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Jonathan Seitz. *Witchcraft and Inquisition in Early Modern Venice.* New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011. xi + 286 pp. $99.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-107-01129-8.

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Commissioned by Matt Vester

This study of the Roman Inquisition in Venice is an admirable addition to works by Carlo Ginzburg, Paul Grendler, Ruth Martin, and others. Jonathan Seitz focuses on the Inquisition's handling of cases of *maleficio*, or the use of witchcraft to cause physical or mental harm. In the period 1550 to 1650, with a gap in documentation from 1593 to 1610, the Venetian Inquisition dealt with approximately 120 cases of *maleficio*, or one-fifth of the 600 cases it reviewed related to the use of illicit magic. At a time when the "witch craze" was at its height in other areas of Europe, the record of the Venetian Inquisition was surprisingly benign. Not only did it fail to execute a single person for witchcraft, but it also failed to pronounce a single sentence for the specific crime of *maleficio*. The Venetian inquisitors clearly believed in the supernatural and in the powers of the devil, but moved cautiously and haltingly when handling cases of witchcraft and illicit magic.

Seitz goes beyond merely tracking the record of the Venetian Inquisition. His objective is also to explore the mentalities of the people of Venice, in particular the ways individuals distinguished the natural from the supernatural. Seitz argues that Venetians as a whole saw the boundaries between the natural and the supernatural as permeable, using natural, physical signs as proof of supernatural activity. They readily offered evidence to support denunciations for *maleficio* based on physical symptoms, such as victims swelling up, wasting away, vomiting, and turning black. They also referred to the presence of suspicious objects, such as bones, bags of feathers, or cryptic writings hidden in bedclothes. Other categories of evidence included suspicious foods, eaten by alleged victims, and erratic behavior by persons accused of causing harm through witchcraft.

Although these signs of possible witchcraft were visible to all, there was a tendency for those making denunciations to find experts to support their case. For the wealthy victim of alleged witchcraft, physicians were often called on to offer testimony about the failure of natural remedies. For the majority of the population, clerical healers or exorcists and healing wise women were often consulted. The records speak most frequently of the role played by healing clerics, usually friars of the Franciscan and Augustinian orders. Seitz examines in detail the exorcists' claims to act with authority, claims based on authorization received from the ecclesiastical hierarchy as well as on their use of manuals which were published in the early seventeenth century. Less frequently, clerics based their claims to exercise the office of exorcist on their "experience." Clerical healers treated patients by blessing them or by a more elaborate process of "signing," during which they often employed ointments, fumigants, drugs, and foods. The use of "natural" methods for healing often landed clerical healers in trouble not just with physicians, on whose territory they encroached, but also with the Inquisition, because the clerical healers were deemed to be straying into the realm of secular medicine at a time when the Inquisition itself wanted to establish clear boundaries between the secular and the spiritual, the natural and the supernatural.

Seitz then turns to the role of physicians who after 1600 appeared more and more frequently before the Venetian Inquisition as expert witnesses. When serving in their professional capacity, physicians demonstrated a world view that was dissimilar from that of clerical healers, wise women, and the general public by insisting that they were concerned with natural illnesses only and that they considered *maleficio* to be something outside of their sphere of activity. Seitz attributes the "naturalism" of Venetian physicians to their training, which usually occurred at the University of Padua and the much smaller Venetian *studio*. Their main texts were by Galen and Avicenna, both of whom treated witchcraft as a marginal issue. However, physicians were not entirely consistent in maintaining the line they drew between the natural and the supernatural. When asked to testify as experts in canonization proceedings, physicians were open to dis-

cussing supernatural options as well as natural mechanisms. More surprisingly, when called on as "ordinary" witnesses in *maleficio* trials and not as experts, and when making denunciations about *maleficio* touching members of their own families, even physicians demonstrated strong beliefs in the power of witches and demons.

Seitz has less to say about the role of wise-women healers, in part because they lacked the prescriptive books available to physicians and exorcists, and in part because the Inquisition did not cite them as experts, despite the prominent role they had in everyday medical practice. While the Inquisition may not have cited them as experts, it was concerned about their activities, prosecuting a number of them for illicit healing methods. The authorities sought to maintain a line between naturalistic remedies and ritual remedies. They were generally not troubled by the women's use of material cures against supernatural illnesses. In fact, as long as wise-women healers confined themselves to herbal remedies they were generally safe from inquisitorial interference.

Finally Seitz expands on the conduct of the Venetian Inquisition itself, noting the tribunal's desire to keep separate the natural and the supernatural. Neither the texts employed by the inquisitors nor the directives from the Congregation of the Holy Office in Rome offered the Venetian tribunal clear guidelines for conducting trials on witchcraft. As a result, the Venetian inquisitors had to work out problems of procedure and interpretation of evidence in an ad hoc manner, struggling to integrate the congregation's piecemeal instructions with the published literature, and with the recalcitrance and duplicity of witnesses. The overarching message conveyed by the congregation in Rome, taken to heart by the Venetian tribunal, was one of caution when dealing with witchcraft. The congregation was especially concerned that in cases of *maleficio* there should be a suitable body of evidence to demonstrate that a crime had in fact occurred before the local inquisitor acted on confessions of alleged witches. The congregation also insisted that the local tribunal contact experts. Seitz argues that the Venetian tribunal was critical of testimony provided by, on the one hand, clerical healers or exorcists, demonstrating, perhaps, friction between inquisitors who were from the Dominican order and exorcists who were for the most part Franciscans and Augustinians. On the other hand, the Venetian Inquisition was more accepting of the testimony of secular physicians and rarely questioned their credentials. But here the Venetian tribunal faced a problem: the congregation at Rome offered no advice on how to proceed when physicians, called as experts, refused to answer the question of whether or not a disease was natural or supernatural. This factor and the high demands the Inquisition made for evidence resulted in the absence of convictions. Although members of the Inquisition believed that supernatural powers intervened in the natural world, they seemed to regard such interventions as rare or at least difficult to prove, an opinion not shared by the rank and file of Venice's population. Seitz concludes by noting that both the church and the Venetian Republic empowered the Inquisition to impose its views on the broader population by force, but in fact the tribunal had decidedly limited success in doing so.

Seitz's book is based on a thorough reading of the archival records left by the Venetian Inquisition and the prescriptive literature employed by physicians, exorcists, and inquisitors. Although he would have benefited from Michael Tavuzzi's recent work on the Inquisition in northern Italy in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries (*Renaissance Inquisitors: Dominican Inquisitors and Inquisitorial Districts in Northern Italy, 1474-1527* [2007]), he is well grounded in recent scholarship on the Venetian Inquisition, and the result is a penetrating study not only of the inner workings of the Venetian tribunal but also of the mental universe of early modern Venetians, and the slow progress toward the separation of the natural and the supernatural.

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