

The Devil and the Religious Controversies of Sixteenth-Century France

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RESEARCH conducted by social historians in the past few decades has revealed a rich fabric of religious belief and ritual in late medieval and early modern Europe. In concentrating on behavior and practice, as opposed to doctrine and dogma, these historians have shown that Christianity as understood by the masses was at times far removed from the liturgical and doctrinal controversies of the elite. An examination of the accounts of demon possession and of the treatises on demonology written in France in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries can tell us a great deal about the thoughts, beliefs and preoccupations of contemporary Christians. The impression left by many of these is that the majority were written in an attempt to suppress the unorthodox views of the masses. It should be recognized, however, that many of the Catholic elites defended certain beliefs which their Protestant counterparts regarded as superstitious. One cannot speak, therefore, simply of 'elite' versus 'popular' culture. 'Ritual, myth and magic' often merged imperceptibly with the beginnings of science, a field in which the elites predominated. What is certain is that a whole body of thought and belief which a few decades ago was often dismissed as unworthy of serious historical consideration has now been shown to be a fruitful area of research.

Historians working on the ecclesiastical history of France in the early modern period are fortunate in that a rich collection of pamphlets and demonological tracts has survived and has been made widely accessible in a microfiche series. One of the earliest accounts in this series describes a demon possession which took place at Laon in 1566. The testimony of three eyewitnesses, the Dean of the Cathedral at Laon, one of the canons, and the Royal notary of the city, was compiled by Jean Boulaese, professor of Hebrew at the College De Montaigu in Paris.¹ Boulaese's pamphlet, first published in 1573, provides the following account. It begins in Vervins, a small town in Picardy, and concerns a young girl, Nicole Obri, who was approximately sixteen years of age. She was the daughter of a butcher and the wife of a tailor. On the afternoon of 3 November 1565, while kneeling on the grave of her maternal grandfather in the local parish church, there suddenly appeared before her a man standing upright but entombed. This spirit, who resembled her grandfather, spoke to Nicole and informed her that he was

indeed the spirit of her deceased relative. Because she *believed* this spirit, the author emphasized, it took possession of her body, and she became so ill that it was feared she was on the point of death. Despite such fears, Nicole soon regained her senses and returned home to recount her experience to her parents.²

Boulaese records that Nicole told her parents that her grandfather had appeared before her in order to exhort his descendants to make the amends necessary to secure the release of his soul from Purgatory. He told Nicole that his soul was detained there because he had died suddenly without having received the last rites nor having made arrangements for the fulfillment of the pilgrimages that he had vowed to complete during his lifetime. He demanded that his family have masses performed, that they give alms to the poor, and that they make the promised pilgrimages. These deeds, with the exception of the pilgrimage to St. James of Compostella, were accomplished, but Nicole once again began to exhibit certain behaviors which were regarded as signs of recurring possession. Upon the advice of some friends, the family summoned the local curate to try to conjure this spirit. When interrogated by the curate, the spirit responded that he was "le bon Ange, l'Ame de Joachim Vuillot," sent by God. Unsure of himself, the curate consulted a Dominican from the local priory, who immediately declared that the spirit was in fact an "Ange mauvais et Sathanique . . . un Diable." Finally, under the constraint of conjuration, the spirit revealed himself as Beelzebub and said that, in *believing* him, Nicole had allowed him to enter her body.³

As the Dominican, holding the consecrated host in front of Nicole's face, proceeded to exorcise this demon, she became "hideously horrible to see, frightful to hear [and] incredibly hard and stiff to the touch." Nicole then became mute, blind and deaf for unspecified periods of time. When the demon spoke, it accused spectators of various vices, sins and secrets which they had failed to confess to their priest.⁴ The monk succeeded in restoring Nicole's sight, speech and hearing by touching the afflicted parts of her body with a portion of the true Cross. Finally, at the end of the day, Nicole "received the only victorious remedy that is our Creator, Savior and Lord Jesus Christ in the consecrated Host." She at once became "holy of spirit and body, inflamed with devotion, and endowed with a gracious beauty that surpassed the natural." Boulaese added that this was not accomplished by the efforts of the Protestant ministers, for whom the demon said that it would do nothing because they were his servants.⁵ As it turned out, the exorcism was unsuccessful, because Beelzebub entered Nicole's left arm and, with the aid of twenty-nine other demons, caused her to have a series of frightening hallucinations. Twenty-six of these demons were subsequently exorcised, but the remaining ones, as Beelzebub informed the exorcists, would

only depart on the command of the bishop.⁶ The next day, 24 January 1566, Nicole was taken to Laon to see the bishop. The remainder of the case involves an escalation of publicity and manipulation by the Catholic authorities, a subject which will be dealt with in more detail after an examination of some of the questions raised by the early stages of this particular case.

In his analysis of Boulaese's account, D. P. Walker dismissed Nicole rather uncharitably as a fraud. In studying other contemporary documents, he concluded that the origins of her "fits and delusions" could be found in her medical history, though, as he insisted, "nothing in her background can account for her really brilliant performances as a demoniac." Walker believes that the beginnings of the story amount to "a frustrated attempt to have a good possession."⁷ Boulaese's comment concerning the reformed clergy certainly reveals that he was engaged in writing Catholic propaganda, but this aspect of the pamphlet's content becomes more glaringly obvious only in the latter portion of the account. It seems unfair to impugn Nicole's original beliefs and thoughts because of subsequent abuse and exploitation by Catholic propagandists. It is equally possible to contend that Nicole was a disturbed, yet ardently devout, young girl who, like many of her contemporaries, was genuinely concerned about the soul of her deceased relative.

THE LITERATURE of sixteenth-century Europe reveals at once that a belief in ghosts, that is, in the souls of the deceased that have returned to earth, was widespread during this period and was not simply an element of 'popular culture.' Shakespeare's plays are replete with fairies and ghosts, that of Hamlet's father being the most famous. Hamlet, as in all of his actions, may have hesitated about how to react to this apparition, wondering whether it was truly the soul of his father or some foul demon; but it is likely that many of the less educated folk, like Nicole, accepted the existence of ghosts as a matter of course. Ludwig Lavater, a Swiss Protestant minister, wrote one of many contemporary treatises on ghosts. He stated in his preface to the English edition published in 1572 that

many and diuers things are resoned upon both of the learned and unlearned, as well of other matters, as also of spirites, which are seene and heard, and make men afrayed in the night season, and in the daye tyme, by sea and by lande, in the fieldes, woods, and houses. And some . . . affirme that the moste parte of such things which are hard or seene, are the soules of dead men, which crave helpe of them that are living, to be delivered out of the most cruell payne in Purgatorie. Many not only of the common sorte, but also menne of excellent knowledge, do marvayle whether there bee any spirits or

no, and what manner of things they are.⁸

Similar notions can be found in some of the literature written in France during this period. In the preface to the second edition (1605) of his work *III Livres des Spectres*, first published in 1586, Pierre Le Loyer, an Angevin lawyer, remarked that,

of all the common and familiar subjects of conversation that are entered upon in company of things remote from nature and cut off from the senses, there is none so ready to hand, none so usual as that of visions of spirits, and whether what is said of them is true. It is the topic which people most readily discuss and on which they linger the longest because of the abundance of examples.⁹

Allowing for some exaggeration on the part of this author, who perhaps overstated the importance of his subject, it is clear from these two examples that Nicole's vision was not a mere aberration that can be passed off unquestionably as an attempt to defraud. In addition, it should be noted that both passages reveal that these views permeated all levels of the social hierarchy and were not merely 'peasant superstitions.'

Lavater's purpose in writing his treatise was not simply to confirm the existence of visions and spirits, but primarily to prove that these apparitions were "not the souls of dead men, as some men have thought, but either good or evil Angels, or else some secrete and hid operations of God."¹⁰ Le Loyer wrote his treatise in direct response to the challenge presented by Lavater's work. "I have so well proved," he insisted upon completion of his work, "by the Doctors of the Church, that whatever thing that Lavater and his may say to the contrary, nevertheless the truth is that there are Spectres of Souls as well as Spectres of Angels and Demons."¹¹ These two authors are representative of the ghost controversy that raged during the second half of the sixteenth century. This controversy is merely one aspect of the polemical debates that arose out of the Protestant attack on the doctrine of Purgatory. Although not explicitly stated, it seems that it was implicit in the Catholic position, and evidently widely believed in European society, that departed souls could return to earth to solicit the help of their descendants. In an article on the subject of ghosts, Geoffrey Parrinder explains that, "in developing Christian doctrine theologians discussed the nature of angels, good spirits, bad spirits, the resurrection of the dead, heaven, hell and purgatory. But belief in ghosts and their possible return to earth was left indeterminate, neither accepted nor rejected."¹²

Protestant reformers in many parts of Europe launched a savage attack on

certain beliefs which they considered to be inherently noxious superstitions of a predominantly ignorant population. They maintained that all souls were either saved or damned, and that these souls proceeded directly to heaven or hell. While most Protestant intellectuals did not expressly deny the existence of spirits, they insisted that apparitions were not the souls of dead men but rather were evil spirits sent by the devil to lure weak souls through guile and deception into devilry and wickedness. Keith Thomas contends that, "although it may be a relatively frivolous question today to ask whether or not one believes in ghosts, it was in the sixteenth century a shibboleth which distinguished Protestant from Catholic almost as effectively as belief in the Mass or the Papal Supremacy."¹³ As we have seen from the story of Nicole Obri, however, this issue was not confined to the polemical debates of Catholic and Protestant doctrinaires. There was real confusion among the populace over the whole spectrum of the supernatural—ghosts, demons and the like.

This confusion is further evinced by the actions of the parish curate and the friar from the local priory. The Dominican who came to observe Nicole's condition quickly disabused the family, as well as the ingenuous curate, of the idea that the souls of the dead might take possession of a human body. Such heresies were condemned in the exorcism manuals,¹⁴ so it was immediately determined that Nicole had been possessed by a demon. Boulaese's account contains all of the necessary indications of a true possession as established by the Catholic authorities. In the first stage, which has already been described, Nicole demonstrated knowledge of the secrets or unconfessed sins of others and reacted with violent revulsion to the consecrated host. When the exorcisms continued, at Laon and now conducted by the bishop, the other two conventional signs of possession appeared: superhuman strength and a knowledge of foreign tongues. Nicole had been restrained on a dais at the east end of the cathedral nave. When the bishop raised the host during the consecration, she miraculously broke free from those men holding her and leapt more than six feet in the air.¹⁵ Then, as the bishop burned the name of the devil over the flame of a candle, Nicole's body went into convulsions, and, with her mouth open wide and her lips and tongue motionless, she spoke in various unintelligible languages.¹⁶

From this point the exorcism becomes even more conspicuously propagandistic. The eucharist occupies a central position in this account, as the short title suggests, "La Victoire du Sacrement de l'autel." At one point during the exorcism, the demon, acting through Nicole, "looked as if it had wanted to speak to those who did not bow their heads before the precious Body of our Savior and Lord Jesus Christ,"¹⁷ as though a special rapport existed between the demon and the irreverent Protestants who refused to acknowledge the real presence or

transubstantiation. On this same day, 8 February 1566, the exorcism was temporarily successful, and the devout Catholics "were repeatedly saying that they would die in order to uphold that our Savior and Lord Jesus Christ is in the Sacrament of the Altar." Boulaese admitted that the exorcism did not succeed in convincing all of the Protestants, but some were converted.¹⁸ Walker asserts that the eucharist played an abnormally conspicuous role in this account, for traditionally it did not "occupy a privileged place in exorcisms; indeed it had a less important one than holy water, the sign of the cross, and other holy objects."¹⁹ Clearly, the author was promoting the doctrine of transubstantiation. In the days that followed this initially successful exorcism, Nicole was repeatedly repossessed. Each time, only the host was effective in exorcising the demon.²⁰ At the conclusion of the story, Nicole met with a royal deputation in August of 1566 to confirm the truth of her possession, and shortly thereafter, when the ecclesiastical authorities had determined that she was now free from her torment, she returned to Vervins and presumably went on to lead a normal life.²¹

It is significant that Boulaese emphasized the fact that Nicole's proclivity to believe that the ghost was her grandfather was largely responsible for the possession. This suggests that he was writing not only to refute Protestant doctrine but also to correct the misguided views of an unwary populace. Some of the contemporary pamphlets reveal that such beliefs could often be outlandish. In 1596 Claude Prieur, a Franciscan from Laval in Maine, published a tract entitled *Dialogue de la Lycanthropie ou transformation d'homme en loups*. One of the participants in the *Dialogue*, who represents the extreme views against which the author's work was directed, inquired: "Do you not believe in metamorphosis, that man can assume another bodily form?"²² In response, Proteron, the disputant who relates the author's position, embarked upon a lengthy discourse, in which he refuted the widely-held notion that men often transformed themselves into wolves and devoured women and children. William Monter has stated that "the belief that sorcerers can transform themselves into animals is probably nearly as universal in 'primitive' societies as is the belief in magical healing... But popular belief and demonology differed somewhat about werewolves."²³ For theological reasons, the demonologists were not willing to accept the idea that a sorcerer or demoniac could be metamorphosed by the power of the devil. In the *Dialogue* Proteron conceded that devils could cause a demoniac to perceive others in strange forms or could themselves assume the shape of a wolf, but he also pointed out that, "in detesting and rejecting all charms and all superstition, and using the prayers of the Church... [one] could not only avoid such sorcery and enchantments, but also the danger that could ensue."²⁴ Again we see evidence of an attempt to steer the overly credulous away from

unorthodox belief.

A SIMILAR attempt to combat what many among the elite classes regarded as peasant superstition is evident in a French translation of a book written by Jean Wier, physician to the Duke of Cleves. The French work, published in 1569, was entitled *Cinq Livres de l'Imposture et Tromperie des Diables: Des Enchantements et Sorcelleries*. Speaking of certain diabolical arts practiced by magicians and prognosticators, the author, Jacques Grevin, who practiced medicine in Paris, protested that

this plague . . . has remained too long among the Christians: principally in the places where the name of the Gospel is still not clearly understood, and where the truth of the divine service is spoiled by . . . pagan ceremonies, and superstitions which without any doubt, were invented by the finesse of the Devil, to deceive men.²⁵

He went on to say that certain priests and monks, who are ignorant and of an "incomparable impudence," respond with deception to those who seek them out in times of sickness and need.²⁶ Grevin also explained that the people most susceptible to the ruses of the devil "are those who mistrust the Lord, the malicious, those who are curious about illicit things, those who are poorly instructed in the Christian religion, the envious, the malfaiteurs, the elderly who have almost lost their mental faculties, and all manner of women."²⁷ Equally susceptible, he continued, are those who are "infested by the smoky vapors of melancholy . . . from which proceed all sorts of fantastic monsters."²⁸ Finally, the author insisted that the primary cause of the wild imaginations of the people was fear. "Apparitions oftentimes appear to little children, to women, to the fearful, to the delicate, and to the sick who are incessantly tormented and persecuted by fear."²⁹

Most of these conditions of susceptibility mentioned by Prieur constitute what Robert Muchembled has described as the 'milieu magique' of the sixteenth century. He stresses the ignorance of the rural masses, as well as that of much of the rural clergy, with respect to Catholic dogma, the sacraments and the ritual of the Mass. Along with this relative ignorance went a pervasive fear of hell, damnation, and death. Plagues and other scourges were attributed to the action of evil forces in the world and to God's punishment of impenitent sinners.³⁰ According to Muchembled, the sermons of this period were saturated with "vocabulaire diabolique." But superstitious practices were not always associated with such gloom and doom. Pierre Crespet, a Parisian prior writing in 1590,

remarked that the devil and his ministers "make use of the days dedicated to the veneration of the mysteries of our faith, and of our redemption, and consecrated to the memory of the Saints, for their ceremonies and diabolical superstitions."³¹ He also deprecated "the follies and ridiculous mummeries . . . [and] the odious ceremony that is practiced in certain places of France, where every year people solemnly wear on the first day of Lent a masque with teeth extremely sharp and long and a face large and hideous . . . which has been borrowed from the Idolaters and Pagans."³² These were the sorts of beliefs and practices which many enlightened contemporaries regarded as a threat to the unity and even the subsistence of the Christian faith. As a result, Muchembled concluded,

popular culture . . . began to disintegrate under the action of corrosive forces. . . . [cultural repression] developed to reduce diversities that seemed too great, to destroy superstitions, and to implant everywhere identical ideals founded on obedience, orthodox religion, an austere morality, and work . . . [the result was] a great effort to acculturate the popular masses, the peasants in particular. Thus a society clearly defined its orthodoxy and marked its limits by creating a mythical countersociety, an imaginary counterculture.³³

Thus, Muchembled would regard these authors whose works we have examined here as part of a broader effort on the part of the elite to suppress the culture of the masses. This idea of elite versus popular culture, however, is but one way to look at these works on the supernatural.

Michel Marescot, the author of an account of another demon possession, stated unequivocally at the outset of a work he wrote in 1599 that "excessive credulity is a vice proceeding from an imbecility of the mind of man and often by the suggestion of an evil spirit."³⁴ He asserted that "faith is a sure and certain path to arrive at truth, salvation and wisdom: excessive credulity is a path that leads us precipitously toward falsehood, fraud, folly and superstition."³⁵ According to him, this difference between faith and credulity could best be demonstrated by the story of Marthe Brossier, a twenty-two-year-old woman who lived in Romorantin, a village in the province of Berry. Marescot referred to her as one who pretended to be possessed ("une pretendue inspiritee"). He related in his account how "several prelates, theologians and doctors, all recognizing by the Christian faith that evil spirits enter into the bodies of humans, and that by the command and word of God they are exorcised, have discovered by a diligent observation of all the signs and actions the imposture and dissimulation of this woman."³⁶ He admitted, however, that there were other monks, theologians and doctors who, "either by credulity or in order to follow the opinion of the people",

insisted that Marthe was in fact possessed by a demon, "calumniating the others as infidels and atheists." The Parlement, to which the case was submitted, "confirmed by a celebrated decree the judgment of the best and most prudent [meaning, of course, those who accused her of being a fraud] and ordered that such credulity and superstition should not proceed any further to the detriment of the Catholic Religion." Then Marescot went on to describe the case in detail, "so that the simplest minds would have no doubts."³⁷

On 30 March 1599, having been summoned to Paris, Marthe Brossier appeared before the bishop and his entourage and informed them that she was possessed by an evil spirit. Marescot, who was also present, addressed her in Latin in an attempt to obtain proof of her possession, but Marthe did not respond. Then she was taken to an absidial chapel, and, when they started to pray, Marthe began to turn somersaults, and her eyes rolled back into her head. Next some fragments of the true Cross were brought before her, but these seemed to have no noticeable effect. She did, however, question the bishop's ability to interrogate her effectively because he was not wearing his mitre. And when the cap of a theologian was presented to her, she rejected it wildly, "as if," Marescot scoffed, "a theologian's cap or bishop's mitre had more power and more divinity than relics of the true Cross." The verdict of all of those present was: "Rien du diable: plusieurs choses feintes: peu de la maladie."³⁸

Several doctors from the University of Paris continued to claim, however, that Marthe had in fact been possessed. On 3 April 1599, they drafted a short tract entitled *Rapport de Quelques Medecins de Paris sur le faict de Marthe Brossier*, in which they testified that they had themselves witnessed, during the past two days, Marthe's strange behavior. They reported that Marthe had been seized repeatedly by convulsions and had responded to commands and interrogations in Greek, Latin and English.³⁹ The doctors gave their medical reasons for refusing to believe that Marthe's behavior was caused by any physical malady and concluded that the behavior could not have been fraudulent because she evinced no reaction at having pins stuck into her hands and neck. Even more convincing, they reasoned, was the fact that neither any blood issued forth nor was any visible mark left behind after the pins had been retracted.⁴⁰ Although the doctors did not witness it themselves, a certain monsieur de Sainte Genevieve had also seen Marthe jump more than four feet in the air while five or six men were attempting to hold her down. In the final analysis, the doctors were forced "by all the laws of discourse and of sciences to believe this girl, Demoniac, and the devil living within her."⁴¹

Even more interesting than the events of this case is the controversy among various members of the elite classes which it sparked. In the second half of the

year 1599, Leon d'Alexis wrote a refutation of the doctor's arguments.⁴² He insisted that Marthe's failure to exhibit any sort of reaction upon being stuck with pins was inconclusive evidence of possession, for he had himself seen people "burned alive without giving any indication of pain."⁴³ Then, in a comment which betrays his disgust at the undue willingness of some men of authority to condemn all anomalous behavior as demonic, Alexis makes the following charge against the doctors: "Under an argument such as yours, we have seen unfortunate people condemned as sorcerers: then absolved by gentlemen of the Court."⁴⁴ Moreover, he continued, "there is an infinity of things that are done by the secret force of nature: because of the fact that they were mysterious, it has been necessary to attribute them to the Devil [as a means of] explaining questions of physics and medicin."⁴⁵ Finally, in a derisive taunt which further displays his disgust, Alexis addressed the contention that Marthe had knowledge of the secrets of others. He recounted that, when asked by a monk to tell him what he had done on a particular night, Marthe responded: "You prayed to God." With undisguised scorn, Alexis remarked, "Now there's a great secret to tell to a Capucine: You prayed to God. Because of this it is well-known that [the inhabitants of] la Romorantine mock the simplicity of these monks."⁴⁶ Alexis concluded his refutation with an extract from the registers of the Parlement of Paris dated 24 May 1599. Marthe was placed under her father's supervision and was ordered to remain in Romorantin unless express permission to depart could be obtained from the "Juge chastelain" of the said locale.⁴⁷ Alexis is representative of a developing tendency, at least after the Italian Renaissance, to question antiquated explanations of mysterious phenomena. Many Europeans, while becoming increasingly skeptical of the traditional propensity to attribute aberrations in nature and human behavior to demonic interference, deplored the apparently frequent practice of condemning innocent victims to be burned for what they regarded as naturally explicable behavior. Alexis, himself, considered the credulity of those overzealous elites who encouraged the persecutions to be more deleterious than the naive convictions of the masses. He went so far as to question Scripture: "If there are thus no other signs necessary to demon possession, than those which are described by the Evangelists, [then] every epileptic, melancholiac, phrenetic, will have the devil in their body: and there will be more demoniacs in the world than fools."⁴⁸

The views of men such as Alexis were met with fierce resistance by a significant number of intellectuals. Pierre Crespel expressed his disgust and frustration at the growing influence of the devil in the world: "Never have there been seen so many warlocks, and witches, and so many impious and diabolical persons, as there are in this century who are left unpunished by the Magistrate

who by this means is establishing the reign of Satan. Even the judges are so blind that they deny that there have ever been warlocks and witches."⁴⁹ Henri Boguet, chief justice for the county of Burgundy, conveyed a similar sense of horror and disbelief at the growing number of skeptics. In a treatise from 1603, he remarked: "I marvel at those who ridicule the exorcisms and conjurations that our priests employ against demoniacs: because what reason do they have to do this? Did Jesus Christ not cure an infinite number [of such persons] while he was in this world."⁵⁰ Another author, Pierre Node, exhorted the Judges and Lords of France "to avoid being deceived by idle words, such as [those] used by beguilers, Sorcerers, Magicians, and Nostradamists."⁵¹ Node then warned these magistrates of the impending doom if they failed to carry out their responsibility of eradicating this threat to the kingdom. "If either unadvised pity or negligence and scorn, or excessive disbelief softens the hearts of those who hold authority over any province of this kingdom in order to spare the life of these wretched creatures who provoke our God to such a great extent, the end of this poor France will not be unlike that of the Israelite kingdom."⁵²

In the writings of Crespet, Boguet and Node, we can see the major elements of a type of propaganda that was not intended to serve as a vehicle of oppression of 'popular culture.' On the contrary, this literature seems to have been directed at the skepticism of other members of the elite classes. It is in fact evident that one cannot speak of the 'elite class' as a single, coherent entity. As one historian has described the situation, "Protestantism aside, there was no monolithic orthodoxy upon which all Catholics agreed in every detail. The church in France lacked the machinery, even if it had the will, to impose a single set of views on all people."⁵³

Jonathan Pearl has shown that at least some of the French Catholic demonologists were concerned with both the blind credulity of the masses and the skepticism of some of the elites. His views have been particularly influenced by Pierre de Lancre's *L'Incredulite et Mescreance du Sortilege Plainement Convaincue* (Paris, 1622), which he cites at some length. He contends that de Lancre represents the middle position between the two extremes of belief, because De Lancre argued that

We should avoid the extremes. It is not necessary to line up with the Platonists who attribute everything to demons; but one must even less hold the belief of the Pythagoreans who laugh at demons, magicians, and witches . . . One must be a Christian and hold Christian beliefs according to the Holy Scriptures and the doctrines of the Holy Fathers and confirm these apparitions, not from stories gathered from everywhere, but by visions of holy personages, by

daily experience, and by the testimony and confessions of witches.⁵⁴

Pearl's reading of the primary source material led him to conclude that "the opinion, widely maintained in the modern historical literature, that the demonologists represented a unified elite that was reacting violently against peasant folk religion and general religious ignorance, is seriously flawed because it ignores sharp divisions of opinion among the elite class. The demonological works were written to convince the learned classes, especially incredulous or lukewarm clergy and judges, of the centrality of demonology to good Catholic theology."⁵⁵ While Pearl is correct to stress this division of opinion among the educated, it seems, on the basis of the evidence, difficult to deny that some members of the social and intellectual elite were in fact attempting to suppress the unorthodox views of the masses, mainly in order to establish a greater degree of uniformity of religious belief within their respective territories. Furthermore, the two positions are not mutually exclusive, as the passage from de Lancre's work suggests.

Although the subject of 'magic' as practiced by members of the elite classes has not been dealt with in this essay, it should be recognized that the meanings of such terms as 'myth', 'magic' and 'superstition' and just what practices these words encompassed have varied significantly throughout history. William Monter has stated that "throughout much of Protestant and Catholic Europe, governments made *de facto* compromises with learned magic during the sixteenth century, while condemning popular or 'superstitious' magic and executing witches for their *maleficia*.⁵⁶ Such a comment reminds us that, in dealing with such topics, we inevitably run up against a great deal of subjectivity and biased preconceptions, from those writing in the early modern period as well as from historians of our own day. As demonstrated, however, a widespread belief in ghosts, demons, witches, and other phenomena often associated with occult magic permeated European society in the sixteenth century. Many Catholics regarded the growth of Protestantism as an insidious development that attested to the rapid diffusion of evil forces in the world and provided proof that the final day of judgement was imminent. Most Protestants, on the other hand, as well as an emerging group of Catholic skeptics, regarded various diabolical practices and beliefs as a mortal threat which had to be eradicated at any cost. Thus, we should not dismiss the type of literature that has been examined in this essay as the product of fanciful delusion. As Stuart Clark has correctly pointed out,

to attribute the belief in demonic witchcraft to some determining 'social dysfunction' would not only beg philosophical questions

about the way language gives such traumas the meaning they have but ignore the extent to which contemporaries found reassurance in demonological (and millenarian) explanations, even of chaos.⁵⁷

These demonological tracts were at once attempts on the part of some contemporaries to suppress certain beliefs and attitudes which they considered superstitious and of others to contend that such views were indeed orthodox. For many, however, they were simply a means by which one could attempt to come to terms with aspects of his experience which he could not explain.

ENDNOTES

1. D. P. Walker, *Unclean Spirits: Possession and Exorcism in France and England in the Late Sixteenth and Early Seventeenth Centuries* (London, 1981), 20.
2. Jean Boulaese, *L'Abbregee Histoire du Grand Miracle par notre Sauveur & Seigneur Jesus-Christ en la Sainte Hostie de l'Autel* (Paris, 1573), fol. A4^r.
3. *Ibid.*, fol. A5^r.
4. *Ibid.*
5. *Ibid.*, fol. A5^v.
6. *Ibid.*, fol. A6^r.
7. Walker, *Unclean Spirits*, 21.
8. Ludwig Lavater, *Of Ghostes and Spirites Walking by Night*, edited by J. Dover Wilson and May Yardley (Oxford, 1929), fols. B1^{r&v}.
9. May Yardley, "The Catholic Position in the Ghost Controversy of the Sixteenth Century, with special reference to Pierre Le Loyer's *III Livres des Spectres*," 221; appendix to Lavater, *Ghostes and Spirites*.
10. Lavater, *Ghosts and Spirites*, B2^r.
11. Quoted in Yardley, "Catholic Position," 225.
12. Geoffrey Parrinder, "Ghosts," *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, edited by Mircea Eliade (New York, 1987), 5:548.
13. Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (New York, 1971), 588-89.
14. Walker, *Unclean Spirits*, 22.
15. Boulaese, *Grand Miracle*, fol. A7^r.
16. *Ibid.*, fol. A7^v.
17. *Ibid.*, fol. B1^v.
18. *Ibid.*, fol. B2^r.
19. Walker, *Unclean Spirits*, 23.

20. Boulaese, Grand Miracle, fol. B3^{r&v}.
21. Ibid., fol. B4^v.
22. Claude Prieur, *Dialogue de la Lycanthropie ou transformation d'homme en loups, vulgairement dits Loups-garçons et si telle se peut faire* (Louvain, 1596), fol. C4^r.
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