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Diabolic Magic

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Diabolic Magic

Abstract
'All superstitious arts of this sort, therefore, whether foolish or harmful, constituted through a certain pestiferous association of human beings and demons, as if by a pact of faithless and deceitful friendship, must be utterly repudiated and shunned by a Christian." So proclaimed Saint Augustine in the second book of his De doctrina Christi, written around 396. 1 And so it remained for the next millennium and beyond. The great Bishop of Hippo was not the first Christian authority to associate superstitious and magical practices with demons, but he was surely the most influential, at least for the Latin West throughout the medieval and early modern periods. His discussions of demonic power and his statements about the inevitable entanglement of any human who sought to invoke or control that power with diabolical evil "as if by a pact" provided a solid foundation for most subsequent learned discourse on diabolic magic. 2 Two centuries later, the encyclopedic Isidore of Seville recapitulated Augustine almost exactly when he declared that "in all these things [magical practices] is the art of demons, arising from a certain pestiferous association of human beings and evil angels." 3 Amidst a bewildering variety of actual practices, what defined magic at a theoretical level for most Christian authorities, and what epitomized its evil, was a perceived unholy alliance between human sorcerers and the forces of hell.-1

Disciplines
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Comments
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Chapter 12
Diabolic Magic

MICHAEL D. BAILEY

"All superstitious arts of this sort, therefore, whether foolish or harmful, constituted through a certain pestiferous association of human beings and demons, as if by a pact of faithless and deceitful friendship, must be utterly repudiated and shunned by a Christian." So proclaimed Saint Augustine in the second book of his De doctrina Christiana, written around 396. And so it remained for the next millennium and beyond. The great Bishop of Hippo was not the first Christian authority to associate superstitious and magical practices with demons, but he was surely the most influential, at least for the Latin West throughout the medieval and early modern periods. His discussions of demonic power and his statements about the inevitable entanglement of any human who sought to invoke or control that power with diabolical evil "as if by a pact" provided a solid foundation for most subsequent learned discourse on diabolic magic. Two centuries later, the encyclopedic Isidore of Seville recapitulated Augustine almost exactly when he declared that "in all these things [magical practices] is the art of demons, arising from a certain pestiferous association of human beings and evil angels." Amidst a bewildering variety of actual practices, what defined magic at a theoretical level for most Christian authorities, and what epitomized its evil, was a perceived unholy alliance between human sorcerers and the forces of hell.

Yet in terms of the overall history of magic in the premodern West, many centuries were to elapse before authorities, be they intellectual, ecclesiastical, or judicial, became truly energized by the demonic menace that they were convinced lay at the heart of almost all magical practice. Often presented as an example of the relatively moderate concern of earlier centuries (when compared to the bonfires to come) and an important foundation for later skepticism are the statements in the canon Episcopi about the essentially illusory nature of demonic power and of human engagement with demons. The first known copy of the canon appears in the early tenth-century law collection
of Regino of Prüm, but medieval authorities believed that it dated from the fourth-century Council of Ancyra. It appears to consist of two separate documents fused into one. First, it exhorts bishops and their officials to eradicate the “pernicious and diabolical art of sorcery and harmful magic” from regions under their jurisdiction and to expel any practitioners of this art, male and female alike. It then recounts at much greater length the case of “certain wicked women” who believe themselves to travel at night in the train of the goddess Diana, whom they imagine that they serve. The figure of Diana is, of course, understood to be a demon, but there is no reality to these diabolical escapades, for the women are merely “seduced by illusions and phantasms.”

A similar attitude can be found in the legislation against magical practices collected in Burchard of Worms’s *Decretum*, composed around 1010, especially books 10 and 19 of this work, the latter of which is known separately as *Corrector sive medicus*. Here, in particular, statutes often condemn not so much magical actions themselves as the belief that they might have real effects, whether those effects were to harm, heal, or protect.  

This (somewhat) restrained view of demonic capabilities, and hence the nature of the threat represented by demonic magic, which was evident into the early 1000s, changed dramatically during the eleventh through eighteenth centuries, the era of “Old Europe.” Old doubts and hesitancies never vanished entirely, but other, considerably more dramatic concerns arose and gained wide credence across much of Western Christendom. The most spectacular manifestation of those concerns, of course, was the concept of diabolical, conspiratorial witchcraft and the tens of thousands of witch trials that occurred between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries. Hundreds of thousands of people were accused or threatened with accusation, and across the continent, probably fewer than 50,000 were executed not just for performing what was then generally conceived as terribly real, effective harmful magic (*maleficium*) but also for being sworn agents of the Devil and operatives in a covert diabolical campaign against Christian society. Witchcraft and witch trials were multifaceted phenomena reflecting social, legal, political, and economic tensions, as well as both “elite” and “popular” understandings of the demonic. This chapter, however, approaches them as the major evidence for and consequence of a particular Western European view of diabolical magic, and in order to understand that aspect of the complex conglomeration that was witchcraft, we need to look back several centuries before the earliest witch hunts.

The story of Europe’s mounting diabolical obsession is frequently presented as one of steadily increasing credulity and fear, and validly so. Yet through all
of these centuries, there also existed enduring currents of skepticism, typically not in the basic existence of demons, but certainly in the various possibilities of demonic power. The survey offered here will therefore trace the “rise” of diabolical concerns and of witchcraft, but it will also stress ongoing tensions between concern(s) and skepticism(s). The ultimate skepticisms of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that ended witch hunting and contributed to the at least partial undoing of the notion of an “enchanted” world rife with materially active demonic (and divine) power will then be understood, when we encounter them, not entirely as innovative or unprecedented eruptions of the radically “modern” but rather as another phase in a long tradition of vacillating concerns and convictions about the magical and the diabolic.

New Knowledge and New Magic in the Eleventh, Twelfth, and Thirteenth Centuries

The significance of the “renaissance of the twelfth century,” which really began in the eleventh century and extended into the thirteenth, on conceptions of magic in Western Europe, especially elite conceptions, is well known.9 “New” learning flowed into the West, mainly in the form of ancient texts, some of which were rediscovered in the recesses of monastic libraries, but most of which were transmitted via the far more intellectually advanced Muslim world and complemented by the learned commentaries of generations of Muslim scholars. A number of these texts addressed magical knowledge, much of it astral or alchemical, and a significant portion also included discussion of spiritual magic, that is, rites intended to invoke and harness the power of spirit beings that Western clerical authorities inevitably identified as demons. Perhaps the best known such text, although it entered the West only late in the thirteenth century, was *Picatrix*, which dealt extensively with rites focused on astral spirits, thus blurring the lines that medieval authorities hoped to draw between varieties of magical practice.10 Dangerous and morally disreputable as it was understood to be, magic of this sort nevertheless carried a powerful intellectual pedigree. Magicians who entangled themselves in demonic operations could no longer be dismissed as foolish *illiterati*, and the power of demons, in their hands, could not be reduced to simple trickery and illusion.

New fears of diabolical magic began to become manifest in tales set, not surprisingly, in zones of intense Christian contact with Muslim culture, namely southern Italy and Iberia. Among the more famous accounts was that concerning Gerbert of Aurillac (ca. 940–1003), later Pope Sylvester II. As
a scholar, he had traveled to Spain to study and subsequently rose through the German imperial and ecclesiastical hierarchy to attain the papal throne. Within a century after his death, rumor held that Gerbert had studied diabolical sorcery in Toledo (which developed an enduring reputation as the site of a legendary school of satanic magic) and that he used his alliance with demons and the power it conferred to achieve his startling rise within the church. Other eleventh-century popes supposedly studied magic in a secret diabolical school in Rome itself. As magical knowledge moved north, so did tales of shadowy demonic rites set amid the learned culture and often at the very real schools that developed in these years. In the mid-eleventh century, the rhetorician and imperial bureaucrat Anselm of Besate included vivid accounts of demonic invocation in his *Rhetorimachia*. Born at Besate, just outside Milan, he studied at the schools of northern Italy before entering the service of the German emperors, ultimately dying in the service of the Bishop of Hildesheim in the 1060s. In his major work, he constructed a rhetorical critique of his cousin Rotiland (who may or may not have actually existed) as an educated magician who was entangled with diabolical forces. In one account, for example, he related how Rotiland took a young boy outside the walls of a city – perhaps the city of Parma, where Anselm had himself studied. He buried the lad up to his waist, suffumigated him with acrid fumes, and uttered incantations involving strange, diabolical words, all as part of a spell to compel a woman to fall in love with him. Emphasizing the learned component of such magic, Anselm noted that Rotiland possessed a book of demonic magic, and, drawing an explicit connection to Muslim learning, he also accused him of sometimes performing magic in the company of a Saracen physician.

A century later, in the mid-1100s, the English scholar John of Salisbury wrote in his *Policraticus* about how, when he was just a schoolboy, his teacher had involved him and another student in a ritual for conjuring demons to appear in a polished basin, or even in the boys’ own fingernails made shiny with oil. Supposedly, young boys could more easily see such demonic apparitions because of their unpolluted, impressionable nature, although John saw nothing and the other boy perceived only uncertain, cloudy figures. Stories such as these indicate not just a new level and locus of concern about diabolical magic, but they also point to a new type of magician taking his (and the gender here is decidedly male) place in Europe – the educated cleric who worked in, or at least in a shadowy world linked to, the great schools and later universities of the High Middle Ages, as well as the increasingly bureaucratic courts where many university-trained clerics obtained employment (Figure 12.1 illustrates
learned magicians in a courtly context). These men comprised what Richard Kieckhefer has called a "clerical underworld" of necromancy.14

Thus far, my account of new magical concerns has been basically anecdotal—schoolmen telling tales out of school, so to speak, but not yet

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addressing diabolical magic as part of their main intellectual activity. For that type of engagement with magic, we might think to look at high medieval canon law, the codification of which was certainly part of the great systematizing effort that emerged out of twelfth-century Scholasticism. The central figure here is Gratian, a scholar at the law school of Bologna in the mid-twelfth century and author of the *Decretum*, which became the fundamental basis for all subsequent canon law. Yet law, which is conservative by nature, is actually not the place to get a good view of new concerns about magic in this period. The principal case that forms the basis of Causa 26, the main section of the *Decretum* that addresses magic, deals with a clerical magician, but this is not novel. Many early medieval accounts discussed village priests, who were no better educated or less superstitious than their parishioners were, succumbing to magical demonic fraud, but certainly not practicing the learned and elaborate conjurations of later schoolmen-necromancers. In terms of making some statement about the nature of demonic power, the *Decretum*, like earlier legal collections, mainly reiterated the canon *Episcopi*.6

In the thirteenth century, however, how magic might operate by diabolical agency and how it bound or obligated a human magician to a demonic spirit became important subjects not of legal commentary but of Scholastic reflection, both philosophical and theological. The great theologian Thomas Aquinas, for example, discussed the nature and operation of demonic power at length in his famous *Summa theologiae*, as well as in other works, such as *Summa contra gentiles* and *De malo*.7 Like most Scholastics, Aquinas set the power of demons entirely within the divinely ordered parameters of the created world. Their abilities were preternatural, in that they could manipulate aspects of that world in marvelous ways, but they were not truly supernatural, that is, exceeding the limits of natural law, like God could through a miracle. Perhaps the most famous illustration of amazing, but nonetheless naturally bounded, demonic operation came with Aquinas’s parsing of how demons might impregnate human women. As spiritual entities, demons had no natural sexual capacity, and in any event, divinely ordered nature did not allow sexual generation between creatures of different species. By manipulating natural processes, however, demons could mimic sexual potency. First assuming the artificial physical form of a female succubus, a demon would have sex with a man, collecting his semen. Then, using its capacity for near-instantaneous motion, the demon would appear to a woman as a male incubus and impregnate her with the stolen semen.8 In principle, such a notion of demonic operation harkened back to basic Augustinian thinking that a demon’s main abilities
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lay in moving and transporting matter at great speed and in manipulating human perceptions. Aquinas and other thirteenth-century Scholastics, however, provided a more fully developed framework for thinking systematically about demonic power that became the basis for almost all subsequent demonology in the medieval and early modern eras, at least for those authorities who adhered to a basically Aristotelian tradition. They also created a fundamental intellectual problem that would haunt all later thought about diabolic magic. Namely, if demons operated only by manipulating natural processes, albeit sometimes in fantastic ways, how could authorities reliably discern demonic magic from natural occurrences, especially from possibly rare and wondrous ones?

In recognition of the possible marvelous, mysterious, and occult virtues in nature that human beings might learn to manipulate, a category of "natural magic" emerged in thirteenth-century Christian thought, which would further complicate notions of demonic magic for the remainder of the era of Old Europe. The key figure here was not Aquinas but his contemporary William of Auvergne, who was also a scholar at the University of Paris and ultimately became Bishop of Paris from 1228 until his death in 1249. Aquinas discussed aspects of what could have been conceived as natural magic, mainly astral magic purporting to manipulate natural forces emanating from the stars and planets, but he concluded that such rites were actually directed toward demonic spirits. By contrast, in the early work in which he first introduced the term magia naturalis, William argued that many authorities were too ready to attribute to demons what could, in fact, be entirely natural operations. In a later, more detailed treatment, however, he stressed that most kinds of magical practices did involve demons, and he also noted that these wicked spirits, possessing great knowledge of the physical world, might instruct humans in forms of natural magic or even manipulate occult natural forces themselves once they had been invoked by a diabolic rite. Indeed, in a sense, all demonic magic was "natural," given that Scholastics maintained that demons always operated within the strictures of natural law. What mattered, as it had for Augustine centuries earlier, was whether, by some magical rite, human beings could be thought to have entangled themselves with demonic forces in any way. Concern about such magic clearly grew in Paris during the thirteenth century, and in 1277, Bishop Etienne Tempier, in the course of condemning more than two hundred philosophical propositions drawn from Aristotle and his Arabic commentators, also condemned books of divination, sorcery, and demonic invocation. Early in the next century, such concerns reached a crescendo not in Paris but at the papal court in Avignon.
Diabolical Concerns in the Fourteenth Century

An argument can be made that Christian demonology, including the elaborate analysis of the nature of demonic being and power, as well as hardening condemnations that human interaction with demons via invocation and conjuration necessarily entailed supplication, worship, and ultimately conspiratorial alliance, began only in the early fourteenth century and was in large measure inaugurated by Pope John XXII (1316–1334). He was deeply concerned throughout his papacy with the sort of magic addressed in the previous section – learned, clerical, and demonic. Fearing magical attacks on his own person, as well as against Christian society, John ordered the prosecution, on charges of demonic invocation, of numerous clergy, including some bishops, and in 1320, he ordered the inquisitors of Carcassonne and Toulouse to direct their attention to cases of demonic invocation in magical rites. Also commonly attributed to him is one of the most fundamental condemnations of diabolic magic in the Western tradition, the decretal *Super illius specula* (*Upon His Watchtower*), which was reportedly issued in 1326. It excommunicated any Christian who invoked demons for magical purposes. Curiously, however, it was not registered in standard canon law collections of the time and seems to have remained essentially unknown for fifty years, until the inquisitor Nicolau Eymerich cited it as an essential legal basis for the prosecution of sorcerers in his influential handbook *Directorium inquisitorum*, which was written in 1376. This has caused some scholars to question its authenticity and attribution to John. Yet, as Alain Boureau has rightly pointed out, establishing appropriate grounds to condemn demonic magicians was certainly a major and heated issue of John’s papacy. In 1329, the pope assembled a commission of ten theologians and canon lawyers to consider the vexing question of whether demonic invocation automatically constituted heresy. The answer was by no means straightforward, because heresy was, by most definitions, a matter of belief and not behavior, so the question became whether certain actions, in this case magical rites deemed to be demonic, so thoroughly demonstrated illicit belief that the act itself became heretical. Although a range of opinions were advanced, the majority of the commission ultimately agreed with the pope’s preferred position that demonic invocation equated to heresy, primarily because, it was determined, such invocation necessarily involved some type of devotion shown toward demons and constituted a pact involving the magician in an alliance with the Devil against God.
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Inquisitorial literature can help us gauge how rapidly these concerns spread outward from the papal court. As noted in the previous paragraph, Nicolau Eymerich eventually made *Super illius specula* a centerpiece of his condemnation of demonic magic in *Directorium inquisitorum*. More immediately, however, we can look to Bernard Gui, the inquisitor of Toulouse in the early 1320s, to whom John's letter directing action against demonic sorcery had been addressed. Despite the papal imperative, Gui appears not to have prosecuted any cases of sorcery personally, but other inquisitors in this region certainly did so, and Gui himself included some influential discussion of demonic magic in his 1324 manual *Practica inquisitionis*. When addressing diabolism directly, he dealt mainly with the sort of magicians who troubled John, namely, learned necromancers who were often clerics, performing elaborate rites and utilizing intricate ritual objects that could be construed as demonstrating devotion to and allegiance with demons (see Figure 12.2). Yet he also included relatively simple practices of common sorcery: spells performed with herbs or basic household items in order to heal or protect from injury, divine the identity of thieves, or arouse affection or animosity between spouses. Here we see a pattern that would persist throughout the rest of the fourteenth century and into the era of the first witch hunts in the early fifteenth century: authorities constructed notions of diabolic magic based mainly on elite practices but extended the diabolism they believed to be evident in such practices either tacitly or explicitly to simpler rites of common sorcery, as well.

The world of elite necromancy that authorities directly targeted in the fourteenth century was quite real, and it involved a learned tradition transmitted through texts that became well known to magistrates. Nicolau Eymerich, for example, listed several manuals of demonic magic seized from necromancers whom he had tried. Whereas alchemists or practitioners of astral magic could argue that their rites drew exclusively on natural forces (a defense that authorities regularly rejected), necromancers generally admitted that their rites relied on demons. Their most common defense was that they commanded and controlled these creatures rather than being in any way subservient or bound to them. After all, Christ had promised that any faithful Christian could wield power over demons, exorcizing them in his name, and most necromancers were clergymen employing what were often quasi-liturgical rites. Authorities rejected this defense, as well, often stressing the elements of necromantic magic that seemed to smack of blatant demon worship: lighting candles, burning incense, saying prayers, and even animal sacrifices and blood offerings. More basically, they responded with the line of argument first
advanced by John XXII and his commission: that simply to invoke a demon entailed a heretical act of worship and consecrated a pact that bound, and to some extent subjugated, the human magician to diabolical masters.\textsuperscript{14}

Some traditions of elite learned magic claimed to invoke not demons but beneficent spirits.\textsuperscript{15} The so-called \textit{ars notoria}, for example, purported to bestow on its practitioners knowledge and wisdom through invocations of God, the Virgin Mary, and angels.\textsuperscript{16} Here too, authorities dismissed such assertions, contending that practitioners of these arts, if they were not simply lying to protect themselves, were deceived about the nature of the spirits they conjured. Satan could, after all, present himself as an angel of light. Although normally, before the law, ignorance of one’s crime reduced one’s culpability, succumbing to

\begin{figure}
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\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{image.png}
\caption{Medieval necromancers often employed ritual objects similar to this elaborate talisman associated with John Dee in the sixteenth century. Credit: © The Trustees of the British Museum.}
\end{figure}
demonic deception was itself a violation, both for educated clerics (who, it could be argued, should have known better) and for the common laity.

By the end of the fourteenth century, many notions regarding diabolical magic that would be manifested in the idea of witchcraft had been established. Authorities (and although I have focused on ecclesiastical authorities thus far, one could include secular officials, as well) were increasingly concerned about the materially harmful power of demons. They were convinced that most forms of magic were demonic, whether they explicitly appeared to be so or not. And they had developed a battery of arguments stating that any type of demonic invocation necessarily entailed not just engagement with but also subservience to the minions of the Devil. Nevertheless, in the late fourteenth century, such notions remained focused mainly on only one end of the social scale, with authorities worrying about educated clerical necromancers rather than simple village witches. Also still absent was the notion of demonic sorcerers operating as members of diabolical cults of the sort that inquisitorial and other officials had long imagined to characterize other forms of heresy. These final elements emerged in the fifteenth century, as the full stereotype of diabolical, conspiratorial witchcraft coalesced in Western Europe.

The Emergence of Diabolical Witchcraft

Witchcraft is many things. Most broadly, it can mean almost any kind of harmful magic (*maleficium*). It can mean magic performed mainly by women. It nearly always means magic performed in relatively simple ways (a few words, a gesture, or even a threatening glance) by people of relatively low social status. It can be imagined as magic performed as part of a vast diabolical conspiracy, with witches gathering in sometimes great numbers at terrible nocturnal assemblies where demons or the Devil himself preside, obeisance and offerings are made to them, and horrific rites of sexual depravity, murder, and cannibalism are enacted. In all of these ways except the first, witchcraft is quite different from the learned elite (and male) tradition of diabolic magic we have been tracing thus far. Although most authorities were convinced that clerical necromancers bound themselves to demons when performing magical rites, they did not imagine those necromancers as members of great cults of sorcerers, like they sometimes did with witches. In some respects, the phenomenon of witchcraft, as it was conceived in the fifteenth century, represents a return to the more typical early medieval pattern of authorities focusing their magical concerns mainly on simple, uneducated people. What carried over from the world of elite magic were ideas of demons as more actively threatening
and powerful agents of physical harm than they had typically appeared to be in earlier centuries and the notion that witches were not just dupes of demonic illusion but that they deliberately surrendered themselves to Satan.

This new image of diabolic magic proved highly successful and endured for several centuries. Yet we should not imagine it being so powerful as to sweep aside all elements of skepticism. We would do well to remember that toward the end of the fifteenth century, the inquisitor Heinrich Kramer witnessed the utter collapse of a series of trials he had been conducting in Innsbruck in the face of substantial opposition and skepticism, certainly of him as a reliable and responsible prosecutor, if not of the possible existence of witches themselves. Still stinging from this defeat, he began his infamous Malleus maleficarum with the pronouncement that failing to believe in the existence of witches, and by extension in the intensely diabolical image of witchcraft that the Malleus would present, was itself a grave heresy. Although the extent of such skepticism was certainly limited, especially from a modern point of view, because the acceptance and successful diffusion of the witch stereotype is an often told story, I want here at least somewhat to stress the very real, although always mitigated, degrees of skepticism that accompanied the notion of diabolical witchcraft.

As Richard Kieckhefer reminds us, we should not think of a single, coherent conception of witchcraft, at least in terms of its origin in the fifteenth century, and I would extend his caution to the entire period of the witch trials. One of the remarkable facts about the emergence of Western European notions of diabolical witchcraft is just how localized their origins really were. Many of the earliest trials and the initial theoretical literature that proposed the notion of a devil-worshiping cult of maleficent sorcerers appeared in the space of only a few years in the early 1400s, and they occurred in lands that all ringed the Western Alps: present-day western Switzerland, northern Italy, and French Dauphine. These were, importantly, borderland regions where different cultures (legal, linguistic, and otherwise) came into contact. A strong inquisitorial presence, particularly the Dominican inquisition based in Lausanne, overlapped with growing secular jurisdictions as city governments and territorial lords in this region sought to consolidate their power. The blurring of language is best exemplified by the various uses of the francophone term vaudois. The word could be applied to Waldensian heresy, to heretical or just disreputable behavior of a more general sort, or ultimately to witches. How exactly the meanings shifted is uncertain, now and probably then, as are the effects such shifts may have had on the process of accusations and trials.
Having just cautioned against advancing any single stereotype of witchcraft, let me sketch at least some basic characteristics of that construct before noting some of the discrepancies and skepticisms that always pertained to it. One important, although not always essential, component of witchcraft, that was central to its diabolic character was the notion that witches operated not individually but as members of satanically orchestrated sects. This concept of cultish organization and activity underlay almost all of the other horrors of witches’ “synagogues,” an initial term for the imagined gatherings that later became known as “sabbaths.” The conviction that witches met in groups and thus could identify one another was a major component of the mentality that supported expansive hunts as opposed to more contained individual trials. Helpfully, we can see this concept emerging in a single source. The Dominican theologian Johannes Nider’s *Formicarius* (Ant-Hill) of 1437–1438 described groups of witches gathering at assemblies, swearing service to presiding demons, and engaging in horrible rites at their command. Yet Nider also presented several accounts of an individual witch named Staedelin who operated alone or with a single accomplice. He performed demonic *maleficium*, summoning demons and making crude offerings to them so they would carry out nefarious tasks on his behalf, but none of the other elaborate mythology of the sabbath is evident in Nider’s descriptions of him. As I have argued elsewhere, he seems to represent an older view of individual diabolic sorcery at the very moment it began to give way to a new, more elaborate vision of witchcraft in the minds of authorities.41

As the idea of diabolical cults of witches developed, it was perhaps only natural that extreme notions derived from earlier polemics against heretical groups should be extended to witchcraft: that witches worshiped the Devil or demons at sabbaths, that they proclaimed their homage to these creatures through words and gestures, often including the ritual of the obscene kiss, that they feasted and engaged in perverse sexual orgies with demons and with each other, and that they desecrated the cross and sacraments. Pope Gregory IX had articulated such an image as early as 1233 in his decretal *Vox in Rama* when he addressed the supposed depravity of heretics, but not yet witches.42

The relationship of witchcraft to heresy, as opposed to or in conjunction with the history of magic and diabolism, has long been debated. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, such founding fathers of witchcraft studies as Henry Charles Lea and Joseph Hansen came to witchcraft by way of their histories of medieval inquisitions.43 In the 1970s, when the study of witchcraft underwent a major resurgence, Jeffrey Russell argued forcefully that witchcraft emerged from medieval heresy, whereas Norman Cohn and
Richard Kieckhefer tied it more to traditions of demonic magic. More recently, Kathrin Utz Tremp has revisited this question, providing a detailed study of diabolic elements of heresy and how they eventually informed ideas of witchcraft in the fifteenth century.  

The exact image of a witches’ sabbath was always contested. Among the earliest demonological sources from the 1430s, the brief, anonymous *Errores gazariorum* (*Errors of the Gazarii*; *gazarius*, like *vaudois*, being a generic term for heretic that blended with the notion of “witch” at this time) contains the most vivid description of a sabbath (here “synagogue”). In addition to elements mentioned already—diabolical homage, orgies, and desecration—this text recounts how witches murdered children, cannibalized their corpses, and also boiled them down to make poisons and other magical unguents, including some to smear on brooms and staves, which were then used to travel to future gatherings (see Figure 12.3). The notion that witches killed children sprang from several roots, among them various beliefs in creatures of folklore and legend, such as the *strix* or *lamia* (both later terms for witches), which were originally vampiric monsters that haunted the night. Another major root of
ideas of the sabbath, some scholars have argued, was a continent-wide web of belief in various forms of shamanism and mystical healing that revolved around spirit journeys. The most notable scholar here is Carlo Ginzburg, who contends that such notions comprise the principal root of the idea of the sabbath, although others have advanced similar arguments in a more moderate vein.48

Possible shamanistic notions of nocturnal spirit journeys intrude most obviously into stereotypes of witchcraft in the form of witches’ suspected night-flight to sabbaths. But such flight was also the most broadly contested idea associated with diabolic witchcraft. Skepticism here was founded on the ancient decree of the canon Episcopi (five hundred years old by the early fifteenth century and believed by ecclesiastical authorities to be more than a thousand years old), which declared in no uncertain terms that nocturnal journeys in the service of a demon were pure illusion. This did not obviate the crime – swearing oneself to Satan’s service was just as severe a transgression whether it was done in the flesh or only in the mind. Still, if flight, and hence the sabbath itself, was purely illusory, this raised serious questions about the sexual congress, murder of children, and other activities that supposedly took place.49 Some authors were content to leave nocturnal travels to the realm of erroneous imagination. Johannes Nider, for example, presented a supposedly contemporary account that echoed the canon Episcopi. A Dominican friar, he related, once observed an old woman who claimed that she flew with Diana. To do so, she slathered herself with ointments and entered a trance while perched in a large pasta bowl balanced on a stool. Although she thrashed about under the force of her delusion, physically she never traveled any farther than the serious tumble she took from her perch to the floor in the course of her gyrations.50 Another approach was to argue that Episcopi pertained to a much earlier era and had no bearing on the “new sect” of witches that was believed to manifest in the fifteenth and subsequent centuries. The strongest early voice here was that of the Dominican inquisitor Nicolas Jacquier in his Flagellum haereticorum fascinariorum, which was written in 1458.51 Almost thirty years later, Heinrich Kramer had his cake and ate it, too, reporting the supposed testimony of a witch who confessed that sometimes she journeyed to the sabbath in the flesh, but when this was inconvenient for her she could also travel there in spirit, in the form of a blue vapor that emitted from her mouth while she slept.52

The reality of flight, and of the sabbath, remained an open question throughout the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries. In addition to being a matter of considerable skepticism itself, it provided an obvious
point of departure for any skeptic who sought to challenge the possibility of effective demonic power in the physical world more generally (we will encounter examples of that sort of skepticism later in the chapter). The debate around flight also provides an excellent illustration of the mixed nature of the concept of diabolical witchcraft. Although in part it revolved around purely intellectual issues—the accepted potentials of demonic power, for example, or the degree of authority ceded to a centuries-old legal document—the issue was never one of purely abstract Scholastic debate. Depending on their own inclinations, church inquisitors and lay magistrates either reluctantly accommodated or actively sought out the testimony of people who, whether because of some shamanistically tinged experience or because of the threat of torture or because of some other reason entirely, admitted to encountering demons, flying with them, or having sex with them in real physical terms. The power balance in these interactions was, of course, massively unequal, but we would be wrong to think that certain ideas that became constituent of witchcraft never flowed up from popular or common belief to the level of the legal and intellectual authorities or that authorities simply overlaid their own demonological conceptions and concerns onto a body of more popular or common belief that had to do only with healing, harming, and magical protection. Although the heavy framework of diabolism that came to envelope witchcraft was undoubtedly primarily a construct of educated elites reading their own and earlier demonological works, all the way back to the foundational pronouncements of Augustine, nevertheless, in this as in every other aspect of its complicated and variable structure, witchcraft emerged not solely by means of authoritative pronouncement but also through discourse and debate that drew on ideas from a multitude of sources.

**Diabolic Magic in an Age of Witch Hunts**

If the concept of witchcraft is multifaceted and mutable, with even its overtly diabolic elements emerging from a number of traditions—earlier notions of diabolic magic, certainly, but also ideas about demonically inspired heresy and a broad but diffuse gamut of folkloric beliefs in spirit travel, spirit beings, and so forth—what are we to make of the witch hunts themselves as expressions of concern over the diabolic? Scholars have long identified intense, specifically Christian, diabolism as the principal element that distinguishes the historical Western European notion of witchcraft from conceptions of malevolent magicians who might be called witches elsewhere in the world, and as was noted earlier in the chapter, these diabolic fears and conceptions of
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satanic cults stoked the flames that allowed more contained and limited trials to expand into full-fledged hunts. But major hunts, which were capable of claiming hundreds or even thousands of victims, were always sporadic and localized, even at the absolute height of Europe’s trials in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. They also tended to be clustered in lands of the German Empire, especially in the politically fragmented western regions of the empire, the zone of diverse territories (not all of them Germanophone) stretching from the Western Alps up the “Lotharingian corridor” to the Low Countries. Everywhere major hunts occurred, they did so because multiple factors converged – political, legal, economic, and social, as well as some basic underlying fear of diabolical agents being loose in Christian society – to create the particular circumstances that allowed accusations and trials to spiral out of control.

Below the level of major hunts, among the individual trials or small clusters that comprised much of Europe’s “witch hunt,” again multiple factors always had to converge, and overt diabolism often appears to have played a relatively minor role. The most essential root of individual suspicions, and ultimately accusations, leading to a trial was the conviction that maleficium had been performed – animals had sickened, crops had withered, or children had been injured or taken ill. All of these things could, of course, happen quite naturally, so there had to be something (almost anything, if suspicion already ran high enough) that marked the harm or misfortune as particularly sudden or strange. Those suspected of causing such harm were typically neighbors, even family members, and so accusations, when they finally came, were generally heavily loaded with all of the various intense animosities and tensions that split small, tightly knit societies: conflicts about property, inheritance, charity, good motherhood, sexuality, and proper gender roles, to name only a few. In all of this, diabolic concerns figure lightly, if at all. If there was any one element that might be said to have been overriding (or underlying), it would likely be fertility and all of the multifarious anxieties that revolved around maintaining precarious human, animal, and agricultural reproduction in this era. This very basic fear of witchcraft as an assault on fertility and hence on the continued survival of society itself did, however, loop back into notions of witches as diabolical agents, and tracts and treatises on the subject are replete with images of demons instructing witches to kill children, impede conception, and steal crops or blast them with thunderstorms or hail.

The relationship of witchcraft to gender, which is a central concern in much modern scholarship, also illustrates the complex place of diabolism within processes of suspicion and accusation. Witches were predominantly women;
that is, women were generally suspected, accused, tried, and convicted of this crime at substantially higher rates than men were, and depictions of witches typically show women, often in a highly sexualized way (see Figure 12.4). Nowhere was witchcraft an exclusively female crime, and in some regions, such as Normandy or remote Iceland, the majority of witches were men. Yet across Europe, roughly three out of every four victims of witch trials were women. As with every other major aspect of witchcraft, multiple factors interwove to produce this preponderance. Women were generally more legally vulnerable than men were, especially widows or the unmarried. Women who were not under the control of some immediate male family member raised concerns about supposedly unrestrained female sexuality. Unmarried daughters could be an economic burden on their families, particularly as they aged, and women who had married but were then widowed could obstruct (ideally patrilineal) inheritance patterns. Ingrained cultural beliefs about both women and magic also played a significant role, insofar as a great deal of witchcraft (harmful magic that often affected fertility) was associated with areas of predominantly female activity: childbirth, the care of sick children, food preparation (with attendant possibilities for poisoning), and so forth.

Demonologists and other elite authorities had definite ideas about why witches tended to be women, and those ideas derived from their view of witchcraft as an intensely diabolic practice. Weaker than men physically, mentally, and spiritually, women were more vulnerable to outright demonic assaults, such as possession, and also more susceptible to the alluring wiles of demonic temptation. Among witchcraft theorists, the Dominican Johannes Nider first articulated such an argument in the early fifteenth century, and toward century's end, Heinrich Kramer expanded upon it significantly in Malleus maleficarum. As Stuart Clark has rightly cautioned, however, among demonological authors, Kramer was singularly gender-obsessed, and most theoretical literature treats witchcraft's strongly gendered character only slightly, if at all. This is not to say that gender and sex—especially sex with demons—did not enter into the thinking of the male authors of these treatises, but it was not typically at the forefront of their stated concerns, as it so clearly was in the Malleus. In fact, there is some reason to believe that early witchcraft theorists may have hesitated slightly before accepting the predominance of women suspected and accused of witchcraft in the course of the trials. The image of the wicked female sorceress was of course deeply rooted in medieval traditions, and it rested on venerable classical antecedents. Yet prior to the fifteenth century, when authorities had thought seriously about diabolic magic, they had thought primarily of male necromancers. In the dialogue of his Formicarius,
Figure 12.4. Hans Baldung Grien, *Witches' Sabbath*, 1510. Credit: © The Trustees of the British Museum.
Johannes Nider had the character of a befuddled student express surprise that women, too, were capable of such powerful and terrible magic, and this may have been more than a rhetorical device allowing Nider to launch into his explanation for why witches were predominantly women. Throughout the period of the trials, the predominance of women as witches (where they did predominate) seems to have been more a matter of popular consensus than an imposition of elite demonology.

In a broad sense, demonology and conceptions of diabolic magic underwent relatively little change during the period of the witch trials, and such change as there was related only tangentially to witchcraft. Theories of witchcraft, like notions of diabolic necromancy before them, were based firmly in Scholastic, Aristotelian thought. Yet even as stereotypes of diabolic witchcraft were coalescing in the fifteenth century, rival intellectual systems grounded in Neo-Platonism were on the rise in Italy, offering new perspectives on old questions about the nature and power of demons and other spirit entities. "Renaissance magic" is a vague category, but in general it may refer to learned systems of magic grounded in new modes of thought that emerged initially out of Italy. Such magic was frequently aimed at attaining knowledge or some sort of spiritual or intellectual elevation on the part of the practitioner, although it could certainly also be intended to achieve more practical ends, whether those were to heal, protect, or divine the future. For example, Pope Urban VIII had the magus Tommaso Campanella transferred from an inquisitorial prison in Naples to Rome in 1626, so that he could serve the pontiff as an astrologer and magician, performing rites to protect the pope from inimical magical or astral forces.

Recent scholarship has pointed to the limitations of any notion of absolutely distinct "Renaissance magic." Recognizing that some medieval mages also attempted to summon angels or benevolent spirits to achieve personal edification or elevation or claimed that their rites drew exclusively on natural forces, we should undoubtedly see the elite spiritual and natural magic of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries as building on certain thirteenth- and fourteenth-century developments, just as conceptions of witchcraft did. Yet in the era of the trials, this elite magic and witchcraft largely diverged. The greatest connection between them was the concern many learned mages felt that they might be linked to or condemned as witches. True, sometimes humanist intellectuals opposed witch trials, but they usually did so by focusing on procedures or evidence, not by voicing any broad objections to the basic demonology on which the idea of diabolic witchcraft rested. Famously in 1519, the German humanist and occultist Cornelius Agrippa, who was then civic orator in Metz, defended
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a woman accused of witchcraft by the local Dominican inquisitor, arguing that she was old and senile, not a sworn agent of Satan. But in his major work *De occulta philosophia*, although he rather daringly blurred the lines between purely natural and demonic magic, he also strove to separate elite magic from the diabolic practices associated with witches. Nevertheless, he was plagued by suspicions of him being a diabolical sorcerer all his life, and after his death, he became a likely model for the developing Faust legend (there was also an actual Faust who lived at roughly the same time).

The other classic historiographic watershed of this period, the Reformation, produced no substantial change in demonology or conceptions of diabolic witchcraft whatsoever. Protestant authorities conceptualized and condemned witchcraft in almost exactly the same terms as Catholics did, although Catholicism allowed for certain means of defense against witchcraft via the power of church rituals and sacramental items, which Protestantism denied. Condemnation of witchcraft was closely tied to Reformist concerns among all Christian confessions in this period, primarily through efforts to promote greater piety while stamping out superstition among the laity. The inter- and intra-confessional strife of the Reformation era certainly also contributed to a range of other factors that promoted witch hunting, such as social tension, political uncertainty, and even economic privations. But religion per se was not a primary factor determining whether a given prince, magistrate, or court pursued witches intensely or with lenience. Most of the so-called German superhunts, for example, occurred in the territories of Catholic prince-bishops or in mini-states controlled by individual monastic houses. Yet at the other end of the spectrum, such aggressively Counter-Reformation institutions as the Roman and Spanish inquisitions prosecuted very few witches. Such variance stemmed from differences in the juridical and bureaucratic structures of these courts, not from any fundamental disagreement about the nature of the diabolic threat that witches represented. Similar comparisons could be developed for Protestant jurisdictions. In general (although of course not always), larger, more bureaucratic, and more professional courts tended to inhibit prosecutions for witchcraft by an insistence on strict rules of evidence and procedure.

All of this calls into question how central diabolic aspects of witchcraft really were to actual dynamics of witch hunting or to the functioning of witchcraft beliefs within society in general. On the one hand, the perceived relationship between witches and the Devil, which was broadly believed across Europe, was, along with the basic practice of *maleficium*, one of the two fundamental components of what “witchcraft” usually meant in the period of the trials.
On the other hand, the ways in which diabolism interacted with and influenced all of the other factors that shaped beliefs, concerns, and ultimately trials varied dramatically from region to region and across more than two centuries. In some times and places, diabolic fears loomed large, whereas in others, they were muted or virtually nonexistent. England, for example, has typically been seen as more resistant to the "cumulative concept" of witchcraft, including the more intense diabolism of "continental" demonology. Yet, there in fact never was any continental norm, and numerous regions throughout Europe proved resistant to severe diabolic concerns, at least as reflected in the dynamics of their trials.

Several decades ago, Richard Kieckhefer argued that, at least in early trials, diabolism was primarily an elite concern that magistrates imposed on accusations having to do mainly with maleficium, and this observation has been frequently confirmed. People who believed themselves afflicted by witchcraft generally focused on the harm done to them and how it might be alleviated—which could well involve having recourse to a cunning person, magical healer, even to the witch herself—rather than making a formal accusation in some court. Once a case entered the courts, however, magistrates familiar with learned demonology began to inquire about cults, sabbaths, and other diabolic elements. This picture must be nuanced in two ways. However. First, as has already been touched on in this chapter, although diabolism may not have been the primary practical concern that drove people to bring formal charges of witchcraft against their neighbors, that does not mean that common images of witchcraft were not infused with diabolic elements, either learned from authorities through such mechanisms as sermons, popular broadsheet literature, or even the process of the trials themselves or stemming from widely held folkloric beliefs. Second, not all magistrates were equally obsessed with the diabolic. In reality, every official had his own level of concern or, alternately phrased, his own degree of skepticism about the clear and present danger of the diabolic. In general terms, we can say that the higher up in any court system a case went (and, hence, assumedly the more trained and expert the judges), the less the likelihood that a trial would be affected by rampant diabolic fears. This was not because more educated magistrates were skeptical about basic demonology, but because they tended to question the means by which the diabolic aspects of witchcraft could be proven legally. The "evidence" for sabbaths was inevitably the testimony of other witches or of the accused herself, often extracted under torture or threat of torture. Rather, mid-level courts, which were staffed by educated jurists but still able to be affected by potentially explosive local concerns, may
have been the most likely to fixate on diabolic elements in witchcraft trials. Once again, we confront the inherently mixed nature of witchcraft, particularly regarding its diabolical components.

Skepticism about Diabolic Magic

“Skepticism” and “decline” are often linked terms in witchcraft historiography. As I have tried to illustrate throughout this chapter, however, various degrees of skepticism about certain components of witchcraft actually manifested in every period and form a continuous component of the history of this topic. Moreover, as suggested earlier in the chapter (and as is well known to experts), nothing like complete skepticism about the entire construct of diabolic witchcraft was necessary to restrict or reduce the number of trials. One often-drawn contrast is that made between full skepticism and a more limited “judicial” sort, which focused on doubts about the validity of evidence and procedure in the trials. In broad terms, judicial skepticism took root first, being fairly firmly established (although, as with every aspect of the history of witchcraft, by no means universally accepted and applied to different degrees in different jurisdictions) in the early seventeenth century. Fundamental skepticism about the power of demons and the basic possibility of demonic maleficium became widely accepted only in the eighteenth century. Yet in more precise terms, the two skepticisms cannot be neatly isolated from one another. Although they achieved greater levels of acceptance at different times, they actually developed alongside one another. Moreover, it is fair to assume that most authorities who tended to oppose judicial skepticism, arguing that witchcraft was a crimen exceptum (an exceptional crime to which normal judicial restraints, rules of evidence, restrictions on torture, and so forth could not be allowed to apply), did so because of the exceptional fear generated by the notion of witches as both powerful malefactors and sworn agents of Satan. Conversely, authorities who upheld various forms of judicial skepticism were self-evidently less inclined to cast aside established rules of procedure even in the face of a (perceived) monstrous threat, although whether that also means they were to any degree more skeptical about the scope or reality of that threat is another matter.

As we have seen, some degree of doubt about the nature and extent of demonic power, and hence about the severity of diabolic threat, was actually the earlier form of skepticism, as it was encoded in the canon Episcopi and in many early medieval legal condemnations of magic. As Scholastic theories of magic and demonology developed in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries,
they also spawned certain forms of skepticism about the potentialities of demonic power. William of Auvergne, especially, developed the notion of natural magic and at least initially warned that most other authorities were too eager to attribute to demons what were likely entirely natural operations, although he subsequently mitigated his own "skepticism" on this point somewhat. That demons were largely powerless and that most magic was either natural or simply unreal was never a widely appreciated position in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, yet there were some powerful voices that articulated just that sort of skepticism. Possibly the greatest was the French schoolman Nicole Oresme, who, writing in the decades after 1350, advanced the position that demons essentially did not interfere in the physical world in any way. In the fifteenth century, as stereotypes of diabolic witchcraft coalesced, many authorities were skeptical at least of certain elements of those stereotypes, above all the physical reality of flight and the sabbath. Judicial skepticism also began to manifest with the earliest witch trials. The bishop of Brixen who opposed the trials at Innsbruck in 1485, for example, did not question the possibility of demonic menace, but he did doubt the capacity of Heinrich Kramer to identify and prosecute witches responsibly, ultimately calling the inquisitor senile and banishing him from his diocese (admittedly a rather ad hominem form of skepticism).

Beginning in the fifteenth century and continuing into the sixteenth, a number of humanist thinkers became opponents of witch trials. Some challenged certain aspects of Scholastic demonology upon which notions of diabolic magic rested, but they also frequently objected to the extreme and (in their view) excessive nature of witchcraft prosecutions. In 1515, for example, the Milanese jurist Andrea Alciati labeled the hunts developing in northern Italy a "new holocaust." Other major intellectual figures, such as Erasmus and, as we have seen, Cornelius Agrippa, challenged various aspects of witch trials, casting doubt on procedures and questioning the degree to which the often poor old women targeted as witches were actually entangled with demonic forces as opposed to being merely deluded and confused. Agrippa's student Johann Weyer, the court physician to the duke of Cleves, is often considered the first truly major skeptical authority, having published the treatise De praestigiis daemonum (On the Deceptive Illusions of Demons) in 1563. His attack on witchcraft, and the forms of skepticism underlying it, took various forms. Theologically, he did not deny the power of demons in the physical world, but he did question why they would choose to act through human agents rather than exercise their power directly. He also subverted the notion of the pact whereby powerful demonic agents supposedly submitted to apparent human
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close. To explain why so many accused witches themselves believed they were in league with Satan, he turned to medical explanations—they were sick, senile, or deluded.80

In 1584, the Englishman Reginald Scot published his Discoverie of Witchcraft, frequently hailed as the first radically skeptical work in the Western European demonological tradition, in which he denied the reality of any spiritual operations in the physical world and, hence, any real possibility for diabolic magic.81 As we have seen in this chapter, Scot was not the first thinker to assert that degree of skepticism about spiritual operations in the world. Nicole Oresme had done so more than two centuries earlier, although there is no evidence that Scot had read Oresme.82 The Englishman was the first, however, to make such skepticism the foundation of a sustained attack on witchcraft and witch trials, and in this he was still too precocious—his book was banned and his ideas would not gain widespread acceptance for more than a century. More successful was the German Jesuit Friedrich Spee, who published (anonymously) his Cautio criminalis in 1631. This work was a landmark of judicial skepticism, lambasting the severity and procedural iniquities of witch trials, particularly the unrestricted use of torture. Some modern scholars have suggested that Spee’s own skepticism ran deeper, to a rejection of the reality of witchcraft rather than just a criticism of trial procedures. His tactic of more limited critique was successful, however. Although the book sparked some controversy, it found a sympathetic audience almost immediately.83 By the end of the seventeenth century, European intellectuals were ready for a full rejection of diabolic witchcraft. This came in the form of the Dutchman Balthasar Bekker’s De betoverde weerd, published in four volumes in the early 1690s (see Figure 12.5). His rejection of any real demonic operations in the world was based at least in part on the new philosophy of Cartesian rationalism, which imposed a sharp separation between the worlds of matter and mind or spirit.84 The book was banned in some places, and Bekker was tried for blasphemy and stripped of his ministerial position, because his arguments applied equally to divine as well as diabolic power operating in the world. But the time for such skepticism had clearly come, and his ideas would carry the day in the coming century.

Thus told, the spread of opposition to witch hunting and skepticism about the reality of witchcraft appears to be a relatively straightforward story. Any simple, teleological narrative of intellectual progress culminating in “modern rationality” will be deceptive, however. Given that belief in diabolic witchcraft and magic did decline precipitously in the eighteenth century, at least among intellectual and political elites, there is a tendency to view the great skeptics

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of earlier periods, clear back to Oresme in the fourteenth century, as bold
harbingers of modern thought and daring rebels ahead of their times. In fact,
however, although their positions could be radical and extreme, they all oper-
ated within the skeptical possibilities of their own eras. Such possibilities had
always existed, not as some entirely external challenges to ideas of diabolic
magic, but as parts of those very systems of thought. A major illustration of
this point is the relation of the scientific revolution to belief in diabolic magic and witchcraft. The old whiggish paradigm would tell us that as "modern scientific thinking" developed in the seventeenth century, it clashed with and ultimately conquered those premodern, superstitious systems of thought that gave rise to diabolic magic and witchcraft. In fact, early science and witchcraft theory developed side by side, and they were just as capable of supporting as of conflicting with one another. In 1681, only a decade before Bekker's *De betoverde weerd*, Joseph Glanvill's *Saducismus triumphatus* advanced a powerful defense of spiritual forces and diabolic witchcraft grounded in the most current scientific thought.

The significance of the great works of skepticism, with their neatly ordered publication dates, in terms of charting waning concern over diabolic magic and witchcraft is hard to say. Many major jurisdictions were already curtailing witch trials in the early seventeenth century. The Parlement of Paris, for example, executed its last witch in 1623, and the famously tolerant Dutch Republic did so in 1609. But neither do the dates of "last executions" or "last trials" in any given region always correlate securely to a moment of major decline in concern. The Spanish Inquisition, for example, had always kept fairly good control over trials, and in 1623, its central council had ordered all tribunals to adhere to strict guidelines that made capital convictions extremely rare. Nevertheless, the last execution in Spain came in 1781, and the final trial was held in 1820, among the latest in all of Europe. In general, though, across much of the continent, trials were already being restricted to a significant degree and authorities were becoming intent on stamping down, rather than fanning, diabolical concerns by the time that what is often meant by "skepticism toward witchcraft" took major hold.

What that decline indicates, I suggest, is the importance of less spectacular but more practically effective varieties of skepticism about diabolic magic. Doubts always existed about the possible extent of demonic powers, and about how likely it might be that this or that person had actually become entangled with diabolic forces in the manner described by the most extreme visions of sabbaths and necromantic ceremonies. Rarely rising to the level of complete disbelief in diabolic magic or witchcraft per se, they were nevertheless surely a major factor in restraining concern over witchcraft and the ruthless hunting of witches. We have the examples of truly out-of-control hunts to remind us just how deadly the matrix of beliefs centered around diabolic magic could be. Yet we will understand those beliefs more fully if we focus not just on the obvious credulities but also on the constant skepticisms that accompany the entire history of diabolic magic.
In most regions of Europe, witch trials ended mainly in the seventeenth century, and in the course of the eighteenth, most elite authorities came to deride any notion of direct demonic action in the physical world, and hence of any "real" diabolic magic. Yet not all belief in magic and certainly not in the real existence and power of the Devil vanished as Europe entered its modern era. The curtain does not come down entirely on diabolic magic, therefore, as we pass the boundary year of 1800. Instead, we enter another era of its long history.

Notes

1. *De doctrina Christiana* 2.23(36), ed. Martin, 58: "Omnes igitur artes huiusmodi uel nugatoriae uel noxiae superstitionis ex quadam pestifera societate hominum et daemonum quasi pacta infidelis et dolosae amicitiae constituta penitus sunt repudianda et fugienda christiano." Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

2. Aside from *De doctrina Christiana*, see Augustine, *De divinatione daemonum*, and *De civitate dei* (esp. books 8–10).

3. Isidore, *Etymologiarum sive originum libri XX* 8.9.31, ed. Lindsay, 2 vols., n.p.: "In quibus omnibus ars daemonum est ex quadam pestifera societate hominum et angelorum malorum exorta."

4. Kieckhefer, "The Specific Rationality of Medieval Magic," 813–836. For a valuable discussion of how central diabolism should be to investigations of European magic and witchcraft, see Midelfort, "Witch Craze?" and Kivelson, "Lethal Convictions," 11–33 and 34–61, respectively.


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15. For a survey into later periods, see Hersperger, *Kirche, Magie, und "Aberglaube."
17. See Linsenmann, *Die Magie bei Thomas von Aquin*.
20. William of Auvergne, *De legibus* 24, in *Opera omnia*, 67. On this as the first usage of *magia naturalis*, see Boudet, *Entre science et nigromance*, 128.
22. The term *magia naturalis*, however, always meant non-demonic magic in Scholastic usage.
32. On necromantic practice, see Kieckhefer, *Forbidden Rites*.
34. Eymerich, *Directorium inquisitorum* 2.43.14, ed. Peña, 344.
35. On various types of medieval spirit magic, see Fanger, “Introduction,” in *Conjuring Spirits*, esp. vii–ix, as well as several other essays in that volume; see also Veenstra, “Venerating and Conjuring Angels,” 119–134.
39. These trials and literature have been studied extensively by historians working in Lausanne. For an overview, see Utz Tremp, “Witches’ Brooms and Magic Ointments,” 173–187.
43. Lea, A History of the Inquisition of the Middle Ages; Hansen, Zauberwahn, Inquisition, und Hexenprozesse.
44. Russell, Witchcraft in the Middle Ages; Cohn, Europe’s Inner Demons; Kieckhefer, European Witch Trials.
45. Utz Tremp, Von der Häresie zur Hexerei.
46. Edited in Ostorero, Paravicini Bagliani, and Utz Tremp, eds., L’imaginaire du sabbat, 267–353. One version of the text, which is misdated, is also in Hansen, Quellen und Untersuchungen, 118–122.
48. Ginzburg, Ecstasies: Deciphering the Witches’ Sabbath. For other positions and an overview of current debates, see the special forum on “Shamanism and Witchcraft” in Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft, 207–241.
49. See Ostorero, Le diable au sabbat, 571–720.
51. See esp. ch. 7 of Jacquier, Flagellum, 36–51: “De differentia inter sectam et haeresim fascinariorum modernorum et illusionem mulierum de quibus loquitus c. Episcopi”.
53. On witchcraft and witch hunting in a global context, see Behringer, Witches and Witch-Hunts, esp. 3–4, 8–9.
55. A good introduction to witchcraft at this level is Briggs, Witches and Neighbors.
56. Roper, Witch Craze.
57. On the phenomenon of male witches, which is now beginning to receive serious scholarly attention, see Schulte, Hexenmeister; Apps and Gow, Male Witches in Early Modern Europe; Rowlands, ed., Witchcraft and Masculinities in Early Modern Europe.
58. See Roper, Witch Craze; Willis, Malevolent Nurture; Karlsen, The Devil in the Shape of a Woman.
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60. Clark, "The 'Gendering' of Witchcraft in French Demonology," 426–437; Clark, *Thinking with Demons*, 106–133.

61. See Stephens, *Demon Lovers*.

62. Nider, *Formicarius* 5.8, ed. Colvener, 388 (this section is not excerpted in *L'imaginaire du sabbat*). For a more extensive argument along these lines, see Bailey, "The Feminization of Magic." On conceptions of women in fifteenth-century demonology, see Chène and Ostorero, "Demonologie et misogynie," 171–196.

63. A good introduction to "Renaissance" magic remains Walker, *Spiritual and Demonic Magic*.


67. Baron, *Doctor Faustus from History to Legend*.

68. The interface of witchcraft and other religious concerns is explored with great sophistication in Clark, *Thinking with Demons*, 437–545.


73. Ibid., 218; Ankarloo, "Witch Trials in Northern Europe 1450–1700," 79.


78. Kieckhefer, "Magic at Innsbruck."


82. Anglo, “Reginald Scot’s Discoverie,” 130, notes similarities to Oresme.


84. Fix, *Balthasar Bekker, Spirit Belief, and Confessionalism*.


88. Europe’s last legal execution for witchcraft took place in the Swiss canton of Glarus in 1782; a trial of debatable legality resulted in executions in the Polish city of Posnan in 1793. See Levack, “The Decline and End of Witchcraft Prosecutions,” 88–89.