

HERBAL HEALERS AND DEVIL DEALERS:
A STUDY OF HEALERS AND THEIR GENDERED PERSECUTION
IN THE MEDIEVAL PERIOD

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A Thesis

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Abstract
of
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Long before written record, men and women have known the healing properties of herbs and medicinal arts have been practiced even before the first civilizations emerged. This ancient tradition of treating infirmity with herbal medicants was especially significant during the late middle ages, when women healers became a target and were cast as enemies of society. This thesis examines the evolution of the female healing tradition, focusing on the role of women as healers and their devaluation to witches during the renaissance and early modern periods (1500-1700). This study will also address why women and especially those identified as healers were singled out in the witch crazes that sporadically raged throughout western Europe for over two centuries.

_____, Committee Chair
Candace Gregory-Abbott

Date

DEDICATION

For My Aunt Deborah,
who taught me the importance of
Healing.

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(Ego Amo Latinam)

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Chapter 1

A HISTORY OF HEALING

Long before written record, men and women have known the healing properties of herbs and medicinal arts have been practiced even before the first civilizations emerged. This ancient tradition of treating infirmity with herbal medicants was especially significant during the late middle ages, when women healers became a target and were cast as enemies of society. Upwards of 100,000 women would be burned at the stake, accused of witchcraft by both the church and secular powers, while few men were prosecuted for the same.¹ This thesis examines the evolution of the female healing tradition, focusing on the role of women as healers and their devaluation to witches during the renaissance and early modern periods (1500-1700). This study will also address why women and especially those identified as healers were singled out in the witch crazes that sporadically raged throughout western Europe for over two centuries.

In the ancient world, herbs were an essential aspect of life. Early societies passed down the knowledge of herbal remedies for centuries; this learning came much earlier than both writing and history. People used herbs that were available in the local area to heal their wounds and ailments. To define a point at which this learning began is impossible. It simply grew organically, one civilization co-opting the medicinal knowledge from their ancestors and adopting other herbs and herbal traditions as new cultures and civilizations were encountered. The first point in history from which there is written record and thus a good place to begin is ancient Sumer. Herbal healing

¹ Anne Llewellyn Barstow, *Witchcraze: a New History of the European Witch Hunts* (San Francisco: Pandora, 1994), 23.

knowledge was so essential to the Sumerians that this knowledge was written down as soon as they invented the art of writing.

Sumerian men and women employed herbs in a wide array of uses: as healing agents, in spiritual ceremonies, as cosmetics and fragrances, as well as in their cooking. Notably, women were free to practice medicine completely unrestricted. In fact, the head of the Sumerian pantheon was Bau, the goddess of medicine and healing.² Besides sustaining health, female goddesses resided over birth and death, two aspects of life that have traditionally been dominated by females. As the erudite religious scholar Marija Gimbutas states, “In the Sumerian poem *The Descent of Inanna*, the underworld goddess, Ereshkigal, groans in childbirth as she brings forth life out of death.”³ These goddesses as symbols represent the cyclical nature of birth, life, death and rebirth, particularly significant to ancient societies.

Thusly, Sumerian female healers were able to achieve relatively high status and honor until they were denigrated by scribes and other powerful men, in the attempt to rein in the agency these revered women enjoyed.⁴ Between the second and first millennia B.C.E. succeeding migrations from the east, such as the Assyrians, brought with them a society dominated by male power, based on fear and protection rather than the care-giving earth-mother figure. As civilizations moved away from goddess worship to a more patriarchal pantheon, with a focus on male war-like deities, the

² Marija Gimbutas, *The Living Goddesses* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 42.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Jeanne Achterberg, *Woman as Healer* (Boston: Shambhala, 1990), 19.

magical healing arts of women were banned. This steep decline influenced subsequent civilizations, especially evident in ancient Greece and Rome.

In Greco-Roman societies, women were for the most part subjugated and excluded from practicing any form of medicine. The democratic rights of the citizen were applicable only to men in the classical world. Upper-class women held limited property rights and economic status. Athenian women, in particular, were required to seclude themselves inside the *oikos*, or home, at all times and are thusly an enigmatic subject of research. Reconstructing the herbal healing practices of women in the classical period can be challenging as historians of the classical era were exclusively men; often these men did not see the value of recording most aspects of women's lives.

Ancient historians such as Herodotus, Thucydides, Cato and others focused their historical works on the important leaders and warfare of their respective times. Exceptional women were mentioned only briefly and usually in respect to prominent men. Still, there is evidence in these sources that women practiced healing. "The healing skills of a Greek queen, Artemisia (about 350 B.C.) were praised by Pliny, Strabo, and Theophrastus. She was credited with discovering wormwood as a cure for a wide range of disorders."⁵ One should not conclude that she was the only woman practicing healing arts because this is one of the few women immortalized by the historians of her time; rather, Artemisia was included because of her societal status. There are a few fragments of writings and tales of brilliant women and healers that, despite adversity, have survived over the ages.

⁵ Ibid., 32.

Therefore, scholars who attempt to understand the lives of ancient Athenian women must employ a variety of sources also written exclusively by men, such as drama, epigraphy, and literature in an effort to gain a comprehensive understanding and holistic view. Although it is uncertain how many women were taught the skills of reading and writing, what women wrote was not held as worthy to be preserved by historians. Sometime before the twelfth century C.E., the increasingly powerful Catholic Church destroyed a great deal of what was written by Sappho, who was certainly the most prominent if not the most talented female poet of ancient Greece.⁶ Unfortunately, this would not be the only attempt by the church to eradicate accomplished women from historical record.

Many ancient sources from the male writers of the classical period document the extent to which herbs were employed as medicine without acknowledging the role women played in maintaining, passing on, and using this body of knowledge. Philosophers such as Plato, Aristotle, and Galen wrote on medical matters and the herbs that were known to heal. Even Virgil's *Aeneid* references herbs and their medical applications:

Venus picked stalk / Of dittany from Cretan Ida – dittany / With
downy leaves and scarlet flower, a plant / That wild goats know
about when stuck with arrows. / Venus now brought this down,
veiling her face / In a dark cloud, and for a secret poultice
/ Dipped the leaves to imbue a shining bowl / Of Tiber water,
sprinkling in ambrosia's / Health-giving juices and the fragrant
Heal-all. / Quite unaware of her, old Iapyx used / The medicated
fluid to lave the wound. / Then, sure enough, all anguish instantly
/ Left Aeneas' body, all his bleeding / Stopped, deep in the wound.
The arrowhead / Came out, unforced and ready into his hand. / New

⁶ Ibid., 65.

strength renewed his old-time fighting spirit.⁷

Greco-Roman myths and mythological poems offer evidence of the knowledge of herbs and their medicinal properties. This and many other literary sources provide evidence that healing herbs were connected with mythology of old, often embedded in prose.

While countless Greek and Roman sources deal with herbal healing, Pliny the Elder was by far the most prolific writer on ancient herbal healing practices. Of his thirty-seven volume work titled *Natural History*, Pliny devotes sixteen volumes to the history of plants and their use as remedies for various ailments.⁸ He wrote about the healing properties of plants such as myrtle, marjoram, rose, and coriander, to name just a few. The herbal knowledge documented by ancient philosophers would have continued influence throughout the medieval era. Unfortunately, Pliny wrote little about female healers, a convention that would also be carried on.

In addition to healing, herbals written by Pliny document many plant-based contraceptives and abortifacients in use in the classical world. Pomegranate, pennyroyal, rue, and myrrh have been scientifically proven to be effective herbs as contraceptives and abortifacients. Modern testing shows the remarkable accuracy of these herbs, most are close to one hundred percent effective.⁹ As shall be discussed later, this particular use of herbs would prove problematic for women healers in the middle ages.

⁷ Virgil, *Aeneid* trans. by Robert Fitzgerald (New York: Vintage Books, 1981), BkXII, lines 563-578. The healer- Iapyx -is male in the *Aeneid*. Venus is not a mortal woman but a goddess (not to mention Aeneas's mother). She procures the dictamnus (modern name: Cretan dittany) out of maternal worry, not as a healer. Venus was never connected with herbal healing as were Proserpina/pomegranates, Ceres/spearmint, or Hymen/marjoram.

⁸ Marina Heilmeyer, *Ancient Herbs* (Los Angeles: The J. Paul Getty Museum. 2007), 2.

⁹ John M. Riddle, *Eve's Herbs: a History of Contraception and Abortion in the West* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997), 41-54.

During and after the fall of western Roman empire, great strife descended on all its former citizens, depriving them of the stability they had enjoyed for nearly one thousand years. Tribal invasions coupled with rampant disease saw society descend into a time of instability and chaos.¹⁰ At this point, the compendium of medical science established in the classical world vanished. Women became the healers of the masses, primarily serving the peasant population. These women, attempting to support themselves and their families or bolster their families' income, had few options available to them. Healer or midwife was one way women could earn a respectable income. Usually this occupation was handed down through maternal familial bonds. A mother would teach her daughter the healing arts, passing all of her knowledge to the next generation. Wise women preserved the knowledge of healing which would not be reestablished in any formal way throughout western Europe for hundreds of years.

At about the same time, Arabic scholars were busy accumulating and archiving the philosophical theories and medical texts that had been lost to the west after the fall of the Roman empire. Constantine the African's work in the eleventh century was significantly influenced by the Arabic writings he came into contact with in his native North Africa, hence his epithet. Constantine's efforts to disseminate the lost knowledge of herbal healing and medical knowledge inherited from the Greeks and Romans through his writings would have immense impact on the west. Later scholars would begin to translate the ancient Greek medical and natural philosophic texts, creating the

¹⁰Achterberg, 36.

revitalization of investigative and inquisitive study that is commonly associated with the renaissance.

As Constantine's works were influencing medical knowledge scholarship from Mediterranean Europe, Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179) wrote on the subject from her monastery in northern Europe. At this time in history, Hildegard was one of the only women to write on the topic of herbal healing. She recorded the "functions of 485 plants, each of which she believed to be a God-given remedy" in her medical treatise, *Causae et Curae*.¹¹ The extent of her herbal knowledge went well beyond the understanding of Greek texts that had been translated and her writing was unconventional to say the least. Hildegard went against the medieval idea that women were more sexual than men, instead advocating that women's pleasure was like the warmth of the sun while men suffered from an uncontrollable fire.¹² Without disregarding the cultural norms, she attempted to alter the commonly held attitude regarding gender during the middle ages.

However, Hildegard's life offers a strange contradiction. Besides writing herbal and medical treatises, she was the abbess of a German convent and moreover, a brilliant composer. She wielded great power, communicated with ecclesiastical leaders, and read and wrote in the intellectual language of Latin. Paradoxically, Hildegard was deeply absorbed in church doctrine, which was responsible for the misogynistic sentiments that would eventually be used as validation in the stamping out of women healers in the coming centuries. Her belief in the weakness of women was used as justification to

¹¹ Ibid., 56.

¹² Martha Brozyna, ed., *Gender and Sexuality in the Middle Ages: A Medieval Source Documents Reader* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland and Company, Inc. 2005), 85.

eradicate many pious women healers.¹³ The agency Hildegard enjoyed was not tolerated in the coming centuries and women healers would find it problematic to achieve such status and freedom.

After a succinct survey of the historical scholarship regarding medieval women healers, the next chapter moves to Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, illuminating societal mores and the context in which the systematic eradication of women healers took place. Subsequently, a brief survey of the misogynistic doctrine of the Christian Church is reviewed and its responsibility for the problematic gender constructs at work during this period is demonstrated. The process of devolution of women from healers to witches is examined in chapter four, followed by a brief conclusion as to the causative factors in the grievous destruction of ancient healing knowledge and the deaths of many innocent women.

For the most part historians in the modern era, following their predecessors, wrote about women in history in brief and compensative chapters, if at all. Throughout history, women have been either disregarded completely or only mentioned if their accomplishments were deemed exceptional. As has been established previously, women are a challenging subject of historical research. Regrettably, the historical record offers very little documentation to a significant portion of the population; for the most part, this is true for all of history. However the advent of the feminist movement during the sixties

¹³ Achterberg, 58.

shattered this status quo.¹⁴ From the arduous work of a few innovative historians came a new field of study. Women's history grew from these efforts and today the field is well established and continues to develop.

This historiography examines a few selected works from 1973 and 2007 germane to the topic of women healers in the middle ages, thereby illustrating the need to reevaluate woman's role as healer in the late middle ages. This realm is best surveyed through two distinct historical topics. First, this survey will focus on books that evaluate the multifaceted lives of women in the middle ages, which include healers. Second, the historiography appraises works pertaining to "witches" that deal with wise women and healers. Both topics offer insight for medieval historians trying to understand the realm of healers, yet neither clearly illuminates that realm or the gravity of the societal impact this shift would create. Rather, we see the dearth of scholarship pertaining to the medieval healer exclusively and a need to reevaluate the history of medieval healers.

Medieval women are an established topic of historical research. Books evaluating women specifically are generally broad and problematic as it is difficult to capture all aspects of one half of the medieval population, especially when said research attempts to look at a large geographical area like all of western Europe or a large time period like one thousand years. A postmodern approach shifted historical research of women specifically

¹⁴ The application of the term "feminist" used throughout this historiography is problematic as there is no simple or monolithic definition. Therefore, "feminist" shall be understood as one who follows or believes in the theory of the political, economic, and social equality of the sexes or one who is involved in organized activity on behalf of women's rights and interests. (Merriam Webster Dictionary) There are many variations of feminist theory that will not be discussed in detail as they are deserving of a study of their own.

towards more objective studies based on gender. These broad investigations are especially useful in the learning process, as an expansive overview is helpful to the budding historian, yet they often misrepresent some significant elements of the medieval woman's life, by and large.

Shulamith Shahar, with her book *Fourth Estate: A History of Women in the Middle Ages*, claims that women of this period are best seen as a fourth societal group outside “worshippers, warriors, and workers.”¹⁵ The book examines women by classifying them in societal groups familiar to the middle ages however outside of society. The immense scope of the book suggests that generalizations are inevitable; Shahar attempts to survey the lives of all the women of Europe, excluding Scotland and Scandinavia. The significance the chronology of the survey is that it is during this period that there is a discernable deterioration in the status of women in many parts of Europe. As time passed, women lost power, and by the high middle ages, women were more powerless than they had been in the early middle ages.

Shahar points out the array of occupations held by townswomen during the medieval period, asserting that women worked in many aspects of medieval commerce. Only a few guilded professions like woodcutting and house building excluded women entirely. However, this again contradicts the author's overarching thesis, which states that women should be seen as a fourth group outside of medieval society as a whole. For, if as the author suggests, “the role of women in medieval towns was considerable,”¹⁶ the

¹⁵ Shulamith Shahar, *The Fourth Estate: A History of Women in the Middle Ages*, (New York: Routledge, 1983), 1.

¹⁶ Shahar, 189.

inherent implication is that women were not completely outside of societal groupings and therefore should be seen in their own fourth estate. The author hardly discusses female herbalists, whose profession was essential to medieval society. She asserts that women were not permitted to practice medicine after the rise of the medieval university system around the twelfth century. Yet the author neglects to point out that before the rise of academic medicine it was women, as healers and midwives, who commonly held curative knowledge and orally passed that knowledge to subsequent generations. Shahar's book influenced much of the scholarship that follows.

Another author who offers a survey of European women is Helen Jewell, who has examined women's varied societal roles during the medieval period. The first of her two-part series is titled *Women in Dark Age and Early Medieval Europe c. 500-1200*. The author demonstrates throughout the text that although some facets of women's societal roles transcend political territories in Europe, their lives were complex and varied geographically. Her style is erratic and the book lacks structure, which lends to confusion in an already complex undertaking such as surveying all the women of Europe in the early middle ages in less than two hundred pages. Jewell's chapters are short which should lend to clarity in her prose but instead the chapters often end without segues and coherent conclusions, thereby losing its reader in cluttered facts. Throughout the text there are many sudden shifts, drawing heavily on archeological, archival and legal record, always leading to substantiation of the author's thesis that geography greatly influenced the various and disparate roles held by women in early medieval Europe.

An example of the author's tendency to abruptly change topic is evident in Jewell's treatment of women in rural communities. She points out the lack of evidence regarding rural women's lives and then unexplainably goes on to elucidate medieval population growth and reduction at some length. This kind of surplus information continues to be injected into the book's prose without germane connections to the information being presented. This chapter covering women in rural Europe is a point of bewilderment. The author states that ninety percent of the population of Europe fall under this sub-section.¹⁷ However, there is no mention of any discernable differences in this significant population's geographical diversity as the author's thesis suggests. Moreover, in the rural setting, healers were paramount to society and there is no mention of this important role held by women for the most part.

Moreover, Jewell discusses two significant points in relation to women's agency in the early middle ages that seem to counter her thesis. First, the author employs references to Judeo-Christian ideology. She uses numerous examples from the Old Testament that accentuate negative images of women but avoids discussing some of the more positive representations of the female archetype such as woman as Divine Wisdom in represented in Proverbs.¹⁸ Historians can skew a collection of evidence to argue any position depending on what evidence is offered. In using the Christian Bible as a historical source, Jewell has provided fodder to oppose her argument as the bible itself was read and disseminated across Europe. Christianity was the single most unifying force

¹⁷ Helen Jewell, *Women in Dark Ages and Early Medieval Europe c. 500-1200*, (New York: Macmillan, 2007), 47.

¹⁸ Proverbs 8:22-31

in European society. Its influence on women's societal standing across political or geographical boundaries is immeasurable.

The author claims that of the women covered in the last chapter, the most surprising case is Hrotsvit of Gandersheim. A canoness by day and a dramatist by night, Hrotsvit was extraordinarily productive, writing "six plays, eight sacred legends, two epics, one in praise of Otto the Great and one on the history of Gandersheim itself, three long prose prefaces, and many letters and short works."¹⁹ Jewell suggests Hrotsvit's plays had a "distinct cleverness about the pieces, and a good deal of sex inversion, which lets us see that this canoness could see perfectly clearly the traditional misogyny around her and challenge it with boldness and humour."²⁰ Jewell also notes that Hrotsvit had a remarkable knowledge of classical writers such as Virgil and Ovid. However, the author neglects to address the requisite element that connects almost every woman mentioned in this chapter, that being the protection offered by the church itself. These women were allowed to be educated and produce literary works because they were first and foremost ecclesiastical members. There is very little historical evidence of erudite women outside of the church from the early middle ages; this is simply a case of a distorted historical record.²¹ Unfortunately, *Women in Dark Age and Early Medieval Europe c. 500-1200* offers little to the compendium of scholarship to combat this distortion.

While many medieval historians have focused their research on the female population, in recent years authors have demonstrated the value of studying gender issues

¹⁹ Ibid., 142.

²⁰ Ibid., 143.

²¹ In Chapter 2, Chaucer's tales will do a good job of illustrating the many skilled female healers paramount to Medieval survival, unfortunately missing from the historical record.

as a whole, rather than singling out women as a separate group. Joan Cadden offers *Meanings of Sex Difference in the Middle Ages: Medicine, Science, and Culture*, in which she examines the social gender constructs which can be understood from a survey of existing medical and natural philosophical treatises of the medieval period. The author's balanced research and original insight provide clear understanding of medieval gender constructs, specifically through examining what people believed about such questions as "where do babies come from" and "how is sexual pleasure experienced by men and women."²² Cadden illustrates the cultural impact that the writings of medical and scientific treatise disseminated between the eleventh and fourteenth century.

Cadden details the precursors to medieval thought regarding sexuality. The author discusses ancient philosophers such as Plato, Aristotle, and Galen. She examines the beliefs that each man held regarding sexuality and reproduction shows how these ideas would greatly influence the medical and natural philosophical ideas about sexuality. Theories abounded on the nature of men and women at this time, and the theories proposed by ancient philosophers would have continued impact during the medieval era.

The author goes on to discuss the intellectual shift that took place during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries from monastic learning to the universities and how this shift created an influx of ancient medical and natural philosophical text being translated completely and precisely rather than in excerpts as has been the approach thus far. Cadden also points to the significance of *The Cannon of Medicine* written by Avicenna and then translated and disseminated throughout western Europe. This text,

²² Joan Cadden, *Meanings of Sex Difference in the Middle Ages: Medicine, Science, and Culture*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 2.

originally written in Arabic at the beginning of the eleventh century, drew from both the ancient philosophers and Arabic medical principles, making it profoundly important to sexual understanding during this era.

Cadden focuses on themes within the medical scientific theories regarding sexuality and explicates from them the gendered disparity of the time. Examining such topics as sterility and virginity, Cadden illustrates the hypocrisy that abounded during the middle ages. For example, while the medical treatises of the time clearly espouse that it is from the man's semen alone that the child is formed, the cultural responsibility for conception lay on the woman.²³ The author notes that in a few cases, the man held the responsibility for sterility, but only in the situation of documented impotence. Cadden employs the medieval double standard for women and men in regards to virginity as an example of manifest misogyny, which of course endures in our present culture. The author also discusses the medical documents on the topic of sexual positions, and points out that the woman on top during sex was seen as usurpation and strongly discouraged. Taken thematically, the documents included in Cadden's survey illustrate medieval notions regarding gender. Such medical texts were eventually propagated as justification for the witch-craze that spread like fire across Europe.

Gender and Sexuality in the Middle Ages, edited by Martha Brozyna, is a primary source collection which presents diverse depictions of the social constructs of gender and sexuality throughout the middle ages. The editor employs a cross-disciplinary selection of documents, including religious texts, literature, and laws, in an effort to understand what

²³ Ibid., 240.

it meant to be a man or a woman during this historical period. What makes the compilation so unique is its expansive scope, thus illustrating the diverse cultural tapestry evident during this time period.

The section regarding biology, medicine and science is by far the most pertinent section of the book to this research. Brozyna includes medieval remedies for impotence, a concoction comprised of pulverized dried hedgehog's penis and regaining the appearance of chastity by applying leaches to the vaginal area, practices which are so bizarre, they seem fictitious.²⁴ There is a significant segment of text which considers how one can confirm the virginity of the betrothed woman, substantiating the magnitude of this stricture for men during the middle ages. It is also noteworthy that in this section, the only author that finds female pleasure an important subject worthy of investigation is a woman, Hildegard of Bingen.

In the section titled witchcraft and heresy, Brozyna includes some of the most infamous works on the subject, including *Summa Theologica* and *Malleus Maleficarum*; both of these texts were riddled with misogynistic sentiment and both were highly influential in the persecution of thousands of women in centuries to come. The sources dealing with heresy detail men and women who were supposedly involved in pagan rituals. These texts depict heretics as licentious fornicators when in fact both the Manichaeans and Cathars were committed to chastity. There are many congruencies that can be made between these persecuted Christian sects and the women persecuted as witches.

²⁴ Brozyna, 162-164.

The topic of healers is discussed in much of the research pertaining to witches. It is through the labeling of healers as witches that powerful men recast these once revered women within medieval society. This inclusion of healers in scholarship regarding witches is well established. Neither the healer, nor any other medieval woman actually took part in witchcraft practices as such; each and every one was wrongfully persecuted. Therefore, a history written of witches is, in many ways, analogous to scholarship pertaining to healers.

Robin Briggs, in his book *Witches and Neighbors: The Social and Cultural Context of European Witchcraft*, suggests that the witchcraft movement was propagated by the laity, the neighbors of the victims. The author illustrates his point well however, he downplays the role of the authorities in the persecution of witches, namely the church and secular powers. These authoritative men used their power to influence the laity. Everlasting damnation consumed the impressionable, and this fear acted on. Conversely, Briggs suggests that children played a larger role in the persecutions, pointing out that children's testimony was often employed as damning evidence in trial records.

Healers are discussed only briefly, included in a chapter regarding "the gendering of witchcraft." The author notes that healing was a significant way for medieval women to support themselves. He states, "There was a natural extension from women's responsibility for the health of their own household to wider medical activity."²⁵ He purports that while there is evidence of misogyny in the persecution of female healers, it was more a case of the male medical profession attempting to subdue their female

²⁵ Robin Briggs, *Witches and Neighbors: The Social and Cultural Context of European Witchcraft*, (New York: Penguin Group, 1996), 277.

competition. However, women were not persecuted by groups of doctors, but groups of powerful men from both church and state institutions.

The author successfully illustrates throughout the text that ordinary grievances were deflected into blame and that victims of the persecution were scapegoats for ordinary strife. Briggs illuminates the difficult position midwives held as medieval infant mortality was high, and often these women would be blamed for these unfortunate events. Furthermore, they were also accused of propagating infidelity and causing the death of the mother during childbirth. Yet, he suggests that there is little evidence that midwives were persecuted along with healers. His generalization of the European situation, based on trial records from a few sporadic cites, namely Nancy, Epinal, and Lorraine, cannot represent all of Europe. Still, the book offers a great deal of useful information through trial accounts used as evidence.

Like Briggs, Anne Llwellyn Barstow's research relies heavily on trial records to establish the connection between the brutal witch hunts and gender. *Witchcraze: a New History of the European Witch Hunts* discusses healers in an auxiliary sense. In this paramount work, the author insists that the two hundred year period, between 1560 and 1760, saw a mad eruption of brutality and violence against women and should be seen collectively as a witch craze. Barstow suggests that the public spectacles of witchcraft trials struck fear into the medieval populace. In these trials, women were mercilessly tortured and the author claims that this would have had an immense impact on the construct of gender, for both men and women. Barstow proposes that both sexes would have been horrified, wondering what: "the executioner would do next to the half naked

woman. When he reached for his knife, took one of Anna's breasts in his hand, cut off the flesh, plunged the bloody nipple between her lips."²⁶ The author uses this graphic depiction to establish the connection between fear and power influencing the witch hunts.

Barstow also discusses the societal role healers had in the middle ages, albeit briefly. The author suggests that as the restrictions placed on women laborers increased, the options available to women dwindled, thereby forcing many women to support their families through the occupations of diviner, healer, and midwife. Barstow illustrates all three roles overlapped and incorporated incantation, prayers, and charms. She notes the blending of ancient healing knowledge with Christian liturgy: "In order for herbs to be efficacious, as one gathered them one must say five Lord's Prayers, five Hail Mary's and the Creed. Faith in verbal formulae was strong."²⁷ The inclusion of Christian liturgy is problematic. Healing was a pious activity and simply cannot be propagated as devil-worship.

The author points out healers doubled as village counselors, a medieval therapist, if you will. Her role within the village gave her much prestige and power as she not only offered healing but also comfort. Barstow states "Not only the healers-diviners, but also their followers, believed that what they were doing was good and necessary."²⁸ However, this prestigious position soon became precarious. The author tells of Nicolaea, who was beaten until she agreed to cure the castellan's wife. When she rid the woman of her disease, she was burned to death as "she proved that she had the power of a witch for

²⁶ Barstow, 150.

²⁷ Ibid., 114.

²⁸ Ibid., 117.

‘such sicknesses could hardly be cured or assuaged except by the witch who caused them’.”²⁹ Barstow exposes the dilemma healers found themselves in, not only for the accuracy of its facts, but also for the harsh reality it offers.

Woman as Healer is an important addition to a compendium of the history regarding medieval healers. As a student of psychology, author Jeanne Achterberg offers fresh insight women’s historical role in the curative arts. Written almost twenty years ago, it remains a significant addition to scholarly research dealing with the subject of healing and gender. The book traces healing from ancient Mesopotamia to the modern day, illustrating its association to the spiritual and the feminine aspects of society. The author also demonstrates the profound connection between the cosmology of particular society to the women’s social order within that society.

Achterberg deals with the development of women’s healing professions, specifically midwifery and nursing. In a brief chapter, the author covers four centuries of midwifery on two continents. Women were excluded from the universities that controlled medical degrees. The only sanctioned role for women at this time became as midwife. Achterberg contends that “midwifery was a less-than-honorable profession. Birthing was regarded as objectionable, private and nasty business.”³⁰ This role was only acceptable for women, as their gender was seen as ignorant and unsophisticated. Society at this time believed that men alone were able to understand the science of medicine.

Throughout the text the author consistently returns to the important connection between society’s cosmology and women’s status. This argument is cemented in every

²⁹ Nicholas Remy, quoted in *Ibid.*, 123.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 119.

chapter and is integral to Achterberg's thesis. She states "At the very dawn of humankind, the human female was regarded as a prodigious source of wisdom and power. She could bring life and save life, and therefore was the healer of sick bodies and wandering souls."³¹ Then the author points out that "as cultures moved to the final stages of monotheism, every institution of society became patriarchal in form."³² Through the text, the author continues to recall this connection, especially when discussing the Christian Church.

The works that have been surveyed offer insight into what is successful and what has failed. The research pertaining to women and gender in medieval society do not accurately represent the significance of the healer role. Studies dedicated to witches do a better job of accurately representing reality; however, they are simplistic or one-dimensional. Scholars that attempt to find an uncomplicated cause inevitably fall short of their goals. The devaluation of woman healers is best surveyed by the interweaving of the threads of medieval culture with Christian misogyny, which generated a nefarious tapestry depicting an ardent seizure of wealth and authority.

³¹ Ibid., 9.

³² Ibid., 11.

Chapter 2

CHAUCEUR AND MEDIEVAL SOCIAL CONTEXT

As female healers have been largely excluded from the historical record, one is left with scant reliable information regarding their lives and practices. However, Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* presents representatives from all classes and both genders. There are many clever female characters represented and many possess the knowledge of herbs and healing. Medieval historians wishing to give a voice the wise women dedicated to healing the masses must employ alternative sources to achieve a more comprehensive representation. Hayden White's theory demonstrates the importance of one's facility to blur the lines between history and literature in order to obtain a clearer view of both.

The historical value of contemporaneous literature is that it sheds light on subjects for which there is a paucity of evidence. *The Canterbury Tales*, written in the fourteenth century, gives the reader information regarding the nuances of life that historical texts have disregarded, helping to elucidate the social context of this historical investigation. In recent years, numerous historians have used *The Canterbury Tales* for insight into the cultural framework of the middle ages. The significance of this particular literary work is that through deep textual analysis, it clarifies the important role held by medieval healers and demonstrates the malignant way in which these women were abused.

Western literary theory firmly established its foundations from Plato until the present, with every theorist building on the theorists before them in an effort to gain an understanding of what the word 'literature' signifies and how its corresponding text

should be studied. In the twentieth century Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, founder of the structuralist theory, and the method of deconstruction espoused by Jacques Derrida advanced literary theory outside its traditional boundaries. As the priority of the study of language flowed out of the English department, it expanded into the entirety of arts and letters, each department co-opting it for its own purposes. Literary critics had already established the practice of incorporating an investigation of the historical context of a text into their criticisms. However, this “Linguistic Turn” had a profound impact on how one studies history.

Consequently, historian Hayden White did not establish an original theory in his significant book, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth Century Europe*, but he applied literary analysis, already firmly established, to historical research. This position is by no means a radical departure in the understanding of literature or language. White’s theory has important implications for the understanding of history, nevertheless. He surveys the works of prominent historians and philosophers of the 1800’s such as Ranke, Tocqueville, Marx, and Nietzsche, evaluating their works as narrative and classifying them into one of four types of literary tropes. These tropes: emplotment, argument, ideology, and poetic structure, were originally defined by Northrop Frye, who states, “when a historian’s scheme gets to a certain point of comprehensiveness it becomes mythical in shape, and so approaches the poetic in

structure.”³³ White applies literary theory to history, pushing the confines of history by offering historians new tools and sources to employ in their research.

White blurs the line between literature and history, directly addressing the narrative aspects of historical prose. He incorporates Michel Foucault’s theories on power, structure, and discourse, which assert that history is the negotiation of relationships of power and therefore not absolute, disputing history’s claim to a place among the sciences.³⁴ The transitory nature of meaning defined by Foucault is significant to White’s theory as it establishes the postulation that there are no fixed meanings of words and texts available for reflection. As Foucault, building on the theories of Saussure and Derrida, gave light to the transitory nature of language, semiotic investigations have been incorporated within current historical research. This wedding of history to literary theory, according to White:

would only detract from it (history) if we were to believe that literature did not teach us anything about reality, but was a product of an imagination which was not of this world but of some other, inhuman one. In my view, we experience the fictionalization of history for the same reason that we experience great fiction as an illumination of a world that we inhabit.³⁵

The fictionalization of history reiterates the claim that there is a danger for historical research to descend into reductionism, condensing it into mere names, dates and places.

White further argues, “There has been a reluctance to consider historical narratives as

³³ Northrop Frye quoted in Hayden White, “The Historical Text as Literary Artifact,” in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, ed. Vincent B. Leitch (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2000), 1713.

³⁴ Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth Century Europe*, (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1974), 2.

³⁵ White, “The Historical Text as Literary Artifact,” 1728.

what they most manifestly are: verbal fictions.”³⁶ White undermines history’s traditional power base by threatening the tenuous connection between historiography and authenticity. Likewise, White states, “the different kinds of historical interpretations that we have of the same set of events, such as the French Revolution as interpreted by Michelet, Toqueville, Taine, and others are little more than projections of the linguistic protocols that these historians used to pre-figure that set of events prior to writing their narratives of it.”³⁷ Chaucer’s narrative is a fiction, yet it offers a more accurate and balanced depiction of medieval culture than historical records of the time. Historians gain a broader perspective by incorporating contemporaneous fiction into their research, especially when there is little unbiased historical record available, as is the case of medieval healers.

A piece of text may have been written for the purpose of history and can be read as literature, or a literary piece can be read for its historical significance. Chaucer might not have had any idea when he wrote *The Canterbury Tales* his manuscript captured the social context of the medieval period, thereby offering a significant resource to modern social historians. Renowned scholar Terry Eagleton asserts that “Some texts are born literary, some achieve literariness, and some have literariness thrust upon them.”³⁸ The brilliant way in which Chaucer’s literary text captured the historical environment through his characters offers remarkable historical insight into medieval culture and the enigmatic healers significant to this study.

³⁶ Ibid., 1713.

³⁷ White, “The Historical Text as Literary Artifact,” 1728.

³⁸ Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 8.

White explores the blending of literary theory to history as a way of repairing what has been fragmented. Blurring the lines between literature and history on occasion, and crossing the informal boundaries between disciplines, brings insightful connections and fresh perspective. A new way of thinking must be embraced in order to offer relevant historical examinations in this universal age. Hayden White, in discussing the future of history, states:

We are in a moment of profound historical transition, as we move from national and regional historiography through the necessity of conceptualizing a "world history" on to the more difficult problem of historicizing an emergent "global" culture. If historical thinking remains wedded to the idea that history can only be a history of nations and the relations among them, then historical thinking will not be able to contribute to current questions that have to do with politics, economics, warfare, culture, and society in "a global age." Moreover, if historians remain unable or unwilling to try to historicize the emergent global ecumene, they will confirm that history itself is a Western invention that is primarily of service to the Western national state system and, as such, pure ideology rather than a science.³⁹

History, and the historians that write it, benefit by incorporating literature into their research. This confirms White's idea of blending the two disciplines to create a more complete view of the relevant society in question. Chaucer went beyond the distorted historical record of his time, which only puts forward the ideology of the dominant authoritative figures. His work is a vital source for the underrepresented peasant class and the healers that served them.

In general, when medieval works are consulted as a purely historical source, they are used in addressing a distinct social class, specifically the upper nobility, while a host

³⁹ In communiqué via email, when discussing the future of history, White to McPhee. 3/16/2007.

of peasants, barbs, and magicians play supporting roles. The illumination of these medieval characters against the aristocratic backdrop of courtly romances and *chason de geste*s suggests a distinction between history and culture, rather than a more accurate view of the social relationship which existed. *The Canterbury Tales* successfully captures that essential relationship lost to historians.

Chaucer's manuscript starts out on a mild day in April with a group of pilgrims traveling from London to Canterbury to visit the tomb of St. Thomas Becket. To keep entertained while making the journey, the group decides to have a contest to see who can tell the best tale. Even though a collection of stories, or narrative epic, was an established genre of his day, Chaucer wrote within the unique framework of a pilgrimage. He linked the stories of the diverse group of pilgrims into a broader reflection of society, gender and expression. The tales represent medieval women in both a positive and negative manner. Chaucer includes women who are prudent and benevolent as well as women who are malevolent and untrustworthy. Many stories are left unfinished or half told and readers are left to draw their own conclusions. The pilgrims never reach Canterbury, nor return to London and the winner is never announced. The tales are varied in topic and opinion and many offer insight into the medieval attitudes held by women and toward women.

Scholars have often spoken of the cultural movement between the fourteenth and early sixteenth century known as the renaissance, in which medieval society began to embrace a new reverence for the classical Greek and Roman ideals. This humanistic movement is traditionally attributed to having started in Italy slowly spreading west across Europe and then north, finally reaching the British Isles. Historians usually speak

of this process as a gradual one that is not fully evident in England until the late fifteenth century. However, this development is already evident in *The Canterbury Tales* which has been dated to the last half of the fourteenth century. Every story has elements recalling ancient heroes and practices. Many tales are set in ancient Greece or Troy and revolve around their heroes whose names have been recorded in history and myth, revealing an aura of nostalgia for the past already permeating the medieval collective consciousness.

The author's framework of the pilgrimage to Canterbury lends to an unmistakable religious theme. Each story has either obvious or obscure Christian dogma woven into the narrative; several contain quotes from and references to both scripture and the doctrine of church fathers. As evidenced in *The Canterbury Tales*, Christianity structured medieval society. Even the concept of time was signaled by the ringing of the church bells. In this period, the Christian Church was subject to much criticism due to notorious pecuniary practices and moral lapse among some members of the clergy. However, this did not stop those corrupt in clergy from victimizing the weaker members of medieval society, which generally included women.

Unique among extant literary sources, *The Canterbury Tales* is one of the few works that comments on the inequality of women within medieval society. In the format of relating a tale, the genre allows for an inclusion of scandalous subjects, which were by and large culturally unacceptable. For instance, even women writers such as Hildegard of Bingen and Christine de Pisan were unable, or unwilling, to comment so directly on the

medieval gender discrimination that Chaucer so eloquently reveals. Moreover, the female writers' gender dictated specific acceptable topics for the content of their writing.

In *The Canterbury Tales*, the wife of Bath makes several statements that illustrate precise views of her own gender's position within western European society. First, she echoes the words of Paul in the New Testament, succinctly stating: "It is better to marry than to burn."⁴⁰ Her words illustrate the medieval fear that sexual relations outside of marriage would send one straight to the fires of hell.⁴¹ The Christian Church deemed any sexual relation, other than for procreative purpose, a dire sin. This aspect of fear based control and sexual repression within western European Christianity reached its apex during the middle ages. This form of repression, a major factor that led to the witch hunts of the late medieval and early modern period, is aimed at controlling women's agency. The wife of Bath goes on to discuss the blame heaped onto the female gender by ecclesiastics: "For take my word for it, there is no libel on women that the clergy will not paint, / Except when writing of a woman-saint."⁴² Church fathers such as St. Augustine of Hippo and St. Thomas Aquinas had great influence on medieval society. Their misogynistic texts will be discussed further in the next chapter. Nevertheless, the condemnation of women that the wife of Bath bemoans was utilized as justification for the burning of many healers as witches throughout Europe.

Interestingly, one of the passages from *The Canterbury Tales* regarding the healer role that many women held in medieval Europe comes from an animal. The *Nun's*

⁴⁰ Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*, trans. by Nevil Coghill (New York: Penguin Books, 1951), 260.

⁴¹ Chaucer capitalizes hell, I have chosen not to.

⁴² Chaucer, 276-277.

Priest's Tale tells of Pertelote, who is in fact a chicken, living near the small cottage of a widow. When Chanticleer, the cock, comes down with illness, it is the voice of Pertelote which reveals interesting information regarding medieval society. She states:

For the love of God do take some laxative / Upon my soul that's
the advice to give / For melancholy choler; let me urge / You free
yourself from vapours with a purge. / And that you may have no
excuse to tarry / By saying this town has no apothecary, / I shall
myself instruct you and prescribe / Herbs that will cure all
vapours of that tribe, / Herbs from our very farmyard! You will
find / Their natural property is to unbind⁴³

This excerpt illuminates a very important point. Women carried the ancient knowledge of herbs and their healing powers. Pertelote points out her familiarization with the herbs and that they are available locally. This was of great importance as she notes that a cure was accessible for anyone with knowledge of the flora and fauna in their own local area. She goes on to list the herbs that she is prescribing, "Centaury, fumitory, caper-spurge / And hellebore will make a splendid purge; / And then there's laurel too and blackthorn berry, / Ground-ivy too that makes our yard so merry."⁴⁴ In this passage Chaucer demonstrates the ability of the local women healers through their knowledge of the previously mentioned herbs, which have been proven to have tremendous purgative effects.

There are many examples of actual female healers in *The Canterbury Tales*. *The Squire's Tale* tells of a noble princess named Canace who had the knowledge of curative herbal remedies. The story takes place in the land of Tartary. Like *The Nun's Priest's Tale*, this story revolves around a sick bird. The tale tells of a badly wounded falcon

⁴³ Ibid., 217-218.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 218.

which falls from the sky while the princess is on a walk by herself in the forest. After a bit of interspecies communication, the princess offers to heal the injured bird: “Great God of nature, help me so to do! / I shall find herbs enough and salves for you / To heal your wounds and quickly if you will. / The falcon made a shriek more piteous still.”⁴⁵ The first line of this passage is compelling; rather than invoking the customary God almighty, etc., the princess calls for assistance from the “Great God of nature.” Traditionally, Christians pray to the virgin mother Mary for healing miracles. This appeal to the great spirit of nature reveals the undercurrent of pagan ritual which was still infused in the realm of healing, within medieval society. This excerpt, like the tale of Pertelote, discusses the ability of a woman to recognize and harvest indigenous herbs.

The Squire’s Tale offers another example of Canace’s vast herbal knowledge, stating, “Of every rooted grass that grows on earth / She shall have knowledge too and test its worth / In sickness, or on wounds, however wide.”⁴⁶ Rather than tout the negative qualities attributed to the female gender, this fable focuses on the generous and nurturing nature of women; a viewpoint seldom espoused at this time in history. Again, this is made clear in the passage “Canace bore her homeward in her lap; / In softest plasters she began to wrap / The falcon’s wounds that her own beak had torn, / And Canace went delving eve and morn / For herbs out of the ground; new salves she made / From precious grasses of the finest shade / To heal her hawk, indeed both day and night / She lavished

⁴⁵ Ibid., 401.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 393.

on her all the care she might”.⁴⁷ Women healers nurtured those who were ill and gained knowledge through empirical method.

The character Griselda, a daughter of the poorest of the poor, also had the knowledge to collect local healing herbs as offered in *The Clerk’s Tale*. “When she came homeward she would bring / Roots, herbs and other grasses to the croft”.⁴⁸ Evidenced throughout *The Canterbury Tales*, women of all strata, from princess to pauper, knew the healing powers of the indigenous herbs and grasses. Medieval society believed that one’s character was directly connected to the class they were born to and Chaucer’s portrayal of the benignity of Griselda directly opposed this widely held view.

Chaucer, while representing most women as patient, intelligent, and nurturing, also offers a few examples of the accustomed medieval sentiment. “Just look what cunning tricks and subtleties / There are in woman! Busy little bees / They are, deceiving silly men like us!”⁴⁹ Here the Host speaks of woman as conniving and devious. The whole gender is grouped together with the use of “woman” rather than some or a few women. Interestingly, the standard gender power structure is shifted in the above excerpt. Women are depicted as vicious stinging insects while men are portrayed as defenseless as children. In reality, medieval women were living under a dreadfully patriarchal society in which they were completely dependent on the men in their lives, and holistically without recourse. The protest of the wife of Bath represents the reality women faced in medieval society.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 406.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 327.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 388.

Immediately after *The Wife of Bath's Tale*, in which, coincidentally, the main character laments the gender inequality from a woman's view, the text offers a particularly misogynist narrative. *The Friar's Tale* is about a bishop with a penchant for burning witches and other enemies of the church. Chaucer portrays the sordid corruption going on within the clergy and their propensity to attack the weakest members of society, in this case a poor widow. "For those whose tithes and offerings were small / Were made to sing the saddest song of all".⁵⁰ The Friar tells of a crooked Summoner, employed by the bishop to handle his dirty work of bribery, fraud, and sadism. The Summoner, with the help of a band of spies, exacts as much money as he can from the people within his jurisdiction, usually persecuting "some obscure, uneducated sot".⁵¹ The Friar's Tale, more than any other, illustrates the wholly unequal circumstances within the holy faith, between rich and poor, man and woman, educated and uneducated.

At the onset of the tale, the Summoner rides out to harass "a poor old fiddle of the widow tribe" who he plans to extort.⁵² At the beginning, the author makes clear the magnitude of the Summoner's egregious activities. "He knew so much of bribery and blackmail I should be two years telling you the tale."⁵³ On the way to force the widow to pay a false fine for a fictitious charge of fornication, the Summoner meets a yeoman, who offers to ride with him. The Summoner acts as if he is a bailiff in order to conceal his nefarious mission of corruption and cavorting, and the yeoman lies and says that he too is a bailiff. Soon after the yeoman reveals that he is actually a demon from hell which does

⁵⁰ Ibid., 294.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid., 295.

⁵³ Ibid.

not fluster the Summoner in the slightest. In fact, the Summoner launches into questioning the demon on his ability to shape-shift and other sinister powers. Rather than oppose the demon as a virtuous man of God should, the Summoner seeks advice and approval from him. He brags to his new acquaintance, “There’s an old fiddle here, an ancient wreck, / Dear brother, who would rather break her neck / Than lose a penny of her goods. ... But if she doesn’t pay she’ll face the court. / And yet, God knows there’s nothing to report, / She has no vices. But as you failed just now / To earn your keep, I’d like to show you how.”⁵⁴ There was no shame in the plunder of money or goods; not even a virtuous old crone was safe from the corrupt thieves in the clergy.

In their dialectic the fiend declares, “I ride on business and have so far thriven / By taking anything that / I am given. That is the sum of all my revenue. / You seem to have the same objective too, / You’re out for wealth, acquired no matter how, and so with me. I’ll go a-riding now.”⁵⁵ Here the fiend or demon points out the lucid connection he has with the Summoner, each with only himself and his own profit in mind. A very significant detail of this passage lies in this woman’s age. Older women and widows were often targets during the witch craze. This passage also shows the commonplace practice of phony indictments so prevalent in the medieval period. The woman, simply because she has no way to defend herself, is the target of the Summoner. A widow or older woman who used their wisdom of healing within their communities often became innocent victims of the witch craze.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 301.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 297.

In the end, his greed is the Summoner's undoing. He forces the feeble widow to pay a fee by threatening to arrest her and drag her on an arduous trip to the archdeacon's court to answer for the false allegation. Extortion was indeed typical of this period of history; however, as such contemptible actions are clandestine in nature, they are rarely documented in historical text. *The Canterbury Tales* are able to capture an enigmatic and endemic societal scourge that has been left out of the historical record. This passage reveals how the power held by men of the church was sometimes abused. The widow cries for mercy and explains that she will certainly die if forced to make such a journey. When she reveals that she has no money to extort, the greedy Summoner settles for her new frying pan. The frustrated old woman emphatically refutes her guilt, "'You lie!' she said. 'On my salvation! What? / Correction? Whether as a widow or as a wife / I've never had a summons in all my life; / I never cuckolded my poor old man! / And as for you and for your frying-pan / The hairiest, blackest devil out of Hell / Carry you off and take the pan as well.'"⁵⁶ The widow curses the Summoner to be banished to hell if he does not rescind his fallacious charge. He refuses to repent and the demon carries him and the frying pan down to hell, "where summoners have a special shelf."⁵⁷ There are two points to be considered from this last passage. First, cursing someone who had insulted or offended was commonplace in medieval society. In many cases, curses made by women, especially from women on the outskirts of society like older women and widows, were used as proof of witch-craft. Second, when it is made known that the old

⁵⁶ Ibid., 302.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

woman has no money to pilfer, the Summoner takes her only cooking pan; the epitome of greed.

Chaucer cleverly places criticism of the church on to a character from within the church, which was certainly true for the time. Many Christians, both clergy and common folk called for reform within the church for similar abuses of power to those of the Summoner. The Friar was a member of one of the mendicant orders. Monks like the early Franciscans lived in poverty and dedicated their lives to preaching and caring for peasants. The corruption and greed of some of the church leaders offended the Friar's sense of piety. This corruption is best exemplified by the oppression and brutality executed against defenseless women who were trying to survive whilst healing their families and neighbors. Like the Friar, Cornelius Loos and Friedrich von Spee, were both clergy members and courageous opponents of the impure actions and corruption they observed within the church.⁵⁸

⁵⁸ These men are discussed further in Chapter 4.

Chapter 3

THE ROOTS OF MEDIEVAL MISOGYNY

In order to gain insight into the realm of medieval healers and why they were systematically exterminated in the late middle ages and early modern period, it is important to understand the gender constructs operating at that time. Outside of the church, healing and midwifery were occupations largely held by women.⁵⁹ The persecution of healers was for the most part the persecution of women and the justification for this persecution was established by the misogynistic doctrine of the Christian Church.

Medieval women lived in a society completely saturated with Christianity. There was no separate religious realm in the middle ages. Religion pervaded every aspect of medieval life. Christian doctrine as passed on by literate priests prescribed how one ate, worked, slept, and even suggested correct action in private moments (the only acceptable position for sexual intercourse was of course missionary). Therefore, discourse written by Christian scholars regarding women had a huge impact on women's societal position. Historian Howard Bloch argues:

So persistent is the discourse of misogyny- from the earliest church fathers to Chaucer- that the uniformity of its terms furnishes an important link between the middle ages and the present and renders the topic compelling because such terms still govern (consciously or not) the ways in which the question of woman is conceived by women as well as men. Misogyny is not so much a historical subject as one whose very lack of history is so bound in its effects that any attempt merely to trace the history of woman-hating is

⁵⁹ Barstow, 82.

hopelessly doomed.⁶⁰

Finding an origin for misogyny in western civilization is clearly problematic, as each anti-feminist Christian theologian drew from a preceding theologian or philosopher in a seemingly never-ending web of antecedents. Scholars such as Marija Gimbutas have suggested the tradition of misogyny has its roots in both the Old Testament and ancient Greek culture.⁶¹ While acknowledging the difficulties one finds when attempting to trace misogyny in Western civilization, a few notable offenders warrant survey for their particularly vile doctrine against women.

Ancient philosophers such as Aristotle and Galen had great influence on western civilization's ideology, especially in regards to gender. Medieval society's gender constructs of women/men as passive/active, cold/hot, wet/dry, body/soul and left/right come directly from the writings of these early thinkers. More than other ancient authors, Aristotle was inclined to see warmer as better than cool.⁶² Thus, women were perceived as weaker and inferior to men. Aristotle elucidated in detail the range of women's inferiority, from her passive role in procreativity to her limited capacity for mental activity. He suggested: "Since the male secretes sperm and the female menstrual blood, conception takes place during menstruation. Since blood is merely nutritious and not procreative, the female has no genetic power, but provides temporary nourishment."⁶³ It would be the gendered philosophy found in Aristotelian theory that medieval theologians most often drew upon in support of their misogynist doctrine against women healers.

⁶⁰ Howard Bloch, "Medieval Misogyny," *Representations* No. 20, (1987): 20.

⁶¹ Gimbutas, 153.

⁶² Cadden, 23.

⁶³ Eva C. Keuls, *The Reign of the Phallus: Sexual Politics in Ancient Athens*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 145.

Paradoxically, Christianity's triumph over the myriad of religions available to the population of the Roman empire is due in large part to the efforts of Christian women converting their pagan husbands. Christianity's original message of equality attracted many women to the new religion. In the late Roman empire, Celsus noted that the new Christian religious were "unprofitable members of society – weaklings, women, and slaves."⁶⁴ In a grassroots movement these members of society, who had experienced subjugation within Roman society, sought to escape suppression through the Christian promise of egalitarianism. Unfortunately, Church fathers had no intention of applying the Christian message of equality to the female gender.

The gender constructs of the middle ages, like medieval society in general, were greatly influenced by the doctrine of the Christian Church. During the middle ages, the church was in crisis. The Great Schism, caused by eastern bishops questioning the infallibility of the Pope, had split the church by 1054. The infallibility of the bishop of Rome was again brought into question, this time within western Europe; between 1378 and 1417, three men simultaneously claimed Papal legitimacy.⁶⁵ This turmoil within church bureaucracy coupled with rampant corruption led to the establishment of new sects of Christianity, such as the Waldensians and Cathars. These movements were quickly labeled heretics. Influential theologians such as Augustine of Hippo and Thomas Aquinas wrote extensively against heretics within the early Christian movement. This

⁶⁴ Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, 3rd. ed. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company. 2003), 599.

⁶⁵ Karen Armstrong, *A History of God: The 4,000 Year Quest of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*, (New York: Alfred A Knopf, Inc., 1993), 272.

compendium, rife with misogynistic doctrine, was employed later during the witch craze to justify the murders of thousands of women.

Augustine, bishop of Hippo, lived from 354-430 C.E. and his prolific writings gave him a position of supremacy among western Christian theologians; these writings were highly influential. According to him, it was woman that bore the burden of Original Sin, and as such was inherently drawn to the dark forces of Satan. Augustine held that the Devil in the form of the serpent ⁶⁶

first tried his deceit upon the woman, making his assault upon the weaker part of that human alliance, that he might gradually gain the whole, and not supposing that the man would readily give ear to him, or be deceived, but that he might yield to the error of the woman. ... because the woman accepted as true what the serpent told her, but the man could not bear to be severed from his companion, even though this involved a partnership of sin. ⁶⁷

Nowhere in the Old Testament is Eve blamed exclusively for the fall from the Garden of Eden. In the east, Cyril of Alexandria and other Greek theologians had developed much less alarming interpretations of the doctrine of Original Sin and held a more reasonable idea of sexuality. Augustine saw sex and sin as one and the same. ⁶⁸ Western Church fathers invented Eve's culpability and argued that Original Sin passed down to all humanity directly through the sex act. Again, this is evident in the disparate views on Original Sin held by the eastern Church and the western Church. Where the Bible could be read in Greek, instead of the Latin translation by Jerome, eastern Church fathers

⁶⁶ When referring to the Devil, I have capitalized his name and then when discussing devils and devil-worship I have not.

⁶⁷ Augustine of Hippo, "City of God" in *Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers*, ed. Phillip Shaff, trans. by Rev. Marcus Dods, D.D., Vol. I, (Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994), 272.

⁶⁸ Armstrong, 272.

interpreted the story of Adam and Eve as a myth to be taken metaphorically and symbolically. As a literalist, Augustine espoused the Christian creation myth was a historical fact.⁶⁹ Augustine's writings held little authority in the east. Regrettably, his vast influence had significant adverse effects on gender constructs throughout western Europe.

Augustine's life experiences and struggle with his own sexuality tainted his views regarding women. He, like other "born again" Christians, espoused extremely conservative, traditionalist theology parallel to the conversions of the Apostle Paul and St. Jerome. Augustine spent much of his early life as a Manichaean, a religious belief similar to Gnosticism, in the principle of a spiritual lightness in constant contrast to a material darkness. He had a lover whose name was not recorded. She bore him a child and he lived with her for over thirteen years. Augustine's mother Monica, a devout Christian, had pressured him for years to repent his pagan ways and convert to the True Faith. He finally did so in 387 C.E., abandoning his lover and taking his son for his mother to raise.⁷⁰ This experience undoubtedly had a stark impact on Augustine's view of the opposite sex, leading him to malign them at every opportunity. In an effort to repress his own sexuality, as well as the greater Christian community's, Augustine espoused that the Christian man should turn away from what is mortal and focus on what is immortal and pleasing to God. To him, the true Christian man "loves that fact that she is human,

⁶⁹ Karen Armstrong, *The Gospel According to Woman: Christianity's Creation of a Sex War in the West*, (New York: Anchor Press, 1987), 33.

⁷⁰ Uta Ranke-Heinemann, *Eunuchs for the Kingdom of Heaven: Women, Sexuality and the Catholic Church*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1990), 78-79. Interestingly, Augustine's conversion took place after the Roman emperor, Theodosius I, issued a decree of death for all Manichaeans and just before he declared Christianity to be the only legitimate religion for the Roman empire in 391 C.E.

and hates the fact that she is woman.”⁷¹ The hatred of women espoused by Augustine greatly influenced medieval society’s gender constructs and would lead to the widespread persecution perpetrated on the female gender, the witch craze. Augustine’s statement could not have been more concise. However, this did not stop him from expanding his viewpoint.

Operating within the gender constructs in the ancient world, Augustine suggested a complex theory to justify his misogynistic sentiment. He states:

Have women not this renewal of mind in which is the image of God? Who would say this? But in the sex of their body they do not signify this; therefore they are bidden to be veiled. The part, namely, which they signify in the very fact of their being women, is that which may be called the concupiscential part, over which the mind bears rule, itself also subjected to its God, when life is most rightly and orderly conducted. What, therefore, in a single individual human being is the mind and the concupiscence, (that ruling, this ruled; that lord, this subject) the same in two human beings, man and woman, is in regard of the sex of the body exhibited in a figure. Of which sacred import the Apostle [Paul] speaks when he says, that a man ought not to be veiled and a woman ought. For the mind doth the more glorious advance to higher things, the more diligently the concupiscence is curbed from lower things.⁷²

At the outset of this excerpt, Augustine suggests that the woman does not possess the cognizant ability to control their evil “concupiscential” vagina.⁷³ His association of women’s sexual organs as the root of evil was, and is, heavily drawn on as justification of women’s subjugation. Augustine suggested that women must be controlled by men like the body over the mind, working within the Aristotelian philosophy of the

⁷¹ Ranke-Heinemann, 96.

⁷² Augustine, 524.

⁷³ Concupiscence is defined as lust; it is derived from the Latin word *concupiscentia* meaning intense desire.

corpus/body/woman being ruled by the superior nous/mind/man. Only until his doctrine was superseded in authority by Thomas Aquinas in the early middle ages would Augustine lose his position of primacy. Still, a cursory reading of *Summa Theologica* shows Augustine's influence on Aquinas' stance. Almost every article includes "Augustine says..." in a sycophantic manner.

Thomas Aquinas was a Christian monk who wrote profusely in the thirteenth century on a variety of topics he deemed relevant to Christianity. He was a member of the Dominican order, a monastic sect that earned the nickname "Domini Canes" or God's Dogs, by ruthlessly pursuing and punishing the burgeoning reform-minded Christian sects they deemed heretical such as the Cathars and the Waldensians. His position on women was significantly influenced by Augustine, but also by Galen and Aristotle. He espoused that women were the weaker sex but went further still. Aquinas pressed the notion of female inferiority when he discussed "whether woman ought to have been made in the first production of things" considering that "woman is defective and misbegotten."⁷⁴ In other words, if anti-feminism in western civilization could be seen as a startling classical movement, Aquinas would be the reverberating crescendo.

In *Summa Theologica*, a collection of one hundred and fifteen theological questions, Aquinas devotes four articles to the topic of God's production of women. The first article sets out to answer the question "Whether the Woman Should Have Been Made in the First Production of Things?" to which he answers that "it was necessary for woman to be made, as the Scripture says, as a helper to man; not, indeed, as a helpmate in

⁷⁴ Thomas Aquinas, "The Production of the Woman" in *Summa Theologica*, Vol. I, Q92, Art. 1, Pt. 1. (New York: Benziger Brothers, Inc., 1947), 468.

other works, as some say, since man can be more efficiently helped by another man in other works; but as a helper in the work of generation.”⁷⁵ Aquinas, with strange hubris, suggested that it would have been better for God to offer Adam a male companion rather than Eve. The question of God’s creation of woman led Aquinas to the assumption that woman was a freak of nature. Borrowing Aristotle’s biological theories, Aquinas suggests that a woman is a failed or deformed man. “As regards to the individual nature, woman is defective and misbegotten, for the active force in the male seed tends to the production of a perfect likeness in the masculine sex; while the production of woman comes from a defect.”⁷⁶ He goes on to include many regurgitated theories like women are passive and moist, and that “woman is naturally subject to man because in man the discretion of reason predominates.”⁷⁷ The idea that reason was a quality man naturally possessed and women naturally lacked would directly influence gender identity in this period, as well as modern gender constructs. For if women did in fact lack the cognitive ability to reason, it follows that any knowledge they possessed was emphatically diabolical.

Aquinas also addresses whether or not God should have made woman from man. On this point, Aquinas wrote “The man is the head of the woman” and then the same section a few lines further states, “the woman should never use authority over man, and so she was not made from his head.”⁷⁸ His message was clear. For Aquinas, there was no room for gender equality in Christian doctrine. Men were analogous to the head on the

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 466.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 469.

body; women were desperately in need of direction from men, a headless body lacking reason. Women were not worthy of authority in any realm, not even at home with their husband, where Aquinas preferred they stay, as they were only good as “generative helpers.”

In the preface of *Summa Theologica*, Aquinas dedicates his work to “the Virgin Mary Immaculate Seat of Wisdom.”⁷⁹ This presents a very relevant juxtaposition between the images of females within his ideology. Mary was wise and virtuous. Aquinas ignored her womanhood and saw her as androgynous as opposed to Eve and every other female on earth, who Aquinas thought were the anathema to all that is good and righteous. This dichotomy deeply impacted the medieval belief in the good Mary the evil Eve. The connection of woman to evil found in the *Summa Theologica* as well as the collected writings of anti-feminist Church fathers would offer much fodder for the justification of the persecutions of women healers in the late middle ages and early modern period.

Theologians such as Aelfric of Eynsham laid important foundations for the persecution of women healers as devil dealers by attempting to Christianize the realm of healing. In that effort, the Germanic and classical pagan traditional aspect of the medieval healing practices which the laity had preserved were stamped out over time in a gradual process. What had once been sacred pagan sights and rites of healing became associated with devil worship. The dichotomy between herbal healers and devil dealers was put in place by Aelfric of Eynsham even before the eleventh century:

⁷⁹ Ibid., iii.

The Christian man who is afflicted in any way like this [example of bodily weakness], and then wishes to seek his health from unlawful cures, or from cursing charms, or from any witchcraft, then will be like those heathen men who offered to devil-worship for their bodies health, and so destroyed their souls. Let him who is unhealthy pray for his health from his Lord, and patiently endure the strokes; ... and let him not buy the body's health through any Devil's craft with his soul; let him ask also good men's blessing, and seek his health at holy relics. ... The wise Augustine said that it is not dangerous if anyone eat a medicinal herb; but he censures it as unlawful sorcery if any one ties those herbs to himself, unless he lays them on a sore. Nevertheless we must not set our hope in medicinal herbs, but in the Almighty Creator.⁸⁰

Ecclesiastics recommended that those suffering from illness such as the plague must accept their fate and pray to almighty God for a cure. They also condemned anyone who sought a cure from cunning folk, as they were doing so at the peril of their very soul; better to die than receive medicinal cures from a local healer. There were men practicing marvels and miracles with herbs from inside the cloister. These men were sanctioned by God. The women with the knowledge to use indigenous herbs to heal practiced witchcraft and received their knowledge directly from the Devil.

⁸⁰ Aelfric of Eynsham quoted in Karen Louise Jolly, *Popular Religion in Late Saxon England: Elf Charms in Context*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 92-93.

Chapter 4

HERBAL HEALERS TO DEVIL DEALERS

The last two chapters have investigated both the social milieu and religious belief causative to the frightful way that women healers were treated due to ignorance and fear of female agency. This repression of sexuality and the demonization of women, which developed in the Christian west, would culminate in a wild fear that gripped medieval society at every level. Persecution is seldom directed at a legitimate enemy but victims are selected as scapegoats for repressed societal neuroses perpetrated in a brutal and illogical manner. An example of this is the widow in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, where invalid charges were invented against her and fueled by fear through Christian propaganda. In point of fact, the term "witch hunt" has come to mean a relentless and unsubstantiated assault on a beleaguered societal group, as with the McCarthy period in modern U.S. history.

A post-modern understanding of society tends to focus on the fluidity of social divisions. However, this is not so with medieval society. Examining medieval culture through the two groups, herbal healers and devil dealers, as extreme opposites, is necessary because European society at this time saw their world as a binary classification based on opposing forces. Much of the medieval world was seen through this dualistic lens of man/woman, hot/cold, wet/dry to God/Devil.⁸¹ What is perhaps most surprising

⁸¹ Briggs, 103.

about these labels is that persecutors saw little difference between the two categories. A woman possessing the knowledge to heal her family and neighbors through herbology and a woman perusing vengeance through supernatural measures were judged the same; both were believed to have implicitly dealt with the Devil. Protestant minister William Perkins, an organizer of the witch craze in Scotland, suggested that the “good witch was more a monster than the bad ... If death be due to any ... then a thousand deaths of right belong to the good witch.”⁸² Both were seen as a threat to their community and as an undermining force to the church.

In actual fact, there was no witchcraft in Europe. This is a hard fact to accept, considering the large numbers of women murdered for such actions. There is not one shred of historical evidence to support any claims that parties of women or men gathered together to worship any forbidden idols: pagan, diabolical, or otherwise.⁸³ The belief in witchcraft was sanctioned by Christianity only after Pope Innocent VIII issued the Papal Bull, *Summa desiderantes*, in 1484.⁸⁴ Prior to this, the church had condemned belief in witches as pagan superstition.

The magnitude of the witch craze is frightening. During the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, there were thousands upon thousands of executions in Europe. In most cases, these women were beheaded or burned alive at the stake after being tried

⁸² William Perkins, quoted in Achteberg, 89.

⁸³ Armstrong, *The Gospel According to Women*, 99.

⁸⁴ Brozyna, 234. Pope Innocent VIII is an interesting character, noteworthy considering the impact of his Papal Bull. He was very superstitious and had an irrational fear of witches and demons. In an effort to prolong his life, he drank breast milk and bled three young boys to death in a selfish and ultimately failed endeavor, one of first historical accounts an attempt to transfuse blood. In light of this and the atrocities sanctioned by his Bull, one cannot help but note the irony of his name. For more information see: Achteberg, 86.

in secular courts. In the mid-sixteenth century the terror spread across western Europe, even infecting new colonies in America. Some areas were more infamous than others. The persecution was worse in Scotland, France, the German States and Switzerland. By the seventeenth century, thousands of women had been sent to their deaths, tried and convicted of witchcraft.

The church, through the office of the Inquisition, set in place the framework for the witch craze of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The earliest form of inquisition was aimed at heresy. In the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries, these investigations were sanctioned by the Pope. Later in 1478, the Spanish Inquisition was initiated by King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella, making it both a secular and ecclesiastical movement. Their target was not heretics, but the conversion of Muslims and Jews within their kingdom to the Christian Church. Subsequently, secular authorities throughout Europe began working closely together with the church in the persecution of “witches.” Christian leaders in collaboration with secular powers persecuted anyone with a belief outside Catholic or Protestant religious teachings. In regards to whether Catholic persecution was more or less severe than Protestant, both are equally stained with the blood of innocent women.⁸⁵

There were three main “crimes” women were accused of: sexual crimes against men, unlawful assembly, and providing healing and medical assistance. Sexual crimes against men included causing sexual dysfunction thru spells and incantations. Unlawful assembly was the gathering of women and men in the cover of night, to attend the

⁸⁵ Briggs, 100.

“Witches’ Sabbath,” where alleged witches would revel with the Devil. The last and most pertinent to this research was the trials of women possessing healing knowledge.

Women were accused of having magical powers affecting health, to harm or to heal and were charged with possessing medical and obstetrical skills.⁸⁶ Up to this time midwives had been accepted for hundreds of years as providing genuinely sound assistance and knowledge during the rigors of childbirth. From peasants to queens, midwives served all levels of society. The reverence held for midwives and healers radically waned and these once respected women were recast as witches.

While one of the most significant occupations available for women, namely as healers and midwives, was being systematically eradicated during the witch craze, new and lucrative professions were created and held solely by men. Witch hunters offered their lucrative services to local authorities, instigating fear, moral panic, and damaging accusations among the laity, to find potential victims. They would then torture their victims mercilessly until a confession was obtained, resulting in certain death. In the spirit of self-interest and under the guise of divine justice, witch hunters filled their pockets in a self-righteous manner.⁸⁷ Nicolas Remy was an infamous witch hunter who began his career out of an irrational fear of the power of magic, even practicing counter magic himself.⁸⁸ He boastfully espoused that he had personally sent over eight hundred witches to the stake and even more monstrously, he sentenced children of convicted witches to be beaten as they watched their mothers burned alive.⁸⁹ He was especially

⁸⁶ Riddle, 111.

⁸⁷ Briggs, 342.

⁸⁸ Barstow, 65.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

suspicious of old women and healers.⁹⁰ He wrote of a woman by the name of Thenotte who served her community as a healer, noting her services were in high demand.⁹¹

Women healers like Thenotte found themselves in a precarious position. Witch hunters like Remy persecuted healers that cured their patients, on the basis that having the power to heal was sufficient evidence for the crime of witchcraft. These women were persecuted because they lacked protection and influence within the leadership of their communities and because they held enviable authority in society through their healing abilities.

At the same time that witch hunters like Remy were showing no mercy to healers, witch prickers began traveling around, from village to village, offering their services, for a fee. In many instances, witch prickers were paid by the number of women found to be witches. These contemptible men would physically violate and humiliate women who were accused of witch craft. The disgraceful ordeal was described by a witness:

... and presently in the sight of all people, (he) laid her body naked to the waste, with her cloaths over her head by which fright and shame, all her blood contracted into one part of her body, and then he ran a pin into her thigh, and then suddenly let her coats (petticoats?) fall, and then demanded whether she had nothing of his in her body but (yet) did not bleed, but she being amazed replied little, then he put his hand up her coats, and pulled out the pin and set her aside as a guilty person, and child of the devil, and fell to try others whom he made guilty.⁹²

The pricker described in the above trial was personally responsible for sending 220 women to their death; each conviction earning him a whopping twenty shillings.⁹³ This and other similar barbarous practices elucidate the violence and violation exercised by

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Ibid., 110.

⁹² Ibid., 130.

⁹³ Ibid., 213.

men against women, in the name of the church and personal gain, during the late middle ages and early modern period. These sadistic activities reveal medieval ideology regarding women; they had to be dominated, and more importantly controlled, as they were supposedly easily susceptible to the wiles of the Devil.

As women were excluded from studying medicine, any woman who possessed herbal healing skills could only have received such knowledge from the Devil. Blatantly put, “If a woman dare to cure without having studied she is a witch and must die.”⁹⁴ It is during the early sixteenth century, that we see an influx of legislation instituted regarding herbal healers. As medical practice became increasingly professionalized, women were excluded from providing medical care in any form.⁹⁵ In Paris, the court proceedings against a woman healer illuminate the absurdity of this new form of legal subjugation. After a long list of charges, which include such “heinous crimes against society” as visiting the sick, examining them, and then curing if possible, “the prosecution called witnesses to testify against Jacoba. They all agreed that the charges were mostly accurate, but they also said she was a wise and practiced physician who had cured them. Some even mentioned the names of other physicians who had failed to offer relief or cure, much to the embarrassment of the Faculty of Medicine.”⁹⁶ Jacoba’s crime, if truth be told, was intuitively curing the infirmed who physicians had not been able to help.

Even the mother of the celebrated astronomer Johannes Kepler was not impervious to the witch craze. “Katharina was an amateur apothecary, an herbalist who

⁹⁴ Riddle, 121.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 134.

⁹⁶ Achterberg, 79-80.

gathered flowers from the field and boiled up potions and healing tonics for all occasions.”⁹⁷ In 1619, Katharina was accused of forty-nine articles of heresy. Most of these charges were false but a minuet number were factual, such as “she remedied his [the local butcher’s] pain”⁹⁸. She was never successfully convicted though. She had some powerful friends, through her son and therefore was not easily condemned. “According to the Guglingen magistrate, the Kepler woman continued her denial, even after they showed her the *instrumenta*, even after they hounded her to confess.”⁹⁹ Katharina died soon after her release. Although she survived the ordeal, withstood immense suffering and more than a year of incarceration, the strain had taken its toll on the old woman.

As with the case against Katharina, some of the misinformation employed to persecute witches during the middle ages originated with medical science. Many doctors who came upon an incurable disease tended to blame the illness on a convenient “unnatural source” such as a hex from a witch. Historian Leland Estes notes that in the middle ages, “diseases and accidents of the widest variety were being attributed to the machinations of fairies, house cobolds, stable goblins, hobhurts, dwarfs, trolls, hillmen, pixey leds and will-o-the-wisps. They were also often attributed to sorcerers and witches.”¹⁰⁰ As scientific and medical knowledge increased throughout Europe, so did society’s intolerance of women living outside their designated gender roles, making use of their healing knowledge and skills; this was their magic.

⁹⁷ James Connor, *Kepler’s Witch: An Astronomer’s Discovery of Cosmic Order Amid Religious War, Political Intrigue, and the Heresy Trial of His Mother*, (New York: Harper San Francisco, 2004), 285.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 283.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 304.

¹⁰⁰ Leland L. Estes, “The Medical Origins of the European Witch Craze,” *Journal of Social History* Vol. 17 No. 2., (Winter, 1983): 275.

The idea of magic in our modern society as illusions cannot help one's understanding of medieval magic as the two ideas are completely divergent. Magic, to medieval society, was a very real thing and deeply ingrained. The populace saw the mysterious aura of magic comprised of common superstition, inexplicable healing activity, as well as the mystical elements of the Christian faith. Scholar Michael Bailey states:

One main factor behind this shift was the rise of various types of learned magic, including astronomy, alchemy, and spiritual and demonic magic, among the educated elites of western Europe. Grounded in Arab, Greek, and Jewish texts, such magic became the focus of much interest among the scholars and intellectuals of Europe. While some were fascinated, many others greatly feared this new learning. The church remained convinced that demonic power lay hidden at the root of even apparently innocent magical practices.¹⁰¹

Christianity was presented with a strange dichotomy. How could they condemn folk magic as the Devil's work, and at the same time, affirm the magic their own rituals depended on? Healers were empiricists; they used scientific methods of observation, trial and evaluation. This gradual shift in the medieval view of magic threatened religious leaders and required the production of an undeniable set of laws.

The *Malleus Maleficarum* was penned by Heinrich Kramer and James Sprenger in 1486. Both men were members of the Dominican order in Germany. The authors were appointed inquisitors by Pope Innocent VII; in the text of the bull, he goes so far as to refer to them as his sons. Kramer, in particular, had proved his loyalty by achieving a notorious reputation for being tremendously aggressive and violent when hunting women

¹⁰¹ Michael Bailey, "From Sorcery to Witchcraft: Clerical Conceptions of Magic in the Later Middle Ages," *Speculum*, Vol. 76, No. 4. (Oct., 2001): 964-965.

accused of witchcraft. When Kramer arrived in Tyrol, attempting to continue his hunt, he came into conflict with Bishop Golser, who wrote in 1486, “I am completely disgusted at this monk in my bishopric. . . he seems in his old age to have become rather childish . . . I advised him to go back to his monastery and stay there. He seems to me really to be crazy.”¹⁰² The fanatical authors of the *Malleus Maleficarum* married popular beliefs of witchcraft to biblical and church doctrine in a virulent combination, producing one of the most misogynistic texts in history which propagated the brutal maltreatment of women throughout western Europe.

Even the title implicitly singles women out as the authors’ explicit target. The Latin word *malleus* means hammer and *maleficarum* is the genitive feminine form of the noun *maleficus/malefica*, meaning witch and is therefore the title is translated as *The Hammer of (Female) Witches*. This fifteenth century text was highly influential on medieval society, launching a persecution that would see thousands of women charred by the flames of misogyny for the next two centuries. The Papal Bull, *Summa desiderantes*, was included in the preface of the *Malleus Maleficarum* and gave credence to the misogynistic text.¹⁰³ Interestingly, while secular powers in Protestant areas rejected the Pope sanctioned Inquisition as harassment and persecution, they embraced this doctrine and instituted its use.

The authors discarded all logic and reason in an effort to argue against those who were brave enough to refute witchcraft as a superstitious invention, such as the Jesuit

¹⁰² Bishop Georg Golser of Bressanone, quoted in Rainer Decker, *Witchcraft and the Papacy: An Account Drawing on the Formerly Secret Records of the Inquisition*, (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2008), 56.

¹⁰³ Heinrich Kramer and James Sprenger, *The Malleus Maleficarum*, trans. by Montague Summers (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1971), xliii.

priest Friedrich von Spee. Despite the danger of becoming a target himself, Spee railed against the men in charge of the trials.¹⁰⁴ He attended a witch trial in Westphalia and wrote of the injustice he observed: “I confess that I would at once admit any crime and chose death rather than such suffering ... I know that many die under enormous tortures, some are crippled for life, many are so torn that when they are beheaded the executioner does not dare to bare their shoulders and expose them to the people.”¹⁰⁵ However, the authors of the *Malleus Maleficarum* argued against their opposition with threats of excommunication on the grounds of heresy. “Whether the belief that there are such beings as witches is so essential a part of the Catholic faith that obstinately to maintain the opposite opinion manifestly savours of heresy.”¹⁰⁶ Kramer and Sprenger followed the established methods of the church which forced their opponents into submission through coercion.

However, even the tremendously misogynist Augustine and Aquinas never went so far as to suggest that a belief in witches was an essential part of Christian doctrine. The authors did employ many of the more familiar arguments to further their agenda. The story of creation is again employed to justify anti-feminism, this time with a crooked twist:

It should be noted that there was a defect in the formation of the first woman, since she was formed from a bent rib, that is, a rib of the breast, which is bent as it were in a contrary direction to a man.

¹⁰⁴ Friedrich von Spee (1591-1635) made the famous statement in *Cautio Criminalis*: “In Germany especially the smoke from the stake is everywhere.” He was a Jesuit priest and professor, who lived his life in Germany, speaking out against the crimes and torture of the witch-craze that he witnessed. For more information see: Ranke-Heinemann, *Eunuchs for the Kingdom of Heaven*, 230.

¹⁰⁵ Friedrich von Spee, *Cautio Criminalis*, xx, quoted in Armstrong, *The Gospel According to Women*, 127-128.

¹⁰⁶ Kramer and Sprenger, 1.

And since through this defect she is an imperfect animal, she always deceives.¹⁰⁷

Like most of the arguments in the *Malleus Maleficarum*, this last passage defies logic and illustrates the extent of the authors' misogyny. Thusly, the *Malleus Maleficarum* presents women as weaker than men and therefore more susceptible to the Devil's snare. Women were more likely to come under the Devil's spell as "they were more stupid, weak, superstitious, and fickle than men."¹⁰⁸ The *Malleus Maleficarum* cites Thomas Aquinas more frequently than any other anti-feminists, almost as frequently as Aquinas cited Augustine. The handbook illustrates the magnitude of influence theologians like Augustine and Aquinas had on this movement, continuing the subjugation of women through pointing out her supposed inadequacies.

Thanks to the newly invented printing press, the *Malleus Maleficarum* was able to be rapidly disseminated throughout western Europe and quickly assumed the position of being the authority on how to conduct a witch hunt. Between 1486 and 1520, at least fourteen editions of the *Malleus Maleficarum* were published, and another sixteen editions were published between 1547 and 1669.¹⁰⁹ Its publication during this period is second only to the Bible. The *Malleus Maleficarum's* widespread use is striking considering its vile principles were aimed at roughly half of the medieval populace.

The *Malleus Maleficarum* consists of many examples of sexist sentiment, too numerous to incorporate within this thesis. However, a few of the most offensive examples include: "What else is woman besides a foe to friendship, an unescapable

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 44.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 47

¹⁰⁹ Barstow, 171.

punishment, a necessary evil, a natural temptation, a desirable calamity, a delectable detriment” and “When a woman thinks alone, she thinks evil.”¹¹⁰ Kramer and Sprenger pushed the misogyny they inherited even further than their predecessors. While chauvinism was certainly evident throughout the middle ages and before, this malevolent manuscript had huge impact on gender constructs and on medieval society in general.

Midwifery was a vocation closely connected with women healers; both were eventually seen as suspect and disreputable occupations by the church. Author Jeanne Achterberg illustrates the Christian abhorrence at the process of birth:

That the birth passage was placed between where feces and urine were eliminated was often cited as God’s way of showing disgust for the birth of yet another sinner. The act of giving birth itself defiled the mother, who could be readmitted to the Church only after rites of purification, called “churching”.¹¹¹

The practice of churching was designed to enforce the Christian conviction that anyone intimately involved with the process of child-bearing was labeled unclean. What the church promulgated as “nasty business” is and has always been a natural and miraculous event and an especially significant process for women. The negative stigma attached to this phenomenal act and the women connected to it, identified midwives and healers as hostile to the mores of Christian society.

The authors of the *Malleus Maleficarum* suggest that the most common act of malevolence by a witch was actively attempting to block or thwart procreation. The following passage indicts healers and midwives expressly by focusing on generative power:

¹¹⁰ Kramer and Sprenger, 43.

¹¹¹ Achterberg, 119.

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 with 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 hard.¹¹²

The passive role that the authors assign to men is counterintuitive after the lengthy discussion of how much weaker women are by nature. They accuse midwives and healers of misusing their powers for nefarious ends. As the handbook made its way throughout western Europe, midwifery became an increasingly dangerous line of work. One out of every three witches burned in the city of Cologne was a midwife.¹¹³ The following quote outlines the alleged crimes committed by women in general, but midwives in particular:

Here is set forth the truth concerning four horrible crimes which devils commit against infants, both in the mother's womb and afterwards. And since the devils do these things through the medium of women, and not men, this form of homicide is associated rather with women than with men. And the following are the methods by which it is done. The Canonists treat more fully than the Theologians of the obstructions due to witchcraft; and they say that it is witchcraft, not only when anyone is unable to perform the carnal act, of which we have spoken above; but also when a woman is prevented from conceiving, or is made to miscarry after she has conceived. A third and fourth method of witchcraft is when they have failed to procure an abortion, and then either devour the child or offer it to the devil. ... We must add that in all these matters witch midwives cause yet greater injuries, as penitent witches have often told to us and to others, saying: No one does more harm to the Catholic Faith than midwives.¹¹⁴

¹¹² Kramer and Sprenger, 47.

¹¹³ Ranke-Heinemann, 231.

¹¹⁴ Kramer and Sprenger, 66-67.

This passage finds women and midwives guilty and in collaboration with devils for any difficulty relating to the sex act and procreation. Men were absolved from any responsibility in the sex act, while women were touted as the only active force present in it.

Much is written regarding women who attacked the male member with their witchcraft. “They prevent the flow of the vital essences to the members in which reside the motive force, closing up the seminal ducts so that it does not reach the generative vessels, or so that it cannot be ejaculated, or is fruitlessly spilled.”¹¹⁵ The authors suggested witches were to blame for a myriad of sexual dysfunctions, from impotence to premature ejaculation. Again, Augustine’s demonization of women in his doctrine of Original Sin provides substantiation to the theory that women have power over procreation, this time with even more leaps and holes. “God allows them more power over this act, by which the first sin was disseminated, than over other human actions. Similarly, they have more power over serpents.”¹¹⁶ The authors suggest that God only allows women power within the sphere of sin as they are naturally more inclined to it, recalling the writings that have been discussed in the third chapter. Further, the association between healers and snakes, which have been connected with the healing realm since the ancient times, through re-association and superstition became connected with the dark arts.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 118.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 118.

¹¹⁷ The snake entwined on the staff represents medicine to this day. That symbol traces its roots to Asclepius, the famous healer who became revered as a god in ancient Greece. The women in his family became important healing goddesses for their wisdom and knowledge. The Hippocratic Oath begins “I swear by Apollo the physician, by Asclepius, by Hygeia and Panacea and by all the Gods and Goddesses

Women became associated with dark magic exclusively because of their herbal knowledge. The use of healing herbs became tantamount to an alliance with the Devil.¹¹⁸ The church had succeeded in their goal of recasting herbal healers as evil witches. Herbs that once were revered as gifts from the gods and goddesses were now connected with devil worship. Plants of the Devil included: nightshade, hemlock, mandrake, henbane, poppy seeds and cannabis.¹¹⁹ Mood altering herbs were especially connected with the Devil. The “heretical herbs” used by witches and midwives in the middle ages have similar compounds to those used in modern medicine.

The aforementioned herbs and other plants of the Devil were purported ingredients in witches’ brew. More likely, healers employed these herbs for patients in extreme pain. Achterberg explains:

According to reports, the women supposedly combined concoctions of plants with a fatty substance for skin absorption. (Witches were frequently accused of using the fat of dead babies for this purpose.) They would anoint some object—brooms, pitchforks ... rub the mixture directly into their “hairy parts.” Sensitive vaginal tissue would absorb the mixtures especially well. Observers say the women were convinced they were flying.¹²⁰

Highly alkaloid concoctions such as witches’ brew have been tested on modern subjects and they reported entering the dream state and seeing fantastical exotic visions similar to

making them my witnesses, that I will fulfill according to my ability and judgment this oath and this covenant.” Both Hygeia and Panacea were often depicted as the keepers of snakes. The symbolism of the snake is chthonic and connected with mythological figures such as the Gorgon sisters, specifically Medusa. Greek myth holds that Medusa had the magical ability to both create and destroy. Her hair was venomous snakes that could kill but her blood was regenerative and healing. For further reading see: Gimbutas, 162.

¹¹⁸ Achterberg, 89.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 93.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

what was described in the extant witchcraft confessions.¹²¹ Nonetheless, one cannot miss the sexual innuendo in this allegation. Most probably, these things were imagined by sexually frustrated clergy members.

In that vein, Augustine's doctrine that babies who died before they received baptism would burn in hell produced the insane belief that midwives and healers were consumed with efforts to offer the babies, dead or alive, to Satan. Birth in medieval times was a much more dangerous process for both mother and child. The death or stillborn birth of any child was made the sole responsibility of the midwife. The church believed that the pain of birth was necessary to remind woman of her sinful temperament and her responsibility in the expulsion from the Garden of Eden. The punishment was severe for midwives who dared to provide relief to their suffering sisters.¹²² The archaic rules now enforced by the church stripped women of any control over their own bodies.

Medical knowledge regarding contraceptive herbs has been known for thousands of years. Ancient thinkers and physicians wrote extensively on the topic. With aid from church propaganda, "herbs that had been employed in the popular culture for millennia moved from medical lore to magic lore known only to those with malevolent motives."¹²³ People long ago used contraceptives and early-term abortifacients in order to control their own reproduction. In the church's eyes, there was no difference between these two particular herbal uses. Historian John Riddle notes the important place some herbs held for medieval women:

¹²¹ Riddle, 116.

¹²² Achterberg, 67.

¹²³ Riddle, 118.

Artemisia is a genus of plants that are known by common names like mugwort, southernwood, and absinthium. ... Most people regarded it as a weed, but many women did not. The plant was named for the goddess of love, and for good reason. Animal studies over the past twenty years have reported that artemisia delays the onset of estrus and ovulation and interferes with implantation.¹²⁴

Herbalists and midwives who employed birth control methods found increasing opposition from ecclesiastical authorities in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. This “If anyone, in order to satisfy his lust or out of deliberate hatred does any harm to a man or woman, so that he or she does not have children, or if anyone gives them something to drink, so that he cannot beget or she cannot bear, then he shall be considered a murderer.”¹²⁵ Chaucer captures similar notions regarding the church’s view on birth control in *The Parson’s Tale*:

Also, when a man interferes with the / Conception of a child,
and makes a woman / Barren by the drinking of poisonous
drugs, / Whereby she cannot conceive, or slays an unborn
child / Deliberately, by drugs or by the introduction of
certain / Substances into her secret parts with intent to slay
the child; / Or does any unnatural sin whereby man or /
Woman spill his or her fluid in such manner or in such /
Place as a child cannot be conceived; or if a woman,
Having conceived, so hurt herself that she slays her /
Child, it is homicide.¹²⁶

The use of contraception was seen as a mortal sin, no different from abortion. This knowledge was not included in many herbals for its controversial nature and could only have been passed down orally from ancient sisters. In keeping with the church’s doctrine, Hildegard of Bingen made no references to contraception or abortion in her

¹²⁴ Ibid., 32.

¹²⁵ Ranke-Heinemann, 148.

¹²⁶ Chaucer, 489.

pharmacology, but recommended various herbs like wild lettuce to suppress sexual desire in men and women.¹²⁷ The church sanctioned this employment of herbal remedies as it was in line with the Christian tradition of making women responsible for the advent of sexual desire. The influence and reverence held for women healers in the time honored profession of collecting indigenous herbs, healing their communities, and thereby making a living was ruined by the secular and Christian authorities, who profited greatly in their disgrace.

Healing was a reasonably profitable occupation for women. Renowned healers were sought out by aristocrats and peasants alike, some traveling great distances seeking healers with esteemed reputations. Anna la Rossa of Udine earned two hundred ducats per year, and she treated many people that had travelled great distances, seeking her healing talents.¹²⁸ This brought women healers into direct competition with the financial earnings of the medieval church. The church also offered magical healing relics, prayers and incantations, for a fee. However, the church simply could not compete with women healers in some realms; healers and midwives were the authority on matters of fecundity, pregnancy and a safe delivery. These women remained more popular and sought after until they were nearly wiped out through persecution from ecclesiastical as well as secular authorities.

Property confiscation of women accused as witches and heretics became a profitable endeavor for their accusers. In many cases, healers and midwives were called to trials, mercilessly tortured into confessing to witchcraft and/or devil-worship and

¹²⁷ Ranke-Heinemann, 202.

¹²⁸ Barstow, 116.

sentenced to death, at which point the church would then seize the victims' property.

"Claudatte Parmenties told her sister-in-law that if she were to confess, her goods would be confiscated, leaving nothing for her children."¹²⁹ These devious methods prompted the Roman Catholic priest Cornelius Loos, who witnessed the Trier persecutions, to write that "innocent lives are taken, and by a new alchemy gold and silver coined from human blood."¹³⁰ The practice of "lavish dinners held to mark the end of trials- in part a celebration of supposedly restored local harmony" is significant evidence that economics was a large factor for impetus. Moreover, local economies received a boost during the trials. "Many other people gained something from the bustle of activity surrounding trials and executions; those who provided facilities such as transport and valuations, the clergy who officiated and so on."¹³¹ This was better than market day for the local economies and the fact that the trials and burnings of so many innocent women was the product of this effort was hardly considered. The men in control were certainly on the right side of this crusade as "the trials allowed them the perfect opportunity to practice their sadism free of guilt."¹³² The healers were sufficiently eradicated, stripping women of any authoritative knowledge within the medical sphere.

¹²⁹ Briggs, 358.

¹³⁰ Ibid., 342.

¹³¹ Ibid., 343.

¹³² Ibid., 399.

Chapter 5

CONCLUSION

Healers and midwives were promulgated as devils' devotees and were pronounced guilty, no matter the misfortune. These women were blamed as scapegoats for the likes of erectile dysfunction, stillbirth or any other birthing problem, animal sickness, bad harvest or a multitude of other calamities that occurred in normal living.¹³³ Seemingly counterintuitive misfortunes were used as proof of witchcraft. Especially bad weather causing ships to sink was justification and ample proof for persecutions that took place in Scotland. The absurdity of blaming Scottish women for inclement weather is appalling considering how often the weather was, and still is, poor.

Scholars have discussed the myriad of things causative to the witch craze: fear of the plague, economic stress, and the influence of the Inquisition have been referenced as possible causes. This extensive exploration has led to the conclusion that there is no one clear, undeniable motive for the persecution of women healers. A simplistic view is not helpful and does not do justice to the enormity of the transgression against society.

As there is often no historical record which captures the voice of vulnerable victims, the advantage of incorporating literature into historical research is that it offers insight into the social milieu, as the survey of *The Canterbury Tales* has clarified. The misogynistic sentiment espoused by church leaders, like St. Augustine and Aquinas, set a precedent, straining western civilization's gender relations for generations to come. The legal scheme set in place by the *Malleus Maleficarum* shaped the widespread European

¹³³ Briggs, 77-80.

persecution of healers. A multifarious combination of church and state trying to crush the agency that women held over their own bodies, and the opportunity for material gain, led these truculent men down a very dark road.

This motivation becomes clear through careful research. The persecution of healers was a calculated effort by those in power to consolidate their position, using the medieval belief of witches as a way of extorting the weaker members of society and at the same time holding sway over the fearful populace. This intertwined relationship was advantageous for the ecclesiastical and secular powers, both attempting to further their own sphere of power and economic gains.

This examination studies one facet of medieval women's lives, through the changing role of the healer, illuminating the social constructs of gender and sexuality throughout the middle ages. Christianity sought to repress the spiritual competition within the healing realm in which they held a proprietary interest. They did so by spreading a fear of damnation and misogynistic propaganda. As we see through the above examination, man's aggressive and systematic suppression of women healers in the middle ages was a concerted effort on the part of the patriarchal authorities in the attempt to eliminate powerful women. The grievous crimes perpetrated on wise women in the name of God remain a sinister stain on Christian history. One can only imagine what secrets these women took to their graves with them, ancient healing knowledge possibly lost forever.

When greed and a fear of female agency took over, persecutors became what they were searching to eradicate: perpetrators of calamitous intent on innocent victims. The irony lies in the fact that in an effort to stamp out the devil dealers, the very men who took part in the gendered holocaust were, like the Summoner in Chaucer's tales, actually the ones who dealt with devils. The persecution of herbal healers as witches left western civilization without a cohesive balance between the healing arts and medicine, which to this day remains elusive.

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