

# The Otherness of the Familiar: Witchcraft, Land Use Policies, and Husbandry Manuals in Early Modern England

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## Abstract:

Witchcraft familiars have a long and varied interpretive history. This article suggests the connection of the familiar tradition in England to two prevalent social developments during the period: changing land use policies and the development of husbandry manuals that emphasize how one ought to take care of a household. First, English land policies were undergoing significant change during this period as normal relations between farmers and lords had begun to change with the increased use of enclosures, engrossing, privatization, and mensuration of land. Land was becoming a resource that could be exactly measured, demarcated, plotted, mapped, and redistributed as the increasing number of surveyors, surveyor manuals, and calls by Elizabeth I to reorder and consolidate weights and measurements show. Second, good husbandry manuals proliferated from the early 1500s into the 1640s, which not only affirmed traditional hierarchies with nobility at the top, but also offered “sage” advice on proper gender roles to best manage a household to be economically viable. The English familiar tradition substantively violates both, and the familiar tradition can be explained through the lens of these dual social conflicts that play out in an “othered” space of witchcraft.

**Keywords:** familiars, witchcraft, land use, husbandry manuals, early modern magic

## Situating the Familiar in the Critical Tradition

Early Modern witchcraft familiars—small, insignificant creatures that facilitate a pact with the devil—seem provincial compared to the nefarious participation of witches in grand covens, a practice articulated by Kramer & Sprenger of *Malleus Maleficarum* fame (Bergin, Broedel, Roberts, & Naphy 2004, 60; Mackay & Institoris 2009). But familiars, the intermediaries and low-level managers in the hierarchy of hell, form an important part of the witchcraft literature, and explanations as to their presence in the witchcraft tracts have varied, dating back as far as the Middle Ages (Kittredge 1972, 491).

These creatures could be imps, black dogs, cats, rats, or other suckling creatures that offered service for blood, deriving their powers from the devil while they corrupted would-be witches. Victoria Carr has even found evidence for familiars operating as ghosts within the

literature (Carr 2019). Their provenance has remained a matter of deep speculation; their origins might be connected to animals traditionally used in folklore to threaten children into obeying parents (J. R. Porter & Russell 1978; Widdowson, Porter, & Russell 1978). Widdowson, in particular, noted how folkloric traditions of wild and domestic animals and “supernatural and mythological figures of fear and their apparent preponderance in the threats” could be read through the lens of psychoanalysis and even (Widdowson et al. 1978, 40). Other important work on familiars examines their role in animal/human relationships and as supernatural guardians (D’Aoust 2019; Parish 2019). And no discourse could leave off Keith Thomas, the titan of witchcraft studies, who includes research on the damage and indictments familiars caused (Thomas 1997, 446).

Even *The Bible* has been offered up as a possible source for these malevolent spirits in an exhaustive analysis that catalogues every known instance of animals or animal motifs in the text, yet “in the Old Testament, witchcraft and magic are viewed primarily as trafficking with supernatural beings and particularly with the departed: this latter practice is more frequently condemned than any other” (J. Porter 1978, 76).

Exciting interpretations of the role of the familiar by Willis in her landmark book articulate the malevolent nurture aspect of witches, as they cared for their familiars as they would pets or children, connecting the tradition with a corrupted form of maternal affection (Willis 1995); and Wilby clearly finds resonance of familiars with cunning folk (Wilby 2000), something altogether reminiscent of the shamanic tradition (Wilby 2005). Frances Dolan’s seminal work provides a panoply of interpretative frameworks, especially in terms of violence and crime, as her investigations focused on domestic disputes, abuse, women as sexual agents, as well as the social tensions of witchcraft in plays like *The Tempest* or *The Witch of Edmonton* (Dolan 2016).

Most notably, Diane Purkiss argues that the scholarly tradition itself allows historians to exercise power and gain artificial acclaim by positing that witches were weak, old, and manipulated women: “Without apprehension of theory, academic historians of English witchcraft have created a narcissistic myth which shapes them as skeptical empiricists, confirming their academic identities” (Purkiss 1996, 60). The critical lens, cast toward academia itself, casts light on the power dynamics involved with any sort of historical research, yet the numerous interpretations offered over the years by researchers and scholars have shed light on the role of the familiar.

In the hopes of adding another interpretive lens to the scholarly conversation, this essay investigates two additional factors that appear deeply connected to the prevalence of witchcraft accusations with familiars in English cases, though Continental tracts may fall into the same paradigm as well. Their distinctive strangeness or “otherness”—limited in this investigation to English cases—can be attributed to two socio/cultural and economic phenomena during the period: 1) land use policies and dramatically changing village/land boundaries and the penchant for familiars to trespass these boundaries; 2) the rise of husbandry manuals that may be juxtaposed to images of the malevolent maternal and corrupted households through witches and their familiars.

## **A Representative Familiar Tract**

The tracts themselves hold part of the answer. Joan Cunny of Stisted in the county of Essex was typical for an accused witch; arraigned in March of 1589 for various “devilish acts,” including causing maleficium with her familiars, she was said to have contacted her creature on the tenanted land of John Wiseman outside of the village:

two spirits did appear unto her within the said circle, in the similitude and likeness of two black frogs, and there demanded of her what she would have, being ready to do for her what she would desire, so that she would promise to give them her soul for their travail (Rosen 1991, 184).

A prototype of so many other lost souls, Cunny, a poor, elderly, irascible woman within the village, was refused alms and help by neighbors alike.

Just like her own social position, Cunny locates these familiars outside of her traditional structures and contracts with them, takes them home, hides them in her house, and begins caring for them—a motif that replicates the malevolent nurture paradigm (Willis 1995). But just as in many other cases, Cunny sends these familiars (Jack and Jill) into the community to conduct their mischief:

...she sent them to milk Hurrell’s beasts, which they did...she sent her said spirits to hurt the wife of John Sparrow the elder of Stisted, which they did, and also that where Master John Glascock of Stisted aforesaid had a great stack of logs in his yard, she by her said spirits did overthrow them....She going to Braintree market came to one Harry Finch’s house to demand some drink; his wife being busy and a-brewing told her she had no leisure to give her any. Then Joan Cunny went away discontented, and at night Finch’s wife was grievously taken in her head (Rosen 1991, 184-185).

Joan Cunny’s case mirrors so many others of the time.

Her spirits affect maleficium only in certain areas—domestic ones that strike at the heart of managing one’s household, lands, animals, and crops (Dolan 2016; Willis 1995). Moreover, Cunny sends her familiars throughout Stisted, which represents a fundamental—and unremarked—element in the critical literature: familiars are always on the move, trespassing on others’ property.

Not everyone received Cunny’s approbation as she never sent “her said spirits to Finch’s wife, Devenish’s wife, and Reynold Ferrer” (Rosen 1991, 185). Sending of spirits in the tracts is remarkably exact and specific as they violate spaces of specific people. Joan Cunny could easily have admitted to sending these spirits to other members of the community, but she forcefully states that she had nothing to do with the harm that these people suffered.

Cunny is not alone. Joan Upney of Dagenham, another accused witch in the same tract, placed her familiar spirits in specific locations in order to plague her enemies:

She saith that one day she left a toad under the groundsill at Harold's house, and it pinched his wife and sucked her till she died....She saith that one day another toad went over her threshold as Richard Foster's wife was coming that way, and it went and pinched her and never returned again (Rosen 1991, 186).

Joan Upney goes so far as to place her familiars in the liminal spaces in her neighbor's yards, the threshold, instructing her familiars where and when to wait for their victims. Upney, Cunny, Elizabeth Bennett and scores of other accused witches from the tracts tell the same story: specific disruption of space and boundaries.

### **Familiars as Violators of Space and Disruptors of Good Husbandry**

From 1550-1650, witchcraft trials were rampaging through parts of Continental Europe, chiefly Germany, with an inevitable focus on older women, crones, and a particularly gendered approach to the accusations (de Blecourt 2000; Kounine 2013; Rowlands 2001). The numbers of accused are startling, but so too is the difference in tenor of the cases, specifically in the role that space plays in the accusation process. Accused witches in Germany practiced their dark arts in covens or witches sabbaths (de Blecourt 2000) in something similar to the witches of MacBeth—lost on a misty heath in a barren wasteland far from civilization

The English witchcraft tracts seem particularly embroiled in the concept of space precisely because, I argue, land use was dramatically changing (in Europe, similar consolidation of agrarian landscapes was occurring, but perhaps not at the same rate) (Hoffmann 2017). The witches themselves remark on specific areas of mischief, but so to do the victims, who carefully explain where their livestock suffered, or where they first fell down in a palsy and began bleeding, or where the suspected witch entered their house. Unlike the witch coven of the *Malleus Malificarum* (Mackay & Institoris 2009) and the popular trope of accusations on the Continent, the accused witches (and their victims) are intimately familiar with specific domestic and agrarian space, down to the last coordinate where mischief was perpetrated.

The intense focus and violation of specific spaces of the village, the common areas, and land ownership are, I believe, deeply connected to the profound changes in land use and tenancy that were taking place in sixteenth-century England, which irrevocably altered the landscape of through revised leases, enclosing of common areas, and a rise of a landed middle class that the accused (older, cantankerous women) were not only failing to participate in, but were also impeding.

England underwent massive cultural change in the sixteenth century in nearly every aspect of society as traditional relations between lord and servant, man and women, and city and village were being recast into different molds throughout this century. And it is precisely during this high period of witchcraft accusations in England where land surveying and mensuration accelerated, where land became a commodity that could be specifically measured, marketed, sold, and enclosed, where manuals on the proper husbandry of property proliferated.

## **Mensuration in England**

The Elizabethan period could easily be recast as the age of weights and measures, for a wholehearted attempt to quantify and secure the English measurement system, specifically during the sixteenth century, took place. Though reforms and attempted standardization of measurement scales had been attempted since the Anglo-Saxon period, these proved to be markedly ineffective since measurement systems varied from location to location. Indeed, from the Anglo-Saxon period until the late sixteenth century, England had at least two hundred different ways to measure weights (Zupko 1977).

Earlier, medieval forms of measurement depended on the location, the fertility of the land, the amount of rainfall and ultimately how hard the farmer worked. From Italy to England, traditional systems of measurement in which agricultural land was measured by the amount of a man's labor prevailed. What mattered, as Witold Kula has argued, was "the general emphasis on the relation of man to land. The fact that the principle of mensuration was based on this relation tells us that the input of labor needed to yield a harvest was of paramount importance" (Kula 1986, 30). Crop yield could vary significantly from year to year, and it remained notoriously difficult to truly measure a man's land.

This agrarian connection between social relations and land distribution remained relatively intact into the beginning of the sixteenth century, despite the attempts of various English governments to standardize weights and measures and the relationship of servant to lord had already been for centuries based on traditional and inherited values. A farmer's land was typically measured not by any "objective" standard of measurement (i.e., a geographical location to it with exact coordinates), but by how long it would take him to plough his field given a pair of decent oxen or by traditional agreements that approximated land boundaries (i.e., the field that stretches up to the forest). The lord, likewise, would heavily tax his underlings based on the same system.

Even the acre, a traditional standard of measurement derived from the amount of land a yoke of oxen could plough in one day, was set by law as the "common-field rectangular plot of four by forty perches or rods" (Zupko 1977, 184). But this standard was seldom if ever followed since perches, the common measurement of land fixed by law at 16.5 feet, could vary in practical circumstances between twelve and twenty-four feet. Local variations in land measurement were ubiquitous, which might have been due to the differing inherited systems from the Romans, Saxon farmers, and post Norman conquest.

The entrenched "medieval" mode of measuring property had created inconsistent land measurements in rural areas and closely reflected the ties and boundaries of local communities:

Units such as ploughlands and dayworks could reinforce existing appreciation of rates of labor and sizes of landholdings within a community.... In *The Surveyor in Foure bookes*, it confirms the importance of such perceptions when he writes that the surveyor may often have to resort to questioning a tenant about his lands 'as he esteemeth them'. Thus 'if he know not what acres they containe (as most tenants will seem ignorant thereof) let him expresse of his Meadow how many

daies mowing, of his Arable how many daies plowing, and of his Pasture how many Beast-gates, and the like (Zupko 1977, 184-185).

The physical layout of property and the relatively imprecise methods of measuring the land were a distinct part of the social construction of rural areas. Until the sixteenth century, a farmer seldom knew with certainty how much land he had; he only knew how long it would take to plough, seed, and harvest it, a usage of land reflecting social custom and vague agreement.

But social custom does not always represent the best way to conduct business. Real change in these systems of measurement began to creep into English society when the Tudor government commenced a set of standards in 1497, which have been painstakingly refashioned and scanned (Shields 2021). During Henry VII's reign, he attempted to pass metrological uniformity laws to curtail the rampant fraud due to inconsistent measuring standards. However, this effort failed due to lack of uniform enforcement or consistent reform of the law codes. Henry VII took a haphazard approach to reform, hoping that if some standards were set in London, they would likewise be followed in rural districts.

But fail it did. After a period of attempted reform, Tudor officials concluded that only “a massive assault on local customs could eradicate the innumerable variations and the resultant fraudulent weighing and measuring practices” (Zupko 1977, 74). In this botched attempt, Parliament ordered the construction of standards of weight, length, and capacity, which were stored in the Treasury and supervised by the commissioners of assize, but even these standards proved to be inconsistent and were thus scrapped (Kisch 1965).

The problem with this attempt was not primarily that the weights that the monetary and measurement commission cast were faulty, but the commission met heavy resistance from local communities who resisted reform while the government in 1491 lacked sufficient infrastructure to affect real change as more officials would have been required to control the rural districts in England just to ensure proper conformity to the new standards. The Tudor reform movement was doomed to failure before it began.

The next major effort for changing weights and measures occurred during the reign of Elizabeth, precisely during the period of greatest witchcraft “activity”. Begun in 1558 and strongly supported by Elizabeth once she came to power, a new measurement system was devised. By 1574 the Crown had realized, just as its' predecessors had, that divergent standards throughout the countryside formed an obstacle to state-sponsored changes. Where Henry VII's England could not logistically or bureaucratically handle the task of reforming agrarian practice, Elizabeth's government attacked it with full force.

By 1574 Elizabeth had created a panel to oversee the divergent sets of standards, to remedy this costly situation, and to determine a proper system of measurement and weights that all could agree upon. Composed of a jury of nine merchants and twelve goldsmiths—all London residents—the panel determined the weight and measurement systems to be used throughout England. Royal

edicts left no system unaltered and basically revised—in totum—the units of measurement and the physical standards (Kisch 1965; Zupko 1977). Distances, weights, and measurement itself were changed in substantive ways from city to country croft.

Additionally, these policies reflected a London-centered worldview in which all local districts would be held responsible to the standards set in the capital. While this may seem logical nowadays, during this time of profound change in England, many villages had their own competing systems of measurement. The reform movement met heavy resistance in enforcement of standards in local communities. These policies, then, were originally designed to allow for better business practices throughout England, but they also had the effect of isolating power—even in terms of the way land and space was to be measured—in the hands of London merchants, government officials, and local lords intent on obtaining more lands.

Even the mile was standardized in a statute in 1593, which was codified to curtail further development in the periphery of London, especially the suburbs, but it soon became the national standard (Sullivan 1997, 8). The mensuration of the country was not done in secret, for the maintaining of exact measurements, especially with land boundaries—whether it is house, field, or city—became a pronounced part of public discourse as Elizabeth I created not only standards for troy and avoirdupois weights between 1582 and 1602, but she enforced national standards on local communities with an iron will.

### **Enclosing and Engrossing Land**

In the latter part of the sixteenth century there exists a great deal of upheaval in rural England and “the impetus to fashion authoritative representations of agrarian practice and change assumed a heightened significance. The Tudor moralists’ cries of complaint in the face of change and the agrarian improvers’ calls for progressive reform are equally urgent, yet utterly opposed in their definitions of social and economic values” (McRae 1996, 3). Yet, one of the principal problems in the land debate revolved around enclosing common land for private use, specifically sheep farming (Jessel 2011). Enclosing land involved the abolition of common rights, subsuming common village areas, arable strips of common land, and other fringe areas under the authority of private individuals. If it could be measured with the new “modern” methods, in juxtaposition to traditional medieval land practices, then these tracts of land could be annexed by whoever paid the surveyor (Jessel 2011).

Concomitant with enclosing private land was another process called engrossing, which ultimately had the same effect on common village space:

Engrossing, which was not necessarily carried out in association with enclosure, ‘signified the amalgamation of two or more farms into one’. Each process extended the rights of individuals over those of a community; and in many instances, each could lead to depopulation and an abandonment of traditional methods of husbandry (McRae 1996, 16).

Both enclosure and engrossing involved the same threat to traditional conceptions of social and economic order. It mattered little if an industrious farmer cared to engross his land by two rods or if a manorial baron found some method by which he could enclose common land to his own profit, these acts took away from common land. Indeed, enclosure fundamentally altered the relationship of master to servant and man to land: “the guiding principle of enclosure is the rational apportionment of rights of property over any given piece of land. Its strict distribution of common and waste land privileges individual interests over communal relations, and thus facilitates the gradual formulation of a modern conception of property” (McRae 1996, 42).

These enclosure acts had a profound effect on social relations and the construction of social space. And while enclosure in England is more commonly associated with parliamentary acts during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, where the process accelerated tremendously, its origin can be found in the sixteenth century (Attack 2010; Cragoe & McDonagh 2013; Wheeler 1894). Every measure, no matter how small, affected social and human relations since it altered the place in which people gather together, how they gathered, and with whom they gathered. The particular agrarian configuration of human relations came under profound change precisely during this period (Finberg & Thirsk 1967; Thirsk 2006), so much so that even Sir Thomas More’s *Utopia* reflected the enclosing of dramatic landscapes (Closel 2018).

Few phenomena were more disruptive to local social relations and land disbursement than were the surveyors who proliferated during the period. According to McRae:

The century between the 1520s and the 1620s, by comparison, has been identified as that of ‘the birth of the modern surveyor’. During this period the surveyor was increasingly seen as an independent specialist, who brought to an estate a newly legalistic appreciation of tenurial relationships and newly rationalistic standards of land measurement and estate planning (McRae 1996, 170).

During Elizabeth’s tenure as Queen, the number of surveyors multiplied rapidly, both as a result of Elizabeth’s goal to solidify new measurement and weight standards, but also because private landowners were hiring them with the hope of increasing their landholdings through “legitimate” calculation.

And enclosure was part of the public zeitgeist, not a trend that villagers or low-level landed gentry would have been unaware. McRae, for instance, has charted some of these changes in agrarian politics of the time by looking specifically at the representation of the plough in agrarian treatises by arguing that the plough changes meaning in the various books of husbandry from the early 1500’s to become a contentious symbol in the fight against enclosure acts by the 1550’s (McRae 1996). As a symbol of morality early in the century, the plough later symbolizes new capitalist tendencies that nearly every writer of the time appropriated for his own uses. Featuring the ploughman as a stolid, reasonable character allowed for societal critique as the ploughman changes in the literature from the noble poor man who works his land in the early part of the sixteenth century to a poor man who threatens land owners by his incessant attempts to

appropriate land not his own (i.e. common areas not assigned to him by the surveyor) (McRae 1996). But what interests us here is not that the plough operates as a symbol of morality, but that it becomes a contested symbol that was used to argue government policy about the allocation of land and the use of rural areas. And this allocation was under constant strain by an army of surveyors entering small communities to initiate enclosure/engrossing processes.

### **The Rise of the Surveyor**

It should be no surprise that John Fitzherbert, who produced a blockbuster text on husbandry, also produced the earliest printed book on surveying (*The boke of surveying and improvements / John Fitzherbert* 1974; Henley & Grosseteste 1508). Like his other success, this book went through 11 editions between 1523 and 1567 in which he fully capitalized on the new medium of print (Baron, Lindquist, & Shevlin 2007; Eisenstein 2013). Also like his *Boke of Husbandry*, Fitzherbert's treatment of surveying focused more on traditional social relations (or at least the maintaining of them in an increasingly changing world) rather than on actual surveying methods, spending much of his effort here on the treatment of fealty rather than surveying, but by 1567, surveyor texts gradually leave the discussion of fealty behind on the field and instead focus on "modern" methods of land calculation, private ownership, and capital gain through increased work.

These books increasingly take a pragmatic view toward land mensuration, arguing that a man should know exactly how much land he owns. This led to significant reordering of village level space since common land gradually became subsumed within private landholdings. Where farmers would have known roughly where their land ended and the villages' land began in the medieval conception, through the surveyor's intervention, they could now know exactly where every boundary lay.

Surveying was not an esoteric subject read by the very few. Many other tracts on surveying were produced during this time. John Norden's *Surveiors Dialogue* with editions in 1607, 1610, and 1618 found great success (*The surveiors dialogue very profitable for all men to peruse especially lords of manors, stewards of mannor-courts, tenants, farmers and husbandmen*, 1738). Other notable tracts include: Edward Worsop's *A Discoverie of sundrie errours and faults daily committed by Landmeaters* (Worsop 1582); Rooke Church's *An olde thrift newly revived* (Chruche 1612); Robert Recorde's *The Pathway to Knowledge* (Record 1574) and subsequent editions 1551, 1574, 1602; Valentine Leigh's *The Moste Profitable and commendable science, of Surveying* with five editions between 1577 and 1596 (Leigh 1578).

In these later tracts "land ownership is figured as reducible to facts and figures: a conception which inevitably undermines the matrix of duties and responsibilities which had previously been seen to define the manorial community. In the perception of the surveyor, the land is defined as property, as the landlord's 'own'" (McRae 1996, 178). These tracts use the increasing knowledge of geometry to articulate a science for land measurement that replaced the traditional agrarian

method of measuring land as the amount that could be ploughed in one day. Treading the open fields or measuring based on a day's work were passe by the mid to late sixteenth century, and more exact methods using geometry could accurately measure the amount of land in a given area, a practice greatly to the nobleman's benefit as lands were slowly taken away from villagers.

The medieval notion of land use had suddenly met the tools of the surveyors, and more than not, surveyed boundaries benefited the wealthy—those able to pay the surveyor's fees—rather than villagers who actual used these common areas. Hired by a local lord, surveyors descended upon communities, participated in enclosure, and attempted to “accurately” measure land down to the nearest foot. While the science of mensuration could allow for accurate measurements, often the employer, if displeased with the accuracy of the surveyor's findings, could ask for a secondary opinion, which could lead to a claim for more land. The surveyor cut into the traditional method of land disbursement based on fealty and mutual obligation as the decisive shift away from the ideals of Fitzherbert (the last publication of his book being in 1567) to the newer methods of agrarian measurement shows, which allowed for actual quantification of lands and resources.

Surveyors altered village topography in a massive way, literally redrawing maps to indicate changes in ownership, and one (expensive) function of the new surveyor was to draw new maps that reflected the new shift in property within the village. This service became quite important to lords who wished to consolidate their holdings or occasionally for the upwardly mobile farmer.

Enclosure, engrossing, and ultimately measurement of local lands all contributed to the changing dynamics of village life, but not everyone agreed with these new initiatives. One of the most prominent sets of surveying texts articulates the concern of farmers in an extended dialogue between irate farmer and logical surveyor:

for indeede there are euen amongft vs, in the Mannor wherein I dwell, officious fellowes, that to procure the Lords good opinion, will pry into mens estates, and indeede as you say, into the quantity, quality, and value of mens Lands, and give fale information oftentimes, and I know it is a foule abuse... (*Foure bookes of husbandry* 1578, 14).

As this is a tract written by surveyors, the hapless farmer eventually concedes to the righteousness of the surveyor and the justness of having an exact demarcation of his land in a form of subversion and containment (Greenblatt 1988; Mark 2014).

Attempts to change these measurement systems had been made before, especially during the Anglo-Saxon period, but they had little success because they weren't conducted as countrywide changes. Likewise, enclosing public land had also been attempted, but on a very small scale and thus did not totally alter the traditional roles of servants and masters in communities across England. Surveyors and their new techniques, then, changed the way people related to the space around them, all of which began to accelerate into the 1600s with the Parliamentary enclosures that occurred then.

This type of change affected nearly every parish beginning in the 1550's and progressing well into the 1800's. One major instance of this appears in the parish of Laxton, which was originally settled by Saxon farmers in the sixth or seventh century. Laxton operated with the traditional relations of a feudal manor, but this gradually began to change. Finally, in 1635 Sir William Courten bought the manor and commissioned a surveyor named Mark Pierce to make a detailed map showing the ownership of the land. Indeed, by 1635 "the strips of the demesne had already been consolidated into a solid block of land just north of the village of Laxton," and the subsequent maps produced from this endeavor clearly illustrate the gains made by the new owner of the manor (Hart 1998, 123).

Laxton represents only one village of many that were undergoing vast change. Enclosure physically and socially altered relations during this time, and it became necessary that members of the community know about the new boundaries:

Survey lines must be identifiable unambiguously on the ground, and the most obvious manifestations of land-survey systems on the visible landscape are the fences that mark field boundaries. An observant traveler may sense a survey system, and occasional vantage points may offer a bird's-eye view of the way the land has been divided, but usually you can see survey systems only on maps and aerial photographs. In contrast, you can actually see field boundaries on the ground, and they have piquant tales to tell to anyone who learns to read them aright. Not only do they show the line that surveyors laid out on the land, but fence, or even the absence of fences, may also send messages about the rural economy and its physical environment (Hart 1998, 165).

The only good boundary system is the one that people in the community recognize. New fences, new boundaries, and new consolidation of land strips altered the physical geography of the field system.

Those traditional methods of social order that relied on the distribution of land by lords to servants changed within a few generations, straining the social compact. Villagers had to interact within this new system of land use; they could see the physical change in the environment; they could speculate about its meaning, but more profoundly, they then had to change the way they related to other villages in time-space. One scholar has even gone so far as to call this change of social relationships an inevitable collapse:

What we see then is that the feudal conception of social relations that has been under strain since at least the beginning of rampant enclosure is by the Elizabethan era finally near collapse. The ideology of paternalistic interdependence could hardly flourish in its feudal form for long with the 'covetous' father of the manor moving to the big city and relinquishing all his familial responsibilities (Sullivan 1998, 37).

This fragmentation, partly due to the reformation of land use and surveying policies, changed society irrevocably (Parkes & Thrift 1980).

Just as with the witchcraft trials, the social tensions boiled over as the dearth of famine

exacerbated fears of land ownership as evidenced by the contemporary Oxfordshire rebellion of 1597, and one of the primary complaints of this early modern peasants' revolt was for "the petitions for redress of enclosure and relief of corn [that] confirm that enclosure was the focus for popular discontent in the dearth of 1596" (John 2013, 81). This despair is not hard to understand, as the Oxford family had managed to purchase some eighty-six thousand acres of assorted land, seventy-eight mills, fisheries, rectories, and other alienations of public land within 64 transactions from 1574 to 1592 (Estate 2004, 48-49).

### **Husbandry Manuals and Social Change**

The massive change in land use policies can be seen reflected in the host of husbandry and surveying manuals that were produced and reproduced during this the sixteenth century: just as social relations were being altered due to land grabs, so were traditional gender roles and social hierarchies reinforced with a host of husbandry manuals published during the same period. Xenophon's *Oeconomicus* or *Treatise of Household* appeared in six English editions between 1532 and 1573 (Fussell 1972; Xenophon & Pomeroy 1995). This work reflected the traditional master/servant relationship as well as traditional land use policies and didn't contain much relatively valuable information to farmers. Likewise, John Fitzherbert's *Boke of Husbandrye*, which came out with 18 editions from 1523 and 1600, focused heavily on the role of women and men in rural economies (Fitzherbert 1552). Part of the *Hausvater* literature that emphasized patriarchal dominance, Fitzherbert's book emphasized social control and proper social position for wife, ploughman, servant, and master: on the master's land.

Numerous other husbandry texts from the period reinforce notions of gender (*Foure bookes of husbandry* 1578), contain advice for diligent work as in *The Country Farme* (Estienne, Liébault, Markham, & Surflet 1616) or include a miscellany of good advice as in Thomas Tusser's *Five Hundred Points of Good Husbandry* (Tusser 1984). Originally published in 1557 as *A hundreth good pointes of husbandrie*, it led the market for 50 years and grew in stature and size.

These manuals gradually came to be written for members of all orders since their presentation "was increasingly designed to encourage the diffusion of their information, either directly or indirectly, through to the middle and lower orders" (McRae 1996, 145). Other books appeared that were for precisely written for the public at large: Leonard Mascall, *The first booke of Cattell* (1587), which had 13 editions from 1587-1662; and *The Husbandlye ordring and Governmente of Poultrie*, which appeared in 1581. These books represent the trend to order both gender relations and land relations during the period. The early works focus on the traditional relations of men and women and servant and lord, whereas the later works gradually come to argue for a type of individual diligence in farming.

Even *Piers Plowman* surfaced again in the 1550s in its role as sociological husbandry manual and provocateur of English dissent (Alford 1988), where Robert Crowley's edition framed Langland not only as a proto-Protestant, but the poem was appropriated for the land debate to

signify the traditional relations of man to land and servant to master (Bowers 1992; Rentz 2011; Rhodes 2014, 2015). Numerous *Piers Plowman* manuscripts and bastardizations were printed (Hudson 2020); *I playne Piers* (1550; STC 19903a); *Pierce the Ploughmans crede* (printed in 1553 (STC 19904); *Pyers plowmans exhortation* (1550 STC 19905), each one appropriating the poem for its own purposes. Just like the husbandry manual tradition, *Piers Plowman* also participates in the enclosure debate by either coming in on the side of “traditional” relations or by being appropriated by nascent landowners hoping to solidify their gains.

### Familiars and Anti-husbandry

In numerous descriptions, they are discovered as pets—kept in pots, or simply fed scraps of food—within the houses of suspected witches and the role of these familiars within the domestic structure was no less important to the outcome of the trial as was the meeting of them on some deserted road. These pamphlets constantly emphasize the domestic nature of caring for these strange animals and that these witches have changed their house space into a foul perversion of motherhood. *The Witches of St. Osyth* includes many descriptions of small creatures in the midst of domestic scenes (Rosen 1991; W & Harris 1981); these descriptions of these animals seem tender and motherly.

Ursula Kemp, who herself harbored familiars, reports in her own confession on a number of other women in her community whom she “knew” kept familiars of all kinds:

...she went unto Mother Bennett’s house for a mess of milk, the which she had promised her. But at her coming, this examine saith, she knocked at her door and nobody made her any answer, whereupon she went to her chamber window and looked in thereat, saying, ‘Ho, ho, Mother Bennett, are you at home?’ And casting her eyes aside, there was a spirit lifting up a cloth lying over a pot, looking much like a ferret (Rosen 1991, 118).

Ursula also happened to visit the house of William Hunt, where she espied “a spirit to look out of a potsherd from under a cloth, the nose thereof being brown like unto a ferret.” The *St. Osyth* pamphlet reveals an Ursula Kemp who has admitted to practicing magic on her neighbors, whose own familiar, Tiffin, shared with her that both Mother Bennett and Hunt’s wife used their familiars for harm. But what is remarkable here is the attention to details of domestic space. Ursula Kemp is at the very least guilty of prying into her neighbor’s affairs and houses. But more than that she violates their space just as she does with Grace Thurlow and others.

Familiars are often described in such situations. They are cared for in elaborate ways, given wool to sleep on, milk to drink bits of scraps to eat (Rosen 1991, 95, 110, 112, 123-125, 128-139). Henry Sellis reports that his mother often: “fed them out of a black dish each other day with milk, and saith, that he hath seen her to carry it unto a heap of wood and broom standing under a crab tree by the house. And being asked what their names were, he saith, that one of them is called by two names, which is Hercules, other John or Jack, and that is a black one” (Rosen 1991, 133).

Another young boy confessed that his mother kept three familiars, one in a wicker bottle, another in a leather bottle, and the third in a woolpack. The elaborate care and ministrations that these old women apparently showed their familiars is without parallel. These beasts are often described in terms of their arrangements within the house of the “masters.” In this regard, the familiar simply becomes an extension of the witch with its intimate connection to domestic spaces (Willis 1995).

Hundreds of pages from the tracts could be brought to bear to illustrate the vagaries of the witchcraft accusations in England, especially in Chelmsford, England where the cast of characters grows as the accusations rampage through that community as evidenced from the expansive Chensforde trial pamphlet (Phillip 1566).

### **Familiars as Social Construct**

The sixteenth century, in particular, saw the rise of two genres of texts, the surveyor’s manual and the husbandry manual, but they both had the same focus: to legitimize the revised land use policies while affirming traditional relationships that reinforced the hierarchy. Witches in the latter half of the sixteenth century were doubly to blame. Not only did they violate the rules of “good husbandry” espoused by the countless manuals circulating during the period, but their *maleficium* violated the space of others.

According to one estimate, public lands (the common waste) had already been reduced to 5-10 percent of the commons by 1600 (Clark & Clark 2001, 1034) through enclosure practices. Thus, rampant surveyors in villages, increased numbers of land transactions that consolidated wealth holdings, and changing dynamics within the village environment were already well underway before 1600 (Bell, Brooks, & Killick 2019, 301-302).

In many of the witchcraft cases from the period, familiars are not simply placed within the home, as the descriptions of the accusers would have us believe. These familiars do not easily become the tame yet monstrous entities who can suckle at the third teat, murder an infant, kill cattle, and terrorize neighbors all before breakfast. There is, in fact, a type of seduction that occurs in these tracts in that the familiars slowly approach the domestic in order to corrupt it. They initially contact these suspected witches in boundary areas and crossroads while the witches are underway and then cajole or seduce their way into the witches’ house.

Ultimately, however, these familiars are sent out on missions of disruption, crossing boundaries, and causing harm to the good husbandry of others. Where witches in Continental Europe more often created contracts with the devil, oftentimes for apparently no remuneration in either a social or monetary sense, witches in England manage to force their servants to work for them in a perverted husbandry relationship. What should be noted, however, is that they demand that familiars in the English tradition during the sixteenth century trespass on their neighbor’s land continuously, which is perhaps an echo of the increased litigation from 1540-1650 involving parcels of land (Brooks 1998). In this sense, English witchcraft remains the anomaly within the tradition since it developed the pact with the devil quite late and lacked, for the most part, the

Witches' Sabbath. Indeed, no trial reference to the pact with the devil (outside of ones with familiars) exists before 1612 and it wasn't until Matthew Hopkin's famous witch hunt in the 1640s that the written covenant with the devil occurs (Thomas 1997, 444).

What changes in the English tradition? The extensive transformation of land use through enclosure acts, engrossing, purchases of land, and alterations of tenancy, along with the enforcement of behavioral norms through husbandry manuals contribute a great deal to the transgressive nature of these women within these tracts as familiars trespass space while the witches themselves turn into monstrous visions of a perverted domestic—the antithesis of good husbandry.

Henri Lefebvre, the great critic of space and construct, writes that social space subsumes things and encompasses interrelationships, creating multilayered meanings (Bauer & Fischer 2019; Lefebvre, Brenner, & Elden 2009; Lefebvre, Elden, Lebas, & Kofman 2006). For Lefebvre, spatial representations transform based on a myriad of contexts:

the relationship of local and global; the re-presentation of that relationship; action as signs; the trivialized spaces of everyday life; and, in opposition to these last, spaces made special by symbolic means as desirable or undesirable, benevolent or malevolent, sanctioned or forbidden to particular groups (Lefebvre 1974/91, 288).

In essence, space is constantly being refigured and remains a potent exemplar of cultural and political meaning (Bauer & Fischer 2019; Blake 2002; Jannis 2021).

The presence of familiars in the English witchcraft trials transform these proceedings into a contested site for symbolic meaning, both in terms of the prevalent husbandry manuals with their corrupted domestic spheres but also from the alterations of land boundaries that are symbolically violated in the tracts. Familiars are the quintessential early modern “other,” an amalgamation of superstition and response to societal stresses brought on by a literal landscape that morphs into an “othered” space where devilish creatures run rampant across field, stone, and property line, causing ruination along the way. The wayward crone and her familiar, maligned by neighbors and accused by community members, is the site where class, land, and husbandry meet (John 2013; Sennett & Cobb 1993), a potent moment of symbolic value where the concerns and values of the community are laid bare at the feet of its vulnerable population and metastasized in the corrupted magic of the anti-domestic.

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