

THE FAMILIAR ALGORHYTHM

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If it be urged that the action of the potato is chemical and mechanical only, and that it is due to the chemical and mechanical effects of light and heat, the answer would seem to lie in an inquiry whether every sensation is not chemical and mechanical in its operation?

- Samuel Butler, Erewhon, 1872

SYNCHRETIC TENSIONS

The Hedge is the border between village and wild, functioning as a thin place, a portal to the other side. In Medieval Europe, the Hedge was distinct from the simple rows of bushes or trees that separated fields. The Hedge was the limit of control. These thin places are familiar to us even now, just as we still talk of fairy rings and Samhain. Women who lived at the edges of the village would pass over the Hedge often, to gather medicinal herbs and to commune with the nature spirits that had receded into the forests as the Church settled into the village. They were cunning folk, paired with familiars that served as protectors and guides in journeys both practical and spiritual. They wore amber, revered for its mysterious properties, and sacred knives to collect their herbs. Accounts tell of an electricity coursing through them as they moved through these thin places, from home to unknown.

Just as these women moved with skill between places, between the new and the old ways, so to was the Church cunning in its movements, in its absorption of the old traditions. One wonders if the converted were smarter still, hiding their true faith in Catholic customs, for the Church certainly wondered. At particular intervals, their awareness wakened by the more alarming signs of the true spiritual practices of the flock, the Church clamped down on its followers. Certain Saints fell out of favor, dances were banned. Familiars were sought out and murdered. Cats, dogs, crows and hawks captured and killed. Owls, frogs, lizards and goats slaughtered. Even wolves and bears were not spared. And as our myth comes from practice, it was black cats especially that vexed the priests.

An exploding rat population gave wings to the spreading Black Death and fed the split between the Church and the old ways. With the cats largely gone the balance of predator and prey was reduced to a battle between flea and rat and man. Plague clawed at Europe's populace, laying down millions. Fear, desperation, superstition and terror, never in short supply when times were good, bubbled up now into vicious attacks. Perceived self preservation fueled violence against those seen as existing outside the boundaries of the Church, outside the centers of the cities, at the edges of society. These women living along the thin places, now termed witches, were deemed particularly suspicious as they were spared the worst of the Black Death. Some managed to retain their familiars, and while the method was not understood, these familiars kept the rats and fleas away. Those who had been familiar hunters became Witch Hunters.

Wise women bearing the weight of a new name were captured, tortured, and burned alive. It is clear that most of these women were healers and midwives, practicing a system of folk knowledge developed and nurtured over the years and interwoven with an open system of divination that clearly functioned much like psychotherapy today. But at this stage their sacred knowledge became synonymous with devil worship in the eyes of the Church. The effects of their craft was viewed instead as practical malice. Like other groups marginalized in the villages and towns of Europe, they bore eager blame for the torrential deaths. In the face of such directed violence against themselves and their ways, what was to become of the witches in their hedgerows?

THE TELEOLOGY OF THE ALCHEMIST IS GOLD

When the Alembic was invented by (not that) Cleopatra, an Egyptian alchemist and philosopher, it was used initially to conjure up medicines and a little down the line, perfume. We often speak of the five senses and we have a term for those without vision, we call them blind. We have a term for those without hearing, we call them deaf. Each of these has their own culture, and each of these cultures has cultivated their own system of navigation. But, for good reason, there is no common term for he without a sense of smell--is it too rare or painful to consider? The sense of smell seems unimportant, if not an unpleasant burden, until it flees. Then it's real value is found, as direct communication to the amygdala. It is a key to memory pure and simple. Without it, we are lost in a way for which we have no words, no poetry. Perhaps perfume started as a prosthetic memory for those whose sense of smell was slipping away.

(Not that) Cleopatra's cosmetics formed the backbone of *De ornatu mulierum*, a chapter in the Trotula, a 12th century text on women's medicine that was transcribed time and again until all the new authors were men. Her work hidden in the Trotula intersected the rise of the perfume trade, a fact perhaps overshadowed by rumors that she produced the Philosopher's Stone as early as the 3rd Century. The Philosopher's Stone promised the transmutation of the base metal lead into precious metals, gold and silver, like wine into blood, as well as the extension of life. It was a panacea against death.

Was there a connection between the search for youth and the secret concoctions of skin cream made with crushed pearl and shea and Argan oil? Could the Philosopher's Stone extend life in the way perfume amplified memory? What we know now is that Madam C.J. Walker picked up (not that) Cleopatra's mantle almost two millennia later.

When the European alchemists finally gave up on discovering the mysteries of transmutation, they set out in ships to find, rather than synthesize, gold and the secret of eternal youth. This Great Bifurcation split the men into Explorers and Scientists. Isaac Newton was the first of the Science Alchemists, a man rather convinced that metals were alive and who placed the end of the world at 2060.

The Explorer Alchemists transformed the base metal of iron into gold through the Age of Discovery. They set out for Spice, for riches, for the fountain of youth. Precious metals were torn from mountains, soft earth itself was taken, and finally bodies themselves were no longer safe. That our first president wore the teeth of people stolen from (that) Cleopatra's land in his mouth is no coincidence. Discovery was both a lie and a moment of geographical transmutation, of one world multiplying itself against the surfaces of others. But the Saints and dances were cunningly reclaimed in the name of the old ways, by bodies and lands transposed at the end of the sword. The Church cut fresh borders over the ancient homelands. New witches were born from new accusations and new fires. Had the terror of the Plague resulted in an unending cycle of retaliation against any other encountered?

The Fountain of Youth was never located...instead of a map with an X marking its spot, the failed Alchemists rather sheepishly brought back the potato. Even that small concession was but a fleeting victory, a crop that promised sustenance was destined to eventually symbolize famine. Still, the root held promise. Like so many of the poor in Europe, witches were now nourished with the potato. The Alchemists never discovered that potatoes contain an acid which offers several kinds of life extension.

OBJECT-ORIENTED WITCHCRAFT

The Black Death long behind them but now under the persecution of the Church, disparate wise women found themselves connected by a network of inquisition and documentation. The Hammer of the Witches was the most prominent manual concerning their habits. Suddenly the Fetilleria, the Stregheria, the Augurs, the Hecatine, and those without title, found themselves interrogated with details of each other's secrets. Some true, most fantastical. The sudden drop in population caused by the Plague left a surplus of cloth that was used to make paper. Almost overnight a means to record was within the reach of the poorest citizen. Those witches that survived or escaped transcribed their secrets on the now plentiful paper.

How precious a recipe for curing a skin ailment if its price was a woman's burnt flesh? What incantations and sigils could travel from the cells of the Mediterranean to the Nordic coast? Kitchen witches traded recipes under torture, green witches spread characteristics of plants and soil in chains. The secret of flight was clearly misunderstood by the inquisitors. True there was a salve comprised of various mixtures of henbane, mandrake, datura, poppy, belladonna, wolfsbane, Amanita muscaria, and even DMT from toad skins. But applied to armpits it simply allowed for an eased childbirth, a shamanistic journey, or in the case of the Stregheria, it allowed for night battles to be fought under the banner of Diana against threats to crops.

These women had long held the ancient knowledge tighter than the Church, this they had in common with the monasteries of Ireland and the north Atlantic, and the lands South and East of Europe. It is clear to see how bodies of knowledge moved up out of Africa into the Northern Mediterranean and ever east and back and forth over the centuries. The surviving witches scribbled down every bit of their craft, increasingly referencing the Arabic knowledge that came through trade routes as far as the North Sea.

Even their symbol, the pentagram, had bubbled out of Sumeria as the pictogram *ub*, then formed the five points of health to the Pythagoreans. These points traveled east in Ayurvedic medicine and the star was even used by the early Church to symbolize the five senses or the five wounds of Christ. To the witch the points symbolized Earth, Water, Fire, Air and the uppermost was a blurry combination of concepts ranging from Spirit to Ether to a kind of energy.

Convinced by the severity of the burnings that they must be vessels of some deeper secret than even they consciously possessed, the witches began to work within the idea of this energy and power. At the same time they sought to repair the loss of their familiars. At first they made do with a kind of necromancy, perhaps better understood as nostalgic taxidermy. Beloved familiars were exhumed and returned to sacred spaces, even if a few mere bones were located. Elaborate replicas were built around these few parts. Over time they began to largely prefer to create wholly artificial familiars rather than training live animals as they had before the killing began.

Spells whose vocabulary were a set of patterns or instructions for the dialogue with and movement of the artificial familiars was slowly developed. These instructional incantations were increasingly influenced by Muhammad al-Khwarizmi whose writings had been traveling from Baghdad for centuries with the traders. The witches began to organize their incantations into attributes and methods that informed the spiritual guidance they sought. The spells were intermingled with the concept of their fifth element, the mysterious power they associated with amber.

Eventually it became clear to the witches that this power called electricity could be culled from the potato using pieces of different metals and wire then drawn through sigil patterns drawn on paper with charcoal made with ceremonially burnt herbs. In the British isles, the depleted potatoes were viewed with much disdain and were often referred to as *badrys*. This practice was interwoven with sigil making and resulted in a visual language to describe and control the actions of the electricity as it moved through the familiars towards the earth. Some of the older witches found this energy could be driven into the corpse of a familiar and many frogs were posthumously electrocuted as part of the Toad Bone Rite, but increasingly it was used to animate the artificial familiars crafted by each witch in pursuit of a transcendent spirit guide.

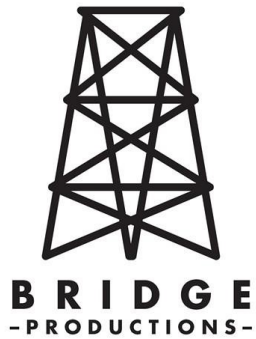
In the coastal areas, these artificial familiars were constructed using twine woven into basket-like animal forms built around bones or feather or fur to somewhat illustrate the idea of the original animal. Set out by the ocean, the twine baskets took on salt and the distinct sections hardened into sparkling crystal forms. The witches saw the strange beauty of these things, harvested under moonlight, and thought that all the burning may have been worth it to drag these half-alive creatures out from the Ocean. Even before the rites of activation the artificial familiars would, as they were cut away from their tethers, sometimes catch the wind coming off the sea and ambulate down the beach, casting off flickering moonlight. The clacking of the salt limbs rising above the sound of the waves was like a baby's first cry, an affirmation of life.

The familiar rites of the witches were certainly witnessed by Luigi Galvani and perhaps Alessandro Volta as the ideas of electricity were beginning to be explored by the Scientists. But perhaps the biggest shock to the witches was the publication of Mary Shelley's investigation of human necromancy. Was she advocating the familiar rites be applied to bodies? Would their craft, could their craft, be used to create synthetic familiars but somehow in human form? Was this the suspicion that may have driven the Church to burn them all those years ago? Had the Church the prescience to detect this as logical outcome of their growing corpus?

As the modern age erupted the witches became very curious about the parallels between their craft and the new languages of logic and control. Between looms and the punch cards that provided mechanical divination. The aesthetic vocabularies that were interspersed in patterns temporal and physical. They took jobs as computers when they were still human and as programmers when they became machines. They worked in factories building core rope memory by wrapping wire, giving it the name Little Old Lady memory. They rejoiced at the trip to the Moon in a vessel full of their weaving. Their familiars grew in complexity, bone and string and wax and salt gave way in part to wire and metal. But strangely similar mechanical creatures with no souls began to appear as well.

Programming was just another type of spell casting, of intention setting. Witches were able to mold algorithms through trance, incantation and execution. They had intuitively grasped that aesthetic vocabularies are eternal, despite their taxonomy. But as midwives to lives both human and artificial they wondered after the purpose of the synthetic humans or even the ethics of soulless familiars. Slowly the old taboo of human necromancy found itself expressed, or perhaps upended, in the growing field of robotics.

The witch, even today, rides the veil, the border, the liminal space between order and wild, analog and digital, between human and machine. Since the burning times she has done it with the companionship of a familiar more likely to be crafted than tamed. But a new question arises, does she, do we, have need of a tutelary mechanism in our own shape to guide us over the hedge?



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