

Witches, Midwives, and Nurses
A History of Women Healers

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Introduction

Women have always been healers. They were the unlicensed doctors and anatomists of western history. They were abortionists, nurses and counsellors. They were pharmacists, cultivating healing herbs and exchanging the secrets of their uses. They were midwives, travelling from home to home and village to village. For centuries women were doctors without degrees, barred from books and lectures, learning from each other, and passing on experience from neighbor to neighbor and mother to daughter. They were called "wise women" by the people, witches or charlatans by the authorities. Medicine is part of our heritage as women, our history, our birthright.

Today, however, health care is the property of male professionals. Ninety-three percent of the doctors in the US are men; and almost all the top directors and administrators of health institutions. Women are still in the overall majority—70 percent of health workers are women—but we have been incorporated as *workers* into an industry where the bosses are men. We are no longer independent practitioners, known by our own names, for our own work. We are, for the most part, institutional fixtures, filling faceless job slots: clerk, dietary aide, technician, maid.

When we are allowed to participate in the healing process, we can do so only as nurses. And nurses of every rank from aide up are just "ancillary workers" in relation to the doctors (from the Latin *ancilla*, maid servant). From the nurses' aide, whose menial tasks are spelled out with industrial precision, to the "professional" nurse, who translates the doctors' orders into the aide's tasks, nurses share the status of a uniformed maid service to the dominant male professionals.

Our subservience is reinforced by our ignorance, and our ignorance is *enforced*. Nurses are taught not to question, not to challenge. "The doctor knows best." He is the shaman, in touch with the forbidden, mystically complex world of Science which we have been taught is beyond our grasp. Women health workers are alienated from the scientific substance of their work, restricted to the "womanly" business of nurturing and housekeeping—a passive, silent majority.

We are told that our subservience is biologically ordained: women are inherently nurse-like and not doctor-like. Sometimes

we even try to console ourselves with the theory that we *were* defeated by anatomy before we were defeated by men, that women have been so trapped by the cycles of menstruation and reproduction that they have never been free and creative agents outside their homes. Another myth, fostered by conventional medical histories, is that male professionals won out on the strength of their superior technology. According to these accounts, (male) science more or less automatically replaced (female) superstition—which from then on was called “old wives’ tales.”

But history belies these theories. Women have been autonomous healers, often the only healers for women and the poor. And we found, in the periods we have studied, that, if anything, it was the male professionals who clung to untested doctrines and ritualistic practices—and it was the women healers who represented a more humane, empirical approach to healing.

Our position in the health system today is not “natural.” It is a condition which has to be explained. In this pamphlet we have asked: How did we arrive at our present position of subservience from our former position of leadership?

We learned this much: That the suppression of women health workers and the rise to dominance of male professionals was not a “natural” process, resulting automatically from changes in medical science, nor was it the result of women’s failure to take on healing work. It was an active *takeover* by male professionals. And it was not science that enabled men to win out: The critical battles took place long before the development of modern scientific technology.

The stakes of the struggle were high: Political and economic monopolization of medicine meant control over its institutional organizations, its theory and practice, its profits and prestige. And the stakes are even higher today, when total control of medicine means potential power to determine who will live and will die, who is fertile and who is sterile, who is “mad” and who sane.

The suppression of female healers by the medical establishment was a political struggle, first, in that it is part of the history of sex struggle in general. The status of women healers has risen and fallen with the status of women. When women healers were attacked, they were attacked *as Women*; when they fought back, they fought back in solidarity with all women.

It was a political struggle, second, in that it was part of a *class* struggle. Women healers were people’s doctors, and their medicine was part of a people’s subculture. To this very day

women’s medical practice has thrived in the midst of rebellious lower class movements which have struggled to be free from the established authorities. Male professionals, on the other hand, served the ruling class—both medically and politically. Their interests have been advanced by the universities, the philanthropic foundations and the law. They owe their victory—not so much to their own efforts—but to the intervention of the ruling class they served.

This pamphlet represents a beginning of the research which will have to be done to recapture our history as health workers. It is a fragmentary account, assembled from sources which were usually sketchy and often biased, by women who are in no sense “professional” historians. We confined ourselves to western history, since the institutions we confront today are the products of western civilization. We are far from being able to present a complete chronological history. Instead, we looked at two separate, important phases in the male takeover of health care: the suppression of witches in medieval Europe, and the rise of the male medical profession in 19th century America.

To know our history is to begin to see how to take up the struggle again.

Witchcraft and Medicine in the Middle Ages

Witches lived and were burned long before the development of modern medical technology. The great majority of them were lay healers serving the peasant population, and their suppression marks one of the opening struggles in the history of man's suppression of women as healers.

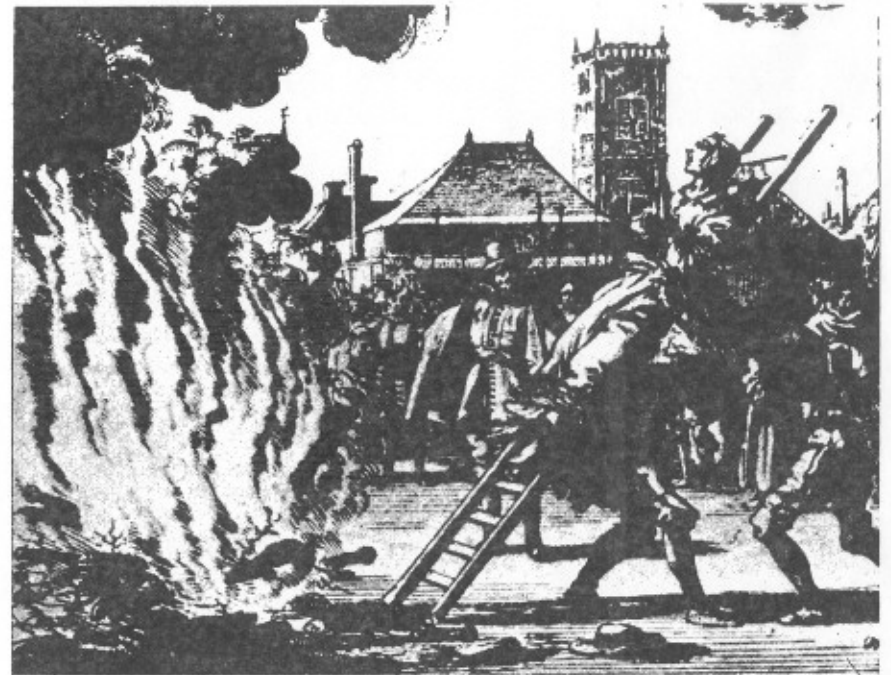
The other side of the suppression of witches as healers was the creation of a new male medical profession, under the protection and patronage of the ruling classes. This new European medical profession played an important role in the witch-hunts, supporting the witches' persecutors with "medical" reasoning:

... Because the Medieval Church, with the support of kings, princes and secular authorities, controlled medical education and practice, the Inquisition [witch-hunts] constitutes, among other things, an early instance of the "professional" repudiating the skills and interfering with the rights of the "nonprofessional" to minister to the poor. (Thomas Szasz, *The Manufacture of Madness*)

The witch-hunts left a lasting effect: An aspect of the female has ever since been associated with the witch, and an aura of contamination has remained—especially around the midwife and other women healers. This early and devastating exclusion of women from independent healing roles was a violent precedent and a warning: It was to become a theme of our history. The women's health movement of today has ancient roots in the medieval covens, and its opponents have as their ancestors those who ruthlessly forced the elimination of witches.



Witch healing
peasants
(Brueghel)



The Witch Craze

The age of witch-hunting spanned more than four centuries (from the 14th to the 17th century) in its sweep from Germany to England. It was born in feudalism and lasted—gaining in virulence—well into the "age of reason." The witch-craze took different forms at different times and places, but never lost its essential character: that of a ruling class campaign of terror directed against the female peasant population. Witches represented a political, religious and sexual threat to the Protestant and Catholic churches alike, as well as to the state.

The extent of the witch-craze is startling: In the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries there were thousands upon thousands of executions—usually live burnings at the stake—in Germany, Italy and other countries. In the mid-sixteenth century the terror spread to France, and finally to England. One writer has estimated the number of executions at an average of 600 a year for certain German cities—or two a day, "leaving out Sundays". Nine-hundred witches were destroyed in a single year in the Wertzberg area, and 1000 in and around Como. At Toulouse, four-hundred were put to death in a day. In the Bishopric of Trier, in 1585, two villages were left with only one female inhabitant each. Many writers have estimated the total number killed to have been in the



Three witches hanging, from the title page of a contemporary pamphlet on the third Chelmsford witch trial, 1589

millions. Women made up some 85 percent of those executed—old women, young women and children.*

Their scope alone suggests that the witch hunts represent a deep-seated social phenomenon which goes far beyond the history of medicine. In locale and timing, the most virulent witch hunts were associated with periods of great social upheaval shaking feudalism at its roots—mass peasant uprisings and conspiracies, the beginnings of capitalism, and the rise of Protestantism. There is fragmentary evidence—which feminists ought to follow up—suggesting that in some areas witchcraft represented a female-led peasant rebellion. Here we can't attempt to explore the historical context of the witch hunts in any depth. But we do have to get beyond some common myths about the witch-craze—myths which rob the "witch" of any dignity and put the blame on her and the peasants she served.

Unfortunately, the witch herself—poor and illiterate—did not leave us her story. It was recorded, like all history, by the educated elite, so that today we know the witch only through the eyes of her persecutors.

Two of the most common theories of the witch hunts are basically *medical* interpretations, attributing the witch craze to unexplainable outbreaks of mass hysteria. One version has it that the peasantry went mad. According to this, the witch-craze was an

* We are omitting from this discussion any mention of the New England witch trials in the 1600's. These trials occurred on a relatively small scale, very late in the history of witch-hunts, and in an entirely different social context than the earlier European witch-craze.

epidemic of mass hatred and panic cast in images of a blood-lustful peasant mob bearing flaming torches. Another psychiatric interpretation holds that the witches themselves were insane. One authoritative psychiatric historian, Gregory Zilboorg, wrote that:

...millions of witches, sorcerers, possessed and obsessed were an enormous mass of severe neurotics [and] psychotics...for many years the world looked like a veritable insane asylum...

But, in fact, the witch-craze was neither a lynching party nor a mass suicide by hysterical women. Rather, it followed well-ordered, legalistic procedures. The witch-hunts were well-organized campaigns, initiated, financed and executed by Church and State. To Catholic and Protestant witch-hunters alike, the unquestioned authority on how to conduct a witch hunt was the *Malleus Maleficarum*, or *Hammer of Witches*, written in 1484 by the Reverends Kramer and Sprenger (the "beloved sons" of Pope Innocent VIII.) For three centuries this sadistic book lay on the bench of every judge, every witch-hunter. In a long section on judicial proceedings, the instructions make it clear how the "hysteria" was set off:

The job of initiating a witch trial was to be performed by either the Vicar (priest) or Judge of the County, who was to post a notice to

direct, command, require and admonish that within the space of twelve days...that they should reveal it unto us if anyone know, see or have heard that any person is reported to be a heretic or a witch, or if any is suspected especially of such practices as cause injury to men, cattle, or the fruits of the earth, to the loss of the State.

Anyone failing to report a witch faced both excommunication and a long list of temporal punishments.



If this threatening notice exposed at least one witch, her trial could be used to unearth several more. Kramer and Sprenger gave detailed instructions about the use of tortures to force confessions and further accusations. Commonly, the accused was stripped naked and shaved of all her body hair, then subjected to thumb-screws and the rack, spikes and bone-crushing "boots," starvation and beatings. The point is obvious: The witch-craze did not arise spontaneously in the peasantry. It was a calculated ruling class campaign of terrorization.

The Crimes of the Witches

Who were the witches, then, and what were their "crimes" that could arouse such vicious upper class suppression? Undoubtedly, over the centuries of witch hunting, the charge of "witchcraft" came to cover a multitude of sins ranging from political subversion and religious heresy to lewdness and blasphemy. But three central accusations emerge repeatedly in the history of witchcraft throughout northern Europe: First, witches are accused of every conceivable sexual crime against men. Quite simply, they are "accused" of female sexuality. Second, they are accused of being organized. Third, they are accused of having magical powers affecting health—of harming, but also of healing. They were often charged specifically with possessing medical and obstetrical skills.

First, consider the charge of sexual crimes. The medieval Catholic Church elevated sexism to a point of principle: The *Malleus* declares, "When a woman thinks alone, she thinks evil." The misogyny of the Church, if not proved by the witch-craze itself, is demonstrated by its teaching that in intercourse the male deposits in the female a homunculus, or "little person," complete



Devil seducing a witch



Witches and demons dancing in a ring

with soul, which is simply housed in the womb for nine months, without acquiring any attributes of the mother. The homunculus is not really safe, however, until it reaches male hands again, when a priest baptises it, ensuring the salvation of its immortal soul.

Another depressing fantasy of some medieval religious thinkers was that upon resurrection all human beings would be reborn as men!

The Church associated women with sex, and all pleasure in sex was condemned, because it could only come from the devil. Witches were supposed to have gotten pleasure from copulation with the devil (despite the icy-cold organ he was reputed to possess) and they in turn infected men. Lust in either man or wife, then, was blamed on the female. On the other hand, witches were accused of making men impotent and of causing their penises to disappear. As for female sexuality, witches were accused, in effect, of giving contraceptive aid and of performing abortions:

Now there are, as it is said in the Papal Bull, seven methods by which they infect with witchcraft the venereal act and the conception of the womb: First, by inclining the minds of men to inordinate passion; second, by obstructing their generative force; third, by removing the members accommodated to that act; fourth, by changing men into beasts by their magic act; fifth, by destroying the generative force in women; sixth, by procuring abortion; seventh, by offering children to the devils, besides other animals and fruits of the earth with which they work much harm...

(*Malleus Maleficarum*)

In the eyes of the Church, all the witches' power was ultimately derived from her sexuality. Her career began with sexual in-

tercourse with the devil. Each witch was confirmed at a general meeting (the witches' Sabbath) at which the devil presided, often in the form of a goat, and had intercourse with the neophytes. In return for her powers, the witch promised to serve him faithfully. (In the imagination of the Church even evil could only be thought of as ultimately male-directed!) As the *Malleus* makes clear, the devil almost always acts through the female, just as he did in Eden:

All witchcraft comes from carnal lust, which in women is insatiable...Wherefore for the sake of fulfilling their lusts they consort with devils...it is sufficiently clear that it is no matter for wonder that there are more women than men found infected with the heresy of witchcraft...And blessed be the Highest Who has so far preserved the male sex from so great a crime...

Not only were the witches women—they were women who seemed to be organized into an enormous secret society. A witch who was a proved member of the "Devil's party" was more dreadful than one who had acted alone, and the witch-hunting literature is obsessed with the question of what went on at the witches' "Sabbaths." (Eating of unbaptised babies? Bestialism and mass orgies? So went their lurid speculations...)

In fact, there is evidence that women accused of being witches did meet locally in small groups and that these groups came together in crowds of hundreds or thousands on festival days. Some writers speculate that the meetings were occasions for pagan religious worship. Undoubtedly the meetings were also occasions for trading herbal lore and passing on the news. We have little evidence about the political significance of the witches' organizations, but it's hard to imagine that they weren't connected to the peasant rebellions of the time. Any peasant organization, just by being an organization, would attract dissidents, increase communication between villages, and build a spirit of collectivity and autonomy among the peasants.

Witches as Healers

We come now to the most fantastic accusation of all: The witch is accused not only of murdering and poisoning, sex crimes and conspiracy—but of *helping and healing*. As a leading English witch-hunter put it:

For this must always be remembered, as a conclusion, that by witches we understand not only those which kill and torment, but all Diviners, Charmers, Jugglers, all Wizards, commonly called wise men and wise women...and in the same number we reckon all good Witches, which



Witch preparing a potion

do no hurt but good, which do not spoil and destroy, but save and deliver...It were a thousand times better for the land if all Witches, but especially the blessing Witch, might suffer death.

Witch-healers were often the only general medical practitioners for a people who had no doctors and no hospitals and who were bitterly afflicted with poverty and disease. In particular, the association of the witch and the midwife was strong: "No one does more harm to the Catholic Church than midwives," wrote witch-hunters Kramer and Sprenger.

The Church itself had little to offer the suffering peasantry:

On Sundays, after Mass, the sick came in scores, crying for help, — and words were all they got: "You have sinned, and God is afflicting you. Thank him; you will suffer so much the less torment in the life to come. Endure, suffer, die. Has not the Church its prayers for the dead?"

(Jules Michelet, *Satanism and Witchcraft*)

When faced with the misery of the poor, the Church turned to the dogma that experience in this world is fleeting and unimportant. But there was a double standard at work, for the Church was not against medical care for the upper class. Kings and nobles had their court physicians who were men, sometimes even priests. The real issue was control: Male upper class healing under the auspices of the Church was acceptable, female healing as part of a peasant subculture was not.

The Church saw its attack on peasant healers as an attack on *magic*, not medicine. The devil was believed to have real power on

earth, and the use of that power by peasant women—whether for good or evil—was frightening to the Church and State. The greater their satanic powers to help themselves, the less they were dependent on God and the Church and the more they were potentially able to use their powers against God's order. Magic charms were thought to be at least as effective as prayer in healing the sick, but prayer was Church-sanctioned and controlled while incantations and charms were not. Thus magic cures, even when successful, were an accursed interference with the will of God, achieved with the help of the devil, and the cure itself was evil. There was no problem in distinguishing God's cures from the devil's, for obviously the Lord would work through priests and doctors rather than through peasant women.

The wise woman, or witch, had a host of remedies which had been tested in years of use. Many of the herbal remedies developed by witches still have their place in modern pharmacology. They had pain-killers, digestive aids and anti-inflammatory agents. They used ergot for the pain of labor at a time when the Church held that pain in labor was the Lord's just punishment for Eve's original sin. Ergot derivatives are the principal drugs used today to hasten labor and aid in the recovery from childbirth. Belladonna—still used today as an anti-spasmodic—was used by the witch-healers to inhibit uterine contractions when miscarriage threatened. Digitalis, still an important drug in treating heart ailments, is said to have been discovered by an English witch. Undoubtedly many of the witches' other remedies were purely magical, and owed their effectiveness—if they had any—to their reputation.

The witch-healer's methods were as great a threat (to the Catholic Church, if not the Protestant) as her results, for the witch was an empiricist: She relied on her senses rather than on faith or doctrine, she believed in trial and error, cause and effect. Her attitude was not religiously passive, but actively inquiring. She trusted her ability to find ways to deal with disease, pregnancy and childbirth—whether through medications or charms. In short, her magic was the science of her time.

The Church, by contrast, was deeply anti-empirical. It discredited the value of the material world, and had a profound distrust of the senses. There was no point in looking for natural laws that govern physical phenomena, for the world is created anew by God in every instant. Kramer and Sprenger, in the *Malleus*, quote St. Augustine on the deceptiveness of the senses:

... Now the motive of the will is something perceived through the senses or the intellect, both of which are subject to the power of the

devil. For St. Augustine says in Book 83: This evil, which is of the devil, creeps in by all the sensual approaches; he places himself in figures, he adapts himself to colors, he attaches himself to sounds, he lurks in angry and wrongful conversation, he abides in smells, he impregnates with flavours and fills with certain exhalations all the channels of the understanding.

The senses are the devil's playground, the arena into which he will try to lure men away from Faith and into the conceits of the intellect or the delusions of carnality.

In the persecution of the witch, the anti-empiricist and the misogynist, anti-sexual obsessions of the Church coincide: Empiricism and sexuality both represent a surrender to the senses, a betrayal of faith. The witch was a triple threat to the Church: She was a woman, and not ashamed of it. She appeared to be part of an organized underground of peasant women. And she was a healer whose practice was based in empirical study. In the face of the repressive fatalism of Christianity, she held out the hope of change in this world.

The Rise of the European Medical Profession

While witches practiced among the people, the ruling classes were cultivating their own breed of secular healers: the university-trained physicians. In the century that preceded the beginning of the "witch-craze"—the thirteenth century—European medicine became firmly established as a secular science and a profession. The medical profession was actively engaged in the elimination of female healers—their exclusion from the universities, for example—long before the witch-hunts began.

For eight long centuries, from the fifth to the thirteenth, the other-worldly, anti-medical stance of the Church had stood in the way of the development of medicine as a respectable profession. Then, in the 13th century, there was a revival of learning, touched off by contact with the Arab world. Medical schools appeared in

The humors: sanguine, melancholy, hot-tempered, sluggish

