

Scepticism in the Renaissance

Scepticism has long been acknowledged to be a vital feature of Renaissance thought, and one which has been said to distinguish the period from the Middle Ages. Conventionally, Renaissance scepticism has been seen as part of what puts the ‘modern’ into ‘early modern’: the questioning of old certainties which ultimately helped to usher in the Enlightenment. This view understates the importance of sceptical attitudes within the medieval period; as early as the fifth or sixth century, Pseudo-Dionysius was emphasising the unknowability of God and the severe limitations of human reason, a sceptical tradition brought into Western Europe in the ninth century by John Scottus Eriugena.¹ William of Ockham and other nominalist thinkers provide further evidence of sceptical thought within medieval theology.² Nonetheless, the rediscovery of a wide range of ancient thought during the Renaissance, including the sceptical writings of Cicero but especially those of the Greek Pyrrhonist Sextus Empiricus, was part of what brought about the ‘sceptical crisis’ of the period.³ Philosophical scepticism played a significant role in undermining the certainties offered by the philosophy of the later medieval period, which was dominated by Aristotelian scholasticism (Aristotle’s dominance was such that he was frequently known simply as ‘the philosopher’). In doing so, scepticism left a mark on the work of many of the period’s most famous thinkers, eventually making a significant contribution to the development of scientific method, as Richard Popkin’s history of the phenomenon shows. Even those who did not embrace scepticism were forced to take account of these ideas.

1 Jeffrey Burton Russell, *Lucifer: The Devil in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984), pp. 30, 114–15.

2 Russell, p. 276.

3 Richard Popkin, *The History of Scepticism*, 3rd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003, first published in 1960), p. xx.

The most obvious role for this newly sceptical mentality in relation to witchcraft would seemingly be to encourage people to deny the possibility of such a thing. Modern assumptions about witchcraft tend to treat it as the product of blind credulity, so a modicum of scepticism would seem to be fatal to witchcraft belief – and this appears to have been the dominant view of most historians of witchcraft in the early twentieth century. Support for such a view is not entirely lacking: the Aristotelian natural philosophy that was gradually eroded by sceptical thought has frequently been linked to witchcraft belief,⁴ and Thomas Aquinas was a vital authority for later witchcraft theorists.⁵ Furthermore, some writers on witchcraft explicitly rejected epistemological scepticism as part of their argument in favour of witchcraft persecution, among them Jean Bodin and John Cotta.⁶ But despite its intuitive appeal and some superficial support, a straightforward correlation between philosophical scepticism and scepticism about witchcraft does not hold up.

The most obvious problem is one of chronology. During the blindly credulous medieval period of popular caricature, witches were not persecuted in great numbers. Orthodox opinion, as represented in the ecclesiastical law recorded in the Canon *Episcopi*, held that the stories told by self-proclaimed witches were delusions, and that believing them to be true was heretical.⁷ Meanwhile, in the sceptical and questioning Renaissance, witchcraft was widely proclaimed to be real, and executions for it reached levels never seen before, or since, anywhere in the world. The rise of witchcraft belief, therefore, seems to have coincided with the rise of scepticism, rather than being ended by it. Nor does this appear to be a coincidence. As Stephens points out, one of the earliest sceptics was also a persecutor of witches:

Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola (d. 1533) was the first modern philosopher to quote the arguments of the ancient Pyrrhonian sceptic Sextus Empiricus (d. CE 210) extensively. At the same time, Pico was

4 See, for example, Russell, p. 296; Stuart Clark, *Thinking with Demons* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 153; Stephens, *Demon Lovers*, pp. 30–31.

5 Stephens, *Demon Lovers*, pp. 61–62.

6 On Bodin, see Popkin, p. 77; John Cotta, *The Trial of Witchcraft* (London, 1616), pp. 2–3, 41–42.

7 Stephens, *Demon Lovers*, pp. 127–28. The Canon *Episcopi* held that the stories of witches were delusions in the sense that they did not happen *physically*. The stories were not, however, unreal – they could be said to take place in spirit.

a major theorist of witchcraft, and vehemently defended the prosecution of witches. This apparent paradox, the exploitation of radically sceptical arguments in order to *defend* the reality of witchcraft rather than to attack it, is essential to understanding the context and complexities of scepticism about witchcraft.⁸

Clearly, the impact of scepticism was not a straightforward matter. Part of the reason for this was that scepticism in early modern argument was frequently used not for its own sake but in a rhetorical manner. In other words, scepticism was frequently used in order to argue not for the suspension of judgement, but in support of a particular conclusion.

To illustrate this point, it is worth briefly considering the role played by scepticism in related areas of early modern intellectual life – perhaps the most fundamental being that of religious controversy. One of the reasons identified by Popkin for the rise in importance of sceptical ideas during this period was the Protestant Reformation. Scepticism was used by both sides in the debates between Catholics and Protestants. The Protestant reformers challenged the authority of popes and councils, which the Catholic Church insisted was beyond question. Catholic writers responded by pointing out that reliance on personal revelation or an individual interpretation of scripture required relying on one's own, necessarily fallible, reasoning and intuition. Any such reliance on individual conscience, it was argued, led inevitably to relativism and, therefore, complete uncertainty. As a result, 'it became a stock claim of the Counter-Reformers to assert that the Reformers were just sceptics in disguise'.⁹ But while they depicted Protestants (unflatteringly) as sceptics, these anti-Protestant arguments themselves incorporated scepticism, as they were founded upon an insistence on human fallibility. If, in the absence of certain knowledge, one should rely on faith and trust in the established church rather than trying to reach a truth that is inaccessible to human beings, then that faith is based on highly sceptical intellectual premises.

A sceptical argument can therefore be used to provide certainty, or at least a semblance of certainty. The most illustrious example of the philosophical use of scepticism is found in the work of René

8 Walter Stephens, 'The Sceptical Tradition', in *The Oxford Handbook of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe and Colonial America*, edited by Brian Levack (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 101–21 (p. 105).

9 Popkin, p. 10.

Descartes. In his *Meditations on First Philosophy* (1641), Descartes doubted all the evidence of his senses, stripping away all knowledge that could conceivably be doubted in an attempt to arrive at indubitable knowledge.¹⁰ This project resulted in the famous proposition *cogito ergo sum*: I think, therefore I am. Descartes' use of scepticism does not treat it as an end point; instead, Descartes is actually in quest of certainty. *Cogito ergo sum* is the first step in that it establishes the outer limit of doubt, but by itself it is not very helpful, since nothing else directly follows from it. Descartes could only move beyond the cogito by proving the existence of God, which he proceeded to do in more or less the same way as Thomas Aquinas had before him. Descartes is not a doubter but a striver after certainty, much like the scholastic philosophers with whom he is usually contrasted. His use of scepticism is never more than a thought experiment; his doubts are put forward in order that they can be defeated. The cases of Cartesian method and the arguments of the Reformation show that scepticism is in practice more flexible than a 'pure' sceptic might wish it to be. The apparent paradox of scepticism used to reinforce belief in witchcraft dissolves when it becomes clear that scepticism is frequently used in this way.

The notion that scepticism, rather than merely opposing belief, could actually support and even form an important part of it, has as its corollary the idea that excessive credulity ultimately undermines belief. The alleged tendency of 'simple people' to believe virtually anything about witches could lead to dangerous incredulity in others, according to the seventeenth-century scholar Meric Casaubon.¹¹ And while credulity could lead to incredulity, Casaubon held that the reverse was also true. Part of what made the divine mystery so powerful and compelling was precisely the fact that it was difficult to believe:

the more we are apprehensive of Gods Greatness and Omnipotency, which makes other miracles, probable; doth make this, or seem to

10 Descartes does not mention witches in the *Meditations*; but as Stuart Clark has pointed out, his strongest statement of sceptical doubt is the so-called demon hypothesis: the idea that all sensory perception is the product of an all-powerful and deceitful demon. See Clark, *Thinking with Demons*, pp. 174–75 and René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, translated by John Cottingham (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 1.22–23, p. 15.

11 Meric Casaubon, *Of Credulity and Incredulity in Things Divine & Spiritual* (London, 1670), p. 176 (incorrectly marked 172).

make it, the more improbable, and incredible. To say therefore the more credible, because incredible; and that such things become God best; that may seem most incredible to men.¹²

Casaubon claims that God's existence is the greatest of miracles, and its incredible nature makes other miracles (which include everything in nature, he argues, since everything proceeds from God) seem probable by comparison. But, he continues, God's existence is credible precisely because it is so incredible, so remarkable: the sheer vastness of the idea is what convinces people of the existence of a vast creator.¹³ A properly controlled sense of incredulity – one that only makes itself felt occasionally, and without seriously threatening Christian faith – is in fact an essential part of that faith, and Casaubon writes that he 'shall not much applaud' the faith of those who do not have moments of incredulity, or doubt.¹⁴ With the complexity of the relationship between scepticism and belief in mind, I now turn back to the importance of these concepts within the debate on witchcraft.

Sceptics and believers

[I]f I heard any body speake, either of ghosts walking, of foretelling future things, of enchantments, of witchcrafts, or any other thing reported, which I could not well conceive, or that was beyond my reach ... I could not but feele a kinde of compassion to see the poore and seely people abused with such follies. And now I perceive, that I was as much to be moaned myselfe: Not that experience has since made me to dicerne any thing beyond my former opinions ... but reason hath taught me, that so resolutely to condemne a thing for false, and impossible, is to assume unto himselfe the advantage, to have the bounds and limits of Gods will, and of the power of our common mother Nature tied to his sleeve ... Let us consider through what clouds, and how blinde-fold we are led to the knowledge of most things, that passe our hands: verily we shall finde, it is rather custome, than science that removeth the strangenesse of them from us.¹⁵

12 Casaubon, *Of Credulity and Incredulity*, p. 123 (marked 119).

13 In making this argument, Casaubon forms part of a theological tradition based on the idea that *credo quia absurdum est* – I believe because it is absurd – a phrase often erroneously attributed to Tertullian.

14 Casaubon, *Of Credulity and Incredulity*, p. 207 (marked 203).

15 Michel de Montaigne, *Essays*, vol. 1, translated by John Florio (London: Folio, 2006, first published 1603), pp. 176–77.

In this passage Michel de Montaigne, dubbed by Popkin the most important sceptical thinker of the sixteenth century,¹⁶ describes his transition from an impious incredulity to a humble and Christian scepticism. Having reached what he later perceives to be an overconfident and unjustified conclusion, Montaigne realises his mistake and suspends his judgement entirely. True scepticism, in this case, precludes scepticism about witchcraft in the sense of the word which is ordinarily used. The young Montaigne is, properly speaking, a witchcraft denier (the negative connotations of this word notwithstanding), while the older is a witchcraft sceptic.

However, the word 'sceptic' is much more commonly used to denote a denier, certainly in relation to witchcraft. Histories of English witchcraft written in the early twentieth century tended to categorise authors on witchcraft as either sceptics or believers, celebrating the former, in particular Reginald Scot, while condemning or apologising for the latter.¹⁷ More recently, however, the validity of a clear distinction between authors in terms of scepticism and belief has been called into question by historians of witchcraft, notably Peter Elmer and Stuart Clark.¹⁸ Using the examples of Henry Boguet and Johannes Weyer, Clark makes the important point that texts written by authors traditionally characterised as 'believers' often contain much that is sceptical, while authors regarded as sceptical often concede a great deal to the believers.¹⁹

Nonetheless, it is important to recognise a fundamental dividing line in the motivations of different authors in the period up until the Restoration: some write in order to encourage witchcraft persecution, while others write in order to discourage it. (In the second half of the seventeenth century, as prosecutions became much rarer, what was at stake in the debate on witchcraft changed considerably, as discussed in Chapter 6.) The views of 'sceptics' and 'believers' about what is and is not possible can be much closer than is sometimes

16 Popkin, p. 44.

17 Wallace Notestein, *A History of Witchcraft in England from 1558 to 1718* (Washington: American Historical Society, 1911), for example, portrays Scot as heroically 'battling with the single purpose to stop a detestable and wicked practice' (p. 58), while Matthew Hopkins is said to be 'a figure in the annals of English roguery' (p. 164).

18 Peter Elmer, 'Towards a Politics of Witchcraft in Early Modern England', in *Languages of Witchcraft*, edited by Stuart Clark (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2001), pp. 101–18 (p. 105).

19 Clark, *Thinking with Demons*, p. 203.

recognised, but the more practical question of what they wish to recommend does separate them. To take two examples from England, George Gifford and William Perkins are very close indeed in terms of their theoretical and theological positions, but they are almost diametrically opposed in terms of their tone and recommendations. Gifford writes in order to discourage witchcraft persecution in the strongest possible terms, while Perkins advocates increased zeal in hunting witches. The demonological beliefs of the two authors are similar, but their prescriptions as to what evidence should be required for the conviction of a witch are very different: Gifford's demands would have made it almost impossible for any witch to be convicted.²⁰ It is hard to read Gifford's works without coming to the conclusion that he would, in spite of his declared beliefs, have been very much opposed to any accusation of maleficent witchcraft.

Why should this difference exist between two Protestant clergymen with much in common in other respects? One way to answer this question is to consider the specific circumstances under which individual authors wrote. Gifford had personal experience of witchcraft accusations as minister for the parish of Maldon in Essex, a county which underwent a much higher level of witchcraft persecution than the rest of the Home Counties, and his works suggest that he was horrified by what he saw.²¹ Perkins's book on witchcraft was published posthumously in 1608, at a time when witchcraft prosecutions seem to have begun to decline. There is no suggestion of any personal involvement in witchcraft accusations or trials in Perkins's treatise on the subject, although he was rumoured to have been involved in astrology as a student, which, it has been suggested, might account for a later hostility towards magic.²²

20 George Gifford's mouthpiece in his *Dialogue concerning Witches and Witchcraftes* (London, 1593), Daniel, seems to argue that two witnesses to the actual pact between witch and devil should be required for a witchcraft conviction (sig. H2^r). I am not aware of any case in which witnesses swore to having seen the pact between witch and spirit take place.

21 On Gifford see Peter Elmer, *Witchcraft, Witch-Hunting, and Politics in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 42–43 and Alan Macfarlane, 'A Tudor Anthropologist: George Gifford's *Discourse and Dialogue*', in *The Damned Art*, edited by Sidney Anglo (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1977), pp. 140–55 (p. 144).

22 ODNB, 'William Perkins'. A later Puritan writer on witchcraft, Thomas Cooper, also claims to have dabbled in magic; *The Mystery of Witchcraft* (London, 1617), pp. 11–13. While there is no evidential basis for doubting these claims, both writers follow in the illustrious footsteps of St Augustine,

Paying attention to the immediate context in which writers operated, as well as the broader intellectual context, is important because it helps to provide some indication of what shaped their thinking, and what the concerns might have been that drove them to write. The rhetorical purpose of the author, where this is possible to infer, is particularly important in the case of witchcraft because a variety of aims and objectives are consistent with broadly similar theoretical positions. Classifying an author like Gifford as a ‘believer’ in witchcraft, while basically accurate in terms of his declared beliefs, fails to acknowledge his self-evident commitment to arguing against the persecution of actual witches. Richard Bernard, likewise, would normally be classified as a ‘believer’; but by his own admission, he wrote in order to counter potentially damaging accusations of scepticism about witchcraft.²³ Furthermore, despite his stated purpose of proving his belief in witchcraft, Bernard devotes the entirety of the first section of his book to discouraging witchcraft accusations on grounds very similar to those of Gifford. Bernard even cites Scot, from whose views he distances himself in his preface, as an authority. Belief in witchcraft and support for the persecution of witches are entirely distinct in principle, and often also in practice: as well as ‘sceptical believers’ like Gifford and Bernard, there are cases of witchcraft sceptics who nonetheless supported the continued existence and enforcement of the laws against witchcraft.²⁴

While the dividing line between believer and sceptic cannot be drawn in a simplistic manner, there is good reason to retain the ideas of scepticism and credulity themselves, since these ideas appear so often in early modern writings on witchcraft. Believers in witchcraft often present themselves as sceptical, and accuse their opponents

who describes a similar involvement in astrology, and later repented: St Augustine, *Confessions*, translated by E. B. Pusey (London: J. M. Dent, 1962), vii.8–9, pp. 125–27. The narrative of sin and repentance – whether based on actual experience or not – may be a means of emphasising the moral authority of the authors.

- 23 Richard Bernard, *A Guide to Grand-Ivry Men* (London, 1627), sigs A3^v–A4^r.
 24 John Selden, in *Table Talk* (London, 1689), writes that ‘The Law against Witches does not prove there be any; but it punishes the Malice of those people, that use such means, to take away mens Lives. If one should profess that by turning his Hat thrice, and crying Buz; he could take away a man’s life (though in truth he could do no such thing) yet this were a just Law made by the State, that whosoever should turn his Hat thrice, and cry Buz; with an intention to take away a man’s life, shall be put to death’ (p. 59).

of credulity. Gifford, for example, arguing against Scot, writes ‘Alacke, alacke, I see that those which take upon them to be wiser than all men, are soonest deceived by the divell.’²⁵ Scot’s scepticism, according to Gifford, is in fact credulity; he reveals himself to have been duped. Early modern writers, like early twentieth-century historians, frequently prize scepticism and pour scorn on credulity. Scepticism was the mark of a discerning judgement, while credulity was frequently ascribed by learned authors to the ignorant masses.

At the same time, however, incredulity was also frequently presented as reprehensible – the error of the fool of Psalm 14 who ‘hath said in his heart, There is no God’.²⁶ Meric Casaubon’s book on the subject certainly treats incredulity as more problematic than credulity. Writing about incredulity in relation to witchcraft, Casaubon almost identifies it with witchcraft itself, and states in no uncertain terms that disbelief in witchcraft, while not necessarily equivalent to witchcraft itself, certainly derives from ‘the same cause, or agent, as ordinary witchcraft doth’. The word ‘agent’, in this context, leaves the reader in little doubt that Casaubon thinks incredulity is inspired by the devil.²⁷ James I, in his work on witchcraft, is even more forthright, accusing Johannes Weyer of witchcraft simply for having written a sceptical book on the subject.²⁸

For most early modern Christians, the importance of pure belief, humility, and trust in God rather than in one’s own corrupt and earthly wisdom could hardly be overstated. From this point of view, scepticism could be presented as false wisdom, and a sceptic who, like Scot, mocked belief in witchcraft or other supernatural phenomena might resemble the ‘natural man’ of 1 Corinthians 2:14, who ‘receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him’. For obvious reasons, it was easier for those authors writing to persuade others of the real existence of witches to accuse their opponents of lacking faith. However, sceptics about witchcraft were also able to employ the charge of incredulity in the related sense of infidelity to God. Reginald Scot, for example, argues

25 George Gifford, *A Discourse of the Subtill Practises of Deuilles by Witches and Sorcerers* (London, 1587), sig. E3^v.

26 A complex attitude towards scepticism and credulity is likewise evident in the Bible itself. While sceptical doubt is repeatedly condemned (see, for example, Romans 14:23), an attitude not dissimilar to philosophical scepticism is also expressed quite often, most famously when it is said that ‘we see through a glass, darkly’ (1 Corinthians 13:12).

27 Casaubon, *Of Credulity and Incredulity*, p. 113 (marked 109).

28 James I, *Daemonologie* (Edinburgh, 1597), preface to the reader, p. 2^v.

that those who credit witches with the power to raise storms are, in effect, denying that power to God, and are therefore guilty of the sin of idolatry.²⁹ Scot also accuses the believers of secret scepticism, arguing that ‘some of these crimes ... are so absurd, supernaturall, and impossible, that they are derided almost of all men, and as false, fond, and fabulous reports condemned: insomuch as the very witchmoongers themselves are ashamed to heare of them’.³⁰ He even presents himself, implausibly, as a believer when he claims in his epistle to the reader that he does not deny the existence of witches – only impious opinion concerning them. Belief and scepticism, when closely examined, are best understood not as fixed positions within the witchcraft debate, but as rhetorical tools used by all of the contributors to that debate. Every author on witchcraft needed to find a way to utilise both belief and scepticism, and to strike a balance between them, whatever the exact nature of the argument.

Evidence, authority, and ridicule

[T]he sheer fact that something is written down gives it special authority. It is not altogether easy to realize that what is written down can be untrue.³¹

One of the effects of the sceptical crisis described by Popkin was a gradual shift in the kinds of evidence that were required to support claims to truth. The general picture here is again well established. The Renaissance saw a gradual shift in attitudes, based in part on the recovery of sceptical thought and newly sceptical attitudes, which slowly led from a reliance on authority to a new emphasis on empirical evidence and independent investigation.³² Many Renaissance authors started to display a more critical attitude towards their sources.³³ This development is particularly evident in historical

29 Reginald Scot, *The Discoverie of Witchcraft* (London, 1584), I.5, p. 12.

30 Scot, II.10, p. 34.

31 Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, translated by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 1998, first published in 1960 as *Wahrheit und Methode*), p. 272.

32 John Selden made an explicit connection between sceptical philosophy and a sceptical attitude towards historical sources; see Peter Burke, *The Renaissance Sense of the Past* (London: Edward Arnold, 1969), p. 69.

33 Lorenzo Valla's exposure of the forged Donation of Constantine in 1439 is a celebrated example (Burke, pp. 55–58).

writing. In England, for example, stories about the founding of London by the Trojan Brutus were dismissed by the early Tudor historian Polydore Vergil. Most historians after Vergil continued to include these old stories in their chronicles, but during the seventeenth century scepticism about their historical foundation became much more open and widespread.

In connection with witchcraft, the view of early twentieth-century historians was in line with what common-sense assumptions might suggest: that questioning authority and turning to empirical evidence helped to undermine witchcraft belief. Again, this is not an indefensible position; Sidney Anglo's view of Reginald Scot as a rational empiricist who was simply ahead of his time was supported by Scot's claims to have investigated the mechanics of magic thoroughly.³⁴ Frequent references to the ultimate written authority – the Bible – in the texts of those supporting continued persecution of witches suggest a basis in faith rather than fact. The *Malleus Maleficarum*, a foundational witchcraft text, also provides a very good example of typically medieval attitudes towards written sources: virtually anything that supports the argument of the authors is thrown in, including crude anti-clerical jokes.³⁵

However, just as philosophical scepticism and scepticism about witchcraft are not linked in the way that might be expected, so the association of an empirical approach with scepticism and reliance on authority with belief in witchcraft is not tenable. All early modern authors (and, for that matter, all present-day academic researchers) make use of authority. Even Reginald Scot, for all his claims to have subjected the practices of various tricksters to empirical investigation, relies heavily on authority of various kinds. In recent years, scholars have increasingly pointed to the theological elements of Scot's argument, and scriptural authority is of particular importance to him, as are the opinions of Calvin or St Augustine. Other sceptics, in contrast to Scot, rely almost entirely on authority rather than on empirical evidence, notably Thomas Ady, who proclaims in his preface that he does not wish to make any reference to the kind of anecdotal evidence used by proponents of witchcraft, but will rest

34 Sidney Anglo, 'Reginald Scot's *Discoverie of Witchcraft: Scepticism and Sadduceeism*', in *The Damned Art*, edited by Sidney Anglo (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1977), pp. 106–39. Scot stresses that he writes on the basis of 'due prooffe and triall'; III.6, p. 48.

35 Stephens, *Demon Lovers*, pp. 303–4.

his argument entirely on scriptural authority.³⁶ The witch-finder Matthew Hopkins, on the other hand, writes that his skill in detecting witches depends not on any great learning but upon ‘experience, which though it be meanly esteemed of, yet [is] the surest and safest way to judge by’.³⁷ Other believers, too, including James I and Bodin, make reference to everyday experience as sufficient proof of the existence of witchcraft. Perhaps the biggest problem for linking an empiricist outlook to scepticism about witchcraft is the case of Joseph Glanvill, a proponent of both witchcraft belief and the developing scientific method in the later seventeenth century. In historical cases of witchcraft, too, empirical evidence was often vital to the prosecution case; the discovery of teats or witches’ marks was an important source of evidence in trials, and the infamous ‘swimming test’ could even be presented as a scientific experiment, with an innocent person used as a control.³⁸

Empirical evidence and authority, like scepticism and belief, cannot be understood as two mutually exclusive and antagonistic categories which are straightforwardly associated with particular attitudes towards witchcraft. Rather, empirical evidence and written authority are the two most important means of supporting any argument, and they are invoked to varying degrees by all writers, whatever their particular position on the question of witchcraft. But again, this does not mean that the increasing importance of empirical reasoning is irrelevant to the topic of witchcraft. The essence of Walter Stephens’s argument is that the witch hunts began precisely in order that empirical evidence could be found for propositions that had previously been accepted on the basis of authority: propositions concerning the existence of spirits, the devil and, ultimately, God himself. Witches, as a point of contact between the human world and the spirit world, proved the existence of the latter. This, Stephens argues, is why it was necessary to *find* witches: the existence of witchcraft was itself a form of empirical evidence, or evidence posing as empirical, used to reinforce the dictates of medieval authorities that no longer seemed sufficiently authoritative.

36 Thomas Ady, *A Candle in the Dark* (London, 1655), p. 5.

37 Matthew Hopkins, *The Discovery of Witches* (London, 1647), p. 1.

38 Orna Alyagon Darr, *Marks of an Absolute Witch* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), pp. 167, 183; Darr notes that the swimming test was widely used in England, despite its illegality (pp. 44–45). On the ‘witch’s mark’ see Darr, pp. 111–40.

Some caution is needed in making any distinction between evidence and authority. It is especially important to recognise that, while such a distinction could be made in early modern Europe as well as today, it might be understood in rather different ways. Meric Casaubon, for example, accepts a distinction between authority and reason and places greater value on reason; but he nonetheless maintains that '*Divine Authority* is equivalent to Sense and Reason'.³⁹ Furthermore, while claiming to argue on the basis of what he calls reason, rather than authority, Casaubon cites a huge number of authors in support of his claims, often simply praising them as learned and wise rather than presenting arguments to show that they are right. What Casaubon means by the terms 'reason' and 'authority' is, in practice, not always clear, but it does seem safe to conclude that the two cannot be neatly separated in early modern usage.

In fact, the distinction between authority on the one hand and evidence on the other breaks down altogether in view of some of the 'empirical evidence' offered by witchcraft theorists. For obvious reasons, finding what would now be regarded as empirical evidence of witchcraft was difficult, so it was necessary to manufacture it.⁴⁰ Often, especially within the pages of the *Malleus Maleficarum*, evidence offered as empirical – the testimony of eyewitnesses – could equally be described as authority, since it is ultimately written material of various kinds, presented as if it were a record of true events. In the *Malleus* the effect can be grimly comical, as patently absurd stories are solemnly presented as factual. Jean Bodin, too, invites derision on occasion, such as when he claims that one witch 'caused her neighbour's chin to turn upside down, a hideous thing to see'.⁴¹

39 Casaubon, *Of Credulity and Incredulity*, p. 7. From a modern point of view, Casaubon relies almost entirely on authority throughout the book.

40 In this sense, witchcraft theorists followed in a long tradition of manufacturing evidence in support of the faith, which was a notable feature of early and medieval Christianity. Particularly interesting in relation to the demand for the credible eyewitness testimony that was so important to the witchcraft phenomenon is the 'gynaecological examination performed on Mary after the nativity by two sceptical and reputable midwives', described in an apocryphal gospel attributed to Matthew (William Nelson, *Fact or Fiction: The Dilemma of the Renaissance Storyteller* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1973), p. 20). On the use of panels of 'honest matrons' or midwives in witchcraft trials, see Darr, pp. 117, 121–23. See also Chapter 3 on the examination of Frances Howard.

41 Jean Bodin, *On the Demon-Mania of Witches*, translated by Randy A. Scott (Toronto: Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies, 1995, first published as *De la Demonomanie des Sorciers* in Paris in 1580), p. 140.

Despite the differences between modern and early modern perceptions about the validity of different types of evidence, it is important to emphasise that Bodin's claim is not only ridiculous from the anachronistic perspective of a present-day reader. Witchcraft sceptics in England frequently, if not invariably, described the evidence offered by sources like the *Malleus* as absurd.

Reginald Scot, in particular, makes use of this tactic. Scot attacks evidence that is offered as empirical by simply asking the reader to judge its plausibility, with a heavy dose of irony. While Scot has been characterised as an ultra-empiricist by Anglo and earlier historians, and more recently as a writer with serious theological concerns,⁴² few historians have placed much emphasis on his extensive use of mockery. This is odd, since ridicule is probably the single most distinctive feature of Scot's text. The rhetorical strategy of much of the *Discoverie* is simply to repeat what witchcraft believers have said to justify their beliefs, occasionally pausing to highlight contradictions or make sarcastic comments.⁴³ It is striking how infrequently Scot feels the need to actually argue against witchcraft beliefs. Scot even says, in relation to the legal treatment of witches, that 'I neede not staie to confute such parcial and horrible dealings, being so apparentlie impious and full of tyrannie ... I will passe over the same; supposing that the citing of such absurdities may stand for a sufficient confutation thereof.'⁴⁴ Scot almost defies the reader to disagree; claims not worth disproving, he implies, could only be taken seriously by a fool.

Scot's representation of the witchmongers' claims is often quite skewed, but even more important than this is his consistently mocking tone. Scot's contemptuous authorial persona is designed to undermine witchcraft belief in the reader, based on the assumption that the reader does not wish to feel like a fool. Discussing animal transformation, Scot mocks his favourite antagonist by writing that '*Bodin* saith, that this was a man in the likenesse of an asse: but I maie rather thinke that he is an asse in the likenesse of a man'.⁴⁵ Telling

42 See, for example, Clark, pp. 211–12; Philip Almond, *England's First Demonologist* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2011), pp. 183–92; and David Wootton, 'Reginald Scot/Abraham Fleming/The Family of Love', in *Languages of Witchcraft*, edited by Stuart Clark (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2001), pp. 119–38.

43 Almond, p. 106.

44 Scot, II.6, pp. 27–28.

45 Scot, XII.15, pp. 253–54.

the story of an archer punished because he was so skilful that a judge assumed he must have magical help, Scot comments with heavy irony that ‘the archer was severelie punished, to the great encouragement of archers, and to the wise example of justice’. Scot’s sarcasm is on display again when he tells the story of an evil spirit which

came to a ladies bed side, and made hot loove unto hir: whereat she ... cried out so lowd, that companie came and found him under hir bed in the likenesse of the holie Bishop Sylvanus, which holie man was much defamed thereby, until at length this infamie was purged by the confession of a divell made at S. Jeroms toombe. Oh excellent peece of witchcraft or cousening wrought by Sylvanus!⁴⁶

Scot’s implied question to the reader, posed every time he tells one of these tall stories, is ‘what kind of idiot would believe this’? As important as Scot’s sarcastic commentary is the language in which these stories are told. When discussing sex, for example, witchcraft theorists tend to use formal terms like ‘carnal copulation’. Scot refers instead to the incubus making ‘hot loove’ to the lady, an unusual phrase more reminiscent of the 1970s than the 1580s. Scot also recounts one of the stories told in the *Malleus*, about a penis-stealing witch. According to the *Malleus*, the victim of this theft is restored when he threatens the witch with violence, saying somewhat primly: ‘Unless you restore my health to me, you shall die at my hands.’ In Scot’s telling, the young man says to the witch: ‘Restore me my toole, or thou shalt die for it.’⁴⁷ Scot’s use of the informal term ‘toole’ – in contrast to the *Malleus*’s vague reference to ‘health’ – seems to be designed to provoke amusement and heighten the reader’s sense of the story’s absurdity. When Scot describes a lustful abbot who was visited by an angel, and ‘after that (forsooth) was as chaste as though he had had never a stone in his breech’, Scot’s derisive, bracketed ‘forsooth’ and clever punning ridicule the story simply by telling it.⁴⁸ Proponents of witchcraft, in their texts, prefer to keep things as serious as possible. Scot, while making disingenuous apologies for the filthiness of the stories he is sadly

46 Scot, iv.5, p. 79.

47 Scot, iv.4, pp. 77–78; Heinrich Institoris and Jakob Sprenger, *The Hammer of Witches*, translated by Christopher S. Mackay (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); II.7.115C, p. 323.

48 Scot, iv.7, p. 81.

forced to relate, clearly aims to make his readers laugh, both at his jokes and at the claims of witchcraft theorists.

Scot does also provide some logical argument against the reality of witchcraft, devoting much space to discussions of the signification of words in the Hebrew Bible and discussing the nature of spirit in the final book of the *Discoverie*, a section which has attracted much attention from recent historians. But Scot's actual arguments against witchcraft are not the strong point of his book; if anything, they are its weakness. To engage in argument with belief in witchcraft is to take it seriously, and Scot's book is most effective when it refuses to do this. Responding to a story in the *Malleus Maleficarum* concerning a witch who could not be burned until a charm had been removed from her possession, Scot simply dismisses it, saying that 'This is so gravelie and faithfullie set downe by the inquisitors themselves, that one may believe it if he list, though indeed it be a verie lie.'⁴⁹ Scot boldly accuses his opponents of lying – a charge he repeats regularly – but he also mocks their gravity, refusing to adopt an equally serious attitude himself. When Scot does make a logical objection to the arguments of believers in witchcraft, it is not always clear that logic is the point. Scot proudly recounts that, 'I have put twentie of these witchmongers to silence with this one question; to wit, Whether a witch that can turne a woman into a cat, &c: can also turne a cat into a woman?'⁵⁰ This question ought, in principle, to be answerable, but it reduces witchmongers to silence because it is not really a question: it is mockery dressed as a question. The suggestion that cats could be turned into humans – an idea that was not part of the folkloric tradition – was so unfamiliar that its absurdity was immediately obvious.

From a literary and rhetorical point of view, it is the destructive aspects of the *Discoverie*, the parts which reject and ridicule the claims of witchmongers, which are the most memorable, and the most extensive, parts of the book. Mockery is present from the first page and continues throughout the book, while Scot's thoughts on the nature of spirits are appended to the main text in a separate book, not appearing until page 489 of the 1584 edition. Scot's intellectually sophisticated attempt to build an alternative understanding of spirit is indeed fascinating, but most early modern opponents of Scot paid little attention to these ideas; James I's offhand claim

49 Scot, II.8, p. 30.

50 Scot, v.1, p. 92.

that Scot fell into ‘the old error of the Sadducees’ misrepresents Scot completely, knowingly or not.⁵¹ Most authors hostile to Scot simply condemn him and move quickly on to their own positions on witchcraft, often rejecting his arguments without referring to him by name.⁵² But there are some detailed and explicit criticisms of Scot’s arguments in manuscript sources which, as far as I know, have yet to be discussed by historians of witchcraft. One such manuscript is by George Wyatt, a grandson of the poet Thomas Wyatt and biographer of Anne Boleyn. Wyatt displays great concern with what he regards as Scot’s distortion of Calvin’s commentary on Job:

Trewly a ma[n] would hardly thinke yt a Gentelma[n] yt in al things profresseseth faithfulness and spetially a kentisma[n] where ther are so many able to deserue what is right shuld so far corrupt his pen to take so many sente[n]ses scattered so diversly in so few sermo[n]s of Job and yet to be carried w[ith] so co[n]trarie an opinio[n] to ye plaine words of ye Authour.⁵³

Wyatt has read Calvin on Job, and is scandalised by what he sees, with justification, as Scot’s use of selective quotation and the abuse of Calvin’s authority, but he makes no mention of Scot’s views on the nature of spirit.⁵⁴ Another manuscript source is a lengthy (albeit incomplete) point-by-point rebuttal of Scot’s arguments in the Harley collection at the British Library. The only published mention of this document that I have been able to discover is in a footnote in Wallace Notestein’s *History of Witchcraft in England*, which is more than a century old; Notestein credits ‘Professor Burr’ with informing him of the manuscript’s existence but did not read it himself.⁵⁵ The anonymous author of the Harley MS also rejects

51 James I, p. 2^v. The Sadducees were a Jewish sect, treated with hostility in the New Testament, which denied both the existence of spirits and the immortality of the soul. One author who does seem to be aware of Scot’s views on spirit is Thomas Nashe, who refers to them twice; *Works of Thomas Nashe*, vol. 1, edited by R. B. McKerrow (London: A. H. Bullen, 1904), pp. 309, 351. However, Nashe is sympathetic to Scot and cites him as an authority on this question.

52 Henry Holland’s *Treatise Against Witchcraft* (Cambridge, 1590) is an exception, as it contains responses to Scot’s book, complete with page references in the margins.

53 London, British Library, Add. MS 62135, fols 416–423 (fols 421^v–421^r).

54 Holland also takes issue with Scot’s interpretation of Calvin: sig. E4^r; cf. Scot, v.7, pp. 104–5.

55 Notestein, p. 69. George Lincoln Burr (1857–1938) was professor of history and librarian at Cornell University.

Scot's interpretation of Calvin, writing that: 'I can not p[er]use Mr Calvins words uppon yt place because I have not his homelies uppon the booke of Job. but at adventur I dare wager w[ith] yow the price of that booke yt y[ou] are deceived in his opynion.'⁵⁶ The author of this work also expresses disapproval of Scot's irreverent attitude.

The idea that the kind of mockery at which Scot excels could be a threat to belief in witches, on the other hand, is tacitly acknowledged by Bodin. Claiming that judges who are too lenient may themselves be witches, Bodin writes that 'the first presumption against the magistrate who is a witch is when he makes a joke of such witchcraft. For under the pretence of laughter he brews his fatal poison.'⁵⁷ Bodin accepts, in the early part of his book, that people may find witchcraft hard to believe. If people are prepared to take the discussion seriously, he is, it seems, comfortable with the debate to which his book is a contribution; logical objections can be met with argument, and such a discussion presupposes that the possibility of witchcraft *might* be accepted. But ridicule is a threat which cannot be tolerated, because it puts the credibility of witchcraft, and Bodin himself, at stake. Bodin therefore needs to make what is, under the circumstances, an ominous and threatening statement against such mockery, to make sure that nobody begins to laugh. If Bodin, or any other witchcraft theorist, is made the subject of ridicule, he looks like a fool – a naked emperor who cannot distinguish between fact and fiction.

Histories and stories: facts, fictions, and lies

DOUBT. When I hear a very strange story, I always think 'tis more likely he should lye that tells it me, than that [it] should be true.

SIR EDW. 'Tis a good rule for our belief.⁵⁸

While Scot amuses himself and his readers at the expense of the witchcraft theorists, and while he does seem to have been an important figure within the English witchcraft debate, *The Discoverie*

56 London, British Library, Harley MS 2302, fol. 77^r. The author also criticises Scot's readings of other theologians, such as Chrysostom (fol. 80^r), but returns most frequently to Calvin (e.g. fols 84^r-84^v).

57 Bodin, p. 216.

58 Thomas Shadwell, *The Lancashire Witches*, edited by Judith Bailey Slagle (New York: Garland, 1991), II.415-17.

of *Witchcraft* did not end that debate.⁵⁹ Clearly, it was possible for some early modern people to dismiss stories like Bodin's as absurd, just as it is for people today. The difference between then and now is that it was not then, as it is now, more or less impossible to take such stories seriously while maintaining any kind of credibility. Part of the reason for this difference can be found in the confused epistemic status of stories in the Renaissance.

It has already been noted that a critical attitude towards the past, and towards texts that purported to record it, had begun to emerge during the sixteenth century. It was in the Renaissance that the methods of what would now be called archival research began to be applied to the study of the past.⁶⁰ But while histories began to have a greater factual basis during the Renaissance, the period also saw an increased emphasis on the literary nature of historical writing, in contrast to the list-like nature of some early chronicles. Renaissance historians considered history to be closely allied to rhetoric and poetry, and they modelled themselves on ancient examples. This included mimicking ancient devices, like the lengthy speeches most Renaissance historians put into the mouths of historical personages.⁶¹ This kind of embellishment of the bare facts was usually left unacknowledged and may, by some readers at least, have been accepted as factual.

Fiction, meanwhile, was not always accepted as a category at all. There was prose writing in the sixteenth century that advertised its self-consciously fictional nature – Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516) would be one example – but the difference between fiction and lie was, for many people, hazy at best. In fact, More's Protestant opponents attacked him on the basis that he had written *Utopia* and was therefore a liar.⁶² His critics may well have been disingenuous, but the fact that they advanced the argument at all reveals that they expected readers to feel unease, at the very least, with invented stories. While it seems to have been accepted that a person telling

59 On Scot's influence see Almond, pp. 2–4, and S. F. Davies, 'The Reception of Reginald Scot's *Discovery of Witchcraft*: Witchcraft, Magic, and Radical Religion', *Journal of the History of Ideas* 74:3 (July 2013), 381–401. Davies writes of the *Discoverie* that 'No other English witchcraft treatise was as widely cited' (p. 389).

60 John Burrow, *A History of Histories* (London: Penguin, 2009), p. 299.

61 Geoffrey of Monmouth was an early adopter of these more literary techniques; see Burrow, p. 237.

62 Alan H. Nelson, *Monstrous Adversary: The Life of Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2003), p. 7.

a true story had licence to embellish and invent, embellishment and invention for their own sake were less excusable.

The most famous defence of fiction from the period is Sir Philip Sidney's. Tackling the accusation that fiction is equivalent to lying, Sidney dismisses it as absurd with reference to the example of Aesop's fables: 'who thinketh that Aesop wrote it for actually true, were well worthy to have his name chronicled among the beasts he writeth of'.⁶³ This is a telling example to use. Long before Sidney wrote, St Augustine and other theologians had defended those fictions which were so implausible that their fictitiousness was obvious; since nobody would accept them as true, such stories need not be considered lies.⁶⁴ Sidney's discussion skirts around the question of those morally dubious stories that are a little more plausible than beast fables. Conditioned as we are by a few centuries of the realist novel, this may appear less troubling to modern people than it did to Sidney's contemporaries, many of whom may have felt that the area between obvious fiction and obvious truth was worryingly crowded. Nelson points out a striking example of an educated person getting it wrong: 'Although *Amadis* was usually thought of as a delightful fiction, an English translator saw fit to introduce it with reference to Cicero's praise of histories and to dilate on the advantage of learning from the lessons of the past.'⁶⁵ It might be difficult to see how *Amadis de Gaule*, with its giants and wizards, could be accepted as history by anyone, but the translator's mistake is perhaps understandable given that even 'true' histories contained so much fabrication.

The distinction between 'history' and 'story' that exists today was uncertain in early modern England. The term 'history' is used indiscriminately in sixteenth-century English texts to describe both fiction and historical writing; the adjective 'tragical' – with its theatrical associations – is used to describe historical events as well as stage plays. The embellishments of historical writers were not normally regarded as problematic because the aim of history was not to recreate past events as accurately as possible, but to provide exemplary moral lessons from the past. This didactic purpose – or at least the pretence of it – was one that historians shared with

63 Philip Sidney, *An Apology for Poetry* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002, first published in 1595), p. 103.

64 Nelson, pp. 14–15.

65 Nelson, p. 39. The translator is A. M., in his epistle to the *Third Booke of Amadis de Gaule* (London, 1618).

poets and writers of fiction: it is central to Sidney's defence. This convention also allows both fictional and historical sources to be cited in support of particular arguments without addressing the question of whether or not the events described actually took place: this question is ultimately unimportant, because all stories should contain a deeper moral truth. This is not to say that early modern people were incapable of distinguishing between factual relation and fictional representation. Scot, for one, was able to do so:

I doo not thinke that there will be found among all the heathens superstitious fables, or among the witches, conjurors, couseners, poets, knaves, fooles, &c: that ever wrote, so impudent and impious a lie or charme as is read in Barnardine de bustis; where, to cure a sicke man, Christs bodie, to wit: a wafer cake, was outwardlie applied to his side, and entred into his heart, in the sight of all the standers by. Now, if grave authors report such lies, what credit in these cases shall we attribute unto the old wives tales, that Sprenger, Institor, Bodine, and others write? Even as much as to Ovids *Metamorphosis*, Aesops *fables*, Moores *Utopia*, and diverse other fansies; which have as much truth in them, as a blind man hath sight in his eie.⁶⁶

While Scot lumps falsity and fiction (and knaves and poets) together in this passage, he does seem to be aware of them as distinct. The tales of Catholic authors and witchmongers are described as 'lies' while the fictional works of Ovid and More are termed 'fansies' (although Scot also writes that he is unsure whether the ancient poets were serious or joking).⁶⁷ Nevertheless, even with these fictional works, Scot does feel the need to repeatedly state that they are untrue. He cannot take for granted that his readers will automatically accept this to be the case – although he thinks most of them will⁶⁸ – and in fact the authors he disagrees with seem not to. The respect given to all stories, and the understanding that even a fabrication can convey a higher truth of practical value, allows fiction to be used as a means of argument. While fiction is typically more useful to the persecutors of witches than it is to writers like Scot, who dismisses the stories told by ancient poets, it is also worth noting that Scot is happy to use some of Ovid's more obscure writings as evidence that love magic does not work, as Cora Fox has pointed out.⁶⁹

66 Scot, XII.14, p. 248.

67 Scot, XII.8, p. 229.

68 Scot, XII.8, p. 229.

69 Cora Fox, *Ovid and the Politics of Emotion in Elizabethan England* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 135; Scot, VI.6, pp. 121–23.

Scot himself quotes the more sceptical (and comical) poet Chaucer, repeatedly and approvingly.⁷⁰

There were other, perhaps more pressing, reasons to take the stories of ancient poets seriously. Casaubon illustrates these succinctly when he explains that

in reading ancientist Authors, Poets, and others; but Homer especially, I have received such satisfaction, as that, had I no other ground to induce me to believe the antiquity of the Scriptures, which they pretend unto ... this very consideration would have been a great motive unto me: so many things do I find of that nature from the beginning to the end, which, to me, seem in a manner indubitable.⁷¹

In other parts of his book, Casaubon provides concrete examples of why ancient poets support the truth of Christianity. Ovid, for example, describes a ‘deluge’ that Casaubon identifies with the story of Noah.⁷² Later, the myth of Prometheus is taken to be a corrupted version of the true story of Adam’s fall from grace.⁷³ Many authors on witchcraft found evidence of the interactions of evil spirits and human beings in Greek and Roman myth, on the basis that the pagan gods could only have been devils in disguise.⁷⁴ The apparent support for the Christian story of creation and God offered by pagan stories of creation and the gods was too valuable to be abandoned, so despite the obvious implausibility of much ancient poetry, it had to be taken seriously.

The confusion of story and history, or fiction and reality, played a prominent role in the witchcraft debate; but quite apart from the arguments that took place about which sources could legitimately be used as evidence, questions of deception and falsehood were central to the early modern demonological discourse of witchcraft. Witches themselves were said to be both deceivers and deceived;

70 Scot dismisses accounts of witchcraft in Ovid, Horace, and Virgil, who are sarcastically referred to as ‘grave authors’; i.4, p. 10, xi.7, pp. 224–29. He quotes Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* in support of his sceptical arguments: iv.12, p. 88; xiv.1–3, pp. 353, 355–56.

71 Casaubon, *Of Credulity and Incredulity*, p. 60 (marked 56).

72 Casaubon, p. 30 (marked 26).

73 Casaubon, p. 36 (marked 32).

74 See, for example, Cotta, pp. 30–31: ‘Who almost that readeth any ancient classical Author, can auoide the common mention of fained gods ... offering themselues vnto men and people, sometimes in one shape, sometimes in another; requiring worship, ceremonies and rites ... doing strange and admired workes oft-times.’ All such ‘fained gods’ could be recognised by Christians as devils.

they were credulous tricksters. Their magic was often described as primarily a matter of deceiving the senses of their victims. If witches were able to transform human beings into animal form, as some maintained, this transformation was usually said to be a mere deception affecting form rather than substance (albeit indistinguishable to human senses from a genuine transformation).⁷⁵ A more common view, in England at least, was that the witches' magic lacked even this much reality, and it was frequently asserted that witches were deluded about the extent of their power, even by writers not normally regarded as sceptics. Any magical powers witches seemed to have, it was often argued, were in fact provided by the devil – or perhaps the devil did nothing more than predict events that would have taken place anyway, before tricking the witches into believing that they had brought these things about by magic.

The witches themselves, then, were even more deluded than those victims whose senses they deceived: they mistook the devil's lies for truth. Like their master, the devil, witches delighted in tricking others because they had themselves been deceived.⁷⁶ Witches were often regarded as the greatest victims of their own witchcraft (although this did not always generate much sympathy for them) since, by allowing themselves to be seduced by the devil, they had condemned themselves to eternal damnation, often without getting anything in return. The foolish credulity of the witches and their defenders – who were also foolish enough to believe the devil's lies – was frequently noted by demonologists, in what a Freudian might call an example of projection. Others, like Reginald Scot, who scornfully noted the credulity of those who believed that witches could perform genuine feats of magic, also accounted for the existence of self-proclaimed witches in terms of delusion induced by melancholy. Distinguishing truth from lies and fictions was thus at the heart of early modern thought about witchcraft.

75 An exception is Jean Bodin, who maintained the reality of lycanthropy; see Bodin, pp. 122–29 and note 73. The *Malleus* maintains that such transformations do occur but are illusory; 1.10.59C–62D (pp. 201–09).

76 A point made, for example, by Robert Burton in *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (London: J. M. Dent, 1972, first published in 1621), 1.2.1.2, p. 196, on the authority of St Augustine. As Russell points out, Dante established a strong literary precedent for the idea that '[d]eception and self-deception ... are the key to all sin' by placing traitors in the lowest circle of hell (p. 227).

Avoiding accusations of credulity was more important for those authors arguing in favour of witchcraft persecution than for those who argued against it, for obvious reasons. (Thomas Ady's claim to rely entirely on scripture may reveal an equivalent desire to avoid accusations of incredulity: Ady was a physician, not a clergyman.) One strategy employed by witchcraft theorists bears a resemblance, albeit on a much more modest scale, to the methodology of Descartes: using scepticism, or the pretence of scepticism, as an argumentative and narrative tactic to persuade others that all reasonable sceptical doubts have been overcome. This type of scepticism is referred to in this study as rhetorical scepticism, since it is used with a persuasive purpose. The following section discusses the features of such rhetorical scepticism with reference to specific examples.

Rhetorical scepticism

The rhetorical use of scepticism is in evidence in a wide range of purportedly factual texts, including pamphlets describing specific trials or cases, as well as more theoretical and learned works. At the more popular end of the spectrum, the author of a pamphlet describing the career of Stubbe Peeter, a German sorcerer, produces evidence of the veracity of his account towards the end of the text:

And that this thing is true, Maister Tice Artine a Brewer dwelling at Puddlewarfe, in London, beeing a man of that Country borne, and one of good reputation and account, is able to iustifie, who is neere kinsman to this Childe, and hath from thence twice received Letters concerning the same, and for that the firste Letter did rather drive him into wondering at the act then yielding credit thereunto, he had shortlye after at request of his writing another letter sent him, whereby he was more fully satisfied, and divers other persons of great credit in London hath in like sorte received letters from their friends to the like effect.⁷⁷

The standard tactic used in this passage is to emphasise the reliability of the person who is prepared to vouch for the truth of the story. Only one of the 'persons of great credit' is actually named, and his social standing as a brewer might not have impressed all contemporary readers. However, Master Artine's reliability is emphasised by the apparently trivial detail that he does not immediately believe the story. Instead of accepting the version of events as related in

77 Anon., *A Most True Discourse, declaring the life and death of one Stubbe Peeter, being a most wicked Sorcerer* (London, 1590), p. 14.

the first letter, he demands further evidence, and is only satisfied when he receives it, again in the form of a letter. The content of the two letters is left unspecified, but it is difficult to imagine what further details Master Artine's correspondent – if a correspondent ever existed – could possibly have supplied that would have convinced him of the existence of a magic belt that turned Stubbe Peeter into 'a greedy devouring Woolf'.⁷⁸

Artine's supposedly sceptical attitude in this passage is being used, in a rather transparent way, to enhance his credibility as a witness, and this technique is frequently used in witchcraft writings. Typically, such rhetorical scepticism involves the author, usually early on in the text, claiming to have been sceptical about the allegation of witchcraft at first, only to be convinced by overwhelming evidence. Sometimes this claim is no more than a straightforward assertion. One anonymous pamphleteer writes that: 'It had been very difficult to convince me of that which I find to be true, concerning the wiles of that old Serpent the Diavel.'⁷⁹ In this case, the author's supposed scepticism is not on display in any other part of the text: the reader is told in a matter-of-fact way about the existence of an English college of witches and a man transforming himself into a toad, among other things. Other texts build rhetorical scepticism into the narrative much more subtly and effectively. Edward Fairfax's lengthy tract describing his daughter's possession provides a good example. Fairfax spends a long time detailing his daughter's symptoms, which include falling into a trance, what would now be called hallucinations, and conversations with an invisible interlocutor (named by her as Satan), in which she defies the devil. Fairfax then tells a story about a penny left at his house by a woman reputed to be a witch. The penny has 'by the woman's confession ... been put to evil use',⁸⁰ and Fairfax attempts to destroy it, which is only achieved with great difficulty. He then claims that

[u]ntil this time we had no suspicion that this should be Witchcraft; but the matter of the penny, and the fame of the woman who did bring it to the house, gave cause unto us to surmise that perhaps this might be the action of some Witch, many about being evil reputed of in that kind. Yet were we slow to believe.⁸¹

78 *A Most True Discourse*, p. 4.

79 Anon., *The Divels Delusions* (London, 1649), sig. A2^r.

80 Edward Fairfax, 'A Discourse of Witchcraft', in *Miscellanies of the Philobiblon Society*, vol. 5 (London, 1859), p. 57.

81 Fairfax, p. 63.

Fairfax claims he was 'slow to believe', and it is indeed the case that he has not mentioned witchcraft until this point in the text. However, given the public interest generated by cases of demonic possession, and the fairly standard symptoms displayed by victims of it (which his daughter shares), it would be unwise to accept this claim at face value. The details provided to the reader all point to demonic possession induced by witchcraft, and any contemporary reader would probably have noticed this. In making these statements, Fairfax emphasises his own fair-mindedness to the reader, demonstrating that he is not a credulous or hasty person who will jump to unwarranted conclusions. He presents himself as a sceptic, a person who requires conclusive evidence before he will diagnose witchcraft. But persuading the reader to accept this diagnosis is his purpose for writing in the first place, as he makes clear in his preface.

In telling the story about the penny, Fairfax has clear ideas about what will count as empirical evidence of witchcraft. These ideas are presented as having been formulated and agreed upon prior to the situation which puts them to the test. Fairfax explains to his wife – who also shows her scepticism in that she 'gave no great respect' to the significance of the penny – that 'if Wait's wife were indeed a Witch (as she was reputed) then ... the penny would be gone' from the place where it had been left.⁸² Of course, the penny had disappeared as predicted, at which Fairfax claims he and his wife were 'amazed'. A hypothesis is outlined in advance, an experiment is conducted, and the results point clearly to the outcome that the experimenter had least expected: the hypothesis is verified, and this really is a case of witchcraft. Exactly why the disappearance of the penny proves that a particular person – the owner of the penny – is guilty of a particular bewitchment is an issue that the author avoids. The important point, it seems, is that Fairfax decided *in advance* what would count as evidence, so the result cannot be said to be unfair or arbitrary.

Rhetorical scepticism was also used to pre-emptively answer possible objections that could be raised against an accusation. In a case of witchcraft tried at Bury St Edmunds, the prosecution claimed that Rose Cullender and Amy Duny had bewitched a number of children. The children displayed the classic signs of demonic possession, going into fits and coughing up pins. Margaret Arnold,

82 Fairfax, pp. 57–58.

aunt to two of the supposedly bewitched children, was called as a witness, and testified as follows:

This Deponent said, that she gave no credit to that which was related to her, conceiving possibly the Children might use some deceit in putting Pins in their mouths themselves. Wherefore this Deponent unpinned all their Cloathes, and left not so much as one Pin upon them, but sewed all the Clothes they wore, instead of pinning of them. But this Deponent saith, that notwithstanding all this care and circumspection of hers, the Children afterwards raised at several times at least Thirty Pins in her presence.⁸³

The most obvious sceptical counter-argument is anticipated and neutralised by this witness. The children cannot have been concealing pins in their mouths because all pins were removed from them. This trial took place in 1664, a time when there seem to have been very few convictions for witchcraft, at least on the Home Circuit, and cases of demonic possession always provoked greater scepticism than did 'ordinary' witchcraft cases. There are several recorded cases which were eventually exposed as fraudulent, many of them as a result of the involvement of James I.⁸⁴ The strength of the evidence required in this case was therefore high; the witnesses came prepared, and succeeded in securing the witches' execution.

Rhetorical scepticism seeks to demonstrate that a given accusation of witchcraft is not frivolous but has been carefully investigated. Typically the technique implies (as in the Stubbe Peeter pamphlet) or explicitly asserts (as in Fairfax's text) the existence of vital details which need to be checked, and can only then act as a guarantee of the veracity of the accusation. The fact that the stories are always difficult to believe – not just now but then too – is dealt with by focusing on particular details within the story. By stressing that witchcraft is a credible explanation if and only if certain evidential conditions are met, the authors of these accounts evade the larger and much more difficult problem of demonstrating that witchcraft is possible at all.

This reluctance to deal with the larger issues of the possibility, or otherwise, of witchcraft is especially evident in Henry Goodcole's pamphlet on Elizabeth Sawyer, the witch of Edmonton, a source for the play of the same name. Goodcole stresses his reluctance to

83 Anon., *A Tryal of Witches*, p. 25.

84 A detailed study of one such case is James Sharpe's *The Bewitching of Anne Gunter* (London: Profile, 1999).

write the pamphlet in the first place. He is so far from enthusiastically proclaiming the existence of witches that he refuses to take any general stance on witches and witchcraft, an issue which he acknowledges to be controversial. He complains that he has been pushed into writing against his will, and does so to get some peace from those who are demanding his version of events (who these people are, and why they want to know, is left tantalisingly vague). His reason for writing, he says, is to

defend the truth of the cause, which in some measure, hath receiued a wound already, by most base and false Ballets, which were sung at the time of our returning from the Witches execution. In them I was ashamed to see and heare such ridiculous fictions of her bewitching Corne on the ground, of a Ferret and an Owle dayly sporting before her, of the bewitched woman braying her selfe, of the Spirits attending in the Prison: all which I knew to be fitter for an Ale-bench then for a relation of proceeding in Court of Iustice.⁸⁵

The pamphlet, according to its author, sets out to defend the truth from the wild exaggerations of uninformed and uneducated people. In contrast to these people, Goodcole himself, as the title page of his pamphlet says, had access to Elizabeth Sawyer during her trial and imprisonment. Goodcole's pamphlet stresses his position of authority, by virtue of his privileged knowledge of the Sawyer case. (Goodcole even admits that he 'with great labour ... extorted'⁸⁶ a confession from her, *after* her conviction.) The pamphlet is carefully positioned in opposition to the kind of 'base' and scurrilous entertainment which threatens the dignity of the criminal justice system. Goodcole's attitude, then, is in some respects sceptical about witchcraft beliefs. But this scepticism bears further examination.

The stories told by the (sadly lost) ballads about Elizabeth Sawyer are a threat to the official version of events represented by the verdict of the court against Sawyer, not because they are sceptical but because they are credulous. How seriously the ballads were taken by the people who listened to them, and what spirit they were composed in, is now impossible to say. But it is clear from Goodcole's account that he at least does not consider them credible or helpful to his 'cause'. Goodcole has less fanciful criteria in mind

85 Henry Goodcole, *The Wonderfull Discouerie of Elizabeth Sawyer, a Witch* (London, 1621), sig. A3^v.

86 Goodcole, sig. B4^r.

about what constitutes evidence of Sawyer's witchcraft, and even provides a list:

- 1 Her face was most pale & ghoast-like without any bloud at all, and her countenance was still delected to the ground.
- 2 Her body was crooked and deformed, euen beinding together, which so happened but a little before her apprehension.
- 3 That tongue which by cursing, swearing, blaspheming, and imprecating, as afterward she confessed, was the occasioning cause, of the Divels accesse vnto her.⁸⁷

No mention is made in this list of the supposed circumstance that the devil appeared to Sawyer in the form of a large black dog. Goodcole presents a list of characteristics which are easily verifiable, setting the burden of proof for witchcraft extremely low. If this is all that is required to prove witchcraft, then witchcraft is easy to prove; the pamphlet claims that the factor which was most important in determining the jury's guilty verdict was Elizabeth Sawyer's 'swearing and cursing'.⁸⁸ This kind of behaviour is not difficult to believe at all, while stories about owls and ferrets 'sporting' are not, on the face of it, either plausible or serious. As Anthony Harris points out, the play is less coy than Goodcole about endorsing some of these 'ridiculous fictions',⁸⁹ and this is probably because it is designed to entertain. Entertainment presents a threat to Goodcole's serious, 'true' version of events, in part because of the risk that it might provoke laughter, and laughter might then provoke disbelief.

Goodcole mentions in his '[a]pologie to the Christian readers' that the ballads have already caused a 'wound' to the truth which he presents. This is not the only sign that sceptical attitudes towards the Sawyer case may have been widespread. Immediately before the dialogue in which Goodcole represents Sawyer's confession, he mentions his desire to 'stop all contradictions of so palpable a verity',⁹⁰ and appeals to the authority of the men who he claims witnessed Sawyer's confession. While the pamphlet is in one sense responding with scepticism to the ballads it mentions, genuinely sceptical denials of Sawyer's status as a witch – which pass largely unmentioned – are what Goodcole is really concerned about.

87 Goodcole, sigs A4^v–B1^r.

88 Goodcole, sig. B1^r.

89 Anthony Harris, *Night's Black Agents* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1980), p. 92.

90 Goodcole, sig. B4^r.

Specific parts of his account lend further weight to this suspicion, as when Goodcole claims to have asked Sawyer, ‘Did you ever handle the Divell when he came unto you?’ Goodcole explains in a marginal note that, ‘I asked of her this question because some might thinke this was a visible delusion of her sight only.’⁹¹ Fortunately for Goodcole, Sawyer’s answer confirms the tangible presence of the devil, which provides an answer to anyone who might otherwise have claimed that Sawyer’s confession was the product of delusion. For Goodcole to have asked the question because he himself was concerned that the devil’s appearance was a hallucination would have been understandable, but he ascribes this doubt not to himself but to ‘some’ people. Either Goodcole had the foresight to realise his actions would be questioned, or (as seems much more likely) he simply made up both question and answer after the event in order to strengthen his case. What really went on in Sawyer’s prison cell can never be known for certain, but the partiality and defensiveness of Goodcole’s account are undeniable.

By presenting themselves as having been gradually won over by compelling evidence, writers making use of rhetorical scepticism seek to provide compelling evidence for the reader as well. The pamphlet *Newes From Scotland* incorporates James VI’s (later James I) initial scepticism and eventual belief about witchcraft into its story of the interrogation of the North Berwick witches.⁹² Laura Kolb observes that ‘as a character in the story, the king himself offers a model for the reader’s response. He undergoes a passage from doubt to belief’.⁹³ A number of witchcraft treatises were written in the form of dialogues, including James’s own contribution, *Daemonologie*, and the earlier works of Nider, Molitor, Pico, and others. The dialogue form allows a similar transition from scepticism to belief, with the reader identifying with the sceptical voice that is gradually persuaded as the evidence and argument accumulates.⁹⁴ In their use of narrative, character development, and dialogue, witchcraft texts demonstrate that they are not (or not only) lies, but (also) fictions.

91 Goodcole, sig. D1^r.

92 See also the discussion of *Macbeth* in Chapter 3.

93 Laura Kolb, ‘Playing with Demons: Interrogating the Supernatural in Jacobean Drama’, *Forum for Modern Language Studies* 43:4 (2007), 337–50 (p. 342).

94 On the progression from scepticism to belief in *Daemonologie* see Kolb, 344–45; on the dialogue form in witchcraft theory generally and Pico in particular see Stephens, *Demon Lovers*, pp. 92–99.

Submerged scepticism

But what contempt, what dishonour, what more despicable villainy can one imagine than what witches suffer when they are forced to worship Satan in the guise of a stinking billy goat, and to kiss it on the part one does not dare write or frankly say? This would seem completely incredible to me if I had not read it in the confessions and convictions of innumerable witches.⁹⁵

While rhetorical scepticism is clearly a tool of persuasion, one of the most provocative claims made by Walter Stephens is the argument that writers on witchcraft wrote to conquer their own scepticism, as much as that of others. As Stephens puts it, ‘actual belief did not provoke the speculations of witchcraft theorists: belief is what they were *seeking*’.⁹⁶ Difficult though this claim might be to substantiate, it is one that must be taken seriously. While it may seem safer to take the claims of witchcraft theorists at face value – which is, in effect, to assume their sincerity – this is surely even more risky than trying to read between the lines in the case of documents that are so self-evidently inaccurate in their claims. It is worth noting, too, that all of the major early modern texts on witchcraft include arguments devoted to demonstrating that witches do, in fact, exist. The concern with proving the existence of witchcraft is maintained from the very start to the very end of the period in which witchcraft was a crime, suggesting that the degree of scepticism about the very possibility of witchcraft in early modern Europe was considerable, was never overcome, and may well be both understated and tacitly revealed by the surviving textual evidence.

The submerged scepticism that Stephens detects in some early Renaissance demonologists is displayed even more clearly in some of the later authors, perhaps most of all in the work of Jean Bodin. On the face of it, Bodin writes to overcome the scepticism of others, stating as much in the preface to his book *On the Demon-Mania of Witches* (1580).⁹⁷ But while Bodin acknowledges scepticism about witchcraft, the evidence for the existence of witchcraft is repeatedly described as overwhelming. Bodin calls sceptics ‘fools or madmen’ who ‘do not want to believe’.⁹⁸ Similarly, James I declares the existence of witches to be a ‘certainty’ proved by the ‘daily experience of the

95 Bodin, pp. 156–57.

96 Stephens, *Demon Lovers*, p. 179.

97 Bodin, p. 37.

98 Bodin, p. 38.

harmes that they do'.⁹⁹ The existence of scepticism about witchcraft is acknowledged (and its prevalence is deplored), but readers might be forgiven for wondering how scepticism can exist given the seeming confidence of authors like James and Bodin.

But while Bodin claims that the existence of witches is obvious and plainly proved by an abundance of evidence – by which he means stories that he has read or heard and confessions extracted under torture – it is impossible to miss a defensive quality to his arguments. St Augustine, according to Bodin, '[s]ays that one must not doubt in any way and that one would be very impudent to try to deny that demons and evil spirits have carnal relations with women'.¹⁰⁰ Bodin orders the reader not to doubt, but does not address the question of whether demonic copulation is actually possible. When assuring the reader of the existence of spirits, Bodin points out that 'to call it into doubt ... would be to deny the principles of all metaphysics, and the existence of God'.¹⁰¹ Again, Bodin does not say that calling the existence of spirits into doubt is mistaken. He states that he is not prepared to contemplate doing so because the intellectual and theological consequences, in his view, are too dire. His reference to the existence, or otherwise, of God is revealing, as this is precisely what is at stake in these debates.¹⁰² Bodin is writing to defend his belief in God, but this is also his ultimate argument for the reality of witchcraft. Witches' confessions are true even when they involve impossibilities, Bodin argues (against Johannes Weyer):

[W]hen one asserts that a confession to be believable must report something which is possible and true; and that it cannot be true unless it is possible; and nothing is possible in law except what is possible by nature: it is a sophistic and specious argument – and nevertheless its assumption is false. For the great works and marvels of God are impossible by nature, and nonetheless true.¹⁰³

The unstated logic is, of course, circular: God's existence is invoked in this passage in order to guarantee the existence of witches, and the existence of witches is primarily important because it proves the existence of God.

⁹⁹ James I, p. 31.

¹⁰⁰ Bodin, p. 41.

¹⁰¹ Bodin, p. 46.

¹⁰² See Stephens, *Demon Lovers*, esp. pp. 365–67.

¹⁰³ Bodin, p. 193.

Bodin is not alone in connecting witchcraft belief to religious faith. The anonymous author of the Harley manuscript does so even more explicitly when he refuses to accept that the devil cannot appear in physical form on the following grounds:

I wrytt not as confessing w[i]th y[ou] that he never appeareth to honest & credyble p[er]sons in some grosse or corporall forme. for yf I shuld confess yt I must denye & condemme as false & fabulous the hystories & testymonies of most credyble hystoryographers & wrytters yea the scriptures them sealves for I am of opynion that the dyvell appeared to Christ him sealfe in a corporall shape when he tempted him.¹⁰⁴

As with Bodin, this author rejects Scot's claims not because they are implausible but because their consequences are unacceptable.

That Bodin's arguments are advanced in order to counter his own doubts, as well as those of others, becomes evident on the occasions when he is no longer able to suppress his own scepticism. In describing common magical techniques, or rather refusing to describe them so as not to encourage their use, Bodin in passing calls these techniques 'inept and ridiculous'.¹⁰⁵ This brief, throwaway comment sits so uneasily with what the treatise is actually arguing for that it is difficult to understand why Bodin wrote it at all. On other occasions, too, Bodin gives his opponents ammunition. Commenting on one phenomenon widely attributed to witches, he writes that

There is no village peasant who does not know that by means of a verse from the Psalms, which I shall not write down, being pronounced while one churns butter, it becomes impossible to make any ... However, if one were to put a very small amount of sugar in it, it is quite confirmed by experience that the butter cannot coagulate.¹⁰⁶

Bodin's refusal to spread magical knowledge is rendered rather pointless by his claim that the trick is already known to every peasant, but even more serious for the credibility of his argument is that he offers an entirely naturalistic and non-magical explanation for the failure to churn butter in the same paragraph as his stories about village-level witchcraft. It is natural enough to find Reginald

104 MS Harley 2302, fols 61^v–62^r; cf. Scot, 1.6, p. 13, where the phrases 'honest and credible persons' and 'grosse and corporall forme' are also used.

105 Bodin, p. 92.

106 Bodin, p. 97, cf. Scot, 1.4, p. 11.

Scot making the point about sugar preventing butter from churning, but why does Bodin share this information? It is as if he wants both to believe and disbelieve at the same time – to believe, because of the theological imperative to do so, which he frequently stresses; and not to believe, because believing is not only difficult, as Bodin himself points out, but also rather foolish, as his comment about ‘inept and ridiculous’ magical techniques indicates. It is probably not coincidental that Bodin has often been seen as an exceptionally credulous witchcraft theorist, willing to believe even in genuine lycanthropy: his credulity – his need to believe – is in proportion to his own scepticism.

While theological concerns are often paramount, more human motivations also compel belief in witchcraft for some writers. Bodin, having had some personal involvement in a witchcraft trial, might have had reason to want to believe his own claim that burning people alive is not really cruel, but an act of mercy.¹⁰⁷ Edward Fairfax displays a similar anxiety even more clearly. He cannot disbelieve in witchcraft because it would be terrible if all the people executed for it had not been guilty. He condemns sceptics on the grounds that ‘I cannot without horror think with what ungracious impudency these impure mouths do condemn so zealous a King, so religious magistrates, and so Christian a state as ours is, to be guilty of so much innocent blood, as in these last 20 years hath been shed for this one offence.’¹⁰⁸ Fairfax’s inability to consider this prospect ‘without horror’ does not, of course, change the reality of the situation; but many people – past and present – have been unable to accept states of affairs which they consider to be ideologically unpalatable. Both Bodin and Fairfax suggest that certain thoughts, on certain topics, ought to be avoided altogether.

Another example of an author who appears to be struggling with his (or perhaps, though it seems unlikely, her) own disbelief can be seen in *The Wonderfull Discoverie of the Witch-crafts of Margaret and Philip Flower* (1619), a document that is fascinating mainly because of the anxious and inconsistent nature of its argument.¹⁰⁹ The anonymous author begins, in similar vein to Goodcole, by refusing to take a position on witchcraft, claiming it is unnecessary

107 Bodin, p. 173.

108 Fairfax, p. 26.

109 For another discussion of the pamphlet see Gibson, *Reading Witchcraft*, pp. 177–81.

because of the authority of scripture, the King, and ‘many worthy Writers’, all of which agree

that divers impious and facinorous mischefes haue bene effectuated through the instruments of the Deuill, by permission of God, so that the Actors of the same haue carried away the opinion of the world, to doe that which they did by Witch-craft; or at least to be esteemed Witches, for bringing such and such things to passe.¹¹⁰

This shambolic piece of prose is remarkable for its ambivalence and vagueness. At first, mischiefs are brought about by the instruments of the devil – a standard description of witches – and this seems quite clear. But the actual nature of these mischiefs is not specified. Not only that, but it seems uncertain whether actual witchcraft has been used – the author will only go so far as to say that this is so in ‘the opinion of the world’. Everybody else believes in witchcraft, it seems, but the author remains non-committal. Even this statement is qualified further when it is added that, even if the murky deeds the agents of the devil have committed are *not* brought about by witchcraft, the deeds themselves are sufficient grounds for those responsible to be ‘esteemed’ witches. The author of the pamphlet is much more to the point when expressing scepticism than when attempting to express belief. Wise men and women who offer magical services, such as the finding of lost or stolen items, are summarily dismissed as

meerely coseners and deceivers ... if they make you beleewe, that by their meanes you shall heare of things lost or stolne, it is either done by Confederacie, or put off by protraction, to deceive you of your money.¹¹¹

At this point the author sounds every bit as sceptical as Reginald Scot. While wise women and men were often regarded as distinct from witches, the contrast between the direct statement above and the tortuous formulations which preceded it betrays a good deal of scepticism about maleficent witchcraft as well.

The author also resembles Scot – and Johannes Weyer – in describing witches as ‘men and women grown in yeeres, and over-growne with melancholie and Atheism’. But while Scot and Weyer regard this as a reason to spare witches from execution, the author

110 Anon., *The Wonderfull Discoverie of the Witch-crafts of Margaret and Philip Flower* (London, 1619), sig. B1^r.

111 *The Wonderfull Discoverie*, sig. B1^v.

of this pamphlet does not consider melancholy and delusion to imply innocence. Instead, the sceptical argument is appropriated and turned on its head: melancholy is what draws witches into the study of ‘mischiefe and exoticicke practises of loathsome Arts and Sciences’. Whether their studies actually provide them with any magical powers, again, is not entirely clear. On the one hand, the author speaks sceptically of witches ‘making you beleewe with *Medea*, that they can raise tempests’.¹¹² At the same time, however, ‘we know too well, what monstrous effects haue beene produced ... by such kinde of people’.¹¹³ As always, the author declines to specify what it is that we already know so well, and is similarly non-committal about the promises made by the devil to his servants, which may or may not be deceptions. In the end, the author concludes uneasily, it does not actually matter whether witches have any power or not. The pamphlet lists ten lessons to be drawn from the case, and the tenth and final lesson is that

private opinion cannot preuaile against publike censures ... Therefore though it were so, that neither Witch nor Devill could doe these things, yet Let not a Witch lue, saith God, and Let them dye (saith the law of England).¹¹⁴

The pamphlet bears clear traces of the author’s doubts about the statements made in it. The question ‘what is a witch?’ – never asked or answered – nevertheless haunts the text. In the end, the answer implicit in the pamphlet is that a witch is simply a person who is considered to be a witch, because that is the only definition of a witch that all readers – and, it would seem, the author – can take seriously. The difficulty in taking witchcraft seriously is also evident in the earliest English plays to feature witches as characters, which are discussed in the following section.

Protestant scepticism and the origins of witchcraft drama

[T]he witchmongers ... publish so palpable absurdities concerning such reall actions betwixt the diuell and man, as a wise man would be ashamed to read, but much more to credit: as that S. Dunstan lead the diuell about the house by the nose with a paire of pinsors or tongs, and made him rore so lowd, as the place roong thereof,

112 *The Wonderfull Discoverie*, sig. B1^v.

113 *The Wonderfull Discoverie*, sig. B2^r.

114 *The Wonderfull Discoverie*, sig. D3^r.

&c: with a thousand the like fables, without which neither the art of poperie nor of witchcraft could stand.¹¹⁵

The development of the professional theatre in sixteenth-century England was, like much else at the time, marked by the Protestant Reformation. Witchcraft first appeared in the theatre in connection with Catholicism, and this link remained intact throughout the period covered in this study, both inside and outside the theatre. The relationship between Catholicism and witchcraft is discussed by virtually all English writers of longer works on witchcraft, and in several pamphlets as well. The connection is made irrespective of the author's substantive position on witchcraft, and anti-Catholic rhetoric is a common feature of several texts on the subject.

Protestant zeal in early modern England, so-called 'puritanism', has traditionally been regarded as hostile to the theatre as well as to Catholicism. While this picture has been vigorously challenged, notably by Margot Heinemann and Paul Whitfield White,¹¹⁶ it remains undeniable that many reform-minded clergymen, together with the City authorities, attacked the institution of the Elizabethan commercial theatre in no uncertain terms. Earlier in the sixteenth century, however, before the advent of permanent purpose-built theatres, things were quite different. Protestant reformers in the reign of Henry VIII, for instance, urged the King to use theatrical performance as a means of attacking the Catholic Church and establishing the authority of the Crown over church matters more firmly. Sir Richard Morrison wrote to the King in around 1535, pointing out that

In summer, commonly upon the Holy Days in most places of your Realm, there be plays of Robin Hood, Maid Marion, Friar Tuck ... How much better is it that those plays should be forbidden and deleted and others devised to set forth and declare lively before the people's eyes the abomination and wickedness of the Bishop of Rome, monks, friars, nuns and such like, and to declare and open to them the obedience that your subjects, by God's and man's laws, owe unto your Majesty.¹¹⁷

115 Scot, v.8, p. 108.

116 Margot Heinemann, *Puritanism and Theatre: Thomas Middleton and Opposition Drama under the Early Stuarts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980); Paul Whitfield White, *Theatre and Reformation: Protestantism, Patronage and Playing in Tudor England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

117 Quoted in Glynne Wickham, Herbert Berry and William Ingram, *English Professional Theatre, 1530–1660* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 20.

Morrison attacks secular plays on frivolous subjects; but the medieval cycle plays, originally designed as Church propaganda, were the real competition for Protestant reformers. According to Peter Happé, these plays were ‘at their most vigorous’ during the early sixteenth century, perhaps precisely because the old faith was felt to be under threat at this time.¹¹⁸ Soon after Morrison’s letter was written, the former Carmelite friar John Bale began writing his plays, as a dramatic response to, and a Protestant version of, the mystery and morality plays.¹¹⁹ The enthusiasm with which the reformers embraced the theatre, at least in the first half of the sixteenth century, is suggested by the fact that so many extant plays from this period are written from an obviously Protestant perspective.

A major part of the Protestant attack on Catholic ‘abomination and wickedness’ was an attack on magic. Keith Thomas points out that the difference between religion and magic was both ‘blurred by the medieval Church’ and ‘strongly reasserted by the propagandists of the Protestant Reformation’.¹²⁰ More recently, Eamon Duffy has argued that Thomas, if anything, understated the close relationship between Catholic ritual and magical ceremony. Magic, rather than being a popular corruption of Church practices or a survival of pre-Christian beliefs, is described by Duffy as a natural extension of the teachings of the Church. Discussing the use of charms against thunder and storms, for example, he argues that

the rhetoric and rationale at work in such incantations cannot sensibly be called pagan. Instead, they represent the appropriation and adaptation to lay needs and anxieties of a range of sacred gestures and prayers, along lines essentially faithful to the pattern established within the liturgy itself. This is not paganism, but lay Christianity.¹²¹

Duffy emphasises the centrality of magic – the achievement of supernatural effects in the physical world through ritual – to Catholic teaching and practice in the late medieval period. It is this centrality which allowed Protestant polemicists to caricature

118 Peter Happé, *English Drama Before Shakespeare* (London: Longman, 1999), p. 93.

119 Happé, p. 125.

120 Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1991, first published in 1971), p. 58.

121 Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), p. 283.

the old faith as witchcraft, regardless of their attitude towards magic – Reginald Scot, for example, condemns the practice of exorcism on the grounds that it is a ‘conjunction’, appealing to the very hostility to magic that he seeks, in the case of witchcraft, to mitigate.¹²² The association of Catholicism and witchcraft can only have been strengthened by the fact that Catholic authors admitted that a variety of religious props were used by witches for magical purposes. Bodin, for example, writes that ‘the invocation of devils (which the most despicable witches do now) is full of prayers, fastings, crosses and consecrated hosts which witches use in this’.¹²³ These associations are exploited by the earliest witchcraft plays in England.

Perhaps the earliest English play to feature a witch is Bale’s *Three Laws* (1538?), an allegorical anti-Catholic polemic which shows the three laws ordained by God – the laws of nature (*Naturae Lex*), Moses (*Moseh Lex*), and Christ (*Christi Lex*) – corrupted by various personified vices acting under the direction of *Infidelitas*. The Catholic Church, according to the logic of the play, has corrupted the law of Christ by hypocrisy (*Hypocrisis*) and false doctrine (*Pseudodoc-trina*), while the laws of Moses – which within the play represent the laws of secular authority – have been corrupted by avarice (*Avaricia*) and ambition (*Ambitio*). Even the law of nature – in some ways the most fundamental of the three laws, as it has been humanity’s only guide from the fall of Adam until the time of Moses – has been corrupted by idolatry (*Idolatria*) and sodomy (*Sodomismus*). *Idolatria* appears on stage in the form of a witch.

Decades before legally sanctioned witchcraft persecution had begun, almost all the characteristics of a witch that would be recorded by later writers like Reginald Scot are already present in *Idolatria*. She is able to interfere with the brewing of beer, she can find lost goods or buried treasure, she can cure various ailments, tell fortunes and even ‘fatche the devyll from hell’.¹²⁴ There is a hint, too, that these activities are becoming increasingly associated with women rather than men: *Idolatria* is said to have been a man once, but is

122 Scot, xv.28, p. 446. Calvin himself compares the Catholic mass to ‘a magic incantation’: *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, edited by John T. McNeil, translated by Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), iv.14, p. 1279.

123 Bodin, p. 66.

124 John Bale, ‘Three Laws’, in *The Complete Plays of John Bale*, edited by Peter Happé (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1986), l. 416. Subsequent references, in parentheses, are to this edition.

now female (425–26); she is also described as being ‘sumwhat olde’ (477). Finally, she demonstrates her specifically Catholic piety in a lengthy speech listing her magical practices, which involve the use of both saints’ relics and more profane ingredients, establishing a link between witchcraft and Catholicism that would later be repeated by Scot, who identified both those accused of witchcraft and those who persecuted witches as papists. *Infidelitas*, too, connects Catholic liturgy to illicit magic, saying to *Naturae Lex*: ‘I wolde have brought ye the paxe, / Or els an ymage of waxe, / If I had knowne ye heare’ (184–86). *Infidelitas*’s speech treats the pax – a tablet to be kissed during Mass – as interchangeable with the kind of wax effigy that was used in image magic.

Idolatria’s identification with witchcraft is not fortuitous. The sin of idolatry is forbidden by the first commandment:

Thou shalt have no other gods before me. Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them.¹²⁵

The reference in the first commandment to ‘other gods’ required interpretation in an early modern Europe that only recognised the existence of one god. Stuart Clark has shown that the sin of idolatry was frequently linked to the practice of witchcraft.¹²⁶ The practice of magic could be interpreted as a form of idolatry because it appealed to spiritual forces other than God. Worse still, these ‘other gods’ could only be evil spirits in the service of the devil.

While many theologians, both Catholic and Protestant, would have accepted the characterisation of witchcraft as a form of idolatry, Bale’s play uses witchcraft or idolatry as a stick with which to beat the papists. *Idolatria*’s lengthy list of ingredients and magical charms identifies witchcraft with Catholic ritual by specifying which saints provide remedies for various ailments. As *Infidelitas* comments,

It is a spoart I trowe
To heare how she out blowe
Her witche craftes on a rowe;
By the Masse I must nedes smyle. (547–50)

Both the anti-Catholicism and the long list of magical ingredients and spells are recurring elements of witchcraft drama, still appearing

125 Exodus 20:3–5.

126 Clark, pp. 489–93.

in the late seventeenth century. Even more fundamental to the theatrical representation of witchcraft is the entertainment value to which Infidelitas refers. Witches on stage seem to have generated smiles, and perhaps laughter too, from the very start. The Tudor interlude *Thersites* (c.1562?) contains a similar scene which is even more obviously comical. The eponymous character's mother, a witch, recites a long and absurd list of charms in the course of an attempt to cure Ulysses' son Telemachus of worms.¹²⁷

It has been suggested that laughter at the absurdity of witchcraft undermines belief in it more powerfully than any logical argument. But Bale presents moments that might induce scepticism closely juxtaposed with a more serious treatment of witchcraft. *Three Laws* refers to one of the earliest examples of a papal witch, Sylvester II:

Sylvester the Seconde to the devyll hymself ones gave
 For that hygh offyce that he myght dampne and save.
 He offered also hys stones to Sathan they saye
 For prestes chastyte, and so went their marryage awaye. (1603–06)

Bale is presumably not joking in the first two lines about Sylvester II's pact with the devil. Sylvester, the scholar-pope whose achievements included reintroducing the abacus, the rediscovery of Aristotle and perhaps also the introduction of Arabic numerals into Europe, was for his pains depicted after his death as having sold his soul to the devil in return for forbidden knowledge, making him one of the earliest models for the Faust myth.¹²⁸ Like many other Protestant polemicists, Bale seizes on this centuries-old propaganda in order to attack Catholicism. But he follows this serious point with a crude joke; this pattern of serious theological and political discourse being suddenly deflated by bawdy humour is another enduring feature of witchcraft plays.

One reason for this combination of humour and gravity is that the anti-Catholicism of the play requires it. The status of Catholic magic is, in *Three Laws*, quite uncertain. Idolatria's charms are

127 'Thersites', in Marie Axton (ed.), *Three Tudor Classical Interludes* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1982), ll. 697–754.

128 A concise account of Sylvester's life and later reputation can be found in E. R. Truitt, 'Celestial Divination and Arabic Science in Twelfth-Century England: The History of Gerbert of Aurillac's Talking Head', *Journal of the History of Ideas* 73:2 (April 2012), 201–22. The fabled talking head apparently inspired the prop used in Robert Greene's plays *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay* and *Alphonsus King of Aragon* (see Chapter 3).

ridiculous; even Infidelitas has to smile at them. Nonetheless, they do constitute witchcraft, and the possibility of giving oneself to the devil seems entirely real in the play. The kind of Catholic witchcraft represented by *Idolatria* must be both dismissed *and* taken seriously. Catholic magic must be shown to be no more than cheap trickery, so that the claims made for it can be contradicted. At the same time, it must present a genuine threat to true religion, since if it were harmless there would be no need to oppose it. Both scepticism towards and belief in witchcraft are therefore required of the audience. The tricky question of whether *Idolatria*'s magic actually works is avoided altogether.

The most interesting play to touch on witchcraft prior to the professional Elizabethan theatre is *Gammer Gurton's Needle* (c.1550–53?), written by an author identified only as Mr. S.¹²⁹ The play – whose plot turns on a lost needle – does not contain any witchcraft, but it is packed with witchcraft belief, mainly in the person of Hodge, Gammer Gurton's servant, who is desperate to find the needle in order to repair a hole in the seat of his trousers (which, some of his lines imply, would have been displayed to the audience in performance on several occasions). Many of Hodge's statements about his beliefs and perceptions anticipate later texts on witchcraft, suggesting highly specific beliefs about what counted as evidence of bewitchment, or at least of the supernatural, that date back before the re-criminalisation of witchcraft in 1563. For example, Hodge is amazed to witness an event that may seem less than magical to modern readers:

ich saw such a wonder as ich saw not this seven year:
 Tom Tankard's cow, by Gog's bones, she set me up her sail,
 And flinging about his half-acre fising with her tail
 As though there had been in her arse a swarm of bees – (I.2.30–33)

Hodge is, within the play, a ridiculous character, and it seems likely that the well-educated original audience of the play¹³⁰ would have regarded him as foolish for thinking that an unusually lively cow

129 The most likely author is William Stevenson, but cases have been made for John Bridges and John Still; see Charles Whitworth's introduction to *Gammer Gurton's Needle* by Mr. S, edited by Charles Whitworth (London: A. & C. Black, 1997), p. xiii–xv. References, given in parentheses, are to this edition.

130 Assuming the quarto's title page can be trusted, the play was acted 'in Christes Colledge in Cambridge'.

was a ‘wonder’. Nevertheless, similar testimony would later come up in one of the most infamous early trials. In the 1582 trial of witches as St Osyth in Essex, Elizabeth Ewstace was accused of making hogs ‘skippe and leape aboute the yarde in a straunge sorte’.¹³¹

The credulous Hodge almost becomes a witch himself at one stage, when he swears to serve the trickster Diccon and seals the bargain by placing his hand on Diccon’s buttock and kissing his ‘breech’. The play’s editor considers this to be a ‘[c]oarse parody of a solemn oath taken on a cross’ (II.1.68–76 SD and note), and it can be read as such; but as Bruce Boehrer points out, it also resembles the oaths of allegiance sworn by witches to the devil, which often featured buttock-kissing in European sources.¹³² In the conjuring scene that follows, Diccon insists that Hodge remain inside a magical circle for protection from the devil, who Diccon proposes to summon in order to find the needle.¹³³ In his fear, Hodge loses control of his bowels, and when Diccon comments that he can smell the devil coming, Hodge flees. This is medieval jest-book treatment of the diabolical, and in that sense follows established tradition. Importantly, however, the devil is not really present in this scene.

The obscene oath taken by Hodge is one aspect of a wider concern with oaths and swearing within the play, a concern which is linked to the play’s anti-Catholic stance. Throughout the play, a variety of the characters swear various colourful oaths: Dame Chat swears by several saints (II.2.33–34), and Hodge and Diccon repeatedly swear by ‘Gog’s soul’ or ‘Gog’s bones’. The unsympathetic and aptly named curate Dr Rat, a representative of the Catholic Church of whom the play is obviously critical, is most telling when he refuses to believe Dame Chat because she has not sworn an oath: ‘Only upon a bare “nay” she saith it was not I’ (v.2.39). Gammer Gurton, similarly, seems to think a bare assertion is not enough, saying of Dame Chat ‘Ye know she could do little and she could

131 W. W., *A True and Just Recorde, of the Information, Examination and Confession of all the Witches, taken at S. Oses in the countie of Essex* (London, 1582), sig. C7^r.

132 Bruce Boehrer, ‘Gammer Gurton’s Cat of Sorrows’, *English Literary Renaissance* 39:2 (March 2009), 267–89 (p. 270). See also Clark, p. 14.

133 This incident seems to be modelled on the story of Henry of Falkenstein; see Russell, pp. 89–90.

not say nay!' (v.2.161). The insistence on the swearing of an oath is similar to Diccon's, and perhaps similarly mock-diaboli-cal; it is certainly in conflict with the scriptural authority so important to early modern Protestants.¹³⁴

Despite – or because of – his continual swearing of oaths, Hodge is evidently untrustworthy. In the following act, Hodge's story about the summoning of the devil is embroidered considerably. Discussing Diccon, Hodge tells Gammer Gurton that

HODGE	By the mass, ich saw him of late call up a great black devil! 'O! the knave cried, 'Ho, ho!' He roared and he thundered! And ye 'ad been here, cham sure you'd murrainly ha' wondered.
GAMMER GURTON	Was not thou afraid, Hodge, to see him in this place?
HODGE	No, and he 'ad come to me, chwould have laid him on the face. (III.2.12–16)

Whether Hodge is understood to be lying or merely allowing his imagination to run away with him, the audience can be sure that his claims are inaccurate since they have already witnessed the incident. The idea that Hodge might successfully defeat the devil in a physical fight also appears ridiculous, and not just because Hodge is a clown. One writer on witchcraft, Richard Galis, later wrote that he had attacked the devil with a sword, but this was an unusual claim to make. The idea of physical confrontation with the devil was regarded with great scepticism by Scot, who as noted mocked the idea of St Dunstan taking the devil by the nose.¹³⁵

134 See, for example, Matthew 5:37: 'But let your communication be, Yea, yea; Nay, nay: for whatsoever is more than these cometh of evil.' Protestant authors tend to recommend great caution in the swearing of oaths; see, for example, William Perkins, *A Direction for the Government of the Tongue According to God's Word* (Cambridge, 1603), pp. 84–87.

135 Scot, v.8, p. 108; Richard Galis, *A brief treatise containing the most strange and horrible cruelty of Elizabeth Stile alias Rockingham* (London, 1579), sig. C4^r. Scot comments of Galis that 'if you will see more follie and lewdnes comprised in one lewd booke, I commend you to Ri. Ga. a Windsor man; who being a mad man hath written according to his frantike humor' (I.8, p. 17).

One of the most revealing features of the play, in relation to the attitudes towards witchcraft which inform it, is the way in which the characters use the word 'witch'. Gammer Gurton is repeatedly called a witch by her rival Dame Chat, but the term is used simply as an insult rather than as an accusation of any supernatural crime. Nobody ever takes up Dame Chat's suggestion, or accuses Gammer Gurton of using magic, nor does anybody (including Gurton herself) feel that it is necessary to defend her against this accusation. The word 'witch' seems, in the absence of any law against witchcraft, to be no more significant than the word 'whore', which Gurton regularly throws back at Dame Chat.

Nonetheless, it is not clear that Dame Chat is wrong: there is something of the witch about Gammer Gurton, not least because of the intriguing presence of her cat, Gib. Although not a speaking part, Gib is a significant presence in the play, and there are intimations that there might be more to the cat than meets the eye. At line 1.4.28, Gib is counted as one of the people present in the house. Hodge, fearing that the house is haunted by a 'felon sprite' (1.3.3), sees the cat's eyes and reaches the conclusion that the fire is bewitched, eventually chasing Gib up the stairs (1.5.14–27). References to Gib's specialness continue throughout the play. Believing the needle to be in Gib's throat – as if the cat were itself demonically possessed – Hodge claims that 'ich know there's not within this land / A murrainer cat than Gib is, betwixt the Thames and Tyne; / Sh'as as much wit in her head almost as chawe in mine!' (III.4.6–8). Of course, this line pays ironic tribute to Hodge's intelligence more than Gib's, but Hodge is not the only character to mention Gib with respect. At the end of the play, Diccon is sworn by Master Bayly to be 'of good abearing' to Gib, Gammer Gurton's 'great cat' (v.2.283).

Gammer Gurton's Needle does not deny the existence of witches; in fact, it seems to feature a 'witch' – that is, a person understood by her community to be a witch – as a character. But the play does present a highly sceptical attitude towards magic in general and towards oath-swearing Catholic 'magic' in particular. It is also remarkable for its charitable attitude towards the eponymous witch. Gammer Gurton is an absurd, and not particularly commendable, character, but at the same time she is certainly not unlikeable or threatening, let alone evil. Even her accuser, Dame Chat, does not seem to regard her supposed status as a witch as very blameworthy, even if the word can serve as an insult which conveniently rhymes with 'bitch'. The play, which probably dates from the 1550s, suggests what the attitudes of the educated gentry towards witchcraft might

have been in the absence of laws making it a criminal offence. But it is also another example of a play which associates a witch, or witch-like character, with superstition, ignorance, and Catholicism.

Protestant debunking of implicitly or explicitly Catholic ‘witchcraft’ further complicates an evidently ambiguous attitude towards witchcraft and the possibility of supernatural events. The widespread Protestant conviction that miracles had ceased, or at least were not to be expected,¹³⁶ would seem to leave little room for the supernatural in early modern life, and it appears to have been important to the early reformers to demonstrate that miracles, which seemed to legitimate the teaching of the Catholic Church, were in fact no more than trickery. Under the iconoclastic Protestant regime of Edward VI’s protector, Somerset, the Spanish ambassador van der Delft wrote as follows to Emperor Charles V:

Many persons who still persevere in the holy ancient faith murmur greatly at the casting down of the images from the altars, and consequently a sermon was preached in the cathedral by a bishop, who explained to the people the reasons for the abolition of the images: and in order the better to persuade them he produced and exhibited to them publicly certain artificial figures which moved their heads, arms and legs, these figures having formerly been visited and venerated as miraculous.¹³⁷

The exposure of what had been thought to be supernatural as trickery is a strand in Protestant thought which has obvious resonance with

136 D. P. Walker, ‘The Cessation of Miracles’, in *Hermeticism and the Renaissance*, edited by Ingrid Merkel and Allen G. Debus (Washington: Folger Books, 1988), pp. 111–24 (p. 111). However, Keith Thomas points out that the idea that miracles had ceased ‘took some time to establish itself’ (p. 147). The author of the manuscript referred to above writes that ‘for trew and godly myracles ... although we are not now to requyre or looke for any for the conyfirmation of o[u]r faythe bicause the myracles already done and mencyned in ye scriptures are suffycient yeat ys ther nothings yt I knowe in dyvynytye to p[er]swade vs that God hathe so vterly determynd to cease fro[m] all suche myracles yt he will never shewe any after Christs tyme & the tyme of his Apostles for yf we wyll not dyscredyt the hystories of all tymes & ages we can not ... deny but yt God hathe shewed some Myracles in all ages’ (MS Harley 2302, fols 67^v–68^r).

137 CSP Spain, ix (5 December 1547). www.british-history.ac.uk/cal-state-papers/spain/vol9/pp218-236 (accessed 11 June 2015). On van der Delft’s and other contemporary assessments of the impact of the Edwardian Reformation see Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Tudor Church Militant* (London: Penguin, 1999), pp. 107–9.

the sceptical witchcraft writings of, for example, Reginald Scot. This attitude towards Catholic miracles has a protracted literary afterlife. Long after the Renaissance, Matthew Lewis's lurid Gothic novel *The Monk* (1796) features a statue of St Clare in the vault of a convent, a statue which is believed by the nuns to have miraculous powers. Dashing, aristocratic Lorenzo, the Spanish but crypto-Protestant hero of the novel, reveals the nuns' belief to be mere superstition:

the Saint underwent a thorough examination. The Image at first appeared to be of Stone, but proved on further inspection to be formed of no more solid materials than coloured Wood. He shook it, and attempted to move it; But it appeared to be of a piece with the Base which it stood upon. He examined it over and over ... and discovered a small knob of iron ... This observation delighted him. He applied his fingers to the knob, and pressed it down forcibly. Immediately a rumbling noise was heard within the Statue, as if a chain tightly stretched was flying back.¹³⁸

It transpires that Lorenzo has discovered a sensational, but not supernatural, secret passage, at the other end of which is his sister, who has been imprisoned by the Prioress. The ability of Protestants to cut through the darkness of papist trickery and superstition with the clear light of God-given sceptical reason was an important cultural trope which continued well into the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Seen in this light, Reginald Scot, who has often been seen as a radical figure within the debate on witchcraft, is actually quite orthodox.¹³⁹ While his view of the nature of spirit is certainly unusual, his anti-Catholic rhetoric and his dedication to the exposure of superstition and trickery are reassuringly mainstream. As has often been pointed out, Samuel Harsnett – certainly an orthodox figure, since he eventually rose to become Archbishop of York – produced arguments influenced by Scot in his dispute with John Darrel.¹⁴⁰ It has also been shown that Calvin himself, in his role as the leading

138 Matthew Lewis, *The Monk* (London: Bibliolis, 2010), p. 263.

139 The view of Scot as unorthodox has recently been called into question, however: see Glyn Parry, *The Arch-Conjuror of England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011) pp. 207–08; Elmer, *Witchcraft, Witch-Hunting, and Politics*, pp. 18–24; and Pierre Kapitaniak, 'Reginald Scot and the Circles of Power: Witchcraft, Anti-Catholicism and Faction Politics', in Marcus Harnes and Victoria Bladen (eds), *Supernatural and Secular Power in Early Modern England* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015).

140 Davies, p. 387.

member of the Genevan Consistory, seems to have displayed considerable scepticism towards accusations of witchcraft.¹⁴¹

However, while the Protestant Reformation in England had a strongly sceptical strand to it, it is also associated with greater emphasis being placed on the role of the devil. The devil had been a less important feature of medieval religion; in fact, the medieval mystic Julian of Norwich, encountering the devil in a dream, laughed contemptuously at his weakness.¹⁴² Medieval jestbooks and plays often treated the devil as a buffoonish character, easily tricked or even defeated in physical combat by a human being. The Reformation saw the devil adopt a more central role in Christian thought – not least because Catholic and Protestant polemicists kept accusing each other of serving him.¹⁴³ In England, the devil's role as a tempter became increasingly prominent, and the danger that he posed became more pervasive because he was able to win men and women to him by exploiting everyday means, especially the temptations of the flesh. These developments in attitudes towards the devil came to form part of a characteristically Protestant conception of evil.¹⁴⁴

Witches, according to the theorists who described them, were servants of the devil, a kind of anti-Christian fifth column who had made their pact with Satan and, in doing so, broken with Christ and with God. It was intellectually tenable to hold both that witches themselves were powerless – that genuinely supernatural magic was impossible – and that witches were servants of the devil capable of causing great harm indirectly by virtue of their relationship with their master. The devil sought to win the souls of witches by carrying out, or appearing to carry out, their sinful commands, thereby binding them to him all the more securely. Once again, scepticism and credulity about witchcraft turn out to be much more compatible than they might at first seem.

141 Jeffrey R. Watt, 'Calvin's Geneva Confronts Magic and Witchcraft: The Evidence from the Consistory', *Journal of Early Modern History* 17 (2013), 215–44. The Consistory was a 'quasi-tribunal' responsible for 'the enforcement of Reformed morality' in Geneva (p. 215).

142 Darren Oldridge, *The Devil in Tudor and Stuart England* (Stroud: The History Press, 2010), p. 37. However, Russell points out that the devil, while becoming less important to theologians in the late medieval period, simultaneously became more important in popular culture and art (p. 161).

143 Oldridge, p. 20.

144 Nathan Johnstone, *The Devil and Demonism in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 19. See also Chapter 4 of the present book.