The Witch and the Hysteric: The Monstrous Medieval in Benjamin Christensen's Häxan

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At its base, witchcraft, whether as espoused by Dominican Inquisitors or Lutheran physicians, channeled theological debates shot through with epistemological problems. It was not, as we have seen, a war between irrational “superstition” and rational “science”: religious polemic produced Weyer’s putatively “rational” treatise, and scholastic hyper-rationality runs through Kramer’s “religious” one. A host of questions were at issue, including the nature of evidence; the discernment of spirits; knowledge of the subject’s interior; the trustworthiness of what can be seen; the reliability or efficacy of folk traditions; whether and how dictums of faith can reconcile physical facts; the methods by which inquisitors acquired and verified their knowledge of demonic activities, and the production of knowledge about sex and sexuality.  

42 Both Weyer’s and

42 Some, like Anglo, contrast the uses of authority and evidence here to a later scientific method: “What constituted a conclusive argument in the period between the fifteenth and late seventeenth centuries? . . . It was something very different from what scholars now regard as valid argument: that is the deliberate attempt at objectivity; inductive reasoning; the evaluation of evidence rather than its mere accumulation; conscious sceptism of received authorities; and above all else, the process of constantly
Kramer’s texts endeavor (if in different ways) to cope with crucial problems of knowledge, and with the disjunction between structures of belief and contradictory physical evidence.

Women’s testimony proves particularly crucial for these thinkers. Kramer’s “monsters,” as Stephens calls them, were women; and Weyer protests that it is women who, whether filled with “ill will” or suffering from melancholia, are punished too “rashly on the basis of a confession.” If the early modern problem of the witch developed out of a longstanding tradition concerning the discernment of spirits, it is striking the degree to which, by the early modern period, the interiors at issue (sexual as well as spiritual) came to be female. Stephens argues that the verifiability of women’s testimony is a primary concern because of a crucial case important to the Malleus: the threat that the fact of impotence posed to confidence in God’s control of human procreation. In Part I, Question 8, the Inquisitor considers “Whether sorceresses can impede the faculty to procreate (the sexual act).”43 Answering in the affirmative, Kramer carefully outlines the circumstances under which “countless effects of sorcery can happen truly and really with God’s permission.”44 Asserting the omnipotence of God is crucial to this work. If impotence were simply the result of the work of Satan, in defiance of God’s command to procreate, Satan would be more powerful than God. But such a case was, for Kramer, impossible. Searching for circumstances under which God would permit such a thing to happen, Kramer persistently twins the sorceress’s disordered spiritual interior with her sexual proclivities: a wife may be seeking other lovers; women wish to “create an opportunity to commit adultery.” In these tendencies

43 Mackay, The Hammer of Witches, 187.
44 Mackay, The Hammer of Witches, 188.
toward sin, “God gives more permission to the demons to act savagely against sinners than against the just.”

Asserting the power of demons emerges, in this context, as the evil twin to a belief in God’s transformative power in the world. This makes clear, as Stephens points out, that so far as Kramer’s text was concerned, “the impotence of men or the power of women” was not “the fundamental anxiety of witchcraft theory.” Kramer was driven by “the possibility that God himself might be impotent, indifferent, or illusory.” The testimony of women to the reality of demonic influence served as the proof, paradoxically enough, for belief in God’s power. In Kramer’s “hyper-rational” logic, such testimony simply had to be true. The witch-hunts were, in this way, “a war on reality” that produced “a massacre of women.”

The question of whether the testimony of women counts as reliable evidence will, of course, also be crucial to that later infamous controversy, one that arguably still haunts the fields of psychiatry and psychoanalysis: that is, Freud’s infamous revision of his seduction theory in favor of his theory of infantile sexuality. This revision would be famously criticized by Jeffrey Mousaieff Masson and others as a failure of Freudian science. As is well known, Freud revised earlier claims validating his patients’ recollections as actual experiences of childhood sexual abuse at the hands of family members and friends; he argued, in the end, that many such memories, released in analysis, were the result of repressed guilt to do with the sexual fantasies of the children themselves. Critics, like Peter Swales, will adduce Freud’s admiration for Weyer to intellectual timidity, unscientific error, and superstition. Emphasizing Freud’s admiration of Weyer as crucial to the controversial

45 Mackay, *The Hammer of Witches*, 189.
rethinking of his seduction theory, Swales argues that Freud’s retreat from his earlier theory emerges not (as was claimed) from a rethinking based upon clinical data, but as a function of Freud’s unacknowledged indebtedness to Weyer. For Swales, Freud’s interest in Weyer figures his interest in all things medieval and, precisely as such, tracks a monstrous history whereby Freud crucially turned away from fact and toward error. Swales thus opposes Freud’s interest in “medieval” witchcraft (and, not coincidentally, his interest in religion) to his work as a scientist.48 As an episode in the history of the field of psychoanalysis, Swales argues, Freud’s submerged medievalism compromises both a commitment to truth and his claims as a scientist.

Writing forty years before Swales, Zilboorg, we recall, would praise Weyer as the “father of psychiatry.” Weyer’s reading of female confession as a result of internal conflicts “undermine[s] the authority of the devil,” Zilboorg argued, through “a factual approach,” the latter attesting to the Lutheran physician’s scientific bonafides.49 Swales reads Weyer’s influence (now, specifically on Freud) in opposite terms. The contrast between the positions taken by Zilboorg and by Swales strangely repeats the earlier debate between Weyer and Kramer but, and paradoxically, in reverse. In the earlier centuries, confidence in the truth of confession and in the real existence of the devil was critiqued in an alternative account in which confession was understood as engaged with a host of human desires, aggressions, and frailties. Yet by the last third of the twentieth century these positions emerge, only now reversed. In the 1970s, a view of confession as engaged with a host of desires and human frailties will be contested by the reality principle of not the devil but of sexual abusers (a devil in a

modern cast). Testimony to the existence of sexual abuse must be believed as true; and reports no matter how outlandish will be taken seriously and, in the United States, prosecuted to the full extent of the law. In the light of the history of the witch, it may not be only coincidental that allegations of widespread and rampant sexual abuses of children in childcare centers and preschools, such as the famous case of the McMartin Preschool in Manhattan Beach, California, included allegations of Satanic worship, cults, and rituals. Such a recurrence points to the persistence of this monstrous epistemological problem, the witch as harbinger of category crisis.

In a psychoanalytically-informed reading that interrogates crucial features of the problem of knowledge in the history of witchcraft, Kathleen Biddick suggests that the *Malleus Maleficarum* occupies a key role in the development of those epistemological methods important to the later knowledge/power systems reliant on eyewitness testimony, ethnography and history in particular. For Biddick, the figure of the devil provided Inquisitors and historians since with “a powerful optical device,” such that accused women were subjected to an early ethnographic method, committed to making diabolic practice visible and thus evidentiary. This technique becomes foundational to the technologies of knowing that come down to us in the form of expert testimony and verifiable evidence:

The devil serves as a kind of optical device that makes the inquisitor’s [work] visible and therefore something that can be counted as evidence. The textual materialization of the devil that the *Malleus* sediments with such care enables the inquisitor to gaze at and see, make legible, an invisible world of the ethnos he is conjuring . . . . The devil offers a special kind of insight, what ethnographers today
would call a theoretical abstraction that promises the ethnographer “to get to the heart” of a culture.50

Witchcraft provided, in the face of intellectual uncertainty, a set of procedures for the verification of knowledge as evidence (juridical, but also empirical). If Weyer came, as Zilboorg argues, to inspire the field of psychiatry, Biddick’s work reads Kramer’s methods as equally crucial to later empirical procedures associated with disciplines in the social sciences. Inquisitorial technologies, she argues, remain sedimented in standard historicist and ethnographic methods regularized in later centuries. Biddick’s work foregrounds the political and epistemological stakes in all such matters of testimony evidence. Biddick notes Freud’s interest in the Malleus in passing: “even Sigmund Freud could not bear to part with his German translation as he stood before his bookshelves in Nazi Vienna making decisions about which books to leave behind and which to take along on his flight to London.”51

51 Biddick, The Shock of Medievalism, 108–109. These responses, just like the controversy itself, mark the line that joins imagination and fantasy (on the one hand), with truth, history, or fact (on the other). On this same boundary, edge, border, or seam, medievalism and the Middle Ages converge; over such terrain these two fields have been both joined and separated. Scholars pursuing those relations, such as John Ganim, Kathleen Biddick, or Thomas A. Prendergast and Stephanie Trigg, have emphasized the politics and passionate attachments spanning that edge. See John Ganim, Medievalism and Orientalism: Three Essays on Literature, Architecture, and Cultural Identity (New York: Palgrave, 2005), and Thomas Prendergast and Stephanie Trigg, Medievalism and Its Discontents (forthcoming). And in a spirit not unlike our own, Prendergast and Trigg have recently remarked on Freud’s interest in medieval testimony about witches, considered as a “stumbling block” of consequence, an implicit
Memories of sexual abuse have raised problems for evidentiary juridical standards—problems associated most recently with “recovered memory syndrome”; this suggests instead a complicated position regarding the interpretation of testimony, and the evidence of remembered experience. It hints, too, at the degree to which Freud’s point is larger, and more incisive than Swales admits, in large measure because Freud’s medievalism is fairly nuanced: Freud turns to the medieval so as to ponder epistemological question about inquisitorial technologies, and thus about the reports he hears from his analysands. Yet, when Freud remarks on the analogies he saw between “his patients under psychic treatment” and witchcraft victims who “confessed under torture,” he appropriates certain facets of Early Modern debates over witchcraft for this crucial question. Freud is struck by historical repetitions, by similarities between his clinical experience and the historical record. As he asks Fleiss: “Why did the devil who took possession of the poor things invariably abuse them sexually and in a loathsome manner? Why are their confessions under torture so like the communications made by my patients in psychic treatment?” These two questions concern the nature of confession as evidence, something that Weyer—as part of his critique of Catholic priests—explicitly calls into question.

Throughout her reading of the technologies of knowledge produced by the witch craze, Biddick reminds us of the important question of when and how testimony counts as real, a question crucial to both Freud’s qualification of his seduction theory and to those critical of that qualification. Weyer’s “science” did not, that is, repudiate religious superstition, as Zilboorg would have it. Instead, questions of verifiable evidence were split between “scientific” and

reminder that the discernment of “truth” regularly converges on fantasies of “punishment, and pleasure.”
“ethnographic” methods. Problems of verification, and of truth, remain. And it is, thus, not at all coincidental that when the witch becomes refigured as the “hysteric,” questions of testimony and fantasy will again reemerge. For the problem of testimony was not, it turns out, overcome with the “inquisitorial techniques” of the early moderns.

Freud’s interest in the witches—his disdain for “medieval” inquisitors and his interest in Weyer’s critique of them—does not revel in superstition so much as promote a reconsideration of the epistemological status of experience, memory, confession, or personal testimony as evidence. Yet insofar as he distrusted the inquisitors and the testimony thereby produced, insofar as the so-called “medieval” history of witchcraft displayed for him confession as a mode not of evidentiary truth, but of fantasy, Freud’s “medievalism” provided him (perhaps paradoxically) with a skepticism powerful enough to challenge even the modern man of science. This is not, as Swales might have it, a turn to a medieval religious superstition, but rather a return to uncertainty about the nature of testimony, an epistemological crises long associated with the history of High Modernism.52 Freud’s medievalism shows this to be a

modern, secular epistemological crisis that retroactively resonates with a medieval, religious past.

Like Freud, Christensen’s 1922 film considers certain women of the Middle Ages alongside certain women of the 1920s, and all under the sign of the “witch.” The final filmic chapter of Häxan duplicates the links made in Freud’s comments to Fleiss, schematizing such women by associating witchcraft and hysteria. Christensen’s work, as we will shortly demonstrate, was deeply (if idiosyncratically) informed by a range of psychological, neurological, psychoanalytic contexts out of which Freud worked.

constructions of positivism and empiricism owe to the mechanisms of repression. For an analysis of the paradox of Freud’s relation to science, “sabotaging the language of science while claiming it as one’s own,” see Paul-Laurent Assoun, Introduction à l’épistémologie freudienne (Paris: Payot 1981). On Lacanian epistemology, see Alexandre Leupin, “Lacan: une nouvelle théorie de la connaissance,” Squiggle (2006): http://www.squiggle.be. The epistemological implications of psychoanalytic accounts of the “event,” specifically the traumatic event, have been particularly controversial, as evinced in the charge made most famously by Jeffrey Masson that in moving from a “seduction” theory to a theory of infantile sexuality, Freud “suppressed” the truth about the childhood sexual abuse suffered by his analysands. On this point, see Jeffry Mouissieff Masson, The Assault on Truth: Freud’s Suppression of the Seduction Theory (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 1984). Both analysts and theorists have taken on Masson’s critique, though many believe his analysis of Freud’s motivation to be fundamentally wrong. For them the central controversy concerns the status of fantasy in psychoanalytic theory and the relation of fantasy to questions of truth: for Freud, Lacan, and others fantasy remains an important source of information and knowledge regardless of its relation to historical fact. Recently, the problem of fantasy and the “historical event” has been revisited within trauma theory. For an important, if not entirely satisfying account of this problem and the relevant debates, see Ruth Leys, Trauma: A Genealogy (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).
There are other historical features to the convergence of the witch and the hysteric. Historians have also read Freud’s interest in the medieval witch as part of the project through which psychoanalysis understood itself to be offering a radical alternative to institutional religion. William McGrath links Freud’s account of the history of witches to his distrust of clericalism, a disposition which grew during his years with Charcot at Salpêtrière Hospital in fin de siècle republican France. For McGrath, Freud’s reconsideration of the testimony of witches mirrors the anti-clerical politics of the French medical establishment (including Charcot) at the time: “Freud found in Charcot a modern-day defender of the tradition of men like Weier . . . a liberator, a view perhaps enhanced because it was set against the background of Charcot’s great interest in the medieval.”

Freud certainly shares in the anticlericalism of the French medical establishment; and his record on the question of gender is controversial. To the degree that Freud’s medievalism produced the hysteric as evidence to be analyzed, his theory encodes the “inquisitorial techniques” that Biddick ascribes to later historians and ethnographers. One could argue that the perception of the witch as hysteric (as a victim of both society and a disordered interior) played a role in occluding for contemporary historians the possible (albeit limited) agency an individual might obtain in adopting and negotiating the identity of the witch.

Filmmaker Christensen was, as we shall see, similarly influenced by the “alliance between psychiatry and anticlerical politics” that developed in late 19th-century France—a time when secular intellectuals and politicians like Desire Magloire Bourneville, or pioneers in the development of psychiatry like Jean Charcot sought to “laicize the public hospitals” by combining “scholarship [that] sought to

show that medieval Catholic religious beliefs were based on misunderstood hysterical phenomena” and “politics [that] invoked the name of modern science to wrest control of the hospitals from the church.”54 The major thrust of the ideological narratives of anticlerical politicians and scientists is to effect a clear separation of church from science/medicine by employing tropes of Dark Age, Catholic superstition so as to promote its difference from a rational secular modernity.

Furthermore, while the identification of witchcraft as, in Freud's words, a “medieval theory of possession” may have been prompted by the politics of anti-clericalism in the early 20th century, its meaning carries well beyond those concerns. Freud's and Christensen’s medievalisms have had different afterlives; yet both turn to the medieval history of witches to press upon crucial epistemological questions of knowledge and truth, of power and desire, of punishment, and perversion. And the medievalism of Christensen’s film Häxan makes this crisis explicitly a cross-period problem. It is to this film that we turn.
