

“The Root is Hidden and the Material Uncertain”: The Challenges of Prosecuting Witchcraft in Early Modern Venice*

by JONATHAN SEITZ

The rich archival records of the Holy Office of the Inquisition in Venice have yielded much information about early modern society and culture. The transcripts of witchcraft trials held before the Inquisition reveal the complexities of early modern conceptions of natural and supernatural. The tribunal found itself entirely unable to convict individuals charged with performing harmful magic, or maleficio, as different worldviews clashed in the courtroom. Physicians, exorcists, and inquisitors all had different approaches to distinguishing natural phenomena from supernatural, and without a consensus guilty verdicts could not be obtained.

1. INTRODUCTION

A patrician named Girolamo Marcello came to the Venetian Holy Office — otherwise known as the Inquisition — in early 1624 with a problem: his brother, Andrea, was “gravely ill” and none of the remedies applied by his physicians had been able to cure him. Girolamo had come to the religious court because he had decided that his brother’s sickness “was not natural,” and that his brother had been “bewitched by a Signora Camilla Saviona . . . a woman who is old, ugly, and [who] with her arts had induced the said Signor Andrea” to take her as a lover for at least a decade.¹ Apparently, Camilla’s use of love magic to seduce Andrea was not enough to bring Girolamo to the Holy Office, but her use of maleficent witchcraft to sicken him required action. Girolamo proceeded to lay out his case, describing the inefficacy of physicians’ ministrations, Andrea’s strange

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¹Archivio di Stato (Venice), Sant’Uffizio, *busta* (hereafter ASV SU b.) 79, trial of Camilla Saviona et al., denunciation by Girolamo Marcello, 21 February 1624: “Ritrovandosi il Signor Andrea Marcello gravemente amalato . . . havendo scoperto esso male non esser naturale ma dubitando che lui fosse esser stato ammalato et stregato di una signora camilla savioni . . . qual donna è vecchia brutta, et con sue arti haveva allettato detto Signor Andrea.” This case was recently analyzed in McGough. In this and other quotations, I have expanded abbreviations but have not regularized spelling or punctuation. All translations are my own.

symptoms, and Camilla's claims to be able to cause Andrea to "come running" whenever she wanted.² The Holy Office promptly began an investigation, and heard from witnesses that Camilla, in cooperation with a certain Zanetta, had engaged in various kinds of witchcraft, including love magic, to keep Andrea's affections. A boatman testified that Zanetta had bewitched him, too, at the request of his ex-lover, a woman who had been living in Zanetta's building at the time and who had often visited her. He also told the tribunal that Zanetta was reportedly "the best woman in the world at casting the cord," a particular type of love magic.³ Girolamo returned to the tribunal a few months later to report that his brother continued to worsen, and to add further details of the alleged crime. A few days before Andrea fell ill, he recalled, Camilla had asked her lover to tell her to whom he planned to leave his house when he died, and Andrea had answered that she was to be the sole beneficiary of his will.

With the multiple reports of Camilla's and Zanetta's illicit activities, a dying nobleman, and a clear motive, things would seem bleak for the two. Neither woman, however, was found guilty of causing Andrea's illness. Intriguingly, the experience of these two women was not unusual for accused witches in Venice. Most witchcraft trials conducted by the Venetian Inquisition from 1550 to 1650, the height of early modern worries over witchcraft, did not result in guilty verdicts.⁴ Indeed, one of the most striking statistics of the Venetian Inquisition in that period is the number of convictions for the crime of *maleficio*, that is, magic intended to sicken or otherwise harm a person: zero.⁵ Out of over 100 trials in which *maleficio* was

²ASV SU b. 79, trial of Camilla Saviona et al., Girolamo Marcello's denunciation, claiming to quote Camilla, 21 February 1624: "lo farò correre à tutte l'hore... et cosi aveniva."

³Ibid., testimony of Pietro Moretti, 14 March 1624: "la più valente donna che fosse al mondo nel buttar la cordella." "Casting the cord" meant to toss a knotted rope while using invocations in order to foretell success in love.

⁴The Venetian Inquisition was not alone in its fairly cautious approach to witchcraft prosecutions. Recent work on the early modern Inquisitions has largely undermined outmoded views of a bloodbath of witch-hunting. See, for instance, Contreras and Henningsen; Grendler; Tedeschi. Other tribunals have undergone similar historical revision: see, for example, Soman. Certainly the premise of the inquisitions shocks the modern conscience, but the tribunals' ferocity has been largely overstated, especially taken in the broader context of early modern approaches to investigating and punishing crimes of all sorts.

⁵In my term "convictions" I include not only those verdicts declaring defendants formally guilty but also those lesser (but far more frequent) verdicts designating defendants "lightly" or "vehemently" suspect. That the Inquisition had these alternatives available to them in case of uncertainty makes the Holy Office's reluctance to convict on a charge of *maleficio* even more striking. On the possible verdicts, see Eymeric and Peña, 376–80.

alleged, the Venetian Inquisition did not convict a single defendant of the crime, although in about a quarter of the trials the Holy Office convicted at least one person of another offense, generally another type of magic or witchcraft, such as divination or love magic.

The amount of credence given to witchcraft accusations varied from place to place in early modern Europe, and a number of legal scholars, theologians, physicians, and others argued for judicial restraint (or even outright disbelief) when investigating witchcraft. Recently, historians have identified centralized judicial control and scholarly debates about evidence as factors inhibiting witchcraft prosecutions.⁶ Nevertheless, courts across Europe, religious and lay, Catholic and Protestant, regularly convicted individuals of *maleficio*, although the rates at which they did so remain unclear.⁷ Within Venice, the Inquisition was generally cautious and methodical in its operation, but even so readily convicted individuals of a variety of crimes. For example, the tribunal convicted Jews and Judaizers, false saints, and witches and sorcerers in general at rates ranging from one-in-six to one-in-two.⁸ But there was never a conviction for the crime of *maleficio*.

How can we account for this null result? What was it about *maleficio* trials that made the Inquisition so unlikely to convict alleged offenders? The answers to these questions not only tell us an interesting story about the adjudication of witchcraft, but also provide insight into the ways in which early modern individuals conceived of the categories of natural and supernatural, and how their conceptions changed during this era of religious and epistemological upheaval. In using the terms *natural* and *supernatural* here, I am echoing the usage of the trials themselves. Individuals contrasted *maleficio*, *stregheria*, or a *male soprannaturale*, a “supernatural illness,” with a *male* (or *infermità*) *naturale*, a “natural illness.” Broadly speaking, although early modern theologians and natural philosophers regularly argued that demons were creations of God, and hence necessarily part of the natural

⁶On such debates within both Protestantism and Catholicism, see Clark. In the Catholic context, the problem was exacerbated by the question of whether witchcraft counted as heresy, and therefore a crime subject to the Inquisition: see Martin, 199–202; Romano, 280. I will return below to the jurisdiction problem.

⁷Comparative statistics of conviction rates specifically for *maleficio* are difficult to find: most scholars writing about witchcraft and magic prosecutions have not distinguished between maleficent and nonmaleficent magic when reporting trial numbers and outcomes. Two exceptions are Macfarlane, 57–58; Monter, 1976, 48–49. However, many historians have anecdotally cited particular cases from courts in Italy and across the Alps in which individuals were convicted of *maleficio*: Lerner, 120–33; Malavasi, 1989, 50–51; Midelfort, 255–59, 268; Monter, 1990, 90–120, 134–38; Romeo, 45–46, 54–57; Stafford. Further detailed local analyses would be useful.

⁸Toly Zorattini; Schutte, 5–25; Martin, 214.

order, Venetians both clerical and lay regarded demons and their activities as supernatural, just as they did miracles wrought by God. Early modern Venetians also did not assume witches to have acted using secret natural means to carry out their crimes, but rather to have drawn somehow on supernatural powers. Although the idea of “natural magic” — magic relying on mysterious and hidden (but natural) virtues of objects and materials — was common among Renaissance thinkers, such a category was not used by the Venetians discussing accusations of love magic or *maleficio* in Inquisition trials.

Convictions in *maleficio* trials turned, not surprisingly, on issues of evidence. The records of the Venetian Holy Office, as well as the instructions sent from the supervisory Supreme Congregation of the Holy Office in Rome, reveal a clear rift between the kinds of evidence the Venetian tribunal expected to use in *maleficio* trials and the kinds actually available to it.⁹ As we shall see, the Congregation urged local tribunals to have physicians confirm that suspected illnesses were caused by witchcraft, but physicians largely refused to provide such diagnoses, instead insisting on their ability only to discuss natural factors. Meanwhile, although exorcists and wise women healers were more willing to give such diagnoses, the Holy Office deemed them substandard witnesses. The Venetian tribunal was also unable to impose its preferred method for discerning *maleficio* — and for distinguishing natural events from supernatural more generally — on the broader public.¹⁰ The Holy Office saw the supernatural as a remnant category, identified indirectly by eliminating possible natural causes until a supernatural cause was the only remaining possibility. In contrast, most early modern Venetians, including exorcists and wise women healers, believed that one could discern supernatural phenomena directly, by looking for specific signs.¹¹ In short, when pursuing *maleficio* cases the members of the Venetian Inquisition found themselves caught between competing

⁹The reliability of Inquisition documents generally, and trial transcripts in particular, as historical sources has been the subject of much discussion. Although we must remember that these sources are not unmediated — scribes recorded Inquisition proceedings with more attention to preserving ideas than exact words — scribal intervention was nevertheless limited. It is also important to remember that the Holy Office was not ashamed of its activities: inquisitorial secrecy was intended to protect the integrity of the process rather than to hide what might today be described as flawed procedures. See Del Col, 2002; Paolin. For a more pessimistic view, see Davidson, 1991.

¹⁰The complicated interaction between the attitudes of the ecclesiastical authorities and those of the general public in these matters seems to parallel the efforts at confessionalization in the same era: see Harrington and Smith.

¹¹Seitz, 78–88.

conceptions of natural and supernatural, between the expectations of their superiors in Rome and the reality of the testimony their witnesses were able, or willing, to provide.

Although Venice is a unique context in some respects, its parallels with, and links to, other areas suggest that the phenomena evident there should be applicable beyond the republic. The history of the Venetian *maleficio* trials undermines the notion of the Holy Office acting as a force for disenchantment in early modern Europe, but it also effectively challenges the more fundamental claim that early modern views of the world were gradually displaced by more modern, rational, or scientific attitudes.¹² Instead, it is clear that a variety of conceptions of the categories of natural and supernatural coexisted in Venetian vernacular culture, as did a variety of approaches to distinguishing between the two.¹³ Though some elements of Venetian society (most notably, physicians) increasingly displayed what appears to be a distinctly naturalistic approach to potential witchcraft cases, such an attitude did not require a commensurate rejection of supernatural causation. Narratives of a progressive disenchantment or secularization of society, which implicitly assume a zero-sum relationship between world-views, are far too neat for the complicated mental universes of early modern Europeans. Instead, I would like to cast the increasing importance of naturalistic discourses and lay medical expertise in discussions of witchcraft as an additive process, one that provided another way for early moderns to approach the interface between natural and supernatural without foreclosing other, preexisting options.

2. MAGIC, *MALEFICIO*, AND THE VENETIAN INQUISITION

Although we still lack a full historical account of the Venetian Inquisition, several historians have described the institution's structure and operation as part of other projects.¹⁴ The Roman — that is, Italian — Inquisition, to

¹²The classic account of disenchantment in early modern Europe is found in Weber. More recently, various revised and nuanced versions of this process have been proposed or embraced in Di Simplicio; French and Cunningham; Scribner; Webster. The contributions of the Holy Office in particular to the contraction of the scope of the supernatural and the expansion of the natural has been explored in Keitt; Ruggiero, 2001.

¹³I draw the concept of vernacular culture from Cohen and Cohen, 3–4.

¹⁴For the basics of the personnel and operation of the Venetian Inquisition, see Del Col, 1988 and 1991; Grendler, 25–62; Martin, 9–33; Pullan, 3–142; Schutte; Santosuosso. For a brief overview of the operation of the Roman Inquisition, of which Venice's tribunal was one local instance, see Tedeschi, 127–203; an exhaustive overview can be found in Del Col, 2006.

which the Venetian Holy Office was subordinate, was reconstituted in the mid-sixteenth century in response to Protestantism and other threats to the Catholic Church, and was overseen by a congregation of cardinals in Rome, the Sacred Congregation of the Roman and Universal Inquisition or Holy Office, who set policy and served as a court of appeal. Local tribunals were made up of the local ordinary (bishop, archbishop, or patriarch), the inquisitor (a Franciscan or Dominican friar, in Venice uniformly the latter after 1560), and the papal nuncio. The Venetian tribunal's initial priority was to discover and root out Protestants or other heretics within Catholic communities, ferreting out those who distributed banned books, suggested that divorce might be allowed, or ignored religious fasts. However, as the sixteenth century waned, the perceived threat of Protestant infiltration of Venice faded and the Holy Office turned its attention to another problem, correcting illicit beliefs and practices among those who did not wish to break with the Roman Church, but rather considered themselves good, obedient Catholics. One of the main efforts in this project was the fight against magical practices and superstition.¹⁵ According to one preliminary statistical study of the Venetian Inquisition, from 1547 to 1585 the Holy Office prosecuted more than ten times as many people for Protestantism as for magic, but from 1586 to 1630 the balance tilted in the other direction, with more than twice as many defendants prosecuted for magical practices as for Protestantism.¹⁶

Crimes involving magic fell into a variety of categories, including divination, love magic, and harmful magic, or *maleficio*. To identify thieves, for instance, Venetians commonly used a ritual in which young children observed a candle through a water-filled glass vessel, as well as a ritual in which a sieve was balanced on a pair of scissors and various suspects named until the sieve rotated at the guilty party's name. Venetians used love-magic rituals — casting marked beans or knotted cords while saying invocations, for example — to create harmony or discord between individuals. One could also anoint one's lips with holy oil and kiss the object of one's affection to create love, or say an incantation to the stars at night to send spirits to bind the target's dreams. Although divination and love magic were

¹⁵*Superstition* was a term used in Holy Office trials almost exclusively by the members of the tribunal: witnesses and writers of denunciations only very rarely invoked superstition as an accusation. A useful taxonomy of Venetian magical practices can be found in Martin, 86–147.

¹⁶Tedeschi and Monter, 134. Note that quantitative analyses of witch trials are, in the words of Lerner, 60–61, “a nightmare for those of a statistical inclination,” given that accusations often included a variety of charges against multiple individuals, only some of which were pursued. See also Del Col, 1991b; Sarra.

most prominent, out of the hundreds of magic-related trials in Venice between 1550 and 1650, about one in five involved accusations of *maleficio*, defined as magic intended to inflict harm, usually physical, but occasionally mental. In most cases, the charge of *maleficio* was part of the denunciation initially submitted to the Inquisition, but in some cases the denunciation listed other charges and the *maleficio* accusation only arose in later testimony.

3. EXPLAINING THE LACK OF CONVICTIONS

There are several possible explanations for the lack of *maleficio* convictions in Venice. Given that the Venetian Inquisition never convicted anyone of *maleficio*, one could suppose that the inquisitor and his colleagues on the tribunal did not admit the reality of such phenomena. There were, indeed, many debates among early modern Europeans regarding the possibility of witchcraft and the activities of demons, and a number of prominent doubters, such as Johann Weyer (or Wier) and Friedrich von Spee, held that witchcraft was largely, or entirely, illusory. At the University of Padua, the natural philosophers Pietro Pomponazzi and Cesare Cremonini (to the chagrin of Catholic authorities) argued strenuously in their writings for a minimalist view of supernatural activity using natural causes — or the possibility of error or delusion — to explain a variety of phenomena that others deemed supernatural. The physician Girolamo Cardano, educated at Padua, similarly doubted the reliability of standard tropes of witches and witchcraft. Depending on their predispositions, judicial authorities could find respectable sources to support either rigorous prosecution or skeptical dismissal of witchcraft accusations.¹⁷

In Venice, both the Inquisition's practices and the prescriptive literature written for Inquisition officials reveal that most Inquisition authorities believed in witchcraft. An examination of the textual authorities used in *maleficio* trials suggests that the Inquisition emphasized those writers who supported witchcraft prosecutions, rather than those who criticized the trials. Moreover, inquisitorial investigations and prosecutions involved a significant outlay of resources: the Holy Office tribunal in Venice consisted of the patriarch, nuncio, and inquisitor (or their lieutenants), assisted by a small staff and up to three prominent lay noblemen, the so-called *Savii sopra*

¹⁷Clark, 195–213, provides an extensive analysis of demonological debates among literate European society. This point, that a range of views could be found in the literature, has been raised before: see Cohn, 232. The same phenomenon can be observed in the medical literature of the day, which similarly encompassed positions ranging from steadfast rejection to broad acceptance of witchcraft and demonic influences.

eresia, who were supposed to represent the Venetian Republic's interests in inquisitorial business. It is unlikely that these important individuals would have spent their time investigating an allegation they dismissed out of hand, and indeed the tribunal chose to pursue almost 150 cases involving *maleficio* in the century after 1550.

Nor were *maleficio* investigations merely incidental to the Venetian Inquisition's pursuit of other crimes. Although in most cases *maleficio* was only one of a number of charges, in some instances it was the only crime alleged, and thus the entire investigation was dedicated to the prosecution of that specific offense. In 1622, for instance, the Holy Office went through a great deal of trouble to pursue an accusation of *maleficio* against a certain Maria — a case in which no other charges had been made. The Inquisition arrested, imprisoned, and interrogated her, and interviewed half a dozen other witnesses over the course of a month before finally releasing Maria without having reached a verdict.¹⁸ In many trials, the Holy Office summoned medical experts to testify about their treatment of an alleged victim of *maleficio*. These were witnesses who could speak only to the charge of *maleficio*, not to any additional accusations, again demonstrating the seriousness with which the tribunal undertook such investigations. It is evident, then, that the Holy Office firmly believed in the possibility of *maleficio* even if it never issued a guilty verdict. Moreover, even if the inquisitors had admitted the theoretical possibility of the crime while holding that individual cases could never be sufficiently proven, the same objections would apply. In sum, the Venetian Inquisition clearly felt that *maleficio* allegations needed to be pursued, and the malefactors punished.

Another potential explanation for the lack of convictions is offered by Ruth Martin, who suggests that the lack of *maleficio* convictions in Venice can largely be ascribed to a problem of jurisdiction.¹⁹ Technically, the Holy Office was responsible for the extirpation of heresy, and thus only crimes that in some way involved heretical belief were subject to prosecution by the tribunal. The prosecution of witchcraft was an ambiguous case, especially in Venice, where the connection between magic and devil-worship was weaker than in many other areas. Claims of attendance at a witch's sabbath were not accepted by the local tribunals of the Roman Inquisition, and accusations of witches' apostasy to the devil or rejection of the Christian faith were essentially absent from the witchcraft trials held in Venice. Martin suggests that the Venetian tribunal primarily followed the recommendations of

¹⁸ASV SU b. 77, trial of Maria "furlana" (that is, an immigrant from the Friuli region near Venice).

¹⁹Martin, 197–204, 212–13.

the *Directorium inquisitorum*, an inquisition manual originally written by Nicolau Eymeric in the fourteenth century and republished, edited and augmented by Francisco Peña, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.²⁰ The *Directorium* states that heretical *maleficio* had to include both worship of the devil and abuse of sacraments, and thus Inquisitorial prosecution of any crime lacking those two elements would be on shaky jurisdictional ground — as the defense sometimes argued. Martin reasons that, instead of convicting individuals on the charge of *maleficio*, the Inquisition chose to pursue crimes that more clearly fell within the boundaries established by Eymeric and Peña, such as the misuse of holy oil or the invocation of spirits.²¹

In practice, however, the Holy Office appears not to have doubted its jurisdiction in these cases. Instead, the tribunal's primary concern was to establish whether the sickness or death in question was supernaturally caused and whether it could be ascribed to the accused. In the handful of *maleficio* cases in which the defendant offered a formal defense written by a lawyer, these defense counsels never argued that the crime was not heretical — an argument that defense advocates did use when responding to charges of divination or love magic. Whether pro or con, arguments about jurisdiction and the heretical nature of *maleficio* simply did not occur in the trials. Moreover, the Venetian Holy Office was able to (and did) draw on prescriptive literature beyond the *Directorium*. Other inquisition manuals, as well as letters and circulars from the cardinals of the Congregation of the Inquisition in Rome, gave instructions for the prosecution of *maleficio*, and did not question the Inquisition's jurisdiction over such harmful magic.²²

4. A PROBLEM OF NATURAL PHILOSOPHY

In fact, the Inquisition's primary stumbling block in *maleficio* trials was not the jurisdictional problem of categorizing magic as heresy, but rather the natural-philosophical problem of identifying supernatural phenomena in practice. In each case, the members of the tribunal had to verify the *corpus delicti* — the body of facts establishing that a crime had been committed — and that the crime was *maleficio*. Most significantly, they had to determine that the illness or death was not the result of natural forces — natural illness

²⁰On the *Directorium*, see Borromeo.

²¹Martin, 199–202.

²²Romeo, 94–97, argues that the jurisdiction question was settled decisively in the Congregation in the late 1580s. If he is correct, then jurisdiction was firmly established just as Venetian witchcraft prosecutions began in earnest.

or a natural homicide by poisoning, for example — but rather the result of supernatural forces. Without this determination, the tribunal could not be sure that there was any relevant crime for it to prosecute. The problem of proving the *corpus delicti* was one that the Venetian Inquisition found nearly intractable, given the regulations issued by the cardinals of the Holy Office in Rome and the kinds of evidence available to the local tribunal.

Issues of evidence were especially difficult in *maleficio* trials. For most other crimes, direct evidence of the illicit act was available, at least in theory. A seller of banned books could be caught through a search of his shop; witnesses could testify to seeing someone who flaunted the ecclesiastical rule against eating meat on Fridays. Even divination and love magic were frequently done in groups and often for hire, meaning such acts had participant witnesses, to say nothing of nosy neighbors looking into the windows or through the keyholes of Venice's crowded living quarters. There was also broad agreement in Venetian society about the illicit nature of divination or love magic: consequently the only evidence needed to prove the crime was a reliable eyewitness. If one was seen casting beans while muttering incantations, there was a *prima facie* case that one had been caught engaging in illicit magic. In such trials, there was little to no discussion about the types of evidence necessary or sufficient to reach a conviction, nor was there substantial debate about the significance of the evidence available. Evidentiary arguments in these cases typically centered around the reliability of the witness, and no special expertise was needed to evaluate the evidence.

For *maleficio*, in contrast, there were almost never eyewitnesses to the magical act itself. Instead, the evidence Venetians marshaled to make their *maleficio* denunciations was indirect: primarily the behavior or physiological condition of the victim, and the presence of certain tell-tale objects in the victim's home. The denouncer had to convince the Holy Office that the sickness in question might be supernatural, and therefore caused by witchcraft. As we shall see, the usual evidence of *maleficio* was also more fragile than that of other kinds of criminal magic, subject to counterclaims that the victim was naturally ill or that the suspicious objects found in the house had been planted by the accuser or had other benign explanations. Consequently, the Inquisition's evaluations of *maleficio* allegations often turned on definitions of the categories of natural and supernatural: the characteristics that distinguished events or causes as belonging to one category or the other, and the kinds of knowledge or expertise needed to distinguish between them.

These evaluations essentially paralyzed the Venetian Inquisition in matters of *maleficio*. Rome warned the local tribunal that *maleficio* cases

must be examined with great care and urged the inquisitor to have a physician confirm that the illness in question was indeed supernatural before pursuing the case. In practice, physicians were extremely reluctant to give such a diagnosis. Other medical practitioners, such as exorcists and wise women healers, were more willing to diagnose witchcraft, but the Inquisition considered them less reliable witnesses. Thus, the Holy Office found itself in an evidentiary quandary, trapped by requirements that it could not meet in practice.

5. THE IDEALS OF PROSECUTION

The Sacred Congregation of the Roman and Universal Inquisition, or Holy Office, which had the task of overseeing local tribunals, was established in 1542 in order to systematize and centralize inquisitorial procedure.²³ Prior to this reorganization, inquisitions had largely been diocesan affairs, and most of them had lapsed by the early sixteenth century. After the initial reestablishment of the Roman Inquisition, Church officials refined and regularized inquisitorial procedures only gradually over the succeeding decades. No single text provided a comprehensive, Church-approved, official guide to inquisitorial procedure, so local tribunals had to rely on an assortment of inquisitorial manuals as well as instructions periodically sent out by the Congregation. While the manuals had the advantage of comprehensiveness, they lacked the authority of the (usually) more narrowly-focused declarations sent from Rome. Consequently, local tribunals, like the one in Venice, by and large had to work out for themselves the proper procedures to follow in individual cases, with only spotty (and often contradictory) help from the prescriptive literature.

Our view into the relationship between the Venetian tribunal and the new Congregation is obscured because little of the correspondence between the two has survived.²⁴ Nevertheless, it is apparent from the extant materials that although the Venetian state carefully and diligently protected its independence and its right to participate in the activities of the Holy Office, the tribunal regularly received, and generally strove to follow, guidance from the pope and cardinals.²⁵ This was especially true in witchcraft cases,

²³On the early history of the Congregation, see Mayaud.

²⁴The correspondence between Rome and certain other tribunals does still exist, and can give a general sense of the communication that would have transpired. For example, the Congregation's correspondence with Bologna is explored in Dall'Olio.

²⁵Davidson, 1988; Del Col, 1991a; Pullan, 26–57. A classic exposition of Venice-Rome tensions in general is found in Bouwsma, especially 71–83, 112–23.

which rarely involved politically sensitive issues or individuals, the usual flashpoints for conflicts between Venice and Rome.

As an especially difficult crime to prosecute, *maleficio* cases were subject to particular scrutiny from Rome. The Congregation of the Holy Office was clearly concerned that local tribunals might not be sufficiently meticulous in their prosecutions of witchcraft, and one theme in the stream of instructions sent by the Congregation to local tribunals, either individually or collectively, was the need to establish the *corpus delicti* at the beginning of the trial. For example, in 1589 the cardinals sent an order to the Genoese inquisitor to reinvestigate a case, in order to determine whether the facts of the *corpus delicti* agreed with the defendant's confession.²⁶ In 1628, the Congregation ordered that if any exorcist should come across (unspecified) evidence comprising the *corpus delicti* of a *maleficio* case, he must report it to an official of the local Holy Office on pain of being deprived of the right to exorcize. And in 1643, the Congregation chastised the Milanese tribunal when a set of transcripts that had been forwarded to Rome revealed that certain "corpora delictorum" had not been sufficiently proved in the case.²⁷

Unfortunately, perhaps, for the local inquisitions, the cardinals in Rome provided little guidance as to exactly what evidence could serve as the *corpus delicti* in *maleficio* trials. In fact, the only evidence we have of the Congregation's views on this point is indirect. A "Collection of the Texts of Letters and Instructions of the Holy Office" from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries compiled by the early modern Congregation (one of many such compilations in its archive) offers a hint of the Congregation's views under the heading of "Witches, *Corpus Delicti*." The entry summarizes a case from 1591, in which the Congregation ordered that the alleged victims' parents be reinterviewed, more extensively this time, and that they be asked specifically "whether they had ever had children, and how many, whether they had been sick, when, and how long, what illness they had had, whether they had been medically treated [and] by whom, and what remedies had been applied to them, whether they died, when, and from what ailment."²⁸ The same collection of texts includes memoranda from two

²⁶Archivio della Congregazione della Fede, Stanza Storica (hereafter ACDF St. St.), *decreta*, 15 March 1589, f. 53^v (new numbers; 39^v old): "an reperiantur corpora dilectorum in conformitate confessionum."

²⁷ACDF St. St. E4-b (1628 case); ACDF St. St. *decreta*, 13 January 1643 (1643 case).

²⁸ACDF St. St. Q3-d, Raccolta di testi di lettere ed istruzioni del S.O. agli inquisitori e vescovi, alfabetica per materiis XVI-XVII, Streges [I] Corpus Delicti, f. 676^r: "se mai habbino havuti figlioli, e quanti, se sieno stati malati, quando, e quante volte, che male habbino havuto, se sieno stati medicati da chi, e che remedii gli habbino fatti, se sieno morti, quando, e di che infermità."

years later, in which the cardinals similarly ordered that witnesses in a *maleficio* case be reinterviewed to determine the details of the alleged victims' illnesses and the medical treatments they had received.²⁹ Nevertheless, all of these instructions remain silent on the subject of just which clinical symptoms might indicate *maleficio* rather than a natural illness. And although the Congregation ordered inquisitors to determine what medical treatments had been applied to the putative victims, the cardinals did not specifically instruct the local tribunals to examine the healers themselves about their observations, or to use the healers as expert witnesses to help them come to a decision about the character of the illnesses alleged to be *maleficio*.

To supplement the Congregation's advice, the Venetian Holy Office and its sibling tribunals elsewhere could look for guidance to an array of less official but more comprehensive inquisition manuals. Few of these texts have much to say about witchcraft and magic; instead they concentrate on the classification of different heresies, examine jurisdictional issues, and provide a detailed guide to inquisitorial procedure, answering such questions as, what staff should an inquisitor have? Should he have his own prison? The *Directorium inquisitorum* is a prominent example of this kind of text: in its examination of magical misconduct, *maleficio* garners only a passing mention, with attention focused instead on the classification of different types of ritual magic and on resolving the question of which are heretical. It offers no solutions to the problem of distinguishing natural phenomena from supernatural.³⁰ A 1583 text by Umberto Locati, the *Praxis iudiciaria inquisitorum*, is similarly terse on these issues. Locati examines the usefulness of testimony from individuals who have directly witnessed the witch performing the *maleficio*, but is silent on procedure in instances when, as was normally the case in the Venetian trials, no such witness to the act was known. Diego Simancas's *Enchiridion iudicum* discusses an inquisitor's jurisdiction over witchcraft and addresses the question of the reality of the witch's sabbath, but again gives no guidance on the detection of *maleficio*.³¹

Some inquisitorial manuals did, however, provide local tribunals with at least a starting point for their investigations, again emphasizing the need for careful investigation, establishment of the *corpus delicti*, and consultation with professional healers. One important text is the *Instruction for*

²⁹ACDF St. St. Q3–d, memoranda of 25 February and 17 March 1589, ff. 269^v–270^r.

³⁰The section on necromancy is representative of the approach: Eymeric and Peña, 443–45.

³¹Locati, 243; Simancas, 44–47. Castro is similarly focused on jurisdictional issues and on defining the relationship between magical crimes and heresy.

Establishing Trials in Cases of Witchcraft, Sorcery, and Maleficio, the *Instructio pro formandis processibus in causis strigum, sortilegiorum, et maleficiorum*. John Tedeschi has argued that the document's pervasiveness in ecclesiastical archives around Italy — dozens of copies are in the archive of the Congregation of the Holy Office, for instance — suggests that when it was written ca. 1620 it represented settled policy for witchcraft prosecution by tribunals subject to the Roman Inquisition.³² The *Instructio* was addressed to bishops, their assistants, and inquisitors, and was a synthetic work, including many of the recommendations supplied piecemeal in *decreta* and in other texts circulated by the Congregation of the Holy Office. In addition to being disseminated on its own, the *Instructio* was soon incorporated into published inquisitorial manuals: parts were included in the second (1625) and subsequent editions of Eliseo Masini's influential *Sacro arsenale*, and the entirety was appended to editions of Cesare Carena's *Tractatus de Officio Sanctissimae Inquisitionis* beginning in 1655.³³

One theme evident in the *Instructio*, as in other prescriptive literature, is a recognition of the difficulty of witchcraft cases and the many opportunities for a careless investigator to go astray. The *Instructio* begins with a caution to readers, noting that witchcraft trials are often conducted poorly, with improper prosecutions, incarcerations, and applications of torture. Like the individual instructions sent out by the Congregation of the Holy Office, the document declares that the identification of the *corpus delicti* is critical in *maleficio* cases. In fact, the *Instructio* notes, the “principal error” in these cases is the failure to establish the corpus “delicti sive maleficii” (literally, “the body [of evidence] of the crime or of the *maleficio*”) before embarking on the prosecution, since “it is clear also that illness and death commonly do not come from *maleficio*.”³⁴

In contrast to the Congregation's instructions, the *Instructio* gives more specific guidance on the subject of establishing the *corpus delicti*, and advocates relying on the opinions of medical experts. The *Instructio* directs readers “to examine doctors who may have cared for the patient, questioning them diligently on the type of illness, and whether from the art of medicine they can distinguish whether the illness is, or might be, natural,

³²Tedeschi, 213–15. Tedeschi's findings are supported by the documentation in the ACDF, which was still closed to scholars when he wrote.

³³Carena; Masini. The document evolved over time, in part because the curia did not issue an official printed version of the *Instructio* until 1657. In what follows I rely on the unpaginated 1657 Latin standalone version and the lightly abridged Italian version reprinted in the 1639 edition of the *Sacro arsenale*.

³⁴*Instructio*: “Clarum est enim quod infirmitus, et mors regularitèr ex maleficio non provenit.”

and also questioning them about the entire course and characteristics of the infirmity, from the beginning,” with the answers to be recorded in the trial transcript. And “if (as often happens) a physician, owing to inexperience, cannot judge” whether the illness is natural or *maleficio*, the inquisitor can consult another, “more expert” physician, who can make a determination based on the original physicians’ observations: the “more expert” physician need not have observed the patient himself.³⁵ In addition to expert testimony from physicians, the *Instructio* directs judges to examine members of the alleged victim’s household on the course of the illness in question. This testimony, along with that of the physicians, should be sufficient for an inquisitor to determine whether there is proper proof of *maleficio*. In particular, if a physician concludes based on his knowledge of the patient’s ailment that the illness “is or was natural” then there must be no *maleficio* prosecution. On the other hand, if “expert physicians judge [the illness] to be, or that it probably could be, *maleficio*” then the inquisitor may consider a prosecution.³⁶

In addition to assessing the testimony of physicians and other witnesses, the *Instructio* evaluates the usefulness of other types of evidence, striking a decidedly pessimistic note. One key category of evidence of *maleficio* for most early modern Venetians was the presence of suspicious objects, such as seeds, feathers, knotted cords, needles, pins, or statues made of wax or other materials, in the mattress or bedclothes of the sickbed, beneath the victim’s doorstep, or in the victim’s kitchen.³⁷ Accusers also often pointed to the defendant’s possession of inscriptions, powders, potions, statues, or other materials as a sign of guilt. The *Instructio* notes that a defendant’s home ought to be searched, but also points out that the record of the search should include both incriminating and exonerating evidence. Moreover, the *Instructio* urges its readers not to jump to conclusions when evaluating materials found in the homes of suspects and victims. Judges should submit

³⁵Ibid.: “examinare Medicos, qui infirmum curarunt, illos diligentè interrogando de qualitate infirmitatis, et an ex arte Medicinae dignoscere possint infirmitatem esse, vel esse posse naturalem, illos etiam interrogando circa totam seriem et accidentia ipsius infirmitatis à principio”; “ut si forte aliquis medicus per imperitiam (prout multoties evenit) nescivisset qualitatem morbi iudicare, et propterea iudicasset non esse naturalem, sed ex maleficio provenire, alius medicus magis peritus habita notitia omnium accidentium eiusdem infirmitatis, licèt infirmum non viderit, possit dignoscere, an talis infirmitas ex morbo naturali nec ne, provenire poterit.”

³⁶Ibid.: “Quod si ex huiusmodi diligentis Iudici apparebit infirmitatem esse, vel fuisse naturalem, procul dubio procedere non debet. . . . Si verò Medici periti clarè iudicaverint esse, vel esse posse probabiliter maleficium, tunc Iudex securius cogitare poterit de inquisitione formanda.”

³⁷See Seitz, 83–86; Ruggiero, 1993, 78, 98, 114–15.

suspicious finds to unspecified experts (*periti*) for evaluation, and should keep in mind the possibility of benign explanations for such objects. According to the *Instructio*, accusers might have planted or fabricated items they claimed to have found in the sickbed. In addition, bundles of feathers or wool could be explained by the ordinary movements of the mattress or bedclothes, and other objects might have been left in the mattress or pillows by a careless craftsman. As for pins and needles, the *Instructio* notes that “where there are women, needles abound,” and one should not be surprised that over time even a great number could accumulate in the furniture.³⁸

The *Instructio* is even more pessimistic about the probative value of witnesses’ reports of the defendant’s reputation. The text notes that, given the hatred of witchcraft in society, unfounded rumors flourish, especially regarding “old and ugly” women.³⁹ Furthermore, judges should give no credence to the statements of demons speaking through the alleged victim, or to defendants’ reports of visiting a witches’ sabbath. Finally, the *Instructio* notes, accusations of *maleficio* might themselves be deceptive and self-serving. Women, particularly “poor mothers and nurses,” sometimes used a witchcraft accusation to cover up the fact that they accidentally suffocated a baby by having it sleep in bed with them rather than in a cradle.⁴⁰

Other prescriptive literature offers similar guidance, recommending that inquisitors take a cautious approach to *maleficio* cases. A compendium of advice and instructions from the Congregation of the Holy Office collected by a Dominican priest from Vicenza (a city under Venetian control at the time) urges “much circumspection” in the trials of “women prosecuted for *maleficio* and witchcraft,” and advises local tribunals to “give this [Congregation of the] Holy Office an account of everything, which will then let you know which opinions you must follow” before torturing a suspect or coming to a verdict.⁴¹ The collection also includes several reminders of the need to establish the *corpus delicti*, including an instruction from 1640 in which the Congregation ordered the tribunal in Vicenza in one case to “prove conclusively the *corpora delictorum* of alleged *maleficio*,

³⁸*Instructio*: “ubi sunt mulieres, acus ubique abundant”

³⁹*Ibid.*: “Vetula, et turpis formae.”

⁴⁰*Ibid.*: “pauperum Matrum, et Nutricum.”

⁴¹Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Vat. Lat. 10945, “Anima del Sant’Offitio Spirata dal Sopremo Tribunale della Sacra Congregazione raccolta dal Padre Predicatore F. Giacomo Anagarano da Vicenza l’anno del Signore MDCXLIV,” f. 143^r. The *decretum* is dated 23 February 1591 and is addressed to the tribunal at Vicenza: “Avvertendo di procedere bene nelle Cause delle Donne processate per Malefiche, e Streghe, et con molta circonspezzione, e maturità. . . di tutto da avviso à questo Sant’Offitio che poi se le farà intendere qualche parerà doversi eseguire.” This manuscript is described in Jobe, 48 (item 30).

and especially of the deaths that occurred, examining [the] physicians and experts [to determine] that the infirmities did not come from natural causes, because otherwise one cannot convict nor charge the alleged witch.”⁴² Another instruction addressed to the Venetian Inquisition directed the members to be careful in a particular case: “[S]ince it is about *maleficio*, [the tribunal must] work in particular to verify the *corpora delictorum*. And . . . take care that the confessions be clear, and explicit, without any illusion or delusion by the demon taking place, etc.”⁴³

A “Summary of Certain Letters Written from the Holy Congregation in Rome to the Inquisitors of Adria on the Part of His Beatitude,” preserved in the archive of the Venetian Holy Office, similarly urges inquisitors to approach *maleficio* cases “with great circumspection and deliberation” as “the root [of the crime] is hidden, and the material uncertain.”⁴⁴ “Rarely or never is an investigation in this area found to be well-conducted,” the document warns, “whether because [such investigations] are for the most part founded on remote clues, such as certain threats: ‘I will make you sorry,’ ‘you will pay for this,’ etc., or on other clues, such as things eaten, after which the person falls ill, or whether because ordinarily the *corpora delictorum* are not proved, and these illnesses might arise from natural causes.” The “Summary” advises tribunals to examine a physician in order to confirm “that the illness is not natural, or, at least, that he doubts it.”⁴⁵

⁴²Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Vat. Lat. 10945, “Anima,” ff. 143^{r-v}: “V.R. procuri di provare concludentemente i Corpi dei delitti de pretesi malefici, e principalmente delle morti succedute, esaminando Medici, e periti, che l’infirmità non siano procedute da causa naturale; perche in altra maniera non si può convincere, ne inditiare la pretesa Malefica.”

⁴³Ibid. f. 143^v: “Et per essere materia de Malefitii, attenda in particolare à verificare i Corpi de delitti. Et . . . avverta che le confessioni siano chiare, et esplicite, senza che vi habbia luogo illusione, ò inganno del Demonio etc.”

⁴⁴ASV SU b. 153, “Sommario d’alcune lettere scritte dalla S.C. di Roma agl’Inquisitori d’Adria per parte de Sua Beatudine.” The “Summary” is an unbound, undated booklet, but is later than 1616, based on a reference to Prospero Farinacci’s *Tractatus de haeresi*, which was first published in that year. The section on witchcraft incorporates chapter 8 of the “Prattica per procedere nelle cause del Sant’Officio” of Desiderio Scaglia wholesale. On Scaglia’s “Prattica,” see Mirto, which contains a transcription of one of the variant versions of the text; Tedeschi, 229–58; Turchini.

⁴⁵ASV SU b. 153, “Sommario”: “In questi casi, à penetrare giuridicamente il vero per esser la radice occulta, e la materia incerta il S.O. procede con gran circospezzione, e lentezza così in procedere, come in processare, e raro, ò mai processo si trova ben formato in questa materia, si perche sono per lo piu fondati sopra indizii remoti, come di qualche minaccia, ti farò pentire, me la pagherai etc. ò sopra indizii differenti[?] cioè cose mangiative, doppo le quali, la persona s’inferma, si anche perche non si ponno per ordinario provare li corpi de delitti, e quelli infirmità possono provenire da cause naturali”; “che quella infirmità non sia naturale, ò almeno, ne dubiti.”

The advice supplied to the Venetian tribunal and other local inquisitions was essentially twofold: first, approach the thorny problem of *maleficio* with caution, and second, seek out the advice of competent physicians who could verify the supernatural character of the illness in question, in order to establish the *corpus delicti*. The prescriptive literature suggested that physicians would be able to diagnose a case of *maleficio* just as they might diagnose a case of *mal francese* (the French disease) or the plague, allowing an inquisitor to proceed with confidence in his prosecution.

6. THE PRACTICAL DIFFICULTIES OF PROSECUTION

The members of the Venetian Holy Office largely abided by the prescriptive literature and the instructions issued by the Congregation in Rome.⁴⁶ They dutifully called in physicians to testify in *maleficio* cases, asking them about the symptoms they had observed in the putative victim, the diagnoses they had reached, and the treatments they had applied. The Venetian Holy Office at one point specifically advised the inquisitor in Rovigo to pursue a *maleficio* investigation by calling in physicians. The inquisitor had written to Venice for instructions, because he knew *maleficio* cases to be “most difficult, especially since it is necessary in this instance to prove [the] *corpus delicti*” and “because in carrying out these trials there are many written warnings given by the Holy Congregation, and also by the *Arsenale*.”⁴⁷ His plan was to begin the investigation by asking the denouncer about the victim’s symptoms in order to confirm that the illness was truly *maleficio*. “But,” he wrote to the Venetian inquisitor, “Your Most Reverend Paternity would do me a great favor to tell

⁴⁶The archive of the Venetian Inquisition provides only indirect indications of the sources on which the tribunal actively relied. However, the “Summary” mentioned earlier, along with other evidence, confirms that the published works mentioned above were almost certainly familiar to the Inquisition. The Venetian tribunal’s surviving correspondence reveals the use of Masini’s *Sacro arsenale* in Venetian lands: ASV SU b. 152, letter of 22 December 1646, inquisitor of Chioggia to inquisitor of Venice; letters of 25 (possibly 29) August and 4 October, 1646, both inquisitor of Rovigo to inquisitor of Venice. Defenses submitted to the Venetian Inquisition often cited Arnaldus Albertinus’s *Tractatus solemniss et aureus... de agnoscendis assertionibus catholicis et haereticis tractatus*: see Paolo Grillando; Locati; Simancas; Peña and Eymeric; and, especially, Farinacci. For comparison, the works found in the Pisan inquisition’s library in 1658 are described in Prosperi.

⁴⁷ASV SU b. 152, letter of 4 October 1646, inquisitor of Rovigo to inquisitor of Venice (the hand is small and difficult, thus my transcription is uncertain in places): “e perche si tratta di causa[?] di Streghe che è difficilissimo, massime che bisogna provare quà corpus delica... perche nel formar questi processi vi sono molti avvertimenti dati alla Sacra Congregatione in scrittis, e anche dall’Arsenale.” On the Inquisition in Rovigo, see Malavasi, 1989 and 1991.

me what other questions will be necessary to put to him. Also, advise me whether I need now to have the child visited by a physician in order to see whether the illness is natural or comes from *maleficio*,” and whether other witnesses should be called in and asked about the child’s illness.⁴⁸ He also wondered if the requirement that the *corpus delicti* be established before beginning the trial meant that he could not examine a physician under oath about the illness before confirming the *maleficio*, or if instead that should be his very first step. In the margins of the letter we have the Venetian Holy Office’s response: “Have the [patient’s] own physician go, and others as well and then ask them . . . if the illness is supernatural.”⁴⁹ Closing his letter, the beleaguered inquisitor in Rovigo apologized for being a bother, but, he noted, “one can easily go astray here, and Rome wants to hear the whole [matter] in similar cases, etc.”⁵⁰ Local tribunals were evidently aware of the difficulty of *maleficio* cases and felt the eye of the Roman Congregation on them as they pursued their prosecutions. They would prosecute alleged witches for *maleficio*, but due care would have to be taken.

The importance of physicians — and, in fact, of healers more broadly — in Inquisition witchcraft trials is clear from what we have seen so far. And yet, healers’ roles in these proceedings have received only sporadic attention from historians.⁵¹ Most of what has been written has drawn on the prescriptive literature discussed above, supplemented by a small number of medical authors who, in their theoretical treatises, commented on their participation in trials.⁵² An examination of trial transcripts provides a useful

⁴⁸ASV SU b. 152, letter of 4 October 1646, inquisitor of Rovigo to inquisitor of Venice: “ma Vostra Paternità Reverendissima mi farà gratia dirmi che altri interrogatorii saranno necessari di farli. Anche mi avisi se devo hora far visitar il putto dal medico per vedere[?] an morbus sit naturalis, vel ex maleficio proveniat[?]”

⁴⁹Ibid.: “far’ andar il proprio medico, et altre ancora e poi demandargli . . . se il male è soprannaturale.”

⁵⁰Ibid.: “vi si puol errare facilmente, e Roma vuol audire in simil cause il tutto etc.”

⁵¹As Di Simplicio, 371, notes, “The medical dimensions of the history of witchcraft are an area of historical research that remains inadequately explored.” For some limited forays into this underexplored territory, see McGough; Milani; Romano; Ruggiero, 2001; Seitz, 195–285. On physicians and witchcraft more broadly, see Beier; Porter; Weir (all three articles are part of a special issues of the *Bulletin for the Social History of Medicine*, on the theme of “Witchcraft, Magic and Medicine”); Castelli; Di Simplicio, 353–60, 371–76; Estes, 1983; Miele. It is useful to note that physicians had been testifying in ecclesiastical evaluations of proposed saints for some time by this period: see Park; Ziegler.

⁵²The classic example is Paolo Zacchia, who participated in trials before the Roman Rota, among other courts, and wrote a fundamental book on legal medicine in which he briefly addresses supernatural illnesses: see Zacchia, 241–45 (*consilium* 49). Zacchia’s work was published in parts beginning in the 1620s, and appears to have had limited influence in the Venetian *maleficio* trials. A similar but lesser-known example is Pietro Piperno: see Miele.

corrective to such a small sampling of experiences, experiences the physician-authors selected and repackaged for their own purposes. The records of the Venetian Holy Office allow us not only to highlight the striking divergences between practice and theory, but also to broaden our view to include nonphysician healers, who also regularly participated in witchcraft trials.

The physicians who testified before the Venetian Inquisition about their care for victims of witchcraft were generally treated deferentially by the tribunal. The inquisitors did not challenge their qualifications or ask them to justify the criteria they used for their diagnoses, but instead allowed them to testify to their knowledge with little or no interruption.⁵³ However, these physicians did not give the kind of information envisioned by the prescriptive literature. They were extremely reluctant to provide a positive diagnosis of a supernatural illness and instead spoke only of the sufficiency of natural causes to explain the illness in question, refusing to discuss any factors beyond the natural. Physicians' testimonies were usually brief, straightforward accounts of their observations and of their treatments of the alleged victim. The inquisitor would often follow up on a physician's narrative by asking specifically whether the illness in question was, or could have been, supernatural. The exchange between the inquisitor and the physician Curzio Marinelli in the case of Camilla Saviona, with which we began, is typical. Having reported his treatment of Andrea Marcello for "the French disease, accompanied by melancholic humor," Marinelli was asked by the inquisitor "Whether from any of the things that happened to the said Lord Andrea one might argue that this ill was not entirely natural." Marinelli responded, "I would not swear that his ill did not come also from a supernatural ill, because the devil *potest decipere etiam medicos* [can deceive even physicians]. And this is all I can say on this subject."⁵⁴ The tribunal then dismissed the physician.

⁵³This treatment was not the case for other categories of healers, such as wise women and exorcists, whom the Inquisition regularly questioned about their qualifications, and challenged to justify their diagnoses and treatments.

⁵⁴ASV SU b. 79, trial of Camilla Saviona, testimony of 17 August 1624, p. 36: "Interrogatus se da accidente alcuno occorso al sudetto Signor Andrea si potesse argomentare che quel male non fosse da principio naturale. Respondit io no giurarei che il suo male non procedesse anco da male sopranaturale, perche il diavolo potest decipere etiam medicos. Et questo è quanto posso dire in questo proposito. quibus habitis fuit licentiatus etc." It appears that Marinelli switched to Latin for a few words in the midst of his vernacular testimony, which suggests the phrase is a quotation. I have not been able to identify a source. It is also possible that the notary recording the testimony rendered these words in Latin on his own initiative, but such an action would have been unusual.

Marinelli's desire to evaluate only the sufficiency of natural causes and his resistance to discussing possible supernatural causes was widely shared by those of his colleagues who testified before the Holy Office. A physician named Giovanni Steffani told the Inquisition in 1638 that his patient had also been treated by exorcists, who had "said that [the patient] had some signs of bewitchment in which I didn't put any faith because it is not my profession."⁵⁵ In a case from 1639, two different physicians testified about their treatments of a certain Maria, the wife of a wool merchant. The first, Valerio Martini, reported that he had diagnosed the woman with a natural "hypochondriacal melancholy," described the course of her illness, and noted that he had been unable to cure her. "As for the rest," he concluded, "I do not know anything else, because I do not deal with supernatural things." The inquisitor pursued the possible supernatural character of the illness, asking Martini whether "it conforms to your expertise and your art [that] the infirmity of that woman could have arisen from other origins or supernatural causes?" Martini responded, "I cannot know this," but noted that though he had been unable to cure Maria, she did get some benefit from his (natural) medicines. The second physician, Raimondo Zuanforte, reported having similarly diagnosed a melancholic illness that had only partially responded to treatments. Again, the inquisitor wondered whether "the said indisposition was caused by some supernatural reason. He responded: I know nothing of this" and was dismissed.⁵⁶

Physicians, then, were not playing by the rules assumed by the inquisitors' prescriptive literature. They would neither rule in nor rule out supernatural causes: they "did not deal with" such things, supernatural causes were "not [their] profession," they knew "nothing of this." On the whole, physicians disclaimed competence to speak of supernatural interventions in the body, at least in the case of witchcraft — an attitude not foreseen by the inquisitorial literature. Nor does it seem that inquisitors could simply call in another, more expert physician, as the *Instructio* put it, to give a diagnosis

⁵⁵Ibid., b. 95, trial of Girolama Baglioni, testimony of Giovanni Steffani, 9 December 1638, f. 54: "et alcuni esorcisti dicevano che haveva alcuni segni di amaliatura. Alli quali io non prestai fede per non esser la mia professione."

⁵⁶Ibid., trial of Catterina Cimolin, testimony of Valerio Martini, 28 June 1639: "del resto non sò altro, perche non me ne intendo delle cose sopranatural. Interrogatus se conforme al suo parere et l'arte sua l'infermità di quella donna poteva esser cagionata da altri principii ò cause sopra natura. Respondit non posso saper questo." Martini appeals to a broadly-accepted sign of supernatural illness: its imperviousness to natural medications. His inability to cure Maria's sickness could be taken as indicating a supernatural cause, but the partial success of his naturalistic treatments pointed instead towards a natural illness. Testimony of Raimondo Zuanforte, 5 July 1639: "Interrogatus se sà che detta indispositione causasse da qualche cagione sopranaturale. Respondit non sò niente di questo."

when the treating physician could not. The problem was not one of insufficient expertise to positively identify supernatural causes in *maleficio* cases (the only problem foreseen in the prescriptive literature), but rather a refusal of physicians, as a group, even to attempt such an identification in the first place. Indeed, the Venetian Inquisition did not try to call in more expert physicians who did not have direct, firsthand information about the case in question to give a second opinion.⁵⁷ However, we should take care not to interpret the physicians' attitudes as indicating that the *medici* were, as a class, rank skeptics of supernatural intervention in the mundane world. In fact, their understanding of the world was more complex, as we shall see shortly.

The other category of healers that the Inquisition frequently called to testify was that of healing clerics, or exorcists.⁵⁸ However, although ordinary Venetians relied heavily on exorcists' opinions in order to detect *maleficio*, the officials of the Holy Office were much more circumspect. The Veronese priest's "Summary" of Holy Office instructions mentioned above advises inquisitors to call "expert and prudent" exorcists in addition to physicians in order to determine that a suspicious illness "truly comes from *maleficio*." The author continues: "I say a 'prudent' exorcist because there are many who in any illness judge *maleficio* to be present, either from inexperience or to gain business."⁵⁹ In addition to general suspicions about exorcists'

⁵⁷The Venetian approach contrasts sharply with the practice of some Roman courts as described in De Renzi. The physicians' approach, as I have argued elsewhere, results from a combination of the dominant naturalism of the University of Padua, where many of the physicians were educated; a desire to protect their field of competence from competitors such as exorcists, charlatans, and women healers; and a general reluctance to become too deeply involved in questions of the supernatural lest they transgress doctrinal rules, which were being enforced with new rigor by the Church.

⁵⁸Venice, like the rest of early modern Europe, had a lively and diverse medical marketplace: see Palmer, 1979; Ruggiero, 1981; Vanzan Marchini, 1995 and 1995–. On the medical world of early modern Italy more generally, see Bylebyl; Gentilcore, 1994 and 1998; Palmer, 1983; Pomata. Exorcists have received increased scholarly attention of late: see Ferber; Hummel; Stephens, especially 322–65. Much work remains to be done, however, especially in uncovering the clerics' training and everyday practices. In addition to clerics, women who treated both natural and supernatural afflictions also appeared, but were not accepted as experts by the Inquisition.

⁵⁹ASV SU b. 153, "Sommario": "il ricercho in giudicio . . . anco la fede d'un esperto, e prudente esorcista, che venga veramente da maleficio. dico prudente esorcista, perche molti ve ne sono, ch'in ogni infermità giudicano esservi maleficio, o per poca pratica, ò per farvi sopra mercanzia." Scaglia's "Prattica," the source for this section of the "Sommario," also notes in a later chapter that when communities of women religious falsely think themselves under attack by witches or demons, their delusions are often made worse when their superiors send in exorcists to treat them, even though the women are, in fact, neither bewitched nor possessed: Mirto, 136.

competence, inter-order strife may have undermined exorcists' standing in the eyes of the Venetian Inquisition. The Congregation of the Holy Office in Rome sent out a number of instructions, especially in the late sixteenth century, in which they warned Franciscans against practicing magic and consorting with spirits.⁶⁰ As most of the exorcists mentioned in Venetian Inquisition trials were Franciscans, the Dominican inquisitors may have suspected that the exorcists' work with the demonic was not limited to curing.

Consequently, although the Venetian Inquisition regularly made use of healing clerics' knowledge in *maleficio* trials, it deferred much less to the opinions of the exorcists than to those of their lay colleagues, physicians. Inquisitors regularly challenged exorcists to describe their qualifications, the authoritative texts on which they relied, and the criteria for their diagnoses.⁶¹ In addition, exorcists occasionally found themselves tried by the Inquisition on charges of improper healing practices.⁶² In at least one instance, it appears that the Holy Office explicitly advised a man claiming *maleficio* to have his afflicted wife seen by a physician, though he chose to take her to exorcists instead.⁶³

Despite the problems inquisitors saw with exorcists' testimony, these clerics, unlike physicians, were prepared to provide the Holy Office with positive diagnoses of *maleficio*. In 1587 a priest named Zuan Antonio Mazuoli testified that a woman he had treated had been possessed by spirits who claimed to have been sent by a certain Madalena.⁶⁴ Some thirty years later, an elderly priest named Ottaviano Rati testified that he had diagnosed a patient, the wife of a physician, as bewitched, based on the presence of suspicious objects in her home and on her reaction to exorcisms he had read. A second cleric confirmed the diagnosis, saying that his application of

⁶⁰See, for example, ACDF St. St. M3–g, *decreta* of 19 September 1591, p. 559, and 25 May 1593, p. 569; *ibid.*, L6–i, s.v. “Minores Observantes,” *decretum* of 30 May 1601 and letter of 1 December 1657; and *ibid.*, P3–a, s.v. “Decretum,” the subsection “Reformati.”

⁶¹See, for example, ASV SU b. 95, trial of Caterina Cimolin, testimony of Alberto Pasini, 12 July 1639; *ibid.*, trial of Girolama Baglioni, testimony of Pietro da Montereale, 2 December 1638; ASV SU b. 66, trial of Fra Marino Palazzi, his *constitutus* of 17 March 1590; ASV SU b. 46, trial of Andriana Savorgnana, testimony of Fabrizio Aldiverti, 20 November 1581; Archivio Storico del Patriarcato di Venezia, Criminalia Sanctae Inquisitionis, *busta* (hereafter APV CSI b.) IV, f. 276^v, trial of Pre Giovanni Tafferini.

⁶²See, for instance, ASV SU b. 66, trial of Fra Marino Palazzi; *ibid.*, b. 46, trial of Andriana Savorgnana, testimony of Fra Fabritio Aldiverti, 20 November 1581, 18 January 1582, and 15 February 1582; APV CSI b. IV, trial of Pre Giovanni Tafferini.

⁶³ASV SU b. 98, trial of Giulia, testimony of Guglielmo Rossi, 13 March 1642.

⁶⁴*Ibid.*, b. 53, trial of Madalena Bradamonte, testimony of Antonio Mazuoli, 19 June 1587.

exorcisms had eased the woman's symptoms.⁶⁵ A particularly active Franciscan exorcist named Claudio Manzini testified about his healing activities in two *maleficio* trials and was mentioned by witnesses in others.⁶⁶

The Venetian Holy Office thus found itself in a difficult position. On one side, the prescriptive literature and the Roman Congregation urged expert, especially physician, confirmation of the *corpus delicti* in *maleficio* cases, while on the other side, the tribunal found only less reliable exorcists willing to provide it.⁶⁷ Complicating matters, the Inquisition's general approach to the problem of identifying supernatural phenomena differed from that employed by exorcists. For the most part, the Holy Office sought to determine whether natural causes were sufficient to explain the phenomenon in question: in the words of the *Instructio* and "Summary" cited earlier, physicians were supposed to inform the tribunal "whether the illness is, or might be, natural," or whether "the illness is not natural." If no sufficient natural cause could be adduced, then the tribunal could identify the phenomenon as supernatural. This was essentially an indirect, or negative, approach; the category of the supernatural, in the Inquisition's view, was a remnant category, containing only those phenomena that could not be explained in natural terms. In contrast, healing clerics, like their patients, felt that specific positive signs could identify supernatural phenomena directly. For instance, healing clerics almost invariably instructed their patients to search the bedclothes for seeds, feathers, knotted cords, or similar materials that they believed accompanied *maleficio*. By the late 1630s, exorcists also embraced a relatively stable, well-defined set of physiological *maleficio* symptoms, which included heart palpitations, prickling pains, weight loss, and a throbbing or lump in the neck or throat.⁶⁸ As far as the exorcists were concerned, there was no need to evaluate alternative natural explanations for a suspect illness: one could determine directly whether the patient had been bewitched or not.

As a result of their approach to identifying *maleficio* and their attempts to cede to lay physicians the authority to draw boundaries between natural

⁶⁵Ibid., b. 72, trial of Domenica "cameriera," testimonies of Ottaviano Rati, 5 September 1617, and Piero Picino, 16 September 1617. This trial is analyzed in Ruggiero, 2001.

⁶⁶Manzini testified in ASV SU b. 72, trial of Maria "relicta Ferro," and in ibid., b. 87, the trial of Marina Ravanella.

⁶⁷This difference between the approaches to witchcraft of physicians and exorcists has also been noted by Di Simplicio, 360. The Venetian Holy Office viewed other categories of healers, especially wise women, as even less useful than exorcists. On the Inquisition and women healers, see Gentilcore, 1992, 128–61; Gentilcore, 1998; Martin, 139–47, 180–89; Milani; O'Neil.

⁶⁸Seitz, 146–61.

and supernatural phenomena, the members of the Venetian Inquisition found themselves ensnared in a thicket of conflicting legal and natural-philosophical issues when adjudicating *maleficio* cases. Without a certain diagnosis of a supernatural ailment and the elimination of the potential natural causes for a suspect illness, the *corpus delicti* was not proved and a *maleficio* prosecution could not proceed. Thus, notwithstanding the intense early modern concern about witchcraft, we have not a single *maleficio* conviction by the Venetian Inquisition. Much as the members of the tribunal worried about the crime, the evidence available to them could not meet the legal standards required for conviction, given their preferred approach to the problem of distinguishing between natural and supernatural phenomena.

7. IMPLICATIONS

Venice provides yet another example of the general early modern correlation between centralized judicial control and moderation in witchcraft prosecutions that has been previously established by historians.⁶⁹ More broadly, the story of the Venetian Holy Office's reluctance to convict in *maleficio* cases, examined in light of divergent approaches to distinguishing between natural and supernatural phenomena, gives greater insight into the forces shaping the Inquisition's pursuit of witchcraft. The tribunal's refusal to convict on *maleficio* charges did not result from jurisdictional issues or an institutional disbelief in *maleficio* imposed on the Venetian Holy Office by higher authorities. Rather, the lack of convictions can be traced to the unwillingness of physicians to provide evidence that met the expectations of the Roman Congregation and of many authors of inquisition manuals. Moreover, although exorcists, an alternative category of experts, was available to the Inquisition, the institutional suspicion of these healers prevented their filling the evidentiary gap left by the reticent physicians.

We can also observe just how ineffective the Inquisition was in imposing its attitudes on the broader public. It was unable to convince physicians appearing as expert witnesses to rule supernatural illnesses in or out in any specific, explicit way and it was equally unable to spread its misgivings about the competence of exorcists to ordinary Venetians, who continued, despite the inquisitors' concerns, to rely primarily on clerics to support their claims of *maleficio*. Witnesses and denouncers also continued to cite defendants' reputations, suspicious objects found in the furniture, and other categories of evidence about which the Congregation of the Holy

⁶⁹Levack, 96–97; Soman.

Office in Rome had its doubts — a direct approach to identifying supernatural phenomena that contrasts with the Inquisition's preferred indirect approach identified above.

It is worth noting, however, that this split between direct and indirect approaches to the identification of supernatural illness does not imply or map onto a division between elites and the general populace. The direct approach was shared across social lines in Venice: merchants and servants, men and women, exorcists and laypeople favored this method. Most interesting, perhaps, is that even physicians participated in this aspect of Venetian vernacular culture. Although most physicians in the Inquisition's records appear as expert witnesses, some appear as private citizens making a *maleficio* denunciation based on the illness of someone in their family. When testifying in these cases, the physicians did not stick to a strictly naturalistic evaluation of the illness and did not refuse to discuss the likelihood of witchcraft. On the contrary, their claims read like those of their nonphysician neighbors: they cite suspicious objects discovered in the mattress, *maleficio* diagnoses from exorcists, and so on.⁷⁰ Only when appearing as experts in their professional medical role did physicians confine themselves to speaking only of natural causes. Thus the distinctive approaches to the problem of discerning natural and supernatural phenomena was not a split between the elite and lower strata in society, but rather a divide between vernacular culture and what we might call inquisitorial culture, where different ground rules were in effect.

A variety of scholars has seen the Roman Inquisition's institutional caution toward witchcraft accusations as an unexpected force enabling disenchantment in early modern Europe.⁷¹ Were this the case, however, the Inquisition would have to be considered a poor force for disenchantment indeed, as it failed to impose its more limited approach to identifying supernatural phenomena on the broader population, and even failed to quash what it deemed magical and superstitious activities. To judge from the trial records, Venetians were still performing many of the same divinations and other practices in the mid-seventeenth century that they had in the mid-sixteenth.

In fairness, historians who have embraced the idea of disenchantment have not suggested that the process was instantaneous and comprehensive.⁷²

⁷⁰See, for example, ASV SU b. 72, trial of Domenica "cameriera"; *ibid.*, b. 97, trial of Giovanna Compoliti, testimony of Domenico Luchini, 7 November 1641.

⁷¹See n. 10 above.

⁷²Ruggiero, 2001, 1157, for example, calls it "a long, slow, and never entirely successful process."

A feeble agent of change does not necessarily rule out the change itself. But implicit even in accounts of a slow and weak disenchantment is the idea that a particular, newer understanding of the world was progressively displacing an older conception. The history of witchcraft in Venice belies this idea, and suggests that the assumption of a zero-sum relationship between different views of the world is itself flawed. Multiple ways of evaluating the boundary between the natural and supernatural worlds coexisted in early modern society, even within particular sectors of society. In some instances, these approaches could compete or clash, but in others they could peacefully coexist, as when the Holy Office accepted physicians' refusals to speculate about supernatural sources of illness, or when Venetian physicians themselves refused to consider supernatural causes for disease in one context but argued forcefully for such causes in another.⁷³

In sum, the rise of a more naturalistic understanding of the world did not require a commensurate decline in belief in supernatural activity, for the more naturalistic approach could grow up alongside existing ways of thinking about and discussing events without necessarily displacing them. It is thus imperative to consider the varieties and intricacies of early modern views of nature and the supernatural in order to understand fully how and why claims of witchcraft were made and adjudicated. Without an understanding of Venetian physicians' complex, context-sensitive approach to disease causation, we cannot fully understand the Holy Office's refusal to convict anyone of *maleficio*. And we must take care to avoid too-easy correlations between the decline of witchcraft prosecutions with the rise of rationality, modern science, or any such narrative that imposes an unwarranted linearity and determinism on a complex past.

The extent to which we can extend the Venetian findings to other areas is an open question. Venice's history, government, and relationship with Rome certainly set it apart from many other areas. And yet, inquisitions in other cities under Venetian political control, such as Rovigo, Padua, and Vicenza, had access to much the same instructions and advice as did the Venetian tribunal, and even exchanged letters with Venetian authorities. The inquisitorial prescriptive literature, including many of the instructions emanating from the Congregation of the Holy Office in Rome, was widely available to tribunals throughout the Italian peninsula and to judicial authorities north of the Alps, suggesting that the approaches used by the

⁷³I strongly suspect that these different ways of evaluating and discussing phenomena could and did coexist in individuals. Unfortunately, I have been unable to identify any individual physician who appeared as a plaintiff in one trial and as an expert witness in another, so such an interpretation remains somewhat speculative.

Venetian tribunal need not have been unique to that city. More-detailed examinations of other tribunals are needed, especially examinations of actual trial practices rather than the approaches espoused in theoretical tracts and manuals.⁷⁴

To return to the trial of Camilla and Zanetta: after receiving Girolamo Marcello's denunciation, the Venetian Inquisition interviewed more than a dozen witnesses over a more than six-month investigation. In the end, though, the tribunal simply released Camilla with a "sharp warning" to avoid "divinations and crimes," and an order to perform penances for a year.⁷⁵ Zanetta, more directly implicated in divination practices, was similarly warned and given penances, and also ordered to spend a month in jail, a sentence that was commuted to house arrest after two weeks. *Maleficio*, the accusation that sparked the investigation in the first place, was not mentioned at all in the conclusion of the case. The Holy Office had called in no fewer than four physicians to testify about the alleged victim's condition, but none of them could, or would, confirm that Andrea Marcello's illness had a supernatural cause. No *corpus delicti*, hence no conviction.

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⁷⁴Clark, 205, provides a contrasting view of German-speaking areas to the north, where criticisms of witchcraft in the early 1600s were "essentially legal and jurisprudential in character," resting on questions like the extent of judicial authority, procedural safeguards, and the value of evidence gained under torture. *Ibid.*, 210, argues that such criticism gradually "made it impossible in practical terms to secure a conviction against any particular witch," just as did the problem of determining causality and the *corpus delicti* in Venice. However, Clark's focus is explicitly on theoretical works, not on trial procedures as they actually occurred. Similarly, Estes, 1985, explores the role of physicians and of patients' and practitioners' medical theories in witchcraft prosecutions in England, again depending on published treatises rather than on trial records.

⁷⁵ASV SU b. 79, trial of Camilla Saviona, sentence of 12 September 1624: "acri monitione"; "sortilegiis et criminibus."

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