Witchcraft and the Sons of York

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On 9 December 1484 the recently elected Pope Innocent VIII (Giovanni Battista Cibo, died 1492), alarmed by the fearful growth of witchcraft, addressed a Bull, *Summis desiderantes affectibus*, to the German Dominican Inquisition Fathers, Jakob Sprenger and Heinrich Kramer, requesting them to prepare a detailed study of the entire ‘perilous heresy’ of witchcraft so that the evil might be eradicated. Detailing fearful crimes and abominations, he granted fresh powers to the two Dominicans who were enjoined to shrink not from drastic penalties should milder measures fail. In 1487 they produced their *magnum opus*, *Malleus Maleficarum*, ‘The Hammer of Female Witches’, which for at least two centuries remained the standard authority on the subject. Their researches revealed a truly impressive number of sexual crimes and, socially and historically, the treatise remains important. When published it gave a fearful impetus to the persecution of witches. Yet this Bull of 1484 was but the latest of a long line of papal ordinances attacking the problem.

Throughout the medieval period, and for some time after, the belief in witchcraft, sorcery, conjuration, however the supposed power to produce effects or influence events be named, was universal, not only among the masses for whom it may have provided opportunity for a defiant perversion of Christian worship and a rejection of its restraints, but also among the educated, the Law and the Church.

Rarely, however, is witchcraft, with which medieval and early Renaissance men were so obsessed, seriously considered by historians of the period, including those specializing in that very fifteenth century which was so preoccupied with this ‘scourge’. It was clearly an important element in the intellectual climate of the period.

Students of the Wars of the Roses should note that accusations of witchcraft and sorcery were levelled, at times successfully, in every reign, whether of York or of Lancaster, against members of the ruling royal family. Two of York’s surviving sons made accusations of witchcraft against each other. The third, Richard of Gloucester, levelled the accusation against the wife, the mother— in—law and the mistress of his brother Edward. Nor, as we shall see, did the Tudors hesitate to use the charge. Indeed Henry VIII used it to destroy the most eminent of those Plantagenet descended nobles whose very existence the Tudors so resented.

Before going on to these matters we will start with charges of witchcraft in the reign of Henry VI. In 1432, Walter, Lord Hungerford, Constable of Windsor, brought before the Privy Council three persons suspected of sorcery within his jurisdiction. These were Margery Jourdemain, a married woman, John Verley, a
cleric, and John Ashwell, a Crutched Friar. All were eventually dismissed, giving
sureties. Nine years later Eleanor Cobham, Duchess of Gloucester, was arrested
on suspicion of treason. It is possible that enemies of her husband, Humphrey,
Duke of Gloucester, the King's uncle, were responsible. However this may have
been, the first move was the arrest of a member of the Duke's household, Roger
Bolingbroke, an astrologer, 'for werchyrye of sorcery against the King' by casting
the duchess' horoscope to ascertain her chances of a throne and plotting to secure
this for her by bewitching to death the King by the orthodox method of melting
the king's waxen image. Implicated were Thomas Southwell, a canon of St.
Stephen's, Sir John Hume, priest, and William Woodham. Also charged was
Margery Jourdemain. The charge proved fatal and Margery was burned at
Smithfield on 27 October 1441. Bolingbroke, who had been compelled to ask
pardon at St. Paul's Cross, was hanged at Tyburn, headed and quartered, the
portions being displayed as a deterrent against treason combined with witchcraft.
Southwell died in prison. The Duchess was brought before the Bishops of London,
Lincoln, and Norwich, who found her guilty of high treason and sorcery, and
condemned her to do penance. On Wednesday and Friday she was accompanied by the Mayor and the Sheriffs. She was then imprisoned for life. The
possibility that Richard, Duke of York, father of the Yorkist Kings, intended to
rescue her in 1450 has been suggested by R. A. Griffiths.

Under the Yorkist Kings we find Jacquetta, Duchess of Bedford, daughter of
Pierre de Luxembourg, Count of St. Pol (in Artois) and Ligny, widow of the
recently executed Earl Rivers and mother of Elizabeth Woodville, being accused
of sorcery in 1469. It may be noted that the lady's family had been concerned in
another, more celebrated, case of witchcraft. Her father's brother, John de
Luxembourg, Count of Ligny and Captain-General of Picardy, was the
Burgundian leader who sold Joan of Arc to the English who were then governed
in France by John, Duke of Bedford. A theory that Joan, convicted of witchcraft,
escaped the pyre on 30 May 1431 assisted by the then Duchess of Bedford, and
the Bishop of Beauvais, has been advanced by the French writer, Maurice
David-Darnac. Be that as it may, Bedford (whose own stepmother, Queen Joan
of Navarre, was once accused of dabbling in witchcraft), Warwick, and the
Inquisitors were absent from the official platform that day, but another of
Jacquetta's uncles, Louis de Luxembourg, Bishop of Thérouanne, was present. On
20 April 1433 Jacquetta became Bedford's wife at the age of seventeen. Soon after
Bedford's untimely death, Jacquetta married, secretly and without licence, Sir
Richard Woodville, an extraordinarily handsome member of Bedford's household.
Her family were disgusted.

Jacquetta was accused in 1469 by Thomas Wake of Blisworth (a near
neighbour in Northamptonshire, and a supporter of the Nevills) at Warwick
where Edward IV was then held captive following his opponents' victory at
Banbury. Wake produced an image of a 'man of armes' made of lead, broken in
the middle and fastened with wire, which he claimed had been made by Jacquetta
to use with witchcraft and sorcery. There were two other figures, one representing
the King and the other the Queen. In January at London, the King and some of
his Council cleared Jacquetta of these charges as the witnesses, Northamptonshire
men, failed to support Wake. This was predictable as the political situation had changed. An exemplification under the Great Seal was granted to Jacquetta, the Chancellor (Stillington, himself accused of heresy and sorcery in 1487) being present, as were Warwick, his brother the Archbishop of York, and Lord Scrope of Bolton, all lately the king's captors, among the lords of Edward's 'grete counsail'. The king's brothers were not present.5

Edward IV himself is said to have been helped by witchcraft in 1471, by the manipulation of the weather by Friar Bungay, astronomer and necromancer. He was believed to have by enchantments prevented Margaret of Anjou from crossing the Channel to assist Edward's enemies in 1470 and to have hampered the Lancastrians by mists and other impediments at Barnet, in 1471.6

In 1477 George, Duke of Clarence, asserted that his wife Isabel, the kingmaker's daughter, had been poisoned by the elderly Ankarette Twynyhoe, one of his wife's gentlewomen, and secured her death for the supposed crime. Hanged with her was one John Thursby of Warwick who was charged with having poisoned Clarence's infant son. Clarence seems to have been convinced that Ankarette had been suborned by the Woodvilles or by Edward IV. As if suspicious of poison, he thenceforth ostentatiously refused food and drink at court. On the other hand, an Oxford clerk, John Stacy, being accused in 1477 of having attempted to murder Richard Lord Beauchamp by sorcery implicated one Thomas Burdett, a member of Clarence's household in his confession. Charged with spreading treasonable writings and of attempting to procure the King's death by necromancy, Burdett was tried and condemned. Both Stacy and Burdett were hanged on 20 May 1477. Clarence soon retaliated with defiant actions. He sent his servants throughout the realm to declare that the King 'wroght by Nygromancye, and used Craft to poyon his Subgettes' among other crimes. He also impugned Edward's legitimacy, and the validity of Edward's marriage. The accusations of sorcery made by each brother against the other may be found in the Rolls of Parliament. Following the arrest of Clarence, Richard of Gloucester appears to have pleaded in vain for his brother's life. He was not to forget the circumstances of Clarence's death.7

As King, Richard, or his Parliament, attainted the Cambridge necromancer Thomas Nandyke, a supporter of Buckingham, or perhaps in fact of Margaret Beaufort. Nandyke's name was linked with Morton, and Kelly has stated that he knows of no direct evidence associating Morton with a witchcraft plot against Richard III.8 He cites Professor Russell Hope Robbins who says that Morton, the Countess of Richmond, and other Lancastrians, were tried for using sorcery in 1483. Professor Robbins admitted to Kelly that he was unable to locate the source for this statement. Robbins' source may be Buck who states: 'In the Parliament Anno I. Richardi tertij there was accused and attainted of sorcerie and such other devilish practices, Doctor Lewis, Doctor Morton, William Knevitt of Buckingham, the Countess of Richmont, Thomas Nandick, of Cambridge Conjurer, with others; ...'9 The passage continues with the reported poisoning of Edward IV by Morton and 'a certain Countess' referred to above. According to Buck an Earl was also accused—Rivers? Buck's statement, which is a very free rendering of the Act of Attainder of 1484, is not strictly accurate, since neither the Countess of Richmond nor 'Doctor Lewis' was attainted.10 According to Vergil, Richard, when Protector, accused 'that sorceress Elizabeth the queen, who with
her witchcraft hath so enchanted me that by the annoyance thereof I am dissolved'. The same narrative contains a passage in which Richard subsequently questions whether the practices were rather those of Hastings. More makes the Protector accuse both the queen and 'Jane' Shore, the mistress of the late king and of Dorset and of Hastings. Mistress Shore's public penance for sorcery (for harlotry according to Kendall) was remarkably similar to that imposed upon Eleanor Cobham, and upon other women accused of witchcraft.

More serious and explicit were the charges of witchcraft contained in the Act of Titulus Regis which rehearsed Richard III's title. After describing the late King's 'ungracious pretensed marriage, as all England hath cause to say,' with Elizabeth Woodville, and the subsequent deterioration in the government of the realm, the Act recites how 'the said pretensed marriage ... was made of great presumption, without the owyng or assent of the lords of this land and also by sorcery and wichecrafte, committed by the said Elizabeth and her moder, Jacquetta, Duchess of Bedford, as the common opinion of the people and the publique voice and fame is through all this land; and hereafter, if and as the case shall require, shall bee proved suffyciently in tyme and place convenient. And here also we consider how that the said pretensed marriage was made privaty and secretly, with edition of banns; in a private chamber, a profane place, and not openly in the face of Church, aftre the lawe of Godde's Churche, but contrarie thereunto, and the laudable custome of the Churche of England'. The Act then goes on to note that Edward stood troth plight to one Dame Eleanor Butteler. Here, then, it is clearly proclaimed that through the sorcery of Elizabeth Woodville and her mother, the 'pretensed' marriage was made. Let us therefore examine more closely the circumstances surrounding this marriage.

A clear and available account of these events (citing Fabyan) is given by Dr. Charles Ross in his biography of Edward IV. On his way north to meet the threat from the Lancastrians in Northumberland Edward stopped at Stony Stratford on 30 April 1464. Very early next morning he slipped away from his entourage, no easy matter for the King, of all men, and in view of what followed, presumably alone, and rode over to Grafton, about five miles away, the home of Richard, Earl Rivers and his wife, Jacquetta, Duchess of Bedford. There, that same morning—and it must have been a very sudden decision—the first day of May, in the presence of Jacquetta, the officiating priest, and perhaps three others, he married Jacquetta's eldest daughter, Elizabeth Woodville, widow of Sir John Grey. Immediately afterwards the King, presumably with his bride, went to bed for a short time. Then he returned to Stony Stratford, pretending that he had been out hunting, and complaining sorely of fatigue, again went to bed. Soon afterwards he returned to Grafton for three (possibly four) days, Elizabeth being brought secretly to his bed each night. He then continued his journey to the North. In the event his absence from the field was of no advantage to the Lancastrians who were defeated by that excellent commander, John Nevill, Earl of Northumberland, at Hexham on May 15.

At first sight these proceedings appear harmless and innocently romantic, even if politically disastrous and rather furtive, and here we may recognize the experienced hand of Jacquetta. But let us consider further the significance of the time, date and setting of Edward's adventure. We have seen that Edward halted at Stony Stratford on 30 April, St. Walpurga's Eve. This is the Walpurgisnacht of
Goethe's Faust, one of the four Grand Sabbaths of the Witches' Year. These were held on 2 February (Candlemas), 30 April (Walpurgnacht), 1 August (Lammas) and 31 October (Hallowe'en). The sorcerers went to the sabbath about midnight or a little before, the proceedings continuing until cock-crow. In Central Europe signs of the cross were painted on doors and herbs offensive to witches, such as marjoram and gilly-flower, were hung on Walpurgnacht, St. Thomas' Eve and Midsummer. In Bohemia on St. Walpurga's Night the peasants, as recently as 1925, strewed brambles and thorns on lintels, and by cowsheds and pens. The rustics of Silesia also dreaded this night, removing fireplace utensils and securing the broom, forks and rakes. In short, country folk stayed within, shutters fastened, until cock-crow. This would greatly assist the unobserved passage of a lone night rider.

The proceedings of the sabbath as revealed in confessions vary in detail according to period, nation or district, even class and temperament. By the sixteenth century the rites were, broadly speaking, as follows. The celebrants rode to the sabbaths on goats, sticks, etc.; the cross was trampled underfoot (reminiscent of the ceremonies for which the Templars suffered); they were rebaptized in the Devil's name; they gave their clothes to the Devil; they kissed his private parts behind in submission and homage; they danced in circles back to back always treading to the left (an important part of the ceremony); the mass was parodied and the liturgy burlesqued. The leader of the sabbath (the 'Devil') sometimes appeared in animal disguise, as a bull, cat, above all as a goat. The queen of the sabbath, the witch ranking first after the local 'Master', was usually the most experienced of the ladies. The local 'experts' would arrive to the number of thirteen, the 'master' and twelve subordinates, forming a 'coven'. It may here be noted that, as Sinistrari and others relate, novices had first to conclude with the demon, or some wizard or magician in his place, a witnessed pact on enlisting in the Devil's service, receiving in turn his promise of honours, riches and carnal pleasures.

The prevailing mood at the sabbath was hilarious and often frenzied. The sceptical Reginald Scot observed in his The Discoverie of Witchcraft (1584) that some alleged cases of possession were faked—'Lecherie covered with the cloak of witchcraft'. Many were drawn to these coarsely orgiastic rites believing that thus carnal satisfaction could be obtained without delay, and with a greater number than otherwise likely.

Grand (and lesser) sabbaths were held in a variety of conveniently remote places. The proximity of a stream was thought desirable. In Germany the Brocken, highest point of the Hartz Mountains, attracted witches from as far as Lapland and Norway, while in Sweden the blockula, a meadow, was the meeting place. In England, market crosses were among the favourite rendezvous of witches and warlocks. The English equivalent of the Brocken was, according to Summers, the Wrekin, presumably the hill which lies little more than twenty-five miles to the north of Ludlow where Jacquetta's son, Anthony Woodville, had the guiding and upbringing of his nephew, Prince Edward. Among the places regarded as suitable for the holding of sabbaths was 'an open waste beneath some blasted oak'. Local tradition states that Edward IV and Elizabeth Woodville first met under the tree still known as 'the Queen's Oak', the hollow trunk of which
survives in a hedgerow between the parks of Purdy and Grafton. The sabbaths were, however, occasionally held in some sizeable private house.

Remembering the description of Edward’s night ride, and that of the King’s irregular and profane, ‘pretended’ marriage given in Titulus Regis, it is clearly apparent that the young king, one of our history’s notable voluptuaries, on a date of obvious significance, and in circumstances and company which were, to put it mildly, dubiously, entered into a form of marriage which may well have been precisely what Titulus Regis claims, a marriage made by ‘sorcerie and wichecraft, committed by the said Elizabeth and her moder’ in a ‘profane place’ and contrary to the law of ‘Godde’s churche’. Even the fatigue of which Edward, a young man of exceptional physique, complained so sorely acquires an added significance when one considers the orgiastic nature of the rites to which he may have been introduced.20

The Yorkist brothers’ preoccupation and involvement with witchcraft is not an isolated phenomenon. In addition to those already recited, many instances of royal involvement with sorcery are documented. A few examples may be given here.

In 1492 Henry VII’s death was planned in Rome by conspirators led by Sir John Kendall, Prior of the Order of St. John of Jerusalem and England’s premier baron. They enlisted the aid of Spanish astrologers, one of whom prepared a magic ointment for the purpose. Nothing came of the plot, largely because of the unreliability of Kendall’s French servant, Bernard de Vignolles.21

The greatest noble in the kingdom, Edward, Duke of Buckingham, was in 1521 condemned to death for having, according to his treacherous chaplain, Delacourt, sent the said Delacourt to a Mage, Dom Nicholas Hopkins of Hinton Charterhouse in Somerset, to discover Buckingham’s chances of attaining the crown. This had been done in 1513, the year in which Richard III’s nephew, Suffolk, the White Rose claimant, was executed. Buckingham had also unwisely accused Wolsey of being an idolator and sorcerer. On the day of Katherine of Aragon’s funeral, Henry VIII remarked in confidence that he had made his second marriage to Anne Boleyn ‘seduced by witchcraft’.22 This, and from a Tudor, is uncannily reminiscent of the condemnation of Edward IV’s marriage as stated in the recapitulation of Richard III’s title, Titulus Regis, in 1484.

In 1541 Walter, Lord Hungerford, was beheaded for ‘procuring persons to conspire that they might know how long the king’s Grace should live’. In that year an act was passed whereby such practices, including witchcraft, invocation, conjuration of spirits and the like, were considered felony. Overthrowing calvaries and roods were among the offences. Not surprisingly therefore the statute was repealed within six years...

The events involving witchcraft which led to the execution of Clarence were closely paralleled in the year following his death in Scotland. In 1479 John Stewart, Earl of Mar and brother of James III, was accused of practising magic to shorten the King’s life. James’ hatred for his brother has been attributed to a prophecy uttered by a Flemish astrologer, one Andrew, favoured by the King, or by certain witches trusted greatly by James. A dozen women and several wizards were burned at Edinburgh for having in Mar’s service roasted a wax effigy of the King.23 With Mar (who may have been murdered in prison in 1479 by order of the King) was arrested his elder brother, the Duke of Albany. Albany escaped to
France. In 1482 he assisted Richard of Gloucester in the latter’s Scottish expedition and in 1484 he left England to invade Scotland, but was defeated and fled again to France. The Scots appear at this earlier date to have been more ready than the pre-Tudor English to inflict the penalty of death by burning for witchcraft and treason. Later in 1537 the beautiful Janet Douglas, Lady Glamis, was also sent to the pyre on suspicion of having attempted the King’s life by poison and charms.24

Turning to Europe we may note that Faust, one of the most famous figures in the history of witchcraft, was a contemporary, or near contemporary, of Richard III and the first Tudors. Born of poor parents at either Knittlingen near Wurtemburg or Roda near Weimar, an uncle’s legacy enabled him to study at Cracow where he began to study witchcraft. In the opinion of Summers, Johann Faust, who took the degree of bachelor of divinity at Heidelberg in 1509, may be identical with Georgius Sabellicus, Faustus junior. As plain George, Faust is better documented. By 1507 this restless and boastful necromancer, philosopher, sorcerer, had been compelled to flee the town of Kreuznach. His charlatanry at Erfurt was noted in 1513. In 1528 Dr George Faust of Heidelberg was thrown out of Ingoldstadt for suspected sorcery. By 1544 he was dead, and his death was believed to have occurred violently at a wayside inn in 1538, his soul having been carried off by the Devil during a violent mountain storm.25

Another near contemporary was Cornelius Agrippa von Nettesheim, born at Cologne in 1486, and reputed an expert magician when, only twenty—two years of age, he was confidential secretary to the Emperor Maximilian. He was forced in 1518 to leave Metz (for long the home of the exiled nephew of Richard III, Richard de la Pole, died 1525), of which free town he had been made orator and advocate, because of the opposition of the Dominicans and Franciscans. His greatest mistake was to write De Occulta Philosophia. He was eventually hounded from one city or state to another, dying in obscurity. The archives of Metz, be it noted, contain a long list of executions for witchcraft between 1482 and 1488.26 It should also be remembered that in 1486 it was Maximilian who had taken the Inquisitors Sprenger and Kramer under his especial protection and required all of his subjects to aid them in their mission.

In Spain, the infamous Tomas de Torquemada, a Dominican, was made Inquisitor-General of Castile by Ferdinand and Isabella in 1483. As witchcraft and sorcery were in Spain merged in the crime of heresy, official records of prosecutions for witchcraft are rare, but doubtless many of the nine thousand or so wretched victims of his inquisitorial zeal were suspected of sorcery.

As for Italy, many of the gangs of outlaws who infested the Campagna near Rome during the sixteenth century were devotees of the Black Arts.27 It is therefore possible that the bandits who robbed Anthony Woodville at Torre di Baccano in 1476 were similarly addicted. Four of these thieves, Germans, were detained and racked for this offence in May 1476.28 It is perhaps unlikely that they would have been able to teach a Woodville much about the Black Arts.

Returning to Richard III, we may in conclusion note that although hostile writers have consistently portrayed him as a cruel tyrant, who obtained the throne by Machiavellian means, cynically fabricating such charges as those of witchcraft in order to remove political opponents, his treatment of those opponents accused of witchcraft compares very favourably in its mildness with
that accorded similar offenders by his two predecessors and by contemporary and later monarchs in England, Scotland, and in Europe.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. The earliest directly concerned with witchcraft was that of 13 December 1258, issued by Alexander IV to the Franciscan Inquisitors. Alexander, who favoured the Franciscans, as one of his earliest official acts, canonized St Clare. Montague Summers, The Geography of Witchcraft (London 1927), pp.524, 579 n.2. For the Bull of 1484, see History of Witchcraft and Demonology (1926), pp. 476–7.
5. Rotuli Parliamentorum, Vol. VI, p. 232; W. E. Hampton, Roger Wake of Blisworth, The Ricardian, Vol. 4, No. 52 (1976), p.8. That the attack on Jacquetta continued during the Reseption is shown by the following entry in the Fine Rolls: In November 1470 Henry Stafford and his wife, Margaret Countess of Richmond, were granted the keeping of all lordships, etc., in Yorkshire, Lancashire, Westmorland and Cambridgeshire, which Jacquetta Duchess of Bedford late held in dower after the death of John late Duke of Bedford sometime her husband . . ., Calendar of Fine Rolls 1461–71, (H.M.S.O. 1949), p. 281.

14. As the secret was well kept Edward must have been alone, and as the King's attendants would as was then customary rise with (or before) the dawn, Edward must have slipped away at an earlier hour. This would have been made more difficult by the fact that the King's party was on its way to oppose the Lancastrians, thus likely to have posted some sort of watch. Possibly Edward was assisted by some confidential friend among his entourage—such as William Lord Hastings.
15. Montague Summers, The History of Witchcraft (London 1926), pp.116–8. The present writer has drawn heavily upon Summers' two works, which are well documented, with copious notes concerning a vast amount of source material. Summers is, however, occasionally credulous, and as a Catholic scholar he is blind to Papal faults and irate in his criticism of Reformation worthies.
16. ibid., p.519 also Summers, The History of Witchcraft, pp.112–113.
20. Witches had a great knowledge of herbs and stimulants. The 'flying' ointment with which they anointed their bodies before placing a stick between their legs upon which to `ride' through the air contained such deadly poisons as aconite, belladonna and hemlock. Professor A. J. Clark considers it possible that such liniments might produce excitement and even delirium. See Margaret Murray, The Witch Cult (1921), Appendix V, pp.279–80, cited by Summers, History of Witchcraft, p.6.
24. Summers, Geography of Witchcraft, p.208, citing Scots Criminal Trials; see also Complete Peerage (1926) vol. V, under Glamis.
25. Summers, *Geography of Witchcraft*, pp.479–81, citing many accounts of Faust's end including one written about six years after that event by the Protestant Johann Gust, *Convivium Sermonum Liber* (1544).

