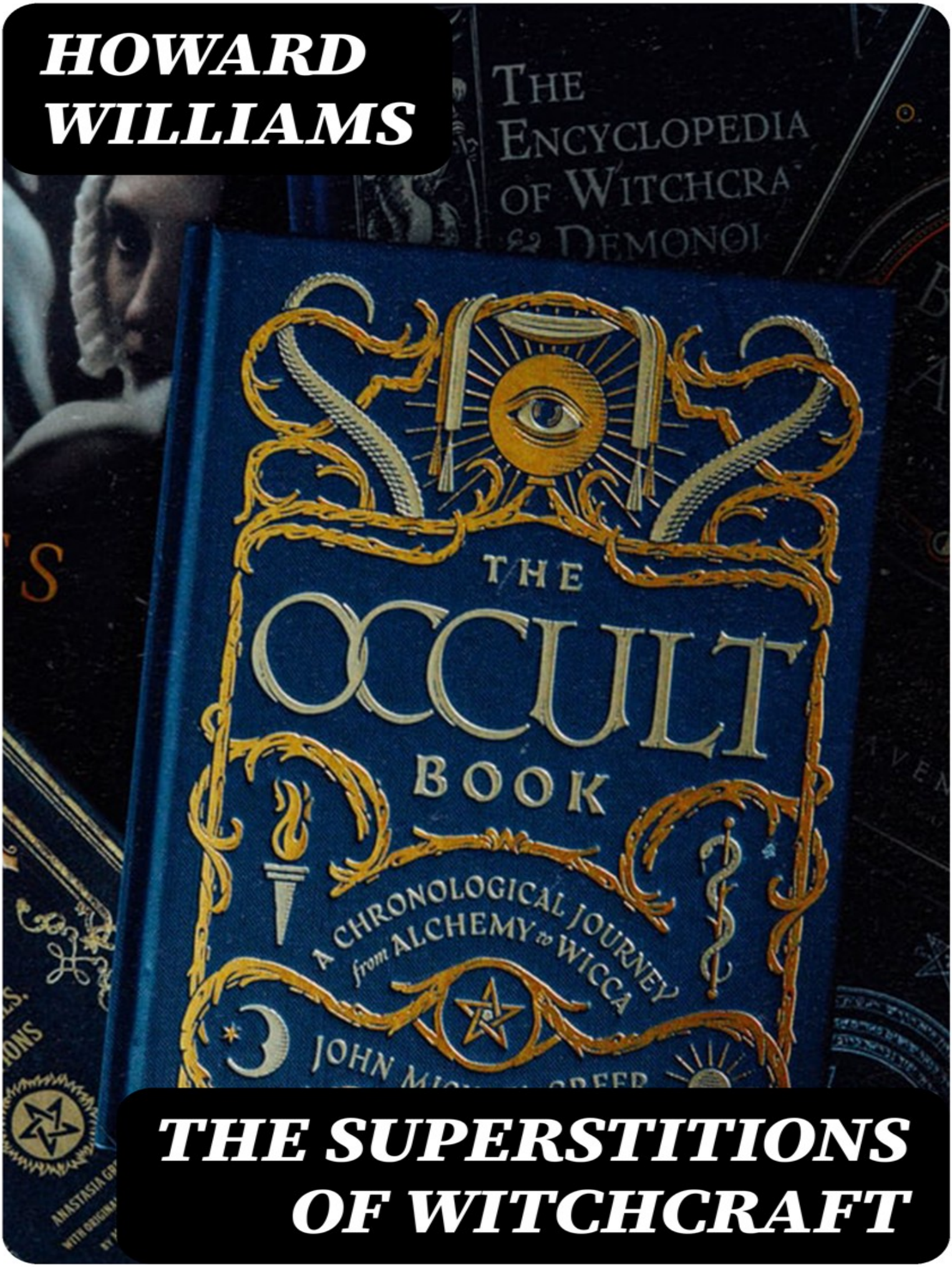
HOWARD WILLIAMS



THE SUPERSTITIONS OF WITCHCRAFT

Howard Williams

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EAN 8596547311799

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PART I.

EARLIER FAITH.

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The Origin, Prevalence, and Variety of Superstition—The Belief in Witchcraft the most horrid Form of Superstition—Most flourishing in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries—The Sentiments of Addison, Blackstone, and the Lawyers of the Eighteenth Century upon the Subject—Chaldean and Persian Magic—Jewish Witchcraft—Its important Influence on Christian and Modern Belief—Greek Pharmacy and Sorcery—Early Roman Laws against Conjuration and Magic Charms—Crimes perpetrated, under the Empire, in connection with Sorceric Practices—The general Persecution for Magic under Valentinian and Valens—German and Scandinavian Sagæ—The probable Origin of the general Belief in an Evil Principle.

SUPERSTITION, the product of ignorance of causes, of the proneness to seek the solution of phenomena out of and beyond nature, and of the consequent natural but unreasoning dread of the Unknown and Invisible (ignorantly termed the supernatural), is at once universal in the extent, and various in the kinds, of its despotism. Experience and reason seem to prove that, inherent to and apparently coexistent with the human mind, it naturally originates in the constitution of humanity: in ignorance and uncertainty, in an instinctive doubt and fear of the *Unknown*. Accident may moderate its power among particular peoples and persons; and there are always exceptional minds whose natural temper and exercise of reason are able to free them from the servitude of a delusive imagination. For the mass

of mankind, the germ of superstition, prepared to assume always a new shape and sometimes fresh vigour, is indestructible. The severest assaults are ineffectual to eradicate it: hydra-like, far from being destroyed by a seeming mortal stroke, it often raises its many-headed form with redoubled force.

It will appear more philosophic to deplore the imperfection, than to deride the folly of human nature, when the fact that the superstitious sentiment is not only a result of mere barbarism or vulgar ignorance, to be expelled of course by civilisation and knowledge, but is indigenous in the life of every man, barbarous or civilised, pagan or Christian, is fully recognised. The enlightening influence of science, as far as it extends, is irresistible; and its progress within certain limits seems sure and almost omnipotent. But it is unfortunately limited in the extent of its influence, as well as uncertain in duration; while reason enjoys a feeble reign compared with ignorance and imagination.[1] If it is the great office of history to teach by experience, it is never useless to examine the causes and the facts of a mischievous creed that has its roots deep in the ignorant fears of mankind; but against the recurrence of the fatal effects of fanaticism apparent in the earliest and latest records of the world, there can be no sufficient security.

> 1 That 'speculation has on every subject of human enquiry three successive stages; in the first of which it tends to explain the phenomena by supernatural agencies, in the second by metaphysical abstractions, and in the third or final state, confines itself to ascertaining their laws of succession and similitude' (*System of Logic*, by J. S. Mill), is a generalisation of Positive Philosophy, and a theory of the Science of History, consistent probably with the progress of knowledge among philosophers, but is scarcely applicable to the mass of mankind.

Dreams, magic terrors, miracles, witches, ghosts, portents, are some of the various forms superstition has invented and magnified to disturb the peace of society as well as of

individuals. The most extravagant of these need not be sought in the remoter ages of the human race, or even in the 'dark ages' of European history: they are sufficiently evident in the legislation and theology, as well as in the popular prejudices of the seventeenth century.

The belief in the *infernal* art of witchcraft is perhaps the most horrid, as it certainly is the most absurd, phenomenon in the religious history of the world. Of the millions of victims sacrificed on the altars of religion this particular delusion can claim a considerable proportion. By a moderate computation, nine millions have been burned or hanged since the establishment of Christianity.[2] Prechristian antiquity experienced its tremendous power, and the primitive faith of Christianity easily accepted and soon developed it. It was reserved, however, for the triumphant Church to display it in its greatest horrors: and if we deplore the too credulous or accommodative faith of the early militant Church or the unilluminated ignorance of paganism, we may still more indignantly denounce the cruel policy of Catholicism and the barbarous folly of Protestant theology which could deliberately punish an impossible crime. It is the reproach of Protestantism that this persecution was most furiously raging in the age that produced Newton and Locke. Compared with its atrocities even the Marian burnings appear as nothing: and it may well be doubted whether the fanatic zeal of the 'bloody Queen,' is no less contemptible than the credulous barbarity of the judges of the seventeenth century. The period 1484 (the year in which Innocent VIII. published his famous 'Witch Hammer' signally ratified 120 years later by the Act of Parliament of James I. of England) to 1680 might be characterised not improperly as the era of devil-worship; and we are tempted almost to embrace the theory of Zerdusht and the Magi and conceive that Ahriman was then superior in the eternal strife; to imagine the *Evil One*, as in the days of the Man of Uz, 'going

to and fro in the earth, and walking up and down in it.' It is come to that at the present day, according to a more rational observer of the seventeenth century, that it is regarded as a part of religion to ascribe great wonders to the devil; and those are taxed with infidelity and perverseness who hesitate to believe what thousands relate concerning his power. Whoever does not do so is accounted an atheist because he cannot persuade himself that there are two Gods, the one good and the other evil[3]—an assertion which is no mere hyperbole or exaggeration of a truth: there is the certain evidence of facts as well as the concurrent testimony of various writers.

> 2 According to Dr. Sprenger (*Life of Mohammed*). Cicero's observation that there was no people either so civilised or learned, or so savage and barbarous, that had not a belief that the future may be predicted by certain persons (De Divinatione, i.), is justified by the faith of Christendom, as well as by that of paganism; and is as true of witchcraft as it is of prophecy or divination.
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> 3 Dr. Balthazar Becker, Amsterdam, 1691, quoted in Mosheim's *Institutes of Ecclesiastical History*, ed. Reid.

Those (comparatively few) whose reason and humanity alike revolted from a horrible dogma, loudly proclaim the prevailing prejudice. Such protests, however, were, for a long time at least, feeble and useless—helplessly overwhelmed by the irresistible torrent of public opinion. All classes of society were almost equally infected by a plague-spot that knew no distinction of class or rank. If theologians (like Bishop Jewell, one of the most esteemed divines in the Anglican Church, publicly asserting on a well known occasion at once his faith and his fears) or lawyers (like Sir Edward Coke and Judge Hale) are found unmistakably recording their undoubting conviction, they were bound, it is plain, the one class by theology, the other by legislation. Credulity of so extraordinary a kind is sufficiently surprising even in theologians; but what is to be thought of the

deliberate opinion of unbiassed writers of a recent age maintaining the possibility, if not the actual occurrence, of the facts of the belief?

The deliberate judgment of Addison, whose wit and preeminent graces of style were especially devoted to the extirpation of almost every sort of popular folly of the day, could declare: 'When I hear the relations that are made from all parts of the world, not only from Norway and Lapland, from the East and West Indies, but from every particular nation in Europe, I cannot forbear thinking that there is such an intercourse and commerce with evil spirits as that which we express by the name of witchcraft.... In short, when I consider the question whether there are such persons in the world as those we call witches, my mind is divided between two opposite opinions; or rather, to speak my thoughts freely, I believe in general that there is and has been such a thing as witchcraft, but at the same time can give no credit to any particular modern instance of it.'[4] Evidence, if additional were wanted, how deference to authority and universal custom may subdue the reason and understanding. The language and decision of Addison are adopted by Sir W. Blackstone in 'Commentaries on the Laws of England,' who shelters himself behind that celebrated author's sentiment; and Gibbon informs us that 'French and English lawyers of the present age [the latter half of the last century] allow the *theory* but deny the *practice* of witchcraft'—influenced doubtless by the spirit of the past legislation of their respective countries. In England the famous enactment of the subservient parliament of James I. against the crimes of sorcery, &c., was repealed in the middle of the reign of George II., our laws sanctioning not 130 years since the popular persecution, if not the legal punishment.

4 *Spectator*, No. 117. The sentiments of Addison on a kindred subject are very similar. Writing about the vulgar ghost creed,

> he adds these remarkable words: 'At the same time I think a person who is thus terrified with the imagination of ghosts and spectres much more reasonable than one who, contrary to the reports of all historians, sacred and profane, ancient and modern, and to the traditions of all nations, thinks the appearance of spirits fabulous and groundless. Could not I give myself up to the general testimony of mankind, I should to the relations of particular persons who are now living, and whom I cannot distrust in other matters of fact.' Samuel Johnson (whose prejudices were equalled only by his range of knowledge) proved his faith in a well-known case, if afterwards he advanced so far as to consider the question as to the reality of 'ghosts' as *undecided*. Sir W. Scott, who wrote when the profound metaphysical inquiries of Hume had gained ground (it is observable), is quite sceptical.

The origin of witchcraft and the vulgar diabolism is to be found in the rude beginnings of the religious or superstitious feeling which, known amongst the present savage nations as Fetishism, probably prevailed almost universally in the earliest ages; while that of the sublimer magic is discovered in the religious systems of the ancient Chaldeans and Persians. Chaldea and Egypt were the first, as far as is known, to cultivate the science of magic: the former people long gave the well-known name to the professional practisers of the art. Cicero (*de Divinatione*) celebrates, and the Jewish prophets frequently deride, their skill in divination and their modes of incantation. The story of Daniel evidences how highly honoured and lucrative was the magical or divining faculty. The Chazdim, or Chaldeans, a priestly caste inhabiting a wide and level country, must have soon applied themselves to the study, so useful to their interests, of their brilliant expanse of heavens. By a prolonged and 'daily observation,' considerable knowledge must have been attained; but in the infancy of the science astronomy necessarily took the form of an empirical art which, under the name of astrology, engaged the serious attention and perplexed the brains of the mediæval students of science or magic (nearly synonymous terms), and which still survives in England in the popular

almanacks. The natural objects of veneration to the inhabitants of Assyria were the glorious luminaries of the sun and moon; and if their worship of the stars and planets degenerated into many absurd fancies, believing an intimate connection and subordination of human destiny to celestial influences, it may be admitted that a religious sentiment of this kind in its primitive simplicity was more rational, or at least sublime, than most other religious systems.

It is not necessary to trace the oriental creeds of magic further than they affected modern beliefs; but in the divinities and genii of Persia are more immediately traced the spiritual existences of Jewish and Christian belief. From the Persian priests are derived both the name and the practice of magic. The Evil Principle of the Magian, of the later Jewish, and thence of the western world, originated in the system (claiming Zoroaster as its founder), which taught a duality of Gods. The philosophic lawgiver, unable to penetrate the mystery of the empire of evil and misery in the world, was convinced that there is an equal and antagonistic power to the representative of light and goodness. Hence the continued eternal contention between Ormuzd with the good spirits or genii, Amchaspands, on one side, and Ahriman with the Devs (who may represent the infernal crew of Christendom) on the other. Egypt, in the Mosaic and Homeric ages, seems to have attained considerable skill in magic, as well as in chymistry and astrology. As an abstruse and esoteric doctrine, it was strictly confined to the priests, or to the favoured few who were admitted to initiation. The magic excellence of the magicians, who successfully emulated the miracles of Moses, was apparently assisted by a legerdemain similar to that of the Hindu jugglers of the present day.[5]

5 The names of two of these magicians, Jannes and Jambres, have been preserved by revelation or tradition.

In Persian theology, the shadowy idea of the devil of western Asia was wholly different from the grosser conception of Christendom. Neither the evil principle of Magianism nor the witch of Palestine has much in common with the Christian. 'No contract of subjection to a diabolic power, no infernal stamp or sign of such a fatal league, no revellings of Satan and his hags,'[6] no such materialistic notions could be conformable to the spirit of Judaism or at least of Magianism. It is not difficult to find the cause of this essential dissimilarity. A simple unity was severely inculcated by the religion and laws of Moses, which permitted little exercise of the imagination: while the Magi were equally severe against idolatrous forms. A monstrous idea, like that of 'Satan and his hags,' was impossible to them. Christianity, the religion of the West, has received its *corporeal* ideas of demonology from the divinities and demons of heathenism. The Satyri and Fauni of Greece and Rome have suggested in part the form, and perhaps some of the characteristics, of the vulgar Christian devil. A knowledge of the arts of magic among the Jews was probably derived from their Egyptian life, while the Bedouins of Arabia and Syria (kindred peoples) may have instilled the less scientific rites of Fetishism. It is in the early accounts of that people that sorcery, whatever its character and profession, with the allied arts of divination, necromancy, incantations, &c., appears most flourishing. The Mosaic penalty, 'Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live,' and the comprehensive injunction, 'There shall not be found among you that maketh his son or his daughter to pass through the fire, or that useth divination, or an observer of times, or an enchanter, or a witch, or a charmer, or a consulter with familiar spirits, or a wizard, or a necromancer,' indicate at once the extent and the horror of the practice. Balaam (that equivocal prophet), on the border-land of Arabia and Palestine, was courted and dreaded as a wizard who could

perplex whole armies by means of spells. His fame extended far and wide; he was summoned from his home beyond the Euphrates in the mountains of Mesopotamia by the Syrian tribes to repel the invading enemy. This great magician was, it seems, universally regarded as 'the rival and the possible conqueror of Moses.'[7]

6 Sir W. Scott, *Letters on Demonology*.

7 Dean Stanley's *Lectures on the Jewish Church*.

About the time when the priestly caste had to yield to a profane monarchy, the forbidden practices were so notorious and the evil was of such magnitude, that the newly-elected prince 'ejected' (as Josephus relates) 'the fortune-tellers, necromancers, and all such as exercised the like arts.' His interview with the witch has some resemblance to modern *diablerie* in the circumstances. Reginald Scot's rationalistic interpretation of this scene may be recommended to the commentating critics who have been so much at a loss to explain it. He derides the received opinion of the woman of Endor being an agent of the devil, and ignoring any mystery, believes, 'This Pythonist being a *ventriloqua*, that is, speaking as it were from the bottom of her belly, did cast herself into a trance and so abused Saul, answering to Saul in Samuel's name in her counterfeit hollow voice.[8] An institution very popular with the Jews of the first temple, often commemorated in their scriptures—the schools of the prophets—was (it is not improbable) of the same kind as the schools of Salamanca and Salerno in the middle ages, where magic was publicly taught as an abstruse and useful science; and when Jehu justifies his conduct towards the queen-mother by bringing a charge of witchcraft, he only anticipates an expedient common and successful in Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. A Jewish prophet asserts of the Babylonian kings,

that they were diligent cultivators of the arts, reproaching them with practising against the holy city.

> 8 *Discoverie of Witchcraft*, lib. viii. chap. 12. The contrivance of this illusion was possibly like that at Delphi, where in the centre of the temple was a chasm, from which arose an intoxicating smoke, when the priestess was to announce divine revelations. Seated over the chasm upon the tripod, the Pythia was inspired, it seems, by the soporific and maddening drugs.

Yet if we may credit the national historian (not to mention the common traditions), the Chaldean monarch might have justly envied, if he could scarcely hope to emulate, the excellence of a former prince of his now obscure province. Josephus says of Solomon that, amongst other attainments, 'God enabled him to learn that skill which expels demons, which is a science useful and sanative to men. He composed such incantations also by which distempers are alleviated, and he left behind him the manner of using exorcisms by which they drive away demons so that they never return.'[9] The story of Daniel is well known. In the captivity of the two tribes carried away into an honourable servitude he soon rose into the highest favour, because, as we are informed, he excelled in a divination that surpassed all the art of the Chaldeans, themselves so famous for it. The inspired Jew had divined a dream or vision which puzzled 'the magicians, and the astrologers, and the sorcerers, and the Chaldeans,' and immediately was rewarded with the greatest gift at the disposal of a capricious despot. Most of the apologetic writers on witchcraft, in particular the authors of the 'Malleus Maleficarum,' accept the assertion of the author of the history of Daniel that Nebuchadnezzar was 'driven from men, and did eat grass as oxen,' in its apparent sense, expounding it as plainly declaring that he was corporeally metamorphosed into an ox, just as the companions of Ulysses were transformed into swine by the Circean sorceries.