

Richard Kieckhefer

WITCH TRIALS IN MEDIEVAL EUROPE

In comparison with the mass persecution of following centuries, the witch trials of the years 1300–1500 were few and sporadic. There was seldom a sustained effort in any one community to exterminate witches, as occurred frequently in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Even in years when there were multiple trials, they generally occurred in widely separate towns. Yet historians have rightly viewed the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries as witnessing the initial

stages of the European witch craze. It was during this period that prosecution of witches first gained real momentum. And the intensified hunts of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries can be explained only as outgrowths of an earlier obsession.

Even during the period 1300–1500, though, one must distinguish various stages of prosecution. On the one hand, the rate of frequency changed sharply; on the other, the nature of the accusations altered significantly. Bearing in mind both the intensity and the form of witch-hunting, one can perceive four broad periods during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, extending roughly from 1300 to 1330, from 1330 to 1375, from 1375 to 1435, and from 1435 to 1500.

During the first period, the rate of frequency was low indeed. For all of Europe, the trials occurred on an average of roughly one each year. Slightly more than half of these come from France; among other countries, only England and Germany had significant numbers of witch-hunts.¹ Probably the most remarkable feature of the trials during this first phase is their political character. Almost two-thirds of them involved prominent ecclesiastical or secular figures, sometimes as suspects but most commonly as sorcerers' victims. . . .

The best-known political trials of the early fourteenth century are those of the Templars and of Dame Alice Kyteler. The Templars, tried on the urging of the French crown, were convicted of charges that were certainly exaggerated, if not wholly fabricated. In addition to sodomy, blasphemy, and other species of immorality, they are supposed to have venerated the Devil in the guise of an animal named Baphomet.² Whereas the motives in many political trials are only vaguely ascertainable, the desire of Philip IV to confiscate the Templars' abundant wealth is notorious. Almost as apparent were the political motives in the trial of Alice Kyteler, an aristocratic lady of Ireland. This woman had family relations with numerous political leaders, and the best accounts of her trial explain it as largely an outgrowth of feuds among these aristocratic families. Her accusers charged that she had killed three husbands and reduced a fourth to debility through sorcery; she had furthermore maintained an imp named Robert Artisson, and engaged in diabolical rituals.

The prominence of the sorcerers and victims in these trials is of the utmost importance. Though in some instances the accusers may have raised the charges cynically as ways of undermining their opponents, in the majority of cases the charges were no doubt based on sincere belief in the reality of witchcraft. Yet the fact that these trials reflect concern with sorcery and invocation is less important in the long run than the likelihood that they intensified this concern throughout western Europe. The notoriety and suggestive force of these episodes may have been largely responsible for the gradual increase in witch prosecution through the following generations.

Apart from the political character of prosecution during the first phase, its most significant feature is the mildness of the allegations. Sorcery was by far the

most common charge; invocation was not so frequent, but was known; diabolism, though, was extremely rare, and even when alleged it was usually not described in great detail. Even in the trials of the Templars, and Alice Kyteler, the depictions of devil-worship are less lurid than in later trials. Pope John XXII routinely spoke of pacts with the Devil, yet did not specify whether these agreements led to diabolism or merely to invocation of the Devil. . . .

Long before it appeared independently or in connection with sorcery, the charge of diabolism had been used in trials against heretics. No matter how rigorous their moral codes might be, mediaeval heretics such as the Cathars and Waldensians were believed to reject moral law entirely – a position known as antinomianism. They allegedly held nocturnal orgies, and in some instances were thought of as paying homage to the Devil.³ In a few trials of the early fourteenth century charges of diabolism seem to have been made against heretics, in the specific form of Luciferanism. The basic premise of Luciferanism, if indeed anyone actually subscribed to the doctrine, seems to have been that Lucifer would eventually attain salvation, and would even rule over creation in place of the Christian God. Churchmen accused Luciferans of venerating the Devil in underground assemblies. To be sure, in most instances the charge of Luciferanism is related only in chronicles, usually of questionable veracity. Thus it is not even fully certain that the accusation actually arose in the heresy trials, much less that it was accurate. In any case, the allegation was set forth a few times in the years 1300–30, though its importance was apparently minimal.

The second period, from around 1330 to about 1375, is like the first in that the accusations were still for the most part relatively tame, but unlike it in that trials connected with important public figures were virtually unknown. . . . Largely because of the decrease in political trials, the rate of prosecution in the second phase was slightly less than in the first. With a few exceptions, the trials occurred in France and Germany, with only a scattering of cases in England and Italy. Once again, apart from a few trials for Luciferanism, the charge of diabolism was rare and undeveloped. . . .

It was during the third period, roughly 1375 to 1435, that a twofold change took place. Throughout these years there was first of all a steady increase in the number of trials for witchcraft in general, and second an intensification of concern for diabolism. The rise of prosecution during this period may in part be an optical illusion caused by the general increase in extant judicial records from these years. But it is surely not coincidental that the later part of the fourteenth century was the period when in many places municipal courts began to adopt inquisitorial procedure. Once such procedure was adopted, even if the judges were not yet familiar with theological notions of diabolism, there would be machinery appropriate for handling sorcery charges that arose among the populace. Perhaps the most important feature of inquisitorial procedure, for present purposes, is that it did away with the earlier custom of judicial penalties for an accuser who

failed to substantiate his charges. In trials for sorcery it would be particularly difficult for the accuser to prove his case, because the alleged culprit was not connected with the victim in the usual ways; the sorcerer might carry out his deed several blocks away from the scene of the crime. Prior to the development of inquisitorial justice, it must therefore have been particularly dangerous to accuse someone of sorcery or of witchcraft generally. In one peculiar case from Strasbourg in the mid-fifteenth century the earlier, accusatory procedure was revived: a man accused a woman of weather magic, and when he was unable to prove his claim he himself was drowned. If those judicial rules had been maintained throughout Europe, no doubt very few people would have raised accusations of this kind, difficult as they were to prove. . . .

Indirectly, the spurt of witch trials beginning around 1375 may also have been influenced by the plague. The long-term social effects of the plague, particularly in those areas where it brought migration from the countryside into the cities, may have stimulated social friction that could have aggravated the preoccupation with witchcraft. . . .

The overall acceleration can be traced most clearly for Switzerland, where conditions in modern times have favoured the survival of documents that might have been lost elsewhere. Prior to 1383 there are no known instances of sorcery in Swiss territories. In the last decades of the fourteenth century there were four minor cases, each involving a single sorceress – though in one of these there seem to have been no judicial proceedings. Around the turn of the century there was a famous outbreak in Simmenthal under the secular judge Peter of Greyerz, who related his discoveries to the Dominican John Nider. The original records do not survive, but if one can believe the much later account that Nider wrote, the subjects in this case were accused of diabolism as well as sorcery. They were supposed to have made homage to their 'little master', repudiated the Catholic religion, and devoured a total of thirteen infants. When the authorities sought to capture one member of the 'sect', their hands began to tremble uncontrollably, and their noses were assaulted with a loathsome stench. Yet the judge was zealous, and despite severe opposition from the witches he managed to apprehend and burn numerous offenders.⁴

Between the turn of the century and the year 1435 there were more than twenty trials in various towns of Switzerland, notably Lucerne, Basel, and Fribourg. In most, the charges were simple sorcery. In 1428 there was extensive persecution in Valais; whereas the fragmentary judicial documents speak only of sorcery, the chronicler John Fründ gives abundant details about a devil-worshipping cult in southern Switzerland. According to Fründ, the Devil seeks out men who are in a state of doubt or despair, and promises to make them rich, powerful, and successful, and to punish those who have done them harm. First, though, they must dedicate themselves to him, deny their former faith, and make some kind of sacrifice to him – a black sheep, one of their bodily limbs (to be claimed after

death), or some other offering. Fründ tells of wild assemblies in which the Devil appeared in bestial form and encouraged the witches to commit foul deeds; the witches are supposed to have flown to orgies or elsewhere on chairs that they anointed with an unguent. Though not typical of Swiss witch cases during this period, this chronicler's account shows the kind of extravagant detail that was beginning to be associated with maleficent activities.

Italy, like Switzerland, joined with France and Germany in the forefront of witch persecution during the third period. But there is another, more important respect in which Italy took the lead at this time: with the exception of the trials in Simmenthal and Valais, it is from Italy that the only definite instances of prosecution for diabolism come during this phase. . . . The trials from Italy during the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries were still for the most part restrained; the allegation of diabolism, though more common, was still often vague and peripheral. Thus a Florentine subject named Niccolò Consigli was accused primarily of sorcery, necromancy, and unlicensed exorcism, but an additional charge was that, while imprisoned, he dedicated himself to demons named Lucifer, Satan and Beelzebub. No further elements of diabolism are mentioned in the records of his proceedings.⁵

In a small minority of Italian trials, one finds a mixture of charges that cannot be categorized as either sorcery or typical diabolism. For example, a Milanese woman who went before an inquisitor in 1384 confessed that each Thursday evening she went to an assembly led by a woman named Oriente. There was every kind of animal at this meeting except the ass, which was excluded because of its role in Christ's passion. Oriente gave instruction to her followers, foretold future events and revealed occult matters. After their deaths, the followers' souls were received by the signora.

Perhaps the most important statement by the accused woman is that she had never confessed her involvement in these activities, because it had never occurred to her that they were sinful. The details of this case, which do not at all fit the stereotype of contemporary demonology, suggest that the woman was merely engaging in a popular festivity or ritual. The gatherings that she attended may have survived from before the conversion of the Italian countryside to Christianity; yet it would be misleading to speak of them as conscious and deliberate pagan survivals since the participants seem to have viewed themselves as Christians, despite the reservations that churchmen evidently held. In an age when notions of diabolism were becoming important, however, a sinister interpretation of these activities lay readily at hand. When this woman relapsed into her illicit activities she again fell prey to an inquisitor, and this time went to the stake for outright diabolism.⁶

Why did diabolism enter into witch trials during this period? The component elements of diabolism – veneration of Satan, nefarious assemblies, flight through the air, formation of a pact, and so forth – had been known for centuries. They

had arisen in trials of heretics as early as the eleventh century. In the course of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, jurists and theologians tended increasingly to view witchcraft as a form of heresy. The theological faculty of the University of Paris deliberated in 1398 whether *maleficia*, or acts of sorcery, entailed idolatry and apostasy if they were accomplished through a tacit or express pact with the Devil. The conclusion reached was that such deeds did involve idolatry and apostasy, and were thus tantamount to heresy. This decision – which was merely the culmination of a series of writings to the same basic effect – was intended to justify the prosecution of witchcraft by inquisitors, whose main task was supposed to be the extirpation of heresy. A secondary result of this definition of witchcraft as heresy was that the stereotypes earlier found in heresy trials now increasingly transferred to witch trials.

The new obsession with diabolism was also related to developments in the theological literature of the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, which set forth all the elements of diabolism in great, pornographic detail. The first of these writings were brief treatises, or sections in judicial manuals; for the most part they were technical works, yet they evidently circulated widely among the people engaged in prosecution. . . .

The full force of the new composite notion of witchcraft came only in the fourth phase of witch prosecution, from around 1435 to 1500. This is the longest of the four stages, and in virtually every way the most important. Trials were particularly frequent during the years 1455–60 and 1480–5, while during the intervening years the rate of prosecution remained higher than it had been in any previous period. The intense witch-hunting of this stage anticipated, if it did not equal, the witch craze of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Once again there is correlation between judicial and literary developments. Around the year 1435, an extended and non-technical account of devil-worship was produced with the fifth book of John Nider's *Formicarius*. Further writings followed; the publication of Jacob Sprenger and Henry Institoris' *Malleus Maleficarum* in 1487 made available a fully developed manual for witch hunters. Even if these writings were not solely responsible for the acceleration of trials, they surely must have contributed greatly towards that result.

By far the majority of cases during this final period occurred in France, Germany, and Switzerland. Only a few took place in England and Italy, and virtually none in further countries. Once again, the majority of trials were for sorcery alone, or for vaguely specified 'witchcraft', with no specific allegation of diabolism. Yet in addition there were now many trials throughout Europe in which diabolism was charged, and when it came forth at all it was usually the prominent allegation. Thus, more than any previous period, this fourth phase was a time of sensational trials. Some of the earlier political trials – those of the early fourteenth century, and especially that of Joan of Arc in 1431 – had aroused widespread attention.

But in the later fifteenth century the charge of diabolism or even sorcery by itself, regardless of political implications, was enough to produce a dramatic episode. In the mid-fifteenth century an epidemic that struck a French town resulted in vigilante prosecution of sorceresses thought to be culpable; the affair aroused such attention that the king himself intervened, and punished the local officials for failure to maintain order. A famous trial that began a few years later at Arras led to hearings before the *parlement* of Paris. By the end of the century, secular and ecclesiastical dignitaries commonly recognized a duty to purge their lands of the menace: examples such as Sigismund of Tirol or Innocent VIII are merely the best known. Nor was the concern limited to ruling circles. The above-mentioned case of vigilante justice, as well as other incidents, suggests that the people at large were keenly aware of the supposed problem. . . .

In 1477, in the Savoyard town of Villars-Chabod, a woman called Antonia stubbornly refused to confess what the inquisitor Stephan Hugonodi demanded that she admit. After more than a month the imprisonment and torture to which she was subjected broke her resistance, and at last she gave a lengthy confession. About eleven years earlier, one Massetus Garini found her in a state of sorrow and discontent, and ascertained that she had fallen into financial embarrassment. He told her that she could solve her problems by going with him to a certain friend. Reluctantly she left her home and went to Giessbach, where a synagogue was being held, with a large number of people feasting and dancing. Allaying her apprehensions, Massetus introduced her to a demon named Robinet, in the form of a black man, and said that he was the master of the group. He explained that to obtain her desires she would have to pay homage to this demon by denying God, the Catholic faith, and the blessed Virgin, and taking Robinet as her lord and master. She hesitated. Robinet addressed her in a barely intelligible voice, promising her gold, silver, and other good things; others in attendance likewise encouraged her. Then she consented, kissed the demon's foot, received a 'sign' on her left little finger (which was deadened ever afterward), and trampled and broke a wooden crucifix. The demon gave her a purse full of gold and silver, a container full of unguent and a stick. When she rubbed the stick with the unguent and recited an appropriate incantation, the stick would transport her through the air to the synagogue.

After further feasting and dancing, the members of the sect paid homage to the demon who by now had changed into the form of a black dog by kissing him on the posterior. Then the demon cried out 'Mecllet! Mechet!' and the fire was put out, whereupon the participants in the festivity gave themselves 'over to each other sexually, in the manner of beasts'. When the meeting was over Antonia went home, only to find that the purse she thought was filled with gold and silver was in fact empty. In further confessions she told of the activities she engaged in as a member of the sect: further synagogues, consumption of human infants,

manufacture of maleficent powders from the bones and intestines of these babies, use of such powders to inflict illness and death on men and animals, and desecration of the eucharist.⁷ . . .

As already indicated, even during the years 1435–1500 cases of this kind were less common than trials for mere sorcery, yet the incidence of diabolism was far greater than in any previous period.

Notes

- 1 Here 'France' applies to all French-speaking territories, and 'Germany' to all German-speaking lands, with the exception of Switzerland, which is treated separately.
- 2 For the suppression of the Knights Templar, see Martin Barber, *The Trial of the Templars* (CUP 1978).
- 3 Norman Cohn describes the demonization of Cathar and Waldensian heretics in Chapter 2 below. Despite the allegations of devil worship that were frequently made against them, Cohn maintains that no medieval heretics actually practised Satanism.
- 4 See Chapter 3 below for the attitudes of Peter of Greyerz and Johann Nider towards witchcraft.
- 5 For a detailed account of this incident, see Gene A. Brucker, 'Sorcery in Renaissance Florence', in *Studies in the Renaissance X* (1963), 13–16.
- 6 This episode is similar to those described by Henningsen in Chapter 11 below. In the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the Roman Inquisition recorded numerous accounts of women and men travelling to distant places while dreaming; here they joined others to participate in beneficent rituals. Like the Milanese woman in 1384, these informants did not regard this activity as witchcraft.
- 7 For contemporary documents relating to this episode, see Charles Henry Lea, *Materials Toward a History of Witchcraft*, Vol. I (Philadelphia 1939), 238–41.