

Witchcraft in early modern Europe

Studies in culture and belief

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1. *Introduction: Keith Thomas and the problem of witchcraft*

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Few historical enterprises have been as intensively historiographical and reflexive in character as the study of witchcraft in early modern Europe. Doubts about the very existence, let alone the character, of the object of study, together with the interdisciplinary nature of the subject, have ensured that the explosion of studies in this field since the 1960s has been accompanied by a regular rethinking of its intellectual parameters and conceptual tools. One of the most important moments in this process was the publication in 1971 of *Religion and the Decline of Magic* by Keith Thomas.¹ The essays in this book, arising from a conference held in 1991, examine the developments in witchcraft scholarship in the last two decades or so in the light of Thomas' contribution. In part a review of his influence, it also offers both prescriptions and examples for alternative approaches. This introduction begins this process by re-examining the arguments of *Religion and the Decline of Magic* in the light of subsequent studies (particularly, but not exclusively, in the English-speaking world), as a way of exploring the changing nature of witchcraft research.

Like any reception study, this chapter will chart an uneasy course between analysis of what Thomas himself was arguing and what has been read into his work. *Religion and the Decline of Magic* is a large and complex work, in which witchcraft is only one theme. It could be seen as both a strength and a weakness of the book that it offers a remarkably

¹ His approach had been signalled in an earlier article and through the publication in the previous year of Alan Macfarlane's study of Essex witchcraft, based on research supervised by Thomas: K. Thomas, 'The relevance of social anthropology to the historical study of English witchcraft', in M. Douglas, ed., *Witchcraft Confessions and Accusations* (1970), pp. 47–80; A. Macfarlane, *Witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart England* (1970). In this chapter references will be to the revised Penguin edition of *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (Harmondsworth, 1973).

multistranded, even eclectic, account, anticipating to some degree almost all subsequent approaches and arguments about witchcraft. At the same time, Thomas, or perhaps one should say ‘Thomas–Macfarlane’, has been particularly associated with one specific approach, drawing on functionalist anthropology and a specific type of ‘village-level’ analysis of witchcraft in relation to social tensions. Without adjudicating on the fairness of this encapsulation of Thomas’ argument,² it is important to note that, like any other historical classic (the obvious parallel would be with E. P. Thompson’s *Making of the English Working Class*), *Religion and the Decline of Magic* has become a contested symbol for all kinds of debate about the nature of the historical discipline. However (unlike Thompson’s work), the book has not attracted any sustained historiographical analysis since its early reviews.³ A full analysis of that kind would need to give equal weight to all parts of the volume (for example, the influence on Reformation studies of his view of the magic of the late medieval church and its continued attractiveness), whereas this chapter concentrates on witchcraft.

Like any great work, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* is notable as much for establishing the centrality of its theme as a historical problem as for any specific solution that it offers to that problem. To understand its impact, however, we have to place it alongside a number of other works that, around the same time, were making witchcraft appear a mainstream concern for early modern European history, not just an intriguing side issue. Traditionally, the historiography of witchcraft, itself marginal to historical writing, laid no particular claim to attention as a problem for early modernists. Belief in witchcraft represented the continuation of medieval delusion and superstition, set to be destroyed by the rise of such aspects of modernity as science and legal professionalism. Even those scholars who dissented from this ‘whiggish’ approach

² The encapsulation is offered by Thomas himself in ‘Relevance of social anthropology’.

³ T. Ashplant and A. Wilson, ‘Present-centred history’, *Historical Journal*, 31 (1988), 253–74 (at 257–61) uses the book as an example of the methodological problems besetting ‘present-centred history’, but does not offer a substantial empirical account of the book. The fullest responses have come from anthropologists and other social scientists, notably in Thomas’ exchange with Hildred Geertz: ‘An anthropology of religion and magic’, *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 6 (1975), 71–109. See also: R. Keynes’s review in *Journal of the Anthropological Society of Oxford*, 3: 3 (1972), 149–57; M. Crick, *Explorations in Language and Meaning* (1976), pp. 109–26; D. O’Keefe, *Stolen Lightning: The Social Theory of Magic* (Oxford, 1982), pp. 440–9; S. J. Tambiah, *Magic, Science, Religion and the Scope of Rationality* (New York, 1990), pp. 18–24.

did so in a manner which denied witchcraft any problematic status, since they assumed that it really existed, either as diabolical worship (Montague Summers) or as a pagan cult (Margaret Murray).⁴ Yet by the 1960s there was mounting empirical evidence that the persecution of witches, at the very least, was growing in intensity in early modern Europe and that this growth could itself be attributed, at least in part, to the forces of modernisation.⁵ It was this evidence that Hugh Trevor-Roper so elegantly marshalled in his essay on the European witch-craze.⁶ In a world still darkened by Nazism and mortally threatened by the Cold War, Trevor-Roper chronicled the resurgence of what he saw as an elite irrationality, linked in particular to the Reformation's defeat of Erasmian humanism. Yet, for him, as for earlier scholars, witchcraft beliefs amongst the ordinary people were an unproblematic survival of age-old superstitions.

Thomas accepted the challenge posed by Trevor-Roper and the other studies, that is, to explain the greater impact of witchcraft beliefs in the early modern period, and yet dissented from Trevor-Roper's characterisation of both elite and peasant mentalities. Thomas sought to find the 'logical coherence of despised beliefs' (in Macfarlane's words)⁷ and how they appealed to those whom Thomas characterised as 'intelligent persons' of the past (p. ix; cf. pp. 105 and 800). As Thomas himself summarised his study's task: 'it has to offer a *psychological* explanation of the motives of the participants in the drama of witchcraft accusation, a *sociological* analysis of the situation in which such accusations tended to occur, and an *intellectual* explanation of the concepts which made such accusations plausible' (p. 559, his italics). It is significant that, despite this ordering of the three tasks, Thomas actually began with the issue of intellectual plausibility.⁸

⁴ M. Murray, *The Witch Cult in Western Europe* (1921); M. Summers, *The History of Witchcraft and Demonology* (1926).

⁵ Bibliographical surveys of this phase of study and proposals for further research by two of the leading American scholars of European witchcraft can be found in H. C. E. Midelfort, 'Recent witch-hunting research, or where do we go from here', *Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America*, 62 (1968), 373–423 and E. W. Monter, 'The historiography of European witchcraft: progress and prospects', *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 2 (1972), 433–51.

⁶ H. R. Trevor-Roper, *The European Witch-Craze of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (1967: rev. edn, Harmondsworth, 1969).

⁷ In *History Today*, 31 (Apr. 1981), 56–7.

⁸ In his response to Geertz, Thomas wrote: 'Neither was my treatment of witchcraft primarily psychological in character. I tried to show that witchcraft *beliefs* were not private delusions, generated by situations of stress, but were anchored in a culturally

This priority is important, given the frequent criticism of *Religion and the Decline of Magic* for its 'functionalist' as opposed to meaning-oriented account of witchcraft.⁹ As this introduction will itself question aspects of Thomas' approach, and propose a more cultural model for witchcraft history, it is worth noting that the functionalism to which Thomas himself pleaded guilty is *not* a type of analysis which is content simply to analyse the social utility of a belief or action, regardless of its meaning to the individual actors involved. Thomas himself distinguished a functionalist approach from a 'utilitarian' one, defining the former as studying 'the socially useful consequences of the belief in question, regardless of its intrinsic merits' (pp. 748–50). This may still sound utilitarian, but as frequent passages in *Religion and the Decline of Magic* make clear, these socially useful functions are identified by individuals in relation to their aims and values, not dictated by an abstract social function. Indeed, the 'function' repeatedly identified for magical beliefs, including witch beliefs, is of providing a meaningful explanation for the apparently inexplicable in individual life (e.g. pp. 623, 642, 794). Thomas' explanation of witchcraft in particular, and magic in general, can only be appreciated if it is seen in the context of the close relationship between anxiety, misfortune and guilt which dominates the book (pp. ix, 17–24, 179, 676). The decline of magic, or Weberian 'disenchantment of the world', that Thomas wished to portray is the unravelling of this nexus in personal experience and values. Hence his account of witchcraft accusations hinges on notions of guilt felt by the accuser (as compared to feelings of revenge, envy or rebelliousness, which others in this volume emphasise) and the decline of witchcraft arises, in large part, from the unravelling of this mentality in educated thought, in the minds of 'intelligent persons'.¹⁰ In this sense the criticism

acceptable view of reality . . . part of a much larger corpus of assumptions about the universe.' Thomas, 'Anthropology', 100. However, in an article published in 1985, Thomas regretted that he had not explored further 'the mental assumptions that made [astrology, magic and witchcraft] plausible' (P. Scott, 'Conjuring the Past', *The Times Higher Educational Supplement*, 18 Jan. 1985, 11).

⁹ Geertz, 'Anthropology', passim, especially 79; B. R. Copenhaver's review in *Church History*, 41 (1972), 423; G. Scarre, *Witchcraft and Magic in Sixteenth and Seventeenth-Century Europe* (1987), pp. 41–4.

¹⁰ Thomas, 'Anthropology', 98 and 100, emphasises this theme in the book, as does A. Macfarlane, 'Evil' in his *The Culture of Capitalism* (Oxford, 1987), pp. 101–2, where he sees this as the theme linking *Religion and the Decline of Magic* with Thomas' later book, *Man and the Natural World* (1983); for a review of this theme see R. W. Scribner, 'The Reformation, popular magic and the "Disenchantment of the World"', *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 23 (1992–3), 475–94. O'Keefe, *Stolen*

of Thomas for having it both ways about whether such guilt served a conservative or radical social *function* (to reinforce norms of neighbourliness about whose breach one feels guilty or to break them) mistakes his main interest (unlike that of Macfarlane), which was not to establish the functionality of witchcraft for society as a whole so much as its plausibility to a specific person faced with an immediate problem (pp. 674–6).¹¹

Thomas' functionalism has also been held responsible for his failure to see magic as a system of belief with internal coherence, while granting this privileged status to religion. He has been accused of following Malinowski in treating magic as a pragmatic collection of (ineffective) techniques.¹² It is certainly true that Thomas made this distinction in some crucial passages (pp. 750, 761), and that *Religion and the Decline of Magic* displays his clear preference for what are called 'coherent' (pp. 105, 125, 215, 455, 750) or 'comprehensive' (pp. 384, 391, 760–1) forms of thought over others. But the main thrust of the book as a whole is surely to re-establish for the reader the coherence of magical systems – most clearly in the case of astrology, and least effectively, perhaps, in that of demonology, as we shall see – and also to establish the interconnectedness of both religion and magic as sharing a common meta-belief, namely the anxiety-misfortune-guilt relationship. There are repeated references to magical ideas as 'systems of belief' (e.g. pp. ix, 206, 767) and if one takes the book as a whole it is a study of 'allied beliefs' and 'interconnections' (especially pp. 755–66). *Religion and the Decline of Magic* presents religion and magic, until the late seventeenth century, as part of one cognitive system, at least in relation

Lightning, pp. 440–7 emphasises *Religion and the Decline of Magic's* position as a cognitive intellectual history, while placing it within an 'Oxford' school concerned with social strain.

¹¹ J. Bossy, 'Early modern magic', *History*, 57 (1972), 399–403 is especially acute on the strains within *Religion and the Decline of Magic*. Peter Burke (in B. Ankarloo and G. Henningsen, eds., *Early Modern European Witchcraft: Centres and Peripheries* (Oxford, 1990), p. 436) sees Thomas emphasising the conservative aspect, compared to Macfarlane, while G. R. Quaipe (*Godly Zeal and Furious Rage* (1987), p. 12) sees Thomas as emphasising the radical function.

¹² J. Butler, 'Magic, astrology and the early American religious heritage', *American Historical Review*, 84 (1979), 319; R. A. Horsley, 'Further reflections on witchcraft and European folk religion', *History of Religions*, 19 (1979), 74–6; C. Larner, *Witchcraft and Religion* (Oxford, 1984), p. 145; R. Godbeer, *The Devil's Dominion: Magic and Religion in Early New England* (Cambridge, 1992), pp. 11–13. Thomas, 'Anthropology', 95 claims that such a definition was introduced 'half frivolously', and was alien to his working definition in 'the main body of the book'.

to anxiety, misfortune and guilt (pp. 173, 179, 318, 761–6), although in exploring their connections Thomas stressed magic's debt to religion not vice versa.¹³ Thomas' methodological critics have also overlooked the fact that his intended audience was largely one of historians, requiring persuasion to view magic in the same light as religion, who would only be alienated by the implication that religion is just magic.

It is helpful to consider the wider question of Thomas' use of anthropology in this light. Although he clearly valued anthropology, not least for its detached approach, Thomas also deployed it to get historians to take magical beliefs and their analysis seriously. If we look at how anthropology is introduced in *Religion and the Decline of Magic* we find, as E. P. Thompson noted approvingly,¹⁴ that anthropologists are used to suggest hypotheses and provide analogies (e.g. p. 287), but never actually to 'prove' a point that lacks historical evidence. In this respect Thomas is much less anthropological than many subsequent historians who have used models, especially from cultural anthropology, to sustain a historical argument.¹⁵ Indeed one might argue that in *Religion and the Decline of Magic* anthropologists are largely adding credence to approaches and interpretations already suggested by earlier historians and folklorists (especially Kittredge)¹⁶ and, in particular, by Tudor and Stuart writers, above all Reginald Scot (pp. 61–2, 361) and George Gifford (pp. xxi, 257), but also some of the demonologists. If Carlo Ginzburg has proposed the inquisitor as anthropologist¹⁷ (and Lyndal Roper in this collection offers us the inquisitor as psychoanalyst), both Thomas and Macfarlane¹⁸ have shown the roots of modern anthropological analysis in Reformation debates about the categories of religion and magic and their social context (pp. 69, 85). As Thomas himself noted, he has been accused both of importing an alien anthropological vocabulary into the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and of restating

¹³ O'Keefe, *Stolen Lightning*, pp. 445–7 sees Thomas as a Durkheimian whose main conclusion is that witchcraft was created by religion. For a spirited argument that the reverse links should be stressed see A. Kibbey, 'Mutations of the supernatural', *American Quarterly*, 34 (1982), 135.

¹⁴ E. P. Thompson, 'Anthropology and the discipline of historical context', *Midland History*, 1: 3 (1972), 46–7.

¹⁵ An example of Thomas' caution about applying anthropology is his extended discussion of the distinction between witchcraft and sorcery (pp. 551–4).

¹⁶ G. L. Kittredge, *Witchcraft in Old and New England* (New York, 1929).

¹⁷ C. Ginzburg, 'The inquisitor as anthropologist' in his *Myths, Emblems, Clues* (1990), pp. 156–64.

¹⁸ A. Macfarlane, 'A Tudor anthropologist', in S. Anglo, ed., *The Damned Art* (1977), pp. 140–55.

the religion/magic distinction established by interested parties in the period.¹⁹ As he recognised, there are great dangers in privileging an educated and partisan viewpoint of the process being described, but they are not the dangers of anachronism – Scot is far more often used to clinch a case than Evans-Pritchard!

Ironically, the heavy rhetorical use of anthropology has created many problems for the reception of *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (just as Thomas' reverence for statistics could do, as Thompson noted,²⁰ given that the book is largely non-statistical) because it threw Thomas into the thick of anthropological battles. He not only became identified with an old-fashioned school of British anthropology, but even got caught up in battles over the true legacy of Evans-Pritchard.²¹ Most obvious and least defensible of his borrowings from this school is the language of 'primitivism';²² Willem de Blécourt's essay in this collection offers a sustained critique of the linked language of survivalism. Less obvious, but perhaps even more damaging in 'dating' *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, is Thomas' concentration on African anthropology just when, in 1971, British attention was shifting away from the imperial connection and towards the Continent. Whereas Thompson could argue in 1972 that the more appropriate imperial comparisons would have been with nineteenth-century India, modern readers are more likely to look instinctively for European comparisons. The most extreme example of this is Carlo Ginzburg's reconstruction of a Eurasian shamanistic root for witchcraft, where comparisons with Africa are sidelined as foreign to the European cultural inheritance, but Gaskill's chapter argues a similar case.²³

However the most immediate objection was to *Religion and the Decline of Magic*'s neglect of what Thomas labelled the 'symbolic' or 'structuralist' approach, in which witchcraft can only be analysed as part

¹⁹ Geertz, 'Anthropology', 76 and Thomas, 'Anthropology', 94.

²⁰ Thompson, 'Anthropology', 48, 55; M. Bowker's review in *Historical Journal*, 15 (1972), 363–6.

²¹ Geertz, 'Anthropology', 84; Crick, *Explorations*. For a sympathetic historian's review of this material see M. MacDonald, 'Anthropological perspectives', in P. Corsi and P. Weindling, eds., *Information Sources in History of Science and Medicine* (1983), pp. 63–80.

²² Thomas, 'Anthropology', 93 notes the 'condescending evolutionary overtones', though he questions whether other preferred terms are more than 'debatable substitutes'.

²³ Thompson, 'Anthropology', 48; E. W. Monter, *Witchcraft in France and Switzerland* (1976), p. 9; R. Rowland, 'Fantastical and devilish persons', in Ankarloo and Henningsen, eds., *Early Modern European Witchcraft*, pp. 161–90, especially pp. 172–3; C. Ginzburg, *Ecstasies* (1990), pp. 4, 249, 260.

of a broader system or language of cultural classification.²⁴ His stated reason for rejecting this model, namely that it can be applied to simple societies but not to a complex one like early modern England (p. 750) seems weak, not least given his own use of African tribal comparisons. But his later response to Geertz, questioning the model of unitary cultural systems in favour of what might be termed cultural ‘bricolage’, now looks much stronger, not least because most cultural anthropologists have come round to the same approach (for religion as for magic), and Thomas’ more pragmatic, situation-centred, model, of culture as a resource rather than a unitary system, seems back in favour, as de Blécourt shows.²⁵ As will be suggested later, it may be that in the long run Thomas will appear to have accepted too *much* of a symbolic system/holistic culture model, rather than too little.

Thomas’ main debt to anthropologists in the specific analysis of witchcraft was in his focus on the accuser/accused situation (p. 652). He is often assumed to have analysed witchcraft principally as a gauge of social strain, perhaps because this looms large in his 1970 article.²⁶ In fact this issue is only the subject of one out of five chapters on witchcraft in *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (quite apart from the rest of the book) and there is no sign that it is given priority over the ‘making of a witch’, the intellectual assumptions behind witchcraft or the history of its rise and decline as a crime – so it seems hardly fair on Thomas (often here bracketed with Macfarlane) to see this as his main preoccupation. Within his analysis of this situation, what has consistently been singled out, first for approval and now increasingly for criticism,²⁷ is *Religion and the Decline of Magic*’s reliance on the ‘charity-refused’ model, that is the hypothesis that most accusations of witchcraft arose from situations where the accused was refused charity by the accuser, who then felt guilt

²⁴ Thompson, ‘Anthropology’, 49–55; Geertz, ‘Anthropology’; M. MacDonald, ‘Religion, social change and psychological healing in England’, in W. J. Sheils, ed., *The Church and Healing* (Studies in Church History 19, Oxford, 1982), pp. 106, 109; Ginzburg, *Ecstasies*, pp. 4–8.

²⁵ Thomas, ‘Anthropology’, 104–6. See, for example, D. D. Hall, *Worlds of Wonder, Days of Judgement* (New York, 1989), p. 260 n. 53; R. Sawyer, ‘“Strangely handled in all her lymys”: witchcraft and healing in Jacobean England’, *Journal of Social History*, 22 (1989), 485 n. 59; W. de Blécourt, ‘Witchdoctors, soothsayers and priests: on cunning folk in European historiographical tradition’, *Social History*, 19 (1994), 299.

²⁶ C. Lerner, *Enemies of God* (1981), p. 21; J. P. Demos, *Entertaining Satan* (New York, 1982), p. 483 n. 5.

²⁷ For approval see, for example, R. Briggs, *Communities of Belief* (Oxford, 1989), pp. 31, 69. For criticism, see Lerner’s review in *Scottish Historical Review*, 50 (1971), 165–71; Scarre, *Witchcraft*, p. 42; Quaipe, *Godly Zeal*, pp. 181, 189–90.

and attributed subsequent misfortune to the malice of the person refused (pp. 660–77). Thomas was rather equivocal on the status of this model, noting many other types of situation and that he had no statistical proof of the dominance of this type (p. 659), and acknowledging the problems posed by the sources in recreating the circumstances behind most accusations (p. 677). He nevertheless concluded firmly that this was the common pattern, *if* one could be deduced at all, referring at one point to ‘the overwhelming majority’ of fully documented cases (p. 661). But his interest in this type of accusation surely arose largely because of its relationship to his overall theme of misfortune and guilt (pp. 659, 665–7). It is only secondarily, in *Religion and the Decline of Magic* at least, that ‘social historians’ are invited to view this as a social strain gauge (p. 669). While there have been many criticisms lately of his reliance on this single model, many critics also view accusations in terms of social strain, though they tend to prefer a broader interpretation of the conflicts between neighbourliness and individualism involved than Thomas provided (though see pp. 662, 670).²⁸ We will return to two key forms of such an interpretation, namely feuding and gender, later in this introduction.

There is however scope for a deeper critique of *Religion and the Decline of Magic*’s focus on the moment of accusation, as revealed in the witchcraft records, as the key to the thinking of the parties involved and especially of its emphasis on the thought patterns of the individual accuser. Despite his own caveats about the stereotyping of reports in indictments and the press (which Gaskill’s chapter in this collection shows to be most misleading guides to the nature of the accused and their offences), and the effect of the legal statutes on what was mentioned (namely the concentration on harming of people and animals) (p. 642), Thomas failed to allow sufficiently for the shaping of the evidence we have by its status as legal evidence. Furthermore, he dodged the question of why the particular episodes that got to court did so, compared to the countless other cases of charity refused that cannot have done (pp. 534–5). One problem here is his emphasis on an individual accuser’s thinking, rather than the social process that led to a trial. In *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, there is no reconstruction of the complete sequence of events that might turn an individual suspicion into a public case, nor

²⁸ See Demos, *Entertaining Satan*, pp. 298–9; Sawyer, ‘Strangely Handled’, 461–2; A. Gregory, ‘Witchcraft, politics and “good neighbourhood” in early seventeenth-century Rye’, *Past and Present*, 133 (1991), 31–66, especially 32–4, 61, 66.

any systematic consideration of the reactions and attitudes of the other participants in this process, though the importance of such matters is implied, though ambiguously, in references to the types of accusation that could be 'plausibly made'.²⁹

It is here that one must agree with Thompson that the lack of specific case studies is a crucial weakness.³⁰ Instead we have a heavy reliance on the (stylised) court material plus contemporary analyses which were themselves generally intended to identify or guide the motives of individual accusers or accused, whether it was in cases of conscience, uncovering of fraud or narrating the 'confession' of the guilty. Much less attention is given to these sources which might recreate the full social dynamics of a witch episode, for example the plays of the period that incorporate witchcraft cases.³¹ In this respect Thomas' use of Macfarlane's statistical study of Essex witchcraft is no substitute for a detailed reconstruction of the social relationships of the parties involved in specific cases. Given the evidential problems, such studies are only now emerging in England, one example being Annabel Gregory's study of Rye.³² Continental legal practices, as Roper's study of Augsburg shows, often give a much fuller picture, while in New England the survival of extraordinarily rich archives of almost every aspect of social life has enabled historians to place witchcraft cases very precisely into their social context, which has often turned out to be rather different, as we shall see, from that predicted by Thomas on the basis of the court records.³³

²⁹ 'Before a witchcraft accusation could be plausibly made, the suspect had to be in a socially or economically inferior position to her supposed victim. Only then could she be presumed to be likely . . .' (p. 669). Cf. the slippage from 'Everything thus depended on the prior attitude of those *trying the witch*' (my italics) to 'The basic problem is that of how the initial suspicion came to be formed' (p. 658).

³⁰ Thompson, 'Anthropology', 50-1.

³¹ See P. Corbin and D. Sedge, eds., *Three Jacobean Witchcraft Plays* (Manchester, 1986). This literature is discussed in A. Harris, *Night's Black Agents* (Manchester, 1980).

³² Gregory, 'Witchcraft'.

³³ The most substantial of many recent American studies are P. Boyer and S. Nissenbaum, *Salem Possessed* (Cambridge, MA, 1974); Demos, *Entertaining Satan*; R. Weisman, *Witchcraft, Magic and Religion in Seventeenth-Century Massachusetts* (Amherst, 1984); C. Karlsen, *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman* (1987; pbk. edn, New York, 1989); B. Rosenthal, *Salem Story* (Cambridge, 1993). European case studies accessible in English include: D. W. Sabeau, *Power in the Blood* (Cambridge, 1984), pp. 94-112; M. Kunze, *Highroad to the Stake* (Chicago, 1987); R. W. Scribner, *Popular Culture and Popular Movements in Reformation Germany* (Cambridge, 1987); E. Le Roy Ladurie, *Jasmin's Witch* (1983; translated Brian Pearce, Harmondsworth, 1990); L. Roper, *Oedipus and the Devil* (1994).

In this respect, then, Thomas may stand convicted of unduly neglecting the legal or judicial factors which have attracted so much fruitful attention in recent witchcraft literature.³⁴ How far such work has invalidated Thomas' account of the broad pattern of legal change and trial practice may be questioned. Although we now know a great deal more about crime and law in early modern England than we did in 1971, most of *Religion and the Decline of Magic's* observations seem to have held up quite well. One crucial exception may be the assumption that the legal processes were firmly in the hands of the educated classes, reflected in the discussion of the causes of the decline of prosecution in the later seventeenth century. Recent work on participation in the law suggests this is correct only if we define the educated classes very broadly to include many of the middling sort of town and countryside and that a key feature of the early modern period was the new willingness of the middling sort, and perhaps even the poor, to use law for resolving all types of difficulty.³⁵ This is hinted at in Thomas' remarks on the decline of other types of court and arbitration (p. 672), but now looks much stronger as an explanation of why people turned to the courts to rid themselves of witches. If so, this crucially weakens Thomas' case that we cannot provide a 'supply-side' account of the rise in witchcraft prosecution and must instead look to other aspects of contemporary life to explain a growing popular demand for legal action specifically against witches (pp. 548–51).

At the same time, Thomas' own account of the motives for and benefits of recourse to law by witchcraft accusers looks rather shaky. He suggested that the rise of witch trials in the Elizabethan period reflected the fact that, with the removal of ecclesiastical counter-magic, the trial and execution of witches became the best solution, practically and psychologically, for those frightened of a witch (pp. 315–16, 588–94,

³⁴ For criticism see Lerner's 1971 review; R. A. Horsley, 'Who were the witches', *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 9 (1978–9), 714; N. Cohn, *Europe's Inner Demons* (1975), p. 160; Gregory, 'Witchcraft', 32. B. P. Levack, *The Witch-Hunt in Early Modern Europe* (1987; 2nd edn 1995) offers the best guide to such work, but see also, in addition to works cited below, C. R. Unsworth, 'Witchcraft beliefs and criminal procedure in early modern England', in T. G. Watkin, ed., *Legal Record and Historical Reality* (1989), pp. 71–98, especially pp. 85–6; R. Briggs, 'Women as victims? Witches, judges and the community', *French History*, 5 (1991), 438–50; J. A. Sharpe, *Witchcraft in Seventeenth-Century Yorkshire: Accusations and Counter-Measures* (University of York, Borthwick Papers no. 81, 1992); A. Soman, *Sorcellerie et justice criminelle (16–18e siècles)* (Guildford, 1992).

³⁵ J. Sharpe, *Crime in Early Modern England 1550–1750* (1984); C. B. Herrup, *The Common Peace* (Cambridge, 1987).

650).³⁶ *Religion and the Decline of Magic* describes prosecution's therapeutic (p. 650) and cathartic effects, even suggesting that the absence of witch trials after 1700 would have made witch beliefs decline (pp. 696–7), because of their importance as a practical remedy. So, it is argued, fear of a witch without a magical counter-remedy would 'lead inexorably' to trials as the only sure and legitimate remedy (p. 593). But this poses all sorts of problems. It assumes a populace that has rejected counter-magical remedies, and here Thomas referred the reader back to his discussion of this in earlier sections of *Religion and the Decline of Magic*. However, these passages indicate a distinct reluctance to confirm the view that the Reformation marked a break, either in popular use of counter-magic or in official condemnation of it (pp. 301–13 (esp. 310–11), 324–6, 330–1, 764–5). If any significant change in attitudes towards counter-magic is established, it is only for specific sections of the population, especially the Puritan and more educated, and so one would expect here a discussion of why *these* particular groups now turned to the law. Such an account would help to explain the prominence of 'Puritan' counties like Essex in early cases (p. 536), if this is more than an illusion created by uneven record survival.

However, Thomas could not really develop this argument because *Religion and the Decline of Magic* hardly ever provides an extended social (or indeed religious or political) profile of the accusers, as opposed to the accused, and when it does so it is a very ambiguous one. The emphasis on the 'dependent' status of the accused and the description of prosecution, at one point, as 'class hatred' might suggest antagonism between the middling or elite and the poor, but this remark is immediately qualified by observation that most such cases involve the 'fairly poor' against the poor (p. 673; cf. pp. 669–70). As we shall see, Thomas was reluctant for a number of reasons to present the typical witchcraft accusation as one in which religious belief or superior education encouraged the accuser to take legal action.

Before developing this point, it is worth noting another problem with the emphasis on the law as a remedy preferable to prayer and patience for the godly (pp. 591–3). Thomas failed to explore the pros and cons of taking people to court, both as an individual and as a community. Both in discussing the advantages of a trial and in assuming that it was the

³⁶ 'Ecclesiastical magic crumbled and *society* was *forced* to take legal action . . .' (p. 594, my italics): a rare personification of 'society', whose exact reference is unclear, since this is not identified as a motive behind the various witchcraft statutes (pp. 549–51).

decision to accuse that was the crucial moment, after which the witch was caught up in a legal process with few chances of escape (pp. 657–8), Thomas ignored his own statistics about the high levels of acquittals, not to mention defamation cases and other ways in which witchcraft accusations could rebound on the accuser (pp. 537, 539, 667–8). There is also clear evidence that most accusations only came after years, often decades, of smouldering distrust of someone as a witch. All of this suggests that a trial was the *last* resort of an accuser and that its success and advantages were far from clear, not least because going to law was itself, for many, an unneighbourly act – one likely to cause guilt as much as it resolved it, and one which risked future reprisals if, as often occurred, the accused was acquitted or, once punished, returned to the same community. Set against the costs and problems of a law case, it may well be that Job-like patience seemed a better bet, psychologically and socially, to many of those who had learned to abjure counter-magic.

This emphasis on the problems associated with a successful witchcraft accusation raises the much wider question of what it is exactly that needs explanation about witchcraft prosecutions. Thomas, as we have seen, sought to make the process comprehensible, but, as Briggs points out in his chapter, one of the dangers of making witchcraft fears seem rational is that we can ‘over-explain’ what occurred; any satisfactory account of early modern witchcraft must be able to explain its limited and sporadic impact and then the decline of witchcraft prosecution, as well as its incidence. Thomas himself admitted that, given his interpretation, it is the decline of witchcraft that becomes ‘baffling’ (p. 681), but much of this mystery is removed if we explore the complex legal and social ramifications leading from suspicion to accusation to trial and how many opportunities this offered for a witchcraft prosecution to collapse.

Another consequence of Thomas’ effort to see why witchcraft accusations were plausible to intelligent persons was his reluctance to take seriously the notion that factional disputes and the conscious manipulation of false accusations lay behind many cases. John Bossy’s penetrating review of *Religion and the Decline of Magic* encapsulated this approach in suggesting a further study entitled ‘Religion and the Decline of Feud’!³⁷ Thomas insisted (in what seems a heated passage) that such uses were ‘essentially parasitic’ on an accepted body of belief

³⁷ Bossy, ‘Early modern magic’, 403. As Gregory, ‘Witchcraft’, 36 indicates, Bossy’s own work on religion’s changing role in concepts of good neighbourhood has been of crucial importance.

and honest accusation (p. 646).³⁸ There is a danger here of too polarised a contrast – between conscious manipulation and ‘honest’ belief. Many of the later case studies of accusations have convincingly accounted for them precisely in terms of such factionalism, noting that those targeted as witches, though particularly vulnerable as individuals (or perhaps presented as such in the stereotyped indictments or trial tracts) were representatives of a rival group in a local power struggle. However, as these studies also show, in these power struggles the accusation of witchcraft was not *merely* a rhetorical tool, because it often expressed a genuine belief by the accusers that their opponents stood for a dangerous principle threatening the community – which might indeed make them ‘witch-like’ in their threat to social harmony.³⁹ In this respect, at least, witchcraft cases, like many other criminal offences, offer an invaluable means of penetrating the social strains and rival values of early modern communities, but in such investigations notions such as charity, neighbourliness, malice and nonconformity have to be approached not as descriptions of social behaviour so much as complex vocabularies, whose applications to specific people and acts are subject to constant contestation and change.

Again, it is easier to understand why Thomas sought to distance himself from the ‘feuding’ approach when we bear in mind his historiographical context. His emphasis on the genuineness of individual fears of witchcraft was a response both to rationalistic accounts of witchcraft (as simply the product of manipulative conspiracies) and, more particularly, the existing scholarship which presented witches as one of a number of interchangeable scapegoats sacrificed to partisan rivalry – a position particularly identified at that point with Trevor Davies’ work on England and Trevor-Roper’s European study.⁴⁰ Unable to find much evidence in the English case for their sweeping identification of rival sides

³⁸ Thomas’ argument that feuding or fraud explanations fail because they cannot explain ‘how such beliefs came to exist in the first place’, is, though true, hardly appropriate, since his own discussion in the chapter in question is about the way in which people applied accepted beliefs to specific situations. As *Religion and the Decline of Magic* argues later (p. 689), transparently self-interested manipulations of witchcraft accusations might, in the long term, discredit witchcraft accusations altogether, but, while the belief existed, they supplied, as Gaskill shows, a resource available for the vengeful as well as the guilt-ridden: only empirical analysis can show which was more common.

³⁹ This is particularly clear in Boyer and Nissenbaum, *Salem Possessed*.

⁴⁰ R. Trevor Davies, *Four Centuries of Witch Beliefs* (1947); Trevor-Roper, *European Witch-Craze*.