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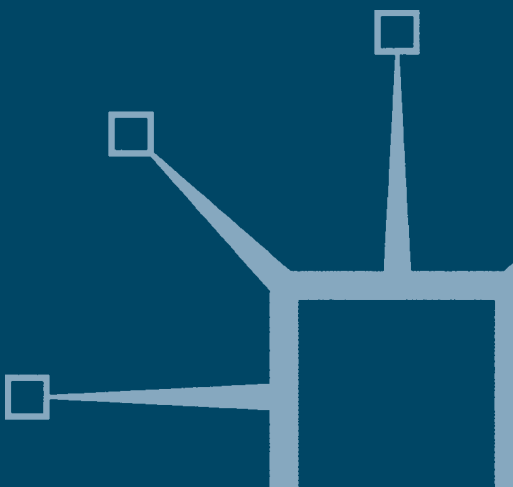
The Realities of Witchcraft and Popular Magic in Early Modern Europe

Culture, Cognition, and Everyday Life

Edward Bever



The Realities of Witchcraft and Popular Magic in Early Modern Europe

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For Patricia

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Introduction

The basic question this book seeks to answer is, "What basis did early modern beliefs about witchcraft and magic have in reality?" To answer this question, it focuses on a detailed study of trial records from the Duchy of Württemberg, a medium-size principality in southwestern Germany that conducted a moderate number of prosecutions, and evaluates the events and experiences reported in them in the context of Württemberg's judicial administration, socioeconomic development, and provincial culture; the findings of historical studies of other parts of Germany and Europe; and interdisciplinary investigations into the activities and phenomena they describe. The results of this investigation indicate that early modern Europeans' fears of malefic magic reflected both actual practices and potential harms more than previous accounts have suggested; that belief in the Devil and witch Sabbaths not only contributed to but also reflected the perceptual and cognitive processes by which people construct their experience of reality; that beneficent magic was both pervasive and more potent than heretofore appreciated; and that while the European elite's campaign to repress popular magic during the period did not succeed in eliminating it, the effort did succeed in marginalizing it and thereby contributed to the eventual triumph of disbelief in modern culture.

Determining what was real about early modern witchcraft and magic involves addressing three more specific questions. First, to what extent did people really engage in and experience the things contained in the beliefs? Second, to what extent did their activities have real effects, and their perceptions reflect objective events? Third, to the extent that their perceptions did not reflect external reality, what were the actual sources and nature of these subjective experiences? The book's purpose in answering these questions is both to help satisfy the curiosity many people have about the reality of the phenomena involved and also, by establishing that there was more to the beliefs than scholars have generally assumed, to enrich the discussion of the wider role and significance of witchcraft and magic in early modern society and culture, and of the reasons for and consequences of their eventual decline as well.

In seeking the answers to these questions, this study employs two basic methodologies. First of all, it is centered on a close reading of judicial records preserved in Württemberg's archives. The core of the study is a series of systematically sampled trials, supplemented by material drawn from an extensive reading in additional records. These are carefully examined to distinguish as far as possible what people actually did and what they experienced from what they later only claimed from fear, pain, perversity,

expediency, or suggestibility. As a general rule, tortured testimony is excluded from consideration, and all other evidence is evaluated with a consciousness that not only can less blatant pressures and inducements influence what people say, but also that judicial records by their nature emphasize certain things and disregard others and, in the end, are written by one party in a contentious interaction. Nevertheless, a substantial amount of credible testimony is contained in the records, which generally helps answer the first question, the extent to which people really did and experienced things contained in their beliefs about witchcraft and magic, and it also helps answer the second question, the extent to which these activities had real effects (for example, by demonstrating the actual use of poisons) and were based on actual experiences (as when a partner in illicit sex was afterward understood to have been the Devil). The information thus gleaned is connected to the evidence of similar and related activities and experiences in other parts of Europe and discussed in relation to broader sociocultural trends so that the results of this intensive local study have a significance beyond the specific incidents and provincial culture involved.

The second methodology the book employs is to conduct interdisciplinary investigations into the types of activities and experiences revealed by the archival research. The specific disciplines involved vary depending on the nature of the activities and experiences in question, but include in particular recent work on psychosocial factors in health and disease and nonconscious interpersonal communication, new studies of cognition and perception, contemporary research into consciousness and alternate states of consciousness, and scientific investigations of fringe phenomena. These investigations contribute additional insight into which unusual perceptions could have been of objectively real physical phenomena (like when what appears to have been ball lightning, an unexplained but widely accepted physical phenomenon, was seen near the grave of a recently buried woman), which activities could have had real results, and what those results might have been (as when expressions of anger appear to have triggered stress-reactions contributing to illness, or when divination seems to have elicited unconscious knowledge through ideomotor activity). When the evidence suggests that an experience did not reflect an external event, interdisciplinary insights can help explain how such perceptions arose and why they were taken to be important sources of knowledge by the people who experienced them.

While these two methodologies address the basic questions the book seeks to answer, they are not sufficient to accomplish its larger purpose, which is to show how the answers they supply impact the broader historical understanding of witchcraft and magic and their relationship to early modern society and culture as a whole. Therefore, the book also draws liberally on approaches used in other, more standard historical studies. For example, it discusses intellectual and legal history, starting with the general European

background and moving to the specific situations in southwestern Germany and Württemberg, to show the interplay of popular and official beliefs and their relationship to the legal system as background to the cases that are studied in detail. It includes statistical information about witch suspects, accusers, and beneficent magicians in systematically sampled trials to help determine their social positions in their communities, and it considers how magical beliefs and practices fit into the larger context of popular culture. By integrating interdisciplinary investigations involving the cognitive and other sciences and more traditional social and cultural approaches, the book develops a richer picture of the specific cases being investigated while conveying their implications for our broader understanding of early modern witchcraft and magic.

By focusing squarely on what was real about early modern witchcraft and magic, *The Realities of Witchcraft and Popular Magic in Early Modern Europe* adopts a significantly different perspective than most other scholarly historical treatments. A glance at some of the most notable recent English and American works on the subject highlights this difference. Alison Rowlands' *Witchcraft Narratives in Germany* (2003), for example, seeks to explain why one German city near Württemberg did not experience many witch trials, assuming that such trials were displaced expressions of "social and psychic tensions" in which the participants "pursued strategies, expressed emotions and negotiated conflicts" that were only obliquely manifested in accusations and confessions of witchcraft (p. 1). Walter Stephens' *Demon Lovers* (2002) interprets demonology as a desperate attempt to defend supernatural delusions, while Hans Peter Broedel's *The Malleus Maleficarum and the Construction of Witchcraft* (2003) traces the interplay of elite and popular beliefs in the creation of that seminal witch tract. Michael Bailey's *Battling Demons: Witchcraft, Heresy, and Reform in the Late Middle Ages* (2003) focuses on Johann Nider's earlier work in the context of late Medieval religious tensions, and Gary Waite's *Heresy, Magic and Witchcraft* (2003) offers a broader interpretation of the witch trials as manifestations of religious tensions and confessional conflict. Lyndal Roper's *Witch Craze: Terror and Fantasy in Baroque Germany* (2004) explains witchcraft accusations in terms of "passions ... derived from deeply rooted fantasies," while Stuart Clark's *Thinking with Demons* (1996) argues explicitly against attempts to discern reality in witchcraft beliefs. All of these works raise interesting issues and offer stimulating insights, but all work within well-established social, intellectual, and psychological traditions that focus on the elements of unreality rather than the aspects of reality in beliefs about witchcraft and magic.

The current study does not exist in isolation, however. Robin Briggs' *Witches and Neighbors* (1996), while it shares the basic assumptions of the works mentioned above, uses a focused study of witch trials in Lorraine, like Württemberg a center of widespread but not virulent prosecutions, as the basis for a generalized depiction of witchcraft beliefs in popular culture in the

core areas of persecution: western and central Europe. Eva Pócs' *Between the Living and the Dead* (1999), which is more specialized but also more groundbreaking than Briggs, concentrates on an area peripheral to the main persecutions, Hungary, and is therefore able to bring to light popular beliefs and practices involving witches, healers, and other magical folk that were obscured by the prevalence of the witch stereotype and the use of torture in the core areas. In a sense, the present work seeks to combine the strengths of these two works, including elements of each that the other lacks – information about the core areas that is in Briggs but not Pócs, and insights about popular magic beyond witchcraft that are in Pócs but not Briggs – while going beyond them by undertaking explorations of the origins and nature of magical beliefs that neither attempts. The present work also has affinities with Carlo Ginzburg's *I benandanti* (1966, translated as *Night Battles* in 1985) and *Ecstasies* (1991) and Wolfgang Behringer's *Shaman of Oberstdorf* (1998), which are more narrowly focused but specifically treat elements in popular culture as actual experiences rather than simply folk beliefs.

One very recent book, Emma Wilby's *Cunning Folk and Familiar Spirits: Shamanistic Visionary Traditions in Early Modern British Witchcraft and Magic* (2005) appeared too late to be consulted for this study, but according to an online review by Moira Smith, it discusses witches' familiar spirits, a concept most characteristic of English witchcraft, as "remnants of pre-Christian belief and practice," an instance of a "transhistorical and transcultural" shamanism "that survived amongst the folk" in the form of "vision experiences of British cunning folk who regarded the fairy folk as sacred spirits." The review criticizes the book for some methodological flaws – specifically an oversimplified presentation of shamanism as a transcultural phenomenon, and assumptions that current folklore connects in some direct way to prehistoric religion, that popular and elite culture exist in substantial isolation from each other, and that contemporary tribal religions can be used in a straightforward way to illuminate prehistoric European religions – but whatever the merits of this critique, it sounds as if the book does present some additional evidence of shamanic activity in the British Isles and may find support in places from the interpretation developed here.

While looking at the relationship of the approach employed in the present work to other recent studies conveys something of its implications, these are most apparent in considering the relationship of its two methodologies to the larger tradition of scholarship on witchcraft and popular magic as a whole.

The first methodology, close reading of archival materials to determine what people actually did and experienced and what effects those actions and experiences had, is a basic historical practice that would be totally unremarkable in an investigation of almost any other topic. In the case of witchcraft and magic, though, while close reading of archival materials is not

unusual, reading them to determine what was really going on is less common, for historians have traditionally started from the assumption that at bottom nothing real can have been going on, and therefore have focused on explaining why people would hold delusional beliefs and engage in inefficacious activities. Of course, they have always recognized that some real activities and experiences were involved, but traditional rationalists explicitly regarded them as superstitious nonsense, while the leading romantic scholar, Margaret Murray, constructed a credulous interpretation of witchcraft beliefs that, when it was debunked, effectively discredited attempts to discern aspects of reality in them for a generation. Social historians recognized that there was a certain amount of real activity recorded in the archival materials they analyzed, but they focused their attention on the evidence of mechanisms by which other, to them more significant, processes like class conflict or gender oppression were re-directed into witchcraft accusations, and tended to treat any actual activities as secondary by-products of these social forces. Postmodern historians have adopted the cultural relativism of anthropology and the epistemological relativism of semiotics, which have enabled them to make considerable progress in establishing people's actual beliefs and practices, but the implication of this approach (and frequently the explicit position as well) is that the beliefs are produced by the logic of narrative and the interdependence of cultural forms essentially independent of anything that might have actually happened.

In terms of discerning the aspects of reality in early modern witchcraft and magic, recent historical work, not only that of Pócs, Ginzburg, and Behringer mentioned above, but also of historians such as Keith Thomas, Willem de Blécourt, Owen Davies, Gábor Klaniczay, and the whole school of German historians who focus on witchcraft in the context of "everyday life," such as Reiner Walz in *Hexenglaube und Magische Kommunikation im Dorf der Frühen Neuzeit* and Eva Labouvie in *Verbotene Künste*, has been particularly fruitful in the area of popular magic, where the existence of beneficent practices and practitioners has been established with relatively little controversy. The existence and, more importantly, significance of malefic magic is a touchier subject, however, for there is an understandable reluctance to "blame the victims" of persecutions that have been recognized as misguided and unjust for centuries. The historians who have explored beneficent magic have done much to show how witchcraft fit into normal life, but their emphasis is still on explaining witchcraft fears rather than examining malefic practices. Nevertheless, evidence of actual malefic practices is scattered throughout the historical literature, and discussed more directly in Chadwick Hansen's *Witchcraft at Salem* and a few recent works like Giovanna Fiume's "The Old Vinegar Lady," Ingrid Ahrendt-Schulte's *Zauberinnen in der Stadt Horn*, Richard Kieckhefer's *Magic in the Middle Ages*, and Hans Sebald's "Justice by Magic." It is also, as we shall see, revealed by a dispassionate reading of the records of small trials. Therefore, the most notable contribution of the close archival

readings to determine what people were really doing and experiencing conveyed in the following chapters is to show what *maleficium* actually involved and the extent to which it was a real factor in early modern peoples' individual and communal lives. Without in any sense attempting to justify the early modern persecutions, the book provides new insights into why the fear that fuelled them existed and what their consequences were.

The second methodology employed in this book, interdisciplinary investigations into the types of activities and experiences revealed by the archival research, sheds additional light on *maleficium*, because the research into psychological factors in disease and subliminal communication suggests that it was far more potent than is generally acknowledged, being rooted in the ability of threat displays, unconscious as well as conscious, to induce chronic stress, independent of the belief-system or psychological health of their target. Additional interdisciplinary investigations explore the nature and significance of the experiences related to diabolism; the efficacy of divination, healing, and other forms of beneficent magic; and the neurocognitive basis of disbelief. A number of historians have reported on examples of people who really had experiences they understood to be magical, but attempts to understand what these involved, how people could have experienced them, and what effects they could have had are few and far between. Traditional rationalists regarded such experiences as ephemeral, either fraudulent or manifestations of some pathology. Romantics portrayed the experiences as physical events as far as possible, explaining the demonology as a misunderstanding of their true nature (peasant rebelliousness or an underground, prehistoric pagan religion) and offered little insight into the roots and nature of the physically impossible features beyond the suggestion of the influence of hallucinogenic drugs. Social scientists have developed models of the psychological processes by which social conflicts could be sublimated into witchcraft accusations, but their explanations for magical experiences, to the extent that they attempted or implied them, have generally involved emphasizing the degree to which they were based on rationally intelligible misrepresentations such as fraud or therapeutic deception and then falling back on vague speculations about pathology or drugs. Postmodern scholars extend their agnostic approach from the external efficacy of magic beliefs to their internal psychology, treating belief as sufficient to account for reported experience, and paying little heed to the difference between construction of a narrative and the process of perception.

In recent times, a number of historians have evinced interest in understanding the roots and nature of experiences like, as opposed to beliefs about, demonic possession (Moshe Slutovsky in "A Divine Apparition or Demonic Possession," for example) and the "Old Hag" syndrome (particularly Owen Davies in "The Nightmare Experience, Sleep Paralysis, and Witchcraft Accusations"). However, so far these investigations have been relatively isolated and *ad hoc*, with some reviving psychoanalytic interpretations and

others drawing eclectically on cognitive materials. *The Realities of Witchcraft and Popular Magic in Early Modern Europe* is intended to provide a broader, more cohesive theoretical framework for this latter approach, for, while the impetus for the various interdisciplinary investigations the book includes is the specific evidence found in the archival material, the investigations are not unrelated. Instead, research into the relationship of mind and body in disease, the workings of perception and cognition, and the effects of alternate states of consciousness like dreams, trance, and intoxication leads to an interconnected body of recent work by cognitive and cross-cultural psychologists, neuroscientists, psychological anthropologists, and even cognitively oriented scholars of religion that has changed our understanding of how humans think and experience the world so substantially that it has been labeled the "cognitive revolution." For a long time, this work in the cognitive sciences and the cultural approaches that currently dominate historical scholarship have been seen as antagonistic, but recently attempts have begun to bring them together, to show how cognitive structures, perceptual processes, and cultural constructs interact in shaping human understanding and experience. Some examples of this trend that proved particularly helpful for the present study include Brad Shore's *Culture in Mind: Cognition, Culture, and the Problem of Meaning*; Merlin Donald's *A Mind So Rare: The Evolution of Human Consciousness*; Michael Winkelman's *Shamanism: The Neural Ecology of Consciousness and Healing*; Charles Laughlin, John McManus, and Eugene d'Aquili's *Brain, Symbol, and Experience*, and Alexander Hinton's *Biocultural Approaches to the Emotions*. *The Realities of Witchcraft and Popular Magic in Early Modern Europe* seeks to contribute to this movement by drawing from and at the same time adding to the growing body of literature on the relationship between cognition and culture. Its final goal is to help open up an historical dimension to this interdisciplinary discussion while developing a fuller and richer "realist" understanding of witchcraft and magic.

Part I The Reality of *Maleficium*

Introduction

The Latin word *maleficium* originally meant "wrongdoing" or "mischief," but in Roman times it came to be specifically associated with harmful magic. Most agricultural peoples have believed that injury can be inflicted via occult means, and have tried to defend themselves against it by utilizing protective magic, appeasement, and various forms of counteraction including countermagic, spontaneous physical retribution, and formal legal sanctions. Correspondingly, early Roman law outlawed harmful ritual magic, sorcery, because of the injury it was thought to inflict on individuals. Later, imperial Rome persecuted magical practitioners more generally as a threat to political stability, and the Judeo-Christian tradition regarded any ritual magic as a moral lapse, so when Rome adopted Christianity Theodosius' law code substituted *maleficium* in place of the more neutral word *magia*, categorizing all magic, whatever its intent or effect, as harmful. Medieval law codes and theology maintained the idea that all magic was to some degree harmful, but generally treated magic used to cause injury more seriously than magic used for benign purposes. Late medieval demonologists like Heinrich Kramer, the author of the *Malleus Maleficarum*, argued that all magic was equally harmful because it involved the agency of demons and at least an implicit pact with the Devil, and their arguments led to a strengthening of laws in this direction, but the moral equivalence of all forms of magic never won general acceptance in early modern Europe's elite, let alone its popular, culture. Most witch accusations made by commoners concerned harmful magic, and most witch trials included charges of *maleficium*, harms inflicted through occult means.[1]

There was no single law against witchcraft in early modern Europe, and, in fact, there was no single legal definition of the crime. Statutes varied enormously in their wording and significantly in the substantive importance they placed on different aspects of the generalized belief. However, there was no question of the crucial role of malefic acts, whether because of

their inherent harmfulness or as evidence that the suspect was "given to Satan."[2] The example of the steps that led to the proscription of witchcraft in Württemberg illustrates the idiosyncratic process by which demonological theory influenced legal practice, while highlighting both the centrality of *maleficium* and continuing uncertainty about the role of the Devil. In 1532, Charles V promulgated the *Constitution Criminialis Carolina*, a model law code for the jurisdictions contained in the Holy Roman Empire. Dubbed the *Carolina*, the code stipulated that "when someone harms people or brings them trouble by magic, one should punish them with death, and one should use the punishment of death by fire. When, however, someone uses magic and yet does no one any harm with it, he should be punished otherwise, according to the custom of the case."[3] The *Carolina* thus proscribed harmful magic in clear and unequivocal terms, but sidestepped the issue of nonharmful magic. In 1667, the Duchy of Württemberg implemented the suggested reforms in its Sixth Provincial Ordinance, adopting the *Carolina's* prohibition of harmful magic "almost word for word," while creating a more complex compromise regarding magic without harm in which a pact with the Devil alone was to be prosecuted and punished as severely as *maleficium*, but magic involving neither a pact nor injury was to be dealt with more leniently.[4] Here again, the issue of *maleficium* seems to have been clear-cut, while the question of witchcraft without harm involved a compromise between those who held that any dealings with the Devil were equally bad and those who argued that beneficent magic was less bad than malevolent magic.

As in most jurisdictions, the Württemberg statute did not specify exactly what constituted harmful magic. Instead, commoners who suspected their neighbors, local officials investigating complaints, ducal officials supervising the trials, and the legal experts at the University of Tübingen who reviewed them at critical junctures all worked from a common fund of knowledge that mixed in different degrees local traditions, regional pamphlet literature, and the Europe-wide demonology. Witches were generally thought to use magic to influence the weather, interfere with smaller-scale domestic processes like churning butter and brewing beer, harm farm animals or prevent them from producing eggs or milk, cause impotence in men or frigidity in women, and injure people through illness or accidents.[5] The means by which they were thought to work their *maleficium* included secret spells and incantations; actions and gestures; potions, salves, and powders; magically potent objects; a look, breath, touch, or blow; public verbal curses; and the sheer power of their ill will. Some of these means involved deliberate rituals, which anthropologists and historians call sorcery, while others manifested an inherent power in the witch, referred to as witchcraft; but while early moderns recognized the potency of both means, they did not consider the distinction crucial. Evidence of sorcery would certainly strengthen an accusation, but it was by nature often not available,

and was not necessary to sustain a charge of *maleficium*; the correspondence of an expression of ill will followed by some injury was the most typical basis for an allegation.

In the first chapter of this section, we will look at the variety of injuries and expressions of ill will that were connected to allegations of *maleficium* that precipitated small trials or came out during their course. In contrast to most previous historical discussions, however, we shall do this with an eye toward discovering what was really going on, both in terms of the extent to which suspects really did express ill will in various ways, and in terms of the extent to which these expressions of ill will really could have caused the harms intended. In the second chapter, we will look at the social context of these expressions and their consequences: how they fit into the larger constellation of interpersonal conflicts typical of village and small urban communities in early modern Europe; how they related to social characteristics like class, gender, and age; and how they related to the mass witch prosecutions that swept up dozens, and even hundreds, of victims at a time in a relentless cycle of denunciation and torture so horrifying that it came to dominate our understanding of witchcraft to the point that it has hindered for centuries our ability, our very willingness, to see the real activities and their real consequences that lay at the root of the phenomenon.

While both chapters draw upon a wide reading of materials in the archives of the Duchy of Württemberg, they center on a detailed analysis of a systematic sample of 29 trials labeled as witchcraft or a pact with the Devil in the archival index. The sample was drawn from the cases contained in the records of the Ducal High Council, "Malefizsachen," A209. The sample was stratified chronologically, with the specific cases chosen at random within three strata. One was chosen from the four before 1590 (25%), 20 of 132 between 1581 and 1669 (15%), and 6 of 49 after 1670 (12%). The reason for the stratification was to ensure representation of early and late trials; the reason for the slight overrepresentation of cases in the middle section is that examination of the index of *concilia* concerning witchcraft and related in the University of Tübingen's legal archive indicated that a number of cases from this period were contained there that were not contained in the High Council's archive, and so the actual number of trials in the duchy in this period is actually slightly underrepresented by a sample drawn from the High Council's records.[6] The sample was used as the basis for a considerable amount of quantitative analysis of judicial and social aspects of the trials in my dissertation "Witchcraft in Early Modern Wuerttemberg," but since these characteristics have been fairly well established since it was written (see especially Brian Levack, *The Witch Hunt in Early Modern Europe*), these analyses are drawn on here as appropriate to support the present inquiry and the sample is mainly used to give a general quantitative structure to the discussion in order to counteract the subtle biases that a lack of attention to quantities can introduce into analysis. The cases are listed in the appendix.

In addition to the witchcraft sample, a similar sample was taken of 21 out of 48 cases labeled *zauberei*, *magia*, or other general terms for magic in the archival index. Upon examination, about half were found to basically be late witch cases, but the government's changing terminology (discussed in Chapter 8) led the archival indexer to label them more vaguely as magic. The other half were a combination of beneficent magic cases generally designated by more specific labels like "blessing" and "treasure-hunting" and a miscellany of other magical practices and unusual occurrences. The latter group is utilized with the samples of specific beneficent practices in Part III, as explained in the introduction there, while the witch-like cases were not analyzed systematically, but instead are drawn upon like the numerous other cases read unsystematically to supplement the systematic sample.

1
The Varieties of *Maleficium*

Historians have long recognized that some people in early modern Europe did attempt to perpetrate *maleficium*, but have downplayed it both because their focus has generally been on the dysfunctions of early modern society that led to the widespread indiscriminate witch persecutions and because its has generally been regarded as essentially ineffectual, as strong at most as the weakness of the people against whom it was directed. Indeed, the main focus of their attention, as with other social scientists, has been on the reasons why people say that they are the victims of occult attack. Explanations have included fraudulent self-interest, the projection of anger or guilt onto the object of the anger or guilt, a way of accounting for inexplicable misfortune, the workings of a self-referencing symbol system, and "infantile fantasy."[1] Confessions of witchcraft are correspondingly treated as some sort of cognitive malfunction resulting from either some individual psychological or some more general cultural defect: the confession is either an ex-post-facto bid for attention or a narcissistic delusion of control to compensate for powerlessness.[2] To the extent that people did suffer misfortune related to perceived *maleficium*, this is explained as a result of their own weakness; "fears," it has been noted, "have genuine power against the suggestible."[3] Even postmodernist analysis tends to reinforce this basic view, for while it takes the position that "reality" is just a sociocultural construct, this ends up just being another way of explaining how the people involved in witchcraft cases didn't know what was really going on.[4]

Evidence contained in the stratified random sample of trials conducted in the Duchy of Württemberg between 1565 and 1701 considered in light of recent advances in cognitive and medical science, however, suggests that these various explanations, while they do a good job of explaining certain phenomena associated with witchcraft and magic beliefs, are seriously incomplete.[5] The reason is that they start from the basic assumptions that occult attack was uncommon, that it was usually ineffectual when it happened, and that when it was effective it was only as effective as the purported victims let it be. All three of these assumptions, however, are

wrong. Occult attacks may not have been as common as some early moderns feared, but they were an integral part of early modern life; many of them had genuine physical or psychological power; and this power was to a significant degree independent of the beliefs, fears, or psychological weaknesses of the people on the receiving end.

Table 1.1 shows the various types of accusations that were made in the course of the 27 cases:

Table 1.1 Accusations of *maleficium*

Type of injury	Primary	Secondary	Total
Theft	2	2	4
Arson	0	1	1
Poison	7	6	13
Assault	5	5	10
Occult injury	6	18	24
Harm to animals	3	21	24
Total	**23**	**53**	**76**

Source: Sampled witchcraft cases (see the appendix).

Primary accusations refer to those which precipitated trials, while secondary accusations are older allegations that surfaced during the course of a trial.

Several things are immediately apparent from this table. First of all, some of the types of *maleficium* that were part of the general discourse about the crime are not here, specifically weather manipulation and interference with domestic production (there was one allegation involving impotence, which is included in the occult injury category). There were a couple of spectacular trials involving allegations of weather manipulation early on in the region, but their absence from the sample of trials, as well as the impression given by a less systematic reading of a much larger number of trial records in the ducal archive, suggests that trials involving this form of witchcraft were infrequent at most in Württemberg. In the case of Württemberg this might be attributable to a local theological tradition discounting witches' power over the weather, but a similar pattern of a few spectacular trials centering on weather magic seems to have obtained in some other parts of Europe like Scotland and Hungary, while the great majority of trials centered on other things.[6] Similarly, interference with domestic production was also reported in the pamphlet literature, particularly in England, but appears to have been no more frequent in actual trials there than in Württemberg.[7]

Secondly, the great majority of accusations were concerned with injury to people and animals, which is also consistent with patterns noted elsewhere.[8] Theft and arson were the only forms of damage to inanimate property reported, and there were only five reports of these among the sampled trials (and only another two mentions of witchcraft and theft and one of witchcraft and arson in the archival index cataloging Württemberg's judicial

records from the time). Moreover, the specific circumstances of these accusations further reduce their apparent importance. The charge of arson was just a secondary accusation.[9] Both of the primary accusations linking theft and witchcraft (as well as the only other two mentions of the two crimes together in the archival index) occurred relatively early, before 1620. In the earlier of the sampled cases, a woman named Barbara Tolmayer was arrested in the town of Freudenstadt for theft; she was accused of witchcraft because her husband had recently been executed for the offense in the nearby town of Balingen, confessed to witchcraft under torture, but seduced her jailer and escaped.[10] In the second case, a young woman named Maria Braittingen was arrested for stealing in the village of Eberspach in 1619 and volunteered that she had had sex with the Devil.[11] In neither case does the theft appear to have been put forward as substantial evidence in support of the charge of witchcraft. In the first, it may have contributed to the impression of Tolmayer's bad character, but her husband's conviction and execution appear to have carried more weight, while in the second case the theft and the girl's refusal to admit it even when the missing items "were all found with her" led the constable (*Vogt*) of Blaubeuern, who was questioning her, to remark "that she appeared to be no Christian, but rather given to Satan himself," which precipitated her confession that she had already slept with him "in the form of her boyfriend."

The two secondary accusations involving theft did involve a crime often connected to witchcraft, stealing milk, but in one case the allegation appears to have concerned a physical rather than magical crime, while in the other it is ambiguous. In the first, the accuser said someone "broke in and took the milk" from his cow, while in the other the accuser, a 71-year-old woman named Agnes Fritz, said that another old woman, 73-year-old Agatha Stosser, must have stolen cream from her because she sold much more than she could have gotten from her own cow.[12] We shall see in Chapters 5 and 7 that other allegations of milk stealing came to light in other jurisdictions and during trials in Württemberg of beneficent magicians accused of using divination and counter-magic against it that clearly assumed that magical means had been used, but the contribution of such concerns to witch trials themselves appears to have been quite limited.

The third thing that is immediately apparent in Table 1.1 is that it includes a number of offenses that, like surreptitious milking, are not, to modern eyes anyway, particularly magical: in addition to theft and arson, poisoning, assault, and, depending on the circumstances, harming animals. We may wonder about allegations involving occult bewitchings, how they would work and if any significant number of people would attempt to perpetrate them, but poisoning and assault are concepts whose mechanisms we can understand, and whose occurrence we should be able to evaluate unclouded by uncertainty about what they entailed.

Poison and assault

Allegations of poisoning precipitated the greatest number of trials of any single accusation, and they also comprised a number of secondary denunciations. In about half the cases, including most which began trials, the victims did not actually die, but just became ill. In several cases, it appears that the "poison" was actually intended to benefit the victims. For example, this was the conclusion a young woman named Johanna Fehlen came to when she discovered a white powder at the bottom of a glass of wine given to her by an older woman, Barbara Schmied, at Barbara's nephew's wedding.[13] It was probably also the case when the suspect in another of the sampled cases, Anna Schnabel, brought a neighbor named Margretha Ruchhinbrodt some disgusting soup when Margretha was sick.[14]

In other instances, it is not clear whether the suspect actually gave the victim poison at all. In 1659, the pastor in Geradstetten, a village near Schondorf, Johannes Brand, accused a woman named Maria Laichlin, whom he thought his sister-in-law Susanna Catharina was spending too much time with, of poisoning the young woman with a piece of bread. She had become weak and disoriented while returning home after going to borrow some milk from Maria's one day, and later had seizures, became paralyzed, and suffered from pain and hallucinations. However, the case dissolved when witnesses could not agree whether Maria had given Susanna Catharina any bread, poisonous or otherwise.[15] Similarly, the charge made by Hans Rolf Kellern that Catharina Freyberger sold him poisoned cheese that made him and his wife sick collapsed in the face of both her apparently genuine surprise upon arrest and the testimony of a man who had eaten her cheese without ill effect.[16]

Sometimes it is difficult to judge what the suspect intended. In 1688, an old widow named Anna Serrin gave a teenage girl named Anna Maria, who lived nearby in the village of Wasserstetten, a piece of stale bread saying it was too hard for her to eat, after which the girl "was driven from inside to hop and jump bizarrely."[17] She then set out to collect a debt owed to her father by a man who lived in the village of Dottingen, an hour away, "without telling her father," and on the way she said she met a man with a "red beard and hair" who told her of a horse master she could go to, to get some money. She followed his instructions, but when she got there, she acted "as if she didn't know what she was doing." The man reappeared to her, but the horse master said it was "only an hallucination." Some people tried to get her to go home, but "out of the earlier compulsion to jump around, she sprang in the river named the Lauter, which fortunately wasn't deep." Her father finally caught up with her and brought her home, where she told him "she doesn't know why she was overcome by this desire to jump," and that he shouldn't worry about money since he would soon get more. She acted unusually secretively and somewhat wild for a number of days more, and "one could not anger her in the least, or else she'd become very abusive, which she was not like before."

While it is not possible to definitely diagnose Anna Maria's problem, her wild, compulsive behavior and hallucinations make it sound like she could have suffered from ergot poisoning. Ergot is a fungus that grows on grains containing several alkaloids related to LSD that cause similar, although weaker, effects.[18] When consumed in bread, it can cause either gangrenous ergotism, known as St. Anthony's Fire, or convulsive ergotism.[19] Both cause delirium and hallucinations, but the former goes on to cause a sensation of burning inside, dry gangrene, and the loss of fingers, toes, and even limbs, while the latter causes at most convulsions. At times entire communities in premodern Europe appear to have suffered from accidental ergot poisoning, which has led some scholars to suggest that this was the cause of the witch fears and trials.[20] While this claim seems overly ambitious, given that the great majority of trials clearly do not contain evidence of ergotism, it may well have been the cause of some witch panics and trials. In this case, it seems quite likely that ergot is what caused the girl's strange behavior and perceptions, but we cannot know whether Anna Serrin knew the bread was contaminated. She admitted she had given Anna Maria the bread, but insisted she "had put nothing bad in it." As is often the case with suspected poisoning, it is impossible to know for sure.[21]

In certain cases, however, the charge of malicious poisoning was credible, and in several of the sampled cases it was almost certainly true. To begin with, both naturally occurring and synthetic poisons were available, and there is no question that they were used.[22] In 1674 Anna Maria Schilling accused Barbara Gessler of giving her a poisoned apple, and two neighbors came forward with stories of earlier incidents when Barbara was suspected of poisoning people she was ostensibly nursing.[23] After Anna Maria died, the doctor who examined her body said that she had succumbed to poison, but it was impossible to determine where it had come from. Less mysterious was the source of the poison that afflicted a young boy, Jakob Endriss, in 1628. His step-grandmother, Maria Schneider, the mother of his father's second wife, had prepared a soup for him, and when he became ill, a doctor "found … that something wrong had been given to him in his food."[24] Jakob told the investigating constable that Maria had earlier threatened to "feed him lye" and when the official questioned her, "at first she did not want to admit any knowledge of a soup," at all. Confronted by the testimony of other witnesses against this transparent lie, she "finally … acknowledged her guilt."

We know that poisoning is possible and that it works through biochemical actions that are as a rule independent of the victim's state of mind, but the administration of poison is by its nature surreptitious and so, as the examples discussed above illustrate, is often difficult to verify.[25] Assault, on the other hand, is a more open form of attack which could also, as Table 1.1 shows, be linked to witchcraft. For example, in the earliest of the sampled cases, an elderly woman named Magdelena Horn confessed in 1565 to having struck a boy so hard that he died several days later, and when the