

Magia Posthuma: Karl Ferdinand von Schertz, Calmet and revenant beliefs

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Considered lost for many years, Karl Ferdinand von Schertz's Magia Posthuma from 1706 has gained the reputation of an influential book on vampires. Recent research shows that the book itself deals exclusively with Moravian revenant and witchcraft beliefs, and that the book had a limited impact on the vampire debate of the eighteenth century. Similarly, the term 'magia posthuma' appears to have had limited use before it was employed by the Habsburg court of Maria Theresa in her ruling against superstitious acts towards corpses.

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In Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu's classic vampire novella *Carmilla*, Baron Vordenburg "devoted himself to the minute and laborious investigation of the marvelously authenticated tradition of Vampirism. He had at his fingers' ends all the great and little works upon the subject," of which the first to be mentioned is *Magia Posthuma* (Le Fanu 1872, 75-6).

No doubt, Le Fanu learned of *Magia Posthuma* from the English translation of the Benedictine abbot Augustin Calmet's investigation of vampires and apparitions. Originally published in 1746 as *Dissertation sur les apparitions des anges, des demons et des esprits, et sur les revenants et vampires de Hongrie, de Bohême, de Moravie et de la Silésie* (Calmet 1746), Calmet's book became the subject of much debate, so he revised and augmented it for later editions. It was the third edition published in 1751 that was translated into English in 1850 as *The Phantom World*. Calmet refers to *Magia Posthuma* in the second volume:

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These apparitions have given rise to a little work, entitled, *Magia Posthuma*, printed at Olmutz [present day Olomouc in the Eastern part of the Czech Republic], in 1706, composed by Charles Ferdinand de Schertz, dedicated to Prince Charles of Lorraine, Bishop of Olmutz and Osnaburgh. The author relates, that in a certain village, a woman being just dead, who had taken all her sacraments, she was buried in the usual way in the cemetery. Four days after her decease, the inhabitants of this village heard a great noise and extraordinary uproar, and saw a spectre, which appeared sometimes in the shape of a dog, sometimes in the form of a man, not to one person only, but to several, and caused them great pain, grasping their throats, and compressing their stomachs, so as to suffocate them. It bruised almost the whole body, and reduced them to extreme weakness, so that they became pale, lean and attenuated. (Calmet 1850, 2 and 30)

Calmet briefly recounts parts of *Magia Posthuma*, and this summary appears to have been all that was known about the book for the next two and a half century, as scholars for many years considered the book lost (Petersen 2011, 257). When searching for the book, this author was initially told in 2006 by the Royal Library in Copenhagen that the book could not be verified. After further research, however, the library was able to obtain a microfilm of it the following year.

Apparently very scarce, at least four copies are known to exist, three in the Czech Republic and one in France (Maiello 2016, 182). Furthermore, a manuscript of the book from 1703 can be found at Brno (von Schertz, 1703), which like the book itself is nowadays readily available on the internet (von Schertz, 1706).

Titled *Magia Posthuma per juridicum illud pro et contra suspensio nonnullibi judicio investigata*, von Schertz's book is dated 1706 in a chronogram: "paCIsCenDVM" (von Schertz, 1706). This technique was used by von Schertz in several instances and appears to have been in vogue at the time in Baroque Olomouc, where a similar chronogram can be found on The Holy Trinity Column on the town square. The manuscript is also dated (twice) in a chronogram: "MorDaCes Cæsar sternes Inslgnlter hostes, et MoDo Concertans trlsta bole ferēs" (von Schertz 1703).

The author, Karl (or Carl) Ferdinand von Schertz, was of a Silesian family known as Scherz or Stertz (Kneschke 1870, 28) that settled in Sponau (present day Spálov, east of Olomouc). He was a nobleman and landowner, who established a village south of Sponau known as Scherzdorf (present day Heltinov). He was educated in law and acted as assessor to the Archbishop of Olomouc, Prince Charles Joseph of Lorraine, managing the property of the Archbishop at a time

when the Archbishop preferred to stay at his other diocese, Osnabrück, and appears to have been mainly interested in Olomouc as a means to gain riches from the diocese (Elbel 2015, 141). Von Schertz wrote a number of books in German and Latin on subjects like heraldry and topography. His date of birth appears to be unknown, but he died on October 18, 1724 (Glonek 2012, 26).

A frontispiece in one of his books (von Schertz, 1717) has been identified as a portrait of von Schertz himself (Hilton 1895, 31) and is partially reprinted as such in a Czech book on vampires (Maiello 2014, 29). It is, however, most likely a portrait of the Jesuit father Jean-François Regis who was beatified in 1716, the year that is the subject of the book.

Although the subject of *Magia Posthuma* appears to be a phenomenon that had troubled the Moravian countryside for some time, von Schertz was conscious that he was probably the first to write a study of the subject in detail, as he states that the reader will not easily read about the subject elsewhere (Petersen 2011, 266). *Magia posthuma*, 'posthumous magic', relates to instances where a deceased person either appears to exhibit signs of not undergoing decomposition or apparently returns to haunt the living in some way. People consequently employed various means to prevent the deceased from harming the living.

One example occurred in Freudenthal (present day Bruntál, northeast of Olomouc) half a century before the publication of *Magia Posthuma*:

In Freudenthal in 1651 spectres [Gespenster] bothered people horribly during the night. The authorities had a suspicious corpse exhumed from the grave, and cut off its head, from which fresh blood flowed. This made the frightened inhabitants so alarmed, that some of them went away to find safety elsewhere. (Lucae 1689, 2233; my translation)

Such instances are recorded in books and in church registers, as in the case of a number of disturbances in Bärn, northeast of Olomouc (present day Moravsky Beroun) like this entry from the church register from September 13, 1662:

Catharina, Bartholomæi Richter ex Maywaldt relicta vidua, annorum circiter 80. extra Communionem S.æ Matris Ecclesiæ mortua, et tertio ab hinc die sepulta est, in loco profano, ad limites agrorum, eò quod cadaver non obriguerit & alia signa habuerit, quæ personam merito suspectam reddebant. (*Rímskokatolická fara Moravsky Beroun 1651-1680*)

Apparently, the text originally read: "Catharina, the widow of judge Bartholomew from Maywaldt [Karlów in Poland] died at around 80 years of age outside the community of the church of the Holy Mother, and was buried on the third day in the cemetery of the Lutherans". However, a decision was apparently made either to move the corpse from the Lutheran cemetery or to not bury it there at all. So the text was changed by striking out "in the cemetery of the Lutherans" to say that the widow was "buried on the third day in unconsecrated ground, at the bounds of the fields, because the body had not become rigid and showed other signs belonging to a rightly suspect person" (my translation).

The same church register contains several examples of people who were buried in the Lutheran cemetery located in a nearby village, so there appears to be nothing unusual in Lutherans living in the same community as Catholics.

Such instances of 'posthumous magic' should be considered in the context of the ambiguous relationship between folk customs and beliefs on the one hand and on the other the Catholic clergy that emerged after the re-catholicizing of Moravia and Bohemia. According to Howard Louthan,

The church was in some ways so willing to accommodate to popular culture that it is often difficult to tell whether Bohemian Catholicism was actually assimilating these folk customs and beliefs or was itself being amalgamated into the peasant world." (Louthan 2009, 208)

Similarly, a historian of the Jesuit Society in baroque Bohemia, Paul Shore, states that:

Baroque Catholicism acknowledged the existence of demons, and religious literature described in detail the nature of the interaction between demons and those who could call on relics and other holy objects in struggling with them. (...) The willingness of Jesuits in particular to identify mental illness as possession and to seek to cure them through supernatural means can illustrate how the Society could adapt to local cultural circumstances that were already well entrenched and endorsed by local priests. (Shore 2002, 107-8)

Particularly harsh were the witch trials in Northern Moravia, which were not only contemporary with many of these instances of 'posthumous magic', ending in 1696, but also occurred in the same parts of Moravia.

So von Schertz writes his work in a climate where 'posthumous magic' is a phenomenon that is now and then encountered. Consequently, it needs to be examined from a Catholic and judicial point of view, not unlike the literature upon witchcraft and demonology which von Schertz himself refers to throughout *Magia Posthuma*, e.g. del Rio's *Disquisitionum Magicarum* (del Rio 1599).

Von Schertz himself had experience with 'posthumous magic', perhaps in the village Scherzdorf, where a spectre began to cause tumult, after an old woman had died. Her husband in particular was haunted and asked for his wife to be exhumed. Von Schertz, however, decided that masses and prayers should be said for her, "Et Deo sint Laudes! Malum imminens den Polter-Geist svaviter sic avertimus. Multum valet oratio Justi. ["Glory be to God! We averted the overhanging evil, the Poltergeist, with ease. The prayers of the Just are powerful.]" (von Schertz 1706).

Von Schertz does not deny the existence of spectres, but he takes on a sceptical and moderate point of view (Petersen 2011, 269), or, in the words of Augustin Calmet, von Schertz "examines the affair in a lawyer-like way, and reasons much on the fact and the law." (Calmet 1850, 30-31)

It is not known how Calmet came to read *Magia Posthuma*, but we know that he compiled periodicals, books and information from various sources, while he was working on his study of apparitions and vampires. Recent research by Gilles Banderier (Banderier 2008, 33, and 2015, 134-9), Aurélie Gérard (Gérard 2012), and Philippe Martin and Fabienne Henryot (Martin and Henryot, 2008) has mapped the correspondence of Calmet and his fellows at the abbey in Senones, including some correspondence pertaining to vampires. Calmet had connections in Warsaw, Prague and Vienna among the cities with relations to Catholic Moravia, and he possibly gained access to *Magia Posthuma* through one of these sources.

Calmet's work no doubt was read in Vienna, both in the French original and in a German translation published in Augsburg in 1751 (Calmet 1751). Apart from Calmet's work, neither *Magia Posthuma* nor the term 'magia posthuma' are mentioned for around fifty years after von Schertz's book was originally published. In particular, neither are mentioned in any of the works following the vampire reports from Northern Serbia in 1732, including Michael Ranft's commentary on this literature (Ranft 1734).

The term, however, does turn up in documents relating to another occurrence of 'posthumous magic' in Moravia. In the winter of 1754-55, reports of exhumations of several bodies in Hermersdorf (present day Svobodné Heřmanice, northeast of Olomouc) reached Maria Theresa's court. The Empress and her

Protomedicus (chief physician) and Bibliothecarius (librarian), Gerard van Swieten, decided to send court physicians to Hermersdorf to examine the bodies suspected of 'posthumous magic' (Brechka 1970, 110 and 132) (Unterholzner 2011, 89) (Hamberger 1991, 83-85). Inspecting the report from doctors Christian Wabst and Johannes Gasser (Slezáková 2013, 152), van Swieten wrote a note "über die vermeintliche sogenannte magia posthuma" ["about the alleged, so-called magia posthuma"] (van Swieten, 1768) to the Empress explaining and denouncing the belief as superstition. This led to Maria Theresa's ruling in March 1755 that corpses suspected of 'posthumous magic' should be examined by the authorities and a physician, to learn what the true cause of death is (Sammlung 1786, 172-3).

After these writings, the term 'magia posthuma' only turns up in works relying on Calmet or in reprints of Maria Theresa's ruling. Calmet himself reiterated his writings about *Magia Posthuma* in 1769 in volume 14 of *Histoire universelle* during a discussion of incorruptibility and excommunication (Calmet 1769, 258).

So, the term apparently originates in the 1703 manuscript by Karl Ferdinand von Schertz, which is printed in 1706, and forty years later, in 1746, is summarized by Augustin Calmet. Through Calmet, the term and the book become known in the context of vampirism, but after von Schertz it appears to have been only employed in its own right in connection with the Hermersdorf incident in 1755. Whether van Swieten and the Viennese court learned of the term from Jesuits at the court, from Olomouc or from reading Calmet's book on vampires, is not known, but we can say that all instances relate to Olomouc, Moravia and neighbouring regions, and that the term is certainly only used in a Catholic context. One would in fact hardly expect the many Protestant scholars who wrote about vampires, many of whom examined the vampire reports from a medical point of view, to talk of magic.

As for the relationship between 'posthumous magic' and the vampire reports from Serbia, there are certainly some similarities (e.g. the signs of incorruptibility), but there is no notion of bloodsucking revenants in von Schertz's *Magia Posthuma*. The closest one gets is a description of some cattle that had been killed, where the "cows were found prostate as if bloodless" (Petersen 2011, 267).

It would definitely be more correct to talk of spectres, poltergeists or of beliefs relating to the process of dying, when considering the 'posthumous magic' of Moravia, than of vampires. This is in line with the view of Winfried Irgang in his writings about how the Teutonic Order handled superstition in Freudenthal and Eulenberg (present day Sovinec, north of Olomouc):

Based on the phenomenon described, one cannot, as has been the case in the literature, talk of vampirism in its proper sense: there is never spoken of bloodsucking or of killing living persons. In the sense of folklore it is rather a case of revenants, where the distinction from *Nachzehr* and vampire from time to time becomes vague and elusive. (Irgang 1978, 269; my translation)

Another noteworthy aspect of ‘posthumous magic’ was actually omitted by Calmet, when he summarized the above-mentioned instance of “a woman being just dead, who had taken all her sacraments.” Von Schertz actually describes the woman as “*Mæviam Strigem, Sagam Posthumam*”, i.e. he uses the Latin words *strix* and *saga* to describe the woman (*mævia*), words that are frequently used to signify a witch (Paule 2014). Another word that is used in connection with witches, *larva*, is used by von Schertz to describe the spectre.

In short, Karl Ferdinand von Schertz’s *Magia Posthuma* is not in any usual sense “a key work on the topic of vampirism throughout the eighteenth century,” as a news web site in Olomouc claimed in 2016 (REJ Olomouc 2017; my translation). Von Schertz’s book and the concept of ‘posthumous magic’ were primarily related to incidents in Moravia and neighbouring areas, and they should be understood and examined in light of the beliefs concerning death, revenants and witchcraft that were prevalent there, rather than in the context of the Serbian vampire reports and our modern notions about fanged, bloodsucking vampires.

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