Witch Beliefs and Witch Trials in the Middle Ages

Documents and Readings

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Introduction

When a Mediaeval peasant and a Mediaeval scholar looked up into the sky by day or night, what they saw was evidence of a *universum*, a whole complete in all its parts, a single thing tending always in one direction, its Creator, who, as Genesis explains, made the sky and the earth, the darkness and the light, the waters below and above the sky and the lights which shine in the sky and illumine the earth. Beyond this first sky, however, as both the Old and New Testaments bore witness, there were other skies, other heavens. 'Therefore, the heavens and the earth were completed' (Genesis 2.1); 'the heavens expound the glory of God, and the sky brings news of the works of His hands' (*Psalm* 19.1); 'Our Father, who are in the heavens' (Matthew 6.9); 'I knew a man in Christ ... who had been snatched up to the third heaven' (2 Corinthians 12.2). We can see what our two Mediaeval individuals were looking at in illustrations such as the one to be found in Hartmann Schedel's *Historia aetatum mundi et civitatum descriptio*, published in Nuremberg in 1493 (see illustration of the Mediaeval universe). Here, the earth is at the centre of a large number of enclosing spheres, with those of water, then air, then fire expanding round the onlookers, and beyond these, the spheres of the known planets – the moon, Mercury, Venus, the sun, Mars, Jupiter and Saturn. Beyond Saturn is the sphere of the 'firmament' which contains the fixed stars, those luminaries which, unlike the planets, do not move individually but all together, each keeping an immutable station; and beyond that again a 'crystalline heaven' and the *primum mobile*, the sphere first set in motion by God's hand. Outwith these, and beyond the range of human sight, was the dwelling place of God, where ranks of created spirits were ranged around God's throne in a strict hierarchy: seraphim, cherubim, thrones, dominations, principalities, powers, virtues, archangels and, in the humblest place, angels. Somewhere within this *universum*, too, in localities or positions or states of spiritual being never definitely fixed in 'maps'of the *universum*, were Purgatory and Hell,[1] again not visible to the human eye, except in vision, until death supervened and opened the eyes of the soul.

Now, this was not a *universum* which had come into being by chance, existed merely because it existed and had no purpose or meaning beyond the fact of its own existence. It had been created by an act of rational will and existed to

1. The Nuremberg *Chronicle* notes, 'the mouth of Hell appeared in dreadful fashion in the middle of a huge fissure in the ground' (folio 70r), and this indeed is how artists often depicted it.

provide a series of suitable planes of being for an immense variety of *creaturae*, individual creations, whose purpose was to worship God in the ineffable and perpetual joy of His presence and, in the case of humanity, to advance to that state of salvation which would result in such enjoyment. In this *universum*, therefore, everything which exists has been created – it is a *creatura*, not an emergence *ex nihilo* – and thus each type of *creatura* is linked with every other type in an immense connectedness which begins and ends with God. Hence, nothing happens by chance. *Fors*, and its personification as Fortuna, does not operate blindly, of itself, but under the ultimate direction of God whose will and purposes give meaning to even the slightest motion, sight or sound.

The inhabitants of the Mediaeval world thus lived in a meaningful, purposeful *universum* of which they were an integral part and whose spheres, visible and invisible alike, impinged upon one another, interpenetrating and interacting in rhythms dictated by divine intention.[2] Angels, demons and souls of the dead, for example, might leave the realm of spirit and enter the realm of matter to be seen by, converse with or physically abuse living human beings. 'Devils many times appear to men', wrote Robert Burton in the seventeenth century and as truly of the Middle Ages as his own times, 'and affright them out of their wits, sometimes walking at noonday, sometimes at night, counterfeiting dead men's ghosts'.[3] Such visitations were not surprising – not, at least, in our sense of causing astonishment because such things are assumed to be impossible. If they were surprising, it was merely because they were unexpected. Their possibility could be taken for granted – not that that necessarily lessened the fear naturally attendant on coming face to face with these intruders from other planes of being. All this can be seen in an incident which took place during the life of Rabanus Maurus. Adelhard, the steward of Rabanus's monastery, was given strict instructions to distribute to the poor the allowances of food which had been allotted during life to some of his brethren who had recently died. Adelhard, however, was seduced by greed and kept these offerings for himself. The consequences were dire.

> Divine justice did not endure his rash insolence without revenge. For one day, when he had been very much preoccupied with worldly affairs, it became rather late and the rest of the brethren were already asleep. Adelhard was making his way alone to the dormitory through the chapter house carrying a small oil lamp, as usual, when he saw a large number of monks seated there in rows, wearing their usual black. Seized by an immense fear, he did not know what to do; for it was too late at night for him to believe that a chapter had been assembled. When he looked more closely, he realized that each was the ghost of one of the recently deceased brethren whose allowances he had held back. Terrified out of his wits, he began to try to withdraw. But his blood drained away

2. It can also be said that Mediaeval *mappae mundi* in the West mirrored this concept of an integrated universal whole and could be read 'as depictions in time and space of the world as subject to divine will' and as 'pictorial representations of universalism in geographical, legal-political, and religious dimensions', H. Kleinschmidt, 2008, *Ruling the Waves* (Utrecht: Hies and De Graaf BV) pp. 15.

3. *Anatomy of Melancholy*, Part 1, section 2, member 1, subsection 2.

and panic made his legs and feet grow stiff, as with freezing cold, so that he could not move from the spot. In an instant, the dreadful ghosts of the dead, seeing him struck down by great fear, rose up with sudden violence and, with hidden power, stripped him of his clothes and beat the wretched man with sticks – not just on his naked back, as is the custom in monastic punishments, but over his whole body – in such a way that he could really feel it. While they struck him, they uttered [the following words] in an awful semblance of a voice: 'Wretched man, take the punishment you deserve for your greed. You will receive worse in three days' time, and then you will be numbered with us among the dead'. At about midnight, when the brethren got up to sing Matins and Lauds, they found the wretched man who had been beaten, lying in the chapter house more dead than alive. They took him to the infirmary and, after a while, when the brothers' efforts had restored him to himself, he told them what awful things he had suffered and that, according to the spirits who had appeared to him, he was going to die in three days' time. Lest they imagine he had dreamed it, or that it was merely a sick fantasy of his mind, he said, 'Look at the blows. Observe the livid marks. No one could get the signs of a violent assault and remain asleep' (Trithemius, *Beati Rabani Mauri Vita*, book 2).

Notice that this encounter between the living and the dead has been permitted by God for a purpose; Adelhard is terrified, not because ghosts cannot happen, but because they can and he is faced by that reality; and the ghosts, though spirits, are able to make themselves heard and felt, the bruises they leave being proof that they are no fantasy or dream.

Within what appeared to be the physical world, however, there existed beings neither spirit nor human, but of an order seemingly partaking of both, living in a species of time different from that of humans and able to manipulate the interconnectedness or 'sympathy' of things to produce effects not possible to humans by ordinary means. These creatures had a great variety of names – fairies, trolls, goblins, elves and so forth – and European folklore teems with stories about human encounters with them. People honoured them and sought their help or blessing. During the trial of St Jeanne d'Arc, for example, questioning her elicited the following information about her childhood:

24 February 1431. She was asked about a certain tree which grew near her village. She answered that quite near the village of Domrémy there was a tree called 'The Ladies' Tree'. Some people called it 'The Fairies' Tree'. Not far away there is a spring of water. She has heard it said that people who are ill with fever drink from this spring, and come to seek its water to restore their health. She has seen this herself, but she does not know whether they are cured thereby or not. She says she has heard that when the sick can get up, they go to the tree in order to walk round it. It is a big tree, called a 'beech', from which comes many a [blossom] ... . She said that sometime she used to walk round it with other young girls; and close by that tree she used to make garlands of flowers for the statue of the Blessed Virgin of Domrémy. On many occasions, she has heard from the very old – not those of her own family – that the fairy ladies used to visit it frequently ... . She said she has never seen the fairies at the tree, as far as she knows. Has she seen them elsewhere? She does not know whether she has or not. She said she has seen young girls putting garlands on the branches of the tree, and she herself has sometimes put

them there, in company with the other girls. Sometimes they would take the garlands away with them, sometimes they would leave them there.

Procès de condemnation de Jeanne d'Arc

Fairies and similar spirits had a helpful side to their character – 'a bigger kind there is of them', wrote Burton, 'called with us hobgoblins and Robin Goodfellows, that would, in those superstitious times, grind corn for a mess of milk, cut wood or do any manner of drudgery work'[4] – but they could also be menacing or malicious. Human babies were sometimes taken by fairies who left a caricature of their own, a changeling, in its place; men might take their fancy and be invited into the fairy realm whence, years later, they emerged, thinking they had been absent for only a day – a good example of the human's entering a different dimension, as we might say; and fairies also hunted in packs, letting fly arrows at unwary human beings and careering through the countryside in a company which might include the dead and other spirits. Uninhabited or sparsely inhabited places were actually not as empty as they seemed, for it was quite likely they were alive with spirit life whose uncertain moods had to be negotiated with care; and deep underground in mines, there existed yet another variant, equally disconcerting and potentially unpleasant.

Among the number of subterranean entities or (as theologians prefer) 'substances', one can include evil spirits who busy themselves in mines. There are two kinds. They are aggressive, frightening to look at and, for the most part, dangerous and hostile to miners. Such was the Anneburgius who, with his breath, killed more than 12 workmen in a cave. He is called 'the rosy crown' because he used to emit breath from his open mouth. He is said to look like a horse with a long neck and savage eyes. Belonging to this type, too, was Sneburgius, clad in a black cowl. In a Georgian mine, in a big cave which was once very rich in silver, he lifted a workman from the ground and put him in a higher place, bruising his body in the process ... . Then there are the gentle ones which some of the Germans (like the Greeks) call 'Cobali' because they imitate human beings. These smile, as if longing for pleasure, and seem to do many things when actually they do nothing. Some people call them 'little men of the mountain'. This usually refers to their height. They are actually dwarfs, 27 inches long. They look like old men and wear miners' clothes, i.e. an outer tunic and an animal skin round their loins. These do not usually cause miners trouble. They wander about in wells and burrows and although they do not do anything, they give the appearance of occupying themselves with every kind of work such as digging veins, or pouring into jars what they have dug out, or turning the hoist. Although they sometimes assail miners with gravel, they very rarely hurt them; and they never hurt them unless they themselves have first been hurt with laughter or insults. So they are as completely different from evil spirits as are those who rarely appear to humans but who finish the housework every day and look after the farm animals (George Agricola, *De animantibus subterraneis*).

4. *Anatomy of Melancholy*, *loc. cit.* supra. By 'those superstitious times', of course he means Catholic England.

Humanity, then, lived cheek by jowl with non-human entities whose states of realms or habitations stretched from the presence of God Himself to the infernal regions where Satan exercised sway over demonic hierarchies no less complex than those of Heaven, each rank of which seemed to contain numberless spirits, and people, surrounded by a constant flux of interactive, intrusive, intelligent entities, were caught, as it were, in the middle of strong currents which could sweep them in one direction or in another or pull them both ways at once. Such a precarious existence, which mirrored that of a physical life always subject to disease, famine, sudden death, alarming falls from fortune and, above all, the wills and caprices of powerful individuals, might have been unbearable were it not for three things. First, we should not suppose that people lived in a constant state of immediate awareness of these circumambient spirits. As always, the attendant circumstances of each daily task informed the character of the moment. But, in contrast with modern Western experience, any change in those circumstances might trigger awareness of the spirits and hence affect emotional reaction and consequent behaviour. Secondly, because the interconnectedness of the *universum* stemmed from God, the Church, which had been entrusted by Him with authority reaching beyond this physical world – 'I shall give you the keys of the kingdom of Heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in Heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in Heaven' (Matthew 16.19) – and which was thus the repository of ultimate power, under God, over the *creaturae* of the *universum*, was able to protect, help and heal human beings and release them, if need be, from the consequences of interaction between them and the spirit worlds. Thirdly, because everything was connected with everything else, everything existed in a state of sympathy or antipathy with everything else, and there were those who understood or claimed to understand how these reactions worked or could be made to work separately and conjointly. Hence, spirits could be invoked, made to appear and constrained to answer questions or do a human's bidding – even, in some circumstances, imprisoned in a ring or bottle, to be used more or less as a servant – and because even the simplest of objects were likely to reflect or possess within themselves hidden powers not otherwise available to human beings: marks in sand or earth could foretell the future, precious and semi-precious stones could make spirits visible, sticks or brooms carry people through the air and a verse or two of St John's Gospel written on paper and worn about the person ward off all kinds of evil from disease to demons. Magic, from its simplest to its most complex forms, provided a beleaguered humanity with powerful means to exercise some kind of control over the forces and entities of and in the *universum*, and the knowledge that such possibilities existed mitigated what might otherwise have been an all too troubling consciousness that human powers are very limited, especially when asked to exist beside and cope with those of non-human beings whose puissance is God-given and superior.

The Church on the one hand, however, and magical practitioners on the other offered everyone ways to cope with these problems. Religion and magic provided reassurance that humans need not be overwhelmed by obtrusive spirits, nor feel themselves hapless in the face of powers greater than they. Religion

and magic also gave people access to authority. In the case of the Church this was an authority which gave its consent to, and therefore rendered licit, the use of prayers, blessings and sacramentals such as holy water, which would act as channels of communication between humans and God, the ultimate authority, or as instruments of His responses to people's pleading and expectation. In the case of magic, the authority was illicit, either because people used words, gestures or things to which they attributed what was, in fact, a non-existent power;[5] or they applied to an authority other than divine or divinely sanctioned, in which case they were at least tacitly substituting that authority for the authority of God. The former was 'superstition', the latter 'idolatry and apostasy' the assumption being that a lesser power which was willing to allow itself to be elevated in such a fashion could not be good, since good 'powers' must always be conscious of their subordinate relationship with God; and if good 'powers', such as angels or saints, would not let themselves be used thus – unless, of course, God made them a special case and permitted it – then those lesser 'powers' must be evil, and evil 'powers', being governed by pride, would not hesitate to let themselves be addressed and used as having authority.

It is easy to see, therefore, why the Church attacked any whom she considered to be idolaters and apostates and was deeply suspicious of those she called 'superstitious'. Their willingness to apply to authorities other than God amounted to *lèse majesté* and needed to be dealt with as such. Only the Church's mission to save souls – to do so with mercy if she could, with rigour if she could not and with final rejection of those who proved obdurate if they gave her no other choice – meant that she exercised any patience at all with people who ignorantly, recklessly or intentionally put their souls in jeopardy by venturing themselves into alliance or traffic with spirits of any kind. Hence, one of the principal concerns of a succession of Popes (as we see from Part I), was to suppress superstition on the one hand and demon worship on the other.

But while it may be said that a simple, uncomplicated act of magic by a peasant who undertook it for a practical end – to increase a cow's flow of milk, for example, or make someone fall in love – can readily be accepted by us as a genuine action actually performed by an individual, can we bring ourselves with equal readiness to accept that some people actually did worship a demon or demons, as was alleged of them by their contemporaries? Here we come to one of the most difficult points of difference between ourselves and earlier times. The temptation is for us to dismiss that type of allegation as fantasy or lies or

5. For example, during the 1130s David of Ganjak noted in his *Penitential* that magical curers 'make passes with the hand over their young children and say, "Let there be no pain in their bodies". And they rub the spittle of their mouths on them with their hand, and say, "The evil eye is upon him, he has become sick. May he not attract the evil eye". And wicked old crones yawn and stretch round the sick child; and they cast sparks into water and give it to the children and other sick persons to drink, in order [to see] whether they have been the victim of the evil eye or not. Also they melt lead and cast it into water in a vessel and place it upon people's chests, saying that it is a cure for palpitations and toothache. In remote places, they cut roots of plants and stuff them in pear trees and other bushes around the room, and say it is a cure for fever'.

malicious gossip, and indeed one would be unwise to thrust any of these on one side altogether, since the nature of many of our records and the context in which such a thing is said suggest that particular instances of demonolatry may well owe much to fantasy, lies or gossip. Nevertheless, 'particular instances' do not amount to 'all', and we must surely be prepared to allow that the Church's concern with demon worship was based on sufficient fact to make that concern legitimate.

'Insulting to God', observed the French Dominican, Étienne de Bourbon in the thirteenth century, 'are superstitions which pay divine honours to evil spirits or to any other created being – as idolatry does, and as wretched female diviners and sorcerers [*sortilegae*] do when they heal by worshipping elder trees or making offerings to them, despising churches or the relics of the saints' (*Anecdotes historiques*). 'Why do you supplicate the sun with blessings and incantations to protect you, fool', asked Nicholas of Cusa in 1431, 'and the new moon to do likewise, by fasting on the day she first makes her appearance? The Lord is your spouse. He created them, and you are an idolater!' (*Ibant Magi* 20). Pope John XXII summarized similar activities carried out under his very nose by both priests and laymen at the Papal Court in 1318 (see below, Part I, no. 3).

The involvement of priests in acts of ritual magic – and one can see and appreciate the difference between these complex ceremonies and the simple words and gestures which, on the whole, constituted non-learned magic, even if the basis on which both learned and non-learned acted was the same, that is, an appeal to an authority other than God – was clearly disturbing to the Pope, as it had been to his predecessors and would continue to be to his successors. Priests, who had access to power legitimately authorized, had no business, to say the least, in perverting that access in the service of ends for which it was not given. Thus, during the trial of Gilles de Rais in 1440, it was alleged he had been assisted in his invocation of demons by a cleric, Francesco Prelati. 'On one occasion, [Gilles] brought to Francesco's room a jar containing the hands, the heart, the eyes and the blood of a child and gave them to him. Then Francesco made an invocation to offer them to the demon if the demon came in answer to the invocation' (Deposition of Francesco Prelati). But even if he were a layman, the magician was likely to dress and act as a priest – 'you should wear a priest's garment, if possible', recommended Pietro d'Abano in his *Heptameron*, a detailed account of how to perform a complex magical ritual – and when he spoke, he was likely to speak with the assumed authority of a priest-exorcist:

> I mark you with the sign of the cross, o air. I adjure you, o Devil and your angels. I adjure you not to bring a hailstorm or any distress into this district, and not to have anything to say in the presence of God on the grounds that no one has spoken against you. May God speak against you, and the Son of God who is the beginning of all created things. May holy Mary speak against you. I adjure you, Merment, along with your companions, you who have been given charge of the storm. I adjure you in the name of Him who made heaven and earth in the beginning. I adjure you, Merment, by the right hand of Him who formed Adam, the first human being, in His own image. I adjure you, Merment, by Jesus Christ, the only Son of God. I conjure you, demon and Satan, I conjure you that

> you have no power in this place or in this village either to do harm or to cause damage, to send a storm or throw down very violent rain.
>
> Eleventh-century spell

Should priests be allowed to continue to practise magic, or wink at others who did so, by co-operating in their blasphemies – the altar cloths of churches frequently concealed an extraordinary array of objects waiting to be 'consecrated' by having Mass celebrated over them – lay people might well come to believe that the authority and therefore the power of Satan and his demons was as legitimate and effective as that of God Himself, a muddling of comprehension which in any case was already often evident in individuals who developed highly peculiar theological notions out of their misunderstanding the Christian doctrine they heard expounded during sermons, or from their own meditations upon the pictures in glass and paint and stone which they saw round them in church. To give only one example, Domenico Scandella, a miller from the mountainous region of Friuli in the north of Italy, had an odd notion of creation:

> I have said that, in my opinion, all was chaos ... and out of that bulk a mass formed – just as cheese is made out of milk – and worms appeared in it, and these were the angels. The most holy majesty decreed that these should be God and the angels, and among that number of angels there was also God, He too having been created out of that mass at the same time.
>
> C. Ginzburg, 1980, *The Cheese and the Worms*, English trans. (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul), 53

Christianizing Europe had been a long, drawn-out process and Christianizing its thousands of isolated communities a challenge which was clearly not complete even by the time the Protestant and Catholic reformations began to make their several impacts, and their separate confessional authorities were making serious efforts to bring doctrinal uniformity to bear upon the quirks, bizarreries or plain ignorance of their widespread laities. Even before these sixteenth-century endeavours, however, the Church had been involved in recurrent battles with those whose particular interpretations of Scripture or doctrine led both themselves and those who accepted their views away from that orthodoxy the Church felt herself charged to preserve and defend. Heresy, in other words, had fertile ground in which to plant its seeds.

Now, heresy by its very nature challenges the Church's claim to have been constituted by God the only legitimate source of true and valid teaching on matters of faith and morals, and although the problems presented to the Church by heresy on the one hand and magic on the other were in many ways separate and distinct, they had in common their dissension from the Church anent legitimacy of authority. For the Church, this dissent was a serious matter. If she was to fulfil her role as pastor of souls and guide them to salvation, she could not stand by and let people stray into or deliberately embrace behaviour which would result in their soul's damnation. Again, reading Hansen's selection of Papal letters and decrees illustrates the range of problems relating to magic alone with which the Popes were faced: heretical groups, odd rituals, Jewish intransigence,