Reginald Scot, the author of *The Discoverie of Witchcraft*, a massive treatise published in 1584, emerged as the most radical skeptic regarding witchcraft in the sixteenth century. An educated English layman of deep Calvinist convictions, his skepticism was in large part derived from his belief in the sovereignty of God and the absence of any biblical foundation for witch-hunting. Often linked with Johann Weyer, who wrote twenty years before him, Scot not only ridiculed the *Malleus maleficarum* and the works of other demonologists like Johannes Nider and Lambert Daneau but also responded to the attacks that were levelled against Weyer, especially by Jean Bodin in 1580. These selections present four different dimensions of Scot’s skepticism. First, Scot provides a social analysis of witchcraft accusations, identifying poor women who begged for charity and who had been estranged from their neighbors as the most likely to be accused of having caused their misfortunes. Second, he argues not only that there was no biblical foundation to the belief in witchcraft but also that it was idolatrous to attribute power to witches. Third, he presents a devastating analysis of the different components of the crime of witchcraft enumerated by Bodin, showing that those components could be prosecuted on the basis of laws already in force. Finally, he uses philosophy and science to establish the impossibility of the deeds confessed by witches.

Book I

Chapter 3. Who they be that are called witches, with a manifest declaration of the cause that moveth men so commonly to think, and witches themselves to believe that they can hurt children, cattle, etc. with words and imaginations; and of cozening witches.

One sort of such as are said to be witches are women which be commonly old, lame, bleary-eyed, pale, foul, and full of wrinkles; poor, sullen, superstitious, and papists, or such as know no religion; in whose drowsy mind the devil hath gotten a fine seat; so as what mischief, mischance, calamity or slaughter is brought to pass, they are easily persuaded the same is done by themselves, imprinting in their minds an earnest and constant imagination hereof. They are lean and deformed, showing melancholy in their faces, to the horror of all that see them. They are doting scolds, mad, devilish, and not much differing from them that are thought to be possessed with spirits; so firm and steadfast in their opinions, as whosoever shall only have respect to the constancy of their words uttered, would easily believe they were true indeed.

These miserable creatures are so odious unto all their neighbours, and so feared, as few dare offend them, or deny them anything they ask, whereby they take upon them and sometimes think that they can do such things as are beyond the ability of human nature. These go from house to house and from door to door for a pot full of milk, yeast, drink, pottage or some such relief, without the which they could hardly live, neither obtaining for their service and pains, nor by their art, nor yet at the devil’s hands (with whom they are said to make a perfect and visible bargain) either beauty, money, promotion, wealth, worship, pleasure, honor, knowledge, learning, or any other benefit whatsoever.

It falleth out many times that neither their necessities nor their expectation is answered or served in those places where they beg or borrow, but rather their lewdness is by their neighbours reproved. And further, in tract of time, the witch waxeth odious and tedious to her neighbours, and they are again despised and despited of her, so as sometimes she curseth one and sometimes another, and that from the master of the house, his wife, children, cattle, etc. to the little pig that lieth in the sty. Thus in process of time they have all displeased her, and she hath wished evil luck unto them all, perhaps with curses and imprecations made in form. Doubtless (at length) some of her neighbours die or fall sick, or some of their children are visited with diseases that vex them strangely, as apoplexies, epilepsies, convulsions, hot fevers, worms, etc. Which by ignorant parents are supposed to be the vengeance of witches. Yea, and their opinions and conceits are confirmed and maintained by unskillful physicians, according to the common saying, “Witchcraft and enchantment is the cloak of ignorance”; whereas indeed evil humors and not strange words, witches or spirits are the causes of such diseases. And some of their cattle perish, either by disease or mischance. Then they, upon whom
such adversities fall, weighing the fame that goeth upon this woman (her words, displeasure and curses meeting so justly with their misfortune) do not only conceive, but also are resolved, that all their mishaps are brought to pass by her only means.

The witch on the other side expecting her neighbours’ mischances, and seeing things sometimes come to pass according to her wishes, curses and incantations (for Bodin himself confesseth that not above two in a hundred of their witchings or wishings take effect), being called before a justice, by due examination of the circumstances is driven to see her imprecations and desires, and her neighbours’ harms and losses to concur, and as it were to take effect, and so confesseth that she (as a goddess) hath brought such things to pass. Wherein not only she but the accuser and also the justice are foully deceived and abused, as being through her confession and other circumstances persuaded (to the injury of God’s glory) that she hath done, or can do that which is proper only to God himself.

Another sort of witches there are which be absolutely cozeners. These take upon them, either for glory, fame or gain, to do anything which God or the devil can do, either for foretelling of things to come, betraying of secrets, curing of malefices, or working of miracles. . . .

Chapter 5. A confutation of the common conceived opinion of witches and witchcraft, and how detestable a sin it is to repair to them for counsel or help in time of affliction.

But whatsoever is reported or conceived of such manner of witchcrafts, I dare avow to be false and fabulous (cozenage, dotage and poisoning excepted). Neither is there any mention made of these kind of witches in the Bible. If Christ had known them, he would not have permitted to inveigh against their presumption, in taking upon them his office, as to heal and cure diseases and to work such miraculous and supernatural things as whereby he himself was especially known, believed, and published to be God, his actions and cures consisting (in order and effect) according to the power of our witchmongers imputed to witches. Howbeit, if there be any in these days afflicted in such strange sort as Christ’s cures and patients are described in the New Testament to have been, we fly from trusting in God to trusting in witches, who do not only in their cozening art take on them the office of Christ in this behalf, but use his very phrase of speech to such idolaters as come to seek divine assistance at their hands, saying, “Go thy ways, thy son or thy daughter, etc. shall do well and be whole.”

It will not suffice to dissuade a witchmonger from his credulity, that he seeth the sequel and event to fall out many times contrary to their assertion; but in such case (to his greater condemnation) he seeketh further to witches of greater fame. If all fail, he will rather think he came an hour too late than that he went a mile too far. Truly I for my part cannot perceive what is to go a whoring after strange gods, if this be not. He that looketh upon his
neighbour’s wife, and lusteth after her, hath committed adultery. And truly, he that in heart and by argument maintaineth the sacrifice of the Mass to be propitiatory for the quick and the dead is an idolater; as also he that alloweth and commendeth creeping to the cross, and such like idolatrous actions, although he bend not his corporal knees.

In like manner I say he that attributeth to a witch such divine power as duly and only appertaineth unto GOD (which all witchmongers do) is in heart a blasphemer, an idolater, and full of gross impiety, although he neither go nor send to her for assistance.

Book II

Chapter 9. The fifteen crimes laid to the charge of witches, by witchmongers, especially by Bodin, in Daemonomania.

[1] They deny God and all religion.
   Answer. Then let them die therefore, or at the least be used like infidels or apostates.

[2] They curse, blaspheme and provoke God with all despite.
   Answer. Then let them have the law expressed in Levit. 24 and Deut. 13 and 17.

[3] They give their faith to the devil, and they worship and offer sacrifice unto him.
   Answer. Let such also be judged by the same law.

[4] They do solemnly vow and promise all their progeny unto the devil.
   Answer. This promise proceedeth from an unsound mind and is not to be regarded because they cannot perform it; neither will it be proved true. Howbeit, if it be done by any that is sound of mind, let the curse of Jeremiah 32:36, light upon them, to wit, the sword, famine and pestilence.

[5] They sacrifice their own children to the devil before baptism, holding them up in the air unto him, and then thrust a needle unto their brains.
   Answer. If this be true, I maintain them not herein, but there is a law to judge them by. Howbeit, it is so contrary to sense and nature that it were folly to believe it, either upon Bodin’s bare word or else upon his presumptions, especially when so small commodity and so great danger and inconvenience ensueth to the witches thereby.

[6] They burn their children when they have sacrificed them.
   Answer. Then let them have such punishment as they that offered their children unto Moloch: Levi. 20. But these be mere devices of witchmongers

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and inquisitors that with extreme tortures have wrung such confessions from them; or promises have won it at their hands, at the length.

[7] They swear to the devil to bring as many into that society as they can.
   _Ans._ This false and so proved elsewhere.

[8] They swear by the name of the devil.
   _Ans._ I never heard any such oath, neither have we warrant to kill them that so do swear, though indeed it be very lewd and impious.

   _Ans._ This is a stale ridiculous lie, as is proved apparently hereafter.

[10] They boil infants (after they have murdered them unbaptised) until their flesh be made potable.
    _Ans._ This is untrue, incredible, and impossible.

    _Ans._ Then they are the kin to the Anthropothagi and Cannibals. But I believe never an honest man in England nor in France will affirm that he hath seen any of these persons that are said to be witches do so. If they should, I believe it would poison them.

    _Ans._ Let them be hanged for their labour.

    _Ans._ Then let an action of trespass be brought against them for so doing.

[14] They bewitch men’s corn and bring hunger and barrenness into the country; they ride and fly in the air, bring storms, make tempest, etc.
    _Ans._ Then I will worship them as gods, for those be not the works of man nor yet of witch, as I have elsewhere proved at large.

[15] They use venery with a devil called incubus, even when they lie in bed with their husbands and have children by them, which become the best witches.
    _Ans._ This is the last lie, very ridiculous, and confuted by me elsewhere.

Chapter 10. A refutation of the former surmised crimes patched together by Bodin, and the only way to escape the inquisitor’s hands.

If more ridiculous or abominable crimes could have been invented, these poor women (whose chief fault is that they are scolds) should have been charged with them.
In this libel you do see is contained all that witches are charged with, and all that also which any witchmonger surmiseth, or in malice imputeth unto witches power and practice.

Some of these crimes may not only be in the power and will of a witch but may be accomplished by natural means; and therefore by them the matter in question is not decided, to wit; whether a witch can work wonders supernaturally? For many a knave and whore doth more commonly put in execution those lewd actions than such as are called witches, and are hanged for their labour.

Some of these crimes also laid unto witches’ charge are by me denied and by them cannot be proved to be true or committed by any one witch. Othersome of these crimes likewise are so absurd, supernatural and impossible that they are derided almost of all men and as false, fond and fabulous reports condemned: insomuch as the very witchmongers themselves be ashamed to hear of them.

If part be untrue, may not the residue be thought false? For all these things are laid to the charge at one instant, even by the greatest doctors and patrons of the sect of witchmongers, producing as many proofs for witches’ supernatural and impossible actions as for the others. So as, if one part of their accusation be false, the other part deserveth no credit. If all be true that is alleged of their doings, why should we believe in Christ, because of his miracles, when a witch doth great wonders as ever he did.

But it will be said by some, as for those absurd and popish writers, they are not in all their allegations touching these matters to be credited. But I assure you that even all sorts of writers herein (for the most part) the very doctors of the church to the schoolmen, protestants and papists, learned and unlearned, poets and historiographers, Jews, Christians, or Gentiles agree in these impossible and ridiculous matters. Yea, and these writers, out of whom I gather most absurdities, are of the best credit and authority of all writers in this matter. The reason is because it was never thoroughly looked into, but every fable credited, and the word (witch) named so often in Scripture.

They that have seen further of the inquisitors’ orders and customs say also that there is no way in the world for these women to escape the inquisitors’ hands, and so consequently burning, but to gild their hands with money, whereby oftentimes they take pity upon them and deliver them, as sufficiently purged. For they have authority to exchange the punishment of the body with the punishment of the purse, applying the same to the office of their inquisition; whereby they reap such profit as a number of these seely women pay them yearly pensions, to the end they may not be punished again.
Chapter 7. A confutation of the objection concerning witches' confessions.

It is confessed (say some by the way of objection) even of these women themselves, that they do these and such other horrible things as deserveth death with all extremity etc. Whereunto I answer that whosoever considerately beholdeth their confessions shall behold all to be vain, idle, false, inconstant and of no weight, except their contempt and ignorance in religion, which is rather the fault of their negligent pastor than of the simple woman.

First, if their confession be made by compulsion, of force or authority, or by persuasion or under the colour of friendship, it is not to be regarded because the extremity of threats and tortures provokes it or the quality of fair words and allurements constrains it. If it be voluntary, many circumstances must be considered, to wit: whether she impeach not herself to overthrow her neighbour, which many times happeneth through their cankered and malicious melancholic humour; then, whether in that same melancholic mood and frantic humour she desire not the abridgment of her own days. Which thing Aristotle saith doth oftentimes happen unto persons subject to melancholic passions and (as Bodin and Sprenger say) to these old women called witches, which many times (as they affirm) refuse to live, threatening the judges that if they may not be burned they will lay hands upon themselves and so make them guilty of their damnation.

I myself have known that where such a one could not prevail to be accepted as a sufficient witness against himself, he presently went and threw himself into a pond of water, where he was drowned. But the law sayeth . . . his word is not to be credited that is desirous to die. And sometimes (as elsewhere I have proved) they confess that whereof they were never guilty, supposing that they did that which they did not, by means of certain circumstances. And as they sometimes confess impossibilities, as that they fly in the air, transubstantiate themselves, raise tempests, transfer or remove corn, etc., so do they also (I say) confess voluntarily that which no man could prove and that which no man would guess, nor yet believe, except he were as mad as they, so as they bring death willfully upon themselves, which argueth an unsound mind.

If they confess that which hath been indeed committed by them, as poisoning or any other kind of murder, which falleth into the power of such persons to accomplish, I stand not to defend their cause. Howbeit, I would wish that even in that case there be not too rash credit given, nor too hasty proceedings used against them, but that the causes, properties, and circumstances of everything be duly considered and diligently examined. For you shall understand that as sometimes they confess they have murdered their neighbours with a wish, sometimes with a word, sometimes with a look, etc., so they confess that with the delivering of an apple or some such thing to a woman with child they have killed the child in the mother's womb,
when nothing was added thereunto which naturally could be noisome or hurtfull.

In like manner they confess that with a touch of their bare hand they sometimes kill a man being in perfect health and strength of body when all his garments are betwixt their hand and his flesh.

But if this their confession be examined by divinity, philosophy, physic, law or conscience, it will be found false and insufficient. First, for that the working of miracles is ceased. Secondly, no reason can be yielded for a thing so far beyond all reason. Thirdly, no receipt can be of such efficacy as when the same is touched with a bare hand, from whence the veins have passage through the body into the heart, it should not annoy the poisoner and yet retain virtue and force enough to pierce through so many garments and the very flesh incurably to the place of death in another person. . . . Fourthly, no law will admit such a confession as yieldeth unto impossibilities, against the which there is never any law provided; otherwise it would not serve a man’s turn to plead and prove that he was at Berwick that day that he is accused to have done a murder in Canterbury, for it might be said he was conveyed to Berwick and back again by enchantment. Fifthly, he is not by conscience to be executed which hath no sound mind nor perfect judgement. And yet forsooth we read that one mother Stile did kill Saddocke with a touch on the shoulder, for not keeping promise with her for an old cloak to make her a safeguard and that she was hanged for her labour.
Excommunicat persons, partakers of the falt, infants, wicked servants, and runnawaies are to be admitted to beare witnesse against their dames in this mater of witchcraft: bicaus (saith Bodin the champion of witchmoongers) none that be honest are able to detect them. Heretikes also and witches shall be received to accuse, but not to excuse a witch. And finallie, the testimonie of all infamous persons in this case is good and allowed. Yea, one lewd person (saith Bodin) may be received to accuse and condemne a thousand suspected witches. And although by lawe, a capittall enimie may be challenged; yet James Sprenger, and Henrie Institor, (from whom Bodin, and all the writers that ever I have read, doo receive their light, authorities and arguments) saie (upon this point of lawe) that The poore frendlesse old woman must proove, that hir capittall enimie would have killed hir, and that hee hath both assaulted & wounded hir; otherwise she pleadeth all in vaine. If the judge aske hir, whether she have anie capittall enimies; and she rehearse other, and forget hir accuser; or else answer that he was hir capital enimie, but now she hopeth he is not so: such a one is nevertheles admitted for a witnes. And though by lawe, single witnesses are not admissable; yet if one depose she hath bewitched hir cow; another, hir sow; and the third, hir butter: these saith (saith M. Mal. and Bodin) are no single witnesses; bicaus they agree that she is a witch.