

Cambridge University Press
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Jeanne Favret-Saada
Excerpt
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Part I

THERE MUST BE A SUBJECT

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‘They say there are savages in Africa; but you who’ve read so much, do you know – anyone more savage than us?’

‘Here, one is immediately caught – to the death: death is the only thing we know about around here.’

An unwitcher, to the ethnographer

I

 THE WAY THINGS ARE SAID

It seems that even the pure light of science requires, in order to shine, the darkness of ignorance.
 Karl Marx (1856)

Take an ethnographer: she has chosen to investigate contemporary witchcraft in the Bocage* of Western France. She has already done some fieldwork; she has a basic academic training; she has published some papers on the logic of murder, violence and insurrection in an altogether different, tribal society. She is now working in France, to avoid having to learn yet another difficult language. Especially since in her view the symbolic shaping out of murder or aggression – the way things are said in the native culture – is as important as the functioning of political machinery.

I. The mirror-image of an academic

Getting ready to leave for the field, she looks through the scientific (and not so scientific) literature on contemporary witchcraft: the writings of folklorists and psychiatrists, of occultists and journalists. This is what she finds: that peasants, who are ‘credulous’, ‘backward’ and impervious to ‘cause of effect’, blame their misfortune on the jealousy of a neighbour who has cast a spell on them; they go to an unwitcher† (usually described as a ‘charlatan’, now and again as ‘naïve’) who protects them from their imaginary aggressor by performing ‘secret’ rituals which ‘have no meaning’, and ‘come from another age’. The geographical and cultural ‘isolation’ of the Bocage is partly responsible for the ‘survival’ of these ‘beliefs’ in our time.

If that is all there is to be said about witchcraft (and however much you try to find out from the books of folklorists or the reports of trials in the French press over the last ten years, you will learn no more), you may

* *Bocage*: countryside of Western France marked by intermingling patches of woodland and heath, small fields, tall hedgerows and orchards.

† *Unwitcher*: The Bocage natives use the word *désorcelleur* rather than the more usual *désensorcelleur* [ensorceller = to bewitch]. I have translated it by *unwitcher* rather than *unbewitcher*. Similarly, *désorceller* is translated as *to unwitch* and *désorcillage* or *désorcèlement* as *unwitching* or *unwitchment*.

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4 THERE MUST BE A SUBJECT

wonder why it seems to be such an obsession. To judge by the public's immense curiosity, the fascination produced by the very word 'witchcraft', the guaranteed success of anything written about it, one wonders what journalistic scoop could ever find a greater public.

Take an ethnographer. She has spent more than thirty months in the Bocage in Mayenne, studying witchcraft. 'How exciting, how thrilling, how extraordinary . . .!' 'Tell us all about the witches', she is asked again and again when she gets back to the city. Just as one might say: tell us tales about ogres or wolves, about Little Red Riding Hood. Frighten us, but make it clear that it's only a story; or that they are just peasants: credulous, backward and marginal. Or alternatively: confirm that *out there* there are some people who can bend the laws of causality and morality, who can kill by magic and not be punished; but remember to end by saying that they do not really have that power: they only believe it because they are credulous, backward peasants . . . (see above).

No wonder that country people in the West are not in any hurry to step forward and be taken for idiots in the way that public opinion would have them be – whether in the scholarly version developed by folklorists, or in the equally hard faced popular version spread by the media.

To say that one is studying beliefs about witchcraft is automatically to deny them any truth: it is just a belief, it is not true. So folklorists never ask of country people: 'what are they trying to express by means of a witchcraft crisis?', but only 'what are they hiding from us?' They are led on by the idea of some healer's 'secret', some local trick, and describing it is enough to gratify academic curiosity. So witchcraft is no more than a body of empty recipes (boil an ox heart, prick it with a thousand pins; etc.)? Grant that sort of thing supernatural power? How gullible can you be?

Similarly, when the reporter, that hero of positivist discourse, goes along on behalf of a public assumed to be incredulous, and asks country people whether they 'still believe' in spells, the case is decided in advance: yes, people do still believe in spells, especially if you go to the Lower Berry or the Normandy Bocage. How convenient that there should be a district full of idiots, where the whole realm of the imaginary can be held in. But country people are not fools: they meet these advances with obstinate silence.

But even their silence about things to do with witchcraft; and more generally about anything to do with illness and death, is said to tell us about their status: 'their language is too simple', 'they are incapable of symbolizing', you won't get anything out of them because 'they don't talk': that is what I was told by the local scholarly élite. Why not say they are wild men of the woods, since they live in a 'bocage'; animals, even? 'Medicine is a veterinary art round here' a local psychiatrist once told me.

So all that was known about witchcraft is that it was unknowable: when I left for the field, knowledge of the subject boiled down to this. The first

question I asked myself when I met the peasants, who were neither credulous nor backward, was: is witchcraft unknowable, or is it just that those who say this need to block out all knowledge about it in order to maintain their own intellectual coherence? Does the 'scholar' or the 'man of our own age' need to comfort himself with the myth of a credulous and backward peasant?¹

The social sciences aim to account for cultural differences. But can this be achieved by postulating the existence of a peasant who is denied all reality save that he is the mirror-image of an academic?

Whenever folklorists or reporters talk of witchcraft in the country, they always do so as if one were facing two incompatible physical theories: the pre-logical or medieval attitude of peasants, who wrongly attribute their misfortunes to imaginary witches; and ours, the attitude of educated people who know how to handle causal relations correctly. It is said or implied that peasants are incapable of this either because of ignorance or of backwardness. In this respect, the description given of the peasant and the '*pays*', the canton, that determines him is governed by a peculiar set of terms which necessarily imply that he is incapable of grasping causal relations. Witchcraft is put forward as a nonsense theory which peasants can afford to adopt because it is the local theory. The folklorist's job is then to underline the difference between his own theory (which also happens to be a 'true' one) and the peasant's, which is only a belief.²

But who can ignore the difficulties involved in postulating the co-existence of two incompatible physical theories which correspond to two ages of humankind? Do you really have to do thirty months of fieldwork to be in a position to say that country people are just as well able to cope with causal relations as anyone else, and to make the suggestion that witchcraft cannot be reduced to a physical theory, although it does indeed imply a certain kind of causality?³

¹ I have published an earlier version of the above: Jeanne Favret, 'Racontez-nous des histoires de sorciers', in *Le Monde*, 6–7 October 1974. Appendix I. (*The explorer of darkness*, cf. p. 225) reproduces a comment I wrote on a television report about witchcraft in the Berry: 'Sorciers et paysans', in *Critique*, No. 299, April 1972.

² Arnold Van Gennep introduces the subject 'Magic and Witchcraft' in his well-known *Manuel du folklore français contemporain* (1938) as follows: 'When one looks more closely at the facts, almost the whole of French folklore could be substituted here, since the acts and concepts which are designated *popular* [i.e. the subject of folklore] contrast exactly with acts and concepts which are designated *scientific*, through a *mistaken application of the law of causality*. The importance of this '*logical error*' has varied with time . . .' I have italicized what goes without saying for Van Gennep. Appendix II, *Ignorance as a profession* (cf. p. 227) analyses the folklorists' attitude to witchcraft.

³ In theory, anthropology is a more sophisticated discipline than folklore. However, its remarkable naïveté is illustrated by the fact that it was not until 1966 that a distinguished researcher, Edmund Leach, put his own reputation at stake by criticizing the dictum (which had so far been totally accepted) according to which some primitive people ignored the causal relation between copulation and birth. Cf. Edmund Leach (1967).

6 THERE MUST BE A SUBJECT

II. Words spoken with insistence

I began by studying the words used to express biological misfortunes, and used in ordinary conversation: about death, sterility, and illness in animals and humans. The first thing one notices is that they distinguish between ordinary misfortunes and their extraordinary repetition.

In the Bocage, as anywhere else in France, ordinary misfortunes are accepted as 'one-off'; so, a single illness, the loss of one animal, one bankruptcy, even one death, do not call for more than a single comment: '*the trouble with him is that he drinks too much*'; '*she had cancer of the kidneys*'; '*my cow was very old*'.

An onslaught by witchcraft, on the other hand, gives a pattern to misfortunes which are repeated and range over the persons and belongings of a bewitched couple: in succession, a heifer dies, the wife has a miscarriage, the child is covered in spots, the car runs into a ditch, the butter won't churn, the bread won't rise, the geese bolt, or the daughter they want to marry off goes into a decline . . . Every morning, the couple ask anxiously: '*What on earth will happen next?*' And every time some misfortune occurs: always unexpected, always inexplicable.

When misfortunes occur like this in series, the countryman approaches qualified people with a double request: on the one hand for an interpretation, and on the other for a cure.

The doctors and vets answer him by denying the existence of any series: illnesses, deaths and mechanical breakdowns do not occur for the same reasons and are not treated in the same way. These people are the curators of objective knowledge about the body, and they can claim to pick off one by one the causes of the misfortunes: go and disinfect your stables, vaccinate your cows, send your wife to the gynaecologist, give your child milk with less fat in it, drink less alcohol . . . But however effective each separate treatment may be, in the eyes of some peasants it is still incomplete, for it only affects the cause and not the origin of their troubles. The origin is always the evil nature of one or more witches who hunger after other people's misfortunes, and whose words, look and touch have supernatural power.

Faced with a bewitched, one can imagine that the priest is in a more awkward situation than the doctor, for evil, misfortune and the supernatural mean something to him. But what they mean has become singularly blurred by many centuries of theological brooding. The dividing line between the ranges of the natural and the supernatural has been fixed by Catholic orthodoxy; but the reasons given have scarcely been assimilated, especially since each late pronouncement does not categorically cancel former ones. So theological knowledge is

no more unified in the mind of a country priest than it is in the body of doctrine.⁴

Hearing the various stories told in his parish, the priest can choose between three different and mutually exclusive types of interpretation:

1. He can dismiss these misfortunes as part of the natural order, and so deny them any religious significance: by doing so he sides with medical ideology, and in effect says the bewitched are raving or superstitious people.

2. He can acknowledge that these misfortunes do pertain to the supernatural order, but are an effect of divine love: so the bishop of Séez preaches 'good suffering' to a congregation of 'luckless' peasants.⁵ A universally aimed (Catholic) discourse can turn him who is 'luckless' into the most lucky. The man whom God loves best and so chastises, is only a victim in the eyes of the world. This reversal of appearances sometimes has its effect.

3. The priest can meet the peasant on his own ground and interpret his misfortunes as the work of the devil. He is permitted to do this by at least one branch or stratum of theology. He then has two alternatives.

He may consult, as he is supposed to, the diocesan exorcist, the official expert in diabolical matters appointed by the hierarchy. But in Western France, the priest knows very well that he is not likely to convince the expert, who has held this position for thirty years precisely because he is sceptical about the devil's interest in so-called 'simple' peasants: you have to be clever to interest the devil. So the diocesan exorcist, in the elitist style of any country priest who has risen in the Church or any peasant who has risen in society, offers the positivist interpretation. He refuses to give any religious meaning to the peasant's misfortune except by mentioning 'good suffering' or saying he will pray for him. Like the doctor, he refuses the peasant's request for a meaning by advising the man to consult a psychiatrist, to live a more balanced life, and to apply better the rules of the experimental method. The village priest knows in advance that to send a bewitched to the diocesan exorcist is to ask him to take his troubles elsewhere, and in effect to direct him to a doctor by way of the ecclesiastical hierarchy.

Alternatively, the priest comes and exorcises the farm and its inhabitants without consulting the hierarchy. As a more or less willing distributor of blessings and medals, holy water and salt, he plays the role in his parish of a

⁴ Sometimes the dogma changes, but it is always expressed in an a-historical form and guaranteed by the infallibility of the Supreme Pontiff: 'The dogmatic truth consists in effacing its historical trace from writing', writes Pierre Legendre (1974). Anyone could lose their way in it, and the country priest must have a hard time trying to find the religious code which is appropriate to the dramatic situation presented to him by the bewitched. For although the priest is concerned with dogma, he is much more concretely involved in the a-theoretical use that the ecclesiastical hierarchy makes of an institution (here, that of the diocesan exorcist) at the particular point in time when the bewitched comes to consult him.

⁵ To use one of their own expressions.

8 THERE MUST BE A SUBJECT

small-scale unwitcher who protects people from evil spells without sending them back to the witch.

'If it's a small spell, it works': the series of misfortunes stops and everything returns to normal. It works, but the origin of the misfortune and its repetition are still not satisfactorily symbolized. For when the peasant talks about being bewitched to anyone who is willing to listen, what he wants acknowledged is this: *if such repetitions occur, one must assume that somewhere someone wants them to*. I shall show later that witchcraft consists in creating a misunderstanding about who it is that desires the misfortunes of the bewitched. Note here that the Church's rite merely clouds the issue by attributing the evil to some immaterial spirit included by half-hearted theology in a list of *'preternatural facts'*. For the victim, the witch is some familiar person (a neighbour, for example) whose aims he can at least hope to discover.

If *'it doesn't work'*: if the priest *'isn't strong enough'* because his parishioner is *'caught tight'* in the spells, the bewitched is left with his question: why this series of events, and why in my home? What is at stake here, my sanity or my life? Am I mad, as the doctor says, or does someone have it in for me to the point of wanting me to die?

It is only at this point that the sufferer can choose to interpret his ills in the language of witchcraft. Some friend, or someone else who has noticed him moving deeper into misfortune and seen the ineffectiveness of approved learning makes the crucial diagnosis: *'Do you think there may be someone who wishes you ill?'*⁶ This amounts to saying: 'you're not mad, I can see in you the signs of a similar crisis I once experienced, and which came to an end thanks to this unwitcher.'

The priest and the doctor have faded out long ago when the unwitcher is called. The unwitcher's task is first to authenticate his patient's sufferings and his feeling of being threatened in the flesh; second, it is to locate, by close examination, the patient's vulnerable spots. It is as if his own body and those of his family, his land and all his possessions make up a single surface full of holes, through which the witch's violence might break in at any moment. The unwitcher then clearly tells his client how long he still has to live if he stubbornly remains defenceless. He is a master of death; he can tell its date and how to postpone it. A professional in supernatural evil, he is prepared to return blow for blow against *'the person we suspect'*, the alleged witch, whose final identity is established only after an investigation, sometimes a long one. This is the inception of what can only be called a cure. The séances later are devoted to finding the gaps which still need sealing, as they are revealed day by day in the course of life.⁷

⁶ An essential character, whom I have called the *annunciator*.

⁷ I have published an early draft of the above, although it now seems to me confused and inadequate: cf. Jeanne Favret (1971).

III. When words wage war

In the project for my research I wrote that I wanted to study witchcraft practices in the Bocage. For more than a century, folklorists had been gorging themselves on them, and the time had come to understand them. In the field, however, all I came across was language. For many months, the only empirical facts I was able to record were words.

Today I would say that an attack of witchcraft can be summed up as follows: a set of words spoken in a crisis situation by someone who will later be designated as a witch are afterwards interpreted as having taken effect on the body and belongings of the person spoken to, who will on that ground say he is bewitched. The unwitcher takes on himself these words originally spoken to his client, and turns them back on to their initial sender, the witch. Always the *'abnormal'* is said to have settled in after certain words have been uttered, and the situation persists without change until the unwitcher places himself like a screen between the sender and the receiver. Unwitching rituals – the actual 'practices' – are remarkably poor and contingent: this ritual or that, it makes no difference, any one will do. For if the ritual is upheld it is only through words and through the person who says them.

So perhaps, I was not entirely mistaken when I said I wanted to study practices: the act, in witchcraft, is the word.

That may seem an elementary statement, but it is full of implications. The first is this: until now, the work of ethnographers has relied on a convention (one too obvious to be stated) about the use of spoken words. For ethnography to be possible, it was necessary that the investigator and the 'native' should at least agree that speech has the function of conveying information. To be an ethnographer is first to record the utterances of appropriately chosen native informants. How to establish this information-situation, the main source of the investigator's knowledge, how to choose one's informants, how to involve them in a regular working relationship . . . the handbooks always insist on this truly fundamental point in fieldwork.⁸

Now, witchcraft is spoken words; but these spoken words are power, and not knowledge or information.

To talk, in witchcraft, is never to inform. Or if information is given, it is so that the person who is to kill (the unwitcher) will know where to aim his blows. 'Informing' an ethnographer, that is, someone who claims to have no intention of using the information, but naïvely wants to know for the sake of knowing, is literally unthinkable. For a single word (and only a word) can tie or untie a fate, and whoever puts himself in a position to utter it is

⁸ The anthropologist's task is like learning an unknown symbolic code which must be taught him by the most competent speaker he can find. Cf. for example: Royal Anthropological Institute (1971), S. F. Nadel (1951), John Beattie (1964).

10 THERE MUST BE A SUBJECT

formidable. Knowing about spells brings money, brings more power and triggers terror: realities much more fascinating to an interlocutor than the innocent accumulation of scientific knowledge, writing a well-documented book, or getting an academic degree.

Similarly, it is unthinkable that people can talk for the sake of talking. Exchanging words just to show that one is with other people, to show one's wish to communicate, or what Malinowski called 'phatic communication' exists in the Bocage as it does anywhere else.⁹ But here it implies strictly political intentions: phatic communication is the expression of zero-aggressiveness; it conveys to one's interlocutor that one might launch a magic rocket at him, but that one chooses not to do so for the time being. It is conveying to him that this is not the time for a fight, but for a cease-fire. When interlocutors for whom witchcraft is involved talk about nothing (that is about anything except what really matters) it is to emphasize the violence of what is not being talked about. More fundamentally, it is to check that the circuit is functioning, and that a state of war does indeed hold between the opponents.¹⁰

In short, there is no neutral position with spoken words: in witchcraft, words wage war. Anyone talking about it is a belligerent, the ethnographer like everyone else. There is no room for uninvolved observers.

When Evans-Pritchard, founder of the ethnography of witchcraft, studied the Zande, he made it his practice to interpret the events of his life by means of schemes about persecution, consulting oracles and submitting to their decisions: 'I was aided in my understanding of the feelings of the bewitched Azande', he says, 'by sharing their hopes and joys, apathy and sorrows [. . .]. In no department of their life was I more successful in "thinking black" or as it should more correctly be said "feeling black" than in the sphere of witchcraft. I, too, used to react to misfortunes in the idiom of witchcraft, and it was often an effort to check this lapse into unreason' (1937). But we learn from his book that actually the Zande had given him the position of 'Prince without portfolio', which is no slight consolation if one remembers that in Zande society, a prince can only be bewitched by another prince (a rather reassuring thought for an ethnographer established many miles from the court) and that by not giving him of portfolio, the Zande were exempting Evans-Pritchard from having to play the role, so important for the effectiveness of the cure, of symbolic guarantee of the return to order.

⁹ Under the term 'phatic communion', as part of 'ordinary conversation', Malinowski identified a particular type of discourse which is not aimed at giving information, but at a communion through words: 'inquiries about health, comment on the weather, affirmations of some supremely obvious state of things' . . . (B. Malinowski, 1923). These remarks are exchanged in order to establish and maintain communication between the speakers. On this problem, see also T. Todorov (1970), E. Benveniste (1970), R. Jakobson (1960).

¹⁰ R. Jakobson (op. cit.) remarks that the prototype of this kind of utterance is '*Hallo, can you hear me?*'.