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Series Standing Order ISBN 978-1403-99566-7 hardcover

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Urban Magic in Early Modern Spain

Abracadabra Omnipotens

María Tausiet

Translated from Spanish by Susannah Howe

palgrave
macmillan



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Foreword © James S. Amelang 2013

Note to the English Edition © Stuart Clark 2013

Softcover reprint of the hardcover 1st edition 2013 978-1-137-35587-4

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First published 2013 by
PALGRAVE MACMILLAN

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Palgrave Macmillan in the US is a division of St Martin's Press LLC, 175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010.

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ISBN 978-1-349-47031-0 ISBN 978-1-137-35588-1 (eBook)
DOI 10.1057/9781137355881

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A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

*For Antonio and David,
sorcerer and apprentice*

By writing on a parchment with the juice of nuts and milk of mother and daughter the following words, Abracadabra Omnipotens [...], and by carrying this on his person when gaming, he would be sure to win.

Relación de causa of Pedro Montalbán (Saragossa, 1631)

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Note to the English Edition

Stuart Clark

María Tausiet is held in such high regard among historians of pre-modern demonology, magic and witchcraft that it is astonishing that a major work of hers has not been made available to English readers before now. Whenever world experts in these subjects are brought together, she is the automatic choice to represent the Spanish dimension. In the last two decades, inspired by the work and tradition of Julio Caro Baroja, she has virtually single-handedly modernized the history of witchcraft in Spain, both in and beyond the early modern centuries. This is the achievement of her monograph on witchcraft and superstition in Aragon, two studies of possession and magic in Tosos and Saragossa respectively, and many scholarly essays. *Ponzoña en los ojos* (2000), in particular, is a skilful blend of advanced treatment of witchcraft prosecutions in the inquisitorial and secular courts with broader studies of the wider cultural environment, both popular and learned, that produced them. Alongside Gustav Henningsen's *Witches' Advocate* (1980), it is simply the best work on the subject. The editors of the *Palgrave Historical Studies in Witchcraft and Magic* are therefore to be congratulated for now making the Saragossa study available in translation. It is a book full of human interest and fascinating local detail, made all the more compelling by María Tausiet's skill in letting the people and practices of the past speak for themselves and her capacity for shrewd, unforced historical arguments. *Abracadabra Omnipotens* is the work of an innovative, courageous and, above all, compassionate historian, and it deserves the wider audience it will now reach.

Foreword

James S. Amelang

Why were there so few witches in cities? Given the nearly universal belief in the existence of sorcery and diabolical witchcraft that led to the trial and punishment of tens of thousands of individuals from the fifteenth to the later seventeenth centuries, why were witches found only in the countryside? Historians have long recognized that witchcraft was specifically, and almost exclusively, a rural crime. Why this should be so has attracted much less attention, and even fewer attempts at explanation. Only a handful of studies have touched on this issue, and there is still no complete monograph devoted exclusively to this question anywhere in Europe. The existence of this historiographic vacuum makes this book all the more welcome.

What María Tausiet's patient research has turned up is a seeming paradox: while there were virtually no instances of persecution of diabolical witchcraft in early modern Zaragoza, the city nevertheless housed a wide range of magical practices. There were no *aquejarres*, then, but plenty of *encantos*, *hechizos*, *adivinaciones*, *círculos y cercos mágicos*, *numerología* and the like. Their practitioners comprised an equally wide range of colourful characters, including *hechiceros*, *saludadores*, *astrólogos*, *buscatesoros* and readers (and authors?) of magical texts. All told, the supernatural underworld of Zaragoza was rich, varied and populated by a remarkably heterogeneous cast of characters. So much so, in fact, that the only individuals missing from this roll call were the experts in diabolical magic who filled the pages of the demonological treatises of the period. Their absence specifically marks the city as a space replete with figures claiming special access to magical powers, yet who were lucky – or cautious – enough to escape prosecution as witches.

Which raises an obvious question: that of the local response to the threat posed by the activities of these amateur and professional magicians. The author of this study has long shown interest in the attempts by both ecclesiastical and secular authorities to bring what they regarded as magical activity under control. In her first major book, *Ponzoña en los ojos* (2000) – by far the most detailed and sophisticated study of witchcraft and magic in early modern Spain – María Tausiet took

pains to underline the differences in the responses on the part of the three legal systems charged with vigilance over crimes of illicit magic. Focusing on the available documentation from the kingdom of Aragon, she demonstrated that the interests and approaches of municipal officials, ecclesiastical courts and the Inquisition diverged widely. Following an initial period of uncertainty, both the church courts and the Holy Office wound up devising a fairly lenient policy towards magical and other practices that they demoted to the category of 'superstitions' and eventually dismissed as mere fraud. Their reluctance to prosecute contrasted starkly with the eagerness with which secular officials persecuted the crime of diabolical witchcraft, especially in the countryside. Clearly, the powers that be were not of one mind on the subject of magic, especially of the more malevolent sort. That episcopal judges showed scepticism regarding the reality of diabolical witchcraft from the very beginning betrayed a conservatism whose roots lay in the *Canon episcopali* and other expressions of unwillingness to lend credence to witch beliefs that marked the official policy of the Church during the Middle Ages. At the same time, the Inquisition showed a greater willingness to prosecute and even execute suspects for the crime of witchcraft. By the mid-sixteenth century, however, it had adopted a more cautious approach. As Tausiet notes, this placed it in an intermediate position between episcopal and secular justice. This stance of moderation would only strengthen as time went by, and became the official policy of the Holy Office throughout the Spanish monarchy following the spectacular failure of the huge macro-trial of the Navarrese witches of Zugarramurdi in 1609–1610. Clearly, what most merited a closer look was this curious inhibition on the part of both clerical institutions – and 'inhibition' is by far the best term with which to characterize an attitude widely shared in much of the periphery of western Europe. Hence this book, which focuses on the urban sphere, precisely the area where the most active legal systems successfully resisted pressure to prosecute magical practices as crimes of witchcraft.

Seen in the light of this longer trajectory, this book represents a further step in Tausiet's painstaking attempt to chart an important sector of the religious and cultural history of early modern Spain. As before, her focus is on Aragon. And once again, she brings to bear the same wide and varied range of sources in her effort to bring to life a lost world of beliefs and practices. Her imaginative and empathetic reconstruction of urban popular culture exemplifies much of the history being written by a new generation of young and highly talented historians. This project of historiographic renovation has shown a distinctive willingness to

pose new questions – and the open-ended nature of this questioning is very much in evidence – that move in a broadly cultural direction. It has also shown a proclivity for incorporating themes hitherto neglected in traditional historiography; the gender dimension is one obvious example. At the same time, its practitioners have made substantial efforts to look outward to what is being done elsewhere; Tausiet is second to none in her cosmopolitan spirit and commitments, as her publishing record makes clear. She moreover brings to bear on her work a rich background in folklore, literature and, above all, religion, of which she shows a deep knowledge based on an enviable familiarity with traditional primary sources. Finally, Tausiet is an agile writer. The reader of this book will appreciate in particular her capacity to evoke figures who seem to walk out of the pages of picaresque novels, ranging from Jerónimo de Liébana, a crafty *embaucador* who eventually made his way up to the highest circles of the court under Olivares, to the truly unforgettable Pablo Borao, whose career as an exorcist gave rise to countless opportunities for indulging his remarkably uninhibited sexuality.

The history of magic and witchcraft contains many puzzles. It is littered with questions that historians have yet to answer, despite the abundance of sources available for study. This short but effective book brings one such puzzle into sharp focus. It invites its readers to join the author in subjecting the rich evidence it examines to closer inspection. At the same time, in the best tradition of historical writing, it challenges them to come up with explanations of their own. No small achievement, that.

Acknowledgements

I am indebted to Dries Vanysacker for the initial stimulus to write this book. In 2002 he suggested that I carry out research on urban magic in Saragossa for a future comparative work on that city and Bruges. With that in mind, I decided to complete the material I had already published on sixteenth-century Aragon, and to broaden its temporal scope to cover the whole of the early modern period. The kindness of the staff at Madrid's Archivo Histórico Nacional made my job far simpler. Librarians Matilde and Inmaculada Cantín helped me track down books with their habitual dedication and helpfulness, and Luis Miguel Ortego played a key role in reconstructing a map of the early modern city. Meanwhile, the opportunity to present my early conclusions at a Cultural History Seminar coordinated by James S. Amelang and María José del Río at the Universidad Autónoma de Madrid provided fresh motivation, thanks to the comments and ideas contributed by those who attended. I'm especially grateful to Hugh Sadleir and Adam Beaver: their interest in and willingness to discuss the subject and the encouragement they gave me were a real boost in the final stages of elaborating the book. I also thank William Christian and François Delpech for their unconditional support and their advice over the years. Without the detailed readings, critiques, suggestions and constant inspiration provided by James S. Amelang, this book would not be what, little by little, thanks to his collaboration, it has turned out to be: the foreword he agreed to write is just the final fruit of his long involvement in this project. Words cannot express my gratitude for the assistance and enthusiasm of Luis Gago in Madrid and Antonio Tausiet in Saragossa.

Finally, as this book now embarks upon a new life in English, I express my sincere thanks to series editors Owen Davies, Willem de Blécourt and Jonathan Barry for their support and encouragement, and to Jenny McCall at Palgrave Macmillan for her understanding and professionalism. As a long-time reader and admirer of Stuart Clark's writings, a continuous source of inspiration and insights during my career as a historian, I feel it a rare privilege to be able to include a note to this edition from him. And my last acknowledgement must go to Susannah Howe. She has worked indefatigably to make this book readable and comprehensible to an English-speaking audience, and we both know that this was often anything but an easy task. Her quest for accuracy and her

outstanding linguistic skills have been a continuing source of wonder, and no author could ever dream of working with a better translator or companion in learning.

María Tausiet
Madrid, January 2013