

# Rudolf Zacharias Becker, “On Bewitching, Performing Magic, and Poisoning” (1788)

## Abstract

Rudolf Zacharias Becker (1752–1822) was a popular writer, teacher, journalist, and publisher. His advice book, *Not- und Hilfsbüchlein*, was a bestseller among eighteenth-century secular books and a classic of the German public enlightenment movement. Becker aimed to dispel prejudices and to communicate new knowledge in the hopes of encouraging new practices. To that end, he was committed to combatting the belief in witches. Becker attacked the Catholic Church, including the Pope, as the authorities responsible for witch-burnings.

## Source

Sometimes people contract diseases whose cause cannot be fathomed, or which are very bizarre. [...] Many sick people also have all kinds of delusions, for example, one person thinks that he is made of glass; another, that he has a cat, a mouse, a ball of yarn, and the like inside his body. It is often the case in children that they eat a great deal and still do not gain weight: usually worms are the cause. Likewise, a cow sometimes suddenly stops giving milk, when she eats noxious herbs, or horses fall suddenly, when they are neglected by ignorant farm laborers. In such cases, simple-minded people think that evil persons, witches, or sorcerers have done something to the sick person or animal, that is, that such people caused these accidental occurrences with the help of the devil. There are cunning people who exploit the situation and say that they could take action in advance or reverse the witchcraft. They feed the sick person good herbs or only perform all kinds of antics that neither help nor hurt. If now in the meantime nature itself helps, it is claimed that he or she did something in advance, and such cunning people get a reputation for being masters over witches or even Satan himself and make the hoodwinked peasants pay generously for their tricks. And this ridiculous belief in witches, druids, and whatever the things are called, often still does damage because one person slanders another, and serious feuds, court cases, and even murder results. But the belief comes from paganism and Judaism, and is based on lies and deception. [...] And this false belief then traveled on from one place to the next. The Pope, the bishops, and other clerics who heard about it in the end also thought it was true, and banned witches and sorcerers under penalty of death, because belief in such beings caused the Christian religion to be denied. They also induced the secular ruler to have the ostensible witches and warlocks burned alive. If, therefore, such an unfortunate person came under suspicion of being a witch, she was tortured until she said that yes, she was one. Then she was tortured until she named her acquaintances who were with her at the devil's feast. In such cases, the poor tortured person in her fear just named a number of people who occurred to her. They were also taken prisoner and tortured until they confessed their guilt just to be released from torture by death, and then they all got the stake. Some woman or another who had used the witch's salve probably also said without torture what the judges wanted to hear and reinforced their belief that there was some truth in it. In this way, Christian rulers and priests, because of this fundamentally false and ridiculous belief in leagues with the devil and witches, ages ago tortured and killed many thousands of innocent people. And this terrible disaster persisted in Germany until thirty years ago when in Würzburg the Abbess Renate was burned as the last witch. But now the courts, praise and thanks to God, no longer accept any charges for witchcraft, but instead penalize people who accuse some one of it for being slanderers. For it is known for sure that there has never been a real witch and there will never be one, now and forever, although at the same time there are all kinds of natural tricks to make people and animals sick or otherwise cause damage. [...]

---

Source: Rudolph Zacharias Becker, *Vom Behexen, Zaubern und Vergiften*, in *Noth- und Hülfsbüchlein für Bauersleute*. Gotha, Leipzig, 1788 (available online at: <https://doi.org/10.11588/diglit.38842#0369>); reprinted in Barbara Stollberg-Rilinger, *Europa im Jahrhundert der Aufklärung*. Stuttgart: Reclam 2000, pp. 346–48. Republished with permission.

Translation: Kathleen Dell'Orto

Recommended Citation: Rudolf Zacharias Becker, “On Bewitching, Performing Magic, and Poisoning” (1788), published in: German History Intersections, <<https://germanhistory-intersections.org/en/germanness/ghis:document-307>> [July 14, 2025].