Review of "Between the Devil and the Host: Imagining Witchcraft in Early Modern Poland", by Michael Östling

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Witches and witchcraft have fascinated not only the people of the pre-modern era, but also modern scholars who produced a tremendous amount of scholarship that has covered not only a large geographic area but also a wide variety of topics related to this subject in European history. Scholars have studied the legal and cultural underpinnings of witch-hunts; records of witch trials and works on witchcraft have served scholars as sources for the history of women and gender and the history of folk medical practices in the pre-modern era. Anyone interested in the history of witchcraft and magic in Europe can find an almost overwhelming amount scholarship on the subject, focusing on the German lands, Italy, England, and France. But readers interested in areas beyond western and southern Europe would have more problems learning about the topic, unless they were able to read in the local languages. This is certainly the case for Poland. Scholarship on witchcraft in Poland has been quite impressive but, save for a few articles in English, German, or French, it has been limited to those able to read Polish. Michael Ostling's book Between the Devil and the Host is the first large scale attempt to remedy this situation.

Ostling's study not only offers a discussion of a region rarely studied by western scholars, it also offers more general methodological reminders to modern readers interested in the topic of witchcraft against an anachronistic perception of the subject. Far too often witches and witchcraft have been studied in the context of deviance. Ostling's study meticulously documents that there was in fact a very blurred boundary between practices approved by contemporary writers, judges, and clergy and those that could bring one to the stake. For example, discussing the popular agricultural manual by Jakub Kazimierz Haur, Skład abo skarbiec znakomitych sekretów oekonomiej ziemianńskiej, published in Cracow in 1689, Ostling notes that the advice and practices described in this book are very nearly identical with those that appear in witch-trials (113); all this, despite ‘Haur's strenuous insistence that in caring for cattle and milk-production one must “perform no sort of superstition” but trust “in the Lord GOD’” (113). Similarly, works, even those written by clergymen, including the Jesuit Benedykt Chmielewski's encyclopedia Nowe Ateny, describing healing methods and herbs used for medical purposes trace very closely to practices employed by those who were brought to courts on charges of witchcraft. As Ostling rightly notes, depending on the context, ‘[w]hat had been condemnable superstition could be refigured as pious practice’ (115). Indeed, ‘the use of herbs could be grounds for suspicion of witchcraft, but could also be a fully orthodox method to protect oneself or one's cattle from witchcraft’ (116). What Ostling's findings highlight is the ‘common set of assumptions, tropes, metaphors, and structural relations’ in early modern Polish society.

The book offers a valuable analysis of popular and elite practices, assumptions, and cultural tropes. It asks an important question, ‘What counts as Christianity?’ (185) Between the Devil and the Host demonstrates (especially in Part II) that in the use of Catholic ritual or sacred objects in magic—for example, the Eucharistic wafer—the action of those accused of witchcraft ‘was fully in keeping with the symbolic logic, if not the law, of Catholic Eucharistic doctrine.’ Similarly, the employment of other elements
of Catholic rituals, such as ‘the holy water, blessed herbs and the Lord's Prayer,’ Ostling argues, ‘stands as testimony to the strength and the depth, not the weakness and superficiality, of peasant Christianity in early modern Poland’ (164).

Ostling persuasively demonstrates the deep penetration of Catholic tenets and rituals into even peasant populations. But the case may be somewhat overstated. Briefly discussing anti-Jewish accusations of host desecration and ritual murder (mostly based not on primary sources but on the works of other scholars), the author argues that these ‘trials against Jews or witches ... serve not only as indices of antisemitism or demonological obsession, but also of the spread and penetration into the Christian populace of Eucharistic piety... [T]he proliferation of trials for host desecration from the late sixteenth century onward expresses the success of Tridentine Eucharistic devotion among the Christians in Poland’ (169). It is true that the awareness of the meaning of the Eucharist seems to have penetrated to the populace, as even criminals stealing silver from churches were aware of the delicate nature of the objects directly related to the Eucharistic worship. Yet, it is unclear whether some of that awareness was ‘a success of Tridentine Eucharistic devotion’ or, at least among the thieves, was related to awareness of the severe punishments meted out to thieves who were accused of ‘sacrilege’.¹ One should also not entirely discount the low level of religious education in early modern Poland, where as late as the eighteenth century religious leaders warned against allowing priests ‘to join in marriage those who do not know Pater Noster or the basic tenets of the Holy Catholic Faith’.² So, perhaps, the accusations, including anti-Jewish accusations, are not necessarily evidence of ‘success’ but a tool in disseminating the message. Still, Ostling is right that the vocabulary central to Eucharistic worship did indeed become part of broader culture.

While some readers may object to the wide chronological span of the book, demanding a discussion of what changed over the long period discussed, Ostling is right in emphasizing continuity. It is true that in many areas of life and culture between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries were marked by change. But, as the author notes, it is equally important to remember that some areas of life, like agriculture where methods of agricultural production, animal husbandry, even natural healing methods, for example, changed little, displayed more stability over centuries. Indeed, some of the areas of life did not alter until modern technology propelled change. Beer production, for example, did not change much between the sixteenth and late nineteenth centuries when Louis Pasteur invented new methods of beer fermentation. So, too, milk production and preservation methods remained largely the same till the twentieth century, and until then a close ‘association of witches with milk-theft or milk spoiling continued’ (3). Thus while the intellectual and political history may have witnessed significant change in the period covered by the book, ‘everyday concerns and fears’ display a far greater continuity.

Given the dearth of works on early modern Poland, Part I ‘History’ (other parts are Part II ‘Religion’ and Part III ‘Demonology’) will appeal not only to ‘social and legal historians’ (vii), but to all early modernists. This part provides a very useful and

¹ Such cases are discussed in Magda Teter, Sinners on Trial: Jews and Sacrilege after the Reformation (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), thought the author could not have known the work.
² Source quoted in Magda Teter, Jews and Heretics in Catholic Poland: A Beleaguered Church in the Post-Reformation Era (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 140.
thorough overview of social and legal structures in early modern Poland, helping historians of early modern European history include Poland in their surveys, and studies. Early modern European history has been focused on western, or southern Europe, Poland, for a long time the largest European country during this period has been neglected. Yet, understanding Poland can also help one to understand broader early modern cultural, social, legal, and religious transformations. Part I offers a corrective on the numbers of witch trials in Poland, and a summary of the historiographical discussions on the topic, helping broaden our understanding of this European-wide phenomenon. It also discusses demographic trends during this period, such as population decline and the role of the economic conditions in Poland, which remained throughout this period a mostly rural society.

Unlike the situation in Italy, for example, in Poland, witch trials were handled by secular, not ecclesiastical courts. Just as Ostling helpfully highlights the similarities between the practices approved by contemporary writers and clergy with those that sometimes sent the accused to the stake, he also reveals a very complex attitude of the Catholic writers toward witchcraft, who often criticized the judicial process, or even, opposed trials of witches entirely, as was the case with Bishop Kazimierz Florian Czartoryski in his pastoral letter in 1669. The letter, originally written in Latin, was translated into Polish, and republished in ‘at least nine editions between 1670 and 1739’ (55-56). To be sure, some of the Church's opposition to witch trials in Poland stemmed from a conflict over jurisdiction and the authority of ecclesiastical courts. This was particularly obvious in the strong opposition to secular trials of witches by Bishop Krzysztof Antoni Szembek, who, in 1703, succeeded in obtaining a rescript ‘forbidding town and village courts [in Szembek's diocese] from trying witchcraft cases without prior examination in an ecclesiastical court’ (56). Other bishops obtained similar rescripts, resulting in the occasional punishment of officials for prosecuting witch cases, as was the case in a 1716 witch trial that was apparently ‘marked by exceptional brutality.’

Ostling rightly points out that Polish secular courts ‘applied torture routinely, and the resulting death sentence was very nearly a foregone conclusion’ (61). The evidence from Poland and the contrast between the judicial proceedings in Poland and elsewhere in Europe help historians understand better the role of political structures in the intensity of judicial violence, and religious transformations, as well. Although strong monarchies have often been credited with the success of ‘confessionalization,’ Ostling reminds us (after Brian Levack) that in states with a strong central administration the number of trials was smaller than in states, ‘where central power was weak’ (100-101). While the book provides rich material for studying Poland, and occasionally evokes European context, it sometimes lacks a broader historical analysis, explaining what may be different from other European places, or conversely what may be similar. One would like to know how the Polish cases fit those found elsewhere in Europe. Are they different? If so, how and why? If not, why not? What could Poland tell us about Europe? Why, for example, is there more pleasure in the Italian cases of magic and witchcraft, and in the stories of demons, than those found in Poland? Sometimes, with chiefly descriptive summaries of the cases, especially in Part III, the book reads more as a recovery than analysis.

On this see also, Teter, Sinners on Trial.
One reason for the lack of such deeper analysis may be rooted in the fact that the book is impressively deeply grounded in Polish historiography, but draws less on Western historiography of similar phenomena elsewhere in Europe. The area where author engages with some of the earlier Western scholarship is mostly focused on its critique, at times too heavy-handed and polemical, unnecessarily filled with jargon and tedious prose, to help readers understand Poland in its broader European context. In fact, Western historiography on the subject is currently too vast to be so easily dismantled, so it would have been more useful to use it to explain than to argue. Indeed, the ‘Conclusions’ illustrate this problem. These read more as a didactic, methodological postscript, than as the conclusions of an impressively complex book on witchcraft in the much-neglected region of eastern Europe.

Although Between the Devil and the Host does briefly discuss Jews, it takes little account for the presence of other non-Catholic groups, and their role in the shaping of the narratives of witchcraft. Even in the discussion of Jews, the author at times misses the connection between trials against Jews and those involving magic, not just in the use of similar tropes but in the actual evolution of trials from accusations against women of magic/witchcraft to anti-Jewish host desecration trials. For example, the archival records show that the well-known 1630 trial of Jews in Przemyśl started as a trial of a woman accused of misusing the Eucharistic wafer in healing magic, precisely in the manner that Ostling has discussed in his book. Yet, for political reasons, the trial evolved into an anti-Jewish host desecration trial.4

Despite these occasional shortcomings in analysis and sometimes in prose, Michael Ostling’s Between the Devil and the Host is an exceedingly valuable book. It can join the growing English-language historiography on early modern Poland that will allow Western scholars situate their own work on other European regions in a broader, more thoroughly represented context.5 It is regrettable that Between the Devil and the Host is not priced affordably, since one could imagine it not only on syllabi for courses on Polish history but also on early modern European history, the history of witchcraft and magic, and early modern law.

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4 Akta m. Przemyśla 81, 235, 824, 838 in Archiwum Państwowe w Przemyślu. On this trial see, Hanna Wegrzynek, ‘Czarna Legenda’ Żydów: Procesy o rzekome mordy rytualne w dawnej Polsce (Warsaw: Bellona, 1995). In English, this trial is now discussed in Teter, Sinners on Trial, chapter 7, though this work would not have been available to Ostling.