



Michel Porret, *L'Ombre du Diable : Michée Chauderon, dernière sorcière exécutée à Genève* / Ulrike Krampl, *Les secrets des faux sorciers : police, magie et escroquerie à Paris au XVIII^e siècle*

James Sharpe



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Ulrike Krampl, *Les secrets des faux sorciers : police, magie et escroquerie à Paris au XVIII^e siècle*, Paris, Éditions EHESS, 2011, 302 pp., ISBN 9 782713 223228.

- 1 6 April 1652 Michée Chauderon, a Catholic washer-woman aged about fifty, was condemned to death for witchcraft by the Genevan authorities. Chauderon's social profile rendered her an almost ideal type witchcraft suspect. Her sex and her age were two important parts of the mix, she was widowed, and she was a marginal member of the society she lived in, poor, illiterate, and one of those immigrants (in her case a Savoyard) who formed about thirty per cent of the population under Geneva's jurisdiction. Chauderon, moreover, had already been identified a bad person. In 1639, pregnant with an illegitimate child which had been fathered on her by a recently-deceased fellow-servant, she had been tried and convicted for sexual immorality, 'paillardise'. Now, in 1652, she was accused of having made a pact with the devil, of carrying his mark, and of bewitching two girls. And, as was so often the case, the core

accusations against the suspected witch came from other women, a group of eight of them in his instance. Both Michée Chauderon and the charges on which she was capitally convicted were typical of the witch – trials which afflicted late medieval and early modern Europe. One small mercy was that the judges decreed that she should be hanged until dead, and that her body should then be burnt to ashes, rather than that she should be burnt alive.

- 2 But Chauderon's case was an unusual one, in that she was the last person to be condemned for witchcraft at Geneva. This distinction has given her and her trial a prominent place in the francophone history of the witch-trials, and Michel Porret and the twelve others who are named as having co-operated with him in writing this book have done a valuable service in bringing together the numerous references made to Chauderon by later writers and by later interpretations of her case. For somebody coming to Chauderon's story for the first time (as I do) Porret weaves a fascinating account of how her case has been reinterpreted, and manages at appropriate points, to use these reinterpretations as a microcosm of how the period of witch persecution has been interpreted more generally. Her trial was known about, and discussed, by pre-Enlightenment thinkers at the end of the seventeenth century, but perhaps received its greatest publicity when it was taken up by Voltaire (who renamed its central protagonist Michelle Chaudron) in various of his writings portraying the witch-trials as evidence of the obscurantism of the past. The case was known to several of the psychiatrists who, in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries added their own professional slant on the interpretation of the witch trials. Remembering the case took on a new intensity in the late twentieth century. It became the subject of radio broadcasts and plays, the subject of a theatrical production proper, and was also mobilised by the 1970s women's movement. Chauderon now became one of the oppressed, with some redress being offered in 1997 when a street in Geneva was named after her, as part of a policy of naming streets in the city after distinguished women who had been associated with Geneva.
- 3 Michel Porret also gives us transcripts of both her 1652 trial and her earlier trial for sexual immorality. The 1652 trial is an excellent example of how a case might be built up against a witchcraft suspect, with repeated bouts of questioning initially without, but subsequently with, torture. Porret devotes a chapter of the book to her trial, and leads the reader expertly through both the Genevan criminal justice system of the period more generally and the specifics of Chauderon's case. Porret shows us how the various women giving evidence against her built up a convincing account of how she had 'given evil' to her victims, confirming their opinion that she was indeed a witch. Their evidence was reinforced by expert medico-legal opinion, this focusing especially on the reality of the sufferings of her two supposed victims. The doctors and surgeons giving evidence also confirmed that, in their opinion, the accused wore the devil's marks, one on her upper lip, one on her right thigh. Despite some dispute among the experts, a consensus emerged that these marks were insensible, and seemed to be genuine evidence of Chauderon's status as a witch. After repeated questioning, and being confronted by so many witnesses, the suspect eventually cracked and on 1 April 1652 confessed to all of the charges against her: sentence and execution followed rapidly.
- 4 This is an excellent book, intelligent, imaginative and meticulously researched, and one which deserves to be widely read. It would therefore seem churlish to raise a criticism

of it, but I feel that more depth might have been offered on why there were no more witch executions in Geneva after 1652. The last previous execution for witchcraft had been in 1626, following a steady if unspectacular flow of case over the mid to late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. This raises questions about why this final trial had taken place and why, indeed, it was Geneva's final witch trial. To explain this latter point Porret invokes a general shift in western European thinking over the pre-Enlightenment period, and in this he is, on one level surely correct. But more detailed work on some of the later trials in other parts of western and central Europe (eastern Europe was to experience hunts well in the eighteenth century) demonstrate that the potential for witch hunting disappeared more slowly and less absolutely than once would have been thought, and some further reflections on how Geneva's experience fitted into this general pattern would have been valuable, especially from such a gifted historian as Michel Porret.

- 5 The survival of belief in witchcraft, and in occult practices more generally, well into the century of the Enlightenment is demonstrated admirably in Ulrike Krampl's superb study of the occult underworld in eighteenth-century Paris, where '*faux sorciers*' (a term perhaps best rendered into English as 'fake magicians') flourished almost up to the outbreak of the Revolution. Those interested in criminal justice history will note that what is primarily responsible for making Krampl's study possible are the records kept by the Paris police, a body founded by royal edict in 1667, but transformed into an effective organization under the second lieutenant-general of police, Marc René de Voyer d'Argenson. With the Paris police we obviously have a new mechanism for, and a new vision of, law enforcement and control. Religion and morals were not totally absent from this organization's concerns, but its main objective in investigating fake magicians was not the rooting out of satanic magic, but rather the exposure and punishing of fraud and trickery, and the consequent financial or material loss of the victims. And although the cases of fake magic coming to the attention of the authorities were not numerous (one suspects, of course, as does the author, that they were the tip of a fairly substantial iceberg), they do bear witness to a widespread accept of the occult : magicians and other occult practitioners were involved in charges of alchemy, of helping find hidden treasure through magic, of conjuration, of fortune-telling and of other forms of divination, and of using magic to uncover assorted secret matters.
- 6 Krampl is an expert guide to this magical underworld, one which was different from, but not totally unconnected with, the world of village magical practitioners with which Michée Chauderon and every other inhabitant of peasant Europe in the early modern period would have been familiar. The social profile of Krampl's *faux sorciers* was relatively high, a number of clergymen, possibly of somewhat precarious status, among them, along with a smattering of foreigners, the age of these practitioners taken together normally being above forty. Their social status was demonstrated further by the fact that most of them, unlike Chauderon and the women accusing her were literate, many of them underlining their expertise by the possession and use of magical books and manuscripts. These included familiar classic works on magic by Albertus Magnus and Cornelius Agrippa, works of demonology by Jean Bodin and Martin Del Rio, the *Clavicula Salomonis*, a variety of almanacs, and works by, or attributed to, Nostradamus, Paracelsus, Ramon Lull, and Nicolas Flamell. The continued use of such a wide body of occult works is evidence of a willingness to believe in the occult sciences

at the very point at which Enlightenment thinking was meant to be gathering momentum.

- 7 Krampl's main concern is with magical mentalities, and thus her work might be thought as going somewhat beyond the usual interests of readers of this journal. But anyone wishing to broaden their knowledge of occult mentalities in the early Enlightenment period will find much that is instructive in this book. The author is especially concerned to understand how magic could continue to function in eighteenth-century Paris, how magicians operated, and how they managed to convince their clients (who were, after all, generally fully disposed to be convinced) of the potential efficacy of the service they offered. It seems, as might be expected, that their social profile was not that dissimilar to those of the occult practitioners whose expertise they sought, further evidence perhaps of the widespread cultural acceptance of the reality of magic. And, of course, there is an important underlying law and order theme : as hinted above, magic and the occult were now being interpreted as deception, as confidence trickery, rather than as satanic arts. This book is excellent in itself, but it also calls out for comparative studies. Krampl is aware, for example, of Owen Davies's exploratory work on the occult in early modern London, and one wonders how many other eighteenth-century European cities housed occult underworlds replete with fake magicians of the type described in Paris. And possibly the redefinition of witchcraft, magic, fortune telling, alchemy and the rest as trickery and deceit was a European phenomenon : certainly this was one of the main outcomes of the statute of 1736 which de-criminalised witchcraft in England and Scotland.
- 8 Thus here we are presented with two excellent, if very different, books, both of which help enrich our knowledge and understanding of witchcraft and related matters, topics which have attracted considerable attention from historians over the last two decades but about which, clearly, there are still some important things still to be said.

AUTHORS

JAMES SHARPE

University of York, UK