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**BOIL THOU FIRST IN THE CHARMÈD POT:**

*Witch Mania in 17th Century Hessen*

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To my accused forebears:

*die Lang Katt:*

one of the lucky ones,

and Margaretha Fritz,

not so lucky.

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*And it shall come to pass,  
that instead of sweet smell there  
shall be stink;  
and instead of a girdle a rent;  
and instead of well set hair  
baldness;  
and instead of a stomacher a  
girding of sackcloth;  
and burning instead of beauty.*

—Isaiah 3:24

Her name was Ann Hibbins, and even in the midst of being tried as a witch before the Boston magistrates in May of 1656 she was addressed not by the familiar, somewhat patronizing "Goodwife", but as *Mistress* Hibbins. This was only in keeping for the well-to-do widow of a respected Boston merchant and magistrate; but it is peculiar to reflect on how status acknowledged in court did not prevent the disapprobation of same from, in the end, convicting and hanging the *fine lady* on charges soon to become included among that familiar array of "humours" guaranteed to earmark the colonial witch in future. "Humours", however, which had formed a part of the indictment laid at the unwitting doorsteps of many other women long before 1656.

They said that Mrs Ann Hibbins gave "obstinate challenge" to religious, secular and family authority. Like many women richer and poorer, Hibbins met her fate because she neither could nor would toe that delicate balance of behavior which kept others—often, but not always, the accusers—safe from the gallows or the stake, as well as safeguarding the control over their persons so important to the men in their lives. The independent woman, in popular parlance, was "never satisfied", in terms ranging from the financial to the sexual, and particularly the latter, for females were believed to be insatiable in the realm of *amour*, veritable vampires who after exhausting their husbands were still desirous of further caresses. This sort of independent female could also do such

shocking things as command many of the elements in her environment, which meant holding onto property despite remonstrances from children wanting her to give it up [to them], even to remarry, all of which tended to fret one's relations male and female. But then what did she do in that big house all day long? the busy goodwives might mutter, passing in the street outside. This certainly was echoed by servants within, those young girls who were obliged to sweep the hearths, pack in the wood, trim the wicks, maidens who in time were to prove the most daunting adversaries of the *fine lady* who had too much time and freedom on her hands.

But what was the recourse of the envious, in an age devoid of the solution-proffering social programs proliferating today, not to mention the modern availability of behavioral outlets for tensions which in the case of these young women were preponderantly of a repressed sexual nature? There was only one thing to do, or so it seemed, since so many of them took this course: you worked yourself into the hysterical state afterwards termed "devil-possession"; you turned to your evil employer whose freedom oppressed you and accused her and her myriad familiars of, for example, standing beside your bed bathed in lurid hellish light; you described in unsettling detail her demons and assorted other hangers-on from hell; and you swore it was all true. And, *mirabile dictu*, everyone believed you. The chaos thus caused varied the workaday routine, certainly, as well as giving the *fine lady* an interesting time in the law courts, where her powerlessness contrasted so sharply with the dominion she so freely exercised and presumably enjoyed at home. Did not that 15th century handbook of accusation, *Malleus Maleficarum*, state that "in order to deal with [witches' crimes], the evidence of servants against their masters, and of disreputable persons against others, must be admissible"?

That is to say, all of this might have occurred to an accuser who carefully planned her accusations. The general tendency, however, was to *ad lib*—the "snowball effect". Open Pandora's box and run. Unfortunately, unlike its misuse to describe a political myth during the Cold War, this situation fully justifies the term "domino effect". One accusation often brought down more than one accused; sometimes the accuser was also sent tumbling.

The obverse side of the social coin was, of course, the accused witch who was terribly poor and completely powerless. Sometimes such women had been reduced to their state by the unfair or unintelligent writing of a will; sometimes they were already destitute in marriage and driven further down by a spouse's demise. Widowed or never married, living off what the community provided or what she could get in exchange for her besoms or herb-simples, with no company save for a cat or tame rodent, and wrinkled, stooped, with the premature aging of poverty, perhaps querulous toward curious neighbors or their children... this was the classic witch stereotype. To this image, any and all calumnies might stick, for as the *fine lady* annoyed through her uncontrollable freedom, so the gnarled crone annoyed through her hideous appearance. And neither blindness, incapacity, deafness or plain pity could be relied on to save such a woman with the "evidence" of her evils stacked against her, any more than the eloquent testimony of a lady of property was valued higher than that of her jealous kitchen-maid or snooping neighbor.

The earliest known execution of a woman on grounds of "coitus with the devil", which was to become in later times *prima facie* evidence of being a witch, took place in Toulouse in 1275. (Women were accused of dabbling in witchcraft to the detriment of male relatives, however, much earlier than this, as evinced by the many cases of such mentioned in, for example, Gregory of Tours' 6th century *History of the Franks*.) This woman of Toulouse, Angela de Labarthe, gave birth to what was probably a congenitally deformed child which in the superstitious climate of the day became transformed into a wolf-headed, reptilian-tailed monster sired by the devil. Whether Angela de Labarthe denied this or was tortured and "confessed", she was convicted and burned for her crime. Though the Church formally cited and proscribed witchcraft as heresy in the 14th century, it took two enterprising German Dominicans, both seasoned Inquisition judges who enjoyed the approbation of the Pope<sup>1</sup>, to standardize the stereotype. Heinrich Institoris' and Jakob Sprenger's *Malleus Maleficarum* of 1484 set forth the rules: witchery got its power from a pact with the devil; witches met secretly [as did all evil-intentioned persons, including, later on, Freemasons]; witches had a distinctive mark on their bodies, derived from the devil, by which he knew "his own"; witches gave unbaptized infants to the devil for unholy rites.

By this time, the devil was assumed in the fertile imaginations of all true believers to possess a three-dimensional reality: a collage of bat's wings, goat's horns, toad's flesh, and the omnipresent stallion-sized penis that either burned or was freezing cold. One Sylvine de la Plaine, burned as a witch in Paris in 1616, testified [under torture?] that she had consorted with the devil, who "had known her once before, and his member was like that of a horse, and on insertion it was as cold as ice and ejected ice-cold semen." It is perhaps significant that this description of the implausible end of the reality spectrum follows through almost without variation among the women from whom confessions and testimonies were obtained. To knowledge of these things and more were witches supposed to confess, including providing the names of other members of their covens, much the way rabbis in Inquisitional Spain were bribed to name members of their congregations, Jews being devils walking the earth clothed in temporary human form. When there were communication breakdowns between witch and interlocutor, it was quite permissible to use certain compelling devices on her or his legs, thumbs, and other more sensitive body parts to get answers to the questions posed.

England's Parliament made witchcraft a capital crime in 1542; in the following decade several hundred persons were hanged on this charge, 90% of whom were women. The hysteria was only heightened by the accession of King James I. of England, 1603-1625 [since 1567, VI. of Scotland], for whom all things mysterious, particularly in the feminine, posed such terrible imaginings that the only way for this odd mixture of early senility and blind cruelty to deal with the situation was to send out the witch-hunters and their packs, round up the accused, and make lots of human-fueled bonfires. One hundred years later, the first witch executed in colonial America was one Else Young, while, somewhat surprisingly, one of the latest punitive efforts toward accused witches occurred in South Carolina in 1709. Virginia tried but did not condemn one accused witch, while among those accused in Maryland, a woman by name of Rebecca Fowler was hanged in 1685. (Obviously the Puritan colonies did not corner the market on superstition and cruelty.)

In 16th century Bavaria there had been the occasional witch trials since the 1570's, but formalized persecution of witches only began to gain momentum under the reign of Duke Wilhelm V. von Wittelsbach, activated by a case in 1587 wherein a farmer's wife came under suspicion of having hexed some cattle, leading to the apprehension, torture and execution of hundreds of individuals. On 24 September 1590, Wilhelm V. issued a ducal decree regarding how a judge was to properly identify, capture and interrogate sorcerers and "persons rumored to be guilty of witchcraft." These instructions were sent out to all the prefects of every district in the duchy. Wilhelm V.'s son, the pallid Duke Maximilian I., reiterated his father's mania to control the superstitions of an entire nation when he promulgated his own instructions of witchcraft in 1611. The state-sanctioned murder this brought upon Bavaria was to last until mid-century; what makes the information harder to digest is that all along highly placed councilors to the various demonophobic Wittelsbach dukes were protesting, but unsuccessfully, the abuses of law and order by decrees, judges and prefects—still small voices in a demented wilderness.<sup>2</sup>

The last witch trial in England took place in 1712, followed a few years later, in 1718, by France, home of Jeanne d'Arc, the most famous witch of them all. Due in large part to *Malleus Maleficarum* and the tell-tale signs it listed, not to mention a widespread fear [founded on widespread ignorance] that such persons as witches constituted a dangerous counter-culture invidious to the well-being of society, from 300,000 to an estimated several millions of persons were hanged or burned from the 16th to 17th centuries in England and on the Continent.

Theories vary regarding the nature of the accusations, and the confessions, themselves, ranging from the notion that the sabbaths, nocturnal broomstick flights, horned devil lovers and the rest of the Halloween *accoutrements* were little more than village scapegoating, to Margaret Murray's intriguing thesis that these elements constitute remnants of old pre-Christian religion, with preagricultural rites focused on a horned deity dating back to prehistoric times. According to Arthur Evans' book *The God of Ecstasy*, the traits of this Horned God, known variously as Herne, Kwaternik, and Cernunnos, and metamorphosed by disapproving Christian thought into the corporeal form of Satan, points to the Greco-Middle Eastern fertility god Dionysos, surviving in the collective memory-bank of a rural populace largely untouched by more than the outward trappings of Christian piety and belief. Dionysos' Pan-like hooves, horns, and unrestrained sexuality all appear in one form or another in accounts of witches confessing to have had relations with "the Black Man."

What it boils down to in the charmed pot of human paranoia is a few but potent prime ingredients for the brewing of fear: women who were old, poor, and widowed; women who were younger but self-sufficient; men who were unmarried and led solitary lives not spent in the benignity of a monastery. These are hardly threatening figures, but even the smallest child's hand can cast the silhouetted head of a demon on a wall. What matters is how the light is trained, to what effect, and how receptive the audience to fear over reason. Not surprisingly, most groups of people seem to prefer fear.

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When one thinks of witch trials, one most often will automatically envision those that took place in Salem, Massachusetts, where in 1692 a fury was unleashed that knew

no social, ethical or logical boundaries. A town named for peace became for some of its unfortunate, mostly female, citizens the very antithesis of the word.

However madness being the universal commodity it is, it is not well known that at roughly the same time as Mrs Ann Hibbins' trial in Boston in 1656, the flames of witch phobia were eating their way through the rolling countryside of the landgravate of Hessen, in a manner not far removed from methods employed throughout Germany some 300 years later when new bogeymen—the European Jew, the political dissenter, the homosexual—took the stage of persecution. Though the outbreaks were often dissimilar in their beginnings and in the conduct of their persecutions, the events that unfolded were underscored by the same unreasonable reliance on certain "infallible" physical or emotional signs, as well as rigid enforcement of interrogation techniques which were geared to humiliate the accused while encumbering her or his statements with hyperbole won with pain and accepted as valid evidence.

One of the earliest cases, between the years 1652 to 1659, occurred in the jurisdiction of Bingenheim, east of the famous spa at Bad Nauheim. The ball was got rolling by a man who, if we may judge worldly sophistication as a by-product of princely station, and that sophistication as a virtue, ought to have known better: Landgrave Wilhelm Christoph of Hessen-Homburg [1625-1681], who lived with his family in an unattractive stone box of a castle in the flatnesses of Bingenheim. (Today it is romantically wreathed in foliage and, with the uncompromising justice of Time, serves as a sanatorium.) Indeed, the Bingenheim witch-madness is a case which strongly resembles that brought forth by Francis Manners 6th Earl of Rutland and his family some forty years earlier. The Manners easily internalized the fearful notion that witch-craft was to blame when it was bruited—and admitted [under torture] by the accused persons—that their sickly children were the victims of hexing. The result of this fear was that most of one family of former servants were sent to the scaffold: a strange family to be sure, but no more so in the shreds of paganism they clung to than others of their class and time.

So, too, at Bingenheim was the swineherd from the village of Bisse suspected of having damaged the health of Landgrave Wilhelm Christoph's infants. What evidence, if any, this accusation was based on is not known to us, but the Landgrave's children did pass on to the next world with a peculiar regularity: all totaled, nine infant sons were lost, with only two daughters surviving. Life in the 17th century, lacking the health care and awareness, the sanitation, and the absence of local armed conflict that characterize most modern Western societies, was never easy, and particularly not when living in a 15th century fortress with inadequate heating and dubious notions of cleanliness and proper care of infants. That the Landgrave's children were so continually hastened to the grave does not seem to 20th century eyes all that surprising. To the eyes of their father, to the mother who had to undergo one painful and fruitless childbirth after another, the reason for the endless deaths must be found at some mysterious source having little or nothing to do with normal causality.

Technically prosecutions were not to be brought against one or more suspects until it was completely clear that a crime had indeed been committed: the theory of *corpus delicti*. As Michael Kunze writes in *Highroad to the Stake*, "Mere rumor was not enough, suspicion must be based on a proven act." Having a bad reputation could help get a person arrested only if that suspect had been in the vicinity of the place where a corpse

was found or there had been damage to church property. Additionally, if there was no proof of a suspect's having committed a criminal act, a confession would not serve as substitute.

Emperor Charles V.'s penal code, expressing this principle of *constare de delicto*, states that "no person might be examined under torture unless sufficient evidence has first been found of the criminal act being investigated." A bad reputation was no substitute for *corpus delicti* required by established law, but sometimes the law could be creatively interpreted. The leap from another death in the princely nursery to the arrest of a swineherd whose social position and responsibilities would never have brought him any closer to that gloomy stone house than the usually distant pigsty, confirms above all else that readiness in all desperate people when faced with a problem their reason cannot solve to rush into the arms of that unreason, which seems to offer plenty of answers. And as with the infamous Pappenheimer show-trial in Munich 52 years before, these men of justice showed their continued conviction on one principle only: saturation bombing achieves broader aims than focussing on specific targets. And even truer to human nature, they undoubtedly considered the swineherd, denizen of a despised sector of society, beneath the law, even as persons of influence were often above it.

Contrary to the usual manner of viewing such matters, it is not so much the swineherd here who casts a ghoulis shadow over the curtains of the innocent little princes' crib, but something like the reverse; for in setting first upon this man the Landgrave's agents were falling in with a custom as old, perhaps, as humanity itself: the suspicion and persecuting of those human creatures who due to temperament or occupation or both remain mostly apart from their fellow man. A swineherd, by virtue of his very vocation, would not often be found in a "normalizing" crowd of companions. During the early Romantic period the figure of the shepherd or shepherdess found great vogue, whether depicted in Meissen porcelains, as ballet dancers leaping about a stage, in literature sighing over the troubles of the world or an unrequited love from the solitude of his or her munching flocks. In the centuries before this, however, it would seem that such persons were more figures of mystery than romance. Could it be mere coincidence that the local herdsman is usually to be found among those denounced in witch-scares? And that many of these men were not married? And that many of them had young men or boys as apprentices? And that many of these men and their apprentices were found "guilty as charged"?

Whatever the swineherd from Bisse actually did to warrant his imprisonment, he was not able to manage his emotions under the circumstances; and we may also speculate on his treatment in custody, particularly if this incarceration, as with others, had about it a touch of homophobic paranoia. Above all we can be in no doubt as to the methods used to interrogate the man; who, if elderly, certainly could not have withstood the *strappado* or the arm-pit singeing which were common practices for very long. All that is known is that the swineherd from Bisse was found "with broken neck in his cell", which death was officially ascribed to the devil, that exacting taskmaster who assassinates his own minions when they are in danger of telling too much. A far more plausible explanation for this death would be that the swineherd made himself a rope of knotted clothing, and hanged himself, knowledge of which would, not surprisingly, be naturally kept mum, hence the

breezy inculpation of supernatural forces. It is, however, eminently likely that he simply died from maltreatment; but it was not always an ignorant hangman who diagnosed the lolling head of a corpse as the result of diabolical throttling. The civilized Jesuit father Friedrich von Spee [1591-1635] of Bavaria was once accorded the dubious privilege of being present upon the discovery of an accused, and now deceased, sorcerer in his cell, which death was, of course, announced to be none other than the devil's work. Even von Spee's doubting acquaintance, a level-headed mayor, who checked on the corpse for symptoms of strangulation and broken neck, came back from the cell stating that the neck was indeed broken, and since it was not obvious otherwise how such an act could have happened it obviously *was* the devil's work, as the torture-master said. Von Spee could only sit back in awe before such gullibility, though he did ask his companions, some of whom were doctors, whether they had ever dealt with a corpse before, since had they done so they would surely know that however subject the rest of the body was to *rigor mortis*, the head and neck were not. That this sane man lived until 1635, having ventured this dangerous attempt at reasoning, is perhaps even more astonishing than the ignorance of his compeers.

But with the Bisse swineherd, it was not enough, apparently, that he was now dead—his eternally guilty corpse was consigned to the stake and sent up in flames; and it is interesting to note that to these same flames was sent the similarly unidentified "swineherd's boy", his apprentice, again without details as to what charges merited his arrest or execution; and certainly in total absence of *corpus delicti*—almost as if the crime deserving of this punishment must be perfectly clear to all concerned; which perhaps, given the fears and ignorance of those concerned, it was.

The subsequent witch-trials or hearings (for by this time many others would have been suspected, named and detained) were conducted by two men hand-picked by the Landgrave: one Dr. Hünfeld and "the scribe", Caspari. Wilhelm Christoph's selection could not have been more successful for between them these two men convicted 56 people in the small area over which they were authorized to hold forth, with the proud record of "only two persons burnt alive"—the others were first beheaded and burnt. Ten victims were buried rather than burned after the beheading, consisting of "mostly ... children" who had been "led astray" by evil-intentioned adults.

Under that most poetic of trees, a linden—here called "the Tree of Judgment"—which stood not far from the small late Gothic 15th century church, at an ancient stone table, the accused persons were questioned as to their origins and background, followed by the examination, after which they were required to sign the proceedings. How many children or elderly and illiterate adults were capable of understanding what they were asked or signing to what they had said is open to question. As Michael Kunze describes in *Highroad to the Stake*, referring to the Bavarian Pappenheimer Trial from 1600, legal scholars asserted that in a group of suspects, it was always better to "open the oyster at its weakest point" by grilling those who appeared most timid. That these questions were often loaded is borne out by the following sample of statements the accused were requested [or forced] to make their mark to:

"True, you are aware that you are a witch?"

"True, that you, at age 10, were...led astray by a [currently] deceased witch?"

"True, that you were baptized in the devil's name?"

"True, that you committed fornication with a devilish lover?"

The accused was asked to recognize also that she/he had been given "the devil's mark" [any birthmark or scar would and did do], took another name from Satan in unholy baptism, attended the black mass, swore to the devil to lead innocent children astray, and to poison them and cattle; and last but not least, to be responsible for having "helped fill the pasturage with frogs and flies, also to do harm to the fruit." What connection these phenomena had with the deaths of the Landgrave's infant sons is unclear, but someone, obviously, was at fault, and it may as well be a "statistical deviate" to use historian John Boswell's telling term.

The relatives of the accused would have been doubly unhappy under the circumstances, unless having done the denouncing themselves, when informed that they had to pay the cost of the judicial proceedings. They were given to understand additionally that when there was no cash on hand, land or houses sufficed. There is no indication into whose hands such payments would fall, or how much larger the Landgrave's domain was after the witch-trials compared to before. At any rate, it was all a very expensive business, for the community was well aware that it had to "make it worth the executioner's while," the dispatching of a human being being costly business. Since it cost roughly 5 Gulden [= 40 German pounds] to set the fellow to work, often more than one person was burnt at one time.

A few of the victims who followed the swineherd from Bisse to the flames, all executed in 1652, were:

1. Hanß Rau from Berstadt;
2. "The swineherd's boy from Bisse, who was burned along with Johann Waasen's wife, who was the 'Head Witch' of the witches of Echzell [north of Bingenheim]."
3. Johann Schultheiß's wife, Gersten;
4. Conrad Heusen's daughter, "burnt";
5. "Matthäus Schütz's wife from Geltenau was burnt alive, for having hexed her two husbands, her brother and her brother-in-law";
6. "The Jew, Löw<sup>3</sup>, from Bisse, was burnt alive."

Since burning alive was reserved even in the most drastic judicially sanctioned mass-murders for the very worst of reprobates and heretics, Frau Schütz must have either annoyed more people than just the men of her family, including Judge Dr. Hünfeld, or admitted to fantastic crimes of which we know nothing but can guess from the severity of the punishment. Several of the accused persons were "tortured so hard" during the questioning they perished while still in custody—compelling proof, at any rate, that they had not parted with their conviction in their own innocence despite repeated application of increasingly agonizing torture.

At the pinnacle of this unholy pyramid of witchdom stood two women who were proof that, like Mrs Ann Hibbins, one's privileged place in the hierarchy was by no means one guaranteeing safety of one's person. The "Witch Queen" who was burned for her crimes was none other than the wife of the Magister [schoolmaster] Crecelius of Echzell, whose husband was spared but was transferred to a distant school. The Witch Queen's lady-in-waiting, wife of an Echzell Chancellery Councillor, emerged somehow unscathed,

but was banished from the district with her husband in tow. The grand total, after this human holocaust, comprised roughly 6.2 persons executed for every sickly infant son lost to the Landgrave Wilhelm Christoph of Hessen-Homburg. Strangely enough, Prince Leopold Georg, born to the Landgrave and his wife a few days before All Hallow's Evening in 1654, never made it to his twenty-first birthday, leaving behind his two sisters, with whom this elder branch of the Hessen-Homburg princes died out. With the evil swineherd dead, who did the Landgrave cast blame upon then? Perhaps his second wife, a Saxon duchess who suspiciously gave him no children at all, had something to do with it.

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The Buseckertal or Buseck valley, some 15 miles south-east of the old Hessian university town of Gießen, is so named from the many beech forests surrounding the area, and gave a name to the family of the Barons von Buseck who first appeared in the region in the mid-12th century. In a map dated latest 1608 the baronial territory is spelled out down to the trees, cultivated fields, church spires—even such landmarks as boundary stones, replete with cast shadows, and border information on the other "gentlefolk" holding sway to east, west, north and south. "On all but special occasions," reads the furling engraved legend, "[the flag] made of yellow taffeta and painted in the center with a large black eagle [was displayed]" from the turrets of the family's *Schloß* at Großen-Buseck.

In the Buseckertal, with its rolling hills and fields neat as tapestry-work, its forests both eerily black and dappled with yellow sun, its gingerbread villages and stately manors, surely there lived no evil witch to trick an innocent Hänsel or Gretel into her cannibalistic embrace. There was, of course, a host of local folk-tale ghosts and assorted other presumably unhappy spiritual trespassers to trouble those mortals living on this earthly plane: there were headless horsemen and strange huntsmen replete with packs of hounds "fierce and black"; no castle but had its "*weiße Frau*" who had drowned in the moat in times long past, normally witnessed in their eternal wanderings by shepherds or serving-maids or village merchants walking home by night and thereafter logged into the community memory-bank, to be related in increasingly imaginative form at the fireside or accompanied by the hum of the spinning-wheel. The communities were tiny: in 1640, there were only 53 households in Großen-Buseck, which had decreased to 46 by 1657. Whatever happened in the Buseckertal that seemed out of the ordinary did not happen very far from some other small but inhabited place, which itself was never far from another small but lively community. In this case, the idyllic setting, with its interesting, sometimes spine-tingling local myths, belies the fact that it was not so much Hänsel and Gretel in all their *naïveté* who had to fear the deprivations of the witch, but the accused witch who had very much to fear from them.

The hamlet of Oppenrod, when its *Leibeigene* or "serfs" were tallied up in 1657, only had 16 households to its name. Consequently there must have been quite a stir when, on 25 August 1655, Eva Eisermann, wife of the late Zirben Eisermann of that place was brought before the magistrates in Großen-Buseck to answer for "crimes committed through *Zauberei* [magic]." According to the normal procedure, Eva was asked presently who had taught such things to her, in keeping with the notion that witches habitually handed down the secrets of their infernal arts from one generation to another. She

answered readily, "My mother." When she was little, she said, her mother had instructed her in "the words and gestures", by now well known from *Malleus Maleficarum* as some of the earmarks of true witchery. Eva informed the court that at midnight each year on *Walpurgisnacht* or 1st May, a "dance" was convened. Near Climbach, a village surrounded by ancient woodlands that lay in the territory of the Barons von Nordeck zur Rabenau, "there was a place in the hedge" where the "dance" took place. Eva even named her sisters "Kathy" and Anna Margaretha as participants in this activity, and no doubt several pairs of eyebrows were raised heavenward when she claimed that the Pastor of Reiskirchen, Johannes Steindecker, clad "in his long black cloak" was also there. Eva went on to say that the Pastor had taught the girls how to say some sort of spell which she rendered pathetically, per the court proceedings, as: "*pab, pab, ab, ab, ab,*" [Abracadabra?] She had also been required to "stand on her head, and hold a lighted candle in her fundament"—a function confessed to by accused witches for years and one which was relegated to the "inferior witches" for the illumination of the site of midnight revels. Before the magistrates could catch their breath, and with all the loquacity so desired by the authors of *Malleus Maleficarum*, Eva named as accomplices eleven people from Großen-Buseck, six from Albach, and three from Burkhardsfelden.

Eva, who concealed who knew how many riches in further denunciations of family and friends, was "put to the question" at the beginning of September—a.k.a. the thumbscrews, an instrument with which most interrogations began. This got out of her that she had bewitched some kine. Perhaps the milk had mysteriously soured, or perhaps the cows did not give milk for several days; it did not matter. As with the flies and frogs in the pastures at Bingenheim, a socially-subversive witch must be to blame, and here she was in flesh and blood. The freeholders must have breathed a sigh of relief: at last they knew who was responsible.

But this was not quite enough. Eva was then transferred to the leg-irons, no doubt on the strength of one or another of the magistrates' "feeling" that there was more to this woman and more to be had from her information-wise than had been obtained hitherto. Remarkably, the accused stood by her assertion that she had done no other misdeeds. But by the time an hour of this agony had passed by, Eva changed her tune. She said [or shrieked] that she "would tell [now] what she knew."

So Eva Eisermann was brought before the court again and questioned for two hours. Evidently a great obsession of this particular court was whether or not there existed what was referred to as *Hexensalb* or witch-balm; and Eva was prepared to tell the court that it was to be found at Oppenrod, hidden in a jar under a stone beside a hearth—a labyrinthine disclosure now familiar through the fairy-tales of the Brothers Grimm. Two men sworn by the court were sent to find this jar but could not, whereupon Eva asked the court to pardon her lack of memory: she had given the balm to her father last *Walpurgisnacht*. The court's impatience to locate this mysterious substance was in part formed of curiosity as to its rumored magical properties, for Eva claimed that when she and her sisters smeared themselves with the witch-balm they were able to fly to the site of the black mass using an *Ofengabel* or long oven-fork—a useful substitute for the now-traditional broomstick as a mode of transportation<sup>4</sup>. (It is interesting to note that the *thyrsus* or willow-wand tipped with a flaming pine cone was said to be used by the mænads, those uncontrollable females who are the witch-precursors of Greek myth, to fly

to their places of wild and wooly worship; in which rites, incidentally, they were said to tear men limb from limb.)

The court's curiosity certainly got the better of its reason, for they snatched at this pathetic attempt of Eva's to start a wild goose chase. The judge asked her where her father was to be found. Eva replied that she did not know, but perhaps in an effort to cover for an actual father, if she had ever known him, or because she was a simple woman who thought another fantastic lie might save her from more torture, Eva dropped another bombshell. "[My father] is a [werewolf]," she told the men assembled before her. With more of their dangerous credulity, the court questioned not the validity of the information but more of its details, leading the accused to offer the supporting evidence that her father stole sheep when in his werewolf guise, bringing them home to the family to eat. Eva herself had eaten of such mutton, but where her father had found the sheep she had no idea. Strangely, no shepherd came forward to corroborate this claim. (Perhaps an edible *corpus delicti* was taken even less seriously.)

From this point on, Eva Eisermann descends into a veritable labyrinth of jumbled lore—how much was suggested, how much was the product of desperate self-preservation, how much was actually true, cannot be determined. Here was a woman deprived of sleep, of adequate nourishment, to whose body painful devices were being constantly applied (they were now putting her in the dunking-stool), to whose nonintellectual brain the similar device of hairsplitting interrogation was administered without cease. Thus we can perhaps understand why, when asked how she had made the infamous magical witch-balm, Eva proceeded to deliriously relate an ugly story in which her sister Kathy had borne an illegitimate child by a local man, which the devil conveniently "pulverized in a mortar", after which Eva and Kathy boiled the mixture, to which other ingredients had been added, and placed the resulting witch-balm in a jar. (This is reminiscent of post-torture testimony given in 1600 by the child Hänsel Pämbs, during the infamous Munich Pappenheimer Trials: how a criminal who had implicated his brothers had given them the dried and crushed hands of dead children, baked in a roll. This was not to make them ill, but to further facilitate in them the ability to commit murder.<sup>5</sup> See the case of Elisabeth Schmidt below for more bewitched pastry.)

"Without being asked," the proceedings make a point of telling us, neatly sidestepping the court's coercive measures, Eva now admitted to having poisoned her first husband, Heinrich Schäfer, with brandy which she had laced with a "black powder" given to her by the devil. The court asked her to explain whether she had disliked her husband so, to have poisoned and killed him in this way, but Eva merely shrugged: "*Was batt's?* [So what?]" Of course she had not disliked him. But it was "the devil made her do it." It is not known whether the death of Schäfer was ever ascribed to poisoning, or whether there was corroboration—*corpus delicti*—for Eva's confession of having committed murder: not that the courts of the place and time were generally so scrupulous as to demand it.

A few days later, Eva's connection with reality had deteriorated to the point where she was saying things "which [even] startled the ... judge." Exhausted, in pain, Eva reacted as many people have done and do under the pressures of interrogation and torture: she passed into "an ecstasy." Those present thought her asleep, but noticed that her throat was "hard as wood, and flies settled on her mouth, nose and eyes [without her flinching]."

Someone among the court, perhaps the *Scharfrichter* [executioner], had the novel idea of piercing Eva with a needle, "to the bone," but still no reaction came.

Eva remained in her trance from 8:00 AM till four in the afternoon. When she came to, she was asked where she had been, as approved by Institoris and Sprenger and all subsequent witch-hunting manuals, since for the witch the walls between worlds, particularly between this one and hell, were easily trespassable. Eva replied (no doubt in these very words, since the vernacular is preserved in the proceedings), that she had been "with our loving Lordy at the pearly gates, and with all the angel-folk." She then requested that she not be questioned any more, because she was "talked out" [*geschwobelt*].

So the court let her alone for the day, then greeted her with more torture early the following morning, asking with their now risible inquisitiveness where in fact she had been during her trance, since everyone knew that as a witch she had literally not a chance in heaven that our Lord would consent to receive her at the pearly gates as she had described. Eva obliged them by answering that, in truth, she had been out in a field, where all the accused people, including herself and her sister Kathy, were seated about a fire and talking. The dreadful appositeness of this fiery image is magnified by the interpolation in the text beside Kathy's name, "*so verbrannt*" ("[this one] also burnt"). Thus we have with this little note the solid confirmation of Eva's simplicity in not knowing just how fatal it was to name other people in a confession which itself was probably two-thirds invention, which she most likely thought would save all concerned, as well as ample proof of the cruel power of applied pain to loosen a tongue of all the collected nonsense silted up in the crannies of the human brain.

Nor did it help for Eva to disavow the heavenly and mundane visions altogether. Now she claimed that her father was not a werewolf, but that he *was* a sorcerer; it was *he* who had first bewitched her, not her mother, and him they would have to go to if they wanted the witch-balm, wherever he was.

After a trial of less than a month's duration, Eva Eisermann of Oppenrod was burned in September 1655.

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Seven months later, on 29 April 1656, the pastor of Reiskirchen was again named by an accused witch as the "Chief Warlock" of the Buseckertal coven. It might be thought that "unnerved" would hardly do justice to what the pastor presumably felt upon being implicated again, but Johannes Steindecker, who had been living in Reiskirchen in the rectory since about 1645, had had many other troubles on his hands which were to only increase with time. According to Reiskirchen historian Gustav Ernst Köhler, Steindecker "appears to us as an unlucky man living in terrible times. Due to the [30 Years] war and famine the unlivable rectory in Winnerod [where Steindecker had previously resided] had to be given up" in favor of the one in Reiskirchen, where the pastor was to encounter so much *Sturm und Drang* in very short order. It was on 4 August 1655, a few weeks before Eva Eisermann was brought to trial, that Steindecker went through a trial of his own, focusing not on charges of witchcraft but of adultery and other behavior considered inconsistent with his position as clergyman. Indeed, the trial proceedings paint a picture of a rather foolhardy person, given the goldfish bowl existence of rural men of the cloth. In the preamble to the testimonies against

Steindecker, his wife's voice is first to be heard. She was "a young lady of family", who according to the Londorf pastor was "*eine böse Frau*" ["a difficult woman"] with whom Steindecker had many more children than his youth or finances could support, and who allegedly drove him to the drinking binges later used against him to turn him out of office. She may have had many more pertinent stories to relate, but here Frau Steindecker chooses an interesting but pointless tale that leaves, like so much else related to the trial, many loose ends trailing. According to her, when Steindecker was still attending the Gießener Pädagogium [now the Landgraf-Ludwig-Schule], he filled a room in her father's house in that city "with many fluttering birds", so that the young lady's father declared, "You godless scamp, you are supposed to be a child of the Lord, but you are in reality a child of the devil!"

Other testimonies were of this same mysterious character. A Gießen juryman, Philipp Farber, as well as hinting that Steindecker was already an *habitué* of the beer-halls of the town, stated that "even when at school" Steindecker had had "a familiar spirit." The schoolmaster in Burkhardtsfelden next took the rostrum to consequentially declare his inability to understand how Steindecker, who "never took book in hand", could "give three sermons in one day one after the other."

These charges would appear weakened by their very inapplicableness (not to mention downright irrelevance) to a trial concerning Steindecker's fitness to properly discharge his religious duties, but others of a graver nature were brought up. He was accused of having fathered a child not only on his maidservant, who had recently borne the child and died a few days afterward, tearfully confessing all her relations with the pastor, but that he had allegedly fathered children on five others as well. Witnesses came forward to state that Steindecker had also made advances toward married women.

The list of eyewitness testimonies reveals that Steindecker, whatever his abilities as a clergyman, had not been too concerned with discretion despite the eyes of the locals beholding his every act. He was seen "by the whole community of Reiskirchen" in company with the maidservant mentioned above, "in woods, fields, grass and forest." He took her with him to Gießen, Grünberg and Lich to the marts, during which time he was seen coming home drunk at night. Christian Schwalb of Großen-Buseck deposed that when Steindecker and the maidservant were together at his house, the pastor came into the kitchen where the girl was, "kissed her and asked when they were to go home". As if this were not enough, the two sons of Philipp Wagner later saw them walking home across the fields and beheld the pastor as he "took out his [penis] in full view and made water in front of [the maidservant]." (The crucial words here were coyly left in Latin.) One can well visualize the witnesses crowding in to give their separate accounts, for the next was the Reiskirchen shepherd, Jost Nürnberger and his wife, who claimed they had seen the pastor with the maidservant among some thick hedges "where they remained for almost half an hour." Two more men, including the schoolmaster of Winnerod, Johannes Lenhardt, claimed to have seen some similar hanky-panky occurring between the couple<sup>6</sup>.

Obviously, such behavior in a man purported to be the Lord's official shepherd in the Buseckertal would indicate that he had no inkling whatever about the impressions his actions made on his flock, but then what preservative mechanisms Steindecker may have possessed were probably fuddled with alcohol much of the time. The result of the trial was the pastor's dismissal from his post, and the next we read of him he has died without

incident and been buried in Gießen nearly twenty years later, on 7 April 1673. In the burial entry, significantly enough, there is no mention of his past exploits, giving an impression that either the Buseckertal was particularly unlucky for this urbanite from Gießen, or that his unhappiness there had driven him to take the risks he took, ultimately in his unreluctant removal from the area. Less easily explained is the continued reference to him in further confessions of accused witches. We may perhaps easily dismiss the notion of Steindecker's "truck with the devil" and other flirtings with the supernatural, but in view of his activity with his servants are we witnessing the backfiring of the willful assertion of sexuality of a man of education and background, but not much common sense, upon the naïve amorality of the girls in his rural parish?

The unnamed woman who implicated Steindecker in April of 1656 is additionally interesting in that she actually names and describes her "familiar spirit". When asked by the court who had told her to take the [devilish] oaths she had sworn to, she replied, "The Evil One." The devil, she explained, had assured her that these oaths would help her. The irony of this claim would, of course, be clear to all the good Christian citizens who beheld the woman sitting in chains before them: the devil as common jilter as well as prince of hell.

But the devil, it appeared, was distinct from the accused's "spirit", named Hans, whom she vividly pictured in "red clothes, and a plume of feathers." Hans, as well as the Evil One, advised her in all things. In fact, it was Pastor Steindecker who was able to "call forth" this spirit Hans at the sabbath celebrations—a powerful allegation indeed, since warlocks were merely tolerated at sabbaths; the devil's female minions were the companions of choice. Obviously Steindecker was an especial favorite of the opponent of Heaven.

The court naturally asked the accused how it was possible for Pastor Steindecker to be at the sabbath she described as taking place on Jakobisnacht [24 July], when at the time the pastor was in legal custody in Gießen, but she stated simply, "The devil brought him. He *was* there." As with the birds let loose in his father-in-law's *gute Stube* and the less than cogent schoolmasterly criticism of his ability to extemporize sermons, these accusations against the pastor are not taken any further. To do so, it must even have been obvious to the magistrates in charge of the trial, would surely disprove rather than support their validity as evidence.

Steindecker was not the only fish caught in the net of denunciation. Among those the accused said were with her at the sabbaths in question, most were women save for the "cowherd Curt Jung", about whom ominous "other allegations" are cited, without explanation, in the proceedings. The accused also mentioned magical practices on the part of these women: for example, one of them could "make" vermin appear, while the "miller's wife" had a talent for mice. Wilhelm Samm's wife Dorothea could have frogs and snakes slithering before one's very eyes. There were a few people whom the accused had apparently previously denounced and now wished to exculpate, among whom was "the old schoolmaster Johann Heinrich Sax", to whom she "knew she had done wrong" and now admitted was never at the sabbaths. However she maintained her position concerning two citizens, one from the village of Beuern, the other from Großen-Buseck. The accused dangerously claimed that these men had "danced with her at the sabbath", and afterwards had had sex with her—sex being, once again, at the bottom of it all. There

is no evidence that these men were ever called on to defend themselves, and both appear in later records and died in their beds. They were not unusual in this, but the fact that the three women—the miller's wife<sup>7</sup>, Wilhelm Fritz' wife, and Dorothea Samm—denounced by the unnamed accused were later burned at the stake, shows that much of the burden of proof, as of so many other things, still rested with the females involved in the witch-trials. All in all, the unnamed witch went on to name two children from Großen-Buseck, eight adults from Alten-Buseck, two from Bersrod, and four from other villages in the region.

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Dorothea Samm was next in the dock, thanks to the above mentioned denunciation. Her case has about it all the lurid *dramatis personae* of the worst of the folk tales collected by the Grimms, which however much resembling a fairy-tale was still treated with all the grave respect of solid legal evidence. On 3 November 1656 Dorothea Samm, having been kept in custody for some days already on the strength of the earlier accusation, suddenly claimed to the jurymen "with great fright and trembling" that she had been visited in the night by three evil spirits, who desired to "do her dishonor"—to have their way with her, in modern parlance. While this terrifying session was taking place, she stated that her own spirit came, whom the proceedings characterize as her "*Buhl*" or lover, because she had permitted these three other spirits to have sexual relations with her.

Dorothea Samm was told that this must have been a dream, and the court proceedings faithfully reproduce her reaction to this one moment of reason: "No, no, no! I was not sleeping!" She went on to provide further evidence of the event by stating that the third spirit had "ejaculated pure blood" upon her, after which her own "lover" came and slept with her also.

It is impossible not to see the smirks on faces here and there in the court when Dorothea was asked whether she had enjoyed this sexual activity with disembodied spirits; but only partly falling into the trap, Dorothea said "Not at all! It [the sexual activity] was as cold as ice; it was like sleeping with a man, but no enjoyment!" The smirks must have faded. She evidently believed, even if others had difficulty doing so, that her nocturnal rape at the hands of four *incubi*<sup>8</sup> had actually occurred.

Dorothea's spirit lover also had a name and something like a physical presence. "[He] is named Hans Wilhelm, and he is [dressed in] black with a plume," a variation only in color from the spirit Hans belonging to the unnamed accused who had implicated her. Taking the same credulous line of questioning applied to Eva Eisermann and the unnamed witch, in hopes of laying a minefield of self-inculpation, the court then asked Dorothea Samm what she could do with the magic she professed. She answered that she "could make snakes," as the unnamed witch had correctly stated in her confession. The two women had obviously known each other. She further revealed that her spirit Hans Wilhelm gave her "little black seeds" which could be placed in soup to poison the unsuspecting victualler as well as to be tossed into a hedge in Hans Wilhelm's name, at which serpents would slither forth. In her own defense Dorothea Samm stated that she had hexed neither man nor child, but that she did once kill a horse belonging to her husband. She did this, she explained, by stroking the animal and speaking her spirit's name, so that the creature was hexed and died soon afterward. "But she says she did not do this to anyone else's animals." However she knew other women who had—the miller's

wife had helped her, and *die Lang Katt*, or "Tall Kathy", the village name for Catharina Bauernfeind, wife of the church treasurer [*Kastenmeister*] in Bersrod, Melchior Bauernfeind. Dorothea insisted that together with these women she had brought trouble through witchcraft upon Thielmann Erben's cattle. Erben, who was one of the jurymen hearing the case, would certainly have not been prejudiced in the accused's favor upon hearing this bit of information.

The accused named others with equal alacrity. Moving from cattle to human creatures, Dorothea was asked how, after all, had her brother-in-law Heinrich Wagner died some years back? Was that not the result of his being hexed? (Evidently at the time of his death there had been curiosity left unassuaged.) Dorothea agreed that it most assuredly was the result of what we now call foul-play, and she knew who did it: Wagner's mother-in-law and sister-in-law had given him "a drink". "As soon as he drank it, he fell sick and never rose from his bed again.... He was not nice to his mother-in-law," Dorothea explained further. "She was a witch, you know. When he had something good to eat, he kept it to himself and his wife." Thus the revenge of his female relatives, who also were wroth with him because "he was an enemy of witches", and by extension, even more proof for those men present who had always doubted that too much freedom of expression was good for the women in their lives. Look what they did with it! Wore their hair long, rode sticks to midnight orgies, poisoned their men.

It was soon brought out that Dorothea Samm had helped create other witches in the neighborhood. She admitted to having baptized "in the devil's name" the three-year-old son of Melchior Hofmann, whose mother had brought him to the Samm house one Sunday morning on account of a persistent head cold. Evidently Dorothea was already considered something of what is now called a "natural healer", and we may speculate on the reasons for the mother having brought the boy to the woman's house that "Sunday morning", when everyone else would have been tucked away in the pews of the Großen-Buseck church. Perhaps her reputation was already a dubious one, necessitating discreet use of her services. Dorothea further alleged that others were present at this godless ceremony: Johannes Born was the child's godfather, while Conrad Maurer's wife served as godmother. When asked why, when she herself had stood as godmother to various infants over the years, Dorothea had been seen at the font with her head "trembling violently" (people noticed everything), she replied that this was due to her "bad conscience". Further malefic acts in church, admitted the accused, included her having not ingested the host but taking it home with her to give to her spirit lover, who would "use it in the [witch-]balm." Again, great curiosity reigned as to the location of the legendary balm, but Dorothea cut it short, since it is not mentioned again, with: "I have none with me."

The "unholy baptism" issue is explored at length later in the proceedings with Dorothea Samm's description of having helped a local woman become a witch. It was a simple procedure. All one had to do was "stand in a manure pile while saying, 'I forswear Jesus Christ.'" When the woman in question had done so a sufficient number of times, she returned to the Samm household where Dorothea rebaptized her and assigned her a "spirit" with the typically commonplace name of Peter. (It is an interesting phenomenon that these women possessed imaginations fertile enough to be able to conjure up and describe three-dimensional, sexually aggressive supernatural spirits and how they looked,

commit fantastical acts supposedly ordered by same and devise ceremonies of intricate symbology to propitiate them, and yet call these same exotic ghosts by the same prosaic given names filling every page of the church-books back to the beginning of recorded time.)

Of the men accused by Dorothea Samm, she follows the unnamed witch of earlier memory in denouncing Sittich Ott of Großen-Buseck, calling him the "Chief Warlock" as well as "bed-partner"; and then apparently overlapping time-frames by naming the by now infamous Pastor Steindecker as the true *Hexenmeister* of their coven. She too testified that Steindecker, despite being held in arrest in Gießen at the time, was present at the already mentioned sabbath on *Jakobisnacht* or 24 July, as well as describing him as wearing "his black clothes and cape." The obvious question, unless we accept that the incarcerated Steindecker *was* supernaturally conveyed to the scene of these midnight revels, is: was it actually the pastor, or another man posing as him? Was Steindecker the victim of what can only be called a "character assassination"?

The trial dragged on until February of 1657, when it was judged that Dorothea Samm had committed sufficient crimes evil in the sight of the Lord [and the neighborhood] to warrant her execution. On 24 February, she was burned at the stake. A record exists of both the juridical faculty at the University of Gießen and the von Buseck family that ruled over the area requesting that Dorothea Samm be either strangled before the flames were lit or "hung about the neck with the exploding gunpowder bag", a questionable form of hastening death for the victim sentenced to live burning; in any case, as mentioned above, burning alive was normally reserved for the most evil few. It is to be hoped the former mercy was shown, though given the insatiability of the mob for the goriest of scaffold spectacles it is possible the gunpowder was used. However no evidence survives that the advice was ever even acknowledged. Given the magnitude of crimes confessed to, it is likely that Dorothea Samm was consigned to the flames while still living.

Wilhelm Samm, meanwhile, continues to appear in the records in Großen-Buseck, with a new wife and more children. Neither the women his former wife accused of poisoning her brother-in-law nor those she claimed were responsible for hexing livestock were to suffer the same fate, but we may imagine that the already eagle-eyed gaze of the locals upon the actions of one another grew ever more piercing as a result of her trial and execution. Only the luckiest of those implicated by an accused witch, with steadfast friends, family and business associates, could hope for something better than eternal social suspicion, if not banishment. Yet as we have seen, no one was exempt.

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The best known, and certainly the only one with a more or less happy ending, among the Buseckertal witch-trials is that of Elisabeth Schmidt, called "*die Schul-Else*", which lasted from 1672 to 1674, still almost a generation before the madness overtook colonial Salem. As with many in her case, Elisabeth Schmidt was drawn into the maelstrom in which she suddenly found herself by those who, like Eva Eisermann, already floundered there, until the difference between truth and fiction was replaced by that now familiar sliding-scale of pragmatic imagination—the taller the tale, the more accomplices implicated, the less the process might hurt. Unfortunately most of those we have seen before could truthfully be convicted on one charge only: inability to withstand

the agonies of the thumb-screws, leg-irons, *strappado*, and the other instruments of the search for "truth". Elisabeth Schmidt was to prove far more memorable than any of the others for her ability to maintain her truth and her personality under torture—not only physically but mentally as well.

Schmidt came from Burkhardsfelden, the village south of Reiskirchen where less than twenty years earlier Eva Eisermann had posited three of her "accomplices", as well as being the district of the schoolmaster who took part in the denunciation of Pastor Steindecker. She was brought before the court in Reiskirchen to answer to charges made by other accused witches that she had bewitched mice, "led astray" a boy with witchcraft and "rebaptized him" in the now familiar way; visited sabbaths, poisoned a man with brandy and a woman with sauerkraut [surely the most prosaic of all the substances used to commit this crime], as well as causing a young girl's hair to fall out.

Because Elisabeth categorically denied these charges, a hearing was called by the court. One curious detail concerning the preparations for this hearing was the gathering of "long citations from books about witch prosecutions", as if the accusers were not only uncertain of their ability to bring the accused to justice, shoring up their allegations on basis of texts biased at best, but were additionally perplexed as to how best to approach a woman who declared her innocence with such disarming forthrightness: most accused witches and sorcerers, as we have seen from the preceding cases, poured forth all manner of self-incrimination just being shown the piquant array of torture instruments on the prison wall.

Another peculiarity of this trial is that Elisabeth Schmidt, who was certainly not of the social caste of the burned Witch Queen of Echzell, wife of the schoolmaster of that place, nevertheless had for herself a legal defender, who set forth a detailed defense brief demonstrating with more than usual competence (and no small amount of courage) that the various points of accusation were without foundation in fact. In earlier times such a boon would have been even rarer, and the result now was that the case was sent up to the juridical faculty in Gießen for an "objective" review. For whatever reason—perhaps because the unnamed village "defender" required, in the minds of these urban attorneys, to be put in his (or her?) place—the defense brief was rejected as insufficient to dismiss the case against Elisabeth Schmidt. What this meant was that the magistrates in Reiskirchen now had permission to put Elisabeth "to the question".

They tortured Elisabeth Schmidt for two hours with thumb-screws and leg-irons, and for two hours the woman denied that she had committed any wrongdoing as claimed by the other accused women and those among the community who had added fuel to the fire. It was at this point that the court thought it meet to bring out a veritable Homeric catalogue of grievances against Elisabeth, referred to as "the Devil's woman", no doubt to establish justification for pursuing further torture, according to the old Caroline code. The following allegation, but one of these, seems to indicate that Elisabeth Schmidt, like Dorothea Samm in Großen-Buseck, walked that dangerous line between natural healer and minion of Satan:

*"The Schul-Elsa once gave a woman a bun which she had hexed, so that [the woman's] knee became so swollen the pastor preached against such practices from the pulpit; the*

*accused then made a poultice of tobacco leaf and honey and placed it on the troublesome knee. At once the swelling opened to let forth a quantity of vermin, hairy caterpillars, [cockchafer] grubs, butterflies and blowflies."*

The report states further that this sufferer from what appears to have been the Pandora version of housemaid's knee "soon recovered", but of course that hardly made Elisabeth Schmidt a dear and glorious physician in the eyes of the community.

After having to hear the details of this interminable list, and denying everything under more torture with her unswerving zeal, Elisabeth was incarcerated in a cell. She must have caused much shaking of heads among the magistrates, who still seem to have been restricting themselves to operating within the legal system of the time by not applying a third session of torture. However the place where they put Elisabeth Schmidt could well be said to have served that purpose amply. Her place of confinement was little better than a hole in the wall; it was dark and damp and unheated, the floor was covered with straw that was never changed. There the accused was left to languish in irons, "permitted to lie in her own filth", while the court debated what to do with her.

For a year and a half, *die Schul-Elsa* remained in this cell, until 6 May 1674, on which day she was summoned into the light and without being in the least informed as to her fate, subjected to the infamous "Test of the Needle". Two jurymen from the court had noticed, under what circumstances it is unclear, that Elisabeth's right shoulder bore a *stigma diabolicum* or mark of the devil, which was almost 99% proof of witchcraft. It is surprising, of course, that in the initial search made by "trusted women" of Elisabeth's body, some other mark or "teat" had not been located and confirmed as caused by the sucking of a familiar or the devil himself; it is also interesting that a mark on the right side of Elisabeth's body was believed to count for much, since the left side was, in witch-trial lore, the "devil's side", where such *stigmata* were normally found.

Whichever shoulder, however, this mark was certainly proof-positive that Elisabeth was one of the devil's own. So adult men of affairs pierced this birthmark/scar, "producing no sensation or blood," according to these same two men. It hardly requires pointing out that there is no record of a third and impartial witness being present. Because this lack of bleeding was considered conclusive evidence of the accused witch's guilt, it might be said that Elisabeth Schmidt passed the test with flying colors. However as Michael Kunze points out, "[The] lack of a witch mark was no proof of a woman's innocence; on the contrary, it was evidence that she enjoyed a position of special trust in the kingdom of evil."<sup>9</sup> Once again, whether you healed or harmed, were scarred or smooth, the "public cry" was sufficient *stigma* to mark one as witch and enemy of society.

This further evidence of the guilt of Elisabeth Schmidt was sent, along with documentation, to the law faculty of the University of Mainz, in order to gain permission from this imperial authority to proceed with additional torture certain to finally bring out the truth of Elisabeth's witchery, names of further accomplices, and perhaps admission of a devilish lover or two. The reply a month later was hardly what the magistrates were expecting to hear; it might just as well have come from a world as far removed from the Buseckertal as the supernatural realm with which Elisabeth Schmidt was supposed to be in contact. With a humanity, open-mindedness and polish for which the courts of

Germany's princes of the Church were becoming well-known, the Mainz faculty not only emphasized the redundancy of a second phase of torture, but stated their belief that the first phase had been more than the evidence warranted; that, in fact, it was an illegality under the Caroline code, in which proper justification for each stage of torture must be sought out and established. The witch-court and its magistrates had "mishandled" the affair, they said. The faculty emphasized their conviction that "an injustice was done here, that this poor woman ... for two hours should have been put so hard to the leg-irons and other sort of torture. It were well," the letter goes on to say, "if the unjustly accused Elisabeth, through subtle means, were conveyed away [from the area], that ... she elsewhere betake herself, considering she cannot live [where she is] without vexation, antipathy, and continual disturbance...." And if this forbearance were not shown her, the jurisdiction was to make public that attached to any further persecution against Elisabeth Schmidt would be a severe penalty. "Elisabeth and her folks" were not to be mistreated nor the trial spoken of, she was to be released from custody immediately, and court costs were to be borne not by Elisabeth, as was the custom, but absorbed by the community itself.

So *die Schul-Elsa* was free—but at what price? What did weeks of applied pain and 18 months lying in the cold and dark, "in her own filth", cost someone to whom truth obviously mattered more than light and warmth and freedom? Where did she go, this unbreakable spirit, and her "folks", when they left the village that had become more of a hell for them than anything ruled over by Elisabeth Schmidt's alleged mentor, the devil? The definite ending we seek, perhaps the happy ending, does not seem to be there, despite all the humanity of the bright lawyers of Mainz.

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The trial of Elisabeth Schmidt of Burkhardsfelden was the last to take place in the Buseckertal, but already the reasonable outcome of this exercise in unreason savors of the embers rather than the leaping flames. The unrecognized demon driving its herd of hysteria over the countryside seemed to suddenly disappear forever over the hill. There were other outbreaks of witch-mania that continued for a few years, like that in Butzbach (not far from the scene of the witch-trials at Bingenheim) lasting till 1675. Salem was still to come, where in 1692, 19 women and men were hanged as witches on Gallows Hill. Times change, of course, and in the case of Salem the change began before 1700. Puritan Minister Increase Mather's contemporaneous *Cases of Conscience* brought to bear a new approach to witch-mania, to the persecutions of anyone, a concept of justice formerly bereft of the faintest tint of the intelligence and clear reasoning which are more or less characteristic of the court system<sup>10</sup>. In this key work Cotton Mather's son maintained a new position, modern for his day: that the lies and fancies previously taken from accusers' lips, either under torture or of free will, as gospel truth were insufficient to "take away the Life of any Man [or woman]." This happy premonition of the Age of Reason required that evidence be more strongly scrutinized, that the accused's defense be taken more seriously, that the accuser's possible perjury be taken into consideration. Now in Salem, Massachusetts, the town has its Witch Museum, located in of all ironic places an 1845 stone church. In 1992 the town held a year-long celebration of the 300th anniversary of the witch trials, culminating with Laurie Cabot, Salem's official witch, leading a candlelight procession to Gallows Hill on All Hallows Eve. Statues

commemorating the trials were raised, with exhibitions, plays, lectures, gatherings of descendants of the unfortunate 19 Salemites who never made it to 1693. The horror of the trials and their aftermath, the hatred and ignorance that gave birth to them, are now virtually transmuted into a sanitized Disneyland of colonial history.

Such is not the case in the Buseckertal, where many more people died, where by comparison the madnesses scribbled down by the court reporter make the hysterical mutterings of the Salem kitchenmaids look like Charles Lamb's bloodless rendition of *Macbeth*. Where are the monuments to remind today of yesterday? Why do we need them in Salem and they do not in Bingenheim? Either way, wallowing in memorials or in amnesia, the concepts of the past are strangely similar: perhaps not healthy but at least understandable reactions to the absurdities of which even the educated human mind is capable.

Seventeenth century German artist Michael Herr's engraving of what was popularly believed a typical black mass includes all the stock characters and props that could be clumped onto the surface of a piece of parchment. Amidst the chaotic scenery we can make out the many nocturnal antics of "witch-folk". The prevalence of old women is particularly to be noted—especially the hag on the right, who is so subtly yet hungrily explaining the chaos to a little girl who has just stumbled onto the frightful rout, her pitcher about to drop from her hand. "See what these evil ones do!" we are asked by every figure of this sabbath. "Soon even the child will become one of them!", that is, if they are not able to find room for her in the pot bubbling away in the center. The creatures surrounding the witches' circle, also on the right, are straight from a Goyaesque nightmare, and yet are made to resemble those slimy, cold-fleshed things that witches were commonly supposed to use either for familiars or brew-pot ingredients: toads, lizards, snakes, disinterred decayed heads of criminals. The ruins beside which these creatures cavort comprise the basilica of a church, church ruins being the precursors of the more developed Victorian concept of the haunted house. A ruined church implied a forsaken church, no longer bathing in the smile of God, even as we are to understand completely this same application to the people in this scene. They are the outcasts of society, the old, the strange, the bedraggled, the roamers by night. The scenery around them, the dead livestock, the writhing snakes, starting cats, sexual license, brewing up of potions, enticing of children, all are just what the witch-hunters expected to, and did, hear about in detail, despite total lack of a scrap of proof for flight on pitchforks or the presence of the forsaken gibbering in fallen churchyards. By its attempt to validate witch-mania by total condemnation, the picture seems to say even to the reasonable who behold it, "You may not believe it, but you know that it *must* be true." The thin line between possible and impossible becomes blurred, indistinct; unable to endure the impossible, we preserve the limits of the possible, like the accused under torture, only to what we can personally withstand. Sometimes in so doing we miss the point, we lose the opportunity to learn, and the perspective to judge.

Could the witch-mania happen again? Or is it too late to ask?

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Notes:

<sup>1</sup>Pope Sixtus IV [1471-1484]. As often happens in the annals of history, it is the Borgia Pope Alexander [1492-1503] who garners disapprobation not merely for himself but

whose children (Cesare and Lucrezia among others) as well as family name also live on in infamy for far less dangerous crimes than the workaday Catholic intolerance displayed by popes before and after him. Pope Alexander, whatever his vagaries of character, was remarkably sane when it came to the supernatural and accusations relating thereto:

"Witches and warlocks, who elsewhere—and even in much later ages, and in Protestant as well as Catholic States—were given to the fire, [Alexander] ignored. The unfortunate Moors and Jews, who elsewhere in Europe were being persecuted by the Holy Inquisition and burnt at the stake as an act of faith for the good of their souls and the greater honour and glory of God, found in Alexander a tolerant protector and in Rome a safe shelter."

—*The Life of Cesare*

*Borgia,*

Rafael Sabatini

<sup>2</sup>Michael Kunze [trans. William E. Yuill], *Highroad to the Stake*, University of Chicago Press, 1987.

<sup>3</sup>By simple definition, non-Christians could not be witches since through willful confusion of civil and canon law witchery became synonymous with apostasy; only baptized Jews or Gypsies could fall under that category. The problem with Jews was that they could be considered, using interesting convolutions of legal theory, already apostate by virtue of birth. Since the Black Death of the 14th century, the hue and cry during subsequent outbreaks of plague was that Jews had poisoned the wells, or that Jews had introduced toxins into the air breathed by stout-hearted but all too vulnerable Christians, forming no small part of the legal injunctions that drove Jews into ghettos or beyond the frontiers of lands where they had formerly lived blamelessly. The easy step from well-poisoning, Christian blood-drinking Jew to cattle-poisoning and child-sacrificing witch is all too clear.

<sup>4</sup>Other implements for magical flight included fire-irons and ordinary sticks and staves. In an old Hessian custom, young women ride a broom before the stove on New Year's Eve, or gallop past the hen-house on St Matthew's Eve or 21st September, so that they may find out whether they will become brides during the year to come. The phallic significance of the broomstick or staff can only be characterized as obvious. Thus even more equivocal the role of the few men who confessed to being able to fly using similar irons, sticks and staves.

<sup>5</sup>All bodies which had suffered a premature [as in still-born or short-lived infants] or unnatural [as in an executed criminal] death were believed to retain a certain magical power. In the underworld of thieves hands of unborn children were considered an especially effective talisman, though adult corpses left hanging for the crows to pick were

constantly being robbed by human hands of fingers and, especially, thumbs. See *Highroad to the Stake*, p.182

<sup>6</sup> Both the shepherd Nürnberger and the schoolmaster Lenhardt were forebears of the writer.

<sup>7</sup> Mills, according to Michael Kunze, were considered favorable ground for the supernatural and the natural worlds to meet; see pp.231-235, *ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> [St] Thomas Aquinas can be thanked for establishing the ground rules of the problematic relations between demonic and human creatures. In the *Summa Theologica* he spills a great deal of ink devolving the following solution: since demons, however evil, were still spirits, they had no such organs as are commonly found in men, and technically would be unable to produce the "icy" semen which so many witches claimed they felt ejaculated into their vaginas. Aquinas solved this tricky situation by insisting that *succubi* would first assume female shape and seduce a man; after assuming his semen, *succubus* became *incubus*, or male demon, and flew to his witch of choice, whom he impregnated with the semen. Children born of such a union, of course, were not bastards from the demon's loins but were still suspect as being conceived through the cooperation of evil.

<sup>9</sup> *Highroad to the Stake*, p.215;

<sup>10</sup> Jesuit father Friedrich von Spee's *Cautio Criminalis*, from 1631, makes many of the same points as *Cases of Conscience*, though written at a time and in a place [Bavaria] when such candor was far more dangerous.

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A few of the victims who followed the swineherd from Bisse to the flames, all executed in 1652, were:

1. Hanß Rau from Berstadt;
2. "The swineherd's boy from Bisse, who was burned along with Johann Waasen's wife, who was the 'Head Witch' of the witches of Echzell [north of Bingenheim]."
3. Johann Schultheiß's wife, Gersten;
4. Conrad Heusen's daughter, "burnt";
5. "Matthäus Schütz's wife from Geltenau was burnt alive, for having hexed her two husbands, her brother and her brother-in-law";
6. "The Jew, Löw<sup>3</sup>, from Bisse, was burnt alive."

Eva Eisermann of Oppenrod was burned in September 1655.

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on 29 April 1656, the pastor of Reiskirchen was again named by an accused witch as the "Chief Warlock" of the Buseckertal coven.