'We Can Get the Witch-Doctor but We Cannot Get God'

Witchcraft in the Low Countries

[ROBIN BRIGGS]

Witchcraft, even as a subject for historical enquiry, needs to be treated with great caution, coupled with real subtlety. Until very recently the persecution of supposed witches in early modern Europe was regularly condemned as a prime example of ignorance and superstition, which then might be used as an index to award retrospective blame or credit to particular confessions and nations. Protestant and Catholic scholars often sought to portray the 'other side' as notably guilty in this fashion, forgetting the proverbial warnings about stones and glasshouses. The Low Countries lay all too open to such facile interpretations, because the region does indeed provide some striking contrasts. Although intermittent persecution had existed since the late Middle Ages, and there were the celebrated Arras trials of 1460, the peak period (as for all of Western Europe) coincided with the Eighty Years War and the division of the 17 provinces inherited by Charles V. Three contrasting areas had emerged by the late sixteenth century. Luxembourg, whose affairs were only very loosely supervised by the Council of State in Brussels, saw an intense persecution at one of the highest levels (relative to population) anywhere in Europe, which is now reckoned to have claimed between 2,000 and 3,000 victims. This was largely a grass-roots phenomenon, often driven by special village committees appointed to organize prosecutions; the authorities in Brussels were increasingly worried about legal irregularities, which they found great difficulty in curbing. The number of trials declined after 1650, before they ended with the French occupation of 1683. Since Luxembourg would not normally be thought part of the Netherlands this tragic story will not be discussed in any detail here. By comparison the Southern Netherlands under Spanish rule had many fewer trials, but several hundred death sentences were passed and there were some more spectacular outbursts, including some cases of demonic possession attributed to witchcraft. In the Northern provinces under the States-General, with their non-inclusive minority Calvinist church, prosecutions were rarer, with perhaps 150 executions, the last at the exceptionally early date of 1608.

There has been an obvious temptation to interpret these differences in terms of a 'modernization' theory, associating persecution with rural backwardness, traditional religion, and autocratic government. Although such factors probably do all possess some marginal relevance, on closer examination none of them

Pieter van der Heyden's 1559 engraving after Pieter Bruegel, now in the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, depicts The Witch of Malleghem, a village healer who played on the gullibility of her audiences. She and her assistants were pretending to cure madness or folly by removing stones from the heads of the sufferers. This reminds us that sixteenth-century people could be well aware of the possibilities of deceit and trickery.

comes close to accounting properly for a notably complex situation on the ground. It is far from obvious just what the numbers of trials can be taken to indicate; they are certainly not a reliable index of beliefs in witchcraft, local activity directed to countering its effects, or magical practices more generally. Apart from Luxembourg, the whole of the Low Countries really belongs with the broad sweep of Western Europe in this period, where there was an intermittent and rather inefficient attack on alleged witches by legal means, a relatively modest persecution very largely driven by local demands rather than by the rulers. Wherever the surviving documentation allows detailed investigation historians have found only contingent reasons for why one village or small region saw much greater activity than some of its neighbours. The overall conclusion is that in both rural and urban communities witchcraft beliefs were commonplace, but there was great reluctance to denounce neighbours to the authorities, coupled with a marked preference for informal methods of control. Luxembourg, on the other hand, looks to have been the north-western outlier of a zone stretching up either side of the Rhine from the Western Alps northwards. This Rhineland corridor was characterized by relatively weak states and a tendency to political and religious fragmentation, also in some cases by legal arrangements which probably made prosecutions easier. Although there were striking local divergences here too, a very high proportion of known European trials for witchcraft can be located within this relatively restricted area. The Low Countries stood on its fringe, so it is interesting that they were not drawn in to much higher levels of legal persecution.

This is one of several illuminations in copies of a 1460s treatise on the Waldensian heresy, associated with the Arras witchcraft trials of 1460, showing a group of devil-worshippers engaged in a precursor of the witches' sabbat. This would only become a common theme for artists a century later. MS Du crime de Vauderye, Royal Library, Brussels.

Little eagerness to persecute

The Revolt itself, and the longer story of attempts to enforce religious orthodoxy, might suggest some characteristics shared by both Northern and Southern provinces. Precocious urbanization may have affected only a minority of these directly, but it implied unusual possibilities for migration from rural areas too; as in England, a relatively mobile society could defuse local tensions more readily. Power tended to be dispersed, shared out among a nexus of local oligarchies and professional groups, generally far more concerned to defend their privileges than to act as moral policemen. The ability of Anabaptists, Mennonites and other religious dissidents to survive within this milieu is striking evidence for a lack of persecuting zeal. Such reluctance can only have been powerfully reinforced by the traumatic experiences of the mid-sixteenth century, with their legacy of religious pluralism in the North and considerable tolerance even in the South. The occasional episode pointed up the danger that localism could make space for individual persecutors, but in general consensual and collegial practices look to have operated as a very effective inhibitor. This did not prevent a trickle of witchcraft cases, most of which seem to have been instigated by local officials in response to popular pressure; however these never escalated into more general campaigns, and tended to attract disapproval from central authorities if numbers of accusations increased. Hardline Calvinists in the North displayed little eagerness to persecute, being much more concerned about the ubiquity of popular superstition. If the possession cases of the early seventeenth century attracted support from some groups of Catholic zealots in the South, they found to their dismay that the political and

ecclesiastical hierarchies saw matters very differently. A relatively intense early 1590s persecution inspired by two lords in Peelland was greeted with unanimous hostility by the local Catholic clergy. Like the lawyers and divines in the Republic, these priests were concerned about the abuse of process and the risks when innocent persons were accused. Such worries about the actual conduct of trials seem to have been the crucial reason why death sentences for witchcraft disappeared from the United Provinces in the first decade of the seventeenth century. Nor were similar concerns absent in the South, where the government issued several ordinances seeking to improve procedure in witchcraft trials between 1591 and 1623; these have too often been interpreted as simple encouragements to persecution, when their intention was evidently much more balanced.

Poor women or nuns

The Low Countries therefore belong to that much larger part of Europe where legal proceedings against supposed witches were commonplace but not particularly common, and the most striking feature was how soon courts in the Republic refused to pass death sentences – this also goes a long way to explain why the death rate in the South was significantly higher. Here trials continued at moderate (if very patchy) levels until the 1650s, and did not end in some places until the 1680s. The discrepancy cannot merely be ascribed to Catholic traditionalism, when one remembers the notably sceptical attitude being taken by the Roman and Spanish Inquisitors in the same period. It may well be, however, that the second phase of the Eighty Years War saw far less interchange across the frontier zones than previously, so that administrators and jurists in the South would have remained largely unaware of the changed approach in the Republic. In addition, most contemporaries probably thought witchcraft trials to be a relatively unimportant if routine phenomenon; they were far from seeing them as a touchstone of rationalism, as modern historians are prone to do, and would hardly have felt any need to worry about cases that only involved humble people. It was different when nuns at a Brigittine convent in Lille succumbed to an outbreak of demonic possession in 1612-14, and in obvious imitation of the recent Gaufridy case at Aix-en-Provence accused their convent almoner of being the witch responsible. The Dominican exorcists from Aix were brought in through the influence of a powerful nobleman, the Count of Montmorency, and started to extract astonishing claims from the nuns. These extended to the idea that exorcism could force the demons in the nuns' bodies to reveal crucial truths about religion and politics, behind which a blatant ventriloquism was all too evident to observers. Several leading Catholic clerics reacted strongly against the exorcisms, then the papal nuncio took charge of the case and with assistance from the Pope closed the whole affair down. The danger of scandal and discredit in the upper levels of the Church evidently aroused fears on a quite different scale from the executions of witches who were predominantly poor women.

Some other aspects of the persecution deserve brief mention. It is important to understand that virtually all trials took place in normal secular courts, with only minimal clerical involvement. As elsewhere in Europe, this was part

of a trend towards a much more repressive judicial system, which moved from composition fines to various forms of corporal punishment. In Gelderland and other parts of the North one can discern a pattern in the spread of trials, starting around the 1470s, with ideas and practices filtering in from the nearby Electorate of Cologne where prosecutions had already begun. The relevant expertise was then gradually exported to other provinces, while executioners learned to supplement their traditional battery of tortures with what proved very effective techniques of sleep deprivation through 'watching and walking'. On the side of restraint the Northern Netherlands provide two of the very rare examples (1515 and 1553) where the law of talion was applied to accusers, who were put to death when they failed to substantiate their charges (because the accused resisted the torture). There were occasional lynchings by angry crowds, some of them in maritime communities where the loss of ships might be attributed to witches; these naturally continued into a later period, the last known case being from 1746. Something of a legend has accumulated around the weighing house at Oudewater, supposedly a place where suspects could go in the hope of clearing their names, whose role looks to have been almost entirely an eighteenth-century fable. In both North and South the authorities declared a wish to crack down on a whole range of magical and superstitious activities, but this should not lead to the conclusion that most convicted witches were practitioners of traditional healing; witchcraft was indeed very largely about sickness and healing, but in a very specific idiom that does not fit this model. Many cunning folk were prosecuted, but rarely as witches, and they continued to be punished well into the seventeenth century, often by whipping and banishment from the locality.

Witch-doctors

The greatest historical interest of Low Countries' witchcraft lies in the wealth of surviving evidence for witchcraft as a shared belief system across all social groups below the educated elites. The archives are particularly rich in material relating to the cunning folk, many of whom can properly be described as witch-doctors. What emerges is a picture of widespread therapeutic practices, plainly dating back before the witchcraft trials themselves, and continuing a vigorous life for centuries after the end of the persecution. Although these activities were anathema both to the elite among the Catholic clergy and to the Dutch Reformed Church, and were repeatedly made the subject of formal prohibitions, half-hearted repressive campaigns never seem to have achieved anything significant against them. By the eighteenth century it looks as if most hostile clerics preferred to turn a blind eye; while statistical precision is impossible, the serious decline of magical healing should probably be placed as late as the early twentieth century. This is a pattern that can be paralleled for much of Europe, with witchcraft beliefs having an immensely long history in comparison to the relatively brief period of legal action against supposed witches. Since official medicine was still largely useless, if not positively lethal, there was in truth much to be said for a style of folk medicine that relied heavily on the placebo effect, even if some of its social effects may have been unpleasant. Moreover there were real problems to be dealt with, because there is much

David Teniers the Younger painted several pictures in the style of this Sabbat Scene from 1633, which makes witches a subject for entertainment rather than terror. Musée de la Chartreuse, Douai.

evidence to suggest that people who believe themselves bewitched can sicken or in some cases die as a result; it is a grave error to underestimate the power of fantasy and the imagination. There were no obvious theoretical limits to the range of misfortunes that could be attributed to witchcraft, but in practice various understandings appear to have governed suspicions. For reasons that we may never fully understand, fears of witchcraft waxed and waned, and accusations never became an automatic response to misfortune. While certain kinds of affliction were associated with the ill-will of neighbours, there was also an interpersonal element, because such a diagnosis plainly needed a plausible target, preferably in the form of someone with a reputation or with whom one had recently quarrelled. It was believed that witches could effect evil by glancing at their victim or exchanging small gifts, so it was wise to avoid any relationship and even eye contact with suspects.

In coastal areas bewitchment could be blamed for maritime accidents, elsewhere it might account for misfortunes with animals and milk churns, but everywhere human sicknesses formed the commonest basis for accusations. The surest way to lift the curse was to have the witch pronounce a blessing, so much of the activity of the witch-doctors was devoted to identifying the person(s) to be coerced – often very unwillingly – into this ritual. Some elementary counter-magic might also be employed, sometimes by priests using

A contemporary engraving of the execution of Anne Hendricks at Amsterdam in 1571.

exorcisms or sacramentals. When the cunning-man Gillis Snouk was banished from Staats-Vlaanderen for thirty years in 1657 it was said that in some sixty cases over the last six or seven years he had used

> 'black magic, divination and blessing of people, cattle and farms in the sense that he disenchanted people who were already bewitched by blessing and conjuration, thereby using many books and documents containing many abominable and blasphemous conjurations, adjuring the devils, princes of evil and murderers, male and female witches . . . '

The official line that only recourse to God was permissible must have seemed very feeble by comparison, as it did to a farmer's wife from Gelderland, who when asked in 1647 why she did not pray to God rather than running to a witch-doctor, answered: 'We can get that man [the witch-doctor] but we cannot get God.' A remarkable analysis of these patterns was offered by the Catholic priest of Groessen in Gelderland (previously in Cleves), Jacob Vallick, in his booklet of 1559 Tooveren, wat der voor een werc is (Witchcraft, what manner of work it is), a notably shrewd and sceptical work. He was one of a number of writers from the Netherlands who expressed similar doubts, including Johan Wier, Cornelis Loos, Philippus Rovenius, and Balthasar Bekker. The most famous demonologist who took the other side was the Jesuit Martin Delrio, but the influence of his encyclopaedic 1599 work on magic on judicial practice in the South has probably been much exaggerated. There is little doubt that most of these writers were expressing an attitude common to reforming clerics of all denominations, who reacted with deep hostility to a world of popular belief that long defied all efforts at reform. They also had good reason to think that witchcraft charges might be socially disruptive, for suspects were often shunned or maltreated - one reason why they often brought slander cases against their accusers, long after they were at no risk of prosecution in the courts. ■

FURTHER READING

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