

# *Horse and Hattock: The Origin of the Witch's Chant*

By Sarah Lawless



***Horse and hattock! Horse and go! Horse and Pellatis, Ho Ho!***

This may be a familiar chant to many Wiccans and Witches and commonly used in ritual, but many of us are clueless as to the meaning behind this chant and where it comes from. This chant is probably most familiar to Gardnerians and those in BTW traditions and it is included in the questionable online Gardnerian Book of Shadows. Where it comes from is easy to answer; the simpler phrase "Horse and Hattock" originates from Scotland as does the first mention of the chant in its entirety. The meaning however gets more complex. The following is not fact; it is simply what I have come across in study.

First let us take a look at folklore. In Scottish folklore, the fairies say the phrase: "*Horse and hattock*" when they leave a place to go back to their own realm and also when they prepare to go off for their nightly escapades. It is said people that have heard the fairies shouting it out and in turn they have repeated it and were transported away as well. There is also a story of a child that cried "*Horse and Hattock with my top!*" and had his toy whisked away on the winds [1]. In another folk story, the laird of Duffus was walking in the fields when he heard the cry. When he repeated it he was whisked away with the faeries to the cellar of the king of France. The butler found him with a faery cup in his hand. When brought before the king to explain his intrusion, the laird was pardoned thanks to the tale of his adventure and he returned home with the cup [2].

I have also found a reference to 'Horse and hattock' in a novel by the 19<sup>th</sup> century Scottish writer Sir Walter Scott called *The Black Dwarf* and in a 19<sup>th</sup> century Camelot ballad, *The Doom Well of St. Madron* by the Reverend R.S. Hawker, a Cornish clergyman and folklorist.

Both examples are used in reference to mounting and riding horses:

*"Now horse, and haddock, cried the laird, --- Now horse and haddock speedilie; They that winna ride for Telfer's kye, Let them never look in the face o' me.*

*'Horse! horse! and spear!' exclaimed Hobbie to his kinsmen. Many a ready foot was in the stirrup; and, while Elliot hastily collected arms and accoutrements (no easy matter in such a confusion), the glen resounded with the approbation of his younger friends."* [2]

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*"Now horse and haddock, both but and ben, '  
Was the cry at Lauds, with Dundagel men;  
And forth they pricked upon Routorr side,  
As goodly a raid as a king could ride.*

*Hare, hare, God send thee care.  
I am in a hare's likeness now,  
But I shall be in a woman's likeness even now.* [3]

Thanks to various 18th-20<sup>th</sup> century novels and writings, my conclusion is that “Horse and haddock” is Scottish patois for mounting a horse. It came to be so because of its use in folklore relating to the faeries. As I said before, any time the faeries went anywhere they shouted this phrase. “Haddock” in the *Dictionary of the Scots Language* is “the elfin sign for mounting and riding off... Horse and haddock, the well-known cry of the faeries at mounting for a moonlight expedition, came to be familiarly adopted on any occasion of mounting”. [5]

In my opinion, the phrase became associated with witches through Isobel Gowdie, a Scottish witch put on trial in 1662. In her detailed voluntary confessions, she spoke of how she used the phrase: “Horse and haddock, Horse and go, Horse and Pellatis, Ho Ho!” in order to fly by mounting a brookstick: “Then they would put a strae [straw] between their legs, cry -- “Horse and haddock in the Devil's name!” and flee awa owre [away over] the muirs [moors] and fells.” [6] Gowdie is also commonly associated with the shapeshifting song: “I shall go into hare,/ With sorrow and sych meickle care;/ And I shall go in the Devil's name,/ Ay while I come home again.” Isobel Gowdie can be compared to the modern “hedge riders” - sending her spirit forth with the cry of the faeries and the shapeshifting can be compared to the fetch found in modern traditional witchcraft. Perhaps Gowdie learnt the chant from her meetings with the faeries or, as a less mystical view, she may have created it herself based on the faery lore of the times. She stands out from other witches who were tried because, while her confessions are consistent with folklore, her accounts are much more detailed and the information she gave (on flying, shapeshifting and witches' meetings) was not typical in other witch confessions of the time [7]. The commission for her trial was told not to use any forms of torture, most likely because she had confessed of her own volition. Gowdie claimed to have been a member of a coven, to have been entertained by the Queen of Elphame (the underworld) and to have had sex with the Devil himself. [6 & 8].

I looked up “pellatis” as well, but did not find the word as it is spelled in the chant. What I did find was “pellax”, meaning seduction in Latin. Some Latin words commonly end in 'tis'. So perhaps it is a Scottish corruption of the Latin? “Pellatis” might also come from the Scottish word “pelat”, from the French “paillet” meaning a bundle of straw – perhaps even referring to

a broom or besom. The latter is the most likely definition as in 1538 King James V of Scotland married a French noblewoman. Years alter their daughter, Mary Queen of Scots, married the French dauphin [9]. During the time of Isobel Gowdie, French would have been integrated into the Scottish patois. This would fit in perfectly with “Horse and Hattock” because in Gowdie's chant you place a broomstick (bundle of straw) between your legs and then shout out the chant in order to fly.

Thanks to Isobel Gowdie and Scottish folklore, “Horse and hattock” will forever be associated with witchcraft and faery lore. Even though to most people the chant has no meaning, I hope that I have opened a door to understanding it. In my eyes, using the chant in ritual opens a door to the spirit world and leaves the material world behind behind for the duration of the rite. Used in Gowdie's terms, it would be a cry or shout used when preparing to cross over to the spirit world, perhaps with the aid of trance, gnosis, or entheogens. Overall, what at first seemed senseless goes very deep indeed.

### **Resources:**

1. Sir George Douglas. *Scottish Fairy and Folk Tales*. A. L. Burt Company, 1901: 126.
2. Briggs, Katherine Mary. *British Folk Tales and Legends* (1898-1980) .
3. Sir Walter Scott. *The Black Dwarf* (1816: Chapter 8) .
4. Rev. Robert Steven Hawker. *The Doom-Well of St. Madron*.
5. *Dictionary of the Scots Language* - "Hattock"  
<http://www.dsl.ac.uk/>
6. Margaret Alice Murray. *The God of the Witches*. Oxford University Press, 1933.
7. *Isobel Gowdie Case – Survey of Scottish Witchcraft Database*  
<http://www.webdb.uas.ed.co.oc>
8. “Isobel Gowdie” - entry in *Wikipedia*  
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Isobel\\_Gowdie](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Isobel_Gowdie)
9. “Religion and Power in Scotland 1503-1603” in The National Archives of Scotland  
<http://www.nationalarchives.go.uk>