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# Finding the Witch's Mark: Female Participation in the Judicial System During the Hopkins Trials 1645-47

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Finding the Witch's Mark: Female Participation in the Judicial System During the  
Hopkins Trials 1645-47.

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An Honors Thesis

Submitted for partial fulfillment of the requirements

for graduation with honors in History

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## Table of Contents

|  |    |
|--|----|
| Introduction .....   | 2  |
| The Hopkins Trials.....  | 9  |
| Context.....   | 16 |
| Historiography .....   | 25 |
| <i>Witchcraft Accusations: A result of interpersonal conflict</i> .....      | 27 |
| <i>Gender and Witchcraft</i> .....   | 29 |
| <i>Patterns of Accusation as a Multi-faceted Problem</i> .....               | 37 |
| <i>The Nature of Evidence</i> .....  | 41 |
| Primary Sources: Evidence of power .....                                     | 44 |
| <i>A typical accusation and trial: the example of Elizabeth Clarke</i> ..... | 48 |
| <i>The Women Called Searchers</i> .....                                      | 50 |
| <i>The Appearance of Marks</i> .....   | 52 |
| <i>The Importance of Marks</i> .....   | 53 |
| <i>A Deeper Analysis of Searchers</i> .....                                  | 55 |
| Conclusion.....  | 60 |
| Primary Source Bibliography.....   | 64 |
| Secondary Source Bibliography .....  | 66 |

## Introduction

In April of 1645, a woman named Frances Mills from Manningtree in Essex traveled to the nearby town of Thorpe. Mills had an important task: she had been summoned by a man named Henry Cornwall<sup>1</sup> to examine a local woman accused of being a witch. In Thorpe Mills was met by Mary Phillips, a neighbor of hers from Manningtree, and by several local women as well.<sup>2</sup> The accused, a woman named Margaret Moone, did not submit willingly to physical investigation. Nevertheless she was stripped, and Mills led the search for marks of her covenant with the devil. On April 29, she stated before local Justices Grimston and Bowes that she had found three teats (nipples) on Moone's "secret parts." She further testified that she knew that these marks were not pyles (hemorrhoids), which they resembled, because she herself was bothered with pyles and knew the difference between them and witches' marks. According to Mills' testimony, after finding the marks she asked to see Moone's imps. In response Moone asked for bread and beer. Once she had them, she put the bread into the beer, placed the mixture against a wall, drew a circle around it, and cried for her imps. They did not come. She was distraught and told her investigators that her "Devillish Daughters" must have taken her imps from her, and that they should be searched for marks as well. Both daughters were summoned and searched, and found to have marks

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<sup>1</sup> Malcolm Gaskill, *Witchfinders: A Seventeenth-Century English Tragedy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), 62-63. Cornwall was a man from Thorpe whose family had allegedly been cursed by Moone, and whose baby daughter had died as a result. He and two of his neighbors went to Manningtree to obtain a warrant for Moone and hired Frances Mills and Mary Parsley to search Moone.

<sup>2</sup> On her way to Thorpe, Phillips was hit in the head by an unknown force and knocked over while she was crossing a footbridge, falling into water. When she got to Thorpe and met Margaret Moone, Moone eerily eluded to having 'met with some of you' while they were on their way to her. H.F., *True and Exact Relation* (London, 1645), 24-25.

like their mother.<sup>3</sup> Moone was tried for her crimes at the Chelmsford Assizes on July 17, 1645. She, along with 18 other witches, was sentenced to death. The process that began in Thorpe in April 1645 led to Margaret Moone being executed as a witch.

This story, even though it sounds horrible or fictional to us, is the record of one woman's story within what are called the Hopkins Trials, witch trials that transpired between 1645 and 1647 in England. Many historians of witchcraft in England have looked at the story of Margaret Moone and the other women accused during the Hopkins Trials. In reading the story of Margaret Moone, most historians have focused on understanding what made the trials possible. Others have focused on the victims of the trials, analyzing their social and economic positions and often focusing on gender. None have spent much time or energy on the women, such as Frances Mills, who examined accused witches. These women were called 'searchers' and were—as the above anecdote makes clear—important authorities in the process of accusing, trying, and executing a witch. In spite of this, they have received little scholarly attention, and are usually either overlooked or mentioned by historians only in passing. In a world where most people believed in witchcraft and women such as Mills (often midwives or otherwise "honest women") were relied upon to search witches for tangible marks of their guilt, Mills and her colleagues had power that requires attention and analysis that they have not yet received.

The involvement of women as searchers in the Hopkins Trials is significant because these women were not under suspicion of witchcraft themselves—in fact, they were respected members of their community whose expertise was necessary in

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<sup>3</sup> Gaskill, *Witchfinders* 62-63.

obtaining convictions of suspected witches. At a time when the legal system was changing, proving a crime which was essentially intangible meant getting proof in the form of an authorized sighting of a witch's mark. Focusing on searchers in the context of witch trials fills a gap in historical discussion. Thorough attention has been paid to judges, clerics, and other actors in the complicated mechanism of witchcraft accusations and trials, women still seem to be lumped into a single group. Even when historians such as Clive Holmes discuss the differences among various female actors—searchers, possessed women and witnesses of witchcraft--mention of these differences is brief and has not been integrated into the study of witchcraft in early modern England. Women were not a single social category in early modern Europe: they could be victims, family members of victims, accusers, witnesses, the possessed (on the Continent), or searchers. Their social standing varied greatly, as did their economic situation. Some women had a long history of being suspected of witchcraft; others were considered “honest women” and were entrusted with the task of helping obtain a conviction on one of the worst crimes a person could commit.<sup>4 5</sup> Women were not all the same, and cannot be treated as such in historical study.

The European witch craze has been a part of popular culture and imagination since it occurred hundreds of years ago. In the last sixty years, more scholarly work has been done on the causes, events and effects of the witch craze than ever before.

Witchcraft and the myths and legends surrounding it continue to permeate popular culture today, from the 1953 play *The Crucible* by Arthur Miller to the 2013 television

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<sup>4</sup> Gaskill, *Witchfinders*, 37. Anne West and her daughter Rebecca had been suspected of witchcraft before the Hopkins Trials began. Their neighbors believed them to be dangerous and Anne had even been formally prosecuted and acquitted twice for witchcraft before 1645.

<sup>5</sup> Gaskill, *Witchfinders*, 229 and 254.

series *American Horror Story: Coven*. Ideas about witchcraft and the witch trials continue to change as historians try to better understand what happened.

While many scholarly studies have been done on women as witches in and victims of the witch trials, there is no study focused on searchers, the women whose job it was to search accused witches for physical evidence of their demonic pact with the Devil. Searchers had significant authority, and their findings were critical to the witch trials. Yet searchers are consistently overlooked in witchcraft scholarship and warrant only a few short mentions.<sup>6</sup> This paper, on searchers and their authority, begins to address that gap. Using one set of trials—the mid-seventeenth century Hopkins trials in England—as a case study, it reveals the centrality of women searchers in the process of witch trials.

Witch hunts were a feature of early modern Europe and followed several set patterns. Overall, they tended to accompany religious turmoil, civil unrest and a breakdown of normal authoritative structures. They flourished between 1450 and 1750, but even in the century and a half before that period, we see some important developments. Between 1300 and 1375, trials were quite political, with little or no mention of diabolism or devil worship.<sup>7</sup> Witches were generally accused of having bewitched political and ecclesiastical leaders. In France, for example, the deaths of several monarchs in quick succession were ascribed to sorcery.<sup>8</sup> Then between 1375 and

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<sup>6</sup> Clive Holmes, “Women: Witnesses and Witches” in *Past and Present* 140 (1993): 67. Holmes groups female participation in witch trials into three groups: women who were possessed, women who were searchers, and women who witnessed *maleficium*. He also states that the ‘matrons and midwives’ who searched witches’ bodies were “marginal procedures originating in the concerns of exclusively male professional groups.”

<sup>7</sup> Brian P. Levack, *The Witch-Hunt in Early Modern Europe* (New York: Longman Inc. 1987), 185.

<sup>8</sup> Richard Kieckhefer, *European Witch Trials: Their Foundations in Popular and Learned Culture, 1300-1500* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 10-11.

1435, there was an increase in the number of prosecutions, and prosecutors began to link sorcery with diabolism. Between 1435 and 1500, historians have noted a rise the publication of witchcraft treatises, most famously the *Malleus Maleficarum* (*The Hammer of Witches*), which attempts to prove the existence of witchcraft and asserts that most witches are women<sup>9</sup>.

The “European witch craze” proper began in 1450 and lasted until 1750. The name, however, can be misleading. This was not a 300-year period of sustained witch trials, nor do we see a simple and single rise and decline. Instead, from about 1450 to the early 1500s, we see a substantial number of trials. Then in the mid-1500s there was a decline in witch hunts, caused by two factors. First, humanist skepticism made people question long-held ideas about witchcraft. Second, the Reformation, in its early years, led to a decline in prosecutions; the Catholic church was preoccupied with internal problems, while Protestant leaders had yet to establish clear sectarian doctrines regarding witchcraft. This decline in witchcraft hunts and prosecutions is also marked by a cessation in printings of witchcraft tracts like the *Malleus*. In the 1550s, 1560s, and 1570s, once the initial shock of the reformation passed, witchcraft persecutions began to pick up once more, and thrived until the mid-seventeenth century. From 1650 until about 1750 trials were in steady decline; by 1750 European and English witch trials can be considered to be essentially over.<sup>10</sup>

The vast majority of European witch trials, then, took place between 1580 and 1650. At this point the structure of continental European witch trials typically followed

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<sup>9</sup> Heinrich Kramer and James Sprenger, *Malleus Maleficarum* (Nuremberg: Anton Koberger, 1494), 47. The *Malleus Maleficarum* asserts that “all witchcraft comes from carnal lust, which is, in women, insatiable.”

<sup>10</sup> Levack, 172-73.



what is called an “inquisitorial” style. The accuser was no longer responsible for carrying out trial proceedings against the accused (as they had been previously), and even though it was still possible for one individual to accuse another of witchcraft, the inquisitorial style also made it possible for several members of a community together to accuse someone based on reputation or rumor. Because it was much easier to accuse a witch, and because people could simply denounce someone thought to be a witch without much evidence, there was a rise in witch trials overall.

In England, however, the situation was different. English witch trials were not as rigorously structured as those on the Continent. Where in Europe, court officers could begin trials and determine trial outcomes, in England jurymen who were not trained in the legal field decided the outcomes of trials. The power of a lay jury in a trial was a defining factor in English witch trials and made them quite different from continental inquisitorial witch trials. In England it was still technically the original accuser who carried out the trial; the judge acted as a mediator rather than as one who drove the trial forward with evidence gathering and prosecution.<sup>11</sup> In addition, England had no Papal inquisition, and hence none of the severe forms of evidence-gathering and of punishment that went with it. Many continental ideas about witchcraft such as possession by the Devil simply were not adopted in England.<sup>12</sup> The witch’s Sabbath played a much smaller role in English witchcraft hunts and trials in England than it did on the continent. Where English trials did feature the witch’s Sabbath, the ritual was believed to be far less grotesque than the one imagined by continental authorities. Furthermore, torture was routinely used to extract confessions on the continent, but

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<sup>11</sup> Leveck, 71-74.

<sup>12</sup> Leveck, 200.

only rarely in England. As a result, confessions extracted from accused witches in England were less graphic. Lack of torture also meant fewer witches who accused others while being interrogated, and thus meant fewer accusations that grew into large hunts. This meant English trials tended to remain smaller and more contained than continental trials.<sup>13</sup>

One of the most famous examples of English witch trials is the Hopkins Trials, which took place between 1645 and 1647 in East Anglia. They are named for the self-proclaimed ‘Witchfinder General’ Matthew Hopkins (c.1620-1647), who, assisted by his partner John Stearne (c.1610-1670), traveled to towns where witches were believed to have committed acts of witchcraft. The Hopkins Trials resemble continental trials more than other English trials do in some ways. They saw higher numbers of witches prosecuted and convicted than any other episode of witch hunting in England. They featured a peculiar emphasis on the witch’s Sabbath, absent in most previous English trials. And in addition to the usual emphasis on *maleficium* (physical harm caused by acts of witchcraft) there was also a concern about pacts with and intercourse with the devil. Finally, Hopkins and Stearne went from town to town assisting local officials with the task of gathering evidence against accused witches, which (as far as historians can tell) did not happen in other English witch trials, although the presence of charismatic leaders like Hopkins and Stearne have been seen in some Continental trials.<sup>14</sup> Overall, however, the Hopkins Trials are certainly typical of English beliefs and legal practices around witchcraft. Familiars, also referred to as imps, were central to the trials. These

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<sup>13</sup> Levack, 202.

<sup>14</sup> E. William Monter “Witch Trials in Continental Europe, 1560-1660” *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe*, ed. Bengt Ankarloo and Stuart Clark, vol. 4 *The Period of the Witch Trials* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), 43. The Languedoc example is profiled briefly here.

creatures often took the shape of small animals such as cats, dogs or toads (although sometimes children or even men) were agents of the Devil. They sucked blood from witch's so-called teats—also referred to as marks, or bigges—and sometimes carried out evil acts for the witch. The focus on marks—thought to be marks of a covenant with the devil and therefore evidence of guilt—was a hallmark of English trials and shows that traditional components remained even in the Hopkins Trials.

During the Hopkins trials, as many as 250 suspected witches were tried, and at least 100 were executed.<sup>15</sup> This is certainly an anomaly in the history of English witch trials. Before this, the biggest witch trial held in England was the “Pendle Witch” trial in 1612, in which ten people were executed. Most trials didn't involve as many suspected witches, and didn't cover such a wide geographical area. Furthermore, no trial after the Hopkins Trials resulted in such a high number of executions.

### **The Hopkins Trials**

The story of the Hopkins trials began in a small village called Manningtree in the northeastern county of Essex. In February of 1645, a man named John Rivet accused a woman, Elizabeth Clarke, of bewitching his wife. In March 1645, when asked by Rivet and a group of unnamed local men if she was guilty, Clarke admitted that she was a witch and was linked with other witches, but would not name them. The men brought the news of Clarke's confession to John Stearne, who had connections to the local magistrates, John Bowes and Sir Harbottle Grimston. Bowes and Grimston listened to Stearne's account of Clarke's confession on March 21 and granted him permission to

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<sup>15</sup> James Sharpe, *Instruments of Darkness: Witchcraft in Early Modern England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996), 129.

investigate Clarke so long as she also gave the names of the other witches with whom she was involved. Stearne began to investigate Clarke. Matthew Hopkins volunteered to help him.

We know very little about Matthew Hopkins before the trials that are named after him. The son of one James Hopkins, a Puritan minister from the Isle of Ely, Matthew grew up with Puritan ideas and zeal as part of his everyday life. When he began what would later be called the Hopkins Trials, he was likely in his mid-twenties, and owned a house and garden in Manningtree, Essex.<sup>16</sup> There is scant evidence that he may have been a lawyer's clerk in Ipswich before moving to Manningtree in 1644, but these claims are not substantiated.<sup>17</sup> John Stearne was born in the neighboring county of Suffolk. When the trials began he was in his mid-thirties and had a wife and a daughter. Like Hopkins, he was a Puritan. Unlike Hopkins, he owned no property in Manningtree that we know of, and we are unsure why he was in Manningtree when the trials began. Neither man had any noble or civic title; notably, both asserted their authority regardless of upbringing.<sup>18</sup>

The first step in the investigation of Elizabeth Clarke was for her to be searched for marks. The witches were also watched to see if they were visited by familiars—small animals such as frogs, cats or rabbits who carried out a witch's evil deeds—who were thought to be minions of the devil. Witches' marks were in places where familiars could suckle, and were often located between the witch's thighs or in her genital area. They

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<sup>16</sup> Gaskill, *Witchfinders*, 23.

<sup>17</sup> C. L'Estrange Ewen, *Witchcraft and Demonianism* (London: Heath Cranton Ltd. 1933; repr. 1970), 257.

<sup>18</sup> Gaskill, *Witchfinders*, 38-39.

were usually searched for by women, not men. It was appropriate for women to search accused women because of their expertise regarding the female body.

On the night of March 21 1645 four women—Grace Norman, Mary Phillips, Frances Mills and Mary Parsley—came to Elizabeth Clarke’s home to search her for the marks after having been employed by the justices to do so. They found three marks on her body. This was serious evidence of her guilt. It also meant she had familiars, which now needed to be identified. In order to collect more evidence against her, the four women, along with John Bankes and Mary Parsley’s husband Edward Parsley, watched Clarke for three full nights in the hope that her familiars would be seen suckling her. She was watched Friday, Saturday, and Monday night, but there was no sign of her imps. On Tuesday night, Hopkins and Stearne joined the watchers at Clarke’s home. According to those present that night, Clarke’s imps did indeed make an appearance. Clarke confessed that two of her imps were on loan from a woman named Anne West, from the neighboring village of Lawford.

On Wednesday Hopkins and Stearne reported to Grimston and Bowes what they had seen. They also began to investigate other people. By mid-April there were six Manningtree witches imprisoned in the gaol in Colchester (a town ten miles away at which circuit courts called assizes were convened) awaiting trial. These were Rebecca West, her daughter Anne West, Elizabeth Clarke, Elizabeth Gooding, Anne Leech, and her daughter Helen Clarke. On April 17th, Hopkins traveled to Colchester in the hopes of gathering more evidence against the now-imprisoned accused. All had been found to have teats, found to have familiars, or had confessed, but while this was very damning evidence, Hopkins apparently did not want to take any chances that these women might be acquitted. (This was a reasonable worry as many witches who had been brought to

trial under King Charles I (r 1625-1642) had been acquitted.<sup>19</sup>) Hopkins isolated Rebecca West from the other prisoners and asked her to describe the witch's Sabbath in which the six had all allegedly participated and which would constitute proof that they were all in league with each other. West confessed. Hopkins relayed this information to magistrates Grimston and Bowes the next day.

Meanwhile in Thorpe-le-Soken, ten miles southwest of Manningtree and thirteen miles east of Colchester, Margaret Moone was, after years of suspicion on the part of her neighbors, formally accused of witchcraft. The recent accusations in nearby Manningtree and Lawford had brought tensions in Thorpe-le-Soken to the surface. Victims of her supposed witchcraft obtained a warrant from the justices in Manningtree and hired Manningtree searchers Frances Mills and Mary Phillips, accompanied by three local women, to search Margaret Moone. She was found to have teats, on April 19th and 20th was watched for imps, and on April 21st confessed to having 12 imps.

On April 25th Grimston and Bowes arrived in Little Bentley, six miles from Thorpe-le-Soken, accompanied by searchers Elizabeth Hunt from Wivenhoe and Priscilla Briggs from Manningtree. There Susan Sparrow was searched for marks and confessed to witchcraft, in the process implicating Mary Greenleife of nearby Alresford. Grimston and Bowes, accompanied by Briggs and Hunt, went to Alresford; Hunt and Briggs searched Greenleife and found her to have three teats. The same day, the four also went to Wivenhoe to investigate suspected witches Mary Johnson and Alice Dixon. On Monday March 28th Grimston and Bowes came to Thorpe-le-Soken to deal with Margaret Moone. She denied everything, but no one believed her. News of a possible

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<sup>19</sup> Gaskill, *Witchfinders*, 36-37. Margaret Moone, Sarah Hatyn, Marian Hocket, Elizabeth Harvey and Anne West had all been accused of the crime of witchcraft prior to being tried during the Hopkins Trials.

alliance between all of these witches in all of these nearby towns traveled back to Manningtree. Through late April and early May, Grimston and Bowes, accompanied by the searchers from Manningtree, continued to carry out investigations based on accusations in the area. By June, Colchester gaol housed at least thirty people accused of witchcraft. At the end of July, 36 witches had been put on trial at the Chelmsford assizes and 18 or 19 of them were hanged.<sup>20</sup>

As the summer progressed the searching was continued by Hopkins and Stearne and the female searchers. At this point in the chronology of events accounts of what happened become much harder to come by, and numbers of those accused and executed are harder to find. The two witchfinders left Essex and travelled to towns in the neighboring county of Suffolk, where people already had suspicions of witchcraft. In June or July 1645, Hopkins and Stearne split up, and continued to search separately. Drawing a line on a map north from Ipswich (in Suffolk) to Norwich (in East Anglia), Stearne took the western side and Hopkins took the eastern side. Trials occurred in the counties of Huntingdonshire, Cambridgeshire, Northamptonshire, Norfolkshire and Bedfordshire in varying numbers. Hopkins and Stearne were each accompanied by women searchers; they could not do without their female expertise. Records demonstrate that each of the two men was, at least at some point, accompanied by searchers from Manningtree: Stearne was accompanied by Priscilla Briggs, and Hopkins was assisted by Mary Phillips and Frances Mills. In addition, when Hopkins and Stearne came to a town, they sometimes relied on local women to search accused witches'

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<sup>20</sup> Malcolm Gaskill, "Introduction," in *English Witchcraft 1560-1736*, ed. James Sharpe, vol. 3 *The Matthew Hopkins Trials* (Brookfield: Pickering and Chatto, 2003), xvi.

bodies.<sup>21</sup>

The assizes at Bury St Edmunds were in August of 1645, and a total of 150 suspects were in the gaol when they began. In all, 16 women and two men were hanged. In early September, a woman named Mother Lakeland was burned at the stake for witchcraft. Hers is an exceptional case, as in England the usual death sentence for a witch would be by hanging. However, Lakeland had apparently killed her husband with witchcraft, which was petty treason and thus punishable by burning.<sup>22</sup>

By mid-August, Hopkins and Stearne were being summoned to towns all over Norfolk and Suffolk for their witch-finding expertise. Hopkins visited Great Yarmouth and Aldeburgh, where he deployed searchers to investigate accused witches in August and September 1645. In December of the same year, he returned to both and visited King's Lynn as well. In January 1646 Hopkins and Stearne traveled to Stowmarket, and then on to other counties: Cambridgeshire, Northamptonshire, and Huntingdonshire. By this point, people's feelings about the witchfinders were divided. In Huntingdonshire, where many witches were tried and some were executed in May of 1646, a minister named John Gaule of Great Staughton thought it was inappropriate that the members of his parish talked more about these witch trials than about God, and made it clear that the witchfinders were not welcome.<sup>23</sup> During the fall and winter of 1647, Hopkins and Stearne traveled to the Isle of Ely where Stearne began to lead the

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<sup>21</sup> Gaskill, "The Matthew Hopkins Trials," xvi. Parliament learned about the hunt for witches around this time, possibly owing to the fact that John Lowes, the Vicar of Brandeston (in Suffolk), had been accused. He was swum and exhausted by Hopkins and his associates and eventually confessed to having imps and a teat under his tongue, and to sinking a ship with all its crew. A special commission of Oyer and Terminer (to hear and determine) was sent by Parliament to stop the practice of swimming accused witches.

<sup>22</sup> Gaskill, "The Matthew Hopkins Trials," xvi-xvii.

<sup>23</sup> Gaskill, "The Matthew Hopkins Trials," vii-xviii.



pair in their investigations. There, too, in the summer of 1647, several witches were executed. That winter, Hopkins was questioned at the Norfolk assizes about his methods of finding witches. The same year, he published his *Discovery of Witches*, a defense of his actions presented in question-and-answer form.<sup>24</sup> The witches executed at Ely were the last victims of the Hopkins trials. At this point, Hopkins himself fades from the historical record, and historians are unsure of when or how he died. One legend has it that Hopkins was, ironically, accused of witchcraft and executed, but it is more likely that he sickened and died of consumption soon after the *Discovery of Witches* was published.<sup>25</sup>

The Hopkins Trials were a remarkable chapter in the history of English witch-hunting. In all, historians believe that during the Hopkins trials about 250 witches were accused and at least 100 were hanged. (Stearne claimed in his *Confirmation and Discovery* that 200 were hanged, but generally this is seen as an exaggeration.) Most of these convictions hinged on the presence of witch's marks, testified to by female searchers. The context which allowed them to occur, unique features of the accusations and trials themselves, such as the emphasis on marks and the use of searchers, and the high number of executions make the Hopkins Trials extremely important in the overall understanding of English witchcraft. An extraordinary set of political, economic and social conditions came together to make this particular set of trials—now known as the Hopkins trials—possible.

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<sup>24</sup> Gaskill, "The Matthew Hopkins Trials," xvii-xix.

<sup>25</sup> Gaskill, "The Matthew Hopkins Trials," xix-xx.

## Context

That the Hopkins Trials featured two leaders called ‘witch hunters’—though admittedly the title was at first self-proclaimed—is unique. There is no record of other trials having leading accusers called ‘witch hunters’, as Hopkins and Stearne were, operating anywhere else in England at this or any other time. Cunning folk, those who were considered ‘good witches’ by lay people, but were often denounced by the authorities, had some authority regarding the problem of witches. They were consulted by victims of witchcraft or their families about local witches or remedies for problems arising from being bewitched. However no one else attained the same degree of authority in the accusation and trial process as Hopkins and Stearne did.<sup>26</sup> Hopkins and Stearne provided leadership that may have been key to the momentum of the Hopkins trials. This may explain why the accusations and trials in Manningtree did not remain isolated, as was typical in England, and instead, spread to cover many different towns in Essex and eventually the entire area of East Anglia, involved the accusation of 250 people and the execution of 100 people, and drew hundreds if not thousands into their workings. However, these extraordinary trials cannot be explained simply by the forceful personalities and confidence of two individuals. They were the product of four sets of circumstances which allowed the early accusations in Manningtree to build into much more than an isolated event.

First, there were religious factors. One was a rise in popular Puritanism in the decade or so before the Hopkins Trials. There was a push by strict Puritans to purge local churches of those they saw as unholy clergymen and of overly Catholic practices.

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<sup>26</sup> Sharpe, *Instruments of Darkness*, 66.

This spike in popular Puritan activities included waves of iconoclasm, or the destruction of idols which were thought to be too similar to Catholic symbols such as crucifixes. This popular Puritanism was especially vigorous in the eastern counties where the Hopkins trials took place. Although much of this religious zeal was on a popular, unofficial level, local authorities also became involved in some instances. For instance, the Earl of Manchester, in charge of East Anglia's army, paid a man named William Dowsing to smash idols in churches in England's eastern counties.<sup>27</sup> Church purges across the eastern counties and iconoclasm in Suffolk exacerbated religious tensions in the area and contributed to an atmosphere in which accusations of witchcraft could be made.<sup>28</sup>

Another related religious factor was a post-Reformation change in popular sexual mores. Reformation-inspired English Puritans sought to suppress activities previously seen as acceptable, including dancing and out-of-wedlock sex. From 1600, these once-acceptable behaviors were seen as evidence of witch's Sabbaths and sex with the devil, and were frequent aspects of witch trials.<sup>29</sup> Common people who did not follow Puritan standards regarding leisure and sexuality could find themselves accused of witchcraft.

Second, there is the political context. Between 1645 and 1647, when the Hopkins trials took place, England was under serious political strain. King Charles I (1625-1649), like his father James I (1567-1625), believed that the King of England should have immense power. His general refusal to call Parliament during his reign led to

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<sup>27</sup> Gaskill, *Witchfinders*, 24-26. Dowsing, also called the 'Iconoclast General,' was a yeoman who lacked a formal title which might have been necessary for him to obtain such a position during a time when England was in a less chaotic state. His ability to obtain such authority was, in a way, a precursor to Matthew Hopkins' ability to become 'Witchfinder General.'

<sup>28</sup> Gaskill, *Witchfinders*, 24-25.

<sup>29</sup> Gaskill, *Witchfinders*, 44-45.

widespread dissatisfaction with the crown. The decision not to call Parliament affected his rule both in England and foreign relations with Continental authorities. He could not raise taxes on the people of England, and as such had to pull forces out of the Thirty Years' War from a lack of funds to continue the effort. His choice to marry a Catholic princess made him unpopular, as did his attempt to impose religious reforms on Scotland; Scottish forces retaliated against his reforms. Charles reconvened Parliament to help him in the conflict with the Scots, but dissolved it soon after. Soon afterwards, the "Long Parliament" passed the Triennial Act (1641) which stated that the King was required to assemble Parliament at least every three years or they could assemble without him. However, this did not quell tensions between the King and Parliament as Charles had hoped, and in 1642 the nation descended into civil war.

The years of civil war were years of terrifying chaos for many English people. Many Puritans believed the war was a very literal sign that Armageddon was upon them. Stories of what seemed to be signs of the end-of-days—of witches walking on the water of the Thames, of children being born headless by their mother's request rather than being baptized by the sign of the cross—spread widely. For the Puritan Hopkins, the chaos of the Civil War enabled him to assert his position as a predestined Man of God, and to carry out his hunt for the devil's worldly evildoers—witches.<sup>30</sup>

Third was the particular legal culture of the mid-1640s regarding witchcraft. The first English witchcraft act, passed in 1542 under Henry VIII, made witchcraft a felony and punishable by death, and moved witch trials out of the Church courts into the common law courts. In 1562, an act was passed which distinguished between acts of

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<sup>30</sup> Gaskill, *Witchfinders*, 21-22.

witchcraft and sorcery resulting in severe outcomes (such as a death), which were punishable by death, and other less severe witchcraft offenses (not leading to the death of a person) which often resulted only in prison sentences. In 1604 this law was amended to classify the invoking of evil spirits and the keeping of familiars as severe witchcraft. This meant that by the early seventeenth century, keeping familiars and invoking spirits were acts punishable by death.

In the 1620s, beginning with Charles I's ascension to the throne, until 1642 when civil war broke out in England, prosecution of witches seems to have declined. This can be attributed to the accuser being accused of fraud, a lack of convincing evidence or a "natural medical explanation" for the supposed witchcraft. However, the decline in trials was not the result of any decline in the belief in witches. Indeed historian Malcolm Gaskill suggests that anxiety about witches increased during the first part of Charles' reign because the decline in trials may have made people feel they were not being protected against witches.<sup>31</sup> Because there was a need for more concrete evidence in order to convict a person of witchcraft during Charles' reign, the role of searchers was especially important.

By the 1640s, the legal culture of witch trials had changed. The focus of a trial was not, as it had been following the 1562 Act, to prove acts of *maleficium* (harm) in order to prove guilt, although this was certainly still a large part of trials. Instead, prosecutors sought to prove that the accused witch had entered into a covenant with the devil. This meant that the way guilt was proven in witch trials was different. Marks or teats were searched for on many of the accused as evidence of the covenant, and if they were found

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<sup>31</sup> Gaskill, *Witchfinders*, 33.

(and sometimes even if they were not) the accused witch was watched for her or his familiars, with both marks and imps proof of involvement with the devil. Because of this change, English witchcraft trials began to look a bit more like Continental trials in that more emphasis was being placed on the witch's relationship with the devil than before.

The window of opportunity presented by the suspension of normal legal structures, religious problems and the presence of a fierce leader made the Hopkins Trials possible. In addition, as was discussed above, many of the accusations which would arise during the trials were a result of disagreements or altercations between people in towns across East Anglia, some of which had been brewing for years.<sup>32</sup> Accusations often involved family issues, such as harming livestock or crops, children, husbands, wives or unborn fetuses. These issues clearly affected women, often disproportionately, and make them an important part of our discussion about the context of the Hopkins Trials.

Gender was important in witchcraft accusations: witchcraft in England was seen as primarily (though not exclusively) a woman's crime. Because women were thought to be morally weak, it was assumed that the Devil, when seeking to corrupt minds, would choose women as his first victims.<sup>33</sup>

The idea of gender in early modern England was a complicated one. Women and their bodies were held to be inferior to men and men's bodies for several reasons. For instance, women were thought to be weak and unstable, and according to humoralism, a commonly accepted theory about bodily fluids at the time, women were also inherently

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<sup>32</sup> Gaskill, *Witchfinders*, 36.

<sup>33</sup> Sara Mendelson and Patricia Crawford, *Women in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 71.

wet and cold. This meant that they were more susceptible to disease, but also more passive and gentle. In contrast, men were hot and dry which also meant they were the stronger sex.<sup>34</sup> Along with physical weakness, women were also assumed to be morally weak. Christianity held that women were responsible for the Fall from Grace, and were punished with painful childbirth.

Though women were supposed to be inferior to men, their bodies and the processes through which the female body went during a woman's life were feared and highly misunderstood by men. Much attention was paid to menstruation, which was seen as a way for women's bodies to shed excess and impure blood and menstrual blood which was considered unclean. Men feared menstrual blood because it was supposed to be harmful to the male genitals. It was also a powerful ingredient in 'love magic' that could be added to the food a woman prepared and fed to a man. While menstruation was considered unclean, a woman who did not menstruate was considered unwell and was often treated with bloodletting. Yet women who menstruated more (often upper-class women who were well-fed and did not get much exercise) were also seen as unwell. 'Mother-fits,' an ailment which affected women, could be caused by either too much or not enough menstruation.<sup>35</sup>

From the sixteenth century women were seen as more than simply a deviation from the original (man), but instead beings with their own purpose. Women's bodies were created for the purposes of sexually satisfying men and for carrying and bearing children.<sup>36</sup> The ability to have children gave women power but power coupled with

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<sup>34</sup> Mendelson and Crawford, 18-20.

<sup>35</sup> Mendelson and Crawford, 21-26.

<sup>36</sup> Mendelson and Crawford, 30.

instability made women potentially dangerous. Medical knowledge about the female body was one cultural attempt to understand and control the female body. While most early modern women accepted medical understandings of the female body, they also had additional knowledge about their bodies which they obtained from experience.<sup>37</sup> One way women used this experiential knowledge was in the searching of witches' bodies for marks.

Because of medical ideas about the bodily processes through which women went, they were often thought to be in very precarious positions which could seriously affect their health. Sex was seen as necessary to women's physical health, but too much sex was frowned upon, as was masturbation. Married women were considered healthier than virgins or widows; marriage was sometimes recommended for virgins who were thought to have menstrual disorders, in order to alleviate their condition. Pregnancy was a delicate time in a woman's life and even being startled could harm a fetus. Birth defects in newborn children were the fault of the mother, either as a result of her sins or because of her imagination during pregnancy, as the mother was thought to shape the child with her mind.<sup>38</sup>

One of the principal ways that women had authority in early modern England is through their expertise about bodies, especially the female body, and their ability to care for them. Female searchers, with the experience they had from being women themselves and often wives and mothers, used this bodily knowledge to thoroughly search other women for various reasons. Women were often involved in the care of others, especially within their own families. For poor women, midwifery and nursing (along with spinning

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<sup>37</sup> Mendelson and Crawford, 18.

<sup>38</sup> Mendelson and Crawford, 25-28.



and childcare) were principle ways of making ends meet. Childbirth was almost always attended by a female midwife. Many married or widowed women practiced some form of midwifery, with levels of training, expertise and status varying widely. As with most skilled women's work, midwives remained responsible for their own households, and their midwifery was integrated into their lives. Training varied. Some midwives trained as apprentices under older, more experienced women. Some women had formal training in midwifery and were paid for their work. Some were licensed by the ecclesiastical authorities. Others lacked the money for a license, but were respected for their expertise nonetheless.<sup>39</sup>

Women found a source of social authority through and expertise about bodies by searching them for various reasons, because they alone had the ability to do so. Most importantly, women were paid to examine the bodies of other women. This paper focuses on women who searched other women's bodies for evidence of witchcraft, but there were other reasons that women might search other women. Beyond midwifery and nursing, very poor women also took on other body-oriented work. They could be hired to assist in embalming or clothing a dead body.<sup>40</sup> They could be employed to look after plague victims, to examine the bodies of the dead for signs of the plague; here they were carefully searching bodies for particular signs, just as they did when they searched accused witches' bodies for teats and other marks, although this kind of searching was a very dangerous occupation.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Mendelson and Crawford, 284-316.

<sup>40</sup> Mendelson and Crawford, 288.

<sup>41</sup> Laura Gowing, *Common Bodies: Women, Touch and Power in Seventeenth-Century England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 45.

Female searchers were referred to in many investigations as ‘matrons’; they were women who were respected in the community and were thought to have sufficient knowledge of the female body. Women who were asked to be searchers were often wives and mothers. Their own experience allowed them to judge which women had had ‘carnal knowledge’, had been pregnant, or had given birth. They often proceeded by comparing the body of the accused to their own bodies.<sup>42</sup>

For example, female searchers could be paid to examine the bodies of women who were accused not of witchcraft but of being unchaste or ‘light’; these searchers sought evidence not of a pact with the devil but of sexually transmitted diseases or past pregnancies. The legal process here was structured the same way a witchcraft accusation and trial was. The searching of a woman’s body for ‘lightness’ was triggered by accusations of sex outside of wedlock, but could also be triggered by accusations of theft. An accusation was followed by a search of the accused woman’s body by another woman. As with witchcraft accusations, women who were going to be searched sometimes claimed virginity and then changed their stories after searchers examined and challenged them. Searching for signs of pregnancy was a particularly important job; an illegitimate child could be a financial burden on the local parish or could become the victim of infanticide. It was difficult to prove a woman was pregnant; female searchers used their own experiences to discern whether the women they examined were pregnant or not, and their opinions were respected.<sup>43</sup>

The process of finding a woman guilty of sexual misconduct did not rely entirely on the midwives or other local women who served as searchers, just as the Hopkins

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<sup>42</sup> Gowing, 45-46.

<sup>43</sup> Gowing, 44-45.

trials did not rely entirely on women who searched other women for marks of witchcraft. However all of these searchers—those who searched for sexually transmitted diseases, pregnancies, illicit sex, and witches' marks—were important to the processes at hand, and in all of these processes the searchers' expertise and judgments were respected.

Accusations of witchcraft could arise out of a woman's disagreements with another woman, or from her transgression of local standards of female virtue.<sup>44</sup> An accusation of witchcraft was also an accusation of social deviance; a woman who was perceived as socially deviant was more likely to be called a witch than mad.<sup>45</sup> Poor women were more likely than non-poor women to be accused of witchcraft; they were often accused after speaking harshly to or of a neighbor from whom they had sought help and by whom they had been turned away. However women of higher status were not entirely safe from being accused of witchcraft.<sup>46</sup>

## **Historiography**

Early modern English witch trials have been the subject of sustained study. Since the 1970s, scholarship on the trials includes foci on and diverse interpretations of its causes, patterns of persecution, and decline. The study of the legal persecution of English witches can be broken into three main categories. First is the group of historians who argue that witch persecutions were the result of interpersonal conflict. These historians believe that accusations and the trials that resulted from them can be traced back to disagreements between members of a community (and to a general belief in

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<sup>44</sup> Mendelson and Crawford, 241.

<sup>45</sup> Gowing, 30.

<sup>46</sup> Mendelson and Crawford, 294.

witchcraft). Second is the group of historians who emphasize that witchcraft accusations arose from assumptions about gender in early modern Europe. This approach emphasizes gender discrimination as a cause of witch trials. Third and the most recent to emerge is the group of historians who argue that witch trials were always the result of multiple factors, including but not limited to interpersonal conflict and gender discrimination, that together created an atmosphere in which trials were possible. Witchcraft accusations and trials, according to these historians, are a multi-faceted issue which can only be accurately explained when a wide array of conditions and causes are considered. Furthermore, these trials may best be examined on a local level, using a microhistorical approach.

The first studies of early modern English witch trials focused on those involved in the process who had some sort of social or legal power: those who were making accusations against witches, investigating witches, and trying witches. The most important scholars here were Keith Thomas and Alan MacFarlane in the early 1970s (whose work built on that of Wallace Notestein and C. L'Estrange Ewen in the 1910s and 1920s).<sup>47</sup> Also in the 1970s, an important second historiographical school developed. Feminist historians sought to explain why the majority of those accused of witchcraft were women, and stressed gender hierarchy or even simple misogyny as causes of witch hunts. More recent works, though they reject the overly simplistic notion of misogyny, continued to consider how assumptions about gender affected trial processes and outcomes. Most recently, historians working in the past decade or so have critiqued

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<sup>47</sup> Wallace Notestein, *A History of Witchcraft in England from 1558 to 1718* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1911; repr. 1965). Ewen, *Witchcraft and Demonianism*. C. L'Estrange Ewen, *Witch Hunting and Witch Trials* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co. Ltd., 1929; repr. 1971).

earlier scholars for seeking a single causal factor, and instead strive to gain a holistic view of the multiple causes that made trials possible including civil war, religious changes, economic hardship, as well as interpersonal conflict and misogyny. Some of these historians also advise applying a microhistorical approach to smaller geographical areas because it yields more meaningful results.

### ***Witchcraft Accusations: A result of interpersonal conflict***

While earlier twentieth-century studies exist, the modern scholarship on the early modern English witch hunts begins in the 1970s with the work of Keith Thomas and Alan Macfarlane. Both scholars stress that community conflicts led to accusations of witchcraft. For example, a person in need might have asked a neighbor for food or drink and been declined. If the person who had asked for charity reacted negatively to this refusal, for example by cursing the neighbor who turned them away, they were often vulnerable to accusations of witchcraft. The neighbor might well attribute a subsequent misfortune to the curse.<sup>48</sup> For example, in 1582 Ursley Kemp was accused of witchcraft; among her alleged motives were two refusals of charity on the part of her neighbors (one of money, one of a loan of sand for cleaning).<sup>49</sup> Thus the people whose lives most depended on the charity of others were most at risk of being accused of witchcraft. Thomas and MacFarlane's careful analysis of primary sources demonstrates that many victims of witchcraft knew their alleged tormenters. In some cases Thomas and

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<sup>48</sup> A.D.J. Macfarlane, *Witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart England* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), 196.

<sup>49</sup> Macfarlane, 173.

MacFarlane were even able to document long-standing feuds between the families of accusers and victims.

Keith Thomas' 1971 book *Religion and the Decline of Magic* is a monumentally important work which continues to influence ideas about the witch hunts to this day. Thomas argues that persecutions originated from below, not from above. He states that the lives of early modern people were difficult and unpredictable, that people often sought supernatural explanations for tragedies, and that this social reality led to accusations of witchcraft against neighbors. There were many tragedies in early modern English life, like the death of a child or the failure of a harvest, which had no explanation. Witchcraft was a cause of misfortune that made sense of the world. Accusers then got support from others who were willing to testify against the accused. In the absence of other explanations for illness and disease, the belief in magic and the idea that misfortune was the fault of a witch was preferable to the notion of the completely inexplicable. In other words, witchcraft was used to explain the everyday hardships early modern people experienced. Thomas argues that the fact that so many people came forward to support accusers demonstrates that trials were not caused by pressures from above, authorities seeking to eradicate witchcraft. Rather, the energy came from below: people feared *maleficium* and what it could do to their lives. Neither a judicial system which could be used to prosecute witches nor the ruling class can be blamed for the rise in witch persecutions in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in England; both, Thomas argues, were of long standing. Rather, social tension caused witchcraft accusations.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, (New York: Macmillan, 1971), 458-463.

Alan Macfarlane, in *Witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart England* (1970) also argues that witch hunts were caused by intensely local conflicts within small communities. According to him, accusations were made when someone broke with traditional community values by failing to give charity to those in need. Those who had failed to be charitable then expected misfortune, but instead of accepting it, they blamed the people they had wronged by accusing them of witchcraft.<sup>51</sup>

These two major works established the historical study of witchcraft in early modern England. They were extremely influential for later scholars, particularly in their use of anthropological models to help explain why witchcraft beliefs and accusations were useful to the cultures in which they thrived. Thomas and Macfarlane helped historians to understand why these beliefs existed, and then further to analyze the causes and effects of these beliefs. While many historians working since the 1970s have drawn different conclusions from Macfarlane and Thomas, or have critiqued them for an overly narrow focus on social structure, their works mark the point at which the modern historical study of witch hunts begins, and are still relevant to scholarship today.

### ***Gender and Witchcraft***

Shortly after Thomas' and Macfarlane's works were published, feminist historians of women and gender began to pay attention to witchcraft and witch hunts, and to form their own ideas about the cause of the witch hunts. Since the mid-1970s there has been a significant amount of research on English witchcraft which focuses on

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<sup>51</sup> Macfarlane, 204-05.

the fact that the overwhelming majority of the accused were women. This group is broad and important, with scholars differing significantly in their interpretations of the role of gender. Some works such as Marianne Hester's *Lewd Women and Wicked Witches: A Study of the Dynamics of Male Domination* (1992) argue that the witch trials were an attack against women; others, like Alison Rowlands' *Witchcraft and Gender in Early Modern Europe* (2003) focus more broadly on the how ideas about gender affected outcomes of witch trials.

The first group to draw attention to and analyze the fact that the majority of those accused of witchcraft during the European witch craze were women were radical feminists. Radical feminist history rejects the 'detachment' of traditional academia in favor of a more emotionally motivated interpretation of history.<sup>52</sup> Although these scholars made important strides in bringing the issue of gender into the historical spotlight, many of their conclusions have been proven incorrect. For example, in radical feminist philosopher Mary Daly's 1978 work *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism*, Daly argues that the witch hunts were used to weed out women who had rejected patriarchy in some way, either by refusing to be married or by outliving their partners.<sup>53</sup> However her discussion of witchcraft relies heavily on a reading of the *Malleus Maleficarum*. That 1478 work was virulently anti-female and memorable for its shock value, but scholars now hold that there is little evidence that it was representative of contemporary attitudes. Rather, its authors, James Sprenger and Heinrich Kramer,

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<sup>52</sup> Diane Purkiss, *The Witch in History: Early Modern and Twentieth-Century Representations* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 11.

<sup>53</sup> Mary Daly, *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978), 55.



were likely trying to convince readers of their minority view regarding the evil innate in woman.

Other early feminist works which focused on why women were most often the victims of witch prosecutions were Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English with their pamphlet *Witches, Midwives and Nurses*. They argued that the majority of women who were accused were local healers and were systematically hunted by men in order to eliminate female participation in community health matters.<sup>54</sup> This has since been proven untrue by other historians, but nonetheless brought further attention to the study of why women were so involved in the European witch trials.

Christina Larner's book *Witchcraft and Religion*, written in 1984, brought the conversation of gender and witchcraft into more mainstream historical study. Here and in later works she argued that witch hunting was not the systematic hunting of women healers by male medical professionals. The male medical profession was in its very early stages when the witch-hunts of Europe were peaking, and did not have the clout to persecute female healers.<sup>55</sup> Moreover men did not seek to eradicate healers, many of whom were male. Finally, she points out that witches were more likely to be accused for entering into a demonic pact with the devil than for healing or harming.

Marianne Hester, in her 1992 book *Lewd Women and Wicked Witches*, argues that accusations during the witch craze were sex-specific. Specifically critiquing Larner's conclusion that witch-hunting was not woman-hunting, she highlights that Larner admits witch hunting to be the hunt for women who don't conform to patriarchal ideals

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<sup>54</sup> Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English, *Witches, Midwives, and Nurses: A History of Women Healers* (New York: The Feminist Press at CUNY, 1973), 6.

<sup>55</sup> Christina Larner, *Witchcraft and Religion: The Politics of Popular Belief* (New York: Basil Blackwell Inc, 1984), 152.

but is unwilling to make the jump to definitively stating that it was woman-hunting.<sup>56</sup> Hester believes that in a patriarchal society, heterosexual relationships are inherently violent, and rape and pornography are just an extension of this violence. Applying this theory to the witch craze, Hester argues that the persecution of women as witches was a form of sexual violence because its success relied on the exploitation of female sexuality.<sup>57</sup> Because the world was changing so much at the time of the witch hunts with respect to religion, culture, and economy, the patriarchy used the trials as a way to ensure they would remain in control of women.<sup>58</sup> Hester's work is unconvincing: rather than using her theory to illuminate the witch trials, she uses the witch trials to support her feminist theory's applicability throughout history to the present day. In addition her overly narrow focus on sexuality and its place in persecution leads her to neglect important factors such as religious and political tensions.

Anne Barstow, author of *Witchcraze: A New History of the European Witch Hunts* (1994) is of the opinion that previous historians' work was marred by a failure to grasp the importance of patriarchy.<sup>59</sup> She also hints at something which is of particular importance to the historical work which will follow—the role of female accusers of other females in a structure which was dominated by men. Barstow's conclusion is that women knew they couldn't subvert the patriarchal authorities because they would then be in danger of harm themselves. In order to save themselves, then, they contributed

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<sup>56</sup> Marianne Hester, *Lewd Women and Wicked Witches: A Study of the Dynamics of Male Domination* (London: Routledge, 1992), 112.

<sup>57</sup> Hester, 197.

<sup>58</sup> Hester, 202.

<sup>59</sup> Anne Llewellyn Barstow, *Witchcraze: A New History of the European Witch Hunts* (San Francisco: Pandora, 1994), 9.

significantly to attacks on those who had a more precarious place in society—women of lower social standing.

To Barstow, witch-hunting was woman-hunting. In her work, Barstow focuses on the differences between men and women in European witch trials in order to understand the power structures which made witch hunts possible. Despite the work of Daly, Ehrenreich and English, and Hester, she argues that there was a lack of analysis of gender in the witch hunts. She further argued that special attention should be paid to physical violence perpetrated upon the suspects in witch trials and to the sexual nature of the violence.

Critiquing the idea that early modern witches were either feminist forerunners knowingly rejecting patriarchal ideals or the descendants of ancient female healers and sorceresses is Diane Purkiss in her 1996 book *The Witch in History*. Purkiss states there is no evidence to support such claims, and that they are made because people are looking to the past hoping to grasp some sort of reflection of themselves in history. The witch has served different purposes at different times—in early modern European society she was the anti-mother and was a way for people at the time to make sense of the choices they were making as members of society and as parents. Through folklore like Hansel and Gretel she became a tool for teaching children how to behave and finally, she is now a feminist symbol. Sexually liberated, learned in herbal techniques of curing health problems and in opposition of the oppressive forces of her time, the witch has been reshaped once again to serve a purpose. However, Purkiss argues, this idea of who a witch really was in early modern European society is inaccurate and the witch has been misrepresented in modern historical scholarship because of her utility as an early feminist symbol.

Purkiss' argument that some feminist historians have been searching for "a Holocaust of one's own" is important to the wider conversation about the role of misogyny in the early modern European witch hunts. Purkiss reminds historians that midwives were more likely to be involved in trials as searchers than as accused witches, and that to see these midwives as 'sexually liberated' is incorrect.<sup>60</sup> However, some people still attempt to hang onto the image of the midwife as liberated woman who was deliberately subverting patriarchal society by using her knowledge of herbal cures and the female body to help women in the community. Purkiss points out, however, that feminist historians are not the only culprits; non-feminist historians who used the idea of the witch to support their arguments are often just as biased.<sup>61</sup> Noting radical feminism's rejection of academic detachment, Purkiss compares Daly's *Gyn/Ecology* to a poem by Robin Morgan entitled "The Network of the Imaginary Mother"<sup>62</sup> in that both rely on the reader not knowing many specific details about the witch trials in order for the work to be effective. Both Daly and Morgan, according to Purkiss, are less interested in giving specifics about witch trials and more concerned with evoking emotion about the mythical 'Burning Times.'<sup>63</sup> According to Purkiss, Daly and scholars like her have a need to see a version of themselves in history, and have created their

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<sup>60</sup> Purkiss, 8.

<sup>61</sup> Purkiss, 10.

<sup>62</sup> Robin Morgan, *Lady of the Beasts: Poems*. "Network of the Imaginary Mother." (New York: Random House, 1976), 68. Morgan's poem included lines such as "*Mother Lakeland, healer, burned 1645.*" While it is true that Lakeland was burned for her supposed crimes, it was not because she was a healer. She was tried for malevolent witchcraft, and was burned because she committed petty treason (killing her husband via witchcraft). Page 78 "*Margaret Barclay, crushed to death with stones, 1618.*" If the reader were familiar with what the practice of crushing was used for, the example would be less useful to Morgan. *Peine forte et dure* (hard and forceful punishment), was used to force a suspect to enter a plea, not as a form of execution.

<sup>63</sup> Purkiss, 12-13.

image of the witch and her persecutors accordingly. This approach is dangerous because it turns women's history into a competition about who has been the most wronged.<sup>64</sup>

Christina Lerner investigated gender and the trials more holistically in her 2000 book *Enemies of God: The Witch-hunt in Scotland*. While Lerner's research is on Scottish witch trials, she considers the implications of her argument regarding trials in England and on the Continent, and her work has influenced scholarship on the trials in England. Lerner argues that while women were more likely to be accused of witchcraft than men—that “all women are potential witches”—the goal of the trials was not to hunt women.<sup>65</sup> She concludes that we should see witch hunts and trials as *sex-related*, but not *sex-specific*. Further, it was not all women who were hunted, but rather those women who broke with certain societal norms. Lerner's work has been criticized by earlier historians, notably Hester, who maintains her position that the witch trials were misogynist. However her insight helped to establish a new research agenda, and most subsequent scholars who focus on gender, even those who critique her work, owe a lot to her new interpretation of witch hunts.

Other recent works on gender have taken different approaches; Karen Jones and Michael Zell's work examining witch trials before the 1563 witchcraft act argues that witchcraft was attributed more often to women than men even before the act. So-called “white magic” (benevolent witchcraft) was attributed to both men and women, but malevolent witchcraft was already more closely associated with women.<sup>66</sup> Recent works

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<sup>64</sup> Purkiss, 26.

<sup>65</sup> Christina Lerner, *Enemies of God: The Witch-Hunt in Scotland* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 92.

<sup>66</sup> Karen Jones and Michael Zell. “‘The divels special instruments’: Women and Witchcraft Before the ‘Great Witch-Hunt’,” in *Social History* vol. 30, no. 1 (2005): 45-63.

by Willem de Blecourt and Emma Wilby marry the historical approaches of focusing on gender as well as using a microhistorical approach to most effectively study a specific set of trials. De Blecourt examined witchcraft accusations in the Netherlands and hypothesizes that while the transgression of social norms could mean an accusation for a man or a woman, women were more often accused because it was men who were able to establish social rules and what constituted breaking them.<sup>67</sup> Wilby, who focuses entirely on the trial of Scottish witch Isobel Gowdie, contradicts other historians who have studied her trial in the context of other trials. By looking at Gowdie and her circumstances only, she is able to argue that Gowdie's fantastical visions and confession are not a result of her being mad; instead, it was a result of the particular people involved in the trial, local context and the way in which her trial was carried out.<sup>68</sup>

Alison Rowlands, in her 2013 piece "Witchcraft and Gender in Early Modern Europe," brings to the conversation the problem of male witches and how to incorporate them into gendered analyses of the witch craze. She argues that feminist scholars have previously been reluctant to acknowledge the large number of men who were prosecuted as witches because it does not fit their model of misogyny.<sup>69</sup> Some minimize male witches by pointing out that a man was more likely to be accused if he was related to a woman who had already been convicted of witchcraft. However Rowlands maintains that this is not grounds for dismissing the importance of male witches. Rowlands also

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<sup>67</sup> Willem De Blécourt, "The Making of the Female Witch: Reflections on Witchcraft and Gender in the Early Modern Period," in *Gender & History* vol. 12 no. 2 (2000): 287.

<sup>68</sup> Emma Wilby, *The Visions of Isobel Gowdie: Magic, Witchcraft and Dark Shamanism in Seventeenth-Century Scotland* (Portland: Sussex Academic Press, 2010).

<sup>69</sup> Alison Rowlands, "Witchcraft and Gender in Early Modern Europe" in *The Oxford Handbook of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe and Colonial America*, ed. Brian Levack (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 465.

points out that in the large-scale continental trials, the use of torture could account for the larger number of men accused because those being tortured were forced to give the names of others. This could explain why there were proportionally fewer men convicted in England, where torture was far more regulated and less violent. This is also likely a reason why admissions of guilt in England less frequently included admissions of sexually deviance.

### ***Patterns of Accusation as a Multi-faceted Problem***

Most recently, historians have advocated a multi-causal approach to the European, English and North American witch hunts that acknowledges and investigates religious tensions and economic crises as well as interpersonal conflicts and gender politics. Although it is not the newest way to look at the witch trials, it is the most successful approach and has endured in more recent works on the subject. In works by these scholars, many factors came together in order to make the witch trials possible. This is one of the newest approaches to the subject, and provides promising ideas about how a certain society's conditions could, unfortunately, experience a combination of problems which made possible a witch hunt. This approach leaves its practitioners room to examine all the factors which previous researchers saw as causes of the witch trials, but instead of championing a single issue, these scholars can explore how various factors affected and perhaps exacerbated each other.

Robin Briggs builds on Macfarlane and Thomas' work on community tensions by adding a psychoanalytic framework to explain these tensions. In his comprehensive *Witches and Neighbors* (2002) argues that large-scale European witch hunts which could be considered "crazes" are a small minority of European witch trials overall.

Contrary to some previous historians, he argues that most witch trials happened on a small scale and were undertaken with caution by local authorities.<sup>70</sup> The majority of European towns never saw a witchcraft trial or execution. However Briggs stresses that this does not mean that people were unaware of witchcraft or trials for it; most were aware of trials and executions elsewhere. Furthermore most people likely believed they lived among witches and dealt with this in some way; that way just did not include bringing suspects to trial or killing them.<sup>71</sup> Those who wrote about the necessity of large-scale persecutions were not representing common opinion; they were a minority, trying to convince the majority to join them. It is important to understand why most places escaped persecution. As Briggs recognizes that problems between neighbors are in and of themselves neither a cause nor an explanation of witch trials, Briggs is one of the newer historians who argue that witchcraft was caused by more than one factor.

Also arguing that witch hunts need to be investigated as a multi-faceted problem is Brian Levack, specifically in his work *The Witch-hunt in Early Modern Europe*. He explains that it is important to look at the many factors which made the hunts possible, from religious pressures to emergent capitalism', and the way they affected each other. Of all these possible causes, however, Levack does admit that a few of them likely played a larger part in the hunts than others, stating that he:

adopts a multi-causal approach which sees the emergence of new ideas about witches and a series of fundamental changes in the criminal law as the necessary preconditions of the witch-hunt, and both religious and social tension as its more immediate social tensions.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Robin Briggs, *Witches and Neighbors* (New York: Penguin Books USA Inc, 1996), 401-02.

<sup>71</sup> Briggs, 400.

<sup>72</sup> Levack, 3.



Furthermore, Levack argues that while there may be a good, convincing argument for the cause or context of a specific hunt, it is counterproductive to attempt to impose the same conclusions on all hunts elsewhere in Europe because of the significant differences between areas that experienced witch persecution such as comparing witch trials in Bavaria to those which occurred in Lorraine.<sup>73</sup>

Levack's argument is in direct conflict with Thomas' position that witch hunts could not have been caused by the changes in criminal law about witches because there had been channels through which the prosecution of witches was possible for quite a long time. Levack explains that in early modern states that were decentralized, local governments usually retained a great deal of autonomy, and were able to achieve higher rates of conviction and execution than were possible in areas in which the judicial process was highly regulated by central authorities.<sup>74</sup> This disagreement can probably be attributed to the fact that Thomas focuses more on the English trials than Levack, who although he uses some English evidence to support his thesis, relies much more on Continental evidence. This is a great example of why microhistorical study of the witch trials is sometimes necessary. Levack's conclusion may not be completely applicable to all trials, but in the case of the Hopkins Trials, it stands that because normal judicial structures had been suspended, local authorities (like Hopkins) had the opportunity to exact justice on witches.

James Sharpe is a third example of a historian who has synthesized many ideas about the cause and context of English witch trials. He concedes that hunts were not sanctioned and carried out by an organized elite as earlier historians such as Anne

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<sup>73</sup> Levack, 146.

<sup>74</sup> Levack, 90.

Barstow suggested; rather, witches were often accused by their neighbors because of conflict which arose between them. However, he also points out that local conflict was not enough to explain the occurrence of witch trials. Sharpe also emphasizes the importance of understanding beliefs about witchcraft at all levels of society – those in power to the peasantry – in order to gain a holistic understanding of the dynamics of belief.

Sharpe stresses that English witch trials must be understood in the context of the larger European trials. They were, in his words, “a variation on a European theme.”<sup>75</sup> There are obvious differences between trials in certain areas of Europe and England—one of the most important differences was the lack of emphasis in England on the witch’s pact with the devil, (with the important exception of the Hopkins Trials). In addition, testimony and admissions of guilt which were less graphic and grotesque (likely because of the restrictions on the use of torture in England). Finally, the familiar spirit or imp was a factor unique to English witch trials. However, given these exceptions, English witch trials were still heavily influenced by Continental ideas and neither occurred in a vacuum. For example, the island of Guernsey was influenced considerably by French culture, so trials which occurred there resembled Continental witch trials.

Building on the multi-causal school, the most recent works are local studies or microhistories which look very specifically at circumstances and at multiple causes. Sharpe has written a study on the Isle of Man, Gaskill has written on East Anglia, and several other historians have written on other small areas. This approach relieves

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<sup>75</sup> Sharpe, *Instruments of Darkness*, 32.

historians of the pressure to apply theories which may only work for a specific set of trials and surrounding circumstances to a larger area in which they may not apply as effectively.<sup>76</sup>

### ***The Nature of Evidence***

Especially important to the topic of this paper is Clive Holmes' 1993 article "Women: Witnesses and Witches." Holmes argues that gender and misogyny cannot be overlooked as categories of study because of the large and varied roles that women played in the witch trials either as victims who had been possessed, those who had experienced *maleficium*, or those who had testified to the existence of marks or other physical indicators of guilt.<sup>77</sup> Female searchers may have been acting as agents of their own oppression but this does not mean that study of their contributions to the witch hunts should be abandoned. Holmes is the only historian to discuss the role of searchers in witch trials at length and acknowledge their importance, and that is significant. However, once he establishes that these women are worth studying he also states that their involvement began and ended entirely with male authority. What he found confirmed women's inferior status, and their participation was entirely in the hands of

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<sup>76</sup>James Sharpe, "Witchcraft in the Early Modern Isle of Man," in *Cultural & Social History*, 4 (2007): 11-28.  
 Jonathan Barry, *Witchcraft & Demonology in South-West England 1640-1789* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).  
 Malcolm Gaskill, "Witchcraft, Politics, and Memory in Seventeenth-Century England," in *Historical Journal*, 50 (2007): 289-308.  
 Mark Stoye, "It Is But an Olde Wytche Gonne': Prosecution and Execution for Witchcraft in Exeter, 1558-1610," in *History*, 96 (2011): 129-151.  
 Sally Parkin, "Witchcraft, Women's Honour and Customary Law in Early Modern Wales," in *Social History*, 31 (2006): 295-318.  
 Liv Helene Willumsen, "A Narratological Approach to Witchcraft Trial: A Scottish Case," in *Journal of Early Modern History*, 15 (2011): 531-560.  
 Stephen Timmons, "Witchcraft and Rebellion in Late Seventeenth-Century Devon," in *Journal of Early Modern History*, 10 (2006): 297-330.

<sup>77</sup> Holmes, 45-6.

the “magisterial and clerical elite<sup>78</sup>.” Holmes’ work makes clear an important distinction: just because women at the time may have been reinforcing ideas which contributed to patriarchal domination does not mean they were either simple victims of or thoughtless perpetrators of patriarchal structures. The conversation cannot end with simply blaming searchers for not falling to male authority.

Finally, Orna Alyagon Darr discusses the nature of proof and evidence in contemporary England in her book *Marks of an Absolute Witch: Evidentiary Dilemmas in Early Modern England* (2011). Her book focuses on changes in English trial proceedings using witch trials as a case study.<sup>79</sup> Because witchcraft was a serious crime but was also difficult to prove, there was a considerable amount of debate over what could truly be considered proof of guilt.<sup>80</sup> Finding a mark on a suspected witch was, in the author’s words, ‘the early modern forensic equivalent of today’s fingerprints,’ or a way of proving guilt without relying on witnesses. Although the search for marks wasn’t an official part of English criminal proceedings, it was a regular part of pre-trial evidence gathering.<sup>81</sup> Darr states that marks were important because they resonated with both learned ideas of witchcraft which focused on the witch’s covenant with the devil and the mark as evidence of the covenant, and with popular notions about witchcraft in which familiars sucked from the witch’s mark or teat.<sup>82</sup> Darr explains that

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<sup>78</sup> Holmes, 77-78.

<sup>79</sup> Orna Alyagon Darr, *Marks of an Absolute Witch: Evidentiary Dilemmas in Early Modern England* (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2011), 4.

<sup>80</sup> Darr, 262.

<sup>81</sup> Darr, 112-113.

<sup>82</sup> Darr, 114-116. It is also important that here, Darr discusses the difference in terminology. Learned belief that marks were a sign of a demonic pact was reflected in the fact that scholars actually called them marks. However, the searchers who reported their findings to the Justices of the Peace called

“the practice of the search for the devil’s mark reflected and reasserted the asymmetrical power grid in which the men orchestrated and ordered the searchers and the women complied with their orders, either in the vulnerable position of suspects or in the more empowered role of female searchers.”<sup>83</sup> While it is true that searching was ordered by men and often carried out by women, this does not automatically mean that female searchers were entirely controlled by men or that they are unworthy of scholarly attention. In an entire chapter devoted to the evidentiary value of witch’s marks, Darr spends only a page and a half on the searchers themselves.<sup>84</sup> Her work is extremely important in the ways that it calls attention to marks, but it is a work about marks as an interesting form of evidence, not a work about female searchers.

For the past forty years, a significant amount of work has been done in interpreting the causes and preconditions for the European witch hunts. By approaching historical problems in a multi-disciplinary way, historians like Alan Macfarlane have been able to make breakthroughs in our understanding of the hunts. Historians of gender have expanded on this further and have researched gender as a separate but very important category of study. It is through their work that I became interested in the role of women who were neither accusers nor accused. The role of such women in witch trials is worth study, and these women cannot be simply dismissed as enablers of the patriarchy. They deserve to be thoroughly investigated and given as much attention as the rest of those involved in the Hopkins trials. Furthermore the histories of gender and of witchcraft need to be better integrated into one another.

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them teats or bigges, reflecting the belief that they were for the purpose of suckling familiars.

<sup>83</sup> Darr, 381.

<sup>84</sup> Darr, 117-18.

### **Primary Sources: Evidence of power**

The involvement of women searchers in the Hopkins Trials is a perfect example of how different women's experiences in early modern England could be. These women were sometimes local, as in the case of Mary Phillips or Frances Mills when they were assisting in the search of women from Manningtree, but could also be called upon to search women in other communities and were used throughout the trials in East Anglia. Unlike the families of victims, searchers were often not directly involved in the community conflicts which resulted in accusations. This is an example of the diversity of female experience in the witch trials that has been underexplored. Because they were uninvolved in the local quarrel at hand, they brought a different perspective to the conflict.

The argument of this essay rests on my reading of five pamphlets about the Hopkins Trials. All were written and published in the mid- to late-1640s, during or soon after the trials, and all provide evidence that female searchers played an important role in the legal procedures surrounding witchcraft. The longest source, and one of the principle primary sources on the Hopkins Trials, is a 36-page pamphlet, published in 1645 by an author we know only as H.F., entitled "A true and exact Relation Of the severall Informations, Examinations, and Confessions of the late Witches, arraigned and executed in the County of Essex" (and referred to here as *True and Exact Relation*). *True and Exact Relation* discusses the first set of accusations and the first trials which are considered the beginning of the "Hopkins Trials." The pamphlet begins with a three-page discussion of why witchcraft is immoral. After that, the pamphlet is structured so that each witch is discussed separately. First, there is evidence given against a witch

from any combination of people who were her/his victims, who witnessed malicious acts, who watched the witch for familiars or who searched the witch for marks. Then, there is a statement from the witch him/herself which was given under examination. The pamphlet then moves on to the next witch. In all, 19 witches are discussed in *True and Exact Relation*. Information against witches is given by date, as are the actual examinations of the witches. In the examination section for some of the witches, their fate is noted. In the case of Rebecca West, she was “found by the grand Jury, but acquitted by the Jury of life and death” meaning she was found guilty but was spared the death penalty. Elizabeth Clarke was “executed at Chelmesford,” and Rose Hallybread “died in the Gaole.” This tells us that rather than being published as a sort of play-by-play of the trials, *True and Exact Relation* was made available to the public after the trials had finished. The intended audience is likely the general literate public, who would have had access to the pamphlet once it was published.

The second pamphlet is “A confirmation and discovery of witch-craft, Containing these severall particulars; That there are VVitches called bad Witches, and Witches untruely called good or white Witches, and what manner of people they be, and how they may bee knowne, with many particulars thereunto tending. Together with the Confessions of many of those executed since May 1645. In the severall Counties hereafter mentioned. As also some objections Answered. By Iohn Stearne, now of Lawshall neere Burie Saint Edmonds in Suffolke, sometimes of Manningtree in Essex” (shortened here to *Confirmation of Witchcraft*). This 61-page pamphlet is quite thorough in explaining the significance of marks and the process by which they can be found. The first, shorter section of Stearne’s pamphlet is devoted largely to using religious teachings to justify the existence and sinfulness of witchcraft. Following that

section, the vast majority of his work is devoted to recounting his travels and experience in finding witches. Here I focus on the sections of the pamphlet that address the searching of witches and their marks. One section discusses familiars, a popular part of English witch beliefs. Watching of witches for their familiars, according to Stearne, is important because a witch will often confess either when her familiars come to her or if she fears they have abandoned her. A second passage describes the case of a woman from Huntingdonshire who was searched several times, fled, eventually returned to her town, and was swum. Stearne explains that she was searched multiple times because if a witch is given notice that she will be searched for marks, she has the opportunity to hide them. Finally, there is an important section in which Stearne describes the differences between a witch's 'teat' and a normal one, down to the length, sensitivity, and dryness.

The third source on which my argument rests is written by Hopkins himself. After the trials were over, Hopkins wrote about his experience and defended his actions in a text called "The discovery of vvitches: in answer to severall queries, lately delivered to the judges of the assize for the county of Norfolk. And now published by Matthew Hopkins, witch-finder. For the benefit of the whole kingdome" (here shortened to *Discovery of Witches*). After a quotation from Exodus 22:18, "thou shalt not suffer a witch to live," the entire work is Hopkins' defense of himself presented in the form of 14 questions and answers. The pamphlet ends with the phrase "*judicet ullus*" ("let anyone judge"). Hopkins' pamphlet is only ten pages long, but a significant portion of it is devoted to discussing the importance in a witch trial of marks and those who searched for marks.

The fourth pamphlet discussed in this paper is an eight-page piece entitled "The Lawes against witches, and conivration. AND some brief noted and observations for the



discovery of witches. Being very usefull for these Times, wherein the DEVIL reigned and prevails over the souled of poor Creatures, in drawing them to that crying Sin of WITCH-CRAFT. ALSO, The Confession of Mother Lakeland, who was arraigned and condemned for a Witch, at Ipswich in Suffolk” (shortened here to *The Laws Against Witches*). Although this pamphlet is short and says nothing about the involvement of Hopkins, Stearne or any specific searchers, the lengthy list in it of types of possible evidence that a person was a witch—in a section titled “The Observations for the discovery of Witches”—is important. The fact that familiars and marks are listed first and as the most effective way of proving guilt is critical.

Finally, the fifth pamphlet to be examined is called “A True Relation of the Araignment of eightheene Witches. That were tried, convicted, and condemned, at a Sessions holden at St. Edmunds-Bury in Suffolke, and there by the Iudge and Iustices of the said Sessions condemned to die, and so were executed, and their severall Confessions before their executions. With a true relation of how they find them out. The names of those that were executed. Mr. Lowes parson of Branson. Thomas Evered a Cooper with Mary his wife. Mary Bacon. Anne Alderman. Rebecca Morris. Mary Fuller. Mary Clowes. Margery Sparham Katherine Teo[...]ey. Sarah Spinlow. Iane Limstead. Anne Wright. Mary Smith. Iane Rivert. Susan Manners. Mary Skipper. Anne Leech” (here shortened to *True Relation of Arraignment*). This eight-page document recounts the trials held at St. Edmunds-Bury in Suffolk in the summer of 1645 and the execution of those who were condemned on August 27, 1645. It includes a crucial passage about the four searchers in Suffolk devoted to looking for witch’s marks.

***A typical accusation and trial: the example of Elizabeth Clarke***

Let us begin with an explication of how most witch trials progressed, using the example of Elizabeth Clarke, the first witch accused in what came to be known as the Hopkins Trials. Clarke was first accused of witchcraft in March of 1645, was tried and convicted in late July, and was condemned to death by hanging. The accusations against, examinations of, and trial of Clarke were all fairly typical of an English witch trial of the 1640s.

Clarke was thought have harmed people in her community through the use of witchcraft and was formally accused of witchcraft on March 21, 1645. The next step was to have her searched for marks by local women who were respected and seen as having the experience necessary to find witch's marks. When these searchers found marks on Clarke, she was watched for imps. When her imps were seen by those watching her, Clarke confessed and implicated other local women in the crime of witchcraft.

*True and Exact Relation* begins with narratives relating to Elizabeth Clarke. It makes no mention of the marks being found on Clarke, but we know from historian of witchcraft Malcom Gaskill that Clarke was found to have three marks.<sup>85</sup> *True and Exact Relation* then provides several accounts—by Hopkins, Stearne, female searchers and a few men—of the next step: watching the witch for familiars.

Hopkins' account of the night when Clarke was watched for her familiars begins with his statement that he was appointed by local Justices Grimston and Bowes to watch Clarke for familiars the night before this narrative was reported to the justices. He states that he did not plan to stay very long, but that his plans soon changed. Clarke told him

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<sup>85</sup> Gaskill, *Witchfinders*, 48. Gaskill cites BL Royal 17, C.XXIII, which states that Clarke was searched and three marks were found.

and Stearne that if they stayed and did not harm her, she would call an imp for them. She confessed that she had been having sex with the Devil for six or seven years, three or four times a week, when he came to her in the night in the shape of a man. The first two imps that came that night to Clarke were Jarmara, a fat dog, and Vinegar Tom, a greyhound with long legs. Another black imp came and vanished very quickly. A final imp who appeared took the shape of a 'polcat.' She told them she had five imps that were her own and two that belonged to Anne West (also suspected of witchcraft). Hopkins' statement continues on after the watching; he states that when he left Clarke's home that night, his greyhound became scared. As his dog was running away, Hopkins saw what looked like a kitten, and when his dog came back had some flesh torn from its shoulder, an injury he suspected was inflicted by the kitten. When he walked onto the yard of his home, he saw a creature which was black and looked like a cat but was three times as big. The greyhound chased it out of his yard through the gate and then came back to Hopkins, very shaken.

Stearne's statement of what happened that night at Elizabeth Clarke's home in *True and Exact Relation* is briefer than but similar to Hopkins'. Stearne names an additional imp who arrived before Jarmara, something white named Holt. Then came Jarmara, whom he described not as a fat dog but as white with red spots and about the size of a small dog. Then, just as in Hopkins' account, another unnamed imp appeared but vanished immediately. Then Vinegar Tom, which Stearne described as looking like a dumb dog. Stearne states that Clarke also told them she had another imp, called Sacke and Sugar, but that it would not come for a long time. She told them that she received three of the imps from her mother and two from Anne West. In Stearne's account of Clarke's explanation, she and West shared imps who sucked on both women.

Clarke was found guilty and was—along with 18 other witches—condemned to death at Chelmsford on July 29, 1645. She was executed by hanging. Although her story is just one of many in the Hopkins Trials, the ordeal she endured was fairly typical of a witch accused at this time.

In this example, we can see how important marks are. The finding of marks on Clarke's body leads to her being watched for familiars and ultimately confessing to her crimes. Searchers' knowledge of the female body gave them the information they needed to make a decision about what were considered unnatural marks on her body. Together, this evidence helped obtain a guilty verdict for her.

### ***The Women Called Searchers***

Careful analysis of references to the women asked to search witches for marks reveals that although they have been overlooked by most scholars, female searchers were in fact critical authorities in the witch trials. This finding significantly complicates attempts to portray the witch trials as the persecution of women by men.

It is perhaps impossible to know much about the female searchers involved in the Hopkins trials beyond the trials themselves. However, it is possible to highlight their contributions to those trials in a more thorough, meaningful way than has been done before. This is necessary because searching was such an important step in the process of convicting a witch. *True Relation of Arraignment* includes a long section on the searching process. In it we learn that in Suffolk, there was a standing team of four searchers—two men and two women—appointed to find marks on accused male and female witches respectively. When someone in the county of Suffolk was suspected of witchcraft, the searchers were asked to travel to the place where the suspected witches

lived. The suspect was taken to a room, stripped naked, and searched for marks. If s/he was found to have marks, the suspect was set on a stool in the middle of the room and watched for imps. It was understood that either his or her imps would approach within 24 hours, or the suspected witch would become very ‘perplexed and much tortured’ for lack of suckling. Searching, then, was a necessary first step in conviction, and county officials kept a team of searchers at the ready.

*True and Exact Relation* names quite a number of searchers at work in Essex most of whom have been overlooked by scholars. Elizabeth Hunt and Priscilla Briggs searched Mary Greenleife. Mary Phillips, Grace Norman, Mary Parsley, and Frances Milles all gave evidence against Elizabeth Clarke. Milles was the searcher who investigated Margaret Moone and stated that Moone’s marks were unnatural because they weren’t like her own. Elizabeth Harris, Mary Parsley, Susan Burles and Philip Tumnor were consulted regarding Briggs’ findings regarding Mary Greenleife, and concurred with her assessment of Greenleife’s marks. Bridget Reynolds searched Marian Hocket, Sarah Hiting, and Elizabeth Harvey. Elizabeth Durden and Mary Phillips were called in to consult and concurred with Reynolds’ findings.

Clearly these women are important if they are mentioned so often in pamphlets meant for consumption by the general public about witchcraft trials. They were important because of their detailed knowledge of the female body—knowledge that was seen as specifically female—and their status as respected women in their communities. Their expertise and social standing together enabled them to pronounce on witch’s marks. Without their authoritative judgments of marks most of the guilty verdicts in the Hopkins Trials would not have been possible. Female searchers were an indispensable part of the Hopkins Trials.

### ***The Appearance of Marks***

Englishmen and women involved in the Hopkins Trials knew that marks were proof of witchcraft. However, establishing the existence of a mark required skill and expertise. Searchers' knowledge about marks was central. There were criteria which helped searchers distinguish between a naturally-occurring mark and one given to a witch by the devil. Descriptions of what a mark could look like were highly technical and relied heavily on a woman's knowledge of her own body through experience or observation. In *Discovery of Witches*, Stearne provides an extremely detailed description of witch's marks. Because they were insensible, a witch would not feel pain when her mark was pricked. They sometimes looked like a nipple. Marks could also look like a loose bit of skin which could be pulled and twisted "much like the finger of a glove"; this sort of mark was usually empty (unless it had been recently sucked by a familiar, in which case it might be filled with a bit of watery blood). A witch's mark could be distinguished from a natural mark because it had a small hole at the top for suckling and did not show signs of scarring. Some witches' marks were, Stearne claimed, inward; they might have small red spots or a white tip with a circle around it. Sometimes witches would attempt to remove the spots, but the marks always came back when a witch's familiars came to suckle. That Stearne thought it worth his time to recount exactly how a mark was determined to be natural or unnatural and the different forms a mark could take makes it clear that searching was a complex and intricate business.

### ***The Importance of Marks***

In his *Confirmation of Witchcraft*, Stearne states that Elizabeth Clarke told him every witch who had marks was guilty of witchcraft, and that there were even witches who did not have familiars, but could be discovered because they had marks.<sup>86</sup> Given that Clarke was the first witch in the Hopkins Trials to be formally accused, Stearne likely carried this idea with him throughout the trials. In his *Confirmation of Witchcraft*, he asserts that he has found this—that all witches have marks, even those that do not have familiars—to be true in his experience. Stearne goes on to say that “it is the devils custom to mark his,” meaning that the devil will mark those who are in league with him—in this case, in the form of witch’s marks.<sup>87</sup> Where there is a mark, there is a witch who has entered into agreement with the devil. That one of the two people leading these trials believed that marks were the most reliable evidence against an accused witch demonstrates the importance of marks, and by extension of the women who searched for and found them.

*The Laws Against Witches* tells us that a single witch can have various types of marks upon her body—some for the familiar to suck and some just marks from the Devil. Marks can be covered or removed but will come back, will be insensitive, and will not bleed. Marks are often in the witch’s genital area and as such require a careful search. The author states that these two kinds of marks are “maine points to discover and convict these Witches” because they are proof that the accused witch has familiars and is in league with the Devil.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>86</sup>John Stearne, *Confirmation of Witchcraft* (London, 1648), 41.

<sup>87</sup> Stearne, 42.

<sup>88</sup> *Laws Against Witches*, 4-6. The discussion of marks is followed by a list of more ways to tell if

These marks can be found by searching, and Stearne remarks specifically on the importance of searchers. In *Confirmation of Witchcraft* he states “here you may observe, that their diligentnesse of searching is a great matter, and one of the chiefest points of their [the witch’s] discovery.”<sup>89</sup> He stresses that searching is extremely important to the trial of a witch especially because accused people who are not found to have marks almost never confessed. Therefore many investigations hinged on the searchers. Confessions, which were key in the trials, were usually made only after searchers found marks. Stearne saw searching was so important that he advises that when no marks are found on the first thorough search, a witch may be searched a second or even a third time. He also stresses the importance of having trusted people as searchers, stating that searchers had to be “able people, of discretion and good carriage [who] were sworn before searching, that diligent search might be made . . . in such a case of life and death.” Clearly, he has high expectations of the searchers involved in witch trials specifically because of how important their job is. He goes on to say it is extremely important “that none that be guilty might escape the punishments [and] be freed thereof,” meaning that witches should not be allowed to get away with their crimes.

*Laws Against Witches* names the voluntary confession of the witch as the evidence that “exceeds all other evidences.” However as witches usually did not confess until after they were searched or watched for imps, searching was directly linked to confession. The structure of *Laws Against Witches* is itself evidence of how crucial the

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someone is a witch. For example, a witch will appear to those they have bewitched when they are in fits. Another list is provided to help determine whether a person who is sick has been bewitched, with seven types of evidence for which to look.

<sup>89</sup> Stearne, 45.



role of searcher was in English witch trials. Following a reiteration of the Jacobean witch statute is nearly a full page devoted to the discussion of familiars and marks.<sup>90</sup> Much of the rest of the pamphlet simply summarizes for the general public how to tell if someone is bewitched how the investigation of an accused witch proceeds. For such a short pamphlet, the discussion of marks and familiars is quite long and quite central. Marks and familiars were clearly important.

### ***A Deeper Analysis of Searchers***

*True and Exact Relation* has several passages on searches. The first specific mention of searching a woman's body for marks comes about 16 pages in. Searchers Elizabeth Hunt and Priscilla Briggs examined suspected witch Mary Greenleife. They state that they were employed by the justices to search Greenleife because she had been suspected of witchcraft. They found three teats in her "secret parts," which they emphasized were neither like hemorrhoids nor located in the places a woman might usually have hemorrhoids. Hunt and Briggs had previously been employed to search other suspected witches; those women had similar marks and eventually confessed to witchcraft. Based on these experiences, Hunt and Briggs stated that the marks they found on Greenleife were teats for imps to suck on. They added that, having been asked to search other female suspects of witchcraft, women who were found to have marks like Greenleife's had later confessed to the crime.<sup>91</sup> Crucially, Hunt and Briggs compared the marks on Greenleife not only to marks on other witches, but also to marks on women who were considered normal. Their special knowledge of what was right and wrong on

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<sup>90</sup> *Laws Against Witches*, 4.

<sup>91</sup> *True and Exact Relation*, 16.

the female body made them the authority on what could be considered a witch's teat. They used their knowledge of the female body to make these decisions.

The next mention of a witch being searched—the searching of Margaret Moone, who lived in the town of Thorpe—comes on page 24. The testimony of Frances Mills, who was also one of the women present at the searching and watching of Elizabeth Clarke, is given first. She was employed by the “Neighbors of Thorpe” to search Moone. She found three long teats in Moone's secret parts which looked as if they had been sucked recently.<sup>92</sup> Just as Hunt and Briggs had done, Mills stressed that she knew that these marks were not pyles; she knew exactly what pyles look like because she herself had them. This is a perfect example of how comfortable Mills had to be in her knowledge of the female body. She is secure enough in her position as a searcher for witch trials that she is willing to compare marks on a witch's body to marks on her own body. Clearly her local standing guaranteed that she was in no danger of being taken for a witch. The testimony of all three of these searchers (Mills, Hunt, and Briggs) implies that amateurs could mistake pyles for witch's marks, but that searchers could tell the difference. Furthermore Mills' expertise about the normal female body comes in part from her knowledge of her own body; she has (and is willing to admit that she has) pyles.

*True and Exact Relation* also offers Bridget Reynolds' testimony of her work searching accused witches. Reynolds was a midwife, but also worked as a searcher. Reynolds states that she, along with some other unnamed women, was asked to search Sarah Hiting, Elizabeth Harvey and Marian Hocket. Reynolds and the other searchers

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<sup>92</sup> *True and Exact Relation*, 24.

found that Hiting had four teats almost an inch long in her groin, and that Harvey had three smaller teats in a similar location. Reynolds stated that these marks on Hiting and Harvey were unlike anything she had seen on any other woman, which given the expertise on female bodies that she possessed as a midwife was very meaningful. She did not find any teats on Hocket, but stated that Hocket “was found in the same parts *not like other honest women* [emphasis added].” It is unclear what exactly is meant by this, but the result of Reynolds’ statement was that Hocket was not completely cleared of being suspected of witchcraft (as she might have been after a search failed to reveal teats). Harvey, who was found to have marks, said that Hocket had brought her three imps and that “the said Marian told this examinant they were pretty things, and would do her and this Examinant good, if she and this Examinant would keep them; and that afterwards she was very much pained in those parts of her body where the said [teats] or bigs were discovered by the said searchers, as aforesaid.”

Ultimately, Hiting and Hocket were executed and Harvey was spared. Hiting was found to have marks, and was executed. However Harvey, who was also found to have marks, was pardoned. It is difficult to definitively explain why she was pardoned while having marks. The searchers’ testimony that Harvey blamed Hocket for any involvement Harvey had with witchcraft may be the reason. In this case it is very clear that the searchers were given an immense amount of authority in deciding who was truly guilty and who wasn’t. This is further evidence of the authority of searchers. Reynolds’ evidence seems to have been definitive; apparently, being found by her to be “not like other honest women” was sufficient for Hocket to be condemned for witchcraft.

In *Discovery of Witches*, Hopkins’ own written work which defends his witch hunt in East Anglia, he also mentions the importance of marks and searchers in the

work he has done. Beginning with questions 3 and 4, he explains his qualifications for witch hunting. He states that he has the authority to seek out these witches because he has the experience necessary to be skilled at finding witches, in part because in 1644, in Manningtree near his home about every six weeks on a Friday, he would see witches from the town and other towns nearby participating in a meeting in which they made sacrifices to the Devil. One night, he states, he heard a witch telling her imps to visit another witch—Elizabeth Clarke—who was then apprehended “and searched by women who had for many yeares knowne the Devills marks, and found to have three teats about her, which honest women have not.” He continues the story by saying that when Clarke’s imps vanished, she implicated several other witches, and “upon their searches the same Markes were found, the same number, and in the same place.”<sup>93</sup> In other words, when Hopkins seeks to offer a source for his own authority regarding witches, the first thing he recounts is an episode in which he saw seachers at work. At a time when everything he had spent his time doing in the last two years was under suspicion, he relies heavily on the idea that these women knew what they were doing. In his eyes these women had authority and expertise which he cites as reasons why his witch-finding expedition was worthy of credibility.

The fifth question is devoted to the distinction between natural and witch’s marks. Hopkins stresses that “the parties so judging can justifie their skill to any, and shew good reasons why such markes are not merely natural.” In other words, searchers could be considered worthy of this task by anyone because of their skills and have the knowledge and experience to back up their findings. Hopkins emphasizes that the trial

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<sup>93</sup> Hopkins, *Discovery of Witches*, 2.

process never relies on a single searcher's opinion. Men are never judged by just one male searcher, but by a "dozen of the ablest men in the parish." Furthermore "many ancient skillful matrons and midwives" were present in the searching of each woman, and "the skillfulest of them" who would see a mark on a witch would also agree that it was unnatural, meaning that the absolute most talented of these women would agree that the condemned witches were, in fact, guilty based on searchers' findings.<sup>94</sup>

Next, Hopkins asks how these marks can possibly be discerned from natural ones. He answers by giving three reasons why the marks are different; first, the marks will be in an unusual place, like marks which look as if they could be from childbirth in a place where marks from childbearing cannot possibly be found. Second, they cannot feel pain. Third, witches can temporarily hide their marks if they hear the *Witch-finder* is coming but the marks will reappear when she is unable to suckle her familiars.<sup>95</sup>

At the very end, he addresses the (supposed) accusation that all he does is take the country's money by telling people they have witches in their village. He maintains that he never went anywhere he wasn't first asked to go, and that he did not make very much money. Most importantly, he says that "he is a man that doth disclaime that ever he detected a witch, or said, thou art a witch; only after her tryall by search, and their own confessions, he as others may judge." Only after a witch was searched or confessed to witchcraft did Matthew Hopkins, witchfinder, consider whether s/he was guilty or not.<sup>96</sup> This positions searchers as a whole as extremely important: Hopkins himself is saying that convicting witches hinges on finding marks or obtaining a confession.

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<sup>94</sup> Hopkins, 3.

<sup>95</sup> Hopkins, 3-4.

<sup>96</sup> Hopkins, 9-10.

## **Conclusion**

Witchcraft gave an explanation to random tragedy, and as such the prosecution of those responsible was essential to early modern English culture. Historians of witchcraft have come a long way in determining which circumstances had to exist in order for witch trials to occur, the causes of accusations of witchcraft, and the patterns of accusation. However, and despite a flourishing field of history of women and gender in early modern Europe, the histories of gender and of witchcraft remain discrete, and within witchcraft studies women are too often treated as a single, undifferentiated category; there is little attention to differences among women. Women's economic standing, community ties, and work and home life varied greatly and historical discourse about witchcraft should reflect these differences. Women's varied social positions and experiences need to be further investigated as part of the larger historical discussion of witch trials and belief. Searchers, who provided the most crucial evidence in convicting a witch during the Hopkins Trials, should be researched not simply as women but as actors in a complex situation, who were part of the legal system, community, and population as a whole.

To date, historical discussion of women searchers has been fleeting in the context of early modern English witch trials as a whole. The fact that women searchers were able to provide such convincing proof of guilt in the Hopkins Trials means that they deserve greater attention than they have thus far received. In addition, searchers and witches together are a perfect example of how different the experience of women in early modern England could be. Searchers were trusted and essentially safe from accusations

of witchcraft themselves. Accused witches, on the contrary, were often in a completely different position within their society. Women weren't just victims in the witch trials; just like men, they could be involved in a number of ways, and as searchers, they wielded a significant amount of power in their ability to detect extremely important evidence which often led to the conviction of a witch.

Since the 1970s, a significant amount of work has been done in the European witch trials as a whole. The collection of pamphlets and trial records helped to piece together general patterns which the trials followed. Subsequently, historians used anthropological methodology to add another dimension to the study of witch trials and accusations. Keith Thomas and Alan Macfarlane, although not the first in the twentieth century to complete important studies of witchcraft, analyzed the importance of community conflict in accusations. Without their work, we would not understand the complexities of accusations on a popular level.

Also in the 1970s, feminist historians began to investigate why so many of the witches brought to trial and executed during the European witch trials were women. Many feminist historians argued that the witch trials were a systematic attack on women, especially women who transgressed the patriarchal ideals of feminine behavior. While much of their work has been discredited, their attention to the fact that so many witches were women was extremely important. In years following other historians were able to further investigate this issue and make more comprehensive conclusions about the link between the female experience and accusations of witchcraft.

In recent years, historians have adopted a multi-causal approach to the witch trials. Rejecting a focus on just one part of the trials, they argue that a more holistic approach can better explain why trials occurred and how they were able to happen.

These historians recognize and study how different factors interacted with each other. There has also been a shift in the scope of individual historical research. Instead of attempting to explain an entire country (or continent) of witchcraft trials and belief in one study, microhistorical study has allowed for more accurate conclusions and thorough explanation of specific sets of trials. Finally, some historians have focused on the nature of evidence and the process through which an accusation of witchcraft could lead to execution. Clive Holmes has some discussion of women searchers in the context of witch trials; Orna Alyagon Darr emphasizes the importance of marks and compares them to modern fingerprint evidence.

This analysis of pamphlet literature on the Hopkins Trials has made clear the importance of women searchers in the pre-trial gathering of evidence, and ultimately, in the conviction of an accused witch. Witch's marks were a tangible sign of an intangible crime (its intangibility is what made witchcraft so difficult to prove) and so searchers' expertise was relied upon. These women, because of their experiential knowledge of the female body and respectability within their communities, possessed the power to make extremely important decisions about the fate of accused witches. The trial of Elizabeth Clarke, who was accused, searched for marks, watched for imps, confessed, and was tried and ultimately executed is a good example of how most trials proceeded. The finding of marks on her body is what led to the rest of her investigation her trial, her conviction, and her execution.

Women searchers clearly had a significant amount of power in the collection of important evidence against a witch; this is why several women accompanied Hopkins and Stearne throughout East Anglia in the search for witches. One of the three most definitive ways to prove guilt of witchcraft was via marks, and on both the popular and



the elite level marks were perceived as significant. John Stearne, in his *Confirmation of Witchcraft*, provides a detailed account of how exactly a witch's mark could be differentiated from a natural mark. His thoroughness is evidence that the business of looking for these marks was complicated and required extensive knowledge of the body. Searchers of accused female witches were able to distinguish natural marks unnatural ones, and so had a form of expertise that was simply indispensable.

Confident in their knowledge of the female body and their respectability as searchers, women like Frances Mills were willing to compare the marks on their own body to those of a witch. This shows that Mills was not in danger of accusation and was in a completely different societal situation than the women she was investigating. In Hopkins' own *Discovery of Witches*, he defends his actions during the period known as the Hopkins Trials. In doing so, he also defends searchers and their important place in a witch trial. Hopkins points to the outcome of a search as the ultimate and most reliable way of determining guilt, and stands by this statement as he defends his own actions.

Although excellent work has been done regarding the witch trials in early modern England including work on women in these trials, there is still important work to be done. Women's varied experiences are still not fully integrated into witchcraft study. Historians need to move from a discussion of women as a category to one which recognizes the complexity of the female experience. Female searchers and their role in the Hopkins Trials are an example of powerful women in history who should not be overlooked. Instead, their ability to determine the outcome of trials which convicted the most serious crime in early modern England should serve as proof that women's historical experience was varied, complex, and included many experiences beyond that of victim.

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*there by the Iudge and Iustices of the said Sessions condemned to die, and so were executed, and their severall Confessions before their executions. With a true relation of how they find them out. The names of those that were executed. Mr. Lowes parson of Branson. Thomas Evered a Cooper with Mary his wife. Mary Bacon. Anne Alderman. Rebecca Morris. Mary Fuller. Mary Clowes. Margery Sparham Katherine Teo[...]ey. Sarah Spinlow. Iane Limstead. Anne Wright. Mary Smith. Iane Rivert. Susan Manners. Mary Skipper. Anne Leech (London, 1645).*

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