# CALIBAN AND THE WITCH

## WOMEN, THE BODY AND PRIMITIVE ACCUMULATION

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# The Great Witch-Hunt in Europe

Une bête imparfaicte, sans foy, sans crainte, sans costance.
(French 17th-century saying about women)

Down from the waiste they are Centaurs,
Though Women all above,
But to the girdle do the gods inherit,
Beneath is all the fiends;
There is hell, there is darkness,
There is the sulphurous pit,
Burning, scalding, stench, consumption.
(Shakespeare, *King Lear*)

You are the true Hyenas, that allure us with the fairness of your skins and when folly has brought us within your reach, you leap upon us. You are the traitors of Wisdom, the impediment to Industry... the clogs to Virtue and the goads that drive us to all vices, impiety and ruin. You are the Fool's Paradise, the wiseman's Plague and the Grand Error of Nature (Walter Charleton, *Ephesian Matron,* 1659).

## Introduction

The witch-hunt rarely appears in the history of the proletariat. To this day, it remains one of the most understudied phenomena in European history[1] or, rather, world history, if we consider that the charge of devil worshipping was carried by missionaries and conquistadors to the "New World" as a tool for the subjugation of the local populations.

That the victims, in Europe, were mostly peasant women may account for the historians' past indifference towards this genocide, an indifference that has bordered on complicity, since the elimination of the witches from the pages of history has contributed to trivializing their physical elimination at the stake, suggesting that it was a phenomenon of minor significance, if not a matter of folklore.

Even those who have studied the witch-hunt (in the past almost exclusively men) were often worthy heirs of the 16th-century demonologists. While deploring the exter-

mination of the witches, many have insisted on portraying them as wretched fools, afflicted by hallucinations, so that their persecution could be explained as a process of "social therapy," serving to reinforce neighborly cohesion (Midelfort 1972: 3) or could be described in medical terms as a "panic," a "craze," an "epidemic," all characterizations that exculpate the witch hunters and depoliticize their crimes.

Examples of the misogyny that has inspired the scholarly approach to the witch-hunt abound. As Mary Daly pointed out as late as 1978, much of the literature on this topic has been written from "a woman-executing viewpoint" that discredits the victims of the persecution by portraying them as social failures (women "dishonored" or frustrated in love), or even as perverts who enjoyed teasing their male inquisitors with their sexual fantasies. Daly cites the example of F. G. Alexander's and S.T. Selesnick's *The History of Psychiatry* where we read that:

> ...accused witches oftentimes played into the hands of the persecutors. A witch relieved her guilt by confessing her sexual fantasies in open court; at the same time, she achieved some erotic gratification by dwelling on all the details before her male accusers. These severely emotionally disturbed women were particularly susceptible to the suggestion that they harbored demon and devils and would confess to cohabiting with evil spirits, much as disturbed individuals today, influenced by newspaper headlines, fantasy themselves as sought-after murderers (Daly 1978: 213).

There have been exceptions to this tendency to blame the victims, both among the first and second generation of witch-hunt scholars. Among the latter we should remember Alan Macfarlane (1970), E.W. Monter (1969, 1976, 1977), and Alfred Soman (1992). But it was only in the wake of the feminist movement that the witch-hunt emerged from the underground to which it had been confined, thanks to the feminists' identification with the witches, who were soon adopted as a symbol of female revolt (Bovenschen 1978: 83ff).[2] Feminists were quick to recognize that hundreds of thousands of women could not have been massacred and subjected to the cruelest tortures unless they posed a challenge to the power structure. They also realized that such a war against women, carried out over a period of at least two centuries, was a turning point in the history of women in Europe, the "original sin" in the process of social degradation that women suffered with the advent of capitalism, and a phenomenon, therefore, to which we must continually return if we are to understand the misogyny that still characterizes institutional practice and male-female relations.

Marxist historians, by contrast, even when studying the "transition to capitalism," with very few exceptions, have consigned the witch-hunt to oblivion, as if it were irrelevant to the history of the class struggle. Yet, the dimensions of the massacre should have raised some suspicions, as hundreds of thousands of women were burned, hanged, and tortured in less than two centuries.[3] It should also have seemed significant that the witch-hunt occurred simultaneously with the colonization and extermination of the populations of the New World, the English enclosures, the beginning of the slave trade, the enactment of "bloody laws" against vagabonds and beggars, and

it climaxed in that interregnum between the end of feudalism and the capitalist "take off" when the peasantry in Europe reached the peak of its power but, in time, also consummated its historic defeat. So far, however, this aspect of primitive accumulation has truly remained a secret.[4]

## Witch-burning times and the State Initiative

What has not been recognized is that the witch-hunt was one of the most important events in the development of capitalist society and the formation of the modern proletariat. For the unleashing of a campaign of terror against women, unmatched by any other persecution, weakened the resistance of the European peasantry to the assault launched against it by the gentry and the state, at a time when the peasant community was already disintegrating under the combined impact of land privatization, increased taxation, and the extension of state control over every aspect of social life. The witch-hunt deepened the divisions between women and men, teaching men to fear the power of women, and destroyed a universe of practices, beliefs, and social subjects whose existence was incompatible with the capitalist work discipline, thus redefining the main elements of social reproduction. In this sense, like the contemporary attack on "popular culture," and the "Great Confinement" of paupers and vagabonds in work-houses and correction houses, the witch-hunt was an essential aspect of primitive accumulation and the "transition" to capitalism.

Later, we will see what fears the witch-hunt dispelled for the European ruling class and what were its effects for the position of women in Europe. Here I want to stress that, contrary to the view propagated by the Enlightenment, the witch-hunt was not the last spark of a dying feudal world. It is well established that the "superstitious" Middle Ages did not persecute any witches; the very concept of "witchcraft" did not take shape until the late Middle Ages, and never, in the "Dark Ages," were there mass trials and executions, despite the fact that magic permeated daily life and, since the late Roman Empire, it had been feared by the ruling class as a tool of insubordination among the slaves.[5]

In the 7th and 8th centuries, the crime of *maleficium* was introduced in the codes of the new Teutonic kingdoms, as it had been in the Roman code. This was the time of the Arab conquest that, apparently, inflamed the hearts of the slaves in Europe with the prospect of freedom, inspiring them to take arms against their owners.[6] Thus, this legal innovation may have been a reaction to the fear generated among the elites by the advance of the "Saracens" who were, reputedly, great experts in the magical arts (Chejne 1983: 115–32). But, at this time, under the name of *maleficium*, only magical practices were punished that inflicted damage to persons and things, and the church criticized those who believed in magical deeds.[7]

The situation changed by the mid the 15th century. It was in this age of popular revolts, epidemics, and incipient feudal crisis that we have the first witch trials (in Southern France, Germany, Switzerland, Italy), the first descriptions of the Sabbat,[8] and the development of the doctrine of witchcraft, by which sorcery was declared a form of heresy and the highest crime against God, Nature, and the State (Monter 1976: 11–17). Between 1435 and 1487, twenty-eight treatises on witchcraft were written (Monter

1976: 19) culminating, on the eve of Columbus' voyage, with the publication in 1486 of the infamous *Malleus Maleficarum* (*The Hammer of Witches*) that, following a new papal Bull on the subject, Innocent VIII's *Summis Desiderantes* (1484), indicated that the Church considered witchcraft a new threat. However, the intellectual climate that prevailed during the Renaissance, especially in Italy, was still characterized by skepticism towards anything relating to the supernatural. Italian intellectuals, from Ludovico Ariosto, to Giordano Bruno, and Nicoló Machiavelli looked with irony at the clerical tales concerning the deeds of the devil, stressing, by contrast (especially in the case of Bruno), the nefarious power of gold and money. *"Non incanti ma contanti"* ("not charms but coins") is the motto of a character in one of Bruno's comedies, summing up the perspective of the intellectual elite and the aristocratic circles of the time (Parinetto 1998: 29–99).

It was after the mid-16th century, in the very decades in which the Spanish conquistadors were subjugating the American populations, that the number of women tried as witches escalated, and the initiative for the persecution passed from the Inquisition to the secular courts (Monter 1976: 26). Witch-hunting reached its peak between 1580 and 1630, in a period, that is, when feudal relations were already giving way to the economic and political institutions typical of mercantile capitalism. It was in this long "Iron Century" that, almost by a tacit agreement, in countries often at war against each other, the stakes multiplied and the state started denouncing the existence of witches and taking the initiative of the persecution.

It was the Carolina — the Imperial legal code enacted by the Catholic Charles V in 1532 — that established that witchcraft be punished by death. In Protestant England, the persecution was legalized by three Acts of Parliament passed in 1542, 1563 and 1604, this last introducing the death penalty even in the absence of any damage inflicted upon persons and things. After 1550, laws and ordinances making witchcraft a capital crime and inciting the population to denounce suspected witches, were also passed in Scotland, Switzerland, France, and the Spanish Netherlands. These were re-issued in subsequent years to expand the number of those who could be executed and, again, make *witchcraft as such*, rather than the damages presumably provoked by it, the major crime.

The mechanisms of the persecution confirm that the witch-hunt was not a spontaneous process, "a movement from below to which the ruling and administrative classes were obliged to respond" (Larner 1983: 1). As Christina Larner has shown in the case of Scotland, a witch-hunt required much official organization and administration.[9] Before neighbor accused neighbor, or entire communities were seized by a "panic," a steady indoctrination took place, with the authorities publicly expressing anxiety about the spreading of witches, and travelling from village to village in order to teach people how to recognize them, in some cases carrying with them lists with the names of suspected witches and threatening to punish those who hid them or came to their assistance (Larner 1983: 2).

In Scotland, with the Synod of Aberdeen (1603), the ministers of the Presbyterian Church were ordered to ask their parishioners, under oath, if they suspected anyone of being a witch. Boxes were placed in the churches to allow the informers to remain anonymous; then, after a woman had fallen under suspicion, the minister exhorted the faithful from the pulpit to testify against her and forbid anyone to give her help (Black 1971: 13). In the other countries too, denunciations were solicited. In Germany, this was the task of the "visitors" appointed by the Lutheran Church with the consent of the German princes

*WITCHES SABBATH. This was the first and most famous of a series of engravings the German artist Hans Baldung Grien produced, starting in 1510, pornographically exploiting the female body under the guise of denunciation.*

(Strauss 1975: 54). In Northern Italy, it was the ministers and the authorities who fueled suspicions, and made sure that they would result in denunciations; they also made sure that the accused would be totally isolated, forcing them, among other things, to carry signs on their dresses so that people would keep away from them (Mazzali 1988: 112).

The witch-hunt was also the first persecution in Europe that made use of a multimedia propaganda to generate a mass psychosis among the population. Alerting the public to the dangers posed by the witches, through pamphlets publicizing the most famous trials and the details of their atrocious deeds, was one of the first tasks of the printing press (Mandrou 1968: 136). Artists were recruited to the task, among them the German Hans Baldung, to whom we owe the most damning portraits of witches. But it was the jurists, the magistrates, and the demonologists, often embodied by the same person, who most contributed to the persecution. They were the ones who systematized the arguments, answered the critics and perfected a legal machine that, by the end of the 16th century, gave a standardized, almost bureaucratic format to the trials, accounting for the similarities of the confessions across national boundaries. In their work, the men of the law could count on the cooperation of the most reputed intellectuals of the time, including philosophers and scientists who are still praised as the fathers of modern rationalism. Among them was the English political theorist Thomas Hobbes, who despite his skepticism concerning the reality of witchcraft, approved the persecution as a means of social control. A fierce enemy of witches — obsessive in his hatred for them and in his calls for bloodshed — was Jean Bodin, the famous French lawyer and political theorist, whom historian Trevor Roper calls the Aristotle and Montesquieu of the 16th century. Bodin, who is credited with authoring the first treatise on inflation, participated in many trials, wrote a volume of "proofs" (*Demomania,* 1580), in which he insisted that witches should be burned alive instead of being "mercifully" strangled before being thrown to the flames, that they should be cauterized so that their flesh should rot before death, and that children too be burned.

Bodin was not an isolated case. In this "century of geniuses" — Bacon, Kepler, Galileo, Shakespeare, Pascal, Descartes — a century that saw the triumph of the Copernican Revolution, the birth of modern science, and the development of philosophical and scientific rationalism, witchcraft became one of the favorite subjects of debate for the European intellectual elites. Judges, lawyers, statesmen, philosophers, scientists, theologians all became preoccupied with the "problem," wrote pamphlets and demonologies, agreed that this was the most nefarious crime, and called for its punishment.[10]

There can be no doubt, then, that the witch-hunt was a major *political* initiative. To stress this point is not to minimize the role that the Church played in the persecution. The Roman Catholic Church provided the metaphysical and ideological scaffold of the witch-hunt and instigated the persecution of witches as it had previously instigated the persecution of the heretics. Without the Inquisition, the many papal bulls urging the secular authorities to seek out and punish "witches" and, above all, without centuries of the Church's misogynous campaigns against women, the witch-hunt would not have been possible. But, contrary to the stereotype, the witch-hunt was not just a product of popish fanaticism or of the machinations of the Roman Inquisition. At its peak, the secular courts conducted most of the trials, while in the areas where the Inquisition operated (Italy and Spain) the number of executions remained comparatively low. After

the Protestant Reformation, which undermined the Catholic Church's power, the Inquisition even began to restrain the zeal of the authorities against witches, while intensifying its persecution of Jews (Milano 1963:287-9).[11] Moreover, the Inquisition always depended on the cooperation of the state to carry out the executions, as the clergy wanted to be spared the embarrassment of shedding blood. The collaboration between Church and state was even closer in the areas of the Reformation, where the State had become the Church (as in England) or the Church had become the State (as in Geneva, and, to a lesser extent, Scotland). Here one branch of power legislated and executed, and religious ideology openly revealed its political connotations.

The political nature of the witch-hunt is further demonstrated by the fact that both Catholic and Protestant nations, at war against each other in every other respect, joined arms and shared arguments to persecute witches. Thus, it is no exaggeration to claim that *the witch-hunt was the first unifying terrain in the politics of the new European nation-states, the first example, after the schism brought about by the Reformation, of a European unification.* For, crossing all boundaries, the witch-hunt spread from France and Italy to Germany, Switzerland, England, Scotland, and Sweden.

What fears instigated such concerted policy of genocide? Why was so much violence unleashed? And why were its primary targets women?

## Devil Beliefs and Changes in the Mode of Production

It must be immediately stated that, to this day, there are no sure answers to these questions. A major obstacle in the way of an explanation has been the fact that the charges against the witches are so grotesque and unbelievable as to be incommensurable with any motivation or crime.[12] How to account for the fact that for more than two centuries, in several European countries, *hundreds of thousands* of women were tried, tortured, burned alive or hanged, accused of having sold body and soul to the devil and, by magical means, murdered scores of children, sucked their blood, made potions with their flesh, caused the death of their neighbors, destroyed cattle and crops, raised storms, and performed many other abominations? (However, even today, some historians ask us to believe that the witch-hunt was quite reasonable in the context of the contemporary belief structure!)

An added problem is that we do not have the viewpoint of the victims, for all that remains of their voices are the confessions styled by the inquisitors, usually obtained under torture, and no matter how well we listen — as Carlo Ginzburg (1991) has done — to what transpires of traditional folklore from between the cracks in the recorded confessions, we have no way of establishing their authenticity. Further, one cannot account for the extermination of the witches as simply a product of greed, as no reward comparable to the riches of the Americas could be obtained from the execution and the confiscation of the goods of women who in the majority were very poor.[13]

It is for these reasons that some historians, like Brian Levack, abstain from presenting any explanatory theory, contenting themselves with identifying the preconditions for the witch-hunt — for instance, the shift in legal procedure from a private to a public accusatory system that occurred in the late Middle Ages, the centralization of state-power, the impact of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation on social life (Levack 1987).

There is no need, however, for such agnosticism, nor do we have to decide whether the witch hunters truly believed in the charges which they leveled against their victims or cynically used them as instruments of social repression. If we consider the historical context in which the witch-hunt occurred, the gender and class of the accused, and the effects of the persecution, then we must conclude that witch-hunting in Europe was an attack on women's resistance to the spread of capitalist relations and the power that women had gained by virtue of their sexuality, their control over reproduction, and their ability to heal.

Witch hunting was also instrumental to the construction of a new patriarchal order where women's bodies, their labor, their sexual and reproductive powers were placed under the control of the state and transformed into economic resources. This means that the witch hunters were less interested in the punishment of any specific transgressions than in the elimination of generalized forms of female behavior which they no longer tolerated and had to be made abominable in the eyes of the population. That the charges in the trials often referred to events that had occurred decades earlier, that witchcraft was made a *crimen exceptum*, that is, a crime to be investigated by special means, torture included, and it was punishable even in the absence of any proven damage to persons and things — all these factors indicate that the target of the witch-hunt — (as it is often true with political repression in times of intense social change and conflict) — were not socially recognized crimes, but previously accepted practices and groups of individuals that had to be eradicated from the community, through terror and criminalization. In this sense, the charge of witchcraft performed a function similar to that performed by "high treason" (which, significantly, was introduced into the English legal code in the same years), and the charge of "terrorism" in our times. The very vagueness of the charge — the fact that it was impossible to prove it, while at the same time it evoked the maximum of horror — meant that it could be used to punish any form of protest and to generate suspicion even towards the most ordinary aspects of daily life.

A first insight into the meaning of the European witch-hunt can be found in the thesis proposed by Michael Taussig, in his classic work *The Devil and Commodity Fetishism in South America* (1980), where the author maintains that devil-beliefs arise in those historical periods when one mode of production is being supplanted by another. In such periods not only are the material conditions of life radically transformed, but so are the metaphysical underpinnings of the social order — for instance, the conception of how value is created, what generates life and growth, what is "natural" and what is antagonistic to the established customs and social relations (Taussig 1980: 17ff). Taussig developed his theory by studying the beliefs of Colombian agricultural laborers and Bolivian tin miners at a time when, in both countries, monetary relations were taking root that in peoples' eyes seemed deadly and even diabolical, compared with the older and still-surviving forms of subsistence-oriented production. Thus, in the cases Taussig studied, it was the poor who suspected the better-off of devil worship. Still, his association between the devil and the commodity form reminds us that also in the background of the witch-hunt there was the expansion of rural capitalism, which involved the abolition of customary rights, and the first inflationary wave in modern Europe. These phenomena not only led to the growth of poverty, hunger, and social dislocation (Le Roy Ladurie 1974: 208), they also transferred power into the hands of a new class of "modernizers" who

looked with fear and repulsion at the communal forms of life that had been typical of pre-capitalist Europe. It was by the initiative of this proto-capitalist class that the witch-hunt took off, both as "a platform on which a wide range of popular beliefs and practices... could be pursued" (Normand and Roberts 2000: 65), and a weapon by which resistance to social and economic restructuring could be defeated.

It is significant that, in England, most of the witch trials occurred in Essex, where by the 16th century the bulk of the land had been enclosed,[14] while in those regions of the British Isles where land privatization had neither occurred nor was on the agenda we have no record of witch-hunting. The most outstanding examples in this context are Ireland and the Scottish Western Highlands, where no trace can be found of the persecution, likely because a collective land-tenure system and kinship ties still prevailed in both areas that precluded the communal divisions and the type of complicity with the state that made a witch-hunt possible. Thus — while in the Anglicized and privatized Scottish Lowlands, where the subsistence economy was vanishing under the impact of the Presbyterian Reformation, the witch-hunt claimed at least 4,000 victims, the equivalent of one percent of the female population — in the Highlands and in Ireland, women were safe during the witch-burning times.

That the spread of rural capitalism, with all its consequences (land expropriation, the deepening of social distances, the breakdown of collective relations) was a decisive factor in the background of the witch-hunt is also proven by the fact that the majority of those accused were poor peasant women — cottars, wage laborers — while those who accused them were wealthy and prestigious members of the community, often their employers or landlords, that is, individuals who were part of the local power structures and often had close ties with the central state. Only as the persecution progressed, and the fear of witches (as well as the fear of being accused of witchcraft, or of "subversive association") was sowed among the population, did accusations also come from neighbors. In England, the witches were usually old women on public assistance or women who survived by going from house to house begging for bits of food or a pot of wine or milk; if they were married, their husbands were day laborers, but more often they were widows and lived alone. Their poverty stands out in the confessions. It was in times of need that the Devil appeared to them, to assure them that from now on they "should never want," although the money he would give them on such occasions would soon turn to ashes, a detail perhaps related to the experience of superinflation common at the time (Larner 1983: 95; Mandrou 1968: 77). As for the diabolical crimes of the witches, they appear to us as nothing more than the class struggle played out at the village level: the 'evil eye,' the curse of the beggar to whom an alm has been refused, the default on the payment of rent, the demand for public assistance (Macfarlane 1970: 97; Thomas 1971: 565; Kittredge 1929: 163). The many ways in which the class struggle contributed to the making of an English witch are shown by the charges against Margaret Harkett, and old widow of sixty-five hanged at Tyburn in 1585:

> She had picked a basket of pears in the neighbor's field without permission. Asked to return them she flung them down in anger; since then no pears would grow in the field. Later William Goodwin's servant denied her yeast, whereupon his brewing stand dried up. She was struck

*A classic image of the English witch: old, decrepit, surroundered by her animals and her cronies, and yet maintaining a defiant posture.*
*From* THE WONDERFUL DISCOVERIES OF THE WITCHCRAFTS OF MARGARET AND PHILLIP FLOWERS, *1619.*

by a baillif who had caught her taking wood from the master's ground; the baillif went mad. A neighbor refused her a horse; all his horses died. Another paid her less for a pair of shoes than she had asked; later he died. A gentleman told his servant to refuse her buttermilk; after which they were unable to make butter or cheese (Thomas 1971: 556).

One find the same pattern in the case of the women who were "pre ented" to court at Chelmsford, Windsor and Osyth. Mother Waterhouse, hanged at Chelmsford in 1566, was a "very poor woman," described as begging for some cake or butter and "falling out" with many of her neighbor (Rosen 1969: 76–82). Elizabeth Stile, Mother Devell, Mother Margaret and Mother Dutton, executed at Windsor in 1579, were also poor widows; Mother Margaret lived in the alm house, like their alleged leader Mother Seder, and all of them went around begging and presumably taking revenge when denied. (*ibid.*: 83–91). On being refused some old yeast, Elizabeth Francis, one of the Chelmsford witches, cursed a neighbor who later developed a great pain in her head. Mother Staunton suspiciously murmured, going away, when denied yeast by a neighbor, upon which the neighbor's child fell vehemently sick (*ibid.*: 96). Ursula Kemp, hanged at Osyth in 1582, made one Grace lame after being denied some cheese; she also caused a swelling in the bottom of Agnes Letherdale's child after the latter denied her some scouring sand. Alice Newman plagued Johnson, the Collector for the poor, to death after he refused

her twelve pence; she also punished one Butler, who denied her a piece of meat (*ibid.*: 119). We find a similar pattern in Scotland, where the accused were also poor cottars, still holding on to a piece of land of their own, but barely surviving and often arousing the hostility of their neighbors on account of having pushed their cattle to graze on their land, or not having paid the rent (Larner 1983).

## Witch Hunting and Class Revolt

As we can see from these cases, the witch-hunt grew in a social environment where the "better sorts" were living in constant fear of the "lower classes," who could certainly be expected to harbor evil thoughts because in this period they were losing everything they had.

That this fear expressed itself as an attack on popular magic is not surprising. The battle against magic has always accompanied the development of capitalism, to this very day. Magic is premised on the belief that the world is animated, unpredictable, and that there is a force in all things: "water, trees, substances, words..." (Wilson, 2000: xvii) so that every event is interpreted as the expression of an occult power that must be deciphered and bent to one's will. What this implied in everyday life is described, probably with some exaggeration, in the letter of a German minister sent after a pastoral visit to a village in 1594:

> The use of incantations is so widespread that there is no man or woman here who begins or does anything... without first taking recourse to some sign, incantation, magic or pagan means. For example during labor pains, when picking up or putting down the child... when taking the beasts to the field... when they have lost an object or failed to find it...closing the windows at night, when someone gets ill or a cow behaves in a strange way they run at once to the soothsayer to ask who robbed them, who's enchanted them or to get an amulet. The daily experience of these people shows there is no limit to the use of superstitions.... Everyone here takes part in superstitious practices, with words, names, rhymes, using the names of God, of the Holy Trinity, of the Virgin Mary, of the twelve Apostles.... These words are uttered both openly and in secret; they are written on pieces of paper, swallowed, carried as amulets. They also make strange signs, noises and gestures. And then they practice magic with herbs, roots, and the branches of a certain tree; they have their particular day and place for all these things (Strauss 1975: 21).

As Stephen Wilson points out in *The Magical Universe* (2000), the people who practiced these rituals were mostly poor people who struggled to survive, always trying to stave off disaster and wishing therefore "to placate, cajole, and even manipulate these controlling forces... to keep away harm and evil, and to procure the good which consisted of fertility, well-being, health, and life" (p. xviii). But in the eyes of the new capitalist class,

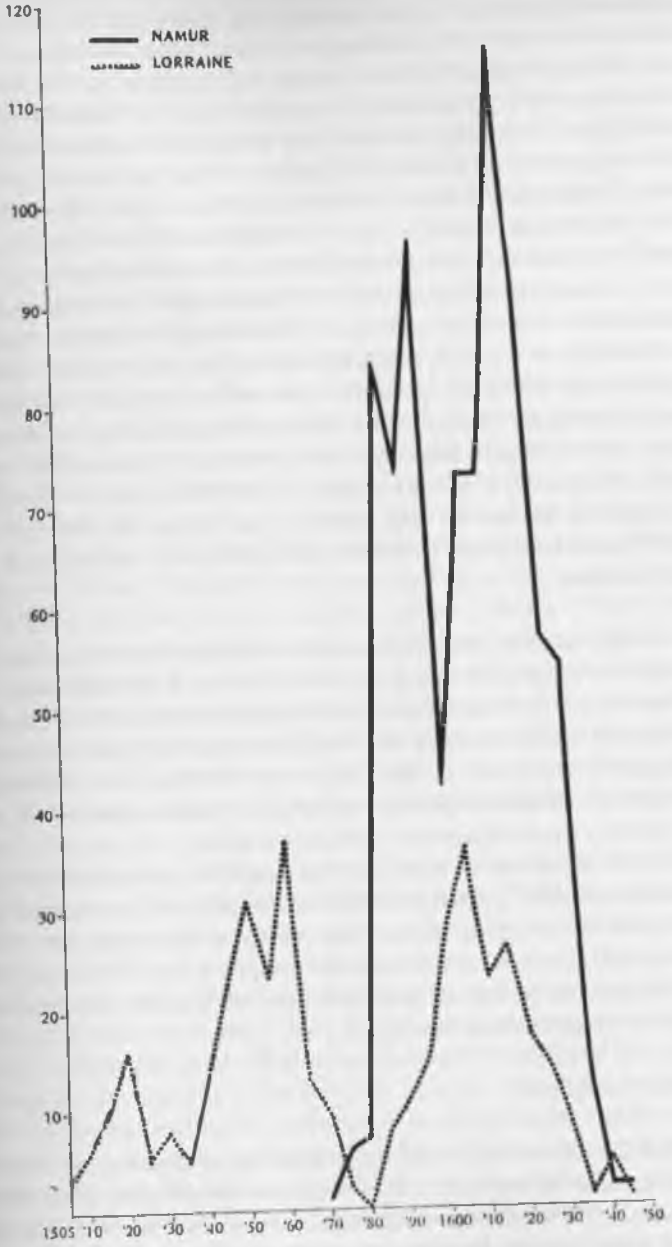
this anarchic, molecular conception of the diffusion of power in the world was anathema. Aiming at controlling nature, the capitalist organization of work must refuse the unpredictability implicit in the practice of magic, and the possibility of establishing a privileged relation with the natural elements, as well as the belief in the existence of powers available only to particular individuals, and thus not easily generalized and exploitable. Magic was also an obstacle to the rationalizaion of the work process, and a threat to the establishment of the principle of individual responsibility. Above all, magic seemed a form of refusal of work, of insubordination, and an instrument of grassroots resistance to power. The world had to be "disenchanted" in order to be dominated.

By the 16th century, the attack against magic was well under way and women were its most likely targets. Even when they were not expert sorcerers/magicians, they were the ones who were called to mark animals when they fell sick, heal their neighbors, help them find lost or stolen objects, give them amulets or love potions, help them forecast the future. Though the witch-hunt targeted a broad variety of female practices, it was above all in this capacity — as sorcerers, healers, performers of incantations and divinations — that women were persecuted.[15] For their claim to magical power undermined the power of the authorities and the state, giving confidence to the poor in their ability to manipulate the natural and social environment and possibly subvert the constituted order.

It is doubtful, on the other hand, that the magical arts that women had practiced for generations would have been magnified into a demonic conspiracy had they not occurred against a background of an intense social crisis and stuggle. The coincidence between social-economic crisis and witch-hunting has been noted by Henry Kamen, who has observed that it was "precisely in the period when there was the main price hike (between the end of the 16th century and the first half of the 17th) [that] there were the greatest number of charges and persecutions"(Kamen 1972: 249).[16]

Even more significant is the coincidence between the intensification of the persecution and the explosion of urban and rural revolts. These were the "peasant wars" against land privatization, including the uprisings against the "enclosures" in England (in 1549, 1607, 1628, 1631), when hundreds of men, women and children, armed with pitchforks and spades, set about destroying the fences erected around the commons, proclaiming that "from now on we needn't work any more." In France, in 1593–1595, there was the revolt of the Croquants against the tithes, excessive taxation, and the rising price of bread, a phenomenon that caused mass starvation in large areas of Europe.

During these revolts, it was often women who initiated and led the action. Exemplary were the revolt that occurred at Montpellier in 1645, which was started by women who were seeking to protect their children from starvation, and the revolt at Cordoba in 1652 that likewise was initiated by women. It was women, moreover, who (after the revolts were crushed, with many men imprisoned or slaughtered) remained to carry on the resistance, although in a more subterranean manner. This is what may have happened in Southwestern Germany, where a witch-hunt followed by two decades the end of the Peasant War. Writing on the subject, Erik Midelfort has excluded the existence of a connection between these two phenomena (Midelfort 1972: 68). However, he has not asked if there were family or community relations, such as the ones Le Roy Ladurie found in the Cevennes,[17] between the thousands of peasants who, from 1476 to




*This graph, indicating the dynamics of the witch trials between 1505 and 1650, refers specifically to the area of Namur and Lorraine in France, but it is representative of the persecution in other European countries. Everywhere, the key decades were those from the 1550s to the 1630s, when the price of food escalated. (From Henry Kamen, 1972.)*

1525, continuously rose up in arms against feudal power and were so brutally defeated, and the scores of women who, less than two decades later, in the same region and villages, were brought to the stake. Yet, we can well imagine that the ferocious work of repression which the German princes conducted, and the hundreds and thousands of peasants crucified, decapitated, burned alive, sedimented unquenchable hatreds, secret plans of revenge, above all among older women, who had seen and remembered, and were likely to make their hostility known in numerous ways to the local elites.

The persecution of witches grew on this terrain. It was class war carried out by other means. In this context, we cannot fail to see a connection between the fear of uprising and the prosecutors' insistence on the Witches Sabbat, or Synagogue,[18] the famous nocturnal reunion where thousands of people presumably congregated, travelling often from far distant places. Whether or not, by evoking the horrors of the Sabbat, the authorities targeted actual forms of organization, cannot be established. But there is no doubt that, through the judges' obsession with these devilish gatherings, besides the echo of the persecution of the Jews, we hear the echo of the secret meetings the peasants held at night, on lonesome hills and in the forests, to plot their revolts.[19] The Italian historian Luisa Muraro has written on this matter, in *La Signora del Gioco* (*The Lady of the Game*)(1977), a study of witch trials that took place in the Italian Alps at the beginning of the 16th century:

> During the trials in Val di Fiemme one of the accused spontaneously told the judges that one night, while she was in the mountains with her mother in law, she saw a great fire in the distance. "Run away, run away," her grand-mother had cried, "this is the fire of the Lady of the game." 'Game' (*gioco*) in many dialects of Northern Italy is the oldest name for the Sabbat (in the trials of Val di Fiemme there is still mention of a female figure who directed the game).... In the same region in 1525 there was a vast peasant uprising. They demanded the elimination of tithes and tributes, the freedom to hunt, less convents, hostels for the poor, the right of each village to elect its priest.... They burned castles, convents and the clergy's houses. But they were defeated, massacred, and those who survived for years were hunted by the revenge of the authorities.

Muraro concludes:

> The fire of the lady of the game fades in the distance, while in the foreground there are the fires of the revolt and the pyres of the repression.... But to us there seems to be a connection between the peasant revolt that was being prepared and the tales of mysterious nightly gatherings....We can only assume that the peasants at night secretly met around a fire to warm up and to communicate with each other... and that those who knew guarded the secret of these forbidden meetings, by appealing to the old legend.... If the witches had secrets this may have been one (Muraro 1977: 46-47).

Class revolt, together with sexual transgression, was a central element in the descriptions of the Sabbat, which was portrayed both as a monstrous sexual orgy and as a subversive political gathering, culminating with an account of the crimes which the participants had committed, and with the devil instructing the witches to rebel against their masters. It is also significant that the pact between the witch and the Devil was called *conjuratio*, like the pacts often made by slaves and workers in struggle (Dockes 1982: 222; Tigar and Levy 1977: 136), and that in the eyes of the prosecutors, the Devil represented a promise of love, power, and riches for whose sake a person was willing to sell her (or his) soul, that is, to infringe every natural and social law.

The threat of cannibalism, a central theme in the morphology of the Sabbat, also recalls, according to Henry Kamen, the morphology of the revolts, as rebel workers at times showed their contempt for those who sold their blood by threatening to eat them.[20] Kamen mentions what happened in the town of Romans (Dauphiné, France), in the winter of 1580, when the peasants in revolt against the tithes, proclaimed that "before three days Christian flesh will be sold" and, then, during the Carnival, "the rebels' leader, dressed in a bear skin, ate delicacies which passed for Christian flesh" (Kamen 1972: 334; Le Roy Ladurie 1981: 189, 216). Again, in Naples, in 1585, during a riot against the high cost of bread, the rebels mutilated the body of the magistrate responsible for the price rise and offered pieces of his flesh for sale (Kamen 1972: 335). Kamen points out that eating human flesh symbolized a total inversion of social values, consistent with the image of the witch as the personification of moral perversion which is suggested by many of the rituals attributed to the practice of witchcraft: the mass celebrated backwards, the counter-clockwise dances. (Clark 1980; Kamen 1972). Indeed, the witch was the living symbol of "the world turned upside down," a recurrent image in the literature of the Middle Ages, tied to millenarian aspirations of subversion of the social order.

The subversive, utopian dimension of the witches' Sabbat is also stressed, from a different angle, by Luciano Parinetto who, in *Streghe e Potere* (1998), has insisted on the need to give a modern interpretation of this gathering, reading its transgressive features from the viewpoint of the developing capitalist discipline of work. Parinetto points out that the nocturnal dimension of the Sabbat was a violation of the contemporary capitalist regularization of work-time, and a challenge to private property and sexual orthodoxy, as the night shadows blurred the distinctions between the sexes and between "mine and thine." Parinetto also argues that *the flight, the travel*, an important element in the charges against the witches, should be interpreted as an attack on the mobility of immigrant and itinerant workers, a new phenomenon, reflected in the fear of vagabonds, that much preoccupied the authorities in this period. Parinetto concludes that, viewed in its historical specificity, the nocturnal Sabbat appears as a demonization of the utopia embodied in the rebellion against the masters and the break-down of sexual roles, and it also represents a use of space and time contrary to the new capitalist work-discipline.

In this sense, there is a continuity between the witch-hunt and the earlier persecution of the heretics which also punished specific forms of social subversion under the guise of imposing religious ortodoxy. Significantly, the witch-hunt developed first in the areas where the persecution of the heretics had been most intense (Southern France,

*Waldensian heretics as represented in Johannes Tinctoris,* TRACTATUS CONTRA SECTUM VALDENSIUM. *The witch-hunt developed first in the areas where the persecution of the heretics had been most intense. In the early period in some areas of Switzerland, witches were often referred to as "waudois."*

the Jura, Northern Italy). In some regions of Switzerland, in an early phase, witches were called *Herege* ("heretic") or *Waudois* ("Waldenses") (Monter 1976: 22; Russell 1972: 34ff).[21] Further, the heretics too were burned at the stake as traitors to the true religion, and they were accused of crimes that entered the decalogue of witchcraft: sodomy, infanticide, animal worship. In part, these were ritual charges that the Church had always moved against rival religions. But, as we have seen, a sexual revolution had been an essential ingredient of the heretic movement, from the Cathars to the Adamites. The Cathars, in particular, had challenged the Church's degraded view of women and advocated the rejection of marriage and even of procreation, which they considered a form of entrapment for the soul. They had also embraced a Manichean religion that, according to some historians, was responsible for the increased preoccupation of the Church in the late Middle Ages with the presence of the Devil in the world and the Inquisitorial view of witchcraft as a counter-church. Thus, the continuity between heresy and witchcraft, at least in the first phase of the witch-hunt, cannot be doubted. But the witch-hunt occurred in a different historical context, one that had been dramatically transformed, first by the traumas and dislocations produced by the Black Death — a watershed in European history — and later, in the 15th and 16th centuries, by the profound change in class relations brought about by the capitalist reorganization of economic and social life. Inevitably, then, even the apparent elements of continuity (e.g. the nocturnal promiscuous banquet) had a different meaning than their anticipations in the Church's struggle against the heretics.

## Witch-Hunting, Woman-Hunting, and the Accumulation of Labor

The most important difference between heresy and witchcraft is that witchcraft was considered a female crime. This was especially true at the peak of the persecution, in the period between 1550 and 1650. In an earlier phase, men had represented up to forty percent of the accused, and a smaller number continued to be prosecuted later, mostly drawn from the ranks of the vagabonds, beggars, itinerant laborers, as well as the gypsies and lower-class priests. By the 16th century, moreover, the charge of devil worship had become a common theme in political and religious struggle; there was hardly a bishop or a politician who, in the heat of the moment, was not accused of being a witch. Protestants accused Catholics, especially the pope, of serving the devil; Luther himself was accused of magic, and so were John Knox in Scotland, Jean Bodin in France, and many others. Jews too were ritually accused of worshipping the devil, often being portrayed with horns and claws. But the outstanding fact is that more than eighty percent of those who were tried and executed in Europe in the 16th and 17th centuries for the crime of witchcraft were women. In fact, more women were persecuted for witchcraft in this period than for any other crime, except, significantly, infanticide.

That the witch was a woman was also stressed by the demonologists, who rejoiced that God had spared men from such a scourge. As Sigrid Brauner (1995) has noted, the arguments used to justify this phenomenon changed. While the authors of the *Malleus Maleficarum* explained that women were more prone to witchcraft because of their "insa-

tiable lust," Martin Luther and humanist writers stressed women's moral and mental weakness as the origin of this perversion. But all singled out women as evil beings.

A further difference between the persecutions of the heretics and that of the witches is that in the latter the charges of sexual perversion and infanticide had a central role, being accompanied by the virtual demonization of contraceptive practices.

The association between contraception, abortion, and witchcraft first appeared in the Bull of Innocent VIII (1484) which complained that

> by their incantations, spells, conjurations and other accursed superstitions and horrid charms, enormities and offenses, (witches) destroy the offspring of women....They hinder men from generating and women from conceiving; whence neither husbands with their wives nor wives with their husbands can perform their sexual acts (Kors and Peters 1972: 107–08).

From then on, reproductive crimes featured prominently in the trials. By the 17th century witches were accused of conspiring to destroy the generative power of humans and animals, of procuring abortions, and of belonging to an infanticidal sect devoted to killing children or offering them to the devil. In the popular imagination as well, the witch came to be associated with a lecherous old woman, hostile to new life, who fed upon infant flesh or used children's bodies to make her magical potions — a stereotype later popularized by children's books.

*Why such a change in the trajectory from heresy to witchcraft? Why, in other words, in the course of a century, did the heretic become a woman, and why was religious and social transgression refocused as predominantly a reproductive crime?*

In the 1920s the English anthropologist Margaret Murray in *The Witch-Cult in Western Europe* (1921) proposed an explanation that has recently been revived by eco-feminists and practitioners of "Wicca." Murray argued that witchcraft was an ancient matrifocal religion to which the Inquisition turned its attention after the defeat of heresy, spurred by a new fear of doctrinal deviation. In other words, the women whom demonologists prosecuted as witches were (according to this theory) practitioners of ancient fertility cults aiming to propitiate birth and reproduction — cults that had existed in the Mediterranean areas for thousands of years, but which the Church opposed as pagan rites and a challenge to its power.[22] The presence of midwives among the accused, the role that women played in the Middle Ages as community healers, the fact that until the 16th century child-birth was considered a female "mystery," all of these factors have been cited in support of this view. But this hypothesis cannot explain the timing of the witch-hunt, nor tell us why these fertility cults became so abominable in the eyes of the authorities as to call for the extermination of the women practicing the old religion.

A different explanation is that the prominence of reproductive crimes in the witch-trials was a consequence of the high infant mortality rates that were typical in the 16th and 17th centuries due to the growth of poverty and malnutrition. Witches, it is argued, were blamed for the fact that so many children died, died so suddenly, died shortly after birth, or were vulnerable to a broad array of ailments. But this explanation too does not go far enough. It does not account for the fact that women labelled

*Witches cooking children. From Francesco Maria Guazzo's* COMPENDIUM MALEFICARUM, *1608.*

as witches were also accused of preventing conception, and it fails to place the witch-hunt in the context of 16th-century economic and institutional policy. Thus, it misses the significant connection between the attack on witches and the development of a new concern, among European statists and economists, with the question of reproduction and population size, the rubric under which the question of the size of the work-force was discussed at the time. As we have seen earlier, the labor question became especially urgent in the 17th century, when population in Europe began again to decline, raising the spectre of a demographic collapse similar to that which had occurred in the American colonies in the decades after the Conquest. Against this background, it seems plausible that the witch-hunt was, at least in part, an attempt to criminalize birth control and place the female body, the uterus, at the service of population increase and the production and accumulation of labor-power.

This is a hypothesis; what is certain is that the witch-hunt was promoted by a political class that was preoccupied with population decline and motivated by the conviction that a large population is the wealth of the nation. The fact that the 16th and 17th centuries were the heyday of Mercantilism, and saw the beginning of demographic recording (of births, deaths and marriages), of census-taking, and the formalization of demog-

raphy itself as the first "state-science" is a clear proof of the strategic importance that controlling population movements was acquiring in the political circles that instigated the witch-hunt (Cullen 1975: 6ff)[23].

We also know that many witches were midwives or "wise women," traditionally

*The drama of infant mortality is well-captured by this image from Hans Holbein the Younger's "The Dance of Death," a series of forty-one designs first printed in France in 1538.*

the depository of women's reproductive knowledge and control (Midelfort 1972:172). The *Malleus* dedicated an entire chapter to them, arguing that they were worse than any other woman, since they helped the mother destroy the fruit of her womb, a conspiracy made easier, they charged, by the exclusion of men from the rooms where women gave birth.[24] Observing that there was not a hut that did not board a midwife, the authors recommended that no woman should be allowed to practice this art, unless she first demonstrated to have been a "good Catholic." This recommendation did not go unheard. As we have seen, midwives were either recruited to police women — to check, for instance, that they did not hide their pregnancies or deliver children out of wedlock — or were marginalized. Both in France and England, starting from the end of the 16th century, few women were allowed to practice obstetrics, an activity that, until that time, had been their inviolable mystery. Then, by the beginning of the 17th century, the first male midwives began to appear and, within a century, obstetrics has come almost entirely

*Witches offer children to the Devil. A woodcut from a tract on the trial of Agnes Sampson, 1591.*

under state control. According to Alice Clark:

> The continuous process by which women were supplanted by men in the profession is one example of the way in which they were excluded from all branches of professional work, through being denied the opportunity of obtaining an adequate professional training (Clark 1968: 265).

But interpreting the social decline of the midwife as a case of female de-professionalization misses its significance. There is convincing evidence, in fact, that midwives were marginalized because they were not trusted, and because their exclusion from the profession undermined women's control over reproduction.[25]

*Just as the Enclosures expropriated the peasantry from the communal land, so the witch-hunt expropriated women from their bodies, which were thus "liberated" from any impediment preventing them to function as machines for the production of labor. For the threat of the stake erected more formidable barriers around women's bodies than were ever erected by the fencing off of the commons.*

We can, in fact, imagine what effect it had on women to see their neighbors, friends and relatives being burned at the stake, and realize that any contraceptive initiative on their side might be construed as the product of a demonic perversion.[26] Seeking to understand what the women hunted as witches and the other women in their community must have thought, felt, and concluded from this horrendous attack waged upon them — looking, in other words, at the persecution "from within," as Anne L. Barstow has done in her *Witchcraze* (1994) — also enables us to avoid speculating on the intentions of the persecutors, and concentrate instead on the effects of the witch-hunt on the social position of women. From this point of view, there can be no doubt that the witch-hunt destroyed the methods that women had used to control procreation, by indicting them as diabolical devices, and institutionalized the state's control over the female body, the precondition for its subordination to the reproduction of labor-power.

But the witch was not only the midwife, the woman who avoided maternity, or the beggar who eked out a living by stealing some wood or butter from her neighbors. She was also the loose, promiscuous woman — the prostitute or adulteress, and generally, the woman who exercised her sexuality outside the bonds of marriage and procreation. Thus, in the witchcraft trials, "ill repute" was evidence of guilt. The witch was also the rebel woman who talked back, argued, swore, and did not cry under torture. "Rebel" here refers not necessarily to any specific subversive activity in which women might be involved. Rather, it describes the *female personality* that had developed, especially among the peasantry, in the course of the struggle against feudal power, when women had been in the forefront of the heretical movements, often organizing in female associations, posing a growing challenge to male authority and the Church. Descriptions of witches remind us of women as they were represented in the medieval morality plays and the *fabliaux*: ready to take initiatives, as aggressive and lusty as men, wearing male clothes, or proudly riding on their husbands' backs, holding a whip.

Certainly, among those indicted there were women suspected of specific crimes. One was accused of poisoning her husband, another of causing the death of her employer, another again of having prostituted her daughter (Le Roy Ladurie 1974: 203–04). But

*In the market of Guernsey, England, three women are burnt alive. Anonymous engraving, 16th century.*

it was not only the deviant woman, but *the woman as such, particularly the woman of the lower classes, that was put on trial*, a woman who generated so much fear that in her case the relation between education and punishment was turned upside down. "We must," Jean Bodin declared, "spread terror among some by punishing many." And indeed, in some villages few were spared.

Also the sexual sadism displayed by the tortures to which the accused were subjected reveals a misogyny that has no parallel in history, and cannot be accounted for on the basis of any specific crime. According to the standard procedure, the accused were stripped naked and completely shaved (it was argued that the devil hid among their hair); then they were pricked with long needles all over their bodies, including their vaginas, in search for the mark with which the devil presumably branded his creatures (just as the masters in England did with runaway slaves). Often they were raped; it was investigated whether or not they were virgins — a sign of innocence; and if they did not confess, they were submitted to even more atrocious ordeals: their limbs were torn, they were seated on iron chairs under which fires were lit; their bones were crushed. And when they were hung or burnt, care was taken so that the lesson to be drawn from their end would not go unheeded. The execution was an important public event, which all the members of the community had to attend, including the children of the witches, especially their

daughters who, in some cases, would be whipped in front of the stake on which they could see their mother burning alive.

The witch-hunt, then, was a war against women; it was a concerted attempt to degrade them, demonize them, and destroy their social power. At the same time, it was in the torture chambers and on the stakes on which the witches perished that the bourgeois ideals of womanhood and domesticity were forged.

In this case, too, the witch-hunt amplified contemporary social trends. There is, in fact, an unmistakable continuity between the practices targeted by the witch-hunt and those banned by the new legislation that in the same years was introduced to regulate family life, gender and property relations. Across western Europe, as the witch-hunt was progressing, laws were passed that punished the adulteress with death (in England and Scotland by the stake, as in the case of High Treason). At the same time prostitution was outlawed and so was birth out of wedlock, while infanticide was made a capital crime.[27] Simultaneously, female friendships became an object of suspicion, denounced from the pulpit as subversive of the alliance between husband and wife, just as women-to-women relations were demonized by the prosecutors of the witches who forced them to denounce each other as accomplices in crime. It was also in this period that the word "gossip," which in the Middle Ages had meant "friend," changed its meaning, acquiring a derogatory connotation, a further sign of the degree to which the power of women and communal ties were undermined.

Also at the ideological level, there is a close correspondence between the degraded image of women forged by the demonologists and the image of femininity constructed by the contemporary debates on the "nature of the sexes,"[28] which canonized a stereotypical woman, weak in body and mind and biologically prone to evil, that effectively served to justify male control over women and the new patriarchal order.

## Witch-Hunting and Male Supremacy: The Taming of Women

The sexual politics of the witch-hunt is revealed by the relation between the witch and the devil, which is one of the novelties introduced by the 16th and 17th-century trials. The Great Witch-Hunt marked a change in the image of the devil compared with that to be found in the medieval lives of the saints or in the books of Renaissance magicians. In the former, the devil was portrayed as an evil being, but one who had little power — a sprinkling of holy water and a few holy words were usually sufficient to defeat his schemes. His image was that of an unsuccessful ill-doer who, far from inspiring horror, was credited with some virtues. The medieval devil was a logician, competent in legal matters, sometimes represented in the act of defending his case in front of a court of law (Seligman 1948: 151–58).[29] He was also a skillful worker who could be used to dig mines or build city walls, although he was routinely cheated when the time came for his recompense. Also, the Renaissance view of the relationship between the devil and the magician always portrayed the devil as subordinate being called to task, willing or not, like a servant, and made to perform according to his master's will.

The witch-hunt reversed the power relation between the devil and the witch. It

*The devil carries away the soul of a woman who served him. Woodcut from Olaus Magnus,* HISTORIA DE GENTIBUS SEPTENTRIONALIBUS *(Rome, 1555).*

was the woman now who was the servant, the slave, the *succubus* in body and soul, while the Devil functioned as her owner and master, pimp and husband at once. It was the Devil, for instance, who "approached the intended witch. She rarely conjured him up" (Larner 1983: 148). After revealing himself to her, he would ask her to become his servant, and what would follow then would be a classic example of a master/slave, husband/wife relation. He stamped her with his mark, had sexual intercourse with her and, in some instances, he even changed her name (Larner 1983: 148). Moreover, in a clear pre-figuration of women's matrimonial destiny, the witch-hunt introduced *one single Devil*, in the place of the multitude of devils to be found in the medieval and Renaissance world, and a *masculine Devil at that*, in contrast with the female figures (Diana, Hera, "*la Signora del zogo*"), whose cults were spread among women in the Middle Ages, in both the Mediterranean and Teutonic regions.

How preoccupied were the witch hunters with the affirmation of male supremacy can be seen from the fact that, even when in revolt against human and divine law, women had to be portrayed as subservient to a man, and the culmination of their rebellion — the famous pact with the devil — had to be represented as a perverted marriage contract. The marital analogy was carried so far that the witches would confess that they "did

not dare to disobey the devil," or, more curiously, that they did not find any pleasure in their copulations with him — a contradiction with respect to the ideology of the witch-hunt which derived witchcraft from women's insatiable lust.

Not only did the witch-hunt sanctify male supremacy, it also instigated men to fear women, and even to look at them as the destroyers of the male sex. Women, the authors of the *Malleus Maleficarum* preached, are lovely to look at but contaminating to the touch; they attract men, but only to undermine them; they do everything to please them, but the pleasure they give is more bitter than death, for their vices cost men the loss of their souls — and perhaps their sexual organs (Kors and Peters 1972: 114-115). A witch, presumably, could castrate men or make them impotent, either by freezing their generative forces or causing their penis to come out and draw back as she wished.[30] Some stole male penises, which they hid in great numbers in bird nests or boxes, until, under duress, they were forced to return them to their owners.[31]

But who were these witches who castrated men or made them impotent? Potentially, every woman. In a village or small town of a few thousand people, where at the peak of the witch-hunt dozens of women were burned in the space of a few years or even a few weeks, no man could feel safe and be sure that he did not live with a witch.

*Women fly on their brooms to the Sabbat after applying unguents to their bodies. 16th-century French print from Thomas Erastus's* DIALOGUES TOUCHANT LE POUVOIR DES SORCIÈRES (1570)

Many must have been terrified upon hearing that at night some women left the marriage bed to travel to the Sabbat, fooling their sleeping husbands by putting a stick next to them; or hearing that women had the power to make their penises disappear, like the witch mentioned in the *Malleus,* who had stored dozens in a tree.

That this propaganda successfully divided women from men is suggested by the fact that, despite individual attempts by sons, husbands, or fathers to save their female relatives from the stake, with one exception, we have no record of any male organizations opposing the persecution. The exception is the case of the fishermen of the Basque region where the French Inquisitor Pierre Lancre was conducting mass trials that led to the burning of perhaps as many as six hundred women. Mark Kurlansky reports that the fishermen had been been absent, engaged in the annual cod season. But,

> [when the men] of the St.-Jean-de-Luz cod fleet, one of the largest [from Basque country] heard rumors of their wives, mothers, and daughters [being] stripped, stabbed, and many already executed, the 1609 cod campaign was ended two months early. The fishermen returned, clubs in hands, and liberated a convoy of witches being taken to the burning place. This one popular resistance was all it took to stop the trials... (Kurlansky 2001: 102)

The intervention of the Basque fishermen against the persecution of their female relatives was a unique event. No other group or organization rose up in defense of the witches. We know, instead, that some men made a business of denouncing women, appointing themselves as "witch finders," travelling from village to village threatening to expose women unless they paid up. Other men took advantage of the climate of suspicion surrounding women to free themselves from unwanted wives and lovers, or to blunt the revenge of women they had raped or seduced. Undoubtedly, men's failure to act against the atrocities to which women were subjected was often motivated by the fear of being implicated in the charges, as the majority of the men tried for this crime were relatives of suspected or convicted witches. But there is no doubt that years of propaganda and terror sowed among men the seeds of a deep psychological alienation from women, that broke class solidarity and undermined their own collective power. We can agree with Marvin Harris that,

> The witch-hunt... scattered and fragmented all the latent energies of protest. [It] has made everyone feel impotent and dependent upon the dominant social groups, and has furthermore given them a local outlet for their frustrations. By this it has prevented the poor, more than any other social group, from confronting ecclesiastical authority and the secular order, and making their claims within the redistribution of wealth and the leveling of social status (Harris 1974: 239-240).

Just as today, by repressing women, the ruling classes more effectively repressed the entire proletariat. They instigated men who had been expropriated, pauperized, and criminalized to blame their personal misfortunes on the castrating witch, and to view

the power that women had won against the authorities as a power women would use against them. All the deep-seated fears that men harbored with regard to women (mostly because of the Church's misogynous propaganda) were mobilized in this context. Not only were women accused of making men impotent; even their sexuality was turned into an object of fear, a dangerous, demonic force, as men were taught that a witch could enslave them and chain them to her will (Kors and Peters 1972: 130–32).

A recurrent charge in the witch trials was that witches engaged in degenerate sexual practices, centering on copulation with the devil and participation in the orgies that presumably took place at the Sabbat. But witches were also accused of generating an excessive erotic passion in men, so that it was an easy step for men caught in an illicit affair to claim they had been bewitched, or, for a family wanting to terminate a son's relation with a woman of whom they did not approve, to accuse the latter of being a witch. Wrote the *Malleus*:

> there are...seven methods by which [witches] infect ... the venereal act and the conception of the womb: First, by inclining the minds of

*The Devil seduces a woman into making a pact with him. From Ulrich Molitor,* DE LAMIES (1489)

men to inordinate passion; Second, by obstructing their generative force; Third, by removing the member accomodated to that act; Fourth, by changing men into beasts by their magic art; Fifth, by destroying the generative force in women; Sixth, by procuring abortion; Seventh, by offering children to the devil... (1971: 47).

That witches were accused simultaneously of rendering men impotent and arousing an excessive sexual passion in them is only apparently a contradiction. In the new patriarchal code that was developing in concomitance with the witch-hunt, physical impotence was the counterpart of moral impotence; it was the physical manifestation of the erosion of male authority over women, since "functionally" there would be no difference between a man who was castrated and one who was helplessly in love. The demonologists looked with suspicion at both states, clearly convinced that it would be impossible to realize the type of family the contemporary bourgeois wisdom demanded — modeled on the state, with the husband as the king, and the wife subordinate to his will, selflessly devoted to the management of the household (Schochet 1975) — if women with their *glamour* and love filters could exercise so much power as to make men the *succubi* of their desires.

Sexual passion undermined not only male authority over women — as Montaigne lamented, man can preserve his *decor* in everything except in the sexual act (Easlea 1980: 243) — it also undermined a man's capacity for self-government, causing him to lose that precious head wherein Cartesian philosophy was to locate the source of Reason. A sexually active woman, then, was a public danger, a threat to the social order as she subverted a man's sense of responsibility, and his capacity for work and self-control. If women were not to ruin men morally — or more important, financially — female sexuality had to be exorcised. This was accomplished by means of torture, death by fire, as well as the meticulous interrogations to which witches were subjected, which were a mixture of sexual exorcism and psychological rape.[32]

For women, then, the 16th and 17th centuries did inaugurate an age of sexual repression. Censorship and prohibition did come to define their relationship with sexuality. With Michel Foucault in mind, we must also insist that it was *not* the Catholic pastoral, nor the confession, that best demonstrate how "Power," at the dawn of the modern era, made it compulsory for people to speak of sex (Foucault 1978: 116). The "discursive explosion" on sex, that Foucault detected in this time, was in no place more powerfully exhibited than in the torture chambers of the witch-hunt. But it had nothing in common with the mutual titillation that Foucault imagines flowing between the woman and her confessor. Far outstripping any village priest, the inquisitors forced the witches to reveal their sexual adventures in every detail, undeterred by the fact that they were often old women and their sexual *exploits* dated back many decades. In an almost ritual manner, they forced the alleged witches to explain how in their youth they were first taken by the devil, what they had felt upon penetration, the impure thoughts they had harbored. But the stage upon which this peculiar discourse on sex unfolded was the torture chamber, and the questions were asked between applications of the *strappado*, to women driven mad by pain, and by no stretch of imagination can we presume that the orgy of words the women thus tortured were forced to utter incited their pleasure or re-oriented, by linguistic sublimation, their desire. In the

case of the witch-hunt — which Foucault surprisingly ignores in his *History of Sexuality* (Vol. 1, 1978) — the "interminable discourse on sex" was not deployed as an alternative to, but in the service of repression, censorship, denial. Certainly we can say that the language of the witch-hunt "produced" the Woman as a different species, a being *suis generis*, more carnal and perverted by nature. We can also say that the production of the "female pervert" was a step in the transformation of the female *vis erotica* into *vis lavorativa* — *that is, a first step in the transformation of female sexuality into work.* But we should appreciate the destructive character of this process, which also demonstrates the limits of a general "history of sexuality" of the type Foucault has proposed, which treats sexuality from the perspective of an undifferentiated, gender-neutral subject, and as an activity presumably carrying the same consequences for men and women.

## The Witch-Hunt and the Capitalist Rationalization of Sexuality

The witch-hunt did not result in new sexual capacities or sublimated pleasures for women. Instead, it was the first step in the long march towards "clean sex between clean sheets" and the transformation of female sexual activity into work, a service to men, and procreation. Central to this process was the banning, as anti-social and virtually demonic, of all non-productive, non-procreative forms of female sexuality.

The repulsion that non-procreative sexuality was beginning to inspire is well captured by the myth of the old witch flying on her broom, which, like the animals she also rode upon (goats, mares, dogs), was the projection of an extended penis, symbol of an unbridled lust. This imagery betrays a new sexual discipline that denied the "old and ugly" woman, no longer fertile, the right to a sexual life. In the creation of this stereotype the demonologists conformed to the moral sensibility of their time, as illustrated by the words of two illustrious contemporaries of the witch-hunt:

> To see an old lecher, what more odious? What can be more absurd? And yet so common.... Worse it is in women than in men.... Whilst she is an old crone, a beldam, she can neither see nor hear, a mere carcass, she caterwauls and must have a stallion (Burton 1977: 56).

> Yet it is even more fun to see the old women who can scarcely carry their weight of years and look like corpses that seem to have risen from the dead. They still go around saying "life is good," still in heat, looking for a mate...they are forever smearing their faces with make up and taking tweezers to their pubic hair, exposing their sagging, withered breasts and trying to rouse failing desire with their quavery whining voices, while they drink, dance among girls and scribble their love letters (Erasmus 1941: 42).

This was a far cry from the world of Chaucer, where the Wife of Bath, after burying five husbands, could still openly declare: "Welcome the sixth.... I don't mean to be

*A dispute between a witch and an Inquisitor. Hans Burkmair (before 1514).*

*Many women accused and tried for witchcraft were old and poor. Often they depended on public charity for their survival. Witchcraft — we are told — is the weapon of the powerless. But old women were also those in the community most likely to resist the destruction of communal relations caused by the spread of capitalist relations. They were the ones who embodied the community's knowledge and memory. The witch-hunt turned the image of the old woman upside down: traditionally considered a wise woman, she became a symbol of sterility and hostility to life.*

chaste at all cost. When a spouse of mine is gone, another Christian man shall take me on" (Chaucer 1977: 277). In the world of Chaucer, the sexual vitality of the old woman was an affirmation of life against death; in the iconography of the witch-hunt, old age precludes in women the possibility of a sexual life, contaminates it, turns sexual activity into a tool of death rather than a means of regeneration.

Regardless of age (but not class) in the witch trials, there is a constant identification between female sexuality and bestiality. This was suggested by copulation with the goat-god (one of the representations of the devil), the infamous kiss *sub cauda*, and the charge that the witches kept a variety of animals — "imps" or "familiars" — that helped them in their crimes and with whom they entertained a particularly intimate relation. These were cats, dogs, hares, frogs, that the witch cared for, presumably suckling them from special teats.

Other animals, too, played a role in the witch's life as instruments of the devil: goats, and (night)mares flew her to the Sabbat, toads provided her with poison for her concoctions. Such was the presence of animals in the witches' world that one must presume that they too were being put on trial.[33]

The marriage between the witch and her "familiars" was perhaps a reference to the "bestial" practices that characterized the sexual life of peasants in Europe, which remained a capital offense long after the end of the witch-hunt. In an era that was beginning to worship reason and to dissociate the human from the corporeal, animals, too, were subjected to a drastic devaluation — reduced to mere brutes, the ultimate "Other" — perennial symbol of the worst human instincts. No crime, then, would inspire more horror than copulation with a beast, a true attack on the ontological foundations of a human nature increasingly identified with its most immaterial aspects. But the surplus of animal presences in the witches' lives also suggests that women were at a (slippery) crossroad between men and animals, and that not only female sexuality, but femininity as such, was akin to animality. To seal this equation, witches were often accused of shifting their shape and morphing into animals, while the most commonly cited familiar was the toad, which as a symbol of the vagina synthesized sexuality, bestiality, femininity, and evil.

The witch-hunt condemned female sexuality as the source of every evil, but it was also the main vehicle for a broad restructuring of sexual life that, conforming with the new capitalist work-discipline, criminalized any sexual activity that threatened procreation, the transmission of property within the family, or took time and energies away from work.

The witch trials provide an instructive list of the forms of sexuality that were banned as "non-productive": homosexuality, sex between young and old,[34] sex between people of different classes, anal coitus, coitus from behind (reputedly leading to sterile relations), nudity, and dances. Also proscribed was the public, collective sexuality that had prevailed in the Middle Ages, as in the Spring festivals of pagan origins that, in the 16th-century, were still celebrated all over Europe. Compare, in this context, the way in which P. Stubbes, in *Anatomy of Abuse (1583)*, described the celebration of May Day in England, with the standard accounts of the Sabbat which charged that the witches always danced at these gatherings, jumping up and down at the sound of pipes and flutes, and indulged in much collective sex and merrymaking.

*The execution of the Chelmsford witches in 1589. Joan Prentice, one of the victims, is shown with her familiars*

Towards May...every parish, town and village gets together, both men, women and children, old and young...they run to the bushes and woods, hills and mountains, where they spend all the night in pleasant pastimes, and in the morning they return bringing home birch bows and branches of trees...(T)he chiefest jewel they bring home is their maypole, which they bring home with great veneration...then they fall to banquet and feast, to leap and dance about it, as heathen people did at the dedication of their idols... (Partridge: III).

An analogous comparison can be made between the descriptions of the Sabbat and the descriptions which Scottish Presbyterian authorities made of pilgrimages (to holy wells and other holy localities), which the Catholic Church had encouraged, but which

the Presbyterians opposed as congregations of the devil and occasions for lewd affairs. As a general tendency, throughout this period, any potentially transgressive meeting — peasants' gatherings, rebel camps, festivals, and dances — was described by the authorities as a virtual Sabbat.[35]

It is also significant that, in some areas of Northern Italy, going to the Sabbat was called "going to the dance" or "going to the game" *(al zogo)*, particularly when one considers the campaign that Church and state were conducting against such pastimes (Muraro 1977: 109ff; Hill 1964: 183ff). As Ginzburg points out, "once we remove [from the Sabbat] the myths and the fantastic trappings, we discover a gathering of people, accompanied by dances and sexual promiscuity" (Ginzburg 1966: 189), and, we must add, much eating and drinking, surely a fantasy at a time when hunger was a common experience in Europe. (How revealing concerning the nature of class relations at the time of the witch-hunt, that dreams of roasted mutton and ale could be frowned upon by a well-fed, beef-eating bourgeoisie as signs of a diabolical connivance!) Ginzburg, however, following a well-trodden path, labels the orgies associated with the Sabbat as "hallucinations of poor women, to whom they serve as a recompense for a squalid existence,"

*portant theme in many representations of the Sabbat — a fantasy at a time re a common experience in Europe. Detail from Jan Ziarnko's plate for Pierre BLEAU DE L'INCONSTANCE (1612)*

(*ibid.*: 190). In this way, he blames the victims for their demise; he also ignores that it was not the women accused of being witches, but Europe's elite who devoted reams of papers to discussing such "hallucinations," debating, for instance, the roles of *succubi* and *incubi*, or whether the witch could be impregnated by the Devil, a question that, apparently, was still of interest for intellectuals in the 18th century (Couliano 1987: 148–51). Today, these grotesque disquisitions are screened from the histories of "Western Civilization," or are simply forgotten, although they wove a web that condemned hundreds of thousands of women to death.

Thus, the role that the witch-hunt has played in the development of the bourgeois world, and specifically in the development of the capitalist discipline of sexuality, has been erased from our memory. Yet, we can trace back to this process some of the main taboos of our time. This is the case with homosexuality, which in several parts of Europe was still fully accepted during the Renaissance, but was weeded out in the course of the witch-hunt. So fierce was the persecution of homosexuals that its memory is still sedimented in our language. "Faggot" reminds us that homosexuals were at times the kindling for the stakes upon which witches were burned, while the Italian *finocchio* (fennel) refers to the practice of scattering these aromatic vegetables on the stakes in order to mask the stench of burning flesh.

Of particular significance is the relation the witch-hunt established between the prostitute and the witch, reflecting the process of devaluation which prostitution underwent in the capitalist reorganization of sexual work. As the saying went, "a prostitute when young, a witch when old," for both used sex only to deceive and corrupt men, faking a love that was only mercenary (Stiefelmeir 1977: 48ff.). And both *sold themselves* in order to obtain money and an illicit power, the witch (who sold her soul to the Devil) being the magnified image of the prostitute (who sold her body to men). Furthermore, both the (old) witch and the prostitute were symbols of sterility, the very personification of non-procreative sexuality. Thus, while in the Middle Ages the prostitute and the witch were considered positive figures who performed a social service for the community, with the witch-hunt both acquired the most negative connotations and were rejected as possible female identities, physically by death and socially by criminalization. For the prostitute died as a legal subject only after having died a thousand times on the stake as a witch. Or better, the prostitute would be allowed to survive (she would even become useful, although in a clandestine fashion) only as long as the witch would be killed; for the witch was the more socially dangerous subject, the one who (in the eyes of the inquisitors) was less controllable; it was she who could give pain or pleasure, heal or harm, stir up the elements and chain the will of men; she could even cause damage solely by her look, a *malocchio* ("evil eye") that presumably could kill.

It was the sexual nature of her crimes and her lower-class status that distinguished the witch from the Renaissance magician, who was largely immune from the persecution. High Magic and witchcraft shared many elements. Themes derived from the learned magical tradition were introduced by the demonologists into the definition of witchcraft. Among them was the belief, of Neoplatonic origin, that Eros is a cosmic force, binding the universe through relations of "sympathy" and attraction enabling the magician to manipulate and imitate nature in his experiments. A similar power was attributed to the witch, who reputedly could raise storms by numerically

stirring a puddle, or could exercise an "attraction" similar to the bonding of metals in the alchemic tradition. (Yates 1964: 145ff; Couliano 1987). The ideology of witchcraft also reflected the biblical tenet, common to both magic and alchemy, that stipulates a connection between *sexuality* and *knowledge*. The thesis that witches acquired their powers by copulating with the devil echoed the alchemic belief that women had appropriated the secrets of chemistry by copulating with rebel demons (Seligman 1948: 76). High Magic, however, was not persecuted, though alchemy was increasingly frowned upon, as it appeared an idle pursuit and, as such, a waste of time and resources. The magicians were an elite, who often serviced princes and other highly positioned people (Couliano 1987: 156ff), and the demonologists carefully distinguished between them and the witches, by including High Magic (particularly astrology and astronomy) in the range of the sciences.[36]

## The witch-hunt and the New World

The counterparts of the typical European witch, then, were not the Renaissance magicians, but the colonized native Americans and the enslaved Africans who, in the plantations of the "New World," shared a destiny similar to that of women in Europe, providing for capital the seemingly limitless supply of labor necessary for accumulation.

So connected were the destinies of women in Europe and those of Amerindians and Africans in the colonies that their influences were reciprocal. Witch-hunting and charges of devil-worshipping were brought to the Americas to break the resistance of the local populations, justifying colonization and the slave trade in the eyes of the world. In turn, according to Luciano Parinetto, it was the American experience that persuaded the European authorities to believe in the existence of entire populations of witches, and instigated them to apply in Europe the same techniques of mass extermination developed in America (Parinetto 1998).

In Mexico, "[f]rom 1536 to 1543 the Bishop Zumarraga conducted 19 trials involving 75 Indian heretics, mainly drawn from the political and religious leaders of central Mexican communities, a number of whom ended their lives at the stake. The friar Diego de Landa led idolatry trials in the Yucatan during the 1560s, in which torture, whippings, and *auto-de fe* figured prominently" (Behar 1987: 51). Witch-hunts were conducted also in Peru, to destroy the cult of the local gods, considered demons by the Europeans. "Everywhere the Spaniards saw the face of the devil: in the foods... [in] the 'primitive vices of the indians'... in their barbaric languages" (de Leon 1985 I: 33–34). In the colonies, too, it was women who were more vulnerable to being accused of being witches, for, being held in special contempt by the Europeans as weak-minded females, they soon became the staunchest defenders of their communities (Silverblatt 1980: 173, 176–79).

The common fate of Europe's witches and Europe's colonial subjects is further demonstrated by the growing exchange, in the course of the 17th century, between the ide- of witchcraft and the racist ideology that developed on the soil of the Conquest and ... The Devil was portrayed as a black man and black people were increasingly that "devil worship and diabolical interventions [became] the most pect of the non-European societies the slave traders encountered"

*16th-century representation of Caribbean Indians as devils from Tobias George Smollett [compiler], "A COMPENDIUM OF AUTHENTIC AND ENTERTAINING VOYAGES, DIGESTED IN A CHRONOLOGICAL SERIES..." (From Tobias George Smollet, 1766.)*

(Barker 1978: 91). "From Lapps to Samoyed, to the Hottentots and Indonesians...there was no society" — Anthony Barker writes — "which was not labeled by some Englishman as actively under diabolical influence" (1978: 91). Just as in Europe, the trademark of diabolism was an abnormal lust and sexual potency.[37] The Devil was often portrayed as possessing two penises, while tales of brutish sexual practices and inordinate fondness for music and dancing became staples in the reports of missionaries and travelers to the "New World."

According to historian Brian Easlea, this systematic exaggeration of black sexual potency betrays the anxiety that white men of property felt towards their own sexuality; presumably, white upper-class males feared the competition of the people they enslaved, whom they saw as closer to nature, because they felt sexually inadequate due to excessive doses of self-control and prudential reasoning (Easlea 1980: 249–50). But the oversexualization of women and black men — the witches and the devils — must also be rooted in the position which they occupied in the international division of labor that was emerging on the basis of the colonization of America, the slave trade, and the witch-hunt. For the definition of blackness and femaleness as marks of bestiality and irrationality conformed with the exclusion of women in Europe and women and men in the colonies from the social contract implicit in the wage, and the consequent naturalization of their exploitation.

## The Witch, the Healer and the Birth of Modern Science

Other motives operated behind the persecution of witches. Charges of witchcraft often served to punish the attack on property, primarily thefts, which increased dramatically in the 16th and 17th centuries, following the increasing privatization of land and agriculture. As we have seen, in England, poor women who begged for or stole milk or wine from the houses of their neighbors, or were on public assistance, were likely to be suspected of practicing evil arts. Alan Macfarlane and Keith Thomas have shown that in this period there was a marked deterioration in the condition of old women, following the loss of the commons and the reorganization of family life, which gave priority to child-raising at the expense of the care previously provided to the elderly (Macfarlane 1970: 205).[38] These elders were now forced to rely on their friends or neighbors for their survival, or joined the Poor Rolls (at the very time when the new Protestant ethic was beginning to finger alms-giving as a waste and an encouragement to sloth), and as the institutions that in the past had catered to the poor were breaking down. Some poor women presumably used the fear that their reputation as witches inspired to obtain what they needed. But it was not just the "bad witch," who cursed and allegedly lamed cattle, ruined crops, or caused her employer's children to die, that was condemned. The "good witch," who made sorcery her career, was also punished, often more severely.

Historically, the witch was the village midwife, medic, soothsayer or sorceress, whose privileged area of competence (as Burckhardt wrote concerning the Italian witches), was amorous intrigue (Burckhardt 1927: 319–20). An urban embodiment of this type of witch was the Celestina, in the play by Fernando de Rojas (*The Celestina* 1499). Of her it was said that:

> She had six trades, to wit: launderess, perfumer, a master hand at making cosmetics and replacing damaged maidenheads, procuress, and something of a witch.... Her first trade was a cover for the rest and with this excuse many servant girls went to her house to do their washing....You can't imagine the traffic she carried on. She was a baby doctor; she picked up flax in one house and brought it to another, all this as an excuse to get in everywhere. One would say: "Mother, come here!" Or "Here comes the mistress!" Everyone knew her. And yet in spite of her many duties she found time to go to Mass or Vesper" (Rojas 1959:17–18).

A more typical healer, however, was Gostanza, a woman tried as a witch in San Miniato, a small town of Toscana in 1594. After becoming a widow Gostanza had set herself up as a professional healer, soon becoming well-known in the region for her therapeutic remedies and exorcisms. She lived with her niece and two other women, widows as well. A next-door neighbor, also a widow, gave her the spices for her drugs. She received her clients in her home, but she also traveled wherever she was needed, to "mark" an animal, visit a sick person, help people carry out a revenge or free themselves from the effects of medical charms (Cardini 1989: 51–58). Her tools were natural oils and powders, as well as devices apt to cure and protect by "sympathy" or "contact." It was not in her interest to inspire fear in her community, as practicing her arts was her way of making a living. She was, in fact, very popular, everyone would go to her to be cured, to have his or her fortune told, to find missing objects or to buy love potions. But she did not escape persecution. After the Council of Trento (1545–1563), the Counter-Reformation took a strong position against popular healers, fearing their power and deep roots in the culture of their communities. In England as well, the fate of the "good witches" was sealed in 1604 when a statute passed by James I established the death penalty for anyone who used spirits and magic, even if they caused no visible harm.[39]

With the persecution of the folk healer, women were expropriated from a patrimony of empirical knowledge, regarding herbs and healing remedies, that they had accumulated and transmitted from generation to generation, its loss paving the way for a new form of enclosure. This was the rise of professional medicine, which erected in front of the "lower classes" a wall of unchallengeable scientific knowledge, unaffordable and alien, despite its curative pretenses (Ehrenreich and English 1973; Starhawk 1997).

The displacement of the folk-healer/witch by the doctor raises the question of the role that the development of modern science and the scientific worldview played in the rise and fall of the witch-hunt. On this question we have two opposite viewpoints.

On one side we have the theory descending from the Enlightenment, which credits the advent of scientific rationalism as the key factor in the termination of the persecution. As formulated by Joseph Klaits (1985), this theory argues that the new science transformed intellectual life, generating a new skepticism as "it revealed the universe as a self-regulating mechanism in which direct and constant divine intervention was unnecessary" (p.162). However, Klaits admits that the same judges who by the 1650s were put-

*THE WITCH'S HERBARY, engraving by Hans Weiditz (1532). As the starry globe suggests, the "virtue" of the herbs was strengthened by the proper astral conjunction.*

ting a break on witch trials never questioned the reality of witchcraft. "Neither in France nor anywhere else did the seventeenth-century judges who put an end to witch-hunting profess that there were no witches. Like Newton and other scientists of the time, judges continued to accept supernatural magic as theoretically plausible" *(ibid.*: 163).

Indeed, there is no evidence that the new science had a liberating effect. The mechanistic view of Nature that came into existence with the rise of modern science "disenchanted the world." But there is no evidence that those who promoted it ever spoke in defense of the women accused as witches. Descartes declared himself an agnostic on this matter; other mechanical philosophers (like Joseph Glanvil and Thomas Hobbes) strongly supported the witch-hunt. What ended the witch-hunt (as Brian Easlea has convincingly shown) was the annihilation of the world of the witches and the imposition of the social discipline that the victorious capitalist system required. In other words, the witch-hunt came to an end, by the late 17th century, because the ruling class by this time enjoyed a growing sense of security concerning its power, not because a more enlightened view of the world had emerged.

The question that remains is whether the rise of the modern scientific method can be considered the cause of the witch-hunt. This view has been argued most forcefully by Carolyn Merchant in *The Death of Nature* (1980) which roots the persecution of the witches in the paradigm shift the scientific revolution, and particularly the rise of Cartesian mechanistic philosophy, provoked. According to Merchant, this shift

replaced an organic worldview that had looked at nature, women, and the earth as nurturing mothers, with a mechanical one that degraded them to the rank of "standing resources," removing any ethical constraints to their exploitation (Merchant 1980:127ff). The woman-as-witch, Merchant argues, was persecuted as the embodiment of the "wild side" of nature, of all that in nature seemed disorderly, uncontrollable, and thus antagonistic to the project undertaken by the new science. Merchant finds a proof of the connection between the persecution of the witches and the rise of modern science in the work of Francis Bacon, one of the reputed fathers of the new scientific method, showing that his concept of the scientific investigation of nature was modeled on the interrogation of the witches under torture, portraying nature as a woman to be conquered, unveiled, and raped (Merchant 1980: 168–72).

Merchant's account has the great merit of challenging the assumption that scientific rationalism was a vehicle of progress, and focuses our attention on the profound alienation that modern science has instituted between human beings and nature. It also links the witch-hunt to the destruction of the environment, and connects the capitalist exploitation of the natural world with the exploitation of women.

Merchant, however, overlooks the fact that the "organic worldview" which the elites embraced in pre-scientific Europe, left room for slavery and the extermination of the heretics. We also know that the aspiration to the technological domination of nature and the appropriation of women's creative powers has accommodated different cosmological frameworks. The Renaissance magicians were no less interested in these objectives,[40] while Newtonian physics owed its discovery of gravitational attraction not to a mechanistic but to a magical view of nature. Furthermore, when the vogue for philosophical mechanism had run its course, by the beginning of the 18th century, new philosophical trends emerged that stressed the value of "sympathy," "sensibility," and "passion," and yet were easily integrated in the project of the new science (Barnes and Shapin 1979).

We should also consider that the intellectual scaffold that supported the persecution of the witches was not directly taken from the pages of philosophical rationalism. Rather, it was a transitional phenomenon, a sort of ideological *bricolage* that evolved under the pressure of the task it had to accomplish. Within it, elements taken from the fantastic world of medieval Christianity, rationalistic arguments, and modern bureaucratic court procedures combined, in the same way as in the forging of Nazism the cult of science and technology combined with a scenario pretending to restore an archaic, mythical world of blood bonds and pre-monetary allegiances.

This point is suggested by Parinetto who observes that the witch-hunt was a classical instance (unfortunately, not the last) of how, in the history of capitalism, "going back" was a means of stepping forward, from the viewpoint of establishing the conditions for capital accumulation. For in conjuring the devil, the inquisitors disposed of popular animism and pantheism, redefining in a more centralized fashion the location and distribution of power in the cosmos and society. Thus, paradoxically (Parinetto writes), in the witch-hunt the devil functioned as the true servant of God; he was the operator that most contributed to paving the way to the new science. Like a bailiff, or God's secret agent, the Devil brought order into the world, emptying it from competing influences, and reasserting God as the exclusive ruler. He so well consolidated God's command over human affairs

*The alchemist's "desire to appropriate the function of maternity" is well-reflected in this picture of Hermes Trismegistus (alchemy's mythical founder) holding a fetus in his womb and suggesting "the inseminating role of the male."*

that, within a century, with the advent of Newtonian physics, God would be able to retire from the world, content to guard its clock-like operations from afar.

Rationalism and mechanism, then, were not the *immediate* cause of the persecutions, although they contributed to create a world committed to the exploitation of nature. More important, in instigating the witch-hunt, was the need of the European elites to eradicate an entire mode of existence which, by the late Middle Ages, was threatening their political and economic power. When this task was accomplished — when social discipline was restored and the ruling class saw its hegemony consolidated — witch trials came to an end. The belief in witchcraft could even become an object of ridicule, decried as a superstition, and soon put out of memory.

This process began throughout Europe toward the end of the 17th century, though witch trials continued in Scotland for three more decades. A factor contributing to the

end of the witch-hunt was the fact that the ruling class was beginning to lose control over it, coming under the fire of its own repressive machine, with denunciations targeting even its own members. Midelfort writes that in Germany:

> as the flames licked closer to the names of people who enjoyed high rank and power, the judges lost confidence in the confessions and the panic ceased... (Midelfort 1972: 206).

In France, too, the final wave of trials brought widespread social disorder: servants accused their masters, children accused their parents, husbands accused their wives. Under these circumstances, the King decided to intervene, and Colbert extended Paris' jurisdiction to the whole of France to end the persecution. A new legal code was promulgated in which witchcraft was not even mentioned (Mandrou 1968: 443).

Just as the state had started the witch-hunt, so too, one by one, various governments took the initiative in ending it. From the mid-17th century on, efforts were made to brake judicial and inquisitorial zeal. One immediate consequence was that, in the 18th century, "common crimes" suddenly multiplied (*ibid.*: 437). In England, between 1686 and 1712, as the witch-hunt died down, arrests for damage to property (burning of granaries, houses, and haystacks in particular) and assaults rose enormously (Kittredge 1929: 333), while new crimes entered the statute books. Blasphemy began to be treated as a punishable offense — in France, it was decreed that after the sixth conviction the blasphemers would have their tongues cut out — and so was sacrilege (the profanation of relics and the theft of hosts). New limits were also put on the sale of poisons; their private use was forbidden, their sale was made conditional upon the acquisition of a license, and the death penalty was extended to poisoners. All this suggests that the new social order was by now sufficiently consolidated for crimes to be identified and punished as such, without any recourse to the supernatural. In the words of a French parliamentarian:

> Witches and sorcerers are no longer condemned, firstly because it is difficult to establish proof of witchcraft, and secondly because such condemnations have been used to do harm. One has ceased therefore to accuse them of the uncertain in order to accuse them of the certain (Mandrou 1968: 361).

Once the subversive potential of witchcraft was destroyed, the practice of magic could even be allowed to continue. After the witch-hunt came to an end, many women continued to support themselves by foretelling the future, selling charms and practicing other forms of magic. As Pierre Bayle reported in 1704, "in many provinces of France, in Savoy, in the canton of Berne and many other places of Europe... there is no village or hamlet, no matter how small, where someone is not considered a witch" (Erhard 1963: 30). In 18th-century France, an interest for witchcraft developed also among the urban nobility who — being excluded from economic production and sensing that their privileges were coming under attack — satisfied their desire for power by recourse to the magical arts (*ibid.*: 31–32). But now the authorities were no longer inter-

ested in prosecuting these practices, being inclined, instead, to view witchcraft as a product of ignorance or a disorder of the imagination (Mandrou 1968: 519). By the 18th century the European intelligentsia even began to take pride in its acquired enlightenment, and confidently proceeded to rewrite the history of the witch-hunt, dismissing it as a product of medieval superstition.

Yet the specter of the witches continued to haunt the imagination of the ruling class. In 1871, the Parisian bourgeoisie instinctively returned to it to demonize the female *Communards*, accusing them of wanting to set Paris aflame. There can be little doubt, in fact, that the models for the lurid tales and images used by the bourgeois press to create the myth of the *petroleuses* were drawn from the repertoire of the witch-hunt. As described by Edith Thomas, the enemies of the Commune claimed that thousands of proletarian women roamed (like witches) the city, day and night, with pots full of kerosene and stickers with the notation "B.P.B." ("bon pour bruler," "good for torching"), presumably following instructions given to them, as part of a great conspiracy to reduce Paris to ashes in front of the troops advancing from Versailles. Thomas writes that "*petroleuses* were to be found everywhere. In the areas occupied by the Versailles army it was enough that a woman be poor and ill-dressed, and that she be carrying a basket, box, or milk-bottle" to be suspected" (Thomas 1966: 166–67). Hundreds of women were thus summarily executed, while the press vilified them in the papers. Like the witch, the *petroleuse* was depicted as an older woman with a wild, savage look and uncombed hair. In her hands was the container for the liquid she used to perpetrate her crimes.[41]

## Endnotes

1. As Erik Midelfort has pointed out "With a few notable exceptions, the study of witch-hunts has remained impressionistic.... It is indeed striking how few decent surveys of witchcraft exist for Europe, surveys that attempt to list all the witch trials in a given town or region" (Midelfort 1972: 7).
2. An expression of this identification was the creation of WITCH, a network of autonomous feminist groups that played an important role in the initial phase of the women's liberation movement in the United States. As Robin Morgan reports, in *Sisterhood is Powerful* (1970), WITCH was born on Halloween 1968 in New York, but "covens" soon were formed in several cities. What the figure of the witch meant to these activists is shown in a flyer written by the New York coven which, after recalling that witches were the first practitioners of birth control and abortion, stated:

> Witches have always been women who dared to be courageous, aggressive, intelligent, non-conformists, curious, independent, sexually liberated, revolutionary... WITCH lives and laughs in every woman. She is the free part of each of us...You are a Witch by being female, untamed, angry, joyous and immortal. (Morgan 1970: 605–6).

Among North American feminist writers, those who have most consciously identified the history of the witches with the struggle for women's liberation are Mary

*Above: "Petroleuses," color lithograph by Bertall reproduced in* LES COMMUNEAUX, *n. 20.*

*Right: "The Women of Paris." Wood engraving reproduced in* THE GRAPHIC, *April 29, 1871.*

Daly (1978), Starhawk (1982), and Barbara Ehrenreich and Deidre English, whose *Witches, Midwives and Nurses: A History of Women Healers (1973)* was for many feminists, myself included, the first introduction to the history of the witch-hunt.

3. How many witches were burned? This has been a controversial question in the scholarship on the witch-hunt and a difficult one to answer, since many trials were not recorded or, if they were, the number of women executed was not specified. In addition, many documents in which we may find references to witchcraft trials have not yet been studied or have been destroyed. In the 1970s, E.W. Monter noted, for instance, that it was impossible to calculate the number of secular witch-trials that had taken place in Switzerland because these were often mentioned only in fiscal records and these records had not yet have not been analyzed (1976: 21). Thirty years later, accounts still widely differ.

While some feminist scholars argue that the number of witches executed equals that of the Jews killed in Nazi Germany, according to Anne L. Barstow, on the basis of the present state of archival work, we are justified if we assume that approximately 200,000 women were accused of witchcraft over a space of three centuries and a lesser number of them were killed. Barstow admits, however, that it is very difficult to establish how many women were executed or died due to the tortures inflicted upon them.

> Many records [she writes] do no list the verdicts of the trials ...
> [or] do not include those who died in prison ... Others driven
> to despair by torture killed themselves themselves in prison ...
> Many accused witches were murdered in prison... Others died
> in prison from the tortures inflicted on them (Barstow: 22-3)..

Taking into account also those who were lynched, Barstow concludes that at least 100,000 women were killed, but she adds that those who escaped were "ruined for life," for once accused, "suspicion and ill will followed them to their graves" (ibid.)

While the controvery concerning the size of the witch-hunt continues, regional estimates have been provided by Midelfort and Larner. Midelfort (1972) has found that in Southwestern Germany at least 3,200 witches were burned just between 1560 and 1670, a period when "they no longer burnt one or two witches, they burned twenties and hundreds" (Lea 1922: 549). Christina Larner (1981) places the number of women executed in Scotland between 1590 and 1650 at 4,500; but she too agrees that the number may be much higher, since the prerogative of conducting witch-hunts was granted also to local notables, who had a free hand not only with arresting "witches" but with record keeping.

4. Two feminist writers — Starhawk and Maria Mies — have placed the witch-hunt in the context of primitive accumulation, reaching conclusions very similar to those presented in this volume. In *Dreaming the Dark* (1982) Starhawk has connected the witch-hunt with the dispossession of the European peasantry from the commons, the social effects of the price inflation caused by the arrival in Europe of the American gold and silver, and the rise of professional medicine. She has also noted that:

> The [witch] is gone now ... [but] Her fears, and the forces
> she struggled against in her lifetime, live on.
> We can open our newspapers, and read the same charges

against the idle poor... The expropriators move into the Third World, destroying cultures... plundering the resources of land and people... If we turn on the radio, we can hear the crackle of flames... But the struggle also lives on (Starhawk 1997: 218-9).

While Starhawk examines the witch-hunt mostly in the context of the rise of a market economy in Europe, Maria Mies' *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale* (1986) connects it to the colonization process and the increasing domination of nature which have characterized the capitalist ascendency. She argues that the witch-hunt was part of the attempt by the emerging capitalist class to establish its control over the productive capacity of women, and first and foremost over their generative powers, in the context of a new sexual and international division of labor built upon the exploitation of women, the colonies, and nature (Mies 1986: 69-70; 78-88).

5. Since the late Roman Empire, magic had been held in suspicion by the ruling classes as part of the ideology of the slaves and an instrument of insubordination. Pierre Dockes quotes *De re rustica* by Columella, a Roman agronomist of the Late Republic, who himself quoted Cato, to the effect that familiarity with astrologers, soothsayers and sorcerers was to be kept in check, because it had a dangerous influence on the slaves. Columella recommended that the *villicus* "shall make no sacrifices without orders from his master. He shall receive neither soothsayers nor magicians, who take advantage of men's superstititions to lead them into crime.... He shall shun familiarity with haruspices and sorcerers, two sorts of people who infect ignorant souls with the poison of baseless superstititions" (Quoted by Dockes 1982: 213).

6. Dockes quotes the following excerpt from Jean Bodin's *Les Six Livres de la Republique* (1576): "[T]he might of the Arabs grew only in this way [by giving or promising freedom to the slaves]. For as soon as captain Homar, one of Mehemet's lieutenants, promised freedom to the slaves who followed him, he attracted so many of them that within a few years they made themselves lords of all the East. Rumors of freedom and the conquests made by the slaves inflamed the hearts of slaves in Europe, whereupon they took up arms, first in Spain in 781, and later in this kingdom in the time of Charlemagne and of Louis the Piteous, as may be seen in the edicts issued at the time against sworn conspiracies among the slaves.... All at once this blaze broke out in Germany, where slaves, having taken up arms, shook the estates of princes and cities, and even Louis, king of the Germans, was forced to assemble all his forces to rout them. Little by little this forced the Christians to relax servitude and to free the slaves, excepting only certain *corvées*..." (quoted in Dockes 1982: 237).

7. The most important text documenting the tolerance of the Church toward magical beliefs is considered to be the *Canon Episcopi* (tenth century), which labelled as "infidels" those who believed in demons and night flights, arguing that such "illusions" were products of the devil (Russell 1972: 76-7). However, in his study of the witch-hunt in Southwestern Germany, Erik Midelfort has disputed the idea that the Church in the Middle Ages was skeptical and tolerant with regard to witchcraft. He has been particularly critical of the use that has been made of the *Canon Episcopi*, arguing that it states the opposite of what it has been made to say. That is,

we should not conclude that the Church condoned magical practices because the author of the *Canon* attacked the belief in magic. According to Midelfort, the position of the *Canon* was the same that the Church held until the 18th century. The Church condemned the belief that magical deeds are possible, because it considered it a Manicheian heresy to attribute divine powers to witches and devils. Yet, it maintained that those who practiced magic were rightly punished, because they harbored an evil will and allied themselves with the devil (Midelfort 1975: 16–19).

Midelfort stresses that even in 16th-century Germany, the clergy insisted on the need not to believe in the powers of the devil. But he points out that (a) most of the trials were instigated and managed by secular authorities who were not concerned with theological disquisitions; (b) among the clergy as well, the distinction between "evil will" and "evil doing" had little practical effect, for in the final analysis many clergymen recommended that the witches should be punished with death.

8. Monter (1976), 18. The Sabbat first appeared in Medieval literature toward the middle of the 15th century. Rossell Hope Robbins writes that:

> To the early demonologist Johannes Nieder (1435) the Sabbat was unknown, but the anonymous French tract *Errores Gazariarum* (1459) has a detailed account of the 'synagogue.' Nicholas Jaquier about 1458 used the actual word 'sabbat,' although his account was sketchy; 'sabbat' also appeared in a report of the witch persecution at Lyons in 1460... by the 16th century the sabbat was an established part of witchcraft (1959: 415).

9. The witch trials were expensive, as they could continue for months and they became a source of employment for many people (Robbins 1959: 111). Payments for the "services" and the people involved — the judge, the surgeon, the torturer, the scribe, the guards — including their meals and wine, are shamelesssly included in the records of the trials, in addition to the cost of the executions and the cost of keeping the witches in prison. The following is the bill for a trial in the Scottish town of Kirkcaldy in 1636:

| | Pounds | Shilling | Pence |
|---|---|---|---|
| For ten loads of coal, to burn them five marks or | 3 | 6 | 8 |
| For a tar barrel | | 14 | |
| For hurden (hemp fabric) to be jumps (short coats) for them | 3 | 10 | |
| For making of them | | 8 | |
| For one to go to Finmouth for the laird to sit upon their assize as judge | | 6 | |
| For the executioner for his pains | 8 | 14 | |
| For his expenses here | | 16 | 4 |

(Robbins 1959: 114)

The costs for a witch-trial were paid by the victim's relatives, but "where the victim was penniless" they were born by the citizens of the town or the landlord (Robbins, *ibid.*). On this subject, see Robert Mandrou (1968: 112); and Christina Larner (1983: 115), among others.

10. H. R. Trevor-Roper writes: "[The witch-hunt] was forwarded by the cultivated Popes of the Renaissance, by the great Protestant Reformers, by the Saints of the Counter-Reformation, by the scholars, lawyers and churchmen.... If these two centuries were an age of light, we have to admit that in one respect at least the dark ages were more civilized...." (Trevor-Roper 1967: 122ff).

11 Cardini 1989: 13-6; Prosperi 1989: 217ff; Martin 1989: 32. As Ruth Martin writes concerning the work of the Inquisition in Venice: "A comparison by [P.F.] Grendler of the number of death sentences awarded by the Inquisition and by civilian tribunals has led him to conclude that 'Italian Inquisitions exercised great restraint compared to civil tribunals,' and that 'light punishment and commutation, rather than severity, marked the Venetian Inquisition,' a conclusion more recently confirmed by E.W. Monter in his study of the Mediterranean Inquisition.... As far as the Venetian trials were concerned, neither execution nor mutilation was given as a sentence and galley service was rare. Long prison sentences were also rare, and where these or banishments were issued, they were often commuted after a comparatively short space of time.... Pleas from those in prison that they may be allowed to transfer to house arrest on grounds of ill-health were also treated with sympathy" (Martin 1989: 32-33).

12. There is also evidence of significant shifts in the weight attributed to specific accusations, the nature of the crimes commonly associated with witchcraft, and the social composition of the accusers and accused. The most significant shift, perhaps, is that in an early phase of the persecution (during the 15th-century trials) witchcraft was seen predominantly as a collective crime, relying on mass gatherings and organization, while by the 17th century it was seen as a crime of an individual nature, an evil career in which isolated witches specialized — this being a sign of the breakdown of communal bonds brought about by the increasing privitization of land tenure and the expansion of commercial relations in this period.

13. Germany is an exception to this pattern, since the witch-hunt here affected many members of the bourgeoisie, including town councillors. Arguably, in Germany the confiscation of property was a major reason behind the persecution, accounting for the fact that it reached there proportions unmatched in any other country, except for Scotland. However, according to Midelfort the legality of confiscation was controversial; and even in the case of rich families, no more than one third of the property was taken. Midelfort adds that in Germany too "it is beyond question that most of the people executed were poor" (Midelfort 1972: 1964-169).

14. A serious analysis of the relation between changes in land tenure, above all land privatization, and witch-hunting, is still missing. Alan Macfarlane, who first suggested a significant connection between the Essex enclosures and the witch-hunt in the same area, later recanted (Macfarlane 1978). But the relation between the two phenomena is unquestionable. As we have seen (in Chapter 2), land privatiza-

tion was a significant factor — directly and indirectly — in the pauperization that women suffered in the period in which the witch-hunt assumed mass proportions. As soon as land was privatized and a land market developed, women became vulnerable to a double process of expropriation: by well-to-do land-buyers and by their own male relations.

15. As the witch-hunt expanded, however, the distinctions between the professional witch and those who turned to her for help or engaged in magical practices without any special claim to expertise were blurred.
16. Midelfort, too, sees a connection between the Price Revolution and the persecution of the witches. Commenting upon the escalation of witch-trials in Southwestern Germany after 1620, he writes:

> The years 1622–23 saw the total disruption of coinage. Money became so depreciated that prices soared out of sight. Food prices, moreover, did not need monetary policy to rise. The year 1625 had a cold spring and bad harvests from Wurzburg across Wuttemberg to the whole Rhine valley. The next year found famine along the Rhine valley.... These conditions of themselves drove prices beyond what many laborers could afford (1972: 123–24).

17. Writes Le Roy Ladurie: "Between these frenzied uprisings (*sic*) [the witch-hunts] and authentic popular revolts which also reached their climax in the same mountains about 1580-1600, there existed a series of geographical, chronological, and sometimes family coincidences" (Le Roy Ladurie 1987: 208).
18. In the obsession with the Sabbat or Synagogue, as the mythical witches' gathering was called, we find a proof of the continuity between the persecution of the witches and the persecution of the Jews. As heretics and propagators of Arabic wisdom, Jews were regarded as sorcerers, poisoners and devil worshippers. To the portrait of Jews as devilish beings contributed the tales surrounding the practice of circumcision, which claimed that Jews ritually murdered children. "Time and again the Jews were described [in the miracle plays as well as in sketches] as 'devils from Hell, enemies of the human race'" (Trachtenberg 1944: 23). On the connection between the persecution of the Jews and the witch-hunt, see also Carlo Ginzburg's *Ecstasies* (1991), Chapters 1 and 2.
19. The reference here is to the conspirators of the "Bundschuh" — the German peasant union, whose symbol was the clog — which in the 1490s, in Alsace, plotted to rise against church and castle. Of them Friedrick Engels wrote that they were wont to hold their meetings at night on the lonesome Hunher Hill (Engels 1977: 66).
20. The Italian historian Luciano Parinetto has suggested that the theme of cannibalism may be an import from the New World, as cannibalism and devil-worship merged in the reports about the "Indians" made by the conquistadors and their clerical accomplices. In support of this thesis Parinetto cites Francesco Maria Guazzo's *Compendium Maleficarum* (1608) which, in his view, demonstrates that demonologists in Europe were influenced, in their portrayal of witches as cannibals, by the reports coming from the New World. However, witches in Europe were accused of sacrificing children to the devil long before the conquest and colonization of the Americas.

21. In the 14th and 15th centuries, the Inquisition accused women, heretics, and Jews of witchcraft. It was in the course of trials held in 1419–1420 in Lucerne and Interlaken that the word *Hexerei* ("witchcraft") was first used (Russell 1972: 203).

22. Murray's thesis has been revived in recent years, in the midst of a renewed interest among eco-feminists for the woman–nature relation in early matrifocal societies. Among those who have read the witches as the defenders of an ancient female-centered religion that worshipped women's reproductive powers is Mary Condren. In *The Serpent and the Goddess* (1989), Condren argues that the witch-hunt was part of a long process whereby Christianity displaced the priestesses of the older religion, first by asserting that they used their powers for evil purposes and later by denying they had such powers(Condren 1989: 80–86). One of the most interesting claims Condren makes in this context concerns the connection between the persecution of the witches and the attempt by the Christian priests to appropriate women's reproductive powers. Condren shows how the priests engaged in a true competition with the "wise women," performing reproductive miracles, making barren women pregnant, changing the sex of infants, performing supernatural abortions and, last but not least, fostering abandoned children (Condren 1989: 84–85).

23. By the middle of the 16th century most European countries began to gather regularly demographic statistics. In 1560 the Italian historian Francesco Guicciardini expressed surprise upon learning that in Antwerp and generally in the Netherlands the authorities did not gather demographic data except in case of "urgent necessity" (Helleneir 1958: 1–2). By the 17th century all the states where the witch-hunt was taking place were also promoting population growth (*ibid.*: 46).

24. Monica Green, however, has challenged the idea that in the Middle Ages there existed a rigid sexual division of medical labor, such that men were excluded from the care of women and particularly from gynecology and obstetrics. She also argues that women were present, although in smaller number, throughout the medical community, not just as midwives but as physicians, apothecaries, barber-surgeons. Green questions the common claim that midwives were especially targeted by the authorities, and that we can trace a connection between the witch-hunt and the expulsion of women from the medical profession starting in the 14th and 15th centuries. She claims that the restrictions placed on practicing resulted from many social tensions (in Spain, e.g., from the conflict between Christians and Muslims) and, while the increasing limitations placed on women's practice can be documented, the reasons behind them cannot. She admits that the prevailing concerns behind these limitations were of "moral" origin; that is, they related to considerations about the woman's character (Green 1989: 435ff).

25. J. Gelis writes that "the state and church traditionally distrusted this woman whose practice often remained secret, and steeped in magic if not witchcraft, and who could definitely count on the support of the rural community." ("*L'état et l'église se méfient traditionellement de cette femme dont la pratique reste souvent secrète, empreinte de magie, voire de sorcellerie et qui dispose au sein de la communauté rurale d'une audience certaine.*") He adds that it was above all necessary to break the complicity, true or imagined, of the *sages femmes* in such crimes as abortion, infanticide, child abandonment (Gelis 1977: 927ff). In France the first edict regulating the activity of the *sages femmes* was

promulgated in Strasbourg at the end of the 16th century. By the end of the 17th century the *sages femmes* were completely under the control of the state, and were used by the state as a reactionary force in its campaign of moral reform (Gelis 1977).

26. This may explain why contraceptives, which had been widely used in the Middle Ages, disappeared in the 17th century, surviving only in the *milieu* of prostitution, and when they reappeared on the scene they were placed in male hands, so that women were not allowed to use them except with male permission. For a long time, in fact, the only contraceptive offered by bourgeois medicine was to be the condom. The "sheath" begins to appear in England in the 18th century, one of the first mentions of it is in James Boswell's *Diary* (quoted by Helleiner 1958: 94).
27. In 1556, Henry II in France passed a law punishing as murderous any woman who hid her pregnancy and whose child was born dead. A similar law was passed in Scotland in 1563. Until the 18th century in Europe infanticide was punished with the death penalty. In England, during the Protectorate, the death penalty was introduced for adultery.

    To the attack on women's reproductive rights, and the introduction of new laws sanctioning the subordination of the wife to the husband within the family, we must add the criminalization of prostitution, starting in the mid-16th century. As we have seen (in Chapter 2), prostitutes were subjected to atrocious punishments such as that of the *acabussade*. In England, they were branded on the forehead with hot irons in a manner reminiscent of the "devil's mark," and they were whipped and shaved like witches. In Germany, the prostitute could be drowned, burned or buried alive. Here, too, she was shaved — hair was viewed as a favorite seat of the devil. At times her nose was cut off, a practice of Arab origin, used to punish "crimes of honor" and inflicted also on women charged with adultery.

    Like the witch, the prostitute was presumably recognized by her "evil eye." It was assumed that sexual transgression was diabolical and gave women magical powers. On the relation between eros and magic in the Renaissance, see Ioan P. Couliano (1987).
28. The debate on the nature of the sexes began in the late Middle Ages and then reopened in the 17th century.
29. "Tu non pensavi ch'io loico fossi!" ("You didn't think I was a logician!") chuckles the Devil in Dante's *Inferno,* while snatching the soul of Boniface the VIII, who had cunningly thought of escaping the eternal fire by repenting in the very act of perpetrating his crimes (*Divine Comedy, Inferno*, canto XXVII, verse 123).
30. The sabotage of the conjugal act was a major theme also in contemporary judicial proceedings regarding matrimony and separation, especially in France. As Robert Mandrou observes, men were so afraid of being made impotent by women, that village priests often forbade women who were suspected of being experts in the "tying of knots" (an alleged device for causing male impotence) from attending weddings (Mandrou 1968: 81–82, 391ff.; Le Roy Ladurie 1974: 204-205; Lecky 1886: 100).
31. This tale appears in several demonologies. It always ends with the man discovering the injury inflicted on him and forcing the witch to return his penis to him. She accompanies him to the top of a tree where she has many hidden in a nest; the man chooses one but the witch objects: "No, that one belongs to the Bishop."

32. Carolyn Merchant argues that the interrogations and tortures of the witches provided the model for the methodology of the New Science, as defined by Francis Bacon:

> Much of the imagery [Bacon] used in delineating his scientific objectives and methods derives from the courtrooms, and because it treats nature as a female to be tortured through mechanical inventions, strongly suggests the interrogations of the witch-trials and the mechanical devices used to torture witches. In a relevant passage, Bacon stated that the method by which nature's secrets might be discovered consisted in investigating the secrets of witchcraft by inquisition..." (Merchant 1980: 168).

33. On the attack against animals, see Chapter 2, pp. 60 and 70n.

34. It is significant, in this context, that witches were often accused by children. Norman Cohn has interpreted this phenomenon as a revolt of the young against the elderly, and in particular against parental authority (N. Cohn 1975; Trevor Roper 2000). But other factors need to be considered. First, it is plausible that the climate of fear created by the witch-hunt over the years was responsible for the large presence of children among the accusers, which began to materialize in the 17th century. It is also important to notice that those charged as witches were mostly proletarian women, while the children who accused them were often the children of their employers. Thus, we can presume that children were manipulated by their parents to make charges which they themselves were reluctant to pursue, as it was undoubtedly the case in the Salem witch-trials. We must also consider that, in the 16th and 17th centuries, there was a growing preoccupation among the well-to-do with the physical intimacy between their children and their servants, above all their nurses, which was beginning to appear as a source of indiscipline. The familiarity that had existed between masters and servants in the Middle Ages vanished with the rise of the bourgeoisie, who formally instituted more egalitarian relations between employers and their subordinates (for instance, by levelling clothing styles), but in reality increased the physical and psychological distance between them. In the bourgeois household, the master would no longer undress in front of his servants, nor would he sleep in the same room with them.

35. For a true-to-life Sabbat, in which sexual elements and themes evoking class revolt combine, see Julian Cornwall's description of the rebel camp that peasants set up during the Norfolk uprising of 1549. The camp caused much scandal among the gentry, who apparently looked at it as a veritable Sabbat. Writes Cornwall:

> [T]he conduct of the rebels was misrepresented in every way. It was alleged that the camp became the Mecca for every dissolute person in the county.... Bands of rebels foraged for supplies and money. 3,000 bullocks and 20,000 sheep, to say nothing of pigs, fowl, deer, swans and thousands of bushels of corn, were driven in and consumed, it was said, in a few days. Men whose ordinary diet was too often sparse and monotonous revelled in the abundance of flesh, and there was reckless waste. It tasted all the sweeter for coming from the beasts which were the root of so much resentment (Cornwall 1977: 147).

The "beasts" were the much prized wool-producing sheep, which were indeed, as Thomas Moore put it in his *Utopia*, 'eating humans', as arable lands and common fields were being enclosed and turned to pasture in order to raise them.

36. Thorndike 1923–58v: 69; Holmes 1974: 85–86; Monter 1969: 57–58. Kurt Seligman writes that from the middle of the 14th century to the 16th century alchemy was universally accepted, but with the rise of capitalism the attitude of the monarchs changed. In Protestant countries, alchemy became an object of ridicule. The alchemist was depicted as a smoke-seller, who promised to change metals into gold, but failed in his performance (Seligman 1948: 126ff). He was often represented at work in his study, surrounded by strange vases and instruments, oblivious to everything around him, while across the street his wife and children would be knocking at the poor house. Ben Jonson's satirical portrait of the alchemist reflects this new attitude.

    Astrology, too, was practiced into the 17th century. In his *Demonology* (1597), James I maintained that it was legitimate, above all when confined to the study of seasons and weather forecasts. A detailed description of the life of an English astrologer at the end of the 16th century is found in A. L. Rowse's *Sex and Society in Shakespeare's Age* (1974). Here we learn that in the same period when the witch-hunt was peaking, a male magician could continue to carry on his work, although with some difficulty and taking some risks at times.

37. With reference to the West Indies, Anthony Barker writes that no aspect of the unfavorable image of the Negro built by the slave owners had wider or deeper roots than the allegation of insatiable sexual appetite. Missionaries reported that the Negros refused to be monogamous, were excessively libidinous, and told stories of Negroes having intercourse with apes (pp. 121–23). The fondness of Africans for music was also held against them, as proof of their instinctual, irrational nature (*ibid.*: 115).

38. In the Middle Ages when a child took over the family property, s/he would automatically assume the care of the aging parents, while in the 16th century the parents began to be abandoned and priority was given to investment into one's children (Macfarlane 1970: 205).

39. The statute which James I passed in 1604, imposed the death penalty for all who "used spirits and magic" regardless of whether they had done any harm. This statute later became the basis upon which the persecution of witches was carried on in the American colonies.

40. In "Outrunning Atlanta: Feminine Destiny in Alchemic Transmutations," Allen and Hubbs write that:

> The recurrent symbolism in alchemical works suggests an obsession with reversing, or perhaps even arresting, the feminine hegemony over the process of biological creation.... This desired mastery is also depicted in such imageries as that of Zeus giving birth to Athena from his head...or Adam being delivered of Eve from his chest. The alchemist who exemplifies the primordial striving for control over the natural world seeks nothing less than the magic of maternity.... Thus the great alchemist Paracelsus gives an affirmative answer to the ques-

*A witch rides a goat through the sky, causing a rain of fire. Woodcut from Francesco-Maria Guazzo,* COMPENDIUM MALEFICARUM *(1610).*

tion 'Whether it was possible for art and nature that a man should be born outside a woman's body and a natural mother's' (Allen and Hubbs 1980: 213).

41. On the image of the *petroleuse* see Albert Boime's *Art and the French Commune* (1995: 109–11;196–99), and Rupert Christiansen's *Paris Babylon: The Story of the Paris Commune* (1994: 352–53).

*Amerigo Vespucci landing on the South American coast in 1497. Before him, seductively lying on a hammock, is "America." Behind her some cannibals are roasting human remains. Design by Jan van der Straet, and engraved by Théodore Galle (1589).*