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Before the Fire Burns: Trials for Superstition, Magic, and Witchcraft in Sixteenth-Century Bologna [†]

Guido Dall'Olio 

Dipartimento di Scienze della Comunicazione, Studi Umanistici e Internazionali, Università di Urbino Carlo Bo, 61029 Urbino, Italy; guido.dallolio@uniurb.it

[†] Since there is no objective definition of “superstition” (as well as of “magic”), I use this word in its historical and “empirical” meaning, and not as a value judgment. With “superstition”, therefore, I refer only to the rites and the words that inquisitorial and episcopal authorities considered as such in the sources I examine.

Abstract: This article investigates the factors that provoked the trial and death sentence of four witches in Bologna in 1559. That is, it aims to elucidate how a witch hunt (albeit a small one) was triggered in a context where demonology was present, but the persecution of witchcraft had been kept at a relatively moderate level (and continued to be so after that). Scholarly contributions on witchcraft and witch hunts are now innumerable, but in general, scholars have focused on the social relations between the alleged witches and the community in which they lived, on the theological culture of the judges, or even on the deep roots of the sabbath. An analysis of a series of trials for magical and superstitious practices held in Bologna shortly before the 1559 convictions reveals how it was possible to move from simple sorcery to actual witchcraft. This transition was accomplished both because of the malefic nature of some of the spells practiced by the defendants and because of the intervention of diocesan judges who, for various reasons, were more determined than their predecessors to prosecute witchcraft harshly. Although the link between simple superstition and witchcraft has already been explored to some extent, it emerges with particular clarity in these events.

Keywords: magic; superstition; European witch trials; early modern European witchcraft; inquisition; early modern ecclesiastical courts; bologna



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1. Introduction

The history of witchcraft beliefs and witch hunts has been and continues to be an area of research that challenges our knowledge and tools of inquiry. With the publication of *Thinking with Demons* by Stuart Clark, now almost 30 years ago, witchcraft beliefs found their place in the cultural and intellectual history of early modern Europe (Clark 1997; Machielsen 2020). In the meantime, research on the reality of witchcraft and witch hunts in individual European realities, on a national or local scale, has also continued. By now, we have more than one general work on the subject (Ankarloo and Clark 1999–2001; Behringer 2004; Golden 1996; Levack 2006; Montesano 2023). It is crucial, however, to continue research on individual episodes, even seemingly less relevant ones, because the correctness of large syntheses depends not only on the completeness of the analysis, but also and above all on understanding the dynamics of the events, which can only be grasped on a smaller scale.

On 27 May 1559, in Bologna, the second largest city in the Papal States,¹ four women accused of being witches were hanged and then publicly burned. This was the most serious witch-hunting episode in the city's history; nothing like this had ever happened before, nor did it happen afterward. According to the classification developed by William Monter and Brian Levack, it can be considered just a small witch hunt (Levack 2006, pp. 188–89; but see also Behringer 2004, p. 49), but if we relate it to the history of the city, it was an important episode. In fact, it remained in the memory of the inquisitors for a long time, as

the references to those convictions in the papers thirty years later show.² The purpose of this article is to analyze some of the premises from which those convictions arose; what is surprising at first glance, in fact, is that the accusations of witchcraft occurred in a context of rather common magical practices, which until a few years earlier were repressed by much less violent methods. Even though Bolognese church judges had long since accepted the “cumulative concept of witchcraft” (Levack 2006, pp. 32–51), there had been very few accusations of diabolical witchcraft. And, if we look at the reality of Bologna in 1559, we realize that of the many factors that usually contributed to triggering witch hunts, very few were present. The Bolognese witches were no scapegoats, and at that time, there was no crisis or famine; demonic possession, as far as we know, played no role in the accusations (Besides Levack 2006, pp. 176–88; see Voltmer 2006, pp. 1211–13). Why, then, were those convictions pronounced? What kind of relationship existed between “common” superstition and witchcraft? I will attempt here to answer these questions, thus trying to make a contribution to the understanding of a phenomenon that has now been widely investigated but always requires our attention.

The first factor to consider, and maybe also the most important, is that of justice, that is, courts, judges and trials. Prior to 1559 there had been some capital convictions for witchcraft in Bologna. However, as far as we know, these had been individual cases, such as that of Gentile Budrioli (1498), or appendices to trials begun elsewhere, as happened to three defendants in the witch hunt initiated in 1523 in Mirandola by Giovanfrancesco Pico. In 1549, Gentile da Modena, known as “la Ravanella”, from her husband’s surname, was sentenced to be burned at the stake, having been accused of participating in the sabbath. The court most involved had been that of the Inquisition.³ This, moreover, is consistent with what we know of the activity of inquisitors in the late fifteenth and early decades of the sixteenth century, especially of judges who belonged to the Dominican provinces of northern Italy, or to the Observant Congregation of Lombardy (Tavuzzi 2007). In the 1540s, it was again the inquisitors, together with secular authorities, who captured and tried the “Lutherans” of Bologna (Dall’Olio 1999, pp. 159–66). As far as we know, the bishop’s court, though involved in the repression, played a marginal role.

As we shall see, the death sentences of 1559, by contrast, took place during the rule of a reforming bishop, Giovanni Campeggi. As Michael Bailey has pointed out in his study of the Dominican Johannes Nider—one of the founders of the modern concept of witchcraft in the fifteenth century—the fight against superstition and maleficent magic was one aspect of a more general project of Church reform, which aimed to eliminate immorality and ignorance among clerics and laity. Through the construction of a negative model to be combated, which was, not surprisingly, exactly the opposite of the ideal pursued by Western Christianity, the most committed forces in the Church were called together (Bailey 2003). This, of course, did not apply to all reformers. Gabriele Paleotti for example, one of the most important bishops of the Counter-Reformation, who governed the diocese of Bologna from 1566 to 1597, initiated several legal actions against superstition, but he also knew how to curb the excesses of repression.

The bishop, however, was the most important but not the only person responsible for the religious life of the diocese. Almost as important were the personalities and orientations of the bishop’s vicars, that is, the judges who conducted criminal trials. As we shall see later, on the eve of the witch trials of 1559 an important change had occurred: after a serious scandal caused by suspicions of impiety against an episcopal vicar, who was forced to resignate, two judges had been appointed in his place who were certainly strongly motivated to make harsh and final decisions.

The accusations referring to the “cumulative concept of witchcraft” (the sabbath, devil worship, covenant, renunciation of baptism, and so on), which determined the fate of the four sentenced to death, were certainly the result of pressure from the judges. Indeed, these were manifestly impossible actions, which the defendants could not have performed; they also unequivocally traced what the witch-hunters’ treatises had written. In addition to these charges, however, the defendants were accused of using potions, herbs, rituals,

incantations and invocations of the devil, which can very hardly be considered an invention of the judges: these were practices that were widespread in European popular culture of the pre-industrial age. When questioned by bishop vicars, women would describe in detail and with little reticence how those practices were performed. This means that the presence of the “cumulative concept of witchcraft” and judges oriented toward harsh repression were not enough to initiate a witch hunt. Equally important was the culture of the accused, which evidently offered the guardians of orthodoxy an excellent pretext for accusations of complicity with the devil. As we shall see, “mere superstition” and diabolical witchcraft are intrinsically linked.⁴

2. The Bishop against Superstition: The Trials of 1556–1557

In 1553, Giovanni Campeggi was appointed bishop of Bologna; unlike all his predecessors, from the following year, he established his residence in the city, where he remained until at least 1559. This circumstance gives an idea of Campeggi’s orientation. Before the closing of the Council of Trent, in fact, there were not many bishops residing in their own dioceses; moving to one’s own episcopal see already indicated a definite willingness to improve the conditions of religious life. The new bishop intervened vigorously with a decisive reforming action: he called a pastoral visitation (1554–1555), convened several diocesan synods, supported the entry of the Society of Jesus in Bologna, and finally, most importantly from our point of view, he actively dealt with the organization and functioning of the bishop’s tribunal.⁵ The presence and reforming activity of Giovanni Campeggi are most likely at the origin of a substantial group of trials against women accused of magical practices. The records, unfortunately, have come down to us in incomplete form; in particular, it is not possible to precisely reconstruct the role played by the inquisitors and their vicars, although it is quite clear that a substantial part of the trials, at least in the beginning, was conducted by diocesan judges.

Thus, from October 1555 to March 1557, 20 women were tried. For the purposes of this study, we will focus on the seven who were recognized as enchanters and suspected of heresy;⁶ sentences ranged from “perpetual” imprisonment to abjuration (public or private) and to flogging.⁷ Torture was never used in the interrogations of the accused, although at least two of them were made to undress and tied to the rope. This was the practice referred to in the legal jargon as *territo*, that is, a threat of torture, which was not necessarily put into practice.

The most notable feature of these trials is the fact that the magical and superstitious practices for which the defendants were prosecuted related almost exclusively to the sphere of affection and sex. Married and in dispute with their husbands, or alone, sometimes with children, abandoned by their spouses and often by lovers, driven by the need to find protection and economic support, these women almost always led promiscuous lives or even prostituted themselves. In such precarious conditions, in which dependence on the male gender was even stronger than for others, they would try in every possible way to bind men to themselves, who would instead turn away from them, often after mistreating them, leaving them poor and helpless. In other cases they used magic to try to separate men from their mistresses, whether it was their own husbands, or sons or daughters whom they wanted to divert from disapproving acquaintances.⁸ These were, in short, very different situations from the witchcraft cases in which the entire community participated in the identification of a culprit, as was often the case in the Alpine arc or in the countryside; in those cases, a woman who was already isolated and marginal to the community—but often with therapeutic skills to which many resorted—was identified as responsible for individual misfortunes or calamitous events that had affected all the inhabitants. Her archaic, mysterious, and jealously guarded knowledge made her an ideal target for accusations that were often also the outbreak of old grudges.⁹ These city women, on the other hand, practiced their magical arts primarily for themselves, for the reasons mentioned above, but they dispensed their knowledge to relatives and friends, teaching them prayers to recite or rituals to perform in order to win and keep men captivated or

to keep them away from other women. This is why we often find several defendants in a single proceeding: once one of these women was captured, the judge needed only to ask who had taught her how to cast spells—or vice versa, to whom she had taught them—to quickly come to grips with a network of sorceresses who passed on their secrets to each other. As for the latter, what can be gleaned from the trial records leads one to believe that they were not necessarily knowledge and skills slowly accumulated over time—such as might have been knowledge of herbs or observation of natural phenomena—but rather, above all, formulas and rituals that were easy to learn and simple to carry out and therefore widely spread over time and space.¹⁰ Moreover, unlike what usually happened in the countryside, writing frequently intervened in the transmission of this knowledge, either directly or, more often, through the mediation of members of the clergy or other figures. This is a very important fact—even for the judges who tried the accused—because it is a clue to the links that united simple superstitions with the world of learned magic of the invokers of spirits and demons, which had been the object of the inquisitors' attention in the previous century especially and would become so again in the eighteenth century.¹¹

A few examples will better clarify what has just been said. On October 7, 1555, Veronica, daughter of Alessandro Rossi from Pistoia, who had been captured and imprisoned the previous day while in bed with a man who was not her husband, was interrogated by the bishop's vicar. Veronica lived in the city, in the Pratello neighborhood (*contrada del Pratello*); she explained to the judge that she was legally separated from her husband Berto Ungarelli, with whom she had also quarreled in court over the division of property. Even before the separation, the woman, for as many as six years, had been having relations with Cristoforo, weaver of velvets (*veludaro*), with her husband's consent; in all likelihood, although it was only implied in the trial, Berto earned money by prostituting his wife. For about three months, then, Veronica had been linked to Petronio, son of Girolamo, wine transporter (*brentadore*), who was captured with her. Again, however, this was a mercenary relationship: Petronio had helped and supported her after she miscarried. When questioned on 27 October, then, the man expressed himself in unequivocal terms about Veronica:

“Sometimes I sleep with her, but last night [. . .] she was sick [. . .] and I couldn't fuck her, and maybe the last time I fucked her I attacked her with syphilis, because a few days ago I fucked a woman who attacked me with syphilis, and then I fucked Veronica, since I didn't realize I was infected”.¹²

In the second interrogation, on October 29, the judge asked Veronica if she knew any women who did enchantments. The defendant replied that once, while she was in dispute with Petronio, she had confided in a woman whose name she said she did not know; the woman advised her to buy a wax head, cut it into pieces and throw it under the porch of her house. That way, Petronio would never visit her again. Veronica had put into practice that suggestion, but then—she told the judge—the man had gone to her house anyway, and the two of them had laughed together about what had happened. This display of incredulous superiority toward magical practices is often encountered in trials for superstitions; on the one hand, it may be an indication of genuine distrust or at least a highly ambiguous attitude about their possible effects; on the other hand, it is always possible that it was a trial tactic to diminish her responsibility before the judges. In fact, the statement that she did not take that charm seriously was made after she did it, and she had expected, albeit with some skepticism, a result.

Immediately afterwards, the bishop's vicar asked Veronica if she had ever recited spells (*coniurationes*) to make Petronio love her. Again, as in the previous interrogation, Veronica gave an answer that avoided naming people and giving precise directions to the judge. She said that she had found a prayer and had someone read it to her, who had told her that it was for making herself loved. She therefore had her own name and Petronio's name written on the paper, but then did not recite the prayer and “did not have anything done over it” (i.e., most likely, she did not have any rites performed on the paper that contained the formula); Veronica had also told Petronio about this finding. In this case, the judge was content with the defendant's evasive words and accounts: on October 31

Veronica's brother-in-law bailed her out of jail and guaranteed for 100 *scudi*. The following day, Petronio was also freed.¹³

The trial against Veronica Rossi had begun as an action against two concubines. By contrast, we do not know when and how the one that led to the sentencing of five women to various penalties and the release on bail of two others had begun. The first to be captured and tried was Innocenza Bosini, who was already imprisoned in early June 1556; the records of her trial, unfortunately, are the only ones that have not come down to us. Innocenza, a native of Mantua, had previously lived in Ferrara, Cesena, and Ravenna together with her children, a son (whose name we do not know), and Isabella, who was also imprisoned since June 10. Again, circumstances emerged from the interrogations that reveal the precarious existence of the two women: after living in Ravenna for ten years, they had been forced to leave because they could no longer pay their rent. They had arrived in Bologna, along with Isabella's brother, with the hope of greater earnings. Isabella had then married a barber, Giovanni Maria; but that relationship had begun irregularly. Isabella, in fact, had begun having relations with Giovanni Maria while he was married to another woman; she had become pregnant and had a baby girl.¹⁴

It can therefore come as no surprise that, after initial reticence, the woman confessed to the judge a series of prayers and rituals by which she had tried to keep her future husband bound to her. In reporting the first of them, Isabella tried to reassure the judge about the orthodoxy of that practice; for she said that before uttering the formula to provoke John Mary's love, she had recited no less than fifteen Pater Nosters and fifteen Ave Marias. Then she had prayed in this way:

"I come to you, O sweet crucified one, just as my heart is slow and sad; just as you consoled Martha and Mary, just as you set the three Magi on the right path, direct the heart and mind of Master Giovanni Maria toward me Isabella; so that he loves me when he sees me, and desires me when he does not see me, O holy cross, grant this request of mine".¹⁵

This pattern belongs to a type of prayer that has been widespread in popular culture since the Middle Ages; they were also called *historiolae* (i.e., "little stories"). They are found both in the court records of the early modern age and in field records made by folklorists and demologists of the last two centuries. Through the formula *così... come* ("so... as") they drew an analogy between episodes in sacred history (in this case the God-led journey of the Magi) and the events they wished to provoke (here Giovanni Maria's turning to Isabella). The most convincing interpretation of their meaning was given by the Italian anthropologist Ernesto De Martino, who conducted field research in Basilicata (southern Italy) from 1950 to 1959: through the similarity (according to James Frazer one of the two basic principles of magic) the chaos and suffering of real, everyday life were overcome, and the time present was transported into the timeless dimension of myth, in this case the Gospel Age. More recently, other scholars have focused on the importance and spread of this and other types of verbal spells. Their detectable morphological similarity in the most diverse European regions has also led to thoughts about the possibility of an "international index of charms", which, like the Aarne-Thompson classification for fairy tales, could provide scholars with a fundamentally important tool.¹⁶

Another very notable feature of the prayer recited by Isabella, which is also well known to scholars of medieval and early modern popular culture, is the massive use of Christian elements, coming from canonical or apocryphal texts; but spells, charms, and incantations often and abundantly borrowed words and objects from the liturgy and from the whole ritual and sacramental apparatus the Church used. One woman from Modena even went so far as to say that "no spell or evil spell could be cast if the sacraments of the Church were not used" ("non se poteria fare ni malie ni factura se non ge intravano li sacramenti della Gesia") (Duni 1999, p. 169). This is very significant. For too long, in fact, "paganism", or the derivation of certain behaviors from supposed "pre-Christian rites", has been sought in popular culture. What we observe, in these processes and countless others, is instead an alternative form of Christianity to that proposed by most clergy. This

religious conception, which in several respects appears “archaic”, since it often retained many features now proscribed by the official Church, was nevertheless also participated in by some of the clergy themselves, as many studies show (e.g., Allegra 1981; Duni 1999).

The recitation of the above formula concluded Isabella’s first interrogation. There were two more, on July 13 and July 19, in which she confessed to having performed several spells that had been taught to her by her mother Innocenza, and to having enacted them both for herself and at the request of others. These were, in this case, rituals involving the manipulation and transformation of natural elements, as well as the recitation of formulas: the liquefaction of lead, the “string in the wind”, (*cordella al vento*), divination with fava beans (practices that we will illustrate later), and the *spannare la terra* (i.e., measuring the ground with the span, or the width of a hand from the thumb to the little finger). Already from this last ritual, the only one of the four mentioned that Isabella described to the judge, the potentially malefic aspects of love magic emerged.¹⁷ In Bologna and nearby areas, love spells were universally referred to, significantly, by the term *martelli* (“hammers”). In sixteenth-century Italian, in fact, *martello* meant amorous passion; the expression *dar martello*, that is, to provoke desire in someone, was also used. The passion one wanted to arouse in the beloved, in fact, was something powerful and constricting, if not downright destructive. Isabella had also recited that formula for her future husband Giovanni Maria, and she had done so while she “spanned”, that is, measured by spans, the ground. These were the words:

“Ground, ground, the hoe and the shovel strike you and death destroys you. So may be destroyed the heart, mind and five senses of Master John Mary as the corpse under the ground does, until he comes to me and does what I want him to do”.¹⁸

The act of measuring an object with the span was a practice used mainly by healers, who diagnosed magical illnesses by measuring the clothes of the supposed victims, but also, as in this case, for amorous purposes.¹⁹ However, Innocenza, Isabella’s mother, had also practiced the art of healing, curing scrofula and other diseases in children. In popular culture, formulas and rituals behave somewhat like myths and folk tales: individual elements of a whole can find themselves identical or similar in different contexts, taking on similar, but also completely different meanings.²⁰ Certainly, however, in this case, the similarity mechanism was used in a much more disturbing way than in the previous formula.

These aspects emerged even more alarmingly from the interrogations of Pellegrina, daughter of Andrea “Trombetta” (i.e., public herald), who had been mentioned several times by Isabella as a friend of her mother and who was then captured on the evening of the first day of July 1556.²¹ Pellegrina had already been interrogated the previous year by the inquisitor, who had been seeking information about Innocenza Bosini da Mantova ever since. In front of the bishop’s vicar, Pellegrina described the “hammers” of molten lead, string in the wind and many other rituals that she had been taught, she said, by Innocenza herself. These, too, concerned the amorous sphere: some were used to arouse passion, while others were used to put discord between a man and a woman; and Pellegrina, like almost all the other women involved in these processes, had also performed or had those spells performed to bind to herself a man to whom she was not married, but who kept her in exchange for sexual favors (“he kept me at his beck and call”)—the bookseller Francesco Benedetti.²²

This is how Pellegrina described the “hammer” of molten lead:

“She [*Innocenza*] made a ‘hammer’ by pouring lead into a vessel, and when the lead is molten she pricks it with a black-handled knife and these words are said, ‘As, te trapas [. . .]’²³

against the sea, podestà, captain, five devils, for the love of Pellegrina, must depart and go to the heart of Francesco, take from him five ounces of blood; three keep them in payment and two let them leave him; let them serve her well, that she will pay you well on behalf of her great devil”.²⁴

This formula was to be repeated as many as nine times. While piercing the molten lead with the knife, Pellegrina added, these words were to be said:

“I pierce you and I don’t pierce you, but I pierce Francesco’s heart and mind, penis and five senses in the name of his great devil”; and that molten lead is thrown into a basin where there is running water and urine of the person who ordered the spell. When I did it, I put my urine in it”.²⁵

Innocenza had also taught her to “throw the string into the wind”, a spell that Isabella had also mentioned in her confession. According to Pellegrina, one had to go, three hours after sunset, to a place from which one could see the sky and, knotting the string behind one’s shoulders, recite these words three times:

“I woke up at three o’clock, went to the sky of the dead, looked eastward, and saw Messer Francesco with all his people, and said, ‘Where the devil are you going, and where the devil are you coming from?’ [...] ‘I come to you, Pellegrina, who stole my heart and bound my sleep’, yes as this is true and not a lie, so let the sleep of messer Francesco be bound”.²⁶

Then the string was knotted two more times. In this case, the action of knotting symbolized the impediment that would block Francesco’s sleep and keep him bound to Pellegrina. The tying, like the “spannare”, is also an element we find in other rituals of European folk magic, such as the *aiguillette* in France, which, however, served mainly to cause the man’s impotence and prevent the consummation of marriage.²⁷

The recited formula, which seems almost to allude to the myth of the “army of the dead”, (*wütende Heer*) reminds us how the souls of the dead, especially those of the “dead of ill death” such as the hanged, were likened to entities endowed with constricting power over the living, much like demons therefore, so much so that they were often invoked, even as messengers of love.²⁸

With the rituals just described, however, the devil and his court had made their way into the confessions of the defendants. In the eyes of the judges, this is an important fact that transformed the practices used to induce passion from mere superstitions into actions with strong heretical implications. In fact, the sentence, pronounced jointly by the bishop’s vicar and the inquisitor’s vicar on 11 July 1556, qualified Innocenza, Isabella, Pellegrina, and another of their accomplices, Camilla, nicknamed *Cusiliera*,²⁹ as “malefic enchanters and suspected of heresy”; at least Innocenza and Camilla, in addition to the corporal punishments to which they were condemned, had to abjure.

In the following days, other women who had turned to Innocenza were imprisoned and interrogated, and they confessed to having put on these and other spells with her help. In some cases, to overcome the reticence of the accused, the bishop’s vicar proceeded to face-to-face confrontations with Innocenza. One of these, Veronica, wife of Domenico Panirani, questioned on 15 July 1556, recounted that she had put a friend of hers named Antonia in contact with Innocenza, who wanted to get a Francesco della Sega to marry her daughter Orsolina by resorting to magic. Innocenza had made a powder with the hearts of two black hens and a shirt of Orsolina’s and had masses recited over it; the powder was to be placed in a place where Francesco would pass. But then, Veronica also reported another episode told to her by Orsolina. One day, the girl had gone to confession to a Celestine friar named Crisostomo and had told him that she was in love with Francesco and wished to marry him. The friar had promised to help her with his prayers, but he also told her that he would give her a gold ring with a stone; by touching the young man with that ring, he would cause Francesco to fall in love with her. In itself, this episode would not be very significant; Veronica herself, who had been instructed by Orsolina and her mother to bring Friar Crisostomo food as a reward, reported to the judge that in her opinion, the Celestine’s intention was actually to seduce Orsolina. The enchanted ring and the presence of a member of the regular clergy, however, seem to bring the milieu of Veronica, Innocenza, and their friends, with their kitchen-packed spells and rhymed orations, closer to the world of learned magic, devoted more consciously to harnessing and

utilizing the occult forces present in the universe, as well as, often, to evoking spirits and demons. It should be noted, however, that unlike what would happen in the late sixteenth century, members of the regular clergy were almost never involved in these trials. At least as far as the actions conducted bishop's court, they were well protected by the privileges of their respective orders.³⁰

Almost certainly, another defendant, Antonia, wife of Gabriele the tailor, had also been denounced by Innocenza da Mantova. The woman had formerly been the mistress of the nobleman Bonifacio Fantuzzi. This situation too—a woman of humble origins and promiscuous life joining members of the city's nobility—seems to have been quite common in the Bolognese city environment. In the following decade, more than one such case would raise accusations of maleficium (i.e., harmful magic), one of which only narrowly—and probably due to the enlightened orientation of the judges—did not result in serious convictions for the defendants (Dall'Olio 2001b, pp. 100–7).

It was Innocenza who taught Antonia the use of the magnet and told her that it was used to provoke man's love and that it had to be baptized first. Again, this was a belief and ritual witnessed extensively in trials for magical practices in Italian courts. The "magnet" (magnetite), just as it attracted metals to itself, was believed to be effective in attracting people and also in facilitating childbirth. The "baptism of the magnet" is another significant example of attributing to Christian sacramental ritual the property to give objects a power they would not otherwise have. In the eyes of the ecclesiastical judges, conversely, the baptism of an inanimate object was a rather serious offense; the abuse of sacrament, in fact, was one of the two aggravating factors that transformed a "simple spell" into a "heretical spell" (the other being the invocation of the devil).³¹

Antonia told the bishop's vicar that Innocenza could "do lots and lots of things", but she was no less; during the trial, their roles seemed almost to reverse. It was Antonia who had explained to Innocenza the practice of *cordella al vento*, which, in her version, involved a serious flouting of the liturgy of the Mass. The knot in the string with the hands behind the shoulders, in fact, had to be made while the priest, during Mass, pronounced the words *Dominus vobiscum* ("The Lord be with you"), at which point one had to respond by saying, "You lie by the throat" (*Tu menti per la gola*).³² This is an important fact: responding with insulting words or gestures to the priest's *Dominus vobiscum* was in fact already considered an indication of witchcraft in the *Malleus Maleficarum*, but also, to mention a treatise closer in space and time to our trials, in Giovanfrancesco Pico's *Strix*.³³ While, however, in those cases, the outrage took place at the behest of the devil and with the aim of despising Christianity, Antonia described the rite as a spell to provoke the love of a person: the string, in fact, was then to be placed in the bed of the person one wanted to force to love, at the height of the head. This discrepancy seems to me very significant regarding the often ambiguous relationship that links simple magical practices such as love magic and what is called "diabolical witchcraft". On the one hand, those practices, as we have seen, often involved the use and invocation of demonic forces for a wide variety of purposes; on the other hand, it is possible that the authors of the treatises misunderstood, perhaps consciously, the purpose of that magic and made it a key component of a full-fledged devil cult. In all likelihood, these overlaps and exchanges also influenced the trials that, three years after these events, led to the burning of the witches we mentioned at the beginning of these pages and about whom we will write again shortly. For the time being, however, the bishop's vicar merely enjoined Antonia to stop practicing her arts and released her on bail of 50 *scudi*, for which two of the woman's brothers were obligated.³⁴

In that summer of 1556, the bishop's court also held other trials, which did not have to do with the events of Innocenza and Veronica, but which in many respects were similar and, in some cases, even more troubling in their eyes. On July 16 Giulia, daughter of the carpenter Giovan Francesco, was imprisoned in the bishopric prisons and interrogated about her sister Ginevra. The latter had been accused of using her magical arts to cause the death of a child, the son of Giacomo Dalla Sarta, a married man with whom she was having an affair, in order to bind her lover more closely to her by making him free of family

ties. The bishop's vicar, after asking her some indirect questions about the affair, explained to Giulia what he wanted from her, and he did so ignoring all the precepts of legal manuals, which required judges not to suggest in the question the facts they wanted to ascertain:

"I want you to tell me the curses (*malefici*) your sister cast on that child".³⁵

Julia responded by denying the accusations but confessed that her sister was throwing fava beans (which was a minor thing, she commented) and that she was reciting the St. Martha's prayer, which was used to "make herself liked", but in which, she admitted, the devil was named. At this point the judge showed her some "virgin paper", bits of magnet, and other items. Virgin paper, also found in many medieval and early modern magical practices, was a fragment of amniotic membrane (human or animal), dried to be written on. Also frequently baptized, it was used to give more power to the spells that were written on it. Its power came not only from the rite of baptism, but also from its origin: the amniotic sac, in fact, came from somewhere between the world of the living and the afterlife from which the souls of children came (Duni 1999, p. 189; Dall'Olio 2001a, p. 100–1). The interrogation record specified that those objects had been found in the dead child's cradle, although almost certainly this was not told to Giulia. This detail is important; the practice of looking for magical objects in the beds or mattresses of alleged victims of maleficium was certainly of much earlier origin than these trials; it is in fact already mentioned in the *Malleus Maleficarum*, but in the Bolognese documentation, it is attested mainly later, from the 1560s onward (Kramer 1669, p. 198; Dall'Olio 2001b, p. 81 ff). Those objects were usually found by the relatives of the alleged victims of maleficium, but often the suggestion came from exorcists who had been called to the bedside of the sick. In the story we are telling, on the other hand, the search for the objects of the malefic or diabolic art seems to have played a rather marginal role, and, above all, in the records, no exorcist appears with an important role in the investigation of the maleficium and its traces. Only from the 1560s in Bologna did the art of exorcism acquire a relevant—though not preponderant—place in arguing the case of alleged victims of maleficium against those identified as responsible.

Giulia recognized the objects and said she had seen them in a drawer in Ginevra's house. She was then confronted with her sister, in front of whom she reiterated her version. She was then questioned further about Ginevra's magical practices; in addition to confirming the recitation of the St. Martha's prayer, Giulia reported to the judge that her sister was "spanning" the fireplace and throwing salt into the fire, naming the demon.³⁶ We do not know how the trial against Ginevra ended. Giulia asked to be released, since—she declared—she had always told the truth, had done nothing wrong, and was pregnant. The bishop's vicar granted the request and released her on bail of 100 *scudi*. Her husband Antonio Del Chierico da Reggio, servant of Senator Gaspare Dall'Armi, stood surety for that sum.³⁷

Some of these women had previously been accused of practicing magic, such as Paola, wife of blacksmith Giacomo Manganelli da Vignola, who was captured and imprisoned in the bishopric on 12 August 1556. At her home, court officials had found fava beans accompanied by bread, stone, coin (*quattrino*), charcoal and alum, handwritten prayers "to provoke love", various powders, and a fragment of umbilical cord (*imbelicolum pueri*) that was probably believed to have similar power to that of "virgin paper". Five or six years earlier, Paola had been denounced to the inquisition on charges of stealing a child's corpse from a tomb but was later released. During the trial before the bishop's vicar, the woman, who at first was rather reticent and unsuccessfully tried to feign insanity, recounted that she had enacted several spells and had even appealed to Giacoma, wife of the Michele Rodolfini from Cento (between Bologna and Ferrara)—who had evidently mentioned her name while she was being tried—to do something to reconcile her with her husband Giacomo. Among other things, she had performed the ritual of molten lead, in which the "great devil" was mentioned. But Paola had not limited herself to reconciliation with her husband: she had also had continued relations with fra' Paolo da Montalbano, a Benedictine from the convent of San Michele in Bosco. In that case, too, it was Giacoma who had prepared for her various *pignatini* (=small pots) and *martelli* to bind the friar to Paola. Among the ingredients of

these potions were dead man's bones, soil, and holy water. To verify Paola's claims, the episcopal notary went to the inquisition's prison, in which Giacoma was being held, and questioned her about those evil deeds performed with dead bones. Giacoma confirmed what the other woman had confessed and, above all (exaggerating, surely to mitigate her and her accomplice's responsibility) she said that those things had happened more than ten years earlier and that therefore Paola had already been judged for those deeds.

Eight days later, Paola was questioned again about the items found in her house. Faced with her evasive answers, the judge threatened her with torture and soon after confronted her with Giacoma. At that point Paola, after much insistence from Giacoma and the judges, confessed that she had taught her friend the "hammer" of molten lead. Two days later, on 22 August, she was released on 50 *scudi* bail guaranteed by her husband.³⁸

We do not know whether Paola had to undergo any penance after her release; she almost certainly had to abjure, as an annotation on Giacoma's sentence indicates. The latter was dated 31 August and was read in the cathedral of Bologna; it condemned the woman to be pilloried on a donkey and, while being flogged, to be transported to San Domenico, where she would be placed in the iron cage in which those guilty of evil spells and sorcery used to be exposed to the public. Giacoma was also sentenced to imprisonment at the will of the bishop's vicar. The abjuration she had to recite on the same day in Bologna cathedral before judges and other witnesses is as follows:

"I, Giacoma, wife of Michele Rodolfini da Cento, confess to you reverend father vicar of the reverend inquisitor of Bologna and to you lord vicar of the very reverend bishop of Bologna, that I believe all that the Holy Roman Church believes, and I abjure all heresies that go against the Church, of whose errors you regard me as gravely suspected for the incantations and invocations to the devil and for the works of necromancy which I have done and taught, and I oblige myself for the future to suffer the penalty of relapses into heresy, if I do these things again".³⁹

While she was reciting her abjuration in the chapel of St. Sebastian in the cathedral, Giacoma, kneeling, was beaten with a wooden rod; the two judges, meanwhile, pronounced her absolution and intoned the psalm *Miserere*. The sentence was signed by the bishop's vicar, Alfonso Binarini,⁴⁰ with the consent of the vicar of the inquisitor of Bologna, and materially drawn up by a notary of the bishop's curia. In all likelihood, it was an event like this—if not this itself—that an anonymous informant reported to the Brabantine physician Johann Weyer, who, on the basis of it, praised the mildness and prudence of the Bolognese judges who, in dealing with cases of maleficium and witchcraft, spared the lives of witches.⁴¹

During her trial, Giacoma had mentioned the name of another woman, Elisabetta Busola, who was captured on the day of her sentencing, 31 August, and interrogated three days later. Elisabetta was explicitly characterized as a "harlot". As Paola had already done, Elisabetta also assumed theatrical attitudes before the judge. She repeatedly proclaimed her innocence with such expressions:

"Sir, if you find that I have done anything to my husband before I married him, treat me worse than how Giacoma was treated, who last morning was put astride the donkey, or Ravanella, who was burned [. . .]. No, Sir, I don't know anything, if you find that I do, let me ride the donkey [. . .]. If you find that I know, make me the worst you know".⁴²

One of the reasons the bishop's vicar suspected her of magical arts was the fact that Elisabetta the previous year had been taken as a wife by a student in his early twenties, a certain Giuseppe da Verona, whom she had met in the house of the *Marescotte* (i.e., women of the Marescotti family, also suspected of superstitious practices). The judge asked the defendant how it was possible that a noble and wealthy young student had married a prostitute who was not very young and not even particularly beautiful. Initially, Elisabetta merely confessed that she had made the friars of the Annunziata (Conventual Franciscans)

celebrate a Mass of the Holy Spirit and that she knew how to recite the prayer of St. Francis, which was customarily recited by the blind. She then admitted to having thrown fava beans, a spell that had primarily divinatory value but was also used for amatory purposes. It consisted of throwing a varying number of fava beans into the air, mixed with other objects: a piece of bread, a piece of coal, a piece of rock alum, and a coin, and drawing auspices depending on the position in which the fava beans and objects were placed after they fell to the ground. Elisabetta recited before the judge the prayer that almost always accompanied the ritual. It briefly recounted the story of St. Helena, the mother of Constantine who had miraculously found the “true cross” of Christ and thus, by analogy, would help unveil occult things and find objects and lovers:

“Lady Saint Helena, who went behind the sea, sought the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ, found it and rested, bread, onion and salt you ate, and the Lord Jesus Christ came and said, ‘What are you doing, Helena?’ ‘Lord, I rested, bread, onion and salt I ate’”.⁴³

Elisabetta said she had also known the prayer of St. Martha, but prudently said she did not remember it (she said only that it served to make someone love her). Pressed by the judge’s questions, she related that she had made a “hammer” by throwing salt and *saina* herb into the fire and reciting the following formula, in which again the devil appeared:

“I do not burn salt or grass, but the heart and mind and five senses of N., in the name of his great devil”.⁴⁴

Elisabetta was also threatened with torture, but that was all the judge could get out of her. We do not know whether she was convicted or released from the bishop’s prisons.⁴⁵

Far more serious was the case of Anna Marziani, whose father was a German named Rigo, and therefore she was also called Anna Tedesca; like many other defendants in these trials, she practiced prostitution, albeit occasionally. Indeed, one witness said, “I heard that this woman sometimes indulges herself”.⁴⁶ She had a scar on her face that made her easily recognizable. Her trial, which lasted from 5 to 19 September 1556, took place entirely before the *magnificus dominus* Leonardo Colombino, assessor of the bishop’s curia.⁴⁷ This figure is rarely encountered in Bolognese documentation; it is unclear whether he was a temporary substitute for the vicar, or a judge appointed ad hoc only for this trial. Anna was denounced anonymously as an enchantress and malefic; she was also said to have a book in which were written all the superstitions she used. The complaint also pointed to a well-informed witness about these things, who in fact was summoned and questioned four days later. This was a young man who attended the Bolognese Studio (i.e., the University), Giovanni Guidacci da Novara. Before the judge, Giovanni said that Anna had two manuscript volumes, in which were the prayer of St. Daniel and “prayers that serve to compel spirits and other things that serve to provoke love or hate”.⁴⁸ He himself, he added, had written for Anna “the names to make one love” (“li nomi di far volere bene”)⁴⁹ and also instructions for baptizing the magnet. As noted above, the latter practice was considered more serious than mere superstition, for it implied the abuse of a sacrament; the same considerations apply to the rite of “marrying valerian grass”, which the woman later confessed to having performed. Anna also was a great expert in “hammers” and had prepared one on behalf of another married woman, Lucia Nani, who wanted to seduce Count Giorgio Manzoli. Once again, then, women of low social status were trying to lure gentlemen into adulterous relationships through love spells.

The latter circumstance was confirmed by Lucia herself on September 11. On that day, Anna was arrested and interrogated for the first time. Three days earlier, “the friars of St. Dominic”, that is, evidently, the inquisitor and his retinue, accompanied by the bishopric notary who was recording the interrogation, had been to her house to search for the spell books. They had found nothing, evidently because the woman had disposed of those compromising objects. She admitted that she had recited some prayers for amorous purposes, including one that was to be said during the elevation of the host:

“The lord Jesus Christ is up, the friar is prepared, the altar is set, the book is opened, so I pray to the lord Jesus Christ that he will open Hannibal’s heart toward me and my daughter”.⁵⁰

The prayer was to be said until the priest, after the elevation, moved the missal from one side of the altar to the other. Anna had recited it together with her daughter, who was in dispute with her husband because of his mistress. She later confessed that she had thrown fava beans for several other women and performed a spell to put discord between a man and a woman. However, regarding the magic book, in which the judge had shown a strong interest, she said she had burned it. After the interrogations of other witnesses named in the denunciation and in Giovanni da Novara’s deposition, Anna was also taken to the torture room and threatened. Among the many rituals she had practiced, the defendant confessed to having recited the prayer of Saint Martha, which is now well known thanks to a study by Maria Pia Fantini,⁵¹ but which is still worth describing. According to Anna, the prayer was to be recited nine times each morning, with a blessed candle in her hand. The worshipper had to be naked and to kneel in front of an image of St. Martha with a crucifix on one side. Before the prayer, the Pater Noster, Hail Mary, Creed, and Salve Regina were to be recited.⁵² Then, the prayer of St. Martha was recited, which, in Anna’s version, was as follows:

“What are you doing here Martha, watching the dead man? Indeed, I am that Martha who kindles and warms the living man, so I want to pray to you, Martha, that for the sake of this blessed mother and her most holy son, that you would give me the grace to bring peace, love, faith and charity, as Jesus Christ did in the holy trinity, so will God and the sweet Virgin Mary, amen”.⁵³

It is true that the devil was not mentioned here, as Giulia di Giovan Francesco had said, but the invocation of a saint for amorous purposes already configured a crime of superstition.

The ritual was to be performed on a Tuesday of the new moon and continued until the following Tuesday. But the judge wanted a full confession from Anna about the magical art she used to lure men (*ad illaqueandum homines*) and perform evil spells. The defendant, amid cries and exclamations directed at the judge, always under threat of torture, confessed to numerous other magical practices. However, the assessor was still unsatisfied and questioned other witnesses, who punctually reported other facts against Anna. Not much else emerged from her interrogations, however. In the last one, on September 19, Colombino asked her if she had ever invoked the devil in her superstitions. Anna said that in the “hammer” of the salt into the fire, which she had reported earlier,⁵⁴ one must at the end say, facing the salt: “Stand there in the name of the great devil” (*Stati mo lì nel nome del suo gran diavolo*). She also returned to describe a ritual for putting discord between a man and a woman, which she had performed to detach her lover Cesare, with whom she was pregnant, from one such Vincenza, who had seduced him. To achieve that purpose, on the Wednesday of the new moon, one had to buy a black hen’s egg and pronounce the following formula:

“I do not buy this egg, but I buy the discord and malevolence of such and such, that they may never love each other except as Cain and Abel did”.⁵⁵

These words were also uttered while cooking the egg and then peeling it. Then, still reciting the formula, one would cut the egg in half using a knife that had committed murder, bind the two halves of the egg upside down, and finally throw it down the toilet, adding “in the name of his great devil, that he may break the necks of both of them”. In a way that must have appeared suspicious and inconsistent in the judge’s eyes, finally, Anna confessed that, because of her passion for Cesare, she prayed to God and Our Lady that He would place the devil between the two, “that He might break their necks”.

The assessor asked her again if she had ever invoked the devil in other superstitions; Anna said no, and the judge did not insist. The evil and partly devilish nature of Anna’s love magic had sufficiently emerged. It is surprising, however, that the judge had not

decisively investigated another deed for which the woman had been denounced. The student Giovanni Guidacci had heard from a weaver who lived in Borgo dell’Ariente (today via Arienti⁵⁶) that he had once seen Anna naked in the courtyard and that shortly afterwards it had begun to rain and hail; nevertheless, she had not moved. Another witness, Lucrezia Cavallari, reported that a certain Ginevra, wife of the cobbler Giorgio, who also lived in borgo dell’Ariente, had seen Anna on the roof, naked and disheveled, and a great noise had been heard in the house. Both, admittedly, were indirect testimonies, and furthermore, Lucrezia had been unable to say whether the day Anna had been seen on the roof was Christmas or St. John the Baptist. It was, however, a much more serious accusation than all the others. The woman’s amorous rites and spells, in fact, could only be directed against individuals and had a specific purpose; causing storms, on the other hand, was an act that had no motive other than to harm others. The *Malleus Maleficarum* spoke clearly on the subject.⁵⁷

On September 19, 1556, the trial was completed; the inquisitor’s vicar was present at the closing, in addition to the assessor. The sentence condemned Anna Marziani to abjuration de vehementi (i.e., for a strong suspicion of heresy) for having performed maleficia with the invocation of the devil and for possessing books on magic and necromancy. The abjuration was recited in the cathedral in Bologna; in the end, Anna was reconciled publicly with the people who had offended and hurt her; perhaps among them was the man or woman who had scarred her.⁵⁸

The other three trial records that close this series are found among the documents of the bishop’s court, but the trials were carried out by the inquisitor’s vicar. They are exclusively testimonies against women, usually prostitutes, who, with formulas and rituals not unlike those we have seen so far, practiced love magic to bind their lovers to themselves.⁵⁹

3. From Love Magic to Witchcraft: The 1559 Trials

Judging from this set of trial records—although incomplete and fragmentary—in the 1550s, the Bolognese ecclesiastical judges who fought against maleficia and spells had a highly ambiguous situation in front of them. The prayers and magical operations enacted by the accused were confessed without much reticence and described in their details as if they were cooking recipes (and in some cases they were indeed similar). There were no secrets or night meetings; the devil, although invoked, did not appear in person and was not a concrete figure. The purpose of that magic was not to gain knowledge or riches, as was the case with necromancers and treasure seekers, but to hold on to those men from whom protection and, perhaps, even affection were expected. On the other hand, love magic evidently had an evil implication: one invoked the devil so that it would torment the body and mind of the desired person in order to have him at one’s disposal. Testifying against Elisabetta “Piladora”, another Elisabetta reported to the bishop’s vicar that she had heard that Alessandro, the woman’s lover, had vomited needles because of her evil spells.⁶⁰ The vomiting of abnormal objects, which could not have been previously ingested, was believed to be a sign of maleficence and clearly indicated diabolical intervention.⁶¹ However, this is one of the few explicit mentions of maleficium and its preternatural manifestations; in addition to the aforementioned affair of Ginevra, accused of bewitching her lover’s son, Camilla “Cusiliera” had also been suspected of provoking a man’s madness with a potion.⁶²

Vicar and inquisitor, however, did not insist much on delving into those accusations, nor do they seem to have given them much weight; they did not even use torture to make the accused confess. It is precisely these features that draw a clear line between the trials of 1556 and those of three years later. In all likelihood, moreover, it was the latter, and the noise they made, that drew attention to the dangerousness of witches and their evil spells. Starting in the 1560s, in fact, as we said before, trials for maleficium, sometimes fueled by the activity of exorcists, became more frequent in Bologna and often threatened to result in serious convictions, although this did not happen, most likely because they were not accompanied by accusations of participation in the sabbath and devil worship.

In short, the 1559 trials seem to have played a watershed role; it is therefore particularly important to try to understand their dynamics, as far as possible. What prompted the judges to force the confessions of four defendants, to induce them to admit that they had participated in the sabbath, that they had had relations with the devil, and that they had renounced baptism, with all that that entailed? This question is not easy to answer. In those trials, “traditional” accusations and confessions, such as love magic and maleficium (which in all likelihood were actually practiced), coexisted with elements traceable to what Brian Levack has called the “cumulative concept of witchcraft”, derived mainly from the elaboration of theologians. Identifying the relationships between these two components, or the paths that lead from one to the other, could lead us to a deeper understanding of the phenomenon we call “witchcraft”.⁶³

The first factor to take into account concerns the judges. The trial against the witches was conducted, like almost all those we have mentioned so far, by diocesan authorities. In the meantime, however, the bishop’s vicar had changed since 1556. Alfonso Binarini had succeeded by two other vicars until, in October 1558, the bishop appointed one of his protégés, the nobleman Bartolomeo Casali, to that office. The latter, however, was made the subject of public accusations of heresy that scandalized the entire city; he was accused, in particular, of a form of impiety that attributed human happenings exclusively to natural causes. Forced to resign on 26 February 1559, Casali was replaced on the same day by a “lieutenant”, the cathedral canon Giovan Battista Castelli; he was joined by jurist Sebastiano Rolandi, who not long after, at the end of May, became titular vicar. On 27 March the trial against the witches had already begun, and the inquisitor of Bologna, the Dominican Eustachio Locatelli, delegated the conduct of the trial to Castelli and Rolandi, reserving the right to intervene in the final decision. In this situation, it is possible that Giovan Battista Castelli, through the trial, intended in some way to remove from the bishop’s curia the suspicions of heterodoxy that hung over his predecessor and perhaps also to protect the bishop’s good name; clamorously reaffirming the existence of the devil and his accomplices, unmasking and annihilating them probably seemed to him the best way to do so. Perhaps it was Giovan Battista Castelli himself who, ten years later, having become a collaborator of the Archbishop of Milan Carlo Borromeo, relied on the Bologna trials to support the request for the death sentence of some witches.⁶⁴

As for the progress of the trials, however, we unfortunately do not know how they started. The surviving documentation, in addition to the aforementioned authorization of the inquisitor, consists of some letters sent by the bishop and inquisitor to the cardinals of the Holy Office in Rome, two judicial consultations on the affair, the records of the execution of the sentence, and finally a partial copy of five interrogations of one of the defendants, Domenica Malatesti, widow of a spinner named Desiderio and therefore known as Domenica Desideria, from 21 March to 14 April 1559.⁶⁵ These documents, however, are sufficient to understand that, at least initially, the magical practices performed by the four defendants, the purpose to which they were directed, and the environment in which they took place were not very different from those we have seen so far. Domenica, in fact, was questioned about a ritual to create discord between a man and a woman quite similar to the one confessed by Anna Marziani three years earlier and about a “hammer” made by piercing a gelding’s heart with needles and cooking it in a pot. The formula had to be pronounced while placing the objects in the pot: “I do not place these things here, but I place N’s heart and mind in it”. Finally, the ritual described by Domenica called for the woman to urinate in the pot—similar to what Pellegrina had confessed about Andrea Trombetta—again reciting the words, “Yes as I cannot be without pissing, so cannot you be without me N”.⁶⁶

The surviving copy of the trial records omits most of the names of the people Desideria denounced, but it is clear from her answers to the judge’s questions that there was a network of women—which may have included some of the sorceresses tried three years earlier—who shared the use of orations, formulas, and spells to keep unfaithful men with her. However, when the judge asked her if she had ever taught love spells to her

friends Vincenza wife of Giovanni Facchini from Ferrara and Laura Campana, nicknamed “Mingarella” because she was the concubine of a certain Mingarelli, Domenica replied in the negative. What happened after this last response makes it clear that the two women, who were also captured and tried, had confessed to being witches and going to the sabbath and what is more, no doubt to lessen their own guilt, had blamed Domenica for their recruitment into the sect. Unfortunately, the lack of Laura’s and Vincenza’s interrogatories does not allow for us to reconstruct how from love spells Domenica’s friends had come to tell about the sabbath and devil worship; it is most likely that it was the judges who had suggested the confession to them, perhaps with the promise (later unfulfilled) of impunity or reduced sentence or, more likely, with torture.

Laura and Vincenza, following a script that had evidently been prepared beforehand, were then summoned to the room where the interrogation was taking place and, after acknowledging each other, one after the other said that Domenica, asked by them how to get the love of their respective lovers, had taught her a way to do it. One had to approach a window one Thursday evening, standing “naked and disheveled”, walking backwards. A being in human form would appear at the window, asking them for their souls, and in return giving them whatever they asked for. Vincenza added that, according to what Domenica allegedly told her, the man would leave her a container with an ointment. Domenica initially denied the accusations, but her resistance—if the copy of the trial record is faithful to the original—was very short: it was enough for Laura to urge her to repent and “return to God” (*ut reverteret ad Deum*) for her friend to confess that those accusations were true. The intervention of the judges and their willingness to induce Domenica to make a detailed confession that corresponded to their expectations appear evident from the question they immediately asked her afterwards: who was the being who would come to the window and ask her friends for their souls? Domenica’s obvious answer was, “The one from hell, that is, the devil”. To the next question, about how she knew all that, the woman replied that she knew that because she too had performed that ritual several times.⁶⁷

The blatant forcing made by the judges, however, cannot conceal the closeness between this description of the witchcraft ritual, or at least of its beginning, with the accusations and confessions of some of the defendants from three years earlier, in particular with the manner of the recitation of the Santa Marta oration and the alleged unleashing of storms by Anna Marziani. This partial coincidence highlights, as has already been noted, the demonic side originally present in the rituals enacted in love magic, but it also makes clear the fact that ecclesiastical judges almost always had the opportunity to turn trials for simple superstitions into witch hunts if they so desired.

This was precisely what happened in the trial against Domenica Desideria and her friends. After that first admission, Domenica recounted that she had gone to the sabbath for the first time about fifteen years earlier, while she was in the house of a lover of hers named Vincenzo *cavallaro* (i.e., stable boy); after invoking the devil in the manner mentioned above, she had promised him her soul and smeared her body with the ointment he had given her. She had then climbed on a goat (*bricho*) and had come to a house where there were fifty or sixty other people including men and women, “all naked”. Among them, sitting on a black chair, stood an old man with a white beard, dressed in black, wearing a black hat and holding a black wand, whom Domenica dubiously identified as “the great devil”. The new adept had gone to pay homage to him by bowing backward and raising her right leg. The great devil had made her repeat the promise she had already made to her companion, and the woman had agreed, provided she was given whatever she asked for. Immediately she was brought before a black altar, on which stood a black rooster, larger than normal. One of the two devils who had led her told her that he wanted to baptize her in the name of the devil and that therefore she should renounce Christian baptism, which Domenica did by uttering the words, “I renounce baptism, the salt that was put in my mouth and the water that was put on my head”.⁶⁸

At this point, however, something unexpected occurred: when the judge asked her what the devil’s words were, Domenica began to deny what she had just confessed. The

judge then had her hands bound, placed a torture instrument on them and asked her if her confession was true. Domenica's response clearly expressed her awareness of the violence she was undergoing, "No, sir, it is not true, you have forced me to confess".⁶⁹ Contrary to what his predecessor had done three years earlier, however, the bishop's judge who tried the witches did not limit himself to *territio*, but put the threat into practice by compressing her fingers with the so-called *ciuffoli*.⁷⁰ During the torture, Domenica continued to deny the allegations, while Vincenza, who was still witnessing the interrogation, helped the judge in two ways: by urging her friend to "tell the truth" and thus avoid the torments, but also by denouncing her, saying she had seen her "there at those games of the devil".⁷¹ This last detail reveals to us that in this trial acted, in at least one case, as the mechanism that in other places had caused—and would cause even more later—the wildfire extension of witchcraft accusations and the consequent conviction of dozens or even hundreds of people (see, for example, Midelfort 1972, p. 106). The reporting of accomplices encountered at the sabbath, in fact, allowed for the defendants to implicate in the trials practically anyone they wished to target. As we shall see, in the case we are narrating, this did not happen, although certainly the number of people involved was much higher than the four sentenced to death. After all, charges for events that occurred during the sabbath would later be considered null and void by the Roman Inquisition judges from the late sixteenth century onward, as is well known (Tedeschi 1983, now in Tedeschi (1991); Romeo 1990).

Eventually the torture, repeated at least three times during the interrogation, bent Domenica, who resigned herself to confess what was evidently wanted of her and resumed her narrative. The judge's insistence that he wanted to know what precise words the devil had spoken as he baptized her—which the defendant herself was astonished to hear—clearly indicates that he wanted to see confirmation of a pre-established pattern, certainly gleaned from the treatises and confessions of Laura and Vincenza.⁷²

Domenica thus described the feasting, singing, and dancing that took place at the sabbath, which she had attended together with her lover Vincent, or perhaps, she said—continuing to maintain a sometimes dubious attitude about what she was recounting—a demon who had taken the form of Vincent. The participants had eaten the flesh of an ox that had been killed by the great devil with his wand, with which he had separated the bones, the skin and the flesh; after the banquet, the bones had been placed on a mountain, the skin had been thrown over it, the great devil had touched it with his wand, and the ox had come back alive. This detail had almost certainly been taken from Giovan Francesco Pico's *Strix*, vulgarized by, among others, the Dominican Leandro Alberti, who had been inquisitor of Bologna.⁷³ The original amorous and sexual nature of the magical practices enacted by Domenica and her friends was clearly reflected in the description of the relationship with the devil, who "was equipped with two penises, with which he penetrated both orifices simultaneously".⁷⁴ Finally, the great devil ordered her to build a domestic altar, covered in black, on which was to be placed a yellow wax ox, which Domenica was to kiss in his honor and to which she was to address her requests.

In the following days, Domenica confirmed what she had told the judge and denounced many other people, whose names were unfortunately omitted in the manuscript, as noted above. She then confessed that she had been in the company of her devil to perform maleficia. According to a classic stereotype found in the literature on sorcerers and witches, Domenica would magically cause illnesses that she then offered to cure.⁷⁵ After recounting other love spells, when questioned by the judge about her sacramental practice and how it had made her compatible with her witchcraft militancy, the woman said that at Mass, as the priest elevated the host and asked the faithful if they believed it contained the body of Christ, she assented with her body, but with her heart she did not believe it, and thought the host was only flour and water, "without any other substance". This confession can be compared to the other women's response to the priest's *Dominum vobiscum* that we mentioned above, but also to the radical denial of transubstantiation that the Zwinglian and Calvinist heretics were professing in Bologna in those very years. In one of her last interrogations, after again denouncing her accomplices, Domenica also recounted that she

had married her devil, called “Zanello”, by touching his hand. She then described a kind of ritual that consisted of washing the devil’s head with ashes. This was an act that, in the symbolism of the activities and trades, indicated a relationship of prostitution and which, again, emphasizes that one of the main elements—perhaps the main one—of the magical practices of these as well as other witches was sex.⁷⁶

On 1 April 1559, Domenica, in a very last attempt to save herself, declared herself repentant and told the judge that, after she had been to the sabbath one last time on Carnival Thursday that same year, she had thrown away the black cloth, the wax ox, and the vessel with the ointment. The next night she had heard a great noise in the house and, to defend herself from the devil, she had prayed and recited Psalm 90 (91) (*Qui habitat*), also used in exorcisms. She then said that she had never willingly gone to demonic gatherings but had done so only so that her lover Vincent could make her a silk-twisting device.⁷⁷

As noted above, the trial was conducted entirely by the diocesan judges Giovan Battista Castelli and Sebastiano Rolandi. On April 5, Bishop Giovanni Campeggi wrote a letter to the cardinals of the Holy Office in Rome, reporting to them news of the ongoing trials. Although he had kept in touch with the inquisitor in Bologna, the bishop was determined to alert the Roman authorities, he wrote, because this was a particularly serious case. In the following weeks, bishop and inquisitor continued to write to Rome, asking for opinions and informing the cardinals of the results of the meetings of the consultors of the Bologna tribunal, who had unanimously agreed to sentence the four main defendants to death.

Finally, on 11 May 1559, Pope Paul IV, before the general inquisitors, announced his decision to condemn witches to capital punishment. The pontiff himself acknowledged, however, that the measure was an extraordinary one, going beyond civil and canonical laws; in fact, women were not relapsed and, according to the existing norms, in case of repentance, they could be reconciled by abjuration. The sentence was carried out, by hanging and burning the bodies, on 27 May.

4. Conclusions: After the Bonfires

After that date, the Inquisition and the bishop’s court continued to prosecute crimes of magic and superstition in large numbers. The types of offenses and the procedure used were not much different from those we saw at the beginning of these pages, if we exclude a greater presence of charges of maleficium. Charges of participation in the sabbath, in any case, are almost entirely absent from the surviving documentation. Death sentences for witchcraft were also very rare and, more importantly, never extended to more than one defendant at a time. More than one problem then arises in interpreting the documents. First of all, if the death sentences of the four witches in 1559 had originated from trials for practices of amorous and partially evil magic, why had this not happened on a massive scale before then and why did it not happen later? Trials for superstitions were perhaps considered less trivial than they appear to us and could always result in very serious charges and persecution. In the eyes of theologians and judges, much of the superstitions in fact involved the intervention of the devil (Bailey 2007, pp. 124–25; Cameron 2010, pp. 103–15). Based on what element then was the capital condemnation and mass persecution of witches triggered? Was it the sabbath? But if the charge of participation in devilish games was usually placed on the accused by judges, why, in the Counter-Reformation offensive against superstitions, was this weapon used so little? Perhaps the Bolognese (and, for the most part, Italian, including members of the Roman Holy Office) judges were more skeptical than others about a crime that was considered largely imaginary? This, at least, is what part of the historiography has argued about the absence or near absence of witch hunts in the Italian states. Although in recent years, the picture of the situation has been partly revised with respect to the first investigations, in general, it remains true that in Italy, those mass persecutions did not occur in which, thanks to the mechanism of denouncing sabbat participants, dozens of people at a time ended up at the stake (Romeo 1990; Lavenia 2010). In the Italian trials, in short, the devil was an evil being who acted behind the scenes, rumbled, caused mysterious illnesses, and was capable of altering relationships between

people, but was almost never a bodily presence, with whom people went to the sabbath and with whom they joined carnally. These characteristics could also have resulted from the diversity in culture of Italian defendants compared with that of other countries; the folklore of northern Europe certainly left more room for fairies, goblins, and night flights (real or ecstatic) than that of the Mediterranean area. Even here, however, there were relevant exceptions, such as the Sicilian *donne de fora*, and the Friulian *Benandanti* (Ginzburg 1966; Henningsen 1990; Geremia 2024). But perhaps these very cases demonstrate, in turn, the importance of diversity in judging such phenomena: although both the *donne de fora* and the *Benandanti* offered ecclesiastical judges the opportunity to turn those beliefs into accusations of witchcraft, this happened only marginally and generally without serious consequences for those involved.

In the decades following the 1559 convictions in Bologna, however, other potentially dangerous situations occurred for those accused of magical practices. These were mainly cases of maleficium, some with characteristics similar to the love magic events of the 1550s: a young prostitute or at any rate a “disgraced” woman would make a man of higher social status fall in love with her. The latter would be struck by a spell (of which traces were invariably found), become ill, and in some cases even die. Sometimes exorcists would strive to prove the guilt of the accused and would intervene in trials as witnesses, having lent their services to heal the sick people. Not even in these cases, however, were there harsh convictions, if we exclude the perpetual imprisonment of a nun whose guilt was proved through a collective exorcism that was also witnessed by the inquisitor (1562) (Dall’Olio 2001b).

Beginning in the last decade of the sixteenth century, with the final defeat of reformed heterodoxy, the Bolognese inquisition took the place of the bishop’s court as a tool to combat superstitions. The scant surviving documentation, however, does not reveal situations comparable to the 1559 emergency. Still, in the 1660s, neither the crimes prosecuted nor the attitude of the judges differed much from what we saw at the beginning of these pages: a love magic practiced by women who sought the protection of untrustworthy men, and judges who condemned them to penalties even serious, but never capital (in particular public flogging), probably aware that this would not serve to erase rites and beliefs that had their roots in centuries of a miraculous and magical religiosity (Mazzone and Pancino 2008). It was not until the eighteenth century that the typology of superstitious offenses underwent an important change: in fact, cases related to seekers of hidden treasure, who, through necromantic-type practices derived from learned magic, summoned the spirits that guarded precious goods, began to become more frequent. The protagonists of these trials were very different from those we have seen so far: they were mostly men, almost always well-educated, often even clerics. The inquisition was much more interested in these phenomena than in the “mere superstitions” of magical orations, pots, and love potions (Dall’Olio 2008, pp. 1136–38). The time was slowly approaching when all this was transformed from the work of the devil into “popular errors” and then became the subject of field research by demonologists and anthropologists in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

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Notes

- 1 For general information, see [Blanshei \(2018\)](#).
- 2 On the 1559 trials, in addition to what will be said below, see [Dall’Olio \(2001a\)](#).
- 3 On Gentile Budrioli (or Cimieri) [Tavuzzi \(2007, pp. 115–17\)](#); [Dall’Olio \(2008, pp. 1099–100\)](#); [Herzig \(2011, pp. 1047–51\)](#); on the three fugitive Mirandola sorcerers [Dall’Olio \(2007, p. 29\)](#). The case was entrusted jointly to the Vicelegate and the inquisitor of Bologna. The sentences were carried out in 1525, but it is unclear whether in Modena or Bologna; on these trials [Pico \(\[1523\] 1989, pp. 9–41 and 217–22\)](#) (foreword and appendix by Albano Biondi); on Ravanella, whose trial was held in Ferrara, [Dall’Olio \(2008, p. 1116\)](#).
- 4 Superstition and the devil have always been linked in the thinking of Christian theologians since at least St. Augustine. Significantly, one of the most important texts in the foundation of the concept of witchcraft, the so-called Canon Episcopi, is, in fact, a treatise against superstition.
- 5 See the entry on Campeggi in the Dizionario biografico degli italiani, by [Prosperi \(1974\)](#) and [Dall’Olio \(1999, pp. 191–207\)](#). He was certainly a reformer, yet the sources do not show any direct evidence from which the bishop’s particular interest in the suppression of witchcraft is apparent.
- 6 Of the remaining thirteen, five were released on bail, while the fate of eight of them is unknown.
- 7 In most of the cases, “perpetual” imprisonment meant that the condemned person had to stay in prison for three years. See, e.g., [Tedeschi \(1979, p. 4, now in Tedeschi \(1991\)\)](#).
- 8 However, this is not exceptional; already, the *Malleus Maleficarum* devoted several pages to love magic; [Kramer \(2003, pp. 240–55 \(I,7\) and 542–49 \(II/2, 3\)\)](#). Wolfgang Behringer, editor of this edition, noted that the trials held by Heinrich Kramer in Innsbruck in 1485 frequently dealt with love magic. The best exposition on the subject remains that of [Duni \(1999, pp. 183–208\)](#), with extensive exemplification (relating to Modena in the first half of the sixteenth century). According to Richard Kieckhefer, in the late Middle Ages, love magic was particularly common in Italy; [Kieckhefer \(1976, p. 57\)](#). See also [O’Neil \(1987\)](#); [Bailey \(2007, p. 82\)](#); [Black \(2009, pp. 250–52\)](#). On the attitude of secular and religious authorities in Bologna toward the “deviant” sexuality of women, see [Ferrante \(1987\)](#).
- 9 On the differences and similarities between rural and urban witchcraft, [Levack \(2006, pp. 134–74\)](#); see also [Thomas \(\[1971\] 1973, p. 628 ff. \(chapter 16.4\)\)](#).
- 10 Many of the spells and rituals described below, for example, are found, with few variations, in the Bolognese inquisitorial trials of the second half of the seventeenth century; [Mazzone and Pancino \(2008\)](#). On the European dissemination of *historiolae*, see below, n. 16.
- 11 [Kieckhefer \(2022, pp. 208–12\)](#); [Parmeggiani \(2017, 2018\)](#); for the eighteenth century, [Dall’Olio \(2008, pp. 1136–38\)](#).
- 12 “Io ci dormo tal volta, ma hieri sera [. . .], per che era amalata, [. . .] io non la potete chiavare, [. . .] et dubito ancor che l’ultima volta ch’io usai con lei de non li havere attachato li taroli, per che a giorni passati io chiavai una femina quale me attachò li taroli, et usai di poi con detta Veronica, non mi sendo accorto di essi taroli”.
- 13 The very brief trial against Veronica in Archivio Generale Arcivescovile di Bologna (AAB), Foro Arcivescovile, Sgabello VI, n. 2 (Barbadori Francesco, mazzo II), 7 October–1 November 1555.
- 14 These details emerge from Isabella’s interrogatories, *ibid*, atto no. 17 (“Contra Isabellam uxorem magistri Joannis Andree barberii”, 10 June–14 July 1556, the document from which the following quotations come, where not otherwise indicated.
- 15 “Io vengo da te, o dolce crocifisso, così come il mio cuore è lento e triste; così come hai consolato Marta e Maria, come hai messo i tre Magi sulla via giusta, orienta il cuore e la mente di maestro Giovanni Maria verso di me Isabella; che mi ami quando mi vede, che mi desideri quando non mi vede, o santa croce, esaudisci questa mia richiesta”.
- 16 In general, on the superstitious prayers, [Fantini \(1996, 1999\)](#), the latter article contains a very large repertory; [Caravale \(2003\)](#); In particular on *historiolae*: [De Martino \(\[1959\] 1995, pp. 71–74\)](#); [Duni \(1999, pp. 187–88\)](#); [Roveri \(2003–2004, pp. 193–46\)](#); [Cameron \(2010, pp. 51–56\)](#); [Bozóky \(2013\)](#); on the proposed classification, [Agapkina and Toporkov \(2013\)](#).
- 17 The malefic aspects of love magic have been emphasized by [Kieckhefer \(1976, p. 57; 2022, p. 99\)](#); [Duni \(2007, p. 41\)](#)
- 18 “Terra, terra, la zappa e il badile ti colpiscono e la morte ti distrugge. Così si possano distruggere il cuore, la mente e i cinque sensi di maestro Giovanni Maria come fa il cadavere sotto terra, finché egli non venga da me e faccia quello che voglio io”.
- 19 Another Bolognese example in AAB, Ricuperi Attuariali, reg. 249, cc. 53r–64r (trial against Bartolomea Brighenti, June 1567); a similar practice in [Cardini \(1989\)](#), 137 (trial against Gostanza da Libbiano, 1594); [Black \(2009, pp. 248–49\)](#). But measuring with fingers could also have been a way of summoning the devil; [Zanelli \(1992, p. 106\)](#); abundant examples of both uses in [Roveri \(2003–2004, pp. 25–30\)](#).
- 20 [Propp \(1968\)](#) and see above, note 16.
- 21 The trial against Pellegrina in AAB, Foro Arcivescovile, sgabello VI, n. 2 (Barbadori Francesco, mazzo II), file n. 21, “Contra Peregrinam filiam Andree Trombetta curialem” (2–10 July 1556).
- 22 «Mi teneva a sua posta». On the Benedetti family and their activity as booksellers in sixteenth-century Bologna, see [De Tata \(2021, pp. 64–78\)](#)

- 23 One undecipherable word.
- 24 “Lei [Innocenza] fece uno martello quale si fa con scolare del piombo in una mescola, et quando è disfatto se gli punta dentro con uno coltello che habbia il manico negro et si dicono queste parole, cioè: ‘As, te trapas, [. . .] contra il mare podestà capitano, per amore della Pellegrina cinqui diavoli si partano, che vadano al cuore di Francesco, et cinque onze di sangue gli cavano, tre se ne tengano in pagamento, et due ne lasci gli, servela bene che ti paga bene al nome del suo gran diavolo”.
- 25 “‘Io ti foro et non ti foro, ma foro il cuore et la mente, il membro et li cinque sentimenti di Francesco a nome del suo gran diavolo’, et detto piombo disfatto si throw poi in uno cadinello dove sia della acqua coria et della orina di quella persona che fa fare la fare, et quando io la feci gli messi della mia orina”. Cast lead is also mentioned, with similar but also partly different meanings, in other trials; [Romano \(1996, p. 38\)](#).
- 26 “Alle tre hore mi levai, al cielo di morti me ne andai, guardai in verso oriente et vidi messer Francesco con tutta la sua gente, et disse ‘donde diavolo vai, et dove diavolo vienti?’ [. . .]. Io vengo da te Pellegrina che il cuore tu mi hai tolto et il sono tu mi hai legato, sì come le vero et che non è busia, così il sono di messer Francesco con me legato sia” A very similar prayer was recited by the Modenese Barbara Grafagnina before the inquisitor in 1594; [Roveri \(Roveri 2003–2004, p. 242\)](#).
- 27 [Robbins \(1997\)](#); [Rider \(2006\)](#), but see [Romano \(1996, p. 37\)](#), in which this charm is similar to that performed by Pellegrina. See also [Black \(2009, pp. 249–51\)](#), that translate the Italian “cordella” with “rope”.
- 28 [Roveri \(2003–2004, pp. 245–46\)](#). On the “army of the dead” and its connection with witchcraft, [Ginzburg \(1989\)](#), 130ff; [Ginzburg and Lincoln \(2020, p. 52–54\)](#).
- 29 In the dialects of northern Italy (especially Lombardy), “cusiliere” meant “spoon”.
- 30 AAB, Foro Arcivescovile, sgabello VI, n. 2 (Barbadori Francesco, mazzo II) file n. 15 (15 July 1556).
- 31 The most important contribution on the use of the magnet is now [Tedesco \(2016\)](#); see also [Duni \(1999, pp. 193–97\)](#); [Messana \(2007, p. 360\)](#); [Black \(2009, p. 253\)](#). On the distinction between “simple” and “heretical” spells, [Duni \(2007, pp. 15, 34\)](#); on the role played by Catholic ritual *ibid.*, 49–51
- 32 In Italian, this was the so-called “mentita”, that is, the words spoken by a person who wants to challenge his opponent to a duel; see for example [Cavina \(2022, pp. 43, 49\)](#).
- 33 For the *Malleus*, [Kramer \(2003, p. 365 \(II/1,1\)\)](#); for the *Strix Pico* ([\[1523\] 1989, p. 139](#)); cf. [Duni \(1999, pp. 191–92\)](#) and [Roveri \(2003–2004, pp. 33, 42, 105\)](#).
- 34 AAB, Foro Arcivescovile, sgabello VI, n. 2 (Barbadori Francesco, mazzo II) file n. 11 (19–20 July 1556).
- 35 “Io voglio che tu mi dica i malefici che tua sorella ha fatto a quel bambino”.
- 36 The chimney, evidently, was a suitable place to invoke the devil. Spanning the chimney hood is a very common practice in Italian inquisitorial trials of the early modern age, often accompanied by the recitation of the rhymed formula: “Five fingers I place on the wall, five devils I avert” (“Cinque dita pongo al muro, cinque diavoli scongiuro”); see, e.g., [Mazzone and Pancino \(2008, p. 128\)](#) and [Zanelli \(1992, p. 106\)](#).
- 37 AAB, Foro Arcivescovile, sgabello VI, n. 2 (Barbadori Francesco, mazzo II), file n. 19, “Contra Juliam filiam magistri Joannis Francisci fabri lignarii”, 16–18 July 1556.
- 38 AAB, Foro Arcivescovile, sgabello VI, n. 2 (Barbadori Francesco, mazzo II), file n. 57.
- 39 “Io Iacoma, moglie de Michele di Rodolfini da Cento, a voi reverendo padre vicario del reverendo inquisitore di Bologna et a voi monsignor vicario de monsignor reverendissimo vescovo di Bologna, con la voce confesso me credere tutto quello che crede la Santa Romana Chiesa, et abiuro ogni heresia contra essa santa romana chiesa, de quali errori voi me havete gravemente sospetta per l’incantationi et invocationi del demonio et opere nigromantice che ho fatto et insegnate, et obbligo me stessa per lo avvenire, se più caderò in simili cose, per qual appresso di voi son gravemente sospetta di heresia, di cadere nella pena debita alli relapsi in heresia, alla qual pena giuro et protesto me in futuro rendere obligata”; AAB, Miscellanee Vecchie, 917, “Sententia contra dominam Iacobam uxorem Michaelis de Rodolfinis de Cento”. The iron cage outside the convent of San Domenico was placed by inquisitor Leandro Alberti in 1537 to prevent penitent heretics from being stoned to death by children; [Dall’Olio \(2007, p. 31\)](#).
- 40 He held this office from 1553 to 1558. See [Dall’Olio \(1999, pp. 205–6\)](#).
- 41 [Wier \(1568, pp. 638–39 \(book 6, ch. 19\)\)](#). On Wier, see [Valente \(\[2003\] 2022\)](#).
- 42 “Signor, si voi trovati mai ch’io habbia fatto cosa nissuna a mio marito innanti ch’io lo pigliasse o doppio, fatemi peggio che non si facie alla Jacoma, che si mese l’altra matina a cavallo dell’asino, o alla Ravanella, che fu abrusiata [. . .]. Signor no mi, non ne so niente, se trovate ch’io lo sapia, fatemi andare a cavallo del asino [. . .]. Quando trovati ch’io lo sapia, fatemi il peggio che sapeti”.
- 43 “Madonna Santa Lena, che drieto al mare vevi andvi, la croce di messer Jesu Christo la cercavi, tanto che la cercassi, tanto che la trovassivi, e ve repossasevi, pane, poro e sale che a mangiasevi, e ne arivò messer Jesu Christo et disse: ‘Che fate, Lena?’ ‘Signor, me repossava’, pano, poro e sale ch io mangiava”. This too, with many variations, is a common prayer in inquisitorial trials; e.g., [Martin \(1989, pp. 121–24\)](#); [Fantini \(1999, pp. 623–24\)](#); [Roveri \(2003–2004, pp. 219–20\)](#). In appropriately purged versions, it is still found among contemporary Catholics; see, e.g., <https://www.preghiereperlafamiglia.it/sant-elena.htm> (accessed on 3 September 2024); [Gala Pellicer \(2015\)](#).

- 44 “Io non brucio sale né saina, ma il core e la mente e i cinque sentimenti del N. al nome del suo gran diavolo”; the herb “saina” is probably a variety of juniper (*Juniperus Sabina*), which is highly toxic and whose extract was often used as an abortive drug.
- 45 AAB, Foro Arcivescovile, sgabello VI, n. 1 (Barbadori Francesco, mazzo I), file n. 63, “Contra dominam Helisabettam Busolam” (28 August–4 September 1556).
- 46 “Ho inteso che lei è una donna che fa qualche volta a piacere”.
- 47 A native of Siena, Colombino had been governor of Foligno in 1554–1555; he was then auditor of Rota in Bologna and died in Naples; Weber (1994, p. 258).
- 48 “et delle orationi da constringere li spiriti et al.tre cose da metere in gratia et in disgratia”.
- 49 On the prayer of St. Daniel Fantini (Fantini 1999, pp. 613–15); the “nomi del ben volere” are mentioned in a catalog of superstitions by Rodolfo Paleotti, bishop of Imola (1611–1619); see Zanelli (1992, p. 107).
- 50 “Messer Iesu Christo è levato el frate è apparato, l’altare è aparechiato, il libro aperto, cussì prego messer Iesu Christo che apra il cor de Hanibal verso de mia figliola et de mi”.
- 51 Fantini (1996, 1999, pp. 620–22); the versions reported by Fantini are longer and more elaborate than those transcribed here.
- 52 On the details of these practices, see Fantini (1996, 1999)
- 53 “Che fai qui Marta, che l’homo morto guarda? Ancì, son quella Marta che l’homo vivo accendo e riscaldo, cussì te voglio pregare, Marta, che per amore di questa madre benedetta et del suo santissimo figliolo che me debbi prestare gratia de mettere pace, amore et fede et carità como fe’ messer Iesu Christo in la Santa Trinità, voglia Dio et la dolce vergine Maria, amen”.
- 54 “Si piglia tri picigotti de sale et si getano suso il foco, et a ogni picigotto se dice: ‘O sal de sapientia, che in man strenzo, cussì possa stringere il core di N. verso di me, che mi possa amare et bramare come fece la dolce Vergine Maria il suo figliolo caro, cussì como Dio fece il ciel, la terra et il mare, cussì possa fare che costui mi voglia bene et non mi voglia male’. Et questo l’ho fatto per Cesare del quale era gravida, et questo me lo insegnò una dona che ha nome Lucia, moglie de un chiodarollo”. [“Si prendono tre pizzichi di sale e si gettano sul fuoco, e ad ogni pizzico si dice ‘O sale di sapienza che stringo in mano, così si possa stringere il cuore di N. verso di me, che possa amarmi e desiderarmi come fece la dolce Vergine Maria col suo caro figlio, così come Dio creò il cielo, la terra e il mare, così possa egli volermi bene e non volermi male’. E ho fatto questo rito per Cesare, del quale ero gravida, me l’ha insegnato una donna di nome Lucia, moglie di un chiodaiolo”].
- 55 “Non compro questo ovo, ma compro la discordia e la malivolentia del tale et della tale che non si possano mai volere bene se non come fece Caino et Abello”.
- 56 Still in the second half of the 17th century, Borgo dell’Ariente was an infamous area frequented by prostitutes and sorceresses; Mazzone and Pancino (2008, p. 93).
- 57 Kramer (2003, pp. 489–96 (II/1,15)); similar considerations in Kieckhefer (1976, pp. 75–76).
- 58 AAB, Foro Arcivescovile, Sgabello II, n. 10 (Cesare Belliossi, mazzo V/1), “Ex officio contra Annam Teutonicam” (5–19 September 1556).
- 59 Ibid, contra Cassandra Bertucci (23–24 September 1556); AAB, Ricuperi Attuariali, f. 152, fasc. “Contra mulieres de Butrio” (21–22 March 1557); ibid, fasc. “Franciscae Zampettae” (3 May–25 August 1557).
- 60 “Alessandro mi disse che la detta Isabetta havea fatto delle malie al detto maestro Alessandro, et che lui havea vomitato delle agochie”; AAB, Foro arcivescovile, sgabello VI, n. 2 (Barbadori Francesco, mazzo II) file n. 14, 16 luglio 1556.
- 61 E.g., Paulus Grillandus, *Tractatus de hereticis et sortilegiis*, Lugduni, apud Jacobum Giuncti, 1536, fol. 23r (book 2, § Sortilegia multis fiunt modis, no. 22).
- 62 AAB, Archbishop’s Forum, stool VI, Barbadori Francesco, deck II, deed no. 22, “Processus Camille Cusilieriae” (2–11 July 1556). However, Camilla denied all charges and was eventually released.
- 63 On the connections between lower magic (sorcery) and witchcraft, Kieckhefer (2022, pp. 244–55).
- 64 A detailed exposition of these events in Dall’Olio (2001a).
- 65 This copy is found, for reasons I don’t know, among the manuscripts of the Bolognese naturalist Ulisse Aldrovandi (Bologna, Biblioteca Universitaria, ms. Aldrovandi, 21/III, cc. 28r–36r). On Aldrovandi’s multiple interests, which nevertheless seem to exclude magic, Olmi (1976) and Tugnoli Pattaro (1981). For other documents we refer entirely to Dall’Olio (2001a).
- 66 BUB, ms. Aldrovandi, 21/III, cc. 28r–v (21 March 1559). Domenica, like other women tried three years earlier, had also undergone a trial. The consequences, however, must have been rather mild, since later the inquisitor wrote to Rome that the defendants had never abjured before.
- 67 Ibid, cc. 29r–v.
- 68 Ibid, c. 30r.
- 69 “Signor no che non è vero, che me l’havete fatto dir per forza!”.
- 70 In other places this kind of torture was known as “cannette” or “sibille”; Black (2009, p. 84)
- 71 Ibid, cc. 30r–v.
- 72 BUB, ms. Aldrovandi, 21/III, c. 30v.

- ⁷³ Ibid, cc. 31r-v. Here again we can see the forcing made by the judge, who was questioning according to a pre-established pattern. Domenica, in fact, had narrated only that she had eaten the meat; it was the judge, after asking her other questions, who asked her what happened to the ox after they had eaten it. Cf. Pico ([1523] 1989, p. 122). On this rite see Ginzburg (1989, pp. 206–75).
- ⁷⁴ “Havea due bechine, et ambedue le adoperava in una volta, in uno et l’altro loco”, c. 31r. The devil’s bifurcated member, an instrument of lust, was present in the confessions of the Valcamonica witches in 1518 and was later present in those of the Milanese witch Caterina de Medici (1616); cf. Muraro (1976, p. 159) and Farinelli and Paccagnini (1989, p. 299).
- ⁷⁵ Biblioteca Universitaria di Bologna (BUB), ms. Aldrovandi, 21/III, c. 32r (22 March 1559).
- ⁷⁶ Ibid, cc. 34r-35r (22 and 27 March 1559); (Rezasco 1890).
- ⁷⁷ Ibid, cc. 35v-36r.

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