



Demonic 'Get Rich Quick Schemes'. Economic Magic in Early Modern Germany

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The preoccupation of many historians with the imaginary malevolent magic of the so called witches has obscured the fact that some people in the early modern period really tried to use magic. Many of them did so for economic reasons. Among other things, they hoped to receive money directly from the spirit world. This text presents some of the results of my latest research concerning economic magic and its relation to witch beliefs. I will address three sets of magical beliefs and practices: treasure hunting, the belief in money puppets and in money-bringing dragons. My sources are early modern (ca. 1500-1800) German criminal trials as well as learned texts by theologians, lawyers and scientists.

In the early modern period, treasure hunting was a magical activity. Treasure hunters used a plethora of magical implements, including divining rods, magical swords and mirrors, as well as lengthy incantations. Treasure magicians indiscriminately called on ghosts and demons that were supposed to guard buried treasures. Certain rituals were needed in order to invoke the demons, to placate them, to urge them to help and dismiss them. Even though some of the conjurations of treasure hunters resembled exorcisms and other prayers, the leadership of both churches condemned these rituals as abuses of liturgy. In the early modern period magic was a punishable offense. Even though treasure hunters clearly used elaborate magical rituals, even though they abused liturgy, even though some of them indubitably tried to invoke demons, they were usually not accused of witchcraft. Most culprits were condemned to a fine, short spells in prison or a couple of weeks of forced labour (Dillinger 2012:85-146).

A money puppet ("Geldmännlein"), sometimes misleadingly identified with the mandrake, was a magical item, usually some kind of doll, which was said to house a spirit. This spirit produced money magically. It was enough to keep the money puppet in the money chest. The spirit would see to it that money would multiply miraculously. Where the money puppet's money came from was unclear, it was simply supposed to materialize out of thin air. Even though money puppets should have been priceless, they were bought and sold. Persons who tried to get a money puppet were often in a desperate economic situation. People said to actually own a money puppet were social upstarts: They were rumored to owe their economic success to the money puppet. When confronted with such allegations, the supposed owners of money puppets claimed that they simply worked harder than their fellow-villagers. The contemporaries saw the money puppet clearly as a demonic object. Nevertheless, money puppet magic was not seen as witchcraft and punished very leniently (State Archive Stuttgart, A 209 Bü 625, 835, 961, State Archive Coburg, LAF 12577; Fromschmidt 1674).

Early modern German and Baltic folklore knew spirits in the shape of flying fiery snakes called dragon ("Drache"). In contrast to the monstrous dragons of medieval epics, they were small household spirits that acknowledged a magician as their master. The dragon allegedly flew into its master's house and brought him money or goods that could be used directly or sold like grain or milk. All the goods the dragon allegedly brought to its master it had stolen from somebody else. The dragon was the embodiment of transfer magic. Most sources mentioning dragons are trial records from witch trials. Owners of dragons were said to be in league with the devil; the dragon itself was – in accordance with the Biblical use of the word 'dragon' – identified as a demon. Owning a dragon was a common accusation brought against men and women suspected of witchcraft (Thüringen State Archive Weimar, EA, Rechtspflege, Nr 1563; State Archive Coburg, LAF 12534, 12535, 12542, 12546; Goldast 1661: vol. 1, 26-27, 177-180). All people said to have a dragon had recently enjoyed some economic success. They produced more milk than the livestock they actually owned seemed to allow. The dragon helped to explain why some householders did a lot better than their neighbours: They had a dragon working for them. As all the goods the dragon brought to its master it had stolen from someone else, the dragon witch directly harmed his/her neighbours. Dragon rumours were radically negative interpretations of competitive, profit-oriented behaviour. Dragon magicians were regarded as witches and burned at the stake.

Why did the courts treat the three kinds of economic magic so differently? The magic of the money puppet as well as the treasure seekers' conjurations were punished rather mildly because they were in the literal sense of these words – harmless and otherworldly. They were not supposed to interfere with other people's life or livelihood. However, the true difference between the treasure hunters and money puppet magicians on the one side and the dragon magicians on the other was that they stood for different economic outlooks and styles of behaviour. People who conjured demons in order to find treasure and people who wanted to get a money puppet tried to get rich quickly, but they did not take anything away from anybody else. Indeed, they seemed to have found ways of improving their economic situation that even avoided competition. The money they hoped to get came purely from the spirit world. It was not taken out of the pool of goods available to society (limited good mentality, Foster 1965). In contrast to that, dragon rumours literally demonized 'selfish', one might say proto-capitalist economic behaviour. They explained material gain in the most negative way as magical thievery. When courts and communities punished magic, they indirectly sanctioned economic behaviour and financial success.

Bibliography

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