CERÆ

An Australasian Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies

Volume 12:

Dreams, Visions, and Utopias

2025

CERÆ: An Australasian Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies

ISSN: 2204-146X

https://ceraejournal.com/

Table of Contents

ARTICLES

BOOK REVIEWS

Editor's Foreword

"The chief end of the constitution is to allow the people as much time as is necessary for the improvement of their minds, in which they think the happiness of life consists."

(Thomas More, Utopia)

If the secret to happiness truly lies in the improvement of the mind, there is surely great satisfaction to be found in the pages of Volume 12 of *Ceræ*. Picking up from last year, the articles in this volume continue to explore our previous theme of 'Metamorphosis, Transformation, and Transmutation' and ultimately settle into the equally enigmatic space of 'Dreams, Visions, and Utopias'. While these concepts may sometimes be regarded as intangible and out of reach, there is nevertheless something powerful about the possibilities they envisage. The fantastic contributions presented over the forthcoming pages offer an optimistic vision of a bright future for academia in a world full of change.

Kyna Noelle Bullard begins this volume in the Iberian Peninsula, focusing on a fascinating sixteenth-century treatise on superstition and witchcraft by the Franciscan friar, Martín de Castañega. Bullard uses a comprehensive examination of de Castañega's thoughts on medicine and healing to highlight growing institutional attempts to regulate informal networks of popular healers, as well as consequent attempts to regulate the female body. From medicine we turn to alchemy in the second

article by Elisabeth Genter Montevecchio about the hybrid figure of the serpent-woman, who transgresses natural boundaries in a myriad of ways. Deftly moving from alchemy to literature to theology, and drawing insightful comparisons with religious icons like Mary and Eve, Genter Montevecchio highlights a radical mode of thinking inherent in this figure of the 'melusine'. On an even larger temporal scale, Dunja Haufe next compares the medieval *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* with its 2021 film adaptation through the lens of metamorphosis. Underpinned by theory from ecocritical and monster studies, Haufe skilfully reveals an enhancement of the supernatural qualities of the film's titular figure that extends greater agency to nature itself. The final article by Agustín Méndez considers seventeenth-century concerns about and responses to demonic possession on both sides of the pond. Numerous quotes from demonological treatises and pamphlets make for captivating reading, and their analysis by Méndez offers a nuanced exploration of the emotions (or lack thereof) of the possessed.

Alongside these four articles, this volume features an impressive slate of fifteen reviews of recently-published books in medieval and early modern studies. It is always wonderful to see the great breadth and depth of research by colleagues, with subjects ranging from English queens to French dreams, from prophecy to Paradise to Twitter. I commend Maria Gloria Tumminelli and Quinn Bouabsa Marriott for their enormous efforts in putting these reviews together and for strengthening our relationships with a suite of publishers, who also have my gratitude for their kind collaboration.

This volume would not have been possible without the dedication and keen eyes of the entire *Ceræ* committee, who have spent their time reading and editing submissions, attending lengthy meetings at all hours of the day, and organising an excellent annual conference that has become key to generating enthusiasm and ideas for the journal. Special mention must be made of Michele Seah and Erica Steiner for tirelessly keeping the wheels of the journal turning, and of Barbara Taylor, our accomplished Deputy Editor, to whom I am personally indebted.

I am especially grateful this year for our network of external peer reviewers, who have generously donated their time and expertise to offer guidance to authors. In an undoubtedly difficult and far-from-utopian time for academia, marked by precarity and bursting schedules, their support has not been taken for granted. Journals like ours must constantly find new ways to adapt to the changing academic landscape, and it is possible that the publishing system as a whole will face a complete overhaul in the not-so-distant future. In the meantime, however, *Ceræ* will continue to be a space for early career and other researchers to find community through the global exchange of knowledge. I will personally be watching these changes more from the sidelines as I come to the end of my tenure as Editor of this wonderful journal, but I step down at ease, knowing that I leave the editorial team in the extremely competent hands of Ela Sefcikova.

Ashley Castelino
University of Notre Dame

Superstitious Activities: An Analysis of Martín de Castañega's Writing Regarding Sorcery and Popular Medicine

Kyna Noelle Bullard

University of Colorado Boulder

The Iberian Peninsula, in comparison to the rest of Western Europe, had a lower level of enforced restriction on popular healers until the eighteenth century at the state level, with the regulation often being determined by municipal governments. However, while secular legal texts may have been more concerned with guaranteeing the competence and skill of healers, texts from the ecclesiastical powers were more preoccupied with guaranteeing that the proper religious expectations were carried out in the case of emergencies. This article analyzes a sixteenth-century treatise of Fray Martín de Castañega, a Franciscan friar writing in the aftermath of the Navarre Witch Trials (1525–27). His work, the Tratado Muy Sotil y Bien Fundado de las Supersticiones y Hechicerias y Vanos Conjuros y Abusiones; y Otros Cosas al Caso Tocantes y de la Posibilidad e Remedio Dellas, *covers witchcraft and superstition, dedicating a significant amount of space to the correct and moral behavior of popular healers, and what counted as sorcery and witchcraft amongst them. This paper seeks to argue that, while his arguments regarding the validity of various popular beliefs regarding witchcraft and folk medicine are more tentative and skeptical than those of his contemporaries, his work still displays the presence of popular beliefs regarding the practice of female healers, as well as the inherently dangerous nature of the aging female body. Ultimately, by examining the contents and circulation of this treatise, and the context in which it was written, this article seeks to illustrate ecclesiastical and theological concerns regarding individuals who worked as popular healers in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, attempting to illuminate both the role they were expected to fill and the shifts occurring in popular belief in the world around them.*

In 1529, Franciscan friar and inquisitor Martín de Castañega was commissioned to produce a short treatise on witchcraft and sorcery. His treatise, *Tratado Muy Sotil y Bien Fundado de las Supersticiones y Hechicerías y Vanos Conjuros y Abusiones; y Otros Cosas al Caso Tocantes y de la Posibilidad e Remedio Dellas,* did not gain much recognition within his lifetime. It was not reprinted until 1946, four hundred and seventeen years after his death. Castañega's treatise is unique for a variety of reasons. First, it was the first witchcraft treatise initially published in a vernacular language in Europe, in this case, Castilian Spanish, the rest having first been published in Latin.[1] Second, Castañega's writing showed a much higher level of suspicion regarding the existence and prevalence of witches than his contemporaries, including the infamous authors of the late fifteenth-century *Malleus Maleficarum* (*The Hammer of Witches*), and the theologian and scholar Pedro Ciruelo, who published a far more successful treatise on witchcraft two years after Castañega's.

Compared to the rest of Western Europe, the Iberian Peninsula had a lower level of enforced restriction on popular healers until the eighteenth century at the state level, with the regulation being determined by municipal governments. However, while secular legal texts may have been more concerned with guaranteeing the competence and skill of a broad range of healers, texts from the Inquisitorial courts, judicial bodies charged with identifying and punishing heretics

[1] David H. Darst, *Witchcraft in Spain: The Testimony of Martín de Castañega's Treatise on Superstition and Witchcraft (1529)* (American Philosophical Society, 1979), p. 298.

but still intimately tied to the secular arm of justice, were more preoccupied with guaranteeing that the proper religious expectations were carried out. Likewise, they sought to ensure that healers were not bordering on heretical practice, even those such as *saludadores* and *santiguaderas,* whose practices took on more magical and ritualistic undertones. When healers', or even surgeons' and physicians', practices came into question, the Spanish Inquisition and secular *Protomedicato* (the board of physicians who regulated medicine in Spain and its colonies) would often butt heads, arguing over which group would investigate the individual and determine whether or not they should lose their license to practice, if they had one, or be banned from practicing altogether.[2]

During the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, there existed a blurred line between medical practitioners and practitioners of magic or other practices of a curative nature associated with popular religious beliefs.[3] Nowhere is this better demonstrated than in the conflict between the *Protomedicato* and the Inquisition when a medical practitioner was accused of improper medical practice, especially when that practice included activities that were believed to be outside of the proper realm of behavior for a good Catholic. From the early sixteenth century, superstition was considered a severe sin that should be combated, so theologians, clerics, and inquisitors focused on eradicating customs that, in their eyes, leaned toward

[2] Michele L. Clouse, *Medicine, Government, and Public Health in Philip II's Spain: Shared Interests, Competing Authorities* (Routledge, 2016), p. 39.
[3] María Tausiet, 'Healing Virtue: Saludadores Versus Witches in Early Modern Spain', *Journal of Medical History*, 53.29 (2009), pp. 40–63 (p. 40).

superstition. [4] The Tribunal brought charges against various non-licensed practitioners, both male and female, and while midwives, barber-surgeons, spice traders, and other extra-academic healers were technically not under the purview of the *Protomedicato*, they still could be investigated, fined, and charged by the organization, with fines often amounting to six thousand *maravedis*.[5] Castañega, who had been commissioned by the Bishop of Calahorra, attempted to clarify the lines between the natural and the metaphysical, between legitimate practice and that of the scammer, delineating those preying on the superstitious from those providing legitimate care.

This article analyzes the sixteenth-century treatise of Fray Martín de Castañega to shed light on the moral expectations of popular healers and Castañega's motivations for producing such a document. This illustrates one example of the theological concerns regarding individuals who worked as popular healers, providing medical care to their communities, such as midwives, herbalists, *santiguaderas*, and *saludadores* in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, attempting to illuminate both the role they were expected to fill and how both the broader population and the church perceived this role.

[4] Maria Jesus Zamora Calvo, 'Ciruelo y Sus Juicios Contra La Superstición', in *La Fractura Historiográfica: Las Investigaciones de Edad Media y Renacimiento Desde El Tercer Milenio*, ed. by Laura Mier Pérez, Francisco Javier Burguillo López, and Javier Francisco San José Lera (Universidad de Salamanca Seminario de Estudios Medievales y Renacentistas, 2008), pp. 781–97 (p. 781).

[5] Teresa Ortiz-Gomez, 'From Hegemony to Subordination: Midwives in Early Modern Spain', in *The Art of Midwifery: Early Modern Midwives in Europe*, ed. by Hilary Marland (Routledge, 1993), p. 99. '*Maravedi*' is a type of coin used since the Almoravid dynasty of the eleventh century, eventually becoming a unit of account rather than a literal currency.

In regards to the overall goal of Fray Martin de Castañega's work, this article argues that, while his statements regarding the validity of various popular beliefs regarding witchcraft and folk medicine are more tentative and skeptical than those of his contemporaries, his work still displays the presence of popular beliefs regarding the practice of female healers, as well as the inherently dangerous nature of the female body, especially in its moments of change or transition, such as during menstruation, pregnancy, or simply through the process of aging; as the imbalanced humors of the body in flux was a threat not only to their health, but also that of individuals who came into contact with them. Furthermore, it will briefly examine his work's influences, as well as the writings of contemporary theologians on sorcery and healing. In fact, it is a more accurate depiction of how the Spanish secular and Inquisitorial courts typically dealt with accusations of witchcraft or sorcery in comparison to the more popular work of Ciruelo; as Castañega is writing in response to improper actions from Inquisitors and witchfinders regarding witchcraft and sorcery in Navarre, denouncing the hasty punishment of individuals for supposed acts of witchcraft and diabolism.

The first section of this work will briefly note what we know about Castañega's life, as well as the sources he uses to craft his arguments regarding the nature of witchcraft, superstition, and seemingly inexplicable medical practices. The second section displays his work's perspectives on male and female healers and briefly analyzes how it compares to broader contemporary beliefs on gender and

healing. This leads into a discussion of four subjects explored by Castañega: the evil eye, understandings of popular healing, the improper use of amulets, and beliefs on possession. The third section will briefly compare the statements from Fr. Martin de Castañega and theologian Pedro Ciruelo concerning popular healing by both men and women, as well as displaying what was and was not considered to be witchcraft, sorcery, or superstition by the Church and the Spanish Inquisition. It will also explore how, while critics of superstitious behavior, including the Church and the Inquisition, did not discourage recourse to supernatural healing, especially from more conventional religious methods, they harshly attacked popular specialists, deeming their practices as diabolical superstitions in anti-superstitious discourses.[6]

The Inquisition investigated three major groups of heresy: 'counterculture, including the converted Jews, Moriscos, and witchcraft/superstition; sexual crimes, including bigamy, solicitation, simple fornication, sodomy, and bestiality; and crimes of thought and expression.'[7] Healers charged by the Inquisition were most often accused of engaging in countercultural behavior, with the most common charges being related to witchcraft, sorcery, and superstitious practices. One final note when analyzing any work that factors in witchcraft and sorcery in the Spanish context: there is a discernible difference between *brujería* and *hechicería* in the Spanish context. Martin de Castañega's treatise deals with both subjects, as well as

[6] Fabián Alejandro Campagne, 'Medicina y Religión en El Discurso Antisupersticioso Español de Los Siglos XVI a XVIII: Un Combate Por La Hegemonía', *Dynamis: Acta Hispanica Ad Medicinae Scientiarumque Historiam Illustrandam*, 20 (2000), pp. 417–56 (p. 423).

[7] Stephen Haliczer, *Inquisition and Society in the Kingdom of Valencia, 1478–1834* (University of California Press, 1990), p. 4.

superstition and spellcasting, which are considered separate offenses by the Inquisition. '*Hechicería'*, translated most accurately as 'sorcery', differentiated the medical practitioner or other defendant from the *'bruxa'* or *'bruja*' ('witch'), who worshiped the devil. The *hechicera* did not worship the devil or have a pact with him, but often 'held certain powers over him'.[8] However, these accusations were relatively uncommon, as healers and medical practitioners often owed their positions to good standing within their communities, while *brujas* and *hechiceras,* on the other hand, were most likely to be those who were considered disreputable or marginalized people, or outsiders who were not natives to the communities that they served. Rather than burning, healers accused of improper conduct, if convicted by the Holy Office or a secular court, would often face bans on their practice, heavy fines, and exile from their communities. Such a result remained a potential threat into the late eighteenth century when women, and a few men, were still called to stand in front of the Inquisitorial tribunal to face accusations of *hechicería* and superstitious behavior.

A NOTE ON TRANSLATIONS

Sixteenth-century Spain's medical marketplace can be most easily explained through the concept of medical pluralism, which in this case involves the coexistence of academic medicine, Galenic theory taught to university-trained physicians,

[8] John Beusterien, 'The Celebratory Conical Hat in *La Celestina*', in *Crime and Punishment in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Age: Mental-Historical Investigations of Basic Human Problems and Social Responses*, ed. by Albrecht Classen and Connie Scarborough (De Gruyter, 2012), pp. 403–14 (p. 409).

surgeons, and apothecaries, through guild-based instruction, and other forms of medical practice. Thus, as Maria Luz-Terrada argues, to understand the relationships among the different medical systems that coexist in a society during a historical moment, we must take into account not only academic medicine and its professionals but also folk practitioners and the society collectively.[9] Furthermore, as there was a broad range of different healing practices in the early modern world, many walked the line between the medical and the magical, often with gendered connotations.

Castañega's use of terms for medical professionals and healers throughout his treatise is often broad, encompassing a variety of different folk and medical traditions under umbrella terms. Rather than discussing specific occupations and traditions, Castañega often speaks about healers in broad strokes or does not name them by profession; rather, he is more interested in criticizing specific actions that they are performing, assuming the reader is familiar with the traditions discussed. The term '*saludador*' is used frequently to refer to a wide range of folk practitioners, but most frequently, the *saludador* is considered to be a folk and religious healer, most often but not exclusively male, who uses prayer and incantation alongside some more traditional medical practices. Some earlier English translations elect to use the term 'medicine man' as a translation for '*saludador*', which has the literal translation of 'one who heals' from '*salud*'. I elect to keep the word in its original

[9] María Luz Terrada, 'Medical Pluralism in the Iberian Kingdoms', p. 8.

Spanish form, as it covers a wide swath of different practices. Castañega's work also includes discussions of female healers utilizing similar practices in this chapter, albeit the fact that he refers to these women as simple and foolish, without giving them a title like their male counterparts.

When Castañega uses other terms, such as '*santiguador*'/ '*santiguadora'*, a type of healer who uses spells and invocations in which holy words and symbols are used, most often performed by women, it is to provide specific case studies or criticize specific behaviors that the inquisitor had deemed superstitious.[10] The term was ambiguous and many-layered, covering a variety of different folk healers, but also "doctors" who claimed to be able to recognize evil witches and the ailments that they caused.[11] Likewise, his occasional use of the word '*médico'* does not refer to university-trained physicians, as a modern Spanish speaker would assume, but to travelling men who claimed to practice medicine, whom he derides as frauds and cheats. When this designation needs to be made, this work will specify which profession is being discussed. This article will use the original Spanish terms to maintain the precision of each term used here.

In addition to this discussion of folk healers who utilized magic or ritual healing as the primary part of their practice, Castañega discusses medical occupations, such as midwifery, that are familiar to the modern reader. However,

[10] Sebastián Jiménez Sánchez, *Mitos y Leyendas: Prácticas Brujeras, Maleficios, Santiguados y Curanderismo Popular En Canarias* (Faycan, 1955), p. 20.
[11] María Tausiet, 'Healing Virtue: Saludadors versus Witches in Early Modern Spain', *Medical History*, 53.29 (2009), pp. 40–63 (p. 63).

both he and Ciruelo include them within the framework of popular healers and potential frauds that the reader might face, though they do not necessarily place the full profession in the categories they are discussing. The idea that midwives were a key target of the witch-hunters was refuted in 1990 by David Harley, who deconstructed the intertextuality of the *Malleus Maleficarum*, and other such texts to show that the 'witch-midwife' was a rhetorical trope among inquisitors who cited each other in their works, not a widespread phenomenon that played itself out in regular accusations against midwives.[12] In this case, Castañega, as well as Ciruelo, work within this tradition, casually referencing the idea of the midwife as a perpetrator of diabolical infanticide and as users and abusers of magical items and rituals.

MARTIN DE CASTAÑEGA AND THE PAMPLONA WITCH TRIALS

Before introducing the contents of his work, it is imperative to outline what is known about the life of Martin de Castañega before he published his 1529 treatise. His positioning in Logroño is key to his narrative, as this city's location on the borders between the kingdoms of Aragon, Castile, and Navarre meant that it was held in dispute between the three regions for centuries. This tension, and the eventual conquering of the Basque regions in Navarre, would lead to Castañega

[12] David Harley, 'Historians as Demonologists: The Myth of the Midwife-Witch', *Social History of Medicine*, 3.1 (1990), pp. 1–26.

bearing witness to the Pamplona witch trials of 1526, one of three major witch panics that took place in Navarre, considered the center of Spanish witchcraft.[13]

The witchfinder who instigated the Pamplona trials believed deeply in witches, leading to the executions of an unknown number of individuals by fire after a series of accusations from two young witch girls, aged 9 and 11.[14] This action provoked intervention from the Inquisition, causing conflict in the Spanish court and requiring that the thirty accused witches be handed over to the local Inquisitor.[15] After this incident, Spain's Holy Office would restrict the allowance of execution for accusations of witchcraft and sorcery, instead pushing for the re-education of supposed witches, necromancers, and sorcerers.[16] Furthermore, they would ban the confiscation of property and livestock due to accusations of witchcraft, seemingly meant to further prevent inquisitors from sentencing the accused to death.[17] Navarre's cultural conceptions of witchcraft varied from the rest of Spain, which appeared in its trials of sorcery and witchcraft, ones that favored folkloric notions of those who used poisons, venoms, and herbs to harm fields and livestock, rather than the intervention of the devil.[18] In the Navarrese witch trials, witnesses describe the accused with the phrase *'bruja, hechicera'*, sometimes even supplementing the label

[13] Darst, *Witchcraft in Spain*, p. 300.
[14] William Monter, Bengt Ankarloo, and Stuart Clark, 'Witch Trials in Continental Europe 1500–1600', in *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe, Volume 4: The Period of the Witch Trials* (Bloomsbury, 2001), pp. 1–53 (p. 45).
[15] Ibid, p. 46
[16] Rochelle E. Rojas, 'Bad Christians and Hanging Toads: Witch Trials in Early Modern Spain, 1525–1675' (unpublished doctoral dissertation, Duke University, 2016), p. 284–85.
[17] Bengt Ankerloo, William Monter, and Stuart Clark, 'Witch Trials in Continental Europe 1500–1600', p. 45.
[18] Rochelle Rojas, 'Bad Christians and Hanging Toads', p. 19.

with *'mala cristiana'*, or 'bad Christian', a term that suggested improper religious practice and poor moral character on the behalf of the accused but not necessarily diabolism.[19] The Inquisition's initial inability to intervene in these early witch trials exposed the institution's lack of clear protocols on witchcraft and made evident that it would need to formulate an official approach if it were to be effective in the future.[20] There would not be another execution in the Iberian peninsula for witchcraft until fifty years later, in which the 1575 trial and execution of Maria Johan, potentially a sufferer of epilepsy, for heresy, sorcery, and diabolism would kick off the second series of the mass trials and executions in Navarre, before it was once again brought under the control of the Inquisition.[21]

Castañega had been commissioned to write this article by the bishop of Calahorra, Alonso de Castilla, as fears of witchcraft and secret Satanic sects had spread through the diocese, in addition to an increase in religious dissent, such as Protestantism and other forms of heresy.[22] The clergy of the diocese of Calahorra were not a sound religious formation, nor did they display moral conduct appropriate to their status, especially in the Basque provinces. This was particularly true in the case of Vizcaya, as they also failed to fulfill the duties of their ministry, wore clothing inappropriate for their status, and even carried weapons. As if that

[19] Ibid., p. 10.
[20] Ibid., p. 285.
[21] Ibid., p. 82.
[22] Iñaki Bazán Díaz, 'El Tratado de Fray Martín de Castañega Como Remedio Contra La Superstición y La Brujería En La Diócesis de Calahorra y La Calzada: ¿un Discurso al Margen Del Contexto Histórico', *Ehumanista*, 26 (2014), pp. 18–53 (p. 29).

were not enough, this coincidence with the beliefs of the community meant that priests themselves administered some of the superstitious rites that Martin de Castañega writes about.[23]

Bearing this continuing fear of witchcraft and the continuation of improper rites in Calahorra in mind, as well as the resulting policy towards re-education instead of immolation, Martin de Castañega's work reads as a response to the trial itself and its aftermath, dedicating far more time to what is not witchcraft than actually discussing how to deal with what he would deem genuine cases of diabolism. His audience, who had lived through and known the facts, would have been more receptive to his text, along with achieving the effect desired by the bishop of clarifying which practices were superstitious and which were the real dangers of the diabolical church.[24] Furthermore, he rejects folk belief on the practices of witches, focusing on how they are discussed within the works of Augustine of Hippo, Isidore of Seville, and Thomas Aquinas, as well as the *Canon Episcopi* that appeared in the Decretum of Burchard of Worms, and John Gerson's *De Erroribus Circa Artem Magicam Reprobati*.[25] Rather, he emphasizes the role of diabolism in genuine cases of *brujería*, specifically noting that an individual must have a pact with the devil.

[23] Ibid.

[24] Ibid., p. 39.

[25] Darst, *Witchcraft in Spain*, p. 302. Specifically, Castañega cites Isadore of Seville's *Etymologies,* particularly Book IV, 'de medicina'. When discussing the pagan healers of the past, he relies on this work to outline their practice and philosophies, especially in Chapter XV entitled 'Medical Preparations are Neither Superstitions nor Spells'. In addition to this, he cites Thomas Aquinas's *Summa Theologica*, pulling from his statements on demons, incubi and succubi, and diabolism.

Tratado Muy Sotil y Bien Fundado de las Supersticiones y Hechicerias has two distinct parts. The first eleven chapters almost exclusively discuss 'diabolism' and the workings of the Satanic church, while the last thirteen chapters are concerned mainly with sorcery and superstition. However, these last thirteen chapters are also intent on demonstrating that superstitious practices and spellwork were often *not* witchcraft but rather the result of ignorance and improper popular belief. The majority of his references to healing and healers come from the second half, in which he both defends them against accusations of witchcraft but also dismisses many practices, especially those popular amongst female healers, as ignorance or superstition.

PERSPECTIVES ON MALE AND FEMALE HEALERS

The majority of this article will focus on the second half of de Castañega's work, as this is where the lion's share of his statements regarding medicine and healing originate. The first half of the work only briefly mentions medicine and healing, in chapter 9, titled 'The Sacrifices that Satan's Disciples Make to Him', referencing witches who serve as midwives and perform diabolical infanticide.[26] However, there is a distinct shift away from this theme in chapter 12, entitled 'Why Saludadores Are Not Sorcerers and the Virtue That is Theirs'. These healers, as previously mentioned, often came under the purview of both the *Protomedicato*, the Spanish Court's board

[26] Ibid., p. 307.

of physicians, as well as the Church. Castañega's work chides those who frame all extra-academic healers as witches, although he primarily speaks positively about male healers and warns the reader about the prevalence of potential scams. He begins the chapter with the statement:

> Many doubt the virtue and grace that the *saludadores* possess and demonstrate through experience against rabid dogs and their venom. To understand this, it is worth noting that natural virtues are so hidden in this present life from human understanding that we often witness or experience marvelous works without being able to explain them, except to say that such is the property of natural things, though it remains hidden from us. This is like the natural property and hidden virtue of the lodestone, which attracts steel, as is evident through experience; yet no one can explain why, other than that it is simply its nature.[27]

Many *saludadores* claimed that they also had powers that stemmed from the possession of a divine gift bestowed upon only a chosen few.[28] Castañega does not offer a divine explanation for this phenomenon or attribute it to the faithfulness of the healer, noting that as both Jewish and Muslim healers possessed the same abilities, 'it seems that such a virtue may exist in infidels as well as in the faithful, and the wicked as well as in the good; because (as has been said) this is not a moral

[27] Martin De Castanega, 'Tratado Muy Sotil e Bien Fundado de Las Supersticiones y Hechizerías, y Vanos Conjuros y Abusiones, y Otras Cosas al Caso Tocantes; y de La Possibilidad y Remedio de Ellas', ed. by Girassol Sant'Ana, *Lemir*, 24 (2020), pp. 339–400 (p. 366). '*Muchos tienen duda de la virtud y gracia que los saludadores tienen y por experiencia muestran contra los perros rabiosos y la ponçoña de ellos. Pa- ra esto es de notar que las virtudes naturales son tan ocultas en la vida presente a los entendimientos humanos, que muchas vezes vemos la experiencia y obras maravillosas y no sabemos dar la razón de ellas, salvo que es tal la propiedad de las cosas naturales y que a nosotros es oculta, como es la propiedad natural y virtud oculta de la piedra ymán, que atrahe assí al azero, como claramente parece por experiencia; y ninguno podría dar la razón de ello, sino que es tal su propiedad*.' All translations are my own, unless otherwise stated.

[28] Tausiet, 'Healing Virtue', p. 43.

virtue that makes a person good and virtuous, but rather a natural virtue that arises from the natural constitution of the body.'[29] This theme continues into chapter fourteen, in which he explicitly states that medical practices and preparations are neither superstitions nor spells.[30]

This declaration was not particularly surprising, especially in concern to male practitioners, as there was a precedent for the presence of *sanadores,* a broad term for those engaged in the healing arts outside of the practice of the physician or the surgeon, often using spiritual means, in the Royal courts, particularly that of Philip II, as well as in cities such as Valladolid and Valencia, which cannot be excused simply by superstition.[31] A part of the success of male *saludadores* was based not only on curing disease, but discerning its cause and combatting the influence of witchcraft and sorcery.[32] The complementary nature of the myths of witches and *saludadores* comes from the fact that they were supposed to be capable of causing harm simply by channeling their will through their gaze. This is a topic that Castañega discusses later in the work when describing the evil eye, which he argues all women are capable of in some capacity on an unintentional level. Meanwhile, the male *saludador* was able to restore people to health with their words, breath, or

[29] Martin De Castanega, 'Tratado', p. 368. '*De aquí parece que assí puede estar esta tal virtud en los infieles como en los fieles, y en los malos como en los buenos; porque (como está dicho) no es esta virtud moral que al hombre haze ser bueno y virtuoso, sino que es virtud natural que nace de la complexión natural del cuerpo; y por esto no es razón que los que estas virtudes naturales tienen, y por esperiencia las muestran, sean reprovados o condenados por sospechosos o supersticiosos, porque no sepamos dar razón ni cuenta de ello.*'
[30] Ibid., p. 370.
[31] María Luz Terrada, 'Medical Pluralism', pp. 8–9.
[32] Tausiet, 'Healing Virtue', p. 40.

saliva, with the healing power of the *saludador* standing in contrast to the venom of the witch.[33] Interestingly, much like he does not necessarily attribute the powers of the *saludador* to supernatural means, Castañega also provides potentially natural explanations for the evil eye and its connections to elderly women, discussed later in this work.

Castañega's opinion on the real, natural, and non-superstitious virtue of *saludadores* was not shared by all those in the diocese who had the power to sanction behavior. Iñaki Bazán Díaz notes that the magistrate of Vizcaya, in his audit of the accounts of Valmaseda Town Council, considered payment to a *saludador* an inappropriate use of municipal funds, and ordered that the money be returned to the municipal coffers.[34] Furthermore, Bernal Díaz de Luco, the bishop who succeeded Alonso de Castilla as head of the bishopric of Calahorra, agreed more with the opinion of the magistrate, as he considered *saludadores* as a whole to be vain, suspicious, and bad examples.[35]

Castañega is much more charitable to the male *saludador* than the broad range of women he discusses, healer or no, indulging the possibility that many of their curative powers are so hidden from human understanding that one might witness a marvelous cure and not know the reason for them, 'except that such is the property

[33] Ibid.
[34] Bazán Díaz, 'El Tratado de Fray Martín de Castañega Como Remedio', p. 42.
[35] Ibid.

of natural things and that it is hidden'.[36] Likewise, later in the work, he makes explicitly clear that medical preparations that one may not understand are not witchcraft or sorcery, but rather the virtues of natural things are so hidden that they cannot be explained rationally.[37] However, whenever Castañega discusses female healers and spellcasters, the tone of his work changes significantly. He emphasizes their foolishness and superstitious nature. Furthermore, after this statement in which he defends the legitimacy of *saludadores'* practices, he cites a case of an elderly woman who used a magnet and an iron needle to scam younger women with love spells.[38] He sternly warns his female readers that 'simple women should not involve themselves in curing the illnesses of children or other people, especially through words and practices that they would not want wise and discerning men to hear or see.'[39] Such depictions fit a pattern delineated by Paloma Moral de Calatrava, who asserts that Spanish cultural attitudes toward a treatment varied according to the sex of the person who prescribed it. Physicians and authors of medical treatises assume that treatments from women were based exclusively on magic and superstition, unlike recipes and treatments prescribed by the educated men in medical manuals,

[36] Martin De Castanega, 'Tratado', p. 366. '*es de notar que las virtudes naturales son tan ocultas en la vida presentan a los entendimientos humanos, que muchas veces vemos la experiencia y obras maravillosas y no sabemos dar la razón de ellas, salvo que es tal la propiedad de las cosas naturales y que a nosotros es oculta, como es la propiedad natural y virtud oculta de la piedra ymán, que atrahe así al azero, como claramente parece por experiencia.*'
[37] Ibid.
[38] Ibid, p. 366.
[39] Ibid.

which were always in accordance with Galenic theory, even when the practices were identical.[40]

The archetype of the bawdy and foolish woman, particularly the elderly woman, occupies a significant place in the work, with the uneducated *'vieja'* desiring sexual satisfaction as his primary example of the type of individual most likely to fall to the Devil's temptations. Castañega goes as far as to create an addendum noting that women can't become necromancers, defining it as an exclusively male group of witches, as women 'don't have any art or science as an excuse'.[41] Despite Castañega's claims and regional bans on female medical practice, there were women who were a well-established part of the medical marketplace in early modern Europe. Women, *and men,* were in constant interplay over how knowledge of the female body was generated, disseminated and used, creating a complex network of information and sometimes putting different occupations and traditions in opposition.[42] Even if one of these woman did not consider her profession to be a healer, bonesetter, or midwife, or even a healer specializing in ritual practice such as a *santiguadera,* informal networks of knowledge transfer were widespread, with many women communicating with each other as well as with the men in their communities such as the spice traders and apothecaries that they got their

[40] Emily Kuffner, 'Bawds, Midwifery, and the Evil Eye in Golden Age Spanish Literature and Medicine', *Humanities*, 12.4.78 (2023). Paloma Moral De Calatrava, 'Magic or Science?: What 'Old Women Lapidaries' Knew in the Age of Celestina', *La Corónica*, 36.1 (2007), pp. 203–35.
[41] Martin De Castanega, 'Tratado', p. 360.
[42] Monica H. Green, 'Gendering the History of Women's Healthcare', *Gender & History*, 20.3 (2008), pp. 487–518 (p. 490).

ingredients from, as well as physicians and priests.[43] Early modern systems of care were a web of multiple resources, with a highly varied medical marketplace that offered options of care for individuals to peruse for themselves and to choose from. Many literate women also used domestic manuals to record intergenerational household information, including culinary recipes, cleaning products, cosmetics, and medical preparations, but also lists of household goods, prayers, letters, or notes.[44] The healing and cosmetic recipes that a woman had, and her customization of them, were considered a mark of social prestige, as these networks of information placed both men and women in contact with each other, even if men's was given precedent as coming from a more legitimate, scientific form of knowledge, even if men's was given precedent as coming from a more legitimate, scientific form of knowledge.[45]

So, where is Castañega getting these ideas from, and what precedent do they have? In addition to the literary artifice of the so-called midwife-witch that was disseminated throughout inquisitor's texts, there was a similar artifice within the literature of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Spain, often using sexually promiscuous old women peddling magical means to ends. As the discussion of

[43] For more information on these networks of information, and their often transnational nature, read *Panaceia's Daughters: Noblewomen as Healers in Early Modern Germany* by Alishha Rankin (University of Chicago Press, 2013), which displays the social prestige these recipes carried and the transfer of knowledge between both male and female practitioners, both professional and amateur.

[44] Emily Kuffner, 'Sweet Chains and Happy Prisons: Collective Rituals of Pregnancy and Childbirth in Seventeenth-Century Spanish Occasional Poetry and Domestic Remedy Manuals', *Early Modern Women*, 15.1 (2020), pp. 26–50 (p. 32).

[45] Montserrat Cabré, 'Women or Healers?: Household Practices and the Categories of Health Care in Late Medieval Iberia', *Bulletin of the History of Medicine*, 82.1 (2008), pp. 18–51 (p. 18).

women's information networks show, while these skills gave them forms of social power, they were also viewed with suspicion by male authors within literary works that had been published during Martin de Castañega's lifetime, with roots reaching back into the medieval period. The most successful example of this is *La Tragicomedia de Calisto y Melibea* (Fernando de Rojas, 1499), although the work is better known through the name of the bawdy old procuress, self-proclaimed sorceress, and healer, *La Celestina*. Her love potions and advice, the legitimacy of the magical properties of which are ambiguous throughout the text, allow for the titular star-crossed lovers to continue their affair and eventually leads to their untimely demise.[46] While it cannot be known if Castañega would have had access to the text, it was likely that he did have access to the work due to the text's popularity and wide circulation, the cultural ideas regarding elderly women and sexuality that allow each work's arguments and plots to find footholds remain the same. Witchcraft, dedication to magic, and recourse to the imaginary are therefore considered ways of remedying emotional frustration or as revenge against a society in which women are only valued when they serve sexually, and devalued when they can no longer do so.[47] As widows and old women, women were still defined by marital status, or lack thereof, this time by absent and deceased husbands, as well as by their inability to engage in procreative sex and the dangerous humoral imbalance that the retention of menses

[46] Encarnación Juárez Almendros, *Disabled Bodies in Early Modern Spanish Literature: Prostitutes, Aging Women and Saints* (Liverpool University Press, 2017), p. 107.
[47] María Tausiet, 'Religión, ciencia, y superstición en Pedro Ciruelo y Martín de Castañega', *Revista de Historia Jerónimo Zurita*, 65–66 (1992), pp. 143–44 (p. 142).

supposedly caused.[48] Despite ancient precedents, ten years after Pope Innocent VIII's bull in 1484 that initiated the witch hunts, the *Repertorium Inquisitorum* made the association between witchcraft and old women.[49] This same association is highlighted by Castañega, among many others.

At the end of the fifteenth century, the medical text *Compendio* also discussed the threat of unproductive '*viejas*' ('old women') for children and men and advised its readers to avoid intimate contact with them.[50] Likewise, witches were characterized by their sexual desire and their capacity to foil the process of creation in all possible ways.[51] *Brujas* destroyed, causing milk to curdle, cheese to refuse to form, men's fertility to fail, genitals to shrivel, and pregnancies to be lost.[52] Within Castañega's work, the archetype of the bawdy and foolish hag, desiring sexual satisfaction that she cannot have and lacking a husband, is his primary example of the type of individual most likely to fall to the Devil's temptations and engage in witchcraft. In addition to being creatures deserving of disdain, it is emphasized that 'senility was confused with witchcraft practices', because accusing an individual was easier when she was a 'marginalized, economically destitute old woman who had long been socially denigrated'.[53] Old women, with their worldly wisdom and

[48] Lynn Botelho, 'Old Women and Sex: Fear, Fantasy, and a Defining Life Course in Early Modern Europe', *Clio*, 42 (2015), pp. 191–201 (p. 189).
[49] Robin Ann Rice Carlssohn, 'Mujeres Viejas En La Modernidad Temprana: Brujas, Alcahuetas Y Otras Inadaptadas', *Edad De Oro*, 42 (2023), pp. 237–48 (p. 238).
[50] Juárez Almendros, *Disabled Bodies in Early Modern Spanish Literature*, p. 85.
[51] Botelho, 'Old Women and Sex', p. 194.
[52] Ibid.
[53] Carlssohn, 'Mujeres Viejas', p. 238.

accumulated knowledge, were the acknowledged experts of all things sexual, but also considered corrupted beings themselves who were incapable of being acknowledged as sexual beings deserving of pleasure.[54]

ON THE EVIL EYE AND THE USE OF AMULETS

Even when elderly women are not falling to the temptations of the Devil, Castañega still describes their ability to foil the process of creation and poison in other ways, even unintentionally. The most important notion is that post-menopausal women lack the purgative effects of menstruation, and the accumulated toxins have terrible consequences for their bodies and minds, making them more predisposed to certain mental illnesses and the evil influences of the devil.[55] When considered within the ancient medical world of Galen's four humors, the process of growing old was a time of growing drier and warmer. This change resulted in the creation of a physical body that was unfit for reproduction and risked harm to both their sexual partners and others they came into close contact with as the supposed retention of menses created noxious humors.[56] Late medieval treatises on the evil eye used humoral theory to explain how it could occur naturally through the process of aging.[57] This idea of the inherently dangerous nature of the body of the *vieja* primarily appears in his sections on the evil eye, in which he states that mothers should not suppose that

[54] Botelho, 'Old Women and Sex', p. 196.
[55] Juárez Almendros, *Disabled Bodies in Early Modern Spanish Literature*, p. 85.
[56] Ibid.
[57] Kuffner, 'Bawds, Midwifery, and the Evil Eye', p. 78.

their children's sickness comes only from witches, because it is a natural thing that can come from any indisposed person. It can, however, be made more intense by malice in the heart of she who looks at the child, and thus it may be done by some malicious person or witch or sorceress that wishes to harm innocent infants to serve the devil.[58]

However, by the mid-sixteenth century, the evil eye ceased to be the focus of scholarly monographs and was increasingly attributed to witchcraft rather than humoral forces.[59] Academic interest in the evil eye continued to appear in medical texts, though, including in midwifery manuals, which began to appear in the vernacular in the sixteenth century and depicted the evil eye as especially threatening to newborns and fetuses.[60] Despite this claim about the inherent danger of the evil eye from women, Castañega states that this is a natural phenomenon that cannot be helped by the one who inflicts it. In fact, chapter fourteen, dedicated to this phenomenon in its entirety, is titled 'To Give the Evil Eye is a Natural Act and Not Witchcraft'.[61] He discusses the threats of the elderly and the menstruating woman, but notes that rather than witchcraft, it is one of the ways that the body rids itself of toxins, and 'the most subtle impurities of the body come out through the eyes like rays, and the more subtle they are the more they penetrate and are most

[58] Martin De Castanega, 'Tratado', pp. 339–400 and 370–71.
[59] Kuffner, 'Bawds, Midwifery, and the Evil Eye', p. 78.
[60] Ibid., p. 203.
[61] Ibid., p. 370.

infectious.'[62] In Castañega's mind, some have this infection and poison more than others, especially old women who no longer menstruate, because they then purge more impurities through the eyes. In curing this ailment, the author further pushes away mothers from going to *santiguaderas,* a type of healer who performed blessings; instead, they should use steam treatments of odorous herbs and incense and similar aromatic things, as quickly as possible and for some days.[63] To Castañega, like many following Galenic medical ideals, the build-up of impurities in the elderly body did more than explain the causes behind lechery and lust in female old age; it also made a case for why it was physically dangerous for all involved, especially the young.[64]

Castañega also addresses the use of amulets and talismans, a type of sympathetic magic very frequently used by folk healers and even by physicians. He emphasizes the use of '*nóminas*', objects worn to ward off evil, approving of them under specific circumstances. Castañega states that 'these amulets can indeed be used for devotional purposes'.[65] However, he rejects the ceremonies surrounding them, including writing them on a certain parchment, hanging them with certain threads, or similar superstitions.[66] He explicitly rejects the use of amulets and *nómina* carried so the carrier will not 'die by water, fire, childbirth, or in battle, and other similar words; or if it contains any figures, except for the cross, or any words outside

[62] Ibid.
[63] Ibid, p. 371.
[64] Botelho, 'Old Women and Sex', p. 196.
[65] Martin De Castanega, 'Tratado', p. 373.
[66] Botelho, 'Old Women and Sex', p. 196.

those used in the Church, very clear in scripture and doctrine'.[67] They could consist of figures drawn or superimposed, or composed of some metal, stone, gem, or herb. Eugene A Maio and D'Orsay W Pearson's translation of Pedro Ciruelo's witchcraft treatise includes a definition of a *nómina* as a sort of talisman, and points out that the mineral bloodstone was considered efficacious in both preventing and curing hemorrhage.[68] This is not surprising, despite the popularity of these amulets among the population, as written amulets were a popular way to ward off evil, especially witches. Sixteenth-century physicians noted the use of talismans and amulets without much concern, not denying their usefulness to the population, at least on a psychological level.[69]

Both the *Protomedicato,* a secular institution of medical regulation, and the Inquisitorial Tribunal, an ecclesiastical system of social control, show concern in preventing, or at least minimizing, the 'superstitious' practices of healers, including the improper use of religious artifacts, prayers, talismans, and even spells during the healing process. The *Protomedicato* and the Spanish Inquisitorial Tribunal were both under the direct control of the Spanish Crown, leading to the two institutions being used to reaffirm the desires of the Catholic Monarchs. While the Inquisition was

[67] Martin De Castanega, 'Tratado', p. 373. '*Y estas tales nóminas bien se pueden traer por devoción, sin guardar cerimonia alguna, assí como por razón del tiempo, o del día, o de la hora, o en tal pargamino virgen escritas, o con tal hilo colgadas, o semejantes supersticiones; y más si en la nómina se pone que quien la traxere no morirá en agua, ni en fuego, ni de parto, ni en armas y semejantes palabras; o si ay en ellas algunas figuras, salvo la cruz, o algunas palabras fuera de las que se usan en la Yglesia, muy claras en la escritura y sentencia.*'
[68] Pedro Ciruelo, *Treatise Reproving All Superstitions and Forms of Witchcraft: Very Necessary and Useful for All Good Christians Zealous for Their Salvation*, trans. by Eugene Anthony Maio (Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1977), p. 215.
[69] Ibid.

most concerned with those who claimed to have made a pact with the devil to heal, the improper use of amulets and talismans, and those who used incantations, the *Protomedicato* had also been given the right to investigate spells, conjurations, and incantations, all of which fell under the purview of the Supreme Council of the Inquisition.[70] In this way, Castañega's work largely falls into line with the concerns that the Spanish Inquisition had, with many of these offenses not being investigated as witchcraft, but rather upon suspicions of superstition or spellwork intentionally used to scam individuals in the early modern world's diverse medical marketplace.

SIMILAR WORKS

Two years after Castañega published his treatise, another more popular work would be published by the well-known theologian and scholar Pedro Ciruelo, gaining much more attention. In the biographical information he provided in his 1521 astrological work *Apotelesmata Astrologiae Christiana*, Ciruelo stated that he was an early orphan, alone in the world. Historians have pointed out that this is unlikely, not only because he had several relatives living in Daroca and Molina during the fifteenth century, when he would have been attending university, but also because the cost of his education could not have been covered by a poor orphan.[71] However, a possible explanation for this intentional distancing from his own family is the fact

[70] Monter, Ankarloo, and Clark, 'Witch Trials in Continental Europe 1500–1600,', p. 48.
[71] Matteo Valleriani and Tayra M. C. Lanuza Navarro, 'Pedro Sánchez Ciruelo. A Commentary on Sacrobosco's Tractatus de Sphaera with a Defense of Astrology', in *De Sphaera of Johannes de Sacrobosco in the Early Modern Period: The Authors of the Commentaries*, ed. by Matteo Valleriani (Springer, 2020), pp. 53–89 (p. 55).

that he was of *converso* origin, meaning he was the descendant of jews who had converted to Christianity, and several members of his family, including his grandfather Francisco Sánchez Ciruelo, were tried in front of the Inquisition as Judaizers, having been accused of relapsing into Judaism after nominally converting to Christianity. His paternal grandparents had both been condemned for Judaizing and apostasy and, after his death, Ciruelo's four cousins (Benito, Cristóbal, Francisco, and Pero) would be forbidden to work in public positions for this reason, making it clear that the family had Jewish ancestors.[72]

In 1530, he published a work on the same topic as Castenega's titled *Treatise Reproving All Superstitions and Forms of Witchcraft: Very Necessary and Useful for All Good Christians Zealous for Their Salvation,* with a much broader publishing than its predecessor, totally eclipsing the earlier work.[73] Ciruelo is best known for his work on mathematics, theology, and astronomy, as well as his role as a professor and lecturer in various Spanish and French universities. His place in Daroca, and later in Salamanca and parts of France, situated him far away from the locations in which the major Spanish and Basque witch trials were happening, but also gave him access to foreign sources that Castañega would not necessarily have had access to. This also impacts the contents of his works, with him defining many things that Castañega dismisses as superstition or madness, such as instances of possession and the improper use of devotional amulets, as forms of witchcraft that should be strictly

[72] Valleriani and Lanuza Navarro, 'Pedro Sánchez Ciruelo', p. 56.
[73] Darst, 'Witchcraft in Spain', p. 298.

punished. Furthermore, while he does cite Castañega's treatise, he often does so out of context, preferring to rely on the more inflammatory *Malleus Maleficarum*.

Throughout the work, Ciruelo condemns many popular superstitious beliefs and practices of the sixteenth century, such as belief in the evil eye, the use of amulets, healing by spells, and rain-making. In this same treatise, however, Ciruelo, a scholar with an international education, defends the reality of the witch's sabbat and the flight of witches, which Castañega's work dismisses as illusions produced by the Devil or the madness of the elderly woman.[74] These concerns of witches targeting children also appear in medical literature like Francisco Nuñez's *El Libro del Parto Humano*, showing a broad belief in the possibility of witchcraft and spell work posing a danger in the birthing chamber and the danger of the evil eye. Furthermore, Pedro Ciruelo directly cites Castañega's work within his own, much longer text. However, their works hold some key differences that make the two worth analyzing as a pair of documents. Ciruelo's treatise takes a more aggressive stance than Castañega's regarding the definition of witchcraft and the presence of *brujas*, as well as other types of witches, spending far more time emphasizing the possibility of sorcery and what could be considered as such. One potential factor for the more aggressive attachment to religious suspicion and discussion is Ciruelo's

[74] Fabián Alejandro Campagne, 'Witchcraft and the Sense-of-the-Impossible in Early Modern Spain: Some Reflections Based on the Literature of Superstition (ca. 1500–1800)', *Harvard Theological Review*, 96.1 (2003), pp. 25–62 (p. 26).

own status as a *converso*, which he may have felt the need to draw attention further away from by doubling down on the dismissal of potential heretics and witches.[75]

Ciruelo directly cites Castañega's work two times in his treatise, building off of arguments that he had displayed in his work, citing his origin of the Spanish '*bruja*' as originating from an Italian word, '*bruciare*' ('to roast'), derived from the Latin *In Combustam Seu Incineratum* ('In Either Flame or Ash'), referring to the punishment of burning a witch to ash.[76] However, he also contradicts many of Castañega's arguments. For instance, while Castañega argues that female necromancers and magicians did not exist due to the inferior intellect of women, effectively gendering the practice as masculine, Ciruelo explicitly describes that a man or a woman can be judged to be a necromancer.[77] Furthermore, he follows this statement with the argument that for a single male witch, 'you will more easily find a hundred far superior female witches'.[78] His work immediately deviates from Castañega's again, as while he also agrees that witchcraft involves a pact with the devil, his list of witches is as follows:

> There are many types of witches. Some are heretics; others are superstitious; and still others deceitful, as Farinacio says. The *Malleus Maleficarum* lists other types who perform injurious actions and cannot heal the evil they cause; others can cause injury and heal it. Finally, there is the worst kind of witches, who devour their own

[75] Kyna Noelle Bullard, 'Places Between Life and Death: Secular and Ecclesiastical Perspectives on Midwifery in the Early Modern Iberian Peninsula' (unpublished master's dissertation, Texas Tech University, 2024), p. 39.
[76] Pedro Ciruelo, *Treatise*, p. 125.
[77] Ibid, p. 119.
[78] Ibid, p. 124.

> children. All the names which various doctors give to witches in Latin, according to St. Augustine, Martin del Rio, and Torrablanca, are lamia, estriges, sage, lemures, larve, lampusas, simulatrices, and fictrices.[79]

Ciruelo directly frames the evil eye as a practice of witches, placing it among a broad list of those who can both damage and heal the body. Ciruelo notes that 'the truth or falsity of superstitious persons rests in the judgment of the practitioners themselves, for in their fascinations (use of the evil eye) and enchantments they say they are aided by the devil.'[80] He also argues against the idea of the evil eye as a beam or a natural expulsion of toxins, as Castañega argues, stating that 'Since vision is an immanent action and results from susceptibility and intrinsic causes, it is not a voluntary action, nor an active cause. Nor is it the result of the emission of beams from the eye; so that this fascination, or casting the evil eye cannot be assigned a natural cause.'[81] He recommends the reader seek out the *Malleus Maleficarum* for further discussions of this topic, noting that it states that these bewitchments happen only to tender young children, by the look of an old, bewitching woman.[82]

Chapter Four of the third section is a lengthy discussion of the use of amulets, *nóminas*, and talismans by those Ciruelo describes as 'superstitious men and women'.[83] However, these are not considered witchcraft by Ciruelo, but rather 'sins

[79] Ibid, p. 125.
[80] Ibid, p. 241.
[81] Ibid.
[82] Ibid., pp. 241–42.
[83] Ibid, p. 212.

of superstition and idolatry'.[84] A *nómina* originally warded off evil, while a talisman was designed to attract good fortune. Similarly to Castañega, Ciruelo limits his discussion to written amulets, including written words, prayers, and passages of holy writings. Both works feel a need to emphasize the improper use of religious relics and amulets by laypeople, especially to ward away harm during healing or illness. These sorts of amulets, and the improper usage of them as a curative measure, or even their use by a midwife during the birthing process, had come before the Spanish Inquisition, setting precedents for the improper use of Christian talismans or imagery.[85]

Only after natural medicines failed did it make sense to resort to religious procedures. If these legitimate remedies failed, under no circumstances should good Christians turn to the wide range of popular specialists available, whether or not their cures were successful. There was nothing left but to resign themselves patiently to illness and death. The distrust of healers was complete on Ciruelos' part, as they were all to be viewed with suspicion. Although the incantations, spells, and charms demonstrated effective healing power, their effects were due to the intervention of the devil.[86] In only one respect did Pedro Ciruelo seem to admit a practice opposed to this outlook. With the attitude of one aware of the immediate impossibility of medicalizing the entire rural and urban areas of the peninsular territory, he admitted

[84] Ibid, p. 215.
[85] For a particularly compelling example of this, see Ronald E. Surtz, 'A Spanish Midwife's Uses of the Word: The Inquisitorial Trial (1485/86) of Joana Torrellas', *Mediaevistik*, 19.1 (2006), pp. 153–68.
[86] Campagne, 'Medicina Y Religión', p. 433.

that self-medication was preferable to risking one's soul at the hands of a popular healer. Given the dire circumstances, Ciruelo states that the solution should never be oriented toward consulting *saludodores*, 'even if one knows one is about to die'.[87] It was preferable to resort to self-medication practices; this transgression of the curative monopoly of the university doctor was preferable to consulting healers and practitioners of folk medicine, risking one's eternal soul.

Despite being written only two years apart, the positionality and personal experiences of the authors create a distinctively different tone within their works. Ciruelo's more aggressive stance than Castañega's regarding the definition of witchcraft and the presence of witches pulls from foreign sources and not from interaction with the Inquisitorial courts and crises that occurred in the aftermath of the first Navarre witch trials. Furthermore, Ciruelo's own status as a *converso* could have inspired the more aggressive approach, drawing attention further away by doubling down on the dismissal of potential heretics and witches and pulling from more well-known, traditionally disseminated sources on witchcraft and the identification of such.[88]

CONCLUSION

As the boundaries between medical regulation at the state and regional levels were being solidified in the Spanish world, there was still debate over what forms of

[87] Ibid.
[88] Bullard, 'Places Between Life and Death', p. 39.

improper medical practice were under the purview of the church, or the responsibility of state and regional licensing boards, such as the Crown's *Protomedicato*. Martin de Castañega's position in Logroño offered him a unique perspective on the shifting attitudes towards witchcraft and healing in Spain, placing him at the forefront of witnessing the concerns regarding witchcraft and sorcery that were sweeping Western Europe in the sixteenth century and how the Spanish Inquisition and the Spanish court responded to them. Likewise, it offered a unique perspective on how witchcraft and magic were understood, placing him in a region that believed in forms of witchcraft that were less focused on the diabolical, unlike Ciruelo, who was writing from Castile. Rather, it emphasizes the practices of folk magic and healing, regarding them not as *brujería* or *hechicería,* but rather as the work of the uneducated who needed correcting.

Castañega's work reflects the fallout of the first of the three groups of trials which would take place in Navarre, written from the perspective of an individual who witnessed the violence firsthand, as well as one whose occupation made him keenly aware of what exactly the Inquisition would want to be said regarding witchcraft and sorcery in the years following the trials and mass executions. In this case, he makes explicitly clear the line between what is considered witchcraft according to the Bible and the sources he considers to be ultimate authorities on the

subject. His arguments often attempt to dissuade belief in witchcraft and to prove that diabolical intervention normally does not exist.[89]

He displays special concern with the mentally or physically ill being mistaken as witches, with those he deems as demented, hysterical, or epileptic people, like Maria Johan, being considered possessed by the devil and subsequently exorcised or burnt at the stake.[90] However, despite the restraint and suspicion that set his work apart from his contemporaries, such as Ciruelo, he also still displays a variety of popular beliefs regarding the practice of healers and the female body that stray away from his cited source base. The hierarchical nature of late medieval and early modern society, moreover, created a conscious ostracization of women medical practitioners from academic medicine, which meant that the women who practiced medicine found themselves relegated to a legal gray area; a grey area that portrayed female healers as untutored practitioners, but also linked their methods with magic and superstition.[91] As Castañega writes, this delineation becomes clear, as he regards male practitioners of extra-academic medicine with far less suspicion than women, who he disregards as foolish, ineffective, and superstitious, albeit not as witches or sorceresses.

This relegation turned to outright suspicion as professional medicine sought to legitimize itself. At the beginning of the 16th century, academic medicine faced two serious problems: establishing a monopoly on the practice of medicine and the

[89] Darst, *Witchcraft in Spain*, p. 300.
[90] Ibid.
[91] De Calatrava, 'Magic or Science?', p. 204.

acute persistence of the social discredit and undervaluation of professional physicians. In facing these two issues, university physicians received the unexpected collaboration of the theological community, including Castañega and Ciruelo, who wrote about their distrust of popular folk healing practices as scams, or worse.[92] As the medical processes and practices within the Spanish crown were centralized in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, this concern with a woman's morality as a good Christian and ideas about the sinister nature of their practices would not diminish. It would remain a central tenet of the licensing process for midwives and nurses, as a woman had to prove her '*limpieza de sangre*' ('or cleanliness of blood'), and good moral character to be licensed by the *Protomedicato*.

[92] Campagne, 'Medicina y Religión', p. 421.

Melusine and Eve: Christian Alchemical Visuality and the Serpent-Woman

Elisabeth Genter Montevecchio
University of Rochester

In the long and esoteric tradition of alchemical imagery, the hybrid serpent-woman is a curious and obscure figure who appears in several important texts, including the Buch der heiligen Dreifaltigkeit (Book of the Holy Trinity) *and the writings of Paracelsus. The symbolic meaning of this figure is often ambiguous, but an exploration of medieval literary representations and later alchemical discourse on the serpent-woman will help to elucidate the layered meaning of the image. An investigation into medieval theological discussions on Eve, Mary, and the serpent will assist in this evaluation, as early modern alchemists constructively used theology and theological images to illustrate their ideas. Additionally, this article explores the serpent-woman as she appears in the alchemical writings of Paracelsus and the prose text by Jean d'Arras,* Le Roman de Mélusine. *By examining the serpent-woman image in these late medieval literary, theological, and alchemical sources, we can ascribe a clearer meaning to this unique symbolic figure. This article posits that the alchemical serpent-woman represents a kind of sympathetic monster possessing a non-normative body whose liminality and hybridity allow her to transgress the boundaries of nature.*

The serpent-woman, or 'melusine', is a curious pictorial and textual motif that appears in late medieval literature and alchemical manuscripts. The melusine is identified as a hybrid snake-woman whose presence in European literary tradition can be traced back to Jean d'Arras and his fourteenth-century text, *Le Roman de Mélusine* (*The Romance of Melusine*).[1] Previous scholarship has focused on the figure's symbolic meaning in legend and folklore, especially the mythical 'Melusine of

[1] Jean d'Arras, *Melusine; or, the Noble History of Lusignan*, trans. by Donald Maddox and Sara Sturm-Maddox (Penn State University Press, 2012).

Lusignan' character, the fairy founder of the Lusignan dynasty. The presence of the serpent-woman in an alchemical context has received far less evaluation, although scholars like Melissa Ridley Elmes have attempted to understand the 'subversive' role of the melusine in the works of Paracelsus, the Swiss alchemist and physician, who incorporated the melusine into his alchemical textual corpus as a water spirit symbolizing mercury.[2] Elmes argues that the Paracelsian melusine represents 'the union of pagan and Christian beliefs and the transformation of the pagan symbol of the siren into a Christian one of duality and enlightenment.'[3] While this is a convincing interpretation, it does not address the other iterations of the alchemical melusine outside of Paracelsian tradition. Most significantly, a notable serpent-woman image appears in the *Buch der heiligen Dreifaltigkeit* (*Book of the Holy Trinity*) (Figure 1). The serpent-woman in the *Buch der heiligen Dreifaltigkeit* has yet to be convincingly interpreted in conjunction with the Paracelsian melusine, the Lusignan legend, and other relevant medieval serpent-women, such as feminized images of the serpent in the Garden of Eden. In this article, I will argue that a more complete analysis of the alchemical serpent-woman can be achieved by comparative investigation of several versions of the figure in different genres of late medieval texts. I posit that the serpent-woman belongs to the significant corpus of alchemical imagery that presents irregular bodies and gender constructions as essential to the transformative work of alchemy.

[2] Melissa Ridley Elmes, 'The Alchemical Transformation of Melusine', in *Melusine's Footprint: Tracing the Legacy of a Medieval Myth*, ed. by Misty Urban, Deva F. Kemmis, and Melissa Ridley Elmes (Brill, 2017), pp. 94–105 (p. 94).
[3] Ibid.

Figure 1: The serpent-woman stabs Adam accompanied by Eve. *Der Buch der heiligen Dreifaltigkeit*. Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, MS BSB Cgm 598, fol. 2r.

Figure 2: Alchemical hermaphrodite. *Aurora consurgens*. Zurich, Zentralbibliothek, MS Rh. 172, fol. 1v. https://www.europeana.eu/en/item/9200211/en_list_one_zbz_Ms_Rh_0172.

Alchemical images provide imaginative alternatives to the structure of human bodies in a manner that premodern scholars considered spiritually and materially constructive. This framing opens an avenue for queer and non-normative reimaginings of the human form outside of more rigid representations of bodies in

other medieval illustrated texts, such as medical treatises. A number of studies have already discussed these creative explorations of gendered bodies in medieval illustrations, such as Karl Whittington's *Body-Worlds*, which analyzes the fourteenth-century writer and mystic Opicinus's strange cartographic diagrams as expressions of queer and alternatively-gendered bodies.[4] Also, in *The Shape of Sex*, Leah DeVun traces the history of nonbinary bodies in premodern texts, investigating several alchemical configurations of nonbinary gender, such as the hermaphroditic figure that appears as the frontispiece of the fifteenth-century alchemical miscellany, *Aurora consurgens* (Figure 2). The alchemical hermaphrodite, or androgyne, is an allegorical visualization of the perfect, prelapsarian human body.[5] Following in the footsteps of scholars like Whittington and DeVun, I argue that, like the alchemical androgyne, the alchemical melusine has a hybrid body that, through its visual liminality, allows the alchemist unique access to spiritual knowledge. Although these non-normative alchemical bodies are symbolic rather than literal, their visualization could possibly represent an effort among some premodern thinkers to understand sexual difference from a more flexible perspective.

Although alchemical imagery places an emphasis on the duality of gender as a positive and generative characteristic, it does not necessarily insinuate or perpetuate ideas about gender equality. M. E. Warlick cautions against thinking about early modern alchemical rhetoric as proto-feminist, pointing out underlying layers of sexism, such as 'feminine silver tarnishes beneath the perfection of masculine gold'.[6] In her extensive studies of gender ideology in alchemical imagery, Warlick has acknowledged that though these images are entirely symbolic, they do

[4] See Karl Whittington, *Body-Worlds: Opicinus de Canistris and the Medieval Cartographic Imagination* (Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 2014).

[5] See Leah DeVun, *The Shape of Sex: Nonbinary Gender from Genesis to the Renaissance* (Columbia University Press, 2021); as well as DeVun, 'Erecting Sex: Hermaphrodites and the Medieval Science of Surgery', *Osiris*, 30 (2015), pp. 17–37 and DeVun, 'Heavenly Hermaphrodites: Sexual Difference at the Beginning and End of Time', *Postmedieval*, 9 (2018), pp. 132–46.

[6] M. E. Warlick, 'Fluctuating Identities: Gender Reversals in Alchemical Imagery', in *Art & Alchemy*, ed. by Jacob Wamberg (Museum Tusculanum, 2006), pp. 103–28 (p. 106).

reflect the social situation and gender expectations of the society that produced them. These ideologies fluctuate with the changing attitudes towards gender that exist historically, but this makes uncovering a consistent pattern of meaning difficult.

I will investigate the ubiquity of the serpent-woman in Western literary and theological tradition, specifically her entrance into alchemical discourse. She has played a diverse array of roles in Western history, at times representing Satanic influence, the danger of a woman's choice, a devouring mother, or the queenly progenitrix of a noble dynasty. I argue that of all her varied figurations, the serpent-woman's appearance in an alchemical context is one of the most constructive. In alchemy, her monstrosity symbolizes transformation and liminality instead of moral degeneration or punishment. The alchemical serpent-woman is a virtuous monster, possessing an abnormal gender construction, but necessary as a discursive presence capable of transgressing binaries and occupying liminal spaces.

THE SERPENT WOMAN IN THE *BUCH DER HEILIGEN DREIFALTIGKEIT*

The *Buch der heiligen Dreifaltigkeit* (*Book of the Holy Trinity*) is a fifteenth-century manuscript that employs Christian theological language and symbols to illustrate alchemical processes. The book is an early illustrated alchemical treatise and the first to be written in vernacular German. While the use of theological metaphors for alchemical subjects is not exclusive to the *Buch der heiligen Dreifaltigkeit*, what is exceptional about the treatise is its conception of the Holy Trinity. The triad is composed of the Father, Son, and Mother — the Virgin subsumes and replaces the Holy Spirit, creating a construction of spiritual and chemical balance that relies on a

union between Christ and Mary.[7] The *Buch* privileges a primacy of mystical feminine and reproductive energy that reflects contemporary alchemical discourse about the centrality of gender and the vital equilibration of masculine and feminine properties in chemical processes. In alchemy, chemicals are gendered and considered to reproduce vegetally.[8]

The original *Buch* predates Paracelsus's intervention by more than a hundred years. The serpent-woman in the *Buch* is likely, therefore, not explicitly a melusine, but instead a representation of the serpent in Eden, who emerged as a snake-woman hybrid in medieval visual tradition (as in Figure 3). The serpent of Genesis along with a variety of serpent-women from Classical mythology likely served as precedents for this melusine. Much scholarly attention has been paid to the medieval image of the woman-headed serpent. The image did not appear in medieval visual culture until the thirteenth century, although the Eden story was depicted with a normal serpent in Christian art as early as the third century.[9]

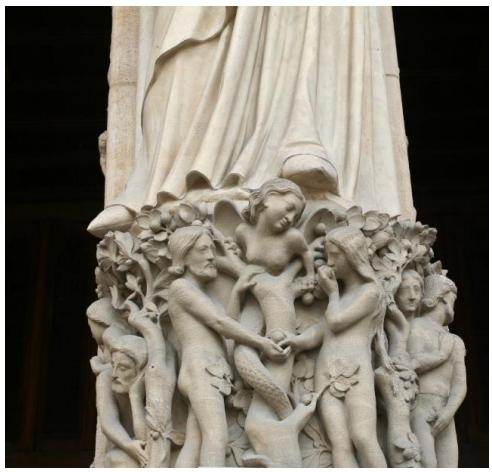


Figure 3: Adam, Eve, and Female Serpent at Mary's Feet. Notre Dame Cathedral, Paris, France. Image by Sharon Mollerus, CC BY 2.0 https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0 via Wikimedia Commons.

[7] Urszula Szulakowska, *The Alchemical Virgin Mary in the Religious and Political Context of the Renaissance* (Cambridge Scholars, 2017), p. 55.

[8] For further discussion of the alchemical conception of metals as organic materials capable of reproduction, see Aaron Kitch, 'The "Ingendred" Stone: The Ripley Scrolls and the Generative Science of Alchemy', *The Huntington Library Quarterly*, 78 (2015), pp. 87–125.

[9] Shulamit Laderman, 'Two Faces of Eve: Polemics and Controversies Viewed through Pictorial Motifs', *Images*, 2.1 (2009), pp. 1–20 (p. 2).

The most widely accepted explanation for the appearance of the woman-headed serpent seems to be that presented by John K. Bonnel in 1917, who suggested that the motif emerged first in Peter Comestor's twelfth-century biblical commentary, *Historia Scholastica,* and was then adopted into contemporary mystery plays.[10] From there, Bonnel argues, the visual arts began implementing the serpent-woman motif. Comestor's commentary claims that Satan approached Eve through the guise of a serpent with a woman's head because, '*similia similibus applaudunt*' ('like favors like').[11] This theological discourse explains why in these medieval images the serpent seems not to simply have a generic woman's head, but the head of Eve herself. The woman-headed serpent is a reflection of Eve, a mirror of her internal, sublimated desires. It is her own image that entices her, so that she seduces not only Adam, but herself as well. This interpretation provides a source for medieval misogynistic rhetoric about women as naturally untrustworthy, seductive, and inclined towards sin.[12] Eve's transgression irreparably damaged woman's relationship to God and man, condemning her entire sex to an eternity of subjugation by man and punishment in the pain of childbirth. Was there even a serpent in the garden at all, or was Eve solely tempted by her own devious feminine proclivities toward disobedience?

The *Buch* presents a fascinating 'sapiental Mariology', where Mary and Jesus become one entity, inseparable at the beginning and end of time, creating a figure of paradigmatic twofold humanity, Jesus-Mary, the Mother-Son — a new kind of

[10] John K. Bonnel, 'The Serpent with a Human Head in Art and in Mystery Play', *American Journal of Archaeology*, 21 (1917), pp. 255–91.

[11] Peter Comestor, *Historia Scholastica*, in *Patrologia Latina*, ed. by Jacques Paul Migne, 217 vols (Migne, 1841–55), CXCVIII, pp. 1053–1722 (p. 1072), I.21.

[12] For an exploration of the figure of Eve in medieval theology, see Roche Coleman, 'Was Eve the First Femme Fatale?', *Verbum et Ecclesia*, 42 (2021) p. 1; *The Routledge Companion to Eve*, ed. by Caroline Blyth and Emily Colgan (Routledge, 2024); Tova Rosen, *Unveiling Eve: Reading Gender in Medieval Hebrew Literature* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003); John Flood, *Representations of Eve in Antiquity and the English Middle Ages* (Routledge, 2011); Katherine DeVane Brown, 'Antifeminism or Exegesis? Reinterpreting Eve's *wacgeþoht* in *Genesis B*', *Journal of English and German Philology*, 115 (2016), pp. 141–66; *Woman Defamed and Woman Defended: An Anthology of Medieval Texts*, ed. by Alcuin Blamires (Oxford University Press, 1992).

divine, perfect hermaphrodite.[13] The manuscript was written by a Franciscan alchemist and is notable for its creative use of the Virgin Mary as an explanation of alchemical processes. Franciscan scholars were quite familiar with the language and practice of alchemy, and some even recognized that the opening chapters of Genesis could be interpreted as a text of natural philosophy, or alchemy.[14] This esoteric and spiritual reading is then layered with a more material context, where Jesus-Mary signifies gold, silver, and mercury, and the four evangelists become other metals (lead, copper, iron, and tin).[15] The Franciscan author is attempting to deconstruct and reconstruct the building blocks of the earth using these divine Christian figures as metaphorical guides. The *Buch* establishes Mary as an integral part of the Trinity and a symbol of the Godhead.[16] This representation of hermaphroditism is common in alchemical texts, as Leah De Vun explains:

> According to alchemists, their work combined male and female elemental qualities into a compound substance of both sexes—a hermaphrodite—that was capable of transmutation. This body (since chemicals and metals were often called "bodies" in alchemy) was both, but also neither, because the alchemical process held contrarieties in stasis, creating a new substance that was outside the norms of binary division.[17]

Several modern scholars have attempted to decode the meaning of the text and its accompanying images, most notably Barbara Obrist who, in her 1982 *Les débuts de L'Imagerie Alchimique*, convincingly interpreted the pictorial systems employed in several medieval European alchemical treatises, including the *Buch*.[18] Additionally,

[13] Barbara Newman, *Gods and Goddesses: Vision, Poetry, and Belief in the Middle Ages* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), pp. 241–42.
[14] Zachary A. Matus, *Franciscans and the Elixir of Life: Religion and Science in the Later Middle Ages* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017), p. 27.
[15] Ibid.
[16] Ibid., pp. 242–43.
[17] Leah De Vun, 'The Jesus Hermaphrodite: Science and Sex Difference in Premodern Europe', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 69 (2008), pp. 193–218 (p. 195).
[18]See Barbara Obrist, *Les débuts de l'imagerie alchimique* (Le Sycomore: 1982).

Uwe Junker provided a modern German translation of the text (a complicated project, as it is written in a peculiar Bavarian dialect of Middle High German).[19]

The serpent-woman of the *Buch* is directly related to medieval images of Eve's temptation in Eden which depict the serpent with the head (and sometimes the torso) of a woman. Take, for example, a thirteenth-century depiction of Adam and Eve on the exterior of Notre Dame in Paris (Figure 3). Dated to around 1220, the carved image depicts the original couple at the moment of the Fall. Eve presses the fruit to her lips as she hands Adam his own condemning piece. Coiled around the tree trunk and sinuously peering through the branches, the serpent casts her grinning face towards Eve, delighting in the moment of transgression. The serpent has short, draconic arms that clutch the branches with talons, a scaled tail, and the head, shoulders, and breasts of a human woman. Her face, down to the shape of her nose and the wave of her hair, is similar to Eve's. This sculptural tableau of the Fall occurs directly beneath a much larger image of the crowned Virgin and Child at the top of a column; the Virgin's foot is poised to appear as if she is standing on the serpent's head, trampling the tempter underfoot. The Virgin, in her position as divine mother to Christ, eradicates the shame and moral degradation of Original Sin, so it is common to see her image paired with that of Adam and Eve in medieval iconography. Theologically, she comes into the world to replace Eve; she is a perfect woman who purifies the sins of the first, flawed woman. As Angela Lucas wrote, '[Mary] was believed to have undone the damage wrought by Eve, at the same time she was established as a model of behavior which few women could readily identify with, and as an ideal unattainable by every earthly woman.'[20]

In this curious reflection of Eve and Mary, where does the serpent-woman fit? Images of the woman-headed serpent in Eden like the Notre Dame sculpture appear

[19] Uwe Junker, *Das "Buch der Heiligen Dreifaltigkeit": in seiner zweiten, alchemistischen Fassung (Kadolzburg 1433)* (Kohlhauer, 1986).

[20] Angela M. Lucas, *Women in the Middle Ages: Religion, Marriage, and Letters* (Harvester Press, 1983), p. 24. Regarding medieval women and the figure of Mary, see also Marina Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and Cult of the Virgin Mary* (Knopf Doubleday, 1983).

also at Amiens, in illuminated manuscripts from the thirteenth century such as the *Bible moralisée* or the *Psalter of Saint-German-en-laye*, as well as later medieval manuscripts like the early fifteenth-century *Trés riches heures du Duc de Berry* (Figure 4).[21] The serpent-woman of the *Buch* finds pictorial precedence in these medieval images of Eve's temptation.

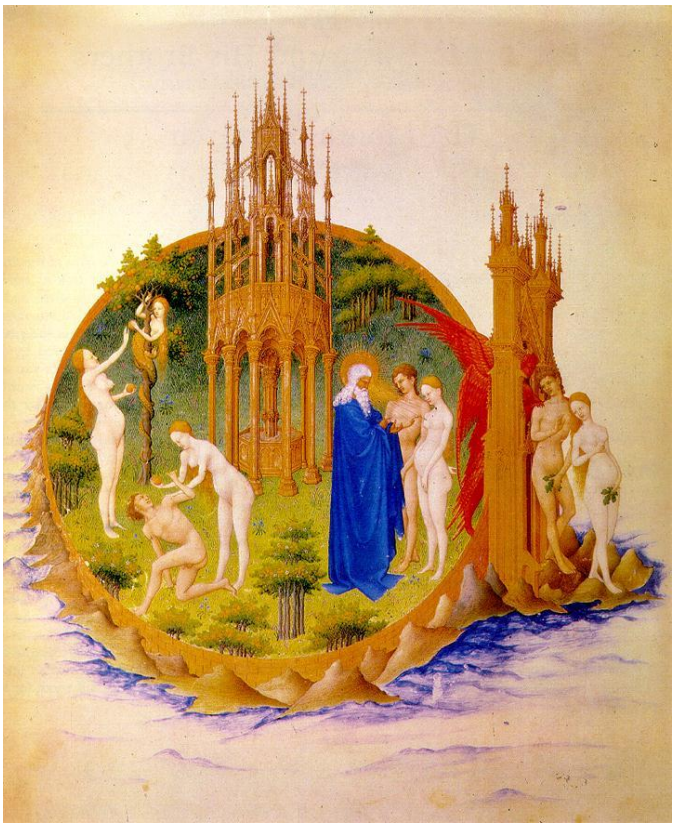


Figure 4: Limbourg Brothers, 'Expulsion from the Garden'. *Trés riches heures du Duc de Berry* (1412–16). Tempera on vellum. Condé Museum, Chantilly, France.

There are around thirty extant copies of the *Buch*, and there is some scholarly disagreement about which is the original — it is likely that the original 1419 manuscript is either the version at the Wellcome Institute in London or the Berlin MSS Codex 78 A 11. The version which I refer to throughout this article is the Munich MS BSB Cgm 598, dated to approximately 1467, primarily because it is entirely digitized and has some of the clearest, brightest images. Luckily, in the

[21] Interestingly, the *Trés riches heures* was made for the same Duke of Berry who commissioned *Le Roman de Mélusine* from Jean d'Arras, a prose text about the serpent-woman founder of the Lusignan dynasty.

several versions of the manuscript I have consulted, there appears to be little deviation in the images, besides the expected differences in quality resultant from the hands of different artists and copiers.

In the Munich MS BSB Cgm 598 *Buch*, the first image of the serpent-woman occurs early in the manuscript (fol. 2r). The image is of a crowned woman with the lower body of a snake wielding a spear alongside Adam and Eve, identifiable by their nakedness and their gestures of shame as their cover their genitalia (Figure 1). The serpent-woman's face is much like Eve's, and both women have long, disheveled, yellow hair. The serpent uses her spear to pierce Adam in the chest and blood spills down his torso. She appears again midway through the manuscript (fol. 79v), this time with her hair carefully concealed, alongside an image of Christ in front of the cross, apparently after the crucifixion, evident by his bloodied body and the presence of the stigmata (Figure 5). He gestures towards the wound from Longinus's lance in his side. The presence of the serpent-woman, still wielding her spear (or lance), perhaps indicates that it is she who has pierced Christ's side as she pierced Adam.

Figure 5: The serpent woman and Christ. *Der Buch der heiligen Dreifaltigkeit*. Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, MS BSB Cgm 598, fol. 79v.

While the serpent-woman of the *Buch* is clearly the serpentine temptress of the garden, and consequently a version of Eve, her symbolic meaning in the alchemical manuscript is less clear. The early parts of the text are eschatological in nature and concern an apocalyptic battle against the Anti-Christ, but the latter half of the manuscript describes actual alchemical laboratory processes, complete with diagrams and depictions of athanors, alembics, and other alchemical apparatuses. As previously mentioned, one of the curious aspects of the manuscript is the configuration of a Holy Trinity that includes the Virgin. Urszula Szulakowska has argued that this variation is 'probably intended merely to facilitate the development of alchemical discourse and is unlikely to be meant as a deliberate challenge to Catholic doctrine'.[22]

The use of pictorial allegory, religious or otherwise, to communicate alchemical processes is typical of medieval and early modern alchemical texts. Premodern alchemists witnessed observable chemical phenomena in their laboratories; they saw the visual changes in the metals, minerals, and chemical substances they experimented with, but they did not yet have the technological advancement of the microscope or the scientific language to accurately explain what it was they were seeing. In lieu of this, European alchemists developed a visual language for describing these subtle chemical transformations and an alchemical iconography was born.[23] This allegorical and pictorial language also had the benefit of acting as a kind of encryption for alchemical secrets. Only a learned scholar, well-read in a variety of scientific and philosophic texts, could translate the coded alchemical dialect. For example, the image of the sun symbolizes gold, a lion can represent the acidic solution *aqua regia*, Christ sometimes symbolizes the *lapis philosophorum* (the alchemical end-product that can transmute lead into gold and grant immortality), and so on. These symbols are mutable and adapted differently

[22] Szulakowska, *The Alchemical Virgin Mary*, p. 59.
[23] For a short but comprehensive discussion of the history of alchemical visualization, see Barbara Obrist, 'Visualization in Medieval Alchemy', *HYLE*, 9 (2003), pp. 131–70.

by each alchemist in their writings. Part of the *magnum opus*, the Great Work of the alchemists, is to read these texts, learn the numerous identities of each symbol, and decode their myriad meanings. These meanings then might be applied in laboratory praxis, or they might be a metaphorical guide towards spiritual gnosis and a purification of the soul through a meditative, mental alchemical journey.

What then is the allegorical meaning of the serpent-woman in the *Buch*? Based on the repeated motifs of laboratory equipment, as well as the latter half of the text itself, it seems clear that the *Buch* is not a metaphorical work, but a semi-reliable instructional handbook for the laboratory that is interpreted through eschatological Christian discourse typical of fifteenth-century German religious polemic. The serpent-woman, therefore, symbolizes some chemical element of experimental practice. Szulakowska argues that she represents an alkaline substance like the *aqua regia* that dissolves the noble metals, such as gold, mercury, silver, and iron, and while that indeed may be the case, I believe there is additional symbolic meaning to her presence.[24] Evidence for this identification is that she is shown wounding the body of Adam, who represents prime matter, which must be destroyed in the alchemical process and reforged, transmuted into something new. Visualizations of violence enacted on symbolic bodies is common in alchemical emblems. Take, for example, the image of a beheading in the fifteenth-century *Aurora consurgens*, where another serpent-woman uses an axe to decapitate an anthropomorphized sun and moon (Figure 6).

[24] Szulakowska, *The Alchemical Virgin Mary*, p. 64.

Figure 6: Serpent-woman beheads the sun and the moon. *Aurora consurgens*. Zurich, Zentralbibliothek, MS. Rh. 172, fol. 28v.
https://www.europeana.eu/en/item/9200211/en_list_one_zbz_Ms_Rh_0172.

The second image of Christ and the serpent-woman in the *Buch* (Figure 5) is likely a reflection of Christ as a second Adam, just as the Virgin is a second Eve. While Adam is the *materia prima*, a starting material, Christ is the perfected form of matter that has undergone the alchemical process. The serpent-woman, in this construction, represents the transmutative agent, a force that affects transformation. She is not a moralized figure that reflects ideas of gendered sin, but instead a crucial mediator of change, her centrality signified by the crown of nobility she wears. She is a vital aspect of the laboratory process and, without her, achievement of the *magnum opus* is not possible. This represents a stark contrast to the serpent-woman of more strictly theological images, whose monstrosity is sinful and deceptive. The alchemical serpent-woman's monstrous hybridity represents her liminality; she exists between states of matter, between woman and serpent, so that she may move in two realms and act as chemical intercessor.

MELUSINE OF LUSIGNAN

The most significant medieval iteration of the serpent-woman is Melusine of Lusignan, the mythic ancestor of the Lusignan dynasty in France. Jean d'Arras wrote

the *Roman de Mélusine* in the fourteenth century under the patronage of Jean de Berry. The text provides a foundation narrative for the powerful Lusignan House of southwestern France, claiming that the Lusignan fortress in Poitou was constructed by Melusine, a fairy woman of Celtic origin who married a nobleman named Raymond and gave him ten sons who would go on to be kings and famous knights of the Crusades. Melusine is cursed by her fairy mother to transform into a serpentine creature every Saturday. Her secondary shape is alternatively represented as a dragon or as a hybrid monster with the torso of a woman and the tail of a snake. In order to maintain her humanity, Melusine must find a husband who will not attempt to break her trust by witnessing her serpentine form.

Figure 7: Jean D'Arras, *Le Roman de Mélusine*. Bibliothèque nationale de France. MS Français 24383, fol. 19r. https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b90631148/f20.item.

Like many other medieval stories that use the motif of the taboo, Melusine and Raymond's relationship is doomed to fail. Although they live together for several decades, Raymond's curiosity about what his wife does on Saturdays never abates, and one day when the temptation becomes too much, he makes a hole in the door of Melusine's bathing chamber and spies on her, discovering, to his horror and

sorrow, his wife's secondary, monstrous body (Figure 7). Upon uncovering the betrayal, Melusine tells her husband,

> Alas! My friend, our love has turned to hatred, our tenderness into contempt, our solace and our joy into tearful remorse, our good fortune into irreversible calamity. Alas, if you had not betrayed me, I would have been redeemed, exempted from pain and torment, and I would have lived out the full course of a mortal woman's lifetime and died naturally. I would have received all the sacraments, and been buried in the Church of Our Lady in Lusignan, and every year mass would have been celebrated in my memory. Now you have cast me back into the dark abyss of penance that had held me hostage for so long on account of one misdeed. And now I must endure and suffer it until Judgement Day, all because of your betrayal.[25]

Her husband's betrayal results in a kind of damnation for Melusine. She can no longer live as a Christian woman and must instead be condemned to the pagan darkness from which her mother originates. Melusine's 'serpent half' could possibly be a metaphor for gendered sin; without the support of her husband to maintain her virtuous Christian nature, she falls into the profane form that is her inheritance from her fairy mother, perhaps paralleling womanhood's sinful inheritance from Eve. Melusine is represented as a tragic figure, an 'accessible Other', as Frederika Bain describes, 'comprised of known and unknown parts'.[26] She is a redeemable monster, but that redemption relies entirely on the integrity of her husband; like any other medieval Christian husband, he is responsible for maintaining his wife's virtue. Melusine is presented as a sympathetic character — she is a good mother, a good wife, a good Christian, the architect of Lusignan, and the founder of a dynastic line. Despite all of this, her monstrous nature proves to be her downfall, through no fault of her own, as she is presented as a victim of her husband's doubts and suspicions. This portrayal of the serpent-woman as a sympathetic monster capable of

[25] Jean d'Arras, *Melusine*, pp. 191–92.

[26] Frederika Bain, 'The Tail of Melusine: Hybridity, Mutability, and the Accessible Other', in *Melusine's Footprint: Tracing the Legacy of a Medieval Myth*, ed. by Misty Urban, Deva F. Kemmis, and Melissa Ridley Elmes (Brill, 2017), p. 20.

redemption parallels the alchemical serpent-woman that appeared in the early modern alchemical texts of Paracelsus.

PARACELSUS'S MELUSINE

While the serpent-woman appeared first in alchemical visual language in the *Buch der heiligen Dreifaltigkeit*, she entered alchemical textual discourse more popularly through the intervention of Paracelsus (c. 1493–1541). The Swiss alchemist is considered the father of modern toxicology, as he wrote extensively about the nature of poisons and the use of harmful non-organic substances, in moderation, to treat illnesses. He was one of the earliest physicians to introduce chemistry to medicine; he advocated for the careful dosage of certain minerals, salts, and metals in medical treatments.[27] He invented the first liniment made of soap and alcohol.[28] His knowledge of infection and preventing sepsis through the careful cleaning of wounds resulted in his reputation as a miracle healer. He also was interested in investigating folk medicines and was not burdened by the heavy skepticism his contemporaries had about peasant herbal remedies. He developed a personal alchemical philosophy that incorporated hermetic ideas about the macrocosms and microcosms and the spiritual nature of earthly matter. Religiously, he did not adhere to the tenants of Catholicism or the new Protestantism popular in his native Switzerland. Instead, Paracelsus believed in a Christian spiritual philosophy that directly related to his scientific practice. As he wrote in *A Book on Nymphs, Sylphs, Pygmies, and Salamanders, and On Other Spirits*, published in 1566:

[27] For further reading about Paracelsus and his contributions to modern medicine, see Martin F. Wilks, 'Bringing Chemistry to Medicine – the Contribution of Paracelsus to Modern Toxicology', *Chimia*, 74 (2020), pp. 507–08; Joseph F. Borzelleca, 'Paracelsus: Herald of Modern Toxicology', *Toxicological Sciences*, 53 (2000), pp. 2–4; Frederick W. Gibbs, '"It Depends on the Dose": Poison and Medicines in European History', *Bulletin of the History of Medicine*, 93 (2019), pp. 451–53.

[28] Paracelsus invented a medical plaster he called 'opodeldoc', which was a mixture of soap and alcohol with herbal essences. He first described opodeldoc in *Bertheonea Sive Chirurgia Minor* (Zacharias Palthenius, 1603), pp. 80 and 216.

> For it is man's function to learn about things and not be blind about them. He has been equipped to talk about the marvellous works for God and to present them. It is possible for man to explore the essence and qualities of every single work that God has created. For nothing has been created that man could not explore, and it has been created so that man may not be idle but walk in the path of God, that is, in his works […] to apply his spirit, his light, his angelic kind to the contemplation of divine objects. […] He who experiences and hears much on earth will also be learned in the resurrection while he who knows nothing, will be inferior.[29]

The pursuit of scientific knowledge was for Paracelsus an exercise in spiritual gnosis, and his medical practice was therefore inseparable from his religious beliefs. It is with this religio-scientific framework in mind that we must explore his adoption of the serpent-woman into alchemical discourse.

In *A Book on Nymphs, Sylphs, Pygmies, and Salamanders,* Paracelsus discusses the existence of elemental creatures, pondering them in a philosophical manner and analyzing them as natural phenomena. He understood them as organisms of God's creation, and he sought a significance for them in the macrocosmic construction of the physical and spiritual worlds. One of these elemental creatures that he focused on was the melusine, figuring her as a sort of generic water nymph who had a longer contextual history as a character damned by religious superstition. In Paracelsus's construction, as Melissa Ridley Elmes writes,

> Melusine becomes a form imbued with the promise of enlightenment and salvation, a dual figure representing the union of the natural and supernatural worlds. […] The alchemical Melusine serves as a bridge between the visible and the invisible, between the explicable and the inexplicable, between immortality and humanity, and between the sacred and the profane.[30]

[29] Paracelsus, 'A Book on Nymphs, Sylphs, Pygmies, and Salamanders, And On Other Spirits', in *Four Treatises of Theophrastus von Hohenheim Called Paracelsus*, ed. by Henry E. Sigerist, trans. by C. Lilian Temkin, George Rosen, Gregory Zilboorg, and Henry E. Sigerist (Johns Hopkins Press, 1941), pp. 224–25.

[30] Elmes, 'The Alchemical Transformation of Melusine', p. 94.

Specifically regarding the melusine, Paracelsus wrote that she was a *nympha* who sought to acquire an eternal soul through marriage with a human man. She was 'a *nympha*, with flesh and blood, fertile and well built to have children. She came from the nymphs to the humans on earth and lived there'.[31]

Paracelsus acknowledges that there may have been some devilish influence that allowed the melusine her ability to transmute shape, but her demonization by the Catholic Church was the result of backwards superstitious belief:

> It is stupid, however, to consider such women ghosts and devils on the basis of such happenings because they are not from Adam. […] There are more *superstitiones* in the Roman Church than in all these women and witches. And so it may be a warning that if *superstitio* turns a man into a serpent, it also turns him into a devil. That is, if it happens to nymphs, it also happens to you in the Roman Church.[32]

Paracelsus laments the melusine's unfair villanization through religious superstition and warns that the Catholic institution may victimize his readers in a similar manner. For Paracelsus, the monstrous serpent-woman is not an evil presence, but a misunderstood creature of elemental nature and unique hybridity. Through the influence of Paracelsus, this configuration of the melusine was absorbed into wider European alchemical discourse. He later would incorporate the melusine into the process for his *opus alchymicum* in the text, *De vita longa (On Long Life)*, a guide to achieving longevity through the construction of the philosopher's stone. Paracelsus's alchemical process is more theoretical than the practical nature of the *Buch*, but he describes the laboratory stage of *coniunctivo*, the chemical wedding, the separation and subsequent reunion of the masculine and feminine principles of the *materia prima*. [33] Melusine becomes the female form of the transformative substance, Mercurius, or *aqua permanens*, and she must be first separated and then rejoined with

[31] Paracelsus, 'A Book on Nymphs', p. 246.

[32] Ibid.

[33] See Melissa Ridley Elmes, 'The Alchemical Transformation of Melusine', as well as Carl Jung's commentary on 'Paracelsus as a Spiritual Phenomenon', in *Alchemical Studies*, trans. by R. F. C. Hull (Princeton University Press, 1967), pp. 109–88 and Carl Jung, *Mysterium Coniunctionis*, trans. by Gerard Adher and R. F. C. Hull (Princeton University Press, 1977).

the masculine property of Mercurius in order to create the *materia prima*.[34] Having previously used an Aphrodite-Venus figure to represent this feminine, transformative principle, Paracelsus at times substitutes the melusine rather than the more humanoid Aphrodite-Venus.[35] Mercury and sulfur are two of the most important alchemical elements, a pair of polar substances defined by their humoral nature — mercury as wet and cold, sulfur as hot and dry — and envisioned as female and male, moon and sun, respectively in alchemical imagery.[36] In *De vita longa*, the two halves of the *materia prima* are then combined into the hermaphroditic form of Primordial Man, a visualization of prelapsarian humanity as matter in its prime state.[37]

The melusine is associated with the humoral feminine qualities of water, earth, and cold. She becomes indispensable to Paracelsus's chemical wedding, and as Elmes writes, 'Melusine is essential to this process both in her hybrid form, as the female, sexual, unifying aspect that brings together human and nature'.[38] Like the serpent-woman of the *Buch*, Paracelsus's melusine is an agent of transformation important to the alchemical process. Both melusines exist within the respective authors' experimental approach to the overlap of Christian gnosis and alchemy. Paracelsus's framework, and the place of the melusine in it, is more straightforward in text as opposed to the somewhat occluded and enigmatic purpose of the melusine images in the *Buch*. Despite this, there seem to be shared threads of symbolic meaning in the serpent-woman's liminal nature and transformative powers. The

[34] Elmes, 'Alchemical Melusine', p. 100.
[35] See Elmes, 'Alchemical Melusine', p. 99, and her detailed exploration of this complex configuration in Paracelsus's *De vita longa*.
[36] For an example of this imagery, see the emblem 'Figura VI: Queen Mercury marrying King Sulfur' in D. Stolcius von Stolcenberg, *Viridarium chymicum figuris cupro incisis adornatum, et poeticis picturis illustratum* (L. Jennis, 1624), p. C1; or 'Mercury, the White Queen', in *Splendor Solis*, The British Library, MS Harley 3469, fol. 27v.
[37] The alchemical hermaphrodite, also called the androgyne or rebus, is frequently used as a metaphorical proxy for *materia prima*, also seen in visual form with the hermaphrodite of *Aurora consurgens*, as previously discussed.
[38] Ibid.

primary difference seems to be Paracelsus's departure from the more heavy-handed religious themes in the *Buch*, choosing instead to explore alchemy through a vague concept of spirituality rather than the dedicated symbolism of biblical figures. In both contexts, the melusine acts as an intercessory figure, bridging binaries — the material and spiritual, the human and animal, the male and female. This might make for a more explicit connection between the Virgin Mary and the melusine in the *Buch*, especially if we regard that melusine as a pseudo-Eve who parallels the Virgin's role in the Holy Trinity. Although the comparison is less apparent in Paracelsus's writings, the melusine is still overtly presented as an intercessor between worlds, a characterization that has unavoidable resemblance to the Virgin.

While it is unknown whether Paracelsus ever encountered a copy of the *Buch*, it is possible, perhaps even likely, that both Paracelsus and the author of the *Buch* independently decided to incorporate the serpent-woman as a symbolic aspect of their alchemical practices. The image of the serpent was long associated with alchemy in motifs like the caduceus of the science's mythical founder, Hermes Trismegistus, or in the ancient symbol of the ouroboros, first visually connected with alchemy in *The Chrysopoeia of Cleopatra*, a Greco-Egyptian work dated as early as the third century, where the ouroboros symbolized unity and duality (Figure 8).[39] The gendering of metals and chemicals is also central to alchemy, and so femininity is a critical concept that must be imbued into alchemical metaphors and symbols. The inclusion of the serpent-woman as symbol, therefore, was a logical innovation for medieval alchemical texts. This is especially the case when considering the ubiquity of the serpent-woman in medieval theological images (the serpent in the Garden as Eve-mirror), and the European folkloric tradition of the melusine. Already surrounded by images and stories of serpent-women, the medieval alchemists embraced her for their own purposes.

[39] This alchemical text is single leaf document containing symbols and drawings, first found in the tenth-century manuscript MS Marciana gr. Z. 299 at the Biblioteca Marciana, Venice.

Figure 8: Ouroboros. Venice, Biblioteca nazionale marciana, MS Marciana gr. Z. 299, fol. 188v.

It is perhaps important to mention that Paracelsus imagined another configuration of the serpent-woman within his textual corpus. Paracelsus uses the basilisk as a symbol of unnatural generation and monstrous birth in several texts, as medieval folkloric belief was that the basilisk, a serpentine monster, was born from the homosexual copulation of two roosters, who inexplicably lay an egg which is then incubated by a toad.[40] Paracelsus also used the basilisk's other notorious characteristic, its deadly gaze, to explain 'action at a distance', such as epidemic diseases and plagues that spread rapidly within large populations.[41] He also made a connection between the basilisk and the nature of women when he wrote in *De causis morborum invisibilium* about the potentially deleterious power of a woman's imagination:

> [The woman's imagination] acts the same as do the eyes of the basilisk: whomever it glances at is killed by it. […] The imagination of women directs itself. This is why *menstruum* is the material of the work for which only women are responsible. […] Women's imagination is so great that they have [been capable of] imagining a *menstruum* of that sort, [projecting it] into the intermediate heavens. Through the power of their imagining, they have formed out of it the object which they had seen painted or sketched in front of their eyes.[42]

[40] For a nuanced discussion of the basilisk as it appears in genuine Paracelsus and Pseudo-Paracelsus texts, see William R. Newman, 'Bad Chemistry: Basilisks and Women in Paracelsus and pseudo-Paracelsus', *Ambix*, 67 (2020), pp. 30–46.

[41] Newman, 'Bad Chemistry', p. 34.

[42] Paracelsus, *De causis morborum invisibilium*, in *Paracelsus (Theophrastus Bombastus von Hohenheim, 1493-1541): Essential Theoretical Writings*, ed. and trans. by Andrew Weeks (Brill, 2008), pp. 817–21.

Paracelsus connected that monstrous serpent, the basilisk, with the imaginative and malevolent eye of a menstruating woman. William R. Newman claims that Paracelsus used the basilisk as a model of monstrous generation and action at a distance; it represented deadly, highly transmissible disease as well as the danger of a woman's imagination and strange phenomena of the natural world. The melusine, in contrast, is the virtuous serpent-monster, whose monstrosity is not unnatural at all, but a result of her misunderstood elemental status. These two configurations of the serpent-monster in Paracelsian texts are not, therefore, conflicting: one is the generative chemical shepherdess, agent of change and construction, and the other a monstrous result of disorder in the natural world akin to plague and disease. Paracelsus's serpent-monster has the potential to be both curative and lethal, and it is the practical and proper work of the alchemist or physician that determines which she will be. While this configuration still privileges a masculine creative agency, it provides an outlet of salvation for the serpent-woman that the Christian construction of the serpent in the Garden does not.

CONCLUSION: *DRACO MULIEREM* AND THE PERSISTENCE OF THE ALCHEMICAL MELUSINE

After Paracelsus, the melusine figure was adopted into the alchemical visual lexicon. She appears, for example, in the *Clavis artis* (c. 1700) as a watery serpent or mermaid with the symbol for mercury above her head (Figure 9). She brings together the male and female principles, labeled with the sun and moon above their heads, in the chemical wedding. Whether she is configured as a serpent, a dragon, or a fish-woman, her hybrid bodies reappear throughout the visual history of alchemy. In the seventeenth-century alchemical emblem book, *Atlanta fugiens*, the serpent-woman is imagined in new shape with the figuration of *draco mulierem* (Figure 10). A woman and a winged serpent lie coiled together in a grave, engaged in a strange coupling as they appear to kiss. This binding union of opposite bodies is the final emblem of

Michael Maier's book, and the text accompanying it implies that the conjunction of woman and dragon is a fitting end to a text on alchemical process, revealing 'the secrets of almost the whole art.'[43] The sensuous embrace of woman and serpent symbolizes doubling, death, and rebirth, the central philosophical tenets of alchemy and spiritual gnostic process.

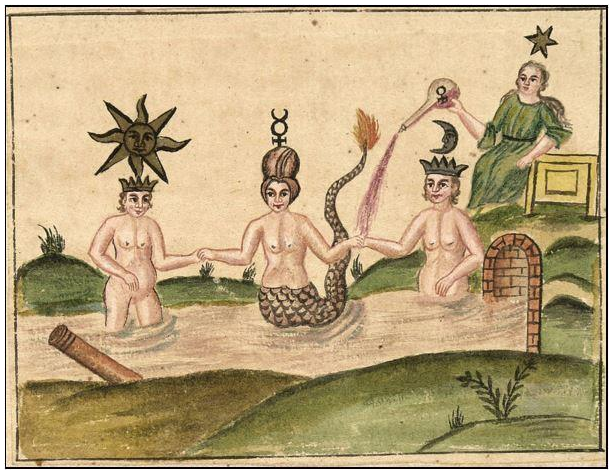
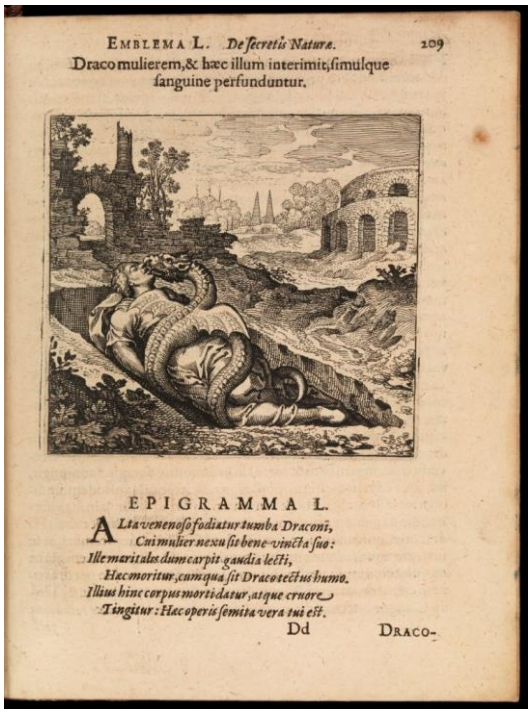


Figure 9: *Zoroaster Clavis Artis*. Trieste, Biblioteca Civica Hortis, MS-2-27, vol. 2, p. 27.



EMBLEMA L. *De secretis Natura.* 209

Draco mulierem, & hæc illum interimit, simulque sanguine perfunduntur.

EPIGRAMMA L.

A Lta venenoso fodiatur tumba Draconi,
Cui mulier nexu sit bene-vincta suo:
Ille maritalis dum carpit gaudia lecti,
Hæc moritur, cum qua sit Draco tectus humo.
Illius hinc corpus mortis datur, atque cruore
Tingitur: Hæc operis semita vera tui est.

Dd DRACO-

Figure 10: Michael Maier, *Atlanta fugiens* (Johann Theodor de Bry, 1617), p. 209. Emblem 50: 'Draco mulierem'.

[43] Michael Maier, *Atlanta fugiens,* (Johann Theodor de Bry, 1617), p. 209.

Through this research, it is my contention that the alchemical serpent-woman is a figure of transformation who is empowered through the liminality of her hybrid body. In alchemical context, she transcends any moralizing meaning and instead, like the base and noble metals that compose the prime materials of the alchemical process, she is a vital and inseparable aspect of the *magnum opus*. This fulfills Paracelsus's proclamation that the melusine is not a demon, but a villainized and misunderstood *nympha*, an elemental creature unfairly targeted for her non-Christian origins, like the pseudo-historical serpent-woman Melusine of Lusignan. Early modern alchemical discourse favors interpretations that refuse to malign or cast ethical judgement on natural materials, instead valuing the scientific worth of all God's creations. It was this method of thinking that allowed Paracelsus in his toxicological research to discover that even poisons, in measured quantities, have medical benefits. While contemporary feminist discourse rightfully causes us to cringe at the conflation of women with toxic substances, this was a rupture in misogynistic medieval gender discourse that was possible through alchemical-thinking and a conception of the natural world as gendered both male and female, inherently sacred, and ultimately good.

To briefly return to the alchemical hermaphrodite as investigated by Leah DeVun previously mentioned in this paper (Figure 2), there is a close parallel to be made between the hermaphrodite and the melusine as alchemical symbols of change and liminality, but from an expanded perspective, they are also both notable examples of non-normative and arguably queer bodies appearing in late medieval visual culture. This furthers the argument previously made by scholars like DeVun that queerness was an indivisible aspect of premodern alchemy. These images and conceptions of queer and hybrid bodies were essential to alchemical visualization and to the practitioner's process. Both the hermaphrodite and the melusine share a utility in guiding the human spirit towards alchemical knowledge. These explorative and imaginative thought exercises, ruminating on the protean nature of gender and

the body, were necessary for alchemical transformation. The combining of binary opposites, male and female or human and bestial, brings the thinker closer to an absolute and complete epistemological comprehension of the macrocosm.

The act of seeking spiritual gnosis through the contemplation of these images familiarizes one with non-normative, different bodies. The study of alchemy plays with notions of different corporealities in a way that could be interpreted as an alternative to dominant ways of thinking promoted by medieval theological and political authorities.[44] The cultural result of this bodily reconfiguration in thought is difficult to track, but it could potentially represent a stepping-stone on the path towards more modern and receptive ideas about gender and sex. The evidence of this could perhaps be seen in the sheer number of premodern women alchemists that existed. Unlike other scientific pursuits that required more formal university education and were therefore closed to female scholars, alchemy's creative spiritual-science and alternative nature made it more accessible.[45] This does not necessarily denote alchemy as a socially progressive science in the medieval world, but it does demonstrate a consistent sense of imaginative openness about sex and gender that is particular to the history of alchemy. This logic of imaginative hybridity is essential to understanding the function of the alchemical melusine.

I posit that the serpent-woman image, her body inherently transgressive, is a visual realization of this openness and creative thought. Borrowed from medieval literary tradition, she is an ideal figural representation of hybridity who appealed to writers, illustrators, and readers of alchemical texts. Her body came to symbolize

[44] Kathleen P. Long, 'Odd Bodies: Reviewing Corporeal Difference in Early Modern Alchemy,' in *Gender and Scientific Discourse in Early Modern Culture*, ed. by Kathleen P. Long (Routledge, 2010), pp. 63–86 (p. 74).

[45] Many examples of premodern female alchemists can be found in texts such as Robin L. Gordon, *Searching for the Soror Mystica*: *The Lives and Science of Women Alchemists* (University Press of America, 2013); Meredith K. Ray, *Daughters of Alchemy: Women and Scientific Culture in Early Modern Italy* (Harvard University Press, 2015); *Gender and Scientific Discourse in Early Modern Culture*, ed. by Kathleen P. Long (Ashgate, 2010); and Tara Nummedal, *Anna Zieglerin and the Lion's Blood: Alchemy and the End Times in Reformation Germany* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019).

both chemical and spiritual change in its dual corporeality. In all her configurations referenced throughout this paper, the melusine's liminal body acts as a bridge between two states of being. In her intercessory role, she defies the boundaries and attempts at categorization prevalent in traditionalist discourse, instead requiring a more mutable and radical mode of thinking that seems endemic to premodern alchemical thought.

Present and Absent Metamorphosis in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and David Lowery's *The Green Knight* (2021)

Dunja Haufe
University of Freiburg

In the recent film adaptation, The Green Knight *(2021), director David Lowery incorporates a number of alterations to the fourteenth-century source material,* Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. *One impactful change is the omission of the metamorphic potential of the Green Knight and the resulting disconnection between the supernatural challenger and Bertilak, the human character. Drawing on theoretical frameworks such as monster studies and ecocriticism, this article analyses the major effects of both the transformation in the poem and its cinematic exclusion. Due to the lack of transformation in the film, the Green Knight does not undergo a process of humanisation, which leads to a strengthening of his supernatural quality instead of the original's lessening of it. This transposition to the non-human realm is furthered by emphasising his link to nature, and heavily affects the power dynamics within the narrative. All these alterations ultimately favour an ecocritical reading of the film and lay the foundation for a potential re-evaluation of the medieval poem's relationship to nature.*

Metamorphosis is a transgeographical and transhistorical cultural phenomenon that, in the arts, encapsulates change on a visual and abstract level. As we have to navigate rapidly changing worlds while at the same time being prone to strive for evolution, metamorphoses are legion as themes in narratives and images. As Santiago Barreiro and Luciana Russo explain, metamorphosis turns its objects/agents

into 'taxonomy-breaking beings who embody difference', a description that reveals the inherent monstrous aspect of transforming something familiar into something uncanny and unknown.[1] Such, in Caroline Bynum's words, 'destabilizings of expectation' result in the labelling of shapeshifting in general as an act of transgression and norm-defiance.[2] Metamorphosis thus not only encompasses some key anxieties of and potential threats to societies at large, but can also be understood as one indicator of monstrosity.

At the same time, the destabilisation of normative perceptions also bears a great subversive potential, because it highlights the artificiality of cultural and social norms. This possibility to undermine dominant discourses is likely one of the reasons for the great prevalence of metamorphoses and their objects/agents in a vast number of cultures around the world, past and present. Attesting to their popularity is the presence of shapeshifting in the portrayal of medieval monsters in modern literature and film — though many such adaptations differ from their premodern sources in order to make them more appealing to a contemporary audience, the werewolf being one of the better-known examples for such a change in representation.[3] This form of drawing inspiration from the Middle Ages and thereby

[1] Santiago Barreiro and Luciana Cordo Russo, 'Introduction', in *Shapeshifters in Medieval North Atlantic Literature*, ed. by Santiago Barreiro and Luciana Cordo Russo (Amsterdam University Press, 2019), pp. 9–19 (p. 13).
[2] Caroline Walker Bynum, *Metamorphosis and Identity* (Zone Books, 2001), p. 31.
[3] See, for instance, Leslie A. Sconduto, *Metamorphoses of the Werewolf: A Literary Study from Antiquity through the Renaissance* (McFarland & Company, 2008).

'comment[ing] on the artist's contemporary sociocultural milieu' is generally referred to as medievalism.[4]

One example for such a re-imagining of medieval source material is the recent film adaptation of the late-fourteenth-century poem *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.[5] Directed by David Lowery, *The Green Knight* (2021) follows the larger plot points of the poem by focusing on the adventures of the Arthurian knight Sir Gawain.[6] During Christmas, the Arthurian court's festivities are interrupted by the sudden intrusion of a literal green knight who challenges the court to a game. He demands that one knight strike him and bear a return strike in one year's time. Gawain accepts the challenge on his king's behalf and decapitates the Green Knight. The monstrous half-giant, however, simply picks up his head and leaves to meet Gawain at the Green Chapel at the appointed time. Gawain sets out to face his fate and the narrative follows his quest, including his stay at the human lord Bertilak's court and the eventual re-encounter with the Green Knight. The plot twist: in the poem it is revealed that the Green Knight is actually the human Bertilak, who has been transformed by the malicious Morgan le Fay to attack Queen Guinevere and indirectly destabilise the Arthurian court — a revelation that is entirely omitted in Lowery's adaptation.

[4] Tison Pugh and Angela Jane Weisl, *Medievalisms: Making the Past in the Present* (Routledge, 2013), p. 1.

[5] All quotes have been taken from 'Sir Gawain and the Green Knight', in *The Complete Works of the Pearl Poet*, ed. by Malcolm Andrew, Ronald Waldron, and Clifford Peterson, trans. by Casey Finch (University of California Press, 1993), pp. 209–321. Henceforth referred to as *Sir Gawain*.

[6] *The Green Knight*, dir. by David Lowery (USA/Canada, 2021).

This omission has drastic consequences for the film's plot: instead of eventually returning to the known human domain as the literary equivalent does, the film's Green Knight remains firmly in monstrous and supernatural territory. Lowery expands upon the content presented in the medieval source material in his portrayal of the Green Knight's non-human monstrosity, as well as his status as a personification of nature. Drawing on ecocritical approaches and monster studies — two theoretical fields that overlap in the figure of the Green Knight in meaningful ways — I argue that the film's emphatic description of the Green Knight's link to nature, as well as the omission of the metamorphosis, position him as a deity-like creature with an amount of agency far exceeding his fourteenth-century counterpart. The film thus offers an ecocritical reading that depicts nature as potentially monstrous, but undeniably powerful and enduring in the face of humanity's temporary presence in the world — a reconstruction that partially reframes the poem as well.

There are several scholars who have, directly or indirectly, read the poem through an ecocritical lens. Gillian Rudd, for instance, claims that the Green Knight 'reflect[s] the concept of nature in equilibrium'.[7] Alden Wood uses the medieval poem to call for a less static view on what constitutes the categories of human and nature.[8] Jeffrey Cohen contends that the Green Knight's survival of the beheading

[7] Gillian Rudd, 'Being Green in Late Medieval English Literature', in *The Oxford Handbook of Ecocriticism*, ed. by Greg Garrard (Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 27–39 (p. 35).
[8] Alden Wood, '"Weaving" a New Dialectics of Ecology: Reading *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* in the Anthropocene', *Interdisciplinary Humanities*, 32.3 (2015), pp. 100–09.

game indicates 'a survival beyond death that declares green entanglement within a world exceeding the human'.[9] Michael Twomey uses the ecocritical approach to analyse the literary forests in *Sir Gawain* and relate them to the historical context of forest ecology, and Iris Ralph focuses on the poem's portrayal of hunting as a sport when associating the Green Knight with the hunted fox.[10] Michael George makes a similar argument when he identifies two apparently contradictory medieval attitudes towards the natural environment expressed in the poem: 'domination on Gawain's part and stewardship on Bertilak's'.[11] Although I disagree with George's disregard of the notion of human exceptionalism in his reading of the hunting scenes, his identification of the two discourses on nature is convincing.[12] Sarah Higley takes a new approach when turning her attention to modern adaptations of the poem, namely, *The Green Knight*. She compares the medieval text with Lowery's translation of the poem into film, remarking on the former's ultimately anthropocentric perspective, and Lowery's attempt to present a more 'environmentally conscious story of a young man struggling to discover his meaningfulness within the natural and the human world'.[13] Lowery, thus, expands

[9] Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, 'The Love of Life: Reading *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* Close to Home', in *Premodern Ecologies in the Modern Literary Imagination*, ed. by Vin Nardizzi and Tiffany Jo Werth (University of Toronto Press, 2019), pp. 25–58 (p. 35).

[10] Michael W. Twomey, 'How Green was the Green Knight? Forest Ecology at Hautdesert', in *Arthurian Literature 30*, ed. by Elizabeth Archibald and David F. Johnson (D.S. Brewer, 2013), pp. 27–53. Iris Ralph, 'An Animal Studies and Ecocritical Reading of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*', *Neohelicon*, 44 (2017), pp. 431–44.

[11] Michael W. George, 'Gawain's Struggle with Ecology: Attitudes toward the Natural World in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*', *The Journal of Ecocriticism*, 2.2 (2010), pp. 30–44 (p. 39).

[12] Ibid., pp. 37–38.

[13] Sarah L. Higley, 'David Lowery's *The Green Knight*: An Ecocinematic Dialogue between Film and Poem', *Medieval Ecocriticisms*, 2 (2022), pp. 53–87 (p. 57).

on the fourteenth-century source material in true medievalism fashion, that is, by augmenting those features of the poem that are already suggestive of ecocritical undertones.

Such a fortification of his nature-related features bolsters the Green Knight's independent agency and, ultimately, positions him as a god-like entity. This depiction also enhances both his overall supernatural qualities, in particular his monstrosity. The formula of 'emphasised links to nature increases supernatural-ness increases monstrosity' that can be applied to the portrayal of the Green Knight, requires a short excursion into the analysis of monsters in general. The supernatural has been lurking in the human imagination since premodern times, with monsters and monstrosity playing an important role in the concept's definition and depiction. Aristotle, for instance, claims that monsters are 'contrary to Nature', a perspective that to a certain extent, still exists in today's conception of monstrosity.[14] Isidore of Seville explains that the term '*monstrum*' is linked to '*demonstrare*' ('to indicate') and '*monstrare*' ('to show'), thus highlighting the dual function of monsters in societies that combines warning and teaching.[15] Augustine insists that monsters are, despite their alterity, part of God's creation — again, a point of view that can also be found, to an extent, in contemporary religious discourses.[16] Modern theorizing of monsters

[14] *Aristotle XIII: Generation of Animals*, trans. by A.L. Peck (Harvard University Press, 1942), p. 425, IV. iv.
[15] *The Etymologies of Isidore of Seville*, ed. by Stephen A. Barney, W. J. Lewis, J. A. Beach, and Oliver Berghof (Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 244, XI. iii. 3.
[16] *Augustine: The City of God Against the Pagans*, trans. by Eva Matthews Sanford and William McAllen Green (Harvard University Press, 1965), p. 45, XVI. viii.

as an academic field emerged in the late twentieth century. One key contribution is Cohen's seminal essay 'Monster Culture (Seven Theses)', in which he 'offer[s] seven theses toward understanding cultures through the monsters they bear'.[17] Other groundbreaking works on the conception of the monstrous include J. R. R. Tolkien's 'Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics', and John Friedman's *The Monstrous Races in Medieval Art and Thought*, a leading monograph on the Plinian monsters. Interest in monstrosity evidently has a long history and plays a fundamental role in the sociopolitical context of premodern societies and their conceptions of alterity and identity.

In *Sir Gawain*, the Green Knight's monstrosity takes an in-your-face approach: he is described as a green giant on a green horse, carrying an axe and, in Rudd's words, 'demanding respect through his mid-winter challenge' — a game that promises a violent outcome, despite the original rule simply stating '*a strok for anoþer*' ('one stroke for another'), and the resulting decapitation being of a temporary nature only.[18] Whether it is Gawain immediately jumping to homicidal conclusions, or the supernatural challenger purposely withholding information to create uncertainty and confusion, the game itself becomes the framework in which the monstrous behavioural tendencies of both players are revealed.

[17] Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, 'Monster Culture (Seven Theses)', in *Classic Readings on Monster Theory: Demonstrare Volume 1*, ed. by Asa Simon Mittman and Marcus Hensel (Arc Humanities Press, 2018), pp. 43–54 (p. 44).

[18] Rudd, p. 35. *Sir Gawain*, pp. 222–23, l. 287. Larissa Tracy, '"So He Smote of Hir Hede by Mysse fortune": The Real Price of the Beheading Game in *SGGK* and Malory', in *Heads Will Roll: Decapitation in the Medieval and Early Modern Imagination*, ed. by Larissa Tracy and Jeff Massey (Brill, 2012), pp. 207–31.

In terms of the Green Knight's physical monstrosity, it is in particular his '*enker grene*' ('vivid green') complexion and his giant size that have drawn attention from scholars throughout the years.[19] The green colour has here taken a two-fold position, as symbol of both his monstrous quality and his link to nature. Some scholars see the greenness as originating from potential source material, like Helmut Nickel, who contends that it is due to a mistranslation from a possible French source that would also link the supernatural challenger to the figure of the wild man, or Lawrence Warner, who suggests a potential Islamic source for the striking colouring.[20] Others have read the 'vivid green' as highlighting the Knight's intertwinement with the natural environment, thus pointing back to the more or less explicit ecological interpretations of the poem and putting an ecocritical and a monster studies approach in direct conversation with one another. Larry Benson, for instance, sees the Knight's complexion as the 'one unconventional element' in his description that both links him to nature and the green man, and also adds to the overall ambiguity regarding his moral stance.[21] Rudd continues this argument by calling the interpretation of the Green Knight as a representative of nature due to his

[19] *Sir Gawain*, p. 216, l. 150. In this particular instance, I follow the translation provided by the MED, instead of the one offered by Finch: 'enker grene', in *Middle English Dictionary*, <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english-dictionary/dictionary/MED13883/track?counter=1&search_id=61030084> [accessed 8 October 2025].

[20] Helmut Nickel, 'Why was the Green Knight Green?', *Arthurian Interpretations*, 2.2 (1988), pp. 58–64. Lawrence Warner, '*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and the Alliterative Tradition', in *The Routledge Companion to Medieval English Literature*, ed. by Raluca Radulescu and Sif Ríkharðsdóttir (Routledge, 2022), pp. 268–77 (p. 270).

[21] Larry D. Benson, *Art and Tradition in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (Rutgers University Press, 1965), p. 91.

striking colouring 'the usual reading of this figure'.[22] Bella Millett, in contrast, insists that such readings of the Knight are artificial and tainted by modern ideology. Rather, she argues, he is green simply because it is an unnatural colour for humans and horses, and may actually 'be seen as a plot-device'.[23] While I agree with Millett's insistence to rely on a close reading of the medieval source, I align myself to the side advocating a more or less strongly pronounced link to the natural environment. I disagree with the dismissal of the Green Knight as nothing more than a plot device due to his extensive characterisation in the poem and amount of screen time he is granted, both as Bertilak and as the supernatural challenger.

A number of scholars have interpreted the striking colouring more explicitly as a marker of the Green Knight's monstrosity. Derek Brewer finds the Green Knight's complexion a 'signal of his strangeness'. It 'is supernatural simply because it is *not* natural'.[24] Given the conceptual closeness of the supernatural with monstrosity, the logical conclusion of Brewer's claim would be a recognition of the greenness as being indicative of the Knight's monstrous character. Both Benson and Rudd make similar arguments in their respective texts, where they acknowledge the colour's association with the devil.[25] Georgina Anderson alludes to Cohen's analysis of monsters and their function in and effect on society when she calls the Green

[22] Rudd, p. 35.
[23] Bella Millett, 'How Green is the Green Knight?', *Nottingham Medieval Studies,* 38 (1994), pp. 138–51 (p. 146).
[24] Derek Brewer, 'A Supernatural Enemy in Green in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*', in *Supernatural Enemies*, ed. by Hilda Ellis Davidson and Anna Chaudhri (Carolina Academic Press, 2001), pp. 61–70 (pp. 65 and 70).
[25] Benson, p. 91. Rudd, p. 33.

Knight an 'uncanny figure' with 'destabilizing power'.[26] Helen Cooper incorporates the emotional reaction commonly exhibited in the face of monsters and monstrosity by claiming that the Green Knight's 'appearance' is 'shocking' and something the audience is not prepared for.[27] Indeed, I would add that the Green Knight's demand to play a game that is based on physical violence, the outcome of which is, presumably, deadly, only serves to further these monstrous associations.

Such a reading of the Knight's greenness as a marker of monstrosity is particularly strong when combining it with his giant size. The giant is a well-known figure in the Middle Ages, whose monstrosity was predominantly based on sexual and social transgressions, as well as immeasurable and violent behaviour. The giant 'knows neither limit nor control […and] the desires to which his excessive form gives instant expression mark him as not quite human'.[28] What is more, as Cohen explains about medieval giants in general, they usually do not carry the chivalric weapon, the sword, but instead a more primitive tool that further indicates their distance from society and civilisation. The club — sometimes wood, sometimes iron, always crude in its simplicity — became the 'inevitable weapon of the giant of

[26] Georgina Anderson, 'Masculinity, Monstrosity, and the Uncanny in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and David Lowery's *The Green Knight* (2021)', in *Unveiling the Green Knight*, ed. by Jonathan Fruoco (Presses Universitaires de Paris Nanterre, 2024), pp. 115–39 (p. 116).
[27] Helen Cooper, 'The Supernatural', in *A Companion to the Gawain-Poet*, ed. by Derek Brewer and Jonathan Gibson (D.S. Brewer, 1997), pp. 277–91 (p. 287).
[28] Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, *Of Giants: Sex, Monsters, and the Middle Ages* (University of Minnesota Press, 1999), p. 38.

medieval romance'.[29] Thus, combining the Green Knight's size with his strange and unnatural colouring seems to firmly establish his monstrosity at the very first glance.

There are, however, several problems with this particular line of argument, at least with regard to the medieval portrayal of the Green Knight, which describes his physique as follow:

> Þer hales in at þe halle dor an aghlich mayster,
> On þe most on þe molde on mesure hyghe;
> Fro þe swyre to þe swange so sware and so þik,
> And his lyndes and his lymes so longe and so grete,
> Half-etayn in erde I hope þat he were,
> Bot mon most I algate mynn hym to bene[30]
>
> (When in haste to the hall came a haughty, bold man,
> In his stature the stoutest who stood on the earth.
> From his neck to his waist he was wondrously strong;
> His loins and limbs were both lengthy and great.
> I might hold him a half-giant, haughty on earth,
> But maintain he's a man, though mighty and large)

Although the Green Knight is said to have a body that is '*longe*' and '*grete*', he is never called an actual giant. Instead, the term '*Half-etayn*' is used, which already carries the undertones of an intertwinement of monstrous and human heritages. However, the poet takes this contradiction one step further when he points out that

[29] Cohen, *Of Giants*, p. 85.
[30] *Sir Gawain*, pp. 216–17, ll. 136–141.

the supernatural Knight's appearance is deceiving, and he is, in fact, a full '*mon*'. A similarly contradictory description is used for the objects associated with the Green Knight: his axe is described in much detail as '*al bigrauen with grene in gracios werkes*' ('[e]ngraved with green and graceful details'), which contrasts with the giant's stereotypical primitive weapon of choice.[31] He is also riding a '*grene hors gret and þikke*' ('green steed, great and wild'), bringing to mind the human/horse complex, a feature 'integral to knighthood', and both his garments and accessories are easily identifiable as finely crafted and man-made.[32] All these elements and descriptions would firmly situate the Green Knight in the chivalric and, thus, human category instead of the monstrous one. What is more, such a categorisation is visible from the very beginning during the half-giant's entrance scene, where 'the poem's narrator is adamant in maintaining the Green Knight's humanness'.[33] The attribution to the 'natural' is further supported by Arthur's deference when referring to the Green Knight as '*Sir cortays kny3t*' ('fine knight').[34] The contradicting associations of monstrosity and humanness cast the Knight in incertitude from the moment of his first appearance. In so doing, the green half-giant's portrayal points towards the threat that an unstable body can be perceived as by society, fitting well with Cohen's third thesis that delineates monsters as 'disturbing hybrids whose externally incoherent bodies resist attempts to include them in any systematic structuration'.[35]

[31] *Sir Gawain*, pp. 218–19, l. 216.
[32] *Sir Gawain*, pp. 216–17, l. 175. Cohen, *Of Giants*, p. 104.
[33] Wood, p. 102.
[34] *Sir Gawain*, pp. 222–23, l. 276.
[35] Cohen, 'Monster Culture', p. 45.

The fact that the Green Knight transgresses a multitude of borders in his mesh-up of the categories 'man', 'knight', 'half-giant', and 'supernatural challenger' only further enhances his monstrous character and, subsequently, his ambiguity.

This ambiguity finds its climax in the revelation that the Green Knight has been a victim of Morgan le Fay's sorcery and was the human lord Bertilak all along:

> Weldez non so hyȝe hawtesse
> Þat ho ne con make ful tame–
> 'Ho wayned me vpon þis wyse to your wynne halle
> For to assay þe surquidré, ȝif hit soth were
> Þat rennes of þe grete renoun of þe Rounde Table;
> Ho wayned me þis wonder your wyttez to reue,
> For to haf greued Gaynour and gart hir to dyȝe
> With glopnyng of þat ilke gome þat gostlych speked
> With his hede in his honde bifore þe hyȝe table.[36]
>
> (The proud and prosperous
> She'll dominate and tame.
> "In this shape Morgan sent me to seek out your hall,
> For the purpose of putting its pride to the test,
> And arraigning the Round Table's richly famed knights.
> She bewitched me this way to bewilder you all,
> And to goad Guinevere to a grievous death
> From her shock at the sight of a strange, bright green man
> As he hailed the hall with his head in his grip.)

[36] *Sir Gawain*, pp. 318–19, ll. 2454–62.

Though it remains uncertain exactly how innocent (read: powerless) the Green Knight really is, the way Bertilak portrays the situation definitely frames Morgan as the instigator. After all, it was she who ordered the supernatural challenger to the Arthurian court and she who dominated him.[37] Regardless of the (un)reliability of Bertilak as a narrator, however, this shift in blame leads to a drastic change in power dynamics and thus to a reframing of the monstrous and supernatural Knight, who is suddenly put in the inferior position of a servant or a pawn. Instead of calling for his damnation, it now is impossible to not somewhat pity him. Before, the Green Knight was perceived to be a dangerous and independent agent, equipped with the power to make free choices and act upon them. Now, his level of agency has been drastically reduced and his independence all but disappeared.

Thus, it is the incorporation of the magical metamorphosis into the narrative that ultimately decreases the Green Knight's perceived supernatural quality and humanises him. Such an effect has already been acknowledged by scholars, with Benson, for example, suggesting that the transformation indirectly 'assures us of the humanity of the challenger'.[38] Cooper makes similar claims when she argues that the supernatural Knight cannot possibly be a devil because he is, first and foremost, Gawain's human host.[39] Jayme Yeo adds to that by contending that the revelation of

[37] Morgan's active role also adds another layer of monstrous behaviour to the table: female monstrosity and the overall misogynist discourse has quite a long history and was a prevalent source of supposedly true information during the medieval period. For more information, see Charity Urbanski, *Medieval Monstrosity: Imagining the Monstrous in Medieval Europe* (Routledge, 2024).
[38] Benson, p. 94.
[39] Cooper, p. 288.

the dual identity reduces the threat the Green Knight poses to the Arthurian court drastically, 'dissolving [him] into a delusion wrought upon the community in a game played among women'.[40] All come to the conclusion, more or less explicitly, that although the Green Knight is indeed a transformed human — a monstrous aspect in itself, all the more so when taking into consideration that the source of his predicament is the witchcraft of Morgan le Fay — he is not a monster by nature, and any malevolence on his part is thus, to an extent, debatable. What is more, this decrease of his supernatural quality, so to speak, leaves the Knight with a concrete, though not fully, human body, that also works on an abstract level: after all, with the revelation of his human origin also comes a number of answers to important questions, such as the motivation for his actions, an explanation of where he came from, and who was responsible. This additional information is crucial for the shifting perception of the Green Knight from an unknown and dangerous threat to society to an assessable variable in a social setting that can be categorised. At the same time, this humanisation also diminishes the level of power attributed to nature in general in the poem, as the image of a powerful natural environment is, via his strange colouring, intrinsically intertwined with the image of a powerful Green Knight. If one declines in dominance, the other inevitably follows.

The situation differs greatly in Lowery's film adaptation, where there is no revelation of any transformation and, consequently, no connection between the

[40] Jayme M. Yeo, '"Dere dame, to-day demay yow neuer": Gendering Fear in the Emotional Community of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*', *Exemplaria: A Journal of Theory in Medieval and Renaissance Studies,* 28.3 (2016), pp. 248–63 (p. 259).

supernatural Green Knight and the hospitable lord at the castle where Gawain rests. Lowery's adaptation even employs two different actors for the two roles — Ralph Ineson plays the Green Knight, and Joel Edgerton embodies the human lord — bringing the separation full circle. Moreover, the name 'Bertilak' is dropped entirely from the film, highlighting the Green Knight's indefinite and anonymous position and allegiance in the narrative. The film's omission of the metamorphosis therefore prevents the aforementioned humanising effect, leaving the Green Knight with a full-time monstrous body and position within the plot. In so doing, Lowery's supernatural challenger also avoids the pitiful portrayal that Bertilak in the poem experiences due to his victimisation and suggested servitude to Morgan. Moreover, the Green Knight's monstrosity remains present throughout the entirety of the film, partly because his humanity is cut from the plot, but also due to the uncertainty of his final action: does he kill Gawain or does he spare him? The created tension leaves the audience in a continued state of doubt, anxiety, and confusion.

Contrasting with the medieval source, in the film the original power dynamics depicted at the beginning of the poem remain present and alive, that is, the cinematic Green Knight is not portrayed in a position inferior to that of the human characters. Even Morgan's summoning is a far cry from the control she wields over him in the poem. The absence of the magical metamorphosis and the subsequent humanisation, as well as the continuous exhibition of his dominance strengthen the Green Knight's non-human aspects, namely his supernatural

elements and his overall monstrosity. This portrayal, in turn, facilitates the Green Knight's attribution to the sphere of nature and supports the ecocritical reading of the film.

Besides omitting the metamorphosis, the film achieves such a strengthening largely by amplifying the Green Knight's links to nature that already exist in the medieval material, to the point that he is recast as a deity-like entity. The most straightforward feature connecting him to nature in both sources is his physical appearance. Like in the poem, in the film he is of giant proportions and green all over, with both features carrying the same connotations and associations as they do in the poem: his connections to nature, monstrosity, and the supernatural. What distinguishes the Green Knight's appearance in the film from his descriptions in the poem, however, are the respective choices of details that are provided. In contrast to the poem, which focuses for the most part on the supernatural challenger's courtly (read: human) attire and accessories, thus effectively initiating his humanisation, the film emphasises the added tree-like details, prompting more than one critic to comment upon the imagery. For Kevin Harty, the film's Green Knight is a 'gigantic version of Groot from the *Guardians of the Gallery* [sic] franchise'.[41] Eric Kohn calls him a 'giant tree', and according to Melissa Crofton, Lowery himself 'describes his vision of the Green Knight of being "an 8-foot-tall Druidic being made of Wood"'.[42]

[41] Kevin J. Harty, 'Notes Towards a Close Reading of David Lowery's 2021 Film *The Green Knight*', *Journal of the International Arthurian Society*, 10.1 (2022), pp. 29–51 (p. 36, note 15).
[42] Eric Kohn, 'David Lowery almost Quit Filmmaking Before "Green Knight" Release: "It Was a Very Existential Year"', *IndieWire*, 31 July 2021 <https://www.indiewire.com/features/general/the-green-

The bark-like skin, hair, and beard, which are his most striking features, as well as the creaking sounds he makes when moving, truly convey the image of an 'animated oak', of nature personified — a characterisation that not only echoes the well-known depiction of the green man in medieval art and architecture, but also brings to mind Cohen's fourth thesis: the 'monster is difference made flesh, come to dwell among us. […T]he monster is an incorporation of the Outside, the Beyond'.[43] His physical appearance not only undeniably marks the film's Green Knight as monstrous, but also as an agent of nature, and the epitome of otherness — a representation that differs vastly from the portrayal of the ultimately shapeshifting and human(ised) Bertilak in the poem.

In addition to his full-time non-human physical appearance, the increased number of ritualistic performances surrounding the Green Knight are also indicative of his intended portrayal as a powerful and supernatural entity of god-like proportions. Adding to the poem's already-existing rituals, such as the link to the specific day of New Year's, the equal exchange, and the three hunts, the film shows Morgan (in the film Gawain's mother, not his aunt) summoning the Green Knight by enacting what appears to be a pagan ritual. Admittedly, such a conjuring may indicate her potential power over the Green Knight, but this interpretation remains questionable and inconclusive. After all, the Green Knight seems capable of

knight-david-lowery-interview-1234654659/> [accessed 8 October 2025]. Melissa Crofton, '"You Are No Knight": David Lowery Rivals a Medieval Poem in *The Green Knight*', *South Atlantic Review,* 88.2–3 (2023), pp. 41–60 (p. 56, note 6).

[43] Higley, p. 68. Cohen, 'Monster Culture', pp. 46–47.

possessing humans, as seen when he uses Guinevere to read out his challenge at court, which poses the question of whether he holds similar influence over Morgan and manipulated her into performing the ritual in the first place.

Likewise, Morgan also appears to be unsure of whether the supernatural challenger will allow Gawain to survive the return blow, a fate she shares with the audience after the final scene: 'Well done, my brave knight', says the Green Knight after Gawain has thrown away the girdle and left his fate entirely to the nature-god's devices. 'Now. Off with your head'.[44] Unsatisfyingly, the film ends without depicting the Knight's actions. By withholding a clear conclusion to Gawain's journey, the Green Knight is yet again presented as unpredictable, uncanny, and thus, monstrous. He still poses a threat both to individual humans, like Gawain himself, as well as the societies from which they hail, in this case the Arthurian court. What is more, as Higley argues, such an ending implies 'a geocentric acceptance of the earth as a green encompassing "All" to which human submission is natural'.[45] Gawain's decision to accede to the actions of this monstrous personification of nature, combined with the subsequent uncertainty of his fate, ultimately underscores the Green Knight's independent agency despite the summoning. Morgan may (or may not, if we follow the idea of the Knight possessing Morgan) have kickstarted the actions in the film but, in the end, it is the Green Knight who decides Gawain's future and nobody else.

[44] *The Green Knight*, 1:58:51–1:59:08.
[45] Higley, p. 62.

Another alteration in the film that suggests ritualistic practices is Gawain's early arrival at the Green Chapel, a location that William Woods calls 'nature's 'chapel''.[46] Gawain finds the Green Knight seemingly sleeping and is forced to wait for him to wake, which takes place exactly one year from the original exchange of blows, contrasting with the 'one year and a day' timeline in the poem. The overt presentation of the human knight as the waiting party situates him hierarchically lower than the non-human Green Knight. Both the summoning and the awaiting underline the presence of a system of ritualistic practices that the Green Knight is embedded in and thus give rise to a number of imageries that are usually suggestive of religious worship. Given both the absent metamorphosis, which could have prevented the strong enhancement of the Knight's supernatural quality and his monstrosity, and the prevalent link to the natural world, Lowery's alterations strongly encourage the Green Knight's positioning as a god-like entity rooted in nature. The role the supernatural challenger is thus cast in is either a powerful agent of nature that, by extension, ascribes similar levels of power to nature itself, or, to take it even a step further, nature personified. Either way, the Green Knight assumes a domineering position in Lowery's cinematic adaptation.

Further reflecting the Knight's power in the film is also his emphasised association with life and death. In the poem, his connection to death is mostly based on the expectation that Gawain has to endure the return strike, which would

[46] William F. Woods, 'Nature and the Inner Man in "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight"', *The Chaucer Review*, 36.3 (2002), pp. 209–27 (p. 222).

condemn the latter to death. This position as 'moral judge' and enforcer has led Brewer to confidently declare that the poem's supernatural challenger 'represents death, our universal enemy'.[47] He continues that such a '[c]onfrontation with, [and] coming to terms with, death' is a common narrative theme, as '[d]eath may not be the worst but it is certainly the last enemy of life'.[48] The film's unnamed lady Bertilak enhances and expands on this primary association of the Green Knight with (an inevitable) death: in what Harty declares to be the 'film's most interesting soliloquy',[49] the lady explains that green

> comes back. It does not dally, nor does it wait to plot or conspire. Pull it out by the roots one day and the next, there it is, creeping in around the edges. Whilst we're off looking for red, in comes green. […] Green is what is left when ardour fades, when passion dies, when we die, too. When you go, your footprints will fill with grass. Moss shall cover your tombstone, and as the sun rises, green shall spread over all, in all its shades and hues. This verdigris will overtake your swords and your coins and your battlements, and, try as you might, all you hold dear will succumb to it.[50]

Eerily reminiscent of Brewer's words regarding the inescapability of death, the lady argues that green not only persistently returns, but persistently *remains*. It exists regardless of and independent from the actions of humans. In fact, the lady's association of nature with death brings to the forefront the possible monstrosity of nature itself, ascribing to it yet again large amounts of power. Both nature and

[47] Higley, p. 77. Brewer, p. 64.
[48] Brewer, p. 64.
[49] Harty, p. 46.
[50] *The Green Knight*, 1:22:56–1:24:14.

monsters are often portrayed as being situated out of human control, and can thereby pose potentially life-threatening risks for humans. Moreover, reading the lady's proclamations in light of the Green Knight's links to both nature and death due to his greenness, her deliberate choice of nature-related vocabulary yet again underlines the ecocritical undertones of both the film and the poem.

However, these remarks about death only come after the lady's open juxtaposition of the Green Knight with the theme of life — a feature that is only suggested in the poem by the Knight's ability to survive Gawain's blow. At the very beginning of her soliloquy, she counters Gawain's accusation that the supernatural challenger is green because he is not of this world with the insistence that 'green is the colour of earth, of living things, of life'.[51] The lady's speech thus makes explicit the relationship between life, death, and, by means of his green complexion, the Green Knight himself. In doing so, the Knight is effectively implied to combine two oppositional concepts in one body – an ontological impossibility that casts him in the powerful position to control both, at least to the extent of harbouring them both side by side. Such a portrayal, combined with his clearly non-human depiction, his monstrosity, as a result of the absent metamorphosis, constitutes the pivotal element of the Green Knight's representation as deity-like entity. At the same time, the Knight's empowerment extends such a superiority to the natural environment surrounding him, and thus also suggests the overall portrayal of an enduring nature that outlasts humanity's transient existence.

[51] Ibid., 1:22:10–1:22:13.

What is more, other characters of the film acknowledge and partially submit to the Green Knight's power. At the Arthurian court, the challenge and its peculiar rules are accepted unquestioned, and despite Gawain's unhappiness regarding his role in the game, he ultimately holds up his end of the bargain, and becomes, in Crofton's words, 'his uncle's proxy, doing exactly what Arthur's aging body denies him — facing the Green Knight', though the film ends before the final blow can be delivered.[52] In contrast to the poem's Green Knight, whose human origin with its ties to servitude severely decreases any potential agency, in Lowery's adaptation the ambivalence of Gawain's fate underscores the Green Knight's position as a free agent, whose abundance of power is indicative of a general superiority of nature.

This superiority is also alluded to by the way the scenes at the Green Chapel are shot: the Green Knight is located in an elevated position, with the human (Gawain) kneeling before him like a devoted subject. The rising sun behind the supernatural Knight creates a not-so-subtle halo-like ring around his head that recalls the crowns of the king and queen at the court — crowns that, according to Lowery, were used to give the royal couple 'the countenance of saints'.[53] The impression given in the scene at the Green Chapel in particular, but also the entrance scene at the Arthurian court, is a sense of helplessness that is experienced by the human characters in the face of an overall superior (super)natural entity — more so

[52] Crofton, p. 47.
[53] Jason Hellerman 'David Lowery Breaks Down a Scene From "The Green Knight"', *nofilmschool*, 30 August 2021 <https://nofilmschool.com/green-knight-scene-breakdown#> [accessed 10 October 2025], 6:08.

when taking into consideration Brewer's words again, that such a '[c]onfrontation with […] death', with the Green Knight, with nature, is inescapable and must be accepted as such.[54] The portrayal of the Green Knight as a nature god is thus indicative of the idea of a natural world that presides over death and decides who will face it and when. This inevitability of encountering death via nature, as well as the hierarchisation of the Green Knight in relation to the other characters, create tension between humans and the natural environment that culminates in the ambiguity of Gawain's fate and his voluntary submission to the Knight's judgement. Danko Kamčevski argues that, in offering such a strengthened ecocritical angle of the fourteenth-century poem, 'Lowery has demonstrated not only a close knowledge of his medieval source but that he was also able to expand upon it, developing already existing themes and changing their emphases'.[55]

In conclusion, the magical transformation in the poem ironically contributes to the humanisation of the Green Knight and facilitates his attribution to known categories, namely that of human and non-human. The absence of the metamorphosis in the film, on the other hand, removes said humanisation and leads to the subsequent enhancement of the Green Knight's supernatural qualities. The latter effect adds to his mysterious and ambiguous position and presents him as an agent capable of making independent decisions. What is more, in the portrayal of the eponymous character, *The Green Knight* highlights the nature-connected features

[54] Brewer, p. 64.
[55] Danko Kamčevski, 'Amplifying Gawain's Identity Crisis in *The Green Knight*', in *Unveiling the Green Knight*, ed. by Jonathan Fruoco (Presses Universitaires de Paris Nanterre, 2024), pp. 155–71 (p. 169).

that ultimately leave Nature itself as a free player with the greatest amount of agency of all. The result is the depiction of a relationship between humans and the natural world that is marked by tensions and ambiguity. The film thus makes a strong case for an ecocritical reading that relates to our modern environmental situation regarding issues like climate change, animal rights, and human exceptionalism. In the end, it is the Knight's portrayal as a nature-god-like entity in the film that extends his high degree of agency to the natural environment in general, and ultimately depicts Nature as powerful and indomitable compared to humanity's fleeting insignificance.

‘He is marvellously afraid of you’: Demonic Possession and Emotional Experience in Early Modern Old and New England (1580–1700)

Agustín Méndez[1]

University of Buenos Aires / National Scientific and Technical Research Council of Argentina (CONICET) / National University of La Matanza

Although phenomena with independent histories and distinctive characteristics, demonic possession and witchcraft demonstrated a profound connection during the Early Modern period. Between 1500 and 1700, the well-known idea that demons could invade a human body was intertwined with the belief that such invasions could occur at the behest of a witch. In seventeenth-century Old and New England, the association between these two concepts was particularly strong: the terms 'possessed' and 'bewitched' practically became synonymous. Drawing on the analysis of demonological treatises and pamphlets on witchcraft and demonic possession, this article examines whether emotions played a significant role in the experiences of the possessed in England and the New England colonies. A review of the symptoms described in the aforementioned primary sources suggests that the emotions of demoniacs were not given explicit attention. Although they might foam at the mouth, consume unusual objects, experience muscular spasms, and lose consciousness for extended periods, possessed individuals did not appear to exhibit any emotional response. This study argues that the absence of references to emotions and affect can be attributed to a foundational principle of diabolical possession: demons were believed to exert complete control over the bodies they inhabited, including the areas from which human emotions originate. It was not that the victims of spiritual invasion did not express emotions; rather, these emotions were attributed to the malevolent spirit possessing them. Based on this subtle distinction, I propose that demonologists and pamphleteers deliberately excluded the feelings of demoniacs from the symptoms and experiences of diabolical possession because those emotions were not considered their own.

[1] I would like to thank the anonymous reviewers and the copyeditors of *Cerae* for their careful reading and for the suggestions they provided to improve the article.

The idea that a malignant spiritual entity could penetrate and occupy a human body in order to control its movements and behaviors is present in numerous societies around the world. This notion has deep roots in Christian tradition and possesses undeniable biblical legitimacy. According to the synoptic gospels, during his itinerant preaching in the historical region of Judaea, Jesus encountered men and women suffering from a peculiar condition that prevented them from leaving normal lives, causing both their families and their extended communities to remain in a state of suspense. This condition was deemed sufficiently disruptive and dangerous to warrant exile or confinement, as exemplified by the Gerasene demoniac described by the evangelists Matthew (12: 22–23), Mark (9: 17–19), and Luke (8: 27–31).

According to Scripture and subsequent theological developments, diabolic possession was considered a preternatural affliction that disturbed the human body: a purely spiritual entity infiltrated and occupied a corporeal being.[2] The principal characteristic of this phenomenon was, therefore, that the body of the afflicted individual was internally possessed by an alien spirit.[3] The effective entry into the human body distinguishes possession from another form of diabolical attack,

[2] Ismael del Olmo, *Legio: Posesión diabólica y exorcismo en la Europa de los siglos XVI y XVII* (Institución Fernando el Católico, 2018), p. 77. Janice Boddy, ‘Spirit Possession Revisited: Beyond Instrumentality’, *Annual Review of Anthropology Online*, 23 (1994), pp. 407–34 (p. 407). Kirsten Uszkalo, *Bewitched and Bedeviled. A Cognitive Approach to Embodiment in Early English Possessio*n (Palgrave MacMillan, 2015), p. 19. Naomi Janowitz, ‘Demons and witchcraft in the early Church’, in *The Routledge History of Witchcraft*, ed. by Johannes Dillinger (Routledge, 2019), pp. 36–45 (pp. 41–42).

[3] Nancy Caciola, *Discernment of Spirits. Divine and Demonic Possession in the Middle Age* (Cornell University Press, 2003), p. 41. Richard Godbeer, *The Devil´s Dominion. Magic and Religion in Early New England* (Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 106–07.

obsession, in which evil spirits assault the victim externally. In this case, they may manifest visibly to frighten, strike, or harass the individual without penetrating their anatomy.[4] In possessions, the entry of the demon was invariably aggressive and violent, constituting an invasion of the victim's body.[5] The spirit could access the body through openings such as the mouth, nose, ears, fingernails, or even the skin. Physical senses also served as gateways for the spirit to enter the human body. As noted by historian Nancy Caciola, possession relies on the elemental tension between the exterior and the interior of the body, as spirits invade the individual's physical domain and assume control over it.[6]

In addition to having a clear etiology, demonic possession also exhibited recognizable and characteristic symptoms. The spiritual invasion manifested through extreme external signs that remained consistent over two millennia and were documented in texts, ballads, iconography, and cinema.[7] The basic external signs that identified a demoniac can be found in the synoptic gospels: blindness, mutism, deafness, extraordinary physical strength, suicidal tendencies, foaming at

[4] Brian Levack, *The Devil Within. Possession and Exorcism in the Christian West* (Yale University Press, 2013), pp. 16–17. Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic. Studies in Popular Beliefs in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century England* (Penguin Books, 1991), p. 570. Researchers such as Philip Almond and Brendan Walsh have noted that in the Protestant world, the distinction between these two categories was much more unstable than in Catholicism. Philip Almond, *Demonic Possession and Exorcism in Early Modern England. Contemporary Texts and their Cultural Contexts* (Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 338. Brendan Walsh, *The English Exorcist. John Darrell and the Shaping of Early Modern English Protestant Demonology* (Routledge, 2021), p. 14. This article, however, maintains the distinction between the two and will focus exclusively on possessions.

[5] Sari Katajala-Peltomaa, 'Diabolical Rage? Children, Violence, and Demonic Possession in the Late Middle Ages', *Journal of Family History*, 41.3 (2016), pp. 1–19 (p. 6).

[6] Caciola, *Discernment of* Spirits, p. 43.

[7] Ibid., pp. 44–45.

the mouth, gnashing of teeth, and loss of consciousness.[8] Over the subsequent fifteen hundred years, apologists and theologians identified new marks of possession, among which the most significant included rigidity of the limbs, severe physical pain, abnormal muscular flexibility, fasting or consuming unusual objects such as nails or hair, aversion to sacred items, profanity or immoral gestures, convulsions, glossolalia, clairvoyance, and, although infrequently, levitation.[9] Due to their dangerous, dysfunctional, and antisocial characteristics, the possessed were alienated from both their bodily and mental faculties, as well as from their communities.

Although present in late antiquity and medieval Christian culture, demonic possession reached its ‘golden age’ during early modern times.[10] During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, demoniacs were counted in the thousands, both in Europe and in the Americas, among Catholics as well as among Protestants.[11] Furthermore, as a result of the unusual proliferation of cases, historians have pointed out that during the early modern period, demonic possession was perceived by members of the elite and also by those who were not part of it as a regular

[8] Sarah Ferber, ‘Possession, Demonic’, in *Encyclopedia of Witchcraft. The Western Tradition*, ed. by Richard Golden (ABC Clio, 2006), pp. 920–24 (p. 920).
[9] Levack, *The Devil Within*, pp. 6–15.
[10] William Monter, *Witchcraft in France and Switzerland: The Borderlands during the Reformation* (Cornell University Press, 1976), p. 60.
[11] Levack, *The Devil Within*, p. 254.

component of social and religious existence, something almost belonging to everyday life.[12]

One of the main characteristics of early modern diabolic possession was its connection to witchcraft. Between 1500 and 1700, the well-known idea that demons could invade a human body was intertwined with the belief that such invasions could occur at the behest of a witch. In other words, in addition to destroying crops, sinking ships, hindering human reproduction, and harming or killing animals and people, witches were believed to have the power to send evil spirits to possess human bodies.[13] In seventeenth-century Old and New England, the association between these two concepts was so strong that the terms 'possessed' and 'bewitched' practically became synonymous.[14] Consequently, treatises on witchcraft frequently referenced possessions, while texts addressing the latter also made mention of the former.

Despite the considerable body of high-quality research on witchcraft and demonic possession in Old and New England, several aspects of both topics remain

[12] Stuart Clark, *Thinking with Demons: The Idea of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe* (Clarendon Press, 1997), p. 391. Levack, *The Devil Within*, p. 18. Moshe Sluhovsky, *Believe Not Every Spirit. Possession, Mysticism, & Discernment in Early Modern Catholicism* (Chicago University Press, 2007), pp. 14 and 27–28.

[13] Mairi Cowan, *The Possession of Barbe Hallay: Diabolical Arts and Daily Life in Early Canada* (McGill-Queen's University Press, 2022), p. 50. Andrew Cambers, 'Demonic Possession, Literacy and "Superstition" in Early Modern England', *Past & Present*, 202 (2009), pp. 3–35 (p. 17). Richard Raiswell and Peter Dendle, 'Demon Possession in Anglo-Saxon and Early Modern England: Continuity and Evolution in Social Context', *Journal of British Studies*, 47.4 (2008), pp. 738–67 (p. 760). Brian Levack, *The Witch Hunt in Early Modern Europe*, 3rd edn (Routledge, 2006), pp. 12 and 35. Indeed, contemporaries believed that possessions represented the most potent form of harm within the magical repertoire of witches. Walsh, *The English Exorcist*, p. 19.

[14] Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, p. 570. Richard Weisman, *Witchcraft, Magic, and Religion in 17th Century Massachusetts* (University of Massachusetts Press, 1984), pp. 177–78.

to be further investigated. First, there is a notable lack of studies that consider both phenomena from an Atlantic perspective. Additionally, the emotional experiences of demoniacs have not received adequate attention to date. One of the primary goals of this investigation is to address both issues. Drawing on the analysis of demonological treatises and pamphlets on witchcraft and demonic possession, this article examines whether emotions played a significant role in the experiences of the possessed in Old and New England. A review of the symptoms described in the aforementioned primary sources suggests that the emotions of demoniacs were not given explicit attention. Although they might foam at the mouth, consume unusual objects, experience muscular spasms, and lose consciousness for extended periods, possessed individuals did not appear to exhibit any emotional response of their own. This study argues that the absence of references to emotions and affections can be attributed to a foundational principle of diabolical possession: demons were believed to exert complete control over the bodies they inhabited, including the areas from which human emotions originate. It was not that the victims of spiritual invasion did not express emotions. Rather, these emotions were attributed to the malevolent spirit possessing them. Based on this subtle distinction, I propose that demonologists and pamphleteers deliberately excluded the feelings of demoniacs from the symptoms and experiences of diabolical possession, as those emotions were not regarded as belonging to the possessed. As a result, the possessed individuals

neither had control over nor bore responsibility for the passions that manifested during their diabolical raptures.

POSSESSIONS IN OLD AND NEW ENGLAND

The first English treatises on diabolical witchcraft were published in the 1580s, a decade that marks the onset of the peak of both witch-hunting and diabolical possession across Western Europe. Consequently, it is not surprising that English demonologists explicitly addressed the possibility of impure spirits occupying the body of a human being.

One of the earliest demonological treatises, *A Discourse of the Subtill Practices of Devilles by Witches and Sorcerers* (1587) by the minister George Gifford, briefly mentions the affliction: 'they come under the tirannie of wicked divels, which worke in them with power, their harts do they harden, their eies, even the eies of their minds do they blind'.[15] In his second text, *A Dialogue Concerning Witches and Witchcrafts* (1593), the author connected the two issues that would preoccupy Europeans in the ensuing decades. First, he acknowledged that God permitted Satan and his minions to possess human beings. He then pointed out that evil spirits sought to place themselves under the command of a witch in order to invade a person's body. Therefore, Gifford suggested that both witches and demoniacs were

[15] George Gifford, *A Discourse of the Subtill Practises of Devills by Witches and Sorcerers* (Toby Cooke, 1587), D2.

under the control of the devil, with the former having committed the sin of apostasy and the latter having lost control over their bodily faculties.[16]

John Darrell (1562–?) was the most renowned and controversial exorcist of early modern England. Over a period of just over a decade, the Puritan cleric led a series of campaigns to expel demons in various localities across central and northern England. In his first public intervention, he dispossessed Katherine Wright, a young woman from Derby. A decade later, near Ashby de la Zouch in Leicester, Darrell was summoned to heal the afflictions of Thomas Darling from Burton upon Trent. In 1597, now accompanied by his colleague George More, he relieved seven individuals residing in the household of Nicholas Starkie in Lancashire. Finally, in that same year, the cleric exorcised the musician’s apprentice William Sommers at St Mary’s, Nottingham. In all these cases, Darrell employed prayer and fasting as his primary methods, distinguishing himself from the modus operandi of Catholic priests in similar cases.[17] Some years later, while defending himself against the campaign of persecution orchestrated by the Church of England to discredit his dispossessions, Darrell asserted in one of his treatises that demonic possessions represented the ultimate means by which the Prince of Darkness manifested his power over human

[16] ‘The Lord giveth him power to possesse a man. He under a collour will be sent by a conjurer, or by a witch: and the one thinketh the devill entreth at her intreaty: the other supposeth he doeth even bind him thereto, whereas he ruleth both their mindes, and setteth them a worke. Then doeth hee willingly bewray them, even for many subtill purposes’. George Gifford, *A Dialogue Concerning Witches and Witchcrafts* (1593; repr. The Percy Society, 1843), p. 84.

[17] For a detailed analysis of Darrell's trajectory, it is recommended to read the two most comprehensive works written on the subject: Marion Gibson, *Possession, Puritanism and Print* (Pickering and Chatto, 2006), pp. 1–100; and Walsh, *The English Exorcist*, pp. 1–141.

beings: 'For what more can satan doe to the body of man, then rule and torment it thus in the inward and outward partes, and in every parcell and member theirof accordinge to his lust and pleasure?', he asked, before concluding that no Christian could deny the premise that the devil infested bodies from within.[18]

Preacher Henry Holland further developed this concept in his work *A Treatise Against Witchcraft* (1590), in which he explained that Satan 'may have a reall possession' of men and women 'when God permitteth'.[19] Following the established pattern regarding witchcraft, Holland asserted that no individual was exempt from the possibility of being diabolically possessed. Spiritual invasions could serve as punishment for the disobedient or as a testament to the faith of the saints.[20] A century later in New England, Puritan theologian and former Harvard president Increase Mather pointed out that while possessions could arise as a result of harmful magic, they possessed distinct characteristics that differentiated them from other instances of *maleficia*. For example, demoniacs exhibited preternatural body tremors and displayed suicidal tendencies.[21]

[18] 'The which if he could doe being without, he would never desire nor seek entrance into man to posses him the which no man will deny but he doth'. John Darrell, *A true narration of the strange and greuous vexation by the Devil, of 7. persons in Lancashire* (Unknown publisher, 1600), p. 2.
[19] Henry Holland, *A treatise against witchcraft* (John Legatt, 1590), p. 25.
[20] 'He may not onely hurt the bodies of the Saints, but before grace also have a reall possession of them'. Holland, *A treatise against witchcraft*, p. 58.
[21] 'And whereas some say that the persons in question are only bewitched and not possessed, let it be considered that possessed persons are called energumens […] they whose bodys are Preternaturally agitated, so as to be in danger of being thrown into the fire or into the water, though they may be bewitched, are undoubtedly possessed with demons'. Increase Mather, *Cases of conscience concerning evil spirits personating men, witchcrafts, infallible proofs of guilt in such as are accused with that crime* (Benjamin Harris, 1693), p. 40.

In addition to recognizing diabolic possession as a plausible and contemporary phenomenon, various types of documents produced in Old and New England meticulously detailed the symptoms, actions, and common occurrences associated with it. Although these texts were written for different purposes and audiences, pamphlets, news sheets, and demonological treatises systematically linked witchcraft and demonic possession. However, beyond this shared commonality, these documents exhibit notable differences. While scholarly texts aimed to describe spiritual infestations and their physical effects in abstract and conceptual terms, libels employed a casuistic approach, engaging readers by recounting the sufferings endured by specific individuals, identified by name, who were perceived to have been possessed by demons.

Numerous examples of more sophisticated demonological works exist on both sides of the Atlantic. Notably, one of the authors who demonstrated considerable interest in this topic was the aforementioned John Darrell. Occurring amid an open conflict between the Puritan faction, which was seeking to push the Reformation beyond the wishes of Queen Elizabeth I, and the conservative religious hierarchy of the Church of England, which was determined to prevent any further theological and liturgical transformations, Darrell’s dispossessions and growing popularity alarmed the anti-Puritan religious authorities based in London. Among the most prominent figures were the Archbishop of Canterbury, John Whitgift (1530–1604), the Bishop of London, Richard Bancroft (1544–1610), and his chaplain,

Samuel Harsnett (1561–1631). It was Harsnett who took the lead, on behalf of the ecclesiastical establishment, in the judicial persecution of Darrell. As a result, both Darrell and George More were tried before the kingdom's highest religious court, the Court of High Commission, on charges of having orchestrated fictitious possessions and exorcisms. Both were sentenced to imprisonment. Darrell remained incarcerated for eighteen months, while More died in captivity. Both before and after the trial, Darrell, More, and their Puritan supporters launched a written campaign to bear witness to the events and defend the authenticity of the exorcisms, prompting a counteroffensive from Harsnett, who sought to prove precisely the opposite. This literary controversy culminated in the publication of more than a dozen treatises, primarily devoted to debating the phenomenon of demonic infestations and the orthodox means of curing them. Darrell's practices even aroused suspicion among certain Puritan ministers who denied both the contemporary reality of demonic possession and the ability of human beings to remedy such afflictions.[22]

Among the extensive array of texts Darrell penned to defend himself against the accusations from the London clerical elite, the exorcist dedicated one to the harrowing events that transpired within the household of the pro-papist patriarch Nicholas Starkie of Cleworth (Lancashire) in 1597.[23] According to the records, seven members of the family and household staff exhibited signs of possession. Following

[22] See Herman Bhogal, *Rethinking Demonic Possession: The impact of the debates about the John Darrel case on later demonological thought, with particular reference to John Deacon and John Walker* (unpublished doctoral dissertation, Birkbeck University of London, 2013).
[23] Walsh, *The English Exorcist*, pp. 142–99. Gibson, *Possession, Puritanism and Print*, pp. 101–74. del Olmo, *Legio*, pp. 213–68.

the unsuccessful interventions of a Catholic priest and Edmond Hartley, a cunning man who would ultimately be tried and executed for allegedly bewitching the possessed, the paterfamilias sought the services of Darrell, whose reputation as an exorcist had already attained regional prominence. The behaviors exhibited by the Starkie children, Anne and John, aged between ten and twelve years, epitomized the experiences of the other family members. The girl and boy would grind their teeth, bleed profusely from their noses and mouths, vomit, abruptly enter into catatonic states mistaken for death, curse, and obstruct the performance of religious rituals.[24] The Starkie demoniacs were ultimately dispossessed by Darrell, an outcome that served as a tool for Protestant proselytism. This was particularly significant because it was a Reformed minister who led the expulsion of the unclean spirits from the bodies of members of a family with strong Catholic ties, in a locality where this variant of Christianity held particular strength.[25]

Two decades later, when the debates surrounding Darrell’s dispossessions had become outdated but concerns about Satan’s intervention in the material world persisted, clergyman Alexander Roberts remarked that demoniacs typically spoke

[24] ‘John Starchy the next was so miserably rent that aboundance of blod gushed out both at his nose and mouth. As the day before, so that day he gnashed fearfully with his teeth, he also lay as dead about the like time, soe that some said to us, he seemeth to be dead […] also made sundry times greate shewe of vomting and nowe and then vomited indeede, somthing like fleam thick spettle […] used much light behaviour and vain gestures, sundry also filthy scurrilous speaches, but whispering then for the most part among themselves, so as they were no let to that holy exercise we then had in hand. Sometimes also they spake blasphemy calling the word preached, bible bable’. Darrell, *A true narration,* pp. 10–11.

[25] Daniel Walker, *Unclean Spirits. Possession and exorcism in France and England in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981), pp. 57–59.

'strange languages, doing things of extraordinary strength'.[26] Similarly, concerned with the possibility of impostors feigning possession, Richard Bernard dedicated a paragraph of his *A Guide to Grand Jury Men* (1627) to outlining the genuine signs of possession. In addition to abnormal strength and physical power, the theologian emphasized ferocity: demoniacs were known to break chains and shackles. Other dysfunctional behaviors were also considered. It was common for demonically possessed individuals 'to cut themselves with stones, to teare off their cloathes, and to goe naked; to runne into solitary and hideous places, and not to bee tamed'.[27] Always attentive to the preternatural realm, Increase Mather and his son Cotton Mather were also concerned with the characteristic symptoms of possessions. Prior to the events in Salem, the younger Mather published his *Memorable Providences* (1689), in which he recounted the ordeal of a Puritan family from south Boston. According to the author, the four children of bricklayer John Goodwin experienced multiple instances of diabolical infestations in 1688. Throughout the text, Mather detailed the 'tortures' endured by the children, aged between four and thirteen:

> Sometimes they would be deaf, sometimes dumb, and sometimes blind, and often, all this at once […] their jaws went out of joint […] The same would happen to their shoulder-blades, and their elbows, and hand-wrists, and several of their joints […]

[26] Alexander Roberts, *A Treatise of Witchcraft* (Nicholas Okes, 1616), p. 179. English Protestant theologians favored the term 'dispossessions' over 'exorcisms' to refer to the expulsion of demons. See Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, p. 571. Walsh, *The English Exorcist*, p. 45. Gibson, *Possession, Puritanism and Print*, pp. 1–5. Levack, *The Devil Within*, pp. 85–86 and 111–12. Richard Raiswell, 'Faking It: A Case of Counterfeit Possession in the Reign of James I', *Renaissance and Reformation/Renaissance et Reforme*, 23.3 (1999), pp. 28–48 (p. 39). Richard Ross, *Before Salem. Witch Hunting in the Connecticut River Valley, 1647–1663* (McFarland & Company, 2017), p. 249.
[27] Richard Bernard, *A guide to grand iury men* (Richard Clutterbuck, 1627), p. 64.

> Their necks would be broken, so that their neck-bone would seem dissolved unto them that felt after it; and yet on the sudden, it would become again so stiff that there was no stirring of their Heads; yea, their heads would be twisted almost round.[28]

The young demoniacs also barked and, more spectacularly, flew over their house, an event witnessed and recounted by trustworthy individuals of impeccable character. In his *Cases of Conscience* (1693), the older Puritan leader concluded that those who possessed knowledge of secret aspects of past or future events, dislocated parts of their body only to recover normal function without permanent damage, or entered trances of diabolical origin, during which they spoke things they later could not remember, could be classified as ‘demoniacks’.[29]

Although more specific and sensational in their descriptions, pamphlets do not differ from treatises when listing and describing the symptoms of diabolical possession. The anonymous *The Witches of Warboys* (1593) recounts one of the best-known cases of the period. Over the course of five years, five daughters and a dozen servants of wealthy Puritan landowner Robert Throckmorton were attacked by malignant preternatural entities purportedly sent by Alice Samuel, her husband John, and their daughter Agnes, a family of farmers (and witches) who lived on their land. According to the unknown author, when the spirits entered the victims, they

[28] Cotton Mather, *Memorable providences, relating to witchcrafts and possessions* (Benjamin Harris, 1689), pp. 4–5.

[29] ‘A most certain sign of possession, when the afflicted party can see and hear that which no one else can discern anything of, and when they can discover secret things past, or future […] And when the limbs of miserable creatures are bent and distorted so as could not possibly be without a luxation of joynts, were it not done by a preternatural hand, and yet no hurt, caused thereby, that argueth possession. Also, when persons are by the Devil cast into fits, in the which they speak of things, that afterwards they have no remembrance of’. Mather, *Cases of Conscience*, pp. 40–41.

'fell into their fits, with such terrible screeches and strange sneezings' and were 'wonderfully tormented as though they would have been torn in pieces'.[30] A similar text published in the same decade recounted the sufferings of the young musician apprentice William Sommers, who achieved some fame at the end of the sixteenth century for having been one of the persons dispossessed by Darrell. According to the text, Sommers 'shrieked and roared with a loud voice, he foamed abundantly, he gnashed with his teeth'.[31] The same year (1597) that the Sommers case hit the presses, the pamphlet *The Most Wonderful and True Story of a Certain Witch Named Alice Gooderige* reported the torments of Thomas Darling of Burton Upon Trent, another young man diagnosed and assisted by Darrell. Both demoniacs had remarkable similarities: gender, age, and religious affiliation. However, Darling's raptures were more elaborate. During these episodes, the victim acquired such extraordinary physical strength that he could only be overpowered by two or three men. After being subdued, he would fall to the ground on his back, with his legs so

[30] *The most strange and admirable discovery of the three Witches of Warboys* (Thomas Man and John Winnington, 1593), C. The case of the Throckmorton demoniacs represented the first instance in which diabolical infestations were linked to a spiritual attack orchestrated by witches. Philip Almond, *The Witches of Warboys. An Extraordinary Story of Sorcery, Sadism and Satanic Possession* (I. B. Taurus, 2008), pp. 174–75. Bhogal, *Rethinking Demonic Possession,* pp. 93–94. The association between demonic possession and witchcraft was also addressed by continental authors. For instance, the Italian Franciscan Girolamo Menghi (1529–1609), one of the most prominent exponents of exorcistic theory and practice, advanced this view in his most renowned treatises: *Compendio dell'arte essorcista* (1576) and *Flagellum daemonum* (1577). Mary O′ Neil, 'Menghi, Girolamo', in *Encyclopedia of Witchcraft. The Western Tradition,* ed. by Richard Golden (ABC Clio, 2006), pp. 749–50.

[31] *A Breife Narration of the possession, dispossession, and, repossession of William Sommers: and of some proceedings against Mr Iohn Dorrell preacher* (Unknown publisher, 1597), p. 268.

numb and stiff that the spectators could not bend his knees. Finally, in addition to the typical screams, grunts, and tremors, he would vomit profusely.[32]

A 1615 pamphlet reported the possession of Alexander Nyndge, the youngest son of a pious family from Herringswell (Suffolk), who exhibited symptoms similar to those mentioned above:

> His chest and body began swelling, his eyes staring, and his back bending inwards to his belly which did at first strike the beholders into a strange wonder and admiration […] Then drawing his lips awry, gnashing with his teeth, wallowing and foaming, the spirit would vex him monstrously, and transform his body and alter the same by many violences.[33]

Possessions in the Americas exhibited similar features. In 1672, the Reverend Samuel Willard published a brief text concerning the possession of one of his servants, Elizabeth Knapp, a sixteen-year-old girl from Groton (Massachusetts). The teenager's sufferings began progressively: ‘sometimes she would have sudden shrieks […] and

[32] ‘Forthwith they took him up, and laid him on a bed where, having lain some small time, he rose up suddenly, striving and struggling in such a way that it was enough for two or three to hold him. Then he fell suddenly on his back and, lying in such a manner, raised up his legs one after the other so stiffly, that the bystanders could not bend them in the back of the knee. And thus, continuing a while with grievous roaring, at last he raised himself up on his feet and his head, his belly standing up much above his head or feet. Continuing so a little time, he fell down on his back groaning very pitifully. Then rising up, he ran around on his hands and his feet, keeping a certain circular course. After that, striving and struggling with groaning, he began vomiting’. *The most wonderful and true story of a certain Witch named Alice Gooderige* (I. O, 1597) pp. 158–59.

[33] Even though the possession occurred in 1573, the pamphlet was published in 1615. Edward Nyndge, *A True and fearful vexation of one Alexander Nyndge: being most horribly tormented with the devil* (William Stansby, 1615), A3. For an in-depth analysis of this case, see Amy Tan, ‘The godly re-presentation of Alexander Nyndge: two versions of a Protestant dispossession narrative’, *The Seventeenth Century*, 34.5 (2019), pp. 583–99.

would burst forth into immoderate and extravagant laughter'.[34] Later, she endured terrifying visions of the devil, who urged her to sign his book and commit murder.[35] In the following days, Elizabeth 'was hurried again into violent fits after a different manner, being taken again speechless […] and do mischief together with others; striking those that held her, spitting in their faces'.[36] She could also extend her tongue in extraordinary ways and contort her body in remarkable and unnatural positions.[37]

Back in England, and nearing the end of the timespan covered in this article, the pamphlet *The Surey Demoniak* (1697) narrated the possession of Richard Dugdale, a nineteen-year-old gardener. The young man 'had many praeternatural motions, far above the reach of his personal ability and agility'. He also displayed 'great defiance against the said ordinances of God'.[38] Finally, during the most acute phases of his ailments, he would throw his body desperately against the walls, emit thundering sounds, and display an extraordinary ability to stretch his neck.[39]

[34] Samuel Willard, *A briefe account of a strange & unusuall Providence of God befallen to Elizabeth Knap* of *Groton* (1672), quoted in *Witch-Hunting in Seventeenth Century New England. A Documentary History 1638–1693*, ed. by David Hall (Northeastern University Press, 1999), p. 98.
[35] 'At first this apparitions had been more rare, but lately more frequent […] he had presented her a book written with blood of covenants made by others with him […] he urged upon constant temptations to murder her parent, her neighbors […] to murder myself.' Ibid., p. 200.
[36] Ibid., p. 207.
[37] Ibid., p. 208.
[38] Thomas Jollie, *The Surey demoniack, or, An account of Satans strange and dreadful actings, in and about the body of Richard Dugdale of Surey* (Jonathan Robinson, 1697), pp. 1–2.
[39] 'In his said fits, Richard's body was hurled about very desperately, and besides his abundance of confused hurry and din, he oft stretched out his neck to a prodigious length'. Jollie, *The Surey demoniac*, p. 4.

Based on what has been seen so far, it is clear that whether it was in the second half of the seventeenth century or on the eve of the eighteenth century, in England or Massachusetts, in treatises or pamphlets, the symptoms of diabolical possessions were similar. The representation of demonic possession in Old and New England did not stray far from the master lines first traced by Scripture and later by Christian theologians. This had to do with the fact that possession was never a purely personal experience but was always lived and analyzed within a set of social, institutional, political, and cultural norms.

Within this historical context, the development of the witch hunts was far from insignificant. Although the notion of possession predated the early modern persecution of witchcraft as a criminal offense, during this period, both phenomena became mutually reinforcing. It is no coincidence that the golden age of demonic infestation and the height of the witch trials overlapped chronologically. In the case of a secret and concealed crime such as witchcraft, judicial evidence to convict suspects was often scarce. The bizarre and disruptive symptoms of the possessed, along with the visible and somatic nature of their suffering, became some of the most compelling proofs against alleged witches. The epidemic of demoniacs played a crucial role in the proliferation of stakes and gallows, both in the English Atlantic and across Europe. Thus, the deeply personal experience of the possessed had far-reaching consequences for the broader society to which they belonged, particularly for those they accused of causing their affliction. This was tragically evident in the

execution of Edmond Hartley, the alleged instigator of the possessions within the Starkie family.[40] As suggested by Sari Katajala-Peltomaa and Darren Oldridge, the idea of diabolical possession was a social construction, a collective process that required negotiations between the possessed, those around them, and their historical context.[41] Moshe Sluhovsky thinks of demonic possession as a language that was part of a cultural vocabulary shared by the possessed, his family, and neighbors, as well as by the experts who sought to cure them.[42]

In this context, other specialists in the field have proposed a performative analysis of demonic possessions. Nancy Caciola conceptualizes it as a distinct cultural process involved in the formation of identities, which is based on several interdependent factors: the social construction of identity roles, the personal representation by those who inhabit these roles, and the external collective evaluation by observers. Individuals aspiring to be recognized as demoniacs structured their lives in accordance with the prevailing cultural ideals associated with that role.[43] Brian Levack and James Sharpe similarly employ the language of performance and theater when discussing demonic possession. Both historians assert that the possessed served as protagonists in religious dramas, adhering to scripts they had internalized from others who had previously undergone similar

[40] As we shall see, similar outcomes occurred in the cases of the Throckmorton children and Mary Glover.

[41] Sari Katajala-Peltomaa, *Demonic Possession & Lived Religion in Later Medieval Europe* (Oxford University Press, 2020), p. 28. Darren Oldridge, T*he Devil in Tudor and Stuart England* (The History Press, 2011), p. 141.

[42] Sluhovsky, *Believe Not Every Spirit*, p. 15. See also Judith Bonzol, 'The Medical Diagnosis of Demonic Possession in an Early Modern English Community', *Parergon*, 26.1 (2009), pp. 115–40 (p. 125).

[43] Caciola, *Discernment of Spirits*, pp. 83–84.

experiences.[44] It is important to clarify that neither author considers the scripts nor the religious culture within which they are inscribed in a deterministic manner. Neither the former nor the latter inexorably dictated what the possessed said or did while under the influence of the demon; rather, they provided a set of practices and beliefs that the possessed articulated and acted upon, often based on suggestions from others. This did not preclude a certain degree of improvisation.[45] Consciously or unconsciously, demoniacs adhered to a *didascalia* that had developed over a millennium, originating in the Gospel and evolving through news sheets detailing contemporary instances of diabolic infestation. The possessed often had read or were familiar, through secondhand accounts, with episodes similar to their own that had occurred previously. The aforementioned pamphlet *The Witches of Warboys*, which recounts the sufferings endured by the Throckmorton family's afflicted individuals, for example, influenced subsequent demoniacs such as Thomas Darling, William Sommers, and Anne Gunther.[46]

The individuals whose specific cases of possession were analyzed in pamphlets designed to inform, educate, moralize, and entertain broad audiences

[44] Levack, *The Devil Within*, pp. viii–ix, 29, and 153. James Sharpe, *The Bewitching of Anne Gunter: A Horrible and True Story of Deception, Witchcraft, Murder, and the King of England* (Routledge, 2000), p. 141.

[45] Levack, *The Devil Within*, pp.140–41. Frances Dolan contributes to the clarification of this nuance: ‘To say that people know a story is not to say that their conformity to that plot is intentional and, in the legal context, a willful attempt to deceive. But without assuming that conformity is necessarily “knowing” in the sense of self-consciously doing or saying what is expected, one can say that possession, however disorderly, had meaning only as it was legible or scripted as such’. Frances Dolan, *True Relations. Reading, Literature and Evidence in Seventeenth Century England* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), p. 68.

[46] Almond, *The Witches of Warboys*, p. 36. Walsh, *The English Exorcist*, p. 78.

conformed to societal expectations. If they adhered to these expectations effectively, they would be classified as demoniacs not only by casual observers or future readers of their accounts but also by members of the elite, such as theologians, ministers, and exorcists.[47] These authorities rendered definitive judgments based on, among other factors, their knowledge of the extensive scriptural tradition on the subject as well as contemporary scholarly demonological works.[48] Without an examination of the religious beliefs of the period and the ways in which these beliefs were created, recreated, elaborated upon, and reworked over time across various types of documents, the early modern epidemic of possessions in Europe, particularly in England and its colonies, becomes incomprehensible. The very concept of demonic possession loses its significance.[49] The fact that possessions could lead to witch trials and death sentences, along with the influence that political and religious tensions had on the diagnosis and cure of demoniacs, serves as evidence of how contentious and complex possession cases were. The bodies of the possessed became battlegrounds shaped by conflicts of all kinds, ranging from petty family grievances and communal disputes to clashes between religious ministers and physicians, as

[47] Although their role is not central to the arguments of this article, it must be acknowledged that doctors and other healthcare practitioners also played a significant role in determining whether a person was bewitched or possessed. As Norman Gevitz noted, there were various factors that might lead a physician to suspect that a patient's condition resulted from an act of harmful magic: the suddenness of the onset of symptoms, the strangeness of the symptoms, the rarity of the complaint, and prior diagnoses made by laypersons. Norman Gevitz, '"The Devil Hath Laughed at the Physitians": Witchcraft and Medical Practice in Seventeenth-Century New England', *Journal of the History of Medicine*, 55 (2000), pp. 1–36 (pp. 14–15).

[48] Cowan, *The Possession of Barbe Hallay*, p. 49. Stephen Greenblatt, 'Shakespeare and the Exorcists', in *Shakespeare and the Question of Theory*, ed. by Geoffrey Hartman and Patricia Parker (Methuen, 1985), pp. 97–120.

[49] Levack. *The Devil Within*, pp. ix and 29–31.

well as broader struggles between different Christian denominations. All these factors played a role in every case of demonic possession. Various interests contributed to shaping and manipulating the origin, development, and resolution of each demoniac's experience.

DEMONIACS AND EMOTIONS

The cultural scripts followed by the possessed in both Old and New England, however, made no reference to their emotions. None of the passages cited in the previous section mention the feelings experienced by demoniacs during possession. This omission relates to the fact that the possessed were considered to be out of their minds. During their fits, they were unaware of what was happening to them. When the invading spiritual entity controlled their body, the demoniacs lost complete control over their physical being and basic bodily functions, including their senses.[50] This is how contemporaries of the events understood the phenomenon. The anonymous author of the pamphlet *The Witches of Warboys* described the demoniac Grace Throckmorton as being 'overruled in the action' and 'altogether besides her nature' when the demon manipulated her to wreak havoc in her home.[51] In *A true narration of the strange and grievous vexation by the Devil, of 7 persons in Lancashire* (1600), exorcist John Darrell noted that during the acute phase of possession, the

[50] Katajala-Peltomaa, *Demonic Possession*, p. 1.
[51] *The most strange and admirable discovery of the three Witches of Warboys,* L.

victims were deprived of the proper use of their minds.[52] George More, Darrell's associate during his dispossession campaigns in the English Midlands, concurred with his partner: 'and so they remained, deprived of the right to use their senses, both speaking and doing much evil, and yet utterly ignorant and senseless in all that passed from them'.[53]

To understand why the primary sources examined did not account for the emotions of the possessed, it is essential to consider a crucial aspect of the anatomy of diabolical possession: in which specific parts of the body did it occur? This question was a matter of debate between antiquity and the early modern period. As Sarah Ferber pointed out, most theologians agreed that possession was a condition in which demons manipulated the body but not the soul.[54] Augustine of Hippo (354–430), for instance, explained that fallen angels were not empowered to control the essence of human nature, which only God could penetrate and inhabit. Around the same time, the Desert Fathers John Cassian (360–435) and Evagrius of Pontus (c. 345–399) wrote about *acedia*, a diabolical mental state of lethargy and abandonment experienced by monks. According to both early Christian thinkers, this disorder occurred in the soul, but only in its lower part, while the ethereal spirit, its upper part, remained immune and beyond the reach of the material world, to which

[52] 'Indeede out of their fits those which are possessed have the right use of theire mindes, but in, and during the same they are altogether ordinarily de prived thereof, as hath bene shewed. If it be said that these actions and speches came from the divels within them I answer that that is most true: yet forasmuch as it seemed to men otherwise, and so they seemed to be out of their right mindes thereupon they are said so to be'. Darrell, *A true narration,* p. 11.
[53] George More, *A True Discourse concerning the certaine possession and dispossession of 7 persons in one familie in Lancashire* (Unknown publisher, 1600), D3.
[54] Ferber, 'Possession, Demonic', p. 920.

demons were believed to belong.[55] Historians disagree as to how this issue was evaluated after the year 1000. Some have maintained that during the Middle Ages, it was argued that the human spirit remained untainted during diabolical raptures.[56] Others have claimed that Satanic infestations differed from divinely inspired possessions. While the former were believed to occur in the entrails and viscera, the latter were thought to reach the heart, which some considered to be the seat of the human soul.[57] From his analysis of the writings of theologian Peter Lombard (1100–1160) and inquisitor Heinrich Krämer (c.1430–1505), Argentinian historian Ismael del Olmo concluded that infernal beings could not occupy the noblest areas of human beings.[58] Nevertheless, some scholars have suggested that the new mystical spirituality that emerged in the twelfth century challenged dualistic interpretations that excluded Satan and his minions from the usurpation of a person's soul. This ‘spiritualization of possession’, as Moshe Sluhovsky called it, gained momentum in the Thirteenth and Fourteenth centuries and expanded even further throughout early modern period.[59]

As with many other aspects, the Reformation can be considered a watershed in this debate. Due to its influence in the English Atlantic, developments within Calvinism are of particular interest. Consistent with their belief that the devil was primarily an internalized threat, with temptation as his preferred mode of operation,

[55] Sluhovsky, *Believe Not Every Spirit*, p. 28.
[56] Katajala-Peltomaa, ‘Diabolical Rage?’ p. 2.
[57] Caciola, *Discernment of Spirits,* p. 191.
[58] del Olmo, *Legio*, p. 77.
[59] Sluhovsky, *Believe Not Every Spirit*, pp. 28–29.

Reformed theologians understood that the devil could penetrate and establish himself within the human spirit.[60] In fact, in early modern England, possessions were seen as the ultimate manifestation of Satan's temptation of men and women.[61] In his first writing on witchcraft, George Gifford asserted that unclean spirits tempted men and sought to 'buffet them, every way seeking to annoy and molest them both in bodie and soule'.[62] This is particularly evident in the narratives about cases of possession. In the pamphlet detailing the sufferings of Alexander Nyndge, the author explained that the devil sought to occupy both the body and soul of the young Puritan. The usurper himself confessed this intention when questioned by Edward, Alexander's brother and a theologian, during one of the attempts to expel the demon from the victim's body 'I will have his soul and body too'.[63]

One of the most well-known demoniacs of the early seventeenth century was Mary Glover. Her case also reflects the political and religious tensions that permeated the phenomenon of demonic possession in early modern England. The girl, granddaughter of a Protestant martyr burned at the stake during the reign of Mary Tudor (r. 1553–1558), was exorcised by six ministers, who used the successful

[60] Levack, *The Devil Within*, pp. 161–62. Oldridge, *The Devil in Tudor and Stuart England*, pp. 14–50. Walsh, *The English Exorcist*, p. 14. For this reason, some historians consider the line between possession and obsession to be blurred within Protestantism. Both are expressions of a more encompassing and significant phenomenon: temptation. For various fields of action and strategies employed by demons to operate in the material world in England during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, see Agustín Méndez, *El Infierno está vacío. Demonología, caza de brujas y reforma en la Inglaterra temprano-moderna (s. xvi y xvii)* (Publicacions de la Universitat de València, 2020), pp. 216–59.

[61] Nathan Johnstone, *The Devil and Demonism in Early Modern England* (Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 102. 'The most visceral and substantive form of demonic agency', according to historian Brendan Walsh (*The English Exorcist*, p. 13).

[62] Gifford, *A Discourse of the Subtill Practises of Devills by Witches and Sorcerers*, D2.

[63] Nyndge, *A True and fearful vexation of one Alexander Nyndge,* A4.

outcome to advance the Puritan cause at the beginning of James I’s reign, a period of time when England’s religious course was under dispute.[64] The Bishop of London, Richard Bancroft — who, as we have seen, had already established a record of opposing Reformed dispossessions campaigns — intervened in an effort to neutralize this symbolic victory for his rivals. To this end, he enlisted the physician Edward Jorden, who attributed Mary’s afflictions to a natural illness (hysteria) rather than to demonic infestation. Regardless of the religious disputes, Elizabeth Jackson was accused of witchcraft and of having caused Mary’s possession, a crime for which she was sentenced to one year in prison.[65]

Thus, this episode sparked a controversy among medical, religious, and judicial authorities, who could not reach a consensus on whether her sufferings were natural (hysteria) or preternatural (diabolical infestation). One of the advocates of the second option, clergyman John Swan, wrote the libel *A True and Briefe Report of Mary Glovers Vexation, and of Her Deliverance by Fastings and Prayer* (1603) to publicize the case. In his text, Swan referenced a specific prayer uttered by Mary, in which she implored God not to allow the demon to exert power over her soul, thereby

[64] Patrick Collinson, ‘The Jacobean Religious Settlement: The Hampton Court Conference’, in *Before the Civil War: Essays on Early Stuart Politics and Government*, ed. by Howard Tomlinson (Macmillan, 1983), pp. 27–51.

[65] For a detailed study of the debates surrounding the possession of Mary Glover, see Michael MacDonald, *Witchcraft and Hysteria in Elizabethan London: Edward Jorden and the Mary Glover Case* (Routledge, 1990). Despite the apparent defeat of the faction led by Bancroft, in 1604 the Church of England promulgated Canon 72, which prohibited any form of exorcism without the explicit authorisation of the bishop with jurisdiction over the region. Failure to comply carried the penalty of removal from ministerial office and, ultimately, excommunication on charges of ‘imposture and deceit’. Francis Young, *A History of Anglican Exorcism. Deliverance and Demonology in Church Ritual* (T&T Clark, 2018), pp. 49–51. *Witchcraft and the Act of 1604*, ed. by John Newton and Jo Bath (Brill, 2008), pp. 241–42.

acknowledging the possibility of such an occurrence.[66] Finally, in the middle of the century, pastor Nathaniel Holmes (1599–1678) specified in his *Plain Dealing* (1652) that Satan possessed the wicked in body and soul.[67]

The notion that, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, both Old and New Englanders viewed the devil as capable of possessing the human soul is crucial for understanding why demonological discourse largely omitted references to the emotions of demoniacs. During the early modern period, the term 'passion' was commonly employed to describe emotions.[68] Derived from the Greek term *pathos* through the Latin *passio*, 'passion' occupied a central position within a distinctly Christian conceptual framework that encompassed other terms such as 'soul', 'conscience', and 'spirit'.[69] In both scholarly and non-elite circles, passions were consistently understood as 'movements of the soul'.[70] For instance, in his work *The Passions of the Mind* (1601), English writer Thomas Wright (1561–1624) defined passions as 'certaine internall actes or operations of the soule'.[71] This perspective was

[66] 'O Lord, though you would let Satan kill my body, let him have no power over my soul'. John Swan, *A True and Briefe Report of Mary Glovers Vexation, and of Her Deliverance by Fastings and Prayer* (Unknown publisher, 1604), D2v.

[67] 'Possession, when he is permitted to enter into a man, and is there powerfully predominant over his soule and body, wracking him inwardly with horrours, and strengthening him with untameable violencies'. Nathaniel Holmes, *Plain dealing: or the cause and cure of the present evils of the times* (R.I, 1652), p. 78.

[68] Ross Knecht, 'Grammar', in *Early Modern Emotions. An Introduction,* ed. by Susan Broomhall (Routledge, 2017), pp. 48–49 (p. 49).

[69] Thomas Dixon, *From Passion to Emotions. The Creation of a Secular Psychological Category* (Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 4–5.

[70] Angus Gowland, 'Melancholy, Passions and Identity in the Renaissance', in *Passions and Subjectivity in Early Modern Culture,* ed. by Brian Cummings and Freya Sierhuis (Routledge 2013), pp. 75–94 (p. 91).

[71] 'Certaine internall actes or operations of the [sensitive power of the] soule bordering upon reason and sense, prosecuting some good thing, or flying some ill thing, causing therewithall some alteration

grounded in an early modern anthropological consensus: human beings were viewed as dual creatures, with a clear distinction between the soul and the body.[72] In accordance with the Augustinian interpretation, the inner and outer aspects of an individual were differentiated. The inner aspect corresponded to the incorporeal, spiritual, and intellectual elements, representing the soul in its strictest and highest sense. Consequently, it was deemed superior to the outer aspect.[73] As the most substantial part of humanity, the soul was responsible for a wide range of faculties regarded as principles of operation. [74] Drawing on the ideas of Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas, the soul was believed to consist of three faculties: the vegetative, the sensitive, and the rational, each serving distinct functions. The vegetative faculty was associated with generation, nutrition, and growth; the sensitive faculty dealt with perception and motivation; while the rational faculty was linked to will and understanding. Within this framework, the sensitive faculty encompassed the five internal senses (touch, hearing, sight, taste, and smell) and three internal senses (common sense, imagination, and memory). The passions emerged in response to the functioning of this interplay of senses.[75]

in the body'. Thomas Wright, *The Passions of the Minde* (Valentine Simmes and Adam Islip, 1601), p. 11. Dixon, *From Passion to Emotions*, p. 18. Susan James, *Passion and Action. The Emotions in Seventeenth-Century Philosophy* (Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 4.

[72] Gowland, 'Melancholy, Passions and Identity in the Renaissance', p. 93. Angus Gowland, 'Medicine, Psychology, and the Melancholic Subject in the Renaissance', in *Emotions and Health, 1200-1700*, ed. by Elena Carrera (Brill, 2013), pp. 185–220 (p. 196).

[73] Dixon, *From Passion to Emotions*, p. 29–30.

[74] Dominik Perler, 'Faculties in Medieval Philosophy', in *The Faculties. A History,* ed. by Dominik Perler (Oxford University Press, 2015), pp. 97–139 (p. 99).

[75] Andrés Gattinoni, *El mal moderno. La melancolía en Gran Bretaña, 1660-1750* (Miño y Dávila, 2024), p. 60. More specifically, Louise Curth notes that emotions arose in the sensitive soul and manifested as

Even the various medical theories in vogue during the period covered by this article — Galenic, corpuscular, and iatromechanical – posited that spiritual entities could inhabit and control the body, mind, senses, and stir passions, whether through the humours, animal spirits, or atoms.[76] Especially in humoral theory, bodies were conceived as porous and permeable, linking each person's microcosmic interior with the macrocosmic external world.[77] Demonic possession was one of the clearest manifestations of this: upon entering the body, demons could manipulate the blood, phlegm, yellow bile, and black bile, disrupting the balance that ideally should exist among the four humours and causing, among other effects, emotional imbalances.[78]

It is important to recognize that early modern descriptions of emotions frequently emphasized their physical or somatic expressions, resulting in their interpretation as 'embodied' phenomena, given that the body served as their seat. Nevertheless, these emotions were primarily regarded as manifestations of the soul

physical symptoms, indicating that, despite being dual creatures, the spiritual and physical aspects in humans have a direct relationship. Louise Curth, 'Working Animal', in *Early Modern Emotions. An Introduction,* ed. by Susan Broomhall (Routledge, 2017), pp. 337–39 (p. 339).

[76] Gevitz, '"The Devil Hath Laughed at the Physitians"', p. 11. Bonzol, 'The Medical Diagnosis of Demonic Possession in an Early Modern English Community', pp. 118 and 125. Stuart Clark, 'Demons and Disease: The Disenchantment of the Sick (1500–1700)', in *Illness and Healing Alternatives in Western Europe*, ed. by Marijke Gijswijt-Hofstra, Hilary Marland, and Hans de Waardt (Routledge, 1997), pp. 38–58 (p. 46).

[77] Danijela Kambaskovic, 'Humoral Theory' in *Early Modern Emotions. An Introduction,* ed. by Susan Broomhall (Routledge, 2017), pp. 39–41 (p. 40). Mary Anne Lund, *A User´s Guide to Melancholy* (Cambridge University Press, 2021), pp. 49–50.

[78] Andrew Gowland, *The Worlds of Renaissance Melancholy. Robert Burton in Context* (Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 86. Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, pp. 249–50. Sam Migliore, 'The Doctor, the Lawyer, and the Melancholy Witch', *Anthropologica, New Series*, 25.2 (1983), pp. 163–92 (p. 173). Kambaskovic, 'Humoral Theory', pp. 39 and 58. Thomas Dixon, *The History of Emotions. A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2023), p. 30. Bonzol, 'The Medical Diagnosis of Demonic Possession in an Early Modern English Community', p. 138.

or ‘ensouled’ experiences.[79] For this reason, demonic possessions conceptually suggested that the invading spirit governed the emotional control center of the demoniac. The aspect of human nature responsible for the origin of emotions was influenced by an entity external to that individual’s subjectivity. Etymologically, the term ‘passions’ was linked to notions of passivity, signifying something that acted upon individuals and was beyond their control, essentially, something that was endured or suffered.[80] Possessions exacerbated this situation. The entire emotional experience of the demoniac was foreign to them.

In this regard, treatises and pamphlets addressing the issue of satanic infestations were unequivocal: the emotions experienced by the possessed were attributed to the devil; they were felt by the entity that usurped the body and soul of the victim. During the events chronicled in *The Witches of Warboys*, Elizabeth Throckmorton, one of the afflicted girls, was visited by her neighbor, Alice Samuel. When Samuel was at her side, filled with ‘a marvellous anger’, the young girl accused her not only of being a witch but also of being responsible for her current condition.[81] This reaction astonished everyone in the Throckmorton household due to its abruptness and the fact that no one had suspected Alice. Following the

[79] Karen Harvey, ‘The Body’, in *Early Modern Emotions. An Introduction,* ed. by Susan Broomhall (Routledge, 2017), pp. 165–67 (p. 165). Erin Sullivan, ‘A Disease Unto Death: Sadness in the Time of Shakespeare’, in *Emotions and Health, 1200-1700*, ed. by Elena Carrera (Brill, 2013), pp. 159–84 (p. 164). Again, the documentary reference is Wright's treatise: ‘the heart is the peculiar place where that Passions allodge’. Wright, *The Passions of the Minde*, p. 32.

[80] Knecht, ‘Grammar’, p. 49. Aleksondra Hultquist, ‘The Passions’, in *Early Modern Emotions. An Introduction,* ed. by Susan Broomhall (Routledge, 2017), pp. 71–73 (p. 71). Dixon, *The History of Emotions,* p. 51.

[81] *The most strange and admirable discovery of the three Witches of Warboys*, Lv.

accusation, Elizabeth began to scratch her alleged aggressor.[82] The child promptly asserted that she acted under the orders of the demon that had previously possessed her sister: 'my sister Joan's Devil told me, just now as I sat at supper, that I must scratch the young witch'.[83] After several minutes of uncontrollable fury, Elizabeth regained her composure. She offered an apology and explained that her actions had occurred beyond her control: 'it was completely disagreeable to my will to do it'.[84] Thus, it may be posited that the anger that precipitated the scene did not originate from her but rather from the entity that was tormenting and harassing her entire family.

Similarly, Darrell assured that 'in the manifoulde vexations of satan therefore and manner of usinge them he possesseth', the 'mallice, rage, cruelty and unsatiable desire of the devil' was transparently displayed.[85] It must not be overlooked that the behaviour of the possessed individuals and the accusations they made while under the demon's control were crucial in securing the conviction of Alice Samuel, her husband John, and their daughter Agnes, who were sentenced to death for the crime of witchcraft. The alleged Throckmorton children's possession constituted the most

[82] Although expressly rejected by religious authorities, the belief that scratching an alleged witch until they bled would reverse any harm they had caused through magical means spread during the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries. 'She slipped from the bench whereon she sat, and fell upon her knees, for she was not able to stand, and caught the maid by the hand that stood hard by her, holding of her sister, and scratched one of her handes most fiercely to see'. *The most strange and admirable discovery of the three Witches of Warboys*, Lv.

[83] *The most strange and admirable discovery of the three Witches of Warboys*, Lv. Stephen Quensel proposes the existence of a 'hermeneutical circle', meaning a 'collusion between the possessed, the audience, and the text', through which it was possible to connect possession and witchcraft in a way that the demon residing within the body of the demoniac could identify the witch responsible for its actions. Quensel, *Witch Politics in Early Modern Europe,* pp. 430–31.

[84] *The most strange and admirable discovery of the three Witches of Warboys*, Lv.

[85] Darrell, *A true narration,* pp. 40–41.

compelling evidence against the three suspects. The conflict between the Throckmorton and Samuel families unfolded within a broader context of religious tensions in Elizabethan England. As Philip Almond wrote: ‘the Samuels and the Throckmortons were agents of the two sides of a conflict between “Puritans”, on the one hand, and those whom they saw as the ungodly, on the other hand. And the battle was joined between those who saw it as their role to live a godly life and their responsibility to impose this life on others, and those who, not surprisingly, resented their interference’.[86]

Regarding dispossession strategies, Darrell considered that when attempting to expel an evil spirit, the person carrying out the healing action should ‘anger the devils as much as he can with reproaches, injuries, all which with greife the indure’.[87] Regarding this matter, in *The Replie of Iohn Darrell, to the Answer of Iohn Deacon, and Iohn Walker* (1602), the same author advised invoking prayers to the divine, imploring that, through His mercy, the possessed might be liberated ‘from Satan's great rage’.[88] Therefore, the negative emotions physically manifested by demoniacs through bodily contortions and acts of destruction originated from feelings that, in a technical sense, were not their own.

[86] Almond, *The Witches of Warboys*, p. 154.
[87] Darrell, *A true narration*, p. 78.
[88] John Darrell, *The replie of Iohn Darrell, to the answer of Iohn Deacon, and Iohn Walker, concerning the doctrine of the possession and dispossession of demoniakes* (Unknown publisher, 1602), p. 25.

Glover suggests a similar trajectory. In his pamphlet addressing her case, John Swan remarked that Satan's malice 'raged in her'.[89] In 1615, a news sheet concerning Alexander Nyndge's demonic infestation reported that during one of his moments of full consciousness between fits, he implored his brother Edward to remain by his side, as the demon 'was terribly frightened' by his presence. This fear was also cited as the reason for the astonishing and terrifying transformations in Nyndge's physical appearance that had occurred previously.[90]

Nevertheless, few incidents illustrate the emotional atrophy experienced by the possessed and the control exerted by diabolic usurpers as effectively as the case of Richard Dugdale, recorded in *The Surey Demoniack* (1697). According to this pamphlet, the protagonist suffered from two types of vexations: dead fits and raging fits. During the former, Richard's body entered a catatonic state that isolated him from his surroundings, rendering him nearly lifeless. In contrast, during the latter, the spirit manipulating him from within deployed its full range of resources to confuse and distract him.[91] Raging fits are particularly relevant here. In this active phase of possession, anger overwhelmed the young man, transforming him into a

[89] Swan, *A True and Briefe Report of Mary Glovers Vexation*, C3.

[90] 'At which, the countenance of the same Alexander turned more strange, and full of amazement and fear than it was before, and then returned to its former state again. This Alexander Nyndge, having his speech then at liberty, said to the same Edward, "Brother, he is marvellously afraid of you. Therefore I pray you, stand by me"'. Nyndge, *A True and fearful vexation of one Alexander Nyndge*, A3-A3r.

[91] 'It was strange, it was pitious to behold what horrors, what convulsions the demoniack was under during this discourse, until with great struglings, shrieks, and leaps, he fell into his dead fit, and after came out of that fit, till in his second fit his rages returning'. Jollie, *The Surey demoniac*, p. 9.

near-demonic entity.[92] Carlisle, the clergyman overseeing Richard's dispossession, addressed the impure spirit directly, reminding it of its cosmic defeat at the beginning of time and the infernal captivity to which it had been subjected since then. As part of his strategy to expel the demon, the minister provoked it by asserting that it must be blinded by rage at the fact that a man of faith like him was beyond its reach. According to the pamphlet, as soon as Carlisle ceased speaking, the demoniac became frantic in response to the fury incited in his infernal guest by the minister’s words:

> If thou be a Devil that troublest this youth's body, as I suppose thou art, then I tell thee thou art in chains; in chains to restrain thee, so that if thou do thy worst against me, through God's blessing thou canst do me no hurt, and in chains to torment thee, so that thou art now full of hellish pain and anguish; and does it not vex, and fret, and mad thee, to see me through God's unsearchable goodness out of thy reach, whilst thou feelest thy burning chains scorching and tormenting, and devouring thee? How did the demoniack gnash, and shake, and rage at this, sometimes in an inarticulate clatter.[93]

Rather than demonstrating signs of intimidation, the demon continued to assert control over Richard's body, issuing threats to anyone attempting to expel him.

[92] ‘Then he raged as if he had been nothing but a Devil in Richard's bodily shape’. Jollie, *The Surey demoniac*, p. 2. In his demonological treatise of 1677, Richard Gilpin suggested something similar: the possessed individuals were so out of their minds and so devoid of any possibility of self-control or regulation that they seemed to be demons: ‘That the Devil should take possession of the bodies of men, and thus act, drive, trouble and distress them; so distort, distend, and rack their members; so seat himself in their tongues and minds, that a man cannot command his own faculties and powers, but seems to be rather changed into the nature of a Devil, than to retain anything of a man; this shews a power in him to be trembled at’. Richard Gilpin, *Demonologia Sacra or a Treatise of Satans Temptations in Three Parts* (Richard Randal and Peter Mapladsen, 1677), p. 40.

[93] Jollie, *The Surey demoniac*, pp. 8–9.

Additionally, he threatened to possess other individuals and to unleash his wrath upon them for extended durations, thereby obstructing any opportunity for recovery or the restoration of control over their bodies.[94] Notably, George More described how, once expelled, the unclean spirits attempted to repossess the bodies of the Starkie family members in the forms of wild animals (such as bears, monkeys, and crows), flames, or a local sorcerer who had recently been executed for the crimes he had allegedly committed.[95] Animals, fire, and sorcerers symbolize intensity, destruction, and a lack of restraint or control. As previously noted, once inside a body, demons supposedly seize the soul, thereby instigating perverse passions. From these examples, it can be suggested that nothing more effectively captures the inherent disruption of identity in demonic possession than its emotional dimension. As Nancy Caciola posits, the possessed lack deictic integrity or stability; demonic possession hinders the adoption of a consistent subjective viewpoint within language.[96] Therefore, narratives about possession sought to be as precise as possible in their use of pronouns or demonstrative words to reflect that, although the exorcist looked at and spoke to the possessed person, the communication was not directed at them but at the entity victimizing them. The dialogue was not structured around the

[94] 'Satan followed his blow with invectives, insultings, and comminations, and particularly cried out […] I will pour forth my continued rages against thee, and lash thee with insatiable furies for three hours longer, far worse than I have done hitherto; nor will I intermit them, or give thee the least breathing fit, until I have utterly confounded thee'. Jollie, *The Surey demoniac*, pp. 16–17.

[95] 'In these assaults to re-enter, the spirits appeared sometimes in the likeness of a bear with open mouth, sometimes of an ape, sometimes of a big black dog, sometimes of a black raven with a yellow bill, sometimes of a flame of fire, sometimes of divers whelps. But most usually they appeared in the likeness of Edmond Hartley, a conjurer who had bewitched them, and was also hanged at Lancaster for that fact, and for conjuring'. More, *A True Discourse concerning the certaine possession and dispossession of 7 persons in one familie in Lancashire*, F.

[96] Caciola, *Discernment of Spirits*, p. 129.

word ‘you’, referring to the possessed, but rather around the term ‘him’, alluding to the demon. Similarly, upon regaining consciousness, the possessed would recount what occurred during their trance in the third person singular, as when Alexander Nyndge said to his brother, ‘he is marvellously afraid of you’. This instability originates from the fact that the possessed could not maintain their usual identity, as they were subjected to a foreign and invasive entity that controlled them entirely, affecting their mental faculties and personality.[97] Certainly, during possessions, emotions were not confined within the body but manifested externally.[98] The depersonalizing effects of possession were thus evident, particularly in the case of Richard Dugdale, whose anatomy and the imagined figure of the demon within him appeared to blur due to the uncontrollable fury consuming him from within: ‘he raged as if he had been nothing but a Devil in Richard's bodily shape’.[99]

These disruptions and impediments to identity and subjectivity were only overcome once the demon or demons were expelled from the sufferer’s body. From that moment on, the individual regained full control of their body and spirit, which was manifested not only in the ability to once again feel and express emotions that were truly their own, but also in the positive nature of those emotions. Exorcisms distanced both the protagonists and the witnesses from rage, sadness, and fear, guiding them toward more pleasant emotional states. George More explained that when the first member of the Starkie family was liberated from his spiritual

[97] Caciola, *Discernment of Spirits,* p. 130. Levack, *The Devil Within*, p. 129.
[98] Cowan, *The Possession of Barbe Hallay*, p. 53.
[99] Jollie, *The Surey demoniac*, p. 2.

oppression, the atmosphere around him was filled with 'great joy and gladness of heart', in contrast to the 'great sorrow and grief in compassion for their miseries' that had previously prevailed.[100] In fact, the emotional transformation that followed the dispossessions left no room for doubt regarding its success. Whereas demoniacs had previously experienced violent passions provoked by demons that led them to 'cry and roar with all madness and fury', after the beneficial intervention of the divinity, they were 'quite changed into another condition' characterized by 'unspeakable and excessive joys'. The triumph over Satan, marked by his expulsion from the body of the possessed, liberated them from an 'emotional servitude and torture' giving way to the 'glorious freedom' that identified the sons and daughters of the Creator.[101] Emotions, then, once again fully belonged to them. Years earlier, the dispossession of Thomas Darling demonstrated a similar resolution. Once the influence of the impure spirit over his body and soul was broken, the young man from Burton thereafter experienced 'the joy of the godly'.[102] Similar reactions surrounded the cure of Mary Glover. When the young woman awoke from her diabolical trance, exclaiming, 'Oh Lord, you have delivered me', her affirmation was accompanied by 'an abundance of most joyful tears' which affected her father and the other witnesses of the event.[103] Similarly, after Alexander Nyndge expressed his gratitude to the divinity for inspiring the departure of his invader, he and his family dined 'with

[100] More, *A True Discourse concerning the certaine possession and dispossession of 7 persons in one familie in Lancashire*, D7v and Ev.
[101] Ibid., E2.
[102] *The most wonderful and true story of a certain Witch named Alice Gooderige*, p. 191.
[103] Swan, *A True and Briefe Report of Mary Glovers Vexation*, F4.

great joy and gladness’.[104] Finally, Mr. Carrington, another minister involved in the dispossession of Richard Dugdale, reported encountering him by chance on a road six months after the conclusion of his sufferings, during which time he appeared ‘overjoyed, and as surprised with an unspeakable gladness’.[105]

Positive emotions and states of harmony could serve to distinguish diabolical possessions from divine ones.[106] The pamphlet *Wonderfull News From the North* (1650) recounts the story of Margaret Muschamp, an eleven-year-old girl from a Puritan family in Northumberland, who displayed clear signs of spiritual rapture, culminating in a prolonged and profound trance.[107] Upon waking, she asked her mother not to grieve, as she had experienced a joyful vision: ‘the Lord has so loved my poor soul that he has caused his blessed trumpet to sound in my ears, and has sent two blessed angels to receive my sinful soul’.[108] This experience differed significantly from the classic satanic attacks described earlier in this article. The document itself defines it as a divine rapture.[109] The angelic visitation to Margaret's body, for instance, kept her free from fear and anger.[110] During the ecstasy, the

[104] Nyndge, *A True and fearful vexation of one Alexander Nyndge*, B.
[105] Jollie, *The Surey demoniac*, p. 51.
[106] David Davis, *Experiencing God in Late Medieval and Early Modern England* (Oxford University Press, 2022), pp. 51–52.
[107] For a study of the Muschamp case, see Diane Purkiss, ‘Invasions: Prophecy and Bewitchment in the Case of Margaret Muschamp’, *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, 17.2 (1998), pp. 235–53.
[108] John Downame, *Wonderful News from the North. Or, a true relation of the sad and grievous torments, Inflicted on the Bodies of three Children of Mr George Muschamp, late of the County of Northumberland, by Witch-craft* (T. H, 1650), p. 1.
[109] ‘On Monday night, she fell into a heavenly rapture, rejoicing that ever she was born, for these two drops of blood had saved her life’. Ibid., p. 9.
[110] ‘But now, one of her angels bade her to have a care that she was neither frightened nor angred for twelve weeks’. Ibid., p. 12.

divinity had revealed to her that, despite being a sinner, she was 'worthy of so much happiness'.[111] The young woman asserted that the only thing capable of disturbing the atmosphere of joyful calm was the possibility that the heavenly messengers might cease visiting her, a prospect that saddened her more than any physical pain.[112]

Witches committed criminal acts such as *maleficium* and demonism due to a lack of control over their passions. Their actions were punishable because they knowingly and consciously committed these crimes. Focusing on the emotional aspect, the negative feelings that drove them to become the worst kind of sinners were not imposed by external forces but were instead the result of their exercising free will. For this reason, they deserved to be punished with the full severity of human justice. In contrast, the possessed, who often appeared to experience emotions similar to those that led one toward witchcraft (rage, envy, fear), were mere vessels, devoid of free will, internally subjected to a more powerful and utterly perverse entity. Herein lies the essential difference between a victim and a felon.[113] Demoniacs were not guilty of any fault, nor were they subject to criminal prosecution.[114] They were out of their minds, devoid of reason, and unable to offer

[111] Ibid., p. 376.
[112] 'Will I never behold your faces again? If it were so, it would be more sad to me than all my pain. Though you be not in my sight, yet I trust in God's mercy so much that you will still watch over us and protect us'. Ibid., p. 18.
[113] Quensel, *Witch Politics in Early Modern Europe (1400–1800*), p. 425. Uszkalo, *Bewitched and Bedeviled*, p. 59.
[114] Levack, *The Devil Within*, p. 2. Sarah Ferber, *Demonic Possession and Exorcism in Early Modern France* (Routledge, 2004), p. 26. Erica Gasser, *Vexed with Devils: Manhood and Witchcraft in Old and New England* (New York University Press, 2017), pp. 17–20. Almond, *Demonic Possession and Exorcism in*

resistance. Unlike witches, the passions that characterized their fits were not, strictly speaking, their own, but rather originated in a part of their being — the soul — under the control of an impure spirit. This does not prevent them from being considered sinners. The possessed were not necessarily innocent of having committed spiritual transgressions. Possession, in fact, could be understood as a personal punishment for sins that the possessed individual had committed prior. Nevertheless, they were victims because demons invaded them without their consent; they were not guilty of having committed apostasy, as was the case with witches.[115] Similarly, the English theologian William Gurnall (1617–1679), indicated that the devil preferred classic temptation over demonic possession. This was because, in the former case, the individual could be considered entirely responsible for their actions and, therefore, punished by God, whereas in the latter case, this would not be possible, as the person was not in control of themselves: ‘he had rather possess the souls of men than their bodies [...] He had rather hear Job himself blaspheme God, while was compos mentis- his own man, than himself in Job to belch out blasphemies against God, which would have been the devil's own sin, and not Job’.[116] Demonologists Thomas Cooper and John Cotta propose this argument in their treatises. In *The Mystery of Witchcraft* (1617), Cooper clearly distinguished

Early Modern England, p. 15. Katherine Sands, *Demon Possession in Elizabethan England* (Praeger Publishers, 2004), p. 27.

[115] Walsh, *The English Exorcist*, p. 71. Ferber, ‘Possession, Demonic’, p. 922. Katajala-Peltomaa, ‘Diabolical Rage?’, p. 2.

[116] William Gurnall, *The Christian in Complete Armour; or A Treatise on the Saint´s War with the Devil* (1655–62; repr. William Tegg, 1862), p. 300.

witches from demoniacs: 'Such as are demoniackes, possessed by him, whereof though some are properly witches, as consenting to him, and so he possessing them out of them speaketh, by them working strange things: yet others though they bee possessed, yet they consent not thereto, they in their spirits strive against him'.[117] In *The Infallible, True and Assured Witch: or the Second Edition of the Tryall of Witchcraft* (1625), Cotta reached similar conclusions: 'The possessed and the witch, are both the habitacles of Divels; with this onely difference, that the witch doth willingly entertaine him'.[118]

CONCLUSION: POSSESSIONS AND SOCIAL ORDER

In the previous sections, I pointed out that I subscribe to the interpretation of possession as a social construct, both individual and collective, associated with a specific historical context that provides it with meaning and significance. In this context, demoniacs assumed particular roles and adhered to a social script regarding what was expected of them, thereby progressively constituting their identity as such.[119] It may be useful to interpret diabolic possessions as part of what is referred to as 'lived religion', understood as a social process, a way of living, interacting, and participating in the community to which an individual belongs. This

[117] Thomas Cooper, *The Mystery of Witchcraft* (Nicholas Okes, 1617), pp. 178–79.
[118] John Cotta, *The infallible, true and assured witch: or the second edition of the tryall of witchcraft* (I.E, 1625), p. 134.
[119] Katajala-Peltomaa proposes to understand it as the intersection of different levels: personal experience, social dynamics, and cultural expectations. Katajala-Peltomaa, *Demonic Possession*, p. 29.

conceptualization is rooted in the core of communal life, where religious ideas and concepts are experienced. This framework provides a performative space for constructing social positions, deploying and constituting identities, and fostering communal cohesion. In short, it represents a social phenomenon built on practices, shared meanings, and common experiences.[120] All possessions were influenced by the position of the demoniacs within society, as well as by their responses to it and, at times, their intentions to change it.[121]

In connection with the aforementioned, the immediate environment in which possessions occurred, as well as the specific individuals who were possessed by demons, are elements that should not be overlooked. With regard to the former, these types of diabolical attacks typically took place in small communities bound by direct and very close social ties. In the absence of convents or monasteries that proliferated in Catholic regions, Old and New England found such spaces within domestic units whose members adhered to the most intense version of Protestantism.[122] Puritan families were seen as an earthly microcosm of the heavenly kingdom. Godly homes were regarded as the cornerstone for building an authentic Christian society. Maintaining order and discipline within these households was

[120] Katajala-Peltomaa, *Demonic Possession*, p. 2. Uszkalo, *Bewitched and* Bedeviled, p. 10. Sands, *Demon Possession in Elizabethan England*, p. 9.
[121] Levack, *The Devil Within*, p. 29.
[122] Brian Levack, ‘Possession Witchcraft and the Law’, *Washington and Lee Law Review*, 52.5 (1995), pp. 1613–41 (p. 1620). R. Godbeer, *The Devil´s Dominion*, p. 107.

essential not only for their immediate members but also for the entire community.[123] The daily coexistence of members of the nuclear family, servants, and other occasional workers, combined with the pressures of strict codes of conduct imposed within an apocalyptic context rife with social tensions, religious conflicts, and rising instances of witchcraft, created a highly conducive environment for possessions.[124] The experience of demoniacs William Sommers, Thomas Darling, Mary Glover, Alexander Nyndge, Elizabeth Knapp and Richard Dugdale, to name just a few, demonstrate this. Indeed, possessions and their associated behaviors often spread rapidly to those with whom the possessed cohabited, transforming an initially individual affliction into multiple cases of satanic infestations, as occurred in the Throckmorton and Goodwin families in Huntingdonshire and Boston, respectively.

This internal pressure toward conformity and discipline, particularly intense in Puritan families, can be linked to the gender and age of most demoniacs. In his study of diabolic possessions in early modern England, Philip Almond observed that, of the sixty-four possessed individuals whose ages can be directly or indirectly determined, only eight were over the age of twenty. Similarly, of the sixty-two cases in which the sex of the possessed is specified, forty-four were female, and of these, only three could be considered adults. In other words, roughly two-thirds of the

[123] Anna French, *Children of Wrath: Possession, Prophecy and the Young in Early Modern England* (Routledge, 2015), p. 41. Walsh, *The English Exorcist*, p. 42.
[124] Levack, *The Devil Within*, p. 169.

possessed were children or adolescent girls.[125] In New England, the proportions are even more striking: more than eight out of ten demoniacs were women, most of whom were not within the age range typically associated with adulthood.[126] Such statistical patterns have led Almond to conclude that the possession of children was a phenomenon unique to English culture and, within it, particularly specific to the Puritan substratum.[127]

This preponderance of young females among demoniacs was partially explained by contemporaries through the belief, inherited at least since the medieval period, that women were physically, morally, and psychologically weaker than men. This perceived frailty allegedly made them more vulnerable to diabolical vexations, particularly those that involved the occupation of both body and soul.[128] The passivity attributed to women in Christian anthropology also served to justify their overrepresentation among demoniacs.[129] Even humoral medical theory, which posited that females were naturally cold and moist, associated them with mutability,

[125] Almond, *Demonic Possession and Exorcism in Early Modern England*, pp. 22–23. The tendency for the possessed to be predominantly young women is also observed in other European territories. Sarah Ferber, ‘Possession and the Sexes’, in *Witchcraft and Masculinities in Early Modern Europe,* ed. by Allison Rowlands (Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 214–38. Monter, *Witchcraft in France and Switzerland*, p. 139. Caciola, *Discernment of Spirits,* p. 40. However, the same cannot be said regarding age. Sari Katajala-Peltomaa and Moshe Sluhovsky link female possessions less to childhood or adolescence and more to specific moments of changes in social status, such as the loss of virginity or the celebration of marriage. Katajala-Peltomaa, *Demonic Possession*, p. 48. Moshe Sluhovsky, ‘A Divine Apparition or Demonic Possession? Female Agency and Church Authority in Demonic Possession in Sixteenth-Century France’, *The Sixteenth Century Journal*, 27.4 (1996), pp. 1039–55 (pp. 1051–52).
[126] Carol Karlsen. *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman. Witchcraft in Colonial New England* (Norton, 1998), p. 223. Godbeer, *The Devil´s Dominion*, pp. 114 and 116.
[127] Almond, *The Witches of Warboys,* p. 30.
[128] Levack, *The Devil Within*, p. 182. Cowan, *The Possession of Barbe Hallay*, p. 50. Caciola, *Discernment of Spirits,* pp. 130–35.
[129] Sluhovsky, *Believe Not Every Spirit*, p. 99.

credulity, moral, and physical decay, traits that made them more appealing to demons.[130] According to Galenic medicine, which retained its prestige and influence throughout the period covered in this article, women were biologically predisposed to demonic possession. And, as we have seen, once this occurred, the invading spirits would completely dominate the victims' emotions, imposing their own in the process.

On the other hand, children were generally regarded as more susceptible to experiencing extreme spiritual phenomena. Historian Anna French explains that in early modern societies, childhood was not necessarily defined by a person's age. Other factors, such as social status, gender, and physical size and abilities, were as important, if not more so, than age itself.[131] Interpreted from a contemporary perspective, however, the link between demonic possession, the female sex, and the stages of life prior to adulthood can be attributed not to supposed physiological or spiritual frailties, but to the subordinate status of women and children within the social hierarchy of the period. Women were expected to submit first to the authority of their parents and subsequently to that of their husbands, while infants and adolescents were similarly expected to defer to their elders. Consciously or not, possessions created spaces for individuals with limited agency and virtually no autonomy or authority to defy the social mandates and expectations imposed upon them. As long as their bodies and souls were dominated by impure spirits, the

[130] Katajala-Peltomaa, *Demonic Possession*, p. 63.
[131] Anna French, 'Possession, Puritanism and Prophecy: Child Demoniacs and English Reformed Culture', *Reformation*, 13 (2008), pp. 133–61 (p. 58). French, *Children of Wrath*, p. 13.

possessed were permitted to think, express, and engage in behaviors that were normally forbidden to them.[132] Based on the analysis conducted thus far, we can add to this list the ability to feel and express emotions that individuals could not normally articulate in their daily lives. The otherness of the demoniac was physical and spiritual, but also emotional. The theatrical performance inherent in all demonic possession, along with the stage directions that delineated a series of behaviors and actions identified as demonic infestation, was inscribed within socially recognized scripts that included emotional dimensions not to be overlooked. Just as individuals possessed by demons were expected to transgress socially accepted norms through their behavior, there was a corresponding expectation regarding their emotional experiences.

However, possessions did not pose an actual threat to the prevailing social order. Rather, they represented a brief, supervised, and limited interlude for the manifestation of negative behaviors and emotions. Within this constrained space and time, what may initially appear as a challenge to established power relations ultimately served to reinforce them. In a certain sense, possessions functioned similarly to the carnival in pre-modern cultures: they served as release valves, activated at specific moments to alleviate the tensions inherent in hierarchical and structured societies. However, it is crucial to recognize that what was permitted within these episodes remained distinct from everyday life, operating outside

[132] Levack, *The Devil Within*, pp. 184–85. Cowan, *The Possession of Barbe Hallay*, p. 57. Almond, *Demonic Possession and Exorcism in Early Modern England*, p. 26. French, *Children of Wrath*, p. 138.

established norms and alien to orthodox practices.[133] Both fulfilled the crucial role of highlighting the boundaries of what was culturally acceptable. As a matter of fact, carnival events can also be understood in terms of dramas with established scripts and predetermined steps known to those participating in them.[134] In other words, although possessions and carnivals could be understood as criticisms of the social order, they also served to perpetuate it.[135] With this in mind, it is useful to consider one of the definitions of authority from the early modern period: 'the power or right to define and regulate the legitimate behavior of others'.[136] Diabolical possessions were neither forbidden nor legally punished. In fact, they were often made public, whether through open exorcisms or published accounts designed to disseminate what had occurred. This is because they simultaneously represented the extreme manifestation of personal disorder and the reaffirmation of the established social order: while evil spirits disrupted the human body and society, they could also be expelled, allowing harmony to be restored.[137]

Negative emotions produced by the Adversary from within the human soul he occupied were always regarded as undesirable. Precisely because these were not emotions belonging to the possessed but rather passions imposed by the devil — the epitome of inversion — they were indelibly linked to Evil, standing in direct

[133] Peter Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* (Harper Torchbooks, 1978) pp. 200–04. Edward Muir, *Ritual in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 90.
[134] Muir, *Ritual in Early Modern Europe*, p. 92.
[135] Natalie Zemon Davies, 'The Reasons of Misrule: Youth Groups and Charivaris in Sixteenth-Century France', *Past & Present*, 50 (1971), pp. 41–75 (p. 41).
[136] Paul Griffiths, 'Introduction', in *The Experience of Authority in Early Modern England*, ed. by Paul Griffiths, Adam Fox, and Steve Hindle (Macmillan, 1996), pp. 1–9 (p. 2).
[137] Sluhovsky, *Believe Not Every Spirit*, p. 28. Almond, *The Witches of Warboys*, p. 95.

opposition to what was right and desirable. We have observed that when possessions ended, and the impure spirits left the bodies following the dispossessions, the individuals resumed experiencing socially desirable emotions, such as joy and fear of God.[138] The order was restored and the norm was ensured. Although for different reasons than witches, the possessed were regarded as anomic others, serving as an inverted reflection of the ideal model of a pious person to which English religious culture, on both sides of the Atlantic, aspired.

[138] As Dixon notes, Christian affective psychology did not promote ideals of apathy or the absence of emotions; rather, it valued positively those emotions that were free from sin and did not cause spiritual disturbances. Dixon, *From Passion to Emotions*, pp. 60–61.

Jacob Abell, *Spiritual and Material Boundaries in Old French Verse: Contemplating the Walls of the Earthly Paradise* (Medieval Institute Publications/De Gruyter, 2023). Hardcover, 131 pp., € 129.00, ISBN: 9781501520570.

Review

This book begins in a moment of serendipity: while travelling and reading Marie de France's *Purgatory of St Patrick*, Jacob Abell noticed that its description of Eden's walls closely echoes the account in Benedeit's *Voyage of Saint Brendan the Abbot*. From that observation he develops a focused inquiry into how a single image – the exterior walls of the Earthly Paradise – operates across genres and centuries.

The Earthly Paradise stood at the center of medieval Christian geographies of the cosmos. As humanity's primal home, lost through the sin of Adam and Eve, it figured prominently in Old French narratives of lands beyond the ordinary world. Abell revisits this symbol in three poems: Marie de France's *Purgatory of St Patrick*, Benedeit's *Voyage of Saint Brendan the Abbot*, and Guillaume de Lorris's *Roman de la Rose*. Working across literary, cultural, and artistic evidence, he advances the thesis that the walls of Eden function as contemplative objects whose meanings shift with context, implicitly engaging ideas of economic solidarity and idealized community.

The imagery is Biblical. Lush visions of Eden draw on Genesis; the distant city with ornate walls and abundant riches recalls the Apocalypse of John and its New Jerusalem. Abell's readings track how these scriptural topoi are re-situated in vernacular poetry and in visual culture, where precious stones, measured

architecture, and radiant surfaces signal both eschatological promise and moral scrutiny. The 'wall', in his account, is not a boundary that excludes so much as a threshold that teaches: it arrests the eye, suspends desire, and invites evaluation of the social order.

In the *Voyage of Saint Brendan*, the walls mark a critique of material excess consonant with apocalyptic denunciations of wealth. The gems that crown Eden's circumference – Brendan's journey's end – are removed from circulation and offered purely for contemplation, set against the oppressive economies of Babylon. The episode intimates a community no longer organized by private property, anticipating the immateriality and shared goods of the afterlife.

Marie de France adapts the same lexicon differently. Inside the Earthly Paradise of the *Purgatory of St Patrick*, Owein and his companions encounter spectral clergy and Cistercian figures, and undergo an epiphany that foregrounds unity and caritas. Here the walls frame a pedagogy of spiritual communion animated by the Holy Spirit. Matter is not vilified so much as subordinated to the bonds that constitute an ecclesial commonwealth.

The contrast becomes sharper in Guillaume de Lorris's *Roman de la Rose*. Detached from explicit biblical scaffolding, the poem redeploys Edenic walls within an erotic and allegorical itinerary. The architecture still stages desire and contemplation, but it serves individual quest rather than communal or theological

ends. Abell's comparison shows how stable motifs migrate into new literary economies, where allegory reorganizes inherited forms and their moral resonance.

A strength of the study is its consistent attention to how "contemplative objects" mediate social imagination: by pausing movement and concentrating vision, the walls make visible competing logics of value – gift, use, ornament, and exchange. Read this way, Eden's perimeter becomes a site where aesthetics and ethics meet, and where vernacular poetry negotiates the claims of scarcity, abundance, and belonging.

Abell also widens the stakes. He argues that medieval visions of the Earthly Paradise, and of its walls in particular, can contribute to historically grounded reflection on contemporary issues, including the legacies of colonialism and the international refugee crisis. Without forcing equivalence, the book suggests that the imaginative geographies of paradise – edges, thresholds, guarded access, shared goods – illuminate how communities picture inclusion, exclusion, and care across borders.

As a whole, the study shows the value of revisiting familiar topoi from a new angle. The first two poems, *The Voyage of Saint Brendan* and *The Purgatory of St Patrick*, benefit especially from Abell's intertextual method and from his attention to apocalyptic economics and monastic ideals of community. In the case of the *Roman de la Rose*, the comparison inevitably loses some explanatory power because the biblical framework is more attenuated; yet its presence clarifies how resilient and adaptable these motifs are when translated into a different literary economy. The result is a

concise contribution to the study of Old French literature and to the cultural history of paradise, one that connects medieval contemplative images to questions of value, solidarity, and common life.

Erika Dell'Acquila

Università degli Studi di Trento

Laurie Atkinson, *Ideas of Authorship in the English and Scottish Dream Vision: Skelton, Dunbar, Hawes, Douglas* (Boydell & Brewer, 2024). Hardcover, 236 pp., £ 65.00, ISBN: 9781843846925.

Review

How was authorship conceived by late fifteenth and early sixteenth-century poets at the English and Scottish courts? What role did the dream vision play in facilitating various expressions of authorship? These are the questions explored and deftly answered in Laurie Atkinson's *Ideas of Authorship in the English and Scottish Dream Vision: Skelton, Dunbar, Hawes, Douglas.* Throughout this book, Atkinson argues that while the works of John Skelton, William Dunbar, Stephen Hawes, and Gavin Douglas adhere to many of the established elements of late medieval and early modern authorship, they also include in their dream visions 'gestures […] towards alternative strategies for authorial self-promotion' (p. 8). Ultimately, this book explores the ways in which these four authors 'reinvent their poetic inheritance to reflect, and also to effect, changing realities and ideals of textual production and literary authority' (p. 8). Atkinson's focus throughout the book is the above-mentioned idea of 'self-promotion' carried out to varying degrees by Skelton, Dunbar, Hawes, and Douglas, a concept through which these authors created a fictionalised version of themselves — the poet-narrator, as Atkinson terms it — in their work.

The first chapter of this book is largely contextual, offering a thorough overview of the medieval conceptions of authorship in print, in the royal courts of Europe, England and Scotland, and in the genre of dream visions. Atkinson begins this chapter with a discussion of the development of the concept of authorship in the Middle Ages, highlighting the ways in which Chaucer particularly influenced medieval authorial authority. Referring to the work of Seth Lerer on Chaucer, Atkinson shows the extent to which Chaucerian literary forms, including the dream vision, provided many of the themes and motifs adopted by authors in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries (p. 18). Atkinson regularly acknowledges the impact of Chaucerian tradition of the works of this book's four authors, but also explores the other contextual influences that shaped their work. A particular strength of this chapter is Atkinson's repudiation of the categorisation of the authors as either 'late medieval or early modern, or as belonging to a Scottish Middle Ages or an English Renaissance' (p. 23). Rather, Atkinson demonstrates both the similarities and differences that exist between each author's work, allowing for a more nuanced interpretation of their dream visions. Atkinson also highlights the extent to which courtly display and spectacle at the courts of Henry VII, Henry VIII and James IV influenced the notions of self-representation and self-promotion present in the dream visions of each author.

In chapter two, Atkinson explores the differing ways in which John Skelton and William Dunbar approach the idea of authorial self-promotion. Focussing

primarily on Skelton's *The Bowge of Court* and *The Garlande or Chapelet of Laurell* and Dunbar's *The Golden Targe*, this chapter explores the dream vision and self-promotion within the setting of the royal court. Atkinson first shows how Skelton reconfigures Chaucerian tradition in *The Bowge of Court* and challenges the traditional understanding of poetry as a medium through which truth is conveyed. Skelton's poem fits into the category of court satire, however it differs from tradition through his decision to frame it as a dream vision, and his choice to critique the satirist himself within it (p. 42). Atkinson frames Skelton's *Bowge* and its use of allegory as a transformation from 'satire into self-scrutiny…[then] from self-scrutiny to self-regard', successfully arguing that such a transformation allows Skelton to criticise his own poet-narrator, allowing him to ultimately 'dictate the terms of that role' (p. 48). Atkinson shows in this chapter how Skelton transformed traditional genres and literary forms to be able to write about himself, allowing him to devise his own concept of authorship and authority. Turning to Dunbar, Atkinson demonstrates the extent to which court culture and spectacle informed the literature, particularly dream visions, of the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. Dunbar's dream visions position the royal court as an object of display in and of itself, and, notably, emphasise the role of the poet or *makar* in constructing that court (p. 51). Atkinson's explanation of Dunbar's self-promotion feels slightly less convincing and less certain here; Dunbar's version of authorial self-promotion is described as 'a projection of, and onto, a courtly milieu, from which the *makar* — if not necessarily Dunbar the *makar* — emerges as a significant personage' (p. 51).

Atkinson argues that Dunbar, rather than representing himself, represents a particular court and its culture within his dream visions.

In the third chapter, Atkinson considers the work of Stephen Hawes and his use of 'obscure allegory'. Hawes falls into a different category to the other authors discussed in this book; his comparatively low status at the early Tudor court and his subsequently limited access to patronage set him apart from his contemporaries, though this should not, according to Atkinson, undermine the significance of his work (p. 88). Atkinson demonstrates throughout this chapter the ways in which Hawes made use of 'obscure allegory', particularly in his dream visions *The Conforte of Louers* and *The Pastime of Pleasure* — allegories which 'seem deliberately detached from any fixed referents in the real world but have countless analogues in the textual and visual arts of the early Tudor court' (p. 88). Atkinson argues in this chapter that Hawes derives authorial authority through situating his work within the established 'network of texts, objects, and images associated with the court' in which he writes (p. 128).

Finally, chapter four of this book explores the work of Scottish poet Gavin Douglas and his use of what Atkinson terms implied authorship. Douglas also differs from the other authors discussed in this book, in this case due to his noble status as a member of the powerful Douglas family. Douglas's conception of authorship, Atkinson argues, was closely related to his strategic manipulation of self-representation, and his works position himself very much outside of the text as

the compiler responsible for their creation (p. 131). Douglas's work, rather than positioning the poet-narrator at the centre of the story, instead places focus on the 'authorial agent' or compiler of the texts (that is, himself) as the ultimate authority for them (p. 131). Atkinson also highlights the ways in which Douglas emphasises the differences between himself and his in-text persona, rather than using it as an extension of himself.

Atkinson's exploration of authorship is meticulously researched and compiled. Though there were points where the analysis was somewhat hindered by heavy verbiage, this book nonetheless offers a highly detailed and considered exploration of the concept of authorship and its intersection with fifteenth and sixteenth-century dream visions.

Reilly O'Hagan

University of Sydney

Mary Elizabeth Blanchard and Christopher Riedel, eds, *The Reigns of Edmund, Eadred and Eadwig, 939–959: New Interpretations* (Boydell Press, 2024). Hardcover, 236 pp., £ 85.00, ISBN: 9781783277643.

Review

The Reigns of Edmund, Eadred and Eadwig, 939–959 makes a compelling case for re-considering the importance of King Edmund (r. 939–46), King Eadred (r. 946–55), and King Eadwig (r. 955–59). The essays in this volume bring these kings out from under the shadow of their better-known predecessors and successors and presents to us a fuller picture of tenth-century England. The neglect shown to these kings is difficult to justify. As this volume persuasively argues, Edmund, Eadred, and Eadwig made certain that the 'semi-autonomous north' did not re-establish independence, while their political and religious patronage sustained the environment in which reformist energies could flourish (p. 1). Indeed, without these kings, the celebrated 'Golden Age' of the later tenth century, especially the heights of the Benedictine Reform in the 960s and 970s, would not have been possible (p. 2).

Here we are presented with a diversity of approaches brought by its contributors. These cohere around three central themes: the complexity of tenth-century West Saxon courtly and dynastic politics and their later remembrance; the cultural and religious creativity of the mid-tenth century; and the consolidation of power by the West Saxon line (p. 7). While these overarching themes connect the

essays in *The Reigns of Edmund, Eadred and Eadwig*, the structure is sporadic. My main critique of the collection is that this organisation, at times, made it difficult to see how the individual contributions related to one another in any meaningful order. Considered on their own, however, the chapters certainly offer some noteworthy findings. Chapters one and eight offer compelling insight into the fraught relationship between the royal authority, the court, and ecclesiastical influence. In chapter one, Alison Hudson examines how the erasure of Edmund's successors, Eadred and Eadwig, began almost as soon as they died. She demonstrates that the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicles* and other surviving texts devote little space to the reigns of these kings. Essentially, later reformers, whose writings came to dominate the records that survive, deliberately 'tried to downplay' the records of Eadred and Eadwig, thus embedding a consequential negative narrative that has seemingly endured centuries after (p. 25). In chapter eight, Katherine Weikert looks to Eadwig's court, where factional conflict aimed to 'denigrate' the king's authority and legitimacy (p. 175). Through a reading of hostile accounts of Eadwig's marriage to Ælfgifu, and the infamous scandal involving her mother Ælthelgifu, Weikert shows how distorted, and often fabricated, tales of sexual impropriety were deployed to delegitimise kings, while also attempting to elevate more saintly figures, such a Dunstan, who acted as political counterweights and models of righteous behaviour.

The bulk of this volume is dedicated to its second theme, of which there are five chapters concerned with the cultural and religious developments in the 940s

and 950s. In chapters two and three, Nicole Marafioti and Isabelle Beaudoin focus on particular clauses in Edmund's law codes which tend to have 'gotten short shrift among legal historians' (p. 40). Marafioti argues that Edmund's legislation regarding the Church deserves far more credit than it has received. This chapter shows how the cooperation between secular and ecclesiastical courts established patterns that shaped the reform movement under Edgar much earlier than previously assumed. Beaudoin then builds on the importance of Edmund's laws by demonstrating that the oath of loyalty imposed by Edmund acted as a turning point in English legal history. Beaudoin argues that more scholars should recognise that the oath of allegiance made to English kings was made 'explicitly' first in the laws of King Edmund (p. 59). Stuart Pracy and Gerald Dyson extend this focus towards development and innovation. In chapter 4, Pracy examines the emergence of heriots in wills. This was a practice that reflected the increasingly public and performative nature of kingship in relation to magnates. In essence, Pracy argues that the practice of heriots in this period 'marked a period of intensified royal authority' (p. 82). In chapter 9, Dyson analyses a unique penitential which reveals how scribes outside reformed centres adapted elements of reformist practice. His study exemplifies that there was a creative diffusion of reformist ideals across the English Church. In chapter 7, Mary Blanchard combines both themes of politics and cultural creativity by examining Eadred's reign through the lens of infirmity and the underestimated role of queenship. She shows that Eadred's chronic illness was an important reason as to why we see the elevated role of his mother, Eadgifu. The prominence of the

mater regis in charters and court politics reveal the importance of queenship and dynastic continuity when the male lineage was at times incapable of fulfilling their duties.

The final theme of the volume, which focuses on West Saxon lineage, is enriched by Andrew Rabin and Neil McGuigan. In chapters 5 and 6, these scholars reconsider the fraught incorporation of Northumbria into the emerging English kingdom. In chapter 5, Rabin's contribution foregrounds the characterisation of Wulfstan I, Archbishop of York's, long dismissed for his 'opportunism' and 'disloyalty' (p. 100). Here Rabin argues that we should recast Wulfstan as a cleric navigating a precarious political environment, striving to protect his diocese amidst competing Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian pressures. In chapter 6, McGuigan shifts his attention to the Norse world. He argues that York's politics were shaped as much by external dynamics across the North Sea as by southern royal authority, reminding us that later historians were perhaps a little too eager for neat succession lists, which were indeed often 'misguided' (p. 132). Consequently, McGuigan sees this as oversimplifying the complex reality of leadership in York.

Overall, the collection of essays presented in *The Reigns of Edmund, Eadred and Eadwig* are exceptional works that do exceedingly well to explore the reigns of three kings which have been sidelined too often in the scholarship. The text is very accessible to those wanting to open up new pathways to better understand the tenth

century. It should also be of value to a wide range of scholars interested in kingship more broadly, and it will surely earn a place on their shelves.

Julian Calcagno

Flinders University

Michelle P. Brown, *Bede and the Theory of Everything* (Reaktion Books, 2023). Hardcover, 312 pp., £ 16.95, ISBN: 9781789147889.

Review

Professor Emerita and former British Library curator, Michelle P. Brown, continues to publish on Anglo-Saxon studies with her latest work, *Bede and the Theory of Everything*. In this book the author presents both a concise overview of the Venerable Bede's life and work as well as the positing of new theories on his authorial contributions and translations. Brown stresses that the Northumbrian's approach to both science and theology, and the ways in which they meet, is born of a youthful fascination with the world and cosmos that never really diminishes, guiding Bede through a lifetime of investigation.

In her introduction, Brown positions Bede as an ardent seeker of knowledge, out to discover a 'theory of everything'. One who is using their intellectual gifts to gain a holistic understanding of the natural and God-created world around them. She also grounds Bede as someone making these discoveries in their own backyard of Wearmouth-Jarrow Abbey as, despite his fascination with the world, Bede seemed content to occupy only a fraction of it. The author noting that Bede, one of the most renowned minds of the Western world, is 'known to have travelled only within a radius of 130 kilometres' during his life (p. 9). Following this, in chapter 1, 'Bede the Monk and Priest', Brown provides key background information that might inform the cultivation of such an inquisitive mind; we learn that Bede was given to

the monastery at a young age during the 8th century, that he would have been exposed to a vast array of monks and visitors, and that he was instilled within the Irish monastic tradition, common among Northumbrian monasteries at the time.

Chapters 2 and 3, 'Bede the Monk and Priest' and 'Bede the Scholar and Scientist', dives into the monk's notable accomplishments in both theology and science, as well as the complementary natures of the two. Most important in this process was Bede's successful campaign to enshrine changes in the Easter calendar from a lunar-devised dating, popular among the Irish, to one favoured by Rome. Though feathers were ruffled, the change was soon adopted by the entirety Anglo-Saxon Christendom and, later, the Irish Church. Bede's scholarship on time and the natural world, work which Brown notes as 'part of his quest to understand God's purpose' (p. 75), continued with further inquiry and discovery; notably, it was Bede who popularized the system of dating which extends from the birth of Christ, which we in the West still use to this day. For Bede, the pursuit of such inquiries were not secondary, but necessary for an overall understanding of God's creation, Brown saying that Bede 'sought to show that Christian culture and faith had a robust, joined-up approach to understanding the cosmos, the world, the humans and other creatures and things that inhabited it and their relationship with one another and their Creator' (p. 102).

In chapter four, 'Bede, Poetry and the Origins of Written English', Brown assesses the importance of the monk's adherence to the usage of his native English

when writing on the faith. Of course, Bede read and wrote in Latin, but it is his insistence on writing in his own English which creates the legacy of a truly homegrown saint. Brown says that Bede was 'one of the foremost advocates of the use of vernacular languages in the service of the apostolic mission' (p. 132) which provides the clue that, though he 'preferred to dwell amid his beloved books' (p. 131), he placed the importance of his spiritual and theological output in fostering a faith in others, specifically his English speaking brethren.

The next two chapters, 'Bede the English Patristic' and 'Bede the Historian Reformer', go over the enormity of Bede's writing. Bede is primarily known for his *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, but his prolific output also includes commentaries on scripture and hagiographies. Knowingly or not, Bede carved a place for himself in a successive line of theologians like Jerome, Basil, and Augustine in that he was 'working to transmit, interpret […] critically revise, compile, interrogate and supplement the work of the patristics' and 'in doing so, he effectively became one of them' (p. 155). This work often seems to have been in service to his flock; he took it upon himself to provide resources and explications where he deemed necessary, in manner or vernacular that would be understandable. Brown says that Bede was 'an activist whose research was focused upon changing the world for the better' (p. 177).

Chapters seven, 'Bede the "Scribe of Scripture" and the Making of the Ceolfrith Bibles', and eight, 'Bede and Lindisfarne', see Brown taking an in-depth

look at Bede's scribal contributions, alongside positing some distinct possibilities pertaining to Bede's as-of-yet unattributed contributions (in both thought and hand) to some surviving manuscripts and translations. Additionally, Brown notes the influence of Bede on the Lindisfarne Gospels; with one of the great libraries of the time being at Wearmouth-Jarrow, alongside minds such as Bede's, it is unsurprising that the Lindisfarne Gospels contain bear his influence. Brown saying that in these Gospels the 'cultural legacies of the peoples of Britain and Ireland were designed to interact with those of the international past and present in vision of an eternal harmony in which the flora and fauna of Creation were sustained and made whole by the Word' (p. 242).

Finally, chapter nine, 'Bede and His Legacy', pays tribute to the lasting impression the saint made in subsequent years; his work being so revered that in 1899 he was made a Doctor of the Church, 'the only Englishman to have gained this honour' (p. 252). Brown homages Bede by noting that the man's intellectual prowess is evidenced as unique by his abilities in research, the ordering of data and science, and a deeply theological mind all combined with a 'fine literary and poetic style' (p. 253). Likewise, native Anglophones can applaud him for the 'earliest translation of the gospels into a Western vernacular' alongside authorship of the earliest written English poems, being Caedmon's Hymn and his own elegy.

Bede and the Theory of Everything is both a refreshing introduction to the life and work of Bede, particularly with its focus on the scope of the monk's work

(especially outside of the *Ecclesiastical History*), as well as a reminder to Bede adherents as to the massive extents of the saint's intellectual abilities and contributions. Over nine chapters and fifty illustrations, the beautifully designed book is a welcome contribution to those texts chronicling the saint's life. One which insists that the root of discovery, at least for Bede, is an ongoing fascination with God's creations.

Scott Royle

Concordia University

Kimm Curran and Janet Burton, eds, *Medieval Women Religious c. 800–c.1500: New Perspectives* (Boydell & Brewer, 2025). Hardcover, 278 pp., £ 95.00, ISBN: 9781837650293.

Review

The twelve articles of *Medieval Women Religious c.800–c.1500* offer a refreshing contextualisation of how women lived under medieval monasticism. The volume succeeds in inserting women into the wider narrative of the religious institutions of medieval Europe by analysing how these women lived in their own right and not simply in comparison to their male counterparts. These articles highlight the diversity within the term women religious. This volume can be situated in the rise of interest in medieval women and gender studies, and its contribution to the field cannot be understated. Through addressing the complexities of defining women religious, nuance on the topic of medieval nuns, abbesses, saints, hermits, and anchorites was able to enter the narrative (p. 1) The inclusion of an abundance of background information suggests that this volume is accessible to expert readers in search of a new perspective on a familiar topic, as well as for newcomers to the subject. With a wide variety of contributors ranging from professors of medieval studies, such as Janet Burton, to independent researchers like Cate Gunn, this volume offers well-rounded, yet in-depth, discussions on how medieval women religious interacted with the world around them. The extensive bibliography, index, list of illustrations, contributors, and abbreviations, further assist any reader who hopes to continue their research on the subject.

Yvonne Seale's *Communities of Medieval Religious Women and Their Landscapes* and Tracy Collins' *Materiality and Archaeology of Women Religious* illuminate the interdisciplinary approach taken in this volume. The inclusion of the study of the historical landscape and archaeology allow for a more complete version of the narrative of medieval women religious. Seale uses the physical location of female monastic sites to situate them within the context of their communities (p. 168). Seale affirms the vital role of these spaces to the community, with female monastic spaces being integral as places to care for the sick (p. 168). Seale also references the difficulties associated with looking at the inner landscape and architecture of female religious communities as they only show the site's final phase of development (p.170).

Similarly in this regard, Collins discusses how material remains can inform us about the lives of medieval women religious. Collins references the groundbreaking work of medieval archaeologist Roberta Gilchrist and her application of the gendered approach to material culture (p. 183). Collins notes that a problem when using material culture is that only so much information can be gleaned from archaeological finds. For example, although human remains are useful in understanding the lifestyle of women buried at these religious sites, it is difficult to state definitively whether every woman buried at a religious site was part of the monastic community (p. 194).

A particularly enjoyable aspect of this volume was the inclusion of individualised accounts. These individualised accounts further emphasise the complexities and variety within the term women religious. Elizabeth Lehfeldt's *Authority and Agency: Women as Heads of Religious Houses* acknowledges the tendency to study women religious through the lens of enclosed spaces and positions, which in turn minimised the agency of these women (p. 105). Lehfeldt includes accounts of women with authority, such as the superior of Santa María de las Huelgas in Burgos, who presided over an annual chapter meeting, which could include male clerics (p. 110). By noting how female superiors often collaborated with male lay personnel, a sense of agency can be recovered from these women. Lehfeldt also mentions the restraint placed on women's autonomy, through the control of their movements with the implementation of the 1298 papal directive *Periculoso* (p. 116). These directives, while not always explicitly adhered to, demonstrate how society and authority interacted with women religious.

A major theme within the volume is class and how the stratification of society impacted and created variation within the term medieval women religious. Diana Denissen's *Literacies, Learning, and Communal Reform: The Case of Alijt Bake* and Sara Charles' *Family and Friends: Gift Giving, Books, and Book Inscriptions in Women's Religious Communities* highlights class as a leading factor of the variability amongst women religious. Denissen's focus was centred around literacy rates, which were analysed through the case study of the fifteenth-century Dutch prioress, Alijt Bake.

Denissen discusses the concept of literacy and the difficulties in defining it. Reading and writing were considered an important aspect of establishing a personal relationship with God (p. 144). The discussion on literacy further emphasises variety by acknowledging the difference in schooling depending on geographical location. English women religious supposedly had a weaker standard of education compared to German women religious (p. 139). Bake was used as a case study to exhibit the reality of having a lower literacy level, and how this led to social exclusion and hindered one's relationship with God. Bake's participation in the late fourteenth-century Modern Devotion movement accentuates the variation in the lives of women religious based on their location and social status.

Sara Charles' *Family and Friends: Gift Giving, Books, and Book Inscriptions in Women's Religious Communities* offers further insight into the comparison of male and female monastic institutions. The act of gift giving was significant because of the tangible connections it created within and between communities. Charles notes that gift giving was an intrinsic part of religious patronage, and was used to solidify alliances (p. 154). Charles discusses the act of gifting books in a monastic environment to exemplify the intellectual engagement of female religious communities. Inscriptions included in books, such as the fifteenth-century inscription from the Minores in London, suggests that female institutions were respected as legitimate sites of literacy and centres of knowledge (p. 160). The passing down of books from one family member to the next acted as a constant

reminder of familial ties, which once again hints at variation in the experience of women religious based on social status and class (p. 154).

This volume diligently undertook the task of providing a more in-depth overview of variation within the term women religious in the medieval period. A potential point of contention that this volume may face is the lack of inclusion of women religious from non-Christian backgrounds. The inclusion of women religious from the Islamic or Judaic traditions would have supplied an even more in-depth overview of how medieval women religious lived in Western Europe. However, this should not detract from the significance of the research that has been completed for this volume.

The goal of this volume was to question the previously assumed narrative that medieval women religious lacked agency. With a renewed interest in the lives of medieval women, this timely publication provides a deeper understanding of the reality and diverseness of the lives of women religious in the medieval period. By analysing medieval women religious in their own right, it determines that medieval female monasticism was more than simply a carbon-copy of male monasticism, and that there is no catch-all representation that can encompass the experience of every medieval woman religious.

Caitríona Spratt

University of Iceland

John A. Dempsey, *Bonizo of Sutri. Portrait in a Landscape* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2023). Hardcover, 374 pp., 90.00, ISBN: 9781793608239.

Review

This monograph examines the life and works of Bonizo, bishop of Sutri between 1072 and 1082, from his early years as a clergyman to his tragic death. Bonizo played a crucial role in the Investiture Controversy, particularly through his political relationships with Matilda of Tuscany, Pope Gregory VII, and Emperor Henry IV. The author aims to define the historical, religious, and political landscape in which Bonizo, who belonged to the *Pataria*, a popular reform movement originating in eleventh-century Milan, carried out his political and episcopal activity. Dr. John Dempsey's primary field of research includes Matilda of Tuscany, Bonizo of Sutri, the Eleventh-Century Reform (especially in Italy), and the Medieval Papacy. His studies focus on the key figures of the Italian eleventh century in an effort to reconstruct the political ideologies circulating within the Italian *Reichskirche* (Imperial Church) between 1050 and 1100.

The book opens with a feature of particular value for readers who wish to explore the complex political world of late eleventh-century Italy: a table listing the principal political actors of the period under investigation (something rarely found in similar works) together with a map.

In the introduction, Dempsey provides a concise portrait of Bonizo and the major scholarly works devoted to him, such as Walter Berschin's *Bonizo von Sutri — Leben und Werk* (De Gruyter, 1972). He also offers a short overview of the *Pataria*, intended to introduce the reader to this multifaceted context, with its numerous actors and intricate political doctrines. The introduction addresses the question of Bonizo's birthplace, which Berschin identifies as Cremona, in contrast with competing hypotheses placing it in or near Piacenza. In Dempsey's interpretation, the *Pataria* appears as a distinctive expression of the Lombard urban world during a phase of marked economic growth.

The first chapter, 'The Broad Historical Landscape', reconstructs the political tapestry of Italy from the ninth century onward and explains the origins of the Pataria, from the Milanese riots under Archbishop Ariberto da Intimiano to the turbulent episcopacy of his successor, Guido da Velate, a *Reichskirche* prelate appointed by Henry IV to extend imperial influence over the traditionally independent Milanese see. The chapter discusses the *capitanei* (local vassals tied to the bishop and often opposed to the German emperor), the roles of Arialdo da Cucciago (founder of the *Pataria*) and Erlembald Cotta, and their opposition to nicolaism and simony, particularly widespread in the Lombard setting. Dempsey relies extensively on primary sources such as the *Monumenta Germaniae Historica* and the *Complex Diplomaticus Cremonae*, along with hagiographic and chronicle material. Although some secondary literature he cites dates from the 1970s and 1980s, these

works remain influential in Italian medieval studies. The chapter concludes with an exploration of the *Pataria*'s deep connections to Christian literature and its mimetic strategies inspired by Pauline thought.

The second chapter, 'Bonizo of Sutri — A Biographical Outline to 1085–1086', describes Bonizo's political and episcopal activities with particular attention to one of his most important works, the *Liber ad amicum* (book to a friend), a central source for the first half of the book. Here the author highlights evidence of Bonizo's close ties to Cremona, visible in the *ad amicum*, where Bonizo gives a tendentious, 'Cremona-centric' account of the Milanese riots. The chapter also discusses a letter from Pope Alexander II, quoted by Bonizo, ordering the bishop to 'seal off with hewn corpses the passageways of simoniac selling and clerical adultery, through which the devil has entered your Church' and to 'extend a bulwark, offer a shield of protection' (p. 85). Since the text is transmitted by Bonizo, the literal accuracy of the papal wording cannot be confirmed. Nonetheless, most likely through the intercession of Erlembald Cotta, who enjoyed Gregory VII's confidence, Bonizo was appointed papal legate and bishop of Sutri. This ancient diocese had been the site of the pivotal synod of 1045, at which Henry IV's father, Henry III, deposed Gregory VI from the papacy for simony and appointed Suidger von Morsleben-Horneburg (Clement II), a *Reichskirche* member. Bonizo's first significant mission, in 1077, was the translation of the relics of Saints Marcellinus and Peter to the monastery of St Thomas in Cremona and the consecration of its church. Following the events at

Canossa, the previous bishop of Cremona having been excommunicated fled the city. The translation symbolically strengthened the spiritual bond between Rome and Cremona, a major Patarene stronghold, reinforcing Gregory VII's ecclesiastical and political agenda.

The third chapter, 'The *Liber ad Amicum* — Historical and Literary Context', shifts the focus back to the broader historical setting. Bonizo, who considered himself a man of law (as reported in his book *De vita christiana* II/6), was a fierce polemicist against Henry IV. Peter Crassus, the author of *Defensio Henrici IV Regis*, responded by offering a legal and historical defence of the king. His main argument was that the emperor possessed autonomous temporal authority, which justified his intervention in ecclesiastical affairs: a position that contravened the ancient Gelasian doctrine but aligned with earlier precedents such as the *Privilegium Othonis*. Crassus (almost certainly a pseudonym) strategically adopted the same Patarene rhetorical technique of mimesis, claiming that Henry IV imitated proper models, whereas Gregory VII acted inconsistently. This chapter also highlights the influential role of the monastery of Montecassino in disseminating Gregory's reform programme.

After this extensive reconstruction of the political background, the fourth chapter turns directly to the meaning of the *Liber ad amicum*. In roughly forty pages, Dempsey analyses the themes of this crucial political and historical treatise and explores Bonizo's thought through a Patarene lens. He elucidates the rhetorical

significance of the term *amicus* (friend) within the Patarene mimetic framework and its cognitive implications.

The fifth chapter examines the 'Patarene armed *Kulturkampf*' (cultural battle), which proved far more physical than merely moral or cultural. The language attributed to Alexander II in his instructions to Bonizo reflects this intensity. Dempsey reveals Bonizo's thought and describes the conflict as a holy war against heretics, waged with divine sanction (p. 161). The First Crusade, proclaimed by Urban II, was not far off.

The sixth chapter, 'Bishop Bonizo of Piacenza', focuses on the final years of this dynamic figure. Between the completion of the *Liber ad amicum* (1085–1086) and 1088–1089, Bonizo was elected bishop of Piacenza by the Patarene reformers, in opposition to Dionigi. The chapter provides significant insights into the alliance between Gregory VII, Matilda of Tuscany, and the city of Pisa, whose bishop, Daibert, aligned himself with Matilda's side. Dempsey compares a wide range of sources, including Benzo of Alba and the *Collectio Britannica*. The chapter concludes with the savage assault on Bonizo, aimed at annihilating his political authority. He was blinded and mutilated.

'A Paterene in Winter' recounts Bonizo's final tragic years in Cremona, where he lived humiliated and silenced, with the punishments symbolically depriving him of the ability to "see" his enemies. During this period he composed the *Liber de vita Christiana*, which is examined in the eighth chapter. The ninth chapter analyses the

de vita Christiana in both its religious and political dimensions. It is followed by the conclusion, an epilogue, and an appendix summarising Bonizo's minor works.

This monograph is a valuable contribution for scholars seeking a deeper understanding of the late eleventh century in Europe. It skilfully illustrates the fragile balance between competing political powers, from the first appearance of the *Carroccio*, a symbol of Italian urban liberty, to the *Dictatus papae* and the Road to Canossa, just a few years before Urban II's call for the First Crusade in 1095. It also brings renewed attention to a figure still insufficiently studied in modern scholarship and to the instrumentalization of a genuine local reform movement, the Pataria, within the international political struggle between the Papacy and the Holy Roman Empire during the Investiture Controversy.

Alessandra Bucci — Politecnico di Milano

Daniele Ottolenghi — Università degli Studi di Milano

Simona Feci, *L'aquetta di Giulia. Mogli avvelenatrici e mariti violenti nella Roma del Seicento [Giulia's Aquetta. Poisoning Wives and Violent Husbands in Seventeenth-Century Rome]* (Viella, 2024). Paperback, 368 pp., € 28.00, ISBN 9791254696699.

Review

This book, authored by Simona Feci, Professor of Medieval and Modern Legal History at the University of Naples 'L'Orientale' and currently president of the *Società italiana delle storiche* (Italian Society of Women Historians), is the result of over twenty years of research in women's history and the history of gender violence. It revisits a well-known topic in historical research — the *acqua tofana* (a type of poison) and its use — through a microhistorical approach, focusing on a homicide trial during the seventeenth century plague in Rome.

The trial, opened in 1659 against Giovanna de Grandis, Girolama Spana, Maria Spinola, Graziosa Farina, and Laura Crispoldi, revolved around accusations of poisoning their husbands with the *acquetta* — a lethal mixture of lead, arsenic, and antimony boiled in water. All were found guilty and sentenced to death by hanging. This case can attract the interest of several fields within the social sciences because of the richness of sources employed: not only the trial minutes but also *avvisi* (warnings, a hybrid between newsletters and political-economic reports), popular *resoconti* (reports) in verse used by storytellers, chronicles in both Latin and the vernacular, and even eighteenth and twenty century novels. Altogether, these sources span more than

two centuries and testify to the persistence of narratives connecting female violence and poison, despite statistical evidence suggesting otherwise (p. 11).

The author provides a detailed account of the trial, continuously enriching it with in-depth analyses of microeconomic contexts, Roman law, contemporary medical knowledge, and popular beliefs. This reconstruction offers a vivid picture of the broader cultural and social background in which the defendants — figures reminiscent of a baroque tragedy — were born, lived, and died tragically (p. 309).

Violence emerges as a recurring theme across the book's chapters: above all gender-based violence, but also intrafamilial violence (what the author defines as 'proxy violence'), violence between women, and conflicts between groups and institutions. Even relationships among allies — those facing a judicial system firmly controlled by men as a common enemy — are marked by suspicion, betrayal, and violence.

The first chapter, *Vite barocche di donne (quasi) comuni* [Baroque lives of (almost) ordinary women], traces the biographies of the five main defendants. These lives reveal recurring patterns of economic decline, poverty, dependence on nobles, sexual exploitation, and abandonment. Feci investigates their movements within Rome, their marriages, their shifting economic status, and patrimonial assets. For instance, Giovanna de Grandis, the principal seller of *acqua tofana* who learned the recipe directly from Giulia 'Tofana', initially lived in Trastevere with her husband Battista Cipriani, a courtesan of Cardinal Giovan Battista Leni, who owned two vineyards. As

a widow, Giovanna inherited the family house and the vineyards but also her husband's debts, which grew to over 10,000 *scudi*. After three further marriages, each ending in suspicious deaths, she eventually became a *cortigiana* in the *Rione Ponte* (*Rione* is a toponym of some, but not all, Italian cities for neighbourhood as administrative divisions. Rome used to be divided by *regiones*, or regions, during Roman Era, and then the term was passed through Italian Rione). The lives of the other women follow similar trajectories: marriage, economic decline, domestic violence, ties to higher social classes, and the suspicious deaths of their husbands. The unifying thread, as the author highlights, is violence — together with the attempt to escape poverty and submission. During the plague, poison that promised a *buona morte*, a good death — undetectable by physicians, neither too swift to prevent a will nor too slow to arouse suspicion — appeared to be the 'perfect solution'.

The second chapter, 'A Woman's Affair', turns to the social networks underpinning the *acqua tofana* trade. While Feci's initial aim was to reconstruct the economic network behind the poison, the result is a broader analysis of papal Rome's social fabric in the mid-seventeenth century. The reach of these women extended even to the powerful Colonna family. This chapter highlights the marriage policies of lower-middle-class Roman families in the baroque age and the ways women could — or could not — resist them. Two sections are devoted to domestic violence, analysed both legally (through the *ius corrigendi et verberandi*, the right to educate, even with physical punishment) and ethically, tracing the boundaries between licit and illicit

forms of violence. The chapter concludes with practical aspects of poisoning: its price (depending on the buyer's status), administration (preferably when the victim was already ill), and strategies for managing suspicion.

The third chapter focuses on the trial itself. Drawing on her expertise in legal history, Feci guides the reader through the complexities of early modern criminal procedure. Even within a bureaucratic and ostensibly 'scientific' process, violence emerges as an instrument of power, echoing themes familiar from Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*. Torture was a crucial mechanism: Giovanna de Grandis confessed under torture not out of fear of death, but out of a desire to avoid further torment. She was tortured four times, since a confession obtained under duress was deemed more reliable than voluntary ones. When suspects refused to confess, exceptions were requested. For Girolama Spana, who resisted despite torture, the judges appealed directly to Pope Alexander VII, who issued a special *motu proprio* to ensure that *'si nefando et enormissimo delitto […] non rimanghi senza il dovuto castigo'* (so that such a nefarious and most heinous crime […] may not remain thought the due punishment). The chapter concludes with a reconstruction of the final hours of the condemned, from sentencing to execution, accompanied by contemporary chronicles that capture the women's last emotions.

The final chapter, '*memorie e fortune dell'acquetta'* (memories and fortunes of water), analyses the trial's long afterlife across diverse sources, showing how the

association of women, rage, and poison shaped cultural narratives while obscuring the structural gender violence enforced by dominant social classes.

In conclusion, despite its rigorous methodology and the impressive breadth of references — over 1,700 footnotes in fewer than 400 pages — *L'acquetta di Giulia* also reaches a wider audience thanks to its accessible prose. The author guides the reader through a complex web of sources, narrating the trial almost like a novel. Her investigation demonstrates how a 'classic' primary source such as a trial record can be studied through multiple perspectives and methodologies: microhistory, social history, gender history, the history of violence, and the history of emotions.

Daniele Ottolenghi

Università degli Studi di Milano

Jennifer Hemphill, Ségdae Richardson-Read, and Solveig Marie Wang, eds, *Performing Magic in the Pre-Modern North: Practice and Transgressions* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2024). Hardcover, 294 pp., £ 129.99, ISBN: 9783031612046.

Review

This volume explores the performance of magic in a wide variety of pre-eighteenth-century Northern European literary, historical and archaeological sources. It is based on the first Performing Magic in the Pre-Modern North conference, which took place online on 8–9 December 2021, and consists of ten chapters, organised around three strands. The volume's interdisciplinary breadth is balanced by its thematic focus on magic, performance and transgression, which brings together the otherwise diverse subject matter of the contributions. From Viking Age cremation burials to early modern Danish witchcraft trials, the volume's chapters explore the relationship between realism and magic, social conformity and transgression, acknowledging the fluidity of these concepts and, in some cases, exploring the impact of contemporary expectations on scholars' interpretations of magical performance. Ann Sheffield, for example, argues that although the process of fermentation is now well understood and considered mundane, this was not the case in the Middle Ages (p. 103), while Luthien Cangemi explores the ways in which magical performance intersects with religious belief in an Icelandic medical manuscript (pp. 29–58).

The volume does not offer a definition of the term 'magic', nor does it discuss the meaning of the term in depth, although several of the individual contributions engage with the question of terminology, especially in relation to the translation of terms relating to magical practices and to the opposition between the 'magical' and the 'ordinary' or the 'real'. The contributors are thus able to discuss the use of magic in a diverse and flexible sense but such an approach is not entirely conducive to the aim of the volume as formulated by Jennifer Hemphill in the Introduction 'to provide a comprehensive exploration of magical practices that transcends traditional boundaries' (p. 2). The volume's focus on transcending boundaries and diverse approaches is somewhat at odds with the idea of a comprehensive handbook; the volume does not cover all areas, time periods and disciplines of pre-modern and early modern Northern Europe. Nevertheless, its interdisciplinary and comparative approach provides a valuable contribution to research on magic in Scandinavia and Northern Europe before the late modern period, both in its focus on neglected areas of scholarship and in its effort to spotlight marginalised elements in literature and society.

The volume's first strand, 'Magic in the Sources', focuses on textual depictions of magic and contains two chapters. In the first, Solveig Marie Wang examines portrayals of Saami magic in medieval Scandinavian texts, concluding that the reception of Saami magic is varied, often resulting in positive effects for texts' protagonists although sometimes being described in negative terms. Wang also

addresses the question of terminology, considering the term 'shamanism' to be obsolete, but expressing reluctance to use alternative Saami terms such as *noaidevuohta* or *eamioskkoldat* on the basis that these terms are not documented before the early modern period. The second chapter in this strand, by Luthien Cangemi, examines the extent to which medicine can be considered 'magical' in a medieval Scandinavian context, focusing on the fragmentary fifteenth-century Icelandic manuscript AM 434 a 12mo. Cangemi argues that healing as presented in this manuscript includes a magical dimension that involves 'the conjuration of spirits, symbolic manipulation, the countering of directly efficacious volition, and the exploitation of hidden powers' (p. 34), stressing the fluidity of the healing process and the intersections between religion, magic and medicine which lead to unconventional renditions of liturgical ritual and language.

The volume's second strand, 'Magical Acts', focuses on specific instances of performing magic; its first chapter, by Fiorella Di Fonte, explores the depiction of curses in Old Norse saga literature. Di Fonte notes that there is no specialised vocabulary denoting curses, defining a curse as 'a magical practice with a purpose to cause harm to someone' (p. 61). Di Fonte finds curses to be present predominantly in the *Íslendingasögur* and the *fornaldarsögur*, concluding that while many of the curses appear to conform to 'what must have been the daily reality of medieval Scandinavia' (p. 91), they also function as literary devices. Ann Sheffield's chapter addresses the magical dimension of brewing ale, arguing that brewing was generally

performed by women and that the fermentation process 'might have been perceived as having a supersensory aspect in medieval Scandinavia' (p. 105). The boundary between the 'ordinary' and the 'magical', according to Sheffield, would have been porous in this period, meaning that activities such as brewing could have incorporated both mundane and magical aspects. The next chapter, by Jennifer Hemphill, examines portrayals of weather magic in medieval Scandinavian textual sources and speculates about the degree to which this may have reflected historical practice. Hemphill argues that portrayals of weather magic in saga literature 'must have originated from a longstanding oral and written tradition' (p. 148) and that the spoken word played a key role in the performance of this type of magic. The final two chapters of this strand concern themselves with the role of the devil in early modern Danish witchcraft trials. Maria Østerby Elleby examines the extent to which the devil played a role in the court records of three witch trials that took place in 1664, 1686 and 1692. Elleby finds that although the judges in these trials were generally dismissive of the devil's supposed role in facilitating witchcraft, there was a degree of folk belief in such phenomena, likely as a result of 'demonological exchange between England and Denmark' (p. 171). Louise Hauberg Lindgaard, meanwhile, focuses on the period between 1589 and 1660, describing the magical practices that were criminalised during the Danish witch trials of this time. Hauberg Lindgaard argues that most Danish magical practice of the time can be divided into 'protective magic' and 'counter-magic', which was mostly benevolent but with

occasional cases of malevolent practices, and that magical practices in Denmark were similar to the surrounding protestant world.

The volume's final strand, 'The Magic of Transgression', contains three chapters; the first, by Gaïa Perreaut, focuses on the portrayal of old age in relation to magic in medieval Scandinavian literature, arguing that magic as a literary motif functions as a discourse of othering in relation to the social status of women, especially single women and widows. The second, by Ségdae Richardson-Read, takes a queer theoretical approach to analysing two tenth-century cremation burials from Öland, using a combination of literary and archaeological sources. On this basis, Richardson-Read argues that individuals who perform *seiðr* have fluid identities and occupy a queer space, 'defying heteronormative assumptions of their identity' (pp. 255–6). Basil Arnould-Price, in the volume's final contribution, argues that the binarism drawn between the 'realism' of earlier *Íslendingasögur* and the 'fantasy' of the late *Íslendingasögur* does not reflect the reality of the texts and that magic was considered neither fully distinct from reality not fully integrated into it, and that magic is queer because it operates in opposition to dominant social norms.

Overall, the volume shows a high degree of thematic coherence, although the length of time and the range of disciplines spanned by its contributions does diminish the depth to which any single area or time period can be treated (except for medieval Icelandic saga literature, which features heavily throughout the volume). There is little reflection within the volume on the extent to which portrayals of magic

in different areas and time periods can be meaningfully compared, or on the pitfalls of using literary sources as evidence for historical practice. In terms of developing understudied areas in Scandinavian studies such as portrayals of the Saami or the use of gender and queer theory for pre-eighteenth-century texts, however, the volume is an important contribution to knowledge and the individual chapters are highly innovative in their approach to their subject matter.

Ela Sefcikova

Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin

Marina Montesano, *Maleficia. Storie di streghe dall'Antichità al Rinascimento [Maleficia. Histories of Witches from Antiquity to the Renaissance]* (Carocci, 2023). Paperback, 284 pp., € 27.00, ISBN: 9788829016501.

Review

Witchcraft, in the European context, is a historically complex phenomenon that assumes different shapes and expressions. This subject has received considerable scholarly interest, and the critical literature covering the period from antiquity to the Renaissance is both extensive and well developed. Marina Montesano has contributed to this field of study through valuable research that follows the lines of inquiry established by her former mentor, Franco Cardini, with whom she co-authored historical essays on magic and female figures associated with esotericism. Montesano's research on these topics owes much also to the contributions of other historians, cited in the introduction of her recent book *Maleficia*, for instance Richard Kieckhefer, Robin Briggs, and Stuart Clark. In her monograph, Montesano introduces various themes and examples related to the role of the witch, beliefs in supernatural phenomena, occult sciences and aspects of folklore documented in texts from different times and places. She reconstructs these narratives with a critical approach. The result is a very detailed essay, accessible not only to scholars from different fields of study, but also to a broader audience of non-specialist readers seeking to deepen their knowledge and understanding of the topics explored in each chapter. Originally published in 2018 as *Classical Culture and Witchcraft in Medieval*

and Renaissance Italy, the Italian edition's title is arguably more fitting – ironically because it omits any reference to Italy. The study does indeed focus primarily on sources from the Italian context. At the same time, though, it highlights intersections among different cultures and traces the historical development of themes associated with witchcraft. Montesano's line of inquiry extends from antiquity to the early modern period. Her work puts strong emphasis on the multiple terms associated with female figures with magical powers throughout the centuries (for example, *strix*, *saga*, *venefica*, *malefica*), showing the influence of classical Greek and Roman culture on the medieval and early modern folkloristic beliefs which broadly introduce the figure of the 'witch'. Montesano considers different kinds of sources, ranging from mythological texts, such as Homer's *Odyssey*, to texts of Roman jurisprudence, from encyclopaedic works of medieval scholars to Renaissance treatises and manuals concerning superstition, for instance the infamous *Malleus maleficarum* of Kramer and Sprenger, and the *Démonomanie* of Bodin. The density of references to sources and figures — both historical and fictional — makes the historical reconstruction occasionally difficult to follow. Nevertheless, Montesano's choice to incorporate such a wide range of material remains understandable and justified, given the aim of her essay. *Maleficia* retains its value as a book for a wide audience, encouraging further exploration of the various topics addressed in its seven chapters.

The first two sections of the monograph are dedicated to Greek and Roman literature. Montesano introduces mythological characters associated with magical powers and practices of ceremonial magic, for example Circe, Medea, Canidia, Erichto, and Meroe. The author also introduces other known figures of classical mythology, known for their feminine appearance accompanied by animal traits, their capacity to transform partially or completely into beasts, and a distinctively malevolent behaviour toward human beings. This is the case with harpies, lamiae, and empusae. A short paragraph (pp. 46–49) concerns the theme of medicine and poison, which both Greeks and Latins referred to with a single word (*pharmakon* or *venenum*). This example of terminological ambiguity helps to illuminate the depiction of the witch as a woman with the ability to prepare herbal mixtures to either heal or harm people. As highlighted by the author, classical sources also refer to male healers with knowledge on the properties of herbs, yet the harmful use of filters is more commonly associated to women in ancient culture. The third chapter considers the transition from late antiquity to the early Middel Ages, highlighting the importance of the rise of Christian communities, as well as the constitution of the Church as an institution. The author underlines the attention medieval Christian authorities gave to unorthodox beliefs and provides examples of the condemnations of the so-called *malefici* — men and women practicing magic, considered sacrilegious. The fourth chapter focuses on the reception of Greek and Latin culture between the twelfth and the fourteenth century, drawing attention to authorities such as Peter Damian, William of Auvergne and various preachers, who showed

interest in ancient folkloristic beliefs that had survived up to their time, especially in rural environments. These beliefs concern daemons, supernatural creatures and phenomena, such as the magical flight, associated with evil by Christian authorities. The fifth chapter moves to the period between the fourteenth and the first half of the fifteenth century and presents the discourses on witchcraft in the sources of Italian preachers such as Bernardino of Siena, John of Capistrano, Jacob de Marchia, and Roberto Caracciolo, considering the relation of some of these religious authorities to classical sources such as Apuleius' *Golden Ass* and Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. The sixth chapter considers the central role of Dominicans in the condemnation of superstition in the fifteenth century, focusing on historical accounts of the practice of witchcraft in various regions of Italy. The author also considers the importance of humanistic philology in the rediscovery of Greek literature, which enriched the knowledge of the preachers on the ancient folkloristic beliefs which resonated in Latin culture. Furthermore, she mentions philosophers like Marsilio Ficino and Giovanni Pico, known for their interest in the astrological culture of the Greeks, as well as themes described in sources on occult sciences, such as the Arabic *Picatrix*. The last chapter further explores the relationship between humanists and treatises on magic and witchcraft, mentioning related sources, for example Gianfrancesco Pico's *Strix* and Ulrich Molitor's *De lamiis et pythonicis mulieribus* to examine the critical approaches towards superstitions and the attempt to interpret them rationally. The author underlines once again the interest of Latin authors in ancient sources and focuses on

the reinterpretation of classical figures, such as Circe, which takes on new roles in the literature of the Renaissance.

In conclusion, Montesano's essay is relevant for the advancement of historical studies especially for the attempt to reconstruct a 'pre-history' of witchcraft, tracing back the evolution of concepts and terminology in classical literature and underlining its reception in both the oral and written tradition of the Middel Ages, as well as its revival in the Renaissance. The book offers a detailed overview of this topic, aiming to stimulate scholarly discussion on the singular cases examined in its chapters. The variety of topics related to witchcraft across different places and historical periods — including those after early modernity — underscores the potential for further research in this field.

Francesco Malaguti

Istituto Italiano per gli Studi Storici

Marco Nievergelt, *Medieval Allegory as Epistemology: Dream-Vision Poetry on Language, Cognition, and Experience* (Oxford University Press, 2023). Hardcover, 572 pp., £ 125.00, ISBN: 9780192849212.

Review

Imagine that you are approaching a tavern. Barrel hoops (*circulum vini*) hanging outside advertise the beverages within. Yet on entering the establishment, you find that all of the wine has been drunk. Does the sign of the hoops still signify its original intent, or has its signification been altered? This thought experiment, popular among medieval logicians, is introduced by the character of Trahison (*treason*) in Deguileville's *Pèlerinage de Vie Humaine*, which is in turn one of the three sets of poems studied by Marco Nievergelt in *Medieval Allegory as Epistemology*. This brainteaser also reflects the main concerns of Nievergelt's book, namely semiotics, the slipperiness and failure of those signs, and the first-person experience of allegory.

Medieval Allegory as Epistemology is a thorough exploration of how three groups of allegorical poems express philosophical concepts of sign theory and faculty psychology. The analysis expands beyond merely how these poems 'reflect' scholasticism to how they engage with and challenge the philosophy of the period. 'Philosophy' is broadly interpreted, recognizing the porous boundaries between the philosophical trends prevalent in the universities, monasteries and courts. These

three sets are the *Roman de la Rose* of Guillame de Lorris and Jean de Meun, the *Pèlerinages* trilogy of Deguileville, and the three versions of William Langland's *Piers Plowman*. The *Rose* is not the subject of its own section but serves as an 'interlocutor' in '*disputatio*' with the latter two sets of poems. The book takes an inductive approach, building up from the poems themselves rather than using the analogy of a mirror for the relationship between philosophy and the poems. Nievergelt argues that it is the very ambiguity of allegory and its lack of resolution that enables allegory to perform its functions. Such irresolution generates anxiety, which writers must accept or attempt to close off. The *Roman de la Rose* for example continually escapes definition, eluding attempts at characterization. The second version of Deguileville's *Pèlerinage de la Vie Humaine*, by contrast, tries to close off the ambiguities which arose in the first version. The first-person nature of allegory is a main focus of the book. Allegory, the author suggests, does not so much impart a didactic moral as generate a readerly experience leading to salvation. In other words, allegory trains the reader in how to read its particular signs so as to effect one's own liberation. The experientiality of allegory also creates an experimental space for testing theories about cognition and experience. Such an emphasis on experience also emerges from anxiety, as fourteenth-century poets, seeing the complexities of faculty psychology, became more interested in the possibilities of 'relativism and cognitive error'. The Will (*voluntas*), so central to the first-person experience, did not find a clear place in the Aristotelian psychology of scholasticism. Moreover, in a medieval intellectual world based on the proof of the syllogism and

the power of authority, the role of individual experience is uncertain. The *Pèlerinages* in particular explores the forms of knowing that lie behind the path to salvation. Nevertheless, Nievergelt makes clear that he is not buying into the well-worn narrative of the 'emergence of the individual' in this period, which he terms 'crass' with reference to books like Stephen Greenblatt's *The Swerve*.

A recurring citation in the book is to the scholastic dictum '*Nihil est in intellectu quod non prius fuerit in sensu*' (nothing is in the intellect that was not previously in the senses). This sentence provokes uneasiness about the functionality and utility of allegory. How can a genre focused on presenting visual representations of abstractions succeed in pointing away from these abstractions to the target concepts themselves? In one of the book's most understated but insightful points, Nievergelt argues that one purpose of these allegories is to 'stress-test scholasticism', seeing how philosophy's abstractions play out at the level of personal experience.

In his initial discussion of the *Rose*, Nievergelt highlights the poem's endless deferral of meaning, which sets up the expectation of resolution and then pushes it further on. The *Rose* loops back on itself in a recombinatory manner, such that the terms 'literal to allegorical, husk to kernel no longer apply'. The narrative does not have a single encoded moral message, rather the work is in a continual state of flux. The reader, identified with the first-person narrator, is at the same time authoring

and being authored by the narrative, creating an opportunity to 'do philosophy with poetry'.

The following chapters on Deguileville are an effort to bring this marginalized Cistercian poet back into the literary conversation. Deguileville's three *Pèlerinages* (*Pèlerinage de la Vie Humaine* in its two versions, *de l'Ame*, and *Jhesuchrist*) have rarely been edited. These works are mostly known to English-speaking scholarship through Chaucer's adaptation of his "ABC Poem" from a similar abecedarian work in Deguileville. The Cistercian is also known in the English-speaking world through Lydgate's 1427 Middle English translation of *Vie Humaine*. Rather than following the limited scholarship on Deguileville in framing him as a moralizing and derivative poet, he is presented here as a sophisticated if fear-driven writer, whose attempts to prevent unauthorized interpretation only created more gaps of uncertainty.

The connection between the *Pèlerinage de la Vie Humaine* and the *Rose* is a direct one. Deguileville opens the *Vie Humaine* by stating that it was a reading of the *Rose* which prompted the dream which in turn resulted in his own allegory. In fact, Nievergelt pointedly asks, 'what on earth is a Cistercian monk doing reading a smutty erotic allegory like the *Rose*?' The author argues that the *Vie Humaine* is trying to create 'functional, systematic epistemology' out of the *Rose*'s amorality and relativism.

This idea of 'doing philosophy with allegory' finds expression in the uncertainty Deguileville feels in choosing between an Augustinian and an Aristotelian model of human nature. Augustine is central to Deguileville's project of experiential allegory, since in *De doctrina Christiana* Augustine defines the idea of a 'pilgrimage of reading' which leads to elevated self-understanding. At the same, Augustine's position that the body and soul are separate substances would seem to undo Aristotelian faculty psychology.

Turning to *Piers Plowman*, Nievergelt observes that both the *Pèlerinages* and *Piers Plowman* come in three parts. He argues that Deguileville is the most influential source for Langland's poem, both of which model a 'recursive', reiterative model of composition. Though this philosophical reading of the poems is insightful, *Medieval Allegory as Epistemology*: *Dream-Vision Poetry on Language, Cognition, and Experience*, despite its subtitle, seems at times to overlook the fact that these allegories are indeed dreams. There is little discussion of the oneiric dimension to the poems, or connections to the theory of dreams. The book focuses on the fourteenth century, with some discussion of antecedents such as Alan of Lille's *De planctu naturae*. However, perhaps in a desire to maintain focus, the book misses the opportunity to look at the aftereffects of these poems on later dream-visions such as the 1499 *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*. *Medieval Allegory* also assumes a high level of background knowledge, with lesser-known figures such as Pseudo-Robert Kilwardby introduced without contextualization. Likewise, the book discusses how Chaucer largely drew

inspiration for his *ABC Prayer* from Deguileville, but it is assumed that the reader is already familiar with this work and it is not quoted.

Medieval Allegory as Epistemology also largely passes by discussion of the manuscript nature of these works. While differences among the nine manuscripts of the *Pèlerinages* are mentioned, they are not explored in detail. This is a missed opportunity, because a central part of the book's argument is that Deguileville, in the second *Pèlerinage*, was attempting to head off unintended interpretations. Most notably, the *Medieval Allegory* makes tantalizing references to illustrations in the manuscripts of Deguileville which are not depicted, with reference only to an unpublished dissertation on the subject. Though academic publishing restrictions may have inhibited the inclusion of images, this should have been mentioned if it were the case. In addition, while the book draws heavily on the theoretical frameworks of Jacques Derrida, Umberto Eco, and Paul Ricœur these theoreticians are not mentioned until deep into the book and the specifics of their influence remain less than clear. John Lydgate's 1427 translation of Deguileville is mentioned in passing, but as a point of entry into Deguileville this translation would have merited more page space.

Medieval Allegory has made a significant contribution to the study of the first-person experiences of allegory protagonists and their readers. The book has also done a major service in recuperating the image of Deguileville from that of a derivative poet to a dynamic, complex and troubling one. Even though the book's

lack of scaffolding for the non-specialist is something of a hindrance, Nievergelt's thesis that experiential allegory can make the act of reading salvific will likely be influential on future studies of dream-vision literature.

James Russell

Rio Salgado College, Tempe, Arizona

Michele L. C. Seah, *Financing Queenship in Late Fifteenth Century England* (Boydell & Brewer, 2025). Hardcover, 298 pp., £ 85.00, ISBN: 9781837650460.

Review

In *Financing Queenship in Late Fifteenth Century England*, Michele Seah offers a detailed and methodologically rigorous investigation into the financial foundations of English queenship in the second half of the fifteenth century. Focusing on three queens consort, Margaret of Anjou, Elizabeth Woodville, and Elizabeth of York, the book addresses a significant gap in queenship studies by placing economic resources and financial administration at the very centre of the analysis. Rather than treating income and landholding as peripheral to female power, Seah demonstrates that they constituted the material preconditions for the exercise of queenship itself.

The volume is structured into two main parts. The first part is devoted to identifying and analysing the different categories of resources that sustained the queens' households and status. The second part shifts the focus from possession to practice, examining how these resources were administered, defended, and deployed in political, social, and cultural contexts. This bipartite organisation is one of the strengths of the book, as it allows the reader to follow a coherent trajectory from financial structures to historical agency.

The introduction situates the study within the highly unstable political landscape of England between 1450 and 1509, a period marked by the Wars of the

Roses and an exceptional number of dynastic changes. Within just a few decades, five kings and four queens consort occupied the throne, none of whom were linked through the usual dynastic succession of mother-in-law to daughter-in-law. This radical instability profoundly affected the financial position of queens and created highly fluid conditions for the construction of queenship. Seah argues that this context makes the reigns of Margaret of Anjou, Elizabeth Woodville, and Elizabeth of York especially suitable for a comparative study of queenly resources.

The first part of the book, centred on 'The Queen's Resources', is primarily concerned with the structural foundations of queenly income. Here Seah engages closely with administrative, legal, and fiscal sources in order to reconstruct the mechanisms through which queens were financed. Building on earlier scholarship, she identifies three main categories of income: queen's gold, dower lands and estates, and supplementary grants. The discussion of queen's gold is particularly illuminating. This prerogative, by which the queen received a fixed proportion of certain payments made to the king, is traced back to twelfth-century fiscal treatises. Seah shows how this form of income, possibly unique to England and the British Isles, symbolised a recognised financial entitlement attached to the office of queen consort. Its persistence into the fifteenth century highlights the long institutional memory embedded in royal finance, even amid political breakdown.

The analysis of dower grants constitutes the core of the first part and represents one of the strongest contributions of the book. Seah carefully dissects the

ambiguous legal terminology surrounding dower, dowry, and jointure, demonstrating that modern distinctions between these categories cannot simply be projected onto late medieval practice. Through close reading of the grants made to the three queens, she reveals striking differences in the structure and expectations attached to their financial provision.

Margaret of Anjou received a fully specified and exceptionally large dower, fixed at 10,000 marks annually and drawn from a combination of landed income, customs revenue, ducal annuities, and direct Exchequer payments. This arrangement placed her within a late medieval tradition of high-value dowers created for diplomatic queens. By contrast, the financial provision made for Elizabeth Woodville consisted primarily of fee-farms and estates without a fixed overall annual sum. Elizabeth of York's situation was even more complex, as her dower was in part shaped by the politically charged confiscation and partial restoration of her mother's former lands under the early Tudor regime. One of Seah's most persuasive arguments is that the abandonment of fixed-sum dowers after Margaret of Anjou marked a significant transformation in the institutional shaping of queenship during the later fifteenth century.

The second part of the book shifts from financial structures to the practical use and management of queenly resources. Here the focus moves to administrative agency, household organisation, estate management, and the political deployment of wealth. Seah demonstrates that queens were not merely passive recipients of income

but actively engaged, through officials and bureaucratic apparatuses, in the governance of their lands and revenues. The queen emerges as a major landholder whose estates required constant oversight and generated local relationships of obligation, loyalty, and conflict. Particular attention is given to the ways in which financial resources enabled queens to participate in patronage networks. Through grants, pensions, annuities, and household appointments, queens used their income to build affinities that extended both within and beyond the court. This patronage activity is convincingly shown to be inseparable from political influence. Economic power, in this sense, was not only a means of sustaining the household but also a crucial instrument for shaping power relations at court and in the localities.

The book also explores how queenly resources were affected by periods of political crisis, such as deposition, exile, widowhood, and regime change. Margaret of Anjou's dramatic fall from power, Elizabeth Woodville's precarious position after the disappearance of her sons, and Elizabeth of York's role in stabilising the early Tudor monarchy all illustrate how the queen's financial position was deeply entangled with the fate of the dynasty itself. Seah is careful not to overstate queenly autonomy: instead, she emphasies the vulnerability of queenly resources under conditions of political upheaval and the extent to which economic security depended on royal favour, legal recognition, and administrative continuity.

Methodologically, the book is grounded in an impressive range of administrative sources, including household accounts, patent rolls, parliamentary

records, and Exchequer documentation. Seah handles this material with precision and restraint, avoiding speculative reconstructions where the evidence is inconclusive. The result is a study of remarkable archival solidity, which significantly enhances its historiographical impact. From a broader interpretative perspective, the volume makes a compelling case for integrating economic history into the core of queenship studies. By shifting the focus from reputation, propaganda, and political narrative to financial infrastructure and administrative practice, Seah reframes queenship as an institution rooted in material realities. This move has important implications beyond the English case, as it invites new comparative work on the economic foundations of female power across Europe. Obviously, there is an inevitable concentration on elite actors at the very summit of the social hierarchy. While this is intrinsic to the subject, it leaves largely unexplored the interactions between queenly estates and non-elite communities outside the framework of administrative documentation. Nevertheless, this does not detract from the book's major achievements.

In conclusion, this is a finely structured, thoroughly researched, and conceptually significant study that reshapes our understanding of late medieval English queenship. By clearly separating the analysis of financial structures from the examination of their political and social uses, Seah provides a model for future work at the intersection of economic history and gendered power. The book will be

essential reading for scholars of queenship, late medieval England, and the political economy of monarchy.

Maria Gloria Tumminelli

University of Cambridge

Andrew H. Sorber, *Prophecy and Politics in the Early Carolingian World* (Routledge, 2024). Hardcover, 284 pp., £ 145.00, ISBN: 9781032422725.

Review

Prophecy and Politics in the Early Carolingian World is Andrew H. Sorber's first monograph, and building upon his previous work, proposes to act as a starting point for the wider study of prophecy in the Frankish world. Certainly, it establishes a fruitful intellectual framework for those interested in the cross-section between early medieval studies and more modern scholarship focused on apocalyptic ideologies across time. This work serves as an exploration of the rise of prophecy as a new political genre, first used by Charlemagne and increasingly developed, for better or for worse, under the subsequent reigns of Louis the Pious and Charles the Bald. Sorber focuses on the observation, interpretation, and heeding of portents such as famine, comets, or political strife, which allowed for kings — and their opponents — to highlight their connection to the Divine and establish themselves as calm, controlled, and above all, pious rulers. In contrast to previous scholarship, Sorber directs his attention at the larger picture of portent interpretation — rather than only dreams, such as those experienced by Charles the Fat — to fully understand the degree that the rhetoric of prophecy had disseminated throughout the empire.

Sorber establishes his framework of investigation through the analysis of three significant works: the *Annals of Fulda,* Einhard's letters and *Life of Charlemagne,*

and a biography of Louis the Pious by an author known only as the Astronomer. Emphasis is placed on Einhard's works produced during the reigns of Charlemagne and Louis the Pious as the most essential for Sorber's overall thesis, as they not only identify portents, but also advise the emperors as to how they should be interpreted. The works of the Astronomer take a similar approach, clearly working within the tradition established by Einhard, while the *Annals of Fulda* serve as a less politicized example of a heightened awareness of possible portents within the empire at large. Using these texts, Sorber focuses on the contrast and continuity across the reigns of Charlemagne, Louis, and Charles to better understand the phenomena at hand.

Thus, the driving force behind this work is textual analysis and historical contextualization. The first chapter specifically provides a succinct overview of the period from Charlemagne to Charles the Bald to highlight the continuities across the period and the overall development of the genre at hand. He is not heavy-handed with unnecessary detail; rather, it is sufficient for someone new to the period to grasp the essential political and social context driving the development of these texts without bogging down the more advanced scholar with repetitive information. Interestingly, he called the first usage of such writings by Charlemagne a 'social experiment' (p. 52) which brings a new element to such a form of writing, yet he does not further develop this social aspect. Rather, this work remains firmly within in the intellectual and political side of these compositions. Such an approach is a strong one, considering the context in which these texts were written. However, the

nature of the scholarship and its focus on writing begs the question about the means through which these texts were being written, circulated, and preserved. Though the manuscript culture receives no attention within this work, focused as it is on the political side of history, it is nevertheless unfortunate that Sorber did not consider any original manuscripts to support his overarching thesis, despite the great availability of digitized manuscripts from the Carolingian Empire, especially annals. Instead, all the works consulted are editions either in the *Monumenta Germaniae Historica* or more modern incarnations. While this is understandable for the sake of continuity, the lack of original manuscripts is a glaring absence in an otherwise intriguing work.

A contribution to both Carolingian and apocalypticism studies, this work fits into a wider, though still growing, effort to bring the early medieval period into a broader conversation about scholarship that typically focuses only on the later periods. That being said, to further establish the wider relevance of this work, it would have been beneficial if the Carolingian use of prophecy had been briefly contextualized alongside other contemporary uses, particularly in the British Isles and the Byzantine Empire. Sorber does, however, acknowledge the brevity of this work as inherent to its nature as a starting framework of a potential new area of inquiry. That this review was able to identify several gaps open to investigation indeed supports Sorber's approach as particularly fruitful. As a starting point, however, more historiographical and historical discussion would have greatly

benefited and strengthened the overall argument. Nevertheless, this is a well-written and argued work which builds upon the established foundations of Carolingian scholarship, and looks forward to the rich interdisciplinary possibilities for the early medieval period as a whole.

Lynn Riehl

Purdue University

Alicia Spencer-Hall, *Medieval Twitter* (Arc Humanities, 2024). E-book, 228 pp., $ 143.00, ISBN: 9781802702644.

Review

Alicia Spencer-Hall's *Medieval Twitter* is not a conventional academic monograph. In many ways, it is a profoundly and proudly personal and political piece of writing, not least in response to the takeover and takedown of Twitter by Elon Musk in October 2022, an event that radically altered the course of the application and of this work. The demise of the platform as it once was has also created a curious temporality for this monograph as the twenty-first-century online community styled '#MedievalTwitter' has itself become something a relic of the past. In both its analysis of medieval literature and of #MedievalTwitter, this book becomes driven by a methodology that Spencer-Hall calls a 'critical and progressive nostalgia' (p. 3), a term adapted from Paolo Magagnoli. As a result, the book itself 'does not, cannot, really, develop in an orderly and linear fashion' (p. 7); nor, therefore, can this review. Instead, this review follows the author's 'hypertextual' recommendation to 'dip in and out, scroll up and down, flip back and forth' (p. 7).

If this monograph is unconventional, it is partly because its subject defies convention. Inspired by similar online communities (including digital humanities and 'Black Twitter') and formalised by medievalist Dorothy Kim, #MedievalTwitter was (and to some still remains) a digital space that brought together medievalists both within and outside academia. As illustrated with diverse examples, this was a space

for routine administrative tasks like circulating job adverts, soliciting and sharing advice and information, posting manuscript memes and, in some cases, inhabiting medieval identities online. It was truly a community of contrasts — simultaneously personal and professional, private and public, supportive and toxic, inclusive and gatekeeping. This complex identity is made particularly clear in the final section of Chapter 2, which describes the results of the author's survey of the inhabitants of #MedievalTwitter. Given the anonymous and somewhat simplistic nature of the survey, it is difficult to draw any real conclusions about, for instance, the demographics of the community, but individual responses about the benefits and pitfalls of the platform (neatly illustrated in a bar chart on page 67) make for interesting and instructive reading.

In line with its subject matter, the language of this monograph is characterised by informal slang, niche online references, and even emojis in some footnotes. Despite a somewhat helpful appended guide to such 'internet-speak', this text will therefore require a certain 'willingness to undertake interpretive labour' (p. 8) from readers who are not terminally online, and even from some who are. However, as the author points out, this should not be too big an ask of medievalists as similar practices are required when approaching a medieval text — the Twitter vernacular thus becomes 'a living medieval(ist) language' (p. 8). In fact, such similarities form the central premise of this monograph.

Medieval Twitter is at its best when drawing innovative parallels between the digital platform and the Middle Ages. In this framework, Twitter is a 'social manuscript', tweeting is a 'medieval(ist) praxis', retweeting is akin to the medieval arts of *compilatio* and *collectio*, and a quote-tweeter is like a medieval commentator (pp. 28–30). At times, these connections are less convincing. In Chapter 1, the serious issue of 'Nazi Twitter' isn't quite done justice through a contrast with Chaucer's *Parliament of Fowls*, and Chapter 4's reading of 'medieval letters' as subtweets is let down by a lack of geographical or temporal specificity. On the other hand, the third chapter is a truly joyful one, unearthing a host of witty content from underappreciated accounts, while re-evaluating the figure(s) of Margery Kempe as an example of 'saintly celebrity', 'autohagiography', 'sadfishing', and 'ugly crying' (pp. 90–99). Nor are these simply superficially entertaining comparisons; this creative methodology enables Spencer-Hall to demonstrate an instability of authorship and authenticity that connects medieval and digital textual spaces and thus uncover new readings for both. Chapter 4 takes this methodology further by persuasively reading a collection of medieval texts and their historical contexts through the critical lens of 'subtweeting', a strategy that works remarkably well.

Setting aside the merits that this monograph holds as a work of literary scholarship, perhaps its most enduring value will prove to be as a fascinating microhistory of the short-lived phenomenon that was #MedievalTwitter, documenting its lifespan from inception to demise and serving as a written record of events such as

'the ISXX Affair' and the British Library cyberattack. Usefully to the theme of this volume, it is also a study of the utopian promises of #MedievalTwitter (and, at times, of the Internet at large), of the failures of that promise, and of the eventual dystopian shift brought by its successor, X.

With its unique style, innovative methodology, and political leanings, Spencer-Hall correctly surmises that *Medieval Twitter* 'will not be everyone's cup of tea, and that's okay' (p. 8). In a difficult time for medieval studies, though, one must appreciate the work's ultimate aim of making the field more accessible to all, whether online or offline. To paraphrase the author (p. 83): #MedievalTwitter is dead; long live *Medieval Twitter*.

Ashley Castelino
University of Notre Dame

Noëlle L. W. Streeton, Tine Frøysaker, and Peter Bjerregaard, eds, *Sacred Medieval Objects and Their Afterlives in Scandinavia* (Brill, 2024). Hardcover, XXVI + 570 pp., € 124.00, ISBN: 9789004707573.

Review

Resulting from the project 'After the Black Death: Painting and Polychrome Sculpture in Norway', the present book concentrates on the *material biographies* of devotional objects from the medieval North (XI; p. 2). Historians, conservators, material scientists, and museum professionals contributed to both the project and this book. A preface, seventeen chapters, organized in five thematic parts, and a closing index configure it. Numerous images, all duly credited, provide additional information for each chapter. Part 1 concentrates on the original appearance and use of these objects. Part 2 focuses on modern methodological approaches to studying their evolution. The challenges of some of these approaches are discussed in Part 3, whereas Part 4 explores the contemporary use of these objects. Part 5 offers some concluding remarks. In a book as extensive and diverse as this one, it is only possible to comment briefly on a selected number of chapters.

The first chapter sets the tone for the rest of the book. Appearing before the volume's first part, it explores the shifting status of a selected number of medieval Scandinavian objects in the early modern period. It does so by connecting ideological frameworks brought by the Reformation to an active repurposing of devotional objects. The Reformation spurred a discourse that sought to deprive objects of their

agency, or at least erase such a perception, by portraying them as mere remnants of a past era. And so, many devotional objects now stand isolated, removed from their original context and phenomenological functionality. Nöelle Streeton (pp. 4–11) calls for considering both aspects to understand their shifting perceptions and reparations over the centuries. The chapter also explores the complex relationship between tradition, renovation, and the perceived value of devotional objects as historical heritage. Inheritors of such a multiplicity, they have now become museological heritage or achieved the status of 'art', which, as Streeton explains, is inherently problematic (p. 25).

The first part of the book ('Original Object. Original experience') begins with the second chapter. In it, Jón Viðar Sigurðsson and Anne Irene Riisøy touch upon the concepts of *blót* and *bœnir* to analyze the continuities and ruptures of divine communication from the pagan to the early Christian period. Their core argument is that *bœni* substituted *blót* (p. 48) as a set of ritualized practices that made supernatural communications possible while ensuring social cohesion. For the heathens, these practices involved sacrifices, wordy speeches (*langmæli*), worshipping statues, and feasts, whereas Christians worshipped sculptures of saints and employed concise prayers. The authors chiefly locate the performance of these practices in *hof* during pagan times and in churches after the conversion. As divine communication required specialized knowledge, it was primarily performed by kings, chieftains, and earls in pre-Christian times. In Christian times, kings and bishops were the main agents of

divine communication, but other powerful individuals capable of founding churches also played a role in it during the earliest stages. The increasing organization of the church in the following centuries, paradoxically, resulted in a growing popular accessibility to supernatural communication. Notwithstanding the success of Sigurðsson's and Riisøy's argument, some of the secondary discussions (e.g., pp. 45–46; 48) appear overstated, owing to the scarcity of examples, the difficulties inherent in Old Norse written sources, and the seemingly uniform treatment of these sources. In addition, the chapter would have benefited from the inclusion of recent archaeological literature, specifically regarding the debate on *hof*.

Nöelle Streeton and Jón Viðar Sigurðsson turn towards the craftspeople of the far North in the second chapter. They consider how the main actors in the production of devotional objects found a balance between crafting sculptures and respecting ambiguous views and prohibitions against idolatry. The chapter analyzes Old Testament passages as adapted in *Stjórn*, theological writings, sagas, and surviving objects. These reflect that craftspeople 'satisfied desires within wealthy church foundations for resplendent symbolic objects' (p. 65). Their work required a learning process to handle valuable materials, thereby conferring a special status on them. Yet, craftspeople had to juggle the sociological stigmas related to laboring. Not least, the issue of idolatry chased both craftspeople and beholders; copying Byzantine models of the Virgin and Christ protected them from suspicion. It was important to avoid similarities between pre-Christian idols (*Skurðgoð*) worshipped (*blóta*) in pagan times

and images of holy personages (*líkneski*) that could be venerated. The key was crafting 'see-able' (i.e., perceptible) images. A shift had occurred by the mid-fourteenth century, thanks to some theological treatises: polychrome wooden sculptures started to populate Icelandic and Norwegian churches by the late medieval period, while craftspeople began producing original images of local saints. Crafters justified their actions in prologues to art-technical treatises that emphasized their virtuosity and purity of mind.

The same authors explore these treatises in the fourth chapter to examine the mindset surrounding the making of images in the far North during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. The chapter transcribes, translates, and comments on the treatises 'Image Making' (*Líkneskjusmíð*) and 'To Paint on Wood' (*Að mála upp á tré*). These texts show that Icelandic and Norwegian craftspeople worked in similar ways on images that fed directly into northern Latin Christian practices. The treatises allow the authors to argue that craftmaking practices were already well-established in northern Europe by 1300 (p. 91). Bishops' cartularies (*máldagar*) from Skálholt and Hólar, for the period c. 1320 to 1500, additionally testify to the presence of a great deal of craftspeople in Iceland and Norway. The chapter concludes with an interesting reflection on the existence of a North Sea network that enabled craftspeople to operate at multiple locations. Although both treatises offer specific and impressive details, the omission of others (quantities, materials, and tools; pp. 100–04), the distance between ideal instructions and real working conditions, and the plausible unavailability of

materials despite trade networks, may call for caution when inferring how craftspeople operated.

The sixth chapter is a good example of the second part, 'Ageing Gracefully?', which centers around conservation and non-invasive research on late medieval objects. The chapter focuses on the late medieval sculptural group of Saint Anne with the Virgin and Child located at the Collection of Norwegian Antiquities at the University of Oslo (#C23312). This sculpture was damaged by image-breakers, who aimed to prevent spiritual interactions through the object, and was later repaired and repainted. However, the lack of documentation regarding provenance and reparations prevented a coherent understanding of the piece (pp. 164–65). The sculpture was treated between 1932 and 1933, removing secondary interventions and some gilded effects. The use of new imaging and surface methods, along with consultation from the repairer's notes, has now offered an enhanced understanding of the original polychromy and of the changes that have occurred over time. These results underscore the importance of interdisciplinary research to understand medieval working practices and interactions between devotees and objects.

The third part, 'Interrogating Materials. Decoding transformations', concentrates on challenges associated with contemporary conservation. Authored by Aoife Daly and Jørgen Wadum, Chapter Nine explores the possibilities offered by new, non-invasive dendrochronological methodologies to study late medieval polychrome sculptures and altar objects made of composite polychromed oak boards

(pp. 287–91). In addition to dating most objects, this effort has provided new, impressive interpretations about their provenance, late medieval trade, material choices, and working techniques.

In Chapter Twelve, Jørgen Wadum considers the subjectivities and complexities inherent in the observation and study of ancient objects. These challenges arise from the very objects themselves, which carry symbolic values that should be considered either for research or exhibition purposes. One of the merits of the chapter is that it moves beyond the lens of historical art towards the broader, complex, and contested concept of heritage. The author presents a wonderful plea to think of objects as 'living heritage', with their nuances, resignifications, and potential future trajectories, and encourages an interdisciplinary collaboration informed by this concept. Although it does not tie directly with the previous chapters, one cannot think of a better end to this part of the book.

Part 4 — 'Becoming medieval heritage' — embraces the concept of heritage to review museum exhibitions in Sweden, Denmark, and Norway. In Chapter Fifteen, Karoline Kjesrud offers an overview of the main ideas that have configured the permanent exhibitions at the Museum of Cultural History of the University of Oslo. Evolving from a 'cabinet of curiosities' mindset towards ideas of nation-building, to later being dominated by an academic, stylistic, and artistic (or aesthetic) approach, the exhibitions have played an important role in shaping Norwegian cultural memory. Today, the narrative has adopted a heritage perspective to offer

anthropologically relatable narratives for our present (pp. 493–96). The changing attitude towards these objects as exhibition 'agents' demonstrates the extent to which the concept of heritage is a contested one.

Karl Christian Alvestad continues exploring such complexities in Chapter Sixteen. The chapter explores the ideological influence of German Romanticism on Norwegian romantics and the long-lasting conflation of Romanticism, the medieval past, and a growing nationalistic approach to history. The Norwegian state and private enterprises have spurred this linkage to this day, using medieval symbols. Recent far-right cooptations of such symbols, the author argues, have nuanced and tarnished the popular appeal they once garnered, except for Saint Olaf (pp. 520–23). The chapter concludes with an appropriate call for caution towards heritage as a narrative maker.

Chapter Seventeen is the last, and hence, conclusive, part of the book. Elina Gertsman links some concepts discussed in the other chapters through the Borre cross (#C6130). The piece conveys multiple views about Scandinavian late medieval objects. It was enmeshed in a complex European cultural network, and yet, it is particularly local. The cross lacks the image of Christ, aligning with the ideas forbidding *Skurðgoð*, while conveying a halo of transcendence and omnipresence linked to the Christian ethos of *bœni*. Non-invasive research on this object also serves to consider the potential and pitfalls of these methodologies. The chapter concludes the book with an apt reflection: interdisciplinarity requires collaboration and critical reasoning. As this

book illustrates, the latter is fundamental for exhibited heritage, given its socio-political contingencies.

The merits of a book should be evaluated through its results. For this reason, I would like to conclude by returning to the first pages. The preface states that this project has 'led to new insights into human-material interactions, new interpretations of their changing appearances, and new understandings of the impact of changing locations and priorities within museums' (XI). As shown here, this statement is not an exaggeration. I would argue that this is partly a result of moving beyond traditional narratives based on the history of art to instead focus on the craftspeople. Although the book succeeds in distancing itself from an 'artistic' approach to instead favor interdisciplinarity (p. 25), some chapters, especially those in the first part, lack a broader perspective. It seems as if the authors could have enhanced their overall approach had they considered parallel lenses and theories. However, as the first chapter states (p. 3), the volume avoids theorizing about object agency or engaging with current archaeological narratives. No explanation is given for such avoidance, and the present reviewer cannot help thinking about an omission that could have brought alternative and pertinent insights to ponder over, especially in chapters five and twelve. In addition, given that Old Norse terms are not standardized throughout the book, an initial note on spellings would have been welcome. Despite this criticism, the book offers a stimulating analysis of the conditions under which late medieval craftspeople in the far North operated, an essential — but sometimes overlooked —

theme. It also presents up-to-date methodologies for understanding these objects and an interesting discussion on their status as living heritage. No doubt, this book will become essential for any scholar interested in the many aspects related to sacred Scandinavian medieval objects.

Pablo Barruezo-Vaquero

University of Iceland & University of Oslo

Theresa Tinkle, *Imagining Jesus Christ in Middle English Literature, 1275–1475: Royal Traitor, Heroic Lamb* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2024). E-book, 251 pp., € 135.19, ISBN: 9783031650765.

Review

In this monograph, Theresa Tinkle argues that Christ is characteristically portrayed as both a powerful heroic figure and a suffering man in Middle English texts, two images which broadly correspond to Christ's two natures: divine and human. Tinkle examines, through close reading, many literary and dramatic works, including some which have received little scholarly attention in this field. This book contributes to a growing shift by scholars such as Mary Dzon towards recognizing the multiple, sometimes contradictory, aspects of Christ present simultaneously in medieval literature, something which has been identified in medieval art by art historians like Sixten Ringbom, Bernhard Ridderbos, and David S. Areford. This book stands in contrast to existing literary scholarship which generally overemphasizes the human suffering of Christ in works from this period. It is intended for specialists in the field already familiar with late medieval religious literature.

Tinkle's first chapter lays out her argument: images of Christ are multivalent. This results from changes in the theology of redemption over time, where older theories are not replaced by newer ones, but linger on in the vernacular literature. Tinkle briefly describes the theories of redemption of Augustine, Anselm of

Canterbury, and Peter Lombard, which provide the images of a heroic Christ, a militant Christ, and a suffering Christ respectively. Peter Lombard's work is multivalent itself, combining many theories, some representing an objectivist view of redemption (which stresses Christ's actions) and some a subjectivist one (where a change occurs in human sinners). Tinkle associates the images stemming from these views with Christ's two natures. Added to this is a 'sheer diversity of figurative representation generated from Scripture' (p. 15). Late medieval authors are left with a variety of tropes that they utilize concurrently. Throughout the book, Tinkle also discusses affective piety, where Christ's suffering inspires compassion in the sinner, which leads to redemption. Tinkle argues that affective piety elicits a broader range of emotions from readers than only compassion. Different images of Christ induce different responses — including anti-Judaism. Almost every text that Tinkle examines blames Jews for Christ's death, and she highlights that anti-Judaism forms an 'integral part of English devotional practice and pastoral instruction' (p. 17). Tinkle describes an ambivalence towards Jews, stemming from a tension between being 'at once past and present, repudiated and depended upon, superseded and the source of Christian identity' (p. 19). Discussion of each text's anti-Judaism is a through-line in each following chapter.

In the second chapter, Tinkle studies the way Christ is portrayed in texts covering the Annunciation, Incarnation, and Nativity, specifically in *Cursor Mundi, Stanzaic Life of Christ,* and *Pepysian Gospel Harmony.* She particularly examines the

emphasis that these texts place on portraying Jesus as divine king. Despite their focus on the infant Jesus, they describe him as powerful and heroic, serving as a counterpoint to the narrative that Christ's human suffering is foregrounded in post-twelfth-century literature. Mary, often associated with affective piety, is treated as 'an indispensable witness to Jesus's two natures' (p. 21) and a wider range of emotional responses are elicited by the texts: 'awe, wonder, and reverent worship rather than pity or loving care' (p. 35).

The third chapter concerns Jesus's Passion, again in *Cursor Mundi* and *Stanzaic Life of Christ,* but also in *Northern Passion* and *Southern Passion.* Here the militant Christ trope, appears alongside the trope of Jesus dying out of love for sinners. Christ is also imagined as traitor, accused of treason against Caesar and arrested by Jews. These texts exhibit the ambivalence that Tinkle mentions earlier. These texts are more outright hostile than not, and 'they portray Jews who converted in the past, and Jews who will never convert in the present' (p. 89). They speak volumes as to contemporary attitudes of antisemitism, especially *Southern Passion,* given that the text was compiled not long before the 1290 expulsion of Jews from England. Anti-Judaism in these texts is connected most with the heroic Christ who triumphs over both Satan and Jews.

In chapter four, Tinkle moves to examining the varied images of Christ in a single text; Nicholas Love's *Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ* (c. 1400). Tinkle explores the many images of Christ that are present in this work, which stress

Christ's two natures. The king and warrior tropes are present in *Mirror*, alongside Christ as lover, traitor, bait to trick the devil, and meek sacrifice. Tinkle also discusses the ways that the literary image of Jesus as king in *Mirror* displays the virtues an English king was meant to display, with potential contemporary political significance for Henry IV's reign.

Tinkle has been working with the ideas she puts forth in this monograph for at least a decade. Chapters five and six concern texts that feature in Tinkle's previous publications. Chapter five is about the York Corpus Christi *Play*, and an earlier version of this chapter appeared in *Speculum* in 2019 under the title 'York's Jesus: Crowned King and Traitor Attainted.' Most of the chapter is devoted to how the play's shifting portrayals of Jesus, especially the king and traitor tropes, comment on the relationship between different kings and the city of York across the period of the cycle's development.

Chapter six concerns Sir John Mandeville's *Book.* Like the *Play*, Tinkle has worked with this text before, handling similar subject matter in 'God's Chosen Peoples: Christians and Jews in *The Book of John Mandeville*' (2014), in which she develops her concept of Christian ambivalence towards Jews, and 'Sir John Mandeville's God(s)' (2015), which shares a title with this chapter. The chapter considers the different depictions of Jesus and God in Mandeville's text, which come from a larger variety of sources and traditions than the texts previous examined. Tinkle also examines these depictions of God in relation to conceptions of

Judaism, Islam, and paganism in the text.

As an afterword, Tinkle examines Julian of Norwich's *Revelation of Love* as a sort of test of her theory that Christ is normally depicted with differing images that stress the two natures. She selects this specific text because the image of Jesus of mother in the text is dissimilar to the tropes already discussed, as well as the fact that the author is a woman. Her arguments are persuasive.

Lilith Cole

University of Iceland