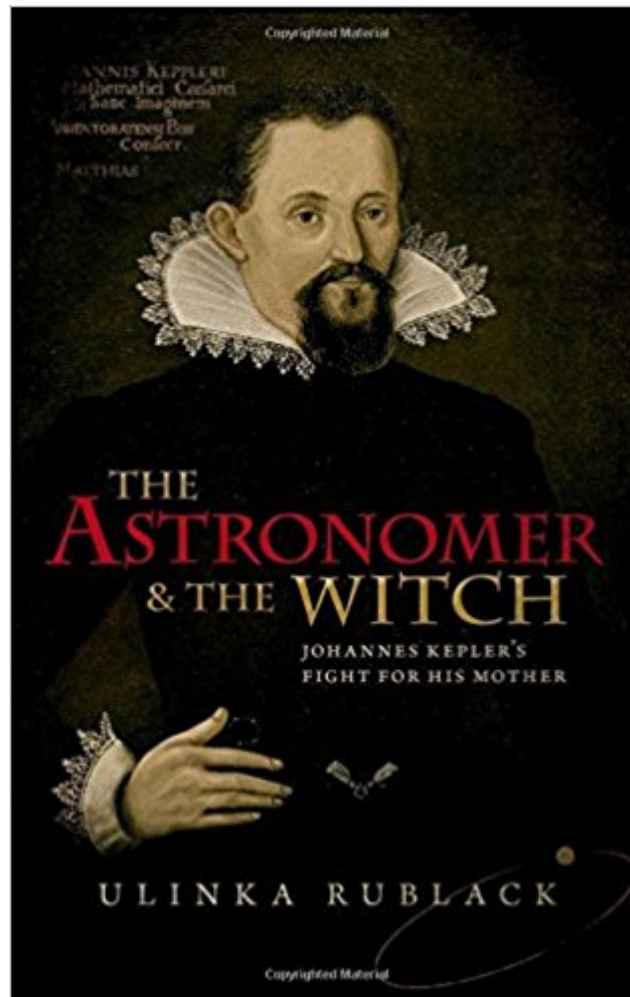


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The Astronomer And The Witch: Johannes Kepler's Fight For His Mother



Synopsis

Johannes Kepler (1571-1630) was one of the most admired astronomers who ever lived and a key figure in the scientific revolution. A defender of Copernicus's sun-centred universe, he famously discovered that planets move in ellipses and defined the three laws of planetary motion. Perhaps less well known is that in 1615, when Kepler was at the height of his career, his widowed mother Katharina was accused of witchcraft. The proceedings led to a criminal trial that lasted six years, with Kepler conducting his mother's defense. In *The Astronomer and the Witch*, Ulinka Rublack pieces together the tale of this extraordinary episode in Kepler's life, one that takes us to the heart of his changing world. First and foremost an intense family drama, the story brings to life the world of a small Lutheran community in the center of Europe at a time of deep religious and political turmoil - a century after the Reformation and on the threshold of the Thirty Years' War. Kepler's defense of his mother also offers us a fascinating glimpse into the great astronomer's world view, on the cusp between Reformation and scientific revolution. While advancing rational explanations for the phenomena that his mother's accusers attributed to witchcraft, Kepler nevertheless did not call into question the existence of magic and witches. On the contrary, he clearly believed in them. And, as the story unfolds, it appears that there were moments when even Katharina's children wondered whether their mother really did have nothing to hide...

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

A readable work about the mother of the famed astronomer, Johannes Kepler (1571-1630), who was accused of witchcraft in Germany. In 1615, his 73 year old mother, Katharina Kepler was

accused of bewitching several people in town, and over the next six years a continuing trial and imprisonment was challenged by her son. Later, after a year of imprisonment, she was threatened with torture to confess her crimes. Only Johannes and his siblings kept up a steady opposition to the governor's accusations and attempts to have his mother convicted of the crime. This is an interesting account of witch trials in Protestant Germany at the start of the 17th century. There is an examination of the evidence, how it was interpreted, and how it was refuted by one of the better mathematical minds living in Europe at that time. Some of the 24 witnesses were deemed to be irrelevant, but enough were thought competent for the charges to be prosecuted. Kepler spent much of his time trying to refute the witnesses and write up a point by point rebuttal to the accusations, and then reply to the attack of his rebuttal by the prosecution. Finally, it was decided to scare her into confession, not by torture, but by pretending to have sentenced her to torture, and showing her the devices to be used to force her to confess, hoping the mere sight of the devices and descriptions of enhanced interrogation by the executioner will frighten her into revealing her crime. Refusing to be intimidated, she was eventually released after 14 months locked to a chain in a cell, and she died six months later. This is an interesting study of how a witch trial was conducted, the types of evidence and methods of defense used, and how a counter-suit of defamation was used to protect Katharina Kepler.

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