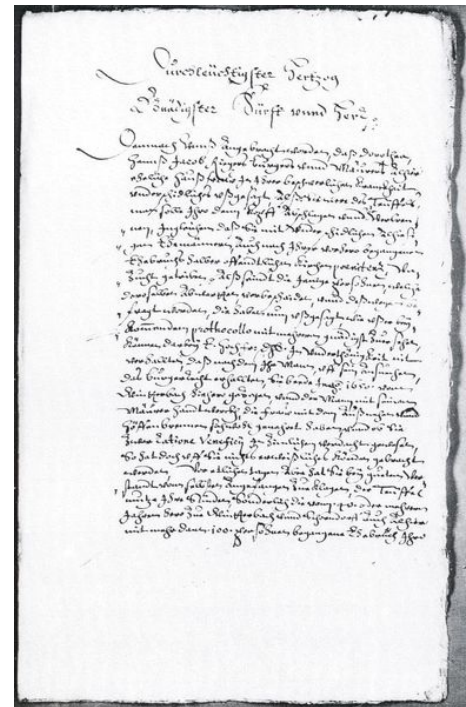


"The Devil Used Her Sins": Despair, Confession and Salvation in a Seventeenth-Century Witch-Trial

by Laura Kounine

Dorothea Rieger was put on trial for witchcraft in 1678, some fifty years after the height of the "witch-craze" had swept Germany between 1580 and 1630. She was tried in Besigheim, approximately thirty kilometres north of Stuttgart, in the southwestern duchy of Württemberg, an area that experienced relatively low levels of witch-hunting. The trial of Dorothea Rieger thus came relatively late in the history of the early modern witch-hunts, and was not an altogether "typical" case. Rieger had come to the attention of the authorities because of her suicidal thoughts and her "feeble-mindedness", which had led her to confess that the Devil had "used her sins" and that she "belonged under the gallows".

Witch-trial narratives are fascinating sources for the early modern historian, particularly for looking at the history of emotions.[1] Witchcraft, at its most fundamental, involves wishing harm to others. It centrally concerns the impact of emotional states on physical ones.[2] In a court of law, establishing whether someone was a witch or not necessitated the interrogators – both spiritual and judicial – to examine the accused's conscience, their soul, their emotions. In a trial such as Dorothea Rieger's, which was predicated on compelling a spiritual conversion, and where physical evidence of witchcraft – if it at all existed – was almost absent from the trial record, the accused's behaviour, their comportment on trial, and above all, their "interior states" were all investigated for signs of guilt. The crime of witchcraft can in this light be seen as a crime of conscience and a crime of emotions. Witch-trial records can be frustratingly opaque and even mundane, and they can never offer a direct lens onto the voice of the accused. Read carefully and sensitively, however, they can give us an idea of the rich emotional language employed and deployed by the accused and their interrogators.



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In a court report dated 15 January 1678, it was stated that Dorothea Rieger, a 74 year-old widow, was brought forward as she had said various things in her illness, about which her guard was questioned.[3] Christoph Ott, the guard, declared that the previous Saturday at around midday, Rieger "began to talk quite despairingly" that she was not worthy of a Christian burial but rather "she belonged under the gallows, yes one should burn her".[4] She claimed that "the Devil used her sins", through the "numerous adulteries" that she had committed.

She had thought that the Devil would take her the previous night, she could not pray, the Devil was her, everything was in vain, she could not believe that God would forgive her, and whilst she had a day of rest and could pray again, yesterday it got worse again, and the despair was once again completely there.[5]

Rieger had further declared that she had committed adultery with the Bürgermeister, "which had happened recently", and listed numerous other men with whom she claimed to have had affairs, eventually stating that she had committed adultery with over one hundred people.[6]

It was evident from the outset that Rieger suffered from some form of mental illness, which was described as "Blödigkeit" or feeble-mindedness.[7] This "feeble-mindedness" that afflicted Rieger waxed and waned, such that it was reported that at times she spoke in 'Blödigkeit' and at times without. The "Blödigkeit" had led Rieger to confess to some extraordinary crimes – for instance that she had committed adultery with the town mayor "recently" – which did not seem to have been thought of as credible by everyone. Indeed, given her old age and the fact that she was "already quite weak" – both physically and mentally – her claims seemed hardly convincing. The Bürgermeister himself was questioned about Rieger's allegations and strenuously denied any affair, said it was "blatant lies", that he had "never touched her, much less slept with her".[8]

Rieger was quite distraught, consumed with her own guilt, and it was reported that "she wants to stab herself, if someone would only give her a knife".[9] Rieger evidently had contemplated suicide. However, there were stark cultural sanctions against suicide, which in the early modern period was held to be a crime: those who committed it were punished by being buried in unconsecrated ground, and thus suffered eternal damnation.[10] By confessing to these crimes with the Devil, therefore, Rieger not only ensured herself an almost inevitable death, but she also could die a penitent sinner, where suicide would only lead to damnation. Her confession to witchcraft thus is reminiscent of cases of suicide murders, in which a person would commit murder with the aim of being killed for their crime.[11]

In the language of the court record – an opaque mixture of Rieger's own words and that of the court scribe –

one emotion was paramount: despair. This emotion was described in the highly Lutheran terminology of *Anfechtung* and *Verzweiflung*. Indeed, *Anfechtungen* – assaults or temptations by the Devil – were a symbol of piety for Lutherans; they were a mark of being spiritually alive. In early modern Lutheran Germany, therefore, what we would think of as an emotion, such as despair or fear, was not grounded in the "unconscious" or in personal failure, but rather could be understood as assaults by the Devil.[12] That is not to say that early modern people did not experience "emotions"; but that emotions were conceptualised, and made sense of, through a starkly different world-view.[13] Rather than locating *Verzweiflung*, despair, within one's "self", as one might be inclined to do in the twenty-first century, it was couched instead in terms of one's relationship with God and the Devil. In order to become closer to God, one first had to overcome the Devil. This understanding was meant to provide consolation for those afflicted with such thoughts, since Luther held out the hope that "whoever suffers from the devil here will not suffer from him yonder".[14] Yet, as Luther himself acknowledged, this was slim consolation for anyone caught in a deep depression.[15]

Rieger exclaimed once again that she 'belongs on the stake, and finally confessed, yes she was a witch'.[16] She continued:

with repeated pleas to do justice by her, so that she could escape from torture, for the Devil lives in her, presses hard on her heart and in her throat, that she cannot talk well, and so [...] torments and maltreats her, that she cannot bear and stand it any longer, one should give her a knife, that she could stab in her body.[17]

Finally, she exclaimed, she does not want to affirm this particular point, given that she does not remember everything, so exactly, what she said back then in her fear, but this she will admit: "that she had met the Devil two years ago, in the form of a handsome young man, he fetched her from her parlour [...]. [She] had since then not heard anything from him until fourteen days ago, when her conscience was awoken because the Devil heavily exploited her sins".[18] She claimed that everything else that was charged against her was a "misunderstanding", and begged that "nothing else be put upon her".[19] It was now observed that this Dorothea Rieger had confessed "without feeble-mindedness" [blödigkeit]. [20]

Before a verdict could be reached, however, it was recorded on 1 March that Rieger, the previous night, "with good sanity", had come to a "calm and peaceful end".[21] This remark in the trial record is in itself a model narrative of redemption: after spiritual guidance, Rieger confessed with a clear mind and was then granted a peaceful death. The question turned to whether Rieger had died a witch, or a penitent sinner, who deserved a Christian burial. It was reported:

[that we] do not doubt her conversion and blessedness, since, as long as we had visited her, she always [...] prayed devoutly, yesterday we visited her for the last time, she prayed after us with understanding and intelligence [...] with belief and hope [...] that she would expect mercy, her sins [...] forgiven, and only shed one drop of blood from all her sins [...] we asked her, next to other points, if she still had Anfechtung, seduction and re-enactment from the Devil? Response: no, not anymore; 2: if heavy sins no longer lie on her heart and conscience? Rp: No, she has confessed everything and does not know anything anymore [...] that she yesterday evening four hours before her death with the pastor in the presence of her three guards, confessed again and clearly also with a sound mind confirmed [deutlich auch vernünftig bejaht]. So it is to decide how to bury her.[22]

There is much to glean from this trial. Although she was clearly suffering from a mental illness, as well as being old and weak, the magistrates had concluded that Rieger, at her death, had in fact been in "sound mind". Her mental illness and her vulnerable emotional state were not taken as mitigating factors in Rieger's ability to give an account of herself on trial. This is striking, as Rieger was clearly plagued with guilt, not of witchcraft, but of her numerous sins as she conceived of them, and thus was desperate to confess to all manner of things in order that she could stop the *Anfechtungen* – her battles with the Devil and the root of her despair – and clear her conscience and heart. It is plausible that, in confessing to these crimes, Rieger hoped to secure her death and her salvation. It could thus be read as an act of suicide – although in this configuration, Rieger was able to die a Christian, rather than receiving eternal damnation for the crime of suicide.[23] For Rieger, morality and sin were understood within the framework of good, evil, God and the Devil. The emotions that she experienced, despair and fear, moreover, were also understood as grounded in the Devil; overcoming these feelings would mean overcoming Satan himself. The Devil had "fed" off her sins and had taken hold of her conscience. Her imagery, "that the Devil lives in her, presses hard on her heart and in her throat, that she cannot talk well" illustrates the way in which she conceived of her sins weighing down on her and her ability to express herself. It is not hard to imagine that she might be so determined to clear her conscience, and confess all her sins, precisely *because* she was nearing death. This way she could ensure the salvation of her soul and die a penitent Christian. It also seems that both Rieger, and her interrogators, shared in this understanding of the trial: her confessions, and the salvation of her soul, were paramount for both parties in this drama.

Further Literature

- Bengt Ankarloo, Stuart Clark and William Monter, *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe: The Period of the Witch Trials* (London: Athlone, 2002).
- Laura Kounine, "The Gendering of Witchcraft: Defence Strategies of Men and Women in German

Witchcraft Trials," *German History* 31 (2013), 295–317.

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- David Lederer, *Madness, Religion and the State in Early Modern Europe: A Bavarian Beacon* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).
- H. C. Erik Midelfort, *A History of Madness in Sixteenth-Century Germany* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999).
- Lyndal Roper, *Witch Craze: Terror and Fantasy in Baroque Germany* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004).

[1] See Laura Kounine, "The Gendering of Witchcraft: Defence Strategies of Men and Women in German Witchcraft Trials," *German History* 31 (2013): 295–317.

[2] Lyndal Roper, "Beyond Discourse Theory," *Women's History Review* 19 (2010): 307–19, quot. 314. See also Lyndal Roper, "Jenseits des 'linguistic turn'," *Historische Anthropologie* 7 (1999): 452–66, quot. 465.

[3] HtStAst, A209 Bü 327, Dorothea Rieger, 15 January 1678, 6r, "Hannß Jacob Riegers Maurers fraw Dorothea ist angebracht worden, daß sie inn Ihrer Kranckheit underschidliches außgeredt, warüber dann Ihre wächte dergestallten befragt worden seindt".

[4] HtStAst, A209 Bü 327, Dorothea Rieger, 15 January 1678, 6r, "Christoph Ott sagt aus, das nicht allein vergangenen Sambstag umb 12. Vhren Sie dorothea anfangen gantz verzweifelt zuereden, Sie seye nit wehrt auff deme Kirchhoff begraben zuwerden, sonder Sie gehöre under deme galgen, ja mann solle sie verbrennen." Later on in the trial Dorothea is referred to as the widow of Jacob Rieger: "dorothea Jacob Riegers Wittib", 28 January 1678, 20r.

[5] HtStAst, A209 Bü 327, Dorothea Rieger, 15 January 1678, 6v, "Der Teuffell nutze Ihre Sunden Jhr auff, sonderlich die vihfaltig begangene Ehebruch, vndt das laden vor das Jungste Bericht, vndt habe sie gemeint, der Teuffel werde sie vergangene Nacht gewiß hohlen, sie könne nicht betten, der Teuffel wehre Jhr, es seye alles vergebens, sie könne nicht glauben, das Jhr Gott werde gnadig seyen, Vndt ob sie schon *per intervalla* einen tag ruhe gehabt vndt wider betten können, so ist es doch gestern wider schlimmer worden, vndt ist berichts die vollige verzweifflung wider da." A similar claim was repeated in a report dated 18 January 1678.

[6] HtStAst, A209 Bü 327, Dorothea Rieger, 15 January 1678, 6v, "daß Sie Ehebruch mit Jhr getriben seindt; Der Bürgermeister [...] welches erst newlich geschehen". On 7r, "Ja Sie gestehet sie habe mehr alls 100 Ehebruch begangen".

[7] HtStAst, A209 Bü 327, Dorothea Rieger, 21 January 1678, 14r, "Jnn Ihrer kranckh- vndt blödigkeith [...] hirmit vnßer befehl, daß bey so beschaffenen dingen Jhr, der *Specialis* nebst dem Pfarrer vndt *Diacono* zur Besigheimb, ernante Riegerin fleißig besuchen".

[8] HtStAst, A209 Bü 327, Dorothea Rieger, 16 January 1678, 10r, "allß wann er Vnzucht mit Jhro getriben hette, da es doch die lauther Vnwahrheith [...] daß er sie niemahlen berührt, weniger beschlafen".

[9] HtStAst, A209 Bü 327, Dorothea Rieger, 15 January 1678, 7r, "Sie wolle sich selbst erstrichen, wann mann Jhr nur ein Meßer geben".

[10] Lyndal Roper, *Witch Craze: Terror and Fantasy in Baroque Germany* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 93. See also Vera Lind, *Selbstmord in der Frühen Neuzeit: Diskurs, Lebenswelt und kultureller Wandel am Beispiel der Herzogtümer Schleswig und Holstein* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1999), 158. Lind shows that he overwhelming majority of people who committed suicide in the early modern period were those who considered melancholy and suicidal despair as afflictions that came from outside, specifically from the Devil.

[11] See Type Krogh, *A Lutheran Plague: Murdering to Die in the Eighteenth Century* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), ch. 1, in particular pp. 84–5. Tellingly, Krogh has found that suicide murders were only a significant problem in Lutheran cities and countries. See also Kathy Stuart, "Suicide by Proxy: the Unintended Consequences of Public Executions in Eighteenth-Century Germany", *Central European History* 41 (2008): 413–45; Helga Schnabel-Schüle, *Überwachen und Strafen im Territorialstaat: Bedingungen und Auswirkungen des Systems strafrechtlicher Sanktionen im frühneuzeitlichen Württemberg* (Köln: Böhlau Verlag, 1997), 261–2.

[12] H. C. Erik Midelfort, *A History of Madness in Sixteenth-Century Germany* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 106.

[13] Reddy's contention that human emotions are constant – given that they have a physiological component – but how they are expressed can vary at different historical moments is helpful here. See William M. Reddy, *The Navigation of Feeling: A Framework for the History of Emotions* (Cambridge, 2001). See also the discussion on history of emotions in Lyndal Roper, *The Witch in the Western Imagination* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2012), ch. 4 "Envy".

[14] Luther quoted in Midelfort, *A History of Madness*, 106.

[15] Midelfort, *A History of Madness*, 104. Cf. the preoccupation with anxiety and despair in Puritanism, as discussed in Robert Burton's famous *Anatomy of Melancholy*. Burton's emphasis was on the emotional effects of religious melancholy, where the uncompromising doctrines of Puritanism drove people to despair and even suicide. See Michael Macdonald, "Insanity and the Realities of History in Early Modern England", *Psychological Medicine* 11 (1981), 11–25, quot. 15.

[16] HtStAst, A209 Bü 327, Dorothea Rieger, 15 January 1678, 7v, "hat sie dorothea abermahl gesaget, sie gehöre auff deme Scheiterhaufen, auch entlich bekennet, ja sie seye ein hex".

[17] HtStAst, A209 Bü 327, Dorothea Rieger, 15 January 1678, 9r, "mit nochmaligem bitten, Jhro das recht gedeyen vndt wider fahren zuelaßen, das sie der Martter abkomme, dann der Teuffel Jhn Jhr wohne, vff dem hertzen vnd in demm halß hart truckhe, daß sie nit wohl reden könne, vndt so *quele* vndt peinige, daß sie es nit mehr erdulden vndt vßstehen könne, mann soll Jhr ein Meßer geben, daß sie es in leibe stoße".

[18] HtStAst, A209 Bü 327, Dorothea Rieger, 23 January 1678, 27v, "Will sie nicht mehr bejahren, fürgebend, sie wiße nicht mehr alles, so punctlich, was sie damahlen inn Jhrer angst gesagt, soch aber diß bekenne sie, das sie der Teuffel vor 2. Jahren inn gestalt eines schönen Jungen gesellen auss ihre Stuben abgehohlt[...]. Vnderdeßen habe sie nicht mehr vor Jhme gehört, biß vor 14. tag Jhr das gewißen auffgewacht, da der Teuffel die Sunden Jhro hefftig auffgenutzt".

[19] HtStAst, A209 Bü 327, Dorothea Rieger, 23 January 1678, 27v, "Jnn dene vbrig, was Jhr vorgehallten worden, sey ein Mißverstand, vndt bitte sie, mann wolle Jhr nicht mehr zuelegen".

[20] HtStAst, A209 Bü 327, Dorothea Rieger, 23 January 1678, 28r, "Dises alles hat sie Dorothea ohne einige blödigekeith auff befragen inn gegenwart vnderzeichneter Personhnen nochmahlen bekhennet".

[21] HtStAst, A209 Bü 327, Dorothea Rieger, 1 March 1678, 41r, "das Dorothea Jacob Riegers Wittib [...] gestern nachts, nach 10 Vhr beyguether vernunft [...] ein stilles vnd sanftes End genommen".

[22] HtStAst, A209 Bü 327, Dorothea Rieger, 1 March 1678, 41r, "alß das [...] wür an Jhrer bekherung vnd Seeligkeit nicht zweiffen, bevorab, weil, sie, so lang wür sie besuechet, sie all weeg [...] andächtig gebetten, gestern haben wür sie das letstere mahl besuecht, da sie vns dann nach vernünftig vnd verständtlich nach gebetten, mit [...] glauben vnd hoffnung zue Bald, der werde sie zu gnaden annemmen, Jhre Sünden [...] willen vorgeben, desen auch nur ein einig vergoßen blueth tröpflin sie von allen Jhren Sünden vernige [...] haben wür sie gefragt neben ander puncten, ob sie auch noch anfechtung, versuchung, vnd nachstellung von bösen feind hab? Rp: Nein, Bald hab nicht mehr 2. ob sie kein schwere sünd mehr vber die bekhandte auff Jhren hertzen vnd gewisen so sie [illegible] ligen habe? Rp: Nein, sie hab alles bekhendt, vnd wise nichts mehr. 3. ob es wahr seye, vnd sie wahrhaftig vnd beständig bey der angebung der 4. hiesigen mander in *puncto adultery* verbleibe. rp. Ja, es sey vnd bleibe äwig wahr, sie wolle darauff leben vnd sterben, welchs sie erst gestern abendts 4. stund vor jhren todt mir dem Pfarrer jn beysein jhrer 3. wächter wider bekhent vnd deutlich auch vernünftig bejaht. Anizo Jsts an dem, dz F. vogt, Bürgmaister vnd Bericht disen Jhren todfall vnderthönigst zur furstl. Cantzley berichten, vnn sich beschaidts zue erhohlen, wie es mit Jhrer begrabens soll geholten werde."

[23] Lind, *Selbstmord in der Frühen Neuzeit*, 160–1.

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