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To What Extent was Necromancy a Branch of Magic and The Preserve of The Educated Elite?

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Abstract

The development and spread of necromancy, a branch of ritual black magic, practiced by learned men with close ties to what Richard Kieckhefer dubs the 'clerical underworld' caused much pushback and persecution of magic by high ecclesiastical and secular officials. This study will closely examine Richard Kieckhefer's *Forbidden Rites*, which contains a copy of the *Munich Manual*, a manual that displays in detail necromantic ritual magic. It will be argued that this fear of necromancy was caused by the art's appeal to the learned and the courtly elite of society, who had clear motives for using the craft for their own desired ends. To support this argument the study will refer to the infamous *Trial Transcript of Gilles de Rais* provided by Georges Bataille, Gilles' motives for using necromancy, and the actions of François Prelati, a necromancer in Gilles' employ. Finally, there will be a discussion of how necromancy changed late medieval societies' perceptions of magic as a whole and how the use and persecution of necromancy by the Papal Inquisition, and its confusion with common magical practice, resulted in the conception of the witch cult.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The use of magic underwent massive change and development throughout the period of the middle ages. By the late medieval period of the 15th century, magic was considered synonymous with heresy, demonic worship and witchcraft. Although there are a vast number of reasons for this development, a major motivator was the spread of a ritualistic form of explicitly demonic black magic known as necromancy. While magic was used and utilized throughout the whole of medieval society, with rich and poor alike using charms and incantations for various intended ends, it was the use of necromancy by learned individuals, mainly men, which caused such alarm from high ecclesiastical and secular officials. At the beginning of the 13th century, magic was viewed by most clerical and secular authorities as mere superstition, and its penalties were closely linked to its relative physical crime.^{1 2} However, from the 13th century onwards, with the rise of heretical movements such as the Waldensians,³ the creation of the Papal Inquisition to stem such heretical ideas, and the rise of this learned necromantic ritual magic, ideas about the use of all types of magic, both learned and common, became intertwined with ideas of heresy and demon worship. Many scholars agree that it was these three occurrences combined which lead to the witch crazes of the early modern era.^{4 5}

While many scholars suggest that necromantic ritual magic, such as that exemplified by *The Munich Manual of Demonic Magic*,⁶ resulted in the witch crazes,⁷ the average necromancers of the 15th century were not merely rural peasant women, but learned literate men⁸ often belonging to clerical backgrounds, many of whom found patronage by the elite of society.⁹ With

¹ Richard Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge University Press, Eng., 1989), pp. 177-179.

² Ibid., pp. 139.

³ For more on the Waldensians see Norman Cohn, *Europe's Inner Demons: The Demonization of Christians in Medieval Christendom* (Pimlico, London), pp. 51-8.

⁴ Ibid., 110

⁵ Michael D. Bailey, 'From Sorcery to Witchcraft: Clerical Conceptions of Magic in the Later Middle Ages', *Speculum*, 76, (2001), pp. 960-990, 961.

⁶ Richard Kieckhefer, *Forbidden Rites: A Necromancer's Manual of the Fifteenth Century* (Pennsylvania State University Press, Pennsylvania, 1998).

⁷ Michael D. Bailey, 'From Sorcery to Witchcraft: Clerical Conceptions of Magic in the Later Middle Ages', *Speculum*, 76, (2001), pp. 960-990, 965.

⁸ I will refer to necromancers using the masculine pronoun throughout this thesis because it was mainly a preserve of clerical individuals who were mostly men.

⁹ Jan R. Veenstra, *Magic and Divination at the Courts of Burgundy and France: Text and Context of Laurens Pignon's Contre les devineurs* (Brill, the Netherlands, 1998), pp. 67.

the development of paper as opposed to parchment in the 15th century, many books of black magic became available to the learned and literate men of society.¹⁰ As Richard Kieckhefer emphasises, this learned ritual black magic, which became known as necromancy, was quite different from the common magic used by most individuals. Necromancy, with its reliance on books written in Latin outlining various complex and often expensive rituals, became an art of the learned and the elite, with its practitioners mainly stemming from what Kieckhefer dubs the “clerical underworld” of society.¹¹ To practice necromancy, one had to be both able to read the elaborate rituals, often written in Latin, and recite the lengthy incantations, also, for the most part, to be spoken in Latin.

Thus, many learned, literate men, for it was men who made up the vast bulk of literate individuals, claimed knowledge of necromancy and often sold their skills to those who could afford to pay for their services. These patrons were normally courtly men and women of the upper echelons of society, for they had both the motivation and financial means to pay for the often elaborately expensive rituals.¹² An example of one these elite courtly individuals is the infamous Gilles de Rais, the companion of Jeanne d’Arc, Marshal of France, and for a time one of the richest men in Europe.¹³ His trial in 1440 extensively outlines his necromantic endeavors with the aid of his court sorcerer François Prelati, as well as many others.¹⁴ This study will argue that this trial clearly exhibits the connection between necromancy and courtly society, elaborates on the motives of such courtly individuals for using necromancy, and it demonstrates the reality of the craft in late medieval Europe.

In addition, the work of the Inquisition will be examined, and how, in their attempts to stem the use of necromantic ritual magic, inquisitors began to mislabel common magic of the time as being closely linked with necromantic practice. For this both Johannes Nider’s *Formicarius* and John D. Bailey’s argument will be examined, wherein these two types of magic

¹⁰ Richard Kieckhefer, *Forbidden Rites: A Necromancer’s Manual of the Fifteenth Century* (Pennsylvania State University Press, Pennsylvania, 1998), pp. 1.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 12.

¹² Edward Peters, *The Magician, The Witch and The Law* (University of Pennsylvania Press 1978), pp.112-125.

¹³ Jean Benedetti, *Gilles de Rais: The Authentic Bluebeard* (London: Peter Davies Ltd 1971), pp 128.

¹⁴ Georges Bataille, *The Trial of Gilles de Rias* (Paris: Jean-Jaques Pauvert, 1990).

become confused, and this confusion leads to a greater fear that demonic necromancy was not just being committed by a few learned men with clerical backgrounds but by a large segment of society.¹⁵ This confusion and the resulting paranoia was one of the driving forces that led to the later witch craze of the early modern period.

An understanding of what necromancy entailed, who practiced it, for whom it was practiced and its impact on late medieval society is of great importance for understanding the change in perceptions of magic over the course of the middle ages as well as the associated increases in paranoia surrounding magic, ultimately leading to the infamous witch craze.

This dissertation will provide a definition of magic and give a brief overview of how perceptions of magic changed during the later medieval period. Three primary sources of the 15th century will be examined, namely the *Munich Manual*¹⁶, the *Trial of Gilles de Rais*,¹⁷ Johannes Nider's *Formicarius*¹⁸ and their relevance to the use of necromantic ritual magic. The impact of this learned necromantic magic sponsored by the courtly elite, its effects on popular society, the inquisition and its contribution to the witch craze of the early modern period will be explored. It will be argued that necromancy is a particular branch of magic conceived of and advanced by the educated elite of medieval society, and its influence was not only substantial but consequential, resulting in religious, societal and historical developments.

¹⁵ Michael D. Bailey, 'From Sorcery to Witchcraft: Clerical Conceptions of Magic in the Later Middle Ages', *Speculum*, 76, (2001), pp. 960-990.

¹⁶ Richard Kieckhefer, *Forbidden Rites: A Necromancer's Manual of the Fifteenth Century* (Pennsylvania State University Press, Pennsylvania, 1998).

¹⁷ Georges Bataille, *The Trial of Gilles de Rais* (Paris: Jean-Jaques Pauvert, 1990).

¹⁸ As discussed in, Michael D. Bailey, 'From Sorcery to Witchcraft: Clerical Conceptions of Magic in the Later Middle Ages', *Speculum*, 76, (2001), pp. 960-990.

Chapter 2: To What Extent was Necromancy a Branch of Magic in Late Medieval Europe?

If one is to write at length on the use of necromancy, the practice of it and the resulting perceptions of it during the course of the late medieval period in Europe, one must first define what magic entailed and how it differed, especially from that of popular religious practice, but also from that of the newly developing and still infant perceptions of science. Since magic is so diverse a subject, to document a medieval definition of magic and what it constituted would be extremely varied between individuals. Thus, most of the classifications here provided are those of modern scholars' definitions of magic, for as is further extrapolated, what constitutes medieval magic was extremely subjective and varied depending upon the individual, his station in society, the extent to which he was literate and his own personal beliefs. Richard Kieckhefer defines medieval magic as being "a kind of crossroads where different pathways in medieval culture converge."¹⁹ Magic is hard to distinguish from religion and science and often develops out of the interplay between the two subjects. Second, to Kieckhefer's definition of magic is the idea that "magic is an area where popular culture meets with learned culture."²⁰ He uses the term 'learned culture' to mean "those with philosophical or theological education".²¹ It is the transmission, spread and development of these intellectual ideas with popular thought that gives rise to many conceptions of what is magical throughout society. Thirdly, Kieckhefer states that magic "represents a particularly interesting crossroads between fiction and reality."²² Throughout the medieval period magic appears in various works of literature and storytelling, and while the authors of such tales may have intended for such ideas to be thought of as fictional, ideas of "sorcerers, fairies, and other workers of magic... did resemble the magical practices of medieval life."²³ Thus, for Kieckhefer, magic is defined as "[a] crossing-point where religion converges with science, popular beliefs intersect with those of the educated classes, and conventions of fiction meet with the realities of daily life."²⁴ Therefore, Kieckhefer believes that magic is found in almost all aspects of medieval life, and its influence can be seen in all levels of society and is demonstrable in almost any medieval subject. It can be used to analyze multifarious facets of

¹⁹ Richard Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge University Press, Eng., 1989), pp. 1.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid., pp. 1-2.

medieval life, from the creation of laws to its use in literature and even its role in medieval politics. Thus, Keickhefer states, by studying magic's influence, one may have further insight into almost any concept in medieval society.²⁵

Another definition of medieval magic is provided by Karen Jolly, who writes that due to its nebulous nature, it is in fact exceedingly hard to define. Jolly states of medieval magic that:

magic is more of a concept than a reality. The term is a way of categorizing a wide array of beliefs and practices, ranging from astrology and alchemy, charms and amulets, to sorcery and necromancy, trickery and entertainment, as practiced by both laity and clergy, by those of high and low social status, educated and uneducated and found in diverse sources and contexts, including scientific medical treatise, liturgical and other religious documents, and literary texts. How certain practices in medieval Europe come to be labelled as magic, as opposed to scientific or religious, depends on the perspective of the person using the label... Consequently, the study of magic is the study of the systems of thought that defined magic in particular ways, and the changes in these systems over time. The concept of magic is, then, a window into medieval mentalities precisely because it was (and is) a problematic and evolving category in European history.²⁶

Thus, for Jolly, the study of magical practice utilizes so many sources, from literary works to courtly forms of entertainment, that it is hard to define the reality of magical practice for which there is little direct evidence. Defining magical practice is further obscured by an author's contemporary perception of magic from whichever specific period they may be writing. However, Jolly gives a definition of magic, specifying that magic is (1) exceptional due to a difference in rationality which "emerges in response to some normative... acceptable way of knowing – for example, revealed, religious knowledge or learned, scientific knowledge."²⁷ This leads to the idea that magic is (2) that which "holds the group of excluded, magical practices together [depending] upon the theoretical framework of the persons employing the term magic, and its opposite, whether it be religion or science." And that (3) magic is defined by the literate elite at the time and its use of religious or scientific rationalities "often leaving the common

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Karen Jolly, Catharina Raudvere, and Edward Peters, *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe: Volume 3 The Middle Ages* (Athlone Press, 2002), pp. 3.

²⁷ Ibid., pp. 3-4.

practices of magic in an excluded category, as demonic or low magic versus the more progressive thinking of religion and science.”²⁸

These scholarly definitions of magic demonstrate the nebulous and subjective nature of medieval magic as a fluid and constantly evolving cultural construct. There was no definitive definition of what constituted magical practice, as opposed to religious or scientific practices. It will be clearly demonstrated later in this paper that many practitioners of magic saw little distinction between magical enchantment, religious ritual and scientific experiment. What one may see as magic another may take as religious practice. However, there were some common ideas that formed a general concept of what magic constituted in the minds of medieval people. These ideas of magic contained the notion that magic itself was fantastical in aspect, that it was something in between, or some foreknowledge of scientific and religious practice, and that it was in some way unusual, mysterious and contained an inherent otherness. Over the course of the late medieval period perceptions of magic generally became imbued more and more with a sinister aspect as clerical and inquisitorial thought steered the idea that all magic was inherently connected to demonic powers.²⁹

Of great import for this study is the definition of necromancy as a branch of magic. Necromancy was understood in earlier periods as the magic of communication with the spirits of the dead.³⁰ This was usually done via complex rituals and incantations used to evoke the spirit of the departed. However, while this definition was still to some extent understood as necromancy in the middle ages, on the whole necromantic practice increasingly became concerned with the invocation of demons.³¹ This change was due in large part to the skepticism shown by ecclesiastical sources who were quick to posit that rather than the spirit of a deceased person being summoned, the spirit was in all truth most likely to be demonic in nature.³² In the middle ages one finds permutations of the word necromancy, i.e. “nigromacy” meaning literally dark

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Jan R. Veenstra, *Magic and Divination at the Courts of Burgundy and France: Text and Context of Laurens Pignon's Contre les devineurs* (Brill, the Netherlands, 1998), pp. 80.

³⁰ Ibid., pp. 106.

³¹ Ibid., pp. 13.

³² Ibid., pp. 106.

magic, being used to evoke this new connection to the demonic.³³ This is the form of necromancy most referenced by contemporaries of the later medieval period and the subject referred to in the primary sources of this study.

Kieckhefer states that a major element of necromancy is a connection to the power of what was considered sacred, “The necromancers perceived their art and office as sacred and saw themselves as invoking the sacred powers of heaven by which they could constrain the equally numinous but malign and treacherous powers of hell.”³⁴ This demonstrates that necromantic practice was closely aligned with the clerical powers attributed to the exorcist, and indeed Kieckhefer states that the necromancer was an inversion of the exorcist:

What we now call exorcism was practiced by an individual, usually a cleric, who addressed demons with formal commands, whose power was derived chiefly from the sacred realities invoked in the formulas of command. What we now call conjuring was also practiced by an individual, usually a cleric, who addressed demons with formal commands essentially identical to those of the exorcists, again powerful by virtue of appeal to sacred realities... both exorcist and the conjurer were engaged in spiritual wrestling matches with the demons...if exorcisms were allowed, at least to authorized clergy, while conjuring was forbidden to all, it was because of the one key difference: the exorcists intent was to dispel the demons, while the conjurer’s was to summon them, and mainstream opinion held that it was better to be rid of malign spirits than to invite them into one’s life.³⁵

An explicit connection can be drawn between the art of necromancy and the clerical art of exorcism, suggesting the two arts are essentially the same practice but with different end results. While there were lay individuals who claimed to be exorcists, for the most part exorcism was regarded as a profession of the clergy and an art utilized by clerics. This clerical connection was also largely the case with the necromancer and his art.

Finally, a 15th century definition of necromancy appears in *The Book of Forbidden Arts* by Johannes Hartlieb, written between 1456-1464, in which he defines the art of necromancy:

³³ Richard Kieckhefer, *Forbidden Rites: A Necromancer’s Manual of the Fifteenth Century* (Pennsylvania State University Press, Pennsylvania, 1998), pp 4.

³⁴ Ibid., pp. 26.

³⁵ Ibid., pp. 14.

Nygramancia is the first forbidden art, and is called the black art. This art is the worst of all, because it proceeds with sacrifices and services that must be rendered to the devils. One who wishes to exercise this art must give all sorts of sacrifices to the devils, and must make an oath and pact with the devils. Then the devils are obedient to him and carry out the will of the master, as far as God permits them. Take note of two great evils in this art. The first is that the master must make sacrifice and tribute to the devils, for we should make sacrifices only to God, who created us and redeemed us by his passion. The other is that he binds himself with the devil, who is the greatest enemy of all mankind.³⁶

This definition portrays more in the way of fiction than it relates to true necromantic magic of the period. As discussed above, the necromancer did not submit to demons, and the *Munich Manual* has little mention of sacrifices being made to them. Kieckhefer makes an interesting connection to this definition and the emerging definition of fictional witchcraft, in which supplication to demons and sacrifices are a mainstay of the imagined practice.³⁷

³⁶ Ibid., pp. 33.

³⁷ Ibid.

Chapter 3: A Short Overview of Magic in the late Medieval Era, circa late 1200-1400.

The use and practice of learned magic, especially that of necromancy, its changes and development from the end of the high medieval period until the end of the late medieval period, is one of initial and continued growth after the 13th century and is closely mirrored by an intensification of both secular and theological condemnation. The story of magical practice is one which can be both as murky as it is documentable. The introduction of magical thought from Arabic and classical sources into Europe, and an increasing argument for its defence in the 13th century, may have precipitated an increase in the popularity of magic. However, over the course of the proceeding 14th and 15th centuries, as magic spread, its influence increased as more learned men read and practiced the craft in clerical as well as courtly circles, often payed for by wealthy patrons.³⁸ This increase in popularity by the elite led to a rise in fear of the craft.³⁹ This, in combination with its use as a valuable slander tool in many high profile courtly cases, led to a great fear by high theological and secular authorities and to a crackdown on its use.⁴⁰

It is particularly difficult to give a conclusive overview of the practice of magic during the high to late medieval period, due to a number of factors. These comprise the somewhat vague but dynamic definition of magic, combined with its extremely complex and multitudinous array of practices. Furthermore, the fact that the thoughts and perceptions of magic itself are so vast and come from so many different strata of society and separate regions adds to the complexity. Indeed, as stated earlier, two individuals living in the middle ages in the same environment at the same time may have had entirely different and conflicting ideas of magic and magical practice. Also, and most importantly for the study of the elite's use of magic, one may have an extraordinarily difficult time separating slander from the actual use of magic. Thus, for the sake of brevity and cohesion, the focus of this section will remain on written clerical thought and courtly sources on the subject of magic taken from select sources. This is due to the fact that clerical ideas of magic are both the most readily available, due to the Churches' and court's

³⁸ Edward Peters, *The Magician, The Witch and The Law* (University of Pennsylvania Press 1978), pp. 133.

³⁹ Karren Jolly, Catharina Raudvere, and Edward Peters, *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe: Volume 3 The Middle Ages* (Athlone Press, 2002), pp. 64-65.

⁴⁰ Jan R. Veenstra. *Magic and Divination at the Courts of Burgundy and France: Text and Context of Laurens Pignon's Contre les devineurs* (Brill, the Netherlands, 1998), pp. 22-23.

privilege as being the most powerful literary authority, and these sources and views on magic are the most influential and important in terms of this paper's subject matter.

The use of magic written about in elite courtly society and by Church authorities of the middle ages is quite dynamic. Previously in the 13th and 14th centuries there had widely been scholastic writings by a great many learned minds such as Thomas Aquinas and others, who described in great detail and with considerable persuasion the topics of magic and its evil uses which included heresy and diabolical sorcery.⁴¹ The increasingly vast literature from learned scholars made credible the idea that demonic magic represented an attack on humans occurring via Satan and his messengers, demons, sorcerers and witches. Thus, in combination with "the institution of the office of inquisitor of heretical depravity in the 1230s"⁴² the seeds of the persecution of magic were planted.

However, there was still during the 13th century a learned and persuasive argument to be had in the defense of various magical practices, primarily involving astrological divination, which posited that different forms of magic existed and that not all of the magical arts were truly heretical or demonic in nature.⁴³ New texts created from newly gleaned information derived from Arabic and classical sources that had been introduced or even reintroduced into the minds of Europeans and written scholarly defenses of magical craft made earlier in the century, such as the *Picatrix* and *The Sworn Book of Honorius* (or the *Liber Jurantus*), argued that magic is a craft like any other. These works emphasised and stipulated that the magician in question must be both learned and pure of heart, for "the ignorant, unstudied, or amateur magician runs the risk of being destroyed by the very forces he pretends to command."⁴⁴ Edward Peters sums up this defense of magic, its rise in popularity and the change between the 13th and 14th century thus:

The observations of Grosseteste and William of Auvergne that they had handled magical and astronomical books at Paris and Oxford in the twelfth century is echoed by many more writers in the late thirteenth century. *Picatrix* and the *Liber Juratus* are merely two

⁴¹ *Witchcraft in Europe 400-1700: A Documentary History, Second Edition* ed. by Alan Charles Kors and Edward Peters (University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 2001), pp. 112.

⁴² *Ibid.*, pp. 113.

⁴³ Edward Peters, *The Magician, The Witch and The Law* (University of Pennsylvania Press 1978), pp. 110.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

of the most eloquent defenses of magic that the thirteenth century produced. There were others, and there were those who read them and practiced what they taught – not only miscalculating court astrologers and physicians like Arnald of Villanova, Peter of Abano, and Cecco d’Ascoli, but lesser-known figures with less learned books whose presence is attested to in a large number of court records dating from the end of the thirteenth century. Often they worked in the service of powerful ecclesiastical or temporal figures, but the power of their masters failed to save most of them once they were caught, and they often took the brunt of punishment from which their employers were often spared. As *Picatrix* and the *Liber Jurantus* indicate, the appeal of magic grew in the thirteenth century, and the crime of magic entered into both spiritual and temporal courts.⁴⁵

In the wake of such defenses and the grey area surrounding magical practice, interest in the art grew. Indeed, such was the thought at the time that when the newly formed Inquisition asked Pope Alexander IV in 1258 to allow the Inquisition to add sorcery to the list of issues they could govern and discipline. Although Alexander denied this request broadly, he did allow the opportunity for the Inquisition to become involved, by indicating that they could in fact bring sorcerers to trial “only if there was evidence of manifest heresy in their cases.”⁴⁶ This demonstrates a tremendous level of uncertainty in the practice of magic and a relative laxity that existed in the later 13th century, when magic on the whole was not yet synonymous with heresy, idolatry and diabolism – an affiliation that it would develop by the end of the 15th century.

As Europe, especially France, entered the 14th century, so too did the fear of magic, wherein its use as a form of slander and the resulting arguments against its use grew. However, at the beginning of this period, magical practice was becoming increasingly popular in higher circles of learning as well as in princely courts. Edward Peters writes that not only had magicians’ skills and literature “increased immensely”⁴⁷ but so too magicians “found in the courts of the thirteenth century a particularly hospitable welcome.”⁴⁸ Indeed Peters states that “By the late thirteenth century, the learned magician had returned with his discipline, books and professional – even clerical – status.”⁴⁹ One can thus argue that even though these courts were

⁴⁵ Ibid., pp. 111-112

⁴⁶ *Witchcraft in Europe 400-1700: A Documentary History, Second Edition* ed. by Alan Charles Kors and Edward Peters (University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 2001), pp. 113.

⁴⁷ Edward Peters, *The Magician, The Witch and The Law* (University of Pennsylvania Press 1978), pp. 112.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid., pp. 118.

where the “earliest persecutions and charges of magic took place”⁵⁰ magic remained common in courtly circles throughout the century. Jan R. Veenstra writes that by the turn of the 1400’s the French court was still a major source of sorcery.⁵¹ Indeed many have stated that the court was a magnet for magical practitioners due to the multifaceted and conspiratorial nature in which power could be gleaned through patronage and favoritism by wealthy courtly figures.

This can be seen in the courts of frivolous or especially weak kings, such as that of Richard II and particularly the Court of Charles the Mad, where numerous allegations of sorcery arose as various powerful courtly figures vied for power and attempted to cure the king of his affliction. Jan R. Veenstra demonstrates quite comprehensively in *Magic and Divination at the Courts of Burgundy and France: Text and Context of Laurens Pignon’s Contre les devineur* the extent to which magic played a role in the court of Charles the Mad in late 14th century France, providing a glimpse into both magic’s use as slander and its use in the French Court. For example, Veenstra documents the trial of an apostate monk whose practice of magic is of particular interest to this paper:

Louis d'Orléans had employed an apostate monk, a knight, an esquire and a varlet, to whom he gave his sword, a dagger and a ring to be used in magic rituals and to be consecrated in the name of demons. These four persons lodged themselves in the tower of Montjay, near Laigny-sur-Marae, where on a nearby hill the monk performed several invocations. One day before sunrise between Easter and Ascension Day, after he had traced a circle on the ground, stripped, and knelt down with the sword and dagger stuck into the soil next to the ring, suddenly two demons appeared dressed in green, called Hérémas and Estramain. As the monk hid behind a nearby bush, one of the devils took the ring and vanished while the other took up dagger and sword, put them down again and likewise vanished. Half an hour later the first demon reappeared with the ring (which had turned scarlet red) and the message that in order to complete the spell the ring had to be put into the mouth of a hanged man and the sword and the dagger would have to be thrust into his corpse. Having received this unsavoury assignment, monk, squire and varlet went to the notorious Montfaucon gallows just outside Paris and took down one of the corpses which they deposited in a stable of the knight's Parisian lodgings. There they put the ring into the dead man's mouth and forced the sword from his nether parts up to his chest; and also the dagger was driven into the body. After three days these objects

⁵⁰ Ibid., pp. 113.

⁵¹ Jan R. Veenstra, *Magic and Divination at the Courts of Burgundy and France: Text and Context of Laurens Pignon’s Contre les devineurs* (Brill, the Netherlands, 1998), pp. 59.

were returned to the duke of Orléans along with a small pouch containing some pulverized bone and pubic hair from the corpse. This, attached to a string, Orléans carried under his clothes. One day, however, the pouch was forced from him by a knight who thus exposed Orleans's superstition before the king and many nobles.

The same apostate monk also performed other feats of magic for the duke, Petit reports. One was a love-charm and involved a branch of the cornel-tree which was consecrated with the blood of a cock and a hen. Using it, Orléans could impose his will on any woman he fancied. By sorceries such as these, Petit claimed, Orléans had attempted to kill the king, for had not the king himself exclaimed in one of his fits of insanity: 'Pour Dieu! otez moy ceste espée qui me transperce le euer. Ce m'a fait beau frère d'Orléans'.⁵²

This documentation of necromancy, delivered at the trial of the said apostate monk is of note for several reasons: Firstly, d'Orléans never denied having dealings with the monk, stating only that he had "expressly forbidden"⁵³ the monk to use magic upon the king. Thus, there is an air of truth in his dealings with this supposed practitioner of the magical arts. Secondly, and also of interest in this paper, is that the accused is stated to be a monk, a man now apostate, who is assumed to have a prior career in The Church, and as we shall later see is a prime example of someone from Kieckhefer's 'clerical underworld'⁵⁴ from which many necromancers are said to have learned their craft. Thirdly, and of greatest importance, is the explicit use of necromancy. Many of the monk's rituals are closely mirrored within the *Munich Manual*. There is the use of magical circles, invocations, swords and daggers, love potions, and other complex rituals that can be found in the *Munich Manual*. His rituals are clearly demonic in nature with the invoking of the two demons. This is unmistakably the use of necromancy as opposed to other forms of magic.

The other major development is the use of magic as a form of slander and the growing fear of magic by church officials. The clearest case of this is found in the trial of the Order of the Knights Templar orchestrated by King Philip the Fair of France in October 1307; while the Templars were widely regarded as innocent, their destruction shows the power that this kind of

⁵² Ibid., pp. 59-60.

⁵³ Ibid., pp. 60.

⁵⁴ Richard Kieckhefer, *Forbidden Rites: A Necromancer's Manual of the Fifteenth Century* (Pennsylvania State University Press, Pennsylvania, 1998), pp 12.

slander had on individuals and institutions.⁵⁵ There is also the trial of the then deceased Pope Boniface VIII by Philip the Fair, which is one of the first trials for necromancy to be levied against a powerful and elite member of society.⁵⁶ While in these cases the accused were most likely innocent of the crimes of which they were accused, this can be contrasted with the reality of the case of the apostate monk provided above.

With this increase in fear of practice of demonic magic reaching the very highest echelon of medieval society, Pope John XXII issued the decretal *Super illius specula* in 1326.⁵⁷ This document demonstrates a clear response to the heightened fears regarding ritual demonic magic and the change in society from the time of Pope Alexander. This decretal clearly targets necromantic ritual magic:

Grievingly we observe... that many who are Christian in name only... sacrifice to demons, adore them, make or have made images, rings, mirrors, phials, or other things for magic purposes, and bind themselves to demons...by their means a most pestilential disease, besides growing stronger and increasingly serious, grievously infests the flock of Christ throughout the world... We hereby promulgate the sentence of excommunication upon all and singular who against our most charitable warnings and others presume to engage in these things, and we desire that they incur this sentence ipso facto.”⁵⁸

This document states that black magic was from this point onwards to be integrated into the charge of heresy and that it extended “the jurisdiction of the inquisition to cover cases of black magic.”⁵⁹ The practices outlined in this document clearly target the kind of magic seen in the case of the apostate monk along with the other magical documents found in this study. This is not the magic of the common folk but rather ritualistic necromancy.⁶⁰ Thus, by the late medieval

⁵⁵ For more on the trial of the Knights Templar see, Malcolm Barber, *The Trial of the Templars* (Cambridge University Press, Bristol 1978).

⁵⁶ Edward Peters, *The Magician, The Witch and The Law* (University of Pennsylvania Press 1978), pp. 120-121.

⁵⁷ *Witchcraft in Europe 400-1700: A Documentary History, Second Edition* ed. by Alan Charles Kors and Edward Peters (University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 2001), pp. 119-120.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Isabel Iribarren, From Black Magic to Heresy: A Doctrinal Leap in the Pontificate of John XXII, *Church History*, 76, (2007), pp. 32.

⁶⁰ Michael D. Bailey, ‘From Sorcery to Witchcraft: Clerical Conceptions of Magic in the Later Middle Ages’, *Speculum*, 76, (2001), pp. 967.

period, magic, especially necromancy, had become one with heresy. However, this did not stop the use of necromancy in the later medieval period as will be discussed in the next section.

Chapter 4: The *Munich Manual*, a Window into the Practice of Necromancy by the Learned Clerical Elite

The *Munich Manual* is an especially interesting book of magic; indeed, this is due to the fact that it is a book dedicated to a clearly demonic form of necromantic ritual magic. *The Munich Manual*, or *Codex Latinus Monacensis* 849, abbreviated to CLM 849 is a manuscript found within the Bavarian State Library. The text is largely intact, although the first two folios are missing, which Kieckhefer states is not uncommon for a manuscript of this type.⁶¹ The 107 folios that remain contain forty-two magical “experiments.”⁶² Kieckhefer organizes these into three categories: illusionist “designed to make things appear other than they as they are;” divinatory “for gaining knowledge of future, past, distant or hidden things;” and psychological “intended to have influence on people’s intellects or wills.”⁶³ There are other passages of note besides these:

interspersed with these are a version of the *Liber consecrationum*... a list of spirits, with descriptions of the forms in which they appear and the functions they perform... a manual of astral magic... a list of favourable and unfavourable days for writing magical inscriptions... and a fragment of a chemical prescription.⁶⁴

In addition, there are magical experiments that do not fall into Kieckhefer’s three categories. These include: “a procedure for gaining knowledge with the aid of a demonic tutor, a brief experiment called the ‘Key of Pluto’ for opening all locks, a fragmentary operation for avoiding harm...”⁶⁵

The magical rituals contained within the *Munich Manual* are not the writing of a singular author with a singular theoretical structure, but rather a compilation of rituals, most likely by a singular compiler, with necromantic rituals that are taken from separate sources and compiled into a single work. This is not detrimental to the text however for “the lack of a systematic

⁶¹ Richard Kieckhefer, *Forbidden Rites: A Necromancer’s Manual of the Fifteenth Century* (Pennsylvania State University Press, Pennsylvania, 1998), pp 25.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid., pp. 26.

framework means that each section, essentially self-contained, has a coherence and clarity often lacking in more fully developed writing.”⁶⁶ The fact that the various rituals in the text are taken from different sources suggests that there must have been many such books, and that other books of such rituals must have existed. Kieckhefer describes the text as “flamboyantly transgressive, even carrying transgression toward its furthest imaginable limits, and in today’s academic environment one might justify studying [it] on these grounds.”⁶⁷ He also states that the *Munich Manual* is “a rare example essentially intact, of what must once have been a flourishing genre: the manual is explicitly demonic magic, or necromancy.”⁶⁸ Most of the work is primarily written in Latin with a few passages in German and Italian. This is important to note for in order to use the book one must have had to be literate in Latin and also have been able to speak Latin, meaning that for the most part the practitioner must have come from a clerical background or been closely linked to the clergy.

This book then is a clear link to actual necromantic practice by learned individuals. It is meant for more frivolous purposes, either to entertain, to coerce or to learn via divination. The purpose of such a book would have been well suited to the courtly environment, where such rituals would correspond well to courtly motivations. For example, in the experiment for summoning forth an illusory banquet the author states that “You have often seen me exercise at your court the art of summoning banquet bearers.”⁶⁹ The fact of whether the claim of the anonymous compiler is true or not is irrelevant. The compiler states that this ritual is meant for a courtly patron, and the ritual is thus intended for use in a courtly environment. Another experiment found within the *Munich Manual* is for gaining someone’s favour; this is extremely applicable to the courtly environment and indeed the compiler states, “I wish you to read a well tested art for obtaining dignity and honour, status and the supreme and undying love of a king, prelate, lord or, in general, any man you wish.”⁷⁰ Kieckhefer states of this ritual that it “presuppose[s] a magician connected to court circles or perhaps to the ecclesiastical hierarchy, or else a magician serving a client with political ambitions.”⁷¹ These rituals, along with the fact that

⁶⁶ Ibid., pp. 25.

⁶⁷ Ibid., pp. 10.

⁶⁸ Ibid., pp. 25.

⁶⁹ Ibid., pp. 47.

⁷⁰ Ibid., pp 76.

⁷¹ Ibid.

they are contained within a book written in Latin, demonstrates explicitly that the book is intended for use by the literate and for the elite of society. There is no mention within the book for healing the sick or for helping in any aspect of ensuring a productive crop.⁷² The rituals of the *Munich Manual* are intended to either entertain, manipulate or to gain “true knowledge.”⁷³ These rituals are of most use to a courtly patron. “The necromancers and their clients dreamed of discovering wealth, sexual fulfillment, favour and promotion, power over adversaries, entertainment, and knowledge of secret and future matters...”⁷⁴ Thus the *Munich Manual* sheds light on the reality of necromantic practice and the rituals for invoking demonic aid for a courtly client.

⁷² Ibid., pp. 26.

⁷³ Ibid., pp. 91.

⁷⁴ Ibid., pp. 188.

Chapter 5: The Trial of Gilles de Rais, a Look at the Motivations, Usage and Reality of Necromancy

Where the *Munich Manual* establishes the reality of books of necromantic ritual, the types of magic evoked and the intended ends of a necromancer and his clients, *The Trial of Gilles de Rais*⁷⁵ demonstrates the explicit use of such magic by an elite member of society who was aided in his endeavours by a literate necromancer.

Gilles de Rais' career was quite extraordinary. He was an active combatant during the Hundred Years War and was assigned in April 1429 to be one of Jeanne d'Arc's captains.⁷⁶ Gilles fought with distinction during important battles such as the Siege of Orleans that he was made Marshal of France in July 1429 and attended the coronation of Charles VII, being one of the few tasked with carrying the phial containing the Holy Chism.⁷⁷ After 1432 Gilles' grandfather, Jean de Craon, died, leaving Gilles one of the richest men in France, if not Europe at the time. Jean Benedetti writes of Gilles, "No one in France, or for that matter in Europe, possessed such a fortune."⁷⁸ Leonard Wolf gives a more tangible explanation of Gilles' vast wealth:

In 1432, Gilles was twenty-eight years old. He was the undisputed possessor of one of the greatest fortunes in France. In money alone, his annual income surpassed two and a half million francs a year; and his capital, four and a half million. To these holdings, one should add art objects, books, furnishings, and tapestries estimated as being worth an additional one hundred thousand pounds.⁷⁹

It is well documented that after 1432 Gilles began to squander much of his wealth on various expenditures, namely the play *Mistère du siège d'Orléans* in 1434, of which he personally paid for the entire production and staging.⁸⁰ During his stay in Orleans it is stated by

⁷⁵ Georges Bataille, *The Trial of Gilles de Rias* (Paris: Jean-Jaques Pauvert, 1990).

⁷⁶ Ibid., pp. 76.

⁷⁷ Ibid., pp. 78.

⁷⁸ Jean Benedetti, *Gilles de Rais: The Authentic Bluebeard* (London: Peter Davies Ltd 1971), pp. 128.

⁷⁹ Leonard Wolf, *Bluebeard: The Life and Crimes of Gilles de Rais* (New York: Clarkson N. Potter Inc., 1980), pp. 83.

⁸⁰ Leonard Wolf, *Bluebeard: The Life and Crimes of Gilles de Rais* (New York: Clarkson N. Potter Inc., 1980), pp. 108.

Benedetti that he often paid “two or three times the real price for almost everything he purchased...”⁸¹ By June 1435 it is documented that Gilles’ relatives appealed to both King Charles VII of France and Pope Eugene IV to disavow Gilles’ exorbitant spending, and they succeeded in gaining an edict on July 2nd 1435 forbidding Gilles from selling anymore of his property.⁸² However this did not apply to the Duke of Brittany, Jean V, who had “sound personal reasons for refusing to ratify Charles’ edict.”⁸³ By the year 1440 Gilles was in dire straits in terms of money, and it was on May 15th 1440 that Gilles made a violent entry into the Church of Saint-Etienne-de-Mer-Morte in order to re-possess land that he had previously sold to Geoffroy le Farron in 1438. Gilles then took in chains and detained Jean le Farron, a priest, his brother Geoffroy, as well as Duke Jean V’s tax collector and sergeant-general. This act simultaneously offended Charles VII, Duke Jean V and the Church.⁸⁴ It was then during this year that Gilles de Rais was tried for various crimes:

...more or less five years ago in a lower hall of the castle at Triffauges, belonging to his wife, in the diocese of Maillezais, he had several signs, figures, and characters traced by certain masters like François Prelati, of Italian decent, self-styled expert in the forbidden art of geomancy; and...he had these same signs traced in the earth by Jean de La Riviere, and Antione de Palerne, a Lombard, as well as by a man named Louis, and other magicians and conjurors of demons, and had them conjure and divine, and he invoked and had them invoke evil spirits answering to the names of Barron, Oriens, Beelzebub, and Belial, by means of fire, incense, myrrh, aloes and other aromatics... while they genuflected to obtain responses from these same evil spirits, ready to offer and sacrifice to them and to adore them; the said Gilles, the accused, wanted to conclude a pact with them in order to obtain and recover knowledge, power, and riches with the assistance of these evil spirits...⁸⁵

Other accusations levied against Gilles include human sacrifice, sodomy and the mass murder and torture of children. The trial of Gilles de Rais, however, remains highly suspect and a topic of scholarly contention as Elizabeth Butler writes:

⁸¹ Jean Benedetti, *Gilles de Rais: The Authentic Bluebeard* (London: Peter Davies Ltd 1971), pp. 128.

⁸² *Ibid.*, pp. 135.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, pp. 136.

⁸⁴ Leonard Wolf, *Bluebeard: The Life and Crimes of Gilles de Rais* (New York: Clarkson N. Potter Inc., 1980), pp. 172-173.

⁸⁵ Georges Bataille, *The Trial of Gilles de Rais* (Paris: Jean-Jaques Pauvert, 1990), pp. 172-173.

there are few darker and more revolting stories in the annals of cruelty and crime than those related by Gilles and his associates before the Ecclesiastical and Civil Courts in 1440... yet since they were extorted by means of torture from his so-called accomplices, and confirmed by Gilles after the threat of like treatment (and possibly the treatment itself) had broken his nerve, they are probably quite as fictitious as those attributed to his mythical namesake...⁸⁶

It is almost impossible to glean the private psychology of a man who lived so long ago, and whether the allegations of the mass murder and torture of children ever took place is one that will not be contested in this paper, for the truth to these allegations has no relevance to the subject matter of this study.

Thus, by the time of Gilles' trial in 1440 both those that proclaim his innocence and his guilt agree that he was in dire financial straits, and it is commonly argued that Gilles thus turned to alchemy and necromancy in order to recoup his fortunes. This argument is supported by scholars on both sides of the debate of Gilles' innocence, namely, Jean Benedetti⁸⁷, Leonard Wolf⁸⁸, Saloman Reinarch⁸⁹, Elizabeth Butler⁹⁰ and Richard Kieckhefer.⁹¹ Indeed, during the Ecclesiastical Trial Gilles confesses:

...the said accused stated and confessed that he was told on his return that at one invocation the said Francois' in his absence, François had seen the demon named Barron and spoken with him... and he, the accused, upon learning this, charged Francois to ask that same devil what he wanted of him and to assure him that whatever the devil wanted he would give, with the exception of his life and soul, provided that in this way, the devil conceded and gave him what he asked for; the said accused adding that he intended to ask for knowledge, power, and riches, in order to recover the original state of his lordship and power...''⁹²

⁸⁶ Elizabeth Butler, *Ritual Magic* (Sutton Publishing, Gloucestershire, 1998), pp. 100.

⁸⁷ Jean Benedetti, *Gilles de Rais: The Authentic Bluebeard* (London: Peter Davies Ltd 1971), pp. 145.

⁸⁸ Leonard Wolf, *Bluebeard: The Life and Crimes of Gilles de Rais* (New York: Clarkson N. Potter Inc., 1980), pp. 120.

⁸⁹ Salomon Reinach, "Gilles de Rais", *Cults, Myths and Religions* (Editions Ernest Leroux, Paris, 1905-1923).

⁹⁰ Elizabeth Butler, *Ritual Magic* (Sutton Publishing, Gloucestershire, 1998), pp. 101.

⁹¹ Richard Kieckhefer, *Forbidden Rites: A Necromancer's Manual of the Fifteenth Century* (Pennsylvania State University Press, Pennsylvania, 1998), pp 186-187.

⁹² Georges Bataille, *The Trial of Gilles de Rias* (Paris: Jean-Jaques Pauvert, 1990), pp. 198.

Gilles' motives for using magic are both easier to argue for and are also supported by ample evidence, besides the circumspect confessions, namely, the fact that François Prelati did exist. "Prelati was most assuredly a magician; the descriptions of the various evocations tally with the instructions found in ritual texts, reveals an all too likely state of affairs."⁹³ Gilles' and Prelati's rituals and the motives for them closely relate to those found within *The Munich Manual*, and there are various connections to be made between Gilles' trial, *The Munich Manual* and the aims of this study.

During the trial, note is made of Prelati stating that "François was exceptionally gifted and agreeable to converse with, speaking Latin eloquently and learnedly and that he applied himself zealously to the affairs of the said Gilles, the accused."⁹⁴ It is also of note that François is the one who oversees and conducts many of Gilles' later rituals and is someone whom Leonard Wolf names in passing as a priest.⁹⁵ Prelati and the many others who were Gilles' sponsors demonstrate that it is literate learned men who conduct necromancy. This idea is further established, and another connection can be drawn between *The Munich Manual* and Gilles Trails in the following passage:

Gilles, the accused, stated and confessed that in order to perform and the said invocations they traced signs in the form of a circle, or a cross, and of characters in the earth; and that the said François possessed a book that he had brought from Italy, so he said, in which there were the names of many demons and words to conjure and invoke them by...⁹⁶

This book, which Prelati is said to have possessed, must have been similar to the *Munich Manual* in which one can likewise find all the elements mentioned in Gilles' confession. The drawing of circles, or crosses in the earth along with characters and a list of demons can similarly be found therein. This also confirms that it is Prelati who owns a book on necromancy, further establishing Prelati as a literate, learned man who was conducting these invocations on behalf of Gilles de Rais.

⁹³ Elizabeth Butler, *Ritual Magic* (Sutton Publishing, Gloucestershire, 1998), pp. 101.

⁹⁴ Georges Bataille, *The Trial of Gilles de Rias* (Paris: Jean-Jaques Pauvert, 1990), pp. 200.

⁹⁵ Leonard Wolf, *Bluebeard: The Life and Crimes of Gilles de Rais* (New York: Clarkson N. Potter Inc., 1980), pp. 122.

⁹⁶ Georges Bataille, *The Trial of Gilles de Rias* (Paris: Jean-Jaques Pauvert, 1990), pp. 198.

Finally, it is also important to note that throughout the trial, Gilles states that he was entirely unwilling to give over his life or his soul to the demons which he and Prelati invoked, and that in their eyes they had never strayed from the Christian faith. This fact is displayed in two passages of Gilles' trial, namely "...in the aforesaid invocations or the like he [Gilles de Rais] said he believed that divine clemency and the intercession of the Church, from which his heart and his belief have never strayed..."⁹⁷ This belief is further affirmed in Gilles and Prelati's last meeting:

Lord President then ordered the said François to return to his room... Whereupon the said accused, turning to the said François, spoke in tears and gasps to him in French: 'Goodbye, François, my friend! Never again shall we see each other in this world; I pray that God gives you plenty of patience and understanding, and be sure, provided you have plenty of patience and trust in God, we will meet again in the great joy of paradise! Pray to God for me, and I will pray for you!' upon which saying, he embraced the same François, who was taken away immediately."⁹⁸

This passage is considered without contention as Gilles being truthful, and it is understandable that Gilles de Rais truly believed that they would see one another again in Heaven. It is a shame that Prelati is not recorded as giving an answer, but this emotional display of faith and conviction can once again be connected to the *Munich Manual* in which the necromancer is or once was a member or had close ties to the clergy. Within the *Munich Manual* the most common invocation is the name of, or alludes to the power of, God himself. Kieckhefer states that necromancers "saw themselves as having a power analogous to that by which Christ astonished those about him (Mk 1:27, Lk 4:36), that of commanding unclean spirits and compelling their obedience."⁹⁹ This is further shown in Conjuraton Experiment no. 7 in which the necromancer "invokes the power of God; events in the life of Christ; various sacred personages (Mary, the saints, then specifically the apostles, martyrs, confessors, virgins, and widows); the sacred name of God (which brings great fear to 'all things in heaven, on earth, and in hell)...'"¹⁰⁰

⁹⁷ Ibid., pp. 202.

⁹⁸ Ibid., pp. 194.

⁹⁹ Richard Kieckhefer, *Forbidden Rites: A Necromancer's Manual of the Fifteenth Century* (Pennsylvania State University Press, Pennsylvania, 1998), pp. 131.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., pp. 133.

Thus, the necromancer in question need not be a man without faith but rather a man who is commanding the power of God over the demonic spirits he wishes to control. Leonard Wolf provides one of the incantations Gilles and Prelati were supposed to have performed, and it is closely linked to the above passage from the *Munich Manual*: “I conjure you, Barron, Satan, Belial, Beelzebub, by the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit; by the Virgin Mary and all the saints to appear in person, so that you may speak to us and fulfill our desires.”¹⁰¹ We will never know to what extent François Prelati thought himself a man of God, but it is important to draw this connection to the mindset of Gilles de Rais, who may have truly believed that in the case of his demonic invocations, by not giving over his life or soul that he was still a true and honest Christian.

There are many connections between the *Munich Manual* and the trial of Gilles de Rais which demonstrate the relationship between a necromancer and his courtly patron. One finds in both texts the idea that necromancy was the practice of learned literate men, who owned and used books for their magical invocations. There is also a clear connection between the wishes of Gilles de Rais, “that he intended to ask for knowledge, power, and riches, in order to recover the original state of his lordship and power...”¹⁰² and the experiments listed within the *Munich Manual*, “the necromancers and their clients dreamed of discovering wealth, sexual fulfillment, favour and promotion, power over adversaries, entertainment, and knowledge of secret and future matters.”¹⁰³ The practice, clientele and intentions of 15th century necromancy are consistent in both sources.

¹⁰¹ Leonard Wolf, *Bluebeard: The Life and Crimes of Gilles de Rais* (New York: Clarkson N. Potter Inc., 1980) pp. 127.

¹⁰² Georges Bataille, *The Trial of Gilles de Rias* (Paris: Jean-Jaques Pauvert, 1990), pp. 198.

¹⁰³ Richard Kieckhefer, *Forbidden Rites: A Necromancer's Manual of the Fifteenth Century* (Pennsylvania State University Press, Pennsylvania, 1998), pp. 188.

Chapter 6: Nider, the Inquisitor and the Fusion of Elite Necromantic Practice, the General Usage of Common Magic, and the Development of the Witch Cult

By looking at the above examples it can be assumed that necromantic practice was alive and well during the late medieval period of the 15th century, however this practice was well within the domain of the educated and the elite of society. To practice necromancy, one had to read and recite Latin as well as have knowledge of how ritual functioned and an idea of the relationship between the power of God and his divine power over demons. It has been argued that necromancy was thus mostly used by what Kieckhefer describes as men belonging to the ‘clerical underworld’¹⁰⁴ of society who were then sponsored by wealthy courtly patrons to fulfill their various desires and ends. Due to the morally suspect nature of necromancy it was an art practiced only by a select few. It can be stated with confidence that with the pushback by both secular and ecclesiastical powers, the Inquisition’s enforcement of necromancy’s illegality and its use as a popular slander tool all helped to ensure that necromancy was at best a fringe practice, with only those clerics of a morally suspect nature and desperate nobles willing to sponsor the craft.

It is of great interest to this study then to consider how the fringe practice of necromancy contributed to one of the most famous mass paranoia events in history, the witch craze, which began in the fifteenth century and continued on into the early modern period. How did the art of necromancy, an art mainly perpetrated by learned men of clerical backgrounds and sponsored by the courtly elite become so confused that it evolved into a vast conspiracy made up of mostly rural, common folk, most of whom were women? To understand this, we must look at the confusion of the inquisitors tasked with persecuting necromancy and heresy and how these inquisitors began to judge common forms of magic as being no different from necromantic practice, thus leading to perceptions of a great satanic conspiracy.

Norman Cohn writes:

At first glance it may seem incredible that the reality of the magician, with his abstruse technical literature, his elaborate professional techniques, for mastering and binding demons, his incessant invocation of God, could have contributed anything at all to

¹⁰⁴ Richard Kieckhefer, *Forbidden Rites: A Necromancer’s Manual of the Fifteenth Century* (Pennsylvania State University Press, Pennsylvania, 1998), pp. 12.

fantasies about illiterate peasant women sexually seduced by demons and enlisted in the service of Satan. Nevertheless, it did contribute something and that something can be defined.¹⁰⁵

For greater understanding of this late medieval development we will look closely at the study made by Michael D. Bailey and how in his work *From Sorcery to Witchcraft: Clerical Conceptions of Magic in the Later Middle Ages*, he argues that necromantic practice directly fed into emerging conceptions of witchcraft.¹⁰⁶ Bailey argues:

clerical authorities were generally familiar with the essentially elite system of necromancy. But there also existed in western Christendom a widespread and diffuse system of common spells, charms, blessings, potions, powders, and talismans employed by many people at all levels of medieval society, including, it should be noted, many clerics... Critically, once this system had become established in the later Middle Ages, the idea that sorcery might be performed by means other than complex necromantic ritual seems not to have figured significantly in clerical thought. The need to harmonize learned theories of magic with far more widespread common practices is evident in many clerical writings on the subject, although only in an ironic sense, since clerical authorities never recognized that they were dealing with two different and highly divergent systems...¹⁰⁷

Norman Cohn echoes this idea when he writes, “the first step towards the great witch-hunt was taken when the traditional teaching of the Church was applied... to the relatively unfamiliar phenomenon of ritual magic.”¹⁰⁸

This confusion can be seen in John XXII’s *Super illius specula*. The purpose of the *Super illius specula* was for inquisitors to crack down on necromancy, “the type of sorcery to which these decrees refer is rather clearly elite necromancy...”¹⁰⁹ however the true repercussions of this decree, Bailey argues, were wider ranging than John XXII had realized, and it affected many more than simply the educated necromancer. “By commanding papal inquisitors to take action against

¹⁰⁵ Norman Cohn, *Europe’s Inner Demons: The Demonization of Christians in Medieval Christendom* (Pimlico, London), pp. 110.

¹⁰⁶ Michael D. Bailey, ‘From Sorcery to Witchcraft: Clerical Conceptions of Magic in the Later Middle Ages’, *Speculum*, 76, (2001), pp. 965.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 965-966.

¹⁰⁸ Norman Cohn, *Europe’s Inner Demons: The Demonization of Christians in Medieval Christendom* (Pimlico, London), pp. 111.

¹⁰⁹ Michael D. Bailey, ‘From Sorcery to Witchcraft: Clerical Conceptions of Magic in the Later Middle Ages’, *Speculum*, 76, (2001), pp. 967.

all sorcerers, however, Pope John ensured that his fears would affect the lives of many people living far from courtly halls of power, people familiar with far different forms of magic.”¹¹⁰ From inquisitorial documents such as Bernard Gui’s *Practica inquisitionis heretice pravitatis*,¹¹¹ even though very little is devoted to magical practice, the work demonstrates this confusion of elite necromancy and what Baily coins as ‘common magic.’ Baily writes:

What is so interesting here is the fact that, upon close examination, these questions reveal that the type of sorcery Gui thought inquisitors would typically be encountering was in fact common sorcery, not elite necromancy. For example, Gui specifically instructed inquisitors to ask accused sorcerers about ‘curing diseases by conjurations or incantations,’ yet medical magic figured almost not at all in elite necromantic practice. On the other hand, by far the most typical use of common sorcery was to heal, or conversely to inflict disease or suffering.¹¹²

Thus, Baily states that the first step was made towards the confusion between necromancy and common magic and the development of the idea of witchcraft.¹¹³ It must be stated that Gui was never too concerned about magical practice, but over the course of the middle ages, as fears of necromancy grew, so too did this confusion between these different types of magic. “...even late into the fourteenth century clerical concerns about sorcery remained focused on elite practices... Instead that concept [witchcraft] appeared, in a recognizable form, only in the early decades of the fifteenth century, being codified for the first time in several sources written in the 1430s.”¹¹⁴

There is great scholarly speculation about the emergence of the newly developing ideas of the witch cult and its ties to heretical groups such as the Waldensians in this period. Scholars such as Norman Cohn place great weight on the Waldensians and other earlier heretical groups such as the Cathars and how their persecution likewise also lead to ideas of witchcraft.¹¹⁵ The rise of the perceived conspiracy of the witch cult has its own complex history besides simply being a misconception of necromancy, but nevertheless necromantic practice did play a large role in the development of the ideas of witchcraft.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Ibid., pp. 968.

¹¹² Ibid., pp. 968-969.

¹¹³ Ibid., pp. 971.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 976.

¹¹⁵ Norman Cohn, *Europe’s Inner Demons: The Demonization of Christians in Medieval Christendom* (Pimlico, London), pp. 51.

Norman Cohn writes how the practice of Necromancy does have many parallels with witchcraft:

In ritual magic demons were imagined as participating in a far more direct and individual way than had been the case with ordinary magic... now magicians were conjuring demons by name, summoning them to manifest themselves in visible form, giving them precise instructions: and this implied a new and closer form of collaboration...¹¹⁶

While all magic was assumed by the Church as being the work of demons, it had “been understood in a very vague and general sense.”¹¹⁷ This was a change that explicitly connected magic to satanic worship and while “the magicians were not Satanists...God was still invoked, and his omnipotence affirmed. But this did not make the proceedings any less blasphemous, indeed heretical, when viewed in terms of the Catholic doctrine.”¹¹⁸ While the necromancer may have made a clear distinction between his craft and satanic supplication, the Church did not.

During the 15th century the first books of clerical thought began to circulate about the practice of witchcraft, and these works, according to Bailey, are what finally fused common magic, necromantic practice, and real heretical groups to create the witch cult that so terrified late medieval and early modern Europe:

The church now equated the performance of common sorcery, involving only a few words or simple gestures and aimed at curing or causing illness or affecting the weather, with hidden yet necessary acts of worship and postulated a preexisting pact between the sorcerer and demons that made such magic possible. Indeed, such sorcerers, whom in an earlier era the church had seen more as victims and dupes of demonic illusions and had hardly taken seriously, now became all the more terrible in that they were capable of commanding demonic forces with only a few simple words or signs.¹¹⁹

Bailey states that the works of Johannes Nider, a Dominican theologian, and his work the *Formicarius*, written between 1437-1438, is one of the most significant of the period, because he

¹¹⁶ Ibid., pp. 110.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., pp. 111.

¹¹⁹ Michael D. Bailey, ‘From Sorcery to Witchcraft: Clerical Conceptions of Magic in the Later Middle Ages’, *Speculum*, 76, (2001), pp. 977.

is one of the first to devote an entire book to “witches and their deceptions.”¹²⁰ Bailly argues that this work is the most extensive and influential work on witchcraft, and its importance and popularity are evidenced by the numerous manuscript copies and printed editions continuing until 1692. In addition, Nider’s document is a primary source of the infamous *Malleus Malefactorum* written in 1486.

The portrayals of witchcraft presented in the *Formicarius* were loosely based on the trials of Peter of Bern, a secular judge who “had conducted a series of trials for maleficium in the Simme valley of the western Alps in the early years of the fifteenth century,”¹²¹ however the original transcripts of these trials have been lost, and from the fragments that remain little evidence can be found that the sabbaths in the *Formicarius* even took place.¹²² Thus, Nider may have “freely interpreted”¹²³ stories of necromancy and ritual magic being practiced in the Alps of which Peter of Bern also writes, and these trials may have become confused with witchcraft. Bailly states that Nider’s work and its resulting influence is crucial to our understanding of the relationship between necromancy and the witch-cult:

..the clerical conception of witchcraft grew directly from ecclesiastical authorities' understanding of common sorcery, and more basically from their conflation of common sorcery and elite necromancy. Here the writings of Johannes Nider are critical sources, above all his *Formicarius*, for a close reading of this work reveals two distinct notions of magic placed side by side: full-fledged witchcraft and the earlier conception of "mere" demonic sorcery. Thus, in this treatise we get a picture almost of the very moment when sorcery became witchcraft in clerical minds.¹²⁴

By linking common magic with necromancy and witchcraft, Nider and others had made it appear that demonic magic was being practiced to a far larger extent, and that these witches were in clear supplication to Satan. Where once a common incantation for good weather or healing the sick was seen as simple superstition and relatively harmless by Ecclesiastical and secular

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Ibid., pp. 980

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Ibid., pp. 981.

¹²⁴ Ibid., pp. 979.

authorities, such common practices now had become linked to a far reaching satanic conspiracy.¹²⁵

The last connection to the witch craze and necromancy is how necromancy, a practice mainly perpetrated by learned clerical men, become associated with the image of the female witch, and how, ironically, the majority of those tried and executed during the witch craze were women, even though necromancy was a practice primarily originally created and utilized by men. The following quote suggests the early identification of men as necromancers:

Surviving court records from the fourteenth century reveal that in trials for maleficium prior to 1350, as notions of common sorcery and necromancy were only beginning to collide, men constituted over 70 percent of the accused, and this decided majority may well reflect a prejudice on the part of authorities against believing that women could also be capable of such crimes. After all, the system of magic that these authorities understood and were concerned about was essentially learned necromancy, which, insofar as it was mainly a clerical form of magic, was therefore also mainly a male form of magic. Certainly, women had long been active in the common tradition of medieval magic as village healers, wise women, and soothsayers, but such women could hardly be suspected of anything like learned necromancy. They had neither the training to perform such acts nor, in the view of most clerical authorities, the capacity for such knowledge.¹²⁶

While there is a great range of scholarly debate in this topic, Baily suggests that the answer is inherent in the confusion of common magical practice with necromancy, stating that common magic was regarded as little different and indeed synonymous with educated necromancy: “authorities began to perceive a system whereby simple, uneducated people might also gain terrible power over demons, indeed far greater power than even learned necromancers wielded...”¹²⁷

After the release of works such as Johannes Nider’s *Formicarius*, that confused common magic, necromancy, and witchcraft, one can see a gradual shift in the perceptions of who was committing such crimes. There is evidence in the records that before 1350 the majority of

¹²⁵ Ibid., pp. 985.

¹²⁶ Ibid., pp. 986.

¹²⁷ Ibid., pp. 986-987.

individuals tried for sorcery were men, however the percentage of men fell while the percentage of women grew. By the beginning of the 15th century women comprised up to 70 percent of those tried. By the 16th and 17th century, during the notorious witch hunts, more than 80 percent of those tried and convicted were female, and those males involved were primarily related to the women considered to be witches.

The ecclesiastical confusion of the early 15th century eventually led to the accusations of women and satanic magic. By the time of the *Malleus Malificarum*, which in itself was profoundly misogynistic, it further cemented the ideas expressed earlier by men such as Nider.

Chapter 7: Conclusion.

Magic was a fluid and constantly evolving cultural construct, which might be understood in the medieval period as having a fantastical aspect, that was in some way mysterious and contained an inherent otherness; it was also an art that required knowledge of scientific and religious practice. In this paper it is argued that necromancy was a clear branch of magic used in the high to late medieval period and that it was an art practiced by learned men of clerical background and mainly utilized for elite courtly patrons. Necromancy was not unlike the clerical craft of exorcism which was mainly used to compel demons via the power of God to perform a specific action, with the main departure from exorcism being that instead of compelling the demon to depart, the rituals and incantations instead compelled said demons to perform a specific function.

The art of necromancy differed from that of other ‘common magic’ of the time in part because it was spread via books of complex rituals and incantations generally written in Latin, and thus was the domain of the learned, who were primarily male and had some previous clerical knowledge. In addition, the purposes of necromancy differed from those of common magic. Due to the gray area that magic represented in the high medieval period, it found its way into courtly circles where authorities began to fear the practice of necromancy and its diabolical connections. This culminated in Pope John XXII’s decree in 1326 which allowed the Inquisition jurisdiction over all cases of black magic, where previously it had only jurisdiction over magic that was clearly heretical in nature.

The aims of necromancy, as provided in the *Munich Manual*, had little to do with healing, the weather, or other practices useful to the common man or woman, but rather boasted rituals which would aid in finding riches, influencing the perceptions of others and gleaning knowledge. With these ends in high demand and the unquestioning belief in the efficacy of the craft, many would-be necromancers found themselves rich patrons. The *Munich Manual* is then a clear link to actual necromantic practices of the 15th century.

Two infamous individuals who exemplify the type of person who used necromancy were Gilles de Rais and François Prelati. Prelati is a good example of a learned man of clerical

background who practiced the craft for the benefit of a patron from elite courtly society, namely Gilles de Rais. Gilles worked with various necromancers to help recoup his dwindling fortune until finally gaining the sustained help of the sorcerer Prelati. Both the types of rituals these two men performed and their motives for doing so, are well reflected in their confessions, and both align well with the rituals and common reasons for performing necromancy as outlined within the *Munich Manual*.

The art of necromancy, although a fringe practice, had a significant impact on late medieval society, particularly on women and the development of the idea of the witch. The increasing fear of the art of necromancy by high authorities became associated with other forms of magic, and little distinction was made by inquisitors between necromancy and more benign practices of magic. This reached its zenith when perceived ideas of necromancy merged with ideas of common magic and heresy to form the late medieval image of the witch cult. Ironically, although the most selfish and perhaps devious uses of magic were performed via necromancy within the domain of the learned, wealthy or privileged men of society such as Gilles de Rais, the height of the witch hunt focused persecution on women and those who were more likely to be underprivileged. Thus, a fringe practice associated with learned men evolved into a vast satanic conspiracy associated with rural women.

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