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The Witches in Early Modern England (WEME) Project: Online at <http://witching.org>

Witchcraft is about the way the mind fills in absence with meaning. It is about causality and connection; accusers and authors theorize why and how it happened. It is about magical thinking—seeing the world as a place in which spiritual energies can be bought into and exploited, albeit at a very steep price. Moreover, it is like a double helix: with its twisting, evolving, centrifugal nature, witchcraft is organic and compound. It represents an idea and a plurality of connected strands.

The narratives of early English witches have survived in medical and philosophical treatises, salacious and cheap ephemera, formulaic and culturally constructed legal depositions, and texts which are some combination of all of these. Studies such as Phillip C. Almond's *The Witches of Warboys* (2008), Malcolm Gaskill's *Witchfinders: A Seventeenth-Century English Tragedy* (2005), Robert Poole's *The Lancashire witches: histories and stories* (2002), and Gilbert Geis and Ivan Bunn's *A Trial of Witches* (1997) have done much to retrace the stories of witchcraft as they happened in their own contexts. However, there is a very large corpus of very small stories of sixteenth and seventeenth century witchcraft. Already standardized by the genre expectations and the legal protocols, many of these formulaic narrative fragments have not been, nor cannot be, traced with the scholarly rigor of the above case studies. As such, when small segments of these already fractured stories appear, they often appear as examples or citations in long lists, stripped of their already fragile dimensionality and their subtle distinctions, becoming easily homogenized or even worse—overlooked.

To explore the witch and the bewitched in early English witchcraft, one must create an environment in which the minute narrative can expand fully and express all its available dimensions. One must allow for the placement of such narratives as small puzzle pieces in a macroscopic view of witchcraft narratives, as was reported all over England throughout the century and a half when it was a legally recognized threat and punishable crime. When one can

bring enough of these small stories together, and give them equal weight with the component pieces of other narratives, one can begin to see a conceptual chain. These chains themselves produce arterial beliefs which branch out and crisscross place and time. Witch beliefs, the legally and socially 'authorized' ideas of witchcraft, supported the conviction that felonies could be enacted with curse words and demoniac familiars. Compound ideas about the witch were internalized across social strata, and imposed with such conviction onto the witch that her body was read as physically changed by magic and changed back through countermagic. This does not suggest, however, that these ideas were static. Rather, these mutating malefic memes evolved and perpetuated through language and through blood across space and time.

The digital methods outlined here encourage a re-visualization of long-standing paradigms by tracking the intersections between the social, legal, and medical structures which acknowledged, supported, and perpetuated the evolution and shift of witch beliefs. Trying to capture single moments within the evolving trajectory of early English maleficium across the lengthy period in which it appeared in print as a legally recognized threat therefore necessitates the expandable flexibility of a digital platform and the willingness to create theories which somehow try to capture magic, as they did in sixteenth and seventeenth century England, by somehow embodying it.

Broad in scope, and interlinking approximately 2050 short event entries, 1825 short person entries, and entries on 350 preternatural being across approximately 150 years of accounts of English witchcraft between 1550-1700, the Witches in Early Modern England (WEME) project (witching.org) applies database structures, innovative interfaces, and web services to the literary and historical study of witchcraft.¹ *Throwing Bones and Reading Leaves*, the flagship tools of the WEME project, create a recuperative model for storytelling which allows

¹ Precedent for the publication of agile and scholarly electronic resources of this type has been set by the well received and commercialized in Cambridge University Press' [Orlando Project](#) database, and print volumes, such as *Orlando: Women's Writing in the British Isles from the Beginnings to the Present* (Cambridge University Press, 2006).

for comprehensiveness without flattening.² They take a hybrid approach to academic articulation: they seek to simultaneously represent the recoverable details of these accounts and to situate these singular narratives within the vast pattern of witchcraft. They seek to tell the stories and to show the stories, to allow as many inroads into witch-texts as possible. They use unique graphic interfaces, object modeling, and cluster diagram information display as forms of academic articulation. When combined with other platforms such as faceted browsing, searching, and mapping,³ Throwing Bones and Reading Leaves encourage scholars to spot differentiations between formulaic narratives by positioning them in the context of a large and evolving corpus of beliefs and texts.

This talk will focus on part of WEME's corpus, the intersecting ideas of witching and unwitching, to illustrate how these two seemingly antithetical threads were knotted at the points where practical bodily punishment acts as a functional counterbalance to perceived malefic attack. When studied side by side as individual conceptual clusters in Throwing Bones, the stories of magic and counter-magic reiterate the unnerving and shared 'realities' of these magical events. Real people, in known places, cursed their discourteous neighbors. The bewitched suffered from physical and mental disease caught from familiars which acted as vectors of spiritual contaminants. Those same victims, mad with sickness and fury, could attack the body of the witch to try to preserve their own, scratching, swimming, and searching powerful witches, making them back into women who could be finally disposed of at the gallows.

² The WEME project is at this time the most ambitious project of this type. The University of Edinburgh's Survey of Scottish Witchcraft (<http://www.shc.ed.ac.uk/Research/witches/index.html>) led by Julian Goodare provides a database with graph visualizations of the names, gender, marital status, year, and the cultural events and social relationships which defined witchcraft accusations. The University of Virginia's Salem Witch Trials Documentary Archive and Transcription Project (<http://www2.iath.virginia.edu/salem/home.html>) led by Benjamin Ray contains a series of text and map images which follow the accusations across Salem.

³ The benefit of mapping movement has been demonstrated in populous textual records. Stanford University's Mapping the Republic of Letters Project (<http://republicofletters.stanford.edu/>) led by Dan Edelstein and Paula Findlen maps out correspondences to track intellectual exchange in the early modern period. The University of Houston's Digital History provides temporal and geographic representation of important historic events in American History (<http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/timeline/timelineO.cfm>).