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THE SOURCES OF HAWTHORNE’S “YOUNG GOODMAN BROWN”

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In its characters, setting, and descriptive details the story of “Young Goodman Brown” reproduces the witch-haunted Salem of Hawthorne’s ancestors; but the tale, the chief interest of which lies in its graphic portrayal of a Witches’ Sabbath, contains no suggestion of the doctrines of magic and Maleficium which mark the testimony recorded by Cotton Mather in his accounts of New England witch-trials and which Professor Kittredge considers the most distinctive features of the witch creed of England and America. Hawthorne’s story, in substance an account of a young man’s experiences with some New England witches, deals with the effects of secret sin in the human heart and with the dual nature of man, doctrines which had their origin in certain continental conceptions of witchcraft; and the main source of the tale is, I believe, a story entitled “El Coloquio de los Perros” (or “The Conversation of the Dogs”) by Cervantes.

In Hawthorne’s story the Devil, in the guise of the grandfather of Young Goodman Brown, meets Goody Cloyse, one of his subjects, who explains why she is walking instead of flying through the air in the manner of witches:

“But—would your worship believe it?—my broomstick hath strangely disappeared, stolen, as I suspect, by that unhanged witch, Goody Cory, and that, too, when I was all anointed with the juice of smallage, and cinque-foil, and wolf’s bane.”—

“Mingled with fine wheat and the fat of a new-born babe,” said the shape of old Goodman Brown.

“Ah, your worship knows the recipe,” cried the old lady, cackling aloud.3

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3 The Complete Works of Nathaniel Hawthorne (Boston, 1882), II, 94.
The reference to witch ointment parallels a brief article published in *The American Magazine of Useful and Entertaining Knowledge*, six numbers of which Hawthorne edited in 1836. The article, which bears the title “Witch Ointment,” appeared in *The American Magazine* in its issue for July, 1836, and contains direct evidence of a slight indebtedness on the part of Hawthorne to Francis Bacon and a reference to Cervantes, which suggests the main source on which he drew for his story. I quote the article in full:

**Witch Ointment**

Lord Bacon, in his philosophical works, gives the following recipe for the manufacture of an ointment, by the use of which the ‘midnight hags’ were supposed to acquire the faculty of flying through the air. We trust that none of our readers will make the experiment.

‘The ointment which witches use is made of the fat of children, digged out of their graves, and of the juices of smallage, cinque-foil and wolf’s-bane, mingled with the meal of fine wheat.’

After greasing themselves with this preparation, the witches flew up chimney and repaired to the spot in some church-yard or dismal forest, where they were to hold their meetings with the Evil One. Cervantes, in one of his tales, seems to be of opinion that the ointment cast them into a trance, during which they merely dreamt of holding intercourse with Satan. If so, witchcraft differs little from a nightmare.5

Hawthorne and his sister, as we know, prepared practically all of the material for the numbers of *The American Magazine* which he edited, and it is pretty certain that “Witch Ointment” is from Hawthorne’s pen. The philosophical work of Bacon referred to is, I take it, *Sylva Sylvarum, or A Natural History in Ten Centuries,* Century X, in which we find the following reference to witch ointment:

975. The ointment that witches use is reported to be made of the fat of children digged out of their graves; of the juices of smallage, wolfbane, and cinque-foil, mingled with the meal of fine wheat. But I suppose that the soporiferous medicines are likest to do it; which are henbane, hemlock, mandrake, moonshade, tobacco, opium, saffron, poplar-leaves, &c.6

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5 *The American Magazine of Useful and Entertaining Knowledge*, II, 470 (July, 1836).
6 *The Works of Francis Bacon* (Boston, 1862), V, 152.
Though the ingredients of the two recipes as given in “Witch Ointment” and the *Sylva Sylvarum* are the same, the phraseology differs slightly. The author of “Witch Ointment” doubtless quoted from memory, and the article is in all likelihood merely a reminiscence of the story of “Young Goodman Brown,” which Hawthorne had printed more than a year before the publication of “Witch Ointment.”

We can be reasonably sure, I think, that Hawthorne is indebted to Bacon in the main for the recipe as given in his story; but the ingredient, “the fat of a new-born babe,” which he apparently substitutes for “the fat of children digged out of their graves,” an ingredient of the recipes in “Witch Ointment” and *Sylva Sylvarum*, may in all probability be traced to the tale of Cervantes referred to in “Witch Ointment.” The reference is, I believe, to “El Coloquio de los Perros,” a large part of which is devoted to an account of the meeting of the dog, Berganza, with La Canizares, an old hag who claims to be a witch. In her account of the practices of witchcraft La Canizares mentions the blood of strangled children, only to deny it a place among the ingredients of the witches’ ointment. The passage from Cervantes reads as follows:

This ointment with which we witches anoint ourselves is composed of juices of extremely cold herbs and not, as the common people say, of the blood of infants which we strangle.\(^7\)

In the course of her conversation with the dog, La Canizares reveals many of the mysteries of witchcraft; and in these revelations Hawthorne almost certainly found other suggestions for his account of Goodman Brown, who, having made a pact with the Devil, reluctantly bids farewell to his wife, Faith, and goes secretly to the nocturnal meeting of the witches, only to find that the most worthy and respected citizens of Salem village have anticipated him in allying themselves with the forces of evil. Returning from the Witches’ Sabbath, Goodman Brown finds the good folk of Salem apparently unaffected by their participation in the infernal ceremony; but he is

\(^7\) The *New England Magazine*, VIII, 250 (April, 1835).

a changed man, doomed henceforth to view his fellow-men through the clouded glasses of suspicion and distrust.

The conception of a Witches' Sabbath composed of the good and the wicked on equal terms, is, I imagine, original with Hawthorne; but the idea for such an association was no doubt suggested to him by the dual nature of the witches in "El Coloquio," who, in the manner of Goodman Brown's townsmen are respected citizens by days but who by night, or in consequence of an application of a magic ointment, assume the character of witches. Hawthorne’s characters by their actions reveal their propensity for doing good as well as evil, though it is not clear that they are conscious of the incongruity of their nature. Hypocrisy, however, is one of the main items in the creed of La Canizares. She admits that she is a witch and that she "covers the sin with the cloak of hypocrisy." She claims that her good deeds win for her the respect of "all the world," and she advises Berganza to be good in every way that he can and to try not to seem bad when he is. She says:

I am better off as a hypocrite than if I were a declared sinner. . . . Indeed, feigned sanctity injures no third person, only him who practices it.⁹

When Hawthorne includes in his congregation of witches those in whom their neighbors find no sign of evil, those who sit at the council board of the province, and those who "Sabbath after Sabbath" occupy the "holiest pulpits in the land," he apparently intends his picture of the Witches' Sabbath to be a symbol of the good and bad in the heart of man, such as we find in the nature of the witches portrayed by Cervantes.

Hawthorne may also have found in "El Coloquio" the suggestion for the idea that witchcraft is a manifestation of secret sin. La Canizares, the witch in "El Coloquio," regrets her participation in the evils of witchcraft; but she is resigned to a fate from which she sees no escape, and by a semblance of piety and the performance of charitable deeds she makes the best of an evil destiny. Sin, she explains, is inherent in the heart of man and for this reason God gives the Devil power to make witches of whomever he desires.

⁹ "Vame mejor con ser hipócrita que con ser pecadora declarada; . . . En efecto, la santidad fingida no hace daño á ningún tercero, sino al que la usa." "El Casamiento Engañoso" y "El Coloquio de los Perros," pp. 338 ff.
In Hawthorne's story Goodman Brown is impelled by an "instinct that guides mortal man to evil." Though he has given his word to the witch-fiend, the young man hesitates to take the final step that will bind him to the Devil's service, and he resists the invisible force that drives him to his rendezvous in the forest. As a means of overcoming the young man's resistance, the Devil shows him that those whose lives of righteousness he is contrasting with the evil in his own heart are also bound for the Witches' Sabbath. When Goodman Brown sees his friends and neighbors whom he has honored and reverenced most, even Faith his wife, in league with the Devil, he abandons hope; and, as he rushes madly on to his doom, he cries, "There is no good on earth; and sin is but a name. Come, devil, for to thee is this world given." His worst fears are realized when, in the midst of the initiation ceremony, the arch-fiend thus addresses the converts:

Ye have found thus young your nature and your destiny... ye still had hopes that virtue were not all a dream. Now are ye undeceived. Evil is the nature of mankind. ... Welcome ... my children to the communion of your race.10

From this statement of the witch-fiend we may judge that Hawthorne considers the witchcraft delusion a manifestation of secret sin in the human heart. Inasmuch as the chief horror of Goodman Brown's experience with the witches is that to him is revealed "the mystery of sin" and the "secret guilt" in the thoughts and deeds of all mankind and as he is not accused of diabolical persecutions of his neighbors, it would seem that Hawthorne's conception of the evils of witchcraft bears a closer relation to the creed of La Canizares than to the teachings of the New England writers who for the most part interpret the practices of witchcraft in the light of punishment for the "bitter discontents" caused by "Affliction and Poverty."11

Other details in the development of Hawthorne's story may also be traceable to "El Coloquio." Goody Cloyse, "a very pious and exemplary dame," and the moral and spiritual adviser of Goodman Brown, arouses the first suspicion in the young man's mind of innate sin in the human heart. As he hesitates in the darkening forest,

10 Hawthorne, Works, II, 103.
he sees Goody Cloyse making her way to the Witches' Sabbath, "mumbling some indistinct words . . . a prayer, doubtless." This description of the good woman appears to be an echo of a passage from "El Coloquio"; namely, the lines, "I pray a little and in public, and murmur much and in secret," from the explanation of La Canizares as to the inconsistencies of her behavior.

In "El Coloquio" La Canizares describes in the following words La Camacha de Montilla, whom she pronounces to be "the most famous witch the world has ever had":

She congealed the clouds, when she wished, covering the face of the sun with them; and when the whim struck her, she could turn serene the stormiest sky.12

This passage, I believe, gave Hawthorne suggestions for the details of certain phenomena by means of which the Devil weakens the faith of Goodman Brown. Looking up into the serene heavens, the young man decides to go no further but "to stand firm against the devil." No sooner does he make this decision than a cloud hides the heavens above him, though the blue sky is still visible except directly overhead. From the cloud come signs convincing Goodman Brown that he stands alone against the forces of evil, and so he resists no longer. At the moment of his surrender the cloud disappears as mysteriously as it has come.

According to Professor Woodberry, "Young Goodman Brown" is a tale "whose significance is felt to contain mystery which Hawthorne meant to remain in its dark state."13 Hawthorne himself raises a question as to the nature of the young man's experience, a question which he does not answer. He asks:

Had Goodman Brown fallen asleep and only dreamed a wild dream of a witch meeting?14

Analogous to Hawthorne's question is the statement in "Witch Ointment" to the effect that Cervantes seems to think that the magic preparation cast the witches "into a trance, during which they

12 "Ella congelaba las nubes cuando quería, cubriendo con ellas la faz del sol; y, cuando le antojaba, volvía sereno el más turbado cielo." "El Casamiento Engañoso" y "El Coloquio de los Perros," p. 334.
14 Hawthorne, Works, II, 106.
merely dreamt of holding intercourse with Satan.” In the recurrence of the suggestion that the diabolical orgies took place only in the subconscious minds of the witches, we have, in my judgment, further evidence that Hawthorne wrote “Witch Ointment”; and the following passage tends to corroborate my suggestion of his indebtedness to Cervantes at this point:

There is the opinion that we do not go to these orgies except in imagination in which the Devil presents the images of all those things that we afterwards tell have happened to us. Others say, no, that in truth, we go in soul and body; and I believe that both opinions are right, since we do not know when we go in one form or another, for all that happens to us in our fantasy is so intensely felt that we cannot distinguish it from the times when we really and truly go.15

The passage is from one of several references that La Canizares makes to the consequences that follow upon the application of the witches’ ointment.

In The American Notebooks, under the date, May 5, 1850,16 Hawthorne refers to his request for information from George Ticknor, the historian of Spanish literature, “as to whether there had been any English translations of the Tales of Cervantes.” The following year, in a letter written March 11, he urges his sister, Elizabeth, to work on the translation of the Tales; and she writes him as follows:

I have been very busy about ‘Cervantes’ Tales.’ I want to consult you about what I think a few necessary alterations, when you come.17

Elizabeth Hawthorne’s letter, which bears the date May 3, appears to be an answer to her brother’s letter of March 11;18 and it shows beyond a doubt that Hawthorne had more than a passing knowledge of the works of Cervantes.

15 “Hay opinión que no vamos á estos convites sino con la fantasía, en la cual nos representa el demonio las imágenes de todas aquellas cosas que después contamos que nos han sucedido; otros dicen que no, sino que verdaderamente vamos en cuerpo y en ánima, y entrambas opiniones tengo para mí que son verdaderas, puesto que nosotras no sabemos cuándo vamos de una ó de otra manera; porque todo lo que nos pasa en la fantasía es tan intensamente, que no hay diferenciarla de cuando vamos real y verdaderamente.” “El Casamiento Engañoso” y “El Coloquio de los Perros,” p. 338.
16 Hawthorne, Works, IX, 372.
17 Julian Hawthorne, Nathaniel Hawthorne and His Wife (Boston, 1885), I, 440.
18 Ibid., p. 390; see also in this connection, Randall Stewart (ed.), The American Notebooks of Nathaniel Hawthorne (New Haven, 1932), p. 331, note 606.