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Man's Best Fiend: The Black Dog and Social Change in England

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Abstract: Tales of dark, fiery-eyed hounds heralding storms and prowling lonely roads have been a consistent presence in English folklore since at least the time of the Reformation. Despite their ubiquity, these Black Dogs do not always serve the same purpose. These distinctions correspond with three different natures: the Devil, which seeks to punish sinners; the Omen, which appears as a portent of death; and the Guardian, which acts as a protector. These interlocking evolutions formed as direct reflections of moments of social change within England.

The dog has been Man's steadfast companion since before the birth of civilization, and has remained with us every step of the way. The dog is closer to us than perhaps any other creature, and occupies that dubious space between the civilized structure of humanity and the wild world that lies just beyond. Intertwined as they are in our history, it is hardly surprising that they are an enduring presence in our mythologies as well. The dog thus becomes elevated to something *more*. The Ancient Greeks knew of the three-headed Cerberus standing at the gates of Hades, while the Norse placed Garmr at the threshold of Hel and the Aztecs had Xolotl to guide souls. But of all these supernatural dogs, or paracanines, few exemplify the close relationship between man and dog more than the Black Dog specters of England. The Black Dog is a manifestation of social identity because it is defined by moments of challenge to the social order.

Defining the Dog

Black Dogs are ubiquitous specters found in English folklore since at least the time of the Reformation.²⁹⁹ They have gone by many names, from Barguest to Shuck to Owd Rugman and more, but their characterization rarely varies: the Black Dog is an enormous, shaggy black beast with large, fiery eyes and an aura of fear. He is ominous at best and malevolent at worst. Black Dogs are always solitary, unlike the hounds of the Wild Hunt, and they usually do not shapeshift. Belief in Black Dogs remained common in England well into the twentieth century, and in some parts of the country there are those even today who take the legends quite seriously.³⁰⁰ However, for all the similarities, Black Dogs have even more differences, and for every rule there are exceptions. Some, such as the Padfoot, may not even explicitly be described as *dogs*.³⁰¹ Various folklorists have attempted to divide up occurrences to ascertain which qualify as *true* instances of the Black Dog.

²⁹⁹ Theo Brown, "The Black Dog," *Folklore* 69, no. 3 (1958): 175–192.

³⁰⁰ Martin Newell, "Martin Newell's Joy of Essex: Black Shuck Is the Hell-Hound Legend That Won't Lie down," *East Anglian Daily Times*, June 9, 2014, <https://www.eadt.co.uk/news/martin-newell-s-joy-of-essex-black-shuck-is-the-2148306>.

³⁰¹ William Henderson and Folklore Society (Great Britain), *Notes on the Folk-Lore of the Northern Counties of England and the Borders* (London: Folk-lore Society, 1879), 273-274.

There is too much variation to comfortably set a clear outline for Black Dogs as a whole, but enough overlap occurs that grouping them by recurring traits is possible. In 1832, Robert Chambers defined three separate types of English specter-hounds in his *Book of Days*: fiends that have taken the forms of Black Dogs, evil human spirits made into dogs as punishment, and evil spirits that group together to hunt souls.³⁰² The final kind refers to variations of the Wild Hunt. These packs of dogs—usually paired with at least one ghostly huntsman—are not Black Dogs, which are solitary creatures. However, much of the characterization and symbolism surrounding their respective mythologies bleed into each other. They should therefore not be fully discarded as irrelevant, especially in places where both Wild Hunts and Black Dogs are found. The other two of Chambers' categories, fiends and ghosts, refer to a distinction in supposed origin, but not necessarily behavior. The 'fiend' type comes about from an inhuman demon or boggart taking the appearance of a dog, either as a disguise or simply having their form mistaken as such by the witness. The second kind is a type of human ghost trapped in the shape of a dog as a punishment.³⁰³ Both of these sorts of Black Dogs are certainly found in England, but Chambers' groupings leave out others, especially in regards to the spirit kind. There are instances of Black Dogs as ghosts lingering, not as punishment, but because they are victims of some horrid crime seeking revenge. On other occasions, it may be the ghost of an actual dog.

In her seminal work on the topic in 1958, Theo Brown also identified distinct "species" of Black Dog.³⁰⁴ Some instances are defined individuals tied to a specific location or known to traverse a set path while others, which she dubs "Barguests," represent a broader type of apparition that may appear anywhere. There is also a rare third kind where the hound is tied to the calendar rather than geographic location. Brown does not consider Barguests "true" Black Dogs since, on occasion, they can occur as shapeshifters. However, these few occasions should not disqualify the many instances of impersonal paracanines that do take the explicit form of dark-coated dogs.

Rather than simply the origin or behavior, it is more useful to look at the *purpose* of the Black Dog. Doing so, there are three primary natures that reveal themselves, each more or less

³⁰² Robert Chambers, "Spectre-Dogs," in *The Book of Days: A Miscellany of Popular Antiquities in Connection with the Calendar, Including Anecdote, Biography, & History, Curiosities of Literature and Oddities of Human Life and Character* (W. & R. Chambers Limited, 1832), 433–436, <http://www.thebookofdays.com/months/oct/11.htm>.

³⁰³ Chambers, "Spectre Dogs," 435.

³⁰⁴ Brown, "The Black Dog," 175–192.

prominent in different times and places: The **Devil**, the **Omen**, and the **Guardian**. Despite their distinct characterization, throughout English history each developed as a reaction to moments of changing social order.

Devil

The earliest concrete accounts of what may be classified as Black Dogs are of the Devil type. In these instances, the dog is either specifically associated with the devil or otherwise characterized as representing an ‘Evil One.’ Unlike most Black Dogs, the Devil is actively malevolent and can even directly attack an unlucky witness. However, the purpose that the Devil Dog serves on a folkloric basis is one of justice against infringements on the social order, particularly perceived moral failings and spiritual impurity. It is important to note here that the devil appearing as a black dog is not quite enough to qualify it, since the beast must be *primarily* tied to the form of a dog to be a true Black Dog.

The devil appearing as a black dog in Europe dates back well over a thousand years, but it is not solidly documented in Britain until the time of the Reformation.³⁰⁵ The infamous Black Dog of Bungay was recorded in 1577 through the dramatic pamphlet *A straunge and terrible Wunder* written by Abraham Fleming. The pamphlet tells how, during a violent tempest, a terrible black dog, “or the devil in such a likeness,”* crashed through the doors of a church in Bungay during a morning meeting. The beast snapped the neck of two people, shrunk another, and knocked some more people about before being driven off by prayer. It then fled to the Holy Trinity Church in Blythburgh where it brutally slaughtered three people, harmed at least one more, and caused notable damage to the church itself.³⁰⁶

Fleming, a clergyman at the close of the English Reformation, makes clear that this is an example of God’s wrath bestowing terrible justice upon those who fell from piety.³⁰⁷ The account

³⁰⁵ Patricia Dale-Green, *Dog* (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1966), 53.

³⁰⁶ Abraham Fleming, *A straunge and terrible Wunder wrought very late in the parish Church of Bongay* (Reprinted for T. and H. Rodd, 1820). *Spelling standardized.

³⁰⁷ “Abraham FLEMYNG,” Cambridge Alumni Database, University of Cambridge, accessed April 24, 2022, <https://venn.lib.cam.ac.uk/cgi-bin/search->

concludes with a prayer pleading for God's forgiveness and mercy. The storm itself was real, and the scorch marks from lightning (or, perhaps, the Black Dog) can still be seen on the Blythburgh doors today.³⁰⁸ Because of the author's clear drive in both building a religious narrative and telling an entertaining story, it is difficult to determine to what extent Fleming is exaggerating oral accounts of the event and how much of the story is drawing on preexisting folklore.

Nevertheless, it is still possible to identify what Fleming may have intended by his use of the dog and the characterization it held as a reflection of social identity. This story was published as a pamphlet meant to be widely distributed and appealing to the general masses. England had somewhat of a unique relationship with their hounds at the time compared to the rest of Britain and mainland Europe. In 1576, a year prior to writing *A straunge and terrible Wunder*, Fleming published an English translation *Of Englishe Dogges*.³⁰⁹ The treatise was originally written in Latin in 1570 by John Caius and describes how and why English dogs were distinct as a product of the surrounding culture. Caius makes clear that the English are nothing short of obsessed with hunting, and this has a profound impact on their varieties of dog. The lack of wolves in England and Wales also created an environment where the English had both the desire and ability to cultivate the best dogs for every type of situation. Throughout the book, Caius portrays dogs as an extension of English character and society. Nowhere is this more apparent than in his discussion of Bandogges; mastiffs bred primarily as attack and guard dogs, described as "huge, stubborn, ugly, and eager... Our Englishmen (to the intent that their dogs might be the more fell and fierce) assist nature with art, use, and custom."^{310**} These fearsome curs are especially prized for their unwavering loyalty to their masters, and their ability to deal with thieves—which Caius reports are everywhere in England, and fear no other retribution. He proudly states that even in these "devilish days nothing can escape the claws" of the English Bandogge.^{311**}

2018.pl?sur=&suro=w&fir=&firo=c&cit=&cito=c&c=all&z=all&tex=FLMN570A&sy=&eye=&col=all&maxcount=50.

³⁰⁸ "History," Holy Trinity Blythburgh: The Cathedral of the Marshes, accessed April 24, 2022, <https://www.holytrinityblythburgh.org.uk/history/>.

³⁰⁹ John Caius and Abraham Fleming, trans., *Of Englishe Dogges: The Diuersities, the Names, the Natures, and the Properties* (A. Bradley, 1576), <http://archive.org/details/englishdoggesd00flemgoog>.

³¹⁰ Caius and Fleming, *Of Englishe Dogges*, 25-33. *Spelling standardized.

³¹¹ Caius and Fleming, *Of Englishe Dogges*, 28. **Spelling standardized.

In *A straunge and terrible Wunder*, Fleming's description of the looming, hideous Black Dog is remarkably similar to that of the Bandogge, and the crude woodcut image provided on the cover of the original account does appear to be some sort of mastiff.^{†312} This does not mean that the devilish Black Dog is meant to literally be a Bandogge, or any specific type of dog for that matter, but there are clearly parallels in the characterization. Fleming frames the Black Dog as a violent punishment from God against those who have sinned. He says that a less brutal spectacle would not have sufficed because anything less would be ignored, and only through such an event could He "open the eyes of our hearts, that we may see in what Wildernesses, among what wild Beasts and devouring Serpents we do wander."^{313*} Thieves and sinners alike will only be deterred by a hellish hound. This also highlights the Black Dog in a position linking humanity to the wild that lies beyond. Fleming's use of the dog acts as a commentary on social identity. To him, this dog is a dramatic—and perhaps even comical—reminder of the limitations of humanity in the face of both nature and the divine. Just as the Bandogge is necessary to combat the scourge of thieves, the Devil Dog is turned against Man by God because only such drastic measures will deter sin. Fleming includes himself in this, defining everyone within his own group as needing to be humbled. His story is a reflective judgement on the morality of society.

During this same period, the legend of the Black Dog of Newgate Prison was well known in London. In 1596, the criminal Luke Hutton wrote a lengthy poem describing the wretched, inhumane conditions of the prison and the system around it in vivid detail.³¹⁴ The goddess Minerva and the personification of Time task Hutton, as the narrator, with discovering the true nature of the Black Dog and revealing it to the world, and soon the beast itself comes along to drag him to hell. However, the Dog soon changes to the form of a man who informs the terrified narrator that this is, in fact, Newgate Prison. As they journey through the prison the Dog-man alternatively treats him with extreme cruelty and small, surface-level acts of kindness that are enough to keep Hutton, desperate for any kind of solace, submissive and eager to ingratiate himself to the beast. In the end, the Dog charges him with a crime he did not commit and condemns him. Hutton falls into despair as he is left to rot, realizing "For worse then Dogs, lye we in that foule kennel," and "That

³¹² † See Appendix 1.1

³¹³ Fleming, *A straunge and terrible Wunder*, vii. *Spelling standardized.

³¹⁴ Luke Hutton, *The Blacke Dogge of Newgate Both Pithie and Profitable for All Readers* (London: G. Simson and W. White, 1596), <http://name.umd.umich.edu/A03921.0001.001>.

metamorphosd we were beasts not men.”³¹⁵ Hutton concludes with a prose section explicitly explaining the true identity of the Black Dog: it is the “Cunny-catchers,” charismatic but corrupt con men who use the system to get rich. They are paid by victims of pickpocketing to catch the perpetrator and then extort all the poor, petty thieves, demanding payment to not turn them in. They are able to get the Constable to arrest dozens at once for a single crime that none could have committed and will even fabricate felony charges for those who oppose them. The pickpockets are thrown in prison, where their only escape is to pay the Cunny-catcher. Many of those who cannot are hanged. The true Black Dog of Newgate Prison is the nature of the prison itself: it is an error and corruption in the social order. Honest people are led to believe that the Cunny-catchers are figures of justice while the pickpockets, who take far less, are demonized and treated as inhuman.

Similar to Fleming’s account, the roles of man, dog, and thief are turned around. Social identity is criticized and called into question. However, the framing of the Dog within the narratives of each text is opposite: Fleming assures the reader that although the Dog appears violent and brutal, it is a necessary act of justice from God, while Hutton makes clear that the Dog portrays itself as a figure of justice but in truth is a terrible evil. At one point in the poem, a preacher comes to the prison and the inmates all flock to him. Hutton is surprised, since if these are meant to be the souls of the damned in hell then surely they would not seek out the light and redemption of God. The preacher tells them that they are not worthy of salvation and condemns them to both death and damnation. Fleming was himself a clergyman, and his words of righteous punishment are not so different from what is told to the Newgate prisoners. Hutton, meanwhile, was a criminal. Their respective positions in the social order of society at the time are what makes the nature of the Dog different.

The Black Dog of Bungay appeared at the end of the English Reformation, in a period under Elizabeth when the religious world reached a point of uncertain stability compared to the previous decades of inconsistency.³¹⁶ However, the peace would not last forever. The seventeenth century was one of great upheaval for England, including civil war, regicide, revolution and

³¹⁵ Hutton, *The Blacke Dogge of Newgate*.

³¹⁶ Andrew Pettegree, “BBC - History - The English Reformation,” BBC, 2011, https://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/tudors/english_reformation_01.shtml.

increased conflict between Catholics and Protestants.³¹⁷ During this time of distinct challenge to tradition, the Devil Dog turned from being used to criticize the social order to being used to uphold it.

At the start of the century, Elizabeth Sawyer was tried for witchcraft and executed. Her questioning was published in 1621 and widely distributed through the pamphlet *The wonderfull discouerie of Elizabeth Savvyer*, where her account of the devil visiting as a dog (sometimes black and sometimes white) called ‘Tom’ became widely known.³¹⁸ This cannot truly be called an instance of a Black Dog, but in 1658 the play *The Witch of Edmonton* was published and leaned much more into the character of this ‘Tom.’³¹⁹ In the play, his nature as the literal devil is secondary to his role in his relationship with Sawyer. She is a lonely, bitter old woman who is scorned and abused by those around her, and sells her soul for revenge. However, two of the men she despises, Cuddy and Frank, also ally themselves with the Tom. The world presented is fundamentally one of corruption, and the very people Sawyer wishes to see fall are the same ones who also easily step into the devil’s fold. Frank and Sawyer are both arrested, for murder and suspected witchcraft respectively. She remains angry and protests the abuse and corruption, causing the crowd to feel no pity for her, while weak-willed Frank expresses remorse and appeals to the social standards, winning over the sympathy of even those hurt by his actions.³²⁰ Tom appears to Sawyer one final time in prison, for the first time white, and tells her he no longer has use for her, and that he will not even take Cuddy’s soul since the corrupt are more useful to him alive.³²¹

The Black Dog of the play represents the threat of socially disruptive crimes to the bonds within the community.³²² However, Tom is not the cause of the evil within the play, but the consequence. His manipulative relationship with Sawyer is markedly similar to the one the Black Dog of Newgate has with Hutton. Their desire for any form of companionship and comfort makes

³¹⁷ Matthew White, “The Turbulent 17th Century: Civil War, Regicide, the Restoration and the Glorious Revolution,” British Library, 2018, <https://www.bl.uk/restoration-18th-century-literature/articles/the-turbulent-17th-century-civil-war-regicide-the-restoration-and-the-glorious-revolution>.

³¹⁸ Henry Goodcole, *The Wonderfull Discouerie of Elizabeth Savvyer a Witch Late of Edmonton, Her Conuiction and Condemnation and Death. Together with the Relation of the Diuels Accesses to Her, and Their Conference Together. Written by Henry Goodcole Minister of the Word of God, and Her Continuall Visiter in the Gaole of Newgate. Published by Authority.* (London: For VVilliam Butler, 1621).

³¹⁹ William Rowley et al., *The Witch of Edmonton* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999).

³²⁰ Rowley et al.

³²¹ “The Witch of Edmonton | Royal Shakespeare Company,” 2014, <https://www.rsc.org.uk/the-witch-of-edmonton>.

³²² Rowley et al., *The Witch of Edmonton*, 7.

them vulnerable to the devilish dog, who winds up leaving them both alone and condemned in the end. In fact, it is the *same* prison he leaves them to; Sawyer was held and ultimately executed at Newgate.³²³ But between the writing of the poem and the publishing of the play, a shift has occurred. In Hutton's work, the prisoners are victims of the corruption of the social order. There is a clear distinction between the crimes of petty thieves who only steal a few shillings or blaspheme and the Cunny-catchers who exploit and extort everyone. The play, on the other hand, makes all crimes that threaten communal cohesion equivalent. Frank was arrested for stabbing someone to death, while Sawyer's main direct attack on those around her is *cussing*. It is not just the crowd of the narrative but the text itself that places Sawyer in the wrong for refusing to conform.³²⁴

This theme was not isolated to the play. Hutton's poem was republished by a third party in 1638, but this time with a lengthy additional introduction added by the publisher. This section gives a new definition of the dog:

The Black Dog is a black Conscience, haunting none but black conditioned people, such as Newgate may challenge to be guests; yet this rugged Curre hath his several abidings; as in the bosoms of Traitors, Murderers, Theives, Cut-purses, Cunny-catchers, and such like...they commit many notable felonies and cozonings, to the great hurt of plain minded people.^{325*}

Rather than the Black Dog specifically being the Cunny-catchers, it is all criminals—including petty thieves and pickpockets ('Cut-purses'). The introduction goes on to describe the immorality of Newgate in terms of the criminals housed within. This edition attempts to reframe the original work into a similar message as appears in *The Witch of Edmonton*. This idea was still present in 1691, when one author wrote of an instance in Colchester where a man had entered the churchyard at night and, as punishment for transgressing acceptable behavior, the devil came to him as a "Black Dog with terrible Eyes" and followed him thereafter.³²⁶ The terror of the beast's presence

³²³ Goodcole, *The Wonderfull Discoverie of Elizabeth Savvyer*.

³²⁴ Rowley et al., *The Witch of Edmonton*, 9.

³²⁵ Hutton and Rowlands, *The Discovery of a London Monster, Called, the Blacke Dogg of New-Gate Profitable for All Readers to Take Heed By* (London: M. P. for Robert Wilson, at his Shop at Grayes-Inne Gate in Holborne, 1638).
*Spelling standardized.

³²⁶ Richard Baxter, *The Certainty of the Worlds of Spirits and, Consequently, of the Immortality of Souls of the Malice and Misery of the Devils and the Damned : And of the Blessedness of the Justified, Fully Evinc'd by the Unquestionable Histories of Apparitions, Operations, Witchcrafts, Voices &c. / Written, as an Addition to Many*

drove him mad until he found God and got into “good Society.” The Dog never left, but he no longer had anything to fear from it. This account directly ties the Black Dog to a form of social judgment; the afflicted man is only safe from the Devil after he starts praying and spending time with those deemed to be of moral virtue. Wherever the Devil Dog appears, he is a manifestation of perceived degradation of the social and moral order.

Omen

Black Dogs of the Omen type act as portents of death or other misfortune to those unlucky enough to encounter them. Omens are particularly liminal, appearing only in moments and places of transition. It has been a common belief in many places around the world that dogs have a sort of ‘spirit-sense’ that makes them aware of things just beyond human perception, leading to beliefs around the world that the behavior of dogs—especially howling—can act as an omen of death.³²⁷ However, this generally applies to regular dogs. A paracanine acting as an omen is not nearly as universal. The Black Dog can be found as a death-sign throughout Britain and even beyond, but the Barguest in the North of England and the Shuck of East Anglia are particularly and consistently ominous in nature. Encounters with Omens are typically said to precede death or other disasters to either the witness or someone around them. However, while most Omens are simple heralds of coming misfortune, in other cases it is the very act of seeing the Black Dog that causes bad luck. Omens are generally the most consistent in their physical descriptions, as well, and tend to form the basis of the archetypal Black Dog in England: they are big, black, shaggy, and have “fiery” or “glaring” eyes.

The Barguest of Northern England is always ominous, and is not a kindly creature to meet. William Hone’s *Every-day Book* includes a piece of correspondence from 1827 by one ‘T.Q.M,’ recording a ballad about the Troller’s Gill in the Yorkshire Dales, as well as a follow-up noting a supposed recent encounter with the fiend mentioned within—the “Spectre Hound,” which T.Q.M

Other Treatises for the Conviction of Sadduces and Infidels, by Richard Baxter (London: Printed for T. Parkhurst, 1691), 153, <http://name.umd.umich.edu/A26888.0001.001>.

³²⁷ Maria Leach, *God Had a Dog: Folklore of the Dog* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1961), 275-279, 316-321.

identifies as the Barguest.³²⁸ The Ballad tells the story of a man who foolishly called upon the specter, using decidedly un-Christian magic, and was soon found dead. The Barguest is a death-omen explicitly connected with an “elfin band, from faerie land.” T.Q.M also expands on some of the rites and rituals for the dead in the area, which are described as eerie and strange to outsiders. This description positions the Barguest as a distinct marker of past tradition against local identity and contemporary customs in opposition to broader norms. In addition, the Barguest carries a fairy connection that is not present in its southern neighbors—though it does echo the Scottish *coinnshith*, which are related to but distinct from English Black Dogs.³²⁹

During the early nineteenth century, the Barguest was especially prevalent in Lancashire, where he was greatly feared.³³⁰ This period was one of great significance in Lancashire. The region was a major center of the Industrial Revolution and saw an explosion in population in both rural and urban areas.³³¹ After the mid-nineteenth century, the population density in cities continued to rapidly grow as people consolidated there and the rural population stagnated.³³² Barguests became prevalent in this decidedly liminal moment, appearing to mark the tension between old and new, rural and urban, and native and outsider.

Sometimes, particularly in the north-east of the region, he is referred to as “Skriker” or “Trash,” for his loud shrieking cries at night and the wet sound of his feet on the bogs, respectively.³³³ Typically, Omens are regarded as morally neutral figures. They may represent something undesirable and can even be dangerous if provoked, but no more than a force of nature or wild beast. In 1872, Charles Hardwick connected Skriker’s bright eyes and ability to vanish as suggesting a connection to both lightning, a natural phenomenon, and “Will-o’-whisp” fairies.³³⁴

³²⁸ “The Legend of the Troller’s Gill,” in *The Every-Day Book and Table Book*, by William Hone, vol. II, III vols. (London: T. Tegg, 1835), 653–659.

³²⁹ John Gregorson Campbell, “Fairy Dogs (‘Cu Sith’),” in *Superstitions of the Highlands and Islands of Scotland. Collected Entirely from Oral Sources*. (Glasgow: J. Maclehose & Sons, 1900), 141–144, <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/001880520>.

³³⁰ Hardwick, *Traditions, Superstitions, and Folklore, (Chiefly Lancashire and the North of England:)* “Their Affinity to Others in Widely-Distributed Localities; Their Eastern Origin and Mythical Significance (Manchester: A. Ireland, 1872), 172.

³³¹ Malcolm Falkus and John Gillingham, *Historical Atlas of Britain* (New York: Crescent Books, 1987), 200–201.

³³² Falkus and Gillingham, *Historical Atlas of Britain*, 193, 202–203.

³³³ John Harland and Thomas Turner Wilkinson, *Lancashire Folk-Lore* (London F. Warne and Company, 1867), 91 ; Chambers, “Spectre-Dogs,” 433–436.

³³⁴ Hardwick, *Traditions, Superstitions, and Folklore, (Chiefly Lancashire and the North of England:)*,” 175.

But even if the Black Dog is not *evil*, it is certainly not good. Skriker curses anyone who lays eyes upon it. Those stalked by the beast, or just unlucky enough to hear his footsteps, were sure to soon see death in their family.³³⁵ Lancashire natives had a particularly strong belief in dogs as being spirit-sighted and able to sense coming death, and even that the souls of a dog and its master could be so entwined that the death of one ensured the passing of the other.³³⁶ These beliefs made the Black Dog a particularly potent portent of doom and made it easy to tie the apparition closely to the community and social order. Some Barguests were even tied to specific families or towns, where an appearance meant someone prominent was soon to die.³³⁷

East Anglia's Black Dog, called Old Shuck, is also ominous, but unlike the northern Barguest it is much more closely associated with ghosts. The Shuck also rose to popularity in the nineteenth century, and has remained present in folklore ever since. One of the highest concentrations of Black Dogs is along the Norfolk coast, where a recurring story is common: some years ago, there was a shipwreck in which many people died. Among the dead were a dog and his master who both washed up on a beach. The dog was unceremoniously buried there on the beach while his master was brought to a churchyard. The spirit of the dog now forever wanders between the two graves, never able to rest as he searches in vain for his lost companion. In the early twentieth century one old Cley fisherman reportedly said that, "As the years passed, they say its appearance became more grotesque as if in increased frustration, grief and anger! He now has large red eyes; his coat as black as ebony; shaggy and the size of a calf. Many have sensed a hound padding silently behind them as if in two minds as to whether or not to vent its perceived anger."³³⁸ The hound is permanently locked into this transient, in-between state.

Other variations claim that Shuck in fact had two masters, who were buried in separate parishes, and he now journeys between *their* graves, unable to rest beside one while knowing the other lies elsewhere.³³⁹ However, this element of the myth appears to be a later addition. The

³³⁵ James Bowker, "Th' Skriker," in *Goblin Tales of Lancashire* (London: W. Swan Sonnenschein & Co., 1887), 27–36, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/39712/39712-h/39712-h.htm>.

³³⁶ Harland and Wilkinson, *Lancashire Folk-Lore*, 142.

³³⁷ Dale-Green, *Dog*, 50-51.

³³⁸ W.H. Barrett and R.P. Garrod, *East Anglian Folklore and Other Tales* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1976) ; as quoted in "A Ghostly Tale: Salthouse Shuck!," *Norfolk Tales, Myths & More!*, 2018, <https://norfolktalesmyths.com/category/ghost-tale/>.

³³⁹ Ivan Bunn, "Black Shuck Part Two," *Lantern* 19 (Autumn 1977): 4-8.

earliest accounts—which tend to agree that the Norfolk Shuck passes between Beeston and Overstrand—make no mention of the supposed shipwreck or even any graves. In the mid-nineteenth century, he was said to be an entity associated with storms, rising out of the sea at Beeston and running towards Overstrand.³⁴⁰ It is only later that the narrative of being caught between graves becomes apparent, along with other accounts for his supposed origin, though the Shuck as a storm spirit does not wholly vanish.³⁴¹ In the 1970s, the town of Overstrand erected a new village sign, depicting the Black Dog caught between the graves of ‘The Saxon’ and ‘The Dane,’ paying homage to the shipwreck variant of the tale.³⁴²

The transformation from being a sort of storm spirit to an actual ghost likely occurred in the late nineteenth or early twentieth century. The close of the Victorian era in England was a time of massive social upheaval that brought both English and more local identities into question. As a storm spirit, the Shuck was more emblematic of natural forces, but as a specific ghost it was solidly anchored in a societal narrative of transition from the past. After the Industrial Revolution, the focus on agriculture diminished and the developed world saw the rise of the new middle class. In England, there was a growing feeling of uncertainty about British supremacy on the global stage.³⁴³ Meanwhile, the country itself was becoming increasingly connected. Railroads in England increased more than three-fold between 1852 and 1914.³⁴⁴ East Anglia, which had not experienced the same industrialization or population increases as Lancashire, had to reckon much harder with the agricultural depression of the late nineteenth century.³⁴⁵

The Black Dog as an Omen has always been a decidedly liminal figure. As a death-sign, he travels the space between the realm of the living and the dead. Unlike the earlier Devil types that will intrude upon churches and cities, the Barguest or Shuck is found along roads and bridges, never truly able to exist *here* or *there* but always in between. He is between the north and the south,

³⁴⁰ *Norfolk Archaeology, Or, Miscellaneous Tracts Relating to the Antiquities of the County of Norfolk*, vol. 2 (Norfolk and Norwich Archaeological Society, 1849), 307 ; Chambers, “Spectre Dogs,” 434.

³⁴¹ Margaret Aldred, “Letter from Miss Margaret Aldred FRSA,” November 12, 1983; as quoted in Mike Burgess, “Caister,” Shuckland, Hidden East Anglia, accessed May 7, 2022, <https://www.hiddeneaa.com/shuckland/caister.htm>.

³⁴² Andrew Tullett, “The Saxon, the Dane and the Black Shuck - the Story behind Overstrand’s Village Sign,” *North Norfolk News*, June 24, 2019, <https://www.northernorfolknews.co.uk/news/the-story-behind-overstrand-s-village-sign-1638468>.

³⁴³ Patrick Joyce, “United Kingdom - Late Victorian Britain | Britannica,” Britannica, accessed April 27, 2022, <https://www.britannica.com/place/United-Kingdom/Late-Victorian-Britain>.

³⁴⁴ Martin Gilbert, *British History Atlas* (Toronto: The Macmillan Company, 1968).

³⁴⁵ Falkus and Gillingham, *Historical Atlas of Britain*, 186.

or the sea and the land. The danger of that boundary is what makes him so fearsome. In both Northern England and East Anglia, he appeared as an omen of the changing times, and of the area's rural identity and traditions facing increasing threat.

Conclusion: Later Perceptions of the Black Dog

While Black Dogs are usually defined as bogey creatures of fear, this is not always the case.³⁴⁶ The Devil and Omen types are the most historically prevalent natures of the Black Dog. However, the emergence of folkloric studies in the late 19th and early 20th centuries highlighted claims of this other, more benevolent, characterization. In these depictions the Dog is neither a punishment for nor manifestation of societal threats, as with earlier types, but a bulwark against it. In particular, it is connected with *resistance* to modernization and protects those who respect tradition. In these rare occasions, the specter is a **Guardian** figure, taking on a protective role for a family, town, or lone traveler.

A recurring pattern appears in many works that have investigated the Black Dog, usually written by those who grew up with the stories themselves. In 1872, Charles Hardwick spoke of the superstition of dogs as death omens being “yet, at the present day, firmly believed in, even by the middle, and by no means uneducated, classes in Lancashire.”³⁴⁷ Ethel Rudkin's formative 1938 paper on Black Dogs begins with a similar disclaimer:

The Black Dog walks in Lincolnshire still; and there are a number of living people who have seen him, heard him, and even felt him. The people who can supply these details are of the hard-working, normal, strong-minded type...I have never yet had a Black Dog story from someone who was weak in either body or mind.³⁴⁸

Similar claims appear elsewhere as well, emphasizing both that the belief is widespread within a community and that the community is not gullible or uneducated for their belief. Notably, early scholarship on the Black Dog all comes from those who grew up around the stories. Any analysis

³⁴⁶ Katharine Briggs, “Black Dogs,” in *British Folktales* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1970), 115–119.

³⁴⁷ Hardwick, *Traditions, Superstitions, and Folklore, (Chiefly Lancashire and the North of England)*,” 174.

³⁴⁸ Ethel H. Rudkin, “The Black Dog,” *Folklore* 49, no. 2 (1938): 111–131.

of the Dog becomes an analysis of their own community. As such, it is intertwined with their own social identity, and many seek to defend both the belief and the Dog itself.

This characterization appears most concretely with Rudkin and the Black Dogs of Lincolnshire. There, the Dogs are Guardians, and she explains that they are “*never feared*.”³⁴⁹ However, this is not entirely true, even within her own accounts—the *people of Lincolnshire* may not usually fear the Dog, but *outsiders* are another matter.

Most of the accounts she shares are set at least a few decades prior to the time of writing the paper, as she claims, “the Dog has not been seen here in years gone by, as it is only a few older natives who remember these things.”³⁵⁰ However, there are a couple of more recent encounters she notes, and neither involve a ‘native’ at all. She explains how in her own home village of Willoughton, the area was recently bought up by a “very up-to-date and go-ahead farmer,” who had several clerks and assistants.³⁵¹ One of these secretaries—whom she explicitly notes as being from the city—was chased and even pushed by the Black Dog in 1933. Another instance in 1934 saw an Irishman working in the area for the harvest deeply disturbed after he saw the Dog stalk him for some time.³⁵² In both cases, Rudkin highlights that she had to inform them of the local lore since they were strangers to the area. Because these two witnesses were not aware of the Black Dog, Rudkin is the one who classifies their encounters as such. For her, the Dog in Lincolnshire is a marker of social belonging. She identifies it with local *identity*.

This is a recurring theme in the Lincolnshire accounts. One woman “years ago” was walking along the road when the Black Dog joined her. “Presently she passed some Irish labourers, and she heard them say what they would do to that lone woman if ‘that (something) dog hadn’t been with her.’”³⁵³ The Dog vanished once she safely made it home. This role as a guardian for women traveling alone is incredibly common in the Guardian type. Again, the Dog stands between the insiders and the outsiders, this time in a more direct way. As a Guardian, the Dog provides protection from change and the ‘other’ that threatens to bring it.

³⁴⁹ Rudkin, “The Black Dog,” 130.

³⁵⁰ Rudkin, “The Black Dog,” 126.

³⁵¹ Rudkin, “The Black Dog,” 122.

³⁵² Rudkin, “The Black Dog,” 126.

³⁵³ Rudkin, “The Black Dog,” 117.

Lincolnshire does not have a full monopoly on this sort of dog, however. A story told in the 1920s in Wiltshire explained how, sometime in the eighteenth century, a pair of robbers were chased out of town after murdering a couple.³⁵⁴ They fled into the woods to escape the mob. They knew that you were not supposed to pass through the woods at night with a guilty soul, but they ignored the legend. Soon, though, they saw the glowing green eyes of the Black Dog. They tried to get away to no avail, and the Dog chased them right back out of the woods and into the hands of the waiting mob. Another story from Yorkshire was apparently widespread in the early twentieth century, with variations reaching as far as London.³⁵⁵ The story went that a young man (or a kind minister) was passing through a dark wood at night when a strange Black Dog appeared and would not leave his side until he reached the end of the woods. When he had to pass back through the woods to return home, it again accompanied him. Years later, two prisoners admitted they had been planning to murder the lonely traveler but were scared off by the unnerving dog. These two stories share many similarities with each other, as well as the Lincolnshire accounts. Their representations mirror the Devil type in several regards as well. These Dogs can still be dangerous, and act as figures of justice, but now they are characterized as Guardians of the good more than punishers of the bad.

In *The Devil in Dog Form*, Barbara Allen Woods points out that despite Rudkin's attempts to portray a gentle-natured dog in Lincolnshire, many of the accounts she shares contain details traditionally associated with the Devil.³⁵⁶ There are a few instances tied to witchcraft, elements of the danger of naming the beast, and domestic animals showing terror in its presence. In the story of the Wiltshire Black Dog, even the good villagers fear going into the woods at night because of the fiend that lies within. There are also clear parallels with the Omen types. The Guardian can act as a sign of danger, and he appears where there is a perception of social placement and identity under threat—such as from foreigners, or urban incursions into the countryside, or from criminals. However, while the Omen embodies that threat, the Guardian symbolizes resistance to it. Starting in the early twentieth century, as belief in the hound began to wane, it became a symbol of cultural

³⁵⁴ Ruth Tongue, *Forgotten Folk-Tales of the English Countries* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970), 48-49.

³⁵⁵ Briggs, "Black Dogs," 115-119.

³⁵⁶ Barbara Allen Woods, "The Devil in Dog Form," *Western Folklore* 13, no. 4 (1954): 229-235, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1496435>.

identity. Wanting to preserve that identity meant preserving the Dog. In turn, the Dog seemingly returned the favor of protection.

Since the end of the Reformation, the Black Dog has been defined by moments of challenge to the social order. It exists along the boundaries of identity and the winds of change. While the exact origins of the Dog may be obscure, it has become a living phenomenon in England that evolves as a reflection of the society and communities around it. Whether it carries the unholy justice of the Devil, the perilous warning of the Omen, or the dutiful protection of the Guardian, the Black Dog has been a consistent presence in the country. In 1570, John Caius characterized English Dogs as a reflection of his country, and this is no less true for their supernatural counterparts.

Appendix: The Devil Dogs

1.1: The Black Dog of Bungay



The Black Dog of Bungay, from *A straunge and terrible Wunder*, 1577.

Fleming, Abraham. *A straunge and terrible Wunder wrought very late in the parish Church of Bongay*. Reprinted for T. and H. Rodd, 1820.

1.2: The Black Dog of Newgate



The Black Dog of Newgate, from *The Discovery of a London Monster*, 1638.

Hutton, Luke, and Samuel Rowlands. *The Discovery of a London Monster, Called, the Blacke Dogge of New-Gate Profitable for All Readers to Take Heed By*. London: Marmaduke Parsons for Robert Wilson, 1638.

1.3: The Witch of Edmonton



Tom, Sawyer, and Cuddy, from *The Witch of Edmonton*, 1658.

Rowley, William, Dekker Sedge, Thomas Dekker, and John Ford. *The Witch of Edmonton, A known true Story*. London: Printed by J. Cottrel, 1658.

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