INTRODUCTION
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WITCHCRAFT; WITCH CODES; WITCH ACT*

JOHN NEWTON

A Witch is one who worketh by the Devill, or by some develish or curious art, either hurting or healing, revealing thinges secrete, or foretelling thinges to come, which the devil hath devised to entangle and snare mens soules withal unto damnation.

A witch is a person that hath conference with the Devil to take counsel or to do some act.

[A] Witch is one, who can do or seems to do strange things, beyond the known power of Art and ordinary Nature, by vertue of a Confederacy with Evil Spirits.

Over the course of almost a century these three writers gave three fairly consistent definitions of what a witch was and did. They shared certain codes, certain interpretative practices, that allowed them to provide an apparently fixed view of the nature of witchcraft. Yet ‘witch’ is a word, a linguistic sign, and while it may appear to refer to something fixed and definite this semantic stability is deceptive. The linguistic sign consists of the signifier (the part one reads or hears) and the signified (what the signifier means to us). The signifier is potentially capable of relating to several different signifieds simultaneously, as well as meaning different things to different people. Indeed the signifier is a nexus, diachronically capable of connecting to an array of different images or concepts, and synchronically evolving as the discourse of the culture develops.1 As

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1 At this point it is necessary to acknowledge Stuart Clark’s pioneering use of semiotics as a way of approaching witchcraft. See Thinking with Demons: The Idea of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).