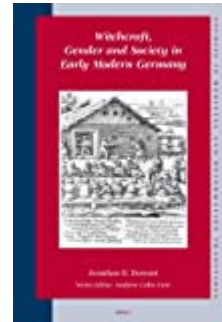




Jonathan B. Durrant. *Witchcraft, Gender and Society in Early Modern Germany.* Boston: Brill, 2007. xxvii + 288 pp. \$112.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-90-04-16093-4.



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Why Witches?

Witchcraft, witch hunt, witch craze: the very diversity of terminology for discussing the identification and persecution of witches highlights our ongoing historiographical and methodological dis-ease with this matter. Jonathan B. Durrant's clearly structured and well-researched book offers new perspectives on the genesis of the persecutions, though despite the title, it is not a general treatment, but a regional one, with an explicit focus on the prince-bishopric of Eichstätt in Franconia, from 1590-1631. Part 1 describes the course and procedure of the persecutions, part 2 the web of relationships of the accused, together with separate chapters on food and drink, sex, health, and the predatory behavior of the jailers. Two useful appendices present the 1627 interrogatory and a list of the witches' occupations. The introduction and conclusion acquaint the reader succinctly with the main concerns of the author while the five illustrations are disappointingly predictable.

In comparison with events in the prince-bishoprics of Bamberg and Würzburg, the three phases of intense witch persecution in Eichstätt (1590-92, 1603, and 1617-1631) have not been studied in detail before, no doubt

because of the scattered territories of the bishopric and the fragmented source material. Careful examination of these prompts Durrant to downscale the overall numbers of executions to between 217 and 256, though these remain sizeable numbers for a thinly populated area, especially when most took place in the little town of Eichstätt itself. The driving force for the persecutions, Durrant believes, was the "culture of demonology" (p. 32) of such Franconian prince-bishops as Adolf von Ehrenberg of Würzburg and Johann Christoph von Westerstetten of Eichstätt (r. 1612-37). Since 1589, as a young canon, Westerstetten had been influenced by the Jesuits, and supported their drive to roll back heresy. Durrant delineates the personal, political, and ideological links between the prince-bishops, the Counter-Reformation policies of the Bavarian dukes, the Society of Jesus, and the University of Ingolstadt. Jesuits, such as Peter Canisius and Jacob Gretser, dominated the demonological literature of the time. Professional witch commissioners, such as Dr. Wolfgang Kolb, moved around the whole Bavarian region and reinforced the standardizing influence of the witch manuals. All this activity coincided with the Thirty Years War, when the fear of Protestant aggression

was real enough. One of Westerstetten's first acts was to join the Catholic League. Durrant is convinced that the persecutions were a product of clerical agency, its concerns about heresy, and of the dynamic of the interrogatory process itself. Witchcraft was seen as a particularly malevolent form of heresy, mocking and defying all that was sacred. One interesting result of this perspective on the causation of the persecutions, he believes, will be a more benign view of early modern society than that fostered by the Thomas-McFarlane thesis, with its contention that the strains and conflicts in the societal base provoked them.[1]

Evidence for the first wave of persecution in Eichstätt in 1590, in which nineteen women were executed, is sparse. It was concentrated in the district of Spalt. In 1603, another twenty witches were executed, this time in the town of Eichstätt itself. Again, evidence is sparse. The primary focus of the book falls on the 1617-31 period, during von Westerstetten's rule, which saw 175 executions. A remarkable and horrifying 98 percent of those arrested and interrogated were executed. Some ninety of those trials are documented. About 80 percent of the accused were women. Other suspects frequently named men, including members of the clergy, as accomplices, but inquisitors were seldom interested in pursuing these leads. Durrant raises a number of questions about these circumstances: why accusations against witches almost never flowed from members of the wider community, but were thrown up by the interrogations; why the accused were not ostracized by relatives and acquaintances, but instead often offered support when arrested, or even found sexually attractive by their predatory jailers; and why the numbers of arrests fluctuated so significantly from year to year.

Answering these questions has led the author to conclude that, at least in Eichstätt, no moral panic emerged in the community at large. Nor can correlations be found between extremes of weather or poor harvests and outbreaks of persecution. On the other hand, clerical zeal and agency appear obvious. We have, for 1590, for example, specific and urgent recommendations from the Jesuit, Gregory of Valencia, that Duke William V launch a sharp crusade against the witch sect. However, evidence tying the outbreaks of the 1590 and 1603 persecutions to the influence of Westerstetten or the Jesuits seems at best inconclusive. From 1612 on, however, Durrant is on firmer ground, as the various elements of Westerstetten's recatholicization program swung into motion.

The primacy of theological concerns for the inquisi-

tors is clear. The Eichstätt interrogatory used from 1617 clearly reflected the gender and demonological concerns of Kramer's notorious *Hammer of the Witches* (1486) and of later Jesuit texts. Few questions dealt with alleged harm to neighbors. The focus is trained overwhelmingly on the spiritual and moral state of the defendant and on the nocturnal gatherings of the sects. Durrant frequently deploys the term "recycle" to describe the way in which the suspects' ordinary relationships of friendship and kinship or their experiences of common meals, shared drinking, Catholic rites, or sex were transformed into accounts of diabolical seduction and Sabbath orgies to satisfy interrogators. Margretha Bittelmayer, for example, answers questions about her seduction by the Devil by drawing on her memories of wedding celebrations and courtship and even what appears to be a same-sex relationship with one Anna, who "handled her and rolled around with her like a male person" (p. 57). After being thoroughly broken by torture, she confessed to nine acts of harmful witchcraft, and denounced twenty-nine other accomplices.

Those listed in the denunciations were drawn from family and neighborly contacts, and this information should be taken, Durrant argues, as evidence of social cohesion, rather than of hostility. Suspects did not denounce people who fit into the cultural stereotype of the witch or of cunning folk, but those with whom they were in daily contact. Most of the cobbler Valtin Lanng's 237 names were drawn from artisan households. In interpreting the transcripts of the witches' confessions, Durrant draws on the historical anthropology of David Sabeau to decode the language used. Clearly, the confessions reflected "a mixture of voices": leading questions from the inquisitors, fear of prolonged torture, recent pronouncements about convicted witches, current gossip, and rumor. Yet they also are valuable as disclosing the subjective experience of the individual. The interpretive process involves uncovering the "relational idioms" of their discourse. This strategy appears to lead on occasion to overinterpretation, as when the expression to "wash his hands in her blood" is seen as part of the local "restricted code" of communication (p. 111). The same is apparently true of the expression "good friends and neighbours" (p. 114). These reflections on discourse and methodology are accompanied by criticism of functionalists, structuralists, and feminists.

The brief chapter on food and drink provides data that flesh out the contention that normal festivities or drinking sessions were "diabolized" into Sabbath orgies. Suspects themselves, after all, never used the term "Sab-

bath,” but spoke simply of dances or meals or wedding feasts. A triangular relationship appears to have developed between such secular occasions, Catholic sacraments, and alleged sacrilegious baptisms or desecrations of the host from the Mass. This chapter includes references to alleged break-ins by suspects into cellars, stalls, and bedrooms and evidence of sexual indiscretions. As the chapter on sex points out, suspects almost invariably described their seduction by the Devil as having taken place in the form of their spouse, or more often, a lover. Durrant does make his case successfully that normal experiences or fantasies of sex were recycled. Confessions include instances of adultery, prostitution, incest, and bestiality as well as intercourse within marriage. Durrant even claims that the narratives allow one to “reconstruct a vibrant sexual world which was not always constrained by patriarchal norms promoting chastity, honour and reproduction” (p. 168).

In the chapter on health, Anna Harding emerges from the confessions as a practitioner of folk medicine, with expertise in menstruation and inducing abortions. Her confessions and those of midwives such as Barbara Haubner to the murder of children again seem to reflect failed attempts at inducing birth or treating ailments. Finally, a very long chapter is included on the sexual abuse of

“witches” by their jailers, including the eighty-year-old Anderle. As mentioned above, it is illuminating that those involved appear to have had no fear of the malign powers of those they abused. It may well be that such abuse was common.

Overall, Durrant’s arguments are cogent, and the book is a genuine contribution not only to regional history, but also to the wider debate about the origins of the witch craze. The book includes too much speculation and reiteration of the obvious, however: “marriage was more the product of interaction between individuals than a dull rehearsal of the prescriptions of the patriarchal ideology” (p. 219). Occasionally one suspects that the evidence is being massaged to fit the thesis, which is robust enough not to need it. In this account, the Tridentine reform program, the Jesuits, and Westerstetten himself come close, like the alleged witches, to being “diabolized.” Comparisons with recent historiography on the Spanish Inquisition might be helpful.

Note

[1]. Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (London: Penguin Books, 1991); Alan Macfarlane, *Witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart England: A Regional and Comparative Study* (London: Routledge, 1999).

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