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Miraculum and Maleficium: Reflections
Concerning Late Medieval Female Sainthood

In the year 1276, during the investigations around the canonization of Princess Margaret, daughter of the late King Béla IV, at the Rabbit Island near Buda (also named Virgin Mary Island, and soon to be renamed Margaret Island), one of the witnesses from the royal Dominican nunnery, daughter of Domina Anna, sister of Princess Margaret, related the following miracle about her saintly aunt:

That day, as the virgin Margaret stood diligently in prayer, a bone became dislocated in her shoulder and she suffered great pain. The prioress and other sisters became very anxious and asked for medicine to heal her. Seeing this I said to myself that too much fuss was being made about medicine for that nun. In my thoughts, I found that ridiculous and I was laughing at her. But then I immediately felt a great pain in my own shoulders at exactly the same spot where she had it. Without any hesitations I prostrated myself to the feet of the above named virgin Margaret, and related her my previous ill thought, also telling what had happened to me in consequence. Confessing my sin, I asked her to release me. When I told her all this, the virgin Margaret said: 'May the Lord release you' and I was immediately relieved from the pain.1

This story (although by no means typical among the eighty-four miracles attributed to Saint Margaret2) is very revealing for the vicious

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2 For the essential data concerning Margaret see my study 'Legends as Life-Strategies for Aspirant Saints in the Later Middle Ages', in The Uses of Supernatural Power: The Transformation of Popular Religion in Medieval and Early-Modern Europe (Cambridge, 1990), pp. 97 – 98 (the present study has evolved in fact from the
hidden animosities which surrounded the elect royal princess, a candidate for sainthood even during her own lifetime, by her equally aristocratic but less fortunate fellow nuns. It is also quite revealing of conceptions about miracles current in thirteenth-century Hungary. One might even wonder: is it a miracle or is it a spell, a maleficium? Let us contemplate the structure of the narrative: a person endowed with supernatural power detects the hidden offence by thoughtreading, punishes the offender by inflicting pain on him or her, and when begged for release, after obtaining satisfaction for the offence by the other's repentance, is willing to undo the magical harm. This sequence to be found in our miracle is incidentally also one of the underlying patterns in the innumerable stories told by witnesses in early modern witch-trials about their bewitchment and subsequent attempts at healing. If reconciliation with the witch is possible and feasible, the malefic can be undone without relying upon the help of a professional healer or witchfinder, or without turning to judicial prosecution.

Besides the analogies there are of course important differences. Margaret's miracle is achieved by means of the saint's explicit reliance upon divine power. Moreover, the well-calculated symmetry of the nature of the sin and the manner of punishment, and the fact that pardon is obtained following public repentance, make an important pedagogical-pastoral addition to the miracle narrative, which is altogether absent from the descriptions of maleficium. The typological similarities are still intriguing.

To heighten our suspicion, let me cite three more miracles of St Margaret of Hungary from the same investigation. The first two illustrate her power over the elements. When she was still a child in a different nunnery, the monastery of St Catherine in Veszprém, she expressed her eager desire to hear more preaching from two visiting Dominican friars. When they showed that they were unwilling to stay at her demand, she said

problems arising from this previous one); her miracles had been analyzed in detail by Elemér Lovas, Árpádházai Boldog Margit élete (Budapest, 1940), pp. 276 – 337.

I shall pray to God to make such a powerful rain that you will not be able to leave. They said that no rain could detain them, but the Blessed Margaret, who would then have been ten years old, went into the church and beseeched God that it should rain, and it rained in such quantity that the friars had to return and could not leave. Other versions of this story speak of her causing the wheel of their cart to break, with the same aim and with the same result. Many years later it was her confessor, Friar Marcellus, Provincial Prior of the Hungarian Dominicans, who was to learn the lesson about Margaret's miraculous power over the elements:

I came from Esztergom to that monastery, and the blessed Margaret said to me: 'We have been in danger of drowning because of the inundation of the Danube, and if we had stood at that spot – indicating a certain place – the water would have completely covered us.' Come now, come now, I don't believe it,' I responded, and then she said 'Lord Jesus Christ, show the truth of what I am saying to this Prior here, so that he would believe me.' And suddenly the water rose with such a speed that I had to run away from it and climb upon the wall surrounding the monastery.

The Danube, encircling the sacred realm of Margaret's monastery, also plays a role in the fourth punitive miracle I should like to cite, although not because of the means of the miraculous action, but because of the liminal zone, the passage through which one enters the territory of the radiating miraculous power of Margaret's holy relics.

6 MRV, pp. 169, 218.
7 Miklós Pfeiffer, Die ungarische Dominikanerprovinz von ihrer Gründung bis zur Tätigkeit in Ungarn 1241 – 1242 (Zürich, 1913); Elemér Mályus, Árpádházai Boldog Margit (A magyar egyházi művészet problémája in Eminékkönyv Károlyi Árpád születése nyolcvanadik fordulójának ünnepére (Budapest, 1933), pp. 341 – 384; Elemér Lovas, 'Árpádházai B. Margit első életjáznának irája – Marcellus', A Fon- non-halmi Főapátság Főiskolai Évkönyve 1940/1941, pp. 21 – 85.
9 I have discussed the sacred space of the Margaret Island more in detail in my 'Il monte di San Gherardo e l'isola di Santa Margherita: gli spazi della santità a Buda nel Medioevo,' in: Sofia Boesch Gajano, Lucetta Scaraffia (eds.), Luoghi sacri e spazi della santità. (Torino, 1990), pp. 267 – 284.
There was an honourable man named Ponds. He lived in the diocese of Veszprém. He visited devoutly and frequently the grave of the virgin sister Margaret. Once he told his companions: 'Let us make a salutary pilgrimage to St Margaret!' His companions disliked this pious suggestion and argued against it, and since he was a layman and easily influenced it was not hard to dissuade him from his plan. Two days later he said to the same friends: 'Let us go to the island of our Lady the Virgin Mary and take a walk there!' By then he had completely forgotten his former devotion. As soon as they were in the boat, he began to feel a strong pain in his left hand. Before they could cross the river Danube, the pain increased so much that his hand and arm became rigid and insensate up to his shoulders: he could neither raise nor lower it. He immediately realized that he was being chastised for his sin, and in fear and trembling he went to the grave of the said virgin Margaret, but he did not obtain pity and pardon from his Creator, for he was not yet completely exempt of the sin of inconstancy. Then with a broken heart, humbly and in lamentation, he asked the virgin for mercy with the following words: 'Oh, blessed Margaret, who devoted yourself to God! Those who come here from different parts of the country, tortured by all kinds of illness or pain, return to their homes healed and cured. I left my home healthy and sane, but, alas, because of my disbelief I would return home wretched and lame, to the eternal shame of myself and my family.' Meanwhile his pain continued to increase, and he was copiously watering the grave with the tears of repentance. He assiduously prayed for the benefit of healing. With the growing desire, the healing came nearer as well, and after singing vespers he was completely cured. Then he praised with loud words the greatness of God, the merits of sister Margaret and the benefits of the perseverance of his imploring supplications.

The four miracles of St Margaret cited here in detail exemplify two rather rare, although not altogether unfamiliar aspects within the abundant genre of medieval miracle collections, even within their closer type, that of miracles of vengeance or punishment. It is not the offenders of a religious community or institution under the patronage of saint that the miracles strike, nor do they chastise transgression of sacred time and space, nor transgressions of moral prescriptions. St Margaret (or her relics) set in motion the mechanism of miraculous chastisement not for any altruistic purposes, but because of personal offence or for the fulfilment of a purely personal goal.

Relying upon this insight into the ambiguity of the supernatural power attributed to medieval saints, largely obscured by the propagandist and hagiographical aims of most miracle collections, I should like to propose a reflection upon a much wider theme (as the title of my paper indicates): upon the problem of the historical relationship between sainthood and witchcraft. My arguments will explore four subjects.

In the first part I shall characterize the 'celestial courts' of St Margaret and of another dozen thirteenth-century saintly princesses. We find here a strange combination of old-style dynastic and new-style feminine saint-hood, which - along with other types of female saint-hood - so radically altered medieval conceptions about women's access to supernatural power. In the second part I discuss a surprising consequence of the religious ascendency of women in the later middle ages, which had partly been triggered by saintly Central European princesses and later became a pan-European current. I will suggest that the terrifying fifteenth-century imagery of an essentially female witch-figure is partly a consequence of this late-medieval female emancipation.

To this argument two larger sets of problems can be added. On the one hand, there is the historical conflict between, yet interdependence of, the beliefs and functions connected to sainthood and witchcraft, whose roots can be discerned in late antiquity and whose outcome is an important factor in explaining early modern witch-hunts. On the other hand, there is the morphological and typological comparison of miracle and malefic. I shall juxtapose the historical transformations observable in these various and disparate fields (dynastic prestige, religious movements, popular beliefs, narrative genres), and I shall explore their interrelation and their articulation. Even without being able to go into great detail concerning medieval Central Europe, or the cult of the saints and the

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13 A general image is provided by Bálint Hóman, *Geschichte des ungarnischen Mittelalters*, tr. Hildegard Roosz, Lothar Saczek (Berlin, 1940/43), Bd. 2 (Vom Ende des XII. Jahrhunderts bis zu den Anfängen des Hauses Anjou), and Gyula Moravcsik, *Byzantium and the Magyars* (Amsterdam, 1970).

belief in miracles. I hope that an exploration of this broad field will shed some additional light on the ambiguities of late-medieval sainthood mentioned above.

"Deus vellem, quod ego essem una ancilla pauperis potius, quam filia regis, quia magis possem servire Deo." This exclamation by Margaret of Hungary, quoted by Domina Candida during the 1276 investigations concerning her canonization, gives us a concise, emblematic image of the ideal of female and royal sainthood which could have animated a dozen saintly princesses in Central European courts of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Princess Margaret's yearnings must have been a genuine reflection of her own personal ideas as they related to the most up-to-date currents in thirteenth-century spirituality. But they should not be taken to be an adequate description of the religious characteristics of that model of sainthood, which opened up a specific new career opportunity to the Central European princesses of the age. Therefore, instead of paying tribute to their sincere religious vocation, I shall try to characterize some aspects of their new type of power, made possible by their renunciation.

First of all it has to be said that they enjoyed tremendous success quite unusual for Central European saints. The voluntary poverty of these princesses must have seemed to contemporaries the most heroic form of renunciation possible: of all women they had the most to give up. This explains why the first and most famous representative of this new model of sainthood, St Elizabeth of Hungary (1207 – 1231), daughter of King Andrew II of Hungary and widow of Count Ludwig of Thuringia, was canonized so quickly and within the most magnificent circumstances, only four years after her death, with the active and (considering the strained relationship between pope and emperor) unusual collaboration of Pope Gregory IX and the Emperor Frederick II. Throughout Europe she became one of the most popular saints of the later middle ages.

Her success is also illustrated by the fact that a further considerable number of saintly female members soon showed up in the Central European royal or princely dynasties. It is worthwhile enumerating them here: Hedwig of Silesia (1174/78 – 1243), Agnes of Bohemia (1205 – 1282), her sister, Anne of Silesia (1203 – 1265), the daughter-in-law of Hedwig, Margaret of Hungary (1242 – 1270), two of her sisters, Cunegond (1234 – 1292) and Yolande († 1298), widows of Polish princes, Salomea (1211 – 1268), widow of the Hungarian Prince Coloman, who became 'King of Galicia' for a short time, and finally the last Arpadian princess, Elizabeth of Töss (1292 – 1338). These saintly women represented not only a numerically remarkable group within the thirteenth century vogue of female religiosity, but they also brought about a change within the hitherto dominant type of sainthood in the region, namely royal and dynastic sainthood.

20 A. Knoblich, Herzogin Anna von Schlesien (Breslau, 1865); Vita Annae ducissae Siletiæ, ed. Aleksander Szmekowicz, in MPH IV, pp. 656 – 661.
After a series of cults focussed on founders of states and converters of the pagans, and increasingly from the twelfth century chivalric saintly rulers (Wenceslas of Bohemia, Stephen, Imre and Ladislas of Hungary), the appearance of these female dynastic saints is an interesting reinterpretation and a further extension in the histories of these cults. In several regions (Silesia, the Polish principalities, Thuringia, Hesse), it was only with these female dynastic saints that the cult of the saints began to be put to such a secular, political use. This transformation as to who became the object of a new cult of sainthood could also be interpreted as a new sexual division of labour in this field. It now became the task of the female members of the ruling dynasties to ensure the halo of sainthood for their family, to ennoble them and to become a *beata stirps*.

The dynastic aspect of all these new cults can be amply illustrated, but this is not my concern here. Let me only emphasise that the cults of new female saints became a matter of dynastic prestige, to the point of producing in central Europe a kind of chain reaction in attempts at canonization. This can be illustrated by the initiatives promoting the cult of St Margaret of Hungary between 1271 and 1276. Besides the example of the tremendous success of her aunt, St Elizabeth, the more immediate impetus for this enterprise was given partly by the 1276 canonization of Hedwig, and partly by an initiative by Princess Cunegond in Cracovia. The latter, herself also a prospective candidate for sainthood, wished to adorn Little Poland with a new princely saint: her sister-in-law Princess Solomea, the deceased widow of Coloman († 1241), the brother of her father, King Béla IV (* 1206, reigned 1235 – 1270*). This ultimately unsuccessful campaign was witnessed by Cunegond's and Margaret's brother, the new Hungarian king, Stephen V (* 1239, reigned 1270 – 72), who paid a visit to Cracovia at precisely this time, in August 1270. It is small wonder that he immediately took measures to ensure papal investigations of Margaret's sanctity, since she had died very recently, in January 1270.

The dynastic motivation is also underlined by the oldest legend of Margaret, in a lengthy passage describing the devotion she paid to her 'saintly predecessors'. According to her hagiographers, she studied carefully every single aspect of their saintly virtues in order to emulate and synthesize them in her own life. Within this 'family tradition', of course, a special role was ascribed to St Elizabeth, who provided for these saintly princesses the clearest set of prescriptions leading to the glory of sainthood. Let me try to characterize this new model of female aristocratic sainthood with the metaphor of the 'celestial court', a fashionable motif of late-medieval iconography depicting the coronation or the enthronement of the Virgin Mary.

The saintly princesses or widows at first tried to transform their immediate courtly surroundings according to celestial principles. In the archetypical case of St Elizabeth it has to be stressed that her stern confessor, Conrad of Marburg, acquired his special authority at the Thuringian court (which had an especially lavish, worldly fame in the time of her father-in-law, Duke Hermann I) in connection with the vow taken by Elizabeth's husband Ludwig to undertake a crusade. The strict regulation of the pious activities of the young princess served similar objectives as the turning of the chivalric and military capacities of her husband to the service of the holy aim of a crusade: both amounted to a religious discipline imposed upon the princely court; Elizabeth's way of life, her unusual and shockingly uncourtly dresses, her refusal to eat food prepared from unjust exactions, sought to impose the principles of divine justice upon the daily life of the court. During her husband's absence in 1226, at a time of serious drought and famine, she became even more

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25 I have tried to document this element in my ‘From Sacral Kingship to Self-Representation. Hungarian and European Royal Saints’, in *The Uses of Supernatural Power*, pp. 79 – 94; cf. also ‘Legends as Life-Strategies’, ibid, pp. 95 – 110.

26 *Vita Sanctae Solomeae*, pp. 784, 788, 791.


29 *Vita beate Margaritae*, pp. 21 – 22.

30 I have documented this emulation in my ‘Legends as Life-Strategies’, p. 103.


radical: she transformed the Wartburg castle into a hospital and a center for charitable activities, according to the new religious principles.

However, secular courts could not function as religious establishments in the long run. If the saintly princesses wished to embody an earthly prefiguration of the celestial court, they had to constitute their own community, and they were well provided with the means to do so. The hospital foundation of St Elizabeth in Marburg became a new model to be followed (its popularity is shown by similar hospital foundations by St Agnes, St Hedwig and her daughter-in-law Anne). As to Elizabeth's lifestyle, however, the inquisitorial rigor exercised by Conrad deprived her even of the closest circle of her ladies in waiting and directed her religious career towards the Mediterranean pattern of the inclusa. One has to add that a hospital could in any case provide less support for the religious activities of a princess still maintaining close relations with the courtly circles of her origin than a religious community gathered around her in a monastery. In addition, the new series of queenly foundations could rely upon the respectable tradition of early-medieval royal monasteries.


St Hedwig was the first to take this road, when in 1202 she founded for her daughter Gertrud the Cistercian monastery of Trebnitz where she spent the last years of her life and where, for many generations the abbesses were her descendants. In 1234 Agnes of Bohemia, escorted by the seven noblest ladies of the kingdom, like an innocent dove fleeing from the deluge menacing this world (saeculum), took refuge in the sacred arch of religion, entered the Clarissan convent of Prague founded by herself, where she was to spend the remaining half-century of her long life. Her sister Anne, the daughter-in-law of St Hedwig, followed her example on becoming a widow and founded a convent of the Poor Clares in Breslau in 1257. As to the other Polish princesses, Salomea entered a Clarissan convent founded for her by her brother Boleslaus, in Zawichost. Her sister-in-law Cunegond founded one for herself in 1279, where she was joined by her widowed sister Yolande, who later, in 1292, also founded a Clarissan convent for herself in Gniezno.

As for St Margaret, we have already had some glimpses of her community. Her parents arranged for her a kind of religious 'nursery', at first in the St Catherine monastery in Veszprém, where she received her religious education together with a dozen other aristocratic oblates; then, in the 1240s, at the same time as the future medieval capital was founded on the castle-hill of Buda, they constructed a Dominican monastery for her on the near-by Rabbit Island of the Danube, to where she was moved from Veszprém in 1253, together with eighteen of her fellow nuns. She was soon surrounded by an even larger company of aristocratic maidsen and widows. Margaret's canonization proceedings preserved the testimony of forty nuns out of the seventy known to have resided there. Three of them, her nieces, were royal princesses, sixteen came from the highest aristocratic circles (such as the widow and the daughter of a former palatine, and several female members of the mighty aristocratic clan of

39 Knoblich, Herzogin Anna, Anhang.
41 Király, Apádházai Szent Margit, pp. 49 – 77.
the Csák), a further sixteen can be assumed to have come from noble families. Thus, the saintly princess was surrounded by a true aristocratic female court and her monastery, thanks to the abundant donations of the royal and aristocratic families, very quickly became one of the richest ecclesiastical institutions in Hungary.

If one reads the first legend of St. Margaret (probably written by her confessor, friar Marcellus) and the testimonies of the other sisters in her canonization proceedings, an interesting picture unfolds, revealing the symbolic contradiction within the daily lives of a male-dominated secular court and the female-dominated 'celestial' counterpart. Margaret's ascetic exercises (while they present many parallels to the brutal forms of self-torture and the passionate eucharistic spirituality of thirteenth-century female religiosity centred on the person of the 'heavenly bridegroom', the suffering and loving Christ), in Margaret's context exemplify above all a spectacular criticism of the courtly way of life. Margaret finds pleasure in putting on, for the dirtiest and vilest jobs, the fine garments received from her parents; she avoids the gastronomic luxuries offered to her by her family; she uses the money received from her parents to distribute aims and to support other ecclesiastical institutions; she insists upon doing the vilest jobs of the servants in the monastery (such as cleaning the latrines or clearing away the intestines of slaughtered animals). The more she surpassed everyone with her nobility, the more she strove to show herself as the most humble' we read in her legend.

A symbolic inversion of this kind does not of course mean a complete renunciation of power. Quite the contrary, it gives a new type of foundation to power by combining it with supernatural prestige. The miracle-working, prophesying, thout-reading Margaret, whose body radiates a gleaming light before being flogged by her fellow nuns and who, as I have illustrated in my initial examples, punished her opponents or those who doubted her words with miracles of vengeance, this self-humiliating princess, was of course vested with a far greater power, one which she could impose even beyond the walls of her celestial court. Three times she successfully resisted her father's determination to remove her from the monastery and marry her into advantageous dynastic alliances. That these stories, unlike the usual hagiographical topoi, must have had some basis in historical reality, is illustrated by the fact that after the last such case the Dominicans who supported Margaret in her resistance were completely disgraced by King Béla IV, who from then on completely relied upon the Franciscans. Only her new kind of power, granting her an unusual right to self-determination, explains her independence.

The political prestige of the saintly princesses is well illustrated by the frequent intervention of Hedwig in matters of jurisdiction. Their new standing gave them a right to intervene in family quarrels. In 1248, when the Bohemian king Wenceslaus I had to regain Prague from his rebel son (and would-be successor) Přemysl Ottacar II by means of a siege, Wenceslaus was reconciled with his son by his sister Agnes in her convent, where the King had himself crowned again, on Assumption Day. A very similar story occurred in Hungary in 1266 when, due to Margaret's mediation, a peace treaty was signed between the warring Béla and his son Stephen V, the 'younger king', probably in Margaret's presence on Margaret Island.

The growing influence of the saintly princesses naturally added to the ascendancy of their Cistercian, Dominican or Franciscan confessors as

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46 Vita beate Margaritae, p. 19.
47 MRV, p. 245.
well\textsuperscript{52}. One could say that these well-controlled aristocratic maidens, exploited as some kind of medium and acting in their 'celestial courts' according to the stage instructions of their confessors, helped to permeate with religion the weak sprouts of Central European chivalric culture. Very much as the Church had relied in the early middle ages upon the role of wives as agents of conversion in other regions\textsuperscript{53}, these princesses became agents of the mendicant orders and a means of ensuring them a political influence in Central Europe similar to that acquired in other territories such as in the cities of Italy, albeit with quite different means.

A very brief comparison with the Italian counterparts of these saintly princesses (from St Clare or St Angela of Foligno to St Catherine of Siena) could illustrate that this kind of female religious charisma\textsuperscript{54} could also be constructed from very different raw materials. The Italian female mystics – who also had some talented mendicant confessor-impresarios to help them\textsuperscript{55} – ingeniously discovered how to adapt symbolic forms and religious means to achieve political influence in the urban milieu of Italy, and propagated the new 'techniques' by initiating a kind of fashion for the tertiary religious life. These techniques ranged from well-publicized solitary seclusion\textsuperscript{56} to prophetic incursions into the city squares (Rose of Viterbo\textsuperscript{57}); from passionate anti-heretical discussions (Clare of Montefalco\textsuperscript{58}) to gently resolving the city's factional struggles (Umiliana dei Cerchi, Margaret of Cortona\textsuperscript{59}); from the deliverance of their cities from the danger of invasion (St Clare\textsuperscript{60}) to corresponding or holding personal meetings with the highest dignitaries of their age: pope, emperor, kings (St Catherine of Siena\textsuperscript{61}). In this process they very quickly relegated the mendicant confessors to the role of simple-minded scribes (scorned for their lack of ability\textsuperscript{62}). They liked to transcend their confessors' moderating prescriptions and advice, they engaged with a passionate frenzy in more and more impressive ascetic exercises, frequently torturing and starving themselves to death (Catherine of Siena), with the competitive consciousness of becoming an even worthier bride of Christ.

The late-medieval female saints could indeed build up impersive prestige based on charismatic and mystical power. The first Central European generation, that is, the holy princesses, still needed the image of the 'celestial court' and the prestige of royal origins for this achievement. Their aristocratic status enabled them to impart a decisive impetus to the late-medieval ascendency of women. The urban saints of Italy could dispense with such high rank and impressive courtly retinue. Their power relied upon the subtle tools of political mysticism, supported by spectacular ascetic exercises, self-starvation and even more spectacular bodily signs. A major sensation, for example, was the discovery of the instruments of Christ's Passion in the heart of Clare of Montefalco.

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\textsuperscript{54} About the notion of Charisma, especially in relation to sainthood, cf. Wolfgang Lipp: \textit{Stigma und Charisma. Übers soziales Gottesverhalten} (Berlin, 1985), pp. 250-255.

\textsuperscript{55} A short list: after the archetypical relation of St. Francis and St. Clare: Umiliana dei Cerchi/ Fra Michele; Angela da Foligno/ Frate Arnaldo; Margherita da Cortona/ fra Guenta Bevignati; Clare of Montefalco/ fra Benignato di S. Aforico; Aignese da Montepulciano and Catherine of Siena/ Raymondo da Capua.

\textsuperscript{56} Benvenuti Papi, 'Velat in sepulchro'.


\textsuperscript{61} Grau, \textit{Leben und Schriften}, pp. 21 – 23, 30 – 33.


\textsuperscript{63} This is for example, narrated by Frate Arnaldo, the 'scribe' of Angela da Foligno: M. Faloci Pulignani, \textit{L'autobiografia e gli scritti della beata Angela da Foligno pubblicati e annotati da un codice sublazense} (Città di Castello, 1952), pp. 28, 40 – 42.
forces into everyday experience, and especially their way of converting supernatural prestige into political power contributed to a kind of female emancipation. But it must also have generated fear and anguish. The ambivalent feelings about these influential female saints must have contributed to the fact that the terrifying image of the early modern witch was essentially female, as depicted in the Maleus Maleficarum (which offered a special case study as to Why it is that women are chiefly addicted to evil superstitions), and as shown in the gender-specific nature of the victims of the witch-hunts.

This proposition could be researched in more detail if we took into consideration the essential ambiguity from the fourteenth and fifteenth century onwards connected to the evaluation of new female mystics and saints: was she truly a saint or was she a witch? The early fourteenth century had already witnessed several periods of backlash against the emerging new ideal of female sanctity, such as the posthumous condemnation of Guigelman (1300) and the execution of Marguerite de Porète (1310), to mention only the two most famous cases. Ecclesiastical leaders had serious doubts even about Catherine of Siena, who had to defend herself against charges of heresy before a Dominican inquisitorial commission, and later had to rebut suspicions around her miraculous survival without food (many had suspected devilish tricks) by agreeing to make daily public attempts to swallow food (which she always vomited out immediately).

Another prime example of the same
ambiguity was the famous examination in 1430 of Joan of Arc's visions. Who spoke to Joan: St Catherine of Alexandria, St Margaret of Antioch and St Michael, as she asserted, or rather 'malign and diabolical spirits, Belial, Satan and Behemoth', as her judges alleged.  

The ambiguous position of late-medieval female saints between God and the devil must have been enhanced by the increasingly extended narratives provided by themselves or by their hagiographers about their heroic resistance to diabolical temptations. The ancient tradition of the battle between the saint and the demon acquired an entirely new significance when the demon was tempting these solitary recluse. Although the general story concerned the humiliation of the devil who appeared in the form of a frightening snake, as in the cases of Umiliana dei Cerchi (1219 - 1246) and Margaret of Cortona (1247 - 1297), the demons tended to attack women especially through their sexual appetite. The North Italian Benevenuta Bojani (1255 - 1292) was tormented by devils who tried to seduce her in the form of handsome youths breaking into her room, or on other occasions as wandering friars. Francesca Romana (1384 - 1440) had a series of sexual demons who appeared to her nightly as naked men, women and children engaging in sodomitic orgies, all the while as she was lying in bed beside her husband. How long could these pious women convince their audience that they had been successful in resisting such temptations? In similar situations many alleged witches ended up concluding a pact with the devil – both according to their accusers and according to their own confessions.

With Colomba of Rieti (1467 - 1601) this ambiguity exploded literally into the accusation that...

being no saint who does not eat or drink, but rather a glutton and something else too... she is a witch. In her room we find a collection of bones under her bed, and a basket full of hosts she vomited. And her confessor is an enchanter himself, and holds the key to everything.  

The same accusation fell upon many religious women striving to achieve the rank of sainthood in the later middle ages and the early modern period – Catherine of Raccooniga († 1547), Domenica dal Paradiso († 1553), Orsola Benincasa (1547 - 1618), Giulia di Marco or Alfonzina Rispoli (sixteenth century). Popular mystics could easily end up before the Inquisition, accused as servants of the devil.

Witchcraft is related to the cult of the saints in many other more profound ways than this 'female saint-witch' antithesis, so frequently hinted at in contemporary public discourse. Representing two opposed poles of a wider universe of beliefs connected to the superhuman capacities of human agents, they offer a series of intriguing historical and structural interrelations. A brief review of these two broad fields would help to put our investigation into a new perspective.  

Peter Brown has ingeniously analysed how, in the fourth-century Roman Empire, the decline of the first wave of sorcery prosecutions known to us in European history was related to the ascendency of the figure of the saint. The emerging cult of the saints gave an explanation of misfortune that both embraced all the phenomena previously ascribed to sorcery, and armed the individual with weapons of satisfying precision against its suprahuman agents. In late antiquity, the spectacular exorcisms performed by the saints acting with 'vested power' not only 'stole...
the scene' from the sorcerers, but in fact shifted the attention from a way of countering misfortune by blaming a presumed enemy within the community (a 'traitor within the gates', as Philip Mayer characterized the witch\(^{82}\)), to another type of explanation, where essentially the devil and the demons acting on his behalf were to be blamed rather than individual human agents. (The human sins come into question here too, but rather in the form of original sin, or in the continuing weakness of men, which caused God to allow a larger sphere of activity to the Devil to seduce or torture those who deserve it.) In this perspective the 'cumbersome' magical skills of the sorcerer or witch, though their existence or harmfulness are not questioned, are still relegated to the background, to the sphere of unbelievers, while the community of Christians emerges from these problems under the protection of their saintly patron. Saints and their miracles were also far more effective than the 'imposture of malignant spirits' and the petty malevolent activities of their practitioners, as St Augustine pointed out\(^{83}\).

However, the practice of magic, sorcery and witchcraft (the conceptual boundaries of which became considerably blurred by the various strands of pagan beliefs melting together in the early middle ages\(^{84}\)) did not lose their importance to the extent they seemed at the turn of the fourth and fifth centuries. During the following five centuries, in the course of the ongoing conversion of various new peoples, these beliefs had to be counteracted repeatedly by the church. The major proponents in the fight were, once again, the saints. The saintly converters (such as St Martin, St Cuthbert or St Boniface) repeatedly had to perform miracles to demonstrate that their supernatural power (persisting even after their death, in their relics) was superior to that of the pagan sorcerers and to their spells and amulets and that it provided a more effective remedy for the very same problems\(^{85}\). This led to a further set of interrelationships between the presumed techniques of the miracle-working saints and those of the popular sorcerers, witches and cunning folk (all this fits well within what Keith Thomas called the 'magic of the medieval church'\(^{86}\)). The large number of miracles of vengeance in the early medieval miracle collections, such as those of Gregory of Tours, can be counted among the effects of this confrontation of the cult of the saints with rival popular beliefs. Similar aspects could be detected in the curious practice of 'coercing' and 'humiliating' relics, recently analysed by Patrick Geary\(^{87}\). The relics were here mistreated according to a strange liturgy which implied sometimes physical damage and a quasi-magic constraint with the aim of provoking a desired miracle (most frequently a miracle of vengeance, such as punishing the secular lord who had expropriated the goods of a monastery). This sequence once again shows many similarities between the simplest late-medieval popular techniques dealing with prescribed witches. People tried to coerce them into lifting the spells they had cast by threatening them, beating them or symbolically injuring them with the help of a popular specialist in magical counter-aggression.

The presence and evolution of witchcraft beliefs throughout the middle ages is an obscure story, difficult to follow, turning up in charms, Carolingian capturaries, penitentiary manuals, Merovingian and Carolingian court intrigues, scattered judicial procedures and vague popular mythologies. This obscure story – obscure both because so little scholarly attention has been directed to the subject and because legal procedure offered so little assistance to settle such conflicts that they mostly remained unrecorded – does not permit us to make judgments on the comparative weight of the persistence of witchcraft beliefs. A careful charting of the large number of miracle collections, with special attention paid to punitive miracles and to saintly healing in cases of the possessed and the

85 Cf. Ward, Miracles, pp. 10 – 13, 56 – 65; Gurevich, Medieval popular culture, pp. 39 – 76; Peter Dinzelsbacher, 'Der Kampf der Heiligen mit den Dämonen'.
bewitched, would probably increase our knowledge of its medieval forms. However, the resources to know much more than we do following the extensive researches of Jeffrey B. Russell, Norman Cohn, Richard Kieckhefer, Edward Peters and Carlo Ginzburg⁸⁸ seem fairly limited. There still seems to be a possibility of a detailed examination of the theme proposed in the title of my paper, and in suggesting its outlines I come to my last point.

If one looks for massive sets of historical sources about beliefs in human agents vested with supernatural power, two kinds of sources propose themselves throughout the long period extending from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries to the seventeenth and eighteenth. One of them is the series of miracle descriptions of the so-called 'modern saints' arising from the examination of their cults by the new proceedings of the canonization trials⁸⁹. (These can be supplemented by the less formalized local lists of miracles recorded at various sites of pilgrimage⁹⁰.) The other set would be the documentation of early modern witch-trials, and especially that which has only recently come to the attention of historical research⁹¹, namely the many thousands of descriptions of maléfica by persons claiming to have been bewitched, or by their relatives and friends making such a claim, all of whom appeared as witnesses in witch-trials.

Although one should be cautious about comparing such disparate kinds of document, some striking common themes still tempt the historian to do so. First, the point at issue is very similar in both cases: the supernatural standing of a person to be defined by an inquisitorial-judicial investigation. (This is, incidentally, the technique of 'power/knowledge'

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⁸⁹ E. W. Kemp, Canonization and Authority in the Western Church (Oxford, 1948); Vauchez, La sainteté, pp. 25 – 119.


identified by Michel Foucault as the most original creation of the middle ages in the field of criminal justice⁹².) Furthermore, neither of these investigations was carried out in neutral conditions. Rather, they created a heated campaign which was largely responsible for generating the evidence it had originally intended to discover. In both cases a number of people are telling stories, i.e. narrative constructions about miraculous events or those which brought magical misfortune upon themselves or persons known to them. These stories sometimes echo the learned traditions of hagiography or demonology; but sometimes they diverge from them. However, the canonization trial and the witchtrial ensure constant communication, mingling and confrontation between these two different religious systems. In the testimonies it is not so much the variety of odd and archaic beliefs which seems to be the most valuable from our point of view, but rather the glimpses which show how various expectations, fears and tensions become embedded by retrospective interpretation in the context of everyday life or family and neighbourhood conflicts. We can equally see how certain individuals come to personify loosely defined miraculous and magical charisma, how 'an abiding if combustible aspect of social life occasionally bursts into open flame' (Geertz)⁹³.

On examining larger sets of descriptions of miracles from the twelfth to fourteenth century, André Vauchez and Pierre-André Sigal detected the presence of recurrent types of miracle and within these types a regular sequence of structural-morphological units⁹⁴. I could provide an outline of a typical sequence in the following: A misfortune is accompanied by indications of a crime or mistake that may have brought it about; a prayer is addressed to the saint in the form of a vow promising recompensation for the expected miracle; a pilgrimage to the shrine of the saint is undertaken, possibly accompanied by the expiatory tribulations appropriate to this 'liminal' procedure⁹⁵; then comes the drama which undoes the misfortune (mostly through healing) with special parameters of time and space or other ritual parameters; the saint is remembered by ex voto gifts.

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⁹⁴ Vauchez, La sainteté, pp. 519 – 557; Sigal, L'homme et le miracle, passim.

⁹⁵ Cf. the works by Victor Turner, cited in N. 11.
It seems undeniable that miracles bring in motion a set of techniques, rules and dynamic regularities which can be observed in a large number of the cases. Furthermore, throughout the three late-medieval centuries examined, a gradual transformation of these structural rules can be observed. From the more archaic types of healing obtained by touching the relic, lying upon it or circumambulating it, through more sophisticated cases where a gradual healing can be observed (increasing from the moment of the vow, with progressive proximity to the relic, until its presence was reached), one can observe how the miraculous power gradually got 'banalized', acting at a distance, right at the moment of the vow, through the mediation of a picture, or by dreams. 

Let me stress that this transformation is only something to be observed in the comparative shift in the proportions of miracles recorded within the documentation. The 'archaic' types of miracle can still be observed up to the present day. Still, the more 'banal' versions gradually become more and more important: conceptions about the workings of the supernatural seem to undergo a slow transformation. This change can only be measured by taking into account a real large number of cases – which is now made possible with the new techniques of the computer.

Inspired by all these questions about medieval miracles, about ten years ago we constituted in Budapest a workshop of ethnographers and historians, with the ambitious project of undertaking an examination of descriptions of bewitchment found in some two thousand witch trials known in Hungary during the relatively late waves of prosecution between 1560 and 1770. We have developed a project to code and analyse in detail the data of about 20,000 descriptions of bewitchment found in these trials, using the computer database Kleio. To be able to encode such a clumsily described and obscure event as 'maleficium', we tried to establish an idealized structural-morphological sequence, taking into account seven principal units of bewitchment: 1. the initial conflict (opposing the witches and their victims); 2. the ensuing menace or curse; 3. the physical reappearance of the witch in the proximity of the victim (casting a spell with spittle, the evil eye, false medicine or a hidden magical tool); 4. the visionary experience of the supernatural reappearance (nightmare, carrying away the victim to the Sabbath); 5. the actual damage resulting from bewitchment; 6. the diagnosis used to interpret it as bewitchment (mostly with help of a professional diagnostician or by means of a divination ritual); 7. an attempt at healing (sometimes demanded from the witches themselves by menacing them, mistreating them or repairing the damage; in other cases from a specialist).

Comparing this morphological sequence with that of the miracles, a number of intriguing parallels and similarities emerge. Besides those that I have already alluded to, I should like to stress at this point that in both cases we have to do with specific accounts constructed with a large number of omissions, combinations and repetitions. Thus, they can by no means be taken as adequate descriptions of the events themselves – they are (as in the case of witchcraft accusations examined by Jean Favret-Saada[97]) posterior and therapeutically elaborated reinterpretations of the actual events (this could be accepted in the case of miraculous healing as well). In both cases the interpretations are constructed with the support of a specialist in the matter (witch-doctors and cunning folk, or priests and hagiographers on the other hand). They are carried out in a desperate desire to rely upon the stock of knowledge instantly available as to how one should deal with the supernatural. For all this, they necessarily conform to an underlying structure, to a king of 'grammar' of the sacred, that is, to a set of rules defining the conditions, the techniques and the space-time parameters, the ritual and dynamic regularities which can make a magical type of action effective in the given context.

The exploration of this underlying grammar could be attempted with this two sets of documentation. Perhaps some propositions could also be made about its transformation. Such an intriguing question is e.g., whether within the witchcraft beliefs we could trace a type of 'spiritualization' similar to the one observed in connection with medieval miracles (a growth of the proportional weight of descriptions of the nightmarish, supernatural type of bewitchment compared to the more archaic kind linked to physical proximity and contact with the witch). Another wider question might reopen the problem posed by Keith Thomas[98], namely, whether witchcraft accusations and the fear of bewitchment and magical aggression in general occupied the same space in the daily life of the early modern period which throughout the middle ages had been regulated by the benevolent magical protection of the saints. However, all this must await the results of our long-term investigation.

96 Vauchez, La sainteté, pp. 519 – 539.
97 Jeanne Favret-Saada, Deadly Words. Witchcraft in the Bocage (Cambridge, 1980).
98 Thomas, Religion and the Decline of Magic, pp. 51 – 78.