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Ryan P. Mealiffe, University of Washington, undergraduate student, “Familiar Ecology: The Demonization of Spirit Knowledge in Early Modern England and its Ecological Ramifications”

Abstract: During the English witch trials of the mid-sixteenth century to 1735, more was on trial than just the accused humans before the bar. Witch trials also threatened an entire mental landscape, the beings that inhabited it, and their relationships with both the accused and the general populace. This ecological ontology coalesced in the other party on trial: the intersectional helpers known as familiar spirits. Spirits animated the natural world, intermingled with flora and fauna, and impacted many aspects of everyday life, representing a keystone species in popular conceptions of nature in early modern England. The assumption of malevolence present in witch trials and the use of familiar spirits as evidence of witchcraft slowly warped these ambivalent creatures from domestic helpers, companions, and sources of knowledge into malevolent, demonic servants. Drawing from the fields of historical ecology, anthropology, and philosophy, this paper focuses on the conception of the familiar spirits as intersectional beings, environmental agents, and bearers of ecological knowledge, arguing that their demonization marked a turning point in how many English men and women viewed their relationships with other organisms and the environment they shared.

Familiar Ecology:  
The Demonization of Spirit Knowledge in Early Modern England and its Ecological  
Ramifications

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Initiated with the trial of the Chelmsford witches in 1566 and concluding in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century, the English witch trials lasted over one hundred and fifty years, during which time southeast England saw 785 indictments brought against a total of 474 accused witches. However, more was on trial than the accused humans before the bar. Their professions and practices were ruled illicit, their beliefs deemed anti-Christian, and their supernatural knowledge and power judged as demonic and maleficent by both courts of law and by regular English men and women. At stake were the ontologies of popular folklore and the supernatural beings that inhabited this mental landscape. Linking the fates of accused witches to these broader ontological and supernatural realms were familiar spirits, a hybridized and diverse group of supernatural beings that straddled modern conceptions of what is natural and supernatural, human and animal, magic and science. Companionate to human witches, familiars were a species in the broader genus of spirits which constituted a keystone species in the conceptualized ecology of early modern England. Over the course of the trials, magical practitioners, their familiar companions, and the broader genus of spirits to which they belonged, once considered morally ambivalent, were jointly condemned, resulting in a gradual but critical shift in English collective ecological ontology starting in the 16<sup>th</sup> century and the eventual existential rejection of spirits and witchcraft by the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century.

Although it is likely that the origin of the witch's familiar lays in the elite magicians and sorcerers of the Middle Ages, by the early modern period the idea that both cunning folk and witches were assisted by a familiar spirit had entered the popular consciousness and constantly recurred in pamphlet accounts.<sup>1</sup> Familiars might be called imps, demons, fairies, ghosts or spirits and appeared in a variety of forms from animal to human, hybridized, mundane, and fantastic.<sup>2</sup> They were intersectional creatures, "hybrids, not totally animal, nor totally spirit, neither

completely old, nor entirely novel, creating, and created by the narratives of witchcraft that emerged in England.”<sup>3</sup> Whether a familiar was described as a devil, fairy, ghost, or spirit, they all belonged to a larger supernatural world filled with other beings similar to themselves.

The confessions of accused witches’ familiar encounters all follow a similar structure. Magical practitioners commonly encountered their familiars while in a state of economic and psychological stress and are offered supernatural aid by the spirit. The individual, agreeing to make a pact with the spirit, provisioned the spirit with domestic comfort, food and drink, as well as blood, although demon familiars additionally asked witches to renounce their Christian faith and pledge their souls to the devil.<sup>4</sup> The pamphlet accounts detailing the trial of Essex witch Elizabeth Francis in 1566 exemplify a secondary familiar encounter narrative: familiar inheritance. Francis had been given a demon familiar called “Satan... in the likeness of a white spotted cat, and [that her grandmother] taught her to feed the said cat with bread and milk.”

The 1566 account also exemplifies the peculiarly English “animal familiar.” Descriptions of familiar spirits given by early modern English magical practitioners were quite ordinary with a pervading sense of naturalism and only occasionally displaying fantastic traits or conforming to a devilish stereotype. In most instances, familiars would visually resemble ordinary creatures, including humans, and in England specifically, animals. Familiars were believed to shapeshift and appeared in a variety of animal guises ranging from apes, stags, horses, lambs, ferrets, dogs, cat, and mice to birds, bees, spiders, grasshoppers, snails, and frogs. To match their commonplace appearance, animal familiars were given the same types of personal names given to both fairies and pets, reflecting an affectionate and intimate relationship often found between magical practitioners and their spirits.<sup>5</sup> The relationship between English witches, such as Elizabeth Francis, and their animal familiars were notoriously close.

Joan Prentice, accused of witchcraft in Essex in 1589, and her ferret familiar display the symbiotic working relationship and domestic intimacy that supposedly developed between many magical practitioners and their familiars. Joan and her familiar shared an affectionate relationship centered around the sucking of blood. When the spirit first appeared to Joan, she was terrified; however, their relationship quickly improved and soon Joan was calling to her familiar in a similar fashion as one summoning a beloved pet, asking, “Bid, Bid, Bid, come Bid, come Bid, come suck.” On some occasions they even seemed to chat like an old married couple. One night, the ferret asked “Joan, wilt thou go to bed,” and after she had done so, hopped onto her lap, and sucked blood out of her left cheek.<sup>6</sup> A human kind of intimacy was present between a cunning woman or witch and their familiar, and yet they also acted not unlike pets of the time.

Although whether English familiar spirits were illusory or real remains a hotly debated topic in scholarship, the similarities between animal familiars in early modern witchcraft trials in England and common pets of the day suggest that, at least, real animals could easily be mistaken for a spirit, and vice versa. Some scholars, including Walker-Meikle, believe that many of the alleged familiars appear to have been the pets of the accused, citing earlier medieval precedents like the 1324 trial of Dame Alice Kytler from Kilkenny, Ireland, who was visited by an incubus in the shape of a large furry cat, and one of the earliest cases of a cat familiar in an English witch trial, Elizabeth Francis’s large white spotted cat familiar Satan.

The example of Renaissance magus Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa (1486-1535) provides an example of how real animals could be identified as familiars. Agrippa was very affectionate toward his dog, Monsieur, who he allowed to eat beside him and sleep on his bed. Some of Agrippa’s contemporaries, correlating his intimacy with Monsieur and his work on magic, concluded that Monsieur was a familiar demon.<sup>7</sup> The rumors of witchcraft that followed Agrippa

during his lifetime became increasingly virulent after his death when it was rumored that, upon Agrippa's passing, "people noticed a black dog, which he called Monsieur coming out of the room, which went into the Rhone, and was not seen again."<sup>8</sup> Had Agrippa been a poor, old, widowed English woman instead of an influential and wealthy German polymath, perhaps his case would have differed little from those of Elizabeth Francis or Joan Prentice.

Even the diets and living conditions of animal familiars were indistinguishable from pets. Accounts like that of Elizabeth Bennet in 1582, who fed her animal familiars from her milk bowl, parallel fairy superstitions in many parts of Britain. Substances such as ale or milk could be sacrificed to the fairies when poured on springs, trees, and rocks and housewives commonly left bowls of bread, milk, or water in the kitchen overnight to appease domestic fairies.<sup>9</sup> And both of these practices, in turn, reflect the diets of pets, as the standing fee for familiars and other fairies – bread, milk, and ale – were commonplace foods for companion animals. Spirits and pets were even provided similar living conditions. Irish legal texts refer to cats kept indoors by women and allowed to sleep in special baskets or on a pillow on the bed, a practice common in early modern England. Many animal familiars were kept in such baskets, including Elizabeth Francis's cat familiar, which had its own sleeping basket, and Essex witch Margery Sammon's toads "Tom" and "Robin."<sup>10</sup> Even familiar inheritance parallels the gifting of a pet, a common mode of acquiring a pet in the early modern period.<sup>11</sup>

Pets inhabited a very close personal space, being held in their owners' arms or lying by their feet, an association that would not go unnoticed if a woman was suspected of witchcraft. And, at least for dog owners, being bitten was likely part of owning them, a bad habit that could produce injuries easily interpreted as a witches' mark – the location where a familiar sucked the witch's blood.<sup>12</sup> This fact was made even more likely given the kinds of animals taken in by the

lower classes, which were unlikely to be the groomed, passive lap animals of the aristocracy. For example, the aristocracy had expensive, imported Syrian cat breeds with brown and black stripes as pets, while the native grey, striped cats, which show up both in medieval iconography and witch trial records, were cheaper and relatively abundant. Comparing petkeeping and the relationship between women and their pets in the early modern period to the relationship between Joan Prentice and her ferret familiar, it is clear that they share many similarities. The keeping of pets outside of the aristocracy became common during the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries and almost certainly provided models for familiars.<sup>13</sup>

Yet, even vermin and other animals simply in the general proximity of a woman, the domestic sphere, and especially a suspected witch could easily end up being interpreted as a familiar. The practice of “watching” prisoners in mid-seventeenth century trials resulted in the interpretation of a passing rodent as the suspected witch’s familiar.<sup>14</sup> Cunning women periodically used live animals in their healing magic, such as frogs and spiders, which could be either ingested or put onto afflicted parts. Some cunning women even transferred sicknesses from a patient onto an animal, themselves, or inanimate objects.<sup>15</sup> Frogs in particular were abundant in many parts of England and are found in archaeological assemblages from the period.<sup>16</sup> Collecting and keeping frogs for patients would have been fairly easy in rural England. The keeping of live frogs and other animals in containers such as baskets would not, then, seem out of the ordinary given a cunning person’s profession and could explain why frogs, often kept in such containers, appear in witch trial records.

In their relationship with magical practitioners, familiars adopted the practices of keeping and tending for a pet that had solidified by the beginning of the early modern period, but often occupied a working, intimate position rather than a subordinate one. They communicated, co-

evolved, cohabitated, and worked with their human partners. Familiars, therefore, represent a kind of supernatural companion species. Familiars and their magical practitioners, in their long-term companionship, engage at the extremes of natureculture and significant otherness, relating to not just a different species, but a different kind of being altogether.<sup>17</sup> The familiar, like animals, were part of the household and the community and were equally persecuted as accused “witches.” Just as some people have dogs, and the dog has their human, the magical practitioner has a familiar and the familiar has a magical practitioner, a human companion. The pact relationship made with a familiar, then, was reciprocal, symbiotic, and contractual – a working relationship, the moral nature of which reflected the moral disposition of the magical practitioner, often ambivalent or even benevolent in general and definitively malevolent in witchcraft accounts. Familiar assistance came in the form of the skillset necessary to become a magical practitioner – healing, finding lost goods, identifying thieves, divining, and even conversing with the dead and spirits.<sup>18</sup> Through this companionship with the familiar, the magical practitioner gained the agency, power, and knowledge of the spirit, while the spirit was afforded domestic intimacy, food, drink, and on occasion blood.

When considered this way, the acts of the magical practitioner were supposedly as much a result of human agency as familiar agency. Depending on their moral (or amoral) disposition, a familiar could heal, injure, sicken, or kill crops, animals, and humans. They could divine the future, act as mediators between the living and the dead, identify criminals and witches, and were skilled in matters of love. Malevolent spirits could make men impotent, sabotage the fields and domestic activities like the churning of butter or the fermentation of beer. In some cases, they might even cause pestilences, famines, bad weather, and shipwrecks. Familiar spirits held unparalleled knowledge about the world, medicine, astrology, fairyland, and the supernatural.<sup>19</sup>

The entire genus of spirits, or fairies, held an almost omnipresent place in the ecology of the early modern world. The category of animism best defines the ontology of the common people, in which the harsh and unyielding physical world was also an enchanted realm teeming with invisible supernatural entities – of which familiars were merely a notable variety.<sup>20</sup> These entities constantly influenced the natural world and the lives of men. They could answer prayers, guide a housewife’s spinning hand or a husband’s plow-arm, charm crops in the fields or the animals in the barns, bringing good luck and gold, or famine and disease.<sup>21</sup> Thus, any mishaps which occurred around the homestead could be attributed to fairy displeasure. In this way, relationships between fairies and English households have much in common with the Rincón Zapotec, who emphasize reciprocity with supernatural actors and maintenance of social relations with those same supernatural forces to help the household successfully sustain itself.<sup>22</sup> And spirits were not a homogenous group, having various “species” with various names including elves, faunes, puckrels, brownies, siths, Robin Goodfellows, good people, good neighbors, or subterraneans.<sup>23</sup>

With their extensive knowledge of the natural world, fairies could manipulate the rate of natural processes, attract desirable animals, and repel undesirable vermin and predators<sup>24</sup> Fairies were believed to cause and cure most diseases and thus possess unparalleled skills in human health with an extensive knowledge about the use of herbs, plants, stones, minerals, creatures, beasts, and astrology.<sup>25</sup> In these ways and more, fairies were believed to be able to use their supernatural powers to influence almost any aspect of the natural world, including the lives of humans. Consequentially, people were anxious to be in their favor.

This diverse genus of beings was associated with the natural landscape, particularly hills and subterranean caves that concealed the great halls of *elfhame*. Fairies danced in the woods,

skies, and waters, in mines and stars, and even lived in domestic settings where brownies would help clean houses and potentially leave silver in shoes in exchange for bread and milk.<sup>26</sup> As animist beliefs hold, such spirits were a part of every crack and crevasse of the universe, they populated the “middle” realm of earth as well as the subterranean and astral planes and had a part in almost every aspect of ecology. From the failure of a crop to the putting-out system and the spawning of “fairy rings” of mushrooms, these relationships constituted a kind of spiritual ecology, one that would have been familiar to many English men and women.

But familiars did not just live among animals, they also interacted with them. Animals were essentially indistinguishable from animal familiars, were victims of *maleficium* themselves, were herded and repelled by spirits, and acted as integral parts in the magic and healing of the magical practitioner and her familiar. They were also guardians against malicious spirits. One function of a woman’s pet beyond companionship, especially for dogs, was to guard against the fairies while she was in labor. In Old Irish law, if someone killed a woman’s pet dog, they had to compensate for the pet by hiring a priest to read scripture at her bedside.<sup>27</sup> These laws stemmed from a widespread belief that, without the guardianship of the pet, fairies would exchange the healthy child for an inferior replica known as a “changeling” (sickly or deformed children) in the womb, spiriting away the real child to fairyland.<sup>28</sup> Particular spirits might assume the form of a pet, similarly fulfilling the function of companionship and protecting the “owner” and others against maleficent fairies and their magic, or in the case of witch’s familiars, subverting this second function. Animal familiars, then, were not just at the intersection of natural and supernatural, but at a twilight zone between human, animal, and spirit. They are evidence of a permeable boundary between humans and animals and echo a debate over the nature of animals and animal-human relations.<sup>29</sup>

Perhaps the most revealing example of human-animal-spirit interaction is the case of Saint Guinefort, a greyhound mistakenly killed after protecting its master's baby from a snake. Local women who worshipped the animal saint would bring their changeling children to the place of the greyhound's death to force the fairies to take back their sick changeling children and return the real, healthy children. Abandoned by their mothers as part of the ritual, the children were left as prey to passing wolves or "the devil in disguise." The place of the saint's death became a site of interspecies interaction, a geographical location and ecological niche where an animal mediated between humans and fairies, between the middle and lower realms, between "natural" and "supernatural" environmental agents. The medieval and early modern world was enchanted, "in that natural and supernatural worlds (and niches) coexist, equally and simultaneously."<sup>30</sup>

During the almost two centuries of witch trials in England, the magical practitioners on trial and their familiars were effectively "demonized" by their neighbors, elite prosecutors, and themselves.<sup>31</sup> A cunning woman stepping into the "reductionist glare" of the law courts would have had "little chance of escaping the charge of covenanting with Satan." Even if she did not consider herself to be in a relationship with a fairy, which could be a familiar, which could itself be a devil, which could be *the* Devil, it would not have been all that difficult for an angry community or a zealous prosecutor to persuade her that it was so.<sup>32</sup> The accusations of witchcraft brought against these cunning women "demonized the remedies that they peddled as magic and superstition, illicit natural knowledge acquired by contract with forces beyond their control."<sup>33</sup> The legal demonization halted when Parliament broke with past precedent, passing the witchcraft act of 1735, which repealed the earlier witchcraft acts and changing the charge of witchcraft from treason to fraud. Rather than characterize familiars as malevolent beings, the legislation

rejected the existential possibility of spirits altogether, malevolent or benevolent. And by the late 17<sup>th</sup> century, a stark realism can be detected in the attitudes of the aristocracy towards familiar beliefs. Dr. Harvey, physician to Charles I, claimed that ‘being at the Newmarket, he called on a reputed witch, and ingratiated himself by pretending to be a wizard, persuading her to introduce her imp, which she did by calling a toad from under a chest and giving it milk.’ After sending her away, Harvey seized the animal, cutting it open with a dissecting knife, demonstrating it to be “nothing but a plain natural toad.”<sup>34</sup>

The gradual dissipation of legal recognition of familiars denotes an ontological shift that ultimately resulted in a wide elimination of stories of non-malevolent animal sages, guides, and protectors from English folklore, since these too closely resembled familiars. Animals and pets, easily and often misinterpreted as animal familiars, also lost of much of their spiritual significance, which may have opening the way for their increased exploitation.<sup>35</sup> Ordinary English men and women would have begun to think about natural phenomena and systems, once believed to be the handiwork of spirits, in different terms. The witch trials changed the English ecological ontology by pushing spirits to the fringes of the environment and altogether removing the niches, eco-spiritual systems, sacred spaces, and animist ontology that had been mentally constructed since pre-Christian times. Never again would spirits feature so heavily in the ecological conception of the English landscape.

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- <sup>1</sup> James Sharpe, *Instruments of Darkness*, 71-72.
- <sup>2</sup> Emma Wilby, *Cunning Folk and Familiar Spirits*, 3.
- <sup>3</sup> Helen Parish, "Paltrie Vermin, Cats, Mice, Toads, and Weasils", 11.
- <sup>4</sup> Emma Wilby, *Cunning Folk and Familiar Spirits*, 92-96.
- <sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, 63.
- <sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, 82-83.
- <sup>7</sup> Kathleen Walker-Meikle, *Medieval Pets*, 61.
- <sup>8</sup> Boria Sax, "The Magic of Animals: English Witch Trials in the Perspective of Folklore," 318-319.
- <sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, 109-111.
- <sup>10</sup> Kathleen Walker-Meikle, *Medieval Pets*, 4, 13; Emma Wilby, *Cunning Folk and Familiar Spirits*, 109.
- <sup>11</sup> James Sharpe, *Instruments of Darkness*, 71.
- <sup>12</sup> Kathleen Walker-Meikle, *Medieval Pets*, 47, 58.
- <sup>13</sup> Boria Sax, "The Magic of Animals: English Witch Trials in the Perspective of Folklore," 327-328.
- <sup>14</sup> Helen Parish, "Paltrie Vermin, Cats, Mice, Toads, and Weasils", 5.
- <sup>15</sup> Emma Wilby, *Cunning Folk and Familiar Spirits*, 32-41.
- <sup>16</sup> Aleksander Pluskowski, ed., *Breaking and Shaping Beastly Bodies*," 2.
- <sup>17</sup> Donna Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness*
- <sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, 60-80.
- <sup>19</sup> Emma Wilby, *Cunning Folk and Familiar Spirits*, 21.
- <sup>20</sup> Emma Wilby develops the analogy between indigenous shamanistic belief systems and practices and familiar beliefs and practices. That European familiar beliefs were folkloric nature and grounded in an animist belief system synchronous with Christianity is assumed here based on Wilby's ethnographic argument. For more information, see Emma Wilby, *Cunning Folk and Familiar Spirits*, 50-146.
- <sup>21</sup> Emma Wilby, *Cunning Folk and Familiar Spirits*, 8.
- <sup>22</sup> Roberto González, "The Conceptual Bases of Zapotec Farming and Foodways," 16.
- <sup>23</sup> Emma Wilby, *Cunning Folk and Familiar Spirits*, 16.
- <sup>24</sup> Sophie Page & Brigitte Resl, ed., "Good Creation and Demonic Illusions: The Medieval Universe of Creatures" In *A Cultural History of Animals*. Vol. 2, "In the Medieval Age," 53-54.
- <sup>25</sup> Emma Wilby, *Cunning Folk and Familiar Spirits*, 21.
- <sup>26</sup> Emma Wilby, *Cunning Folk and Familiar Spirits*, 18-19.
- <sup>27</sup> Kathleen Walker-Meikle, *Medieval Pets*, 26-27.
- <sup>28</sup> Emma Wilby, *Cunning Folk and Familiar Spirits*, 151.
- <sup>29</sup> Helen Parish, "Paltrie Vermin, Cats, Mice, Toads, and Weasils", 2-3.
- <sup>30</sup> Agustín Fuentes, "NATURALCULTURAL ENCOUNTERS IN BALI," 608.
- <sup>31</sup> Emma Wilby, *Cunning Folk and Familiar Spirits*, 123.
- <sup>32</sup> Emma Wilby, *Cunning Folk and Familiar Spirits*, 119-120.
- <sup>33</sup> Helen Parish, "Paltrie Vermin, Cats, Mice, Toads, and Weasils", 10.
- <sup>34</sup> Emma Wilby, *Cunning Folk and Familiar Spirits*, 170-171.
- <sup>35</sup> Boria Sax, "The Magic of Animals: English Witch Trials in the Perspective of Folklore," 317.