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Learned Credulity in Gianfrancesco Pico's Strix

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Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola (1469–1533): Faith, Antiquity, and the Witch Hunt

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Article abstract

In 1522–23, Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola was involved in trials that executed ten accused witches. Soon after the trials, he published *Strix*, sive de ludificatione daemonum, a meticulous defence of witch-hunting. A humanistic dialogue as heavily dependent on classical literature and philosophy as on Scholastic demonology, *Strix* is unusually candid about the logic of witch-hunting. A convicted witch among its four interlocutors makes *Strix* unique among witch-hunting defenses. Moreover, it devotes less attention to maleficia or magical harm than to seemingly peripheral questions about sacraments and the corporeality of demons. It attempts to demonstrate that witches' interactions with demons happen in reality, not in their imagination, thereby vindicating the truth of Christian demonology and explaining the current surfeit of evils. *Strix* explicitly reverses Gianfrancesco's earlier stance on witchcraft in *De imaginatione* (1501) and supplements the defence of biblical truth he undertook in *Examen vanitatis doctrinae gentium* (1520).

Learned Credulity in Gianfrancesco Pico's *Strix*

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In 1522–23, Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola was involved in trials that executed ten accused witches. Soon after the trials, he published Strix, sive de ludificatione daemonum, a meticulous defence of witch-hunting. A humanistic dialogue as heavily dependent on classical literature and philosophy as on Scholastic demonology, Strix is unusually candid about the logic of witch-hunting. A convicted witch among its four interlocutors makes Strix unique among witch-hunting defenses. Moreover, it devotes less attention to maleficia or magical harm than to seemingly peripheral questions about sacraments and the corporeality of demons. It attempts to demonstrate that witches' interactions with demons happen in reality, not in their imagination, thereby vindicating the truth of Christian demonology and explaining the current surfeit of evils. Strix explicitly reverses Gianfrancesco's earlier stance on witchcraft in De imaginatione (1501) and supplements the defence of biblical truth he undertook in Examen vanitatis doctrinae gentium (1520).

Entre 1522 et 1523, Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola prit part à des procès qui s'achèverent sur l'exécution de dix présumés sorciers et sorcières. Peu après ces événements, il fit paraître Strix, sive de ludificatione daemonum, une défense méticuleuse de la chasse aux sorcières. Ce dialogue humaniste, exceptionnellement candide et direct en ce qui a trait à la logique de la chasse aux sorcières, s'appuie aussi bien sur la littérature et la philosophie classiques que sur la démonologie scolastique. Il s'agit d'un texte unique au sein de la littérature démonologique, qui est d'autant plus singulier que l'on compte une sorcière parmi les quatre interlocuteurs de Strix. Qui plus est, il accorde moins d'attention aux maleficia ou aux torts maléfiques qu'à des questions en apparence périphériques portant sur les sacrements et la corporalité des démons. Il tente de démontrer que les rapports qu'entretiennent les sorcières avec les démons se produiraient en réalité, et non dans leur imagination, ce qui confirmerait la vérité de la démonologie chrétienne et expliquerait l'abondance actuelle des malheurs. Il prend ainsi le contre-pied de la position que Gianfrancesco avait précédemment adoptée dans son De imaginatione (1501) et complète la défense de la vérité biblique qu'il avait entreprise dans l'Examen vanitatis doctrinae gentium (1520).

Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola (1469–1533) is best known as a philosopher, a humanist, and a theorist of literature. It seems incongruous that he should have advocated anything as brutal as witch-hunting—yet that is the message of his dialogue *Strix*.¹ Although *Strix* is couched as a humanistic

1. The critical edition is *La sorcière: dialogue en trois livres sur la tromperie des démons*, ed. and trans. Alfredo Perifano (Turnhout: Brepols, 2007). See also the excellent edition, translation, and commentary by Lucia Pappalardo, *La Strega (Strix) di Gianfrancesco Pico* (Rome: Città Nuova, 2017). I also include

dialogue, it does not represent an open-ended or even open-minded discussion. Instead, it articulates all the most cogent objections raised against the reality of witches and witchcraft, and against the increasingly common practice of witch-hunting, and then refutes them exhaustively. This attitude situates Gianfrancesco Pico at the opposite end of the humanist spectrum from his uncle Giovanni Pico's *Oratio* ("On the Dignity of Man"). *Strix* opposes pessimism about human nature to the *Oratio*'s optimism, and a dark, demonic view of magic to Giovanni's natural magic and his search for a Neoplatonic or Kabbalistic gnosis that would sublimate humans into angels.²

Gianfrancesco Pico's motive for writing *Strix* was in part to defend his own problematic conduct. In 1522 and 1523, seven men and three women were burned at the stake in Mirandola. Gianfrancesco was legally responsible for these deaths, given the fiction that the Inquisition did not execute condemned witches but turned them over to the "secular arm" of the law (with a merely *pro forma* recommendation for mercy). In reality, remarked Albano Biondi, Gianfrancesco did a lot more than simply "lend the secular arm" to the inquisitors.³ Both he and his close Dominican collaborator, Leandro Alberti, OP (1479–1552), assert that he was personally involved in the trial process, reading the minutes of the interrogations and even questioning defendants privately.⁴

A strong motivation for Gianfrancesco's participation in the affair was his ongoing desire to defend Christian doctrine from those he saw as its enemies. Although witches were the ostensible enemy, the deeper adversary in Gianfrancesco's eyes was doubt about the validity of Christianity, which he decided was due to the pernicious effects of philosophy. In 1520, three years before writing *Strix*, he had published *Examen vanitatis doctrinae gentium*, a

signature references for the first edition, *Strix, sive de ludificatione daemonum* (Bologna: Girolamo de' Benedetti, 1523).

2. See *Giovanni e Gianfrancesco Pico: L'opera e la fortuna di due studenti ferraresi*, ed. Patrizia Castelli (Florence: Olschki, 1998); Lucia Pappalardo, *Gianfrancesco Pico: Fede, immaginazione, e scetticismo* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2015); and, in this issue, Ovanes Akopyan, "Praenotio, Prisca Haeresis, and Astrology: Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola between Savonarola and Giovanni Pico." To avoid ambiguity, I refer throughout to "Gianfrancesco," rather than to "Pico."

3. Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola, *Libro detto Strega, o delle illusioni del demonio [...] nel volgarizzamento di Leandro Alberti*, ed. Albano Biondi (Venice: Marsilio, 1989), 10: "fece ben più che prestare il «braccio secolare»."

4. See *Strix*, ed. Perifano, 51–56 (sig. A2r–A4v); *Libro detto Strega*, ed. Biondi, 52–53.

massive tome that sought to convince his readers they should abandon pagan philosophy and cultivate uncomplicated belief in the Bible as the word of God. As scholars have remarked, Gianfrancesco fought skepticism with skepticism: he enlisted the arguments of the ancient Pyrrhonian Sextus Empiricus (d. ca. 210 CE) as a weapon against Aristotle, whom he accused of retailing erroneous dogmas based on reason and fallible human senses. Gianfrancesco was a devoted disciple of Savonarola, who apparently recommended he investigate the Pyrrhonian skeptic's utility for opposing Aristotle.⁵ As one of Gianfrancesco's two mouthpiece figures explains in *Strix*, its goal is to convince skeptics that a firm belief in the reality of witchcraft is indispensable to Christian faith and practice:

If I can prove that this is intrinsic to Christianity, and if I can produce enough witnesses that you will no longer seek not to believe that there are many things that are done truly and as we are accustomed to say "really" [*realiter*] (let me be allowed to use this word), I think that you will no longer resist so obstinately.⁶

Gianfrancesco's attitude foreshadows that of John Wesley (1703–91), the founder of Methodism, two and a half centuries later. Lamenting that belief in witchcraft had lost intellectual respectability, Wesley declared aphoristically: "The giving up of witchcraft is, in effect, the giving up of the Bible."⁷

Demonology

From Gianfrancesco to Wesley, self-styled opponents of witchcraft explicated what fifteenth-century heresiophobes had asserted with varying degrees of

5. Charles B. Schmitt, *Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola (1469–1533) and His Critique of Aristotle* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1967); Gian Mario Cao, *Scepticism and Orthodoxy: Gianfrancesco Pico as a Reader of Sextus Empiricus* (Pisa: Fabrizio Serra, 2007).

6. "Si effecero ut constet hoc ad christianam pertinere religionem, et tot adduxero testes ut non credere fere non queas multa esse in ipso ludo quae vere, et uti nos dicere consuevimus (verbum hoc mihi, si placet, condonato) realiter, peraguntur, puto te obstinatius non reluctaturum," *Strix*, ed. Perifano, 94 (sig. F2v), my translation.

7. Quoted in Walter Stephens, *Demon Lovers: Witchcraft, Sex, and the Crisis of Belief* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 366.

detail: that witchcraft was a conspiracy of demons and renegade Christians to commit magical harm; that it was real, and was therefore the most conclusive argument for the reality of spirits, or, in the terminology of the time, “separate spirits”—angels, demons, the human soul, and, ultimately, God Himself. Since antiquity, Christian pneumatology had invoked biblical authority, faith, logic, or a combination of them to proclaim the existence of angels, demons, and an immortal human soul. But by the 1400s, belief in these entities by everyone was no longer blithely taken for granted, and old skeptical arguments seemed newly threatening. Materialism—the argument that the soul dies with the body—had been propounded by ancient Epicureans and Jewish Sadducees, and was known by reputation throughout much of the Middle Ages, as Dante showed in *Inferno* 10 and Boccaccio in a famous novella (*Decameron* 6.9). Already about 1225, Caesarius of Heisterbach (ca. 1180–ca. 1240) had composed a dialogue in which a novice monk demanded that his mentor provide eyewitness proof of demons rather than bookish definitions.⁸ Half a century later, Thomas Aquinas mentioned in several works that certain unnamed “Peripatetics” did not accept the existence of demons. In one of his works, *De substantiis separatis*, the Angelic Doctor went further and admitted that “we find that neither Aristotle nor any of his followers has made mention of demons.”⁹ Elsewhere, he noted the opinion that neither *maleficia* nor the demons who caused them existed anywhere outside the imagination of ignorant common people. But he regularly disqualified such philosophical objections against the reality of demons.¹⁰

By the 1450s, Aquinas’s remarks were being nervously repeated in several pioneering treatises against demonic witchcraft, accompanied by condemnations of Sadducistic and Epicurean denials of spirits and immortality.¹¹ Averroes’s doctrine that all people share a single collective intellect, which scandalized the

8. This is the argument of Stephens, *Demon Lovers*. See also Stephens, “Strategies of Interspecies Communication, 1100–2000,” in *Conversations with Angels: Essays Towards A History of Spiritual Communication, 1100–1700*, ed. Joad Raymond (Houndmills, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 25–48, 28–32.

9. Thomas Aquinas, *Treatise on Separate Substances*, trans. Francis J. Lescoe (West Hartford, CT: Saint Joseph College, 1963), 54–55: “unde de daemonibus nullam invenitur nec ipse [Aristoteles] nec eius sequaces fecisse mentionem.”

10. Stephens, *Demon Lovers*, 318–20.

11. Stephens, *Demon Lovers*, 20–26, 325–31; Stephens, “Corporeality, Angelic and Demonic,” and “Imagination,” in *The Encyclopedia of Witchcraft: The Western Tradition*, ed. Richard Golden (Santa

thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, remained so troubling that in 1513 the Fifth Lateran Council felt it necessary to reiterate explicitly that the individual human soul is immortal. In 1516, Pietro Pomponazzi (1462–1525) crossed the line and argued in *De immortalitate animae* that Aristotelian philosophy provided no support for an immortal human soul, whether individual or collective.¹² Although it would not be printed for nearly four decades, Pomponazzi's *De naturalium effectuum causis*, completed in 1520, argued that supposedly magical and miraculous phenomena were due to natural causes, that Aristotle had dismissed witchcraft as old wives' tales (*figmenta muliercularum*), and that "if such things can be done *by* demons, they can also be done *without* demons."¹³ As if to corroborate the theological interconnectedness of witchcraft and human immortality, in 1523, shortly after publishing *Strix*, Gianfrancesco had the same printer publish his *De animae immortalitate digressio*.¹⁴

Witch-hunting

Early modern witch-hunting was not lynching. It was entrusted to officials who acted in the name of civic or ecclesiastical governments. In the words of Norman Cohn, early modern witch-hunts "can be taken as a supreme example of a massive killing of innocent people by a bureaucracy."¹⁵ Cohn was careful to avoid presupposing a single overarching bureaucracy, however. Official organizations, both secular and Christian, Catholic and Protestant, engaged variously in the pursuit of a phantom, an imaginary enemy.

The typical witch-hunter was not seeking merely to execute a single "witch," or even (to use an anachronistic term) a localized "coven" of witches, but rather the "*sect* of witches," an inverted doppelganger of Christian religion.

Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2006; henceforth abbreviated *EW*), 217–19, 538–40. *EW* has articles and concise bibliographies for most personalities and concepts mentioned here.

12. Eric A. Constant, "A Reinterpretation of the Fifth Lateran Council Decree *Apostolici regiminis* (1513)," *Sixteenth Century Journal* 33.2 (2002): 353–79, 376; Pietro Pomponazzi, *Trattato Sull'immortalità dell'anima*, ed. V. Perrone Compagni (Florence: Olschki, 1999).

13. Pietro Pomponazzi, *De incantationibus* (i.e., *De naturalium effectuum causis*), ed. V. Perrone Compagni (Florence: Olschki, 2011). Quotation from Stephens, *Demon Lovers*, 78, emphasis in original.

14. Schmitt, 206–07.

15. Norman Cohn, *Europe's Inner Demons: An Enquiry Inspired by the Great Witch-Hunt* (New York: Basic Books, 1975), 255.

Witchcraft was imagined as a vast international conspiracy directed by the Devil himself, nothing less than Satan's anti-church. Witches supposedly worshipped the Devil as their god after renouncing their baptism, and were ritually inducted into Satan's "sect." There were various names for witches' gatherings: *synagoga*, *sabbatum*, *cursus*, or *ludus* in Latin, *tregenda* (from *transienda*), *corso* or *gioco* in Italian, but these designated the activity and attitude of heretical opposition to Christianity rather than acts of harmful magic. Witches trampled crucifixes and desecrated eucharistic hosts, and invoked devils who obliged them by harming their enemies' health, children, crops, and livestock. Witches were said to break not only every law of Christianity but every convention of human society. They subverted God's command to "be fruitful and multiply" by causing miscarriages, female infertility, and male impotence. At their mass meetings, witches killed and ate babies, and they processed the little cadavers to produce unguents that allowed them to fly, potions that instilled instant knowledge of witchcraft, and powders that caused sterility or death to their victims. To round off their subversion of procreation, witches engaged in revolting, often terrifying sex acts with incarnate devils.¹⁶

During more than two and a half centuries, beginning around 1430, some thirty thousand to sixty thousand persons were put to death for crimes of witchcraft.¹⁷ Scholars have calculated that about 80 percent of all defendants were women, but the proportions varied by region and by era. In the case of the Mirandolese trials, we know of seven male and three female victims who were put to death; there may have been other executions, but the scant surviving records preclude certain knowledge.¹⁸

16. Comprehensive introductions are in Brian P. Levack, *The Witch-Hunt in Early Modern Europe*, 3rd ed. (Harlow, UK: Pearson Longman, 2006), and Julian Goodare, *The European Witch-Hunt* (London and New York: Routledge, 2016). Goodare, 39–48, is particularly good on the "sect of witchcraft." In-depth articles on aspects of witchcraft are in *The Oxford Handbook of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe and Colonial America*, ed. Brian P. Levack (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013). Editions of crucial early texts are in *L'imaginaire du sabbat: Edition critique des textes les plus anciens (1430 c.–1440 c.)*, ed. Martine Ostorero, Agostino Paravicini Bagliani, Kathrin Utz Tremp, and Catherine Chène (Lausanne: Cahiers Lausannois d'Histoire Médiévale, 1999); for further analyses, see Martine Ostorero, *Le diable au sabbat: Littérature démonologique et sorcellerie (1440–1460)* (Florence: SISMEL–Edizioni del Galluzzo, 2011).

17. Goodare refers to "the current consensus of about 50,000 executions" (16).

18. See note 42 below.

Crusades against witchcraft were the violent expression of a process of learned credulity. As Brian Levack observes, the “concept” of witchcraft was “cumulative.”¹⁹ The mythemes of witchcraft expanded in number and complexity as they journeyed from decade to decade and place to place. Cohn described the resulting transformation: witchcraft theories incorporated “beliefs which, unknown or rejected in earlier centuries, had come to be taken for granted, as self-evident truths” by the early fifteenth century.²⁰ *Maleficium*—literally “evil-doing”—was the generic Latin term for the magical crimes that European vernaculars called witchcraft, *stregoneria*, *sorcellerie*, *Hexerei*, and so on. Malevolent sorcery has been the common denominator in witchcraft accusations throughout history, the world over. The term *maleficium* had been current in antiquity and the medieval period—but with one great difference from its early modern meaning. During much of the Middle Ages, churchmen had dismissed the most dramatic accusations made by illiterate common people against their neighbours. Such crimes were considered impossible, on the grounds either that the magic itself was indemonstrable, or that God would not permit it to happen.²¹

Maleficium was not a technical *ars* or “art” transmitted by learned magicians; there was no *ars maleficiendi* but only orally-transmitted lore that could be practised even by illiterate folk.²² Necromancy, by contrast, was a magical *ars* performed with books according to precise rituals, practised and discussed by literate men, mainly clerics.²³ After about 1200, rulers and churchmen defined necromancy or “nigromancy” with increasing seriousness as a crime. As codified “ritual magic,” necromancy required a familiarity with

19. Levack, *The Witch-Hunt*, 32–37; but see also Goodare, 65–71.

20. Cohn, 255.

21. Cohn, 159–63, 207–10.

22. Edward Bever, “Maleficium,” *EW* 713–16, 714.

23. For a brief history, see Marguerite Johnson, “Necromancy,” *EW*, 808–09. In-depth studies by Richard Kieckhefer include *Magic in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989) and *Forbidden Rites: A Necromancer's Manual of the Fifteenth Century* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997). See also Johannes Hartlieb, *The Book of All Forbidden Arts*, in *Hazards of the Dark Arts: Advice for Medieval Princes on Witchcraft and Magic*, ed. Richard Kieckhefer (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2017), 21–92, and Owen Davies, *Grimoires: A History of Magic Books* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

demonology, a sophisticated branch of Christian theology.²⁴ But beginning about 1350, increasing numbers of worried churchmen and secular magistrates, reassessing illiterate “superstitions,” likened peasant magic (sorcery) to necromancy. By 1450, many intellectuals convinced themselves that illiterate sorcery did have real effects, and that common folk erred only by imagining that witches’ own personal power caused magical harm; in reality, the only possible source was the almost unlimited power of demons.²⁵ The standard formulation posited three necessary components for witchcraft: the malevolent human, the devil who performed the harm, and God’s permission for both of them to act.²⁶ The witches themselves had no magical power, but commissioned a devil to perform the harm through a “pact” or agreement. Pacts were either “express” or “implicit”—either articulated in detail or simply “telegraphed” as an unspoken malevolent intention. While express pacts between devils and necromancers were typically written documents, witches, being illiterate, were supposed to seal demonic pacts through action, by either desecrating a holy object, surrendering a limb (e.g., a finger-joint) or item of clothing to the demon, or copulating with an incubus or succubus.²⁷

Early modern witchcraft theory created a powerful, durable stereotype by synthesizing erudite necromancy and peasant accusations about *maleficium* with longstanding ecclesiastical dread of heretical subversion. Several early theorists of witchcraft were clerics who attended the Council of Basel (1431–49), called in part to address Hussite resistance to Rome.²⁸ Writings of these suspicious churchmen added opposition to the church’s doctrines to the accumulating concept of demonically-inspired *maleficium*. Accusations against the Hussites reinvigorated heresiophobic stereotypes dating from the eleventh and twelfth centuries, when Waldensians’ and Cathars’ opposition to the Roman church had inspired mainstream clerics to accuse them of crimes against the sacraments,

24. Cohn, 164–79; Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages and Forbidden Rites*; Davies, *Grimoires*.

25. Levack, *The Witch-Hunt*, 32–51; Goodare, 32–42; Michael D. Bailey, *Fearful Spirits, Reasoned Follies: The Boundaries of Superstition in Late Medieval Europe* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013).

26. Henricus Institoris, *Malleus Maleficarum*, ed. Christopher S. Mackay, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 2:202–10.

27. David Lederer, “Pact with the Devil,” *EW*, 867–69.

28. Michael D. Bailey and Edward Peters, “A Sabbat of Demonologists, Basel, 1431–1440,” *Historian* 65.6 (2003): 1375–95; Michael D. Bailey, *Battling Demons: Witchcraft, Heresy, and Reform in the Late Middle Ages* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003).

especially the Eucharist. *Vaudois* and *Gazarii* are early fifteenth-century names reflecting ongoing hostility to Waldensians and Cathars, but used against heretics whose alleged crimes against sacraments and people evolved into the concept of witchcraft. Nocturnal meetings of heretics in secret venues—one of the few accusations that had some basis in fact—nurtured the fear that the subversive “antichurch” practised sexual deviance, including copulation with demons. The cumulative profile of the demonolatrous heretic also included crimes formerly attributed to Jews, especially sacramental profanation and ritual infanticide. Hence, names for the heretics’ conventicle also reflected stereotypical antisemitism: before it became the witches’ “sabbath” or “sabbat,” it was commonly called the “synagogue,” reflecting the medieval commonplace of church vs. synagogue.²⁹

Witchcraft in *Strix*

By 1523, the amalgamation of these stereotypical accusations was complete, and *Strix* epitomizes early modern witch-hating literature as a whole.³⁰ Along with his erudite contemporaries, Gianfrancesco lacked a non-demonic concept of common people’s sorcery as mere magic, a Latin equivalent of the folk’s *stregoneria* or *sorcellerie*. The stereotype of the village witch as either a beneficent healer or a solitary outcast is equally absent from Gianfrancesco’s thinking.³¹ Instead, *Strix* describes a populous, demonolatrous sect performing *maleficia* and inverting the norms of Christian religion and society.

Most defenses of witch-hunting were formatted as either analytical treatises or sets of Scholastic *quaestiones disputatae*. Gianfrancesco’s choice of the erudite humanist dialogue was not completely anomalous, however, nor was *Strix* the first such composition to defend witch-hunting.³² But the

29. Cohn, 32–42; Goodare, 39–48. Key texts are in *Errores gazariorum*, ed. Kathrin Utz Tremp and Martine Ostorero, in Ostorero et al., eds., *L’imaginaire du sabbat*, 270–353; *The Arras Witch Treatises: Johannes Tinctore’s Invectives contre la secte de vauderie and the Recollectio casus, status et condicionis Valdensium ydolatrarum*, ed. and trans. Andrew Colin Gow, Robert B. Desjardins, and François V. Pageau (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2016).

30. This useful term is Stuart Clark’s: *Thinking with Demons: The Idea of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), ix. See also Stephens, *Demon Lovers*, 99–102.

31. On “village” versus “demonic” witch stereotypes, see Goodare, 9–13.

32. The paramount example is Ulrich Molitor or Molitoris, *De lamiis et phitonicis [sic] mulieribus*. See *On Witches and Pythonesses* (1489), trans. Richard Kieckhefer, in *Hazards of the Dark Arts*, 91–153.

sheer quantity of references to classical learning that Gianfrancesco deploys to defend the reality of witchcraft is unique. Two other features distinguished *Strix*: the degree of reader skepticism about witchcraft that it anticipates, and the doggedness of its arguments. *Strix* presumes that most readers will be hostile to the idea that witches exist. It differs from better-known defenses by its unusual emphasis on crimes other than *maleficium*, and by exhaustively enlisting classical literature as evidence that widespread personal interaction with demons is an eternal threat, not a new one. Using Scholastic categories, Gianfrancesco Pico argues that crimes of the “sect of witches” are merely the sensational “accidents” masking the perpetual “substance” of Satan’s war on humanity and God.³³

The “story” of *Strix*

In the first of *Strix*’s three books, two humanists, Apistius and Phronimus, are out for a walk in Mirandola. In the distance, they see a crowd gathering at the Dominican monastery and its attached church, still under construction but already known, says Apistius, as the “Church of the Miracles.” They decide to investigate. Although they are over a mile (*sic*) away from the commotion, Phronimus thinks he sees the retinue of the Inquisitor, and surmises that a witch has been captured. Apistius, fixating on the ancient meaning of the word *strix*, declares that he’s never seen this *rara avis*, and that the ancients must not have either, since Pliny the Elder declared these infanticidal night birds a fable. Phronimus objects that many ancient writers described *striges* as real, but concedes that the term was a metaphor for infanticidal old women. Nonetheless, he thinks the old women known as *striges* were and are consorting with demons, and affirms that witches are transported to the “Game of Diana,” a secret gathering where they harm newborn children. Apistius dismisses this Game (*ludus*) as a delusion: ignorant common people accuse witches of flying to it, where they banquet and fornicate with “evil specters.” Phronimus rebuts that many educated men of wide experience and good morals openly defend the reality of the *ludus*. As their names indicate, Phronimus and Apistius personify attitudes of “the prudent man” and “the unbeliever,” respectively, toward the crimes of witchcraft. Marshalling ancient authorities about *striges* and medieval

33. *Strix*, ed. Perifano, 76 (sig. D2v).

folklore about magic, Phronimus argues that the “sect of witches” is a real and present danger, while Apistius remains resolutely skeptical.³⁴

Notice that the two humanists are not yet debating *maleficium*, the magical harm witches supposedly inflict on others. In early modern prosecutions and treatises, confessions to harming other people with magic were not always de rigueur; making a pact with a devil or attending the “sabbath” were considered sufficient proof of apostasy and could be punished by death.³⁵ However, *Strix* dedicates even less attention to *maleficium* than we might expect. Instead, Phronimus concentrates on the two primary and most sensational early modern accusations against witches: that demons not only fly them to the *ludus*, but also copulate with them. Witches’ aerial transportation by demons was asserted in the 1440s, while deliberate copulation with a demon had been alleged over a century earlier, in 1324.³⁶ By 1450, Scholastically-trained theorists of witchcraft described flying and human-demon copulation meticulously.³⁷

Throughout *Strix*, Gianfrancesco defends these bizarre charges with great seriousness. Phronimus adheres to the biblical idea that all gentile gods were demons in disguise, so he interprets Greek and Roman mythology as evidence that throughout antiquity demons and humans had regular corporeal interactions, including sex.³⁸ But Apistius’s erudition is a match for his opponent’s, and he will believe none of this. The idea that witches have sex with demons is particularly absurd, he tells Phronimus: demons have no bodies, so they cannot even be touched.³⁹ Phronimus will rebut that, despite lacking intrinsic corporeality, demons fabricate marvellously lifelike artificial bodies

34. *Strix*, ed. Perifano, 57–60 (sig. B1r–B2v); the rest of book 1 until the men meet the Witch and Inquisitor (61–73 [sig. B2v–C4v]) is consumed by parallels from the classics.

35. Levack, *The Witch-Hunt*, 37–45.

36. *The Sorcery Trial of Alice Kyteler*, ed. L. S. Davidson and J. O. Ward (Binghamton, NY: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1993); Cohn, 203; Stephens, *Demon Lovers*, 264–67. Accusations of demonic concubinage were rare in England except during the Civil War, as English law forbade the torture necessary for extracting such confessions (Stephens, *Demon Lovers*, 102–06; Levack, *The Witch-Hunt*, 9–10, 14–17).

37. Vital texts are in Ostorero et al., eds., *L'imaginaire du sabbat*, and Gow, et al., eds., *The Arras Witch Treatises*; see also Stephens, *Demon Lovers*, 13–31.

38. *Strix*, ed. Perifano, 103 (sig. G2r). Descriptions of pagan gods in *Strix* represent them explicitly or implicitly as disguised demons.

39. *Strix*, ed. Perifano, 60 (sig. B2v).

that surpass the physical strength and sexual potency of men.⁴⁰ However, Apistius stubbornly resists the variety of arguments marshalled against his skepticism until a few paragraphs before the dialogue's end, when he suddenly surrenders and proclaims himself "converted."

The third major topic of *Strix* is the accusation that witches mock, desecrate, and sabotage the sacraments. Before the dialogue begins, Gianfrancesco's collaborator Alberti prefaces it by alleging that widespread reports of sacramental profanation, rather than accusations of *maleficium*, first attracted the attention of Girolamo Armellini, OP (1470–ca. 1550), the inquisitor who oversaw the Mirandolese trials.⁴¹ Among the seventy-three known defendants in the Mirandolese trials were eight ecclesiastics, including three friars and five others who were chaplains or parish priests.⁴² These historical data relate to the emphasis on desecration in *Strix* and its paratexts. *Strix* names one of the real-life defendants, Don Benedetto Berni, as ringleader of the sect, and accuses him of subverting the sacraments, particularly the Eucharist and infant baptism, and of facilitating numerous desecrations.

In other words, anyone who reads *Strix* expecting to find descriptions about the mechanics of "spells" and "bewitchings" is in for a surprise. Gianfrancesco's hierarchy of witchcraft crime is practically the inverse of modern ideas, in both the popular imagination and much scholarship. Moderns consider accusations of *maleficium* to be the bedrock of witchcraft persecution, as they have been throughout history, and such allegations were the initial stimulus to many early modern European trials. But fifteenth-century theoretical texts about the activities of witches denounce their bodily interactions with demons and their

40. Stephens, *Demon Lovers*, 58–124; Stephens, "Sexual Activity, Diabolic," *EW*, 1024–27.

41. *Strix* begins with Alberti's statement that "Hieronymo Faventino nostro consecraneo Haereticorum Censore, [...] superioribus diebus Mirandulae, inquam, plurimos de Christi optimi maximi fide male sentientes, sacratissimumque eius corpus impudentissime diversis ludibriis afficientes, animadvertente, eosque igni adiudicante praetore" (Our brother Friar Girolamo of Faenza, the Inquisitor of Heretics, recently learned that at Mirandola many people were misinterpreting the faith of Christ the Lord of Lords and shamelessly performing various outrages against his most holy Body, and the secular magistrate condemn[ed] them to the pyre; my translation). Alberti continues that Gianfrancesco decided to write *Strix* to refute "mutterings" of the populace that the trials were cruel and unfair (*Strix*, ed. Perifano, 51 [sig. A2r]). Alberti repeats and elaborates the connection with eucharistic sacrilege the following year in his Italian translation of *Strix*, in a prefatory letter to Gianfrancesco's wife (*Libro detto Strega*, ed. Biondi, 51–53).

42. *Libro detto Strega*, ed. Biondi, 217–22.

profanation of sacraments with equal, and often greater, vehemence than their *maleficia*. As in *Strix*, bodily contact with demons and the relation between witchcraft and Catholic sacraments were to remain as worrisome as *maleficium*, among both Catholic and Protestant witchcraft theorists.⁴³

Ask the expert

But the significance of *Strix* does not end here. At the close of book 1, when Apistius and Phronimus arrive at the church, they learn that the inquisitor, Dicastes (“Judge”), has indeed captured a witch, “Strix,” and extracted detailed confessions from her through torture. Dicastes promises the two humanists that on the morrow he will allow them to interrogate the witch about the activities of her “sect.” Although she must testify under oath, she will answer “spontaneously,” and will incur no further torture unless she contradicts the notarized written record of her confession.⁴⁴ In books 2 and 3, *Strix* responds to the two laymen’s questions, repeating the earlier confessions she made to the inquisitor.

Apistius and Phronimus are laymen, not clerics or secular magistrates. But Gianfrancesco justifies the interview on the grounds that condemned witches were required to repeat their confessions before final sentencing.⁴⁵ These repetitions were supposed to be public, but the private interview in *Strix* is not unprecedented; indeed, it is based on interviews Gianfrancesco himself conducted, if we can believe him and Alberti.⁴⁶ Dicastes mentions that, pending his own recommendation, the secular magistrate has not yet decreed Strix’s punishment, so presumably, her public confession will come later. The inquisitor presents himself—suspiciously, to modern eyes—as guarantor against inconsistencies between Strix’s official confession and the upcoming interview. In books 2 and 3, he adds his theological and legal erudition to Phronimus’s classical quotations, effectively “double-teaming” the skeptical Apistius.

43. For general remarks, see Levack, *The Witch-Hunt*, 109–33; Goodare, 155–88.

44. *Strix*, ed. Perifano, 73–76 (sig. C4v–D2v).

45. For context, see Levack, *The Witch-Hunt*, 51–61; Jonathan Durrant and William Monter, “Confessions,” *EW*, 203–07.

46. For Alberti, see note 4 above; for Gianfrancesco, note 48 below.

The extraordinary novelty of books 2 and 3 in *Strix* cannot be sufficiently emphasized. Phronimus and Dicastes frame the witch's reiterated confession as the pièce de résistance to crush the doubts of Apistius. Defenders of witch-persecution regularly paraphrased witches' confessions or quoted them briefly to prove that *maleficium*, demonic interaction, and sacramental profanation were real, profoundly threatening crimes. But no defender of witch-hunting had yet dramatized a witch explaining her alleged crimes informally, almost conversationally, without the immediate stimulus of torture. *Strix* illustrates how, during actual trials, witches' "confessions" were based on a kind of "Stockholm syndrome," a confabulation between interrogator and defendant that bordered on but carefully avoided outright ventriloquism. In the treatise format, nothing prevented a witchcraft theorist from distorting or completely fabricating confessions to prove a point, but Gianfrancesco's dialogue is marginally more honest. In his introductory letter, he openly admits that *Strix* contains elements of fiction, and that actual stagecraft was not far from his thoughts while composing it. Alluding to Aristotle's *Poetics*, he says that dialogues, unlike histories, show what could have happened, not what did happen on a single occasion.⁴⁷ *Strix* does not purport to record individual "historical" confessions; however, despite his concession to the *Poetics*, Gianfrancesco forcefully asserts that the witch's confession is "pure history," synthesized from transcripts of the Mirandolese trials and his interviews with defendants.⁴⁸

Of course, witches had been represented as speakers before *Strix*. Classical literature represented infamous *maleficae*: the archaic Circe and Medea had

47. *Strix*, ed. Perifano, 55 [sig. A4r]: "Sed ut me non latet, si quid ficti dialogo misceatur id non esse mendacium, cum tacito quodam consensu lectori fiat cognitum indicari, non sic ut proditur rem ex integro gestam esse, sed sic geri facile potuisse" (But I am not unaware that if some fiction is mixed into a dialogue, this is not lying, as long as the reader is given to understand, by a kind of tacit agreement, that things did not happen exactly as they are presented, but that they might easily have happened that way; my translation). Cf. Aristotle, *Poetics, with the Tractatus Coislinianus*, ed. Richard Janko (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1987), 12 [i.e., 1451b1]. The emblematic names of *Strix*'s characters are another indication that the dialogue is "poetic" in an Aristotelian sense; they are stereotypes.

48. *Strix*, ed. Perifano, 56 [sig. A4v]: "In hoc sane opusculo putes te ubi Strigem audieris colloquentem, audire meram historiam, quam partim oculis hausi, partim auribus, dum mihi libelli quaestionum recitarentur" (In the present little work you must believe that when you hear the Witch speaking, you are hearing the absolute truth, which in part I saw with my own eyes, and in part listened to, when the minutes of the interrogations were read aloud to me; my translation).

descendants in the works of Horace, Apuleius, and other Roman authors,⁴⁹ and witchcraft theorists, including Gianfrancesco, treated them as historical figures. But no previous author had imagined that the stereotypical modern witch, an illiterate common woman, a pariah juridically convicted of heinous crimes, merited literary representation, much less the privilege of speaking on her own behalf. *Novelle* since Boccaccio, and early modern stage comedy in both Latin and vernacular, often featured “low” characters, but even prostitutes commanded a measure of respect and empathy that would be denied a *malefica* until much later.⁵⁰

Still, Gianfrancesco's decision to make the witch speak for herself was not his most radical departure; the novelty was instead to remove her altogether from the torture chamber and seat her at the seminar table, as it were. Ironically, this apparently humane innovation was inspired by an idea Gianfrancesco encountered in the *Malleus maleficarum* (1486). Superficially, the Scholastic format of that infamous treatise seems completely foreign to *Strix*, but Gianfrancesco understood that the *Malleus's quaestiones disputatae* represented dialogues among learned men. Thus, the structure of *Strix* merely presents the arguments more naturalistically. Moreover, the anomalous participation of *Strix* herself dramatizes the *Malleus's* contention that witches were not ordinary defendants. They were also expert witnesses whose “confessions” disclosed both their own guilt and, more crucially, the indisputable reality of witchcraft. When discussing demonic copulation, the *Malleus* declared that “the testimony of experience given by the [witches] themselves [*ipsarum maleficarum experta testimonia*]” has “rendered all these things believable.”⁵¹ Accordingly, Gianfrancesco presented the two laymen's interview with *Strix*, overseen by the theologian Dicastes, as the resolution of their *quaestio disputata* over witchcraft.

49. Daniel Ogden, *Magic, Witchcraft, and Ghosts in the Greek and Roman Worlds: A Sourcebook* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); Ogden, *Greek and Roman Necromancy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001).

50. Humanist comedies featuring prostitutes and procuresses include Aeneas Silvius Piccolomini's *Chrysis* (1444), Fernando de Rojas's *La Celestina* (1499), and Ariosto's *Lena* (1528).

51. *Malleus Maleficarum*, ed. Mackay, 2:259–60; Latin text 1:416. Mackay systematically translates early modern references to *maleficae* as “sorceresses,” a term without historical specificity, rather than “witches,” contrary to scholarly consensus (e.g., Levack, *The Witch-Hunt*, 6–7; Christa Tuczay, “Sorcery,” *EW*, 1061–64).

Gianfrancesco's dialogue between an illiterate village woman, her inquisitor, and two erudite humanist scholars dramatizes with striking originality the genesis of witchcraft theory from its disparate sources: common people's apprehensions about malefic sorcery and learned men's preoccupation with theological conundrums and the spread of heresy. When Strix confesses to causing storms that destroy crops, sneaking into her neighbours' homes at night to suck their infants' blood, killing and feasting on their cattle, then magically resuscitating them, she voices the familiar, age-old fears of illiterate villagers, frightened by the scourges of hailstorms, livestock mortality, and little children's fragile health, resentfully envious of more affluent neighbours, and dreading the envy of the least fortunate, which, they feared, might find expression in harmful magic.⁵²

But when Strix describes trampling the cross, secretly making obscene gestures to the priest, and whispering "you lie" during his celebration of Mass, surreptitiously removing the consecrated host from her mouth, urinating on it at the *ludus*, or pounding it with a stick in her filthy chamber-pot, she confirms the clerical suspicion that laypeople not only mocked the sacraments but actually desecrated them to confirm their apostasy. To learned Christian males, Strix's desecration provides a theological consolation: when the desecrated host bleeds, "there amid the dung,"⁵³ it dramatically confirms Eucharistic theology. Bleeding demonstrates the host's normally invisible reality as the transubstantiated Corpus Verum, the True Body and Blood of Christ.⁵⁴

Strix's "expert testimony" about "the Lady of the Game" who oversees the *ludus* confirms the literate elite's suspicion that the poor and subaltern classes (along with certain prosperous nonconformists) are literally in league with the Devil, whom they worship ritually instead of God. At a deeper level, her evidence gives implicit but unmistakable answers to questions that Gianfrancesco's readers could ask if they were willing to acknowledge their own curiosity, uncertainties, or doubts. When Strix solemnly confesses being flown to the "Game" by her familiar demon "Ludovicus" and fornicating lustily with

52. Goodare, 88–120; Robin Briggs, *Witches and Neighbors: The Social and Cultural Context of European Witchcraft* (New York: Viking, 1996); see also geographical essays in parts 2 and 3 of Levack, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Witchcraft*.

53. Alberti's interpolation in his translation (*Libro detto Strega*, ed. Biondi, 140).

54. Strix, ed. Perifano, 93–94. (sig. F2r–v).

him, Gianfrancesco expects his reader to conclude “independently” and “on the evidence” that demons are real, without ever having to ask the question.⁵⁵

These are not my conjectures; toward the end of the dialogue, Apistius twice accepts the other men's exhortation to deny he has ever doubted that demons are real.⁵⁶ At other moments, Phronimus openly expounds the paradoxical consolation witchcraft provides: “the confessions of witches [...] corroborate the faith. [...] From the testimony of a numerous multitude of both sexes, we recognize demons as the enemies of Christian truth.” Witches' confessions demonstrate that “the harder [demons] labor with every possible effort to destroy and sully it, the more thoroughly [Christian faith] is strengthened, and shines the more brightly far and wide.” Proof that Christianity is valid, after all and despite all, is essential to maintaining belief, says Phronimus, because the age is rife with “wars, famines, and plagues.” If the exposure of witches and demons did not localize the source of evil, it would be incomprehensible, and “people without faith, overwhelmed by these calamities, might easily suspect they were caused by some chance or by fate”—those mysterious, impersonal forces identified by pagan philosophers.⁵⁷ A world without an identifiable source of intentional evil close at hand would be intolerable, and faith would be impossible. Despite—or indeed because of—witchcraft, we know that God is in heaven and benevolently oversees the world. Witches' confessions to *maleficia*, to corporeal interaction with demons, and to sabotage of sacramental energies are essential to “justifying the ways of God to men.”⁵⁸ Evil can derive from only one of three sources: demonic witchcraft, impersonal forces, or God Himself. Of the three possibilities, the third is paradoxical, and blasphemous if not carefully explicated, and the second is either irresistible or, as Dante hypothesized, answerable to God.⁵⁹

55. Compare Armando Maggi, *In the Company of Demons: Unnatural Beings, Love, and Identity in the Italian Renaissance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006): 25–65 at 52–53, and, more generally, *Satan's Rhetoric: A Study of Renaissance Demonology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001). Maggi's rhetorical interpretations of witchcraft theorists, particularly Gianfrancesco Pico, often blur the boundaries between his own voice and theirs.

56. *Strix*, ed. Perifano, 95–97 (sig. F2r–f3v); 107 (sig. G4r).

57. *Strix*, ed. Perifano, 90 (sig. E4v).

58. Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 1.25.

59. Dante, *Inferno* 7.67–96 (on Fortune).

Despite inscribing the expert testimony of his witch, Gianfrancesco does not give her a truly independent voice or a coherent point of view. Indeed, he cannot: although he presents her as ignorant, illogical, and stupid, the contradictions in her testimony reflect incongruities in learned witchcraft theory, particularly the idea that devils repeatedly fool witches with the simplest and most transparent tricks. While he does distinguish between the gritty village realities of Strix's "confession" and the abstruse theological conjectures of the three men, Gianfrancesco also represents—against his demonstrable intentions—how the Christian elite misinterpreted illiterate people's complaints that "She bewitched my baby/husband/cow/crop." Like Dicastes, interrogators corroborated such accusations of magical harm by extracting defendants' "confessions" with torture and leading or unanswerable questions. But in the process, they interpolated a crucial preoccupation of their own. The ideological superstructure inherited from Scholastic theology stipulated that the power to perform *maleficia* could only derive from demons, never, as common people assumed, from the witch.⁶⁰ Interrogators interpreted accusations about "spells" or magical procedures as evidence that defendants deliberately interacted with demons. Then, once torture was applied, confessions typically progressed from *maleficia* to "flying" and copulation. Interrogators often made use of formularies, preset sequences of questions designed to elicit evidence of such interspecies activity, including the bald "When and how did you first meet your demonic familiar?"⁶¹ Particularly during the first century of witchcraft persecution, the illiterate had to be taught, through sermons, trials, and public repetition of "confessions" at executions, that demons were the only source of magical power.

Gianfrancesco provides a capital example of such propaganda: while he was composing *Strix* in humanistic Latin, Alberti, true to the Dominican order's mission of preaching against heresy, steadily translated *Strix* into Italian, for the express purpose of "educating" the masses. Alberti published his translation in 1524, not quite a year after shepherding Gianfrancesco's Latin original into print.⁶² In his prefatory letter, the translator stressed his intention

60. Levack, *The Witch-Hunt*, 51–61.

61. The classic study is Richard Kieckhefer, *European Witch Trials: Their Foundation in Popular and Learned Culture, 1300–1500* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976); see also Levack, *The Witch-Hunt*, 30–41.

62. Biondi shows (*Libro detto Strega*, 43–44) that the translation was finished in May 1523—a few days before the publication of the Latin original—but was not published for eleven months; both editions

to avoid the highly polished, Latinate, literary Italian of contemporaries such as Pietro Bembo. Instead, he aimed for a rough-and-ready idiom that would be easily “understood of the people.”⁶³ He apparently considered it a kind of sermon, possibly to be read aloud in public or around the hearth-fire. Contrary to Alberti's expectation, however, “the people” are unlikely to have understood much of the dialogue's content. The three male characters' erudite discussions are far too complex to be understood by illiterate villagers. Even moderately educated laypeople would have been discouraged and exhausted by the complexity of the demonological and theological arguments and the wealth of classical citations; non-clerics and non-classicists would have found these hardly more intelligible in Italian than in Latin.

Once *Strix* is introduced, we are expected to imagine she is present in books 2 and 3 for all but a few moments. However, despite being an expert witness, she says little, and her interlocutors hardly treat her with respect or humanity. The disproportion between her brief “confessions” and the long-winded theorizing of her questioners demonstrates that neither they nor Gianfrancesco have any interest in her as anything but a prosecutor's “Exhibit A” for confirming the erudite theological conception of witchcraft. Of the 20,381 words in the Latin original, only 894 (about 4.4 percent) are spoken by her. Moreover, although she speaks eighty-five times, she only ever responds to questions or commands from the men, and as briefly as possible. Only twenty-seven of her answers contain ten or more words; several are a single word. Significantly, her longest answer, 146 words, is dominated by her description of breaking up the Eucharist in her chamber-pot and watching in horror as it bled. Only two other responses, of fifty-one and fifty-two words, respectively, rival this length; the first is a direct prelude to her “chamber-pot” confession, while the second describes witches vampirizing infants in order to make the “flying ointment” from their blood. These three “confessions” reinforce the evidence, in both Gianfrancesco's and Alberti's paratexts to *Strix*, that a search for proof of sacramental profanation was a major trigger for the witch-hunt in Mirandola.⁶⁴

were issued by the same Bolognese printer.

63. *Libro detto Strega*, ed. Biondi, 49–50.

64. Above, note 41.

The utility of Strix's confession to Christian theology is explicitly—even naively—signaled by the three men at several points. Besides Phronimus's declaration that witches' confessions confirm Christian truth, three other moments are important. When Apistius and Phronimus encounter Strix and Dicastes at the end of book 1, Apistius—the nominal skeptic—immediately declares: "We're asking a favour, Dicastes: Phronimus here and I have come expressly to hear the Witch tell us in your presence about activities of the other world."⁶⁵ *Alterius mundi negotia* is a curious way for anyone, least of all a skeptic, to describe the activities of witches. Notice that Apistius's request is not about "activities *in* the other world"; he is inquiring about activities *by* inhabitants of the other world. His question concerns whether demons can intrude into everyday reality, and the dialogue makes clear that he expects Strix to discuss precisely that. Accordingly, "the testimony of experience given by the witch herself renders believable" the *ludus* as a temporary, *visitable* hell on earth.

In response to Apistius's express curiosity, Dicastes promises Strix that "no harm will come to you, if you candidly confess your crimes [*scelera*], which can no longer be hid." This sounds like a straightforward command to confess acts of *maleficium*. However, Strix's crimes against other people are not yet up for discussion. When she begs to be spared further torture, Dicastes assures her that "I command you nothing more than that you tell *what you did with the demons* during the 'gathering' or the 'Game': "nihil aliud mando, quam uti referas acta cum daemonibus in cursu sive in ludo."⁶⁶ The command is limited and unequivocal: Apistius and Phronimus want first-person testimony about interaction with the otherworld, and throughout the dialogue they show little curiosity about *maleficium* or compassion for victims of it.

As soon as Strix begins confessing, Apistius displays his minimal interest in magical harm or even desecration. His first question for Strix is whether she has ever attended the *ludus*. She answers affirmatively. Seeking theological confirmation, he directs his second question to the inquisitor: does Dicastes believe that witches are always carried bodily (*corpore semper transferri*) to the *ludus*? "Almost always" is the gist of the inquisitor's reply. Apistius then asks Strix herself if she attended the *ludus* "in the body," or only "in the spirit." Both, she answers: "Et animo et corpore." A few brief questions establish her flight

65. Strix, ed. Perifano, 73 (sig. D1r).

66. Strix, ed. Perifano, 73–74 (sig. D1r–v); my emphasis.

protocol: she anointed her pudenda with “witches’ unguent,” straddled a bench, and Ludovicus flew her bodily to the *ludus*.⁶⁷

Apistius’s next question may look like a non sequitur, yet it deepens the theme of bodily interaction: “But, my good Witch,⁶⁸ please recount your love life [*tuos amores*] sincerely to us.” When she inquires “What do you want to know?” Apistius reveals he is not interested in Strix’s “love life” with men, but only with demons, especially Ludovicus. To moderns, Apistius’s curiosity about “lovemaking” can seem either pornographic or a sadistic way of “demonizing” and humiliating Strix, but in fact he wants her expert testimony about the corporeality of demons: do witches interact with demons in reality (*corpore*) or only in their mind (*animo*)? He asks her: “We know that there are no bones or flesh in demons: how do they eat, how do they copulate?” Wanting more detail about demonic bodies, he continues: “Can you compare them to anything, so as to give us an indication that would allow us to understand this similarity of their limbs?” Strix responds that “I don’t know, except that they’re thicker than human limbs, and softer, and quite similar to compressed straw or even cotton.”⁶⁹ She assures Apistius that Ludovicus visited her “in the body” and gave her more sexual pleasure than she ever experienced with her husband. Dicastes interrupts their exchange with a decidedly pornographic explanation: “[the demons’] members are of an uncommonly large size [...] and [...] fill up the witches’ most hidden parts.”⁷⁰

The men’s “prurient” questions reveal their underlying interest as theological. Dicastes asks Strix about the “aerial body” by means of which Ludovicus copulates with her, seeking confirmation of the Scholastic commonplace that demons confected hyperrealistic bodies of compressed air.⁷¹ Not being a theologian, Strix denies any knowledge of Ludovicus’s physiology: all she knows or cares about is the sexual pleasure the demon gave her. Thus, the

67. *Strix*, ed. Perifano, 75–79 (sig. D2r–D4r). See Walter Stephens, “Skepticism, Empiricism, and Proof in Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola’s *Strix*,” *Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft* 11.1 (2016): 6–29 at 12–15.

68. After initially calling her “my good woman,” Apistius will address her four times by the phrase “my good witch” (*bona strix*). I concur with Pappalardo (*La Strega*, 218–20, 380), who sees *bona* as indicating Apistius’s assessment of Strix’s authority or trustworthiness.

69. Quoted from Stephens, “Skepticism, Empiricism, and Proof,” 16–17.

70. *Strix*, ed. Perifano, 88 (sig. E3v).

71. See Stephens, “Corporeality, Angelic and Demonic,” *EW*, 217–19.

reader should draw two conclusions: first, that Ludovicus is real, not a dream or hallucination, and second, that Strix has not been coached by the inquisitor.

Strix makes no effort to hide the source of Apistius's curiosity. Like witchcraft theorists of the preceding eighty years, Gianfrancesco is fascinated by a half-millennium-old article of canon law concerning women who confessed something resembling an early-modern *ludus*. The Canon *Episcopi*, first attested in 906, reflects the ongoing Christianization of Northern Europe in the time of Charlemagne and his sons. It commands bishops to stamp out a weird superstition among certain women who have been seduced back into paganism by Satan. They believe (i.e., have presumably confessed) that "Diana, the goddess of the pagans" wakes them in the dead of night and commands them to join an "innumerable multitude of women," riding on the backs of "certain beasts," and travelling vast distances with the goddess. This cannot be happening, declares the canonist: the women are merely dreaming. "Who has not had the experience," he asks, of such vivid dreams, which reveal their unreality on awakening? Although numbers of women confess to this experience, he knows very well why it can only be a dream: the words of the Bible assure him that not even Ezekiel, Saint Paul, and Saint John ever claimed their visions happened in reality.⁷²

Reality, however, was not the canonist's term; instead he employed the body/spirit dichotomy that *Strix* and other discussions of witchcraft emphasized centuries later. The biblical prophets never claimed their visionary experiences happened "in the body," says he. On the contrary, "Ezekiel saw visions of the Lord in spirit and *not in the body*, and the Apostle John saw and heard the mysteries of the Apocalypse in the spirit and *not in the body* [...]. And Paul does not dare to say that he was rapt [to the third heaven] *in the body*."⁷³ Although the holy men's experiences were authentic, they were mental, not physical. Therefore, the women's claim that their bodies were fully involved—i.e., that they were

72. Canon *Episcopi* and related texts are in Alan Charles Kors and Edward Peters, ed., *Witchcraft in Europe, 400–1700: A Documentary History*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), 58–78.

73. Kors and Peters, ed., 62; emphasis added. See Rev. 4:2; 2 Cor. 12:2–5; and Ezekiel 2:2, "ingressus est in me spiritus" (the spirit entered into me); 8:3, "elevavit me inter terram et caelum, et eduxit me in Ierusalem, in visione Dei" (lifted me up between the earth and the heaven, and brought me in the vision of God into Jerusalem); and 43:5, "elevavit me spiritus" (the spirit lifted me up) (Douai translation of Vulgate).

not asleep and dreaming—is untrue, and, should they continue defending it, heretical. Since divinely-inspired men never claimed to experience visions “in the body,” these simple women’s dreams must be sent from Satan himself, who notoriously “transforms himself into an angel of light.”⁷⁴

Having lain dormant for half a millennium, Canon *Episcopi* rather suddenly assumed prominence in the early fifteenth century. Discussions at the Council of Basel about increasing heresy among the masses drew the attention of several attending theologians.⁷⁵ Over the next half-century, theologians and secular magistrates debated Canon *Episcopi*’s contention that experiences confessed by the “followers of Diana” were confined to the “spirit.” By Gianfrancesco Pico’s time, the task of refuting this dream-explanation had evolved into disqualifying the *imagination*, a concept of Scholastic psychology based on Aristotle’s *De anima* (on the soul).

Gianfrancesco was an important theorist of imagination, and his evolving attitude to witches mirrors the fifteenth-century debate over Canon *Episcopi*. In *De imaginatione* (1501), he theorized that the experiences of “women called witches” were unreal, caused by demons “running riot in their imaginations.”⁷⁶ But by 1523 he had reversed his attitude. The about-face correlates to his repudiation of Aristotle in 1520. Whereas *De imaginatione* had been an admiring commentary on *De anima*, *Examen vanitatis* identified Aristotelian philosophy, at great length, as the primary obstacle to uncomplicated belief in the truthfulness of the Bible.⁷⁷ Despite retaining a broadly Scholastic frame of mind after *De imaginatione*, Gianfrancesco came to oppose his earlier assumption that human interaction “in the body” with angels and demons was not possible. His interest in witches’ corporeal interactions with demons complemented his fascination with female mystics, particularly Caterina da Racconigi (1486–1574), whom he defended against accusations of witchcraft and later welcomed

74. On Canon *Episcopi*’s theory of dreaming and early modern resistance to its implications for witchcraft, see Stephens, *Demon Lovers*, 125–79; Edward Peters, “Canon *Episcopi*,” *EW*, 164–65.

75. Cohn, 210–19; above, note 28.

76. Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola, *On the Imagination*, trans. Harry Caplan (1930; Repr. Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1971), 57. (Literally: “they deceive people through the imagination.”)

77. Above, note 5. Albano Biondi wrote a succinct account of the relation among Gianfrancesco’s many works (*Libro detto Strega*, 27–41). See also Pappalardo, ed., *La Strega (Strix)*, 83–165.

into his home, gathering evidence of her corporeal struggles with demons.⁷⁸ *Strix* interprets the Mirandolese witch-hunt of 1522–23 as confirmation that demons were “running riot” *in corpore*, in reality, as witchcraft theorists had claimed for a century. Gianfrancesco mentions Canon *Episcopi* several times, always arguing its irrelevance to the activity of modern witches.⁷⁹ *Strix*’s own expert testimony seals Dicastes and Phronimus’s theological demonstration that witches’ “flying” and demonic copulation confirm the reality of demons by happening *in the body*, not merely “in the spirit.” At the end of the dialogue, having overcome his doubts about *alterius mundi negotia*, Apistius asks Dicastes to give him a new name. The inquisitor obliges, dubbing him Pisticus, “The Believer.”⁸⁰

78. On the general question of connections between saintly female mystics and witches, see Tamar Herzig, *Christ Transformed into a Virgin Woman: Luca Brocadelli, Heinrich Institoris, and the Defense of the Faith* (Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 2013); on Gianfrancesco’s interactions with Caterina da Racconigi, see Maggi, *In the Company of Demons*, 28–31, and Gabriella Bruna Zarri’s studies of *sante vive*, including “A Compendium of the Wondrous Deeds of Caterina da Racconigi: Hagiography or Philosophical Treatise?” in this volume.

79. See esp. *Strix*, sig. G2r–v (ed. Perifano, 103–05).

80. *Strix*, ed. Perifano, 119 (sig. I1v).