

## A Man and His Dog

In the fifth chapter of book two of the final edition of his *De Praestigiis Daemonum*, Johann Wier (aka Weyer, 1515-1588) referred to the story about Monsieur, the dog of his teacher Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa (von Nettesheim, 1486-1535).

Having mentioned the book ascribed to Agrippa, in the interest of truth, I will no longer allow a statement that I have read in several different writers to be wrapped in silence – namely, that the Devil, in the form of a dog, had been a companion to Agrippa right up until his last breath, and that he then vanished somehow or other. It never ceases to amaze me that men of such repute sometimes speak, think and write so foolishly on the basis of an idle rumor that had circulated. The dog was black, of moderate stature, and was named Monsieur in French (which means Master); and if anyone knew him well, I did, sice I often walked him on a rope leash when I was studying under Agrippa. He was truly a normal male dog ...<sup>1</sup>

Wier continued to explain that Agrippa had loved his dog very much, had often kissed him and even had him sleep under his bed cover after he had banished his wife. Agrippa hardly ever left his study but he was informed about what happened throughout Europe. People said, news was fed to him by his devilish dog. In truth, Wier asserted, Agrippa conducted a lively correspondence with intellectuals everywhere. Although Wier mentioned that the story about Monsieur was based on an 'idle rumour', *ex inanissimo uulgi rumore*, he did not take such seriously.<sup>2</sup> He also refrained from extrapolating whether there were rumours about a sexual relationship between Agrippa and his dog which may very well have been the case as 'trafficking with demons meant having sex with them'.<sup>3</sup>



- 1 Translation John Shea, in: George Mora (ed.), *Witches, Devils, and Doctors in the Renaissance. Johann Weyer, De praestigiis daemonum* (Binghamton NY 1991), p. 113. The original Latin passage can be found in col. 165 of the 1583 Basel edition.
- 2 The account appeared in Johannes Manlius, *Collectanea locorum communium*; Andreas Hondorff, *Promptuarium Exemplorum*; Wolfgang Bütner, *Epitome Historiarum*; and Zacharius Rivander, *Historien und New Exempelbuch*. See: Rainer Alsheimer, 'Katalog protestantischer Teufelserzählungen des 16. Jahrhundert', in: Wolfgang Brückner (ed.), *Volkserzählung und Reformation* (Berlin 1974), 417-519.
- 3 Leo Ruickbie, *Faustus: The Life and Times of a Renaissance Magician* (Stroud 2009), p. 54.



Wier's sixteenth-century German tale is one of the few non-British stories about a so-called 'witch's familiar', an accompanying spirit in the form of an animal. This story was also told about Faustus, who had a devil/dog called Mephistopheles. Either Faust's dog had attached itself to Agrippa at some point or, what is more likely, the story about Agrippa's dog was written into the Faust tradition.<sup>4</sup> In 1548 the parson Johannes Gast (who died in 1552) wrote about his meeting with Faust:

At Basel I had dinner with him. (...) He led a dog and a horse, I believe them to have been demons, that were ready to follow him to the end. The dog sometimes assumed the likeness of a servant and carried the food, so I was told.<sup>5</sup>

Since Agrippa did not have a horse, at least there were no rumours about one, the two stories do not seem to chime very well. When he adapted his play *The Tragical History of the Life and Death of Doctor Faustus* for an English public, Christopher Marlowe (1564-1593) featured Mephistophiles in the guise of a Franciscan friar (not even a Dominican). The story about the dog became really famous when Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832) worked it into his version of *Faust*, a play written in the late eighteenth century and first published in 1808. Now it had become a black poodle.



Gustav Schlick, *Faust und Wagner auf dem Spaziergang*, ca. 1850.



Kupferstich von Th. Blaschke nach der Zeichnung von Joh. Heinr. Ramberg, 1828.

4 Ursula Brunold-Bigler, *Teufelsmacht und Hexenwerk. Lehrmeinungen und Exempel in der "Magiologia" des Bartholomäus Anhorn* (1616-1700) (Chur 2003), p. 132.

5 Ruckbie, *Faustus*, 200. From: 'Aliud de Fausto exemplum', in: *Sermon Convivalis*, II.

From the perspective of the English familiar, the story about Agrippa's and Faust's dogs tells us at least two things. First: the relation between a witch (female or male) and the devil originated in the 'clerical underworld' and was disseminated in stories about magicians. That is to say that part of the answer to the riddle of the familiar's origin is to be found in the learned notions about raising demons. The magicians involved were men and one of the main issues of this voluntary pact was who controlled whom. Did the magician control the demon or vice versa?<sup>6</sup> Second: the English familiar needs to be seen in this context, which is wider than just England but more specific than just stories about the devil in animal form.<sup>7</sup> The familiar of the female witch was adapted from the demon of the male magician.

Jim Sharpe called the witch's familiar 'a central element in English witch beliefs' but could not explain why this had 'assumed such importance in England but nowhere else'.<sup>8</sup> The solution to this last problem can be found in the Bible and especially in its translations.<sup>9</sup> The passage about the 'Witch' of Endor in the King James Bible went as follows:

Then said Saul unto his servants, Seek me a woman that hath a familiar spirit, that I may go to her, and enquire of her. And his servants said to him, Behold, there is a woman that hath a familiar spirit at Endor. (1 Samuel 28: 7).<sup>10</sup>

The corresponding passage in Luther's Bible of 1545, for instance, has a *Wahrsagergeist* (prophesying or fortune-telling spirit); the early seventeenth-century Dutch translation contains a similar '*waarzeggende geest*'.<sup>11</sup> Since witches and fortune tellers were mostly different people, witches on the continent were not adorned with a familiar. Some of the more learned fortune tellers did indeed resort to spirits. Magicians such as Faustus, however, were not prone to end up in a witch trial. The question is, of course, whether Samuel had been translated into English when the first familiars appeared or whether the term 'familiar' was used in the translation because by the early seventeenth century it had become popular through the many pamphlets reporting witch trials.<sup>12</sup>

A familiar is characterised by its permanent relationship with the magician. It is not precisely a devil who consoles a witch and takes her to the sabbat. But sabbats were rare in England and for English witchcraft researchers the contrast was thus hardly noticeable. This may nevertheless not be the whole story because a creature was needed that the English could call a familiar. In other words, the familiar needed to be conflated with the *imp* to become the figure we know today. I will consider this in my next post.

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6 See among other works chapter 7 of: Richard Kieckhefer, *Forbidden Rites: A Necromancer's Manual of the Fifteenth Century* (Stroud 1977).

7 Cf. Ronald Hutton, *The Witch: A History of Fear From the Ancient Times to the Present* (New Haven/London 2017), p. 262-278.

8 James Sharpe, 'Familiars', *Encyclopedia of Witchcraft* (Santa Barbara CA 2006), p. 347-349; see also his: 'The Witch's Familiar in Elizabethan England', in: G.W. Bernard & S.J. Gunn (eds), *Authority and Consent in Tudor England* (Aldershot 2002), p. 209-232.

9 Rainer Walz, 'Bible', *Encyclopedia of Witchcraft*, p. 117-120.

10 <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=1 Samuel 28:6-8&version=KJV>

11 About the 'witch' of Endor: Charles Zika, 'The Witch of Endor Before the Witch Trials', in: Louise Nyholm Kallestrup & Raisda Maria Toivo (eds), *Contesting Orthodoxy in Medieval and Early Modern Europe* (Basingstoke 2017), p. 167-191.

12 Michael Ostling and Richard Forest, '"Goblins, Owles and Sprites": discerning early-modern English preternatural beings through collational analysis', *Religion*, 44 (2014), p. 547-72.