Lay Sisters as Conveyers of Witchcraft to Seventeenth-Century French Convents

by
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Often considered a by-product of the deprivations of peasant life in isolated villages, witchcraft did not cease with the expansion of the cities from the middle of the sixteenth century until the end of the seventeenth. Rather, it split into different factions as it transformed itself to accommodate the confusion of weak people forced to grapple with unexpected changes in their lives. Much remains to be done on the distinctions between urban sorcery both secular and ecclesiastical and the ongoing cults in the countryside where many magical practices continued among the peasants and the minor clergy. It is noteworthy that during this period of the height of the Counter-Reformation women were both actors and victims in three important social changes: the reform movements in convents, the rise in mysticism, and the increase in persecution of social outcasts as witches.

In *La Sorcière*, Jules Michelet created a classic study of the origins of sorcery in his evocative romantic style filled with implications inviting reinterpretation. Therein, he traces a sympathetic portrait of his composite heroine who endures the poverty and oppression suffered by country women from the end of the Middle Ages until the dawn of the Modern Era. Michelet saw remnants of paganism in witchcraft. In the latter part of the book, he discloses how "Satan se fait ecclésiastique," after 1610 and a gap or slippage occurs as his tale moves from country to town. In so doing, La Sorcière, the naive heroine of the earlier part of the work, disappears into the particulars of accounts of the havoc wrought by real

nuns in the waves of hysteria which engulfed real convents.

With compelling detail, Michelet recounts the celebrated trials for sorcery which damaged even well-established convents like those of the Ursulines of Aix and Loudun or that of Louviers, where the possession of Madeleine Bavent took place. The episode of the hysterical possession of Soeur Jeanne des Anges of Loudun who accused the priest, Urban Grandier, as the Devil's accomplice appeared first in a French account of the early eighteenth century, then in *La Sorcière*, and even more recently in *The Devils of Loudun*, by Aldous Huxley (1952) which reappeared in the theatrical version, about fifteen years ago as a vehicle for the talents of Anne Bancroft, who played Soeur Jeanne des Anges. Ken Russell then transformed the material into a sensational film, *The Devils*. Influenced by Freudian theory, modern interpretations emphasize not only the Devil, but also the psychological aspects of these episodes as evidence of hysterical pathology caused by sexual frustration. In so doing, they neglect the elements of political conspiracy which triggered many of the denunciations.

Margaret Murray, in collaboration with Pennethorne Hughes and other investigators, launched theories popular earlier in this century, to the effect that witchcraft was a vestige of pagan rituals dating back to Stone Age beliefs in the "Horned God" which had persisted in mountainous areas. It also presumed the survival of the supposed matriarchal society of prehistoric times. Contemporary researchers reject all of these hypotheses. While some modern feminists also take sorcery as evidence of underground transmission of feminine healing skills, no justification for this supposition has been accepted by historians either. We are, nevertheless, left with the undeniable coincidence of cases of witchcraft both in and around convents in seventeenth-century France, so brilliantly narrated by Michelet (The Witch-cult...; The God of the Witches).[1]

Rather than reviewing these familiar cases from new perspectives, I seek here to outline an hypothesis as to the means by which sorcery approached and penetrated the convents. How did diabolic practices menace some of the outstanding convents of the time including aristocratic enclaves like Montmartre in Paris, and the Val-de-Grâce dear to Anne d'Autriche? Who transmitted them into the rarefied atmosphere of the cloister?

The objective of religious life was the attainment of the ideal of "perfection" through purity and taming of carnal impulses. The nun sought to cut all worldly ties through the vows of poverty—renunciation of personal property; chastity—abnegation of the flesh through suppression of sexuality, fasting and discipline; and obedience—the surrender of her will to God through the direction of her superiors. The convent thus aimed to become a center of pure, indeed, angelic beings who quickly became the targets of the attacks of the Devil and his lieutenants both from within and without its walls. I propose here to examine how the lay sister often served as the channel through which knowledge of sorcery poured into the convents. As a member of the lower classes, whether urban or rural, she was often illiterate, but brought with her to the convent the folk wisdom of generations, some of which included those practices labelled witchcraft. Conflict could occur as a function of the class differences among nuns, which mirrored distinctions among women in the world outside. Under the direction of "la cellière," lay nuns did the heavy work of the convent, but lived apart from the others whom they served.

The weakest nun, most susceptible to the charms of sorcery was often the lay sister or "la soeur converse" called to perform menial chores of the house and to liberate the "soeur de choeur" for the more elevated labor of study, meditation and prayer. While most contemplative nuns engaged in manual labor every day, their tasks included artistic work like embroidery and illumination and took place within the precincts of the convent. The lay sisters accomplished most of their

drudgery in the house also. Sometimes, however, their duties called them outside to bargain for purchases in nearby markets and farms, exposing them more frequently to possible contamination from the world.

While the royal or aristocratic nun often wrote the history of her visions or retold the *Lives of the Saints* in devout books, the lay sister inscribed her penitential life with her own blood on her own body. By 1633, through the efforts of St. Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac, the establishment of the Soeurs de Charité would furnish to the daughters of the countryside an opportunity to serve others in their own right in this first of apostolic orders. From 1575 to 1625, however, they often entered older orders like the Benedictines as lay sisters, or newer orders like the Ursulines, in the same capacity.

Marie de Beauvilliers of an aristocratic family of Sologne, pronounced her vows in the Benedictine order at the age of 16 in 1590 in the monastery of Beaumont-lès-Tours. Eight years later, at 24, although still younger than the canonical age for Abbesses prescribed by the Council of Trent, she obtained the brevet of the Abbey of Montmartre which she would rule until her death at 83 on 21 April 1657. She undertook the reform of the dissolute convent, but found her proposals blocked at every turn by unsympathetic older nuns, quite happy with things as they were. Her plans to enforce stringently the rules of poverty, chastity and obedience threatened their comfortable lives and so they conspired to rid themselves of their new Abbess and her despised regulations. Jacqueline Bouëtte de Blémur, official historian of the Benedictines, narrates the particulars of the opposition to Marie. When those opposed to the reform found their attempts to thwart it unsuccessful, they resorted to plots against the life of the new Abbess. They tried to rid themselves of her, first by poison, and then by the sword. Once, she fell ill and the conspirators tampered with her medicine:

> "...elles luy firent prendre du poison caché dans un remède, dont l'opération fut si prompte, /que/ sa tête devient prodigieusement enflée."
>
> (*Eloges* 154)[2]

To make sure she was, in fact, dead, each nun of the opposition party bent over her to verify that her breathing had stopped. When to their distress she recovered, (miraculously, of course) they hired assassins to kill her with a sword while she slept. She finally retreated to safety behind closed doors.

The Devil himself then intervened to obstruct the restoration of the reform and seduced a nameless lay sister into witchcraft by making her sign a pact with him (*Blémur* 168). After having endured the attentions of a Dominican exorcist, the lay sister confessed to the assembled community that:

> "...qu'elle estait en la possession du Démon dupuis l'âge de seize ans qu'elle se donna à luy; que luy mesme l'avait contrainte d'entrer à Montmartre, pour ruiner le commencement d'une Réforme dont il enrageait...qu'elle avait rapporté des poudres ensorcelées, pour faire mourir l'Abbesse et les filles...qu'elle avait donné une cédule au diable signée de son sang..."
>
> (*Eloges* 169)

The Devil arrives with the onset of puberty to endow his disciple with all of the conventional marks of possession from sexual congress with him to enchanted powders and a signed pact. Not only her lower class status, but also her greater freedom rendered the lay sister suspect. Perhaps her expeditions to the marketplace had allowed her to purchase the powders and spells which introduced Satan himself into the ancient convent of Montmartre.

Although deemed cured after her public confession and abjuration of sorcery, a change of heart encouraged no doubt by the prospect of renewed visits

by the Dominican inquisitor, she quickly lapsed into her former ways and resumed her magical practices. The Abbess then exiled her to Flanders. But, even distance failed to effect a change of heart and she soon returned to harry Madame de Montmartre:

> "Depuis elle revint à Paris, et fit de nouvelles persecutions à la maison; de sorte qu'après l'avoir enfermée dans une prison, d'où elle s'eschapa, Madame de Montmartre aima mieux luy payer pension dans un lieu fort éloigné, que de l'avoir toujours à sa porte."

Madame de Montmartre dealt in like manner with all who dared oppose her plans, but she had to struggle to extinguish the forces of evil introduced into the convent by the nameless lay sister. Soon after, however, she had to deal an attack from without.

The convent of Montmartre had been erected above the ancient crypt probably built by Christianized Romans in honor of Saint Denis and his band of martyrs. Marie wanted to renovate this ancient site and to connect it to the main monastery farther up the hill. She planned to construct a tunnelled staircase to link the crypt to the main convent, but her efforts were frustrated on several different occasions. In the opinion of Madame de Blémur, such hindrances and impediments to a worthy project could be attributed only to the intervention of "le malin esprit" who surfaces whenever the devout attempt to glorify God in the world. In the spiritual realm, the numinous site drew the spells of witches and demons, while in reality thieves and criminals congregated below the main convent whose underground passages concealed a "Cour des Miracles" or thieves den which illustrates how virtue and vice cohabited in this violent century:

> "Les carrières où sont à présent les bâtiments du cloître d'en bas, estaient remplies de sorciers et de voleurs. Il ne se passait quasi pas de nuit qu'il ne s'y commet quelque meuntre; de sorte qu'il n'en faut pas s'étonner si celuy qui se

> nomme par usurpation le Prince de ce Monde, enrageait céder cette place aux servantes de Jésus-Christ. Il en fut chassé pourtant, et ce mesme lieu est présentement sanctifié... par la pénitence d'un grand nombre d'illustres vierges.
>
> (*Eloges* 181)

The author elaborates this division into camps where the nuns, on the side of the angels, represent purity, virginity and self-restraint, in contrast to the "sorciers," clearly of the lower orders, who besiege them and who incarnate the snares of impurity, sexual licence and unbridled liberty.

Later, Mme de Blémur tells how a troop of demons penetrated the convent in a package marked with "caractères" or written incantations. They caused eight deaths and paralyzed the legs of four of the nuns. Eventually, the intervention of the Virgin Mary cured their paralysis. The forces of evil under the domination of the witch are referred to as "rusé," "malin," in short, tricky, clever and not always easy to discern. This renders the struggle between Evil and Good more equal than one would at first surmise.

This contest continued in the convent of the Val-de-Grâce under the direction of Marguerite d'Arbouze, protégée of Anne of Austria and recipient of the implacable hostility of her jealous rival, Madame de Montmartre, a story which cannot be told here. Born in 1580, Marguerite d'Arbouze had been educated in the convent since the age of nine and entered the Benedictine order at the age of 19 in 1599. Later, in 1611, she transferred from her liberal convent of St. Pierre of Lyons to participate in the reform at Montmartre. On one occasion she seated herself at dinner with the lay sisters to the general consternation of all. The Prioress pulled one of the lay sisters away, "...ne pouvant souffrire une telle humilité."

As Mistress of Novices, Marguerite defended one of her charges from diabolic trickery, when the Devil appeared to the young nun disguised as an angel of

light. Marguerite sent her to the chapel and aroused the Devil's rage, "...il donna un soufflet à la fille, la renversa par terre, et ne parut plus qu'une fois." When this same nun fell ill, the Devil disguised himself as Saint Teresa of Avila and offered to cure her, but she saved herself by refusing deliverance because of her obedience to Marguerite.

The rivalry between the two Abbesses caused grave problems for Marguerite whose honor and reputation was attacked. A whispering campaign started against her whereby:

> "...on la soupçonna de s'entendre avec le démon, et d'estre sorcière; on l'a punie comme une fille qui mettait la division dans la Communauté, quoi-qu'elle fut tres-innocente..."
>
> (*Eloges* 153)

The line of demarcation between those within and those without the cloister could be breached easily. Marguerite, however, possessed two skills advanced as evidence of witchcraft in many cases. She was an excellent cook, even though she went for weeks without eating, and she was skilled in the medicinal use of herbs and simples. Charges of sorcery had been levelled against or threatened many of the visionaries and even suspicion of witchcraft could be used to check the career of one who was rising (as was Marguerite) too fast.

In his biography of Marguerite published in 1780, Claude Fleury recounts the story of the rivalry between the two nuns more frankly than their contemporary Mme de Blémur. His anecdote about La Soeur de Saint Pélage shows how an opponent of the reform was persuaded to participate. A simple woman, she was awakened one night in her cell by a nun in an unfamiliar habit, surrounded by a great light, whom she asked:

> "...assez grossièrement, Qui êtes vous? La Sainte lui répondit: Je suis Thérèse, je viens

pour vous avertir de prendre la réforme et de faire tout ce que votre Mère vous dira."

(Fleury, *Opuscules* 31)

The next morning, Soeur de Saint Pélage surrendered all her private property, including precious furniture she had been hoarding, and hastened to join the reform. Now one might well wonder, how did the superiors distinguish the diabolic representation of Saint Teresa to the young novice from this heavenly visit from the Saint, incidentally extremely active in seventeenth-century French convents? Marguerite questioned the simple sister, who had never seen a Carmelite, but who described the details of Teresa's habit exactly and remembered her features even to a wen. On this occasion, the vision reinforced monastic authority which proved its veracity. Since Fleury depicts Soeur de Saint Pélage as a simple country woman and calls her "Soeur" rather then "Mère" we may surmise that she also was a lay sister.

Contact with hidden powers through visions, shamanism, or incantations happens in many cultures where cases of possession, both good and evil, occur frequently. The European witch frenzy which waxed from the early Renaissance to the middle of the seventeenth century is distinguished from this worldwide cultural phenomenon first by the fact that most of those accused of being in complicity with the Devil were women, and, second, by the quality of parody of established religion, a hallmark of sorcery in Christian countries. To clarify the variations between elements of sorcery as practiced by adepts in urban and rural areas, among both ecclesiastics and laypeople, a review of the special traits of some of the more celebrated cases of the epoch may prove helpful.

Although the details of the interrogation and trial of Madame de Brinvilliers and her operatives la Voisin and la Vigoreux will remain hidden forever, we know that the latter provided practical services—abortion, love potions and poisons to members of the nobility and the court motivated by greed and ambition. Some

critics think that la Voisin and company practiced the black arts with a certain cynicism only to impress their clientèle. The inhabitants of convents like Loudun, on the other hand, dedicated their lives to the attainment of perfection. Always on guard against the temptations of the Evil One, they became acutely aware of their own sensitivity to his tricks. Their very vigilance made them vulnerable to the curses and spells of sorcery. As enclaves where aristocratic and peasant women lived side by side as "soeur de choeur" and "soeur converse" they provided a choice milieu for the transmutation of village witchcraft into the hysterical sorcery of the town. Further analysis of the lay sister's role may yet establish her importance as a crucial link in the transmission of forbidden knowledge from the wise women of the country to the nuns of the city, and reveal why the convents so often were the targets of both the demons and the exorcists who pursued them.

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Notes

[1] An anthropologist and Egyptologist, Margaret Murray collaborated with many different colleagues. Her theory on witchcraft as the reappearance of pagan religion received respectful attention through the 1950s. Then historical reevaluations cast doubt on this approach. Hugh Trevor-Roper identifies the political and social realities which permitted and encouraged the persecution.

[2] As official historian of the Benedictines, Mme. de Blémur tried to present controversies within the order in the best possible light.

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