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Willem de Blécourt

# Witch doctors, soothsayers and priests. On cunning folk in European historiography and tradition

## I

In certain parts of Europe, calamities, illness and even death, could – and still can – be ascribed to witchcraft. When people adhered to this diagnosis, there were basically two courses of action to follow. One could attempt to solve the problem oneself, or one could consult a specialist, someone who was known for her or his special knowledge and ability to counteract witchcraft.<sup>1</sup> For the sake of convenience, I will call those ‘unwitchment’ experts cunning folk.

To present-day students of historical European witchcraft, cunning folk seem to be somewhat enigmatic. At least, they provide an interesting topic for discussion. This paper is concerned with setting out the parameters of that discussion. It also stresses the need for further substantial research. Because it starts with a critical analysis of witchcraft historiography (as far as it concerns cunning folk), further clarifications on what cunning folk actually were, and what they did, only appear in the course of the paper. The matter of definition is eventually dealt with at the very end. In between, I shall pay attention to the rather poor treatment of cunning folk by scholars of the witch trials, and especially criticize one influential article, in which it is stated that cunning folk were among the main victims of the so-called ‘witch hunt’. My criticism is followed by a step-by-step attempt to reconstruct the general picture of cunning folk anew, by tracing them in recent witchcraft literature – first in the context of persecution, then as witchcraft experts, and finally as experts *per se*. As far as specific examples – mainly taken from the northern Netherlands<sup>2</sup> – can be generalized and applied to other times and places, they are only meant to provide possibilities and are not to be taken as substitutions for research that has not yet been

<sup>1</sup> A full account of the several types of informal counter-actions against witchcraft is given by Alan Macfarlane, *Witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart England: A Regional and Comparative Study* (1970), 103–14.

<sup>2</sup> See, for an overview of the literature, Marijke Gijswijt-Hofstra, ‘Recent witchcraft research in the Low Countries’ in N. C. F. van Sas and E. Witte (eds), *Historical Research in the Low Countries* (Den Haag, 1992), 23–34.

carried out. The concluding remarks delineate the social field in which cunning folk operated.

## II

Since Keith Thomas discovered the presence of cunning folk in Britain and analysed their basic function in witchcraft accusations,<sup>3</sup> attention to them has been limited among historians of the European witch prosecutions. Brian Levack, to name but the latest author of a general synthesis of the hunts, has dedicated only a few lines to them. Wolfgang Behringer, in his survey of recent witchcraft publications, does not mention them at all. Even Andreas Blauert omitted them from his stock-taking introduction to the volume of essays he edited about the beginnings of the witch trials, as did Gustav Henningsen and Bengt Ankarloo in their foreword to papers on demonology and peripheral regions.<sup>4</sup> This does not imply that these authors are totally unaware of cunning people.<sup>5</sup> It just shows that cunning people are not deemed important enough to figure prominently in syntheses and introductions, which consequently points to their marginal place in the historical works that form the basis of these overviews. 'We have no idea how prevalent such wise men and women were in the rest of Europe,' wrote Erik Midelfort after discussing Thomas's work on England, 'but they were obviously sought out by common folk for similar reasons.' This conjectural remark was made two decades ago;<sup>6</sup> at the present time the situation is pretty much the same.

One of the reasons for the neglect of cunning folk lies in the preoccupation of historians with witch trials. 'Scientists were so fascinated and horrified by the prominent features of witch trials that they hardly paid attention to cunning folk.'<sup>7</sup> Or, after having found out that witch trials also originated from 'below', due to social tensions at the village level that

<sup>3</sup> Keith Thomas, 'The relevance of social anthropology to the historical study of English witchcraft' in Mary Douglas (ed.), *Witchcraft Confessions and Accusations* (London [etc.], 1970), 47-79; Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic. Studies in Popular Beliefs in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-century England* (Harmondsworth, 1973). (First published, 1971.)

<sup>4</sup> Brian Levack, *The Witch-hunt in Early Modern Europe* (London and New York, 1987), 10, 23, 127, 222, 223, 228; Wolfgang Behringer, 'Erträge und Perspektiven der Hexenforschung', *Historische Zeitschrift*, CCIXL (1989), 619-40; Andreas Blauert, 'Die Erforschung der Anfänge der europäischen Hexenverfolgungen' in Andreas Blauert (ed.), *Ketzer, Zauberer, Hexen. Die Anfänge der europäischen Hexenverfolgungen* (Frankfurt am Main, 1990), 11-42; Gustav Henningsen and Bengt Ankarloo, 'Introduction' in Ankarloo and Henningsen (eds), *Early Modern European Witchcraft: Centres and Peripheries* (Oxford, 1990), 1-15.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Wolfgang Behringer, *Hexenverfolgung in Bayern. Volksmagie, Glaubenseifer und Staatsräson in der Frühen Neuzeit* (München, 1987), 181-4; Andreas Blauert, *Frühe Hexenverfolgungen. Ketzer-, Zauberei- und Hexenprozesse des 15. Jahrhunderts* (Hamburg, 1989), 124-5; Gustav Henningsen, 'Hexenverfolgung und Hexenprozesse in Dänemark' in Christian Degn, Hartmut Lehmann and Dagmar Unverhau (eds), *Hexenprozesse. Deutsche und skandinavische Beiträge* (Neumünster, 1983), 143-9, esp. 144.

<sup>6</sup> H. C. Erik Midelfort, 'Were there really witches?' in Robert Kingdom (ed.), *Transition and Revolution: Problems and Issues of European Renaissance and Reformation* (Minneapolis, 1974), 189-205, cit. 196.

<sup>7</sup> Tekla Dömötör, 'The cunning folk in English and Hungarian witch trials' in Venetia Newall (ed.), *Folklore Studies in the Twentieth Century. Proceedings of the Centenary Conference of the Folklore Society* (Rowman & Littlefield, 1980), 183-7, cit. 183.

increased with or after economic depressions, it no longer seemed appropriate to pay attention to the socio-cultural dimensions of local witchcraft accusations. Witchcraft research, one could argue, 'has become mainly a "men's subject", as it deals with territory, collectives, the creation of modern states and the consolidation of legal and juridical authority'.<sup>8</sup> The riddle why so many women were singled out for prosecution has thus mainly been left unexplained.<sup>9</sup> Neither has the research been much extended to the period after the trials.<sup>10</sup>

An additional reason for the neglect of cunning folk can be found in the rather poor reception of anthropology in witchcraft research. Thomas's discovery is based on anthropological literature,<sup>11</sup> but after their initial enthusiasm historians turned to the trials again<sup>12</sup> and on the whole hardly applied notions of 'thick description'<sup>13</sup> or cultural relativism.<sup>14</sup> One could certainly question historians' borrowing from anthropology in this respect or, vice versa, anthropology's (in)ability to provide a useful frame for the study of

<sup>8</sup> Ute Frevert, Heide Wunder and Christina Vanja, 'Historical research on women in the Federal Republic of Germany' in Karen Offen, Ruth Roach Pierson and Jane Rendal (eds), *Writing Women's History. International Perspectives* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1991), 291–311, cit. 302.

<sup>9</sup> But see Carol F. Karlson, *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman. Witchcraft in Colonial New England* (New York and London, 1987); Eva Labouvie, *Zauberei und Hexenwerk. Ländlicher Hexenglaube in der frühen Neuzeit* (Frankfurt am Main, 1991), esp. 172–94; Ingrid Ahrendt-Schulte, 'Schadenzauber und Konflikte. Sozialgeschichte von Frauen im Spiegel der Hexenprozesse des 16. Jahrhundert in der Grafschaft Lippe' in Heide Wunder and Christina Vanja (eds), *Wandel der Geschlechterbeziehungen zu Beginn der Neuzeit* (Frankfurt am Main, 1991), 198–228.

<sup>10</sup> Willem de Blécourt, *Termen van toverij. De veranderende betekenis van toverij in Noordost-Nederland tussen de 16de en 20ste eeuw* (Nijmegen, 1990); Eva Labouvie, *Verbotene Künste. Volksmagie und 'Aberglauben' in den Dorfgemeinden des Saarraumes (16.–19.Jh.)* (St Ingbert, 1992).

<sup>11</sup> Thomas, 'The relevance of social anthropology', *op. cit.*, 61.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Peter Kriedte, 'Die Hexen und ihre Anklager. Zu den lokalen Voraussetzungen der Hexenverfolgungen in der frühen Neuzeit – ein Forschungsbericht', *Zeitschrift für historische Forschung*, xiv (1987), 47–71.

<sup>13</sup> The concept of 'thick description' has become popular among historians through the essay by Clifford Geertz, 'Thick description:

toward an interpretive theory of culture' in *The Interpretation of Cultures. Selected Essays* (New York, 1973), 3–30. For criticisms see, for example, Ronald G. Walters, 'Signs of the times: Clifford Geertz and the historians', *Social Research*, XLVII (1980), 537–56; Bob Scholte, 'The charmed circle of Geertz's hermeneutics. A neo-marxist critique', *Critique of Anthropology*, vi (1986), 5–15; Giovanni Levi, 'On microhistory' in Peter Burke (ed.), *New Perspectives on Historical Writing* (Cambridge, 1991), 93–113.

For examples of 'thick description' as applied to witchcraft (albeit departing from a different concept of culture), see David Warren Sabean, 'The sacred bond of unity: community through the eyes of a thirteen-year-old witch (1683)' in *Power in the Blood. Popular Culture and Village Discourse in Early Modern Germany* (Cambridge, 1984), 94–112; Michael MacDonald, *Witchcraft and Hysteria in Elizabethan London. Edward Jorden and the Mary Glover case* (London and New York, 1991).

<sup>14</sup> See, for example, Malcolm Crick, *Explorations in Language and Meaning. Towards a Semantic Anthropology* (1976), esp. 109–27: 'Recasting witchcraft'. Comparative approaches to witchcraft usually reveal more about the author's conception than about actual beliefs and practices: see the recent attempt by James L. Brain, 'An anthropological perspective on the witchcraze' in Jean R. Brink, Allison P. Coudert and Maryanne C. Horowitz (eds), *The Politics of Gender in Early Modern Europe* (Kirkville, 1989), 15–27, which is lacking on anthropological critique as well as on historiographical sensitivity.

witch trials – especially so since the critique on functionalism.<sup>15</sup> What the anthropologically inspired approach did result in was a huge number of regional studies. In contrast to the culturally more coherent demonological and judicial concepts, aspects of local culture hardly invite a comparative synthesis of village or town witchcraft. As William Monter remarked twenty years ago, 'Witchcraft beliefs can differ significantly even within fairly small regions and they can change rapidly over a fairly short span of time.'<sup>16</sup>

Why, then, should a general discussion of European cunning folk still be of some relevance to European witchcraft studies? The fact that cunning folk are sometimes confused with malicious witches would only partly justify consideration. What is more important is that it would be problematic to leave them out, as they were the experts to consult in cases of witchcraft. Studying witchcraft and neglecting cunning folk would be comparable to studying medicine without considering doctors. The 'unwitchment' specialists are part and parcel of witchcraft traditions; they occupy the crossroads in the flow of witchcraft accusations. If one agrees that witchcraft is as worthy an object of examination as are the witch trials – and it has become thoroughly apparent that witch trials cannot be comprehended without insight into witchcraft – then the neglect of cunning folk has to be rectified immediately.

But restoring the cunning folk to their rightful place on a structural level does not solve the problem of how to compare differences in their actual practices. The answer, however, may be simple: one should not attempt the impossible by confusing time-embedded regional, local or even social traits with general, modern academic compartmentalizations. That is to say, by addressing the role of cunning folk, one of the first tasks should be to recognize different traditions in different parts of Europe.<sup>17</sup>

### III

The overall lack of attention to cunning folk is particularly curious in the light of the persistent scholarly as well as popular supposition that most people persecuted for witchcraft were in fact 'wise' men or women. This idea is mainly aired by those who seem to have turned a blind eye to the daily practice of early modern European witchcraft and the sources from which it can be reconstructed.<sup>18</sup> Most of the recent scientific

<sup>15</sup> See, for example, T. O. Beidelman, 'Towards more open theoretical interpretations' in Douglas (ed.), *op. cit.*, 351–6. Cf. John Putnam Demos, *Entertaining Satan. Witchcraft and the Culture of Early New England* (New York and Oxford, 1982), 277–8; Blauert, *Frühe Hexenverfolgungen*, *op. cit.*, 134–9; Marijke Gijswijt-Hofstra, 'The European witchcraft debate and the Dutch variant', *Social History*, xv (1990), 181–94, esp. 181–2.

<sup>16</sup> E. William Monter, 'The historiography of European witchcraft: progress and prospects', *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 11 (1972), 435–51, cit. 450.

<sup>17</sup> Or, for instance, in New England, where only a few traces of cunning folk have been unearthed and where examples of consultations of cunning folk in cases of witchcraft are

missing. Cf. David D. Hall, *Worlds of Wonder, Days of Judgment. Popular Religious Belief in Early New England* (New York, 1989), 98–100; Jon Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith. Christianizing the American People* (Cambridge, Mass. and London, 1990), esp. 73–6; Richard Godbeer, *Magic and Religion in Early New England* (Cambridge, 1992).

<sup>18</sup> Recent examples include: Anne Llewellyn Barstow, 'On studying witchcraft as women's history. A historiography of the European witch persecutions', *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, iv, 2 (1988), 7–19; Levack, *op. cit.*, 127; William L. Minkowski, 'Women healers of the Middle Ages: selected aspects of their history', *American Journal of Public Health*, LXXXII (1992), 288–95, esp. 294.

manifestations of the thesis can be traced back to an article by the American historian of religion, Richard Horsley, published in 1979.<sup>19</sup> Few of its users, however, have subjected it to a critical examination as regards its author's approach, as well as the substantiation of his conclusions.

Horsley states: 'Investigation of the available fragmentary evidence for the popular realities suggests that many of those executed as witches were folk healers.' He adds: 'A substantial number of the accused . . . were "wise women" of the peasant society. In some areas of Europe, judging from the available evidence, these diviners and healers would probably account for nearly half the victims.'<sup>20</sup> To prove this allegation, he skimmed the then available literature on witch trials, particularly publications on England, Lorraine, Bremen, Schlesweig, Luzern and Austria. Apart from Lorraine, the main areas of the prosecutions are somewhat under-represented,<sup>21</sup> which alone tends to undermine a more general applicability of Horsley's statement.<sup>22</sup> Nor does the latter seem to account for all the jurisdictions that only suffered a weak prosecution, as is shown in the case of the Netherlands where cunning folk even escaped the relatively few pyres set up for witches.<sup>23</sup> But leaving aside the matter of representability,<sup>24</sup> the really important question is that of proof. It turns out that checking Horsley's main references raises serious doubts even about those cases he cites in support of his thesis (negative examples he omits).

On Lorraine, Horsley seems to be satisfied with a general remark: 'It is clear from Delcambre's work that large numbers of peasant *devins-guérisseurs* were burned for witchcraft in Lorraine.'<sup>25</sup> This clarity dissolves when one consults Delcambre's work itself, as it is not concerned with trial statistics, but mainly focuses on therapeutics, as is stressed in the subtitle.<sup>26</sup> Yet, on first sight, Robin Briggs's recent work on the same area seems to confirm Horsley's reading of Delcambre: 'It's no surprise to find a significant number of magical healers among those accused of witchcraft,' part of the reason being 'the hostility they naturally aroused among powerful groups and distinctly monopolistic tendencies: doctors, lawyers and above all the church'.<sup>27</sup> Conducting the argument with

<sup>19</sup> Richard A. Horsley, 'Who were the witches? The social roles of the accused in the European witch trials', *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, ix (1979), 689-715.

<sup>20</sup> *ibid.*, 690, 712.

<sup>21</sup> The best overview to date is to be found in Wolfgang Behringer, "Erhob sich das ganze Land zu ihrer Ausrottung . . ." Hexenprozesse und Hexenverfolgungen in Europa' in Richard van Dülmen (ed.), *Hexenwelten. Magie und Imagination von 16.-20. Jahrhundert* (Frankfurt am Main, 1987), 131-69.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Walinski-Kiehl's remark on the trials in Bamberg and Würzburg which, according to him, 'cannot be regarded as campaigns directed mainly against female healers, since the prosecutions did not focus primarily on such practitioners': Robert Walinski-Kiehl, "Godly States", confessional conflict and witch-hunting in early modern Germany', *Mentalities*, v, 2 (1988) 13-24, cit. 20.

<sup>23</sup> See, for example, Marijke Gijswijt-

Hofstra, 'Six centuries of witchcraft in the Netherlands: themes, outlines, and interpretations' in Marijke Gijswijt-Hofstra and Willem Frijhoff (eds), *Witchcraft in the Netherlands from the Fourteenth to the Twentieth Century* (Rijswijk, 1991), 1-36, esp. 25-8.

<sup>24</sup> As I have remarked elsewhere, one would also like to know what proportion of the residing cunning folk was actually prosecuted. See Willem de Blécourt, 'Cunning women: from healers to fortune tellers' in Hans Binneveld and Rudolf Dekker (eds), *Curing and Insuring. Essays on Illness in Past Times: The Netherlands, Belgium, England and Italy, 16th-20th Centuries* (Hilversum, 1993), 43-56.

<sup>25</sup> Horsley, *op. cit.*, 705.

<sup>26</sup> See Etienne Delcambre, *Les devins-guérisseurs dans la Lorraine ducale. Leur activité et leurs méthodes* (Nancy, 1951).

<sup>27</sup> Robin Briggs, *Communities of Belief. Cultural and Social Tension in Early Modern France* (Oxford, 1989), 16; cf. 60, 75.

regard to Briggs's more sophisticated discussion, rather than dissecting Delcambre's presentation for traces of prosecutions (or trial sources), can help to bring out some of the difficulties that confront the student of witchcraft and particularly of cunning folk.

Instead of treating his material in a systematic way, Briggs merely supplies his readers with conclusions, thereby forcing an evaluation of his paper on a logical level. He rightly concludes that in France and the other regions under scrutiny 'the majority of accusations came from below, and concentrated on actual harm supposedly caused by maleficium'.<sup>28</sup> Having also remarked that for ordinary people 'the real division was that between the malevolence of evil witches and the benign activities of village wizards or cunning folk',<sup>29</sup> the two findings can only be combined when *devins* were accused for their harmful witchcraft, not for the witchcraft they practised as healers. In this latter role, they were usually left untouched, as can be gathered from the complaint by the demonologists about 'the tolerance generally shown towards the *devins*'.<sup>30</sup> While cunning folk were also instrumental in the accusation of maleficent witches – I will return to this function below – the argument that many cunning folk fell victim to the witch hunts ultimately rests on the assumption that they found ways to accuse their colleagues (thereby precariously siding with their main adversaries from the medical and ecclesiastical camp). This seems a little far-fetched<sup>31</sup> and not entirely compatible with yet another of Briggs's conclusions which points to intra-communal tensions or 'village quarrels', or with his finding that there were two groups of people who possessed the power to lift a spell, 'the *devins* or cunning folk, and the witches, the latter of course only by undoing the effects of their own malice'.<sup>32</sup> It may very well be that in Lorraine cunning folk formed a discernible group among the prosecuted, but their visibility – which depends on the particular trial proceedings – cannot yet be expressed quantitatively, or turned around by pretending that persecution was for the most part directed against folk healers.

While for Lorraine the final solution has to await further research (or a schematic

<sup>28</sup> *ibid.*, 36. See also the works cited in n. 46 below.

<sup>29</sup> *ibid.*, 15; see also Delcambre, *op. cit.*, 9. Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, *op. cit.*, 534, provides a similar distinction, as does Labouvie, *Zauberei und Hexenwerk*, *op. cit.*, 181.

<sup>30</sup> Briggs, *op. cit.*, 41. See also E. William Monter, *Witchcraft in France and Switzerland. The Borderlands during the Reformation* (Ithaca and London, 1976), 175.

<sup>31</sup> It is nevertheless put forward by Robert Muchembled, among others, in his 'Sorcières du Cambresis. L'acculturation du monde rural aux xvie et xviiie siècles' in *Prophètes et sorciers dans les Pays-Bas, xvie-xviii siècle* (Paris, 1978), 219–20. It cannot be taken very seriously, however, as Muchembled mainly resorts to the rhetoric of overgeneralization (cf. Briggs, *op. cit.*, 54–6), based on the notion of a 'magical equilibrium' in which cunning folk were consulted from afar and accused of harmful

witchcraft within their own village. This argument relies solely on an early (1446) case; as Muchembled has to admit, it cannot be proven with sixteenth- or seventeenth-century cases. Cf. Robert Muchembled, *Culture populaire et culture des élites dans la France moderne (xve-xviii siècles)* (Paris, 1978), 113. Yet the suggestion seems to be appealing and even turns up without references to its author; see Francisco Bethencourt, 'Portugal: a scrupulous inquisition' in Ankarloo and Henningsen (eds), *op. cit.*, 403–22, esp. 415; Marcel Gielis, 'The Netherlandic theologians' views of witchcraft and the devil's pact' in Gijswijt-Hofstra and Frijhoff (eds), *op. cit.*, 37–52, esp. 47. See, for a more factual assessment, Matthew Ramsey, *Professional and Popular Medicine in France. The Social World of Medical Practice* (Cambridge, 1988), 266.

<sup>32</sup> Briggs, *op. cit.*, 35; cf. 94, 26. See also n. 74 below.

presentation of the cases),<sup>33</sup> for other regions Horsley has clearly stretched his evidence to fit his thesis. 'The most abundant and accessible evidence to date comes from England,' he declares, overruling Alan Macfarlane who argued 'that the role of the cunning folk in the Essex trials was more as detectors of witches and directors of suspicions than as victims of the craze'.<sup>34</sup> Consulting Macfarlane's book itself yields the following revealing quotation: 'Of forty-one definite Essex cunning folk, only four were later recorded as accused of "black" witchcraft, while less than half a dozen of a total of over 400 persons accused of black witchcraft are known to have been cunning folk.'<sup>35</sup>

A similar distortion can be detected from Horsley's use of the Bremen cases as presented by Herbert Schwarzwälder. The latter, writes Horsley, 'received the impression that many of the trials in the Bremen area resulted from the miscarrying of magical healing which was then interpreted as evil work of the Devil'.<sup>36</sup> Schwarzwälder's article in *Heimat und Volkstum* is difficult to evaluate because, like Delcambre's and Briggs's, it is set up thematically and does not give a clear overview of the individual cases and the sources from which they are drawn. If one looks at the sections quoted by Horsley, a slight suspicion arises. Schwarzwälder did put forward a general impression, but in the accompanying note he only refers to two cases and possibly another one,<sup>37</sup> which is not exactly 'many of the trials'. Horsley subsequently cites these two cases in support of his general thesis. But the Bremen trials – which are also much in need of being studied more rigorously – actually seem to provide the opposite evidence, not only because two people out of the twenty-two accused between 1558 and 1603<sup>38</sup> by no reckoning amounts to 'many', but especially because the Bremen authorities did not persecute cunning folk for their speciality but, as in Lorraine and Essex, only if they were suspected of malicious witchcraft. Schwarzwälder may have thought that most of the trials resulted from harmless forms of witchcraft that under torture were converted into malicious ones.<sup>39</sup> However, he is merely putting forward an interpretation that is not backed up by evidence and which certainly does not explain anything about specialists.

To give a final example of the way Horsley treated his material, I would like to consider the case of the Oberhuserin who was on trial in Luzern in 1500. Horsley identifies her as a wise woman who practised divining and healing.<sup>40</sup> Yet Blauert, who recently undertook a thorough restudy of the early Swiss trials, did not come across this vital piece of information and had to resort to 'thick description', using all kinds of diverse sources not

<sup>33</sup> A random sample of 100 accused witches from Lorraine yielded ten 'healers of some kind, although several appear to be marginal examples'. See Robin Briggs, 'Women as victims? Witches, judges and the community', *French History*, v (1991), 438–50, esp. 442–3.

<sup>34</sup> Horsley, *op. cit.*, 703.

<sup>35</sup> Macfarlane, *Witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart England*, *op. cit.*, 128. Monter's assessment of the English situation has been more in accordance with English witchcraft historiography: see *Witchcraft in France and Switzerland*, *op. cit.*, 17. Cf. Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, *op. cit.*, 292–3, 677.

<sup>36</sup> Horsley, 'Who were the witches', *op. cit.*, 708.

<sup>37</sup> Herbert Schwarzwälder, 'Die Formen des Zauber- und Hexenglaubens in Bremen und seiner weiteren Umgebung, vor allem während des 16. und 17. Jahrhundert', *Heimat und Volkstum. Bremer Beiträge zur niederdeutschen Volkskunde* (1958), 3–68, esp. 5 and 54, n. 3.

<sup>38</sup> Herbert Schwarzwälder, 'Die Geschichte des Zauber- und Hexenglaube in Bremen', *Bremisches Jahrbuch*, XLVI (1959), 190.

<sup>39</sup> *ibid.*, 208–9.

<sup>40</sup> Horsley, *op. cit.*, 706–7.



related to witchcraft proper to reach his social-economic conclusions.<sup>41</sup> When one also examines Horsley's source, i.e. Hoffmann-Krayer's edition of the earliest Luzern witchcraft documents, it turns out that none of the accused can be considered as cunning folk. Witnesses believed that the witches could somehow cure their own victims, but mention is nowhere made of other cures as well. The specialists people did consult occur rather frequently in the depositions; they were not prosecuted, however.<sup>42</sup>

Since Horsley not only uncritically accepted and even reinterpreted secondary material but also totally misread the only printed sources he consulted, the value of his thesis must be seriously questioned. Actually, his exercise can be still better understood – and criticized the more – by taking into account his initial question, as well as the categories in terms of which he moulds his answers. Horsley considers witchcraft as belonging to a 'European folk religion'. On the basis of anthropological literature he discerns 'sorceresses' (those who practise maleficent magic) and 'wise women' (practitioners of benevolent magic). He categorizes the accused accordingly: the 'many' of the cunning folk is to be seen as opposed to the 'some' of the sorceresses. He thereby ignores the bulk of the accused, who did not consciously 'practise' any witchcraft, but as the results of their actions were interpreted as such, were merely called witches, either in their neighbourhood or during the interrogation of other suspects.<sup>43</sup> Horsley explains the witch hunts within the framework that is composed of the opposition between 'sorceresses' and 'wise women': 'It was the officials who transformed such testimony [on magical healers] into accusations of witchcraft and applied torture in order to extract confessions – thus turning peasant beliefs and practices back against some of the practitioners themselves.'<sup>44</sup> When Horsley's thesis is put back into its theoretical context, it is easy to notice where he went wrong.<sup>45</sup> One may dismiss his notion of 'folk religion' and its subsequent division as an academic construct and start considering the indigenous and contemporary cultural, social and economic background to witchcraft and witch persecutions, as indeed many historians have since done.<sup>46</sup>

<sup>41</sup> Blauert, *Frühe Hexenverfolgungen*, op. cit., 96–106. See also Andreas Blauert, 'Hexenverfolgung in einer spätmittelalterlichen Gemeinde. Das Beispiel Kriens/Luzern um 1500', *Geschichte und Gesellschaft*, xvi (1990), 8–25.

<sup>42</sup> E. Hoffmann-Krayer, 'Luzerner Akten zum Hexen- und Zauberverwesen', *Schweizerisches Archiv für Volkskunde*, III (1899), 22–40, 80–122, 189–224, 291–329. See also Blauert, *Frühe Hexenverfolgungen*, op. cit., 130.

<sup>43</sup> During massive witch hunts, of course, any public figure could be named, without any link to previous witchcraft accusations whatsoever. Cf. Behringer, *Hexenverfolgung in Bayern*, op. cit., 201–2.

<sup>44</sup> Richard A. Horsley, 'Further reflections on witchcraft and European folk religion', *History of Religion*, xix (1979), 71–95, cit. 93.

<sup>45</sup> In a later article, which has escaped the attention of most witchcraft scholars, four categories are distinguished: 'witches, sorceresses, wise women, and midwives'. The overall thesis has not been abandoned, however, and research into primal sources, as well as insight of

the variety of legal proceedings is still lacking. See Ritta Jo Horsley and Richard A. Horsley, 'On the trail of the "witches": wise women, midwives and the European witch hunts', *Women in German Yearbook*, III (1986), 1–28.

<sup>46</sup> Recent witchcraft research indicates, among others, the substantive importance of demands from the populace for prosecution. See, for example, Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, op. cit., 546–8; H. C. Erik Midelfort, *Witch Hunting in Southwestern Germany 1562–1684: The Social and Intellectual Foundations* (Stanford, 1972), 190; Alfred Soman, 'The Parlement of Paris and the great witch hunt (1565–1640)', *The Sixteenth Century Journal*, ix, 2 (1978), 31–44, esp. 42–3; Behringer, *Hexenverfolgung in Bayern*, op. cit., 421; Briggs, *Communities of Belief*, op. cit., 12; Walter Rummel, *Bauern, Herren und Hexen. Studien zur Sozialgeschichte sponheimischer und kurtrierischer Hexenprozesse 1574–1664* (Göttingen, 1991); Labouvie, *Zauberei und Hexenwerk*, op. cit.

## IV

Cunning folk have mainly been considered within the context of the study of witch trials. If it is taken for granted that some of them could have been swept along during the hunts on accusations of malicious witchcraft and devil worship, the question still remains as to whether they were also prosecuted because of their speciality. In other words, was the differentiation between the practice of the cunning folk and the committing of harmful witchcraft recognized in legal terms, or were both lumped together under the same crime of apostasy? This question is difficult to answer univocally. Only a few researchers have addressed it and judicial practice seems to have varied throughout Europe. A few possibilities, however, can be outlined.

In the province of Holland cunning folk were liable to be burnt at the stake, at least in theory. In practice soothsayers, fortune tellers and the like were banished, usually after being displayed in the pillory.<sup>47</sup> In the north-eastern part of the Netherlands practice was more in accordance with the legal norms. While witches were to be put to the stake, the laws of Groningen and Drenthe decreed that cunning folk should be dealt with according to the 'discretion' of the court, which could also mean banishment.<sup>48</sup> In fact, cunning folk who fell into the clutches of the law were banished everywhere in the northern Netherlands, even during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries when witches were no longer burned at the stake.<sup>49</sup> Apparently this was also the case in some cities in northern Germany. In Bremen, cunning folk were, as Schwartzwälder phrased it, 'mildly' punished or not at all. In Kiel, no final verdicts against two cunning women have survived, but a third and fourth woman were banished. Their colleagues in Flensburg were exhibited in the pillory and then banished as well.<sup>50</sup>

The same overall picture applies to Flanders, where cunning folk were usually put on show and sometimes compelled to leave the area of the court's jurisdiction. At some courts, though – Monballyu cites two instances from Bruges in 1596 and 1635 – the activities of cunning folk were qualified as devil worship and verdicts of burning were pronounced.<sup>51</sup> Monter describes a similar though mainly normative transition in the Jura region towards 1600, but adds that 'defining harmless witchcraft in law codes and demonologies as a crime on the same theoretical level with harmful witchcraft is not the same thing as actually

<sup>47</sup> Hans de Waardt, *Toverij en samenleving. Holland 1500–1800* (Den Haag, 1991), 87, 144, 146.

<sup>48</sup> De Blécourt, *Termen van toverij*, *op. cit.*, 81.

<sup>49</sup> Gijswijt-Hofstra, 'Six centuries of witchcraft in the Netherlands', *op. cit.*, 28; see also Willem de Blécourt, 'Four centuries of Frisian witch doctors' in Gijswijt-Hofstra and Frijhoff (eds), *op. cit.*, 157–66.

<sup>50</sup> Schwarzwälder, 'Die Geschichte', *op. cit.*, 196, 208–9; Dagmar Unverhau, 'Kieler Hexen und Zauberer zur Zeit der großen Vervolgung (1530–1676)', *Mitteilungen der Gesellschaft für Kieler Stadtgeschichte*, LXVIII, 3/4 (1981), 41–96, esp. 45–6, 72; 'Flensburger Hexen-

prozesse (1564, 1607/08) – erneut betrachtet. Die "Hexe" als "Ärztin"?, *Grenzfriedenbund*, IV (1984), 171–87, esp. 183; and 'Akkusationsprozess – Inquisitionsprozess. Indikatoren für die Intensität der Hexenverfolgung in Schleswig-Holstein' in Degn, Lehmann and Unverhau (eds), *op. cit.*, 59–142, esp. 98.

<sup>51</sup> J. Monballyu, 'De houding van de rechters tegenover hekserij in de Zuidelijke Nederlanden tijdens de 15de tot 17de eeuw', *Standen en landen*, LXXXVI (1987), 11–36, esp. 25–7; cf. Willem de Blécourt and Hans de Waardt, 'Rhein, Maas und Schelde entlang. Das Vordringen der Zaubereiverfolgungen in die Niederlande' in Blauert (ed.), *op. cit.*, 182–216, esp. 197.

punishing both crimes with death. Condemning people to death for performing or even attempting kinds of magic which were supposed to be harmless and even benevolent was an incredibly extreme step, and it must have been very rarely taken.<sup>52</sup> This contrast between judicial norms and judicial practice occurred in Bavaria as well. There, too, cunning folk were included in the demonological definitions of witchcraft around 1600, while they themselves looked at their deeds as permissible, and systematic prosecution did not take place.<sup>53</sup> 'The attempt by the theologians to wipe out the distinction between black and white witches by branding them both as diabolical', wrote Thomas in connection with England, 'never got through to the people to whom these witches ministered.'<sup>54</sup>

Far from wanting to present a general trend, I believe that there are at least several indications of a change in theological and legal attitudes towards cunning folk at the end of the sixteenth century.<sup>55</sup> For a more comprehensive and systematic overview on how they were actually opposed, criminal trial records may be a poor source, although in witnesses' depositions cunning folk may figure prominently. Protestant as well as Catholic church records appear to be a much better source on cunning folk, as is shown by research from various regions in western Europe.<sup>56</sup> Macfarlane, for instance, found most of his material on cunning folk in the archives of the archdeaconries of Essex and Colchester.<sup>57</sup> In the Netherlands, seventeenth-century visitation and *classis* records have revealed the most

<sup>52</sup> Monter, *Witchcraft in France and Switzerland*, *op. cit.*, 171.

<sup>53</sup> Behringer, *Hexenverfolgung in Bayern*, *op. cit.*, 76, 185, 187, 297 (n. 232), 348 (n. 57). In other places cunning folk too seem to have been convinced of the lawfulness of their deeds: cf. Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, *op. cit.*, 226; Mary R. O'Neil, 'Sacerdote ovvero strione. Ecclesiastical and superstitious remedies in 16th century Italy' in Steven L. Kaplan (ed.), *Understanding Popular Culture. Europe from the Middle Ages to the Nineteenth Century* (Berlin, 1984), 53–83, esp. 57; 'Magical healing, love magic and the Inquisition in late sixteenth-century Modena' in Stephen Haliczer (ed.), *Inquisition and Society in Early Modern Europe* (London and Sydney, 1987), 88–114, esp. 91.

<sup>54</sup> Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, *op. cit.*, 316.

<sup>55</sup> This development has also been attested in Norway. See Hans Eyvind Naess, 'Norway: the criminological context' in Ankarloo and Henningsen (eds), *op. cit.*, 367–82, esp. 368, 374. (Although many cunning folk seem to have been involved in the Norwegian trials, Naess's figures do not differentiate clearly between different

sorts of witchcraft as related to different sorts of complaints and verdicts.) See also Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, *op. cit.*, 526–7 and Ahrendt-Schulte, *op. cit.*, 205.

<sup>56</sup> Monter, *Witchcraft in France and Switzerland*, *op. cit.*, 178–9; Clarke Garrett, 'Witches and cunning folk in the Old Régime' in Jacques Beauroy, Marc Bertrand and Edward T. Gargan (eds), *The Wolf and the Lamb. Popular Culture from the Old Regime to the Twentieth Century* (Saragota, 1977), 53–64; Eva Labouvie, 'Wider Wahrsagerei, Segnerei und Zauberei. Kirchliche Versuche zur Ausgrenzung von Aberglaube und Volksmagie seit dem 16. Jahrhundert' in Richard van Dülmen (ed.), *Verbrechen, Starfen und Soziale Kontrolle. Studien zur historischen Kulturforschung* (Frankfurt am Main, 1990), 15–55; Labouvie, *Verbotene Künste*, *op. cit.*, 164. See also the following footnotes.

<sup>57</sup> Macfarlane, *op. cit.*, 120, 278–96. Cf. Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, *op. cit.*, 293–4; Peter Rushton, 'Women, witchcraft, and slander in early modern England: cases from the church courts of Durham, 1560–1675', *Northern History*, xxviii (1982), 116–32.

traces of them so far.<sup>58</sup> Also, substantial material has turned up in the Italian and Spanish Inquisitorial archives.<sup>59</sup> Protestant ecclesiastical institutions were restricted in dealing out punishment. Dutch ministers merely urged the secular authorities to inflict banishment on the accused, while they themselves could only demand penance or prohibit participation at the Lord's Supper. In Italy, as well as in Spain, the Inquisitorial trials were not meant to result in death sentences; their aim was to let the accused become aware of their misdemeanours, not to destroy them.<sup>60</sup> As Ruth Martin meticulously demonstrates, it was of vital importance to the Roman Inquisition to establish the degree of the sinners' awareness during their actions and 'to bring the accused to a true state of repentance whereby he could be absolved from all hint of association with heretics and heretical belief and to be restored to the fold of the Church'.<sup>61</sup>

Behind the changing legislation and the different degrees of severity with which it was applied, it is possible to discern debates on a theological level. Essentially, a distinction emerged between the orthodox view, which considered the covenant with the devil as a reality and aimed at annihilating Satan's minions, and the more moderate attitude derived from Aquinas, according to which all superstition was based on the demonic manipulation of a sign system, and which called for a re-education of cunning folk and their clients.<sup>62</sup> While both positions can be understood as an attempt to reform 'popular' attitudes,<sup>63</sup> the

<sup>58</sup> Marijke Gijswijt-Hofstra, 'Witchcraft before Zeeland magistrates and church councils, sixteenth to twentieth centuries' in Gijswijt-Hofstra and Frijhoff (eds), *op. cit.*, 103-18; Willem de Blécourt and Freek Pereboom, 'Insult and admonition: witchcraft in the Land of Vollenhove, seventeenth century', in *ibid.*, 119-31, esp. 121; De Blécourt, 'Four centuries of Frisian witch doctors', *op. cit.*, 158-61; Willem Frijhoff, 'Witchcraft and its changing representation in eastern Gelderland, from the sixteenth to twentieth centuries' in *ibid.*, 167-80, esp. 172.

<sup>59</sup> Carlo Ginzburg, *The Night Battles. Witchcraft and Agrarian Cults in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (1983); Ruth Martin, *Witchcraft and the Inquisition in Venice 1550-1650* (Oxford, 1989). Both books mainly deal with cunning folk or 'magical rituals', which makes comparisons with people to whom maleficent witchcraft was attributed awkward. See on Ginzburg: Willem de Blécourt, 'Spuren einer Volkskultur oder Demonisierung? Kritische Bemerkungen zur Ginzburgs *Die Benandanti*', *Kea. Zeitschrift für Kulturwissenschaften*, v (1993), 17-29. On Spain, see n. 60.

<sup>60</sup> William Monter, *Ritual, Myth and Magic*

in *Early Modern Europe* (Brighton, 1983), 66-7; Stephen Haliczer, *Inquisition and Society in the Kingdom of Valencia, 1478-1834* (Berkeley, 1990), 312. Haliczer's contrasting picture of 'much of northern Europe' is far too polarizing, as is Monter's. See also María Helena Sánchez Ortega, 'Sorcery and eroticism in love magic' in Mary Elizabeth Perry and Anne J. Cruz (eds), *Cultural Encounters. The Impact of the Inquisition in Spain and the New World* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and Oxford, 1991), 58-92; 'Women as source of "evil" in counter-reformation Spain' in Anne J. Cruz and Mary Elizabeth Perry (eds), *Culture and Control in Counter-reformation Spain* (Minneapolis, 1992), 196-215.

<sup>61</sup> Martin, *op. cit.*, 154. See also John Tedeschi, *The Prosecution of Heresy. Collected Studies on the Inquisition in Early Modern Italy* (Binghamton, 1991), esp. chaps 6 and 7.

<sup>62</sup> Stuart Clark, 'Protestant demonology: sin, superstition and society (c. 1520-c. 1630)' in Ankarloo and Henningsen (eds), *op. cit.*, 46-81; Gielis, *op. cit.*; O'Neil, 'Sacerdote ovvero strione', *op. cit.*, 58, 70; 'Magical healing', *op. cit.*, 84, 90; Martin, *op. cit.*, 47 ff; cf. Thomas, *Religion*, *op. cit.*, 522.

<sup>63</sup> Clark, *op. cit.*, 72-3; Labouvie, 'Wider Wahsagerei', *op. cit.*

overall effect of ecclesiastical efforts remains uncertain: for one thing, because of the abundant indications of the continuing presence of cunning folk right into the twentieth century;<sup>64</sup> for another, because even if it were possible to detect a decline in their influence, other factors may have contributed to it as well.<sup>65</sup>

## V

When in late medieval and early modern Europe legislators, clergy and even people without a formal education were able to differentiate between at least two kinds of witchcraft, as well as between the respective (alleged) practitioners, present-day students should not be led astray by the demonological interpretation that defines both forms of witchcraft as a crime of devil worship. The restoration of cunning folk on the witchcraft scene explicitly involves recognizing their position *vis-à-vis* their clients and the people they directly or indirectly accused as the perpetrators of harmful witchcraft (which, of course, does not exclude the possibility that they themselves were sometimes accused of maleficent witchcraft).

One of the first things that needs to be established is their social role as experts. In societies where most people were familiar with the use of spells and other cures, it might be difficult for modern researchers to discern differences in expertise.<sup>66</sup> The boundaries between private care, neighbourly help and public reknown may have been rather fuzzy, especially when they concerned women healers.<sup>67</sup> They can, nevertheless, be indicated.

<sup>64</sup> See, for example, Joachim Friedrich Baumhauer, *Johann Kruse und der 'neuzzeitliche Hexenwahn'* (Neumünster, 1984); Willem de Blécourt, 'Heksengeloof. Toverij en religie in Nederland tussen 1890 en 1940', *Sociologische gids*, xci (1989), 245–66, esp. 252–4; Gustav Henningsen, 'Witch persecution after the era of the witch trials. A contribution to Danish ethnohistory', *ARV. Scandinavian Yearbook of Folklore* 1988, XLIV (1989), 103–53; Marie-Claude Denier, 'Sorcières, présages et croyances magiques en Mayenne aux XVIII<sup>e</sup> et XIX<sup>e</sup> siècles', *Annales de Bretagne et des Pays de L'Ouest*, xcvi (1990), 115–32.

<sup>65</sup> De Blécourt, 'Cunning women', *op. cit.*, 54–5; Lucinda McCray Beier, 'Evil humors: witchcraft, illness and healing in early modern England', *The Society for the Social History of Medicine Bulletin*, xli (1987), 20–3, esp. 22.

<sup>66</sup> For some scholars, it also seems hard to comprehend past witchcraft without referring to later medical accomplishments: see Thomas, *Religion*, *op. cit.*, 242–51; Briggs, *Communities of Belief*, *op. cit.*, 25.

<sup>67</sup> In the discussion on the midwife's vulnerability to witchcraft accusations, the failure to discern between midwifery as a general women's practice on the one hand, and as a specific trade

of specialized women on the other, has resulted in major misunderstandings. Female witchcraft is clearly related to the female domain, and thus to the caring and curing that formed part of women's activities. See, for example, Karlsen, *op. cit.*, 141–4; Ahrendt-Schulte, *op. cit.*, 209; Eva Labouvie, 'Von Cassandra bis Dr Faustus. Weibliche und männliche Magie von 16. Jahrhundert bis heute', *Saarpfalz. Blätter für Geschichte und Volkskunde* (Sonderheft, 1991), 69–84; Heide Wunder, 'Er ist die Sonn', *sie ist der Mond* (München, 1992), 199; J. A. Sharpe, 'Witchcraft and women in seventeenth-century England: some northern evidence', *Continuity and Change*, vi (1991), 179–99, esp. 188; Briggs, 'Women as victims?', *op. cit.* The notion that specialized midwives were singled out for prosecution, however, has been categorically denied by virtually every researcher who consulted primal trial sources: see, for example, Dagmar Unverhau, 'Frauenbewegung und historische Hexenverfolgung' in Blauert (ed.), *op. cit.*, 241–83, esp. 254; David Harley, 'Historians as demonologists: the myth of the midwife-witch', *Social History of Medicine*, iii (1990), 1–26; Labouvie, *Zauberei und Hexenwerk*, *op. cit.*, 180. Cf. Robert Jütte, 'Die Persistenz der Verhütungswissens in der

As Cristina Lerner remarked in one of her lectures: 'But although in isolated [Scottish] communities there was a great deal of self help, there was, nevertheless, a class of specialist healers of tried repute, very often passing down skills and knowledge from mother to daughter'<sup>68</sup> – or, as can be added in regard to other places in Europe, from father to son or from whatever relative to another.<sup>69</sup> Cunning folk or other irregular healers often attracted attention from the authorities precisely because of their popularity; most of the information about them would never have been transmitted if they had not been public figures. In some cases, however, it may be hard to tell whether a 'superstitious' ritual was performed by an expert or by an occasional lay person.

At the level of the assessment of sources as well as secondary material, it is vital to recognize the relevance of a categorical separation of two basic cultural processes, between attributed deeds and performed practices. The notion of expertise centres on the latter, maleficent witchcraft on the former. With regard to counter-witchcraft, the distinction is between the belief that witches were capable of lifting their own spells but not those of others, and the broader rituals performed by witch doctors. The notion of the individual disenchanting capacity thereby constitutes the main cause of scholarly disagreement, as it has been taken as a paradigmatic example of the ambiguity of 'magic'. It must be stressed, nevertheless, that it concerns not so much a magical ambiguity in general but a practical device for identifying the culprit of a bewitchment. Scholars who identify maleficent, their own spell lifting, witches as cunning folk, turn the identification process upside down; in early modern practice a maleficent witch could be identified precisely because she was thought to have lifted her spell – witch doctors especially knew the techniques and rituals which contributed to this. An approach which focuses on the latter might show this more clearly. What did witch doctors do?

The accounts by Thomas and Macfarlane of the role of specialists in informal witchcraft accusations still provide the most useful general picture. In the words of Thomas, 'The function of the cunning man was to confirm the suspicions the victim had already formed, and thus to create the circumstances which were necessary to convert a mere suspicion into a positive accusation.' And, more generally, on divination: 'Its basic function was to shift responsibility away from the actor, to provide him with a justification for taking a leap in the dark, and to screw him up into making a decision whose outcome was unpredictable by normal means.'<sup>70</sup> In most cases the decision to visit a cunning man or woman will have been taken on the basis of the diagnosis of witchcraft; 'they could confirm that the misfortune was the result of witchcraft.'<sup>71</sup> But the opposite could also be the case. If a witch doctor was experienced enough, he or she also avoided telling his clients who was to blame but let them find out for themselves. In this way she or he can be considered as a

Volkskultur. Sozial- und medizinhistorische Anmerkungen zur These von der "Vernichtung der weisen Frauen"', *Medizinhistorisches Journal*, xxiv (1989), 214–31; Larissa Leibrock-Plehn, *Hexenkräuter oder Arznei. Die Abtreibungsmittel im 16. und 17. Jahrhundert* (Stuttgart, 1992), 161–76.

<sup>68</sup> Cristina Lerner, *Witchcraft and Religion. The Politics of Popular Belief* (Oxford, 1984), 143.

<sup>69</sup> Cf. Peter Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* (New York, 1978), 106–8; Richard Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 1989), 59.

<sup>70</sup> Thomas, *Religion*, *op. cit.*, 656, 288; cf. 257–8; cf. Briggs, *Communities of Belief*, *op. cit.*, 29.

<sup>71</sup> Macfarlane, *op. cit.*, 122.

broker, a mediator between people who were unable to resolve their own conflicts. To fulfil this task, cunning folk had to be some sort of outsider, whether they resided in their client's village or not.<sup>72</sup>

How cunning folk actually managed to affirm their clients' suspicions will have varied from place to place and from time to time. Most often, however, they offered their clients a means of identification, by using divination by key and book, by sieve and shears, by boiling urine or milk, by showing the culprit in a basin of water, or by simply pointing out that the first person to cross the threshold would be the cause of their troubles – 'there could plainly be a random element in the operation.'<sup>73</sup> Whether they performed the rituals themselves, or just advised their clients to do so, is of less importance; whatever means of identification they offered, it was entirely based on the premise that the right person must be found if the calamity was to be undone, that is, the person who had originally inflicted it. Traces of this system can be found not only in Luzern, but all over western Europe. In her discussion of two typically Scottish cases Lerner, for instance, concluded that both the witches 'were credited with the power to remove illnesses, though less with the power of healing in general than with that of shifting those illnesses which they were supposed to have inflicted in the first place'. In Bavaria, when someone had found out who had harmed him, he usually tried to get her to turn the spell away. 'Belief in the witch's ability to cure her own maleficia . . . can be found among the earliest preserved trials' in the Jura.<sup>74</sup>

It may be possible that western European cunning folk also directly combatted maleficent witches as a kind of equivalent of the trance experiences that their central European colleagues underwent,<sup>75</sup> although I have not yet come across early modern instances.<sup>76</sup> It was surely possible to counteract bewitchment without identifying the agent, or to take general counter-measures against it, which were mainly of a Catholic nature since 'the orthodox [Catholic] remedies of holy water, clerical blessings, pilgrimages and exorcisms were employed against problems of both natural and supernatural origin'.<sup>77</sup>

## VI

So far, cunning folk have mainly been dealt with in relation to witchcraft. As specialists, however, they showed a range of activities that, although sometimes labelled as

<sup>72</sup> De Blécourt, *Termen van toverij*, *op. cit.*, 233–4, 244–6; cf. Macfarlane, *op. cit.*, 124; Ramsey, *op. cit.*, 271.

<sup>73</sup> Briggs, *Communities of Belief*, *op. cit.*, 75. This implies that it cannot be taken for granted that the ones identified as maleficent witches were always people with whom the bewitched had quarrelled before. Cf. Martin, *op. cit.*, 194.

<sup>74</sup> Cristina Lerner, *Enemies of God. The Witch-hunt in Scotland* (1981), 129; Behringer, *Hexenverfolgung in Bayern*, *op. cit.*, 93; Monter, *Witchcraft in France and Switzerland*, *op. cit.*, 180. See also Briggs, *Communities of Belief*, *op. cit.*, 93; Thomas, *Religion*, *op. cit.*, 648; De

Blécourt, *Termen van toverij*, *op. cit.*, 103–4; De Waardt, *op. cit.*, 140–1; Labouvie, *Zauberei und Hexenwerk*, *op. cit.*, 221.

<sup>75</sup> Ginzburg, *op. cit.*; Gábor Klaniczay, *The Uses of Supernatural Power. The Transformation of Popular Religion in Medieval and Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, 1990), 129–50.

<sup>76</sup> Cf. the accounts on twentieth-century witchcraft by Hans Sebald, *Witchcraft: The Heritage of a Heresy* (New York and Oxford, 1978) and especially Jeanne Favret-Saada, *Deadly Words: Witchcraft in the Bocage* (Cambridge and Paris, 1980).

<sup>77</sup> O'Neil, 'Magical healing', *op. cit.*, 91.

'witchcraft', were nevertheless hardly restricted to countering bewitchments. The term 'cunning folk' can be considered as an overall concept and it is therefore not surprising to find a fair amount of diversity among these specialists. Cunning folk could also be consulted about lost or stolen property, and some of them even proclaimed themselves able to locate hidden treasure. Furthermore, they could offer help in matters of love and marriage, they could lay ghosts, gaze into the stars and reveal the future. It should be taken into account, though, that the different services they provided did not form part of an overall 'magic' system: 'These practices did not reflect a single coherent cosmology or scheme of classification, but were made up of the debris of many different thoughts.'<sup>78</sup> To obtain some consistency, the general image of a cunning man/woman has to be reduced to its singular contemporary manifestations, and these should be related to specific settings and situations.

As the study of cunning folk, properly speaking, has yet to start, conclusions will be highly premature. It is possible, however, to sketch the broad lines along which future studies may develop by indicating a (non-exhaustive) set of dichotomies, a range of (overlapping) specific characteristics that may help to present a more time-embedded picture of actual cunning folk. One can, for instance, differentiate between clergy and laymen, between men and women, between city dwellers and inhabitants of the countryside, between sedentaries and travellers, and between different sorts of popularity. Within more or less specific regions it might even be possible to link a specific kind of practitioner with a specific practice.<sup>79</sup> Specialization will have occurred among cunning folk, like it did among other trades.<sup>80</sup> A more differentiated look at cunning folk may also build on separate case-studies.<sup>81</sup> Moreover, either a broad, differentiated overview, or a case-study, or (preferably) a combination of both, may constitute the cultural dimension within a broader discussion of social, political and economic developments. The following examples are meant to show the preliminary possibilities of this approach.

Catholic priests were renowned for their curing activities and powers of exorcism, whether legal or not.<sup>82</sup> Their power, of course, derived from their distinctive link with the Christian pantheon – the line between orthodoxy and heresy being extremely thin. Some of them stayed within the limits that were set by the authorized church manuals and, for instance, abstained from identifying a particular person in case of thefts or bewitchments. Others overstepped these boundaries, dabbled in love charms, treasure hunting or thief

<sup>78</sup> Thomas, *Religion*, *op. cit.*, 219; cf. 761.

<sup>79</sup> Cf. Franco Cardini, 'Hexenwesen und Volkskultur im Spätmittelalter an Beispielen aus der Toskana' in Peter Dinzelsbacher and Hans-Dieter Mück (eds), *Volkskultur des europäischen Spätmittelalters* (Stuttgart, 1987), 73–88, esp. 81–2.

<sup>80</sup> Cf. Kathryn C. Smith, 'The wise man and his community', *Folk Life*, xv (1977), 24–35, esp. 26.

<sup>81</sup> Ronald C. Sawyer, '"Strangely handled in all her lyms": witchcraft and healing in Jacobean England', *Journal of Social History*, xxii (1989), 461–85; Hans de Waardt, 'At bottom a family affair: feuds and witchcraft in Nijkerk in

1550' in Gijswijt-Hofstra and Frijhoff (eds), *op. cit.*, 132–48; Willem Frijhoff, 'Médecine au quotidien au pays de Clèves. Un dialogue de village en 1559' in *Symbole des Alltags. Alltag der Symbole. Festschrift für Harry Kühnel zum 65. Geburtstag* (Graz, 1992), 805–20.

<sup>82</sup> On witch trials against clergy, see Harald Schwillus, *Kleriker im Hexenprozeß. Geistliche als Opfer der Hexenprozesse des 16. und 17. Jahrhunderts in Deutschland* (Würzburg, 1992). In later times, they (as well as their lay counterparts) could still be occasionally prosecuted for acting as 'unwitchment' experts, as is shown by nineteenth-century Dutch trial records.



detection and could become famous for these practices. The differences between them had to do not only with adherence to the (changing) guidance from the ecclesiastical hierarchy or departure from it; the Catholic clergy were – like their lay counterparts – sensitive to demands from their congregation.<sup>83</sup> They were also bound up with the rivalry between the different orders. In the seventeenth-century Dutch Republic, for example, Jesuits continued to practise exorcism with tremendous zeal while their fellow-Catholics increasingly abstained from it.<sup>84</sup> The Dutch Protestant clergy – a considerable number of them being recruited from former Catholic priests – did not immediately abandon exorcism *en masse*, although they were soon under pressure to do so.<sup>85</sup>

What proportion of the cunning clergy belonged to the totality of available experts within a certain region cannot yet be determined, although it seems clear that there was a significant variation from Catholic to Protestant areas, as well as a change after the transition to Protestantism. Whether lay cunning folk in a Protestant country like Denmark would have contributed to the rise of witch trials, as Karsten Jensen suggested, is highly questionable, however.<sup>86</sup> Even when an increase in consultations can be documented – as in Bavaria, for instance<sup>87</sup> – cunning folk might have been dependent on the demands of their clients, in which case an increase of consultations would merely reflect multiplying accusations (which in turn might be related to economic setbacks, demographic constraints, cultural trends, or some mixture of the three).

Changes in the practices of cunning folk may also be detected. For example in Amsterdam, evidence of seeking and giving advice in cases of love and courtship has only been found in the first quarter of the seventeenth century and not later.<sup>88</sup> It has yet to be determined whether this finding relates to demographic processes or simply resulted from an alteration in ecclesiastical attention. A possible change in the attitude towards ghosts has been slightly better documented (although one might build a criticism on the scarcity of sources). According to Hans de Waardt, ghosts were depersonalized in the seventeenth-century province of Holland, which would indicate the transition from an extended to a nuclear family.<sup>89</sup> In the north-eastern Netherlands cunning women were highly concerned with ghosts as well, especially during the second half of the seventeenth century. A hundred years later ghosts no longer seemed to bother them or their clients.<sup>90</sup>

Preoccupation with ghosts was also a special feature of itinerant treasure-hunting specialists in the Netherlands, who usually portrayed themselves as gypsies or heathens.

<sup>83</sup> O'Neil, 'Magical healing', *op. cit.*, 102–3; 'Sacerdote ovvero strione', *op. cit.*; De Waardt, *Toverij en samenleving*, *op. cit.*, 55.

<sup>84</sup> De Waardt, *Toverij en samenleving*, *op. cit.*, 150–1, 171–9. See also MacDonald, *op. cit.*, xix–xx.

<sup>85</sup> De Blécourt, *Termen van toverij*, *op. cit.*, 83; De Waardt, *Toverij en samenleving*, *op. cit.*, 148–9, 166.

<sup>86</sup> Karsten Sejr Jensen, 'Zauberei in Dänemark 1500 bis 1588' in Degn, Lehmann and Unverhau (eds), *op. cit.*, 150–8, esp. 150–1.

<sup>87</sup> Behringer, *Hexenverfolgung in Bayern*, *op. cit.*, 183.

<sup>88</sup> Herman Roodenburg, *Onder censuur. De kerkelijke tucht in de gereformeerde gemeente van Amsterdam, 1578–1700* (Hilversum, 1990), 211.

<sup>89</sup> De Waardt, *Toverij en samenleving*, *op. cit.*, 223–5. The interpretation draws on Natalie Zamon Davies, 'Ghost, kin and progeny. Some features of family life in early modern France', *Daedalus*, cvI (1977), 88–114, esp. 94–6.

<sup>90</sup> De Blécourt, 'Cunning women', *op. cit.*, 53–4.

Their technique consisted of telling susceptible people about a ghost that guarded treasure. To obtain it, the ghost had to be diverted by other valuables, which were subsequently taken by the tramp. On the whole this group of specialists was far more interested in their own gain than in the needs of their victims; they were prone to exploit people rather than to consider local tensions.<sup>91</sup> These treasure-hunting – and occasionally soothsaying – vagrants should not be confused with other itinerants. Some medical specialists usually travelled around from one market or fair to another.<sup>92</sup> When they administered cures against bewitchment, they were sometimes forced to alter their itinerary because of banishment. Most of the cunning folk, itinerants as well as sedentaries, who were expelled from a certain jurisdiction, seem to have turned the lack of an overall judicial organization to their advantage; they simply continued their practices just across the border or adjusted their agenda accordingly.

Males seem to have formed the greater proportion of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century cunning folk in the Netherlands as well as in Saarland.<sup>93</sup> Elsewhere, for example in Cologne, women were in the majority.<sup>94</sup> The overall male–female ratio is nevertheless less interesting than its changes through time and the development in the relative spatial distribution of cunning men and women. In the seventeenth-century province of Holland sedentary cunning women, or soothsayers, were mainly found in the cities, while their male colleagues held the countryside.<sup>95</sup> In the east cunning women disappeared from the countryside as well. When in the nineteenth century they re-emerged in the peat areas, a strict division of labour had occurred between them and cunning men.<sup>96</sup> Folklorists – whose collections nevertheless are very informative on nineteenth- and twentieth-century cunning folk – may have been mistaken when they only investigated the remote parts of the countryside.

As a final point in the study of cunning folk one may look at their popularity and the changes therein. The availability of sources permitting, within a certain region it might be possible to distinguish spatial, as well as temporal and social aspects of popularity and to classify cunning folk according to their local, regional or even supra-regional fame.<sup>97</sup> Apart from a differentiation on the basis of their cultural and social features, cunning folk may thus be considered in terms of the attractiveness to their clients. To understand the changes in the cunning folk's practices, a shift of focus from supply to demand may be appropriate.

<sup>91</sup> Willem de Blécourt, 'Undersyk nei tjoenderij yn Fryslân. Beskriuwing en evaluaasje fan ûndersyk nei tsjoenderij yn de sechstjinde oant en mei de achttjinde ieu', *It beaken*, XLIX (1987), 105–20, esp. 110–11; De Waardt, *Toverij en samenleving*, op. cit., 64, 223–6. Cf. Behringer, *Hexenverfolgung in Bayern*, op. cit., 348–50.

<sup>92</sup> Frank Huisman, 'Itinerant medical practitioners in the Dutch Republic. The case of Groningen', *Tractrix*, 1 (1989), 63–83; Ramsey, op. cit., 129–75.

<sup>93</sup> Labouvie, *Verbotene Künste*, op. cit., 165.

<sup>94</sup> Gerd Schwerhoff, *Köln im Kreuzverhör*.

*Kriminalität, Herrschaft und Gesellschaft in einer Frühneuzeitlichen Stadt* (Bonn and Berlin, 1991), 428.

<sup>95</sup> Cf. Roodenburg, *Onder censuur*, op. cit., 225; De Waardt, *Toverij en samenleving*, op. cit., 147.

<sup>96</sup> Willem de Blécourt, 'Specialistes in geluk. Waarzegsters in Groningen, Friesland, Drenthe en Overijssel in de 19e en het begin van de 20e eeuw', *Etnofoor*, 11, 2 (1989), 71–90.

<sup>97</sup> Willem de Blécourt, 'Duivelbanners in de Noordelijke Friese Wouden, 1860–1930', *Volkskundig bulletin*, XIV (1988), 159–87; De Waardt, *Toverij en samenleving*, op. cit., 151–2.

## VII

Tracing different sorts of cunning folk through time – far beyond the temporal confines of the witch trials – can reveal the opposition between modern academic categories and contemporary indigenous ones. Traditions, whether they are continuous or discontinuous, can mainly be discerned from a detached point of view, defining the object of scrutiny from the outside. As long as only one aspect, unwitching for example, is focused on, the problem might not be insurmountable – there is only the danger of missing interesting developments. But as soon as one concentrates on a broad range of ‘magical’ experts, one may fall into the trap of substituting present-day classifications for historical practices (apart from the problem that much of the knowledge about ‘cunning folk’ is gained through the categorizations of contemporaries who opposed them). In my opinion, trying to formulate a clear-cut definition of ‘cunning folk’, which encompasses all the necessary elements, would not solve the dilemma. That would only distance it, and being based on the characteristics of people that are already considered as ‘cunning folk’, in fact obscure it. As diachronic processes have to be approached from synchronistic understanding, I would propose to reconsider ‘cunning folk’ on a higher semantic level. At any specific point in time not only the diversity of cunning folk needs to be studied, but the whole ‘person field’ in which they operated. To paraphrase Malcolm Crick, in order to define ‘cunning folk’ ‘we should need fully mapped out the different symbolic definitions of those sorts of person categories normally translated as “sorcerer”, “diviner”, “prophet”, “priest” and so on’.

Crick uses the metaphor of the chessboard to clarify his position. If one piece is only seen apart from the others, its meaning will not be comprehended: ‘The value of the bishop (or witch) [or cunning man/woman] derives from all the other pieces which the bishop (or witch) [or cunning man/woman] is not. Neither has any [of them] significance in isolation.’<sup>98</sup> While the image of the chessboard might surely help to grasp the problem, it may also oversimplify it. That is to say, it sensitizes the researchers’ notion of other trades, makes her try to define one type of expert in relation to others, and encourages her to overstep the confines of ‘magic’. To quote Crick again: ‘For there is the danger that the alien nature of such categories as “witch”, “diviner”, and so on, because they are not part of the internal structuring of this classificatory plane in our culture, will lead anthropologists [or historians] to close off this area as concerned with “mystical” beliefs or suchlike. But this may badly disfigure the semantic structure of other cultures.’<sup>99</sup> The most obvious ‘field’ to place cunning folk in would be one that consists of the specialists in human health, spiritual as well as physical. Cunning folk should be investigated precisely along with those people who opposed them most, the doctors and the clergy.<sup>100</sup> It may also be argued that their trade overlapped with that of the forebears of detectives and that consequently the category of law enforcement agents should be taken into account as well. To do so would result in discarding the chessboard metaphor; the movements of the different pieces are not governed by the same overall set of rules, neither are they restricted to sixty-four

<sup>98</sup> Crick, ‘Recasting witchcraft’, *op. cit.*, 116.

<sup>99</sup> *ibid.*, 118–19.

<sup>100</sup> Although lacking in local depth, a good discussion on cunning folk in the context of

(other) medical practitioners is offered by Ramsey, *op. cit.* See also Doreen Evenden Nagy, *Popular Medicine in Seventeenth-century England* (Bowling Green, 1988).

squares. Actual historical practice comes closer to a situation in which certain pieces force the rules to change in mid-game and acquire temporary power to impose the new rules on the others. Cunning folk, while at times being subjected to the empowerment of their adversaries, not only attempted to find ways to oppose them (in which they sometimes succeeded and sometimes did not), they also played their own power games.

To reconstruct the various ways in which these constellations changed over time, I would again suggest that one looks at them from 'below' and starts with the question of how and why people chose to consult particular specialists, when confronted with illness, death or loss. Concomitantly, this would imply addressing people instead of cultural features like disenchantment techniques or rituals. What insights and image shattering results such new research will yield, cannot, of course, be predicted.

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