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"Paltrie Vermin, Cats, Mise, Toads, and Weasils": Witches, Familiars, and Human-Animal Interactions in the English Witch Trials

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Abstract: This article explores the role played by the relationship between witch and familiar in the early modern witch trials. It positions animal familiars at the intersection of early modern belief in witchcraft and magic, examining demonologies, legal and trial records, and print pamphlets. Read together, these sources present a compelling account of human-animal interactions during the period of the witch trials, and shed light upon the complex beliefs that created the environment in which the image of the witch and her familiar took root. The animal familiar is positioned and discussed at the intersection of writing in history, anthropology, folklore, gender, engaging with the challenge articulated in this special issue to move away from mono-causal theories and explore connections between witchcraft, magic, and religion.

Keywords: witchcraft; familiars; popular belief; animals; demonology; witch trials

The mental and physical space occupied by the stereotypical early modern 'witch' lies at the intersection of popular culture and inquisitorial anxiety, drawing upon a longstanding lexicon of faith, folk belief, night flights, magic, devils, and demons. The witch embodied and enabled conflict and contradiction, reflecting and creating anxieties about the nature of humanity, social order, heresy and heterodoxy, and the language of opposition between good and evil in moral and theological terms. In the hands of demonologists, inquisitors and law-makers, the multiple components of the archetypal witch crystallised around the imagery of the 'demonic pact', the personal relationship between the witch and devil, and the all-encompassing vocabulary of *maleficium* which made real these ideas in popular culture and social communities. In the character and actions of the witch, religion, ritual, magic, law, and social tensions intersected, creating a shared belief in the constructed enemy of Christian society. The vocabulary of demonologies, statute, and judicial processes made its way into popular culture, a culture that perpetuated and solidified that language by proving it to be anchored in the reality of the day-to-day. The presence of witchcraft and magic at the 'crossroads' of early modern belief has been well documented in recent years, and our appreciation of the complexities of early modern witchcraft has greatly enhanced as a result (Bailey 2003, 2006, 2007; Behringer 1997; Broedel 2003; Clark 1997; Cohn 2000; Edwards 2002; Montesano 2018; Kieckhefer 1976, 1996).

Within that more nuanced appreciation of the multiplicity of ideas and anxieties from which the image of the witch emerged lies the witches' 'familiar'. The presence of the familiar in the witch trials is an almost uniquely English phenomenon, but it is one that raises important questions about the nature and practitioners of witchcraft, the role of demons and the demonic in the actions of witches, and the challenge that witchcraft and familiars posed to traditional categorisations and assumptions around human and non-human interactions. Keith Thomas' assertion that the presence of animal familiars in the English witch trials is 'largely unaccounted for' remains almost as accurate thirty years later (Thomas 1971, p. 569). However, it is worth noting that the witches' Sabbat, so prevalent in the records of continental witch trials, was almost entirely absent from the English narratives in

this period. Instead, the relationship between witch and devil was displayed in the contact between the human witch and the animal familiar, a relationship which in many respects presented a material embodiment of the demonic pact. The familiar acted a hybrid of learned demonological anxieties about human commerce with demons, and a popular culture and folklore that positioned animals, imps, and fairies as intermediaries between humans and the numinous supernatural. Animal familiars made it possible to elide well-articulated views about demonic magic with the broader range of practices and supernatural encounters associated with cunning men and women. Animal familiars, treated as pets and companions, were not innocent participants in the practice of witchcraft, but creatures with agency, demons in corporeal form, whose interactions with the witch were problematic both conceptually and practically. Familiars were evidence of the permeable boundary that existed between humans and animals, the presence of demonic ritual and blood-feeding among practitioners of magic, the moral and theological depravity of witchcraft, and the transgression of nature that lay at the heart of the witch. As a result, the narrative of the familiar, and the search for physical evidence of interaction between witch and familiar became a vibrant thread in English witchcraft narratives. Specific reference to the actions of witches who nourished and rewarded their 'spirits' found its way into English law in 1604, positioning the familiar as an almost mandatory element in the armoury and reputation of the witch.

The *Act against Conjuration, Witchcraft and dealing with evil and wicked spirits*, (1 Ja. I c. 12) issued in 1604 identified as felons 'any persons or persons [who] shall . . . use, practice, or exercise any invocation or conjuration of any evil or worked spirit, or shall consult, covenant with, employ, feed, or reward any evil and wicked spirit to or for any intent or purpose . . . '. The relationship between the person and the familiar was, in law, evidence of witchcraft itself. The specific reference to feeding or rewarding an evil spirit in the Jacobean legislation was an important moment in the definition of witchcraft in England. Before his accession to the English throne, James' views on magic and witchcraft had been presented in the *Daemonology*, and in the pamphlet *News From Scotland*, which included references to weather magic, nocturnal flight, and the presence of animal familiars in the practice of witchcraft. But while the reference to the feeding of evil spirits in the 1604 Act was the first explicit reference to the 'familiar' in English law, the association between witchcraft and demonic familiars had a longer ancestry. Familiars featured in vernacular pamphlet literature circulating in England in the 1560s, laden with contemporary colour culled from the trials of witches, and echoing the longer history of the relationship between witches, demons, and animals. The familiar was much more than a construct of early modern demonology, informed by the language of the demonic pact, and its application to the contractual interaction between the human witch and non-human, or demonic, creatures. Rather, the relationship between witch and familiar, and the representation of that relationship, grew out of, and informed, the relationship between religion, magic, folk belief, and learned demonology in late medieval and early modern Europe. The witch's familiar was to become a common feature of early modern witchcraft literature, but, like much of the language and imagery that defined beliefs, the familiar sat at the intersection of ideas, assumptions, and fears about magic, demons, and the nature of the human witch.

Like many components of early modern witchcraft, the relationship between the witch and the familiar had a long ancestry. A digression in William of Malmesbury's *Gesta regum Anglorum* (c.1123), is often regarded as the first written reference to the relationship between witch and familiar (William of Malmesbury and William 1887, an.1125 Bk.2, §204; Coxe et al. 1841, an.852). In his narrative of the so-called 'witch of Berkeley', William of Malmesbury described a witch's corpse, torn from its tomb by violent demons, and conveyed to Hell by a demonic horse. This was no accident; the so-called 'witch' had, in her lifetime been known to practice divination, particularly 'ancient augury' a form of divination involving birds. She was also, in the chronicler's words, 'excessively gluttonous, perfectly lascivious, setting no bounds to her debaucheries', and although not old, certainly in declining health. As she neared the end of her life, she made elaborate provisions for the treatment of her body after death. The medieval church took a dim view of augury and divination, and the witch, appeared to

recognise the impact of her actions upon the fate of her soul, describing herself as 'the sink of every vice.' She summoned her pious children (both of whom were in holy orders) to make every effort to preserve her body, even if the 'sentence was already passed' on her soul. Her children were instructed to sew her corpse into the skin of stag, and lay it upon its back inside a stone sarcophagus in the parish church. The lid was to be weighed down with lead and iron, and the fortress-like sarcophagus bound with three heavy iron chains. Psalms were to be sung for fifty nights, and Mass to be said for her soul. On the fourth day, her body was to be removed and buried in the ground. However, the fears of the witch were realised, as demons burst into the church, broke the chains, and tore her body from its refuge. Thrust onto iron barbs on the back of a black horse waiting outside the church, the woman's body was conveyed away with the demons, her cries audible up to four miles away. The narrative had multiple meanings, which ebbed and flowed in later re-tellings of the tale. In many respects, the story is simply a medieval morality tale, in which the punishment for sin reflects the nature of the offence against God (Russell 1972, p. 99). However, given the propensity of medieval chroniclers to weave the supernatural and wondrous into narratives in order to make a polemical point, William of Malmesbury's inclusion of the Berkeley story might also be read as a judgement upon the political disruptions of the age and the symbolic judgement of God. By the end of the eighteenth century, the witch had become part of English literary folklore in Richard Southey's ballad, 'A Ballad, shewing how an old woman rode double, and who rode before her', later reprinted in Matthew Lewis' *Tales of Wonder* (1801). Southey's attribution of the original story to 'Matthew of Westminster' is erroneous, but his reference to the appearance of the witch in the works of Olaus Magnus and in the Nuremberg Chronicle is a useful pointer to the early modern re-telling of the tale (Magnus 1555, book 3 c.21). Clearly, the story of the witch of Berkeley and her communion with animals and demons was capable of speaking to many audiences.

The first recorded witch trial in which explicit reference is made to the use of a familiar in witchcraft is that of Dame Alice Kyteler, in 1324 (Wright 1833, p. 2). But the Kyteler case is an isolated instance; it was two centuries later before familiars were to become a distinctive feature of witch beliefs. This integration of the familiar into the narrative of witchcraft evolved as a result of the osmotic relationship that existed between demonological writings, popular culture, ecclesiastical law and secular statute. The demonisation of animals as "familiars" was fuelled by the circulation of discussions of magic and witchcraft in print, within the broader context provided by early modern confessional and secular imperatives, and debates over the nature of animals and animal-human relations. The appearance of the devil to a witch in the form of an animal was to become a common feature of accusations of witchcraft, confessions, and trial records (Amphlett Micklewright 1947, p. 286). The presence of animals in witchcraft belief has been described as a 'peculiarly English' phenomenon, but it is one that illuminates the ongoing interactions between religion, magic, witchcraft and folklore across in a broader sphere (Creagor and Jordan 2003, p. 157; Thomas 1983). The interplay between witch and familiar presented evidence of the corporeality of demons, and thus the demonic nature of witchcraft. While such connections between witch and demon were an integral component of early modern European demonology, the roots of the demonic familiar lay less in learned theological tomes, and more in the landscape of popular belief. Published in 1523 in defence of a witch hunt that had claimed ten victims, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola's *Strix sive de ludificatione daemonum* included reports of witches who could assume animal form, but presented such belief as folklore rather than objective fact. The *Dialogue* took the form of an interrogation of an accused witch by two humanists, one convinced of the reality and threat of witchcraft, and the other a sceptic. The presiding judge, confronted by the discussion of animal familiars, dismissed such accounts as 'empty, with no basis in reality.' (Pico della Mirandola and Perifano 2007, F1r; Stephens 2016) Mirandola was, by the time the *Dialogue* was published, familiar with the now infamous work of two Dominican theologians and inquisitors, *The Malleus Maleficarum*, to which he referred three times in his text. However, despite the detail and range of the *Malleus,* its authors offered very little comment upon the interaction between animal and human in the domain of witchcraft, other than the potential harm that witches could

cause to animals, and a description of a witch who was accompanied to her place of execution by a raven. Similarly, brief discussion is to be found in Francesco Maria Guazzo's *Compendium Maleficarum*, published a century later. Guazzo, a priest with some experience in bewitchment, possession and exorcism, made only passing reference to witches seated at the sabbath, each with a 'familiar spirit'. Such spirits might assume an animal form, he noted, but the *Compendium* contains no explicit reference to the more colourful stories told about relationships between witches and familiars, or the more specific matter of spirits receiving nourishment from the witch (Guazzo and Summers 1988, p. 15). The French jurist and philosopher Jean Bodin included passing references to demon spirits and familiars in his *De la démonomanie des sorciers*, including a description of toads kept by witches in pots, but despite the length and detail of his analysis of demonic pacts, the narratives are again sparse and without the vibrant colour that attended accounts of the English familiar (Bodin 1587, book 2.3). The French inquisitor Nicholas Remy presented a more detailed description of the birds, crabs, hares, mice and birds associated with the practice of witchcraft, but we should not discount the possibility here that Remy's evidence for such interactions came from the evidence presented in trials, and accusations made against witches by neighbours. The relationship between learned demonological treatises, legal structures, and popular belief was often circular rather than unidirectional; it was possible for the judicial process to shape a broader cultural understanding of witchcraft and familiars, and for the evidence presented in accusations and trials to exert an influence over legislative and theoretical constructs of witchcraft (Serpell 2002, p. 187).

Similarly, the prominent role played by the animal familiar in English witch belief and trials is only occasionally evident in early modern English demonological writing. The churchman Henry Holland's *Treatise Against Witchcraft* (1590) drew upon Bodin's demonology, among others, but was also informed by the English context, a desire to eradicate folk magic, and a wish to respond to Reginald Scot's rather more sceptical assessment of witchcraft and magic in England. Constructed as a dialogue between the God-loving 'Theophilus', and devil-loathing (and Scot-citing) 'Mysodaemon', Holland's work was wideranging. But the dialogue and debate are not laden with references to animal familiars, and where the term 'familiar' is used, its use is not specific enough to denote an animal or minor demon. The terminology does, however, refer to interactions between the witch and the devil, and in his discussion of the Old Testament locus classicus for the evils of witchcraft, the witch of Endor, Holland argues for the existence of a demonic being with whom the witch co-operated, suggesting that 'there must be to cooseners at the least, so there are and the witch is on, the deuil an other.' The role of animals as the agents through which witches might fly to the sabbath is discussed, but within the broader context of the journey, assisted sometimes by ointments, goats, horses or brooms, and sometimes without (Holland 1590, C1). The presence of the familiar in Williams Perkins' treatise on the damned art of witchcraft is likewise transitory. Perkins starting point was the assertion that witchcraft was a common sin, exploited by Satan in diverse ways that ranged from a deliberate contract or pact, to seemingly innocuous but in reality diabolic superstitions. Perkins notes that marks on the body of the witch, putatively evidence of a demonic pact, might be read as a sign of guilt, but offers no detailed explanation of how these marks were created. The pact with the devil was, in Perkins' mind, the first proof of witchcraft, but the presence of a familiar, a spirit in a visible, bodily form 'mouse, catte, or some other visible creature, was the second (Perkins 1608, pp. 186, 203). The animal familiar featured more prominently in a longer discussion of the corporeality of the devil, but in this case it is possible to observe the influence of statute upon demonology; Perkins' work appeared in print shortly after the link between witch and familiar had been articulated in the Witchcraft statute of 1604. Witch belief in the English context is indicative of the existence of a syncretic relationship between oral tradition, judicial processes, pamphlet literature, and legislative process. That same relationship is evident in the voices of scepticism raised against the English witch trials. If the devil were indeed so terrible and powerful, George Gifford suggested, why might his minions take the form of 'paltrie vermin, cats, mise, toads, and weasils'? (Gifford 1593, pp. 22–23)

These 'paltrie vermin' might have been largely absent from English demonologies, but by the seventeenth century, lurid details of the interactions between a witch and a familiar had become a commonplace in English witch trials and the popular print literature that accompanied them. Some three quarters of such trial accounts made reference to familiars (Murray 1970, p. 85; Briggs 2002, Sharpe 1997, p. 137). Familiars appeared in a variety of forms in these sources, and the power attributed to witches and their maleficent familiars was extensive. Familiars appeared most commonly depicted as animals, occasionally in human form, familiars appeared in some instances as a hybridisation that both reflected and shaped their demonization. These creatures served as a point of intersection between humanity and the devil, orchestrating a relationship between the material actions of the witch and the supernatural origins of such power. The maleficent actions of familiars occupied the physical and mental space that was traditionally filled by the devil in the writings of demonologists; it was the familiar that tempted the individual, secured a contractual arrangement with the promise of assistance in return for allegiance, and then enabled the witch to inflict harm upon neighbours and communities.

These familiars, although demonic, often took a mundane form. Animal familiars came in various shapes and sizes, but by far the most common were mice, cats, dogs, and even toads, all animals that were both ubiquitous, and common as domestic companions (Thomas 1983, pp. 100–12; Herzig 2010). The use of 'watching' in the mid-seventeenth century trials often led to accusations that the witch possessed a mouse as a familiar, a pattern identified by Serpell (2002), and interpreted as a result of natural causation. Sitting and observing a prisoner during the day and night, a 'watcher' was highly likely to find their attention caught by a rodent. That same association between witchcraft, magic, and mice continued to hold purchase over the popular imagination long after the end of the witch trials in England, with reports of practitioners of magic who kept white mice as familiars, and passed them to relatives.

Insects, particularly bees and flies, were also identified in witch trials and demonologies as familiars and agents of demonic activity. An early account of a pseudo-familiar from 1510, for example, detailed the actions of a schoolmaster at Knaresborough (Yorkshire), who kept three spirits in the form of bumble bees, feeding them with blood let from his fingers. In 1654, Elizabeth Roberts was accused by John Greencliffe of Beverly of keeping familiars taking the likeness of a cat and of a bumble bee 'which did very much afflict him, to witt, in throwing of his body from place to place notwithstanding there were five or six persons to hold him downe' (Raine 1861, p. 67). The Demonic familiars in the form of insects featured prominently in the trial of Rose Cullender and Amy Duny in Bury St Edmunds (1662) at which it was alleged that 'a thing like a bee flee' had caused the child to fall into a fit, vomiting a nail that she claimed had been forced into her mouth by the bee. Flies also swarmed around the child, forcing her to swallow pins. Another witness claimed to have been affected by 'lice of an extraordinary number and bigness' when passing Rose Cullender's house (Anon 1664). Plagues of lice and other insect familiars also featured in the trials of Alicia Warner or Rushmere, Joan Wayte (1650) and Susannah Smith. The association between witches and insect familiars could extend beyond the personal to impact upon a broader landscape, causing crop damage, famine and social dislocation. Guazzo's *Compendium Maleficarum* described the use of insects by witches who were inspired by the devil to pervert nature by 'infesting the trees and fruits with locusts, caterpillars, slugs, butterflies, canker-worms, and such pestilent vermin which devour everything, seeds, leaves, fruit' (Weiss 1930, p. 127; Guazzo and Summers 1988, Book 2 c.1). This is not surprising; the association between failed harvest, hunger, and fear of witchcraft has been well documented (Behringer 1995). The irritant and destructive power of insects was attested in nature and Scripture, enabling their role to shift readily from agents of providential judgement to enactors of maleficent destruction (Exodus 22:28, Joshua 24:12, Deut. 7:20).

A similar intermingling of natural observation, common reputation, and fear of the demonic is evident in the frequent references to toads as familiars in early modern witchcraft literature. The devil, 'who squat like a toad at the ear of Mother Eve in Eden' was believed to wait in churchyards in the hope that a communicant, emerging from church, would feed it part of the consecrated bread

(Kittredge 1929, pp. 180–82). The association of toads with demonic magic grew out of a broader cultural understanding that extends well beyond the chronology of the witch hunt. Toads featured prominently in popular belief and legend, often linked with illness. The assumption that toads were poisonous was well established, but toads were also believed to possess curative medicinal properties, as in Shakespeare's *As You Like It:* 'the toad, ugly and venomous, Wears yet a precious jewel in his head' (Shakespeare et al. 2015, Act 2 Scene 1). Toads were used to treat a variety of ailments, including plague, abscesses, nosebleeds, sprains, smallpox, and the king's evil. Pliny's *Natural History*, which was to become a model for encyclopaedists of natural history in the medieval and early modern period (xxxii. xviii) commended the use of bones from the legs of toad as an aphrodisiac, and as a means of fending off wild dogs. Advice to consume toads 'given in some pleasant or delightsome drinke', appeared in Edward Topsell's *The Historie of Foure-Footed Beastes* (1607), the first full length English encyclopaedia of natural history (Topsell 1607, p. 515). Given the potential for subjectivity in the separation of practitioners of magic from practitioners of medicine and healing, references to toads in early modern witchcraft were commonplace. In 1580, at the execution of an accused witch in Steiermark, observers note the appearance of a toad, unusually large, rushing from the fire to find water (Petzoldt 1990, p. 116). At the trial of Ursula Kempe in St Osyth (1580), her son described her four familiars, including a toad named 'Pigin' who had caused a young child to fall ill. In Stradbroke, Suffolk, Joan Jorden was reportedly bewitched by three toads; the first prevented her from sleeping, the second was destroyed by fire, and the third caused its victim to fall downstairs, falling unconscious, and giving onlookers the sense that she had been possessed (Wright and Wright 2005, p. 13; Notestein 2003, p. 313). Toads were added to witches' cauldrons, most notably to create the unguent that was used to enable night flight; 'Toad, that under cold stone, Days and nights has thirty-one Swelter'd venom sleeping got, Boil thou first i' the charmed pot' (Institoris and Sprenger 1486; Shakespeare and Hunter 2015, Act 4 scene 1; Allen 1979, pp. 256–58). In the descriptions of the Sabbath that featured prominently in early modern European denunciations of witchcraft, the baptism of toads was presented as evidence of the depravity and sacrilege that attended such gathering (Allen 1979, pp. 265–66; Monter 1997). The trial of John Walsh for witchcraft in 1566, recorded evidence of the use of toads as familiars, and the use of the toad for demonic purposes was assured a cultural longevity by the reference to Paddock, a toad familiar, in the opening scene of Macbeth. The use of such creatures by witches in order to inflict harm upon not just individuals but whole communities present further evidence of the position of familiars as a point of intersection between learned demonologies, popular belief, social need and religious context.

How was it that common, domestic, animals came to play such a prominent role in witch belief in this period? Again, it is worth considering the broader backdrop against which such ideas evolved; the history of familiar lies at the intersection of debates over the natural world, human-animal relations, magic, and social pressures (Wilby 2000, p. 300). Keith Thomas' magisterial study of the relationship between man and nature identifies the domestication of animals as a key indicator of changing attitudes to animal-human interactions. The practice of keeping of animals as 'pets' had traditionally been confined to courtiers, nobles and members of the higher clergy; for the rest of the population, animals were kept for more functional reasons, undertaking physical labour in order to serve the needs of humans. However, the popularisation of the practice of keeping animals as companions, and for emotional and sentimental reasons, changed the position of animals in human society and the relationship between man and nature. The boundary between animals as pets and animals as familiars was certainly permeable, with the relationship between witch and familiar often framed by a requirement to care for animal (Sax 2009, p. 327).

The keeping of some animals as pets required a carefully articulated separation between domesticated animals and 'beasts.' The separation was in part linguistic; animals whose contribution to human society was practical and functioned tended to have names that were descriptive (sheep, horse, cow) whereas animals with which humans formed a more emotional bond were given more personal, 'pet' names (Creagor and Jordan 2003, p. 54; Kean 2012). Farm animals were physically separated from humans, and a lack of segregation seen as 'very beastly and rudely in respect of civility'

(Thomas 1983, p. 94). This transition, it has been argued, encouraged the rejection of assumptions and practices that had attributed a religious or magical value to non-human creatures (Bulliet 2005, p. 181; Sax 2009, p. 327). Children were often prohibited from crawling on all fours for fear that they become less human by mimicking animals (Klaits 1985). In this context, it is possible to see how practitioners of magic and witchcraft might be assumed to be engaging in interactions between animals and humans that were deemed to transgress social norms. The animal familiar inhabited the physical margins of human society and the cultural and religious boundary between orthodoxy and deviance. On one side, an animal could be domesticated, a pet, and a source of companionship, but on the other, a sign of corruption and the inversion of appropriate beliefs and relationships. Contact with animal familiars both exposed and enabled the corruptions of the witch.

The animal familiar had the potential to make the witch appear less human, almost bestial in character and nature. This theme is particularly evident in the inversion of female characteristics in the image of the witch; women who nurtured familiars rather than children, feeding a suckling familiar transgressed social, cultural, and moral norms. Blood feeding was presented as the means by which the witch provided sustenance to the familiar, but it was also the pivot of the rewards promised for acceptance of the devil's demands. The confessions of the witches of Windsor (1579–80) reflected this permeable boundary, with the descriptions of the feeding of familiars as both basic sustenance and covenant-based suckling. The suckling of familiars also conjured images of suckling infants, juxtaposing immoral or demonic actions upon images of godly Christian motherhood and care for infants. Worse still, the connection between blood and the life of the soul in the Judaeo-Christian tradition deepened the sense of sin that accompanied reports of blood-feeding. Whether the witch shed blood to feed an animal or a demon, such actions were morally and theologically dangerous. Feeding blood to an animal inverted the natural order, and imbued the creature with a quasi-human status as the recipient of human blood. To feed blood to a demon was indeed to offer one's soul to the devil, and such actions presented tantalising proof of the corporeality of the devil that was exposed by interactions between animal familiars and witches (Leviticus 7:27 and 17:11-14). A pamphlet account of the trials that took place in Chelmsford in 1566 provided a detailed account of the three women accused of witchcraft, and their connections with their familiar, described as a white spotted cat named Satan. Nourished by drops of their blood, the cat had brought material objects to the women, but had also inflicted harm upon members of the community, causing illness, and even death. The cat had been passed from grandmother to grandchild, with instructions that it be kept in a basket, and fed with bread and milk. Of the three accused witches, Agnes Waterhouse confessed to witchcraft and was hanged; Elizabeth Francis was imprisoned for one year, and required to stand on the pillory on four occasions, and Joan Waterhouse was acquitted. In the examination of Agnes Waterhouse, the feeding of blood to the familiar loomed large in her testimony. Agnes described how 'every time he did any thinge' for her, a demand was made for a drop of her blood. Pricking her body to release the blood, Agnes was left with a permanent mark on her skin. Under pressure from the presiding judge, Agnes attempted to withdraw her testimony, but the skin on her face and head was revealed to be marked with such spots where her familiar had fed upon her blood recently, but 'not this fortnight' (Phillips 1566, Part 2, A7v; Serpell 2002, p. 178; W. W. 1582).

Such accounts fuelled and were fuelled by the practice of searching the body of witches. Four men and sixteen women were convicted of witchcraft at the Lancaster Assizes in 1634; of the women, thirteen were searched for a physical mark in their bodies that might present evidence of interaction with devils and demons. Four were conveyed to London, where they were examined by midwives under the supervision of a group of physicians including William Harvey. Their examination concluded that only one of the women presented with unusual marks on her body, but that even these were not 'un natural.' Such determined searching for evidence of physical contact between the witch and her familiar presents one of the clearest illustrations way in which oral culture could be intermingled with theological and moral concerns about the physical nourishment of familiars by witches. John Walsh, put on trial for witchcraft in 1566, was a practitioner of medicine and surgery, but also immersed in

a world of magic, fairies, and numinous beings. He described human communication with fairies at designated hours of the day, and complex rituals that smacked of the learned ceremonial magic of court magicians. Under examination, Walsh provided an account of the use of wax images and pictures which had been 'tempered all in water in which toads have been washed' which could be used to bring harm and injury. Such *maleficent* magic required the toad to swell in order to perform the 'evil act.' He also confessed to having fed drops of blood to his familiar. Walsh asserted that he could summon a spirit by using a book that he had inherited from his father, and reported that the spirits took various forms when they appeared. Such summons were only successful if issued by the master, equipped with the book itself, candles, and other ritual objects, in a narrative that was redolent with the language of the learned magic of the Middle Ages. But the intention was presented clearly as a pact; Walsh described how 'the first time when he had the spirit, his said master did cause him to deliver him one drop of his blood, which blood the spirit did take away on his paw' (Ewen 1933, pp. 146–47; Purkiss 2001, p. 82; Lüthi 1976, p. 68). This reciprocal arrangement between witch and familiar, the contractual language with which it was described, composed a demonic refrain for the domestic voices in the English witch trials. Blood-feeding in return for reward was described in a language that intersected with that used to represent the demonic pact in continental demonologies, but the use of that language in the English trial narratives was integrated into a longer tradition of popular belief about the relationship between humans, animals, and evil spirits. The use of blood in narratives of magic had its roots in much older accounts of the provision of corporeal strength to the dead and to spirits, and the feeding relationship between witch and familiar reflected broader popular beliefs around the role of animals in human contact with the supernatural and the materiality of spirits in animal form. That same symbolism of food and feeding was used in early modern continental demonologies in which the material feeding confirmed and symbolised the spiritual pact in which the soul was surrendered to the devil, to the point at which the nurturing of animals exemplified and evidenced the inversion of the divine order by witches and their animals demons (Sax 2009, p. 318; Wilby 2000, p. 287; Ewen 1933, pp. 72–73).

The physicality of the familiar, which embodied the pact between witch and devil, derived from the requirement that devils and demons acquire a tangible form in order to engage in physical contact with the witch and cause material harm. The animal familiar therefore had agency in the orchestration of their meeting with a human accomplice (Serpell 2002, p. 158). In many witchcraft narratives, an individual was approached by an animal, often while alone or distressed, with a promise to alleviate social or material suffering in return for the co-operation of the witch. Such agreements amounted to a pact with the demonic familiar, and lead to acts of harm and destruction. During the Chelmsford witch trials, women confessed that they had been promised material gifts, including money and livestock, in return for the renunciation of their baptismal promises and rejection of Christian salvation (Anon 1589). In the case of Elizabeth Stiles, one of those accused of witchcraft in Windsor, her acceptance of the promise of material wealth from her familiar precipitated a series of maleficent acts including murder and infanticide (Anon 1579). Stiles repeated a discussion with her familiar in which she had asked 'that she might be ryche and to have goodes' and 'Sathan' promised to deliver her request'—'Sathan' would 'do what she would command' or 'do for her what she would have him do.' When she found herself pregnant, Stiles asked the Satan to abort the pregnancy, and took her familiar's advice to consume a 'certayne herb' which brought the pregnancy to an end. In August 1645, self-appointed witch-finder John Stearne sent five witches from Ratlesdon, Suffolk, for trial in Bury St Edmunds, including Meribell Bedford, who confessed that a 'black thing' had visited her, 'which asked her to deny God and Christ, and told her, if she would, she would never want.' The agreement between witch and devil, described as a 'covenant', was sealed by blood from Meribell's little finger, at which point further creatures appeared to her (Stearne 1648, p. 26). By the publication of the fourth edition of his *Countrey Justice* in 1630, Michael Dalton was content to make full use of the theological presentation of the relationship between witch and familiar as a form of demonic pact. The work of the churchman Richard Bernard provided Dalton with language and evidence that was first expanded and then employed as part of the

judicial process against witches. The actions and writings of Stearne, Dalton and Bernard are indicative of the way in which such fears surrounding familiars were anchored in the reality of the witches' confessions, and the potential for the familiar to act as the point of intersection between popular belief and demonological and judicial anxieties (Bernard 1629; Dalton 1630, p. 276).

Although the demands made by familiars often contained hallmarks of the demonic, particularly the witch's blood, many simply mirrored the standards of general care for animals. Familiars were nourished not only with blood, but with milk, bread, water or beer. Images in printed pamphlets depict witches suckling familiars, but also feeding them, sometimes with a spoon, confined in a box (Anon 1579, title page). The language of the pact, and the relationship between the witch and the familiar further domesticated and anthropomorphised the animal. Familiars acquired their own nomenclature, often being given human names (Wilby 2000, p. 288; Anon 1579). Mary Hockett, interrogated as a witch by Matthew Hopkins, confessed to keeping three mice as familiars, named "Littleman," "Prettyman," and "Daynty" The practice of naming animals was part of a process of domestication, but the naming of familiars also marked out these creatures as a source of companionship for individuals who lived on the edge of human society. As Keith Thomas observed, familiars "may have been the only friends these lonely old women possessed, and the names suggest an affectionate relationship" (Thomas 1971, p. 523). Such affectionate integration of animal familiars into the commerce of human environment has echoes in the form of communication between witch and familiar. Such contact was often verbal, with conversations recorded and reported in detail during the interrogation of suspected witches (Phillips 1566, p. 17). Elizabeth Francis, accused in Chelmsford in 1566, described how her familiar had advised her to 'renounce God and his word, and to give of her blood.' The testimony of Agnes Waterhouse, at the same trial, presented a picture of her relationship with the cat familiar that was similarly contractual and verbal in nature. At her trial, Agnes confirmed that she had received the cat from Elizabeth Francis, with the promise that 'yf she made much of him, he would do for her what she wolde have him do.' When Agnes found that 'being moved by poverty' she could no longer provide her familiar with a bed of wool, she successfully persuaded the animal to assume the form of a toad. Agnes' daughter, Joan, confessed that she had found herself at home alone and hungry, having been refused food by a neighbour's child. Joan described how she had then done what her mother had done, and summoned the familiar Satan, to frighten the girl into handing over food. In return, Satan demanded that Joan promise him her body and soul. Helen Clark, accused in the Essex witch trials of 1645, described how her dog familiar had appeared to her at home with the verbal request that she renounce God and deliver it her soul (Wilby 2000, pp. 291–94). Testimony from the 1582 trial of Ursula Kemp included an account of her familiar, Tiffin, had engaged in detailed conversation with her about other local witches and their familiars, reporting the harmful acts that they had committed together. Such conversations between witch and familiar provide a compelling example of the anthropomorphism that was often involved in the relationship between the witch and the familiar, and the personal and particular nature of the communication between the two.

Matthew Hopkins' account of his witch-hunts in East Anglia, *The Discovery of Witches* (1647) described a range of animal familiars whose appearance gave little cause for comment, but on occasion the animal possessed unusual features. Such creatures appeared almost monstrous, a physical manifestation of the moral distortion of the witch. Agnes Francis kept as a familiar a toad, or 'a thynge lyke a blacke dogge with a face like an ape, a short tail, and a peyre of hornes.' During her trial, Agnes' daughter described how she had seen her mother carrying 'the thing' in her hands. (Ewen 1933, pp. 143–46). Elizabeth Francis' familiar, although shaped like a dog, had unusual horns Hopkins' description of 'Vinegar Tom' attributed to him a horned head 'like an Oxe' (Hopkins 1647, p. 2). Other animals were over-sized, including several toads. In the printed account of the Lowestoft witch trials, two of the named familiars, Lyerd and Suckin, appeared in the form of a dog and a lion. In the same trial, Ursley Kempe confessed that she had been tricked into thinking that her white lamb was always truthful. Her son testified that she kept four spirits in animal form, the lamb, a toad, and two cats, but his description of these creatures as 'like a toad', or 'like a cat' suggests that these creatures occupied a liminal state between

animal and non-animal form (W. W. 1582). Such aberrations were unlikely to be mere accidents; as the visual stereotype of the devil became more homogenous in the late medieval and early modern period, so its iconic attributes could be readily used to communicate the demonic nature of the witch's relationship with her familiar. Familiars were often described as dark in colour, symbolising their association with demons (Wilby 2000, p. 287; Anon 1579). Accounts of demonic trickery by familiars punctuated witchcraft trials and confessions in a way, enabling the use of pamphlet literature to warn readers against co-operation with the demonic, and incite a more determined rejection of superstition and false wonders (Anon 1589, B2r). A shared lexicon positioned the familiar on the margin of human and animal form, and at the linguistic intersection of true faith and false superstition in which the rejection of God was articulated in a highly religious language.

Such a visual and verbal language of the demonic, laden with darkness, transitional forms, trickery and temptation was widely disseminated. It was not, however, the product or preserve of the witch trials alone. The vocabulary that was used by and against those who were accused of witchcraft and consorting with familiars bore a marked resemblance to that which was used to denounce human commerce with other numinous beings, particularly fairies. Significant analysis has been undertaken here by Emma Wilby and others, who have identified the common ground that existed in early modern accounts of interaction with familiars and with fairies. Both fairy and familiar had access to a broad range of supernatural powers, which could be used to ill effect and good. A semantic imprecision in the use of words such as 'imp' or 'sprite' in both contexts testifies to the fluidity of the language and the permeability of the boundary. Such imprecision was reflected in the testimony provided by those accused of witchcraft, whose accounts of their familiars were heavily laden with imagery derived from the language of fairies and the wider supernatural (Wilby 2000; Anon 1566, A5v). Both fairies and familiars offered assistance to their human companions, and in both cases the acceptance of this offer acquired a contractual status and significance. The distinction between the familiar and the fairy was often not made by those most intimately associated with them, but by individuals seeking to label and categorise such creatures and their human interactions within the demands of a religious and cultural context.

Against this backdrop, the vehement assault on witches and their familiars in early modern England needs to be seen not as an isolated quirk, but as part of a broader attempt to suppress a syncretic popular culture in which aspects of religion, magic, and the broader supernatural had coalesced. The link between practitioners of popular medicine, healing, 'cunning folk' and witchcraft forms part of this nexus. Accusations of witchcraft levelled against cunning women demonised the remedies that they peddled as magic and superstition, illicit natural knowledge acquired by contact with forces beyond their control. Both fairies and familiars were reported to be able to assist in the location of lost property, but such use of magic and natural knowledge, even for benign purposes, was readily overlaid with demonic connotations. Heinrich Kramer and Jacob Sprenger, authors of the *Malleus Maleficarum*, counselled the reader against resort to 'wise women, by whom they are very frequently cured, and not by priests and exorcists. So experience shows that such cures are affected by the help of devils, which is unlawful to seek' (Institoris and Sprenger 1486). Even without systematic attempts to suppress such beliefs, cunning folk were viewed with heightened suspicion (Davies 2007, p. 4; Davies 2016, pp. 1–15). Alan Macfarlane identifies cunning folk as the primary target visitation articles that referred to 'sorcery, witchcraft, enchantments, incantations, charms, unlawful prayers, or invocations in Latin', and Owen Davies makes a persuasive case for seeking the same individuals as the initial focus of the 1563 'Act agaynst Conjuracons Inchantments and Witchecraftes' (Macfarlane 1970, pp. 67, 115; Davies 2007, p. 7). By claiming access to supernatural power, cunning folk left themselves open to accusations of witchcraft and demonic magic, particularly where such power appeared to derive from communication with spirits (Larner 2000, pp. 138–39). The demonization of cunning folk, fairies and imps was part of a broader effort to eliminate superstition, 'diabolical delusions' and the 'popish mist that had befogged the eyes of our poor people' (Harsnett 1603, pp. 135–36; Holland 1590, p. 8).

But animal familiars were more than just a 'popish mist.' Anxieties about witches and witchcraft were articulated in different forms during the English witch trials, but that most 'different' creature, the familiar, emerges from the records as an important illustration of the diffuse origins of belief in magic, witchcraft, and the wider supernatural, and the role of animals and demons within it. The relationship between witch and familiar enables us to perceive both the distinctive nature of belief in England, and the diffusion and distillation of complex and often contradictory ideas in what at times appear to be the most mundane and ordinary moments. In those animals whose footprints can be seen in the English trials and literature, we can see the extent to which these animals acted as a pivotal point of intersection between learned and popular beliefs, demonology and traditional belief, attitudes to gender, and social and moral norms, and attitudes to human, animal, and interaction between the two. The pact between witch and familiar simultaneously shared the language of demonic pact, sabbath, and the surrender of the soul that permeated continental demonologies, and undermined it by locating that most feared of moments in the world of the domestic and the mundane. The feeding of animal familiars by witches presents evidence of the domestication of animals and the importance of animals as companions, while at the same time fuelling the persecution of witches on the basis that they shared that most precious and sacred fluid, human blood, in which inhered the soul, with creatures who were at best non-human, and at worst demonic. In the language used to describe familiars inhered both a traditional lexicon in which such creatures were recognised as agents of the supernatural, and a more novel vocabulary in which particular animals, were demonised. Familiars were hybrids, not totally animal, nor totally spirit, neither completely old, nor entirely novel, creating, and created by the narratives of witchcraft that emerged in England. This intersectionality should remind us that we have much to learn about the dimensions and dynamics of witch belief from the 'paltrie vermin, cats, mise, toads, and weasils.'

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