

How to Spot a Witch

by Adam Goodheart

The belief in witches existed for centuries before the trials at Salem. Over time, a considerable body of folklore developed about how to identify witches. A contemporary writer explains the most popular methods.

Perhaps the reason witch-hunting has gotten a bad name is that some practitioners used rather crude methods to separate the guilty from the innocent. The notorious judges of the Holy Roman Empire, for example, simply applied thumbscrews until the unfortunate suspects confessed. And during the English witch craze in the 1640s, the Rev. John Gaule recorded that 'every old woman with a wrinkled face, a furred brow, a hairy lip, a gobber tooth, a squint eye, a squeaking voice, or a scolding tongue ... is not only suspected, but pronounced for a witch.' (Sexism was regrettably widespread among Gaule's colleagues, even though both men and women could be witches.) But more discriminating European witch hunters used far more refined techniques, as described in early lawbooks, manuals and court records.

1. Devil's Marks and Witches' Teats According to many witch-hunting guides, it is best to start your examination by shaving the suspect's body and examining it for devil's marks. These are the spots where Satan brands his followers to seal their pact with him. An English jurist in 1630 described them as "sometimes like a blew spot, or a red spot, like a Fleabiting." One problem: In the vermin-ridden 17th century, such blemishes were hardly uncommon. So the witch hunters devised an ingenious solution. The Devil, they reasoned, would not allow anything of his to be harmed. Therefore, they pricked any suspicious marks with a long silver pin. If the spot didn't bleed or was insensitive to pain, the suspect was a witch.

English experts believed witches often had extra nipples that they used to suckle demons. Matthew Hopkins, a witch hunter under Oliver Cromwell, exposed one woman as a witch when she was "found to have three teats about her, which honest women have not.

2. The Swimming Test If the hunt for teats and devil's marks proves inconclusive, you may have to resort to a popular folk method, the "swimming test." First, sprinkle the suspect with holy water. Tie his right thumb to his left big toe, and his left thumb to his right big toe.

Fasten a rope around his waist. Then toss him into a pond or river. If he floats, he's a witch.

If he sinks, haul him back in and set him free. The theoretical basis for this is simple, explained James VI of Scotland in 1597: "The water shall refuse to receive in her bosom those who have shaken off the sacred water of baptism."

Other popular tests include weighing the suspect against a very heavy Bible (if she weighs less than the book, she is guilty) and asking her to recite the Lord's Prayer without making a mistake. (In 1663, a defendant was convicted after repeatedly failing to do better than "Lead us into temptation" or "Lead us not into no temptation.") When you suspect a witch has murdered someone, ask her to lay her hands on the victim's body. If she is guilty, the corpse will start to bleed.

3. Nabbing the Elusive Imp One of the most devious ways to foil witches is to catch them with their familiars, the imps in animal form who do their nefarious [wicked] bidding. Many witch hunters believed the imps could not go for more than 24 hours without being suckled by their master or mistress. Therefore, when you have a suspect in prison, drill a peephole in the cell door and keep a close watch. If you see a rat, mouse or beetle in the cell, you've nabbed an imp. Beware of even the most improbable animals. In 1645, an Englishman named John Bysack confessed that for the last 20 years, he had regularly suckled imps in the form of snails.

4. Asking the Right Questions Even stubborn suspects will often collapse under skillful interrogation. Europe's most successful witch hunters were expert at framing questions of the when-did-you-stop-beating-your-wife sort. The justices of Colmar in Alsace used to lead off with "How long have you been a witch?" before moving on to more specific inquiries such as "What plagues of vermin and caterpillars have you created?"

WARNING:

According to the *Molleus Ma/eficarum (Hammer of Witches)*, a comprehensive witch-hunting guide published in 1486, judges at witchcraft trials should take precautions against being bewitched by the accused.

Always wear protection: A wax medallion containing a bit of salt blessed on Palm Sunday, worn round the neck, will defend you from Satan's wiles [tricks].

Otherwise, you yourself could end up on the wrong end of a witch hunt.