

#1. W/C Debate of 16th C.  
Brenz on Hailstorms  
Wever Brenz-correspondence  
Rodin's attack on Weyer & Brenz

from:

Robert M. Kingdon (ed), Transition & Revolution:  
Problems & Issues of European Renaissance &  
Reformation History (1974), pp.189-233.  
(U.W. Library BR309/K5)

H. C. ERIK MIDELFORT

## Were There Really Witches?

5

*On Hailstorms:*  
A Sermon by Johann Brenz (1539)

---

To calm the terror and to combat the vulgar errors of common folk many learned preachers insisted that the physical threat of witchcraft had been exaggerated. In effect, they harked back to the attitude of the *Canon Episcopi*. Johann Brenz (1499-1570) is best known as the Protestant Reformer of Schwäbisch Hall and of the Duchy of Württemberg, but he preached eloquently on the false fear of witchcraft as well.

SOURCE: Johann Brenz, "Ein Predig von dem Hagel und Ungewitter," in *Evangelien der fürnembsten Fest- und Feyer-tagen* (Frankfurt, 1558).

---

Beloved in Christ, since faithlessness and idolatry are not simple but complex and of many varieties among mankind, and since they are no small cause of the corruption of body and soul, it is necessary that we recognize and avoid both kinds of corruption and piously live our life in our calling and walk in the fear of the Lord. First of all we must see that this pertains not

only to the unbelieving heathen who invoke, pray to, and honor images, gods, and so forth; but that all those who grant or ascribe to witches, the devil's followers, and to magicians what pertains and belongs only to God's majesty, are guilty of idolatry too. It is even idolatry when a man falls into misfortune and despairs of God's help and does not believe that God could help him in time of need, and so seeks help elsewhere. Oh, would God that our idolatry would disappear as that of the heathen did. But idolatry changed only its name, as we know by experience, and men continued with an idolatrous life. Many of that pitiable sort are to be found. That this is true is sufficiently proved by the horrible event which recently occurred and which we saw ourselves. For God the Lord has so thoroughly punished and visited us with very destructive cold weather, frosts, hail and storms from heaven that we might recognize and learn that he is father and still rules and governs, and that if he wanted to use his power, he could destroy us in a moment. But how do we react? We do nothing extraordinary. The majority, when they see that wine, fruit, and other things necessary for nourishing the body are destroyed by hail and storms, complain vehemently and act so indecently and so dejectedly that, in their great impatience, they seem to think that God himself has died and cannot help. Others are of the opinion that hail and storms come not from God but from magicians and witches. Therefore they begin to scold, curse, and grumble against them and to wish that all the witches could be burned at once. But such persons would do better to remember their own sins and many misdeeds, which they do very rarely because they never muddy their own waters and think that in the sight of God they are innocent. Truly this is blatant, heathen idolatry and myth. For whoever doubts God's help in time of need and does not call on God the Lord and does not trust him acts just as if there is no longer a God who can and will help.

Still others think that hail and storms, which God sends us because of our sins, actually are the work and business of the devil and his followers. Such persons really have not one spark of Christian faith in their hearts and neither know nor understand what the true faith is. In the first article of our Christian creed we confess openly that we have a gracious, good, and almighty God. And we pray and ask in the fourth part of the Lord's Prayer that dear God not withhold from us our daily bread, but that he graciously give and share it. Moreover the First Commandment warns us to avoid strange gods and pray to and honor only the one God. Now what are we to make of that? Some of us are just like the Marcionite heretics, who believed in, or made, two gods, one from whom good came, and the other from whom evil came. They make the devil himself into a God. Surely this is the greatest idolatry of all.

That this matter may be properly understood, I should like to insert at this time a short report concerning the origin of thunder, hail and storms, to the end that our terror and fright may be diminished. For we should learn and observe how we should properly react to thunder, storms, and other misfortunes. If we know and understand the true character of thunder, then

we will be surer that God the Father and his beloved Son, Jesus Christ, are still completely in control even if the earth has been smitten and destroyed by hail. And the more certain we are of that, the better we will learn and understand our catechism, the creed, the Lord's Prayer, and the Ten Commandments, and the more reason we will have to walk in the fear of God.

First of all, beloved in the Lord, you should note that here I am not speaking about hail and its properties in a natural way, but I bring explanations from the true Word of God. The scientists assert that hail originates when the sun draws up the humidity or moisture out of the earth and carries it through the air to the clouds. There it is turned into clouds because of the great cold of the air, but later, when it is warmed by the sun again, it is turned into rain or hail, especially during the summer. And the rain falls unless the drops freeze again because of the freezing cold air, and they coalesce. This freezing and coalescing are the origin of hail as explained by the scientists and naturalists. Yet the significance of hail is taught us by the Word of God, for God is the true, natural, and almighty inventor, creator, and distributor of hail. His Word tells us also how he governs and for what reasons he ordains hailstorms. For men too are conceived naturally in their mothers' wombs, but the greatest and most important fact is that the dear God creates, supports, nourishes and supplements this natural order, for without God's help no man can be born into this vale of tears. It is the same with hail, which begins in a natural way but is ordered and regulated by God the Lord, the true and right author, according to his desire. The unbelieving and godless are certain that thunder, hail, and storms come from none other than the devil and from his followers, the magicians and witches. And if the wine and fruits of the field are ruined or beaten down, they blame only the witches. But we are taught completely different things by God's Word, i.e., that God the Lord makes the hail in order to punish the godless, the faithless, and the unjust, and thereby bring them to a recognition of their sins and turn them to repentance and improvement. And the pious, god-fearing people are tested by a hailstorm to see whether they will stand firm in the true faith and confession of God. This is clearly proved by the testimony of Holy Scripture, as in Exodus 9, where we read that God ordered Moses to stretch out his hand and release a huge hailstorm over Egypt, over men and cattle alike. This is an obvious proof that God the Lord is the author and founder of hail and that He releases it over men and beasts to punish the godless. And in Job 38 it is written that God said to Job, "Have you been where the snow comes from or have you seen the storehouses of the hail which I have reserved for the time of trouble, for the day of battle and war?" Here we hear that God himself claims that hail is sent by Him and only Him. I must insert one more example from Joshua, where it is written that the Lord allowed a great hail to fall from heaven among the enemy of the people of Israel, and that more died from the hail than from the sword of the children of Israel. And in Haggai, the second chapter, God says, "I have smitten you with drought, mildewed grain, and hail in all your labors, and yet you still do not turn to me, says the

Lord." Here the prophet shows us two things. First that hail comes from God the Lord. Second, that it is sent in order to punish the godless and to warn or drive them to repent. Here someone could conclude "I have heard that neither the devil nor witches can make hail." To which I would agree that God the Lord, and not the devil, is the author and founder of hail and storms, and they give evidence, as shown above, of his ruling pleasure and will.

But in addition, it is the devil's principal and highest task to bring harm to men both in material or temporal matters and in spiritual concerns. Without God's permission and decree he cannot begin or finish the task, as is clear in Job. For the will and purpose of the devil were totally directed at corruption of righteous Job and bringing him to utter ruin. Yet without God's permission and decree he could not harm or rump a hair on his head. Similarly he could not seduce or deceive the prophets of King Ahab without God's command, just as he couldn't enter the herd of swine without Christ's permission. And he was unable to attack and tempt Christ's disciples without the permission of the Lord Christ, as is clear in Luke 22, where Christ says to Peter, "The devil demanded to have you that he might sift you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail." From these examples we should learn, and console ourselves too, that when we hear of the devil as a forceful, powerful, sworn enemy of the human race who sneaks about day and night to devour us, yet we should not give up since he has no power or strength to harm us without the decree of God. Thus the devil is not so powerful that at his own pleasure he can change and transform the air. Even less can the witches and sorcerers do such things.

How then does it happen that the Imperial [Roman] law punishes witches? For it is written in the law that there are many who take up evil arts and use them to enchant and disturb the air and the elements, not even sparing the life of the innocent, but causing them great harm. Such persons, because they are enemies and attackers of nature, should be given their reasonable and well-deserved punishment. Thus we also read in Exodus 22 that God said to Moses, "You shall not allow the witch among you to live." Now if no witch can interfere in the working of nature, and if it is not in her power to make hail, why are they punished according to Imperial laws and edicts and especially by the command and law of Moses, which originated in the Holy Spirit? Here one must observe that the witches and sorcerers are punished by Imperial laws and mandates and by command of Moses not because they caused or made hail and storms of their own power and will, but because they gave themselves to the devil and have drunk so deeply of Satan's spirit that they desire only what their captain, the devil, desires; namely, the corruption and ruin of mankind. This they seek with all their strength. And they believe that they have produced the evil, which, however, only the devil causes by using the decree and permission of God. For when the devil is allowed by God the Lord to awaken or cause a hailstorm, he at once turns to his tools, the witches, and encourages them to use their magic and to attack their neighbors by causing misfortune. And when the hail begins to fall, it comes not from the power or strength of the witches but from the devil, to

whom God gave control and permission. In this way the witches are deluded and deceived by the devil into thinking that it was their work whenever evil things happen, when actually it is the devil alone who causes such things with God's decree. Thus witches are punished by the magistrates because they are without fear of God, lead a godless and un-Christian life, give themselves entirely to the devil to corrupt and harm mankind, and not because they actually cause any harm, as they think they do; for they cannot harm.

Why then does God permit the devil to ruin and lay waste the wine and fruit of the field? On the causes of this I have taught and shown above that God causes hail and allows it to fall in order to test thereby the faith of the faithful and to punish the godless as they deserve, bring them to recognition of their sins, and encourage true repentance. I will say no more about it here.

How, and with what means, can hailstorms and punishments be avoided? This I will try to show with God's help. Here there are many recent errors, for some take blessed or consecrated herbs and throw them into the fire in the belief that they will in that way drive the devil out of the air. This is pure magic and idolatry. For the devils, who are purely spirits, cannot be driven off with such delusions and with physical materials. For that reason I regard such persons who use smoke rituals to drive off the devil, displaying thereby an utter faithlessness, as worse than the infamous magicians and witches. They ought to be punished no less severely than the witches. Some people blow horns and ring bells in the opinion that the hail and storm will be driven off by the noise, a practice which I wish to expand on. The pious and god-fearing have their own useful customs relating to bells, but the godless are all of the firm opinion that the clang of a baptized bell has such powers that the devil is frightened and driven from the air, and that thereby hail and storms can be avoided or controlled. That is a horrible and gruesome idolatry, first, because baptism is given to bells, and second, because these men attribute to the clang of bells what belongs to God alone. Yet the pious turn bells to their own use in two ways, as I said, namely in a temporal and in a spiritual way. First, the pious, and especially the weak and fainthearted are given some courage by the ringing of bells, for they note that men are still around. Secondly, the careless, lazy, and negligent persons are reminded by the ringing bells of God's wrath that they may turn more zealously to prayer and ask God for grace. For the sound of bells warns us to call out to merciful God and ask him to forgive our sins. If a storm is coming, therefore, we ought first to go to church and pray from the heart that God graciously turn away from wrath. Since man is not accustomed at such times to run to church, however, our dear ancestors ordained and recommended that bells be rung and sounded at such times to remind everyone at home to turn to thoughtful and heartfelt prayer in his house as if he were in church. And such bell ringing would still be tolerable and permissible except that bells are merely rung, or they are baptized by the suffragan in order to drive away the devil and thereby prevent storms and hail, as if they could claim such power and strength. This is certainly the greatest and most terrible idolatry for the bells can do nothing in such cases.

On the other hand there are others who think that there is no other way of avoiding hail and storms than by burning witches. Although the magistrate must indeed punish the witches according to the laws described above, yet he must not rely on their confession but only when their deed is proved and undeniable. Why is that? Even if all witches were burned to ashes, still hail, thunder, and storms would not on that account cease, for all of them are sent by God, as I said. But then in what way can we turn aside hail and storms? Above we have said that God the Lord is author and administrator, governor and ruler of the hail, and that he decrees and allows the devil to act when he wants to unleash a hailstorm on account of our sins. Now what sort of sins are they for which God releases the devil? Oh, dear God! Who could list all of these sins one after the other? Yet I will describe and explain a few of them briefly. The law teaches that God usually punishes us in those things with which we offend him, as is written: "An eye for an eye, a hand for a hand, tooth for tooth, foot for foot." We misuse the gifts of God, like wine, grain, and other things; therefore God punishes us in the same way. Here both rich and poor are guilty, for the rich hoard everything as if they were always in want and were about to starve to death. And when they grow even wealthier, and have stuffed their barns, kitchens, and cellars, and have filled their purses, then the gluttony, swilling, and gaming are almost without pause. And among those who have many goods, the trick is common in which the lord whom one owes money, fruits, and tithes is a master of deceit and gives himself the advantage of saying how much should be his portion. But the punishment is not long in coming, as the prophet Amos said, "Hear this word, you who are on the mountain of Samaria, who oppress the poor, who crush the needy," etc. Therefore have I allowed it to rain on one town and not on another; one field gets rained on, and the other, which receives no rain, dries up. And in Haggai, chapter 1, it is written "Now thus speaks the Lord of hosts, Consider how you have fared. You have sown much and harvested little; you eat, but you never have enough; you drink, but you never have your fill," etc. And why is this? For this reason, the Lord says, "that my house lies in ruins, and everyone busies himself with his own house. Therefore the heavens above you have withheld the dew and the earth has withheld its produce. And I have called for a drought upon the land and the hills, upon the grain, the new wine, the oil, upon what the ground brings forth, upon men and cattle, and upon all the work of their hands." And further he says, "I smote you with drought, mildewed grain, and hail, and all the products of your toil." And why? "Because my house is not yet built, says the Lord." God says the same thing through the prophet Malachi, saying, "Since you have cheated me in your tithes and offerings, so be cursed that everything will flow through your hands." Yet how many servants gladly pay their debts without deceit? When they bring money or tithes or pay whatever is appropriate, they cry out and say, "May it all go to the devil," which is truly a sign of a godless character and mind.

Since therefore both poor and rich lead an immoderate and impudent life,

and misuse the gifts of God, such as wine and fruit, God the Lord will send us hail and storms to ruin the wine and grain. He has good cause. Thus men should not immediately seek and shout for the burning of witches, for with such a cry we condemn ourselves to the fire. But since some are stubborn and insist on executing and burning witches, tell me rather where will one find fire enough, and who would be safe? Truly neither magistrate nor subject, neither lord nor servant would be able to protect himself or escape such a misfortune or remain safe. Whoever would seek to avoid the harm and ruin of thunder and hail, let him learn his own sins, do true penance, and turn his heart to the Lord, and work in his office or calling with a zealous fear of God. If even then you encounter some misfortune, the dear God will richly restore everything to you through his grace and blessing, for the sake of Jesus Christ, His beloved Son. To whom be laud, honor and praise, together with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.

## 6

### Debate on the Nature of Witchcraft: Correspondence Between Johann Weyer and Johann Brenz (1565)

Johann Weyer (1515?-1588) was a physician at the court of Jülich-Cleves who concluded that most witches were silly, deluded, melancholy old women who deserved sympathy rather than punishment. The only physically dangerous witches, he thought, were those who used poisons. Naturally, he read Brenz's sermon (Source 5) with great interest and wrote to him enlisting his aid. Brenz responded with appreciation for Weyer's efforts on behalf of the innocent, but he insisted that real witches, even if harmless, must be severely punished. This exchange reveals clearly the importance of accurate biblical interpretation in the sixteenth century and helps explain why even humane and reasonable men could believe in witchcraft. The debate also provides evidence for a number of different kinds of witchcraft and distinguishes carefully the kinds of punishment appropriate for each.

SOURCE: Johann Weyer, *De Praestigiis Daemonum* (Frankfurt, 1586), pp. 491-99.

Johann Weyer to Dr. Johann Brenz, Doctor of Sacred Scripture and Provost at Stuttgart:

I wish you happiness, grace, and good fortune together with my friendly greeting, worthy Brenz, through Him who loved us and with His blood cleansed all who deny themselves, receive Christ and walk in His footsteps and follow Him.

For good reasons I have always regarded you highly and held you in highest honor for the great energy, skill, and fear of God which you have displayed in your efforts to rid the church of idolatry and to cleanse it of false teaching. But now even more should you be praised and honored on account of a wonderfully learned and pious sermon which you recently delivered and had printed. For in that sermon you teach elegantly and truly that idolatry should not be held to be the sin of heathen alone, when they make gods and pray to them, but also the sin of men who attribute what belongs to God alone to the devil and his horde, the magicians, witches, and covenanters with the devil. As when men, after an accident or misfortune, neglect God's help, as if there were no longer a God who could help, and fall away from God, no longer calling on Him in need; but seek elsewhere for help and salvation, with the devil or his followers. This too is a shameful and cursed idolatry. Therefore, you were rightfully angry about the people in the Duchy of Württemberg whose wine and fruit were destroyed by a terrible hail. In their stubborn faithlessness, instead of coming to recognize their own sins through such punishments, and instead of truly repenting and reforming their lives and living according to God's word, they fell into superstition. They hold that such misfortunes come not from the Lord God on account of their sins, but from witches, whom they wish burned. Rightly have you punished and thumped these fellows. Verily you instructed and taught your congregation and dear flock rightly by displaying witnesses from Holy Scripture and also by showing the natural causes of hail so that it is in no way a work or creation of the devil or of his followers, the witches and magicians, but that it is God the true author and ruler's creation and work, and that he sends such things to mankind that the godless may thereby be punished, led to recognize their sins, and encouraged to repentance and improvement of life. But also that the pious may be tested through such hail and storms whether they will remain steadfast in the true faith. I say truly that your teaching of how men should react to such evils in certainty and with a good conscience, and how they may avoid misfortune, is not poor or despicable advice but true and godly. I understand your teaching and opinion very well, dear Brenz, and I do not doubt that you serve the Christian congregation best with such a glorious and consoling sermon.

The seriousness and industry that suffuse your work are especially needed in this area of great darkness and confusion, for the conjurers blind the eyes of many, especially those who praise the gospel most highly, including great lords and nobles as well as the common man, but even more importantly those like you whose office and calling require them to teach healthy, pure doctrine to others. They have made much confusion. But the good and gracious God, who leaves no pious man unrewarded, will reward you richly.

As to the first part of your sermon, I must confess that it seems sufficient to me (for which I thank you very much). As to the second part, however, I have a criticism and objection at a point in which we do not agree. Therefore I could not omit explaining myself and describing my position briefly so that if you teach me that I have erred anywhere, I can improve and change my opinions, which are contained for all to see in my *Six Books on the Delusions of Demons (De praestigiis daemonum)*, and especially in Book Six. Witches have no power to make hail, storms, and other evil things, but they are deceived by the devil. For when the devil, with the permission and decree of God, can make hail and storms, he goes to his witches and urges them to use their magic and charms, so that when the trouble and punishment come, the witches are convinced that they and the devil have caused it. Thus the witches cannot make hail and other things, but they are deluded and blinded by the devil himself to whom they have given themselves. In this way they think that they have made hail and storms. Not on that account but for their godless lives should they be punished severely. All of this you teach openly. And to confirm and strengthen your position you also cite the Imperial Law with these words: "There are many who practice evil arts to disturb and poison the elements. And they spare not the life of innocent persons but cause them great harm. Therefore when such people oppose nature they should be punished with death." You also confirmed and strengthened your teaching with the law of Moses, by which, as Moses said: "Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live" (Exodus 22:18).

Now, dear Brenz, so that the truth may appear openly from a friendly comparison, I ask that I may present freely my opinions. Do not take offense at this or blame me, for I will not present anything willful, unreasonable, frivolous, immoderate, or outrageous (as God is my witness, who knows everything). First you admit that witches have no power at all to cause hail or storms, even though their senses are so deluded by the devil that they believe and confess that they have awakened or caused storms and other such evils. The law, however, does not speak of those who cannot work such magic, but of those who do use the evil magical arts, which our witches cannot learn or understand because they are stupid, uneducated, dull, foolish, and crazy, and also because of their age and sex. And the law states clearly that it has those in mind who disturb and poison the air, which again our witches cannot do, as you explicitly teach. For no one can do that. Thus such witches are not referred to in this law for they cannot harm human life. I argued this extensively in my book. Since I find that you agree sufficiently with me in your sermon, I do not wish to explain myself at length or use a lot of words.

For if witches could physically harm someone or be dangerous, then they are not simply witches or sorcerers, and they should be called poisoners instead. And they deserve the punishment meted out by Moses, Imperial law, and common law. Yet just because there is no agreement in that matter, one should not on that account conclude that Imperial law teaches or confirms that our witches must be punished. Indeed the law says not one word about them. Our witches have been corrupted in their phantasy by the devil and imagine often that they have done evil things that didn't even happen or caused natural occurrences that actually did not take place. In their confessions, especially under torture, they admit to doing and causing many things which are impossible for them and for anyone. One should not believe them when they confess that they have bound themselves to the devil, given themselves to his will, promised to follow his evil goals, just as we do not believe their confession that they make hail and storms, disturb and poison the air, and other impossible deeds. For both are confessed by one man at the same time and in the same way. Why should we believe such ridiculous confessions, brought us by the devil, more than others? Why approve a confession which is totally false and deluded, especially when made by an old, feeble, and captive woman, who is not to be trusted anyway? Therefore put no trust in such false and unfounded confessions, for they are started and fostered by the devil who is a liar and a father of lies. A person who is driven by the devil and almost always possessed by him confesses whatever the devil forcefully impresses on her senses, and she believes thoroughly whatever she confesses and says. Yes the devil always rules the tongues of witches so that they say much that they did not intend, which can be seen in women possessed by the devil, who, when released from the devil's bondage, are reminded of what they said earlier, and they are ashamed. I saw this the first time in a nun who lay sick in the hospital; when she came to her senses, she confessed to me the same horrible deeds that others confess with torture and torment. She had been plagued by the devil in this way in her cloister. She was later sacrificed, despite the fact that she was possessed by the devil, and despite the law's insistence that in criminal cases proof must be as bright and clear as the noonday sun. Even if an old woman, in deep depression, gives herself to the devil, one should not immediately condemn her to the fire but instead have regard for her confused, burdened, and depressed spirits and use all possible energy to convert her that she may avoid evil, and give herself to Christ. In this way we may bring her to her senses again, win her soul, and save her from death, as St. James teaches. For every man who sins, or is unjust, or hates his brother, is not of God but of the devil, as St. John says. And the fornicators, adulterers, idolaters, voluptuaries, drunkards, calumniators, and slanderers, and the avaricious will not inherit or possess the Kingdom of God. When such persons devote themselves criminally to the devil's service, and are unfaithful to God the Lord, they are not condemned to flames at once, even if they have seduced other persons into taking part in their evil deeds, thereby sinning more grievously. They fully deserve God's revenge and punishment, which is much harder and stricter than temporal

punishment; nor can they escape it unless they repent and cordially convert. For then they are released from pain and punishment, just as those whom Paul described, who abandon the faith in the last times, and follow seductive spirits and devil's doctrine. I would say the same concerning heretics, who are seduced by the devil's false words and persuasions, and who are unjust to God and to others. At the Last Judgment they will not be severely punished if they repent, confess their error, and abandon it. That such persons should be sharply restrained in some cases I do not deny; nor would I oppose it. But clearly it is even more imperative for magistrates not to proceed too harshly or too quickly with the many old women who are naturally feeble and silly and are deceived, seduced, and sometimes even possessed by the devil; for they are considered witches although they are harmless. Those who kill these poor, duped, crazy, but innocent women anger God most of all. I do not doubt that they will have to suffer harsh punishment from Christ for the gruesome cruelty and tyranny that they exercise against these women, like the bloodthirstiest hangmen, unless they do true penance and obtain a merciful God. A vice or sin, committed or conceived in the heart, is punished by God the Lord, who is a searcher of men's hearts and who knows our thoughts. For a man who desires the wife of another is an adulterer in his heart and cannot escape the punishment of God. But the magistrate must not punish him as an adulterer even if he confesses openly his deepest will and thoughts, for the sword is not entrusted to the magistracy for such cases.

Now, if a troublemaker or quarreler is to be punished, as the will and consensus of mankind agree, it is first necessary and required that he really deserve punishment by displaying a reasonable and understanding human will. He must have intentionally planned, with will, mind, and spirit, to commit some crime or heinous deed against the commonwealth; and he must have been able to do the deed; and he must have begun to commit at least part of the crime, or have made an attempt. It were well to distinguish clearly such men from those who, in the weakness of their mind, imagine that they are committing some evil or believe that they have already completed some deed which actually never occurred and was impossible to do. Otherwise one would have to attribute criminal will and consent to fools, children, and the mentally ill, who often persuade themselves that they have done evil and in their folly confess that they are guilty of crimes. What have witches done in consenting to and applauding the plans of the devil for causing trouble and misfortune (at God's decree)? Nothing more than people who, when in trouble, wickedly and jealously wish bad luck to others, and who rejoice and are happy, with willing and consenting minds, when misfortune occurs, as we often see. The secular laws occasionally deal with this matter, teaching that all other things being equal, women sin less than men in doing certain crimes because their mind and understanding are weak. Therefore, they ought also to be less severely punished, as I demonstrate in Book Six, Chapter Ten. And God specially commanded that poor widows be faithfully protected and cared for, because they are old women, as Holy Scripture testifies. I know of no better or more secure way of punishing and chastising the witches than

having them taught the law of God's Word by a true and pious teacher, so that they may withstand the devil and his deeds, and his blandishments, and if repentant thus find the free acceptance of the whole community again. Yet because they did give in to the devil and did not completely oppose him, some argue that they have earned and indeed deserve a sharper punishment; in that case then send them for a while into miserable exile or fine them according to the gravity of their crime and sin; but spare their lives.

Regarding the law of Moses in Exodus 22, which you apply to this case, I answer that in the Hebrew text the word is *Mechasepha* which the Seventy Translators [the editors of the Septuagint] rendered as *pharmakous ou peribiōsete*, that is, thou shalt not suffer the poisoner (as the Hebrews called it) to live or to survive; and in this way the Seventy Translators interpreted and explained the intent and meaning of the law. And the word *Casaph*, and other words with that as a root, can hardly be interpreted in the Greek translation as meaning anything other than poisoning. Therefore this decree does not concern our witches, who poison no one and use no poisons in their business. They cannot be punished on that basis. Yet others foolishly persuade themselves that the witches should be killed and burned because this word *Mechasepha*, in the Old Testament, is translated into German as sorceress. Here one should note the teaching of Josephus, who was a born Jew. He interpreted the law this way: "No Israelite should possess anything deadly or poisonous, prepared for harmful use. Those who are found with such things should be killed and thus suffer what they planned to do to others, and the prepared poison should be exhibited."

For this reason no one will easily convince me that anyone at the time of Moses had ever seen or heard of the kind of diabolical nonsense and delusion with which our witches have long been troubled and fooled. Moses and the books of the Old Testament actually speak of only four kinds of sorcery and magic. The first were the diviners or tricksters of Pharaoh, who dazzled the eyes of the king with their devil's art, and could make a fog before his eyes so that he believed certain things existed which actually did not. Our witches cannot bring such things to pass, and do not want to. Moses called them *Hartumim*, if I remember correctly, for I am at the hunting lodge Betsburg, fifteen miles from my library at Cleves, and cannot consult a Hebrew Bible. Secondly, there are the *Mechasepha* or poisoners, who kill or otherwise grievously harm men and cattle, using perhaps poison or other evil medicines. Third are those who practice all kinds of divination, and they are called by various names: *Kasam* (Deut. 15; Jeremiah 17), *Onen* (Deut. 18; 2 Chron. 31; Jeremiah 17; Micha 5), *Nahas* (Deut. 18; 2 Chron. 33), *Ob* (Deut. 18; Isaiah 19; 1 Kings 28; 4 Kings 23; and elsewhere), *Jidoni* (Deut. 18; Levit. 19 & 20; 4 Kings 23; Isaiah 19). [Fourthly] the Hebrews used the word *Habar* for magicians who mumble secret words which supposedly contain great mystery and power. David uses this word and also *Lahas* (Psalm 58) when he speaks of the adders that stop their ears against the voice of the charmer. Whatever the meaning of these words, they do not imply the kind of foolishness employed

by our old women. When the decree of Moses is rightly used against poisoners, they really ought to be punished according to its terms. And I have never defended those whom the *Lex Cornelia de sicariis et veneficis* condemns (*Digest*, Book 46, Title 8).

I have been glad to send you my opinion, dear Brenz, because I trust that you will respond to my writing with a favorable answer. May the merciful God give grace and spirit that you may follow faithfully your Christian calling, for the honor of God, the building of his Church, and so that souls may be saved.

Betsburg, 10 October 1565

#### RESPONSE OF JOHANN BRENZ TO JOHANN WEYER

[Brenz praises Weyer's work but insists on one point of disagreement.]

Yet it must be noted clearly that these persons who have broken the laws deserve a dreadful punishment and are reasonably and rightly condemned. Regarding the imperial law, I see very well that it uses language like this: "Whoever uses evil and inappropriate arts to infect or disturb the elements," etc. And I insist now as before that it is not within the ability of the devil himself or of any man to cause the disturbance of the elements. It is in God's power alone. Yet I do not doubt that the said law only uses the language of the common man and simply expresses the opinion which magicians and witches also have regarding themselves. For they are persuaded by the devil that they can disturb the elements with their arts. To this I can hear your response that in this case the law is punishing only an intention and a false persuasion. But this is not so, for the law "regards the completed and certain attempt as equivalent to the crime itself." For these poor, wretched women do not only intend to disturb the elements with their cooking and other arts, but they do all they can with the greatest energy, collecting herbs, cooking them with their charms over a fire, and all those things that they learned from the devil and his followers. Here the law is right in punishing the "completed attempt" as I indicated. . . . [Brenz gives several examples in which attempted murder and attempted fornication are punished.] Thus one can conclude that regardless of whether witches and sorcerers can disturb the elements or cause harm to men with their charms and magic, yet their intentions do not remain only evil thoughts and desires, but produce a full attempt at the crime itself. For this reason the stern seriousness of the law should not be rejected or discarded in this case. And I believe also that the law of Moses in Exodus 22 has the same meaning. It is true, of course, that the word *Casaph* is translated as *pharmakos* or poison. But the *pharmakos* is not only a person who gives someone a poisoned drink, but also he who by mistake gives a safe drink to a person for whom he had prepared a poisoned drink. Thus when the witches and magicians thoroughly intend and plan to harm the fruits, meadow, cattle,

or other persons by using either poison or other illicit means, they cannot be held guiltless. . . .

It is, however, necessary to know that one has to have really thorough knowledge and sound witnesses in these cases so that one does not go too far in accusing and punishing those who break these laws. If the matter is understood rightly, one has to distinguish, as you correctly say, between the evil-minded, impudent, willful knaves and the melancholy or mentally ill, or those who err solely from simplicity or superstition. For who could be so merciless and stubborn that he would want to prosecute these last-mentioned persons? . . . It is a great virtue and sign of virtue to take care of the poor orphans, to sympathize with them and have mercy on them. May the dear Lord further you in your new calling and office since you desire that the poor, troubled women should be taken from the hangman and saved from fiery punishment either through your medical healing or through my theological healing. . . . Stuttgart, on the day of the holy martyr Stephen, 1565.

## 7

### Scholarly Attack on the Positions of Brenz and Weyer: Jean Bodin, *On the Demonic Madness of Witches* (1580)

Jean Bodin (1529?-1596) was one of the greatest French thinkers of the sixteenth century. His historical and constitutional principles were widely influential. His ideas on witchcraft were also persuasive. He states that he was skeptical of witchcraft until he witnessed several cases including voluntary confessions. They convinced him that witchcraft was a major threat to the well-being of Christendom and that soft-hearted men like Brenz and Weyer must be strenuously refuted. His legal mind may be seen at work in the careful definition of witchcraft with which he works. Despite his erudition, however, it is questionable how successful Bodin's arguments were, even in sixteenth-century terms. Like most witchcraft books, the *Démonomanie* was placed on the Catholic Index of Prohibited Books.

SOURCE: Jean Bodin, *De la démonomanie des sorciers* (Paris, 1580), Preface, sigs. aiii recto-verso, bii verso-biii verso, biv recto; fols. 1, 68-69, 79, 226-27.

## PREFACE

The judgment which was passed against a witch in a case to which I was called on the last day of April, 1578, gave me occasion to take up my pen in order to clarify the subject of witches—persons who seem strange and wondrous to everyone and incredible to many. The witch whom I refer to was named Jeanne Harvillier, a native of Verbery near Compiègne. She was accused of having murdered many men and beasts, as she herself confessed without questioning or torture, although she at first stubbornly denied the charges and changed her story often. She also confessed that her mother presented her at the age of twelve years to the devil, disguised as a tall black man, larger than most men and clothed in black. The mother told him that as soon as her daughter was born she had promised her to him, whom she called the devil. He in turn promised to treat her well and to make her happy. And from then on she had renounced God and promised to serve the devil. And at that instant she had had carnal copulation with the devil, which she had continued to the age of fifty, or thereabouts, when she was captured. She said also that the devil presented himself to her when she wished, always dressed as he had been the first time, booted and spurred, with a sword at his side and his horse at the door. And no one saw him but her. He even fornicated with her often without her husband noticing although he lay at her side. Now because she was widely rumored to be an infamous witch, it was almost impossible to keep the peasants from taking the law into their own hands and burning her, fearful that she might escape. For it was ordered before proceeding to a definite judgment that an enquiry be made at Verbery, where she had been born, to find out about her life, and in the other villages where she had lived. It was found that thirty years earlier she had been whipped for the same crime and that her mother had been condemned to be burned alive by an edict of the Court of Parlement, confirming the sentence of the judge of Senlis. And it was learned that she was used to changing her name and residence to hide these facts. In all of these ways she was suspected as a witch. Finding herself convicted, she begged pardon, appeared to repent, and constantly denied many of the crimes which she had committed and confessed earlier. But she persisted in her confession of the latest murder, saying that she had thrown certain powders, prepared for her by the devil, into the path of the man who had struck her daughter. Instead, another man passed by whom she wished no ill, and at once he felt a sharp pain throughout his whole body. And all the neighbors had seen him enter the

place where she had cast the spell, and on the same day they had seen the man burned by the sudden malady and crying out that she had enchanted him. She promised to cure him, and in fact she nursed the patient during his illness and confessed that the Wednesday before being taken prisoner she had prayed that the devil cure him. But he had responded that this was impossible. . . . And two days later the man died.

.....

Now even Aristotle was astonished at the many things whose cause he did not know and said that one who calls in question what he sees is no better than other people. For we see that Orpheus, who lived about 1200 years before Jesus Christ, and before him, Homer, men who were the first authors among the pagans, described sorcerers, necromancers, and charms which are still performed today. One sees in the Law of God, published more than two years before Orpheus, that the sorcerers of Pharaoh counterfeited the works of God. One sees the sorcerer of Saul calling up spirits and making them speak. The Law of God forbids going to diviners, witches, fortune-tellers, and specifies all the kinds of sorcery and divination. God declares that it was on their account that he exterminated the Amorrheans and Chananeans from the face of the earth. And for such sorceries Jehu gave Queen Jezebel to the dogs after throwing her from his palace. One also sees the punishments established against witches in the Twelve Tables [of Roman Law], which the ambassadors of the Romans had extracted from the Greek laws. One sees again the very cruel punishments set up for witches in all of the constitutions of the Roman emperors which called them enemies of nature, enemies of the human race, and maleficent witches on account of the great evils which they work. And the horrid imprecations of the laws are not found in any place but against them, whom (the law says) a cruel plague should destroy and consume. One sees the histories of Greeks and Latins, of ancients and moderns, of all countries and all peoples, which describe the things done by witches, and the same effects in diverse countries: the rapture of the soul, the transport in body and soul of witches to distant places conducted by evil spirits who later return them in the briefest time. All witches confess the same things as one can see the books of Germans, Italians, French, and other nations. What Plutarch described concerning Aristeus Proconesus and Cleomedes Astypalaia; or what Herodotus said of a philosophic atheist; or Pliny of Hermes Clazomenae; Philostratus of Appolonius Tyana; and what all the Romans said of Romulus, who was carried through the air before the whole army. As we read in our chronicles, this happened also to a Count of Mascon. And, as is discovered in an infinite number of trials, many do as the witches and find themselves transported in a short time 100 or 200 leagues from their homes. When they see the assembly of witches, they have called on God for help. And then, just as fast, the evil spirits and witches vanish, and they find themselves alone and return the long journey home. In brief we see the trials against the witches of Germany, France, Italy, and Spain, in which we have written evidence and every day we see an

infinite number of witnesses, the recollections, confrontations, convictions, confessions, in which some who are executed persist right up to their deaths. These persons are mostly completely ignorant, or old women who never heard of Herodotus, Philostratus, or the laws of other peoples; nor have they ever spoken to the witches of Germany and Italy that they should agree so well in all of these matters and at all points as they do. They never read St. Augustine's Fifteenth Book of the *City of God* where he says that there can be no doubt and it would be shameless to deny that demons and evil spirits have carnal copulation with women, whom the Greeks for that reason called Ephialtes and Hyphialtes; the Latins, Incubi and Succubi and Sylvens; the French, Dusios (this is the word used by St. Augustine). These spirits appear in the guise either of a man or a woman. This copulation, all witches agree, occurs not while they sleep but while awake, which shows that it is not the "oppression" of which the physicians speak, for they all agree that that never occurs unless one is asleep.

.....

The ignorant think that it is impossible. The atheists and those who pretend to be wise do not want to admit that they see what they cannot explain, so that they will not look ignorant. . . . But men who fear God, after seeing the stories of witches and contemplating the wonders of God in the whole earth, and having read His Law and the sacred histories, will not call in question things which seem incredible to human sense. For they judge that if many natural things are incredible and some of them incomprehensible, how much more incomprehensible are the powers of supernatural intelligences and the actions of spirits. We do see strange things in nature which are nonetheless ordinary, like the circling of the earth and the sea, which our merchants do, or running upside down, which seemed ridiculous to Lactantius and to St. Augustine. Those men denied that there were antipodes, a fact which is now as certain and as firmly demonstrated as the brightness of the sun. And those who say that it is impossible that an evil spirit carry a man 100 or 200 leagues from his house have not considered the fact that the heavens and all the great celestial bodies make their movement [around the earth] in twenty-four hours, that is to say, 245,791,440 leagues at 2000 paces to the league, as I will demonstrate in the last chapter. If they say that one sees that action every day and that one must judge with one's senses, they confess therefore that one has to believe and pay attention to the actions of spirits against the course of nature even though we cannot understand the marvels of nature which we see regularly before our eyes.

#### CHAPTER 1: DEFINITION OF THE WITCH

A witch is someone who by diabolical means consciously tries to accomplish something. I have set up a definition here which is necessary not

only for understanding this treatise but also for the judgments which must be made against the witches. This definition has been omitted up to now by all who have written on witches, but nevertheless it is the foundation on which this treatise must be built. Let us examine our definition in detail. First, I say "consciously" because error cannot imply any consent, as the law says. Such is the case with a sick man, who uses in good faith a diabolical recipe given to him by a witch whom he considers an honest person. Such a person is not a witch for he has a just plea of ignorance. But not if the witch tells him or if he invokes evil spirits in his presence, as happens sometimes. . . .

### BOOK II, CHAPTER 3: ON EXPLICIT INVOCATIONS OF EVIL SPIRITS

Those who in seeking to do good invoke the evil spirit for advice and counsel, or for aid and comfort, thinking that he is God, in the way that many still do in the West and as the ancient pagans did, are no more witches than those who worship the sun and the moon, and other creatures. One could well say that they are idolaters. To enquire if God approves of their good intentions I leave to the judgment of God. For it infringes too closely on the secrets of God to ask how those who have been damned to eternal damnation like Socrates, Phocion, and Aristides the Just, merit the same punishment as the most detestable witches. The Law of God says that one must differentiate punishments, having regard for the gravity of the crime. But among the pagans those who knew the difference between good and evil spirits and not only sacrificed their own children but also committed lecheries and sodomies and other abominable filthinesses against the right reason which God engraved on our souls to attain their designs were not merely idolaters but also witches. And all the philosophers and legislators have condemned such men. God told his people that this was why he had uprooted the land of the Amorrheans and other peoples who gave themselves to such witchcraft. And also by edict of the Roman Senate the Bacchanales were banned from Rome and all of Italy on account of the horrid witchcraft which was committed during the night. Satan does all in his power to enslave men and draw them from the true worship of the true God. And since God is invisible, men see the admirable beauty of the sun and the course of the celestial bodies, their virtue and their strange movement, and easily fall into praise or worship of the sun, moon, or even Jupiter and other celestial bodies. And instead of following Noah's advice to his children to sacrifice to God in all places, men found it easy to turn their eyes to the sun and the moon and other celestial bodies. . . .

#### Witchcraft distinct from idolatry

The differences among witches are very noteworthy and must be taken into account in the difficult judgments which have to be made. The most

hateful witches, however, are those who renounce God and his service, or, if they do not worship the true God, then those who, having some superstitious religion, renounce it in order to give themselves to the devil by an explicit pact. For there is no religion so superstitious that it does not restrain men somewhat within the barriers of the law of nature, urging men to obey their fathers and mothers and the magistrates, and instilling a fear of hurting anyone. Yet Satan wants to uproot from the heart of men all fear of sin. And as for the explicit pact, sometimes she gives her word verbally and without writing; but occasionally Satan, to secure his people before granting their demands, makes them write out their obligations, if they know how to write, and sign the agreement, sometimes with their own blood as the ancients used to do to guarantee their oaths and friendships. Just as we read in the second book of Titus Livy and in Tacitus regarding the kings of Armenia, so Satan with his own.

#### Are the witches mentally ill or melancholy? Refutation of the opinions of Johann Weyer

Hippocrates, in the first book of common diseases, and Galen, in the same book, hold that women generally are healthier than men because of their menstrual flow, which guards them from a thousand illnesses. Hippocrates says that women never have gout, pulmonary ulcers (according to Galen), epilepsy, apoplexy, raving madness, lethargy, convulsions, or trembling so long as they have their menstrual period. And although Hippocrates describes as natural the falling sickness and the disease of those who are possessed by demons (which is called the sacred disease), nevertheless he holds that the disease attacks only the phlegmatic and not the bilious. This is a fact which Johann Weyer, being a doctor, cannot ignore.

Now we have shown that ordinarily women are possessed by demons more often than men and that witches are often transported bodily but also often ravished in an ecstasy, the soul having separated itself from the body, by diabolical means, leaving the body insensible and stupid. Thus it is completely ridiculous to say that the illness of the witches originates in melancholy, especially since the diseases coming from melancholy are always dangerous. Nonetheless, one finds witches who have practiced their trade forty or fifty years, from the age of twelve years on, as with Jeanne Harvillier, who was burned alive the 29th of April 1578, and with Magdaleine de la Croix, Abbess of Cordova in Spain, in 1545. They had ordinary acquaintance and copulation with the devil over a period of forty years for the former and thirty years in the latter case. Thus Weyer must admit that there is a remarkable incongruity for one who is a doctor, and a gross example of ignorance (but it is not ignorance) to attribute to women melancholy diseases which are as little appropriate for them as are the praiseworthy effects of a tempered melancholy humor. This humor makes a man wise, sober, and contemplative (as all of the ancient philosophers and physicians remark), which are qualities as incompatible with women as fire with water. And even Solomon, who as a man of the world knew well the humor of women, said that he had seen a wise man for every thousand men, but that he had never seen a wise woman. Let us therefore abandon the fanatic error of those who make women into melancholics.