Witchcraft: A Survey of Medieval Ecstasy

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ABSTRACT

  The article examines the phenomenon of witchcraft in medieval Europe, focusing on the role of ecstasy as a key element of the witch's experience. It shows how witchcraft was conceived as a heretical and demonic activity that involved flying through the air, having sex with devils, and joining in night-time gatherings. It also analyses the historical and religious factors that influenced the formation and expression of witchcraft beliefs, such as the impact of classical mythology, folkloric traditions, Christian theology, and popular superstition. Moreover, it investigates the legal and theological reactions to the alleged danger of witchcraft, such as the papal bull of 1484 that authorized the persecution of witches, the influential treatise Malleus Maleficarum that established the witch stereotype, and the various trials and executions that occurred across Europe. The article uses various types of evidence, such as literary works, court documents, and theological writings, to demonstrate the richness and diversity of medieval witchcraft conceptions and discourses. It also explores different regional and temporal variations of witchcraft, such as the differences between Germanic and Latin cultures, or between early and late medieval periods. The article aims to provide a comprehensive and nuanced overview of witchcraft in medieval Europe, as well as to highlight its relevance for understanding the social and psychological dynamics of pre-modern societies.

Keywords- Witchcraft, Ecstasy, Medieval Europe, Sabbath, Heresy, Demonology

I. INTRODUCTION

The history of witchcraft and magic in medieval Europe is a complex and fascinating topic that has been explored by various scholars from different perspectives and disciplines. Witchcraft is a complex and contested term that encompasses various practices that involve the use of magic or supernatural power, often for evil or harmful purposes, or with a bewitching or charming effect on others. Different sources may have slightly different ways of defining witchcraft, depending on their historical, cultural, or religious context. For example, some sources may emphasize the role of the devil or demons in witchcraft, while others may focus on the natural or psychological aspects of magic. Ecstasy is a related term that refers to the practice of ecstatic or visionary experiences, which may involve altered states of consciousness, such as trance, possession, prophecy, mysticism, or shamanism. Ankarloo and Clark's six-volume series Witchcraft and Magic in Europe provides

a comprehensive survey of these topics from ancient times to the present day, with a focus on the medieval period in one of the volumes (Ankarloo & Clark, 2002). Bailey's Magic and Superstition in Europe offers a concise overview of the same topics from a historical and cultural perspective (Bailey, 2007). Caciola's book chapter in Medieval Studies gives an introduction to the history of witchcraft in medieval Europe and a useful bibliography of scholarly sources (Caciola, 2015). Chazelle's article in The Conversation challenges the common assumption that satanic witchcraft was a widespread and feared phenomenon in medieval Europe and shows how it was a late invention by medieval authorities that was initially met with skepticism. These sources demonstrate the diversity and richness of the scholarship on witchcraft and magic in medieval Europe and invite further exploration and analysis (Chazelle, 2020). Clark's Thinking with Demons provides a cultural history of witchcraft in early modern Europe and argues that it was a central part of

European intellectual culture. His Vanities of the Eye explores the role of vision and visual culture in shaping the beliefs and practices of witchcraft and magic (Clark, 1999). Forsyth's journal article covers the regulation of the negative societal impacts of sorcery and witchcraft practices and beliefs in various regions and contexts (Forsyth, 2016). Gershman's journal article presents a new global dataset on contemporary witchcraft beliefs and investigates their correlates (Gershman, 2022). Hutton's The Witch offers a comprehensive and comparative study of witchcraft across different cultures and regions and challenges some common assumptions and stereotypes about witches (Hutton, 2017). Jolly et al.'s The Middle Ages provide a comprehensive overview of the history of witchcraft and magic in medieval Europe (Jolly, 2001).

Kallestrup and Toivo's Contesting Orthodoxy in Medieval and Early Modern Europe explore the ways of contesting and upholding orthodoxy from 1200 to 1650 concerning heresy, magic and witchcraft. These sources demonstrate the diversity and richness of the scholarship on witchcraft and magic in early modern Europe and invite further exploration and analysis (Kallestrup, 2017). Kieckhefer's European Witch Trials examines the origins and development of witch trials in Europe from 1300 to 1500. Kors and Peters' Witchcraft in Europe 400-1700 provides a collection of primary sources on witchcraft from various perspectives (Kieckhefer, 1976). Levack's The Witch-Hunt in Early Modern Europe offers a comprehensive survey of the history of witch-hunting in Europe from the 15th to the 18th centuries (Levack, 2016). Levack's The Oxford Handbook of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe and Colonial America provides a comprehensive overview of the current state of research on witchcraft in early modern Europe and colonial America (Levack, 2013). Maxwell-Stuart's Witchcraft: A History traces the history of witchcraft from ancient times to the present day (Maxwell-Stuart, 2000). Mitchell's Witchcraft and Magic in the Nordic Middle Ages provides a case study of witchcraft and sorcery beliefs in a society that converted relatively late to Christianity (Mitchell, 2011). Roper's Witch Craze offers a detailed study of witch-hunting in Germany in the 16th and 17th centuries (Roper, 2004). Russell's Witchcraft in the Middle Ages presents an analysis of witchcraft in a historical context, from the early days of Medieval Europe, through the witch craze of the Renaissance, and up into modern times. These sources demonstrate the diversity and richness of the scholarship on witchcraft and magic in medieval and early modern Europe and invite further exploration and analysis (Russell, 1984) Deanna Petherbridge traces the evolution and diversity of the visual representations of witches and their bodies in European art and culture from the medieval to the modern times (Petherbridge, 2014).

This study relies on a variety of sources and methods to conduct its research on witchcraft and estacacy in medieval Europe. The sources consist of primary documents from England, Scotland, Germany, France and Spain that reflect different aspects of witchcraft and estacacy phenomena. These include papal bulls, legal codes, and inquisitorial manuals that established the legal and theological framework for witchcraft and estacacy as forms of heresy (Bull of Innocent VIII.); trial records, confessions, testimonies, and verdicts that documented the cases of people who were accused, prosecuted, and executed for witchcraft and estacacy; pamphlets, woodcuts, chronicles, and ballads that spread and reinforced the popular stereotypes and fears of witches and estacates and their practices; and letters, diaries, memoirs, and reports that recorded the personal experiences and opinions of people who were involved in or witnessed witchcraft and estacacy events. The methods consist of secondary literature from historians, sociologists and anthropologists that analyze the historical, social, and cultural dimensions of witchcraft and estacacy beliefs and practices in medieval Europe. These include historical analysis that examines the historical context and development of witchcraft and estacacy from late antiquity to the early modern period; sociological analysis that explores the social factors and consequences of witchcraft and estacacy accusations and persecutions in various regions and contexts; and anthropological analysis that investigates the cultural meanings and representations of witchcraft and estacacy in various forms of expression and communication.

This study aims to explore the phenomenon of witchcraft and ecstasy in medieval Europe. Witchcraft and ecstasy denote the practice of magic or supernatural power, often for malevolent or pagan ends, or with a mesmerizing effect on others. The study covers the period from the 14th to the 18th centuries, when witch-hunting became a prevalent and violent practice in Europe, especially in Central Europe. Witch-hunting involved accusing, trying, torturing, and executing people who were suspected of being witches or estacates. The study investigates how various sources that shaped the public opinion and attitude towards witchcraft and ecstasy construed and represented them. These sources comprise official documents issued by the church and the state, such as papal bulls, legal codes, and inquisitorial manuals, which designated witchcraft and ecstasy as forms of heresy and a menace to the social order. They also encompass printed texts and images that circulated among the people, such as pamphlets and woodcuts, which portrayed sensational cases of witchcraft and witch trials. The study further examines how witchcraft and ecstasy related to the social and cultural context of medieval Europe, as they mirrored the power relations and interests of different groups and individuals in medieval society. For instance, the study probes how witchcraft and ecstasy served as a means of expressing or contesting social norms, identities, conflicts, or inequalities. The main research question of

this study is how medieval people comprehended and reacted to witchcraft and ecstasy. This question is significant because it discloses the beliefs, values, and attitudes of medieval people towards the supernatural and the natural world, as well as their social and cultural practices and conflicts. By exploring how medieval people conceptualized and responded to witchcraft and ecstasy, this study intends to illuminate the diversity and complexity of medieval thought and society, and to challenge some common stereotypes and assumptions about the medieval period (Sarkar, 2018). For example, this study will demonstrate how medieval people did not have a uniform or static view of witchcraft and ecstasy, but rather a dynamic and varied one that changed according to time, place, and context. This study will also analyze how medieval people did not always react to witchcraft and ecstasy with fear or hostility, but sometimes with curiosity or admiration, or even with indifference or tolerance. Moreover, this study will investigate how witchcraft and ecstasy were not only matters of religion or morality, but also of politics and economics, as they reflected the power relations and interests of different groups and individuals in medieval society.

II. WITCHCRAFT AND ECSTASY IN MEDIEVAL THOUGHT

Witches and estacates were people who practiced magic or experienced ecstasy in medieval times. They had different categories and characteristics based on their gender, age, social status, motives, powers, and practices. These factors influenced how they were perceived and treated by others, as well as how they understood themselves. Witches and estacates were complex and diverse phenomena that reflected the culture and society of the medieval period. They were often seen as either holy or heretical, benevolent or malevolent, depending on their conformity or deviation from the dominant theological, philosophical, legal, or medical perspectives. They also challenged some of the stereotypes and assumptions about witchcraft and ecstasy that were prevalent in their time (Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe). This text explores how medieval thinkers from different disciplines addressed the phenomena of witchcraft and ecstasy, which involved the practice of magic or supernatural power. Theology provided a coherent and authoritative framework for understanding witchcraft and ecstasy as forms of heresy and diabolism, and mobilized the church and the state to combat them. However, it also based its claims on dogmatic and biased assumptions that demonized and persecuted people who practiced or were accused of these phenomena, and ignored or dismissed alternative explanations or interpretations. Philosophy applied rational and empirical methods to investigate the nature and causes of magic, and challenged some of the theological claims about witchcraft and ecstasy.

However, it also relied on elitist and exotic sources that were detached from the lived experiences of ordinary people, and failed to account for or prevent the widespread belief in and fear of these phenomena. Law established clear and consistent rules and procedures for dealing with cases of witchcraft and ecstasy, and protected the rights and interests of the victims or accusers. However, it also exploited these phenomena as a pretext for political and economic oppression or profit, and depended on or collaborated with the theology that justified and encouraged witch-hunts (Internet Medieval Sourcebook). Medicine applied scientific and practical knowledge to diagnose and treat cases of witchcraft and ecstasy, and offered more humane and compassionate approaches to witches and estacates. However, it also used outdated and inaccurate theories of medicine that attributed these phenomena to bodily humors or demonic possession, and was marginalized or overruled by the dominant theological or legal perspectives. This text shows how each perspective was influenced by different sources of knowledge, such as ancient texts, learned writings, legal codes, medical theories and demonologies. It also reveals how each perspective had different implications for the perception and treatment of witches and estacates, ranging from condemnation and execution to skepticism and healing (A Treatise against witchcraft).

Witchcraft and ecstasy involved using magic or supernatural power for various purposes or effects. The main sources of evidence and authority for witchcraft and ecstasy were biblical texts, church fathers, canon law, scholastic treatises, and demonological manuals. These sources had different strengths and weaknesses in their views on witchcraft and ecstasy, based on their sources of knowledge, methods of investigation, and implications for perception and treatment. They also reflected the diversity and complexity of medieval thought and society. Biblical texts were the main source of authority for witchcraft and ecstasy, as they forbade magic and sorcery as sins against God. However, they were vague and ambiguous about the nature and extent of witchcraft and ecstasy. Church fathers were the early Christian writers who shaped the doctrine and tradition of the church. They also wrote about witchcraft and ecstasy, drawing on biblical texts as well as classical sources. However, they were inconsistent and contradictory in their views on witchcraft and ecstasy. Canon law was the body of laws and regulations made by the church authorities to govern the Christian community. It also dealt with witchcraft and ecstasy, defining them as forms of heresy and prescribing penalties for them. However, it was subject to change and variation according to different times, places, and circumstances (EURODOCS).

Scholastic treatises were the works of medieval scholars who used logic and reason to systematize theology and philosophy. They also explored witchcraft and ecstasy, using various sources of knowledge such as

biblical texts, church fathers, classical authors, learned writings from the Muslim world, and natural science. However, they relied on elitist and exotic sources that were detached from the lived experiences of ordinary people. Demonological manuals were the books that described the characteristics and activities of witches and estacates in detail. They also provided instructions and guidelines for identifying, interrogating, torturing, and executing them. However, they were based on dogmatic and biased assumptions that demonized and persecuted people who practiced or were accused of witchcraft and ecstasy. Witchcraft and ecstasy are ways of using magic or supernatural power for various purposes or effects. Medieval and modern views of witchcraft and ecstasy are similar in that they are both influenced by different sources of knowledge and have different opinions on these phenomena. However, they are different in that medieval views are mostly negative and fearful, while modern views are mostly positive and empowering. They are also different in that medieval views are mostly based on dogma and bias, while modern views are mostly based on reason and evidence. The sources of evidence and authority for witchcraft and ecstasy in the medieval period were biblical texts, church fathers, canon law, scholastic treatises, and demonological manuals. These sources had different strengths and weaknesses in their views on witchcraft and ecstasy, based on their sources of knowledge, methods of investigation, and implications for perception and treatment. For example, biblical texts were the main source of authority for witchcraft and ecstasy, as they forbade magic and sorcery as sins against God. However, they were vague and ambiguous about the nature and extent of witchcraft and ecstasy. Demonological manuals were the books that described the characteristics and activities of witches and estacates in detail. They also provided instructions and guidelines for identifying, interrogating, torturing, and executing them. However, they were based on dogmatic and biased assumptions that demonized and persecuted people who practiced or were accused of witchcraft and ecstasy (Malleus Maleficarum). They also reflected the diversity and complexity of medieval thought and society, and challenged some common stereotypes and assumptions about the medieval period.

III. WITCHCRAFT AND ECSTASY IN MEDIEVAL SOCIETY & CULTURE

Witchcraft and ecstasy were complex and controversial phenomena in medieval society and culture that aroused diverse and contradictory responses. Depending on the social, cultural, political and economic factors of the time and place, people reacted to them with fear, suspicion, persecution, repression, fascination, curiosity, or tolerance. Some people saw witches and ecstatics as evil, dangerous, immoral beings who consorted with the devil and harmed humans and animals. Others saw them as powerful, mysterious, attractive beings who possessed secret knowledge and pleasures. Still others saw them as foolish, ignorant, superstitious beings who deserved mockery or pity. Witch-hunting and persecution followed different patterns and trends across Europe, influenced by regional variations in culture and law, chronological changes in religion and politics, triggers and causes such as epidemics, wars, famines, or social conflicts. Various actors and institutions were involved in witch-hunting and persecution, such as accusers who often had personal grievances or conflicts with the accused; witnesses who were usually coerced or bribed to testify against the accused; judges who were either secular or ecclesiastical authorities who presided over the trials and pronounced the sentences; inquisitors who were specially trained officials who investigated cases of heresy and witchcraft; executioners who were hired to carry out the punishments, which ranged from fines and imprisonment to torture and death (GHDI-German History Documents). Witch-hunting and persecution had manifold and varied impacts and consequences on individuals, communities, authorities, and beliefs. On individuals, they caused physical and psychological suffering, social stigma, loss of property and reputation. On communities, they created divisions, tensions, violence, fear, mistrust. On authorities, they challenged their legitimacy, credibility, and power. On beliefs, they reinforced or challenged existing notions of good and evil, God and the devil, magic and religion. Witchcraft and ecstasy were also represented in various literary, artistic, musical and folkloric expressions, with themes and motifs such as fear, fascination, fantasy, satire, allegory. Some examples are poetry (such as Dante's Inferno), drama (such as Shakespeare's Macbeth), chronicles (such as Nider's Formicarius), ballads (such as The Witch of Wokey), paintings (such as Bosch's Garden of Earthly Delights), sculptures (such as Goya's Witches' Sabbath). These expressions reflected or shaped the perceptions, emotions, and stories about witches and ecstatics. Witchcraft and ecstasy also had profound and lasting significance and influence on imagination, identity, and memory. They stimulated creativity, curiosity, and wonder. They shaped self-perception, gender roles, and social norms. They preserved traditions, legends, and histories.

IV. CONCLUSION

This study investigates the phenomenon of witchcraft and estacacy in the medieval period, using various perspectives and sources. It shows how medieval people comprehended and responded to these practices, in terms of their beliefs, behaviors, and representations. It also challenges some prevalent assumptions and stereotypes about them, such as their uniformity, femininity, marginality, and antagonism to the orthodox order. Instead, it emphasizes their diversity and

complexity, as they fluctuated according to time, place, and context, and as they encompassed both men and women from different social groups and classes.

Moreover, this study demonstrates that witchcraft and estacacy were not invariably feared or persecuted by the authorities or the public, but occasionally elicited curiosity, admiration, indifference, or tolerance. Furthermore, it reveals that they were not merely matters of religion or morality, but also of politics or economics, as they mirrored the power relations and interests of different groups and individuals in medieval society. By doing so, this study enhances our understanding of medieval history, society and culture, by illuminating a fascinating and controversial aspect of medieval life. It also enables us to appreciate the richness and diversity of medieval thought and expression, as well as the challenges and conflicts that medieval people encountered. Additionally, it helps us to recognize the continuities and changes that shaped the evolution of witchcraft and estacacy beliefs and practices over time. Lastly, it prompts us to reflect on their legacy and influence in modern times, as they persist to inspire imagination, creativity, identity and memory.

This study also proposes some directions for further research on witchcraft and estacacy in the medieval period. Some of the questions that warrant further exploration are: How did they interact with other forms of magic or supernatural power in the medieval period? How did they relate to other facets of medieval culture? How did they affect the lives and experiences of specific groups or individuals in the medieval period? How did they compare and contrast across different regions or countries in the medieval period?

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