

Article

# Witch Hunting and Prosecuting in Early Modern Italy: A Historiographical Survey

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**Abstract:** This article critically assesses Italian scholarship on the history of witchcraft over the last 60 years. Beginning with Carlo Ginzburg's influential *Night Battles* (published in 1966 and translated to English in 1983) and ending with the recent work of Matteo Duni, Tamar Herzig, Vincenzo Lavenia and Louise Nyholm Kallestrup, the article traces the intellectual contexts and shifts in historiographical debates.

**Keywords:** witchcraft; inquisition; counter-reformation Italy; historiography; microhistory

## 1. Introduction

Witchcraft, both belief in and practice of, was widespread in early modern Italy. This realization has been difficult for some to accept. A generation of (mostly Anglophone) scholars downplayed its position in Italian Renaissance life and culture. Others sought to find plausible explanations for the persistence of a way of thinking considered irrational and superstitious<sup>1</sup>; however, its persistence could not be ignored. Over time, research into the world of magic and witchcraft split into two distinct currents: learned and mostly text-based magic was studied by historians of philosophy and science, while practices related to witchcraft and folklore were researched by those in the emerging field of historical anthropology (Gentilcore 2004; Amabile 1892). While important studies have piled up in both these fields, to date, no comprehensive and comparative work has been written about witchcraft in the Italian peninsula during the early modern centuries.<sup>2</sup> This historiographical debate is likely the result of Italy's unique political fragmentation and the jurisdictional divide among its secular, ecclesiastical and Inquisitorial justice systems. The existence of numerous political entities, often administered by foreign powers, and the consequent differences in legislative, civil and criminal procedures and policies renders a comparative synthesis very difficult. In addition, there is also a lingering misconception that a clear demarcation existed between a "superstitious" south and a more "rational" north, a prejudice that has been resoundingly disproven, for example, by documents of pastoral visits. All these factors seem to have discouraged historians from producing a comprehensive comparative work on early modern Italian witchcraft.

Scholars have focused instead on individual trials, like that of Guglielmo Campana in Modena of the 1520s, studied by Matteo Duni,<sup>3</sup> or of particular areas, such as Ruth Martin, Jonathan Seitz and Federico Barbierato's work on Venice (Martin 1989; Barbierato 2002, 2012; Seitz 2011); Siena has been studied by Oscar Di Simplicio, Sicily by Maria Sofia Messana and Naples by Giovanni Romeo (Romeo 2004; Messana 2007). At the same time, the topic of possession has drawn attention with the work of Elena Brambilla (2010), Vincenzo Lavenia (1998, 2008a) and Guido Dall'Olio (2001, 2006, 2008, 2012), while Andrea del Col has attempted to sketch a concise outline of inquisitorial activity (Del Col 2006, pp. 176–93). Many other studies that I cannot mention here have contributed to the complex picture of episodes and trials of witchcraft (Lavenia 2001; Mazza 2009; Duni 2008; Moretti 2019). While unique and particular, every local study can help us better understand the general



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situation in the Italian peninsula (Visintin 2008). The risk for historians is that limited findings will be overestimated and, perhaps erroneously, held up as a key for general interpretation. Yet, with the accumulation of such studies, some patterns will begin to emerge.<sup>4</sup> Along with showing the extent and variety of witchcraft cases investigated by local tribunals, recent scholarship has also suggested honing our instruments of analysis to move beyond the particular circumstance and to generate interpretations valid for a wider horizon.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, the (alleged) witch's aims and practices were more or less the same across the peninsula: to heal or cause illness, to seduce or to find treasures (Gentilcore 1992, 1998; Tedesco 2019).

My aim in this essay is to identify and trace the main features of this historiographical debate and to offer some pathways toward a more comprehensive approach to the study of early modern Italian witchcraft. A particular concern is to compare and generalize from rich and diverse localized studies and to investigate how gender studies, a central concern of much Anglophone scholarship on witchcraft, has shaped and will continue to guide research in the Italian context. Lamentably, the Italian historiographical tradition no longer seems able to guide or direct studies on the subject, but is limited to following international trends.

## 2. Before and after *The Night Battles*

In the first half of the twentieth century, scholars concentrated mainly on episodes involving individuals and groups, such as the well-known trials in the Ligurian town of Triora in the 1580s (Panizza 1997; Fontana 2010). After the second World War, historians were encouraged to deal with the quite different topics of political and economic history, and it was not until 1959 that the anthropologist Giuseppe Bonomo published *Caccia alle streghe* (with two subsequent editions in 1971 and 1983), in which he adopted a long-term perspective from the thirteenth to the eighteenth centuries and sought to combine an anthropological approach with a keen interest in practices and rites, as well as a historical reconstruction that drew on other studies of trials and cases Bonomo (1959). A look at the bibliography cited by Bonomo suggests that he was not aware of (or at least did not think worthy of consideration) the fundamental and innovative studies by cultural anthropologists Evans Pritchard and Mary Douglas, which appeared only some time later in Italian translation Clemente (1986). In his introduction, Bonomo argues for the need to investigate witchcraft from the perspective of folklore in order to shed light on the continuity of beliefs between the past and present.<sup>6</sup> Bonomo aimed to show how the existence of local Italian specificities coincided with those in other parts of Europe, while emphasizing that many of the sixteenth-century interpretations of witchcraft were later taken up again by scholars closer to us. Bonomo especially insisted on the fact that ideas (fears and beliefs) based on witchcraft “did not disperse like the smoke from the fires they had lit” (Bonomo 1959, p. 470); on the contrary, in his opinion, they lived on.<sup>7</sup>

It is important to remember that Bonomo's book came out before the appearance of a major watershed in studies of witchcraft, *The Night Battles (I Benandanti)*, by Carlo Ginzburg. Published by Einaudi in 1966, the book was translated into English in 1983 and would go on to influence and, to a great extent, shape scholarship on witchcraft (Ginzburg [1966] 2011; See Nardon 1999). Thanks to the discovery of archival records in Friuli, Ginzburg brought to light the existence of a fertility cult among a group of peasants born with a caul on their head, and who, under certain conditions, fought against demons in nocturnal battles to protect the harvest.

“In this book I have studied the religious attitudes and, in a broad sense, the mentality of a peasant society—the Friulian—between the end of the sixteenth century and the first half of the seventeenth, but from an extremely limited point of view: the history of a nucleus of popular beliefs, which little by little, as a result of specific forces, became assimilated by witchcraft. It is an episode in history that has been unknown until now, but one which casts a great deal of light on

the general problem of witchcraft and its persecution.” (Ginzburg [1966] 2011, vol. XVII)

A pupil of Delio Cantimori’s, Ginzburg published *Night Battles* at a particular time in history, in which the world was undergoing various political, societal and cultural transformations. From many quarters, demands were being voiced for a history “from below”, for a history that was not only concerned with illustrious and elite people, but one that looked for and to the regular, common folk. Following the methodological revolution of the *Annales* school, there was a thirst for a new kind of history, a history free from categories considered outdated and that stimulated scholars: many initiatives were undertaken that were aimed at renewal, studies drew on the hazy concept of interdisciplinarity, and discussions were about methodology that in part failed to effectively meet these demands. The academic response, at least in Italy, was not satisfactory because it lost itself in many small streams and was unable to effectively exploit circumstances which, from today’s standpoint, were extraordinary and unrepeatable, such as the availability of immense resources for recruitment and research.

Meanwhile, the tide of the feminist movement began rising, producing seismic tremors even in Italy. In 1975, the book *Witches midwives and nurses* by Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English was published (Ehrenreich and English 1975; Sarti 2008), which was echoed by Luisa Muraro (1976) with *La Signora del gioco. Episodi di caccia alle streghe*, published by Feltrinelli. Both books drew attention to the question of women’s history, without specifically dealing with Italy, and adopted a refreshing, though largely anachronistic perspective by applying categories that did not exist in the historical periods they were looking at.

In the academic world, the upheaval occasioned by Carlo Ginzburg’s *Night Battles* was followed by further initiatives, such as the studies by Franco Cardini, Sergio Abbiati and Attilio Agnoletto (Cardini 1979; Agnoletto 1984). It was Agnoletto himself who gave the book he edited the same chronological framework as Cardini’s, thus opening it to a wider public of non-specialists and dialoguing with several scholars, such as Gabriele De Rosa, who had studied popular religion in Italy’s south. Shedding light on the path undertaken, Agnoletto summarized the main features of the contemporary debate and underscored the intention to give a voice to the persecuted. The views of Jean Delumeau were directly invoked as an indication of the need to know history without fear or shame.<sup>8</sup>

Cardini’s initiatives for the Middle Ages and Agnoletto’s for the early modern period are important because they attest to historiographical ferment and a return to the documents in order to make them accessible (through editions and translations) to those who could not find them or read them easily. Yet, what was still lacking was the daringness of a strong interpretation. Interest in the topic among both scholars and educated laymen was further fueled by Marina Romanello’s anthology, which ventured beyond academia and showed how the history of witchcraft is largely a history of its persecution (Romanello 1975). The topic even piqued curiosity outside the domain of academia, and in 1980, Marcello Craveri published with Feltrinelli *Sante e streghe*, a successful pamphlet that also went into subsequent editions. In his introduction, Craveri considers saints and witches on an equal footing and puts forward the interpretation that misogyny was the cause of their persecution.<sup>9</sup> Influenced by certain feminist views, his reading is anachronistic, for example, when he writes about “psychological rebellion against female slavery” (Craveri 1981, p. 27) or “contesting male brutality” (Craveri 1981, p. 30). Not very interested in providing a general interpretation, Craveri published eleven portraits of women, including one of the witch Bellezza Orsini (See recent work by Di Sivo 2016).

### 3. Recent Work and New Directions

In the meantime, while various university courses were devoted to witches, progress was being made by archival research, which was oriented by the availability and accessibility of trial sources. The impregnable archive of the Holy Office remained closed to most scholars, which was thought to preserve many illuminating documents, in spite of the

well-known damage to the collection's integrity. Yet, there were many archives scattered around Italy where one could study witch trials. From one of these emerged the case of Gostanza, a Tuscan spinner who had the reputation of being a witch. Put on trial, she gave such a compliant confession under torture that the inquisitor intervened to reestablish the truth (Cardini 1989). The extraordinary abundance of local archival *fondi* (not only of the six inquisitorial series of Aquileia, Imola, Modena, Naples, Pisa and Venice) was tenaciously shown by Giovanni Romeo, one of Italy's most active and refined historians; in a 1990 essay, Romeo condensed decades of archival research conducted all over Italy and provided a very complex picture of witch hunts.<sup>10</sup> His aim was to verify the hypothesis of greater judicial leniency on the part of the Roman and Spanish inquisitions, and in doing so, he raised the problem of inaccessible archival sources. As an initial result, Romeo noted how lukewarm persecutory fervor was the fruit of "a tradition of entrenched skepticism", which had never disappeared, even among the most authoritative inquisitors (Romeo 1990, p. 271). Moderation, in his view, was thus a product of skepticism.

The earliest studies clearly showed a greater degree of moderation (fewer trials, fewer capital sentences) by the inquisitions compared to secular European courts. This fact was due to the control that the Holy Office exercised over peripheral tribunals as a result of a number of rules that were introduced to limit the mechanism for launching witch hunts: in 1588, the Holy Office ruled that its officials could not prosecute someone accused by another witch of attending sabbaths (Romeo 1998). Moreover, since 1587, following the papal bull *Coeli et terrae*, the authority of the tribunals of the Holy Office gained precedence over other courts in the prosecution of magic in the Italian peninsula. Nonetheless, civil magistrates continued to claim jurisdiction over cases involving *maleficia*. According to Brian Levack, the presence of the Inquisition, though in different forms, brought the Italian and Spanish experiences closer together:

"Witch hunting in Italy, where most historians contend that the development of the modern state began, had much in common with the prosecutions that took place in Spain. In Italy, as in Spain, most witchcraft prosecutions came under the control of the Inquisition, and as in Spain the judicial record is one of almost astonishing restraint. The main point to be made here is that it was in the courts of the Roman Inquisition that inquisitorial procedure was perfected, and where the interest of the state in prosecutions was most boldly asserted. Yet that highly developed procedure, as John Tedeschi has shown, worked constantly in favour of the accused witch (...)"<sup>11</sup>

The theory of inquisitorial restraint was particularly supported by the work of John Tedeschi, who carefully studied the now famous *Instructio pro formandis processibus in causis strigum sortilegiorum et maleficiorum* (*Instruction for Proceeding with Cases of Witchcraft, Sorcery, and Harmful Magic*), the handwritten guidelines, written about 1620, later published in 1655 by Cesare Carena, which advised judges to exercise extreme caution in witchcraft cases (Tedeschi 1991). The same line was pursued by Adriano Prospero in his most acclaimed and much debated work, *Tribunali della coscienza*, where he devoted much attention to the question of witch hunts in Italy. Prospero emphasized particularly the pervasiveness of inquisitorial activity, which was facilitated by a widespread network of confessors, thanks to which individuals were brought back to orthodoxy. In addition, he shed light on many jurisdictional conflicts between bishops and inquisitors (Prospero 1996).

The opening of the Holy Office archive, ordered by Pope John Paul II in 1998 to mark the occasion of the 2000 jubilee, was a turning point, even if few studies were devoted to witch hunts, the only exceptions being Di Simplicio's work on the Siennese *fondo*<sup>12</sup>, and German scholar Rainer Decker, who reconstructed the genesis of the *Instructio* and the relationship between the Church and the witch hunts, for which he drew on the Roman documentation and especially on the *Decreta* (Decker 2008). Of great interest was the case of the witches of Bitonto, which, according to Decker, led to the writing of the *Instructio*

because of the question of jurisdictional conflict and the credit given to certain accusations (Lavenia 2011; Tarantino 2022).

Di Simplicio's examination of the Siennese documents added a good deal of knowledge and ranged over a lengthy period of time, and this is an important aspect. He also succeeded in drawing a number of significant conclusions, such as the fact that participating in sabbaths was not included among the indictments of those accused of witchcraft, a very important piece of information that can also be found in many other trials in Italy.<sup>13</sup>

The abundance of non-Roman inquisitorial records also emerges in the accurate and painstaking work of Maria Sofia Messina, who took on the challenging task of providing an overview of the topic of necromancers and witches in Sicily over a long time span (1500–1782). Not confining herself to a study of persecutions, Messina succeeded in reconstructing a picture of the practices of presumed witches and how these were rooted in a dense network of beliefs. Her work is not focused on repression, but on the "Sicilian people with their religious and magical convictions, with their attachment to the traditions from the most distant past which they felt to be irreplaceable roots..." (Messina 2007, p. 21).

Studies based on inquisitorial sources, with all the caution they require, are still the most numerous, and many still confine their research to the judicial aspects, as may be seen in Tamar Herzig's excellent contribution to *The Oxford Handbook of Witchcraft*, the ambitious work Edited by Brian Levack in 2013. In her paper "Witchcraft prosecutions in Italy", Herzig, who has done outstanding work on witch hunts and sanctity, as well as on other topics, focused her attention on persecutions over a short period of time and urged:

"it is high time for broad syntheses that explore common themes and variations in Italian witchcraft trials from the late fourteenth through the eighteenth centuries". (Herzig 2013, p. 266)

After Herzig's essay, Matteo Duni, a refined scholar of magic and witchcraft in Italy, offered his interpretation of the situation in Italy. Duni was also convinced of the influence of political fragmentation on the history of Italian witch hunts as a reflection of cultural, and especially institutional, diversity.

"Studying the history of witchcraft and witch hunts in Italy therefore requires the adoption of multiple analytical models, capable of taking into account the extreme diversity of the political and legal backgrounds, as well as of describing and interpreting the folkloric varieties of the witchcraft paradigm". (Duni 2020, p. 81)

According to Duni, witch hunts in Italy had four characteristics:

"it began early, took place almost exclusively north of the present-day region of Tuscany, only rarely reached the mass dimensions it had in northern Europe, and was mostly the work of church courts. This last point requires some explanation. The Inquisition shared with secular justice the responsibility of trying heretics, as magicians and witches were considered to be, because heresy was a crime which both church and state courts could prosecute (a crime of "mixed jurisdiction", as jurists called it), and also because criminal law mandated that harm provoked by witchcraft be punished by the civil magistrate". (Duni 2020, p. 82)

Duni examined the findings of many studies ("it is problematic to single out some traits as being "typical" of Italian witches") and offered an appraisal, according to which there was a significant difference between urban and rural areas. In towns and cities, he observed a clear male prevalence, which he attributed to necromantic practices learned by men from writings and books, while in rural areas, operative, therapeutic or love magic performed by women was more common. Duni's theories will orient future research and will be a useful point of departure.

Based on the studies he examined, Duni proposed a numerical estimate: in Italy, between 22,000 and 33,000 trials were held for magic and witchcraft, with a very low rate

of capital sentences (Duni 2020, p. 85). As regards the chronology in Italy, the first wave of trials that turned into veritable witch hunts date back to the end of the fifteenth and beginning of the sixteenth centuries, and they were concentrated in northern Italy. During the wars of Italy between 1494 and 1530, the number of trials peaked, with many cases distributed all over northern Italy (from Bologna to Valcamonica) and several in Mirandola, Perugia, Siena and Rome (Herzig 2011; 2013, pp. 250–51). This was followed by a period of stagnation corresponding to the eruption of the Reformation and to the creation of the Holy Office, whose primary objective was to stem the spread of heresy. Only in the second half of the sixteenth century, around the 1560s, did the tribunal begin dealing with magic and witchcraft, as John Tedeschi has pointed out (Tedeschi 1991).

Later in the seventeenth century, the *Instructio* circulated, in part contradicted by Gregory XV's bull *Omnipotentis Dei* (1623), which punished with death those convicted of witchcraft. According to Romeo, Gregory XV's intransigent pivot may have been a countermove aimed at regaining control over persecutions of witches, in which the secular authorities had shown themselves to be much more severe (Romeo 2008b, p. 62). As Herzig pointed out, these two positions reveal the Church of Rome's ambiguity between procedural moderation and repressive intransigence. In terms of chronology, Duni observed a lack of inquisitorial interest in the eighteenth century, in spite of there being trials in secular courts (Duni 2020, p. 85; Monter and Tedeschi 1986).

This is the general picture, which still presents many grey areas. Thus, Louise Nyholm Kallestrup's interesting study is an attempt to go beyond a reconstruction of institutions and trials, and she sheds light on several problems in her comparative study of the situations in Denmark (Viborg in northern Jutland) and in Tuscany around the mid-seventeenth century in order to evaluate analogies and differences in their premises, developments and outcomes, despite their religious, political and judicial differences. In the cases she studied in Orbetello, love magic prevails in its practical aims to transform the seducer's promises into reality (Kallestrup 2015, p. 88):

“It was distinctive of the Orbetello cases that the majority of those practising love magic or consulting love magicians did so with marriage in mind. These marriage seekers were often already involved in a sexual relationship with the chosen person. All of them were women, and they were typically motivated by the lover having given a promise of marriage that he had yet to fulfil or, even worse, by the lover having simply withdrawn his promise”.

Kallestrup also draws attention to the attitude of the inquisitor towards those who practiced love magic, which was considered a religious offense, and for that reason, was punished.<sup>14</sup> In this original study, an attempt is made to establish a dialogue between institutional and social history and to propose a useful model.

Another historiographical turning point concerns the question of the inquisition's moderation. Twenty years later and in the light of new documentation including Roman sources, Romeo reexamined the “turn to moderation” in order to clarify several obvious contradictions and determine to what extent Dominican inquisitors shared the moderate line and how far the cardinal inquisitors were ready to “cover” the responsibilities of their confreres (Romeo 2008a, p. 332). Over the years, Rome asked the inquisitors to be very scrupulous in gathering evidence and to transcribe depositions in the vernacular, just as they had been pronounced, in order to avoid the translation betraying their meaning<sup>15</sup>; these are instructions aimed at exercising better control and avoiding excesses and abuse. It turns out that when abuses were committed, Rome intervened mildly only, with formal warnings and without inflicting any penalties. The documentation also proves how little interest there was in protecting the rights of the defendants and how little capacity there was to control procedures, as many inquisitors complained that they were being kept away and not listened to for cases of witchcraft that ended with the death penalty. On the other hand, others boasted of the exceptional results they had obtained, as in the case of Giovanni Pietro Stoppani in the trial in Valtellina of 1597 (Romeo 2008a, pp. 324–25) or the inquisitor

of Novara from 1570 to 1603, Domenico Buelli, whose activities the Holy Office intervened in (Romeo 2008a, p. 335).

In the same vein as Romeo are the conclusions of Vincenzo Lavenia, who, after tallying the number of Italian trials after 1542, stated the Holy Office was less keen on demanding persecutory intransigence, which did not mean it was moderate or skeptical.<sup>16</sup> Now, that doubt has been cast over the theory of greater Roman restraint; the quantitative volume of the different cases still lying unexplored in peripheral archives still needs to be determined, and it may be that some indication of this will be found in their correspondence with Rome through the nunciatures and various diocesan archives.

#### 4. Conclusions

Based on the studies I have discussed, we can draw a number of tentative conclusions. In terms of the accused, the overwhelming majority were women (many of them prostitutes). The defendants were accused of love spells, of magical healing or of casting curses, but only rarely did these involve diabolic magic; similarly, the references to the Sabbath are very few. In cases where men were involved, often following spontaneous appearances (*sponte comparentes*), necromancy was the main allegation (Prosperi 1994; Valente 2021). In terms of social status, women who were charged with being witches came mostly from the lower classes, while the men enjoyed a higher social and economic status (Valente 2012).

It would be very interesting to study the fates of those who were charged and tried, but who did not receive the death penalty. We have information about a number of these people because, after being exiled from the area in which they lived and were tried, they sometimes returned and tried to reintegrate into their communities; however, their reappearance often occasioned immediate denunciations to the authorities. Thus, more attention could be devoted to the relational and social dynamics that exposed people to the accusation of witchcraft, which has hitherto been relatively neglected; Lavenia, among others, has lamented this absence (Lavenia 2018, p. 164). Equally promising would be to study those clerics who were experts in magic and who sold their services: there are a great many of such cases throughout the peninsula. It would be interesting to follow their stories after the trial and their sentence to determine whether they managed to reconfigure their reputation within the boundaries of orthodox practices, and which were, therefore, permitted by the Church; in Venice, 45% of the men tried were from the clergy, a proportion that is similar in other places. Duni explains “due to their mostly rudimentary training and education, clergy often failed to distinguish between the licit and the illicit in their manipulation of the sacred, and routinely took part in magico-religious operations” (Duni 2020, p. 8; See O’Neil 1984). This is a fact that warrants reflection, given the monastic rivalries, especially between Franciscans and Dominicans, that also impacted the persecution of witches, as Fabrizio Conti and Tamar Herzog have shown (Conti 2015; Herzog 2013, p. 250).

What is also needed is an in-depth study on the relationship between political authority and trials for witchcraft where the accusation of witchcraft was used to demonize and delegitimize a political opponent, a topic whose importance has become clear from the first studies undertaken in that direction.<sup>17</sup> Examining a small but lively center like Mantua, which lost territory and power over the course of the sixteenth century, as Tamar Herzog noted, where convicted witches were sentenced to death in 1493, 1494, 1505 and 1507, and after 1587, under Vincenzo Gonzaga, from 1595 to 1603, there was “one of the most vigorous episodes of witch hunting in the Italian peninsula in those years, and in 1601 induced the Congregation of the Holy Office to warn Mantua’s inquisitor to exercise caution when prosecuting presumed witches, and to refrain from proceeding against more than one witch at a time.” (Herzog 2016). Several proceedings reveal an uninhibited use of politics in accusations of witchcraft on the Piedmont of the Savoias (Lavenia 2008b). An intriguing episode is the reaction of the Council of Ten to a case of collective possession in the Dolomites in the eighteenth century, where jurisdictional motivations and religious issues overlapped (Barbierato 2019).

To describe the world of beliefs and go beyond treating witch hunts exclusively from the perspective of persecution, further digging needs to be conducted into Italian treatises on exorcism and demonology (Lavenia 2013, pp. 174–75; Valente 2022). Another field of enquiry currently lacking in the Italian context concerns how witches were perceived in literature and art, pioneered in other European contexts by Charles Zika and others (Zika 2017; Montesano 2018; Valente 2020).

The trials discussed and examined thus far mostly focus on confessions, sometimes revealing that the accused understood the nature of traditional witchcraft, *maleficium*, and sabbath and the dangers of admitting to practices associated with demonological ideas, while often showing the inquisitors' culture and prejudices. Some scholars, as Moretti outlines, think "some trial documents and inquisitorial documents can truly provide a glimpse—albeit minimalistic—on the perceptions and concepts of witchcraft beliefs from both the accused and the inquisitor and the more general cultural background within which these witchcraft beliefs and traditions were developed" (Moretti 2019). That has been the aim, without overlooking the institutional and political frameworks that fashioned them. The Catholic Church adopted a strategy that tried to fight against what it deemed superstition, and then it abandoned the eradication of superstitious rites and beliefs in order to control them. Italian States had to combine their power with the Church. That dynamic affected all and even reverberated in beliefs and practices. Sometimes this awareness seems to vanish. Thus, nowadays, scholars are more interested in reading the anthropological issues than in the institutional attempt to fight them. The insistence on those features and on manipulated sources risks losing sight of the nuance of those documents and the roles of those who wrote them. After Ginzburg's watershed, the history of witch hunting in Italy has been afflicted by dispersion, and the lack of comprehensive accounts still persists.

The scholarship on witch hunts in Italy is slowly abandoning the institutional perspective and responding to stimuli coming from the Anglophone historiography of gender studies, as well as from the history of emotions, and it is hoped that historians extend their scope to include the eighteenth century and areas that continue to be neglected. Here, research could benefit from digitalization and greater access to archival documents. Nonetheless, given the current state of affairs in Italian academia, this would seem more wishful thinking than a realistic hope (Suitner 2019).

Indeed, the gendered perspective is still lamentably lacking. While European and American historiography are fully engaged in this approach, as Lyndal Roper and Liv Helen Willumsen's (to name just two scholars) work highlights, there are still only a few mentions of the discussion and reception of the demands of gender studies in Italian scholarship about witch hunting (Roper 1994; Roper 2004; Willumsen 2022). As Rowlands points out, some strong prejudices towards feminist interpretation are still present (Rowlands 2013; Toivo 2020). However, while approaching the subject from a gendered perspective is important and too often neglected by Italian scholarship, it comes with its own set of consequences. First, it runs the risk of reducing all arguments to the connection between women and witchcraft, without examining the demonological theory and broader cultural issues. Second, there is always the risk of failing to consider the involvement of men in the practice (although examining the masculine construction of witchcraft would be fascinating area research) or downplaying the political uses of witchcraft accusations and trials. The gender perspective should have raised some methodological concerns and questions in an area where some ideas are rooted deeply. Recently Matteo Duni, Matteo Al Kalak and Xenia von Tippelskirch focused on this problem in a thoughtful way (Al Kalak et al. 2020).

Research on early modern Italian witchcraft should further highlight the issue of gender in political culture more broadly. It should also illuminate how the Catholic Church dealt with superstitious practices more generally, in both theory and practice. With this overview, I have tried to shed new light on some features of how Italian scholarship has been shaped, and I hope to stimulate further research on Italian witch hunting in a wider context. It is time to take up the gauntlet thrown down by Behringer several years ago: "our knowledge of Italy is no better than sketchy, not due to the lack of sources, but to a lack



of research.” (Behringer 2004, p. 155). Perhaps, it is also because of the uneasy dialogue between Italian and Anglo-American scholarship.

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## Notes

- 1 “Tale credenza si manifestò in forma scientifica e in forma volgare, e l’una diede mano all’altra per dedurre da principij falsi spaventosi effetti. Non tutti vogliono ricordare che, nel meriggio delle arti e delle lettere, fra i godimenti della civiltà in Italia come altrove presero incremento le scienze occulte, alcuno dirà perché le illusioni meglio vivaci avvengono sempre più spesso all’istante dello svegliarsi”, Cantù (1866), vol. II, p. 368.
- 2 The single exception is Duni’s *Under the Devil’s Spell*, which concentrates on the period of the Renaissance and contains a collection of sources mainly from Modena, Duni (2007).
- 3 Duni (1999). On Modena, see also Watt (2010).
- 4 See the new introduction written by Levi (2020).
- 5 Among the most recent books, I mention Romeo (2015); Pedrini and Dubbini (2018); Ferraiuolo (2019); Weber (2011); Montesano (2020).
- 6 “Delle credenze e delle superstizioni popolari quelle relative alla stregoneria non ci appaiono il relitto di un immenso naufragio, ma il documento più vero di un particolare modo di intendere la vita e il mondo. I demonologi e gli inquisitori operarono su una materia incandescente che avevano a portata di mano irrigidendola in schemi sociali o sociologici. Le ricerche degli studiosi si sono specialmente indirizzate agli aspetti storico-religiosi e psicologici della stregoneria moderna, e sono senza dubbio utili. Ma questo fenomeno, di grande importanza nella storia della civiltà europea, non può essere indagato soltanto sotto quei profili. La stregoneria è anche un fatto folklorico, come è dimostrato dai legami tra i motivi stregonici fondamentali e talune credenze e superstizioni, le quali non si sono tuttavia cancellate dalla tradizione popolare. Muovendo da queste premesse, lo studio su basi folcloriche della stregoneria serve a mostrare la continuità con cui il passato proietta la sua vita nel presente, come la religione e le superstizioni di antiche civiltà divennero in un erto periodo storico armi pericolose per la vita associata; e infine in che misura quelle armi, non più sotto i fulmini della legge, vivono o sopravvivono tra i volghi dei popoli civili e ne condizionano talune forme del pensiero e dell’attività”, Bonomo (1959), p. 11.
- 7 “Le rilevanti sopravvivenze della stregoneria cinquecentesca o moderna e quelle della più antica ‘società di Diana’, che si ritrovano nel folklore italiano, documentano il perdurare nella vita del nostro popolo di un mondo e di una mentalità per altri rispetti tramontati”, Bonomo (1959), p. 471.
- 8 “L’antologia così appassionatamente curata da Abbiati e Lazzati mette a disposizione del lettore la documentazione diretta (e talvolta inedita) di una vicenda complessa, tragica e conturbante per le nostre coscienze: si è particolarmente richiamato il volo notturno, perché in tante sciagurate credenze essa è apparsa forse una delle meno appariscenti ma certamente la più funesta per la sua logica perversa. La vicenda non è qui ricostruita, come tante altre, ma narrata dalle voci stesse dei protagonisti: impietosamente sottili quelle degli accusatori, fievoli, ma talvolta commoventi quelle degli inquisiti. Purtroppo la Kultur, la storia di ogni società, come la nostra occidentale cristiana, comprende anche il negativo: in questo caso brutale e ottuso; tuttavia, anch’io ritengo che ‘è tempo che i cristiani cessino di aver paura della storia’, Agnoletto (1984), pp. 14–15.
- 9 “Ma il filo rosse che lega strettamente le sante e le streghe è soprattutto ila ribellione al marchio d’infamia che l’antifemminismo del cristianesimo, ereditato dall’ebraismo attraverso la morbosa misoginia di san Paolo, imprime sulla donna, considerata causa di dannazione per l’uomo”, Craveri (1981), p. 10.
- 10 “nonostante l’ampia diffusione di questa credenza e la sua ricezione nella manualistica inquisitoriale e negli assetti normativi di tanti stati Europei, l’andamento della caccia alle streghe nell’Europa moderna lascia intravedere più dissonanze che omogeneità. La discontinuità e l’imprevedibilità delle epidemie persecutorie, la varietà delle istituzioni giudiziarie che le promossero, la molteplicità della cause scatenanti, sembrano difficilmente riconducibili a coordinate comuni”, Romeo (1990), vol. VII.
- 11 Levack (1996). On the Roman Inquisition, see Brambilla (2006); Romeo (2006); Del Col (2006); Black (2009); Mayer (2014); Del Col and Jacobson Schutte (2017). See also Levack (2001).
- 12 “Il reperimento dell’archivio dell’Inquisizione senese provava, al contrario, che accuse e processi per maleficio negli anni di maggiore intensità (1580–1600) assommavano a poco più del 25% dei crimini” (...), Di Simplicio (2005), p. 17.
- 13 For Venice, see Martin (1989), pp. 206–12; Milani (1989).
- 14 “These examples illustrate how the inquisitor in Orbetello regarded the practice of magical rituals as religious offences, rather than as a method for material gain, which had formed the basis of the original accusations. Equally, they demonstrate that these trials were held in a judicial system in which the judge acted as confessor with the obligation of giving absolution. The denunciations from fellow inhabitants of the town were always included in the trials, but the most crucial piece of evidence against a suspect continued to be the statements—the confession—given by the suspect herself”, Kallestrup (2015), p. 139.

- <sup>15</sup> In a letter (Rome, 7 April 1623), Cardinal Giovanni Garcia Millino wrote to Eliseo Masini, inquisitor in Genua: “Verifichi i corpi dei delitti, che hora ha confessari la medesima Catherina, con l’esame de medici e di chi assisteva ai pretesi maleficiati et s’alcuno di essi sia morto o solo ammalato et che effetto habbia operato il preteso maleficio (...) nelli sommarij che manderà qui per l’avvenire faccia mettere le parole precise con quali depongono i testimoni e confessano i rei, non in lingua latina, ma nel modo ch’essi dicono in processo (...), [Romeo \(2008a\)](#), p. 343.
- <sup>16</sup> “Una cosa è dire che la caccia alle streghe non venne incoraggiata da Roma, almeno dopo il segretariato di Santoro; altra cosa è dire che non ci sia stata *tout court*. Non si tratta di una sottolineatura inutile, se solo si tiene conto che dalla mitezza nei confronti delle streghe si è ribaltata l’immagine ‘nera’ che ha accompagnato la storia dei tribunali inquisitoriali sin dal Settecento”, [Lavenia \(2010\)](#), p. 1527.
- <sup>17</sup> In his entry on Italy, Di Simplicio pointed out: “What needs more investigation is the Italian dialectic between power and its subjects, between the Church and the faithful. Witchcraft trials cannot be separated from the intense religious climate of the post-Tridentine Church, and its political ideology accounts for their peculiar course. It was not coincidental that the peak phase of repression in the 1590s coincided with the most intense religious climate of the period. Labelling and punishment of deviants became a preoccupation of Church and regional states aiming at achieving conformity in behaviour and belief. In Scotland, Italy, and elsewhere, witches were pursued primarily as “enemies of God”. The attempt to equate healers with maleficent witches was a constant concern of the Church, and the mild, drawn-out trials against the *Benandanti* of Friuli seem exemplary of this process of indoctrination”, [Di Simplicio \(2006\)](#).

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