

1 Introduction

A writer's real work is the endless winnowing of sentences,
The relentless exploration of possibilities,
The effort, over and over again, to see in what you started out to say
The possibility of something that you didn't know you could.¹
All too often a sense of magic is lost in the process of studying magic.²

1.1 History, Magic, Creativity

This Element is a call to arms for historians to embrace creative research methods and alternative ways of presenting histories. 'Practice-based research' is now a well-established methodology in many arts disciplines and social sciences. Textbooks explore how and when to use creative practices and how to address the risks and shortcomings of practice-based research.³ But historians have generally been slower to take up the idea of creative research methods, and there are very few examples of how-to guides that others can draw on.⁴ This Element is a case study in what creative practice can do for historians and other humanities researchers. How might the methods of dramatists, poets, and other artists help historians understand a topic like magic?

Academic research into histories of magic struggles to capture the mystery at the heart of supernatural experiences and beliefs. We can blame our sources, which are often hostile to magical beliefs, whether they treat them as heresies or superstitions. Such hostile sources distort the histories we write, encouraging historians to tell the same stories of 'secularization' in the modern period and to treat magic like outsiders. Yet, as Chris Gosden has noted in an ambitious survey of magic across all of human history, 'rumours of the death of magic have been constantly exaggerated'.⁵ Historians have long known that this 'decline of magic' may fit with a general pattern in elite attitudes but makes

¹ Verlyn Klinkenborg, *Several Short Sentences about Writing* (New York: Vintage Books, 2013), 14.

² Owen Davies, *Magic: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 112.

³ See, for example, Helen Kara, *Creative Research Methods in the Social Sciences* (Bristol: Policy Press, 2015).

⁴ Although see Robert Bickers, Tim Cole, Marianna Dudley, et al. 'Creative Dislocation: An Experiment in Collaborative Historical Research', *History Workshop Journal* 90:1 (2020), 273–96; Hillary Davidson, 'The Embodied Turn: Making and Remaking Dress as an Academic Practice', *Fashion Theory* 23:3 (2019), 329–62.

⁵ Chris Gosden, *The History of Magic: From Alchemy to Witchcraft, from the Ice Age to the Present* (London: Viking, 2020). The same year that Gosden wrote this, Michael Hunter published an updated account of this process of disenchantment in Britain: *The Decline of Magic: Britain in the Enlightenment* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2020).

less sense among the broader populations of modern Europe.⁶ Historians of popular magic have learned to read against the grain in order to uncover submerged perspectives about magic in hostile sources.⁷ The methods of imagination and speculation they have used to do this have tended to come from anthropology or psychoanalysis.⁸

This Element explores a different set of imaginative techniques to address the fundamental challenge of understanding magic in the past: creative practices, including poetry, drama, and other forms of creative writing. The Element draws on the collaborative project ‘Creative Histories of Witchcraft: France, 1790–1940’, which brought together a poet (Anna Kisby Compton), a playwright (Poppy Corbett), and a historian (Will Pooley) to explore cases of witchcraft from across this long period. In what follows, we explain our project and how we did it, providing hands-on exercises for other researchers, creative practitioners, and teachers to try out for themselves.

1.2 Witchcraft in France, 1790–1940

The work for this Element began with Will’s research into witchcraft in France between 1790 and 1940.⁹ Although historians tend to think of witchcraft more as an early modern problem than one from the nineteenth century, specialists have long known that witchcraft beliefs did not wither with the end of the officially sanctioned witch trials in Europe in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.¹⁰ Despite effectively decriminalizing witchcraft relatively early – in 1684 – French courts have continued to deal with questions of harmful magic up

⁶ See the pioneering work on British supernatural beliefs by Owen Davies, *Witchcraft, Magic, and Culture, 1736–1951* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999).

⁷ A much-debated example was provided by Carlo Ginzburg’s *The Night Battles: Witchcraft and Agrarian Cults in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, trans. Anne Tedeschi and John Tedeschi (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983).

⁸ Lyndal Roper, *Oedipus and the Devil: Witchcraft, Sexuality, and Religion in Early Modern Europe* (New York and London: Routledge, 1994); Diane Purkiss, *The Witch in History: Early Modern and Twentieth-Century Representations* (New York and London: Routledge, 1996).

⁹ This research draws on Ronald Hutton’s definition of the witch as a human being believed to cause supernatural harm, usually to people within their own community. See Ronald Hutton, ‘Anthropological and Historical Approaches to Witchcraft: Potential for a New Collaboration?’ *The Historical Journal* 47:2 (2004), 413–34, 421–3.

¹⁰ Some countries did not actually repeal anti-witchcraft legislation until the nineteenth century. See, for instance, the Irish case discussed in Andrew Sneddon and John Fulton, ‘Witchcraft, the Press, and Crime in Ireland, 1822–1922’, *The Historical Journal* 62:3 (2019), 741–64. For overviews of witchcraft after the witch trials, see Willem de Blécourt and Owen Davies (eds.), *Witchcraft Continued: Popular Magic in Modern Europe* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004); Bengt Ankarloo and Stuart Clark (eds.), *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe: The Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999).

to the present day.¹¹ Between 1790 and 1940, there were close to 1,000 different cases either tried in regional courts or described in the national and local press.

Why were the authorities interested in witchcraft if witchcraft itself was not a crime in this period? The answer can be found with other types of crime whose origins lie with witchcraft, such as some types of fraud. Around two thirds of the cases identified from newspapers and judicial sources involved accusations of fraud or of practising medicine without a licence. These prosecutions were not normally launched against suspected ‘witches’ themselves. Instead, they targeted the ‘unwitchers’ who took payment to help deal with spells and curses. Since the courts did not believe in magic, taking payment for these services constituted an obvious fraud, not to mention a contravention of the rules on medical practice if the suspected witchcraft involved an illness.

The other category of crime that covered a large number of the cases was violence against persons. Around a quarter of the cases are what Owen Davies has called ‘reverse witch trials’: prosecutions brought against people who abused – whether physically or verbally – people that they accused of being witches.¹² The remaining cases include rare attempts to prosecute witches for witchcraft, as well as retaliations by men and women accused of being witches, crimes of nuisance, vagrancy, and some rare sexual offences where ideas about witchcraft were muddled into legal prosecutions and police investigations.

These cases present modern historians with many of the same challenges and opportunities that the cases from the famous witch trials presented to early modern historians. They seem to offer unrivalled access into the often-unspoken assumptions around gender, sexuality, and the family.¹³ They are like strange windows into the subjectivity of people in the past.¹⁴ Yet so much of what historians want to say about the cases must remain speculative and imaginative. The sources are filled with silences, contradictions, and material that makes no

¹¹ For the eighteenth century, see Ulrike Krampl, *Les secrets des faux sorciers: Police, magie et escroquerie à Paris au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: EHESS, 2012). The best survey of the modern period remains: Owen Davies, ‘Witchcraft Accusations in France, 1850-1990’, in Willem de Blécourt and Owen Davies (eds.), *Witchcraft Continued: Popular Magic in Modern Europe* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004). Anthropologists including Marcelle Bouteiller and Jeanne Favret-Saada documented witchcraft beliefs firsthand during the 1950s-1970s. See Marcelle Bouteiller, *Sorciers et jeteurs de sorts* (Paris: Plon, 1958) and Jeanne Favret-Saada, *Deadly Words: Witchcraft in the Bocage*, trans. Catherine Cullen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980).

¹² See Owen Davies, ‘Researching Reverse Witch Trials in Nineteenth- and Early Twentieth-Century England’, in Jonathan Barry, Owen Davies, and Cornelia Osborne (eds.), *Cultures of Witchcraft from the Middle Ages to the Present: Essays in Honour of Willem de Blécourt* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 215–33.

¹³ This is the argument in Tessie Liu, ‘Le Patrimoine Magique: Reassessing the Power of Women in Peasant Households in Nineteenth-Century France’, *Gender and History* 6:1 (1994), 13–36.

¹⁴ See, for instance, Roper, *Oedipus and the Devil*.

sense to readers today. And, like all historians of witchcraft, historians of more recent European witchcraft struggle to convey the variety and complexity of witchcraft phenomena in the face of powerful popular cultural stereotypes of the ‘witch’ today.¹⁵

But the history of witchcraft after the witch trials also presents different challenges and opportunities to the better-known topic of the early modern trials. Modern witchcraft is chronologically awkward. The folklorists and some early historians thought of witchcraft as a ‘survival’.¹⁶ More recent work has tended to emphasize the constant adaptations and mutations of witchcraft belief. Inspired by anthropologists, historians can now explore the psychological and economic ‘modernity’ of modern European witchcraft.¹⁷ Many people from the same generations that lived through the emergence of dynamic psychology, the Pasteurian revolution, and the First World War also believed in witches.

Also, there are major differences in the institutional frameworks that governed the early modern and the modern cases. When it came to witchcraft, both the Church and the legal system changed beyond recognition. Not only had ecclesiastical support for prosecutions largely evaporated, but the legal system had almost no interest in witchcraft itself as a criminal problem. With the evaporation of this institutional focus, the ‘witches’ themselves also disappeared. Where the early modern trials produced a discourse of witchcraft with at least two sides – that of the victims, and that of the witches’ confessions, extracted under duress, if not torture – the modern period, Thomas Waters has pointed out, is characterized by witchcraft largely ‘without witches’.¹⁸ Meanwhile, other contexts became increasingly important for criminal justice and witchcraft, such as France’s status as a colonial power and the issues of race, justice, and culture that came with maintaining overseas territories.¹⁹

Nor do these cases of modern witchcraft necessarily conform to the patterns that historians might expect, based on the dismissive attitudes of newspaper editors or the romantic nostalgia of the folklorists. Many cases took place in urban settings, such as Lyon, Marseille, and Rouen. Paris itself – much to the dismay of contemporaries – was a hotspot of witchcraft disputes in the

¹⁵ A key point in Purkiss, *The Witch in History*.

¹⁶ Among the historians, see, for instance, Judith Devlin *The Superstitious Mind: French Peasants and the Supernatural in the Nineteenth Century* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1987).

¹⁷ For example, see Thomas Waters *Cursed Britain: A History of Witchcraft and Black Magic in Modern Times* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2019). For a key inspiration, see Peter Geschiere, *The Modernity of Witchcraft: Politics and the Occult in Postcolonial Africa* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1997).

¹⁸ Waters, *Cursed Britain*, 257.

¹⁹ See Aaron Freundschuh, *The Courtesan and the Gigolo: The Murders in the Rue Maitaine and the Dark Side of Empire in Nineteenth-century Paris* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2017).

nineteenth century.²⁰ Perhaps even more surprisingly for what historians know about early modern witchcraft, the information available from these cases suggests that the majority (fifty-seven per cent) of the people feared as ‘witches’ in this period were men.²¹

It is in order to puncture such easy assumptions about magic in modernity that we propose a turn to creative methods.

1.3 The Need for Creative Histories of Magic

The need for creative histories of magic is part of a wider turn to ‘creative histories’, ‘an umbrella term for diverse traditions and genealogies of scholarship, such as the imaginative, the fictional, and the genre-challenging’.²² Saidiya Hartman, for instance, has written of the need for speculation, imagination, and amplification in her ‘serial biography of a generation’ of young black girls at the start of the twentieth century. Her writing draws on archival research but also openly speculates and embroiders, blurring the lines that many historians would draw between factual research and fiction.²³ Similarly, Matt Houlbrook’s work on the confidence trickster Netley Lucas blends research with creative forms of presentation, such as a television script or a letter to his research subject.²⁴ As Sarah Knott has argued, different histories invite different forms and conventions. Her own work on mothering is written in fragments which focus on verbs, because of the fragmentation characteristic of early motherhood, and her desire to emphasize mothering as an activity performed by a range of actors, rather than a fixed identity.²⁵ Hartman, Houlbrook, and Knott’s books show how much interest there is in creative historical writing, but researchers and students who want to follow their lead will struggle to find examples of writing manuals for creative historians. In what follows, we describe the methods we have found most useful for exploring histories of magic and provide hands-on exercises to try. If creative historical work is as much about process as output – as one group of historians has put it – there is a pressing need for examples that model process, rather than just presenting creative outputs.²⁶

²⁰ William G. Pooley, ‘Magical Capital: Witchcraft and the Press in Paris, c.1789-1939’, in Karl Bell (ed.), *Supernatural Cities: Enchantment, Anxiety and Spectrality* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell Press, 2019), 25–44.

²¹ This is based on the gender – where known – of 578 suspected witches from 997 cases. Of these, 247 were women and 331 were men.

²² Bickers et al., ‘Creative Dislocation’, 274.

²³ Saidiya Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Riotous Black Girls, Troublesome Women, and Queer Radicals* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2019).

²⁴ Matt Houlbrook, *Prince of Tricksters: The Incredible True Story of Netley Lucas, Gentleman Crook* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2016).

²⁵ Sarah Knott, *Mother: An Unconventional History* (London: Penguin, 2019).

²⁶ See Bickers et al., ‘Creative Dislocation’.

These exercises draw on another set of traditions of creative historical work that have sometimes overlapped with, but often developed independently of, academic researchers: artist practitioners and community histories. Openstorytellers, for instance, are a company of performers with learning disabilities who have engaged with histories of disability by devising theatre pieces, such as their play about Fanny Fust, an eighteenth-century heiress with learning difficulties. Working on a performance in this way has allowed the members of the group to engage with histories that they could not access in other ways.²⁷ In a similar way, the artist Ruth Singer has described how making quilts was a way to bring all of the female criminals she researched ‘together in one place and to remember them as real women not just as criminal statistics or a mugshot without a story’.²⁸ Beyond academic creative writing, a range of practitioners have explored ways to do history through visual arts, performance, re-enactment, and music. We need these creative methods because they allow us to take magic seriously, to go beyond easy stereotypes, and to appeal to different audiences.

Academic researchers are caught between two extremes when it comes to studying the history of magic. On the one hand, as both Stuart Clark and Diane Purkiss have pointed out, researchers struggle to accept that people really believed in the supernatural experiences they described. It has been easier for historians to accept that witchcraft was ‘really’ about gender or social tensions between rich and poor than to take the fear of witches seriously in its own right. As Purkiss puts it, historians’ explanations have a tendency to explain too well, ‘explaining witch-beliefs away’.²⁹ At the other extreme, researchers have arguably been too willing to believe that people in the past fervently believed in magic. Bruno Latour has called this a singularly ‘modern’ attitude to belief. ‘A Modern’, he points out, ‘is someone who believes that others believe’.³⁰ Moderns think for themselves, unlike ‘primitives’ and ‘pre-moderns’, who naively and uniformly believe in magic, witchcraft, and other supernatural phenomena. The image of ‘belief’ that underpins this attitude to the academic study of magic, as Nils Bubandt has pointed out, does not fit well with the uncertainty and vagueness that characterizes witchcraft belief. Based on his

²⁷ The Company of Openstorytellers, Nicola Grove, Simon Jarrett, et al., ‘The Fortunes and Misfortunes of Fanny Fust’, in Andrew W. M. Smith (ed.), *Paper Trails: The Social Life of Archives and Collections* (London: UCL Press, forthcoming).

²⁸ Ruth Singer, *Criminal Quilts: Textiles Inspired by the Stories of Women Photographed in Stafford Prison 1877–1916* (Leicester: Independent Publishing Network, 2018), 19.

²⁹ Purkiss, *The Witch in History*, 60–5, 61. Stuart Clark, *Thinking with Demons: The Idea of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

³⁰ Bruno Latour, *On the Modern Cult of the Factish Gods* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 2.

Indonesian fieldwork, Bubandt argues that witchcraft is more like a persistent doubt than a positive belief.³¹

Creative practices offer solutions both to the tendency to explain magic away and the tendency to depict belief as homogenous and absolute. Written forms and performance techniques drawn from poetry and theatre are a way to stay with the magic. As the poet Rebecca Tamás has written:

Poetry, like the occult, embraces the necessary irrationality that exists squashed up against rationality in the material world. It does not ‘reject’ the rational, but it does extract what else is there, the elements that don’t fit.³²

Where academic research often follows conventions that encourage seamless, comprehensive, and definitive arguments, creative practices do not have to be directed towards firm conclusions. Instead, they preserve silences, speak in metaphors, juxtapose, hint, elaborate, or embroider in ways that are particularly valuable when trying to preserve the mysteries of magical experiences. Where academic conventions demand clearly articulated epistemologies, working through poetry or drama can be a way to defer truth claims and final interpretations, to leave some aspects of magic unresolved. The many different voices that speak through plays or poems allow multiple epistemologies to bump up against one another. The poet does not have to settle, nor does the playwright summarize her conclusions.

1.4 Format of the Element

This is a hands-on text. We have divided the Element into four thematic sections, which include thirteen specific tools for creative research into magic. These tools would also be a good starting point for teaching creative historical research methods. Like other creative non-fiction writers, we are less interested in outright invention than ways of re-using the past, histories that are ‘creative, not falsified’.³³

In search of historical ‘fidelity’, the second Section encourages researchers to:

1. Write to discover
2. Borrow other forms
3. Use the whole page
4. Play with footnotes

³¹ Nils Bubandt, *The Empty Seashell: Witchcraft and Doubt on an Indonesian Island* (Ithaca, NY and London: Cornell University Press, 2014).

³² Rebecca Tamás, ‘Songs of Hecate’, *The White Review*, 24 (2019), <https://bit.ly/3tKjQV6>.

³³ Gay Talese, ‘Delving into Private Lives’, in Mark Kramer and Wendy Call (eds.), *Telling True Stories: A Nonfiction Writer’s Guide from the Nieman Foundation at Harvard University* (New York: Plume, 2007), 6–9, 7.

The third Section addresses the values of ‘brevity’, suggesting that researchers should:

5. Erase the sources
6. Write short
7. Accumulate fragments

The fourth Section turns to ideas of ‘performance’, inviting researchers to:

8. Re-enact
9. Improvise
10. Use dialogue

The fifth Section suggests tools for creative empathy:

11. Change perspective
12. Make methods of metaphors
13. Use props

Each section presents two case studies in detail, including cases of murder and infanticide, as well as minor mysteries without neat resolutions: a family whose animals mysteriously died or a couple of greengrocers who complained of a bewitched cupboard. In the epilogue, we reflect on these cases and on the processes involved in the thirteen creative tools we have suggested for researching magic.

The Element is written using some unusual layouts, forms, and genres. This style represents the fusion of our different styles of writing and viewpoints. Eclectic forms achieve eclectic aims. They listen to silences, represent multitude, and speak for the dead. There are moments where we describe some of our historical research and the individual cases we encountered on the project. Some of it is written poetically, in abstraction, dramatically, and in ways that will appear unfamiliar to historical researchers. But all of the Element explores the fundamental question of what happens when we bring creative and historical forms of writing together.

Different readers may want to use the Element in different ways. We do not assume any specialist knowledge of French history or the history of modern witchcraft, but instead propose methods and techniques for writing and researching. Creative practitioners may be familiar with many of these techniques but are likely to be less familiar with discussions of how they might be used for history. We discuss the value and purpose of these applications in the second half of this introduction and throughout the Element. Some sections will be of more interest to historians, such as the discussion of the creative turn in history. The sections can be used as standalone resources for working with

students, researchers, or creative practitioners, although they contribute to an overall argument about creative practice as historical research. Readers in search of spells will find some, although mostly in fragmentary form. Like a dictionary or a technical manual, the *Element* is best enjoyed by dipping in and out in search of what you need.

As a three-way partnership between a playwright, a poet, and a historian, this *Element* straddles academic and practitioner interests. It departs from well-established models of ‘historical advisors’ or consultants who provide expertise for theatre companies and film productions, or professional artists who produce ‘impact’ work for academic researchers. What happens, instead, when research and creative practice work in equal partnership? We are less interested in art ‘inspired’ by history than art challenged by and developed in conversation with historical research.

We speak in many voices, reflecting the many different people who have collaborated and contributed to this work. We do provide references in footnotes and there is a list of references. Its eclecticism is a source of joy to us, but we could not approach the topic of witchcraft, even in this limited place and period, from every angle. Poppy, Anna, and Will brainstormed ideas, recording them on whiteboards, paper, and online documents. We dictated words to one another to write. We edited each other’s writing, adding and trimming, rearranging and repurposing. We interviewed each other. We wrote each other letters. We translated words from one language to another and from one form to another. We took scripts and made them poems. We took sources and made them scripts. The format of the *Element* reflects these methods.

Others speak, too, because we wrote with others in ever-widening circles of conversation and adaptation. Some we interacted with in person. We would like to mention Ellie Chadwick, who produced and directed a rehearsed reading based on the project, and the actors Alan Coveney, Esme Patey-Ford, Joanna Cross, Matthew Bulgo, and Tobias Weatherburn. Nicola Burnett-Smith composed and performed original music for the rehearsed reading, in addition to appearing as part of the cast. We also worked with Shelley, Richard, Rebecca, and other members of the Bristol Open Circle Moot to discuss the meaning of magic to modern pagans. The poets Karen Dennison, Hilary Dyer, Lindsay Macgregor, E. E. Nobbs, Lydia Harris, and Caroline Davies collaborated with Anna as guest poets on the project, producing one long collaborative poem and a range of shorter individual pieces.³⁴

³⁴ See <https://creativewitchcraft.wordpress.com/guest-poets/>

And the dead? Throughout the project we have been drawn to specific individuals whose lives we wanted to understand. In the words of the historical novelist Hilary Mantel:

In imagination, we chase the dead, shouting, ‘come back!’ We may suspect that the voices we hear are an echo of our own, and the movement we see is our own shadow. But we sense the dead have a vital force still – they have something to tell us, something we need to understand.³⁵

Some researchers will be more comfortable with a sense of mysterious connection to the past, and even supernatural communication across time.³⁶ Others may object that speculative, imagined, and improvised work of this kind lacks rigour. But a third approach is also possible: reserving judgement about the significance of practice-based or creative insights. Perhaps they open new questions. Perhaps they provide provocations that challenge the established facts. The final outputs from work like this do not necessarily capture its experiential significance, especially when these outputs are – like this Element – textual. There are ways of knowing that only come through doing. Sometimes the findings are new questions.

2 Fidelity

*How does one write a history of the impossible?*³⁷
Tell all the truth but tell it slant –³⁸

2.1 The Problem

What does it mean to write histories that are creative, yet accurate? This is a particularly pressing problem for histories of magic. Notoriously hard to define, ‘magic’ is a fluid category which can encompass everything from the fundamental rules of everyday life in cultures such as ancient Egypt to a special category of events and practices that somehow stand outside the normal way things work, as in post-Enlightenment European cultures.³⁹ It is a realm that few historians would openly profess to believe in. Marion Gibson has posed this

³⁵ Hilary Mantel, ‘The Day is for the Living’, *The Reith Lectures*, 2017. <https://bit.ly/3lXgau6>.

³⁶ Carlo Ginzburg, for instance, has written of the ‘nucleus of truth’ in his ‘absurd fantasizing’ ‘that [a historical] document was there waiting for me, and that my entire past life had predisposed me to find it’. *Threads and Traces: True, False, Fictive* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 222.

³⁷ Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1995), 73.

³⁸ Emily Dickinson, ‘Tell All the Truth But Tell It Slant’ [1951]. <https://bit.ly/36jZby1>.

³⁹ For one recent attempt to define magic, and an overview of Egyptian beliefs, see Gosden, *The History of Magic*, 1–2, 92–108.