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BELIEF, INFLUENCE AND ACTION: WITCHCRAFT IN SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY

YORKSHIRE

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Witchcraft is one of the most popular, and yet misunderstood, topics of historical research. It is quite a surprise, then, that very little has been written about witchcraft in Yorkshire. This article, inspired by James Sharpe's work on Yorkshire witches, sets out to dispel some of the myths surrounding the history of witchcraft in England.¹ It will assert that written works on this subject did not always reflect popular opinion; and that belief, influence and action in Yorkshire depended on social status instead.

There are some key stances taken by historians when assessing witchcraft persecutions and their origins. The first is the extent to which the Christian Church contributed to the rise in trials.² This debate centres on the religious turbulence that accompanied the Reformation. Anne Reiber DeWindt is one historian who believed that differing beliefs led to neighbours accusing one another of heretical beliefs, including witchcraft.³ Whilst the Reformation did influence the trials that took place in Yorkshire, as we will see, this explanation cannot be used to explain the persecutions that took place before it; or those which took place in communities with shared religious beliefs.

Grassroots history has since introduced the idea that social misfortune drove people to blame witches for their plight; this idea is intrinsic to understanding witchcraft in Yorkshire.⁴ Stuart Clark suggested that collective fears, scapegoating and natural disasters were all components of witchcraft persecution.⁵ However, there is division over whether the trials were a product of a communal drive to rid their area of evil, or whether they were a

¹ James A. Sharpe, 'Witchcraft in Seventeenth-Century Yorkshire: Accusations and Counter Measures', *Borthwick Papers*, 81, (York, 1992), pp. 1-28.

² James Sharpe, *Witchcraft in Early Modern England*, (Pearson Education, 2001), p. 6.

³ Anne Reiber DeWindt, 'Witchcraft and Conflicting Visions of the Ideal Village Community', *Journal of British Studies*, 34, 4, (1995), 427- 463, pp. 432-439. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1086/386086>

⁴ Sharpe, *Witchcraft in Early Modern England*, p .8.

⁵ Stuart Clark, 'Introduction', in Stuart Clark (ed.), *Languages of Witchcraft: Narrative, Ideology and Meaning in Early Modern Culture*, (Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), p .5.

product of individual desire to see the supposed witch destroyed.⁶ This point will be tackled later, as it is key to assessing the extent of popular belief in witchcraft. Using this approach will help us to see how contemporaries actually behaved, rather than how they wanted to be remembered.

The final idea, and one I disagree with, is witchcraft as a form of gender persecution: that there was a sudden 'bout' of misogyny.⁷ This is one of the oldest arguments, and seems to be the most hotly contested. It centres on the idea that accusations were a way for men to punish women who had gained a level of independence or notoriety.⁸ However, as a general explanation this has a fundamental flaw: there were more women who stood as beneficiaries of witchcraft legislation than men.⁹ This article will argue that people who were supposed victims of bewitchment were not concerned with the gender of the witch; instead, what influenced their beliefs and actions was their social status.

Social status, though, was quite different to what we are familiar with today. High culture was seen as distinctly separate from popular culture; something which Peter Burke described as 'unofficial culture, the culture of the non-elite'.¹⁰ The upper reaches of society existed almost entirely separately from the rest of the populous, and were influenced by different circles of people and ideas. William Harrison, a contemporary Elizabethan writer, said that there were four sorts of people in England. The first were 'gentlemen', these were the elite and included the King; the next were 'citizens or burgesses', these were the landed gentry or those who were sufficient enough to bear office, and included the growing middling sort; next were 'yeomen', usually wealthy farmers; and last were 'artificers or labourers', which included the poor.¹¹ The first sort, gentlemen, were part of the high culture

⁶ DeWindt, 'Witchcraft and Conflicting Visions of the Ideal Village Community', pp. 431-432. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1086/386086>

⁷ Sharpe, *Witchcraft in Early Modern England*, p.9.

⁸ Patricia Crawford, *Women and Religion in England, 1500-1720*, (Routledge, 1996), p. 25.

⁹ Malcolm Gaskill, 'The Devil in the Shape of a Man: Witchcraft, Conflict and Belief in Jacobean England', *Historical Research*, 71, 175, (1998), 142- 171, p. <http://dx.doi.org/144.10.1111/1468-2281.00058>; Jacqueline Eales, *Women in Early Modern England, 1500-1700*, (Routledge, 1998), p. 105.

¹⁰ Peter Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe*, (Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2009), p.xiii.

¹¹ William Harrison, 'Description of Elizabethan England: Chapter I, Of Degrees of People in the Commonwealth of Elizabethan England', (1577), from *Holinshed's Chronicles*, chapter 1, <http://legacy.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/1577harrison-england.asp#>, [Accessed 27 October 2015].

that Burke described.¹² The rest of the populous were part of popular culture, reaching all of the way from wealthy businessmen to poor farmers.

Keith Wrightson said that Harrison's description was extensive when it came to high society, but 'when dealing with the middling ranks of society, Harrison was curiously silent about, or made only glancing references to, certain groups which did not fit neatly into his classification.'¹³ However, Steve Hindle described how the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries supported 'the incorporation of men of middling status into the process of governance'.¹⁴ This cements the interpretation that the gentry were set apart from yeomen and labourers, who were of subordinate status. For the rest of the article I will refer, in general terms, to gentlemen as the elite, aristocracy, nobility or the upper sort. I will refer to citizens and burgesses as the gentry or the middling sort. I will then refer to those below as the commonality, commons or the lower sort. In terms of belief and action with regards to witchcraft, there is little difference between yeomen, artificers and labourers; they also made up the bulk of the population, and therefore were the most 'common'.

When we say 'witch' most conjure the image of a haggard old woman, living alone on the outskirts of a village with a familiar in the shape of a black cat or a toad. This image was generally true for the early modern populous as well.¹⁵ A witch was someone who caused misfortune to others through the use of maleficium, or harmful magic.¹⁶ Due to this the failure of crops and the death or illness of livestock was attributed to magical theft.¹⁷ This is shown in a case from the York Assizes in 1612: that of Jennet Preston. She is described to have 'revenged herself upon his sonne; who in short time received great losse in his goods and Cattel by her meanes'.¹⁸ This illustrates how the 'witch' could be used as a scapegoat for

¹² Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe*, p.xiii.

¹³ Keith Wrightson, *English Society 1580-1680*, (Routledge, 2003), p. 28.

¹⁴ Steve Hindle, *The State and Social Change in Early Modern England, 1550-1640*, (Palgrave, 2000), p.ix.

¹⁵ Malcolm Gaskill, *Witchcraft: A Very Short Introduction*, (Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 3-4.

¹⁶ Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic: Studies in Popular Beliefs in Sixteenth and Seventeenth-Century England*, p. 519.

¹⁷ Wolfgang Behringer, *Witches and Witch-Hunts: A Global History*, (Polity Press, 2004), p. 11.

¹⁸ John Gray Bell (ed.), 'Trial of Jennet Preston, of Gisbourne, in Craven, at the York Assizes, July, 1612; for Practising Devilish and Wicked Arts Called Witchcraft', (London, 1612), in *Series of Tracts on British Topography, History, Dialects, &c*, (Leeds Brotherton Library), p. 7.

misfortunes which were out of a farmer's control. In the end, social misfortune and the failure of crops caused witch persecutions because there were no other explanations.

The English clergy, and therefore the English people, whose thinking the clergy guided every Sunday, seem to have been less concerned with the demonological emphasis those on the Continent had placed on witchcraft. Whilst they did believe that the Devil was the master of witches, they did not believe that witches were controlled by demons.¹⁹ Christina Lerner stated how Continental witchcraft never sat at the forefront of the English mind; instead the English courts were presented with simple maleficium rather than demonic possession.²⁰ This was certainly true when we consider cases from Yorkshire; which, as we will see, gave no mention of demonic possession, and focused instead on illness and the loss of goods and livestock.

Belief not only varied from country to country, but also from county to county. On the surface, Yorkshire did not have a witch 'hunt', even though the Pendle trials, 1612, took place nearby in Lancashire. Nevertheless, when we delve deeper we come across Edward Fairfax's account of a coven of witches in Yorkshire, and how they bewitched his daughters. His account titled *Deamonologia*, written in 1621, gives us a valuable insight into what the lower gentry of Yorkshire actually believed.²¹ It reveals deviations between Yorkshire and the rest of England: he stated that 'the women questioned for this offence are in number six, of whom five fall in my knowledge'.²² This shows that Fairfax believed in covens, organised groups of witches; an idea that was not as popular in the rest of England.

Fairfax's account does, however, highlight a trait that was present in almost all cases in England and continental Europe: the person in question was already suspected of being a witch. In Yorkshire this element was crucial for the accusation to be taken seriously. Fairfax stated that 'Margaret Waite . . . brought with [her] an evil report for witchcraft . . . Jennit Dibble, a very old widow, [was] reputed a witch for many years . . . Elizabeth Fletcher . . .

¹⁹ Sharpe, *Witchcraft in Early Modern England*, p. 58.

²⁰ Christina Lerner, 'James VI and I and Witchcraft', in Alan G. R. Smith (ed.), *The Reign of James VI and I*, (Palgrave, 1973), p. 87.

²¹ Edward Fairfax, 'Deamonologia: A Discourse on Witchcraft, as it was Acted in the Family of Mr. Edward Fairfax, at Fuystone, in the County of York, in the Year 1621', in Grainge. W (ed.), *Deamonologia: A Discourse on Witchcraft. With a Biographical Introduction- Primary Source Edition*, (Harrogate: R. Ackbill, 1882).

²² Fairfax, 'Deamonologia', p. 32.

[was] a woman notoriously famed for a witch'.²³ These reputations would encourage belief and impact upon the reaction to the women. In addition to this, we can see that the witches in this instance were all female. However, in support of the idea mentioned earlier, it is important to note that the accusers, in this case Fairfax's daughters, were also women. This stands against the misogyny theory, as Fairfax named the women only because his daughters had identified them first.

Jennet Preston's trial also involved one of the most famous early modern ideas regarding witches: that of the familiar. The source stated that Jennet 'had a spirit with her like unto a white Foale, with a blacke-spot on the forehead'.²⁴ We can be fairly certain that the people of Yorkshire did at least believe in familiars, even if they were not an intrinsic part of maleficium, as thought elsewhere in Europe. Ultimately, wherever witchcraft beliefs originated, all of them influenced the ways in which society reacted.

To delve deeper into why the people of Yorkshire reacted as they did, then belief in the highest reaches of society needs to be assessed. That is, we need to look beyond ecclesiastical doctrine or State religion to individual faith. Coward described the elite, or the aristocracy, as 'rentier landowners'.²⁵

As part of their limited interaction with the more subordinate members of society, the elite enforced legislation and justice upon the populous through their influence over the law and via the Justices of the Peace. Without their belief in witchcraft the persecutions would not have been allowed to take place. We can read their books and treatises to assess their influence on the wider population: *The Certainty of the Worlds of Spirits* (1691) by Richard Baxter, and *An Advertisement to the Jury-Men of England* (1653) by Sir Robert Filmer are just two examples.²⁶ Their actions were separate to the commonality of Yorkshire, and were

²³ Fairfax, 'Deamonologia', pp. 32-34.

²⁴ Bell (ed.), 'Trial of Jennet Preston, of Gisbourne, in Craven, at the York Assizes, July, 1612; for Practising Devilish and Wicked Arts Called Witchcraft', p. 13.

²⁵ Coward, *The Stuart Age: England, 1603-1714*, p. 44.

²⁶ Richard Baxter, 'The Certainty of the Worlds of Spirits. Fully Envinced by the Unquestionable Histories of Apparitions, of Operations, of Witchcrafts, of Voices, etc. Proving the Immortality of Souls, the Malice and the Misery of the Devils, and the Damned, and the Blessednes of the the Justified', (London: Printed for T. Parkhurst, 1691), *Early English Books Online*, B1214, <https://data-historicaltexts-jisc-ac-uk.libaccess.hud.ac.uk/view?pubId=ebo-ocm11696963e&terms=The%20certainty%20of%20the%20worlds&pageTerms=The%20certainty%20of%20the%20worlds&pageId=ebo-ocm11696963e-48243-1>, [Accessed 24 January 2016], p. 102; Filmer,

open to further political and scientific influence due to their level of education. Nevertheless, popular belief is difficult to assess due to the differences in personal opinion; it is necessary to look at practical influences and actions to understand what they may have really thought.²⁷

James I's beliefs are very important in this respect.²⁸ His book influenced the people of England, especially the upper and middling sort; both to start hunting for witches and to stop. James had followed the hunts in Scotland eagerly, and acquired his knowledge from actively encouraging and writing about them.²⁹ However, when he came to the throne of a less than zealous England, he used all of the knowledge and negotiation skills that he had gained in Scotland to convince the population that there was an active threat of witches amongst them.³⁰

Wallace Notestein suggested how courtiers, especially those who sought to gain more power, wanted to impress their new king.³¹ There was no better way to do this than to appeal to James's enthusiasm for witch hunting. James's influence over the commonality is seen in legislation on witchcraft, which with *An Act Against Conjuracion, Witchcraft and Dealing with Evil and Wicked Spirits* 1604, became more drastic.³² Although he only personally influenced the nobility and those educated enough to read his works, his ideas did extend into the lower parts of society through his legislation. Judges, for example, followed the King's authority, which directly affected the lives of the commons through the judicial system.³³

'An Advertisement to the Jury-Men of England, Touching Witches Together with a Difference Between an English witch and an Hebrew Witch'.

²⁷ Purkiss, *The Witch in History: Early Modern and Twentieth-Century Representations*, p. 153; Gaskill, 'The Devil in the Shape of a Man: Witchcraft, Conflict and Belief in Jacobean England', p. 167 <http://dx.doi.org/144.10.1111/1468-2281.00058>.

²⁸ Eales, *Women in Early Modern England, 1500-1700*, p. 104.

²⁹ David Harris Willson, *King James VI & I*, (Jonathan Cape Ltd, 1956), p. 105.

³⁰ John Philipps Kenyon, *Stuart England*, (Penguin, 1978), p. 49.

³¹ Wallace Notestein, *A History of Witchcraft in England from 1558 to 1718*, (Createspace, 1909), p. 101.

³² R. Trevor Davies, *Four Centuries of Witch-Beliefs: With Special Reference to the Great Rebellion*, (Methuen, 1947), p. 41.

³³ Notestein, *A History of Witchcraft in England from 1558 to 1718*, p. 145.

Nevertheless, belief in witchcraft lingered in the upper reaches of society, even after James's death. The president of the Parliamentary Commission, who helped to sentence Charles I to death, was an avid believer in witches.³⁴ It is difficult, though, to use Government and State measures as an example of public opinion, since the beliefs of lords and judges were not consistent in every county. Although, looking at what these educated men wrote can give us clues about how their beliefs and actions both differed from and influenced the rest of Yorkshire.

It is clear that the elite were more concerned with the idea of a very real evil on Earth, whereas the commons concerned themselves with a witch's practical deeds, such as the cursing of livestock and crops.³⁵ The nobles were also much more anxious to purge society on a national level, whereas the lower sort were only worried about their own town or village.³⁶ Many villages had their local cunning person whose advice was used to safeguard them on a local level; whereas towns and cities usually discouraged such practices.³⁷ This is supported by James Raine who stated that wise people in the countryside would make a trade out of their practice of folk magic.³⁸ The conclusion that we can draw from this is that belief and action differed greatly depending on social status.

It was not only the nobility who influenced the commons; roles sometimes reversed. The upper and middling sort depended upon yeomen, husbandmen and labourers for the farming economy, which was the basis of society. Essentially, they preserved the folkloric ideas around witchcraft, to an extent, instead of challenging them.³⁹ In fact, folkloric belief reached further into the upper levels of society to influence even the literature. For example, Joseph Blagrave actively encouraged not just the belief in witches, but also the use of folk

³⁴ Davies, *Four Centuries of Witch-Beliefs: With Special Reference to the Great Rebellion*, p. 146.

³⁵ Ronald Holmes, *Witchcraft in British History*, (Tandem, 1974), p. 75.

³⁶ Deborah Willis, *Malevolent Nurture: Witch-Hunting and Maternal Power in Early Modern England*, (Cornell University Press, 1995), p. 86.

³⁷ This may have been due to the larger proportion of nobility who did not support superstitious folk magic.

³⁸ Raine (ed.), *Depositions from the Castle of York Relating to Offenses Committed in the Northern Counties in the Seventeenth Century*, (London: Surtees Society, 1860), p. 64.

³⁹ Philip Tyler, 'The Church Courts at York and Witchcraft Prosecutions, 1567-1640', *Northern History*, 4, 1, (1969), 84- 110, pp. 92-93 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1179/nhi.1969.4.1.84> .

magic.⁴⁰ Influence is also present in a Yorkshire text by Henri de Heer, who actually mocked those who did not believe in witches. He stated that ‘men in this Age are grown so wicked, that they are apt to believe there are no greater Divells than themselves’.⁴¹ This peculiar give and take of belief is the context of witchcraft in Yorkshire. In spite of these examples though, differences regarding belief and action did remain fairly distinct between the social levels.

Most of the commonality believed in witches, even if they had different explanations for it; one source even described how witches were ‘much feared of the common people’.⁴² Richard Blakeborough suggested that witch-lore in Yorkshire was the same throughout the social hierarchy, and followed the routine of: misfortune or social disaster, followed by a visit to a wise man or woman, who would then work a counter-spell.⁴³ Whilst this is true, his description is too simplistic; the elite put much less stock in folklore. For example, there exists a witch-post in Stang End Cottage at the Ryedale Folk Museum, in North Yorkshire.⁴⁴ It symbolises how the laity attempted to prevent witches from entering their homes by

⁴⁰ Joseph Blagrave, ‘Blagrave’s Astrological Practice of Physick Discovering, the True Way to Cure all Kinds of Diseases and Infirmities which are Naturally Incident to the Body of Man. Being Performed by Such Herbs and Plants as Grown Within our own Nation, Directing them to Distil and Extract their Vertues and Making up of Medicines’, (London: Printed by S. G. and B. G, 1671), *Early English Books Online*, B3112, <https://data-historicaltexts-jisc-ac-uk.libaccess.hud.ac.uk/view?pubId=eebo-ocm11697220e&terms=blagrave&date=1671&undated=exclude>, [Accessed 23 January 2015], p. 102.

⁴¹ Henri de Heer, ‘The Most True and Wonderful Narration of Two Women Bewitched in Yorkshire’, (1658), cited in Notestein. W, *A History of Witchcraft in England from 1558 to 1718*, (Washington: The Floating Press, 1909), [http://reader.ebilib.com.libaccess.hud.ac.uk/\(S\(iujmjkdsfoep1tjd5hnmgon\)\)/Reader.aspx?p=1706720&o=1085&u=MhtZnQ0dcd5GI%2fWwv2ESRw%3d%3d&t=1453635250&h=E840DFDD9CC426903E1C8D6420F36F638D606750&s=41482573&tut=3552&pg=1&r=img&c=-1&pat=n&cms=-1&sd=2#](http://reader.ebilib.com.libaccess.hud.ac.uk/(S(iujmjkdsfoep1tjd5hnmgon))/Reader.aspx?p=1706720&o=1085&u=MhtZnQ0dcd5GI%2fWwv2ESRw%3d%3d&t=1453635250&h=E840DFDD9CC426903E1C8D6420F36F638D606750&s=41482573&tut=3552&pg=1&r=img&c=-1&pat=n&cms=-1&sd=2#), [Accessed 24 January 2016], p. 250.

⁴² Yorkshire Archaeological Society, *A Presumption Against Witches*, DD146/12/2/19, (Yorkshire, late 16th century to early 17th century), p. 2

⁴³ Richard Blakeborough, *Wit, Character, Folklore and Customs of the North Riding of Yorkshire: With a Glossary of over 4,000 Words and Idioms Now in Use*, (Oxford University Press, 1898), p. 153.

⁴⁴ For additional information on the mark see: *Ryedale Folk Museum*, <http://www.ryedalefolkmuseum.co.uk/our-photo-gallery/?album=1&gallery=9>, [Accessed 23 January 2016].

carving protective marks near the entrances.⁴⁵ This mark is carved next to the fire place, as chimneys were considered to be the weakest points in the envelope of the building. But when we look at an educated man, William Drage, he thought that the idea of folk magic was foolish and sinful: 'it is the Devil that doth these things; for such Ceremonies do nothing'.⁴⁶ So, there is a stark contrast between the actions and beliefs of different levels of society in Yorkshire; supporting this article's argument.

Contemporary evidence also exemplifies how those from the lower sort were unaffected by the scientific enlightenment. The Yorkshire witch hunt of 1673 shows how people lapsed into superstitious thinking, and stated how each suspected witch had confessed to the ruining of goods and livestock on behalf of the Devil.⁴⁷ That the case had even made it to trial meant that the commons were still convinced that the Devil had agents on Earth. But, even after the justice system had become sceptical regarding witchcraft accusations, another primary source described an account of angry villagers attacking a witch in 1652, after the courts refused to bring a case against her. The suspected witch, Elizabeth Lambe, was beaten by Nicholas Baldwin after his cattle fell ill. The same source also described how 'they also did beat her', meaning that she received a second beating from the rest of her neighbours.⁴⁸ That we rarely find cases like this in the cities shows how the nobility had much more influence over them than country villages; given that they tended to be less involved with village gossip and superstition.

These cases symbolise how the elite believed and acted in different ways when compared to those below them. The split in education explains why certain members of society reacted towards witches in the ways that they did. The elite relied much more on theology and religious texts; the gentry on the courts, religion and occasionally folk magic,

⁴⁵ For more information on ritual protection marks and apotropaic symbols, see Timothy Easton & Jeremy Hodgkinson, 'Apotropaic Symbols on Cast-Iron Firebacks', *Journal of the Antique Metalware Society*, 21, (2013), pp. 14- 33.

⁴⁶ William Drage, 'Daimonomageia. A Small Treatise of Sicknesses and Diseases from Witchcraft, and Supernatural Causes', (London: Printed by J. Dover, 1665), *Early English Books Online*, D2117, <https://data-historicaltexts-jisc-ac-uk.libaccess.hud.ac.uk/view?pubId=eebo-ocm17015106e&terms=william%20drage&pageTerms=william%20drage&pageId=eebo-ocm17015106e-105786-1>, [Accessed 24 January 2016], p. 13.

⁴⁷ Raine (ed.), *Depositions from the Castle of York Relating to Offenses Committed in the Northern Counties in the Seventeenth Century*, p. 195.

⁴⁸ The National Archives, ASSI 45/16/3/54-5, (1652), pp. 55-56.

as we will see next; followed by the commons, who were influenced largely by superstition and folklore.⁴⁹ These findings support the article's premise because they reveal how contrasting beliefs and actions towards witchcraft were dependant on social status.

Assessing the actions of the middling sort has revealed that there are many misconceptions about how witchcraft was truly dealt with by the English justice system.⁵⁰ In particular, very little has been written on what actually happened in the Yorkshire courts. England had a small number of executions: around two thousand men and women were arraigned for the crime, and only three hundred executed between 1560 and 1706.⁵¹ It makes sense then to ask why so many witches had the charges against them dropped, or avoided the court system altogether. Holmes suggested that this was because the lower sort were much more likely to protect themselves at home, rather than risk 'outing' the witch in the court system and potentially landing themselves in more trouble.⁵² However, the justice system was used frequently by the gentry; Fairfax is an excellent example of this.

Witchcraft trials were usually reserved for the assizes, where judges were members of the elite; the local ecclesiastical courts were only able to try lesser accusations and could not give out harsh sentences.⁵³ Fairfax himself had to wait for the York Assizes before he was able to go to court.⁵⁴ This may help to explain why the commons did not tend to use the court system, especially if their complaint was only minor. They would need to travel to the assizes and present a convincing case to the judges, who held their own theories surrounding witchcraft. To those unable to afford the journey, or the possible defamation case if they lost, it may have seemed an impossible task.

It is usually presumed that any woman with an odd birth mark was condemned by the courts as a witch, but this was not always the case. Sharpe wrote how people were well aware of the natural explanations for such marks, and would have struggled to explain them

⁴⁹ Maurice Ashley, *Life in Stuart England*, (Batsford, 1967), p. 138.

⁵⁰ This middling sort largely consisted of landed gentry, merchants and professionals, such as lawyers and physicians.

⁵¹ Crawford, *Women and Religion in England, 1500-1720*, p. 102.

⁵² Clive Holmes, 'Women: Witnesses and Witches', *Past and Present*, 140, (1993), 45- 78, p.52
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/past/140.1.45>

⁵³ James Sharpe, *Instruments of Darkness: Witchcraft in England 1550-1750*, (Hamish Hamilton, 1996), p. 214.

⁵⁴ Fairfax, 'Deamonologia', pp. 32-152.

as unnatural.⁵⁵ In spite of this, we do have accounts of suspected witches being searched for unnatural marks, such as the case of Margaret Morton from the Depositions of York Castle: they found 'two black spots between her thigh and her body'.⁵⁶ Fairfax also described how 'the women apprehended were . . . searched for marks upon their bodies'; although he does not give us the outcome of this search.⁵⁷

The only ordeal that the commons seem to have been concerned with was swimming, even though it had been outlawed in England since 1219, despite James I's recommendation of it in his book. Nevertheless, it does still seem that the ordeal was used, although it did not just involve submerging a witch in the nearest pond. Instead 'swimming', as Holmes explained to us, included other ordeals such as those involving boiling water.⁵⁸

The cutting of hair was also a popular method used by the justice system. Purkiss depicted how people believed that the hair of a witch could not be cut by using the trial of Anne Kerke as an example. She stated that "'upon a serjeant attempting to cut them [her hair] with a pair of barber's scissors, they turned round in his hand, and the edges were so battered, turned and spoiled, that they would not cut anything'".⁵⁹ This case further portrays the actions of the middling sort, as the 'hairdresser' here was a sergeant. Nevertheless, Barry Reay wrote that not all investigations were violent or invasive in Yorkshire: many would merely consult with a minister for advice, or try to converse with the accused in an attempt to placate them.⁶⁰

By understanding how the justice system worked, it can help us to assess the following examples of how it was used and manipulated. The common people of Yorkshire either avoided the courts or were present as the accused; by evaluating why this was the case, we can better understand their beliefs and actions. Fairfax's case can be used as one of these examples: all of the women he accused were common people from the nearest villages.⁶¹ His case is also an example of how the lower sort were exploited by those who were either bored

⁵⁵ Sharpe, *Witchcraft in Early Modern England*, p. 64.

⁵⁶ Raine (ed.), *Depositions from the Castle of York Relating to Offenses Committed in the Northern Counties in the Seventeenth Century*, p. 38.

⁵⁷ Fairfax, 'Deamonologia: A Discourse on Witchcraft, as it was Acted in the Family of Mr. Edward Fairfax, at Fuystone, in the County of York, in the Year 1621', p. 78.

⁵⁸ Holmes, *Witchcraft in British History*, p. 135.

⁵⁹ Purkiss, *The Witch in History: Early Modern and Twentieth-Century Representations*, p. 125.

⁶⁰ Barry Reay, *Popular Cultures in England: 1550-1750*, (Routledge, 1998), p. 108.

⁶¹ Fairfax, 'Deamonologia', pp. 48-99.

or wanted more attention. Even the judges who presided over Fairfax's case remarked on this: Fairfax stated that 'they add an end my children should aim at in this- to be more cherished'.⁶² His neighbour's daughter, who was part of the same case, admitted that this was true.⁶³

Further to this, accusing someone of witchcraft at court was an easier way for a person to gain financial advantage over another. For instance, a landlord could accuse an unruly tenant of witchcraft in order to more easily evict them. A letter from Yorkshire dated 1641 is evidence of this: it stated that 'Wilkinson was convicted of witchcraft and his lands let to another tenant'.⁶⁴ Eileen Rennison also gave us an example of a witchcraft case involving land rights: Jennet Benton was accused of witchcraft at the York Assizes on 7 June 1656, Richard Jackson had fallen ill after he won a court case over land rights against Benton and her husband George.⁶⁵ In these cases at least, the Yorkshire gentry were able to use the courts to their advantage by accusing those of lower status than themselves.

Even with this evidence, the commonality were aware of fraudulent claims within the court system, and would often sign petitions in support of the accused. In Yorkshire there are quite a few examples of this: Sharpe described in his study how he unearthed a petition signed by no less than 200 people in support of a woman brought to court on witchcraft charges.⁶⁶ Fairfax also described how the son of 'Dibb's wife', one of the women accused of bewitching his daughters, 'procured a certificate to the judge, that the women were of good fame, and never till that time ill-reported of for witchcraft'.⁶⁷ This epitomises how people could act as a unified community in order to appeal to a judge. Community solidarity was one of their only defence systems against the often more powerful accuser; and was also one of the few ways in which they could attack established political and social structures.

Defamation suits were one way for a witch, cleared of his or her charges, to retaliate; and are examples of how the commonality behaved within the judicial system. Such suits enabled the exonerated to claim compensation for the loss of their good reputation; indeed it

⁶² Fairfax, 'Deamonologia', p. 124.

⁶³ Fairfax, 'Deamonologia', p. 127.

⁶⁴ West Yorkshire Archive Service, *Correspondence*, WYL100/HX/D, (1641), p. 1.

⁶⁵ Eileen Rennison, *Yorkshire Witches*, (Amberley, 2012), p. 17.

⁶⁶ Briggs, *Witches and Neighbours: The Social and Cultural Context of European Witchcraft*, p. 365.

⁶⁷ Fairfax, 'Deamonologia', p. 127.

was possible to counter accusations with considerable success.⁶⁸ They also explain why the commons were less inclined to go to court, because they were less likely to be able to afford the defamation suit if they lost.⁶⁹ The Borthwick Archives show that between 1600 and 1700 there were at least 22 defamation cases in the Diocesan Courts of the Archbishopric of York, the majority of which were dealt with quickly.⁷⁰ This is quite a large number given that it does not include cases that were unsuccessful, unrecorded, or cases from other areas of Yorkshire.

Also in support of the theory that those from the lower sort were less likely to use the court system, is the trial of Michael Theakstone from Ripon, who had got into trouble for beating the supposed witch Elizabeth Parving in 1688. The account stated that 'he struck her over the head twice with a pair of bellows, told her that she was a witch, and her picture was burnt att London, and he would burne her, and said if he had her son he would make gunpowder of him'.⁷¹ This case illustrates that the lower sort would take matters into their own hands when dealing with a suspected witch.

In all, the judicial system was mainly used, and sometimes exploited, by the gentry. Nonetheless, some found the courts less than willing to entertain their accusations. Fairfax described his experience as 'not fair', and accused the judges of making it easy for the witches to escape due to their 'hardness of hearts' and unwillingness to believe his daughters' testimonies.⁷²

The personal beliefs of the commonality, which encompassed yeomen, husbandmen, labourers and vagrants, are fascinating. While having faith in their religion, they also took part in folk rituals and superstitious rites which were denounced by their superiors. Nonetheless, these rites and rituals were a fundamental part of protection against witches for those who knew little of demonological theory, and could not afford medical professionals to diagnose mysterious illnesses.

⁶⁸ Peter Rushton, 'Women, Witchcraft, and Slander in Early Modern England: Cases from the Church Courts of Durham, 1560-1675', *Northern History*, 18, (1982), 1- 28, p. 132

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1179/007817282790176645>

⁶⁹ Sharpe, *Witchcraft in Early Modern England*, p. 111.

⁷⁰ Borthwick Institute for Archives, *Borthwick Cause Papers in the Diocesan Courts of the Archbishopric of York, 1300- 1858*, pp. 1-2.

⁷¹ Raine (ed.), *Depositions from the Castle of York Relating to Offenses Committed in the Northern Counties in the Seventeenth Century*, p. 285.

⁷² Fairfax, 'Deamonologia', p. 123.

These specific beliefs saw a distinction between 'good' witches and 'bad' witches. Many ordinary folk were happy to seek out the help of a wise woman or man, either out of superstition or long-standing tradition; whereas the elite identified them all as malefic witches.⁷³ This shows a clear difference of ideas depending on social status and education, proving how both belief and action were complex. There is one contemporary source from the Quarter Sessions Records which exemplifies the acceptance of wise men and women by the commons: villagers went to see Edmund Robinson in the hopes that he could locate a shirt, smock and linens stolen from John Lodge.⁷⁴ Contrary to what the written sources would have us believe, not all saw magic as an evil practice.

By looking at methods of bewitchment, we can see that the commons actually had some influence over the gentry. Folkloric beliefs regarding bewitchment techniques were fairly common, which is primarily represented by the use of food. Purkiss described an example of witches threatening to kill a man with the use of nine bits of bread and butter.⁷⁵ This belief is then reflected in the middling levels of society, namely by Fairfax. He wrote that 'the spice which the woman put into her hands was great raisins which she would have had her eat'; illustrating that the witch attempted to gain further control over his daughter through the use of food.⁷⁶ This highlights how the gentry sometimes adopted beliefs from the commonality, exemplifying how people of different social status could influence one another.

Fairfax is also useful in illustrating additional superstitious beliefs surrounding bewitchment. He surmised a number of reasons for his daughter Hellen's bewitchment, one of which was the possession of a coin taken from the 'witch'.⁷⁷ He later went on to describe how a slap on the back was another method believed to cause bewitchment; he wrote that 'suddenly she slipped before the two men, and with her hand gave a clap upon the back'.⁷⁸ This perpetuation of superstition shows again how a member of the gentry could regress to applying popular folklore as evidence.

⁷³ Sharpe, *Witchcraft in Early Modern England*, p. 55.

⁷⁴ West Yorkshire Archive Service, *Quarter Sessions Records*, QS1/18/2/5/5, (Kirkburton, 1679), p. 1.

⁷⁵ Purkiss, *The Witch in History: Early Modern and Twentieth-Century Representations*, p. 107.

⁷⁶ Fairfax, 'Deamonologia', p. 65.

⁷⁷ Fairfax, 'Deamonologia', pp. 42-43.

⁷⁸ Fairfax, 'Deamonologia', p. 50.

Additionally, there is a remarkable continuation of superstitious belief after the Reformation regarding the prevention of bewitchment; it is decidedly different to what the nobility, gentry and the clergy would have us believe happened in Yorkshire. Witch protection marks, usually relating to the Virgin Mary in the form of a double V or 'VV', are one such method. These marks were placed on or near doors, windows and hearths, which were weak places within the envelope of the home that were believed to be at risk of penetration by witches.⁷⁹ The overlapping 'VV' found in Goatchurch Cavern is an example of this; it stood for 'Virgo Virginium', the Virgin of virgins.⁸⁰ The use of these marks in caves and temporary dwellings shows how folkloric traditions were ingrained into the social mind. This only really applies to the commons, however, as it would have been unusual for a member of the gentry or higher to take up residence in a cave, however temporarily.

Other prevention techniques included anti-witch charms. Blakeborough described one such charm, which was widely used by the commonality of Yorkshire: a beast's heart would be stuck full of pins, and roasted in absolute silence at midnight with closed doors and windows.⁸¹ It was believed the rite would keep away witches and their curses. Another method included the use of a stone with a hole in the centre. It was believed that witches greatly disliked these stones, so hanging one in the household proved useful at deterring them.⁸² This illustrates the wide range of anti-witch techniques which had survived the Reformation; showing how belief and action in the lowest levels of society was quite different to what religious writers and the elite would have us believe. These methods also highlight the complexity of popular belief, both in the fact that people did not solely rely on

⁷⁹ Christopher J. Binding & Linda J. Wilson, 'Ritual Protection Marks in Goatchurch Cavern, Burrington Combe, North Somerset: With an Appendix on the use of Conjoined Vs to Protect a Dwelling by Easton. T', *Proceeding of the University of Bristol Speleological Society*, 23, 2, (2004), 119-133, p.122; for more on the meaning of these marks in Yorkshire see Tom Lord & John Howard, 'Cave Archaeology', in Tony Waltham & David Love (eds.), *Caves and Karst of the Yorkshire Dales*, (vol.1), (British Cave Research Association, 2013), p. 11.

⁸⁰ Binding & Wilson, 'Ritual Protection Marks in Goatchurch Cavern, Burrington Combe, North Somerset: With an Appendix on the use of Conjoined Vs to Protect a Dwelling by T. Easton', p. 120; Purkiss, *The Witch in History: Early Modern and Twentieth-Century Representations*, pp. 154-155.

⁸¹ Blakeborough, *Wit, Character, Folklore and Customs of the North Riding of Yorkshire: With a Glossary of over 4,000 Words and Idioms Now in Use*, p. 164.

⁸² Blakeborough, *Wit, Character, Folklore and Customs of the North Riding of Yorkshire: With a Glossary of over 4,000 Words and Idioms Now in Use*, p. 157.

religion for protection, but also that there were decided differences in action depending on which section of the community is looked at.

Assessing the acceptance and use of village wise women and men is also an excellent way to support this article's premise and represents the differences between the social levels. The works of those like Fairfax would have us believe that wise people were sinful and untrustworthy, given that he refused to take his daughter to a 'wizard' when suggested.⁸³ Yet when contemporary evidence regarding the commons is assessed, it is clear that wise people were trusted members of the community. In one case someone was encouraged to visit 'one widow Gransley' in order to diagnose her bewitchment, and most likely to find a solution.⁸⁴ Sharpe described an interesting instance in Scarborough: a wise woman consulted regarding a sick child told the mother exactly when and where the bewitchment had occurred.⁸⁵ Last, we have a poem that encouraged the use of wise people and portrayed them in a positive light: 'Untill at last they to a Chymist went, Who was well known to have great art and skill, And strove the minds of patients to fulfill'; the author also described counter-magic techniques as being successful.⁸⁶

The upper and middling sort, however, were occasionally able to persuade the commons to take their cases to court, instead of dealing with them at home. Holmes described the situation perfectly when he wrote 'how did villagers who may have co-operated, if uneasily, with the suspected witch come to testify against her? In both Knaresborough and Pendle that transformation was accomplished by the direct intervention of members of the élite'.⁸⁷ Even so, it was much more common to see court cases brought by the more prominent members of society, as we saw earlier.

⁸³ Fairfax, 'Deamonologia', pp. 44-45.

⁸⁴ The National Archives, ASSI 45/5/2/30, (1655), p. 30.

⁸⁵ James A. Sharpe, 'Witchcraft and Women in Seventeenth-Century England: Some Northern Evidence', *Continuity and Change*, 6, 2, (1991), 179- 199, pp. 185-186
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S0268416000001326>

⁸⁶ Unknown Author, 'A Miraculous Cure for Witchcraft or Strange News from the Blew-Boar in Holburn to the Tune of, " Aim not too High"', (1670?), *Early English Books Online*, M2214A,
<https://data-historicaltexts-jisc-ac-uk.libaccess.hud.ac.uk/view?pubId=eebo-ocm99888229e&terms=A%20Miraculous%20Cure%20for%20Witchcraft&date=16481880&undated=exclude&pageTerms=A%20Miraculous%20Cure%20for%20Witchcraft&pageId=eebo-ocm99888229e-201010-1>, [Accessed 23 January 2016].

⁸⁷ Clive Holmes, 'Women: Witnesses and Witches', *Past and Present*, 140, (1993), 45-78, pp.52-53
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/past/140.1.45>

The findings regarding the responses of the lower sort illustrate how belief and action were not universal. By assessing the commonality of Yorkshire we can apply some of their practices to wider England, as it allows us to explore what happened in other counties when valuable evidence is missing.⁸⁸ It could also inspire historians to look closer at the commons and their practices, rather than the 'official' statistics and views found in court studies and theoretical works, because they do not truly reflect popular thought.

In all, this article has used textual sources and material culture to demonstrate that reactions towards witchcraft in Yorkshire depended chiefly on an individual's social status. Popular belief and action were certainly not reflected in official religious or scholarly texts. The gentry and those within the middling levels of society had a mixed set of ideas: praying to God and often exploiting the judicial system on the one hand, and yet sometimes visiting wise people and allowing servants to carve protective marks on the other. The commonality, however, held beliefs which were deeply rooted in folklore and superstition, as had been the case for centuries. This was all due to how certain factors influenced each level of society, and shows that belief and action within Yorkshire were incredibly complex.

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⁸⁸ Garfield Tourney, 'The Physician and Witchcraft in Restoration England', *Medical History*, 16, 2, (1972), 143-155, p.154 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S0025727300017531>