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Feeling with Demons: Emotional Displacement and Surrogate Relationships in *The Witches of Warboys*

Oscar Joyce

Between 1589 and 1593, the village of Warboys in Huntingdonshire was the setting of a protracted witchcraft drama centred on the household of the Throckmortons, a well-connected and locally influential gentry family. The five Throckmorton daughters (Joan, Elizabeth, Mary, Jane and Grace) were the most prominent victims of bewitchment and suffered a panoply of debilitating ailments for over three years. The unfolding psychodrama eventually resulted in three members of the neighbouring Samuel family—John, Alice (aka Mother), and Agnes (aka Nan)—being tried, convicted, and executed for witchcraft at the Assizes. Less than three months later, the Throckmortons and their allies had written and published a pamphlet account of the extraordinary events that justified such a harsh verdict.[1] What is interesting about the Warboys case were extensively recorded interactions between the bewitched and the witch's familiars. How these victims invented relationships with these spirits and excused certain emotional behaviours—especially anger and aggression—gives us vital insight into how early modern English people experienced bewitchment.

This article is largely a response to Charlotte-Rose Millar's 2017 book *Witchcraft, the Devil, and Emotions in Early Modern England*. She analysed a corpus of sixty-six pamphlets printed during the period when witchcraft was criminalised in England (1542 to 1736). From this analysis, she convincingly argued that historians had overlooked quite how vital themes of emotional control and emotional disposition were to how contemporaries understood the nature of witchcraft and the witch. By reconsidering the significance of the relationship between witches and their familiars, she contributed to a predominantly twenty-first-century historiographical turn that has found English witchcraft to have been significantly more diabolised than historians have previously thought: centring around the pact between witches and their familiars. The familiar was a peculiarity of British, especially English, witchcraft: a demonic spirit

[1] [Anon.], The most strange and admirable discouerie of the three Witches of Warboys arraigned, conuicted and executed at the last Assises at Huntington (London: Printed for Thomas Man and John Winnington, 1593): all subsequent in-text citations refer to this document.

companion that usually manifested physically as a small animal or domestic pet and enacted the witch's will Michael MacDonald reasoned that witchcraft and demonology functionally provided people with ways to satisfy their 'yearning to violate moral imperatives and a way to mitigate their guilt' over doing so.[2] Accordingly, Millar identifies the familiar as an 'emotional conduit' through which the witch weaponised her antipathy for others: a method of transmission, whereby resentments were operationalised to affect others.[3] The implicit intimacy to this process consequently generated considerable contemporary speculation about the exact nature of relationships between witches and their familiars. Such relationships were fertile emotional spaces in which surrogate experiences of motherhood, friendship, and romance could be produced.[4]

Millar's thesis was tightly focussed on the emotions of accused witches themselves; she only included the experiences of those bewitched peripherally. A close reading of *The most strange and admirable discouerie* reveals that its descriptions of victim-experiences provide supporting evidence for Millar's arguments. Namely, that people formed surrogate relationships with familiars and displaced their emotions onto these spirits. This relates to a broader issue in the history of emotion and witchcraft. The emotions of witches were important, but they were not conceived of in isolation. Whether termed an emotional regime, community, habitus, arena or style, this emotional superstructure that witch emotions were part of was produced in concert with the emotions of nonwitches.[5] Within a given text, we can identify how both witch and nonwitch emotions formed an affective system—not as a register of "real" feelings, but as ideal representations of the same.

The Warboys case maintained a high profile in subsequent decades and the children's uncle, Gilbert Pickering, went on to be involved in another witch trial in 1612, this time in Northampton.[6] The Samuel estate was sold and it was arranged that the proceeds would fund a sermon in remembrance of the

[2] Michael MacDonald, *Mystical Bedlam: Madness, Anxiety, and Healing in Seventeenth-century England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 202.

[3] Charlotte-Rose Millar, *Witchcraft, the Devil, and Emotions in Early Modern England* (London: Routledge, 2017), p. 101.

[4] Ibid., chapters 2 & 4.

[5] For a concise but thorough review of the history of emotions see: Katie Barclay, 'State of the Field: The History of Emotions', *The Journal of the Historical Association* 106:371 (July 2021), 456–466.

[6] Richard Bernard, *A gvide to grand-jvry men* (London: Printed by Felix Kingston, 1627), pp. 111–14; [Anon.], *The Witches of Northamptonshire* (London: Printed by Thomas Purfoot, 1612), fol. C2v.

case to be delivered in Huntingdon, which persisted in variable form into at least the nineteenth century.[7] As for its historiographical legacy: there have been several dedicated studies of the Warboys case—Anne Reiber DeWindt's article is particularly excellent—but the length of the text (approximately 116 pages) has made it less suitable for full reproduction in source-compendia.[8] For instance, neither Marion Gibson nor Brian Levack included it in either of their widely cited collections.[9] Philip C. Almond did write a full length book devoted to the events in Warboys: a hybrid text that reproduces the full pamphlet narrative in a more digestible format for non-academic readers and which contains only light touches of scholarly commentary.[10] Prior to the publication of his monograph Almond presented a condensed version of the *Warboys* pamphlet, in which he deliberately omitted many of the interactions between Joan and the witch's familiar Smack.[11] So, although events in Warboys are not necessarily underrepresented in the scholarship—they crop up regularly in the bibliographies of many histories of witchcraft in Britain—elements of the story remain underexplored.

Displaced Fury: Emotional Projection and Witch-scratching

For three months—from when she was bailed on 9 January 1593 until the Assizes at Huntingdon in early April—Agnes Samuel was confined in the Throckmorton household in Warboys, just as her mother Alice had been. In the looming shadow of those Assizes, the five sisters who had accused her of witchcraft became increasingly intimate with the cadre of familiar spirits ostensibly there to torment them. They eventually claimed that one of the familiars had implanted a dark compulsion into their hearts: they must claw blood from Agnes to cure themselves.

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[7] Henry More, *An Antidote Against Atheisme* (London: Printed by Roger Daniel, 1653), p. 116; R. Trevor Davies, *Four Centuries of Witch Beliefs* (London: Methuen, 1947), p. 35.

[8] Anne Reiber DeWindt, 'Witchcraft and Conflicting Visions of the Ideal Village Community', *Journal of British Studies* 34:4 (1995), 427–63.

[9] Marion Gibson, *Early Modern Witches: Witchcraft Cases in Contemporary Writing* (London: Routledge, 2000); Brian Levack (ed.), *The Witchcraft Sourcebook* (London: Routledge, 2004).

[10] This is not a criticism of Almond's book and I think he has done an excellent job of making such a primary source more publicly accessible: Philip C. Almond, *The Witches of Warboys* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2008). For a more rigorously academic microhistory of a similar topic see: James Sharpe, *The Bewitching of Anne Gunter* (New York: Routledge, 2000).

[11] Philip C. Almond, *Demonic Possession and Exorcism in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004): for the specific signatures omitted see: pp. 119–26.

Scratching the witch was one of, if not the, most ubiquitous folk remedies available to treat bewitchment and, whilst legally and theological dubious, continued in Britain well into the twentieth century.[12] There was such strong cultural confidence invested in the practice that, even as criminal prosecution of witchcraft was evaporating in the early eighteenth century, a deponent at a trial in Leicester in 1717 enthused that 'the most infallible cure [for bewitchment] was to fetch blood of the witches [...] which was constantly practised and with good success'.[13] In March 1593 the Throckmorton sisters began scratching Agnes. Mary initiated it on 1 March; followed by Elizabeth, 10 March; Jane, 15 March; Grace, 21 March; and finally, both Elizabeth and Joan, 2 April. The prospect of scratching had been raised in mid-February when Joan, the eldest sister, admitted that she 'would fain scratch [Agnes]'. When asked why she could not 'abide her now adaies' Joan was baffled, 'for she did beare her no malice nor grudge [yet] loathed her companie' (K4^{r}). Joan purposefully separated the dark feelings she harboured towards Agnes from her sense of self. This interoceptive disjunction between emotion and the self was the mechanism by which all of the sisters distanced themselves from facing the consequences of their violent thoughts and actions.

Mary repeated Joan's claim that Smack was the familiar responsible for her desire to scratch Agnes. The suspected witch was brought into the room and Mary tore at her with her fingernails 'so eagerly and so fiercely [... that] it was a woonder to all that saw it'. Even as a shilling-sized chunk of flesh was ripped from her face, Agnes did not retaliate and merely 'cried very pittifully' (L2^{r}). Within a cultural context that valued forbearance and distrusted extraordinary rage, Agnes was clearly the more sympathetic party in this exchange. Her tearful forbearance embodied that ideal feminine virtue ascribed in personifications of Repentance as a woman who 'hath only her eiaculations' and whose arrows were 'feathered with water, her own soft tears'.[14] Mary was forced to awkwardly justify her pitilessness by displacing responsibility for it onto Smack, who had instructed her not to listen to Agnes 'because [she] should not pittie [Agnes]'. Jane later mimicked Mary's disregard verbatim, claiming that 'she could not

[12] Susan Hoyle, 'The witch and the detective: mid-Victorian stories and beliefs', in *Witchcraft Continued: Popular Magic in Modern Europe*, ed. by Willem de Blécourt and Owen Davies (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), pp. 46–68.

[13] C. L'Estrange Ewen, *Witch Hunting and Witch Trials* (New York: The Dial Press, 1929), p. 315.

[14] Thomas Adams, *God's Anger and Man's Comfort* (London: Printed by Thomas Maxey, 1652), p. 83.

heare [Agnes] (for so much the spirit tolde her before) but she should not pittie her' (O2^{v}). Mary ingeniously subverted Agnes's fortitude by asserting that it was not a reflection of Agnes's own stoicism but merely a result of her being held tightly by one of the familiars as to prevent her from escaping (L2^{r}). Despite her justifications, an exhausted Mary was ashamed enough to seem 'woonderfull sorie' and continued to plead that 'the thing [...] forced [her] therevnto'. She initially feigned amnesia about the incident, but when confronted with the wound she had inflicted upon Agnes's face, she once again 'brake into teares, and was maruellous sorie to see it'. Her disavowal of her actions was of abundant relief to those present who 'knew'—and who were invested in maintaining the image of—her 'mild disposition'. They were understandably shocked at Mary's sheer 'vehemencie and crueltie', which was so disconcerting that it necessitated they establish the whole ugly affair to have been 'altogether besides her nature'. Once it was understood that Mary had been 'ouerruled in the action', then her outbursts did not violate the righteous and proper dispositional façade they had laboured to craft for her (L2^{r-v}). The text consistently stressed and accentuated the godly and venerable character of the Throckmorton family overall with near-constant references to their prayers, godly speeches, and general piety. This is unsurprising, given that it was almost certainly authored and edited by adult family members who had been directly involved, as well as their sympathisers. Despite their partisanship, the violent intensity of the scratchings seems to have genuinely horrified witnesses and deeply troubled both them and the children themselves.

Consequently, they engaged in both active and retroactive projects to separate unseemly behaviours from any overall estimations of the sisters' agency and personhood. Mary—evidently still uncomfortable with how she had behaved—made major revisions to the narrative of the scratching on the following day. She retreated into the collaborative imaginary space in which the sisters wrote their story and wove the event into the collective narrative as a way to escape playing a game she no longer enjoyed. Taking up a thread that Joan had initially spun about Smack –that he accurately predicted future episodes of illness and did not lie—she relayed that he had informed her that she would 'neuer more haue any fit, bicause she had scratched Agnes Samuel' (L2^{v}). She delivered on "his" promise and stopped engaging in their game, having no subsequent fits.

Regardless, the precedent was set for future scratchings. Elizabeth next took up the torch when she said, 'on the sudden in a maruellous anger' to Agnes that she was compelled to scratch her and proceeded to do so with such exhausting ferocity that 'both her breath and strength fayled her'. She followed Mary's emotional trajectory precisely. First, she deflected responsibility onto Smack by claiming that he 'made her to scratch', that she herself 'would not haue scratched', and that 'it was full euil against [her] will to do it'. Someone present was prescient enough to coerce Agnes into absolving the girl by having her concur that it was 'no part of her will thus to scratch'. Then, in the aftermath of the outburst, Elizabeth wept 'maruellous bitterly [...] as if she had committed some great offence'(L4^{r-v}). Joan likewise dislocated her hatred of Agnes from herself and marvelled instead that 'God hath set [her] hart against [Agnes]'. She admitted having a 'good will' to scratch her but bravely signalled that she would resist the impulse 'if she can otherwise choose'. After she inevitably relented, she 'fell into a merueilous weeping & sobbed so greatly, [...] saying that she would not haue scratched her, but that she was forced vnto it by the spirite' (N4^{v}). When Jane also inevitably indulged her resentment, it was 'with such feircenesse, & rage as if she would haue pulled the flesh of [Agnes's] hand from the bones', whilst she simultaneously apologised 'with teares trickling downe her cheeks' and insisted that it was 'the spirit [that] compelleth' her (O2^{r-v}). Similarly, when little Grace scratched Agnes her affect during the act was to 'grone and weepe greatly as if she had bene doing of some thing against her will' (M4^{r-v}). The vicar of Warboys, Dr Francis Dorrington, directed a pious speech at Agnes, wherein he framed her nightmarish experience as being enacted through 'these innocent children contrary to their willes' (O2^{v}). Adult observers chronicling events thus thoroughly corroborated the sister's absolution from their undesirable emotions by projecting them onto the influence of external forces, as when they described Jane's behaviour:

> Then did the child begin to weepe, most lamentable to see, yet so mixed with anger towards the maide, as that often times looking vpon her, [...] her teeth being set togeather as if the euill spirit had bene whetting and kindling her furie against the maide (O2^{r}).

Bewitched and witch were alike in that they were set ablaze. The Devil was 'the worker of the wrath and malice in the heart of the witch', who 'kindled' and 'inflamed her mind with malice, to be reuenged, and

to doe mischiefe'.[15] All involved were uncomfortably aware that during the scratchings the sisters had slipped between ideals from 'godly zeale' into 'mad rage'; it was imperative to relocate this fury in case it began to corrode the family's reputation.[16]

Familiar Intimacy: An Imp and a Bewitched Young Woman

Interactions between the accused witches and their familiars were barely described in the text. By far the most developed relationship between human and spirit presented was between the bewitched Joan and her ostensible tormentor Smack. Whilst their relationship contained hints of romance, the more overt aspects were increasing companionship and even collaboration. Information about their relationship was delivered in bizarrely ventriloquised dialogues that Joan acted out by speaking for herself aloud and then repeating his responses, which a third part then recorded. The authors relayed these dialogues cautiously, choosing to omit most, and labelling them as 'foolish talke' (K3^{v}). There was a real risk that including these more fantastical elements could cause readers to disregard the whole text as ridiculous. Despite the danger of being dismissed as absurd, the passages chronicling these interactions retained some strategic merit. They demonstrated that the children could accurately prophesise about their future episodes of illness beyond normal predictive capacity and so established that their testimony was imbued with a kind of supernatural truthfulness. In these demoniac episodes the involvement of the Samuels in the death of Lady Cromwell had been revealed. The Samuels being responsible for supernaturally afflicting the children was insufficient to warrant a death sentence for a first offence under the 1563 Witchcraft Statute; their execution depended upon their responsibility for killing Cromwell. The fantastical conversations were evidently a contentious aspect to the text—hence the authors' reluctance to include them at all—but those passages that made it into the published version show a victim of bewitchment forming an unlikely alliance with a demon to bring down their shared enemy.

The role of the spirits had begun to shift in the months prior to Agnes's imprisonment when it was her mother Alice who was instead being kept in the Throckmorton house against her will. The

[15] George Gifford, *A Dialogue Concerning Witches and Witchcraftes* (London: Printed by Iohn Windet, 1593), fols C4^{v}–D1^{r}.

[16] George Gifford, *A Discourse of the Subtill Practises of Deuilles by Witches and Sorcerers* (London: Printed by T. Orwin, 1587), fols H4^{r}–I1^{v}.

godly adults present were disturbed by how the bewitched children were beginning to include the spirits in their games. As good Christians, they knew that the familiars should have been desperate to kill the children outright because the 'nature of the euill spyrite' was incontrovertibly malevolent. Therefore, they were understandably discomfited when the spirits sent to torment the girls chose instead to 'sport and play' with them. This marked a broad shift in the allegiance of the familiars, as the children reported that the spirits 'waxed weary of theyr Dame Mo. Samuell' (F3^{r}). Part of the phrase Agnes spoke to bring the sisters out of their fits was to 'charge thee thou diuell, as I loue thee, and haue authoritie ouer thee' to release them (K1^{v}). Her recital successfully relieved the sisters, but the relationship between the witch and her familiars, along with the 'loue' between them, was fraying.

Demonic betrayal itself was consistent with all flavours of demonology available to inform contemporary interpretations of events in Warboys—learned and popular alike. The Devil and his demons were infamously capricious, giving the appearance of obedience to the witch only to ultimately deliver her soul to ruin.[17] Therefore, their betrayal of the Samuels was anodyne enough. It was rather the manner by which they allied themselves to the sisters that carried the dangerous implication that the sisters were colluding with spirits. The character of Smack became increasingly ambiguated: to Joan especially, he became a caring ally, even a "bad boy" suitor, and facilitated her fantasies of recovery and revenge. After Mary revealed that Smack had heralded her recovery, he became almost a beacon of hope for the sisters, who enviously 'wished that Smacke would come to them, and tell them the same' (L2^{r-v}).

There was nothing coincidental about the fact that the surrogate romance between Joan and Smack peaked around Valentine's Day. In a pageant of gallantry, he insisted that he would 'win her fauour, making very faire promises to her that he would do any thing for her, if she would loue him' (K3^{v}). There was a hint of intimacy about the circumstances in which the imp visited her on the morning of March 2 as she was in her bed. When the condition of Joan's stricken legs improved, he expressed, not the dismay one might expect from a demon, but joy at her recovery; he coyly reassured Joan that although he served Agnes Samuel, he did not love her (K4^{v}). His sweet nothings evoked Isabella Whitney's advice to the young women of mid-sixteenth-century England 'to beware of mennes flattery, [...] of fayre and painted

[17] Gifford, *A Discourse*, fols G1^{r}–H4^{r}.

talke [and] flattering tonges'.[18] Smack certainly talked the talk, and Joan "wrote" him to walk the walk. Several times she was visited by demons he had fought and injured on her behalf: redolent of a gentleman chivalrously duelling with any who would mistreat his *inamorata*. Smack an able combatant—breaking Pluck's head, Catch's leg, and Blue's arm—but for all his pugnacious labours 'all the thanke' he received was Joan wishing they would all be hanged, him included (K2^{r}–K3^{v}). Although Joan rebuffed him—itself an outward demonstration of propriety—she ensured those listening knew that it was nevertheless an impressive feat for him to have bested such 'very great' opponents.

On 10 February, the familiars felt restless and rebellious; the authority Agnes had over them was fracturing. Blue revealed to Joan that Agnes had secretly 'intreated him not to let [Joan] haue any such extreme fits [...] But he answered that he would torment me in that sort, and not giue ouer vntil he had brought his dame [...] vnto her end'. Joan mocked Agnes's waning control of her imps, threatening they would soon 'be no longer at [her] commandment' (I4^{v}).[19] When he had visited her on Valentine's Day, she had uttered a tantalisingly underdeveloped line in response to his arrival: saying 'I had rather that you would to keepe you away, and *come when I send for you*' (K3^{r}, emphasis mine). There is a sense that she was toying with the much more darkly portentous act of usurping Agnes's power to summon a familiar to her. Bewitched persons were guaranteed practically boundless amounts of attention, but it was attention of an abnormal kind. The sheer weirdness of bewitchment provided an abundance of gawking fascination and pity but scant amounts of camaraderie with a peer-group. By 9 February, Joan's social isolation was such that it had already become her 'common custom' to descend into talking 'very familiarly' with Smack each evening (I3^{v}). A little of her loneliness spilt sadly into one interlocution wherein he recommended she stay with friends to avoid an especially terrible week of fits, and she responded that she had 'no friends house to go vnto' (L3^{r}). She was fifteen when she and her sisters were first troubled in 1589, and so by early 1593, she was around the age of eighteen. Her illness had dominated her life, and she had been shipped to-and-fro to reside with various family members and friends. She was immobilised by both her

[18] Isabella Whitney, *The Copy of a letter, lately written in meeter, by a yonge Gentilwoman* (London: Printed by Richarde Jhones, 1567), fol. A6r.

[19] Gibson misattributes the target of this taunt as Alice, but it is from an encounter between Joan and Agnes on 10 February: Marion Gibson, *Reading Witchcraft* (London: Routledge, 1999), p. 106.

illness and her entanglement in narrative threads she and her sisters had spent years spinning and which by 1593 were tightening around her. As Lyndal Roper stated: 'coming to understand oneself can involve learning to recognise one's feelings in terms of a theory, psychoanalytic or diabolic'.[20] Joan came to understand her illness and isolation through an ongoing deployment of popular demonological concepts.

Ultimately, a close reading of the actions of Joan and her sisters reveals that they were part of an ambiguous thematic convergence between the characteristics of the witch and the bewitched, between victim and abuser.[21] Like Millar's witches, when the bewitched sisters were overwhelmed by their feelings of frustration and rage, the familiar became a repository for these emotions. As when the weirdness of her condition had left her socially isolated, Joan began having conversations with an invisible coparticipant with whom she developed a fantastical friendship tinged with romance. These intriguing parallels should encourage historians of emotion and witchcraft to be more attentive to the feelings of nonwitch participants in witchcraft narratives.

[20] Lyndal Roper, *Oedipus and the Devil: Witchcraft, Sexuality, and Religion in Early Modern Europe* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 207.

[21] Gibson, *Reading Witchcraft*, p. 106.

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