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*Changing Magic:
Evolving Conceptions of Witchcraft in Essex County*

by

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In 1579, a court in Essex, England arraigned thirteen-year-old Thomas Lever for acting as an assistant to William Randall, a conjurer suspected of leading a group of male witches. The court claimed young Thomas “mixed potions and was familiar with all [of Randall’s] workings.”¹ Yet for Raphael Holinshed, the commentator on the trial, the case was unique only in the age of the defendant. Holinshed gives a stark example of a common view of the witch trials by noting “That her Majesty is sore oppressed by these witches and devil-mongers is now common knowledge, but that a child should be in such company is a singular and amazing thing.”² By analyzing Holinshed’s commentary on the trial, rather than age or gender of the defendant, historians can discover the nuances of witchcraft belief. He both affirms a common belief in witchcraft, its prevalence and its danger, and expresses skepticism about a particular defendant. Witch trials contained elements of both common belief and individual detail and history.

By the end of the seventeenth century, communities across Europe had executed sixty thousand people as witches or practitioners of magic.³ Although demonologies such as *Malleus Maleficarum* were translated and spread rapidly throughout Europe, prosecutions of accused witches occurred entirely at the local level and were connected to local culture, politics, and social tensions. Research about the witch hunt has changed radically from the 1960s, when scholars described it either as the church’s effort to root out heresy or, according to Margaret

¹ Raphael Holinshed, *The Witchcraft Apprentice* (1579), in *The Witchcraft Papers: Contemporary Records of the Witchcraft Hysteria in Essex 1560-1700*, compiled and edited by Peter Haining (Secaucus, NJ: University Books, Inc., 1974), 37.

² Holinshed, *Witchcraft Apprentice*, 38.

³ Michael D. Bailey, "From Sorcery to Witchcraft: Clerical Conceptions of Magic in the Later Middle Ages," *Speculum* 76, no. 4 (October 2001): 960, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2903617> (accessed March 21, 2009).

Murray, as a final attempt by Christian authorities to eradicate a pagan fertility cult.⁴ Most significantly, historians still regarded the belief in witchcraft and magic as irrational and did not consider how witchcraft belief could have been part of a larger worldview.

Contemporary scholars no longer accept these theories as valid explanations for the witch hunt and view magic as a part of the intellectual landscape for people of the early modern era.⁵ Much of the post-1960s research on witchcraft has focused on the accused witches themselves, their similarities, and frequently on the role of misogyny in the accusation of women as witches. While historians agree that gender was not the only part of the witch trials, the exact role of gender and sexuality in the witch trials has been a well-covered part of the scholarship.⁶ Publications about the trials expose other elements of accusation, confession, and belief in communities. Recent research uses micro-history of witch trials in specific towns and regions to understand exactly how the witch hunt operated and how it related to emerging religious dissension.

This emphasis on local communities has led a number of scholars to focus on the annals of the county of Essex in England, a community with numerous witch trials from 1560 to 1700. Historians often separate the study of English witch trials from their continental European counterparts because of the differences in England's legal treatment of witches as well as the less sexualized nature of its witch trials. Early analysis of the Essex witch trials focused on Matthew Hopkins, a witch hunter in the Eastern English countryside during the mid-seventeenth century. For some historians, Hopkins became either a cause of the later Essex witch trials or a

⁴ H.C. Erik Midelfort, "Witchcraft," in *Reformation and Early Modern Europe: A Guide to Research*, edited by David M. Whitford (Kirksville, MO: Truman State University Press, 2008), 357.

⁵ Midelfort, "Witchcraft," 359.

⁶ Midelfort, "Witchcraft," 356.

embodiment of them. In his 1968 book about the English witch trials, Wallace Notestein comments, “the Hopkins crusade was one of the expressions of the intolerant zeal of the Presbyterian party during its control of Parliament.” Hopkins, Notestein argues, reflects how the tensions of the English Civil War manifested in Essex or how religious “belief grew terribly literal under the tension of war.”⁷

While Hopkins’ role in a handful of mid-seventeenth century cases provides an interesting case study of an individual’s involvement in witchcraft proceedings, his activities were too insignificant to cause the witch trials in the years surrounding the English Civil War. His accusations were always part of many other accusations by neighbors and confessions by the accused in a witch trial. At most, Hopkins exploited support for an existing system of accusing and trying witches in Essex. Moreover, the chronological scope of witch trials in the Essex community disproves the theory that the English Civil War created the communal tensions at the base of the Essex trials during the mid-seventeenth century since witch trials in Essex began almost eighty years before the English Civil War and did not abate after its conclusion. Witch trials in Essex, while possibly affected by the Civil War, were not the result of political tensions that lasted less than a decade. Hopkins and the chaos of the Civil War continue to interest scholars but have been discredited as significant players in the emergence of the Essex trials.

More recently, researchers located the cause of the witch trials in Essex and other eastern English counties in unease over the shifts in communal identity in the early modern period. Historians in the late 1970s and early 1980s studied the Essex community because of its reputation for witch trials and large amount of surviving records, but historian Alan McFarlane summarized and expanded much of this research. In 1992, McFarlane argued “that the emotion

⁷ Wallace Notestein, *A History of Witchcraft in England: From 1558 to 1718* (New York: Thomas Y. Cromwell Company, 1968), 195-98.

that lay behind witchcraft accusations arose largely from discord within individuals, within people who felt the old communal values.”⁸ In McFarlane’s understanding, the witch trials in Essex and in England more generally gave the community an acceptable means to cope with uncertainty and anxiety. Likewise Anne Reiber DeWindt cites the changing demography of English villages, particularly the rise of the number of gentry in the sixteenth and seventeenth century, as stresses on communal life.⁹ DeWindt claims that the fears “that coalesced around the witch were one response to the tension between the need for the comforts of community and the imperfect nature of the real experience of community.”¹⁰ McFarlane and DeWindt reflect the more recent incorporation of an understanding of the community into analysis of the witch hunt and the portrayal of the trials as local rather than as a national or international dilemmas.

This analytical paradigm, popular from the 1990s onward, does address some of the problems inherent in previous analysis of the witch trials. By studying witch trials within the community in which they occurred rather than more broadly, researchers can understand the nuances of the community and place the witch accusations and trials in a richer context. This shift allows more detail about the trials to emerge and shape analysis and corrects an earlier pattern of assuming various facts about the accused or the community, such as a certain profile for the accused witch or a specific religious nature of the community. Moreover, this approach permits more fruitful comparison of communities, which in turn can expose new trends while falsifying some existing theories.

⁸ Alan D.J. McFarlane, "Witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart Essex," in *Articles on Witchcraft, Magic, and Demonology*, edited by Brian P. Levack (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1992), 16.

⁹ Anne Reiber DeWindt, "Witchcraft and Conflicting Visions of the Ideal Village Community," *Journal of British Studies* 34, no. 4 (October 1995): 435, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/175779> (accessed February 21, 2010).

¹⁰ DeWindt, "Witchcraft and Conflicting Visions," 463.

However, the assumption that changes in a community's values sparked the pursuit of witches also creates problems in research. The witch trials in Essex occurred over the course of one hundred forty years. While tensions over changing community demography or stresses about how to care for the poor can explain witch accusations and trials during a brief interval, it seems unlikely that these same anxieties continued unresolved for over a hundred years at a time. More careful research should explore the specific anxieties that caused such stress in the community rather than point to one general source of communal pressure. This scholarship fails to address any change over time in reference to the causes of the witch trials. Moreover, this theory does not adequately answer why these particular stresses, rather than earlier or later ones, led to the witch trials. Scholarship must more fully address the nuances not just of a community but also of a time period to improve understanding of the witch trials, their causes, and the reasons they came to an end.

Although hundreds of small villages and parishes make up Essex County, this research will follow previous historians in examining the trends of the county as a whole. George Gifford, a leading Puritan in England in the late sixteenth century, described Essex as "a bad county, I think one of the worst in England... There is scarce any town or village in all this shire but there is one or two witches at the least in it."¹¹ Researchers analyzed the community this way because individuals writing during the Early Modern period grouped all of Essex together. Both Alan McFarlane and William Hunt, historians of the Essex community in the Early Modern period, chose to examine the entire county and view the villages as connected to one another socially and religiously because of their similar responses to changes or issues such as the Lollard heresy or the English Civil War.

¹¹ William Hunt, *The Puritan Moment: The Coming of Revolution in an English County* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), 55.

This analysis of the Essex witch trials draws on the published records of Essex witch trials and commentary by Essex residents about the trials or witchcraft generally. Peter Haining collected and published *The Witchcraft Papers: Contemporary Records of the Witchcraft Hysteria in Essex, 1560 -1700* in 1974 during a larger effort in witchcraft historiography to collect and conserve records of witch trials, and this work provides a rich basis for the analysis of Essex.¹² Records of other English trials of the period, mostly collected from the Cornell University Library Witchcraft Collection, will supplement the Essex documents and provide a larger context for the events and ideas described.¹³

Relying on these resources, this paper will examine how Essex residents perceived witchcraft, particularly evaluating how perceptions changed over the one hundred forty year span of the witch trials. While McFarlane's general research on the Essex community provides compelling arguments about the mentality of the Essex community in general during the witch trials, his work provides only a general overview of the trials. His scholarship does not track the nuances in community perception of witchcraft or what particularly constituted witchcraft belief. This research will not only explore those distinctions but also track the subtleties of degrees of belief, and change over time. This paper will more closely investigate the individual responses to witchcraft in the Essex community and then fit those responses into larger patterns. Similarly, Wallace Notestein presents a dynamic argument about the effect of Matthew Hopkins and the English Civil War on the Essex trials.¹⁴ These arguments trace the effects of specific events on the Essex community but fail to provide any context of previous trials and beliefs. In response,

¹² *Witchcraft Papers*, edited by Haining, 37-38.

¹³ *Cornell University Library Witchcraft Collection*, <http://digital.library.cornell.edu/w/witch/> (accessed March 17, 2010).

¹⁴ Notestein, "Matthew Hopkins."

this paper will contextualize the intense Essex trials of the 1640s with previous trials and statements of belief about witchcraft. More specifically, this paper will investigate the effects of the first large-scale witch trial, the St. Osyth trial in 1582, on Essex residents' approaches to witchcraft.

While this paper will consider larger themes of belief and action in the Essex community, the analysis more thoroughly will explore the role and the range of beliefs of individuals in the trials. Rather than identify a single communal cause of the witch trials in Essex, this paper instead will explore the nuances of accusation, confession, and belief that all contributed to the trials. Particularly, this research will examine the Essex conceptions of witchcraft before and after the St. Osyth trial and trace changing and static qualities of the witch trials before and after this trial. First, this analysis will examine enduring qualities of the Essex witch trials from the 1560s to the 1680s, such as the relationship between the crimes associated with witchcraft and the severity of the sentence and the difference in the treatment of male and female witches, to create a context for the changes that occurred in the seventeenth century. Next, this paper will review the changes in beliefs and treatment of witchcraft after the St. Osyth trial, particularly the relationships of accused witches to their accusers and their roles in the trial. While certain qualities of witchcraft conception remained consistent throughout the Essex trials, the first large-scale trial changed the understanding of witchcraft, as debate on the issue became a public, community event.

I. Conceptions of Witchcraft

Although the Essex community experienced significant social, economic, and political changes during the witch trials, certain elements of the construction of witchcraft remained the

same. The first part of this paper will explore these fixed features. In almost every Essex trial in the sixteenth century, familiars or imps existed as proof of witchcraft. The nature of the animals, which investigators, witnesses, and the accused identified as agents of Satan, implies a communal fear of the ordinary becoming an unseen threat to the community. In the 1566 trial, Elizabeth Frauncis explained that she fed her familiar, a white cat, blood and called the animal Satan.¹⁵ The animal's name conveys what the familiar represented to the Essex community, the devil acting in the community in animal form. Again in 1589, Joan Prentice confessed that Satan spoke to her through the form of a ferret and demanded her soul.¹⁶ Witchcraft was a serious crime in this community because it represented the Devil's ability to harm individuals, families, and the larger community through chaos, destruction, and death. Satan's appearance in common animals such as cats or ferrets conveys a communal fear of the Devil acting through domesticated or safe forms.

As the trials progressed, imps became an understood symbol of the presence of the Devil in the accused witch's life. The presence of imps and later a witch's teat became physical representations not only of a woman's pact with Satan but also of her willingness to cause death and destruction in the community. In a 1621 record about a family faking the bewitchment of their daughter, the grandparents convinced "their grandchild to accuse [two women], and accordingly she declared that they appeared to her in the shape of cats and dogs."¹⁷ Even a family falsifying a bewitchment knew to include the mysterious presence of animals to create a realistic accusation. Bewitchment through animals was an accepted part of the conception of

¹⁵ John Phillips, *The Examination and Confession of Certaine Wytches* (1566), in *Early Modern Witches: Witchcraft Cases in Contemporary Writing*, edited by Marion Gibson (London: Routledge, 2000), 17.

¹⁶ Thomas Lawe, *Three Notorious Witches* (1589), in *Early Modern Witches*, edited by Gibson, 135.

¹⁷ *A Child Possessed by the Devil* (1622), in *Witchcraft Papers*, edited by Haining, 159.

witchcraft. This generalization applies to most English trials, many of which include familiars or imps as part of the charge against accused witches. In his defense of his witch-finding techniques, Matthew Hopkins describes keeping an accused witch awake for three nights so that her imps- a spaniel, a greyhound, a polecat, and a rabbit- would appear to her.¹⁸ The connection of an accused witch to a particular animal was not only an accepted part of the understanding of witchcraft but also a means of proving witchcraft.

Moreover, the presence of animals as agents of witchcraft communicates the fear of social disorder present in many witch trials. In the 1645 Essex trial, one of the witnesses against an accused witch recounts finding a snake in her garden which she “endeavoured to kill with a Spade; and striking at it, the Snake suddenly vanished away, and could no where be found.”¹⁹ A snake, an animal that humans could usually control or kill simply with a spade, became a dangerous sign of evil when interpreted in the witch trials. In the same trial, the author of the record comments that the “devil can cause such a transmutation of the bodies of Witches into those severall shapes and forms of Cats, Dogges, Birds, and other creatures.”²⁰ The animals witnesses identified as agents of the devil were animals either domesticated by humans, such as cats and dogs, or animals that posed no threat to humans, such as rats and hedgehogs. The creatures associated with destruction and sickness were specifically animals beneath humans in the natural social order and posed no real threat to the safety of humans normally. In witchcraft belief, these animals became not only a danger to the community but also the actual embodiment

¹⁸ Matthew Hopkins, *The Discovery of Witches* (1647), in *Witchcraft Papers*, edited by Haining, 208-9.

¹⁹ “A True and Exact Relation of the Severall Informations, Examinations, and Confessions of the Late Witches, Arraigned and Executed in the County of Essex,” July 29, 1645, Cornell University Library Witchcraft Collection, 189.

²⁰ “Examinations, and Confessions of the Late Witches, Arraigned and Executed in the County of Essex,” 169.

of evil itself. Witchcraft posed a threat to the social order of the community, and the trials express a fear of the normal becoming different and dangerous.

Furthermore, the community attributed to men more power over the devil in witch trials than credited to their female counterparts. William Randall, a man tried and executed for witchcraft in 1579, “could bewitch and summon spirits and call the Devil to his tune,” according to the trial record.²¹ The author describes Randall and the group of men charged with him as having power over the devil himself. By contrast, in her 1589 trial Joan Prentice confessed that Satan appeared to her through the form of a ferret and demanded her soul in exchange for aiding her against her enemies.²² The author ascribes much less agency to Joan. She did not call the devil but rather cooperated with him. This distinction made her seem much less powerful than Randall, a person with control over Satan. Similarly, in the introduction of a 1566 pamphlet, the writer asserts, “in them such power Satan had,” the accused witches could not call upon God to refuse him.²³ The devil acts upon women accused of witchcraft while male witches use the devil.

The writings about women’s and men’s magical practices indicate the community considered women simultaneously victims of Satan and agents for him but viewed men as actively using Satan. Elizabeth Clarke confessed in 1645 that “Satan would never let her rest, or be quiet, untill shee did consent to the killing of the Hogges” after she made a pact with him.²⁴ Clarke repeatedly blamed the devil for the charges against her, a defense asserted by many women in the Essex community. This pattern indicates a community expectation that the women charged could not act without supernatural support. The butcher relying on an Essex cunning

²¹ Holinshed, *Witchcraft Apprentice*, 37.

²² Lawe, *Three Notorious Witches*, 135.

²³ Phillips, *Examination and Confession of Certaine Wytches*, 14.

²⁴ “Examinations, and Confessions of the Late Witches, Arraigned and Executed in the County of Essex,” 171.

man to help him find his lost cattle “returned to the Conjuror again and desired him to call up the Devil once more.”²⁵ Communities regarded even non-malicious male witches as capable of using a more extreme level of magic. The authors describing individuals charged with witchcraft characterize women as needing the support of a masculine diabolical figure to commit their witchcraft, while men accused could act alone for diabolical purposes. This sharp difference in expectation reveals the subtle sexism of lower expectations in the witch trials. While the public considered female witches a threat through their susceptibility to the devil, trials of male witches attributed to them particular power and control.

While this subtle difference in expectation existed in the conceptions of male and female witches, this distinction did not affect the punishment for either group. William Randall was executed for conjuring the devil and using this power to steal from neighbors, but females described as being under the control of the devil were executed as well.²⁶ The varying level of power given to men and women conveys how the community conceived of witchcraft and its relation to gender. Nevertheless, women faced equal consequences for a witchcraft allegation. Despite a woman’s status as a victim of the devil, the public still considered her an equal threat to the well being of others.

II. Spectrum of Magic and Malice

Throughout the Essex witch trials, the community responded to the perceived threat of witches for numerous reasons and with a variety of consequences. While witchcraft and the pact with the devil the charge implied were considered serious, the courts tried individuals for the

²⁵ Thomas Ady, *An Essex Cunning Man Exposed* (1656), in *Witchcraft Papers*, edited by Haining, 222.

| ²⁶ Holinshed, *Witchcraft Apprentice*, 38.

crimes associated with their witchcraft rather than for witchcraft itself. In one of the first Essex witch trials, Agnes Waterhouse confessed that through her familiar named Satan, an animal creature which signified a witch's pact with Satan and acted on the witch's behalf, she killed with dysentery some neighbors who had offended her and "likewise shee confessed, that because she lyved somewhat unquietly with her husbände she caused Satan to kyll him."²⁷ While Agnes Waterhouse was charged with and executed for witchcraft, the questions and conclusions in the pamphlet describing the trial emphasize the destruction caused through witchcraft rather than the state of being a witch. Witchcraft charges signified a threat to the community because the pact with the devil conveyed a threat to the lives and property of the community as well as to religious security.

This trend of violence and destruction associated with witchcraft continued in the Essex trials. The trial of 1582 involved thirteen women, six of whom the court sentenced to execution, and was the largest Essex trial up to that date. In this trial, one neighbor refused to have Ursula Kempe nurse her child, and the child subsequently fell out of the cradle and died "not because it was clumsily laid, or carelessly rocked, but because Ursula was a witch and had a grievance against" the mother.²⁸ This trial record firmly identifies witchcraft as the source of the child's death. The trial represents Ursula Kempe, who was executed after her conviction, as a physical danger to the community rather than as an individual who made a pact with the devil. No Essex trial contains evidence of trying an individual for witchcraft without a connection to property damage, illness, or loss of life. Witchcraft charges necessitated a link with crimes against other individuals in the community.

²⁷ Phillips, *Examination and Confession of Certaine Witches*, 19.

²⁸ W. W., *The Saint Osyth Witch Trial* (1582), in *Witchcraft Papers*, compiled and edited by Peter Haining (Secaucus, NJ: University Books, Inc., 1974), 44.

Furthermore, the severity of the crime associated with a person's witchcraft affected the severity of the court's sentence. Like Agnes Waterhouse and Ursula Kempe, Joan Cony was accused of cursing her neighbor to death and sentenced to hang in 1589.²⁹ The Essex courts consistently executed individuals accused of witchcraft resulting in murder. In contrast, in the 1582 trial, after two neighbors accused Joan Pechy of being a witch and having imps, the court imprisoned Pechy for an unknown amount of time.³⁰ The severity of a sentence pronounced by the Essex court depended not only the perceived pact with Satan, although records strongly vilify this bond, but also on the nature of the crimes associated with witchcraft. Essex courts recognized different degrees of threat from witchcraft and punished those perceived threats accordingly. While the records strongly condemn witchcraft as a pact with Satan which threatened the community, the practices of the courts suggest that the crime of witchcraft was not a single charge but rather represented different possible degrees of maliciousness, threat, and level of punishment.

Neither did the gender of the accused witch change the link between the nature of the crime and the severity of the punishment. In 1653 a man who confessed to stealing a roll of cloth through witchcraft "was sent to gaol and was also to be placed in the pillory once in each quarter upon a market day."³¹ The sentence in this case is interchangeable with the sentence for a man stealing without any accusation of magic. Similarly, a judge in the 1570s sentenced a woman accused of killing livestock through witchcraft to a year in jail, a punishment similar to the

²⁹ Lawe, *Three Notorious Witches*, 133.

³⁰ W.W., *Saint Osyth Trial*, 47.

³¹ Ralph Josselin, *An Experiment in Necromancy* (1653), in *The Witchcraft Papers: Contemporary Records of the Witchcraft Hysteria in Essex 1560-1700*, edited by Haining, 218.

general punishment for destruction of property.³² Although gender influenced many aspects of the witch trials, the connection between a crime and witchcraft was a fixed feature of the trials, and this correlation formed the basis for the judgments in witchcraft cases.

Moreover, individuals could function in the community with the label of witch without the authorities arresting them. A 1606 pamphlet records a man in a tavern taunting a local woman for being a witch and then experiencing a swelling in the face and an excruciating pain in his bowels which he attributed to witchcraft.³³ The man's classification of the community woman as a witch and his comfort with taunting her for it suggests that her reputations as a witch was known and established before her arrest. An arrest necessitated a specific crime or misfortune to bring an accused witch to trial. Moreover, this ease with which the man heckles a woman he believes to be a witch hints at the complicated status of the witch in the community. While many people feared witchcraft and its effects enough to try individuals for the crime, for others a witch was a person more eccentric than malicious. Similarly, the 1645 trial record states that community members suspected Elizabeth Clarke was a witch for years prior to her arrest.³⁴ While the rumor of witchcraft made an individual susceptible to arrest, the court had to link a specific crime to a witchcraft charge.

In the first decades of the Essex trials, the courts and community members recognized a spectrum of good and evil magic that could either harm or restore an individual. In a 1570 trial, Goodwife Malter thought her husband was bewitched and practiced a counter charm through an elaborate ceremony so that "he should be delivered of his bewitching, or his witch should

³² Thomas Smith, *The Memoirs of a Witchcraft Judge* (1570), in *Witchcraft*, edited by Haining, 35.

³³ *How a Witch Served a Fellow in an Alehouse* (1606), in *Witchcraft Papers*, edited by Haining, 156.

³⁴ "Examinations, and Confessions of the Late Witches, Arraigned and Executed in the County of Essex," 170.

consume as the fire did.” To Malter, her effort to cure her husband was an act of caring and healing rather than malicious witchcraft. Communal ideas about witchcraft did not identify all witches as evil. Individuals could have an association with magic without malicious intent. In the same trial record, one individual who considered herself bewitched, “went to see Cobham of Romford, who was thought to be cunning in such matters; and he declared that she was bewitched by the same woman.”³⁵ Common understanding of magic suggested that a person practicing beneficial magic or who demonstrated a specific understanding of magic could counter a malicious bewitchment. Indeed, the record of this common knowledge of who could help with a bewitchment and even how to magically counter a curse suggests that the community tolerated and accepted certain kinds of magical practice.

This practice of using magical practices to identify or counteract a bewitchment continued in the seventeenth century. In 1656, a butcher looking for his lost cattle consulted “a Cunning Man... skilful in the Black Art.”³⁶ Individuals could not only exist with the status as magical individuals but also earn a respected status in the community through it. Moreover, this practice was not gender exclusive. In the 1645 trial, one witness against the accused witches, concerned about his wife’s violent fits, “went to a Cunning Woman... who told this Informant, that his wife was cursed by two women who were neere neighbours to this Informant.”³⁷ For women, the label of a cunning woman could increase social status and bring new forms of revenue. Even individuals who participated in the growing denunciation of belief in witchcraft acknowledged the superior social status of a person practicing white magic. Reginald Scot, in a

³⁵ Smith, *Memoirs of a Witchcraft Judge*, 33-34.

³⁶ Ady, *Essex Cunning Man Exposed*, 222.

³⁷ “Examinations, and Confessions of the Late Witches, Arraigned and Executed in the County of Essex,” 170.

1584 book refuting belief in witchcraft, condemned people who consulted individuals claiming magical abilities, “seeking at their hands comfort and remedie in time of their tribulation.”³⁸ For Scot, the presence of cunning people reinforced beliefs about witchcraft and led to witch trials.

Nevertheless, widespread use of white magic put individuals at risk for accusation of malevolent magic. Malter’s husband rebuked her for using witchcraft and later accused her of bewitching two of his sheep and a cow.³⁹ While Goodwife Malter viewed her practice as a legitimate and beneficial means of countering an evil bewitchment, her actions created suspicion about her knowledge and ability to affect events by witchcraft. Likewise in a 1563 case, a neighbor approached Elizabeth Lewys because of her reputation as a witch for help with a suspected bewitchment, but did not pay Lewys for her services. Soon after, the neighbor accused Lewys of bewitching her livestock and family in retribution.⁴⁰ Although certain types of magical reputations were tolerated or even accepted by the community, this designation increased an individual’s risk of being labeled as a malicious witch.

Moreover, a previous connection with witchcraft increased the likelihood of a subsequent arrest. Elizabeth Clarke, the first woman accused of witchcraft in the 1645 trial, was suspected of witchcraft for years prior to being brought to trial because her mother had been executed for witchcraft. Although white magic could exist without the immediate threat of arrest, any connection to malicious witchcraft made a person a threat to the community. In the same trial Anne West, another woman condemned with Elizabeth Clarke, “hath been suspected for a Witch many yeers since, and suffered imprisonment for the same.”⁴¹ Even individuals who survived a

³⁸ Reginald Scot, *The Fables of Witchcraft* (1584), in *Witchcraft Papers*, edited by Haining, 167.

³⁹ Smith, *Memoirs of a Witchcraft Judge*, 33.

⁴⁰ *Deposition Against a Witch* (1563), in *Witchcraft Papers*, edited by Haining, 21.

⁴¹ “Examinations, and Confessions of the Late Witches, Arraigned and Executed in the County of Essex,” 172-74.

witchcraft conviction still faced the continued prejudice from the community. An existing connection with witchcraft could lead to an accusation and arrest.

III. Reasons for Confession

Confessions in Essex witch trials were numerous, with a least one of every group of accused witches confessing to the crime at some point. The reasons for confession often vary based on trial and individual. In the Essex trials, the accused did not always confess. Moreover, some individuals arrested with a group would confess while others would not. While the exact reason for any person's confession cannot be known, an examination of trial proceedings provides clues to the motive behind a confession. English law prohibited torture as a means of extracting a confession, but many counties relied on more subtle means to get evidence, such as false hope for a lighter sentence.⁴² In the 1582 trial, the pamphlet records blatant promises by questioners for easier sentence if a confession was made. For example, at first Ursula Kempe would confess to nothing, except using a witch's cure for her lameness, but after being promised favor from the questioners she, "Bursting out with weeping and falling on her knees," confessed to everything charged against her. Despite this promise, Kempe was still executed. The questioner in the 1582 trial stated to Elizabeth Bennet that those who "confess the truth of their doings, they shall have much favour; but the other they shall be burnt and hanged."⁴³ The pattern of witch trials and executions would have been well known to women in the 1580s, so the promise of a lighter sentence gave real incentive for confession. In the 1582 trial, the earlier

⁴² McFarlane, "Witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart Essex," 3.

⁴³ W.W., *Saint Osyth Trial*, 46-48.

confession of Ursula Kempe, which still resulted in her execution, likely was concealed from other individuals questioned.

The promise of a more favorable sentence was also used in a more spiritual sense. A trial in Oxfordshire in 1579 displays how this spiritual persuasion would function. A woman confessed to the crime of witchcraft and accused others after a jailer who treated her kindly urged her to “turn hir self to God, from whome she had notoriously fallen...and there withall urged in signe of hir repentaunce, to confess hir follies and facts.”⁴⁴ Rather than persuade through a promise of a lesser punishment, these examples suggest that questioners appealed to the Christian ethic of confession and forgiveness to produce a confession from a witness. Of those who did confess, the confession often came with religious repentance. Agnes Waterhouse stated that she had committed “many abhominable deeds, the which she repented earnestly...and dysyred almighty God forgevenes.”⁴⁵ This emotional and spiritual confession, particularly from individuals such as Waterhouse set for execution, could reflect religious pressure to repent of sin or make peace with the community before death. In the 1589 trial, Mother Upney, after her confession “seemed very sorry...and died very penitent, asking God and the world forgiveness.”⁴⁶ Like Waterhouse, Upney ties her confession to emotional religious penitence. The promise of salvation and forgiveness formed an incentive for women to confess, even if their sentence did not change because of it.

Yet even in the same trial, confession did not produce the same sentence. While the confessions of Ursula Kempe and Elizabeth Bennet ended in death sentences, Agnes Heard, a

⁴⁴ Edward White, *A Rehearsall both Straung and True*, Reprints of English Books, 1475-1700 40 (1579; reprint, London: n.p., 1940), 34.

⁴⁵ Phillips, *Examination and Confession of Certaine Wytches*, 24.

⁴⁶ Lawe, *Three Notorious Witches*, 137.

woman accused by her daughter and the wife of a pastor of bewitching animals and individuals, confessed to those crimes, and the court acquitted her. While confession was a valuable part of a case against an accused witch, it did not remove all doubt from the court. Heard's acquittal conveys a sense of doubt and discomfort on the part of the Essex court. Even in a chaotic trial such as the Essex trial of 1582, there was enough skepticism about the charge of witchcraft in the courts for women to be acquitted despite confession. By contrast, in the same trial, Elizabeth Eustace denied all the allegations against her but "on being search, she was found to have no 'bigges' or witch marks, she was sent to prison instead of the gallows."⁴⁷ The author of the trial record explains that only the absence of the most common form of physical evidence in a witch trial, the presence or absence of a witch's mark or teat, commuted the sentence to prison time rather than execution. While confession allowed the courts to convict some women, a refusal to confess did not necessarily improve an individual's chances of escaping conviction or execution. With a pattern of execution for those who denied witchcraft charges known in the community after decades of trials, the accused could have seen the promise of a lighter sentence as the only legitimate hope for escaping execution.

Moreover, practices to obtain confession came under increasing scrutiny as individuals became aware of the subtle torture often used. Matthew Hopkins, after his involvement in the 1645 Essex witch trial, published a pamphlet in 1647 defending his methods of obtaining confessions. While he admitted that in the beginning of his involvement with witch trials, accused witches were kept awake for days "because they being kept awake would be more active to cal their Imps in open view...which often happened," he maintained that "never or seldom did

⁴⁷ W.W. *Saint Osyth Trial*, 50-53.

any Witch ever complaine in the time of their keeping for want of rest.”⁴⁸ Hopkins confirms the use of a type of physical torture, sleep-deprivation, that would likely produce a confession either from physical exhaustion or from confusion. Questioners likely used these practices for decades prior to Hopkins’ use of them. Scot, in 1584, questioned “what creature being sound in state of mind, would, (without compulsion) make such maner of confessions as they do.”⁴⁹ Although no standard method of procuring a confession existed in English law, the means of obtaining confessions was by the 1580s public knowledge and produced. Scot wrote his tract in response to the St. Osyth trial and the practices used to obtain confessions in that trial, both persuasion and physical torture, inspired him to bring those practices into public question.

Although many qualities in the Essex trials remained the same after the St. Osyth trial, the nature of this trial created particular tension in Essex. This trial provoked many changes in the conceptions of witchcraft in Essex and its function in the community. From this point forward, this research will examine features in the Essex witch hunt that changed over time. Usually two or three Essex women were accused of witchcraft at a time, but the Clemsford community of Essex in 1582 tried thirteen women in St. Osyth for bewitching twenty-three individuals to death, causing even more people to suffer from pains and seizures, and evoking intense damage to cattle and property. The trial took place over the course of a few weeks and led to the execution of six of the women tried.⁵⁰ No Essex witch trial prior to those at St. Osyth had involved so many individuals accused of so much damage and death. This trial became an example of the turmoil and fear prevalent in communities involved in witch trials and created

⁴⁸ Hopkins, *Discovery of Witches*, 211.

⁴⁹ Scot, *Fables of Witchcraft*, 69.

⁵⁰ W.W., *Saint Osyth Trial*, 43-55.

passionate responses because of the considerable number of individuals charged together and chaotic nature of the evidence, with numerous cross-accusations and differing degrees of confession.

Contemporaries distinguished this trial from to the trials that preceded it. In direct response to the St. Osyth trial, Reginald Scot, a country gentleman and sometime member of Parliament wrote, “The Discoverie of Witchcraft,” a pamphlet that denounced the witch trials and belief in witchcraft in general, in 1584.⁵¹ This work was the first direct challenge to the English witch trials and provoked a defensive response from those with opposing beliefs. For example, an Essex clergyman, Thomas Pickering, disputed the arguments made by Scot in the 1605 book *A Discourse of the Damned Art of Witchcraft*. Pickering relied on theological support in his case for the belief in witchcraft and commented that “they do grossly err, who either in express terms deny that there be Witches, or in effect, and by consequence avow that there is no league between them and the Devil.”⁵² Both men participated in the debate about witchcraft belief that emerged from the controversial trial. The severe nature of the St. Osyth trial led to an open, fierce debate in Essex about the nature of witchcraft. The presence of this debate would shape the witch trials that followed.

⁵¹ Scot, *Fables of Witchcraft*, 65.

⁵² Thomas Pickering, *On the Punishment of Witches* (1605), in *Witchcraft Papers*, edited by Haining, 144.

IV. Influence of Religion

While the local and Assizes courts tried most witches in Essex, witchcraft could also be an ecclesiastical crime, and trials often reflected changing religious emphases. Essex had a reputation for religious non-conformity for more than a century because of the fervor with which the county adopted the Lollard heresy in the fourteenth century. The community embraced Protestantism in the sixteenth century with zeal, and this fervor would influence the trials.⁵³ In 1566 the religious tone of the witch trial reflected the tensions and priorities in the church—specifically increasing Protestant influence and an effort to banish residual Catholic practices after the break with the Roman church thirty years before.⁵⁴ In her confession, Agnes Waterhouse said she would go to church and pray the Lord’s Prayer and Ave Maria but only prayed in Latin because that was the only language in which Satan would let her pray.⁵⁵ The inclusion of Waterhouse’s details about her spiritual life did not further the case against her as a witch but rather connected her evil practices to the Catholic practice of praying in Latin. The author of the trial record seeks to associate witchcraft with a Catholic threat to the community. Moreover, the author specifically observes that Waterhouse “dysyred almighty God forgevenes.” The author includes only Waterhouse’s repentance in the record, despite the confession of three other witches, possibly in an attempt to address Waterhouse’s heretical practices and frame a Protestant moral victory.

⁵³ L. R. Poos, *A Rural Society After the Black Death: Essex, 1350-1525* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 293.

⁵⁴ McFarlane, "Witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart Essex," 4.

⁵⁵ Phillips, *Examination and Confession of Certain Wytches*, 24-25.

In the 1580s Puritanism, a Calvinist reform movement within the Anglican Church, became increasingly popular in Essex.⁵⁶ The Essex community in these decades developed an association with radical Calvinism that would last throughout the seventeenth century.⁵⁷ In the 1582 trial, the author records the local parson exclaiming after his wife became bewitched, ‘What will the people say, that I being a preacher, should have my wife so weak in faith?’⁵⁸ The expectation that the preacher, not a priest or other Anglican official, should be immune from bewitchment conveys the increased responsibility and authority given to religious leaders in the English Calvinist tradition.⁵⁹ The religious climate of Essex dictated not only that witchcraft was a pact with Satan but also that the truly godly were able to resist bewitchment. In the same trial, one of the accused, Elizabeth Bennet, confessed to having two imps, who “upon her mentioning the name of God, both disappeared.”⁶⁰ Despite a fear of the devil, the Essex community believed God to be more powerful than the Satanic influence of witchcraft, and those who relied upon the power of God would be able to combat Satanic forces. These trials characterize God as the entirely sovereign ruler described in traditional Calvinist sources. The conception of the power of God and the ability of individuals to receive protection through that power reflect the increased influence of Calvinism in Essex.

Moreover, in the 1589 trial record, the accused, Joan Cony, confessed that she sent her imps to hurt two townsmen but claimed the imps told her they could not because of the men’s

⁵⁶ Hunt, *Puritan Moment*, 97.

⁵⁷ McFarlane, "Witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart Essex," 4.

⁵⁸ W.W., *Saint Osyth Trial*, 54.

⁵⁹ Hunt, *Puritan Moment*, 93.

⁶⁰ W.W., *Saint Osyth Trial*, 49.

strong faith.⁶¹ The record of individuals resisting the impact of imps or bewitchment not only reflects the increased expectation of individual faith in the Calvinist tradition but also indicates the potential for bewitchment tarnish the faith and character of the person admitting to it. The trials of the 1580s imply that those strong enough in their faith could overcome malicious witchcraft. If this principle was part of the dominant religious conviction of the community, those who accused a witch of cursing them or their families lost part of their role as a victim, and their admission was a sign of weak faith. The intersection of this belief with the witch trials forms the crucial tension between religious faith and witchcraft accusations in the Essex community.

Even refutation of belief in witchcraft included arguments based in the growing Puritan movement. In his discourse on witchcraft, Scot complains that people believe neither “raine nor tempestuous winds come from the heavens at the commandment of God; but are raised by the cunning and power of witches and conjurers.”⁶² The conception of God’s complete sovereignty over creation is a central theme of Calvinism and Puritanism.⁶³ Scot appealed to this religious theme to undermine belief in witchcraft by questioning how a community with an increasing dedication to this belief could continue to allow the sovereignty of God to be diluted through an acceptance of the power of witches. To appeal to the Calvinist audience, Scot used Calvinist theology to express how witchcraft belief was irrational and even sacrilegious.

By the first decades of the seventeenth century, Puritanism was the most visible and powerful religious faction commenting on witchcraft in Essex. In 1608 Puritan preacher Thomas

⁶¹ Lawe, *Three Notorious Witches*, 132.

⁶² Scot, *Fables of Witchcraft*, 67.

⁶³ Hunt, *Puritan Moment*, 120.

Pickering wrote his treatise about witchcraft, describing how “the light of the Gospel purely preached, is a Sovereign means to discover, confound the power and policy of Satan in Witchcraft and Sorcery.”⁶⁴ This purely preached gospel refers to Puritanism, with its focus on morally instructive, fiery oratory. No Anglican priest or vicar from Essex wrote extensively on witchcraft in the seventeenth century. Puritans controlled the theological discourse on witchcraft. Moreover, to make their false bewitchment convincing, the Malpas family “procured preachers to pray with the said Katherine Malpas” and “directed her to fling away bibles and prayer books etc., whereby it might be thought that some evil spirit possessed her and hindered her devotions.”⁶⁵ By the 1620s, preachers, rather than priests or vicars, were the religious authority in Essex on witchcraft. For practical assistance against the evils of bewitchment, Puritan preachers were the central source of aid. Puritanism was both the intellectual and practical religious authority in seventeenth-century Essex.

However, while Puritanism informed the witch trials and debate about witchcraft in Essex, this religious tradition did not control the dialogue or the trials. While preachers wrote and likely preached about witchcraft in the community, they did not have the power to bring an individual to trial or save a person from a trial. The official ecclesiastical punishment for witchcraft was far less severe than the sentences of the assizes courts; for the church, the punishment for witchcraft was a formal request for forgiveness from God and the community during a Sunday service.⁶⁶ Moreover, no trial transcript records a preacher acting in any capacity beyond that of a minister. Puritan preachers did not assist in examining witnesses or deciding

⁶⁴ Pickering, *On the Punishment of Witches*, 144.

⁶⁵ *Child Possessed by the Devil*, 159.

⁶⁶ McFarlane, "Witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart Essex," 4.

punishment. Puritanism determined much of the dialogue and practical approaches to witchcraft, but the state court system decided the trials.

V. From Family to Community

The early Essex trials reflect tensions within families as much as they demonstrate apprehensions of the community. Every Essex trial record from 1563 to 1582 contains an accusation of witchcraft by one family member against another. While Essex courts often used the statements of young children against their mothers, adult family members frequently accused one another. Historian J. A. Sharpe examined murder rates in the Essex community during the Early Modern Period and discovered that family members committed twenty-five percent of all murders.⁶⁷ Sharpe failed to link this surprisingly common trend of family violence to witchcraft accusations. While this percentage does not make Essex exceptional in the rate of family violence, the commonality of domestic murders creates a context for family members testifying against one another in the witch trials. In the 1563 trial record, the husband of Elizabeth Lewys blames his wife for causing his lameness through bewitchment after a neighbor accuses him of stealing a rooster.⁶⁸ In the Lewys case, the husband uses the witchcraft accusation to deflect attention from his theft, but this incident forms the beginning of a trend. From the beginning of the Essex trials, the courts used family testimony to support witchcraft accusations. Husbands, in particular, regularly accused their wives in the Essex trials.

While the accusation of Elizabeth Lewys should be interpreted in the context of the husband's theft, Malter's 1570 accusation of his wife after her attempt to cure him of a

⁶⁷ J. A. Sharpe, "Domestic Homicide in Early Modern England," *Historical Journal* 24, no. 1 (March 1981): 46, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2638903> (accessed April 12, 2010).

⁶⁸ *Deposition Against a Witch*, 21.

bewitchment reflects the security with which men could denounce their wives.⁶⁹ Husbands who accused their wives of witchcraft either did not fear social ostracism because of their association with an accused witch or felt desperate enough to risk bringing shame on themselves and their children by making the accusation. In the 1582 trial, a son claims his father accused his mother of attacking their children and says, “Why thou whore, cannot you keep your imps away from my children.”⁷⁰ While the reader must contextualize the claim as part of a child’s accusation, the specific language of the claim, even if it only existed in the imagination of the child or the recorder, gives insight into why husbands were willing to accuse their wives. While the records do not provide a chronology of accusation, the husband of an alleged witch may have accused his wife after neighbors first accused her so that his association with his wife would not harm his social standing. By transforming themselves into victims, husbands could avoid the shame and suspicion of association with a witch.

Young children also accused their mothers in the St. Osyth trial. While adult children often accused their mothers in English trials, the some of the Essex trials gave young children a voice as accusers, an unorthodox practice in the English legal system. In the 1582 trial, Ursula Kempe’s son Thomas claimed his mother had four imps, two like cats, one like a sheep, and one like a toad that sucked her blood. In this trial, the evidence provided by children served to corroborate that their mothers had imps. The daughter of Agnes Heard also stated her mother had imps in the form of blackbirds.⁷¹ The testimony of children, while not the sole source of accusation in the trial, provided evidence about the private lives of accused witches. Although

⁶⁹ Smith, *Memoirs of a Witchcraft Judge*, 33.

⁷⁰ W.W., *Saint Osyth Trial*, 50.

| ⁷¹ W.W., *Saint Osyth Trial*, 45-52.

the St. Osyth trial does not provide an exact record of the questioning, the details provided by the children, such as the presence of strange animals around the house, suggests that children were asked specific questions about animals around their homes rather than given a chance to speak independently about their mothers. As with the testimony of husbands, the accusation by children follows accusations by neighbors and other members of the community. Courts relied on family witness to support existing accusations against individuals, but these family accusations created a more full and meaningful allegation. However, child accusations were controversial in English judicial practice and were no longer fully accepted in the seventeenth century.⁷² Essex's brief use of child witnesses fits into the larger trend of family accusations.

While family members often first brought charges of witchcraft against relative in the late sixteenth century, after the St. Osyth trial, the dynamic of family accusations changed. From 1589 to 1645, no family members were brought as witnesses in Essex trials. Although fewer trials occurred during this period, the surviving records do not indicate much family participation in them.⁷³ Instead, neighbors and even casual acquaintances brought the charges of witchcraft against one another. The Essex pamphlet of 1606 recorded one man's accusation of another bar patron, a woman whose name he did not know, of being a witch and causing his bowel pain.⁷⁴ The 1621 case of the Malpas family falsifying a bewitchment included a plan to "to cause [two neighbors] to be taken for witches, they also persuaded Katherine their grandchild to accuse them."⁷⁵ These cases form a sharp contrast to the accusations brought by husbands against wives in earlier Essex trials. When family no longer participated in accusing or testifying against a

⁷² McFarlane, "Witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart Essex," 6.

⁷³ Hunt, *Puritan Moment*, 55.

⁷⁴ *How a Witch Served a Fellow in an Alehouse*, 157.

⁷⁵ *A Child Possessed*, 159.

witch, the accusation lost some of its intimacy. Witchcraft was not a personal charge that required the close knowledge of a family member to verify. Rather, the community, through neighbors and general acquaintances, became the central force in charging a person with witchcraft.

The accusations by family members in Essex cases that did occur in the seventeenth century were part of the 1645 trial. In this trial, adult daughters accused mothers of initiating them into the practice of witchcraft. Rebecca Weste confessed upon arrest for witchcraft that she “about seven yeares since, began to have familiaritie with the Devil, by the instigation of her mother Anne Weste.” In her confession, Rebecca Weste not only accused her mother but also confirmed that five previously arrested women practiced witchcraft in her home. Weste only accused others in the chaotic environment of mass arrests and executions. Similarly, Judith Moone, when arrested along with her mother Margaret, claimed to be the victim of her mother’s witchcraft, while her mother denied all the charges against her.⁷⁶ Both Judith Moone and Rebecca Weste only denounced their mothers after their own arrests. They accused their family in a pressured environment in which they faced immediate consequences for failing to somehow appease their questioners. Unlike husbands who implicated their wives or young children who accused their mothers, these daughters impugned their mothers not as witnesses but as accused witches seeking to avoid conviction by blaming another person for the crime.

Moreover, the 1645 trial record does not contain any mention of questioning the husbands, parents, sons, or young children of the accused women. The family is largely absent from this trial. As the seventeenth-century progressed, witchcraft became a public crime against the community and no longer involved family disputes. In a 1653 trial, a woman testified that her

⁷⁶ “Examinations, and Confessions of the Late Witches, Arraigned and Executed in the County of Essex,” 177-88.

husband was the victim of the witchcraft of a business partner.⁷⁷ The community no longer viewed the family as the primary source of testimony against an accused witch. The accusations of neighbors and acquaintances gave enough evidence to convict a woman of witchcraft.

VI. Role of Skepticism

Skepticism evolved in Essex from personal expressions of doubt, acknowledgement of poor evidence, and a subtle defensiveness about charges to public debate about the effectiveness of the trial system and the validity of belief in witchcraft itself. Members of the community approached the trials with varying levels of confidence in the witch accusations. In the first forty years of witch trials, community members openly expressed skepticism about witchcraft charges. While these expressions of doubt do not occur in every trial, they do appear fairly frequently and come from people with different roles in the trials. After hearing the evidence against two women accused of witchcraft in 1570, Judge Thomas Smith “did commit both the said Malter’s wife and Anne Vicars to the Assizes the next month, with a note that he did consider there was much idle gossip in the stories” and later the Assizes court sentenced them to one year in prison.⁷⁸ Thomas Smith did not write the record of his decision, so his exact state of mind toward witchcraft remains unknown. Nonetheless, the judge recognized how tension in interpersonal relationships could develop into a witchcraft charge, even if he did accept the validity of witchcraft in general. The judge’s doubt about the validity of the accusations conveys not only the misgivings that existed in the community even in the 1570s about witch accusations but also that officials could freely express these doubts. Individuals in the community were not punished

⁷⁷ Josselin, *Experiment in Necromancy*, 218.

⁷⁸ Smith, *Memoirs of a Witchcraft Judge*, 35.

for failure to conform to more common beliefs about witchcraft or for expressing disbelief at witchcraft charges. However, while his opinion about gossip in witchcraft cases was tolerated, Judge Smith had to compromise with the community by committing the case to the Assizes court rather than dismiss the charges. The judge could articulate his opinion, but witch trials were still a charged issue for the community that required some kind of action towards the perceived threats.

Even in records of larger, more chaotic trials, such as the St. Osyth trial, diverse views about witchcraft and the causation of unfortunate events are evident. In her testimony against Ursula Kempe, Annis Letherdall accused her of sickening her child severely and “as proof that its sad state came in no wise from bad food, bad nursing, and filthy habits,” the baby cried out when his parents carried him past Kempe’s house⁷⁹ The record firmly condemns Ursula Kempe, but the inclusion of the anecdotal proof against her and specific denials of other causes of illness reflects a need to convince the reader of the trial record that the cause of the child’s sickness was indeed witchcraft rather than poor food or poor care. By including a story to prove witchcraft in this case, the author of the trial acknowledges reservations in the Essex community about naming witchcraft as the cause of a problem. Witchcraft charges in sixteenth-century Essex, while prominent and often accepted by members of the community, were not above scrutiny and examination by Essex residents.

Moreover, in the same trial, one witness recounted how her child sickened and died after an encounter with one of the accused witches, but “she saith, that her conscience will not serve her to charge the said Cicely or her husband to be the causers of any suche matter.”⁸⁰ Even in a

⁷⁹ W. W., *Saint Osyth Trial*, 45.

⁸⁰ W.W., *Saint Osyth Trial*, 51.

trial record that largely condemns accused witches, a witness's doubt about a magical causation emerges. Personal doubt about witch accusation and magical causation existed commonly enough in the Essex community to be recorded in multiple contexts. While many, if not the majority, of individuals in the Essex community believed witchcraft charges, the opinions during the first few decades were decidedly heterogeneous and created a need either to compromise or provide adequate proof in trials.

After the St. Osyth trial, skepticism became open disbelief in and public refutation of witchcraft and the trial process. Reginald Scot's 1584 book brought the debate about witchcraft into the public forum. In his introduction he explains that in Essex "if any adversitie, greefe, sicknesse, losse of children, corne, cattell, or libertie happen unto [the people]; by & by they exclaime upon witches."⁸¹ Scot attacked the belief in witchcraft and asserted that the people's superstition and ignorance were its causes. While Scot was not the first person to respond to the Essex trials with doubt, his open challenge changed the dynamic of discussion around witchcraft. The trials and how the court treated individuals were no longer the focus of discussion around witchcraft but rather the belief itself. Although Scot specifically responded to the St. Osyth trial, this emphasis on the idea of witchcraft changed the focus from individual cases to larger cultural notions of magic and superstition.

The records of witch trials changed dramatically with the introduction of this debate. No author could fail to address the question of the reality of witchcraft. An Essex minister's 1608 discourse on witchcraft opens with the claim that those who doubt the reality of witchcraft are either foolish or heretical⁸² Even religious discussions about the nature of a pact with the devil

⁸¹ Scot, *Fables of Witchcraft*, 67-68.

⁸² Pickering, *On the Punishment of Witches*, 144.

had to acknowledge that individuals doubted the claim. This acknowledgement suggests that defiance of traditional belief about witchcraft was large enough and powerful enough that it could not be ignored. Even in the early seventeenth century, members of the Essex community challenged witchcraft belief visibly.

These broader debates became more personal to the Essex community as proof of fraudulent evidence in the county's witch trials became clear. In 1621, the grandmother of Katherine Malpas confessed that she forced her granddaughter "to counterfeit herself to be bewitched and possessed with an evil spirit, and to feign strange fits and trances...so that people would be drawn to the house and money be given in pity."⁸³ While no evidence exists to explain how the Malpas family's fraud was uncovered, the investigation into its validity took place in an environment open enough to the possibility of false witchcraft to examine the case. Even as preachers and neighbors supported the Malpas family through prayers and monetary gifts, individuals in the community were aware enough and comfortable enough to express doubt about the circumstances of the case and investigate the individuals who claimed to be victims of bewitchment rather than the accused witch. Moreover, this open confession of a fraudulent bewitchment contributed to the change in Essex culture about witchcraft. Debate about the issue was no longer confined to abstract questions of witchcraft itself but now had a basis in specific cases about how and why enchantment would be faked. The community had a reason to question a person's claim of bewitchment, and those who denounced the witch trials had practical evidence to support their claims.

After the 1645 Essex trial, the largest Essex trial (thirty-two women tried and nineteen women executed for witchcraft in a two-month period), Matthew Hopkins, one of the lead

⁸³ *A Child Possessed by the Devil*, 158-59.

questioners in the trial, wrote a rebuttal to the unnamed people who had denounced his techniques and general belief about witchcraft. One of the complaints he refuted states that it is impossible “that the Devill and the Witch joyning together, should have such power as the Witches confess.”⁸⁴ This complaint represents the more conceptual challenges Hopkins had to face and felt compelled to answer. Both Scot and Hopkins responded to events in Essex and published their work in London, making their contributions to the discourse part of a national dialogue about the trials.⁸⁵ While Hopkins never specifically addresses Scot in his work, their arguments about witchcraft and the trials were both part of a national debate about witchcraft and responded to the increasing public doubt about the legitimacy of the witch trials. Scot, in one of the first public refutations of witchcraft belief, began the discourse that led to the more specific logical and theological claims that Hopkins was compelled to refute. This evolution in the debate about witchcraft to refined, specific objections also led Hopkins to answer the complaint that, “When these [witches’ teats] are fully discovered, yet that will not serve sufficiently to convict them, but they must be tortured and kept from sleep...to make them say any thing.”⁸⁶ Individuals in effect had openly objected to specific practices within the trials. While Hopkins fails to identify specific individuals or groups who objected to his methods and beliefs, his listing of fourteen points of dispute reflects a powerful movement in the Essex culture to end the witch trials. By the mid-seventeenth century, the challenge to the witch trials evolved into practical and more abstract challenges to all the practices and beliefs associated with the witch trials.

⁸⁴ Hopkins, *Discovery of Witches*, 214.

⁸⁵ Scot, *The Fables of Witchcraft*, 65.

⁸⁶ Hopkins, *Discovery of Witches*, 211.

VII. Increased Executions of the 1640s

In the context of the increasing public challenge to witchcraft belief and the practices of the trials, the 1645 Essex trial appears an anomaly. The arrest of thirty-two women and the execution of nineteen in a two-month period, when most trials lasted a year, intrigue scholars.⁸⁷ Alan McFarlane estimates that the Essex assizes courts executed about one hundred women, which makes this trial the source of about twenty percent of the Essex executions.⁸⁸ The grand scale of this trial requires explanation. Although some historians argue that Matthew Hopkins induced a panic about witchcraft and personally led the arrest and judgment of the women, Hopkins in fact only participated in the questioning of two women.⁸⁹ While Hopkins aided in this trial and other trials in Eastern England, the larger community of Essex had control of this proceeding, and the case must be viewed in the context of the community. Similarly, historian Diane Purkiss contends that the English Civil War in Essex, an adamantly Parliamentary county, created stress that erupted into witchcraft accusations and trials.⁹⁰ While the Earl of Essex's key role in the war from 1642 to 1646 may have created tensions in the community, no battles or other war activities took place in or near Essex during this period. The community of Essex did not experience an intense involvement with the war during this period, and the conflict

⁸⁷ "Examinations, and Confessions of the Late Witches, Arraigned and Executed in the County of Essex," 167.

⁸⁸ McFarlane, "Witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart Essex," 6.

⁸⁹ Notestein, "Matthew Hopkins," 190.

⁹⁰ Diane Purkiss, "Desire and Its Deformities: Fantasies of Witchcraft in the English Civil War," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 27, no. 1 (Winter 1997): 106, http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/journal_of_medieval_and_early_modern_studies/v027/27.1purkiss.html (accessed March 28, 2010).

would have been a physically and mentally distant threat.⁹¹ While an immediate stress or incident may have initiated the 1645 trial, the intensity of the trial itself resulted from the tensions of decades of conflict over the reality of witchcraft.

Strangely, the record of the 1645 Essex trial does not acknowledge dissent in the community over the validity of witchcraft belief and trial practices. This debate, while present in Essex for decades prior to this trial, would have been addressed in the introduction of the trial. English trials since 1618 included justifications in the introduction of the trial transcript. A Lincoln trial from 1618 refuted the doubts about witchcraft by noting that “Princes (yea our owne learned and most judicious King) Philosophers, Poets, Chronologers, Historiographers, and many worthy Writers” accept that the Devil acts through witches.⁹² With the beginning of the public debate about the witch trials, legal and theological rationalizations about the witch trials were common. Indeed by the 1650s, few trial records started without acknowledging and refuting the claim that witchcraft did not exist. A 1652 trial from London recognized that many “are of opinion, that there are no Witches, but let them read in Leviticus, and they shall find that in the time of Moses there were Magicians and Sorcerers.”⁹³ For the 1645 Essex trial to omit an explanation of witchcraft based either in Biblical precedent or the state’s acknowledgement and position against witchcraft makes this trial stand out both from the dialogue in Essex at the time and in the larger trends of English witch trial.

⁹¹ Leonard Hochberg, "The English Civil War in Geographical Perspective," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 14, no. 4 (Spring 1987): 744, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/203463> (accessed March 28, 2010).

⁹² The Wonderful Discoverie of the Witchcrafts of Margaret and Phillip Flower, Daughters of Joan Flower neere Beuer castle: Executed at Lincolne, March 11 1618," March 11, 1618, Cornell University Library Witchcraft Collection, Cornell University, Ithaca, Cornell University Library Witchcraft Collection, <http://digital.library.cornell.edu/cgi/t/text/text-idx?c=witch;idno=wit106> (accessed December 5, 2009).

⁹³ "The Witch of Wapping or An Exact and Perfect Relation, of the Life and Devilish Practises of Joan Peterson," Spring 1652, Cornell University Library Witchcraft Collection, Cornell University, Ithaca, Cornell University Library Witchcraft Collection, <http://digital.library.cornell.edu/cgi/t/text/text-idx?c=witch;idno=wit105> (accessed December 5, 2009).

The omission of a justification in this trial's introduction characterizes this trial as a reaction to the increasingly polarized debate about the witchcraft. Instead of addressing the obvious concerns about the witch trials, the 1645 introduction complains that "now when the light of the gospel shineth so gloriously...such a generation of poore deluded soules" is tempted by Satan into witchcraft. It proceeds to use the Bible to explain the need for harsh punishments against witches.⁹⁴ By expressing grief about the situation rather than prove its validity, the author omitted any justification for this trial or explanation for its intensity. The introduction addressed individuals who accepted the validity of witchcraft rather than the entire community. Moreover, the trial transcript does not record any of the forty-nine witnesses interviewed for the trial expressing doubt or doubt about witchcraft. Members of the Essex community who did not agree with either the nature or the substance of this witch trial were pointedly excluded from both the discussion of this trial and acting as witnesses in it. The questioners and judges reduced participation in this trial to individuals who believed as they did and would provide the answers they wanted. In contrast to the doubt expressed by a judge in the 1579 or the recognition of other sources of disaster by a witness in the St. Osyth trial, the scribe for the 1645 trial worked to eliminate any objection expressed about the trial. Indeed, Matthew Hopkins' need to publish his rebuttal of accusations of unfair practices in 1647 strongly suggests that some Essex residents did object to the trial proceedings. This exclusion implies those who oversaw and transcribed the proceedings responded to the challenges about their actions by purposefully remaining silent about them.

This environment of contention and repression about the reality of witchcraft influenced the increased number of individuals arrested and executed. Unlike any of the preceding Essex

⁹⁴ "Examinations, and Confessions of the Late Witches, Arraigned and Executed in the County of Essex," 169.

trials, some of the accused witches confessed to a relationship with the Devil incarnate as a person. The first individual to confess, Elizabeth Clarke, alleged that Satan forced her to perform her acts of destruction and prevented her from resting before their completion. For those who accepted witchcraft as a reality, the threat of witches had escalated from magical practices or acting through imps to the presence of Satan in the community. Similarly, Rebecca Weste claimed “the Devil appeared to her the said Rebecca, as shee was going to bed, and told her, he would marry her, and that shee could not deny him.”⁹⁵ Weste’s confession provides particular insight into the mentality of the 1645 trial. Weste immediately confessed but blamed others for her actions and likely wanted to escape the death sentence. Weste’s testimony, in which she accused five of the other women already arrested of witchcraft, reflects what the questioners wanted to hear about witchcraft. The appearance of the Devil in the confessions and accusations in the trial demonstrates an escalation in the conception witchcraft was and its danger to the community. Previously, the Devil acted only through animals or appeared through a sorcerer’s conjuring. The actual person of the Devil appearing to accused witches made witchcraft more malicious and evil. Clarke’s and Weste’s testimonies convey the difference between the community’s mentality about witchcraft during the fifteenth century and during the 1640s. In the 1560s no question existed about whether witchcraft was a reality but the threat of witchcraft was isolated in the presence of imps and spells. By the 1640s, the polarizing debate about the validity of witchcraft forced those who professed a belief in it to raise the community’s awareness of the threat witchcraft could present.

The omission of doubts about the trial and darker role of witchcraft in the record expose the 1645 trial as a violent reaction to the increasing challenges to the trials and a desperate last

⁹⁵ “Examinations, and Confessions of the Late Witches, Arraigned and Executed in the County of Essex,” 170-77.

effort to push back against the skepticism about the validity of witchcraft belief. Like any trial, the 1645 trial was the result of numerous factors both local and national. Yet placing this trial in the context of the larger debate about the reality and nature of witchcraft provides insight into the mentality of the community in which this trial took place and its existing sources of conflict when the trial started. Advocates of witchcraft belief conducted the 1645 trial and used it as a means of proving the threat that witchcraft could present to the community. As a result, the conception of witchcraft escalated in drama and menace, with the appearance of the devil, and the 1645 trial needed to punish this darker, more dangerous witchcraft accordingly. As the belief in witchcraft came under increasing scrutiny, individuals such as Hopkins and other administrators of the trials needed to prove the integrity not only of their beliefs but also of their actions. Their large scale trial, after years of increasing conflict about the witch trials and a decrease in their numbers, reflects their final push to convey the reality of the threat of witchcraft and punish the menace accordingly.

VIII. Conclusion

By the end of the seventeenth century, much of the English public viewed the witch trials as the product of superstition and irrationality.⁹⁶ This radical transition reflects the malleability of witchcraft belief across England. The published discussion about the trials was not accessible to the entire English public because of the literacy rate and the limited circulation of pamphlets about witch trials and witchcraft belief. For these ideas to affect the English counties so much that the trials were influenced and even ended, scrutiny of the beliefs had to become part of

⁹⁶ John L. Teall, "Witchcraft and Calvinism in Elizabethan England: Divine Power and Human Agency," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 23, no. 1 (Winter-Spring 1962): 26, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2708055> (accessed March 21, 2009).

public conversation. The discourse about witchcraft begun by individuals like Scot redefined what witchcraft was in the minds of the English people. In Essex, the discourse as well as questionable proceedings such as the St. Osyth trial and the 1645 trial led to the gradual decline of the trials and their eventual end.

The Essex trials demonstrate the complex and changing role of the community in the witch trial process. While elements of the conception of witchcraft persisted throughout the one hundred forty year history of the community, the discourse about the subject transformed the nature of the trials and the ideas about what witchcraft was and what it meant for the community. Communities that participated in the witch hunt were not stagnant. Trial records demonstrate not only the nature of witchcraft belief, but also the specific tensions and stresses of a community at a given time. The politics, economic and health struggles, and social dynamics of the community shaped the character of the trials and influenced how and why they ended. Just as trials were conducted by community members rather than by a national organization, they were also ended by individuals who no longer perceived witchcraft as a valid threat to their families, communities, and lives.

Future research should concentrate on how this dialogue about witchcraft changed and shaped the trials. While historians theorized greatly on the influence of pre-Enlightenment ideas about rationality on the end of the witch trials, research could focus on the origins of this discourse and their impact. While the refutations of challenges to witchcraft belief suggest a public discontentment with the trials, research should identify the sources and mediums of this objection and focus on the questions of who participated in the dispute of the validity of witchcraft belief and why. Historians could explore the intersection between the private and public discourse about witchcraft and changes in the nature of trials themselves. By using studies

of communities like Essex, scholars could trace the adaptations of witchcraft belief and how these beliefs affected the witch hunt. Moreover, this research can contribute to larger examinations of national and international trends about the witch hunt. While the English witch trials stand apart from continental European witch trials both in their legal proceedings and conceptions of witchcraft, a better understanding of the development of English ideas about witchcraft and how localities responded to this discourse could augment studies of the continental European trials.

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