

The Crown and Cauldron: Body Politics of the King and Witch

Samrat Sharma

PhD Research Scholar
Department of English,
University of Delhi
New Delhi, India
samrat20@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper evaluates Ernst Kantorowicz' claim of two bodies of the King during the medieval ages in Europe. While the king is born with a natural body and blessed with powers through divine grace, the witch functions as a subversive force as she also has a natural body and powers from the devil. Through this paper I attempt to probe the contentious relationship between power and body, and show how certain symbols have the power to either solidify myths as truth or subvert them by declaring them as fictional.

Keywords:

Witch, Mixed persona, Body politics, Symbol and Power

Ernst Kantorowicz in his book *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Mediaeval Political Theology* explains that a king has bodies, one natural and the other by divine grace. The king while a man with a natural body functions with the power of Christ or in the image of Christ. It is these two bodies which make one person which is the king. More importantly, the body politics of the king exists within the framework of Christian mythology. However, another kind of body politics existed during the medieval ages. While the image of Christ has always been associated with Christian values of sacrifice, love, innocence or shepherd leading the herd, Lucifer came to be identified as the fallen angel. The devil was in need of agents on earth to do his bidding. One such agent that the devil used was the witch. Witches were basically women who had made a deal with the devil for powers in exchange for their souls and did his biddings on earth. One can notice that the witch like the king is two people in one body, that is woman in a natural body and a witch by (dis)grace. The witch just like the king exists within the framework of Christian mythology. This paper shall examine the similarities between the body politics of the king and witch as mixed persons (two people existing as one) and various other symbols associated with the two.

The basis of the paper is rooted in the interpretation of body politics. Kantorowicz explains this by using the concept of *persona mixta* or mixed persons. In simple terms this means “blending together of secular and spiritual powers in one person” (Kantorowicz 43). There is a certain status given to the king. However, the question remains that, is the king divine by nature or by grace? To answer this question one must understand the concept of *persona germinate* which suggest that the king is divine by grace. This grace or the powers of the king according to Kantorowicz is given to the king by Christ himself and acts in the image of god by suggesting that, “the king, otherwise an individual man, is in officio the type and image of the Anointed in heaven and therewith of God” (Kantorowicz 48). In this sense the king thus becomes the vicar of Christ.

The debates and documents about the king possessing divine grace appeared around the twelfth century. Around the same time another hysteria which gripped Europe was the presence of evil. Armando Maggi in his book *Satan's Rhetoric: A Study of Renaissance Demonology* traces various transformations in the attitudes of European societies in medieval times. Maggi argues that access to *The Bible* being limited and restricted to the bishops only made the liturgical practices malleable. What Maggi suggests that since the local population was not educated in Latin (and *The Bible* was written in Latin in medieval times), the bishop class could make the

sermons to suit their own purpose. One of the means of controlling/ maintaining the power of the church over people and crown was spreading awareness about evil. The devil, its agents and its existence among people becomes a cause of social anxiety which can be addressed only through Christ and the church. One of the agents of the devil that the church concerns itself with is the witch.

For the reader to understand the concept of witch, it is important to closely examine the medieval practice of witchcraft and necromancy. Witchcraft has had different meaning at different periods of time associated with it. In Ancient Greece and Rome, the practice the practice of witchcraft was not frowned upon. It was used to help with a better crop yield, predicting the future, bearing children or healing livestock. With the advent of Christianity, all practices associated with Paganism and witchcraft was marked as 'demonic'. In Thirteenth century, the church launched a conscious attack on paganism by either prosecuting its practitioners or converting its symbols into the signs of the devil. For example, the devil was modelled on the pagan god Pan with pointed horns and fangs. Brian Levack suggests that Early Modern Europe perceived witchcraft or 'maleficia' as a practice which is harmful and not beneficial. One of the major debates in the fourteenth century Europe was the distinction between 'black' and 'white' magic. While white magic was similar to the practice of the Ancient Greece and Rome, black magic was seen in the light of dark arts primarily undertaken to bring harm to someone. However, the distinction between black and white magic becomes blurred if the act was committed to harm someone in order to protect oneself. Thus, by the fifteenth century witchcraft becomes the main trans-national problem which was to be curbed or even destroyed.

One of the main questions that the reader must ask is how does a woman become a witch? This question is integral to the body politics of when comparing the woman/ witch duality to that of the king. Many works on demonology by King James I and Kramer and Sprenger suggest that witches are part of the social fabric. Further, there is a transformative process associated with becoming a witch. Brian Levack suggests that "the practice of magic by some sort of mechanical, manipulative process" (Levack 28). In this sense the magic or sorcery becomes an acquired skill. This skill is acquired by making a deal or having a 'pact' with the devil. Witches making such deals with the devil can be found in the writings of St. Augustine. However, this deal is not a simple contract. It is not as if women sign away their souls and the devil gave them powers. The pact was more like a negotiation where had to outwit the other while trying to receive more. However, the devil rarely loses the upper hand in the process. For example, Faustus in Christopher Marlowe's play is given an illusion of power rather than mastery

over the devil himself. Often it is seen that women are as more vulnerable to the devil, the evidence of which is seen in *The Bible* and other demonology texts. The devil is able to seduce the women, transform them into witches for a small reward such as small piece of gold and as soon as the pact is made, the gold turns to stone.

It is important to note that the witch just like the king also possesses two bodies (*persona mixta*). The witch is a woman or natural individual who performs certain duties in the society. At the same time when she makes a pact with the devil, she acquires certain skills in exchange for her soul. This pact marks the witch for damnation for eternity. In this sense the witch is immortal by (dis)grace. As discussed above, a witch is to receive some gifts in exchange for her soul. One of the powers of a witch is the ability of flight. This originates from the belief that witches are able to fly to secret locations to attend nocturnal Sabbaths in remote areas. The flight and nocturnal features of the witch is a perversion of the Roman Goddess Diana who would hunt at night. Another power of the witch is metamorphosis. Canon *Episcopi* suggests that witches can change their shape, size and form especially into wolves. It was believed that witches changed into different animals to hunt on their neighbours' animals, infants or cast a spell on their door.

One of the main texts which described witchcrafts and witches was the *Malleus Maleficarum*. Published in 1487 by Kramer and Sprenger, the *Malleus* condemned witchcraft to the level of heresy and anyone accused of practicing it had to undergo a trial. The main text is divided into three texts. Part I is aimed at clerics who deny the existence of witchcraft. Part II describes the actual forms of witchcraft and Part III assists the judges in combating the same. The basic premise of this text is that witches exist because the devil exists. In this manner agency is taken away from women as a supposed pact is signed with the devil, who is able to control the women and their actions. Part II is written in a manner which shifts the focus away from the devil and brings it on women. It suggests that it is not the devil but witches who recruit young women as witches. Old witches may recruit young witches by making something go wrong in their lives so that they would have to consult a witch or by simply introducing young maidens to the devil himself. Part III of *Malleus Maleficarum* deals how to prosecute a witch. This part of the text lays down a step by process on how to detect, torture and get a confession out of a witch. One of the main processes described was how to collect evidence and formally charge an accused. If the accused did not cry at all during the process, she was automatically believed to be a witch. Critics have suggested that many demonology theorists of the medieval age have

arguments favouring discrimination against women. They have had a long tradition in the western tradition of misogynistic writings. However, Brauner proposes a theory on the dualistic nature of the world by suggesting that:

Everything exists in pairs of opposites: God and Satan, Mary and Eve, and men (or virgins) and women. Perfection is defined not as the integration or preservation of opposites, but rather as the extermination of the negative element in a polar pair. Because women are the negative counterpart to men, they corrupt male perfection through witchcraft and must be destroyed. (Brauner 38)

In this world of duality, the witch is a threat to male dominance because she is subversive as she also possesses power. The witch has two bodies one with which she is able to blend and live in society. The other body which she has, she is able to seduce and kill for the devil.

King James I's *Daemonologie* has the same structure as the *Malleus*. It is also divided into three books. Book III deals with the description of the different spirits which trouble men and women. He suggests that witches or the devil use four methods to cause mischief and torment individuals. More importantly King James suggests that the devil acts under the supervision of God. Therefore, demonic forces are nothing but "rods of correction" (Tyson 47). In book I, King James takes about the contract which the devil makes the witches. Philomathes asks, how can any individual be addicted to perform services for the devil? Epistemon responds by suggesting that the devil offers 'trifles' in exchange for their body and soul. Here King James explains that how individuals transform into witches and get their powers. This is accomplished by entering a contract with the devil where the latter tricks the former by offering something basic in return for something far more precious like the soul.

One of the similarities between the body politics of the king and witch is a kind of mark which distinguishes them. In the case of a king, it is a halo, a circle of light which surrounds the head of a holy person or a saint. Kantorowicz describes the halo as a "special mark of distinction indicated that the figure was meant to represent in every respect a continuum, something permanent... beyond the contingencies of time and corruption" (Kantorowicz 79). However, the issue is further complicated when it is applied to a king. The king as a mortal person is not holy, thus does not deserve a halo. On the other hand, the king is a *persona mixta* meaning he is a mixed person that is a natural individual as well as a divine being. The king gets his powers from Christ himself. In that sense, the king and his image is adorned with a halo. The halo has one more function. When halo is given to a person, s/he has to be seen with reference to temporality. Halo has a tendency to remove an individual from time and shift them to what Kantorowicz calls

“living in time without end”. It suggests that the individual never dies and becomes a kind of a ‘prototype’. Similar to this concept is the mark of the witch. When medieval demonologists started discussing witchcraft and its practitioners, they encountered a serious problem: how to recognise necromancers and witches? The solution to this problem was that the all witches bear a mark given to them by the devil. In part III question fifteen of the *Malleus Maleficarum*, the physician is advised to shave off hair from every part of the woman’s body in order to reveal either a mark or an amulet. This would prevent her from either lying about her being a witch or concealing her identity altogether. However, the doctrine contradicts itself about the marking of the witch. In Part II, rubbing of salt on the mark should not make the witch cry. On the other hand, if the presence of a cross does not produce tears, then the witch has to be tortured or killed.

King James I of England wrote *Daemonologie* which is similar to *Malleus Maleficarum* in its treatment of the witches. *Daemonologie* is written in the Socratic method where a conversation takes place between Philomathes and Epistemon. King James attempts to create an educational piece on witchcraft and at the same tries to inform the public about the harmful effects of practicing the same. In Chapter VI, while talking about trial and punishment, the reader is introduced to Agnes Sampson who is supposedly an elder witch facing an inquisition. Upon shaving her hair, it was discovered that Sampson had the devil’s mark on her ‘private areas’. The readers are told that usually the witches are not marked in such places but during Sabbaths the devil does lick the witches in the private areas, thus leaving his mark. There were several problems with this method. One was that many times birth marks or scars from injuries were confused with the devil’s mark. Levack also suggests that many women became victims of the inquisition if a neighbour was jealous of her beauty; a suitor was disappointed after rejection or a relative who sought her share in inheritance. Sometimes even husbands would accuse their wives of witchcraft if they wanted to end their marriage. However, one of the main conditions of a witch trial was that the witch had to convict herself through confession. If there was no confession, the judges had no other choice than to look for the devil’s mark. The devil’s mark here significantly differs from the halo because it lies within the paradox of justice. The paradox of justice is that once a mark on witch has been found she is sent to a torturer so that they can extract a confession out of her. The witch (accused) is tortured through various methods such as starvation, burns, stretching or beatings. Once the torturer has the confession, the witch is produced in front of the judges where she must confess free crime of “her own free will and

without torture” (Levack 121). In this manner the devil’s mark traps the witch in a vicious circle where she cannot escape punishment if she is accused of the crime. However, an important question comes up at this moment which is why did the people in the existence of the witches and witchcraft in the first place?

To answer this question, one has to look at the king. There are certain symbols that establish the king’s power. One such symbol or emblem is the crown. Kantorowicz suggests that there are two kinds of crowns, ‘visible’ and ‘invisible’. The visible crown consists of a golden circle or a diadem which the prince wears. The invisible crown on the other hand is immaterial and consists of all the royal rights and privileges. Connected to the invisibility of the crown is concept of continuity and inheritance. When the father dies, the crown is passed to the son in continuity. Kantorowicz further points out that the father and son is one in this continuity of the crown: -“The oneness of father and son, and there with the very complex idea of identity of predecessor and successor has roots also in the law of inheritance” (Kantorowicz 338). At the same time, Kantorowicz also sees the crown as a relic, an object which survives from an earlier time; which may have some historical significance. The crown in that sense can be seen as a work of fiction. This means if an individual believes in the crown, then the crown has power and thereby the king can exercise his powers. However, if one does not believe in the crown, it becomes fiction. Fiction here suggests that the crown enters the realm of aesthetics or literature. The politics of belief is that any object, be it a relic or a book such as *The Bible* seems fictive. This can be dangerous as it has a subversive strain to it. Fiction has the power to create and break down the myth (myth of power of crown/ state) simultaneously. In this sense the myth of the state or symbols appear as primitive forms of symbols. This is a kind of a myth which cannot easily be superseded by rationalism. Thus, Kantorowicz creates a space where one can be a sceptic in relation to the crown, state and religion.

If Kantorowicz is to be believed then it creates a serious problem for medieval demonologists as well. The reason being that it introduces a certain kind of scepticism in witchcraft as well. The myth of witchcraft and necromancy survives through motifs such as the devil exercising his powers over people through his agents. Those agents are believed to have certain powers such as flight and metamorphosis. Further, they are recognisable through marks on their body. If the general population or the inquisitors begin to question the same motifs then witches cease to become part of reality as claimed by medieval demonologists. What this means is that witches enter the realm of the myth. In that sense, all the texts including the *Malleus Maleficarum* can only be viewed as a work of literature. Levack points out that the texts which condemned witches to torture and death ultimately introduced scepticism as well. Ulrich

Molitor, was a doctor and judge who published *On Witches and Female Fortunetellers* where he questions the ability of the witches to fly or perform any kind of magic. Another way that scepticism was introduced to the practice of witchcraft was during sixteenth century. The learned magi of the age made a conscious effort to distance themselves from the illiterate women of the countryside who were accused of being witches. Another canon of work was by Johann Weyer who in his books claimed that women who confessed of being witches basically suffered from a delusion and should not be prosecuted in any manner. Weyer combined his knowledge of medical sciences as well as the Roman law to prove that the pact made with the devil is not a valid contract. Therefore, all crimes resulting from an alleged pact were impossible. One can see that Weyer uses rationalism to debunk the various myths and beliefs which were created during the witch trials. Lastly, what marked a decline in the witch trials was the legality of the proof. A major debate about natural versus supernatural had begun in the late seventeenth century. The Judges were advised to look at the reasons behind failure of crops and deaths of individuals as natural rather supernatural. A great deal of evidences began to be questioned or rejected altogether. For example, spectral evidence where witnesses would get possessed in presence of the accused was rejected. Children and neighbours were thoroughly examined with latter being questioned for ulterior motives. In seventeenth century, the philosophers also began questioning the power of God itself. This was most apparent in the work of Thomas Hobbes who denies the existence of all non-corporeal entities which includes the witches and devil. This was known as the mechanical philosophy where the physical world was seen as a machine in accordance to certain laws. All these factors questioned the symbols associated with the witch and witchcraft. The witch in that sense exists only if one believes that she does. Otherwise, she exists only in the realm of fiction and is to be treated as a work of literature/ art.

Conclusions

Medieval age witnessed several many debates regarding statehood and power especially related to monarchy and religion. In order to cement the power of the king, certain symbols were needed to accompany the individual that represented the individual himself/ herself. The crown is one such symbol which the general population associates with power. Kantorowicz shows how the crown is not monolithic but visible as well as invisible. It is the invisible and immaterial crown which connects the father to the son as well as gives divine rights to the king. In that sense the

king is not a singular body. He has a natural as well as divine status. The problem arises when one stops believing in the crown. The crown enters the realm of fiction. In case of Charles I (king of England) and Louis XV (king of France), the crown had failed to exercise its power. The fiction broke when both these kings were assassinated respectively.

Similarly, in case of the witch body politics functions allows the transformation of the woman into a witch. A witch consists of a natural individual as well as the skill she has acquired from the devil after making a pact with him. She is immortal by dis-grace. Medieval demonologists treat a witch as a threat to the society as she acts as an agent of the devil. Both the *Malleus* and *Daemonologie* record the transformative aspect of the woman to a witch. The main issue comes up when one begins to question the very nature of the evidences against the witches in the first place. The shift from religion to science and mechanical philosophy mark the birth of rationalism. Rationalism has a tendency to counter or question the myths around religion. Evidences like flight, metamorphosis and spectral possession began to be rejected. Armond Maggi suggests that the main aim of the witch trials was not to simply get rid of the accused witches but to make them confess so that they can be integrated back into the society before they are killed. In this manner an order is restored in the society and the power of the state and church is maintained. When scientific evidences are introduced in the court, it removes church from law, that is to say it demystifies the court system. In a way previous demonology (and law) documents become fictionalised and the courts introduced the possibility that witches exist only if one believes they exist in the first place.

Works Cited

Brauner, Sigrid, and Robert H. Brown. *Fearless Wives and Frightened Shrews: the Construction of the Witch in Early Modern Germany*. University of Massachusetts Press, 2001. Print.

Elliott, Dyan. *Fallen Bodies: Pollution, Sexuality, and Demonology in the Middle Ages*. Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania, 1999. Print.

James, et al. *The Demonology of King James I: Includes the Original Text of Daemonologie and News from Scotland*. Llewellyn Publications, 2011. Print.

Kantorowicz, Ernst, and Conrad Leyser. *The Kings Two Bodies: A Study in Mediaeval Political Theology*. Princeton University Press, 2016. Print.

Levack, Brian P. *The Witch-Hunt in Early Modern Europe*. Routledge, 2016. Print.

Mackay, Christopher S., and Heinrich Institoris. *The Hammer of Witches: a Complete Translation of the Malleus Maleficarum*. Cambridge University Press, 2014. Print.

Maggi, Armando. *Satan's Rhetoric: A Study of Renaissance Demonology*. Chicago: U of Chicago, 2001. Print.

Ruiz, Teofilo F. *The Terror of History: On the Uncertainties of Life in Western Civilization*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2011. Print.

BIO- NOTE

Samrat Sharma is an ethnographic researcher and a PhD scholar in the Department of English, University of Delhi. His PhD thesis attempts to understand the relationship between trauma and childhood, and how it contributes to the formation of gender identity in autobiographies of Indian authors who are transgender. His area of interests also includes medieval demonology, European fairytales and folklore, and Visual retellings of Shakespeare for children.