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Johannes Trithemius and Witches: Between Religion and Superstition

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Abstract: This contribution reconstructs the reflection on witches of Johannes Trithemius (1462–1516), a German Benedictine who took up the pen on several occasions to declare against the spread of witchcraft and the need to solve this problem. The method adopted is to understand Trithemius' thought from the analysis of his own works, specifically the *Antipalus maleficiorum* (1505–1508), the *Liber octo quaestionum* (1515) and what can be known of the *De daemonibus* (1507–1514). What will emerge will be an articulate reflection, which re-proposes the doctrine of the *Malleus maleficarum* (1486) enriched with original elements often drawn from popular superstitions. Thus, Trithemius proposes artifices to be immune from witches (e.g., apotropaic amulets) and provides specific indications on how to cure evil spells (exorcism), extending the dissertation to broader issues, such as the gender question, the relationship between witches and children (e.g., sacrifices, proselytes, victims) and developments in exorcism practice.

Keywords: Trithemius; witchcraft; exorcism; evil spells; superstition

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1. Introduction

Since the late 19th century, witchcraft has continued to attract unbroken scholarly interest[1], and the 2020 publication of *The Routledge History of Witchcraft* (edited by Johannes Dillinger) not only demonstrated significant progress in research but also highlighted the many questions that remain unanswered. Among the various contributions, the volume includes an excellent essay by Johannes Dillinger (Dillinger 2020), in which the scholar assesses the state of witch hunts conducted in Germany during the Modern Age. Dillinger primarily focuses on the connections between Heinrich Kramer's *Malleus Maleficarum* (1486) and the contemporary German witchcraft context, characterised by the coexistence of both learned and popular demonology, both of which affirmed the existence of witchcraft and the need to eliminate witches.

Although the Benedictine abbot Johannes Trithemius (1462–1516)[2] also contributed to the witchcraft question in 16th-century Germany, his work is notably absent from Dillinger's essay. This omission should not be attributed to any lack of diligence on Dillinger's part, as his research is always precise and meticulous, but rather to the scarcity of works that have focused on elucidating and defining Trithemius' thoughts on witches. Indeed, Trithemius has piqued historiographical interest for his conception of magical disciplines[3], as he believed it necessary to place ceremonial magical practices alongside the natural magic espoused by Marsilio Ficino and Giovanni Pico della Mirandola[4]. Yet, among his cryptographic, magical and historical writings, Trithemius also addressed the topic of witchcraft, both spontaneously and by commission. However, aside from Paola Zambelli's analyses of Renaissance magic (Zambelli 1985, 1988, 2007) and some detailed studies in Noel L. Brann's volume dedicated to the Benedictine scholar (Brann 1998, pp. 51–57), the issue has never been examined in a specific and focused manner. Therefore, my aim in this contribution was to retrace Trithemius' reflections on witches by working directly with the abbot's texts on the subject. More specifically, Trithemius addressed the issue of witches in three works: *De daemonibus*, dated 1507 and probably never completed, of which only

the prologue and a synopsis of the twelve chapters remain; *Antipalus maleficiorum*, written in 1508 but only published posthumously and later censored; and *Liber octo quaestionum*, written in 1508, published in 1515 and widely circulated in the subsequent period[5], which aimed to respond to questions posed by Emperor Maximilian I.

These works were written during a pivotal period in Trithemius' life when the scholar was accused of being a magician and necromancer and subsequently expelled from his abbey of St. Martin in Sponheim. Trithemius had served as abbot there for twenty years from 1463, enforcing a highly strict model of monastic discipline rooted in the teachings of the early Christian Fathers, in which the study of classical texts was essential for individual education, and amanuensis practices were preferred over printed texts[6]. It was also at Sponheim that Trithemius worked on the *Steganographia*, the work that brought accusations against him due to its distinctive conception of magic.

The epistemological status of magic was already complex in the Middle Ages, as the distinction between lawful magical practices and those that bordered on condemnation was often controversial. In *A History of Magic and Experimental Science* (though dated, still indispensable for studies on these topics), Lynn Thorndike argues that the definition proposed by Albertus Magnus clearly illustrates the criteria that distinguish between the two types of magic (Thorndike (1923, p. 554) but see also Gregory (1962, p. 101)). While acknowledging the contribution of medieval thought, Paola Zambelli (Zambelli 2007, *passim*) showed that it was only in the mid-15th century that the definition of "natural magic" was taken up and more clearly articulated. In particular, Zambelli convincingly points out that the concurrence of Marsilio Ficino's formulation of natural magic (1486) and Heinrich Kramer's theories on witches, as promoted in the *Malleus Maleficarum* (1486), was no mere coincidence. Indeed, between 1486 and 1487, Ficino and Giovanni Pico della Mirandola decided to publish their apologetic works on magic, arguing for the existence of purely natural magic with no association to demons, in an effort to distance themselves from popular witchcraft and prevent their magical theories from being condemned as witchcraft. In contrast, Johannes Trithemius chose never to publish his letters advocating necromancy and initiation, nor did he publish his magical recipes.

Trithemius' political-cultural choice of silence[7] stemmed largely from his awareness that the *Steganographia* was not merely a cryptographic work but one of ceremonial magic with frequent demonic references[8]. The occult nature of the text was also evident to contemporary historical actors[9], including the monks of Sponheim, who supported the accusations against their abbot, ultimately leading to his expulsion from the monastery (Arnold 1991, pp. 201–8).

At that time, Trithemius was very close to Emperor Maximilian I, who invited him to move to his court to become the imperial historiographer. However, the Benedictine chose a monastic life and, thanks to his friendship with Elector Joachim von Brandenburg, entered the monastery of St. James in Würzburg, where he remained until his death in 1516. Once in Würzburg, Trithemius dedicated himself exclusively to writing in various genres, ranging from magical epistles and the autobiographical *Nepiachus* (1507) to the aforementioned *Liber octo quaestionum* (1508/1515) and historiographical works such as the *Annales Hirsaugiensis* (1514). Despite the still-pending accusations of black magic, the Benedictine was not deterred from producing three further works with an occult focus (*De daemonibus*, *Antipalus maleficiorum* and *De septem secundeis*), which were not published for this reason. The only work that was printed during this time was the "innocent" *Polygraphia*, a cryptographic text intended to counter slander.

2. Trithemius and the Witches

Trithemius' conception of witchcraft is not entirely original but remains in continuity with the *Malleus Maleficarum*, which serves as the primary source for the Benedictine's theses[10]. According to Trithemius, witches are women who belong to the worst category of the "genus maleficarum."[11] Indeed, they desecrate the consecrated host after stealing it (particularly on Easter Sunday), not only renounce baptism but also use baptismal water as

a lotion to prepare instruments of evil, scorn penance, and mock Christian sacrificial rites. With God's permission, witches are guilty of collaborating with the devil and his demons to cause harm to people and their property through malevolent spells.

Witchcraft can alter the physiological state of its victims, causing dizziness and severe headaches that quickly lead to blindness. Moreover, witchcraft-induced diseases can be so devastating that they manifest as epilepsy, pestilence, and fever, driving victims to madness and sometimes leading them to theft or even more serious crimes. Hearing loss, impotence, sterility, and walking disorders (such as claudication) can also have a witch-like aetiology. In this extensive list of maleficent maladies, Trithemius includes not only physical afflictions but also diseases of the soul, which manifest as foul love, capable of progressing to an extreme form of perdition, resulting in death, severe infirmity, or intense tremors. Beyond illnesses, curses can also cause diabolical harassment or possession of human bodies and alter weather conditions, damaging crops with storms or devastating them with hail.

Finally, according to Trithemius, the crimes of witchcraft are so numerous that it is difficult to list them all, but the most common include stealing milk from neighbours to make butter in water with the devil[12] and engaging in carnal union with *incubi* demons. The Benedictine has no doubt: witches are heretics and apostates from the faith; they sin against God, nature, and humanity, and thus, the most fitting punishment for them is death by fire. What truly terrifies Trithemius in this definition of "witchcraft" is the sheer number of witches in circulation, so vast that there is not even a small village where they are not present. He argues that it is essential to stop them as soon as possible to prevent them from achieving their ultimate goal—the destruction of humanity—and, most importantly, from spreading their influence. This last point seems to be the one that troubles Trithemius the most, as he notes that it is exceedingly rare for a witch to repent and leave the group[13].

The primary paradigm of the witch, according to Trithemius, is the midwife[14]. For this reason, he advises parents to have their children baptised as soon as possible[15] and to avoid choosing a woman with even the slightest reputation for being a witch as a birth attendant, as midwife-witches exploit the moment of birth to make sacrifices to demons. Although the association between midwifery and witchcraft is a common motif, the theme takes on a unique development in Trithemius' text, as he describes the midwife's behaviour varying according to the sex of the newborn child. The infants chosen as sacrificial victims are all male: the witch-midwife uses long needles to kill the baby within the womb, inserting them into the scrotum—still delicate and devoid of blood—up to the head, ensuring that the needles do not pierce anything surrounding it. The foetal remains are then sacrificed to demons and used to produce an ointment that the witches smear on their bodies (though the uses of the compound are not specified), while the bones are employed in evil spells. In contrast, newborn females are not pierced; instead, the midwife baptises them while uttering a series of execrable words, offering them to demons before delivering them bodily to become future witches. This practice, as reported by Trithemius, seems to have no counterpart elsewhere. He adds that this ritual is sometimes also performed on male infants, with the devil intervening more harshly, causing them great pain as he seeks to subdue them. In addition to harming newborns, witch-midwives also inflict substantial damage on women in labour. It often occurs that the midwife deliberately renders a woman infertile by manoeuvring the uterus too far out or pushing it too far in, making it unsuitable for conception. Another possibility is the midwife's collusion with the mother-in-law, ensuring that the witch continues to be involved, surrounding the new mother's household with malevolent influence.

The gender issue is predominant in the *Antipalus maleficiorum*, both in terms of the witches themselves (who are exclusively women) and their newborn victims. The notion that it is the devil himself who imposes the gender issue is a significant theme. Unlike the *Malleus Maleficarum*, which argues that women are more susceptible to becoming witches because the female sex possesses certain traits that predispose them to demonic seduction, Trithemius attributes to Satan a sort of desire—perhaps even a need—to subjugate the male gender. This conclusion seems contradictory, as it might appear more logical to think that

the devil's ambition to conquer humanity would lead him to covet men as his worshippers and co-operators rather than women. Trithemius does not provide any explanation for why witches are women. While the Benedictine does not hide his misogyny in other writings (see Zambelli 2007, p. 91), and his work is strongly influenced by the *Malleus*, there seems to be a deeper undercurrent in these reflections, which is subtly hinted at in the causes that lead women to become witches.

Trithemius diverges from the traditional motif of initiation into witchcraft, where an older witch promises the future neophyte the pleasures and riches bestowed by Satan during nocturnal gatherings or simply orders her to follow an anointed staff or demon astride. In the witchcraft paradigm proposed by the Benedictine, the Sabbath is as absent as night flying, and witches consciously choose the path of the Evil One because they are incorrigible sinners. It is not the devil who persuades or deludes women; rather, it is these women who approach him, driven by their own malevolence and a desire to cause harm to others, craving their destruction. Trithemius thus departs from and overturns the long-standing tradition—from the *Canon Episcopi* to the *Malleus Maleficarum* and beyond—which posited the relationship between the devil-tempter and the witch-temptresses as one of illusion and subservience imposed by the former upon the latter. In the *Antipalus*, as well as in the *Liber octo quaestionum*, witches are active agents who personally seek out the devil to establish a collaboration. In other words, Trithemius does not equate witchcraft with the illusions experienced by *mulierculae* disappointed by demons nor with a generally matriarchal witchcraft lineage but rather with the practice of *invocatio daemonum*.

To close the discussion on the gender issue, it is true that Trithemius never directly defines women as representatives of the weaker sex, yet this notion subtly pervades his works. Given that he asserts an innumerable number of witches scattered across the world, that the most serious sins—avarice and lust—are preparatory to witchcraft, and that there are no male witches, it follows that men are more steadfast than women in adhering to and fulfilling the dictates of the Christian faith. The *Liber octo quaestionum*, in which Trithemius argues that demons can assume the forms of both sexes but prefer the female form, while angels, being blameless, manifest exclusively in male form, further supports this idea (Trithemius 1601, p. 63).

If, by nature, men tend to be more righteous and women more wicked, there is otherwise no difference between the genders when it comes to sin. According to Trithemius, anyone can sin, whether man or woman. He even takes this notion to extremes by considering children to be sinners as well, inheriting their parents' sins, as is written in Scripture[16].

Trithemius asserts that the gravest sin committed by a pure person is lust, and on this point, the Benedictine's thinking is original, presenting witches almost as guardians of Christian righteousness. He suggests that witches have been granted the power to punish the perfidy of married men who prefer the company of incontinent and licentious women. Thus, like a law of counterpoise, the evil that afflicts the lustful manifests as impotence in men and frigidity in women. Trithemius vigorously denounces and is merciless towards those who sin in lust, as they have voluntarily chosen to transgress the Church's rule of equity by violating the marriage bond and, thus, have been deprived of divine protection and exposed to demonic power.

3. Evil Spells: Prevention and Cure

The third and fourth books of the *Antipalus* are both dedicated to remedies against evil spells[17]. According to Trithemius, it is difficult to become a victim of evil spells if one is pure and immaculate, with the exception of children. Even before a witch's wickedness, it is a soul tainted by sin that makes a person susceptible to evil spells. Therefore, the most immediate and effective remedy to protect oneself from witchcraft is the Christian faith. If someone becomes aware that they have fallen into sin, they must immediately repent sincerely and heal the breach by striving to restore the purity of their conscience.

Trithemius is aware of the difficulty of preserving one's spirit from sin because human beings are fragile by nature, so he devotes a large part of his dissertation to curative reme-

dies for eliminating evil. Before proceeding to expound the remedy par excellence, namely exorcism, his final advice is to safeguard oneself at least by respecting the sacraments of the Church or by using unspecified sacred objects. Preservation from evil is the reason why Christian priests and preachers constantly admonish people with redundant reminders to comply with divine dictates and Church rites. Thus, Trithemius exhorts people to attend Mass every day (except for manual workers, for whom it is sufficient to attend the Sunday and public holiday celebration) and to follow these practices, some more orthodox and others more superstitious[18]: after Mass, sprinkle one's home with holy water; hang purifying candles and herbs of the Assumption of Mary above the door of the tabernacle, together with the blessed palms found in the Church; every fourth Friday, take a bath of blessed herbs and palms so as to fill the house with the smell of incense in the name of the Trinity; every morning as soon as one wakes up, and in the evening before going to bed, make the sign of the cross on one's forehead, mouth, and chest; before meals and drinking or leaving the house, always recite the Sunday Prayer and the Angelic Salutation, beseeching God to protect one's mind and body from evil.

In addition to these directives, Trithemius overemphasises the power of sacred objects because they alone "magna vim adversum omnia daemonum maleficia et maleficarum" ("great strength against every evil of demons and witches"). Thus, to use them effectively in an apotropaic manner, it would be appropriate to create a compound from the union, using a sieve, of the powders of blessed candles, the Easter candle, incense, herbs of the Assumption of Mary, blessed offerings, cemetery earth, and blessed water and salt. This Mass is held together with blessed water and can be blessed during Sunday prayer or by asking a priest to exorcise it; then small crosses must be made on it with warm, blessed water and finally placed by the doors of the house, rooms, and stables where livestock is kept. Although close to popular superstition, Trithemius has no doubts about the orthodoxy of these practices and assures that they are an unbreakable shield against evil, and those who choose to be lazy and not follow them deserve that God does not preserve them from evil.

Although these attentions may help, Trithemius does not hide the fact that even the most upright and innocent can fall victim to evil: in the absence of an explanation for this, one must trust in the justice and goodness of the inscrutable divine plan (Trithemius 1601, pp. 65–76).

Finally, Trithemius suggests specific precautions for newborn babies, consisting of some sort of amulets to be attached to their cradles or, preferably, worn around their necks so that they have the protection of God and the angels. To strengthen the pendant, one can also insert a sheet of paper with a Sunday prayer, the Hail Mary, and the Creed or the Gospel according to John written on it. The custom of the amulet is recommended by Trithemius, who claims to have taken it from ancestral customs when it was sufficient to wear a pendant around the neck with the inscription of a single word (unspecified) to be protected from evil (Trithemius 1605, p. 327).

According to Trithemius, once someone has become a victim of an evil spell, the only possible cure is exorcism, even though some of his contemporaries presumed to eliminate witchcraft by resorting to superstitious and ineffective practices[19]. In fact, the scholar complains that it was precisely the disuse of exorcism practices in early Christianity that caused the spread of witchcraft, thus expressing a completely original thought on the reasons for the existence of witches:

"Now that, after this custom [of exorcisms] has been abolished by the Church, the pernicious race of witches is established in great numbers, so that today there is no small village, no town or village in the country where one does not find victims of evil spells, miserably affected in body or in one's possessions."[20]

For this reason, Trithemius finds it necessary to turn to the ancient Fathers and bring exorcism back into practice. To accomplish this, the Benedictine claims to have collated various materials from the Fathers' own texts in order to provide an effective method to cure "from all the evils of demons and women we call witches."[21]

The possibility of eliminating evil spells by using exorcism was not new to Trithemius: the *Malleus Maleficarum* was one of the first printed texts to systematically address the issue of exorcisms of those who had become possessed due to witchcraft (*Malleus Maleficarum*, II, 2 in Kramer and Sprenger (1676, pp. 169–77)). According to Kramer, exorcisms, legal proceedings, the application of torture, and the use of herbs are all effective ways of responding to the apocalyptic spread of witches, caused by the freedom of intervention in the sensitive world granted to the devil until the final triumph of Christ, based on the biblical passage in Rev. 12:12 (Clark 1999, p. 409). Specifically, exorcism is one of the verbal remedies against ailments of witchcraft origin and, together with trials, is one of those means that works not only by chasing away evil but even by eradicating it[22]: similar to the burning at the stake of witches' bodies following the final sentences pronounced by the inquisitors, exorcists eliminate the evil being from the body and mind of the possessed. What Kramer attempts to do is to regulate and define a legitimate type of exorcism, rejecting unorthodox methods (e.g., invocation of demons) and lamenting that, at the time, the practice was overused to heal bewitched persons to the point of being abused. For this reason, respect for matter, form, intention, and order was imperative for the proper performance of an exorcism. From a formal point of view, the practice required that, for the duration of the operation, the possessed person remained naked and near a candle the length of Christ or the Cross. The exorcist would primarily address the bewitched, then invoke God and confront the vexing devil, concluding the exorcism with a prayer. Although implying the theatrical aspect already typical of medieval exorcisms, the model proposed by Kramer is still very much reduced to being a series of guidelines, and only with Girolamo Menghi from Viadana will the exorcism practice obtain the structure that will become topical in the new literary genre of manuals for exorcists and a paradigm for ritual in Catholic contexts[23].

From this brief reference to exorcism in the *Malleus*, it seems that Trithemius' complaint about the desuetude of exorcisms should be somewhat downplayed. Moreover, the same Benedictine mentioned in the *Chronicon Monasterii Hirsaugiensis* his correspondent Adam as abbot of the monastery of St. Martin in Cologne and a famous exorcist, known to have freed several possessed nuns and friars from demons (Zambelli 2007, p. 66). The apparent contradiction can be explained by examining the original exorcism that Trithemius proposes to eliminate evil, which differs from the one performed to cast out demons from the bodies of the possessed or harassed and consists of a particular ablution conducted by a priest. Thus, it is true that sometimes the art of exorcism was used to remove evil spells; however, here, he is referring to a specific ritual that was not performed and derived—according to the author—from the ancient methods of the Fathers.

Despite the originality of the anti-witchcraft purification, the practice has not gained much attention in historiography, and no scholar has retraced it in its complete articulation, neither those who have dealt specifically with Trithemius nor those who have focused on exorcisms[24]. In fact, the proposed ritual is extremely interesting and rudimentary—after all, Trithemius' goal was a return to the Fathers—compared to those theatrical performances typical of the modern age, in which the exorcist acts as a stage director. In the *Antipalus*, a simple ablution of the victim is sufficient to remove a curse, while the priest-exorcist carries out a series of practices ranging from witchcraft to the use of sacred objects and herbs.

Before performing the rite, Trithemius provides certain precautions for the priest, insisting on carrying out a meticulous inspection of the victim's house, searching everywhere for evil objects (e.g., dead people's bones, putrid wood, cloths, pots, snakes and their skins, needles, herbs), inspecting every room carefully, from the beds to the holes in the walls, and also checking the trees in the garden. If he finds anything, the priest must immediately curse the object, the witch and the devil, praise God, and finally burn the find in a field.

In explaining the steps of the exorcism, Trithemius initially focuses on describing how to prepare the bath (Trithemius 1605, pp. 333–34), emphasising and reiterating the need for secrecy so that the witch cannot interfere with the performance. The ritual is intimate and takes place exclusively between the priest and the bewitched person, either in the victim's

home or in a church, as long as the purifying barrel has never been used before and is filled with river water. A table with a tablecloth and two candles must be placed near the barrel to form an altar. Then, all the necessary items must be gathered: a sack full of earth from the cemetery that has been blessed; ashes, which are placed on the head; a candle blessed during the Assumption of Mary; at least one piece of the Easter candle; palm branches, blessed water and salt; and a large quantity of nine herbs such as red artemisia, Jupiter's beard, marigold *lenisticus*, hyssop, sage, pennyroyal, elder leaves with flowers and the herb called "Saint Mary" or *tanacetum balsamita*. These herbs must be put into the water, boiled for a while and then kept warm for each ablution. When everything is ready, the priest begins by blessing the bath in genuflection.

The actual rite (the complete rite is described in Trithemius 1605, pp. 334–83) begins with the reading of seven penitential psalms followed by a litany and the *Dominus vobiscum*. The priest then presents the problem of the curse that has afflicted the victim, begging for his healing. The bewitched person enters the barrel, while the priest takes a fistful of salt and throws it into the bathwater, forming the sign of the cross. Having created the mixture of the blessed water and salt, the "balneum salutis, ad auferendum ab hoc famulo Dei N cuncta daemonum maleficia et omnes morbos sibi quacunque arte impositos" ("bath of health, to ward off from the servant of God N all the evils of demons and all the diseases imposed on him by any art") begins. The bathwater is praised by recalling biblical episodes in which water served as a source of purification (e.g., Abraham in Mesopotamia; Moses and the Red Sea), and the priest blesses the water while gradually adding all the elements, from the cemetery earth to the herbs. At this point, the priest directly addresses the water, touching it with his right hand and invoking its thaumaturgic qualities, implicitly referencing the baptismal exorcisms of early Christianity.

After three priestly prayers and the *Dominus vobiscum* recited by the bewitched person, the priest addresses Satan and the witch responsible for the evil deed, ordering them to leave the victim in peace. The final operation centres around the "blessed wax" (Trithemius 1605, pp. 385–86), which is prayed over to protect the purified person and their livestock from evil. The wax is then used to form small crosses on the doors of the house and inside the home, together with the sprinkling of holy water. This "blessed wax" consists of an elaborate compound created by combining thirty-eight tiny pieces of ashes from the blessed bread, an equal amount of dust from palms and herbs, ashes placed on the head, incense, an Easter candle, thirty-six pieces of purified candles, blessed water, wax, and thirty-one fragments of red coral dust.

Once the ritual is completed, the victim must continue a regimen for the following nine days (Trithemius 1605, pp. 394–96). During this period, they may only drink water from a cup blessed by the priest, consume blessed powders of the hermit Pelagius (taken morning and evening), and drink hot wine or broth in amounts not exceeding half a florin. In addition, they must wash themselves daily in the barrel used during the exorcism. At the same time, the priest must say an antiphon after Mass regarding the purifying bath while kneeling, light three candles, mourn and increase the number of daily prayers. By the end of this period, the victim should be fully free of the curse. However, if the exorcism is unsuccessful, the bewitched person's behaviour must be corrected by imposing prayer, almsgiving and the celebration of Masses for their sins over the next nine days. If the curse still persists, the entire exorcism rite must be repeated until the victim is completely liberated.

Trithemius strongly emphasises how difficult it is to remove a witch's curse and the necessity of perseverance, as it represents the best weapon. In addressing male impotence caused by witchcraft, the Benedictine raises the question of whether it is permissible to use witchcraft to undo witchcraft. The *Antipalus* provides a clear answer: as deduced from Scripture (Trithemius 1605, pp. 402–5), no superstition can counteract diabolic power. The only remedies are ecclesiastical, such as prayers, penance, almsgiving and exorcism. There may be an exception if the evil spell manifests not only as possession but also as illness. In

such cases, consulting a physician is advisable: the exorcism ritual may cure the witchcraft component of the illness, but any disease with a natural cause will remain[25].

Finally, I conclude with a brief clarification on the "dust of Pelagius". The hermit Pelagius frequently appears in the *Antipalus*, identified with Pelagius of Majorca, the author of the *Liber naturalium experimentorum Pelagii heremitae*. However, Trithemius is the only source that mentions him, and the work attributed to him has been lost. The identity of Pelagius has sparked debate among scholars, some supporting his existence and others considering him a literary invention by the abbot[26]. Based on the available sources, the notion that Pelagius never existed and was a fictitious character chosen by Trithemius to justify and legitimise his doctrines appears far more convincing. Trithemius may have used Pelagius to provide authority to his rituals, lending them an appearance of historical backing. It should be noted that, even among his contemporaries, Trithemius was known to falsify sources to construct solid historical arguments[27]. The *Antipalus* itself is steeped in magical references and attributions that often prove unfounded.

4. Conclusions

At the beginning of this contribution, while briefly reviewing the historiography on Trithemius, I mentioned the absence of specific studies on the Benedictine's reflections on witches, aside from some references in the works of Noel L. Brann and Paola Zambelli. For Brann, witchcraft is merely an issue embedded in a broader examination of Trithemius' magic (Brann 1998, pp. 51–57), while Zambelli's dissertation is more structured on this point. Notably, Zambelli compares the only two autograph manuscripts of the *Liber octo quaestionum*: one, the older version, is preserved in Uppsala, dated 1508 (shortly after Trithemius' meeting with Maximilian I), and transmits a shorter version than the later printed text; the other is in Vienna, dated 1515, and identical to the published text (see Zambelli 1985, 2007, pp. 63–69). Focusing on the differences between the manuscripts, Zambelli highlights two key points: firstly, the Uppsala version contains more widespread implicit echoes of Michael Psellos, and secondly, it offers a rather interesting definition of demons. In fact, Trithemius argues that demons are driven by passions that incite them to bodily pleasures, inflame them for battles, make them enjoy lying, and cause them to desire worship. Led by Lucifer, demons are perverted in hatred, and with all the power God allows them, they work towards the destruction of humankind. Zambelli emphasises how this demonic definition distances itself from inquisitorial thought, stresses its Platonic derivation, and suggests it is closer to Trithemius' true thinking (as it comes from an earlier version). She further proposes that the absence of this definition in the printed version may be due to Trithemius' fear of later accusations. Based on these considerations and the absence of references to the Sabbath in Trithemius' works, Zambelli hypothesises that the Benedictine had a more moderate view of witches, being more interested in removing evil spells than in exterminating witches.

Although the interest in the removal of evil spells is paramount in Trithemius' thinking on witches, in fact, reading the *Antipalus* has shown that the learned is very clear not only on the need to eliminate witches but also on the fact that there is no better remedy for their sins. Moreover, the definition of demons handed down from the Uppsala manuscript does not seem so far removed from what is found in the printed version of the *Liber octo quaestionum*. Certainly, there are no references to Satan as a tempter-seducer being worshipped by witches, as is typical of inquisitorial works. However, I believe that this should not be interpreted as moderate thinking but rather as a demonology that aligns with Trithemius' model of a witch: a woman who does not fly by night to attend the Sabbath but one who mainly focuses on performing evil deeds by cooperating with—or sometimes dominating—demons.

In the printed version of the *Liber*, which again implicitly echoes Psellos[28], Trithemius argues for the existence of six types of demons (igneous, air, land, water, subterranean and lucifugal), classified according to where these individual evil beings fell (Trithemius 1601, pp. 55–64). Of these, only air demons collaborate with witches and are capable

of altering weather by causing thunder and storms. These demons are characterised by different kinds of emotions, and when they are greatly offended or upset, they plot to inflict violence during their incursions. What is unclear is how these emotions relate to the feelings of the witch who invokes them[29]. The text reveals only that the passions of air demons vary according to the emotions they encounter at a given moment—when evoked by witches' spells or driven by them to do evil. In this relationship between the witch and the demon, it is the witch who plays the active and dominating role, interfering with and altering demonic emotions, which, in turn, drives the demon to violence. Trithemius adds that witches cooperating with air demons are among the most powerful, aligning with his idea that the power of witches varies depending on the individual, though he does not specify the criteria. What is apparent is that there are two unique and opposing types of people capable of commanding demons: on the one hand, there are witches, defined as "more pernicious", whose wills align with those of demons (to destroy mankind); on the other, there are those who expel demons from possessed bodies, who are mainly priests, as outlined in the *Antipalus* (Trithemius 1601, pp. 47–54).

Unlike the *Liber octo quaestionum*, the *Antipalus* was not written in response to external questions but is a more spontaneous dissertation structured around Trithemius' own needs. Thus, what we read corresponds to the aspects that interested the author most and those on which he felt it was important to focus. The main argument is how to prevent and eliminate evil, presenting various possibilities that straddle the realms of religion and superstition. Trithemius primarily recommends precautionary measures consisting not only of prayers but also of the use of special amulets containing apotropaic inscriptions. Similarly, once an evil spell has been cast, exorcism to ward off demons is a mixture of customary prayers and elements more aligned with popular superstition, as seen in the cases of "blessed wax" and the objects created with it to be worn around the neck and placed in certain areas of the house.

In light of these considerations, I believe that Trithemius' thoughts on witches reflect the contours of his broader religious programme, which includes restoring certain aspects of early Christianity of the Fathers and incorporating elements close to the superstitious world. Just as his issued directives when leading the Abbey of Sponheim[30], his caution against incurring evil spells and the exorcism practices—which are more akin to baptismal exorcisms than to those aimed at liberating the possessed (Young 2016, pp. 27–60)—express Trithemius' intimate desire for a religious revision that brings him closer to the times of Saint Augustine. In other words, the learned calls for a purer, stricter, and more rigorous Christianity, in which preservation from evil and sin is a daily practice, achieved through prayers and the use of amulets, as in ancient times. He also believes that an ancestral exorcism, performed with water and maintained through the use of "blessed wax" worn around the neck and scattered throughout the house, should become a customary practice again to counter the contemporary spread of witches and prevent their threat from returning in the future.

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Notes

1 It is not possible here to account for all the studies on witches that have been produced from the end of the last century to nowadays, nor for the vast number of subjects that have been examined. Thus, see the excellent historiographical reviews that follow: Valente (1998); Duni (2008); Barry and Davies (2007); Valente (2016, 2023).

2 On Trithemius' biography, see the following studies: Brann (1981); Arnold (1991); Kuper (1998); Arnold (2004); Tuczay (2006); Embach (2007). See also Mentzel-Reuters (2015) about Trithemius's historiographical works.

[3] On Trithemius and magic, see Shumaker (1982); Secret (1992, pp. 91–118); Brann (1998); Ernst (1996); Arnold (1975); Grafton (2006, pp. 77–90).

[4] Trithemius supports this thesis in his letter to his pupil Agrippa, in which he commented on the *De occulta philosophia*. See Zambelli (1955, pp. 116–18).

[5] Arnold (1975, pp. 254–56) cites thirteen complete editions of the *Liber octo quaestionum* and notes the numerous repetitions of textual portions within other works.

[6] Trithemius undertook to considerably improve the library of Sponheim Abbey and insisted strongly on the necessity of copying texts rather than printing them. Criticism of printing was clearly exposed in the pamphlet *De laude scriptorum manualium* (1492), modelled on Jean Gerson's earlier work on the amanuensis. On these issues, see Bernardelli (1997); Behrendt (2000); Müller (2002, 2004, 2006, pp. 194–224); Embach (2009); Schlechter (2011).

[7] On Trithemius' choice not to print his own works, see also Schlechter (2018).

[8] According to Trithemius, it did not make sense to limit oneself exclusively to natural magic because it was preferable to unveil the wondrous possibilities of magical practice through an initiatory path. See Zambelli (2007, pp. 60, 75–76).

[9] Problems arose when Trithemius sent the *Steganographia* to the Ghent Carmelite, Arnold Bost, in 1499: the text ended up in the hands of the prior, and the latter deduced that the author was undoubtedly a practitioner of black magic. Among the various detractors, the most incisive for Trithemius was Charles Bouvelles, who was simply bewildered upon reading a letter about the work's contents. Thus, the humanist went to Sponheim to discuss the matter with the man himself, who did not resist and allowed him to read a few pages of the *Steganographia*. Outraged, Bouvelles returned to France, reporting to the prelate Germain de Ganay that Trithemius was a magician dedicated to the evil arts and a necromancer. Trithemius defended himself against the accusations, claiming that his magic was pure and natural, far removed from heterodoxy and, above all, from collaboration with evil demons. On the Trithemius-Bouvelle issue, see Zambelli (1955).

[10] It should be noted that the first edition of the *Malleus* is preserved in the Würzburg Library and that Trithemius includes Jacopo Sprenger among the illustrious men of Germany, citing him in connection with the *Malleus* itself. See Trithemius (1495, p. 68v).

[11] The specific definition of witches is given by Trithemius in Trithemius (1605, pp. 311–13).

[12] The witch-butter connection was already found in *Malleus maleficarum* II, 1, and Trithemius also mentions the food in another passage, in which he creates a similarity between bacchantes and witches: just as the bacchantes can draw honey from rivers because they are possessed by fury. Similarly, witches are able to drink butter from rivers thanks to demonic help. See Kramer and Sprenger (1676, pp. 156–68).

[13] From the way the matter is presented, it appears that witches belong to some sort of sect, but nowhere is Trithemius explicit on this point and prefers to use terms such as "consortium" ("society") to refer to their group. For example, see Trithemius (1605, p. 313).

[14] Ibid., pp. 321–22. The typical motif of the witch-midwife is found in *Malleus maleficarum*, I, 13, but the description of the sacrifices performed by the midwives are more concise (limited to the extraction of the child from the womb), and there are no gender differences regarding newborns. See Kramer and Sprenger (1676, pp. 123–27).

[15] According to Kramer, an unbaptised child would be rejected at the entrance to paradise because of original sin that had not been absolved by the baptismal rite (*Malleus maleficarum*, II. 1). See Kramer and Sprenger (1676, pp. 156–68).

[16] On the question of sins, read Trithemius (1605, p. 320).

[17] On the caution to be exercised and preventive behaviour to avoid being a victim of witchcraft, see Trithemius (1605, pp. 326–27).

[18] On "superstition" see Harmening (1979); Imbruglia (1989); Bailey (2008).

[19] Although Trithemius denounces the existence of superstitious practices as remedies for evil spells, he does not dwell on them or specify them. See Zambelli (2007, p. 83).

[20] Trithemius (1605, p. 331): "Nunc autem, postquam ista consuetudo abolevit ab Ecclesia, nimium invaluit perniciosum genus maleficarum, ut hodie nullus pene sit vicus, nullum oppidum, aut villa, ubi non plures reperiantur, vel in corpore, vel in rebus suis infeliciter maleficiati".

[21] Ibid.: "non solum removendi et curandi modum, sed etiam praeservandi ab omnibus maleficiis daemonum, et mulierum, quas maleficas nuncupamus [...]".

[22] This thesis was also advanced by Armando Maggi, emphasising the linguistic aspect between the diabolic idiom and human counter-rhetoric in Maggi (2001, pp. 96–101).

[23] On exorcism, from the exorcisms of Jesus in Scripture to the most spectacular rites of the Modern Age, see Brown (1981); Lavenia (1998, 2010); Romeo (1999); Di Simplicio (2000); Barbierato (2002); Ferber (2004); Sluhovsky (2007); Brambilla (2010); Dall'Olio (2012); Levack (2013).

[24] For example, Brann only hints at a few passages and in Levack's powerful summary, exorcisms of those who spontaneously presented themselves to be exorcised are excluded a priori, interpreting minor medical problems as a possession.

[25] Unfortunately, this aspect is not articulated by Trithemius and the dynamics of the medicalisation of evil spells are not well understood. The Benedictine only claims to have defined elsewhere the criteria for discerning natural pathologies from diabolic

ones, yet there is no trace of them either in the *Antipalus* or in other works. Perhaps the answer could have been found in the lost *De daemonibus*. Also, in *Malleus maleficarum*, III, 1, the problem of the recognition of which illnesses are raised, but the subject is only hinted at. In fact, Kramer limits himself to arguing that physicians have demonstrated the existence of a disease of witchcraft aetiology, which is recognised because of time: witch sicknesses occur suddenly and in the absence of prior weakening, whereas natural diseases follow a progressive development. See Kramer and Sprenger (1676, pp. 348–52).

[26] For a historiographical discussion of the question of Pelagius' existence, see Zambelli (2007, pp. 77–78).

[27] On the denunciations and criticism Trithemius received from his contemporaries as a falsifier of historical sources, see Arnold (1991, pp. 170–74).

[28] On the demonological thought of Michael Psello, see Lanzi (2014, pp. 15–17).

[29] The correspondence between the emotions of witches and those of air demons is like the relationship of witches with familiars. See Matteoni (2014, *passim*).

[30] In addition to the above, see Schlechter and Stephan (2016) and Arnold and Fuchs (2019) for more on Trithemius' monastic reform programme.

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