

Martin Del Rio: Investigations into Magic

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Hardly a month seems to go by without another book being published about early modern witchcraft. Academic enthusiasm for this particular topic certainly shows no signs of abating, and it is becoming increasingly difficult to keep up with the burgeoning literature on the subject. It was not so long ago that the 16th and 17th century witchcraft prosecutions were generally perceived in academic circles as a rather unusual, idiosyncratic theme - the main preserve of eccentric scholars obsessed with the strange and bizarre aspects of history. However, European witchcraft studies have now become academically respectable and fully integrated into the mainstream of early modern history. There can be few History Departments at universities that do not offer their students courses on 16th and 17th century witch-hunting. Undergraduates who had formerly regarded the early modern era as 'boring' or 'irrelevant' have often had their myopic intellectual prejudices dispelled after studying the fascinating history of the 'European Witch-Craze'. The increasing academic interest in this area of study has not only resulted in a plethora of detailed monographs concerned with examining witch-accusations and trials in specific European regions, but also in the publication of early modern writings about witchcraft. A number of translated demonological writings were, in fact, produced in the 1920s and 30s, some by the rather sinister, mysterious Catholic scholar, Montague Summers, but it was only in the 1990s that important contemporary writings were translated again into English. In 1991, a superb translation was published of the Dutch physician, Johann Weyer's study, *De Praestigiis Daemonum* (1563); this contemporary work was one of the first that was highly critical of witch-beliefs and persecutions. Shortly after this in 1995, an English translation appeared of the infamous demonological study written by Weyer's main opponent, Jean Bodin: the *Démonomanie des Sorciers* (1580). Now five years later, another significant influential demonological text has been produced for English readers: Martin Del Rio's authoritative study on magic and witchcraft, the *Disquisitiones Magicae* (1608).

Del Rio, in common with other eminent demonologists such as Perkins, Binsfeld and Remy, was an extremely erudite man. By the time he was nineteen, he had written a three-volume commentary on Seneca, and he eventually became fluent in nine languages. In 1580, he entered the Jesuit Order and spent his life studying theology at some of the most prominent Catholic colleges and universities in Europe: Clermont, Douai, Louvain, Graz, and Salamanca. Until recently historians have had difficulty in reconciling Del Rio's erudition with his interest in witchcraft and they tended to portray him as a fanatical, intolerant bigot. However, thanks mainly to the research of the historian Stuart Clark, demonologists are now beginning to be viewed from a more intellectually sophisticated and a less moralistic perspective. Clark has emphasised that

demonologists did not examine witch-beliefs in isolation; they viewed them instead from wider intellectual perspectives that touched on contemporary issues such as the workings of nature, political authority and religious orthodoxy. For many early modern educated élites it made 'sense' to believe in the possibility of witchcraft, because the arguments used to sustain this belief could be related consistently to broader intellectual preoccupations. Del Rio certainly did not deal narrowly with witchcraft and magic, but he associated them with a variety of contemporary 'disciplines' that included mathematics, astrology and alchemy. He divided his encyclopaedic study into six books. The first four dealt exhaustively with a vast range of magical practices, and the chapters aimed primarily to explore which specific activities dutiful Catholics should avoid because they were demonically inspired. In the discussions about demonic magic, Del Rio was constantly at pains not to over-inflate Satan's powers at the expense of God's, and so become guilty of Manicheism. Throughout his study, he carefully delineated the devil's powers so that they conformed to contemporary notions about what could be accomplished in the natural world. He emphasised that evil spirits could, indeed, undertake 'preternatural' acts that went beyond the capabilities of humans, but the devil could not ultimately transcend nature's laws; Satan could work marvels but only God could perform the true miracles which were beyond nature.

After thoroughly examining the potential dangers of a whole range of occult practices, Del Rio's final two books dealt comprehensively with the more practical problems that judges and confessors faced when dealing with practitioners of harmful magic. This particular demonological treatise provided such an extensive, wide-ranging synthesis of theological and judicial views on witchcraft and magic that it swiftly became one of the standard 17th century witch-hunting manuals.

Del Rio's study is especially interesting for witchcraft scholars because it appeared in the first years of the 17th century - just at that moment when intensive persecutions were becoming more frequent in parts of Catholic Europe. Confessional conflicts between Catholics and Protestants were then at their height and Del Rio's work offers us illuminating insights into the mind of one pious Jesuit scholar responding to these religious tensions. The threat and dangers of religious unorthodoxy were constantly stressed by Del Rio and, first of all, in his Prologue, he felt it necessary to warn his readers that heresy, magic and witchcraft were intrinsically linked:

.(ii) all heresy is prone to violence at the start, but because it cannot maintain this and cannot return to the truth whence it came, it degenerates into magic or atheism;
(iii) magic follows heresy, as plague follows famine .We have seen heresy flourishing in Belgium and we see swarms of witches laying waste the whole of the North, like locusts.The heretics are strongly opposed by the Jesuits. This book is a weapon in that war. (pp.28-29)

Although these observations were not original and had been borrowed from the lectures given by the Jesuit theologian, Juan de Maldonado, this was one of the first occasions in which the association between the Protestant 'heresy' and witchcraft had been so forcefully and lucidly expressed in a demonolical treatise. Shortly after Del Rio's work was published, some of 17th century Europe's most intensive witch-persecutions occurred in those German Catholic states that had witnessed significant Protestant penetration such as the bishoprics of Bamberg and Würzburg. It would, of course, be misplaced to make this specific demonological study mainly responsible for unleashing these savage witch-hunts. However, Del Rio's work certainly helped to provide the ideological justification for the persecutions, and it is likely to have confirmed the suspicions of the zealous witch-hunting prince-bishops that the Protestant presence in their lands had made the territories especially susceptible to the vice of witchcraft.

Intensive witch-hunts in Catholic Germany and elsewhere could not have erupted if the ruling élites had not become obsessed about the 'reality' of the witches' secret meeting (the sabbat), for this was the supposed

main location for organised witchcraft. It should be noted here that Del Rio's work contributed significantly to the elaboration of this important demonological notion. The development of the sabbat idea had, in fact, been a complex, protracted affair and, by the early 16th century, formulations of the witches' secret meeting were still mostly vague and undelineated; even the notorious demonological manual, the *Malleus Maleficarum* (1487), failed to offer its readers an adequate account of this phenomenon. It was only in the writings of demonologists from the 1580s onwards, such as Bodin's treatise, that a detailed picture began to emerge gradually about the witches' nefarious assemblies. By the start of the 17th century, the composite notion of the blasphemous sabbat had been fully articulated, and Del Rio's work was one of the first to provide its readership with a vivid, comprehensive account. He graphically described the demonic exploits of the witches at the sabbat:

There, on most occasions, once a foul, disgusting fire has been lit, an evil spirit sits on a throne as president of the assembly. His appearance is terrifying, almost always that of a male goat or a dog. The witches come forward to worship him in different ways. Sometimes they supplicate him on bended knee; sometimes they stand with their back turned to him. They offer candles made of pitch or a child's umbilical cord, and kiss him on the anal orifice as a sign of homage. Sometimes they imitate the sacrifice of the Mass (the greatest of all their crimes), as well as purifying with water and similar Catholic ceremonies. After the feast, each evil spirit takes by the hand the disciple of whom he has charge, and so that they may do everything with the most absurd kind of ritual, each person bends over backwards, joins hands in a circle, and tosses his head as frenzied fanatics do. Then they begin to dance. They sing very obscene songs in his [Satan's] honour. They behave ridiculously in every way, and in every way contrary to accepted custom. Then their demon-lovers copulate with them in the most repulsive fashion. (pp.92-93)

Throughout this depiction of the sabbat, Del Rio stressed that the witches' activities represented an inversion and antithesis of the everyday world. However, the employment of inversionary imagery was not simply a decorative, entertaining literary device. Within educated culture, images of inversion were often used to promote orthodoxy. By emphasising what appeared to be the unruly, heretical or immoral features of an opposing belief or cultural practice, the positive values of the established order were affirmed. Del Rio's sabbat concept provided a particularly dramatic example of negative images being employed to accentuate positive, pious characteristics. At the sabbat, Christian rituals were systematically parodied and inverted. Satan was worshipped instead of God, and the Host was desecrated and not venerated. The whole moral and cultural order was also turned upside down during the witches' assembly: communal sex was practised instead of maintaining faithful, monogamous relationships; indecent back-to-back dancing was practised accompanied by obscene melodies; those persons who committed the most detestable crimes received the greatest praise from the devil. To the educated élite, this must have represented a nightmarish vision of a normless anti-society where Christianity had been totally abandoned. The blasphemous, disorderly world of the sabbat constituted a complete antithesis to the kind of virtuous Catholic society that a Jesuit such as Del Rio wanted to establish.

Besides elaborating at length on the intricacies of the sacrilegious sabbat, Del Rio aimed to convince his readers that witches could, with the devil's assistance, undertake a range of extraordinary feats such as flying to the nocturnal meetings. To those critics of demonology who argued that much of the witches' testimony were simply illusions produced by dreams, Del Rio retorted that their confessions were too uniform and they could not, therefore, all be dreaming the same thing. In order to maintain his argument that the flight was genuine, he relied rather dogmatically on the authority and infallibility of his Church, and tersely observed that 'the Catholic Church does not punish crimes unless they are certain and manifest' (p.97).

In common with previous demonological treatises, Del Rio's work was specifically concerned to aid and provide guidance to judicial authorities faced with the difficult task of prosecuting criminals who had committed secret, supernatural offences. Del Rio, together with Remy, Boguet and many other demonologists, believed that, in a similar manner to treason, witchcraft was 'an extraordinary and exceptional crime' (p.189). Consequently, it was not subject to the normal rules of evidence. Testimony inadmissible in normal judicial proceedings, such as evidence provided by persons of bad reputation, criminals or accomplices, was acceptable 'because this is an exempted crime' (p.210). Acceptance of accomplice testimony, in particular, was very significant for the conduct of witchcraft prosecutions, because this allowed the accused to denounce others whom they claimed to have supposedly seen at the sabbats; many of these denounced suspects were subsequently arrested and the trials multiplied. During the early 17th century, accomplice testimony became the principal dynamic of the mass witch-persecutions that were especially prevalent in southern German Catholic regions, and treatises such as Del Rio's must bear some responsibility for encouraging these dangerous judicial practices. However, it should be noted that Del Rio's recommendations on the investigation of witchcraft offences were not completely reckless, for he did suggest that defendants should never be tortured more than on three separate occasions. On this specific legal issue, Del Rio was adhering to the more orderly recommendations concerning the application of judicial torture that had been prescribed in the legal code of the Holy Roman Empire, the *Constitutio Criminalis Carolina* (1532). Those territories that held to the *Carolina* Code and refrained from repeated use of torture were able to avoid large-scale persecutions. On the other hand, Del Rio's restrictions concerning the use of torture were all but obviated when he discussed the reasons why many witches remained silent during interrogations. He suggested that a suspect's silence and refusal to confess was not usually an indication of innocence but was brought about by Satan aiding his adherents and making defendants insensitive to pain. Needless to say, magistrates who accepted this view would be inclined to torture suspects excessively in order to break the devil's hold on his stubborn disciples. These judges would have had little compunction about disregarding Del Rio's qualifications on the repetition of torture, because the author of this demonological work was, after all, a theologian and not a magistrate. On certain procedural matters Del Rio's work carried perhaps less weight than that of secular jurists, such as Remy or Boguet; they could, of course, base their judicial recommendations on more direct involvement in the prosecuting process. Although Del Rio lacked a criminal lawyer's practical experience, he was still able to provide Catholic magistrates with very useful, detailed guidelines on how to prosecute suspect witches, and also offer them a thorough theological justification for the extermination of the pernicious witch-sect.

Throughout his study, he certainly displayed great erudition, and cited an impressive range of authorities from classical, biblical and medieval writings to support his arguments. However, for modern readers this is not an easy text to assimilate, and there is much that they will find specious and tiresome in Del Rio's observations. Along with other demonologists, he used his sources indiscriminately and frequently quoted out of context: fables from poets and curious episodes recounted by medieval chroniclers were accorded the same authority as the opinions of learned jurists and theologians. Some of the strange incidents that Del Rio cites to prove the existence of witches verge on the comic and are difficult to take seriously. A case in point occurred in 1587 while Del Rio was residing in Calais during a time of military conflict. Del Rio informs us that two soldiers 'saw a dark cloud flying towards them in a clear sky and thought they could hear the voices of many people jumbled together inside it.'. One soldier shot at the cloud and 'a woman fell down from the cloud at their feet. She was drunk, naked, very fat, middle-aged, and her thigh had been shot through twice. They arrested her.'. (p.197). The conviction and sincerity expressed by Del Rio when recounting this astonishing tale cannot help but remind us of the great gulf that separated his mental universe from that of more modern world-views.

PG Maxwell-Stuart, the translator of Del Rio's treatise, has provided an edited, rather than a complete translation, and this may disappoint some early modern witchcraft scholars. Particular sections that Maxwell-Stuart decided to summarise may be those that some historians would want to read in their entirety, especially if detailed comparisons need to be made with themes discussed by other demonologists. However, Del Rio's whole text is very lengthy and publication costs would, I suppose, have been prohibitive. For

historians unable to read the original treatise because they are not proficient in Latin (unfortunately general changes in secondary education over the years have resulted in more scholars lacking such skills), this edited version of a leading early modern demonologist's work will be greatly welcomed. It cannot have been an easy undertaking to translate this complex, discursive text, and Maxwell-Stuart must be congratulated for providing us with an extremely lucid and elegant translation. The only quibble that can be made relates to the book's format. Occasionally, it is difficult to distinguish between Maxwell-Stuart's commentaries and Del Rio's own words because both are printed in the same type-face, and they are not always separated from each other clearly enough in the punctuation. Surely the publishers, Manchester University Press, should have had the foresight to have reproduced Del Rio's text in different print from that of his commentator? After all, no self-respecting modern scholars would want their views to be too closely associated with those of an early modern advocate of social persecution, however extensive his erudition may have been.

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