

Witches and Neighbours: The Social and Cultural Context of European Witchcraft

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'Much nonsense has been written on this subject', wrote Keith Thomas in a famous and influential footnote to his own pioneering chapter on English witchcraft in *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (1971). In similar vein, Robin Briggs remarks near the start of this magnificent new survey that 'common assumptions about the subject tend to have one very marked feature in common, which is that they are hopelessly wrong' (p. 9). The concept of witchcraft is notoriously slippery; scholarly research over the past quarter-century has barely changed the received ideas of most people. Some of what reputable and intelligent scholars have contributed to the subject has proved at best untypical of the wider witchcraft phenomenon, at worst seriously misleading. Robin Briggs has devoted many years to meticulous examination of a large body of trial records of witchcraft cases from the Duchy of Lorraine in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In this book he has brought the insights from that research to a synthesis and survey of the social context of all early modern witchcraft cases in western Europe and New England. The resulting book will have a deeply corrosive effect on all sorts of traditional wisdom about the subject of witchcraft and society.

The astringent and critical quality of Robin Briggs's work may come as all the more of a shock, given that whatever nonsense may have been written about witches before 1971 (and since) there has also been a lot of good sense written about them as well. A number of excellent studies carried out in the 1970s cleared much of the ground in witchcraft history. Their view acquired general assent, at least among historians, until it was distilled into several modest-sized and accessible textbooks in the mid-1980s, and became the bread-and-butter fare of undergraduate courses. Norman Cohn's *Europe's Inner Demons* and Richard Kieckhefer's *European Witch Trials*, though written independently, reached complementary conclusions about the origins of the continental European witch hunt. The stereotypic, mythical 'witch' appeared as the result of an amalgamation, in the minds of inquisitors and specialist judges, of various components drawn from folk-belief: night-flight, spells, charms, and weather-magic. These elements were fused together with the conceptual glue of 'demonic pact', which was turned into an explicit act of adoration of Satan by the witch, rather than an unconscious use of evil spirits by the superstitious. 'Witches' were then assumed, like heretics before them, to meet in secret nocturnal assemblies, to carry out disgusting inversions of Christian worship, and to engage in promiscuous orgiastic group sex. This imaginary fusion of disparate folkloric, theological and legal elements received official sanction from the papacy, and literary notoriety in the *Malleus*

Maleficarum, in the mid-1480s. The adoption of inquisitorial procedures by lay courts as well as ecclesiastical in the sixteenth century, and the diffusion of the ideas of the *Malleus*, led to the mass witch-hunting of the later sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The use of torture to extract confessions, and the obligation imposed on penitents to name their imaginary accomplices at the 'sabbat', elicited closely similar confessions of group diabolism from a wide range of otherwise unconnected victims, and perpetuated the fear of a hidden, secret, malevolent society.

At around the same time, work on England established a quite different pattern for its witchcraft. The apparent dichotomy between England and western Europe, in theory, legal procedure, and social experience, became another commonplace of the subject. In England demonic pact never acquired the status of a key concept which it held on the continent; neither did the assumption that witchcraft was a collective rather than an individual crime. English courts tried individuals, because they were believed to have hurt or killed animals or people in rural communities. Members of the elite were cautious, rather than credulous. Legal procedure did not allow torture, and was essentially adversarial rather than investigative; the crucial decisions to commit and to convict were taken by juries of laymen rather than specialist investigators. The focus, therefore, shifted in English cases to the social context, to the relationships in village communities which provoked the fear and reputation for hostile magic.

This overall picture of the subject, albeit qualified by an increasing number of helpful studies on Scandinavia, Eastern Europe, Germany, and by the continuing scholarly industry on New England, has seemed neat, attractive, defensible, and probably about right. It is a tribute to Robin Briggs's originality that his meticulous, detailed, thoughtful survey will leave nearly every part of this convenient academic synthesis very badly shaken, if not actually demolished. He approaches the continental trial material in a disarmingly obvious, yet novel fashion. He looks at the social conditions in village communities before an accusation of witchcraft was made, as attested by the earliest stages of a trial record, the depositions of witnesses and the first responses or confessions of the accused. It was always understood that someone had to fear evil magic at work in the community, before the terrible machinery of witch-prosecution could be set in motion. Witches were taken to court by their neighbours; most were not sought out randomly by fanatical 'witch-hunters'. However, this first stage in a cycle of trials has usually been regarded by European historians as the prologue to the main event; as the unspectacular stuff of folk-belief, rather than the sensational evidence of diabolism. Robin has taken this preliminary evidence as the core of a study of the witchcraft phenomenon, to see how far a satisfactory explanation can be advanced from village fears and tensions studied for their own sake. He draws very heavily on the data from Lorraine throughout the book; but forestalling the obvious question of whether Lorraine was typical, he has also examined an impressive range of evidence from other corners of Europe to compare with and reinforce his own conclusions. Cases as far apart as Sweden, Scotland, the Pyrenees and Salem Village are dissected in detail from printed sources.

The work is organized thematically. The first chapter explores, indeed disposes of, the composite of the 'perfect witch' found in many full trials: it identifies more inconsistencies in the evidence than the traditional picture usually allows. Chapters II-IV explore the phenomena of hostile magic: the death, illness, or misfortunes of people or animals, the 'techniques' attributed to witches and the 'healers' who tried to reverse their spells, and the underlying ill-will in close-knit communities which fostered the fear of evil magic in the first place. Chapter V, juxtaposing some surprising elements, describes the 'diagnosing' of witchcraft, whether by cunning folk, semi-professional witch-finders, the state, the clergy, the medical profession, and the unprofessional servants of justice. In chapters VI-IX we are led through the relationship between witchcraft and a range of other major themes in social history: the family, gender and patriarchy, economic problems, and power relationships within society. In the final chapter of the analysis Robin moves into the area of psychology and pure ideas, contrasting the idea of witchcraft as a cultural construct with its roots in collective psychology, 'the standardized nightmares of society' (p. 383).

Robin Briggs's focus on the social context involves some significant omissions, most of which are quite deliberate and avowed. He does not discuss the literature of witch-hunting at any length at all, partly because this will shortly receive a full-dress coverage from Stuart Clark, but also because it is relatively unhelpful to

his explanations. This selectivity ensures that discussion of the 'demonic' elements found in the trials is relatively brief and scattered (see pp. 15ff, 25ff, 104ff, 228f, 390f). Slightly more worrying is the absence of a systematic exploration of judicial procedure. Some important distinctions are signposted, for instance that between the relatively uniform English system with its multiple lay juries, and the confused pattern of overlapping jurisdictions on the continent. Nevertheless, the trial evidence is usually presented apart from the legal context in which it was extracted. In keeping with the overall argument that witch-prosecutions arose 'from below', the specialist witch-hunters are marginalized. Such figures as Matthew Hopkins (pp. 191f) Daniel Hauff of Esslingen (pp. 336ff) or Peter Binsfeld of Trier (pp. 347ff) are treated succinctly; but they are clearly, for Robin, superficial outgrowths on the main topic. It is still surprising that Nicolas Remy, procureur-general for Lorraine and one of the most celebrated writers on the subject, earns only four references in the index.

A number of highly stimulating and provocative arguments emerge from Robin Briggs's exposition. He shows how conventional images of the 'typical witch' do not correspond to the majority of cases, even if a few such examples may be found. Witches were not universally, nor even overwhelmingly female. Men averaged 25% of those convicted across Europe, but the ratio could rise to between 40% and 50% within the jurisdiction of the Parlement of Paris, quite apart from Iceland or Estonia where (as the Bengt A nkarloo / Gustav Henningsen symposium showed) men formed a majority of the accused (pp. 257-61). Witches were not ancient hags; allowing for the decade or two which often passed between rumour and trial, they were in middle life when they first acquired their reputations (pp. 20ff, 263f). Despite the gruesome fantasies of Kraemer and Sprenger, they were unlikely to be midwives (pp. 77f, 277-81). Robin also casts doubt, though not entirely consistently, on the involvement of cunning-folk or magical healers as 'typical' witches (here it should be noted that some witch-writers, like the Danish Lutheran Niels Hemmingsen, saw witchcraft almost entirely in terms of magical healing). At one point Robin claims that cunning folk were rarely accused of being witches, and distinguished from the latter (p. 122); eleven pages later he agrees that witches and cunning folk 'were indissoluble parts of the same belief system' (p. 133); a later discussion renders the point moot, since it is pointed out that few of those who used magical healing were full-time practitioners anyway (pp. 171-3; cf 261). This discussion entails the only seriously misleading comment found, when the book claims that 'such keen observers as [Reginald] Scot distinguished sharply between the witches and the cunning folk and failed to discern any marked tendency for them to merge' (p. 123). It is hard to reconcile that verdict with Scot's comment on the Margaret Simons case of 1581, where the vicar John Ferrall 'found, partly through his own judgement, and partly (as he himself told me) by the relation of other witches, that his said sonne was by [Margaret Simons] bewitched. Yea, he also told me, that his sonne (being as it were past all cure) received perfect health at the hands of another witch.' Scot used the term 'witch' interchangeably of malevolent spell-casters and folk-healers, even at one point claiming that the term signified the two things indifferently.

Because *Witches & Neighbours* focuses on the social context rather than the demonic fantasies with which continental trials commonly ended, its presentation of European witchcraft shows startling similarities with the conventional picture of English witches. The hard-and-fast distinction between England and the continent now looks remarkably shaky, and Robin loses no opportunity to undermine it further. Village tensions were crucial in all regions. English JPs could act as investigators, like continental judges (pp. 187ff). It is even suggested that the English peculiarity of the zoomorphic spirit 'familiar' corresponds to the demonic pact, though there is arguably a real difference between trading with a demonic cat or ferret for favours, and worshipping an enthroned devil at a sabbat (pp. 29ff).

The discussion of other historians' explanations of witchcraft resonates with scepticism: they are mercilessly depicted as untypical, far-fetched, or ill-supported. Robin is particularly severe on the idea that witchcraft was an alien idea imposed on passive, bewildered peasants by a persecuting central authority in the form of the emergent modern state. As he convincingly points out, the strongest and most modern states played a negligible role in hunting witches, and often restrained those who did; small fragmented ecclesiastical states were the worst culprits (pp. 190ff, 321ff).

One important problem raised by the book, which becomes something of a refrain as an explanation for the phenomenon is sought, is that witch-hunting was in fact relatively rare and small-scale. 40,000 victims over more than a century across a continent is not only less than the toll from religious strife or ordinary warfare, it is less than most monocausal explanations would seem to require, if they were true. The conclusion professes honest perplexity as to why there were not more witch-trials than actually took place (p. 399).

In fact, Robin's insistence on the complexity of the causes and the need for 'multiple explanations' (p. 397) does not entirely do his own argument justice. There runs through *Witches & Neighbours* a very fully articulated and closely argued thesis about popular witch-beliefs. It runs more or less as follows. Human beings in pre-industrial society had (or have) a biologically conditioned fear of malevolent evil magic. They could detect ill-will in their neighbours, or believed that they could do so. Faced with incomprehensible and uncontrollable misfortune, in the form of disease, loss of crops or animals, impoverishment, or marital disharmony, they 'projected' the evil in their community on to an individual or individuals who represented the ill-adjusted, the envious, or the somehow hostile. Such people were accused of 'bewitching' their neighbours, and by being cast in this role may, perforce, have come to believe it of themselves. The preferred remedy, within the closed society of the village, was to confront the suspect and ask for the spell to be removed, or by some sympathetic magic to reverse its effects. Only when legal redress was offered, and then only with reluctance and hesitation, did villagers bring their fears before legal systems which they could not control. Where they could control the justice system, they were excessively zealous against witchcraft, as in the rare case of the 'village committees' of the Saarland (pp. 340-6). Any brief summary of such a carefully constructed thesis as this must entail some travesty; but the above synopsis is not, I hope, too far removed from Robin's intention. Certain sections of the book carefully deal with objections to this central argument, for example the refutation of structuralist theories that all collective psychology is culturally conditioned (pp. 371ff) and the wider critique of the idea that witchcraft was an idea simply 'imposed' from above (e.g. p. 262).

According to Robin Briggs, then, previous historians of continental witchcraft have looked at the subject the wrong way round: they have concentrated on the intellectual and judicial outgrowths rather than the social bed-rock where those beliefs persisted, which alone would make villagers accuse their neighbours. This is a bold statement which calls for careful evaluation. It does contain some internal problems. One could object to the circularity involved in selecting the 'social' data out of the trials, then positing these as essential. Perhaps more fairly, Robin's argument may be open to just the objection he makes against others: if the mass-psychological fear of witchcraft was so universal, then the very patchy spread of prosecutions across space and time - not just their overall 'rarity' - needs explaining. Robin shows an awareness of this problem at points (see pp. 146-8, 305-6, 350-1). At one point he floats the idea that accusations of arson may have offered an alternative to accusations of maleficium (p. 319), but the possibility is not developed.

One may, with some hesitancy, query whether the psychological mind-set which Robin Briggs has postulated for pre-modern European people can really be proved to have existed. His argument assumes that pre-industrial people not only feared their neighbours' envy, and believed in magical power; but that they then combined the two, suspecting fellow-mortals of having the power and the will to harm them by magic. The fear of what one might call 'neighbour-witches', therefore, supposedly existed from time immemorial. The puzzle is that medieval literature on popular belief (ecclesiastical in origin no doubt, but the only source we have) does not really attest such fear. Evil - or mischief - was explained in terms of spirit-creatures who do not seem to have been human at all, from the striges of antiquity to the brujas driven away by midsummer fires in Spain, or the creatures whom the benandanti fought in the sky, down to the little fairies or house-ghosts ('ladies of the house', 'ladies from outside' or the German 'Wichtelin'). Some of these names were later transferred to (human) witches, but they seem originally to have designated non-human spirits. Moreover, it was theological high culture which levelled them all down to the rank of demons, insisting that they meant nothing but harm. Finally, while belief in healing magic was everywhere, its association with demonic powers was not universal. The latter was on the contrary a rhetorical device used by ecclesiastics, to persuade a thoroughly sceptical people that this 'useful' spiritual power was really illicit.

Is it not possible that people may have been taught to fear 'witches', in this specific sense of real human beings who were out to harm them magically? Robin Briggs, keen to do justice to the autonomy of popular belief, seems unwilling to accept this possibility. Yet Alonso de Salazar, the sceptical judge of the Navarre witch-hunts, famously asserted that 'there were neither witches nor bewitched until they were spoken about'. The possibility that fear of neighbour-witches, in the particular form in which it surfaced in the late sixteenth century, was an 'acquired' cast of mind ought not to be excluded a priori. If it were so, then part of Robin's problem, the patchiness of witch-hunts, need not be so serious a problem after all, since 'acquired' habits of thought may easily differ from place to place. It may be significant that when teams of inquisitors turned some Alpine villages inside out searching for heresy in the 1480s, they found no mention of evil magic, but one obscure threat of arson, which they duly recorded.

This is not to say that villagers were entirely passive. The form which their witch-fears took may have been an authentically popular creation, a mediation or re-working of the wider fear of 'demonic' power which ecclesiastics had been trying for centuries to instil. 'Neighbour-witches' may owe little or nothing to the image found in the *Malleus Maleficarum*. Yet it may be too much to assert that, at the opposite extreme, they had been feared since prehistory. When we look at a 'natural' European landscape of fields and trees, what we see is actually the result of centuries of gentle cultivation. The sixteenth-century popular mind may be somewhat similar.

It is no small achievement for an author writing on such a fashionable theme, to have opened the whole subject up such that it will never look quite the same again. No historian can read *Witches & Neighbours*, and afterwards teach the subject in the same way as before. I shall certainly not do so.

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