



# Caliban and the Witch



Silvia  
Federici

Autonomedia



*Woman carrying a basket of spinach. Women in the Middle Ages often kept gardens, where they grew medical herbs. Their knowledge of the properties of herbs is one of the secrets they handed down from generation to generation. Italian, c. 1385.*



# All the World Needs a Jolt

Social Movements and Political Crisis in Medieval Europe

All the world must suffer a big jolt. There will be such a game that the ungodly will be thrown off their seats, and the downtrodden will rise.

—Thomas Müntzer,

*Open Denial of the False Belief of the Godless World  
on the Testimony of the Gospel of Luke, Presented to Miserable and  
Pitiful Christendom in Memory of its Error, 1524*

There is no denying that, after centuries of struggle, exploitation does continue to exist. Only its form has changed. The surplus labor extracted here and there by the masters of today's world is not smaller in proportion to the total amount of labor than the surplus extracted long ago. But the change in the conditions of exploitation is not in my view negligible.... What is important is the history, the striving for liberation....

—Pierre Dockes, *Medieval Slavery and Liberation*, 1982

## Introduction

A history of women and reproduction in the "transition to capitalism" must begin with the struggles that the European medieval proletariat — small peasants, artisans, day laborers — waged against feudal power in all its forms. Only if we evoke these struggles, with their rich cargo of demands, social and political aspirations, and antagonistic practices, can we understand the role that women had in the crisis of feudalism, and why their power had to be destroyed for capitalism to develop, as it was by the three-century-long persecution of the witches. From the vantage point of this struggle, we can also see that capitalism was not the product of an evolutionary development bringing forth economic forces that were maturing in the womb of the old order. Capitalism was the response of the feudal lords, the patrician merchants, the bishops and popes, to a centuries-long social conflict that, in the end, shook their power, and truly gave "all the world a big jolt." Capitalism was the counter-revolution that destroyed the possibilities that had emerged from the anti-feudal struggle — possibilities

which, if realized, might have spared us the immense destruction of lives and the natural environment that has marked the advance of capitalist relations worldwide. This much must be stressed, for the belief that capitalism "evolved" from feudalism and represents a higher form of social life has not yet been dispelled.

How the history of women intersects with that of capitalist development cannot be grasped, however, if we concern ourselves only with the classic terrains of class struggle — labor services, wage rates, rents and tithes — and ignore the new visions of social life and the transformation of gender relations which these conflicts produced. These were not negligible. It is in the course of the anti-feudal struggle that we find the first evidence in European history of a grassroots women's movement opposed to the established order and contributing to the construction of alternative models of communal life. The struggle against feudal power also produced the first organized attempts to challenge the dominant sexual norms and establish more egalitarian relations between women and men. Combined with the refusal of bonded labor and commercial relations, these conscious forms of social transgression constructed a powerful alternative not only to feudalism but to the capitalist order by which feudalism was replaced, demonstrating that another world was possible, and urging us to question why it was not realized. This chapter searches for some answers to this question, while examining how the relations between women and men and the reproduction of labor-power were redefined in opposition to feudal rule.

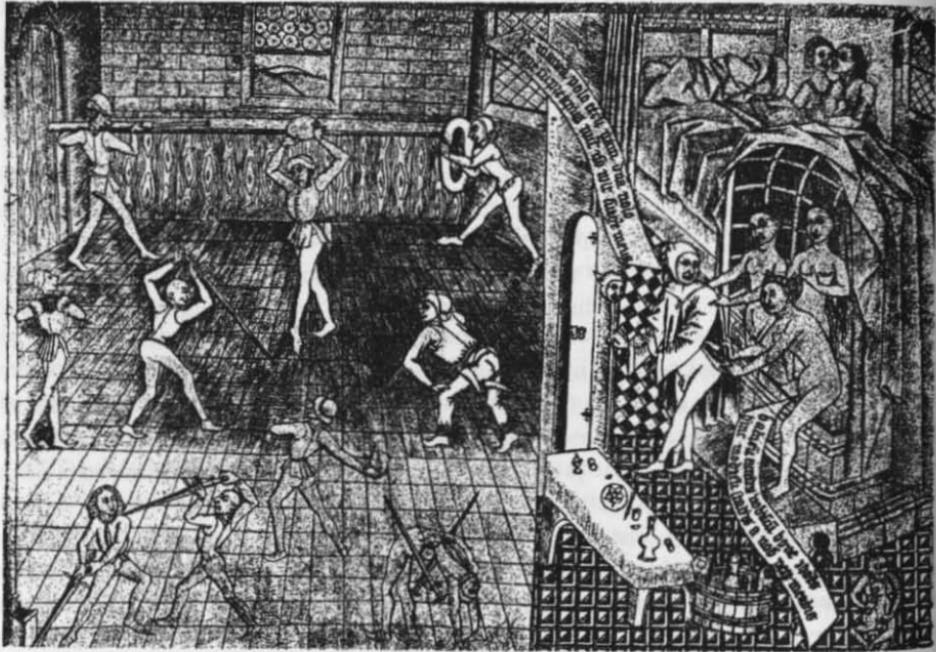
The social struggles of the Middle Ages must also be remembered because they wrote a new chapter in the history of liberation. At their best, they called for an egalitarian social order based upon the sharing of wealth and the refusal of hierarchies and authoritarian rule. These were to remain utopias. Instead of the heavenly kingdom, whose advent was prophesied in the preaching of the heretics and millenarian movements, what issued from the demise of feudalism were disease, war, famine, and death — the four horsemen of the Apocalypse, as represented in Albrecht Dürer's famous print — true harbingers of the new capitalist era. Nevertheless, the attempts that the medieval proletariat made to "turn the world upside down" must be reckoned with; for despite their defeat, they put the feudal system into crisis and, in their time, they were "genuinely revolutionary," as they could not have succeeded without "a radical reshaping of the social order" (Hilton, 1973: 223-4). Reading the "transition" from the viewpoint of the anti-feudal struggle of the Middle Ages also helps us to reconstruct the social dynamics that lay in the background of the English Enclosures and the conquest of the Americas, and above all unearth some of the reasons why in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries the extermination of the "witches," and the extension of state control over every aspect of reproduction, became the cornerstones of primitive accumulation.

## Sexual Politics, the Rise of the State and Counter-Revolution

However, by the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, a counter-revolution was already under way at every level of social and political life. First, efforts were made by the political authorities to co-opt the youngest and most rebellious male workers, by means of a vicious sexual politics that gave them access to free sex, and turned class antagonism into an antagonism against proletarian women. As Jacques Rossiard has shown in *Medieval Prostitution* (1988), in France, the municipal authorities practically *decriminalized rape*, provided the victims were women of the lower class. In 14<sup>th</sup>-century Venice, the rape of an unmarried proletarian woman rarely called for more than a slap on the wrist, even in the frequent case in which it involved a group assault (Ruggiero 1989: 91–108). The same was true in most French cities. Here, the gang-rape of proletarian women became a common practice which the perpetrators would carry out openly and loudly at night, in groups of two to fifteen, breaking into their victims' homes, or dragging their victims through the streets, without any attempt to hide or disguise themselves. Those who engaged in these "sports" were young journeymen or domestic servants, and the penniless sons of well-to-do families, while the women targeted were poor girls, working as maids or washerwomen, of whom it was rumored that they were "kept" by their masters (Rossiard 1988: 22). On average, half of the town male youth, at some point, engaged in these assaults, which

Rossiaud describes as a form of class protest, a means for proletarian men — who were forced to postpone marriage for many years because of their economic conditions — to get back “their own,” and take revenge against the rich. But the results were destructive for all workers, as the state-backed raping of poor women undermined the class solidarity that had been achieved in the anti-feudal struggle. Not surprisingly, the authorities viewed the disturbances caused by such policy (the brawls, the presence of youth gangs roaming the streets at night in search of adventure and disturbing the public quiet) as a small price to pay in exchange for a lessening of social tensions, obsessed as they were with the fear of urban insurrections, and the belief that if the poor gained the upper hand they would take their wives and hold them in common (*ibid.*: 13).

For proletarian women, so cavalierly sacrificed by masters and servants alike, the price to be paid was inestimable. Once raped, they could not easily regain their place in society. Their reputation being destroyed, they would have to leave town or turn to prostitution (*ibid.*; Ruggiero 1985: 99). But they were not the only ones to suffer. The legalization of rape created a climate of intense misogyny that degraded all women regardless of class. It also desensitized the population to the perpetration of violence against women, preparing the ground for the witch-hunt which began in this same



Brothel, from a 15<sup>th</sup>-century German woodcut. Brothels were seen as a remedy for social protest, heresy, and homosexuality.

period. It was at the end of the 14<sup>th</sup> century that the first witch-trials took place, and for the first time the Inquisition recorded the existence of an all-female heresy and sect of devil-worshippers.

Another aspect of the divisive sexual politics that the princes and municipal authorities pursued to diffuse workers' protest was the institutionalization of prostitution, implemented through the opening of municipal brothels soon proliferating throughout Europe. Enabled by the contemporary high-wage regime, state-managed prostitution was seen as a useful remedy for the turbulence of proletarian youth, who in "la Grand Maison" — as the state-brothel was called in France — could enjoy a privilege previously reserved for older men (Rossiaud 1988). The municipal brothel was also considered a remedy against homosexuality (Otis 1985), which in several European towns (e.g., Padua and Florence) was widely and publicly practiced, but in the aftermath of the Black Death was beginning to be feared as a cause of depopulation.<sup>32</sup>

Thus, between 1350–1450, publicly managed, tax-financed brothels were opened in every town and village in Italy and France, in numbers far superior to those reached in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Amiens alone had 53 brothels in 1453. In addition, all the restrictions and penalties against prostitution were eliminated. Prostitutes could now solicit their clients in every part of town, even in front of the church during Mass. They were no longer bound to any particular dress codes or the wearing of distinguishing marks, because prostitution was officially recognized as a public service (*ibid.*: 9–10).

Even the Church came to see prostitution as a legitimate activity. The state-managed brothel was believed to provide an antidote to the orgiastic sexual practices of the heretic sects, and to be a remedy for sodomy, as well as a means to protect family life.

It is difficult retrospectively to tell how far playing the "sex card" helped the state to discipline and divide the medieval proletariat. What is certain is that this sexual "new deal" was part of a broader process which, in response to the intensification of social conflict, led to the centralization of the state, as the only agent capable of confronting the generalization of the struggle and safeguarding the class relation.

In this process, as we will see later in this work, the state became the ultimate manager of class relations, and the supervisor of the reproduction of labor-power — a function it has continued to perform to this day. In this capacity, state officers passed laws in many countries that set limits to the cost of labor (by fixing the maximum wage), forbid vagrancy (now harshly punished) (Getemek 1985: 61ff), and encouraged workers to reproduce.

Ultimately, the mounting class conflict brought about a new alliance between the bourgeoisie and the nobility, without which proletarian revolts may not have been defeated. It is difficult, in fact, to accept the claim, often made by historians, according to which these struggles had no chance of success due to the narrowness of their political horizons and the "confused nature of their demands." In reality, the objectives of the peasants and artisans were quite transparent. They demanded that "every man should have as much as another" (Pirenne 1937: 202) and, in order to achieve this goal, they joined with all those "who had nothing to lose," acting in concert, in different regions, not afraid to confront the well-trained armies of the nobility, despite their lack of military skills.

Marx also recognized that “[a] great deal of capital, which today appears in the United States without any certificate of birth, was yesterday in England the capitalised blood of children” (*ibid.*: 829–30). By contrast, we do not find in his work any mention of the profound transformations that capitalism introduced in the reproduction of labor-power and the social position of women. Nor does Marx’s analysis of primitive accumulation mention the “Great Witch-Hunt” of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, although this state-sponsored terror campaign was central to the defeat of the European peasantry, facilitating its expulsion from the lands it once held in common.

In this chapter and those that follow, I discuss these developments, especially with reference to Europe, arguing that:

- I. The expropriation of European workers from their means of subsistence, and the enslavement of Native Americans and Africans to the mines and plantations of the “New World,” were not the only means by which a world proletariat was formed and “accumulated.”
- II. This process required the transformation of the body into a work-machine, and the subjugation of women to the reproduction of the work-force. Most of all, it required the destruction of the power of women which, in Europe as in America, was achieved through the extermination of the “witches.”
- III. Primitive accumulation, then, was not simply an accumulation and concentration of exploitable workers and capital. It was *also an accumulation of differences and divisions within the working class*, whereby hier-

archies built upon gender, as well as "race" and age, became constitutive of class rule and the formation of the modern proletariat.

- iv. We cannot, therefore, identify capitalist accumulation with the liberation of the worker, female or male, as many Marxists (among others) have done, or see the advent of capitalism as a moment of historical progress. On the contrary, capitalism has created more brutal and insidious forms of enslavement, as it has planted into the body of the proletariat deep divisions that have served to intensify and conceal exploitation. It is in great part because of these imposed divisions — especially those between women and men — that capitalist accumulation continues to devastate life in every corner of the planet.

## Land Privatization in Europe, the Production of Scarcity, and the Separation of Production from Reproduction

From the beginning of capitalism, the immiseration of the working class began with war and land privatization. This was an international phenomenon. By the mid-16<sup>th</sup> century European merchants had expropriated much of the land of the Canary Islands and turned them into sugar plantations. The most massive process of land privatization and enclosure occurred in the Americas where, by the turn of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, one-third of the communal indigenous land had been appropriated by the Spaniards under the system of the *encomienda*. Loss of land was also one of the consequences of slave-raiding in Africa, which deprived many communities of the best among their youth.

In Europe land privatization began in the late-15<sup>th</sup> century, simultaneously with colonial expansion. It took different forms: the evictions of tenants, rent increases, and increased state taxation, leading to debt and the sale of land. I define all these forms as *land expropriation* because, even when force was not used, the loss of land occurred against the individual's or the community's will and undermined their capacity for subsistence. Two forms of land expropriation must be mentioned: war — whose character changed in this period, being used as a means to transform territorial and economic arrangements — and religious reform.

"[B]efore 1494 warfare in Europe had mainly consisted of minor wars characterized by brief and irregular campaigns" (Cunningham and Grell 2000: 95). These often took place in the summer to give the peasants, who formed the bulk of the armies, the time to sow their crops; armies confronted each other for long periods of time without much action. But by the 16<sup>th</sup> century wars became more frequent and a new type of warfare appeared, in part because of technological innovation but mostly because the European states began to turn to territorial conquest to resolve their economic crisis and wealthy financiers invested in it. Military campaigns became much longer. Armies grew tenfold, and they became permanent and professionalized.<sup>19</sup> Mercenaries were hired who had no attachment to the local population; and the goal of warfare became the elimination of the enemy, so that war left in its wake deserted villages, fields covered with corpses, famines, and epidemics, as in Albrecht Dürer's "The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse" (1498).<sup>20</sup> This phenomenon, whose traumatic impact on the population is reflected in numerous artistic representations, changed the agricultural landscape of Europe.



Jacques Callot, *THE HORRORS OF WAR* (1633). Engraving. The men hanged by military authorities were former soldiers turned robbers. Dismissed soldiers were a large part of the vagabonds and beggars that crowded the roads of 17<sup>th</sup>-century Europe.

Many tenure contracts were also annulled when the Church's lands were confiscated in the course of the Protestant Reformation, which began with a massive land-grab by the upper class. In France, a common hunger for the Church's land at first united the lower and higher classes in the Protestant movement, but when the land was auctioned, starting in 1563, the artisans and day-laborers, who had demanded the expropriation of the Church "with a passion born of bitterness and hope," and had mobilized with the promise that they too would receive their share, were betrayed in their expectations (Le Roy Ladurie 1974: 173–76). Also the peasants, who had become Protestant to free themselves from the tithes, were deceived. When they stood by their rights, declaring that "the Gospel promises land freedom and enfranchisement," they were savagely attacked as fomenters of sedition (*ibid.*: 192).<sup>21</sup> In England as well, much land changed hands in the name of religious reform. W. G. Hoskin has describe it as "the greatest transference of land in English history since the Norman Conquest" or, more succinctly, as "The Great Plunder."<sup>22</sup> In England, however, land privatization was mostly accomplished through the "Enclosures," a phenomenon that has become so associated with the expropriation of workers from their "common wealth" that, in our time, it is used by anti-capitalist activists as a signifier for every attack on social entitlements.<sup>23</sup>

In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, "enclosure" was a technical term, indicating a set of strategies the English lords and rich farmers used to eliminate communal land property and expand their holdings.<sup>24</sup> It mostly referred to the abolition of the open-field system, an arrangement by which villagers owned non-contiguous strips of land in a non-hedged field. Enclosing also included the fencing off of the comunons and the pulling down of the shacks of poor cottagers who had no land but could survive because they had access to

customary rights.<sup>25</sup> Large tracts of land were also enclosed to create deer parks, while entire villages were cast down, to be laid to pasture.

Women were also more negatively impacted by the enclosures because as soon as land was privatized and monetary relations began to dominate economic life, they found it more difficult than men to support themselves, being increasingly confined to reproductive labor at the very time when this work was being completely devalued. As we will see, this phenomenon, which has accompanied the shift from a subsistence to a money-economy, in every phase of capitalist development, can be attributed to several factors. It is clear, however, that the commercialization of economic life provided the material conditions for it.

With the demise of the subsistence economy that had prevailed in pre-capitalist Europe, the unity of production and reproduction which has been typical of all societies based on production-for-use came to an end, as these activities became the carriers of different social relations and were sexually differentiated. In the new monetary regime, only



Entitled "Women and Knaves," this picture by Hans Sebald Beham (c. 1530) shows the train of women that used to follow the armies even to the battlefield. The women, including wives and prostitutes, took care of the reproduction of the soldiers. Notice the woman wearing a muzzling device.

production-for-market was defined as a value-creating activity, whereas the reproduction of the worker began to be considered as valueless from an economic viewpoint and even ceased to be considered as work. Reproductive work continued to be paid — though at the lowest rates — when performed for the master class or outside the home. But the economic importance of the reproduction of labor-power carried out in the home, and its function in the accumulation of capital became invisible, being mystified as a natural vocation and labelled “women’s labor.” In addition, women were excluded from many waged occupations and, when they worked for a wage, they earned a pittance compared to the average male wage.

These historic changes — that peaked in the 19<sup>th</sup> century with the creation of the full-time housewife — redefined women’s position in society and in relation to men. The sexual division of labor that emerged from it not only fixed women to reproductive work, but increased their dependence on men, enabling the state and employers to use the male wage as a means to command women’s labor. In this way, the separation of commodity production from the reproduction of labor-power also made possible the development of a specifically capitalist use of the wage and of the markets as means for the accumulation of unpaid labor.

Most importantly, the separation of production from reproduction created a class of proletarian women who were as dispossessed as men but, unlike their male relatives, in a society that was becoming increasingly monetarized, had almost no access to wages, thus being forced into a condition of chronic poverty, economic dependence, and invisibility as workers.

As we will see, the devaluation and feminization of reproductive labor was a disaster also for male workers, for the devaluation of reproductive labor inevitably devalued its product: labor-power. But there is no doubt that in the “transition from feudalism to capitalism” women suffered a unique process of social degradation that was fundamental to the accumulation of capital and has remained so ever since.

Also in view of these developments, we cannot say, then, that the separation of the worker from the land and the advent of a money-economy realized the struggle which the medieval serfs had fought to free themselves from bondage. It was not the workers — male or female — who were liberated by land privatization. What was “liberated” was capital, as the land was now “free” to function as a means of accumulation and exploitation, rather than as a means of subsistence. Liberated were the landlords, who now could unload onto the workers most of the cost of their reproduction, giving them access to some means of subsistence only when directly employed. When work would not be available or would not be sufficiently profitable, as in times of commercial or agricultural crisis, workers, instead, could be laid off and left to starve.

The separation of workers from their means of subsistence and their new dependence on monetary relations also meant that the real wage could now be cut and women’s labor could be further devalued with respect to men’s through monetary manipulation. It is not a coincidence, then, that as soon as land began to be privatized, the prices of foodstuffs, which for two centuries had stagnated, began to rise.<sup>39</sup>

## Women: The New Commons and the Substitute for the Lost Land

It was from this alliance between the crafts and the urban authorities, along with the continuing privatization of land, that a new sexual division of labor or, better, a new "sexual contract," in Carol Pateman's words (1988), was forged, defining women in terms — mothers, wives, daughters, widows — that hid their status as workers, while giving men free access to women's bodies, their labor, and the bodies and labor of their children.

According to this new social-sexual contract, proletarian women became for male workers the substitute for the land lost to the enclosures, their most basic means of reproduction, and a communal good anyone could appropriate and use at will. Echoes of this "primitive appropriation" can be heard in the concept of the "common woman" (Karras 1989) which in the 16<sup>th</sup> century qualified those who prostituted themselves. But in the new organization of work *every woman (other than those privatized by bourgeois men) became a communal good*, for once women's activities were defined as non-work, women's labor began to appear as a natural resource, available to all, no less than the air we breathe or the water we drink.

This was for women a historic defeat. With their expulsion from the crafts and the devaluation of reproductive labor poverty became feminized, and to enforce men's "primary appropriation" of women's labor, a new patriarchal order was constructed, reducing women to a double dependence: on employers and on men. The fact that unequal power relations between women and men existed even prior to the advent of capitalism, as did a discriminating sexual division of labor, does not detract from this assessment. For in pre-capitalist Europe women's subordination to men had been tempered by the fact that they had access to the commons and other communal assets, while in the new capitalist regime *women themselves became the commons*, as their work was defined as a natural resource, laying outside the sphere of market relations.

It is no exaggeration to say that women were treated with the same hostility and sense of estrangement accorded "Indian savages" in the literature that developed on this subject after the Conquest. The parallel is not casual. In both cases literary and cultural denigration was at the service of a project of expropriation. As we will see, the demonization of the American indigenous people served to justify their enslavement and the plunder of their resources. In Europe, the attack waged on women justified the appropriation of their labor by men and the criminalization of their control over reproduction. Always, the price of resistance was extermination. None of the tactics deployed against European women and colonial subjects would have succeeded, had they not been sustained by a campaign of terror. In the case of European women it was the witch-hunt that played the main role in the construction of their new social function, and the degradation of their social identity.

The definition of women as demonic beings, and the atrocious and humiliating practices to which so many of them were subjected left indelible marks in the collective female psyche and in women's sense of possibilities. From every viewpoint — socially, economically, culturally, politically — the witch-hunt was a turning point in women's lives; it was the equivalent of the historic defeat to which Engels alludes, in *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (1884), as the cause of the downfall of the matri-

Frontispiece of *THE PARLIAMENT OF WOMEN* (1646), a work typical of the anti-women satire that dominated English Literature in the period of the Civil War.



archaic world. For the witch-hunt destroyed a whole world of female practices, collective relations, and systems of knowledge that had been the foundation of women's power in pre-capitalist Europe, and the condition for their resistance in the struggle against feudalism.

What has not been recognized is that the witch-hunt was one of the most important events in the development of capitalist society and the formation of the modern proletariat. For the unleashing of a campaign of terror against women, unmatched by any other persecution, weakened the resistance of the European peasantry to the assault launched against it by the gentry and the state, at a time when the peasant community was already disintegrating under the combined impact of land privatization, increased taxation, and the extension of state control over every aspect of social life. The witch-hunt deepened the divisions between women and men, teaching men to fear the power of women, and destroyed a universe of practices, beliefs, and social subjects whose existence was incompatible with the capitalist work discipline, thus redefining the main elements of social reproduction. In this sense, like the contemporary attack on "popular culture," and the "Great Confinement" of paupers and vagabonds in work-houses and correction houses, the witch-hunt was an essential aspect of primitive accumulation and the "transition" to capitalism.

Later, we will see what fears the witch-hunt dispelled for the European ruling class and what were its effects for the position of women in Europe. Here I want to stress that, contrary to the view propagated by the Enlightenment, the witch-hunt was not the last spark of a dying feudal world. It is well established that the "superstitious" Middle Ages did not persecute any witches; the very concept of "witchcraft" did not take shape until the late Middle Ages, and never, in the "Dark Ages," were there mass trials and executions, despite the fact that magic permeated daily life and, since the late Roman Empire, it had been feared by the ruling class as a tool of insubordination among the slaves.<sup>5</sup>

In the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> centuries, the crime of *maleficium* was introduced in the codes of the new Teutonic kingdoms, as it had been in the Roman code. This was the time of the Arab conquest that, apparently, inflamed the hearts of the slaves in Europe with the prospect of freedom, inspiring them to take arms against their owners.<sup>6</sup> Thus, this legal innovation may have been a reaction to the fear generated among the elites by the advance of the "Saracens" who were, reputedly, great experts in the magical arts (Chejne 1983: 115-32). But, at this time, under the name of *maleficium*, only magical practices were punished that inflicted damage to persons and things, and the church criticized those who believed in magical deeds.<sup>7</sup>

The situation changed by the mid the 15<sup>th</sup> century. It was in this age of popular revolts, epidemics, and incipient feudal crisis that we have the first witch trials (in Southern France, Germany, Switzerland, Italy), the first descriptions of the Sabbat,<sup>8</sup> and the development of the doctrine of witchcraft, by which sorcery was declared a form of heresy and the highest crime against God, Nature, and the State (Monter 1976: 11-17). Between 1435 and 1487, twenty-eight treatises on witchcraft were written (Monter

ability to heal.

Witch hunting was also instrumental to the construction of a new patriarchal order where women's bodies, their labor, their sexual and reproductive powers were placed under the control of the state and transformed into economic resources. This means that the witch hunters were less interested in the punishment of any specific transgressions than in the elimination of generalized forms of female behavior which they no longer tolerated and had to be made abominable in the eyes of the population. That the charges in the trials often referred to events that had occurred decades earlier, that witchcraft was made a *crimen exceptum*, that is, a crime to be investigated by special means, torture included, and it was punishable even in the absence of any proven damage to persons and things — all these factors indicate that the target of the witch-hunt — (as it is often true with political repression in times of intense social change and conflict) — were not socially recognized crimes, but previously accepted practices and groups of individuals that had to be eradicated from the community, through terror and criminalization. In this sense, the charge of witchcraft performed a function similar to that performed by "high treason" (which, significantly, was introduced into the English legal code in the same years), and the charge of "terrorism" in our times. The very vagueness of the charge — the fact that it was impossible to prove it, while at the same time it evoked the maximum of horror — meant that it could be used to punish any form of protest and to generate suspicion even towards the most ordinary aspects of daily life.

A first insight into the meaning of the European witch-hunt can be found in the thesis proposed by Michael Taussig, in his classic work *The Devil and Commodity Fetishism in South America* (1980), where the author maintains that devil-beliefs arise in those historical periods when one mode of production is being supplanted by another. In such periods not only are the material conditions of life radically transformed, but so are the metaphysical underpinnings of the social order — for instance, the conception of how value is created, what generates life and growth, what is "natural" and what is antagonistic to the established customs and social relations (Taussig 1980: 17ff). Taussig developed his theory by studying the beliefs of Colombian agricultural laborers and Bolivian tin miners at a time when, in both countries, monetary relations were taking root that in peoples' eyes seemed deadly and even diabolical, compared with the older and still-surviving forms of subsistence-oriented production. Thus, in the cases Taussig studied, it was the poor who suspected the better-off of devil worship. Still, his association between the devil and the commodity form reminds us that also in the background of the witch-hunt there was the expansion of rural capitalism, which involved the abolition of customary rights, and the first inflationary wave in modern Europe. These phenomena not only led to the growth of poverty, hunger, and social dislocation (Le Roy Ladurie 1974: 208), they also transferred power into the hands of a new class of "modernizers" who

looked with fear and repulsion at the communal forms of life that had been typical of pre-capitalist Europe. It was by the initiative of this proto-capitalist class that the witch-hunt took off, both as "a platform on which a wide range of popular beliefs and practices... could be pursued" (Normand and Roberts 2000: 65), and a weapon by which resistance to social and economic restructuring could be defeated.

It is significant that, in England, most of the witch trials occurred in Essex, where by the 16<sup>th</sup> century the bulk of the land had been enclosed,<sup>14</sup> while in those regions of the British Isles where land privatization had neither occurred nor was on the agenda we have no record of witch-hunting. The most outstanding examples in this context are Ireland and the Scottish Western Highlands, where no trace can be found of the persecution, likely because a collective land-tenure system and kinship ties still prevailed in both areas that precluded the communal divisions and the type of complicity with the state that made a witch-hunt possible. Thus — while in the Anglicized and privatized Scottish Lowlands, where the subsistence economy was vanishing under the impact of the Presbyterian Reformation, the witch-hunt claimed at least 4,000 victims, the equivalent of one percent of the female population — in the Highlands and in Ireland, women were safe during the witch-burning times.

That the spread of rural capitalism, with all its consequences (land expropriation, the deepening of social distances, the breakdown of collective relations) was a decisive factor in the background of the witch-hunt is also proven by the fact that the majority of those accused were poor peasant women — cottars, wage laborers — while those who accused them were wealthy and prestigious members of the community, often their employers or landlords, that is, individuals who were part of the local power structures and often had close ties with the central state. Only as the persecution progressed, and the fear of witches (as well as the fear of being accused of witchcraft, or of "subversive association") was sowed among the population, did accusations also come from neighbors. In England, the witches were usually old women on public assistance or women who survived by going from house to house begging for bits of food or a pot of wine or milk; if they were married, their husbands were day laborers, but more often they were widows and lived alone. Their poverty stands out in the confessions. It was in times of need that the Devil appeared to them, to assure them that from now on they "should never want," although the money he would give them on such occasions would soon turn to ashes, a detail perhaps related to the experience of superinflation common at the time (Larner 1983: 95; Mandrou 1968: 77). As for the diabolical crimes of the witches, they appear to us as nothing more than the class struggle played out at the village level: the 'evil eye,' the curse of the beggar to whom an alm has been refused, the default on the payment of rent, the demand for public assistance (Macfarlane 1970: 97; Thomas 1971: 565; Kittredge 1929: 163). The many ways in which the class struggle contributed to the making of an English witch are shown by the charges against Margaret Harkett, and old widow of sixty-five hanged at Tyburn in 1585:

But interpreting the social decline of the midwife as a case of female de-professionalization misses its significance. There is convincing evidence, in fact, that midwives were marginalized because they were not trusted, and because their exclusion from the profession undermined women's control over reproduction.<sup>25</sup>

*Just as the Enclosures expropriated the peasantry from the communal land, so the witch-hunt expropriated women from their bodies, which were thus "liberated" from any impediment preventing them to function as machines for the production of labor. For the threat of the stake erected more formidable barriers around women's bodies than were ever erected by the fencing off of the commons.*

We can, in fact, imagine what effect it had on women to see their neighbors, friends and relatives being burned at the stake, and realize that any contraceptive initiative on their side might be construed as the product of a demonic perversion.<sup>26</sup> Seeking to understand what the women hunted as witches and the other women in their community must have thought, felt, and concluded from this horrendous attack waged upon them — looking, in other words, at the persecution "from within," as Anne L. Barstow has done in her *Witchcraze* (1994) — also enables us to avoid speculating on the intentions of the persecutors, and concentrate instead on the effects of the witch-hunt on the social position of women. From this point of view, there can be no doubt that the witch-hunt destroyed the methods that women had used to control procreation, by indicting them as diabolical devices, and institutionalized the state's control over the female body, the precondition for its subordination to the reproduction of labor-power.

But the witch was not only the midwife, the woman who avoided maternity, or the beggar who eked out a living by stealing some wood or butter from her neighbors. She was also the loose, promiscuous woman — the prostitute or adulteress, and generally, the woman who exercised her sexuality outside the bonds of marriage and procreation. Thus, in the witchcraft trials, "ill repute" was evidence of guilt. The witch was also the rebel woman who talked back, argued, swore, and did not cry under torture. "Rebel" here refers not necessarily to any specific subversive activity in which women might be involved. Rather, it describes the *female personality* that had developed, especially among the peasantry, in the course of the struggle against feudal power, when women had been in the forefront of the heretical movements, often organizing in female associations, posing a growing challenge to male authority and the Church. Descriptions of witches remind us of women as they were represented in the medieval morality plays and the *fabliaux*: ready to take initiatives, as aggressive and lusty as men, wearing male clothes, or proudly riding on their husbands' backs, holding a whip.

With the persecution of the folk healer, women were expropriated from a patrimony of empirical knowledge, regarding herbs and healing remedies, that they had accumulated and transmitted from generation to generation, its loss paving the way for a new form of enclosure. This was the rise of professional medicine, which erected in front of the "lower classes" a wall of unchallengeable scientific knowledge, unaffordable and alien, despite its curative pretenses (Ehrenreich and English 1973; Starhawk 1997).



*Amerigo Vespucci landing on the South American coast in 1497. Before him, seductively lying on a hammock, is "America." Behind her some cannibals are roasting human remains. Design by Jan van der Straet, and engraved by Théodore Galle (1589).*



# Colonization and Christianization

## Caliban and Witches in the New World

"...and so they say that we have come to this earth to destroy the world. They say that the winds ruin the houses, and cut the trees, and the fire burns them, but that we devour everything, we consume the earth, we redirect the rivers, we are never quiet, never at rest, but always run here and there, seeking gold and silver, never satisfied, and then we gamble with it, make war, kill each other, rob, swear, never say the truth, and have deprived them of their means of livelihood. And finally they curse the sea which has put on the earth such evil and harsh children." (Giroloamo Benzoni, *Historia del Mondo Nuovo*, 1565).

"...overcome by torture and pain, [the women] were obliged to confess that they did adore huacas.... They lamented, 'Now in this life we women...are Christian; perhaps then the priest is to blame if we women adore the mountains, if we flee to the hills and puna, since there is no justice for us here.'" (Felipe Guaman Poma de Ayala, *Nueva Chronica y Buen Gobierno*, 1615)

### Introduction

The history of the body and the witch-hunt that I have presented is based on an assumption that is summed up by the reference to "Caliban and the Witch," the characters of *The Tempest* symbolizing the American Indians' resistance to colonization.<sup>1</sup> The assumption is the continuity between the subjugation of the populations of the New World and that of people in Europe, women in particular, in the transition to capitalism. In both cases we have the forcible removal of entire communities from their land, large-scale impoverishment, the launching of "Christianizing" campaigns destroying people's autonomy and communal relations. We also have a constant cross-fertilization whereby forms of repression that had been developed in the Old World were transported to the New and then re-imported into Europe.