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“BECAUSE SHE WOULD NOT BE GOVERNED”: MEDIEVAL WOMEN, POWER, AND THE POLITICIZATION OF WITCHCRAFT

Anna Nelson Bennett
University of Rhode Island, annaleigh.nelson14@gmail.com

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“BECAUSE SHE WOULD NOT BE GOVERNED”:
MEDIEVAL WOMEN, POWER, AND THE POLITICIZATION OF WITCHCRAFT

BY
ANNA NELSON BENNETT

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FUFILLMENT OF THE
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MASTER OF ARTS THESIS

OF

ANNA BENNETT

APPROVED:

Thesis Committee:

Major Professor Joëlle Rollo-Koster

Alan Verskin

Kathleen Davis

Nasser H. Zawia
DEAN OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL

UNIVERSITY OF RHODE ISLAND
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ABSTRACT

Statement of the Problem:

Since the mid-twentieth century, scholarship on European witchcraft has proved critical in understanding the relationship between gender, sexuality, and power in pre-modern Western society. For medieval and early modern people, accusations of heresy and witchcraft served to reinstate control over elements of society that were perceived as dangerous or dissident to the established order. While advances in the study of witchcraft have greatly informed the fields of history and anthropology, such scholarship has up until this point largely focused on witch hunts targeting women of the lower classes. Further study concerning the use of witchcraft charges as a political tool aimed at socially prominent women is needed to better inform scholarly understanding of the full breadth of the European witch craze. This thesis will specifically examine a multitude of cases spanning the early Middle Ages through the early modern period, roughly the fifth through eighteenth centuries, involving women in positions of social visibility and power, who were attacked with witchcraft accusations as a means of removing them from a seemingly unnatural gender role.

Methodology or Procedures:

This thesis utilizes a diverse range of medieval documents, especially witchcraft treatises, as a means of exploring the evolution of European witchcraft throughout the medieval period, culminating in the late medieval feminization of the

institution of witchcraft. In order to establish politically motivated witchcraft charges against powerful women as a repeating pattern throughout medieval and early modern history, this study assumes a sweeping perspective, taking note of similar cases occurred both chronologically and geographically separate from one another. Subsequently, the source material upon which this thesis relies is quite diverse. Infamous inquisitors' guides such as the *Formicarius* by Johannes Nider and the *Malleus Maleficarum* by Kramer and Sprenger provide the theoretical foundation upon which such witchcraft charges were built, and similarly allow me to explain the belief system in place that allowed witchcraft accusations against prominent women to succeed.

Moving on from this foundational literature, this study explores a variety of primary sources documenting specific instances of witchcraft accusations leveled at socially influential women. These will include, to name a few, the claims of witchcraft aimed at the Anglo-Saxon Queen Ælfthryth in the twelfth-century chronicle *Liber Eilensis*, the recording of the sorcery trial of Dame Alice Kyteler in fourteenth-century Ireland, and the court proceedings for treason and witchcraft brought against Joan of Arc in fifteenth-century Burgundy and Queen Anne Boleyn in 1530s England. Examining the implications of witchcraft accusations on powerful women will broaden and bolster scholarship on the European witchcraft movement by illustrating both how these cases fit into the larger fabric of medieval society, and how they maintained or impacted the social hierarchy and its prescribed gender roles.

Findings:

This study illustrates a pattern of politically motivated witchcraft accusations throughout the medieval and early modern period informed by a single, ever-expanding lexicon supporting the idea of feminized witchcraft. Unlike much previous scholarship on European witchcraft, this thesis demonstrates that socially prominent women, for a myriad of reasons ranging from the scrutiny given to their sexual conduct to their contested foothold in both the domestic and public spheres, were just as susceptible to accusations of sorcery and witchcraft as their lower-class counterparts. The case studies presented here also demonstrate a pattern of naming women as witches in an attempt to delegitimize their agency in the male-dominated arenas of governance, religion, warfare, and commerce. Because this method successfully defamed and destroyed numerous powerful women throughout the Middle Ages, the inherent characteristics of the witch became intertwined with unrestrained women, creating an environment that allowed political detractors to slander women for witch-like crimes, without ever invoking that particular label. This finding demands further study on the relationship between powerful women and claims of deviant behavior as an essential aspect of pre-modern women's social history.

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Chapter 1

Introduction: Witchcraft and Powerful Women throughout the Middle Ages

“All witchcraft comes from carnal lust, which in women is insatiable,”¹ caution Kramer and Sprenger, fifteenth-century Dominican inquisitors and authors of the *Malleus Maleficarum*, or *Hammer of Witches*, the definitive text on witchcraft to emerge from the late medieval period. First published in Speyer, Germany in 1486, the *Malleus* not only argues for the existence of satanic witchcraft, but also asserts that refusal to believe in the real presence and power of witches is in fact heresy.² While this text made belief in the manifest evils of witchcraft an element of Catholic orthodoxy, for historians, the *Malleus* represents another marker of the witch craze in Europe: the demonization of female sexuality and confluence in the popular imagination of unrestrained women and licentiousness or evil. While the *Malleus Maleficarum* has been analyzed for centuries as the most influential source for Catholic and Protestant witch hunters alike, the text’s obsessive focus on female sexuality in relation to witchcraft, an overarching theme found in the majority of witchcraft literature from this period, is the issue that will be of greatest importance to the present study.

In spite of the *Malleus*’ common interpretation as a document synonymous with the collective European stance on magical practices, the

¹ Heinrich Kramer and Jacob Sprenger, *Malleus Maleficarum*, in *Witchcraft in Europe 1100-1700: A Documentary History*, ed. Alan C. Kors and Edward Peters (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1972), 127.

² Jeffrey Richards, *Sex, Dissidence, and Damnation: Minority Groups in the Middle Ages* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 75.

misogynistic vitriol exhibited by its Dominican authors was not always associated with witchcraft in the medieval world. While women were known to be capable of both good and dark magic since ancient times, the depiction of witchcraft as an overwhelmingly feminine pursuit, and the further conflation of witchcraft and sorcery with religious heresy, was a development of the later Middle Ages. Understanding the evolution of Church history, popular beliefs, and historical events that eventually led to the late medieval feminization of witchcraft allows us to more holistically examine the total impact of the witch craze.

Without this theoretical background knowledge it would appear that targeting of women such as Valentina Visconti, Joan of Arc, or Queen Anne Boleyn might simply be isolated incidents influenced by the political climate or ingrained superstitions of their particular place and time. On the surface this is indeed true, but when juxtaposed it becomes clear that each individual occurrence of witchcraft accusations leveled against prominent women in the late medieval period illustrates a larger pattern of increasing persecution informed by a single rhetoric on the feminine nature of the witch.

Although the witchcraft cases presented here all took place during or after the fourteenth century, popular belief in sorcery, witchcraft, and other magical practices had existed as a facet of everyday life since pre-Christian Europe. As Peter Brown posits, sorcerers were viewed as legitimate intermediaries between mankind and the gods in many ancient polytheistic

religions, and thus one of Christianity's earliest missions was to delegitimize practitioners of magic in the late Roman Empire by associating their actions with Satanism.³ As early Christians' worship of an executed man smacked of necromancy to many Romans, their efforts no doubt attempted to distance Christianity from magic by openly condemning it.⁴ This explains the sudden upsurge of prosecution for sorcery in the fourth century CE, following the Empire's official toleration of Christianity during the reign of the Emperor Constantine.⁵ At first this purge was not directed more heavily toward one gender or another: both men and women had opportunities to practice sorcery and divination within ancient Roman polytheism and thus could be equally implicated in perpetuating pagan belief systems.

I argue, however, that the growing Church became more exclusively concerned with magical practices among women precisely because of its official toleration. Secretive house churches were often presided over by female heads of household, whose authority in the home automatically granted them leadership roles within Christianity. Some early Christians, namely Gnostics, even took belief in female power within the religion a step further, asserting that because God made both male and female in His image, as stated in Genesis 1:27,

³ Peter Brown, "Sorcery, Demons, and the Rise of Christianity: from Late Antiquity into the Middle Ages," in *Religion and Society in the Age of St. Augustine*, ed. Peter A. Brown (London: Harper and Row Publishers, 1972), 121-123.

⁴ Richard Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 36.

⁵ A.A. Barb, "The Survival of the Magic Arts," in *The Conflict Between Paganism and Christianity in the Fourth Century*, ed. A. Momigliano (Oxford, 1963), 100-125. Evidence of magic's role in early Christianity can also be found in the Gnostic movement, which emphasized apocryphal elements of Christ's magical powers, depicting him as a sort of omnipotent sorcerer. For more see Jeffrey Burton Russell, *Witchcraft in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1972), 45-46.

the Creator was thus both masculine and feminine in nature.⁶ As house churches became obsolete in response to the new acceptance of Christianity within the Roman Empire and basilicas emerged as the preferred site for Christian worship assemblies, power within Christianity shifted from the domestic to the public sphere, thus restricting the agency of women within the religion significantly.⁷ This created an environment in which, as Elaine Pagels has noted in reference to the suppression of the gnostic gospels, “men formed the legitimate body of the community, while women are allowed to participate only when they assimilate themselves to men.”⁸ As a result women who continued to join in the male-dominated public sphere, whether for religious or secular purposes, risked being targeted as dangerous elements aiming to undermine the authority of the Catholic Church and the patriarchal order that it promoted.

Evidence of the vulnerability of socially prominent women to witchcraft accusations in Christian society can be found as early as fifth-century Alexandria. It was in this city circa 415 CE that the renowned female philosopher, astronomer, and mathematician Hypatia, head of the Alexandrian Platonist school and daughter of famed philosopher Theon Alexandricus, was accused of spreading pagan beliefs and practicing sorcery, and was subsequently flayed

⁶ Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels* (New York: Random House, 1974), Chapter III. As Pagels has demonstrated, the early gnostic gospels did in fact include female symbolism in their religious texts. One group of Gnostics is believed to have received the tradition of Jesus’ life and resurrection through the apostle James and through Mary Magdalene, and they prayed to both the “divine Father and Mother, parents of the Divine Being.” This theology, based on the story of creation espoused in Genesis 1:27, which states that God made humanity, both male and female, in His image, implies that God is both masculine and feminine in nature. As a result Gnosticism was fiercely suppressed in the early centuries of the Church’s establishment.

⁷ Carolyn Osiek, Margaret Y. MacDonald, with Janet H. Tulloch, *A Woman’s Place: House Churches in Earliest Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 134-135.

⁸ Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels*, Chapter III.

alive by a mob of angry Christian zealots.⁹ Her violent death, perpetrated by a group of monks no less, illustrates the extreme insecurity that early ecclesiastics felt over highly visible women, especially those that controlled the dissemination of information to the educated elite.

The historian can likewise find corresponding episodes in which socially prominent women were accused of practicing sorcery or witchcraft as the Germanic barbarian tribes of Europe were Christianized and established ruling dynasties throughout the early medieval period.¹⁰ In his *History of the Franks*, for example, Gregory of Tours relates that political detractors plotted against Queen Faileuba, second consort of King Childebert II of the Merovingians (r. 575-595 CE), after she attended and participated in an important conference at Trier alongside her husband.¹¹ In order to convince the king to repudiate his wife they accused her and the king's mother, the formidable Queen Dowager Brunhild, of sorcery. Faileuba caught wind of this plot before it reached the ears of the king,

⁹ Michael Deakin, "Hypatia," *Encyclopedia Britannica* <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/279463/Hypatia> (accessed 19 December, 2014).

¹⁰ Women in barbarian society did enjoy considerable freedoms that their later medieval counterparts often did not, such as widespread involvement in politics and religious life. As the Roman historian Tacitus first explained, Germanic tribes considered women to be more gifted in the arts of prophecy and divination, granting many of them special status as religious visionaries amongst their tribes. Women were, of course, still seen primarily as fixtures of the domestic sphere, and thus the same societal beliefs that allowed barbarian women greater involvement in the public sphere also made them susceptible to charges of wrongdoing from detractors if they did interact with men more frequently. For more on the lives of women in barbarian Europe, see Michael Frassetto, *The Encyclopedia of Barbarian Europe* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, Inc., 2003), 371.

¹¹ Gregory of Tours, *History of the Franks*, trans. Lewis Thorpe (London: Penguin, 1974), 524-526. Interestingly, the person tasked with informing Childebert of his wife's supposed activities in sorcery was Septimima, wet nurse to the royal children, and the plot was concocted immediately after it became known that the Queen had given birth to a son who died during labor. Attacking a queen as a witch because of her difficulty in bearing healthy children, especially males, is a tactic that would be used successfully in the sixteenth century against Queen Anne Boleyn of England.

however, and she and her mother-in-law intervened before the palace coup could be carried out.

Later, in tenth-century England, Queen Ælfthryth, the first English consort to be crowned and anointed alongside the king, was accused of witchcraft after she was implicated in the murder of her stepson.¹² She provided King Edgar with two sons, but the first died young, and Edgar subsequently passed over his younger, and rather unimpressive son, the future Æthelred the Unready, instead naming his illegitimate son Edward heir to the throne. Upon Edgar's death factionalism ensued over which son should inherit, an issue promptly solved in March 978 when Edward was murdered by a group of the queen dowager's attendants upon his arrival at Corfe Castle.¹³ The young king was immediately declared a martyr and Ælfthryth vilified. The twelfth-century chronicle *Liber Eliensis*, or *Book of the Isle of Ely*, argues that Ælfthryth was in fact a witch who practiced spells under an old tree in the New Forest and transformed into a horse; further, she had used her dark powers to bring about her stepson's untimely death and the martyrdom of the first abbot of the Isle of Ely.¹⁴ While the queen dowager's reputation suffered amongst the nobility and

¹² Although Ælfthryth's denunciation as a witch did not occur until after King Edgar's death, an examination of the laws of Edgar's reign illustrate a deep concern over entrenched pagan magic rituals in England: one states that "We demand that every priest zealously promote Christianity and totally extinguish every manifestation of heathenism, that he forbid worship at wells, necromancy, divination and enchantment, the vain practices carried on with spells, with elder trees and various other trees, and with stones." For more see "Laws of King Edgar, 959," in *A Casebook of Witchcraft*, ed. William Woods (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1974), 24.

¹³ Pauline Stafford, *Unification and Conquest: A Political and Social History of England in the Tenth and Eleventh Centuries* (London: E. Arnold, 1989), 57-59.

¹⁴ *Liber Eliensis*, ed. Janet Fairweather (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2005), 153-154. Edgar had supposedly married Ælfthryth because of her well-known beauty and intelligence. The ecclesiastic authors of the *Liber* twisted this to argue that, as a witch, she had enticed the king

English people as a result of her role in Edward's death, her son Æthelred's position as the new king protected her from suffering more serious consequences, and she retired peacefully to a convent for the remainder of her life.

A central theme can be taken from these early examples of female witchcraft persecution. For centuries after the emergence of Christianity, sorcery and witchcraft, although viewed with increasing concern by the clergy, were maintained to be superstitious relics of pagan times. Many laypeople did not necessarily agree with this interpretation, however, and throughout the common population beliefs in the efficacy of magic continued to coexist alongside developing Church doctrine.¹⁵ In spite of the pre-Christian, polytheistic roots of many of the magic rituals that permeated early and central medieval Europe, the underlying belief that these practices still carried real weight and could deliver tangible results to the participant threatened the primacy of Christianity.¹⁶ If magic, especially dark magic in the form of witchcraft, was pagan and thus unreal, and yet in some cases appeared to work, then people might think that perhaps it was actually the Christian religion that lacked real power and legitimacy. Medieval clerics understood that average people might make this connection and subsequently doubt Christianity's utility in their lives, and thus

with her voracious lust, and possibly through the use of magic potions and poisons, a theme repeated in the charges later brought against Alice Kyteler, Valentina Visconti, Elizabeth Woodville, and Anne Boleyn.

¹⁵ Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1971), 26-27.

¹⁶ Michael D. Bailey, "The Disenchantment of Magic: Spells, Charms, and Superstition in Early European Witchcraft Literature," *The American Historical Review* 111, no. 2 (April 2006): 391-392.

began to describe witchcraft not simply as a barbarous vestige of paganism, but as a machination of the devil.¹⁷ Around the turn of the tenth century Regino,

Abbot of Prüm wrote that

certain wicked women won over by the devil and seduced by illusions and hallucinations of demons believe and indeed state openly that they ride out at night with Diana, the pagan goddess.... If only they were destroyed by their own lack of faith! But no. Instead, they drag down many others into their own state of impiety. For they believe that a thing divine both in nature and power can exist apart from the one true God. The clergy ought to preach that these are only demonic fancies they put into their heads, not by God, but by the evil spirit. In this way Satan, who can take the shape of an angel, once he has tangled up some woman's wits, leads her astray in her dreams, so that the victim believes that what happened only in her imagination actually took place in the body.¹⁸

The abbot's observation contains similar references to pagan beliefs as are present in the previously mentioned cases. He asserts that while these women believe they in fact fly at night with Diana, this is simply a figment of their overactive imaginations and sinful natures. It is his placement of Satan in this explanation of witchcraft that marks a change in the Christian approach to magical practices. The abbot's definition illustrates the divergence between sorcery and witchcraft: while sorcery implied a manipulation of magic and the use of otherworldly spirits for earthly ends, witchcraft indicated the practice of magic with an implicit reliance on the devil for power.¹⁹

Ironically, the acknowledgement of witchcraft as an active tool of Satan in turn granted it a measure of legitimacy that the outdated pagan label did not

¹⁷ Ibid., 392.

¹⁸ Abbot Regino of Prüm, *Canon Episcopi*, in *A Casebook of Witchcraft*, ed. William Woods (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1974), 27-28.

¹⁹ Russell, *Witchcraft in the Middle Ages*, 17.

carry. Pagan beliefs in themselves conveyed very little weight, because according to Christian doctrine gods and goddesses such as Diana simply did not exist. The devil, however, was a real and threatening menace to Christians everywhere, implying that his role in the propagation of witchcraft and dark magic could cause palpable harm. Indeed, as Jeffrey Burton Russell has argued, when Christianity assimilated with Mediterranean paganism the new religion in some ways aided in the development of witchcraft as a separate and more pervasive entity than ancient sorcery. Clerics told people that the old gods they continued to worship were false idols, figments of the mind controlled by demons.²⁰ Instead of deterring many people from their polytheistic traditions, it instead transferred the beliefs and loyalties of many from pagan divinities to demonic powers, thus spreading the popularity and practice of witchcraft in the early medieval period.

Because many of the old gods were worshipped at household shrines, nascent forms of demonology and witchcraft also became a fixture of the domestic sphere. This arguably exposed more women than men to witchcraft in its earliest form, as the burgeoning popularity of Christianity as a state-sanctioned religion in the late Roman Empire restricted female participation and promoted their seclusion in the home.²¹ As Martha Rampton points out, the Church's restrictions on female participation in religious life only increased throughout the early medieval period, culminating in the lessening of

²⁰ Ibid., 46.

²¹ Joann McNamara, "Matres Patriae/Matres Ecclesiae: Women of the Roman Empire," in *Becoming Visible: Women in European History*, ed. Renate Bridenthal, Claudia Koonz, and Susan Stuard (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1987), 122.

opportunities for women to join in the monastic movement under the Carolingians during the tenth century.²² As a result magic rituals possibly seemed to offer women greater chance for agency than the severely limited functions available to them in the Church.

Clerics took note of this gender discrepancy, even if they did not see the Church's role in promoting it. Abbot Regino of Prüm's writings on witchcraft, as well as the preceding early medieval cases of prominent women attacked as witches, demonstrate that medieval male concern with witchcraft as a threatening custom most often practiced by women manifested itself long before the late medieval period.²³ Working in the first decade of the eleventh century, Bishop Burchard of Worms built upon Regino's earlier argument by attempting to disprove the efficacy of magic rituals associated with women. The seventieth canon of his *Corrector* urges his audience not to believe in the powers of women "deceived by the devil," who claim to "ride on certain beasts on special nights" with the "witch Hulda," a goddess revered by pre-Christian Germanic peoples.²⁴ Burchard's portrayal of women and witchcraft bears a striking resemblance to Regino of Prüm's earlier description of female magic as both pagan in origin,

²² Martha Rampton, "Burchard of Worms and Female Magical Ritual," in *Medieval and Early Modern Ritual: Formalized Behavior in Europe, China, and Japan*, ed. Joëlle Rollo-Koster (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 9.

²³ In an article attempting to illustrate that most historians only look back to the *Malleus* as the original source of feminized witchcraft, Michael D. Bailey asserts that Nider's *Formicarius*, written about fifty years before Kramer and Sprenger took quill to paper, was the first clerical writing to argue that witches were usually women. These much earlier examples disprove that aspect of his thesis. See Michael D. Bailey, "The Feminization of Magic and the Emerging Idea of the Female Witch in the Later Middle Ages," *Essays in Medieval Studies* 19 (2002): 120.

²⁴ Burchard of Worms, from the *Corrector*, in *Medieval Handbooks of Penance: A Translation of the Principal "Libri Poenitentiales"*, ed. John T. McNeill and Helena M. Gamer (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 331.

devil-inspired, and ultimately impotent. This implies that medieval clerics, from the early stages of Christianity to the fifteenth century and beyond, saw in women particular attributes that they felt made the female sex more susceptible to witchcraft.

Implicit in Regino and Burchard's writings is the belief in the female tendency to gullibly accept backward, pagan superstitions as truth. As witchcraft was purported to be a remnant of pagan superstition in Europe, popular theories concerning the mental inferiority of women slowly began to form an implicit connection that the female sex would be more likely to fall into the snares of dark magic and witchcraft. Despite these early medieval foundations of feminized witchcraft, however, for hundreds of years witchcraft persecution remained sporadic at most. Many clergymen preached against witchcraft and other forms of magic practices while simultaneously holding a set of conventionally misogynistic beliefs about the inferiority and corruptibility of women, and yet did not ever make the two interdependent. In other words, throughout the early and central Middle Ages women were seen as more *likely* than men to practice witchcraft, but the identity of the witch figure was not yet described as innately feminine.

Just as witchcraft quickly became associated with women, other forms of magic conversely continued to exist and function as legitimate sources of power in the medieval period because of their perceived masculine nature. The practice of astrology in particular retained a reputation for efficacy amongst learned men

in many European royal courts until the later early modern period. At its core astrology attempted to determine future events through study of the cosmos, but in spite of its role as a form of divination, astrologers preserved a lasting, if at times tenuous, respect as educated men who melded science and magic in the pursuit of greater knowledge.²⁵

The emerging differences between various means of magic practice illustrate the gendered nature of medieval magic. Astrology served an important purpose as an alternative form of counsel for many medieval rulers. As a result educated men normally practiced it, protecting astrology from intense scrutiny for centuries. Witchcraft on the other hand, seen as a more feminine pursuit because of its roots in pre-Christian magic ritual, was by nature considered an illegitimate and evil institution. This does not mean that men could not be considered witches; male witches were simply thought to have fallen short of the medieval model of masculinity and were regarded as pathetic and womanlike. These gendered interpretations of magic did not evolve overnight, however, but were shaped by the ever-changing political, social, and religious environment of medieval Europe. Thus, before examining some of the most extraordinary cases of witchcraft persecution against prominent women in the later Middle Ages, it remains for us to determine: what historical events or movements precipitated the dramatic increase in witchcraft persecution in the late medieval period? Further, what characteristics caused the witch figure to become associated

²⁵ For an in-depth discussion of the fragile but more reputable role of court astrologers see Hilary M. Carey, *Courting Disaster: Astrology at the English Court and University in the Later Middle Ages* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992), 1-20. Also see Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, 631-632.

almost exclusively with women? And finally, how did this feminization of the witch affect upper class, socially visible women in particular?

Retrospectively, the major catalysts in triggering the witch craze of the late medieval and early modern period were the major heretical movements that exploded in southern France, parts of the Rhineland, and northern Italy during the twelfth century. Heresies such as Catharism, which first began gaining converts in the 1140s, affected the evolution of European witchcraft in two ways. The dualist nature of Cathar belief, which maintained that the benevolent creator God was opposed by an evil earthly god, granted a more active role to Satan in the minds of many people.²⁶ The concept of Satan as a powerful and wicked deity who interacted with and victimized God's creation on a daily basis conversely made witchcraft appear to be a more immediate and serious threat to mankind. Satan relied upon demonic intermediaries to carry out his evil bidding on earth, and witchcraft seemed to be the ideal medium by which he could accomplish this goal.

While the Cathar heresy altered the way medieval people understood witchcraft and its role in the world, the character of the heretics who ascribed to such unorthodox beliefs in turn affected how the Catholic Church approached witchcraft. Cathars rejected all of the Catholic sacraments as a display of their disdain for the degradation of the created world, and subsequently scorned the outward, material symbols of mainstream Christianity, including the crucifix and

²⁶ Russell, *Witchcraft in the Middle Ages*, 101, 122-123.

the Eucharist.²⁷ While Cathars justified this extreme rejection of the material world as a disavowal of earthly idols corrupted by Satan, the Church in turn interpreted their actions as the very practice that Cathars claimed to renounce, a new brand of Satanism, and thus the link between heresy and witchcraft was born.

The radical heterodoxy of heretics like the celibate Cathars and the Waldensians, who renounced worldly possessions in order to act as itinerant preachers, immediately met with intense hostility from the Church. Their status as dangerous outsiders to mainstream Christianity forced these groups to go underground. And yet their secret worship meetings, a direct result of Catholic intolerance toward alternate theologies, only helped to feed the Church's connection between heresy and witchcraft.²⁸ Witches' assemblies were thought to be equally secret and debauched, and thus the two groups became blurred in Catholic condemnations: heretics were seen as devil worshippers, and subsequently witchcraft, an entirely separate entity from medieval heresies, was equated with heresy, evolving from a devious pagan practice to a direct assault on the Church itself.

Their radical and subversive nature was not the only aspect of medieval heresies to affect how witchcraft was viewed. The followers that movements like Catharism and Waldensianism attracted further solidified the Church's association between heretics and witches. Just as Christianity had in its earliest

²⁷ Ibid., 125.

²⁸ Ibid., 131-132.

days, many heretical movements interested women, who saw an opportunity for greater freedom in these unorthodox interpretations of faith. Waldensians, for example, encouraged the spread of Christianity through proselytization conducted by the entire sainthood of believers, including women.²⁹ Certainly the ability to openly preach the Gospel, a role that allowed them more independence and influence, appealed to many women. Ultimately, because the Church considered these heretical groups to be Satanists, it was a simple matter to portray their female members as witches, classic pawns of the devil.

An oft-cited case described by Ralph of Coggeshall, the abbot of a Cistercian monastery in England from 1207-1218, on the so-called “witch of Rheims” highlights the confluence of heresy and witchcraft that occurred in the twelfth century. Ralph relates that in the French city of Rheims in 1176, a hot-blooded clerk of the archbishop of Rheims had approached a young girl he saw walking through a field, attempting to entice her into having sex with him. Her reply, expressing her distaste for sexual relations and her belief that the loss of her virginity would ensure her eternal damnation, led the archbishop’s man to believe that she was in fact a follower of the Publican heresy, which disavowed procreation and thus sex of any kind.³⁰ After being interrogated by the local clergy, the girl admitted to having learned her beliefs from an older woman, who was then brought in for questioning as well. Both women refused to admit the

²⁹ For an in-depth discussion of the Waldensian heresy, see Norman Cohn, “The Demonization of Medieval Heretics,” in *The Witchcraft Reader*, ed. Darren Oldridge (London: Routledge, 2002), 36-43.

³⁰ Ralph of Coggeshall, “The Witch of Rheims, 1176-1180,” in *Witchcraft in Europe: A Documentary History, 1100-1700*, ed. Alan C. Kors and Edward Peters (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1972), 44-45.

error of their Publican sectarianism, however, and were condemned to death by fire. The older woman reportedly scoffed at her sentence, and throwing a ball of thread from the window of the room in which she was being held, “she was lifted from the earth before everyone’s eyes... What became of that wicked woman, or whither she was transported, the onlookers could in no wise discover.”³¹ The young girl, meanwhile, was burned at the stake and yet “she emitted no sigh, not a tear, no groan, but endured all the agony of the conflagration steadfastly and eagerly, like a martyr of Christ... People of this wicked sect choose to die rather than be converted from error...”³² Medieval gender biases concerning the severity of female misbehavior is obvious here: the story focuses on the evil nature of the women’s disavowal of sex, while the clerk’s attempt to rape the young girl is only mentioned in the most casual of terms.

This strange episode reveals the Church’s means of addressing unruly female heretics. Female agency within heretical sects was deeply disturbing for Catholic priests; the girl’s description of her introduction to Publicanism implies that the older woman she implicated had initially converted her, showing that women had the ability to act as agents for their faith. This perversion of gender roles greatly threatened the orthodox order of the Catholic Church: not only did many heresies allow un-ordained laymen to preach, but women as well! While the Publican women acted boldly in this story, their actions are portrayed as a sign of their devilish spirits. The older woman was obviously viewed as a witch

³¹ Ibid., 47.

³² Ibid.

who employed an evil spell as a means of escaping justice, while her young convert died an agent of Satan, refusing to admit her error even in her final agonizing moments. The women's heresy and witchcraft is interwoven into a single incident, succinctly illustrating the intersection of the two in the central Middle Ages.

While heretical movements of the central medieval period conversely marked witchcraft as a major concern for the Church to address, the papacy itself continued to consider witchcraft a separate issue for some time. In fact, in 1258 Inquisition officials formally requested that Pope Alexander IV add witchcraft to the list of offenses over which they had jurisdiction, but he refused.³³ Alexander did not completely sever the tie between dark magic and heresy, however: in his decretal response the pope specifically intoned that "the inquisitors of pestilential heresy, commissioned by the apostolic see, ought not intervene in cases of divination or sorcery *unless* these clearly savour of manifest heresy."³⁴ This wording left room for future generations of inquisitors to expand their definition of heresy, and thus create an environment in which the witch craze would flourish. As Alexander himself explained, magical practices that "clearly savoured" of heresy involved "praying at the altars of idols, to offer sacrifices, to consult demons, to elicit responses from them... or if they associate themselves publically with heretics in order to predict the future by means of the

³³ "The Papacy, the Inquisition, and the Early Witch-Finders, 1250-1484," in *Witchcraft in Europe: A Documentary History, 1100-1700*, ed. Alan C. Kors and Edward Peters (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1972), 77.

³⁴ Pope Alexander IV, "Quod super nonnullis," in *Witchcraft in Europe: A Documentary History, 1100-1700*, ed. Alan C. Kors and Edward Peters (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1972), 79. Emphasis is my own.

Body and Blood of Christ, etc.”³⁵ This description encapsulated a diverse array of perceived heretical acts, and likewise provided the Inquisition with a guide for approaching witches as enemies of the Church.

Even with Alexander IV’s tacit acceptance of some magical practices as a form of heresy in the 1250s, the papacy did not directly target witchcraft until the pontificate of John XXII in the early fourteenth century. John, originally from an area of southwestern France already well acquainted with Catharism, entered his papacy invested with a desire to root out heresy, sorcery, and witchcraft throughout the Christian world. His predecessor, Clement V, was responsible for having helped Philip the Fair of France dissolve the order of the Knights Templar at the turn of the fourteenth century. Many of the Templars in France were subsequently convicted of heresy, sodomy, and sorcery by the Crown and were burned at the stake.³⁶ Pope John thus took up the robes of his office in the wake of a papacy that had been heavily concerned with heresy. It was two alleged attempts on the pope’s life some time around his ascension in 1316 that made the dangers of heresy and witchcraft an immediate and palpable threat for John. First Matteo and Galeazzo I Visconti, prominent leaders of the pro-imperial Ghibelline faction in Italy, were implicated in a plot to murder the pope through the manipulation of a wax doll molded in his likeness.³⁷ Investigations into the

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ On the trial of the Templars, see Malcolm Barber, *The Trial of the Templars* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 2-3.

³⁷ The Ghibellines supported the influence of the Holy Roman Emperors on the Italian peninsula as opposed to the popes, who were backed by the Ghelf faction. Thus if the charges against the Visconti carried any weight, they were as much prompted by political motives as by the snares of dark magic and heresy. For more on the magically aided attempts on John XXII’s life, see Joëlle

case quickly sputtered out, however, when only one witness, who the investigating clergyman feared had been bribed, could be found to corroborate the charges.³⁸

Although the scandal over this assassination plot appeared to have been unfounded, another attempt took place in 1317, and hit much closer to home. Shortly after his ascension word reached John that the elderly bishop of Cahors, Hughes Géraud, had attempted to bring about the pope's death by poisoning as an attempt to stave off his own deposition on charges of simony.³⁹ This case also involved the use of wax dolls, which the bishop had baptized and inscribed with wishes for the pope's death; he then employed two servants in the papal household to poison the Holy Father with arsenic. These accomplices, as could be expected, appeared suspiciously nervous on the way to carry out their crime, and were apprehended before they could put the poison in the pope's food. Although it would seem that arsenic alone could have accomplished the deed, the bishop's further use of wax dolls illustrates the popular belief that natural elements such as poison required dark magic as a means of granting them potency.⁴⁰ In the wake of the trial of the Templars the environment throughout Europe, and especially in France, was ripe with fear over the possible implications of magic and heresy. Thus the pope took this threat to his life

Rollo-Koster, *Avignon and its Papacy (1309-1417): Popes, Institutions, and Society* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, forthcoming).

³⁸ Norman Cohn, *Europe's Inner Demons: An Enquiry Inspired by the Great Witch-Hunt* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1975), 192.

³⁹ Jean Favier, *Les Papes d'Avignon* (Paris: Fayard, 2006), 114-118.

⁴⁰ For an in-depth discussion of the medieval association between magic and poison, see chapters 2 and 3, the cases of Dame Alice Kyteler and Duchess Valentina Visconti.

extremely seriously, perhaps even more so because Hughes Géraud resided over the diocese of his homeland. John personally interrogated the elderly bishop seven times, until under extreme pressure the man admitted to the grave crimes before him; he was immediately tortured, burned at the stake, and his body dumped into the Rhône river.⁴¹ The gauntlet had been thrown: it was now clear that dark magic and heresy were intertwined, dangerous, and a direct threat to the power of the Catholic Church.

It is clear that John felt these incidents serious enough to prompt the creation of an official Church council on heresy and black magic. In 1320 the pope attempted to form a panel of expert clergymen with the express purpose of exploring the relationship between witchcraft and heresy.⁴² Their end goal was to accomplish what Alexander IV had chosen to avoid nearly one hundred years earlier: bringing witchcraft-related offenses under the jurisdiction of the Inquisition. In August of that year Cardinal Guillaume de Peyre Godin wrote to the head inquisitors of Carcassonne and Toulouse on John's behalf, urging them to "devote themselves with zeal to the persecution of those who practice black magic, and to fulfill their task according to the modes of procedure established in cases of heresy."⁴³ These instructions mark a significant change in the way that the medieval Church viewed witchcraft.

⁴¹ Cohn, *Europe's Inner Demons*, 192.

⁴² Isabel Iribarren, "From Black Magic to Heresy: A Doctrinal Leap in the Pontificate of John XXII," *American Society of Church History* 76, no. 1 (March 2007): 32.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 39.

As has been established earlier in this chapter, in the early Middle Ages witchcraft was largely seen as an accessory to pagan rituals, which early Christians considered illegitimate and subsequently powerless. Thus for hundreds of years magical practices “were normally divorced from their religious context...”⁴⁴ In other words, an individual could commit a magic-related offense in their pagan, superstitious ignorance without *intentionally* working to harm the Church. The fourteenth-century approach to witchcraft, however, was influenced by the heresies of the previous two centuries and the Church’s resulting position on Satan’s role in spreading those heretical beliefs. The devil’s active role in using human intermediaries for his foul deeds, in addition to the supernatural demons he was already known to employ, made him a more powerful and dangerous figure in Christian theology than ever before.⁴⁵ This viewpoint likewise granted a frustrating amount of agency to the men and women who practiced, or were at least accused of practicing, witchcraft, sorcery, and the dark arts, and in turn made them a prime target for the growing Inquisition.

The results of the 1320 ecumenical Church council are captured in the papal bull *Super illius specula*, released in 1326, which clearly defined John’s deep-seated worries over dark magical practices. In the bull Pope John asserted that those who “are Christians in name only... sacrifice to demons, adore them, make or have made images, rings, mirrors, phials, or other things for magic

⁴⁴ Ibid., 40.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 33.

purposes, and bind themselves to demons... fulfill their most depraved lusts [in order to] ask them for aid."⁴⁶ Key within this language is the connection between demons and people in practicing witchcraft; the covenant between a witch and his or her demon mirrored and distorted the relationship between Christ and the Church. This advance in the medieval understanding of demonology, as Alain Boureau posits, presented heresy and witchcraft as a series of pacts with demonic figures, usually sealed with sacramental rituals similar, however warped they might be, to those found in the Catholic Church.⁴⁷ While this interpretation explained witchcraft in a manner more easily comprehended by Church officials, it also showed heresy and witchcraft as viable alternatives to orthodox Christianity in the constant search for protection and power in the world. The Church met this tangible threat to its supremacy with the harsh justice of the Inquisition.

John XXII's decision in the 1320s to conflate witchcraft and heresy set a new benchmark by which later pontiffs approached the subject. Traces of the bull *Super illius specula* can be found in the letters and bulls of Pope Eugenius IV (1431-1447) and Pope Innocent VIII (1484-1492).⁴⁸ Although John's concern over witchcraft is less well known or cited than that of later popes, I argue that his pontificate shaped the evolution of witchcraft in a more foundational and

⁴⁶ Pope John XXII, "Super illius specula," in *Witchcraft in Europe 1100-1700: A Documentary History*, ed. Alan C. Kors and Edward Peters (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1972), 82.

⁴⁷ Alain Boureau, *Satan the Heretic: The Birth of Demonology in the Medieval West* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 68.

⁴⁸ For more see Pope Eugenius IV, "Two Letters on the Pressing Danger, 1434-37," in *Witchcraft in Europe 1100-1700: A Documentary History*, ed. Alan C. Kors and Edward Peters (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1972), 98-101. Also see Pope Innocent VIII, "The Witch-Bull, 1484," in *Witchcraft in Europe 1100-1700: A Documentary History*, ed. Alan C. Kors and Edward Peters (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1972), 107-112.

dramatic way. Indeed, it was John's writings on the threat of witchcraft and heresies that inspired the later, more infamous witchcraft writings of Johannes Nider and Heinrich Kramer. These men's reliance on the *Super illius specula*, however, leads us to question how satanic witchcraft, widely viewed as heresy by the late fourteenth century, became so heavily associated with women in such a relatively short period of time.

This question is not easily answered, and historians have offered arguments and counter arguments for the overwhelming late-medieval feminization of witchcraft in the centuries since the witch craze of the early modern period. In the realm of witchcraft studies few scholars have addressed this issue in more detail than Christina Larner, who, following in the footsteps of historians Keith Thomas and Norman Cohn, has simply stated "the stereotype witch is an independent adult woman who does not conform to the male idea of proper female behavior."⁴⁹ Removing all descriptions of ill-intended magical practices in the cases described in this thesis, these witchcraft accusations are at their core an attack on individuals viewed as subversive to the natural order of society. Heretics and witches alike fit that threatening description perfectly, and in a patriarchal context, made women the most likely to be accused of destabilizing that order.

As an aspect of their perceived improper behavior, witches were thought to gain power through the use of wordplay: a witch could defend herself or place

⁴⁹ Christina Larner, "Was Witch-Hunting Woman-Hunting?" in *The Witchcraft Reader*, ed. Darren Oldridge (London: Routledge, 2002), 273.

spells and curses on others by reciting various incantations.⁵⁰ Remnants of the hatred and distrust shown against Hypatia, an influential and learned woman in fifth-century Egypt, remain present in this basic attribute of the witch figure. Educated women who were able to employ rhetoric as a source of power deeply disturbed medieval clerics, for a successful patriarchal society is one in which women must depend on men as a source of knowledge and information. When that dependence is removed, the entire order on which the patriarchy is built begins to crumble.

Whether through speech or action, the witch described in medieval writings was unusually assertive for a woman, attempting to gain power and influence in normally male-controlled spheres of society such as governance, business negotiations, or warfare. Although the present study focuses on influential and socially prominent women, the women most often accused of witchcraft throughout the medieval and early modern period were the most vulnerable: widows, unmarried women, and midwives or healers, women whose nontraditional roles marked them as socially deviant.⁵¹ While such women presented easy targets for witch hunts, the fundamental aspect of their alleged proclivity for evil was a flaw that medieval men assumed *all* women possessed: unappeasable and dangerous sexuality inherited from the sins of Eve. The *Malleus* asserts that “though the devil tempted Eve to sin, yet Eve seduced Adam. And as the sin of Eve would not have brought death to our soul and body unless

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Clarke Garrett, “Women as Witches: Patterns of Analysis,” in *Articles on Witchcraft, Magic, and Demonology: Witchcraft, Women, and Society*, ed. Brian P. Levack (New York: Garland Publishing Inc., 1992), 18.

the sin had afterwards passed on to Adam... therefore she is more bitter than death.”⁵² This deeply rooted mistrust of female sexuality affected women across the social strata, as sexual feeling was considered a part of inherent physical nature rather than a result of socioeconomic station. Historian William Monter states that “pre-Reformation ideology had created a lethal formula to apply to dangerous women, who must be coerced if their impulses could not be controlled.”⁵³ Because of this interwoven relationship between witchcraft and femaleness, all women, regardless of rank, were at risk of being labeled witches. Moreover, socially prominent women, from royal consorts to scholars and Christian mystics, were often at an increased risk for such accusations merely by virtue of their proximity to the male-gendered spaces of politics, education and religion.

It is the fourteenth-century evolution in medieval beliefs concerning demonology that, I contend, set European society on a course firmly toward the witch craze of the early modern period. Long-ingrained beliefs about the unquenchable, sinful nature of female sexuality combined with fourteenth-century theories about witchcraft and heresy as depraved pacts made between Satan and humans to create a picture of the witch that, to the majority of medieval men, could only describe women. Many people commonly believed that pacts made with the devil were sealed by some depraved sexual act in

⁵² Kramer and Sprenger, *Malleus Maleficarum*, 127.

⁵³ William Monter, “Protestant Wives, Catholic Saints, and the Devil’s Handmaid: Women in the Age of Reformations,” in *Becoming Visible: Women in European History*, ed. Renate Bridenthal, Claudia Koonz, and Susan Stuard (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1987), 213.

which an individual bound themselves to their demon lover and overlord.⁵⁴

Demonological beliefs within medieval Christianity similarly held that gendered demons did exist: incubi were usually male and copulated with mortal women, while succubi were female and copulated with men.⁵⁵ While it was considered a grave sin for any human, male or female, to engage in sex with supernatural beings, the ramifications of such an act were far greater for women. As Norman Cohn explains, when a man fornicated with a succubus he still functioned as the dominant partner in the encounter. Thus he committed a sin but did not disturb the patriarchal order in any way. A woman's sexual encounter with an incubus was different, for she was physically dominated by the male-gendered demon, and in her surrender to the incubus she simultaneously risked the permanent loss of her Christian faith.⁵⁶ In sum, the medieval understanding of the sexual act as a relationship between an active and passive partner implied that women who bond themselves to demons, due to their inherent lust, would surrender their bodies and souls to Satan, thus making the female sex in general more susceptible to fall into evil and damnation.⁵⁷

⁵⁴ In *Demonolatry*, an English treatise written in 1595, Nicholas Remy declares that "it is well known that every witch who copulates with the devil (and they all do this when they accept him as their Master) agrees that if his organ ejaculates semen it is so cold that it makes them shiver when it enters their bodies." This description implies that by the late sixteenth century sexual relations with the devil were considered essential to witches' power. See Nicholas Remy, *Demonolatry: An Account of the Historical Practice of Witchcraft I*, ch. VI, ed. Montague Summers, trans. E.A. Ashwin (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 2008), 13.

⁵⁵ R.E.L. Masters, *Eros and Evil: The Sexual Psychopathology of Witchcraft* (New York: Matrix House, 1966), 11-12.

⁵⁶ Cohn, *Europe's Inner Demons*, 236.

⁵⁷ For an in-depth discussion of the medieval understanding of sex and sexuality as an uneven relationship between dominant and submissive partners, see Ruth Mazo Karras, *Sexuality in Medieval Europe: Doing unto others* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 1-32.

Accordingly it followed that women, so prone to insatiable lusts, would willingly surrender to a demon in order to satisfy their desires. It is a theme repeated in numerous witchcraft cases of the later Middle Ages, and one that held great bearing on the trial of Dame Alice Kyteler, which will be explored in the following chapter. The emphasis placed on uncontrollable or deviant sexuality as the benchmark of the witch figure made socially prominent women even more vulnerable to witchcraft charges, as prominent women of the nobility, the Church, and other less conventional roles lived in an environment that placed their sexual conduct under incessant scrutiny.

The preoccupation over patriarchal control of female sexuality resurfaces frequently throughout the witchcraft treatises of the late medieval period. Arguably, the first writer to make the feminized, sexualized nature of satanic witchcraft central to his argument was Johannes Nider, a Dominican theologian born circa 1380. In 1437, three years after serving on the Council of Basel, Nider published the *Formicarius*, or *Ant-Heap*, a treatise that, among other issues, sought to explain the inherent nature of witchcraft and those who practiced it.⁵⁸ The *Formicarius* assumes the form of a discussion between a teacher of the Dominican order and his skeptical student, who requires an explanation for the apparent overwhelming number of female witches in Europe. After reciting a litany of examples of wicked women who practiced witchcraft, focusing on the

⁵⁸ Hans Peter Broedel, *The Malleus Maleficarum and the Construction of Witchcraft* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2003), 113. Also see Gabor Klaniczay, "The Process of Trance: Heavenly and Diabolic Apparitions in Johannes Nider's *Formicarius*," in *Procession, Performance, Ritual, and Liturgy*, ed. Nancy van Deusan (Ottawa: The Institute of Medieval Music, 2007), 203-204.

case of Joan of Arc, who had been executed for sorcery in 1431, the teacher is still questioned by his pupil: why would so many of the fragile sex decide to involve themselves in the dark arts?⁵⁹ An undertone of uncertainty permeates the voice of the student concerning this overwhelming likelihood of finding witches among the ranks of women.⁶⁰ This is worth noting: Nider thought it best to form his argument as the answer to a question precisely because European society was divided as to the approach to witchcraft formed in the previous century.

Nider was mainly tasked with convincing a mainstream, educated audience of the innately feminine nature of witchcraft.⁶¹ Although previously discussed figures such as Abbot Regino of Prüm had already claimed women to be more inclined to the vice of witchcraft, Nider was the first to give the institution of witchcraft itself feminine qualifications. Using verbiage that was later eerily echoed in the *Malleus Maleficarum*, Nider wrote that “there are three things in life that, if they exceed the limits of their conditions, either in diminution or in excess, attain either the pinnacle of good or of evil, namely the tongue, the cleric, and the woman....if guided by an evil spirit they are usually the worst.”⁶² Although the *Formicarius* contains multiple examples of male witches, Nider argues that women are more susceptible to the snares of witchcraft by

⁵⁹ Johannes Nider, *Formicarius*, in *Witchcraft in Europe, A Documentary History, 400-1700*, ed. Alan C. Kors and Edward Peters (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), 156-157.

⁶⁰ Bailey, “The Feminization of Magic and the Emerging Idea of the Female Witch in the Later Middle Ages,” 123.

⁶¹ Michael D. Bailey, *Battling Demons: Witchcraft, Heresy, and Reform in the Late Middle Ages* (University Park: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 30-31.

⁶² Johannes Nider, *Formicarius* vol. 5, ch. 8 (Douai: Belleri, 1602), 388. To see the nearly identical passage repeated in the *Malleus*, see Heinrich Kramer and James Sprenger, *Malleus Maleficarum*, trans. Montague Summers (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1971), 42.

virtue of their mental inferiority and moral laxity. This assumes that, while witchcraft might be efficacious in some situations, its practitioners are in fact weak because of their mental faculties, their gender, and their submissive status as servants of the devil.

Nider bolsters his claims of feminized witchcraft by emphasizing magic-related crimes involving female-gendered spheres of agency. For example, he describes in detail the atrocities that witches commit against infants and small children, thus betraying a sense of distrust over female control of the domestic sphere and childrearing.⁶³ He claims that he has it on the authority of an inquisitor that some witches from the duchy of Lausanne devoured their own children after birth. Likewise, he states that in Bern thirteen infants were found to be eaten by witches within “a very short time,” a massacre made all the more heinous because the babies in question were unbaptized at the time of their deaths.⁶⁴ This caveat emphasizes the witches’ hostility against the Church and positions them as direct enemies of Christians. Most importantly, Nider explains natural tragedies and common superstitions in light of advanced medieval scholarship on diabolism and demonolatry, thus cloaking the conceptualization of witchcraft in language that the educated elite could understand.⁶⁵

⁶³ Some men’s discomfort over the perceived power of women as child bearers, deliverers, and nurturers was often translated into claims of female-perpetrated male impotence. For more see Karen Jones and Michael Zell, “‘The Divels Speciall Instruments’: Women and Witchcraft before the ‘Great Witch-Hunt,’” *Social History* 30, no. 1 (Feb. 2005): 47.

⁶⁴ Nider, *Formicarius*, 157. The number 13 is also of import here; no doubt Nider included this detail to illustrate the witches’ evil and ritualistic purposes in choosing to kill this particular, unlucky number of children.

⁶⁵ Bailey, *Battling Demons*, 38-40.

It is for this reason that Nider's work heavily influenced the writings of the Dominican inquisitors Heinrich Kramer and James Sprenger nearly a half century later. Credited as the main author of the *Malleus Maleficarum*, or *Hammer of Witches*, by far the most well known witchcraft treatise of the medieval period, Heinrich Kramer built his work upon the association between women and satanic witchcraft first made in the *Formicarius*. The text's obsession with unbridled female sexuality informs the prevailing attitude behind many of the cases presented in this study. Kramer claims that female sexuality is the root of all wrongdoings committed by women; to support this claim he references Cicero's *The Rhetorics*, which declares that "the lusts of men lead them into one sin, but the one lust of women leads them into all sins; for the root of all woman's vices is avarice."⁶⁶ In other words, the inherited proclivity for carnality in all women inclines the entire female sex toward evil practices such as witchcraft. Kramer carries this point even further, asserting, "When a woman thinks alone, she thinks evil."⁶⁷ This judgment illustrates that to clergymen like Kramer and Sprenger, women only had the potential for goodness and virtue if men properly controlled them. In spite of the extreme nature of the *Malleus'* position on women, the earlier developments in the European approach to witchcraft, both in practice and persecution, illustrate that the ideas propounded by the *Malleus* were in many ways familiar to fifteenth-century Europeans. In *Europe's Inner Demons*, Norman Cohn explains that the extensive theological discussion in the

⁶⁶ Heinrich Kramer and James Sprenger, *Malleus Maleficarum*, trans. Rev. Montague Summers (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1971), 43.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

Malleus proves that the authors were not introducing brand new ideas, but were attempting to justify and rationalize beliefs that were already popular among the common population.⁶⁸

For most people in medieval Europe, life was dangerous, brutal, and often short. Beyond the ravages of war, natural disasters such as drought, tempests, and disease occurred unaccountably and plagued the lives of many. At its most basic level, witchcraft offered pre-modern Europeans an explanation for otherwise inexplicable natural phenomena.⁶⁹ A plenitude of life's tragedies, from the unexpected death of a child to the failure of a crop, the devastation of a disease or a particularly violent storm, were often attributed to the malevolent workings of sorcery and witchcraft.⁷⁰ The violent and uncertain nature of life in the medieval period left "virtually no type of private misfortune which could not thus be ascribed to witchcraft..."⁷¹ This fostered an environment in which women could be accused of witchcraft for any myriad of negative occurrences that could be, however tenuously, connected to them.

The *Malleus* drew on this popular association to establish an official, rationalized rhetoric for these formerly superstitious beliefs concerning women and witchcraft. Subsequently, many of the crimes that the text accuses witches of committing reflect far earlier beliefs concerning women and the perpetuation of

⁶⁸ Cohn, *Europe's Inner Demons*, 251.

⁶⁹ Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, 535.

⁷⁰ Wolfgang Behringer, "Weather, Hunger and Fear: Origins of the European Witch-Hunts in Climate, Society and Mentality," in *The Witchcraft Reader*, ed. Darren Oldridge (New York: Routledge, 2002), 69-71.

⁷¹ Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, 535.

relic pagan beliefs. Echoing the papal bull of Innocent VIII, the *Malleus* claims that witches act by

Inclining the minds of men to inordinate passion; second, by obstructing their generative force; third, by removing the members accommodated to that act; fourth, by changing men into beasts by their magic art; fifth, by destroying the generative force in women; sixth, by procuring abortion; seventh, by offering children to devils, besides other animals and fruits of the earth with which they work much harm.⁷²

Control over natural elements such as fertility, reproduction, livestock, and the weather reinforces the ancient idea that as more carnal beings, women could manipulate components of their surrounding earthly environment. The associated belief that these earthly powers included the ability to control, harm, and even remove male sexual organs demonstrates the innate belief that female power equaled sexual impotence, or more generally a loss of control, for men.⁷³ Thus the greater the influence a woman wielded, the more threatening this authority appeared to the traditional social order.

Most importantly in light of the present examination of witchcraft accusations and powerful women, the *Malleus* labeled socially prominent women as some of the most wicked. In bolstering their argument of the depravity of women throughout time, Kramer and Sprenger mention a litany of infamous royal ladies in order to illustrate that “nearly all the kingdoms of the world have

⁷² Kramer and Sprenger, *Malleus Maleficarum*, 47.

⁷³ For more on the study of witches’ manipulation of male genitalia in the *Malleus Maleficarum*, see Moira Smith, “The Flying Phallus and the Laughing Inquisitor: Penis Theft in the ‘Malleus Maleficarum,’” *Journal of Folklore Research* 39, no. 1 (Jan.-Apr. 2002): 93.

been overthrown by women.”⁷⁴ Citing the selfishness and evilness of past queens, from Helen of Troy to Cleopatra, the authors lament that “truly, without the wickedness of women, to say nothing of witchcraft, the world would still remain proof against innumerable dangers.”⁷⁵ The *Malleus* labels socially prominent women as particularly threatening because their position grants them a measure of independence and power inaccessible to members of the lower classes.

Fears of uncontrolled female sexuality and agency in the forms of landholdings and wealth, political influence, and social notoriety are elements deeply ingrained in the chapters that follow. Dame Alice Kyteler controlled considerable wealth and actively participated in money changing in early fourteenth-century Ireland. Valentina Visconti carried personal and political influence with the mentally unstable king of France in the 1390s. Joan of Arc, just a few decades later, led the armies of France against their English and Burgundian enemies as a messenger of God. Anne Boleyn, second queen of Henry VIII of England, embodied sexual magnetism and political acumen at a time when either attribute could be very dangerous for women to possess. Although chronologically and geographically disparate, their unconventional roles as powerful, highly visible women connect them in the illustration of a larger pattern. The rhetoric of feminized heretical witchcraft, developed over the course of the Middle Ages, was used as a political weapon when employed

⁷⁴ Kramer and Sprenger, *Malleus Maleficarum.*, 46.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

against women who defied the status quo of Europe's patriarchal order in the pre-modern period.

Each case described here is presented in chronological order as a means of demonstrating the progression of witchcraft beliefs and the resulting suppression of women deemed subversive throughout the later Middle Ages. The evolution of European witchcraft during this period has bearing on our understanding of gender relations and hierarchy within the medieval family, community, and society as a whole. The specific study of witchcraft accusations against prominent women explores the intricacies of gender relations within this complex social hierarchy: the instances in which these women were denounced as witches represent moments when women crossed delineated gender boundaries within medieval Europe. Identifying noblewomen, abbesses, businesswomen or queens as witches illustrates the sense of disorder perceived by their actions or status; stripping them of that status through such accusations returned a sense of normalcy and balance to the medieval social pyramid. Thus, examining the implications of witchcraft accusations for powerful women broadens and bolsters scholarship on the European witchcraft movement by illustrating both how these cases fit into the larger fabric of medieval society, and how they maintained or impacted the social hierarchy.

This study further demonstrates that the approach to witchcraft studies must expand. The examination of witchcraft trials alone does not sufficiently address the full force of the impact that feminized witchcraft had on socially

prominent women in the West. As in the cases of Valentina Visconti and Elizabeth Woodville, women were sometimes accused of witchcraft without ever being formally tried. Thus the terminology employed in labeling witches is just as important to consider as official trial records. Finally, this rhetoric of feminized witchcraft must be studied for its impact on powerful women in general, even after the witch craze died out. While theologians of the late medieval period created an entirely feminine portrayal of the witch figure, the large-scale persecutions of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries fostered an environment in which the qualifiers of witchcraft and femaleness grew so deeply entangled that it became possible to accuse socially prominent women of similarly deviant behaviors without ever directly invoking the witch label.

This evolution in the typical procedure of witchcraft charges against powerful women is an important factor in the succeeding case studies. Women charged with witchcraft from the early Middle Ages until the fifteenth century were not simply accused of practicing dark magic, but of *being* witches. This subtle qualifier assumes that women did not practice witchcraft, a description that implies some sense of female power over the magic they used. The witch label instead presumes that witchcraft, and by association Satan, controlled women, making the evil tenets of the practice an inherent aspect of that woman's identity. By the early modern period, this tactic had been successfully applied in so many cases that prominent women found themselves at risk of targeting for accusations of witch-like deviancies without ever formally being called witches. As the following chapters will illustrate, the late medieval feminization of

witchcraft not only threatened powerful women leading up to and during the witch craze, but created an enduring lexicon with which to attack those women who demonstrated unusual agency in the public sphere.

Chapter 2

A Nest of Heretics on the Isle of Saints: The Sorcery Trial of Alice Kyteler, 1324

On November 3, 1324, in the town of Kilkenny, Ireland, Petronilla of Meath was burned at the stake for her involvement in black magic. On the surface it may appear that Petronilla simply represents one of countless lower-class women persecuted as a witch in Europe's history, and yet her death occurred almost two hundred years before the so-called European witch craze began. Indeed, Petronilla's execution marked the first time in Irish history that an individual, man or woman, was put to death for heresy.⁷⁶ The nature of her heresy, and the cause for her death, was even more unusual for the early fourteenth century. The charges were for witchcraft and diabolism that had influenced and precipitated a host of other devious acts including poisonings, murders, and all manner of sorcery. However, even her accusers only viewed Petronilla as an accomplice to these malicious acts: the main target for their allegations was Dame Alice Kyteler, an influential noblewoman and the lady Petronilla had once waited upon as a maidservant.

The trial of Alice Kyteler and the subsequent execution of her maid fell at a particularly instrumental time in the evolution of witchcraft in medieval Europe. These events unfolded during the papacy of John XXII, a pontiff whose strong views on witchcraft and diabolism greatly influenced the popular association between the practice of magic and religious heresy throughout the

⁷⁶ St. John D. Seymour, *Irish Witchcraft and Demonology* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, Inc., 1972), 39.

later Middle Ages. The events that occasioned Dame Alice's reputation as a sorceress and the motivations for formally charging her with a litany of magic-related crimes were far more secular in nature, and involved family feuding over inheritance rights and the power of women in conducting family affairs.⁷⁷ These local issues were given greater significance when the Avignonese papacy of John XXII conflated sorcery with heresy. This association in turn, rather ironically, granted legitimacy to magical practices that previously had been considered superstitions believed only by the ignorant and uneducated. Changing attitudes toward witchcraft made Dame Alice's spheres of action within her family and community, in combination with her alleged magical practices, not only the meddling of an overly ambitious noblewoman, but the dangerous and heretical actions of a sorceress. The events which culminated with the burning of Petronilla of Meath illustrate that this maid's death symbolized the downfall of one of Kilkenny's most influential and active residents: a wealthy woman whose agency in the public sphere made her extremely vulnerable to accusations of sorcery.

Little is known of Dame Alice Kyteler's life before she was accused of practicing witchcraft and sorcery in 1324; she rarely appears in the historical record before her trial. Thus it is a challenge for the historian to determine what her life was like before these ignominious events thrust her into the annals of history. That being said, there remains enough detail in the account of her trial to form a picture of Alice's life leading up to her condemnation. It is known that

⁷⁷ Ibid., 45.

Dame Alice Kyteler was of a wealthy Anglo-Norman family that had settled near Kilkenny, Ireland, sometime in the late thirteenth century.⁷⁸ In the scheme of history this implies that the Kytelers were relative newcomers to Ireland. Since 1171, when the Normans invaded Ireland, the island remained under fluctuating levels of Anglo-Norman control, but in any account it is clear that an Anglo-Norman noble family would have been viewed as outsiders, and most likely as members of the hostile invading class, to most of Kilkenny's residents. Dame Alice's choice to retain her maiden name no doubt added to this sense of hostility: she married four times but continued to be addressed as "Dame Kyteler" throughout her life.⁷⁹ This is a fascinating detail that should not be overlooked. The retention of her maiden name emphasized her "otherness" as an Anglo-Norman, setting her apart from the local Irish.⁸⁰ It also implies that Alice was of an independent mind, for whether through family pride, feelings of superiority over her husbands' lineages, or a combination of the two, referring to herself by the name of her natal kin separated her from her husbands as well.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 26. Her relative Jose de Keteller died sometime in the early 1280s and is buried at St. Mary's Church in Kilkenny; this is the earliest inhabitant of Kilkenny bearing the Keteller/Kyteler surname that has been found. It is also believed that the Kytelers, as wealthy merchants, were involved in trade between Ireland and Flanders, and that perhaps members of the Kyteler family were in fact Flemish themselves. See Bernadette Williams, "The Sorcery Trial of Alice Kyteler," *History Ireland* 2, no. 4 (Winter 1994): 20.

⁷⁹ Seymour, *Irish Witchcraft and Demonology*, 25.

⁸⁰ As Heather Rose Jones has argued, fourteenth-century Irish naming practices can be broken into 3 categories: Irish-Gaelic surnames, Welsh, and English names. English surnames were largely the product of the Norman invasion in the late twelfth century. This illustrates the sense of "otherness" that would have been associated with Dame Alice's retention of her maiden name. See Heather Rose Jones, "Names and Naming Practices in the Red Book of Ormond (Ireland 14th Century)," *Medieval Names Archive*, <http://www.s-gabriel.org/names/tangwystyl/lateirish/ormond.html> (accessed January 29, 2015). For more on foreign names in Ireland see also Patrick Woulfe, *Irish Names and Surnames* (Dublin: M.H. Gill and Son, 1906), 2.

Another factor behind the witchcraft charges brought against Dame Alice is the familial dispute over inheritance in which she was embroiled at the time of the charges. Dame Alice was a prolific wife, having first married William Outlaw sometime in the late 1280s. Outlaw was a wealthy banker and moneylender by trade, and upon their marriage Alice joined him in this pursuit. The couple's control over local currency carried them no favor with the local people. Outlaw died suddenly around the turn of the fourteenth century, however, and Alice almost immediately married Adam le Blund. In 1302 Alice and le Blund were briefly accused of having plotted to poison her first husband, charges that could not be corroborated.⁸¹ As Maeve Brigid Callan has recently postulated, these accusations were first voiced by two local noblewomen who owed £3,000 directly to Alice, yet another example of her power and influence in the Kilkenny community, and the resentment that it brooked amongst some men.⁸² In spite of the obvious political motivations behind the initial poisoning rumors, this scandal later added to Dame Alice's reputation as a black widow, for in subsequent years it was rumored that she also poisoned Adam le Blund and her third husband, Richard de Valle. Finally, as her fourth and final husband Sir John le Poer began to grow sickly and emaciated in the early 1320s, local sentiment against Alice exploded into outright accusations of foul play.

⁸¹ Anne Neary, "The Origins and Character of the Kilkenny Witchcraft Case of 1324," *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy. Section C: Archeology, Celtic Studies, History, Linguistics, Literature* 83C (1983): 344.

⁸² Maeve Brigid Callan, *The Templars, the Witch, and the Wild Irish: Vengeance and Heresy in Medieval Ireland* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014).

Court records state that Alice's stepchildren from her four marriages came before the local bishop to accuse her of both killing their fathers through the use of sorcery and denying them their rightful inheritance by "stupefying their senses." According to their argument she bewitched them and in turn bequeathed to her oldest and favorite child, William Outlaw, all of her wealth and land holdings.⁸³ Regardless of Alice's use of sorcery in convincing her children to give up their portions to William, what is clear from this accusation is the complicated familial relations that four marriages had created. The court record implies that Alice produced or gained children from each of her four marriages, fostering jealousy amongst these competing family units and lineages.

Dame Alice's continued activities in moneylending undoubtedly incurred the animosity of her relatives as well. Even after the death of her first husband, Alice continued to work as a highly lucrative moneylender in Kilkenny independent of her subsequent husbands, instead partnering with her favorite son, William. Thus she amassed substantial wealth that belonged to her and her alone.⁸⁴ In fact, local records illustrate that many of the nobility surrounding Kilkenny were deeply in debt to Dame Alice and William Outlaw.⁸⁵ By early 1324

⁸³ Bishop Richard Ledrede, *A Contemporary Narrative of the Proceedings against Dame Alice Kyteler, prosecuted for sorcery in 1324*, ed. Thomas Wright (New York: AMS Press for the Camden Society, 1968), 2. "...ad tantam sensus stoliditatem duxerat quod omnia bona sua sibi et filio suo dederant..."

⁸⁴ A woman's control over so much wealth would have seemed extremely inappropriate to the Anglo-Norman ruling class; As Elizabeth McKenna has argued in her discussion of women's patronage in medieval Ireland, "the Anglo-Irish were, at least in theory, constrained by feudal practice with regard to property, while Gaelic women fared better—Anglo-Irish women did not have control of their marriage portion." See Elizabeth McKenna, "The gift of a lady: women as patrons of the arts in medieval Ireland," in *Women in Renaissance and early modern Europe*, ed. Christine Meek (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2000), 87.

⁸⁵ Cohn, *Europe's Inner Demons*, 198.

it appeared that Alice would also outlive and inherit from her fourth husband, and her control over so much land and wealth was too much for her numerous offspring to bear.⁸⁶

The acrimony between Dame Alice's children and stepchildren boiled over into witchcraft accusations because of larger factors influencing the relationship between secular and ecclesiastic authorities in Ireland during the early fourteenth century. England's kings had struggled to subdue the Irish since the initial Anglo-Norman invasion under Henry II in 1171, and Edward II grew especially concerned over the state of Ireland after Edward Bruce, the younger brother of King Robert Bruce of Scotland, led a campaign of rebellion throughout Ireland beginning in 1315.⁸⁷ Edward feared that prelates were further inciting his Irish subjects to rise against him through their influence in the pulpit. Thus in 1316 he began to vigorously negotiate plans to instate English clergy within the Irish church, supported by the new pope in Avignon.⁸⁸ William FitzJohn, the current chancellor of Ireland, was appointed as the new bishop of Ossory, the diocese that presided over the town of Kilkenny. FitzJohn died soon after accepting his new appointment, however, and Pope John personally sent in his place Richard Ledrede, another Englishman and a Franciscan who as second

⁸⁶ It is possible that Sir John le Poer was indeed the victim of poisoning: in the records of Alice's trial her step-children alleged that their father had become emaciated and sickly, and that his hair and fingernails had fallen out, signs of arsenic poisoning. See Ledrede, *Proceedings Against Dame Alice Kyteler*, 2.

⁸⁷ J. A. Watt, "Negotiations between Edward II and John XXII concerning Ireland," *Irish Historical Studies* 10, no. 2 (March 1956): 1.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 2.

choice for the post demonstrated an eagerness to impress his papal patron and uphold the primacy of the Church over secular authority at all costs.⁸⁹

Records indicate that Ledrede was in Avignon as a student at the university at the time of his appointment to the bishopric of Ossory.⁹⁰ His presence at the papal court seems to have earned him favor with the pope. It also exposed Ledrede to the increasingly widespread fears of witchcraft and sorcery in France. Anne Neary has argued that Ledrede's proximity to the trial of the Templars in France conditioned the cleric to associate any act labeled as *maleficarum* with devil worship and diabolism.⁹¹ It is likely that Ledrede was also deeply influenced by the multiple alleged attempts on the pope's life during his time in Avignon. As described in the previous chapter, Matteo and Galeazzo I Visconti, leaders of the pro-imperial Ghibelline faction in Italy, were accused of threatening the pope's life through the use of magical wax effigies in 1317, although the case against them quickly fizzled out when only a single witness could be produced to corroborate the charges. That same year John arrested the elderly bishop of Cahors, Hughes Géraud, for attempting to kill him by poisoning and *maleficarum*. The pope was so distressed by this crime, committed by a member of the high-ranking clergy no less, that he personally interrogated the bishop seven times. When, under immense pressure, Géraud did finally admit to the charges laid before him he was promptly tortured, burned alive, and his

⁸⁹ Williams, "The Sorcery Trial of Alice Kyteler," 21.

⁹⁰ Neary, "The Origins and Character of the Kilkenny Witchcraft Case of 1324," 338.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 339.

corpse sunk in the Rhône as a means of totally destroying any evil magic that might be left within the bones.⁹²

These events invested the pontificate of John XXII with a deep concern over dark magic and its religious implications, encapsulated in the papal bull *Super illius specula*. For its direct bearing on the Kilkenny witchcraft case, it is beneficial to repeat the contents of that document here. The bull asserted that those who “are Christians in name only... sacrifice to demons, adore them, make or have made images, rings, mirrors, phials, or other things for magic purposes, and bind themselves to demons... fulfill their most depraved lusts [in order to] ask them for aid.”⁹³ This bull officially made the connection between magical practices and betrayal of the Church; it further connected forbidden sexual practices as a common behavior of sorcerers. These are elements that permeate the witchcraft charges brought against Alice Kyteler and her associates in 1324, and it is indeed logical that the pope’s concerns over dark magic and sexuality pervaded the agendas of the clergy that served him as well.

Consequently when the stepchildren of Dame Alice came before Bishop Ledrede in early 1324, he was all too eager to bring formal charges of sorcery against the noblewoman. The charges specifically asserted that Alice had denied her faith in Christ, sacrificed animals to demons, especially one demonic being called the Son of Art, held nightly meetings in which she blasphemed the name of the Church, concocted powders and ointments for magical purposes, including

⁹² Cohn, *Europe’s Inner Demons*, 192. Also see Rollo-Koster, *Avignon and its Papacy (1309-1417): Popes, Institutions, and Society*.

⁹³ Pope John XXII, “*Super illius specula*,” 82.

“shreds of the cerements of boys who were buried unbaptized,” and magically poisoned her four husbands, among other heinous offenses.⁹⁴ The accusations implied that Alice had been an active participant in *maleficum* for many years and, more importantly, that she had influenced and incited many of her entourage to join her in her wickedness. These charges conversely illustrate the influence that Dame Alice had within her community. As a landholder and businesswoman she interacted with many people on a daily basis, mainly through the procurement and payment of loans; the charges of sorcery vilified her notoriety and gave her activities sinister implications.

The seventh and final charge brought against Dame Alice in March 1324 is by far the most unusual and indicative of the case’s role in the wider evolution of European witchcraft. The court claimed that Dame Alice had bound herself to a certain demon, an incubus called Robin son of Art, who appeared to her in the form of a black cat, a shaggy black dog, or an Ethiopian man, and with whom she fornicated regularly as a sign of her pact with him.⁹⁵ This particular charge, much more outlandish and more difficult to prove than the rest, indicates the association between witchcraft and deviant sexuality made by clerics and scholars of the later Middle Ages. Dame Alice’s alleged participation in witchcraft seemed to give her great power: while many had previously resented her influence in the community, now they had real reason to fear her as well. The

⁹⁴ Seymour, *Irish Witchcraft and Demonology*, 27-29. For the original Latin see Ledrede, *Proceedings against Dame Alice Kyteler*, 2-3.

⁹⁵ Ledrede, *Proceedings against Dame Alice Kyteler*, 2-3. “Septimo, quod dicta domina daemonem quondam habuit incubum, a quo cognosci carnaliter se permittit, qui Filium Artis se facit appellari, et aliquando Robinum filium Artis...”

claim that Alice's power as a sorceress resulted from her sexual submission to an incubus attempted to show that she gained authority only through the pollution of her body by way of surrender to a male demon. Indeed, the court record states that Robin son of Art was only one of the lesser demons of hell (*ex pauperioribus inferni*).⁹⁶ Thus the sole element that gave Alice control over mortal men was her own domination by a supernatural male, and an unimportant one at that.

The Kilkenny witchcraft trial marks the first time in European history that a woman accused of witchcraft was likewise charged with maintaining her dark powers through sexual relations with a supernatural being, although the idea already existed in theory, as discussed in the previous chapter. As R.E.L. Masters has asserted in a discussion of the relationship between sex and evil in the medieval world, "what a woman does with her incubus may be what she would wish to do with her man... if repression and suppression did not frustrate and inhibit her."⁹⁷ This implies that sexual relations with an incubus freed women from the physical control of mortal men, a frightening thought for the strict patriarchal order of medieval society. The supernatural abilities, and endowments, of an incubus allowed it to pleasure a woman far beyond what a mere man was capable of. Indeed, once a woman had mated with an incubus it was feared that she would never be satisfied by a man again.⁹⁸

⁹⁶ Ibid., 32.

⁹⁷ Masters, *Eros and Evil*, 58.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 60.

Dame Alice Kyteler already stood out as a serial wife, a behavior that likely met with tacit disapproval from her peers.⁹⁹ The charges of her sexual union with the incubus called Robin implied that her carnal appetite was too great even for four consecutive husbands to gratify. And yet the language of the charges asserted that Alice had bound herself to the demon in much the same fashion as a married couple was united. This made her alleged relationship with Robin of Art, as in all instances where demons demanded loyalty from their female lovers, an example of “unholy unions, devilish travesties on the sacred and sublime institution of wedlock...”¹⁰⁰ This description implies that Dame Alice had committed a terrible sexual crime on multiple levels: she both disregarded and flouted the traditional model of holy wedlock while simultaneously seeking evil, supernatural beings to further satisfy her lust and supply her with a magical power unnatural to women. Most egregious, this sexual union with the incubus Robin was considered binding, and the permanence of their alleged relationship attempted to further illustrate how deep into evil Alice had descended.¹⁰¹

Dame Alice did not stay in Kilkenny to brave the outcome of these charges alone. After the warrant for Alice’s arrest was released she fled to Dublin, seeking shelter with the influential Roger Outlaw, a relative of her first husband

⁹⁹ For more on the irregularity of second marriages and the hostility often displayed by the community against these unions (and any subsequent marriages), see the discussion of charivari in Edward Muir, *Ritual in Early Modern Europe* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 106-110.

¹⁰⁰ Masters, *Eros and Evil*, 61.

¹⁰¹ For an in-depth discussion of medieval views on sexual unions between women and male demons, see Dyan Elliott, *Fallen Bodies: Pollution, Sexuality, and Demonology in the Middle Ages* (Philadelphia, University of Philadelphia Press, 1999), 52-56.

and the current chancellor of Ireland.¹⁰² Her speedy flight to the house of her former brother-in-law, and his willingness to defend her, illustrates that Alice still retained important allies amongst the wealthy and powerful throughout Ireland. Outlaw declared the charges ridiculous and insisted the bishop of Ossory drop the case at once, but Ledrede refused. It is clear that he considered this a religious issue within jurisdiction of the ecclesiastical, not the temporal, courts. In response Outlaw had the bishop thrown into jail by his good friend Arnold le Poer, the seneschal of Kilkenny.¹⁰³ It was a calculated risk meant to intimidate Ledrede into abandoning his case against Dame Alice, but the bishop was determined to carry out his proceedings against her and the people closest to her, and he instead attempted to use this unfortunate situation for his own benefit.

Up to this point Ledrede had earned little affection from the local Irish for his heavy-handed methods and abrasive religious zeal, but he used his imprisonment to swing public opinion in his favor. Immediately placing his diocese under interdict, Ledrede suspended all baptisms, marriages, and burials until he could return.¹⁰⁴ In a deeply religious age where the belief in hell was real and ever-present, people acutely feared the consequences of their denied access to the sacraments necessary for a Christian life and death. Ledrede further insured their loyalty by ordering the Host to be brought to him in prison: in the eyes of the people now not only was the bishop of Ossory imprisoned, but the

¹⁰² Williams, "The Sorcery Trial of Alice Kyteler," 22.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

body of Christ itself was under attack.¹⁰⁵ People began flocking to his cell to listen to him preach there and to receive communion; after only seventeen days Outlaw and le Poer reluctantly released Ledrede.

The battle between secular and ecclesiastic authorities was far from over, however. Ledrede wasted no time in citing Dame Alice and her favorite son, William Outlaw, to appear before him on the original charges of sorcery. The business partnership between mother and son as moneylenders and their subsequent double indictment as sorcerers is uncanny, and definitely not coincidental. They both ignored the summons and instead procured a royal writ commanding Ledrede to travel to Dublin to answer complaints brought against him by Arnold le Poer and justify the reasons for the interdict he had placed over the diocese of Ossory, a decision that they claimed had endangered the spiritual welfare of all its residents.¹⁰⁶ He refused to go, insisting that he would be put in mortal danger by passing through Arnold le Poer's lands. The situation seemed to have reached a stalemate, but Dame Alice herself pushed the issue, publicly accusing Ledrede of defamation of character and contesting her excommunication.¹⁰⁷ It was a bold gesture that amounted to a declaration of her innocence. At this accusation the high court in Dublin once more demanded Ledrede appear in order to answer to these charges. It seemed the tables had turned against the bishop: his superior, the vicar of the archbishop of Dublin, forcibly lifted the interdict from the diocese of Ossory, thereby denying the

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 23.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ William Renwick Riddell, "The First Execution for Witchcraft in Ireland," *Journal of the American Institute of Criminal Law and Criminology* 7, no. 6 (March 1917): 832.

legitimacy of Ledrede's claims. Ledrede also protested that "Alice was free to consort with her friends in Dublin and that she was usually placed with great men and leaders of the land at public assemblies."¹⁰⁸ This is telling of the influence that Dame Alice maintained among the powerful lords of Ireland even after she was charged with sorcery. The accusations seem to have been viewed with enough disdain among the major secular magnates that she was still able to actively participate in the public sphere. In fact, Arnold le Poer responded to Ledrede's accusations by reminding him that Ireland was known as the "island of saints," and that just as St. Patrick had driven out the snakes, there was simply no place for heresy in Ireland.¹⁰⁹

In the end, realizing that even his own superiors in the Church doubted his motives in the Kilkenny sorcery case, Ledrede did appear in Dublin during the summer of 1324. Ever the gifted manipulator, Ledrede argued that he simply wished to root out heresy from the Holy Mother Church, a task that secular authorities had no right to hinder him from accomplishing. He even grouped Arnold le Poer into these claims, arguing that the seneschal only claimed Ireland was free of heretics to hide the fact that he was one, and a follower of Dame Alice herself.¹¹⁰ This argument quickly gained ground with members of the Archdiocese of Dublin. Few wished to rule expressly against the wishes of the pope in Avignon, especially since the pontiff was closely allied with Ireland's ultimate overlord, King Edward II of England. Dame Alice realized that she had

¹⁰⁸ Ledrede, *Proceedings against Dame Alice Kyteler*, 25.

¹⁰⁹ Williams, "The Sorcery Trial of Alice Kyteler," 24.

¹¹⁰ Neary, "Origins and Character of the Kilkenny Witchcraft Case of 1324," 347.

lost the support of her powerful allies in Dublin, especially after the men most able to protect her, William Outlaw and Arnold le Poer, were both accused of heresy as well. At this point she mysteriously fled Ireland. It is the last time Alice Kyteler appears in the historical record; the trial writings state that she traveled to England and comfortably resettled there.

Unfortunately Alice was not the only person to be charged with sorcery and witchcraft in Kilkenny in 1324: the indictment targeted many of Alice's servants and retainers as accomplices in her dastardly activities and numerous lower-class servants were immediately arrested following Alice's disappearance.¹¹¹ Among these was Petronilla of Meath, Dame Alice's former maidservant.¹¹² It was a position that no doubt brought Petronilla into close contact with Alice on a regular basis, to perform such private tasks as bathing, dressing, and ministering to the lady. In the absence of the noblewoman herself, Alice's personal maid seemed the next best option for Ledrede to create a symbolic sorceress and heretic to be brought to justice. On November 3, 1324 by his order Petronilla was beaten as a means of extracting a confession from her. Torture was not considered a legitimate means of interrogation by Ireland's secular courts in the fourteenth century, but the bishop claimed Church jurisdiction: the grave nature of this heresy called for more extreme measures. Petronilla endured six floggings before confessing to having aided her mistress in carrying out her sorcery. The trial record states that she

¹¹¹ Ibid., 24.

¹¹² While Petronilla became the figurehead for this sorcery ring in the absence of her former mistress, Petronilla's daughter Basilia accompanied Dame Alice as her new maidservant and thus was able to escape to England.

confessed publicly before the all the clergy and the people that at the instance of the said Alice she had wholly denied the faith of Christ... and that she had at Alice's instigation sacrificed in three places to devils... she, in the skull of a certain thief who had been beheaded, and on the instruction of the said Alice, made many confections, ointments, and powders for afflicting the bodies of the faithful... She also confessed that many times at the instance of the said Alice and sometimes in her presence had consulted devils and received responses... And though she was indeed herself an adept in this accursed art of theirs, she said she was nothing in comparison with her mistress, from whom she had learned all these things and many more...¹¹³

Her confession mirrors the charges originally issued against Dame Alice, emphasizing the dependence of Alice on her incubus lover and relegating Petronilla to an even lower position within this supposed order of sorcerers. The logical explanation for this overlap is that Petronilla's interrogators fed her the information they wanted to hear, and in the end she gave them what they wanted to make the beatings stop. The vocabulary used in her confession corroborates this hypothesis: the claim that Alice and Petronilla had made concoctions in order to "afflict the bodies of the faithful" implies that the entire body of the Church, in other words everyday Christians, was under attack by this sorcery. This protracted confession gave Bishop Ledrede exactly the information he needed to make his zealous campaign for Church primacy in the diocese of Ossory appear justified. Immediately after confessing, Petronilla was burnt alive.

¹¹³ Ibid., 32. "publicae coram toto clero et populo fatebatur se, ad informationem dictae dominae Alice, fidem Christi... et tribus vicibus ex parte ejusdem demonibus sacrificasse... in testa capitis cujusdam latronis decollati, ad informationem dictae Aliciae, multas fecit confectiones, pixides, et pulveres, ad affligendum corpora fidelium... Fatebatur etiam pluries se ad stimulationem ejusdem Aliciae, et aliquando in sua praesentia, daemones consulisse, et recepisse responsa... Et lucet in arte earum maledicta solennis esset magistra, dixit se tamen nihil esse in comparatione ad dominam suam, a qua omnia ista didicerat et multa alia..."

It is a tragic end to the first recorded witchcraft trial in Ireland, and one that points to the conflation of growing misogyny and the religious connotations applied to *maleficum* during the pontificate of John XXII. Evolving views on the nature of heresy and the role of magic and witchcraft within Christendom had ramifications on the lives of people far beyond the papal court at Avignon. In the case of Dame Alice Kyteler, female agency within the realms of family inheritance and the public spheres of moneylending and governance defied normative gender roles. That in combination with her checkered marital history set her apart as an unnatural and even dangerous woman. While locals may have whispered that her numerous husbands' deaths and her strange arrangements for the family inheritance were the result of some sort of *maleficum*, the involvement of Bishop Richard Ledrede gave her actions serious religious implications as well. Not only were her supposed machinations against her husbands and stepchildren a sin, they put her in direct opposition to the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church, also making her a heretic.

The dramatic unfolding and strange ending to the Kilkenny witchcraft trial of 1324 leaves us to wonder more about the details of Dame Alice Kyteler's life. Were the charges brought against her grounded in reality? Did she truly practice dark magic and poison her husbands in order to gain wealth and independence? And what would have happened to Alice had she stayed in Kilkenny instead of fleeing for England in the autumn of 1324? With the gaping passage of 690 years since these events unfolded it is nearly impossible to answer these questions with any measure of certainty, but some conjecture is

nevertheless possible. Based on the concrete evidence presented in court to corroborate her stepchildren's claims, namely the physical emaciation and gauntness of Sir John le Poer, it does appear that at least her fourth husband had possibly been poisoned with arsenic. Considering the untimely deaths of her previous three husbands, Dame Alice certainly does figure as the primary suspect. Whether or not she used magical spells and incantations as a means of empowering this poison is more difficult to determine.

While traditional scholarship has often relegated genuine belief in sorcery and witchcraft to the poor, uneducated masses, closer examination illustrates that even as late as the sixteenth century much of Europe's educated elite viewed the potency of magic, both for good or evil purposes, as a tangible presence within their world.¹¹⁴ John XXII, after all, officially declared witchcraft and other magical practices a grave form of heresy. This implies that a *lack* of belief in the real powers of dark magic constituted a serious offense against the Church as well. Thus if Dame Alice, like many people of her time, did believe in the power of witchcraft, it is possible that she resorted to spells and potions as a way of ridding herself of unwanted husbands and conducting successful business dealings, among other things. Indeed, a tale recounted in the *Annals of Ireland*, a series of chronicles compiled by Irish monks during the late medieval period, claims that many witnesses had watched Dame Alice rake excrement and

¹¹⁴ For more discussion on upper-rank belief and trust in the powers of witchcraft, see Chapter 5. Anne Boleyn and Henry VIII sought the consultation of witches and wizards as a means of determining the sex of their unborn children, a relatively common practice at the time. Anne, a highly educated noblewoman, was also said to have believed in magical prophecies concerning her reign as queen. Thus it is not impossible that Dame Alice may have believed in the potency of witchcraft herself, regardless of the validity of the charges brought against her in 1324.

rubbish from the street to the door of William Outlaw's home while muttering "Unto the house of William my sonne, Hie all the wealth of Kilkennie town."¹¹⁵ It remains difficult to determine the exact dating of this story, however, and it is certainly possible that this event is apocryphal, written in the aftermath of Alice's trial in order to justify its outcome. Regardless of the veracity of this tale, the opportunity for female agency that it illustrates is worth considering. Assuming that the strange incident related in the *Annals* did actually occur, such actions may have allowed Alice occasion for greater perceived control over her environment. Whether or not the magic she practiced actually achieved the desired effect is not important in the present discussion, but the popular medieval perception that it *could* work is significant. It is an instance that demonstrates her efforts to manipulate her surroundings to favor herself and her son and her belief that she had the ability to do so.

All theoretical possibilities aside, it is of course also probable that in a battle for control over family finances and jealousy of their stepmother's independent success, Alice's stepchildren gave her actions the tainted label of sorcery in order to slander her; the intervention of the overzealous bishop of Ossory simply provided the ideal intermediary to ensure they finally received their inheritance. In fact, the case of Dame Alice is not the only example from the late medieval period in which a wealthy woman was labeled a witch as a means of seizing her financial holdings.

¹¹⁵ *Annals of Ireland*, in *Chartularies of St. Mary's Abbey, Dublin*, ed. J. T. Gilbert, vol. II, London (1884), 362.

Almost one hundred years later in England, identical motivations surrounded the more high profile though less often studied case of Joan of Navarre, queen consort to Henry IV. After the king's death in 1413, Joan, the former duchess of Brittany and heiress in her own right, became the wealthiest woman in England.¹¹⁶ Although she was reportedly on good terms with her stepson, King Henry V, he desperately needed monetary funds to cover the gargantuan expenses of England's involvement in the Hundred Years War, and he could see few other options to raise such funds except to take them by force. Henry magnanimously offered to assume control over the management of the Dowager Queen's dower and land holdings on her behalf in the 1410s, planning to divert the funds necessary for the kingdom's wars in the process.¹¹⁷ Joan saw through the ruse and demurred, but matters came to a head in 1419, when Henry's impending marriage to Catherine of Valois necessitated yet another hefty sum for the new queen's dower almost immediately. Deciding that the most precipitous route to achieving this end lay in claims of dark magic, Henry had his stepmother arrested on suspicion of witchcraft and her assets seized as property of the crown. Although there was no physical evidence to support such a claim, Joan's position as a foreigner already gave her the status of distrusted outsider to many at court; this type of xenophobia toward imported brides is a theme repeated in nearly all of the cases presented here.¹¹⁸ As a result it was

¹¹⁶ J.L. Kirby, *Henry IV of England* (London: Constable and Company Ltd, 1970), 150-151.

¹¹⁷ Lisa Hilton, *Queens Consort: England's Medieval Queens* (New York: Pegasus Books, 2010), 316.

¹¹⁸ This type of xenophobia is an undercurrent that also runs through the cases of Valentina Visconti, an Italian in France, and to an extent, Anne Boleyn as an Englishwoman raised in

easy enough for Henry to convince his courtiers of Joan's guilt. It is obvious, though, that Henry had no desire to heavily punish his stepmother for these fabricated crimes, as she was comfortably housed at Leeds Castle throughout the duration of her imprisonment.¹¹⁹ This fact makes the attack on her control over serious wealth even more compelling.

The Kilkenny case differs from that of Joan of Navarre's because of ecclesiastical involvement; while Henry V was happy to leave his stepmother alone after besmirching her reputation and thus gaining unfettered access to her finances, Bishop Ledrede's presence in the Kyteler case ensured that those accused would not simply get off with the loss of their money, although that was indeed a part of it. Although the details surrounding the final outcome of Dame Alice Kyteler's trial are murky, it appears likely that her own spurned stepchildren did indeed receive at least some monetary compensation from their much-hated stepbrother. After his mother's flight William Outlaw was imprisoned in Kilkenny castle on Ledrede's order.¹²⁰ While this action demonstrated Ledrede's determination to hold at least one Kyteler responsible for sorcery, it also conveniently prevented Outlaw from practicing his profession and retaining control over local wealth. Even Ledrede saw the usefulness of Outlaw's riches, however: William was shortly thereafter released on a promise of daily penance and an agreement to solely fund a building project to replace

France. In the conclusion of this thesis, this distrust of foreign women can also be found in the examples of Leonora Dori, Catherine of Braganza, and Marie Antoinette.

¹¹⁹ A.R. Myers, "The Captivity of a Royal Witch: The Household Accounts of Queen Joan of Navarre, 1419-21," *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 26, no. 1 (1941): 82-100.

¹²⁰ Neary, "Origins and Character of the Kilkenny Witchcraft Case of 1324," 348.

the aged roof of the local church with one of lead.¹²¹ When William tried to shirk his penance soon after his liberation, he was thrown back in jail and his assets seized. In this flurry of imprisonment and payments, it is probable that William's stepchildren were able to gain back at least part of their inheritance.

The dogged persistence of Richard Ledrede to end this "heresy" in Kilkenny implies that, unlike Joan, Dame Alice would have indeed faced punishment for her role as a sorceress had she remained in Ireland in late 1324. As a woman and as the accused ringleader of a nest of witches and devil worshippers in Kilkenny, perhaps Alice would have suffered a similar fate to that of her maidservant Petronilla. The judgment of most of her retainers seems to suggest otherwise, however. While some of the other arrested individuals were also burned at the stake, others were publicly whipped, and still others were simply released from jail at Kilkenny castle after agreeing never to return to Kilkenny upon pain of death.¹²² As a wealthy and socially prominent woman, it seems possible that a similar verdict could have also ended the case for Dame Alice. After all, once she fled to England, the kingdom that maintained the law and order of Ireland, no recorded efforts were ever made to locate Dame Alice and bring her back to Kilkenny to stand trial. The claims of widespread sorcery simply needed a scapegoat, and the bishop needed to conduct a public execution

¹²¹ William did eventually, under threat of permanent excommunication, provide the funds necessary to give the local church a leaden roof. Ironically, just a few decades later the church was destroyed, the walls having collapsed under the weight of the heavy lead roof tiles.

¹²² Ledrede, *Proceedings Against Dame Alice Kyteler*, 40. "De caeteris autem haereticis ac etiam sortilegis memoratae societatis pestiferae praedicti Robini filii Artis, observato juris ordine, quidam ex eis publice sunt combusti, alii publice coram toto populo... alii prae timore fugientes et latitantes nondum sunt inventi."

in order to illustrate not only the power of the Church over heresy, but also the power of ecclesiastic courts, dominated by Edward II's English-appointed clergymen, over secular authorities in Ireland. In this way Petronilla of Meath became the ideal symbolic sacrifice. She was a woman, a close companion of Dame Kyteler, and her death represented the stamping out of heresy in Kilkenny: it began with a woman, and fittingly it ended with one as well.

The trial for sorcery against Dame Alice Kyteler affords a key moment at which to begin this study of the accelerated targeting of socially prominent women for witchcraft accusations in the later medieval period. Although the case against Alice may appear to demonstrate little more than female victimization, it also provides a glimpse into the life of an independently wealthy and influential medieval woman. Alice Kyteler actively participated in business and local government, negotiated multiple marriages for herself and controlled her family's finances. These responsibilities placed her far outside the realm of traditionally accepted female gender roles in medieval society. When this unnatural behavior was given the connotation of dark magic, the clergy were able to call her adherence to Catholic orthodoxy into question as well. As the association between witchcraft and religious heresy solidified throughout the fourteenth century, high-stakes politics created an environment in which prominent women found themselves at increasing risk for accusations of sexual deviancy and witchcraft.

Chapter 3

Insanity, Witchcraft, and Court Politics: The Case of Valentina Visconti, Duchess of Orléans

In the 1390s, the French royal court was in an uproar. The monarch, once known as Charles *le Bien-Aimé*, the Beloved, was gripped by a mysterious insanity that afflicted him suddenly and for unpredictable durations. This mental instability first manifested itself on a sweltering August day in 1392, when according to the renowned chronicler of the Hundred Years War, Jean Froissart, an agitated and overheated Charles flew into a rage while riding through the forest of Le Mans with his retinue and turned on his men, and “he struck down quite a number, for none defended himself.” Indeed, his brother Louis, Duke of Orléans, only escaped the king’s wrath “by turning and twisting” to escape his brother’s grip, and required the help of his companions to fully subdue Charles.¹²³ After this initial episode Charles’ bouts of insanity returned at erratic intervals, creating a tense atmosphere at court.

Even more disturbing to many than the king’s mental state was the company he desired to keep during his bouts of madness. Michel Pintoin, the monk of the monastery of Saint Denis who is credited with authoring one of the most comprehensive chronicles of fourteenth-century France, wrote that when these episodes struck, Charles desired the company of his “most dear” sister-in-

¹²³ Jean Froissart, *Chronicles*, trans. Geoffrey Brereton (New York: Penguin Books, 1968), 392-396.

law Valentina Visconti, the Duchess of Orléans, over all others.¹²⁴ Adding insult to injury, not only did the king prefer Valentina to his queen, he seemed unable even to recognize Isabeau of Bavaria as his wife during these times. Valentina's role as companion to the mad king placed her dangerously close to the center of political intrigue at the French court, and by 1396 her husband's detractors had targeted the duchess as the source of Charles' madness, a witch who had placed spells on the king in order to incapacitate him and elevate her husband's position at court.

Closer examination of the witchcraft allegations against Valentina Visconti demonstrates that by the late fourteenth century witchcraft charges were seen as a useful tool in removing political adversaries. A fierce rivalry already existed between the dukes of Orléans and Burgundy, and these factions had emerged long before signs of the king's mental instability first revealed themselves.¹²⁵ Their dispute appears to have originated as a generational clash. On his deathbed Charles V had named his brother Louis of Anjou as regent for his eleven-year-old heir, but the dying king's younger brother Philip, Duke of Burgundy, quickly seized power from Louis with the help of another brother, Jean of Berry.¹²⁶ In 1388 at the age of twenty, however, Charles VI reclaimed power from his uncles and immediately granted his own brother, Louis of Touraine, the future duke of Orléans, the authority their uncles once shared. In

¹²⁴ Michel Pintoin, *Chronique du Religieux De Saint-Denys, contenant la Regne de Charles VI, de 1380 a 1422*, vol. II, trans. M.L. Bellaguet (Paris: Crapelet, 1840), 88.

¹²⁵ Jan R. Veenstra, *Magic and Divination at the Courts of Burgundy and France* (New York: Brill, 1998), 81.

¹²⁶ Tracy Adams, "Valentina Visconti, Charles VI, and the Politics of Witchcraft," *Parergon* 30, no. 2 (2013): 13, <http://www.jstor.org/> (accessed May 21, 2014).

order to expand his own influence, in the late 1380s Louis attempted to purchase territory in the northeast of France, holdings that would “drive a wedge between his uncle’s Flemish and Burgundian properties.”¹²⁷ Louis simultaneously secured an alliance, through the offer of large loans, with Holy Roman Emperor-elect Wenceslas, an alliance that pitted Louis squarely against the houses of Burgundy and Bavaria. It was a decision that not only intensified the animosity between Louis of Orléans and his uncle; it also caused the queen, Isabeau of Bavaria, to align herself against Louis. Historian R. C. Famiglietti posits that because Philip of Burgundy had been instrumental in securing her marriage to Charles, and because Louis’ wife hailed from a rival branch of her maternal kin, Isabeau felt obliged to throw her support to Philip in this family feud.¹²⁸

The dukes also clashed in their opinions over the schism of the Church. While Louis encouraged his brother to throw French support to the Avignonese pope Benedict XIII, Philip sided with the University of Paris and the official majority of the French clergy, urging Charles to withdraw royal support from both rival popes, which he eventually did in 1398.¹²⁹ While this rivalry showed no signs of abating, Charles’ sudden display of madness proved to be just the calamity Philip of Burgundy needed in order to wrest political control back from his ambitious nephew. The king’s mental illness, largely unexplainable by

¹²⁷ R.C. Famiglietti, *Royal Intrigue: Crisis at the Court of Charles VI 1392-1420* (New York: AMS Press, Inc., 1986), 24.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ Ibid. For an in-depth discussion of French subtraction from obedience to the pope in Avignon from 1398 to 1402, see Joëlle Rollo-Koster, “The Politics of Body Parts: Contested Topographies in Late-Medieval Avignon,” *Speculum* 78, no. 1 (2003): 66-98.

medical expertise, made witchcraft charges an expedient means of neutralizing the powerful influence of Louis of Orléans and his entourage. Both the Duke of Burgundy, and to a lesser extent the queen, saw the king's malady as a prime opportunity to rid themselves of Louis and Valentina in one fell swoop.

Indeed, the method of ruining one's rivals by raising accusations of their involvement in dark magic already had precedent in France. Nearly a century earlier Philip the Fair had swept aside the powerful, wealthy Knights Templar by condemning them to death for allegedly participating in heresy and witchcraft.¹³⁰ Interestingly enough, while the Templars burned at the stake in the early fourteenth century were men, the nature of the charges possessed similar overtones as that of women accused of witchcraft in later decades. The Templars were mainly charged with sexual nonconformity, in the form of homosexual acts, conducted during their initiation ceremonies.¹³¹ The official order for their arrest states that "not fearing to break human law, they bind themselves with a vow of initiation to give themselves over, one to another, to that disgusting and terrifying vice of sexual intercourse—when asked and without excuse."¹³² By taking an oath in the form of a forbidden sexual act the Templars, in the eyes of their accusers, denied Christ and gave themselves over to evil.¹³³

¹³⁰ Jeffrey Burton Russell, *Witchcraft in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1972), 194-195.

¹³¹ Barber, *The Trial of the Templars*, 202-203.

¹³² "Order for the Arrest of the Templars," in *The Crusades: A Reader*, ed. S. J. Allen and Emilie Amt (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010), 379.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 378-379.

Given this direct correlation between satanic witchcraft and deviant sexual practices, it is not surprising that scholars of the late medieval period also began to associate black magic and witchcraft more exclusively with women.¹³⁴ As Michael D. Bailey argues, by the late medieval period “at the very least, witchcraft could be seen as more suited to women than to men, because the power of witches rested on their submission to the devil and their susceptibility to his seductions.”¹³⁵ Taking into account the perceived libidinous nature of women, a view that most medieval scholars accepted without question, it is little wonder that witchcraft was increasingly feminized by the late medieval period, and that any female behavior considered presumptuous threatened to earn a label of witchcraft.

As Jeffrey Burton Russell asserts, in the decades following the dissolution of the Templars the Valois kings continued to use witchcraft accusations as a powerful political tool. Charles IV, for example, accused the highly educated and politically influential Countess Mahaut of Artois of using sorcery to poison his predecessor.¹³⁶ Because she had inherited the county of Artois against the claims of her nephew, Mahaut remained a fierce defender of her holdings throughout her tenure as countess, and arranged her children’s marriages in order to increase her influence at the French court.¹³⁷ Interestingly, her daughter Blanche married Charles IV, a younger son of Philip the Fair, in 1307, but the union ended

¹³⁴ Richards, *Sex, Dissidence, and Damnation*, 75-76.

¹³⁵ Bailey, “The Feminization of Witchcraft and the Emerging Idea of the Female Witch in the Late Middle Ages,” 128.

¹³⁶ Russell, *Witchcraft in the Middle Ages*, 172.

¹³⁷ Carola M. Small, “Messengers in the County of Artois, 1295-1329,” *Canadian Journal of History* 25 (1990): 165.

in scandal in 1314.¹³⁸ It is worth noting that the charges brought against Mahaut by her son in law occurred just one year later, in 1315, and as Elizabeth Brown has argued, the countess continued to communicate with and even send her daughter gifts after her trial for adultery.¹³⁹ The sexual nature of Blanche's crimes, in combination with her mother's persistence in supporting her and actively participating in French politics, seemed enough justification for Charles IV to accuse Mahaut of practicing dark magic.

By the late fourteenth century, increasing hostility directed against women as vessels of weakness more susceptible to sexual sin created the ideal environment in which to blame the political instabilities of the French realm, and the mental instability of its ruler, on a woman's use of witchcraft. Thus regardless of Valentina's possible machinations at the French court in the 1390s, her royal brother-in-law's preference for her company during his mental episodes was enough evidence for many to condemn her by association. Her mere proximity to the mentally ill monarch seemed to demonstrate her complicity in his puzzling behavior. Taking into account the hostile political

¹³⁸ In an infamous incident Isabella of France, Queen of England, gave coin purses to her brothers and their wives while visiting France with her husband in 1313; she later noticed that the coin purse she had given Blanche was in the possession of a Norman knight, whom she immediately supposed to be Blanche's lover, and reported this information to her father when next she visited France. Blanche, along with the rest of Philip the Fair's daughters-in-law, was charged and condemned of committing adultery in 1314 and imprisoned underground for the next eight years at the Chateau-Gaillard. For more information on this incident see Alison Weir, *Isabella: She-Wolf of France, Queen of England* (London: Vintage, 2012).

¹³⁹ Elizabeth A.R. Brown, "Blanche of Artois and Burgundy, Chateau-Gaillard, and the Baron de Joursanvout," in *Negotiating Community and Difference in Medieval Europe: Gender, Power, Patronage, and the Authority of Religion in Latin Christendom*, ed. Katherine Allen Smith and Scott Wells (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 237. For the dating of the charges brought against Countess Mahaut, see Paul Lehugeur, *Histoire de Philippe le Long, Roi de France (1316-1322)* (Paris, 1917), 115.

atmosphere of the French court during the reign of Charles VI, this chapter aims to address the manner in which political intrigue, medieval gender biases, and competing kinship units led to the disgrace of one of the realm's most prominent and powerful noblewomen, Valentina Visconti, Duchess of Orléans.

Although a French duchess by marriage, Valentina hailed from the powerful Visconti family of Milan, and thus was no stranger to political strife. In 1385 Valentina's father, Gian Galeazzo Visconti, overthrew his own uncle, Bernabo Visconti, in an effort to assume control over the lordship of Milan. Having caught wind of possible negotiations for a marriage between Charles VI of France and Isabeau of Bavaria, a granddaughter of Bernabo Visconti on her mother's side, Gian Galeazzo reacted to what he perceived as a loss to his valuable French connections.¹⁴⁰ Imprisoned in the fortress of Trezzo, Bernabo died under suspicion of poisoning later that year.¹⁴¹ In spite of this scandalous family coup, Gian Galeazzo's star continued to rise. His elevated position as Lord of Milan reasserted Gian Galeazzo's influence in neighboring France, and in 1387 he secured through proxy a marriage between his daughter Valentina and the younger brother of the king of France: Louis, Duke of Touraine.¹⁴² Having risen to this powerful position through deceit, however, the Visconti had officially earned a reputation as a ruthless family willing to use dishonest means in order

¹⁴⁰ Barbara Tuchman, *A Distant Mirror: The Calamitous Fourteenth Century* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1978), 417.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 418.

¹⁴² Louis was the Duke of Touraine until 1392, when he and Valentina were awarded the duchy of Orléans.

to achieve influence.¹⁴³ While familial rivalries like the Visconti's were certainly not uncommon in the medieval world, Gian Galeazzo's brutal overthrow of his uncle had lasting ramifications for the reputation of the Visconti that later impacted the treatment of his daughter Valentina.

Much of the resulting resentment against the Visconti stemmed from the manner of Bernabo's death, which resulted not from battle wounds, but from poison. Death by poison was deeply feared by medieval men, and not least for the reason that it robbed a man of the chance to die fighting, with his honor intact. Thus the perpetrators of poison were viewed in an even more derogatory light, and poison, a secretive weapon often put in food or drink, was usually considered to be a woman's preferred method of murder.¹⁴⁴ Thomas Robisheaux's recent study of witchcraft in early modern Germany demonstrates that because of poison's natural origins, deriving largely from plants, minerals, and animals such as scorpions, spiders, and venomous snakes, poisons were also often linked with the occult; these creatures were considered useful to witches and thus there was a common association between the potency of poison and the use of black magic.¹⁴⁵ Many medieval people believed that poison only gained its

¹⁴³ The Visconti family was already regarded with suspicion in many circles after 1320, when Pope John XXII accused Matteo and Galeazzo I Visconti of trying to kill him by manipulating a wax doll of the Pope. The papal bull issued in 1326 reflects this incident; Pope John states "grievingly we observe... that many who are Christians in name only... sacrifice to demons, adore them, make or have made images...or other things for magical purposes... We hereby promulgate the sentence of excommunication upon all and singular who against our most charitable warnings and orders presume to engage in these things..." See Pope John XXII, "The Decretal *Super illius specula*," 82. For a detailed description of John XXII's attitude toward witchcraft and magic, see Rollo-Koster, *Avignon and its Papacy (1309-1417): Popes, Institutions, and Society*.

¹⁴⁴ Russell, *Witchcraft in the Middle Ages*, 280.

¹⁴⁵ Thomas Robisheaux, *The Last Witch of Langenburg: Murder in a German Village* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2009), 50.

deadly potency through the role of magical intermediaries, namely witches and sorcerers, whose spells empowered these naturally derived elements. As Jeffrey Burton Russell has convincingly argued, “it is women who gather the herbs that can cure or poison... they who know the charms or potions that can cause hatred or love, fertility or impotence.”¹⁴⁶ Subsequently, Gian Galeazzo’s probable involvement in his uncle’s poisoning simultaneously cast him as a dabbler in spells and incantations and feminized the nature of his actions, characteristics extremely dishonorable for any medieval nobleman.

Gian Galeazzo’s role in the poisoning of his uncle also tainted French opinion against his daughter in the midst of Charles VI’s mental illness almost a decade later. The *Chronique du Religieux de Saint-Denys* states that in “Lombardy, from whence the duchess originated, poisons and spells flourished more than in other places.”¹⁴⁷ The monk of Saint Denis offers this information as an explanation for the king’s peculiar preference for his sister-in-law Valentina during his periods of insanity. According to Pintoin, Charles did not simply take comfort in Valentina’s company; he was under her spell. Valentina’s family history of involvement in poisoning and *maleficum* allowed Pintoin to plausibly argue that she was a witch; the clergy’s widespread misogyny and the fourteenth-century identification of witchcraft as heresy made his argument all the more persuasive to a medieval audience. In the eyes of many at the French court, the magical properties associated with these actions made the practice of

¹⁴⁶ Russell, *Witchcraft in the Middle Ages*, 280.

¹⁴⁷ Pintoin, *Chronique du Religieux de Saint-Denys*, II, 88. “...in Lombardia, unde ducebat originem, intoxicaciones et sorteligia vigebat plus quam aliis partibus.”

witchcraft the next step to which the Visconti would sink in their efforts to promote family interests. In this way the daughter inherited the sins of the father.

During the king's initial attack of mental illness in 1392 Valentina was not present, but nonetheless the seeds of witchcraft accusations had already been planted. In the weeks following Charles' attack and recovery, many whispered that his strange episode was the result of bewitchment, although at the time the royal physicians suspected he suffered from an imbalance of humors, having inherited excess moisture from his mother.¹⁴⁸ Interestingly enough, while this may seem to imply that witchcraft accusations were only concocted later as a means of slandering the Duke and Duchess of Orléans, a theory that certainly carries weight, this initial diagnosis illustrates that from the onset of Charles' illness women were, in one way or another, found to be the source of his malady.¹⁴⁹

The doctor's assumption reflects medieval medical theory concerning the composition of the human body. Medieval medical knowledge was largely based on the Hippocratic theory, which held that the body consisted of four humors:

¹⁴⁸ Froissart, *Chronicles*, 400.

¹⁴⁹ Although the accusations of bewitchment surrounding Charles' mental illness were definitely given feminine connotations, Louis of Orléans himself was not free from such charges. In January 1393 during what became known as the *Bal des ardents*, a sort of charivari at the second wedding of one of Isabeau's ladies-in-waiting, Charles and several other nobles dressed as wild men and performed a frenzied, mocking dance. Their costumes, covered in resin, leaves, and hair, accidentally caught fire when a drunken Louis entered with a torch, a spark from which caught fire and killed four of the five dancers. Only the king survived; this cast doubt on the intentions of the Duke of Orléans. See Tuchman, *The Calamitous Fourteenth Century*, 503-505.

blood, phlegm, and black and yellow bile.¹⁵⁰ If unbalanced, the humors could lead to a myriad of health problems and required various forms of purging, including bloodletting and herbal remedies alike, in order to rectify the imbalance. These bodily humors also influenced certain inherent physical qualities that men and women were believed to possess: namely that men were hot and dry, while women were cold and moist, an inferior state that Hippocrates and Galen believed caused women to die sooner than men.¹⁵¹ Subsequently this view of the intrinsic female physical nature led medical scholars most influential during the medieval period, and none more so than Galen, to claim that “the female is less perfect than the male for one, principal reason—because she is colder; for if among animals the warm one is the more active, a colder animal would be less perfect than a warmer.”¹⁵² This medical theory was extremely gendered, offering an explanation of the sexes to support a patriarchal view of men and women’s roles in medieval society. In the case of Charles VI, his madness was directly linked to a feminine characteristic inherited from his mother. Initially establishing his mother’s physical imperfections as the cause for the king’s insanity made the later association with witchcraft a natural progression.

Considering these deeply rooted medieval biases against the female sex and linking them with physical and mental deficiencies that in turn made women

¹⁵⁰ Vern L. Bulloch, “Medieval Medical and Scientific Views of Women,” *Viator* 4 (1973): 491.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁵² Galen, *On the Usefulness of the Parts of the Body (de usu partium)*, trans. Margaret Tallmade May (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1968). It is interesting to note that snakes, the animal most often associated with female sin because of Eve’s interaction with Satan in serpent form in the Garden of Eden, are cold-blooded animals.

more susceptible to participate in *maleficum*, or witchcraft, it appears that Valentina Visconti was simply in the wrong place at the wrong time. She garnered the favor of a mentally unstable monarch, and the combination of her proximity to the king and her gender made her an easy target for blame. This interpretation would make Valentina appear to be no more than a passive victim of the Burgundian faction's malice against Louis of Orléans. The overarching political atmosphere at the French court during the late fourteenth century not only demonstrates the politicized nature of these witchcraft allegations, however, but also captures a vignette of female power exercised between two of the most prominent women at Charles VI's court.

While Philip of Burgundy did indeed have ample motivation for removing Louis of Orléans from the king's influence in the mid 1390s, he was not alone in his desire to see the Duchess of Orléans fall from royal favor. Bernabo Visconti's untimely death in 1385 signaled the downfall of Queen Isabeau's Visconti kin, who had earned her loyalty through her devotion to her mother Taddea Visconti, Bernabo's daughter.¹⁵³ Louis' ambitions to secure a lasting alliance with the Lord of Milan, cemented by his marriage with Valentina, certainly earned the Duke little favor with the queen. A scholar of Isabeau of Bavaria who has attempted to improve the queen's tarnished image in conventional French historiography, Tracy Adams has recently posited that Isabeau may indeed have been complicit in the witchcraft charges leveled against Valentina in 1396. The two women

¹⁵³ Tracy Adams, *The Life and Afterlife of Isabeau of Bavaria* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), 2-4.

hailed from rival branches of the Visconti clan and the duchess' removal from court represented the downfall of the queen's adversary, a woman who had stood between her and her husband and as well as her natal family's interests.¹⁵⁴

Interestingly, Adams also asserts that while witchcraft accusations were officially aimed at Valentina, they were in fact intended to discredit her husband, Louis of Orléans, and that in many ways Valentina was merely a "convenient stand in."¹⁵⁵ This theory supports my own findings that Valentina was used as a scapegoat to both explain away the king's madness and dispose of an unwanted political faction at court. Essentially, it also demonstrates Valentina's prominence. In order to diminish her husband's influence by attacking her personally, Philip of Burgundy and the queen had to have realized the influence Valentina held over her husband and the king.

Such a course of action could not be undertaken lightly, however. While Valentina's family history and Milanese roots made her "an easy target" for accusations of witchcraft, she had already gained a reputation for flouting court rank and protocol, a severe offense for any member of the medieval nobility.¹⁵⁶ Froissart relates just such a breach of etiquette in the fourth book of his chronicle. During Queen Isabeau's ceremonial entry into Paris in 1389, he wrote that Valentina, at the time Duchess of Touraine, along with the other leading ladies of the French nobility, set out with the new queen "in order of precedence. Their litters were all similar, and so richly decorated that nothing was lacking.

¹⁵⁴ Adams, "Valentina Visconti, Charles VI, and the Politics of Witchcraft," 11-12.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 14-15.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 16.

The Duchess of Touraine, however, had no litter, to distinguish her from the others, but was mounted on a palfrey with very rich trappings and rode at a walking-pace on one side of the road.”¹⁵⁷ Considering that this passage means to relate Isabeau’s glorious arrival in the capital city of her new realm, it is of note that Froissart spends more detail in describing Valentina’s noticeable display of wealth during this episode. Indeed, his emphasis that the Duchess of Touraine rode apart from the other ladies and sat upon a horse, instead of inside a litter, seems to indicate that she sought undue attention, perhaps an unseemly gesture considering that all eyes were meant to be on Isabeau. Of course, this could also mark an attempt on Louis’ part to elevate the status of his wife above that of Isabeau, whose Bavarian origins pitted her squarely against his own political interests and allegiances. In any case, the bold gesture certainly did not go unnoticed.

The queen’s entry into Paris only marked the beginning of the rivalry between Isabeau and her Visconti cousin and sister in law. Froissart mentions after describing this scene that the duchess herself had only “lately arrived in France from her native Lombardy, for she was the daughter of the Lord of Milan... since this young lady, whose name was Valentine, had never been to Paris until she entered it in the company of the Queen, the citizens rightly owed her a warm welcome.”¹⁵⁸ This may infer that Valentina, herself the new bride of a French royal, felt overshadowed by Isabeau’s higher rank as queen and tried to

¹⁵⁷ Froissart, *Chronicles*, 351.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 358.

stand out from the large crowd of ladies by taking a more active role in their procession. Valentina was completely foreign to French royal protocol at the time, however, and thus this incident also represents the ways in which a wife's presentation reflected upon her husband. By relating the showiness of Valentina's entry into Paris Froissart was perhaps attempting to make a statement about the greed and ambition of Louis himself.

Although few other descriptions remain of Valentina's life and marriage, it is possible even from this small vignette to catch a glimpse of the competition between the two women and their husbands. Valentina's Milanese connections, in combination with her sense of flair as displayed among her French relatives, were enough to make her seem the most likely culprit for any possible wrongdoing associated with the king's insanity. While Tracy Adams argues that Isabeau's motivations for ousting Valentina from court were in fact politically and not romantically based, a charge that bolsters the rehabilitated image of Isabeau presented in her recent biography of the queen, one cannot help but imagine the pain and jealousy Isabeau would have felt at her husband's glaring preference for her sister-in-law during his bouts of mental illness. Such an emotional reaction should not necessarily vilify the queen.¹⁵⁹ After all, Pinton reported that during subsequent episodes of insanity that occurred as early as

¹⁵⁹ Conventional histories of the period depict Isabeau as a conniving adulteress who hated Valentina because she herself was having an affair with her brother in law, Louis of Orléans, who was known as a consummate womanizer. The rumors of an affair between him and the queen have largely been discredited by recent scholarship. See Adams, *The Life and Afterlife of Isabeau of Bavaria*, 40-42. For more traditional, biased depictions of the relationship between Isabeau and Valentina, and about the supposed affair between Isabeau and Louis, see Tuchman, *The Calamitous Fourteenth Century*, 515-516.

1393, Charles refused, or was unable to, recognize even his wife and the children their marriage had produced.¹⁶⁰ His wife since the age of fourteen and mother of their eight children, it is only natural that Isabeau would have felt incredibly hurt at this slight, an unfortunate situation only exacerbated by the king's constant entreaties for Valentina's presence.

Considering both the political and personal stakes that the queen had in removing Valentina from court, it is also important to examine how the court perceived her forced exile in 1396. Pintoin comments that the Duke of Orléans finally felt that he must remove his wife to the countryside in order to avoid a "scandalum," implying that by the mid 1390s many people were of the opinion that Valentina must have been playing some active role in perpetuating the king's malady.¹⁶¹ He further states that it was necessary to remove Valentina and the king from one another's company. It is clear from Pintoin's account that many people disapproved of the frequent, unaccompanied visits which Valentina made to the king during his attacks. What the exact nature of these visits were is very difficult to determine, and few historians have ever tried to address what Valentina actually meant to Charles. While there is no evidence to support any type of sexual relationship between the two, a bond based solely on companionship between two people of the opposite sex would have been just as unnatural and disturbing to medieval people, and reason enough to separate them.

¹⁶⁰ Pintoin, *Chronique du Religieux de Saint-Denys*, II, 86. "Dictu sane mirabile et auditu mirabilius, non solum se uxorum liberosque genuisse denegabat..."

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 406.

While the political motivations of certain factions at the French court, namely the supporters of Isabeau of Bavaria and the Duke of Burgundy, largely explain why Valentina Visconti was accused of witchcraft in 1396, the possibility of Valentina's actual machinations against the mentally ill King Charles are still left to be addressed. Somewhat paradoxically, although he relates Valentina's presupposed involvement in the king's illness and her exile from court as a matter of fact, throughout his chronicle of Charles VI's reign Pintoin still describes those who believe in the power of spells and incantations as "vulgus," common people with little learning or good sense.¹⁶² How are we then to interpret the frequent accusations of sorcery and "malificarum" as mentioned in the *Chronique du Religeux de Saint-Denys*?

Pintoin's repeated use of such charges against foreigners and political rivals, seemingly not supported by belief in their actual powers, illustrates the largely political nature of the accusations. In the case of both Gian Galeazzo Visconti and his daughter Valentina, claims of sorcery and witchcraft did more to besmirch their honor than actually bring them tangible harm. Although by the late fourteenth century some theologians had already begun to connect witchcraft with religious heresy, the nature of the Visconti's supposed dabbling in dark magic did not warrant enough of a threat to physically remove them from power. This explains why no great effort was made to arrest Valentina or keep her in exile for the rest of her life. Indeed, when Louis of Orléans was assassinated in 1407, the duchess immediately returned to court in order to

¹⁶² Ibid., 86, 404.

demand justice for his murder.¹⁶³ She was not prevented from returning, but while public sentiment “softened” toward her in response to her “courage and gracious mourning over the death of her husband,” the new Duke of Burgundy, John the Fearless, seized on this opportunity to claim that her presence at court had caused the king a terrible relapse into madness, no doubt a result of her spells and sorcery.¹⁶⁴ The fact that more serious steps were never undertaken to punish Valentina for her supposed use of witchcraft demonstrates either that she still remained in the king’s favor, or more likely, that there was simply no evidence to support these wild accusations. By slandering Valentina as a witch whenever she figured prominently in the public eye, the Burgundian faction hoped to undermine the legitimacy of the Orléanists. In this instance in particular, John the Fearless attempted to distract from Valentina’s appeals for judicial action in response to Louis’ assassination by asserting that she was a witch who had only returned to court to torture the king.

The witchcraft allegations leveled against Valentina Visconti illustrate how expedient a method of political slander witchcraft had become in Europe by the late fourteenth century. Valentina was not the first upper class, socially influential woman to be targeted with accusations of witchcraft in the medieval period, and she certainly would not be the last. Indeed, as Tracy Adams asserts, “Valentina’s case captures a society in flux. Historians have noted that in Europe beginning around the middle of the fifteenth century, magical practices became

¹⁶³ Famiglietti, *Royal Intrigue*, 63.

¹⁶⁴ Veenstra, *Magic and Divination*, 84.

the focus of an educated elite interrogation.”¹⁶⁵ This shift is essential in understanding the increased targeting of women as witches, among prominent women as well as those of the lower classes, at this point in Europe’s history. By the end of the fourteenth century the medieval discourse on *maleficum* and witchcraft had begun to evolve from the realm of pagan superstition to the treatises of learned, rational men, some of the most well renowned scholars of the later Middle Ages.

Because of this calculated feminization of witchcraft, all women, regardless of rank, were susceptible to such accusations. This put socially prominent women at even greater risk, as their involvement in the male-dominated public sphere placed them outside the safe realm of traditional female gender roles. Valentina Visconti epitomized the risks of such political agency: she represented competing factions at the French court; both her natal kin and her marriage made her an easy target as a convenient means of slandering both. The duchess’ social disgrace alone seemed to suffice in neutralizing her influence and agency. The late medieval confluence of diabolism and witchcraft in religious doctrine and popular scholarship made witchcraft accusations far more dangerous for elite women: as the association of witchcraft with the devil became more marked, fewer women could expect to survive witchcraft convictions with little more consequence than the loss of their place at court. Although misogynistic politics continued to motivate witchcraft charges

¹⁶⁵ Adams, “Valentina Visconti, Charles VI, and the Politics of Witchcraft,” 28.

in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the penalties for such accusations became far more severe, as the following case of Joan of Arc proves.

Chapter Four

The 1431 Trial of Joan of Arc: Renaming Medieval Female Agency as Demonic Possession

Just thirty-five years after Valentina Visconti was exiled from the French court under suspicion of bewitching King Charles VI, a nineteen-year-old peasant girl from the duchy of Orléans was burned at the stake after commanding the French army during the kingdom's most desperate hour of the Hundred Years War. That peasant, Joan of Arc, represents one of the most renowned examples of female agency of the medieval period, and her trial is likewise one of its most notorious witchcraft cases. Yet in spite of Joan's celebrity, the story of her condemnation as a witch is actually an outlier in the present study. Unlike the other woman described within these chapters Joan hailed from the peasantry, thus lacking the social status and reproductive responsibilities that automatically placed women such as Valentina Visconti under extreme scrutiny. Indeed, Joan's social prominence is even more unusual and noteworthy because she rose to power in France as a result of her own religious convictions and personal ambition: her humble origins were of no use to her.

In many ways, the uniqueness of Joan's ascension to the role of France's savior made her even more susceptible to charges of misconduct than those noblewomen who were regarded with distrust simply by virtue of their bloodlines and the gender roles thus expected of them. In becoming leader of the royal French forces Joan broke through multiple gender barriers of medieval society. Not only was her role as military commander deemed scandalously

inappropriate for a woman, a view only exacerbated by her decision to cross-dress in men's clothing, but her rise from humble country maid to celebrated hero of France seemed outrageous, and indeed, enraging to Joan's enemies in England and Burgundy. These medieval biases cemented the political motivations behind Joan's condemnation. After she was captured and brought to trial, a guilty verdict was certain; the tribunal was composed entirely of pro-English and Burgundian clerics, and Joan's repeated requests for French churchmen were denied.¹⁶⁶ When her 1431 trial is examined in light of the feminine gender and socioeconomic roles that Joan blatantly defied, it becomes clear that her fall and execution signifies a key marker in the late medieval feminization of witchcraft: the attempt to re-identify significant female agency as seditious and heretical behavior through whatever means necessary.

The singularity of Joan's life greatly affected the proceedings brought against her for witchcraft and heresy in 1430-1431. The tribunal of clerics tasked with rooting out Joan's wrongdoings had to reinterpret her extraordinary agency as a Christian mystic and as a military leader and cloak these actions in the conventional language of witchcraft accusations. Her downfall depended on a convincing reinterpretation of her actions in the public sphere not as virtuous female independence in the service of her earthly and heavenly kings, but as bondage to a demon. Thus Joan's interrogators focused on removing her self-determination from her incredible story, and instead attempted to portray her as

¹⁶⁶ Régine Pernoud, *Joan of Arc: By Herself and Her Witnesses*, trans. Edward Hymans (New York: Dorset Press, 1964), 165-167.

the manipulated tool of powerful demons. The association between Joan and evil supernatural forces simultaneously delegitimized her and identified her as a witch.

As will be demonstrated in this chapter, the inquisitorial trial held against Joan in early 1431 built its case against her in two ways. First, her judges claimed that as a cross dresser she defied the biblical command against wearing clothing of the opposite gender, an act described in Deuteronomy 22:5 as “an abomination to the Lord your God.”¹⁶⁷ Secondly, the court accused her inner source of inspiration and confidence as demonic in nature. Joan’s initial claims to be the ordained leader of the French army rested on her belief in visions sent to her from God via holy intermediaries, St. Michael, St. Margaret, and St. Catherine in particular. Joan’s claim to have direct contact with God defied the natural order of the Catholic Church, as she did not need, or seek, the help of a priest in order to experience these visions. While Joan lived in an age occupied by an increasing number of female mystics, the line between legitimate spiritual revelation and demonic possession was extremely tenuous for such women.¹⁶⁸ In Joan’s case, even normally appropriate Christian rituals, such as receiving the Eucharist, were reinterpreted as further sign of her demonic possession. Because Joan repeatedly requested the Eucharist while imprisoned, her captors claimed that she craved the body of Christ physically, not spiritually. As Nancy Caciola explains, medieval Christians refused to believe that the Host underwent

¹⁶⁷ Deut. 22:5 (English Standard Version).

¹⁶⁸ Karen Sullivan, *The Interrogation of Joan of Arc* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 21-22.

the normal human digestive process, instead ascending to the soul. Women who displayed an overzealous Eucharistic devotion were thought to physically desire the consumption of the body and blood, a craving brought on not by a pure longing for communion with God but by demons living in the intestines.¹⁶⁹ Combining her masculine appearance and unusual behavior with the possibility of her possession by demonic beings, it became simple enough for Joan's accusers to label her a witch.¹⁷⁰ Thus at its foundation the trial of Joan of Arc represents the medieval preoccupation with outward appearances, inner beliefs, and the societal control of both.

Taken in account with the other instances of witchcraft persecution described in the present study, it at first seems incredulous that France's political and military elite, leaders of a realm whose Salic Law specifically forbade royal inheritance through agnatic kinship lines, ever allowed Joan to exert so much power in such a highly male-dominated sphere as warfare.¹⁷¹ By the late 1420s, however, the French realm was deeply embroiled in internal

¹⁶⁹ Nancy Caciola, *Discerning Spirits: Divine and Demonic Possession in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003), 197-199.

¹⁷⁰ As Catherine Rider explains in a recent article, female mystics were often at risk of being considered demonically possessed. Women who demonstrated an unnatural amount of knowledge, whether it be secular or religious in nature, could conversely be considered to be under the influence of an evil spirit. She specifically cites the case of an unnamed woman who was brought to the shrine of Thomas Becket in the 1170s to be cured of demonic possession; the demon had caused her to learn Latin and German. See Catherine Rider, "Demons and Mental Disorder in Late Medieval Medicine," in *Mental (Dis)Order in Late Medieval Europe*, ed. Sari Katajala-Peltomaa and Susanna Niiranen (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 47, 60.

¹⁷¹ For an in-depth explanation of the restructuring of Salic Law in medieval France during the Valois dynasty, see Craig Taylor, "The Salic Law, French Queenship, and The Defense of Women in the Late Middle Ages," *French Historical Studies* 29 (2006): 543-544. Also see Deborah Fraioli, *Joan of Arc and the Hundred Years War* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2005), 5-8.

strife and still plagued by losses to the English in the Hundred Years War.¹⁷² Charles VI's insanity sparked a period of intense rivalry amongst the members of the nobility closest to the throne, as evidenced by the witchcraft accusations leveled against Valentina Visconti in 1396. This contention came to a head in November 1407, when her husband Louis, Duke of Orléans was assassinated in Paris.¹⁷³ The crime was quickly tied to John the Fearless, Duke of Burgundy, the son of Louis' uncle and deceased enemy, Philip of Burgundy.¹⁷⁴ The kingdom split, divided by loyalties to the Burgundian or Armagnac (Orléanist) factions. John the Fearless turned to the English for support, pitting Burgundy squarely against France in the overarching war between the two kingdoms.¹⁷⁵ As Kelly DeVries has pointed out, this internal conflict remained unresolved when Joan of Arc appeared on the scene in 1428, and thus the young Maid of Orléans was forced to deal with an ethnically French enemy in addition to an English one.¹⁷⁶

While the English, led by Henry V, began to steadily chip away at French holdings throughout the 1410s, Joan lived the life of a peasant girl in the village of Domrémy in northeastern France, an area contested by French and Burgundians at the time. At her nullification trial decades later Joan's godfather, Jean Moreau, remembered that "Joan, in her youth... was well and decently

¹⁷² Kelly DeVries, *Joan of Arc: A Military Leader* (Gloucestershire: Sutton Publishing Ltd., 2003), 15-16.

¹⁷³ As an illustration of the pervasiveness of the witchcraft rumors surrounding the Duke of Orléans and his wife, Louis' right hand was cut off as he was murdered in order to prevent him from casting spells on his assailants. For more on the death of Louis of Orléans see Richard Vaughn, *John the Fearless: The Growth of Burgundian Power* (New York: Barnes & Noble, Inc., 1966), 44-48.

¹⁷⁴ Fraioli, *Joan of Arc and the Hundred Years War*, 56.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 17.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 17-18.

raised in faith and sound morals, and she was so that almost everyone of the village of Domrémy loved her.”¹⁷⁷ It was within this bucolic setting that Joan reported first hearing the heavenly voices that told her she would lead France’s armies into battle against the English. Joan related that the voice came to her in her father’s garden on a summer day, and that a bright light accompanied it.¹⁷⁸ Although at first she was afraid, after hearing the voice on three separate occasions she realized it was in fact an angel, and later claimed that this angel most frequently appeared to her as St. Michael, St. Catherine, or St. Margaret. It was specifically St. Michael who told her that the king of France faced great tribulation, and that it was her God-ordained duty to help him deliver their kingdom by leading the French troops into battle against their English and Burgundian foes.¹⁷⁹ At the urging of these spiritual guides, Joan set out to gain a meeting with the dauphin with the intention of leading France’s soldiers in his name. It was a task that the exiled, uncrowned Charles VII eventually granted her, although with the suspicion expected of a powerful medieval man used to receiving the advice only of *male* counselors and courtiers.

It would be impossible in this brief study to recount the incredible events of Joan’s rise to prominence as an advisor and military leader of the French king in their entirety. Joan’s image as a French heroine plays less of a role in her fall than do the more controversial facets of her character that set her apart from the

¹⁷⁷ Jean Moreau, “Nullification Trial Testimony, The Second Inquiry, 1455,” *St. Joan of Arc Center*, accessed January 31, 2015. <http://www.stjoan-center.com/Trials/null03.html>.

¹⁷⁸ Marina Warner, *Joan of Arc: The Image of Female Heroism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), 119.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 124-125.

rest of her sex. While the events of Joan's campaign and her military prowess is not the focus of this chapter, it *is* important to note that Joan's perceived legitimacy as a messenger of God lasted only so long as her victories continued. The believability of Joan's visions depended on victory: so incredulous was the notion that a woman could lead an army that only total triumph could assure her followers that God had truly chosen Joan to be the savior of France. Doubts of Joan's genuineness were first raised even in the midst of success. At the battle of Montepilloy Joan was reported to have advised a direct attack on the fortified English lines, a course of action that would have caused heavy French losses and was opposed by her fellow commanders. The opinion of the other French leaders took precedence and the English subsequently fled the field in defeat.¹⁸⁰

This turn of events no doubt raised eyebrows: Joan had provided faulty advice and the French victory at Montepilloy thus appeared to be linked to the martial knowledge and experience of the army's male leaders, not the divinely-inspired musings of a young girl. These doubts only increased during the siege of Paris in September 1429, during which Joan faced a larger contingent of enemy forces than any she had previously bested.¹⁸¹ On September 8 Joan led a battalion of men in an attempt to take the Saint-Honoré gate outside the city, but was bogged down in heavy fighting near the moat. Even more troubling, Joan was wounded by a crossbow bolt in the fray. The unnatural skill and supernatural protection that God had supposedly gifted to Joan seemed, to many

¹⁸⁰ DeVries, *Joan of Arc: A Military Leader*, 141.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 143.

of the French, suddenly lacking. Although she prepared herself to fight again the following day, Charles put a stop to the assault on Paris, calling Joan to meet with him in order to reassess whether or not her campaign should continue there.

Charles' reluctance to continue Joan's leadership over the French army is also likely a result of his coronation at Rheims on July 17 of that year. As Marina Warner has argued, Charles VII's ceremonial crowning and anointing reflected a tradition that had granted the kings of France their legitimacy and authority for centuries, and returned at least a semblance of normality to the chaos that marked the king's reign since his ascension to the throne in 1422.¹⁸² It was an event that many of the French, none more so than Joan herself, had waited for with great hope. The chronicler Jean Chartier reports that after leading the triumphant siege of Orléans, a weeping Joan threw herself at the king's feet and implored him: "Gentle king, now the will of God has been accomplished, who wished that I should raise the siege of Orléans and bring you to this city of Rheims to receive your solemn consecration, showing that you are the true king, that you are he to whom the kingdom of France should belong."¹⁸³ In spite of Joan's decisive role in clearing a path for Charles' coronation, his official status as monarch conversely stripped away a measure of her importance. Charles' official crowning made a woman's role in the leadership of the French forces appear even more unnatural, as the kingdom's desperate hour seemed to fade somewhat with the ceremonial investiture of its monarch.

¹⁸² Warner, *Joan of Arc: The Image of Female Heroism*, 70-71.

¹⁸³ Jules Quicherat, *Procès de condamnation et de réhabilitation de Jeanne d'Arc*, 5 vols. (Paris: 1841-1849), 186, quoted in Warner, *Joan of Arc: The Image of Female Heroism*, 72.

With the tangible authority of King Charles VII restored, Joan's star began to wane. After a campaign lasting just over a year and in the wake of a short-lived truce between the English and French, Joan was captured by a group of English and Burgundian soldiers in the service of the bastard of Wandomme outside Compiègne on May 24, 1430.¹⁸⁴ At the time she was wearing under her armor a surcoat of cloth of gold with long panels, which an archer used to forcibly pull her from her horse. This detail of Joan's capture is important: the description of her flashy clothes implies that the outward symbols of Joan's contrived masculinity aided in her seizure.

Joan's detractors relied heavily on her resolution to wear masculine dress as the root of her more egregious sins. The trial record states that

wholly forgetful of womanly honesty, and having thrown off the bonds of shame, careless of all the modesty of womankind, she wore with an astonishing and monstrous brazenness, immodest garments belonging to the male sex...moreover, her presumptuousness had grown until she was not afraid to perform, to speak, and to disseminate many things contrary to the Catholic faith and hurtful to the articles of the orthodox belief.¹⁸⁵

According to this argument one negative habit led to more serious and subversive acts. The court interpreted Joan's practice of dressing as a man not only as a strange quirk in itself, but as an outward display of her inner rebellious spirit. Beverly Boyd explains this relationship precisely, stating that "the issue was, of course, her voices, and by what authority she believed them. But the

¹⁸⁴ Warner, *Joan of Arc: The Image of Female Heroism*, 74-75.

¹⁸⁵ *The Trial of Jeanne d'Arc*, ed. and trans. W.P. Barrett (New York: Gotham House, Inc., 1932), 3-4.

emblem of her heresy was her wearing of men's clothing."¹⁸⁶ Simply put, Joan's use of male dress, whether for practicality or vanity, was considered treacherously atypical within the strictly ordered social structure of medieval Europe, and thus her inner faith and belief in her own abilities, encapsulated in the voices that counseled her, were viewed as abnormal and dangerous as well.

Her captors' deeply rooted concern over Joan's male vestments stemmed from the underlying cultural importance of color and dress as graphic indicators of socio-economic station. In the highly visual culture of medieval Europe, a person's outward appearance signified vital qualifiers such as religion, social status, profession, and of course, gender. This explains the important role that sumptuary laws played in medieval society: regulations must be put in place to control the dress of a kingdom's subjects in order to make them easily identifiable, and thus easily separable.¹⁸⁷ Such a flagrant disregard for customary feminine clothing resisted proscribed gender roles and subsequently flouted the traditional order of patriarchal society. Joan's fame throughout France gave her significant influence over many, men and women alike. Thus her strange behavior had the ability to truly threaten the perceived natural order of the sexes, a proposition that Joan's captors feared deeply.¹⁸⁸

¹⁸⁶ Beverly Boyd, "Wyclif, Joan of Arc, and Margery Kempe," *Mystics Quarterly* 12, no. 3 (September 1986): 116-117.

¹⁸⁷ For an in-depth discussion of sumptuary laws in the late medieval period see Mary G. Houston, *Medieval Costume in England and France: the 13th, 14th, and 15th Centuries* (New York: Dover, 1996).

¹⁸⁸ For more on the medieval concern over female cross dressing, see Valerie R. Hotchkiss, *Clothes Make the Man: Female Cross Dressing in Medieval Europe* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1996).

The judges at Joan's trial returned to her decision to wear men's clothing repeatedly. When asked whose advice she took to wear such clothes, Joan responded, "She charged no one with that;" the preference was hers and hers alone.¹⁸⁹ During later interrogations Joan further justified her wardrobe choices by claiming that God had directly advised her to dress as a man. When her captors offered to bring her a woman's dress, she refused, saying that "[I] am content with this, since it pleases God that I wear it."¹⁹⁰ This proved a point of contention for her interrogators, who continued to ask her who had advised her to wear men's clothing as a means of implicating Joan as a puppet under the control of men, whether they be mortal or supernatural. Joan's obviously saw the manner of her clothing as a trivial detail in the greater scheme of things and

she answered that the dress is a small, nay, the least thing.... Asked whether it seemed to her lawful that this command to assume male attire was lawful, she answered: 'Everything I have done is at God's command, and if He had ordered me to assume a different habit, I should have done it, because it would have been His command.'¹⁹¹

Aside from any divinely inspired commands to don men's clothing, Joan's cross dressing had other, more practical motivations that also should not be overlooked. As the sole female in a heavily male-dominated endeavor, wearing male clothing better protected Joan from possible sexual assault at the hands of the soldiers who surrounded her during her campaign. That Joan saw the

¹⁸⁹ *Trial of Jeanne d'Arc*, 45-46.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 55. As elaborated upon below, it is interesting, as Karen Sullivan has pointed out, that during her interrogation Joan avoided the most sensible argument for her male dress: that wearing male clothing better protected her from possible sexual assault at the hands of her fellow men-in-arms and her English guards while imprisoned. See Sullivan, *The Interrogation of Joan of Arc*, 22 and Pernoud, *Joan of Arc: By Herself and Her Witnesses*, 220.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 61.

practicality behind wearing breeches is illustrated by her unwillingness to accept feminine garb after her capture, when her inner voices came to her with guidance less frequently. Joan only mentioned cross dressing as a practical necessity in the weeks preceding her execution in May 1431, after conceding to wear a woman's shift and reporting that a guard had attempted to rape her, an act more easily accomplished against a woman wearing skirts rather than pants. While this argument at first seemed frustratingly impenetrable to the English and Burgundians, the nature and quality of her masculine clothing offered them another angle from which to criticize her actions as willful, rebellious, and not of God.

Although Joan could argue that the masculine nature of her divinely inspired task required she wear male clothing, the items of clothing gifted to her by the king weren't simply men's vestments, but the most fashionable styles of the day. Indeed, her captors complained that

The said Jeanne attributes to God, to His angels and to His Saints instructions that are contrary to the honesty of womankind, forbidden by divine law, abominable to God and man, and prohibited under penalty of anathema by ecclesiastical decrees, such as the wearing of short, tight, and dissolute male habits, those underneath the tunic and breeches as well as the rest; and, according to their bidding, she often dressed in rich and sumptuous habits, precious stuffs and cloth of gold and furs; and not only did she wear short tunics, but she dressed herself in tabards and garments open at the sides, whilst it is notorious that when she was captured she was wearing a loose cloak of cloth of gold, a cap on her head, and her hair cropped round in man's style.... Having cast aside all womanly decency... she had worn the apparel and garments of most

dissolute men... To attribute this to the bidding of God, His holy angels and virgin saints, is the blasphemy of our Lord...¹⁹²

The language of the court record reveals the connection made between the style, quality, and type of clothes Joan wore and her inner depravity. The finery of Joan's new wardrobe, befitting a military leader, inadvertently helped support the argument of her accusers: not only did Joan cross dress as a man, she wore the latest, most fashionable styles of the early fifteenth century, causing her to stand out even more intensely amongst her peers. By dressing as a young dandy, Joan at least did not appear to humbly follow a God-given command but boldly display her rebellion from the normal expectations placed upon the female sex.

These lines of proper femininity were blurred even further by Joan's hair. When master Pierre Maurice, one of the theologians presiding over her trial, expounded upon Joan's transgressions at the conclusion of the court proceedings in late May 1431, he incredulously remarked that "you even wear your hair cut short above the ears, without keeping anything about you to denote your sex, save what nature has given you."¹⁹³ Joan's hairstyle was for this reason the most threatening aspect of her transvestitism; with a masculine hairstyle no outward vestiges of her femaleness remained other than physical anatomy. These alterations to Joan's outward appearance had effectively allowed her to completely alter her gender and the behaviors that accompanied it. And yet, the remaining visibility of these natural marks of her femaleness, namely her

¹⁹² Ibid., 162-163.

¹⁹³ Ibid., 332.

breasts, implied that she did not attempt to completely hide her gendered identity: she remained at all times a woman in man's clothing.¹⁹⁴

It is key to the outcome of her trial that Joan never actually attempted to change or masculinize her name or identity. She still saw herself as a woman, but one tasked with men's work. Her existence in the worlds of both genders proved extremely upsetting for her captors because Joan viewed her innate femaleness and masculine role as military leader as compatible characteristics. To Joan these elements defined who she was, and did not automatically mean that she wanted to hide her true nature as a woman. In some ways this was even more heretical than if Joan had attempted to completely disguise herself as a man. Whatever the God-given or practical reasons behind her male dress, Joan never saw herself as anything but a woman, implying that she thought it acceptable, if extraordinary, for a woman to participate in the public sphere to the degree that she had.

As Beverly Boyd argues, Joan's transvestitism was seen merely as the outer symbol of her inner depravity. One sin informed the other: Joan's judges found her unnatural, masculine dress and appearance utterly reprehensible. Her disregard for feminine modesty made her sinful, and thus corrupted. As a tarnished woman, it seemed inconceivable that God would deem her a worthy

¹⁹⁴ For a more in-depth discussion of Joan's particular form of cross dressing see Susan Schibanoff, "True Lies: Transvestism and Idolatry in the Trial of Joan of Arc," in *Fresh Verdicts on Joan of Arc*, ed. Bonnie Wheeler and Charles T. Wood (New York: Garland Publishing Inc., 1996), 42-43.

vessel to receive holy visions.¹⁹⁵ As a result Joan's beloved voices, her champions Saints Michael, Margaret, and Catherine, could in reality only be demons. Moreover, Joan's insistence that her actions and outward demeanor were the direct result of her consultation with her inner voices implied that Joan was under the direction of a supernatural force. If her dress and behavior were deemed to be abominations, then the logical argument followed that these voices were in fact of evil origin.

Although Joan's belief in the tangible presence of inner, holy voices may seem difficult for the twenty-first-century reader to comprehend, Joan was only one of numerous women who claimed to receive visions and messages from God in the late medieval period. Women such as Catherine of Siena followed their religious visions into the fold of the Church's newer mendicant orders, the Franciscans and the Dominicans.¹⁹⁶ Several famous laywomen also experienced holy visions that they felt compelled to share with others, including their sovereign, in the decades preceding Joan's sudden rise to influence in France.¹⁹⁷ The irregularity of such women added to their perceived holiness. As Jane Tibbetts Schulenburg has theorized, sainthood, or at least the aura of sanctity that surrounded Christian mystics, required some public display of piety and

¹⁹⁵ Warner, *Joan of Arc: The Image of Female Heroism*, 118.

¹⁹⁶ For discussion on the orthodoxy of Christian mystics like these, see Dyan Elliott, *Proving Woman: Female Spirituality and Inquisitional Culture in the Later Middle Ages* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 199.

¹⁹⁷ Andre Vauchez, "Joan of Arc and Female Prophecy in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries," in *The Laity in the Middle Ages: Religious Beliefs and Devotional Practices*, ed. Daniel Bornstein, trans. Margery J. Schneider (South Bend: Notre Dame University Press, 1996), 255-264.

holiness.¹⁹⁸ Paradoxically, in order to symbolize proper Christian womanhood female reformers, visionaries, and prophetesses had to transgress the very gender boundaries that their model piety was meant to delineate. This was a dangerous endeavor for Christian women; their agency in the public sphere could either cement their reputation as holy women or brand them dangerous heretics. Joan's unprecedented action and influence in arguably the most male-dominated arena of the medieval period, warfare, ensured that many would view her visions negatively.

As previously stated, Joan remembered that the voices from God initially came to her in her father's garden in her village of Domrémy. Their presence was revealed to young Joan not in church but in the natural world. Her interrogators drew on this element during her questioning, specifically asking Joan about her knowledge of a certain ancient tree growing in the fields outside Domrémy, which was commonly referred to as the "Ladies' Tree" or the "Fairy Tree."¹⁹⁹ Villagers often visited the nearby spring as a source of healing or restorative treatment for fever and other illnesses, and young girls annually danced around and garlanded the tree for *le beau may*, the May Day festivities, an activity that Joan admitted to participating in as a child.²⁰⁰ Spring rituals like these were steeped in early medieval pagan traditions that had blended with popular Christian lay practices over time, and the interrogators' obvious goal in

¹⁹⁸ Jane Tibbetts Schulenburg, *Forgetful of Their Sex: Female Sanctity and Society, ca. 500-1100* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 59.

¹⁹⁹ *The Trial of Jeanne d'Arc*, 54. It is interesting to note that the ancient tree was interchangeably referred to as the "Fairy Tree" and the "Ladies' Tree," implying that its magical presence specifically drew women to the tree in order to practice magic.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 55.

questioning Joan about such a seemingly trivial detail of her childhood was to picture her upbringing as an entanglement of unbelief and pagan practices. It is fairly simple to draw a comparison here between the charges of witchcraft leveled at Joan and the tenth-century case of Queen Ælfthryth of England, who was also accused of practicing dark magic beneath an ancient tree; they are cases which both draw connections between women and nature as a source of female power.²⁰¹ The clerical evaluation of Joan's testimony in the *libelle d'Estivet*, a compilation of interrogation materials prepared by the canon Jean d'Estivet, specifically claimed that "Joan was accustomed to frequent the said tree and spring, most often at night... then she hung numerous garlands of different herbs and flowers... saying and singing, before and after, certain songs and incantations with certain invocations, spells, and other witchcraft."²⁰² By this interpretation the pagan relics of the Fairy Tree and its associated rituals were given diabolical connotations to better fit the Christian worldview of the late Middle Ages.²⁰³ As a result Joan's childhood play was deemed to be not simply provincial or superstitious, but malevolent.

The text continues the theme of Joan's dissolute youth by claiming that she "was not entirely educated or instructed in the belief or essential principals of the faith, but by some old women was accustomed to and steeped in the use of spells, divinations, and other superstitious works or magic arts..."²⁰⁴ It is a description that implies Joan had been under the control of unsavory elements

²⁰¹ See Chapter 1.

²⁰² Jean d'Estivet, *Libelle d'Estivet*, 198, quoted in Sullivan, *The Interrogation of Joan of Arc*, 7.

²⁰³ Sullivan, *The Interrogation of Joan of Arc*, 7.

²⁰⁴ d'Estivet, *Libelle d'Estivet*, 196.

long before the supernatural voices first spoke to her. As in the late twelfth-century case of the “witch of Rheims,” in which the bad influence of an old woman was seen as responsible for the heretical beliefs of a young girl, old village wives, a usual suspect for witchcraft, were connected to Joan as poor role models in her youth.²⁰⁵ The court’s presentation of Joan’s connection to Domrémy’s older women played upon popular peasant prejudices against village residents they considered deviant, and thus vulnerable to attack. Old women, who were usually widowed, poor, quarrelsome and unable to work, proved to be the ideal nuisance that bored or vindictive neighbors could accuse of witchcraft.²⁰⁶

Joan’s interrogators attempted to further emphasize the girl’s connection with dissolute old women, or “good wives,” women increasingly viewed as the typical witch by the fifteenth century, during her tenure as military leader of the French forces. The trial record states that “asked whether the good wives of the town did not touch her ring with their own, she answered that ‘many women touched my hands and my rings; but I do not know with what thought or intention.’”²⁰⁷ While Joan’s candidness is apparent in her reply, her acknowledgement of the common female desire to touch her seemed to signify a relationship between witches in which physical touch transferred power. This line of questioning attempted to delegitimize Joan’s influence as a spiritual

²⁰⁵ See Chapter 1 for more on the “witch of Rheims.”

²⁰⁶ For more on witchcraft accusations amongst the peasantry, see Alan MacFarlane, *Witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart England: A Regional and Comparative Study* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), 254-309.

²⁰⁷ The Trial of Jeanne d’Arc, 82-83.

messenger: if her fame attracted elderly women who were weak and believed to turn to dark magic as a desperate grab at power, then Joan's claims to God-given strength and protection must be false as well.

Beyond Joan's provincial upbringing and contact with village good wives, it was the existence of her beloved holy voices that ultimately condemned Joan as a sorceress and witch. Interestingly, Joan's interrogators did not question the *existence* of Joan's inner voices. It was the inherent nature and origin of these voices that concerned the English and Burgundians. Thus many of their questions concerning Joan's interaction with her spiritual guides centered on the manner in which they communicated with her. After Joan told her captors that the voices continued speaking to her following her imprisonment, the time and manner in which the voices made themselves known to her became crucial information. Joan responded that "she was sleeping and the voice awakened her."²⁰⁸ Unfortunately for Joan these circumstances played into established beliefs concerning the usual manner in which demons visited young women; because demons required sexual submission from their human servants, according to many forced confessions they often appeared to women at night in their bedchambers, when circumstances were most conducive to sexual relations. Her interrogators continued this line of questioning by asking her if the voice "woke her by touching her on the arm," but she said she awoke without any perceived physical contact. When asked if the voice "was actually in the

²⁰⁸ Ibid., 50.

room,” she replied that “she did not know, but it was in the castle.”²⁰⁹ These questions attempted to determine the corporeality of the voices. By giving Joan’s spiritual voices physicality, her accusers also hoped to establish the voices’ demonic nature.

Establishing the embodiment of the voices, and if they indeed were visible to Joan, became doubly important after Joan informed her captors that of the three saints who guided her, the voice of St. Michael was the first to make itself known to her.²¹⁰ When asked what form St. Michael took before her, Joan insisted she “had not leave to answer.” This only intensified the court’s interest in St. Michael’s voice; they pressed Joan to tell them details of his clothing and hair, or if he appeared to her naked, to which she asked if they thought God did not have the wherewithal to clothe one of his own saints.²¹¹ Beyond this witty retort Joan refused to offer much information concerning the saint, and her captors began to build an image of the male voice, first to appear to Joan and a guide that instructed her what to say and what to withhold, as the demon she had bound herself to. This theory was only solidified when Joan informed her captors that St. Michael had appeared before her with wings, but was unable to divulge further information concerning his physical being or that of the other voices, St. Catherine and St. Margaret.²¹² Joan’s physical knowledge of St. Michael implied that he was a corporeal being, whereas the other female voices were in fact illusory.

²⁰⁹ *The Trial of Jeanne d’Arc*, 50.

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 60.

²¹¹ *Ibid.*, 75.

²¹² *Ibid.*, 78.

Another damning aspect of Joan's relationship with her voices was her unwavering acceptance of their advice. When Joan reported that the voices had instructed her to "answer boldly" the questions put before her, her interrogators turned to the voices' apparent control over Joan's actions.²¹³ She was "asked whether the voice had forbidden her to answer everything she was asked," and if the voices had told her not to divulge information concerning her revelations for King Charles. Joan retorted, "Believe me, it was not men who forbade me."²¹⁴ This only strengthened the court's argument that Joan was in the service of an evil supernatural being.

Much of the same rhetoric used in the sorcery trial of Alice Kyteler in early fourteenth-century Ireland was also employed in the court case against Joan. Just as intensely sexualized descriptions of a relationship between Dame Alice and a male demon called the Son of Art served to slander and delegitimize the authority of the Irish noblewoman, St. Michael's influence over Joan was interpreted not as the holy guidance of a saint, but the sinister control of a demon. At the conclusion of the trial in May 1431, master Pierre Maurice expounded upon Joan's transgressions, emphasizing the reverence that she gave to the false saints Michael, Catherine, and Margaret, who were in fact no more than "evil and diabolical spirits."²¹⁵ The court's description of her devotion to her voices mirrored the conventional description of servant-master relationships between women and demons. Joan reportedly paid homage to her

²¹³ Ibid., 51.

²¹⁴ Ibid.

²¹⁵ Ibid., 331.

voices by vowing her virginity to them and obeying their every instruction; the court also claimed that she “invoked, kissed, and embraced” the saintly voices “without seeking counsel from your priest or any other ecclesiastic.”²¹⁶ This single claim captures the court’s entire argument against the validity of Joan’s spiritual guides. Assertions that Joan interacted with the voices through invocation and illicit physical touch described the typical three-step process for human connection with a demon while intrinsically establishing the corporeality of the voices. Witches invoked demons through recited spells and incantations. When the creature appeared, they would pledge their loyalty to the supernatural being by kissing it and then surrendering to it sexually, the ultimate symbol of female submission to the forces of evil.

The final caveat, that Joan had failed to inform a priest and seek the Church’s guidance concerning her voices before taking action, attempted to justify the court’s actions even in the event of Joan’s claims being legitimized. Even if the voices somehow turned out to be saintly, her failure to seek guidance from an ordained clergyman still marked her as a heretic. A woman, and a young uneducated peasant woman at that, simply could not be trusted to interpret spiritual and theological issues alone. Attempting to do so smacked of a seditious independence unacceptable in the female sex.

Joan’s independent interpretation of the inner voices, which she unabashedly believed to be Catholic saints, made her condemnation as a heretic almost inevitable. Her fate was sealed by her refusal to bow to the will of her

²¹⁶ Ibid., 335.

English and Burgundian captors. Joan finally cracked under the extreme pressure of her interrogation and admitted her voices to be deceitful and her male dress a brazen sin, but almost immediately she recanted and resumed male dress. Since she would not submit to the powerful clergymen ordered to educate her as to the grave sins she had supposedly committed, their reaction was to declare Joan under the power of demons. The explanation that Joan might simply be ambitious of her own free will was simply unthinkable within the conventional medieval worldview. As a result, the nineteen-year-old Maid of Orléans was determined by the ecclesiastical court to be

superstitious, a witch, idolatrous, a caller up of demons, blasphemous towards God and His saints, schismatic and greatly erring in the faith of Jesus Christ.... As the judgments and institutions of the Church ordain, to prevent the contamination of the other members of Jesus Christ, she was again publically admonished, and... was abandoned to the secular justice which forthwith condemned her to be burned.²¹⁷

Joan's condemnation thus embodies the rise of politically motivated witchcraft charges at their most virulent. As a young woman of the lower classes, Joan's brazenly independent interpretation of her alleged holy visions set a disturbing precedent. Naming God and His saints as her champions, Joan embarked upon a path of short-lived but great influence, in which she largely determined her own individuality. That sort of self-determination was completely unacceptable for any kind of woman within the patriarchal setting of medieval Europe; for a woman of the *peasant* class to rise so high and act so autonomously only

²¹⁷ Ibid., 379-380.

exacerbated the intense hatred felt for her amongst the English and Burgundians.

As Joan of Arc is in some aspects an outlier in the present study, she was also an anomaly in her own lifetime. Although Joan's spiritual visions were a source of agency employed by other women of the late medieval period, those women's willingness to conform to prescribed female roles within the Church hierarchy protected them from the taint of heresy. Joan, a cross-dressing female warrior and self-proclaimed messenger of God, simply existed too far outside those delineated gender boundaries to withstand the accusations of heresy and witchcraft leveled against her.

As was reflected in the writings of scholars and theologians such as Johannes Nider in the years immediately following Joan's downfall, the early fifteenth century proved a critical juncture in the evolution of European witchcraft, in which centuries of popular belief were redefined in the scholastic terminology of the elite. The late medieval concern with feminized witchcraft represents a reactionary measure to keep all members of society firmly within their designated ranks. Gender and socio-economic station largely determined one's role in medieval society: the rhetoric of diabolical witchcraft allowed both the ecclesiastical and secular arms of justice an expedient means of maintaining the "natural" order of society and neutralizing any threat to it. Joan of Arc's condemnation as a witch highlights an extreme example of female agency in the

medieval world and the measures that Church and secular authorities were willing to use to quash it.

After Joan was burned at the stake, her ashes were dispersed as an attempt to prevent her supporters from collecting relics of the woman they believed to be a messenger of God. The complete destruction of Joan's body illustrates the deep-seated fear that many medieval men associated with female power. Joan of Arc represented disregard for prescribed gender roles at its most extreme, and the audacity with which she flaunted her femaleness in the male-dominated world of warfare provoked violent retribution from her enemies. While Joan remains one of the most famous women of the later Middle Ages, her burning was one of many persecutions to come against powerful women who demonstrated a similar audacity to act outside traditional areas of female occupation during the fifteenth century and early modern age.

Chapter 5

'An infamous slander': Miscarriages, Sexual Treason, and the Fall of Queen Anne Boleyn

On May 19, 1536, Anne Boleyn cemented her place in history and legend as the first English queen to be executed for treason. Henry VIII's second and most controversial wife, Anne is most often remembered for her powerful sway over the king and her fiery temper, both of which eventually helped to spell her downfall. The precise nature of her treason, however, is much less well known. According to the indictments brought against Anne in May 1536, she was accused of "despising her marriage and entertaining malice against the King..." and thus "did falsely and traitorously procure by base conversations and kisses, touchings, gifts, and other infamous incitations, divers of the King's daily and familiar servants to be her adulterers and concubines, so that several of the King's servants yielded to her vile provocations..."²¹⁸ Implicit in these accusations is an assertion of the queen's power through the use of her sexuality. Her sexual magnetism enabled her to bend men to her will, a disconcerting prospect in a strictly patriarchal society. By allegedly gaining influence through the corruption of her body, Anne fit perfectly the model of the sexually voracious, morally degenerate woman that men such as Nider and Kramer described as the epitome of the witch.

²¹⁸ "Baga de Secretis (The Bag of Secrets), 1499-1537; Court of King's Bench (Crown Side) Indictments, and documents of state trials," *National Archives London*, accessed November 11, 2014. <http://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/details/r/C10012>

Although Anne was not the first Englishwoman of noble birth, or even the first English queen, to be accused of witchcraft-related acts, she was the first to be put to death for such crimes. Her beheading embodied a grim portent at the start of the early modern period: the witch label could not only socially ostracize powerful women, but could easily warrant their deaths as subversive elements that must be eradicated in order to maintain the normal patriarchal order of European society.

Even more disturbing, Anne's fall illustrates that the label of witchcraft need not even be directly applied, as in the case of Alice Kyteler or Joan of Arc, in order to achieve eerily similar results. Guilt by association was sufficient; as long as the pattern of alleged behavior fit the description of a witch, prosecution could be carried out in an identical manner to that of an official witchcraft trial. As the queen of England, Anne's behavior was the target of extreme scrutiny, and in no way was this more clearly manifested than in the attention given to her sexual conduct. Anne's womb represented Henry VIII's dynastic hopes for the future of the Tudor line, and thus her alleged infidelity equated to what Retha Warnicke has termed "sexual heresy."²¹⁹ A consecrated queen upon whom rested the responsibility of providing an heir for the English realm, Anne's failure to carry a male child to term in combination with rumors of adultery and incest were sufficient evidence to condemn her as a witch.

²¹⁹ Retha M. Warnicke, *The Rise and Fall of Anne Boleyn: Family Politics at the Court of Henry VIII* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 195.

The circumstances that led to Anne's trial and execution are complex and involve a myriad of factors that worked against her. Just as in the case of Valentina Visconti at the court of Charles VI of France, opposing factions targeted Anne as a political threat to be neutralized by whatever means necessary. From the moment that Anne caught the eye of King Henry in 1527 she immediately became a controversial figure. As Henry grew increasingly restless in his marriage to the middle-aged Catherine of Aragon, who after nearly twenty years of marriage had failed to produce a surviving male heir, Anne appeared on the scene as an alluring, cultured young beauty, highly educated both in humanist learning and courtly etiquette from her upbringing at the French court.²²⁰ She also no doubt presented an immediate sexual challenge to Henry: for roughly five years prior to Anne's homecoming her older sister Mary had been the king's mistress, and Anne seemed to promise similar sexual pleasures but was clever enough to withhold them from Henry in order to further her family's ambitions. Anne used her increasing access to the king to advance the interests of her natal kin, an influential position that earned her many detractors. As unofficial representative for the Boleyns, Anne was thus the main impediment for opposing cliques like the Seymour family in their attempts to achieve social and political prominence at Henry VIII's court in the 1530s.²²¹

As the main object of the king's desire over the course of a scandalous seven-year courtship, Anne became a highly sexualized figure for many of her

²²⁰ Ibid., 56-60.

²²¹ Adams, "Valentina Visconti, Charles VI, and the Politics of Witchcraft," 15.

contemporaries. Indeed, those who supported Catherine of Aragon and her cousin the Holy Roman Emperor, and those who simply despised the Boleyn family, referred to Anne as the “adulteress” or the “concubine” even after her marriage to Henry.²²² Because Catherine still lived, albeit in obscurity, many believed that her marriage to Henry could not be dissolved except by death, making his second union unlawful, and Anne no better than a common prostitute. It was a dangerous insult that was eventually used as a weapon against Anne by her husband himself. While her magnetic charm and ability to hold Henry’s interest raised Anne from lady in waiting to the role of queen consort by 1533, these same qualities were used as proof of her bewitchment of the king, and seduction of numerous other men, at her trial only three years later.

The other factor that counted against Anne in the spring of 1536 was completely out of her control. The confluence of medieval medical knowledge and religion in the sixteenth century maintained that miscarriages and the births of premature or deformed children were the result of grave sexual sins, a tangible sign of God’s divine wrath against the offenders.²²³ Many treatises appeared in the sixteenth century that described these “monstrous births” and warned against committing sexual sins that were thought to result in such misfortunes. John Barker’s *The true description of a monstrous chylde born in the cytie of Anwarpe*, published in London in 1565, asserts that because man is

²²² Warnicke, *The Rise and Fall of Anne Boleyn*, 189.

²²³ *Ibid.*, 195-196.

created in the image of God, then clearly any child born deformed must be evidence of some sexual evil on the part of the mother, crimes which God refused to keep hidden by ordaining her offspring to possess features “so grim to see.”²²⁴

Theories concerning the meaning behind birth defects and so-called “disorderly” childbirths became extremely nuanced in England during the sixteenth century. As Julie Crawford has argued, specific deformities were believed to point to particular offenses on the part of the parent, especially the mother.²²⁵ More heinously deformed infants were said to be divine punishment for its’ mother’s sexual transgressions, a belief that betrays fears over uncontrolled female sexuality, and which acted as an attempt to warn women that the consequences for their unrestrained sexual behavior would be grave. The *Compendium Maleficarum*, the infamous witchcraft treatise written by Francesco Maria Guazzo in early seventeenth-century Italy, relates the incident of a “gently born young woman” in Scotland, who “had begun indulging in certain filthy practices with an incubus” and was impregnated by the demon as a result. Guazzo reports that “a little while afterward the girl gave birth to an infant of unbelievable loathsomeness, and to prevent its being seen and bringing disgrace on the family, the midwives burned it.”²²⁶ In this case the child was proof of the young woman’s sexual misconduct; its destruction and her social rank protected her from further punishment. In the Middle Ages, however,

²²⁴ John Barker, *The true description of a monstrous chylde born in the cytie of Anwarpe* (London, 1565).

²²⁵ Julie Crawford, *Marvelous Protestantism: Monstrous Births in Post-Reformation England* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), 61-62.

²²⁶ Francesco Maria Guazzo, *Compendium Maleficarum*, in *A Casebook of Witchcraft*, ed. William Woods (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1974), 48.

sexual crimes often resulted in the physical disfigurement of the offender as visual evidence of the transgression to the rest of society. As those punishments slowly faded out of the English justice system during the sixteenth-century Reformation, treatises on monstrous births attempted to once again give inescapable, visible consequences for these types of crimes.²²⁷ If the mother herself was not physically mutilated for an offense like fornication or adultery, the next most viable type of deforming would be of her resulting offspring.

Given this popular belief, Anne's multiple miscarriages, all of male fetuses, were easily interpreted as the result of some heinous sexual crime. Anne's strong personality, charm and wide-reaching political influence in the interests of the Boleyns, intensified by her inability to produce a male heir, provided her political enemies, and Henry VIII, with the ideal circumstances in which to execute his queen for treason in the spring of 1536.

Anne's condemnation as a traitor was made all the more extraordinary because of her position as queen. Being the highest-ranking woman in the realm in theory came with increased political influence, but it was a role also accompanied by great public scrutiny. Theresa Earenfight has recently argued that during the late medieval and early modern period "queens who exercised public authority were easy scapegoats for disgruntled enemies or anyone more interested in self-protection than guarding the realm or the royal family."²²⁸ This danger was implicitly tied to the symbolic role of queen consort. The importance

²²⁷ Ibid., 66-67.

²²⁸ Theresa Earenfight, *Queenship in Medieval Europe* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 252.

of a queen's piety and maternity represented her harmonious relationship with the king and with the realm itself.²²⁹ This explains why references to the Virgin Mary were often employed in queens' coronation rituals throughout the Middle Ages and early modern period.²³⁰ Such references were especially the case in France, where women were forbidden from the succession but were permitted to act as regents for underage heirs: a queen's only avenue to legitimate power was through her ability to bear children. The importance of this aspect of the queen's role can be found in many coronation rituals, known as *ordines*, from as early as the ninth century. Richard A. Jackson's study of Frankish and French coronation rituals throughout the period describes medieval queens' coronations as a Christianized form of fertility rites in which biblical matriarchs were invoked as shining examples of virtue and fecundity who queens should strive to emulate.²³¹ These centuries-old conventions impacted the manner in which monarchs were crowned throughout the rest of the Middle Ages, and it follows that the more symbolic aspects of such rituals were more heavily emphasized as the sphere for acceptable queenly power narrowed significantly in the late medieval and early modern period. While women could technically inherit the throne in England, Henry VIII had no intention of letting his crown pass to a female, and thus Anne's coronation, as will be seen, bore a remarkable

²²⁹ Ibid., 248.

²³⁰ Holly S. Hurlburt, "Public Exposure? Consorts and Ritual in Medieval Europe: The Example of the Entrance of the Dogaresse of Venice," in *Gendering the Master Narrative: Women and Power in the Middle Ages*, ed. Mary Carpenter Erler and Maryanne Kowaleski (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003), 185.

²³¹ *Ordines Coronationis Franciae: Texts and Ordines for the Coronation of Frankish and French Kings and Queens in the Middle Ages, Volume I*, ed. Richard A. Jackson (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), 80-86.

semblance to French ceremonies in its emphasis on her essential duty as the vessel that must carry and produce the male heir to the English throne.

Although a queen's success depended largely on her sexual and reproductive processes, connecting this responsibility to the mother of Christ gave the earthly duty of childbearing admirable religious connotations. Thus if a queen was seen to fall short in her religious devotion or mothering abilities, her position could be in peril. This narrow sphere of influence, concentrated in domestic duties, was influenced by the "harsh misogynistic rhetoric" of many early modern writers, which in effect constricted the acceptable spheres of action for queens and placed greater suspicion on their involvement in politics and governing.²³²

Evidence of the role expected of Anne as queen can be gleaned from the record of her coronation on May 29, 1533. The official account relates that at Leaden Hall a "costly pageant" was conducted which depicted the "three Marias with their issue, that is to understand, Mary, the mother of Christ... and with a ballad sung in English to her great praise and honour, and to all her progeny also."²³³ This description demonstrates the emphasis placed upon Anne's virtue and her potential fertility, and the king's desire for both. These expectations are further emphasized in the songs supposedly sung to Anne by children stationed along the processional route through London; one child is reported to have

²³² Earenfight, *Queenship in Medieval Europe*, 253-254.

²³³ Wykyn de Worde, "The Noble Triumphant Coronation of Queen Anne, Wife unto the Most Noble King Henry the VIII," in *The Anne Boleyn Papers*, Elizabeth Norton (London: Amberley Publishing, 2013), 182.

intoned “In chastity, Excelleth she, Most like a virgin bright: and worthy is, to live in bliss, always this Falcon White. But now to take, and use her make is time, as troth is plight; that she may bring fruit according for such a Falcon White.”²³⁴

These verses illustrate the equal importance given to both a queen’s chastity and fecundity. The Virgin Mary provided the ideal embodiment of these desirable traits for sixteenth-century queens, as a chaste and obedient woman who possessed a womb especially prepared for carrying an important child: the heir to a kingdom.

Anne did indeed prove herself capable of bearing children not long after becoming queen. It was her most crucial obligation in 1533. As Retha Warnicke asserts, “her first and foremost duty was to give birth to the royal heir, for no consort was ever really secure in her position until she had accomplished this important task.”²³⁵ This was especially true in Anne’s case, for she only had to look at the state of her predecessor Catherine of Aragon, by then divorced, banished, and reduced to the status of Princess Dowager, to see how far Henry would go to get a male child. In spite of this pressure there is little doubt that in the summer of 1533 Anne felt confident in her ability to bear the long-desired heir, as she was around five months pregnant at the time of her coronation.²³⁶ Because Anne and Henry had married on January 25 of that year, the dating of her pregnancy would imply that the royal couple had consummated their

²³⁴ Nicholas Udall, “English Verses and Ditties at the Coronation Procession of Queen Anne Boleyn,” in *The Anne Boleyn Papers*, trans. Elizabeth Norton (London: Amberley Publishing, 2013), 187.

²³⁵ Warnicke, *The Rise and Fall of Anne Boleyn*, 163.

²³⁶ *Ibid.*

relationship before they married, probably during their official visit to the French court in the winter of 1532.²³⁷ This is further supported by the date of Anne's labor; she gave birth to a daughter, her only surviving child and the future Elizabeth I, on the afternoon of September 7, 1533.²³⁸ In reference to the event Wriothesley's Chronicle states "Anne was brought to bedd of a faire daughter," a description that implies the baby was healthy and carried to full term.²³⁹

Although Anne was clearly capable of producing healthy children, the sex of the child was to prove the first of her misfortunes. Eustace Chapuys, the ambassador to the Holy Roman Emperor and a staunch supporter of Catherine of Aragon and the princess Mary, reported to his master that "the King's mistress was delivered of a girl, to the great disappointment and sorrow of the king, of the Lady herself... and to the great shame and confusion of physicians, astrologers, wizards, and witches, all of whom affirmed that it would be a boy."²⁴⁰ This is a telling statement. On one level it illustrates the king's first major uncertainties about his new queen. More importantly, this detail demonstrates the importance of magical intermediaries in the process of preparing for the birth of a royal heir. Chapuys writes as if it was not unusual for practitioners of magic to offer their

²³⁷ As Karen Lindsay has pointed out, Henry had reached a point of extreme frustration in the Church's efforts to deny his divorce from Catherine, and after seven years of turbulent courtship Anne may have seen pregnancy as a more expedient means than virginity of ensuring Henry would move to finally, and quickly, marry her in early 1533. For more on this theory see Karen Lindsay, *Divorced, Beheaded, Survived: A Feminist Reinterpretation of the Wives of Henry VIII* (Reading: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1994), 90.

²³⁸ Warnicke, *The Rise and Fall of Anne Boleyn*, 164.

²³⁹ *Wriothesley Chronicle*, in *The Anne Boleyn Papers*, trans. Elizabeth Norton (London: Amberley Publishing, 2013), 194.

²⁴⁰ Eustace Chapuys, "Dispatches," in *The Anne Boleyn Papers*, trans. Elizabeth Norton (London: Amberley Publishing, 2013), 225.

services in determining the sex of the child; his casual mention of these figures seems to suggest that they frequently participated in the process leading up to the birth of a royal baby. These practitioners' failure to correctly determine the sex, and the consternation caused by their inaccuracy, shows how much stock Henry and Anne put in the powers of magic.²⁴¹ Chapuys further declared that the English people "have rejoiced at the discomfiture of those who attach faith to such divinations," implying that Henry and Anne illustrated their lack of true Christian faith through their use of such superstitious methods.²⁴²

While the role of magical practitioners at the English royal court may seem unusual, especially when taken in consideration with the prevailing attitude toward most magic as devil-inspired by the sixteenth century, astrology, as discussed in the opening chapter of this study, did retain a tenuous foothold as a legitimate pursuit amongst educated men throughout the early modern period.²⁴³ As astrologers were learned men who emerged from the university setting and often practiced other reputable artistries, such as medicine or astronomy, in combination with astrology, their skills of divination retained more trustworthiness among many of the elite than other, more "common" forms of magic. Henry VII and his son Henry VIII, for example, both employed a physician-astrologer, John Baptista Boerio, as chief royal physician.²⁴⁴ As a result

²⁴¹ It is interesting to note that in 1533 Henry trusted in the expertise of "wizards and witches" to help determine the sex of his unborn child, when only three years later he used witchcraft accusations as means of slandering and condemning Anne as a traitor to the crown.

²⁴² Chapuys, "Dispatches," 225.

²⁴³ Carey, *Courting Disaster: Astrology at the English Court and University in the Later Middle Ages*, 56-57.

²⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 161.

Henry and Anne would have placed considerable trust in the court astrologer's predictions for the birth of a son, considering that these men also had extensive medical training to support their claims.

In spite of the astrologers' failure in predicting the sex of the child, official records mention the general happiness at Elizabeth's birth and the king and queen's hopefulness for more children, all sons of course, in the future. Chapuys, on the other hand, certainly had his doubts about this portent for the potential of their union. In a later dispatch he expressed uncertainties about the security of Anne's position "even in case of there being 1,000 daughters born of this new marriage."²⁴⁵ In other words, only a son could truly secure Anne's place as the queen of England. After all, Henry already had a daughter, and the conflicting presence of two princesses left many to wonder where the succession stood.²⁴⁶ Henry's daughter by Catherine of Aragon, referred to after Anne became queen only as the Lady Mary, had been illegitimated upon her parents' divorce, leaving her and the succession in a temporary limbo. Another daughter did little to remedy this situation. Warnicke asserts that Henry only felt confident in naming Elizabeth as his heir precisely because he assumed she would never succeed him; by early 1534 he and Anne both believed that she was once more pregnant.²⁴⁷

This second pregnancy came to naught, however. While Henry had planned to delay his summer progress through the kingdom due to Anne's

²⁴⁵ Ibid., 226.

²⁴⁶ Warnicke, *The Rise and Fall of Anne Boleyn*, 171.

²⁴⁷ Ibid., 173.

delicate condition, in early July 1534 he suddenly continued on without her. Had she still been pregnant it is unlikely that Anne would have stayed behind; during her first pregnancy she accompanied the king on his travels until the second week before her lying-in.²⁴⁸ It appears instead that she miscarried sometime in late June, and her weakened state prevented her from traveling. This loss came as a great blow to both the king and queen, and precipitated a period of quarrel and unrest in the royal marriage. As in the case of Catherine of Aragon, it appeared that Anne was more readily able to bear daughters than sons.

Anne's miscarriage appeared to establish a disturbing pattern in Henry's marriages. Both his first and second wives were capable of bearing children, and had each given him a healthy daughter. But they both seemed unable to carry sons to full term. Catherine's failure to bear surviving male children had been viewed to be her own fault. Medieval medical knowledge, still largely employed by physicians in the sixteenth century, argued that the more complicated, and in many ways defective anatomy of the female body allowed for greater chance of infertility. Much of this belief stemmed from the ancient writings of Aristotle and Galen, which asserted the female's inferiority based on the fact that males regenerate in other beings, while females can only generate life within themselves.²⁴⁹ Aristotle's additional belief that women were in fact a sort of underdeveloped men whose sexual organs remained internal led to the popular belief that these imperfections made women more sickly and fragile.

²⁴⁸ Ibid., 175.

²⁴⁹ Ian Maclean, "The Notion of Women in Medicine, Anatomy, and Physiology," in *Feminism & Renaissance Studies*, ed. Lorna Hutson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 131.

As in the case of the French monarch Charles VI, whose insanity was initially linked to an inheritance of undesirable feminine traits from his mother, doctors believed that the sickness of children, miscarriages, and stillbirths were most likely due to physical imperfections of the female body that in turn negatively impacted their offspring.²⁵⁰ It seemed especially unlikely to many that a man as virile as Henry VIII could possibly be the source of this issue. After all, he did have an illegitimate son: Henry Fitzroy Duke of Richmond, the product of his extramarital affair with Bessie Blount. And yet Anne displayed the same difficulties in bearing sons that Catherine once had. In fact, she was later accused of having questioned the king's ability to sire children as an illustration of her treason: even to suggest that the king was impotent was to betray the crown itself.²⁵¹

In spite of this setback, 1536 dawned full of hope for Anne. She and Henry had often traveled together during the previous autumn of 1535, and reports circulated that Anne had conceived again in October. The tide appeared to turn in Anne's favor again at the start of the new year, as it became known that Catherine of Aragon was extremely ill; she succumbed to a lingering sickness

²⁵⁰ Monica H. Green, *Making Women's Medicine Masculine: The Rise of Male Authority in Pre-Modern Gynecology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 209.

²⁵¹ In pre-modern Europe the fault for impotence was most always attributed to women, even when it was obvious that the physical problem was the man's. Thus, even if Henry might be proven to be impotent, this charge implicitly asserted that Anne was both a traitor *and* a witch, for witches were believed to frequently make men impotent, whether through the use of potions, spells, or incantations that made the male sexual organs seem to disappear. For more see Catherine Rider, *Magic and Impotence in the Middle Ages* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 186-188. For a discussion of how witches steal men's penises, thus making them impotent, see Walter Stevens, "Witches Who Steal Penises: Impotence and Illusion in 'Malleus Maleficarum,'" *The Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 28, no. 3 (1998): 495-529.

and died on January 7, 1536.²⁵² There is little doubt that Anne was relieved at the death of her predecessor. The ambassador to the Holy Roman Emperor, Eustace Chapuys, reported that in late May 1534, just over a month before her first miscarriage, Anne had told Henry that “she will never rest until he has had her [Catherine] put out of the way,” as Anne had foreseen a prophecy in which a queen of England was burnt alive, and that “she is quite justified in trying to avert that fate for herself, and make the Queen [Catherine] play the part of the person doomed to the faggot.”²⁵³ Anne’s vision is an interesting example of the stock that pre-modern Europeans placed in the powers of fate and magic; it also demonstrates that Anne considered Catherine’s continued presence in the kingdom as a serious threat to her own security.

Catherine’s death did not improve Anne’s position. Chapuys states “on the same day that the Queen was buried this King’s concubine miscarried of a child, who had the appearance of a male about three and a half months old, at which miscarriage the King has certainly shown great disappointment and sorrow.”²⁵⁴ As traumatic as this miscarriage must have been for Anne, its timing was even more disastrous. Having lost the child on the same day as Catherine’s funeral seemed to support popular beliefs about divine justice. Nothing could have signaled the illegitimacy of this new union and God’s displeasure at the ignominious death of the late Queen Catherine more than the loss of the unborn

²⁵² Chapuys, “Dispatches,” 265.

²⁵³ *Ibid.*, 247.

²⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 285.

heir to the English throne.²⁵⁵ For Henry this event no doubt brought to his attention a more practical fear: at the time of Catherine's death Anne was around thirty-five years old, older than the age at which Catherine herself had last conceived and lost a child.²⁵⁶ Based on this past experience, Henry probably assumed that Anne would no longer be able to bear children. While Henry found himself once more disappointed in the outcome of his wife's pregnancy it is essential to note, as Warnicke has pointed out, that this time information about Anne's miscarriage had also almost immediately been made public knowledge, something usually never done in such instances.²⁵⁷

The birthing chamber was traditionally a feminine space, with a midwife and female attendants presiding over the birth of a royal baby. While in the early Middle Ages childbirth was a private affair kept separate from the world of men, by the sixteenth century, in an effort to diminish spheres solely under feminine control, gynecological practices such as this were becoming increasingly male-dominated.²⁵⁸ A woman of Anne's position, with the immense pressure placed upon her reproductive abilities, was subject to even more male intervention into the pregnancy and birthing processes than normal. The queen's second failure to

²⁵⁵ There are also complex religious undertones at work here. Because Henry broke from the Catholic Church in order to marry Anne, their marriage was performed by the new Church of England, and thus technically was not a sacrament, as it was within the Catholic Church. Because the marriage was non-sacramental and thus not blessed by the Church, it could be interpreted that Anne's miscarriages were the result of God's displeasure at Henry's waywardness from the fold of the "true faith." His attempts to label Anne as a traitor and witch gave Henry an excuse for his dramatic and unprecedented break from established religious practice among the rulers of Europe.

²⁵⁶ Alison Weir, *The Lady in the Tower: The Fall of Anne Boleyn* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2010), 22.

²⁵⁷ Retha M. Warnicke, *Wicked Women of Tudor England: Queens, Aristocrats, Commoners* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 35.

²⁵⁸ Green, *Making Women's Medicine Masculine*, 265-267.

produce a living male child and the jeopardy that it placed upon her role as consort ensured that information about the appearance of the fetus would be leaked to members of the court.

In the face of this tragedy Anne moved quickly to remove responsibility for her miscarriage, which the king certainly blamed her for, to those around her. She argued that the Duke of Norfolk had precipitated her accident when he brought word of the king's fall from his horse during a joust just six days before her miscarriage. She also accused Henry himself of distressing her, saying that the love she bore the king, much greater than that of Henry's first wife, caused her more broken-heartedness when she learned of his infidelities.²⁵⁹ Chapuys reported that "the King knows very well that it was not that" and "the general opinion is that the concubine's miscarriage was entirely owing to defective constitution, and her utter inability to bear male children..."²⁶⁰ If indeed these rumors were already circulating around court by early 1536, Anne must have realized that without a son Henry no longer had need for her. The birth of the Princess Elizabeth served as the first indication of troubles ahead in the royal marriage, and Anne's second miscarriage of a male fetus in January 1536 acted as the catalyst in her downfall.

Historians have long debated where relations stood between Anne and Henry from February to April 1536, the months leading up to her indictment and arrest. While it is clear that the king was extremely disappointed in the failure of

²⁵⁹ Chapuys, "Dispatches," 286.

²⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 285.

Anne's third pregnancy, the leap from unsuccessful queen consort to accused traitor seems gargantuan. Even if Anne's second miscarriage convinced Henry that his wife could not possibly bear the long-awaited heir, why did he not move to divorce her and put her away in some distant convent or crumbling castle, as he had with Catherine of Aragon, instead of putting her through a public trial which in turn appeared to air the dirty laundry of their marriage?

The maneuvering to have Anne accused of marital failings that might in turn call for capital punishment seems to have been concocted by Anne's enemies at court as much as by the king himself. In the months following Anne's miscarriage Henry vacillated between petulant self-pity, fits of rage, and his continued sexual attraction to Anne. While at times he bemoaned the state of his marriage and complained that God would forever deny him sons, at other times he still referred to Anne as his "dearest wife."²⁶¹ Although rumors of divorce circulated throughout the spring, it remained unclear as to what action Henry wished to take. There were many at court who would benefit from Anne's repudiation, from supporters of the Holy Roman Empire and the Catholic Church like Chapuys and the Lady Mary to members of the English peerage who hoped to sweep aside the Boleyns completely and gain more political advantage for their own families. Chief among these were the Seymours. They recognized that in his unpredictable state Henry might well be persuaded that not only was Anne failing in her queenly duties to the realm, she was actively conspiring against

²⁶¹ David Loades, *The Politics of Marriage: Henry VIII and his Queens* (Dover: Alan Sutton Publishing Inc., 1994), 82.

him, and thus a danger to the monarchy itself.²⁶² Unlike the aged Catherine, though, Anne was still an attractive and vivacious woman in 1536; she could not simply be exiled to some distant corner of England while the possibility remained that Henry might desire her again and recall her to his affections. Anne's detractors understood that in order to neutralize the threat she presented as a powerful political force at court, they needed to convince the king not only to divorce her, but to destroy her.

Heading the anti-Boleyn faction was Secretary Thomas Cromwell, who had initially supported Anne as queen but decided to move against her in mid-April of 1536. He had done little to discourage, if not actually incite, Henry's growing fancy for Jane Seymour, a rather quiet and submissive lady in waiting, in the months following Anne's miscarriage. Cromwell's shifty loyalties earned the animosity of the queen, and he determined the Boleyn-hostile climate of early 1536 to be a precipitous moment at which to change allegiances.²⁶³ Thus Anne's attendants were probed for possible signs of delinquency in the queen's household, and the ideal answer was found in Anne's fondness for medieval courtly love traditions, ideas that she had brought back with her from her upbringing in France. As an aspect of courtly love practices many of the men in Anne's entourage expressed chivalrous affection for ladies of the court through musical composition, poetry, and other attentions, which as Eric Ives has suggested, led to a more causal intermingling of men and women within Anne's

²⁶² Loades, *The Politics of Marriage: Henry VIII and his Queens*, 80.

²⁶³ *Ibid.*

circle.²⁶⁴ Unfortunately, it did not take long to twist the medieval conventions playfully reenacted in Anne's intimate circle of friends into fabricated charges of sexual misbehavior, which the erratic and jealous Henry clung to with gusto.²⁶⁵ Anne's familiarity with her male courtiers was immediately connected with her miscarriage that January; the aborted male fetus that had at first been viewed as a frustrating disappointment was now twisted to support claims of physical betrayal. Clearly God had precipitated Anne's miscarriage as punishment for a sexual crime. This argument at once seriously threatened Anne while removing Henry's culpability from his wife's failed pregnancies.

The charges against Anne released on May 2, 1536 centered on her alleged sexual misconduct; they contended that after becoming queen she had entered into sexual relationships with five men of her entourage, namely the courtiers Henry Norris, Sir Francis Weston, William Brereton, the court musician Mark Smeaton, and, most heinously, her own brother George Boleyn.²⁶⁶ Indeed, it was claimed that in all she had committed adultery with nearly one hundred men throughout the three years of her marriage! Though medieval Europeans despised adulteresses as the epitome of the rebellious woman, their jilted

²⁶⁴ Eric Ives, *The Life and Death of Anne Boleyn, 'The Most Happy,'* (Oxford: Malden Publishing, 2004), 335-336.

²⁶⁵ Ibid. For more on the tenets of courtly love in theory and practice throughout the medieval period and into the early modern age, see Jennifer G. Wollock, *Rethinking Chivalry and Courtly Love* (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2011), 213-240.

²⁶⁶ These charges expand upon those described at the beginning of the chapter; they are taken from an appendix to the Wriothesley Chronicle describing Anne's trial. The charges repeatedly express concern over Anne's willingness to allow multiple men to "violate" her by means of "illicit sexual intercourse," wording that displays Anne's position, by virtue of her womb, as little more than a brood mare owned by the king and country. See "The Trials of Anne Boleyn and Lord Rochford, 15 May 1536," in *The Anne Boleyn Papers*, trans. Elizabeth Norton (London: Amberley Publishing, 2013), 339.

husbands were normally viewed in an equally derogatory light. While an unfaithful wife betrayed her God-ordained duty to serve her husband unconditionally, her husband had clearly failed in his role as *pater familias* to control the behavior of his household.²⁶⁷ In fact, cuckolded husbands were popularly depicted as wearing a set of horns as a visible display of their weakness and loss of control.²⁶⁸ Given the ridicule with which cuckolds were held in pre-modern Europe, it seems almost incredible that the king of England was willing to defame his wife in a manner that made him appear equally blameworthy in the failure of his marriage. And yet Chapuys wryly observed that “you never saw a prince or husband wear his horns more patiently or lightly than this one does,”²⁶⁹ implying that Henry felt sure that his honor would remain intact despite the outrageous depiction of Anne’s infidelity.

The risk of Henry’s possible disgrace was neutralized by the implicit accusations of witchcraft imbedded within the charges against Anne. Henry stated on multiple occasions following her January miscarriage that Anne had “bewitched” him: only this could account for his blind desire for her from 1527-1533 and his former conviction that she was destined to give him a male heir. While this term has lost much of its literal meaning over time, there is no doubt that a sixteenth-century Englishman would have understood bewitchment to be

²⁶⁷ Deborah Willis, *Malevolent Nurture: Witch-Hunting and Maternal Power in Early Modern England* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), 37.

²⁶⁸ For a description of the medieval stories, known as *fabliaux*, many of which derided cuckolds and encourage husbands to control the sexual behavior of their wives if they wished to retain their personal honor, see Georges Duby, *The Knight, the Lady, and the Priest: The Making of Modern Marriage in Medieval France*, trans. Barbara Bray (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 219-220.

²⁶⁹ Chapuys, “Dispatches,” 293.

a literal mind-altering state precipitated by witchcraft. In his 2001 biography of the queen, Eric Ives insists that Henry only used the term as a synonym for “deceive” and that such charges had been more casually leveled at English queens in the previous century, thus marking the association between powerful women and bewitchment only as a common rhetorical device. He goes on to claim that “no accusation that she had ever dabbled in the black arts was ever leveled against Anne,” leaving scholars who have explored this possible connection as no more than conspiracy theorists.²⁷⁰

This argument unfortunately fails to examine the historical context within which these charges surfaced. While Ives is correct to mention earlier witchcraft accusations leveled against English ladies as part of a pattern already established by the time of Anne’s downfall, his interpretation of these incidents as “casual” assumes that because the charges never led to corporeal punishment, they simply weren’t serious in nature. The reference made here is to Queen Elizabeth Woodville, the beautiful, impoverished widow who captured the heart of Edward IV and became his queen in 1464. Elizabeth was an unlikely choice for queen consort, as she was no longer a virgin, already widowed with young children, and the older, impoverished widow of a Lancastrian supporter, ironic considering that Edward was the Yorkist claimant to the throne.²⁷¹ Thus their marriage drew considerable criticism, and at the meeting of Parliament in early 1484, just months after Edward’s death, Richard III claimed that Elizabeth and

²⁷⁰ Ives, *The Life and Death of Anne Boleyn*, 297.

²⁷¹ Hilton, *Queens Consort: England’s Medieval Queens*, 355-356.

Edward's marriage had never been valid, as she had used witchcraft to blindly entice him into marriage.²⁷² As the medieval argument logically followed, because witchcraft caused impotence and Elizabeth was deemed a witch, the offspring of their royal coupling were in fact illegitimate.²⁷³ There is nothing "casual" about these accusations; it simply remains that Richard did not have a vested interest in physically punishing Elizabeth, only in removing the threat of her children possibly disputing his claim to the throne. Witchcraft was an efficient means of achieving this end. The earlier case of Elizabeth Woodville provided a blueprint for Henry VIII to invalidate his marriage with Anne Boleyn and to delegitimize the product of that union, the princess Elizabeth, in a single charge.²⁷⁴

Although the indictment against Anne never specifically accused her of witchcraft, the nature of the crimes described therein were precisely those of a witch: she was sexually voracious, "following daily her frail and carnal lust."²⁷⁵ She used trickery to seduce and sexually dominate men, which "she procured by sweet words, kisses, touches, and otherwise," and she entertained hateful thoughts against her husband that in turn actually caused him bodily harm,

²⁷² Henry Ansgar Kelly, "The Case Against Edward IV's Marriage and Offspring: Secrecy; Witchcraft; Secrecy; Precontract," in *Inquisitions and Other Trial Procedures in the Medieval West* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001), 327.

²⁷³ *Ibid.*, 329.

²⁷⁴ The idea of physical and emotional binding as a result of love magic was a charge often brought against women who were thought to have married above their social rank throughout the medieval and early modern periods. For an in-depth examination of these types of magic see Guido Ruggiero, *Binding Passions: Tales of Magic, Marriage, and Power at the End of the Renaissance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

²⁷⁵ "The Trials of Anne Boleyn and Lord Rochford, 15 May 1536," 339.

making her actions treason.²⁷⁶ The court record asserts that “the king having a short time since become aware of the said abominable crimes and treasons against himself, took such inward displeasure and heaviness, especially from his said Queen’s malice and adultery, that certain harms and perils have befallen his royal body.”²⁷⁷ While Anne’s supposed conspiracy against the king, and his resulting physical discomforts, stemmed from her internal hatred, the indictment also asserted that Anne had more concretely attempted to murder Catherine of Aragon, the Lady Mary, and Henry Fitzroy through the use of poison.²⁷⁸ The magical connotations of poison as a preferred tool of women and witches during the late medieval period has been well established in the cases of Dame Alice Kyteler and Valentina Visconti, described in previous chapters. Thus Anne’s possible role as a poisoner implied an intimate knowledge of dark magic as well. By the 1530s the conflation of uncontrolled female power and sexuality with witchcraft was already widely recognized, making the link between Anne’s crimes and witchcraft an embedded and logical one. There was no need to directly declare Anne a witch because the implication was already present in the popular imagination.

In the wake of Anne’s indictment and arrest on May 2, historians have often portrayed her as a passive victim who could do little but mutely accept her fate. Closer examination of Anne’s behavior at her trial and throughout her

²⁷⁶ Ibid.

²⁷⁷ Ibid., 338.

²⁷⁸ Ibid. Also see Weir, *The Lady in the Tower*, 36-37.

imprisonment in the Tower of London refutes this argument, however. An anonymous manuscript account of Anne's trial reports that

the Queene, sittinge in her Chaire made for her, (whether in regard of any infirmity, or out of honor permitted to the wife of the Sovereigne,) haueinge an excellent quick witt, and being a ready speaker, did so answeare to all obiections, that, had the Peeres given in their verdict accordinge to the expectation of the assembly, shee had been acquitted.²⁷⁹

The surprise of the manuscript's author at this turn of events is palpable; Anne's self-assurance, composure, and articulate testimony seemed to many of the witnesses to confirm her innocence. Multiple sources attest to Anne's determination to prove her guiltlessness. *Wriothesley's Chronicle* states that "she made so wise and discreet aunsweres to all things layde against her, excusing herselfe with her words so clearlie, as though she had never bene faultie to the same..."²⁸⁰ Likewise, in his famous poem about Anne's trial and condemnation, the French emissary Lancelot de Carles marveled that "she did not give up her greatness, but spoke to the lords as a mistress. Those who came to interrogate were astonished."²⁸¹ These accounts demonstrate Anne's intelligence and composure under pressure; while the charges against her depicted Anne as a base, lewd woman, her own behavior in court seemed to prove that she was far too discreet to act so carelessly.

²⁷⁹ "Manuscript Account of Anne's Trial," in *The Anne Boleyn Papers*, trans. Elizabeth Norton (London: Amberley Publishing, 2013), 338.

²⁸⁰ *Wriothesley Chronicle*, 352.

²⁸¹ "English Summary of the Poem on Anne Composed by Lancelot de Carles, a Member of the French Embassy in London on 2 June 1536," in *The Anne Boleyn Papers*, trans. Elizabeth Norton (London: Amberley Publishing, 2013), 356.

Unfortunately for Anne, the judges knew that there could be only one acceptable outcome of the proceedings for the king, and that was a guilty verdict. It appears that the writer of the anonymous manuscript saw the outcome as politically motivated, for he concludes that “they (among whome the Duke of Suffolke, the Kings brother-in-lawe, was Chiefe, and wholly applyinge himself to the Kings humour,) pronounced her guilty.”²⁸² After this pronouncement, the judges, including Anne’s own uncle, “condemned her to Death, either by beinge burned in the Tower Greene, or beheaded, as his Maiestie in his pleasure should thinke fitt.”²⁸³ All reports indicate that Anne received this judgment with incredible poise and allowed herself to be led from the courtroom.

In spite of her composure in court, it is clear from Anne’s behavior after returning to her prison that she refused to accept this verdict without any efforts to defend herself. A controversial letter dated May 6, 1536 seems to encapsulate Anne’s anger and boldness after her sentence, although due to its bluntness and critical tone historians have long debated whether or not the letter was truly written by Anne or was perhaps, as Ives has argued, a forgery meant to further discredit and besmirch the Queen’s reputation.²⁸⁴ This is certainly a possibility given the harsh rhetoric of the writing, as will be seen below, a quality that would have been considered far too direct, casual, and disrespectful according to etiquette of the period. It is nonetheless possible that a woman of Anne’s wit and temperament, having realized the gravity of her situation, wrote such a letter in

²⁸² *Wriothesley Chronicle*, 338.

²⁸³ *Ibid.*

²⁸⁴ Ives, *The Life and Death of Anne Boleyn*, 361.

a final effort either to sway Henry's decision or simply to have the satisfaction of baring her true thoughts to him before her death. In this correspondence she assured the king that "let not your grace ever imagine that your poor wife will be brought to acknowledge fault, where not so much as a thought ever proceeded."²⁸⁵ A clearer declaration of innocence can hardly be imagined. She went on to confront the injustice of the proceedings against her, stating "try me, good king, but let me have a lawful trial, and let not my sworn enemies sit as my accusers and as my judges; yea, let me let me receive an open trial, for my truth shall fear no open shames."²⁸⁶ In some ways this request sounds more like a direct challenge to the king; Anne clearly realized that the charges were at least in part motivated by her apparent inability to bear healthy male children, and if she indeed blamed Henry for their failure to produce male offspring, she could instead describe their shared reproductive shortcomings in court, a threat that would embarrass the king and question his masculinity.

Importantly in Anne's case, her erratic behavior as a prisoner within the Tower of London further allows the historian a glimpse into the reactionary conduct of prominent women accused of witchcraft, information rarely recorded in earlier medieval cases. Anne is reported to have told her warder, Sir William Kingston, that it would rain in London until she was released. She added that were she to be executed for treason, England would not see rain for seven

²⁸⁵ "Anne Boleyn, Queen of England, to Henry VIII, May 1536," in *Letters of the Queens of England, 1100-1547*, ed. Anne Crawford (Gloucestershire: Sutton Publishing, 1994), 193.

²⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

years.²⁸⁷ While it is sensible to imagine that Anne most likely made these predictions out of “sheer desperation and bravado,” her portent for the realm is nonetheless an interesting one.²⁸⁸ Seven was considered an important number in Christian lore, and thus one thought to often be employed by witches as a means of lending potency to their spells and incantations.²⁸⁹ Furthermore, witches were traditionally believed to be able to manipulate the weather, a belief that stemmed from the ancient association between female fertility and cycles of life within the natural world.²⁹⁰ Indeed, in the *Malleus Maleficarum* Kramer and Sprenger suggest that the “most powerful class of witches... raise hailstorms and hurtful tempests and lightnings,” and that “they can show to others occult things and certain future events, by the information of devils...”²⁹¹ Taking these cultural stigma into account, Anne’s statement carried the weight that if she was indeed a witch, as the charges against her implicitly stated, her untimely death could bring with it grave consequences.

There is other evidence to suggest that Anne may have responded to the allegations of witchcraft by attempting to make her accusers believe she truly possessed witch-like powers. On May 2, 1536, her first night of imprisonment, Anne dined with her jailer Kingston and his wife, as was customary for high-

²⁸⁷ “Sir William Kingston to Secretary Cromwell, on Queen Anne’s behavior in prison,” in *The Anne Boleyn Papers*, trans. Elizabeth Norton (London: Amberley Publishing, 2013), 334-335.

²⁸⁸ Weir, *The Lady in the Tower*, 25.

²⁸⁹ Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages*, 146, 149.

²⁹⁰ Sylvia Bovenschen, “The Contemporary Witch, the Historical Witch and the Witch Myth: The Witch, Subject of the Appropriation of Nature and Object of the Domination of Nature,” in *Witchcraft Women, and Society*, ed. Brian P. Levack vol. 10 (New York: Garland Publishing, 1992), 147.

²⁹¹ Kramer and Sprenger, *Malleus Maleficarum*, in *Witchcraft in Europe: A Documentary History 1100-1700*, ed. Alan C. Kors and Edward Peters (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1972), pg. 130.

ranking political prisoners at the time.²⁹² During this meal Anne was extremely distressed, questioning Kingston as to the whereabouts of her father and brother. In the midst of Anne's railing against her unjust imprisonment and the targeting of the gentlemen of her household, she also reportedly expressed great sorrow on behalf of Lady Elizabeth Browne, Countess of Worcester, "because her child did not stir in her body."²⁹³ This is an unusual aside that at first appears to simply be a part of the distressed queen's ramblings. Perhaps Anne was reflecting upon her own miscarriages and the role that these tragedies may have played in motivating the charges now brought against her, and in turn pitied the difficulties of another's woman's pregnancy. Interestingly, however, Elizabeth Browne was the initial person from the queen's household to lay forth evidence against Anne.²⁹⁴ Although the nature of her indiscretion is unknown, records indicate that Elizabeth borrowed the hefty sum of £100 from Anne in early 1536, and she greatly desired to keep the purpose and existence of this loan a secret from her husband. When her brother subsequently accused Elizabeth of immoral behavior, she defensively retorted that "she was not the worst and he should look to the conduct of the queen herself."²⁹⁵ It is likely that Elizabeth verbally struck out against Anne simply to deflect suspicion of immorality away from herself. As that evidence helped to bring about a warrant for Anne's arrest, however, it is almost certain that Anne felt bitterness toward her former friend

²⁹² Weir, *The Lady in the Tower*, 144.

²⁹³ "Sir William Kingston to Secretary Cromwell, upon Queen Anne's committal to the Tower," in *The Anne Boleyn Papers*, trans. Elizabeth Norton (London: Amberley Publishing, 2013), 333.

²⁹⁴ Introduction to "Elizabeth, Countess of Worcester, to Thomas Cromwell, 1537," in *The Anne Boleyn Papers*, trans. Elizabeth Norton (London: Amberley Publishing, 2013), 342.

²⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

and attendant. Because witches were believed to harm children and pregnant women, it is also possible that Anne's comment implied that she possessed the ability to seek retribution on those who had slandered her.²⁹⁶

These instances illustrate the strange dynamic of power between accusers and the accused in European witchcraft trials. As sociologist Steven Russell has posited, witchcraft trials can be viewed as highly ritualized conflicts "over the legitimacy of different forms of knowledge and competing claims to power."²⁹⁷ This argument is further supported by Michel Foucault's theory that "power is employed and exercised through a net-like organization. And not only do individuals circulate between its threads, they are always in the position of simultaneously undergoing or exercising this power."²⁹⁸ The study of the belief in and prosecution of European witchcraft assumes that such trials were normally a lop-sided affair, with power squarely in the hands of the state, while the accused were usually incapable of preventing their own condemnation. Even in such imbalanced relationships, however, defendants could employ a myriad of non-traditional methods in order to regain at least a semblance of control over the outcome of events.

In Anne's case as in countless others during the European witch-craze, it was clear almost even before the trial began that the judges, and the powers which they ultimately served, desired a guilty verdict by whatever means

²⁹⁶ For more on witches both as dangerous to expectant mothers and children, and as bad mothers themselves, see Willis, *Malevolent Nurture*, 14-17.

²⁹⁷ Steven Russell, "Witchcraft, Genealogy, Foucault," *British Journal of Sociology* 52, no. 1 (March 2001): 125.

²⁹⁸ Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 98.

necessary. Yet even in such enormously unbalanced situations “there is still scope for resistance,” from denial of the charges to cynical cooperation or even suicide.²⁹⁹ This subtle resistance is reflected in Anne’s behavior as a prisoner in the Tower: her erratic and curious comments, which never admitted to her involvement in witchcraft but implied an understanding of popular belief in dark magic, served to toy with her accusers. When Anne’s articulate and well-spoken defense at her trial did not save her, she made ambiguous predictions and tacit threats that actually played into the charges against her without ever admitting guilt.

This is not to say, however, that Anne was indeed guilty of witchcraft. There is no concrete evidence to suggest that Anne ever dabbled in dark magic. Her actions and odd predictions reflect the widespread belief in magical powers during her lifetime and show that, as a means of seeking power in a desperate situation, she employed the rhetoric of witchcraft to confound and unnerve her jailers. The reality of whether or not dark magic truly existed and shaped human behavior in this case is irrelevant; the simple fact that people *believed* witchcraft was real granted it legitimacy.

After being forced to watch the executions of the five men condemned as her “concubines,” including her brother, from her window in the Tower, Anne was executed on the Tower Green on May 19, 1536. As had been employed in the earlier cases of Petronilla of Meath and Joan of Arc, at the time burning was the usual means of death for female traitors, and coincidentally for witches and

²⁹⁹ Russell, “Witchcraft, Genealogy, Foucault,” 130.

poisoners as well, but Henry in a magnanimous gesture commuted the sentence to beheading, sending for a skilled swordsman of Calais to perform the deed.³⁰⁰ Anne's final moments have been frequently dismissed as "conventional" of sixteenth-century executions; she asked for forgiveness of her sins, commended the goodness and fairness of the king, and prayed for God to take her spirit after death, before kneeling at the block.³⁰¹ Many elements of her speech were indeed customary in English executions of the period; for the condemned "a good death" meant admitting one's guilt, encouraging the spectators to pray for them and live a better life than they themselves had, and relative composure in the face of their impending doom.³⁰² Yet in many ways even Anne's farewell speech defied her condemners. As several historians have observed, Anne never alluded to her guilt and conversely challenged, "if any person will meddle with my cause, I require them to judge the best."³⁰³ It is this subtle assertion of her innocence that caused observers such as John Husee to marvel that the queen "died boldly."³⁰⁴ Thus while Henry and his councilors had succeeded in employing popular belief concerning female sexuality and witchcraft to remove Anne from power, she nevertheless was able to plant the seed of her unjust execution in the minds of those witnessing her death.

³⁰⁰ For more information on the established methods of execution for women during the early modern period, see Julius R. Ruff, *Violence in Early Modern Europe, 1500-1800* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 98-99.

³⁰¹ Loades, *The Politics of Marriage*, 89.

³⁰² Ruff, *Violence in Early Modern Europe*, 102-103.

³⁰³ John Foxe, *Actes and Monuments*, in *The Anne Boleyn Papers*, trans. Elizabeth Norton (London: Amberley Publishing, 2013), 363.

³⁰⁴ *Letters and Papers, Foreign and Domestic, of the Reign of Henry VIII* (21 vols. In 33 parts, ed. J. S. Brewer, James Gairdner, R. Brodie, et al. 1862-1932).

The rapid fall of Anne Boleyn in 1536 occurred as the European witch-craze of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries swiftly accelerated. Taken in the context of the late medieval feminization of witchcraft and following centuries of increased targeting of women as witches, it is clear that Anne's condemnation fits into a larger design of attempts to quash the influence of women who did not conform to prescribed female gender roles. While Anne's trial and execution ranks among the most recognizable examples of female persecution in the early modern period, she was not the first prominent woman to die as a result of the influence she wielded in the public sphere, and she certainly was not the last. While the present study has attempted to string together a series of previously unrelated cases that illustrate an underlying pattern of witchcraft persecution specifically targeted at socially prominent women, this development was not entirely lost on Anne Boleyn's contemporaries as well. George Constantyne, a former servant of Henry Norris, one of the courtiers executed for an alleged sexual affair with Anne, commented following her execution that he "had never heard of the Queens that they should be thus handled... I promise you there was much muttering of Queen Anne's death."³⁰⁵ While Constantyne felt certain that many doubted the validity of the Crown's charges against Anne, more importantly, some women began to fear what Anne's rapid condemnation and execution meant for the welfare of other powerful females in Europe. After hearing of Anne's execution in England, Queen Mary of Hungary wrote to her brother, the Archduke Ferdinand of Austria, "our

³⁰⁵ "A Memorial from George Constantyne to Thomas Lord Cromwell," in *The Anne Boleyn Papers*, trans. Elizabeth Norton (London: Amberley Publishing, 2013), 278-279.

sex will not be too well satisfied if these practices come into vogue; and, though I have no fancy to expose myself to danger yet, being a woman, I will pray with the rest that God will have mercy on us.”³⁰⁶

³⁰⁶ “Mary of Hungary, Regent of the Netherlands, to her Brother, the Archduke Ferdinand, 23 May 1536, from the Archives at Brussels,” in *The Anne Boleyn Papers*, trans. Elizabeth Norton (London: Amberley Publishing, 2013), 365.

Chapter 6

Conclusions: From the Feminization of Witchcraft to the Vilification of Powerful Females

Anne Boleyn's condemnation came as a shock to many Europeans. Powerful women had been called witches in the past, but relatively few had met such an ignominious end. By the time of her execution in 1536, however, the rhetoric of feminized witchcraft and its many attributes were already firmly entrenched in mainstream European society, and cleared a path for their detractors to target socially influential women as witches, or more circuitously, as guilty of witch-like crimes. The escalating victimization of women during the witch craze of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries occurred as developing scholarly ideals simultaneously sanctioned an ever-narrowing sphere of activities deemed acceptable for upper class women. The accompanying bureaucratization of Europe's monarchies during this period allowed more opportunities for men to participate in the public sphere, while constricting the role of women in governance and other areas.³⁰⁷ As a result, women seen to demonstrate real power in a wide variety of forms became prime targets for politically motivated witchcraft charges.

The following examples of powerful women accused of witchcraft throughout the early modern period are pertinent to the present study because they demonstrate how the dangerous relationship between witchcraft and female power evolved after the Middle Ages ended. Each case proves that the

³⁰⁷ Theresa Earenfight, *Queenship in Medieval Europe* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013), 254.

more conventional scholarly definition of the witch as a powerless victim is incomplete, if not entirely incorrect. Behind every persecuted woman described here lies a story of exercised female power that was deemed threatening enough to be recast in the public eye as witchcraft. These cases also illustrate that the targeting of women like Alice Kyteler and Joan of Arc were never isolated incidents, but markers in a larger pattern: an ongoing patriarchal design of some religious and political factions that attempted to delegitimize female agency by renaming it in terms of dark magic and witchcraft. This disturbing pattern did not ebb during the early modern period, but as these examples aim to illustrate, such cases simply grew more nuanced and ubiquitous within Western society over time.

Just over a year after Anne Boleyn's beheading in London, Lady Janet Glamis, a high-ranking Scottish noblewoman of the Douglas clan, was burned at the stake on charges of practicing witchcraft against King James V.³⁰⁸ As the sister of the exiled sixth Earl of Angus, James' much-hated stepfather, Janet proved the most convenient target for the king to destroy the standing of the entire Douglas family.³⁰⁹ By the sixteenth century witchcraft was the most

³⁰⁸ Sir James Paul Balfour, *Scots Peerage* vol. 8 (Edinburgh: 1904), 278-280. Strangely, this incident has gone largely unnoticed by scholars of Scottish witchcraft persecution, as it fell a few decades before the better-known anti-witchcraft legislation of James VI went into effect. The case is not mentioned in either Ronald Seth, *In the Name of the Devil: Great Scottish Witchcraft Cases* (London: Jarrolds Publishers, 1969), or, more recently, in Christina Lerner, *Enemies of God: the Witch-Hunt in Scotland* (London: John Donald, 2000).

³⁰⁹ There are notable similarities between this attempt to attack a high-ranking noble family by questioning the behavior of a single female relative and the cases of Valentina Visconti and Anne Boleyn. The witchcraft accusations against Valentina were ultimately aimed at discrediting her husband Louis of Orleans, the king's brother. Anne's downfall in England similarly dishonored the entire Boleyn family. Thus by 1537 this was a well-established political technique across Europe.

efficient method of bringing down a powerful noblewoman, and luckily for the king Janet's past proved conducive to supporting such a charge: she had previously been accused of poisoning her first husband upon his death in 1528, an accusation that mirrors details of the earlier cases involving Alice Kyteler, Valentina Visconti, and Anne Boleyn. Although these charges were never proven, the lingering rumor was used against Janet in 1537, when she was accused of plotting her sovereign's murder by magical poisoning.³¹⁰ When evidence for Janet's supposed involvement in this witchcraft failed to materialize, however, James had her attendants arrested and tortured until confessions of their mistress' depravity could be extracted. She was promptly burned alive on the esplanade of Edinburgh Castle while her young son was forced to watch, a clear warning to any other Scottish nobles who might consider working against the interests of the king.

Political motivations echo in the 1590 arrest and execution of Elizabeth of Doberschütz, a German noblewoman executed for giving a "witch poison" to the infertile Duchess of Pomerania. As the wife of an impoverished nobleman who had risen quickly through the ranks of the ducal household, Elizabeth became a prime target for the jealousy of the more established Pomeranian courtiers in much the same manner that Valentina Visconti had been singled out by Louis of Orléans' enemies at the French court in the 1390s.³¹¹ A group of detractors led by the nobleman Jakob von Kleist started a rumor that Melchior's wife Elizabeth,

³¹⁰ Jamie Cameron, *James V* (London: Tuckwell, 1998), 169-181.

³¹¹ In 1575 the couple joined the service of Duke John Frederick of Pomerania, who immediately took a liking to Lord Melchior, granting him the fiefdom of Zamborst in 1578 and promoting him city captain of Neustettin.

who served as an attendant to Duchess Erdmuthe, had poisoned her mistress and made her barren. In truth, Elizabeth had given Erdmuthe an herbal concoction to lower her fever *after* the Duchess suffered a miscarriage, but at the peak of the witch craze in the German lands dark magic seemed a logical explanation to many.³¹² Von Kleist and his followers further claimed that Elizabeth had given magical poisons to the Duke himself, for only bewitchment could explain Duke John Frederick's partiality for two such lowly nobles.

Although Elizabeth and her husband were demoted from their posts and exiled to the family estate, they still enjoyed much of the wealth and comfort that service in the Pomeranian ducal household had brought them. It was a situation that Jakob von Kleist could not bear. In the late 1580s von Kleist attempted to brew his own beer for profit, an enterprise that failed miserably. Determined to regain favor with Duke John Frederick, von Kleist claimed that the failure of his brew was the direct result of Elizabeth of Doberschütz's witchcraft. This time the duke no longer ignored the serious nature of the accusations, and Elizabeth was arrested. While her husband escaped to the electorate of Brandenburg, Elizabeth was convicted of witchcraft and beheaded in the Stettin hay market in 1591, a victim of her husband's political rivals.

The dangers faced by influential women in Europe's royal courts during the witch craze is also reflected in the case of Leonora Dori, a lady-in-waiting and

³¹² Witches were commonly believed to poison pregnant mothers and small children, yet another reflection of male hostility toward female control over birthing and child rearing. For the more infamous example of Anna Ebler, accused of poisoning women in labor and small children in Germany in the 1680s, see Lyndal Roper, "Witchcraft and Fantasy in Early Modern Germany," *History Workshop*, no. 32 (Autumn 1991): 19-43.

favorite of the French queen consort Marie de Medici at the turn of the seventeenth century. Leonora suffered from bouts of severe depression and seizures, symptoms now associated with epilepsy, but considered by pre-modern Europeans to be signs of demonic possession.³¹³ Her favor with the queen granted Leonora great influence at court in spite of her poor health. Queen Marie saw the young woman's seizures as a powerful connection to the spirit world, and thus employed Leonora to exorcise demons and practice white magic as a means of keeping evil influences at bay throughout the court. Leonora amassed a personal fortune through this unusual work for hire, and gained further influence at court from her marriage to Cocino Concini, an Italian politician in Marie's entourage who served as informal minister to the young Louis XIII upon Henri IV's assassination in 1610.³¹⁴ Leonora went so far as to accept bribes from courtiers desperate for an audience with the queen regent, selling the queen's time to the highest bidder.³¹⁵ The couple's control over access to the young king and his mother enraged much of the French court, including Louis XIII himself, who felt stifled by the overbearing guidance of his Italian minister. In 1617 Louis, egged on by his favorite, Charles d'Albret, Duke of Luynes, ordered Concini's apprehension, but royal guards murdered the Italian

³¹³ There are similarities between the interpretation of Leonora's epilepsy as a connection to white magic and the spiritual visions of Joan of Arc. For more on the connection between mental illness and demonic possession in medieval and early modern medicine, see Rider, "Demons and Mental Disorder in Late Medieval Medicine," 40-69.

³¹⁴ Katherine Crawford, *Perilous Performances: Gender and Regency in Early Modern France* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 76.

³¹⁵ Louis Batiffol, *Marie de Medicis and Her Court*, ed. H.W. Carless Davis Ball, trans. Mary King (London: Chatto and Windus, 1908), 197.

when he resisted arrest.³¹⁶ The security of the French court's two most powerful women was shattered with Concini's death. The queen regent Marie de Medici was banished from court, while Leonora was arrested on charges of black magic and witchcraft. She was accused of employing the dark arts to bewitch Marie, thus manipulating the governance of the French realm and supporting the selfish ambitions of her foreign husband, and was subsequently beheaded and her body burned in July 1617.³¹⁷

Attacks on powerful women at the French royal court continued in subsequent decades. During the reign of Louis XIV, in the midst of a panic over Satanism in Paris known as the Affair of Poisons, one of the most powerful women at court was accused of practicing satanic witchcraft. In 1677 Louis' *maitresse en titre*, the influential Françoise-Athenais, marquise de Montespan, was accused of performing black masses in which she sacrificed infants and drank their blood as a means of retaining her beauty and youth.³¹⁸ A record of one such mass relates that

Mlle. Montvoison, aged eighteen, had presented at Mme. De Montespan's mass (and at her mother's order) an infant born before term. She had it placed in a bowl. Abbe Guibourg had slaughtered it and consecrated its blood with the host... Guibourg brought another child to be sacrificed at this mass for one ecu. It had been sold him by a girl. Having first drawn its blood, he cut its throat with a knife and poured the blood into a chalice.

³¹⁶ Anne E. Duggan, "Criminal Profiles, Diabolical Schemes, and Infernal Punishments: The Cases of Ravallac and the Cocinis," *The Modern Language Review* 105, no. 2 (April 2010): 366-384.

³¹⁷ Batiffol, *Marie de Medicis*, 219.

³¹⁸ Anne Somerset, *The Affair of Poisons: Murder, Infanticide, and Satanism at the Court of Louis XIV* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2003), 252.

Then the body was taken off to another place and its heart and entrails brought back to him so that he might make another sacrifice.³¹⁹

The gruesome events related here seem difficult to imagine having secretly taken place at court under the king's very nose, but the nature of the accusations fit a centuries-old pattern of equating threatening female power with dark magic. As one of Louis' most influential mistresses, manipulating both his personal affairs and political decisions throughout most of his long reign, the marquise de Montespan garnered many enemies at the French court. She had been, after all, nicknamed "the real queen of France" at the height of her popularity with the king, who asked her advice on matters of state and even allowed her signature in place of his on some official documents.³²⁰ Attempts to mark her as a Satanist and child murderer aimed to delegitimize her intelligence and political acumen, portraying her instead as an aging woman only concerned with maintaining her physical beauty by whatever means necessary, including swearing her allegiance to the devil. Although Louis responded to the scandal by declaring belief in witchcraft superstitious and officially outlawing witch-hunting in France, he nonetheless still felt the need to distance himself from his former favorite and Françoise-Athenais was exiled to a convent for the remainder of her life.

³¹⁹ Francois Ravaisson, from the *Archives de la Bastille*, in *A Casebook of Witchcraft*, ed. William Woods (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, Inc., 1974), 40. Notice that it is all women who are depicted as the instigators of this systematic infanticide.

³²⁰ Lisa Hilton, *Athénaïs: The Life of Louis XIV's Mistress - the Real Queen of France* (London: Little and Brown, 2002), 2.

While convents might be the ideal sequestered location for disgraced women like Ælfthryth of England and the marquise de Montespan to spend their last days in penance and prayer, it was not only laywomen who were targeted as potential tools of the devil. Prominent women within the Church were also at great risk of having their authority over other women labeled as subversive opportunities to corrupt nuns for evil purposes.³²¹ In 1619 another Pomeranian noblewoman was executed for witchcraft, this time accused by the sub-prioress at the convent where she lived. Born to a powerful Pomeranian noble family in 1548, Sidonia von Borke chose to never marry, a decision that marked her as deviant from the expectations placed upon a woman of her social standing. She did not, however, choose a life as a nun either; Sidonia only entered the Noble Damsels' Foundation, a Lutheran convent for unmarried noblewomen, after the death of her sister in 1600. Sidonia became a fixture for controversy from the moment she took up residence at the convent; she quickly was embroiled in multiple legal disputes with administrative members, a situation that required the intervention of the duchy on numerous occasions.³²² Strangely, the investigating commissions sent by both Duke Bogislaw XIII and his successor Philip II failed to turn up any legitimate reason to expel Sidonia from the convent before the presiding dukes died.

The feud at the Noble Damsels' Foundation festered until 1619, when Sidonia and the nun who replaced her as sub-prioress, Dorothea von Stettin,

³²¹ For an in-depth discussion of "misbehaviors" in early modern convents, see Sharon Strocchia, "Women on the Edge: Madness, Possession, and Suicide in Early Modern Convents," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 45, no. 1 (January 2015): 53-77.

³²² Lisa Graves, *History's Witches* (Irvine: Xist Publishing, 2013), 23.

argued heatedly during the performance of a mass, leading to their dual arrest. In retaliation for this shame, Dorothea immediately accused Sidonia of witchcraft, claiming that she employed a gypsy servant, Wolde Albrechts, to seek information concerning Sidonia's future by the consultation of demons.³²³ Taking into account the untimely deaths of his predecessors in the midst of any investigation into complaints against Sidonia's behavior, Duke Francis I was more than willing to believe that Sidonia might be a witch, murdering the men who attempted to stop her unruly conduct at the convent. The trial against Wolde Albrechts proceeded first, as it was easier to carry out judicial action for witchcraft against women of the lower classes. After enduring five days under torture, Wolde confessed to *maleficum* and having carried on sexual relations with the devil, after which she also implicated Sidonia. Upon hearing of her maid's burning, Sidonia attempted to escape from the convent, but was captured and jailed in Stettin, where seventy-two separate charges of murder and witchcraft were brought against her. She was executed for heresy and witchcraft on September 1, 1620.

In another case from eighteenth-century Bavaria, Maria Renata Saenger von Mossau, the renowned sub-prioress of the convent of Unter-Zell, was convicted of heresy, witchcraft, and Satanism after several of the nuns under her charge began to suffer from strange seizures and convulsions which made them

³²³ Ibid.

“howl and snap like mad cats.”³²⁴ The Church viewed these mysterious illnesses to be the work of the devil, and while conducting an exorcism at Unter-Zell suspicious ointments and poisons were found in Maria Renata’s cell. In a world that equated influential women with social instability, it was logical to suspect the leader of this convent of in fact dragging her impressionable wards into a morass of sin and evil. Under pressure, she subsequently confessed to one of the Benedictine exorcists to having practiced Satanism since the age of seven and having concocted chemical poisons since age twelve; according to her confession she had taken holy orders in 1699 for the sole purpose of creating strife amongst the Brides of Christ.³²⁵ Although she ensured her confessor of her remorse and begged for absolution, Maria Renata was promptly turned over to the Bavarian state, whose authorities had her beheaded and burned in June 1749.

As in the case of Elizabeth of Doberschütz, where the female-dominated birthing chamber was employed as the locus in which to accuse an influential woman of wrongdoing, the male concern with reestablishing control over a female-dominated sphere, in this case the convent, is equally palpable in the downfall of Maria Renata. Female religious houses offered some women an avenue to leadership amongst their peers that was largely unattainable in the secular world, and as a result any misbehavior amongst its members could easily be attributed to the negligent or negative influence of the convent’s female administration.

³²⁴ “Saenger von Massau, Maria Renata,” in *The Northeastern Dictionary of Women’s Biography*, ed. Jennifer S. Uglow, Frances Hinton, and Maggie Hendry (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1998), 473.

³²⁵ Ibid.

Although the witch craze sputtered out by the late seventeenth century, it is nonetheless incorrect to assume that the systematic victimization of women ended completely as pyres were slowly extinguished across Europe. Independent and powerful women continued to threaten the established patriarchal order; witchcraft accusations represent only one particularly virulent means of delegitimizing female agency in the public sphere. The wide array of women targeted, and the multiplicity of charges brought against them, illustrate that the rhetoric of feminized witchcraft first promoted in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries created an umbrella of associated behaviors and sins for which women could be found culpable. Thus throughout the height of the witch craze and even after its eventual decline it is possible to see how the late medieval feminization of witchcraft created a virtual ripple effect, impacting powerful women in an extremely wide-reaching and long-lasting manner.

Other cases of prominent women charged with witchcraft-related crimes have long gone unnoticed by many historians, at least in their direct connection to witchcraft allegations, because the women in question were never *officially* accused of being witches. Catherine of Braganza, queen of Charles II of England, for example, was indicted for attempting to poison her husband in the Popish Plot of 1678, charges which would have brought about her downfall had the king not intervened on his wife's behalf and refused to allow the trial to proceed.³²⁶ Catherine had long been unpopular at court because she was a Catholic and a

³²⁶ Lillas Campbell Davidson, *Catherine of Braganza: Infanta of Portugal and Queen-Consort of England* (London: J. Murray, 1908), 316-319.

foreigner, she had failed to give birth to an heir, and she took to wearing men's clothing as a fashion statement.³²⁷ Her inability to bear children put her in much the same peril that had first endangered Anne Boleyn in the 1530s, and her daring dress marked her as rebellious to her natural role as a woman in much the same manner that it had for Joan of Arc hundreds of years earlier.

Ties to earlier witchcraft rhetoric can also be found in the charges leveled against Marie Antoinette during the French Revolution in 1793, who was accused, among numerous other crimes, of sexually abusing her young son.³²⁸ While the revolutionaries attempted to distance themselves from the rhetoric or influence of the Catholic Church, ironically the description of the queen's crimes mirror details of the sexual deviancy attributed for witches by clergymen since the late medieval period. The charges only built upon the slanderous images depicting Marie Antoinette gorging herself on cake that so infamously define the profligacy and decadence of the *ancien régime* in France by the reign of Louis XVI.³²⁹ Those portrayals displayed the queen in an identical fashion to the witch figure: a gluttonous woman with a voracious appetite for all things dissolute, from material luxuries to sex. Thomas Jefferson, after all, asserted that without the evil excesses of Marie Antoinette the French Revolution would never have

³²⁷ Edward Corp, "Catherine of Braganza and cultural politics," in *Queenship in Britain, 1660-1837: Royal Patronage, Court Culture, and Dynastic Politics*, ed. Clarissa Campbell Orr (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), 55.

³²⁸ Antonia Fraser, *Marie Antoinette: The Journey* (New York: Random House, Inc., 2001), 426.

³²⁹ Susan S. Lanser, "Eating Cake: The (Ab)uses of Marie Antoinette," in *Marie Antoinette: Writings on the Body of a Queen*, ed. Dena Goodman and Thomas E. Kaiser (New York: Routledge, 2003), 274-275.

happened.³³⁰ In instances such as this, outright witchcraft charges were superfluous. The elements of dangerous femaleness originally explained by witchcraft rhetoric was so ingrained in European society by the eighteenth century that, while the witch craze itself may have ended, the vilification of powerful women no longer needed witchcraft charges in order to achieve an eerily similar outcome.

The long record of powerful women targeted as witches in pre-modern Europe demands a shift in the manner that historians approach witchcraft scholarship. In his seminal study *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, Keith Thomas posits that “witchcraft was thus generally believed to be a method of bettering one’s condition when all else had failed. Like most forms of magic, it was a substitute for impotence, a remedy for anxiety and despair.... the desire for revenge, and the inaccessibility of normal agencies for achieving it, were thus the essence of the witch’s predicament.”³³¹ And yet the numerous cases presented here demonstrate that the image of the witch is much more complex than the victimized, weak female so long described by scholars. While the women portrayed in this study may seem to have been powerless in the face of witchcraft accusations, their condemnation in itself reveals an implicit narrative of female agency within a strictly patriarchal society. Socially prominent women proved easy targets for witchcraft charges precisely because they exerted a seemingly unnatural influence over male-gendered spaces like governance,

³³⁰ Ibid., 275.

³³¹ Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, 522.

commerce, religion, or warfare. Politically motivated witchcraft accusations sought to restore a natural arrangement of gender roles that uncontrolled female authority was seen to have inverted. By following accusations against socially prominent women back to their source, scholars can find a surprising amount of power amongst women usually characterized only as tragic victims. In following that course of action, this study has aimed to heed the voices of remarkable women whose accomplishments have long been overshadowed by their oppression, and by the unremitting passage of time.

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