

When I published *A Challenge To All Genuine Skeptics From A Holocaust Revisionist* a decade and more ago, I cited the 1969 Tandem book edition of *Satanism and Witchcraft*...Here I have used a slightly later edition by The Citadel Press of New York. Because the pagination differs, I have included the whole chapter on the Basque Witches. In this edition, the relevant quote appears on page 152. Jules Michelet died in 1874.

Scroll down to read.

behind in the care of God or the Devil, as the case might be. As for the children, these sailors, a very upright and godfearing set of men, would have made more account of them, if they could only have been more sure on the question of fatherhood. Returning after their long periods of absence, they would reckon up the time and count the months,—and invariably found themselves quite out of their calculations.

The women, pretty, bold-eyed and imaginative creatures, would pass the whole day in the churchyards, sitting on the tombs and gossiping of the Witches' Sabbath, which they were going to attend so soon as night fell. This was the passion, the infatuation of their lives.

Nature makes them Sorceresses from the cradle, these daughters of ocean nurtured on weird and fantastic legends. They swim like fishes, every one of them, and sport boldly amid the Atlantic rollers. Manifestly their master the Prince of the Air, king of winds and wild dreams, the same who inspired the Sibyl and whispered the secrets of the future in her ear.

The very judge that burns them is all the while charmed with their fascinations. "When you see them pass," he writes, "their hair flying in the wind and brushing their shoulders, so well adorned and caparisoned are they, as they go, with their lovely locks, that the sun glancing through them as through a cloud, makes a flashing aureole of dazzling radiance. . . . Hence the dangerous fascination of their eyes, perilous for love no less than for witchery."

This worthy citizen of Bordeaux and amiable magistrate, the earliest type of those polished men of the world who ornamented and enlivened the Bench in the seventeenth century, plays the lute in the intervals of judicial business, and even sets the Sorceresses dancing before having them burned. He writes well and in a style of much greater lucidity than any of his fellows. And yet at the same time we discern in his case a fresh source of obscurity, arising inevitably from the circumstances of his day, viz. that among so great a number of Witches, all of whom the

judge cannot of course condemn to the stake, the greater part are quite clever enough to understand he is likely to show indulgence towards such as shall best enter into his preconceived ideas and feed his peculiar passion. What passion was this? First and foremost, a common failing enough, love of the marvellous and horrible for its own sake, the pleasure of being startled and terrified, and added to this, it must be admitted, the fun of indecent revelations. A touch of vanity besides; the more formidable and fierce these women are artful enough to make the Devil appear, the more is the judge flattered and exalted who can master so fell an adversary. He savours the sweets of victory, gloats over his silly success, poses triumphant amid all this foolish cackle.

The finest example is to be found in the Spanish official report of the Auto-da-fé at Logroño (November 9th, 1610), as given in Llorente. Lancre, who quotes it not without envy, and is by way of depreciating the whole thing, yet admits the unspeakable charm of the fête, its magnificence as a spectacle, and the profound effect of the music. On one scaffold stood the condemned Sorceresses, a scanty band, and on another the crowd of the reprieved. The repentant heroine, whose confession was read out, stuck at nothing, however wild and improbable. At the Sabbaths they ate children, hashed; and as second course dead wizards dug up from their graves. Toads dance, talk, complain amorously of their mistresses' unkindnesses, and get the Devil to scold them. This latter sees the Witches home with great politeness, lighting the way with the blazing arm of an unbaptised infant, etc., etc.

Witchcraft among the French Basques showed a less fantastic aspect. It would seem that with them the "Sabbath" was little more than a fête on a large scale, which everybody, including even the nobles of the country, attended in search of amusement. In the front rank appeared a row of veiled and masked figures, believed by some to be Princes. "In former days," Lancre says, "only the simple, dull-witted peasantry of the

Landes were to be seen at these assemblages. Now people of quality are to be found there." By way of compliment to these local notabilities, Satan would frequently, under such circumstances, elect a *Bishop of the Sabbath*. Such is the title the young Seigneur Lancinena received from him, with whom the Devil was graciously pleased personally to open the ball.

Thus influentially supported, the Sorceresses reigned supreme, exercising over the country an almost incredible domination by means of the terrors of the imagination. Numbers of persons came to believe themselves their victims, and actually fell seriously ill. Many were attacked by epilepsy, and started barking like dogs. One small town alone, Acqs, counted among its inhabitants as many as forty of these unhappy creatures. Such was the terrible relationship that bound them under the Witch's influence, that on one occasion a lady, called as a witness, at the mere approach of the Sorceress, whom she could not even see, began barking furiously, and was utterly unable to stop herself.

Those who were accredited with so formidable a power were masters of the situation, and no man durst shut his door against them. A magistrate even, the Criminal Assessor of Bayonne, allowed the "Sabbath" to be held at his house. The Seigneur de Saint-Pé, Urtubi, was constrained to celebrate the festival at his castle. But so much were his wits shaken by the event that he became firmly persuaded a Witch was sucking his blood. Terror lending him courage, he and another baron hastened to Bordeaux and appealed to the Parlement there. The latter body obtained the King's orders that two of its members, Messieurs d'Espagnet and de Lancre, should be despatched to judge the Sorcerers and Sorceresses of the Basque provinces. They were given plenary powers, subject to no appeal; and setting to work with unexampled vigour, in four short months tried from sixty to eighty Witches, besides examining five hundred more equally marked with the Devil's stigmata, but who figured in the courts only as witnesses (May to August, 1609).

It was an enterprise by no means devoid of danger for two men and a few soldiers to proceed to such measures in the midst of a lawless and headstrong population, and a mob of sailors' wives, notoriously a reckless and violent set of women. A second risk came from the priests, numbers of whom were Sorcerers themselves, and whom the lay Commissioners were bound to bring to trial in spite of the fierce opposition of the clergy.

On the judges' arrival many fled with all speed to the mountains. Others put a better face on the matter and remained, declaring it was the judges who would be burned. So undismayed were the Witches, that actually in court they would doze off in the "Sabbatical" sleep, and openly describe on awakening how before the judges' very eyes they had been enjoying the delights of satanic intercourse. Several declared, "Our only regret is that we cannot properly show him how we burn to suffer for his sake."

When questioned they would affirm they could not speak,—that Satan rose in their throats and obstructed their utterance.

The younger of the two Commissioners, Lancre, the same who writes these accounts, was a man of the world, and the Witches were not slow to perceive that with such a judge to deal with there were possible loopholes of escape. The phalanx was broken. A beggar-girl of seventeen, Little Murgin, as she was called (Margarita), who had found in Sorcery a profitable speculation, and who, while scarce more than a child herself, had been in the habit of bringing children and offering them to the Devil, undertook along with her companion—one Lisalda, a girl of the same age—to denounce all the rest. She told everything, and wrote it all down, with all the vivacity, exaggeration, and fiery emphasis of a true daughter of Spain, along with a hundred indecent details, whether true or false. She both terrified and diverted the judges, twisting them round her little finger and leading them whither she pleased like a pair of dummies. They actually entrusted this vicious, irresponsible, passionate girl with the grim task of searching the bodies of young women and boys for

signs of the spot where Satan had put his mark. The place was recognised by the fact of its being insensible to pain, so that needles could be driven into it without extracting a cry from the victim. A surgeon tortured the old women, Margarita the younger ones, who were called as witnesses, but who, if she declared them marked in this way, might easily find their way to the bench of the accused. An odious consummation truly,—that this brazen-browed creature, thus made absolute mistress of the fate and fortune of these unhappy beings, should go pricking them with needles at her pleasure, and might adjudge, if such were her caprice, any one of their bleeding bodies to a cruel death!

Such was the empire she had gained over Lancre she actually induced him to believe that while he slept in his house at Saint-Pé, surrounded by his serving-men and escort, the Devil entered his chamber at night, and said the Black Mass there; that the Witches forced their way under his very bed-curtains to poison him, but had found him too securely guarded by God. The Black Mass was served by the Baroness de Lancinena, with whom Satan had casual intercourse in the judge's apartment itself. The object of this pitiful tale is pretty plain; the beggar-girl bears a grudge against the Great Lady, who was likewise a pretty woman, and who, but for this slanderous story, might also have gained some ascendancy over the gallant functionary.

Lancre and his colleague were appalled, but continued to advance from sheer dread of the dangers of drawing back. They ordered the royal gallows to be planted on the very spots where Satan had kept Sabbath, a proceeding well calculated to strike terror and convince all men of the tremendous power they derived from being armed with the King's authority. Denunciations came pouring down like hail. All the women of the countryside came filing in unceasingly to lay accusations one against the other. Eventually the very children were brought and made to give incriminating evidence against their own mothers. Lancre decides with all due gravity that a witness of eight years old

is capable of affording good, sufficient, and trustworthy evidence.

M. d'Espagnet was unable to give more than a passing moment to the business, being due in a short time in the States of Béarn. Lancre, infected in spite of himself by the fierce energy of the younger Witches who hurried to denounce their elder sisters, and who would have been in sore peril themselves had they failed to get these latter burned, pushed on the trials whip and spur at full gallop. A sufficient number of Sorceresses were condemned to the flames. Finding their fate sealed, they too had spoken out at last, and scattered denunciations right and left. As the first batch were on their way to the stake, a ghastly scene occurred. Executioner, officer, and police all thought their last day was come. The crowd rushed savagely upon the carts, to force the unhappy occupants to withdraw their accusations. Men held daggers at their throats, while many of them almost perished under the nails of their infuriated sisters.

Eventually, however, justice was satisfactorily vindicated. This done, the Commissioners proceeded to a more arduous and delicate task, viz. the trial of eight priests who had been arrested. The revelations of the young Witches had thrown a flood of light on their lives and morals, and Lancre speaks of their dissolute morals as one who has full knowledge at first hand. Not only does he reproach them with their gallant doings at the nocturnal "Sabbaths," but insists particularly upon their relations with their sacristanesses, those church-dames or *bénédictes*, as they were called, mentioned on a previous page. He even condescends to repeat vulgar tales,—how the priests sent the husbands to Newfoundland, and imported from Japan the devils who yielded up the wives into their hands.

The clergy were much exercised, and the Bishop of Bayonne would have resisted, if he had dared. Failing sufficient courage, he kept away, appointing his Vicar-General to watch the case for him. Luckily the Devil helped the accused more efficiently than the Bishop. He can unlock every door; so that it happened

one fine morning that five out of the eight escaped. The Commissioners, without further loss of time, burned the three that were left.

All this took place about August, 1609. The Spanish Inquisitors, who were holding their trials at Logroño, did not on their side reach the final Auto-da-fé before November 8th, 1610. They had had far more difficulties to contend with than their French *confrères*, in view of the prodigious, the appalling number of the accused. Impossible to burn a whole population! They consulted the Pope and the greatest Church dignitaries of Spain, and it was decided to beat a retreat. The understanding was that only obstinate criminals should be sent to the stake, such as persisted in their denials, while all who confessed should be let go. The same method, the application of which had hitherto always saved priests brought to trial for incontinence of opinion or of conduct. Their confession was held sufficient, supplemented by a trifling penance (see Llorente).

The Inquisition, of uncompromising severity towards heretics and cruelly hard on the Moors and Jews was much less harsh where the Sorcerers were concerned. These latter, shepherds in a great many cases, were in no way involved in opposition to Mother Church. The degraded, sometimes bestial amusements of goat-herds occasioned little anxiety to the enemies of liberty of conscience.

Lancre's book was composed mainly with the object of demonstrating the vast superiority of the public justice of France, the justice administered by laymen and members of the legal Parlements, to that of the priests. It is written *currente calamo*, in a light, easy, happy style, clearly manifesting the author's satisfaction at having honourably extricated himself from a serious danger. He is something of a Gascon, boastful and vain of his own achievements. He relates with pride how, on the occasion of the "Sabbath" following the first execution of Witches,

the children of the latter came to lay complaint of their treatment before Satan. He replied that their mothers were not burned at all, but alive and happy. From the depths of the smoky cloud the children actually thought they heard their mothers' voices declaring they were now in full and complete happiness. Nevertheless, Satan was afraid, and kept away for four successive "Sabbaths," sending as his substitute a quite subordinate imp. He did not put in an appearance again until the 22nd of July. When the Sorcerers asked him the reason of his absence, he told them, "I have been to plead your cause against Janicot (Little John, this is the name he bestows on Jesus). I have won my case; and the Witches still remaining in prison will not be burned."

The Prince of Lies was once more shown to be a liar; and the victorious judge assures us that when the last of them was burned, a swarm of toads was seen to escape from her head. The assembled people fell upon these with stones so furiously that the Sorceress was really more stoned than burned to death. But, in spite of all their efforts, they failed to account for one great black toad, which avoiding alike flames and sticks and stones, escaped, like a demon as he was, to a place where he could never afterwards be discovered.