

THEORIZING THE WICKED WITCH: A NIETZSCHEAN DEMONOLOGY

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ABSTRACT: Recent scholarship has adduced convincing evidence that, underlying the late medieval and early modern discourse on witchcraft and diabolism, there lay not only popular folkloric and religious beliefs, but also real practical activities by which individuals made manifest their malicious intent toward others, as well as subjective experiences of interaction with supernatural entities, some of which were interpreted as the Christian Devil. This hypothesis raises a number of hermeneutic questions concerning how the social and material conditions predicating concrete acts of *maleficium* related to practitioners' social psychology and moral self-construction. Through the interpretive frame of Friedrich Nietzsche's antithesis of 'master' and 'slave' moralities, this paper argues that the Christian theological and cultural context of early modern Europe primed individuals to experience the constraints and stresses of everyday life in vividly moralized terms, and to strategically negotiate their own personal advantage by realigning themselves within this moral order.

KEYWORDS: Early Modern Europe; Nietzsche; Social Psychology; Witchcraft

INTRODUCTION

Recent scholarship has adduced convincing evidence that, underlying the late-medieval and early-modern discourse on witchcraft and diabolism, there lay not only popular folkloric and religious beliefs, but also real practical activities by which individuals made manifest their malicious intent toward others, and subjective phenomena including experiences of interaction with supernatural entities – some of which were interpreted, either *ad hoc* or retrospectively, as the Christian Devil. Both Edward Bever and Emma Wilby, for example, have advanced comprehensive arguments that the material austerities and interpersonal tensions characterizing life in

the small, close-knit communities of early modern Europe frequently motivated casual and semi-professional magical practitioners to engage in both ritualized and reflexive activities which, mediated by psychological and neuro-physical processes, generated viscerally real experiences and physiological effects in both the practitioners and those upon whom they practiced.¹ While the prosecutorial concept of a global diabolic conspiracy appears to have been little more than a paranoid delusion cobbled together from learned elites' theological assumptions and misinterpretations of folk-practices, the specific acts of illicit magic for which individuals were interrogated and punished sometimes had a basis in physical reality, and claims of harm caused through occult means were not necessarily transparent slander or pure fantasy. The incriminating testimonies of women and men prosecuted for witchcraft in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century continental Europe and the British Isles sometimes reflected not merely demonological presuppositions projected upon them by their inquisitors, nor simply the idiosyncratic products of individual psychoses, but rather expressed the defendants' real experiences of their own supernatural agency.

This descriptive hypothesis suggests a number of interrelated hermeneutic questions: What were the subjective social and psychological *meanings* of these 'realities of witchcraft'? How did self-confessed practitioners of antinomian sorcery, some of whom believed themselves to have entered into a pact with the Devil, justify crossing what was, in a society fundamentally structured by Christian concepts and values, a moral event horizon? What was the significance to them of doing so? And how did the social and material conditions that hypothetically predicated concrete acts of *maleficium* relate to these individuals' moral self-construction? While scholars such as Per Faxneld, Jesper Petersen, and others have investigated the cultures and ideologies of more modern forms of secular, religious, and esoteric satanism,² the social psychology and self-consciousness of individuals representing what may be the earliest constellation of satanist beliefs and practices for which the historical record provides evidence remain largely opaque. I propose to address these questions through the novel interpretive frame of Friedrich Nietzsche's antithesis of master and slave moralities, as found in his *On the Genealogy of Morals* and other pertinent writings – not as Nietzsche's historical account of an evolutionary process, but rather as an ahistorical psychoanalytic device, and a prompt to engaging historical actors through the sociological imagination. Through this lens, and drawing upon evidentiary materials representing historical and

¹ Edward Bever, *The Realities of Witchcraft and Popular Magic in Early Modern Europe*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2008. Emma Wilby, *Cunning Folk and Familiar Spirits*, Portland, Sussex Academic Press, 2005. Emma Wilby, *The Visions of Isobel Gowdie*, Brighton, Sussex Academic Press, 2010.

² P. Faxneld and J. A. Petersen (eds), *The Devil's Party: Satanism in Modernity*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2013.

cross-cultural manifestations of transgressive magical activities, I will argue that the Christian theological and cultural context of early modern Europe, particularly as it was structured by the concept of original sin delineated in Calvinist theology, primed individuals to experience the constraints and stresses of everyday life in vividly moralized terms, and to strategically negotiate their own personal advantage by realigning themselves within this moral order.

A NIETZSCHEAN ETHICS: THE THEOLOGICAL CONTEXT

Abiding as a potential within Christianity since at least Augustine, but especially following the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century and the subsequent propagation of Calvinist theology, the doctrine of eschatological predestination combined with and reinforced the 'total depravity' interpretation of original sin, leaving human beings incorrigibly damned save for the grace of God, which in turn is only extended to a predetermined and immutable class of the elect.³

Nietzsche's genealogical derivation of punishment as satisfaction of debt has significant implications for how the Christian concept of original sin can be understood. Nietzsche conjectures that "...punishment, as requital, evolved quite independently of any presupposition concerning freedom or non-freedom of the will..." and "[t]hroughout the greater part of human history punishment was *not* imposed *because* one held the wrongdoer responsible for his deed, thus *not* on the presupposition that only the guilty one should be punished..."⁴ Such a formulation of the permissible grounds for punishment (that is, for extraction of payment) would *prima facie* authorize imposing a hereditarily transmitted debt burden upon the human race for an as-yet undischarged (and undischageable) ancestral sin.

Nietzsche (*Genealogy* 62-3) notes that "...the major moral concept *Schuld* [guilt] has its origin in the very material concept *Schulden* [debts]...". The idea of original sin imposes an infinite debt which is not within the power of any individual to repay (*Canons* c. 1, §1; c. 3-4, §3). Thus indebted, one effectively forfeits the right to satisfaction of any subsequent debts, of necessarily lesser magnitude, incurred against oneself. If one nonetheless proceeds to extract restitution of a debt, for instance by taking revenge for some injury to oneself, one implicitly usurps the prerogative to satisfaction

³ *Canons of Dort*, trans. Faith Alive Christian Resources, *Christian Reformed Church in North America*, 2011, c. 1, §6-7, <https://www.crcna.org/welcome/beliefs/confessions/canons-dort>, accessed February 4, 2017. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. H. Beveridge, 2005, II.1-3, III.21, <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/institutes.i.html>. Accessed February 18, 2017.

⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, W. Kaufmann (ed), *On the Genealogy of Morals/Ecce Homo*, trans. W. Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale, New York, Vintage Books, 1989, p. 63.

belonging to one's ultimate creditor, namely God. Recognizing this, more or less consciously and explicitly, yet unwilling to renounce the intuited right to just restitution, one might conceivably elect to void the patron-client relationship underpinning the debt by placing oneself unambiguously under the patronage of the creditor's adversary. I suggest here that the Devil in whom one might thus seek recourse was the egoic projection and ethical refuge of individuals who, culturally unable to conceive of themselves as morally justified, nevertheless felt compelled to act upon the imperative to retributive restitution for perceived wrongs done to them. Having projected the injunction to self-denial onto God as the locus of moral order (*Genealogy* 92), Christianity, in order to reconcile the demands of the ego with the possibility of human virtue, then projected self-affirmation onto the Devil.

The moral status of the early-modern European practices of *maleficium* may be thrown into relief by contrast with that of analogous (and often functionally identical) practices of witchcraft and counter-witchcraft in a cultural context not conditioned by the preconceptions of Christian anthropology. In ancient Babylonia, for instance, highly developed legal institutions provided the metaphors through which many other spheres of life were interpreted, including that of perceived assault by sorcery.⁵ In this secular, bureaucratic cosmos, there is no moral injunction against seeking personal satisfaction for an injury unjustly sustained, nor even against doing so by means of malefic magic; the legitimacy of the magical 'denunciations' through which parties might attack and counter-attack one another depends solely upon the legal merit of the grievances which motivate them (*BWL* 132-5).

That the mere impulse to implicitly transgress a theoretical standard of Christian humility could constitute a basis for self-demonization becomes more plausible when considered in light of the utter ubiquity of influence accorded to the Devil in early modern Europe, to the extent that in Scotland "...in the mid-seventeenth century, educated Protestants considered the Devil to be responsible for anything that was not 'godly'.... [including] thoughts, fantasies and bodily desires that did not conform to godly mores" (*Visions* 458-9).

An awareness of this omnipresence – which can so easily grade into omnipotence – likely accounts for the fact that "...the idea that one could deliberately solicit the Devil's help to gain magical powers was in wide circulation by the turn of the seventeenth century", and the always-marginal existence of the common masses meant there was a receptive intellectual market for an "...idea of the Devil...[which] lent a degree of cohesion to the disparate practices and beliefs of angry and alienated people in various

5 Tzvi Abusch, *Babylonian Witchcraft Literature – Case Studies*, Atlanta, Scholars Press, 1987, p. 127.

corners of Christendom”(*Realities* 181). Mikael Häll is surely correct in observing “[t]hat some of these outsiders would turn to the Devil as a kind of god of the outlawed and enemy of the established order is not surprising”.⁶ Witchcraft is a social malaise, and in early-modern Europe the Devil was a memetic vector transmitting the transgressive envy that was its pathogen.

An awareness, more or less articulated depending upon both education and inclination to introspect, that the final disposition of one's eternal soul is inevitably and unknowably fixed could easily lead to the logical conclusion that, because one was already permanently either damned or saved, adherence to moral law was irrelevant (*Visions* 177). This realization in itself could presumably open up recourse to *maleficium* or more mundane antinomian activities simply as practical expedients for satisfying one's desires. Conversely, the extension of grace would seem to impose a debt of gratitude upon the elect that is of a magnitude equal to the debt of culpability incurred through the state of reprobation from which they are liberated. Moreover, the eschatological reward promised by salvation was rather distant from the immediate needs and desires of corporeal existence; even individuals confident in their own salvation could have been tempted by persistent grievances or a moment of intense distress to disclaim grace in favor of more tangible forms of relief. It was for individuals such as these that satanism *avant la lettre*, an explicit or tacit agreement with the Devil in exchange for material aid, may have appeared a pragmatic option.

That a logic whereby one's debt to God could be rendered void underlay the concept of the diabolic pact as constructed by theologians and legal scholars, and to which no small number of confessed witches evidently subscribed, is implicit in the renunciation of baptism which was frequently the central element of such covenants. Whereas Wilby observes that the demonic familiars of accused witches made the renunciation of Christianity a basic condition of their service “...in the majority of trial-derived encounter narratives”(*Cunning Folk* 96-7), specific reference to the abrogation of the baptismal sacrament appears in the records of sixteenth-century proceedings ranging from Avignon to Liège on the continent, and at Dirltown, Forfar, and Auldearn in mid-seventeenth century Scotland, with at least three such cases occurring there in 1662.⁷ Even in the sacramentally minimalist Reformed tradition, baptism was still the mechanism by which the elected faithful received spiritual regeneration and

6 Mikael Häll, “It is Better to Believe in the Devil”: Conceptions of Satanists and Sympathies for the Devil in Early Modern Sweden, in P. Faxneld and J. A. Petersen (eds), *The Devil's Party: Satanism in Modernity*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2013, pp. 37.

7 Henry Charles Lea, A. C. Howland (ed), *Materials Toward a History of Witchcraft*, vol. 3, 3 vols., Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1939, p. 1221, 1289, 1335. *Visions*, p. 39, 87, 544.

salvation (*Institutes* IV.15). Repudiating this outward sign could be construed as a recantation of the faith upon which its efficacy depended. Recognition of any grace that might potentially have been extended to the renunciate, and thus of any reciprocal obligation to God, would thereby be withdrawn. Conversely, in a notable proportion of pact narratives and derivative literature, this rejection is immediately followed and mirrored by the subject's active receipt of a new baptism in faith with the Devil, often complete with a new baptismal name. Moreover, the advice of a seventeenth-century Franciscan handbook for confessors implies that witches might take it upon themselves to baptize children in the Devil's name, and as late as the eighteenth century, the assertion that witches' renunciation of Christian baptism was necessary to facilitate the Devil's influence could be found in a German priest's refutation of skeptics (*Materials* 1375, 1465). These latter accounts and opinions assume a basically subordinate, dependent status of the witch relative to the Devil; cancellation of one's mortal debt only comes with one's recognition of the new master under whom it is annulled.

A MARXIST ONTOLOGY: THE MATERIAL-SOCIAL BASE

Nietzsche (*Genealogy* 125-8) contends that the idea of congenital guilt is a self-imposed safeguard against the nihilistic impulse of the moral 'slaves', those unable to positively affirm the painful facts of their mortal life and harboring *ressentiment*, a malicious envy, against those who can. Turned back upon themselves by bad conscience, society at large is spared the disintegrative effects of their spite.

If, as Bever (*Realities* 77) suggests, "...early modern belief in the Devil as an immanent presence was... a way of getting people to recognize the nature and significance of their actions beyond the bounds of their local community", then a willingness to accept the negative metaphysical consequences of one's actions could suggest the refusal to privilege such abstract moral imperatives over the much more present social and material imperatives of everyday life. Just as the Colombian shaman manipulates "...the deathly reifications and fear-inspiring mysteries worked into the popular imagination by the official discourse of suffering, order, and redemption..." in order to effect a ritual drama of healing that "...resists the seductive appeal of self-pity and redemption through suffering";⁸ the diabolist mobilizes the Church's Devil to implicitly reject transcendental forms of redemption in favor of corporeal security and temporal empowerment.

In exacting retribution against a party guilty of injuring oneself, one also manifests

⁸ Michael Taussig, *Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wild Man*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1987, p. 466-7.

the other face of Nietzsche's noble, self-possessed 'master': "In 'punishing' the debtor, the creditor participates in a *right of the masters*:.... a warrant for and title to cruelty"(Genealogy 65), for as Nietzsche (Genealogy 40-2) makes abundantly clear elsewhere, the 'noble' psyche is constitutionally disposed toward acts of hubristic violence against its own 'others'. This aspect of the persona through which individuals might legitimize their pursuit of restitution may additionally have been conditioned by the precarious material circumstances of early modern village life. Wilby (*Visions* 158-9), for instance, draws attention to the burdens and abuses imposed upon peasants by the seventeenth-century Scottish manorial system, notwithstanding the scarcity, mortality, and general uncertainty faced by all classes to a greater or lesser degree in pre-industrial societies, and in *The Dawn* Nietzsche posits cruelty as precisely "...the supreme enjoyment for men who live in the state of war of those small, continually endangered communities.... who are prepared for what is most terrible and hardened by deprivations and mores..."⁹

This juxtaposition of values, the hubris of the 'master' morality embedded within the *ressentiment* of the 'slave' morality, is also evinced in the norms of personal honor observed in early modern Scotland, where "...many people considered it quite appropriate for an individual to express resentments through revenge", and "...believed that it was a slur on an individual's valour, family honour and pride to allow an offence to pass without retribution"(Visions 181). As Wilby (*Visions* 195) argues, the "...sense of satisfaction and resolution..." derived from the actual performance of *maleficium* against one's enemies, as much as the imputed effects thereof, is essentially one "...of having restored moral equilibrium..."

As Wilby (*Cunning Folk* 73) points out, resentment and the desire for revenge can be seen as defining characteristics of the witch *qua* witch, who "...alleviated her suffering by using the magical services of the familiar to harm those individuals she deemed responsible for her privation". On one level, whereas some form of desire is inherent to every potentiality of social life, the retributive imperative is an expression of envy, the specific mode of desire fundamental to societies structured by inequality. The witch's rationale exactly mirrors that of the Babylonian *egalkurra* incantations which served the typical bureaucrat or courtier "...within the great paternalistic bureaucracy... [whose] repressed anxieties and hatred against his colleagues are described [in the texts] as their jealousy and hatred of him", a process of psychological projection made manifest in a magical ritual.¹⁰

⁹ Nietzsche, *Genealogy*, p. 186.

¹⁰ Mark J. Geller, 'Freud and Mesopotamian Magic', in T. Abusch and K. van der Toorn (eds.), *Mesopotamian Magic – Textual, Historical, and Interpretative Perspectives*, Groningen, Styx, 1999, p. 52.

Even when it did not victimize others, magic which sought to secure material benefits could sometimes operate by undermining social controls to which the practitioner was subject. As Bever (*Realities* 162) relates, during the 1663 investigation of witchcraft accusations against Anna Schnabel, near Stuttgart in the Duchy of Württemberg, a neighbor claimed that Anna offered “...to teach her an incantation so that no forest ranger should see or catch her”. In addition to increasingly stringent regulations placed upon local communities' access to the Duchy's forests and their resources beginning in the late fifteenth century, “...under the morals regulations put into place at the end of the Thirty Years' War, simply being outside the bounds of the village and fields was suspect, so even if a villager was not poaching... being caught there by a ranger could still lead to trouble”. Sorcery, in this instance, was an attempt to circumvent the state's encroaching surveillance and discipline of the literal 'bodies politic' of the Württemberg peasants, and it was criminalized and prosecuted for that very reason.

If the absence of explicit *maleficium* was no guarantee of security from prosecution for practitioners of magic, the complete lack of concrete evidence of any magical activity whatsoever was likewise no barrier against suspicion of *maleficium*. In 1705 a weaver, Conrad Hahn, of Altdorf was suspected of having “...joined 'the Devil's empire'...” after he allegedly “...produced an extraordinary amount of cloth in a single day...”, as judged by “...several masters...” (*Realities* 316). This indicates that economic output was somehow cause for suspicion, which suggests that production superiority was perceived as a threat by interested parties – perhaps, in this case, those “masters” against whom Hahn competed for market share.

The discourse on witchcraft exists in an ebb and flow between its protagonists and antagonists, and becomes a common currency across intersecting segments of any society in which it arises. Just as the factors predicating the resort to witchcraft across cultural and chronological contexts are overwhelmingly socioeconomic, so too are its imagined manifestations. One Mesopotamian counter-witchcraft ritual, for instance, promises the patient reconciliation with his peers and an end to the social isolation which lies at the root of his physiological illness,¹¹ and the diagnostic portion of another text observes that the victim's “...profit is cut off; people speak defamation about him...”¹²

In ancient Babylonian witchcraft discourse, the ascription of a patient's illness to

¹¹ Marten Stol, 'Psychosomatic Suffering in Ancient Mesopotamia', in T. Abusch and K. van der Toorn (eds.), *Mesopotamian Magic – Textual, Historical, and Interpretative Perspectives*, Groningen, Styx, 1999, p. 63.

¹² Tzvi Abusch, 'Witchcraft and the Anger of the Personal God', in T. Abusch and K. van der Toorn (eds.), *Mesopotamian Magic – Textual, Historical, and Interpretative Perspectives*, Groningen, Styx, 1999, p. 88.

witchcraft was not necessarily incompatible with the ascription of that same illness to the anger of a god. Abusch cites a counter-witchcraft ritual which includes in its diagnosis the statement that “The wrath of his god and goddess is upon him” juxtaposed with assertions to the effect that “...witchcraft has been practiced against him...”.¹³ Elsewhere, Abusch ('Witchcraft' 104-5) attributes this logic to a late stage in the development of Mesopotamian religious thought, wherein “[e]ven when the victim is innocent... the witch is able to distance the personal god or to cause the god to be angry...”. This insertion of the witch into the web of rights, obligations, and transgressions determining the relationship between god and supplicant correlates with a period of increasing socioeconomic complexity in Mesopotamian state structures, in which “...the problems facing the society come increasingly from within the community itself...” ('Witchcraft' 108). The interpersonal rivalries and the potential for deceit and malfasant litigation which exists only in highly integrated complex societies thus become reified in a consciousness of witchcraft – human ill-will given substance and force – as a potential etiology of any and all misfortune.

SIN IN PERSON: A NEURO-COGNITIVE HYPOTHESIS

As Bever (*Realities* 86-7) observes, normal human cognition comprises the simultaneous operation of multiple, relatively autonomous neuro-cognitive modules. Many such processes operate outside of conscious perception and control, and can sometimes behave with a coherent intentionality independent of the personal ego. Moreover, under certain conditions of neuro-cognitive priming, such autonomous patterns can become manifest to conscious perception as external, sentient entities, frequently in the form of auditory and visual phenomena within the sensorium. The manifest forms, behaviors, and subjective interpretations of these phenomena are mediated by immediate context as well as cultural presuppositions (*Realities* 92). Through interaction with these entities, individuals are often made privy to knowledge, typically in the form of non-discursive insights which “...generally involve an intuitive or descriptive understanding of and ability to act on people and things...” (*Realities* 205), which they had not been able to access or articulate during normal consciousness.

While Bever's (*Realities* 92) insistence upon explaining experiences of this sort in terms of “...the breakdown of the 'self's' control of the nervous system...” may be critiqued as excessively reductionist, his observation that such phenomena conveyed “...realizations that would not establish themselves in consciousness otherwise...”

¹³ Tzvi Abusch, 'The Internalization of Suffering and Illness in Mesopotamia', *Studi epigrafici e linguistici sul Vicino Oriente Antico*, vol. 15, 1998, p. 57.

nevertheless suggests a possible explanation for why many early modern Christians experienced them as manifestations of the Devil. As a phenomenon correlated with the emergence of information previously censored from consciousness, perhaps by other neuro-cognitive processes, the manifestation conveying that information may have been conditioned by the preconceptions of subjects to take the form of a culturally-determined personification of transgression.

Nietzsche (*Genealogy* 129) predicates his analysis of moralities upon the presupposition that "...man's 'sinfulness' is... merely the interpretation of... physiological depression..."; and this biological account of moral affect neatly bridges an interpretive gap to Bever's neurophysiology of manifest mental phenomena, because if 'sinfulness' corresponds to a physio-cognitive process, then it is just as susceptible to autonomous activation and personified manifestation as any other modular process of this sort. Thus, at least some of the encounters with a manifest entity interpreted as the Devil may have been instances of this kind of personification of unconscious cognition. Specifically, the form, character, and content of the manifestation in these instances would be motivated by culturally proscribed – and so repressed – feelings of resentment and entitlement to restitution within a social and material context of inequality, subordination, privation, and suffering. These sentiments, whether implicitly legitimized and articulated through a stereotyped 'pact' with an envisioned Devil, or in some other way made conscious and justified to oneself, could then license cathartic retributive action against those perceived as responsible for one's hardships, up to and including attacks against arbitrary representatives of one's community, such as the (evidently hallucinatory) murders and other crimes in which the seventeenth-century cottar's wife Isobel Gowdie of Auldearn, Scotland professed to have participated (*Visions* 320-3).

THE TRANSVALUATION OF VALUES

In terms of what Marc Tyrrell calls an “anti-cosmology”;¹⁴ diabolism legitimates emergent psychological needs and desires that are incompatible with the moral content of a hegemonic cosmological and epistemological system (e.g. Christianity) by inverting the disenfranchised subject's value orientation within the very symbolic complex through which that system's moral content is expressed. Thus, “...the entire field of inquiry contained within the original cosmology is opened up for non-controlled

¹⁴ Marc W. D. Tyrrell, 'Warriors of the Left Hand Path: Radical Magic Applied to Criminal Ends', in R. J. Bunker (ed), *Blood Sacrifices: Violent Non-State Actors and Dark Magico-Religious Activities*, Bloomington, iUniverse, 2016.

examination to the limits of the generally accepted core components”(‘Warriors’ 14). This revaluation opens up an imaginative space for diabolic witchcraft as a “...form of criminal magic... which inverts core components of its own worldview with the specific aim of gaining dominance and power via fear and terror through the use of techniques and technologies that are proscribed by the symbol system...”(‘Warriors’ 6). It is precisely this logic of self-empowerment through the inversion of values which, in early-modern Christian societies, underpinned the Devil’s status as “...the maximum power available for use in illicit spiritual activity”(‘Realities’ 183).

That practitioners of *maleficium* could, in some instances, have internalized the kind of symbolic inversion outlined here is suggested by certain details found in the confessions produced by witchcraft suspects like Isobel Gowdie, which “...point... to the possibility that the accused believed herself to be a malevolent witch”(‘Visions’ 55). Indeed, militating against any simplistic hypothesis of false-memory production or other interrogatorial interference in the construction of her narrative is the fact that “...many of Isobel’s demonological, specific *maleficium* and fairy-related passages emerge fully developed in her very first confession.... [and] vary very little after this date”(‘Visions’ 235).

Michael Taussig has noted how in some instances the therapeutic *yagé* visions of his Colombian informants mobilize their redemptive power by “...pivoting on the glory of the antiself as colonially contrived...”, taking the form of a resplendent Colombian Army battalion for one Indian, while a white colonist encountered a shapeshifting tiger-devil in the person of his shamanic psychopomp (*Shamanism* 327). The image, as well as the efficacy and energy, of the antiself is drawn from the discourse generated from both sides in an epistemic hegemon’s campaign of subjugation and assimilation. As Taussig (*Shamanism* 327) observes, the healing effected through this figure “[s]urely...depends far more on the existence, the reproduction, and the artistry of difference as otherness and as oppression than it does on *solidarity*”. The antiself embodies the course by which “...certain historical events, notably political events of conquest and colonization, become objectified in the contemporary shamanic repertoire as magically empowered imagery capable of causing as well as relieving misfortune”(‘Shamanism’ 367). By precisely the same process, witchcraft in ancient Mesopotamia comprised “...an imaginary anti-institution... [coinciding] with the other counter-forces of hegemonic rule: foreign enemies, primordial gods, demons, wild animals, the whole undomesticated universe”.¹⁵ Turning to the medieval and early-

15 Wim van Binsbergen and Frans Wiggermann, ‘Magic in History – A Theoretical Perspective, and its application to Ancient Mesopotamia’, in T. Abusch and K. van der Toorn (eds.), *Mesopotamian Magic – Textual, Historical, and Interpretative Perspectives*, Groningen, Styx, 1999, p. 28.

modern periods, successive ecclesiastical institutions were engaged in an ongoing campaign of proselytizing to a never-quite satisfactorily assimilated public. This campaign comprised a never-quite completed process of epistemic conquest and colonization, from which the persona of the Devil, the Christian antiself *par excellence*, emerged as the predominant magically empowered image for both hegemon and subaltern. Thus, the spirit-helpers encountered by some magical practitioners “...inversely echoed the [beatific] stereotype by conforming to Christian ideas about the Devil being a tall, frightening man in black, or possessing cloven, hairy feet and a fearsome demeanour” (*Cunning Folk* 225).

The ease with which individuals may have been able to renegotiate their moral position within a nominally Christian *Weltanschauung* is suggested by the relatively anthro-centric and relativizing way in which its inhabitants were conceived. As Wilby describes, “...for those with an obscure grasp of Christian teaching the cosmos would have been peopled by a medley of supernatural figures of both Christian and pre-Christian origin, with little or no discrimination made between them, either morally or ontologically” (*Cunning Folk* 118). For these people, the Devil remained just one morally ambivalent spirit among many – albeit perhaps one more inclined to wickedness than most – and not yet become the metaphysical principle of absolute evil. Just as Colombian “[f]olk healing respectfully takes Church doctrine from the priests... reappropriating for its own use what the Church has appropriated from popular mythology drawn from the dreams of the oppressed” (*Shamanism* 169), the peasants' benevolent, if capricious, spirit-helper becomes the Church's devil, who again becomes the peasants' benefactor in this new guise.

Nonetheless, wickedness was a salient quality of those spirit-entities with whom practitioners of *maleficium* engaged through quasi-shamanistic visionary experiences. As Wilby (*Visions* 313) observes, “...malevolence of some kind is present in most spirit-group narratives...”, many of which seem in no way to conform to the prosocial community-defense rationale typically adduced to justify shamanic acts of magical aggression. Isobel Gowdie, for instance, “...performed rituals to raise winds, steal milk and reduce fertility...” with no discernible motive besides causing harm, and believed herself to have engaged in seemingly arbitrary acts of supernatural murder (*Visions* 321-3).

The narratives by which one represents reality to oneself mutually construct one another. Thus, one narrative, comprising the concrete banalities of injustice, inequality, and envy embedded within quotidian social life, contextualizes, provokes, and ultimately succumbs to a narrative wherein one imagines oneself empowered to act in the world through a compact with the Devil. In aphorism 92 of *Human, All-Too-Human*

Nietzsche (*Genealogy* 168) conditions the concept of justice as “...repayment and exchange on the assumption of an approximately equal power position; revenge originally belongs in the domain of justice, being an exchange.” From this perspective, the very possibility of obtaining just restitution for the inferior party in any asymmetric power dyad would seem to be precluded on purely structural grounds. It is into this kind of asymmetric relation, however, that the figure of the Devil enters as a fulcrum upon which the moral hierarchy is inverted, redefining the subaltern's self-valuation and susceptibility to justice. This axial capacity of the Devil derives from his role as the essential 'other' against which the slave morality defines itself in Nietzsche's genealogical scheme. Nietzsche (*Genealogy* 36-7) argues that “[w]hile every noble morality develops from a triumphant affirmation of itself, slave morality from the outset says No to... what is 'not itself'...” because “...in order to exist, slave morality always first needs a hostile external world...”. And the hostile 'other' of the slave morality, the one who “...is 'evil' in the sense of the morality of *ressentiment*.... is: *precisely* the 'good man' of the other morality, precisely the noble, powerful man, the ruler, but dyed in another color...”(*Genealogy* 40). Within the moral cosmos of early modern Christendom, oriented by original sin and guilt toward a norm of self-abasement, the aforementioned color is the stereotyped *black* of the Devil, presiding over a sabbat of libertine indulgence, or tempting the vulnerable with promises of power. The Devil is elevated as the evil 'master' against whom the community of the good defines itself. When members of that epistemic community reject the passivity this moral status entails, however, it is this same figure of the master through whom they can then project their self-recognition as subjects entitled to justice. The transgressive nature of this rejection is not limited to the eschatological prospects of the individual's soul, however. In a society conditioned by the presumption of inborn culpability, moral justification “...comes to contain the virtue of frequent suffering, deprivation... as a virtue that makes the community look good to the evil gods, steaming up to them like a continual sacrifice of atonement...”(*Genealogy* 187). The state of abjection thus serves as an apotropaic, invoking divine grace – or at least forbearance – upon the community; rejecting that state, as does the witch, is therefore an essentially antisocial act. For that very reason, however, it is through this antinomian counter-morality that the possibility of an autonomous individuality independent of the interests and will of the collective becomes thinkable for persons enculturated to the highly interdependent and paternalistic social structures of early modern communities.

Certainly, this is not to say that the pursuit of restitutive justice by early modern Christians was unknown outside of a more or less proscribed ideological sphere of transgression. Indeed, Nietzsche's 'good men', emblematic of the slave morality, pursue

precisely that end: "...what they desire they call, not retaliation, but 'the triumph of justice'; what they hate is not their enemy, no! they hate 'injustice,' they hate 'godlessness'..."(*Genealogy* 48). But whereas the acquiescent morality of these 'manufacturers of ideals' always leaves arbitration of justice in the hands of some appellate authority – whether God or, more immediately, a communal government which, notionally administering His will on Earth, applies the laws of the state for the maintenance of the state – the witch, by contrast, bypasses intermediation and usurps ultimate authority from God, effecting justice in retaliation by and for her- or himself alone.

One final case, from the city of Offenburg, Baden in 1601, will serve to demonstrate how the intersecting elements of revenge, social and economic power differentials, a common stock of tropes surrounding the concept of *maleficium*, and pervasive preoccupation with material resources served to contextualize the construction of a discourse on witchcraft within the unfolding processes of accusation and confession:

...[T]wo grape-stealers... mother and daughter, Eva and Marie Vetter—vagrants apparently without any fixed place of abode.... were caught by Olmüller Weid eating a bunch of grapes in his vineyard; he brought them to town and handed them to the authorities. They expected the pillory. This the Rath proposed, but the Rathsherr Christoph Rues... insisted on a prosecution for witchcraft. (*Materials* 1144)

There follows a long series of tortured confessions and accusations, in the course of which:

[Marie] evidently recognized her case as hopeless and was resolved to avenge herself. She was especially hard on Else Gwinner, saying she had boasted practicing witchcraft for sixteen years. She had emptied quantities of caterpillars and beetles in the town forests and had such hatred for the town that as long as she lived there would be no more acorns. The acorn crop in those days was a matter of supreme importance, and in Offenburg the town forest not only enabled the citizens to fatten their swine but in good years was a source of considerable revenue. (*Materials* 1144-5)

And shortly before the Veters' execution:

[Agathe Gewinner] was then confronted with Marie, who asked her if she did not remember how they two attempted to raise a storm which should destroy the harvests and raise the price of a loaf to a shilling so that her mother could provide for her children, and she described all details. Agathe denied it all, was taken back to her cell and beaten with rods till she confessed. (*Materials* 1146)

The point here is to indicate that whether or not *maleficium* had actually been

performed in any particular case, the same forces of *ressentiment* and revenge, conditioned by the anxieties of socioeconomic precarity in stratified societies, generated powerful images by which groups and individuals could feel authorized to pursue their respective self-interests – whether demonizing the underclass whose insurrection one dreaded, or demonizing oneself in order to carry out that insurrection. While the often deadly consequences for individuals and shattering ramifications for their communities must not be discounted, we might nonetheless speculate that out of this moral crucible embedded within the social and material relations of early modernity perhaps emerged the prototype of a more fully integrated human being, its sense of agency, albeit projected onto a demonic avatar, no longer repressed. For Nietzsche (*Genealogy* 52) reflected that “...today there is perhaps no more decisive mark of a 'higher nature,' a more spiritual nature, than that of being divided... and a genuine battleground of these opposed values.” Perhaps the dialectical process of transcending contradictory moralities was born in the consciousness of the vengeful, embittered peasant.

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