they fabricated? Why would someone confess to practicing magic if it was

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likely to cause her to be killed? And if interactions with “familiars” were real experiences what was the origin and nature of these experiences?

One option, the idea that it was caused by being chronically undernourished and over-worked as well as “almost continually pregnant and nursing”\(^{10}\) is very similar to James Sharpe’s idea that witchcraft confessions were brought about by Matthew Hopkins’ practice of “watching.” Both theories explore the effects of lack of food and sleep on the body and mind, one sudden and the other over a lifetime. “These conditions can alter the brain makeup and induce altered states of consciousness” and can explain both the confession and the willingness for the community to believe it.\(^{11}\) The trouble with this explanation is that Wilby is diagnosing medical conditions 350 years after they occurred. Physical illnesses can sometimes be diagnosed based on descriptions of symptoms from primary documents but it is much more complicated to diagnose mental illnesses. A disease like smallpox has distinct, identifiable markers, like the distinctive rash, that we can diagnose fairly confidently. The problem with mental illnesses is that their diagnosis depends so much on context. A personality characteristic that is seen as perfectly normal in one context could be diagnosed as a dangerous illness in another.

The next piece of Wilby’s explanation relates to the communal style of living in most of these villages. That combined with lack of medical technology meant that everyone experienced everyone else’s tragedies at close range. She wonders, “How did the constant experience and witnessing of acute tragedies effect mental and

\(^{10}\) Wilby, 245
\(^{11}\) Wilby, 245
emotional state.” Without a clear natural explanation of the frequent deaths or illnesses she argues, people would develop a desperate need to find explanations and given the presence of faith in the community, the work of the devil would be an easy conclusion to draw.

Like Gaskill, though for different reasons, Wilby wonders if some of the confessions were real retellings of hallucinations. Gaskill attributes the hallucinations to an acute problem: three nights without sleep or food. Wilby attributes them to a prolonged condition of grief and malnourishment. Both allow for the personal reality of confessions if not the actual reality. Wilby assumes a hallucination feels real to the person experiencing it even if the events are not physically happening. Wilby’s investigation into the health of the subjects of her research differentiates her project from Gaskill, Sharpe, and Roper but still she attempts to explain away the belief in witchcraft.

Emma Wilby is not alone in her methods of looking into the medical aspects of witchcraft belief, accusation, and confession. Frederick Valletta spends a chapter of his book *Witchcraft, Magic, and Superstition in England 1640-70* using the 1645 witch craze to understand the “Psychological Aspects to Witchcraft and Popular Belief.” Valletta is the first among the authors mentioned here to call attention to the popular belief of witchcraft and the devil and thus the cultural acceptance of magic as an explanation. He, like Malcolm Gaskill places some of the blame for the events of 1645-47 on the English Civil War, stating, “while it may be true that such beliefs

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12 Wilby, 246
had always existed, they became far more plausible as an explanation for misfortune during the chaos of the English Civil War.”

Valletta’s project centers on the power of such beliefs and the ways in which, under the right circumstances, or in this case the wrong ones, they could disrupt an entire community. Valletta argues that popular belief of witchcraft accepted that witches always existed in a community; two kinds of witches in fact: benign witches like healers, midwives, wise women who practiced “white” magic, and hags, the stereotypical “witch” that practiced a darker more dangerous sort. Both of these groups were allowed to exist in a community, one out of necessity and the other out of fear of retribution, until the English Civil War.

Valletta looked into records of the Essex trials and found that often the women who were accused of being witches in 1645-47 had already been accused years before – some had even been living in the community with that label for decades. Fourteen of the 27 witches in the Chelmsford trial were accused of committing acts of witchcraft years before they were brought to trial for this particular incident. Valletta argues that the English Civil War disrupted the social structure in place that had allowed the witches who practiced white magic to exist as long as they did no harm and prevented people from accusing those practice black magic for fear of their own safety.

Next, Valletta does something similar to Emma Wilby and tries to diagnose the belief in witchcraft. While Wilby’s approach focuses on external causes for belief

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14 Valletta, 190
in one's own magic ability as well as that perception by others, Valletta takes an internal approach, what he calls an “answer to [a] problem [that] may be found in modern psychological studies.”\textsuperscript{15} His answer is to diagnose women who confessed to being witches as paraphrenetics. He defines Paraphrenia as a period of “increased suspiciousness, irritability, and hostile attitudes towards others.”

Followed by the patient complaining “of being under hostile scrutiny by neighbors, [and commonly] for the patient experiencing imagined sexual assault, often by occult means, by ordinary acquaintances.”\textsuperscript{16} While he acknowledges the danger in diagnosing mental disorders 300 years after the occurred, Valletta finds this to be a plausible explanation. This explanation uses the popular belief in the devil to explain the belief of witchcraft as a hallucination. Or rather, by acknowledging the belief in the devil, Valletta can look at the belief in witchcraft as the acceptance of hallucinations as reality. The plausibility of the hallucinations reported, given the willingness to believe their content, made them no longer hallucinations. In this way Valletta is both accepting and denying the reality of witchcraft.

The witches in Valletta’s version of this story as portrayed in two ways: the victim who is convinced of her magical powers by the devil, and the “cynical, manipulative extortionist.”\textsuperscript{17} Valletta’s “victim” is a victim of the public’s belief in the devil and the only real crime she has committed is a “sin of imagination”\textsuperscript{18} in which she was convinced to sign a compact with the devil. His “extortionist” used the label of witch for social advancement; she both genuinely believed that she had magical

\textsuperscript{15} Valletta, 201
\textsuperscript{16} Valletta 201
\textsuperscript{17} Valletta, 197
\textsuperscript{18} Valletta, 197
powers and “deliberately exploited [her] evil reputation with [her] neighbors in order to gain what [she] wanted.”

The remainder of this paper will deal with primary sources, some that the authors above have explored and some that they have not. Predominantly, the records that exist from 17th century witch trial are in the form of pamphlets published for public consumption both to spread knowledge and to libel. Previous scholars like Gaskill, Sharpe, and Valetta have read these pamphlets and found evidence of prompting, torture, and disease respectively. Instead of looking for explanations of why people believed that witchcraft was responsible this paper will attempt to understand what happened in Essex because people believed in witchcraft.

Analysis of Primary Sources

Like witchcraft trials themselves, the production of pamphlets on witchcraft did not begin with the 1645 trial but there was a large increase in the number of pamphlets produced in that period including several on the Chelmsford trial. There were two pamphlets published anonymously on the trial and the witchfinders Hopkins and Stearne each contributed to the publishing frenzy with a report of their own. The two anonymous pamphlets were published for different reasons, the first to tell the short, scandalous version of the story to grab the public’s attention and

19 Valetta, 189
the second longer version to tell a full, detailed version of what had occurred in Chelmsford.

Both Hopkins and Stearne published their own pamphlets relating to what had happened at Chelmsford several years after the fact. In the time between the events and the publication of their pamphlets, the panic about witches had subsided and skepticism surrounding their methods had grown. Their pamphlets were published to tell their side of that story as well as defend their knowledge base, their methods, and their involvement in witchcraft trials past, present, and future.

Not all accounts of this period were written expressly for public distribution. Nehemiah Wallington wrote extensively about the trials in Chelmsford in notebooks that were only brought to the attention of the public after his death. Wallington, an English puritan wood turner, offers another perspective, that of an outside observer with no ulterior motives, to place against the deliberately constructed pamphlets.

The Notebook of Nehemiah Wallington

Between 1618 and 1654 Nehemiah Wallington filled 50 notebooks with writing on his life and the broader state of England. Subjects ranging from the progress of the English Civil War to drought conditions to the births and deaths of his children were all covered in Wallington’s notebooks scattered among the musings of a devoutly religious man. Though Wallington rejected the idea of publishing his notebooks David Booy, editor of an anthology of Nehemiah
Wallington's journals has identified passages in which Wallington expresses the desire that others will read his writings and learn from both his experiences and his beliefs. If we accept his claims that he did not write specifically for the purpose of publication we can assume that his retelling of the trial is the most honest written version of the events and therefore it makes sense to begin our exploration of primary sources with his words.

Wallington, a London native, was in Chelmsford in the spring of 1645 during the mass witchcraft trial. Given his status as an outsider, a tradesman, and a devoutly religious man, Wallington offers both a unique point of view and purpose. Keeping a notebook was a religious exercise for Wallington, a way in which to reflect and work through his experiences – he also expressed a desire that one day they might serve as a teaching tool for a broader audience.

Wallington introduces his entry, dated August 29th 1945, on the trial with, “now to speak a few words more of one great mercy of God in that he hath brought to light many witches and hath justice been executed on them.”20 Here he indicates his expectation that, someday, this work will be read by others. The act of introducing a new topic indicates that he intends his words to be read by someone other than himself. He also wishes to make known the evil of the witches and the mercy of God for his own piece of mind and for the education of others.

He goes onto report that as of July 23rd at least 38 witches were imprisoned on the town of Ipswich, that all but one of the accused have been found to have

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20 Nehemiah Wallington “Many Witches in Essex in Suffolk and Norfolk” 177
http://enriqueta.man.ac.uk:8180/luna/servlet/view/search?res=1&pgs=50&q=wal lington&cic=Manchester~91~1&os=50&sort=Reference_Number%2CPage%2CTitle
“witch paps” and that “without any forcing or compulsion freely declare that they have made a covenant with the devil to forsake God and Christ and to take him to be their master.” 21 38 women imprisoned at one time is a significantly larger number of accused compared to previous trials, in addition to being surprising, it shows us that the fear had reached the extent to which the community felt the need to lock up every single person with the slightest bit of suspicion surrounding them. The “witch paps” Wallington mentions were markings that, if found, were proof that a woman was a witch. The “pap” was an extra nipple that was believed to have been used by the witch to feed her familiars. Finding these markings on so many women was enough evidence to send a community into a panic of being overtaken by witches.

While the witch paps served as physical proof of a witch’s guilt, confessions were still necessary to find a woman guilty of a crime as opposed to just of being a witch. The insistence by Wallington that the confessions were freely given reflects a desire to assure his readers and himself that the confessions were genuine so whatever happened to the witches afterward was deserved. It also opposes assertion made by many scholars that witchcraft confessions were the result of torture and leading questions. The witch paps themselves would have confirmed guilt so the confessions were less essential but still necessary for deliverance from the devil.

According to Wallington, several of the witches confessed to having familiars and using them to exact revenge on people they held a grudge against. The content of the confessions, Wallington says, was corroborated by several townspeople who

21 Wallington, 177
had observed the witch’s acts. Whether the townspeople witnessed the women performing the act of witchcraft or if they saw the result of the act, Wallington does not say here but he and others are sure that the events that took place were the result of actions taken by the witches.

Wallington is overwhelmed by the number of witches in jail because he believes they are all guilty and to have that many people guilty of consorting with the devil puts him and the rest of the community at risk. He fears, he says, that soon there will not be any villages left that are free from the grip of the devil and once that happens England and all her people, no matter how devout they are, are at risk for being abandoned by God.22

After introducing the situation in Essex, Wallington moves onto the most compelling piece of this particular trial: the confession of Rebecca West. Rebecca was a young women who, despite he involvement with the other witches, escaped execution by giving evidence on the group of witches, including condemning her own mother. Rebecca testified that she was brought to the house of Mother Benefield and that on her way to the house her mother warned her never to speak of what she was about to see. Next, according to Wallington, Rebecca details the witches’ prayer and their interactions with their familiars. While the other pamphlet published on her confession spends a great deal of time on the details of each of the familiars and the instructions given to them, Wallington only mentions them in passing and instead chooses to focus on the oaths made to the devil and to the other witches. His concern is not what the witches did but what made them do it. For

22 Wallington, 177
Wallington the witches are instruments of the devil so the deeds that they committed can be excused if they acknowledge that they were under his control. He does not care about the witch’s familiars because he is more preoccupied with the devil; the being that caused them to come into existence.

Mother Benefield demanded that Rebecca take their oath and covenant, deny God and Jesus Christ, and “believe as they did, serve and obey as they did.”

Later that night the devil in the shape of a man appeared to her to marry her. He promised to love and protect her and in turn she was required to promise to obey him and renounce God in favor of him, the Devil. She then confessed to having “carnall copulation” with him. Wallington is deeply troubled by this piece of her confession because this makes her not just an observer but also a participant.

Rebecca West’s confession, Wallington says, came after being “asked diverse questions by a gentleman that did speak several times with her before and after (giving her godly and comfortable instructions).” The mention of “godly and comfortable instructions” would be evidence of prompting the witness or even planting the confession for scholars like Gaskill and Sharpe. Wallington though, seems unconcerned by this, viewing it as encouragement to confess her sins rather than prompting her with what they may be been. For Wallington this was much needed religious, “Godly”, advice that allowed her confess and be rescued from the clutches of the devil.

Next Wallington goes into detail about Rebecca West’s experience of waiting to confess. This piece of her story is absent from the other pamphlets; his choice to

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23 Wallington, 178
24 Wallington, 179
include it is telling of his priorities and deepest concerns and is further proof that he viewed witches as puppets of the devil. While Rebecca waited to confess to the “Grand Inquest” she stood with a woman called “Mother Miller” who made her swear that she would not divulge any information. While in Mother Miller’s presence, Rebecca “found herself in such extremity of torture and amazement... and when she looks upon the ground she saw herself encompassed in flames of fire.”

After separating from Mother Miller and confessing what she had seen and done the flames receded and Rebecca no longer felt as though she was being tortured. For Wallington, the torture and the threat of fire is both a punishment from the devil for what she is about to do and a warning from God of what is to come if she does not confess. In Wallington’s eyes the fact that the pain and the flames subside is evidence towards her innocence because her confession has released her from the Devil’s grasp. This piece of Rebecca’s story proves to Wallington that she was under the devil’s control until she was given a way to escape it through confession.

A True and Exact Relation of the Several Informations, Examinations, and Confessions of the Late Witches, Arraigned and Executed in the County of Essex

The longest, most comprehensive pamphlet published on the Chelmsford trial was delivered as a manuscript two weeks after the trials had concluded to London bookseller Henry Overton by a man who only identified himself as “H.F.”.

25 Wallington, 179
26 Wallington, 179
H.F. had been present at the Essex trials and had somehow gotten ahold of a transcript of the witness statements and witch confessions from the trial. He presented an edited, annotated version of those transcripts, along with his own introduction, to a bookseller with a reputation for publishing scandal who would undoubtedly seek to publish it.

In his introduction, H.F. begins by recalling the story of Eve’s fall in Genesis. He reminds us of the Serpent tricking Eve into eating the fruit from the tree and sharing it with Adam; then draws a comparison between the situation in Genesis to the situation in Essex. In the Essex example of this comparison, the Serpent in the Devil that has been appearing and all of the witches on trial take the role of Eve. The devil he says “‘hath ensnared and drawne these poore silly creatures, into these horrid and detestable practices, of renouncing God and Christ, and entering into a solemmne league and contract with the Devil [note: as one of them witnessed in open Court, Rebecca West].” There is obvious fear for the women in H.F.’s statement. The fear is based on cultural understanding of the bible. By comparing witches to Eve, H.F. offers a possible outcome for the rest of the Essex story. Eve ate the fruit and then told Adam to causing God to expel them from Eden: what is to say that something similar would not have happened in East Anglia if not for these trials?

The remainder of the pamphlet, the edited transcript of the statements from the trial, is made up of three different types of information: victim statements, witness statements, and confessions. The victim statements outline the misfortunes

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27 Gaskill, 135
28 H.F. “A true and exact relation...”
of community members and blame various witches for them. The witness statements detail the reasons townspeople are convinced that these women were the cause of the misfortunes. The confessions, which are purportedly transcriptions of what the women said to John Stearne and Matthew Hopkins, are detailed accounts of the women confessing to most of what they had been accused of. Contrary to Nehemiah’s Wallington’s journal, this pamphlet contains confessions of several witches as well as numerous accusations by townspeople.

The first women accused of witchcraft in the Chelmsford pamphlet was Elizabeth Clarke, a poor widow with one leg. She and her family have a history of being involved in witchcraft. The accusations of her malicious acts begin when a man’s, John Rivet’s, wife falls ill in a way that convinces him that this illness is “something more than merely natural.”29 A “Cunning woman” tells him that two neighbor women, one of whom Rivet assumes to be Elizabeth Clarke, have cursed his wife. A “cunning woman” or a wise woman is a woman who claims abilities and is sought after for those abilities. Often accused witches had been operating as cunning women for a long period of time before they are accused and are only accused because something had gone awry. The “cunning woman” in this testimony runs a great risk of being accused herself based on her advice. The assumption here is that she practices “white magic” while Clarke and the unnamed other practice “black” magic but it is tentative line for her before she might be accused of being a witch herself.

29 H.F. “A True and Exact Relation...”
In the witch confessions several of the witches begin to accuse each other. Elizabeth Clarke’s confession to Matthew Hopkins begins with her admitting to having familiars and “carnal copulation” with the devil. She even offers to summon the familiars, Hopkins reports, and gives a detailed record of her interactions with the devil – that have been going on 3-4 times a week for the last 6-7 years\(^ {30} \) - and tells Hopkins that the devil forced her to kill a pig and a horse. She will not admit however, to killing any people, that charge she blames on Anne West, one of the other accused witches.

Many of the witches turn on each other through these confessions not least of all Rebecca West, the daughter of Anne West and the girl who escapes execution by informing on all of the other witches. Rebecca West’s version of events in this pamphlet is slightly different than in Nehemiah Wallington’s journal but the essentials remain the same. She says that her mother brought her to Elizabeth Clarke’s house 7 years ago where she was forced to swear secrecy and to obey the devil and take him as a husband. The way Nehemiah Wallington tells the story it would seem as though these event happened much more recently – perhaps it is Wallington’s desire to absolve her that motivates him to tell the story in this way. Rebecca also admits to much more specific crimes in this pamphlet, including, she believes, causing a miscarriage.

She says that after the devil promised to help her get revenge on anyone she chose, she told the devil “she required of him, that he would avenge her on [one

\(^ {30} \) H.F. “A True and Exact Realtion...”
Thomas Hart of Lawford] by killing his son.” In a later witness statement we are told that Thomas Hart’s wife suffered a miscarriage and it is believed that it was the Devil’s doing on the behalf of Rebecca. Given Rebecca’s belief in the abilities of the devil, the miscarriage of the Hart’s child would have been absolute proof of his abilities and her contract with him.

A True Relation of the Araignment of Thirty Witches

A shorter pamphlet was published in London a week after the trials had taken place. This pamphlet was more inflammatory than the longer, more comprehensive pamphlet as its author chose only the most scandalous details of the trial to share. The front page of the pamphlet states that this is a “true relation of the arraignment of thirty witches” – much like the pamphlet published by Henry Overton – but adds at the bottom a list of all of the witches who had been executed to date for added drama. While the H.F. pamphlet focuses mostly to summarizing its contents on the title page (“Who were arraigned and condemned at the late session... Wherein the severall murthers, and devilish witchcrafts, committed on the bodies of men, women, and children, and divers cattell, are fully discovered” the shorter pamphlet highlights the most shocking points of the narrative on the first page.

31 H.F. “A True and Exact Relation”
33 H.F. “A True and Exact Relation”
A passerby glancing at the shorter pamphlet would know that fourteen of the accused witches were hanged for bewitching and killing men, women, children, and cattle as well as “many other strange things the like was never heard of before.”

They would also see that, inside contained a detailed confession of a young woman who had had sex with the Devil. This title page accompanied with the much shorter length meant this pamphlet was meant for a broad audience while the longer was meant for further reading.

The content of this pamphlet: the record of Rebecca West’s confession, evidence given by a minister called Mr. Long, a story of another witch, and another story about a jailor’s run in with some of the accused witches, is almost word for word what Nehemiah Wallington wrote in his journal. All that is missing from the pamphlet is Wallington’s explanation of how the witches were discovered through the Devil’s book. It is a very likely possibility is that he is the anonymous author of the pamphlet. The end of Wallington’s journal entry on the Essex trials is dated August 29th 1645, one month after the trials, and the pamphlet is undated so there is no way to tell for sure which is a copy of the other.

This pamphlet may have been the first clue for the London public that there was anything going on in Essex. Without the constant exchange of information they would have had to rely on these pamphlets for information. In the context of the Civil War this pamphlet would have been further evidence that something was very much amiss all throughout the country. It is likely that the London public would have shared Wallington’s sense of relief that the guilty witches had been found out.

34 Anon. “A True Relation”
executed and his anxiety that they had existed in the first place. Rebecca West’s story would have provided reassurance for the public as well; the fact that her confession saved her from the devil meant that the community still had hope.

The Discovery of Witches: In Answer to Several Queries, Lately

Witchfinder Matthew Hopkins is held responsible for the deaths of about 300 women over the course of his witch hunt in England beginning in 1644 and lasting until his death in 1647 – might his death have had something to do with the end of the so called “witch craze”? Towards the end of his life and the end of the witch craze, people became skeptical about his methods and the sources from which he claimed his authority. In an effort to clear his name, Hopkins published a pamphlet “in Answer to Severall Queries” that detailed and answered many of the questions asked by skeptics.35

The questions ranged from inquiries into where and how he gained the knowledge and experience to be able to conduct these investigations to criticisms of his methods. For every question Hopkins had a detailed answer that attempted to legitimize his practices and remind the public of the threat of witches and the devil.

The skepticism surrounding Hopkins after so much blind trust signals a shift in the public’s mental state. The anxiety that bubbled over the surface two years

before seemed to have settled enough to allow people to question Hopkins and his associates.

**Conclusion**

When Thomas Hart’s wife Prudence miscarried their unborn son, Rebecca West believed that she was the reason that the child had died – soon the whole community believed the same. For Rebecca and her neighbors, the devil and the witches he controlled were the cause of illness, death, weather, and any number of misfortunes and to explain away that belief is a disservice.

Communities existed for decades without a formal accusation of witchcraft but between 1645 and 1647 there were upwards of 200 that means that something else was going on: the English Civil War. Witchcraft trials were preservation of the self and the community not about vindictive revenge. Given the closeness of communities, the only things that would compel someone to accuse another of witchcraft were belief and fear and extraordinary circumstances; belief in the Devil and his influence and fear of his capacity to establish dominion over the community in this time of uncertainty.

In trials like this one, writers both named and unnamed found an opportunity to say something to the public about English life. Nehemiah Wallington took this opportunity to reflect on God and his mercies while the publisher of his pamphlet took the trial as an opportunity to sell scandal.
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