

# Possession on the Borders: The “Mal de Morzine” in Nineteenth-Century France\*

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A few Parisian physicians will soon stretch incredulity to the point of claiming that the possessed and witches are nothing but frauds. That is going too far. The majority are sick under the sway of an illusion. (J. MICHELET, *La Sorcière*, 1862)

In 1857, a series of psychic torments and bodily seizures erupted in Morzine, a Savoyard commune of some two thousand migrant masons and seasonal workers in the high country of the Chablais. The crisis began when young and adolescent girls claimed to see the Virgin Mary, but this transitory interaction with the Mother of God had neither the beatific nor the awesome qualities normally associated with contemporary visionary experience. Rather than heavenly smiles and bodily rapture, they instead had alarming convulsive attacks, had no message to relay, and relished blaspheming the Eucharist during their seizures. The women believed themselves possessed as a result of a *mal donné*, a witch’s curse, and they sought to counterattack through magic, magnetism, and pilgrimage, going far from their village world in search of relief. Their errant life began when they felt abandoned by their parish priest: Abbé Pinguet and his minions had willingly exorcised them beginning in 1857, convinced such expedients would rid the community of the “devils,” but the situation changed dramatically in 1860 when France annexed Savoy and the authorities pressured the priest to stop his “superstitious” practices. He retracted both his belief in their possession and his willingness to exorcise, and from that moment the intensity of the *mal* grew rapidly.<sup>1</sup>

The degree of attention lavished on the girls and women—numbering around two hundred at the end of 1861—is evidenced by the physicians whom

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<sup>1</sup> C. L. Maire, *Les possédées de Morzine, 1857–1873* (Lyon, 1981), pp. 44, 63–64.

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the Savoyard authorities and later the French administration summoned to investigate the strange epidemic. A local medical man, who diagnosed the outbreak as demonopathy in 1857, was followed by Doctor Arthaud, a Lyonnese physician, who made the more up-to-date diagnosis of “*hystéro-démonopathie*” around the end of 1860.<sup>2</sup> But the resistance of the *mal* to orderly control and treatment seemed to require a more interventionist policy, and in 1861 Adolphe Constans, a Parisian alienist with court connections and the *inspecteur général des asiles des aliénés*, arrived to repress the furious public displays.<sup>3</sup> Unwilling merely to observe and analyze, Constans used all his considerable power to expel the afflicted from Morzine, to intern some in public hospitals, and to use both a small detachment of infantry and a new post of the gendarmerie to maintain order. By 1863, it appeared that his methods had worked, and most of the Morzinoises, seemingly cured, were allowed to return. However, when the bishop, Monseigneur Magnin, visited the village the following year, the *mal* reappeared in more violent form: some ninety women flew into mad convulsions, attacking and insulting him and pleading desperately for a collective exorcism.<sup>4</sup>

The outbreak brought Constans and the infantry back to the village, causing many of the women to flee through the mountain passes into Switzerland, fearful of being deported like criminals to the New World. But the terrified response of the afflicted was misplaced. After this second outbreak, more subtle measures of “*éducation morale*” were introduced, with the foundation of a library and the institution of a regime of lectures and dances intended to provide some “enlightened” diversion and “soothing” distraction. Through a mixture of subsidy and coercion—which ended with billeted soldiers helping villagers with the harvest—as well as the continued hospitalization of the possessed, Constans and his successors forced the *mal* underground.<sup>5</sup> By 1873, only a few lone sufferers remained, women who experienced their convulsions

<sup>2</sup> J. Arthaud, *Relation d'une hystéro-démonopathie épidémique observée à Morzine* (Lyon, 1862).

<sup>3</sup> See his *Relation sur une épidémie d'hystéro-démonopathie en 1861* (Paris, 1863).

<sup>4</sup> See Charles Lafontaine in *Le Magnétiseur* (May 15, 1864); the articles in *Courrier des Alpes* (May 21, 1864), reprinted in *Le Monde* (May 22, 1864); and the reprinted letter in *L'union médicale* (July 2, 1864).

<sup>5</sup> “Rapport de gendarmerie” (May 30, 1867), Archives Départementales, which remarked: “Parmi les 120 filles de Morzine environ qui sont parties ces jours-ci, pour aller effeuiller les vignes en Suisse, il y a une cinquantaine de malades environ,” a figure which points to the persistence and intensity of the disorder. The “Rapport du Docteur Broc,” one of Constans’s successors, gives a brighter picture on August 12, 1867, Arch. Dép., claiming that the majority had reverted to a simple hysterical state. Although some still went on secret pilgrimages and had crises at home, the seizures no longer occurred in public and never during religious services.

in private ignominy,<sup>6</sup> eking out a meager and marginal existence either in Morzine itself or in neighboring Switzerland.<sup>7</sup>

Such a synoptic account gives only the slightest taste of the events surrounding the *mal*. I limit myself to this brief introductory description because of the narrative sweep already provided by Jacqueline Carroy and Laurence Maire.<sup>8</sup> Their informative and perceptive volumes concentrate on the key male actors—priests, physicians, and administrators—and seek to uncover the different tactics employed to help, control, and transform the women under their supervision. Published in the early 1980s, these works show the mark of Michel Foucault and, to a lesser extent, of Michel de Certeau on historical scholarship, focusing on the impact of discursive strategies, especially medical expertise, in containing and transforming the epidemic. While they both begin by elucidating problems of witchcraft and possession in the local world and seek to uncover its religious roots, they are chiefly concerned with the *mal* as a key case study in the coercive secularization of peasant society, with a particular interest in demonstrating how the diagnosis of hysteria was central to that process.

I intend in this article to question not only the vision of secularization but also the broader conceptual categories of “tradition” and “modernity” that underpin it. Although sympathetic to the plight of the villagers and interested in local religious beliefs, both Carroy and Maire nonetheless tend to see witchcraft and possession as expressions of traditional culture and their manifestation as the last gasp of a dying world. Indeed, Maire goes so far as to liken the *mal* to Luddism, and she sees it as an attempt to restore a lost civilization through archaic rituals.<sup>9</sup> In contrast, I will show how the fears and seizures of the Morzinois were part of a changing and developing peasant cosmology that drew on the dilemmas of nineteenth-century society. I reject the bipolar, static concepts of “tradition” and “modernity” in favor of an account that grapples

<sup>6</sup> “Rapport de gendarmerie,” September 14, 1869, Arch. Dép. The gendarme described two women, one forty-eight years old and the other thirty-seven, who lived alone and in the worst poverty. The first, Joséphte Chauplannaz, still had crises lasting three-quarters of an hour and was instructed by the mayor never to speak of them to anyone.

<sup>7</sup> See the pathetic letter, in misspelled French, of January 4, 1870, written to the prefect by Jeanne Berger. Abandoned by her husband and seeking shelter in Geneva, she wrote asking for the means to get through the winter and to keep her children.

<sup>8</sup> See Jacqueline Carroy, *Le mal de Morzine: De la possession à l'hystérie* (Paris, 1981), and Maire, *Les possédées de Morzine*; other works include A. Baleyrier, *A propos d'un mal mystérieux à Morzine* (audience solennelle de la rentrée du 2 octobre) (Chambéry, 1949); and Dr. Henri Bouchet, *Relation sur l'épidémie de Morzine* (Lyon, 1899).

<sup>9</sup> See Maire, *Les possédées de Morzine*, p. 118.

with collective distress by not dismissing witchcraft and possession as anachronistic relics.<sup>10</sup> I will show how possession in both its linguistic and its bodily dimensions expressed the tension between, on the one hand, the desire for exotic urban affluence and, on the other, guilt over the loss of the village's spiritual, psychological, and economic integrity. Religion and "superstition" were thus hardly a brake on peasant mentalities but, rather, mediated the conflicts between the village and the nation.

In addition to this historiographical reinterpretation, I aim to provide a fundamental critique of the discourse analysis that underpins previous studies of the *mal de Morzine*. Such work shows the women as if gripped in a discursive vice, squeezed between the articulated exigencies and expectations of family, religion, medicine, and the state. What is surprising, given this approach to the problem, is how little energy has been spent on examining the discursive world of the women themselves; occasionally, their statements during their possession crises are recounted and an anthropological gloss is painted on the language of collective distress, with Maire tentatively suggesting a protofeminist bid for emancipation encoded in the actions of the afflicted women. She suggests, without arguing directly, that the women created their own discursive response to authority through witchcraft and possession and that they were ultimately constrained by the more powerful discourses that marginalized and silenced them.

Although the linguistic interpretation provides a powerful account of the *mal*, I will argue that it neglects central features. The *mal* was too emotionally disruptive and above all too physical to be understood fully in these terms, and it is these unstable, sometimes violent, and above all painful dimensions that I intend to underscore. The persistence of possession, and the enduring convulsive experience, meant that sufferers could not articulate their distress; they remained locked in a cultural drama in which the defining power of language was largely absent. I will show instead how the *mal* opens a window onto the unconsciously aggressive fantasies of the women against menfolk who were not "good enough" to rid them of their "devils" and purge the parish of witchcraft. As will be seen, the afflicted not only resisted the demands of husbands

<sup>10</sup> In making this argument, I owe much to a developing revisionist historiography that, by and large, has concentrated on questions of political and social acculturation, as well as on problems of regional and national identity. See, e. g., Caroline Ford, *Creating the Nation in Provincial France* (Princeton, N.J., 1993); P. M. Jones, *The Peasantry in the French Revolution* (Cambridge, 1988); Michel Lagrée, *Cultures en Bretagne, 1850–1950* (Paris, 1994); and the recent synthesis by James R. Lehning, *Peasant and French: Cultural Contact in Rural France during the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, 1995). I depart, however, from this trend with my special interest in the parallel, but related, sphere of subjective and collective meaning and experience, which the *mal* and possession crises reveal.

and fathers but also condemned doctors for their inadequacy and cursed priests for having spiritual powers too puny to exorcise the *mal*.<sup>11</sup> Nonetheless, while the *mal* enabled them to renounce patriarchal authority temporarily, it did not offer a means of resolving village tensions; indeed, it only served to strengthen the prestige and authority of outsiders intervening in their affairs.

This study will begin by examining the *mal* in its village context, including the impact of changing social conditions and French annexation. It will continue by investigating the fantasies of fear, evil, remorse, and longing voiced by the “devils,” analyzing why both the witches and the “devils” were male, and showing how unstable gender relations were at the heart of the psychological drama. The final section will examine why, emulating the menfolk who emigrated to find work, the afflicted left the village in search of exorcists and magnetizers to cure them. This quest for men more powerful than those at home, I will argue, left the village in disarray and ultimately, if unwittingly, opened the door to the manipulations of Constans and the French state. Both Constans and the women identified some of the same problems, but his authoritarian solutions were rarely to their liking. While such measures appeased the village and “integrated” Morzine into the French nation, they did not alleviate the psychic distress or bodily misery.

## RELIGION AND THE VILLAGE COMMUNITY

The commune of Morzine sits in the high country of the southern Chablais in the far corner of the Aulph valley, separated from Switzerland by only a single mountain. Difficult of access, it sits perched on the banks of the Dranse and at the time included several dispersed hamlets. Like many villages in Savoy, Morzine depended on emigration to sustain its expanding but impoverished population. From the eighteenth century, when subsistence on the land became increasingly difficult, Savoy became famous for its migrant workers—peddlers, chimney sweeps, masons, carpenters, and later factory workers.<sup>12</sup> By the time of the *mal*, the stream of emigrants had become a flood, with the men and boys of Morzine leaving for Geneva and Lausanne to work in the building trades. A

<sup>11</sup> Constans describes in *Relation*, p. 53, how neither medical intervention was of any use and how priests in particular were singled out for not being “assez saints pour avoir action sur les démons.” When the bishop arrived, the women called him a “Loup d’Evêque” who did not have “le pouvoir de guérir la fille, non il ne peut débarrasser la fille du diable.” See “Rapport du sous-Préfet au Préfet sur les événements qui se sont passés le 30 avril et le 1er mai,” Arch. Dép. The prefect himself was struck by one of the raging women who had no respect for his authority; see Rapport de l’Abbé Chamoux à l’Evêque, 1866, Archives Diocésaines.

<sup>12</sup> See André Palluel-Guillard et al., *La Savoie de la Révolution à nos jours, XIXe–XX siècle* (Rennes, 1986), pp. 150–54.

census of 1854 gave Morzine a population of 2,284 inhabitants; the total men absent from the village varied between 400 and 500, with the majority only returning briefly around the Christmas holidays. The peak of this cycle (and the maximum size of the village) occurred around the time of the outbreak of the *mal*. Later in the 1860s the population began to decline, evidence that the cycle of leaving and returning was finally broken by the decision to settle elsewhere permanently.<sup>13</sup>

The community subsisted on a meager mountain agriculture that produced barley-corn, oats, and potatoes. Scarce resources were spent on bread, which increased the burden of debt and forced ever more men onto the road to Switzerland. Otherwise, the community depended on livestock, the key resource that, when threatened by illness, unleashed the witchcraft fears that haunted the village. The tending of animals exacted a heavy burden, as villagers went up to chalets, first in April to feed the animals on the spring grass, and then again in June during the cheese making. In the valley, however, June sowing and summer cultivating had to continue. The loss of half of the most active men meant that the women were obliged to do more and more of these tasks alone, where once a strict gender complementarity had ruled work and household relations.

The end to this fragile equilibrium brought a severe change in psychological and social relations. For Morzine, like other villages in the Chablais, was made up of large patriarchal clans that encouraged endogamous unions; men who contravened custom by marrying “outside” were regarded with bitterness by the young women of the parish, and the “foreign” bride was often treated with hostility.<sup>14</sup> The emphasis on “marrying in” underscored the priority given to local affiliation in marital unions that fostered the perception that all goodness should be contained within the parish and the mountains that encircled it. The Morzinois lived as a group, garnering their meager livelihood from managed communal property, supplying wood, shelter, and even scarce labor for every member of the village.

Emigration thus strained this society to the limit, breaking the strict division between “us” and “them” that had hitherto structured the villagers’ social and psychic worlds. As fathers and brothers were rarely present to impose discipline, Morzine’s traditions were maintained by women and children, whose continued life in the village came to symbolize the ideal of domesticated rootedness, despite the growing hardships this life demanded. While “free” from their menfolk, they were also overworked and increasingly insecure. The loss of so many of the active men meant that young women were unable to establish

<sup>13</sup> Maire, *Les possédées de Morzine* (n. 1 above), p. 28.

<sup>14</sup> See A. Van Gennepe, “Les fiançailles et le mariage en Savoie,” in *La Savoie, vue par les écrivains et les artistes*, ed. A. Van Gennepe (Paris, n.d.), pp. 343–80.

their own *foyers* and were obliged instead to labor in their relations' households to survive. Women became simultaneously more central to the village community and increasingly constrained by its demands, while men were key in negotiating external challenges but growing marginal to life inside Morzine.

The *mal* reversed all these verities to the point of caricature. As I will show, it was above all these insecure, often unmarried women who left the village in search of a cure; and, far from being a refuge from the sinful world, Morzine itself became the site of danger. Evidence of this belief could be dramatic: one girl carried away from Morzine told her bearer she would be able to walk the minute they came to Montriond (an adjacent commune), and she promptly did so, going on through the mountain passes into Geneva to find relief from a famous magnetizer.<sup>15</sup> Neighbors too began to shun the village when in 1864 the inhabitants of Montriond, who usually made an annual procession with their livestock to receive communal blessing in the church, "did an about turn at the edge of their territory, not daring to put their feet onto the lands of Morzine."<sup>16</sup>

The *mal* took the form it did because of the importance of religion in shaping collective identity. An episcopal enquiry of 1845 had noted the fervor and the devotional regularity of the Morzinois and, more generally, of the parishes of the high mountains. Investigators pointed to the frequency of confession and communion, even among men, the fervor of prayer, the observance of feast days, the love of the Holy Sacrament and the Blessed Virgin, as well as enthusiastic participation in religious confraternities, especially those of the Rosary and the Eucharist.<sup>17</sup> While these two organizations had roots in the Counter-Reformation and were headed by the clergy, the Morzinois were even more devoted to the Confraternity of St. Esprit, the village's oldest penitent organization with early medieval roots and one of the oldest surviving institutions of its kind in Savoy. The penitents believed in its prophylactic powers and sought the aid of priests to ring bells, bless or exorcise farms and stables, and protect them against climatic disaster. Moreover, the confraternity organized funeral meals and distributed alms, acting as a focus for village sociability. In sum, it

<sup>15</sup> Constans (n. 3 above), p. 60.

<sup>16</sup> "Rapports de gendarmerie," May 7 and 9, 1864, Arch. Dép.

<sup>17</sup> Roger Devos, "Quelques aspects de la vie religieuse dans le diocèse d'Annecy au milieu du XIXe siècle (d'après une enquête de Mgr Rendu)," *Cahiers d'histoire* (1966), pp. 49–83. After the Revolution, the clergy saw Haute Savoie as once again in the front line, with the region resisting not only Protestantism but also the seductions of revolutionary doctrine. The diocese of Annecy and Geneva had priests back in every parish church by 1820 and by midcentury had added another 1500 to its ranks; see Paul Guichonnet, "Du concordat à l'annexion (1802–1860)," in *Genève-Annecy: Histoire du diocèse*, ed. Henri Baud (Paris: 1985), pp. 191–222; and Palluel-Guillard et al., pp. 184–201. For more on the vicissitudes of the Savoyard church, see the hagiography by Abbé F.-M. Guillermin, *Vie de Mgr. Louis Rendu, Evêque d'Annecy* (Paris, 1867).

managed the supernatural—especially the highly valued cult of the dead—and the social life of the parish in a manner that satisfied the religious requirements of the laity.<sup>18</sup>

The religious life of the Morzinois was thus made up of two intermingling strands. One, represented by the Confraternity of St. Esprit, was the religion of popular ritual, which included devotion to local saints, talismans, and village processions. The other was shaped by Counter-Reformation missionaries, by the trauma of Protestant conversion and Catholic reconquest. Savoy in general and the Chablais in particular was the *pays par excellence* of St. François de Sales' evangelism, securing Italy from contamination and building a fortress of Catholic power against Calvinist Geneva.<sup>19</sup> This legacy offered the Morzinois a "religion of fear,"<sup>20</sup> an obsession with hellfire and damnation, sin and guilt. Local nineteenth-century clerical reformers bemoaned the continuation of these associations by decrying the stagnant and unyielding attitudes of the parish clergy, with one describing their rigorism as "gloomy, wearying, scrupulous, uneasy,"<sup>21</sup> a type of Catholic piety that mirrored the Protestant severity on the other side of the mountains. Such attitudes often engendered anticlericalism, for the priests controlled the sacraments, monitored penitence through confession, and hence determined who could take the Eucharist.<sup>22</sup> They were able to withhold or to offer religious consolation and, as I will show, it was often priestly harshness, intransigence, or inadequacy that would most enrage the Morzinoises during their crises.

An equally important element of religious sensibility was the belief in magic and sorcery. For, while lamentation over the entrenched "superstitions" of the rural poor was a leitmotif of medical, ethnographic, and sometimes clerical writing in many regions of France,<sup>23</sup> the Chablais seemed particularly susceptible because it bordered on the Vaud, the region that produced the earliest

<sup>18</sup> The centrality of the confraternity is described by A. Van Gennepe, *En Savoie, du berceau à la tombe* (Paris, 1916), pp. 198–217.

<sup>19</sup> Henri Baud, "Le défi protestant et les débuts de la contre-réforme (1536–1622)," in Baud, ed., pp. 98–128. For the seventeenth-century account of this (re)conversion, see P. Charles de Genève, *Les trophées sacrés ou missions des capucins en Savoie* (Lausanne, 1976).

<sup>20</sup> Jean Delumeau, *Sin and Fear: The Emergence of a Western Guilt Culture, 13th–18th Centuries*, trans. Eric Nicholson (New York, 1990), pt. 3.

<sup>21</sup> Palluel-Guillard et al., p. 190.

<sup>22</sup> For more on the rigorism of the early nineteenth-century confessional, see Philippe Boutry, *Prêtres et paroisses au pays du Curé d'Ars*, 3d ed. (Paris, 1986), pp. 405–8.

<sup>23</sup> See Judith Devlin, *The Superstitious Mind: French Peasants and the Supernatural in the Nineteenth Century* (New Haven, Conn., 1987), for an overview of peasant belief and the way "orthodox" Christianity was constantly threatened by the vitality of more "popular" conceptions.



mythology of witchcraft in the fourteenth century.<sup>24</sup> As will be seen, in their efforts to combat the *mal* the Morzinois seemed all too willing to substantiate a picture of atavistic resurgence,<sup>25</sup> and for this reason they attracted the disgusted criticism of a Parisian like Constans.

### THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE MAL: Witchcraft and Possession

It was against this background that the *mal* erupted, intensifying until it attracted the full-scale attention of the state. There was, however, no straightforward evolution, and untangling the various accounts of cause and effect and separating the narratives of witchcraft and possession is often impossible. It is even difficult to know when the *mal* started. One crucial event, however, occurred in the spring of 1857, when Abbé Favre, the *vicaire* of the parish under Pinguet's direction, took his young female parishioners on retreat to prepare them for their first communion. Favre seemed to embody the unyielding religion that so worried clerical reformers. He talked often of Satan, believed in black magic and evil spirits,<sup>26</sup> and terrorized the girls with his depiction of the treasonous Judas.<sup>27</sup> Reports of him thus hinted at a priest who exhorted, bored, and terrified by turns.

He paid special attention to one girl, Peronne T., who became central to subsequent events. She began to have spasmodic convulsions during his lessons and, although known to be overjoyed at the prospect of her first communion, remarked that Favre had vexed and wearied her to distraction.<sup>28</sup> Later, with another ten-year-old, she claimed to have had a letter from the Mother of God. Letters that came into the village from the outside world, properly

<sup>24</sup> For this dating, particularly in relation to the Sabbath, see Carlo Ginsburg, "Deciphering the Witches' Sabbath," in *Early Modern European Witchcraft: Centres and Peripheries*, ed. B. Ankerloo and G. Henningsen (Oxford, 1990), p. 122. See also E. William Monter, *Witchcraft in France and Switzerland: The Borderlands during the Reformation* (Ithaca, N. Y., 1976), esp. chap. 1; and the older works of Jean Guiraud, *Histoire de l'inquisition au Moyen Age* (Paris, 1914), pp. 235–60; Jean Marx, *L'inquisition en Dauphiné: Etude sur le développement et la répression de l'hérésie et la sorcellerie du XIVe siècle au début du règne de François Ier* (Paris, 1914); and A. Van Gennep, *Le Folklore des Hautes-Alpes: Etude descriptive et comparée de psychologie populaire* (Paris, 1948), 2: 72–85.

<sup>25</sup> Van Gennep sought to prove the historical and geographical links in *Incantations médico-magiques en Savoie* (Annecy, n.d.), p. 15.

<sup>26</sup> See the "Rapport de l'Abbé Vallentien . . . L'Evêque d'Annecy, Mgr. Magnin," January 20, 1869, Arch. Dioc.

<sup>27</sup> "Rapport de l'Abbé Chamoux," 1866, Arch. Dioc.

<sup>28</sup> See "Rapport de l'Abbé Vallentien"; the words she reportedly used were "Cet abbé me fatigue."

stamped and delivered, were central events in this tightly woven community, evidence of the importance of the recipients: "One sees these girls raise their hands, as if to receive letters, break the seal, then read with a mixture of groans, tears, smiles, or satisfaction according to whether what they read is happy or sad. At that moment, they fall to the ground and foam [at the mouth] in an alarming fashion. The slightest idea of church prayer sends them into frightful contortions."<sup>29</sup> From the outset their physical and psychic distress was disruptive, as the pair fell into convulsions, uttered prophecies—correctly predicting, for example, who else would fall prey to the *mal*—and surrendered to the male "devils" inside them. The reasons adduced for Peronne T.'s susceptibility were her infatuation with the table turning and spirit rapping so popular in the 1840s and 1850s<sup>30</sup> and her traumatic witnessing of the near-drowning of a young girl in March 1857.<sup>31</sup> Nor was the idea of demonic influence particularly foreign: a young girl from the nearby parish of Essert-Mornand had fallen into convulsions a few years earlier and was taken to Besançon to be exorcised.<sup>32</sup>

This account of the early stages of the *mal* is remarkable for the way the description of Marian encounter is so quickly dismissed in favor of possession. Indeed, there were enough similarities between Morzine and villages where visionaries had apparitions of the Virgin to suggest that the *mal* might have developed differently. A decade earlier, two young shepherds in the neighboring mountain country of the Dauphiné saw the Virgin Mary at La Salette; Bernadette Soubirous had her visions in 1858 in the Pyrenees, and over a decade later the girls of Marpingen in the Saarland had a similar experience.<sup>33</sup> Morzine shared with these other examples many geographical and sociological features. Three cases occurred in poor, overpopulated upland areas; all four

<sup>29</sup> On voit ces filles lever les mains, comme pour recevoir des lettres, on les voit rompre le cachet, puis lire avec un mélange de gémissements, de pleurs, de ris, de satisfaction selon que ce qu'elles lisent est heureux ou malheureux. Dans le moment actuel, elles tombent par terre et écumant d'une manière alarmante. La moindre idée de prière de l'Eglise les jette dans les contorsions affreuses. Lettre de Abbé Pinguet à l'Evêque (signed also by Favre et Sinvel, vicaires), May 22, 1857, Arch. Dioc.

<sup>30</sup> See Thomas A. Kselman, *Death and the Afterlife in Modern France* (Princeton, N.J., 1993), pp. 143–62; and Nicole Edelman, *Voyantes, guérisseuses et visionnaires en France (1785–1914)* (Paris, 1995), esp. pp. 108–58. It is important to note that Allan Kardec, one of the leading lights of spiritism, not only visited Morzine during the outbreak but also wrote about it as an example of the veracity of his doctrines.

<sup>31</sup> Constans (n. 3 above), p. 23. Indeed, throughout the *mal* women threw themselves into the Dranse in some reliving of this traumatic, suicidal experience.

<sup>32</sup> "Rapport de L'abbé Chamoux," 1866, Arch. Dioc.

<sup>33</sup> See J. Stern, ed., *La Salette, Documents authentiques*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1980–84); R. Laurentin, ed., *Lourdes: Dossier des documents authentiques* (Paris, 1958), esp. vol. 1; and David Blackburn, *Marpingen: Apparitions of the Virgin Mary in Bismarckian Germany* (Oxford, 1993).

happened on the borderlands and involved children of similar ages; and Marpingen and Morzine shared a crisis of out-migration that was the most salient feature of their village communities.<sup>34</sup> All were deeply marked by local traditions of Marian piety, increasingly overlaid in midcentury by the Church-sponsored variety. The poor worshipped the Mother of God in local sanctuaries, treasuring miraculous images discovered by their early modern forebears; at the same time, they were increasingly tutored in the dogma of the Immaculate Conception promulgated in 1854 and were part of a movement to inculcate a special love of the Virgin as a model for daughterly purity and motherly virtue.<sup>35</sup>

But for all these similarities and, above all, a shared religious culture that believed in supernatural intervention, the priests and villagers of Morzine were quickly able to distinguish possession from Marian apparition by reference to long-standing religious and folkloric traditions. Unlike the visionaries of La Salette, Lourdes, and Marpingen, the girls of Morzine saw no “lady in white”; not only was there no ravishing sighting, but in addition the Virgin did not appear in her accustomed haunts, on the mountain, in a grotto, or in the forest away from the parish church. Moreover, the visionaries suffered no immediate ill effects from her appearance; Bernadette Soubirous was even temporarily relieved of her many ailments. Nothing could be more different in the case of Morzine. From the outset, the girls experienced debilitating seizures; their prophecies relayed no general mission; and the Virgin was quickly replaced by a cast of male characters variously described as “devils,” “demons,” and the “damned.” Finally, “mischievous” experimentation with the spirit world, as well as the recent evidence of traumatic events, all suggested the influence of evil rather than of good.

For example, Peronne T.’s affliction was contagious, her malady spreading to older women. Moreover, the children astonished the villagers by their frightening acrobatic feats of contortion and physical prowess.<sup>36</sup> Other events confirmed the presence of evil, and villagers remembered that, even before 1857, there had been uncanny happenings—above all, the death of livestock. Animal deaths were often seen as an early and ominous indication of witchcraft, and so seriously did Constans later take this “superstitious” belief that he insisted

<sup>34</sup> Blackburn, *Marpingen*, esp. chap. 2; Lourdes also had a similar crisis, but one involving more permanent emigration to South America; see Jean-François Soulet, *Les Pyrénées au XIXe siècle* (Toulouse, 1987), 2:90–91.

<sup>35</sup> On the cult of the Virgin in the nineteenth century, see G. Miegge, *The Virgin Mary: The Roman Catholic Marian Doctrine* (London, 1955), pp. 107–33; Marina Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and Cult of the Virgin Mary* (London, 1976), pp. 236–54; for the images of Mary, see *L’image de piété en France, 1814–1914* (Paris, 1984), pp. 97–99.

<sup>36</sup> Constans, pp. 28–29.

on the need for post mortems to “prove” to the villagers that the animals’ demise resulted from nothing more than the unhygienic and overcrowded state of the stables.<sup>37</sup> Moreover, throughout the many years of the *mal*, animals, like their human masters, seemed possessed, with horses refusing to go where they were bidden and calves acting like goats, jumping on mountain rocks and precipices.<sup>38</sup>

Whatever the cause of the *mal*, the normally pious, docile, and hardworking dispositions of the affected girls and women evaporated under its influence. Responsibility for their behavior was firmly placed on the “devils” (*les démons*)—on rarer occasions referred to as the “damned” (*les damnés*)—who took over their bodies, spoke their words, and commanded their actions. These two descriptive terms give some clue as to the spiritual universe these women inhabited. They seemed unconcerned with the theological distinction between, on the one hand, the “devils,” fallen angels from the original revolt against God and, on the other, the “damned,” souls who returned from hell to torment the living. They used both categories, seeming to mix them and their characteristics interchangeably.

Sometimes their affliction resembled the activities of “devils,” demonstrating such classic symptoms of possession as physical contortions and an ability to talk in foreign tongues. Although never named,<sup>39</sup> the “devils” never used the highly localized *patois*, speaking instead in French and German, a polyglot capacity that reflected the reality of life in the borderlands. They spoke through the possessed women in Latin, the language both of exorcists and of the devil, who could invert word order and mock the priests. The German no doubt came from forays into Switzerland, while smatterings of Latin came from sermons and exorcisms. The use of “good” French was perhaps the most suggestive, since it was first the language of revolutionary liberation but was increasingly also being appropriated by forces of occupation and repression.<sup>40</sup>

At the same time, these “devils” bore a more than passing resemblance to the errant souls from purgatory who, throughout French peasant culture, played on the feelings of the living by returning from their netherworld to plead

<sup>37</sup> Letter from Constans to the prefect, July 29, 1864, Arch. Dép.

<sup>38</sup> “Lettre du Brigade de Morzine de la Gendarmerie Impériale au Chef d’escadron de la Gendarmerie de la Haute-Savoie,” July 29, 1865, Arch. Dép.

<sup>39</sup> Unfortunately, it is uncertain if they were anonymous or if observers simply failed to record their names.

<sup>40</sup> Many authors mention the different languages spoken, but few as thoroughly as Constans, pp. 88–96; while at other intervals he points to the ignorance of the villagers, in this instance he is obliged to acknowledge that lessons were taught in French and that all children spoke the language fluently from seven or eight years of age. There were also a few words in Arabic, as well as a devil who spoke with an Auvergnat accent.

for masses and indulgences to speed their way to heaven.<sup>41</sup> Such requests could be made with courtesy, but others pressed their cases menacingly, noisily haunting the living until they were satisfied.<sup>42</sup> In nearby Languedoc, girls and young women were frequently the targets of such visits,<sup>43</sup> and when Bernadette Soubirous first saw her vision, local women were convinced that she was receiving a visit from a recently deceased woman.<sup>44</sup> Nor was this the only way that beings from the other world visited their erstwhile companions. As the example of Peronne T. demonstrated, the girls and women of Morzine participated in the vogue for table turning and spirit rapping and were no strangers to the disruptive demands of the spirit world.

Although these “devils” had little individuality, many had a generic identity as semidomesticated wanderers or as foreigners not belonging to the community. One hunter, who spoke through a possessed girl, described himself as a man who detested the French and cursed the priests as hypocrites who would soon join him in hell. There was no remorse for bad behavior, only a celebration of blood lust: “A hunter walks ahead with the sound of the horn and the barking of the dogs,” with a full game bag, liquor, white bread, and meat.<sup>45</sup> Above all, he praised the pleasure of living in the body of the woman, urging her to the same wildness, which she acted out by imitating the barking dog and the sounds of the ass, horse, bull, pig, and lamb—virtually the entire menagerie of Savoyard culture.<sup>46</sup> Others also came from the semidomesticated world: one was a shepherd,<sup>47</sup> a type of traveler seen as having a special knowledge of stars, moon, and sun and who possessed a talent for healing. There is some evidence to suggest that a group of Swiss shepherds regularly appeared in the region to practice their medicinal arts and that these men combined an exotic, foreign, and Protestant presence with magical practice.<sup>48</sup> A third was a woodsman, whose way of life also combined domestic and wild features, as he scratched a living from the forest by selling wood, tending herds for families too poor to rent pasturage, and making charcoal. One girl insisted that this

<sup>41</sup> Kselman (n. 30 above), pp. 111–24.

<sup>42</sup> See Charles Joisten, “Les êtres fantastiques dans le folklore de l’Ariège,” *Via Domitia* 9 (1962): 25–48.

<sup>43</sup> For the continuation of such traditions, see Jean-Pierre Pinies, *Figures de la sorcellerie languedocienne* (Paris, 1983), esp. pp. 205–41.

<sup>44</sup> Laurentin, ed. (n. 33 above), 1: 143–45, 153–54.

<sup>45</sup> “Rapport de gendarmerie,” June 13, 1864 (a statement taken by Dr. Kuhn, Constans’s successor, in the gendarmes’ presence), Arch. Dép.

<sup>46</sup> For similar kinds of eruptions, see Lyndal Roper, *Oedipus and the Devil: Witchcraft, Sexuality and Religion in Early Modern Europe* (London, 1994), pp. 190–91.

<sup>47</sup> “Lettre de l’Abbé Blandin, vicaire . . . Morzine,” September 1, 1864, Arch. Dioc.

<sup>48</sup> Devos (n. 17 above), p. 78.

devil had mutilated her with his axe.<sup>49</sup> All three of these characters seemed tied to a marginal if not semilegal existence and to occupations that were increasingly under threat. The hunter was most likely a poacher, using the forest to kill game that belonged to others; shepherds were known to bring herds across the frontier illegally to escape taxes; and woodsmen often eked out an illicit living in forests that were no longer communal property but increasingly owned and managed by rich proprietors.<sup>50</sup>

While these “devils” celebrated their deeds, others expressed remorse for sins that had condemned them to hell, showing an astonishing degree of conformity to the rigors of Counter-Reformation teaching. Again, on the whole these sinners were not from Morzine, but strangers or outsiders. One devil from Abondance (a neighboring commune) was licked by eternal flames for having “eaten meat on Friday.”<sup>51</sup> One woman who had eight “devils” gave voice to a Frenchman who died at fifty-two: “I missed mass, disobeyed my parents, went to the *veillée*, played cards with libertines, blasphemed, said bad things about religion and priests. . . . I am justly damned.”<sup>52</sup> This catalog of misbehavior in fact summed up well how the women behaved during their winter gatherings. Any good Catholic might regret such misconduct, but in Morzine such remorse was linked to the evils of bewitchment and an intense fear of hell. The two kinds of devils showed different relationships to sin, the former reveling in transgression, the latter tormented by commission of the slightest infraction against religious orthodoxy.

Among the many subversive activities of the “devils” were their rejection of local food, described by Constans as miserable bread, “potatoes of bad quality; salted and smoked meat, often contaminated; the residues of milk; and a bad cheese, hard and heavy, called *tomme*.”<sup>53</sup> Instead, they demanded crippling expensive alternatives associated with luxurious city life, such as sugared black coffee and chocolates. They sat at *veillées*—seen, in this instance, as subversive because they encouraged individuals to impoverish their families by drinking—and showed immorality by playing cards.<sup>54</sup> Their demands later became so extreme that they wanted the same food at home that they had eaten at government expense when in hospital,<sup>55</sup> and, if their families protested, the

<sup>49</sup> Constans (n. 3 above), pp. 26–27.

<sup>50</sup> For the story of these struggles in the Pyrenees, see Peter Sahlins, *Forest Rites: The War of the Demoiselles in Nineteenth-Century France* (Cambridge, Mass., 1994).

<sup>51</sup> C. Chiara, *Les Diables en Morzine ou les nouvelles possédées* (Lyon, 1861), p. 14.

<sup>52</sup> “Lettre de l’Abbé Blandin, vicaire à Morzine,” September 1, 1864, Arch. Dioc.

<sup>53</sup> Constans, p. 5.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 48–50.

<sup>55</sup> The distress of the families is evident in “Rapport de gendarmerie,” October 15, 1863, and again in “Rapport de gendarmerie,” January 15, 1867, Arch. Dép.

convulsions began again, always preceded by an epigastric crisis in which they felt as if they would explode.

As in many village cultures, food and identity were symbolically linked. Survival in overpopulated villages depended on the willingness to sell the best foodstuffs for cash and to keep appetites constantly in check. Again, the *mal* inverted this pattern when the women demanded prohibited alternatives. In so doing, they subverted and mocked; they insisted on eau-de-vie, the classic gift of the bridegroom to the father of the bride and a symbol of masculine exchange. The other foodstuffs were the preserve of the rich and products of the city, and by demanding them they linked themselves with the sinful life of the urban world beyond the mountains.

Such behavior requires interpretation, although making sense of the language and bodily experience of these suffering women takes us beyond conventional historical analysis. Anthropologists like Janice Boddy who have worked on the Zar cult in the Sudan have analyzed similar phenomena in terms of a refined version of discourse analysis.<sup>56</sup> Women's devilish ejaculations are described as an "anti-language" that expressed disquiet and longing, inverting and reassessing daily life from the perspective of the underprivileged. She argues that the unique power of an "anti-language" derives from its "muted" qualities, for subversive feelings and ideas are presented in an idiom of complete irresponsibility: after each outburst, the women distance themselves from their statements and behavior and are able to return to normal life while creatively forging new identities of self and community.

It is tempting to apply a similar analysis to the possessed women of Morzine and to see them as expressing a subversive discourse that destabilized the hegemonic ones that constrained them. The Morzinoises were able to transgress the moral and gender order of their community without sanction as they blasphemed, refused to work, and acted like the wildest of men. Thus, the hunter barked, whinnied, and snorted so that all who knew the woman were convinced that the "devil," not she, was responsible. Moreover, such an "anti-language" would have permitted them to confront the world beyond the mountains, since the devils were foreigners and strangers who relativized the women's position at home. They commented unabashedly on the women's torments and desires by acting out their lazy, brutish, repentant, or self-flagellating fantasies. In this kind of interpretation, the "devils'" commentary on village life created a poetics of transgression and relativity.<sup>57</sup> The women could be seen as mythical "*bri-*

<sup>56</sup> See her impressive *Wombs and Alien Spirits: Women, Men, and the Zar Cult in Northern Sudan* (Madison, Wis., 1989), esp. pp. 156–59.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 301–9, as well as Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (London, 1986).

*coleurs*”<sup>58</sup> who used the debris of historical experience, religious training, and storytelling to construct their demon world. Wandering Jews, the damned burning in hell, the life and times of hunters and journeyers—all would have enabled the possessed to remake themselves and recast village morality.

This seductive approach to the understanding of the possession crisis of Morzine, however, falls dangerously short of grasping the negative, disruptive, and physically violent features of the *mal*. While the theory of an “anti-language” sheds light on the creative and imaginative possibilities of such phenomena—particularly in regard to relativizing Morzine to the world outside—it denies the painful elements that sustained the *mal* for so long. For the rebellion took on a physically compulsive form that was as much self-destructive as it was subversive. Visitors commented on the women’s wide range of physical symptoms, the seizures, the feelings of suffocation, and the stomach disorders; other sufferers hurt themselves when their “devils” mutilated them with axes, or when they beat themselves against the furniture; still others screamed in agony when the “demons” inside them made them tremble convulsively.<sup>59</sup>

Moreover, the possession crisis unleashed a hatred of men that had both liberating and self-defeating consequences. Wives refused to sleep with husbands, and daughters reveled in their willingness to challenge patriarchal directives. For example, during a *veillée*, one girl reportedly mocked her friend for receiving a paternal beating, remarking, “You are really stupid; if my father had done as much to me, I would have killed him.”<sup>60</sup> Such understandable gestures of defiance, however, could be accompanied by more destructive behavior. Repeatedly the possessed women sought to prove how ineffective their menfolk were by parading their “devils” as their new masters, thereby diminishing men who were already emasculated by economic pressures and emigration. Moreover, the *mal* brought families to the brink of destruction. Fathers had to search for cures among doctors in Geneva and Lausanne, among the Capuchin missionaries at St. Maurice-en-Valais, and even as far away as Einsiedeln in Switzerland.<sup>61</sup> These journeys involved tremendous outlays of money, which this impoverished community could ill afford.

As will be seen, these expedients gave the possessed a brief vacation, but they did little to remedy the women’s grievances or to restore a sense of gender complementarity. Nor were fathers and husbands the only ones to be mocked; all local men of authority and influence were swept aside and deemed “not good enough.” Abbé Favre and his ineffectual exorcisms were derided. Other

<sup>58</sup> See Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (Chicago, 1966), pp. 21–22.

<sup>59</sup> Constans (n. 3 above), p. 52.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 49.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 27–28.



men with sounder motives and more power like the bishop were spat on and defiled. Finally, the few able-bodied men who did not leave the community in the months of migration were, as will be seen, accused of witchcraft. For several years, civilized interaction among the villagers ended, and the lack of local solutions left open the possibility of more authoritarian ones devised by outsiders like Constans.

Perhaps nowhere was the breakdown in village solidarity more evident than during the accusations of witchcraft. In theory, witchcraft and possession are distinct phenomena. Witchcraft implies a voluntary pact with evil and the spread of misfortune through spells and curses; possession, in contrast, presents a passive and victimized subject into whom the demons enter.<sup>62</sup> The former phenomenon rests on the knowledge and active perpetration of sin, while the latter disengages the moral responsibility of the subject. The happenings in Morzine obscured such distinctions, for the villagers believed that all their misfortunes, including the susceptibility of the women to possession, resulted from the evil designs of a witch who had ensnared the entire parish. Witchcraft and possession were thus linked in Morzine through territory,<sup>63</sup> with cracks of vulnerability appearing everywhere in the parish in a variety of forms: animals died, accidents occurred, and girls became possessed, with the last only one of the many plagues brought by the witch's great power.

After the early crisis initiated by the communion lessons, the *mal* spread when village women accused witches—often unnamed—of evil intent. Claudine G. said that one of the witches prowled around her house without her being able to see or hear him;<sup>64</sup> Marie Ch. knew a sorcerer had bewitched her by the way he caught her eye;<sup>65</sup> Françoise B. lapsed into convulsions when an unknown man spied on her and her animals in the stable and then transformed himself into a bird.<sup>66</sup> A witch made Suzanne B. eat his bread, forcing her to

<sup>62</sup> In practice, however, possession was more than this brief definition can convey; it was a highly complex social performance and psychological state, and in famous examples could destabilize social values and gender roles. For the classic example, see the documents presented by Michel de Certeau, *La Possession de Loudon* (Paris, 1990); for the dynamics of power involved in the recording and interpretation of the language of possession, see Michel de Certeau, *L'écriture de l'histoire* (Paris, 1975), pp. 250–73.

<sup>63</sup> See Jeanne Favret-Saada, *Deadly Words: Witchcraft in the Bocage*, trans. Catherine Cullen (Cambridge, 1980), p. 196. Favret-Saada shows how witchcraft belief implied a vision of the subject without Cartesian dualism, an idea of the self that made no distinctions between mind and body, progeny and property, the last category encompassing both animals and territory. She speaks only of familial domains, while Morzine showed how an entire parish might be contaminated.

<sup>64</sup> Arthaud, *Relation d'une hystéro-démonopathie* (n. 2 above), p. 24.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 28.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29.

ingest his evil influence, while a different Françoise B. drank a glass of wine in the company of a witch and claimed to be vomiting it up a year later.<sup>67</sup> The tales seem to rework religious mythology and ritual: sharing bread was not a means of spiritual communion, but the ingestion of evil; wine was not the blood of redemption, but a poison that could never be ejected. The woman who worked in the stable—suggestive of the warmth of the manger—was spied on in a voyeuristic fashion by a bird-man not at all like the dove of the holy spirit. What is interesting here is how closely tied to the liturgy the witches' actions were; like the “demons” who missed mass and ate meat on Friday, their behavior seemed utterly predictable—simple inversion fantasies that referred repeatedly to orthodox Christian belief.

The Morzinois were obsessed with identifying the evildoer responsible. Initially, they believed the trouble lay with the shadowy and elusive figure of Abbé Cottet, once a priest in the parish. They remembered how they had thwarted his earlier attempts to complete a new chapel, prompting him to retaliate with the words, “I will stick in a thorn in [Morzine] that will not be pulled out very quickly,”<sup>68</sup> a metaphor that suggested a nagging and painful inflammation. Virtually all subsequent accounts related the *mal* to this imprecation.<sup>69</sup> In suspecting Cottet, the villagers were acknowledging that priests had special powers, which came not merely from the transubstantiation of the Host but also from their constant contact with the supernatural. If good, they could be relied on to protect animals, fields, and households from disturbance, to ease the way of shepherds and travelers, and to expel evil spirits.<sup>70</sup> The heretical notion that implied that the power of the sacraments was tied to the virtue or sinfulness of the priest keenly affected the villagers' perception of Cottet, who was seen as inclined to use his powers for evil.

The villagers sought strong countermeasures in the form of sorcery to release themselves from his spells. At an uncertain date early in the story but before Constans's arrival in 1861, a group of armed villagers went in the dead of night to a ruined chapel—the unfinished edifice of Abbé Cottet's ambitions—by a lake near Montriond, six or eight kilometers from Morzine. There, they eviscerated a dog, took out its liver, savagely ran it through eighteen times with a sabre and then buried it in the middle of the chapel amidst

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 33, 40.

<sup>68</sup> “Rapport de l'Abbé Chamoux,” 1866, Arch. Dioc.

<sup>69</sup> They had risked his wrath, no doubt, because they would have had to contribute both money and labor to the project, and the new chapel would have shifted power, influence, and scarce resources from Morzine. For the competition among priests for new chapels, see Palluel-Guillard et al. (n. 12 above), p. 191.

<sup>70</sup> For a discussion of priestly power in another peripheral and pious region of France, see Sandra Ott, *The Circle of Mountains: A Basque Shepherding Community* (Oxford, 1981), pp. 94–96.

curses.<sup>71</sup> The eighteen blows were meant to represent the days left in Cottet's life; they were disappointed when the priest survived, demonstrating the demonic strength that enabled him to repel such powerful countermagic.

Unlike the events described above, this episode drew on a rich fund of secretive, magical practice that diverged sharply from the liturgy. In the region, villagers protected themselves against spells by burying living snakes under the thresholds of houses, boiling nails in special vinegars, or heating a pot until it was red hot and then striking it, hoping thereby to deflect the witch's power.<sup>72</sup> Even in this magical arena, however, piety and sorcery often went hand in hand; magical incantations, for example, parodied the *Ave Maria*, while the crucifix and holy water were the most widely used talismans against evil spirits. *Guérisseurs-sorciers* would divine the saint responsible for particular maladies and then propose a series of offerings to placate supernatural rage so that the bewitched could be "released."<sup>73</sup>

Whatever his initial responsibility, it soon became evident that Cottet could not be the sole cause of the problem. As the symptoms continued to grow worse long after he had left, new causes were adduced for their persistence. In particular, villagers concentrated on the dissolution of their treasured Confraternity of St. Esprit in 1860 and the transfer of its assets to a secular *bureau de bienfaisance* in the last moment of Savoyard administration.<sup>74</sup> They were convinced that their affliction was due to its destruction and consequently invited a local magnetizer into their midst to combat their troubles. This man arrived with twelve disciples and for five months went from house to house, boarding and lodging at the expense of the afflicted families.<sup>75</sup> The symbolism here was explicit: the confraternity was identified with Christ and the apostles, and in housing these men the Morzinois hoped to restore the spiritual balance of the parish.<sup>76</sup>

Alongside this action was the perceived need to combat those neighbors seen as the beneficiaries of the confraternity's extinction, whether under Savoyard or later under French administration. Accordingly, the accusations shifted from Abbés Cottet and Favre and came to rest on those holding special power in the village, the notary in charge of property transactions and the miller, Chauplanaz. The key object of hatred, however, was Jean Berger, a cobbler and

<sup>71</sup> Constans (n. 3 above), pp. 40–41.

<sup>72</sup> A. Van Gennepe, *Le Folklore des Hautes-Alpes: Etude descriptive et comparée de psychologie populaire* (Paris, 1948), 2:92–93.

<sup>73</sup> Philippe Terreaux, *La Savoie jadis et naguère* (Paris, n.d.), p. 133.

<sup>74</sup> For Cavour's ecclesiastical policy, see R. Aubert, *Le Pontificat de Pie IX (1846–1878)* (Paris, 1952), pp. 76–80.

<sup>75</sup> "Rapport de l'Abbé Chamoux," 1866, Arch. Dioc.

<sup>76</sup> Little is known of the magnetizer except that he was convicted of charlatanism and imprisoned for five years when his ineffectiveness against the *mal* was proven.

the mayor's *adjoint* whose influence had increased with annexation. Berger issued, for a fee, certificates that testified to the health of animals taken into Switzerland, was paid for official seals, and, under French administration, sold for a fee the hated *livrets d'ouvrier* that were so vital to migrating workers: in other words, he controlled the process of leaving and returning that was so essential to the village's continued survival.

Berger maintained he acted honestly, bringing the benefits of the new administration to the village.<sup>77</sup> The villagers, however, accused him of fraud over building works and saw his claims as merely a cover for personal ambition. Moreover, the church seemed to agree and, angry at the dissolution of the confraternity and for other affronts, local priests denied him confession.<sup>78</sup> Berger's French loyalties after 1860 sealed his reputation; it was only a step further to see his declarations as an indication of the sort of disloyalty that a witch would be sure to possess. Eventually, the authorities were forced to give him police protection from the murderous impulses of the villagers who, with pitchforks, axes, and sticks, tried to kill him.<sup>79</sup>

At first glance, the witch accusations seemed to share all the characteristics of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, with animal death, illness, and misfortune followed by individual and collective efforts to forestall the witches' power.<sup>80</sup> But such superficial similarities are deceptive. At Morzine, nineteenth-century tensions were revealed by the accusations, as powerful men—first a vengeful priest and later representatives of the state within the local community—became the targets of hatred. For in the early modern period, older women were most likely to be accused of blighting crops, killing livestock, and deforming babies with black magic. For a brief moment during the *mal* such a traditional figure almost appeared, when one of the girls at the communion lesson spoke of an old (unnamed) woman from the neighboring commune of Gest as the likely source of evil. She never appeared again in the narrative, however. Villagers instead transferred their anger against those who benefited from political change and were held responsible for upsetting the already delicate spiritual and economic balance of the community. This im-

<sup>77</sup> "Lettre de justification écrite par Jean Berger au sous-préfet," April 11, 1862, Arch. Dép.

<sup>78</sup> Brigadier Commandant Fourcade, "Rapport très confidentiel," January 28, 1864, Arch. Dép., related how a priest at the Mission of St. Maurice had refused Berger absolution, taking him to task for not believing in witchcraft, accusing him of working against the St.-Esprit and of being a spy for a secret society, possibly a reference to liberal-leaning groups associated with anticlericalism.

<sup>79</sup> Constans, pp. 43–44.

<sup>80</sup> Robin Briggs, *Communities of Belief: Cultural and Social Tension in Early Modern France* (Oxford, 1989), esp. pp. 83–106. For more, see Robert Mandrou, *Magistrats et sorciers en France au XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Paris, 1968).

portant shift shows how wrong it is to see witchcraft in Morzine as a throw-back; the villagers built on a centuries-old tradition but invested witchcraft with new and different psychic and social anxieties.

### THE SEARCH FOR A CURE

Central to the villagers' perception of the affliction was the idea that the entire parish was contaminated and that beyond its borders improvement could be found. There were two important and intertwined consequences of this belief. First, the afflicted entered the migratory world previously restricted to men; they were permitted the luxury of travel and afforded the opportunity for adventures. Second, they acted out an aggressive fantasy toward the men—fathers, husbands, priests, physicians—at home, constantly insisting that they were “not good enough” to alleviate the *mal*. Even those who treated them on the outside were generally inadequate to the task, so that Morzine seemed to live in a constant state of crisis.

In their search for relief, the afflicted used overlapping remedies; the documents reveal no linear movement from one expedient to the next, but rather record certain moments when a variety of particular strategies were being used. From the earliest days of the *mal*, the afflicted begged the priests at home not only to say the conventional blessing for *loci et animalium* but also to exorcise beasts, property, and people.<sup>81</sup> Exorcism was the obvious first step, and the records show that by 1861 several of the afflicted had already experienced over a dozen such ineffective interventions. They turned to the priests because exorcism was, in a sense, an ordinary part of life, encountered at baptism when the priest ordered the devil to leave the newborn's body and make way for the holy spirit.<sup>82</sup> Local churchmen, such as Abbé Pinguet, performed semipublic and collective exorcisms and only stopped when, as mentioned earlier, French pressure made this course no longer viable. The controversial Abbé Favre also conducted such collective rites in 1858, and contemporary reports recount the harrowing physical expulsion of the “devils”: “at each exorcism the people roll on the ground, make [others] hear the mewling [of cats] and feel suffocated by a lump in their throats which makes them vomit; there is then a panting, like the yapping [of a dog].”<sup>83</sup> Their bodies invaded by a bestial evil, they were unable to ingest the Eucharist, and in this mortal combat the “devils” were

<sup>81</sup> “Lettre de l'Abbé Vallentien au Prévot,” January 20, 1869, Arch. Dioc.

<sup>82</sup> See the entry on “exorcism” which discusses the “exorcismes préparatoires au baptême,” in the *Dictionnaire de théologie catholique* (Paris, 1912), 5:1778–79.

<sup>83</sup> [A] chaque exorcisme les personnes se roulent par terre; font entendre des miaulements, se sentent comme suffoquées par un globule qui leur monte au cou, les provoque à vomir, suit une respiration précipitée, qui ressemble à une sorte de jappement. Abbé Vallentien, “Récit rétrospectif de L'Abbé Vallentien,” Arch. Dioc.

more powerful than the local priests.<sup>84</sup> Those afflicted deserted their priests early on in the story (although the exact date is uncertain), going to the nearby *bourg* of Samoëns and then to the Capuchin missionaries at St. Maurice-en-Valais where twenty-seven of them were exorcised.<sup>85</sup>

When these measures did not work, the clergy were accused of not being “good enough,” their powers undermined by weakness or sinfulness. The afflicted sought ever more powerful priests and pinned great hopes on the pastoral visit of Monsignor Magnin in 1864. A French government appointee of Savoyard origin, Magnin had sought reconciliation with the secular authorities, but Constans’s use of the army to quell the *mal* and the physician’s high-handed attitude toward the clergy quickly soured relations.<sup>86</sup> Magnin’s desire to defend the faithful and to exercise his moral and spiritual authority,<sup>87</sup> however, did not mean he was willing to exorcise. He was convinced that the *mal* was mental illness, not diabolical possession, and had resisted the parishioners’ entreaties. When he arrived, the Morzinois seemed calm,<sup>88</sup> but seven or eight women were in convulsions by the time he came to the church and, later, between sixty and eighty were rolling around in the cemetery, screaming insults at him when he refused to exorcise one sufferer: “Wolf of a bishop, we must tear out his eyes; he hasn’t the power to cure the girl; no, he cannot rid the girl of the devil.”<sup>89</sup> On his refusal to exorcise her, they set on him inside the church, kicking and insulting him, spitting in his face, and finally ripping off his pastoral ring.

<sup>84</sup> For more on exorcism, see Roper (n. 46 above), pp. 171–80.

<sup>85</sup> “Lettre de Bérard, missionnaire de Saint François de Sales . . . à l’évêque,” June 20, 1861, Arch. Dioc.

<sup>86</sup> See “Lettre de Constans . . . à l’Evêque,” May 20, 1861, Arch. Dioc., in which Constans accuses the local clergy of superstitious belief, and Magnin’s angry reply of May 16, 1864, Arch. Dép.; for Constans’s conciliatory responses see his letters of July 30 and August 9, Arch. Dioc.

<sup>87</sup> Whereas the Second Empire had brought collaboration between church and state, these relations soured in 1859, both from internal clerical scandals and from the increasingly divisive Roman question. The eclipse of the church by the secular authority in the later stages of the *mal* reflected, on a local scale, this national shift in policy, particularly important in bringing Catholic Savoy to heel. For background, see Aubert (n. 74 above), pp. 80–97, 108–23. See also René Rémond, *L’anticléricalisme en France* (Brussels, 1985), pp. 9–10; and Alec Mellor, *Histoire de l’anticléricalisme français* (Tours, 1966), pp. 232, 287–91. For clerical scandals, see Caroline Ford, “Guerry vs. Picpus: Religion, Property and the Politics of Anticlericalism in Nineteenth-Century France” (unpublished typescript, Department of History, University of British Columbia).

<sup>88</sup> “Rapport du Sous-Préfet au Préfet sur les événements qui se sont passés le 30 avril et le 1er mai–3 mai 1864,” Arch. Dép. See also Charles Lafontaine in *Le magnétiseur* (May 15, 1864); the article in the *Courrier des Alpes* (May 21, 1864), taken up by *Le monde* (May 22, 1864); and the article in *L’union médicale* (July 2, 1864).

<sup>89</sup> “Rapport du Sous-Préfet au Préfet,” May 3, 1864, Arch. Dép.

Perhaps more than any other, this event tilted local power away from the bishop to Constans.

While religious preoccupations dominated the rantings of the possessed, and the remedies they chose often depended on the consolations of the church, the afflicted easily deserted its ranks to go in search of secular healers. They chose most notably the prince of European magnetism, Charles Lafontaine, who lived in Geneva during these years. In journeying to him, they demonstrated their willingness to try new remedies, as well as their knowledge of the latest therapeutic fashions. He saw the *mal* as the result of exalted religious feeling gone awry, and he blamed Favre for his exorcisms that, he believed, had only intensified the disorder by confirming the superstitious fears of Satan.

With this “enlightened” perspective, he examined the case of Victoire Vuillet, who demonstrated all the symptoms of the disorder: head- and stomach-aches, feelings of suffocation in the epigastric region, nervous tremblings, somnambulant trances, and wild behavior. When she appeared in his consulting room she screamed, bent her body in such a contorted manner that her head touched her feet, suspended herself from the back of a chair “in a position impossible to describe,”<sup>90</sup> and then jumped on all the furniture. Lafontaine sought to calm her through a magnetic trance and the application of magnetic water. He placed a hand on her hand and the other on her stomach and “all these marvels suddenly stopped, and we were merely with a sick person who moaned and twisted in convulsions which we were able to stop almost instantly.”<sup>91</sup> He finished the first treatment by inducing a somnambulant state and after thirty minutes released her into calm consciousness. He repeated this treatment for two weeks and claimed its complete efficacy, both for her and for five others.

We may doubt his claims, and Lafontaine himself acknowledged that his purported success did not terminate the *mal*, since the superstition that reigned in the mountains kept it alive. His account of his work gives little sense of how the Morzinoises viewed his operations. They probably recognized an authority who, despite the lack of priestly garb, impressed them with his commanding personality (all contemporary records attest to his charisma) and the occult quality of his expertise. However, like the priests who exorcised, his approach was overtly physical. He did not use the sign of the cross, preferring instead the movements of great passes that swooped around the subject and persuaded her to enter a trance. The water was magnetic rather than holy, seemingly possessed of physical qualities that acted on the disturbed and “hysterical” organism. Both priest and magnetizer touched and exhorted, using props and ges-

<sup>90</sup> Charles Lafontaine, *L'art de magnétiser, ou le magnétisme animal considéré sous le point de vue théorique, pratique et thérapeutique* (Paris, 1866), p. 348.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 349.

tures of remarkable similarity and resonance. Indeed, the afflicted may very well have appreciated Lafontaine's methods because they reminded them of more familiar religious rites. Both priest and magnetizer rehearsed their moves according to a sexual script, their masculine authority contrasted with the alternatively raging or quiescent female presence ostensibly under their control.

None of these expedients produced anything but temporary relief, and the crisis prompted the administration in Paris to intervene on two separate occasions. Like the magistrates and ecclesiastics of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Adolphe Constans arrived endowed with the powers bestowed on him by centralizing authorities and with a brief to restore order;<sup>92</sup> the reaction of the villagers in both eras was to fly to the hills and resist. But here the similarities end. Counter-Reformation officials often sought not to reconvert but to impose for the first time Christian practices and beliefs on a population innocent of church dogma and ritual.<sup>93</sup> In contrast, Constans brought the thought processes of modern positivism and administration and sought to impose them in an environment where neither tradition nor reputation sanctioned his authority.<sup>94</sup>

Constans confronted what he saw as a case of hystero-demonopathy and used retrospective diagnosis to place the *mal* in a historical context. Working within an established psychiatric genre, he saw Morzine as part of a tradition of pathological religious experience, as he showed the similarities between the physical convulsions manifested throughout that tradition and compared the isolation of convents to the white seclusion of the high Alps.<sup>95</sup> But he also made important distinctions, comparing the diabolical utterances of, for example, the nuns of Loudun—educated women of high social standing—with the banal and brutal exclamations of the peasant folk of Morzine.<sup>96</sup> His disdain for the local poor was not mere disgust, however; he was also making a point about historical evolution. It was not, in his view, surprising that the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries had a surfeit of such pathological manifestations, as they were part of a particular epoch and its spiritual predilections. However,

<sup>92</sup> Mandrou (n. 80 above), chaps. 2, 3.

<sup>93</sup> See Jean Delumeau, *Catholicism between Luther and Voltaire*, trans. Jeremy Moiser (London, 1977), pp. 203–27, and *Sin and Fear* (n. 20 above), pts. 2, 3.

<sup>94</sup> For the history of the emergence of an influential cadre of alienists, see Jan Ellen Goldstein, *Console and Classify: The French Psychiatric Profession in the Nineteenth Century* (New York, 1987). See also her work that impinges on ideas of collective behavior in early psychiatric theory: Jan Goldstein, “‘Moral Contagion’: A Professional Ideology of Medicine and Psychiatry in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century France,” in *Professions and the French State, 1700–1900*, ed. Gerald L. Geison (Philadelphia, 1984), pp. 181–222.

<sup>95</sup> Constans (n. 3 above), p. 13.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 106.



he was visibly affronted that such “superstitious” ideas should persist in the mid-nineteenth century. He saw the *mal* as a dangerous example of their anachronistic survival, and he saw France’s annexation of Savoy as an opportunity to impose his view of psychic and physical health.

Such an approach showed the yawning gap in understanding between the villagers and the plenipotentiary. Other attitudes, however, show a strange intersection of belief. For example, in using the theory of degeneration—fully elaborated in 1857 by Auguste Morel—Constans sought an explanation of how noxious environmental and hereditary characteristics could be transmitted to succeeding generations.<sup>97</sup> While Morel’s work had concentrated on the urban environment of factory workers in Rouen, Constans applied similar principles to the mountains, pointing to the quality of the food, the coldness of the water, and the frigidity of the climate in general, which in his view was too harsh for a healthy physiological equilibrium. Such an assessment of local conditions was not dissimilar to those “voiced” by the afflicted who sought temporary relief by fleeing their *pays*, demanding the luxuries of urban foodstuffs and enjoying the fare provided by hospitals. Both Constans and the afflicted thus made comparisons between Morzine and the “modern” world, and both found the village lacking. With these common points their agreement ended, however. Constans condemned their belief in witchcraft and possession as archaic, while the afflicted groped toward expressing nineteenth-century conflicts through religious traditions he despised.

Moreover, Constans’s “solutions” could be dramatically punitive. He was almost a caricature of the nineteenth-century secularizing physician, representing that tradition in its coercive rather than its tolerant guise. Indeed, his therapeutic rationale was perhaps harsher in its implications than that proposed by the local clergy. Had it worked, exorcism would have provided a means of expelling the “devils” both from the physical bodies of the women and from the contaminated territory of the parish. In contrast, Constans demanded the suppression of the “demons” and insisted that they were an integral aspect of the malady rather than a discrete foreign agent that could be spewed forth and thus ejected. I am hardly suggesting that exorcism had no physical or psycho-

<sup>97</sup> B.-A. Morel, *Traité des dégénérescences physiques, intellectuelles et morales de l'espèce humaine et des causes qui produisent ces variétés maladives* (Paris, 1857). For work that deals with the history of the idea of degeneration, see R. Nye, “Degeneration and the Medical Model of Cultural Crisis in the French Belle Epoque,” in *Political Symbolism in Modern Europe*, ed. S. Drescher et al. (New Brunswick, N. J., 1982), pp. 19–41; I. Downbiggan, “Degeneration and Hereditarianism in French Mental Medicine, 1840–90,” in *The Anatomy of Madness: Essays in the History of Psychiatry*, ed. W. F. Bynum et al., 3 vols. (London, 1985–88), 1:188–232; and my *Murders and Madness: Medicine, Law and Society in the Fin-de-Siècle* (Oxford, 1989), pp. 51–79.

logical costs, but it might have brought the relief of blaming the “devils.”<sup>98</sup> In contrast, Constans’s analysis of demonopathy and hysteria focused on the illness’s pervasive, inescapable quality and the individual’s (and local society’s) responsibility for it.

Above all, Constans generated more fear, as women fled across the mountains to escape the infantry or were forcibly detained in nearby hospitals until they were “cured.” Even he ultimately recognized the need for a more subtle policy. He redrew Morzine’s boundaries and had an important imperial road built that channeled movement in new directions, literally transforming the territory of the *mal*.<sup>99</sup> With these physical changes came a shift in social welfare; he provided pensions for the needy<sup>100</sup> and even subsidized the families whose womenfolk were hospitalized.<sup>101</sup> New clergymen, whom Constans hoped would oppose the demonic and magical beliefs of the parishioners in the confessional, arrived in the village to unite administrative and religious authority.<sup>102</sup> *Bals*, music societies, and a library were introduced to soothe and enlighten, while the soldiers billeted in the village ultimately transformed the village economy by paying for their room and board and helping with the harvest.

## CONCLUSION

With Constans, the women finally found a male figure who, if not “good enough” to cure the *mal*, was certainly powerful enough to transform it. The afflicted of Morzine—impoverished, physically exhausted, and emotionally distraught—did not consciously invite Constans’s intervention. Here I would like to stress the difference between their powerful unconscious fantasies of aggression and the unsought consequences of their realization. The afflicted

<sup>98</sup> For a contemporary example of these preoccupations, see Mart Bax, “Women’s Madness in Medjugorje: Between Devils and Pilgrims in a Yugoslav Devotional Centre,” *Journal of Mediterranean Studies* 1 (1992): 42–54.

<sup>99</sup> See “Rapport du gendarmerie,” September 20, 1864, Arch Dép. The extent of the changes he wrought can be divined from the following: Constans’s letters to the prefect on September 28, 1864, and October 11, 1864, and the confidential report to the sous-prefect on October 22, 1864.

<sup>100</sup> Letter from Constans to the prefect, September 28, 1864, Arch. Dép. In this mis- sive, he asks the prefect to arrange a pension for a soldier from Morzine who lost his sight while on leave rather than on duty, knowing full well that they would need to go beyond the letter of the law to enable the injured man to take up his place in the Invalides.

<sup>101</sup> One way in which this help was given was by offering six months’ leave to soldiers from Morzine who came from afflicted families, enabling them to keep the family economy going. See “Rapport de gendarmerie,” July 26, 1865, Arch Dép.

<sup>102</sup> “Lettre de Constans à l’Evêque,” May 20, 1861, Arch. Dioc.

were too absorbed by their immediate misery to consider their aims dispassionately, and they caused havoc by accusing men of witchcraft and inadequacy. I hardly wish to suggest that their underlying grievances were without justification. Rather, I am arguing that the only available outlet for their rage and hatred was destructive behavior, which not only intensified their suffering but also made it difficult to renegotiate village gender relations.

Understanding this complex psychological dynamic is central to questioning the Foucauldian orthodoxy which has hitherto underpinned the study of the *mal*; Constans's "triumph" was not merely the installation of a new discursive "medico-administrative apparatus" but was equally the fulfillment of an unconscious, inchoate, and often dangerously aggressive emotional process. The women of Morzine desired two irreconcilable aims: first, the maintenance and restitution of the collective spiritual and social solidarity of the village, and, second, the relativization of village morality through greater mobility and openness to the outside world. The conflicts that these divergent desires aroused resulted in psychic misery and physical torment, in self-punishment for perceived transgressions, and in enraged accusations against men unable to "fix" their pain. Constans manipulated this instability, deepened the process of emasculation through his reformist measures, and imposed the outside world without respecting village mores.

The psychological drama of the *mal* thus offers other possible interpretations of peasant distress in the nineteenth century. On one level, the language of the possessed enables us to listen to the muted voices that relativized the village's position vis-à-vis the outside world. The hunter's burlesque, the woodsman's howls, the shepherd's cry, all may have laid the groundwork for forging new identities for women seeking to change their lives. In this expressive task, witchcraft and possession showed the transformative potential of religious belief and the interpretive power of peasant mentalities, both of which hastened rather than forestalled "modernity." Moreover, they demonstrate the extent to which such changes occur not merely through the impact of institutions and mediators such as male clergy, nuns, and teachers, but also through collective cultural processes undergone by people forced to confront the erosion of old patterns of life and the consequences of permanent transformation.<sup>103</sup>

On another level, the *mal* highlights the unarticulated dimensions of rural distress and demonstrates the very real limitations of even a sophisticated discursive approach. Despite the insights it offers, the notion of an "anti-language" cannot comprehend the physical disruption and psychological misery that were the cardinal features of the *mal*. It deepened and endured above

<sup>103</sup> For the key role of intermediaries and relations between the center and periphery, see, e. g., Blackburn, *Marpingen* (n. 33 above); and Ford, *Creating the Nation in Provincial France* (n. 10 above).

all because such distress could *not* be expressed in language, for there was no available idiom to generate narratives able to give such pain broader meaning. Understanding the “irrational” aspects of collective hatred and violence, therefore, demands an imaginative sympathy for varieties of misery that cannot be reduced to mere “discourse” and a focus on bodily and psychic experience in ways that episodes such as the *mal* permit.

Finally, by concentrating on this “irrationality,” by which I mean compulsive physical responses and unconscious psychological motivations, I could be accused of unwittingly reinforcing an older, and often repudiated, tradition that sees peasant eruptions as illogical, incoherent, physically violent, and dangerously “primitive.” I hardly wish to usher in once again the old stereotypes of peasant savagery. Rather, I hope my analysis of the *mal* provides a different tone and emphasis by showing how such popular protest can be neither sentimentalized as the last gasp of a traditional society nor regarded as the heroic incarnation of early feminism. The picture of cultural change that the *mal* suggests was neither a self-conscious march toward modernity nor a desperate clinging to tradition. In Morzine there was an awareness of the inevitability of change, but the evolution was accomplished through painful lurches fueled equally by unarticulated fear of and hope for the future.