

FRENCH AND ITALIAN WITCHCRAFT

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France played a vital role in shaping Europe's view of witchcraft. During the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the largest groups of heretics in Christendom flourished there: the Cathars, who saw the world as a continuous struggle between light and darkness and denied the authority of the church hierarchy; and the Waldensians, who practised apostolic poverty and also denied papal supremacy. The Inquisitors of southern France had no difficulty in demonstrating to their own satisfaction that such heretics, like those of the early Christian era, were in league with the Devil. Then, between 1308 and 1314, witchcraft and heresy were also equated by the secular courts. Abetted by the liberal use of torture, the prosecutors of King Philip the Fair extorted confessions from hundreds of Knights Templar (a quasi-monastic crusading order) that they had engaged in sodomitic orgies and worshipped an idol called Baphomet (Mohammed) who was anointed with the fat of roasted babies and was accompanied by a Satanic cat - that they were, in short, agents of the Devil.

The Inquisitors thus 'diabolised' religious opponents like the Cathars and Waldensians, while the royal judges 'diabolised' political opponents. Shortly after the Templars had been destroyed, French royal judges hanged a former royal councillor and burned his female accomplice for making images of two royal princes; two years later, papal judges at Avignon burned a French bishop for making magical attempts to kill the Pope and some Cardinals. The French connection between sorcery and dealings with the Devil soon spread down the social ladder until in 1390-91 the *Parlement* of Paris, the largest secular jurisdiction in Europe, condemned four

illiterate women herbalists to death at the stake for causing impotence and illness with the Devil's aid.

French-speaking lands continued to play a leading part in the development of witchcraft doctrine and practices during the fifteenth century: the most spectacular 'witch' of the period, Joan of Arc, was tried and condemned in France in 1431; three years before, Europe's first mass panic, or 'witchcraze', occurred in the bilingual Swiss Alpine land of Valais, when over 100 people were tried by secular judges for murder by sorcery, for stealing milk from cows and ruining crops by hailstorms, for worshipping the Devil and using counter-magic against the *maleficia* of other witches. Nor was the Valais panic the last: 110 women and fifty-seven men were executed in Dauphiné for witchcraft between 1428 and 1447; three dozen people were tried in the *vauderie* of Arras in 1459 in Europe's first urban panic. Although after 1550 Germany was undoubtedly the centre of Europe's witch-trials, in the middle ages the centre was the French-speaking lands.

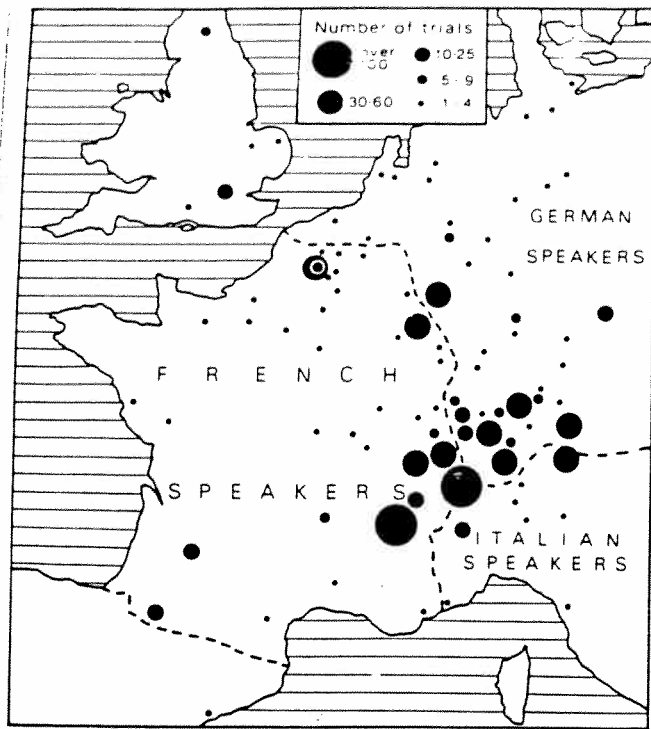
The term *vauderie* (French for 'Waldensianism') is interesting evidence of the connection made in people's minds between witchcraft and heresy. The confusion long persisted among French-speakers from the Swiss cantons to the south Netherlands: an essay on witches printed at Geneva in 1574 called them *eryges* or heretics; witches in French Flanders in the 1580s were compelled by the local authorities to wear straw hats, like condemned heretics. Other common terms for witches included *gyne* (Luxembourg) and *genauche* (Lorraine and Franche-Comté), derived from the pagan goddess Diana, who was widely worshipped in the forested hills of the Ardennes and Vosges.



Earliest known sketch of witches riding broomsticks, from Martin Lafranc's *Champion des dames*, 1440.

It was therefore felt in some quarters that witchcraft had something in common with pre-Christian religion.

It is significant that these examples of popular linguistic confusion between witches and heretics occurred near the Franco-German culture border rather than within the Kingdom of France proper. Likewise, most recorded witch-trials, both during the fifteenth century and the 'witchcraze' between 1580 and 1650, came from the periphery rather than the centre of French Europe. As the accompanying map overleaf shows, these cultural borderlands furnished almost all the large contingents of accused witches during the late Middle Ages. In Italy, too, it was the northern fringe, bordering on other cultural regions, rather than the 'superstitious' south that furnished most of the recorded Italian witches. Before 1500 more people were tried for sorcery in the tiny Swiss diocese of Lausanne than in the half of France subject to the *Parlement* of Paris, which was more than fifty times as populous. This same disproportion continued in the sixteenth century: in 1594, the chief prosecutor of the Duchy of Lorraine boasted that he had signed 900 death warrants for witches in the past twenty years - four times as many as the *Parlement* of Paris con-



(Left) number of witchcraft trials in western Europe. (Below) late fifteenth-century treatise on witchcraft showing a man being initiated by a witch.



demned to death for that crime between 1560 and 1640! Even the underpopulated and underpoliced Duchy of Luxemburg managed to execute many more witches between 1580 and 1636 than did the whole northern half of the Kingdom of France. The only other important zone of relatively dense witchcraft trials in the French-speaking world was the Basque lands on the French side of the Pyrenees, where the savage repression by the Bordeaux judge and demonologist, Pierre de l'Ancre, contrasted strikingly with the mildness of the Spanish Inquisitors toward the Basque witches

who lived on the southern slopes of the Pyrenees.

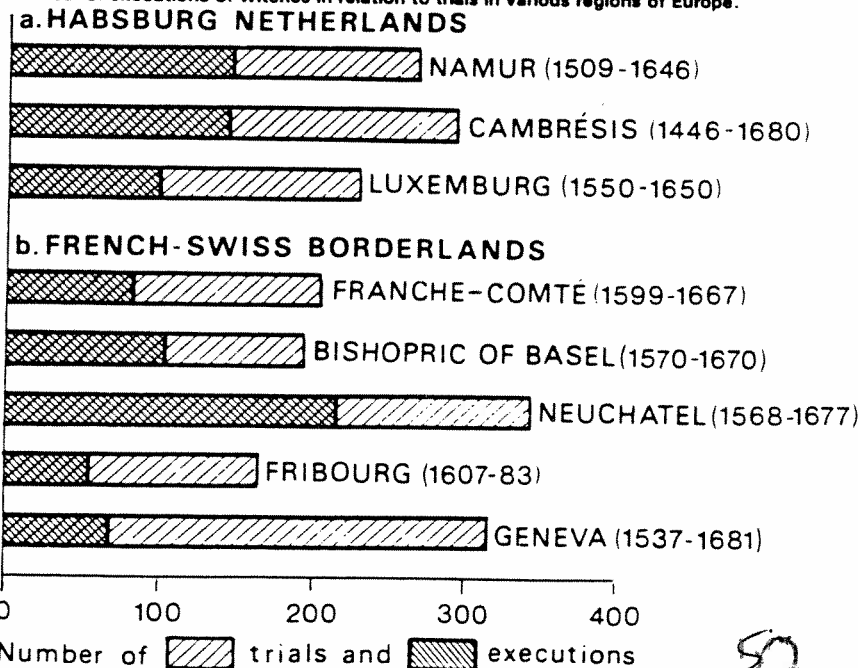
Many of the people tried as witches in France were, however, not sentenced to death. In northern France, subject to the jurisdiction of the Parlement de Paris, most capital sentences were appealed to that tribunal; yet, between 1560 and 1639, fewer than one-quarter of those condemned for witchcraft were actually executed, and more than one-third were simply released. Figures from the northern and eastern borderlands not subject to Paris tended however to be somewhat higher and suggest that perhaps one-

half of all persons tried as witches there were executed (see diagram below).

To be sure, in Lorraine and the Pays de Vaud around Lausanne - which had produced the thickest clusters of fifteenth-century trials - conviction rates for accused witches approximated 90 per cent, as in several parts of Germany; but everywhere else they were relatively low.

Often the condemned were found guilty of some other serious crime, such as theft, arson, homicide, sodomy or bestiality (in Luxemburg, one synonym for 'witch' was *macreille* or whore). When the accusation was witchcraft alone, even torture (which was freely used by continental courts) frequently produced neither confessions nor convictions. Eastern France, French Switzerland, and the French-speaking Low Countries followed the legal norms of the Holy Roman Empire and tortured accused witches up to three times; in France proper, torture could only be applied once, either during a first hearing or at an appeal. Many of the tough old peasants who were tortured as suspected witches managed to withstand everything; evidence from a Swiss canton with detailed prison records (Fribourg) indicates that the supposedly weaker sex survived identical tortures rather better than men. This, however, might not always be an asset: failure to respond to the agony of torture, as the demonologists pointed out, might be due to the 'charm of insensitivity' which the Devil sometimes gave his witches. Overall, the fate of witches undergoing trial in France, and especially in its borderlands, was indeed sad. Anyone who confessed was

Number of executions of witches in relation to trials in various regions of Europe.



executed at the stake - the unluckiest by being burned alive, the more fortunate being strangled by the executioner before the pyre was lit. Those who refused to confess still had to pay the costs of their confinement and were quite likely to be exiled or put under house arrest in order to spare their neighbours' peace of mind. Several were so weakened or maimed by torture that they could not work again. Many archives contain petitions from accused witches or from their relatives detailing the hardships they endured and the infamy they suffered even from unsuccessful prosecutions.

The picture was very different in Italy. The inquisitors, who normally retained jurisdiction over witchcraft cases there, were apparently far milder than French secular judges: many suspects were either released or else condemned to only minor punishments. Milan, a centre of Counter-Reformation zeal under its Borromeo archbishops, executed fewer than fifteen witches between 1580 and 1630. Italian inquisitors, in Milan and elsewhere, seemed reluctant to define superstitious activities as sorcery. Exorcists carefully separated demonic possession from accusations of witchcraft, thus avoiding spectacular cases such as the French 'Devils of Loudun' episode which is discussed below. Italy did not even produce demonologists: whereas France created dozens of learned treatises about witchcraft during the 1580-1630 craze, Italians published only one - and that was written by a Milanese inquisitor who had practised mainly as an exorcist in the Rhineland, but had never judged a witch-trial in his native city.

Of course, knowledge of witchcraft was also widespread among those who could not read. Oral traditions interacted with elite culture, and in parts of Italy local folklore was entirely remodelled by inquisitors. The classic case occurred in Friuli, where Italian culture met its Germanic and Slavic counterparts: a fertility cult that had survived into the sixteenth century was gradually transformed into 'witchcraft' after two generations of patient inquisitorial questioning. The *benandanti* or 'do-gooders' appear in inquisitorial records around 1580: they were men and women who had been born with a bit of the amniotic sac, the *pileus (camiscola)*, attached to their heads. When preserved, this relic gave them the magical power to 'go out' on the night before each seasonal equinox and battle the witches or *stregoni*, in order to determine the success of the coming harvest. But careful, persistent questioning by inquisitors, who could not understand how the *benandanti* could 'go out' to attack witches without somehow knowing about witches' meetings and thus being in league with the

Devil, led the *benandanti* to change their stories. By the 1630s they were admitting that they also attended Sabbats, claiming only that they stood to one side in little groups without participating in the orgies. By 1650 they were full participants. Their process of degradation from witch-fighter to witch was gradual and entirely voluntary: no *benandanti* was ever tortured, and none was ever put to death as a witch. After 1650 the inquisitors of Friuli, like their counterparts elsewhere in Italy, lost interest in witches: the *benandanti* accused afterwards were never even brought to trial.

Secular judges in French-speaking lands, like Italian inquisitors, also remodelled popular beliefs in order to make them conform to official notions of how witches ought to behave. For example, the peasantry of French Switzerland believed that witches caused hailstorms in order to ruin their enemies' crops, and this motif appears in most of the early recorded trials from this region. After the Reformation, Protestant judges generally opposed this belief as superstitious, while Catholic judges raised no

representatives of the Protestant and Catholic reformation attempted to acculturate their rural populations by uprooting the more 'superstitious' forms of popular belief and by raising the moral and educational level of their rural clergy. Both religions required a more individual and more disciplined faith; both came to stress a sense of sin, an omnipresent Devil and a judgmental God. During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, these notions gradually spread downwards from clerics and urban elites to village notables.

Meanwhile, economic and political changes were affecting the quality of village life: for most French peasants, living conditions worsened appreciably between 1560 and 1700, as the gap between rich and poor widened within many villages. A careful study of the villages around Cambrai (ceded to France by the Habsburg Netherlands in 1677) shows that the Catholic Reformation was implemented under these adverse economic conditions and at a time when village governments were increasingly dominated by a few rich clans, the *sanior*

Interior of a witches' house; woodcut from Thomas Erastus *Dialogues touchant le pouvoir des sorcières et de la punition qu'elles méritent*, Geneva, 1579.



such objections. Accordingly, only the Catholic witches in this region of mixed religions ever made hail after 1600. On the other hand, Protestant judges laboured long and hard to persuade the French-Swiss that all witches carried a special insensitive Devil's Mark on their bodies, while Catholic judges were generally indifferent to this belief; therefore, only Protestant witches were found to be marked. Both Protestant and Catholic authorities doubted that the Devil truly possessed the power to turn witches into wolves, although the peasants of the Jura Mountains believed this. Werewolves accordingly became rare after 1600.

Throughout western Europe, repre-

pars. Local power thus became concentrated in the hands of the upper social status of the parish - frequently the only laymen who could read and write and who were thus more intimately affected by the new religious styles. They were simultaneously more powerful and more guilt-ridden than before. Confronted with the increasing mass of village paupers, they instituted witch-hunts which helped restore a sense of social conformity, thereby reducing internal village tensions while transferring some of their own guilt feelings on to convenient scapegoats. In the early 1600s the *sanior pars* of several villages in Cambrésis began witch trials themselves, sometimes going so far as collectively to

petition district authorities to arrest a suspected witch and offer to stand surety against the cost of any such trials. Such scapegoats were old and female and almost always quite poor, so that even confiscating a witch's estate would not necessarily pay the costs of her trial; in addition, many witches could not be convicted because they would not confess, even under torture, thereby increasing the legal costs without any hope of return. But, despite the costs and the uncertain outcome, the village elites of Cambrésis demanded their share of witch-trials during the great craze.

In the Kingdom of France witchcraft trials accorded a special importance to diabolical possession. Although famous cases of possession occurred in many European countries, nowhere else did it play such a vital role in the history of witch-trials. In particular, a handful of famous, well-publicised cases engaged French public opinion to an unusual degree and encouraged critics to attack the whole notion of condemning people for witchcraft.

France had a rich tradition of demonic possessions. Her sixteenth-century religious wars set the stage for dramatic exorcisms of possessed women that were used to stir up anti-Protestant feelings.

In the first such episode, at Laon in 1566, a case of demonic bewitchment was cured by using a consecrated Eucharistic wafer (whose miraculous transformation into the body and blood of Christ was of course denied by the Huguenots); the last such episode, at Paris in 1599, was a platform for propaganda against the recent royal edict of toleration to Huguenots, in which devils (speaking through the possessed woman) explained how delighted they were with the king's policy.

Such episodes belong to French religious history rather than the history of French witchcraft, but this tradition changed suddenly after 1610, when France witnessed the first of an important series of well publicised episodes in which possessed nuns or pious laywomen accused priests of bewitching them. Louis Gaufridi, a Dominican burned at the stake by order of the Parlement of Provence in 1610, began a tradition whose best-known victim was Urbain Grandier, the Jesuit burned at Loudun in 1634 for bewitching an entire convent of Ursuline nuns. Grandier's case was uniquely well publicised: a recent study by another French Jesuit lists twenty-four printings of nineteen pamphlets in the year of Grandier's death, and twenty-nine printings of seventeen other pamphlets during the next three years. (Within recent decades it has also become the subject of British stage



The execution of Father Urbain Grandier; French woodcut of 1634.



Still from Ken Russell's film about Grandier, *The Devils*.

and screenplays and even of a West German opera.)

Grandier's condemnation, by a hand-picked court chosen by one of Cardinal Richelieu's most trusted agents, was upheld by King Louis XIII, overruling Grandier's right of appeal to the Parlement of Paris (which has upheld only sixteen of 129 death sentences for witchcraft appealed since 1611). But Grandier's trial offered a great opportunity for French sceptics to argue that royal judges should never accept testimony from devils ('the father of lies'), and that most possessions were fraudulent, caused by nothing more than sexual hysteria: *poco a*

morbo, multa ficta, a diabolis nihilo ('a little from sickness, much faking, and nothing diabolical'), as a royalist Parisian physician had diagnosed back in the anti-Huguenot possession of 1599. Grandier, however, was an odd martyr. Among the 5,000 pages of evidence accumulated at his trial were not only three signed pacts with the Devil (two in Latin, one in French), but also a manuscript treatise asserting the right of priests to marry and even to perform the ceremony themselves. His undeniable sexual promiscuity scarcely made him a credit to his order. Moreover, it is not certain that French sceptics won the war of public opinion

in the business of the devils of Loudun. The Jesuit exorcist summoned to calm the Ursulines after Grandier's death became possessed himself, subsequently composing an autobiography of unique psychological interest; the bewitched Ursuline prioress, whose possession continued intermittently for several years, also wrote her autobiography and had a long career as a Catholic celebrity.

Even beyond the boundaries of France, demonic possession and witchcraft were closely linked by seventeenth-century Francophones. In Franche-Comté, Henri Boguet's important demonology (published in 1602) originated in a town where 'every day we meet with large numbers of persons who, for the most part, impute their possessions to certain witches' and began with the case of an eight-year-old girl 'possessed of five devils and later delivered of them' and of the old woman whom he had imprisoned for bewitching her. If French Catholics had their star demoniacs, the Protestants of Geneva were no less obsessed with demonic possession caused by witchcraft. During the sixteenth century, Genevan authorities had generally dismissed charges of witchcraft brought by demonically-possessed persons, but after a major scandal involving seventeen possessed women and children who disrupted Communion services in 1607, such episodes figured prominently in Genevan witch-trials. The last witch killed there, in 1652, was accused by her employer's demonically-possessed daughter; seven of the nine Genevan witch-trials between 1647 and 1653 originated with this type of accusation. French Catholics seem similar to French Protestants, but radically different from Italian Catholics, in tying demonic possession so firmly to witch-trials.

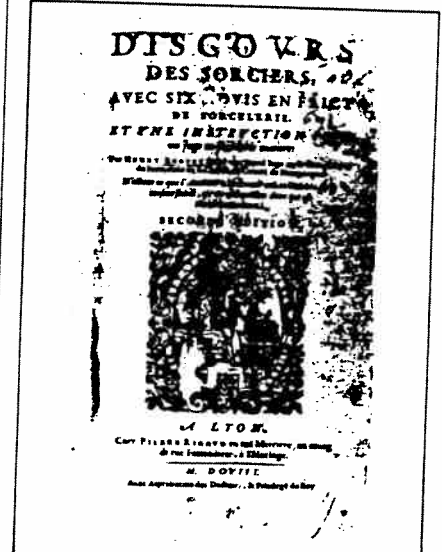
'Witchcraft' was obviously a very complicated notion in French Europe, one which both preceded and outlasted the age of witch-trials between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries. The French proved quicker than other peoples to connect the diabolical activities of heretics with everyone's fears of *maleficia* or evil sorcery. They pioneered many details in the ultimate picture of witches' activities which had spread throughout Christendom by the time of the 1580-1650 craze: Frenchmen drew the first pictures of witches riding on broomsticks or attending Sabbats; they described the earliest werewolves (in Boguet's Franche-Comté); they first connected diabolical possession to witch-trials. Italy, by contrast, offers only one innovation and that was unsuccessful; the good witches or *benandanti* were not permitted to enjoy their ritualistic nocturnal battles against the *stregoni* for long. But if the French did much to pioneer the theory of witch-



(Above) a witch kisses the devil's buttocks in sign of homage: woodcut from Guazzo's *Compendium maleficarum*, Milan, 1602. (Below) frontispiece of Henri Boguet's important demonology, *Discours des sorciers*.

craft, they still managed to avoid the worst excesses of its practical consequences. Their witch-trials began very early, and until about 1480 were the most severe in Europe; but later, during the peak of the craze, French judges were less bloodthirsty than those in central Europe. French lawyers and judges helped perpetrate the theories of demonology, but they also pioneered scepticism about witchcraft. The detached irony of Montaigne, who, when confronted with a dozen confessed witches by a well-meaning prince, simply shrugged and prescribed a purgative instead of poison, prefigured seventeenth-century scepticism which disbelieved in witchcraft without trying to explain it.

The French ended their witch-trials relatively early. Perhaps because both French Catholics and Swiss Protestants had made great progress in acculturating their rural villages to reformed Christianity by the later seventeenth century, perhaps because political and economic conditions had become more stable after the end of religious warfare and of French peasant revolts by the 1660s. Whatever the reasons, nearly all parts of French-speaking Europe (the Low Countries, Lorraine, Switzerland) had stopped holding witch-trials even before Louis XIV intervened in 1682 to stop judicial abuses in some witch-trials in Normandy. He then promulgated an edict which effectively decriminalised witchcraft by stipulating that henceforth only poisoners were punishable by death, while all other sorcerers were to be treated as charlatans. Of course, Swiss Protestants still killed three witches around 1710, and Swiss Catholics killed one in 1731, but such atavisms were hardly significant.



Perhaps Louis' edict of 1682 was merely closing the stable after the horse had bolted; even so, his gesture was important, because all gestures of Europe's most prestigious ruler were important. And Louis was much better at closing empty stables than the British, who only repealed their witchcraft statute in 1736.

NOTES ON FURTHER READING

Recent studies in English include A. Soman, 'The Parlement of Paris and the Great Witch-Hunt (1565-1640)', *The Sixteenth-Century Journal*, IX (July, 1978); The author's, *Witchcraft in France and Switzerland: The Borderlands during the Reformation* (Ithaca, 1976); Robert Muchembled, 'The Witches of the Cambresis: in J. Obelkevich, ed., *Religion and the People, 800-1700* (Chapel Hill, 1979).