



MAGIC, RITUAL, AND WITCHCRAFT

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Witchcraft—Discourse and Disappearance

Württemberg and the Dutch Documentation

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How do you know she is a witch? This question demands a more complicated answer than a series of syllogisms—quite apart from the fact that “he” could be a witch, too. The question is actually misleading; the process of a bewitchment does not start with confirming a suspicion about the identity of the witch, it starts with a misfortune—one that is usually personal or has occurred within a family—and the search for its reasons and causes. Before the witch can be identified, someone needs to presume witchcraft. In every historical situation in which misfortune is encountered, a range of explanations is available, and witchcraft is only one of them. How do you know it is witchcraft? Because other explanations and solutions do not work and the witchcraft discourse has a knack for providing answers where other methods have failed. Because you suspected witchcraft anyhow, although others in your family or among your friends did not. Because an expert told you so. Only at this point does one begin to look for a witch. The suggestion of witchcraft, more specifically of bewitchment, is part of a selection process that depends not only on the cultural availability of witchcraft as an explanation for events but also on personal preferences, chance encounters, and a specific definition of a situation as liminal, as open to attack by people deemed to reside on the margin of society.

The concept of the witchcraft discourse refers to a more or less closed system of thinking and acting, of words and deeds. It is a kind of sublanguage, like a professional language or a subculture. The witchcraft discourse sees the world in terms of witchcraft and it is precisely this circularity that lends it its strength. It is a concept mostly used by anthropologists, but it should be useful to historians, too. However, more often than not it is not recognized, partly out of unfamiliarity (a failure to look beyond history), partly because sources do not unambiguously point to its existence. Historical witchcraft discourses have to be reconstructed, yet this does not imply that they cannot

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be considered as a historical construct at the same time. The particulars of the concept include the diagnosis of a misfortune as the result of witchcraft, stories of similar occurrences in the past or elsewhere, various rituals to facilitate the identification of the particular witch, the idea that only the witch can undo her own actions, and the reinterpretation of past events in terms of witchcraft. For the witch, there is hardly any escape. As German ethnologist Inge Schöck once illustrated, regular church attendance would normally be considered a sign of piety and thus run counter to any definition of a witch; argued from within the witchcraft discourse, however, a witch would deliberately attend church in order to avoid suspicion.¹ The process of identifying witchcraft and a witch transforms every deed into a misdeed. Did she admire the child? Did she touch it? Ah, now we know. That was how she exercised her powers (no matter how many other people had exhibited similar behavior). In the late Middle Ages people in the Netherlands (and elsewhere in Europe) had a very effective way of dealing with these kinds of allegations: accusers bore the burden of providing proof, and when this was impossible they were liable to the same punishment that was accorded to the accused. Under these circumstances the most sensible thing to do was to retract the insult, to swallow one's words and attempt to continue living together in friendship and peace. A few centuries later the vestiges of this system were still visible in slander trials. Society certainly had its way of dealing with false accusations.

In his long awaited and audacious book, Edward Bever, however, does not grant the "witch" any redress and seeks to declare her guilty of deed and intent. In the Württemberg cases he analyzes, witches are malicious and consciously so. There is no question of doubting the descriptions of those who saw themselves as bewitched, no reason to evoke the witchcraft discourse as a way of understanding them. Witchcraft had a very strong physical and psychosomatic component and those accused of witchcraft knew perfectly well what they were doing, which techniques they were applying, what effect their words (in particular the tone) and gestures would have. This extended to the prosecution. As Bever argues at the end of the book, even when trials did occasionally involve "quite innocent women," "yet what innocent woman could honestly deny ever having felt strong anger or desire? The trials combined a relentless specificity with sudden, blind outbursts that might force any woman to confront the asocial, amoral side of being human" (p. 412). There is a problem of selection here, of the historical actors (primar-

1. Schöck, *Hexenglaube in der Gegenwart: Empirische Untersuchungen in Südwestdeutschland* (Tübingen, 1978), 114.

ily the bewitched) and of the historian—are there other historical occurrences that can be comprehended in a similar way but were not ascribed to witchcraft? As to bewitchments, how should one understand the withering of household products? What about weather witchcraft? Württemberg may have escaped such calamities, but in the Netherlands the bewitching of butter churns was rampant from the late Middle Ages into the twentieth century. The brewing of beer was considered prone to bewitchment at least up to the sixteenth century. So was fishing at sea. It may be possible to make a case for domestic animals to be sensitive to sheer ill will; Bever does so and I do not consider myself versed enough in animal psychology to contradict him. I do not see, however, how the psychological processes exhibited to explain his cases apply to incidences without living beings at the receiving end or where, in the case of fish, living beings cannot be presumed to have been influenced by sea-faring witches, who were supposed to float in egg shells or mussel shells. On another end of the witchcraft discourse the victim is also absent; when men were accused of enriching themselves through witchcraft, they could do this without harming others.

The author avoids discussing such cases by not engaging with male witchcraft; he also declares the problematic sorts of bewitchment marginal to his concerns, although “there were a couple of spectacular trials involving allegations of weather manipulation early on in the region” (p. 6), and even an exceptional case deserves explanation. What is more, if the ascription of witchcraft is clearly present in the above cases, why should it not be so in the testimonies of the bewitched in Württemberg? Even ostensibly clear cases of magical practice may have been ascribed, may have been stories without substantiation. This is not to claim that no one practiced any (maleficent) magic or that the bewitched were “delusional,” merely that the evidence about the witches’ “hostility” is one-sided from the start and made even more so in the process of historical interpretation. If bewitchments consisted purely of “raw emotional pressure” or of “explicit expression of dislike” (p. 22), and were therefore fairly direct, what then was the use of elaborate identification rituals? Of boiling urine, of communal blessings to uncover the witch responsible for a sufferer’s ailment, and all kinds of other methods of witch divination? Did they merely confirm what everyone already knew and simply justified the ensuing action? Or were the bewitched perhaps genuinely unfamiliar with their witch? Bever prioritizes the feelings of the receiving party and neglects the receiver’s labeling of the presumed sender. Especially in the context of a criminal trial, the tendency of the witchcraft discourse to recast history in its own idiom became overemphasized, and this should warn researchers to be careful when treating witchcraft narratives as

“real” events. Should the witch not have a say in this and at least be considered innocent until proven guilty without reasonable doubt?

The question is whether the records of criminal trials form a reliable and sufficient source to present an unbiased view of everyday witchcraft. Bever has very carefully avoided using statements by suspected “witches” produced under torture, but the atmosphere of a criminal trial by itself may already have prevented balanced statements from everyone involved. One wonders how the author would have dealt with slander cases, present before, during, and after the period of prosecution, and usually won by the witch’s party; or with testimony of witnesses in situations where they were less aware of the deadly consequences their reminiscences and stories could have. Bever should also have considered sources from the period after the trials, or have refrained from firm conclusions about their effect on the (local) witchcraft discourse. Up to the twentieth century, press reports are not just a sign of enlightened journalism, they also reveal many cases of bewitchments. Now the odd situation occurs that a fairly minute description of the multilayered mechanisms of the repression of magic is practically unaccompanied by any evidence as to how this was received at the village level. Neither is there any indication that discourse persisted in Württemberg into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Instead, witches are portrayed as disappearing in the course of the seventeenth century: “Men in 1580 could look around and see dangerous witches; a century later they could not. They stopped believing in witches in part because over the course of the century women had learned to try to avoid acting like witches” (p. 413). This is clearly overstated for the sake of effect, certainly in the German situation; it also reveals an overreliance on criminal trial material. It may be a general tendency among witchcraft historians who specialize in the early modern period to ignore later periods; acknowledging the continued historical importance of the witchcraft discourse would have qualified both the scope and the outcome of the eighteenth-century “civilizing” venture. Again comparison with the Netherlands proves illuminating: practically without witch trials in the seventeenth century, this region shows that the criminal prosecution of maleficent witchcraft hardly contributed to any discernable change in magical thinking, nor that women could “internalize” a certain form of behavior under pressure of prosecution. Trials were a very crude and ineffective instrument of education as they usually killed the subject. In this respect, church policy was much more relevant (as Bever suspects), although consultation of church records also reveals the fickle effect of educational endeavors.

Ecclesiastical discipline did extend to various forms of healing (unwitching included), but only occasionally to slander and rarely to bewitchments. In

the Netherlands ministers were active in this field of “repression,” but with only lukewarm support by the secular authorities. Church efforts were primarily effective on an individual level and for a relatively short period. Whereas Bever considers the usual form of secular punishment in these cases, banishment (both in Württemberg and the Netherlands, derived from the *Carolina* legal code), as virtually similar, indeed “originally tantamount,” to a death sentence (p. 353), in practice it merely moved the person and the problem to a neighboring jurisdiction. Given the patchwork of small German states, the prospect for cunning folk continuing their magical trade just across the border was even better there than in the Netherlands. If the specialist could not come to the clients, the clients were perfectly capable of traveling to the specialist. Even when the combination of prosecution and education might sometimes have been successful in replacing the witchcraft discourse, there were always counterinfluences from elsewhere. A major one developed within the church as bands of Christians adhered to their own reading of the Bible and found reasons to support their views on the existence of witches. Among other groups, this applied to the Pietist movement, especially the “radical separatists” (p. 413), and when they supported the concept of a new, postwitchcraft woman, they also kept the idea of bewitchments alive.²

When one takes account of the witchcraft discourse, it is hard to understand how women could have adapted their actions in the face of “repression,” as Bever asserts, since no woman in her right mind ever thought she was a witch herself (that is, before she was submitted to judicial pressure). Witches were always other women. That is to say, the witchcraft discourse itself generally ensured that women did not cross the boundaries of the acceptable and it was the recurrence of witchcraft accusations at the village level, not criminal trials, that reminded women what lines they should avoid crossing. Bever is nevertheless one of the few authors who takes quotidian witchcraft seriously and puts it at the center of his analysis. Interpreting it is primarily a matter of perspective and hence debate.

2. Andreas Gestrich, “Pietismus und Aberglaube: Zum Zusammenhang von populären Pietismus und dem Ende der Hexenverfolgung im 18. Jahrhundert,” in *Das Ende der Hexenverfolgung*, ed. Sönke Lorenz and Dieter R. Bauer (Stuttgart, 1995), 269–86.