Cats and the Occult: A Canthropology

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"Who peynted the leon, tel me who?"—Chaucer, *The Wife of Bath's Tale*

Many of us know intuitively that *Felis Catus* is a different order of entity, not merely a flesh-and-blood mammalian member of earth's rich and varied zoology, but also a thoughtful and observant creature inhabiting a mental plane disparate from our own, and who is known to keep his own counsel and drive us mad with wanting to know his secrets. Then, too, the cat is a creature of paradoxes: think how a silky, soft, and pliant lap-nestling cat may at any moment transform himself into a muscular, lithe, quick-springing, sharp-clawed, and razor-toothed warrior and hunter, swatting the hand that pets him—or, alternately, defending his people by slaying the destructive rodents that threaten their well-being. A third uncanny attribute of the cat is his nocturnal nature, for a cat will venture bravely into the darkness that our kind fears, leaving us to wonder what draws him from the light. When all the world is made invisible by the cloak of night, a cat's eyes will shine weirdly from the Stygian void. The characteristic of the cat that tends to most annoy people who do not like—nay, even fear or hate—cats is their independence, for a cat neither heeds a person's orders nor hovers close to his friends, preferring solitary wandering and quiet meditation, and he will come to a person of his own accord and in his own time. Humankind's extreme reactions to these catly qualities has, over time, resulted in the exaltation of our whiskered friends—and in their cruel destruction.

When humans first began to cultivate grain, in the days of ancient Egypt, it was the cats who saved the nascent agricultural enterprise from destruction by mice, rats, and sundry rodents, who, unchecked, can consume a storehouse bursting with next year's foodstuffs faster than farmers can fill it. It was largely due to the essential aid rendered the first farmers by cats that people were able to evolve from their hunter-gathering past into their commercial and communal future. Not only the fields and the storehouses, but their own homes were well served by the cats who preyed on the rats that invaded their dwellings while humans slept at night.

The ancient Egyptians so appreciated the assistance of their feline allies that they accorded them the status of gods. Bastet, the cat-headed goddess of marriage, home, and fertility, and Sekhmet, the lion-headed goddess, a fierce huntress and healer, were the daughters of Ra, the sun god, who, cat-like, slew the Serpent of Darkness. And then there is Mafdet, the cheetah-skin-wearing goddess of judgment and justice. Deceased cats were mummified and placed in tombs, in expectancy of their awakening to an afterlife. People wore cat amulets, seeking the protection of the cat gods, and, in Bastet's temple, the priests maintained a community of cats. At the height of the cult of Bastet, it was a capital crime to kill a cat. Eventually, the ancient Greeks fused Bastet with Artemis and Hekate, who possessed a cat familiar. World-traders, the Egyptians also introduced the domesticated housecat to Europe, unwittingly doing their feline friends an ill service.

Although the Christian people of medieval Europe amassed fortunes buying and selling luxury goods brought from every heathen corner of the globe, they did not welcome the domestication of cats. For their own sake, European cats would have better remained feral, a condition in which they would have been safer from humans; for this was the time of the Inquisition, witches were identified with cats, and witches were thought to change into animals, especially cats (said to be a favorite among their menagerie of small domestic familiars). A

woman could be considered a witch because she harbored a cat in her home. This identification of witches with cats did not bode well for the cats: cats were burned alive, as were witches. In 1232, the Catholic Church pronounced cats to be demonic: in a bull condemning German heretical sects (*Vox in Rama*), Pope Gregory IX said that cats were Satan incarnate; and so, although cats were usually tolerated for the service they rendered in the role of mouser, still they were the frequent object of massive hunts and exterminations. This cruel holocaust of the felines of Europe came back to bite their superstitious persecutors; for, when the Black Death came to Europe, it rode in on the backs of fleas *and mice!* And there were fewer cats around to control the population of mice.

By the eighteenth century, most people considered themselves too modern and sophisticated to believe in witches; hence they discounted as mere nonsense all the testimony given in the witch trials (which had spanned half a millennium), dismissing the confessions as the desperate words of tortured innocents who said what their accusers wanted to hear in order to receive a momentary respite from unbearable suffering. But the damage had been done, for cats, at least, who would forever bear the stigma of evil, in the eyes of many people.

The second half of the nineteenth century through the first quarter of the twentieth century was a period characterized by a widespread popular interest in the occult, with the result that many historians, theologians, and popular writers trawled the witch trials for inspiration. In 1921, in *The Witch-Cult in Western Europe,* an Egyptologist named Margaret Murray broke with the majority opinion when she took a good look at the testimonies of the accused and took them at their word; and she argued that modern witchcraft was a continuation of pre-Christian nature worship, which had never really gone extinct. Murray's theories are the foundation of many modern Wiccan and woman-centered religious beliefs. She found that a large percentage of the crimes of which the witches were accused related to reproduction:

> The celebrated Decree of Innocent VIII, which in 1488 let loose the full force of the Church against the witches, says that "they blight the marriage bed, destroy the births of women and the increase of cattle; they blast the corn on the ground, the grapes of the vineyard, the fruits of the trees, the grass and herbs of the field." (Murray 199)

The frequency with which Murray cites instances of charges being leveled against the accused, *that they practiced diablerie for the purpose of causing impotence,* suggests that the women were not persecuted by the Christian faithful as practitioners of Satanism, but by angry men who were incensed by the witches' impairment of their fertility:

> Jonet Clark was tried in Edinburgh in 1590 "for giving and taking away power from sundry men's Genital-members" . . . The number of midwives who practiced witchcraft points to this fact; they claimed to be able to cause and to prevent pregnancy, to cause and to prevent an easy delivery, to cast the labour-pains, on an animal or a human being (husbands who were the victims are peculiarly incensed against these witches), and in every way to have power over the generative organs of both sexes. In short, it is possible to say that, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the better the midwife the better the witch. (Murray 200)

The devil, who appeared at the Sabbats of the witches, according to Murray, was a man, "the chief personage of the cult" (Murray 32), who was often garbed in an animal costume, a

"bull, cat, dog, goat, horse, and sheep" (Murray 66).[1] Trial testimonies yield hundreds of anecdotes of the devil appearing as a cat, as well as of witches training cats to be their familiars by feeding them with their own blood, witches turning into cats and riding in the air on their victims' backs, and witches suckling their cat familiars on their normal nipples on or on their witch teats.

Murray's chief contribution to the study of the witch trials is her assertion that not all of these stories were the hallucinations of torture-crazed victims:

> These were women of every class and every age, from just above puberty to old women of over seventy, unmarried, married, and widows. It is unscientific to disbelieve everything, as Scot does, and it is equally unscientific to label all the phenomena as the imagination of hysterical women. . . . Such a mass of evidence cannot be ignored, and in any other subject would obtain credence at once. But the hallucination-theory, being the easiest, appears to have obsessed the minds of many writers, to the exclusion of any attempt at explanation from an unbiased point of view. (Murray 207)

A cursory reading of *Malleus Maleficarum,* the 1486 handbook written by Jacobus Sprenger and Heinrich Kramer for the edification and guidance of witch hunters, clerics, and lawyers, on the subject of how to identify and deal with a witch, suggests that the presence of sex therapists, birth control, and Viagra would have saved the lives of more than a hundred thousand accused witches (most of whom were women)—and countless cats. For example, various chapters are entitled "How, as it were, they deprive man of his virile member" (Sprenger 90), "Remedies prescribed for those who are bewitched by the limitation of the generative power" (Sprenger 172), and "Remedies prescribed for those who by prestidigitatory art have lost their virile members or have seemingly been transformed into the shapes of beasts" (Sprenger 181).

While witches may transform themselves into the shapes of many beasts, the authors of *Malleus Maleficarum* single out the cat as the preferred animal. They tell the story of a Strasburg man who, while working, was attacked by a horde of cats, which he beat off of him, only later to be brought up on charges of beating three women, who were so badly injured that they were unable to rise from their beds and who had accused him of beating *them*. Hearing his defense, the authorities, "understanding that it was the work of the devil, . . . released the poor man and let him go away unharmed" (Sprenger 103). The record, apparently, is silent on who did beat the women. By the Burning Times of the Inquisition and the appearance of Witch-Finder General Matthew Hopkins, the cat had already acquired a bad reputation: "an animal which is, in the Scriptures, an appropriate symbol of the perfidious . . . for cats are always setting snares for each other" (Sprenger 105).

In *The History of Witchcraft and Demonology* (1925), Montague Summers, the best-selling Roman Catholic author of many popular works on the occult, agrees with Murray that it is not good history to dismiss the entirety of the testimonies of the witch trials out of hand, simply on the ground that the confessions were obtained by intimidation and torture; he does take issue, though, with several of Murray's conclusions, primarily, her thesis that witchcraft is a

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[1]In *The Downfall of God: A History of Atheism in the West,* S. T. Joshi, in a passage summarizing and seeking to make sense of the witch hunt phenomenon, notes: "Nicolas Rémy (sometimes known by his Latin name Remigius), in *Daemonolatrieia* (1595), propounded the view that the Devil could appear in the shape of a black cat or a man, and in the latter role he would lead the Black Mass. He branded those who denied the existence of witches as atheists."

resurgence of a joyous religion descended from ancient Celtic nature-worship, which had long persisted in hiding. Summers, like Murray, explores the titillating attributes of witches and witchcraft, for which contemporary readers were hungry: witches' marks, witches' teats (for suckling their familiars) the sacrifice and eating of children, utilization of "artificial penises" (Summers 98) in their rites, the Sabbat, the Satanic Kiss, the Black Mass, and demon and animal familiars; but, citing the authority of medieval theologians and more recent theorists, such as Cotton Mather and the authors of *Malleus Maleficarum,* Summers reaches the conclusion that witches are servants of Satan:

> In some sense Witchcraft was a descendant of the old pre-Christian magic, but . . . at the advent of Christianity it was exposed and shown in its real foul essence as the worship of the Evil Principle, the Enemy of Mankind, Satan. (Summers 29)

According to Summers, witches perpetrated their foul spells not only to render men impotent and to ruin crops, but to bring down the Church. As an example of how witches threaten Christendom, Summers cites the often-told story of King James VI (I), in which a cat is the tool of a murderous witch:

> The most celebrated occasion when witches raised a storm was that which played so important a part in the trial of Dr. Fian and his coven, 1590-1, when the witches, in order to drown King James and Queen Anne on their voyage from Denmark, "took a Cat and christened it," and after they had bound a dismembered corpse to the animal 'in the night following the said Cat was convayed into the middest of the sea, by all these witches, sayling in their riddles or cives, . . . this done, then did arise such a tempest in the sea, as a greater hath not bene seene." (Summers 88)

King James was so upset at the attempt on his life by witches that he wrote his own treatise on witchcraft, *Daemonologie* (1597), from which royal text Montague Summers extracted the above anecdote.

Summers concedes that the cat, to its great disadvantage, has been permanently ensconced in the collective cultural consciousness as the confederate of the witch:

> In England particularly there is abundance of evidence concerning them, and even to-day who pictures a witch with nut-cracker jaws, steeple hat, red cloak, hobbling along on her crutch, without her big black cat beside her? (Summers 101)

He feels sorry for the innocent women who were branded as witches simply for loving a companion animal; yet he says not all of them were innocent:

> It is piteous to think that in many cases some miserable creature who, shunned and detested by her fellows, has sought friendship in the love of a cat or a dog, whom she has fondled and lovingly fed with the best tid-bits she could give, on the strength of this affection alone was dragged to the gallows or the stake. But very frequently the witch did actually keep some small animal which she nourished on a diet of milk and bread and her own blood in order that she might divine by its means. (Summers 101)

The three works discussed to this point detail hundreds anecdotes of witches in league with cats, such as this famous story:

> At the trial of Elizabeth Francis, Chelmsford, 1556, the accused confessed that her familiar, given to her by her grandmother, a notorious witch, was "in the lykeness of a white spotted Catte," and her grandmother "taught her to feede the sayde Catte with breade and mylke, and she did so, also she taughte her to cal it by the name of Sattan and to kepe it in a basket. Item that euery tyme that he did any thynge for her, she sayde that he required a drop of bloude, which she gaue him by prycking herselfe, sometime in one place and then in another." (Summers 102)

As we have already noted, at the trials the accused would often speak of the devil appearing in the form of an animal. Summers describes some of the Sabbats as masquerades, with a cat costume being a preferred guise: "Francoise Secretain, who was tried in August, 1508, saw the Devil 'tantost en forme de chat.' Rolande de Vernois acknowledged 'Le Diable se presenta pour lors au Sabbat en form d'vn groz chat noir" (Summers 135).

And again: "Alexander Hunter, *alias* Hamilton, *alias* Hattaraick, a 'Warlok Cairle' who 'abused the Countrey for a long time,' was apprehended at Dunbar [and] he confessed that the Devil would meet him riding upon a black horse, or in the shape of a *corbie*, a cat, or a dog. He was burned upon Castle Hill, Edinburgh, 1631" (Summers, 135).

Another of the popular early anthropological studies of witchcraft to which Summers refers is *The Golden Bough,* a treatise on the development of religion from the dawn of humanity to the present time, initially published in 1890 by Sir James George Frazer and expanded over the next twenty-five years into a twelve-volume work. Postulating that the concept of religion began with the worship of nature by prehistoric peoples the world over and evolved in tandem with human evolution (begging the question of whether human evolution occurs in an upward, downward, or horizontal movement), discarding much of the superstition it had acquired along the way, he shook the foundations of established religions, which claimed to be divinely inspired, not merely a continuance and development of prehistoric superstitions. In his encyclopedic work, Frazer offers thousands of examples of the deification of plants, animals, men, and women by ancient societies in every corner of the globe. Additionally, he explores the fundamental characteristics that all religions possess, among these the worship of and conciliation of the deity to obtain desired outcomes; the sacrifice of animals, plants, inanimate objects, and people for said purposes; and even the sacrifice of the god himself.

Cats, as well as other animals, have a place in his discussions of sympathetic magic, in which he describes a ceremony designed to induce rain in Java, wherein a pair of cats are ritually bathed and paraded in a religious procession (Frazer 83). In his discussion of sacrifice, he tells of the frequent practice of burning cats alive:

> In the midsummer fires formerly kindled on the Place de Greve at Paris it was the custom to burn a basket, barrel, or sack full of live cats, which was hung from a tall mast in the middle of a bonfire; sometimes a fox was burned. The people collected the embers and ashes of the fire and took them home, believing that they brought good luck. . . . At Metz midsummer fires were lighted with great pomp on the esplanade, and a dozen cats, enclosed in wicker cages, were burned alive in them, to the amusement of the people. Similary at Gap, in the department of the High Alps, cats used to be roasted over the

> midsummer bonfire. . . . In the Vosges cats were burned on Shrove Tuesday; in Alsace they were thrown into the Easter bonfire. In the department of the Ardennes the cats were flung into the bonfires kindled on the first Sunday in Lent; sometimes by a refinement of cruelty, they were hung over the fire from the end of a pole and roasted alive. . . . Thus, it appears that the sacrificial rites of the Celts of ancient Gaul can be traced in the popular festivals of modern Europe . . . [and] these rites have left the clearest traces in the customs of burning giants of wicker-work and animals enclosed in wicker-work or baskets. (Frazer 760–61)

Those of us who love cats know all too well that our furry friends continue, through no fault of their own, to inspire hatred and fear—the victims of an unfounded and unreasoned prejudice inculcated by the Catholic Church in the Middle Ages, reinforced by popular writers on the subject of witchcraft, and still held by many people—and that numerous groundless superstitions persist to this day, such as the belief that bad luck (in some societies, good luck) follows when a black cat crosses one's path. Other misconceptions, such as the conviction that black cats are in themselves unlucky, result in a more frequent incidence of abuse of felines of that color than their lighter-hued brethren. Today, many modern witches and Wiccans consider their companion animals to be their spirit guides or partners. (I have attended witchcraft seminars in Salem, Massachusetts, at which the familiars who accompanied the presenters were described as "rescued" animals.) The fact remains that a lot of people tend either to love cats or to hate them. Cats, simply by being cats, inspire strong emotions in many people, a phenomenon of "Otherness" that has resulted in both their being exalted as gods and feared as demons.

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