WITCHCRAFT AND STATECRAFT

A Materialist Analysis of the European Witch Persecutions

by D. L. REISSNER

"Slower Mistress!" A painting of two witches by Goya (1746-1828).

Several years have elapsed since the heyday of feminist organizations with names like W.I.T.C.H. (Women's International Terrorist Conspiracy from Hell) and Red Witch, but many feminists have continued to identify themselves with witches, as is attested to by several recently published articles, including "Witches, Midwives, and Nurses: A History of Women Healers" by Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English and "What Were Those Witches Really Brewing?" by Andrea Dworkin which appeared in the April issue of *Ms.* This identification rests apparently on the feminists' view of witches as early prototypes of the liberated woman, although a little research of witch practices could seriously weaken this assumption. For example, each coven (local organization) of twelve witches was presided over by a man who played the role of the Devil, and it was standard practice at sabbats (witches' meetings) that each witch showed her respect to him by kissing his posterior and penis; this was known as the "kiss of shame." Furthermore, no sabbat was complete until the "Devil" had engaged in sexual intercourse with all 12 witches.

It is not surprising that the history of European witchcraft and witch persecutions (the New England witch trials, which occurred on a relatively small scale and in a different social context at the very end of the European witch craze, must be considered separately) should evoke great interest among people concerned with women's liberation, because it is a segment of the history of the oppression of women which is virtually unparalleled in its scope, duration and intensity. As Marxists, however, we approach this history in a way which is different both from the approach of feminists and from that of most other bourgeois historians whose analyses tend to be psychological, anthropological or merely romantic.

The European witch craze must be viewed as one component in the complex economic, social and political dynamic which transformed European civilization in the period between the 13th and 17th centuries and which included the rise of capitalism and the emergence of Protestantism. Of particular significance to an understanding of the witch craze was the consolidation of modern territorial nation-states during this period, for, as this article will seek to show, the witch craze was in the first instance an attempt to deal with the problem of socially unassimilable peoples in the face of this national consolidation.

Witches Have Not Always Been Persecuted

Ever since the 18th century there has been a tendency to regard European history from the Renaissance onward as inevitably progressive. Yet the same era which witnessed the flowering of Renaissance culture also produced the witch craze—a mania of terror and repression unknown in the so-called "Dark" Ages. Estimates vary, but the most conservative concede that at least 30,000 persons lost their lives as witches during this time—85 percent of them women.

Now that belief in the efficacy of witchcraft has become less fashionable in this part of the world, there is a tendency to dismiss it as nothing more than a delusion of a few unbalanced minds, but witch practices

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have existed since ancient times and among all peoples. In fact, one of the most striking aspects of witchcraft is the uniformity of its practice in widely separated countries and civilizations. In India, just as in England, the cat is believed to be the witch's familiar, and in ancient Italy the evil eye was dreaded as it is in many parts of Africa today and was guarded against by the same symbol.

When religions establish themselves in new territories, the god or gods of the old religion become the devils (the word "devil," derived from the same root as "divine," means "little god") of the new. Then fortune-telling, the special province of the witch or wise woman, which had been called prophecy when it had been done in the name of the established religion, is designated as witchcraft. And so it was when Christianity superseded the older totemic cults of Western Europe—cults which had honored female sexuality as the embodiment of the regenerative power of nature.

While the Church was formally opposed to these relics of paganism which continued to exist alongside

The burning of an Anabaptist who was not accused of witchcraft by Jan Luyken (1571).

Christianity, it found it politic, given their broad popular appeal, to accommodate itself to them in practice or even to co-opt them. In fact when in 1257 the Dominican Order, which had been established to combat the Albigensian and Vaudois heresies, uncovered witch practices in Southern France and requested that Pope Alexander IX grant it jurisdiction over witches as well as heretics, he refused. Not for another 200 years were the Dominicans to have their way unobstructed by the Catholic Church.

The Church based its position on the *Canon Episcopi*, a document dating back to the ninth century at least, which attempted to minimize the importance of witch practices not through persecution—Charlemagne had declared the burning of witches a capital crime as early as 785 A.D.—but through denying the very existence of witches and ridiculing belief in them:

> "Some wicked women, reverting to Satan, and seduced by the illusions and phantasms of demons, believe and profess that they ride at night with Diana on certain beasts, with an innumerable company of women, passing over immense distances, obeying her command as their mistress, and evoked by her on certain nights.... Therefore priests everywhere should preach that they know this to be false, and that such phantasms are sent by the Evil Spirit, who deludes them in dreams. Who is there who is not led out of himself in dreams, seeing much in sleeping that he never saw in waking? And who is such a fool that he believes that to happen in the body which is done only in the spirit?"

As late as the 12th century, John of Salisbury continued to dismiss the idea of the witches' sabbat as a fabulous dream. Yet this skeptical toleration was soon to give way to the hysteria of the witch craze, and woe to the occasional skeptic then, for he too would rapidly fall under suspicion.

The horror of the persecutions—the carefully refined tortures, the sexual degradation, the unspeakable anguish which wrung from the victims accusations against their friends, spouses and children—these are well documented and need not be elaborated here. Suffice it to say that at the height of the witch craze the intensity of the persecutions was such that in at least two villages in Germany only one woman was left alive.

Pessimism or Protestantism?

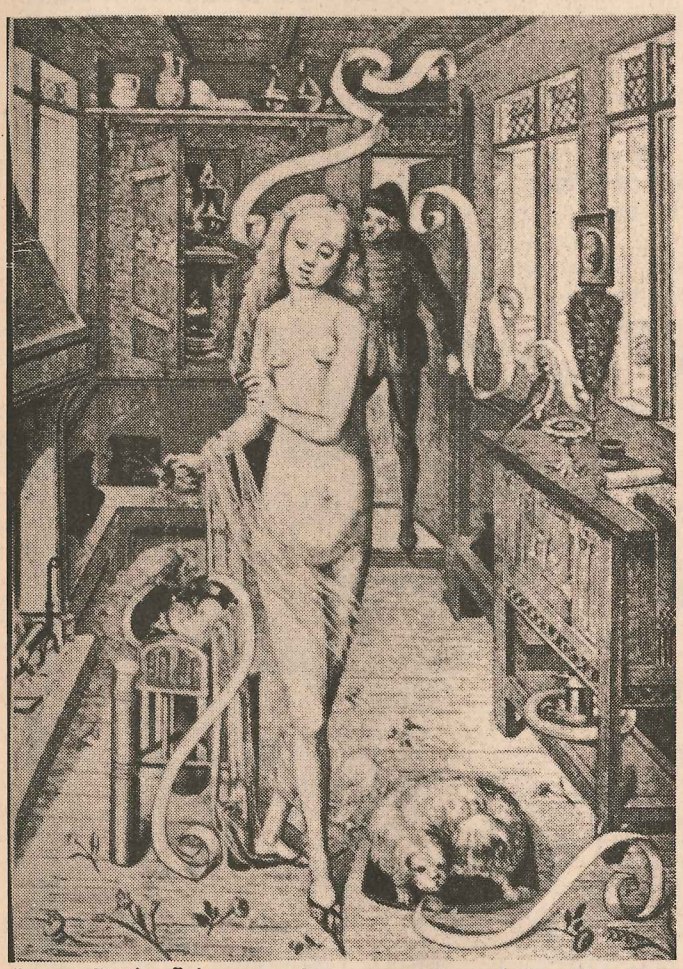
Given the fact that witchcraft had existed more or less undisturbed since ancient times, an analysis of the witch persecutions turns upon the answer to the question of why they erupted at the particular moment which they did.

The historical context in which the craze reached its height was one of unprecedented social upheaval. This was the period of the Hundred Years' War, the rise of capitalism, the consolidation of nation-states, the Black Death, the discovery of the New World, the Protestant Reformation and a series of religious wars so devastating that some historians contend that the European economy has not yet recovered from them. Such periods of social disturbance always give rise to increased superstitions and unorthodox beliefs, and several students of the witch craze, including Jules Michelet and Julio Caro Baroja, claim that it grew out of the catastrophes of the 14th century and the widespread pessimism which these catastrophes engendered.

Michelet points out that while witchcraft had been practiced for hundreds of years, certain of its aspects, including the pact with the devil, did not appear before the 14th century. The reason for this, he argues, is that before this time people had not been sufficiently desperate to conceive of such a thing, but with the coming of an age in which the peasant was for the first time required to pay quit-rents (rents paid in lieu of obligatory feudal services) and taxes in money, the concept of a pact with the devil became extremely attractive. Says Michelet:

> "The pact required an age in which Hell itself appeared as a shelter, an asylum, a relief, as contrasted with the Hell of this world."

But while belief in witchcraft within primitive and modern societies alike increases as a result of social catastrophe and pessimism, this is clearly inadequate as the sole explanation for 400 years of terror. As the historian H.R. Trevor-Roper points out, the craze gathered force *before* either the Black Death or the Hundred Years' War had begun and continued for two centuries after they were over--centuries marked by general recovery and expansion.



"Love Potion" by an unknown master of the Flemish school in the mid-15th century. The scrolls symbolize the sing-song of the witch's incantation.

Another explanation often put forward for the outbreak of witch persecutions in this period is that they were a peculiarly Protestant phenomenon and arose therefore as a result of the Protestant Reformation.

It is true that both Luther and Calvin professed belief in witches and declared that they should be burned, and it is also true that the pattern of the witch persecutions coincided closely with the course of the religious wars, both on the Continent and in Britain, but there is no more basis for linking the craze with Protestantism than with Catholicism. It was in fact a product of the conflict between them. The Protestants carried the witch craze to the countries which they conquered for the Reformation while the Catholic Jesuits introduced it equally into the countries which they reconquered for Rome, including Bavaria, the Rhineland, Flanders and Poland. Toulouse, the capital of the witch burners, was a great center of Catholic orthodoxy. It is also noteworthy that it was the Protestant rather than the Catholic countries which took the lead in bringing the witch craze to a halt. By 1700 England and Holland had long since abandoned the persecution of witches on a large scale while the Catholic prince-bishops of Germany were still burning them by the score.

Since Protestants supposedly rejected *all* doctrine which the corrupt papacy had added to the Bible and the writings of the early Church Fathers, they should have logically rejected the demonology of the Inquisition as well. In fact, this point was raised repeatedly by isolated Protestant critics, but without effect. Although they frequently burned Catholics as witches, the Protestant witch hunters continued to refer approvingly to the Dominican handbook of the witch craze, the *Malleus Maleficarum*. Catholic inquisitors returned the compliment by citing Protestant authorities on the subject such as Erastus and Daneau. In other words, although the witch persecutions waxed and waned in direct proportion to the degree of religious conflict in each area, they were not fundamentally the product of *doctrinal* differences, but rather, as Trevor-Roper convincingly argues, of social differences and specifically of the demand for social assimilation which became acute in this period.

In those instances where there was no such demand, there were no witch persecutions. For example, at the height of the witch craze, the Swedish Lutherans discovered that the Lapps in the territory they governed were imbued with witch beliefs. The Lutheran Church took no action in this case. Since there was no desire to socially integrate the Lapp dissenters, there was likewise no compulsion to persecute them for their witch practices.

The link between the witch persecutions and the question of social assimilation is apparent from the very beginning. When the Dominicans made their discovery of witchcraft in 1257 in the "dark corners" of Europe, i.e., the Alps and the Pyrenees, they were disturbed not by the old rural superstitions *per se*, which were considered harmless enough, but by the fact that they were practiced by the people of a mountain civilization which appeared quite alien to the civilization of the plains—socially, culturally, eco-

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nomically and probably racially. These were the people who had retreated to the hinterlands of Europe at an early period. Feudalism had never penetrated this area in more than a superficial way, and neither had Christianity. Unlike the civilization of the plains, which was based on the cultivation of the land and the institution of the manor, the civilization of the mountains was pastoral and individualistic. The discovery of witchcraft among these people must have come as no surprise to the Dominicans, yet the same practices which had been tolerated in the feudal towns and villages appeared far more ominous when viewed across an unbridgable social chasm. The Dominicans reacted in a novel and unexpected way: they attempted to persecute the witches as heretics.

As we have seen, the papacy refused to support such persecutions at this time, but as the demand for social homogeneity became more urgent, the Dominican crusade became the wave of the future.

Witchcraft and Statecraft

The medieval concept of society had been based on an ideal of universality embodied in the Roman Catholic Church and the Holy Roman Empire. Despite this ideal, however, medieval political, judicial and economic institutions, operating within the confines of an agrarian economy, were almost invariably local. During the 12th and 13th centuries, however, the economic conditions which had made such local autonomy inevitable began to disappear. The revival of commerce and the growth of cities increased the circulation of money and the expansion of trade to the point at which local autonomy became financially impractical. During the 14th and 15th centuries, the feudal suzerainties of local lords were gradually transformed into absolute monarchies. Behind this enormous change lay the power of a new social class—the growing class of capitalist entrepreneurs whose business needs had outgrown feudal social institutions and who now demanded the larger sphere of operation which only a territorial state could provide.

The welding of a nation-state—the creation of a "people" with a sense of common identity—demanded social homogeneity, including religious homogeneity. To be Spanish *meant* to be Catholic; to be English, Anglican. Moreover, religious homogeneity was important to emerging rulers not only because it enabled them to bind their subjects more closely and to disguise territorial aggression as holy war, but also because it enabled them to control their subjects much more effectively. The established church was in each locality an arm of the state apparatus. To the extent that there were citizens beyond its reach, they represented a threat to the newly established order.

Thus the period of the witch craze is also the period in which the Jews and Moors were expelled from Spain, the Protestants were expelled from France, the Puritans were hounded out of England and the Inquisition was at the height of its power. The conjuncture of these persecutions is hardly coincidental. They are all, at least in part, attempts to deal with the problem of socially unassimilable peoples during the period of the consolidation of European nation-states. The witch craze cannot be understood apart from this larger social movement of which it was an aspect. This understanding, incidentally, was not lost on the authorities of the time, who not infrequently launched campaigns of persecution against *all* the stereotypes of unassimilability in their particular areas; for instance, Protestants, Jews and witches in Trier.

"Most Women are Witches"

The one aspect of the witch persecutions which did distinguish them from all other persecutions of the period was that their victims were overwhelmingly women, particularly older women between 50 and 70 years of age and very often women who were unusually independent in one way or another—widows,

"Witches" by Hans Baldung Grien (1470-1522).

spinsters, midwives. Not that men were exempt from persecution, but as Jacob Sprenger, co-author of the *Malleus Maleficarum*, wrote: "We should speak of the Heresy of the Sorceresses, not of the Sorcerers, for the latter are of small account."

The Judaeo-Christian tradition had long rationalized the social oppression of women by designating them as weak and sinful and easily tempted by the devil. The Jewish Talmud makes this clear by its

statement, "Women are naturally inclined to witchcraft," and "The more women there are, the more witchcraft there will be," and again, "Most women are witches."

Christianity postulated that men were protected from becoming witches not only by virtue of their superior intellect and faith, but also because Jesus Christ had died, as it said in the *Malleus*, "to preserve the male sex from so great a crime."

Women were regarded as particularly prone to diabolical temptation not merely because they were deemed intellectually and spiritually inferior to men, but also and especially because they were believed to be sexually insatiable. In the *Malleus* it is woman's carnality which is offered as the ultimate proof of her predisposition to witchcraft: "All witchcraft comes from carnal lust, which is in women insatiable."

It was only this view of women which made the endless confessions of seduction by the devil plausible, for they corroborated the popular conception of the nature of female sexuality.

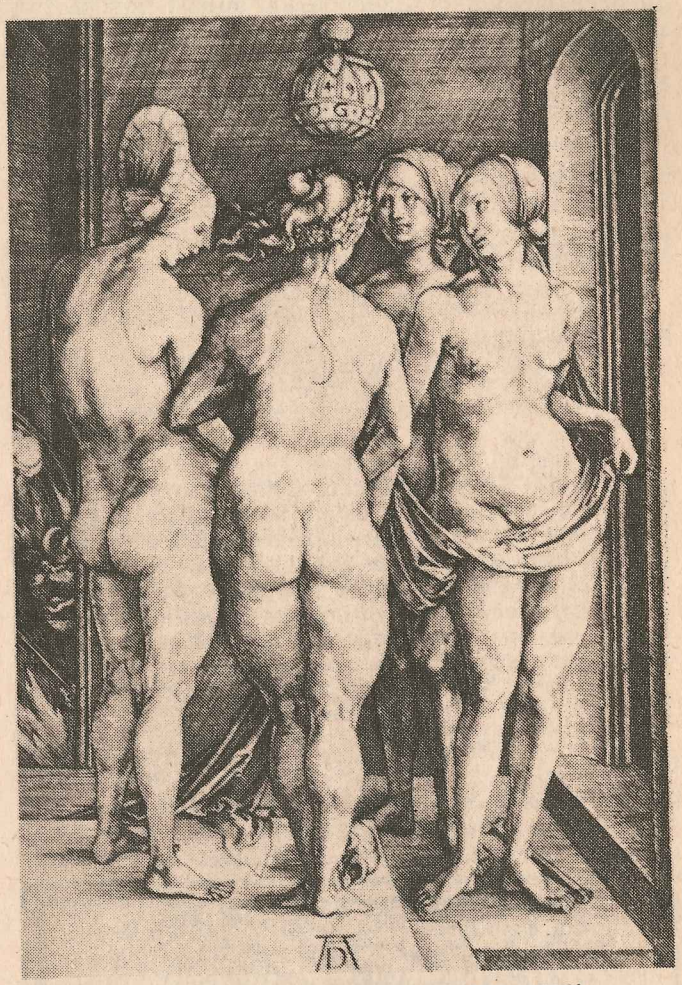
But this long-standing attitude does not in itself explain the outbreak of bitter misogynism which has been observed in this period. Recently published demographic findings, as historian Erik Midlefort has noted, suggest the basis for a more substantial explanation.

The European Marriage Pattern

Demographer John Hajnal has demonstrated that one of the most profound changes that Europe has ever experienced dates roughly from the 15th or 16th centuries. This is the appearance of the "European marriage pattern"—a pattern characterized by relatively late marriage and by large proportions of people who never marry. The percentage of these single people rose in this period from about five percent of the population to 15 or 20 percent.

It was this shift toward later marriage which laid the basis for the nuclear family, since in societies where there is little control over conception the age of partners at marriage is one of the most important variables bearing upon the reproduction rate. It also facilitated the Industrial Revolution by raising the average income and making it possible for savings to be devoted to improving capital assets rather than supporting population growth. Of immediate importance was the fact that for the first time in European history there was a very large percentage of unmarried women, whose ranks were further augmented by widows created by the frequent wars, plagues and emigration. (With regard to the plague, it is noteworthy that in some areas it was fatal for up to ten times as many men as women in the population, possibly because women were more bound to the home and thus less exposed to contagion.) At the same time convents, once the sole refuge of spinsters, were being dismantled in Protestant countries, and even in Catholic countries they were on the decline.

In a society which was totally patriarchal and family-centered and which provided no social role for women outside the family, the growing numbers of single women were regarded as at least peculiar and possibly seditious, especially after the death of their fathers removed them from patriarchal control entirely. And in fact widows and spinsters were accused of witchcraft in numbers far out of proportion to their representation in society. Of course, the fact that these women were unprotected made them more vulnerable to attack, but the essential point to be made is that it was the unprecedented existence of large



"Four Witches" by Albrecht Dürer (1471-1528).

numbers of women outside the protection of the family which brought them under suspicion in the first place.

Aside from spinsters and widows, the women who came under attack for witchcraft most often were lay medical practitioners of one sort or another, particularly midwives. As the *Malleus* says:

> "...as penitant witches have often told to us and to others, saying: No one does more harm to the Catholic Faith than midwives. For when they do not kill children, as if for some other purpose they take them out of the room and, raising them up in the air, offer them to devils."

Country medicine, the medicine of the poor, was often, although by no means exclusively, practiced by women, and witches were often "accused" of having the power to heal. In fact, they did develop herbal remedies, some of which are still in use. It has also been discovered that the ointment with which they anointed themselves before "flying" to the sabbats

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contained hallucinogenic properties such that the feeling of flying might indeed ensue.

Feminists Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English have made the interesting point that the rising European medical profession played an active role in suppressing all lay competition during this period, including the medicine of the "white" (good) witches, although to consider this the fundamental basis of the European witch craze is superficial, and to assert, as they do, that male and female healers were on opposite sides of a class struggle because women served the "people" while men served the ruling class is crude and inaccurate.

The Witch Craze Burns Out

In his *Dictionnaire Philosophique* written in 1764, Voltaire quipped:

> "It is a great pity that there are no longer any persons possessed by the Devil, or magicians, or astrologers, or genii. One cannot conceive how useful all these mysteries were a hundred years ago. In those days, the nobility lived in castles. The winter evenings were long and everyone would have died of boredom if these noble entertainments had not been available.... Every village had its own sorcerer and witch; every prince his astrologer; all the ladies had their fortunes told; those possessed by the Devil wandered all over the place; everyone wanted to know who had seen the Devil or who was going to see him; and all this provided an endless topic of conversation which kept everyone in suspense. Nowadays we play insipid card-games and have lost a lot by losing our illusions."

Voltaire could afford to joke for he had the good fortune to live at a time when such jokes no longer led inescapably to the Inquisition and the stake. The witch craze, along with other mass forms of fanatical religious persecution, began to dissolve in both Protestant and Catholic countries in Western Europe in the mid-17th century. By this time, the wars of religion were coming to an end, territorial nation-states were more securely consolidated and the "alien" social groups within them had been for the most part either assimilated, exterminated or expelled.

"Witches Bringing a Shower of Rain" by Ulrich Molitor.

Furthermore, witch beliefs seemed far less credible, among certain groups at least, during the age of science and skepticism which the commercial revolution had ushered in. The assumption that a neighbor's malice could cause physical harm had seemed more likely in a subsistance-level village where social cooperation was a vital necessity than it did in the 17th century when increased economic individualism and greater social mobility were severing the older collective ties.

Although occasional witch persecutions continued until the 1850's, and although witchcraft long remained a criminal offense in many countries, including England where it was not removed from the statute books until 22 June 1951, by the beginning of the 18th century the witch craze was unmistakably dead. It would be some time, however, before cosmopolitan wits such as Voltaire began to consider the subject amusing. ■

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