Witchcraze

A New History of the European Witch Hunts

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For those who did not survive

The torture of Christine Böffgen at Rheinbach, 1631. A well-to-do widow, she was tortured until she died; her property went to the court. From Hermann Löher's *Hochnötige Klage.* Courtesy of the Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Carl A. Kroch Library, Cornell University.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Controlling Women's Bodies

Violence and Sadism

We find . . . on her secret parts, growing within the lip of the same, a loose piece of skin and when pulled it is near an inch long [and] somewhat in form of the finger of a glove flattened.

—*Committee searching the body of Mercy Disborough*[1]

THE MARK in the form of a teat, from which animal familiars or demons would suck, might be found anywhere on a woman's body. The English, whether in Old or New England, were especially adept at finding it. Though men also were accused of having suspicious teats, the very concept of the devil's teat is based on the female function of providing breast milk; it is an inversion of a natural female function, a parody turned into a deadly jest. One woman had seven imps but only five teats and complained that they fought over her like a litter of pups when they fed.

When Margaret Jones, a Boston midwife, healer and cunning woman, was accused in 1648 of having "an apparent teat in her secret parts," her friend explained that it was a tear left over from a difficult childbirth.[2] No doubt this cause, or a swollen clitoris, explained these cases. But Matthew Hopkins, the fanatical witch hunter of Essex, England, would not take childbearing or hemorrhoids as an excuse, pointing out that the marks "are in the contrary part."[3] Hopkins knew his female anatomy and may have witnessed a number of examinations.

In Scotland the searcher, called the witch pricker, was always male. When two Scottish women wanted to join this lucrative profession they had to disguise themselves as men, "Mr. Dickson" and "Mr. Peterson." The

pricker would know a witch because a true devil's mark would have no feeling or blood when stabbed. A contemporary observed that many innocent women were so overcome with shame and fear at having their bodies probed by a strange man that they became numb and could feel nothing, thus appearing guilty.[4] Women's genitals were routinely searched.

These widespread practices terrorized women. When in 1649 the people of Newcastle-upon-Tyne hired a well-known Scottish pricker to rid their town of witches, promising him twenty shillings for every woman he condemned, they set a potential trap for all the women of the town: "the magistrates sent their bellman through the town, ringing the bell, and crying, all people that would bring in any complaint against any woman for a witch, they should be sent for and tried by the person appointed. Thirty women were brought into the Town Hall and stript, and then openly had pins thrust into their bodies."[5]

Most of them were found guilty.

When "a personable and good-like woman" was defended by one of the local gentry, the pricker argued that, having been accused, she must be tried anyway:

> . . . and presently in sight of all the people, [he] laid her body naked to the waste, with her cloaths over her head, by which fright and shame, all her blood contracted into one part of her body, and then he ran a pin into her thigh, and then suddenly let her coats [petticoats?] fall, and then demanded whether she had nothing of his in her body but [yet] did not bleed, but she being amazed replied little, then he put his hand up her coats, and pulled out the pin and set her aside as a guilty person, and child of the Devil, and fell to try others whom he made guilty.[6]

Public events such as this, in which male magistrates watched a male searcher strip a "good-like" woman, frightening her speechless while feeling her body and applying an unrational "test" as to her innocence or guilt as a witch, established an important point about how women were viewed in early modern society: that women by nature, through their bodies, were susceptible to seduction by the devil, and that they must be controlled and if necessary punished by men.[7] Scenes like this took place also in the German, Swiss, and French lands and were brought by English colonists to New England. The searcher's obscene question, "whether she had nothing of his in her body," expresses the rapelike atmosphere. But the possible outcome (the penalty for a conviction of witchcraft was death) was more dire even than rape, and flaunted the power of these men over the very lives of the women whom they abused.

Though it is essential to pursue, as we have, what power women exercised in early modern Europe, as workers, healers, even as witches, a study of women's power will not take us to the heart of the witchcraze. In matters involving violence, there is no complementarity, there is only "power over." Women were indeed active contributors to European society, but once labeled as witches, they became victims, vulnerable to severe persecution.

Not wanting to restrict women to the role of victim, yet acknowledging the imbalance of power in a male-dominant society, Lois Banner asks how "does one then analyze the witchcraft persecutions of the seventeenth century, the greatest explosion of patriarchal power in the European experience?"[8] How else than by accepting that in this instance women were victimized and by accusing those who were in power? To be more specific, I would say that it is only by learning what happened to the bodies of the accused and naming the agents of their torment, by "acknowledging the imbalance of power in a male-dominant society," that we can move ahead in analyzing this particular "explosion of patriarchal power."

BECAUSE SEARCHING and pricking were carried out on jailed prisoners, that is, on helpless victims, they must be considered a form of torture. Regular judicial torture, as we have seen, was used everywhere except England and was taken to ferocious limits. In the Pas-de-Calais in 1573, for example, one "Nisette," married to her fourth husband and convicted of witchcraft, was ordered to be flogged and banished, *after* having her head flamed with a *chapeau d'étoupe* (a burning circle of flax or hemp).[9]

Torture very often had its sexual angles. Performed on women by men, legal torture permitted sadistic experimentation and gratuitous sexual advances. When the executioner Jehan Minart of Cambrai prepared the already condemned Aldegonde de Rue for the stake, he examined her interior parts, mouth, and *"parties honteuses"* (shameful parts). When a woman was whipped, she had to be stripped to the waist (as Eunice Cole was), her breasts bared to the public. To try to force a confession, a priest applied hot fat repeatedly to Catherine Boyraionne's eyes and her armpits, the pit of her stomach, her thighs, her elbows, and *"dans sa nature"*—in her vagina. She died in prison, no doubt from injuries.[10]

While a female was imprisoned, she might be raped—the young Lorrainer, Catharina Latomia, not yet pubescent, was raped twice in her cell, and nearly died from it. At Ellwangen, Magdalena Weixler gave the jailer sexual favors in return for a promise to be spared torture but was tortured and executed anyway.[11] When one woman was raped and murdered in jail, blame was placed on the devil. Women, sex, and the devil were constantly mixed in with witch lore. Judges in northern France, for example, forced the accused to admit giving the devil "*un poil de ses parties honteuse*" (a pubic hair).[12] Parallels between laws on witchcraft and rape have been pointed out by G. Geis, who notes that both work against women. In rape cases, the accuser (the woman) finds it difficult to prove her allegations, because the very law suspects her of having invited the assault; in witchcraft, the defendant (the woman) must prove that there is no causal connection between her action (cursing, attempted healing, etc.) and the misfortune she is charged with—but the court is operating on a belief in that causality.[13] In either case, rape or witchcraft, the law puts women on the defensive.

It appears that jailers, prickers, executioners, and judges, all could take their sadistic pleasure with female prisoners. And so could respectable ministers and judges. At a public session in New England, Cotton Mather, while working to control a seventeen-year-old girl possessed of demons, uncovered her breasts and fondled them.[14] Women's thoughts, even the most intimate, were made public. The prurient interest priests took in possessed women's bodies and sexual fantasies while exorcising these women was demonstrated clearly at the public exorcisms of Sister Jeanne of the Angels at Loudun and of Elisabeth de Ranfaing at Nancy. Judges at Sugny, Luxembourg, asked female suspects not only about their sexual activity with the devil but about their sexual activity with their husbands and lovers as well.[15]

These men took advantage of positions of authority to indulge in pornography sessions, thus revealing that they wanted more from witch hunting than the conviction of witches: namely, unchallengeable sexual power over women. In reflecting on the sexual abuse of female prisoners in the twentieth century, Susan Brownmiller asks "whether sadistic torture leads by its own logic to the infliction of sexual pain, or whether the motive of eliciting . . . information is merely a pretext for the commission of hostile sexual acts."[16] In the witch hunts, the policy of forcing a witch's confession may have been a cover for making a socially approved assault on her body. Moreover, the basic fact of having total juridical power over women may have fanned the propensity for violence. Because women had never before been prisoners in large numbers, men for the first time now had unrestricted access to them; given the low opinion of women in European society, there was little social pressure to restrain the court officials from taking their pleasure with the victims.

The popular appeal of sexually related torture went beyond the courtroom and jail house. All executions for witchcraft were public events and often drew huge crowds. The general sadism that this engendered will be discussed in chapter 8; here I want to look at the sexual aspects of torture, trials, and executions.

THE HEAVY sexual content of witchcraft prosecution in the sixteenth century parallels the well-documented rise in laws restraining sexual conduct. Among the legal charges on which a person could be brought up, sex-connected crimes—that is, adultery, bearing illegitimate children, abortion, infanticide, and incest—figured large, increasingly so as the two Reformations progressed. Women were more often and more severely punished than men for these crimes. The only sexual crime for which men were punished more often than women was sodomy, sometimes combined with a charge of witchcraft as well.[17] Witchcraft, too, was often sex-related, and charges for all these crimes rose and fell together; the seventeenth century saw a peak of prosecution for abortion, infanticide, *and* witchcraft.

Consider what this meant for the unwed mother in Nuremberg.[18] If suspected of killing her newborn, she was arrested, brought to the prison in chains, her breasts examined for milk. Then the midwife was dispatched to find the baby's body, which was brought back to the mother, no matter how long it may have been dead, to shock her into confessing. Between 1576 and 1617, nineteen women were subjected to this brutal routine, then drowned or beheaded. Women's punishment became more severe in Nuremberg as the sixteenth century progressed: formerly, pregnant prisoners had not been tortured, but now they were no longer spared. Nuremberg was remarkable for a south German city in that it had no executions for witchcraft. This fact did not mean, however, that it tolerated deviant sexual behavior in women or treated them humanely when they were desperate.

In other areas of Europe as well, charges of sex crimes and witchcraft often overlapped: Elizabeth Codwell of Essex, for example, guilty of murdering her bastard child, suspect as a witch, and pregnant with her second bastard, was reprieved from hanging until one month after the child's birth and was then put to death. In Luxembourg, the daughter of a poor manual

worker at Santweiler was executed for sorcery and for killing her child. As we have seen, the word *witch* in Luxembourg was associated with *putain* and *ribaude,* meaning "whore." In New England at Salem, George Jacobs called his servant Sarah Churchill (one of the young accusers) a "bitch witch,"[19] combining sexual and demonic sins in one succinct phrase.

When suspicion of abortion or fornication lay in her background, the accused witch stood little chance.[20] When brought to trial in New England, Alice Lake utterly denied that she had practiced witchcraft but confessed that as a single woman she had sinned, become pregnant, and tried to abort the fetus. Although she failed, "yet she was a murderer in the sight of God [and herself] for her endeavors." This admission of attempted abortion was sufficient to condemn her of witchcraft, and Alice was executed, leaving four small children. Like Margaret Lang, she was no witch—but under the extreme pressure of conviction for witchcraft, she broke down and confessed an old sexual sin.

The greatest sexual sin apparently was birth control, whether as contraception or abortion. The sorcery that one woman was accused of was teaching two young women how not to get pregnant. In Hamburg a woman was burned to death because she taught young women how to use abortifacients, and at Zwickau, another female was burned with her books and instruments because she aborted the fruit of the womb *"durch ihre falsche Art"* (through her treacherous method). Midwives were taunted, "How many children have you destroyed? How many pregnant women? How many mothers lying-in?" At Würzburg, where several hundred people were put to death in two years (1627–29), a midwife was blamed for the entire disorder.[21]

This attack on birth control and abortion might be seen as a protection of the fetus, if the authorities had shown a corresponding respect for pregnancy, birth, or infancy. They did not. When Alison Legrand was arrested for witchcraft, although she protested that she was pregnant, she was twice submitted to the ordeal of water ("ducking"). Although proven innocent, she miscarried. Though courts sometimes let a pregnant prisoner go, often they did not, forcing the gravid woman to give birth under harsh conditions. Sometimes the infant died, as did Sarah Goode's newborn in Salem jail; in other cases, the new mother was tortured and executed anyway (Jehanne de Monchecourt in northern France, 1610); in a few cases the pregnant woman, denied a stay, was executed with the fetus (for example, Elizabeth Lowys, England).[22] Children were pressured to give evidence against their parents and to witness their parents' executions. Children as young as three were imprisoned and as young as eight were executed as witches. The society that hunted witches could not claim to be pro-fetus or pro-child.[23]

So concerned were the French about abortion and infanticide that in 1556 the Parlement passed an extraordinary edict: every expectant mother must register her pregnancy and have a witness to the birth. If she did not, and the infant died, she was liable for the death sentence on a murder charge. This unprecedented intrusion by the state into the act of childbirth made infanticide into a *crimen exceptum,*[24] in the words of Edward Peters "the crime so dangerous to the civil community that the very accusation acted to suspend traditional procedural protection to the defendant, and opened the way for the most ruthless and thorough kind of prosecution, undertaken to protect the state from its most dangerous enemies."[25] Not even witchcraft was a *crimen exceptum* in France, but infanticide was.

All these charges were based on the actual activities of women. They were distortions, a dangerous twisting of the truth, but they were reactions to what women did in order to control their fertility. An even more dangerous projection onto women, however, came from fantasy, not fact, from the sexual fantasies of inquisitors and secular judges about what went on at the "sabbat." In trial records from everywhere in Europe (except England and Russia) we learn that women were believed to have an erotic propensity for devil worship.

Consider the case of a healer named Matteuccia of Todi, Italy, who was brought before the Inquisition for prescribing a contraceptive for the concubine of a local priest and for dispensing love potions. Admitting at first only to using herbal remedies, by the time the inquisitor finished with her she had confessed to anointing herself with an unguent made with the fat of babies in order to invoke demons and be transported to the sabbat.[26]

Moving further into the realm of judicial fantasy, we find women accused of flying to the sabbat on phallic broomsticks, being seduced by demon lovers, joining in orgiastic dances, kissing the devil's ass, copulating indiscriminately with men, other women, relatives, demons, or the devil himself, and giving birth to demon children.[27] Women were believed capable of these acts because of three qualities: being hypersexed, weak-willed, and given to melancholy. The devil could seduce a woman to his service when she was horny, or melancholy (because she was broke or had been deserted by her man), or simply because she lacked character. The classic statement from the *Malleus Maleficarum,* "all witchcraft comes from carnal lust, which is in women insatiable," summed up the widespread belief that women were by

nature oversexed, wicked, and therefore dangerous to men. It is not surprising that many demonologists stressed the witch's ability to render a man impotent, even to cause his genitals to disappear,[28] for the witchcraze took place during a period when women were perceived as sexually omnivorous.

In these proscriptions we find that the most disgusting part of women's disgusting bodies was their menstrual blood. When Stevenote de Audebert showed the witch hunter Pierre de Lancre her pact with Satan written in menstrual blood, he was horrified to look at it. But not too horrified; his fascination overcame his disgust. One must ask why she showed it to the man who boasted he had tortured some six hundred persons, and who put to death eighty, in a brief four-month tour of southwestern France. It is likely that Stevenote was proud of this document. At any rate, showing it to de Lancre was her undoing, for she was burned at the stake.[29]

Early modern people were not casual about menstrual blood.[30] Calling menstruation a "sickness,"a "monthly disease or infirmity," or using the poetic term "the flowers," they referred to the flow as excrement, a "Monthly flux of Excrementitious and Unprofitable Blood,"[31] an impurity with a loathsome smell. They understood the flow to be proof of the inferiority of women's bodies compared to men's: men used all their blood, whereas women had a superfluity. If her period was blocked, this impure excess would trouble her brain, causing melancholy and even suicide. The foulest object that a seventeenth-century person could name was "a menstrous rag." Beyond this disgust over a natural function of the female body, however, lay a fear of its power. Menstrual blood was believed to have magical effects, bewitching a lover, serving as an aphrodisiac, assisting in conception; an extreme fear was that intercourse during menstruation would kill the man. Here we see a clear example of the no-win position of women in that society: they were inferior and yet dangerous, disgusting and yet powerful, and it was their bodies that chiefly made them so.

Larner suggested that it was in the era of the witch hunts that "the evil effects of the menstrual fluid [were shifted] from the menstrual blood to the woman herself." From this shift it was only one step to perceiving a woman as having by nature the characteristics of a witch. Larner believed that "this shift reflects an intensified misogyny in this period."[32]

Women were seen as overassertive sexually, even to the point of wanting to be raped, a belief widely held in the medieval period. The later idea that women wanted the devil to seduce them was based on the medieval literary formula in which women seek and enjoy rape.[33] From the Pays Basque came

the saying, "*Un coq suffit a dix poules, mais dix hommes ne suffisent pas a une femme*" (One cock is enough for ten hens, but ten men are not enough for one woman). About French beliefs in general, Martine Segalen concluded, "Of all the maleficent powers which a man is led to fear in his wife, the most redoubtable are her sexual appetites, which threaten to subjugate him to her power."[34]

Old women especially were seen as oversexed. Much of the basis for legends of demon lovers stemmed from the belief that women were sexually insatiable and could not be satisfied by mere mortal men; widows were, of course, seen as all the needier. In his study of myths about widows, Charles Carlton concluded that "in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries [men] felt that widows, once their husbands had whetted their sexual appetites, were all potential nymphomaniacs, rather like Chaucer's Wife of Bath." Carlton quoted Nathaniel Smith in 1669, "He that would woo a maid must fiegn, lie, or flatter, but he that woos a widow must down his breeches and at her."[35] Noting the fear that men expressed of these oversexed women, Carlton asked if these anxieties might help explain why widows were frequently accused of witchcraft. Surely he is correct in deciding that "men were afraid of widows because they did not fit into the age's concept of a hierarchical cosmic order. Being without a man to guide them they were, so to speak, a weak link in the great chain of being."[36]

Yet this projection of a supersexuality onto older women conflicted with the church's teaching that sex was only for purposes of procreation. Postmenopausal sexual activity was, in that light, inappropriate and illicit in any case.[37] There were thus many reasons for objecting to an older woman who was sexually active.

Old people, and old women especially, were hated for the way they looked. In an age that worshiped outward beauty and equated it with inward virtue, an ugly old woman was seen as evil, and therefore as a witch. An observer of the witch hunt in Essex wrote that suspicion fell on "every old woman with a wrinkled face, a furred brow, a hairy lip, a squint eye, a squeaking voice, or a scolding tongue . . . a Dog or Cat by her side."[38] Bizarre sexuality was attributed to these women, such as Temperance Lloyd, who when searched was found to have two teats in her "secret parts." Poor, addled old Temperance confessed that a Black Man had sucked on them. She was hanged.[39]

Having begun this discussion of the connection between women's sexuality and witchcraft with comments on the victimization of women, it is

important also to take a broader view of early modern women's sexual lives. Putting aside the myths about their sexual insatiability and their demon lovers, what *were* women doing sexually? One thing seems clear: they were asserting themselves more and taking more responsibility for their sex lives than women have since, until very recently.[40] Because premarital sex was the norm and premarital pregnancy not condemned until the seventeenth century, young women and men were freer to learn about themselves sexually, to experiment sexually, and to try out partners than they would be again until the 1960s.

I can find no evidence of how premodern women felt during intercourse except Chaucer's exquisite description of the Wife of Bath, who so loved "the tickle in her root"—and this observation was written by a man. But given the witch hunters' obsession with sex, it is not surprising to find detailed descriptions of what it was like to have sex with the devil. There was an almost universal assertion by women on trial for witchcraft that the devil's touch was cold and disagreeable. Boguet, for example, quoted a suspected witch as saying that the devil's "semen was very cold," and "that she had several times taken in her hand the member of the Demon [which] was as cold as ice."[41] Given the frequency with which witness like this turns up in the records, one might conclude that sexual attraction was not the channel through which the devil won women over. But by contrast there is the testimony of fifty-seven-year-old Suzanne Gaudry that she "took contentment and nothing else" when having sex with her demon familiar, Petit Grinniou. That Susanne enjoyed sex with her demon cannot have helped her case; she was burned at the stake in 1652.[42] At any rate, it is possible that women did enjoy sex more[43] before the Reformations regulated sex and nineteenth-century bourgeois attitudes imposed more passive views of women's sexuality.

Furthermore, women were encouraging their young daughters to take lovers, were arranging this for them, and not, apparently, with marriage yet in mind; the intention must have been to supervise their sexual initiation. Stories that recur in court confessions, from Scotland, England, and France, indicate that children's first sexual experiences were arranged for them, as is still done in some non-Western societies. Elizabeth Anderson may have been a bit precocious at thirteen, but she was expected to go out with the "little dark man" whom her grandmother introduced her to and urged her to hold hands with. In Lorraine, Dominique Fallvasa testified that "although she was not yet of an age to do after the kind of women, she was sent by her mother into a thick wood where she would find a handsome young man whom she would easily be able to love." The story continued:

> She was gathering rushes for binding up the vines with her mother, and they lay down on the ground to rest themselves. . . . Her mother began to warn her not to be afraid if she saw something unusual, for there would be no danger in it; and. . . . There suddenly appeared one in human form who seemed like a shoemaker . . . [who] made her swear an oath to him, and marked her upon the brow with his nail in sign of her new allegiance, and finally defiled her before the eyes of her mother. And the mother in her turn gave herself to him in sight of her daughter. They then joined hands and danced for awhile.

Boys might receive the same treatment: Erik Hennezel's parents gave him a woman whom he madly loved and "at once and greedily wallowed in carnal bestiality with her."[44] At his trial he identified her as a succuba. That all of these stories when told in court end in disappointment, as the lover vanishes into the air or turns into a demon, does not invalidate the glimpse they give us of sexual initiation among peasants. Whether the parents arranged this in order for the child to have a "proper" (i.e., nontraumatic) first encounter with sex, or in order to make money, or to lure a lover for themselves (as in Dominique's mother's case), we cannot know. But the stories indicate that among peasants virginity held no value for marriage, and that initiation took place very young.

And women were loving women; evidence is scant but suggestive. Aside from the myth about the sabbat, that its devotees had sex indiscriminately, males with males, females with females, I can find only four cases of lesbianism, two clear, the other two uncertain, in witch trial records.[45] One of the former is one of the celebrated cases of demonic possession that seized French nuns. In the earlier convent cases at Marseilles, Loudun, and Louviers, when nuns became bewitched they blamed priests, usually their confessors, for seducing and bewitching them, claiming the priests were really servants of the devil. Several prominent priests were burned at the stake on these charges.[46] At Auxonne, however, the nuns accused not their priest but their mother superior. This public charge of lesbianism in a convent created an even greater scandal than the notorious cases mentioned above. The Parlement of Dijon took up the charges, could not handle them, and dismissed the case.[47] But these dramatic convent cases, fueled as they were by sexual repression, do not make an adequate basis for understanding either heterosexual or homosexual sex of the period.

A second case comes from ecclesiastical court records in Pescia, Tuscany, 1619 to 1623.[48] Benedetta Carlini, the young and gifted abbess of the Théatine convent there, experienced trances in which Jesus praised her, gave her the stigmata, and exchanged his heart for hers. Benedetta put on a public marriage between her and Jesus, and led a public processional to ensure that Pescia would be spared the plague. After a careful investigation, the authorities gave their approval to her ecstasies.

A second investigation, however, provoked by the papal nuncio, revealed another side to Benedetta's spiritual life: the nun who was her companion reported that Benedetta, while possessed by a male angel named Splenditello, had forced her to have sex with her, a relationship that lasted for several years. This astonishing revelation raised more questions than the investigators could handle. Was Benedetta responsible for her actions? She was, after all, in trance each time she seduced the nun. Was she committing heterosexual or homosexual acts? The two bodies involved were both female, but Benedetta spoke and even looked like a young male while she was possessed. To further confuse the picture, Benedetta was known to flirt with priests at the gate where the life of the nuns touched that of the outside world, and she had entered a mystical marriage with Jesus. Was she a witch with a demon lover (her "Jesus"), or was she bewitched, the innocent victim of someone else's sorcery? Not knowing what to make of the charges, the commission eventually concluded that her "voices" were demonic but passed no sentence on the charge of lesbianism. Benedetta was sentenced to life imprisonment within the convent. After all, because she had a following in the town, she was a potential threat to law and order there. As for her lesbianism, Benedetta could have been burned at the stake as a sodomite. There were a few precedents in Europe—five, to be exact, in the criminal records—of the death sentence for female sodomites.[49]

Another case, less clear, is found in the trial of Elizabeth Bennet of Essex. Accused by William Bonner of being "lovers and familiar friendes" with his wife, whom Elizabeth had made very ill (or possibly had killed), Elizabeth was hanged as a witch. Granted that she was accused of many other crimes, including being an "olde trot, old whore, and other lewde speeches," still it seems likely that sexual deviance was a basic charge.[50]

The final case, harder still to define, is that of Margaret Lang, the Scottish midwife and ecstatic discussed in chapter 6. Accused by an eleven-year-old girl of bewitching her, Lang was tried, convicted, and sentenced to be hanged. At the gallows she confessed that when she was young she had committed the "unnatural sin," a fact she felt so guilty about that she made a pact with the devil over it. The only other time I have come across this phrase is in the trial of Marguerite Douyn, a French servant girl accused of "having unnatural sex with her master." Because this was heterosexual sex, the charge apparently related to the physical positions.[51] So the nature of Margaret Lang's sin, called by a contemporary her "unnatural lust, which is known to some of your number," remains uncertain. Her case shows how difficult it is to write about sexual history.

Beyond the possibility that early modern women did enjoy and were more assertive about sex than women in a later period, there is one more sexual factor that must be raised: in the early modern period, married women were almost continuously pregnant or nursing—and it was hard on them. Furthermore, almost half their children died before they were five. When the Scotswoman Bessie Dunlop surrendered herself to Satan, she was just up from an excruciating childbirth and hurrying across the moor seeking help for what she feared was her husband's fatal illness; in short, the devil got her while she was down. As the instruments of torture were being prepared at Barbe Gilet's trial in Lorraine in 1587, she calmly told her jailers to stop; she would confess, not in order to spare herself torture (which she claimed she could have endured) but in order to seize her opportunity for death—so that "the four young children which still survive of the many that I have borne" would not be raised by her, in the service of the devil. Her death would free them; she would sacrifice herself for them.[52] Barbe had borne and lost many children and been hounded by the devil all the while. No wonder that she was ready to quit this life.

IT IS IMPORTANT to review the many ways that having a woman's body made a difference during the witch hunt. First, the distinctively female external parts of the body—breasts and labia—were the model for the devil's teat, a sure sign of guilt, and the female function of nursing was the basis for the myth of imps and familiars, who sucked on witches. Some of the most basic and negative imagery of witch lore was thus taken from female anatomy.

Birth control, abortion, and infanticide, all seen as heinous crimes and all the almost exclusive practice of women, were connected with witchcraft and thus compounded its offensiveness. Homosexuality was being increasingly persecuted, and lesbianism may have been connected with demonism, although it is impossible to say on the basis of a few cases.

That women were seen as more strongly sexed and of weaker character than men were crucial points, becoming the basis for the interpretation of the sabbat as a sexual orgy and for the belief that it was inevitable, hence "natural," for women to be seduced by Satan. This view of female sexuality both expressed and intensified men's sexual fright of women. Applied to old women, it made them grotesque and physically repellent. All women without men were seen as especially vulnerable to the devil.

Mother-daughter pairs were especially suspect, and many were burned or hanged together. A mother-daughter pair was buried alive for sorcery in Cologne, and a number of three-generation groups of female victims are known, as well as mother-son pairs. These accusations confirm a belief both in the hereditary nature of witchcraft through the mother and contamination through nurture. They underline the tension already evident in the huge number of accusations made by girls against older women, a tension exposing the desire of females as well as males to "kill the mother."

Finally, the authority figures in witch trials were entirely male. The majority of accusers,[53] the ministers, priests, constables, jailers, judges, doctors, prickers, torturers, jurors, and executioners, and the courts of appeal as well, were 100 percent male. This all-male establishment paid off: as we have seen, 80 percent of those accused and 85 percent of those executed by it were female. As for the appeal process, few women attempted it: in France, 50 percent of the appeals to Parlement were by men, although only 20 percent of the accused were male.[54] The power of the courts trying witches, operating as they were under an extraordinary dispensation from normal legal procedure, gave these men exceptional power over women, and many of them used it to carry out sadistic sexual practices on the victims. Therefore when women asserted themselves, challenging this patriarchal system in any way, they were punished. It was apt that the Scotswoman Margaret Lister was described in her indictment as "a witch, a charmer, and a libber," "libber" meaning then what it means today.[55] That historians in the past could have ignored the blatant gender oppression of the witch persecutions and that some in the present continue to blame the victims, is as extraordinary as the historical facts themselves.

We have seen that by the witch hunt European women as a group were criminalized for the first time.[56] Their vulnerability to mass persecution was proven, their alleged propensity for evil dramatized. Although the oppression of European women had a long history before the sixteenth century, it

"came into its own" then. The lengths to which men in power would go in order to control women became more violent, more public, and more organized.

THE ULTIMATE form of torture was to be burned alive, and the most horrifying symbol of some men's power over all women and over some other men was public execution at the stake. That this ferocious type of punishment was commonly carried out on witches added to the sadistic nature of their treatment, compounding the sexual torture that many had already been subjected to.

That this torture was carried out in the presence of large crowds often numbering in the thousands gave it a ritual meaning beyond that of simple punishment. As a public purging of evil, it declared that the land was rid of demonic enemies and that not a trace of their hated presence remained. Once the condemned had been reduced to ashes, those very ashes would be thrown to the wind or scattered over moving water. But public witch executions were more even than a purging: they affirmed that the ruler who ordered them was godly, and even more important, that his power was greater than the forces of evil.[57] The fate of a poor German family illustrates this point.

Anna Pappenheimer, who was fifty-nine in 1600, was, as we have seen, the daughter of a grave digger, an outcast group in Germany at that time.[58] Marriage opportunities for outcast women being few, Anna had seized the chance to marry Paulus Pappenheimer, an itinerant privy cleaner, also a member of the underclass. In addition to being suspect as outcasts and as wanderers, the Pappenheimers were Lutherans in a Catholic land, the duchy of Bavaria.

But Anna had several things going for her. By the time she emerged into the historical record in 1600 she had been married for thirty-seven years, had borne seven children of whom three sons survived, and had despite constant poverty kept the family together. A respectable woman, one might think.

The Bavarian government thought otherwise. Its young duke, Maximilian, after an intensive Jesuit education, had become concerned about witchcraft in his duchy. As a teenager he had witnessed the trial of several women for witchcraft. Now, worried about unrest among his barons and city oligarchs and a rise in highway robbery and vandalism, he searched for a way to demonstrate his power. Already concerned that witches might have put a curse on him (his wife had not been able to conceive), he called for a

witch hunt. His theological advisers, threatened by the new Protestant movement, were eager to cooperate with him in every way. It was not enough that the Bavarian Council of State was already legislating about almost every aspect of its citizens' lives: "against the marriage of young Catholics into Protestant communities, against the sale of non-Catholic books, against mixed bathing, against dancing in the evenings, against extravagant weddings, against fortune-telling and superstition, against vagrancy and highway robbery."[59] Even though Bavaria was filled with ducal spies, still people did not obey these rules. What was needed, the duke decided, was a show trial, a public spectacle that would make it clear to all his subjects, high and low, who was in charge in Bavaria.

When the Pappenheimers, already seen as polluters of society, were named as witches by a condemned criminal, they were duly arrested and brought to Munich. Held in separate cells, they were questioned repeatedly but would not admit to sorcery. Tortured with the strappado, however, they began to break. Anna finally confessed to flying on a piece of wood to meet the devil, having sex with her demon lover, murdering children in order to make an ointment from their bodies, making a demonic powder from dead children's hands. The ointment and powder, she admitted, were used to carry out murder. After a long, well-publicized trial, the entire Pappenheimer family was convicted of witchcraft.

The execution of the four adult Pappenheimers drew a crowd of thousands from the surrounding countryside. First, they were stripped so that their flesh could be torn off by red-hot pincers. Then Anna's breasts were cut off. The bloody breasts were forced into her mouth and then into the mouths of her two grown sons. (This had not been the custom until Duke Maximilian's time.) A contemporary torture manual recorded that "the female breasts are extremely sensitive, on account of the refinement of the veins."[60] This fiendish punishment was thus used as a particular torment to women. But it was more than physical torture: by rubbing the severed breasts around her sons' lips, the executioner made a hideous parody of her role as mother and nurse, imposing an extreme humiliation on her.

Now a procession formed, over half a mile long, led by a municipal official carrying a large crucifix. Legal officers wearing red and blue tunics, the four Kings of the Night representing the four quarters of the city, the ducal chief justice, and a crowd of clergy helped to fill the ranks. Church bells pealed to celebrate this triumph of Christianity over Satan; the crowd sang hymns; vendors hawked pamphlets describing the sins of the victims.

Meanwhile, Anna's chest cavity bled. As the carts lurched along, the injured prisoners were in agony. Nonetheless, they were forced at one point to get down from the carts and kneel before a cross, to confess their sins. Then they were offered wine to drink, a strangely humane act in the midst of this barbaric ritual.

One can hope that between the wine and loss of blood, the Pappenheimers were losing consciousness. They had not been granted the "privilege" of being strangled before being burned, but in keeping with the extreme brutality of these proceedings, they would be forced to endure the very flames.

Further torments awaited Paulus. A heavy iron wheel was dropped on his arms until the bones snapped. Despite the fact that it was Anna who was the witch, not he, she was spared the wheel, because it was never used on women. Then Paulus was impaled on a stick driven up through his anus. By this brutish parody of anal intercourse, he received not only intense physical torture but also was branded a sodomite; again, as with Anna, he was subjected to a humiliation that canceled out what his life had really been.

The four Pappenheimers were then tied to the stakes, the brushwood pyres were set aflame, and they were burned to death. Their eleven-year-old son was forced to watch the dying agonies of his parents and brothers. We know that Anna was still alive when the flames leapt up around her, for Hansel cried out, "My mother is squirming!" The boy was executed three months later.[61]

After the Pappenheimers' show trial, there was less unrest in Duke Maximilian's lands. But even this fact did not ease the pressure on suspects: as late as 1631 there were still large numbers of accused witches in his prisons.[62]

The Pappenheimer case can serve as an introduction to how the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century state intervened in the lives of individuals, women especially, using sexual references to underline the state's absolute rejection of certain persons. How the growing power of the state also changed gender relations within European society fundamentally will be examined next.

Witchcraze

A New History of the European Witch Hunts

Anne Llewellyn Barstow

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Witches' Sabbath. Fear of the magical powers of village midwives and healers led to the demonization of women's curative skills. Here, active, powerful, and threatening figures are shown concocting an ointment. Hans Baldung Grien, Strassburg, 1514. Courtesy of Dover Pictorial Archive Series.

CHAPTER SIX

From Healers into Witches

At this day it is indifferent to say in the English tongue, "she is a witch" or "she is a wise woman."

—*Reginald Scot,* Discoverie of Witchcraft

THOUGH WOMEN were not in fact riding broomsticks or having sex with the devil, what were they doing? Judging from their neighbors' reactions, the activities of at least some sixteenth-century women had a beneficent effect on their communities. Through healing, by both spells and potions, delivering babies, performing abortions, predicting the future, advising the lovelorn, cursing, removing curses, making peace between neighbors—the work of the village healer and her urban counterpart covered what we call magic as well as medicine. This work overlapped dangerously with the priest's job as well.

Much of women's power lay in their being perceived as able to manipulate magical forces. Exercising control in this way not only over the domestic world of women but when possible over men, they wielded influence through the "idiom of the supernatural."[1] Denied the ancient role of clergy or the newly emerging one of doctor, women drew on their own networks of information and skills inherited from their mothers to serve as privileged counselors and practitioners.

But power creates fear, and power based on magic can cause panic. The witch hunt records speak eloquently of the fear of the wise women that developed, especially in men. The role of healer, long respected and even seen as essential, became suspect. Believing that some women were powerful

enough even to threaten male sexuality, some segments of society began to carry out a terrible revenge on the magic-workers whom they suspected of having this control.

But before we analyze this demonizing of women healers, we must document the role of the wise woman in sixteenth-century society. The importance of this role in understanding the persecution of women for witchcraft cannot be overestimated: certain women were suspected of witchcraft, not because they were powerless, but precisely because they were seen to have a great deal of power. Because we know about folk healers mainly from court records in which they were accused of malevolent acts, we do not have accounts of healers perceived entirely as beneficent. One glimpses the positive aspects of their work, however, in their trial records.

At Nancy in Lorraine around 1580, according to the witch hunter Nicolas Remy, "a witch named Thenotte" was much in demand as a healer.[2] Called in by a neighboring woman who was ill, Thenotte diagnosed that the disease had been sent by Saint Fiacre, who must be appeased by gifts and a pilgrimage to his shrine. She offered to undertake this journey for a fee. As Remy told it,

> When the price of her services had been settled, she first measured the sick woman cross-wise with a piece of waxed linen, and then folded the linen a certain number of times and placed it in her bosom as if for safety. For the whole of the following night she kept watch before the door of the sick woman's house, and at the break of day set out on her way without ever uttering a word. When she came to the shrine of S. Fiacre she entered and set fire to the linen, and with the wax that dropped from it traced figures in the form of a cross on the steps of the High Altar; and then went out and walked three times round the chapel, the linen meanwhile giving out spluttering and violet coloured flames. . . . And having performed all this, she returned to the town.

Thenotte thus utilized folk magic in a Christian setting in order to heal. Although Remy, who claimed to have sent eight hundred witches to the stake (and I find no reason to doubt him), referred to Thenotte as a witch, he mentions no accusations or trial connected with her. Thenotte, therefore, practiced her remunerative profession unharmed.

From Carlo Ginzburg we learn of an even more successful healer, Lucia, "the witch of Ghiai," but one whose career was already threatened.[3]

When in 1614 one of her clients, Franceschina, was reproved by a judge because she knew "that it was forbidden and a sin to go to such people" as Lucia, Franceschina replied, "I believe she is not a witch, but she punishes witches; and then too I went because many people go to her to have signs made over them, and they even come from beyond the mountains." Lucia was seen as one who could protect from witchcraft, performing countermagic. Giving an orthodox coloring to her practices, she told Franceschina, "I cannot say [who bewitched you] because the bishop has given me license to make signs over rich and poor without revealing their names, but even though I cannot reveal the names I will give you a clue: you have quarreled with a woman, and she has cast a spell over you." And then Lucia made signs over her, "with two rosaries and two crucifixes which she keeps in a small box, and also with a coral that had been sent to her by the Pope." Lucia too, despite the appellation "witch," practiced as a diviner unharmed, perhaps by claiming connections in high places.

These women, both called witches, in fact functioned in their communities as healers, to which Lucia added the ability to divine who was a witch. Confusing as these professional roles seem to us, the women and men who filled them were essential to their world. Finding one term to encompass their various roles, however, is tricky. The frequent reference in current witchcraft literature to them all as "midwives" is misleading and too narrow. Just in regard to their healing function, women, in addition to serving as gynecologists, practiced also as barbers (chiefly blood-letters), surgeons (mainly bone-setters), physicians (diagnosticians),[4] and apothecaries (herbalists). When we add to these medical roles those of diviner, necromancer, curser, and countermagician, we see the dynamic possibilities for the cunning woman: in a world where neither healing nor therapy were professionalized in our sense of the word, she had the possibility of wielding considerable power. Healer, expert on all matters pertaining to sex, *and* prophetess, she could be labeled "magic-worker," for the basis of her power in all these areas *was perceived to be* the power of magic.[5] The term *healer* alone does not imply for us the magical aspect of the role, yet it is the description most often used in the literature. "Healer-diviner" perhaps best describes the broad range of most of the cunning folk.

Yet it matters what we call these village experts, because all of their roles eventually became suspect of witchery. Prophets, charmers, conjurors, wizards, treasure finders, dowsers, astrologers, exorcists, spell-casters, all who worked through supernatural, magical means were vulnerable to

charges of witchcraft and did in fact turn up in trial records. Note how Robert Burton mixed them: "Sorcerers are too common; cunning men, wizards, and white witches, as they call them, in every village, which, if they be sought unto, will help almost all infirmities."[6] Attempts to separate out these magic-workers from, on the one hand, doctors or priests or, on the other, "witches" only forces modern distinctions onto sixteenth-century practices,[7] because they all used magic. An example of its pervasiveness occurred in 1695 at Salem, Massachusetts Bay Colony, when a group of young girls began to show hysterical symptoms; the doctor who examined them considered at length and then pronounced, "The evil hand is upon them."[8]

Priests, although quick to condemn magic used in folk practice, were dependent on magic for much of their own ritual and remedies. Catholics observed the miracle of transubstantiation every time they attended Mass and were offered a variety of magical cures through holy water and saints' bones. It was through the ritual of exorcism, however, that the church brought them closest to the power of the village healer. A dramatic example, found in Boguet's treatise, describes how a priest, in trying to exorcise two demons out of Rollande du Vernois, forced holy water down her throat, tried to feed her consecrated bread, and burned paper with a demon's name on it over an incensed fire.[9] In the diocese of Modena, priests performed Masses and baptisms over magical objects, such as magnets and potions, that both laity and clergy then used for love magic.[10]

Popes were not immune from dependency on magic: when Pope John XXII feared he was being poisoned, he procured a magic snakeskin to detect poison in his food and drink.[11] When Pope Urban VIII was cursed by the Spanish ambassador, he ordered an exorcism at the Vatican with bell, book, and candle, presided over by the hermeticist and priest Tommaso Campanella; the exorcism apparently succeeded, for the pope survived.[12] Urban also used Campanella to ward off the evil effects of eclipses.[13]

Many Protestant clergy carried on successful healer-diviner practices; one Anglican clergyman, Richard Napier, working as a therapist and healer, saw in his lifetime about sixty thousand patients, over five hundred of whom believed they were bewitched and twenty-seven of whom he confirmed as such.[14] Some Scottish clergy, too, practiced magic, believing they could clear the devil from church by sprinkling holy water and ringing the bells.[15]

The churches' attitude toward folk healers was rent with ambivalence. Clergy themselves turned to diviners: the churchwardens of Thatcham in England inquired of a cunning woman to learn who had stolen their communion cloth; in Modena in 1559 the Franciscan Girolamo Azzolini turned to a witch during his illness, absolved her *for healing him,* and then recommended her services to his parishioners. Azzolini was himself an exorcist and a witch-finder, but he recognized the limits of his abilities and the superior power of this witch.[16]

Unfazed by their own complicity in relying on magic, the churches still insisted on attacking folk healers. These latter were in fact the priests' competition. Under whatever name, these women and men were looked up to and depended on, as all healers are. But the women had a special edge over the clergy: as the authorities on matters of sex, they asserted what control was possible over fertility, conception, successful pregnancy, and safe childbirth.[17] They cured male impotence and female infertility, performed abortions, provided contraceptives, and advised on problems of nursing, thus affecting the birth rate, a power that the churches were determined to wrest from them.[18]

A classic case of this professional jealousy was recorded in the *Malleus Maleficarum:* having described how a midwife had killed more than forty children "by sticking a needle through the crowns of their heads into their brains, as they came out from the womb," the authors then described what was to them an even worse crime: "For when they do not kill the child, they blasphemously offer it to the devil in this manner. As soon as the child is born, the midwife, if the mother is not herself a witch, carries it out of the room on the pretext of warming it, raises it up, and offers it to the Prince of Devils, that is Lucifer, and to all the devils. And this is done by the kitchen fire."[19] The midwife's role was interpreted as a crime because of professional jealousy; the midwife usurped the role of the parish priest. Because of her favored position as female healer, she was able to seize the child first and "baptize" it in the name of the devil, while the priest ran from the rectory, arriving too late.

A deep male jealousy pervades this story, fed by the exclusion of all men (including fathers) from the birthing room.[20] Left to imagine what went on inside, they sometimes responded with wild imaginings, as the authors of the *Malleus* did. Male fear runs through the *Malleus,* culminating in descriptions of how a witch can cause a man to become impotent or to lose his genitals; a particularly lewd story describes where the village priest lost his penis.[21]

There was more of a "woman's world" in the sixteenth century than today,[22] and part of the female healer's power lay in that fact. Although well-to-do urban wives consulted male physicians as well as cunning women,[23] most women turned to female healers by necessity as well as by choice. As there were few doctors in rural Europe until the nineteenth century, village

healers provided the medical care. They possessed a fund of knowledge about cures handed down from generation to generation, constantly improved by the empirical methods of observation, trial, and evaluation. Their work consisted mainly of prescribing herbal cures, practicing midwifery, and performing rituals of divination and healing.

Many of the herbal remedies developed by woman healers still have their place in modern pharmacology.[24] The village wise woman used ergot to relieve labor pain and to hasten labor, and belladonna to inhibit miscarriage. Digitalis is said to have been discovered by an English witch.[25]

In addition to empirical methods, these women depended also on rituals based on magic. Incantations, the wearing of amulets, and the repeating of charms were universal practices. In order for herbs to be efficacious, as one gathered them one must say five Lord's Prayers, five Hail Mary's, and the Creed. Faith in verbal formulae was strong; one Goodwife Veazy, expert in the cure of canker-worm, intoned this supplication three times: "In the name of God I begin and in the name of God I do end. Thou canker-worm begone from hence, in the name of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost." Afterward she applied a little honey and pepper to the afflicted part. Other magical methods included girdle-measuring (the band would shorten if the patient was bewitched) and boiling eggs in urine.[26]

David Sabean provides a dramatic example of magical healing in describing the drastic cure for an epidemic of foot-and-mouth disease undertaken by a German village in 1796: a group of men sacrificed the communal bull by burying it alive, while the villagers hurried to bring buckets of earth from their yards to pour on the dying animal. When criticized for their cruelty, they said explicitly that the cure would not have worked had it been done any other way (i.e., had they killed the bull with a merciful blow and then buried him). The magic, which is to say the power, lay in the precise ritual technique.[27]

Midwives used magical techniques for childbirth, fertility, and contraception: opening doors or chests to open the womb in prolonged labor, and even arranging for a woman to conceive without the participation of a man—by drinking horse's semen.[28] Wearing amulets containing powders could either enhance or prevent conception; the sorceress Mary Woods gave such a charm to the countess of Essex to enable her to conceive. Pierre Clergue, priest and Don Juan of the village of Montaillou, used an herb wrapped in linen as a contraceptive. When being interrogated by an inquisitor, his mistress Beatrice de Planissoles reminisced that Pierre

> had a long cord which he used to put round my neck while we made love; and this thing or herb at the end of the cord used to hang down between my breasts, as far as the opening of my stomach [vagina]. When the priest wanted to get up and leave the bed, I would take the thing from around my neck and give it back to him. It might happen that he wanted to know me carnally twice or more in a single night; in that case the priest would ask me, before uniting his body with mine, "Where is the herb?"
>
> I was easily able to find it because of the cord round my neck; I would put the "herb" in his hand and then he himself would place it at the opening of my stomach, still with the cord between my breasts.

Pierre may have procured this valuable amulet-pessary from the prostitutes he visited in the town or from a village wise woman. Or as a priest who was also a healer-diviner, perhaps he constructed it himself. Wherever he had acquired it, he knew its value. When Beatrice asked him to leave the herb with her, he refused, because then she might use it to have safe sex with another man! Whatever its power, whether as pessary or magical amulet, it worked: Beatrice, who bore four children by other men, never conceived in the years of her passionate affair with Pierre.[29]

Often, when asked to diagnose illness, cunning women came to the conclusion that the person or animal was bewitched, and used their powers to identify the bewitcher. They were known, in fact, for their ability to be witch finders, what Africans today call witch doctors.[30] Consider the *benandanti* for example: they were not best known for their claim to battle with witches but rather for their ability to recognize witches and to cure those who had been bewitched.[31] Having identified the source of the trouble, some healers worked to reconcile the spell-caster and his or her victim. In Scotland, for instance, when Magdalen Blair was asked what ailed a sick man, she divined that Issobel Bennet ("of ill fame") was the cause. She advised him to "take a grip of [Issobel's] coat tail and drink a pint of ale with her And crave his health from her thrie tymes for the Lords sake and he would be well." We cannot know the outcome of this psychosomatic remedy, because, unfortunately, "he did it not." Magdalen might have been rewarded for her efforts two centuries earlier, but this conversation took place in the mid-seventeenth century; Magdalen was put on trial as a witch, and Issobel was banished.[32]

Other witch finders specialized in preventing persons from becoming witches. When midwife Caterina Domenatta of Monfalcone, Aquileia, delivered a baby feet first, she convinced the parents to let her place the child on a spit and turn it three times over the fire; only this extreme measure could protect it from becoming a witch.[33]

Whether the methods were empirical or bizarre, people made no clear distinction between natural or supernatural means.[34] This fact gave the cunning woman her great range of power. The common people of Europe clung to their folk healers, in preference to priests and doctors, until the nineteenth century. They saw that priests could not help during birth, and that many patients of doctors died. Besides, the cunning woman, with her intimate knowledge of her neighbors, was often an effective therapist, a comforting adviser. And her rituals, placing the sick ones at the center of attention, often enlisting the entire family for support, eased their minds as well as their bodies.[35] When Thenotte kept watch all night outside the sick woman's house, she focused the neighborhood's attention on the patient's suffering, a process of support that might in itself cause healing.

The effect of the healer-diviners on their communities cannot be underestimated.[36] One English healer had forty customers a week;[37] it was said that people traveled twenty to forty miles to consult a witch. Elizabeth Cracklow of Oxfordshire had been "sent for to divers places for the curing of people"; Margaret Neale of Aldeburgh, who healed diseases by prayer, "hath recourse of people to her far and wide."[38] People came "even from beyond the mountains" to consult Lucia of Ghiai. When the need was desperate, healers were sought out even when they were in prison.[39]

One measure of their success was the considerable wealth that some earned: Michele Soppe of the Friuli, who claimed he had healed more than forty persons, "was called to give help almost weekly" and had "earned more than a hundred ducats in this way."[40] The necromancer Anna la Rossa of Udine was said to earn more than two hundred ducats a year; "a great multitude of people" came to see her. Not only were common people loyal to these healers but kings, princes, and archbishops sought them out.[41] In Protestant as well as Catholic lands, in city as well as country, the cunning people held sway.

IT WAS THE VERY nature of their power that, ultimately, did them in. Magic is a two-edged weapon, neutral by nature, capable of being focused either for good or for ill: "she who can cure, can kill" is how people put it,[42]

and when they said this, they feared the magic-worker as much as they respected her. As the churches' campaigns against folk healing ("superstition") progressed during the Reformations, this double gift became more dangerous to possess, more likely to be identified with Satan's power and the work of his demons.

Healers had always been vulnerable to this reverse charge. Muchembled has provided us with an early account, in the story of the widow Perrée Pingret.[43] In 1446 in France's Département du Nord people came from afar to consult Perrée, who could provide an ointment to bring back a lover or a ritual to improve a marriage or get rid of a husband. Many consulted her for mental as well as physical healing. Thirty-eight-year-old Catherine Jolie traveled from a neighboring village ostensibly for healing, but her true purpose may have been to get help with her marriage to sixty-year-old Mahieu Crepin. Perrée prepared for her a bath of herbs, a magical remedy still relied on today in various parts of the world.[44] After the bath, Catherine's condition improved, but her husband turned black; now Perrée was suspected of sorcery. She was also accused of killing a married woman in her village and her own daughter-in-law. This successful healer was tried on charges of witchcraft; the outcome is not known.

Muchembled observes that the healer was more likely to be perceived as a witch by her neighbors, whereas people from outside the community would see her gifts as beneficent: "One always goes to a stranger to have a spell lifted"—at least in the Nord. This information reinforces Thomas's and Macfarlane's theory that most witchcraft outbreaks were caused by village tensions, that people accused their neighbors of sorcery while seeking the advice of the magic-worker who lived a few villages away.

Not only the healer-diviners, but also their followers, believed that what they were doing was good and necessary. When women named Sibillia and Pierina were interrogated by the Milanese Inquisition between 1384 and 1390, having already been tried by the secular court, they told them that they went every Thursday night to a meeting presided over by a Signora Oriente, to whom they paid homage. There they feasted on every sort of animal except the ass, because it was associated with Jesus, and afterward Oriente resurrected all the animals, bringing them back to life with her magic wand. She led her followers at night to break into the houses of the rich, where they stole food and drink, taking care to spare the homes of the poor, whom they blessed. She taught her followers to divine the future[45] and promised to receive them in paradise.[46]

In trying these women, the Inquisition had stumbled across, not the usual heretics, but members of an old fertility cult (hence the reverence for animals) who rode out at night on the "wild ride," dedicated elsewhere to the goddess Diana but centered here on a living woman, "Oriente." This particular group also had a touch of Robin Hood about it, robbing the rich while respecting the poor, an influence that Jeffrey Burton Russell speculates may have come from the Fraticelli or other fringe religious groups who practiced holy poverty. I suggest still another derivation: when Pierina witnessed that Oriente ruled the society as Christ ruled the world, she revealed a cult centered around a female leader seen as divine. Her claim was reminiscent of the Guglielmites, an earlier Milanese cult whose members believed that their female leader was a Christ figure.[47]

What matters most here, however, is Sibillia and Pierina's claim that what they did at Oriente's meetings was not a sin. The Inquisition disagreed, and sentenced them to wear two red crosses as penance. Brought to court again six years later, Sibillia again maintained that she had not confessed her actions because they were not sinful. This time the Inquisition condemned her of diabolism, and she was burned to death.[48] That this cult, remnant of a folk fertility rite and expression of the growing autonomy of Milanese women in matters of religion, did not conflict in Sibillia's mind with her Christian faith is suggestive of how little orthodox teachings had affected the laity of the late Middle Ages, even those living in a city with a powerful Catholic structure.

The case of Chiara Signorini, taken from Italian inquisitional records, illustrates well that people both feared yet depended on the magic-workers.[49] Chiara and her husband, tenant farmers near Modena, already enjoyed "a poor reputation as far as magical arts and witchcraft were concerned," when they were thrown off a plot of land belonging to the estate of Lady Margherita Pazzani. They had in fact been evicted before, by other masters, out of fear of the spells they cast, and were sinking deeper into poverty.

Yet when Lady Margherita became seriously ill, her relatives *turned to Chiara* to cure her, that is, to lift the spell. They, and later Margherita herself, asked the very person who they believed had caused Margherita's paralysis to heal her and promised the magic-worker land and goods if she succeeded. Chiara did indeed pray for and heal the lady, but when the promised goods were not delivered, she cursed Margherita again, and the paralysis returned.

Arrested in 1519 by order of the inquisitional vicar, she straightaway admitted that she had the power to place or take away spells, but that this gift came from God, through prayer. Chiara then grabbed the offensive by telling

the court that she was visited often by the Virgin Mary, who promised to carry out vengeance on Chiara's enemies.[50] She gave her soul and body to this beautiful lady in white, whom she worshiped by "kissing her outstretched arms all the way to the neck with great reverence and happiness, and felt her to be as soft as silk and very warm."

The inquisitor seized on this all too materialistic, unangelic vision and tried to twist it into an admission of demon worship. Subtly his questions set a trap that Chiara slipped into, even describing how she offered her firstborn baby, "raising her child up in her arms and offering it to Our Lady, surrendering its soul and body"[51]—exactly as witch-midwives were reported to offer the babies they delivered to the devil.

Already by 1519 this was seen by the courts as devil talk, as dangerous, heretical doctrine. Why would Chiara risk using the very language of witchcraft in such a setting? She probably had no other religious vocabulary to call on. Everyone knew that she never attended mass; Chiara's religion was folk religion, in which one bargained with God or the saints or, in this case, with the Virgin, promising to worship them if they would do favors, take revenge on enemies, make amends for injustices suffered. Her only religious instruction had come from an old woman who had taught her spells to cure sick livestock. She insisted (rashly) that the Virgin always did all that she asked. Clearly, Chiara did not know the language of her ecclesiastical judges, did not know how her words sounded to them. She could not hope to exonerate herself with such talk.

Because Chiara's drama was played out in an inquisitional court, there was another, final act: the use of torture, in this case, the strappado. Chiara was hoisted up by a rope, probably with weights attached to her feet, then dropped so suddenly that her joints might be dislocated. This method usually brought results, and Chiara was no exception. Soon she confessed to worshiping, not the Virgin, but the devil and being aided in *maleficium* by him. But as soon as she was released from the strappado, she took it all back.[52] With repeated torture they wore her down; although she denied to the end that she had attended the sabbat, still, her admission that the devil appeared to her in prison was enough to condemn her. In penitence she agreed never to call on the devil again.

Had Chiara been in a German court she would surely have been sentenced to death. Given the leniency of the Italian Inquisition in regard to punishment, however, she was sentenced to life imprisonment, prison being the Modena hospital for the poor.

It is believable that this passionate, outspoken, desperate woman might have called on not only the beautiful lady in white but also the devil. Hounded by poverty and repeatedly tricked by the wealthy families she worked for, she may have done as she finally admitted, "called upon the Devil in her despair." Had Chiara had the guidance of a priest, she might have used her magical gifts (seeing visions, hearing voices) to establish herself as an orthodox mystic. But the curses and cures that she dealt in were going out of style.

Throughout the account one senses a proud, imaginative soul, but one unable to deal with the inquisitor's subtleties—or with his demonology. Attend the sabbat, indeed! Chiara's devil was no Prince of Darkness presiding over a great orgy but came to her in the form of a twelve-year-old boy. In light of the newly emerging theology of devil worship, Chiara's folk religion of cures and countercurses looked like heresy and idolatry.

Other sixteenth-century witch trials document the growing suspicion of magic-workers. We saw that many persons whom Walpurga Hausmänin had befriended or attended as midwife turned on her later as the cause of their misfortune. Marguerite Peigne had cured some of her neighbors in Correnol, Switzerland, with herbs from her garden; it was *for this fact* (and the suspicion of hail-making) that she was convicted of witchcraft and banished within her home.[53] Isobel Young's magic had cured some of her Scottish neighbors, but this did not prevent nineteen of them from crying her out a witch; Isobel was hanged and burned. The Bavarian shepherd Chonradt Stocklin had cured men and animals who had been stricken by witches, yet his neighbors turned on him, burning him as a witch in 1586.[54] That such cases were rare before 1550 indicates a worsening in attitude toward healers, a new willingness of communities to turn against their magic-workers.

But one need not have been a healer or a witch finder to draw either the expectation of harming or, then, of curing. One quarrelsome Scottish woman, Elspeth Thomson, apparently built a fearsome reputation just by cursing.[55] Elspeth had a troubled relation with her husband's large family, and it is clear that they were afraid of her. When her sister-in-law's breast milk failed, she suspected Elspeth and therefore asked her to pray for her (that is, to lift the spell); Elspeth finally agreed, and all went well. When her brother-in-law Donald refused to cut peats for her, she retaliated by "getting the sight she desired of him" (putting a curse or possibly the evil eye on him); Donald was reported to say "that as ever before he was still feared for her and that they still discorded and he blamed her for all evil that befell him." When

Donald soon sickened and died, Elspeth's guilt was tested: she was made to touch the corpse, and "immediatle . . . the blood rushed forth at his nose, navel and ears and his corpse bled all the way to the burial place." Dire evidence was fast closing in around her.

Elspeth tried to be neighborly to other family members, offering her daughter as servant to one. But this gesture was refused, and the family in fear tried to shut her out; she was not invited to the birth or baptism of a niece (for fear she would hex the infant), and her own husband claimed that she was on friendly terms with the devil. Ultimately in 1671, when neighbors joined her affinal relatives (relatives by marriage) in accusing her of witchcraft, Elspeth was condemned and hanged.

Elspeth's position as an in-law in a large family was precarious to begin with—she seems to have had no blood relatives to stand up for her, and Larner speculates that she may have been an outsider to the village as well. The loneliness behind her anger over not being invited to the niece's birth and baptism is almost palpable. Yet loneliness and isolation do not necessarily lead to cursing. Somewhere Elspeth had learned the power of particular angry words and used them to lash back when she was hurt. For a woman to be outspoken and aggressive was not acceptable in Scotland's patriarchal society.

The record does not specify at just what point this lamentable state of affairs slipped over into a charge of witchcraft, but the situation was ripe for it: her very existence threatened the family. Yet not all the power lay with the accusers and the courts. Elspeth herself had power; her in-laws lived with a fear so strong that it might have caused the illnesses that they then blamed on her. When witch beliefs became strong enough, they locked a community into a self-fulfilling syndrome; one feared a person, one became sick with fear, thus one knew that that person was indeed a witch.

As for Elspeth's image of herself, whether she saw herself as a witch, Keith Thomas's observation is apropos: "some at least of the witches felt genuine hatred for those around them. Although their resort to cursing and banning was a substitute for real action, they may well have persuaded themselves that an access [to] supernatural power was helping their curses to take effect."[56] Like Chiara, Elspeth had no access to "real action"—legal counsel, protection by her natal family, or the support of the church. Again like Chiara, she protected herself with the only weapons she knew.

In some cases the fear of witchcraft became so great that it required neither cursers nor quarrelsome in-laws to galvanize a community. Thirteen-year-old Anna Catherina Weissenbuhler, an abandoned servant girl,

seems an unlikely person to turn three Württemberg villages upside down, but she did so in 1683, simply by claiming that she associated with witches.[57] She blamed a housewife in Gerlingen, one Madalena, who "had taken her often to the witches' dance by day and by night"; there she saw the devil, who "had a goat's foot, was completely black, and was not like a human." Like so many young girls, from Sweden to Salem, she accused an older woman. Madalena was known to be "an old nasty wife with a bad reputation."

Anna Catherina spoke freely about these contacts, perhaps even boasted of them to other children, thereby causing "a great scandal in the town and its territory." What people feared most was that she would contaminate others, would convert them to a belief in or even the practice of demon worship.

People soon rallied to defend their families against her. Turned out of the home where she worked, she was taken under the care of the municipal judge, who sent her to live with and be instructed by the schoolmaster. He soon wanted to be rid of her (parents threatened to remove their children from the school because of her), forbade her to speak to other children, ordered her to sit at a table alone. Soon his wife moved Anna Catherina's bed out of her parlor and into the infirmary, where she was the solitary occupant. The wife said she would get rid of her, even if they sent her to jail for doing so. Anna's own relatives in other villages refused to care for her. She had harmed no one (they said that she had stroked a cat that then became lame, and five hens on which she spat dropped dead, but she had caused no human injury), but she had frightened everyone just by talking about witches, by indicating a familiarity with them.[58]

Anna Catherina's isolation was even sharper than Elspeth Thomson's, for she was rejected by entire communities and was only a young teenager. Unlike the authorities elsewhere, who believed young girls' accusations against older women, the pastors of Gerlingen did not buy Anna's story about being taken to the sabbat; instead they had her searched for the devil's mark, which was found, thus proving that she, not the older woman, was the witch. Anna fell silent, refusing to answer her interrogator's questions any longer (her fate is not known). Sabean commented on her case, "It is not that weak, marginal people are witches but only that in a contest in which magic plays a role, the powerful win."[59] Anna was strong in her ability to panic others, but the very belief in magic that the village elders held gave them the power finally to silence her.

Increasingly, the healer could not win: when an herbalist in Lorraine doctored a man with a potion and his genitals disappeared, the lord of the land ordered her to restore them. She obliged with another, successful herb, but this act of healing was taken as proof positive of her witchery and she was put to death.[60]

Remy provided a classic story of this kind of betrayal of healers in the complex case of Nicolaea Stephana, which also shows how entire families of healers were destroyed.[61]

Nicolaea, a plague-ridder, claimed that she had learned that art from one Matthieu Amants, who had raped her and made her pregnant as payment for his instruction. Matthieu had recently been convicted as a witch (August 1587), when Nicolaea was hired to rid the castle of Dommartin of plague. Working efficiently, she quickly purged the buildings and was paid and dismissed. But Nicolaea hung around, a fatal mistake as it turned out. When the castellan's wife became ill, suspicion fell, of course, on the magic-worker and healer Nicolaea, who was threatened with beatings unless she healed the woman. She was faced with a quandary: if she succeeded, she proved that she had the power of a witch, for "such sicknesses can hardly be cured or assuaged except by the witch who caused them"; if the woman died, she would be blamed for her death. Given this no-win situation, Nicolaea vacillated.

Meanwhile her son, being held with her, realizing the danger they were in, tried to escape but was caught. He then turned on his mother, calling her a fraud and advising the castellan's men to beat her. As Remy retold it, "two brawny peasants did not cease to hammer and kick and pound and shake her, and finally to drag her to the fire, until she gave her promise to heal the woman at that very hour."[62]

The authorities were not finished with Nicolaea or her son. Allowing her to leave, they seized her at the castle gate and imprisoned her. Interrogated by a judge (Remy?) who had already "inquired into her life and behavior," she confessed to having made the woman ill. And although she had healed her victim, still she was put to death; she and her son were burned together at the stake.

This case illustrates the cat-and-mouse game played by a judge with a peasant woman; probably from the time she was associated with Matthieu Amants, she was under suspicion. From then on, no matter how well she served her community, ridding it of plague and curing the castellan's wife, she was doomed, no matter what she did. It also shows the sexual bind of a woman who had been raped: although she was victim in that act, still it was she who bore the onus of the illegitimate birth that resulted from it, in a time that was beginning to punish out-of-wedlock births.

Often when the healer herself was named as the bewitcher it was up to her to lift the spell. The extreme danger of this process is illustrated in the case of Reyne Percheval. When the entire household of alderman Jean Parmentier was bewitched, they suspected their neighboring healer Reyne, who gave them a potion to drink that would lift the spell, with strict instructions not to imbibe it in their own home. They complied, but as Jean began to drink it he fell in a faint; his wife screamed, and Reyne came running. Struggling to help, Reyne was now taken for a witch for sure. Coming to, Jean forbade Reyne to come nearer and threw a burning ember in her face. His wife joined in, beating Reyne with the embers, but the healer made no attempt to defend herself. Reyne was brought to trial for witchcraft.

The life of the Scottish midwife Margaret Lang demonstrates the way in which medical skill and spiritual gifts mixed in one woman's life, and what a dangerous mix it was. Margaret lived in the Scottish village of Erskine near Paisley, was married, and had a grown daughter.[63] Known for her piety, she would walk miles to attend communion services in the neighboring villages, not satisfied with the annual eucharist offered in each parish. But Margaret was more than pious, she was an ecstatic. After she had been at prayer, she would throw stools about the house in a frenzy and "raged as if she were possessed," and when she gave witness to her faith, she was said to speak "like an angel."[64] She had offered to enable a neighbor to see the woman's dead mother and sister, showing that she practiced necromancy, and she was clairvoyant, correctly prophesying her own violent death.

Margaret earned her living as a midwife who was seen as "esteemed" and "sagacious and exact in her business," and who might have managed safely to continue her double role as healer and charismatic had not the young daughter of the local laird begun to have fits. While possessed, Christian Shaw accused Margaret and two dozen others of bewitching her and of conspiring with the devil to kill her. The year was 1697; by that time witch accusations in Scotland had a very long history and were, in fact, diminishing, but this story shows that they could still cause panic in a community. Eleven-year-old Christian could have modeled her accusations on a number of already famous bewitchings of children by older women: the Fairfax children in Yorkshire, Grace Sowerbutts in Lancastershire, the Pacy girls at Bury St. Edmunds, the demented girls of Salem in New England, Loyse Maillat a century before in Franche-Comté.[65] Christian did not require originality to send seven adults to the gallows, for her society was ready to believe children against adults, especially against mature women.

Once Christian had named Margaret—"Pinched Maggie," she called her—others came forward to accuse her. They claimed that she had been present at witch gatherings at Kilmalcolm and in the orchard of Christian Shaw's manor house. Because of similar testimony given independently by witnesses, it seems clear that *something* was going on at the Shaws' and that most of the accused (all working-class folk) had met at nocturnal gatherings. Whether they met to plot against persons representing the gentry like Christian Shaw or for their own entertainment, mainly sexual, is impossible to say, but Margaret and the other accused persons were a fellowship. They practiced magic, using talents that the church not only denied recognition but condemned.

But there were even more damaging charges against Margaret, that she had spoken to James Millar's child on the day the child died and had caused the death of a young servant woman. In court, Margaret gave eloquent speeches in self-defense, "which neither divine, nor lawyer, could reasonably mend"; her very eloquence, however, was looked upon as one of the strongest proofs of her guilt.[66] Despite a full denial of dealings with the devil, Margaret was condemned to be hanged, then burned. The tragedy did not end there, however: Margaret's daughter was soon implicated and arrested. Several years later she still languished in prison; her fate is not known.

On her way to the gallows Margaret made an unexpected confession: that long ago she had committed the sin of "unnatural lust."[67] We are left to imagine what this transgression was: fornication, lesbianism, masturbation? In any case, Margaret admitted that out of guilt over it she had accepted a pact with the devil. After the executions, she was singled out from the other victims to be called "that great impostor . . . a great masterpiece of the Devil."[68] Perhaps because she had been respected as a midwife and churchwoman, her apostasy cut deeper than most.

It is clear from these accounts that the healers thought of themselves as doing good, but this point needs to be made more fully. In showing how Remy and other witch hunters forced the label of black magic onto the practitioners of white magic, Delcambre explained that the witches "really thought they were endowed with divine gifts, and those who consulted them shared this opinion."[69] Many, such as Maria Medica of Brescia and Lucia of Ghiai, healed with holy oil, orthodox prayers, rosaries, and crucifixes; remember, Lucia even used a piece of coral sent her by the pope. Joan Tyrry of Somerset protested that "her doings in healing of man and beast, by the power of God taught to her by the . . . fairies, be both godly and good." Joan Warden of Cambridgeshire, when charged with being a cunning woman,

protested that "she doth not use any charms, but that she doth use ointments and herbs to cure many diseases."[70]

The *benandante* and necromancer Florida Basili affirmed, "If it wasn't for us benandanti, witches would devour children even in their cradles." Many of her neighbors admired her for being able to talk with the dead, but eventually they reported her to their confessors and even accused her of having the evil eye—that is, of being a witch who dries up mothers' milk and *who eats little children.* Here we see the reversal, from one who saves to one who destroys. Other *benandanti* too had boasted of how they protected their communities and the crops. But *benandanti* were compromised from the start: their society believed both that children born with a caul were condemned to become witches *and* that these same children were destined to be *benandanti,* that is, to fight against witches.[71] Given this dichotomy, the *benandante* walked a fine line, increasingly forced to protest his or her innocence and good intentions.

Perhaps Margery Skelton of Essex summed it up: when accused of witchcraft she maintained that what she had in fact done "with praying of her prayers" was that she had healed six persons.[72]

The frequent mention of the cunning women's prayers points up how closely these women pressed into the priests' territory. No doubt some of these women had spiritual gifts that would have led them into the priesthood—if they had been allowed in. We must see in many of these careers of women healers and prophets the frustration of women who could have accomplished more if they had had institutional backing.[73]

A further proof of this point is found in the number of visionary women who gave sermons, although preaching was strictly forbidden to women except in a few of the radical Protestant sects.[74] Our examples are all from bewitched women, those who engaged in the reverse side of magic, claiming that they were its victims, but who nonetheless used the experience of magical possession to gain attention and authority in their society. Young Christian Shaw is an example, preaching to crowds in her living room while claiming to be bewitched by Margaret Lang. The nun Louise Capeau, at Aix-en-Provence in 1611, while possessed by the devil Verrine, preached every day in the grotto of Saint Baume; her sermons on the Virgin Mary and the imminence of the Day of Judgment were so effective that one hearer claimed God was converting "soules by the Divell!" The teenaged French demoniac Nicole Obry was the conduit through whom the demon Beelzebub spoke, attacking Protestants at the cathedral of Laon.[75]

It was a terrible irony for the healers when, instead of being supported, they began to be attacked. The noted Puritan divine William Perkins of Cambridge was convinced that *all* the works of wise men or wise women were of the devil. Whether the patient was healed or cursed, it mattered not; they must be punished, "because they deny God, and are confederates with Satan." It was the element of magic that Perkins condemned: "all Diviners, Charmers, Juglers, all Wizards, commonly called wise men and wise women; yea, whosoever doe any thing (knowing what they doe) which cannot be effected by nature or art." And it was the successful healer whom he feared most, because people would be persuaded by her: "but it were a thousand times better for the land, if all Witches, *but especially the blessing Witch* might suffer death."[76]

Though both the public and the church were uneasy about these cases of possession, the work of wise women was mostly seen as good and as essential to their world. Lacking doctors or therapists, villagers and the urban poor depended on them in a crisis of life and death. Many women had taken up the practice of magic because it supported them and gave them standing and power in their communities. As the church's and the state's power to intervene in daily life grew, however, the role of *sage-femme* became riskier; always suspect because of the double-edged nature of magical power and the general suspicion of women, cunning women were now hounded by the authorities. Reginald Scot told about a male juggler at Brandon who performed transferred magic and won fame for it. Scot observed that if an old woman had done it, she would have been burned for a witch.[77] It is this change from sought-after healer to hunted witch that is important to our story.