

from *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (1971) by Keith Thomas

A witch was a person of either sex (but more often female) who could mysteriously injure other people. The damage she might do-- *maleficium*, as it was technically called-- could take various forms. Usually she was suspected of causing physical injury to other persons, or of bringing about their death. She might also kill or injure farm animals or interfere with nature by preventing cows from giving milk, or by frustrating such domestic operations as making butter, cheese or beer. There was a wide range of other possible hostile actions, but in England a witch's alleged activities 'usually came under one of these heads. On the Continent witches were also suspected of interfering with the weather and of frustrating sexual relations between human beings [...]

The manner in which the witch actually exercised this occult power was also believed to vary. Sometimes her evil influence was conveyed through physical contact: the witch touched her victim or gave out a potent, but invisible, emanation from her eyes. In this case he was said to have been 'fascinated' or 'overlooked'. Alternatively the witch pronounced a curse or malediction which in due course took effect. Here the victim was said to have been 'forspoken'. Rather less common was the witchcraft which involved technical aids-- making a wax image of the victim and sticking pins in it, writing his name on a piece of paper and then burning it, burying a piece of his clothing, and so forth. In general, contemporaries seem to have been less interested in the mechanics of the operation than in the fact of the witch's malice.

The belief in the possibility of such happenings was very old by the sixteenth century. On one level it was no more than the logical corollary of the equally widespread possibility in the belief of beneficent magic. The 'good' witch who helped a client to triumph over an opponent in law or love, or who cured him by transferring his disease to another person, might well be regarded as a 'bad' one by the injured party. Generally speaking, the cunning¹ folk and the maleficent witches were believed to be two separate species. But they did sometimes overlap, and there are many examples of village wizards and charmers who found themselves accused of maleficent witchcraft.

Whether the magic was helpful or harmful, moreover, the belief in its possibility gained a temporary boost in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries from the same prevailing intellectual current. The occult sympathies and vital spirits of the Neoplatonic universe could be exploited for evil purposes, no less than for good ones. Such doctrines could explain to the satisfaction of intellectuals why dire consequences might follow after tampering with the wax image of a person or with a piece of his clothing. One could harm a man by manipulating his hair, his fingernail parings, his sweat or his excrement, all of which contained his vital spirits. An excessive belief in the power of the imagination similarly made it plausible to think that the object of a witch's imprecations would soon afterwards be taken ill; and the supposed reality of vital spirits and invisible emanations justified the idea that certain men could involuntarily destroy their own cattle, simply by looking at them; a child in his cradle might also succumb to such 'fascination'. Even Aristotle taught that the glance of a menstruating woman would tarnish a mirror. Such theories also magnified the potential efficacy of secret herbal or chemical preparations; as in any primitive society, poison still retained magical associations.

But although Renaissance speculations reinforced the belief of intellectuals in the potentialities of maleficent magic, witch-beliefs of this kind were as old as human history, and in no sense peculiarly English, or even European. It was only in the late Middle Ages that a new element was added to the European concept of witchcraft which was to distinguish it from the witch-beliefs of other primitive

¹ folk healers-- practitioners of folk medicine and folk magic to help people; their magic is "white" magic

peoples. This was the notion that the witch owed her powers to having made a deliberate pact with the Devil. In return for her promise of allegiance, she was thought to have been given the means of wreaking supernatural vengeance upon her enemies. Seen from this new point of view, the essence of witchcraft was not the damage it did to other persons, but its heretical character – devil-worship. Witchcraft had become a Christian heresy, the greatest of all sins, because it involved the renunciation of God and deliberate adherence to his greatest enemy. *Maleficium* was a purely secondary activity, a by-product of this false religion. Whether or not the witch injured other people, she deserved to die for her disloyalty to God. Around this conception was built up the notion of ritual devil-worship, involving the sabbath or nocturnal meeting at which the witches gathered to worship their master and to copulate with him. [...]

In 1542 it was made a felony (and therefore a capital offence) to conjure spirits or to practise witchcraft, enchantment or sorcery, in order to find treasure; to waste or destroy a person's body, limbs, or goods; to provoke to unlawful love; to declare what had happened to stolen goods; or 'for any other unlawful intent or purpose'. Despite some ambiguity of wording (was conjuring an offence in itself or only if performed for an unlawful purpose?), this Act clearly treated the crime of witchcraft as consisting in positive acts of hostility to the community, rather than in relations with the Devil as such. The only possible exception to this rule was the ban on magic to find lost goods, and for that the explanation may well be that the makers of the Act regarded the practice as fraudulent.

The second witchcraft statute, passed in 1563 after the failure of an earlier bill in 1559, also laid its emphasis upon the maleficent nature of the witch's activities. It was more severe than its predecessor, in that it made it a felony to invoke *evil* spirits for any purpose whatsoever, whether *maleficium* was involved or not. But it was also more lenient, in that witchcraft, enchantment, charming and sorcery were deemed capital felonies only if they actually resulted in the death of a human victim. Should the attempt prove unsuccessful, or if the victim was only maimed, or if only animals were killed, the witch was to incur the milder penalty of a year's imprisonment, with quarterly appearances in the pillory. After a second offence, however, the action became a felony. A reduced penalty was also prescribed for magic designed to find treasure and lost goods, or to provoke to unlawful love; on the second offence, this did not become felony, but was punished by life imprisonment and forfeiture of goods. Here again, therefore, the gravity of the offence depended upon the degree of the injury suffered by the witch's victims, not on any postulated covenant (save in the case of deliberate invocation of *evil* spirits). This leniency contrasted sharply with the attitude of those theologians who would have liked to see all magicians, black or white, consigned to speedy execution. [...]

The one common feature of English witch-trials which does indicate some sort of association in the popular mind between maleficent magic and the Devil was the notion that the witch bore on her body the mark of her profession in the form of a spot or excrescence, which could be discovered by searching her for an 'unnatural' mark, usually recognisable because it would not bleed when pricked and was insensible to pain. As early as 1579 this was stated to be 'a common token to know all witches by'. Thereafter it was a relatively common procedure to search the suspect's body for any likely-looking protuberance, which would then be pricked to see whether it hurt. An associated belief was the peculiarly English notion that the witch was likely to possess a familiar imp or devil, who would take the shape of an animal, usually a cat or a dog, but possibly a toad, a rat, or even a wasp or butterfly. This familiar, who performed useful magical services for his mistress, was supposed to have been given by the Devil himself, or purchased or inherited from another witch. The witch's mark was sometimes thought of as a teat from which the familiar could suck the witch's blood as a form of nourishment. It thus became a common procedure in witch-detection to isolate the suspect and wait for some animal or insect to appear as proof of her guilt.

The lore surrounding witch's marks and familiars was considerable, even before it was reinforced by the reference in the Act of 1604 to entertaining and feeding evil spirits. The employment of vampirish familiars for magic purposes had been encountered in medieval legend, while the conjuration of spirits was a stock magical activity. Familiars gained a recognized place in witch accusations at an early stage. They made their appearance in Essex trials in 1566, 1579 and 1582; indeed a striking instance of the clear association in the popular mind between witchcraft and the presence of a toad in the suspect's house occurred in an ecclesiastical case in Somerset as early as 1530.

from *Daemonologie in Forme of a Dialogue* (1597) by James VI of Scotland (later James I of England)

James VI wrote this explanation of witches' behavior and actions as a dialogue, where one character (Philomathes) asks questions, and the other, more knowledgeable character (Epistemon) answers.

[Epistemon]: Every one of them proposes unto him, what wicked turn they would have done, either for obtaining of riches, or for revenging them upon any whom they have malice at [...]

[Philomathes]: What can be the cause that there are twenty women given to that craft, where there is one man?

[Epistemon]: The reason is easy, for as that sex is frailer than man is, so is it easier to be entrapped in these gross² snares of the Devil, as was over well proved to be true, by the Serpent's deceiving of Eve at the beginning.³

[Epistemon]: They can make men or women to love or hate other, which may be very possible to the Devil to effectuate,⁴ seeing he be a subtle spirit, knows well enough how to persuade the corrupted affection of them whom God will permit him so to deal with; they can lay the sickness of one upon another, which likewise is very possible unto him: For as an old practician,⁵ he knows well enough what humor⁶ dominates most in any of us, and as a spirit he can subtly waken up the same, making it peccant,⁷ or to abound, as he thinks meet⁸ for troubling of us, when God will so permit him [...]

[Epistemon]: They can raise storms and temples in the air, either upon Sea or land, though not universally, but in such a particular place and prescribed bounds, as God will permit them so to

² **gross** glaring, flagrant, monstrous (when used, as here, to modify a noun of evil import)

³ **Serpent's ... beginning** In Genesis 1:1-5, Eve is created from one of Adam's ribs to be Adam's companion. They are innocent and unembarrassed about their nakedness. However, a serpent deceives Eve into eating fruit from the tree which God had forbidden them to eat, and she gives some of the fruit to Adam. For this transgression against God's will, the two are expelled from paradise. In the Christian tradition, the serpent is often identified with Satan.

⁴ **effectuate** to bring to pass

⁵ **practician** person who practices a particular art, profession, or occupation

⁶ **humor** any of four fluids of the body (blood, phlegm, choler, and so-called melancholy or black bile) believed to determine, by their relative proportions and conditions, the state of health and the temperament of a person or animal

⁷ **peccant** unhealthy, corrupt, diseased, especially of a bodily humor

⁸ **meet** fitting, becoming, proper

trouble...They can make spirits either to follow and trouble persons, or haunt certain houses, and affray oftentimes the inhabitants: as has been known to be done by our Witches at this time.

[Philomathes]: But will God permit these wicked instruments by the power of the Devil their master, to trouble by any of these means, any that believes in him.

[Epistemon]: No doubt, for there are three kinds of folks whom God will permit so to be tempted or troubled; the wicked for their horrible sins, to punish them in the like measure; the godly that are sleeping in any great sins or infirmities and weakness is faith, to waken them up the faster by such an uncouth form: and even some of the best, that their patience may be tried before the world as Job was.⁹

from *The Wonderful¹⁰ Discoverie of the Witchcrafts of Margaret and Phillip Flower* (1619)

FROM The Examination of Ellen Greene of Stathorne . . . [17TH MARCH]

She saith, that one Joan Willimot of Goadby came about six years since to her in the wolds,¹¹ and persuaded this examine¹² to forsake God and betake her to the Devil, and she would give her two spirits, to which she gave her consent, and thereupon the said Joan Willimot called two spirits, one in the likeness of a kitlin,¹³ and the other of a mouldiwarp.¹⁴ The first, the said Willimot called Puss, the other, Hiss, Hiss, and they presently came to her, and she departing left them with this examine, and they leapt on her shoulder, and the kitlin sucked under her right ear on her neck, and the mouldiwarp on the left side in the same place. After they had sucked her, she sent the kitlin to a baker of that town, whose name she remembers not, who had called her witch and struck her, and bade her said spirit go and bewitch him to death. The mouldiwarp she then bade go to Anne Dawse of the same town and bewitch her to death, because she had called this said examine witch, whore, jade, etc., and within one fortnight after they both died.

About three years since, this examine removed thence to Stathorne, where she now dwelt. Upon a difference between the said Willimot and the wife of John Patchet of the said Stathorne, yeoman, she said the said Willimot called her, this examine, to go and touch the said John Patchet's wife and her child, which she did, touching the said John Patchet's wife in her bed, and the child in the grace-wife's¹⁵ arms, and then sent her said spirits to bewitch them to death, which they did, and so the woman lay languishing by the space of a month and more, for then she died; the child died the next day after she touched it.

⁹ **as Job was** In the Hebrew Bible, Job is presented as a good and prosperous family man who is beset by Satan with God's permission with horrendous disasters that take away all that he holds dear, including his offspring, his health, and his property. He struggles to understand his situation and begins a search for the answers to his difficulties.

¹⁰ **Wonderful** full of wonder; such as to excite wonder or astonishment

¹¹ **wolds** pieces of open country; elevated tracts of open country or moorland

¹² **examine** technical legal term for one who is being investigated

¹³ **kitlin** kitten

¹⁴ **mouldiwarp** mole

¹⁵ **grace-wife's** midwife's

And she further saith, that the said Joan Willimot had a spirit sucking on her under the left flank, in the likeness of a little white dog, which this examine saith that she last saw the same sucking in barley-harvest last, being then at the house of the said Joan Willimot.

And for herself, this examine further saith, that she gave her soul to the Devil to have these spirits at her command; for a confirmation whereof, she suffered them to suck her always as aforesaid about the change and fall of the moon.

from *Witches Apprehended, Examined and Executed, for notable villanies by them committed both by Land and Water (1613)*

The same old servant of Master Engers within few days after going to plow, fell into talk of Mother Sutton, and of Mary Sutton her daughter, of what pranks¹⁶ he had heard they had played thereabouts in the country, as also what accidents had befallen him and his fellow, as they had passed to and from Bedford. In discoursing of which a beetle¹⁷ came and stroke¹⁸ the same fellow on the breast, and he presently fell into a trance as he was guiding the plow-- the extremity¹⁹ whereof was such as his senses altogether distract²⁰ and his body and mind utterly distempered.²¹ The beholders deemed him clean²² hopeless of recovery. Yea,²³ his other fellow upon this sudden sight was stricken into such amazement, as he stood like a liveless²⁴ trunk divided from his vital spirits-- as far unable to help him as the other was needful to be helpt²⁵ by him. Till at length being somewhat recovered, and awaked from that astonishment, he made hast homeward and carried his master word of what had happened.

Upon delivery of this news (for he was a man highly esteemed by him for his honest and long service) there was much moan made²⁶ for him in the house, and Master Enger himself had not the least part of grief for his extremity, but with all possible speed hasted²⁷ into the field, and used help to have him brought home. After which he neglected no means, nor spared any cost that might ease his servant, or redeem him from the misery he was in. But all was in vain, for his ecstasies²⁸ were nothing lessened, but continued a long time in as grievous perplexity, as at first.

Yet though they suspected much, they had no certain proof or knowledge of the cause. Their means were therefore the shorter²⁹ to cure the effect. But as a thief, when he entereth into a house to

¹⁶ **pranks** malicious tricks; the modern word has a more harmless connotation than it would have in 1613

¹⁷ **beetle** an implement consisting of a heavy weight or 'head,' usually of wood, with a handle or stock, used for driving wedges or pegs, ramming down paving stones, or for crushing, bruising, beating, flattening, or smoothing, in various industrial and domestic operations

¹⁸ **beetle came and stroke** beetle struck; the image of a beetle striking him is not meant to be read literally, i.e., *it as if a beetle struck him in the chest*

¹⁹ **extremity** a condition of extreme urgency or need

²⁰ **distract** perplexed or confused in mind by having the thoughts drawn in different directions

²¹ **distempered** disturbed in his normal proportion or distribution of humors

²² **clean** completely

²³ **Yea** truly; indeed

²⁴ **liveless** lifeless

²⁵ **helpt** helped

²⁶ **much moan made** much grieving or sorrowing

²⁷ **hasted** hastened

²⁸ **ecstasies** frenzy or stupor

²⁹ **shorter** reaching but a little way

rob first putteth out the lights, according to that *Qui male agit, odit lucem* (“He that doth evil hateth light”), so these imps³⁰ that live in the gunshot of devilish assaults, go about to darken and disgrace the light of such as are toward³¹ and virtuous and make the night the instrument to contrive their wicked purposes.

For these Witches having so long and covertly con- tinued to do much mischief by their practices were so hardened in their lewd and vile proceeding that the custom of their sin had quite taken away the sense and feeling thereof, and they spared not to continue the perplexity of this old servant both in body and mind-- in such sort that his friends were as desirous to see death rid him from his extremity as a woman great³² with child is ever musing upon the time of her delivery. For where distress is deep and the conscience clear, *Mors expectatur absque formidine, exoptatur cum dulcedine, excipitur cum devotione* (“Death is looked for without fear, desired with delight, and accepted with devotion”).

As the acts and enterprises of these wicked persons are dark and devilish, so in the perseverance of this fellow’s perplexity He being in his distraction both of body and mind, yet in bed and awake espied Mary Sutton (the daughter) in a moonshine night come in at a window in her accustomed and personal habit and shape, with her knitting work in her hands, and sitting down at his bed’s feet-- sometimes working and knitting with her needles and sometimes gazing and staring him in the face-- as his grief was thereby redoubled and increased. Not long after she drew nearer unto hi and sat by his bedside (yet all this while he had neither power to stir or speak) and told him if he would consent she should come to bed to him,³³ he should be restored to his former health and prosperity. Thus the Devil strives to enlarge his Kingdom and upon the neck of one wickedness to heap another.

³⁰ **imps** (figurative) children of the devil or of hell

³¹ **toward** favorable, propitious (the opposite of untoward)

³² **great** of relatively large girth or circumference

³³ **consent she should come to bed to him** agree to have sex with her