

DONATELLA LIPPI

Witchcraft, Medicine and Society in Early Modern Europe

Czarownice, medycyna i społeczeństwo we wczesnośredniowiecznej Europie

Professor of history of medicine, University of Florence

Summary

Witch-hunts supported by the Roman Catholic Inquisition began in the Late Middle Ages. In 1487, the notorious *Malleus Maleficarum* was published, inaugurating the period of witch-hunts in Early Modern Europe which would last for the following two centuries. The witch trials in Early Modern Europe became a major issue in the 17th century: persuasion and some torture was used to make people confess to a covenant with the Devil. Different methods were used in the examinations: archive records provide a rich amount of them. In this article, the Authors provide a short introduction about witchcraft, focusing on the situation in Northern Italy during the period of 16th–17th century, using original sources and archive records¹.

Keywords: History of witchcraft, history of witch-hunts, witchcraft's investigations

Streszczenie

Polowania na czarownice wspierane przez Inkwizycję Kościoła Katolickiego rozpoczęły się w późnym średniowieczu. W 1487 roku został opublikowany słynny traktat pt. *Młot na czarownice (Malleus Maleficarum)* rozpoczynający okres polowań na czarownice w nowożytnej Europie, który trwał przez kolejne dwieście lat. W XVII wieku procesy czarownic nabrały wyjątkowego znaczenia, kiedy to wykorzystywano różne formy perswazji oraz tortur do wymuszania zeznań potwierdzających związku czarownic z diabłem. W śledztwach stosowano różne metody, czego dowodzą zachowane archiwalne raporty. W artykule autorzy skupiają się na sytuacji w północnych Włoszech w XVI i XVII wieku, wykorzystując oryginalne źródła i materiały archiwalne.

Słowa kluczowe: historia czarownic, historia polowań na czarownice, śledztwa przeciwko czarownicom

Introduction

Questioned whether she heals sick persons, *answered* yes Sir.

Questioned with what kind of medicines, *answered* by picking betony up and washing it like salad and crushing it into a mortar to get its juice and to give it to her patients for 3, 4 and 5 days, telling them that the more they drunk it, the better it was [1].

With these words the healer Gostanza da Libbiano, tried for witchcraft in 1594, highlighted the special connection between women and medicine, which, though deeply rooted in the Indo-European culture and dating back to thousands of years ago, represents a cultural *continuum* that reaches up to modern times [2].

The deep bond between women and nature also emerges clearly when we look to the cults of Mother Nature linked to fertility that were widely spread about in the Bronze Age. Goddesses such as the pre-olympian Gaia, considered the origin of all the gods and goddesses,

¹ List of abbreviations: ASM State Archive of Modena; B folder; bb file; c page; cc. nn unnumbered pages.

and her sister Themis created the earth, restoring order [3]. Furthermore, deities like Demetra, Athena, the Egyptian Isis and the Assyrian Ishtar had roles connected with fertility, with the abundance of the harvest and with human reproduction. In ancient Greece Hippocrates acknowledged the importance of popular medicine and the efficacy of the remedies used by herbalists such as, for instance, Artemisia, the queen of Caria, praised also by Strabone and Teofrasto. Nevertheless, common women could only rarely deal with medicine and it wasn't as easy for them as it was for queens: in the Athens of the fourth century A.D. women accused of practicing abortion and of teaching birth control methods were banished from society [4].

Things went better in Rome, where Sorano from Efeso, a physician of Greek origins, wrote a book about obstetrics and gynecology for midwives, believing that they should had a thorough knowledge of anatomy. Moreover, the works of Aspasia, a female gynecologist, were quite often quoted in the encyclopedia written by Ezio from Amida, a physician at the Byzantine court during the sixth century [5].

In the Middle Ages, women's medicine was fully legitimized thanks to the Medical School of Salerno, where women could study and practice medicine, especially in the fields of obstetrics and gynecology. Figures such as Trotula and Francesca Romano were active in the city and were esteemed and respected by the population. With the downfall of the School in the thirteenth century, the first women doctors disappeared: most universities now tended to exclude them, letting women deal with medicine only as midwives [6].

Folk Medicine

That medical tradition, passed down to women since antiquity by the herbalists, ended up being considered a subculture in official medical circles and therefore susceptible to control and suppression. On the other hand the coming of the Scholastica philosophy and the emergence of the universities changed the nature of scientific research, turning medicine into a profession that required a formal and well-defined education. In spite of the decline of Salerno in favor of universities such as those at Padua and Bologna, the most educated women were able to continue taking care of the sick, working with their fathers or husbands, who taught them the principles of anatomy and pharmaceuticals. As a result, a sort of women's medical hierarchy developed, having at the top women of excellent culture and education who practiced among the first families in their cities. Women of low social condition instead, operated under the general belief in the healing power of magic and worked

for the poorest families, despite being often suspected of witchcraft [7]. The fact that female healers worked with life-saving tools surrounded them with a supernatural aura. Both midwives and healers induced respect in people, but at the same time, fear. Going by the belief that knowing how to cure also meant knowing how to kill, if the cure didn't work, healers were often accused of having cast a spell on the patients, using a *maleficium* [8]. If medicine, including the popular variety, aimed at healing people then witchcraft was intended to do them harm, as confirmed by the words "Quelli che li sanno conzare li sano anco guastare" — who knows how to heal also knows how to damage — stated by Andrea Salvioli, a witness in the trial against Maria Mariani, a healer from Modena [9].

On the other hand disease had an obscure etiology and being able to trace its causes led women onto treacherous ground: having to do with infection, blood, nails, hair and other elements considered impure brought the healers to play an ambiguous and suspicious role [10].

The difference between them and physicians was the specific kind of tasks assigned to doctors: physicians, who rarely touched impurities and who regularly graduated from the university, were believed to be able to make the pain cease, whereas the healer, due to the fact that she actually touched her patients, was able both to make pain cease and to cause it [11].

The "ladies of the herbs", though lacking a university education, were not ignorant of the subject but had a deep knowledge of herbs with healing powers [12]. They knew the best time to gather herbs such as St John's wort, betony, sage, the herb of grace, fennel and ferns, when they were richer with active principles, and would gather them on specific days of the year such as the night of June 24th, considered magic and particularly favorable. These plants were often cooked alone or mixed with flour, boiled in wine or left soaking in oil to obtain a decoction and salves to be administered to patients [13]. These were remedies with real anti-inflammatory, disinfectant, expectorant and fever-reducing properties, and were used in conjunction with instruments such as candles, magnets, minerals and metals [14]. Caterina Borgognona, a woman physician from Modena, mixed butter with crushed herbs and then with this mix would grease the limbs of an invalid child, just as Diamante Ascari left some sage and herb of grace soaking in oil of walnut to make an salve out of it [15].

Healers referred to the principles of analogy and contact: in the first case, it was believed that similar produced or removed similar, that for instance red stones caused or stopped hemorrhages or that magnets drew

diseases out of the body; as to contact, they believed an element put in touch with a person maintained a connection to him or her [16].

These two principles along with the knowledge of curing herbs, that had a fundamental value in primitive psychology are still present in the medical practice of all cultures, were passed on to women by other women, received from their own mothers or older experienced healers.

Northern Italy

It is interesting to note how in Italy, in areas near Ferrara, Mantua and Modena, there emerged and spread a belief in *Domina Ludi*, a mythical female figure who, dressed in black clothes, would teach the healing powers of herbs and shrubs to her followers gathered in clearings in the woods [17]. It's a myth ascribable to shamanic beliefs of Celtic origin that were already evident in Europe from the eighth century on. The presence in northern Italy of cults of a shamanic kind linked to goddesses dispensing well-being and wealth led to the creation and entrenchment of certain odd beliefs [18].

In trials concerning evil spells that occurred at the end of the fourteenth century in Lombardy, the two defendants, Sibillia and Pierina, claimed to have joined meetings in the woods by flying there, where a certain *Madonna Horiente* showed them magic practices and the healing virtues of plants [19].

Some centuries later, in 1518, during the trial in which she was accused of casting an evil spell, the healer from Modena, Giovanna Munarina, claimed she had been initiated along with other girls into magic healing by a woman who, standing in her vegetable garden, explained how to get benefits from the various plants and shrubs [20].

In the Emilia region of Italy the significance of these myths connected to the magic of plants explains the particular role of these healers in the urban context of the time, evidence of a strong integration into society: in Ferrara, for instance, a city rich with vegetable and flower gardens, healers enjoyed such a reputation that in the first years of the sixteenth century the physician of the Este court, Giovanni Michele Savonarola, in order to write a book on the healing properties of plants, claimed he had more than once consulted with them and sought their advice [21].

Even more unusual was the situation in Modena where, at the dawn of modern times, city streets and squares swarmed with healers of both genders who, meeting at spice shops, habitually exchanged recipes and advice. Priests, spice dealers and some physicians too, took part in these crowded gatherings, to such an extent that some

speak of an actual interdisciplinary professional network centered around the *res herbaria* [22].

It is not by chance that Giulia from Bologna, a healer tried for witchcraft in 1518, claimed she had often asked a spice dealer for a specific herb to cure a child and of having been introduced to medicine by a "colleague" from Bologna, later burnt alive. Beatrice from Vicenza during her trial stated she had consulted many times with Anastasia, "la Frappona", a famous healer, as to some medical substances [23].

The people of Modena themselves, even those of high social status, often turned trustfully to healers, even those without a license: at the beginning of the century, Camilla from Nirano cast spells for Violante Carandini, who came from one of the noblest families of the city, one which some years later asked for the help of the healer and enchantress, Barbara Carretta [24].

Indeed if compared with situations in which the humble families were often those asking for help from the "ladies of the herbs", the cases of Ferrara and especially Modena represent anomalies, so much so that it is possible to speak in these cities of witchcraft's *social normality*.

Beyond fantasy and beliefs, these peculiar medical skills, passed on to them by relatives or others, became so common among women in part because they represented one of the few means of survival. Many dedicated themselves to therapeutic magic because they were widows or alone or reduced to poverty.

Without the support a husband or a family could provide, these women devoted themselves to the healing of others, putting into practice what they had learned and starting to practice as healers or midwives, often both.

If working as healers in the city was more complicated, it was easier to do so in the country since the scarce presence of physicians led people to turn to a healer more often [25].

Though without a license, these women had a fundamental role in the society of the period, which turned to them despite the fact that they were feared. It was hard to face disease without summoning the local healer and unthinkable to give birth without the help of a "wise woman", who was an expert in gynecology even though she was suspected of messing around with the devil. Therefore these women were involved in crucial moments of life such as birth, sickness and death. They offered diagnoses, prepared medicines and assisted births by whispering propitiatory prayers after having lit white candles. Obviously in the case of diseases difficult to diagnose and cure the death of the patient was inevitable, with the result that the healer was then often accused of witchcraft.

The trust they had inspired notwithstanding, in a few days the healers found themselves before the inquisitors, becoming the scapegoat for the suffering, anxiety and frustration deriving from situations difficult to bear, such as the loss of a relative, especially that of a child. At that point, the witnesses started to trace back past failures of the healers, the diseases they hadn't been able to cure, the babies who died during labor, the medicines that proved useless. Episodes dating back ten or even twelve years were brought up, wholly forgetting the socially necessary role the healer had filled. In such cases we can speak of a "breaking point", meaning that the healers could peacefully live in their society until a negative event brought upon their heads all sorts of accusations [26].

In the 1599 trial against the woman of Modena, Maria da Trignano, the informer reported an episode that had occurred seven years before, just as in the trial against Giulia from Bologna one of the witnesses stated that the defendant had been dealing in magic for some ten years [27].

In addition to healers, midwives too often deemed responsible for the death of newborn babies, fell into the most suspected categories. Until the eighteenth century birth was an event men were completely excluded from: physicians did not pay much attention to gynecology and pregnant women preferred to be helped by female healers during labor. In many cases in addition to the midwife other women from the community joined in to help.

Studies dealing with the iconography of birth have noted how paintings on *The Nativity of the Virgin* are very "crowded". In addition to the midwife, often represented in the act of assisting the mother or giving directions to the servants and wet-nurses, there are also other women depicted while preparing food or the bath and the swaddling clothes for the baby. It's interesting to realize that in these paintings there is no male figure present at all in the room where labor and birth take place [28].

The upcoming birth of a baby was a fundamental moment for the whole community and one of intense emotions: on one hand it meant the fulfilling of every woman's duty, on the other, it meant in some cases coping with the death of the baby or the mother or both [29].

The lack of antibiotics and necessary antiseptic measures led to the death of one woman out of ten, whereas one baby out of three didn't reach his year-old birthday. In this situation the parents, moved by an emotional need, transferred their feelings of guilt onto the midwife, who was accused of witchcraft or of having killed the baby in order to offer it to the devil, often together with the placenta and the umbilical cord [30].

The mothers, who guiltily felt they hadn't been able to give birth to healthy babies, were often the first to ac-

cuse midwives, though sometimes the accusations could come from outside: especially in countries affected by the Reformation, the excessive attention towards illegitimate births led judges to meticulously study every case of infant mortality as a possible infanticide. They believed there was a concrete risk that mother and midwife could be in cahoots to kill an unwanted newborn baby [31].

A study of literature about midwives has suggested further possible interpretations: among these, the psychoanalytical one underlines how the accusations came from women who were envious of midwives, by now post-menopausal, who were about to take care of their own children [32].

These are statements to be considered very cautiously since they have often not been fully and carefully documented, whereas the hypothesis that shows, in witchcraft treatises of the period, how a link was formed between midwifery and evil spells is strongly grounded. The famous *Malleus Maleficarum*, written at the end of the fifteenth century by two German Dominican inquisitors Jakob Kraemer and Heinrich Sprenger, focuses in many places on the subject, actually affirming that «nobody damages the Catholic faith more than midwives», in reference to those crimes midwives were often accused of committing [33].

It is not by chance that during the witch hunt that set Cologne on fire in 1627–30, seven out of twelve of the accused were involved in births. Again in Germany, in 1587, there was the case of Walpurga Hausmannin, a midwife suspected of the death of 40 babies, similar to the first episode of witchcraft to occur in New England before the well-known Salem witch trial of 1692, involving the midwife, Anne Hutchinson, banned from Massachusetts in 1630 [34].

Similar situations occurred a bit everywhere. The story, quoted at the beginning, of Gostanza da Libbiano, a famous healer and midwife, was also representative. Much sought after for her exceptional therapeutic and magic powers by nobles and peasants, Gostanza was actually transported in a carriage while traveling throughout Tuscany. Her reputation was tarnished when she was accused of the inexplicable death of certain babies and of practicing "medicine" [35].

Indeed suspicions of infanticide played an important part in this case, but the attention of judges directed towards midwives was especially motivated by the matter of baptism, a fundamental rite for every Christian. In the case of difficult births or in emergency situations, midwives would baptize the babies, but without following any canonical ritual. As only in the eighteenth century did midwives start to be trained in the correct rite of Christening, they often gave rise to frequent accusations

of *superstitio*, that is abusing the sacraments for therapeutic purposes. A significant example is the case of the healer, Maria di Baccio, who in 1586 was ordered by the bishop of Grosseto, Claudio Borghesi, to stop assisting births since she did not know the correct formula for baptism [36]. If on one hand mothers might fear these women were casting an evil spell in order to later offer their babies' bodies to the devil, on the other hand inquisitors accused them of using prayers not recognized by the church [37].

Before legislation of the seventeen hundreds established specific courses for the would-be midwives, those who decided to prepare for the job were trained by a more experienced midwife, who was often the young woman's mother. It was almost exclusively practical training since most of the midwives were illiterate, and it led the young trainees to assist and help their older colleagues during labor [38].

Midwives made sure they verified the degree of cervical dilation and that the fetal position was correct, then lubricated the genitals with oil to facilitate the birth. Once the baby was born, they freed its respiratory tract of mucus, washed it and swaddled it. Only in dire straits, such as breech deliveries, would they summon a colleague for a consultation or turn to a surgeon for a v-cut or to dissect the cranium of the fetus [39].

The presence of obstetric physicians during labor is attested to starting in the middle of the seventeenth century, but only for the benefit of English and French aristocracy. Louis XIV for instance demanded a physician for the delivery by one of his lovers, but in Germany, Italy, Spain and in eastern European countries they still preferred to turn to female figures [40].

The discriminating difference between physicians and midwives was the use of the forceps, created by the French physician Chamberlains, in the mid-sixteenth century; it was a tool midwives were not authorized to use, since it was considered a surgical instrument. Its use surely saved mother and child in many cases, but this does not mean midwives could not carry through a labor with success. In fact almost ninety per cent of the births they assisted occurred without particular problems [41].

Though lacking a university education and despite the suspicions attached to witchcraft, women still preferred other women to assist them during labor, not only because their experience in the field was considered more trustworthy, but especially because these women were deemed fundamental members of every community, a social necessity and often irreplaceable. Though lacking a university education and despite the suspicions attached to witchcraft, women still preferred other women

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Conclusions

The possibility to examine the archive records preserved in the State Archive of Modena was an extraordinary opportunity to highlight the particular situation of witchcraft in a well-defined geographic area of modern Italy: responses to sorcery, in fact, are deeply different in various contexts, depending on a wide range of social, political and cultural aspects.

The great trust patients had for these herbalists and witchcraft's *social normality* makes the cases of towns like XVI century Modena an exception: in no other cases, healers, cunning men and wise women used to meet, to share their personal knowledge on the properties of plants, herbs and shrubs; in no other cases, they compared their opinion on medicine and magic to the one of spice dealers and priests, asking them for advice, too.

This particular situation is also a glaring sample of the role wise women and magic medicine had for people. These modenese healers would have never been called by wealthy patients- the episode of lady Violante Carandini is very significant- who could afford the expense of a real doctor, as folk medicine was not regarded as effective as the official one.

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