

However great the flow, it will ebb. —Irish proverb [Wood-Martin, 278]

After 1560 the witch-hunters' reign of terror escalated precipitously all over Europe. [Larner, 22] Even



Torture and immolation of witches in Switzerland

Lutherans and Calvinists incited witch burnings in Germany and Switzerland from the 1540s on. In the same period, a big upsurge of witch trials swept England and Scotland in the wake of royal witch Acts. The Catholic reformation stepped up its own persecutions, affecting Germany, Switzerland, France, Italy and Spain. In the Spanish-ruled Low Countries, emperor Philippe II made inquisitorial methods official in 1570, defining sorcery as *lèse majesté divine*: “treason against god.” [Muchembled, 22]

The French state began prosecuting witches more aggressively during the reign of Henri II in the mid-1500s. The 1539 ordinance of Villers-Cotterêts decreed inquisitorial procedure as the legal standard. [Muchembled, 95] The number of people executed increased over the next few Henries, up to the sixth (1589-1610). Bordeaux and Rouen were big burning centers in this period, according to their municipal archives. In southwest France, three hundred witches were tried in the year 1572 alone. [Brocard-Plaut] The Parlement of Toulouse put more witches to death in 1577 than it did for all other crimes combined over two years. The lawyer Gregoire wrote

in the far reaches of Russia, the sorcery-obsessed tsar Ivan IV was mounting witch trials under repressive new laws. From 1560 to 1700 the persecution would ravage most of the continent. It flamed and burned, sank to embers, flared again, and again; climaxing, it sagged, then sharply reasserted itself, and slowly, at long last, waned. The climax of torture-trials and burnings varied from country to country, even region to region. Throughout, the church-generated doctrine of satanism governed the witch-hunters’ war on women.

The conflict between Protestant and Catholic occasioned a brief lull in the persecution. Then came “a massive resumption of trials,” beginning in the newly Protestant regions. [Monter, c 91]

that more than 400 were burned, all with devil's marks. [De Lancre, then Gregoire, in Lea, 1303; Baroja 116]

The witch frenzy got worse in the 1580s, with “lengthy and detailed records, year after year, of witch trials and executions.” [Summers, Geo, 402] Big hunts broke out in Switzerland, Holland, Belgium, and parts of Germany. It was a bad time over much of France, where fanatical witch-judges stoked the fires: Remy in Lorraine, Le Loyer in Anjou, Bodin in Lyonnais, Boguet in Franche-Comté, Gaulmin in Bourbonnais, and de Lancre in Guyenne and Labourd. And “in almost all cases, the sanction adopted is condemnation to the stake.” [Mandrou, 74; 93] In 1582, eighteen witches were burned at once in Avignon. [Lison, 336] In the 1590s, Scotland, Denmark and the Basque country were plagued by hunts. [Levack]

Even in these times, a considerable number of people still valued witches who healed and helped. Preachers and jurists strove to silence their testimony. Early in the century the German priest Geiler von Kaysersberg had preached that beneficent witches should be burned. Another condemnation of

blessing witches came from bishops meeting at Salzburg in 1569. [Lea, 142] These ecclesiastical incitements soon translated into increased legal penalties and prosecutions.

In Germany, the older Carolina code was superseded by a harsher Saxon law of 1572 which order that all “sorcerers and witches who renounce God and bind themselves to the devil are to be burnt

whether they they have wrought injuries or not.” [Robbins 1978: 109 fn 229] In 1584 the Imperial Free City of Besançon promised “exemplary chastisement” to all who practiced beneficent witchcraft. [Monter, c 161-70]

Anne Hendrichs was bound to a ladder and thrust face-first into the fire. Amsterdam, 1571.



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Protestant states also used witch hunts to repress wise-women:

Studies of witchcraft depositions in Switzerland, Austria, Schleswig-Holstein, England, Scotland and New England reveal that many of those who were prosecuted for witchcraft were in fact wise women. The same was true in France, where roughly one-half of the witchcraft cases that reached the Parliament of Paris on appeal involved accusations of magical healing. [Levack, 127 fn to 26 and 27]

In 1568 a well known good witch was arrested and put in the pillory in Jussy, Switzerland. Furious, she in turn accused those she suspected of having denounced her, hoping to put them through the same indignity of public abuse and hurled refuse. But for a such a woman to appeal to the judiciary was literally playing with fire. The town gave itself up to

frenzy of trials that claimed five lives. The good witch was among them. [Monter, c 185]

William Perkins, Puritan clergyman, Cambridge professor, and witch-pricker of the late 1500s, wanted good witches done away with precisely because in ministering to people, they competed with the clergy:

... it were a thousand times better for the land if all witches, but especially the blessing witch, might suffer death. Men doe commonly hate and spit at the damnifying sorcerer, as unworthy to live among them, whereas they flie unto the other in necessitie, they depend upon him [sic] as their God, and by this means thousands are carried away to their final confusion. [Discourse of the Damned Art of Witchcraft, in Hole]

As in anti-Semitic ideology, the danger to christian salvation was used to justify attacks. The Jesuit demonologist Martin Del Rio agreed with his Protestant enemies on this point. In a 1599 tract on

witchcraft he maintained that witches had to be executed even though they killed no one, harmed no crops or animals, called up no spirits of the dead-- simply because (in his opinion) they worked with the demon. Pots, knots, feathers, locks of hair and such were to be considered evidence that sorcery was afoot. [Wedek, 259-60]

Diabolism was used to criminalize the healing and blessing witches. Boguet claimed that healing witches secretly caused disease through witchcraft in order to get credit for curing the problem. [Quaife, 28] This accusation became general by 1600. Paradoxically, as public support was cut away from true witches, more and more victims of the hunts were non-practitioners of the magic arts. It was enough to be a woman and old, or poor, disabled, homeless or homosexual. Many pious christians with no magical reputation also fell prey to the torture-trial. As mass trials widened the net, people who would never have been accused during the middle ages were swept into the holocaust.

“DEFENDERS” OF THE ACCUSED

The German doctor Johan Weyer protested the inhumanity of the witch trials in *De Praestigiis Daemonum* (1563) and *De Lamiis* (1577). A student of Agrippa, Weyer attempted to save the lives of women being tried as witches. He thought the devil had instigated the atrocities of witch-hunting. The “confessions” were “pure fables,” and demons having sex with women were “purely imaginary.” [Mora, 509, 233]

Weyer's protests drew an international outpouring of vitriol from the lawyers and theologians at the forefront of the persecutions, Protestant and Catholic. His book was put on the papal Index of forbidden literature. Jean Bodin tried to have Weyer burned at the stake, and would have succeeded if the duke of Clèves had not protected him as his personal physician. [Hoyt, 67-8] But after duke William suffered an apopleptic fit, he began to allow torture trials. Accusations that Weyer had caused the duke's melancholy by witchcraft forced him to leave town and retire to his lands.

[Lea, 1089?; Ranke-Heinemann, 241]

Weyer was no admirer of the persecution's victims, even though he stuck his neck out in their defense. He thought the diabolist stories were “the follies of old women,” the “deluded confession of demoniacally possessed old hags,” who imagined the diabolist fantasies, even though he knew that they were forced to recite them in torture sessions. He wrote that the devil “especially seduces stupid, worn out, unstable old women.” [Mora, 181, t.o]

In Weyer's opinion, the “silly and miserable” women who confessed to witchcraft were ignorant and suffering from the uterine disease of melancholy. [Levack, 56, 137] They were not masters of their own senses, believing they do impossible things because their brains were scrambled. At the same time, Weyer himself believed in diabolical pacts, and was convinced that he had personally kept the devil from carrying off a maiden. [Robbins, 538-40; Bonomo, 245] He was, after all, the man who wrote that there were 7,405,926 demons in 72 batallions.

[*Psychomonarchia Daemonum*, in Walker, 385]

Weyer cited Augustine, Chrysostom and Paul “concerning the credulity and frailty of the female sex,” which he called “inconstant” and “wicked.” [Mora, 181] He thought that male magicians “use the devil” but that women were “used by the devil.” [Bever, 154] He called the ancient Pythias and Sibyls “devil's prophets.” [Mora, I, 8, 21]

Weyer advised governments not to “impose heavy penalties on perplexed, poor old women.” (Did it seem unthinkable that it was unjust for them to be punished at all? After they had been libeled, harassed, imprisoned, degraded and tortured, the man who has been regarded as their foremost defender judged the old women by words forced from their bleeding mouths.

This mixture of pity with contempt reappears in the writings of other opponents of witch-hunting. Although the Protestant Johann Georg Godelmann objected to the “insufferable torment” inflicted on accused witches, he scoffed: “What proof have you that witches make pact with the demon? Only the confessions of stupid and deluded old women.” [*De magis, veneficis et famiis* (1591) in Lea, 771]

These attitudes were widespread among liberal doctors who were skeptical of witchcraft. Pierre Pigray, the doctor of king Henri III, opposed the hunts. In 1589 he and three other doctors played a part in freeing fourteen witches accused before the Parlement of Tours. But Pigray had no empathy for the targets of the craze, nor understanding of how they might be affected by torture, abuse, and contempt. He wrote that witches are only “poor stupid people, some caring little if they die, the others desiring to.” [Mandrou, 157]

German broadside on witch-burnings, 1580.

**Zwo Neue Zeitung/
Was man für Hexen
oder Unholden verbrennde hat/von dem
siebenden Hornung an biß auff den zwentzig-
sten Hwmonat diß M. D. LXXX. Jars/
auch darbey angezeigt/ an was ohre vnd enden/
auch was sie bekende haben/ 2c.**



**Die ander/ Von der grausamen Würcker
des Türcken/wie er in der Insel Achallander/so iäm-
merlich mit dem Christen Klir Tyrannisiert
von gehandelt hat.**

Printers fed the demand for gossip about witches,
trials, and executions

Reginald Scot agreed that there was no substance to witchcraft. It could be laid to women's “humors melancholicall,” to senility, and to “base” people's

lack of education. In Scot's eyes, for the witch to think that she could call on powers of foreknowing or healing was “vanitie.” His *Discoverie of Witchcraft* (1584) exhorted readers in the tones of early christian patriarchs: “that the glorie and power of God be not so abridged and abased as to be thrust into the hand or lip of a lewd old woman.” [Bever, 154. Scots' book was the first on witchcraft published in English.] It was “their lewdnesse,” too, that neighbors rebuked when old women begged for food and drink. [Pollock, 206]

The repetition is ritualistic: femaleness and age are contemptible, degraded through sexual insults hurled for centuries. In the minds of educated men, whether they were priests or doctors or lawyers or professors, witchcraft was linked to old women, whose sexuality was mocked and whose power was especially feared once they reached menopause. Italian and French demonologists claimed that loverless old women became witches. Scot observed that women were suspected of being witches after “the stopping of their monthly melancholic flux or issue of blood.” [Quaife, 163]

Early modern scientists embraced this medical-biological determinism as doctrinal. Though rationalist science is ordinarily thought of as breaking with religious dogma, it transmitted the canons of male supremacy intact. Notions of female possession by devils transferred easily to theories about “hysteria,” emotional disorders claimed to originate in the womb. Professors and doctors remained as threatened by menstruating, pregnant and menopausal women as the early priests had been. In both systems, female sexuality was the cause of disorder, disease, and forbidden behaviors.

THE DEMONOLOGIST JUDICIARY

**It is rating our conjectures too highly
to roast people alive for them.**

—Montaigne [Russell II, 73]

In the wake of the *Malleus Maleficarum* and a burgeoning industry of witch-craze pamphlets, demonology percolated into the consciousness of

learned men and officials. A second wave of witch-hunting books burst on the scene about 1570. Many of the authors were still diabolist judges, but they now applied Inquisitorial ideology in state-run trials.

The ambitious wielded diabolism to achieve power and fortune, while vulnerability and fear immobilized those who opposed it. The climate of censorship was so overreaching that a good Catholic like Descartes was afraid to publish his scientific opus *Du Monde*. Apprehensive that it would be proscribed by the papal index, he withheld publication for years. [insert Montaigne]

Witch-judge Jean Bodin claimed that it was “impiety and idolatry” to doubt the satanic witchcraft doctrine. He considered its reality proven by the perfect agreement of torture-confessions internationally. His demonological polemics, *De la Démonomanie de Sorciers* (1580) and *Le Fléau des Demons et Sorciers* (1616) catalogued the doctrinal accusations against witches: that they dedicated children to the devil, murdered unbaptised babies and other humans, eating their flesh, caused famine, and had sex with the devil. [Baroja, 115] He called for witches to be burned “over a slow fire,” since they were destined for an eternity in hell. [Robbins, 505]

**“To punish
witches with the
utmost rigor”:
the ruthless
witch-judge and
demonologist
Jean Bodin**



Bodin believed that fifty women were witches for every male. He explained that this was due to women's “bestial cupidity,” strong appetites and desire for vengeance, “out of the anger they have.” [Bonomo, 240-1] The witch-hunter himself did not have to answer for his own lust and anger; he

unabashedly confessed his “fantastic desire to see with my own eyes the sorceress' rapture and their consorting with demons.” [Cixous, 10]

Bodin's *Republique* (1576) puts the wife dead last in the household hierarchy, behind her own children, beneath the servants. [Monter, 123] (Thomas Hobbes went further; his definition of the family (“a little monarchy”) left the mother out entirely.) [Coudert, 45] Bodin declared that men have more brains and prudence than women. The proof? Pallas came from Jove's head, “showing that wisdom never comes from women, who are closer to the nature of animals...” [Bonomo, 240-1]

Bodin's demonology was a roaring success all over catholic Europe. Into the 20th century historians lauded him as a great philosopher, scientist, and worst of all, jurist. Bodin was part of the tribunal that tried 50-year-old Jeanne Harvillier of Compiègne for magical killings of people and animals. After long discussions over whether to impale Jeanne or burn her at the stake, the judges condemned her to be burned alive. [Bonomo, 239]

Another notorious witch-exterminator was Nicholas Rémy, a secular judge at Nancy. By his own boast, he condemned over 900 “witches” to death from 1576-90. Then he was appointed prosecutor general of Lorraine, where he presided for another fifteen years. This single judge executed more than 3000 people as witches between 1571 and 1606.

Rémy recorded his ferocities in the *Dæmonolatreia*, written while vacationing in the countryside. He amused himself by writing the confessions of his torture victims in Latin verse. [Bonomo, 250] Rémy wrote that age, sex, poverty were never admissible as extenuating circumstances. In actuality, gender was an outright liability to the women, who greatly outnumbered the men in the prisons and at the stake. He declared: “I believe that for whoever wants to tie the devil's arms, it will be necessary to take women out of the world.” [Bonomo, 251]

Rémy described how he had children stripped naked and their backs beatend with rods as they were force-marched around the stakes where their mothers burned. In his eyes, even this was not enough, since he thought that the children had been

taken to satanic gatherings and dedicated to the devil. It was therefore necessary to torture them. Rémy sentenced to death at least one child who confessed to going on these excursions. Still, he felt regrets. He had been too lenient toward children.

In Franche-Comté to the south, witch-judge Henri Boguet also countenanced the torture of children. According to his own account (1602) he had presided over the agonies of an eight-year-old girl. Baroja noted the “terrifying lack of feeling” in Boguet's descriptions of these trials. [WoW, 118] He ordered his prisoners to be shaved to uncover any hidden devils' marks. A doctor determined which marks were due to natural causes and which were authentically diabolic.

Early modern scientism grew out of the doctrinal slant of doctors. Physician oversight of witch prosecution was standard not only in Catholic Switzerland but in Protestant England, in state-run trials of Savoy and Inquisitorial trials in Italy. Professional rivalry was still a factor, though most of those accused were no longer true witches.

The judiciary was saturated with demonological zeal. Bishop's courts were among the harshest tribunals. Writing of French Switzerland, Diricq comments that frequently the secular ruler had to intervene in the bishopric “to soften the rigor of sentences pronounced by the 24 criminal judges, who would have willingly subjected to the iron claw [breast-rippers] all the accused that passed before them.” [9]

Secular judges could be equally vicious. Boguet would have inflicted a much higher toll of executions if the local Parlement had not started reviewing witchcraft sentences in 1599. They cut his death sentences by half. [Barstow, 66] Levack demonstrates how crucial the existence of an appeals process was to curbing the bloodshed wreaked by demonologist judges. The worst witch hunts took places in regions that recognized no right of appeal. [find p #]

This was why the hunts ravaged Germany, a patch-work of sovereign counties and bishoprics. The same process was at work in Switzerland. In 1525 the government of Poschiavo abolished church jurisdiction over witchcraft. With the last chance of

outside intervention eliminated, the zealous magistrates hunted witches unchecked. [Mazzali, 27]

By 1570 secular judges had fully absorbed inquisitorial procedure, complete with diabolist mythology. They refused to accept retractions after torture, because the devil was preventing the witch from being reconciled with god. If the judge felt pity, it was his duty to suppress it, lest he be suborned by the devil's tricks. If she did not shed tears, this too was proof that she was a witch. If she refused to confess, that proved that a charm of taciturnity was in effect. Whatever the accused said, judges assumed she was lying and deceiving, inspired by the devil, whose slave and whore she was. [Mandrou, 104-7]

R A P E - T O R T U R E

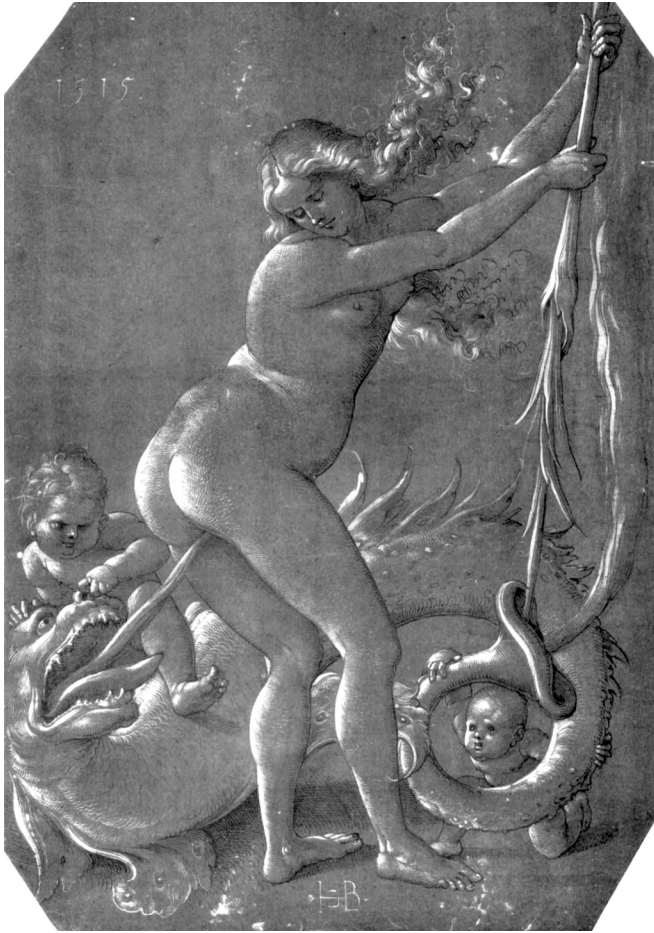
“And how would they confess to having copulated with the Devils if it wasn't true?” [Mandrou, 131]

The sexual obsessions of witch-hunters were writ large across the bodies of their victims. In a society that expected women to cover all but their faces and hands, it was traumatic enough for women to have strange men uncovering and searching their private parts and pricking them with needles, awls, bodkins. This was only the preliminary ordeal, a dramatized justification for their arrest. Once the women were imprisoned, their captors shaved them with razors, raped them, and seared, gashed, and impaled them with instruments of torture.

Diabolist ideology generated myths of sexual torture by the devil that paralleled the secret acts of the torture chamber. While demonologists pictured witches as the devil's sexual slaves, in actuality accused witches were raped at will by jailors, officials and executioners. Their sexual parts were singled out for torture, and they were forced to parrot back the hunters' sadistic fantasies of devil-sex. De Lancre, Boguet and Remy all elicited reports of the hugeness of the devil's member. It was cold as ice and made sex terribly painful for the woman.

For the demonologists, female sexuality itself was diabolical. Boguet wrote that the devil spoke through women's “shameful parts.” His ardent description of

one witch's adventures alleges, "She had numerous times grabbed with her hand the 'member' of the demon coupling with her." [Mandrou, 147, fn 69]



A New Years card by Baldung Grün encodes the church's demonization of clitoral pleasuring, 1515.

Continental diabolism influenced English witch demonologists such as William West. His legalistic treatise *Symbolæographie* (1594) defines magic arts as the powers of male magicians and wizards, but defines "Witch or hagg" as an evil woman in league with the devil, blasting and wasting. Like his continental brethren, West dwells on the witch's unashamed lust; she spends "all the night after with her sweete hart, in playing, sporting, bankqueting, dauncing, daliance and diuerse other deuelish lustes and lewd desports..." [Ewen, 23-3]

Demonologists often fantasized devilish sexual

encounters as acts which were pleasurable to women, but forbidden by the church: cunnilingus, lesbian sex, women rubbing their vulvas against objects such as staves. A drawing by Hans Baldung Grün shows a dragon-devil licking an aroused woman between her legs. Grün produced numerous pornographic engravings of naked witches. One depicts an old woman straddling a young one who is peeking out from between her own spread legs. Another young woman is rubbing her sex against the elder's hip while stroking herself. The lesbian theme recurs in 17th-century witch-scenes, usually with a theme of the old witch as corrupter of young women.

According to the British pamphleteer who authored *Newes from Scotland*:

And for as much as by due examination of witchcraft and witches in Scotland, it hath lately beene founde that the Divell dooth generally marke them with a privie marke, by reason the witches have confessed themselves, that the Divell doth licke them with his tong in some privie part of their bodie, before he dooth recyve them to bee his servauntes which marke commonlie is given them under the haire in some part of their bodie, whereby it may not easily bee founde out or seene, although they be searched... [Summers, Geo]

By this reasoning, the searchers must take a long time checking that privy part under the hair in a certain part of the woman's body. Further, it is crucial that the searchers examine the woman's private parts, because only when the witch-hunters see the "marke" will she confess anything. A glimpse of rape in the torture chambers escapes from this transparent rationale. [Davidson, 150-1]

Genital "searches" had become a routine part of the investigation of witchcraft, justified as a matter of duty by men of faith. In private, within the gaol and torture-chamber, the perpetrators could boast and laugh with each other about their "Discoverie of Witchcraft." Any physical marks or irregularities could be made to serve as a sign of pact with the devil, and if none were found, they could be produced through torture. Because of their "whoredom," captors felt they could do anything to accused women, with total impunity.



In a 1515 drawing by Hans Franck, an old witch performs a rite with a gigantic bundle of flax, while a young woman straddles an oven fork, rubbing it against her vulva. Two other witches are sprawled in ecstasy, one with legs splayed.

A Belgian witch of “good works” was tortured in the presence of the councillors of Bruges. She refused to yield during three torture-sessions, “sometimes sleeping and sometimes defiantly snapping her fingers at the judges.” The record indicates that this witch was broken by rape. Her tormentors said they found a piece of parchment with symbolic characters “concealed *in* her person” while shaving her. Their “search” crushed her resistance, resulting in a confession of diabolical pact. [Lea, *Torture*; emphasis mine]

The trial records of five witches burned at Lisbon in 1559 say that the devil had sex with them many times, taking them from the front and rear. In this account, the sex was more pleasurable than with mortal men. But the devil punished the witches with whippings, “as a pimp would do with his girl.” But these beatings actually took place in the witch-prisons, as the record implies: “the demon came that

night to her in her cell, along with two or three devils, and treated her very badly, scratching her on the face and other parts of her body, and tore a skirt she was wearing into pieces, dishonoring her with many hurtful words...” The ostensible reason for the “devil’s” attack was displeasure at her “confession” that she had killed more than 200 babies. [Cunha, 19-20]

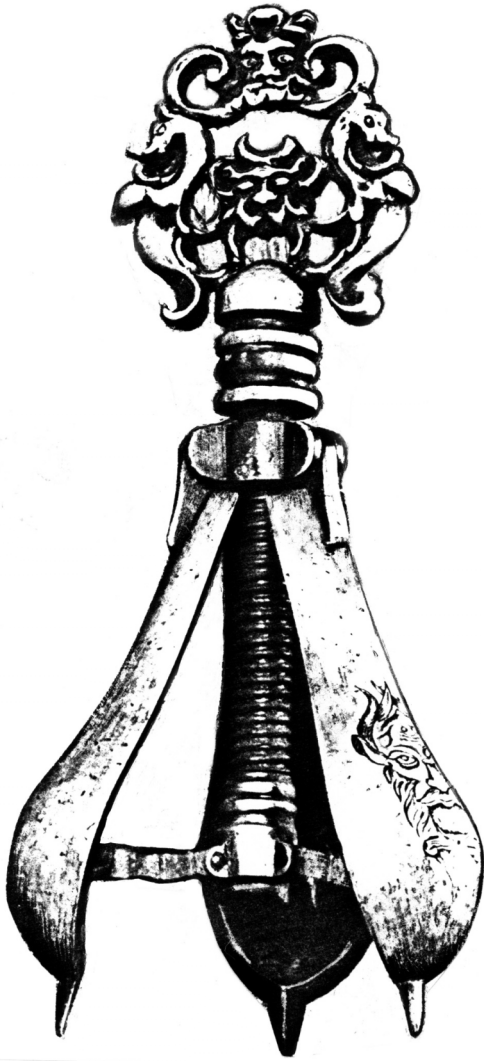
Open secret that it was, testimony of jailor rape trickled into the record. Mary Cunningham appealed for justice for herself and her daughter in Scotland, 1644. The bailies of Culross had attacked the two of them outside their legal jurisdiction, and dragged them through the streets to jail.

And when they hade putt us in prisone they causit their officeris and hangman tirre us mother naked, rype and search our bodies and secret memberis for witchmarkis... [*Register of the Privy Council*, Cal 54]

The mother and daughter were not allowed to put their own clothes back on, but were given only sackcloth to wear in the cold dungeon, where they sat in leg irons. The jailor ate most of their food.

Sexual repression had become so entrenched that the witch-hunters saw the natural anatomy of the vulva and vagina as deviant and therefore suspect. Signs of diabolic pact were always to be found in the victims' genitals. The labia minora, especially, were interpreted as teats sucked by demonic familiars.

The women strenuously objected to the idea that there was anything devilish about their bodies. A Scotswoman from Newbattle “challenged the entire theory of the Devil’s mark, claiming that everyone had such bodily imperfections.” [Levack, 213] When body-searchers declared that a woman of Fribourg had witch-marks on her genitals, she protested, “if this was a sign of witchcraft, many women would be witches.” [Monter, 161] Several other Swiss women told the judges, “If I have a mark, it is God who has made it.” [Diricq 143] In New Haven, Connecticut, Mary Staples challenged the diabolist execution of her neighbor, Goody Knapp. She demanded to examine her body for the vaunted witch-teats and declared that they were “no more teats than I myself have, or any other women.” [Karlsen, 128]



The Pear. Torturers heated this iron tool in fire, then shoved it into the “witch’s” vagina, screwing its parts open for maximum agony, ripping the vagina, cervix and uterus. They did this to men in the anus; to heretical preachers in the mouth. This diabolical specimen bears demonic decorations.

Witch hunt officials were obsessed with wounding and punishing the female sexual organs. Sexual torture was the linchpin of the witch trials, whether the accused were girls or elders of advanced age. The engineers of torture invented horrific machinery—breast-rippers, sharp metal wedges, the “Pear”—to tear the “witch’s” body apart.

They forged body-shackles that pierced the prisoner’s flesh or locked her legs above her belly so that her private parts were exposed.

They built “Iron Maidens,” coffins embedded with long, dagger-like spikes that pierced the prisoner’s body as the device’s doors closed upon her. [Held, 25-27]

In the late 1500s German torturers devised the Witch’s Chair. Iron plates studded with long, sharp spikes covered all its surfaces. Interrogators shackled their prisoner at the arms, legs, and chest, then slid fire-pans under the seat, heating the iron to incandescence beneath the victim’s buttocks and genitals. This invention caused indescribable agony. Few could withstand it without confessing, and they rarely survived the ordeal. The great 19th century historian of the hunts, Henry Charles Lea, called it “the unfailing witch chair.” [MTHW, 1156]

The tortured women often attempted to escape. In Neuchâtel, Perrenon Debrot broke out of jail and tried to kill herself with a knife when recaptured; another woman strangled herself in her cell. [Monter, c 93] Barbara Hanssen of Germany, imprisoned on bread and water, filed through her chains and managed to slip out of the jail, but was recaptured. [Lea?] So was Giovannina of Triora, who fled on fire-tortured feet and was captured three miles away atop a cliff rendered nearly inaccessible by brush. [Bonomo, 259-60]

Where escape was impossible, a considerable number ended their torture by committing suicide, or attempting it. Others endured unbearable tortures with incredible fortitude, all the while maintaining their innocence. Marguerite Lambert of Neuchâtel would not yield to her torturers, “despite the torments she has endured according to Imperial law.” She was banished and ordered “not to avenge herself in any way for her imprisonment.” [Monter, c 93]

Trial records show that the most courageous prisoners under torture were often old women: Gotter Ness, Margot de la Barre, Bellezza Orsini, Agnes Sampson, or the unnamed German woman from Neusse, 95 years of age, who withstood her torturers long enough to eventually win release. [Lea, 1161, 1172]

THE EXORCISTS

The hunts had not diminished society's belief in witches' powers, though diabolism had gone a long way toward transferring them to the devil. But the idea of female agency still lingered. Exorcism offered a way to dramatize women's powerlessness and, at the same time, showcase priestly dominion. In this paradigm, the priest was the channel for godly power, while his polar opposite, the possessed woman, incarnated the powers of evil.



Italian exorcism scene, 1590s.

The wave of exorcism was a new strategy of repression growing out of the witch hunts. Its relationship to those persecutions varied: a woman might be exorcized instead of being tried as a witch; or exorcists might urge the possessed to denounce witches; or witches were blamed for causing the possession, as in the French convent cases. In the late 1500s, writes Giovanni Romeo, the Italian Inquisition substituted exorcism for witch-burning as an anti-diabolical specific. Eventually the Roman Inquisition abandoned witch-burnings, but not witch trials. Nor did it interfere with the explosion of

secular burnings.

Exorcism exploded across France, Italy and Germany in the late 1500s. Manuals of exorcism sold like hotcakes. The hugely influential books of the monk Girolamo Menghi drew on old-school demonologists like Nider, Kramer and Sprenger. [Romeo, 114] Menghi was more successful as an author than as an exorcist, however. One of his spectacular failures was a six-month-long attempt to exorcize a prominent man in Lombardy in 1585. Many doctors declared that the man had never been possessed but suffered from organic causes. Undeterred, Menghi moved on to other pastures. To the end he sang the praises of epic battles with devils and warned exorcists not to lower their guard against the devils and those who disparaged their practice. [Romeo, 138, 122]

It was monks and priests who had inculcated possession, ritually subjugating the devilish female over long centuries. The four minor orders of exorcists could not handle the burgeoning demand, however, and laymen got involved. Secular freelancers were quick to cash in on the profitable market in exorcism. Romeo describes them as “a bit of the doctor, a bit of the witch.” [153] In the main, church authorities tolerated lay exorcists, as they did the witch-hunting *benandanti*. The clergy did not feel threatened by these free-lance exorcists as they did by witches. It was a very different thing for males to exert ritual power, especially when they used christian trappings.

A few half-hearted attempts were made to quell the abuses of power they committed. The Roman Inquisition prosecuted a few exorcists as “necromancers” around 1590. [145, 131-2] The lion's share of these trials were in areas (Naples, the Friuli) that were came late to witch-hunting, and where the priesthood was still struggling to establish its ascendancy over animism. Exorcists called *duivelbanners* proliferated in the Netherlands, but Dutch towns often tried and banished them. [GH-F, 121]

Because animist tradition survived in popular magic, the priests worried that lay practitioners would undermine priestly authority and stray from catholic teaching. Menghi himself remarked that

many exorcists improvised like old sorceresses. [Romeo, 114] Church councils tried to make them hew to canonical formulas and to impose licensing and other controls on them. Some even said that exorcism manuals should be burned. [138]

These efforts were not nearly as enthusiastic as the bishops' industrious hunt for old women who compounded herbal oils. Like their close relatives, the benandanti and cunning men, exorcists served the purposes of the clergy who were finally succeeding in turning common people against the wisewomen by "a simple substitution of operators." [Romeo, 167] Exorcism rapidly ballooned into a profitable industry mined by clerics and laymen alike. Within a short period of time it had insinuated itself into the fabric of Italian society. [Romeo, 135, 151-2]

The exorcists profited greatly from those who believed themselves to be bewitched, and enjoyed a booming practice in Italy of the early 1600s. Dominican exorcist Pio Porta maintained that vast numbers of people were bewitched, so many that in the city of Udine alone twenty-one exorcists would not be able to handle all the cases. [all Ginzburg I, 127-8, 115] Rome was so renowned for its exorcists that prominent foreigners brought possessed girls there to have their demons cast out. [Romeo, 154; Robbins, 395]

France and Switzerland were also overrun with exorcists and their demonological manuals. St Francis de Sales, terrified of spirits in his youth, continued his obsession as bishop of Geneva. He expended much energy on exorcism and finding good exorcists. [Brocard 152] One Swiss tome offered formulas for banishing evil spirits from water, wine, salt, food, incense, perfumes, herbs and medicines, particularly rue, wormwood and roses, potions and salves, herds and flocks, vines, silkworm cocoons, clothes, beds, houses and baths. This list is made up mostly of things held sacred in the animist sense, infused with indwelling lifeforce and pagan associations. [Grillot, 156-8]

The exorcists straddled the roles of priest, cunning man, and doctor. Romeo writes that doctors "did not disdain collaboration with exorcists," though some medical writers reported that the

exorcists' pills and powders caused the deaths of the "possessed." It was common practice for exorcists to subject their clients to emetics, enemas, and harsh cathartics such as antimony. [Romeo, 150, 139-42]



Exorcism, 1512

Even Menghi, the dean of exorcists, had to acknowledge that some of the brotherhood were killing their patients. His own manual *Flagello daemonum* interpreted bodily ailments such as pains in the neck, belly, or kidneys as signs of "sorcery." And countless others, such as the Naples exorcist Francisco Salinas, acted on his advice to treat illness as diabolical affliction. [Romeo, 141, 147-8]

At long last, an all-male group of priests, freelance exorcists, and doctors had succeeded in displacing the witch's position among the common people. Men from all three professions collaborated with witch-hunting judges and regularly functioned as

witch-finders, naming witches and rousing public opinion against them.

In Italy and elsewhere, exorcism was incorporated into witch-hunting. In Vienna, 1583, priests labeled a sixteen-year-old girl suffering from cramps a demoniac. The Jesuits exorcised her for two months, emerging at last with accusations that her grandmother kept thousands of demons as flies in jars. Under torture a story emerged of sex with the devil who took the shape of a ball of thread (even at this date the folkloric motif of the spinner can be glimpsed occasionally) and the old woman was dragged through the streets behind a horse to be burned at the stake. [Robbins, 395]

Exorcisms of the possessed Nicole Obry at Laon cathedral (1565-66) got her to “proclaim the verities of the faith” and to denounce Protestants. [Much, S&S, 108] Later exorcists used possessed nuns as mouthpieces to praise Cardinal Richelieu and to bring down his enemies.

In southern Italy, the bishop of Bitonto used similar tactics. He and his archdeacon detained a possessed young woman, Laura Stella de Paladini, for several months of experimental exorcisms inspired by Bodin, Nider and other demonologist writers. Laura underwent continual public exorcisms during this period. The bishop and archdeacon insisted that she was a witch who went to Benevento (as the demons confirmed) and went on to extract denunciations of their enemies, including some important men, as witches. A youth denounced by the possessed woman was violently seized; several days later, terrified of being taken again, he committed suicide by throwing himself down a well. His alleged accomplices in diabolism were arrested and brutally tortured. Two old women died from torture and maltreatment. The people of Bitonto openly expressed their scorn for these proceedings. [Romeo, 156-158, 163]

Meanwhile the bishop was selling absolutions and faking miracles with a crucifix that (so he alleged) had been abused by the witches. Secular courts jumped into the expanding witch hunt. In 1594 the viceroy of Naples ordered some of the prisoners (all women but one) sent to Naples on diabolist charges. In the end they were tried by Roman inquisitors and

acquitted. Rome suspended the bishop and archdeacon of Bitonto from office and banished them, but only the archdeacon was forbidden to practice exorcism in future—light penalties for an abuse of power that caused multiple deaths. So was the punishment of Genoan confessor Giovan Battista De Felippis. In 1600 he was perpetually banned from exorcism and medical practice, but not barred from the confessional, in spite of glaring evidence that he had used the confessional to seduce young women. [Romeo, 155-9]



Demonology became the lens through which all female sexuality was interpreted. Witch porn proliferated, like this drawing by Hans Baldung Grün.

Sexual abuse and witchcraft accusations were played out in an exorcism drama at Naples in 1574. A few days after marrying Giovan Battista Marsicano, Laura Cataneo had come to hate him, saying that he was a devil. She began to long for her previous suitor Liso, whose mother Dianora soon

came under suspicion for bewitching the married couple. People called her “sorceress and *janara*.” Doctors could do nothing for Laura and her husband. The exorcists also failed. Now the possession spread to Laura's sister and two of Giovan's nieces and a fisherman's daughter. Everyone blamed Dianora, Liso and a magician.

The case was taken to the archbishop. One woman testified that Dianora had the reputation of a witch in her home village, and had even helped her bring her husband home once with a secret powder involving hair, fingernails and blood. (Here we are looking at a historical break-down of female solidarity.) The archbishop's office called in another exorcist, who after several months had no better luck. Numerous clerics and doctors testified that this was not a problem of melancholy humors but of devilish spirits. But the case was dropped. [Romeo, 109-11]

In the meantime, the family of the possessed nieces consulted various clerics and exorcists without success. Cirignolo, the brother of the spurned husband and father of the possessed girls, began to perform his own exorcisms. His success in suppressing possession in his own family spread his fame and led to a new career, in spite of the archbishop's attempts to stop him. Cirignolo claimed that possessed women could be cured “if certain baths were done on the night of christmas or new years because they were *notti janaresche* [‘nights of the ianare’].” The family provided the requisite herbs and waters; the exorcists made conjurations and signs on the walls. [Romeo, 128, 289]

It turned out that Cirignolo used exorcism as a pretext for raping possessed girls. In 1579 he exorcised Violante de Regina. He ordered the girl to lie face down on the ground, sent everyone else out of the room, and put the lights out. When someone knocked at the door, he cursed and exclaimed, “I told you no one comes in, if you want me to free her; and if not, then I'll go.” As the mother came from the kitchen with hot water for the ritual bath, they heard a heart-rending moan. The mother rushed into the room and Violante cried, “Ah, mamma mia, how he has shamed me!” Everyone

ran into the dark room to see what had happened. By the time they got a light, the exorcist had disappeared, leaving the door open. Violante lay shivering on the floor, wearing only her slip, stained with blood from the rape. The family complained to the vicar; the solution he proposed was for the rapist to promise to marry the girl and pay a dowry of 20 ducats. The record shows, however, that Cirignolo did not marry Violante but “brought her home by force...” The scandal forced the Inquisition to intervene in 1580. [Romeo, 289-91]

The 16th-century Spanish exorcist Garci Sanchez committed similar abuses. After a public exorcism of the woman Ynés, he took her home and had sex with her. When he was exposed, many women came forward to say that he had seduced them when they came to him for help. [Harline, 37] A bishop's letter of 1669 documents abuses by exorcists in Poland. [Lea, 1273]

Doctors also exploited their authority for sexual predation, using witchcraft as a pretext. Johan Weyer reported one case of 1567: “A remarkably wicked physician was tolerated for many years in Gelders and also for a while in Cologne.” The doctor wormed his way into a noble household in the duchy of Berg, then induced the castellan to sign up for a cure, plying him with drink so he would agree to a very high price. He told the man that witchcraft had caused his disease, and that without countermeasures it would spread to his entire family and even his livestock.

Next the doctor got his patient to enlist his 20-year-old daughter as a helper; the parents were to fall at her feet and beg her to obey all the doctor's instructions, or her father's health would suffer. The doctor took the young woman alone into a room, where he mumbled conjurations and made some passes with knives. He gave her a piece of drugged food to eat, which confused her to the point that she was “losing control of her senses.” He ordered her to bare her breasts, and after rubbing and kissing them, he made her lie down and uncover her lower body. She resisted, but he threatened that her father would die and she would get the same sickness; the ritual required “a mutual contact of flesh.” Then he raped her. He did the same the next day.

In the meantime the doctor gave the sick man precipitate of mercury and other harsh chemicals, causing terrible pain and bringing him to death's door. The father consulted his daughter about what results she expected from the treatment. Seeing that "she was flushed with shame and ready to burst into tears," the whole story came pouring out. [Weyer, in Mora, 408-9] What if any consequences were there for this horror?

The clergy reestablished its monopoly over exorcism, and spread it far and wide. Spanish and Portuguese monks introduced exorcism to South America, often performing it over sick people, in competition with folk healers. Some adroitly exploited the potential for abuse. In Brazil, the Carmelite friar Luis de Nazaré used his position as priest-exorcist to rape countless women around Bahia. He habitually asked for a "clean and neat" servant woman to assist him, then pressured her into submitting to molestation and rape.



Man groping woman's breast while restraining her during an exorcism. *Histoires Prodigieuses*, Paris, 1575.

Called to exorcise the ailing Dona Antonia de Lacerda, Luis took aside her unmarried sister and molested her. She resisted, but he kept grabbing her, and managed to rub his genitals against her. [182-3] Another family brought him in to exorcise a daughter, Leonor da Silva, thinking her possessed. It turned out that Leonor was faking possession because she wanted to marry the mulato José Romeu,

but her parents wouldn't allow it. Luis got the young woman alone in a room and induced her to have sex with him by promising to bring about her marriage to José. And he did. [Mello, 262]

The lower his victim's status, the more force the monk was able to use. Luis inflicted his worst crimes on enslaved women. In 1736, a pious master called Luis to exorcise Tomásia, a slave who had fallen sick. The monk had her moved to another building and asked for two other slaves to assist him. He made them undress the sick woman, cut off some of her hair and their pubic hair, and burned them, smudging her with the smoke.

The next day Luis got on top of the sick woman, telling the "assistants" to look the other way, and raped her. He then moved on the others, saying that it was necessary to cure Tomásia, required by his exorcism manual, and that they should submit to him. He intimidated them and succeeded in raping them. But they resisted, so he asked for new assistants. Not surprisingly, Tomásia died. [Mello, 181-2]

Church officials refused to believe that this highly reputed Carmelite official was raping women. But so many complaints were made about Luis de Nazaré that he was sent for trial before the Lisbon Inquisition in 1740. He confessed, but blamed his actions on the rough, ignorant women and immoral atmosphere of Brazil. The inquisitors barely punished his crimes. They sent him to a remote monastery for a few years and barred him from returning to Bahía. They took away his exorcist privileges, but not his priesthood. [Mello, 183] The door remained open for him to abuse more women; an ecclesiastical impunity that continued through the 20th century.

These patterns of abuse stretched over great distances and social contexts. Priests, doctors, lay exorcists and cunning men committed them. In a Dorset case of 1616, it was a male empiric who abused vulnerable women. Thomas Tyher was tried at Chaminister, Dorset, for performing abortions for unmarried women and prostitutes. Among the charges against him was "using unchaste means with many women and maids, making them believe he can not help them without either crossing their

foreskinnes [hymens] or lying with them....”

[Thompson, 227] Such abuses were the ultimate consequences of a system that barred women from priesthood and the professions; that punished female sexuality while giving free reign to men, whether their partners were willing or not. Diabolist ideology provided easy cover for male predation. These mythologies were repeatedly presented as received truth, without any relation to reality. And the demonologists passed on each others’ stories:

Sinistrari (1700) took his description of the “devil’s mark” from Guazzo (1608) who took it from Boguet (1602) who had it from Del Rio (1599) who copied it from Bingfield (1589) who got it from Bodin (1580). [Robbins 1978]