



# Societas Magica Newsletter

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## ‘Bewitched in their privities’: Medical Responses to Infertility Witchcraft in Early Modern England

Jennifer Evans

For much of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries medical writers accepted that both infertility and sexual dysfunction, which were intimately connected disorders, in men and women could be caused by the devil and witchcraft. Across the period there were only two published cases of infertility witchcraft in England.<sup>1</sup> Although this suggests that discussions about infertility bewitchment were a mostly theoretical exercise, it is apparent that readers of medical texts believed that witchcraft could be to blame for infertility and that medical writers encouraged these readers to respond to this ailment with natural remedies, alongside prayer. In particular, medical writers emphasised the efficacy of aphrodisiacs in curing sterility of this nature.

Many historians have investigated the relationship between religion, magic and healing. Keith Thomas and Alan Macfarlane have suggested that recourse to cunning folk for cures was common in cases of bewitchment that resulted in illness. The views of medical practitioners and writers on illness caused by witchcraft and the use of popular magic for its treatment have also been discussed. Charles Webster has examined the Protestant influenced views of Paracelsus, who claimed that healing which appeared magical was in fact enacted through natural means.<sup>2</sup> Looking at counter-reformation Italy, David Gentilcore has noted the complexity of ideas surrounding bewitchment; with some physicians admitting the powerlessness of natural remedies while others promoted the efficacy of natural remedies in these situations.<sup>3</sup> This essay adds to this debate by exploring the case study of how medical writers responded to infertility caused by witchcraft. Edward Muir noted in *Ritual in Early Modern Europe*, that impotence magic was initially combated with ritualistic responses, such as making urine through the wedding ring or through the door of the church in which the man was married.<sup>4</sup> Later in the period it became more common to seek the blessing of a priest or minister to remove the spell. Conversely, this article will suggest, like Webster and Gentilcore have implied, that illnesses of this kind could be combated by employing natural cures

## Medical Responses cont'd

and that medical writers sought to delineate and promote the efficacy of natural remedies in their texts, and that this formed a core aspect of the response to infertility enchantments alongside the healing provided by the clergy.

Early modern medical writers understood that infertility could be caused by a range of natural disorders and dysfunctions. The main framework for understanding the body was the humoural model, which outlined that the body was made up of four humours, blood, black bile, yellow bile and phlegm, that existed in a delicate balance. Any disruption to this balance caused bodily ailments and disease. Infertility was thus often thought to be a consequence of a humoural imbalance in the reproductive organs. In women this was most frequently thought of as an imbalance in the nature of the womb, while in men humoural disruption was most often related to the production of seed, which provided the formative element in conception and imparted a soul to the newly formed foetus. Frigidity, a lack of heat in the generative organs which caused a loss of desire and inability to feel sexual pleasure, hindered conception and was believed to be a common cause of infertility in both sexes. Nonetheless, these natural actions were considered to be the “secondary causes” through which God enacted his will. God was the ultimate cause of both diseases and remedies. Additionally it was acknowledged that God gave the devil the ability to cause reproductive failure.

The late medieval text the *Malleus maleficarum* declared that several methods were used by the devil to impede generation. He could prevent bodies from approaching one another, freeze the desire for intercourse, make a woman appear loathsome, prevent erection or prevent the flow of semen into the generative organs.<sup>5</sup>

Medieval discussions of witchcraft were instrumental in shaping the ideas of early modern scholars after the reformation. In *A Dialogue of Witches* (1575) Daneau Lambert wrote of the devil and witches that,

they can hinder ye vertue & acte of generation, which is containd w[ith]in ye bodie in certen vessels of seed, either by casting in by their venim an over coldnes of the vessels, or else raying a certen hatred or misliking one of ye other betwéene man & wife.<sup>6</sup>

The belief that the devil manipulated natural causes to engender infertility meant that there was no clear distinction between natural causes of infertility and witchcraft. As Richard Kieckhefer has suggested, even though the idea of natural magic took a firm hold in European culture in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, it was not precisely defined; for many it merely referred to powers in nature that were not widely understood and aroused awe.<sup>7</sup> Even though the effects might appear wondrous to humans it was only the devil's greater knowledge and cunning that made him more adept at performing these operations. This understanding of the devil's powers, and subsequently of witchcraft, created a distinct setting in which both writers and their readers could advocate and accept the use of natural, aphrodisiac, remedies for the treatment of infertility caused by witchcraft.

Several methods of imposing sterility were thought to be used by witches. The most widely described method for causing impotence in a man was the ligature spell. For example, In *Daemonologie* (1597) James I stated that witches stopped “maried folkes, to have naturallie adoe with [each] other, (by knitting so manie knottes vpon a poynt at the time of their marriage).”<sup>8</sup> Similarly, William Drage, a physician

and apothecary of Hertfordshire, outlined that “Witches use certain words, which they mumble, and tie a knot many wayes, and sometimes hinder copulation.”<sup>9</sup> Secondly, it was believed that witches could use enchantments, such as placing a magical object within the victim's house or in close proximity to their body. In *Daimonomageia* (1665) Drage explained how a witch, “laid a beast like a Toad, under the threshold of a door, and made Barrenness to all the house.”<sup>10</sup> This toad-like beast could have been a witch's familiar, able to harm victims according to the witch's desire. Likewise, Both Drage and R.B., the author of *The Kingdom of Darkness* (1688), described a man who was made impotent when a witch placed an earthenware pot full of enchantments in the well inside his courtyard.<sup>11</sup> The case of the Earl of Rutland and his wife may have been enacted through an elaborate enchantment, where the witch,

tooke wooll out of the said matresse, and a paire of gloves ... and put them into warme water, mingling them with some blood, and stirring it together, then shee tooke the wooll and gloves out of the water, and rubd them on the belly of *Rutterkin* her Cat, saying, the Lord and the Lady should have more children, but it would be long firs'.<sup>12</sup>

It is apparent that belief in the power of magic to affect reproduction was a complex issue. Despite these complexities, witchcraft was often offered as an explanation for infertility in cases where no natural cause could be identified. Within this milieu medical writers sought to expound their own methods for treating ailments inflicted by witches.

The discussions of possible remedies for infertility provided in medical texts suggest that the intended readership believed that witches could cause infertility and that

## Medical Responses cont'd

victims sought medical help for their afflictions, most likely in addition to Church sanctioned responses such as prayer and fasting. The treatments offered to these patients were usually natural – involving little counter magic or ritualistic response. Medical writers endorsed aphrodisiacs, which were widely recommended for the treatment of natural infertility, to promote the sexual and reproductive capabilities of those debilitated by witchcraft. Medical authors often viewed illness of this kind with a level of cynicism and therefore failed to debate the subject in their treatises. Accordingly the argument portrayed here draws together brief comments and does not suggest that a unified appreciation of these remedies was ever achieved or disseminated at this time.

Some medical texts did record ritualistic cures for infertility bewitchment. In 1684 the Swiss physician Theophile Bonet informed his male readers of numerous remedies for impotence. For bewitchment he suggested: “Take the Patient’s Urine, as much as you please, boyl it in a pot covered, and if anyone have bewitched him, he that did it will be in great anxiety, will discover himself, and take off the Inchantment.”<sup>13</sup> This bears a resemblance to the drawing of a witch’s blood to end an enchantment. The action taken by the patient is not intended to remedy the generative organs but to encourage the malefactor to remove the original bewitchment. Some practitioners also used amulets or charms to appease popular understandings of witchcraft. John Webster, a physician and surgeon practising in Clitheroe, suggested that physicians should foster patients’ fantasies in order to treat them.<sup>14</sup> He argued that if you explained to a victim that their disorder was natural that they would not believe you. Thus you should “indulge fancy and seem to concur

in opinion with them ... [hanging] any insignificant thing about their necks” to settle their imagination.<sup>15</sup> Following this you could “give that which is proper to eradicate the cause of disease.”<sup>16</sup> Consequently it may be possible to interpret remedies that appear to be ritualistic as attempts to appease popular needs while addressing the underlying natural cause of the disorder.

Nonetheless, these methods were not common practice for medical men. Most treatises advised readers to follow the humoural medical tradition and use the natural qualities of plants. In cases where witchcraft was acknowledged as the cause of infertility, it was understood that the impediment was ultimately produced naturally, and could be cured with natural herbs and foodstuffs, such as aphrodisiacs. In *The Expert Midwife* Jakob Rueff, city physician of Zurich, drew no distinction between his recipes for natural infertility and witchcraft, stating that “It remaineth also to speake a few words of those things which are to be ministred inwardly. For because the fruitfulness of man and wife may be hindred very much for want of desire to be acquainted with Venus ... disability of ingendering and effecting Conception ... or by the inchantments of evill arts.”<sup>17</sup>

Here Rueff explicitly outlined that by using the aphrodisiacs he subsequently listed the effects of bewitchment could be removed. Similarly, Theophile Bonet, a physician in Geneva, concluded his discussion of the qualities of aphrodisiacs by informing his readers that “Aphrodisiacks take away also that impotency that is caused by Witchery.”<sup>18</sup> He recommended that herbs traditionally used to ward off incantations, such as St. John’s wort, should be mixed with diasatyrion, a renowned aphrodisiac made from the plant satyrion. Bonet did not simply advocate these remedies based on a

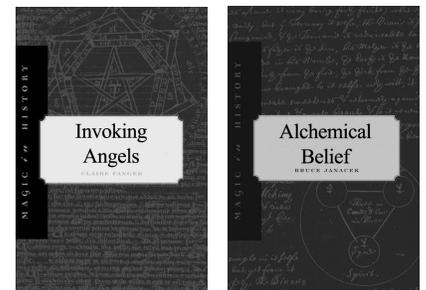
general understanding, he claimed to know of their efficacy through personal experience: “I my self have restored some bewitched and tied up in this manner by Aphrodisiacks alone, particularly by the stimulating ... Chocolad.”<sup>19</sup>

Certain remedies for this form of infertility were based upon ideas of sympathy. Although these remedies were potentially viewed as a form of natural magic, they were understood to be work through natural means. John Pechey (1673) stated that enchanted men who could not have intercourse with their wives, or who were able to but did not emit seed, should drink “a draught of cold water that drops from the mouth of a young Stone-horse as he drinks” as it was “very potent.”<sup>20</sup> This water was most likely believed to pass the potency of an un-castrated stallion to the drinker, thus enhancing his sexual and generative capabilities. Although remedies like this one worked through occult means, these qualities were understood to be a part of the natural world, granted by God.

cont'd on page 5

## 20% Discount

Members of the Societas Magica are entitled to a 20% discount on all books in the Magic in History series put out by Pennsylvania State University Press. Use the discount code SM-MIH when ordering books online, by phone (800-326-9180), or fax (877-778-2665).



# Notes and Queries

## First eColloquium a Success

The inaugural Societas Magica eColloquium was held on February 9. Lauren Kassell of Cambridge University delivered a talk on Thomas Vaughn's refashioning of ritual magic and alchemy. Our thanks to Professor Kassell for a very interesting talk and for her good-natured willingness to be the first speaker. Although there were a few minor technical glitches, the experiment was very much a success, thanks in significant measure to Jason Underhill (ABD, University of Saskatchewan) who was the point-man for much of the technical communication.

We had approximately 20 participants. In addition to our speaker, members joined us from seminar rooms in Saskatoon, Waterloo, Paris, and Cambridge. Several people also joined us through their desktop computers. Those who were in one of the video-conference seminar rooms were able to see all those in the other seminar rooms in addition to the speaker and her PowerPoint presentation, making the event feel very much like a live event. Aside from a slight lag between North American sites and Cambridge (noticeable only during question period), it felt very natural. All in all it was a successful event and certainly worth repeating.

Now that we have the technical details sorted out, we hope to expand the number of participating institutional nodes for the next colloquium. Since it is possible for single individuals to participate

through a private desktop computer, we are particularly interested in including locations where groups of participants are likely to gather. To establish a node at your university, you will need access to a high definition video conferencing unit. (Some institutions will only make this available if it is related to teaching, so please keep in mind that students are welcome.) If you wish to establish a node, please contact us immediately, passing on to us the contact name of the technicians who run the room. Our technicians will contact them to arrange a test so that you can be connected for the next and subsequent colloquia.

In order to accommodate participation from European nodes, we will continue to hold the sessions at 19:00 GMT which will be roughly mid-day in North America.

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## Website Upgrade

The Societas Magica website has been upgraded to offer a secure members-only area where all members can update their own contact information, track their own dues payments, and pay dues up to three years ahead. For those members who choose subscriptions, we will soon have full online access to *Magic, Ritual and Witchcraft* as well. Check out the new site at the old URL: [www.societasmagica.org](http://www.societasmagica.org). If you paid dues in 2011, go to "first login" and use your email address to access the site. Contact us if your email is not recognized.

## Medical Responses cont'd

Despite the paucity of texts directly referring to infertility witchcraft it is apparent that medical writers encouraged a predominantly natural response to this problem, incorporating humoural and sympathetic remedies. The ability of medical writers to offer these substances suggests some measure of acceptance. This delineated natural response may also have provided a strategy for avoiding the connotations of illicit practice that would perhaps have been more clearly aligned with stereotypes of wise-women and cunning folk. Finally it should also be noted that internal remedies based upon the natural properties of plants and animal substances were the mainstay of legitimate humoural medical practice and so would have been the most appropriate prescription for all patients seeking the help of physicians. Nonetheless, the need and ability of medical writers to promote the use of natural remedies suggests that further investigation is required into how men and women in post-Reformation England responded to disease brought about by witchcraft.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> The cases of Frances Howard and Robert

Devereux, the third earl of Essex and the bewitching of the Earl of Rutland and his wife by the Flowers family. I am grateful to Marion Gibson for supporting the contention that these were the only two cases recoded at this time.

<sup>2</sup> Charles Webster, "Paracelsus Confronts the Saints: Miracles, Healing and the Secularization of Magic," *Social History of Medicine* 7/3, (1995), 403-421.

<sup>3</sup> David Gentilcore, *Healers and Healing in Early Modern Europe* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), 22-25.

<sup>4</sup> Edward Muir, *Ritual in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 46-47.

<sup>5</sup> Heinrich Kramer and James Sprenger, *The Malleus Maleficarum*, edited and translated by Montague Summers (New York: Dover Publications, 1971), 55-56.

<sup>6</sup> Daneau Lambert, *A Dialogue of Witches, in Foretime Named Lot-Tellers and Now Commonly Called Sorcerers ...* (London, 1575), 35.

<sup>7</sup> Richard Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 12.

<sup>8</sup> James I, *Dæmonologie, in Forme of a Dialogue, Divided into Three Books* (Edinburgh, 1597), 12

<sup>9</sup> William Drage, *Daimonomageia* (London, 1665), 14.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> R.B., *The Kingdom of Darkness* (London, 1688), 93. R.B. informed his

readers of "an earthen pot filled with enchantments ... of which the old woman [witch] did affirm, that as long as it lay there you should both be disabled as to generation." William Drage, *Daimonomageia*, 14.

<sup>12</sup> Margaret Flower, *Witchcraft, Strange and Wonderful: Discovering the Damnable Practices of Seven Witches, Against the Lives of Certain Noble Personages, and Others of this Kingdome, as Shall Appeare in this Lamentable History ...* (London, 1635), Sig. C.2<sup>r</sup>.

<sup>13</sup> Théophile Bonet, *Mercurius Compitalitiis: Or, a Guide to the Practical Physician* (London, 1684), 546.

<sup>14</sup> Cited in Lindsey Fitzharris, "Magic, Mysticism and Medicine: The Medical Career of John Webster," in Konstantina Georganta, Fabienne Collignon, *The Apothecary's Chest* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009), 125.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Jakob Rueff, *The Expert Midwife*, (London, 1637) (Following irregular pagination at p. 192.), 55-56.

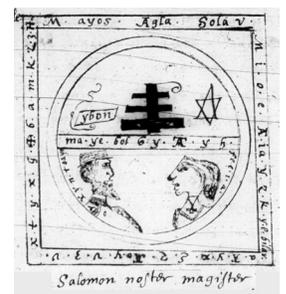
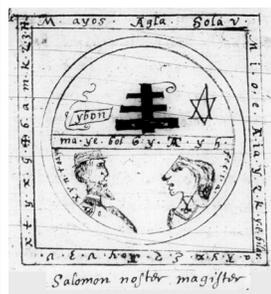
<sup>18</sup> Theophile Bonet, *Mercurius Compitalitiis*, 695.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> John Pechey, *The Compleat Midwife's Practice Enlarged in the Most Weighty and High Concernments of the Birth of Man ...* (London, 1698), 243.

## The Societas Magica invites proposals for essays to run in future issues of the newsletter.

We are looking for short essays (1500-2500 words) announcing new developments deriving from research in the study and teaching of magic and its related topics. We would be especially interested to see lead articles on modern magic, or periods other than medieval. We are also looking for smaller pieces for our notes and queries column. News about dissertations in progress or completed, manuscript discoveries, or other such items are all welcomed.



Please contact David Porreca: [dporreca@uwaterloo.ca](mailto:dporreca@uwaterloo.ca)

[www.societasmagica.org](http://www.societasmagica.org)

# Sessions Sponsored by the Societas Magica at the Forty-seventh International Congress on Medieval Studies May 10-13, 2012

## 1. Session 366, Saturday, 10:00 AM, Schneider 1130

### DREAM BOOKS

(Co-Sponsored by the Research Group on Manuscript Evidence)

Organizer: László Sándor Chardonens, Radboud Univ. Nijmegen

Presider: David Porreca, Univ. of Waterloo

*Editing the Somniale Danielis: Vox Populi and Dream Culture in Medieval Italy*

Valerie Cappozzo, Univ. of Mississippi

*Classified Dreams: Oneirocritical Manuscripts from Dunhuang (Ninth to Tenth Century) and Their Place in the Mantic Culture of Medieval China*

Dimitri Drettas, Centre de Recherche sur les Civilisations de l'Asie Orientale, Paris

*Dream Divination in Manuscripts and Printed Books: Patterns of Transmission*

László Sándor Chardonens

## 2. Session 403, Saturday, 1:30 PM, Valley II 203

### MAGIC, JUDGMENT, AND PUNISHMENT

Organizer: David Porreca, Univ. of Waterloo

Presider: Edward Bever, SUNY College–Old Westbury

*Magic, Judgment, Merlin, and Women*

Stacey L. Hahn, Oakland Univ.

*Ritual Violence against Sorcerers in Fifteenth-Century France*

Aleksandra Pfau, Hendrix College

*Justice and the Supernatural in Early Modern France*

Lynn Wood Mollenauer, Univ. of North Carolina–Wilmington

## 3. Session 480, Saturday, 3:30 PM, Fetzer 2030

### MAGIC, MYSTAGOGUES, AND CHARLATANS

Organizer: David Porreca, Univ. of Waterloo

Presider: Frank Klaassen, Univ. of Saskatchewan

*Norse Euhemerism and Christian Demonology*

Thomas B. de Mayo, J. Sargeant Reynolds Community College

*Merlin, Caiaphas, and Mary: A Story of Magic, Miracle, and Childbirth*

Wendy Love Anderson, Washington Univ. in St. Louis

*The Curious Case of William Medley: Alchemical Patronage and the Mystagogue in Elizabethan England*

Jason Underhill, Univ. of Saskatchewan

## 4. Session 537, Sunday, 8:30 AM, Schneider 1225

### CONJURING FAIRIES

Organizer: David Porreca, Univ. of Waterloo

Presider: David Porreca

*Demons on Leads: Medieval Inscribed Lead*

*Tablets and Material Folk Magic in Central Europe*

Mirko Gutjahr, Landesmuseum für

Vorgeschichte, Landesamt für Denkmalpflege und Archäologie Saxony-Anhalt

*What the Puck? Discerning Demons and Fairies through Corpus Analysis*

Michael Ostling, Central Michigan Univ.;

Richard Forest, Central Michigan Univ.

*Fairy Conjuring: A Survey of the Manuscript Evidence*

Frank Klaassen, Univ. of Saskatchewan

## 5. Session 560, Sunday 10:30, Schneider 1235

### MAGIC AND RELIGION: APPLIED METHODOLOGIES

Organizer: David Porreca, Univ. of Waterloo

Presider: Claire Fanger, Rice Univ.

*The Ritual Basis of Magic: Cognitive Resource Depletion and Ritual Efficacy*

Jesper Sørensen, Aarhus Univ.

*Encircling Magic*

Anders Klostergaard Petersen, Aarhus Univ.

*Faith, Healing, and Cognitive Science: Insights and Limitations*

Edward Bever, SUNY College–Old Westbury

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