

- 17 Viktoria Lyssenko, "The Human Body Composition in Statics and Dynamics: Ayurveda and the Philosophical Schools of Vaisesika and Samkhya", *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 32, no. 1 (2004): 35.
- 18 Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 317.
- 19 Lyssenko, "The Human Body", 31.
- 20 Shusterman, while trying to formulate the notion of "body consciousness", refers to Merleau-Ponty's notion of bodily intentionality which grants the body a kind of subjectivity. Shusterman, *Body Consciousness*, 60.
- 21 *Häsyrnava*, 265.
- 22 The frames getting topsy-turvier is significant throughout; mainly in terms of public-private, sacred-profane, blessing-cursing; theatrical inversion of the outer world making the entire text of the *prahasana* itself grotesque-bodied— with excess, protrusion, regeneration— is significant. This is the textual performance of transgression, which is quite often transfiguration: a trans-figur(e)-ation of the values and orders of the everyday world.
- 23 *Häsyrnava*, 268–269.
- 24 *Häsyrnava*, 265, 267.
- 25 *Häsyrnava*, 269.
- 26 *Häsyrnava*, 266, 283.
- 27 Philip Thomson, *The Grotesque* (London: Methuen & Co Ltd, 1972), 14.
- 28 Her name can be literally translated as "Moon's-Crescent". She is usually referred to as the Moon-faced One in the text. Moon recurs as a metaphor throughout the text. Other female characters are also described in terms of moon and its phases to refer to their youth and bodily appearance. The text has various references linking the moon to images like "beautiful bowl", "billows of foam", or "umbrella" (*Häsyrnava*, 282). In the first image, it is linked to the round bowl that holds together the drink of immortality. Gods drink the moon in another reference. These references equate the female with the sense of pleasure and the recurrent use of the metaphor objectify the female to the state of inaction. It is through laughter that she acts and breaks through the image of inactivity.
- 29 *Häsyrnava*, 286.
- 30 *Häsyrnava*, 271.
- 31 *Häsyrnava*, 271.
- 32 *Häsyrnava*, 273.
- 33 *Häsyrnava*, 276.
- 34 *Häsyrnava*, 277.
- 35 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kauffmann (New York: Vintage, 1968), 799.
- 36 Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's*, 122.
- 37 Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's*, 122.
- 38 Nietzsche, *Will to Power*, 800.
- 39 Martin Heidegger, *Nietzsche, vol. 1: The Will to Power as Art* (New York: Harper One, 1991), 119.
- 40 Heidegger, *Nietzsche*, 115.
- 41 Quoted in Ruth Penfold-Mounce, *Celebrity Culture and Crime: The Joy of Transgression* (UK: Palgrave Macmillan. 2009), 4–6.
- 42 Quoted in Penfold-Mounce, *Celebrity Culture and Crime*, 4–6.
- 43 Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, eds., *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1986), 43.
- 44 Stallybrass and White, *Politics*, 26.
- 45 Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 303.
- 46 Heidegger, *Nietzsche*, 108.
- 47 Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's*, 122.



The Mora witch trial, depicted in this German illustration from 1670, took place in 1669. It is the most internationally famous Swedish witch trial, and the first mass execution during the great Swedish witchhunt of 1668–1676.

Witchhunt in northern Sweden

A Bakhtinian approach

by Per-Arne Bodin

abstract

The Russian Byzantinist Sergei Averintsev writes in a critical article about laughter in Bakhtin's interpretation of popular medieval culture that Bakhtin makes laughter too absolute and that he was wrong in maintaining that it has nothing to do with violence. I apply the reasoning of both authors on a historical phenomenon: the witch trials in Sweden, focusing on one precise geographical place. There seem to be many factors behind the witch trials, but their cultural manifestations demonstrate the qualities of reverse or carnival culture although without having laughter as their main feature, and including violence as a main element.

KEY WORDS: Witchcraft, micro-history, Bakhtin, reverse culture, Averintsev.

In an article from 1992 titled "Bakhtin, Laughter, and Christian Culture", the Russian Byzantinist Sergei Averintsev discusses the role of laughter in Bakhtin's interpretation of popular medieval culture. Averintsev puts forward two main criticisms of Bakhtin. First, he argues that Bakhtin makes laughter in the Middle Ages into a category too far-reaching and too absolute, and, second, that Bakhtin was wrong in maintaining that laughter has nothing to do with violence. It is the following passage from Bakhtin's book on Rabelais to which he particularly objects:

Thus, distrust of the serious tone and confidence in the truth of laughter had a spontaneous, elemental

character. It was understood that fear never lurks behind laughter (which does not build stakes) and that hypocrisy and lies never laugh but wear a serious mask. Laughter created no dogmas and could not become authoritarian; it did not convey fear but a feeling of strength. It was linked with the procreating act, with birth, renewal, fertility, abundance. Laughter was also related to food and drink and the people's earthly immortality, and finally it was related to the future of things to come and was to clear the way for them. Seriousness was therefore elementally distrusted, while trust was placed in festive laughter.²

Drawing examples both from Ivan the Terrible and from Musolini, Averintsev maintains that this is fundamentally incorrect. Fear *can* lurk behind laughter and laughter *can* create dogmas and be related to authoritarian violence. The carnival culture of the European Middle Ages as outlined by Bakhtin is also called into question in another article by Averintsev from 1992, "Bakhtin i russkoe otnoshenie k smekhu" [Bakhtin and the Russian relation to laughter].³ Here, Averintsev points out, for example, that it is wrong to juxtapose the Russian phenomenon of "foolishness in Christ" – known as *Iurodstvo* in the Russian Orthodox tradition – with the culture of laughter, as did the followers of Bakhtin, Likhachev, and Panchenko in their classic book on holy foolishness.⁴ *Iurodstvo* is, to be sure, an instance of cultural reversal, but it is not connected to laughter in any clear-cut way. Laughter is in fact unambiguously linked with sin in the Orthodox tradition. As a whole, these two articles attack some of the fundamentals of Bakhtin's cultural philosophy. Averintsev was of course not the first to criticize Bakhtin's use of carnival and his notion of "laughter culture". Dietz-Rüdiger Moser maintains in his 1990 article "Lachkultur des Mittelalters? Michail Bakhtin und die Folgen seiner Theorie" ["A Medieval culture of laughter? Mikhail Bakhtin and the consequences of his theory"] that carnival had a strong didactic element and was not as closely connected to laughter as Bakhtin believes.⁵

One historical phenomenon, however, that Bakhtin's paradigm can in point of fact help characterize accurately – the foregoing critical comments notwithstanding – is the witch trials in Sweden.

The reason for the paradigm's utility here is that Bakhtin's notion of a reverse culture, whatever its shortcomings, nonetheless sheds considerable light on expressions of popular culture in the premodern era. One of my tasks will be to demonstrate this. On the basis of one particular case, I would like to show how a popular reverse and premodern culture, as defined by Bakhtin, can function. I will make use of the introductory chapter of Bakhtin's book *Rabelais and his World*, where he gives a very thorough definition of this "other" culture. What can be noted in my material is the close connection between the reverse culture and violence – precisely something that Bakhtin denies. The

fundamental issue of the relation between official culture and reverse culture in a Bakhtinian paradigm will be raised. I would like to take one concrete case of witch trials as an example and study it in relation to Bakhtin's theory, including the criticism voiced against Bakhtin, primarily the criticism developed by Averintsev. It is my belief is that this procedure will have some explanatory power in relation to the very complex phenomenon of witchcraft. I will take as my example the witch trials in the third quarter of the 17th century in a small Swedish parish, Boteå, located on the north side of Ångerman River, in Ådalen, 500 kilometers north of Stockholm. I have a personal relationship to Boteå, for I hail from that parish, and it is thus even noted as my place of birth in my passport. Two of my ancestors were summoned to the commission, my ancestress Anna who was accused of being a witch, and her son Daniel, accused of having played the fiddle at the dance on Blåkulla, the place of legend where witches were said to meet. The reason for the choice of geography is on the one hand personal and not by itself particularly scientifically warranted; on the other hand, however, my knowledge of the region is of importance in understanding the toponymies mentioned and the landscape where it all took place. From my personal experience, I can also add that the witchcraft trials are never mentioned by the local inhabitants today, and no word of them was uttered when I was growing up in the village. The memory culture around the witches is created mainly by people coming to the community from the outside, or as a part of modern tourist events.

Background

But first let me provide some background. The witch trials are not, as might be believed, characteristic of the Middle Ages, but of the 16th and 17th centuries. They haunted Sweden as late as 1669–1677. Such trials had been carried out earlier, but they were rather few in number and death penalties were rare. Before 1669, the existence of a *maleficium*, evidence that some injury had been inflicted on a person by the accused, was necessary for conviction.⁶ This was not the case in the years that I will address here, when about 150 women and some men were executed in the province of Norrland alone. They were sentenced to death because they were convicted of being witches and having taken children to Blåkulla, where they engaged in a variety of activities consistent with witchcraft. The epidemic began in Dalecarlia, then spread to Ångermanland and ended in Stockholm. The parish priests acted both as interrogators and prosecutors. The proceeding was called an "inquisition" in the documents from the time. In 1676, one of the witnesses in Stockholm was denounced, after which the trials were resumed – though now directed

against the witnesses. Some of the witnesses were killed in secret and some were prosecuted. Very soon the whole affair was put to an end, as demonstrated in a recent publication by Marie Lennerstrand and Linda Oja from 2006, *Livet går vidare: Älvdalen och Rättvik efter de stora häxprocesserna 1668–1671*

**“FEAR CAN LURK
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[Life goes on: Älvdalen and Rättvik after the great witch trials of 1668–1671]. Indeed, a short time after the trials ended, the families who had given testimony against each other intermarried.⁷

THE SUBJECT OF WITCHCRAFT is much studied in Sweden, as it is in many other countries. To write a survey of existing studies in the field would be an act of hubris. This is noted by Stephen A. Mitchell in his *Witchcraft and Magic in the Nordic Middle Ages*, but he nonetheless gives an impressive *Stand der Forschung* in his book.⁸ Yuri Lotman attempts to inscribe the phenomenon in a broader sociological phenomenon of fear.⁹ I might also mention the historian Carlo Ginzburg's book *Ecstasies: Deciphering the Witches' Sabbath*¹⁰, a fairly new study of the phenomenon from the point of view of micro-history. Ginzburg's thesis is that the so-called witches' Sabbaths were the residue of a heathen cult. He begins his book with a survey of studies of this subject and different explanations of the phenomenon in European scholarship. In the Swedish context, one ought first and foremost to mention the seminal study by the jurist Bengt Ankarloo, *Trolldomsprocesser i Sverige*¹¹ [Witchcraft trials in Sweden], published in 1971.

The historical facts

In 1674–1675, a specially appointed Witchcraft Commission convened on several occasions in Boteå.¹² The commission was appointed by the king and consisted of 25 members, a rather large size for a court. It was chaired by the governor of the province of Västernorrland, Carl Larsson Sparre, but among the appointees were two professors at Uppsala University, both of whom would later become presidents of the university: the jurist Olaus Åkerman and the theologian Samuel Skunck. The peasantry was represented by lay judges. The commission also toured other parts of Norrland.

The vicar of Boteå, Nils Sternelius – also a former student of Uppsala University – acted as investigator and prosecutor. The commission held the status of the Court of Appeal, given that the lower court was not mandated to impose the death penalty, and the number of cases was very large – hence the very unusual procedure of a traveling court. The court convened from early in the morning until late in the evening, sometimes from seven o'clock in the morning to nine o'clock at night, according to the court's report to the king.

The study of a single location and some specific individuals will provide a detailed perspective on the witch trials in Swe-



The governor of the province of Västernorrland, Carl Larsson Sparre, was chairman of the Witchcraft Commission.



The two classic manuals on witch-hunting were *Malleus Maleficarum* [The hammer of witches] by Jacob Sprenger and Heinrich Kramer, and *De la démonomanie des sorciers* [On the demon-mania of the sorcerers] by Jean Bodin.



den – what Carlo Ginzburg would call a micro-history. In this micro-history one may discern the discursive mechanisms of witchcraft and the functioning of reverse culture. Can we gain some understanding of the mechanisms of this complex and ambiguous phenomenon by studying this rather limited geographic area?

Thirteen people, twelve women and one man, were subpoenaed to appear before the commission, which convened in Sundby, a farm where my uncle and aunt lived when I was a child. Much of the recorded proceedings has been preserved, and will constitute the source material for this survey. The protocols contain primarily records of the questioning of witnesses – in many cases simply the witnesses' answers – and also the verdicts. There are indications that the testimony might have been obtained by torture in only a few cases, although it has been shown that torture was widely used during the witch trials in general in Sweden. The courts made use of special shackles called *klumpar*, “lumps”. The protocols indicate that almost the entire population of the villages was involved, either in the capacity of accused, as witnesses, or in some other capacity. Reading through these protocols is a fascinating experience, and presents us with a number of very difficult questions and enigmas.

One difficult question, which I will have to leave unanswered, is why the penalties in this particular location were relatively mild. Only two of the accused were sentenced to death. On the south side of the river, on the other hand, 71 persons were executed. They were all beheaded on the same day in 1675 on the border where three parishes meet. Their bodies were then burned, which was the regular form of execution for witches in Sweden. Stories are still told about the problems with getting the fire to burn because of all the blood flooding the terrain. There is a memorial stone raised there now. The



Illustration from the book *Saducismus Triumphatus*, 1682.

charges were the same on both sides of the river, but the outcome differed completely. Another and similar question is why witchcraft raged so fiercely in some parts of the country, not just in Ångermanland, but also in Dalecarlia and in Stockholm. There is a strange sort of randomness in the seventeenth-century epidemic of witchcraft in Sweden. Perhaps it would be possible to apply a sociological perspective to find an explanation, as was done by Paul Boyer and Stephen Nissenbaum in their book *Salem Possessed: The Social Origins of Witchcraft* maintaining that social mobility was suspicious and was a key-factor uniting the victims.¹³

I will here proceed to demonstrate that almost all of the categories used in Bakhtin's description of the reversed carnival laughter culture show up in the description of Blåkulla:

We find here a characteristic logic, the peculiar logic of the "inside out" (à l'envers), of the "turnabout", of a continual shifting from top to bottom, from front to rear, of numerous parodies and travesties, humiliations, profanations, comic crownings and uncrownings. A second life, a second world of folk culture is thus constructed; it is to a certain extent a parody of the extracarnival life, a "world inside out." We must stress, however, that the carnival is far distant from the negative and formal parody of modern times. Folk humor denies, but it revives and renews at the same time. Bare negation is completely alien to folk culture.¹⁴

I must at the same time stress that Bakhtin, to my knowledge, never discusses or analyses witchcraft as such in his works. I thus apply a Bakhtinian concept to an area beyond the scope of Bakhtin's material.

Life in Blåkulla

What is told in the protocols appears to fit Bakhtin's notion of carnival culture almost seamlessly, closely duplicating its *reversal*, yet *without* the element of laughter. The events at Blåkulla are literally a form of reverse behavior which questions the hierarchies of the established church and the secular powers. Actions that would otherwise seem strange become more understandable when subjected to a structural cultural interpretation within the Bakhtinian paradigm. For example, the customary roles of old and young in the power structure determined by age are reversed: almost all the witnesses are children, some as young as three, and their credibility is never questioned in the protocols. It is children, and almost exclusively children, who raise the serious allegations, which are almost always directed against adults, especially against women. In his notes for the book on Rabelais, Bakhtin makes a distinction between eras in which parents kill their children and times when children kill their parents:

There are periods when children oppress and kill their fathers (the Renaissance, our time) and epochs, when, on the contrary, fathers oppress and kill their children (all authoritarian epochs).¹⁵

The former is a revolutionary epoch, the latter an authoritarian one. The time and the events discussed here certainly belong to the first group: the children and their testimonies are more or less the cause of the death of the fathers – or, rather, the mothers. The commission and the authorities are using the children as a means to their own ends, but the prominent role of the children, and the authority granted their testimonies, are nevertheless astounding. One gets the impression of a terrible revenge on the part of the children acted out on the grown-ups, with the commission serving as the executor. The chairman of the commission perceived the prominent role of children in Blåkulla as a new phenomenon in witchcraft; but this was in fact untrue: the same stories of children being taken by witches to witch convents are found in testimonies from continental Europe. It is however indisputable that the role of the children is extremely important in the witchcraft and witch trials investigated here.

The children were often unanimous in their testimonies. They would claim that a neighbor woman or a female relative had repeatedly brought them to Blåkulla at night. They would also testify about feasts in Blåkulla, where the accused woman would cook, stuff sausages, chop cabbage, milk cows, churn butter, sweep, carry water, and carry out the used dishwater as well as make candles for the Evil One. The women perform everyday tasks with which the children are familiar from home, only with a different beneficiary: not the husband, the children and the household, but the Devil and the coven. The main tasks are the usual ones for the women, what is *reversed* is the beneficiary, place, and time. The chores are many, and the children's stories imply a certain division of labor among the different women. The abundance of food is always stressed, but contrary to the protocols of witch trials in other parts of Sweden, the food is sel-

dom transformed into something unappetizing or sickening. The protocols describing manners in Blåkulla give the impression of the eating habits of a rich peasant family. At the same time, the meals differ significantly: they are wild and sumptuous feasts celebrated at night with carnivalesque frenzy. I would like to use the words employed by Bakhtin in relation to laughter culture: “a brimming-over abundance” that includes an abundance of all carnal pleasures: food, drink, and sex.

The feasts are not connected to any special holiday, they take place every night; but the time of the first journey is almost always related to a public holiday – the tours to Blåkulla, for example, began at Christmas.

Daytime is almost never depicted in the accounts of Blåkulla, only night – another reversal. Almost every night sees the celebration of a feast of abundance, or a carnival, in Bakhtin’s language. The feast is one of the most important components in his characterization of the premodern (or Medieval and Renaissance, in his terms) popular culture. Blåkulla forms another world and another life, to continue quoting Bakhtin:

And these forms of protocol and ritual based on laughter and consecrated by tradition existed in the countries of medieval Europe; they were sharply distinct from the serious official, ecclesiastical, feudal, and political cult forms and ceremonials. They offered a completely different, nonofficial, extraecclesiastical and extrapolitical aspect of the world, of man, and of human relations; they built a second world and a second life outside officialdom, a world in which all medieval people participated more or less, in which they lived during a given time of the year.¹⁶

The difference, and an important one at that, is that the culture described by Bakhtin had a different ontological status from that of Blåkulla: it existed in some real fashion. Both cultures, however, conceptualize a parallel existence. The problem with Bakhtin, both in his book on Rabelais and in his book on Dostoevsky, lies not in his findings of different kinds of reverse culture – he is quite consistent there – but in his wish to ideologize this reverse culture as a sphere of freedom. Blåkulla forms a reverse culture in all respects, but the reversal has little to do with freedom.

There are additional examples in the witnesses’ accounts of the abundance existing in Blåkulla: the witches throw corn into the fire, thus destroying food – a particularly egregious crime in a society where crop failure and famine occurred often. There are also other expressions of abundance. A teenage boy had been promised a horse with a saddle and pistols. It must have been a purely wishful dream on his part. Most children also received gold coins as gifts in Blåkulla, but the coins then turned into stones.

IN ADDITION TO the everyday tasks listed above, the women are involved in evil doings: women are dancing,

and my ancestor is, as mentioned, accused of having regularly played the fiddle to accompany the dancers. The women also file at the Devil’s shackles in order to set him free – really an incredible accusation, but serious in every way. Almost all testimonies mention that the accused women “fornicate with the Devil under the table” (“bolar under bordet”), sometimes referred to in phrases such as “to make the shame” or to “lift her shift”, or “she has been on top of Satan and did what is ugly.” Another account even mentions two positions: “Sometimes she lies on the top sometimes he is on the top of her”. Yet another testimony of the same sort: “Märit lies together with a handsome man under the table and files at the chains”. Only in one case does the intercourse with the Devil result in children:

She has had intercourse with the evil one and every month borne him a child who was boiled into grease.¹⁷

The children ride to Blåkulla on a cow or a heifer, sometimes not on the back but on the stomach. They also often ride to Blåkulla on different men. There is a very open and obvious sexual motif which, according to Bakhtin, is central to the folk culture of laughter. I once more quote Bakhtin’s definition of laughter culture:

To degrade also means to concern oneself with the lower stratum of the body, the life of the belly and the reproductive organs; it therefore relates to acts of defecation and copulation, conception, pregnancy, and birth.¹⁸

The children are not themselves described as sexually active and are not abused, but they witness the sexual acts and give testimony about them in front of the parish priest and the commission. Blåkulla is depicted as a carnival world of obscenities and sex. If one takes into account that these testimonies were made in a court of 25 men, the telling of these accounts can be seen as part of a very peculiar form of voyeurism on the part of the judges, a voyeurism not pertaining to any reality but to listening to the witnesses’ stories.

There is no protection against evil in the world portrayed in the protocols. The housewife Kerstin attests that Satan is present in the courtroom during the hearing, and the court decides to sing two hymns to drive him away. Kerstin claims afterwards that Satan shut her ears so she could hardly hear any of the song. She also states that it is her own mother who induced her to begin making voyages to Blåkulla. “For her mother, Blåkulla was the only heaven she knew, and because she loved her children she wanted to keep them there.”¹⁹ She also married Satan in Blåkulla, and she noticed that he was wearing red boots. During the wedding party she was treated to dog meat. When the mother was summoned she replied to the allegations that she knew nothing about them. Kerstin spat at her

“THE CULTURE DESCRIBED BY BAKHTIN HAD A DIFFERENT ONTOLOGICAL STATUS FROM THAT OF BLÅKULLA: IT EXISTED IN SOME REAL FASHION.”

and said that Satan was sitting on her mother's shoulder in the building where the commission was assembled. She also confessed that she had been renamed in Blåkulla and got the name of Saul. This is one of the most highly detailed episodes of the entire record of the court's proceedings. Kerstin was sentenced to death and beheaded at the execution place in Boteå.

The children are renamed, usually in a ceremony where the Devil takes a drop of blood from them. One boy is renamed "Devil-Per". Other names are "Snake-Neck" and "Devil-Take-Me". A girl may even be given a man's name, as in the case of "Saul". The children also get married in Blåkulla. A young boy from my home village Undrom with the name of Per, for example, is married to a cat, who is even mentioned by name in the protocols. Her name was "Gray" ("Grå") and the cat's owner Karin lived in the neighboring village.²⁰ The girls too get married, but upon the marriage ceremony their husbands are turned into objects – one turns into a log. The girl Annika, eight years, testified that the housewife Margaret milked from Anders in Östpara a barrel of milk – that is more than one hundred liters – and then made cheese from it. The whole thing is laughable in its grotesque horror, but this is from today's perspective. The excesses are comparable to those portrayed in Rabelais. Bakhtin uses the term "grotesque realism" to describe these phenomena. Small insignificant details, such as the testimony of one of the children that a witch counts eggs in Blåkulla, is juxtaposed with the horrible fact that she has intercourse with Satan. We also get a fairly good description of the Devil's appearance in this testimony:

Kerstin cooks sausages, drinks, dances, files at the chains. Takes the hand of Satan and Satan sticks out his tongue, which is hairy as a hairy skin patch. He has horns in his skull.²¹

The Devil is also playing some sort of instrument – with his tail or his rump, instead of with his hands and mouth.

The reader of the protocols also gets a fairly good impression of the dress code in Blåkulla. The colors of the participants' dresses are mentioned. Anna's daughter Kerstin wears a white shift, while the other children have beautiful shifts in bright colors, or striped shifts.

The children in Blåkulla are especially busy reading books. Satan has his own library there, which is also portrayed in accordance with the principle of reversal: the children do not read the catechism or "Our Father", but books full of curses or inverted prayers such as "Our Father, which art not in heaven" – a phenomenon in medieval culture known to us as "parodia sacra." Almost every witness specifies an exact number of books read in Blåkulla: two, three, or perhaps two and a half. Sometimes, the children resume their reading on following visits, and the protocol can run as follows: "he is reading his fourth book [in Blåkulla]". The books are full of curses or "contain all that is

ugly". "The boy Lars in the village Sångå said that he had read five books full of curses on everything on earth except on the magpie." Another child's testimony indicates that both the magpie and the bumblebee are exceptions in that they are not cursed in the books. From the perspective of the contemporary reader, the witnesses would appear to be making fun of the proceedings by the absurdity of their testimonies.

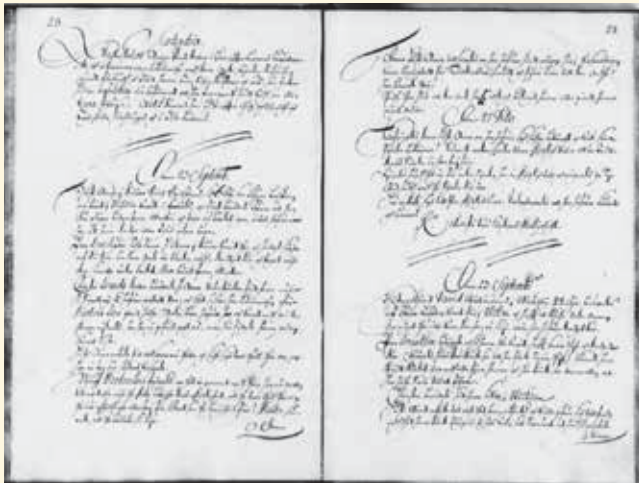
BLÅKULLA FUNCTIONS AS a school for those who are not lyet iterate. Kerstin, who is ten, says that she read five books, first spelled her way through them word by word and then learned how to read prayer curses on her own. One of the charges leveled against the adults is that they assisted with the reading practice in Blåkulla. The 13-year-old boy Per tells the commission about a girl with a gauze-hood who had taught him to read. "Reading" has two senses in the protocols: the reading of books and the recitation of spells, often in order to cure some ailment. Also, writing is demonic in the world of Blåkulla. The Devil takes blood from the children and uses it as ink to write in a book. This is the only writing taking place in Blåkulla; otherwise, the only writing performed is that of the commission in the protocols.

The demonic powers take over one of the most disciplined institutions of the secular and ecclesiastical powers: the schools. After the conclusion of the commission's work, the chairman, Sparre, writes a report to the king where he makes particular mention of the fact that the Devil runs a school in Blåkulla.

It is surprising that the children's stories are taken seriously and written down, their absurdity apparently disregarded. The protocols contain page upon page of the children's nearly identical testimonies, grouped under each accused. The voice of the prosecutor or of the court is not represented. Rather, everything is worded along the lines of "The boy Lars from Sångå, age 10, testifies against the housewife Margaret", followed by the children's stories. These stories are never questioned, and the witnesses are never cross-examined. The only modification of the testimonies made in the protocols is a shift from the first person singular to the third person: an original "I saw" is changed to "She saw". This, together with the precise indication of the place names and dates, makes the protocols particularly frightening. Almost every village known to me from my childhood is mentioned, and a comparison of the names and the villages with the population register from these years shows that the majority of homes in the area were involved.

Some of the children also assign an exact geographical position to Blåkulla, locating it on a field in the village Utnäs belonging to the neighboring parish Styrnäs; but since the world of the carnival – again, according to Bakhtin – is mostly extraterritorial, no one knows for certain where and in what way it exists. Blåkulla is the antithesis of heaven, a church where the Devil either has the role of a priest or of a god. The world

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The sentence against the author's ancestress.

depicted is a sort of hell as described by Bakhtin as a part of the reversed world: “Hell is a banquet and a gay carnival, the crossroads of two cultures”.²² In this case Bakhtin also admits that violence exists in this carnival hell. The very existence of the commission seems to have triggered an intense desire to tell these stories; many of the children connect their first visit to Blåkulla to the arrival of the commission. In the reverse world, the powerless acquire power and create an alternative world which still contains some sort of hierarchy, only with the Devil at the top. This fact is at odds with the carnival world of Bakhtin. Still, the devil's role in Blåkulla is not very prominent; rather, the frenzied activity is mainly carried out by the women.

YET MORE REVERSE behavior can be identified. The carnival world is one ruled by different laws than our own, it is for example possible to be in both places, in Blåkulla and in this world, simultaneously. Time also has a different character and can be prolonged arbitrarily. Children sometimes testified that they were brought to Blåkulla twice during the same night. Descriptions of how the children exit their houses are rare, but it is certainly never through the door; it may be through the window or through an opening in the wall. The witches can transform themselves into whatever they want: one teenager testifies that a woman accused of being a witch had tormented him by sitting on his neck, sometimes in the form of a fly.

Even the greetings are reverted in Blåkulla; for example, the phrase “Woe is me” is used to wish someone a good day or good health. This inversion also applies to such phenomena as the destruction of food (instead of its preservation), the attempts to release the Evil One (instead of chaining him), and the substitution of curses and spells in books for the word of God. According to one witness, one of the accused women used to stand on her head in Blåkulla, and did the same in church. All these practices reverse normal behavior, and are therefore demonic. Also, gender is inverted: a girl may bear a man's name in Blåkulla, and a man can, as mentioned, be made to produce milk. At the same



The execution site in Boteå.

time, most of the descriptions of the women's activities in Blåkulla are devoted to ordinary household chores with which the child witnesses would have been familiar from their own homes.

Explanations and historical context

The key question is how to account for the frenzy of the witch trials. One explanation that has been put forward is that this was a case of mass psychosis, resulting in a ruthless and quite literal “witchhunt”, little different from what sometimes can be encountered today. Another explanation is that the trials were a final manifestation of the “dark” Middle Ages. A third explanation that has been suggested is collective poisoning by ergot in the grain. Ergot is a fungus that produces a toxin that causes dizziness and cramps, often in the form of epidemics. A fourth explanation is that the church used the witch trials to combat the last remnants of a medieval Catholic worldview. Many women still knew the old Catholic prayers by heart and used them in particular situations, for example to treat various diseases. The witch trials did in fact partly revolve around “wise women”, women who would read various prayers from the older, Catholic era as a form of cure, as magic formulas. Ginzburg speaks of a pagan Diana cult still extant from antiquity that was defeated by the civil and ecclesiastical authorities. He also returns to the ergot theory and suggests that ergot was consciously used in the local communities as a drug, producing hallucinations much like those produced by LSD.²³

Let us now return to our line of argument in explaining the phenomenon. Averintsev poses the question: Must folk culture always be associated with laughter, or could it instead be the quality of reversal which is most important? The stories of witchcraft are not funny in themselves, despite the fact that many features may appear so to a modern reader, who naturally views them from an entirely different perspective.

Almost all characteristics of reverse cultures, in the Bakhtinian sense, are present: abundance of food, sex, a night world,

renaming and so on. The seventeenth-century situation, when hierarchical culture comes to dominate Western European civilization, is less well explicated in Bakhtin. In our micro-case we can observe this very process. The popular culture represented by the children and “witches” is taken over by the two authoritarian powers of church and state (the death sentences were always proclaimed both in the name of the state and the church). That, according to Sergei Averintsev, is also what happens with this sort of popular culture, although he does not refer to witchcraft in particular.

Aaron Gurevich, one of Russia’s most famous medieval historians, has also placed the witch trials in this context. He argues that the two forces claiming a monopoly on ideology – the church (the Protestant Reformation or the Catholic Counter-Reformation) and the absolute monarchy – destroyed an entire folk culture:

In witchcraft, the church and the secular power saw the embodiment of all the characteristics of the popular worldview and the corresponding practice, which was fundamentally at odds with the ideological monopoly to which the church and the absolute state of 16th and 17th centuries laid claim.²⁴

And further:

It was no longer a case of balancing one tradition with another – of the previous ambivalent “dialogue-conflict”, only conflict remained.²⁵

There had always existed a practice of accusations and counter-accusations of witchcraft among the people in the villages, but they had been dealt with by the local communities. Violence was a common feature of these communities, and it is also a constituent of “low culture”. In the seventeenth-century situation, these manifestations of folk culture suddenly became an issue for the state apparatus and the central church administration. The “equal” relationship between high and low culture ceased to exist as the authoritarian culture absorbed and annihilated the folk culture.

JUDGING FROM the example of witch trials examined here, folk culture does not seem to have the autonomous status vis-à-vis the official culture that Bakhtin asserts. As mentioned, it is important to remember that the lay judges taken from among the peasantry appear to have been very proactive in the trials, frequently demanding death sentences. However, as Bakhtin often notes in his book on Rabelais, the 17th century is a time of transition, when the popular laughter culture is weakened and the hierarchical culture increases in strength. In our case, the full confrontation between the two cultures results in the destruction of the reverse culture by the hierarchical culture, which employs

“THE TESTIMONIES SEEM TO CONTAIN ALL THE TRAITS ASSOCIATED WITH THE BAKHTINIAN LAUGHTER CULTURE, BUT WITHOUT LAUGHTER AS THEIR MAIN FEATURE.”

a huge number of the inhabitants of the parish for this purpose. Ankarloo describes “the interplay between genuine folklore and official ideology” as characteristic of the time.

Witch trials are thus not primarily a medieval phenomenon, but one connected to the Renaissance and the Reformation. The two classic manuals on witch-hunting were published as late as in 1487 (*Malleus Maleficarum* [The hammer of witches] by Jacob Sprenger and Heinrich Kramer) and 1580 (*De la démonomanie des sorciers* [On the demon-mania of the sorcerers] by Jean Bodin), in other words in the generations before and after Rabelais.

The phenomenon of witch hunting

Let me return to the question raised by Averintsev in relation to the Russian Middle Ages. The protocols do indeed depict a reverse culture, but no one laughs in the world depicted in the trials. The modern reader will find them absurd and grotesque. Laughter and the reverse culture in general do not have the revitalizing or renewing function so important in Bakhtin. Reverse culture may in certain instances be regarded as funny, as it relates to the folk humor of the premodern era, but the use to which it is put in the Boteå witch trials – both by the people themselves and by the commission – is undoubtedly evil. Perhaps it is not a question of laughter at all, but rather of a parodic reverse culture lacking the element of laughter both on behalf of the authorities and the “witches”. Averintsev notes that, in Russian medieval culture, only the Devil laughs. Reading the protocols of the witch trials today, one may very well get the impression that this was a show staged by the Devil – not the fantasy Devil of Blåkulla, but the real one – in order to “make fun” of the poor people in the villages of Ångermanland and the witch commission that recorded all this rubbish and even sentenced people to death by beheading. Drawing on our material, we may conclude that laughter as such is not essential to popular culture, but rather to the reversal in relation to official high culture. The process of reversal always entails a complex relationship to power. It functions at once as a parody of the official culture and as a means of negotiating power with the official culture: the bookish culture, usually important for disciplining people, is subverted into the special school in Blåkulla. The power over sexuality and name-giving is similarly contested.

There seem to be many factors behind the witch trials, but their cultural manifestations demonstrate the qualities of reverse culture: abundance of food, sex, renaming, and dehi-

erarchization. The testimonies seem to contain all the traits associated with the Bakhtinian laughter culture, but without laughter as their main feature. The Russian scholars quoted here – Bakhtin, Averintsev, and Gurevich – as well as our analyses on the basis of their works, make the phenomenon of the witch trials more understandable from a scientific perspective, but the witch trials still remain enigmatic. Why would a local so-

ciety occupied with having enough food to eat for the day want to annihilate itself, and with such fervor?

LET ME SUMMARIZE.

1. The characteristics of reverse culture seem very salient in this minisociety. Bakhtin's framework appears to work very well and have great explanatory power.
2. The relation between the reverse culture and laughter seems to be much more complicated and ambiguous than one would conclude from its presentation in Bakhtin. It can in fact be connected with different kinds of violence, although violence almost never appears in the contexts discussed by Bakhtin.
3. Violence is widespread in both high and low culture. Averintsev calls Bakhtin's relation to laughter "utopian", and I agree with this assessment.
4. There is a complex interrelationship between the high and low cultures, and in this case the secular and ecclesiastical powers usurp and annihilate the folk culture.

And what was the outcome for my ancestress and her son? As may be surmised from the fact that I am able to write this article, it went fairly well. My ancestress denied the charges and was in the end sentenced only to penance, whereas her son was acquitted completely – despite the gruesome allegations leveled against them both. Twelve children had testified against Anna, stating that she had had fornicated with Satan in Blåkulla. Her answer to the court was denial of all rumors of witchcraft:

The housewife Anna was asked if she had heard whether someone in the parish was known for witchcraft or for bringing children to the evil one. She answered: no. ✘

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