

El mundo de las brujas and Some socio-medical aspects of magic

An important work on the subject of witchcraft has recently been translated into English. In this short note I should like to discuss some of the implications, as well as what I feel to be shortcomings in this book — Julio Caro Baroja's *Las Brujas y su Mundo*¹.

There are various reasons why it is an important work : firstly, because it is the first major study on witchcraft to come out of Spain for a long time ; secondly, because the author studies in detail the enormous contribution made by the Spanish Inquisition to enlightenment through the efforts of Salazar y Frías ; thirdly, because it is such an eminently sensible book.

To summarise it briefly, his introduction seeks to explain magical thought through a primitive view of nature and existence itself. This leads him straight into pagan religion and the witch in Graeco-Roman times. It is precisely from this that the whole of the later development of his study takes its colour ; after this, early Christian views on witchcraft are rapidly sketched in, and we are soon ready for the principale theme : the rise in importance of witches in the XIVth and XVth centuries, and their subsequent fortunes in Italy, France, Germany, Britain and Spain. This last not unnaturally takes up a large part of the book, and is almost exclusively devoted to the supposed activities of the witch in the Basque country - C.B.'s own early homeland. It is also the best part of the book, for here we get the bare bones of the Inquisition's views about witchcraft in its relation to heresy.

The last part of the book deals with opinions and reflections on witchcraft during and after the witchmania, and the decline itself of belief in the witch. Then we go back to the Basque country once more for two intriguing modern stories about witches - though one is never quite sure whether C.B. really believes in their existence or not. To round off, there is a chapter of modern views on the subject permeated by his own very strong Spanish horse sense.

¹ Madrid, 1961, 383 pp. Translated by NIGEL GLENDINNING as *The World of the Witches*, London, 1964, 313 pp. Page references given are to the translation.

First amongst the many excellencies of this work one notices how C.B. succeeds in tracing the existence of a witch-tableau in people's minds during the Middle Ages. It has been well attested that such concepts as the universe, heaven, hell, and so on, were, for an illiterate public at least, held pictorially. The picture, too, of the witch was similar in essence to that of hell, in that it included certain stock features, mostly inversions of Christian values: popular were the he-goats, the brooms, the pictures of nocturnal flights across the sky² and the working out and elaborating of such pictures, whether verbally by preachers or visually by painters and sculptors, was of absorbing interest. The so-called witch would have as much reality - has always had and will always have - as that picture of her allowed, and the accusations against her always followed this tableau, always being stereotyped and uniform. Very frequently accused people themselves came to believe in their part in the picture. But it would be wrong to claim that only witches were supposed to deal in nefarious practices of this kind: anyone outside the church was capable of the most frightful conduct: Jews ate humans, drank the blood of children, and Moslems could outdo anybody. Of course, so could Christians in other peoples' eyes: 'The practice of attributing false beliefs and revolting behaviour to those who profess a religion which is not one's own, is common enough. The pagans expressed such views of Christians, the Christians said much the same of the pagans and the Jews: the Mohammedans denigrated the Christians, and the Chinese have cast aspersions on Europeans in general and so on. A believer of one religion, in fact, will readily claim that a man who does not share his beliefs is so perverse that he will perform the most loathsome and indecent acts.' (p. 74)

It follows quite naturally from this that an element of parody, in what witches are supposed to do, can be found in the witch-accusations. In these, abundant detail is given of their ritual, which shows the Christian liturgy turned back to front: thus, in Castañega's *Tratado muy sutil y bien fundado de las supersticiones y hechicerías* (Logroño, 1529), we find elaborate descriptions of how witch rituals parody the church office, witch communion bread and wine replaced, excrements taking the place of sacraments, and so on. Another writer, Avellaneda, points out that in witches, ritual, Christian symbols are always used the other way round, the blessing

² Miniatures in MS illuminations are also instructive, e. g., Oxford Rawlinson D 410, fol. 1r, where there is shown the initiation of a young man by an old witch with two younger women standing by with lighted tapers, a he-goat standing with his back to them, a broom lying on the ground, and several witches in the air flying on broomsticks (XVth century) or, in an encyclopaedia of canon law, theology and general information (between 1330-50) which shows a miniature with magician and devils (B. M. Royal 6. E. VI & VII, fol. 535v).

being given with the left hand instead of the right, etc.³. In the *Malleus Maleficarum* one can find even more lurid examples⁴.

The essence of this type of parody is that as the Devil is worshipped instead of God, everything else in the sacred rites will be exactly copied in reverse, from top to bottom (to my mind it is important to realise that the concept of the Devil in *this* role is one of parody, and not some survival of pagan belief or ancient god). De Lancre, the French Inquisitor, underlined this point when he stressed that the parody-aspect of the witch-ritual comes from the Devil strenuously trying to imitate Christ⁵.

From parody to imputation of heresy is but a short step. That there were survivals of pagan religious beliefs in mediæval Europe cannot be doubted. But that any surviving adherents to such cults in any way practised witchcraft is, in my view, extremely doubtful; people conscious of living outwith the law are not those who wish to draw attention to themselves⁶. Accusations which embraced both witchcraft and heresy, however, were quite frequent in the Middle Ages, and the witch mania itself is, of course, based on the premise that the two went hand in hand. According to Fray Alonso de la Fuente, witchlike sexual orgies occurred amongst the *alumbados*, and there was said to be a nefarious pagan movement in the Durango region of Vizcaya (akin to the Fraticelli), where there were also 'outbreaks' of witchcraft. Yet it was precisely the examination of whether a witch constituted a heretic that did the Spanish Inquisition much credit. The virtual absence of witch-executions under the Inquisition in Spain, culminating in the investigations of Salazar y Frías, are facts that should be borne in mind by all students of witchcraft. Salazar y Frías was one of the Inquisitors on the tribunal of the Logroño witch trials of 1610 and, dissenting from its findings, he was later commissioned to investigate the evidence given by witnesses at these trials. This claimed the usual things: witches' covens, intercourse with the devil, and so on. After carefully sifting through this evidence by way of interrogating hundreds of persons, his conclusions were that none of the evidence given was of the slightest

3 The descriptions occur in a letter of Avellaneda's (Bibl. Nac. 10122, fols. 322r-325v) which CARO BAROJA publishes in his "Cuatro relaciones sobre la hechicería vasca", *Anuario de Eusko Folklore*, 1933, XIII.

4 J. SPRENGER and H. KRAMER or Institor, both Dominicans, published this work in 1486 at Cologne(?). A competent translation is that of Montagu Summers, London, 1928 and (a limited ed.) 1948.

5 PIERRE DE LANCRE, *Tableau de l'inconstance des nauvais anges et démons...*, Paris, 1612, p. 454ff. The whole section portrays a fascinating inversion of Christian ritual.

6 One notes today that there are remnants of hymns to the sun and moon in Basque folksongs (see J. A. DONOSTIA, "Euskal-erriko otoitzak", *Egan* (March-April, 1956). In Britain one can hear people talk about the "old religion", meaning by it a nature cult.

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value: 'And so, having weighed up everything with the proper objectivity and rectitude, I have come to believe, and shall continue to do so, that none of the acts which have been attested in this case, really or physically occurred at all⁷.

He furthermore states that there were neither witches nor bewitched until they were written and talked about. Sermons, such as one given by Fray Domingo de Sardo near Pamplona, were enough to make people believe anything about witches⁸.

Such aspects of C.B.'s work will show how very useful it is. But there is one criticism I should like to make of his study, one which I feel fundamental to the whole of his ideas. I said earlier on that his view of the witch in pagan and Graeco-Roman times coloured the later development of his study, and it is to this that I return. Classical views about witchcraft, which C.B. culls from literary sources, are interesting, but second-hand. Had he been a little more generous in his scope at the beginning, he would have remembered that there are far more important sources for the study of witchcraft than Greece and Rome. Such vital cultures as the Assyrian and above all the Egyptian contain the seeds of all subsequent magic in Europe, and to ignore these, as C.B. does, is a vital blunder. Chief amongst the facts that he would have come up against is that from time immemorial magic and witchcraft have been allied to medicine⁹. Furthermore, and again had he looked more closely at its origins instead of contenting himself with quotations, he would have realised that he no-where defines what magic in society actually is.

It is, of course, a difficult thing to define. Serious scholars such as Frazer and Lyn Thorndike, linking it with religion and science, treated the subject descriptively and at a distance. But to define magic as it weaves its thread through the society about us is a venture few scholars will attempt. Yet one has got to know what magic is within the workings of human relationships and conduct, for here it starts and has its *raison d'être*. And how else base a study of witchcraft, which is based on magic? What, then, is it? Putting aside all the tomfoolery which has accrued to the concept of

7 A. SALAZAR y FRÍAS, *Relación y epílogo de lo que a resultado de la visita q(ue) hizo el sancto offi(cio) en las montañas del Rey(no) de Navarra*, Bibl. Nac. MS 2031, fols. 129r-132v., published by CARO BAROJA in *Anuario de Eusko Folklore*, XIII, pp. 115-30. This quotation is from fol. 132, and cited by CARO BAROJA on p. 188.

8 H. C. LEA, *A History of the Inquisition in Spain*, IV, p. 234, cited by CARO BAROJA, p. 188.

9 The works on this subject are numerous, from WALLIS BUDGE's *Egyptian Magic*, London, 1899, his *From fetish to god in ancient Egypt*, London, 1934 (especially chapter III), WARREN DAWSON's *Magician and Leech*, London, 1929, to B. DE RACHEWILTZ, *Egitto magico-religioso*, Turin, 1961.

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the word, it is the art of making things happen through power, a power conferred on a person through a special knowledge. But the most important part is that the power referred to is one *attributed* to a person by other people. It implies a faith in that person's power, and of course the faith gives it efficacy. The person with the so-called power — be his or her knowledge real or only assumed — will in turn be affected by the public belief, becoming convinced that the power is in fact a real and supernatural one.

It is a common occurrence for writers on magic to throw themselves with enthusiasm into its esoteric side, delving into circles, diagrams, astral planes, divinations and aspects of astrology. But this, to my mind, is as superficial as describing monarchy by starting with the robes and rites of a coronation service. Much, of course, can be learnt about magic in this way, and such a side is invaluable to the practitioner, giving him as it does his rules, his criteria, his ceremonial — and also inspiring awe into his public. But this aspect of magic does not lead into the heart of the matter, even as the rules of the Academy Grammar do not lead us into the heart of the problem of language. One must start from the basic needs of a simple community, for magic in society exists to answer human wants.

These tend to vacillate roughly between two poles, the spiritual and the physical: people need religious comfort, people need medical comfort. The latter, before the advent of doctors, and even after them, was supplied by the local wise-man or wise-woman, known in Spain as the *curandero*, *ensalmador*, and a host of other names, most of whom, today, at least *professing* to specialise in some branch or other of medicine — thus a *curandero* now means or should mean a bonesetter, and so on¹⁰. These functionaries in village or town have been operating ever since human beings grouped together to live in communities, and include as many varieties as

10. F. RODRÍGUEZ MARÍN, in *Ensalmos y conjuros en España y América*, Madrid, 1927, points out that a Spanish law of 1477 equated the *ensalmador* with physicians, surgeons and apothecaries. They had to take an examination in order to satisfy the authorities, but even this was abolished in 1521. An interesting and reliable account of a visit to a modern Galician wise-woman, a *pastequeira*, is given in NINA EPRON'S *Grapes and Granite*, London, 1956, pp. 136-8. The magical *grimoire* mentioned here is the *Ciprianillo*, or alleged writings of St. Cyprian on magic. Although highly suspect as regards authenticity of age (one of the charms mentions a cup of cocoa), the book gives a most valuable insight into the stock-in-trade and psychology of the village wise-woman. It is also well worth studying as a prime example of how magical prayers always have a heavy Christian overlay in order to be acceptable and —presumably— efficacious. The only edition of the *Ciprianillo* known to me is that of Leipzig, c. 1870. The best recent book on the stock of the wise-woman is I. HAMPP, *Beschwörung. Segen. Gebet. Untersuchung zum Zauberspruch aus dem Bereich der Volksheilkunde*, Stuttgart, 1961, and another important recent book on the subject of mediæval magic and medicine is W. BONSER, *The Medical Background of Anglo-Saxon England*, Wellcome Historical Medical Library, London, 1963, 448 pp.

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there are human needs. Viewed in this way, of course, magic can become another term for primitive science, and such it is. At a less humble level than a peasant community, astrologers, necromancers, alchemists and other dabblers in higher magic all looked on themselves as scientists do to a certain extent today, as questors for knowledge through experiment and empirical method¹¹.

And where this whole aspect of magic comes into the witchcraft question so vitally is that here amongst wise-women or wise-men one finds the prototype witch. The very secretiveness of their knowledge often laid them open to accusations and denunciations of all kinds, but what did them even more harm were pure personal grudges. This can be seen at its simplest in love-affairs where wise-women were often called in to lend a hand¹². Here what is evil is apt to get confused. If you help A to win the fair B with magical means, you are likely to be thought highly of by the successful A, but not so by his unsuccessful rival C. Also it is difficult not to side with one or the other faction in a village — it is even more difficult not to get mobbed when you have failed to save the life of someone. This is, in fact, a point touched on by C.B., when he points out that the failed wise-woman, or *hechicera*, was far more likely to be denounced as a witch than one who had been successful in her cures. (p. 227-8)

To return from this digression, there are two other small points in C.B.'s work that call for comment. His main investigations bear on the problem of the witch-mania of the XV-XVII centuries. It is a pity, however, that he does not mention what was possibly an even more terrible persecution of witches, that of the fourth century. This would have provided an interesting comparison¹³. Connected with this should be some mention of the practice of incubation — that is, the trance-like state which patients would undergo in a temple or shrine (a heritage from the temples of Aesculapius), in order to receive healing¹⁴. This greatly helps in explaining the mental background of people who believed that any illness was a possession by an evil spirit — a vital factor in the make-up and magic of witchcraft. Perhaps the nearest C.B. gets to this is when he speaks of Augustine believing in

11 "Orationes and receptae medicae" is a commonly found title to collections of healing recipes in mediæval MSS. A magical prayer or charm would suit one need (toothache, childbirth, etc.) where a more practical recipe like a herbal concoction would suit another.

12 The most accessible account of the love-affair in the wise-woman's practice comes in CIRAC ESTOPAÑÁN, *Los procesos de hechicerías en la Inquisición de Castilla la Nueva*, Madrid, 1942.

13 A. A. BARB, "The survival of the magic arts", in *The conflict between Paganism and Christianity*, ed. A. D. MONIGLIANO, Oxford, 1963.

14 See M. HAMILTON, *Incubation*, St. Andrews, 1906.

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the *sueño imaginativo* of those who were convinced that they had been transformed into witches. (p. 43-4)

My second point is that it is also a pity that C.B. does not distinguish more carefully between *hechicera* and *bruja*, two essentially different things. Although he takes the trouble to cite a definition of the two (p. 317-8), there are places where both terms are used indiscriminately. This carelessness also extends itself to things like section headings: *Magia amatoria* and *Magia venal* (ch. II) do not really fit the matter they contain. Chapter VIII deals simply with witchcraft in France, and Chapter IX with it in England and Germany, but why the rather pompous headings respectively of *El delito de brujería en su forma definitiva* and *El espíritu de algunas declaraciones?*

These considerations apart, *Las Brujas y su Mundo*, is, as I have already said, an important work, not only from the specialised viewpoint of the student of witchcraft, but because the author's view of his subject is so utterly honest and objective, so free from the silly playing to a curious public which usually mars so many books on this extraordinarily tragic theme. Good books have been written on the witch, but they have been descriptive rather than enquiring. C.B. has brought his very considerable erudition to bear on an aspect of folklore which is of immense importance to literary and historical students alike.

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RESUMEN

Después de un resumen breve del libro de Caro Baroja, *El mundo de las brujas* (traducido al inglés por Nigel Glendinning, London 1964), subrayamos en él los elementos de parodia y la vinculación de la bruja con la heresía. Señalamos lo que a nuestra vista constituye una laguna en el estudio de C.B., o sea la falta de orientación hacia la magia social y sobre todo medicinal (procedente en parte de Egipto), aspecto que nos parece fundamental para enfocar el problema de la magia europea, y de allí la ciencia primitiva.

