‘HIDEOUS HAGS’ VERSUS ‘WISE WIZARDS’: HOW MEDIEVAL AND EARLY MODERN PERCEPTIONS OF WITCHES AND WITCHCRAFT ARE REFLECTED IN THE LANGUAGE OF THIS ERA.

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Abstract: This paper explores how perceptions of witches and witchcraft during the medieval and early modern period are reflected in the language of this era. To achieve this, this study analyses language and language change within the semantic field of witchcraft, predominantly during the period surrounding the English witch trials. This language analysis is conducted using evidence primarily from the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) and the Historical Thesaurus of English (HTE) whilst also drawing on and discussing arguments made by historians and linguists in this field. In its analysis of how perceptions of witchcraft and witches were reflected in the language used during this time, this paper focuses particularly on the issue of gender and the treatment of women. This paper discusses how language within the semantic field of witchcraft became increasingly gendered and negative towards women and how this analysis supports the view held by some historians that the witch trials can be primarily characterised as an attack on women.

Keywords: historical linguistics, language, semantic change, Old English, Middle English, Early Modern English, witchcraft, witches, witch trials, gender.

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‘Hideous hags’ versus ‘wise wizards’: how medieval and early modern perceptions of witches and witchcraft are reflected in the language of this era.

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1. Introduction

The modern idea of a witch, at least in Western cultures, usually consists of a woman on a broomstick, with a pointy hat and an affectionate familiar, such as a black cat. This modern idea has been perpetuated, mostly by children’s literature which Present-day English (PDE) speakers have been brought up with. A further stereotype which pervades folk ideas of witchcraft is the divide between the withered crone of a witch and the powerful figure of a benevolent wizard. The question arises of whether these perceptions have always existed and, if so, how they have been reflected in the language of the semantic field of witchcraft.

To answer this question, this essay aims to investigate the perception of witches and witchcraft during the most significant period in the history of witchcraft, the period of the Witch Trials. To achieve this, a qualitative analysis of language within this semantic field will be conducted, using the Historical Thesaurus of English (HTE) and the Oxford English Dictionary (OED), as the main sources of evidence. This will include surviving language from Old English (OE) and Middle English (ME), with the addition of Early Modern English (EModE) vocabulary and semantic changes. These will be analysed in relation to scholarly literature which discusses how witchcraft was perceived during this time and the lasting impressions that this has had on the public consciousness. In my analysis of how perceptions of witchcraft and witches were reflected in the language used during this time, I will be focusing particularly on the issue of gender and the treatment of women.

I will first evaluate various secondary sources on the period of the Witch Trials and perceptions of witchcraft in order to outline an area of contention within them concerning the extent to which the Witch Trials were an attack on women (Section 2). To address this debate, I will first discuss language use and change in the

semantic field of witchcraft (Section 3), highlighting gender divides in the description and perception of male and female magic practitioners (3.1) and acts attributed to them (3.2), followed by a discussion about the types of textual evidence that we can draw on to evaluate how ideological attitudes to witchcraft were reflected in the language used, and the purposes for which these texts were written (Section 4).

My analysis of contemporary language in the semantic field of witchcraft will explore how negative stereotypes about women in mediaeval society fed into ideas about witchcraft, and how the increasingly damning language used to describe witches and witchcraft in turn shaped public perceptions, causing more women to be dragged into the madness of the witch hunts. This will highlight how perceptions of witches and witchcraft were inextricably linked to how women were viewed and treated in mediaeval society, leading me to support the argument that the Witch Trials can be viewed primarily as an attack on women (e.g. Kgatka 2020). Finally, this analysis will lead me to conclude that perception and language change work in what could be considered a feedback loop, with shifting ideologies leading to language change and these new words and meanings in turn altering and reinforcing people's negative or positive perceptions and attitudes towards specific groups of people.

2. Background

The witch trials were a dark period of history in which increasingly severe laws and shifting public perceptions saw a spiral from sporadic witchcraft accusations in the years leading up to the 14th century, to large scale witch hunts and mass executions in the peak of the witch craze across Europe and New England in the 16th and 17th centuries (Blecourt 2000: 91). According to Voltmer (2023), the main period of the English witch trials has been defined as starting in 1563, following the Witch Act which declared witchcraft to be a felony (2023: 107), reaching peak hysteria in 1645-1647 in the mass witch hunt in Eastern England (Sharpe 2013: 167), and ending in the early 18th Century after witchcraft laws were repealed or suppressed in 1736 (2023: 132).

The, albeit limited (see Section 4), records of the Witch Trials reveal an 'overwhelming predominance of female suspects' (Blecourt 2000: 89) in the accused

witches with an estimated 75-80% of the witch trials targeting women (Voltmer 2023: 94). Given these statistics, it is unsurprising that many scholars (e.g. Kgatla 2020) have taken the position of viewing the Witch Trials as a patriarchal attack on women, with the threat of the witch accusations being used as a means of control and as a 'punishment for those who did not cooperate with male-sanctioned norms' (2020: 3). However, based on the principle that, in theory, tried witches could appear in many different guises including children, teenagers, men and even members of the elite such as magistrates, Protestant ministers and Catholic priests (Voltmer 2023: 93), the argument is raised by some that this connection between the Witch Trials and the persecution of women is exaggerated (Blecourt 2000: 291). An additional argument in this line of reasoning is the suggestion that women were tried as witches, not as women, meaning that the accusations were founded on a genuine belief and fear of witchcraft, rather than simply being a device used to control women (Clark 1997: 109).

These arguments based on the existence of men amongst the accused, as well as the idea that witch accusations were founded on genuine beliefs about magic and witchcraft, suggest that the strong assertion that the witch trials were solely an excuse to persecute women (Kgatla 2020: 2) is somewhat unfounded. However, Blecourt (2000: 291) proposes that this is simply a 'misunderstanding between (predominantly male) witchcraft scholars' (2000: 290), which is less based on evidence and more on a reluctance from some researchers to accept the system of patriarchy in this period, potentially to avoid discussing how it still prevails in today's society. It cannot be disputed that women were disproportionately targeted by witchcraft accusations and trials (Voltmer 2023: 94) and furthermore that this was related to women's vulnerable position in this extremely patriarchal society.

As Blecourt (2000) argues, 'the making of the witch was a social process and the ties a woman had within her community determined whether an incidental accusation could stick' (2000: 301) and thus the 'ever lurking threat' of witchcraft accusations compelled women to 'comply with patriarchal communal norms of womanhood, a transgression of which made it only more probable to incite an accusation of witchcraft' (2000: 304). This statement supports the argument that witch accusations and trials could be used as a method of control over women, a line of reasoning that

can be seen to be supported by the language data which will be analysed in the following sections. For example, the differences in the language used to describe female compared to male practitioners of magic and how these differences reflected the ways in which they were treated, both by the common people and in official capacities.

3. Gendered Language in the Semantic Field of Witchcraft

According to Bailey (2003: 49), the ‘fatal prejudices’ that tied women and negative perceptions of witchcraft together were famously expressed in the ‘profoundly misogynistic’ witch-hunting manual *Malleus Maleficarum*, a text which was greatly influential after its publication in the 15th Century and throughout the following centuries, and which, as McCall (2004: 258) argues, created the stereotypes on which the leaders of the witch-hunts were to base their image of a witch. This demonstrates how language was used to shape ideologies concerning witchcraft and women. To investigate how these ideologies were further reflected in language, the following section will look at how terminology in the field of witchcraft is influenced by gender stereotypes which were prevalent throughout the mediaeval and early modern period.

3.1 Terminology Relating to Witchcraft Practitioners

The etymological root of the word *witch* is the OE *wicce* which had masculine and feminine forms (*wicca* and *wicce*, respectively) used to refer to male and female perpetrators of *wiccecraeft* 'witchcraft’ (Hutton 2018: 103). However, when *wicce* evolved into *witch*, as part of the shift into ME, this term came to be applicable to both men and women, simply being defined as someone who practises witchcraft or magic (OED, *witch* n., sense I.1.). This suggests that, at least for a brief period of time, ideas about gender were not reflected in the language of witchcraft. However, as is shown in the HTE lexical set Sorcerer/Magician (01.17.02.02.01 n), while *witch* remained a term that could refer to male magic practitioners, an increasing number of purely masculine terms were introduced to English during the ME and EModE period (see Table 1 below). In addition to these, compounded forms such as *man-witch* and *he-witch* began to emerge in the 17th Century (HTE, 01.17.02.02.01

(n.) Sorcerer/magician), corresponding with the height of the Witch Trials in England. The emergence of these forms suggests that ‘female’ had become a central part of the meaning of *witch*, to the extent that a qualifier was now needed to clarify that the *witch* in question was a man.

Term	Date Range
magician	c1375–
warlock	a1400–
sorcerer	1526–
wizzard	c1550–
wise man	1552–1612 + 1731
cunning man	1593–1807
man-witch	1601
wonder-master	1603
he-witch	1653

Table 1. Examples of terms used to describe male practitioners of magic (HTE, 01.17.02.02.01 (n.) Sorcerer/magician) (*green*: emerged in ME and *blue*: EModE).

There is an interesting turn in the type of language used to describe practitioners of magic once these new, exclusively masculine terms had been introduced. The shift that can be observed is that, once *witch* became a term that could be used predominantly to refer to women, the language by which *witches* were described became decidedly more negative and demeaning and, additionally, *witch* started to be used as a term which expressed abuse or contempt towards women. This contrasts with the more positive connotations of the terms that were introduced for male practitioners of magic such as ‘wizard’ or ‘sorcerer’. These differences have resounded through the ages to the extent that they are still reflected in our PDE

language; *witch* is used as an insult (almost always aimed at women), whereas the metaphor *a wizard at…* has positive connotations, suggesting that someone is impressively skilled.

Examples of the kinds of increasingly insulting terms which appear to be synonyms of *witch* include *bedlam(e)* and *hag*, along with its various compounded forms such as *haggard* or *hagwitch* (HTE, 01.17.02.02.01.01 (n.) *Witch*). The addition of such terms into the lexical set of Witch offers an interesting insight into the perception of witches during this time period, this is because, according to the OED (*hag*, n.1 and *bedlam*, n), these terms can be defined, not only in relation to witchcraft, but also as expressions of abuse towards women. For example, *bedlam* has the definition 'with depreciative sense: A loathsome old woman; a witch; a furious raging woman' (OED, n., Sense 3.). Similarly, *hag* (OED, n.1), can be used to describe 'An old or ugly woman, esp. one who is malicious or immoral' (Sense I.2.a.). The introduction of such words into this lexical set demonstrates, not only that female practitioners of magic were viewed in a more negative light than their male counterparts but also that the contempt towards them was linked to physical characteristics such as their age and appearance. This suggests that, during this time period, there was a connection made between something looking 'bad' and something being 'bad'. This argument is strengthened by the evidence that marginalised women, who did not perform to patriarchal societal expectations, such as elderly spinsters or widows, were more likely to be targeted and persecuted as witches (Clark 1997: 107). It could also be argued that these increasingly negative stereotypes which were cast onto *witches* and the resulting semantic changes to this lexical set, are the reason why the modern, western image of a witch so frequently appears to be that which is some form of a withered, old crone with wiry hair and warts, where, in contrast, wizards tend to be portrayed as wise and stately characters.

Another piece of language evidence to bring into this discussion is the definition of *witch* itself and how this changed during the time periods in question. In line with the HTE evidence that increasingly negative terms for witches were introduced into the semantic field of witches and witchcraft as *witch* became more heavily associated with women, the OED definition of *witch* (n.) (see Table 2 for summary), shows how this term underwent a process of pejoration when 'female' became a part of its

definition. For example, Sense I.3.a. which defines *witch* as ‘a term of abuse or contempt for a woman…’ (OED) was first attested in c1475, around the time that more masculine terms were appearing in the language used to refer to practitioners of magic.

Sense	Definition	Date range
I.	Senses denoting a person, especially one who practises witchcraft or magic, or a supernatural being.	–
I.1.a.	A person (in later use typically a woman) who practises witchcraft or magic, especially of a malevolent or harmful nature.	OE–
I.1.b.i.	A (male or female) practitioner of pagan rituals, sacrifices, etc., viewed from a Christian perspective as a worshipper of Satan or evil spirits; a heathen, an infidel.	OE–1540
I.1.b.ii.	In Europe (and later in European colonies) in the late mediaeval and early modern period: a person who has broken a law prohibiting the practice of witchcraft.	1566–
I.2.	Originally: a female spirit or monster believed to settle on and produce a feeling of suffocation in a sleeping person or animal. Later (with the): a feeling of suffocation or great distress experienced during sleep.	1440–1585
I.3.a.	As a term of abuse or contempt for a woman, especially one regarded as old, malevolent, or unattractive.	c1475–
I.3.b.	A girl or young woman who is bewitchingly or captivatingly attractive or charming.	1740–1888
II.	Other uses.	–
II.6.	*figurative and in figurative contexts.* Something likened to a witch, especially something which seems to have (malignant) magical powers.	1616–
II.7.a.	Forming names of animals thought to be associated with or to resemble a witch in some way. Chiefly with distinguishing word.	1709–

Table 2. Senses and definitions of witch (n.) from OE to EModE (approx. 1750) (*yellow*: first attested in OE, *green*: …ME, *blue*: …EModE, *left-hand column colour gradient* used to distinguish between different branches of meaning).

One might argue that analysis of the OED definition of *witch* (n.), can be used to support the argument that the witch trials should not be viewed primarily as a

persecution of women. Evidence for this would be Sense I.1.b.ii., first attested in 1566, which shows a change in the definition of *witch* in relation to the Witch Trials, which were building in frequency and intensity during this time (e.g. Blecourt 2000: 291); this sense defines *witch* as a person charged with committing an act of witchcraft, without any reference to gender. This judicial sense implies that calling someone a *witch* was less about the individual, and was more of a catch-all term used for someone accused of witchcraft, which therefore could equally be used to apply to men or women, thus returning to the argument that men were also victims in the Witch Trials (Voltmer 2023: 93). However, while this does reveal that, during the period of the witch trials, *witch* was not technically a term which could only apply to women, the language in this lexical set still shows that women and witchcraft were inextricably linked in people's perceptions. Furthermore, while this has shown that both men and women were potentially liable to be prosecuted as witches, I would counter that, at a time where a person was most in danger of being accused of witchcraft, not by authorities, but by their neighbours and fellow common-folk, due to the climate of paranoia and conformity which meant those who did not fit in were more at risk of being accused as acts of self preservation, scape-goating or score-settling (Blecourt 2000: 301), it is the lay people's folk perceptions of *witch* that were more significant in defining a *witch* than those of the judicial elite.

3.2 Terminology Relating to Acts of Witchcraft

According to Bailey (2019: 155), medieval clerical authorities were faced with the debate regarding whether some forms of magic were more acceptable than others. The root of this issue was that while the law stated that all forms of magic were punishable, most of the public only feared and reported magic that caused harm. In deciding which kinds of magic acts should be considered harmful, and prosecuted accordingly, a clear relationship emerges as to whether the acts were performed by male or female practitioners of magic. A notable example of this falls within the area of diabolical magic which, in summary, involved working with the devil in some capacity (e.g. Sharpe 2013). There appeared to be a general consensus that, when entering into such a pact with the Devil, women were sexually subjected by him and acted as his servants whereas men would be equal partners or even masters over him (Blecourt 2000: 299). As Clark (1997: 111) argues, this contrast in the perception

of male and female diabolical witchcraft can be attributed to contemporary notions that women were weak-willed, feeble and sinful and thus were easier targets for the devil to seduce and use as his agents. This is an idea which has permeated patriarchal thinking and thus language used throughout history, perhaps starting with the biblical story of creation, in which the devil targets Eve, causing some to think of her as the very first witch (1997: 113). Because of the pervasive notion that, in contrast to women, men who dealt with the devil found ways to control him, their acts were viewed as less dangerous and heretical than those of women and consequently, according to Hutton (2018: 12), men who tried to control the devil or spirits in this way were not executed.

4. Witches in Writing

The previous section highlighted how differently men and women are treated in relation to witchcraft and how this is reflected in this semantic field. This language analysis has shown support for the argument that women were disproportionately victimised in the witch trials and that this can largely be attributed to women's place in society during this time period. The following section is concerned with how this terminology was introduced into the semantic field of witches and witchcraft and the purpose that it was intended to serve, and how this offers insight into Early Modern perceptions of women and witchcraft.

4.1 The Nature of the Data: Language as a Form of Control

Historians have observed how data from the period of the Witch Trials is limited with many gaps in the records and figures surrounding the number of trials and executions being estimated at best. The study of historical linguistics always faces this challenge of limited textual data, particularly in the OE and ME periods, although this improved gradually following the advent of the printing press in the EModE period, as a much greater array of texts were produced and survived (eg. Voltmer 2023: 104). However, even within this time period, there was still the issue with only a minority of the population having access to education and therefore a voice in the surviving textual records. This is particularly relevant in the study of how perceptions of witches and witchcraft were reflected in the language, as our data is based on

records from a very limited source. Notably and significantly for this study's focus on the perception of witchcraft in relation to gender, women were among the people who did not have a voice in the textual data. Therefore, in the study of the semantic field of witchcraft and witches, it is neither the voices of the accused women, nor the common folk who pointed the finger and made the accusations, which are represented in the the language data and, instead, the majority of the sources are hostile, 'condemnatory accounts by theologians, jurists, moralists, and preachers' (Bailey 2019:150).

In his analysis of the meaning of the word *witch*, Hutton (2018: 112) describes a dichotomy which seems to have been present between popular conceptions of witchcraft, and the ideas of those in positions of power, who had greater influence on the language data, regarding how certain types of magic should be defined. Perhaps unexpectedly, given modern perceptions of witchcraft, and popular depictions such as 'good witch glinda' versus 'the wicked witch of the West', according to Hutton (2018: 113), white or natural magic was just as reviled, if not more so, as malignant forms of witchcraft. However, while this was the official stance of the church and jurors, this was not an opinion shared by the masses and thus popular folk conceptions needed to be corrected. I would argue that this is evidenced by the increased number of words in the lexical sets relating to white and natural magic, as well as references to miracles and miracle workers which emerged in the English language during the period of the Witch Trials (see Table 3). It would appear that such descriptions were used to try and convince the masses that those who they might once have thought of as 'healers' or 'cunning folk' were really as much of a threat as the malignant witches they readily pointed a finger at, and therefore should be condemned as such.

HTE Category	Term	Date Range
01.17.02.02.01|03 (n.) Sorcerer/magician :: white magician	**theurgic**	1610
01.17.02.02.01|03 (n.) Sorcerer/magician :: white magician	**white witch**	1613-

01.17.02.02.01|03 (n.) Sorcerer/magician :: white magician	**theurgist**	1652-
01.17.02.02.01|05 (n.) Sorcerer/magician :: that works/performs wonders/miracles.	**miracle-worker**	1561–2
01.17.02.02.01|05 (n.) Sorcerer/magician :: that works/performs wonders/miracles.	**miracle-man**	1572 + 1914–
01.17.02.02.01|05 (n.) Sorcerer/magician :: that works/performs wonders/miracles.	**miracle-monger**	1584–2
01.17.02.02.01|05 (n.) Sorcerer/magician :: that works/performs wonders/miracles.	**mirabilist**	1599–1601
01.17.02.02.01|05 (n.) Sorcerer/magician :: that works/performs wonders/miracles.	**wonder-worker**	1599–
01.17.02.02.01|05 (n.) Sorcerer/magician :: that works/performs wonders/miracles.	**wonder-monger**	1612–1867
01.17.02.02.01|05 (n.) Sorcerer/magician :: that works/performs wonders/miracles.	**wonderer**	1647
01.17.02.02.01|05 (n.) Sorcerer/magician :: that works/performs wonders/miracles.	**miraculist**	1666
01.17.02.02.01|05 (n.) Sorcerer/magician :: that works/performs wonders/miracles.	**miracler**	1676
01.17.02.02.01|05 (n.) Sorcerer/magician :: that works/performs wonders/miracles.	**thaumaturge**	1715–
01.17.02.02.01|05.02 (n.) Sorcerer/magician :: that works/performs wonders/miracles :: in God's name/by divine aid.	**theomagician**	1650

01.17.02.02.01|05.02 (n.) Sorcerer/magician :: that works/performs wonders/miracles :: in God's name/by divine aid.	**miracle-worker**	1875
01.17.02.02|11 (n.) Sorcery/witchcraft/magic :: white/natural magic.	**natural magic**	c1384-
01.17.02.02|11 (n.) Sorcery/witchcraft/magic :: white/natural magic.	theurgy	1569-
01.17.02.02|11 (n.) Sorcery/witchcraft/magic :: white/natural magic.	natural magie	1592
01.17.02.02|11 (n.) Sorcery/witchcraft/magic :: white/natural magic.	white magic	1614-
01.17.02.02|12 (n.) Sorcery/witchcraft/magic :: magic claiming to have divine aid.	theomagics	1651

Table 3. Words which can be used to refer to various kinds of natural or benevolent magical practices or practitioners, the lexical set in which they appear and the dates when they had this particular meaning (HTE) (*green:* first attested in ME, *blue*: …EModE, *purple*: …LModE).

As can be seen in Table 3 above, within the HTE groupings of lexical sets in the semantic field of witchcraft, there is no subcategory for witches who perform benevolent or natural magic, nor are there any terms for specifically female practitioners of magic within these categories. Contemporary early modern sources suggested that the common folk did draw a distinction between malevolent witches and those they could turn to for healing help; for example Hutton (2018: 113) quotes a physician writing in 1630 who declared that, in the common account, healers, who he termed ‘white witches’ were not ‘reputed to be witches’. The absence of terms such as *healers*, and *wise women*, in these lexical sets thus supports Hutton’s (2018: 113) argument that those in power, with access to education and thus more of a presence in historical textual evidence, did have different views on natural magic to the common people, and accordingly invented and used new terms to attempt to bring the public consciousness inline with their views. This point can be further

evidenced by the OED definition of *cunning woman* (in *cunning,* adj.), shown in Table 4. The introduction of Sense 5.a. shows how this term underwent semantic pejoration during this time period, most likely due to the authorities' 'deliberate and uncompromising attack' (2018: 119) on all forms of witchcraft and magic.

Sense	Definition	Date range
2.a.	Possessing practical knowledge or skill; able, skilful, expert, dexterous, clever.	1382–
2.b.	Showing skill or expertness; skilfully contrived or executed; skilful, ingenious.	1423–
3.	Possessing magical knowledge or skill: in **cunning man**, **cunning woman**, a fortune-teller, conjurer, 'wise man', 'wise woman', wizard or witch.	1594-1807
4.	Possessing keen intelligence, wit, or insight; knowing, clever.	1671–
5.a.	**In bad sense**: Skilful in compassing one's ends by covert means; clever in circumventing; crafty, artful, guileful, sly. (The prevailing modern sense.)	a1616–

Table 4. Selected senses and definitions of *cunning* (adj.) from ME to EModE. (*green*: first attested in ME, *blue*: …EModE, left-hand column colour gradient used to distinguish between different branches of meaning).

As Hutton (2018: 116) remarks, it appears to be the case that it was male physicians who were most vocal in condemning natural magical healing practices and the women who performed them, with the introduction of new terms such as *white magic* being introduced in an attempt to link these sorts of practices, which were still appreciated by the masses, to the sort of magic which they already condemned.

Another example of how, in the words of Voltmer (2023: 115), the sources and language data we have regarding the witch trials are 'a mixture of labelling, fabrication, construction, and embedded interpretation, a cocktail flavoured with fascinating details about occult acts' can be seen in the nature of the language which was introduced to the semantic field of witchcraft during the period of the witch trials, and the method by which these came about. There is a theme which emerges in scholarly literature (e.g. Voltmer 2023) that the folk perception of witches and

witchcraft was shaped in a cyclical fashion by the trial reports which detailed the events of witch trials, including the nature of the charges and the process of the questioning. This cycle can best be explained as a self-fulfilling prophecy in which the inquisitors, who were questioning the accused witches, had preconceived notions about what heinous crimes the witch must have committed. With these ideas in mind, the inquisitors would ask leading questions about certain crimes to which the accused standing trial, potentially under torture, would readily confess to even if, as we can reason was probably the case, these acts had not taken place. These confessions would then be written up in the trial reports, reviewed by judicial authorities and used to shape the proceedings of future witch trials. This reveals a cycle in which allegations and confessions became increasingly exaggerated and ridiculous despite having no ‘real’ foundation. This is an argument which appears to be quite clearly represented in the language changes of this time period. As can be observed from Figure 1 below, during the EModE era, particularly in the 17th century, there was an influx of new terms which were introduced into the lexical set of terms which refer to witches (HTE, 01.17.02.02.01.01 (n.)). This incoming flurry of new words being introduced to the lexicon coincides with the height of the ‘witch-mania’ across England, as well as Europe and New-England (Blecourt 2000) and significantly, as can be seen from this timeline visual, many of these terms were short-lived, falling out of use almost as soon as they arrived.

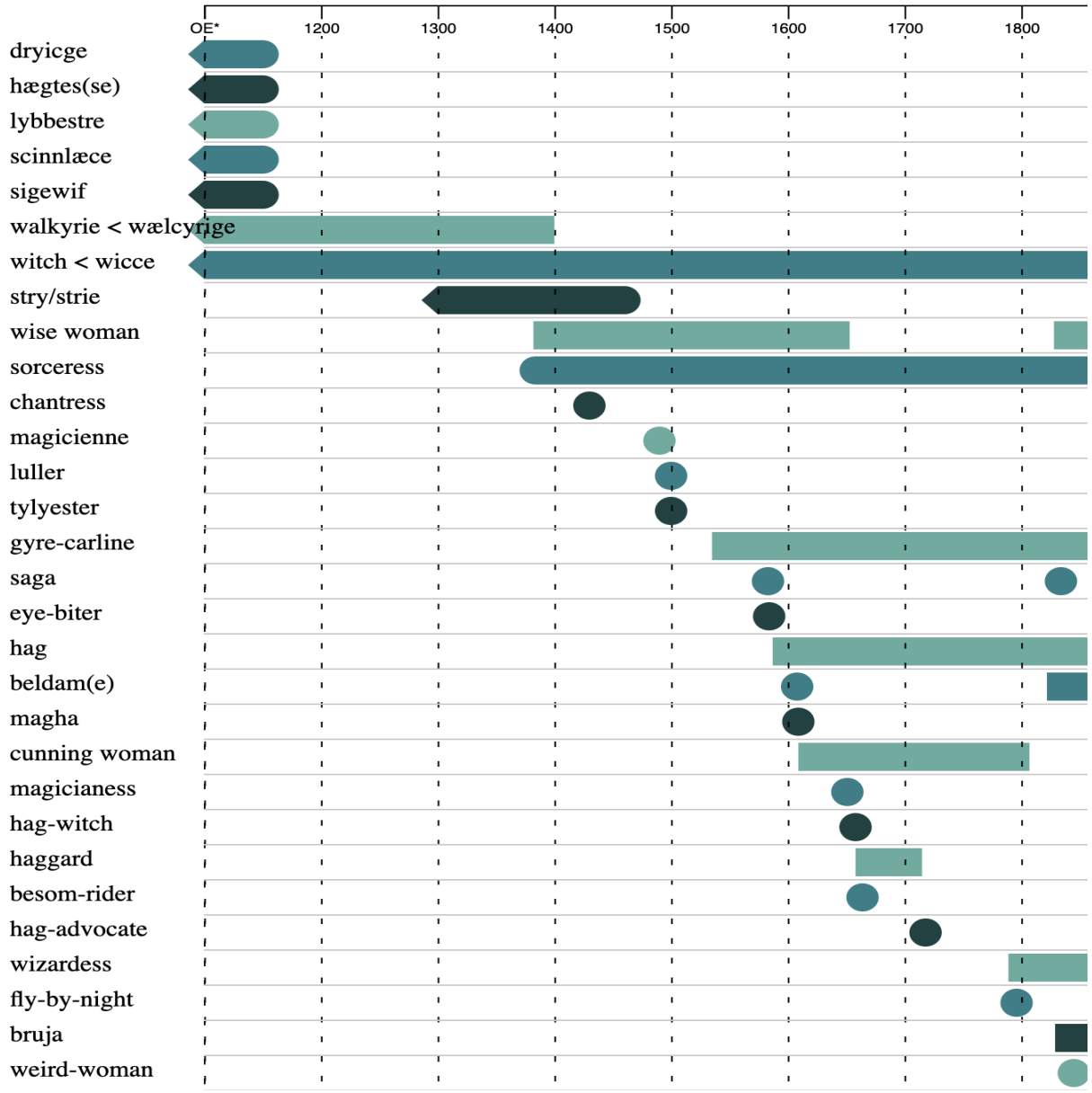

Figure 1. HTE timeline visualisation of when terms appeared in the lexical set *Witch* (01.17.02.02.01.01 (n.)).

Examples which demonstrate this include new terms for witches which can be seen to be increasingly fanciful, referencing apparent attributes of their behaviour and characteristics which one can easily believe would be works of fiction. For example ‘eyebiter’ (first attested 1584, HTE) meaning someone who possess the ‘evil eye’ meaning that they could bewitch and harm others through their sight/with their eyes (OED) or ‘besom-rider’ (first attested 1664, HTE) referencing the idea that witches ride on broomsticks. Additionally there was extensive terminology which emerged in the language which described everyday practices of witches which again seem to

have very limited relation to any real evidence concerning the acts that accused witches committed. For instance, HTE categories which represent the lexical sets Witch (01.17.02.02.01.01 (n.)) and Sorcerer/Magician (01.17.02.02.01 (n.)) include terms such as *underwitch* (|04 (n.) Witch :: subordinate.) and *arch-magician, archimage* and *under-sorcerer* (02 (n.) Sorcerer/magician :: chief/subordinate) to describe a supposed hierarchy between magical practitioners. There were also new terms for the types of magic performed and the instruments which were supposedly used to perform these. A further piece of language evidence which demonstrates this point, is the list of terms which concerned the witches Sabbat, given in Table 5 below.

Term	Date Range
Sabbat	1652–
Sabbath	a1660–
coven/covin	1662–Scots
witches' meeting	a1676–1767
witches' sabbath	a1676
witch-meeting	1693

Table 5. Terms which were used to describe the proposed meetings of diabolical witches (HTE, 01.17.02.02.01.01|08 (n.) Witch :: meeting of).

According to Voltmer (2023: 124) although the witches sabbat, as well as similar imaginative aspects of witchcraft such as flight and shape-shifting, were well known in popular consciousness, they arose almost entirely from the fantasies of the interrogators. Therefore, the evidence suggesting that these terms all appeared in the language in very close proximity to one another (see Table 5), within the most intense phase of the English witch trials, reveals how extensive an influence these new ideas had on shaping EModE vocabulary within this semantic field.

4.2 Shifting Perceptions During the Decline and Aftermath of the Witch Trials

A final area which should be explored in the question of whether the language reflects positive or negative perceptions of witchcraft, is how this semantic field evolved in the aftermath of the witch trials. An analysis of the language surrounding witchcraft and witches towards the end of the EModE era, after the witch trials had reached their peak, and the witchcraft act had been repealed (Voltmer 2023: 132) shows a clear shift in the opinion on this dark period of history. For example, in the HTE subcategories of the lexical set Witch (H01.17.02.02.01.01 (n.)), we can see that the seemingly neutral term *witch finding* (|11.01 (n.) Witch :: witch-hunt :: action of), which emerged during the period of the witch trials is later joined by terms such as *witch hunt* in 1885 (|11 (n.) Witch :: witch-hunt) and *witch smelling* in 1939 (|11.01 (n.)) as well as *witch-mania* in 1855 under Sorcery/Witchcraft/Magic (HTE, 01.17.02.02|09 (n.)). The first two suggest that, when describing the period of the witch-trials retroactively, people view the events as being much more extreme than perhaps they were viewed at the time, in line with this, the introduction of the term *witch-mania* reveals how the madness and sheer scale of the intensity was evident in hindsight, but perhaps wasn't perceived this way by those swept along by these beliefs at the time. As attitudes gradually changed as the early modern era progressed and people began to understand the sheer scale of the witch trials and subsequent executions, we see not only the increase of negative language used to describe these events but also the addition of, if not positive, increasingly imaginative and lighthearted words into this lexical set. An interesting example of this is the process of amelioration that can be seen in the OED definition of *witch* (n.) (Table 2), in the addition of Sense I.3.b in 1740, which suggests that, in this later time period, *witch* could actually be used in a positive sense.

5. Conclusion

In this essay I have analysed language in the semantic field of witchcraft and witches, focusing primarily on the EModE language used during the period of the Witch Trials and the surrounding years. My analysis was guided by historians' arguments about how witches and witchcraft were perceived and treated during this

time period, particularly in relation to the treatment of women within this extremely patriarchal and religious society. This discussion included the contrasting terminology used to describe male and female practitioners of magic and the acts that they performed, as well as diachronic and semantic changes within this field, with regards to how and why new terminology was introduced. The observations made about the language data, based on these topics, revealed how, as people's feelings towards witches changed, the language within this semantic field did too; as witches were increasingly condemned and criticised, language was used as a tool to enforce these ideas with new words being introduced to perpetuate harmful stereotypes.

This study has provided an insight into how an investigation of the language used in a certain time period can reveal how different groups of people were perceived and thus treated. Additionally, this study has highlighted the importance of considering the source when analysing language with regards to what the purpose was for which something was written. This is because, within the historical language in the semantic field of witchcraft, the nature of the evidence suggested that a lot of the perceptions of witchcraft were circulated by those in power, primarily to enforce their damning viewpoint on magic and magic practices as well as perpetuating harmful stereotypes about women. The concept of witches, created in this environment, has shaped the language that we still use to view the concept of witches today, with PDE metaphorical language still associating witches with negative qualities and wizards and other male practitioners with positive qualities.

This exploration of the perception and treatment of women has highlighted the negative treatment and opinions towards women of this time period, however this was only explored through the niche lens of the semantic field of Witchcraft, specifically focused on the Witch Trials in England. Therefore, while outside the scope of this study, using language change to investigate the role of women during this time period more widely would be an interesting area for further research which could lead to intriguing patterns of data emerging. The expansion of this research could involve investigating different semantic fields in which language reflects how women are treated in society, or alternatively, looking beyond England to the Witch Trials as a whole, across Europe and New England, to analyse this semantic field in

the different time periods and languages which were involved. Furthermore, the study of the language of witchcraft in relation to its reflection on how women are perceived, should not be confined to the early modern era as it is an ongoing area of change which can be studied. As Hutton (2018: 119) posits, ‘the semantic field of witchcraft is now more complex than ever before’ because modern ideas about witchcraft have begun circulating based on reclaiming pagan roots and, significantly for this study, on the ideas of individual expression and self-realisation and liberation for women, challenging the misogynistic views which have perpetuated popular parlance surrounding witches and witchcraft since the era of the Witch Trials.

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