

Demon Lovers: Witchcraft, Sex, and the Crisis of Belief

By Walter Stephens

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On September 20, 1587, Walpurga Hausmännin of Dillingen in southern Germany was burned at the stake as a witch. Although she had confessed to committing a long list of *maleficia* (deeds of harmful magic), including killing forty—one infants and two mothers in labor, her evil career allegedly began with just one heinous act—sex with a demon. Fornication with demons was a major theme of her trial record, which detailed an almost continuous orgy of sexual excess with her diabolical paramour Federlin "in many divers places, . . . even in the street by night."

As Walter Stephens demonstrates in *Demon Lovers*, it was not Hausmännin or other so-called witches who were obsessive about sex with demons—instead, a number of devout Christians, including trained theologians, displayed an uncanny preoccupation with the topic during the centuries of the "witch craze." Why? To find out, Stephens conducts a detailed investigation of the first and most influential treatises on witchcraft (written between 1430 and 1530), including the infamous *Malleus Maleficarum* (*Hammer of Witches*).

Far from being credulous fools or mindless misogynists, early writers on witchcraft emerge in Stephens's account as rational but reluctant skeptics, trying desperately to resolve contradictions in Christian thought on God, spirits, and sacraments that had bedeviled theologians for centuries. Proof of the physical existence of demons—for instance, through evidence of their intercourse with mortal witches—would provide strong evidence for the reality of the supernatural, the truth of the Bible, and the existence of God. Early modern witchcraft theory reflected a crisis of belief—a crisis that continues to be expressed today in popular debates over angels, Satanic ritual child abuse, and alien abduction.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly
Throughout the centuries of witch trials in Europe, many Christian thinkers were interested (perhaps a little too interested) in a certain recurring theme of the witches' testimonies: their stories of sex with demons. A Johns Hopkins Italian studies professor, Walter Stephens, looks at this preoccupation in his scholarly but accessible work, Demon Lovers: Witchcraft, Sex, and the Crisis of Belief. Perusing 15th- and 16th-century writings on witchcraft from various European countries, Stephens argues that theories of demon copulation are more than just misogynistic expressions of ambivalence toward female sexuality: they were vital to Christian thought, a way for theologians to resolve perennial questions about the existence of God and the supernatural.
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From Library Journal
Rosemary's Baby fans be forewarned: there is little entertainment but much ponderous discussion about theological history in this book on the Christian obsession with sex and demons during the 15th and 16th centuries. To explain this phenomenon, Stephens (Italian, Johns Hopkins; Giants in Those Days: Folklore, Ancient History and Nationalism) turns his attention to the witchcraft treatises written during that time rather than to accounts of the trials themselves. A conscientious historian and writer, he places his work in the context of what has already been done and is careful to point out the dangers of foisting the concerns of one's own era on the goings-on of another. Instead, Stephens attempts to show at great length and with considerable scholarship that this preoccupation had to do with nothing less than theologians' uncertainty about the realness of demons, without whose existence the very precepts of Christianity could be called into question. Recommended for academic libraries. Ellen D. Gilbert, Princeton, NJ
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From Booklist
The common view of witch hunters as wildly otherworldly zealots disintegrates in Stephens' stunning investigation into the motives and methods of these much-misunderstood inquisitors. Through careful scrutiny of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century witch trials, Stephens lays bare a peculiar inversion of judicial dynamics that made the accusers in these proceedings strangely dependent upon the accused for proof of their own imperiled beliefs. Desperately craving empirical evidence to buttress their metaphysical doctrines, the witch hunters struggled to secure tangible proof of human dealings with demons--most sensationally, of women's liaisons with devils. As fascinating as the primitive empiricism of the witch hunters is the tangled psychology of those (mostly women) who genuinely believed they had trafficked with devils--and were defying the Church in so doing. In their voluntary confessions, the reader glimpses a profound social alienation. Stephens finds that the story of the witch doctors has continued relevance today, in a world in which covens of self-proclaimed witches clamor for headlines, frantic parents accuse day-care providers of Satanic child abuse, and reports of alien abduction stir popular fascination. Unsettling and compelling. *Bryce Christensen*
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Users Review

From reader reviews:

Rolando Gil:

This Demon Lovers: Witchcraft, Sex, and the Crisis of Belief book is simply not ordinary book, you have after that it the world is in your hands. The benefit you will get by reading this book is definitely information inside this e-book incredible fresh, you will get information which is getting deeper you read a lot of information you will get. This specific Demon Lovers: Witchcraft, Sex, and the Crisis of Belief without we understand teach the one who reading through it become critical in thinking and analyzing. Don't possibly be worry Demon Lovers: Witchcraft, Sex, and the Crisis of Belief can bring whenever you are and not make your tote space or bookshelves' become full because you can have it in your lovely laptop even cellphone. This Demon Lovers: Witchcraft, Sex, and the Crisis of Belief having excellent arrangement in word and also layout, so you will not truly feel uninterested in reading.

Lucille Renner:

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Fred Martinez:

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Catherine Almond:

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