# Which Face of Witch

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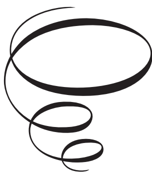
## *Self-Representations of Women as Witches in Works of Contemporary British Women Writers*

By

Adriana Madej-Stang

Cambridge Scholars Publishing



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# PREFACE

The point of this study is to investigate the existing representations of women as witches in publications by contemporary British women writers to see how this figure is perceived, related to and utilised in their texts. Iris Murdoch, Jeanette Winterson, Angela Carter and Fay Weldon, among others, refer in their works again and again to the witch as a figure whom they not only use but also interpret in a creative and frequently surprising manner showing innovative approaches to this comparably ancient image.

Whoever depicts a witch as a character in a modern novel of course is not a woman writing on an empty island. Writers and particularly modern writers live in, by and through a vast background of culture and tradition. It is therefore the cultural image of the witch as it developed throughout history and particularly in the nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries that laid the basis for the literary works of the writers discussed. The transformation the witch figure has undergone since the middle of the nineteenth century is enormous. Her new alternative readings and interpretations have been offered in the fields of historical, political, cultural, social and literary studies, among others.

The 1960s saw a surprising rediscovery of the image of the witch, who by then had become a dusted character in fairy tales and Disney movies. It was feminists who ensured the witch her special position in the modern world. In 1968 a group of American feminists, including Robin Morgan, Florika, Judith Duffett and Peggy Dobbins, created the first WITCH (Brownmiller 1999, 49). Their WITCH was an acronym standing for "Women's International Conspiracy from Hell." They selected the figure of the witch referring to the idea that witch trials were acts of violence undertaken by the patriarchal system against strong and independent women. The witch as a social outcast could subvert the patriarchal society with her "hexes," that is, actions questioning and challenging the existing social and political system. The witch became, thus, a symbol of the feminist movement. The acronym turned out to be immensely successful and soon invited numerous alternative readings such as "Women Inspired to Tell their Collective History" or "Women Interested in Toppling Consumer Holidays" and others. Nine years later the witch was used as a symbol of women fighting for their rights by the participants of the Rome demonstrations (Hartinger 2001, 35). 1978 also saw the publication of

Mary Daly's study *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* which she dedicated to "Hags, Harpies and Crones" (xii) and in which she presented the witch as an independent woman challenging a patriarchal world structure and professing ideals of sisterhood between women. Daly also linked the figure of the witch to that of a goddess and thereby to the theories of matriarchal religion already postulated in the middle of the nineteenth century. The witch thus is transformed into a symbol of a new woman defined in opposition to the patriarchal culture. In the eyes of feminists she became a role model to whom modern women could refer if they should want to gain personal independence and constitute themselves anew in the world.

Although the importance of the figure of the witch in literature has been recognised by critics and scholars, there are no studies analysing in detail the manner of creation and the scope of use of the witch in contemporary fiction by women writers. Paulina Palmer in her study *Lesbian Gothic* devotes a whole chapter to "The witch and rebellious femininity" concentrating on feminist writers only. Referring to such authors as Tennant, Gallop, Winterson, Donoghue, Allard and Galford, among others, she presents the figure of the witch from the point of view of lesbian fiction. She argues that the witch appears in feminist fiction in the form of an archaic mother or a mystic and poet. She also stresses that writers either tend to present the witch as "a signifier of a separate cultural space where women can pursue their desires unimpeded by male control" (Palmer 1999, 30), that is, as a construct of the matriarchal society defying the structure of the patriarchal world (Hanrahan, Allard), or as quite the opposite, the very construct of the patriarchal society (Donoghue, Winterson). Her analysis comprises short summaries of texts pointing out the main roles in which witch characters are used in these texts. Another of Palmer's papers, "Lesbian Transformations of Gothic and Fairy Tale," published in the collection *Contemporary British Women Writers* (2004) presents, among others, Galford's *The Fires of Bride* as an example of the use of Irigaray's call for parodic re-enactment in her construction of the witch figure. Galford's witch, thus representing the feminist world independent of male control, at the same time ridicules radical feminist approaches (Palmer 2004, 146).

One of the most influential studies of the witch in culture and literature was written by Diane Purkiss (1996) who, going against current disbelief in witches, supports the idea of a real existence of witches in the past and in the present. She analyses not only the literary texts in which witches appear, but also historical studies concerning witch trials published by feminist scholars as well as texts by acclaimed historical and modern

witches. In her discussion of witch figures in contemporary literature, she concentrates mainly on the identification of main types of witch representations in feminist literature. Purkiss offers also a new analysis of witch representations in Elizabethan dramas. Both studies mentioned above discussing modern literature concentrate on feminist literature only, thereby making the witch a figure of the feminist movement. Their interest is obviously focused on the presentation of the witch as an expression of the ideas of this movement.

The first part of this thesis discusses the development of the concept of the witch in its historical context. The point of presenting this is to summarise those currently voiced theories which might have influenced the writers analysed herein. Therefore, the survey shall include both the historical image of the witch and later alterations including the development of matriarchal theories, focusing on the discussion of existing ideas rather than on their correctness.

The second part discusses the figure of the witch in English literature from the Anglo-Saxon period to the nineteenth century. It shall present the existing models of witches created by literary texts as well as the literary background against which the modern works consciously place themselves. The overview ends at the beginning of the twentieth century; that is, at the moment when the figure of the witch and the priestess or even some goddess were identified allowing for the proliferation of witch representations in fantasy literature. Fantasy literature as such is excluded from this study.

The third part shall concentrate on the analysis of selected works by contemporary British writers. This arbitrary selection was made taking into consideration the date of publication of works, the sex of the author, the possible impact of the works on contemporary interpretations of the witch figure (popularity of the author, her critical reception), and the innovativeness of the image presented. This part is divided into three chapters presenting three different approaches to this figure. The first chapter discusses works by three authors who depict the witch as the product of patriarchal culture. Iris Murdoch investigates in *The Sea, The Sea* (1978) and *The Green Knight* (1994) the binary opposition between the witch and an enchantress. Both novels by Murdoch refer to the literary predecessors, *The Tempest* and “Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,”, which used this opposition in their constructions of female figures. Fay Weldon in *Puffball* published in 1980 traces the correlation between the image of the witch and the fertility cult as well as the justification of the opposition introduced between sex and gender. In *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil* published in 1983 she interprets the witch as another limiting

representation of womanhood. Emma Tennant in her novel *Faustine* (1992) re-writes the myth of Faustus to embody feminine experience, thus questioning the order of values as open for women in a world dominated by men.

The second chapter includes discussion of works by Margaret Drabble, A.S. Byatt, Emma Donoghue and Ellen Galford. Margaret Drabble in *The Witch of Exmoor* published in 1996 makes her witch a successful social reformer whose professional career is negatively evaluated by her family, stubbornly attempting to adjust her to the lines of social expectations imposed on a woman in her role as a mother, wife and daughter. The title itself places the novel against the background of the Biblical story of Saul and the witch of Endor summoning the prophet Samuel, proposing a dialogue with the Jewish and Christian tradition in the depiction and interpretation of the witch figure. A.S. Byatt's *Possession*, in its Bakhtinian dialogue with the past, delineates complicated correlations between literature and life as well as between cultural and social models of self and their literary constructions. The witch and the enchantress, the great goddess and the demon, the *femme fatale* and the good wife appear and re-appear in Byatt's cultural and literary discourse, undergoing constant revisions and reinterpretations in her narcissistic novel. Byatt's fairy tale "The Story of the Eldest Princess" published in the collection *Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye* in 1994 re-writes the fairy tale figure of the witch. Emma Donoghue's novel *Kissing the Witch* published in 1997, which includes re-visions of popular fairy tales from the heroines' point of view, presents the witch as a personification of freedom from the limitations of the patriarchal world and the patriarchal story structure. Her novel does not only investigate the relations between women in traditional fairy tales, but offers her heroines a way out of the prescribed literary roles into "witchhood." Ellen Galford depicts the feminist image of the witch as a priestess of the great goddess in *The Fires of Bride* (1980) abandoning the discourse of mega-religions for the sake of minor demonic powers in *The Dyke and the Dybbuk* (1993).

The third chapter presents the images of the witch as created in the stories of Susanna Clarke, Angela Carter, Tanith Lee and Jeanette Winterson. Susanna Clarke's "The Ladies of Grace Adieu" (2006) is included in this selection because with this story she comments on her own decision not to include female magicians in her major work *Jonathan Strange and Mr Norrell*. She anchors her short stories in the discourse of fairy presentation in the British Isles, differentiating between the male and female magician figures created by it. Angela Carter and Tanith Lee refer in their new versions of the Red Riding Hood tale to historical representations of

witches as shape-shifters. Both writers change grandmothers from the original tales into werewolves. Witches as werewolves stands for the true nature of witches, who embracing their wildness and amorality negate limitations imposed on women by the patriarchal world. Angela Carter includes two tales, namely "The Werewolf" and "The Company of Wolves,", in her collection of re-written fairy tales *The Bloody Chamber* published 1979. In these tales the image of a beast often represents the image of a woman freed from the sexual and moral restrictions of the patriarchal world. Tanith Lee also includes her story "Wolfland" in a collection of re-written fairy tales entitled *Red as Blood, Or Tales from the Sisters Grimmer* and published in 1983. Both writers chose to introduce a witch figure into a fairy tale which did not feature one originally. They thereby not only subvert the existing image of the witch but also create their own version of her. Jeanette Winterson in dialogue with the historical representations of Lancashire witches gives her own answers to the nature of witchcraft. In her novel *The Daylight Gate*, written for the four hundredth anniversary of the Lancashire witch trials and published 2012, she not only gives her interpretation of the past but also creates her own image of the witch. Her witches also choose freedom of evil-doing and define the value structure of their existence for themselves.

# PART I.

# REPRESENTATIONS OF WITCHES IN HISTORY AND CULTURE

# INTRODUCTION

To understand the texts of the writers discussed here it is imperative to take their cultural background into consideration. No matter the historical correctness of works by Bachofen, Graves, Eliade and others, their influence on popular culture and on the understanding of the figure of the witch cannot be ignored. The historical figure of the witch is the subject of a discussion between historians, sociologists, literary critics and feminists. Witch trials are not only the subject of constant revisions and re-interpretations but are also often used as a tool in political discussion. Therefore this first part will describe the development of, and changes to the figure of the witch that formed the cultural basis on which – and often against which - women wrote throughout the twentieth century.

# CHAPTER ONE

# THE MEANING OF THE TERM "WITCH"

In Old High German the word "unholda," that is, "fiend" or "demon," was used in the meaning of the contemporary word "witch" (Hexe). First of all it was used to name female demons such as "furies," "strigae," "erinyes," "eumenides" and "alps," rather than to refer to a magic knowing woman (Golther 1908, 116-117). The word "hexe" itself, used during the witch craze in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, probably derives from the Old High German words "hagazussa" and "hegezisse" which again stem from the verb "hazzen," to hate, and means "the one who hates," "the hostile one," reflecting in this way one of the most important properties of a witch, her maliciousness and evil doing. Golther further proposes that the word "Hagazusa" derives from the word "hagahazusa" which means "a hostile forest woman" (116-117), as the forest was also the place of residence of evil spirits, many of which were female. All the stories of witches living in a forest find their origin in the belief in sylvan females. The tales about troll-women, where the word "troll" in Northern Germanic languages meant as much as a "demon," also entered the witch-lore. Other female demonic characters known from Nordic and Germanic mythologies, such as, for example, "kveldrida" and "myrkridur," two types of mares who were believed to attack people at night and use them as their horses riding them often to near death or death, started to be perceived as souls of living or deceased witches, and so their lore enriched that of witches. The nightly ride, mare-like nature and malicious goal of their actions contributed to the stories about "Túnridur," that is "Zaunreiterinnen," in English "fence riders," witches who ride on people across the fenced properties. Combining these stories with the belief in the ability of the soul to assume an animal shape and leave the body of a sleeping person, people started to tell tales of souls of witches not only riding people at night, but also roaming the countryside in animal shape, blighting fields, people and animals or conjuring bad weather (see also Eliade 1992; Curtis 2006). This is why a witch was also called "hamhleypa," the one who can assume different shapes. The most popular shapes included those of a cat, dog, hare, rat, mouse, toad, owl and magpie, shapes of animals which later-on

in England were believed to be witches' familiars (Golther 1908, 117-118). As early as pagan times, if a woman was found guilty of one of the crimes considered characteristic of witchcraft such as night rides, causing bad weather, spoiling crops or blighting people and animals, she would have been sentenced to death. In this way she differed from other magic wielding women such as, for example, völvas practicing seiðr (for clarification of the term see page 28), who enjoyed social recognition and whose actions were benevolent and interpreted as advantageous for social welfare. A witch is first and foremost an evil-doer set to harm others out of pure spitefulness.

The English word "witch" comes from an Anglo-Saxon word "wicce" and was related to Low German "wicken" meaning to prophesy or foretell and to bewitch. Golther (1908, 648) stresses that the origin of the word "wicken" is unclear as the majority of words connected with magic and magicians have other roots. In this manner the word "zoubar" (German "zaubern" – to do magic), for example, is clarified by the words "incantation" and "divination," that is, to summon and to divine, and "taufr" is a word used for an amulet (also a form of protective magic practiced in Germanic tribes). Magicians were named in reference to the magic they practice: prophets ("der Weissager" – Anglo-Saxon "witega," Old High German "wizago," Old Nordic "vitki"), fortune tellers ("der Wahrsager/die Wahrsagerin" – Old Nordic "spámadr" and "spákona"), persons knowing the future (Old Nordic "forspár"), magicians (as a general term for a person competent in magic "fjolkunnigr"), wise women (both "spákona" and "völva"), and persons knowing magic charms (Old High German "kalstarari"). Old High German "hlioȥan" and Middle High German "liȥen" referred to the drawing of lots, with the person performing the rite being called respectively "hlioȥari" or "lieȥære." Golther links the expression with the Latin "sortilegus" and "sortiarius" from which the French word "sorcier" comes (1908, 648). Black/harmful magic would be sometimes referred to as "trollskapr" or "trolldom." The border cases were magicians giving or asking for oracles, as their actions usually involved the summoning of ghosts either through "útiseta" (sitting outside) or some other ritual, which would make them a type of necromancer. People performing this type of magic are referred to as "wiȥagun," "leodarseȥȥun" or (a woman) "hleodarsâȥa" (Golther 1908, 648-649).

But the witch from a very early point on seemed to be connected with and to have reached beyond a mere foretelling of the future. Her figure can be and was connected with a number of female spirits said to be accompanying human life. More or less influenced by each other in different times and areas, European cultures developed the idea of the

weavers of fate. Often goddesses or demi-goddesses, it was nearly always women who took this role. Originally an unclear number, in historical times they were often limited to three. Germanic people, for example, believed in "fylgjen" who witnessed human life from the moment of birth to death. In contrast to other demons, who assumed both male and female shapes, "fylgjen" were only female (Golther 1908, 104). Although they were always accompanying people and were sometimes perceived as their guardian spirits, they showed themselves only before life-changing events or death. Thus people started to believe that there were positive, bright, good spirits and others who were negative, dark, and evil, both presiding over human life. In numerous stories they were sometimes identified with the three Norns appearing at the cradle of a child shortly after its birth and prophesying its fate. This is why they were also referred to as spinners and weavers, the ones who spin the fabric of human life. In England they were also known under the name "weird sisters," from Anglo-Saxon "wyrd" for fate (Golther 1908, 98-108). A similar function was held by valkyries, although their role was connected with a man's role as a warrior. The name "valkyrie" comes from Old Norse "valkyrja" meaning the chooser of the slain, where "wal" in Old Norse means "the slain" and "kyrja" (from kjósa) stands for "the selecting one" (Golther 1908, 109). The images of the fylgjur/Norn and the valkyria sometimes overlapped. At times valkyries were like Norns depicted as weavers who decide on the fate of the battle by weaving a fabric from guts using human heads as weights, an arrow as the reed and a sword as the batten (Słupecki 2003, 243-245). These figures, as said previously, are present in different traditions, and thus in Ancient Greece they were called the Moirai, in Rome the Parcae, and in the Slavonic religions the Zorja. It has never been made clear whether these weavers really design the fate of men or just describe an anonymous setting in their patterns that they cannot influence at all. But in ancient times various authors had already said that even the gods could not alter what was predestined in the weavings of the Moirai.

Their role was annihilated by the Christian idea that all future was destined by the one God or maybe a complicated product of God's divination and man's free will, sometimes even further complicated by Satan and his followers.

# Chapter Two

# Magical Beliefs in Christianity

Christianity very strongly integrated itself into the magical discourse. The story of Christ himself follows the pattern of the magi story, and the miracles performed by him belong to the standard scope of a magician's workshop. He healed, cast away demons, changed the nature of elements, walked on the water, multiplied food and so on. He is following such figures as Moses, Solomon, Pythagoras and Apollonius of Tyana (Butler 1979, 66-72). Also his pupils were often perceived by their contemporaries as magicians. The fact that they always stressed that their power came from God whereas the power of any other magician came from the devil did not diminish people's faith in their abilities (Butler 1979, 76-78). Also other Christian saints became famous for their magical powers. Performance of an act outdoing the powers of local priests became a standard part of each Christianisation story. Saint Patrick, for example, could counteract druid magic, amongst other things putting out their fires. The sainthood of Christian saints rested in their ability to perform miracles during their lifetime and after death. Exorcists had power over demons which they could banish from people or places. Each priest had the power to change bread into the body of Christ, to give absolution or to condemn with a curse. In the late Middle Ages a number of superstitions developed in connection with mass. Participation in it was to protect people from sudden death and to ensure good luck during the day. During the mass people were also believed not to get older. Those who took Eucharist were not to be in want of bread on that day. Masses could be held with different intentions, promising health or goodwill to supplicants. Church bells were to protect a village from fire and from plague as the demons causing it would be afraid of their sound (see Vovelle 2004, 141). Pilgrimages to sanctuaries could heal people or redeem them from their sins. Holy relics had a similar function. With the development of teaching concerning purgatory from the thirteenth century on, this area of religious life was connected with magical thinking. It was believed that time spent by the soul in purgatory could be shortened with prayer and the buying of indulgences. Some of the "agents" mediating between the living and the

dead also added to the repertoire of their services the freeing of souls from purgatory, as ghosts appearing on earth were then finally identified with souls in purgatory (Vovelle 2004, 144). Vovelle mentions that in the late fifteenth and throughout the sixteenth centuries one could meet women who during days of drought fell into a cataleptic state during which they participated in the nightly processions of the dead headed by a goddess accompanied by the Wild Hunt. These beliefs are later reflected in the first accounts of Sabbath meetings and are interpreted by the followers of the great goddess theory as an example of the remains of her cult. The dead taking part in such processions included children and victims of sudden death, who on God's verdict were to carry out their penance on Earth (Vovelle 2004, 194). The great goddess appears also in those beliefs as a maiden, a sensual Venus inhabiting Venusberg, a mountain in Germany, who seduces men into eternal perdition. She is already mentioned in *Formicarius* (1435/37) by Johannes Nider, which formed the basis for *Malleus Maleficarum* by Jakob Sprenger and Heinrich Kramer (known also as Henricus Institoris). The sixteenth century *Frankfurt Chronicle* records the stories of clerics who following their visit to Venusberg could tell the past and future and summon a whole army of purgatory spirits including unbaptised children and soldiers who died in battle (Vovelle 2004, 194).

Magic offered by the new religion had its source in God who was no longer part of this world, but who existed outside of this world and created both spirit and matter. This gave him an unlimited power over this world and over people. Everything in nature was subjected to and followed God's will and everything on earth was the reflection of his thought. This earth was given to people to rule, as is stated in Genesis:

> be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the heavens, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth. (Genesis 1:28)

The result was that the earth lost its own spiritual aspect. Earth deities such as vegetation goddesses, forests, lake and river spirits, mountain and mine spirits and so on are no longer accountable for in this new world. Their place is taken by saints and by demons, that is, by entities whose powers come from outside of this world, leaving matter and thus nature either dead or possessed by demons.

Although human life on earth is to be led with the view of future salvation and is often presented as a mere prelude to the real life after death, people are still torn by the same fears and hopes. Dreams still need to be told. Dead appearing in dreams still bring their supplications and

require help from the living. The fate of relatives, if unknown, still needs to be explored. Illness is still perceived as something external which invades the organism of the ill person and which needs to be expelled from the body. All these ills find their magical remedies.

Following the instructions of Pope Gregory I, dating from the year 600, the Church tried to sanctify as much of the old rites as possible, condemning everything remaining as the realm of the demons. Pagan festivals and holidays were combined with Christian holidays. Pagan symbols were accepted for the needs of Christian faith. Forms of pagan ritual were sustained and their content Christianised. Christmas, Easter and the Day of the Dead have roots in various pagan sacred days, which partially even donated their symbols and rites to the Christian holidays. Also numerous places of pagan worship such as sacred wells, springs and groves obtained saints as new patrons and preserved their function. Saints acquired the role of protective and assisting spirits and were invoked in daily life to help find things, to cure minor ailments, to help in the household and so on. The belief in the fourteen holy helpers which became popular in the fourteenth century during the Black Death assigned particular ailments including headache, fever, throat illnesses, intestinal illnesses, black death and epilepsy to specific saints, who were also to protect people from sudden death, which would deprive them of the possibility to confess sins and receive absolution. Saints were also appointed patrons of particular guilds, whose activity they were believed to support. Keith Thomas also draws attention to the integration of the church year with the agricultural year, where the days of the saints where accepted as flag points for subsequent agricultural activities (1991, 347-353). They were also often used as weather prognostics for the rest of the year.

It should also be noted that folk culture still incorporated a number of pagan elements labled “superstitions” by the elite. Rouche (2000, 488) states that all forms of future telling known among pagan Germans, Celts and Romans were still preserved in early Christian society. People read the future from natural omens, from animals they saw during the day, from noises coming from fires, a certain glowing of cinders and so on. They believed in the power of amulets and runes as well as preserving their old death rites (Veyne 2000, 488-489). Vovelle, discussing the treatment of death and the dead in European culture, stresses the strong belief of simple people in ghosts of the dead, who after their death remain on earth. Special “mediators” communicated with ghosts on behalf of the living in order to learn their requests and keep them from harming the community. As the belief in ghosts was in breach of Church teachings about heaven, hell and purgatory, church officials started to call ghosts “demons” or “devils,” and

people communicating with them were called “wizards” and “witches” (Vovelle 2004, 144; 194; 199). Special death rites, such as the wake, among others, also represent the overlap between pagan and Christian elements. In the countryside the enchanted, magical vision of nature which provided for the spirituality of the world and which was typical of the pre-Christian perception of the world (see Groh 1991), was still present and visible in numerous examples of daily “magical thinking” preserved and known until today as superstitions. This specific folk religion with its rituals and agents was opposed and combated vehemently by the Church from the end of the sixteenth century (see Vovelle 2004, 199; Honegger 1978, 66). Christianity also provided new magical formulas used by people, and so those who wanted to bring death to their enemies could order a death mass which, celebrated for the living person, was believed to cause his or her death (Vovelle 2004, 58).

Medical services were another area in which pagan and Christian elements were interwoven. Although the Middle Ages saw the development of medical faculties, still, as Thomas (1991) notices, both the efficiency of the medicine at that time and its availability to the public were unsatisfactory. Rural areas in particular had to rely on traditional medicine and herbal recipes worked out on the basis of personal experience and handed down from generation to generation, usually from mother to daughter, as caring for the sick belonged to women’s duties. In the same way as Germanic charms, cures prepared in the Middle Ages also usually combined herbal medicine with a magic formula, which stipulated and guaranteed its curative effect. In the Middle Ages the role of the magic formula was often adopted by popular Christian prayers. It was still often believed that for their effectiveness herbs needed to be collected at a certain time, sometimes whilst magic formulas were muttered. Christian and pagan elements became strongly interwoven here, making the herb doctors, in Germany sometimes called *Kräuterhexen*, strongly suspected of magic. Nevertheless, herbal medicine was approved by the Church, provided it was not mingled with pagan rituals. The majority of convents and monasteries cultivated herbal gardens and used herbs in their infirmaries. Saint Hildegard of Bingen, in her *Causae et Curae*, writes about the use of herbs, tinctures and precious stones for medical purposes. This overlapping of fields of competence between religious and secular persons sometimes made the distinction between a saint and a witch precarious and arbitrary as Peter Dinzelbacher shows in his study (2001). Should herbal medicine prove insufficient, other forms of magical healing were available to people. Thomas discusses them in the example of the English “cunning people” whose assortment of magical medicines included

laying of hands, saying prayers, examining a belt of the sick person, checking urine, and preparation of amulets or salves, including the popular weapon salve, which was believed to be able to heal a wound even at a distance (see Thomas 1991, 209-251).

Cunning folk did not only specialise in healing but also provided other services to people. One of the most coveted ones was the ability to find lost or stolen things. People whose property was misplaced could call upon the local magician, who would reveal to them the whereabouts of their property or the identity of the thief (Thomas 1991, 253-259). Other services included divination, searches for lost persons or hidden treasures, conjuring, drawing of lots, and love magic (ibid. 253-300). Johannes Hartlieb, an astrologist and doctor to Albert III, duke of Bavaria-Munich and his son Sigismund, drew up on the request of John, Margrave of Brandenburg-Kulmbach, a book compiling information on all types of magic practiced in the middle of the fifteenth century (*das puch aller verpoten kunst, ungelaubens und der zaubrey*, 1456, which may be translated as *Book on all forbidden arts, superstition and sorcery*). Here he differentiated, among others, between:

- necromancy: using grimoires, charts and symbols to summon the dead and learn about the past and the future;
- geomancy: consisting of telling the future on the basis of markings formed by sand, soil or rocks tossed on a board;
- hydromancy: connected with the element of water, involving an innocent child being requested to answer questions concerning daily life or current problems whilst looking into a glass of clear water. The child was assisted by a magician who muttered ritual formulas into its ears;
- aeromancy: connected with the element of air, telling the future from natural omens, usually from animals, but also from celestial bodies and signs noticed in the sky;
- pyromancy: divination from fire;
- chiromancy: divination from palm lines and handshape; and
- scapulimancy: divination from the scapula of an ox, horse, cow or donkey.

These were known also as seven Renaissance *artes magicae* or *artes prohibitae* (Wolf 1980, 145-149).

One of the most popular forms of divination, which operated on the border line between the recognised and the forbidden, was astrology. As Thomas notes, astrologists were not just responsible for the setting of

individual horoscopes forecasting the life of a person from his/her birth on, but also divined the fates of states and cities including the foretelling of fires, wars, diseases (plagues), weather changes and coming crops. Their horoscopes would set out the best days for agricultural and commercial activities and assist in the search for lost persons, among other services. Quoting Lilly and his *Christian Astrology* (1647), Thomas repeats that "there was 'nothing appertaining to the life of man in this world which in one way or another hath not relation to one of the twelve houses of heaven'" and thus, as he says, "there was no other existing body of thought, religion apart, which even began to offer so all-embracing an explanation for the baffling variousness of human affairs" (1991, 384).

# Chapter Three

# Witch Trials

## The Beginning of Witch Trials

The question is simple, yet the answer undecided: Were the Witch Trials a reaction to something that the victims did or said, or to some property that separated them from all others? Or was there some murderous impetus within society that made people look for a victim: first the Jews, then the heretics, then the witches and finally, again, the Jews? Still, it might be that in some way the answer to the question is irrelevant. There might have been various things, attitudes and beliefs, that the victims of the witch trials shared. But maybe it didn't matter at all. Maybe the victims of the witch trials shared some disparate remnants of one or another pagan religion, be it Germanic, Celtic, Basque or any other European tradition. Maybe they practiced some petty magical charades, such as palm reading, or used to talk to their cats or little black dogs. None of them died because of this, but because the European societies, particularly in Germany and Austria, needed victims and so people went to find them. Thus, the witch was not discovered: it was created.

The witches of Ancient Times or of early Germanic history only formed the basic material when the contemporary image of the witch was formed. The late Middle Ages under the pressure and fear of a world seemingly falling apart create something utterly new that might be called "genocidal xenophobia." The other, who was always present and never welcome, suddenly became a possible target of radical extermination. First the Cathars and the Waldensians, then quite soon Jews and heretics, and finally witches and wizards became objects of the xenophobic process of annihilation within the middle European societies. The xenophobic impulse was not created by the stranger, but it was there as a result of fear and aggression, and it then focused on any group that could serve as a victim, meaning any group that could be re-interpreted as strangers, no matter for how long or how deeply this group had already been rooted in society. Thus, it was society which created the witch. The witch as an image did not develop on any empirical knowledge. The witch, as she entered

contemporary European thinking, was not discovered by theologians or inquisitionists. The witch was invented, and only afterwards did hunters set out to fill this well prepared idea with some all too mortal flesh.

One of the earliest entries on witches and witchcraft in preserved Church documents stems from the beginning of the sixth century and orders the excommunication of women claiming to ride on animals together with demons (Wolf 1980, 93). In the second half of the eighth century subsequent Church councils and synods stressed the need to take decisive steps against "witches, wizards, weather makers, summoners and street performers" (Wolf 1980, 93) including imprisonment or the death penalty. The tone of Church documents became milder from the ninth to the beginning of the thirteenth centuries as the punishment for witchcraft was changed from the death penalty to a longer penance or expulsion, while the transgressor could still be forgiven provided he or she renounced his or her behaviour. The enumerated offences comprised calling on names of angels not included in the official scriptures, preparation of love potions, healing using witchcraft, telling the future and performing magical tricks. They also mentioned some instances of protective folk magic such as, for example, the hanging of animal remains on walls to counteract cattle diseases. Interestingly, these records show an overlapping of heathen and Christian religion and the incorporation not only of pagan rites into Christianity but also an adaptation of elements of Christianity into pagan rites. Thus, the Council of Seligenstadt held in the year 1023 warned priests against the use of "Corporal" for fire extinguishing, whereas the Provincial Council of Trier held in 1227 urged clerics to keep holy water, chrism and oils locked to hinder their misuse. Still, the next Provincial Council of Trier held in 1238 prescribed penance for clergymen involved in witchcraft but excommunication for a lay person. Subsequent councils decided to make excommunication public by its announcement in church on Sunday, and prescribed penance for people seeking the assistance of a witch or a wizard. A more specific statement came from the Council of Trier held in the year 1310. The Council explicitly forbade all forms of future and fortune telling, prophesying, summoning, reading of omens and signs, crafting and wearing of amulets, performing either love and protective magic or harmful magic directed against people or animals, and causing or hindering bad weather, either personally or through the employment of the services of a witch or a wizard on the penalty of excommunication. It also forbade the use of the Psalter or the Bible for future telling purposes reflecting, thus, the adaptation of new "power" texts in pagan future-telling rites. Addressing the issue of herbal medicine, it forbade the use of magic forms together with prepared infusions. On the

other hand, it allowed Christian prayers to be used for this purpose, strengthening the confusion between Christian and pagan elements. One of the more interesting entries of this Council says:

> Kein Weib gebe vor, sie reise in der Nacht mit der heidnischen Göttin Diana oder mit der Herodia in Begleitung einer unzähligen Menge von Weibern; denn das ist eine dämonische Vorspiegelung, (Wolf 1990, 94)

which could be roughly translated as:

> No woman should claim to travel at night together with the heathen goddess Diana or with Herodias accompanied by innumerable other women, as it is an illusion created by demons. (*trans. by A.M-S*)

Honegger stresses that Diana was in folk culture often associated with fertility and death rites (Honegger 1978, 64; see Gimbutas 2001). Nightly travels with the souls of the dead belonged also to existing death rites (see Vovelle 2004). Nightly travels, reflecting both ancient Diana festivals taking place at night and the Germanic tradition of "the wild hunt" headed by Valkyries or by Odin, developed into accounts of witch Sabbaths. Here Diana was often replaced by Satan (see Golther 1908). Zacharias analyses this change in his study claiming that any goddess associated with night and earth, that is, matter, only naturally allied herself with the figure of the Devil as the opponent of the sun god that was being transposed into Christ (see Zacharias 1982). Zacharias traces the dualistic perception of reality in Christianity back to Zoroastrianism and Gnostic traditions. Although officially negated by the Church and recognised as heretic when present in the teachings of such sects as the Cathars or the Bogomils, dualism still manifested itself in the structuring and perception of the world by Christians who divided everything into good and evil. Butler and other feminist scholars underline, following the binary set of oppositions present in the culture and reflected in the language, that women necessarily took in this division the position of the other, the weaker, connected with the earth, matter and chaos (see Butler 1990). Honegger stresses that this identification started to manifest itself in Church discourse starting from the twelfth century in the strong opposition between witches and Saint Mary (1978, 61). Whereas a witch was perceived as a woman exerting power over the earth through her ability to change weather and to influence animated and unanimated nature, Mary was a sublime, spiritual being, who through her virgin birth of Jesus and her own immaculate conception negates all connections with nature. This opposition remained

in the culture in the binary image of an angel and a monster as two opposing images of womanhood (see Gilbert and Gubar 1984).

The tone of the above mentioned Council of Trier note shows that at that time the Church still distanced itself from "superstitions" and did not consider them as creditable accounts, but as illusions. This situation changed at the end of the fifteenth century when accounts of witchcraft started to be taken literally and were trusted. Thus, for example, the belief originally rejected, that people (or rather souls of people as Golther [1908] clarifies) could assume animal shapes, was considered a fact during the witch craze. Also the magic flight, treated in the above quoted fragment as a demonic illusion, gradually started to be perceived as reality. This change of approach can be noted, for example, in the sermons of Johann Geiler (1445-1510), a preacher in Strasbourg Cathedral between 1478 and 1510. As Wolf notes, in his nineteenth sermon Geiler clarifies to his congregation that the magic flight as experienced by witches is just an illusion caused by the devil, whereas in the thirty-third sermon he already accepts the reality of the flight and teaches that the devil carries the pitch fork on which a witch travels (Wolf 1990, 156).

The Church councils held in the fourteenth century repeatedly and ever more strongly condemned witchcraft and gradually increased penalties to be given to transgressors. They were to be excluded from the Church and excommunicated and their deeds and punishment made public so that other members of the community were pre-warned and might avoid their company. In the fifteenth century, witchcraft was explicitly forbidden and excommunication extended to cover those assisting in the work of witches and wizards. In the year 1484 the Pope's bull *Summis desiderantes affectibus* was issued by Innocent VIII, in which he confirmed the existence and reality of witchcraft and summoned to its combating:

> In some parts of upper Germany, . . . many persons of both sexes, heedless of their own salvation and forsaking the catholic faith, give themselves over to devils male and female, and by their incantations, charms, and conjurings, . . . ruin and cause to perish the offspring of women, the foal of animals, the products of the earth, the grapes of vines, and the fruits of trees, as well as men and women, cattle and flocks and herds and animals of every kind, vineyards also and orchards, . . . grains and other fruits of the earth; that they afflict and torture with dire pains and anguish, both internal and external, these men, women, cattle, . . . and hinder men from begetting and women from conceiving and prevent all consummation of marriage; that moreover they deny with sacrilegious lips the faith they received in holy baptism; and that, at the instigation of the enemy of mankind, they do not fear to commit and perpetrate many other abominable offences and crimes, at the risk of their own souls, to the insult

> of the divine majesty and to the pernicious example and scandal of multitudes. . . . We . . . do hereby decree . . . that it shall be permitted to the said inquisitors in these regions to exercise their office of inquisition and to proceed to the correction, imprisonment, and punishment of the aforesaid persons for their said offences and crimes. (Burr 1896, 8)

The bull on the one hand specified and enumerated these crimes, which from then on became the core of witchcraft accusation – that is, crimes against the fertility of people, animals and nature and rejection of Christ – and, at the same time, assigned and confirmed the powers of inquisitors Institoris (Kramer) and Sprenger to pursue and punish the guilty. The bull was said to be issued on the request of the said inquisitors who met with difficulties and reluctance from local clergy while they tried to instigate proceedings against witches. The Pope made it clear that everybody who would try to hinder the work of his inquisitors would be excommunicated (Wolf 1980, 169-170).

Theological bases for the bull had already been laid down in the fifth century, in the work of Augustine of Hippo († 430), and in the thirteenth century, in the works of Thomas Aquinas († 1274), who worked out first theories concerning the pact with the devil providing theological clarification for witchcraft (Beier-de Haan et al. 2002, 31). Also important was the work of Johannes Nider († 1438), a German theologian and Dominican, who in Book Five of his work *Formicarius* (presented at the Council of Basel in 1437/38) narrated his collected records of witchcraft. According to him, witches and wizards harmed people by making them susceptible to strong feelings such as love or hate, by hindering conception or birth, by bringing illness and weakness on people, by killing them, and by destroying their property and bringing plague on their animals and fields, also with the help of bad weather, which they were able to conjure (Wolf 1980, 155). Wolf further notes that Nider expressed his belief in the magical abilities of witches and confirmed that they were able to assume mouse shape, and magically transfer hay and corn out of somebody else's field to their own (1980, 155).

Most historians agree that witch beliefs were in fact created by preachers in sermons and popularised in numerous leaflets published at that time, which depicted witches with devils, participating in Sabbath, riding on a fork, stealing milk from cows and so on (see Döbler 1979; Sullivan 2000; Zika 1997). Wolf mentions in particular Johann Geiler who talked in his sermons about women entering into a covenant with the devil, and performing evil acts out of the spitefulness and hatred they felt (Wolf 1980, 155-157).

## *Malleus Maleficarum*

In the year 1487 appeared the most important work of the witch craze, the *Malleus Maleficarum*, that is, *Hammer of Witches* or *Der Hexenhammer* written by the two afore mentioned inquisitors Sprenger and Kramer (Institoris). The work consists of three parts. The first one discussing the nature of wizardry deals with the three aspects of witchcraft: a demon, a witch/wizard and God's allowance. In this part the authors oppose the critics of belief in witchcraft calling such disbelief heresy and clarifying how it is possible for demons to influence Christians. They divided the whole argument into eighteen questions concerning the nature of witchcraft and wizardry, demonic influence and the abilities of witches and wizards. As a whole the work reads as a mixture of misogynistic quotations, superstitions and popular beliefs as well as quotations from philosophical, theological and mythological texts. The point of their argument is that the special vice of a witch rests in her pact with the devil and her subservience towards the latter.

The second part, divided into two main questions, presents protective measures and healing methods against witchcraft. In sixteen answers to the first question the authors discuss the main areas of activity of witches and clarify, among others, how they can cause harm to the innocent, practice witchcraft, travel from one place to another, have intercourse with demons, hinder fertility and conception, cause impotence, change themselves or others into animals, bring illness and plague, possess people, cause harm to domestic animals and cattle, as well as cause hail, storm and lightening. A special chapter is devoted to midwives accused either of killing children or offering newly born children to the devil.

The third and last part deals with witch trials themselves, from the moment of denunciation and instigation of proceedings to the issuing of a final judgement (Sprenger and Kramer [1487] 1983).

Wolf stresses that the importance of this work rested exactly in the novelties it introduced to witch trials. It placed denunciation in the place of accusation, which allowed everybody to denounce another person as a witch without fear of the consequences resulting from a false statement. It also allowed for the application of torture before the performance of a crime had actually been established. As both Behringer and Wolf stress, the very nature of magical activity made the establishment of the connection between the performer of a magical action and its result impossible; thus it was assumed that denunciation was enough to consider the crime as committed and to apply torture to force a confession from the accused (Wolf 1991, 174; Behringer 1988, 72).

## The Witch Craze

The form of the proceedings itself was worked out by the Church as early as the thirteenth century in the course of inquisition proceedings. Just like heretic accusations, witch proceedings were taken out of the jurisdiction of the local clergy and given into the direct jurisdiction of the Pope, with the inquisitors answering only towards the Pope for their actions (Behringer 1988, 72). In fact, critics stress that inquisition and witch proceedings had much in common, and the latter could even be partially the result of the former. Roper also points out, for example, that the set of questions used in witch trials was based on the set used in criminal proceedings (2004, 46). The insistence on the connection between a witch and a devil, and the importance given to the pact they have allegedly entered, reflect the charges of demonism of inquisition proceedings (see Zacharias 1982). The majority of historians discussing witch trials start with the presentation of heretic movements in the middle ages, either to discuss their participation in the development of satanic cults (Zacharias 1982), or to present them as platforms strengthening women's independence movements, as they granted women equal position with men giving them, among other liberties, the right to preach (Droß 1982).

Although single cases of witch persecutions are known from as early as the Middle Ages, and although, as mentioned earlier, even in pagan times witchcraft could be punished with death, the history of the witch craze started, in fact, in the fifteenth century. Behringer mentions that the first historically confirmed proceedings against witchcraft were held in 1420 in Savoy and Burgundy, but from 1450 on spread more widely, extending from Switzerland to the rest of the German speaking nations (1988, 76). Voltmer and Irsigler name the year 1430 as the beginning of the witch craze and specify the area around Lake Geneva as the place where it started (2002, 32). Wolf starts the records with the trials of Agnes Bernauer, who was drowned in the river Danube as a witch in 1435. She was accused of witchcraft by her father in law, who claimed that the only way in which she was able to convince his son to marry her, him being a nobleman (the already mentioned Albert III, Duke of Bavaria) and her coming from a lower social class, was through love magic (Wolf 1980, 152). Being young and beautiful she represents the earlier stereotype of a witch as a seducer, subsequently replaced by the image of an old crone (Vovelle 2004, 271). This first wave of witch trials ended between 1520 and 1530 only to return with increased strength after 1560. Behringer sets the beginning of the second wave of trials as the year 1579/80, reaching its