

## **The Witches of Lorraine: The Trial of Mariette Thomas**

Courtney Castle

History 333: Witches from Roman Times to Harry Potter

Part Three: Final Project

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10 June 2020

### **Lorraine, France (Grand Est), Spring 2020.**

“Alexia!” Gramma Thomas called, “Please run and find me a blanket.” I headed to the closet, my feet dragging behind me. I was supposed to be travelling France with my friends, not fetching blankets. As I tinkered through the linens, I felt something strange. It was a book, and out of curiosity, I pulled it out. The pages felt fragile, and the letters were not English. I snatched the papers, yelling, “Gramma, I have the blanket!” She peered at me while putting on the kettle, and I raised the text, asking, “What is this?” She looked at the relic with shock and said, “Take that to the living room. I need a cup of earl grey if you want me to discuss the history of witches.” “Witches?” I wondered. So, this is some old storybook, “great,” I sighed. Nonetheless, Gramma Thomas made her way into the living room and sat in the chair across from me. “Well, Alexia,” she said, “How about this old witch trial you found.” “What do you mean, trial?” I asked. She smiled, but there was a melancholy look in her eyes. I asked her, “Is everything alright Gramma?” “Yes, child,” she responded. “You see, this witch trial is the story of your ancestors, and I am afraid it does not have a fairy-tale ending.” I snickered, “I am not a child anymore Gramma, and how scary could a bad-old-witch be? Besides, witches are not real.” “On the contrary,” she interrupted, “To the people of Early Modern Lorraine, witches were genuine, and in this document, the ‘bad-old-witch’ shares the same blood as you. This trial is not a legend; it is an authentic history, one that is not easy to swallow.” Feeling intimidated, “Ok,” was all I could muster. Subsequently, Gramma Thomas picked up the pages and began to read.

## The French-Speaking Duchy of Lorraine, France, 1598<sup>1</sup>

The duchy of Lorraine lay on the eastern border of France, and it would come to be “the center of some of the most intense witch-hunting of the sixteenth century,” especially for the vulnerable low class.<sup>2</sup> Within this class, seigneurs leased land revenues to wealthy peasants, and in addition, the peasant class often entered into day labour and sharecropping contracts to keep animals and sustain their living.<sup>3</sup> However, these types of transactions often clashed, resulting in witchcraft accusations or violent conflicts. It seemed “too many hands were chasing too little work,” creating a culture of subjection and tension.<sup>4</sup> The worsening socio-economic position in Lorraine and the surge of witchcraft trials in the decades after 1570 were not a coincidence. Evidence demonstrates significant forms of disaster during this period. For instance, crop failures and deficient weather increased the price of grain, mortgages, and sales, putting many middling peasants on a downward path.<sup>5</sup> This descent into poverty “was a brutal one-way process,” and once families had lost property or revenue, they had no realistic hope of recovering.<sup>6</sup> Hence, combined with the heightening of dark realities and little clarity about where to lay blame, the people of Lorraine released their pent-up fury and fear on the suspected witch. During this time, the witch became expressed through accounts of the diabolical pact and sabbat, which threatened fertility and prosperity.<sup>7</sup> Witches were also linked to unfavourable weather and epidemic diseases of animals, which spelt tragedy for the peasant society.<sup>8</sup> As the sixteenth century came

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<sup>1</sup> The trial in this story is based on various historical sources to create accuracy. However, the trial and story itself are not authentic.

<sup>2</sup> “The Trial of Francatte Camont in Lorraine, 1598,” in *The Witchcraft Sourcebook*, ed. by Brian P. Levack (New York: Routledge, 2015), 179.

<sup>3</sup> Robin Briggs, *The Witches of Lorraine* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 24.

<sup>4</sup> Briggs, *The Witches of Lorraine*, 27.

<sup>5</sup> Willam Monter, “Fiscal Sources and Witch Trials in Lorraine,” *Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft* 2, no. 1 (Summer 2007): 22.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 16-17.

to an end, there was nothing viler nor more punishable than the crime of witchcraft, and thus, the witch became a target of all personal grievances. This deep hatred was exerted by the entire community, including Nicolas Remy, the witch-phobic French magistrate who prosecuted many of the witches in Lorraine. Remy claimed to have sent at least eight-hundred witches to their deaths between 1576 and 1592, continuing such convictions during his time as the procureur général from 1595 until 1606.<sup>9</sup> Although the exact number is unclear, Remy persecuted countless witches, sentencing them to execution. One of the cases that Remy prosecuted was that of Mariette Thomas.

### **Trial of Mariette Thomas, 35, wife of Girard Thomas, Saint-Nicolas-de-Port (1598)**

26 May 1598; Mariette Thomas is confronted by Agnes and Claud Barret, who had accused her, and who maintained charges up to the moment of her execution.

29 May 1598; Remy orders secret investigation; if this produces any charges against her, she is to be arrested and interrogated.

#### **3 June 1598; *Depositions*:**

Claud Barret, 30, had various quarrels with Mariette and her husband some twelve years earlier over a meadow the rented jointly. After cutting the hay, Claud had taken more than their share, and Mariette was furious, leading to a violent exchange. Claud claimed various losses, although he could not now remember the details. One of his children died and many of his animals.

Agnes Barret, 31, said her son Cesar claimed that a black dog carried him and Mariette across the meadow to a fine room where they ate as much meat as they wanted. He said that the dog was so fast they would have gone through a person without being noticed and that she threatened that the black dog would bite him. She offered him powders, and he also prevented other children from catching a bird in the field, saying it was Mariette's master.<sup>10</sup>

Marguerite Charpentier, 26, Marguerite gave birth to a son but lost her milk. She was advised that Mariette might have caused this because she was not invited to baptism. A neighbour asked Mariette for a remedy, and she suggested cooking fennel in an earthenware pot than drinking it and offered a piece of bread as well. The milk returned, after which Marguerite had a pain in her stomach and became very swollen.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Nicolas Remy, "Nicolas Remy: The Devil's Mark and Flight to the Sabbath, 1595," in *The Witchcraft Sourcebook*, ed. by Brian P. Levack (New York: Routledge, 2015), 82.

<sup>10</sup> Briggs, *The Witches of Lorraine*, 134

<sup>11</sup> University of Oxford, "Witches of Lorraine: Witch 322 Agnes Marcoussan," accessed 6 May 2020 <https://witchcraft.history.ox.ac.uk/pdf/w322.pdf>.

Andreu Vigneulle, 42, servant to the widow of Jacquot Rolbel. He had heard of Mariette reputed as a witch as long as he had known her. Three years earlier, when there was a large company in the tavern, he quarrelled with her husband and told him that “he lived and slept with a witch.” There was no reaction.<sup>12</sup>

Francette Rolbel, 36, was her neighbour, living in the same house but did not quarrel with her. Her husband, Jacquot, had been unable to walk for three weeks with very swollen legs, but Francette did not know the cause or want to charge anyone. They raised hens in their house but had lost some twenty, which had not been ill, but suddenly dropped dead. After Mariette and Girard moved into the next village, hailstorm devastated the crops for two years. Francette did not know whether Mariette was a witch.

Claudon Husson, 30, said she knew nothing.

Catherine Claudin, 34, said they had been together when doing day labour, and Mariette had smeared ointment from a basket onto her feet. Catherine believed Mariette would use this power so that she may fly up through the chimney. That night she saw Mariette mount a black goat to attend the sabbat.<sup>13</sup>

Joseph Bonnetier, 30, were neighbours and their daughters quarrelled, followed by a dispute between Mariette and his wife. Soon after the Bonnetier’s daughter lost sight of one eye, he gave her soup made with bread from Mariette’s house, after which the eye recovered, but trouble then spread to the other eye. One year later, their daughter became very ill and died. After this, they decided to move houses.<sup>14</sup>

Catherine Bonnetier, 36, repeated her husband’s story but added that the night before the eye trouble started, a cat with big ears jumped on their bed, which was seen by the light of the moon. She suspected Mariette summoned the demon.<sup>15</sup>

### **7 June 1598; *Interrogation*:**

Mariette said she was 33, native of Metz, daughter of Jean and Edelline, who were farmers. She was employed by a lieutenant to keep animals, which she did for five years. She had another seven years in service with four masters. When she was about twenty, she married her husband Girard, who was a blacksmith from France and had since been married some ten years. They had four children, two who were still alive and learning the trade of smith. She knew she had been accused by the Barrets, and she agreed that in the previous years, she quarrelled with the husband of Agnes because he had stolen hay. Claud called her a “rascal” on this occasion, but that was all.<sup>16</sup> She had not been to see Agnes because she was a “bad neighbour and woman, who was lying about her son, Ceasar.” When asked about Marguerite Charpentier, Mariette said she did

<sup>12</sup> “The Trial of Francatte Camont in Lorraine, 1598,” in *The Witchcraft Sourcebook*, ed. by Brian P. Levack (New York: Routledge, 2015), 181.

<sup>13</sup> Briggs, *The Witches of Lorraine*, 134

<sup>14</sup> University of Oxford, “Witches of Lorraine: Witch 322 Agnes Marcoussan.”

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> “The Trial of Francatte Camont in Lorraine, 1598,” 183.

not remember suggesting a remedy.<sup>17</sup> Implicitly, Mariette accepted that she had been called a witch by Andreu Vigneulle. As for Francette Rolbel, Mariette said she had been a very kind woman and mother. Mariette denied all other charges and made numerous general remarks that the accusers were liars, bore false witness, and were children of witches themselves.<sup>18</sup>

18 June 1598; Remy asks for torture.

**23 June 1598; *Interrogation Under Torture:***

Before torture, when seated on the rack, Mariette was advised: “To tell and declare the truth. Otherwise, she would feel the rigour of justice that might cause paralysis in one of her limbs, which would leave her miserable for the rest of her life.”<sup>19</sup> Mariette insisted she was innocent and carried little reaction to the thumbscrews, so she was racked. She was racked severely but would confess nothing, insisting she was a good Christian.<sup>20</sup> Either later the same day or subsequently, she was tortured again, still no confessions. So, she was threatened with the strappado but continued her denials. She was lifted a foot and a half off the ground on the strappado, and she cried out very boldly with arrogant words, demanding to be taken down, and saying that “we would never be able to justify ourselves before God nor wipe away the sins we were committing in making her endure such pain.”<sup>21</sup> She declared that she had been seduced by the Devil, who carried her to the sabbat in the form of a wolf.<sup>22</sup> They ate small birds, danced, and kissed their master’s backside.<sup>23</sup> When the judges asked if she had helped make hail, she agreed that she had done this on numerous occasions and killed a series of animals in revenge for the minor offences against her.<sup>24</sup> When asked, she admitted that she had made Jacquot Rolbel lame by sprinkling powder on his foot after he stole some of her oats, but she denied diabolic involvement with the Bonnetier and Barrett families.<sup>25</sup>

26 July 1598; Interrogation. Confirmed earlier confessions. Asked if she had taken any of her children to the sabbat, she insisted she had not.

2 July 1598; Remy then asked for execution.

7 July 1598; Approved this request, subject to the reiteration of confessions without any threat of torture.

8 July 1598; Interrogation. Mariette now said she was not a witch and had only confessed this because of torture, but was content for them to put her to death nevertheless. On the suggestion

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<sup>17</sup> University of Oxford, “Witches of Lorraine: Witch 322 Agnes Marcoussan.”

<sup>18</sup> “The Trial of Francatte Camont in Lorraine, 1598,” 183.

<sup>19</sup> Briggs, *The Witches of Lorraine*, 77.

<sup>20</sup> “The Trial of Francatte Camont in Lorraine, 1598,” 183.

<sup>21</sup> Briggs, *The Witches of Lorraine*, 62.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 138.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 138.

<sup>24</sup> “The Trial of Francatte Camont in Lorraine, 1598,” 183.

<sup>25</sup> Briggs, *The Witches of Lorraine*, 138.

that Devil must have visited her in prison to persuade her to say this, she then agreed that the confessions had been true.<sup>26</sup>

9 July 1598; Recommendation that she be hanged and burned, with her goods confiscated.<sup>27</sup>

12 July 1598; Sentence carried out. Mariette was tied to a stake, allowed to feel the fire, and then strangled with a cord. Her body was reduced to ashes.<sup>28</sup>

### **Lorraine, France (Grand Est), Spring 2020.**

After hearing Mariette's story, my gut felt twisted. Immediately, I began frantically questioning Gramma Thomas, "What? How could they believe such absurd accusations? How could this be true? They just killed innocent people? I cannot accept this!" I calmed down by Gramma Thomas laying her hand on my knee, and to my outbreak, she responded with the following. The realities of witchcraft prosecution are tragic and heart-wrenching. To enter into a torture-chamber, even if only through written records and the imagination, indeed induces feelings of disquiet.<sup>29</sup> However, we must critically engage with these histories and understand the reasonable factors that contributed to the witch-hunt-craze. First, Lorraine was highly impoverished, and many lost everything to harsh weather conditions and high mortality rates, thereby causing their aggressive defence against witchcraft, which was the known cause of hardship and misfortune in this period.<sup>30</sup> The second factor that deserves recognition is the religious aspects present in Lorraine. The Catholic reform movement was dominant, and the church regularly denounced witches to the public.<sup>31</sup> The church's presence at executions implied their approval of the eradication of witches.<sup>32</sup> Further, it had been argued by Remy that judges,

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<sup>26</sup> "The Trial of Francatte Camont in Lorraine, 1598," 184.

<sup>27</sup> Briggs, *The Witches of Lorraine*, 63.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 369.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 370.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 370.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 374.

executioners, and inquisitors could not be harmed by witchcraft and were protected by God.<sup>33</sup> Thus, it was assumed that the cruel treatment of witches was in the best interests of the community and the witches themselves, as it was divinely sanctioned.<sup>34</sup> Finally, the major expansion and normalization of demonological beliefs occurring at this time played a significant role in Lorraine's witch-hunting. This occurred in the demonological works of men like Remy and Jean Bodin. Bodin held firmly to the diabolic implications of witchcraft and thought that there were no better witnesses than neighbours to testify.<sup>35</sup> Bodin also recommended the admissibility of testimonies from witches accomplices, secret ignition of cases by judges, anonymous denunciations of witches by the community, conviction based on other testified crimes, valid interpretations of witches obscure testimonies, and the consideration of a person's refusal to confess under torture as a half-confession which justified punishment.<sup>36</sup> As Remy idolized Bodin, many of these beliefs were valid and practiced in Lorraine. Overall, the crime of witchcraft was considered to be the most abominable crime. This justified abandoning safeguards and constraints in the procedures, such as restrictions on the use of torture, the reliance on dubious testimony, or even denial of advocacy to the witches. Nonetheless, these actions, as Lorrainers understood it, were the rendering of true justice.

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<sup>33</sup> Mary Simon, "Rendering Justice in Witch Trials: The Case of the Val de Liepvre," *French History* 25, no. 4 (November 2011): 459.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 459.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 465.

<sup>36</sup> Jean Bodin, "Jean Bodin: Witchcraft as an Excepted Crime, 1580," in *The Witchcraft Sourcebook*, ed. by Brian P. Levack (New York: Routledge, 2015), 146.

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