

Legacies: Old Ways in the Shadow of the Witch Hunts

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This draft is excerpted from Vol XIII of my forthcoming series Secret History of the Witches. I expect to publish the first volumes in 2015, but it will be a while before the later ones are ready, even though most of the manuscript is written. So here's an advance taste of the final volume, even though it will be reworked later.

Shown: French women's hearth ritual with herb, water, and brooms, Touraine

Once upon a time, there was no time, and it was then that... —Breton storytellers' opening

Once there was, and once there was not... —Irish storytellers' opening

Against the accumulated gravity of conquests, subjugations, and cultural repression, there survived beloved customs, play, archaic reverences and celebrations in the cycles of time. A Scotsman from the Hebrides recalled around 1900 how, in his boyhood, when the children started fighting, "my beloved mother would set us to dance there and then." She and the other women would entertain the kids with "the mouth-music," a kind of chanting. "We would dance there until we were seven times tired." [Evans-Wentz, 115]

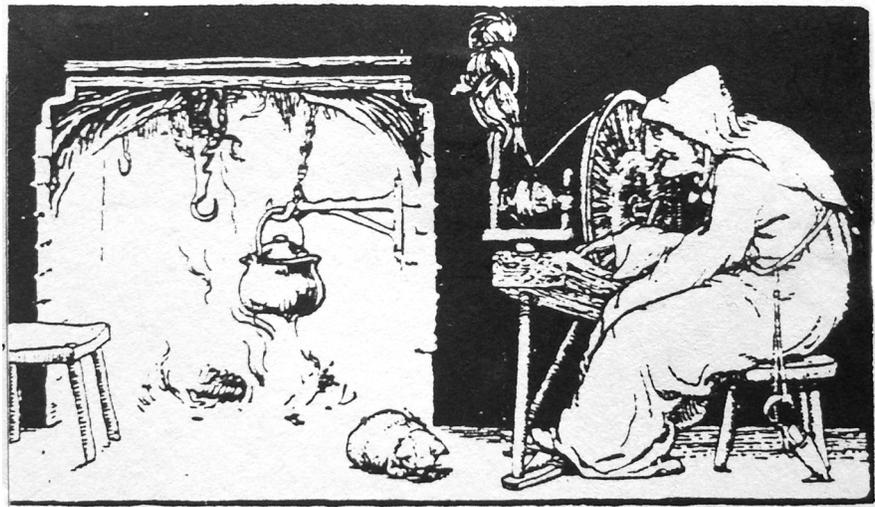
The people of those times were full of music and dancing, stories and traditions. The clerics have extinguished these. May ill befall them! And what have the clerics put in their place? Beliefs about creeds, and disputations about denominations and churches! May lateness be their lot! It is they who have put the cross round the heads and the entanglements around the feet of the people. [Evans-Wentz, 116]

Irish peasants celebrated the old Celtic holydays and resorted to animist shrines of the countryside. They kept alive a thousand charms and magical customs out of their distant past. A woman on trial for selling watered milk swore that she had only added "the three fairy drops." [Evans-Wentz, 43-4] Countryfolk used a magical gesture to invoke good fortune on each other when parting; they would clap their right hands across their mouths to make a sound--thup!--and then shake hands. [Wood-Martin, 285]

Irish proverb held up the existence of pagan deities as the very test of reality: "It is as true as that there is a Pooka in Kells." [Wood-Martin, 279] Much custom centered around the faeries, their haunts and ways. There was great concern not to offend them by intruding on their places or speaking ill of them. A North Galway man told Evans-Wentz that countryfolk attributed the famine to disturbed conditions in the fairy-world." [Evans-Wentz, 43] As late as 1908, a Sligo man declared that the faeries took "a great interest" in human affairs, "and they always stand for justice and right." [Fox, 120]

**"The ould soul have
a bit of belief like
in witch-stones, and
allus sets one aside
her spinning-jenny."**

[From "Ouida", Puck VI, 1870, 206,
in New English Oxford Dictionary]



Wood-Martin wrote that old wise-women were active in "almost every village" in Ireland. They bathed children's eyes in herbal infusions and tied witch-hazel around their necks and tied red threads on the tails of cows about to calve, to prevent them from being fairy-struck. He described the herbs growing in their gardens: tansy, solomon's seal, belladonna, hearts-ease, "dandelion for liver complaints, comfrey as a styptic, samphire boiled in milk for heartburn... mountain sage for palpitations or for coughs, bog bark or parsley boiled in milk for gravel, nettles with ginger for wind in the stomach, horehound as an expectorant, mullein as a cough mixture... A bunch of fairy

flax lies on the top of the salt-box; sown into the folds of the wise woman's scapular is a four-leaved shamrock, an invaluable specific for rendering fairies visible to the human eye.” [Wood-Martin 1902: 176-7]

Irish folk stories celebrate the *bean feasa* (“wisewomen”), *bean leighis* (woman healer) or *bean ghlúine* (“handy woman”) and the *bean chaointe* (“keening woman,” who acted as a funerary priestess without portfolio). [O Crualaoich, 72] These women are often described as going on Otherworld journeys or trances, as having second sight and the power to heal, including bringing people back from what shamanic traditions call “soul loss.” Two of the most renowned Irish healers were Moll Anthony and Biddy Early: “These women were said to travel with the fairies by night, and by this means were able to answer any question regarding an ailment put to them by those who came to seek their aid or advice. According to folklore, they seldom failed to cure either man or beast when their services were called upon.” [O Hogain, 390]

The “fairy woman” Moll Anthony is said to have lived near the Red Hills in Kildare. She gathered herbs from faery raths with incantations and made dark-colored decoctions from them, instructing her patients to carry the potions home without falling asleep on the road. The Rev. John O'Hanlon observed that “her reputation as a possessor of supernatural knowledge and divination drew crowds of distant visitors to her daily, and from the most remote parts of Ireland.” [Wood-Martin, 174]

Biddy Early, who lived in Feakle, west Clare, was said to have received her power from the faeries after a period of illness. She looked into a little black bottle for knowledge. Her fame spread through western Ireland, and people came from far and near. She was a clairvoyant who could tell them the most private of things, as well as a specialist in herbs. “She saved cattle, healed people, helped women to get pregnant, saved babies, prognosticated....” [Sharon Devlin, in Adler, 143]

an over-officious priest once came to upbraid her for dabbling in magical practices. She politely received him, but was not convinced that her healing contravened God's law. The priest left in some anger, but found that his horse would not budge for him and so he had to return rather shamefacedly to seek Biddy's help. She advised him to spit on the horse and bless it, whereupon it obeyed his commands as before. [O Hogain, 390]

Old Peggy Gillin “used to cure people with a secret herb shown to her by her brother, dead of a fairy-stroke... She would pull the herb herself and prepare it by mixing spring water with it.” She conversed with her dead relatives who were among the faeries, especially her brother. After she died (around 1870) her daughter inherited some of her power. [Evans-Wentz, 53]



Tamsin Blight, or Tammy Blee

Another seeress was said to have been with the faeries during a seven years sickness in her youth, “and she was always able to see the good people and talk with them, for she had the second-sight. And it is said that she used to travel with the faeries at night.” She was able to foretell what was going on with her relatives seven miles away. Ketty Queenan Rourk also had foreknowledge of deaths, weddings, and other future happenings, and so did Mike Farrell. He had gotten to know the “gentry” over a long illness. He won over the priest by accurately describing his childhood home and youth, “and Father Brannan never said anything more against Mike after that.” [Evans-Wentz, 43, 55]

The Welsh too consulted their “pellars” for healing. (The word probably comes from “repeller,” from their countermagic.) [Briggs, 426] The most famous was Tamson Blight in west Cornwall, known as the Helston Witch or Tammy Blee. People came to her at “certain fixed seasons of the years ‘to have their protections renewed...’ and she also travelled around to visit homebound clients. Even at the end of her life, when she was confined to bed, patients were brought in on stretchers. Many of them were able to get up and go down the stairs “perfectly cured.” [Jenkins, 269-71]

Another renowned Welsh wisewoman was the Witch of Camborne. People travelled long distances to consult her, often after doctors had told them they were incurable, “and not a few received their health at her hands.” Uncle Jacky Hooper of Blowinghouse divined by gazing into a smoked glass. [Jenkins, AK, 272-3] In west Cornwall, the Witch of Wendron had a very successful healing practice. She gave herbs as a charm to keep horses from dying. [Wentz, 174]

Bridget Bostock practiced healing witchcraft at Nantwich, Cheshire, in the mid-1700s. Hundreds of people consulted her. The *Gentleman's Magazine* “declared that she was the object of adoration of the sick people in the district and her clientele continued to grow. So effectively had she lured patients from orthodox medicine that physicians hated her very name.” [Maple 125]



Old herbalist depicted in German storybook

Folklore preserved memory of outstanding local witches, like Bertha, the Wisewoman of Littondale in Yorkshire (1700s), Nancy Newgill, the Witch of Broughton, and Leah Brinkely, the gypsy Witch of Brandon Creek in the Fens. The famous Witch of Harptree in Somerset healed and foretold happenings, but people who had offended her spread stories that she cast spells on them. Peggy Flaunders (d. 1835) suffered the same kind of rumors. Harriet, the blind Witch of Keenthorne, was called “dangerous,” though good was told of her. [Briggs 2:2, 722, 693, 729, 667, 698-700]

Suspicion and shunning was not all these women had to deal with; some still faced prosecution, though the charge was no longer officially witchcraft. Mary Armfield, “The White Witch of Exeter,” was convicted of fraud for divination in 1802. [Thompson, ‘93, 199]

Germany healing witches continued to practice *böten*, stroking, pouring and charming by spells among the peasantry. [Grimm, 1150] In highland Franconia, women performed healing spells but took care never to accept money for cures. It was too dangerous to accord them any title which might be construed as having to do with witchcraft, so they were simply described as those “who know how to do the *Anfangen* (“beginning”). Some men also

undertook the *Anfangen*, but they were able to charge for it.

These women performed many of the same acts as the old-time witches: midwifery, herbal medicine, treating children's ailments and animals, and charming by repeating verses and rites. In regions where High German was spoken, such women were called *Gesundbeterin* (“health-improvers”) or *Heilerin* (“healers.”) [Sebald, 82-4]

The Hungarian *halottlátó* and *néző*, both of which mean “seer,” gained their power after illness/ ordeal/trance. They had the power to confer with the dead. *Néző* mainly found lost or stolen objects. The *Látó* were visited sometimes after the death of loved one. They were banned in the 1500s, though in the great wars of the 20th century people still consulted them to find out whether their relatives were still alive. [Dömötör, 137]

The *látó* is an unusually sensitive woman who falls easily in a trance and visits the Otherworld. She does not ask for money but takes what is offered her. In cities the belief in witches declined. “But in the typical Hungarian village one or more witches continued to function right down to the Second World War.” [Domotor, 143] In 1952, at Kakasd, Hungary when it rained after a long dry spell, a cunning woman “rushed up a nearby hill and sang a magical song of worship to the rain.” [Dömötör, 237]

Grimm observed the persistence of pagan customs in Iceland where, even in the 1800s, “old women sacrifice to rivers, and throw the branch on the stone.” The memory of shamanic women persisted on the Scandinavian peninsula in the same period: “Vulgar opinion in Sweden to this day suspects old women, who live alone in the

woods, of harboring and sheltering wolves when they are hunted: they are called *vargamödrar*, wolf-mothers...” [Grimm, 1278, 1061]

Archaic healing methods were still practiced in the countryside. A Swedish wisewoman advised a sick woman to cure herself by taking three willow branches, make them into a hoop, crawl through it naked without touching the hoop and keeping silence, then to burn the hoop. It worked. The Scots cut woodbine during the waxing moon of March, made a ring out of it which, when lowered from head to feet, was said to cure children's fevers and consumption. [Frazer, ext soul, 184]

In the Bourbonnais around 1830 there were “la sorciere de Bois-Rond” and “la devine de Céron” who read cards and told fortunes. [Piat] A very poor woman named Mariane de Tibarol was reputed to be a witch, near Foix in the south of France. She said that the *fées* living in the grotto of Aigo-Neichant (“Birthing-Water”) revealed future events to her. Active from the mid-1800s, she predicted epidemics and wars. [Pinies, 159] In Auvergne, a *sorcière* was pointed out to Frances Gostling: “Most villages possess one. The people have more faith in a woman like that than in a regular doctor; besides, they are less expensive.” [Gostling, 85] At Chaneins in the Ain district, Madame Bergeron, called “la Gale,” was known as a skilled healer, consulted by many people. “She was also a benefactress of the parish that the populace held in great esteem.” [Benoit, 80]

In southern Italy a belief persisted that cunning folk turned into animals and flew to Benevento. They were considered beneficial, and people were “full of admiration for these *fatucchieri*.” In rural Sicily the “charismatic healer Marta” was also considered to be a soul traveler. Her family knew not to move her when she was out of her body. [Henningsen 1988: 212, 214]

In the Spanish Montaña, the *hechicera* and *encantadora* are still respected and consulted for healing, and for finding lost animals or other missing things. [Menendez-Pelayo I, 288] The *sabia* (“wisewoman”) remains active in modern Galicia, gathering herbs, preparing infusions and plasters. “The renown of some of them attracts patients from one or even two hundred kilometers away.” Sometimes so many people apply for treatment that they have to wait several days before she can see them. But she has an “open door.” [Lisón, 307]

Before treating a patient, the *sabia* decides if the ailment is “for doctors” or not. Many illnesses are said to arise from soul troubles. In such cases the *sabia* takes away “shadows” or the evil eye with blessings, prayers, and conjurations as well as animist medicines such as the power of trees, rocks, oils, wax, incense, spring water or holy water, dirt from crossroads or cemeteries. She also prescribes herbs, creams, vitamins, penicillin, and codliver oil for physical problems. [Lisón, 308-9]



Basque etxeoandre blesses water with a burning brand

The belief in harmful witches (called *brujas* or *meigas*) remains strong in Galicia. Accusations are still made, for example, that a woman's glance sent away the fish. Lisón noted that “the wisewoman takes pains to show that she is not a witch.” The great majority of those suspected are single or widowed women, usually old. The power of *meigas* was said to be inherited in the female line, not surprising in a region where matrilineal tradition was strong. [Lisón, 310-21]

The Lisbon newspaper *Diario de Noticias* reported excitement in September of 1932 around the “vidente of Caaregueiras.” The seeress was Zefa, an old woman who healed people. She explained her philosophy of healing: “Disease, she states authoritatively, is a spirit. It is the spirit of some deceased member of the patient's family.” Zefa cured by divining and communicating with that spirit. “And the patient is cured. At least, Zefa says so, and the patient says so too.” [Gallop, 63]

“I weird, I weird, hard-hearted lord / Thy fa' shall soon be seen.”

[*Scots Magazine* (Jan. 1765), in the *Scottish National Dictionary*, 110. Fa' = fall]

In spite of intense persecution, rural Scotland still had its spae-wives and cattle-sainers, old women who prophesied and knew charms for healing people and animals. [Campbell JG 3] Old Muckle Meg, famed as the Witch of Aldie, was regarded as a "skilly body," because of her power to heal people and animals. "Though regarded on account of this as 'unchancy,' her fame spread far and wide and young people would come to her cottage to hear their fortunes, good or bad. She knew the virtues of herbs and owned a 'Tade's Stane' (toad-stone) about the size of a pigeon's egg..." [Kingshill, 48] She would boil it and then touch it to sores or bites.

A story was told about how the “notable Seer” Greadach Munro was in a company being served fish in a kneading trough. She stopped eating and threw up, then said that she had seen a little corpse in a winding sheet lying in the trough. A few days later, a child died whose father was too poor to buy wood for a coffin, and the trough was given for its burial. [Buchan, 189-90]

In the early 1800s, Bessie Miller of Stromness traded in winds, for which all the sailors of the Orkneys came to her cottage on a steep hill. “Her fee was sixpence, for which ‘she boiled her kettle and gave the bark advantage of her prayers’; the wind she asked for was sure to arrive, although sometimes the sailors had to wait a while for it. By the time Sir Walter Scott visited her in 1814 she was very old..." [Kingshill, 406] Scott described Bessie Miller as a withered old woman nearly 100 years old, whose nose and chin nearly met (in the classic stereotype of the old witch), with light blue eyes that shone and speech of “astonishing rapidity.” She insisted to Scott that she did not use "unlawful arts. Later in the century, this Stromness witch had a successor, Mammie Scott, who also sold winds in knotted cords and was rumored to drive people mad. [Kingshill, 406]

Scott modeled his character Norna in *The Pirate* on Bessie Miller. After the book made her famous, she moved to a smaller island, presumably to get away from the tourists. [FLS #49, 50] Scott was fascinated by witchcraft, and wrote about “weird women,” ladies of the lake, and other pagan themes. In his 1820 novel *Ivanhoe*, he likens the old Saxon concubine Ulrica brandishing her distaff to the Fatal Sisters. [Scott 1961: 386] The plot shows Rebecca, a Jewish woman well versed in books, languages, and healing, accused of witchcraft after being abducted by the Norman lord Bois-Guilbert. Like other Enlightenment writers, Scott was trying to digest fresh memories of the witch hunts and feudal oppression. His Grand Master of Templars declares: “The laws of England permit and enjoin each judge to execute justice within his own jurisdiction. The most petty baron may arrest, try, and condemn a witch found within his own domain.” [Scott 1961: 446]

Scottish folk culture was rich in charms and proverbs and omens having to do with witches. Many made their way into literature. Robert Burns' “Address to the De'il” refers to “mystic knots” that make young men impotent. [Day, 41] Montgomerie wrote poems about witches who rode backwards on brood sows and black dogs and stags with powers over the four winds, and about Nicniven's Hallowmas processions. [Davidson, 8] Folk songs outlined the Hallowmas Rade in language that evokes the charms of the Weird Sisters in MacBeth:

**When the gray Howlet has three times hoo'd,
When the grinning cat has three times mew'd,
When the Tod has yowled three times i' the wode,
At the red moon cowering ahint the clud...**

Ryde, Ryde, for Locher-briggs knowe! [Davidson, p #]

The witch of Fife “raide the *tod* [fox] doune on the hill,” in a poem by James Hogg. It sums up some of the non-demonized aspects of Scottish witch lore: the shamanic ride on animals to faraway places, faery music and the witches' dance (which the birds and animals join in) and, most crucially for the story, the witches' subversive act of drinking wine from the stores of the wealthy. Her husband followed the witches flying to the bishop's wine cellars, but was unable to escape on his own. The husband questions his wife in a hostile manner until he hears how the witches sneak into the bishop's winecellar and help themselves. Then he changes his mind and wants in

on their game. His wife won't give him the magical password that allows the witches to fly aloft, so he spies on them and follows them on their next outing. He drinks himself into a stupor on the bishop's wine and passes out, to be found in the morning by the English guards who beat, torture, and burn him for witchcraft. [Text at <http://www.poetrynook.com/poem/witch-fife>] In another version, the witch of Fife returns to rescue her husband; she puts a red cap on him and whispering a magic word that enables him to fly away. [Davidson, c 166-223] Scottish witches often drank ale or aquae vitae or other spirits, and liked to steal it from the bishop's kegs.

The great folklorist Carmichael collected narratives of old people who remembered the old ways, and grieved at their loss. Catherine Maclean of Gairloch told him of the rich culture her people had before they were forced out of Ben More. "Whatever the people might be doing... there would be a tune of music in their mouth." [Carmichael 1984: 621] Another person praised the hearth gatherings where "The old people conversed about the state of the world and about the changes of the weather, about the moon and the sun, about the stars of the sky, about the ebbing and flowing of the sea, about the life in the depths of the ocean, and about the hot and cold lands of the earth. We children would be sitting on the bare flat of the floor, not uttering a syllable, nor moving a hand, lest we should be put out of the house were we not mannerly." [Carmichael 1984: 621]

Carmichael praised the way the old Gaels crooned or intoned their morning prayers. If a stranger was in earshot, they would "hum the prayer in an inaudible undertone" like the murmur of the sea. In spite of everything, pagan fragments had survived in these prayers:

The old people had runes which they sang to the spirits dwelling in the sea and in the mountain, in the wind and in the whirlwind, in the lightning and in the thunder, in the sun and in the moon and in the stars of heaven. I was naught but a toddling child at the time, but I remember well the ways of the old people. Then came notice of eviction, and burning, and emigration, and the people were scattered and sundered over the world, and the old ways disappeared with the old people. Oh, they disappeared indeed, and nothing so good is come in their stead—naught so good is come, my beloved one, nor ever will come. [Carmichael 1984: 281]

Catherine MacPhee of Uist described the destruction of her world: "I have seen the townships swept, and the big holdings being made of them, the people being driven out of the countryside to the streets of Glasgow and to the wilds of Canada, such of them as did not die of hunger and plague and smallpox while going across the ocean." [Carmichael 1984: 632] MacPhee recalled the wearing of clan-plaids and how the Scots once thrived on a simple diet. She also remembered how women suffered from the harsh double standard. Maids who lost their virginity were forbidden to wear the snood or fillet on their heads: "They were hard, hard, on the wretched young woman of misfortune." [Carmichael 1984: 633]

Carmichael's informants told him how the ministers and schoolmasters stamped out the Scottish culture. The schoolmasters, said one woman, punished the use of Gaelic by beating the children's hands til the blood flowed. Even the storytelling of elders was deprecated to the students as "lying Gaelic stories." [Carmichael 1984: 24] Catherine MacNeill of Barra told Carmichael that people couldn't stand the ridicule "... strangers began to come into the country, and they began to mock the people of the country, and the beautiful customs of the country were allowed bit by bit to drop, and some of them to be lost." [Carmichael 1984: 620]

Ministers accused the people of Lewis, in the Hebrides Islands, of being "little better than pagans," and "made the people break and burn their pipes and fiddles." If they refused, they destroyed the instruments themselves. A great fiddler's family pressured him to burn his instrument, and he was finally forced to sell it to a peddler. Parting with it broke his heart and, they said, he never smiled again. [Carmichael 1984: 25-9]

FROM WITCH CHARMS TO CHARMS AGAINST WITCHES

Even folk charms came to display the dread of female power in the larger society. An intense strain of anti-feminism attributed enmity and malicious power to women. In the century after the last witch burnings, Scots highland women sang as they ritually washed newborns:

**Hale fair washing to thee
Hale fair washing of the Fians be thine;
Health to thee, health to him
But not to thy female enemy.** [Campbell, 77]

Even more explicitly, another protective charm is phrased as a curse against

the woman, on her knee and on her eye, on her choicest flesh, and on the veins of her heart, til it reach the place whence it came. Every jealous woman that propagates her flesh and blood, on herself be her desire, and envy, and malice. [Campbell, 79]

The old priestly antipathy to women, attributing destructiveness to suppressed female power, made its way into folk verse repeated by women themselves. It is impossible to date this development. There can be no question that the Burning Terror played its part. Any one who was heard chanting the old pagan charms was in danger of her life.

Those who continued to charm (and the custom was kept alive) had to insert defensive disclaimers and omit parts that threatened the powers that were. The content of longstanding traditions shifted under great social pressure. By the same token, first entry or first speaking by women became an unlucky omen on festival days, especially new years. Old women were especially stigmatized in the interpretation of such omens. [Campbell]

Carmichael recorded many Scottish prayers against female malevolence: “Ward off from me the bane of the silent woman... the wanton woman... the fairy woman... the false woman,” and again, “Against the eye of swift voracious women... of swift rapacious women...” [Carmichael 1984:200, 209-10, 385]

Just as incantation was turned against the witch, its most expert practitioner, so was herbal magic. A 1656 English herbal manual states that “The common people formerly gathered the leaves of Elder upon the last day of Aprill, which to disappoint the charmes of Witches they had affixed to their Doores and Windowes.” [William Coles, *The Art of Simpling*, in Rohde, 59] Rowan twigs were used for this purpose across Britain. In Wales, the furze (gorse) was also reputed to be “good against witches.” [Graves, 192] The Welsh also used the pagan pentacle to ward off sorcery. Into the 1800s it was cut into tree bark, on doors of houses and barns and on cradles. [Trevelyan, 234]

The German *Drudenfuss*—two superimposed, downward-pointing triangles—was a symbol of female power. But this “witches' foot” was also used to magically ward off witches' power. In the same way, river rocks with natural holes, called *Drudenstein* (“witches' stone”), were hung over doors. They came to be understood as a protection against witches, rather than as a form of witchcraft. [Sebald, 74] Similarly, in France vervain was considered to be effective against sorcerers and vampire, but was also a plant of incantations. [Benoit, 81]

LEGACIES OF THE HUNTS

Folk tradition never lost its memory of how witches and the old holydays were connected. But in places where the persecution had been fiercest, the celebration was twisted around and turned against the witches. So in Germany special precautions were taken against witches on Walpurgisnacht; in Britain, on Halloween; in Switzerland, Austria and Hungary, around Twelfth Night.

The belief that witches rode abroad on May Eve was still widespread. Witch-finders used magic to track down witches during that old pagan season. Around Worms they rang church bells on Walpurgisnacht to keep the witches that dance “with the devil” at the crossroads from hurting anyone.

New folk interpretations of diabolism appeared, converting the Old Goddess into a demon or the evil witch stereotype. She is ritually banished or abused or tortured as witches were tortured, often around the holydays

traditionally associated with her. In this process, “mythical beings were transformed into human beings and ‘demonic’ characteristics became attributes of the “human witch.” [Pocs, 7]



Dancing at the Midsummer bonfire, German

In some regions, the old fire-festivals were renamed as “burning the witches.” A witch effigy was often burned in the fire. [Frazer, XI, 43] In Voigtland the Walpurgisnacht fire was called “driving away the witches.” Czechs called the May eve bonfire dance “burning the witches.” The renaming became widespread in Bohemia, Moravia, Saxony, Silesia and the Tyrol. [Frazer, X, 159-60]

The May eve fire also succumbed to witch-hunt imagery in Scotland. In the northeast people danced around the Beltaine fire and ran around thrusting firebrands into the air while shouting, “Fire! blaze and burn the witches; fire! fire! burn the witches!” This went on for hours. [Frazer, X, 154] Also on Beltaine, Manx islanders set fire to the gorse—sacred to the Cailleach—to burn out the witches who gathered there in the form of hares. [Frazer, X, 157]

In the Lucerne rite of “burning the witch,” Swiss boys begged for wood and straw, took them up to a hill and piled them around a pole bearing a straw “witch” image. At dusk they lit the fire and danced around it, cracking whips and ringing bells. When the fire burned down they leaped over

it. [Frazer, X, 118-9] This last fire jumping at least preserved old pagan custom.

At Balmoral Castle a hundred years ago, Halloween was celebrated with a float carrying the Shandy Dann. While bagpipes played, this image of an old woman went in procession to a bonfire, where it was burned. [MacKenzie 1935]



Burning of a witch poppet in London, mid-1700s. Etching by Hogarth.

In the far western French Alps young men paraded the effigy of an aged woman whose long arms swung as they marched around town singing, “At La Tour there is an old woman, ouei, oh! an old woman without teeth, an old woman without teeth,” and then burned her image. [Pezet, ••] On the last day of carnival in Val di Ledro, Tyroleans carried out a ritual of “burning the Old Woman,” a straw figure. [Frazer, X, 120] In parts of north-central Europe, the image of Death, or of a Witch, was beaten with sticks, stoned, and driven from the village during ritual contests between Winter and Summer. [Ginzburg, 25]

Italians and Catalans made cloth puppets representing the oldest woman in the village. In Italy, children carried the image through the streets in order to *segare la vecchia*: “saw the old woman.” In Barcelona, too, gangs of boys ran through the streets with saws and wood, some of them collecting gifts, singing that they are looking for the oldest woman in town. After they triumphantly announce that they have found her, they saw and burn the wood. How did old women, many of whom were widows living alone, feel during these antics?

This burning-by-proxy became widespread. Croatians used to say that an old woman was sawn in pieces at noon during Lent. Even the northern Slavs had an expression for observing mid-Lent, called “sawing old granny.” [Grimm, 782] Grimm notes of Holle that “on the high day she is burnt.” [Grimm, 269]

At twilight on Walpurgisnacht, Franconian villagers staged a Hexenauspatchen (“whipping-out-of-witches”). They cracked whips and shot into the air to keep the witches from flying into their village, and set upon old women who fit the witch stereotype. Similar customs were observed in Tyrol, upper Bavaria, and Switzerland. One chronicler attributed a disastrous fire to witches that the Hexenausknallen (“witch-cracking”) had been ineffective in banishing. A diluted version of these witch-banishing rites survived into the 1920s. [Sebald, 69-70]

The Sorbs of Lausitz carried out a ceremonial Hexenbrennen (“witch burning”) every Walpurgisnacht. On the eve they sprinkled holy water, made signs of the cross over their lands, and put a life-size image of a woman in jail. In the morning they took this “witch” to the public square, where a crowd waited. People walked up to it and accused it of all the bad things that happened during the past year, then burned it on a pyre. The re-enactment of the witch burnings went beyond an abstract symbol of the witch; the witch-dummy was named after a woman with the worst reputation. [Sebald, 70]

A number of these witch-burning rituals center around the Lenten bonfire. At Grand Halleux, Belgium, the bonfire was built around a pole called *makral*, “the witch.” By custom, the most recently married man kindled the fire. [Frazer, X, 107] In Echternach, Luxemburg, the pagan ceremony of rolling a burning wheel was renamed “burning the witch.” During the ceremony old men climbed to a high place to observe the wind's direction, which portended the prevailing winds for the year. [Frazer, X, 116]



Old animist harvest customs survived in rural culture

In Bavaria, the men of Althenneberg would not allow females to approach the Easter bonfire. They were forced to watch from a distance. The men raced from the church with lanterns to light the fire, shouting that they were “burning the Judas.” [Frazer, X, 143] The interchangeability of victims is clear: the burning of the old woman, the witch, yields to the burning of a Jewish scapegoat. Frazer cites several examples of the “burning of Judas” in festival fires, which spread even to Brazil and the Peruvian Andes. [Frazer, X, 121, 128. In some Catholic districts they chose to figuratively burn Martin Luther instead. Frazer, 167, 173]

In spite of misogynist distortions, the old festivals retained strong elements of animism. Like the Old Goddess, the burned “witch” image often confers abundance and protection of the crops. At Vorarlberg, Tyroleans tied the “witch” figure to the top of a young fir. Young people danced around it as it burned, singing of corn in the winnowing basket and the plough in the earth. [Frazer, X, 116] Schwabians raised the “witch” or “old wife” or “winter's grandmother” on a pole and burned her, while celebrants hurled blazing discs into the air with staves. “The charred embers of the burned ‘witch’ and discs are taken home and planted in the flax-fields the same night, in the belief that they will keep vermin from the fields.” [Frazer, X, 116-7]

People in eastern Yorkshire marked the last day of harvest by “burning the Old Witch.” This was actually a sacrifice; a sheaf of corn was burned in the field, while the farmers ate roasted peas, drank ale, and cavorted around the fire. Afterwards, they threshed corn over a man, saying, “The Old Man is being beaten to death.” [Frazer, 224] In the Hanover area the peasants drove out the corn mother while threshing: “There she is! Hit her! Take care she doesn't catch you!” [Frazer, X, 133] In Tillot canton, Lothringen, the threshers kept time, crying out, “We are killing the Old Woman! We are killing the Old Woman!” Frazer adds, “If there is an old woman in the house she is warned to save herself, or she will be struck dead.” [Frazer, 223] In most of these rituals, the “Old Woman's” divinity is lost in a welter of hatefulness.

During the debased festival fires, horrors were committed against animals considered witchlike and therefore diabolical. Serpents were thrown into summer bonfires in the Pyrenees. [Frazer XI, 39] In the Friuli, people tried to cure bewitchment by shutting up a live cat in a pot, taking it to a crossroads by night, and lighting a fire under the pot. The witch was supposed to die with the cat. [Bonomo, 454] In France, cats were ceremonially roasted. People in Ardennes hung them over the Lenten fires; in Alsace they threw them into Easter bonfires. At Metz and Gap they put them in wicker cages and pitched them into the midsummer fire. Every summer, Parisians hung baskets, barrels or sacks full of cats from a tall post at the center of a pyre in the Place de Grève. Sometimes the king lit the fire. [Frazer, XI, 39-40]

A Posterli-hunt was performed in the rural Entlibuch country on the Thursday before Christmas. The *Posterli* was a supernatural old woman, sometimes a she-goat. (Her counterparts are Berhta and Hölle and the Swiss *Sträggele* who harasses girls who have not finished their spinning on the Wednesday before Christmas.) Young men gathered with pans, horns, bells and whips, shouting and making a racket. They put an image of the Posterli on a sledge (or one of them dressed up as the Posterli) and trekked to another village where the young men received them in kind. The visitors left the poppet standing in a corner of the village. [Grimm 934]

In the mountains around Salzburg, a Perchta-running or -leaping took place during the *rauchnächte*. Hundreds of costumed young men went from house to house, village to village, cracking whips and ringing cowbells, in broad daylight. Grimm compares this with the *hexentusch* in the Böhmerwald, when young men and boys chase all the witches out of houses, stables and barns. [Grimm, 279]

Hogmany, or New year's night, was called “night of the candle”, and also “night of Calluinn,” which according to some means “night of the calends,” or “of the blows” (*colluinn*). Men and boys gathered boisterously, playing shinty and rolling “snow pigs.” A cow's hide was wrapped around one man's head, and the others went after him, beating on the skin with switches, like a drum. They circled each house in the village sunwise, striking its walls and standing at the door to shout:

**The calluinn of the yellow bag of hide
Strike the skin (upon the wall)
Cailleach in the graveyard
Cailleach in the corner
Another cailleach beside the fire
A pointed stick in her two eyes
A pointed stick in her stomach
Open this, let me in. [Campbell, 231]**

This ritualized attack on the crone came at the powerful time of year's turning. After repeating the woman-hating verse, the party of men was admitted to each house, and smoked the family with a singed sheepskin, three times around the room, sunwise, holding the smoking skin to everyone's noses. Then the family offered them food and whisky.

The houses were hung with holly (which modern sources say was to keep off the fairies) and women baked bread. Candles were lit, and the fire was kept burning all night long. Great care was taken to keep the fire alive. If it went out, no one would give out coals for a new fire the next day. It was considered to be unlucky and even inviting harmful sorcery. Omens were observed on the day of Calluinn. People were happy to see the sun on this

day. The direction of the wind indicated what kind of weather would prevail in the coming year. But it was counted unlucky for an old woman, especially one asking kindling for her fire, to enter the house. This antipathy fully accords with the men's chanted curse on the crone the night before. It sounds as if old women had to stay indoors on Calluinn for fear of evil treatment.



Demonized Perchta mask,
from the post-witch hunt era

If an old woman or a woman with dishevelled hair appeared at certain times of power, it was called an omen of ill luck in France, Germany, and Sweden. A Finnish song, “go forth by early morn, lest ancient crone with crooked chin do squint at thee.” This belief goes back to Roman times. Pliny wrote that a rural law forbade women to go out with their distaffs, since it was thought an evil omen to meet a woman who span as she walked. The *Evangile des Quenouilles* said the same, and recommended taking another route in such a case. [Grimm, 1124-25: Anyone connected to the sacred could be dangerous; examples of danger from priest or parson in England, Holland, Germany, and other countries; Sebillot 1894: 22]

Faery myths were revised to explain away violence against accused witches. The story that faeries left patches of ground barren of growth was often applied to witchcraft suspects. A Scotsman wrote that he had seen Helen Eliot burned at the stake in his youth. It was said that the devil carried her off from prison, but dropped her when she said “O God where

are you taking me!” A gaoler may well have dreamed up this story to explain away Eliot's crushed body, destroyed by torture. Four men carried Helen Eliot to the stake in a chair, since she was unable to walk. Thousands

of people came to see the spot where the men said she had fallen. It was noted that no grass would grow there. [Black 1938: 79]

The old stories of faery godmothers who took offense because they were not invited to wedding banquets were occasionally transferred to witches. Englishman Henry More wrote down a much-told story about the witch of Constance. She went into a rage when she was not invited to a wedding. She flew to a hill near where the festivities were going on, and created a hailstorm over the village. This forced the people to stop dancing and run for shelter. [Robbins, 488]

Would-be hunters were diligent in their attempts to figure out who the witches were. In the Chemnitz region, whoever attended church on Walburgis-day wearing a wreath of ground ivy on his head would be able to recognize who were the witches in the congregation. [Grimm, 1795] In Yugoslavia, a man would rise before the sun on St George's day, put on all his clothes inside out, cut a green turf and wear it on his head, in the belief that this would make him invisible to witches. [Leland 1971: 148] Serbs and Romanians told stories of a serpent granting witch-hunting powers on the same saint's day. [Pocs II, 30] But the method of some Serbian witch-finders was to kill a snake before Lady-day, put a piece of garlic inside its head, and wear it in a cap. This was guaranteed to make the witches come up and try to get the snake, or a piece of it. [Grimm, 1078]

In the Ansbach country people believed that bringing three grains found whole in a baked loaf to church on Walburgis-day gave the power to see the witches and night-hags present. Milk-pails would be visible over their heads. Others held that witches could be exposed in this way if only a harrow's tooth or an egg laid on Maundy Thursday was brought to church. [Grimm, 1805, 1078]

Swiss witch-finders recommended standing on a footstool made out of nine kinds of wood during matins on Christmas day, which was supposed to confer the ability to see all the witches turning their backs to the altar. Danish witches found church services even more repugnant to witches. The Danes said that the Blakulla sisterhood sent a sheaf of straw or a pig-trough to church in their place. [Grimm, 1078-79]

Even those who were consulted to remove spells were feared as *sorcières*. In 1825, people in Montagnole, Savoy, were afraid of Marie Clavel “because of the threats she made. Her knowledge of sorcery was feared so

much that she was given whatever she asked for.” [Brocard, 23] In 1825 Agathe Garnier and her brother, the Cat, were feared but nevertheless called on to treat cases of sorcery. [Brocard, 23]

As late as 1875 in Laissaud, Savoy, there still functioned *diseuses de bonne fortune* (“tellers of good fortune”). [Brocard] Local rumor claimed that animal cries or music of violins, flute, and drums could be heard from the house of suspected witches. [Brocard, 44 or 49]

John Rhys recorded a Manxman’s story of having come across a reputed witch doing ceremony at a crossroads or meeting of three boundaries, on Calan-mai (May Day): “This happened once very early on Old May morning, and afterwards he met her several times as he was returning home from visiting his sweetheart. He warned the witch that if he found her again he would kick her: that is what he tells me. Well, after a while he did

surprise her again at work at four crossroads, somewhere near Lezayre. She had a circle, he said, as large as that made by horses in threshing, swept clean around her. He kicked her and took away her besom, which he hid till the middle of the day. Then he made the farm boys fetch some dry gorse, and he put the witch's besom on the top of it. Thereupon fire was set to the gorse, and, wonderful to relate, the besom, as it burned, crackled and made reports like guns going off. In fact, the noise could be heard at Andreas Church--that is to say, miles away. The besom had on it 'seventeen sorts of knots,' he stated, and the woman herself ought to have been burned: in fact, he added that she did not long survive her besom.” [Rhys, <http://www.isle-of-man.com/manxnotebook/fulltext/rhys1901/chap4.htm>]

On Calan-gaeaf (All Hallows) when the Hwch ddu Gwta (Cutty Black Sow) was abroad, the Welsh made a bonfire. Everyone present put fuel into the fire, and also each threw in a small stone with a distinguishing mark on it. If the stone could be found in the ashes the next year, it augured a lucky year to come. “Those who assisted at the making of the bonfire watched until the flames were out, and then somebody would raise the usual cry, when each ran away for his life, lest he should be found last. This cry, which is a sort of equivalent, well known over Carnarvonshire, of the English saying, ‘The devil take the hindmost,’ was in the Welsh of that county “Yr hwch, ddu gwta / A gipio'ir ola'; that is to say, ‘May the black sow without a tail seize the hindmost!’” [Rhys, 225]



Positive depictions of the Old Goddess as a witch figure also survived in folk tales. Mother Goose story, early 1900s



The Cutty Black Sow appears at a witch-ducking. Note pigs in water. English woodcut, 1600s.

The old Welsh tradition of the creative sow Henwen had been demonized, but she could not be erased. Thus the old traditions persisted in patchy and distorted forms. John Rhys observed, “The cutty black sow is often alluded to nowadays to frighten children in Arfon, and it is clearly the same creature that is described in some parts of North Wales as follows:

Hwch ddu gwta
Ar bob camfa
Yn nyddu a chardio
Bob nos G'langaea'.
A cutty black sow
On every stile,
Spinning and carding
Every Allhallows' Eve. [Rhys, 226]

The Cutty Black Sow retains the spinning attribute of the Fates and fatas and faeries, and is to be found on the liminal stiles that cross the boundary fences, on the ultimate witch holy day, Nos Galan Gaeaf, our Halloween.

Under the Earth I go,
On the oak leaf I stand.
I ride on the filly
That was never foaled,
And I carry the dead in my hand.
--Celtic storytellers's formula [Freeman 1995: 68]