The Historiography of English Witchcraft

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***Rationale**: This paper will examine four approaches toward English witchcraft historiography as defined by Malcolm Gaskill of the University of East Anglia: rationalism, romanticism, relativism, and realism. Other researchers have also utilized these categories, to varying degrees of success. Gaskill's definitions leave some room for interpretation and combination. I endeavor in this paper to prevent these categories from becoming too rigid, while still using them as a framework upon which to rest my discussion of English witchcraft historiography.*

Throughout the 20th century, histories of English witchcraft have been written using a variety of approaches. Earlier historians leaned in to the reality of witchcraft, while later studies utilized anthropological tools to create a functionalist history of the subject. The most turbulent era occurred during the 1970s when historians' relationship with interdisciplinary methods changed drastically. Witchcraft has often been at the forefront of interdisciplinary study because of its association with superstition, psychology, sociology, religion, philosophy, science and literature. Attempts to understand witchcraft as a historical reality have at times pushed the field into the realm of anthropology. Today, witchcraft historians often integrate interdisciplinary methods into their research and benefit greatly from public interest in the subject.

It would be difficult to launch into a discussion about English witchcraft historiography without a brief introduction to the subject itself. During the Middle Ages, village magicians, love potions, charms, black and white magic, poisons and herbs were commonplace.[1] The public believed that they were getting spiritual assistance from the devil in order to right the wrongs that had befallen them. In the Early Modern period, village magicians became less common as theologians and inquisitors began to combine perceived magical acts and heresy with folklore and superstition to form a new category for persecution: "heretical sorcery".[2] Simultaneously, the church expanded its ability to go after those who practiced magic by creating inquisitorial teams and investigative agencies.[3] The first demonology (witchcraft guide) that appeared in England was a translated version of Lambert Daneau's *Discours des sorciers* (A Dialogue of Witches) in 1575. These early works were more like encyclopedias than histories and increased public awareness of witchcraft and its signs.

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[1] W. R. Jones, "Abracadabra Sorcery and Witchcraft in European History," *The History Teacher* 5, no. 1 (1971): 27.
[2] Jones, "Abracadabra," 29.
[3] Jones, "Abracadabra," 29.

By the 16th and 17th centuries, 'heretical sorcery', as defined by the Catholic church, included satanic pacts, night-flying, attending the Witch's Sabbath or Black Mass.[4] Here we begin to see differences forming between European and English witchcraft. Europeans believed that witchcraft was strongly diabolical and closely related to devil worship. Many witches were believed to have been closely involved with the Devil. In comparison, English witches were considered more pragmatic, alert, and their magic was grounded in traditional herbalism rather than satanic worship.[5] The English believed that witches had *familiars,* or animal spirit-guides, that assisted their magic. They also believed that every witch had a 'witch's mark' from which their familiar would suck blood. Interestingly, since it was believed that men could not nurse familiars, it was much less common for them to be accused of witchcraft.[6] In Europe, the marks sometimes found on accused witches were believed to be 'Devil's marks' through which the Devil himself could feed, again showing the close connection European leaders made between witchcraft and devil worship.

English witch-trials reached their peak in the mid-17th century. Due to a brief reprieve in censorship during the English Civil War (1642-1651), roving witch hunters both from Europe and England were able to publish and distribute pamphlets to drum up local support for their campaigns.[7] The most deadly witch hunt was conducted by now infamous witch-hunter Matthew Hopkins and his associate John Stearne.[8] It consisted of 250 arrests across 7 counties and resulted in 100 hangings. This vast number makes up one quarter of the total number of witches

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[4] Night-flying: This belief appeared in Europe in the early modern period when witches were expected to fly to their sabbath meetings; Witch's Sabbath: a midnight meeting between witches and the Devil; Black mass: similar to the Catholic version, but instead worshipping the Devil. These often occurred in conjunction with the Witch's Sabbath.
[5] Jones, "Abracadabra," 29.
[6] Monter, "Re-Contextualizing," 110.
[7] Ronald Hutton, "Anthropological and Historical Approaches to Witchcraft: Potential for a New Collaboration?" *The Historical Journa*l 47, no. 2 (2004): 431.
[8] E. William Monter, "Re-Contextualizing British Witchcraft," review of English Witchcraft, 1560-1736 edited by James Sharpe, *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 35, no. 1 (2004): 108.

executed in England during the Early Modern period. Interestingly, because witchcraft accusations were so common in England, scrutiny of them was much stronger than in other areas of the world; thousands of English disputes were settled before trial or dismissed altogether.[9]

The witch-hunt era began its decline in 1660 and finally met its end in 1735 with the creation of The Witchcraft Act[10] which made it a crime for a person to accuse another of possessing magical powers. There is not currently any consensus between historians about how witch-hunts and witchcraft belief began their decline.

Major methodological approaches:

Malcolm Gaskill, author of "The Pursuit of Reality: Recent Research into the History of Witchcraft" published in *The Historical Journal* in 2008, posits that there are four main categories of, or methodological approaches to witchcraft histories: rationalism, romanticism, relativism and realism.[11] These four approaches form a good baseline from which to explore witchcraft historiography, but Gaskill's definitions of these approaches are at times so similar that a single work could easily fall into multiple categories. This section of my paper will attempt to define the four approaches and point out places where they overlap. It is also important to note that the time periods indicated for each historiographical approach are not definite, nor was there a complete absence of other approaches toward witchcraft history during each.

Rationalist historians in the early 18th century thought the middle ages and early modern period were consumed by superstition driven by ardent religiosity.[12] They were apt to explain

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[9] R. Clifton, review of *Witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart England* by Alan Macfarlane, *History* 59, no. 56 (October 1971): 442.

[10] Passed in 1735, The Witchcraft Act made it a crime for a person to accuse another of magical acts or witchcraft. Prior to this point, any laws about witchcraft made it a crime for a person to practice magic. The Witchcraft Act of 1736 reversed this policy and instead made the *belief* in magic punishable.

[11] Gaskill, "Pursuit," 1069.; Clearly drawing on alliteration, Gaskill attempts to re-cast the functionalist historical method into what he calls 'relativism'.

[12] Gaskill, "Pursuit," 1069.

away magical phenomena as coincidence, or as a result of poison, mental illness, or trickery. As put eloquently by Gaskill, "...they are exchanging an alien reality for one we understand."[13] These historians were likely part of the Age of Reason movement in the 17th century, which encompassed the rise of reason, enlightenment, free thought and a societal divorce from superstition and mysticism found in earlier periods. Consequently, very few witchcraft histories written during this time period. Traits consistent with rationalist thinking also appeared during the boom that witchcraft histories enjoyed in the 1970s. When historians began studying demonologies written between 1400 and 1700, it was hard for them to identify what would have been considered 'magical' acts.[14] The cautionary stories included in demonologies often ended with no clear evidence of magical intervention. As stated by historian Marion Gibson, according to modern historians, "The arguments offered by demonologists not only did not support the weight of the conclusions, which had led to so much death and misery, but they could never have supported it."[15] Feminist historians theorized that witch-hunts must have in fact been woman-hunts steeped in deeply held misogyny.[16] It seemed to them that the authors were assigning inherent wickedness to the women in the stories by not clearly identifying any wrongdoing.[17]

Romanticism, the next of Gaskill's categories, appeared in the late 18th century as a counterpoint to rationalism, but was not necessarily in conflict with it. Novelists, poets, and musicians during the 18th and 19th centuries reacted to industrialization by placing an emphasis on the importance of the natural world and valued feeling over thought. Since they also saw

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[13] Gaskill, "Pursuit," 1085.
[14] Marion Gibson, "Thinking Witchcraft: Language, Literature and Intellectual History," in *Palgrave Advances in Witchcraft Historiography*, ed. Jonathan Barry and Owen Davies (Basingstoke [England]: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 168.
[15] Gibson, "Thinking," 169.
[16] See: Selma Williams and Pamela J. Williams, *Riding the Nightmare: Women & Witchcraft* (New York: Atheneum, 1978).
[17] Gibson, "Thinking," 169.

magic and mysticism as an overflow of feeling, it became a common theme in fictional works. By the end of the 19th century, nostalgia for a time when magic roamed free had taken over public consciousness and romanticists began to adopt cults as surrogate ancestors. The public wanted to believe in magic and witchcraft as a way to escape the ever-increasing pace of life during the Victorian Era.

Despite the obvious difference in methodology, rationalism and romanticism were not at odds with each other. Romanticists believed in a type of magic stemming from the ancient world and like rationalists, believed that witch-hunts during the early modern era were not based on accurate information. Rationalists thought magical phenomena could be explained away using science, coincidence and happenstance, while romanticists believed that witch-finders and the church simply misunderstood and attributed evil to occult or ancient religious practices. Either way, both approaches were critical of the 16th and 17th century witch-hunts.

After witnessing the horrors of World War One, historians began to search for alternatives for their (now shaken) religious and moral beliefs. Drawing on previously-known histories about cults and ancient religions, some historians re-cast 16th and 17th century witches as active practicing occultists.[18] This rationale allowed both romantic ideals and the belief in magic as an ancient religion to appear in historical works.[19] After the romanticist works written during the interwar period witchcraft historiography entered a lull that lasted until the field was refreshed by the introduction of anthropological in the latter half of the 20th century.

In the late 1960s, the line between history and anthropology began to blur as anthropologists underwent several methodological breakthroughs resulting from their work in

[18] See: Margaret Murray, *The Witch-Cult in Western Europe* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1921) and Montague Summers, *The History of Witchcraft and Demonology* (London: Routledge, 1926).
[19] E. William Monter, "The Historiography of European Witchcraft: Progress and Prospects," *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 2, no. 4 (1972): 437, https://doi.org/10.2307/202315.

colonial Africa. The invention of 'functional anthropology' would signal a change both in anthropological and historiographical approach toward witchcraft history.[20] Functional anthropologists pioneered the idea that all cultural traits (religion, kinship, economy) are interrelated and work together to form a complete social system. Witchcraft historians in the early 1970s took this theory and applied it to historical sources to create a complete picture of 16th and 17th century cultures. Into this framework, they were able to weave witchcraft and its many appearances, iterations and symptoms. In keeping with his alliterative theme, Gaskill calls this methodological approach "relativism", but I argue that a better name would be 'functionalism' to relate it more closely with the anthropological method from which it grew. This new method provided some of the conclusions that modern historians take for granted: that accusations were more or less constant throughout the early modern period; that social pressures within communities themselves led to accusations; that accusations were vehicles for expression of personal or communal aggression; that witch persecutions affected major social change and caused neighborly interpersonal relationships to turn sour.

But the historiographical debate did not end there. American historians in the 1970s rejected the cross-discipline approach utilized by Thomas and Macfarlane saying "that the 'primitive' social groups of sub-Saharan Africa bore so little resemblance to the more complex cultures and societies of Europe that comparisons were unhelpful."[21] Historian E. William Monter agreed saying "non-Western social anthropology provides keys that do not fit European locks."[22] Due to these criticisms, anthropological methods were shut out of witchcraft research by the 1980s. Historians turned instead to tools from other disciplines in their quest to map the

[20] Anthropologist E.E. Evans-Pritchard's 1937 study, *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande*, is an outlier of this trend. It was written well before functional anthropology came into style and yet happened to utilize many of its methods.
[21] Hutton, "Anthropological," 414.
[22] Hutton, "Anthropological," 414.

16th and 17th century English social system such as cultural studies, philosophy, psychology, criminology, literary theory and philosophy of science.[23] This process helped the field of witchcraft historiography become more interdisciplinary and allowed for a more nuanced study of the interactions between witches and accusers.

In the 1990s, anthropologist Peter Geschiere called for those in his field to learn from historical studies of European witch trials in an effort to increase their understanding of modern African witch-hunts. Geschiere believed that European witchcraft histories "had shown that beliefs at the local level could only be understood in relation to wider historical processes; he termed the neglect of these studies by recent anthropology 'even more disconcerting' than the lack of awareness of research in Africa on the part of historians of Europe."[24] This call for more integration between the anthropological method and the historical method in the field of witchcraft effectively brought the two disciplines back together. Historians again started using anthropological methods cultivated in studies of European, African, North American and Asian cultures that experienced witchcraft, and vice versa.

The last type of witchcraft historiography defined by Gaskill is realism or "...history committed to the recovery of meaning and experience from above, below, and within."[25] It is a realist historian's job to convey as accurately as possible the lived-experience of the accused, accusers and bystanders involved in witch hunts. Noted witchcraft historian Keith Thomas posits in his work *Religion and the Decline of Magic* that witchcraft was not a fantasy, but in fact a "culturally acceptable form of reality."[26] Thomas argues that the lived-experience of witchcraft contemporaries indicated that witchcraft was 'real' for them and therefore exerted psychological

[23] Hutton, "Anthropological," 419.
[24] Hutton, "Anthropological," 418.
[25] Gaskill, "Pursuit," 1086.
[26] Gaskill, "Pursuit," 1072.

force on their lives that should not be discounted. In the late 1970s, Thomas also stated that historians needed to be wary about attaching modern Western terminology to other cultures. He argued that subjects and people needed to be studied within their own terms, knowledge and mentality.[27]

This is where the methodological approaches laid out by Gaskill begin to blend. According to Gaskill's definitions of relativism and realism, it is clear that they share many ideological similarities and are only functionally different, but more clarification is needed. Realism mandates that we *treat* magic as a historical reality in our discussion and study of it, while relativism (functionalism) instructs us to map out the systemic nature of 16th and 17th century England in order to determine *how* magic became a historical reality. Relativism is typically used in macrohistories comparing different regions or social divisions within a region. Realism is a primarily microhistorical practice that is utilized when studying individual sources and attempting to portray witchcraft in historical writing. However, both do insist upon treating magic as a lived-reality for 16th and 17th century Britons.

Gaskill splits the two categories in order to distinguish pre- and post-Linguistic Turn methods. British historians were at first resistant to the Linguistic Turn and the change it would bring to their work; books integrating ideas from the Turn are found starting in the 1990s.[28] Realism can only exist alongside an understanding of the dangers of assigning modern terminology and understanding to historical events. Relativism (functionalism) is a way to acknowledge and explore the lived-experience of witchcraft contemporaries but does not typically include a discussion of language or acknowledge the historian's own preconceptions/interpretation of sources. Thus, functionalist witchcraft histories often interject

[27] Hutton, "Anthropological," 415.
[28] James Vernon, "Who's Afraid of the 'Linguistic Turn'? The Politics of Social History and Its Discontents," *Social History* 19, no. 1 (January 1994): 83.

modern conceptions of social relations into discussions of historical cultures. Both realism and relativism should be utilized when studying witchcraft in order to furnish a complete understanding of a subject's lived-experience.

Major works:

During the rationalist phase of witchcraft historiography (c. 1770-1918), one of the prevailing methods of studying witchcraft history was to not study it at all. The field was largely rejected by historians due to its association with superstition and mysticism. In the early 20th century, however, witchcraft and witch-hunts again began to be studied. Historian Wallace Notestein believed witchcraft needed to be understood if one was going to do a complete work of 16th and 17th century life. He states in his book *A History of Witchcraft in England from 1558 to 1718* published in 1909, "...the study of English witchcraft is more than an unsightly exposure of a forgotten superstition. There were few aspects of sixteenth and seventeenth century life that were not affected by the ugly belief."[29] Notestein, through his study of manuscripts, pamphlets, newspapers, diaries and court files, covers several periods of witchcraft within England ranging from Medieval beliefs, to the Elizabethan Era. He also covers the final decline of witchcraft belief, which he believes began with the publication of Francis Hutchinson's *Historical Essay on Witchcraft* in 1718 and ended with the repeal of witchcraft as a statutory crime in 1736.[30] Notestein clearly does not believe in witchcraft himself, and often searches for alternative causes of accusations beyond what was brought as evidence in court.[31] According to one reviewer, "Mr. Notestein, making full allowance of the psychology of disease, is alert to discover the manifold

[29] Wallace Notestein, *A History of Witchcraft from 1558 to 1718* (Washington: The American Historical Association, 1911), 1.
[30] Notestein, *A History of Witchcraft*, 314.
[31] W.E. Lunt, review of *A History of Witchcraft in England from 1558 to 1718* by Wallace Notestein, *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 44, The Outlook for Industrial Peace (Nov. 1912): 179.

signs (very frequently seen by contemporaries) or interested imposture, and too often of active malice."[32] Notestein uses phrases such as "superstition", "ugly belief" and "strange and tragic" to describe early modern belief in witches.[33] Reviews of his work by other historians in the 1910s similarly cast a rationalist shadow over witchcraft belief, calling it a "delusion", a "[plot] against the life of Queen Elizabeth", and "the great illusion of the witch."[34]

Once witchcraft became a topic deemed fit for historical study in the first decade of the 20th century, alternatives to the rationalist method began to appear. In 1921, Margaret Murray, an anthropologist from London University, published her work *The Witch-Cult in Western Europe* in which she argues that witchcraft in the 16th and 17th centuries was in fact derived from a paleolithic fertility religion that survived the Roman conquest and Christianization of the West.[35] She believed that the women accused of witchcraft were practicing occultists. Murray, trained as an anthropologist, uses both her romantic lens and the strategies of evolutionism and diffusionism to build her argument.[36] Splitting her study between two groups of people, believers [in magic] and unbelievers, she is able to make her case for witchcraft as religion.[37]

Reviews by other historians in the 1920s lauded this work as a comprehensive study of early modern witchcraft that used a wealth of sources and anecdotes.[38] Lending her more

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[32] Geo. Neilson, review of *A History of Witchcraft in England from 1558 to 1718* by Wallace Notestein, *The Scottish Historical Review* 10, no. 40 (July 1913): 410.
[33] Notestein, *A History of Witchcraft*, 1; Notestein, *A History of Witchcraft*, V.
[34] G. F. B., review of *A History of Witchcraft*, 129; G. F. B., review of *A History of Witchcraft*, 130.; G. F. B., review of *A History of Witchcraft*, 411.
[35] Jones, "Abracadabra," 29.
[36] Evolutionism is the theory that all customs and cultural traits are residuals of portions of cultural history and that each trait stands for something in the past. Diffusionism is the theory that cultural items and customs spread across and between cultures. Both are based in anthropology.
[37] *"Among the believers in witchcraft everything which could not be explained by the knowledge at their disposal was laid to the credit of supernatural powers; ... As also every non-Christian God was, in the eyes of the Christians, the opponent of the Christian God, the witches were considered to worship the Enemy of Salvation, in other words, the Devil. ... It is only by a careful comparison with the evidence of anthropology that the facts fall into their proper places and an organized religion stands revealed."* Murray, The Witch-Cult, 1.
[38] Robert H. Murray, review of *The Witch-Cult in Western Europe: A Study in Anthropology* by Margaret Alice Murray, *The English Historical Review* 37, no. 146 (April 1922): 276-277.; Geo. Neilson, review of *The Witch-Cult*

credibility, some of her arguments were included in the *Encyclopedia Britannica* (until the 1966 edition).[39] Interestingly, one of the historians who reviewed this work also reviewed Notestein's rationalist work, *A History of Witchcraft in England from 1588 to 1718*.[40] Both reviews were positive. Murray's theory and Notestein's theory could indeed live together as one does not discredit the other. However, Murray was eventually discredited by both American historians and British anthropologists. They argued that much of her evidence was cited out of context and was from a time when her proposed fertility cult was in fact crumbling out of existence.[41] They also argue that her argument ignores the evolution of occult traditions within Europe and the effects of both time and geography on their practices.[42]

The first historian to utilize functionalism in his research was Keith Thomas in the late 1960s. In his revolutionary work *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, published in 1970, Thomas explores English culture and customs in order to paint a full picture of the reality of magical belief in England. He does this by exploring the changes in religion, magical healing, astrology, prophecies, crime, and social structures in the countryside. Thomas' thesis is of "witchcraft as a rival 'system' of belief and, moreover, as but one of several occult substitutes (magic healing, astrology, prophecies) for religion."[43] Throughout his work, Thomas posits that witchcraft accusations were a great way to keep people in line with moral and social codes and explores the economic, social and moral factors of accusations.[44]

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in Western Europe: A Study in Anthropology by Margaret Alice Murray, *The Scottish Historical Review* 19, no. 76 (July 1922): 305-307.

[39] Monter, "Historiography," 439.

[40] Neilson, review of *A History of Witchcraft*, 409-411.; Neilson, review of *The Witch-Cult*, 305-307.

[41] Monter, "Historiography," 438-9.

[42] Jones, "Abracadabra," 30.

[43] Rossell Hope Robbins, review of *Religion and the Decline of Magic* by Keith Thomas, *Renaissance Quarterly* 26, no. 2 (March 1975): 113-114.

[44] Don Handelman, review of *Religion and the Decline of Magic* by Keith Thomas, *American Anthropologist, New Series* 75, no. 4 (August 1973): 1027-1028.

Alan Macfarlane, a student of Thomas, followed in his teacher's footsteps in his work *Witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart England (1970).* Macfarlane analyzes court records, literary sources, pamphlets, wills, manor records, parish registers and subsidy assessments to forge connections between the accused and accusers. He posits that they usually knew each other and many accusations were over mundane events such as food spoiling, overturned carts or animal deaths.[45] Macfarlane attempts to create a complete sociological theory of witchcraft in England by exploring the causes and effects of accusations.[46] One of his findings: that "witchcraft prosecutions may be seen as a means of effecting a deep social change … from a neighborly, highly integrated and mutually interdependent village society, to a more individualistic one."[47]

Both Thomas' and Macfarlane's works marked the shift from rationalism and romanticism into relativism (functionalism) in an attempt to deepen understanding of witchcraft beliefs by comparison between cultures and societal analysis.[48] They attempt to study the societal norms and culture of 16th and 17th century England in order to map out the causes and symptoms of witch-belief across social classes. They both work to identify systemic causes of witchcraft accusations that spring from social interactions between individual people and between different loci of power within society.

The subsequent shift away from functionalism in the 1980s is exemplified by Christina Larner's *Witchcraft and Religion: The Politics of Popular Belief*. By discussing early modern witchcraft through political, religious, ideological, legal and social contexts, Larner searches for

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[45] R. Clifton, review of *Witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart England* by Alan Macfarlane, *History* 56, no. 188 (October 1971): 442.
[46] Alan Marwick, review of *Witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart England* by Alan Macfarlane, *Man, New Series* 6, no. 2 (June 1971): 320-321.
[47] Marwick, review of *Witchcraft,* 321.
[48] Gaskill, "Pursuit," 1085-88.

a unified ideology between the church and state.[49] She claims that witchcraft belief could only exist through combined messaging from multiple layers of society. In the second part of this work, Larner criticizes the work of both Thomas and Macfarlane for being outdated and simplistic.[50] In her opinion, functionalism is a method better left to the colonial world of the 1950s and 60s.

After the swing back toward anthropological methods in the study of witchcraft, several books were published that solely utilized comparative anthropology, or relativism, one of which is Emma Wilby's 2006 work, *Cunning Folk and Familiar Spirits: Shamanistic Visionary Traditions in Early Modern British Witchcraft and Magic*.[51] In this work, Wilby compares British witchcraft directly with modern Native American and Siberian shamanistic beliefs. Wilby also attempts to express the cultural reality of spirits and of spiritual assistance from witches.[52] Her work has been criticized for being light on sources, at times factually incorrect, and presumptive about cultural relationships with religion. One reviewer even went so far as to call her work an anthropological study rather than a historical one.[53]

The shift back toward anthropological methods in the 1990s combined with the Linguistic Turn, created another one of Gaskill's categories: realism. This approach is exemplified by Stuart Clark, author of *Languages of Witchcraft: Narrative, Ideology and Meaning in Early Modern Culture*. Clark was not satisfied that witchcraft was often only studied as a byproduct of some other social process; he wanted to go straight to the source and focus on

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[49] Rab Houston, review of *Witchcraft and Religion: The Politics of Popular Belief* by Christine Larner, *Man, New Series* 20, no. 3 (September 1985): 575.
[50] Houston, review of *Witchcraft*, 575.
[51] Emma Wilby, *Cunning Folk and Familiar Spirits: Shamanistic Visionary Traditions in Early Modern British Witchcraft and Magic* (Portland: Sussex Academic Press, 2010).
[52] Gaskill, "Pursuit," 1083-4.
[53] Gaskill, "Pursuit," 1086.

demonologists' work and discover what they were saying about early modern society.[54] It is his aim to represent the contextual meaning of language expressed in primary sources as accurately as possible.

He believes that we should attempt to understand the meanings of language within its own contemporary terms.[55] Clark treats 'reality' as a cultural variant, an aspect of society that is different between cultures, in order to work with seemingly imaginary beliefs and practices like magic.[56] By assuming that witchcraft existed within a reality of its own, Clark is able to focus instead on interpreting the hopes, fears and actions of people associated with witchcraft on their own terms.[57] In his introduction, Clark instructs the reader to consider the use of language in each example and account. He asks us to think about how our own modern conception of words and actions could affect our understanding of the situations described. Clark posits that we are not able to fully understand or appreciate the intense integration that magic, and sorcery had in early modern communities.

Today, Universities teach a combination of relativism (functionalism) and realism to allow students to integrate understanding of both the Linguistic Turn and anthropology into their studies.

Recent developments and areas of concern:

Lying between Gaskill's categories are several modern studies that integrate other fields into witchcraft studies. Historian Ian Bostridge attempts to situate the end of British witch-hunting within the framework of early British political parties in his 1997 work *Witchcraft and*

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[54] Gibson, "Thinking," 170.
[55] Gaskill, "Pursuit," 1072.
[56] Stuart Clark, "Introduction," in *Languages of Witchcraft: Narrative, Ideology and Meaning in Early Modern Culture*, ed. Stuart Clark (Basingstoke [England]: Macmillan Press Ltd., 2001), 5.
[57] Clark, "Introduction," 6.

Its Transformations c. 1650-1750. According to historian T.O. Beidelman, Bostridge posits that the decline in witchcraft belief "was a piecemeal decline mainly resulting from an increasing secularization of the state and a growing toleration of religious pluralism."[58] Bostridge, unlike most modern historians of witchcraft, does not use sociology or anthropology in his method. He only discusses witchcraft within the realm of political structure and motivations.

Brian Levack, author of *The Witch-Hunt in Early Modern Europe*, published in 2016, makes the case that witchcraft historiography should be linked to the history of the law.[59] According to Levack, changes in legal procedure had a major role in shaping the outcomes of witch trials. He also posits that the topic should be situated within the history of crime and criminality.[60] Likewise, Stuart Clark, who published his work *Languages of Witchcraft* in 2001, relates witchcraft to science and re-casts demonology as early modern philosophy.

Another recent trend within witchcraft studies is the emergence of microhistories focusing on singular trials rather than county-wide studies as individual legal records and personal accounts become more available to historians across England. The renewed interest in popular culture surrounding witches and witchcraft also has an effect on the types of stories historians are willing to tell; microhistories with a strong story arc are much more popular to a non-historian audience.

One of the most prevalent issues of concern within the field of witchcraft historiography is the fact that there is no universal definition of witchcraft. Magic has had many forms throughout history and as perception changed, so did the meaning of the word. What a person in France considers magic, a person in England may consider herbalism or sorcery. If one was to

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[58] Beidelman, T.O., review of *Witchcraft and Its Transformations* by Ian Bostridge, *Anthropos* Bd. 93, H 4./6. (1998): 587.
[59] Bailey, "Review," 83.
[60] Brian P. Levack, *The Witch-Hunt in Early Modern Europe* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 1-26.

compare cultures, argues anthropologist Malcolm Crick, a common definition is needed to ensure that one is comparing apples to apples. He asserts that concepts vary so much between cultures that 'witchcraft' could not be treated as a general topic at all.

Silences and inaccuracies can be formed at several stages of the historical process. As Historian Michel-Rolph Trouillot discusses in his work *Silencing the Past*, one of the most delicate stages is when the historical narrative is written.[61] If a historian does not accurately record instances of magic or deliberately re-casts them during the writing process, a silence that later historians need to combat in order to understand the true meaning of magic within a society is created. This lack of clarity results in awkward comparisons between cultures and a general lack of specificity about what historians are considering as witchcraft. These shifting definitions make it difficult to understand how different magical phenomena were viewed by contemporaries.

In some cases, it may not be possible to ever understand the true meaning of witchcraft to those who lived in the 15th and 16th centuries. As historian Stuart Clark states in his article "Inversion, Misrule and the Meaning of Witchcraft", "...we no longer readily understand the language of early modern witchcraft beliefs."[62] Historians must unravel this linguistic code in order to understand the true nature of witchcraft in the early modern period; it is vital that they avoid jumping to modern conclusions. Involuntary rationalism, as in the 1970s when feminist historians were attempting to decipher demonologies and inadvertently re-cast witch-hunts as woman-hunts, is a constant danger.

Increased public interest has also created a strong sense of injustice on behalf of those believed to have been persecuted unfairly (whether they were victims of mistaken identity, or

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[61] Trouillot, *Silencing*, 53.
[62] Gibson, "Thinking," 167-8.

indeed practicing occultists). There have been multiple campaigns aiming to pardon and memorialize executed witches.[63] According to Trouillot, isolating and memorializing single events or lives creates individual facts that jut out of the overall historical timeline and are given weighted importance Through posthumous pardons, executed witches become tragic heroes; their lived-reality is erased or they may have even believed themselves guilty. Assigning a role and belief-system to these people overwrites their true thoughts and emotions; in effect, both the accused and the accusers' intentions are silenced. Trouillot also argues that by commemorating particular witches and witch trials, we are effectively creating 'befores' and an 'afters' with no context or basis in true historical change.

The field of witchcraft studies is ever-evolving. With so much historiographical change occurring in just the past 40 years, one must assume this pace of evolution will continue. Gaskill's four categories of witchcraft historiography allow students of witchcraft to explore the approaches already taken by historians. While it is not a perfect framework, rationalism, romanticism, relativism and realism help students place the approaches within larger historical and historiographical trends. More recent witchcraft histories have effectively moved out of Gaskill's four category framework into a new era. Integrating interdisciplinary methods and approaching discussions of witchcraft with an understanding of the importance of lived-experience is essential to keep the field moving forward.

[63] Gaskill, "Pursuit," 1086.

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