

EUROPEAN WITCH TRIALS

Their Foundations in Popular and Learned
Culture, 1300–1500

Richard Kieckhefer

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WITCHCRAFT



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RICHARD KIECKHEFER



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European Witch Trials

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Culture, 1300–1500*

Richard Kieckhefer



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Preface

The topic of witchcraft has enjoyed popularity for some time, both among scholars and with the broader reading public. It has aroused numerous controversies, and the positions taken in these debates have been diverse. One might pardonably ask whether there is reason for still further work on such well-tilled soil. Clearly my answer would be affirmative. I have profited greatly from the research of many scholars, and made use of their material and analyses; I can hardly presume to supersede their treatment of the subject entirely. If there is any justification for my turning to late medieval witch trials anew, it is the need for methodologically rigorous study of the evidence. The methods used in this work, though neither technical nor revolutionary, are in some measure distinctive. The application of these methods results in a picture of the topic which is revisionist both in general outline and in many details. If the revisions gain acceptance, or even if they provoke discussion, I shall be gratified to have contributed toward knowledge of this important subject.

The scope of this work, as sketched in the Introduction, is admittedly broad: I have endeavored to cover most of western Europe, for a period of two centuries. A study of some specific locality might have better claim to being complete and definitive. Yet the purpose of this work is to ascertain what effects the proposed methodology will have on the total picture of late medieval witchcraft; the patterns produced by a local study would in this regard be of little consequence, since there are so few extant documents from any given region. I have made every effort to take into account all relevant trials cited in modern literature on witchcraft, plus some cases that have been missed in this literature. I have undoubtedly overlooked some records, and there are surely further manuscripts that await systematic investigation in European (and

especially English) libraries and archives. One may reasonably conjecture, however, that the broad patterns revealed in presently known materials will not be seriously disrupted by later discoveries. It is theoretically conceivable that unexpected masses of documents will come to light, but given the generally fragmentary character of records from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries it is unlikely that future discoveries will greatly outweigh materials now at hand.

Even if it could claim to be definitive, a work of this breadth suffers a further handicap: when one draws upon records of widely distant regions, the commonalities in the witch beliefs stand out more clearly than the local variations. I have tried to point out regional particularities when they are clearly significant; for example, the reader will encounter contrasts between Swiss and Italian ideas of witchcraft. For various reasons, however, there would be little purpose in making these discrepancies the object of sustained inquiry. In the first place, information from many regions is so meagre that it would be impossible to discuss the topography of witch beliefs with confidence. Second, even if one could isolate distinctive features of regional tradition, any explanation for these variations would in most cases be merely hypothetical, because the social context has been studied unevenly and for many regions insufficiently. It appears, for example, that Swiss traditions were distinctive in many ways. Yet Switzerland is precisely one of the areas for which least social history has been written in recent years, and until the nature of Swiss society has been studied more carefully it would be futile to speculate about the reasons for specifically Swiss popular beliefs.

If this work is general in its geographical and chronological scope, the thematic focus is quite specific. As the title indicates, this is not a comprehensive investigation of late medieval witchcraft, but specifically an examination of the witch trials. Witchcraft literature and legislation are of only peripheral relevance. For these topics Joseph Hansen's *Zauberwahn, Inquisition und Hexenprozess* is still worth consulting, as is Jeffrey Russell's *Witchcraft in the Middle Ages*. I have nothing new to add on these subjects; prolonged discussion of them would merely be a distraction. The subtitle further circumscribes the topic of this work: Certain aspects of the witch trials, such as judicial procedures and political context, receive only tangential consideration here. Emphasis lies on the one central problem, the distinction between popular and learned

notions of witchcraft, as these are revealed in the trials. I have treated the content of popular witch beliefs in detail. Because the substance of learned tradition has already been discussed at length in analyses of the witch treatises, and because the learned notions found in the trials are fundamentally the same as those in this literature, I have given them less attention.

Among the scholars who have benefited me most are those whose bibliographic spadework has unearthed many of the late medieval trials. The early work of Joseph Hansen brought hundreds of cases to the attention of scholars generally, and in recent years the bulk of known material has been swelled greatly by the exhaustive work of Jeffrey Russell. My approach to the sources, on the other hand, has been influenced to no small degree by the studies of Keith Thomas and Alan Macfarlane, though they deal mostly with centuries later than those that concern me, and work with problems different from those I have encountered.

Norman Cohn's book, *Europe's Inner Demons*, appeared after I had completed the present study, but I have been able to take his suggestions into account in eleventh-hour revision of my work. Cohn's discussion overlaps mine in some areas. Most significantly, we independently recognized that the materials given by Étienne-Léon de Lamothe-Langon are forgeries (though I had not realized until reading Cohn that the legal opinion of Bartolo of Sassoferrato, for the case of c. 1340 at Novara, is also a fabrication). On the whole our studies are mutually collaborative and complementary. In some cases I have taken issue with his interpretations, and have expressed my disagreement usually in my notes. If I can claim to have advanced beyond Cohn it is in my systematic investigation of the judicial sources, and in my effort to make that distinction between popular and learned beliefs that Cohn explicitly poses as an area for further research.

I am greatly indebted to many teachers, colleagues, students, and friends for their assistance. Indeed, it is a source of wonderment to me how heavily indebted I have become in writing such a short book. Robert E. Lerner read the book with painstaking care, and provided a wealth of detailed and insightful suggestions. Likewise, Charles Bowlus, Ilse Bulhof, and Clarke Garrett each read the manuscript at some stage of its preparation and made valuable comments. In March 1974 I delivered a preliminary study for this work at the South-Central Renaissance Conference; I am grateful to the

program committee of this conference, especially Marcus Orr, for allowing me a forum for expression of my thoughts.

Many libraries and archives have furnished materials necessary for my work. I have relied heavily on the excellent resources and services of the Bayerische Staatsbibliothek in Munich. In addition I have received help from the Universitätsbibliothek Erlangen-Nürnberg, the British Museum, the Österreichische Nationalbibliothek at Vienna, the Archives de l'État at Neuchâtel, the Archives Cantonales Vaudoises at Lausanne, and the Archives Départementales de l'Isère at Grenoble. Mrs Jo Anne Hawkins and other personnel in the Interlibrary Service at the University of Texas have borne with interminable requests for materials.

I would also like to express my gratitude to the Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst for a grant for research in Munich during the year 1971-2. Though I was in Munich for research on a dissertation, dealing with a wholly distinct subject, I was able to begin collecting materials for the present study during the few spare moments that I had abroad.

My greatest debts of gratitude are personal ones. In addition to helping with correction of the manuscript, my wife Margaret bore patiently, as usual, with all the inconvenience of having a husband immersed in such a project. And the Department of History at the University of Texas, in particular the chairman, Professor Clarence Lasby, helped me with numerous kindnesses during the time I was working on this book.

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be taken as accurate reflections of popular tradition. The mentality of the accusers is thus obscured, and the social setting of the witch trials becomes only dimly perceptible. The problem may be illustrated with the trial of Pierre Chavaz in the diocese of Lausanne.³ Pierre supposedly belonged to a sect of devil-worshippers, who renounced the Catholic faith, raised storms, and killed infants. Because the devil was hidden in his hair, he was unable to confess his deeds until he had been shaved all over his body. He had been accused by other witches, and according to the inquisitorial protocol public infamy further branded him as a witch. The document narrating his case is extensive, but it tells little that is interesting from an anthropological viewpoint. There is no accurate information about the circumstances that gave rise to accusation; there is no way of determining, from the information given in this particular document, whether Pierre's fellow-townsmen raised the specific charges against him or whether these allegations came from court officials. And the same difficulties arise in countless analogous cases.

The general problem that confronts the historian of witchcraft is a familiar one: it is notoriously difficult to glean the beliefs of the illiterate masses when the only sources are texts drawn up by the literate élite. Essentially the same problem confronts scholars dealing with mythology, legends of the saints, rural festivals, and other subjects.⁴

Despite the enormous body of scholarship on European witchcraft, the problem remains unsolved. To be sure, various historians have intuited distinctions between learned and popular levels of witch belief. Rossell Hope Robbins, for example, has argued that witchcraft proper, which he defines as 'a form of religion, a Christian heresy,' involving allegiance with the devil, was never 'of the people.' The practice of witchcraft, in Robbins's interpretation, was a fiction, devised wholly by theologians and inquisitors.⁵ Joseph Hansen reached much the same conclusion: that notions such as diabolical assemblies, transformation into animal-shapes, flight through the air, and so forth, were taken by medieval theologians from Christian and Graeco-Roman tradition, and woven into a 'cumulative concept' of witchcraft that had no foundations in popular belief or practice.⁶ A contrary view was stated in the nineteenth century by Jacob Grimm, who suggested that the concepts associated with witchcraft arose from Germanic folklore, and thus by implication derived from popular tradition, and not exclusively from

learned belief.⁷ More radical still are those scholars who think of witchcraft as rooted not merely in popular tradition but in actual practice; numerous scholars have argued that the people accused of witchcraft did in fact engage in some kind of illicit rites. The most extreme advocate of this view was Montague Summers, whose faith in the real existence of demons and in the genuine alliance between witches and Satan remained unshakable.⁸ For some time the anthropological interpretation of Margaret Murray and her followers was considered more respectable than the extreme credulity of Summers. Miss Murray suggested that witchcraft was the pre-Christian fertility religion that survived as an underground cult after the nominal adoption of Christianity in Europe.⁹ One of Miss Murray's numerous critics, Elliot Rose, set forth the fascinating hypothesis that high medieval goliards may have organized pagan vestiges and fostered the parodies of Christianity that inquisitors labeled synagogues or Sabbaths.¹⁰ And the notion has often been set forth that diabolism was a form of protest. Jules Michelet viewed it as a protest against medieval society;¹¹ Pennethorne Hughes thought of it as largely a female reaction against male domination;¹² Jeffrey Russell has explained it as an outgrowth of heresy, and a manifestation of dissent against the established Church.¹³

Views on the foundations of witch beliefs thus fall into three main classes, emphasizing respectively the role of learned tradition, popular tradition, and actual practice. None of these divergent views is either manifestly absurd or self-evidently correct. And the questions they raise are clearly fundamental. Before one can begin to analyze the social mechanism that underlay persecution, one must know what the actual grounds were for accusation of witchcraft, and one must determine the social levels from which specific accusations arose. Yet historians have failed to devise a way of answering these questions. Perhaps in despair of ever formulating the required methodology, they have typically proceeded on the basis of *a priori* intuitions of one form or another. Thus, Elliot Rose openly admits that in judging whether witch beliefs were based on real practice 'we must ultimately rely on taste or intuition, the *feel* of the language employed.'¹⁴ And H. C. Erik Midelfort, citing Rose with qualified approval, agrees that 'so long as the bulk of our information is tracts on the threat of witchcraft and records of trials for witchcraft, his statement is substantially true.'¹⁵ The present work will suggest that this counsel of despair is not necessary. Following chapters will

propose a methodology for sorting out fact and fiction, popular and learned tradition, with some confidence and in some detail.

One might ask whether it is valid to distinguish between popular and learned beliefs, or whether it might not be reasonable to assume that the learned and unlearned classes in early European society held witch beliefs that were substantially identical. Indeed, it is likely that popular culture had many features in common with learned tradition, and was subject to constant influence from it. There were numerous possibilities for contact and exchange between the literate and illiterate classes. Parish priests, and perhaps merchants and other groups, might stand midway between the two extremes; they were frequently from the lower or middle classes, and remained constantly in touch with these classes, yet at the same time they were exposed to the beliefs of cultured individuals. Sermons and plays could readily serve as media for popular dissemination of originally learned notions. Hansen suggested that the theatrical devils of the medieval stage influenced popular notions of how devils act.¹⁶ Even woodcuts could fulfill a similar function so long as there was someone on hand to interpret their representations in the intended sense.¹⁷ The scandal aroused by trials for witchcraft might in itself spread learned notions about witches among the populace, whose presence at the executions would be a matter of common occurrence. In one instance the number of spectators at an execution was estimated between six and eight thousand;¹⁸ even allowing for exaggeration, there must have been many people present, and many of them must have known the specific crimes to which the subject had confessed. During the sixteenth century, when extended series of witch trials occurred in many communities, it would be odd indeed if these notions failed to permeate the people at large.

Yet when all of this is admitted, there remains a substantial difference between the educated élite—people who could resurrect through their reading ideas that had lain dormant for centuries in unread manuscripts, who could easily maintain contact with centers of intellectual activity remote from their own countries, and who were trained in the arts of speculation and deduction—and the illiterate masses. Though there was no impenetrable barrier between them, the gap was wide enough that the preoccupations of one class can scarcely be assumed to have been shared by the other. One may presume that there were general forms of culture, particularly

religious culture, that were shared by people of all classes. And one may further take for granted that most people were exposed to some variety of learned notions expounded from the pulpit. Yet one cannot assume that any *specific* idea took hold on the popular imagination, unless specific evidence bears out this conclusion. One must operate on the working hypothesis that there were differences between popular and learned culture, and then proceed to discern how substantial those differences were.

The present work, then, will attempt to trace the origins, popular or learned, of various types of witch belief. Before doing this, one must recognize the various types of concept that are to be distinguished. The notions to be analyzed fall into three general classes: sorcery, invocation, and diabolism. The nature of each will become clarified in the course of this study, but for present purposes it may be useful to give brief descriptions.

The first of these phenomena, sorcery, might be defined as maleficent magic, such as rendering a person lame by making an image of the victim and breaking the leg of the image, or inducing love or hatred through administration of magical potions. Though in many ways the concept eludes rigid definition, sorcery is characterized by three general features. First of all, an act carried out through sorcery is in some way extraordinary: it occurs in extraordinary circumstances, or through use of extraordinary substances, or through the power of extraordinary individuals. Granted, it is not always possible to determine how contemporaries distinguished between ordinary and exceptional events or processes. This is a problem that will arise later, in discussion of magical potions and powders; contemporaries did not distinguish clearly between these and sheerly natural poisons.¹⁹ Yet in most instances the charge of sorcery implied that the misdeed was in some way distinct from those normally performed, even if the accusers could not pinpoint the exact difference. Second, sorcery works by processes that are in principle not subject to empirical observation. Again, the distinction is not absolute. A person who injures his enemy by mutilating an image may not be able to explain the mechanism of his act, but for that matter a specialist in folk medicine might be just as unable to explain how a particular herb takes effect. The folk remedy may in principle be explicable through empirical observation, but when technology for such inquiry is lacking this theoretical possibility is not a significant feature of the process. In general, however, a relative distinction

does hold. For most processes that they employ, people have some vague (and perhaps incorrect) notion of the mechanism involved, or else they assume that they could ascertain this mechanism if they so endeavored, or they take it on faith that someone understands the link between cause and effect. But the man who mutilates his enemy's representation cannot make any of these claims. He may believe that the magical act works, but he cannot explain how. Third, sorcery is distinguished from beneficent magic by virtue of its harmful intent. It is designed to cause illness, death, poverty, or material damage. Even this feature is not wholly unambiguous. For instance, one might argue that love magic is not necessarily deleterious—that the person who drinks a love potion may profit from the relationship to which it leads. But a person who views it as beneficent will *eo ipso* not classify it as sorcery. The word thus implies a value judgment of the effects sought or attained—a judgment passed not by the historian, but by the contemporaries who are afflicted. In the following pages, magic will be referred to as maleficent, and thus as sorcery, only when it was viewed as harmful by the persons affected or by others who brought judicial accusation.

Although sorcery is not in all respects purely a natural phenomenon, it is not supernatural in the sense of involving the participation of spirits. Invocation, on the other hand, is supernatural in that sense: it consists in calling upon the devil to obtain instruction or execution of one's wishes. It may or may not involve a pact with the devil, after the manner of Faust. If a pact is involved, it is contractual rather than religious. The person engaging in invocation does not view the devil as worthy of veneration, but merely uses him as a necessary agent for some end.²⁰ In most instances, however, records of alleged invocation say nothing about a pact. In any event, invocation requires an explicit, deliberate act of calling upon the devil.

Closely akin to invocation, yet distinct from it, is diabolism: deliberate worship of the devil, or of demons. This worship involves a variety of ritual actions, usually occurring at the diabolical assembly, or 'synagogue', or 'Sabbath'. It entails a pact in which the devotee submits himself wholly before the devil, accepting him as lord; it further may involve sexual intercourse with the devil in the human form of an *incubus* or *succubus*, receipt of the devil's prick or 'mark' on one's body, flight through the air on an anointed stick, transformation into the shape of an animal, and so forth.

It may be argued that these distinctions are overly subtle, and not

borne out in the sources. Their applicability to the historical evidence can only be shown in the course of following chapters. By way of general introduction, it should be admitted that in *learned* tradition the various notions did blend. For example, a man who began by invoking the devil would find himself persuaded to make a submissive pact with Satan, committing him to both diabolism and sorcery; he would receive his magical unguents and powders, along with instructions on how to use them, directly from the devil. Scholastic theologians held that in principle both invocation and sorcery were accomplished only through alliance with the devil. This bond might take the form of an explicit, deliberate pact, or it might be merely an implicit pact, entered upon through the simple consent of the devotee, without formalities. In either event, it would be through pre-established association with the devil that invocation and sorcery have their effect.²¹ Yet there is no evidence that this interpretation was adopted by people at large. Thus, the historian cannot suppose that when a townsman accused someone of sorcery the accuser presupposed that the culprit engaged in invocation or diabolism as well. Contemporaries no doubt did not maintain a rigid, formal distinction between the various concepts, but on the other hand one cannot assume in any given case that they conflated the different notions. Simply to specify the nature of the charges as recorded, the historian needs a set of closely defined, specific terms. In a few cases the sources leave room for doubt about the categories being employed. For example, one finds sorceresses described as 'imbued with a malign spirit and inflamed with diabolical art,'²² or as operating 'through the devil's art.'²³ These terms suggest the charge of invocation, but it is not clear from the context that such an accusation was intended. In many other trials the terms employed are so vague that it is impossible to state whether invocation, diabolism, or mere sorcery was alleged. Yet the most important documents are those that state the charges most clearly, and a necessary condition for accurate discussion of these records is a reasonably precise vocabulary.

Perhaps the most problematic word used in such contexts is the term 'witchcraft.' Neither historical nor modern works maintain any clear and consistent definition of the word. Some authors virtually equate it with diabolism, while others, with perfect etymological justification and historical precedent, use it also when speaking of sorcery. Anthropologists have suggested numerous ways of

distinguishing between witchcraft and sorcery. For example, E. E. Evans-Pritchard speaks of sorcery as accomplished through external means, such as rituals, verbal formulas, and material substances, whereas witchcraft works by virtue of a special power resident within the witch.²⁴ But none of these sets of definitions seems greatly useful in treatment of European sources.²⁵ In the present work, then, no endeavour will be made to endow the words 'witch' and 'witchcraft' with any technical or specific meaning. 'Witchcraft' will be used in an inclusive sense, applying to sorcery, *or* diabolism, *or* invocation, *or* any combination of these. Likewise, 'witch' will be used in a broad sense, for a practitioner of any or all such acts. The latter term will thus correspond to the various words employed in the documents—*sortilegus*, *maleficus*, *veneficus*, *striga*, and their vernacular equivalents—which, whatever their original specific meanings, quickly assumed general significance. Words of this sort are required for those many contexts in which the sources afford no clue to what the specific charge may have been. When a definite, technical meaning is required, the words 'witch' and 'witchcraft' will be avoided, and others used in their place.

This study will deal specifically with the period 1300–1500. These limits are not totally arbitrary. Prior to this period the incidence of witchcraft was so rare that it is impossible to detect patterns of accusation, and reliable sources for genuinely popular belief are virtually non-existent. To be sure, there were scattered trials for both sorcery and diabolism centuries before 1300, and any general study of European witchcraft would have to take them into account. But the evidence for these cases does not lend itself to the kind of analysis required in this specific investigation. In discussion of the various types of sorcery there will be occasion to make comparison with earlier material, but this will not be of primary interest. And in study of witch trials from the period after 1500, the attempt to distinguish popular from learned traditions becomes increasingly problematic. The likelihood of intermixture of the two traditions becomes greater, and the number of people with some kind of formal education increases significantly if one goes much beyond the specified time limit.

The geographical scope of this inquiry is indicated even more clearly by the nature of the subject. So far as the extant records indicate, witchcraft was practised or alleged between 1300 and 1500 predominantly in England, the Low Countries, France, Italy,