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THE EARLY MODERN POPULAR DEMONIC AND THE FOUNDATIONS OF TWENTIETH CENTURY BRITISH FOLK HORROR

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At the turning point of the seminal British Folk Horror film, *The Blood on Satan's Claw* (1971), after witnessing the bloody aftermath of a demonic assault, the sceptical eighteenth century-protagonist is forced to confront the spectre of the supernatural. With his staunch Enlightenment values challenged, the Judge exclaims: 'Are you bent on reviving forgotten horrors?' This question articulates a central aspect of British Folk Horror, a self-aware statement on the antiquarian inspiration behind the first wave of films that defined the genre. Folk Horror, in all its many forms, emerged out of a close thematic and aesthetic engagement with the past – real and constructed. First wave British Folk Horror films, according to Mark Gatiss, can be defined by 'a common obsession with the British landscape, its folklore and superstitions' (2010, n.p.). This engagement is largely focused on the early modern period (c. 1500–c. 1800) wherein the folkloric traditions of the Isles were recorded and synthesised by the emerging print industry. The first wave of British Folk Horror, particularly the foundational films *Witchfinder General* (1968) and *The Blood on Satan's Claw*, draw heavily from the cultural, historical, and literary milieu of this period. These works, two thirds of the 'unholy trinity', actively invoke the *wyrd* beliefs of early modern Britain while tempering such beliefs through twentieth-century values. Most importantly, both films draw from, and closely engage with, the early modern genre of popular demonic pamphlets. Within these sensationalist early modern works and the folklore that they inspired lie the generic foundations for first wave of British Folk Horror cinema, updated for a modern context. This chapter, accordingly, examines the early modern subject matter that inspired *Witchfinder General* and *The Blood on Satan's Claw* and establishes how the reception of this historical period shapes the generic traditions of British Folk Horror.

Folk Horror is a product of historical engagement in which the 'past and the present mix' to 'create horror through both anachronisms and uncomfortable tautologies between eras' (Scovell 2017, 10). This engagement is thereby predicated on a sense of historical convergence, offering parallels, yet also allowing for anachronist back projection. The early modern period is uniquely suited for these purposes. Early modern Britain exists at a unique historical crossroads in popular consciousness. This is a transitional period wherein Britain's 'old ways' and an approaching

sense of modernity are increasingly coming into conflict. This conflict, however, was certainly a drawn out one. Throughout the sixteenth, seventeenth, and well into the eighteenth centuries, vigorous currents of supernatural thought circulated across the villages, towns, and cities of Britain, common to folk at every social level. This was a God-fearing country in which ‘superstition’ flourished – a country in which ‘Christianity and pagan folklore flowed into one another’ (Gaskill 2005, xiii). This was particularly the case for demonism. Witchcraft, demonic possession, and other diabolical phenomena were a confluence of systematic demonological thought and more ‘popular’ folkloric beliefs. These beliefs were *lived* by the population, ingrained in the history and identity of individual communities. Despite undergoing a general historical trend of migration to cities during this period, Britain remained a village-based society wherein individuals and their families did not usually stray too far from their place of birth. The landscape and isolated nature of these villages – surrounded by dense forests, flanked by steaming moors, or nestled between rugged hillsides – created the ideal atmosphere for the manifestation of demonic phenomena. This enchanted setting, positioned at the periphery of modernity, thus provides the ideal thematic and historical context for Folk Horror practitioners to draw from.

This chapter also establishes a further anchor point in the Folk Horror timeline. Folk Horror scholars point to the late nineteenth century as an origin for the genre, yet this chapter proposes another: the early modern period wherein many of these folkloric traditions were ‘formally’ introduced. That is not to argue that these folkloric traditions necessarily originated in this period, but it was here in which they were first committed to print and widely disseminated throughout the British Isles. This process kept such beliefs alive, even as beliefs in the supernatural began to wane in the latter stages of the early modern period. Lingering in the collective memory for centuries, early modern folklore was re-introduced into the mainstream by literary figures over the course of the nineteenth century, albeit through a sceptical lens. Sir Walter Scott’s landmark 1830 *Letters on Demonology and Witchcraft* influenced a generation of writers such as M.R. James and Arthur Machen with its stories of early modern demonic encounters. This fascination with the demonic, in part, also functioned as a catalyst for the occult revival and counter-culture movements of the 1960/70s. Adherents of these movements cast their gaze back through history and latched onto beliefs and traditions that aligned with their own ideology. Likewise, they found many historical parallels. The early modern popular demonic is centred on the breakdown of established order – themes that map neatly to the mid-twentieth century context. Folk Horror, according to Scovell, ‘treats the past as a paranoid, skewed trauma; a trauma reflecting on the everyday of when these films in particular were made, especially when bringing past elements to sit with uncomfortable ease within the then-present day’ (2017, 14). Yet rather than upholding counter-culture values, Folk Horror films emerge in the latter years of this movement and reflect its darker aspects. Films concerning witches and demonic cults, particularly those set in, or invoking, the early modern period, were thus in vogue. British productions including *Cry of the Banshee* (1970), *The Devils* (1971), and the 1975 BBC special *The Ash Tree* –adapted from a M.R. James story – stand as a testament to this mid-twentieth century fascination with the early modern popular demonic. *Witchfinder General* and *The Blood on Satan’s Claw* are undoubtedly the best examples of this early modern engagement, in whatever form that may be, and it is, thus, these films that this chapter turns to.

The Early Modern Popular Demonic

The chronology of British Folk Horror begins with the nascent early modern print industry. By the middle of the sixteenth century, numerous commercial printing presses had been established

throughout England, leading to a flourishing print trade. Printed works, predominately in the form of inexpensive pamphlets (or chapbooks), were now reaching the hands of the wider populace rather than exclusively remaining the domain of the wealthy. This type of publication was largely sensationalist in nature, covering contemporary events intended for consumption by the increasing number of semi-literate or abecedarian readers (Suhr 2012, 130). At the forefront of these works were the genre of witchcraft pamphlets, along with the sub-genre of demonic possession pamphlets, which emerged in the 1560s. James Sharpe terms such works as the ‘popular demonic’ (building on Christina Lerner’s scholarship on the Scottish witch hunts), existing at the crossroads between popular and elite demonological publications. While there are inherent complications with witchcraft pamphlets’ status as a ‘popular source’, this definition outlines a type of publication that was far more accessible than scholarly works (2020, 128). Carla Suhr states that witchcraft pamphlets demonstrate the beliefs presented in learned theological works but, rather than ruminating on the finer theological points, communicate their argument through vivid examples (2012, 130). The popular demonic, while detailing actual legal cases with a discernible bureaucratic record, were essentially generic in nature. Demonological tropes were deeply embedded throughout these publications, layered over the historical actors and events. These tropes were primarily drawn from witchcraft and demonic possession ‘cases’ that circulated throughout the British Isles during this period. More so, these pamphlets also kept many pre-Reformation beliefs alive by subtly re-aligning them for Protestant audiences. These dramatic examples were didactic in nature, communicating a breakdown of established order that, once reflected on, led to the restoration of the status quo. Witchcraft and other demonic phenomena were symptoms of a greater transgression, an indication that a significant temporal disturbance had occurred. By this, such phenomena functioned as a dark manifestation of anxiety, anger, and trauma within a society (Gaskill 2005, 96–97). The early modern demonic, and all it represents, is hence the ideal vehicle for thematic exploration in *Witchfinder General* and *The Blood on Satan’s Claw*.

The parallels between the early modern popular demonic and twentieth century British Folk Horror cinema are further illustrated by applying Adam Scovell’s Folk Horror Chain: isolation, skewed belief system, and summoning or happening. Many popular demonic texts map to this chain, as it was, in fact, built on these very foundations. Imbued within these texts are the original generic horror traditions that, over time, developed into Folk Horror. Even a cursory glance of the extant literature qualifies this connection. The 1584 pamphlet, *A True and Most Dreadfull Discourse of a Women Possessed by the Deuill*, tantalised its audience with descriptions of a harrowing possession case in the tiny village of Ditcheat (Somerset). The demoniac, Margaret Cooper, was assaulted by the Devil in the form of a headless bear and rolled around her house and down the stairs before the assembled party. This text proved so popular that it went through multiple reprints over the next few decades. A more pertinent example is the 1612 Lancashire Witch Trials, one of the most famous witchcraft events in early modern England. Covering the malefic crimes of the Pendle and Samlesbury Witches, these trials illustrated that the spectre of witchcraft was alive and well across the country. Thomas Potts, clerk to the Lancaster assizes, outlined the diabolical acts committed by these witches in the 1613 *The Wonderfull Discoverie of Witches in the Countie of Lancaster*. This text is characteristic of many popular demonic publications, as it purports to be a truthful account of the witches’ testimonies, ‘subjugating what really happened to what ought to have happened’ (Gibson 2002, 48). The concept of clandestine witches’ covens, as established in works such as *The Wonderfull Discoverie of Witches in the Countie of Lancaster*, left such a deep impression on the public imagination that it continues to emerge in modern horror. However, just as many first wave British Folk Horror films were seen as lurid and sadistic, the popular demonic was condemned by many Enlightenment figures.

The notable clergyman and sceptic Francis Hutchinson wrote in his 1718 *An Historical Essay Concerning Witchcraft*:

These Books and Narratives are in Tradesmen's Shops, and Farmer's Houses, and are read with much Eagerness, and are continually leavening the Minds of the Youth, who delight in such Subjects; and considering what sore Evils these Notions bring where they prevail, I hope no Man will think but that they must still be combatted, oppos'd, and kept down.

(xiv)

Even though Hutchinson's words proved to be impactful in this period, resistance to the popular demonic may have had the exact opposite effect. Driven underground, these subversive texts survived in folklore for generations. By this, they became the basis of folktales in Britain and continued to 'delight' the minds of future generations.

Witchfinder General

Witchfinder General, adapted from Ronald Bassett's 1966 novel of the same name, is a heavily fictionalised history of Hopkin's witch-finding exploits with an emphasis on the more sensationist elements of his legacy. This film presents the beliefs of the early modern period, particularly in the demonic, as rooted in fear, religious bigotry, and misogyny – effectively 'barbaric in the cold light of a modern-day context' (Scovell 2017, 23). There is no presence of the supernatural in *Witchfinder General*, only the horrors of human behaviour. This horror is conveyed primarily through the figure of Matthew Hopkins (c. 1620–12 August 1647). Hopkins, played with a sinister edge by horror stalwart Vincent Price, has a clear lineage in both text and folklore. Operating in East Anglia at the height of the Civil War, the young Puritan layman Hopkins made a name for himself as a witch finder or 'witch pricker' with his associate John Stearne (c. 1610–1670). Exposed to lurid tales of demonic encounters from childhood, Hopkins and Stearne were responsible for the execution of over 100 witches between 1664 and 1667, nearly one fifth of all recorded witch executions in English history. The pair's exploits were not without scrutiny though. In early 1647, Hopkins was questioned by justices of the Norfolk assizes about his witch-finding methods and subsequently retired to his native Manningtree (Essex) under a cloud of illness. He died over the summer of suspected tuberculosis, but not before hastily penning *The Discovery of VVitches* (1647). This brief pamphlet provided responses to the queries he faced while on trial at the Norfolk assizes and defended his witch-finding methods. John Stearne continued to uncover witches throughout 1647 before settling down at his property in Lawshall (Suffolk). Determined to protect their intertwined legacies, he published the complimentary *A Confirmation and Discovery of Witchcraft* (1648). This work, however, did little to quell the dark and fantastical stories that were forming around these men.

Hopkins, as depicted in *Witchfinder General*, is a career conman preying on the superstitions of ignorant villagers. Contrary to the historical Hopkins, this character is entirely insincere about his stated spiritual crusade against witchcraft and completely driven by personal gain. The 'witches' he commits to the gallows are nothing but unfortunate scapegoats, feeding his growing fame and growing purse. Officials and witness at the 1647 Norfolk assizes made similar claims of the witch-finders. In his *A Confirmation and Discovery of Witchcraft*, Stearne counters that their efforts 'hath beene for the good of the common wealth' (1648, sig. A2v), while Hopkins gives a more personal rationale. During his early days in Manningtree, he writes that he was exposed to a

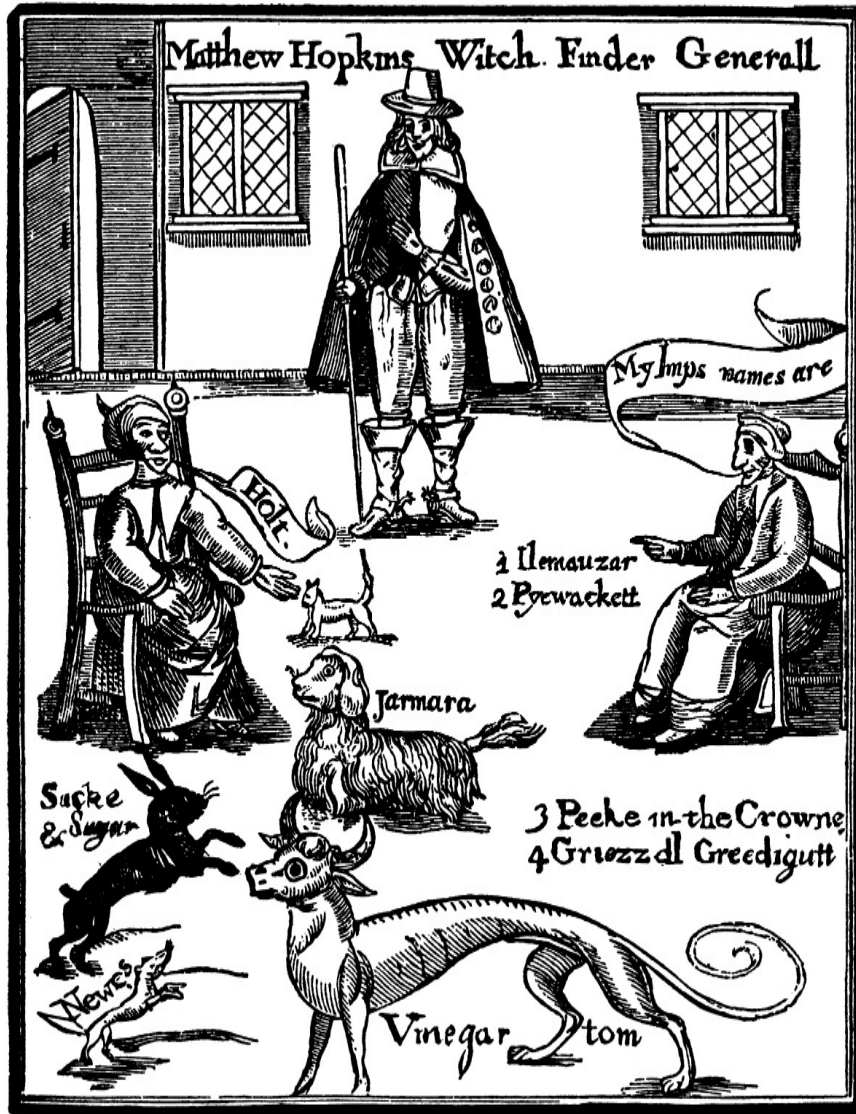


Figure 2.1 Frontispiece from Matthew Hopkins's *The Discovery of Witches* (1647).

coven of witches 'who every six weeks in the night (being alwayes on the Friday night) had their meeting close by his house' (1647, 2). Hopkins likely saw this encounter with the demonic as an explicit providential sign, a chance to make his mark on society (Gaskill 2005, 3). Both Stearne and Hopkins were following established demonological orthodoxy, albeit it tempered with popular beliefs, in their witch-finding. As staunch Puritans, they were clearly influenced by William Perkins's *Discourse of the Damned Art of Witchcraft* (1610) and Richard Bernard's *Guide to Grand Jurymen* (1627) along with more sensationalist fare from popular pamphlets. The religious convictions of Hopkins and Stearne are entirely absent from *Witchfinder General* yet, like all effective conmen, they demonstrate an uncanny ability to manipulate those who are truly faithful. *Witchfinder General*, in the words of Scovell, 'is chiefly a film about belief, or at least the harnessing of belief's power in order to fulfil other terrible needs and desires' (2018, n.p.). This is largely possible by the greater societal breakdown unfolding during the Civil War which grants

Hopkins and Stearne an uncontested authority in carrying out their anti-witch crusade. Hopkins even flaunts this authority openly. When pursued by Richard Marshall toward the end of the film, Hopkins tells Stearne: ‘You’re forgetting our powers...he could be a witch’. This film illustrates the susceptibility of officials to corruption and hysteria as they, too, give permission for the terrible acts that the witch-finders perpetrate (Harmes 2013, 70). These dark times allow for dark deeds. The horror of *Witchfinder General* is, therefore, the early modern belief system itself, as it is these beliefs that embolden the unbridled cruelty of Hopkins and Stearne upon a terrified, yet often complicit, public.

Historical accusations of witchcraft were largely built on existing tensions in communities, amplified during periods of social or civil unrest. The English legal system required members of the public to bring a ‘credible’ accusation to a magistrate or official and for the resulting case to be decided by a jury of their peers. More importantly, any such accusation had to be reconciled with the prevailing demonological traditions of the period. Many of these traditions were mired in misogyny, as women bore the brunt of witch persecutions in the early modern period. Theologians argued that this was because women were more susceptible to the Devil’s advances due to their ‘compromised’ emotional state. Puritan theologian William Perkins writes that ‘the woman beeing the weaker sexe, is sooner intangled by the deuills illusions’ (1610, 168). In *Witchfinder General*, Hopkins and Stearne use these beliefs to fulfil their own perverse desires. Their attitudes toward the hapless villagers that they encounter, women in particular, is one of total indifference. Hopkins quips ‘strange isn’t it how much iniquity the Lord invested in the female?’ Stearne uses his position to charm women of ‘low’ birth, frequenting ale houses and other locations of ill repute, while Hopkins outright procures sexual favours in exchange for favourable treatment of suspected witches (those that he deems to be witches). The character of Sara encapsulates many of the film’s depictions of early modern misogyny, as she is exhorted by Hopkins for sex and then raped by Stearne. She has little social mobility, bound to the patriarchal authority of her uncle and then to her betrothed Marshall. At the film’s end, she is tortured by the witch-finders and driven to madness for the purpose of obtaining a confession of witchcraft from Marshall. Like the countless women accused of witchcraft in the early modern period, her well-being is of no consequence to the witch-finders and their pursuit of ‘justice’. This dark conclusion establishes that *Witchfinder General* is more subversive than it appears. Contrary to its early modern textual inspirations, this film offers no resolution and revels in the destruction left in the witch-finders’ wake. Violence in *Witchfinder General*, once unleashed, only perpetuates further violence, as this contagion spreads across the landscape (Cooper 2011, 75). This film presents a bleak glimpse into the past with the real power of the demonic represented by the heinous acts committed to combat it.

Fittingly, the very belief system that Hopkins and Stearne took advantage of was eventually used against them. Accusations of witchcraft were, by nature, fluid, as the accusers themselves were susceptible to counter-accusations by those that they had incited. The spectre of witchcraft, once unleashed, was difficult to extinguish. Claims were made in court that Hopkins was only capable of discerning witches because he was ‘the greatest Witch, Sorcerer, and Wizzard himself’ (Hopkins 1647, 1). His early death only inflamed such notions. Thus, in the immediate decades after the Civil War, the witch-finders were cast in a different light. The spate of witchcraft executions attributed to Hopkins, unmatched by any other witch-finder in England, ensured that this figure would forever be linked with superstition and religious bigotry. Sir Walter Scott condemned Hopkins for having ‘put infirm, terrified, overwatched persons in the next state to absolute madness’ and this characterisation largely persists in the present (1830, 256–257). Hopkins, according to Malcolm Gaskill, ‘lives on as an anti-hero and bogeyman – utterly ethereal, endlessly malleable’ (2005, 283). So

much so that Hopkins has become a spectre himself: sightings of his ghost in and around the Thorn Inn (Essex) have been made since the nineteenth century. The historical Hopkins has all but disappeared from the collective memory, and all that is left is the folkloric construction of this figure, along with all that this represents. *Witchfinder General*, owing to its textual inspirations, thereby disregards the finer historical nuances of Hopkins's character and, instead, settles on his spectre.

The Blood on Satan's Claw

The Blood on Satan's Claw does not draw from any specific early modern text but, rather, directly invokes the dominant themes and aesthetics of the popular demonic genre. Its tale of a small English village overcome by a resurrected demonic entity has no direct early modern correlation but, rather, exists as an amalgamation of various narrative and thematic threads heightened by sadistic violence. *The Blood on Satan's Claw* is somewhat historicist in nature, presupposing the reality of demonic intervention, in that it largely accepts early modern beliefs, yet casting such beliefs as relics of a distant past. Underlying this historicist position are pagan elements, as the demonic entity at the centre of the film is represented as something from out of time, disturbed from its long slumber to disrupt the present. *The Blood on Satan's Claw* conflates the pagan and the demonic in this fashion, framing witchcraft as an ancient pagan religion. This depiction, as argued by Marcus Harnes, is inspired by Margaret Murray's influential (but far from scholarly) 1921 text *The Witch-Cult in Western Europe* (2013, 72). The demonic cult in the film, led by its young head priestess Angel Blake, evokes the attire and imagery of the 1960s counter-culture movement. Adorned with flower crowns and garbed in flowing white gowns, the cult flees to a ruined church at the outskirts of the village to live a seemingly idyllic lifestyle. However, this façade soon breaks down as the group begins committing heinous acts in the name of their dark master (Robinson 2021, 45). The cult's ritualistic murders and acts of sexual violence invoke the concept of the witches' sabbat: a dark inversion of Catholic Mass wherein individuals pledged their souls to the Devil. Imagery of this nature elevates the malefic activities of individual witches to that of a hierarchal anti-religion. The witches' sabbat was not a fundamental principle of English Protestant demonology, yet various aspects of it appeared in popular demonic pamphlets, most notably in the publications outlining the 1612 Lancashire Witch Trials, along with Hopkins and Stearne's polemics. In *The Blood on Satan's Claw*, the witches' sabbat is tempered with twentieth century counter-cultural imagery to fashion a pagan religion that emerges to challenge the prevailing institutional structures of early modern society.

The demonic figure in *The Blood on Satan's Claw* is not actually Satan but the biblical creature Behemoth. Drawing from descriptions in Job 40:15–24, medieval and early modern demonologies fashioned him as a greater demon associated with gluttony. However, *The Blood on Satan's Claw* casts Behemoth more in the image of a horned god such as Pan (but lacking in any such majesty). Here, Behemoth is a relatively minor demon: insignificant in stature and confined to the shadows (Robinson 2021, 47–48). The demon's features are bat-like, with two small horns protruding from its forehead, and it conceals itself beneath a cloak. It seldom speaks, having Blake communicate in its stead, and only confronts its victims under a veil of darkness. The village physician unknowingly diminishes the powers of this beast, remarking that 'a fiend has been seen hereabouts, hobbling on one leg'. Once confronted by the Judge at the conclusion of the film, Behemoth cowers. This is a creature that is far from whole and requires his demons to return to his original form. The infected villagers, thus, provide the sustenance for their dark master, growing fur and offering their bodies. When the innocent young Cathy is brought

THE
WONDERFULL
DISCOVERIE OF
WITCHES IN THE COVNTIE OF LANCASTER.

With the Arraignement and Triall of
Nineteene notorious WITCHES, at the Assizes and
generall Gaole deliuerie, holden at the Castle of
LANCASTER, *upon Monday, the se-
uenteenth of August last,*
1612.

Before Sir IAMES ALTHAM, and
Sir EDWARD BROMLEY, Knights; BARONS of his
Maiesties Court of EXCHEQUER: And Iustices
*of Assize, Oyer and Terminor, and generall
Gaole deliuerie in the circuit of the
North Parts.*

Together with the Arraignement and Triall of IENNET
PRESTON, *at the Assizes holden at the Castle of Yorke,
the seuen and twentieth day of Iulie last past,*
with her Execution for the murther
of Master LISTER
by Witchcraft.

Published and set forth by commandement of his Maiesties
Iustices of Assize in the North Parts.
By THOMAS POTTS Esquier.

LONDON,
Printed by W. Stansby for Iohn Barnes, dwelling neare
Holborne Conduit. 1613.

Figure 2.2 Title page of Thomas Potts's *The Wonderfull Discoverie of Witches in the Countie of Lancaster* (1613).

before the cult to be ritualistically raped and murdered, the demon finally speaks: 'She has my skin'. *The Blood on Satan's Claw*, therefore, establishes Behemoth as a parasitic host, feeding on the demonic cult that it leads. This parasitic relationship is underlined by an intrinsic connection with the natural landscape. Behemoth is resurrected from the earth, with his followers abandoning civilisation and returning to a 'ancient' pagan lifestyle steeped in ritual and blood sacrifice. During one of their dark summoning rituals at the ruined church, the demonic cult chants: 'Hail, Behemoth, spirit of the dark, take thou my blood, my flesh, my skin and walk... Holy Behemoth, father of my life, speak now, come now, rise now from the forest, from the furrows, from the fields and live'. This paradigm has a clear precedent in Christian theology. The world, the flesh, and the Devil (*mundus, caro, et diabolus*) are presented in scripture and scholastic theology as the three enemies of the Christian soul, often viewed in opposition to the

Trinity. This dark triad, what could be called the original ‘unholy Trinity’, informs much of the horror in *The Blood on Satan’s Claw* and illustrates how the film engages with Christian theology in its configuration of the demonic.

The Blood on Satan’s Claw also blurs the boundaries between witchcraft and demonic possession. The metaphysical operations of such phenomena are left purposely ambiguous for the viewer, functioning beyond our understanding. Early modern demonology established that witches willingly offered themselves to the Devil in exchange for material gain or dark powers, while demoniacs were usually cast as unwilling victims of demonic assault that suffered horribly. The cult members in this film draw from both categories: ‘possessed’ by a demonic figure while maintaining their faculties. This possession manifests as a physiological ailment, in the form of fur and sometimes monstrous claws, and an internal corruption. Rather than individual spirits occupying the bodies of the villagers, Behemoth’s influence seems to radiate out and ensnare all those who encounter his body (in whatever form that may be). This possession is, thus, virus-like, spreading like a sickness throughout the small village community. Early modern popular demonic pamphlets such as *The Most Strange and Admirable Discoverie of the Three Witches of Warboys* (1593) and *A True Discourse Concerning the Certain Possession and Dispossession of 7 Persons in One Familie in Lancashire* (1600) encapsulate this theme concisely. These publications detail the mass possession of children and young adults in two wealthy households, illustrating the breakdown in order that ensues. These two demographics comprise the bulk of demoniacs in popular demonic works as the perception of youth as innocent and more attuned to spiritual energies exposed them to demonic advances. Inherent to the possession experience was a rebellion, permitting behaviour that violated social norms. *The Blood on Satan’s Claw* engages with this early modern archetype of the possessed youth through the character of Angel Blake, while also infusing her character with twentieth century counter-cultural traditions. She is at once a devoted servant of darkness, adhering to gendered early modern stereotypes, yet, in this role, she also embodies modern feminist values. Blake assumes a position of religious and civil authority in the village, supplanting Reverend Fallowfield and even the Judge, that she at once uses to pursue her own agenda (Harmes 2013, 76). Her possession has destroyed all sense of innocence that she once had while also providing a power far beyond the social standing afforded to a young woman of her ilk. This force, as the Judge comments, ‘is more than witchcraft’. Blake is neither the stereotypical early modern witch nor the modern feminist pagan adherent but, like *The Blood on Satan’s Claw* as a whole, she exists as a hybrid of these two historical identities.

A central theme in the film is the inability to stamp out ‘outdated’ beliefs, be that Christian superstition or pagan cults. By this, *The Blood on Satan’s Claw* presents a ‘clash of belief systems and people; modernity and Enlightenment against superstition and faith’ (Scovell 2017, 183). The Judge comes to represent such Enlightenment values, dismissive of unverifiable supernatural phenomena. He declares that ‘witchcraft is dead and discredited’. Indeed, the early eighteenth century witnessed a significant shift in supernatural beliefs (at least at an elite level), as figures such as Francis Hutchinson and David Hume challenged its metaphysical foundations. This, Michael Cerlaino states, is the ‘era of peak disenchantment, where old beliefs...are worth little more than a brief ceremonial acknowledgement before being chucked aside’ (2021, 54). Yet, to defeat the evil force occupying the village, the Judge must embrace arcane knowledge and the very superstitious beliefs he sneered at earlier in the film. The turning point arrives when he witnesses a young man mutilate his own hand and is subsequently introduced to a ‘old volume’ of demonic knowledge from the village physician. After spending time in the city and consulting learned tomes, the Judge accepts the supernatural happenings unfolding in the village and announces that he will use

‘undreamt-of methods’ to address this demonic scourge. Arriving with men-at-arms, hunting dogs, and a massive cross-shaped sword, the Judge leads an assault on the coven and beheads the demon Behemoth. This represents a state-led response to demonic manifestation. Invested in the English legal system was the spiritual and legal responsibility to maintain a godly society. *Witchfinder General* challenges this approach, but in the historicist framing of *The Blood on Satan’s Claw*, this reliance on state power is endorsed. The film upholds traditional societal institutions rather than embracing the counter-cultural values of the period in which it was created. It initially contests patriarchal authority but concludes with ‘the ultimate reassertion of epistemic control of women by men’ and the triumph of traditional Christian values (Harmes 2012, 65). Thus, while *The Blood on Satan’s Claw* is borne out of the twentieth century counter-cultural movement, its resolution indicates that it is more in the vein of the early modern popular demonic.

Early Modern Folk Horror Revival

Folk Horror, particularly early modern Folk Horror, is undergoing a revival in contemporary cinema. Films such as Ben Wheatley’s *A Field in England* (2013) and Robert Eggers’s *The VVitch: A New-England Folktale* (2015) exemplify a profound re-engagement with this historical period while also evoking the aesthetic of first wave Folk Horror. The Folk Horror revival can be read as a critique of modernity, pushing back against an increasingly globalised, homogenous, and superficial society, or as a proponent of insular nationalism that advocates for a return to the ‘old ways’. Conversely, filmmakers could simply be drawing on pertinent historical examples to serve as allegories for the modern context. The genre is open to multiple readings, serving both politically progressive and conservative ends, along with everything in between. This second wave of Folk Horror cinema, according to Dawn Keetley, ‘has moved in two directions – forward, shaping new incarnations, as well as backward, revisiting and reworking’ the defining Folk Horror films from the late 1960s and 1970s (2020, 2, 8). In returning to these foundational works, filmmakers are also returning to the early modern folktales and traditions that inspired them. Twenty-first century interpretations of early modern folklore are certainly distinct from the first wave of British Folk Horror films, but that is not to imply that these earlier films treated their source material in a singular fashion. *Witchfinder General* and *The Blood on Satan’s Claw* take diametrically different approaches to this material. The horror in *Witchfinder General* is the senseless witch-persecutions that Hopkins and Stearne orchestrate across East Anglia, while *The Blood on Satan’s Claw* features an actual demonic presence that erupts in an early eighteenth-century English village. Both films depict the power of the demonic, be it a literal demon or one invoked, and the destruction left in its wake. These films, two thirds of the ‘unholy trinity’, illustrate an intrinsic connection between Britain’s first wave of Folk Horror films and the early modern popular demonic genre of pamphlets. It is in the pages of these dusty tomes that the original generic traditions of this genre are to be found, and it is here that the long-gestating modern revival of ‘forgotten horrors’ has its origin point.

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