

Extended Commentary:

Why Thinking with Witches Matters in the Twenty-First Century Classroom and Beyond

I teach a sixteen-week course on witchcraft for new-to-college students as part of both the First-Year Only curriculum and the general education program at the University of Northern Iowa, where I serve as professor and head of the Department of History. It is a course whose title alone—“Problems & Perspectives in Global History: Witchcraft”—tends to raise a few eyebrows, particularly when I meet with prospective students on campus visit days and when I conduct academic sessions for our summer orientation and registration sessions. When I announce that I teach a course on witchcraft, some students exchange excited glances with an accompanying parent or friend, others look amused or confused, and still others look incredulous, as if waiting for the punchline. I can almost see cartoon thought-bubbles forming above all of their heads, each of which seems to me to contain the same words: “That’s a real college class?!” I always wait a beat or two and say aloud, “Yes, that’s a real college class—and it’s actually pretty awesome.”

Then I briefly sketch why: for approximately three centuries, between 1450 and 1750, elite and popular beliefs in the reality of human witches collided spectacularly with anxieties about heresy, harm, and diabolism to produce a period of witch-hunting that resulted in the deaths of tens of thousands of people. Witchcraft and witch-hunting, both in theory and in practice, can be linked to nearly every important aspect of early modern European society, from gender relations, social hierarchy, and household conflict to neighborly disputes and community dynamics. They can also be linked to a range of critical early modern political, legal, economic, and cultural developments. Thinking with witches lets us peer into the lives of the ordinary men and women who were accused and who accused others of witchcraft. It also brings us into

contact with the secular and clerical elites who penned and enforced the laws that made witchcraft a crime and who authored the demonological treatises that sought to prove the reality of witches and to identify the source and extent of their power.¹ When I designed the course, I thought the complexity of this historical knowledge alone was sufficient to justify its place in the curriculum. But I am pleased that to say that my students have learned much more. Thinking with witches helps them understand how diverse people in the past dealt with powerful human emotions: fear, loss, uncertainty, and the desire to stamp out deviance and to take revenge. And because there is no shortage of fear, loss, uncertainty, othering, and vengeance today,² my students learn that knowing how to think with witches also gives them a valuable lens through which to consider aspects of our own world.

This commentary on teaching and learning underscores the importance of training in the social sciences in an educational landscape in which the place of core social sciences disciplines is being regularly and vigorously challenged.³ As traditional four-year colleges and universities face steep enrollment declines and existential questions about the value of higher education, many social sciences disciplines have seen program closures or hiring freezes, as shrinking resources are instead funneled to new STEM and pre-professional programs. As I discuss how and why I designed a general education course for first-year students on witchcraft below, I invite faculty readers to consider the ways thinking anew about their own course topics, content, and design can help them introduce students to the dynamism and relevance of the social sciences. And as they read, I ask students to be intentional in identifying the ways their own social sciences coursework may offer many more applications than first meet the eye.

Why Teach Witchcraft

I have been teaching courses in witchcraft for nearly twenty years because the topic works on a number of academic levels. On a superficial level, witchcraft is appealing as a course subject because it is an enrollment slam-dunk. It is a topic about which students are innately curious and about which they want to know more. Further, many apparently see a course on the history of witchcraft as an accessible entry point to a college subject they either disliked in high school or otherwise find intimidating—or, erroneously, irrelevant. Because the “Problems & Perspectives” course I currently teach may be a student’s only exposure to history as an academic discipline at my university, I think a topic that rouses student interest at the same time it acquaints students with the skills to think like an historian essential. Witchcraft ticks all of the boxes.

And witchcraft is an ideal subject for helping students thinking like an historian. The study of witchcraft allows rich historical inquiry for a wide range of historians-in-training (as I refer to all of my students). I have taught Honors courses on witchcraft to non-majors, undergraduate writing and research seminars on witchcraft to advanced History majors, graduate research seminars on witchcraft, and now first-year only courses for new students because of the diversity of scholarship and resources available for teaching and learning. Academic and popular writers have produced a veritable explosion of scholarship on the subject of witchcraft in early modern Europe in the last 100 years.⁴ The first decades of the twentieth century saw the publication of two important early works: Wallace Notestein’s *A History of Witchcraft in England from 1558 to 1714*, published in 1911, and Montague Summers’ translation into English in 1928 of *Malleus Maleficarum* (*The Hammer of Witches*), a witch-hunting manual written by inquisitor-turned-prosecutor Heinrich Kramer near the end of the fifteenth century.⁵ But

witchcraft in England, the focus of my own attention, began to gain great attention as a scholarly subject in the early 1970s, thanks in part to Keith Thomas's magisterial *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (1971) and Alan Macfarlane's *Witchcraft in Tudor-Stuart England* (1970). The so-called Thomas-Macfarlane model considered early modern witch-hunting through the lens of socioeconomic tensions related to changing community structures and values, economic challenges, and the Protestant Reformation's refiguring of salvation and charity. Subsequent scholars examined, questioned, and refined that model with analyses focusing on the British Isles and on other early modern lands beyond the British Isles. They also considered new types of sources for the history of witchcraft, raising questions, for example, about the role of gender, since an emphasis on legal records indicated that the vast majority of those accused of witchcraft were women.⁶ Witchcraft is a great topic, then, for convincing students that historical inquiry is never complete but instead evolves with new methodological approaches, new questions, and nuanced readings of extant source material. This is a crucial lesson for them to learn, given the perception many have that history is "done" and needs only to be consumed rather than interrogated and added to.

Witchcraft serves as an excellent introduction to the social sciences and its methods of analysis. Witches were considered to be a social problem in early modern Europe, and early modern people sought solutions to that problem through the lenses of their reality. Studying the solutions they enacted and the ways they enacted them offers modern students considerable insight into how past societies dealt with, for example, problems of poverty, age, and infirmity, all of which have modern counterparts.

How to Teach Witchcraft

Witchcraft is a challenging topic to teach for the same reason that students are drawn to my class: everyone knows (or thinks they know) something about witches and witchcraft. After all, witches have a prominent place in multiple aspects of modern popular culture. From best-selling books, television shows, and movie franchises to the annual preparations for Halloween that seem to start earlier and earlier each year, many of today's college students have had regular exposure to broad depictions of witches and witchcraft from childhood. My class begins by probing the historical accuracy of those pop culture depictions. As the students and I work collaboratively to identify the most common stereotypes associated with witches on the first day of class, I begin the process of separating fact from fiction, affirming the historical origins of some common tropes and introducing important correctives for others.

To accomplish the course's learning objectives, I designed an instructional plan that gives students greater and greater ownership over their learning as the semester progresses. First, I continue the work of historicizing beliefs in witches and witchcraft through a five-week unit titled "Defining Witchcraft," which serves as a bootcamp in early modern European history. Because the European witch-hunts were the product of particular historical conditions, knowledge of that history is essential. Many of my students have not, however, been exposed to it before coming to my classroom. To provide necessary context, I offer in-class lessons on Renaissance and Reformation, the age of religious wars and state-building, early modern law and legal processes, family and gender relations as set against the backdrop of the print debate on the nature and capacity of women known as the *querelle des femmes*, and more. I am aided in providing context by the required course text, *Witchcraft: A Very Short Introduction*, a brisk treatment of the topic by scholar Malcolm Gaskill.⁷ The book's physical size, roughly half the

height and width of a standard college textbook, and length, 162 pages, give it the appearance of accessibility to students. But because Gaskill assumes readers already have a sound background in medieval and early modern historical developments and processes, I have discovered the book's learning curve can be steep. In the opening pages of his text, though, Gaskill introduces the idea of humans' "restless curiosity" in pursuit of knowledge, and I make that phrase the through-line of the course, asking students to be restlessly curious when they encounter an obstacle or a gap in their own understanding. I have also learned to be clear and detailed about why I am having them read the material I assign and why I take class time to talk them through historical context.⁸ I prioritize making time for students to ask questions about and offer interpretations of assigned readings, which identifies and corrects errors, resolves confusion, and helps confirm the acquisition of thinking skills.

Only after students have a solid grasp of the major events and processes of early modern European history do I turn then our focus on the historical evidence itself in a unit titled "Studying Witchcraft: The Sources." It is my goal to have students develop a rich and nuanced understanding of early modern primary sources, but those materials often prove challenging, marked by archaic language and spelling, writing and record-keeping conventions unfamiliar to modern students, and expressions of social, political, economic, and cultural norms and values from historical societies that make the past feel much like our own world at one moment and like "a foreign country" the next.⁹ The knowledge students gain in the first unit is invaluable in the task of making sense of the historical evidence we survey in class, and my weekly lessons on how to read different types of sources provides them with specific methodological strategies for analyzing each. During the course of a month, students tackle excerpts and examples from a wide range of early modern sources: demonologies and religious literature, laws and government

accounts, artistic and literary depictions of witches and witchcraft, and records from individual trials for witchcraft. The latter includes written versions of what were originally oral proceedings, including interrogations of the accused and official court testimony offered by witnesses. Those accounts, combined with popular pamphlets produced to satiate the reading public's appetite for news about witchcraft, help students hear the voices of men and women who lived hundreds of years ago and bring the past to life. The unit on primary sources allows students to interpret the dynamics of witch-hunting from the "inside," and I charge them each to "be the historian," looking for the ways their findings resonate with or deviate from the impressions they formed in the course's first unit.

The third unit of the course, "Witchcraft on Trial: Virtual Village," is dominated by a role-playing game I created that culminates in mock witchcraft trials in class. It is hands-down the students' favorite part of the semester. For three weeks, the students become residents of a sixteenth-century English village on the brink of crisis and have the opportunity to put everything they have learned in class up to that point into action. Each student is assigned a specific historical character who is a member of one of the six distinct socioeconomic groups in our village.¹⁰ I reveal a limited backstory for each character, usually involving familial or occupational ties to one or two additional characters. I then give students permission to develop more details about the character they will play, as long as their additions are historically plausible and drawn from primary source evidence or information in Gaskill's book. At a village social held in class, students meet the other members of their own socioeconomic group as well as the members of other groups, beginning to develop the relationships that will knit the village together—and tear it apart. I instruct students to spend multiple class sessions working with the members of their team to develop a position paper that 1) articulates the group's role and goals

within the village, 2) identifies the groups and individuals who would likely share their interests and be their allies, and 3) labels the groups and individuals they believe would likely prove a threat as rivals or enemies. The final element of that paper is a list of three characters each group suspects of witchcraft. Once those papers are submitted, I then post an announcement on Blackboard, our campus's learning management system, that describes a series of unnatural happenings in the village. The announcement reveals that accusations of witchcraft have come to the attention of a visiting judge (the role that I play), who will arrive to conduct trials that determine the guilt and innocence of three villagers accused.¹¹

The mock trials held in class require significant critical thinking skills as well as their complex application. As the trials unfold, students have to respond quickly, as alliances carefully built during working sessions shift and crumble, as new, often unexpected, threats and charges emerge, and as teams retain or lose members when innocence or guilt is pronounced. Each student offers testimony in one of the three trials, and as they respond to the judge's/my questions, they have to be mindful of giving evidence that 1) matches their team's position paper, 2) is historically plausible and free of major historical errors, and 3) is responsive to the testimony of other witnesses, countering or affirming its authenticity. The degree of difficulty is high, but the results are satisfying. The weeks of learning historical context, reading and talking about beliefs in witchcraft and witchcraft trials, and analyzing historical evidence pay off here.

The final unit of the course, "Going Global: The Witch in the World," moves students beyond the case study of early modern Europe. Each student selects an academic journal article or book chapter discussing beliefs in magic and its practitioners in different cultures from a curated list I provide (or, occasionally, finds an article on a subject of their own interest not represented on my list). The list is extensive and features scholarship on magic and witchcraft in

places as diverse as the colonial Caribbean, seventeenth-century Massachusetts, nineteenth-century France, modern Africa, and contemporary Japan. They read their selections carefully and complete a written critical review of their piece. The critical review assignment requires students to identify the author's argument, sources, and methodologies and then to consider the ways in which ideas about magic featured in the article differ from those in early modern Europe. Here, early modern Europe is not presented as normative or the "standard," but as the example with which they now have greatest familiarity. The class presentations that accompany the written reviews give all students a sense of the range of beliefs in the supernatural and in the human agents believed to be able to wield it for their own interests and benefit. The project helps them develop comparative thinking skills that reveal the diversity of beliefs as well as key similarities across time and space.

Witchcraft, Past and Present

Assessment of student learning has confirmed the value of course's content and approach. I assess the learning objectives I assign on the basis of weekly written reflections on course content and readings and unit tests that examine students' understanding and historical thinking skills. But my course's designation as a general education course requires additional assessment measures to evaluate student learning within the campus's general education framework. My course is an offering in the "Human Condition" category, which includes coursework that requires students to "examine human diversity and commonality" and "analyze ideas, works, or institutions as diverse conceptions of the human condition."¹² To accomplish my assessment, I ask students to write a brief reflection on why the study of witchcraft matters to our understanding of the past, the experience of being human, and the diversity of past peoples' fears, beliefs, and actions, *and* why the study of witchcraft matters to an understanding of the

world today. Students have interesting and thoughtful things to say on the first part of the prompt, many drawing on a wide range of factual details, primary source evidence, and student article presentations to craft a response that demonstrates the achievement of the assigned general education learning outcomes.

Responses to the second half of the prompt have proved unexpectedly sophisticated and nuanced. Some students return to the misunderstandings and misinformation communicated by the stereotypes of witchcraft we encountered to start the semester, being struck by how persistent the errors have been over time and how dangerous incomplete or inaccurate knowledge can be to understanding the past. Many focus their attention on the mock trials, recounting how surprised they were to find themselves caught up in the emotions of the exercise, how anxious they were not to become a target, or how guilty they felt for abandoning allies or targeting someone they perceived as vulnerable. Nearly all suggest at some point in their response that learning about witchcraft in the past caused them to see evidence of irrationality, intolerance, and injustice in the world around them. A few propose solutions for those problems that involve education and an appreciation for rather than suspicion of difference, citing the destructive events of witch-hunting as evidence for what happens when people dehumanize others in the face of fear, hatred, or jealousy. What I find both fascinating and illuminating about these responses is that we do not discuss contemporary society at all in class, beyond the pop culture conversations about witchcraft at the start of the semester and passing references in class discussion. I pose the question in the prompt to see how students might apply what they have learned in another context, uncoached and unprepared by earlier exercises or assignments. Their reflections, I think, underscore the value of training in social sciences disciplines: the skill sets the social sciences impart empower students to think critically and independently, to identify problems, and to

suggest possible solutions. These disciplines remain vital in our educational landscape. They help our students acquire the knowledge and tools to change their world.

ENDNOTES

¹Demonology refers to the study of demons. In the early modern period, the study of demons extended to human agents, believed to be imbued with supernatural powers by the Christian Devil. Demonologies were texts written to explore the power of the Devil and other anti-Christian beings as well as the humans who made a compact with the Devil.

²Othering is a process by which people identify other individuals or groups as different and dangerous, stigmatizing their characteristics or behavior as threatening to broadly accepted values or norms, often in ways that dehumanize them.

³Many educational and news publications have written extensively on declining enrollments in higher education. For examples see <https://www.chronicle.com/article/is-higher-ed-growing-or-shrinking> ; <https://www.vox.com/the-highlight/23428166/college-enrollment-population-education-crash> ; and <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/business/financial-health/2024/08/22/new-report-finds-higher-ed-sector-shrank-2-percent> An examination of the webpages of multiple social sciences disciplines' professional associations indicates some of the growing tensions over resources and the reduction of social sciences faculty and/or curriculum on college campuses. See [Advocacy | American Sociological Association \(asanet.org\)](https://www.asanet.org) and [AHA Advocacy | American Historical Association \(historians.org\)](https://www.historians.org)

⁴Before it became the subject of serious academic scrutiny, beliefs in magic, witches, and witchcraft was largely the preserve of recorders of folklore, studying beliefs and customs.

⁵<https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/31511/pg31511-images.html>

⁶The interplay of witchcraft and gender is a rich field. For a particularly influential early text on witchcraft and women, see Christina Lerner, *Enemies of God: the Witch-hunt in Scotland* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 1981). For an essential text on men, see Lara Apps and Andrew Gow, *Male Witches in Early Modern England* (Manchester: Manchester University, 2003).

⁷Malcolm Gaskill, *Witchcraft: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010). I have also used the following with success as course texts: J.A. Sharpe, *Witchcraft in Early Modern England*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2019); Marion Gibson, *Witchcraft: The Basics* (London, Routledge, 2018); and Brian Levack, *The Witch-hunt in Early Modern Europe*, 4th ed. (London: Routledge, 2015).

⁸Many of my techniques align with the principles of TILT (Transparency in Learning and Teaching). For an overview and resources, visit <https://tilthighered.com/>

⁹For an overview of these positions in historical thinking, see John H. Arnold, *History: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 6.

¹⁰The characters in the virtual village exercise are drawn from court records I used while researching my dissertation. They are real historical persons from a real English town, although I structure their relationships and identities with much greater clarity than emerges from the records themselves.

¹¹I use the lists of suspects in each team's position paper to determine the characters who will stand trial, selecting three at random, using the roll of die to select which of the six teams' lists will be used to identify the first, second, and third suspected witch.

¹²<https://undergraduatestudies.uni.edu/unifi/learning-areas-outcomes>