

WITCH'S MILK AND WITCHES' MARKS*

THOMAS R. FORBES

The term *witch's milk*, referring usually to the mammary secretion of newborn infants,† is an example of that small group of medical and biological words and phrases which had its origin in the popular vocabulary of past centuries. (*Freemartin*²² is a similar term.) Such expressions lack the classical dignity of Greek and Latin ancestry, but they have a flavor and interest of their own. What was the source of the phrase *witch's milk*, with its implications of superstition and sorcery, and how has it persisted to take its place in modern scientific terminology?

Although little attention is given to the phenomenon in modern textbooks of pediatrics, it is well established that during the first weeks after birth the mammary glands of some babies hypertrophy and produce a colostrum-like secretion. Normally the secretion soon ends, and the glands regress. Partly on the basis of an important study by Lyons,²³ it is now generally believed that two maternal hormones, estrogen and prolactin, which during the later stages of pregnancy are preparing the maternal mammary glands for lactation, may escape into the fetal circulation in sufficient quantity so that the same phenomenon appears in the infant. If this theory is correct, the transitory production of witch's milk can be explained by the obvious fact that the availability to the baby of the maternal hormones ceases at birth. However, since prolactin has also been found in the pituitary glands of fetal calves,⁶ it is possible that a brief activity of the baby's pituitary gland may also help to account for the appearance of the secretion.

To turn from the significance of the phenomenon to the significance of the phrase is to look back on the dark and evil history of witchcraft, on a record of inspired ignorance, unresisting credulity, and complacent cruelty. The record is certainly incomplete, and part of it is very nearly inaccessible. For our purposes a start may be made with an ancient belief that there existed a variety of demons which had the appearance of birds.²⁴ These creatures, feared because they were thought to suck the blood of infants, were called *Striges*. (The scientific name *Strigidae* much later was applied

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†According to Marshall,²⁷ witch's milk may also appear in the newborn young of other mammals; the present paper will be concerned only with the human manifestation.

to the owl family, and the vampire tradition has not yet died.) Thomas Erastus (1524-1583), the Swiss theologian, says that Ovid mentioned the *Striges*. Erastus adds another belief: “. . . les anciens croyoyent [*Striges*] venir la nuict trouver les enfans & leur succer les mamelles.”²¹ Pliny the Elder discounts the *Striges* legend; he says the creatures were bats.²²

In the seventeenth century, Johann Bohn described newborn infants (translated) “whose breasts swell with serous milk; if this is not expressed promptly and properly, they [the breasts] will become indurated and inflamed and will suppurate.”²³ Although Bohn’s case was one of the earliest which the author has been able to examine in the original, many previous instances of infant lactation must have been observed. At any rate, here were the elements of the situation—on the one hand, a recognition of the phenomenon as recorded; on the other, a sample of the related superstitions.

Not only were *Striges* and other evil spirits believed to victimize babies, but it was thought that witches—women accused of having sold their souls to Satan in return for the gift of supernatural powers—could suckle their imps or “familiars” from the mammary glands or from “teats” on other parts of the body.²⁴ Podmore has stated²⁵ that the superstitions regarding both the imps and the witches’ teats occurred chiefly in Great Britain and the United States, but this opinion is not supported by evidence to be presented later. The “teat” constituted one of the several varieties of “witches’ marks,” and women accused of witchcraft were sometimes searched for such indication of their traffic with the forces of evil. A contemporary account of an “examen of witches” in France at the beginning of the seventeenth century, mentioning the inspection of the body of an accused woman for such supposed evidence, states that “. . . all witches have a mark some on the shoulder, some on the eyelid, some on the tongue or lip . . .”²⁶ In England there was repeated reference at witchcraft trials to the suckling of imps by witches and to attacks by imps on children for the same purpose. The imps were usually said to appear in animal form.^{1, 2, 3, 28} It is shocking to realize that accusations of this sort and the findings of “teats” (very likely warts or similar structures or, in rare cases, supernumerary nipples) constituted evidence of guilt, but the accounts of the witchcraft trials are convincing. An unpopular individual, often elderly and eccentric, would be accused in vivid detail, torture would usually extract a “confession,” and execution at gibbet or stake would follow swiftly. It has been estimated that 30,000 persons were put to death for witchcraft in England alone.³

New England had its share of witchcraft trials (see, for example, Calef,¹⁶ Hutchinson,¹⁷ and Mather¹⁸), and the witch's milk superstition appeared here too. It is encouraging to discover that in this country, as in Europe, courageous men raised protests against the hysteria. Robert Calef, a Boston merchant who died in 1720, struck out vigorously. He comments on the case of Mary Easty, hanged as a witch at Salem in 1692: "It seems, besides the testimony of the accused and confessors, another proof, as it was counted, appeared against her: it having been usual to search the accused for teats, upon some parts of her body . . . was found an excrescence which they called a teat."¹⁹

Francis Hutchinson, D.D., criticizing bitterly the witchcraft trials, discusses "teats" and other witch marks:

Jur. What Judgment must we make of what they say about *Teats* and *Magical Signs*, as they call them; and insensible Parts that are found upon them?

Clerg. I make no doubt but that some of them are *Scurvy-Spots*, or mortified or withered parts, or hollow Spaces between the Muscles: Others are *Piles* or *Verrucae Pensiles*, hanging Warts, which in Old Age may grow large and fistulous.²¹

Elsewhere Hutchinson states:

I meet with little Mention of *Imps* in any Country but ours, where the law makes the feeding, suckling, or rewarding of them to be a Felony; but amongst our Witch-finders, it hath been a Rule,

That the suspected Witches may be watched till their *Imps* appear; and their Imps may come in the Shapes of *Cats, Dogs, Rats, Mice, Spiders, Fleas, Nits, Birds, Flies, a Toad, a Frog, a Hen, a Crow, a Hornet, or a Mole.*²²

Cotton Mather, thundering against the powers of darkness and encouraging the seeking out of witches, relates in 1693: "Among the Ghastly Instances of the *Success* which those Bloody Witches have had, we have seen even some of their own Children so dedicated unto the Devil, that in their Infancy it is found that the *Imps* have sucked them, and rendred them venomous to a Prodegy."²³

Meanwhile, additional cases of infant lactation were appearing in the medical literature; curiously enough, the authors make no mention of witchcraft. Anton Deusing mentions that the mammary glands of infants of both sexes contain a milky secretion,²⁴ and Théophile Bonet records the phenomenon in a baby girl.²⁵ Diemerbroeck has a similar observation.²⁶ In addition, discussing the nutrition of the fetus, he states that since newborn babies may vomit a milky fluid before they have been fed, they probably draw milk from their own mammary glands *in utero*. He cites as an example the case of his own baby daughter. As Guillot²⁷ and Brouha²⁸ point out, Boerhaave supported this idea, calling attention to the posture of the fetus

in the uterus—“. . . it lies there in a bending Posture with its Head inclined forward.”^{9,10} Morgagni also referred to infant lactation.³⁰

Medical notes on witch's milk appeared much more frequently during the nineteenth century. Textbooks began to include mention of the phenomenon.^{8,18,34} In the journals, Goldschmidt,²⁶ Battersby,⁷ Guillot,²⁸ and Gubler,²⁷ to mention only some of the authors, all described cases. There was disagreement as to whether the secretion actually was milk, but the point was settled, at least for the time being, by chemical analysis. In 1859 one case of witch's milk in a boy aged four weeks was described in the *Lancet*,⁵ and during the summer of 1874 no less than fifteen communications on the subject were printed or summarized in the *British Medical Journal*.⁴ Repeated reference was made to the midwife's or nurse's insistence on the necessity for the removal of the secretion, a procedure earlier described by Bohn,¹² Morgagni,³⁰ and Boerhaave. The latter remarks, “. . . the Nurses usually empty them [the mammary glands] . . . to prevent the stagnating Liquor from causing Disorders.”¹⁰ The injury likely to result from such a practice and from attempts to “break the nipple strings” was emphasized in the *British Medical Journal* contributions.⁴ Knott, in an interesting discussion of witch's milk, states that when he was a medical student it was still customary to express the secretion from afflicted babies.³³ As will be shown later, this harmful procedure, condemned to the present day,⁴⁰ probably had its origin in lingering superstitions regarding witch's milk.

Among the numerous additional medical descriptions of the phenomenon which have appeared in the literature there is virtually no comment on the term. Actually, the phrase itself does not appear, among the large number of documents examined by the author, until the latter part of the nineteenth century. Since the superstition seems to have been an ancient one, *witch's milk* presumably had been in use for centuries, but proof of this supposition, in spite of an extensive search, has not been found. A major link in the history of the term is thus still missing.

Knott mentions that witch's milk was said to have been an ingredient of witches' brews.³³ Certainly there were many other superstitions regarding milk (see, for example, Kittredge³³ and Wuttke⁴⁴). Thus, witches were believed able to obtain milk from the leg of a milking stool. As a result of evil influences, cows went dry or produced red or blue milk, and cream would not turn to butter. Numerous other strange superstitions related to childbirth, and midwives were sometimes thought to possess supernatural powers.

The French equivalent of *witch's milk*, *lait de sorcière*, appears in Frey's

histology textbook of 1871,³³ and has been referred to recently by Courier.³⁷ The German word is *Hexenmilch*. As with the English expression, one cannot be sure how early the French and German terms became part of the respective languages. *Hexenmilch* was employed in a technical article by Genser in 1876,³⁴ but must have already been an established expression, since it is discussed in the famous Grimms' *Wörterbuch* of 1877.³⁵ Variants on the term were *Drachenmilch*, *Zaubermilch*, *Teufelsmilch*, *Hundsmilch*, and *lac magicum, incantamentis acquisitum* (i.e., magical milk, obtained by incantations). Most unfortunately, there is no comment on the Latin phrase. Apparently the German words could refer to witch's milk in the modern sense, to the milk of a witch, to milk drawn from an axe handle by a witch, or even to the sap of the plant *Euphorbia*,³⁶ a member of a family of trees, shrubs, etc. distinguished for their unpleasant and sometimes milky and toxic juices. Here, surely, is a problem for the etymologist.

More recent German sources add further details. Ploss states that in Germany, and also in England and Naples, midwives and grandmothers were convinced that if witch's milk were not frequently and thoroughly expressed from the baby's mammary glands, it would be stolen by witches and goblins.⁴² According to Höfler, *Hexenmilch* referred to enchanted, colored milk from a cow, to the product of infant lactation, and to the juice of the plant *Chelidonium majus*³⁹ (a member of the poppy family, and once used to cure warts—regarding which there are also superstitions). Höfler mentions the belief that evil spirits, goblins, or imps cast the evil eye on babies in order to induce the formation of *Hexenmilch* and thus provide themselves with a source of nourishment (cf. Hutchinson,³⁸ above). This superstition is confirmed by Hovorka and Kronfeld, who add that in Switzerland the appearance of lactation in a baby would evoke the statement (translated): "He has an imp' [Es hat das Schratteli]. This milk must be sucked out, and a knife with the edge uppermost is laid in the cradle."⁴⁰ Presumably the knife was expected to repel the imp. Peter describes a Westphalian remedy, which was to make an ugly puppet, resembling the bewitched infant, from rags and straw and then either to place the puppet in the baby's cradle or to nail the *Caricatur* over the door of the room.⁴¹

The witch's milk story seems to be, basically, the record of successive attempts to account for a readily observed biological phenomenon. Man is uncomfortable without a satisfactory explanation for a mystery. Such an instinct has engendered much superstition, and much science.

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