British radicalism, which grew rapidly in the 1790s, also had a significant freethinking dimension. In the nineteenth century it would be the urban poor who were most detached from the church, and historians of urbanization have seen one of the roots of this alienation in the inadequate response of established churches to urban growth in the second half of the nineteenth century. This is one area where more extensive discussion would have been worthwhile. But all in all this is an impressive volume. It can be recommended to students, but it will also offer new insights to the specialist. And it is highly readable—a virtue seldom found in fat, team-written volumes.

Hugh McLeod
University of Birmingham

doi: 10.1017/S0009640708000802

Strange Revelations: Magic, Poison, and Sacrilege in Louis XIV's France. By **Lynn Wood Mollenauer**. Magic in History. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2007. x + 214 pp. $70 cloth; $25 paper.

Judicial archives of the early modern period provide a rich source of evidence about the attempts of the absolutist state and the Counter-Reformation church to suppress dissent and impose order. Those archives, however, also provide a rich source of evidence about the victims of judicial repression. In the transcripts of interrogations that judges conducted with suspects and witnesses in cases of heresy, sacrilege, and witchcraft, historians have been able to glimpse a lost cultural world, a world of popular beliefs and practices that only came into full view when political and ecclesiastical authorities set about to destroy it. The historian Carlo Ginzburg established the model for such a study with his famous work *The Cheese and the Worms* (trans. John and Anne Tedeschi [Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980]), which used the archive of the Inquisition to reconstruct the cosmology of a late-sixteenth-century Italian miller. In her elegantly written and well-researched book, *Strange Revelations*, Lynn Wood Mollenauer makes an analogous use of judicial records from the France of Louis XIV to reconstruct what she calls "the criminal magical underworld" of late-seventeenth-century Paris.

The judicial records that form the basis of Mollenauer's study come from a remarkable criminal case, the so-called "Affair of the Poisons," which unfolded over a period of six years from 1676 to 1682. The affair began

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0009640708000802 Published online by Cambridge University Press

when La Reynie, the lieutenant general of police, received reports of a widespread trade in illicit poisons in the French capital. Alarmed by those reports, he launched an investigation and uncovered evidence that a number of mainly female courtiers were purchasing poisons. That was a shocking revelation, so shocking that Louis XIV created a special commission (*chambre de l'arsenal*) to prosecute the case. Poisons, however, were only one aspect of the illicit trade that came to light. During the course of his investigation, La Reynie also discovered evidence of an illicit trade in magical aphrodisiacs—love potions and "amatory masses"—the customers for which included no less a figure than Mme. de Montespan, Louis XIV's *maîtresse en titre*. By the time the commission was dissolved in 1782, it had examined more than 400 people, of whom thirty-six were condemned to death. But the judges on the commission did not know that Mme. de Montespan was implicated in the affair. To avoid bringing discredit on the mother of his children, Louis XIV had suspended the deliberations of the commission when the trail of evidence seemed to be leading in her direction; after the judges had handed down their verdicts, he took draconian steps to silence those dealers in poisons and amatory aids whose testimony would have been compromising to the royal mistress and hence to the reputation of the monarchy. There were roughly sixty such people. Instead of granting them a trial, Louis ordered them to be transferred to royal fortresses in the provinces, and there they languished in solitary confinement for as long as twenty or thirty years until their deaths: the forgotten victims of a Louis-Quatorzien Extraordinary Rendition program.

Who were the purveyors of magical amatory aids? Not only sorceresses, as it turns out, but also renegade priests. Paris was home to a "clerical proletariat" whose members were prepared to divert their sacerdotal powers to magical ends. And there was nothing new about that. The close alliance between magic and religion was of long standing. Magical practices based on Catholic rituals went back to the Middle Ages and, until the age of the Counter Reformation, had enjoyed tacit acceptance. By the late seventeenth century, however, the boundaries of tolerance were narrowing. During the Affair of the Poisons, those who were found to have travestied Catholic rituals were condemned of sacrilege, impiety, or the misuse of holy things. Then, following the dissolution of the special commission in 1782, Louis XIV issued an edict outlawing "all practices and acts of magic or superstition, in word or speech, either profaning the text of Holy Writ or the Liturgy, or saying or doing things which cannot be explained naturally" (129). In effect, Mollenauer argues, "the Sun King forbade his subjects to believe in magic" (3). And yet many of them believed in it anyway, including some of the king's female

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0009640708000802 Published online by Cambridge University Press

courtiers. At an absolutist court, where the king was the sole fount of patronage, everyone wanted to gain access to the person of the king. No one, however, could get closer to him than the royal mistress, so the competition for that position was intense. Mme. de Montespan turned to magic in order to maintain her hold over Louis XIV's affections, and she wouldn't have done so had she not believed in the efficacy of magic. In her lifetime, the gap between elite and popular cultures was not nearly so wide as it would become in the age of Enlightenment. As late as the late seventeenth century, there was still "a shared culture of magic" connecting a magical underworld of sorceresses and renegade priests to courtiers at the summit of French society.

Mollenauer develops the main arguments of her book—about the link between magic and religion, the attempts of the monarchy to sever that link, and the persistence of "a shared culture of magic"—with great skill and persuasiveness. She is somewhat less persuasive, however, when she tries to argue that the Affair of the Poisons exposed "the limits on royal absolutism" (8). The only evidence for such an argument is that Louis XIV felt compelled to suspend the deliberations of the special commission he had appointed. The really striking thing about Louis XIV's action, however, is that it went unopposed. The judges on the commission didn't protest, nor did the *parlement* of Paris, nor did the public. And besides, it's not at all clear that there was a public for the Affair of the Poisons. When Mollenauer speaks of "the public," she means the Parisians who witnessed executions at the Place de Grève and who attended performances of a play titled *La devineresse, ou les faux enchantements*—a play that La Reynie commissioned to discredit sorceresses. Did such people constitute a public? Not in the sense in which historians of Old Regime political culture use that term—namely, as a source of "public opinion" in opposition to the state. The Parisians whom Mollenauer describes as the public were merely passive spectators, witnesses to the carefully choreographed *mise en scène* of royal power, the function of which was to intimidate, educate, and overawe the subjects of an absolute monarchy.

Some historians, therefore, may very well reject Mollenauer's argument about the limits on absolutism. But that hardly matters. The crucial sections of her book are the ones dealing with the criminal magical underworld and its connections to the royal court, and those sections are quite capable of standing on their own. For anyone with an interest in the history of magic, *Strange Revelations* contains fascinating revelations indeed.

Jeffrey Freedman
Yeshiva University, New York City

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0009640708000802 Published online by Cambridge University Press