

The Scourge of Demons

Possession,
Lust, and
Witchcraft
in a
Seventeenth-Century
Italian Convent

Jeffrey R. Watt

THE SCOURGE OF DEMONS

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For Julia and Erica

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INTRODUCTION

Nuns, Witchcraft, and the Inquisition

Today in the northern Italian city of Carpi, a small group of nuns pursue a quiet life of prayer and reflection in the Franciscan convent of Santa Chiara, located just a couple blocks to the northeast of the charming central plaza, site of the cathedral and the imposing Pio Castle (see fig. 1). In the seventeenth century, Santa Chiara was one of the most renowned nunneries in the duchy of Modena and the region of Emilia. A small town of about 3,600 inhabitants in the mid-1600s, Carpi had a very strong monastic presence with four monasteries and two convents, the most prestigious of which was Santa Chiara.¹ This convent belonged to the order founded in the thirteenth century by Clare of Assisi. Inspired by Saint Francis, Clare and her early followers sought to pursue a life of “perfect poverty” and refused to own any property either individually or collectively. Canonized in 1255, two years after her death, Clare inspired generations of women to join this Second Order of St. Francis, whose members came to be known as the Clarisses or the Poor Clares.²

The lifestyle of the Clarisses in seventeenth-century Carpi was far removed from that of Clare. The monastery of Santa Chiara was founded in 1490 by Camilla Pio (1440–1504), the grandniece of Pope Innocent VII (pontificate, 1404–06) and a member of the Pio family who ruled Carpi for generations until the 1520s. Admired for her saintliness, Camilla donated the land and the first buildings of the convent.³ Although Clare and her earliest followers had supported themselves by begging, by the 1600s the Clarisses of Carpi, notwithstanding their monastic vows, experienced no poverty either before or after taking the veil. The daughters of many powerful, wealthy, noble families joined this religious community. For several years in the 1630s, Santa Chiara of Carpi was home to three members of the illustrious Este family, the preeminent Emilian dynasty that transferred its court to Modena in 1598 after being forced to relinquish the duchy of Ferrara to the papacy.⁴

In the 1630s Santa Chiara endured the most difficult ordeal in its history. Two residents of the convent began suffering from extraordinary ills in 1636, and later twelve other women endured similar afflictions in the nunnery. Reportedly, all these women frequently threw themselves on the floor,

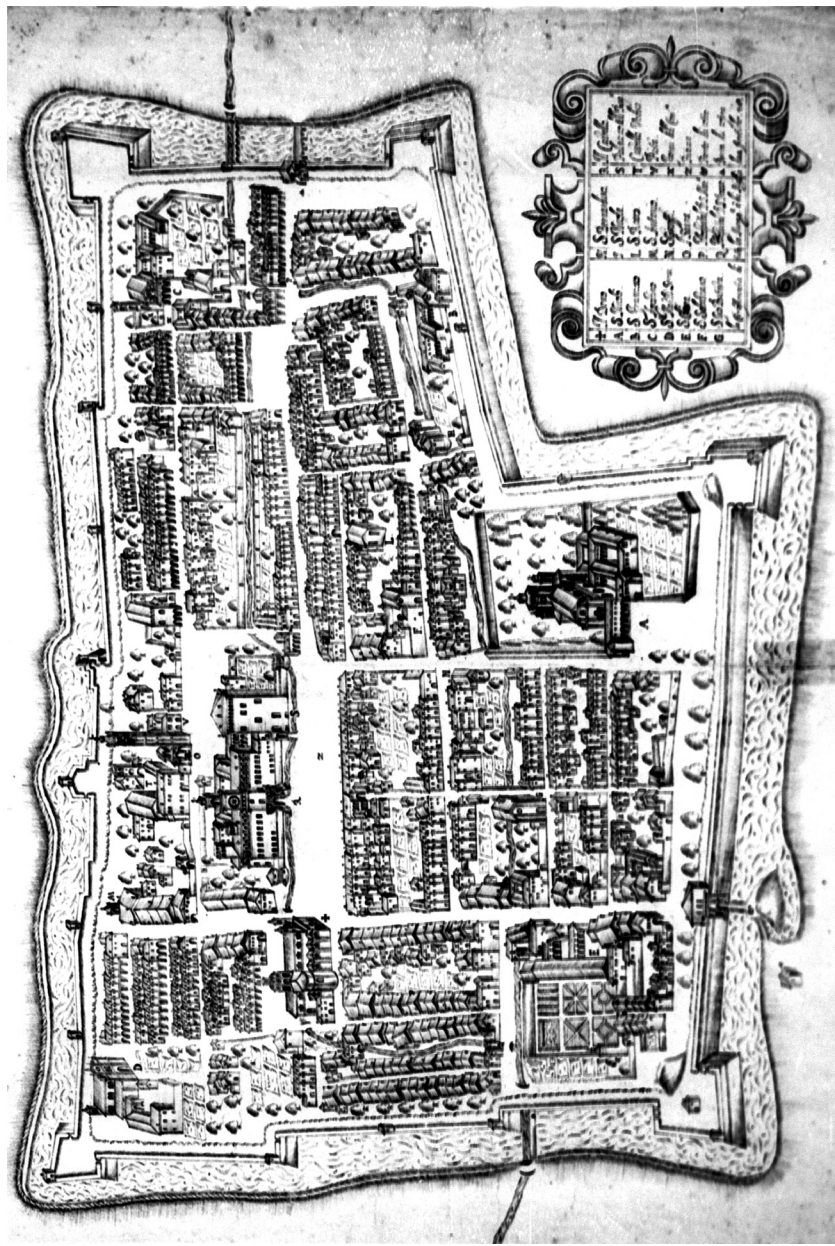


Figure 1. Map of Carpi, Italy (ca. 1670). Oriented toward the east, this map shows the city of Carpi surrounded by its fortified walls and highlighted by the central piazza (Z) and the Pro Castle (R). The convent of Santa Chiara is found in the lower left corner (E). ASM, Mappario Estense, Seria Generali, 336. Reproduced by permission of the ASM, Prot. n. 715/28.13.10/1.15 del 28.03.08.

screamed for no apparent reason, experienced abrupt drastic changes in body temperature, and fell suddenly into a deep sleep from which they could not be awakened. Everyone in Carpi, including the local priests and all the Clarisses, concluded that these troubles were diabolical in origin, that these nuns were possessed by demons. To make matters worse, the priests, magistrates, and nuns of Carpi all quickly deduced that human agents were responsible for having set these demons to work and that the witch or witches were actually in the convent. The ensuing turmoil relentlessly racked this religious community for over three years, and the Inquisition conducted a very lengthy investigation into alleged witchcraft.

The travails of Santa Chiara took place in an era when widespread fears of demons were at a peak in Europe. Beginning in the late Middle Ages, Europeans—first clerics and then laypeople—became increasingly alarmed at the apparent ability of demons to cause harm and lead people astray in this world. Belief in demons predated the birth of Christianity, and theologians continued to insist that Satan could do nothing without God's permission; but by the sixteenth century the devil seemed more powerful and menacing than ever before, capable of assuming an ever-increasing variety of forms. Experiencing a veritable "demonization" of the world, Europeans had never before perceived so many demons, which seemed far more numerous than the benevolent angels.⁵ Although they could not control people's wills, the devil and demons could deceive people and could tempt them, among other things, to reject God and become servants of Satan. Demons could supposedly possess a person's body, and the second half of the sixteenth century witnessed an "epidemic rise" in cases of alleged demon possession.⁶ Demons appeared, if anything, even more menacing at the time of Santa Chiara's tribulations; the seventeenth century has been aptly described as the "golden age of the demoniac," as contemporaries claimed to witness countless cases of people, especially women and children, whose bodies became possessed by demons, resulting in tremendous physical and psychological suffering.⁷

Not only were demon possessions increasing dramatically in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, but they were also perceived differently. For centuries Christians had thought that demons could possess a person's body, but the notion that demons might enter a human's body at the bidding of another person was quite new. The belief that witches were capable of inducing demon possession had been unknown prior to the 1400s. As the Santa Chiara case will illustrate, this change in attitudes had very important ramifications for the hunting of witches, as rumors of demonic possession could raise fears of witchcraft.⁸ The new connection between possession and witchcraft resulted in the first significant numbers of trials of witches, which occurred in the fifteenth century in the regions of Switzerland and Savoy where French and Germanic peoples and cultures intersected.⁹ It was surely not coincidental that the heightened fears of devils coincided roughly with

the period of Europe's most intense witch-hunting, which peaked during the years 1560–1640.¹⁰

As it eventually was understood, witchcraft consisted of two elements: *maleficia*, magical spells cast to cause harm to people, animals, or crops; and diabolism, the belief that these supernatural powers came from the devil. Harmful spells had been associated with witchcraft well before the birth of Christianity, but the great emphasis on the role of Satan distinguished early modern from earlier attitudes toward witchcraft. True, already in the patristic era, Augustine had condemned all magic—that is, the manipulation of supernatural powers—as forms of superstition, idolatry, and diabolical deception.¹¹ In the late medieval era, however, theologians and other thinkers went beyond this notion and became increasingly convinced not only that magic was based on demonic power but also that people who indulged in magic received their power from a pact with Satan. The belief that witches were servants of the devil, though expressed as early as the ninth century, attained much greater prominence in the later Middle Ages. Thinkers elaborated that the diabolical pact could be made either explicitly or implicitly. An implicit pact with the devil might involve indulging in love magic, divining the future, or wearing a talisman to ward off evil, all of which apparently involved occult magical powers.¹² Although ideas of this nature originated among theologians, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the conviction gradually took hold among larger segments of the population that all magic spells—even those cast for good ends, such as curing illnesses or protecting crops or livestock—invariably required the help of the devil.

From the fifteenth through the seventeenth centuries, theologians wrote unprecedented numbers of works on demonology, in which they described the nature and powers of Satan, demons, and witches. The most famous of these books was without a doubt Heinrich Kramer's the *Malleus Maleficarum* (*Hammer of Witches*). Appearing for the first time in 1486, the *Malleus Maleficarum* was reissued many times and was quite influential in northern Europe, though considerably less so in Italy.¹³ A Dominican inquisitor, Kramer based his arguments on biblical passages and the works of church fathers, Scholastic theologians, and canon lawyers and repeatedly stressed that all witches were servants of Satan.¹⁴ According to Kramer and other authors, witches supposedly not only made a pact with the devil but also formed an organized sect of devil-worshippers. This belief, which had never been expressed prior to the fifteenth century, played a key role in the great escalation of witch-hunting.¹⁵ The growing belief that there was an occult network of devil-worshippers incited many theologians and legal scholars to call for the forceful extirpation of this supposed vicious anti-Christian conspiracy. Suspicions of *maleficia* could result not only in accusing likely suspects but also in aggressively eliciting from them the names of fellow devil-worshipping witches. Publications on demonology reached a peak in the late sixteenth

and early seventeenth centuries, when theologians and jurists, often drawing on their own experiences as prosecutors or judges, wrote a plethora of treatises detailing the methods and mischief of demons and their human minions and giving instructions on how to crush witchcraft.¹⁶

To be sure, alleged demon possession did not always lead to accusations of witchcraft. Many, perhaps most, cases of supposed possession did not result in legal investigations of witchcraft. But by increasingly associating possession and other demonic mischief with witchcraft, Europeans greatly raised the likelihood that a case of possession or other misfortune would lead to charges of witchcraft.

Convents and Demonic Possessions

The “demonic” woes of Santa Chiara fit into a broader pattern, as the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries witnessed a large number of reputed group possessions in convents in Germany,¹⁷ France, and northern Italy, where there were demonic scares in nunneries in Reggio Emilia and Piacenza in addition to Carpi.¹⁸ The most famous of these alleged diabolical attacks occurred at the Ursuline convent in Loudun in western France, where seventeen members of that community suffered the alleged torments of demons. Like Santa Chiara, the Ursuline convent of Loudun, catered to the aristocratic elite (it even included among its members a relative of Cardinal Richelieu). Attracting thousands of curious spectators, the cases of possession there led to a criminal investigation that resulted in August 1634 in the execution for witchcraft of a local parish priest, Urbain Grandier. The diabolical tribulations of Loudun have been the subject of a number of studies, including most notably Michel de Certeau’s *Possession at Loudun*.¹⁹ In Emilia itself several nuns were purportedly possessed in a Capuchin convent in Imola in the 1590s, and a number of nuns of Sant’Eufemia in Modena were suspected of being bewitched in 1635, though Alessandro Rangoni, bishop of Modena, was skeptical and claimed that they were “cured” of their ills when they were assigned a new confessor.²⁰

Why were convents especially prone to demon possessions? At the time, theologians offered various explanations for the demons’ penchant for attacking nunneries, the most common being the belief that the devils were committing a greater affront to God by tormenting pious female religious rather than people who were less devout. The *Malleus Maleficarum* also noted that the devil was more interested in tempting the holy than the evil; he already was sovereign over the wicked but desired to seduce “saintly virgins,” who were not yet subject to him.²¹ Various nuns themselves warned of the special dangers that Satan had in store for them. The famous mystic and Carmelite nun Teresa of Avila (1515–82) declared that the Evil One was especially

eager to attack contemplative people who sought a spiritual union with God. In attacking would-be mystics, Satan purportedly hindered prayer, encouraged pride and self-righteousness, nurtured feelings of excessive guilt about sins, and sowed fears that the religious understanding acquired through contemplation was illusory. Teresa claimed that Satan frequently appeared to her visibly and even subjected her to physical abuse through invisible blows.²² Contemporary physicians also warned that cloistered nuns faced a range of mental infirmities that allegedly made them more vulnerable to demon possession.²³

Modern historians have offered a number of explanations for these cases of demonic abuse and possession. Living in a repressive environment and fearing damnation, nuns may have felt guilty about sexual impulses that they could neither satisfy nor squelch and about failures to measure up to the high spiritual standards expected of them. Sin was believed to be an important cause of demon possession; demons could possess a person's body only if God permitted them to do so, and possession could be viewed as divine punishment for the victim's sins. Aware of their own sinfulness, nuns might have interpreted their sins, including sexual urges, as demons that possessed their bodies. Possession could also have served as a channel through which an unhappy nun could express her rejection of strict religious discipline. Scholars base this interpretation in part on reports that many *energumens* became most agitated when they heard religious language or were in the presence of religious objects. Well documented were cases of nuns who, while supposedly agitated by demons, took part in very lewd and scandalous behavior, which included screaming, blaspheming, and unleashing overtly sexual language and gestures. Since female religious of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were exhorted more than ever before to suppress various instinctive desires, they may have felt terribly guilty when they failed to do so. When they could no longer control the pent-up tensions, which they interpreted as the torments of demons, they ran the risk of performing the very actions they were supposed to suppress. Though generally eschewing the idea that women could have merely been feigning these ills, some modern scholars use Freudian psychology to suggest that beliefs about demon possession actually provided a safety valve through which repressed sisters could vent their frustrations. Frequently they blamed males, especially clerics, for their "bewitchments" and thereby reversed the direction of repression by deflecting guilt away from themselves onto the clergy.²⁴ Applying modern theories from the social sciences to past phenomena can provide important insight, but to avoid being anachronistic or reductionistic, we must never dismiss the perceptions of these female religious regarding their troubling experiences.²⁵

Some historians have also pointed out that the saintly and the demonically possessed seemed to exhibit similar unusual behavior that included

trances, visions, and ecstasy. Although belief in demonic possession had existed for millennia—clearly depicted in the sufferings of the biblical King Saul, for example—the idea of *divine* possession did not truly take hold until about the twelfth century. Theologians detailed a number of reasons why they were convinced that females were more prone to both divine and demonic possession: women were weaker and more malleable than men, and their bodies more porous and more susceptible to penetration by spirits. The late Middle Ages witnessed some prominent female visionaries, such as Catherine of Siena (1347–80) and Bridget of Sweden (1303–73), who were eventually canonized even though some theologians initially believed their visions were demonic rather than divine. It has even been argued that the feminization of mysticism in the twelfth century helped lead to the “feminization of the demonic,” which was very prevalent in the *Malleus Maleficarum* and other late medieval treatises.²⁶

In the Counter-Reformation era, numerous Catholic women continued to have reputed visions, and Church authorities did not reject them a priori as demonic in origin. Spain had a long tradition of mysticism, and Stephen Haliczzer has written a fascinating account, *Between Exaltation and Infamy: Female Mystics in the Golden Age of Spain*, in which he examines the biographies and autobiographies of thirty female mystics from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The Church gave its official approval to all these treatises, though only five of these women were eventually canonized. In this age of confessional conflicts, religious leaders lent support to the supernatural visions of mystics, which they viewed as an effective means of showing that God favored Roman Catholicism. Various churchmen encouraged mysticism and viewed divine revelations to women as an especially good sign of God’s benevolence precisely because they considered females intellectually inferior. To enjoy a reputation as a mystic, however, a woman had to come from a respectable (usually aristocratic) family, belong to a religious order, and enjoy the support of the powerful leaders in the Church and society. Obviously, her alleged visions also had to conform to orthodox Catholic beliefs. Although a number of Spanish women enjoyed a lofty reputation as pious visionaries, the Church was often skeptical when hearing reports of women’s visions, particularly when the would-be mystics were lower class and had had only limited educational opportunities. In such cases, the Spanish Inquisition was apt to launch an investigation for pretense of sanctity; Haliczzer examines fifteen such cases to complement the biographies of the “approved” mystics. In short, mystical experiences among women could be a source of both inspiration and suspicion among the Catholic clergy.²⁷

Concentrating on the same period, Moshe Sluhovsky examines both mysticism and possession, which he believes were closely linked, and pays special attention to instances of group possessions in convents. Observing that these possessions of the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries virtually

always involved nuns rather than monks, he argues that these incidents were related both to the recent emphasis on female mysticism and to the post-Tridentine efforts to reform monasticism. Church leaders were uneasy with female mystics, since they were reportedly communicating directly with God without going through the medium of a priest. Sluhovsky claims that many of the female religious who were eventually diagnosed as possessed were first believed by their peers to be visionaries. Convinced that almost all these women were possessed by demonic rather than divine spirits, exorcists or other clerics ultimately persuaded the nuns themselves of the diabolical origins of their extraordinary experiences. Other cases of possession, he maintains, may have been reactions to the greater rigors that reformers imposed. The Ursulines were originally a group of uncloistered women who did not formally take orders, but they were obliged in the early seventeenth century to become cloistered nuns. Suggesting a reaction against greater discipline, Sluhovsky avows that it was not by chance that stricter claustration coincided with mass possessions at Ursuline houses in Aix-en-Provence and Loudun. Significantly, regardless if they involved resisters or proponents of reform, Sluhovsky asserts that the majority of these instances of spiritual turmoil in convents involved only demonic possession and did not include accusations of witchcraft.²⁸

Although some possessions may have been reactions against monastic reforms, scholars have also suggested that demonic possessions could also be common among those nuns who eagerly embraced reform, purportedly because the devil could not tolerate such dedicated servants of God. In Madrid in the 1620s, members of a newly established Benedictine convent began showing signs of both mystical ecstasy and demonic possession. Through the mouths of the affected nuns, “demons” proclaimed that God had sent them on a mission and had specifically chosen eleven of the possessed to play a special role in the reform of the Church. They offered many prophecies, such as their confident (though premature) prediction of the death of Pope Urban VIII (pontificate, 1623–44), which would allow the great reform of the Church to begin.²⁹ Some of the most devout female religious, especially those with strong mystical inclinations, reputedly welcomed possession because they believed it gave them the opportunity to show greater devotion to God through the intense pains they suffered. Since they did not really want to be cured of these ills, these were considered among the most difficult possessed people to restore to health.³⁰ As we shall see, the Clarisses of Carpi appeared to be neither mystics nor the advocates or victims of unduly rigorous reform.

Although this is the first book-length study of the demonic travails of Santa Chiara, this case has already attracted the attention of other historians. Romano Canosa wrote a brief and rather superficial summary of the investigation.³¹ Vincenzo Lavenia wrote a lengthy article that is very thoroughly

researched (his citations have frankly been valuable guides to pertinent archival sources) but analytically problematic.³² He argues that the possessions were essentially the by-product of a struggle for power between the Observant Franciscans and the local secular clergy over who had the right to govern the convent. Undeniably, there were conflicts between Franciscans and other clerics, but reducing the possessions to a by-product of these disagreements runs contrary to the facts that, as we shall see, the possessions began outside the convent and, more important, that the Clarisses actually preferred the Franciscans to the secular priests (as Lavenia himself acknowledges). In light of this latter fact, why would the sisters of Santa Chiara have played into the hands of Carpi's secular clergy by identifying—as we shall also see—a Franciscan as a key suspect of witchcraft? Moreover, like other scholars, Lavenia suggests that group possessions of female religious could stem from the increased discipline of the post-Tridentine era, especially in regard to the more coercive nature of frequent confession. On the other hand, he concedes that Santa Chiara was notoriously undisciplined until the outbreak of possessions, which could have served as a pretext for introducing stricter discipline. He is unable to explain satisfactorily this apparent contradiction. Most important of all, Lavenia pays little attention to the ways in which members of this community understood and experienced possession, witchcraft, and exorcism. His vision of this episode is entirely top-down: in his presentation, the nuns merely seem to be responding to the machinations of competing clerics.³³

Relying entirely on the Lavenia article, Moshe Sluhovskiy briefly discusses the Santa Chiara case and claims, misleadingly, that this was a mere case of possession, not of witchcraft.³⁴ Had there not been strong suspicions of witchcraft, the Inquisition would not have conducted an investigation. Although possession did not necessarily imply witchcraft, all parties in Carpi were convinced that a witch or witches were involved in these demonic woes. Moreover, I will argue that the women of Santa Chiara, both the healthy and the possessed, were not merely manipulated by male authority figures, be they exorcists, confessors, or functionaries of the Inquisition. Rather, the Clarisses played a very active role in this unhappy chapter in the convent's history.

The Roman Inquisition

Although in most areas of western Europe secular courts had jurisdiction over witchcraft cases during this era of the great hunts, in Italy the Roman Inquisition, or Holy Office, was generally successful in asserting exclusive jurisdiction over cases of witchcraft.³⁵ Borrowing legal traditions from Roman law, the Catholic Church created the inquisitorial system in the thirteenth century

to combat heresy. Unlike the accusatorial system, which had heretofore prevailed throughout western Europe and continued to function in some regions thereafter, the inquisitorial system of justice did not require that an aggrieved private party serve as accuser and prosecutor of an alleged crime. Rather, inquisitorial officials themselves investigated and prosecuted the crime of heresy. They initiated procedures on the basis of either their own knowledge of the crime or that of an accuser whose identity was not revealed to the accused. By the later sixteenth century, both lay and ecclesiastical courts in almost all parts of central and western Europe had switched from the accusatorial to the inquisitorial system, and this transformation was a very important factor behind the growing intensity of witch-hunting.³⁶ A significant development took place in 1326 when Pope John XXII authorized inquisitors to prosecute cases of witchcraft, because he considered magic and witchcraft as the most vile form of heresy or apostasy and therefore under the purview of the Church. The earliest inquisitors, appointed by popes or bishops, had specific charges that were generally temporary. A typical task was to investigate an alleged heretical group in a diocese. No permanent ecclesiastical tribunal of this nature existed until the Spanish Inquisition was founded in 1478, primarily for the purpose of dealing with *conversos*, people (especially Jews) who had formally converted to Christianity but were suspected of being apostates who secretly practiced their former faith.³⁷

Like its medieval predecessors, the Roman Inquisition was established in order to fight heresy. Founded in July 1542 by Pope Paul III, the Holy Office was to be an important weapon to combat Protestantism. Modeled to a considerable extent on the Spanish Inquisition, the Holy Office was championed by Cardinal Gian Pietro Carafa, who convinced the pope to create this institution and was in turn appointed inquisitor-general at its inception. Although in its first years the Roman Inquisition dealt strictly with heresy, Carafa expanded its jurisdiction considerably when he was elected pope in 1555 as Paul IV. During his four-year pontificate, the Roman Inquisition began hearing cases of blasphemy, simony, and the selling of sacraments, among others. Under Paul IV, the Holy Office took precedence over all other branches of the papal curia and became the principal organ for imposing the strict reform of the Roman Catholic Church that he promoted. Just as contemporary monarchs increased their authority by making their court systems more centralized, the pope could use the Inquisition as a means of scrutinizing more closely the religious beliefs and practices of Roman Catholics. In the century following its creation, the Inquisition played a central role in the administration of the Church, which is aptly seen in the fact that it served as a springboard to the papacy for several ambitious clergymen. In addition to Paul IV, Popes Marcellus II, Pius V, Sixtus V, Urban VII, Innocent IX, and Paul V all rose in the ecclesiastical ranks largely thanks to their service in the Holy Office.³⁸

Though originally conceived as a temporary institution to deal with the emergency threat of Protestantism, the Roman Inquisition became a permanent tribunal with much broader powers. At the top of the structure of the Holy Office was a group of cardinals, who were appointed by the pope and originally numbered six and later became more numerous. These cardinals had direct jurisdiction over religious deviance in the Papal States and claimed to have ultimate authority on these matters throughout Christendom. In reality, their power rarely extended beyond Italy, where they oversaw a large number of regional inquisitions. A cardinal secretary oversaw this small group of cardinals, and a number of theologians comprised the *Consulta Teologica*, which was responsible for providing learned advice on theological issues. Already occupying a de facto privileged position in the hierarchy of the Vatican, Sixtus V officially established the Inquisition's preeminence in 1588 when he restructured the papal administration or curia into fifteen congregations. The Inquisition was reorganized into the "Congregation of the Holy Roman and Universal Inquisition," a committee of cardinals that served as the supreme tribunal over all local inquisitions, which in turn were responsible for investigating various sins, such as heresy, blasphemy, abuse of sacraments, and so on.³⁹ Throughout this book, the term "Holy Office" will be used generically to refer to the entire network of inquisitions or to designate specifically the Inquisition of Modena; the term "Congregation" of the Holy Office or Inquisition refers exclusively to the central command or supreme court of cardinals in Rome.⁴⁰

Inquisitions were quickly put in place throughout most of sixteenth-century Italy. Their establishment depended on the permission of local political authorities, but Italian secular leaders almost always consented since they believed that heresy was a cancer that needed to be removed for the collective health of society. As Adriano Prosperi rightly notes, for at least two centuries the Holy Office was the only centralized institution that functioned throughout the Italian Peninsula.⁴¹ For each local inquisition, the pope appointed an inquisitor who had to be a friar and at least forty years old. The inquisitor, who had authority over a bishop in his own diocese in matters of heresy, could also delegate responsibilities to vicars, who also had to be friars and at least thirty years old. An authoritative manual for the Inquisition excluded inquisitors from also serving as confessors. As a confessor, a priest or friar heard penitents confess their sins and prescribed various forms of penance to absolve them of those sins. Having heard confessions, clerics should not then conduct judicial inquiries and sit in judgment of sinners in this "tribunal of the conscience"; the struggle against heresy was believed compromised if the same clergymen were both confessors and inquisitors.⁴² If, however, he concluded that a confessant had committed a sin serious enough to merit the attention of the Inquisition, a confessor could refuse to grant absolution until the guilty one "voluntarily" appeared before the local inquisitor to report the indiscretion.

From their creation into the 1580s, inquisitions in Italy remained concerned primarily with combating Protestantism. The most common cases heard by the Holy Office during its first four decades included criticizing Catholic beliefs and practices or praising aspects of Protestantism; possessing or discussing heretical books, especially those written by Protestant authors; and failing to observe certain rites, such as taking communion, fasting, or confessing, the latter two omissions possibly suggesting Protestant tendencies. By the 1580s, however, Protestantism had basically been squelched in Italy, and the Holy Office shifted its focus to other challenges facing Roman Catholicism. By 1600 the most common type of cases heard by the Inquisition pertained to “superstitions” and magic or sorcery, which probably comprised at least 40 percent of trials, inquests, and denunciations heard by Italian inquisitions. More numerous than actions against maleficent witches were investigations of alleged magic used to win another’s love, discover buried treasure, heal illnesses, or protect oneself against harmful spells.⁴³ The Inquisition of Modena reflected this change in focus, concentrating on such various forms of “superstitious” activities beginning about 1580.⁴⁴ Throughout Italy, cases against superstitions continued to be the preponderant type of inquisitorial action during the course of the seventeenth century, and the percentage of defendants who were female increased dramatically compared with the earlier actions against Protestantism.⁴⁵ Adriano Prosperi has shown persuasively that with its network of tribunals set up throughout the peninsula, the Inquisition, not the bishops, was most responsible for eradicating a wide range of beliefs and practices and for imposing a form of social discipline throughout Italy.⁴⁶

Among the most active inquisitions in Italy was that of Modena. The Inquisition actually had a presence in Modena already in the late thirteenth century, but scarcely any medieval records have survived and it may not have functioned much at all for most of the fifteenth century. By the late fifteenth or early sixteenth century, Modena was home to a vicar, a subordinate to the Inquisitor of Ferrara, the city that was then the capital of Estense lands. For the years 1490–1540, the vicar or ad hoc inquisitors in Modena heard about sixty cases concerning witchcraft, most of which ended with the defendants only having to abjure their errors publicly.⁴⁷ Prior to 1542, however, the Inquisition was the least structured and the least deeply rooted of all Church powers in Modena.⁴⁸

Eventually, though, the Inquisition of Modena became a formidable and efficient tribunal. Immediately after 1542, the Holy Office’s principal goal in Modena, as elsewhere, was to combat Protestantism. For a short time, the region surrounding Modena actually appeared to be a hotbed of Protestantism. In 1536 Calvin himself stayed briefly in nearby Ferrara, where he tried unsuccessfully to convert members of the Este family.⁴⁹ The aggressive actions of the Inquisition of Modena quickly succeeded in rooting out Protestantism in

the area.⁵⁰ Modena's inquisitor was appointed directly by the pope, but with the approval of the duke of Modena; to wield power effectively, the inquisitor really needed the duke's support. By the post-Tridentine era, Modena's Inquisition was firmly entrenched throughout the duchy. At the top of the hierarchy of the Inquisition was of course the inquisitor himself, who was based in the city of Modena. Just below him were the vicars, all of whom were supposed to be friars (usually Franciscans) and who had jurisdiction over small towns and rural areas in the duchy.⁵¹ The extensive network of vicariates ensured that the Holy Office had a genuine presence throughout the extensive Estense landholdings. By the early eighteenth century, 204 people worked for the Inquisition of Modena in one way or another: 61 served the Holy Office in the city itself, and 143 assisted the various vicariates in the surrounding countryside.⁵² Fragments or complete records of 125 cases prior to 1630 show that the Inquisition of Modena had been very active in and around the town of Carpi. The majority involved accusations of superstitious or magical practices, such as curing ills, harming people or livestock, or winning the love of another through occult means.⁵³

The Inquisition of Modena has among the most voluminous and best-preserved records of any Italian inquisition, numbering over 300 volumes (*buste*) from its inception through its dissolution in 1785. The era of the Carpi witchcraft scare coincided with the Inquisition's most intense activity, as records of trials and investigations fill 113 volumes for the years 1601–50 alone, a figure that does not include volumes of correspondence, cases specifically involving Jews (*Causae hebreorum*), and other miscellaneous records of the Holy Office.⁵⁴ Consultation of these registers was greatly facilitated by the inventory of cases, now published, that was painstakingly drawn up by Giuseppe Trenti, formerly associate archivist at the Archivio di Stato di Modena.⁵⁵

Among the various sources I have consulted for this study, the registers of the Inquisition of Modena are by far the most important. The minutes from the investigation of the nunnery's possession and witchcraft scare fill about 500 handwritten folios. Less fruitful was my research in the Vatican's Archives of the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith, the direct descendant of the Holy Office. These archives have been open for consultation only since 1998, and most of its documents have been lost or dispersed over the centuries.⁵⁶ To my disappointment, my exhaustive research in those archives revealed no records pertaining directly to the Santa Chiara case. Fortunately, this obstacle is easily overcome as the correspondence between Modena and the Congregation of the Holy Office is fully extant among the vast sources of the Inquisition in the state archives of Modena. This correspondence reveals in minute detail the cardinals' reactions to the investigation in Carpi and their directives to the inquisitor of Modena.⁵⁷ Also quite important are the trials of some related cases in Carpi that predated the witchcraft outbreak in Santa Chiara. Numerous published sources, such

as manuals for inquisitors or exorcists and theoretical works on witchcraft, are also essential to shedding light on contemporary learned opinion on the threat demons posed. Vitally important information about the convent itself is also found in the *Memoriale*, a volume in which a clergyman, usually the convent's confessor, recorded developments in Santa Chiara, most notably the election of officers, the admission of novices, the profession of vows by new nuns, and the deaths of members of the community. The extent of detail varied considerably depending on who was writing these records, but the entries are generally formulaic and shed virtually no light on the personalities of individual Clarisses. Preserved in the monastic archive of Santa Chiara, the *Memoriale* has been transcribed by Anna Maria Ori and is a valuable source for the convent's history for the period 1547–1683. There are, however, some very important and unfortunate lacunae. At some point in the convent's history, someone deleted a number of significant passages, including all but one reference to the demonic episode.⁵⁸

With their very detailed testimony, Inquisition registers make for fascinating reading, but they are not without controversy.⁵⁹ On the one hand, they seemingly provide a window to popular piety. The testimony of defendants and witnesses, for example, could serve as a means through which illiterate peasants could describe beliefs and practices that would have been forever lost without the Inquisition's inquiry. On the other hand, how reliable are the records of the Holy Office in depicting what religion truly meant to common folk? Criminal records of any sort, it has been argued, cannot provide a simple window to popular culture, since they are closely shaped by contemporary laws, legal procedures, power structures, and the like. Among the most provocative publications based on Inquisition records are some works by Carlo Ginzburg: most important are his book about the *benandanti* (good walkers) of Friuli, who claimed to go out at night in spirit to fight witches in order to ensure abundant crops but eventually were convinced by inquisitors that they themselves were devil-worshiping witches; and his study of the miller Domenico Scandella, who, after freely discussing his unorthodox religious views before the Holy Office, was executed as a heretic in 1599. Ginzburg stresses that there was a huge cultural and even linguistic gulf separating the educated world of the inquisitors from that of the largely illiterate peasants who appeared before them: at times, judicial authorities actually needed translators for the testimony of peasants given in their local dialects. Even though the inquisitor's questions strongly shaped the testimony of defendants and witnesses, Ginzburg is convinced that one can nonetheless uncover some of their beliefs, especially in those instances when the inquisitor expressed surprise at the answers he received.⁶⁰ Ginzburg asserts that court records are the best sources for uncovering popular attitudes toward witchcraft and insists that there was often a real disparity between the questions and objectives of judges and the answers of defendants,

a gap that provided a window to popular visions of the occult.⁶¹ Ginzburg finds that the inquisitor was constantly engaged in a dialogue with witnesses and defendants and learned about the cultural differences that separated him from them. In this regard, the inquisitor had much in common with the modern anthropologist.⁶²

An expert in the history of canon law, Andrea Del Col is far less sanguine about using the Inquisition's records to reveal the true beliefs of those appearing before it. He insists that these legal documents cannot be treated as the field notes of an anthropologist. As a rule, inquisitors carefully controlled the direction of the testimony and were usually successful in getting the statements they wanted. Rather than providing people with an open forum to express their religious convictions or worldviews, inquisitors often closely restricted interrogations to confirm or contradict the accusations that were the basis for the investigation.⁶³

Although they should be used with caution, Inquisition records are far too important to ignore. As John Tedeschi points out, authorities of the Holy Office, in inquisitorial manuals as well as in correspondence with local inquisitions, repeatedly warned against both suggestive questioning and misrepresenting testimony to fit any preconceived "mental schema." Keeping very close tabs on provincial tribunals, the Congregation of the Holy Office required local inquisitors to send regular detailed reports of trials and investigations and to await instructions from the cardinals before passing sentences. The cardinals also circumscribed closely the use of torture in the interrogation of defendants, allowing it only when the evidence was already very compelling. This oversight helped provide considerable uniformity in practice in inquisitions throughout Italy. Moreover, in conducting trials and investigations, local scribes who served the Roman Inquisition, like their counterparts in Spain, scrupulously tried not only to write down in the vernacular every word that was spoken but even to record all gestures, facial expressions, and changes in tone of those who testified.⁶⁴

In the case at hand, no one faced even the threat of torture, and the cultural gap between the sisters of Santa Chiara and the judicial authorities was not very great. Almost all nuns were at least of upper-middle-class background and most likely came from families that were more affluent than those of the inquisitors who questioned them. True, few Clarisses would have had a good knowledge of Latin, the language of scholars, and several could not (or chose not to) sign their names on transcripts of their interrogations. This could have reflected the fact that in early modern Europe it was not uncommon for some people, particularly females, to be taught the passive skill of reading but not the active skill of writing. Nuns were expected to be able to read in the vernacular, and all sisters of Carpi received a certain level of education in Italian. Some nuns of Santa Chiara demonstrated a very high level of literary culture and were composers of sonnets and songs.⁶⁵ The

Clarisses of Carpi also would not have been easily intimidated or silenced by anyone. Never did the inquisitor of Modena or his assistant appear to be browbeating the nuns, and, as we shall see, the sisters of Santa Chiara did not hesitate to express in writing their displeasure with some rulings passed by the Congregation of the Inquisition.

A host of scholars insist that much insight can be drawn from court records, including even the confessions of suspected witches made under duress. Lyndal Roper argues that the confessions of an alleged witch provide a window to contemporary understandings of magic and witchcraft: "The fantasies she wove, though often forced from her through torture, were her own condensations of shared cultural preoccupations."⁶⁶ Likewise, in his study of witchcraft in southern Germany, the site of large-scale trials in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century, Jonathan Durrant concentrated on the narratives of confessions made by defendants during interrogations. For a confession to be convincing, prosecutors needed detailed answers, which, though made under duress, reveal, according to Durrant, the "fantasies" and knowledge that suspects had assimilated from sermons, public pronouncements of judicial sentences, neighborhood gossip, and pamphlets.⁶⁷

If confessions made under torture can reveal much about the cultural understanding of witchcraft, the depositions of witnesses are even more reliable indicators of how *maleficia* and magic were popularly perceived. Significantly, the testimony of witnesses, freely given without even a remote possibility of torture, make up almost the entire dossier of the investigation in Carpi. Hardly any of the nuns who appeared before the Holy Office had anything to fear, since they themselves were not suspects. This study will also reveal that the inquisitor's fiscal or assistant, a lay attorney who oversaw much of the investigation, was wont to posit open-ended questions, such as asking witnesses whether they suspected anyone and why. He was thus giving them free rein to discuss at great length their suspicions against any individuals.

Similarly, Del Col's claim that inquisitors essentially got the testimony they desired is much more applicable to investigations of, say, Anabaptism than of witchcraft. Combating heresy was the Roman Inquisition's original reason for being, and inquisitors were ever vigilant to detect any beliefs or practices that smacked of Protestantism. Inquisitors in both Italy and Spain, however, apparently viewed supposed covens of devil-worshippers as much less threatening than Lutheranism or Calvinism. Spain and Italy both had low execution rates in witchcraft trials compared to those of various regions of northern and central Europe, largely because the Inquisition in both countries showed considerable skepticism concerning reputed diabolical pacts, even when suspects confessed to having made such a pact.⁶⁸ This standard played a very significant role in avoiding the domino effect seen in some of the most infamous mass trials of witches, especially in regions of Germany.

The Holy Office's mild treatment of witches also may have stemmed from the fact that it stressed the heretical aspects of witchcraft and was accordingly less interested in punishing witches than in effecting repentance in them and bringing them back, contrite, into the Roman Catholic fold.⁶⁹

The assertion that inquisitors always got the testimony they wanted definitely did not seem to apply to the Santa Chiara case. Officials of the Inquisition of Modena became convinced that the nunnery was plagued by demons and witchcraft, but these fears were first born among the nuns themselves. We have every reason to believe that the ideas concerning demon possession and witchcraft expressed by these educated, aristocratic nuns were genuinely their own and not the result of the intimidating or manipulative questioning of inquisitors. In short, although the records of the Inquisition may not reveal exactly what happened in Santa Chiara—one need not accept at face value the Clarisses' claims that demons and witches were wreaking havoc in the convent—they clearly reveal how these female religious understood maleficent magic and how they reacted to the diabolical fears that took hold well before the Holy Office launched its investigation.

Trends in the History of Witchcraft and Possession

The literature on witchcraft is quite vast, and this is not the place to discuss in detail the historiography of early modern magic and witchcraft.⁷⁰ In very broad terms, scholars have offered a wide array of interpretations of witchcraft. In the past, some scholars concluded that witches actually existed, either as devil-worshippers, heretics, pagans, or social rebels.⁷¹ In the 1960s historical works tended to stress the craziness of the hunts.⁷² Beginning in the 1970s scholars shifted emphasis and sought to explain why the hunts occurred but still implicitly assumed that witchcraft was a form of superstition that had no basis in the real world.⁷³ Many historians have also inferred that the belief in witchcraft and the punishing of people as witches necessarily meant that something was wrong with early modern society. Some, for example, have attributed the hunts to social and economic changes.⁷⁴ Recent scholarship has eschewed monocausal explanations and has shied away from trying to explain why the hunts occurred in favor of seeking to understand witchcraft as a cultural phenomenon.

An issue that is quite pertinent to both witchcraft and possession is that of gender. It has long been known that women were much more likely than men to be suspected of being both witches and demoniacs. Be that as it may, historians of witchcraft and the occult paid little attention to the issue of gender prior to the 1970s. In the late medieval and early modern eras, authors on demonology and witchcraft, all of whom were male, had a ready supply of explanations as to why women were more likely than men to engage in

witchcraft. Heinrich Kramer took an extreme stand in the *Malleus Maleficarum*; his use of the feminine plural word for “witches” in the title reflected his assumption that almost all witches were women. Lambasting females for their “slippery tongues,” he described them as being mentally, physically, and morally inferior to males; deceitful and undisciplined by their very nature, women were more credulous than men, and the devil therefore pursued them because they were more easily corruptible. Kramer also insisted that females had an “insatiable” carnal lust, a theme he repeated so obsessively that one might suspect that he was projecting his own sexual desires onto women.⁷⁵ More than any theologian or demonologist before him, Kramer was adamant that women lacked the moral strength to resist demonic temptations. Although few other treatises came close to the level of misogyny found in the *Malleus Maleficarum*, all authors on witchcraft shared the assumption that women were especially prone to become witches. Many authors used the same reasoning to argue that demons had an easier time possessing the bodies of women than of men. One might wonder, therefore, whether the witch-hunts were simply the result of the mounting misogyny that was evident in the proliferation of treatises, most of them written by clergymen, that depicted women as likely minions of Satan.

It must be noted, however, that critics of the witch-hunts more often than not exhibited very similar sexist attitudes. Deploring the excesses of witch trials, the Jesuit Friedrich Spee observed in 1631 that accused witches were usually females, and such women were quite often “delirious, insane, fickle, babbling, changeable, cunning, lying, [and] perjurious.”⁷⁶ Even outright skeptics exhibited the same negative attitudes toward women. The Lutheran physician Johann Weyer, perhaps the sixteenth century’s most important skeptic about witchcraft, attributed the sabbat and diabolical pacts to the “self-imaginings” of women or to delusions that demons implanted in the minds of women because their uncontrolled passions, inconstancy, feebleness, and simplicity made them more likely to believe in the reality of these illusions. In short, writers on witchcraft and possession did not have a monopoly on sexism, which was endemic in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Europe.⁷⁷

Feminist scholars have effectively placed the issue of gender front and center in the analysis of the early modern witch-hunts, and today no serious treatment of early modern witchcraft would ignore gender analysis. Historians have offered various explanations as to why women were much more likely than men to be accused, tried, and executed for witchcraft. Some feminist historians have equated witch-hunting with women-hunting and have asserted that witches were women who were rebelling against the patriarchal norms established by men of the ruling classes.⁷⁸ The witch-hunts have also been described as a means of reinforcing the patriarchal status quo, of ensuring male dominance over females in a period of economic and social changes that threatened patriarchy.⁷⁹

Feminist scholars must be credited for drawing attention to the importance of gender in early modern witchcraft, but critics warn that at least some have overstated their case. Although women undeniably were more prone to be accused of witchcraft than men, the reduction of the witch-hunts to a male conspiracy against females begs an explanation as to why men made up perhaps as much as a fifth of those executed for witchcraft throughout Europe and constituted a majority of executions for witchcraft in Finland, Iceland, Livonia, and Normandy.⁸⁰ It may also be argued that equating the hunts to women-hunting—inspired by clerical misogyny or the desire to reinforce patriarchy—runs the danger of reducing women who were tried for witchcraft to mere victims of Europe's male-dominated society.⁸¹ Could it be, though, that some of the accused really were witches or at least wanted others to believe that they wielded supernatural power? Some historians have maintained that many women who were accused and condemned of witchcraft had in fact tried to compensate for their subordinate status in this world by acquiring supernatural powers.⁸² Women were less likely than men to seek revenge against enemies by inflicting physical violence or by pressing charges in law courts but may have sought redress of grievances through witchcraft.⁸³ Feminist anthropological scholarship has also suggested that the more women are denied authority, the more willingly they resort to illicit means, such as witchcraft, in order to curb male power.⁸⁴ Various studies on witchcraft have been a very important part of one tendency in women's history since the 1970s: shifting from studying the oppression or victimization of women to examining ways in which females expressed themselves, sought self-fulfillment, and attained degrees of autonomy.⁸⁵ In this present study, the issue of gender is even more important for the examination of possession than of witchcraft; all those in Carpi who were deemed possessed were female religious, but, as we shall see, one of the principal suspects of witchcraft was a male.

In this study, I will be trying above all to understand possession and witchcraft as cultural phenomena. Witchcraft and possession involved deeply held communal beliefs that were every bit as real and are as worthy of study as the growth of the state, conflicts between different religious confessions, or men's subjugation of women. The ways in which people experienced witchcraft and the ideas and values associated with it can provide invaluable insight to the mentality of an age. From the fifteenth to the eighteenth centuries, perhaps 40,000 to 50,000 Europeans were executed as witches, but beliefs in witchcraft were deeper and much more widespread than even these numbers suggest.⁸⁶ In effect, virtually all sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Europeans believed in the reality of witchcraft and demon possession. They were convinced that certain individuals manipulated supernatural forces to cast harmful spells and that devils, either at their own initiative or at the bidding of witches, could possess the bodies of people. By studying