

Managing Our Darkest Hatreds and Fears

Witchcraft from the Middle Ages to Brett Kavanaugh

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First, take a candle. Then, pour some salt into your hand. Then, keeping the grains in your palm, take a pen to write out a thank you to Christine Blasey Ford, the woman whose allegations of sexual assault against Supreme Court nominee—and now justice—Brett Kavanaugh, stunned a nation. Or, if you prefer, simply say, “I believe you.”

THIS IS JUST ONE OF THE MANY quasi-religious rituals circulating on the internet in the wake of Kavanaugh's confirmation to the Supreme Court. These rituals are said to help self-identified witches process trauma, anger, and grief.¹ The autumn 2018 television schedule was also full of witches, from pseudo-historical *A Discovery of Witches* to remakes of *Charmed* and Netflix's reboot of *Sabrina the Teenage Witch*, a feminist who hexes her headmaster with a plague of spiders when he refuses to act on the bullying of her non-binary best friend. The witches of 2018 are galvanised and political, says the *London Times*. Which all sounds like a lovely extended Halloween party. But soon, the reservations begin. “We are the granddaughters of the witches you weren't able to burn,” read a sign at the 2017 Women's March. Yes, except that unless

they were descended from German or French immigrants, they were actually descended from the witches that hadn't been hanged. The writers probably mean the Salem witches, though, which means they are mathematically challenged. It's an odd image to choose to empower young women. The spells, the shows, and the signs are pretending to a history that could be described charitably as misunderstood, uncharitably as utter rubbish. In fairness to them, they are drawing on published books, albeit ones that have been overtaken by more recent work. And they are very clearly picking and choosing. Yet as a historian, I am, shall we say, uncomfortable with the degree of falsification involved.

A central aspect of witchcraft in its 21st-century incarnation is its insistence on its own virtue, a virtue which it projects back into the past. Modern witches have no doubt that witches in the time of the persecutions were good too, opponents of patriarchy like themselves. *Patriarchy* here means Christianity in the sense of organised religion, and especially the Catholic Church with its obvious discomfort with the body and human sexuality. Modern witches claim to be speaking for an entire class of oppressed people who have existed throughout history:

For decades, witches have been moving slowly out of the shadows and spreading good magic across the planet...the forces of capitalism, patriarchal greed and white supremacy united for one last gasp, producing our present circumstances—Nazis in the streets, our earth in peril, and an actual rapist in the White House. It's not great out there these days. But in 2018, we will fight for the change we deserve to see. In 2018, we will support progressive candidates, advocate for justice, and, most importantly, vote witch.²

In a way, this is indeed nothing new; countercultural movements from the 1960s also sought ironically for magical powers, as when the Yippies tried to levitate the Pentagon. Witchcraft “was always practiced by the people who were the outliers, who were on the fringes,” witch Dakota Bracciale says. “Those people oftentimes had to also be the arbiter of their own justice.” This almost meaningless statement seems to claim impunity for launching magical attacks. *They* have been attacked, so it’s fair to fight back.

This argument depends on history. These exotic outsiders are framed as historical constants. However, the source quoted (even by such an august scholarly journal as *Marie Claire*) is Barbara Ehrenreich’s long-discredited idea that the majority of those accused were midwives and herbalists. Careful study of the witch trials, including studies by women historians such as Lyndal Roper, has revealed that very few of the accused were midwives, and some historians have argued convincingly that the majority of midwives were more likely to be working with the persecutors than against them. The popular idea that witches in the past were lonely souls living at odds with their ignorant Christian communities is just not true.

There are in fact so many problems with some modern witches’ historical narrative that it’s hard to know where to begin, but a good starting point might be the assumption that witches are at variance with their culture rather than a *product* of that culture.

Those accused of witchcraft—including those who genuinely believed themselves to be practicing magic, a minority of those accused—espoused beliefs that derived directly from medieval Christendom. In this essay, I will show that medieval and early modern witchcraft was for the most part not a pagan practice, but a dissident form of Christianity. I will also argue that modern pagans and modern witches are themselves products of the very globalized, commercial, urban and anywhere culture which they set out to resist, because rather than reacting against those trends, they are turning what might once have been a genuinely radical alternative into another form of self-care. Finally, I will show that the surviving remnants of pagan culture illuminate a much more violent and less liberal world than the one imagined by modern witches. A number of publications in the past ten years have focused on highly specific aspects of the medieval body, the classical understanding of sexuality, and a wide range of forms of magical thinking in the Middle Ages, including and in particular ideas about the beings usually called fairies. Here, I want to attempt a synthesis of all these strands of thought.

Many modern witches style themselves as goddess-worshippers, but in medieval and early modern witchcraft spells, the Virgin Mary plays a much bigger role. She is referenced far more often than any goddess. The work of Claude Lecouteux in *Traditional magic spells for protection and healing* illustrates this perfectly. The vast majority of his examples of charms combine Christian prayers, a logic of the extensible and sympathetic body, and ideas about the supernatural ministers that surround human beings. Examples of spells include the following:

Lord Jesus Christ, son of the living God, and the blessed Virgin Mary, miraculously fertilised by the operation of the Holy Ghost, logos, God, and flesh, we implore your mercy

*so that we may be delivered from any snare
and evil spell of the devil, and give us the
ability to engender conceive and nurture
children for eternal life.*

This is indistinguishable from prayer. Jonathan Roper, the world-renowned expert on English charms, offers a wide variety of similar combinations. They do not involve candles (and candles are a Christian and Islamic artifact in any case). They do not involve herbs. They mostly involve the reuse of the strangest and most eerie aspects of medieval Catholic thought. One example is the healing charm designated the *bone to bone* type of charm, sometimes called the Merseburg charm; it was unearthed by a folklorist in a north-western German village as recently as 1985:

*As our blessed Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ
was riding into Jerusalem, his horse tripped
and sprained his leg. Our blessed Lord and
Saviour blessed it, and said*

*bone to bone, and vein to vein,/oh vein turn
to thy rest again! And so shall thine. In the
name of the Father and of the son and of the
Holy Spirit.*

It's not very pagan, though it would have upset Calvinists. Repetitive prayers, such as the Rosary and the Litany of Our Lady of Loreto, always troubled Calvinists because they are so like magic charms. It follows that magic charms are rather like prayers. Accordingly, the line between prayer and charm was blurred by popular piety in medieval Catholicism—and for that matter, in the Catholicism of my childhood, in which I learned this valuable set of words: “Hail Mary full of grace/help me find a parking place.” Prayer, or charm? It's true that the majority of surviving medieval charms were kept as family secrets. This was partly because of their market value, partly to keep them far from the eye of extreme Protestants who in every country where they

dominated—not just in Britain and its colonies, but in many parts of France, Switzerland and the Low Countries—were only too happy to interpret Catholic survivals as witchcraft. In both the 1566 Essex trial and the 1612 Lancashire trial of the Pendle witches, many of the complaints about the accused cite what are very evidently Catholic rites, an uncomfortable mix of mystifying prayers in Latin, prayers to icons themselves declared witches such as the statue of the Virgin Mary at Ipswich—burned as a witch in Smithfield market—and sympathetic magic in which, as in the charm above, matching words bring together severed flesh. This complex and nuanced world was a coherent, satisfying, and sophisticated body of popular knowledge which was grudgingly tolerated by the medieval Catholic Church, but hated and feared by Protestants. A sizeable minority of those had by 1625 decided that the Pope was the Antichrist and the mass—any mass—a satanic ritual. It is probable that more witches were accused and condemned because they were residually Catholics than because they were pagan. Admittedly, there are occasional cases throughout Europe where men and women are executed as witches for being the wrong kind of Protestant. Together, these massively outnumber the tiny number of cases which suggest some visible pagan beliefs in play, and in the vast majority even of these cases, those residual pagan beliefs are knitted and woven fully into a tapestry of belief and practice derived from if not entirely approved by medieval Catholicism.

I suspect this will be unwelcome news to people like Amanda Yates Garcia, the ‘oracle of LA.’ Garcia, according to the *Times*, “draw[s] upon astrology, tarot and something called ‘life-path analysis.’” According to the *Times*, she has put binding spells on Donald Trump, a rite that looks to the external eye like a display of powerless bad temper. “A lot

of women come to witchcraft as a feminist position,” Garcia told the *Times*. “Being a witch is essentially an anti-capitalist project.” (For an anti-capitalist, Garcia charges a large fee for her services.) She has her own coven—a concept derived from just *one* witch trial in 17th-century Scotland. “In the future, everybody is going to have their witch that they go to”. Her spells are nothing like any medieval spell: they are more like a spa day.

To attract love

On the night of the new moon, take a bath with white flowers, oil of gardenia, rose quartz and black tourmaline. Let the water completely drain before you get out. On a petition paper next to your bed, write: “By the powers of the goddess within me, I draw to me my new love.”³

This confection of interior decoration, self-help manual, and newspaper astrology is not remotely like any traditional magic ever practised anywhere. Love spells from the pagan world tend to be dramatic and vicious:

Attract her, bind her, [name], filled with love, desire and yearning for [name]..., because I adjure you, god of the dead, by the fearful, great IAEO BAPH RENEMOUN OTHI LARIKKIPHIA EYEA PHIRKIKALITHON YOMEN ER PHABOEAI, so that you attract her,[name], to me and join head to head and fasten lip to lip and join belly to belly and draw thigh close to thigh and fit black together with black, and let her [name], carry out her own sex acts with me, [name], for all eternity.⁴

Readers will have noticed the similarity between this charm and the bone to bone charm cited earlier. They will also have noticed the complete lack of similarity between both charms and the prettier efforts of the witch of Los Angeles.

In the afterword, to a recent essay collection on fairies, Ronald Hutton says something highly relevant to 21st-century witchcraft:

Small gods [fairies] tend to concern small people, and small things. They are overwhelmingly part of the belief systems of the poorer, or at least more ordinary, members of society, and tend not to feature in those of the rich and powerful.... They also tend to have little or no relevance to the mainstream concerns of religion: with the fate of the soul, the place of humanity in the cosmos... They are mixed up instead with the accidents and joys of daily life,... —if, for example, a goblin blights your household, a puck leads you into a hole in which you break your leg, or a fairy purloins your baby—but not for society as a whole.

This silenced substrate is exactly what enlightenment history omits. Small gods are about feelings, not thoughts. In any hierarchical system, including the system in which we now live, there will be big and small; thus it is socially useful for there to be small gods, gods of the small. One could read modern witchcraft as a revival of the small gods.

However, there are several reasons to resist this reading. One is the striking lack of interest in place that makes modern paganism look completely unlike its ancient counterpart, especially where small gods are concerned. What kept small gods in place after the advent of Christianity was for the most part this sense of locale, especially when connected to the buried dead. It was all but impossible in an era when central government was notably weak—an era thus very unlike our own—for the newborn church to control local communities that were accustomed to treating a local burial mound with reverence and caution. Of course, churchmen could warn about it; the pagan shrine and the pagan cemetery and the barrow at a later period become the focus for a criminal cemetery, when the place is then perceived as a heathen and perhaps haunted place. *The Life of Guthlac* describes the battle of the saint with the demons in the burial mound and his success. He drives them from the place and then

constructs his monastery on the site: a ritual of exorcism of the supernatural entities by fasting and prayer, prior to the foundation of the monastic community.⁵

Medieval Christianity's opposition to the relics of paganism didn't mean unwillingness to reuse sites which locals were used to frequenting. The people could keep going to the mound; now they were venerating Guthlac, not pouring blood on a grave to get the dead person to appear. Alexandra Walsham's work on the reuse of wells and trees illustrates the way that far from destroying paganism, the church sought to *convert* pagan objects and rituals to Christianity. Consequently, it is inaccurate to see supernatural beliefs in 1500 as a static combination of Christian ideas with a few anterior pagan notions. Paganism survives *through* rather than in opposition to medieval Catholicism. It's not that the Middle Ages display groups of dissident pagans hiding out alongside a dominant Christian world. All the "pagan" texts we have were transcribed by Christians. The green man carvings, the sheela-na-gigs, the romances populated with pagan figures—all are of *Christian* making.

The inventive unruliness of popular piety means that at no point is the clergy fully in control of the laity. It would be more accurate to see the church hierarchy engaged in a desperate effort to keep at bay the products of popular storytelling, the promulgation of visionary experiences, and the revival of interdicted arenas of belief. Saint Brigid of Ireland is understood to be the repurposing of an Irish goddess. Our Lady of Guadalupe is a combination of the Virgin Mary and an Aztec goddess, and even she has been sidelined by the more recent cult of Santa Muerte, a personification of death who leads souls to the afterlife. Saint Bernadette may originally have seen one of *les demoiselles blanches*, mountain fairies of the area, and Jeanne d'Arc's voices were heard first around a fairy tree. Other creolizations

of the modern era include Santeria and Voodoo, which create figures combining Yoruba myths with Christian figures. An example is the mermaid goddess Yemoja, an orisha and the mother of all orishas, syncretized with the Virgin.

Such outbreaks of popular piety in defiance of direct orders from the center can also be discovered in much earlier periods. One medieval example is the cult of Saint Guinefort, who inspired local devotion after he rescued a child at the cost of his own life. The problem was that Guinefort was a dog. It's a standing joke among Catholics that one cannot ever really leave the Catholic Church; so even those eager to rebel against it, such as Frida Kahlo and James Joyce and Oscar Wilde, are obliged to use Catholic symbolism in order to mark their difference. The liturgy and visual symbology and sheer narrative richness of Roman Catholic religion provide infinite creative possibilities. Ironically, or perhaps not, the tomb of Oscar Wilde has itself become an object of veneration; located in Paris in Père Lachaise cemetery, pilgrims to it leave a lipsticked kiss mark on the stone (now covered in perspex, but the custom continues). Paganism? Perhaps, but in Catholic terms; relics are normally venerated with a kiss.

The 21st-century anti-Christian witch referencing "ancestors" who were probably medieval Catholics is a naturally ironic figure because of her fervent liberalism. She correlates this with being a witch and with paganism. Yet ancient Roman paganism was not liberal towards witches that tried to hex its rulers. As David Bentley Hart points out, the Roman definition of a person was strictly limited. To "have a person"—*habere personam*—was to have a face before the eyes of the law, to possess the rights of a free and propertied citizen. At the opposite end of the social scale, however, was a far greater number of individuals who could be classed as *non habentes personas*, not existing before

the law or, for that matter, before society. The principal occupants of this category were slaves.⁶ By contrast, Christianity at least promises—even if it is very far short of achieving—a world in which God might be a viciously crucified nobody, who saw the divine in the wretched of the earth. Unlike the witch ancestors they claim, 21st-century Anglophone witches are not the underprivileged anymore, but a style choice for the rich of the earth.

One thing we learn from the history of witchcraft is that feminist solidarity is not a feature. Women are accusers as often as they are accused. And yet it is most often the very kinds of magic practitioners that modern neopagans most identify with—the healers, seers, and treasure finders—who are most likely to accuse other people, and especially other women. This has been demonstrated by Gabor Klaniczay's work on healers in Hungarian witch trials. It is a notable but infrequently mentioned aspect of the workplace that the disempowered will pick on less powerful members of the hierarchy in order to survive. Any professional woman will understand that she and not her male colleagues is likely to be the subject of accusations from below. Ask Hillary Clinton—whatever you think of her politics... “You do know that Hillary Clinton is funding the whole radical feminist agenda?” “She had Vince Foster killed.” “She’s behind many more murders than that.” “It’s well-established that Hillary Clinton belonged to a satanic cult, still does.”⁷ One of the most dispiriting aspects of politics last year was people’s tendency to stage it as a combat between good and evil, an attitude to which modern witches seem to contribute; by contrast, as James Wade points out, the medieval Green Knight—despite his appearance—is not a baddie or an evil overlord. Something very similar happens in *Beowulf*. Grendel is horrible, and terrifying, but he is also pitiable.

We might be inclined to blame fairy tales for outbreaks of infantile thinking. Fairy tales, which according to Ruth Bottigheimer are mostly published texts rather than secret oral traditions, exist to help us conform. Ironically, radical fairy tales are often *written* rather than oral, and recent; like modern witchcraft and popular Catholicism, they consciously make use of older material. One example is the constellation of ice maidens and snow queens and white witches, who may ultimately derive from an entity called Perchta, an upholder of cultural taboos, including the prohibition on spinning on holidays and feasting on the right days; she roamed the countryside at midwinter, and entered homes during the twelve days between Christmas and Epiphany, days which were important in all eras because of their proximity to the deepest darkness of the solar year. She would slit open the bellies of the lazy, remove stomach and guts, and stuff the hole with straw and pebbles. Was she once benign?⁸ “Transformed into a witch or hobgoblin” by Christians hostile to her as a survival of paganism?⁹ Behind such interpretations lies the influence of Jacob Grimm’s 1835 *Deutsche Mythologie*. Seeking to retrieve lost myths from Christian writings, Grimm believed he could identify a group of benign mother goddesses, who in pagan Germanic times taught humanity the secrets of agriculture and household economy.

Yet far from offering a positive idea of nature or comfort, most residually pagan figures offer the opportunity to feel appropriate *fear*. Take the Irish fairy *far liath* (Grey Man), one of the most sinister and mysterious spirits of Ireland. He has many names—in the west of Ireland, he is called old boneless—and is thus referenced by Reginald Scot in 1582¹⁰—and in the north he is called *brologhan*, a name which signifies anything without form or shape. He uses his cloak to deceive ships onto the rocks or

people onto precipices. At the touch of his hand, milk goes sour, and if he touches the potatoes in winter they blacken. Guarding against him involves Christian rituals including the expression *God bless you*, or hanging a crucifix or holy medal on a ship.¹¹ There was a connection between fairies and bad weather. Chaucer alludes to it when he mentions the airish beasts that engender clouds and mists on tempests, and a Latin exercise composed for Exeter Grammar School around 1450 reads: “the spirits of the air ... have appeared in bodily form, stirring up great tempests.”¹² The Grey Man is simply an illustration of the intrinsic malignity of nature in the raw. Modern pagans have forgotten to be afraid. Ironically, the longing to identify as witches comes partly from detachment from nature; being cocooned from nature means forgetting what it is really like.

The 21st century has also forgotten about the dead. Rites of mourning now are brief to the point of perfunctory even if grief continues unsupported. If there is a general truth it is that experiences of nature are mapped onto assumptions about the dead. As more and more of us live in vast conurbations, we have forgotten and are able to forget our own ultimate ends. It's this sense of taboo and apprehension that modern paganism wants to omit. Instead of reuniting us with the dead and helping us to manage our fear of death, modern paganism proves to be another form of denial; this in itself makes its claims to historical revival hollow. Timothy Taylor notes that at some point in history, human beings realise that they will *all* die.¹³ To small bands of roaming hunters this was not self-evident; it was possible to view death as something unlucky that happened to other people. Once it was realised that everybody died, further issues arose, including the question “how can I stop the soul of the deceased returning to the body?” Ritual evolved that was designed to

keep the unquiet soul at bay. Modern witches have no truck with this. Nor do they accept that dead members of a family still need and deserve the services of the living, and that without them these dead family members might be impelled to revisit the living world. This drive to revisit the world of the living was a basis for magic, and could be used by magicians in acts of necromancy. Many medieval Christian commentators on residual paganism were describing its dark side. The darkest side of all, carefully not revived or even mentioned by modern practitioners, is sacrifice. It's debatable whether sacrifice is about the violent instincts of the human animal, or our desperate need to create a sense of community at the expense of somebody or something.

At the centre of the most vaunted ancient paganism, Celtic paganism, lies the terrible secret of the bog body, the uncannily preserved bodies of those deposited in bogs by previous societies for reasons that are still debated. Discoveries in Ireland illustrate that bog people could often be high-status individuals who had done little manual labour. Old Croghan Man, discovered in 2003, has a leather and tinned bronze armlet, and was very tall, almost 6'3", and young and healthy. Old Croghan Man's death was garishly violent—hazel rods were threaded through holes in his upper arms; he was stabbed in the chest, struck in the neck, decapitated, and cut in half. The violence, says Eamon Kelly of the National Museum of Ireland, is not done for torture or to inflict pain. It is a triple killing because the goddess to whom the sacrifice is made has three natures. She is goddess of sovereignty, fertility, and death.¹⁴

The logic in the case of one of the Maidstone witches tried in 1645 may be similar:

The said Anne Ashby further confessed, that the Divell had given them a piece of flesh, which whensoever they should touch, they

should thereby affect their desires. That this flesh lay hid amongst grass, in a certain place which she named, where upon search it was found accordingly. This flesh was of a sinewy substance, and scorched.

A pagan survival at last.... No more information is vouchsafed, but the use of the piece of flesh was clearly necromantic. Nor were the bog sacrifices exceptional. A 10th-century Arab Muslim writer named Ahmad Ibn Fadlan produced a description of a funeral of a Scandinavian chieftain who was on an expedition on the eastern route. The account is a unique source on the ceremonies surrounding the Viking funeral:

One of the dead lord's slave women volunteered to join him in the afterlife... She was given intoxicating drinks while she sang happily... Then she went from tent to tent and had sexual intercourse with all the men. Then she was taken aboard the ship. She was given more drink. She sang and said goodbye to her friends, and then she was pulled into the tent and all the men started to beat on their shields to drown out her screams as six men entered the tent to have sex with her. Then they put her on to her dead master's bed, and an old woman called the Angel of Death put a rope around the slave girl's neck; two men pulled on the rope while the old woman stabbed the girl between the ribs. Then the ship was set on fire.¹⁵

It seems paganism and feminism are not the same thing. As Bentley Hart notes, paganism was 'tolerant'—without qualms of conscience—of poverty, disease, starvation, homelessness, slavery, infanticide, gladiatorial combat, and the public slaughter of captives or criminals on festive occasions. The indigenous pagan sects of the Roman world made no connection between religious piety and developed social morality. Tacitus relates the tale of the murder of Pedanius Secundus in AD 61 by one of his own slaves, which meant *all* the slaves of the household were executed—approximately four hundred men, women, and children.¹⁶

Enthusiasm for the pagan past may be further tempered by the extent to which castration played a vital role in some goddess-centered religions. By castration, I do not mean what Sigmund Freud meant; he meant the removal of the penis, but pagan cults removed the testicles and thus male hormonal identity. As Larissa Tracy points out, the generation of some of the staple deities of Greek and Roman myth comes from a violent act of castration. The ancient rite of Cybele in which the goddess's lover Attis castrates himself in a ritual performance does not feature in modern goddess-worship. In the syncretic world of the Eastern Roman Empire, many worshippers of the great goddess aspired to this non-binary identity as a deliberate sacrifice of masculinity that to some extent anticipates today's gender queerness. Part of the horror aroused in conservative circles by transgender identity arises from the consistent Christian and psychoanalytic propaganda against castrated bodies. Yet despite its role in the worship of the great goddess in the near East, the practice of castration—the one most demonized by Christianity—has not been incorporated into neopaganism, which has mostly stuck to an essentialist depiction of gender for the 21st-century. There are still many pagans who believe that only women who have had experience of menstruation could be "true women." Groups such as the Radical Faeries have begun to make inroads into the assumption of essentialist gender; it is unfortunate that many of the most visible young witches do not seem interested in pagan genderqueerness.

Tracy notes that the first canon of the First Council of Nicaea in AD 325 forbade clergy members to castrate themselves "when in perfect health," but accepted those who had been castrated by others against their will, due to sickness, or born as eunuchs. A particular Christian heresy at the time of Augustine had collapsed the distinction

between Jesus and Attis by interpreting the castration of Attis allegorically. Self-castrations were not unknown among Christians; Basil of Ankyra attacked the many self-made eunuchs prominent in Christian churches; in 377, it was said that many Egyptian monks had eunuched themselves; as a result of John Chrysostom's claim that Manichaean heretics were castrating themselves, Pope Leo I in 395 forbade voluntary emasculation. But this was not the result of Christian emphasis on celibacy; it predated the idea of the celibate priest or hermit by many centuries. It was central to many pagan cults that abstaining from sex brought the priesthood closer to God—or goddess. The obvious Roman example is the Vestal Virgins.

So the sexual discipline so disliked by neopagan witches is actually part of classical paganism. However, they are probably right in their assumption that anxieties about sexuality have something to do with the persecution of witches—though it is male sexuality, not women's sexuality, which aroused this anxiety. Surviving court records from the 14th century reveal that in trials for *maleficium* prior to 1350, as notions of common sorcery and necromancy were only beginning to collide, *men* constituted over 70 percent of the accused. But from the revival of Aristotelian—i.e. pre-Christian—anatomical teaching, monastic penitentials register a high level of anxiety about wet dreams, or nocturnal emissions, and the extent to which these are sinful given that they are not willed or intended. Many Compline prayers are about warding off 'pollution.'¹⁷ Instructions to confessors emphasised nocturnal emissions inhibiting participation in ritual; should a person 'so stained' abstain from the Eucharist, especially as a celebrant?¹⁸ Eventually, the anxious came up with a narrative: sometimes Satan induces nocturnal emission to prevent communion. "The conviction that supernatural creatures

(now designated as demons) sexually consorted with humans was generally maintained in learned circles; Caesarius of Heisterbach tells the tale of a demon disguised as a Benedictine nun; pausing at one bed, she kissed and embraced the sleeping lay brother in it and left him lying in a fashion both 'immodest and exposed.'¹⁹

So what did the demons do with the semen they collected? "Demons collect all human seed and from it fashion themselves human bodies, both of men and women, in which they become tangible and visible to men."²⁰ Aquinas agrees that demons can produce natural effects due to seed. At the same moment, the discourse about heretics began to address sexual sin; drawing on previous attacks on pagans, the Cathars were alleged to be homosexual and the Templar trials at the beginning of the fourteenth century connected (fictive) sorcery and demon worship with homosexuality. This whole body of anxious thinking was then picked up by two early demonologists: Johannes Nider wrote that when the will's exercise of rational judgement is suspended due to delectation, such deliberate suspension is tantamount to mortal sin.²¹ He also remarks on the gender fluidity of demons: the demon pretending to be a Benedictine nun can transform itself into a male figure to pass on the semen to a woman. The *Malleus* also says that demons can produce natural effects including human pregnancy; the influence of this text has been overstated, but conversely the influence of Nider has been underrated. So one way of describing the sudden movement of the idea of witches and sex with demons from the sidelines to the mainstream is that it enabled confessors and those in holy orders to explain away the problem of nocturnal emissions, and to exculpate those who suffered from them. Those to blame were really the witches, who by their lascivious participation in sex with demons encouraged demons to adopt female

bodies in order to force semen out of the male body. Like most gender history, it's not about women at all.

There are better alternatives. Remember the Merseburg charm? There's another version:

*Phol and Wodan were riding to the woods,
and the foot of Balder's foal was sprained
So Sinthgunt, Sunna's sister, conjured it.
and Frija, Volla's sister, conjured it.
and Wodan conjured it, as well he could:
Like bone-sprain, so blood-sprain,
so joint-sprain:
Bone to bone, blood to blood, joints to joints,
so may they be mended.*²²

This early version of the Merseburg charm reflects its pre-Christian origin (from before the year 750) even though they were almost certainly transcribed by a Christian, possibly in the abbey of Fulda, on a blank page of a liturgical book. The spells were published later by the Brothers Grimm in *On two newly-discovered poems from the German Heroic Period* (1842) and are now preserved in the library of Merseburg Cathedral. Witch and folklorist Sabina Magliacco says that modern witches use the charm, and that they "simply remove the Christian content of the charms, sometimes substituting the names of their own deities."²³ She cites the charm not from the brothers Grimm, but from Storms' study of Anglo-Saxon magic, though this has itself been superseded. This creative and intelligent reuse of folklore is echoed elsewhere in modern witchcraft, and Magliacco tracks other examples, including tying and untying knots in childbirth and delivery. A cadre of modern witches who are not getting the press they deserve are making much more intelligent use of authentic traditions of magic practitioners in earlier eras, using a technique analogous to what Michel de Certeau calls poaching, the appropriation and re-imagining of material that might not have been liberating in its original incarnation.

This is much more exciting than the Californian witches who see the "craft" in terms of consumer items. This is what is known as Pagan Reconstructionism, the attempt to practise historically-accurate ancient pagan religions.

As Caroline Tully, Egyptologist and Pagan, writes: "Looking back through time to an often idealised ancient world, Pagans frequently seek inspiration, validation, and authorisation for present beliefs and activities, as espoused in the familiar catch-cries of 'tradition,' 'lineage,' and 'historical authenticity.'" Tully comments on the reluctance of many neopagans to recognise that the scholarship on which they built their religion is disastrously flawed. "A movement that consciously looks to the past and claims to revive the ancient religious practices of pre-Christian Europe, modern Paganism has always been dependent upon academic scholarship—particularly history, archaeology, and anthropology—in its project of self-fashioning... trying to understand academic research in history and archaeology is, for many modern Pagans, akin to visiting a foreign country where the inhabitants speak an indecipherable language."²⁴

It is the task of scholarship to try to make the language of the past more comprehensible. It is the task of those eager to claim the authority that derives from ancient tradition to try to understand the complex, and often silent or taken for granted thought patterns that led to the practices that modern witches appropriate. Of course, occasional deafness does no real harm, but genuine creative freedom must come from an equally genuine search for truth. Tully writes:

Pagan Reconstructionism generally consists of people either fleeing from Neo-Paganism or coming from a historical re-enactment background. It tries to re-create ancient religion(s) from available primary sources such as texts and archaeology and is not usually focussed upon "magic".

This is not at all the same as the efforts of some fiction writers like Deborah Harkness to distort history in order to make space for self-aggrandising fantasies, and it differs radically from the naïve cultural appropriation and grotesque self-help consumerism of a certain strand of neopaganism; I hope I have shown that this is not as harmless as it might appear, and that it is certainly not as radical as it should be.

Let me be clear that I am not urging modern witches to take to pushing people into nearby bogs to prove their authenticity. However, it is dispiriting to note that unshackled creativity can lead fairly directly to a banal and overly aesthetic form of “religion” that is unlikely to bring more long-term comfort to anybody than a trip to the mall might. If any religion, any practice, is to have meaning it has to address the deepest aspects of the human, the darkest hatreds and fears. It cannot simply be a refuge from our less pleasant selves. The word pagan—*paganus*—is a term of abuse coined by Christians. It means rube, peasant, or hick. Modern witches should come out—of the mall, and into the library. **A**

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