



## CHAPTER 3

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# Building Internal Coherence

What is *coherence*? Roughly speaking, a state of coherence occurs when snippets of ideas and idea-elements seem to intelligibly go well or “hold solidly” together—or even reinforce or build on one another intricately—without excessive intelligible contradictions or fragmentation.<sup>1</sup> The definition becomes clearer if we picture individuals whose ideas are *incoherent*. An example being those individuals who simply like to express information that might be potentially relevant to an idea that they desperately want to communicate—such as in brilliant idea fragments—but they never get to the point of connecting the dots successfully, and the fragments are too disparate to be easily connected by their audience.

In complex idea systems, which comprise many subparts, establishing coherence means forming component materials into a relationship so that all the individual parts fit and operate well with one another. Imagine there are several contradictory interpretations of preexisting ideas, multiple incompatible testimonies, and many forms of ideas (e.g., sensory image, symbolic association, argument, and narrative), each with their

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Algirdas Julien Greimas and Joseph Courtes, *Semiotics And Language: An Analytical Dictionary*, trans. Larry Christ, Daniel Patte, James Lee, Edward McMahon II, Gary Phillips, & Michael Rengstorf. (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1983), 35. For an entry into a complex discussion of coherence in phenomenology and ethnomethodology, see Clemens Eisenmann and Michael Lynch, “Introduction to Harold Garfinkel’s Ethnomethodological ‘Misreading’ of Aron Gurwitsch on the Phenomenal Field,” *Human Studies* 44, no. 1 (April 2021), 1–17.

own *intricate justification structures*. Accomplishing coherence is an extremely complex task for individuals as well as for institutions.<sup>2</sup>

This chapter sketches out some factors, tools, methods, and mechanisms that enable social actors to create coherence by efficiently handling or preempting contradictions, and by efficiently “synthesizing” disparate components into a common form. Table 3.1 maps out eight different levels of coherence-construction activities to be examined.

I use the term *internal coherence* to refer to the form of coherence in relation to the need to unify and synchronize different accounts and data regarding a localized case. External coherence is a form of coherence in relation to the bridging of what is happening at a given site with what occurs at other sites—that is to say, to a larger set of cases where similar or dissimilar ideas and information are generated.<sup>3</sup>

**Table 3.1** Eight levels of coherence-construction activities in witchcraft cases

<i>Domains of coherence construction</i>	
1	Internal coherence in <i>event correlations</i> (including different asserted unusual signs and circumstantial evidence)
2	Internal coherence in <i>victims', eye-witnesses', and accusers' accounts made in court under oath</i>
3	Internal coherence in <i>interrogated statements (including ostensible "voluntary" confession)</i>
4	Internal coherence in <i>material evidence</i>
5	External coherence with <i>past and ongoing cases</i> (in news, pamphlets, demonological books, official records, etc.)
6	External coherence with <i>established stock of preexisting knowledge</i> (shared among locals or among elites)
7	External coherence with <i>challenging and competing ideas</i>
8	External coherence with <i>other knowledge systems</i>

<sup>2</sup> I take inspirations from discourse analysts' efforts to link the local coherence of individual texts (which consist of “cognitive sets”) to the global coherence of macrostructures (which consist of meta-structures interwoven by multiple “cognitive sets”). Teun A. van Dijk, *Macrostructures: An Interdisciplinary Study of Global Structures in Discourse, Interaction, and Cognition* (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Earlbaum Associates, 1980), v-25. Fundamentally, when people state a verbal thought, a minimal coherence at the textual, social, or communicative levels is required for it to have any functions—including but not exclusive to referential, emotive, poetic, and regulative functions. See Theo van Leeuwen, *Introducing Social Semiotics* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), 75–78.

<sup>3</sup> See van Dijk, *Macrostructures*, 199–295.

## A COMMON CODE SYSTEM AND ITS SET OF CODED THINGS

A predicate for a coherent idea system is an essential set of codes (*conventionalized symbols*) that can generate a cohesive, unifying account. The standardized adoption of codes—for instance, “the Devil” or “witchcraft”—enables particular classes of information to be encoded into related, specific mental objects, like specific “acts of the Devil” or “acts of witchcraft.” Successful, extensive coding efforts can gradually produce a body of “facts” (or a *data set* consisting of *coded information*) that enables more extensive theorizing. Theorizing within an evidentially driven idea system particularly thrives on such “factual” accumulation and organization.

### *Defining a Cohesive Pool of Qualifying Evidence*

Some coded things such as the “winner of last night’s tennis game” have only a restricted class of information that could qualify as proper evidence. In contrast, “gravity” has fewer restrictions; many different things dropping to the ground can be fitting information. “The Devil” and “witchcraft” have almost too many coded things to substantiate their existence—from flying broomsticks to unusual animals, and from poisons to orgies. Such diversity could entail potential challenges to maintain cohesiveness—the same “Devil” or “witch” may look and act too diffusely. At the same time, if managed properly, such a system of coded things could greatly enhance the reservoir of substantiating evidence—there are too much data that seem to offer varying rigorous proofs toward the objects’ existence.

To manage the conceptual codes, *boundaries* are needed. The Devil and witchcraft are not boundless concepts. They are comprehensible to our minds as unique, vivid things because of these boundaries. The ideas (propositions) revolving around them are just *detailed* enough to become conceivable causes, yet *general* enough to enable diverse fact-finding and evidence-building activities.

This balance in the code is delicate. For a moment, let us consider this balance in the context of the cumulative concept of witchcraft.

Most generally, the motivation of the Devil<sup>4</sup>—and his eternal role—is to tempt humans into betraying God. His methods are multifarious but generally involve duplicity, seduction, and temptation. One means of achieving his aims is to form pacts with humans, who would serve him as “witches” and thereby become Satan’s emissaries in the human world.

An example of how ideas grow in detail and complexity is given below.

Embedded in Biblical tales, the Devil often seduced individuals in a state of moral weakness, as he could not succeed in tempting truly virtuous people. Those who were morally weak were often promised the power to kill, maim, or cause misfortune to an enemy. These details in the idea *explained* the witches’ motivation and the reason they are morally responsible for the harms they cause to humans.

Further details about the Devil relate to the *means* (the special power) that witches could possess. The Devil works within the confines of God’s power, and perhaps even with God’s permission, but never really has power anywhere equivalent to God himself. If the Devil’s power could even threaten that of God, this would contradict every narrative in the Bible. Witches borrow a limited amount of power provided by the Devil, and the Devil could withdraw this power at will. This is why witches could never overpower the Devil or even the little devils, why they could be captured by humans even if they possessed supernatural power, and why they might not be able perform an act repeatedly.

Few believed the Devil truly had the power to affect natural events, such as causing a hailstorm or a plague. According to many authoritative interpretations, stating so would be tantamount to putting the Devil on the same level as God’s divine power. Likewise, the Devil—or perhaps his minions, in the form of imps or demons—might change shape, change sex, turn into animals, bi-locate, and so forth, but the idea that witches could possess the same power was much more widely disputed.

Elites and peasants alike generally conceived—with little internal disagreement—that the Devil could cause *illusions* in people, for example, making people *think* illusively that they themselves had caused a hailstorm or had participated in other magical, diabolical, ungodly activities, such as attending the subversive witch sabbath by nocturnal flight on a broomstick. The events need not have physically happened, according to concept conceptions; physical events could accompany illusions. For example, the

<sup>4</sup>The word “Devil,” in uppercase, refers to Satan. However, it is believed that Satan commands many little “devils”; these devils will be represented in lowercase.

Devil might know that a hailstorm was going to take place and can thus duplicitously make people believe he created it. But by making subjects take certain actions, even if only in their mind, the Devil successfully made people betray God.

Details such as these enable the court to eliminate disagreement and contradictions. And for some courts that sought to examine the extent of immorality, whether the causation existed in the physical world was of secondary importance.

It was also widely accepted that the Devil could cause small-scale harm by himself—but his historic role was to tempt humans to commit sins by their own agency. Some teaching cast the Devil in a role similar to that of a background agent, an agent who required—or at least called upon—the agency of the humans to fully realize his malign purposes. And by successfully tempting humans, including the use of coercion, the Devil grew in power, perhaps just as he did through the original sins of Adam and Eve. Here lay the human responsibility in the outcomes, even if the responsibility was only partial. Sometimes the act of temptation included severe beating; even if the subjects had demonstrated unwillingness, their ultimate compliance showed they had given in to the temptation.

Constructing these details about the coded things, which build some conditions of limited tendencies and probabilities, helps to offer a degree of precision in guiding actors' interpretations and actions.

### *Converged Matching Evidence as Seen in Confession Accounts*

By the intricate properties (or “design”) of these coded constructs pertaining to the Devil and witchcraft, a wealth of matching information could be used as evidence. Many sub-ideas (consisting of coded things) are involved.

“Witchcraft” was a concept bordering both the supernatural and the natural. It was a set of *crafted methods* (or “arts”) executed by humans, but could do harm on a scale that an ordinary human could not by borrowing or using diabolic power. The precise methods varied. One was *diabolic contagion*—that is to say, the ability to cause sickness or death by touch.<sup>5</sup> In England, it was believed that witches nurtured little demonic creatures called familiars or imps that had shape-shifting abilities. They sucked on

<sup>5</sup> Henry Charles Lea, *Materials Toward a History of Witchcraft* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1939), vol III, 1512.

the “teats” of witches for nourishment, and they could help the witches spy on neighbors, spread poison, or kill animals. These conceivable, traditional mental objects transformed the perceptions toward many otherwise ordinary animals; common animals thus became a potentially qualifying point of evidence for diabolic contagion.

Confession accounts substantiate some of these ideas. For example, toads show up in confessional accounts in France, England, and Normandy. In a northern French village in 1599, a woman under torture (Reyne Percheval) confessed that “she had dressed her team of toads in red, green, and yellow cloth, and had mixed their venom with water to make a concoction that could rot apples and pears.”<sup>6</sup> Similarly, multiple confessions would confirm the existence of spell casting and ointments (salve, unguent), attributing them special properties.

In other words, such convergent accounts all functioned to affirm plausible, believable causal mechanisms that could *plausibly* explain extraordinary phenomena. Such congruity did not have to be identical—the appearance of the salves could be different. They need only be congruent enough to affirm the existence of a particular class of mental object. Many objects could have different manifestations—as the mental object “human” has its varied manifestations, from an infant to an elderly person.

#### REMARKABLE ACCOUNT CONVERGENCE AND DETAIL-CONGRUITY

Congruence across cases—say, the mention of pitchforks in several different towns—is impressive in its own right. But *detailed congruity in empirical details* was also found *within* many individual cases. Different accounts often converge on specific points. Relating to the case of Anne Fessler (in Chap. 2), rather than different sources documenting different extraordinary signs, several sources may confirm the same extraordinary signs.

For example, historian Lyndal Roper noted that, in the 1580s and 1590s, “the stories women told [about witches] were virtually interchangeable. The Devil came dressed in black, wearing a black hat with a feather on it. His name was nearly always Federle, or Federlin ‘The little feather’.” Roper further cited that in a witch scare that took place in Augsburg, Germany, around 1723–1726, where children were the center

<sup>6</sup>Gilbert Geis and Ivan Bunn, *A Trial of Witches: A Seventeenth-Century Witchcraft Prosecution* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), 50.

of the panic, “nearly all the children accused a woman they called ‘The Seamstress’ of having seduced them.”<sup>7</sup> In a mass trial that took place in Salzburg, Austria, around the 1680s, more than fifty boys ranging from nine to sixteen years old, upon being interrogated, admitted to being seduced by a legendary sorcerer named Jackl.<sup>8</sup> Historian Julian Goodare quotes from the Salazar documents that “In the Basque region of Spain, several witches confessed that they were accompanied to the sabbath by ‘dressed toads;’ toads with human faces and clothes.”<sup>9</sup>

Therefore, a question remains concerning such congruities within individual cases. It is one thing that coercion yields confession, yet it is another entirely when multiple confessions, perhaps stretching across cases, start to concur with one another. General “agreement” on popular imageries, such as a toad—instead of, say, a seagull or a bird—can be accounted for by local customs and rumors. But the congruence of more *specific* details is more puzzling and offers a fascinating impression of the plausibility of the ideas.

To explore this curious phenomenon, let us briefly consider a German case in Trier. This case shows just how many forms of “evidence” converged to besiege the life of one man: Dietrich Flade.

### *The Trier Episode*

The witch hunt at Trier, Germany, in the 1580s was indeed a spectacle that had arguably inspired further witch hunts in the region, if not all of Germany. Starting with isolated cases, the hunt at Trier expanded to involve thousands of people and led to 300 executions within a few years. Many new, shocking elements that the city had not previously encountered came to the surface. Renowned officials of high social status—at that time normally provided protection from witch prosecutions—were ultimately prosecuted. The most prominent figure was Dr. Dietrich Flade—the vice-governor and one of the richest men in the city, a city judge, and the dean of the law school at the University of Trier—who sought to flee

<sup>7</sup>Lyndal Roper, *Witch Craze: Terror and Fantasy in Baroque Germany* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004), 85, 215, 210.

<sup>8</sup>Robert S. Walinski-Kiehl, “The Devil’s Children: Child Witch-Trials in Early Modern Germany,” in *Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Merry E. Wiesner (Boston, MA, and New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 2007), 128.

<sup>9</sup>Julian Goodare, *The European Witch-Hunt* (London and New York: Routledge, 2016), 215–16.

the city but was held at the gate. A number of children and respectable people participated in Flade's denunciations.<sup>10</sup>

The first significant evidence appeared when a fifteen-year-old boy (Matthias, born at Weisskirch) was arrested for witchcraft in another jurisdiction in 1587. The new Trier governor, Johann Zandt von Merl, was a zealous witch prosecutor and Flade's political enemy, who organized much of the evidence against Flade.<sup>11</sup> According to him, Matthias, "being examined, did at once, without torture," confessed to having attended the witch sabbaths. Among many "richly clad people" there were "two grantees in showy array." The boy did not name Dr. Flade explicitly. But "the clothing they then wore and their bodily figure, correspond entirely with Dr. Flade...in...physical proportions and in all other details." When Matthias attended a flogging, he recognized Dr. Flade immediately and declared that he had seen Dr. Flade at the sabbath.<sup>12</sup>

In the same year, on July 1, a second denunciation emerged. A woman ("Maria, the old Meieress" of Ehrang) from another village also testified against Dr. Flade, stating she had repeatedly witnessed him attending the sabbath. It was said that Maria "had remained firm as to Dr. Flade till her death"—"at the stake before all the crowd, she would have kept shouting

<sup>10</sup> Jonathan B. Durrant, *Witchcraft, Gender and Society in Early Modern Germany* (Leiden, The Netherlands, and London: Brill), 40; H. C. Erik Midelfort, *Witch Hunting in Southwestern Germany 1562–1684: The Social and Intellectual Foundations* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1972), 98–112; Wolfgang Behringer, *Witchcraft Persecutions in Bavaria: Popular Magic, Religious Zealotry And Reason of State In Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, UK, and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 221, 225–29; William Monter, "Witch Trials in Continental Europe: 1560–1660," in *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe: The Period of Witch Trials*, eds. Bengt Ankarloo, Stuart Clark, and William Monter (London: Continuum and Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), 23. The Trier episode had an organically developed, bottom-up character of development, according to historian Wolfgang Behringer, compared to some of the later cases in Germany that took on a more "rationalized," top-down, efficient bureaucratic approach to witchcraft prosecution—notably the witch-hunts in Ellwangen around 1611–1618, Eichstätt (1613), Bamberg (1616), and Würzburg (1616).

<sup>11</sup> The context, according to Robin Briggs, is that Dr. Dietrich Flade, who served as vice-governor of Trier, had taken a moderate approach to witch persecution, which went against some witch-hunters with a more enthusiastic sentiment. After an enthusiastic witch-hunter, Johann Zandt von Merl, became governor in 1584, he had a strong motivation to confront Flade. George Lincoln Burr, *The Fate of Dietrich Flade* (New York: G.P. Putnam's, 1894), available online at The Internet Archive, <https://archive.org/details/fateofdietrichfl00burr-iala> (accessed 19 November 2017).

<sup>12</sup> Burr, 24.



out his name if they had not stopped her.”<sup>13</sup> Within a month, another man (Loch Hans of Schweich) made an accusation similar to Maria’s.

The rumors about Dr. Flade spread quickly in the region by the time there were three denunciations. Before October 3, 1587, several more witches in two other jurisdictions named Dr. Flade during their confessions. “In April of 1588, Margarethe of Euren...testified that Dr. Flade had come to the witch sabbath in a golden wagon”<sup>14</sup> and ordered all crops to be destroyed, using snails as a means. When she and some others resisted, Dr. Flade hit her with a stick. In fear she muttered the name of God, and the assembly suddenly vanished. The governor permitted Dr. Flade to send three friends—all with significant social status—to question Margarethe. But Margarethe sternly insisted on her account; one of the friends said, “it seemed as if the Devil spoke out of her.”<sup>15</sup> Another convicted witch came forward a month later, confirming the story about the snails in her confession. By late August, the tally of accusers and witnesses was “no less than fourteen witches” from six jurisdictions; some did not explicitly mention Dr. Flade by name but “spoke only of lordly folk who seemed to come from Trier.”<sup>16</sup> By late September, there were six more corroborating testimonies.

On January 14, 1589, Johann von Schönenberg, the archbishop-elect of Trier,<sup>17</sup> laid down the following case before the theological faculty in Trier. It is difficult to capture the nuanced processes that construct coherence without quoting the archbishop-elect’s statement at length:

into what general suspicion of witchcraft our Judge at Trier, Dr. Dietrich Flade, has fallen, and what has since taken place as to his flight. Now, although at first, when he was accused by only one or two of the persons executed for witchcraft, we thought the matter hardly worthy of notice, and therefore for a while, on account of his rank, let the matter drift; yet

<sup>13</sup> Burr, 25.

<sup>14</sup> Burr, 28.

<sup>15</sup> Burr, 28.

<sup>16</sup> Burr, 30.

<sup>17</sup> The Archbishop-Elector (or prince-elect, or simply referred to as “the Elector” in Burr’s story) was an appointment by the Catholic Church to oversee ecclesiastical matters and church affairs in an ecclesiastical principality of the Holy Roman Empire. Johann von Schönenberg played a facilitating role in witch prosecutions in the region. Gary K. Waite, “Sixteenth-Century Religious Reform and The Witch-Hunts,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe and Colonial America*, ed. Brian P. Levack (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 502.

afterward the scandal grew ever greater, and the accusations of the witches, **both old and young, men and women**, became **so frequent** that we were led to have the trials, in so far as they related to him, excerpted, and find that **twenty-three executed men and women have confessed against him, and persisted firmly in the assertion to their end** that he was with and among them at their witch-sabbaths, took the lead in evil suggestions, and helped personally to carry them out. **And these confessions come not from one court alone, but from many different ones—from Trier, Maximin, Paulin, Euren, Esch, St. Matthias, Pfalzel, Saarburt, and elsewhere;** and the suspicion is increased by the fact that **others accused by these same persons have been found guilty and have confessed**—among them some of **considerable respectability**, except that partly through avarice, partly through unchastity and other devilish impulses, they have fallen into this wretchedness. All this you will learn from the enclosed Extract, and especially **what a young boy who was misled into such witch-doings confessed freely and without constraint against him, Flade, though he had never before known him, with description of his person, rank, and appearance, and how, seeing him by chance at an execution, he immediately, without anybody's suggestion, pointed him out and said that he was the one who had been always at the witch-sabbaths.** Well known to you, moreover, is what afterwards occurred in connection with his **second attempt at flight.** And we send you also herewith the petition the said Dr. Flade wrote us, wherein at the end he **almost betrays himself**, desiring us to allow him to **enter the monastic life**, and offering us the **disposition of his property**; a thing which surely, if he were not conscious of guilt, **was not likely to be done by him, a man notoriously avaricious** and, as shown by an investigation heretofore made, of such character that by reason of his avarice justice was almost ill-administered, so that we perhaps already had cause enough to dismiss him from his office.<sup>18</sup>

This statement was not merely a mechanical listing of witnesses by the speaker, even if the listing is remarkable in its own right. There is a flow to the archbishop-electors' narrative, signaling an *acceleration* of evidence. This dynamic is important, since it conveys an impression that there could be more evidence forthcoming. He also signaled his own attitude of reservation—that one or two accusations would have been a “matter hardly worthy of notice.” These simple words imply an evidential selection process, which ranked evidence based on a hierarchy of rigor. Adding to the appearance of objective reasoning is the governor's allowance of Flade's

<sup>18</sup> Burr, *The Fate of Dietrich Flade*, 36–37.

three friends of high social status to question a witness, a process that seems to show a desire to guard against backstage manipulations, ensuring that the coherence found was being checked by the combined credibility of Flade's peers.

The diversity added to the internal coherence. The archbishop-elect first cited age ("both old and young"), then gender ("men and women"), and that it was a repeated phenomenon ("became so frequent"). Twenty-three witnesses was a remarkable number, and they were largely presented as individuals independent of one another. A further diversity cited was geographical and judicial, since these witnesses came from not just one court but "many different ones," listing no fewer than eight. It played down the likelihood of a centralized coordination and highlighted an organically developed character.

There was also a technique resembling a synchronizing mathematical formula to maximize and calculate the total amount of credibility counted toward the evidence provided.

The credibility of these twenty-three characters was established in different ways. First, some of the witnesses had already helped to officially convict some witches of "considerable respectability" (except for their recent witchcraft involvement). Layering on top of such asserted personal credibility, by citing that the witnesses came from separate courts, he also borrowed the authority of eight separate courts. Finally, he assigned additional credibility by these confessors' motivation and attitude. The boy seemed to have little reason to be so adamant against Flade as an individual—"he had never before known him." By saying that they "persisted firmly in the assertion to their end," these witnesses were in no way uncertain about what they saw. There were no lackluster denunciations, and there seemed to be little reason to believe in any ulterior motive if they remained consistent in their attitude and assertions when they were about to meet "the end." Elsewhere in the dossier, it was recorded that two priests convicted of witchcraft were among the accusers, and they were observed to have repeated the accusation face-to-face to Dr. Flade upon being confronted.<sup>19</sup> By contrast, we saw Flade's character at play—his repeated attempts at flight, and his backdoor attempt at negotiation that also could be called bribery.

The purported diversity and distribution of evidential sources mattered. The more the speaker emphasized the non-manipulative (random or

<sup>19</sup> Burr, 38.

accidental) discovery of convergence—by emphasizing or perhaps even exaggerating the sources' difference—the more these discourses embellish the impression of internal coherence.

Although other cases might not have the same number or diversity of witnesses, a variant of this “calculation” approach can also be seen in many other smaller cases: the phenomenon of *account convergence* is then followed by attending to *credibility convergence*, and then mingled with *authority convergence*. When the elector and the governor incorporated themselves into the narrative statement, they lent their own authority to the final judgment.

Narratively, account convergence represents something like a pinnacle event, accumulated and synthesized from earlier moments of mystery, puzzle, and denial. The main event was the collapse of a hero, reputationally and physically, with execution as the final, unsettling resolution.

The narrative format implies many points of evidence that argumentation does not deliver—such as the tone and words that demonstrate unqualified endorsement, and the tone of caution that the narrator assumes. They may not be evidence in a legal sense, but they still bolster the trustworthiness of an idea. In some other cases, we see that the identity of the accusers may involve one's own family members, spouses, and friends—people who have knowledge and long-standing relations with the accused—telling stories consistent with the multiple dimensions of an accused's history, motive, and so forth. These flavorful, qualitative details captured in narratives complement the “colder” arguments regarding legal violations.

### BACKSTAGE PROCESSES AND INTERNAL COHERENCE

Compact symbolic structures only hold up insofar as the surface validity of individual facts is not challenged. The internal coherence formed by “magical” correlations and illusionary convergence, however, could be broken by the suspicion of dishonesty. This process often entails realizing that certain systematic manipulation processes that may have taken place backstage have caused the extraordinary phenomena at the front stage to be produced.

We can use the Trier trial as a case in point. Deliberately kept hidden or deemphasized—and therefore filtered—in the archbishop-elect's statement was the information that Governor Johann Zandt von Merl was Flade's political enemy and that Flade might be widely disliked

("notoriously avaricious"). Once brought to attention, these acts of filtering raise questions as to whether there were backstage processes that went beyond the official documents, as a general attitude of bias seems to be evident. Continuing this line of thought, the audience may start to wonder what else might have been kept off the front stage. Were there characters Flade personally knew or informants inside the government persuading Flade to flee the city, foretelling his fate ahead? Was there someone who Flade had attempted to make a deal with in secret, hoping to save his life in exchange of disposal of his property? Did little boy Matthias really "being examined, did at once, without torture" when he testified? Did other witnesses providing incriminating information against Flade really not know what he looked like in advance?

Definitive answers to these specific questions, pertaining to any one specific case, will probably be never be found. But historical skeptics and contemporary historians have given us important clues that could plausibly explain—occasionally, even clearly demystify—such seemingly magical convergence and coherence between multiple accounts.

These clues pertain to a few backstage processes: (1) coercion; (2) discursive-elicitation structures; (3) informational leakage. These backstage processes contaminate the presumed independence of account givers' knowledge of one another.

### *Coercion, Seen and Unseen*

Both physical and psychological coercion underpin many witch hunts. The word "torture" is an abstract concept in the witch-hunt literature; it encompasses all kinds of physical abuse and deprivation, even if they may not constitute "torture" in the official sense of the term. Food deprivation, boredom, the deprivation of sunlight, the prolonged deprivation of clothing or the means to keep warm in cold temperatures were some of the phenomena documented by witch-hunt scholars.

Prolonged exposure to stress and extreme uncertainty alone can break people. More mildly, presenting different kinds of incentives—positive or negative—as well as a carefully selected set of information or misinformation could induce psychological torment. Telling a subject that their own siblings and friends have confessed against them; that powerful or corrupt members in the community have already dominated the judicial process; or that they could avoid terrible suffering before, during, or after execution if they could demonstrate true repentance (by offering an honest

confession) could compel the will of many subjects.<sup>20</sup> Though they are not physical, these are acts of *coercion*.

Torture and other forms of coercion (social, political, and psychological) are only half-visible to the public. Court verdicts certainly publicize that torture was approved and used in a number of cases. However, the details of what went on behind the scenes in the torture chamber—such as the dialogue between the interrogator and the prisoner, or the way the torture was actually administered—were mostly hidden from the public, and even in internal documents.

*Torture as a reluctant means toward truth.* On paper, within the Holy Roman Empire, torture in the early modern period was treated with skepticism; it was considered a reluctant alternative when a voluntary confession was not attained, or if eyewitnesses were not forthcoming. For this reason, there were efforts to subject torture to the regulatory guidelines, such as those built into a legal code known as the *Carolina*.<sup>21</sup> However, those regulatory guidelines tended to allow considerable latitude for local interpretative and discretion, especially for exceptional crimes (*crimen exceptum* in Latin) such as witchcraft, for which normal conventions could be suspended.<sup>22</sup>

For normal crimes, the *Carolina* cautioned against the excessive use of torture—ideally it should only be applied on the same day.<sup>23</sup> In principle, torture should not be repeated, a position supported by demonologist

<sup>20</sup>In one Catalan secular court in 1627 in Barcelona, Spain, that yielded a “low rate of ‘torture failure’,” a woman (Joana Trias) “seated nearly naked” on a bench, was told by her torturer: “**You already know that you are sentenced to death** and to be tortured in order that you will tell the truth: with which persons have you used the art of witchcraft. Tell the truth; you do not want your flesh to be maltreated.” Gunnar W. Knutsen, *Servants of Satan and Masters of Demons: The Spanish Inquisition’s Trials for Superstition, Valencia and Barcelona, 1478–1700* (Turnhout, BE: Brepols Publishers n.v., 2009), 109.

<sup>21</sup>“The princes and magistrates of the hundreds of territorial states and independent cities of the empire had been powerful enough to force Charles V to include the ‘salvatory’ clause in the Carolina. According to this clause, the legislators of princedoms and free cities could choose whether to accept the norms of the Carolina in their respective lands or to replace them with their own laws.” Johannes Dillinger, *“Evil People”: A Comparative Study of Witch Hunts in Swabian Austria and the Electorate of Trier*, trans. Laura Stokes (Charlottesville, VA, and London, UK: University of Virginia Press, [1999]2009), 3. Johann von Schöenberg, for example, passed a *Witch Trial Ordinance for the Electorate of Trier*. He bound the judges and officials to the provisions of the Carolina.” Dillinger, 36.

<sup>22</sup>Dillinger, 106–9.

<sup>23</sup>Brian P. Levack, *The Witch-Hunt in Early Modern Europe. Fourth Edition* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 76.

Martin Delrio. Although a judge was allowed to order repetition if needed, three repetitions was commonly viewed by legal experts such as Delrio to be the maximum, and those judges who permitted torture to take place beyond the third round were called “butchers.”<sup>24</sup> If the subject could withstand torture, she or he, in theory, should be acquitted. Moreover, they should not be tortured again unless new, compelling evidence surfaced. To safeguard against confessions purely resulting from the use of force, legal procedures generally required that a confession would only be valid if the accused party willingly, freely, and voluntarily repeated an admission in court outside of the torture chamber.

Many localities in the Holy Roman Empire were indeed in conformity with these rules of judicial caution. It can be argued that the use of *any* torture, even within the norms stated in the *Carolina*, was excessive and unjustified, for even mild torture could yield false confessions. An implicit line of justification—one that survives today—is that the right amount of coercion would overwhelm those with psychological weaknesses to telling the truth, and the truth would subsequently be checked for details and coherence. The principle, in other words, is that people are not convicted *just* because of physical pain.

*Creative disguises and recoding.* These standards, however, were regularly breached or “creatively interpreted,” as shown in the literature on witch panics. For example, per the spirit of the *Carolina*, torture was not supposed to be repeated, although it routinely was. The literary definition of “repeated” becomes irrelevant when considering that some applications of torture could be grouped together in the same sessions—such as an application of a thumbscrew, then of a strappado, and then of a thumb-screw with a strappado. Five applications of thumbscrews could be grouped together into one session.<sup>25</sup> Blatant violations of the *Carolina*—at least the law’s spirit, if not also its semantics—also took place. Measured in number of applications alone, the highest record is perhaps that of Maria Holl of Nördlingen, Germany, who faced sixty-two applications of torture.<sup>26</sup>

The duration of torture is also worth discussing. Using himself as a standard, Jesuit Father Friedrich Spee deemed intense pain lasting a

<sup>24</sup> Friedrich von Spee, *Cautio Criminalis, or a Book on Witch Trials*, trans. Marcus Hellyer (Charlottesville, VA, and London: University of Virginia Press, 2003), 86.

<sup>25</sup> Alison Rowlands, *Witchcraft Narratives in Germany: Rothenburg, 1561–1652* (New York: Manchester University Press, 2003), 45.

<sup>26</sup> Roper, *Witch Craze*, 50, 277.

quarter of an hour (fifteen minutes) to be quite severe. He believed that if the avid proponents of torture—many of them scholars of criminal law—were themselves “subjected to torture for even half of a quarter hour, they would at once cast all their wisdom and pompous philosophy to the ground.”<sup>27</sup> Spee cited Pope Paul III’s decree to prohibit administering torture for a long time, meaning about an hour. But at his day, even “the mildest judges (for it is not pleasant to talk about the harsher ones)...customarily use torture for a whole hour or two half hours.”<sup>28</sup> Some local authorities rearticulated that repeated torture by dividing one hour of torture into separate days, or that frequent torture was performed “not by means of *repetition* but of *continuation*.”<sup>29</sup> Elsewhere, torture sessions of ten to twelve hours were mentioned in historical documents.<sup>30</sup>

Therefore, when we see the wordings (codes) of “voluntary,” “free” confessions made “without torture,” it could mean that the subjects were repeating a confession “freely” outside of the torture chamber. And should the subject refuse to make such confessions, they could be dragged back to the torture chamber for the “continuation” of their torture. In some localities, torture could be “continued” day after day, involving months of detainment.

The methods of torture also reveal a split between front-stage impressions and actual events. Addressing the excessive use of force as a problem, the Catholic Church issued an instructional manual issued by a commissioner of the Holy Office (*Instructio pro formandis processibus in causis Strigum*, abbreviated as the *Instructio*) around the 1620s. Beginning with a preamble denouncing “their [some judges] terrible and unbearable methods of carrying out trials,”<sup>31</sup> it stated that the use of the strappado was only meant to hold a prisoner in the air, with their hands tied behind their back; it should not be worsened “by shaking, extra weight, or a block attached to the feet; the procedure was to involve only lifting the suspect by a rope.”<sup>32</sup> Yet, such practices were common for those who were placed on a torture device, which often led to the dislocation of joints. Some

<sup>27</sup> von Spee, *Cautio Criminalis*, 85.

<sup>28</sup> von Spee, 76.

<sup>29</sup> von Spee, 93–94; see also Goodare, *The European Witch-Hunt*, 207.

<sup>30</sup> Lea, *Materials*, vol. III, 1151.

<sup>31</sup> Rainer Decker, *Witchcraft and the Papacy: An Account Drawing on the Formerly Secret Records of the Roman Inquisition*, trans. H. C. Erik Midelfort (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, [2003]2008), 118.

<sup>32</sup> Decker, 121.



subjects were obviously crippled for life.<sup>33</sup> Levack noted that the severest torture device, called the *squassation*, was found to have weights ranging from 40 to 660 pounds.<sup>34</sup> There are other objects, such as an enigmatic “witch-chair” device mentioned by Lea that brought multiple subjects to “confession,”<sup>35</sup> which constitute some of the many colorful descriptions historians have painted about the backstage environment.

### *Narrative Shell and Other Institutional Elicitation Structures*

Witchcraft stories did not freely flow from the mouths of the accused; many were systematically *elicited* according to certain protocols. This fact makes the backstage interaction between the interrogators and suspects exceptionally important in the detailed information about witchcraft that came to surface in “voluntary” confessions.

*Suggestive questions.* Leading questions or suggestive questioning were explicitly prohibited in the *Carolina*, and this prohibition extended to magical crimes. Contemporary research shows that suggestive cross-examination could implant false memories in subjects. By repeatedly questioning a person whether they had seen Isabelle at the hut, the image of Isabelle could then be potentially implanted into a subject’s memory. The effect was most likely even more pronounced if the subject was senile, drugged (by themselves or by the torturer), deluded, sleep-deprived, psychologically stressed, or mentally ill.<sup>36</sup>

Fredrich Spee described an exchange between himself and a former judge. The judge recounted:

When the accused were hanging in torture, having already confessed themselves, they were questioned about others. After they had persistently denied that they knew of any others, the judge would then ask whether they knew of Titia? Whether they had seen her at the sabbath? If a prisoner dared to answer that she really knew nothing bad about her, then the judge immediately turned to the torturer and said, ‘Pull—stretch the rack.’ Stretched, overwhelmed by pain, she exclaimed, ‘Stop, stop, I know Titia, I know her, I won’t deny it.’ Then this denunciation was entered into the record. Next

<sup>33</sup> von Spee, *Cautio Criminalis*, 76; see also Goodare, *The European Witch-Hunt*, 207.

<sup>34</sup> Levack, *The Witch-Hunt*, 4th ed., 76.

<sup>35</sup> Lea, *Materials*, vol. III, 1151–56.

<sup>36</sup> Goodare, *The European Witch-Hunt*, 211–12.

the judge would immediately ask about Sempronia also... And so it went on until he extracted at least three or four names from each of them.<sup>37</sup>

It is not clear how many of these backstage actions took place. But if they existed, such methods would certainly explain why specific names—detailed congruity in empirical details—could be generated. And if such inquisitors worked in multiple regions, as Spee had stated, extraordinary congruity across regional locations could also be explained.<sup>38</sup>

Some historians who have examined first-hand primary documents acknowledge the general methods of suggestive questioning. An example is the famous Bamberg trial in 1628. Johannes Junius, the mayor of Bamberg, Germany, described in a letter to his daughter how he was pressured to give the appropriate names, streets, and details to his interrogator. Suggestive cues were given regarding what would count as appropriate. When the interrogator claimed: “The rascal knows one on the marketplace, is with him daily, and yet won’t name him,”<sup>39</sup> Junius guessed that it was one Burgomaster Dietmeyer and subsequently named him. He was also prompted to confess his crime in a similar manner, giving the interrogator the desired details.

*Ordering of questions and narrative shell structure.* In other words, there seems to be a certain conversational or discourse structure that runs in parallel to the suggestive questions themselves. Sociologist Hugh Mehan<sup>40</sup> had observed this kind of structure in everyday discourse between teachers and students and between parents and children. The structure begins with Initiation (I) that elicits a Reply (R). If a desirable response is provided, a positive Evaluation (E) is often given. If the response given is undesired, sometimes a negative evaluation is rendered. Another round of Initiation (I)—perhaps embellished with more clues—would usually be given, until ultimately a desired response was reached. Informal questioning and reply structure thus allowed a fruitful way for the subjects to “say” from their own mouths what was actually in the heads of the elicitors.

<sup>37</sup> von Spee, *Cautio Criminalis*, 79–80.

<sup>38</sup> von Spee, 79.

<sup>39</sup> Department of History, University of Pennsylvania, ed., *Translations and Reprints from the Original Sources of European History, Volume III* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1912), 84, <https://archive.org/download/translationsrepr1896univ/translationsrepr1896univ.pdf>

<sup>40</sup> Hugh Mehan, “‘What Time is It, Denise?’”: Asking Known Information Questions in Classroom Discourse,” *Theory into Practice* 18, no. 4 (1979): 285–94.

While detailed transcripts are not available for these torture sessions that would allow us to analyze the elicitation structures, more light is shed from the questioning protocol.

The general ordering and list of questions appear to be designed to elicit enough common points that could be utilized. Kramer and Sprenger proposed some general instructions for questioning the accused and witnesses in their treatise *Malleus Maleficarum*.<sup>41</sup> Their instructions showed little restraint regarding what questions might be “suggestive.” For example, one question suggested for witnesses was “whether he saw or heard Such-and-Such doing such-and-such thing.” And after questioning, if a person knew about person X, the follow-up question would be “whether any of those related to him by blood had in the past been burned to ashes because of acts of sorcery or been considered suspect.”<sup>42</sup> Regarding the accused, after a sworn oath, the first question listed was, “who are his parents and whether they are living or dead,” then “whether they died a natural death or were burned to ashes.” Lineage ties, in other words, were advised to be suggested by the questioner. Kramer explained to the reader that lineage was asked because it was a common practice among sorceresses to offer their babies to the demons, and therefore “the whole progeny is tainted.” If the accused provided a correct answer, then it reinforced the idea that parents indeed offered their children to the demons.

By design, some questions were potentially going to elicit visually vivid images. One item that investigators prompted to question was: “how the effect that the child or domestic animal was so quickly affected with sorcery.” A confessor must, then, create an explanation that is bound to be visually interesting. There are several more questions that immediately follow (see Table 3.2).

The ordering of the questions also helped to reveal how a visual “narrative” was created so much more easily by repeated questions. In modern-day parlance, the protocol was like a software program to help screenwriters or story developers create stories with considerably less effort. A *narrative shell structure* was embedded in the protocol to elicit empirical

<sup>41</sup> Christopher S. Mackay, *The Hammer of Witches: A Complete Translation of the Malleus Maleficarum* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 513–24.

<sup>42</sup> Mackay, 516.

**Table 3.2** Ordering of questions in *Malleus Maleficarum*

<i>Sequencing of questions</i>	
1	“Item. Questioned, ‘And how is it that you said that she would never have a healthy day, and this is what happened?’ she said.”
2	“Item. If she denies everything, she should be asked about other acts of sorcery that were inflicted on other witnesses, for instance their domestic animals or children.”
3	“Item. Questioned as to why she was seen in the fields or in the barn with the domestic animals, touching them in the way that sorceresses do, she said...”
4	“Item. Questioned as to why it was that she touched the child, and later it was not well, she said...”
5	“Item. Questioned as to what she was doing in the fields at the time of the storm, and so on about many other events.”
6	“Item. What caused the fact that while she had one cow or two, she had a larger supply of milk than the neighboring women with four or six?”
7	“Item. Why does she remain in a state of adultery or as a concubine?”

information.<sup>43</sup> Several possibilities had already been set in advance, and rather than having the accused invent everything from a vacuum, the ordering gave the accused some choices regarding the paths and details of narrative development. The accused could choose to reject the last X, but then must choose Y, Z, or W. At the end, Kramer and Sprenger said that “she should be questioned several times about the articles for which she was denounced to see whether or not she maintains her story.”<sup>44</sup> This mechanism of repeated questioning of the same witness helps to smooth out or eliminate incongruities.

It is not necessary that executioners or “witch-finders” have read and agreed with the *Malleus Maleficarum*. But historians have found at least limited evidence that these techniques had been applied in some witch trials during which congruent accounts occurred.

Below is the initial protocol against a woman, Anna Roleffes of Harxbüttel, also known as Tempel Anneke.<sup>45</sup> The court, after receiving

<sup>43</sup>For a contemporary exploration of behind-the-scene interrogation practices, see Gary C. David, Anne Warfield Rawls, and James Trainum, “Playing the Interrogation Game: Rapport, Coercion, and Confessions in Police Interrogations,” *Symbolic Interaction*, 41, no.1 (February 2018): 3–24.

<sup>44</sup>Mackay, 521.

<sup>45</sup>Peter A. Morton, ed., *The Trial of Tempel Anneke: Records of a Witchcraft Trial in Bruinswick, Germany, 1663*, trans. Barbara Dahms (Ontario, Canada, and New York: Broadview Press, 2006), 6–9, folio 2.

reports of prior trials, drafted up a list of sixty-six pre-structured questions, creating a shell structure for a co-constructed narrative between the interrogator and the accused:

41. Whether she didn't order Lüdecke Tau's wife to bring the head of a dead animal from Bortfeld into the house of *Inquisitin*,
42. What did she do with it, and what did she need it for,
43. Whether she didn't throw the head into the water so that when Hans Harves rowed over the spot, he should get the injury to the leg,
44. Whether she didn't offer to help them when dying befell the sheep in Harxbüttel,
45. Whether she didn't bring the dying amongst the sheep through sorcery,
46. How, and by which means, did she want to help the sheep,
47. Whether she didn't burn a sheep from the herd to powder in the oven, cooked something in a kettle, and administered it to the sheep.<sup>46</sup>

Anna Roleffes was brought from the interrogation room to the courtroom several times. Moreover, the court repeatedly revised the list of questions. While Roleffes rejected both of these incidents, she ultimately admitted to others in her confession. These questions were certainly leading and suggestive, yet she did not have to admit to every suggested possible crime that was built into the protocol. This detail is significant, since it shows the less mechanical process of extracting satisfactory confessions. Anna Roleffes' final formal confession made "without torture" included abusing the host, fornicating with the Devil, laming two other people's legs, killing a number of cows by divination, and miscellaneous other diabolical acts. She was ultimately to be "given mercy"—instead of being burnt by fire while alive—that "her head will be cut off with a sword and shall be burned together with the body."<sup>47</sup>

### *Undisclosed Informational Leakage*

Informational leakage also helps to explain extraordinary account convergence. This explanation is less subtle: some details turn out to be similar or identical because the details had been circulated between people.

<sup>46</sup> Morton, 7–8.

<sup>47</sup> Morton, 119–20, folio 44–45.

Several backstage channels could exist. First, rumors often circulated widely before an arrest happened, including some details regarding particular events. If the rumors contained details, then the accused could learn of them in advance.

Second, the accused were not necessarily isolated from others after their initial arrest. Sometimes, there were periods in which torture was applied on different days, and the accused were sent home for the time being. This system may allow the accused to find out about the rumors.

Lea reported accounts of “crafty and experienced spies” being imprisoned with the accused, and these spies could relate to them information, true or false.<sup>48</sup> Witnesses with a notary had been secretly dispatched to overhear how the accused interacted with alleged accomplices or spies disguised as sympathizers.<sup>49</sup> There were also accounts of torture taking place not in private, but in a place that was “semi-public, in the presence of advocates, notaries, discreet and experienced men who might wish to be present.”<sup>50</sup> In one case cited by Spee, an interrogation happened inside a village hut, “where boys lay by the cracks in the door and heard everything.”<sup>51</sup>

Third, there was a range of interactions that prisoners could have with others during imprisonment. Even if they often were placed in isolated cells, they interacted with the interrogators, the guards, the executioner, the executioner’s wife, the scribe or notary, and various others.<sup>52</sup> Through his personal knowledge of the Holy Roman Empire, Spee—who was officially sent as a secret observer, therefore afforded the rare privilege of a look from the “inside”—argued that interrogators who know confessional and denunciation statements deliberately questioned the accused “on the very same points and details [in the denunciation]...as if leading him by the hand.”<sup>53</sup> The torturers, the prison warders, the court personnel—with or without the interrogator’s knowledge—could leak the information to the imprisoned.<sup>54</sup>

<sup>48</sup> Lea, *Materials*, vol. II, 527.

<sup>49</sup> Lea, 862.

<sup>50</sup> Lea, 862.

<sup>51</sup> von Spee, *Cautio Criminalis*, 111.

<sup>52</sup> There are variations from place to place about the system of imprisonment, interrogation, and torture. Sometimes the executioner was also the interrogator, but other times the executioner appointed one or two officials as interrogators. A notary was sometimes present.

<sup>53</sup> von Spee, 110.

<sup>54</sup> von Spee, 81–83, 110–11. See also H. C. Erik Midelfort, *Witch Hunting in Southwestern Germany 1562–1684: The Social and Intellectual Foundations* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1972), 107–8.

## MATERIAL VERIFICATION AND THE LOUDON POSSESSION EPISODE

Material evidence can be conceptualized as finding the knife that a murderer uses to kill a person—ideally a right-sized one fitting the wound, found hidden away and smeared with blood. The lack of this kind of evidence was not critical, but its presence could powerfully enrich and corroborate stories.

The common and routinized form was for a judge to find a witch's pot, charms, powders, potions, symbols, and ointments. If an accused had indeed made herbal potions, received powder from a healer, or had attempted to use mind-altering substances, then it was not difficult for the court to discover such substances. Otherwise, an unusual object or a left-over pot of soup could be named by the accused, under torture, in the hope of satisfying the interrogators. New inconclusive signs—strange symbols and carvings, for example—could be “discovered” during a search. They also could be outrightly fabricated or discursively distorted, and therefore fraudulent.<sup>55</sup>

Aside from extraordinary things, mundane objects—such as pins, feathers, animal teeth, glass pieces, or any hard objects being vomited, which seemed to be common in possession stories—were only extraordinary because of the *contexts* in which they emerged. They may have a weird or repulsive aesthetic to them, especially when they are combined together in certain contexts, but they themselves need not be extraordinary. Eva's cakes, and the narration of them, would be a good example.

Darr relates a case in 1582 in England in which an eight-year-old girl saw her stepmother (Ales Hunt) feeding milk to “two little things like horses” using a “black dish”; subsequently, a black dish indeed turned up after a search. A black dish was symbolically unusual; the color black was often associated with diabolical things, and the decision to use it for feeding animals adds color to the narrative. And if a “black dish” was also found in the possession of other accused witches, then a case of extraordinary correlation can be built. Horses may have been ordinary, but “two little things like horses” violated the typological boundary associated with animals.<sup>56</sup>

<sup>55</sup> Gustav Henningsen, *The Salazar Documents: Inquisitor Alonso de Salazar Frias and Others on the Basque Witch Persecution* (Leiden, The Netherlands, and Boston, MA: Brill, 2004), 88–95, 298–314.

<sup>56</sup> Orna Alyagon Darr, *Marks of an Absolute Witch: Evidentiary Dilemmas in Early Modern England* (Farnham, England, and Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing, 2011), 107.

In a similar manner, in the investigations overseen by the notorious witchfinder General Matthew Hopkins in England, if some creatures appeared near a prisoner's confinement, those beings could be interpreted as "imps" or "familiars." To make the phenomenon more real and alive, sometimes the accused were enticed to "summon" their imps in exchange for their freedom or more lenient punishment. In the case of Elizabeth Clarke, it was observed that "within half an hour" there appeared "a white thing in the likeness of a Cat." Again, a white cat would have been ordinary, but a "white thing in the likeness of a Cat"—a different code—would clearly more qualify as an extraordinary object. So would something with the "likeness of a rat" passing through a prison cell.<sup>57</sup>

Supernatural manifestation was sometimes noted in behaviors. Some prisoners' delusions from extended sleep deprivation and solitary confinement were interpreted as "night flight" experiences with the pagan goddess Diana. Some women who masturbated in jail were seen as having had diabolic sex the previous night from the Devil's secret visit.<sup>58</sup>

A special material (physical) evidence that carries corroborative weight is that of the Devil's mark. In much of continental Europe, it was believed that the Devil (Satan) liked to leave a mark on his servant-minion once a pact was formed. This mark was believed to be insensate; blood is not drawn when cut or penetrated. Variations exist as to whether this mark is in visible or secret places, as well as other properties. In England, the Devil's mark was much more commonly associated with a "teat"—which may stick out an inch from the body—that witches used to nurture their demonic imps by letting them suckle at them. Suspects who were tortured also often had such marks.

### *The Loudon Possession Episode*

A kind of case supported by an array of colorful material evidence is possession cases, where people could see vivid symptoms from people who are purportedly afflicted. In the United States, perhaps the most well-known example is the afflicted girls in the Salem witch trials. Pertaining to continental Europe, one of the most well-known cases is the witch panic in Loudon, France. Around seventeen nuns were alleged to be bewitched in

<sup>57</sup> Darr, *Marks of an Absolute Witch*, 145–49.

<sup>58</sup> Roper, *Witch Craze*, 59.



an Ursuline convent between 1632 and 1637. The accused was a priest named Urban Grandier.<sup>59</sup>

But what kinds of symptoms—that is to say, material evidence—were present? There was one account privately written by Monsieur des Niau, counselor at la Flèche<sup>60</sup> in 1634. In des Niau's account, the nuns communicated with multiple reputable witnesses in languages that were supposed to be unknown to the possessed. The languages spoken and heard included Turkish, Spanish, Italian, Greek, German, Latin, and that of a "certain savage tribe" in America.<sup>61</sup>

Because exorcism sessions were semi-public, at one point seventy-two witnesses testified at Grandier's trial, providing testimony about the nuns' possessions—including some medical authorities. Among other things, witnesses cited that the nuns were able to stretch their legs to such an extraordinary degree that some of them had "passed their left foot over their shoulders to their cheeks" or that their tongues "issued suddenly from their mouths, horribly swollen, black, hard, and covered with pimples"; one nun's face abruptly swelled up to "three times its normal size, and...her eyes instantaneously became as large as those of a horse," and within an hour, "suddenly, in an instant, returned to her natural state, which was that of a beautiful young woman." There were also accounts of nuns' uncontrollably disrobing and committing indecent acts (including self-abuse) in front of the audience; a nun even vomited out a written pact between the Devil and Grandier, purportedly containing Grandier's signature in blood.<sup>62</sup>

<sup>59</sup> See Robert Rapley, *A Case of Witchcraft: The Trial of Urbain Grandier* (Montreal and Kingston, Canada: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1998); Levack, *The Witchcraft Sourcebook*, 252.

<sup>60</sup> "The following extraordinary account of the 'Cause Célèbre' of Urbain Grandier, the Curé of Loudun, accused of Magic and of having caused the Nuns of the Convent of Saint Ursula to be possessed of devils, is written by an eye-witness, and not only an eye-witness but an actor in the scenes he describes. It is printed at Poitiers, chez J. Thoreau et la veuve Ménier, Imprimeurs du Roi et de l' Université, 1634." "I believe two copies only are known: my own, and the one in the National Library, Paris. The writer is Monsieur des Niau, Counsellor at la Flèche, evidently a firm believer in the absurd charges brought against Grandier," Edmund Goldsmid, ed., *The History of The Devils of Loudun; The Alleged Possession of The Ursuline Nuns, and the Trial and Execution of Urbain Grandier*, trans. Edmund Goldsmid (Edinburgh: private printing, 1887–1888), 7, <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/100376836>

<sup>61</sup> See Goldsmid, 27–28.

<sup>62</sup> Rapley, *A Case of Witchcraft*, 152–53, 155–56, 170–72.

Des Niau's account of Grandier's story illustrates why the Devil's mark ought to be seen as definitive evidence of guilt:

A most convincing proof of Grandier's guilt is that one of the devils declared he had marked him in two parts of his body. His eyes were bandaged and he was examined by eight doctors, who reported they had found **two marks in each place**; that they had **inserted a needle to the depth of an inch without the criminal having felt it, and that no blood had been drawn**. Now this is a most decisive test. For **however deeply a needle be buried** in such marks **no pain** is caused, and **no blood** can be extracted when they are magical signs.<sup>63</sup>

The material evidence here was backed by the verification of the judgment of eight doctors, who were there to delineate natural from supernatural causes. Combined with other facts and material evidence, such as the pact being vomited out, from the testimonies of more than sixty people, many of whom were reputable (such as the priests and nuns, who symbolized religious devotion), the coherence of all pieces of evidence was overwhelming. It had led Des Niau to ask: "What criminals could ever be condemned if such proofs were not deemed sufficient?" Indeed, epistemically, it would be a challenge to find a better fitting idea than to explain the phenomena. Socially speaking, it would be hard to find a person in a situation to dispute such evidence resolutely.

*Negative material evidence.* Often adding to the credibility of these investigation institutions was the occasional display of negative findings. Material verification occasionally helped to undermine false claims.

One example, cited by Goodare,<sup>64</sup> concerns a thirteen-year-old girl in Württemberg, Germany, who confessed that she had taken some wine from the cellar of the mayor of Gerlingen to attend witches' sabbaths. Her case was dismissed when wine was not found in the mayor's cellar. Historians have documented further cases such as these.<sup>65</sup> All these cases were sufficient to suggest that the prosecution of witches was not always completely driven by blind prejudice and hatred. Many actors working

<sup>63</sup> Collected in Levack, *The Witchcraft Sourcebook*, 258–59. The full text of the counselor's book is accessible at this website: <http://www.sacred-texts.com/evil/dol/index.htm> and <http://onlinebooks.library.upenn.edu/webbin/gutbook/lookup?num=45282>

<sup>64</sup> Goodare, *The European Witch-Hunt*, 214–15.

<sup>65</sup> See Roper, *Witch Craze*, 75–77, 217, 219, 318; Wolfgang Behringer, *Witches and Witch-Hunts: A Global History* (Cambridge, UK, and Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2004), 143.

within the rationalized institution had attempted to be systematically rational.

*Possible backstage manipulations.* So, if we do not believe witchcraft was the cause, what could have produced the front-stage impressions—the multifarious forms of material evidence—in the Loudon possessions?

Short of stronger proof, we can only rely on speculation as a tool to brainstorm possibilities. There were speculations that the knife used for pricking Devil’s marks might have had a retractable blade.<sup>66</sup> A French writer and skeptic asserted that the surgeon who had pricked Urban Grandier, one of the alleged victims’ brother-in-law, used a device that was dull on one end and sharp on another<sup>67</sup>—contradicting Des Niau’s account that the examiner had “inserted a needle to the depth of an inch without the criminal having felt it, and that no blood had been drawn.” Dumas also questioned the whole business of speaking foreign languages, recounting how the nuns clearly did not really know Hebrew, Gaelic, or other languages—just occasionally and pathetically trying to mimic single words in Latin, while avoiding having to say anything in Greek altogether.<sup>68</sup> The inaccurate reporting was probably responsible for the abnormal multilingual ability of the nuns, not the empirical events themselves. However, how these nuns could have other symptoms—such as the abruptly swollen face and the tongues covered in pimples—still begs explanation.

The secret behind the contortion performances was indeed mysterious. However, in another case in Germany, a young woman (Eva Elisabeth Hennigin) admitted to practicing, in advance, acts that looked like “convulsions and contortions and *Opisthotonos*” from moves she had learned from a ropedancer.<sup>69</sup>

What about the trick of vomiting a foreign object? Around 1606, a woman in England (Anne Gunter) admitted to hiding pins by placing them in her nose or deep into her mouth, so that when she sneezed or spat, they would be secreted at the right moment.<sup>70</sup> A twelve-year-old boy of Bilston, England, in 1620, was caught faking his “black-coloured urine”

<sup>66</sup>William E. Burns, *Witch Hunts in Europe and America: An Encyclopedia* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2003), 66–67.

<sup>67</sup>Alexandre Dumas, *Urban Grandier* (Project Gutenberg Ebook #2746, [1910]2004), <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/2746> (accessed 22 January 2018).

<sup>68</sup>Dumas, xxxvi, xxxvii, xli, xlii, lxx.

<sup>69</sup>Lea, *Materials*, vol. III, 1482.

<sup>70</sup>James Sharpe, *The Bewitching of Anne Gunter: A Horrible and True Story of Deception, Witchcraft, Murder, and the King of England* (New York: Routledge, [1999]2001), 172.

by using black ink.<sup>71</sup> To perform a touching test, a girl (Elizabeth Pacy of Bury St. Edmunds, England, around 1662), blinded by an apron over her head, “would shriek out and open their fists; yet, if anyone else touched them they were quite unaffected.” Only later when a real blindfold was used was it revealed that the girl was probably able to see through the apron.<sup>72</sup>

<sup>71</sup> Andrew Seddon, *Possessed by the Devil: The Real History of the Islandmagee Witches and Ireland’s Only Mass Witchcraft Trial* (Dublin, Ireland: The History Press Ireland, 2013), 104.

<sup>72</sup> Roland Seth, *Stories of Great Witch Trials* (London: Arthur Barker Ltd., 1967), 129.

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