

Superstitions of the Elizabethan Era

By Richard Foss



We do it without thinking. Someone sneezes, and many nearby will automatically respond with a hearty, "Bless you!" When we react to that sneeze with a blessing, we are continuing a superstition that is hundreds, perhaps thousands, of years old.

Back in the age of Elizabeth, everyone knew that when you opened your mouth to sneeze, you gave the devil an entrance into your body. The blessing warded off any possibility of harm, for of course no demon could remain in a place where one Christian blessed another. What we now do from politeness, early Englishmen did to protect their fellows from spiritual harm.

Elizabethans saw the world as a delicate balance, with spirits of good and evil in close proximity. This balance extended beyond the spiritual world; they believed that the laws of nature were similarly related, and that changes that made things more appealing would also make them more healthful. In times of plague, they burned scented firewood in the streets, and people carried sweet-smelling flowers in their pockets to ward off disease. (The childhood rhyme, "Ring around the rosey" is a remnant of plague times and the second line "pocket full of posies" refers to this habit.) This set of beliefs is now referred to as *sympathetic magic*, and the Elizabethans believed it sincerely.

The roots of sympathetic magic in England go back to the pre-Christian era, to the beliefs of the Celtic tribes of the Bronze age, the Romans who conquered them, the Anglo-Saxons who supplanted the Romans, and the Viking raiders who captured much of England in the ninth century. Each brought particular beliefs in magic: the Celts, a reverence for plants and a belief in the power of names; the Romans, superstitions about colors and metals; the Saxons, belief in the magic of animals and the reading of omens, and the Danes, lucky numbers and chants. Over the centuries these different magical ideas mixed with Christianity to create some strange customs that are still practiced today. Dancing around a burning log was customary at the Saxon midwinter festival of Yule: the Yule log was incorporated into the Christmas tradition and continues today (alas, with rather less revelry). Multiple traditions collide in another festival: the Roman tradition of giving eggs in spring and the Saxon spring celebration called Eostre combined for the Christian Easter, celebrated by giving decorated eggs. You don't like the

number thirteen? Neither did the Vikings, who considered twelve the luckiest number, and to whom we owe our habit of counting things by dozens. Thirteen was an inconvenient number, and over time acquired a reputation of evil.that was reflected in such customs as tying a hangman's noose with thirteen loops. About the only positive association with this number is the baker's dozen. This originally came from bakers tossing in an extra roll when a customer bought a dozen, both as a gift and to make up for any that were underweight.

From the Celtic lore about plants, which was passed down through a female priesthood, came the traditions of herbal healing. Though some of these were rather fanciful, many have been discovered to have merit. Traditional headache relievers made from boiled willow bark contain many of same chemicals as aspirin, and herb lore included effective antiseptics, antibacterials, and pain medications. Herb women also provided floral and vegetable remedies that were guaranteed to reveal a vision of a future husband, or to reawaken the love of a bored spouse. Modern science has found these prescriptions to be less effective, though their use continues to this day.

The smallest actions could bring or banish good luck. To stir a pot counter-clockwise, or "widdershins", was supposed to spoil the contents, as well as bring bad luck to all who ate from it. Bad luck could also follow from spilling salt, leaving a door open behind you, or from almost any encounter with a cat, black or otherwise. Good luck flowed from other sources: iron, silver, fire, salt, and running water were thought to be pure and purifying, and many good luck charms involve these elements. Other charms are more mysterious in origin: for instance, it was good luck to touch a man about to be hanged, just as it was lucky to spit into a fire or to be breathed on by a cow.

These beliefs were by no means held only by the peasantry. Queen Elizabeth herself, who patronized scientists, explorers, and scholars, also took advice from Dr. John Dee, renowned as a magician, astrologer, and alchemist. What advice he gave her, and whether she heeded it, we shall never know. In his consultations with his Queen, he was continuing a tradition much older than himself, one going back through the mists of time to the seers, sages, and plant worshipping priestesses who advised the kings and queens of Celtic legends.