

THE
WITCHES'
OINTMENT



The Secret History
of Psychedelic Magic

THOMAS HATSIS

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Park Street Press
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“The Witches’ Ointment is, remarkably, the first full-length treatment of a topic that is central to our understanding of European witchcraft. Did the witches use psychoactive substances or not? This has long been debated but often on the basis of prejudice or inadequate information. We are fortunate that Hatsis has written an authoritative account, drawing deeply on primary sources and pursuing original lines of thought. Entertaining and highly readable, this book seems destined to be the definitive work on the subject. No doubt it will inspire others to see the witch cult in a new light. Highly recommended to all those who are interested in witchcraft, the history of drugs, and the more unusual byways of culture. A fascinating book.”

RICHARD RUDGLEY, AUTHOR OF *PAGAN RESURRECTION* AND *THE ENCYCLOPEDIA OF PSYCHOACTIVE SUBSTANCES*

“This wonderful book brews up a heady potion of folk herbs and psychedelics to intoxicate the conspiracy theorists and passionate disbelievers alike. With his objectivity and beautiful writing, Hatsis shines a light on the destructive Christocentric misogyny of the medieval world, whose holistic pagan medicine was certainly no more diabolical than our own modern Pharma Industry.”

BEN SESSA, MBBS, MRCPSYCH, AUTHOR OF *THE PSYCHEDELIC RENAISSANCE*

“Tales of witches and toads, broomsticks and belladonna—documented herein are the exotic herbal potions and demonic flights of fancy that terrified and confounded the religious

authorities of the Middle Ages. Exquisitely written and meticulously researched, Hatsis clears the supernatural mists of yore and roots out the various psychoactive agents lying at the heart of European witchcraft. A remarkably informative and wholly compelling read!”

SIMON G. POWELL, AUTHOR OF *MAGIC MUSHROOM EXPLORER* AND
THE PSILOCYBIN SOLUTION

“In this remarkable book, Thomas Hatsis reveals the hidden truth behind history’s most legendary ointments—the medieval bewitching potions—that supposedly lubricated broomsticks and fueled extracorporeal mystical journeys and hallucinogenic night flights, setting the stage for strange entity encounters and unholy copulations, animal transformations, and miraculous healings as well as diabolical poisonings, dangerous delusional deceptions, and harmful “black magic.” In this impeccably researched and compulsively readable volume, Hatsis recovers the lost history of these magical medicinal brews and psychoactive formulas that have been hidden for centuries and hinted at in the mythic portrayal of witchcraft and sorcery. Hatsis’s scholarly research shines an illuminating spotlight on what is actually known about these visionary (and sometimes deadly) herbal mixes, and he expertly blends his meticulous studies with keen intuition in this uniquely envisioned volume, overflowing with rare historical treasures and fascinating speculations as well as the secret psychedelic ingredients for re-creating the legendary ointments. This book will appeal to anyone interested in herbal folk remedies, entheogenic medicine, the relationship between alchemy and science, and how heretical notions of healing influenced Western religious systems and modern medicine. A few words of caution: history compels you to use this book wisely or you may get burned at the stake!”

DAVID JAY BROWN, AUTHOR OF *THE NEW SCIENCE OF
PSYCHEDELICS* AND *FRONTIERS OF PSYCHEDELIC CONSCIOUSNESS*

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No book is written by one person, and this book is no exception. The following people have been instrumental in helping me complete this work:

Mom, I am all out of words at this point, and I only hope you find them within these pages, saying “thank you” every time a sentence makes you proud of the writer I have become; El Dad, for teaching me the value of education; Stuart Eisbruck, your legal advice has been both appreciated and edifying; Nini and Thomas Humphrey, for your belief in me and help with last-minute research funding for this work—γιαγιά, for always knowing how to make me smile on the cloudiest of days; Edward Bever, your research advice and tremendous insight into the field of early modern period witchcraft has been invaluable—this book would not be in the shape it’s in without your help; Jack Zevin, for the research experience; Simon G. Powell, for your help in getting it all published; the women and men of the WFTDA (Women’s Flat Track Roller Derby Association) and MRDA (Men’s Roller Derby Association) for keeping me sane (and kinda driving me crazy); and my publisher, Park Street Press, for giving me the chance.

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*You're not writing this for the guy who's in the office next to you,
you're writing this for your mother.*

BART EHRMAN
(COMMENTING ON
THE NATURE OF ACADEMIC WORKS)



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FOREWORD

At the conclusion of the formal session titled “Cognition and Magic,” held at the 2011 Congress of Medieval Studies, informal discussions began, as commonly happens. While I spoke with different people interested in points I had raised in my paper, one of the conference participants came up to me and introduced himself: Thomas Hatsis. He explained excitedly that he was doing research into witches’ ointments that he thought I would be interested in and invited me to hear his paper during the next round of sessions. I took him up on the invitation and was glad I did. His talk impressed me with its combination of openness and rigor, knowledge of the sources and originality of thought, sophisticated understanding of the established authorities in the field and sophisticated critique of the same. We stayed in touch over the next few years as he researched and wrote and gradually transformed that twenty-minute presentation into this book.

As I watched this transformation I was particularly struck by three things. First of all, Tom was not enrolled in a doctoral program, yet he stuck with this project over the course of years, displaying remarkable perseverance in expanding, deepening, and refining it without the pressures, incentives, or support of a faculty position. His is a labor of love, of passion. Secondly, while Tom writes in an engaging, accessible style, he adheres to rigorous scholarly standards. His discussion is based on an extensive use of primary as well as secondary sources; it pays close attention to detail, context, and interconnections, and it displays a judicious regard for the evidence in drawing conclusions. Third, through his perseverance, rigor, and insight, Tom has produced an important and substantial contribution to the field, one that promises to change the terms of the debate about witches’ ointments and their role in early modern period^{*1} witch beliefs.

How so? In a nutshell, this book develops an extended and nuanced discussion of the place of psychoactive potions and ointments in the

coalescing beliefs about ancient magic and deviance—folktales concerning mystical travels at night and animal metamorphosis, scholastic polarization of the world between God and the devil, the campaign against heresy, medieval medical pharmacopeia, magical healing, malicious poisonings, and village sorcery—into the prevailing myth of diabolical witchcraft fueled by noxious ointments that transported witches from their daily lives to Satan’s Sabbats. By placing the psychoactive agents associated with witches’ ointments in this context, including popular magic, poisoning, magical healing, and particularly the medieval medical pharmacopeia, Hatsis shows that far from being exotic substances removed from the mainstream of everyday life during the early modern period, psychoactive plants and the potions and ointments derived from them were employed in a wide variety of ways, as medicines, sleeping potions, poisons, magical objects worn as amulets (rather than consumed), and adulterants to enhance the effects of beer and wine. The use of them to induce magical and mystical experiences did not require a radical break with normal routines and practices, but instead could be a seamless extension of them. Hatsis thus makes a strong case that, as he argues in his conclusion, “while there wasn’t really a witches’ ointment, there was a variety of mystifying mixtures . . . that involved psyche-magical visionary experiences” employed by a small but significant minority of people in medieval and early modern society. Neither a baseless invention of the demonologists, as skeptics have argued, nor a common or organized religious practice, as romantics have claimed, the use of hallucinogens was a foundation in the reality of associated witch beliefs. Furthermore, and far more importantly, it was a component of popular magical practices, as Hatsis says, “the true breadth and nature of which remains unknown today.” The issue is no longer did such substances exist and were they used? It is now how were they used, by whom, how extensively, for what purposes, and to what effect?

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PREFACE

This book began in 2007. I was living in Milan, Italy, finishing up my master's thesis, "starving hysterical naked" (to quote poet Allen Ginsburg) and desperately trying to learn the Italian language so I could talk to the cute Bolognese girl living three doors down. My thesis focused on the 1950s, when LSD was not the horror drug it has become known as today. Rather, it was then considered a wonder drug that promised to usher in new understandings of the human (and animal) mind. In those days one could speak of psychedelics without making the listener cringe. The term *psychedelic* itself was not a colloquialism but an esoteric word of intellectuals. The study of psychedelics and the mental states they occasion was going to be just another academic pursuit—a class to fulfill an undergraduate math major's humanities requirement.

Like any student interested in learning psychedelic history and culture, I had lived much of my life believing that drugs like LSD had just appeared in the 1960s, causing a bunch of people to tune in, turn on, and drop out, before the drugs were quickly made illegal. While writing my undergraduate thesis, a biography of Timothy Leary, I discovered that there was an earlier era of psychedelic drug use in Western culture, before the 1960s. My later master's thesis focused on that much richer history of LSD, which lasted roughly a decade (known historically as the "fabulous fifties"), when a new and exciting experimental drug, LSD, reached American shores and promised relief for a variety of mental disorders. I wondered: if the Western psychedelic experience goes back even a decade before I once believed it did, could it possibly go back even further?

While writing my Timothy Leary thesis, a friend let me borrow^{*2} Richard Rudgley's *The Alchemy of Culture*, a survey, as the subtitle indicates, of "intoxicants in culture," wherein the author mentions a "witches' ointment" over a few pages. I found the idea intriguing but limited, as these early modern period ointments had little to do with my

1960s focus. What the book did accomplish for me, however, was to open a door—a door that led to a history of the psychedelic experience in the West before the 1960s. Reading Leary’s work for my thesis, I was aware that psychedelic visionary experiences had existed and played a role in cultures around the world, throughout history. But even Leary himself had lamented that the West held no history of psychedelia, which is exactly why he appropriated the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, to which he wed his ideas about psychedelics.

But there had been Richard Rudgley’s *The Alchemy of Culture*, which seemed firm in its assertion that some kind of “hallucinatory experience induced by intoxicants in the ointments” existed during the early modern period. I decided to check his sources and came across Michael Harner’s groundbreaking article about witches’ ointments in *Hallucinogens and Shamanism* (1973). The article, though both scholarly and enthralling, wasn’t enough; I wanted to know more. I scoured bookstores and libraries looking for a full-length volume about the legendary witches’ ointment. There was none. I spent the next five years collecting facsimiles of Latin manuscripts, translating them and looking for the historical truth, if any, of the early modern period psychedelic experience (used here anachronistically) in the form of a witches’ ointment.

What I found, however, was not one use but a variety of practices, some malefic, others possibly entheogenic,^{*3} and still others purely recreational. I call these phenomena *psyche-magical* experiences. When Saskatchewan psychiatrist Humphrey Osmond first coined the term *psychedelic*, he meant it as nothing more than “mind manifesting.” Think, therefore, of *psyche-magical* as “mind manifesting to gain the ability to manipulate, communicate with, or otherwise experience a supernatural world.”

I am all too aware that I am stuck with twenty-first-century terminology to describe an experience for which there is little recorded history. Words like *vision*, *ecstasy*, etc., are used throughout this work in a limited sense to mean *psyche-magical*. Furthermore, words like *drug*, *psychoactive*, *hallucinogen*, and the like will also be used interchangeably. They are meant to carry neither positive nor negative associations; consider these words neutral, unless otherwise specified.

I am in no way reducing medieval and early modern period magic to drug use. I merely aim to show first how these drugs fit in with the broader system of magic, and second, how the early modern church demonized the experiences people had while using these drugs. The picture is complicated, the road winding, the record incomplete, but clues do exist, which can at the very least lead us in the right direction.

These kinds of experiences crop up every now and then in the historical record, from the chills of Siberia to the jungles of Mesoamerica and throughout the rest of the world. Sometimes they are accepted by the society in which they occur, other times condemned. The following pages demonstrate how some Western ecclesiastical writers demonized the psyche-magical experiences produced by drugs as the “witches’ ointment” of the early modern period.

INTRODUCTION

A woman, alone at night, pulls an ointment jar from a chest hidden beneath her bed. Opening the container, she scoops a handful of the foul-smelling goop—the witches’ ointment, *lamiarum unguenta*—into her palm. She turns to an ordinary broom in the shadows of the corner, the kind that her neighbors foolishly believe has no other use than that of sweeping—maybe killing a mouse or two. At present, this woman intends to do neither. Grasping the besom, she smears the long wooden handle with her witches’ ointment, destroying the freshly woven spiderwebs that now trail her fingertips. Straddling the oily broomstick, she is instantly lifted out the window into the ethers to join scores of other women who have similarly anointed implements, soaring alongside demons that fill out the aerial entourage. As they glide over rooftops and clouds, dotting the moon in their wake, all are careful not to mention the name of God or Christ lest they plunge to their deaths. They are traveling to a faraway meadow leagues beyond the watchful eyes of the clergy and their neighbors where they will join others already assembled, reveling and worshipping Satan: the Sabbat. Should any newcomer wish to join Satan’s congregation she must pay homage to him by renouncing her Christian faith and trampling a large cross conveniently placed before her feet. Finally, she must solidify her devotion by planting the obscene kiss, the *osculum infame*, on the Devil’s derriere. Now a full member of the sect, she will join the others in a fine banquet of murdered child’s flesh. They will feast heartily only to discover that the food lacks all taste and oddly leaves the diners still hungry. Afterward, she will engage in such wicked debauches as dancing backward and fornicating with demons.

Satan had conspired to rule the world and conscripted gullible witches to help carry out his nefarious plans. He would eventually send his flock away, but not before instructing them in the malefic arts (*maleficia*, or “evil magic”), which include preparing ointments and potions from the remains

of dead children. These mixtures could be used to inflict harm or death on the populace, raise storms and disease, and stir hatred among pious Christians.



The above, more or less, is what some demonologists believed witches practiced during the height of the witch trials, ca. 1550–1650, when tens of thousands of women and men burned at the stake for their supposed diabolical crimes. Scholars largely agree that the Sabbat first appeared in Europe in the texts of ecclesiastics writing in the 1430s. The witches' Sabbat was a composite idea fueled by the literate class's appropriation and redefinitions of numerous templates. Indeed, all of these acts associated with the Sabbat—night flying, demonic congregation, satanic worship, wild orgies, cannibalism, and celestial insurgency—were quite separate ideas at one time, derived from folklore, ecclesiastical ideas regarding heresy, and common ideas about magic and demonology that had been developing over the preceding centuries.

These components were tampered with and eventually amalgamated into the image of the diabolical witch performing her *maleficia* within a larger witch cult. One of these offenses, though, was a newcomer to the stereotype of the witch. While all those other ideas such as night flight, cannibalism, demonic orgies, etc., evolved between the eleventh through the fifteenth centuries, the notion of an ointment used to enable flying through the air started to appear in the written record only around the early fifteenth century, on the cusp of theocrats' formulation of the witch stereotype.

Witches' ointments were magical drug pastes, ointments, and oils that women and men were said to smear over their bodies, and later, over “flying” vehicles such as brooms and rakes. Those thus anointed would then fall into a deep sleep, a *soporatum*,¹ experience fantastic visions, and upon waking, claim to have traveled great distances and copulated with others.² Contemporary reports have led some modern scholars to theorize that the so-called witches' ointments contained soporific, hallucinogenic, or otherwise psychotropic ingredients mostly culled from the Solanaceae family of plants, and that the effects of these drugs were the cause of such

bizarre delusions.³ This theory is not without evidence; most historians of medieval European magic agree that several kinds of medical folk magic existed and were practiced by low-status women and men.⁴ There is little doubt that this folk magic involved the use of plants and herbs in remedies and potions.⁵ Mostly when ointments and potions are mentioned in trial records of this time, they are used to heal, cause insanity, and incite love in humans, or to harm or cause death in people or animals.⁶ A scholarly yet romantic subgroup within this milieu holds that the ointments did exist, they had an unbroken link to antiquity, and they were smeared on brooms and inserted into the vagina or rectum, thus inaugurating our modern idea of witches “riding” on brooms.⁷ This theory is rejected by others who believe that the ointments were a “product of either harmless folklore or demonological theory . . . not effective mind-altering substances.”⁸ These skeptics maintain that during the period when the witch stereotype first began to crystalize, clergymen, lawyers, inquisitors, demonologists, and other members of the learned class fabricated their own fantasies about witchcraft, attaching diabolical implications to otherwise harmless folk practices. To the modern skeptics, the witches’ ointment bubbled up not from any crone’s cauldron but from the vivid imaginations of the priestly class and its long-held traditions concerning apostasy.

While some of the medieval witch trials certainly originated in this manner,^{*4} and those charged with witchcraft, once charged with other witch-related crimes, were often compelled to confess to having attended Sabbats after being arrested for practicing magic, there is previously overlooked evidence indicating that the witches’ ointment, like other aspects of the witch stereotype, had a foundation in real folk sorcery, i.e., intentional drug use. There is reluctance by some to consider the possibility that a few of these potions were vended for private use to clients specifically for their psychotropic effects. The argument is made in several ways, but can be summed up as follows: “The earliest recipes [of witches’ ointments] . . . consist not of narcotics, but of . . . disagreeable but nontoxic substances.”⁹ But the evidence suggests otherwise.



While all magic may seem like the same clatter to us today, to those living in Western Europe during the early modern period, defining what constituted magic was not so simple. Although trial dossiers of the time are terse on the modes of folk magic and often “specify neither means nor ends,”¹⁰ we can nonetheless get a taste of local magic by the practices that inquisitors and others of the literate class documented. Some of these arts involved weather magic, lot casting, invocation, image magic, medical magic, murder through magical means, poison magic (*veneficia*¹⁵), and love magic.

Of these latter two categories, further breakdowns are possible: some kinds of love magic were “sympathetic” in nature—saying certain words while winding the shirt of the person the lovelorn person hoped to gain affection from was one technique,¹¹ placement of magical objects in proximity to the target was another method. Other forms of *veneficia* specifically dealt with ingesting poisons and elixirs of various types, the contents of which comprise the present study.¹² *Veneficia* also included truly spiteful poisonings, in which the ultimate outcome was indeed surreptitious homicide. A modern historian put it this way: “A *veneficus* . . . is not ‘a witch,’ since the latter may include the former but the former does not necessarily imply the latter.”¹³

This is the story of how *veneficia* of the sorcery kind (i.e., not just homicidal poisoning) got swept up into the witch stereotype and thereby became a tool of diabolical witchcraft in the opinions of church authorities. It is the story of an early medieval canonical belief, outlined in the famous Canon Episcopi (or Capitulum Episcopi), a certain passage found in medieval canon law that was debated and readapted by theologians over time. By the beginning of the early modern period this process had transformed local forms of witchcraft into a new heresy. It is also the story of how the Canon’s original condemnation of a specific folk belief once found dubious—that of night riding with ancient goddesses—was reinterpreted by theologians centuries later to prove that witches really did exist. It is the story of folk magic and the knowledge of the poisons some people used to practice those arts and rites. Finally, it is the story of how, within this theological redefinition of the witch in the early fifteenth century, the witches’ ointment was used to explain how witches flew to the Sabbat.

An Internet search of *witches' ointments* will draw nearly one million hits. The validity of the information available is at best questionable; however, the zealousness of the writers is without question. While some academics, both conservative and romantic, can be praised for their contributions to the field, shoddy research from some conspiracy writers has led some academics to reject the possible reality of these magical ointments, and for good reason—most of this “history” by the conspiracy theorists is critically and contextually inadequate.¹⁴ Nonetheless, wholly denying the existence of the psyche-magical experience during the early modern period in Western Europe, as I discovered, is merely zealotry of a different kind. Modern-day skeptics have predispositions that are obvious;¹⁵ their reasons for this skepticism, however, remain debatable.

For now, let us suspend all partiality and start the investigation anew. Let's reject feeble proclamations and focus on the best evidence; let's put that evidence into historical context. Let's shine a light into dark torture rooms, eavesdrop on the fireside lore of the superstitious, aid a village sorceress as she casts her spells, congregate with heretics gathered under cover of night, delve into the minds of fanatical inquisitors, stand in magic circles with necromancers, and see what reality, if any, exists surrounding the lore of the enchanting witches' ointment.

1

HELEN'S TEARS

They have mingled herbs and words which are not without harmful intention.

VIRGIL

Can a chemical substance be given instructions?

QUINTILIAN

A SIMPLE SORCERER

Catarina's eighteen-mile journey north through the Italian countryside, from Pieve to Ripabianca, proved arduous indeed. In the early fifteenth century, even short-distance travel was fraught with perils of both the natural and the supernatural kind. Land maps—rare, expensive, and largely reserved for magistrates—often included geographical errors left uncorrected since the days of ancient Greece.¹ Crude roads might lead Catarina into a forest but held no promise of leading her out again; bandits lay ready and waiting, temporarily unpeeling themselves from the precarious backdrop of night to rob, rape, and kill any unfortunate passersby. Even if Catarina managed to evade such assailants, she might not so easily slip by the wild animals that also prowled the forests; and certainly not the insects. There were also the supernatural dangers: ghosts, fairies, elves, kobolds, to say nothing of the fabled Italian “landladies conversant with the evil arts,” who turned people into horses, asses, and cows for use as temporary laborers.² Finally, Catarina also had to contend with the demons that haunted the very air she breathed.³



These, then, were some of the threats Catarina faced on her way to see Matteuccia di Francesco, a “simple sorcerer and herbal healer” of Ripabianca whose renowned magical skills attracted clients from far and wide.⁴ Yet the hardships Catarina endured on her journey seemed trivial compared to the punishment that awaited her if she failed. She needed an abortifacient; a pregnancy courtesy of a priest in Pieve with whom she was romantically involved could have had them both ostracized. To avoid igniting a scandal, Catarina undertook the hazardous trip to see Matteuccia. The sorceress’s help, apparently, was worth the trouble. She arrived in Ripabianca, found Matteuccia, and followed her instructions precisely: burn a female mule hoof to ash, mix with wine, drink the concoction, and recite the words, “I take you in the name of the sin and of the Great Demon, that it might never stick.”^{*6 5} Presumably closing the spell with the words “never stick” would cause any pregnancy to miscarry.

Journeys like Catarina’s were not an infrequent occurrence at the dawn of the early modern period. Fifteenth century common folk had at least three good reasons to seek out *vetulas expertissimas*, “highly expert old women,” rather than professional physicians for their medical needs.⁶ First, consulting the former was in many cases just as good as visiting the latter, as official credentials offered little guarantee of quality service to the infirm. One contemporary, the Italian druggist Saladin d’Ascoli, writing around 1488 warned his readers that “the ignorance and unskilfulness [*sic*] of spice-dealers is wont very often to lead the most famous doctors and the most learned physicians to infamy and lose [*sic*].”⁷ And the situation does not seem to have improved by the following century.⁸ A second (and probably the usual) reason for a lower-class person to eschew a university-trained physician for a local specialist was, above all, fiscal pragmatism: most people couldn’t afford to pay the fee of an expert. Finally, if a client demanded secret treatment to avoid public scandal (as in Catarina’s case), she or he often consulted *vetulas expertissimas* like Matteuccia, who kept knowledge of spells, incantations, amulet-making, and *veneficia*.

The *venecopeia* of such magicians included natural diuretics, purgatives, and psychoactives. The *veneficae*—the practitioners of *veneficia*—harbored knowledge of plants and poisons, understood the differences

between medicinal and fatal doses, and conjoined them with other magical practices. Consequently, a mistake in dosage or an unwelcome outcome by the sorcerer's client could result in a witchcraft accusation.⁹



When fourth-century BCE Athenian law orator and statesman Demosthenes wrote his deposition against the Lemnian witch Theôris, he was composing one of the earliest references to drugs in conjunction with incantations—a wedding of terms that would later mean “magic” in Latin prose.¹⁰ Demosthenes was among the first to use the Grecian name for those mixers of chants and poisons, *pharmakis* (from which our word *pharmacist* derives), when he ordered the death of Theôris: “The reason for [her trial],” Demosthenes explains, “was her drugs [*pharmaka*],” which she used to either drive people mad or cure their ailments.¹¹ Although Plato's earlier meaning for *pharmakeia* included decidedly nonpoisonous magical arts—the use of puppets, for example—this would change shortly after his death in ca. 347 BCE. The term *pharmakis* would become the customary word for “wise woman” or “witch” until its replacement by the later Latinized *venefica*.¹²

Plutarch called Theôris a “priestess” (*hiereia*)¹³; yet come the Middle Ages most other informal lay healers/poisoners existed in a lower-class social stratum alongside local diviners, seers, amulet dealers, and jugglers. Sometimes several of these skills overlapped in a single person. Indeed, a diviner might possess knowledge of *veneficia*; and a *venefica* might prophesy as well as poison—there was no telling what kind of odd skills a local magician might possess.¹⁴ Proximity to forests, herbal knowledge passed down for generations, experience gained through trial and error—any number of sources contributed to the formulas of the *venefica*.¹⁵ As early as the first century CE, Pliny the Elder mentioned such people in his *Natural History*, a compendium covering such diverse topics as astronomy, botany, geography, zoology, and “the entire scope of pharmacy in the classical world.”¹⁶ Many herbs remained unknown, he wrote, because “only illiterate country folk try them out, for they indeed are the only ones who live among them.”¹⁷ He cites the abundance of educated doctors as the reason most people living in urban areas remained ignorant of folk herbs.

Three centuries later, St. Augustine gave an early and general caution as to the drugs of these country folk, spread about by Christians seeking magical medicines:

A man has a pain in his head. A neighbor male or female will say to you, [“]There is an enchanter here, there is a healer here, and a wizard somewhere.[”] You say, “I am a Christian, it is not lawful for me.” And if he says to you, “Why? Am I not Christian?” You should say, “But I am one of the faithful.” And he will answer, “I too have been baptized.” . . . [Enchanters and healers] lead astray by bindings, by precantationes, by devices of the Enemy, [and] mix with their precantationes the Name of Christ; because they are now able to lead Christians astray so as to give them a poison, they add a little honey, so that that which is bitter may be hidden by the sweet and the draught may be drunk to their destruction.¹⁸

Centuries earlier, famed physician Dioscorides warned of this practice in *Liber de venenis*: “[Poisoners] remove the bitterness [of poisons] by adding something sweet. They also mix poisons with drugs and put them in drinks and meals.”¹⁹

Veneficae held no degrees or certifications, attended no meetings, and gave no lectures detailing the secrets of their arts. They were acknowledged as medicine women and men only by their clients.²⁰ They had no extensive cultic connection that bound them together, though they did know, learn from, and teach one another these arts, and thus carried knowledge of psychotropic, medicinal, and poisonous herbs, roots, and animals from antiquity through even the darkest of ages and into the Renaissance.²¹ The presence of veneficae is firmly established in medieval law codes and penitentials, which confirm their knowledge of the effects of poisons and drugs centuries before the early modern period and the formulation of the witch stereotype; the witch stereotype that placed an ever-expanding emphasis on the devil’s role in sorcery, linking folklore to heresy; the witch stereotype that was unfolding right around the time that Matteuccia was openly practicing her craft.



And so she had to die.

For years, the secular courts of Ripabianca tolerated Matteuccia's activities, allowing her to mix her elixirs, cast her spells, and spew her incantations. But a pact with Satan? That was too much for Lorenzo de' Surdi, captain and protector of the peace of the city of Rome, who ordered Matteuccia burned lest her blasphemies further deceive pious Christians. Her transition from tolerated sorceress to demonic witch is outlined by Novello Scudieri, notary and secretary for witchcraft in Todi, who recorded her as living as "a citizen in conformity of the statutes of the commune of Todi" while dichotomously cultivating an "evil life and reputation."²²

Nearly all societies had "informal healers," those who used magic, folklore, and medicinal flora and fauna to "heal" what ailed their clients.²³ Todi was no exception. Matteuccia was not a social outcast spurned by her neighbors for her magical practices but was rather a famous sorceress, specializing in love magic, who served many people. Unfortunately, it was becoming apparent in Europe at this time that those with a stake in magic would sooner or later find themselves tied to one. A transition was taking place; the sorcery and superstitious remedies used by medicine women and men that had in the past largely been disregarded by authorities was looking ever more demonic to judges, lawyers, lay magistrates, and of course, theologians and demonologists. Matteuccia was but one of many folk sorceresses who represent a way for us to understand that tectonic shift.



Until the late eighteenth century, religion and magic were intimately tied to medicine.²⁴ Because much medicine had found a home in the monasteries, local healers represented a "magical competition" to the arts of medical clergymen, who castigated the lay healers' cures as satanically inspired.²⁵ Restraints on such magical-medicinal arts varied in time and place. Many times those variations depended on gender; other times they did not. While women did not necessarily outnumber men as healers, they were certainly viewed askance by the more misogynistic members of their community. In England in the fourteenth century, for example, physicians successfully lobbied to legally ban uneducated male physicians and *all* women (educated or not) from medical practice,²⁶ while in other areas some women attended

universities (although the practice was uncommon). Alessandra Giliani (ca. 1307–1326 CE), the first woman to be recorded in historical documents as practicing anatomy (which today would be called pathology), studied surgery under Mondino de Luzzi, the “restorer of anatomy,” at the University of Bologna during the early fourteenth century. Not only was she an adept anatomist, she was also a clever chemist who devised a system of dyeing veins with “liquid of a suitable color” so as to not only make them “so perfectly presented in their own natural colors, but also to keep the veins from spoiling.” Due to conditions of life in those days Alessandra didn’t live to see her twentieth birthday, dying at age nineteen. Her methods, however, advanced by de Luzzi, achieved “great praise, fame and esteem everywhere.”²⁷ Though women like Alessandra can-not be considered the norm, chroniclers in Paris recorded toward the end of the thirteenth century that nine female doctors (five surgeons, two barber-surgeons, and two midwives) lived in that city. This trend was not to last, however, and by the beginning of the following century educated physicians worked diligently to overturn such privileges.^{*7 28} In Italy, where women benefited from the legal right to practice medicine, Matteuccia honed her craft while enjoying the insouciance of immunity.



That was until a fiery preacher, Bernardino of Siena, whom future generations would know as “the Apostle of Italy,” arrived in Todi during the winter of 1426. Bernardino’s travels throughout Italy brought him into contact with thousands of people. Some embraced him while others spurned him. Indeed, when Bernardino preached, pious but penniless admirers stood beside equally penniless critics—a situation that caused obvious problems. Once, after reading a sermon before a large crowd, an audience member slapped him; two assassination plots against him were thwarted.

City officials tolerated his presence largely for two reasons: first, in the centuries before the printing press, preachers played a crucial role as information distributors;²⁹ and second, Bernardino brought tourist business to cities and towns. Despite the clamor his visits caused, civil authorities often exhausted any resource to get a good preacher to deliver sermons in

the public square. And it's easy to understand why: one of Bernardino's visits to Siena brought 30,000 florins in tourist money to that city.³⁰

Notary and Secretary for Witchcraft in Todi, Novello Scudieri, records the kind of career a successful sorceress might have enjoyed during the early fifteenth century, and allows us to peek into some of the forms of superstition that haunted quotidian life. Among many other charges that Scudieri records, Matteuccia was accused of various kinds of love magic. Once when a young man complained to her that he was in love with a girl set to wed another man, Matteuccia told him to burn a candle at a certain crossroads during the time of the wedding. He was further to recite these words to the melting wax: "As this candle bends in this heat, so may bridegroom and bride never be united in love."³¹

But folk traditions didn't rely solely on wax and wistful wishing. Matteuccia also possessed knowledge of plants and herbs—the very *veneficia* she employed in several of her *pocula amatoria*, or love potions.

QUINTILIAN'S QUESTION

Otherwise known as a *love philter*, a *poculum amatoria* (literally "love cup") was both a stupeficient and an exciter that "impair[ed] the senses and stirs within . . . apparitions and frenzied loves."³² Sometimes the potion caused such delirium that the user died carelessly by her or his own hands. Poliziano, a flamboyant fifteenth-century Florentine professor, recalled a man "who drank the philters, and straightaway fell upon his sword in a madness. . . . [He] had totally lost his mind."³³ Concocted of various plants, herbs, and roots (sometimes psychoactive, sometimes not), body hairs, menstrual blood, breast milk, and animal parts, *pocula amatoria* had been employed for centuries to "lull all pain and anger, and bring forgetfulness of every sorrow," as Helen of Troy famously lamented in Homer's *Odyssey*.³⁴ It was said, after all, that the first psychoactive plants sprouted from the very spot where Helen's tears fell to the soil.

Ancient Greeks and Romans had an assortment of uses for these plant poisons and root intoxicants, yet used the terms *venenum* (poison) and *veneficia* (poison magic, a term synonymous with Demosthenes' *pharmakis*) interchangeably, indicating one viewpoint on two different drug practices. What mattered was the practitioner's intent. For instance, a

Grecian woman gave a man a love philter, the power of which was so strong that he died. However, the Areopagus, the Athenian High Court of Appeals (for civil law), acquitted her on the grounds that she “had given [the deceased] the philter out of love, but had failed in her purpose. So the homicide was clearly not intentional, because she had not given him the philter with the intention of doing away with him.”³⁵ Some of these drugs, like mandrake and hemlock (which I will discuss in greater detail in chapter 4), are mentioned specifically in the 81 BCE law of the Roman general Sulla.³⁶ Therefore, the confusion arises not because we are ignorant of the drugs used, but rather because classical authors used the word *venenum* in conjunction with a spectrum of drug effects: fatal poisoning, sleep inducing, madness causing, love stimulating, magic making, and medicating (recall that Theôris’s *pharmaka* could cure, drive insane, or kill). The Lex Cornelia de Maiestate, a Roman law passed by Sulla during his dictatorship from 81 to 80 BCE, tried to categorize these diverse drug actions, but still furnishes us with only vague terminology (e.g., *venenum mala*, “bad poison,” and *venenum bene*, “good poison”), again reinforcing a concern with intent and indifference to the *kind* of drugs employed. The most likely explanation is that each incident was considered on a case-by-case basis and must have rested on one pertinent question regarding the definition of *mala* in the Lex Cornelia: “‘known beforehand to be poisonous,’ or ‘proved in the event to be poisonous.’”³⁷ The drugs themselves were simply taken for granted. For years, pocula amatoria existed in this legal purgatory.

The second-century Roman rhetorician Quintilian, recognizing this linguistic problem, resolved that if pocula amatoria or other potions caused illness, madness, death, or all three, the perpetrator should be charged with using *venenum mala*, bad poison, even if the drug’s intended use had been to use it as *venenum bene*, good poison. By this time intent mattered less, and was superseded by outcome.³⁸ Quintilian also grants us an early association between *veneficia* and other magic in the form of a question: “Whether [magical crimes (*carmina magorum*) and poison magic (*veneficia*)] ought to be called by the same name?” He was concerned with how these crimes should be defined in the Lex Cornelia for purposes of punishment.³⁹

Also working off the Lex Cornelia, fifth-century emperor Marcian wrote two *senatus consulta* (texts emanating from the ancient Roman

senate) dealing with drug punishments. The first chastised the use of fertility drugs taken by women in cases that led to her death. Intent aside, the offender should be punished, because the very act involved a “bad precedent.” The second dealt with general poisoners who “rashly dispense[d]” powerful and chancy drugs. Again, the shift here is away from intent, and instead the focus is on negligent use.⁴⁰ Roman jurist Julius Paulus Prudentissimus, writing at the end of the third century CE, warns in book 5 of his *Opinions of Julius Paulus, Addressed to his Son*: “Persons who administer potions for the purpose of causing abortion (*abortionis*), or love philtres (*pocula amatoria*), even if they do not do so maliciously, still, because the act affords a bad example, shall if of inferior rank, be sentenced to the mines; if of superior rank, they shall be relegated to an island, after having been deprived of their property.” Death awaited the venefica whose customer died, malicious forethought or not.⁴¹ We meet the nascent stages of merging veneficia with sorcery in Paulus’s *Opinions*, for under the same section that deals with love philters he condemns those “who celebrate, or cause to be celebrated, impious or nocturnal rites, so as to enchant, bewitch, or bind anyone.” The penalty is severe: perpetrators were to be crucified or fed to wild beasts.⁴²

Centuries after Julius Paulus bequeathed such notions to his son, the association between psychoactive and otherwise poisonous plants and pocula amatoria hadn’t changed much; the only difference was that herbal drugs, as opposed to symbolic ingredients (e.g., hair, semen, nails), were specifically identified with the magical arts: for example, section 19 of the Salic law, an ancient Germanic law code ca. 500, is titled “Concerning Magic Philters or Poisoned Potions,” and places heavy fines on anyone who gives any “herbal potion” that causes injury or death.⁴³

Quintilian’s question had been answered.

THE TRIAL OF MUMMOLUS

And that answer damned Mummolus in the middle of the sixth century.

Only Mummolus’s captors could hear him scream as the *strappado* hoisted his scarred body into the cold air of the torture room. For those unfamiliar with this device, the strappado involved binding a prisoner’s hands behind the back and attaching another rope to the wrists; the torturers

would tug the rope through a pulley system, yanking the arms upward, dislocating the shoulders and tearing at the joints. It was an ingenious way of getting an unfortunate soul to confess to anything. Queen Fredegonda's son Thierry was dead; someone—*anyone*—had to be held accountable.

Given his loyal service to the crown as both a prefect and military general, Mummolus might have believed he was above suspicion. However, Fredegonda was “thoroughly barbaric in her genius,”⁴⁴ and before Mummolus met the infamous torture device, a group of local Parisian sorceresses had already been brought in for questioning; none survived. Gregory of Tours, Gallo-Roman historian and bishop of Tours, recorded the witches' gruesome end: “[Queen Fredegonda] caused some to be drowned and delivered others over to fire, and tied others to wheels [spread-eagle and beaten with mallets] until their bones were broken.”⁴⁵ It was only just before some of these women met their unfortunate end that Mummolus' name spilled from their lips, prompting his summons before the Inquisition.^{*8} While it is true that during his torture Mummolus confessed to obtaining “ointments and potions” from the women, it will serve us well to investigate why he was initially arraigned.



One night over dinner at a fellow high-ranking official's house, the host confessed to Mummolus that some young boy he knew was dying of dysentery. Mummolus assured the official that he had “an herb at hand, a draught of which will soon cure a sufferer from dysentery no matter how desperate the case.” Somehow this information got relayed to Fredegonda, which infuriated her for reasons unspecified in the record. She brought in the unfortunate local sorceresses who, under torture, implicated Mummolus. Mummolus did not deny seeking these women for help but claimed it was not for maleficia or incantations, the actual charges brought against him. His only admission was that he “often received from these women ointments and potions to secure for him the favor of the king and queen.” While his intentions (whatever they were) might have been magical they certainly weren't malefic. Perhaps Mummolus was trying to obtain some form of poculum amatoria for the royal family's private enjoyment? Or maybe he intended to use these mixtures himself for some kind of magical

purpose that would make him seem more attractive to the royal family? It would seem that Fredegonda used drug potions herself to manipulate subordinates. One story outlined by Gregory tells of Fredegonda urging two assassins to take a drug that would give them fearlessness in their task to kill Sigebert, Germanic king of Austrasia.⁴⁶ Nevertheless, whatever the reason, Mummolus would not admit to any foul play on the part of Thierry's death.

Sadly, after the torturers loosened the rope suspending him, Mummolus, too, tried to alleviate the tension by asking his captors to let King Chilperic know that he had "no ill effect of the tortures inflicted." Presumably, he meant that he felt no ill-will toward the king for trying to determine how his son had passed and accepted his abuse as a means to that end. However, Chilperic mistook this as proof that Mummolus hadn't been harmed by the torture—a sure sign of the prefect's magical powers.⁴⁷ Mummolus was tied to the wheel and beaten mercilessly; torturers shoved wooden splints up his finger and toenails. Still, he confessed to nothing remotely evil, all the while speaking openly of elixirs that were obviously not wicked in nature, as there would have been no reason to continue the torture once he spoke of them. Eventually, Mummolus was released; Fredegonda seized all his possessions and banished him to his home city, Bordeaux, where he died shortly thereafter.

Unfortunately, following Greek and Roman legal tradition, medieval records like Gregory of Tours' account of Mummolus's trial, which possibly points to poisons placed in potions, powders, or ointments, rarely mention specific drugs, which were of tertiary concern, coming after the practitioner's intent and the victim's outcome.



The laws of later centuries would fully adopt the standards of Quintilian's answer. In the early ninth century, Egbert of Wessex made sure to include in his *Penitential of Egbert* a punishment for those women who used "witchcraft, and enchantment, and magical philters."⁴⁸ The Latin texts call this latter kind of magic *veneficium*⁴⁹; their Anglo-Saxon counterparts use the term *unlibban*,⁵⁰ specifically connoting "something medicinal and potent, a harmful or powerful drug."⁵¹ Egbert also distinguished penalties

between those who dabbled in these poisons and those who accidentally killed with them. A decade before Egbert died, delegates attending the Council of Paris in 829 CE complained that alongside other “very dangerous evils” like astrology, divination, and dream analysis, certain persons were “capable of perverting the minds of others with the devil’s illusions [via] philters, drugged food, and phylacteries,” an early coupling of demonic deceptions with potent, mind-altering drugs.⁵² Around 1260, the Castilian king Alonzo the Wise (aka Alfonso X), in his *Siete Partidas* (Seven-Part Code), categorized those who employed “love herbs” (*yerbas para enamoramiento*), along with “soothsayers” (*agoreros*), “sorcerers” (*sorteros*), “diviners” (*adevinos*), “enchanters” (*hechiceros*), and “scoundrels” (*truanes*).⁵³ Alonzo attributed the powers of love philters to herbs, not sympathetic magical accoutrements like hair, menstrual blood, animal entrails, or clothing scraps. The Sicilian king Frederick II (r. 1212–20) also made this connection between love potions and effective drugs in his *Constitutions of Melfi*, despite his skepticism of their ability to arouse love or hate (as opposed to madness and death): “Those who administer love potions, or noxious, illicit, or exorcized food for such purposes shall be put to death if the recipient loses his life or senses.” Even using ineffective potions ran the risk of a year in prison.⁵⁴



The use of sorcery to achieve some form of ultimately selfish end seems to have been part of common life for Europeans during the early modern period. In some instances this sorcery involved spending what little money one had on potions and poisons. Indeed, in most towns there was some magician ready to take a person’s money in exchange for some form of supernatural help, whether by amulets, psyche-magical elixirs, or blessings.

Matteuccia was such a vendor. Although many of her spells for lovesick persons involved drugless superstitions, buried in the trial dossiers are some curious remarks suggesting that the witch of Todi at times used drugs both as philters and as harmful poisons. For those who called on her for pocula amatoria, she instructed them to take an undocumented herb, “enchanted by her incantations,” and feed it to the person her customer hoped to attract.⁵⁵ They were then to wash their hands and face with water

and give the wash water to their quarry to drink. The incantations and the washings probably served as a means of symbolically reinforcing the magic, but it was the herb that gave the spell efficacy by giving the user an effect that she or he could feel physically.⁵⁶ Although we do not know the name of the particular herb, it might have caused some form of inebriated psychic arousal—an aphrodisiac perhaps—the kind of *venenum* (poison) used in *veneficium* (poison magic) at the crux of Quintilian’s question. Matteuccia also instructed Giovanna of San Martino to sweeten with sugar a “certain reed,” wash her hands and feet in wine, and give the meal to her husband. The reed might have been the giant cane, *Arundo donax*, native to Italy, a plant that recent studies have shown to contain the tryptamines bufotenine and dimethyltryptamine (DMT).⁵⁷

However, not all of Matteuccia’s potions were supposed to arouse maddening passions. Other tonics were “mercenary” in nature and used by spurned lovers as magical tools of vengeance.⁵⁸ One woman who lamented her husband’s abuse asked Matteuccia for a way “to make restitution for the numerous and great indignities he visited on her daily.” Matteuccia gave the woman the herb horsetail (*Equisetum arvense*) and told her to cook it with an egg and feed the mixture to her husband. We can infer that the woman took great pleasure in watching her husband walk around “deranged to the point of insanity for three days” after he ate the meal. It is written that Matteuccia sold this recipe to a “great and uncountable number of women” in Perugia.⁵⁹ Horsetail is a powerful diuretic and doesn’t cause insanity as far as we know. It is possible that the sorceress’s client gave her husband a stupefying drug not unlike something found in a love philter, which Scudieri misidentified (he was, after all, a notary, not a botanist). The victim’s reaction—“deranged to the point of insanity”—to the drug (whatever it was) surely alludes to a psychoactive effect rather than a diuretic one. While it is possible that the abusive husband’s reaction was a culturally scripted reaction to bodily symptoms he took as signs of bewitchment,⁶⁰ we are given a further clue by the incantation Matteuccia told those women to say as their targets ate the meal: “I give you to drink, in the name of the specter and of the enchanted spirits, and may *be unable to sleep or rest* until you do what I would command you [*italics mine*].”⁶¹ Perhaps the plant was some kind of stimulant that drove a person crazy with

wakefulness? The credulous customer might have believed the incantation caused the delirium; only Matteuccia was the wiser woman.

The end of Matteuccia's trial record is most bizarre. Tacked on to her common folk spells are confessions of pacts with the devil, sucking blood out of nursing infants, and attending "Night-Doings" with other witches at Benevento, an area in Southern Italy infamous for its ties to magic and superstition. These witches didn't travel on foot to these "Doings," but rather rubbed an unguent over their bodies while reciting, "Ointment, ointment, bring me to the Night-Doings at Benevento, over water, over wind, over all bad weather."⁶² After anointing themselves, the witches were prepped for the main event. They continued chanting—this time to invoke the devil: "Oh Lucibel, demon of hell, after you were released you changed your name and have the name of Great Lucifer, come to me or send me one of your servants." Lucifer complied and sent demons in the form of black goats to carry the witches away to the night-doings. Matteuccia turned herself into a mouse, mounted a goat, and flew "over graves, like a shriek of lightning," to Benevento. Once there, the "Enemy of the Human Race" instructed those amassed to continue collecting the blood of babies to mix into their magical ointments. This Matteuccia allegedly did many times between the years 1422 and 1428 in several villages in and around the Todi area.⁶³

After her conviction Matteuccia was symbolically placed on a donkey with a miter over her head, her hands tied behind her back. The knight associate, Sir Giovanni of Lord Antonio de San Nazario of Pavia, led Matteuccia to the "customary public place of justice." To the ringing of the church bells crowds gathered to delight in the execution of the witch among them.⁶⁴

Scudieri also provides us with one final minor (but crucial) detail: "Beyond what has just been said," he tells us regarding Matteuccia's supposed visits to suck the blood of infants, she was able to fly to the night-doings by herself "while asleep," three days a week (Thursday, Saturday, and Sunday), six months out of the year (December, March, April, August, and September).⁶⁵ These trips were separable from her jaunts to collect infant blood to use in making more ointments, as her destination on those nights was always Benevento—not the home of a burgher.

To the crowd listening to the charges leveled against Matteuccia, Benevento made perfect sense; everyone knew that witches gathered there around a walnut tree. Before the coming of Barbatus to Benevento in 663 CE, the people of that duchy remained seized by their “fool-ish and degrading superstitions.”⁶⁶ One of the last vestiges of paganism stamped out of the burgeoning Christian Europe, Benevento, a duchy in Southern Italy with an infamous past, had a long history of involvement with magic, and this probably accounts for its inclusion in the records.



This chapter recounts how and why Matteuccia’s supposedly diabolical ointment originated.^{*9} Sulla’s law couldn’t be more explicit about the use of drugs in the love philters and magical ointments and potions in earlier times. These kinds of drugs were taken for granted in later laws that recognized their inclusion in magic and we can see them still used in some of Matteuccia’s magic. Most modern scholars maintain that “witchcraft,” as identified during the early modern period, represents a mingling of various myths cobbled together by the literate class. These myths are largely based on several noticeable subdivisions borne out in Matteuccia’s trial record: folk beliefs about magic, night flying, congregating with demons to commit blasphemous rites, and knowledge of hallucinogenic and soporific drug potions and ointments. By taking apart and reassembling all the aspects of these early modern period phenomena we will see how between the years 1430 and 1450 overzealous theologians amassed all of these ideas into a single theological conceptualization, that of the satanic witch. In the process, the origin of the witches’ ointment presents itself. While we cannot get behind the clerical prejudices found within the texts that describe these ointments, we can follow descriptions of these ointments historically and note the changes made in literary sources and trial records, as filtered through the lens of the new theologically motivated witch stereotype.⁶⁷

As will be shown, these ointments, like other aspects of the witch stereotype, are part of that hazy intermediate zone where folk beliefs and learned ideas collided, inspired, and reinforced one another.



And so now our journey begins, as tales of witchcraft and diabolism often do . . .

2

IN THE SILENCE OF DEEPEST NIGHT

*Whence many foolish children declare
That men by night, mere phantoms are
Who forth with Dame Habundia speed,
For, of all children born, indeed.*

GUILLAUME DE LORRIS AND JEAN DE MEUN,
THE ROMANCE OF THE ROSE

*That Diana they say is Fortune, [called] in the Italian language
Richella, that is, the mother of riches and good fortune.*

NICHOLAS OF CUSA

NIGHT DOINGS

Matteuccia's neighbors were hardly surprised by stories of night travelers.¹ Such tales date back to the nascent days of magical beliefs and span cultures the world over.² What needs to be determined is whether or not these beliefs involved the use of magical drug ointments. For our purposes, we need to travel back to the early tenth century CE, when Benedictine abbot Regino of Prüm composed his corpus of clerical callings, *Libri de synodalibus causis et disciplinis ecclesiasticis* (*Of Synodical Cases and Ecclesiastical Discipline*), ca. 906. Regino, a Benedictine abbot, compiled this two-volume work under the orders of Radbod, archbishop of Trier, who had employed several "synodal witnesses" (both clerical and secular) to

identify and inform him of various folk beliefs that he wished exorcised from the rural townships and backwoods areas of medieval Germany.³

Regino's collection of canonical writings, the *Libri de synodalibus*, includes the infamous Canon Episcopi, which addresses the problem of those "who have abandoned their Creator and seek favors from the Devil," such as fortune tellers and other such "criminals" (*maleficae*). Included among these misfits of the magical arts were "certain wicked women" who, having reverted to worshipping Satan, rode alongside other women who were really nothing more than demons in disguise:

Seduced by the fantastic illusion of demons, [they] insist that they ride at night on certain beasts alongside the pagan goddess, Diana, and many other women; they cross vast distances in the silence of deepest night; they obey the wills of the goddess as if she were their mistress; on particular nights they are called to wait on her.⁴

Diana (Artemis in Greek) had the reputation of being a rather "schizophrenic deity" who at once guarded animals but also turned lovers into beasts for slaughter. She was a goddess of both the sky and the earth—more accurately, the moon and vegetation—and insured the fertility of fields and females.⁵



The goddess Diana's first appearance in Western Christendom is found conveniently in the Bible. As Paul of Tarsus—the Apostle Paul—continued his journey to Macedonia by way of Ephesus, his converting of polytheists to monotheism started to rouse the ire of Demetrius, a local silversmith whose core business rested in forging shrines of Artemis (Diana). Fearing both a spiritual and a financial loss should his customers turn away from the goddess, Demetrius rallied other silversmiths and various artisans to put a stop to Paul's missionary activities. "[T]here is a danger . . . [that] Artemis will be scorned," he yelled before an angry mob, "and [that] she will be deprived of her majesty that brought all Asia and the world to worship her."

At this, the mob seized Paul's Macedonian companions, Gaius and Aristarchus, and began chanting, "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!" (Acts

19:28). They commandeered the local theater, shouting obscenities and threatening the two terrified Trinity-touting travelers. A man named Alexander tried to speak before the mob in an effort to calm them down. He met with some success until someone revealed that he was Jewish. This only further incensed the angry mob.

The riot was eventually quelled two hours later by a local clerk who rather pragmatically informed the crowd that since it “cannot be denied” that Artemis ruled Ephesus, someone should just take Gaius and Aristarchus to court over the matter (Acts 19:36). Once preliminary passions passed, however, the crowd simmered down and eventually dispersed and Paul’s companions were released to him. Many within the crowd, it turned out, didn’t even know what they were protesting. Paul summoned his Ephesian disciples, said farewell, and resumed his journey to Macedonia to continue spreading the new and highly controversial Christian message. Although modern scholarship has shown this passage in the Bible to have probably been a forgery,⁶ it was regarded as authentic throughout the Middle Ages.

The belief in Diana was persistent; tenth-century common folk still worshipped her or believed they roamed the night with her as the Canon Episcopi alleged. And Diana wasn’t alone among deities. Several surviving sources survey rites of fertility goddesses and gods meant to ensure abundant yields. Fifth-century Christian historian Sozomen recounts how the Thervingian Goth king Athanaric would parade a wooden idol around the countryside in a wagon, burning all Christians who wouldn’t offer homage.⁷ Sozomen does not say the gender of the idol but Gregory of Tours mentions the procession of an explicitly female deity, Berecynthia, through fields and vineyards to encourage abundant harvests as the locals danced and sang before her.⁸ In some respects these fertility deities were carried into Christianity in the form of the Virgin Mary, who was sometimes depicted as a “preserver of fertility.”⁹

Whichever fertility goddesses medieval people believed in and worshipped, ecclesiastics like Regino of Prüm got sufficiently worked up over these “superstitions” to go through the trouble of rooting them out.¹⁰ It seems that the church found Dianic folk beliefs particularly resistant to Christianization. However, other than this imagined journey of the night-goers, which Regino didn’t really believe actually took place, there was

nothing outstandingly “wicked” about these women insofar as they were not flying into peoples’ homes and sucking the blood out of sleeping children like Matteuccia purportedly had done. Their only offense was that they believed in the divinity of a being that wasn’t the Christian God; since there was only one other supernatural force operating in the world, Regino saw no other option than to consider that these women had been seduced by Satan.

In an earlier version of the *Libri de synodalibus*, Regino made no mention of Diana at all. He was dubious, never once giving credence to the reality of such a venture, reproving not the actual practice of the Diana cult, but rather the belief that such a group existed. Therefore, this condemnation was dualistic: people were not only forbidden to believe in Diana, they were forbidden to believe that some people were capable of joining her congregation.¹¹ Any reports of women traveling the night with Diana were to be treated as a delusion. In the Canon Episcopi, Regino at once bastardized this localized rite and at the same time wed it to superstitious practices, demoting Diana (or her folk equivalent) to the ever-expanding catalog of demons in Satan’s service.¹² Once this had been established theologians could ascribe any belief in this goddess to diabolism.

THE HEAD OF JOHN THE BAPTIST

But the Canon Episcopi was missing something—or so thought the elderly Burchard of Worms (ca. 955–1025) as he sat by the candlelight composing his eleventh-century oeuvre, the *Decretum Burchardi* (The Doctrine of Burchard). It was nigh a hundred years after Regino of Prüm had first mentioned those satanic women who rode on beasts with Diana, and things had changed; beliefs had readapted and evolved as time slowly unfolded into the unpredictable present. In Book 19 of the *Decretum*, titled “Corrector,” Burchard assembled questions to ask the contumacious sinner during interrogations. It is here that with a stroke of the pen he composed a cocaptain of the cavalcade, coupling with Diana the figure of Herodias, another wicked (yet human) woman from biblical lore (Mark 6:17–29; Matthew 14:1–12).

Herodias was passionately crafty. Once married to the provincial governor Herod Philip, with whom she birthed a daughter that some traditions call Salome, she left her husband for his brother, Herod Anti-pas,

whom she had met while visiting Rome. John the Baptist intervened in the love triangle on moral grounds, at which point Herodias had him arrested, imprisoned, and ordered executed. Herod Antipas, however, was rather fond of John's teachings and staved off the execution, though the Baptist remained in prison (Mark 6:20).^{*10} Herodias's machinations might have ended in naught had she not used her signature shrewdness to devise a way to rid herself of this Christian pest even as he rotted away in the fortress of Machaerus.

An opportunity presented itself later that year during her husband's birthday party. No doubt to the accompaniment of much wine and merriment Antipas watched Salome dance for him and his guests at his palace in Tiberias, the city of his founding, on the western shore of the Sea of Galilee. Enthused by Salome's gyrations he let his guard down and promised the girl anything she wished for. Salome consulted her mother, who devised a quick plan to silence John the Baptist for good. Knowing her husband would never embarrass himself in front of his guests by breaking a promise, she cunningly told her daughter to request John's head on a platter. Salome confidently walked back into the dining hall and told Antipas her wish. The drunken king sent a guard to the fortress of Machaerus with the orders. As promised, the guard returned a little while later, presenting Salome with a large dish on which sat the severed head of John the Baptist.



Burchard of Worms might have heard other, nonbiblical legends of a worshipped Herodias from Ratherius of Verona (890–974), a brilliant but troubled exile and wanderer. While in prison (for reasons unknown), Ratherius penned his *Praeloquia*, a six-book treatise describing holy living and the profane condition of the Italian bishops. It is here that he openly disdained those worshippers of Herodias.

What shall I say of those impious people who utterly forgetful of their immortal souls, do reverent homage to Herodiad, the murderess of Christ's precursor and Baptist, and acknowledge her as their sovereign, nay as their Goddess. In their lamentable demeritation, they claim that the third part of the world is subject to her sovereignty. As if this was a fit reward for the murder of the

prophet. It clearly appears that the demons have their hand in the matter, who by their hellish prestiges delude the unhappy women, and sometimes even men, who deserve more severe censure than the women.¹³

To Ratherius, Herodias was no regular villainess of Christian mythology; she was the killer of Christ's forerunner, one step short of herself having hammered the nails into the Savior's cross at Calvary. Her legend was bound to evolve. One twelfth-century poem features Salome (though here she is named after her mother) falling in love with John the Baptist. In this version, when his head is presented to her, she cries over it and kisses it. John's lips begin to blow a strong wind that blasts Herodias into space, doomed to forever float in "empty air." However, from dusk to dawn, she may rest on oak trees and hazel brush.¹⁴ In penitentials like those written by Burchard of Worms, she joins Diana in her new role as coleader of a troupe of demons disguised as women who prowl the earth while the pious sleep. But these demonic women following in the trail of the biblical villainesses were not the only nocturnal menaces Christians feared. Indeed, there were a host of other specters, wandering souls, and sex nymphs stalking by moonlight.

WOMEN THAT WALK AMONG THE DEAD

Burchard's "Corrector" is an assemblage of 194 questions that catalog a host of folk beliefs, many of which are contradicted by Christian theology. A handful of his questions deal with different castes of women who have reverted to worshipping Satan. He agrees with Regino, fancying all these things as nothing more than delusions of the impious, though he still marshals five questions that deal specifically with those groups of women who bedeck the night.

Question 70 asks confessants if they believe that women ride on animals on appointed nights with "a throng of demons transformed into the likeness of women," with a witch called Holda by commoners.¹⁵ Holda was a fertility goddess of Northern Germany who went by many names.¹⁶ One early thirteenth-century reference to the goddess describes her as the "Queen of Heaven." Some people would set the table for her on Christmas Eve so that she would bless them.¹⁷ Throughout the Middle Ages her name

was associated with a Hebrew baby-naming ritual dubbed *Hollekrisch*, wherein a secular name was given to a newborn. In this ritual, celebrants raise the cradle three times and call out Holle's (Holda's) name.^{*11 18} Like Diana, Holle was a goddess of the sky and the earth, and so traversed the night during the Christian Ember days, four separate sets of three days within the same week—specifically, Wednesday, Friday, and Saturday—found within each of the four seasons, which were set aside for fasting and prayer.

Unlike Diana, Holda's ventures were aerial rather than terrestrial. Riding on storms she led a trail of the dead, blessing well-kept households and unleashing her wrath on unkempt ones. Her retinue was called the *unholden*—another term for *witch*.¹⁹ Around the eighth century *unholden* connoted goddesses and gods of ancient Germany, the likes of which Christians castigated as demonic.²⁰ So fearful of this company were the inhabitants of Southern Germany that during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries they left food and drinks out four times a year during the Ember nights to pacify the spirits.²¹ Preacher and heresiologist Stephen of Bourbon was lucky that a certain woman had joined the flying cortege that visited his house one night; seeing Stephen lying naked in bed she quickly covered him with blankets. Had the goddess seen him in such a state she would have ordered her companions to beat him.²²

And Holda wasn't the only goddess villagers worshipped. Around 1277 Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun wrote their famous poem of courtly love, *Le Roman de la Rose (Romance of the Rose)*. Here, Dame Habundia (Lady Abundance) is mentioned as an aspect of folk life. The poem reinforces one of Ratherius's earlier claims that "at least one third are of her nature wild and weird," revealing the poets' mingling of canon law with folk tradition.²³

Burchard's question 90 deals with the aforementioned wild ride of the goddesses Diana and Herodias. This passage stands out from the others in terms of length and by the attention Burchard gives to the subject. He attributes this delusionary belief to the power of the devil to mislead the mind in sleep: "Now with joy, now with sadness, now showing unknown persons, [Satan] leads it through strange ways. . . . The unfaithful mind thinks that these things happen not in the spirit but in the body." He ridicules the belief in the goddess by repeating an example given in Regino

of Prüm’s Canon Episcopi, which points out that many people see strange things in their sleep: “[W]ho then is so foolish and stupid that he supposes that those things which take place in the spirit only, happen also in the body?” Question 170 again asks if the confessant believes in women who, “in the silence of deepest night,”

while thou art in bodily form thou canst go out by closed doors and art able to cross the spaces of the world with others deceived by the like error and without visible weapons slay persons who have been baptized and redeemed by the blood of Christ, and cook and eat their flesh and in place of their hearts put straw or wood or anything of the sort and when they are eaten make them alive again . . . ?²⁴

Burchard, in his “Corrector,” says Christians should reject the notion that some women believe they can fly through the night to do battle—the earliest surviving mention of night-flying combat by an ecclesiastic in the Middle Ages.²⁵ Moreover, they should not believe that there are wild woodland women who sneak into homes and defile men as they sleep, an obvious allusion to succubi (although the specific term *succubi* is not specifically mentioned in Burchard of Worms’ “Corrector,” which instead uses *sylvan*, meaning “forest women”). But perhaps the carnal nature of the sylvans was already understood to mean that they were indeed succubi. After all, centuries earlier St. Augustine revealed that these sexually insatiable woodland creatures “are commonly called Incubi.”²⁶ Later commentators would tack on their own distinctions to this general description.



Like most men of his day, twelfth-century canon lawyer Gervase of Tilbury (ca. 1150–1228) believed these woodland creatures to be mere hallucinations. But to “gratify popular belief and [his] listeners’ ears” he merged the concept of the night-goers with a few other legends to create a single entity that belonged to the “wretched lot” of women and men who “cover great distances in swift nocturnal flight . . . enter houses, torment people in their sleep, and inflict distressing dreams upon them . . . [They further] drink the blood of infants.”²⁷ A century later, by 1313, the Veronese

humanist Giovanni de Matociis (the man who determined that there had existed two historical Plinys, the Elder and the Younger) attested to the belief held by Northern Italian layfolk in “a nocturnal society headed by a queen: Diana or Herodia.”²⁸ And a few centuries after Giovanni, the Dominican witch theorist Bernardino of Como (d. 1510) wrote that some of those kinds of people in his area belonged to “the game of the good society.” This society would meet “in certain villages at certain times, especially Friday, when the devil would make an appearance in human form.”²⁹ It seems that the complex of widely disparate ideas that had been derived from the original Canon Episcopi by later writers had not strayed too far from the original.

THE SOCIETY OF THE GOOD WOMEN OF THE NIGHT

Had Sibillia de Fragulati thought even for a moment that the beliefs she confessed to on April 30, 1384, were actually crimes, she might not have been so candid to the inquisitor of Upper Lombardy, Friar Ruggero da Casale, when describing them. Somewhat naively, she told him of her weekly meetings with her mistress:

“Be well, Madam Oriente,” Sibillia would say as she genuflected.

“Welcome, my daughters,” Madam Oriente always replied.

It would be a Thursday, and as had been customary every week since her childhood, Sibillia gathered with other women to pay homage to their mistress. Madam Oriente was a seer who fielded any questions her congregation might ask. These question-and-answer sessions allowed Sibillia to, in turn, guide and inform others in their daily lives. Two of every type of animal would attend these meetings except for donkeys; this animal was excluded because it had carried Jesus gloriously into Jerusalem, and also later helped him carry his cross (at least according to the society).^{*12} This animal was of colossal importance not only to the society but to the whole world; had even one gone missing, Sibillia assured Friar Ruggero, all of Earth would be cosmically razed. Ruggero had heard enough from this silly and confused woman. Two red crosses were affixed to her clothing, which she had to wear daily. This punishment, while not severe, meant an additional burden she didn't need.³⁰

Sibillia's confession coincided with another given that same year by Pierina de Bripio, a Milanese woman who admitted to participating in the sect of Madam Oriente every Thursday night since the age of sixteen. She had joined the society to take the place of her aunt, who would not be allowed to die until replaced by a new member.³¹ Pierina's story, which bore some striking similarities to Sibillia's story, also included some demonstrable differences: first, Pierina's crowd was gender neutral; the Madam didn't greet her followers as her "daughters" (*filie mee*), as Sibillia had attested, but rather as "good people" (*bona gens*). The flock was also joined by the souls of decapitated and hanged persons—the dead. When Oriente called her followers to gather, Pierina and the other members would transform themselves into foxes, donkeys, or the walking dead.^{† 13 32} Together the members of this society wandered through houses eating food and drinking beverages left for them by residents. After sating themselves they cleaned the houses and received Oriente's blessings. Other times the group would dine on cattle, after which they would reassemble the bones beneath the hides; Madam Oriente would then resuscitate the animals (perhaps referencing a fertility rite), although they would no longer be able to labor in the fields. Finally, Oriente taught her disciples magic.^{*14}

Such a complex of beliefs could confuse even the most sincere investigator, to say nothing of a more perfunctory inquisitor like Friar Ruggero's successor, Friar Beltramino da Cernusculo, who called the two women back for questioning in 1390. The charge? "Relapsed heresy." Attempting to make sense of these eccentric beliefs Beltramino defaulted to the Canon Episcopi, inserting the name of Diana in place of Lady Oriente. Although neither Sibillia nor Pierina ever mentioned the Roman huntress in their 1384 confessions (which come down to us only in fragments), Beltramino condemned the two for believing they had joined "the game of Diana whom they call Herodias," and in so judging he willfully reinterpreted the "Good Society" as the Dianic game. Now Pierina was also confessing to some other curious charges, charges most probably absent from the 1384 record as well: copulation with the demon Lucifello.³³



Consorting with demons might not have been the only notion affixed to Pierina's true beliefs. Her confession is unmistakably reminiscent of the legend of Saint Germanus of Auxerre (ca. 378–448), a bishop in late antique Gaul chosen to visit Britain on behalf of a Gaulish assembly of bishops. So the tale was spun: after dining with a family Germanus witnessed the homeowners reset the table. When he asked why, they replied that they were expecting a visit from the “good women of the night,” who always appeared to them in the likeness of their neighbors. These women weren't always as good as their name implied. In fact, they could be downright nasty. If not placated by these offerings of food and drink they would, like the *bona gens*, ransack the household. Propitiation, however, resulted in blessings.

The family went to sleep. Determined to uncover the truth of such claims Germanus remained awake and on watch. To his shock, demons disguised as women entered the home during the night. He awakened the family members, presented the demons, and then brought them to their neighbors' homes, where they all lay fast asleep. At this point, the demons could only admit their trickery.³⁴ The tale is an ecclesiastical *exemplum*, of course, serving its usual moral purpose: to warn people not to have faith or trust in anything or anyone other than the One True God. The story was also obviously reinterpreted by later pens. Its original version, composed by Constance of Lyon around 475–480 CE, doesn't mention demons at all.³⁵ They do appear, however, in Italian chronicler Jacobus de Voragine's story of St. Germanus in his *Golden Legend* (ca. 1250), a collection of hagiographies that was a medieval bestseller.

THE MIRACLE OF THE BONES

Other aspects of Pierina's confession are wholly derived from the realm of folklore. The “miracle of the bones”—the ability to feast on cattle and have them magically resurrected—wasn't relegated solely to Pierina's beliefs. Tales of a similar nature could also be found in the Upper Alps in the Wallis Valley. One told of a cowherd whose cow had wandered into the deep valleys of the range. By nightfall the cowherd eventually located her near an encampment. Deciding it was too late to travel home he bedded down at the empty camp. Around midnight he awakened to the hustle and bustle of a

group of strange people who were busily cooking a meal. The cowherd watched this bizarre scene until one of the strangers noticed him.

“Hey, you up there in the bunk, don’t you want some meat?” the visitor asked.

“Yes, I’d like some,” the cowherd replied with both trepidation and intrigue.³⁶ He climbed down from his bunk and sat among the strange group. The meat was quite tasty, the company polite. But then the cowherd looked over at his cow. He noticed that she was missing a large chunk of her flesh from the side of her body. Saying nothing about this odd marvel he joined the others in playing music and dancing, even learning how to play the flute on the spot for the occasion. As the sun rose over the alpine peaks the curious consortium carried itself into the dawn, leaving a cowhide stretched across the door of the hut and the cowherd not a little bewildered by what he had experienced. When the sunlight fully soaked itself into the sky the cowhide vanished. As the cowherd gathered his things for the journey home he noticed that the cowhide had appeared back on the bovine as if never gone at all.

Scholars have shown that this particular aspect of folk belief, this miracle of the bones as it is called, has a traceable passage from the torture chamber to demonology treatises, seen most clearly in the *Lamiarum sive striarum opusculum* (A Brief Work of Lamia, or Witches, ca. 1460), written by Dominican friar Hieronymus Visconti, wherein the author, along with thoughts about witches and night flight, discusses the bone miracle.^{*15 37}

Such esoteric beliefs make it difficult to determine where the truth of Pierina’s statements ends and the inquisitive friar Beltramino da Cernuscullo’s interpretation of her truth begins. Indeed, the very Germanus who exposed the “good women of the night” as demons also had his own miracle-of-the-bones moment while doing his missionary work in Celtic lands: A swineherd housed Germanus for the night, going so far in hosting his esteemed guest as to feed Germanus his only calf. After feasting heartily Germanus assembled the bones over the skinned animal’s hide. As he prayed over the skeletal outline the animal stood up, totally revived from the dead. One author has argued that the bones miracle motif predates Christianity altogether, originating with the Egyptian god Osiris: after his death Isis, his sister and wife, gathered his body parts and resuscitated him in the underworld.³⁸



Although Pierina makes that curious reference to Lady Oriente, who taught her the virtue of herbs, neither she nor Sibillia mention magical ointments or potions of any kind in the surviving records; nor do the ointments appear in conjunction with miracle of the bones lore in general. Tales of night-roaming “good women” loomed large in the complex of quotidian folk beliefs. The subtle differences between Sibillia and Pierina’s accounts indicate that even people who lived near one another (though there is no evidence that these two women knew each other) had variations on the story based on personal beliefs within a single larger theme. Indeed, these good women of the night were hardly the only beings, real or imagined, roaming the darkness.³⁹

AFTER THE MANNER OF PAGANS

Watching through a crack in the door, Lucius gasped as the Thessilian witch Pamphilē undressed and covered herself “from the ends of her toenails to the hairs on the crown of her head” with an ointment. Looming over a lamp she whispered charms into the flame. Though Thessilian witches were renowned for their sorcery Lucius hardly could have predicted what would happen next: Pamphilē’s body began to tremor and gyrate; her arms thickened into long wings, her nose crooked into a beak, and feathers sprouted from her body. Pamphilē turned into an owl and flew away.⁴⁰

This scene is found in the fictional story by Apuleius (Lucius Apuleius of Madaura) titled *The Metamorphosis of Apuleius*. Apuleius, a Platonist and mystery school initiate, was a second-century Latin-language writer and philosopher, a Numidian Berber living under the Roman Empire who also dabbled in magic, both in his prose and in his life. Romans punished the practice of magic with death, and Apuleius found himself before the tribunal of Maximus. Charges brought against him by slanderers like Aemilianus were dismantled in a “brilliant defense” composed by Apuleius himself, in which he wed the magical impulse to priestly and philosophical desires.⁴¹

The story of Pamphilē’s transformation into an owl is a tempting morsel for a literary origin of our witches’ ointment, but the connection, as

we shall see upon closer inspection, seems merely coincidental. Apuleius clearly based the character of Pamphilē on the ancient idea of the mythological bird known as the *strix*. The *strix*, from the Greek meaning “to screech” (Italian *strigae*), was a peculiar kind of owl-like bird that roamed the night sucking the blood of babies and feasting on their flesh.^{*16} Authorities had definitely imposed *strix*-like characteristics on Matteuccia di Francesco; though her ointment had nothing to do with these literary features found in *strix* lore (Novello Scudieri makes no such connection). Ovid gives us a general outline of a *strix* in Book 6 of his *Fasti*, an incomplete six-book exploration of Roman religion with a calendar structure.

Their heads are large, their eyes stick out, their beaks fit for tearing, their feathers are grey, their claws hooked. They fly by night, attacking children with absent nurses, and defiling their bodies, snatched from the cradle. They’re said to rend the flesh of infants with their beaks, and their throats are full of the blood they drink. They’re called screech-owls, and the reason for the name is the horrible screeching they usually make at night.⁴²

He adds that these creatures might be born as birds or they might be women transformed into birds. Petronius, a contemporary of Ovid, adds that these women, after devouring children, leave straw dummies in their place. In Pamphilē’s case the *strix* is also a relentlessly carnal woman who kills those who reject her advances. The third-century Roman savant and man of letters Quintus Sammonicus Serenus remarked that the *strix* would lead a baby to suckle her breast milk, which was, in fact, poison. There existed a multitude of remedies and protections against this kind of supernatural being: Ovid recommended a mixture of bean and ham soup to stop a *strix* from devouring a person’s innards⁴³; a parent could set up a branch of whitethorn and offer up an animal in lieu of the *strix* choosing an infant^{*17}; hanging garlic over the cradle was another common defense as were later Christianized remedies such as placing an image of Christ on the child; and, of course, the surest lifetime guarantee of protection was the sacrament of Baptism.⁴⁴ Roman authors, for the most part, didn’t believe that the *strix* actually existed and used them more as literary devices in their stories and poems.⁴⁵

But the strix did exist in other texts outside of ancient poetry. The earliest known work of Germanic law, the sixth-century Lex Salica, or Salic law, is resolute on this matter: strix—women who can turn into terrifying birds of prey—are real. So real, in fact, that not only were there punishments for being a strix, an indicter could also face penalties for falsely accusing someone of being a strix. Furthermore, a person bringing a cauldron to the strix with which to cook their prey also paid a hefty fine.

A fantastic reversal occurred once these laws became Christianized in later centuries. One skeptical edict warned against the preemptive eating of women thought to be strix—apparently people so believed in the reality of strix that they would eat suspected women for fear of being eaten by them first! The Lombard law code, the Edictum Rothari (643 CE), dismissed the idea of cannibalistic women as sheer fantasy.⁴⁶ Likewise, in the next century the Lex Saxonum (Law of the Saxons), a series of laws issued by Charlemagne in 785 as part of his plan to subdue the Saxon nation, lists the killing of a woman believed to be a strix as a capital crime.⁴⁷

The populace at large, however, seems not to have adopted this skeptical position,⁴⁸ and the prevailing belief in the existence of strix was real enough to, at times, result in mob violence against those innocent and unfortunate women thought to transform into these terrible creatures.⁴⁹ A certain Cathwulf, in a letter to Charlemagne dated 775, implored his king to take legal action against *strigae* (i.e., strix), equating them with sorcerers, adulterers, pagans, and those who did not pay tithes.⁵⁰ Charlemagne's response to the folk belief of cannibalistic strix can be seen in his Capitulare Saxonum (Capitulary of Saxony), which was issued twelve years after the Lex Saxonum, and in which Charlemagne shows less brutality and issues simple edicts regarding misdeeds that formerly resulted in death. In this he affirms the idea of flesh-eating witches as fallacious: "If any one deceived by the devil shall have believed, after the manner of pagans, that any man or woman is a witch and eats men, and on this account shall have burned the person, or shall have given the person's flesh to others to eat, or shall have eaten it himself, let him be punished by a capital sentence."⁵¹ So far as concerned the Christianized Carolingian king, the strix wasn't real and any violence perpetrated against a person thought to be one meant a forfeiture of the assailant's life.



But how can a religion, itself featuring transformation lore, wholly dismiss the idea of metamorphosis? Did not Nebuchadnezzar devolve into a wild beast for seven years for disobeying the One True God?^{*18} And what about transubstantiation? How can bread and wine really become the body and blood of Jesus if such transmutations of matter are impossible?

While many ecclesiastics pondered this question, the Bishop of Hippo, Saint Augustine himself, had the answer. On the subject of such transformations (and familiar with Apuleius's *Metamorphosis*) Augustine stood firm: the "divine order," a hierarchy of all beings, from insects to angels, placed humans above all other creatures save the one omnipotent God, who alone could change matter. To Augustine, because God created all people in His image, no person could ever really descend to a lower form of life. The innate *homo interior*—that side of humans made in God's image—could not be compromised. If a person thought she or he transformed into some other creature it was an illusion of the devil. Thus Augustine developed the notion of the "phantasm," the image that appears in the mind, which symbolizes that which the senses believe a material object to be.

I cannot therefore believe that even the body, much less the mind, can really be changed into bestial forms and lineaments by any reason, art, or power of the demons; but the phantasm of a man . . . may, when the man's senses are laid asleep or overpowered, be presented to the senses of others in corporal form . . . so that men's bodies themselves may lie somewhere, alive . . . yet with the senses locked up much more heavily and firmly than by sleep, while the phantasm, as it were embodied in the shape of an animal, may appear to the senses of others, and may even seem to the man himself to be changed, just as he may seem to himself in sleep to be changed.⁵²

Augustine is clearly skeptical: unless God so chooses to engineer a transformation—say, bread and wine into body and blood—the act is impossible. A just God simply wouldn't allow women to transform themselves into strix; therefore, strix don't exist. This Augustinian

phantasm view is clearly defined in later Christian law codes like those of Rothari, Charlemagne, and Burchard of Worms. Lawmakers, theologians, and other medieval writers of the strix phenomenon adopted the Augustinian theory and held this view from the fifth through the fourteenth centuries. Thirteenth-century physicians counted these “lamias,” i.e., *mascas* to commoners (*strias* in French), as “nocturnal hallucinations” caused by a thickening of the humors.¹⁹ This in turn resulted in the troubled sleep of insomniacs.⁵³ The masses, however, remained unconvinced. In “Corrector,” Burchard of Worms denounces the belief in “night-flying women who were supposedly killing Christians, cooking and eating their flesh, but then restoring them to life again”—a clear mingling of two separate lores: strix and the bone miracle.⁵⁴ However, not all commentators held to the rational view. As late as the thirteenth century writer and preacher Stephen of Bourbon (d. c. 1260 CE), a historian of medieval heresies, encountered a woman living along the Rhône-Alps expanse who was convinced that a strix (*stryge*) had killed two of her babies.⁵⁵ Stephen concluded that the strix “was a demon who, taking on the semblance of an old woman, wandered about at night astride a wolf, killing suckling babies.”⁵⁶ In 1296, two women in Tyrol were convicted and executed for this imaginary crime.⁵⁷

Throughout the Middle Ages and into the high Middle Ages night-roving women appear in countless stories and incarnations. Some traveled with goddesses to bless or ransack homes; some engaged in aerial battle; others like sylvan were feral women, and still others were strix. Separable as these curious creatures might have been to a commoner, leitmotifs overlapped enough in Burchard’s writing so as to create a base idea for later demonologists to expound upon. Several centuries later, at the dawn of the witch-craze periods, these kinds of groups would coalesce into one kind of midnight assembly—all prompted by a stereotype that started to take form around the early 1400s.



Most important for our investigation is that aside from one ancient literary source, not one chronicler of folk phenomena, theologian, king, or detainee—not Charlemagne, Alfonso X, Regino, Burchard, Bourbon, Ruggero,

Ratherius, Germanus, Sibillia, or Pierina—ever mentions an ointment necessary for nightly excursions with fertility goddesses. And strix, which were not even believed to exist according to later Christianized law, needed no ointment to transform.

The story of the witch Pamphilē as recounted by Apuleius, the lone example from the classical world, might have been an acceptable literary origin for the witches' ointment; however, its exclusion from the tales of strix for nearly fourteen centuries, between Apuleius's comedy and Matteuccia's indictment, indicates that Christian lawmakers hadn't smuggled it into the legend. Hell, these ecclesiastics didn't even think strix existed! And as will be shown in later chapters, not a single early chronicler of these ointments ever makes a connection to Apuleius's novel (including the scribe who penned Matteuccia's record). For now, lacking a direct precedent we still cannot be sure where Matteuccia's ointment originated. However, we can say that the lacuna of historical mentions of ointments in the varieties of folklore at the very least begins the authentication of Matteuccia's psyche-magical salve. Otherwise what is it doing in her trial record?

But there are still other avenues to explore. For example, the concept of nocturnal assemblies as outlined in Matteuccia di Francesco's record most certainly had a foundation in heretical folk religious congregations, spurred on, most likely, by those all-too-human preachers of the early modern period—healer-priests damned by the church as heretics who, like the Dianic horde, succubi, wild women, and strix, also prowled the silence of deepest night.

3

THE HERETICS' POTION

Where or when did anyone ever hear that man, that august and sacred animal, ate excretions? . . . and yet this is but the preliminary proceeding with these execrable wretches.

MICHAEL PSELLUS

They also say the Roman Church is the Church of the wicked, and of the beast and the whore.

RAINIER SACCONI

HUMAN ERROR

Mother Church had strayed from the path, influenced by terrible calamities that had befallen her empire. Those centuries bridging the collapse of Western Rome with the rise of the witch stereotype proved most tempestuous; internal struggles between warring kings and landowners over territory, external threats from savages, widespread famine, papal schisms, disease and plague—all belied the prophecy of a New Jerusalem.

The state of the flock had redoubled this decay; the faithful had wandered from the shepherd, unable to reconcile their daily bread and toils with the church's feasts and spoils. While it is true that many doctors of theology lived piously, they too found themselves abhorred by the negligence and irascibility of the lower clerical orders.¹ Many nuns and monks hardly lived the devotional, humble lives expected of them. Often the bratty daughters and sons of wealthy merchants, many of them found it difficult to relinquish the splendor they had enjoyed while growing up. Gluttonous godmen wore fine clothing and sauntered the streets armed with

small daggers to protect their riches; prurient nuns could be found intoxicated and merry at local inns.²

None of this behavior escaped the attention of Pope Innocent III. His Third Lateran Council of 1179 was comprised of a two-part objective: recapture the Holy Land and reform the church. On this latter point, Canons 16 and 17 were resolute:

Canon 16:

Clerics . . . shall not hold secular office. . . . They shall not attend performances of mimes, jesters, or plays and shall avoid taverns. . . . Nor shall they play with dice; they should not even be present at such games. They should wear the clerical tonsure and be zealous in the performance of their divine offices and in other responsibilities.

Canon 17:

[Some] spend half the night eating and talking. . . . And get to sleep so late that . . . they mumble their way hurriedly through morning prayers. There are some clerics who . . . disdain even attending Mass. And, if they happen to be present at Mass, they flee the silence of the choir to go outside to talk with laymen, preferring their frivolous things to the divine.³

Despite these papal prohibitions the chapels remained empty. At best all priests could hope for was Sunday morning lip service from a sparse and unenthusiastic congregation. The church, with her swift and passionate administration of flagellations, was quite literally flogging herself to death.

But many Christians never totally abandoned the faith and were only missing from the pews; instead, they were reworking Christianity with their own folk variations,^{*20} which the learned ecclesiastics called “errors” of the faith.⁴ These errors were spread by those whom the church labeled *heretics*—believers in Christ who had been disowned by the church. Ironically, these heretics kept faith in Jesus alive among the common folk as trust in orthodoxy slowly bled out of them.



Heretics are as old as Jesus's rumored Resurrection, with various believers inspiring different interpretations of that supreme event. Over the first three centuries of the common era Christian sects and cults sprung up in and around the Roman Empire, steadily rising to prominence in some areas.^{†21} Perhaps the most obvious aberration of the young Christian religion that distinguished it from its pagan and Hebrew forerunners was its insistence that what a person *believed* trumped how one *behaved*. Such a radical view of piety would require cohesion among the various groups that adopted this strange new creed. Thus all the early Christian groups—proto-orthodox, gnostic, and heretical, as well as other spiritual mutations common in the first few centuries CE—fought for their particular set of beliefs as the correct version. What we call Christianity today just so happened to be the one incarnation among a multitude that won those early battles.

The great proselytizer of Christianity Paul of Tarsus (the Apostle Paul) recognized the factionalism among the faithful early on. An ex-Jew who at one time had “violently persecute[ed] the Church of God and was trying to destroy it,” the reformed Paul, in Galatians 1:6–12, revealed revulsion for heretical beliefs: “I am astonished that you . . . are turning to a different gospel—not that there is another gospel, but there are some who are confusing you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ.” In a religion in which belief mattered, *correct* belief mattered most.

Nonetheless, heretical sects flourished. They included both ministers as well as laypeople, both women and men, and encompassed a spectrum of beliefs. Some of the highly localized forms of heresy are forever gone, the records lost to the unyielding abyss of history. Others, however, survive. Still, the most these heresies can tell us about the people who believed them is that the variations were endless. What is clear is that the church's evolution and growth after the fall of Rome included the formulation of the stereotype of the heretic, which became the rallying cry for the battle against all those who would defy the Church Fathers.^{*22} That stereotype included certain key themes: nocturnal orgies, cannibalistic infanticide, and conspiratorial insurgency.

Poignancy is the punch of irony; the stereotype existed in an embryonic form during the days of pagan Rome and was cast on those citizens who practiced the then-illicit religion, Christianity, the newest internal threat to the Roman Empire.⁵

THE LAMP THAT SHINES IN DARKNESS

A scream resounded from within the pile of dough, confounding the new convert. She quickly pulled the dagger out of the floury mound, which to her surprise oozed blood. She wanted to stop but the dozen onlookers urged her to stab the dough again and again, which she did until the screams ceased and blood began to soak the small wooden table. The sectarians had fooled the new recruit, omitting beforehand that a human baby had been sheathed in the dough. They all then thirstily drank the blood of the baby and divided its limbs among themselves in a ghoulish banquet. The murder of the child and subsequent feasting on its innocent flesh had bound them all to one another.

The new recruit was now a Christian.

Illuminated by a single lamp shining ominously in an otherwise dark cellar, this Christian sect then gathered to worship their idol—the severed head of a donkey. Members of this sect were also known to revere “the virilia of their pontiff and priest and adored them [like fathers].” Their feast days were quite the spectacle: they would gather at night with their families for a large meal called an *agape*. Afterward, once “the fervor of incestuous lust [had] grown hot with drunkenness,” a dog leashed to a shining lamp was thrown scraps of meat just out of its reach. The dog pounced on the morsels; the lamp that once shone fell over, was “extinguished in the shameful darkness,” at which point all members of the sect descended into a wild, incestuous orgy.⁶



These were among the many slanders the Roman elite hurled at early Christians. Although such depictions were little more than the persecutory fabrications of an oppressive majority, they were widely accepted as truth by the pagan masses. What is important is what these themes—specifically, the pact over ritualized murder and cannibalism—represented to the ancients: conspiratorial insurgency against the state by secret societies, in this case, Christians.

Indeed, even pagans were not immune from this inflammatory charge. Second-century CE Macedonian writer Polyaeus wrote of a certain

“obscure tyrant” from the third century BCE, Apollodorus of Cassandreia, who tried to seize power from the Romans, but not before making his coconspirators swear an oath. Apollodorus killed a child, cooked the viscera into a meal, and shared it with the insurgents: “When they had eaten, and also drunk the victim’s blood, which was dissolved in dark wine, he showed them the corpse and so, through this shared pollution, ensured their loyalty,” Polyaeus recounted.⁷

The Roman festival of Bacchus, the Bacchanalia, suffered similar slanders in 186 BCE. At one time consisting of a relatively small group of women who gathered during the day to worship, the Bacchanalia grew over time until it evolved into large nocturnal debauches. First-century Roman historian Livy (Titus Livius Patavinus) recorded that to their initiation rites

were added the delights of wine and feasts. . . . When wine had inflamed their minds, and night and the mingling of males with females, youth with age, had destroyed every sentiment of modesty, all varieties of corruption first began to be practiced. . . . If any of them were disinclined to endure abuse or reluctant to commit crime, they were sacrificed as victims.

Livy is clear that aside from murderous orgies the Bacchanalia had as its prime objective the “control of the state.”⁸

Christians had already been blamed for the Great Fire of Rome in 64 CE, making their recalcitrant ritual realistic to their pagan neighbors. Nero targeted them because they were already spurned by the conservative Roman population; we must recall that Jesus, their felonious founder, had been executed for capital crimes only three decades prior. Since prosperity of the Roman State depended on sacrifices to the gods, Christians upset this balance by refusing to participate in public pagan practices and thus they neglected their civic duties. A nonconformist Christian congregation could therefore serve as a way for Romans to explain any kind of misfortune. First-century Roman senator and historian Tacitus made no exaggeration when he admitted that the Roman Christians were “convicted not so much of arson as of hatred of the human race.”⁹ The Christian women and men arrested for starting the fire had the hides of animals sewn on their skin; they were then fed to wild dogs. In other cases unfortunate Christians fell victim to mob justice.¹⁰



Even with the triumph of Christianity in the late fourth century CE, disparate Christian groups still engaged in conflict over the matter of who truly kept the revealed Word. Various gnostic and heretical sects flourished, most with little more in common than their zealous persistence that they alone held the truth.¹¹ Toward the end of the sixth century Isidore of Seville, a scholar of the ancient world, recounted the beliefs of several heretical sects existing in various parts of the empire in his *Etymologiae*. Some were well-known sects like the Arians, who “did not recognize the Son as coeternal with the Father.” Others, like the Nestorians, named for the bishop of Constantinople, Nestorius, “place[d] free will ahead of divine grace.”¹² The Adoptionists seem to have been comprised solely of learned clerics—a departure from the majority of sects, which usually leaned toward inclusiveness. As its name implies, Adoptionism maintained that Jesus was the *adopted* son of God, born purely mortal and chosen to fulfill some divine task. Other heresies sprung up “without founders and without names.” Their beliefs ranged from not accepting that the soul is an image of God, to believing that souls could be transformed into “demons and animals of every kind.”¹³ Some ideas were considered heretical merely because they held “different opinions on the condition of the universe” than those of the orthodox church; there was even rumored to have existed a cult that dared to believe that “water has existed as long as God has.”¹⁴ Labeling all these groups under the umbrella of “heretical” or “gnostic” gets us nowhere, as the groups represent a broad spectrum of beliefs.¹⁵ Furthermore, these groups were not immune from infighting, and variations arose from time to time.¹⁶ One sect in particular deserves special attention for this very reason.

THE POOR OF CHRIST

Martin and Pierre ran as speedily as they could, dodging the pervasive moonlight for the safety of the shadows. An uninvited mist that might stir worry in other travelers would be welcome to them, a natural veil to cover their path. Not far behind them a party of heresy hunters tracked their every move.

Martin and Pierre were Waldensian barbes—itinerant heretical preacher-healers traveling in the dark of night, spreading their gospel, giving alms and healing the sick, and holding clandestine meetings, called *synagogues*,^{*23} which were annual affairs that took place in the home of a rural Waldensian.¹⁷ Potential barbes would “go out into the world” as apprentices with senior members of the group. Once the trainee had proved his worth, he was

presented to the grand master, who, having consulted with the other barbes, if they are deemed capable, will give them the power to hear confession, preach and absolve: having obtained permission for this authority, the master drinks first, then he offers drink to the new barbe, and the other barbes in succession drink too, and then they feast, eating and drinking.¹⁸

Eventually captured, Martin and Pierre were questioned about the proceedings that took place at their synagogues. The Waldensian barbes had worked out a system of secrecy: they traveled only by night, stayed briefly in each village visited, changed residence every two years, and mastered professions that would require one to travel without raising suspicions.¹⁹



We can guess endlessly at the spirit that must have overwhelmed such a wealthy and successful merchant as Peter Waldo of Lyon (ca. 1140– 1220), who did what his family, friends, and business partners could not have imagined possible: he followed Jesus’s words in Matthew 19:21 precisely: “If thou wouldst be perfect, go, sell that thou hast, and give to the poor.” A seasoned salesman who had made a fortune through “wicked usury,” Waldo now believed that “no man can serve two masters, God and [greed].” He asked his wife—undoubtedly surprised to hear of her unprecedented divorce—whether she wanted to inherit all of his real estate or all of his belongings; not feeling much personal affection for his personal effects, she chose the former. After that, all his possessions were divided among “those he had treated unjustly,” an act of restitution for a lifetime of shady dealings. Given to beggary, Waldo now preached a message of material abandonment in the present for heavenly delights in the hereafter.²⁰

As in his secular career, Waldo was successful in his religious career, quickly gaining a following of those who also gave up all their possessions to care for the poor. Before too long a small group of these “Poor of Christ,” as they referred to themselves (“Waldensians” to their critics), could be found around Lyon preaching. Confident in their pious movement a small band of the Poor attended the Lateran Council of Rome in 1179. While at the council they were equally praised for their faithfulness as they were chastised for their unauthorized preaching. They were allowed to continue their almsgiving so long as they stopped holding public sermons. The censure proved fruitless; the Poor continued to proselytize and by 1184 their disobedience earned them denunciation as heretics. From the twelfth through the fifteenth centuries Waldensians were viciously rooted out and neutralized throughout the Franco-German countryside, but to no avail. Something about their devotion to the literal word of the Bible—a concept the established church had already discarded—along with the rebellious life they lived, made the Waldensians popular with common folk.²¹

Due to the persistence with which the Waldensians fought to survive and the equal vigor with which they were hunted, we have numerous surviving documents written both by them and about them.²² These documents paint a picture of a typical annual synagogue, the kind of which barbes traveled to perform around the late fifteenth century: “[We] preach by night . . . hold reunions and synagogues during which [we] preach to begin with,” the barbe Martin told his inquisitor. After offering an initial sermon the heretics “start[ed] the festivities, amusements and dances.” The participants ran around the room in a frenzy until the lone luminous lamp in the room was doused. At that moment, those who were closest at hand “consummate[d] sin of the flesh.” Those children born of this congress would “be more apt than any other to exercise the office of barbe.” According to the record, the barbe Pierre said this practice derived from “the habit of adoring a certain idol called Bacchus and Baron and also the Sibyl and the fairies.”²³ This latter Bacchanalian detail, with associations that Martin himself didn’t even hint at, presents a small problem: we don’t know whether it was inserted into the record by the inquisitor or represents some kind of irregular folkloric component that seeped into the beliefs and practices of some of the more isolated Waldensian congregations—a variant that was the result of remoteness.²⁴ If, however, it is just an inquisitor’s

exaggeration, why is it absent from Martin's confession? Would it not have been inserted there too for consistency?

While they differ on some of the specifics, the testimonies of Martin and Pierre, and those from other Waldensians, demonstrate that there might have been some truth to some of the stories about the sexual activities of the members.²⁵ Though the notion is generally rejected by mainstream modern historians, one such scholar has postulated that such carnal unions might have not only been possible but they may have been key to the sect's impressive survival.²⁶ Indeed, the subject of their peculiar sexual activities comes up about twenty times in a collection of hundreds of interrogations—too few for the idea to have been imposed on a prisoner by an inquisitor, and yet too many times for it not to pique our interest. We must keep in mind that the sexual taboos of the time—especially when accused heretics spoke with clergymen—might have halted any mention of it by the person under interrogation. It is possible that of the larger Waldensian majority there existed minority variations that couldn't help but wed their folk ideas to this bastard Christian faith. For example, in some instances Waldensians appear as the epitome of celibate righteousness; other times, when speaking of sexual congress in general, Waldensian heretics affirmed that sexual license was among the less severe of sins.²⁷

One noted anthropologist and folklorist has surmised that such feast and sex rites might portray cultural ruins from a time before sexual taboos existed in the polite Western mind. Coitus was “the exact equivalent of the communal meal. . . . All the men are united with all the women, so that union between members of the society . . . might be profound and complete.”²⁸ In short the sex rites of one particular Waldensian subsect and the ancient orgiastic stereotype that arose around the first centuries CE could be nothing more than mere historical coincidence. Further rumors of Waldensian preachers lusting after women didn't help the matter: in 1265, almost a century after the Waldensians had both formed and been chastised, the preacher David of Augsburg disabused anyone of the notion that Waldensian heretics engaged in nocturnal orgies, explaining that while a few Waldensian vicars certainly had coital affairs, this did not speak for the group.²⁹

There is another possibility. Maybe, just maybe, some heretics over these long stretches of time came to regard the initial slanders by pagans

against Christians as authentic. Perhaps they based their sexual rites, should such rites have existed, on activities that they *thought* had occurred, founded on misapprehensions of ancient aspersions. It is a stretch, obviously, and cannot be ruminated on here at length. After all, we seek the witches' ointment, whose origin probably rests in some "poison"—i.e., a hallucinogen—that had little to do with the sexual exploits of certain persons deemed heretics. It may, however, have had to do with some of the substances used in antiquity by magicians, some of them founders of heretical sects.^{[*24](#)}

GNOSTIC SORCERY

The color patterns danced before the eyes of the young woman, yellows bleeding into oranges, then into reds and purples, creating visions of fires swaying across the walls of Marcus's home. Her mind might have wandered into a vast cosmos inhabited by goddesses and gods, wherein the infinite touched her fingertips; or she might have slipped into an asinine inebriation, wherein she simply laughed and babbled incoherently at the basest of gestures. Either way, she was awed and amused at once. Marcus couldn't have chosen a better victim than the stupefied beauty before him. Young, attractive, and most important, wealthy, she was also now thoroughly under the influence of one of his magical love philters. Intrigued by Marcus's promises she had taken the potion at his insistence so as to better enjoy the wonders performed by him. The room spun, she felt elated, felt the magic stir within her.

Marcus, the second-century founder of the Marcosian gnostic sect, initiated yet another follower.

Knowing the insatiable vanity that permeates avaricious souls, Marcus sought out people, especially women, who would promise him their fortunes in exchange for not only his prophecies, but also his ability to bestow the gift of prophecy. His method was simple: he would whip his inductees into an ecstatic frenzy with simple parlor tricks and then tell them, "Open your mouth, speak whatsoever occurs to you, and you shall prophesy." Feeling "elated by these words, and greatly excited in soul by the expectation [of] prophecy, [the victim] impudently utters some nonsense as it happens to occur to her." After this, the women would be so overwhelmed with their new abilities that each offered her body to him. If

that didn't work, Marcus always had his "philters and love potions," which he used to "insult [the prey's] person" (i.e., dose them with a drug and have sex with them).

But this report of Marcus and his love potions comes from a hostile source, Lyonese bishop Irenaeus, who sought to ruin Marcus's character. We should therefore be cautious in our assessment of this gnostic magician. To someone like Irenaeus all such magical practices were not only illegal but also immoral—meaning we can't be certain how Marcus *really* used his potions. It is possible that he and his followers took their philters consensually—a shared magical experience that Irenaeus recorded in only the basest of terms to indicate that Marcus had only the most ignoble intentions. In the eyes of the Church Fathers, Marcus was not a divine man; he was simply a magician who was corrupting Christianity with both his gnostic views and his sorcery.³⁰

While we cannot say for sure exactly how Marcus's potions played into his personal beliefs, we can be assured that he at least knew about the properties of some powerful hallucinogens (such as those outlined in Sulla's Law), the kind that epitomized the "criminal magic" discussed in chapter 1 of this book. It must also be recognized that as a gnostic, Marcus's beliefs derived not from apostolic lineage but from direct experience.³¹ It is therefore not so impossible that he might have interpreted the ingestion of his potions as providing visionary or otherwise psyche-magical experiences. As recent scholarship has revealed, certain gnostic texts like *Round Dance of the Cross* and *Thunder, PerfectMind* infuriated the proto-orthodox precisely because these belief systems admitted that their authority rested on individuals' personal experiences of the divine. This was one of the very things Irenaeus complained about: "Every one of them generates something new every day . . . for no one is considered initiated . . . unless he develops some erroneous fictions!"³²



Church Fathers like Irenaeus and Epiphanius also condemned the sorcery of the infamous Samaritan magician Simon Magus as a perversion of orthodoxy. Simon was Christianity's first identified heretic,³³ and enters the historical record via the Bible.^{*25} In the account given in Acts 8:9–24

Simon had been practicing magic in Samaria, “driving the people . . . out of their wits.” The writer doesn’t specify exactly *how* Simon enchanted the minds of those around him other than alleging it was through “magic arts.”

Some time later, Church Fathers confirmed Simon’s activities as sorcery as it was understood around the fourth and fifth centuries CE. Church theologian Theodoret of Cyrus (ca. 390–450 CE) held Simon guilty of all the wiles of magic including the use of “[l]ove philters.”³⁴ Epiphanius (ca. 320–400 CE) is more revealing in his treatment of how these magic potions were used to persuade people: “[Simon,] pretending that he was mixing hellebore with honey . . . added a poison for those whom he hunted into his mischievous illusion under the cloak of the name of Christ, and compassed the death of those who believed.”^{†26 35} In other words the proto-orthodox believed that Simon was drugging his converts in an effort to draw them to become his followers. We can be sure that Epiphanius wasn’t referring to literal death but rather was writing metaphorically about the loss of the True Way on the part of Simon’s pupils. For one thing, from a purely pragmatic perspective, a would-be religious leader like Simon would have much explaining to do to new devotees if his earlier followers had all died at his initiation ceremonies; and second, Epiphanius goes on to write that Simon “fabricated a corrupt allegory for those whom he had deceived.” Certainly if those allegedly poisoned by Simon’s magical drugs had died there would be little reason to construct allegories to further indoctrinate them.

Alas, the Samaritan citizens, so swayed by Simon’s substances, suddenly sought salvation through baptism administered by Philip the Evangelist (ca. late first century CE)—the very man who baptized Simon (Acts 8:13)! It didn’t take long for stories of Samaritans receiving the Word of God through Philip to reach Jerusalem, after which the apostles Peter and John left that city to investigate. What they found was not a nation that had received the Holy Spirit but Samaritans who had merely been baptized, for Philip was just a deacon and could not grant the gift of the Holy Spirit.³⁶ Feeling the need to present the true Holy Spirit to the people, the two apostles “laid their hands on [the Samaritans]” and thus bestowed the gift that a mere deacon could not.

Simon Magus, enchanted by the apostles’ ability to bestow the Holy Spirit with a mere touch,^{*27} offered them silver so as to learn their trick—a

request at which John and Peter took much offense, as their power derived not from any fakery or mere magic but from the power of the One True God. According to the apocryphal Acts of Peter (Acts 8:9–24), Simon would later die while trying to outdo Peter in a kind of magicians’ duel. Apparently Simon was performing magic in the Forum and in order to prove himself to be a god he levitated up into the air. The apostle Peter prayed to God to stop his flying, and he stopped mid-air and fell into a place called the Sacra Via (meaning “Holy Way”), breaking his legs “in three parts.” He supposedly died from his injuries.



The stories of both the historical Marcus and the literary Simon as recorded by the Church Fathers do not shed light on if and how their magical potions were related to their spiritual beliefs. Considered tools of a magician, they were criminalized (and therefore bastardized) by both secular pagan and orthodox Christian authorities even if they weren’t necessarily used for malefic purposes. Even some pagan writers deplored magic; second-century Greek philosopher Celsus, a fervent anti-Christian, viewed Jesus as nothing more than a magician.³⁷ It is therefore not so surprising that in the first centuries CE, magicians like Marcus would be attracted to someone like Jesus.

Sometimes the proto-orthodox condemned the veneficia of not just individual heretics but of entire sects. The Carpocrates, an early gnostic sect from the first half of the second century CE, were said to employ magical potions. We can imagine they used them in one of the following two ways: to dazzle prospective followers or to ingest for divinatory or necromantic reasons, as some ancient spells suggest.³⁸ One group with roots stretching back to antiquity that certainly employed drugs for this latter reason still existed as late as the 1880s. Tucked away in the northern region of the Caucasus Mountains the curious explorer will find the Ossetians, a group with Iranian origins whose beliefs have been called “a bizarre mixture of Christianity and ancient superstition.” They worshipped the Hebrew prophet Elijah, sacrificed goats to him, ate the meat, skinned the carcasses, and placed the fleeces under a tree. They then prayed to Elijah to bestow an abundant harvest on them. They also prophesied by intoxicating themselves

with smoke from burning the highly psychoactive rhododendron bush, falling into a deep sleep, and interpreting the lucid dreams that followed as real events.³⁹

Another reason to take intoxicants during ritual practices was for pain relief. Saint Maximus of Turin (ca. 380–465) wrote emphatically against such practices found within the cult of Diana (her followers were called “Dianaticus”). The priests of Diana would drink much wine in preparation for some kind of self-flagellation rite. These people were easy to spot, Maximus wrote wryly, as they would be “suffering a hangover” the next morning. “They do this not only from intemperance,” claimed Maximus, “but also according to plan, so that they may be less troubled by their wounds on succumbing to the drunkennes of wine.” He compares these individuals to “sooth-sayers.”⁴⁰



Those labeled “heretics” were ordinary people from all walks of life. They could be your neighbors, business partners, family members, or friends. They were, in short, more than just deviants from protoorthodox beliefs; they were humans—flawed, desirous, ignorant, rationalizing a world they wanted, not the world they had inherited. Some of the heretical leaders gained followers by setting an example of piety; others attracted disciples by more nefarious methods, through deception and trickery, and in still other cases maybe by sharing some kind of psyche-magical rite via love philters. While none of the Church Fathers record any heretical beliefs that involved taking drugs as a sacrament—a practice found in other parts of the world—such toxins were employed throughout history by people for various magical reasons.

But the view of magic as an illegal enterprise would soon begin to change. Church Fathers like Augustine, Maximus of Turin, and others would lead the charge, debating magic from a theological perspective instead of a criminal one.⁴¹ Magic, in the eyes of the budding church, started to shift into a status it had never occupied before: it became heresy. ‘Twas a slow conversion spanning centuries, as the religious elite was more preoccupied with organizing the Goliath that the church would soon become than fending off magic and superstitious beliefs. A most sinister

transition would materialize along this road: those same slanders that pagans had once cast on Christians would be coopted by Church Fathers and applied to any and all groups that the orthodox decried.

One of the first heretical sects labeled as such by the orthodox believers was the gnostic Paulicians, who flourished in the early eighth century in southeastern Armenia. Founded in Samosata (modern Turkey) by two learned clerics, Paulus and his brother John were both dualists, believing in two gods, one the creator of material things, the other the creator of souls and the ethereal. They refused to recognize the divinity of Mary and exorcised the Torah from the Bible. In 845 they were captured and tortured during the reign of Byzantine emperor Michael III (r. 842–867 CE) and ordered to convert to orthodox Christianity or be banished from the empire by Michael's mother, the empress Theodora, regent to her underage son.⁴² Allegations brought against the group came from the head of the Armenian Church, John of Ojun. He called a meeting in Ararat in 719 CE, and in his *Oratio Synodalis* condemned the Paulicians for horrific acts.⁴³ Not only did they allegedly worship Satan, John claimed, they would assemble in secret to commit incest. If a child was born of such an unholy union the members tossed it from one to another until it died. The blood was drained and mixed with flour from which the Paulicians made a Eucharist, which was then shared by all.⁴⁴

Several centuries later (around 1114) Guibert of Nogent (ca. 1065–1125), a French Benedictine historian and theologian, borrowed this barbarous stereotype and applied it to another group headed by a “peasant named Clement.” Clement would gather with his followers in “unfrequented cellars, without distinction of sex.” They lit candles; a woman would lie down, chest to the floor, and present her backside to the congregation. The candles were presented to her derriere, and once they flickered out, the group cried “Chaos! . . . and everyone fornicate[d] with whatever woman comes first to hand.” Should a child be born of any foul union after the gathering, the members would light a large fire and throw the baby from one to another over the flames until it died. The ashes were baked with flour into bread; anyone who partook of the loaf became a member of the sect for life.⁴⁵

HEAVENLY FOOD

A disgusted Constance of Provence, queen consort of Robert II of France, upon seeing her own spiritual confessor Stephenus standing before her in chains—a convicted heretic—drove the sharp end of her scepter into his eye. The cries of his pupils as his pupils hung from his skull might have stirred the Christian conscience in at least some onlookers to pity, but most of the spectators delighted in his pain. In an act of calculated cruelty designed to satiate the crowd’s thirst for blood the queen demonstrated to all gathered that she wanted nothing to do with a heretic. He could die for all she cared, along with the rest of his assembly of fellow heretics at Orléans that cold 28th day of December 1022 CE.



Aréfast took no chances. A wealthy knight with close ties to the counts of Normandy, he was “eloquent in speech, prudent in council, morally upright, and well-groomed.”⁴⁶ He was also now a heresy hunter on his way to Orléans under the employ of King Robert II to root out the malicious heretical sect infesting that city. Comprised both of women and men, scribes and laypersons, these sectarians believed a “most wicked heresy” and were prone to “ceremoniously drink deadly poison.”⁴⁷ Aréfast had first heard of this sect from Heribert, a clerk living on his estate. Heribert had gone to Orléans to study and had inadvertently encountered the sect. He converted to an obedient disciple of the group after Stephenus and Liosis, its two leaders, “intoxicated [him] with an evil and deadly draft and the sweetness of the scriptures.” And thus began Heribert’s descent into the “trappings of madness [through] diabolical heresy.” King Robert sent Aréfast to investigate Orléans at once, promising the knight “all necessary assistance.”⁴⁸ Heribert, who joined Aréfast on his journey to Orléans, knew nothing of the knight’s surreptitious investigation; so far as Heribert understood, he was taking Aréfast there to convert him.

Aréfast, as advised, took communion every day and protected his soul with prayers. Dually fortified by his Christian magic Aréfast “went to the house where the heretics gathered, pretending to be an unassuming disciple coming to hear them teach.” After promising Aréfast rebirth into the heretics’ “holy company,” the sect leaders told him:

The Virgin Mary did not give birth to Christ, and he did not suffer for humanity; [moreover] he was not buried in the sepulcher, and [his body] did not resurrect . . . baptism does not wash away sin, nor do the sacraments of the body and blood of Christ administered by a priest [erase sin]. Praying to the holy martyrs and [speaking to] confessors amounts to nothing.

All this seemed pretty bleak to a man of Aréfast's piety. If not through Jesus Christ what could the Orléans heretics offer in the form of salvation? Stephenus's and Liosis's answer was both baffling and enlightening with regard to our inquiry and deserves to be reproduced in full:

When we lay our hands upon you, you shall be washed of every stain of sin, and be filled with the gift of the Holy Spirit, which will teach you without scruple the true dignity and secret meaning of the Scriptures, along with true virtue. When you are sated from eating the heavenly food you will see angelic visions with us, and sated by that comfort you will be able to go where you will at your leisure. You will desire nothing, for the omnipotent God is the treasure of all wisdom, and the [shine] of those riches will never fade.⁴⁹

Soon after, the historical record that describes the above meeting between Aréfast and the heretics of Orléans digresses to tell us more about how “these people confected what they call the heavenly meal.” They would meet up on certain nights at a heretic's home carrying torches and the devil would appear as a wild animal. Then they would throw their torches onto the ground and hold an orgy, regarding this sexual intercourse as their “holy and religious obligations.” When a child was born out of this carnal activity, the sect members would set a fire and throw it onto the blaze. The ashes were collected and given to eat. Those who partook would be unable to ever again leave the sect.⁵⁰

Once brought before the court and confessing, the sectarians refused to renounce their faith (save one clerk and one nun) even after torture. It was then that Queen Constance jabbed her scepter into Stephenus's eye. The lot of heretics, Stephenus and Liosis included, was then taken to a cottage outside the walls of the city and locked inside. Those gathered outside then threw torches onto the house—an act of generosity to be sure, as hanging

the heretics would not have left them time to beg the sky for eternal salvation in their final moments. Redeemed or not, all ended in ashes.



The political nature of the trial at Orléans is well-attested to, tainting all the sources even before the chroniclers touched quill to parchment.⁵¹ Still, there are some realities we can discern from the record. Despite its late composition, which is dated sixty years or so after the episode (ca. 1078 CE) took place, Paul of St. Père de Chartres's chronicle is the most extensive of the four sources we have of this incident.⁵² But the later date isn't the only problem with this source; there are clear literary developments found between the lines that Paul composed (such as the theme of heavenly food), which make it difficult to tell where the real history ends and his story begins.⁵³ But Paul's account also has merit. Some scholars believe this version of the Orléans event materialized in the very house where Aréfast took his vows to become a monk two years after his dealings with Stephenus and Liosis, and might have been based on Aréfast's own eyewitness account. Or Paul's description might have even been based on an earlier document that he used as a source, now lost.⁵⁴

Of the other four historical mentions of the heresy of Orléans^{*28}—a letter written by a monk of Fleury, John of Ripoll, to Bishop Oliba of Vic, penned around 1022–23; a five-volume history authored by a Burgundian monk, Rudolph Glaber, around 1040; *Life in the Fleury Abbey of Gaul (Vie de Gauzlin abbé de Fleury)* by André of Fleury (1042), and a brief account from the eleventh century monk, historian, and literary forger Adémar of Chabannes (1020s)—only the history composed by Adémar of Chabannes mentions a special brew imbibed by the sectarians. Adémar called these heretics “Manichaeans,” referring to a group that flourished in the third century, and attributed that sect's founding to a Frenchman from Perigord. This Perigordian “claimed that he performed miracles and carried about with him the ashes of dead children, by which he soon made a Manichaean of anyone to whom he could give them.”⁵⁵

We are left guessing what the “heavenly food” was, and that it might have been an entheogen certainly cannot be ruled out. Paul's bit about the orgies and the children born of such unorthodox unions as an ingredient in

the heretics' potion seems to be an effort to sell the story as being more heinous than it might have been in reality. If the heavenly food existed—and we can be fairly certain it did not contain infant remains—what was in it? After all, various heretical sects incorporated the idea of a Eucharist, so it should not be thought of solely as a fiction on the part of the Orléans chronicler.⁵⁶ That eating the heavenly food caused “visions” and the ability to “transport” is a departure from the heretical stereotype, which always maintained that drinking the heretics' potion bound someone to a sect^{†29} (as Adémar of Chabannes reported). And so Paul's account strikes one as a distorted resonance that points to something deeper: the use of a psychoactive food as an entheogenic key to divine realms, colored by biased orthodox conceptions of how heretics employed magical foods and drinks.



Needing a way to distill the dissimilarities among the many heretical groups, ecclesiastical law came to rely on a general outline of what all heresies implied. Six centuries after Isidore of Seville published his catalog of beliefs, *Etymologiae*, Pope Gregory IX would collect these diverse profanations into one single heretic stereotype, exemplified in his papal bull *Vox in Rama* (ca. 1230), which he sent to three churchmen: the Bishop of Hildesheim, the Archbishop of Mainz, and a fanatical priest, one Conrad of Marburg, whom the Archbishop of Mainz in turn elected to personally stamp out heresy in the surrounding areas.

In his letter, Pope Gregory made clear which heretical practices he found so revolting: when a new member was indoctrinated into any sect, a large toad was offered the candidate that she or he must kiss so that “they receive the tongue and saliva of the beast inside their mouths.” Next, an emaciated man of “marvelous [*sic*] pallor” came forward, whom the novice must also kiss. This man felt cold and kissing him wiped all remembrance of the Catholic faith from the neophyte's mind. The group then feasted and a black cat^{*30} emerged from behind a statue, “which [*wa*]s usual for a sect of this kind.” This cat would be kissed on the hindquarters first by the novice, then the master, then the “perfects” of the group. All then asked the cat for forgiveness. Finally the lamp was put out and an orgy ensued with

no distinction of gender or family. The revel complete, a man emerged from the corner whose upper body gleamed “more brightly than the sun” and whose lower extremities were “shaggy like a cat.” The emaciated master offered up an article of the novice’s clothing, to which the shining man replied, “You have served me well and will serve more and better. I commit what you have given into your custody.” With that the illuminated man disappeared and the apprentice became a full member of the order. They would continue to attend Sunday Mass and take Communion; however, they held the host in their mouths and later threw it into a latrine “in contempt of the savior.”⁵⁷

In Pope Gregory’s heretic stereotype one finds a variation on the theological tradition: instead of a foul drink supposedly composed of baby ashes, the initiate ingests toad emissions. That this was consumed in a ritual suggests it was a kind of Eucharist and was possibly an entheogen. As will be shown in the next chapter, the use of toad secretions had long been recognized in magic; in fact, such discharges are powerfully psychoactive, producing phantasms of visionary magnitudes. Therefore, should Pope Gregory’s caveat be authentic,^{*31} this aspect of a heretical rite can rightfully be called “entheogenic.”

BILIA’S BREW

The ruthless campaign with which inquisitors hunted Waldensians along the Italian-Franco border throughout the thirteenth century resulted in a meager handful of those faithful heretics retreating to the Cottian Alps. There they reestablished themselves—a band of heretical outlaws that was not opposed to killing should any threat come its way. Indeed, two of the group’s inquisitorial pursuers were slain while trying to arrest them. By the end of the fourteenth century, the sect had a rather impressive stretch along the alpine valleys in multiple towns nestled between Susa and Pignerol, Italy; some clusters of heretics even appeared in neighboring Turin. Despite the sect’s notable size, capture became more of a hassle for even the most persistent heresy hunter, but some, it turned out, were more tenacious in their pursuit than others.

One such dogged hunter was Anthony di Setto, a Dominican friar from Savigliano who, while investigating heresy in Pignerol in November 1387, finally apprehended one of the Waldensian sect’s members, Antonio

Galosna, a tertiary of the Third Order of Preachers. As regards his shadowy life, Antonio had been a sectarian for twenty-five years and had toured the countryside as a wandering missionary for over a decade. His outstanding tenure traveling along the lower valleys of the Cottian Alps would surely house a wealth of information regarding the practices of those isolated peoples once di Setto started the interrogation.

Like any wise heretic Galosna first denied any and all charges of religious error; like any wise inquisitor di Setto tortured him until he confessed. Most unfortunately, Galosna's obviously interpolated account is all that survives from the encounter. He had been pingponged between the secular and religious authorities a number of times after his arrest: the former promising the hapless heretic freedom; the latter, further torture depending on his confession, which was sworn to and retracted several times during the two institutions' volley for his fate. Galosna's record is therefore one of a confused, desperate, tortured man coupled with an inquisitorial zealotry that can only be called fanatical—definitely not the most historically reliable source. Still, the account has value as a fifteenth-century foreshadowing of the witch stereotype—and our witches' ointment.

During one of the interrogations the inquisitor asked Galosna who among the women of the sect was revered by the rest.

“Bilia la Castagna,” he answered, “who carries with her a phial filled with a strange potion made from the emissions of a large toad and the ashes of burned hairs, [which she] mixes around a fire late at night on the Eve of the Epiphany.”⁵⁸ Bilia would sip from the bottle and pass it around the table. Once a man drank so much that he almost died, but those who tasted a responsible dose would understand all the secrets of the sect and forever question orthodox teaching.⁵⁹

It is tempting to interpret the toad potion as an entheogen; the great detail with which Galosna speaks of it only entices us more. Or could it be that di Setto was merely reading Pope Gregory IX's letter into Galosna's confession? But that is to assume Galosna was familiar with that papal bull. What we can see clearly, however, is that Bilia's brew had all the trimmings of a folk magical potion: a psychoactive drug (toad poison, or bufotenine^{*32 60}), symbolic ingredients (burned hair), and a superstitious preparation date (Eve of the Epiphany).

And this is not the only piece of evidence. If the toad merely represents di Setto's insertion of Gregory's ideas into Galosna's confession, where are all the other toads in the records that would surely have been forced on others' confessions? Furthermore, no other element of Gregory's Vox in Rama appears in Galosna's statement. One likely explanation for the lack of toads in other trial records of that time and its inclusion in this one is that perhaps here it is authentic. Maybe Galosna, during his travels, had encountered the toad Eucharist in some isolated form of folk heresy and so he incorporated the toad drug in his description of their rites. Indeed, Galosna described the poison's effects in terms consistent with bufotenine intoxication: if drunk too much, the body swelled; the potion might possibly be fatal, as one enthusiastic imbibitor at a synagogue almost discovered. A small amount, however, could have a profound effect on the psyche. Given that deviations existed from one heretical sect to another—and that the barbe Pierre admitted that some of the cells among the Waldensians celebrated in remembrance of a Bacchus cult—the idea that a psychoactive drug was utilized in some rites deemed heretical is not historically impossible. An anonymous author writing a *recollectio* around the 1460s references “[drugs] put in food . . . which provoke the [regions of the brain] that control the senses,” in discussing the practices of Waldensian idolaters.⁶¹ Di Setto might have dug just deep enough into Galosna's memories among the more remote forms of belief and uncovered a legitimate use of an entheogen in a variant folk heresy.

TREGENDA

Which brings us back to Matteuccia di Francesco.

Eventually the church formally adopted the folk belief in supernatural nightly gatherings. Not long before Matteuccia was accused of rubbing her body with an ointment so as to transvect via demonback to a satanic congress, Italian poet Jacopo Passavanti warned the populace in 1354:

It happens that demons taking on the likeness of men and women who are alive, and of horses and beasts of burden, go by night in company through certain regions, where . . . people . . . mistake them for [other persons]; and in some countries this is called the *tregenda*. And the demons do this to spread heresy . . . to discredit

those whose likenesses they take on, by showing that they do dishonorable things in the *tregenda*. There are some people, especially women, who say that they go at night in company with such a *tregenda*, and name many men and women in their company; and they say that the mistresses of the throng, who lead the others are Herodias, who killed St. John the Baptist, and the ancient Grecian goddess Diana.⁶²

Bernardino of Siena, the traveling preacher mentioned in chapter 1, referred to the *tregenda* (the horde) during a sermon delivered in Florence two years before his Todi visit in 1424. Some years later he wrote about it in a later work, *De idolatriae cultu* (The Cult of Idolatry). Yet the term appears nowhere in a series of laws, *De pena de incantatorum et facturariorum* (The Penalties of Incantation and Sorcery), which he introduced into a body of statutes in Todi. In his Florentine sermon Bernardino makes passing reference to this gathering, supplying few details: it occurs on Thursday night; it is associated with witches, spells, and incantations; and in the skeptical tradition of the Canon Episcopi, it is merely “a dream and diabolical illusion.”⁶³

Later, however, when Bernardino expounds on the *tregenda* in *De idolatriae*, the passage is (perhaps not surprisingly) closer in detail to the Canon Episcopi—nearly word for word, in fact, though there are some differences. For example, some texts referencing the later Italian tales of the *tregenda* are gender-neutral, whereas the earlier Canon only mentioned women. Bernardino says the meetings take place Thursdays and Sundays, and in addition to Diana and Herodias (both are mentioned by name), followers of the *tregenda* also revere a certain “Iobaina.”

In a sermon given to the citizens of Siena in 1427 Bernardino offered the story of a cardinal’s page who accidentally finds himself at a nightly gathering “of women and children and young people,” whom he identifies as “enchanters.” These enchanters danced through the night until the matins bells rung, at which point the carousers disappeared. Despite the page’s initial reticence he intrepidly joined the dance and even kidnapped one of the young women by holding her hand as the others vanished into the dawn. This particular dance assembly, Bernardino tells us, took place in Benevento. It is clear that this story is merely a reproduction of an earlier story found in Walter Map’s *De nugis curialium* (Trifles of Courtiers, ca.

1180 CE), in which the main character, Eadric Wild, stumbles upon a similar gathering and, like the cardinal's page in Bernardino's story, kidnaps one of the revelers. But this is not the only place that Bernardino mentions nocturnal gatherings among his many orations.

He also remarks on the *barilotto*—the “folk of the keg”—during the same Sieneese sermon. Their “cursed practice” is one that must have struck fear into the hearts of his listeners: just after nightfall, certain women and men in the Piedmont region would gather in the home of one of the members in a room lit by a single lamp. At the right moment the light would be extinguished and the congregation would descend into an orgy. These Piedmontiene people probably were comprised of Waldensians.

If this feature of the folk of the keg didn't stir his flock to move against such licentious people, Bernardino had even more gruesome specifics about their nocturnal activities:

[A]t a certain time of year they will take a young boy child and throw it from one to another . . . so that it is killed thereby. Then being dead they pound it into powder, and put this powder into a keg, and then from this keg they give to drink to each one . . . because they say that then it will not be possible for them to reveal any of those practices which they perform.⁶⁴

Bernardino assures us that his information is sound, coming as it did from a friar of his own order (probably meaning the Observants) who had once been a member of the folk of the keg, and told him all of these gruesome particulars. He ends his tirade with a caveat to women: they must not fall prey to any man who invites them to join such a “ribald crew.”⁶⁵ This kind of man, the preacher cautions, has as his sole motive the wish to see women naked!

The essential elixir in the keg from which the folk drank was, of course, a literary embellishment à la our heretics' potion. However, such evidence as the love philters of Marcus, the heavenly food, and Bilia's brew inclines me toward a historical as opposed to literary basis for the drinks. Consider this suggestion as tentative, to be revisited once all the other evidence has been explored; indeed, things that seemed implausible will appear as quite reasonable.

In any case, some ecclesiastics certainly believed the heretics' potion existed, and their prejudices against it would be evident not only in the later, larger witch trials of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries but in the very witches' ointment we seek to understand.



As with Matteuccia, the origins of the more fantastic details of her case have become clear: the allegation that she sucked the blood out of children clearly derives from literary ideas about strix; her ability to traverse the night reminds one of those magical healers, the “Good Women,” and those followers of Diana or some other fertility goddess; and her congregating with others to worship demonic forces obviously derives from theological ideas about heresy (though orgies never played any role in Matteuccia's record).

But what of Matteuccia's ointment? Bernardino's *De pena* does not anticipate it at all. Might it have contained something psychoactive that brought about an experience that the authorities could stigmatize, as they did Bilia's toad potion? For this possibility to be considered it must first be determined whether such drug ointments even existed outside the context of any heretics' potion. Without them, moving forward would only be an exercise in futility.

The possibilities of bufotenine potions existing were touched on earlier. As will be shown in the following chapter such elixirs are merely the surface of a much deeper reservoir of veneficia. Let us now meet the candidate ingredients that might have caused surreal visions when mixed in ointments and drinks—ingredients that folk practitioners like Matteuccia di Francesco called magical, or even sacred, but which the impending witch stereotype castigated as demonic.

4

ROOTS OF BEWITCHMENT

There is another kind of natural magic which is termed, “witching” or “medicinal” which is done with potions, charmed drinks for love, and diverse poisonous medicines.

HEINRICH CORNELIUS AGRIPPA

One thing does not contain a single virtue, but several.

PARACELSUS

THE VENECOPEIA

The phenomenal bond tying magic to medicine during the Middle Ages is well attested to.^{*33 1} The *soporiferis medicamentis* (sleeping medicines) and *pocula amatoria* (love potions) mixed by persons with knowledge of veneficia ranged from the innocuous to the fatal, and derived largely from the Solanaceae, or nightshade, family, which includes several soporific, psychotropic, and hallucinogenic flora. The most infamous among these are mandrake (*Mandragora officinalis*); henbane (*Hyoscyamus niger*); deadly nightshade (*Atropa belladonna*); and datura or thornapple, (*Datura stramonium*). The psychoactive alkaloids found in Solanaceae family plants are atropine, hyoscyamine (scopolamine), and hyoscyamine—anticholinergics that when ingested cause physiological reactions such as dry mouth, impaired speech, light sensitivity, headache, sexual arousal, and sleepiness, as well as other more dangerous side effects such as loss of motor function, spasms, vivid hallucinations, delirium, and in higher doses, death.² Other non-Solanaceae family plants such as hemlock (the Apiaceae or Umbelliferae family) and the notorious soporific/hypnotic opium (*Papaver*

somniferum) were also used. As we have already seen, the European toad (*Bufo*) was a source of a strong nonbotanical hallucinogen, bufotenin, used for magic, homicidal, or religious purposes.

Some of these drugs have a long magical-medicinal tradition with origins stretching back to before the rise of Western civilization.^{*34} As such, there was some confusion in early Western plant prose regarding the identity of these powerful flora. For example, according to some researchers several of the plants we are about to meet might have all referred to a single species. As only one illustration of this muddle we have the *mandrake* of Greek physician-botanist Theophrastus, the *stryknos manikos* (or *anthos melan*, “dark flower”) of Dioscorides, and the *strychnos* (*Solanum*) of Pliny, which at least one author believes all refer to one plant—the deadly nightshade.³ To catalog all the different opinions of modern researchers as to the true identities of these plants is beyond the scope of this work. What we seek is a consistent viewpoint that mirrors the classical, medieval, and early modern period understanding of these poisons, along with regularity in the classification of physiological and psychological reactions to a certain class of drugs, regardless of what their common names were.

As it turns out, such a consistency exists.

To understand what might have been in Matteuccia’s ointment we must first familiarize ourselves with the candidate psychoactive plants and amphibian additives themselves, and understand how our medical progenitors saw them. Their views are important as they set a precedent for usage, belief, and superstition that was still widely accepted by druggists of all social strata during the early modern period. I will first discuss the family of plants known as the Solanaceae; they are not only the most consistent psychoactives mentioned in the texts, their effects, as we shall discover, sound remarkably similar to those produced by the mid-fifteenth-century “flying ointments.” I will then discuss non-solanaceous drugs such as opium, hemlock, and toad poison, which are equally powerful. They all cause *soporatum*—that curious word used by some inquisitors that means a sleep so deep that the accompanying dreams seemed so real as to have actually happened.⁴ Those experiencing *soporatum* sleep so soundly that they appear dead to onlookers, all the while lucidly dreaming fantastic visions from beyond—this was the essence of the psyche-magical state.

MANDRAKE

(Mandragora officinalis)

Antiquity has left literature littered with myriad myths about the maddening mandrake. Although the legends evolved over the eras, varying slightly from one time and place to another, one tradition that spanned Western civilization necessitated a ritualistic reaping of the mandrake from the soil.⁵ The first Western description of the plant's peculiar plucking practice was penned by Greek author Theophrastus (ca. 371–287 BCE), in his *Historia plantarum* (Enquiry into Plants). He confessed doubt regarding the rite but recounted it nonetheless:

[I]t is said that one should draw three circles round mandrake with a sword, and cut it with one's face towards the west; and at the cutting of the second piece one should dance round the plant and say as many things as possible about the mysteries of love.⁶

This is one of the West's earliest allusions to mandrake's prized aphrodisiacal effects—not surprising, considering Theophrastus counted mandrake as not only effective against gout and sleepiness, but also as an effective additive in love philters.⁷ But these uses weren't the exclusive privilege of humans. Medieval bestiaries described the behaviors and traits of animals worthy of Christian observance. The text supposes a curious practice by elephants, those animals seemingly with “no desire to copulate.” If they wanted offspring both male and female should travel “eastward, toward Paradise . . . [where] there is a tree called Mandragora.” The female elephant must seduce the reluctant male into eating the mandrake, after which they mate. The unknown second-century author of *Physiologus* continues:

The elephant and his wife represent Adam and Eve. For when they were pleasing to God, before their provocation of the flesh, they knew nothing of copulation nor had they knowledge of sin. . . . When [Eve] ate of the Tree of Knowledge, which is what Mandragora means, and gave one of the fruits to [Adam] . . . they had to clear out of Paradise.”⁸

This story leaves us with one of the earliest stabs at identifying the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge: the mandrake, at least according to this anonymous author, was responsible for humankind's admittance into self-awareness, carnal knowledge, and fecundity—and subsequent expulsion from Paradise as punishment for these accretions.



Like most solanaceous intoxication the mandrake experience depends largely on dose: small amounts cause mild visuals followed by a somnolent effect; medium doses lead to hallucinations and a frenzied state; higher doses result in delirium, coma, and death.⁹ Because of the stimulating and psychotropic effects occasioned by the first and second phases, mandrake was one of the more widely used drugs in pocula amatoria by the time Dioscorides wrote his *De Materia Medica* (ca. 60–70 CE).¹⁰ This has led some historians to speculate that it was such a mandrake-infused love philter that caused that most infamous of Caesars, Caligula, to go mad.¹¹ The first-century Roman historian Suetonius recorded that Caligula, having apparently drunk a hallucinatory drug (ironically, to “clear his brain”) became restless, “terrorized by outlandish apparitions,” and “imagined that he was holding conversation with a vision of the sea.”¹² Caligula's experience was not an isolated incident; Julian the Apostate commented about mandrake's stupefying effects in a letter to Callixeine.¹³

The Greeks responded logically, naming the mandrake's berries “love apples,” a borrowing from the Hebrew *dūdā'īm* (apples of love).^{*35} Arabs called them “Devil's apples” for the same reason.¹⁴ While the etymological root of *mandrake* remains planted in labyrinthine linguistics, modern efforts have marshaled several competing origins. A feasible Greek derivation is *Mandra agora* (usual meeting place), perhaps pointing to mandrake's annual growing cycle: after the flowers and berries wither and die the root lies dormant, springing forth new flora each year. A pair of promising Persian possibilities are *mardumgiyah* (plant man) and/or *mardom* (magic causing).¹⁵ Both names speak to widespread recognition of two of the mandrake's most famous attributes: the humanlike shape of its root and its enchanting powers. Such ideas were not lost to the Greeks; Pythagoras (ca. 570–695 BCE) called the plant *Anthropomorphon* because of its shape;

later, Dioscorides (ca. 40–75 CE) said that some people called it *Circeium* (or *Circe*), believing mandrake to be the chief ingredient in that goddess’s bewitching potions.¹⁶ Germanic languages called mandrake *alarūna*, which one linguist interprets as “keeper of secrets” (a coupling of Old High German *ala*, meaning “beget,” and *rūna*, meaning “secret”).¹⁷

Greek and Roman physicians took note of the psychoactive potential of solanaceous plants early on when they marveled at the untoward effects of some of their medicines. Around 400 BCE, the Greek physician Hippocrates warned all who prepared mandrake drafts to be cautious and mix the berry juices “in a smaller dose than will induce mania”; alternatively, he prescribed burning a responsible dose around a convulsive person to alleviate her or his seizures.¹⁸ The anti-Christian commentator Celsus carefully mixed mandrake with other powerful psychoactives and soporifics, like henbane and opium (two psychoactive drugs of the veneficia that will be discussed in this chapter), to induce a deep sleep.¹⁹ That the mandrake was largely seen as a panacea, and the abundance of mythology surrounding it suggest a diaspora of mandrake usage and knowledge.²⁰ It even appears as the title of one of Greek playwright Alexis’s erotic comedies, *Mandragorizomene* (The Mandrake-Drugged Woman). Unfortunately, Alexis’s play survives only in fragments.

Owning much to mandrake’s widespread magical reputation, charlatans or thieves might whittle innocuous roots into homunculus shapes, passing such a magical figurine off as the real thing.²¹ In some areas people believed that mandrake brought money, and they happily paid real money for this deception. Mandrake is even mentioned in the trial records of Joan of Arc. She told her inquisitors that some layfolk believed it attracted wealth (a belief she didn’t share), and that it was a “dangerous and evil thing to keep.”²² Joan’s allusion to the mandrake’s ability to bring fortune and plentitude to its keepers was not the only contemporary reference to this sympathetic magical practice.



But superstitious practices like these do not establish that mandrake’s psychoactive properties were known during the Middle Ages; what matters is whether lay and educated physicians composed mandrake-containing

recipes during those centuries with full knowledge of the plant's hypnotic and soporific effects. One of our best sources for answering such a question is the common leechbook of the medieval and early modern period. A *leech*—an archaic term denoting a physician—was an itinerant health practitioner who straddled both learned and folk medicine. It is for this reason that the leechbooks of this time offer a treasure of medieval folk remedies. *The Old English Herbarium*, ca. 1000, an Anglo-Saxon translation of the older fourth-century herbal, the *Pseudo-Apuleius Herbarius*, identifies mandrake as a plant that “shines at night like a lantern.” A train of uses follows: “[f]or headache and for that one may be able to sleep, take the juice, smear the face, and the plant soothes the headache . . . you will marvel at how quickly sleep comes.” Imbibing mandrake with wine or water alleviated ear pain, foot disease, and tightness in the tendons. One could also drink “three-pennies” weight of mandrake mixed in water to cure “devil-sickness,” (i.e., madness).²³

Another source that makes use of mandrake is worthy of mention here as well, as it was intended for leeches and other local healers. One could call it a popular leechbook although the author was not a leech. The thirteenth-century physician Petrus Hispanus left to posterity a medical treatise titled *Thesaurus pauperum* (*Treasury for the Poor*, ca. 1250–70), filled with cures and aids that mostly deal with women's health, intended for the general public. As evidenced by its translation into several vernacular languages (English, Portuguese, Spanish, German, and Italian) and numerous surviving editions, *Thesaurus pauperum* was by all accounts a widely used lay medical treatise.²⁴

Hispanus gives several preparations made from mandrake in conjunction with other known hallucinogenic plants such as opium and henbane.²⁵ One cure for “frenzy” mixes mandrake with opium and storax balsam; parts of these plants, the author says, should be ground into powder and bespattered on the patient's head.²⁶ Hispanus also knew of solanaceous plants' use as powerful soporifics; another chapter, devoted to curing wakefulness, recommends taking the seeds of mandrake to extinguish headaches.²⁷ Another recipe in Hispanus's herbal endorses anointing the forehead with a violet ointment that contains mandrake, opium, and henbane to lull the patient into a deep sleep.²⁸

A similarly popular book of women's medicines and cosmetics comes from a figure known only as Trotula of Salerno (ca. eleventh– twelfth centuries). A popular ointment (*unguentum populeon*) used for “an acute fever and for those who are unable to sleep” is to be rubbed on the “temples and pulse points and the palms of the hands and the soles of the feet.” The unguent contained henbane, red poppy, mandrake, deadly nightshade (discussed later in this chapter), and pig fat.²⁹ Similar actions can be taken with rambunctious children: wine infused with mandrake or dwarf elder “works in a wonderful way for children who are not able to sleep.”³⁰

Closer to Matteuccia's own time another medical book, Magister Santes de Ardoyni's *Opus de venenas* (Book of Poisons, ca. 1430), described mandrake among other powerful drugs.³¹ Ardoyni lists a group of obscure names given to that plant by other writers, further commenting that all parts of the plant have virtue.³² Ardoyni's caveats about the power and allure of mandrake seem to have come from personal observation. Regular folks partook of the plant for various magical means; indeed, Ardoyni writes that he once saw a woman drink the roots of mandrake (with wine) while bathing.³³ Her skin turned red and bloated; these physiological effects evince that she had also succumbed to the drug's other renowned effects: “drunkenness,” “vertigo,” “detachment from reality,” “lethargy,” and eventually, “profound sleep.”³⁴



Come the Middle Ages, mandrake acquired a new magical function: as an antilust drug. We can get a feel for this use by way of two formulas handed down to us from both Hispanus and the Christian mystic, Benedictine abbess, visionary, and polymath Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1179). Mandrake's famously amorous powers had been eschewed in service of chastity; it was recommended as an effective way for men to extinguish their sexual promiscuity—a truly magical act indeed! Hispanus describes an unguent of mandrake, opium, and henbane seeds that men should anoint their testicles with; all licentious thoughts would be extinguished.³⁵ Like all Hispanus's formulas, this one is terse, practical, and uncomplicated by ritual; his faith resides in the action of the drugs themselves. On the other hand, the antilust formula handed down by Hildegard in a compendium of

her earlier works that was titled *Liber subtilitates diversarum natuarum creaturarum* (Book on the Subtleties of Many Kinds of Creatures, ca. 1160),^{*36} can rightly be called psyche-magical. For those who “because of magical intervention” couldn’t contain their “sexual urges,” a mandrake root should be washed and bound to the abdomen for three days and nights. The user was then to remove the root, split it in two, and reattach it to her or his thighs for an additional three days, after which the user should “pulverize the right arm of the root and swallow the powder.” The man should use the female root for this ritual; women should use the male root. In this spell Hildegard innocently recommends washing the root to “cleanse it of its powers,” a thoughtful but fruitless caveat.³⁶ Although Hildegard’s works comprise a hodgepodge of ideas that may not be wholly her own, authorship of the magic ritual is beside the point.³⁷ The spell—whoever wrote it—advocates the deliberate ingestion of a well-known psychoactive in a magical ritual.

To Hildegard, mandrake’s psychoactive powers were secondary to God’s, the true source of all power.^{†37 38} She even alludes to the belief that holding the proper mindset while using such powerful drugs influences the experience. In her collected medical works, *Subtilitates diversarum*, Hildegard warns that “the influence of the devil is more present [in mandrake] than in other herbs; consequently man is stimulated by it according to his desires, whether they be good or bad.”³⁹

Whether in pagan, Hebrew, or Islamic lore and writings, mandrake had been associated with sex, fertility, and recreation. The Christian empire inspired a radical reversal: it was to be used as a way to appease a prudish God. But Hispanus and Hildegard were clearly fighting against a deeply entrenched carnal mandrake paradigm. To assume that no one used mandrake for reasons outside prescribed medical ones is too big a stretch. The Renaissance alchemist Agrippa offers good evidence that the pagan use of psyche-sexual drugs still survived into the early modern period. While commenting on the “whorish arts” in *De incertitudine et vanitate scientiarum atque artium declamatio invectiva* (*Of the Uncertainties and Vanities of the Sciences and the Arts*), a skeptical satire of the sad state of science written in 1526, he stated rather explicitly that after ingesting mandrake one could fulfill “Venus pleasure three score and ten times.”⁴⁰

HENBANE

(*Hyoscyamus niger*)

Dioscorides wrote of “three important different types” of henbane (*Hyoscyamus niger*), two of which cause “delirium and sleep.” The third kind of henbane, he said, was pounded into a liquid with seeds of opium, water, and honey “for suppositories to take away pain, for sharp hot mucus, ear pains, and the disorders of the womb. . . . Boiled like vegetables and a *tryblium* [plateful] eaten, they cause a mean disturbance of the senses.”⁴¹ Pliny the Elder, calling the plant *herba Apollinaris*, after Apollo, the god of music, intellectual pursuits, and prophecy, sounded similar sentiments in his *Natural History*: “[Henbane], like wine, has the property of flying to the head, and consequently of acting injuriously upon the mental faculties.” He further explained henbane’s dualistic nature: “It is a singular thing, but we find remedies mentioned for those who have taken this juice, as though for a poison, while at the same time we find it prescribed as a potion among the various remedies.”⁴²

Historically, henbane went by many names and had many uses. Some names, like the Latin *iusquiamus*, derive from two Greek words, *hus* (pig) and *kuamos* (bean). The anglicanized terms refer to hens (and probably roosters, too) who ate the “baneful” seeds and became mad. Yet henbane’s Sanskrit name, *aj’ amoda*, means “goat’s joy.”⁴³ Other common names for this plant were more straightforward. *Insana* was what Isidore of Seville called it in his *Etymologies*: “If it is eaten or drunk it causes insanity or torpid and vivid dreams,” he warned. “Commoners call it *milimindrum* because it caused mental disturbances.”⁴⁴



As with mandrake the history of henbane also includes nonmedicinal, superstitious uses. For instance, Burchard of Worms, in “Corrector,” reveals a bizarre ritual involving henbane that makes it seem closer to weather magic than anything like *veneficia*. During droughts a young maiden should be stripped by other girls and brought out of the village “where they find the herb henbane which is called in German ‘belisa.’” Using the pinky on her right hand, the nude maiden should dig up the plant and tie it to the

pinky toe of her right foot. The other girls then bring the henbane-wearer to a river and, using twigs, splash her with water. They are then to walk backward to their village.⁴⁵ “Belinus” was a divinity of “heathen Britons and their Celtic kindred in Gaul” who smeared henbane juice over their arrows, which they called *Bellenuncia*.⁴⁶

Another peculiar ritual for gathering henbane for medical use (though it is not ingested in this instance) is found in the writings of Greek physician Alexander of Tralles (ca. 525–605).

[Henbane], when the moon is in Aquarius or Pisces, before sunset, must be dug up with the thumb or third finger with the left hand, and must be said, I declare, I declare, holy wort, to thee; I invite thee tom-morrow [*sic*] to the house of Fileas, to stop the rheum of the feet of M. or N., and say I invoke thee, the great name, Jehovah, Sabaoth, the God who steadied the earth and stayed the sea.

The following day before sunrise the leech should use the bone from a dead animal to dig up the henbane root, which she or he then rubs with salt while saying incantations to angels. The root should then be worn around the patient’s neck as a charm.⁴⁷

Other cases leave us wondering about a henbane possessor’s intentions. In Fyrkat, Denmark, a woman’s body was found in a Viking grave (date unknown). Among her meager possessions, including animal bones, a cup, a silver decorative pendant, and a cooking spit, excavators found a pouch containing around 100 henbane seeds. They may have been nothing more than a way of demonstrating “mastery of a poisonous plant” to her neighbors, or she may have used them for some other superstitious reason that didn’t involve ingesting or inhaling them at all.⁴⁸ However, if we accept the antiquity of henbane’s appearance in the archaeological record, its recorded hallucinogenic properties, its place in magical-medicinal folklore, and that the woman was a seeress based on her burial possessions, ingestion for its psychoactive effects cannot be entirely ruled out. We do, however, have specific examples of how henbane was used for its medicinal properties; many of the descriptions of henbane follow patterns already set up by its solanaceous sibling, mandrake.

One anonymous fifteenth-century leechbook, referenced by its catalog number, *M. 136*, differs from others in its lack of magical prepwork; that is to say, it is almost completely free of any kind of superstitious accoutrements. *M. 136* is practical, albeit pretentious, as its corrupted (though readable) use of Latin and Greek indicates an eager though superficial physician.⁴⁹ But this also places the leech right where we want her: on the border between folk medicine and learned medicine, a kind of information junkie soaking up whatever prescriptions she could find. She writes of university-level medical pastes such as “Emplastrum bonum strutorium” [*sic*], which contains several known psychoactives including cannabis (marijuana), nightshade, and henbane.^{*38 50} She writes of other folk simples like “Henbane Oil” (*Oleum Jusquiami*), in which henbane is the only ingredient, and preparation involves burying the leaves in various holed pots for a year. Setting it apart from other recipes in the book, this one does not mention what the oil was used for.⁵¹ Yet the author was certainly aware of henbane’s soporific effects; she mentions another ointment made of henbane, smallage (a variety of wild celery), and mint, which should be rubbed on the forehead and temples, “[f]or him that may not sleep.”⁵² Another plaster used “to cease weeping” is made of henbane, egg whites, incense, vinegar, and women’s breast milk.⁵³ One particularly popular remedy for toothache involved inhaling the fumes of burning henbane seeds, leed seed, and incense.⁵⁴

Other leechbooks are equally forthcoming with medications that demonstrate that the author understood the soporific effects of henbane. The *Lacnunga* (Remedies), a collection of miscellaneous Anglo-Saxon medical texts and prayers written mainly in Old English and Latin and dating around the late tenth or early eleventh century, recommends a fusion of henbane and hemlock (an herb discussed later in this chapter) to mix into a “sleeping drink.”⁵⁵ Another henbane ointment should be used “when a man cannot sleep.”⁵⁶

Petrus Hispanus, whose *Thesaurus pauperum* we met earlier, also lists henbane (alongside mandrake) as a cure for “frenzy.” An ointment (rubbed on the eyes, nose, and lips of the patient) can be made from henbane, storax, myrrh, and opium juice boiled in honey.⁵⁷ Hispanus curiously shies away from Isidore of Seville’s labeling of henbane as “insane”; indeed, he refers to this herb as “*herbae sanae*”—the healthy, or sane herb. Part of

preparing one henbane remedy (for purposes unstated) involved placing it in the intestines (midbelly) of small animals or roosters or in the lungs of pigs.⁵⁸ Knowledgeable of henbane's soporific effects, Hispanus recommended two kinds of somnolent aids: the first, involving mandrake and henbane (mentioned above), should be used for a "deep sleep." For a less powerful potion "opium, white henbane seeds, and woman's milk, tempered with Albumin will result in a light sleep."⁵⁹ Henbane was believed to be so powerful that the leaves alone could merely be placed under a pillow to "cause a frantic individual to sleep."⁶⁰ But such purely sympathetic magical examples must be seen in conjunction with others that recommend cooking henbane in sweet wine to cast a person into a wondrous dreamland.⁶¹ Accessing the more priggish side of his temperament, Hispanus offered a henbane ointment that should be rubbed on the genitals for purposes of chastity.⁶² Henbane also appears as an antiaphrodisiac in English physician Gilbertus Anglicus's (ca. 1180–1250) encyclopedic *Compendium medicinae* (Compendium of Medicine, ca. 1230). Anglicus, whose use of folk ideas in his *Compendium* demonstrates that some of his medical knowledge came from "unlearned medical practitioners and women,"⁶³ offers a host of possibilities to "restrain sexual intercourse." One method involved rubbing henbane juice all over the testicles to extinguish "heat, erection, and lust."⁶⁴

Ardoyni also gives us some interesting details pertaining to henbane, telling of some accidents that have come about as a result of its use: "It is of the coldest stupefiers. . . . [s]tirs breathing sensations . . . if allowed to penetrate the body it causes a sense of motion." It also "causes drunkenness and synesthesia^{*39} when the hot vapors hit the brain." Users could end up "uttering gibberish, braying like an ass, or whinnying like a horse." It eventually leads to sleep and sometimes spasms.⁶⁵ Perhaps we can get a feel for the kind of hallucinatory power unleashed by henbane through the experience of a twentieth-century German writer, Gustav Schenck, who burned and inhaled the seeds of this unholy root. After some initial physical discomfort (resulting in almost complete loss of motor function) and feelings of giddy drunkenness had subsided, the plant's powerful hallucinatory effects overwhelmed him:

There were animals, which looked at me keenly with contorted grimaces and staring terrified eyes; there were flying stones and clouds of mist, all sweeping along in the same direction. They carried me irresistibly with them. . . . They were enveloped in a vague grey light which emitted a dull glow and rolled onwards and upwards into a black and smoky sky. . . . above my head water was flowing, dark and blood-red. The sky was filled with a whole herd of animals. Fluid, formless creatures emerged from the darkness. I heard words, but they were all wrong and nonsensical, and yet they possessed for me some hidden meaning . . . I know that I trembled in horror; but I also know that I was permeated by a peculiar sense of wellbeing connected with the crazy sensation that my feet were growing lighter . . . I was seized with the fear that I was falling apart. At the same time, I experienced an intoxicating sensation of flying.⁶⁶

The famed doctor and religious reformer of the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries Arnaldus de Villa Nova wrote of a physician who tended to a constipated patient who “had taken opium or henbane” to cure his intestinal problems.⁶⁷ But digestive disorders weren’t the only reason for taking henbane. The thirteenth-century Dominican friar and Catholic saint Albertus Magnus commented on henbane, which he called *Acharonis* in his *Book of Secrets* (subtitled *On the virtues of herbs, stones, and certain beasts, also a book of the marvels of the world*), drawing on the usual medical properties of the plant while elaborating on its powers in another work, *De vegetabilibus et plantis libri septem* (Treatise on Vegetation and Plants in Seven Books, ca. 1250). Besides its use against hardened testicles, St. Anthony’s fire, and uterine pain, the leaves have somnolent effects, he noted, and when ingested “transform . . . one’s ability to reason . . . destroy memory, and make men crazy.” He says that poison is present in both the black and white henbane, yet white henbane is “often administered [to patients].”⁶⁸

Henbane was also added to beer to make it more intoxicating.^{*40} In 1507, a brewer was fined five gulden for strengthening his beer with henbane and other “crazy-making things and plants.” Likewise, in the mid-seventeenth century, Jacobus Theodorus, known as Tabernaemontanus (his Latinized name represented a translation of his native town, Bergzabern)—a

beer enthusiast of the finest order—was enthralled by the many additives that enhanced his preferred beverage: sugar, cinnamon, cloves, Dutch myrtle, ivy, and laurel. On the matter of one plant, however, he was unwilling to compromise, condemning those who added henbane to their beers.⁶⁹ These people, he declared, should be “damned as enemies of the human race,” no different than a killer or a bandit.⁷⁰

Henbane, like mandrake, also had superstitious and magical practices that involved ingesting its hallucinatory poisons. In some cases, ingested and imbibed henbane medications mixed with a kind of Christianized folklore. *Bald’s Leechbook*, an Old English medical text written in the ninth century, includes magical henbane ointment recipes for bizarre conditions indeed. Many of these recipes are a hodgepodge of drug agents, folk superstition, and Christian theology, such as one ointment that contains henbane and protects against “the elfin race, nocturnal goblin visitors, and for the women with whom the devil hath carnal commerce.”⁷¹ The salve should be placed under an altar and the physician should sing nine Masses over it. If a person were struck by elves, the ointment would be rubbed on the forehead and in the eyes. The patient is then to be fumigated with incense as the leech makes signs of the cross over her or him. It is difficult to maintain that a person would *not* have some otherworldly, perhaps even entheogenic, experience with all these prompts in place—psychoactive medicine, spiritual-medical rituals, and an almost shamanistic healer tending the patient. Henbane also appears in another potion used to induce vomiting in “a fiend sick man, or *demoniae*.” It should be mixed with holy water and ale, other herbs, and should be drunk from a church bell. These two medical spells mingling Christian ideology with folk superstition are exactly the kinds of bastardization of the faith that ecclesiastics must have abhorred.⁷²

DEADLY NIGHTSHADE

(*Atropa belladonna*)

Dr. Jeremias Brachelius rushed to the bedside of the son of local bookseller Servatus Sassen. The lad had last been seen playing in the garden of physician, philosopher, and instrument-maker Gemma Frisius. Now Frisius, as a physician, was well-known for growing “nightshade . . . along with

several other exotic herbs” in his garden. Because of the boy’s “youthful impetuosity” he ate a single nightshade berry off the plant. He soon descended into insanity, grew “weak in body and spirit,” and could no longer remember who he or his family was. Eventually the hallucinatory phase passed and the boy crashed under the nightshade juice’s powerful soporific spell, remaining asleep for a full day. After the doctors applied a few “professional remedies” the boy fully recovered.⁷³

The Sassen boy was lucky, for so strong was the fruit of *Atropa*—a name that derives from the Greek fate who cut the thread of life—that the plant for which she was named sprouted poisonous berries, five to ten of which whose juice was enough to kill a person. The root, too, contains these alkaloids. Dioscorides records that one drachm (3.4 grams) of the root mixed in wine is enough to cause hallucinations; upping the dose to four drachms is fatal.⁷⁴ Even nonfatal doses run the risk of unexpected hallucinations, the kind that might have caused a person to believe she or he had been bewitched. The lore and allure of this particular solanum is that which we have come to expect from that family of plants.



This bewitching plant found utility in a variety of ways. In the early eleventh century the Earl of Macbeth—the very Macbeth on whom William Shakespeare would model his infamous character—decided on one last effort to expel the invading Norse from Scotland. After surrendering to King Svein Knutson and taking refuge in Perth, Macbeth sent provisions to his conquerors. “A great quantity of bread was therefore sent, together with wine and ale into which had been infused a poisonous herb . . . commonly called sleeping nightshade”—a shrewd form of medieval psycho-chemical warfare. The results did not disappoint: Macbeth sent Lord Banquo and his army to seize the enemy camp; the panicked and intoxicated Norsemen stood no chance. Other soldiers remained asleep, perhaps not even awakened by Banquo’s sword piercing their stomachs. Knutson probably imbibed the bulk of the spoils; he couldn’t be roused and had to be quickly “thrown like a burden over a baggage horse.” However, Macbeth had already dispatched forces to the harbor. That was the end of King Svein and his brief victory over the Scots.⁷⁵

Women found uses for nightshade in the beauty products of the early modern period. The word *belladonna* (beautiful mistress) probably came from the red juice of the berries that was used as rouge.^{*42 76} A second plausible explanation behind the name might come from the other use of the nightshade berry's juice: as an eyedrop to enlarge women's pupils to make them more attractive.⁷⁷ This latter beauty practice, however, seems to have been local to Venice, as there is scant indication that it existed elsewhere in Europe.⁷⁸



In the *Old English Herbarium*, nightshade is called *solata* and has various uses—to assuage swelling, to soothe earache and toothache, and to stop bloody noses. This volume recommends eating the leaves directly and dripping the berry juice into the ears.⁷⁹ Likewise, leechbook *M.136* endorses various medications made from nightshade. One is an ointment that includes as ingredients nightshade, pennyroyal, wild thyme, and other herbs; it is rubbed on the foreheads of those who have suffered traumatic head injury.⁸⁰ Another recipe contains nightshade, crumbs of sour bread, avens (*Geum*), and knapweed (*Centaurea*), and is to be seethed in ale and used for “felon” (possibly referring to an abscess on the finger).⁸¹ Another involves making a “plaster of barley meal and sengreen [houseleek], nightshade, and vinegar” for “the liver that is sick.”⁸² True to its solanaceous character, nightshade is also included in a knockout potion; mixed in ale with opium, lettuce, and several other herbs into a juice, it will “make a man sleep all day” when drunk.⁸³ There is even a hot compress made with nightshade and linseed for use by those whom Hildegard's and Hispanus's antilust prescriptions failed; it should be rubbed on chafed “privy members.”⁸⁴ Another recipe for “boils on women's teats” includes nightshade, egg oil, and bean meal.⁸⁵

In *Bald's Leechbook*, ointments prepared from henbane, hemlock, and the curiously named “enchanter's nightshade,” among other ingredients, were recommended for everything from toothache to leprosy and “elf disease.” This latter problem integrates some Christian folklore in the following recipe.

[L]ay these worts under the altar, have nine masses sung over them, incense, holy salt, three heads of cropleek, the netherward part of enchanters nightshade, helenium; take in the morning a full cup of milk, drop thrice some holy water into it, let the man sup it up as hot as he can: let him eat therewith three bits of enchanters nightshade and when he hath a mind to rest let him have in his chamber gledes [live coals or embers], let him lay on the gledes . . . and elfthone, and reek him therewith till he sweat, and reek the house all through . . .

This, we are instructed, should be done for nine mornings and nights.⁸⁶

Nightshade's reputation seems to have attracted criticism. It was said by Ardoyni that eating the root of "*solatro*"^{*43} "in sufficient amounts . . . causes insanity, or synesthesia . . . a kind of foolishness . . . bizarre color patterns . . . speech impediments or talkativeness . . . hiccups . . . chest pain, and spasms . . . [and] death."⁸⁷ Like other psychoactive drugs already mentioned it is also listed as a sex inhibitor.⁸⁸

And yet the drug remained in use. The *Macer floridus de viribus herbarum* (On the Strengths of Herbs), a late ninth-century catalog of seventy-seven herbs and their supposed medicinal properties written in a kind of vulgar Latin verse, contains some pithy plant descriptions.⁸⁹ The Greeks called nightshade *strignum* (a linguistic association with *strix*), and said that a plaster made from it helps eye ulcers, headaches, "St. Anthony's Fire and stinging herpes."⁹⁰ Some medieval medical faculties recommended belladonna as a counteraction to incubi possession, a holdover from ancient Greece dating back to as early as 460 BCE.⁹¹

Deadly nightshade was also found in sleep ointments and potions, this practice resulting in a highly unstable medicine. Even a safe quantity of the juice mixed with vinegar or wine and rubbed on the temples "causeth sleep," "troubleth the mind, [and] bringeth madness" to users.⁹² Drunk by children to treat "hooping-cough," a measurement that "exceeds ever so little the proper dose . . . occasion[ed] the most painful dreams."⁹³ Italian scholar, scientist, polymath, and playwright Giambattista della Porta (ca. 1535–1615) warned of belladonna's powers: "So that it is a most pleasant spectacle to behold such mad whimsies and visions, which is also cured by sleep. . . . Nevertheless, we give this precaution, that all those roots or seeds

which cause the takers of them to see delightful visions, if their dose be increased, will continue this alienation of mind for three days. But if quadrupled, it brings death.”⁹⁴

DATURA

(*Datura stramonium*)

The panicked chambermaid, suffering particularly strong hallucinations, rushed back to the room crying aloud, “Look! All the devils of hell are coming!” Unbeknownst to her and the other diners in the household, the meal of lentil seeds they had eaten a short while ago accidentally (or deliberately) contained foreign seeds—seeds of the charlatan, the trickster, the gypsy. The household descended into madness. A lacemaker “exhibited an unusual zeal and fussiness, [and] threw the weaving cone to and fro and entangled everything.”

The others fared no better:

A servant carried all the wood into the secret chamber under the pretext that he had to distill liquor. Another hit two hatchets together and said he was chopping wood. Another crept about on the ground, and dug up and scratched the earth and the grass with his mouth like a hog with its snout. Another imagined he was a wheelwright and wanted to pierce and bore holes in all the wood. . . . Another went into the smithy and cried for help to catch the fish which he imagined to be there in enormous numbers.⁹⁵

The most likely culprit advanced as the cause of this descriptive scene is the thornapple, or datura as it is widely known. Datura’s wide-reaching distribution (as far west as the Americas, as far east as China) makes locating its place of origin almost impossible. Datura also comes in twenty varieties,⁹⁶ amplifying a taxonomical nightmare that has existed in the West since the days of Dioscorides.⁹⁷ While it was once believed that datura first entered Europe via explorers returning from the New World in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, three species of the plant are known to have existed in the Old World prior to the Columbian Exchange: *Datura stramonium* (originating in Eurasia); *Datura metel* (India, South and West Asia); and *Datura ferox* (China). One pre-Christian name for this plant is

the Lithuanian *dievažolynis*, meaning “God’s herb.” A popular term in that same language, *Durnarope*, comes from the Baltic *durna*, meaning “drunk” or “high.”⁹⁸ In Europe *datura*’s status as “God’s herb” seems to have been localized to some areas of Lithuania. Third-century Greek poet Theocritus mistakenly believed one of these types of *datura* to be the elusive “hippomanes,”^{*44} an unknown but powerful additive to love philters; though his postulation does not seem to have been widely accepted by others⁹⁹ I mention it here only as evidence for the antiquity of *datura*’s acknowledged hallucinogenic properties.



If not a love philter additive, *D. stramonium* certainly found its way into the early Arabic medical sources, which first turn up around the early ninth century. *Datura*, therefore, more likely came into Europe proper centuries before the Age of Exploration by way of Arabic learners living in Al Andalus (i.e., modern Spain). Islamic physician Gregorius Abu’l-Faraj ibn al-‘Ibri wrote in 1285 that Al Andalusians regarded *gawz mathil* (*datura*) as “the soporific plant.” Arabic sources placed great emphasis on the plant’s intoxicating and fatal effects. By the mid-sixteenth century, Dawud al-Antaki, aka David of Antioch, a blind Syrian physician and pharmacist, called *datura* the active ingredient in a medical ointment used to alleviate hydropsy, tumors, and other skin diseases; he further recommended its oral ingestion as a cure for insomnia.¹⁰⁰

Across the Atlantic the Aztec civilization held views closer to those held in Lithuania. A species of *datura*, *Datura caratocaula*, called *Atlinan* by locals, was so highly esteemed for its vision-producing properties that only priests were allowed to ingest it.¹⁰¹ Soon after tales of the New World reached the shores of Europe, Franciscan friar Bernardino de Sahagún (1499–1590) traveled to Mesoamerica in hopes of helping Christianize that “heathen” area. Once there he commented on the effects of this local inebriant: “[*Datura*] is intoxicating and maddening. . . . Those who eat it have visions of terrible things. Wizards or persons who wish to injure someone administer it in food or drink.” De Sahagún also remarked on *datura*’s medicinal virtues for alleviating gout. A century later Mexican-born priest Jacinto de la Serna, a doctor of theology and three times the

rector of the University of Mexico, wrote that the Aztecs “had great superstitions regarding [datura and peyote] . . . which they venerate as though divine. For in drinking these herbs they consult them like oracles. [They revere] these seeds . . . as if they were God.”¹⁰²

Other exotic places employed datura for wholly different, surreptitious reasons. India was still another world to most Europeans during the early modern period; indeed, in his *Buch der natur* (Book of Nature), first published in 1475, Konrad von Megenberg (1309–1374) fancied that some Indian women had dog heads, developed six arms, or grew beards. Men could be born with their feet facing backward or with two heads.¹⁰³ Noting some other curiosities of the Orient, Johann Weyer (1515–1588), Dutch physician and demonologist, and disciple of Agrippa, warned that certain people in India “put this flower [datura] (and also the seed) into the food of those they intend to rob. And those who have partaken thereof appear disoriented . . . dissolved in laughter; with perfect nonchalance they allow the thieves to remove whatever they wish.”¹⁰⁴ Such practices probably prompted another German writer to remark that datura was the “tool of brothel-keepers, seducers of young girls, depraved courtesans, and shameless lechers.”¹⁰⁵ Portuguese physician and natural historian Cristóbal Acosta (Cristóvão da Costa, 1515–1594), whose long life spanned almost the whole of the sixteenth century and who traveled extensively in the East Indies, also warned of such practices among Indian harlots who drugged wine with datura seeds, as reported in his *Tractado de las drogas y medicinas de las Indias orientales* (Treatise of the Drugs and Medicines of the East Indies), published in 1578. The Hindu *enamoradas* carried the powdered seeds to drug their victims: “[H]e who partakes of [datura] is deprived of his reason . . . for a long time laughing, or weeping, or sleeping . . . at times he appears to be in his right mind, but really being out of it and not knowing the person to whom he is speaking nor remembering what has happened after his alienation has passed.”¹⁰⁶

Though datura does not seem to have been popularly used the way, say, other psychoactives thus far discussed were, it is also clear that in the British Isles some leeches certainly knew how to use it; the plant appears in four separate recipes in the fourth-century herbal *Herbarium Apuleii Platonici* (sometimes translated as “The Old English Herbarium of Psuedo-Apuleius”).¹⁰⁷ In Ardoynis’s *Opus de venenas* only one species of datura

makes an appearance: *D. metel* of India,¹⁰⁸ about which he writes with all his usual deterrents: it stupefies, causes vertigo, redness in the eyes, and drunkenness, followed by wheezing and a profound sleep.¹⁰⁹ Folk and learned medicine aside, datura seeds might also be used toward more fatal ends in Europe, as assassination and “knockout drops”—a technique perhaps learned from stories that came back from exotic worlds.¹¹⁰

Natural philosophers like Giambattista della Porta declared that datura “will make one mad, and present strange visions, both pleasant and horrible.” Moreover, “three fingers full” of datura seeds crushed into powder and swallowed caused a “pleasant kind of madness for a day.”¹¹¹ Writing in 1784 Prussian toxicologist J. S. Halle became one of the first writers to praise the drug for stirring the artistic mind: “[M]ixing the ground seeds [of datura] with wine will produce an artificial, magic and fantastic tincture; if a poet would drink [this blend], it would provide him with his most exalted flight in odes.” This datura-wine elixir will “fire the pictures of imagination in the most vivid manner, swirling the natural impulse of the muse beyond all enthusiasm of wine.”¹¹²

It should be noted that other hallucinogens and poisons outside of those belonging to the Solanaceae family also appear in some early-modern descriptions of folk medicine and love philters. These drugs were largely harvested from opiate bulbs, amphibian toxins, and other herbs of equal psychoactive intensity as those of the Solanaceae family.

OPIUM

(Papaver somniferum vars. album et nigrum)

French naturalist and explorer Pierre Belon (1517–1564) stood in awe at the fifty-strong camel caravan. Around the 1540s, the wayfaring Belon had made his way around Asia Minor, Arabia, Egypt, and a host of other exotic lands, outlining those places in his 1553 work *Les observations de plusieurs singularitez et choses memorables trouvées en Grèce, Asie, Judée, Egypte, Arabie et autres pays étrangers* (Observations of Several Peculiar and Memorable Things found in Greece, Asia, Judea, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and other Foreign Countries). This camel caravan, according to the adventurer, was loaded with countless pounds of the finest Turkish opium, a good portion of which was destined for Europe.¹¹³ Belon was well acquainted

with the effects of opium from the medical works of such Western greats as Galen, Pliny, and Dioscorides.¹¹⁴



Opium is perhaps the oldest known and most widely used drug in our pharmacopeia. The Ebers Papyrus, which dates from around 1550 BCE, lists *špenn* for opium, and presents it under the title “Remedy to prevent the excessive crying of children.”¹¹⁵ Hippocrates, the earliest Westerner to mention opium, recommended it for thirteen different ailments, nine of which dealt with gynecological matters. That midwives usually worked with such troubles probably means that women in antiquity had a greater familiarity with opium than did men.¹¹⁶

Many writers of antiquity distinguished between white poppy (var. *album*) and black poppy (var. *nigrum*), which probably stemmed from Pliny’s *Natural History*. Pliny wrote of three kinds of poppy. White poppy was roasted and served with honey or sprinkled in egg yolk and poured on top of country loaves. It had a further use as an additive to wine (for a soporific drink) and the seeds supposedly cured elephantiasis. The second kind he mentions, black poppy, was soporific by virtue of the juice it produced; the Romans made lozenges of this creamy residue. The third kind Pliny calls “wild poppy,” which the Greeks called *rheoas*.¹¹⁷ According to Pliny, this poppy was “possessed of more active properties than the other two in every respect,” though this statement is unfounded. Too much partaking of opium resulted in death, he says.

But Pliny only collected the ideas of others. Dioscorides had a different approach: experiment and observe the plants and herbs and then describe. His diligently produced *De Materia Medica* leaves us a richer picture of opium’s use in antiquity, including everything from proper cultivation to how to spot imitation opium.¹¹⁸ *De Materia Medica* presents a larger debate about opium and its virtues, suspending the view of other physicians who claimed opium was dangerous and could cause blindness. “These opinions are false,” Dioscorides tells us, “disproved by experience, because the efficacy of the medicine bears witness to the work of it.” He knew as well that the seeds contained no narcotic properties whatsoever (he recommended that black poppy seeds be crushed and mixed with wine to

alleviate immoderate menstruation and excessive excretion). However, the juice, he says, holds well-known psychoactive properties and was rubbed on the finger and inserted into the rectum or vagina to induce sleep. It was used in a variety of other ways too, as a “pain-easer, sleep-causer, and digester.” But it could also make one lethargic or even lead to death.¹¹⁹

The poppy must have had a strong impact on Roman society. Its image appears alongside wheat on Roman coins during the reign of the emperor Vespasian in the first century CE. His predecessor, Nero, also had the image of this plant placed on coins, as indicated by an Egyptian silver tetradrachm that features the snake of Agathodaemon, the Greek spirit of the vineyards and grainfields, wearing an Egyptian crown, surrounded by poppy and wheat. Opium’s use as a medicine, recreational drug, soporific, and vision-inducing agent has existed in at least one or more of these capacities in every culture familiar with it. It is mentioned countless times in numerous herbals from the medieval and early modern periods, and unlike many of the drugs already mentioned, opium is still used in both its natural and synthetic forms for its medicinal, recreational, and visionary attributes.



Many centuries after the ancient Greeks and Romans, French explorer Pierre Belon demonstrated firsthand knowledge of opium’s powers over the user, saying of the Turks, “There is no Turk that would not buy opium with his last penny. . . . They eat opium because they think that they will thus become more daring and have less fears of the dangers of war.” During warring times, Belon recounted, opium could hardly be found in the marketplace, the bulk of any vender’s supply having been bought up by soldiers.¹²⁰ In fact, Belon even took opium himself, though his experience only resulted in a “burning sensation in the mouth of the stomach, a slight disturbance in the brain, and a somewhat restless sleep.”¹²¹ A contemporary of Belon, French explorer Nicholas de Nicolay, pointed out that opium use among Islamic Turks occurred because their religion forbade wine: “[T]hey have another way to make themselves drunk without wine, which is with their opium.” Nicolay, too, draws attention to opium’s use in wartime to make warriors more “stout and hardy.” However, he also comments on the drug’s recreational uses: “It maketh them so out of sorts, that they lose both

their wit and understanding, for they go reeling about in the streets, holding each other, as the other drunkards do . . . making fierce and terrible cries and howling like unto dogs.”¹²² Another writer, Gulielmus Biddulphus, a preacher stationed in Aleppo, Syria, writing to a friend around 1600 recounted the Syrians’ opium use for its hallucinogenic properties: “They drink bersh or opium, which maketh them forget themselves, and talk idle about castles in the air, as though they saw visions, and heard revelations.”¹²³

Cristóbal Acosta, who warned his readers to beware the drugging practices of datura-wielding Indian prostitutes, also described one of the other uses of opium: to enhance sexual pleasure. Too much of a good thing, though, could lead to impotence, as some European medical students who experimented with the drug unfortunately discovered. Moreover, for those men with innately strong imaginations, opium resulted in premature ejaculation, so lustful did they become by the combination of visual imagery and physical sensation brought forth by the drug. Acosta favored opium use for the more insipid person: by taking opium “[t]hey are able to [have sex] slowly,” allowing women (who took longer to orgasm) and men to “climax together.”¹²⁴

We can be reasonably sure that opium use trickled down to folk medicine in Europe, as it turns up in one medical treatise after another. One of the earliest medieval propagators of opium’s virtues was Avicenna (980–1037), a Persian polymath who has been described as the father of medicine during the early modern period. Avicenna openly admitted to partaking in the drug’s more intoxicating possibilities. A humorous man, he warned other physicians to “[c]ollect your fee before you dose the patient with opium poppy.”¹²⁵ It was in fact rumored that the great Muslim doctor died at age fifty-six as a result of his opium habit.¹²⁶ Nonetheless, he was brilliant, producing two monumental works, one in science and the other in medicine. While Avicenna died centuries before the beginning of the larger witch-hunts of the early modern era, his encyclopedic work *The Canon of Medicine*, written in the eleventh century, was called “the most famous medical book ever written” by Ambroise Paré, a French barber-surgeon who served four different kings (Henry II, Francis II, Charles IX, and Henry III) during the mid-sixteenth century—an interesting comment considering Avicenna’s battery of opium preparations: as ointments, plasters, cakes,

potions, suppositories, and pessaries. Recalling the Ebers Papyrus, Avicenna recommended a mixture of opium and dandelion to quiet “cranky children.” He praised opium for its variety of uses: “It is one of Allah’s gifts, for which He should be thanked every day.” Though divinely inspired as opium was, Avicenna still thought it could earn a bad name due to “mishandl[ing] by bumptious men.”¹²⁷

This strong psychoactive appears in countless formulas and in myriad medical books, both learned and informal. One of the formal texts written for informal practitioners, Hispanus’s *Thesaurus pauperum*, enumerated countless uses for opium including eight opium preparations to cure frenzy alone.¹²⁸ Two other mixes, a suppository and a laxative unguent, are offered to cure wakefulness.¹²⁹ The juice of the poppy is mostly used in conjunction with other powerful solanaceous plants like mandrake, henbane, and deadly nightshade. The *M. 136* leechbook tells us how to prepare opium oil (*opinere*).¹³⁰ Opium also appears in Ardoyni’s *Opus de venenas*; here he cautions the reader about the dualistic properties of opium: “It is both poison and a poisonous medicine, and it is between these [two polarities] that doctors must understand [the difference].” Some of the “consequences for taking opium every day, especially with good wine,” resemble a modern addict: “stupor . . . vertigo . . . teary and blackened eyes (which sink into the face) . . . itchiness . . . profound sleep . . . and synesthesia.”¹³¹ Johann Weyer, “with deep sorrow,” reported on a friend of his who, for reasons unspecified, was called to torture by magisterial decree. This friend decided to imbibe three drachms of opium to numb the torture. Regrettably, without proper knowledge of dosage, the unfortunate man “experienced severe constrictions in his heart and breast, and . . . passed away in a deep coma.”¹³² Under different circumstances, had the opium been given to the man by a village sorceress, she might have been burned for “witchcraft.”

HEMLOCK

(*Cicuta maculata*)

Socrates sculpted even his last words with characteristic wit: “Crito, we ought to offer a cock to Asclepius. See to it, and don’t forget,” he said as he slowly succumbed to the poison given him.

For many Grecians, Asclepius, the god of healing, accepted opportunistic offerings of a rooster and prayers either before going to bed or as a gracious payment after being cured. For Socrates, then, as his wry final words indicate, death was the ultimate cure for all life's ills.¹³³

We do not actually know what Socrates' poisoned cup contained. Around the beginning of the third century CE, biographer Diogenes Laërtius posited that it was hemlock.¹³⁴ Pliny the Elder also qualified that "the Athenian state employed it for inflicting capital punishment."¹³⁵

Hemlock certainly had some curious uses in antiquity. According to Pliny, a way for people to "drink more [wine]," was to eat hemlock first! Since alcohol nulls the effects of this deadly plant, "fear of death [from hemlock poisoning] . . . compel[s] them to drink."¹³⁶ Hemlock also had medicinal applications, such as in poultices used to cure stomach pains, and eye salves; the leaves also relieved "all types of swelling, pain or discharges."¹³⁷



The physician-monks at Monte Cassino Abbey in Italy diligently copied medical manuscripts as ordered by the Synods (or Congress) of Aachen (817 CE). One of these manuscripts includes the earliest reference to an anesthetic sponge in the western world. It was a soporific sponge used to put patients under before surgeons cut them open. Though its main ingredients changed from time to time, nearly every surviving recipe contains at least some of the following: hemlock, opium, mandrake, and henbane. These plants were diced up and mixed in water, into which a sponge was dipped that was then dried in the sun. A surgeon placed this sponge under the patient's nose; the deep inhalation of the juice sent them off into a near-catatonic state. The Bishop of Cervia, Theodoricus Lucca (d. 1298), wrote of the *spongia somniferia* in a work titled *Chirurgiae* (The Surgery), which might have been borrowed from an earlier source—namely, Theodoricus's father, Hugo de Lucca. Theodoricus called his father's sponge an *Oleum de Lateribus* (oil of bricks) and described it as "a most powerful caustic, and a soporific which, by means of smelling alone, could put a patient to sleep on occasion of painful operations which they were to suffer."¹³⁸ The infusion contained, among other nonpsychoactives,

hemlock, opium, mandrake, and henbane. The sponge was, by the time of Lucca *films*, shoved up the nostrils as opposed to just placed beneath them.¹³⁹

The anonymous author of the *Breviarium* (though it is posited to have been famed physician Arnoldus de Villa Nova) credited its sponge recipe to one “Magister Michael Scot.” Hemlock isn’t used in the recipe; however, its soporific equivalents—mandrake, henbane, and opium—are. Their deep somnolent effects were used to “produce sleep so profound that the patient may be cut and feel nothing as though he were dead.”¹⁴⁰

The soporific sponge was still renowned by the time of Montpellier surgeon Guy de Chauliac (1300–1368) in *Chirurgia magna* (The Great [work on] Surgery, ca. 1363). The ingredients hadn’t changed much from those presented in the Monte Cassino Abbey collection other than the addition of that other powerful hallucinogenic-soporific, nightshade; the other ingredients were hemlock, opium, mandrake, and henbane.¹⁴¹ But even as late as 1563, Jean Canape, Lyonnais physician to Francis I, claimed the “second sleep” of Master Hugo (Soporis Secundum Dominum Hugonem) still had value: “There be those, as Theodoric, who give them odoriferous medicines, which make them fall asleep, to the end that they may not feel the cutting.” The active ingredients of the Soporis Secundem should not surprise us: “opium, juice of deadly nightshade, henbane, hemlock.”¹⁴² Soon after, the soporific sponge fell into disfavor as better anesthetics emerged.

Outside the medical universities hemlock was also used as an anesthetic by leeches who favored similar drugs as those used by surgeons like de Chauliac. Hemlock remedies turn up in the *Lacnunga* as a “sleeping drink.”¹⁴³ Two other recipes containing hemlock, an ointment and an elixir, are credited with diminishing head lice.¹⁴⁴ An anodyne (i.e., an analgesic) for a sore knee from *Bald’s Leechbook* recommends pounding hemlock and henbane together, bathing in it, and then rubbing the concoction on the knee.¹⁴⁵ The *M. 136* leechbook outlines an uncharacteristically superstitious-sounding soporific sponge whose chief psychoactive ingredient is hemlock. The passage reminds one of the aforementioned surgical treatise’s recipe.

To put a man to sleep, that he may be treated or cut (operated upon).
Take the gall of swine three spoonfuls, and take the juice of

hemlock root three spoonfuls, of vinegar three spoonfuls and mingle all together; then put them in a vessel of glass to hold to the sick man that thou wilt treat or cut; and take thereof a spoonful, and put [it] to a gallon of wine or ale . . . and give him to drink, and he shall soon sleep. [Then] treat or cut him as though wilt.¹⁴⁶

We can be certain that the common people were privy to these kinds of drug sponges. Because of the widely circulated *Thesaurus pauperum* there was little difference between the sponges coming from medical universities and those used by folk practitioners.¹⁴⁷

Though Ardoyni leaves out his usual adjectives for detachment from reality (alienation, vertigo, etc.) in describing hemlock's effects, focusing more straightforwardly on its physical effects—for example, noting how it immobilizes the body—he does relate that it causes synesthesia.¹⁴⁸

Historically in the West, hemlock appears to have been used in two ways: in antiquity high doses served as a form of merciful execution; with the rise of medical universities in the eleventh through thirteenth centuries, low doses of hemlock were primarily used to slow the functions of the body so as to become cadaverous for subsequent surgery.

ERGOT

(*Claviceps purpurea*)

Had the summer of 1374 not been unusually wet and muggy perhaps the peasants living in the scattered villages along the Rhine Valley in southern France would have been spared. Spared, that is, but only until the next inevitable catastrophe swept across medieval Western Europe. This time ergotism—the effect of long-term ergot poisoning—was the culprit.

Ergot, a fungus that grows on diseased rye grain and thrives in humid temperatures—and is incidentally the base element of the psychedelic LSD (lysergic acid diethylamide)—has been with humanity since the first cultivation of grain millennia ago.¹⁴⁹ Typified by black spurs that grow out of the stalks of the maturing grain,^{*45} those poisoned by ergot exhibit a terrifying collapse of the senses. That autumn an outbreak of ergot-induced hysteria ravaged the Rhine Valley. By the time the first ill-fated folk felt the

symptoms—achy limbs and lameness—it was already too late for most of the rest of the community.

Those infected by ergot suffered muscular convulsions, horrifically kicking and crying out in their beds, while others fled from their homes, defecating and vomiting in the streets. Unholy screams strangled the night as demonic hallucinations filled the village air. The devil had come to the Rhine. One after another those truly fortunate villagers who could still run rushed to the river and drowned themselves to escape further torment. The less fortunate cripples (or otherwise lame) would soon feel all the fires of hell bubbling beneath their skin—an infamous inflammation of the muscles, giving rise to the moniker *ignis sacer* (holy fire). Eventually paralysis stole over the whole body; death, a welcomed emancipation, followed shortly thereafter. St. Anthony, patron saint of ergotism, was pleaded to by scores of the infected to douse their holy fire; he rarely answered.



Following European history like a creeping death, unintentional ergot poisoning such as the epidemic experienced by residents living in the Rhine Valley occurred sporadically as the Middle Ages flickered into the Enlightenment.¹⁵⁰ The twelfth-century English saint Hugh of Lincoln describes in gruesome detail the condition of ergotism survivors. These people had journeyed to Mont St. Antoine, Dauphiné, and been cured—almost: “[A]lthough terribly crippled, their health was nonetheless restored. Some lacked a forearm, others a leg, or even a leg and thigh up to the groin, but all their stumps were soundly healed.”¹⁵¹ Ergotism struck in one of two forms: gangrenous and convulsive. Briefly, gangrenous ergot is characterized by, among other things, muscle inflammation, brutal diarrhea, jaundice, and swelling. Convulsive ergotism causes vomiting, spasms, hallucinations, mania, and burning sensations in the muscles. Both types result in death. Along the impoverished Rhine Valley, a vast spread of land that borders Germany and France, ergot epidemics ravaged the scattered villages for centuries. The German Rhine was more prone to gangrenous ergotism; the French, the convulsive type.

Not every encounter with ergot led to death, though: sometimes just the psychoactive effects, with light physiological effects, would be

experienced. Such occurrences are seen in one microcosmic instance reported by Johann Weyer in the mid-1500s. Weyer reported on two men who “became slightly mad” after eating their employer’s rye bread. They had been repairing a woman’s roof; to feed them for their services, the woman made a rye bread that also included darnel, a Eurasian grass of the genus *Lolium*, typically called ryegrass. After eating, the workmen frantically ran around in a panic, eventually falling into a “profound sleep.”¹⁵²

Detailed descriptions of the psychological effects of these outbreaks remained sparse until 1723, when medical student Joannes Gotofredus Andres produced a doctoral dissertation outlining the history and causes of an ergotism eruption that hit Silesia in 1717. The final draft spoke of the afflictions suffered by the affected. While many experienced spasms and convulsions, others “like ecstasies fell into a deep sleep: when the seizure was over, they awoke and told of various visions.” Those stricken credited the episode to the supernatural.¹⁵³

And yet ergot remained in medicinal vogue. Since the days of Hippocrates, doctors and midwives have used the fungus to induce contractions as an aid in childbirth. It was also recommended as a way to suppress postpartum hemorrhaging.¹⁵⁴ German botanist Adam Lonicer (1528–1586), the first westerner to mention ergot in his popular 1557 medical treatise *Kräuter-Buch* (Herbal), didn’t describe ergot as a witches’ poison used by malevolent old crones to cause madness and death, but rather quite antithetically, as an ecboic, a facilitator of child delivery, which was sporadically used by midwives in different places and at different times.¹⁵⁵

The *M. 136* leechbook counts ergot’s virtues in numerous powders, elixirs, ointments, food additives, and plasters: for strangury (slow and painful discharge of urine), dysuria (painful urination), iliac passion (intestinal obstruction), scabs, worms in teeth, and stomachache. If a patient has “worms in thine ears,” a plaster of ergot mixed with wormwood juice was inserted therein.¹⁵⁶ Ergot would even be used as an ointment for acne; or a person could mix ergot with mint into a juice, and insert this into the nostril to combat runny nose and “cast out the filth of the brain whence it cometh.”¹⁵⁷

TOAD POISON

(venena Bufo)

If a person were to pick a toad at random outside some backwoods village or even just beyond the gates of a large city, chances are she or he would grab one that is poisonous. Its possible role in some forms of the heretics' potion notwithstanding, toad poison might have accounted for some of the ontological and physiological effects of classic love philters (unfortunately described only as *venenem mala*, "bad poison"). Indeed, after a brief debate in the twentieth century about the effects of bufotenine, modern clinical studies have demonstrated that taking toad venom (especially as a fumigated powder) can result in "psychedelic effects, such as mild visual hallucinations . . . distortions of time and space, and intense emotional experiences."¹⁵⁸ While some medieval potions might have contained trace amounts of toad venom—it appears specifically as a homicidal agent in the writings of Juvenal in the late first to early second century CE,¹⁵⁹ nothing is said of its psychoactive powers in early medical works.

This changed with the rise of the European university, or at least it appears that way due to the growth of literature produced after the nearly total information blackout that came with the fall of Rome. By the twelfth century Hildegard of Bingen certainly knew about the association between magic and toads at the time she composed *Physica*, commenting that "humans create idolatry and many empty things with the tree frog, through diabolical arts." She further commented that it is best to use them in the spring, since at that time "airy spirits attack humans more than at any other time."¹⁶⁰ Indeed, toad venom's psyche-magical effects also appear in the work of one thirteenth-century astrologer, alchemist, mathematician, and magician, according to the Italian poet Dante.¹⁶¹ Michael Scot (1190–1230) wrote in *Liber luminis luminum* (Light of Lights) about the preparation of a "marvelous powder," which involved stuffing several "poison-containing toads" into a "vessel that they cannot escape from," and making them "drink the juices of white hellebore and [?] for nine days." The practitioner was then to "burn the [toads] sufficiently . . . and grind gently with [pennyroyal?] . . . [soaked in] urine and let dry." The concoction was used to "transmute a person."¹⁶²

Toads were interesting as far as ecclesiastics were concerned. For Ardoyni, they retained poison in both their blood and saliva, although he felt the latter secretion to be a “more powerful drug agent than the former.”¹⁶³

Like the aforementioned flora, toads were also used for strictly symbolic magical purposes. In 1391 Macete, a local Parisian “diviner and sorceress,” performed a complicated ritual intended to cure someone stricken with the evil eye. The spell required placing two toads into earthenware jars and feeding them on bread and breast milk:

When she wanted to hurt her husband [and/or others] . . . before uncovering the jars she would call Lucifer’s name to her service three times. Then she recited the Gospel of John three times, the Lord’s Prayer, and the Ave Maria. Thereafter, she opened the jars and pierced the toads with long needles . . . the person she intended to hurt would feel the pain of the toad.¹⁶⁴

Another instance dated 1329 found Carmelite monk Petrus Recordi imprisoned for trying to invoke love in a woman “[by] making, five different times, waxen images at various times and places.” He mixed his own saliva with “a large number of poisons,” including toad blood, “extracted in a terrible and horrific way,” and covered a wax puppet with the blend. Recordi then placed the puppet under the front door of the woman’s house; now, should she resist the monk’s advances she would be plagued by demons. Finally, Recordi would sacrifice a butterfly to the demon.¹⁶⁵

The whole trial seems to have been a farce.¹⁶⁶ However, other instances were dangerously real. During a period of upheaval in Laon, France, in 1112 CE, the Benedictine monk and historian Gilbert of Nogent scribed a squabble that took place between a peasant and a priest in the town of Beauvais. Their feud had caught the attention of others (vitriolic as it was) and so the unnamed peasant could not openly attack the priest. He therefore sought justice through a veneficium. The peasant caught a toad and cut it up into small scraps. Sneaking into the church one night, he dumped the toad parts into the jar that housed the sacred wine. When that next Sunday the priest arrived to conduct his sermon, he “performed the sacred mysteries with that poisoned wine.” Immediately falling ill and

terrified by outlandish mental apparitions bewitching his mind, he felt disgusted by the sight of food or drink and began to waste away inside. Thankfully, the church retained a magical lore all its own, and when a friend advised the priest to mix in a cup of water “the dust . . . from the grave of Marcel, bishop of Paris, or from his altar” and drink, all marveled at the priest’s recovery.¹⁶⁷

Toads do begin to appear at the first lights of the witch stereotype and slowly unfold further into the sources that developed during the early modern period. French inquisitor Bernard Gui (1261–1331), while composing his infamous 1320 handbook for inquisitors, *Practica inquisitionis haereticae pravitatis des inquisitors* (A Practical Inquiry of Heretical Depravity for Inquisitors), chose to disclose some of the practices of those soon-to-be-accused heretics, village sorceresses, in his chapter “On Lot-Casters, the Divine, and Invoking Demons.” Here, Gui relates how witches revered demonic forces:

[One of them] fashions two images made from wax and lead . . . and then they gather (with these images) secretly in certain areas to collect flies, spiders, frogs and toads, and the skin of serpents to invoke demons . . . then, at the place of sacrifice, they then take blood from any body part and mix it with the blood of the toads and offer gifts, oblations, and invoke the demons whom they revere.¹⁶⁸

Incidentally, according to Gui these are the same women known as the “good women of the night” who, while collecting herbs kneel toward the East and recite the Lord’s Prayer.¹⁶⁹

Professor of civil law at the University of Cahors, Peter Gregory of Toulouse recorded an incident from 1460 in which an unnamed priest from the Soissons surreptitiously sought a sorceress’s service to settle a score against his nemeses. She advised him to capture a toad, name it John, feed it a consecrated host, baptize it “in the custom of Christian ceremony,” and bring it to her. Thereafter, she tore the toad to pieces and used the remains as active ingredients in her potion. The veneficium apparently worked, as those who drank the potion died in anguish; the sorceress and the priest (now excommunicated) joined them soon after, consigned to the flames for their dealings.¹⁷⁰

A case from Breslau, Germany, implicated Anna Brommenhansinn in 1481 for use of toads in her sorcery. She would boil the toads in water and give it to people to drink (whether they were victims or clients is not mentioned in the record). She was said to have “learned this magic from a known witch, Zyesse Magdalena.” Anna was tried and drowned.¹⁷¹



Toad cameos in fourteenth-century records (and earlier) would give rise to that amphibian playing a major role in the theater of those years that saw the most intense witch burnings. By the seventeenth century the toad was a staple as a witch’s familiar in the English records.¹⁷² But, as shown previously, this was hardly the case when the Waldensian preacher Galosna spoke of Bilia’s toad potion mixed on the Eve of the Epiphany for use in the Waldensian synagogues. The symbolic date of preparation offers another clue: Christians celebrated the Epiphany as the manifestation of God in the human form of Jesus. Should Bilia and her congregation have been trying to manifest that same appearance in themselves, the possibility that the toad was used as an entheogen becomes even more plausible. Behind this obscure rite bubbles a blending of folklore, drug knowledge, and assumptions of both orthodox and heretical observances.



We sought a consistency in how these drugs were viewed in western history. Although uses of solanaceous plants and other intoxicants did vary in times and places and truly evolved over a millennium, an awareness of the chemical effects of these substances nonetheless remains unbroken—an archetype with which Matteuccia seemed familiar (considering the descriptions of her potions on some peoples’ minds). This continuity and archetype rests in the three most famous attributes of solanaceous plants: they are intoxicating and hallucinatory, followed by soporific effects. If any drugs are to be found in the witches’ potions and ointments, these are the most likely.

We can only peer through the brush that separates us from the venecopeia and the herbarium, and do not want, with limited sight, to see

the plants for the garden. Herbalists, veneficae, and other folk doctors, and even impostors, employed a variety of potions, powders, ointments, and medicines that contained no soporific, hallucinogenic, or otherwise psychoactive plants at all. These innocuous recipes are found side by side with the ones discussed in this chapter. And indeed, some of these poisons were even believed to be magical without ingestion. It is important, therefore, to avoid concluding prematurely. The appearance of nonpsychoactive recipes used in medical folk and learned magic does nothing to discredit the venefica's knowledge of psychoactives; it only shows us that the psychoactive spells were part of a broader system of magic that included nonpsychoactive plants (and/or sympathetic magical objects and ingredients).

Furthermore, there are numerous examples from the early modern period that demonstrate the magical use of these poisons specifically for their inebriating and confusing (often interpreted as "bewitching"), and even lethal properties. Cases that make mention of the use of poisons usually refer to them in terms of homicide, botched love magic, or attempts to sway another person. Understanding their role in the village venecopeia will give us a better historical backdrop out of which to see how the witches' ointment arose.

5

VENEFICIA

These poisons more effectively lead a man away from his true self—the dread poisons which enter deep within and harm not the body, but savagely wound the mind.

ANICIUS MANLIUS SEVERINUS BOETHIUS

I freely acknowledge that I have dwelt upon this point . . . because there is much in common between philters and frenzy induced magically.

JOHANN WEYER

The man's senses overwhelmed him—was he going insane?

He had only sought relief from the worms he believed crawled through his teeth. They caused an unbearable ache. He would have much preferred a trained physician but he lacked the funds to pay one. He had instead searched for a healer or some other keeper of the magical secrets of medicine. Perhaps from a local person he could procure some remedy for a small fee. Sadly, what he found was a thief—a charlatan posing as a dentist who knew how to dupe such a patient with veneficium. The swindler had burned henbane seeds beneath the victim's mouth, careful not to breathe in the poisonous smoke himself lest he too fall victim to its spell.

Among other authors, Petrus Forestus (1521–1597), one of the most prominent physicians of the Dutch Republic, had warned the ignorant masses that “these pretended worms are no more than an appearance of worms, which is always seen in the smoke of henbane seed.” Indeed, John Gerard (ca. 1545–1612), an English herbalist, believed that once a victim of

this fraud was sufficiently intoxicated by the henbane, the thief would drop broken lute strings—the so-called worms—on the ground as proof.¹ The illiterate peasant would never have read these warnings; just before slipping into oblivion, as his muscles numbed and slowly shut down, his mind drifted off into an inebriated giddiness. He could swear that he saw tiny worms falling from his mouth . . .



The above scenario depicts one of many ways a person used powerful psychoactive drugs in a malefic veneficium. Henbane, among other poisons, was used for criminal purposes as well as love magic throughout the early modern period. Regarding the latter use it appears that a case was brought to trial if potential or actual harm was perceived. It was for this reason that Alice Perrers, an English royal mistress, found herself before the courts in 1376 for bewitching Edward III. She had asked a Dominican magician to devise ways of gaining Edward’s affections; one of the methods involved “juice of powerful herbs.”² One man in Velay was killed in 1390 by a love philter given to him by a folk-herb specialist, Jeanette Neuve.³ In 1406, a woman in Lucerne was charged with using a love potion; another trial that same year in Nürnberg had the municipal court banishing two women for using powders to persuade love. Over in Basel a group of women burned for using spells and potions to cause love, sickness, and death. In 1420 Appenzell authorities beheaded a woman for killing another woman with a poison apple.⁴ Later that decade Matteuccia burned for unbelievable charges like infanticide and cannibalism and more believable things like practicing medicine and toying with venomous herbs. Another wise woman from Perugia, Filippa da Città della Pieve, found herself standing trial for love magic in 1440; attempting to seduce a tailor named Giacomo, Filippa had buried a bale of “noxious substances” near an area she knew he would walk past. However, Filippa left nothing to chance, giving Giacomo a pocula amatoria as well, a drink made of an unnamed herb, semen, and her own menstrual blood.⁵ In 1439 in Draguignan one Catherine David tried to manipulate her father by giving him a potion she received from sorcerers who, in turn, supposedly obtained it from Satan.⁶ An anonymous author writing not twenty years later made reference to the

pocula amatoria of the *sortilegia* (fortune teller) that “poison many people.”⁷ In 1461 a sorceress in the Putten region of The Netherlands was fined for driving her lover crazy after he drank a potion that was supposed to stimulate his carnal instincts.⁸ In a case from Württemberg (year unknown) Johanna Fehlen drank a glass of wine at her wedding that contained “white residue from a powder or herb.” She soon after complained that “everything in her whole body . . . was turned around.” She grew weak and soon could no longer stand; then “her head became so confused that she no longer knew where she was.”⁹ A similar case from 1685 featured Anna Maria Rippen, a sixteen-year-old servant who drank a glass of wine that contained an unspecified ingredient. Anna experienced pain in her abdomen and then a stream of hallucinations that she could not determine was a dream or reality. Though she recovered, the officials assigned to her case called her ordeal an “example of how simple women and girls are led astray into witchcraft.”¹⁰ A sorceress might even instruct a clergyman in *veneficia*: in 1460 a woman showed a priest how to baptize a toad for use as a poison.¹¹

It would seem that some clergymen did know about the powers of these drugs. In Bern in 1509 four Dominican friars of the Order of Preachers perpetrated a most sinister plot. A certain Doctor Stephanus (and three others) decided to drive one of their lay brothers mad with “some such poisonous potion.” One conspirator dressed up like the Virgin Mary and drove a nail through the drugged monks hands, subsequently “impress[ing] upon his feet and hands and body the four wounds of Christ.” He was placed on an altar in the church “dazed and immobile,” while Stephanus, from behind statues of Jesus and Mary, carried on a conversation with the stupefied brother. The hoax was eventually found out; all four monks were burned.¹²

Around 1567 a more involved con via drugs was hatched by a “remarkably wicked physician” living in Gelders. This case is of particular interest because it demonstrates how a charlatan might use popular beliefs about magic to mask *veneficium*. When Elbert, the chief minister of a nearby castle, asked the physician to cure his sickness, the scoundrel responded that Elbert had been bewitched. Worry not, he assured him, for this “physician” practiced “secret methods of healing unknown to all other doctors.” First, Elbert must cut his hair and the hair of everyone in his

household (including the animals) and bring it to him. Further, Elbert and his wife must beg their twenty-year-old daughter to bring him the hairs and obey his every whim. Desperate for a cure, Elbert did as told, and not a few days later his daughter came knocking on the physician's door. The deception:

She was taken in private to a room where the doctor pretended to recite a lengthy secret prayer and then opened a book which was on the table and placed two knives in it in the shape of an X. This was accompanied by much mumbling and dreadful conjurations and the marking of characters of one sort or another. Finally, he drew a circle upon the ground and ordered the girl to stick into it one of the knives (cursed by him with adjurations). Then after whispering some unintelligible words he handed her the other knife to stick into the circle in the same way.

Then the “true witchcraft” was revealed:

[H]e gave the distraught girl a morsel to eat . . . [a]fter taking the morsel she seemed to be disturbed and confused . . . she was losing control of her senses. Thereupon he commanded her to bare her bosom. After much kissing and fondling of her breasts . . . [he] threatened her father's death would follow most assuredly and she herself would suffer the same malady or one even worse unless she complied, and he tried to convince her that a mutual contact of the flesh was required.¹³

Unfortunate tales like this also appear in popular literature. Italian poet Ludovico Ariosto (1474–1533) surely knew about the powerful psychoactivity of opium, as outlined in an unfortunate scene in his epic poem *Orlando furioso* (*Mad Orlando*, earliest version 1516). Here, the princess Angelica, who has been sought the world over by men, succumbs to the powerful potion of a lusty abbot. He pulls from his side a “liquor of poppies,” doses poor Angelica, “and deceitfully made her fall asleep. . . . He embraces and touches her to his heart's content . . . Now he kisses her breast, now her mouth . . .”¹⁴ The anticlerical overtones are unambiguous.

The scene might have been influenced by an earlier story found in Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron*, a collection of 100 tales scribed in 1353,^{*46} told over a period of ten days by a group of seven young women and three young men sheltering in a secluded villa just outside Florence to escape the Black Death. In the eighth story, on the third day, Boccaccio tells the tale of an abbot and a rich farmer, Ferondo, whose "very handsome woman to wife" the abbot took a fancy to. So that he may biblically know her the abbot concocted a beaker of wine with "powder of marvelous virtue" in order to send Ferondo "to purgatory." The powder was rumored to have come from a great prince of the Levant, and be the same one used by the Old Man of the Mountain, "whenas he would . . . send any one [*sic*], sleeping, into his paradise."^{†47 15}

In another passage, Boccaccio relates how Ruggieri da Jeroli, a noble from Salerno who harbored "a rakish disposition," snuck into famous surgeon Master Mazzeo della Montagna's house to bed his much younger wife. He accidentally drank a medical elixir Montagna had recently prepared, which caused him to "[fall] into a profound doze." The unnamed mistress was not in the mood for such shenanigans when she let herself into the bedchamber: "Get up slugabed! [If] thou hadst a mind to sleep, thou shouldst have betaken thee to thine own house and not come hither!" she shouted as she slapped him off the bench on which he sat. But Ruggieri didn't wake up and only slumped onto the floor as if dead. The lady grew concerned, pinching him, pulling hairs out of his beard, burning him with a candle, and eventually giving up, as "the enchantment was too strong."¹⁶

Leaving the hypothetical sphere, evidence exists pointing to nightshade's use among commoners for its psychoactive effects during the early modern period. Just as Matteuccia gave a woman an "undocumented herb" that drove her husband insane for a few days, so too in 1611 did Styrian sorceress Lenggo Frauhelmbin use the juice of a black berry (likely nightshade berries) to drive her neighbor "senseless."¹⁷ In 1651 a woman complained that another woman had given her "bitter almonds" to eat, save some of the juice, which should be spit onto a cloth and rubbed over her body. The woman grew ill, suffered convulsions, and eventually fell into a deep sleep. The woman's symptoms considered, the "bitter almonds" were probably nightshade berries.¹⁸ Of course, what was recorded as being "bitter almonds" makes it difficult to determine what exactly the woman

actually ate. However, an incident in which someone accidentally died after eating nightshade berries led to a law being passed in Württemberg two decades later that was appropriately titled “Decree Concerning the Partaking and Propagation of Nightshade.” The law specifically targeted consumption of the plant and ordered its immediate eradication.¹⁹ Like Matteuccia’s ointment, other concoctions refer to a drug utilized, but offer no further details. Such a clear case occurred ca. 1494 when a local midwife’s daughter, Anna in der Gasse, gave Cunrat Kurman an apple to stew to cure his chills. The braised apple caused Cunrat to fall “on the floor . . . unconscious for two hours. . . . knowing nothing, bereft of reason . . . senseless, and was no longer like a Christian person.” Further charges were also brought against the pair (and the father, Hans, too) that involved simple *maleficia* like causing lameness in children and raising storms magically. In the encounter with Cunrat a poison that was supposed to act as a medicine had an adverse result. Anna and her mother Benedicta were tried for sorcery.²⁰

In other cases we know exactly which drug from the pharmacopeia was used in witchcraft. Ergot-induced witch phenomena occurred during the seventeenth century in Finnmark, Norway, a picturesque northern port village that boasts calm seas and aurora-sparkling skies, making for good seafood and even better poetry. The district governor of Finnmark, Hans Hanssen Lilienskiold, was such a staunch believer in the validity of witchcraft that after taking his position in 1684 he recorded with great detail the trials of eighty-three people accused of *maleficia* since the 1620s. Although not every case involved ergot poisoning,^{*48} the first recorded instance of someone falling victim to witchcraft via a food or beverage in Finnmark occurred in 1625. The unlucky defendant, Gunnele Olsdatter, ate a piece of bread given to her by the daughter of one Skrepp-Ane. As Olsdatter chewed the loaf, Skrepp-Ane cried out, “Now the devil got into you!” Shortly thereafter, Gunnele felt abdominal pain “as if something living had entered her.” Later she hallucinated a visit from Satan in the form of a black dog.

Other records from Scandanavia allude to the disturbing psychoactive properties of ergotism: Bårne Villats ate a flour-based soup given to her by Smeld-Ane. After finishing her meal “her mind became so queer; she had great pains, and felt as if she was flying through the air.” Another, Sigri of

Steinsland, gave bread to at least two women, Marthe Rasmusdatter, and Mari Thomasdatter. Marthe became “so disturbed that she could not help thinking she was in hell.” As for Mari, eating the bread “made the earth run around with her [i.e., caused vertigo], and at once *the devil* came to them.” Several records indicate that those who “learned witchcraft” after drinking milk or beer found something “black . . . the size of barley grains,” in the bottoms of their bowls and cups.²¹

The influx of rye grain as Finnmark’s main cereal source is well established. While village reports often didn’t specify grains by name, complaints filed after importation did. One name in particular comes up often in these complaint sheets—rye. Another instance in which rye was mentioned by name comes from East Finnmark’s Vadsø district. A cleric there, Ludvig Paus, purchased sixty-four barrels of grain from Poland, of which sixty-two contained rye grain. Finally, rye grain aside, the only other grain available in the cold northern hemisphere was wild lyme grass, which is, like rye, highly susceptible to the ergot fungus.

SPIRITS’ HERBS

“Through a variety of singular accidents” Italian Renaissance Mannerist painter Benvenuto Cellini (1500–1571) found himself standing in a magic circle drawn in dirt on the Roman Colosseum floor. Beside him a necromancer ordered Cellini’s friends Vincenzo Romoli and Agnolino Gaddi to throw more “precious perfumes . . . and drugs of a fetid odor” onto the fire. The smoke filled the air, creeping down into their lungs, inspiring the visions of demons that swarmed across their eyes. Vincenzo, the closest to the burning fumigations, began to “quake like an aspen leaf.” Cellini’s shaking hands desperately clutched a pentacle, which he held over the head of a young virgin boy who was “shriek[ing] out in terror that a million of the fiercest men were swarming round and threatening” the group. These visions were followed by hallucinations of giants. The older men managed to keep their composure; the boy, however, was losing control of the phantasms and began to cry that the giants were infiltrating the magical circle. He panicked: “This is how I will meet death, for we are certainly dead men!”

Cellini, holding back the desire to scream in horror, finally had enough. He ordered Agnolino to quickly throw asafetida onto the flames to drown

out the drugs and perfumes and thus counteract the spell. Agnolino was so scared he couldn't control his bowels, and when he turned to the fire he "let fly such a volley from his breech" that the entire demonic ritual descended into uproarious laughter at the noise trumpeting from his underside. The boy's psyche had been saved by that most primitive and magically mirthful toot: the human fart.²²



Solanaceous drugs were hardly relegated to a village magician's malefic uses of bewitchment, enchantment, and murder. It has been argued convincingly that there existed a necromantic "clerical underworld" in Western Europe during the late Middle Ages, which still existed into the early modern period. Necromancy involves calling on the dead to serve the needs of the conjurer. During the early and later Middle Ages, the term implied the invocation of demons.²³ I do not mean to suggest that all rituals of this kind involved psychoactive or hallucinogenic drugs like the one Cellini experienced, but some of them certainly did. Albertus Magnus openly addressed henbane's visionary properties for use in necromancy in his *De vegetabilis*.²⁴ Famed Renaissance magus Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa not only used mandrake as an aphrodisiac but also wrote of its visionary uses in his *De Occulta Philosophia (Three Books of Occult Philosophy)*: "There are also suffumigations under opportune influence of Stars that make the images of spirits forthwith appear in the air or elsewhere." The herbs to be burned and inhaled are listed as henbane, hemlock, coriander, and smallage. A second entheogenic recipe in Agrippa's *Three Books* mixes "juice of hemlock and henbane," along with opium and other innocuous plants (red sander, for example), to "make spirits and strange shapes appear." These herbs, the magus records, are called "spirits' herbs."²⁵ This spell has all the workings of an entheogenic experience: powerful drugs, a mind readied to accept the apparitions, and a sacred ritual of invocation. Outside this entheogenic use, Agrippa also believed these herbs to be so strong that a similar fumigation could be used to keep thieves away from hidden treasures: "[F]ume the hiding place with coriander, saffron, henbane, smallage, black poppy . . . tempered with the juice of hemlock, that which is so hid shall never be taken away." If someone tried to steal these "precious things" she or he would "fall into

frenzy.” This spell only worked, though, during an eclipse.²⁶ In the magus’s two *veneficia* spells, we greet the same poisonous suffumigations used for different ends, mostly depending on celestial alignments. As far as Agrippa was concerned, whether toxins like henbane caused visions or frenzy could be read in the stars.

Looking at the descriptions of henbane’s psychological effects found in the medical literature of the time offers us more clues. Perhaps the “detachment from reality,” “madness,” “synesthesia,” “vertigo,” and physiological changes to the body found in the medical writings were reinterpreted as magic by sorcerers and magi of various sorts. Necromancers and spirit conjurers might require assistants but there is no evidence that they called on these supernatural beings collectively. Most were probably solo practitioners.²⁷ Indeed, some books, like *The Munich Manual of Demonic Magic*, a fifteenth-century grimoire manuscript, even warn the necromancer to practice this art secretly.²⁸

And then there was Zoe (ca. 980–1050 CE). The Byzantine empress ruled with her sister, Theodora, from November 1028 to June 1050. It was no secret that Zoe understood the properties of poisonous and intoxicating plants. Upon the death of her predecessor, Emperor Romanus III, the philosopher-monk Michael Psellus wrote that it was “universally accepted” that Zoe had “bewitched [Romanus] with drugs,” a point repeated in the works of another contemporary Greek historian, Georgius Cedrenus. She did, in fact, have an entire laboratory dedicated to mixing the latest and most expensive perfumes, potions, and ointments from the most exotic plants and herbs obtained from India and Egypt. What exactly she used all these mixtures for remains uncertain, though at least one scholar trusts that she used them for some kind of divinatory purposes.^{*49 29}



There are also those few accounts where it is impossible to determine if a certain psychoactive plant was used deliberately or accidentally. Swiss pathologist and pharmacologist Johann Jakob Wepfer (1620–1695) gives an amusing account of an accidental poisoning in 1649 at the Convent of Rhinon, Germany; several residents had eaten henbane leaves inadvertently (or intentionally) mixed in their dinner salads. The next morning, one

person experienced soporatum and could not be awakened (apparently he had helped himself to seconds). Those who did wake up experienced bizarre hallucinations at morning Mass: “The vision . . . was so disordered that they thought insects were crawling over their books, and employed themselves in blowing and brushing the intruders off. Others, instead of praying, uttered nonsense.” All the monks fully recovered by the next day, save one tailor: his vision had become so distorted by the experience that thereafter anytime he tried to thread a needle he saw three “ghost-like duplicates.”³⁰

Another episode, in an off-the-cuff comment from Oxford physician Robert Burton (1577–1640), concerns a group of men who stopped at a tavern in Agrigentum, Sicily. Although Burton doesn’t claim to know what was in the patrons’ drinks, he hypothesizes that it was probably henbane, hemlock, mandrake, or deadly nightshade, because after imbibing the men “began to be so troubled in their brains, that their phantasies so crased [*sic*] that they thought they were in a ship at sea.” Fearing they would capsize by a large storm the men (to avoid drowning) decided to throw all the furniture out of the tavern to lighten the load of the basement, or as they saw it, the cargo. They were brought to court while still under the trance; one man threw himself at the mercy of the court, beseeching his judges that if they would save him he would build an altar in their honor. Burton ends the tale with a warning to his readers: “Many such accidents frequently happen, upon these unknown occasions. Some are so caused by philters.”³¹

As the elements of the witch stereotype were coalescing, a certain ointment was said to cause one to fall into a deep sleep, usually accompanied by visions that seemed real to the user. Such a state of being acquired a prominent place in the inquisitorial script: *soporatum*.³² This was the “profound sleep” found in medical texts, described in the previous chapter, caused by plants such as mandrake, henbane, deadly nightshade, hemlock, and opium. The mid-sixteenth-century apothecary text (and international bestseller during the Renaissance) *Secrets of the Reverent Maister Alexis of Piemont* lauded mandrake and henbane ingestion as a way to “see in the night goodly things in your dreame.” But such highly volatile plants needed to be handled with care.³³ Yet evidence suggests that the opposite was true. The inflammatory sixteenth-century physician Paracelsus launched his characteristically acerbic aspersions against those “dirty

ointment-vending quacks . . . [who] have not learnt even the beginning [of the medical arts], and yet health and safety are to be sought from men such as these. What do you find in them but desire for money and thirst for goods? It is all the same whether their medicines do good or harm.”³⁴



This chapter outlined a general survey of how regular people might have used or misused drug ointments and potions for love, revenge, or both in tandem. Also glimpsed was the ceremonial use of special poisons like that employed by Cellini’s necromancer and Agrippa, to say nothing of the toad extracts found in Bilia’s potion from a previous chapter. Yet none of these practices tell us much about what those professional mixers—those *veneficae* who would later be accused of witchcraft—might have used the brews and unguents for in a private ritualistic setting. It is therefore imperative that we get as close as we can to their world, their psyche-magic, and see how these drug ointments fit into the larger folk beliefs discussed in chapter 2. Perhaps a few of the discussed psychoactive, hallucinogenic, and soporific plants and herbs caused such a surrealistic experience, especially if a certain mindset guided by incantations and expectations supplemented the drug. Maybe some of these psychoactive substances comprised a part of the broader concept of *veneficium* that included private psyche-magical visionary journeys—the kind of journeys Matteuccia di Francesco might have been familiar with; the kind of journeys that could be (mis) interpreted by a fanatical clergy.

It is time to turn to the chronicles, trials, and demonological texts that focused on the deeds and beliefs of those local magicians like Matteuccia to see (with admittedly limited vision) what she might have thought about her magical ointments. As we delve through the dossiers please bear in mind that as early as 1322, a century before the formulation of the witch stereotype, Parisian layhealer Jacquelin Félicie was accused of sampling her own potions.³⁵ Perhaps we can get some insights into the underlying truth of Matteuccia’s ointment by looking at reports of how other local magicians likewise self-anointed for psyche-magical reasons—reasons that could be misconstrued and demonized by an obsessed clergy as a trip to the Sabbat.

6

SOPORIFIC SPELLS

That which comes by nature is abused by their superstitions.

GIAMBATTISTA DELLA PORTA

There is sufficient evidence to show that the [witch's] body does not leave. They are removed in mind, so that they fancy that they are flying away.

HANS VON VINTLER

HERBAL IDOLATRY

Daybreak would soon catch up to and then supersede the slowly dissipating nocturnal horizon; the matins bells would ring, prompting the Sun's faithful rotation around Earth. Lurking in the shade of the silvery predawn glow Finicella found her way to the Piazza of St. Peter's. She needed to obtain an ointment—surreptitiously, of course. Abundia smiled; in the piazza at that hour, one could procure ointments made from herbs picked on the holy days of the Ascension and St. John the Baptist—the finest and most powerful herbs indeed! For herbs picked on the mornings of those special days absorbed all the magic that the morning dew baptized the landscape with, or so commoners believed.

Regrettably for Finicella, Bernardino of Siena had just been cleared of all charges of heresy and sought to quickly show his gratitude. The best way he could accomplish this would be to cleanse the Eternal City of all witchcraft, superstition, and other related magical arts. It would begin with a sermon in St. Peter's Basilica . . .



Bernardino had left Todi for Gubbio in the spring or summer of 1426.¹ While there, Pope Martin V had summoned him to Rome to sit before a panel of fifty-two ecclesiastics to answer to charges of magic, heresy, and idolatry, including one such charge positing that Bernardino was “the beast of the Apocalypse” incarnate. Bernardino’s eventual acquittal came with no small thanks to John of Capistrano, a “highly regarded” churchman and friend of the accused. However, the malicious rumors didn’t cease with Bernardino’s initial exoneration and some years later Pope Eugene IV finally silenced them with a bull issued on February 7, 1432, regaling Bernardino as a “most acute and rigorous eradicator of heresy.”² Between the years of his indictment and his final acquittal Bernardino worked diligently to prove that his peers could count him among the devout. Consequently, he set about warning people of the trials of life and the hell that awaited those who failed.

Finicella had failed.

Taking the pulpit, Bernardino’s warnings of sorcery and its prideful implications of saintly renunciation in exchange for satanic jubilee echoed off the finely carved sculptures of the basilica, creating a sound so big it fell on the congregation from all corners. Yet even this grand acoustic effect wasn’t enough to instill the fear of sorcery and enchantment in his listeners. Some of those in the audience even laughed, quietly mocking Bernardino; others stared in simple confusion. As far as these parishioners were concerned, enchanters might have been fairly eccentric folks but they simply didn’t worship the devil. Bernardino, they mumbled among themselves, must have “dreamed all this of which [he] spoke.”

The Sienese preacher’s frustration grew at his audiences’ indifference to the scourge of diabolical witchcraft—*of course enchanters allied themselves with Satan!* He decided to switch tactics, opting for an old standard in the Catholic tool kit: guilt. Bernardino cried out, “Whosoever person knowing a man or a woman who [practiced sorcery], if he did not accuse them, he would be guilty of the selfsame sin”³—a tactic no doubt influenced by his understanding of Isaiah 58:1.⁴ According to Bernardino, not long afterward a “multitude of witches and enchanters” were reported to the authorities by the Roman citizenry, though the rush of accusations

resulted in only “the most important of these women . . . those who had done the worst” actually standing trial.⁵ Of this unknown number only two women were burned. One of these two, Finicella, is named specifically in several early modern period accounts written in both Italian and German.

There is a familiar resonance in the pattern of Finicella’s supposed misdeeds: she engaged in a host of acts that included infanticide, heresy, diabolism, and medicinal sorcery—allegations similar to those thrust on Matteuccia. Infanticide and heresy were seen as one and the same act (such as with the folk of the keg); she was accused of murdering her own son to create powders from the pulverized body parts, “which she gave people to eat in these practices of hers.”⁶

But under the accusations of sorcery there are indications of a true folk healer, a further clue given in the form of Bernardino’s misogynistic admonishment of women like Finicella: “O doctors, how much you have studied . . . amid much expense, peril, and labor, but it is the dog-faced old woman who gathers all the honor!”⁷ It would seem that like Matteuccia’s clients, local Romans sought Finicella’s services over those of elite physicians; her (admittedly incomplete) records indicate that she was not only a healer of sorts but more specifically a pediatrician. She told her inquisitors how she had killed thirty children (or thereabouts) but had healed sixty of them. In reverence for her pediatric prowess Finicella offered up the limb of an animal to the devil every time she successfully cured a sickly child. When the fathers of some of Finicella’s patients were asked if any of their children “at such a time began to pine away, and then died,” many responded in the affirmative. Once the fathers had been questioned, the Roman authorities declared that all “was shown to be nor more nor less than as [Finicella] said.”⁸ The pediatrician’s profession presented an easy target for parental blame when a child died—a usual occurrence in the fifteenth century.⁹



Most of our information regarding folk plant and herbal lore comes from the pens of incensed theologians ridiculing superstitious behaviors they believed corroded the collective soul of the population. One practice Burchard of Worms wanted hammered out of his flock involved the

improper collection of plants, which herbalists should pick according to prescribed Christian methods. For example, Question 65 of Burchard's "Corrector" urges confessors to ask if the confessant has "collected medicinal herbs with evil incantations" instead of singing "credo in Deum" or reciting the Our Father.¹⁰ The punishment for this transgression was relatively light: ten days on bread and water. The caveat was apparently for the herb-picker's own good. Gregory the Great told of a nun who, while walking through her convent's garden, ate a lettuce leaf without blessing it with the Sign of the Cross first. A demon that had been sitting on the leaf immediately seized her. St. Equitius subsequently moved to have the demon expelled from the nun via exorcism.^{*50 11} This aspect of Christian lore found its way into an anonymous tract composed almost three centuries later, where it is addressed alongside questions pertaining to "readers of signs and idolaters."¹²

The emerging heretical underpinnings attached to the practice of gathering herbs can also be seen in that early, most infamous inquisitorial work, *Practica inquisitionis heretice pravitatis* (Conduct of the Inquisition into Heretical Wickedness, 1321), by French inquisitor Bernard Gui. As recounted in chapter 4 (and worth repeating here), it is in this work that Gui relates how some women "recite poetic words" and "kneel towards the East while reciting the Lord's Prayer" while picking fruits and herbs. Unlike Burchard, Gui includes the Lord's Prayer in his condemnation of the superstition. To him these are the same "women of the night" who meet secretly to collect toads for magical uses.¹³

Blessing plants while collecting them was a common enough practice that some medical writers supplied prayers so that all gatherings would be consecrated. We can get a feel for the genera from two litanies: the first appears in a monastic herbal: "Oh God . . . we offer humble and suppliant prayers that you may bless and consecrate in your name these herbs, gathered for medicinal use, so that all who take potions or unguents made from them . . . may deserve to obtain health of mind and body."¹⁴ Another, titled "Benedictio Unguentum," is found in the *Lacnunga*, discussed earlier: "God, almighty father [*sic*], and Jesus Christ, son of god [*sic*], I ask that you will stoop to send your blessing and heavenly medicine and godly protection over this ointment so that it may produce health and cure against all the bodies' disease . . ."¹⁵

Burchard's nonchalance regarding the gathering of medicinal herbs brings us to his true focus: the raw materials (both beneficial and poisonous) themselves caused no alarm, provided persons plucking plants pulled piously, prudently parrying pagan practices. To Burchard, it was the words, either accepted prayer or superstitious—and therefore erroneous—pagan incantations that held the true power.



Bernardino's remarks about Finicella's ointment, too, are tied not to any learned literary traditions but to well-known folk traditions: gathering herbs on the feast of St. John the Baptist redoubled their efficacy. Demonologist Martin of Arles (ca. 1450–1520) records some of these folk beliefs in his *Tractatus de superstitionibus, contra maleficia seu sortilegia quae hodie vigent in orbe terrarum* (Work of Superstitions, against Witchcraft or Sorcery That Thrive in the World Today).¹⁶ St. John's Eve was an especially magical night in all respects; a soul, in fact, could detach from its body and traverse the earth on this haunted summer eve. Others were said to magically enrich their lives on that day in other ways. Sometimes a maiden, desiring to know if her lover was faithful, went out at midnight, stripped nude, and drew a circle around a certain plant; she would then dance along this magical circumference. Afterward she gathered the leaves and placed them under her pillow so that the plant might send her answers in dreams.¹⁷ Additionally a variety of medicinal plants, branches, and nuts collected on the morning of that day were considered exceptionally powerful.¹⁸

Martin in his account does not name specific plants, and simply condemns the practice of picking *any* plant, for *any* unsanctioned reason on that Holy Day. He reports that people would sometimes throw these herbs^{*51} onto a bonfire and dance around the smoke to protect themselves from itching and scabies for the year; these herbs were burned to ward off lightning, thunderstorms, and repel demons. Martin criticizes these heathenish practices with some reservations: “However, we should not deny the medical virtue [of these plants,] of which fumigations work against diseases borne in children and cattle. This is not done by picking the herb at a specific day or before or after sunrise, as some foolishly believe,

but by the natural power in the herbs.”¹⁹ He ends his tract by repeating an injunction that is a variation of one we are already familiar with, from Burchard of Worms and Bernard Gui—to not sing incantations while collecting medicinal plants; only the Lord’s Prayer or the Creed can suffice.

THE CAT WOMAN OF ROME

But Finicella used these herbs to ward off neither demons nor storms nor to protect herself from scabies. She and other women used them, instead, to make ointments, which they smeared over their bodies so as to turn into cats.

Almost.

Bernardino recalls that “once they were covered [with the ointment], they believed they were turned into cats, but that’s not true. They only thought their bodies changed into something else, but it was all in their head.” In other words, they were hallucinating. How did Bernardino know? The ointment jars had found their way to Bernardino himself, who investigated them personally. “They stank with such a foul stench that they seemed in truth to be of the devil,” he claimed.²⁰

Time passed and Finicella’s legend grew. In an account produced around 1456 written by Johannes Hartlieb (1410–1468), a physician of Bavaria, Finicella’s transforming ointment is absent. In its place is a flying ointment, which she begs her captors to give her so she may demonstrate how she can escape her chains.²¹ Writing around 1445 Felix Hemmerlin (ca. 1388–1460), Swiss provost and author of more than thirty polemical treatises on various subjects, makes no mention of Finicella’s ointment at all. The transformation into a cat, says Hammerlin, is Finicella’s way of taking advantage of her patients. Finicella would transform (via modes unspecified) so as to sneak into people’s homes and “infect children lying in their cribs with evil spells; afterward, transforming herself back into human shape, she would cure them, collecting her payment.”²² Another account of Finicella’s magical deeds comes from fifteenth-century chronicler Johann Chraft in his *The Continuation* (1490). He leaves the ointment out as well, saying that “whenever she wished [Finicella] would transform herself into a cat and suck the fresh blood from the children she had killed.”²³ Franciscan observant friar, Bernard of Busti, writing just after Chraft, says nothing of

the cat transformation or the ointment, commenting only that a witch “Fanicella” was burned for killing sixty-five children.²⁴ In short, the further away we get from the original account the more sensational it becomes.^{*52} When we sweep away the later interpolated accounts and focus only on Bernardino’s initial report of Finicella’s ointment, we are left with nothing more than a Roman medicine woman who used some curious ointment on herself to envision that she was, in fact, a feline.

Despite Bernardino’s insistence that Finicella confessed to all this freely and “without being put to torture,” the literary traditions involving heretical infanticide (especially murdering one’s own child) makes the Apostle of Italy’s claim seem farfetched; it is doubtful that Finicella would have admitted to killing her own child if not under torture. Yet it is also surprising that Bernardino, a fanatic who never hesitated to exaggerate a story to scare his audience,²⁵ mentions none of these fantastic details (like an actual transformation into a cat or flying out her cell window) found in later chronicles like those of Hartlieb and Chraft; in fact, of all the records from this time, his is, quite uncharacteristically, the least encumbered by orthodox witch lore regarding the ointment, a tidbit so out of place (considering the temperament of the preacher) as to render Finicella’s ointment an authentic psyche-magical drug as the best explanation of this evidence. That Bernardino admitted that the ointments didn’t *really* transform Finicella into a cat and that it was all in her head is a curious detail.

Why, of the multitude accused of witchcraft only Finicella and the other unfortunate, unnamed woman were burned at the stake should start to become clear: these women practiced a *real* form of sorcery, drowned in plant lore and other folk superstitions. To get them from being the simple sorceresses that they were to being enemies of humankind Bernardino attached folkways and instances of botched child care to ancient acts of heresy, rebellion, and cannibalism. This would certainly prove to his congregation at St. Peter’s Basilica that he wasn’t dreaming everything he spoke of.

THE WITCH OF LINZ

Laboring to understand “True Wisdom, and of the Mystery of the Lord,” Abraham of Worms (ca. 1362–1458), a German Jewish mystic, set out for

the Holy Land. His teacher, Rabbi Moses of Mayence (Mainz), was boring him; Abraham could learn nothing more from this dull old man who concerned himself more with “superstitious secrets . . . collected from various infidels . . . full of nonsense and foolishness of Pagans and Idolaters,” rather than with the Holy Truth.²⁶ Abraham wanted out. One day he “casually met” Samuel, a young Jew from Bohemia who Abraham believed wanted to “live, walk, and die in the way of the Lord.” Samuel was on his way to Constantinople to meet an uncle who would then journey with him to the Holy Land. The coincidence of travel itineraries did not escape Abraham’s attention and on February 13, 1397, the companions set out for Jerusalem.²⁷ They reached Constantinople and stayed for two years. Before they could continue on their way a disease struck Samuel dead. Abraham felt lost, and in despair over time wasted, gave up his quest for the Holy Land.

On his way home to Mainz, Abraham passed through Austria, where he found “an infinitude of Magicians” who murdered or maimed people, broke up marriages, and tied “witch-knots” to stop the flow of breast milk. These people, Abraham deduced, had given themselves over to the devil. One such person, a young girl living in Linz, promised to take Abraham to “a town [he] wanted to visit.” Abraham was intrigued but, to test her veracity, withheld the name of the desired destination. He followed the girl to her home where, to his surprise, she presented him with a special ointment. She oiled him on “the arteries of [his] hands and feet” with her goop and likewise rubbed herself. Falling into soporatum, Abraham “felt like [he] was journeying to the town which [he] in [his] heart wished to visit.” Once awake, Abraham believed he had been “far away,” while also complaining of a “deep melancholic confusion.” The girl awakened shortly afterward and told Abraham of their trip. To his disappointment, her version of the journey was totally different from his; she hadn’t flown with him anywhere.

Abraham’s initial skepticism about the ordeal turned into confusion. He was certain that he had traveled “in [his] body, and personally experienced everything.” Why was the girl’s retelling of the trip so removed from his own experience? After pondering this for a few days Abraham returned to her, having decided to give her a final test of authenticity: she must journey alone to the place of his choosing and report on a friend of his. Agreeing, the girl again rubbed herself with the ointment and fell into a deep sleep.

She awakened several hours later and eagerly told Abraham news of his friend, which he decided was spurious. The Hebrew mystic's conclusion was telling: there was no magic at all, just "a good and fantastic sleeping ointment that made all imaginations appear as realities." Unfortunately, Abraham informs us that since the "natural masters" know of these ointments he feels it "unnecessary to write about them here."²⁸ After that, the girl and her flying ointment disappear into history.

Abraham's account is significant for several reasons: first, the story is disinterested in the matter of the ointment; unlike we modern researchers (or the demonologists we investigate), Abraham wasn't trying to confirm or invalidate the reality of a witches' ointment; indeed, he called it a "sleeping ointment." This makes sense historically, as his encounter with the witch of Linz occurred before the formulation of the witch stereotype that would crystallize later in the century. There are no clerically contrived notions of what will happen; there is no sect of witches gathering to rub ointments on themselves as Matteuccia supposedly did, nor is there infanticide or cannibalism, strix, mention of Sabbats, transvection with demons, wild and licentious orgies, a heretics' potion, or even a hint of any kind of Dianic flight as detailed in the Canon Episcopi.²⁹ There aren't even any incantations or other magical preparations necessary to perform this enchantment, at least none reported by Abraham. As far as we can tell, the witch of Linz believed in the efficacy of the ointment alone.

With all the clerical prejudices removed we are left simply with a solo practitioner sharing with Abraham a magical experience that she believed was real. The account is noteworthy simply by how undiabolical it reads. If Abraham truly invented the story out of whole cloth, why did he ignore all the stereotypes about witches' ointments? It's as if none existed yet.

WHERE WITCHES DANCE

It started with a poet's vision of heaven.

Parzival couldn't help but notice the infinite splendors and "[a] bounding wealth" that greeted all who entered the castle. Knights filled "a hundred tables," waited on by chambermaids who scurried around the grand hall "with heavy basins all of gold." Squires served any kind of food a knight could ask for and goblets overflowed with wine and mead. At the center of all these luxuries sat a grail of tremendous power; overseen by a

queen and her handmaidens, it alone could claim responsibility for all the spoils of the castle. Here, truth and purity reigned—“heaven’s counterpart,” to hear medieval romanticists speak of it.³⁰

Or so the German knight and epic poet Wolfram von Eschenbach envisioned around 1200 CE. Through the early and late Middle Ages, legends of the Holy Grail found expression in stories passed down through generations, most notably in the Arthurian legends. According to some, the Grail saga began in the realm of folklore: post-Resurrection, Jesus visited his imprisoned uncle, Joseph of Arimathea, bringing him a “grail” from which spouted food and light.

Others placed the Grail saga’s inception on the quilltip of Chrétien de Troyes, the twelfth-century French poet and troubadour. A champion of the newest class to emerge in the twelfth century, that of the knights,³¹ de Troyes’ stories took many forms; some involved the idea of “a mystical church, beside the visible and official one.” Opportunists used that notion to argue for the origins of the Church of England as existing separately from the Holy Roman Empire;³² others, like the knight-poet Wolfram, used the idea to add a “touch of religious mysticism” to his masterpiece, the Grail saga *Parzival*.³³

Wolfram’s was a Holy Grail unlike any imagined. Shying away from earlier depictions of the Grail as a “jewel-encrusted golden cup emitting an intense light,” the German poet saw it as the Wunschding, a magical stone that provided abundance for the whole of the heavenly court, where all desires could be met.³⁴ He even changed the location of the Grail castle, Gralsberg, to the inside of a cave.³⁵ Drinking, feasting, copulation—all could be enjoyed at Gralsberg. Indeed, Wolfram’s literary successor, German poet Albrecht von Scharfenberg, wrote in his version of Wolfram’s *Titurel*^{*53} that sex was commonplace there.



The church was enraged.

Heaven was not a place of debauchery and licentiousness. Ecclesiastical authorities were resolute: this wasn’t Paradise; this was a hollow, heathen haven, hardly hallow heaven.³⁶ Nevertheless, the word

grail continued to connote an earthly paradise in the secular literature of those living in the Swiss-German territories, as recorded in the works of Gert van der Schuren (ca. 1411–1495) and Oswald von Wolkenstein (1377–1445), the latter using the term *gral* to mean “sensual pleasure.” Sometimes the legendary Arthur was the king of this utopia, as we find in the collection of early thirteenth-century poems known as the *Wartburgkrieg*.³⁷

But the legendary king was about to be dethroned.

HOW VENUS USURPED THE GRAIL REALM

Despite the Grail sagas that arose from Germanic lands most tellers and believers of those tales placed Gralsberg on a mountaintop in Italy. When poet-cleric Hein van Aken (ca. 1250–1325) wrote his Dutch romance *Die kinder von Limborch* (The Children of Limburg, 1318) he told the story of a man searching tirelessly for his lost sister. He stumbles upon a castle just beyond a thicket. There he is met by Venus and her handmaidens. He must stay for two years lest Venus slay him. Venus is not the typical medieval seductress goddess in this tale, but rather embodies the essence of the Grail in Wolfram’s *Parzival*—she was the “source of all virtue.”³⁸ This would all change shortly. Perhaps the shift was partially the fault of preachers like Pierre Bersuire (d. 1362), who mentioned a “Sybil Mountain” (also in Italy) in a mid-fourteenth-century sermon. Therein, Bersuire was not referring to a mountain of love but rather to a mountain of magic and necromancy.³⁹

By 1410 medieval historian Dietrich of Niem (ca. 1345–1418) wrote confidently in his lugubrious *De schismate* (On the Papal Schism) that “many deluded Germans call in common parlance the ‘Gral,’ claiming that many . . . people are living in this mountain . . . given over to dancing and wantonness and the practice of magic arts.” He makes no mention of Venus, and like others of his time sets the mountain in Italy (Pozzuoli). But his words also indicate a shift in idiom. Indeed, a German lexicon dated 1425 defines *Gralus* as “a mythical place of which it is said that a king is there and that the people are living a life of joy until the day of judgment.”⁴⁰

In just a hundred years the bejeweled castle of the Grail paradise, where chivalry and honesty once ruled, had descended into a school of magical arts and carnal temptation: Venusberg, a mountain ruled by a highly Roman conception of Venus as a goddess of lust. The moniker first appears

in church reformer Johannes Nider's final work, *Preceptorium divine legis* (Teachers of the Divine Law, ca. 1438), in the form of a question: "Is there any truth to what they say of Venus Mountain, where they say men live a life of luxury and beautiful women offer lustful pleasure?"⁴¹ A few years later, an astronomer-physician employed by the Duke of Saxony wrote to Aenus Sylvius (later Pius II), inquiring if he knew the location of Venus Mountain. In an undated letter (probably ca. 1440–45) titled "De Monte Veneris," the future pope responded that he did not know where that legendary land lay. He does offer up a suggestion though: a cave within the mountainous region that overlooks the ancient settlement of Norcia, Italy—about a day's walk from Todi—might be the place. Sylvius had also heard that people "learn the magic arts" while there.⁴² Around 1453 Hermann von Sachsenheim (1365–1458) composed his poem *Die mörin*, which tells the story of a knight who must stand trial before Venus for neglecting to follow her rules of courtly love. The poem gives a brief description of the heathen paradise, Venusberg, as common folk understood it at that time:

*How in the Venus Mount there stayed,
Both dames and knights and dwarf and maid,
In many sports they while the time
With harp and song and ancient rhyme.*⁴³

Von Sachsenheim does not attempt to pinpoint the whereabouts of the extraordinary land. Though, his incorporation of elephants, magical unicorns, and a general Eastern ambiance has led one scholar to suspect von Sachsenheim believed Venus Mountain was located in the Orient.⁴⁴

Another poem dated around 1464 (but probably containing older oral material) speaks of a man who travels through a forest and meets an elven queen. She takes him to her kingdom, found inside a hollow mountain. Once inside her paradisiacal realm, while elves play knightly sports, the elf queen seduces the hero.⁴⁵ Traveling through Cyprus around the 1480s Dominican theologian Felix Faber (or Fabri) brought back to Europe tales of Venus worship among the inhabitants of that island. The citizens of Cyprus supposed that Venus's "pleasure garden" was "sown with lust-making plants." She had "dug out the inner-mountain herself, consecrating it in her name, and setting up different rooms for revelry or Adonis

worship.”⁴⁶ As will be shown, it was this picture of Venusberg as a heathen pleasure garden of infinite luxuries, sexual encounters, ceremonies, and, of course, magical instruction, that would provide the base elements for the formulation of the concept of the witches’ Sabbath in the German and Swiss territories during the early- to mid-fifteenth century.

A NIGHT ON HAY MOUNTAIN

Despite the host of mountaintops where witches were rumored to convene, most German commoners at the dawn of the fifteenth century would not have recognized the name *Venusberg*, a literary creation of the educated class. Even the infamous Blocksberg, perhaps the most famous “witch mountain” throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, doesn’t yet appear in writing at this early date. If anything, early-fifteenth-century Germanic peoples might have referred to the *Heuberg*, that is, “Hay Mountain,” in Swabia (southwestern Germany). With printing still eighty years in the future early references to the Heuberg are scarce, though there is enough to paint a picture, albeit with limited colors. Again, poets supply our best information: Heinrich von Wittenweiler writing around 1410 tells us of the Höperg, a supernatural land populated by giants, heroes of myth, and dwarves that witches flew to join.⁴⁷ The Heuberg served as the meeting place for witches in German lore and, unlike Venusberg, the Heuberg was (and still is) an actual place in Swabia—only these witches did not sojourn to the Heuberg to service the devil in flesh and dine on cadavers. Regrettably, we don’t know exactly what early modern period Western Europeans believed about witches supposedly flying to the Heuberg, but latter-day evidence offers some possibilities. Perhaps the witches met up to dance and worship the gods of yore in secret; perhaps they needed a remote location to practice their magic; in any event there isn’t a trace of devil worship at the Heuberg in early-fifteenth-century sources.

Theologian Martin Plantsch (1460–1533) would describe the Heuberg in a little-known text, *Opusculum de sagis maleficis Martini Plantsch concionatoris Tubingensis*, 1507 (A Brief Book of Magic Observed by Martin Plantsch, Tübingen Preacher). His fusion of the Heuberg legend with both Venus Mountain and the folk of the keg is apparent.

Accordingly, this kind of damnable person, who tries through witchcraft to change locations . . . [this magic] calls for the use of dogs, or other beasts, [pitch]forks, or the handles of brooms to ride to the cellars of the wealthy where they enjoy their wines with moral abandon, or [they ride] to the mountain of hay that commoners call the Heuberg, where in playful happiness, they celebrate [with] banquets.⁴⁸

About a decade or so before Johannes Nider preserved the earliest reference to Venusberg in his *Preceptorium divine legis*, he compiled a series of homilies into one collection, hereafter referred to as *Predigten*, “Sermons.” In *Predigten* (ca. 1430) Nider makes passing reference to a woman that he calls *unholda*,^{*54} affirming that she is a social nuisance. Here, he refers to the puckish village sorceress, the kind of woman (like Matteuccia) that his congregation would recognize. He relates how the *unholda* tried to “fly away” and “travel to the Heuberg.” She did this by placing a large bowl on a bench, and climbing inside “in the devil’s name,” though she didn’t really fly. In fact, just the opposite—she fell, both from the light of God (as Nider saw it) and off the bench, onto the floor, ending with the trough falling onto her head. Nider offers this story as an aside for a larger sermon on the First Commandment. Idolatry, considered among the gravest of errors, usually resulted in, at the very least, penance. And yet Nider regarded this *unholda* as worthy of ridicule.⁴⁹ Yet it is here, between the chuckles of this preacher, that we finally get a break in our case! For Nider also relates why these mischief-making, Heuberg-traveling *unholden* believed they were able to fly: because of “the ointments they make.” One is reminded of the night-stalking *unholda* outlined in Bur-chard’s “Corrector.” Only this woman wasn’t frightening and imaginary at all,^{†55} she was comical and all too real.

VETULA FORMICARIUM

We needn’t question the Dominican’s revulsion to the “demented old hag” (*vetula*), or whoever approached him in a town along the Rhine’s “southern swath of German-speaking lands.”⁵⁰ Unclean, uncouth, emaciated, stupefied, yet not lacking in pomp, she had a fantastic story to tell the Dominican theologian, as accounts of wild flights through the air with the

ancient Roman huntress-goddess Diana floated from her mouth on stale, rusty breath.

The friar scoffed at such notions. After all, Diana was a false goddess, nothing more than the spiritual ruins of a fallen pagan empire.⁵¹ But the vetula was as persuasive as she was “out of her senses,” and sought to prove her aerial journey to him. The friar could only humor her. “Allow me to be present when you depart on your next occasion,” he requested.

“I agree to it and you will observe my departure,” she replied, adding that he may bring others to witness her fantastic powers.

Some days later the friar and several “trustworthy townsfolk” showed up at her home, hoping to “convince this fanatic of her madness.”⁵² They mused among themselves, poking fun at this obviously delusional vetula, until she placed a kneading bowl on a stool and climbed into it. This got their attention. They watched as she smeared herself with an ointment, enchanting the goop with magical gibberish. A network of cuts collected through the travails of daily life crossed her arms. If these scores didn’t absorb the ointment, then the pores covering her forearms, opened by the frantic rubbing of her hands, surely did.^{*56} Soon afterward the woman began to shake “under the operation of demons.” She flailed her arms and cried out; then, falling into a deep sleep, she tipped the kneading bowl off the stool, banging her head on the floor. The impact did not rouse her; she lay there in a stupor.

“May I ask where you think you are?” the friar cried out when she finally awakened. “You were not with Diana . . . you never left this bowl.”

The story ends happily. We are told that through “thoughtful exertions,” the friar was able to remove this particular heresy from the vetula’s “abominable soul.”⁵³



Johannes Nider preserved this story for us in his *Formicarius* (The Anthill, 1435–37), a thick tome written between the productions of his *Predigten* and *Preceptorium divine legis*, which represents that crucial period just before the finalization of the witch stereotype.⁵⁴ If Nider isn’t referring to the same woman described in *Predigten* as he is in *Formicarius*, he is at the

very least describing the same kind of practice. That is, people being fooled into believing they are in the presence of the divine, by what was to him nothing more than an experience generated by the power of an ordinary narcotic. Nider, a student of Jean Charlier de Gerson, French scholar, reformer, and the man largely responsible for declaring that all magic was wicked,⁵⁵ was a “key transitional figure” in the development of witch theory. Yet Nider was not a witch-burning fanatic but rather a “moderate, tempered, and reasonable” friar who neither hunted nor tried a single witch; and *Formicarius* is not the misogynistic, “witch-script” that was the *Malleus maleficarum* (Hammer against Witches, 1484) of five decades later, but rather “a rich picture of the moral and spiritual landscape of Europe,” of which witchcraft was only constituted a small part.⁵⁶ Further still, modern scholars are fairly certain that *Formicarius* is “rooted in folkloric stereotypes.”⁵⁷ Furthermore, like Abraham of Worms’ sober attestation, what Nider understood about the vetula’s ointments didn’t amount to witchcraft, as he doesn’t retell this story in Book 5, “On Witches and their Deceptions” (De maleficis et eorum deceptionibus) but rather in Book 2 “On False Dreams and Visions” (De falsis et illusoriis visionibus).

Additionally, one cannot help but notice the interesting and traceable digression of emphasis found between the lines of Nider’s writings. First, in *Predigten*, in his earlier mention of the ointment the woman is the kind of folk sorceress his audience would recognize: a mischief-making unholda, mixer of salves, who then uses them to travel to the Heuberg. The passage, while spiritual in its injunction, is uncharged with diabolism. In *Formicarius*, produced only a few years after *Predigten*, there are two noticeable shifts in emphasis: first, the woman’s status as a witch is more defined from a theological perspective.⁵⁸ The superstitious village folk sorceress, or unholda, has now become a witch, a vetula, who claims she can fly great distances with Diana but only dreams of Venusberg. Moreover, this time *Predigten*’s avian ointment occurs ominously oiled onto the epidermis, coupled with folk chants to fill out the vetula’s sleep and dreams of Venusberg, the paradise of debauchery. Due to the popularity of the goddess Holda in Germany we can assume that Nider knew the difference between the Heuberg and Venusberg and possibly changed the name to appeal to his audience; in all probability he read his masterwork,

Formicarius, aloud to the attendees while attending the Council of Basel in the mid-1430s.⁵⁹

In his final work, *Preceptorium divine legis*, produced between writing the last book of *Formicarius* in early 1438 and his death later that year, Nider reinstates the vetula one last time. Here he snubs the devil and Diana, redundant players in the narrative.⁶⁰ Furthermore, the incantations and ointments of *Formicarius* have been exorcised as well, needless accessories to a belief he found offensive; in the later work the woman has simply been “fooled in sleep . . . saying she can transvect with Herodias or Venus.”⁶¹ By the time of *Preceptorium* Nider makes a general statement about the widespread belief in some kind of licentious and magical mountaintop: Venusberg. The woman has been distilled down to a deluded vetula who dreams of Herodias and Venus and demons disguised as women à la the Canon Episcopi.

By now the psyche-magical ointment’s role in validating the vetula’s visions vis-à-vis Venus’s venery veers. A “witch’s” mode of travel, psyche-magical ointment or otherwise, mattered not to the theologian. Nider is firm: Venusberg doesn’t actually exist, with or without a magical flying ointment. This is a candid admission of an obscure but nonetheless real use of a hallucinogenic ointment. Should this exemplum have a basis in reality, the ointment might have served as an entheogen. One is reminded of the local spirit Matteuccia adjured while performing her abortion sorcery for Catarina and the way it was interpreted as the “Great Demon” during her trial. In fact, when Matteuccia performed whatever rite she did with her ointment, it was said that Satan sent demons to her service.

But Book 5 of *Formicarius* is not completely without mention of a magical ointment. Nider deals with it when discussing the Simmental trials of the 1390s as recounted to him by Peter of Greyerz, the inquisitor in that area. The ointment and the heretics’ potion in Book 5 are made of the usual clerically contrived concoctions mixed from the bodies of unbaptized children, showing a mingling of magical drugs with heretical prejudices. The ointment was used for “rites and transmutations”; the elixir was one of the heretics’ potions. The ointment is a new addition to the heresy script, and is not only absent from all earlier heresy records (as outlined in chapter 3), but is also absent from a follow-up story in *Formicarius* concerning a married couple burned for similar heresies, which features the heretics’

potion. The couple went to a church with the masters of the sect and there renounced the “Catholic Church.” They then paid homage to the devil, drank the diabolical draught, and became members of the sect.⁶²

The ointments in Book 2 and Book 5 of *Formicarius*, when placed side by side tell two unique stories. None of the heretical archetypes play into the vetula’s sleeping ointment, which merely caused her dreams to seem more real (although, apparently “false”) than ethereal. Hers is no heretics’ potion; it is something else. It is clear that as late as 1436–1437 Nider didn’t equate the two ointments; the vetula’s flying ointment and the heretical stereotypes present at Simmental existed independent of each other yet simultaneously. Furthermore, the vetula’s flight was *imaginary*; the heretics’ meetings were *real*. Peter of Greyerz, who told Nider the story of the Simmental witches, clearly believed these ointments were one and the same. In his recording of those witches Nider inadvertently brought these separate realms closer together.

All this leads to a specific observation: Nider was condemning the belief in the Heuburg/Venusberg, not use of the ointment, which was merely an aside, an inadvertent acknowledgment of a perhaps not widely practiced but nonetheless real use of different medical narcotics to achieve altered states of consciousness for psyche-magical reasons. Like Abraham of Worms’ account, the descriptions of these ointments in *Predigten* and *Formicarius* are striking for how *undiabolical* they read. There is no devil or witches’ Sabbat. In light of the readily available soporific ointment recipes already discussed there is little reason to doubt that Nider’s vetula doesn’t reflect a general caveat against the use of real psyche-magical ointments, dolled up in Dianic dress for an accessible ecclesiastical *exemplum*. One overlapping theme in all three accounts is Nider’s insistence that this act was laughable (*lachen*) and even somewhat pathetic—the dogma of depraved dupes. Nider was not warning against Satan but rather warning against chicanery. Both the Linzian witch’s and the vetula’s attempts to demonstrate their powers of flight “failed” in the eyes of their audience.

Failed, that is, only if we see it from the perspectives of the Hebrew mystic and the theologian. But if we look at this from the unholda’s point of view, there might be something more going on: if she used these kinds of psyche-magical ointments for some obscure folk-religious purpose that was

dismissed as a pagan rite by churchmen and therefore subject to the superimposition of theological concepts like the Dianic society,⁶³ then the experience can rightly be called entheogenic. In any event these kinds of things were too far removed from Nider's worldview to have had a chance of being understood properly. And while he might have chosen different words (*unholda/vetula*, *Heuberg/Venusberg*) depending on the class of his listeners, as a sensible reformer Nider was unlikely to make up a story just to scare his audience.⁶⁴

WICKED RITUALS AND OINTMENTS

Alonso Tostado (ca. 1400–1455), bishop of Ávila, was a Spanish theologian and exegete who left us two separate descriptions of these ointments, one in his *Commentary on Genesis* (1435–36), and the other in his *Commentary on Matthew* (1440). But it is in his interpolations from one commentary to the next that we encounter one of the clearest leaps from soporific drug spells to witches' ointment. While only making passing mention of the ointments in his later *Commentary on Matthew*, he expands on their psychoactive nature in the earlier work, *Commentary on Genesis*, as part of a larger argument about the creation of Eve from Adam.

Let's temporarily suspend the law of anachronism and work backward in these two commentaries, from *Matthew* toward *Genesis*. In *Matthew*, while addressing whether or not people could be carried by the devil to various places, Tostado took a swing at the long-held view of the Canon Episcopi, which stated that the women who rode with Diana did so only in their imaginations: "It is clear that this is the meaning of the text when it is said that the person who believes such things loses his or her faith and . . . belongs, not to Him, but . . . to the Devil. They believe Diana is a goddess, and yet Diana is the Devil."⁶⁵ Tostado further argues that people could not be carried away against their will. For those who chose to be taken away by the devil, it "should not be denied that female and also male sorcerers with certain kinds of wicked rituals and ointments are carried away by demons." They meet with others and together "revere the demons" by "indulging in lust and all indecencies."⁶⁶ The "wicked rituals and ointments" opened an avenue for Tostado to demonstrate that witches really did fly, not bodily, but spiritually, a *crimen animae*, "crime of the soul" so to speak.

In the *Genesis* commentary, however, Tostado says nothing of flying with demons or worshipping Diana or Herodias as Satan's surrogates. He does mention some peculiar properties of these ointments, though, which sound remarkably similar to those in the hallucinatory drug recipes discussed in chapter 4 of this book. He writes that

some of these mixtures are the kind that dull the sensation of pain, such as those used when a person is [operated on]. We know, too, that this kind of anointing causes such mental disassociation that man becomes separate from himself, and for a short period of time feels no sensation . . . [T]here are certain women we call witches that admit to using certain ointments and ritual words to transport whenever they wished to diverse places to meet with other men and women, where there are all sorts of pleasures and foods which they enjoyed and indulged.⁶⁷

Short of actually using the term *Venusberg*, Tostado's description of these mind-travelers' final destination sounds remarkably similar to that psyche-magical locale, their mode of transportation to that paradise: hallucinatory drug ointments.

Taken together the two passages show an evolution of thought regarding magical ointments. With the later commentary, *Matthew*, Tostado fixed them into the Procrustean bed of ecclesiastical demon lore complete with Diana and Satan and magical rites. In *Genesis*, the devil and the goddess are absent and the context demonstrates that Tostado regarded this proto-Sabbat as a drug-induced phantasm conjured in the minds of "witches" (i.e., village sorceresses/sorcerers) who found themselves between reality and some other detached world.

Besides its composition, which occurred before the formulation of the theological definition of the witch stereotype (and subsequently was noticeably reworked in *Matthew*), Tostado's *Genesis* has additional value as a credible source: namely, its role in the commentary. Tostado was a biblical literalist out to prove that stories from both the Old Testament and the New Testament were true. In *Genesis* he was hardly trying to demonstrate that psyche-magical ointments existed, but rather that God could take Adam's rib to craft Eve without causing him any pain. Attempting to rationalize (and historicize) how a loving God could perform sacred surgery on Adam,

Tostado theorized that He must have used the same kinds of medical drugs on the first man in Eden as physicians use to put a patient in a state of soporatum on the operating table. Or, as seems apparent, the kinds of drugs a witch (malefica) might use to magically enter a spiritual realm.

Perhaps unwittingly Tostado demonstrated that at least a small portion of informal healer-magicians knew of and utilized the soporific and hallucinogenic properties of solanaceous plants on themselves for mind journeying. We do not know the true nature of the experience gained by the women taking these medical ointments, but Tostado seems to think it was a recreational one. Of course, that just might have been his interpretation of the beings encountered while detached from reality. Though impossible to determine completely, we might wonder what these women, whom Tostado labeled as witches, believed about the entities they encountered. Such a meeting between the wondering psyche of a dreaming woman and incorporeal creatures (humanoid or otherwise) in an immaterial world smacks of shamanism, provided the woman gained insights from these meetings that she could bring back to waking life.

Looking deeper we can also see at least four different ways these psyche-magical ointments were used. The Linzian witch used her ointment for some kind of magical remote-viewing purpose; the unholda of Nider's *Predigten* and *Formicarius* may have used hers for some kind of reason related to folk beliefs of the Heuburg; Matteuccia and Finicella both used transformation ointments (although Matteuccia's ointment usage might have also included some additional sorcery that entailed spiritual flight); and Tostado makes reference to a kind of magical, psyche-recreational usage (at least as he saw it). The devil played no role in any of these accounts except where he was clearly intercalated, as we see with Matteuccia's record and the corresponding shift in emphasis—from recreational medical drug to agent of demonic activity found between the lines of Tostado's commentaries.



It is important to understand how and why these different ideas—night flight, heretical congregation, magical drugs—came together to generate the concept of the witches' ointment. It is necessary to recognize how the

ointment portrayal from Tostada's *Genesis* commentary fed into that found in his later *Matthew* treatise. For it is within that leap, in which the psychemagical drug practices of the laity were plucked from their local contexts and associated with Satanic forces, that our witches' ointment is born. The answer may rest in the "hereticization," if you will, of the village sorceress as epitomized by the cases of Bilia la Castagna and her magical potion, and half a century later, Matteuccia di Francesco and her psyche-magical ointment.

INCEPTION OF THE SATANIC WITCH

Be sure to ask about the fairy-women, called “ bonas res,” who [common people] claim go out at night.

BERNARD GUI (ON INQUISITORIAL PROCEDURE)

As for their trips to the Sabbats, here is my belief: with the soporific drugs with which they anoint themselves while awake, they imagine that they are soon transported, straddling a broomstick, through the chimney into a room where one can revel, dance, make love, or kiss the ass of a goat.

CYRANO DE BERGERAC

AN INQUISITORIAL CONUNDRUM

The inquisitor of Bern, Peter of Greyerz, glared at the “grand witch” Staedelin, already torn apart by torture, with all the characteristic revulsion one would expect to pass between two such polarized perspectives.¹ Greyerz wanted to know what kind of sorcery this late fourteenth-century witch before him performed. From placing lizards under doorways to cause infertility in both women and cattle, to raising storms, to stealing crops from neighboring fields, to flying (broom- and ointmentless) “from place to place through the air,” Staedelin’s testimony offers a keyhole into the rich assortment of folk sorcery of the times before diabolism played any part.²

Staedelin had learned magic not from the devil but from Hoppo, a man from Bern. Scavius, another witch living in the Simme Valley around 1375,

had taught his arts to Hoppo, who in turn made Staedelin his protégé. While Hoppo might have helped Staedelin steal crops magically, raise hailstorms, push children into bodies of water, cause sterility, and transvect, he didn't believe the devil was necessary to achieve these feats—which is probably why Greyerz tortured him until he confessed to keeping a demon.³ Like his teacher, Staedelin would not have recognized the devil's hand in any of his or Hoppo's deeds; but a turn of the thumb screw might urge him in that direction.

He broke. Physically and spiritually defeated, Staedelin looked up at Greyerz and fabricated the vaguest description of demonic activity that he could muster—anything to loosen those thumb screws. “[W]e implore the prince of all demons with certain words that he should send some [demons] of his, who would strike the place designated by us.”⁴

Greyerz now had all the proof he needed to convict.

TO CALL ON DEMONS

Chapter 5 showed the role that psychoactive drugs played in some necromancers' rituals. And while these drugs, or a mind prepped to experience spirits and demons, or both in conjunction, seems like a rational explanation for the psyche-magical effects that ensued, it is not to suggest that Staedelin practiced some kind of psychoactive necromancy. It is merely to draw attention to the fact that as early as the thirteenth century, French bishop Guillaume d'Auvergne warned that magic arose from a conjuror making a pact with one or many of a seemingly limitless number of readied demons, regardless of the method of invocation.⁵ This demonic retinue was comprised of beings with different magical abilities. They could desensitize a person by taking “awaie the sight, hearing, and understanding of anie man,” or, should the conjuror wish to “taketh awaie monie out of everie king's house,” he should call on “Shax.” “Focalor” should be summoned if the magician wanted to “killeth men, and drowneth them in the waters.” And should the conjuror decide she wanted knowledge of all the arts, she should call on “Glasya Labolas,” who would appear in the form of a dog.⁶

Some demons had powers that sound remarkably similar to the kinds of village sorcery practiced by people like Matteuccia and Staedelin. “Marbas” (or Barbas) could both cause and cure diseases. “Barbatos” could detect

hidden treasures; he also practiced a form of *sortilegia* (fortunetelling), knowing “all things past and to come.” “Buer” sounds similar to Madam Oriente in certain respects: a moral teacher and healer who knew the virtues of herbs. “Bathin” (or “Mathin”) understood the “vertues of hearbs and pretious stones” and how to transfer men “from countrie to countrie.”

In all these invocations the demons are commanded to serve the magician rather than the other way around. In fact, as late as 1563, even after theologians had decided what a witch was, the humanist physician Johann Weyer—among the first to publish against the persecution of witches—could still comment that “unlike many magicians, [witches] carry about no demon to serve them.”⁷ As stated in chapter 1, Matteuccia likely did rely on an assortment of local spirits and specters in her magic, which was interpolated in her account as consorting with demons. In fact, two years before Matteuccia was executed Bernardino of Siena would report that Finicella, the cat woman of Rome, would offer the limb of an animal to the devil every time she cured a sickly child.⁸

There is no evidence that Staedelin required any apparitional aid in his magic. And he certainly didn’t rely on demons. But like Matteuccia before him, he was forced to confess otherwise.



The likening of witchcraft with heresy found approval among the highest echelons of Christendom. Pope John XXII (1244–1334) is a case in point. In 1326, as outlined in his bull *Super illius specula* (roughly translated as “Upon Observation”), he “grievingly . . . observ[ed]” that many Christians were such “in name only,” preferring to spend their time not in a state of beatitude but rather “making a pact with the devil, sacrific[ing] to demons [and crafting or having made] with discernment images, rings, mirrors, phials, or other things for the magical arts.”⁹ The first part of this injunction deals with heretics as understood by the religious elites (i.e., they invoke demons); said sanction’s second section strictly subverts supernatural services. Like the different opinions found a century later at the Council of Basel, this particular midfourteenth-century concept of wedding heresy with sorcery was by no means uniform. University of Bologna law professor Oldradus da Ponte (d. ca. 1340) had a more tempered view than that of John

XXII and chose rather to distinguish between the two crimes, even when it came to that supreme overlap that would later unite them, namely, the invocation of demons. He even urged some judges intent on charging one Johannes Patrimacho with heresy to charge him only with the secular crime of magic for summoning a demon, as Patrimacho hadn't invoked a demon to revere it but rather to control it in order to gain the love of a woman.¹⁰

Catalonian grand inquisitor Nicholas Eymeric (1320–1399), however, later explained how the one implied the other—that magical meant heretical. There were two kinds of magicians, he wrote in 1376 in *Directorium inquisitorum*, (The Inquisitor's Directory). Some of these magicians practiced different forms of magic, like palmistry, but they stayed within the bounds of magic. Others, he contended, used magic in their heresies. They “show the honor . . . to the demons, who rebaptize their children and do other similar things . . . in order to foresee the future or penetrate to the innermost secrets of the heart. . . . [S]uch magicians . . . are punished according to the laws pertaining to heretics.”¹¹

Grand Inquisitor Eymeric's view won out, and the trend of “hereticizing” sorcerers continued into the early fifteenth century, with the University of Paris's theological faculty denouncing all magic in 1398. The faculty's condemnation does not mention magical ointments—or any other aspect of folk sorcery, as its primary focus is the realm of high magic—but the subject does bleed into folk practices with its vague damnation of “every superstitious ritual, the effects of which cannot reasonably be traced back to God or nature.”¹² The condemnation of folk magic had begun with a prior condemnation of learned magic.¹³ French theologian Jean Gerson further cemented this association (for those who accepted it, anyway) a few years later in 1402 with his *Tractatus de erroribus circa artem magicam* (Treatise on the Errors of the Magical Arts).¹⁴

Bernese inquisitor Greyerz certainly agreed with these theologians. As catastrophes of the late fourteenth century intensified in the form of plagues, famines, revolts, and wars, the devil seemingly loomed ever larger over the activities of mortals—perhaps more so than previously thought. And a lowly magician's ability to control such potent powers looked ever more dubious. Even such distinguished men as King James VI weighed in on this argument: “Witches are servants only, and slaves to the devil; but the Necromancers are his masters and commanders.”¹⁵ Surely unlettered

magicians like Hoppo or Staedelin, or folk sorceresses like Matteuccia and Finicella—all equally damned in their folly—couldn't control the devil.

SCOBACES (THE BROOM RIDERS)

The hopeful villagers gathered in the cornfield. Some held pitchforks; others opted for brooms, rakes, shovels, and other domestic items. Their priest might have already tried a remedy not too unlike the following from the twelfth century: before dawn four clusters of dirt should be pulled from the corners of a field. Blessing the clumps with Yahweh's injunction to Eve and Adam ("be fruitful and multiply"), the priest reinforced his prayer by dousing the dirt with holy water, honey, oil, and milk. More prayers would be said, and four Masses would be sung over the loose earth.¹⁶

Still, the crops withered before the villagers, signifying a saturnine certainty should the stalks stay slouched: starvation. Stirred by frustration and distress the villagers took to magic, but not the magic of the church. No, that magic had failed them, had failed the crops, and was eschewed for something more effective: the fertility traditions of yore, specifically a practice that had been exorcised from the Christian litany: the villagers straddled their brooms, pitchforks, and such. Riding their implements like hobbyhorses, they began to leap into the air, urging their cornstalks to grow as high as their springing and jumping.¹⁷



The above *cultis agrorum*^{*57} details one modern researcher's theory for how folk traditions were brought into a heretofore unknown relationship with prevailing theological beliefs about witchcraft, to produce a phenomenon that was to last until the end of the witch craze and beyond and became one of the witch's more longlasting attributes: her *scoba* (from the Italian *scopa*, "broom") and her participation in the *scobaces*—the legendary broom riders.

This kind of magical fertility patronage is one example among many, as discussed in chapter 2. While there is much by way of European broom lore,¹⁸ only the corn ritual involves riding one. Whether there is a kernel of truth to the cornstalk broom rite remains to be historically harvested.

Nevertheless, it has played a major role in the creation of the modern myths about witches' ointments, and it is this aspect of the witch stereotype that is the most widely misunderstood by both romantic historians and the population at large. Their new, twentieth-century lore, completely absent in all forms from the historical record, holds that a supposed witch would rub an ointment comprised of hallucinogenic drugs on a broomstick and then insert the knob into her vagina or rectum as a roundabout way of introducing the drug into the bloodstream.^{*58 19}

Charming as this idea sounds, the true story of the broom riders involves more complex forms of folk superstition, none of which include smearing a drug paste on a broomstick and masturbating with it.^{† 59} The origin of the broom-rider is unknown. An early mention comes in 1261 from heresy historian Stephen of Bourbon, who informs his readers that benevolent women rode brooms while evil women rode wolves. Ointments weren't mentioned—nor do these pastes appear in any other broom lore that fifteenth-century theologians drew from to satisfy their demonological discourse.²⁰

An interesting though rather elusive image of a broom-rider is found in Bavaria within the sacred confines of Schleswig Cathedral. Here a Germanic goddess is seen flying astride a broomstick. She has been identified as the goddess Frigg, although it is possible she might represent Freya. While both goddesses assume different roles in German mythology, there is evidence to suggest that both deities grew out of one archetypal Great Mother.²¹ While Freya became more of a seductress, Frigg became a “fascinating, multiaspected [*sic*] figure”: a goddess of domesticity linked with household duties, an agent of fertility and giver of gifts. She was a seer of future events who ironically never divulged them.²² Frigg's name implies an association with Friday, prompting tenth-century English abbot Ælfric of Eynsham to call her “the shameless goddess called Venus, or Frigg in Danish.”²³ Both goddesses held two things in common: love affairs and the possession of a magical falcon cape that allowed the wearer to transform into a bird.²⁴ Frigg's depiction in flight in the Schleswig Cathedral is not at all outlandish; indeed, she appears to be wearing the falcon cape. But why she is depicted riding a broom while wearing the cape is not known.



The torture seemed endless; the solitude that followed spirit-crushing; the uncertainty of his future nerve-wracking. It had only lasted one day, March 15, 1438, but Peter Vallin had had enough. He wasn't a Waldensian, which the Inquisition had been stamping out of Dauphiné since 1425, making Vallin the first person in that area to be accused solely of a hybridized, imaginary crime: diabolical magical heresy.²⁵ Vallin's "confession" included a combination of ideas already explored: he admitted to having given himself over to a demon, Belzebut (Beelzebub), sixty-three years earlier. He had trampled and spat on the cross, and sacrificed his daughter to Satan (who also helped Vallin raise storms and perform other maleficia). Furthermore, he congregated with others of like kind and ate children after first urinating on them. He flew to these cannibalistic orgies via the "Devil's staff" but no ointment is mentioned in conjunction.²⁶ When, the next day, he stood before a large audience and issued his confession publically, he stated again that he had, in fact, ridden a staff (again, no ointment mentioned) to do the devil's bidding.²⁷

Vallin was then turned over to the Lady of Tournon, Elinor of Grolea, a secular authority who had already tried Vallin for *sortilegis* (lot casting) in 1431. Viennese judge Philippe Baile would set no bail; he wanted names. The four that had been supplied by Vallin did little to satisfy his zeal, as those people mentioned had died long ago. He ordered a more thorough interrogation. After all, Vallin couldn't have been in the devil's service for sixty-three years without knowing others. Further torture resulted in names dropping from his lips.²⁸ And while it was supposed that those later indicted "rode like the wind" on staffs to meet the devil, like Vallin, not a single one required an ointment to do so.²⁹

And Vallin wasn't the only one to fly atop some apparatus without the need of a magical ointment. In 1437, Claude Tholosan, chief prosecutor from Briannçon for over a decade (1426–1449), sentenced Jubert of Bavaria to death for necromancy, practicing veneficia, divination, murder, demon invocation, and apostasy. Jubert was said to have "worshipped Lucifer as if he were God, prostrating himself at night, and turning his hindquarters toward the East. He drew a cross on the ground, which he spat on three times, and also stomped upon three times, and also peed and defecated upon. . . . and would deny God three times." When Jubert wanted to worship the devil he would "straddle the feces of a mule or horse

[signaling] the demons to carry him to their regular assembly.” Finally, he “gathered certain herbs for medicines on the Eve of St. John Baptist.” He also concocted poisonous mixtures from toads, basilisks, snakes, spiders, and scorpions, and put these substances in the food of a Bavarian man named Conrad. Jubert’s rap sheet is an apostasy amalgam, an accusation anthology appropriating folk magic (gathering herbs on the Eve of St. John the Baptist Day, *veneficia*, and night flight), magic (demon invocation, necromancy), apostasy (worshipping the devil), and heresy (urinating on a cross). He would pay the “ultimate punishment” for these crimes.³⁰



Much like hopelessly trying to understand the pain Vallin endured, we can’t quite imagine the kinds of torture inflicted on Johannes de Stipulis that would lead him to confess to such deplorable acts as devil worship, infanticide, and causing the sicknesses and deaths of his neighbors. We can be fairly certain, however, that Stipulis never thought he had committed any of these maleficent deeds at the devil’s direction. He may have belonged to some heretical group rampant in Western Europe during the tumultuous early modern period. He might have even practiced a form of low magic or village sorcery, having nothing to do with his possible membership in the sect. But a charge of witchcraft now routinely meant conviction of things like night flight, devil worship, child murder, sex with demons, and raising storms.

We learn of Stipulis in the anonymously^{*60} penned 1437 tract *Errores Gazariorum seu illorum qui scobam vel baculum equitare probantur* (The Errors of the Cathars, or Those Who Are Proved to Ride on Brooms and Staffs). According to Stipulis this sect engaged in the following new, yet somehow all-too-familiar pattern of error: First, Stipulis received a staff and a jar of ointment from a sect member. He anointed said staff with the ointment and was whisked away to the diabolical congregation. There the devil usually appeared as a black cat (or sometimes another animal) or as an “imperfect man.” Stipulis swore an oath of loyalty to the devil that he would assemble with the society whenever instructed to, that he would never tell the secrets of the sect, and that he would kill all children under the age of three to bring to the synagogue for consumption. He was further

to cause trouble in his community via maleficia, halt sexual intercourse, and avenge any harm brought to the sect by outsiders. Once these formalities were satisfied the group all sat down to a banquet of deceased children. The “presiding devil” called for the lamps to be extinguished, ordering “*Mestlet, mestlet!*” (Mix it up), and the orgy commenced.

These sectarians weren’t just heretics; they were witches who used “baby fat and other [ingredients] . . . such as poisonous creatures like snakes, toads, lizards, and spiders” to raise storms, freeze crops, make flying ointments to rub on sticks, and otherwise kill pious Christians.³¹ Here the heretical underpinnings of the fifteenth-century witch are on full display. The *Errores Gazariorum* contains a general outline of folk magic and even expands on its heretical implications, emphasizing the diabolical nature of that supernatural cult meeting par excellence, the witches’ Sabbat.³² These unfortunates described in this tract have been identified as *Vouderie*: “Waldensian witches.”³³

The anonymous author of *Errores Gazariorum* might have picked up these ideas about witches’ flying ointments while attending the Council of Basel. Indeed, theologians Johannes Nider and Alonso Tostado, along with others we will meet in a moment, attended the Council. While the minutes of the various meetings do not mention it we must consider that several early chroniclers of these magical folk ointments—save Bernardino of Siena, Matteuccia’s interrogators, and Abraham of Worms—were also in attendance at the Council. It is unlikely that the subject of magical folk ointments was not addressed—perhaps not in the grand meeting halls where important matters like heretics and church reform took place, but rather in more intimate settings, whispers and quiet laughter echoing cautiously down the long, stone corridors . . .

A NEW SECT

During the papal schism that infected the church between 1378 and 1418, pitting popes against antipopes,^{*61} various canons elected (as antipope) Pietro Philarghi—Alexander V—to quell the matter. Alexander issued a bull based on descriptions of sorcery he received from Ponce Fougeyron, the inquisitor general of many dioceses including Geneva and Avignon. Pope Alexander wrote of “some Christians and wicked Jews” who comprise “a new sect [practicing] forbidden rituals . . . and secret beliefs.” Some of

them even dabbled in various kinds of witchcraft such as “divining, invoking demons, spell-casting, conjuring, [believing in] superstitions, sooth-saying, and other nefarious and prohibited arts.”³⁴ Assuming Fougeyron was the author of the *Errores Gazariorum*, it might have been he who introduced the subject of magicians to the Council of Basel. In any case, someone surely did, as shown in the minutes of a meeting that autumn of 1433, which deemed magical acts “heretical, erroneous, scandalous [and] offensive to pious ears.”³⁵

But it would teeter on conspiratorial casuistry to assume that everyone attending the Council of Basel accepted this fusion of concepts as readily as Ponce Fougeyron did. Johannes Nider, as shown, believed the whole notion of night flight was a delusion sometimes caused by psyche-magical drug ointments. And while other transcripts from the March 23, 1440, meeting of the Council of Basel lumped “wizards or witches or Waldensians” into a single entity,³⁶ Nicolaus Cusanus (ca. 1400–1464), German philosopher, theologian, and humanist, flatly rejected the idea. Others, like Spanish theologian Juan de Torquemada (aka Johannes de Turrecremata, 1388–1468), opted to uphold the original skepticism of the Canon Episcopi.³⁷ The Dominican Bernard of Como, however, was able to dismiss the Canon by appealing to Fougeyron’s (or whoever’s) “new sect” theory as outlined in the *Errores*. Bernard’s argument is complicated but crucial. Like all theologians of his day he mistakenly believed the Canon Episcopi had originated at the Council of Ancyra (314 CE). Therefore, this “new sect,” as he and many others saw it, was just that—*new*, and therefore unknown to Regino of Prüm, the original author of the Canon.³⁸ It is within this debate over whether a person literally flew in physical form as Fougeyron maintained, or only in spirit as Nider upheld, that the concept of the witches’ ointment develops.

Perhaps it is no coincidence, then, that around 1436–37, at the time of the formulation of the witch stereotype, chief magistrate of Dauphiné, Claude Tholosan recorded a gathering of heretics who “imagine in dreams that they travel bodily at night . . . in order to suffocate children and strike them with sickness.” Ointments, brooms, even the animals supposedly straddled by women in the Canon Episcopi aren’t mentioned in the chief magistrate’s charges. In a move that must have turned demonology on its head at the time, Tholosan “no longer distinguished between dreams and

harmful magic,” insisting that while the heretics traveled in dreams, somehow this journey corresponded to a corporal act in real life.³⁹ Interestingly, though, Tholosan reported that alongside “poisonous powders” and “the devil’s piss,” these particular heretics also employed in their magic “poisons they get from an apothecary.”⁴⁰ He did not connect the “poisons” with the flight; he did, however, contextualize witches, heretics, and drugs.

Still, the rationalists could not stop the currents of fate. Lay magicians like Finicella, Matteuccia, and Stipulis could now theoretically be tried for the ecclesiastical crime of heresy even if they had been arrested only on charges pertaining to the secular crime of magic. Such a case illustrating this ideological transition happened, in fact. In Fribourg two separate persecutions, one taking place in 1399 and the other in 1430, involved some of the same people. Whereas the earlier charges spoke of the accused in terms of heresy only, the later charges speak of them in terms of witchcraft.⁴¹ The most famous source detailing these trials comes from Swiss chronicler Hans Fründ, who in 1428 reported that “witches and magicians”⁴² in Lucerne rubbed ointments on chairs in order to fly from town to town, preferring those neighborhoods with the best wine cellars. These people could transform into animals and had even set up demonic schools where initiates met to listen to the evil master preach against Christianity. The devil appeared in the shape of some black animal and those assembled paid homage to him.⁴³ This was the same year that Matteuccia was charged with many of these same crimes, with one slight modification: she didn’t rub ointment on some apparatus; she rubbed it on her body while singing incantations.



Here is the final link in our thread, incorporating every aspect of the witches’ Sabbat in its earliest imaginings: witches rubbing magical ointments on brooms, chairs, and other implements to fly to a heretical congregation overseen by Satan.

- The ointments come from the medical drugs outlined by Alonso Tostado and Abraham of Worms, found in various contemporary

medical texts; they were not necessarily a part of the general belief in night flight but were nonetheless used by some people as an element in psyche-magical rites; some, perhaps, might have even been used entheogenically.

- The act of rubbing them on chairs, brooms, and so forth, most probably belongs to some obscure folk tradition associated with the Germanic goddess Frigg. Diana's association with the devil probably stretches back to folk beliefs about female fertility and good fortune deities.
- The worship of the devil comes down to us from ancient stereotypes about heretics.
- Finally, the pact with the devil comes from the realm of high magic.

To summarize: At the dawn of the witch stereotype, first conceived by theologians in the 1430s in a merging maelstrom of magical lore, heretical stereotypes, and folk notions, the ointments finally enter the ecclesiastical record alongside the new definition of the witch. Subsequent writers would weave these folk ointments tightly into the demonological fabric as a way to explain how all these so-called witches could fly to their Sabbats. In the years to come, untold numbers of people—mostly women—would burn for this imaginary crime.



Renaissance poet Martin le Franc (ca. 1400–1460) had had enough. Abhorred by the treatment of his countrywomen, he composed his famous 1442 defense of women, *Le champion des dames* (The Champion of Women), wherein he cast himself as “Franc Vouloir,” the defender of women, in a dialogue with his misogynistic antagonist, “the Adversary.” The conversation is not entirely about witchcraft but the few lines that mention it are telling. The Adversary insists that women rode on brooms to the devil (no ointments mentioned), where they encountered thousands of other women who have transformed into goats and cats (transmutation). The devil then gives them “an ointment made out of awful, varied poisons” and instructs them on how to use it to make men impotent.⁴⁴

Poisons and night flight also appear in Le Franc's epic verse, but do not overlap, again pointing to two separate traditions. Martin le Franc pulled his stanzas from the chaotic world around him, and the use of an ointment (for any reason) was hardly uniform by this time; or even yet a staple of theological witchcraft. But even Le Franc's noble (if somewhat pretentious) mission couldn't stop this revolution in theological thought, that which defined the newest sect of heretics: that of the satanic witch.

ALL HELL BREAKS LOOSE

The inquisitor Jacques Dubois, dean of Notre Dame at Arras, was as sly as the devil he pretended to despise. Singing sweet promises of freedom through iron bars, Dubois assured those who had been arrested in Arras around the Feast of All Saints 1459 that any hope of emancipation meant confessing for their crime—the crime of *Vaulderie*.



Dubois had started his roundup of witches with a known prostitute, Demiselle Grenier, who worked out of Douai. Thrown into the bishop's prison without any explanation, she begged her captors to tell her what she had done. Reportedly one of the jailers asked if she knew Robinet de Vaultx, a citizen of Burgundy who had recently been burned for sorcery. Demiselle, fearing for her fate and knowing exactly what Robinet's name implied, asked nervously, "And what of it? Do they think I'm a witch?"⁴⁵

Jacques Dubois wasted no time interrogating her. Not surprisingly, after he left the torture chamber Demiselle confessed that she had attended a *Vaulderie* (Sabbat) and also had provided a lengthy list of names of those whom she had seen while reveling there. One man on that list was Jehan Lavite, known as the "abbot of little sense." Something of an early modern period rock star, he had gained wide fame in his day for his glorious paintings and songs about the Blessed Mother. He also lived up to his nickname by cutting his tongue out to avoid confessing to anything after his arrest—a fruitless effort, as he was made to sign a declaration of guilt saying that he had in fact visited the *Vaulderie*. Between his and Demiselle's confessions a multitude of other people were also implicated. At this point the bishop's vicars grew uneasy about the hordes of people

being accused: women and men, burgers and members of the nobility, prostitutes and theologians. A brief quarrel erupted between the more conscionable vicars and Dubois over the treatment of the prisoners. Sadly, Dubois won out by beseeching the Count of Peronne, Comte d'Estampes, to threaten the vicars with losing their clerical privileges if they did not continue the investigation. Fearing their own loss of status the vicars resumed the interrogations and trials. To no one's surprise the number of those indicted grew every day—all showered with promises of freedom by Dubois if they would simply admit their guilt.

A large scaffold was built in the public square in Arras and each prisoner was led out to it before a large crowd. The accused—complete with miters on their heads with the devil painted on them—were lined up before the spectators and each read their sworn admission of guilt. The hellish scenario was portrayed as follows:

These witches, when they wanted to attend the *Vaulderie*, would smear their hands with an ointment that they then rubbed onto a small, wooden rod. Straddling the rod they flew off to assemble at a fountain in the forests of Mofflaines before the devil, who appeared in the form of a goat with a human face. Due to the nearness of the congregation some participants required no ointment or staffs at all and simply walked to the affair. Once at their destination each paid homage to Satan by offering her or his soul or some other body part as collateral. They then kissed the devil's derriere as a sign of adoration. A cross was brought before them on which they spat and stomped. Afterward, a banquet of meat and wine sated the guests; all then descended into a wild orgy with demons taking on the likenesses of both genders. The devil then preached and forbade them to perform their Christian obligations.

Each prisoner was asked if she or he acknowledged her or his participation in this *Vaulderie*.

“Yes,” they replied one by one.

Their lands and holdings were surrendered to the count and to the bishops. Acknowledgment of the crimes meant a forfeiture of life as well. When the sentence was announced, several of the condemned “burst into fearful screams . . . declar[ing] themselves innocent, and called for vengeance on Jacques Dubois, saying he had induced them to make the confession . . . by the promise that on that condition he would save their

lives.” There must have been something very sincere in their indictment of Dubois, as their words led some in the audience to assert out loud that the “witches” had all been wrongfully condemned.⁴⁶

Nonetheless, the abbot of little sense (and no tongue) was the first one ignited. The people were largely sad to see him go.

Dubois, one can imagine, could only think delightedly of the spoils his machinations had won him.



Little can be done to ameliorate the appetites of the avarice. If Dubois’ deceit could fleece “poor people, and . . . persons of very equivocal character” of their possessions, why not try it on the more moneyed members of society? A new round of arrests snagged a different crop of detainees—rich “men of substance.”⁴⁷ Some were tortured and let go after a confession could not be wrenched from them. Others tried to escape only to be caught later and dragged back to the bishop’s prison. Finally, on October 16, 1460, the “five prisoners of most importance for their wealth and position” were brought before the judges. One of them, Payen de Beaufort, much to the shock of the courtroom, confessed voluntarily that he had in fact known Demiselle and two other prostitutes who had burned with her. They had come to his home and given him the foul ointment that he had rubbed on his body and on a stick, which he mounted to fly to the mountain of Mofflaine (to do all the things we have come to expect happened at such a place). He was sentenced to ten years’ imprisonment, all his possessions forfeited to the church and the inquisitors, chief among them Dubois.

Further clouding the matter for the other prisoners (and thousands of others later in history), Payen’s testimony gave credence to the new Sabbat script. The other men were punished in similar fashion despite never having admitted guilt of participating in the Vaulderie; De Beaufort’s confession alone was enough to implicate them.⁴⁸

But this wasn’t the end of the matter. Some pious churchmen, doubly dubious of Dubois’ duplicity and outraged at his misuse of power, vocalized their discontent, claiming that the Vaulderie wasn’t real and that no one, from Demiselle to De Beaufort, deserved to be punished, much less executed, for something that was impossible. Dubois had also overlooked

the other side of these mens' power: they weren't just rich—they were also tremendously influential, and some, like Payen de Beaufort, seized on the opportunity of the clerical schism at this time to sue his judges in the Parliament of Paris that June of 1461. Meanwhile, Dubois had died earlier that year in February from a paralytic attack, being deprived of both motor function and his mind at the end. But De Beaufort's testimony before the parliament reminded his captors of something they had heard earlier: he claimed that he had only confessed because Dubois promised him freedom if he would. Everyone, from the jailers to the vicars to De Beaufort—and certainly the accused innocents—had been duped by Dubois. The parliament set De Beaufort free; holding the other accused magistrates who had been arrested became moot. While the appeals and countersuits processes lasted until 1491 no further arrests were made and the first major witch craze of Europe terminated bittersweetly. Sadly, with regard to the larger opera of witchcraft this was merely the overture.

The entire Arras affair was the first time the new witch script was used on a large cross-section of people in such an obvious way. We can see how inquisitors like Dubois fit the witches' ointment into this contrived narrative. However, the ointment didn't materialize at Arras in 1460. As has been shown, the ointment first sidled into the record as a magical medical drug used by village sorceresses for reasons outside those prescribed in medical texts. What is interesting about this case, though, is that the surviving trial records do not mention using the flesh or blood of infants to create the ointment used to fly to the Vaulderie. In fact, there is only one known suggested recipe for the ointment, found in famous Renaissance composer, poet, lawyer, and mathematician Johannes Tinctoris's treatise *Sermo de secta Vaudensium* (Report on the Vaudensian [Waldensian] Sect, 1460). Tinctoris had firsthand knowledge of the proceedings, having played a role in the trial (though in what capacity remains uncertain).⁴⁹ In *Sermo de secta*, Tinctoris, another attendee at the Council of Basel, explains that the magical ointment was made from “toads, powdered bones from a corpse, and the bloods of both innocent children and that of the menstrual kind.” These are then mixed into a “liquid paste” enabling them to “fly speedily through the air.”⁵⁰

Considering the farcical nature of the trial at Arras it is possible that Tinctoris pulled this ointment recipe from his own experiences (or the

experiences of his peers), and simply assumed that the “witches” of Arras used a similar “liquid paste” as that of the real sorcerer/esses he might have encountered during his lifetime. Exactly where Tinctoris pulled this recipe from cannot be determined but his contemporaries agreed with him; German historian and chaplain Matthias von Kemnat (1430–1476) included toads in his accounts of these magical ointments too, along with other venomous wildlife like snakes, lizards, spiders (and, of course, the fat of children).⁵¹



But there remains a burning question: of the many subversive groups appearing in sacrilegious symphony throughout the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, why did inquisitors and judges single out the Waldensians as witches? Certainly there were other heretical groups such as the Fraticelli, the Free Spirits of Bohemia, the Hussites (which Nider dealt with personally⁵²), and gangs like the Pastoureaux (“Shepherds,” participants in two popular outbreaks of mystico-political enthusiasm in France, in 1251 and 1320), among other groups of a rebellious nature.⁵³ Theologians must have interpreted some Waldensian beliefs and rites as involving similar practices as those of local magicians, which at first presented opportunities for comparison, and later terminated in a complete synthesis.

One area of common ground exists in both the Waldensian barbes’ and the sorceresses’ ability to heal. Barbes appear in several contemporary records as doctors and surgeons.⁵⁴ Village medicine women, sorceresses, and those who blended the two in their arts, appear in several early cases, serving as prototypes for the formulaic witch. While both groups had their own superstitions and rites (and still there was no intrauniformity in either practice), it seems that at least in the eyes of some churchmen they were similar enough if only in their illicitness.

The most striking of the overlaps must have been the spiritual journeys taken by Waldensian barbes, a similarity that is both enticing yet incomplete. In Waldensian dossiers dating from the fifteenth century we meet several references to barbes journeying “to Heaven” to receive their powers directly from God.⁵⁵ Another posits that the sect sometimes congregated in heaven.⁵⁶ Waldensian confessions that mention such trips

are few, and appear only in dossiers pertaining to the Eastern church, specifically in Pomerania, Austria, and Bavaria. Unfortunately for our exploration, the various inquisitors assigned to each of these confessants didn't bother asking about the trips to heaven; they didn't seem to care.

We do know that many Waldensian barbes were trained physicians—or at least as trained as one could be at the time. Therefore, they would have had access to the kinds of drugs explored in chapter 4 and knowledge of the powers of these substances, which could cause a person prone to such beliefs to have a deeply significant experience while under their influence. This is circumstantial, of course; plausible but by no means certain. There are less glamorous possibilities as well: for all we know, the barbes faked such visits simply to lend credibility to their message. Their followers simply believed the trips to be true. There is also the chance that the few mentions of these trips to Paradise were invented spontaneously by a scared Waldensian under interrogation (though this is unlikely, considering that all those who mention such trips do so without being put to torture). Finally, all affirm that the trips occurred so that the barbe could learn his trade from the Creator, pointing to shamanism. Still, the ways the comments appear in the record imply something more. For our purposes we can say that the mode of transport doesn't really matter. What mattered was whether Matteuccia's magic, and indeed the magic of countless village magicians like her, reminded authorities of those heavenly trips undertaken by the Waldensian barbes.

Still, we must recognize that trance states can be obtained without the use of medical drugs. The *Benandanti*, “Good Walkers,” an Italian fertility cult that had the witch stereotype superimposed onto its beliefs by inquisitors in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, did exactly that. Four times a year during the Ember Weeks the members of the Benandanti fell into a catatonic trance. The person's soul would fly into the ethers and battle witches for the protection of crops and fertility. It has been decisively shown that the Benandanti did not require any kind of drug for their spirit journeying. Benandanti members could perform this bizarre feat (i.e., throwing oneself into a catatonic state at an appointed time) simply because they had been raised their whole lives to accept this responsibility—it was as natural as breathing to them. We therefore cannot dismiss the importance of cultural encoding. Even Nider relates such spontaneous trance states as possible; in his *Formicarius* he writes about a presbyter named Restitutus

who could enter these catatonic trance states and “lie [*sic*] like a dead man. In this state he was . . . completely insensitive to pinching and pricking [or burning].”⁵⁷ A certain horse wrangler and shaman from Oberstdorf, Chonrad Stoeckhlin, could “[fall] as if unconscious. And thus in rapture he went [with an angel] to a place where he observed pain and joy, which he took to be purgatory and paradise.” He required no ointment of any kind to do this.⁵⁸ Perhaps Waldensian barbes arrived at the gates of heaven in a similar fashion.

The most we can say is that while both drug- and nondrug-induced methods of psyche-magical experience existed at the time,⁵⁹ too many cases, especially those that record the use of a love philter or “venom” are so terse and/or incomplete as to render it impossible to tell what caused the experience, an active drug or cultural programming. Demonologists didn’t seem to care much about the methods of belief, only the belief itself; moreover, since they were cocksure in their assertions, any folk notion that didn’t fit their preconceptions was “omitted or reinterpreted” to conform to the stereotype of the satanic witch.⁶⁰



No more than a decade after the horrors that engulfed the citizens of Arras a new trend began to stir in the literature dealing with witches and their psyche-magical flying ointments: the playing down of psychoactive ingredients in order to give the devil a more active role in explaining nocturnal excursions to the Sabbat. Dominican witch theorist Giordano de Bergamo, for instance, commented in his *Quaestio de striges* (Inquiry into Witches, ca. 1460–1470): “[T]he common folk generally believe, and witches themselves also admit . . . they smear a stick with a particular ointment . . . or they [push the ointment] under their nails, the mouth, ear, or under their hairy areas [i.e., vaginas] or underarms.” He writes that neither the stick nor the ointment enable flight; it is all done through Satan’s powers.⁶¹

Bergamo’s argument served a twofold objective: first, it represented his stance on the larger demonological opinion of witchcraft as diabolical illusion. The women didn’t fly corporally; rather, they flew via a corrupted spirit. Second, this explanation eschewed the need for drugs, all the while

recognizing their presence in the ointment. Is it therefore really so impossible, given the clerical trend of demonizing actual practices,⁶² that the bastardization of psychoactive Solanaceae plants (like those found in love philters) can be seen in the development of the witches' ointment?

Perhaps. And perhaps this wasn't overlooked by all clergymen. In 1475 the Dominican inquisitor of Carcassonne, Jean Vincent, warned his readers in his *Tractatus contra demonum invocatores* (A Treatise against Anyone Who Invokes Demons):

Poison witches . . . mix poisonous ingredients into love philters and ointments which disturb people's minds, transform their bodies, but usually serve only to kill the user. They claim to be transported far away, at night, to demonic Sabbats by the influence of these [same] drugs. The correct deduction, however, [is that] not one of these should be attributed to any natural power belonging to such drugs, but rather to the cunning of a demon. . . . He [the demon] is the true operative cause, whereas these kinds of drugs are the secondary cause.⁶³

Vincent even likens the effects of the ointments to “drinking mandrake bark mixed in wine.”⁶⁴ His deduction that the herbs can be used for various reasons—to cause mental disturbances (e.g., feeling like the body is transforming or imagined flight) or biological ones (e.g., to heal, sicken, and especially to cause death)—are all consistent with solanaceous intoxication. Depending on the dose (and one's expectation) any of these outcomes are possible.⁶⁵ The words of Bergamo and Vincent strike us as copouts, admissions that the plants caused these experiences coupled with an attempt to rationalize that natural explanation away with demon theory.

This development of dampening a drug in favor of the devil's powers might account for a curious omission in a flying ointment description composed the same year as Vincent's *Tractatus*. Bavarian physician Johannes Hartlieb mentions such an ointment, *unguentum pharelis*,⁶⁶ found in *Puch aller verpoten kunst, ungeläubens und der zaubrey* (The Book of All Forbidden Arts, Superstition, and Sorcery, 1475). Hartlieb, a man who was present when Finicella was burned (and wrote an account of it, as told in chapter 6, see [here](#)), relates that the flying ointment was composed by an unholden and contained seven herbs, adding that each herb must be

collected on a certain day. A review of the herbal ingredients—*Heliotropium* (borage) on Sunday, *Lunaria annua* (honesty) on Monday, *Verbena* on Tuesday, *Mercurialis* (spurge) on Wednesday, *Anthyllis barba* (vetch) on Thursday, and *Adiantum capillus-veneris* (maidenhair fern) on Friday—does not turn up any plants that are psychoactive. Curiously, though, Hartlieb excludes the identity of the seventh herb, neglecting to mention which plant should be picked on Saturday, admitting that he is withholding that particular piece of information so as not to encourage people to try it.⁶⁷ We can only speculate, but there seems to be little other reason for Hartlieb to deliberately skip over that plant other than a desire to suppress information about an effective drug. While the connection is undoubtedly casual, it is worth noting that certain psychoactive plants like henbane, hemlock, and deadly nightshade fell under the dominion of Saturn (for whom Saturday is named), according to popular early modern period European plant lore.⁶⁸

A mere decade later Catholic clergyman Heinrich Kramer and Dominican priest Jacob Sprenger^{*62} would exclude all plants, whether psychoactive or not, from the flying ointment they describe in their infamous 1484 work *Malleus maleficarum* (Hammer of Witches). Thereafter, witches were said to boil the flesh of children (preferably those who died before baptism) and would smear the resulting gunk onto “a chair or broomstick . . . whereupon they [were] immediately carried into the air.”⁶⁹ Like most learned men of the day, Kramer and Sprenger were familiar with Johannes Nider’s *Formicarius*,⁷⁰ yet made no distinction between the vetula’s flying ointment (found in Book 2 of *Formicarius*, “On False Dreams and Visions”) and the heretics’ potion (found in Book 5, “On Witchcraft”). The highly influential *Malleus* would set a precedent for witches’ ointments and their composition when the first fires of the witch craze started to flicker in the following century.

Another man familiar with Nider, who also makes no distinction between the vetula’s ointment and that of the Bernese heretics, was the “eloquent” Strasburg preacher Johann Geiler von Kaiserberg (1445–1510), a Swiss-born priest considered one of the more popular preachers of his time. In a Lenten sermon delivered in his home city of Strasburg two years before he died, von Kaiserberg informed his congregation that “as a certain rule of matter” Satan could transvect a corporeal body because of divine

authorization allotted by God. “This is why,” he continued, “it is then possible that when a witch sits on a pitchfork, and smears it [with the ointment], and says the words she is supposed to utter, she will fly away. . . . The pitchfork does not do that on its own accord, the salve does not do it either.”⁷¹ He then goes on to borrow from Nider’s *vetula exemplum* explicitly.

The transition is clear: by the late fifteenth and into the early sixteenth centuries, both secular and religious authorities were taking concepts about psychoactive drug use that originated with Nider, Tostado, and others at the Council of Basel, and replacing the psyche-magical effects of the ointments with the devil’s powers.

Religio-philosopher Giovanni Francesco Pico della Mirandola (1470–1533) outlined the incorporeal nature of the witch’s “flight” in his dialogue on screech owls, *Dialogus strix*, which adopts a three-way conversational exchange between a learned theologian, Phronimus, “Prudent Man”; the skeptical Apistio, “Unbeliever”; and Dicaste, “Judge.” The central plot of the book shows the conversion of Apistio from his disbelieving stance to one that accepts the reality of witches. At one point, the object of their conversation, the witch herself (*striga*), enters the discussion. Apistio cannot help but ask her about her ointments:

“The blood of infants makes up the majority of the ointments,” Striga replies.

“And where do you smear this oil?”

“Those body parts that are used for sitting”

Just like Matteuccia’s trial, which opened this investigation, Striga composed her “foul ointments” from the “blood of innocent children” and used them to “depart bodily through the air space.”⁷²

It is no surprise that this striga also flies through the air with Diana and Herodias. The flying, transforming, and otherwise psyche-magical ointments of the previous decade are now charged with diabolism, allegedly containing mostly childrens’ blood. Those who wrote about these ointments in the early sixteenth century appear unconcerned with the natural, medical explanation for the ointment reported by earlier fifteenth-century chroniclers.

THE HEAD OF JEANETTE CLERC

Two weeks after she was arrested for sorcery, Jeanette Clerc, a peasant woman living in Jussy, Geneva, briefly felt the cold edge of the blade tap the back of her neck before her head followed the last of her tears into a coarse wicker basket. Jeanette's magical acts included accusations of simple maleficia: she bit a horse so as to drive it crazy, she argued with an animal herder to the effect that neither of his two oxen would plough the fields anymore, she fed a girl an apple that made her sick, killed an inlaw by blowing a special powder in his face, and finally—the reason she was arrested—a cow died after she fed it an unnamed herb that she had picked on the eve of St. John the Baptist Day, perhaps a clue as to why she was executed in such a manner.

Tortured relentlessly, Jeanette confessed to the true source of her powers. She had given herself to a devil named Simon in exchange for a hefty bounty. She then flew “on a large stick” (which required no ointment to fly) to a “synagogue” where she had “unnatural intercourse” with Satan and participated in all the revelries of the occasion. Afterward, Simon gave her a small white stick, different from the large one she took to the meeting, and a box of ointment. She need only to smear it across the stick when she wanted to return to the synagogue, while reciting “White stick, black stick, carry me where you should; go, in the Devil's name, go!” Jeanette's is one of roughly thirty confessions recorded between 1539 and 1574 that all tell a similar tale complementing the theological stereotype of the witch.⁷³

Since Jeanette's trial occurred at least a century after the formulation of the witch stereotype, there is no way of knowing if she utilized psychomagical ointments the way other local sorceresses like Matteuccia did. But it matters not. We can still see the historicity of the witches' ointment by briefly comparing Matteuccia's experience and that of Jeanette.

Roughly a century before Jeanette lost her head, Matteuccia supposedly sang an incantation that adjured the ointment, which was rubbed on her flesh, to carry her to Benevento. A hundred years later Jeanette sang magical words to animate the *stick*, not the ointment, which would then transport her. As the previous pages outlined, by the time of Jeanette's trial the role of the psychoactive medical drug used for flying (or other magical purposes) had been smothered by a theological concept that put Satan in the pilot's seat. The macrocosmic jump from the workings of Matteuccia's

ointment (pharmacological) to that of Jeanette (purely literary) is as obvious as the microcosmic shift in Tostado's two commentaries.

And while the efforts of traveling preachers like Bernardino of Siena helped spread this paradigm beyond the esoteric village sorceress's use in the fifteenth century, it would be the physicians of the sixteenth century who would disseminate information about the elusive concept of the psyche-magical experience, available by means of these ointments, more broadly into popular culture. In the process these humanist physicians would coin a term that surprisingly still didn't exist until nearly a century after the Arras witch scare: *lamiarum unguentum*, the "witches' ointment."

8

LAMIARUM UNGUENTUM

[They] most foully soil the divine teachings of medicine through their Satanic tricks.

JOHANN WEYER

A certain Frenchman . . . terms me a Magician, a Conjuror, and thinks this book of mine . . . should be burned, because I have written of the “Fairies Ointment,” which I set forth only in detestation of the frauds of devils and witches.

GIAMBATTISTA DELLA PORTA

WAYWARD GENIUSES AND INTELLECTUAL VAGABONDS

Monsieur both gave (and couldn't give) a shit as his feces splattered onto the cobblestone streets of Antwerp. Once relieved he continued his stroll down the road of the bustling Belgian burg, indifferent to the murmurs and gossip coming from those around him. Whatever they were whispering they certainly wouldn't say to his face, for Monsieur controlled the city through the fear he evoked in its denizens.

Antwerp had become the cosmopolitan epicenter of Europe by the 1530s, the result of a lucrative sugar trade that boomed when Caribbean-grown goods made their way to Europe from New World plantations in unprecedented quantities. Economic growth didn't just lure merchants to Antwerp; the city also attracted artists and artisans of myriad trades, steeping that city in sixteenth-century Renaissance culture. Many famous painters like Quentin Matsys (1466–1530), Joachim Patinir (1480–1524), and Pieter Bruegel the Elder (1525–1569), among others, and important

philosophers like Damião de Góis (1502–1574) claimed residence there. The most famous Renaissance magician and alchemist of the day, Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa von Nettesheim (ca. 1486–1535) lived there as well for a short while. Such magnificent structures as the Cathedral of Our Lady and St. James Church, and the first stone fortress of the city, known as Het Steen, which graced the riverbanks of the naturally beatific Scheldt, filled out the cityscape, no doubt inspiring some of the great artworks for which many future generations would remember the Renaissance.

But the streets had just become a little less Old World charming, as the stench from Monsieur’s droppings—not to mention the sight of it—caused not a few Antwerp residents to retch. Others just gawked, momentarily frozen with fear. Satan—the devil himself—was in their midst! Mothers scurried their children away; others stood fast, ready to run should Monsieur decide to spread a pestilence that day, or perhaps poison the crops and livestock of those living outside the city. Maybe he would only strike down firstborns; maybe whole families would be razed, some members dying instantly, others lingering, slowly rotting away. Monsieur’s powers were well attested by the people of Antwerp, and they quickly and quietly went about their business lest the slightest misstep cause him to unleash his terrible wrath that morning. Monsieur’s companion, a young man aged around eighteen years, Johann Weyer, could only keep to himself as the citizens reacted in detestation. Weyer pulled the leash, hurrying along his teacher’s small black French poodle, Monsieur.



Johann Weyer would grow up to author, in 1563, *De Praestigiis daemonum, et incantationibus ac veneficiis* (On the Tricks of Demons, Spell-casting, and Poisoners), a volume Sigmund Freud would one day call one of the ten most important books ever written. Weyer’s opus is a frontal assault on the very idea of witchcraft, appearing about a century after the horrors that had once engulfed Arras. *De Praestigiis*, along with other volumes in the genre, significantly popularized the witches’ ointment by serving as an exposé of it. If the use of Solanaceae family plants to drug oneself belonged to some kind of esoteric knowledge held by some village sorcerers in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries (and potentially earlier), this information would blossom into a wider spectrum of popular magic in the sixteenth and

seventeenth centuries. To be certain, witches were still executed between the late-fifteenth and mid-sixteenth centuries, but not yet on the massive scale that was largely relegated to those unfortunate years between 1550 and 1700.¹

As a teenager Weyer went to live and study in Antwerp under Henry Cornelius Agrippa, a man of “strange and wonderful fields of learning.”² They were the perfect odd couple: the impulsive intellectual and the solemn student. They shared little in common other than the bond of having both been born in the lower Rhine and their aggressive quest for knowledge.³ Agrippa had defended a witch in court and was, in turn, accused of witchcraft himself.⁴ He also damned someone posthumously: years after he died a young man was convicted of witchcraft for trying to obtain his “most important and influential”⁵ opus, *De occulta philosophia libri tres* (*Three Books of Occult Philosophy*).⁶ Agrippa’s black poodle, Monsieur, was rumored to be the devil, which was why the magus referred to the canine in such a polite manner. Agrippa (and his little dog too) had scoured the earth searching for knowledge of the magical arts—a wayward genius that never found peace in life. This dichotomy could be seen in the man himself: he was both “a good soldier and a good student” who hated conflict but invented a kind of gun that shot heated bullets. His friends included people from various social strata, rich and poor alike.⁷ By 1508 he had joined a secret society that studied the “hidden” nature from a Neoplatonist perspective, a philosophy that viewed the entire universe as an interconnected hierarchy, each stratum dominating its immediate inferior, with God commanding over it all.⁸

The fifteenth century proved as tumultuous as the fourteenth. But for the practitioner of magic the years hit harder on a spiritual level. The world was changing, and a splice between a magical world and a scientific one could be felt in the air and in print. Agrippa himself would contribute to this shift, exemplified in the publication of his two masterworks, the *Three Books of Occult Philosophy* and *Of the Uncertainties and Vanities of the Arts and Sciences*. As the title suggests, *Uncertainties* trashed everything he had written in his former masterwork, reflecting the “profound despair” of a man caught between two worlds.⁹

Many intellectuals traveled as widely as Agrippa had, for they knew that true learning came from all over the world, not just from one's homeland. The sixteenth century saw students wandering from country to country, university to university, looking for the opportunity to study with specific professors of myriad disciplines. The college experience in those days involved living a hand-to-mouth existence to survive; along the road students often "earned a few coins by pulling teeth, or selling medical remedies, telling fortunes, [and] singing at inns." The roving experience made them somewhat disorderly in character. Crafty, intelligent, desperate, not accustomed to authority, they were natural troublemakers who drank, fought, fornicated in public, and were even known to throw animal dung at professors they didn't like¹⁰—"wayward geniuses and intellectual vagabonds," as one renowned historian has called these unruly generations.¹¹ The Renaissance was hardly that glorious period we imagine today to the people who shaped our perception of it.¹² To those who lived through it the Renaissance was an era of great uncertainty, anxiety, and conflict, both physical and spiritual; the known world was shrinking as the cosmos was expanding beyond a human-centered Creation paradigm.



At a time when far too many doctors were named Johann, Philippus Aureolus Theophrastus Bombastus von Hohenheim was a welcome mouthful. Most of von Hohenheim's peers had a more succinct adjective for this weird and incorrigible little man: *insane*. History remembers him as Paracelsus.^{*63}

Rumored to be a hermaphrodite, Paracelsus once burned the standard physician's medical text, *The Canon of Medicine*, on the front steps of the University of Basel.^{†64 13} Leaving home at a young age to learn the medical arts, he quickly fell into the spirit of the times, referring to himself as a "resident nowhere" and remarking about "all kinds of behaviors and customs that another would eat his shoes to see."¹⁴ He traveled many of the same routes as Agrippa, and though there is no record of these intellectual vagabonds ever having met, the two interacted with some of the same people.¹⁵ They certainly shared the same philosophies about magic, which they believed was "rooted in Christian tradition."¹⁶

Paracelsus was surely familiar with Agrippa's *Three Books of Occult Philosophy*¹⁷ and employed a wide range of elixirs in his own medical practice. As one would expect, these included solanaceous drugs and opiates.¹⁸ His cure for "falling sickness" (epilepsy) included "sedatives" like opium, mandrake, and henbane.¹⁹ "I have personally prepared *somniferum* and *stupefactivum* with such excellent results. . . . We should all try to rely on and trust these somnifera, because we know of many diseases that cannot be cured without anodynes. God has given us a cure for them, through the nature of anodyne."²⁰ The mad alchemist-doctor also created a special drink, laudanum, a tincture of opium that would become a popular recreational drug and medication in the Victorian Era. This is not meant to suggest that Paracelsus embraced any sort of solanum-inspired magical visions the way Agrippa did; rather, it is to propose that we can credit him (and others like him) to the wider distribution of these psychoactive plants into areas where they might not have been known before. In fact, Paracelsus is known to have opened his university lectures to low status barber-surgeons and even folk healers! The mad doctor didn't don the distinguished garb of a specialist, but rather the "smock of the artisan, stained and smeared with the residues of the chemical laboratory."²¹ We can imagine this pugnacious little man, fresh out of his alchemy lab, yelling through his lectures after having accidentally inhaled some kind of experimental new chemical. Further microcosmic shifts in medical books of the time demonstrate this conceptual popularization of the witches' ointment—even as the nomadic souls who authored those texts traveled and distributed the magical elixirs and ointments to a wider audience.

DR. LAGUNA'S NIGHTSHADE OINTMENT

In 1547, a century after Spanish theologian Alonso Tostado established a link between medical drugs and "flying ointments" (and thus decisively answered whether these psyche-magical practices existed before the crystallization of the witch stereotype proper), Andrés Laguna (1499–1559) wrote of a well-known solanum "manic nightshade," "*manicum solanum*" [*sic*] whose roots when mixed with wine caused "frivolous, unpleasant delusions."²² The passage is interesting only in so far as the time between its 1547 publication date^{*65} and a later edition released in 1570. In the earlier version Laguna was merely composing errata of those mistakes he

found in Pietro Andrea Mattioli's 1540 publication of Dioscorides's work. Based on the success of his errata, Laguna wrote a second version of Dioscorides, this time with commentary. Two variations on solanaceous drugs in the latter text are of notable mention: Laguna adds a new "nightshade species that the Italians call '*Stramonium*,'" [sic] while describing the powerful hallucinogen datura ("*solanum manicum*"), which is absent from the original errata. Another curious edition addition: after quoting Dioscorides' warning that one drachm of the roots of any Solanaceae family plant mixed in wine was a "carrier of madness," he describes these mind delusions as "pleasant"—a departure from the earlier text. He further states that "although they are very pleasant . . . they should be viewed upon like dreams. I believe that [datura] is the active part of those ointments often associated with witches."²³ Laguna's reversal of the description (from unpleasant to pleasant mind delusions) is telling, as is his inclusion of datura in witches' ointments. An experiment with solanaceous ointments between the years of the two editions might have prompted the change in his description of the plant's effects.



One of the most reliable records detailing psyche-magical ointments survives in a medical commentary written by Laguna that details an event that occurred in 1545 that prompted him to concoct and test a sleeping ointment of his own. While living as the municipal physician in Metz, Laguna happened upon two hermits who lived just outside that city.^{*66} A jar found in their home contained an ointment that Laguna believed was composed of "the very coldest and soporific herbs," among them hemlock, henbane, and nightshade.^{†67 24} Laguna proceeded to mix his own ointment based on what he believed that of the hermits contained and tried it on a patient of his. He leaves us not a demonologist's machinated account of demonic night flight but rather a physician's description of a controlled experiment using an ointment that certainly contained Solanaceae family plants.

Laguna didn't use his mixture as a flying ointment (or any other folk-magical kind), but as a sleeping ointment for a patient of his suffering from insomnia caused by suspicions of a cheating husband. This was not his first

attempt to cure her: “An infinite number of other remedies had been tried in vain.” In the presence of several others, Laguna anointed the woman with his nightshade ointment and watched her eyes widen “like a rabbit’s.” She subsequently fell into soporatum for thirty-six hours, having to eventually be beaten awake. Her first words upon reviving were an angry, “Why in an evil hour did you awaken me? I was in the midst of all the pleasures and delights of the world.” She then informed her husband that during her absence she had cheated on him with a younger and handsomer man.²⁵



Another mid-sixteenth-century exposition on the hallucinatory potential of Solanaceae plants comes from Girolamo Cardano (1501–1576), an Italian Renaissance mathematician, physician, astrologer, philosopher, and gambler. In *De subtilitate rerum* (The subtleties of things, 1550) Cardano describes the uncertain nature of the hallucinogenic ointment experience in Book 18 of this work (titled “De mirabilibus,” “On marvels”). It is here that the words *witches* and *ointment* appear side by side for the first time. It is also here that the vacillating effects these drugs can have on the psyche are first outlined.

Cardano first gives a recipe for the witches’ ointment: “fat of young children (so they say), the juices of parsley, aconite, cinque-foil, nightshade, and soot.” He then outlines a variety of visions, such as “theaters, pleasure-gardens, banquets, beautiful ornaments and clothing, handsome young men, kings, [and] magistrates, demons, ravens, prisons, desert wastes, and torments.”²⁶ The term *witches’ ointment* was also used eight years later by Giambattista della Porta in *Natural Magick* (1558), wherein he outlines two ointment recipes. The first reminds one of Cardano’s aforementioned concoction, except it contains “wild celery” (probably hemlock) instead of nightshade. This latter psychoactive appears in della Porta’s second ointment recipe, as does “water parsnip, common acorum, cinque-foil, [and] bat’s blood.”²⁷ He also relates a story about a woman who used an ointment, fell into a deep sleep, and believed her experience to be real. The account, however, seems contrived, striking this writer as a form of *exemplum* from a natural philosopher’s standpoint, a way to disprove the

notion of witches' flight by showing that the phenomenon was caused by drugs, not the devil.

Weyer, of course, took his cue from Cardano and della Porta, reprinting these writers' accounts and recipes of the witches' ointment in his *De Praestigiis*. He also contributes a third recipe that neither della Porta nor Cardano referenced: it includes henbane, hemlock, darnel, deadly nightshade, and opium. Interestingly, he hints that there are even stronger drugs than the ones he cites, admitting that those "experienced with the natural sciences" know of countless other concoctions of this kind, some of which are so powerful that he excludes them from his treatise for pragmatic reasons—"lest I seem to have furnished someone the opportunity to abuse them."²⁸

And yet Weyer didn't feel the need to censor himself when discussing other decidedly nonpoisonous magical ingredients such as clothing shards of the deceased, wax from candles, and other funerary accoutrements. He writes that these objects "have more frivolity than truth about them, whereas [he has] preferred to bury in silence the *natural* and all-too-effective poisons."²⁹ His take on the "witches' ointment" is unique though, and two differences in his reproduction of Cardano's theories are rather telling: first, Weyer quotes Cardano's *De subtilitate* verbatim until its author mentions the physiological effects of the ointment: "illness, death."³⁰ Here Weyer inserts a subtle difference, diverging from describing the bodily effects in favor of a psychological description, maintaining that the mental makeup of the person using them affects the experience.³¹ And second, Weyer's take on these ointments bordered on both medical and theological theories: the drugs served to weaken the minds of those who took them, which made it easier for Satan to enter into one's conscienceness.³² These people needed help, he argued, not torture and death sentences.³³



The backlash was immediate; Weyer had inadvertently given the game away. By admitting that these ointments, at the very least, could delude the mind enough for the devil to enter the psyche was too careless an admission, which his detractors seized upon. The viewpoint had originated a century earlier with the *Malleus maleficarum*, and though the author (or

authors, depending on your point of view) ignored the use of drugs, similar arguments were made about Satan's ability to enter weak minds. Weyer's adoption of that theory gave credence to a demonological belvedere.³⁴ Additionally, this new cadre of demonologists living at the end of the sixteenth century had all the literature from the fifteenth to review for their rebuttals.

The earliest counteroffensive comes from Grand Judge of St. Claude Henry Boguet (1550–1619), as outlined in his *Discours exécration des sorciers* (An Examination of Witches, 1602), in which he rather masterfully uses Weyer's argument against him, meshing it with that posited in the *Malleus maleficarum*: the ointments “deaden and stupefy the witches' senses so that Satan may more easily have his way with them.” Because of Weyer, Laguna, and Cardano's exposés, though, Boguet couldn't just ignore the drugs' role in the witches' ointment: “[A]t other times, the Evil Spirit mixes with it some ingredients which causes deep sleep, such as mandragora.”³⁵ Suppressing the names of the drugs had become moot by the turn of the sixteenth century, so demonologists simply argued around them.

French magistrate and witch-hunter Nicolas Remy (1530–1616) broke convention in his *Daemonolatriae libri tres* (Demonolatry, 1595) by eschewing the common practice of using “poetic fiction” as a point of argumentation: “I shall be content to adduce such instances as are provided by everyday use and experience. . . . Surgeons know the use of such narcotics when they wish to amputate a limb from a man's body without his feeling the pain of it.” Among those drugs named, Remy includes hemlock, nightshade, mandrake, and opium.³⁶ Despite Remy's knowledge of these drugs' effects, he, like Bergamo a century earlier, still attributed the power of the ointments and potions made from them to be secondary to the influences of demons. The witch must first serve demons for a lengthy period of time, after which they will teach her how to turn into a cat, a mouse, a locust, “or some other small animal,” so that the witch may penetrate households to spread her maleficia.³⁷

Later, Italian priest Francesco Maria Guazzo (1570–16??) borrowed heavily from Remy, asserting in his witch-hunters' manual *Compendium maleficarum* (Book of Witches, 1608) that the ointment is composed of “natural soporific drugs . . . known and used by chemists,” such as

nightshade, mandrake, and opium.³⁸ The chief ingredient, of course, comes from our heretics' potion: child's flesh. By now, the heretics' potion had fused with the sorceress's flying ointment to become that newest addition to demonological theory, the *lamiarum unguentum*, the witches' ointment. Guazzo gives the example of a barber named Bertrand, whose wife knocked him out with such an ointment, after which she anointed herself with the same "when she wished to go to the Sabbat."³⁹ These same drugs could be used to "bewitch" a person by swallowing, anointing, or inhaling them. Again, the theology that holds the demon's power over that of the poison is striking.⁴⁰ By this time, the Sabbat itself, however, had undergone a series of noticeable changes.

DANCING BACKWARD

Elizabeth eagerly rubbed the ointment over her flesh, laughing all the while. Society had spurned her, called her most cherished beliefs "errors." The festival culture, where townsfolk gathered to vent their frustrations in the form of carnivalesque debaucheries, was necessary to keep the lower classes placated. But Elizabeth had been banned from participating. Her only solace could be found in the furthest reaches of her mind wherein she controlled some aspect of her life—controlled those who abused her. There, she retained the powers and divine mysteries of nature and conversed with the spirits; there, she was something more than her chauvinistic neighbors thought of her—not just a lost soul gone off to meet the devil, as they saw her. She was not a member of the Benandanti cult, or any other protector of folk fertility who entered natura-ontological trance states on appointed nights, which arise from cultural programming.

Or maybe she knew nothing of traditional magic or folk spells and merely needed an escape. The relentless whispers of gossip had reached her ears. This was a way to alleviate the mind and body for a while, a way to reconcile the fact that while some of the clergy lived in splendor despite preaching the sanctity of poverty, she had to wait until death to receive her just rewards—that is, of course, if she managed to live her unimaginably difficult life without caving in to emotions. Otherwise, she could only expect the pits of hell to open before her at the hour of her death. Christian justice.

Elizabeth waited until an hour or two before midnight, the time “chiefly notorious for specters and hideous ghosts,” to apply her salve. The natural forces within the drugs, delivered by the ointment as it seeped into her skin and flushed through her blood, slowly crept into her awareness, which was inexorably overtaken by the revelries found in the furthest depths of her subconscious mind. And lo, before she knew it she was flying through the air, sailing across the sky in an ecstatic bliss! Eventually touching down in an expansive field far removed from the normalcy of her social order, she and the others bowed before the devil seated on a throne—a testament that he is their king. Elizabeth stepped in line behind the others. One by one, those in front of her approached Satan and took turns kissing his backside, while offering him black candles and umbilical cords. He accepted their gifts and pulled them deeper into his control, impacting their depraved souls to a lifetime of supernatural powers in exchange for an eternity of torment come the Final Judgment. Elizabeth cared not, and sat at a large table beside her “own Familiar Spirit.” Demons served entrées of baby corpses. Wine, “black like stale blood,” touched the rims of Elizabeth’s goblet. A hellion led the diners in grace, though this prayer was “composed of blasphemous words in which [Satan] himself is acclaimed the Creator and Giver and Preserver of all.” Elizabeth sipped her wine, but quickly pulled the chalice away from her lips. *There was no taste at all.* Puzzled but by no means deterred from the festivities, she picked up a fork and knife—finer versions than the jerryrigged utensils she was used to in her ordinary life—and carved a slab of meat from the cadaver. This particular child was a village brat, whom she was all too happy to see dead and consumed by the congregation. And yet, she never felt satisfied. Like the wine, the infant meat could not satiate her cravings. She would always need more, and gnawed away at the flesh uncontrollably.

Under a harvest moon set before a deep orange sky, a sectarian carrying a “bawdy bagpipe” lifted himself into the trees above, so high he disappeared among the gray, portentously low-hanging clouds. He nestled himself amid the branches and put his lips to the chanter, exhaling the first profane notes of the hymn to the Morning Star. Then “each demon [took] by the hand the disciple under his guardianship.” Elizabeth and the others gathered in a circle and began to dance, not forward as good Christians would, but backward “like frantic folk,” singing a blasphemous refrain that celebrated their inversion of the natural order. Elizabeth stopped dancing

and raised her bottom to her demon lover, who hungrily mounted her. The coldness of the demon's penis sent shivers through her spine, condemning her eternal soul deeper into depravity with every blasphemous thrust.

They stopped only as the first rays of sunlight started to crawl over the treetops. The music ceased and the bagpipe player climbed down from the branches above; the dancing came to an abrupt halt; the demons that once swarmed the meadow began to dissipate into the last shadows of the night. Elizabeth and the others straddled their brooms and were whisked back to their homes, where they would be bedridden for a few days after the Sabbat.^{*68}



The above is a depiction of the Sabbat as it typically appears in literature between the mid-sixteenth century and the late seventeenth century. It was this imagined script that allowed untold numbers of women and men to be tried and burned for the crime of witchcraft. Giambattista della Porta discovered this when he was brought before the Inquisition twice: once in 1574, and again in 1580, over his *Natural Magick*. Although della Porta had completed his work in 1558, a debate between Johann Weyer and the French jurist and demonologist Jean Bodin (1530–1596) found della Porta in the middle of this spat three decades later. By arguing that the persecution of witches was an abomination, Weyer had cited della Porta's ointment account in *De Praestigiis* as a natural explanation of witches' hallucinations. In this debate Bodin condemned Weyer for sorcery in the former's *De la démonomanie des sorciers* (Of the Demon-mania of the Sorcerers, 1580) and brought della Porta into the clash. Della Porta wisely removed the ointment story and the recipe from later editions of his book.⁴¹

But this didn't stop della Porta from chronicling other wondrous uses for these drugs. In *Natural Magick*, he describes the solanaceous (and other) plants' fantastic effects in subchapters like "How to Make a Man Out of His Senses For a Day," which describe the properties of opium, henbane, mandrake, deadly nightshade (called *Hypnoticon*), and datura. Datura, he says, "will make one mad, and present strange visions, both pleasant and horrible." Deadly nightshade has similarly marvelous effects, to which della Porta adds a caveat regarding dosage: "[I]t is a most pleasant spectacle to

behold such mad whimsies and visions. . . . Nevertheless, we give this precaution, that all those roots or seeds which cause the takers of them to see delightful visions, if their dose be increased, will continue this alienation of mind for three days. But if quadrupled, it brings death.”⁴² He even comments on how a friend who, using solanaceous drugs—specifically datura, henbane, and belladonna—“as often as he pleased, knew how to make a man think he was changed into a bird or a beast.” Should the desire to become a fish or a goose entertain his fancy, he would drink his own potions and enjoy the pleasant madness by “beat[ing] the ground with his teeth” and flapping his wings.⁴³ Attempting to understand such a concept—he was, after all, laboring “earnestly to discover the secrets of Nature”⁴⁴—della Porta procured some of these plants, and in *Natural Magick* he rather bluntly admits to having experimented on his roommates while in school. One lad ate belladonna on his steak and experienced visions of bulls chasing after him (though he did not become one himself). Another sprawled out on the floor “endeavoring as it were to swim for life.” Whether he thought himself transformed into a fish or not, della Porta does not say. As the drug faded he wrung out his hair and clothes, believing he had just returned from the ocean. The experiment was a success. “These and many other pleasant things, the curious enquirer may find out. It is enough for me only to have hinted at the manner of doing them,” the physician concluded.⁴⁵ Mention of the drugs’ wondrous properties didn’t matter to demonologists—they knew that any person with a little medical training was aware of the profound effects such plants had on the mind. However, to some like Jean Bodin, mentioning the drugs’ role in the *lamiarum unguentum* was a different issue because it left no room for the devil’s trickery.

GIRLS GONE WILD

Margaretha didn’t grow udders, horns, or a tail; her face, too, remained that of a girl, not that of a calf. And this certainly wasn’t the Heuburg! The four teenage girls hadn’t left the strawberry patch in Haberösch at all, the surroundings of which digressed into distressing distortions as the landscape began to “swirl around.” Magdalena’s magic had failed and now Margaretha ran about the field “completely wild, as if out of her senses.” The “peculiar piece of bread” that Magdalena had given Margaretha to eat

only served to terrify the bewildered girl. University students, it would seem, weren't the only ones privy to della Porta's "manner of doing" animal transformations.

In Vöhringen, Germany, in 1663, two women found Margaretha in this state of despair and brought her back to their village, Rosenfeld. While there, authorities discovered that Magdalena had boasted that eating her bread would turn her into a calf, and "insisted that . . . [Margaretha] should travel with her to the Heuberg"—charges that Magdalena did not deny. She stayed around to help Margaretha recover and then fled to an adjacent village where she had grown up. Eventually caught and detained, she was again asked about the incident.⁴⁶ It is the second line of questioning that is of interest to us. When prodded, her testimony strangely conformed to what was believed about Sabbats: "[Magdalena] tearfully acknowledged [that] . . . five years earlier she had been led astray by Leonberger Hansen's deceased wife . . . traveled with her to witch dances . . . [at] the Heuberg," and gave herself to the Devil, who pressured Magdalena to harm Margaretha. The case becomes diabolically derivative with one deviation: it was not Satan who taught Magdalena the use of whatever hallucinogenic drug was in the bread, but Hansen's wife. Authorities filed the case as a "magical poisoning"; Magdalena was executed for *veneficium*.⁴⁷



Medieval theologians explained transformations of this type as mind-forged and generally viewed tales from yore (notably the transformation of Odysseus' company into swine by the dreaded witch Circe) as having "involved delusions of the senses."⁶⁹ When discussing those Italian innkeepers who transformed travelers into pack animals, St. Augustine attributed such magic to a "poison in [a] piece of cheese" that these sorceresses fed to unfortunate passersby. One rover ate this cheese, fell into a deep sleep, and could "by no means be roused" for a few days. Upon awakening, the victim claimed to have become a sumpter horse who spent the past few days carrying soldiers' provisions as far away as Rhoetia (modern-day Switzerland).⁴⁸

As shown earlier, mandrake was called *Circeium* by some, indicating its role in transformation ointments and potions (it could have been the

active additive in the potion of Finicella, the cat woman of Rome). And there is every indication that ominous notions of poisonous potions survived into the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. As was sometimes the case, the artists of these times told the stories that the religious elite would not. Depictions of Circe from humanist Hartmann Schedel (1440–1514), one of the first adepts in the use of the printing press (he reproduced the works of many of the artists of his time) and the German draftsman and printmaker Virgil Solis (1514–1562), among others, show that this magical potion was still considered the true source of her powers.⁴⁹

But just as the author(s) of the *Malleus Maleficarum* omitted the poisonous ingredients in the account of magical flying ointments, so too would they ignore the role of these substances in transformation magic. They tell the story of a wanton young man who turned a girl into a horse after she refused his advances. Although no magical ointment (or drink) is mentioned, the spurned lover sought out a Jew “to work a charm against [the girl].” Yet the girl never really changed physically; her equine body “was not an actual fact but an illusion of the devil, who changed the fancy and senses of the girl herself.”⁵⁰ Kramer and Sprenger further declared that incidents of personal shape-shifting (like Matteuccia’s and Finicella’s) were more common “in our part of the world” (i.e., Western Europe), and those in which transformation of others was used as an act of revenge occurred more often in the East. Even humanists like mathematician Hermann Witekind (aka Hermann Wilken, 1522–1603) followed this lead, writing about animal transmutation as nothing more than the byproduct of diabolical illusion in *Christlich bedencken und erinnerung von Zauberey* (Christian Memory about Witchcraft, 1585), his book against the persecution of witches. Thus, when he pondered whether witches “could transform into cats, dogs, wolves, and donkeys,” he offered myriad illustrations but refuted them as merely symptoms of “melancholie” and demonic trickery.⁵¹ Witekind was familiar with Weyer and even came to his defense when the latter was denounced by theologian, physician, and plague survivor Thomas Erastus (1524–1583).⁵² Weyer does mention the use of opiates and solanaceous roots in conjunction with lycanthropy (werewolfism), though not as a way to transform into a wolf but rather as a way to sedate someone who suffers from that condition.⁵³

Others held a different opinion, claiming that werewolfism was just another fantasy caused by taking a hallucinogenic ointment. Commenting on Witekind's werewolf work, German writer and journalist Joseph Görres (1776–1848), being the enlightenment man he was, couldn't accept satanic trickery as a reality. He not only attributed animal transformations to drug use, he even told of an incarcerated woman he knew, accused of witchcraft, who had "wolf-like desires." She asked her jailors to rub her with her magical ointment (*gesablt*). She fell into a three-hour sleep, and upon waking claimed to have turned into a wolf, traveled to another town, and killed a sheep and a cow.⁵⁴ Perhaps Görres had read the works of earlier theorists like seventeenth-century French physician and werewolf theorist Jean de Nynauld, who wrote of these drugs during the ointment exposé of the sixteenth century. A chapter in Nynauld's 1615 treatise on werewolfism, *De la lycanthropie, transformation et extase des sorciers* (On Werewolfism, the Transformation and Ecstasy of Witches), titled "On the third kind of sorcerer's ointment," names toad venom as the active ingredient in werewolf ointments.⁵⁵

Of the other kinds of "ointments of sorcerers," Nynauld counts a most astounding new addition to the ingredients, a substance certainly popular today but nearly absent from the medieval and early modern pharmacopeia: magic mushrooms, or rather "sleepy" and "maddening" mushrooms.⁵⁶ These fungi, along with henbane, opium, deadly nightshade, and other drugs, were "used by the devil to disturb the enslaved mind . . . [cause] various figures and representations on the senses . . . [and] show the shadows of the underworld."⁵⁷



"Look," said Pierre Gassendi, "you *must* show me the drugs you use to travel to your infernal assemblies, for I wish to accompany you."

The shepherd smiled. "I can bring you there tonight when the clock strikes midnight."⁵⁸

It was a time of new understandings about the universe. Signs of this change could be seen peppered into the chaos of early modern period life, from Galileo's eye to the starry skies above; from the quill tips of Erasmus of Rotterdam to the revolution in orthodox thought in the form of

Protestantism. Pierre Gassendi (1592–1655), scientist and free-thinking intellectual, an admirer of Galileo, truly adopted this new spirit of science, looking out not toward the heavens, but below into the atoms. Like others of this new scientific worldview, Gassendi eschewed the common trend of lengthy philosophical conjecture for a more hands-on approach to experimentation.⁵⁹ He had been a priest, a professor, and an astronomer, but he is most remembered for his reintroduction of Epicurus’s molecular theories to science.

There is something of a contemporary academic rumor that took root around the time Pierre Gassendi came into contact with magicians and their magical ointments.⁶⁰ A source is never cited by these scholars, least of which one that originates from Gassendi himself. There is only a letter from French philosopher and writer Jean-Baptiste de Boyer, the Marquis d’Argens (1704–1771), in his *The Jewish Letters* (mid-1730s) wherein he claims Gassendi was an “eye-witness to the errors of false magicians.”⁶¹ D’Argens claimed his letters were authentic reprints that he translated into French from the original Hebrew. Though such a claim is difficult to accept, the narrative has value as an indication of how popular the concept of the witches’ ointment was as the seventeenth century gave way to the eighteenth. *The Jewish Letters* was a bestseller; half a century after its initial publication it had sold two hundred thousand copies in France alone—an unprecedented number for any book in those days.

So goeth the story:

Gassendi had traveled to a small village to read and relax (he apparently had some kind of summer home there). But the scientific mind finds intrigue in every terrain (as the intellectual bent of wayward geniuses can attest) and someone of Gassendi’s curiosity couldn’t escape his own predilections even while on vacation. Seeing a crowd of people gathered, the famed philosopher-scientist invited himself into the mob, which had gathered around a man in chains, a shepherd by profession. He inquired as to what crime the man had committed.

“Good sir,” replied a peasant in the crowd, “he is a sorcerer. We have arrested him, and are bringing him to justice.”⁶²

Gassendi was even more intrigued now, the concept of magic stirring both his scientific and his theological propensities. He ordered the crowd to

release the prisoner to him. The authorities obliged and delivered the man to Gassendi's custody. Once they were alone at Gassendi's lodgings he inquired if the magician had made a pact with the devil, and if so, how he had managed that diabolical deal. He further promised that if the man told him everything he wanted to know, he would see to it that he was set free; if not he would be delivered back to the provost for sentencing.

Asked how he flew to the Sabbat the man replied, "Sir, I have been a sorcerer for three years. I go to the Sabbat daily. One of my friends gave me the balm to swallow."⁶³

Midnight slowly crept up on the unlikely pair. The shepherd pulled from his pocket a container of opium and pinched a "walnut-sized nug" off the gummy ball for himself, gave the same amount to Gassendi, and told him to swallow it and lie down in the fireplace.⁶⁴ A demon would appear in the shape of a large cat to take Gassendi to the Sabbat. The magician waited for a demonic horse.

Knowing that he could never observe whatever was about to occur while under the influence of a soporific, Gassendi pretended he wanted to disguise the bitter taste of the opium. He went into the pantry in the next room and grabbed jam, bread, and made a sandwich, all the while secretly disposing of the drug (in what fashion is not explained in the text). He then joined the shepherd at the fireplace. Soon after eating the opium the shepherd appeared "dizzy, like a drunken man." Then he fell asleep, though reveling in all the delights of the Sabbat: "[H]e continued to speak," remembers Gassendi, "and rattled off a thousand extravagances while holding conversations with a swarm of demons. He also spoke to his comrades, the other magicians." Many hours later, the shepherd regained full consciousness.

"You must be happy with how the goat received you!" the magician enthusiastically blurted out. "It is a great honor to kiss his underside, and be admitted [to his sect] on your first time!"⁶⁵

Gassendi was, of course, less ebullient, though sufficiently moved "by the state this poor man was in" to disabuse him of his error. To demonstrate the emptiness of this experience to the magician, he gave another morsel of the opium to a dog, which simply fell asleep.

FROM WITCHCRAFT TO SCIENCE

Tempted by the excitement and mystery of the witches' ointment, German folklorist Will-Erich Peukert (1895–1969) stirred an effective dose of henbane, mandrake, and datura into a test tube. If sixteenth-century literates would write about, but certainly not partake in, the experience of the witches' ointment, twentieth-century folklorists and toxicologists enthusiastically sought to unlock this experience in their laboratories—and in their minds.

Peukert was a somewhat perfect specimen to take on the witches' ointment. Growing up in Töppendorf, a rural village in Lower Silesia, he had heard many tales of witches and devils throughout his life; the occult had been a “natural part of his childhood.” He and a friend had experimented with these drugs in their youth. The two would lie in a trance for hours, dreaming of “flying . . . festivals . . . [and] all kinds of erotic adventures.” Therefore, when he dosed himself with the ointment years later he harbored the proper mental set necessary to experience all the promises of his expectations. Falling into soporatum for a full day the professor “dreamed of wild rides, frenzied dancing, and other weird adventures . . . connected with medieval orgies.”⁶⁶ While speaking at a conference in 1959 Peukert admitted to trying the witches' ointment himself. A scandal followed him for about a year afterward. His colleagues and the media reacted in revulsion at the mad witch professor who “[flew] through the air under the influence of drugs.”⁶⁷ Others wanted to know more. In his later years, Peukert allowed a film crew into his basement and prepared della Porta's recipe on camera for the first time in history.

But he wasn't the first modern researcher to try the *lamiarum unguentum*. An earlier experimenter, German occult scholar Karl Kiesewetter (1854–1895), mixed together an ointment based on della Porta's recipe that made him “dream [that] he was flying in spirals.”⁶⁸ Other trials weren't as promising. One conducted by German psychiatrist Otto Snell (1859–1939) ended with nothing more than a headache. A recent case resulted in death: On the summer solstice, 1966, Robert Cochrane ingested a terminal dose of whiskey, deadly nightshade, and sleeping pills. Some believed that Cochrane's death was accidental, an unplanned overdose that occurred during a ritual. Others think that the death was of a sacrificial nature, and that Cochrane was offering himself up to the gods.

There were still others who agreed with the suicide theory but attributed it not to any grandiose and ritualized exit strategy, but to a failed marriage and bungled love affair.⁶⁹

We can imagine the experiences of these people—Peukert, Snell, Kiesewetter, and Cochrane—as modern analogies for how witch accusations might have originated when a psychoactive drug played a role in village magic. A successful experience like Peukert’s would not have roused the suspicion of authorities, should they have even been aware that a drug had been taken by a local resident.^{*70} There is no reason this act would produce an accompanying trial record. His neighbors might have thought him a little kooky, but no one would have condemned his ontological experience as demonic. Peukert’s mind was prepped, the setting was right, and he didn’t take too much so as to overdose. But Snell’s bout with a magical ointment demonstrates that even with safeguards in place (proper mindset, environment, and dosage) there was no guarantee that an otherworldly realm would present itself. Snell’s experience was more or less neutral: no one likes a headache, but given the strength of these poisons it could have been much worse, which brings us to the latest example, that of Robert Cochrane. It seems likely that, should Cochrane’s untimely accident have occurred around the early modern period, his death might have resulted in a witchcraft accusation—especially considering that his passing was tied to a botched love triangle and a magical drug found in love potions.

9

MORNING ON BARE MOUNTAIN

Information underrepresents reality.

JARON LANIER, *YOU ARE NOT A GADGET*

By studying the intoxicants in societies radically different from our own, [we] can counteract the tendency to perceive our own practices and values as universal models of human behavior.

RICHARD RUDGLEY, *THE ALCHEMY OF CULTURE*

In 1428, the first recorded case of a person executed for the crime of applying an ointment to the skin as an act of psyche-magical witchcraft—and perhaps the first case where a witch is mentioned flying in the air to meet Satan—ended when Matteuccia di Francesco was burned at the stake. Throughout this book I have shown how the “diabolical congregation” that Matteuccia purportedly participated in presents a composite of various notions, which were attached to her confession by secular authorities using inquisitorial procedures—i.e., torture. The individual threads that come together to comprise the prevailing stereotype of the satanic witch were cobbled together from a variety of sources: folk beliefs about nocturnal flight, fertility goddesses, and strix; theological ideas about demon invocation and heresy; and the object of our inquiry, psyche-magical drugs—Matteuccia’s supposed mode of transport to a proto-Sabbat under a walnut tree in Benevento. The question hounding modern scholars (well, some of them) is whether this magical drug in the form of an ointment, and the experience it engendered, arose from the minds of demonological theorists or had an actual basis in an obscure form of folk belief and practice. The answer in general terms is that these “flying ointments” were

part of the pharmacy of local village sorcerers/sorceresses, while the “witches’ ointment” was a purely learned literary concept.

Given the time during which Matteuccia di Francesco’s trial took place there is every reason to believe that she used her magical drug ointment on herself for some kind of esoteric psyche-magical purpose,^{*71} which, after her torture, looked closer to what an overzealous inquisitor might imagine to be a mind “corrupted by Satan.” Sadly, the secrets of Matteuccia’s arts are lost to us due to the debasement of recorded knowledge about the folk use of magical drugs. We can’t get behind the dossiers. We can, however, place Matteuccia’s trial within the context of the development of the concept of the witches’ ointment. This progression presents itself in approximately three phases dating from the early to mid-fifteenth century.

The first phase in the progression occurs approximately between 1400 to the 1420s, during which time trial records and other accounts (sermons, stories, etc.) mention love philters and drug ointments that can cause detachment from reality, imagined flight, madness, sexual excitement, or even death, depending on the dose and the ripeness of the ingredients.^{*72} The ointment was rubbed directly on the skin and/or ingested in some way that caused a psychic reaction, for good or ill, though no one associated this practice with diabolical trimmings. It is also evident at this time that the ointments contained plant-based psychoactive medical drugs as noted by Alonso Tostado and Abraham of Worms (and certainly implied by Johannes Nider and Bernardino of Siena). Matteuccia di Francesco’s magical ointment would become the first recorded instance of these folk drugs being associated with Satanism, a confession that came as a result of torture administered by the State.

In the second phase, occurring approximately between the 1430s and 1450, demonologists, judges, and other learned persons further reinterpreted these psyche-magical ointments. In this iteration of the story, the ointments weren’t ingested, but rather rubbed on sticks, fenceposts, and brooms that were then used as flying vehicles.^{†73} Witches rode to the devil, who instructed them in the mixing of other unguents to be used for folkloric purposes (transvection, transmutation), maleficent deeds (to cause storms), and venefic spell-casting (to cause sickness, insanity, love, and death)—essentially the trade of a typical village sorceress like Matteuccia. The tail end of this phase saw ecclesiastics like Jean Vincent recognizing the natural

psychoactive properties of these ointments and rather than focusing there, disregarding this in lieu of some sort of demonic influence. After that the witch trials quieted down, relatively speaking, until the mid-sixteenth century when, during the height of the executions, clerics' notions of the witches' ointment and their zealous persecution of persons deemed to be witches would ignite opposition by a rising class of humanists.

This leads to the third and final phase in the development of the concept of the witches' ointment, which coincides with the writings of mid-sixteenth-century physicians, who condemned the accusations of witchcraft against deluded or otherwise mentally ill persons. Nowhere are such descriptions of the "visionary" effects of hallucinogenic drugs so clearly outlined than in the texts of these mid-sixteenth-century men, who in this heated atmosphere were themselves not safe from accusations of witchcraft. On an unprecedented scale the doctors of this era took the flying ointments out of the torture rooms and into current conceptions of magic; they popularized the idea of numinous drugs by introducing magical drug recipes to a wider audience. This once-obscure sorceress's folk rite was now being practiced by a host of curious adventurers.

Of greatest interest during this time is the fact that in many instances persons found to have been under the influence of these psychoactive plants utterly believed in the reality of their experiences, even when others—specifically, the witch-hunters—did not. A case from Lauffen in 1631 featured a man, Hans Jacob, who apparently took such a hefty dose of a "hallucinogenic salve" that he imagined himself flying through the air "on a rod." Later, to keep warm, he broke into a jailhouse and then imagined he was dancing with twenty-five companions. He woke up alone the next morning in a cell. It was only then that the jailers found him. Hans later spoke of these ointments without being pressured by the authorities; torture was not used to extract this information. And instead of superimposing fantastical diabolical theories onto Hans' experience, the local magistrates tried to get him to admit that he was lying.¹ Hans seems to have been nothing more than a lost and wandering soul, a low magician, a murderer, and a thief.

THE ARGUMENT FROM SILENCE

Those modern-day academics skeptical of the reality of magical drugs demonized as witches' ointments by learned theorists of the early modern period have mostly argued from a position of silence. The "silence" comes from the observation that these ointments, should they have existed outside the pages of demonological and medical texts and sermons, are absent from the trial records before theologians crafted the witch stereotype in the 1430s. They contend (rightly) that the ointments are absent from the "superior records" (i.e., those dossiers dated to before the 1430s); therefore, the witches' ointment is merely a literary device, no more real than the Sabbat itself.

There are two problems with this viewpoint: first, modern scholarship has shown that the literate class even as late as the High Middle Ages was generally ambivalent toward recording the private visionary experiences of common folk. This changed in the early fifteenth century, when such trances became a "crucial constituent" of witch theory.² Indeed, for some they were absolutely necessary to prove that a person could lie immobile, all the while attending a Sabbat; for others the ointments were equally necessary to prove that witches didn't fly at all. Both sides took for granted that such ointments existed. In this we encounter a problem not uncommon in history: no one wrote about magical ointments or the experiences they might have affected in a local magician or layperson because no one who could write cared about commoners enough to record their private matters. During this time this kind of magic had nothing to do with evil or the devil and thus was not worth recording. Early trial records for cases involving magic mostly revolved around political prosecutions involving elite men and not the ecstatic experiences of wise women.³ In fact, the few records we have dating back to the Middle Ages portray clergymen actually protecting women who had been accused of witchcraft from angry mobs.⁴

The skeptics' claim is anachronistic: whatever these sorceresses were dreaming or imagining as a result of the effects of the magical ointments they were dosing themselves with wouldn't arouse the interest of the literate classes any more than would the rantings of a drunken person. The ointments existed but, like the later idea of broom-riding, hadn't yet been swept up into a witch stereotype. A modern analogy would be comparing these deluding ointments with the plethora of opiate-based sleep aids used today. Millions of people all over the world rely on these medications; and

yet, because there is no law against using them we are not going to hear about any court cases that include them—unless someone used them for criminal purposes, for example, to drug someone in order to rape them. And at that point it would become a sexual assault case, not a drug case. If, however, we were to enact a law that criminalized the dreams a person experienced under the influence of such an opiate-based sleep aid, we would then have an accurate analogy for what occurred when the church began to demonize the village sorceress's drug experiences. While drugs used for criminal magical purposes spanned antiquity all the way up to the early modern period (and afterward), drug laws against self-dosing were nonexistent until the mid-1400s. And even here, what mattered was not the medications themselves but what a person *believed* about the experiences garnered while under the influence of these hallucinogenic and soporific drugs. Once these visionary experiences became a part of the theological debate over the “new sect” of witches, they were lumped together with various other elements of paganism including the arch-pagan goddess Diana. Fortunately, several writers during this time did leave us a glimpse at what these kinds of psyche-magical experiences might have been like for those who dabbled in these hallucinogenic substances.

During the Middle Ages and even into the fifteenth century there existed a legal safeguard against “malicious or frivolous accusations,” known as the talion. The talion is that age-old, seemingly universal human law that most everyone, even schoolchildren, commonly know as “an eye for an eye.” With regard to witchcraft accusations, however, the talion also meant that an accuser would suffer the very punishment the defendant would have endured, had the accuser won the case. By what rationale would a plaintiff go through the hassle of taking someone to court over something that wasn't illegal and caused no personal injury, only to potentially lose the case and be burned or hanged?⁵ There would be no reason for magical ointments and stories of flying, transforming, or similar kinds of magical experiences to appear in the trial records—and they didn't until these experiences were deemed illegal (at least in a theological sense) during 1430s.

In short, we find that there were no laws against self-dosing with hallucinogens dating from the time before the formulation of the witch stereotype. The existent laws only forbade dosing another person and

causing her or him harm. And yet, modern skeptics use the lack of self-dosing prosecutions during this early period (the “silence”) as a way to argue against the reality of these magical ointments. Right around the time the ointments begin to appear in the records with any detail, the new witch stereotype was just emerging, coloring peoples’ perception of them. Recall that it was during this time that some theologians desperately sought to explain how people could congregate by the thousands, undetected, to meet the devil, all the while remaining asleep in their beds.

The history of the witches’ ointment isn’t as hidden as some skeptics suggest. The most telling account demonstrating the existence of these magical ointments prior to the emergence of the witch stereotype is also the most controversial. It appears as a tale told by Abraham of Worms, about a witch he met in Linz with whom he shared a magical experience using what he calls a “sleeping ointment.” The skeptics’ contention surrounds the dating of Abraham’s famous magic manual *The Book of Abramelin*, from which this story derives. The earliest existent manuscript of this work is dated 1608 (despite its author having lived almost two centuries earlier). The late date of this manuscript has led some scholars to conclude that the story originated in the seventeenth century.⁶ The most recent translation of Abraham’s original work, *The Book of Abramelin: A New Translation*—the first modern translation of this magical work since Samuel Liddell MacGregor Mathers’ original translation more than 100 years ago, by German esoteric scholar Georg Dehn—places the end of Abraham’s life around the 1450s. Dehn believes Abraham was a pseudonym and that the actual author of the original work was rabbi and Talmudist Jacob ben Moses ha Levi Möllin (1365–1427), which would place his death to just prior to the formulation of the witch stereotype.⁷ Because the account is so damaging to the skeptic’s argument it has been either dismissed or ignored or explained as a later forgery.

I would therefore like to add further support to Dehn’s earlier dating of *Abramelin*. Abraham’s journey lasted seventeen years, meaning he returned to Mainz by at least 1414, and by 1417 he was advising Pope Martin V. Abraham’s story about his encounter with the witch of Linz, described in chapter 6, is striking for its candidness, perhaps even a little naïve in this regard, as it would have been dangerous—nay, downright foolish—if, at the height of the witch trials (the time that modern skeptics say the story

originated), Abraham, a Jewish mystic, would essentially admit to engaging in witchcraft. So it makes more sense historically to date Abraham's account to the time when such practices weren't considered diabolical witchcraft at all, when they didn't even catch the attention of most theologians.

This leaves three possibilities for the composition of Abraham's story: it is either an actual account of an early fifteenth-century encounter (which is how it reads); a forgery dating from the seventeenth century (which raises a lot of questions of anachronism); or Abraham wrote it nearly two centuries after he died. I tend to shave off the latter two possibilities using the finely sharpened principle of Occam's razor.

Moreover, as noted in chapter 2, stories about strix and other nightly earth-crossers abound in folklore, and yet none of them say that an ointment was required in order to fly, transform, or transport. Even as the witch stereotype was beginning to materialize in the 1430s, ointments weren't necessarily a standard feature of the convention. There is also a lack of consistency in the earliest descriptions of how these ointments and potions were used, pointing to a deeper reality in lay magical and/or religious culture than in any theological literary invention.

Certain modern researchers have shown that the ointments served a "structural role" by linking the "new concept regarding nocturnal flight . . . [with] worrying practices related to witchcraft." These researchers also rightly, in my opinion, point out that it was a way to connect infanticide to the new crime of witchcraft,⁸ demonstrating that early chroniclers, drawing from previous sources, added the idea that the ointments of the village sorceress contained the remains of dead children whether they did or not.

As disclosed in chapter 7, the use of torture is a significant contributing factor to the numerous confessions that were extracted by authorities during the seventeenth-century witch scares.⁹ But without something tangible to fasten the witches' ointment onto, theologians would have been unable to convince the public of the dangers of practicing witchcraft. Bernardino of Siena and Johannes Nider wrote of transformation and flying ointments in their vernacular sermons, trying to reach their lay audiences. If such ointments didn't exist what exactly were they warning their congregations about? There was neither reason nor need for theologians to invent a flying ointment as an explanation for nocturnal excursions.

And yet, there it is.

The concept of self-dosing with a hallucinogenic substance for magical and obscure religious purposes narrowly missed appearing in records of the the early modern period in an unadulterated form. Before that time any number of local magical practices that involved drugs were recorded in a variety of terms. Even as late as 1648 a woman gave a handful of henbane buttons (probably the seeds) to a commoner so he could find his lost ox. Perhaps the man was supposed to swallow them and find his ox through some kind of magical remote viewing akin to how the witch of Linz used her ointment. In any event, the official record files this occurrence under “divination.”¹⁰ In another source, this one dating to 1460, we read how “fortune-telling,” “harmful magic,” and “witchcraft” may all involve “love powders or [love] drinks or love confections given to them by the demon . . . which cause many to be poisoned.”¹¹ Puritan theologian William Perkins (1558–1602) summed it up this way: “by Witches we understand not those onely [*sic*] which kill and torment: but all Diviners, Charmers, Juglers [*sic*], all Wizzards [*sic*], commonly called wise men and wise women.”¹²

This is not meant to suggest that all instances of divining (or other magic) involved ingestion of these psychoactives; it is merely to assert that there are some cases wherein poisonous potions and ointments may have been used, despite the case being labeled with a nonveneficia term or a vague catchall word like *sorcery*. Indeed, Alonso Tostado, the bishop of Ávila, called the women in Genesis who used medical drugs not *veneficae*, practitioners of poisoning (as one might expect), but as *maleficae*, practitioners of ill-intent.^{*74} Therefore, when two unnamed women were banned from Strasburg in 1353 for “sorcery” we can only guess fruitlessly about what that implied.¹³

And then there are records of cases that do mention the use of poisons for magical ointments, powders, and potions, but that unfortunately do not go into much detail. Like unearthing the psychoactive roots of the plants themselves, a certain amount of digging is needed, especially since the opposite can also be true: henbane could be worn around the neck as a charm, a magical ritual that includes a powerfully hallucinogenic drug, but has nothing to do with ingesting it.

Besides the argument from silence, the skeptics have another baseless bias against the idea that drugs played a significant role in European

magical history. Their argument involves a slight mis-historization, beginning with Margaret Murray (1862–1963), prominent English Egyptologist, archaeologist, anthropologist, and folklorist. Murray asserted in *The Witch-Cult in Western Europe* (1921) that early modern period women and men met up in covens to participate in some kind of trans-European “witch-cult” that originated before the rise of Rome and survived into the early modern period.⁷⁵ But modern scholars know that most people executed as witches at the height of the hunts (1550–1650) were neither witches nor folk sorceresses but were simply ordinary people who had been name-dropped as a result of the torture of some unfortunate soul in an Arras-style kangaroo court. Notably, the witches’ ointment wasn’t even a major aspect of Murray’s thesis; she mentions it a mere three times in passing, and erroneously dates the first reference of the ointments to 1537—a century after Tostado’s candid admission that medical drugs formed the basis for some psyche-magical experiences.¹⁴ Also absent from Murray’s book are the writings of Johannes Nider, Abraham of Worms, Girolamo Cardano, Andrés Laguna, and others. Neither does she mention the Canon Episcopi, the unholden, the heretics’ potion, how folk beliefs about night flight played into theological concepts of the Sabbat, or the range of available magical ointments.

There was a good reason for Murray to selectively exclude all these items: mentioning them would have destroyed her theory, as she imagined the Sabbat as a real, corporeal, and terrestrial event—much the way some early modern period demonologists did! One skeptical critic put it clearly, if not rather harshly: “[Murray’s] . . . knowledge of European history was superficial and her grasp of historical method was nonexistent.”¹⁵ In short, Murray’s skeptics are right: she knew very little about early modern period witchcraft. As modern scholars have shattered her larger, spurious thesis pertaining to the European “witch cult,” the ointments, insignificant as they are to that theory, went down with her entire premise.¹⁶

ROMANTIC CONJECTURE

It can be argued that a fourth stage in the development of the concept of the witches’ ointment occurred, not in early modern times but just a few decades ago in our own time. This is the romantic view in its most extreme form. It holds that women and men smeared brooms with hallucinogenic

ointments that were then inserted into the vagina or rectum to induce trance, thereby carrying on a ritual that has existed since antiquity.

While certain aspects of this theory have a historical foundation (i.e., anointing one's vagina with a hallucinogenic drug to induce trance, "fly," "transform," or experience some other kind of psyche-magic), the overall idea that people rubbed hallucinogenic drugs on broom handles and masturbated with them appears nowhere in the early modern period records. Not a single word of this manner of introducing the ointments into the body, i.e., via some kind of broomstick dildo, was recorded until 1973, with author Michael Harrison's *The Roots of Witchcraft*. Harrison offers speculation but zero evidence for this claim. Anthropologist Michael Harner repeats this faux pas in his essay "The Role of Hallucinogenic Plants in European Witchcraft,"¹⁷ dated that same year.

I contend that until the early seventeenth century the use of these ointments for some kind of spirit flight was fairly unknown by the larger European population (some learned magicians notwithstanding), who might have been in contact with everyday magic but certainly didn't understand the deeper arts of veneficia. They, of course, used these potions and ointments—vended to them by women like Matteuccia—in at least four ways: recreationally, as love philters; mercenarily, as a way to "bewitch" a pesky neighbor or abusive spouse; passionately, to enchant an unrequited lover; or medically, as a cure for everything from insomnia to indigestion. These veneficae sold their love philters to their clients while using similar drug mixtures on themselves, but with the addition of incantations (and thus a different mind-set), thereby stimulating a different, perhaps visionary, experience.



When early modern period ecclesiastics started to pay attention to localized forms of drug-inspired magical experiences, they looked to ancient literature and saw love potions containing the remains of dead children in Horace's *epodes*¹⁸ and Pamphilë's transformation ointment in Apuleius's *Metamorphosis (The Golden Ass)*. As outlined in chapter 4, there was, in reality, a variety of readily available hallucinogenic and soporific plants that were probably in use rather than the imagined infant corpses. The rich

historical tradition of eating child's flesh could only have pushed its association with the witches' ointment into a stronger relationship. What's more, we have reason to believe that sometimes people really did seek out the flesh of dead infants for their magical efficacies.¹⁹ And yet, our earliest and best accounts of these ointments, from the time immediately prior to the formulation of the witch stereotype (i.e., Johannes Nider, Alonso Tostado's *Genesis* commentary, and Abraham of Worms), make no such heinous connection. The ointments' context in these writers' works had everything to do with folk religion and magic and nothing at all to do with insurgent cults of devil-worshipping witches. Even Bernardino of Siena, who preached against the practice of infanticide for magical purposes in his sermons, did not associate Finicella's cat-transformation ointment with child murder—a point he would not have hesitated to make if he truly believed it. Why bring up the ointment in the first place?

As for transformation ointments in ancient literature, Pamphilē's transformation into an owl in Apuleius's *Metamorphosis* (discussed in chapter 2) has recently been used to serve as a literary origin for the witches' ointment (in lieu of a folk foundation).²⁰ I believe this is true, but only to a certain extent: the early modern period flying ointments weren't the product of ancient fiction, although ancient fiction certainly directed the ecclesiastics' interpretation of them. A drug potion, powder, or ointment that allowed a person to shape-shift into an insect or animal might have reminded a literary cleric of Pamphilē's transformation. But that doesn't mean that the ointments and their use for psyche-magical experiences didn't exist. Giambattista della Porta, who knowingly dosed his mates with a drug so as to watch them shape-shift, makes no mention of Apuleius' comedy at all. As demonstrated in chapter 4, Solanaceae family plants have a seemingly timeless association with magic, witchcraft, and medicine. Apuleius's ancient comedy might have shaped the ecclesiastical interpretation of the ointments in the early modern period but it certainly did not create them. The history of the witches' ointment begins not with an unbroken link stretching back to an ancient witch cult that rubbed hallucinogenic oils on brooms and inserted them in available human orifices, but over a development in theological and physiological debate that occurred during the early modern period regarding nocturnal flight. This debate disseminated the knowledge of these plants, while it also (and perhaps more importantly) popularized the association of Solanaceae family

plants with transcendent magical experiences. This then entered the historical record in earnest around the late sixteenth century. And while there wasn't really a witches' ointment, there was a variety of mystifying mixtures made for myriad means that involved psyche-magical visionary experiences, the true breadth and nature of which remain unknown today. Before the formulation of the convention of the witches' ointment, which began in the early 1400s, those who knew of and used these substances can only be described as a scattered minority, so few that they are impossible to fully track historically.

In some cases it seems these psychoactive drugs may have been a way to lull oneself into a twilight sleep, allowing one to walk freely and lucidly about the dreamscape. Within the larger theological debate, the otherworldly state of mind caused by the ointments—that state beyond the veil—served as a way for the so-called witches to fly to the devil “in spirit” (instead of corporally). So while skeptics like Norman Cohn and Richard Kieckhefer are correct that the witches' ointment is the product of learned demonologists, they are wrong in asserting that psyche-magical drug ointments didn't exist and weren't used for a variety of purposes, whether for visionary journeys or recreational escapes.

Equally incorrect is the romantic notion that flying to meet and worship a horned god presents an unbroken link to ancient rites that were experienced as a result of masturbating with hallucinogenic ointment-covered brooms—from which we get our modern notion of witches riding them. All evidence suggests that while some women might have inserted these drug ointments into their vaginas, it was not done so by way of a broomstick applicator, but more likely the fingers or a pessary.

We can therefore end this study knowing that both positions—that of the skeptic and that of the romantic—simply do not fly.

With or without magical ointments.

FOOTNOTES

- [*1](#) The early modern period follows the late Middle Ages of the post-classical era. Although the chronological limits of the period are open to debate, the timeframe spans the period after the late portion of the post-classical age (ca. 1500), known as the Middle Ages, through the beginning of the Age of Revolutions (ca. 1800).
- [*2](#) Actually, I still have it.
- [*3](#) *Entheogenic*: “awaking the divine within.” The term was coined by classicist Carl Ruck and his coauthors Jonathan Ott, R. Gordon Wasson, and Jeremy Bigwood in 1979 in an article in the *Journal of Psychedelic Drugs* (“Entheogens,” *Journal of Psychedelic Drugs* 11 [1979]: 145) to explain the use of mind-altering substances for spiritual reasons—a way of disassociating the erroneous belief that all drug use represents criminal or immoral behavior.
- [*4](#) The uniformity or “script” of the Sabbat as recorded by inquisitors in the mid-fifteenth through the early eighteenth centuries was clearly a demonological interpolation by the learned class.
- [†5](#) *Veneficia* can mean a variety of things, including the subject of our inquiry: “poison magic”; other times it can refer to the more banal “general herbal knowledge”; it can even be equated more broadly with a vague word like *witchcraft*—a term that doesn’t tell us much. The details of how *veneficia* was used, above all else, will matter throughout the following pages as we decipher the secrets of psyche-magical sorcery.
- [*6](#) The reference to the “Great Demon” was probably a work of later clerical interpolation affixed to some obscure local deity that Matteuccia called on to enhance her spells (see Russell, *History of Witchcraft*, 215).
- [*7](#) An interesting early case involved Jacqueline Félicie, a Parisian lay healer who practiced medicine in the 1320s. Jealous and outraged university personnel tried Félicie, fined her, and ordered that she cease working—a ruling she ignored (see Lynne Elliot, *Medieval Medicine*, 27).

- *8 Such a pairing of magistrate with a local sorceress might not be as uncommon as it sounds. Indeed, Matteuccia herself once received help from a Tuscan mercenary in the army of Umbrian *condottiero* Braccio da Montone, to retrieve a corpse from the Tiber River to be used in her magic spells. See Mammoli, “The Record of the Trial,” 7.
- *9 Scudieri lists only the vilest additives in Matteuccia’s ointment—vulture, owl, and infant blood—stating that there were other ingredients, but leaving those a mystery.
- *10 In Matthew 14:5, Antipas wants to execute John, but doesn’t out of fear of him as a popular prophet. Salome is not mentioned by name in the biblical passages; the name, rather, derives from later folklore and is used for convenience’s sake.
- *11 I am referring to a single goddess here who was called by many names in different parts of Europe (Holda, Holle, Holte, and Hulde, to name a few). For this particular ritual I find reference only to the Holle version of the name. A more detailed breakdown of the local names of this goddess can be found in Russell, *Witchcraft in the Middle Ages*, 49.
- *12 And herein we are allowed a small piece of her folk Christianity, a more or less bucolic (as opposed to learned) form of heresy; nowhere in the established biblical canon does it say that Jesus received help carrying his cross from any kind of animal.
- †13 Here there is an element of folk sorcery in the form of Pierina’s animal metamorphosis. It would be simple to assume that her transformation somehow factored into Sibillia’s mention that if a single donkey were to go missing from the earth, all would be destroyed. Perhaps Pierina needed to temporarily take its place? But then what are we to make of the fox, or a more or less “zombified” Pierina? Sadly, much like the puzzled inquisitors who scratched their heads over Pierina’s obscure folk religion, we too will remain ignorant of her fascinating but opaque rites.
- *14 These powers show the compassionate intentions on the part of the society’s members, hence the moniker “good women” or “good people.” It was this rejection of the church as a source of cures that added to the ecclesiastics’ agitation over the local healers. One is reminded of Thiess, the werewolf from Jürgensburg, Livonia, who fought against Satan for the side of God (see Ginzburg, *Ecstasies*, 153–54).

[*15](#) Hieronymus Visconti is also known by the name Girolamo Visconti.

[*16](#) *Lamia* is a curious Latin equivalent. The true origin of the term is uncertain.

[*17](#) This is what the nymph Cranaë does in *Fasti*.

[*18](#) There is also the interesting story of Jesus turning children into goats; an apocryphal text, it might not have been known during the Middle Ages. It is not found in any surviving Greek or Latin manuscripts, only in the Arabic Gospel and the Syriac History (see Wilson, *Jesus*, 84).

[*19](#) The “four humors,” or humorism, derived from Hippocratic thinking (adopted also by the Indian ayurveda system of medicine), saw health as dependent on the balance of a person’s blood, black bile, yellow bile, and phlegm. People get sick when these four humors are out of balance (see Ball, *Devil’s Doctor*, 53).

[*20](#) Like Sibillia and Pierina from the previous chapter.

[†21](#) The Christian theologian Marcion of Sinope, for example, attracted many followers in Asia Minor around the second and third centuries CE. His theology rejected the deity described in the Hebrew scriptures, and he is often considered to have been the impetus for the proto-orthodox development of the New Testament canon. He was denounced by Christian theologians and he consequently set up his own churches in Sinope. For a general review of first-century Christian beliefs, see Ehrman, *Lost Christianities*, 104–10.

[*22](#) The Church Fathers were ancient and generally influential Christian theologians, some of whom were eminent teachers and bishops. The term is used of writers or teachers of the church who were not necessarily ordained and not necessarily saints, although most are honored as saints in the Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Oriental Orthodox, Anglican, and Lutheran churches.

[*23](#) Secret meetings with barbes went by at least four other names: *conventicles*, *encounters*, *reunions*, and *congregations*.

[*24](#) There are many instances wherein an orthodox writer uses the word *poison* as a metaphor for a heretical *belief*, not an actual toxin. For example, Ignatius of Antioch (ca. 50–110 CE), on his way to be martyred for the Christian’s faith, in his letter to the Trallians, warns them to “Abstain from the Poison of Heretics.” He even names a specific

poison, aconite. And yet this entire reference appears as nothing more than a metaphor for heretical teachings. Likewise in Frederick II of Hohenstaufen's (ca. 1190–1250) condemnation of the Waldensians, after referring to them as “ravening wolves” and “bad angels,” he describes them thusly: “[L]ike serpents they creep stealthily abroad: with honeyed sweetness they vomit forth their virus. While they pretend to offer life-giving food they strike with their tail, and prepare a deadly draught, as with some dire poison” (see “Concerning Heretics,” in Robinson, *Readings in European History*, 385). Frederick II's association of heretics with poison is certainly a metaphor. It might, however, point to a truth lurking just beneath literary devices, as the rest of this chapter will argue.

[*25](#) Although the historical “Simon Magus” might not have existed, his presence in heresiology works is vital to historians. As a template for Church Fathers, “Simon” tells us how magicians were perceived in the early Christian centuries.

[†26](#) One is reminded of the warnings of Augustine and Dioscorides mentioned in chapter 1.

[*27](#) Perhaps reinforcing how Church Fathers viewed Simon's magic as reliant on drugs and other accessories?

[*28](#) The affair was so humiliating for Queen Constance that King Robert's biographer, Helgard of Fleury, doesn't even address the issue in his account of Robert's life and deeds. He would have certainly known of the scandal but chose to remain silent on the matter (see Fichtenau, *Heretics and Scholars*, 30).

[†29](#) What this meant was that a person would always have doubt about orthodox teaching (see Fichtenau, *Heretics and Scholars*, 35). Properly speaking, a drug used entheogenically would instill such doubts rather effectively.

[*30](#) According to scholars, Vox in Rama “is the first official church document that condemns the black cat as an incarnation of Satan, and consequently it was the death warrant for the animal” (see Engels, *Classical Cats*, 188).

[*31](#) Vox in Rama is based on an earlier letter to Pope Gregory penned by Conrad of Marburg and said to contain some inaccurate information

regarding the practices of heretical sects living along the Rhine. Conrad's original letter is lost, making it impossible to tell if the toad-kissing idea began with Conrad or Gregory. See Cohn, *Europe's Inner Demons*, 48–49.

[*32](#) Sometimes it isn't the bufotenine that causes the physiological and psychological effects in those ingesting toad poison but rather another naturally occurring hallucinogenic compound found in toads, 5-MeO-DMT, a powerful tryptamine. I use *bufotenine* here, and in subsequent chapters, for ease of reference.

[*33](#) This connection will be evident in the prescriptions reproduced in this chapter.

[*34](#) The Ebers Papyrus, an Egyptian medical papyrus of herbal knowledge, was around since at least 1550 BCE.

[*35](#) Mandrake is mentioned in Genesis 30:14–17. As used in the Kabbalah it “is the Soul and Spirit; any two things united in love and friendship (dodim). ‘Happy is he who preserves his dudaim [higher and lower Manas] inseparable.’”

[*36](#) Known popularly today as *Physica*.

[†37](#) According to Hildegard, a sympathetic-magical formula that did not include ingesting the mandrake root, but rather merely taking it to bed and uttering an incantation to God before sleep, could be substituted with other nonpsychoactive plants, such as beech, cedar, or aspen; these would work just as well, as it was the incantation to God that carried the most spiritual weight.

[*38](#) While Martin Booth, in his book *Cannabis: A History* (p. 72), presents a fanciful account involving Pope Innocent VIII's open banning of cannabis use in the late fifteenth century, this recipe from *M. 136* is one of only a few mentions of that plant anywhere in the medieval record; its sporadic inclusion in recipes makes it unlikely that it was used regularly, and so it will therefore not be discussed in this chapter.

[*39](#) “Permitionis rationis,” literally “a scrambling of reason” or “mixing of senses.” The Chief of Psychosomatic Medicine at the Veteran's Administration Hospital in Los Angeles, Sidney Cohen (1910–1987), who experimented with LSD in the 1950s and 1960s described synesthesia as including “cross-overs of sensation from one sense

modality to another. For example, the subject will say that he can hear colors or he will speak of the scent of music” (see Cohen, *The Beyond Within*, 51).

[*40](#) Just as the use of cocaine in the first recipes of Coca-Cola survives in the drink’s name, so does the German name for henbane (*pilsen*) survive in our modern “pilsners.”

[†41](#) Henbane is also found in several other practical (i.e., free from superstitions) formulas in *Bald’s Leechbook* (see Cockayne et al., vol. 2): one used “against worms,” (p. 137); another for “every hard tumour or swelling,” (p. 71–73). Furthermore, “if a knee be sore,” the leech should ferment henbane and hemlock, and rub them on the throbbing area (p. 341). Henbane can also be used for toothache (p. 51). Two other henbane extracts are used for patients complaining of earache (pp. 41 and 43). On this last use, a leech should be careful with such henbane eardrops; centuries earlier, Pliny warned his and future generations that one should use henbane oils sparingly, as extracts of the plant dropped in the ear can cause madness (“Oleum fit ex semine quod ipsum auribus infusim temptat mentem,” quoted in Macht, “A Pharmacological Appreciation,” 168).

[*42](#) Another claim advanced by some researchers is that the name derives from Bellona, a Roman war goddess. Those few sources hold that the priests of Bellona used to imbibe an intoxicating drink made from belladonna, but I have been unable to find a reliable basis for this assertion (see Grieve, *Modern Herbal*, 585; and Harold Hansen, *Witches Garden*, 54).

[*43](#) *Solatro* is a variant spelling of the nightshade referred to as *solata* in the *Old English Herbarium* above. The references here come from two different texts talking about the same plant. Spelling variations abound in these archaic texts.

[*44](#) Sixteenth-century Dutch physician Johann Weyer believed the hippomane to be the “little piece of flesh the size of a dry fig, circular in appearance . . . which appears on the forehead of a new-born foal” (see Weyer, *Witches, Devils, and Doctors*, 273).

[*45](#) *Ergot* derives from the French *argot*, meaning “spur.”

[*46](#) The work remained unpublished until 1471.

[†47](#) While it has been rumored that the Old Man of the Mountain used cannabis, not opium, both drugs are pure conjecture. To this writer, however, given the time the *Decameron* was produced it seems more likely that Boccaccio was referring to opium, a widely known drug in the fourteenth century, and not to cannabis, a drug that is largely (though not completely) absent from the medieval herbarium.

[*48](#) Going by Lilienskiold's records, only seventeen of the eighty-three show evidence of ergot-inspired witches' rites (see Alm, "Witch Trials," 406–8).

[*49](#) It should be noted that Psellus does not agree with the general consensus that Zoe poisoned Romanus. Here I refer to Luck, *Arcana Mundi*. The source he draws from, Book 6, Verse 64, in *Fourteen Byzantine Rulers*, however, does not make such a connection between hallucinogenic drugs and Zoe's religious and/or magical beliefs at all other than to suggest that Zoe "enjoyed" whatever ingredients she put in her perfumes.

[*50](#) German theologian Johannes Nider (ca. 1380–1438) retells this story in the *Formicarius*, the second book ever printed to discuss witchcraft, although in Nider's telling the nun is replaced with a young boy (see Klaniczay, "Process of Trance," 208).

[*51](#) Some scholars surmise that this plant was actually St. John's Wort, *Hypericum* (see Adams, *Healing Art*, 185).

[*52](#) Three other mentions of Finicella exist: Roman senate scribe Stefano Infessura notes her execution in his *Diary of Rome* (late fifteenth century), imperial notary Paolo di Lello Petrone also brushes the burning in *La mesticanza* (ca. 1450), and preacher and confidant of Bernardino of Siena, Giacomo della Marca, mentions her in his sermon "De sortilegiis" (mid- to late-fifteenth century). These three accounts say nothing of an ointment or a cat transformation. Infessura recounts that Finicella "betwitched many people" ("affattucchiava di molte persone," see Tommassini, *Diario*, 25), but does not say how. Di Lello Petrone identifies "Finiccola" as a "sorceress and witch" ("fattucchiera e strega," see Muratori, et. al., *Rerum italicarum*, 90). Della Marca's "De sortilegiis" speaks of "Funicella," who, under orders from Satan, killed 65 children including her own son whose body parts she used in magic (see Mormondo, *The Preacher's Demons*, 267).

[*53](#) The fragmentary High German romance *Titirel* was penned by Wolfram von Eschenbach after 1217. The surviving fragments indicate that the story would have served as a prequel to Wolfram's earlier work, *Parzival*, expanding on the stories of characters from that work and on the theme of the Holy Grail. *Titirel* was continued by Albrecht von Scharfenberg.

[*54](#) “Devil” or “monster” in Old English.

[†55](#) See “Women Who Walk among the Dead” in chapter 2.

[*56](#) The use of ointments to deliver drugs safely into the bloodstream was recognized in print as early as the seventeenth century (see Bacon and Montagu, *Works*, 491).

[*57](#) Literally “care of the field.”

[*58](#) The “coldness” of the devil's penis is but one argument that favors this sentiment. However, such ideas involving Satan's cold phallus are centuries older than the first mention of ointment-covered brooms. The idea evolved out of ideas about heretical sect leaders' cold skin (see Cohn, *Europe's Inner Demons*, 49).

[†59](#) There isn't a single mention in the literature prior to 1973 that so-called witches masterbated with hallucinogenic salves smeared on brooms in order to “fly” (See Harrison, *Roots of Witchcraft*, 196–97). Here are some of the problems with that theory that I have noted in my research: in the earliest witch trials, both women and men were accused of riding ointment-sapped brooms; men obviously don't have a vagina, therefore discrediting the theory. If one were to then assume that male members of the scobaces therefore must have inserted the broomstick up their rectum as some have surmised, he would still be met with another problem, the same one shared by women: fifteenth-century broomsticks were hardly the finely finished wooden rods we know today. Like most other peasant possessions in those days, brooms were made by their owners with whatever materials they had available. Usually a “broom” consisted of little more than finding the leafiest branch on a tree. Without sounding too crude, those who believe in ointment-covered broom dildos have yet to explain the splinters that would have undoubtedly poked the inner linings of a vagina or rectum. A safer way to apply an ointment in either orifice would have been to simply rub it in with one's fingers or use a

peppery, which are mentioned as application methods in the medical literature of the time. Finally, brooms weren't the most oft-cited means of transportation in the early demonology works: chairs, fence posts, shovels, and sticks were also reported. In fact, the most frequently recorded means of aerial travel was, as one inquisitor put it, "atop mule or horse shit" (see Joseph Hansen, *Quellen und untersuchungen*, 542: ". . . super stecore muli vel equi ad locum . . ."; for a thorough list of the places and dates of these early excremental flying vectors, see Russell, *History of Witchcraft*, 339–40).

[*60](#) Most likely the author is Ponce Fougeyron, a Franciscan inquisitor general (see Ginzburg, *Ecstasies*, 68–71).

[*61](#) An antipope is one who, in opposition to the one who is generally seen as the legitimately elected pope, makes a significantly accepted competing claim to be pope. The Catholic Church officially lists thirty antipopes (though there are others who have been considered antipopes). At various times between the third and mid-fifteenth centuries, antipopes were supported by a fairly significant faction of religious cardinals and secular kings and kingdoms.

[*62](#) Sprenger's contribution to the *Malleus* is disputed by modern scholars (see Broedel, *The Malleus Maleficarum*, 18). It seems likely that his name was added as coauthor only to bring legitimacy to the work.

[*63](#) "Paracelsus," meaning "next [in his status as physician] to Celsus" or "beyond Celsus," refers to the first-century Roman encyclopedist Aulus Cornelius Celsus, known for *De medicina*, his famous tract on medicine.

[†64](#) Coincidentally, Paracelsus set the book aflame on St. John the Baptist's Day (see Ball, *The Devil's Doctor*, 77).

[*65](#) Although the library fixes the work to 1554, the date on the title page reads "MDXLVII" (1547).

[*66](#) From Laguna's description it seems that these two people were nothing more than eccentrics who might have dabbled in common sorcery and had been singled out as scapegoats and exiled for some misfortune.

[†67](#) In the account, Laguna likens the odorous unguent to a white poplar ointment. One is reminded of this ointment, mentioned in chapter 4 of this work, which contains deadly nightshade, mandrake, and henbane.

[*68](#) All Sabbat imagery inspired by (and quoted from) Henry Boguet, *An Examen of Witches*, 35–38. The name Elizabeth is generic and is used for ease of flow in the narrative.

[*69](#) Although this position was not accepted by all theologians (some believed that the transformations were literal), the theory of deluded senses prevailed when explaining metamorphoses (see Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages*, 29).

[*70](#) In a sense, Peukert's experience shows that it is the lore of the Church, not the actual practices of sorceresses like Matteuccia di Francesco, that has survived into modern times.

[*71](#) We must bear in mind that Matteuccia's ointment could have been used for self-transformation (into a mouse), for invoking a local deity (bastardized by church authorities as a demon), to “fly,” or perhaps for some other reason which remains opaque to historians.

[*72](#) Examples would include a case in 1406 wherein two women in Lucerne were tried for administering a love philter (Joseph Hansen, *Quellen*, 527); that same year two women were tried in Nürnberg for using love powders (Hansen *Quellen*, 526); and in 1407 love potions used to cause sickness, death, and arousal ended in multiple women being banished from Basel, Switzerland (Lea, *Materials*, vol. 1, 247). Even Johannes Nider's hugely influential *Formicarius* was completed only in 1437; the work itself was most likely started a decade earlier, in 1424 or 1425, meaning his reference to the vetula's ointment was untainted by the witch stereotype (see Galbreth, “Nider and the Exemplum,” 55).

[†73](#) Though cases still existed at this time that record instances of flying without any ointment at all—no doubt historical residues of the tales of night flight not wholly scrapped.

[*74](#) See chapter 6, [note 66](#).

[*75](#) Murray argued that early-modern “witches” were really just members of an ancient pagan religion that survived, untouched by civilization, in the backwoods areas of Europe, and worshipped a “horned-god,” later bastardized as Satan by theologians. While some pagan beliefs certainly survived into the early modern period, Murray's theory of a pan-European cult has been crucified by modern scholars who have shown

conclusively that she not only cited selectively from her sources but even butchered the citations used.

ENDNOTES

INTRODUCTION

- [1.](#) Joseph Hansen, *Quellen und untersuchungen*, 228.
- [2.](#) Friedenwald, “Andres Laguna,” 1037–48.
- [3.](#) Bever, *Realities of Witchcraft*, see chapter 4; Rudgley, *Pagan Resurrection*, 47; Baroja, *World of the Witches*, 35; Sidky, *Witchcraft, Lycanthropy, Drugs*, see chapter 7; Harner, *Hallucinogens and Shamanism*, see chapter 8.
- [4.](#) Russell, *Witchcraft in the Middle Ages*, 205; Kieckhefer, *European Witch Trials*, 101.
- [5.](#) Kieckhefer, *European Witch Trials*, 73, 97.
- [6.](#) *Ibid.*, 49.
- [7.](#) Harner, *Hallucinogens and Shamanism*, 131; Rudgley, *Pagan Resurrection*, 47.
- [8.](#) Levack, *Witch-Hunt*, 49. Richard Kieckhefer, e-mail to author, Dec. 11, 2009. For the best arguments from skepticism, see Cohn, *Europe’s Inner Demons*, 175–76; Briggs, *Witches and Neighbors*, 56.
- [9.](#) Cohn, *Europe’s Inner Demons*, 176.
- [10.](#) Kieckhefer, *European Witch Trials*, 64.
- [11.](#) *Ibid.*, 65.
- [12.](#) *Ibid.*, 58–59.
- [13.](#) Del Rio, *Investigations into Magic*, 24–25.
- [14.](#) The latest offenses can be found in Rush, *The Mushroom in Christian Art*, 269–70.
- [15.](#) Most recent would be Robin Briggs’ review of Edward Bever’s *Realities of Witchcraft in European History Quarterly*.

CHAPTER 1. HELEN'S TEARS

- [Epigraph 1](#). Del Rio, *Investigations into Magic*, 117.
- [Epigraph 2](#). Ankerloo and Clark, *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe*, 257.
- [1](#). MacDonald, *Travel and Trade*, 12–13.
 - [2](#). Augustine, *City of God*, 782.
 - [3](#). Russell, *Witchcraft in the Middle Ages*, 101; Lea, *History of the Inquisition*, vol. 3, 380.
 - [4](#). Mormando, *Preacher's Demons*, 74.
 - [5](#). Thompson, "A Trial for Witchcraft at Todi (1428)," 210; Mammoli, "Record of the Trial," 36: "Io te piglo nel nome del peccato et del demanio maiore che non posse may appicciare più."
 - [6](#). Brunfels, *Herbarum vivae eicones*, vol. 3, 13; Mormando, *Preacher's Demons*, 74.
 - [7](#). *Edinburgh Medical and Surgical Journal*, 410.
 - [8](#). Agrippa, *Of the Vanitie and Uncertaintie*, 127.
 - [9](#). Kieckhefer, *European Witch Trials*, 58; O' Conner, *Kepler's Witch*, 17.
 - [10](#). Ankerloo and Clark, *Witchcraft and Magic*, 251.
 - [11](#). Ogden, *Magic, Witchcraft, and Ghosts*, 107; Ankerloo and Clark, *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe*, 251.
 - [12](#). Ankerloo and Clark, *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe*, 251–52.
 - [13](#). Ogden, *Magic, Witchcraft, and Ghosts*, 107.
 - [14](#). Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages*, 60.
 - [15](#). Baroja, *World of the Witches*, 35; Kieckhefer, *European Witch Trials*, 96.
 - [16](#). Pliny, *Natural History*, 230. Available at Tufts University: Perseus Digital Library, www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Plin.+Nat.+toc&redirect=true.
 - [17](#). *Ibid.*, 241.
 - [18](#). Quoted in Jenkins, "Saint Augustine," 135.
 - [19](#). Quoted in Müller, "Love Potions," 620.
 - [20](#). Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages*, 59.

- [21.](#) Arber, “From Medieval Herbalism,” 317–18.
- [22.](#) Thompson, “A Trial for Witchcraft at Todi,” 204.
- [23.](#) Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages*, 59.
- [24.](#) King, “Comparative Perspective,” 276–94.
- [25.](#) Bailey, *Battling Demons*, 127; Ball, *Devil’s Doctor*, 80.
- [26.](#) Easlea, *Witch-hunting, Magic, and the New Philosophy*, 39.
- [27.](#) Quoted in Major, *History of Medicine*, 302.
- [28.](#) Minkowski, “Women Healers,” 284, 288.
- [29.](#) Mormando, *Preacher’s Demons*, 4.
- [30.](#) *Ibid.*, 5.
- [31.](#) Jansen, Andrews, and Drell, *Medieval Italy*, 207.
- [32.](#) Quoted in Weyer, *Witches, Devils, and Doctors*, 273.
- [33.](#) *Ibid.*, 276.
- [34.](#) Lang, *Helen of Troy*, 111.
- [35.](#) Quoted in Ankerloo and Clark, *Witchcraft and Magic*, 249.
- [36.](#) Ogden, *Magic, Witchcraft, and Ghosts*, 280. Salamander poison is also mentioned.
- [37.](#) Quoted in Ankerloo and Clark, *Witchcraft and Magic*, 256.
- [38.](#) Rives, “Magic, Religion, and Law,” 50–51.
- [39.](#) *Ibid.*, 60.
- [40.](#) *Ibid.*, 52.
- [41.](#) Paulus, *Opinions*, book 5, title 23, 14.
- [42.](#) *Ibid.*, book 5, title 23, 15.
- [43.](#) Drew, *Laws of the Salian Franks*, 83–84.
- [44.](#) Michelet, *History of France*, vol. 1, 91.
- [45.](#) Gregory of Tours, *History of the Franks*, book 6, chapter 35: “Tunc regina, tormentis gravioribus mulieribus affectis, alias enegat, alias incendio tradit, alias rotis, ossibus confractis, innectit.”
- [46.](#) *Ibid.*, chapter 29: “Cui praefectus respondit: ‘Habetur mihi herba in prumptu, de qua se desentiricus auriat, quamlibet desperatus sit, mox

sanatur.” “Nihil minus vasculum ab haec potione repletum ipsos levare iubet, dicens ‘In die illa, cum haec quae praecipio facetis, mane, priusquam opus incipiatur, hunc potum sumite’”; “. . . saepius se inunctionis et potionis, quae ei regis reginaequae gratiam praeberent, ab his mulieribus suscipisse”; “. . . erit vobis magna constantia ad haec peragenda.”

[47.](#) Ibid., chapter 39: “Nuntia domino meo regi, quia nihil mali sentio de his quae inlata sunt”; “His auditis, rex: ‘Verumne est,’ inquit, ‘hunc esse maleficum, se de his nihil est laesus poenis?’”

[48.](#) Quoted in Saunders, *Magic and the Supernatural*, 79.

[49.](#) Baron, Report, 21: “Si mulier artem magicam, et incantationem, et veneficium . . .”

[50.](#) Saunders, *Magic and the Supernatural*, 79: “drycraeft ond galdor ond unlibban.”

[51.](#) Cockayne, *Leechdoms, wortcunning, and starcraft*, 397.

[52.](#) Quoted in Baroja, *World of the Witches*, 56.

[53.](#) Alfonso, *Siete Partidas*, 667–68.

[54.](#) Quoted in Lea, *History of the Inquisition*, vol. 3, 431.

[55.](#) Thompson, “A Trial for Witchcraft at Todi,” 205.

[56.](#) Ashton, “Mandrakes”; Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages*, 24.

[57.](#) Thompson, “A Trial for Witchcraft at Todi,” 208; Khuzhaev et al., “Alkaloids from *Arundo donax*,” 261–65; Nordegren, *A–Z Encyclopedia*, 81. Bufotenine derives from toads and is discussed in chapter 4. N, N-dimethyl-tryptamine (DMT) is a powerful psychoactive used as an entheogen in some cultures. For a thorough discussion of the psychological effects of DMT, see Strassman, *DMT*; for a discussion of DMT as an entheogen, see Metzner, *Sacred Vine of Spirits*.

[58.](#) Baroja, *World of the Witches*, 34.

[59.](#) Thompson, “A Trial for Witchcraft at Todi,” 207–8.

[60.](#) On this sort of effect, see Bever, *Realities of Witchcraft*, 161.

[61.](#) Thompson, “A Trial for Witchcraft at Todi,” 208.

[62.](#) Quoted in Mammoli, “Record of the Trial,” 210: “Unguento, unguento mandame a la note de Benivento, supra acqua et supra ad uento et supra

ad omne maltempo.” Mammoli translates Matteuccia’s transformation not into a mouse, but into a fly.

[63.](#) Jansen, Andrews, and Drell, *Medieval Italy*, 210–11.

[64.](#) *Ibid.*, 213.

[65.](#) *Ibid.*, 212.

[66.](#) Hodgkin, *Italy and Her Invaders*, 78.

[67.](#) Bailey, *Battling Demons*, 30; Russell, *Witchcraft in the Middle Ages*, 228–29; Levack, *Witch-Hunt*, 50–53.

CHAPTER 2. IN THE SILENCE OF DEEPEST NIGHT

[Epigraph 1.](#) De Lorris and De Meun, *Romance of the Rose*, 127.

[Epigraph 2.](#) Quoted in Ginzburg, *Ecstasies*, 94.

[1.](#) Limbroch, *History of the Inquisition*, 87; see also Ginzburg, *Ecstasies*, part 2, chapter 1.

[2.](#) Russell, *History of Witchcraft*, 22.

[3.](#) Van de Wiel, *History*, 70.

[4.](#) Joseph Hansen, *Quellen und untersuchungen*, 38: “Illud etiam non omittendum, quod quaedam sceleratae mulieres retro post Satanam conversae daemonum illusionibus et phantasmatis seductae, credunt se et profitentur nocturnis horis cum Diana paganonim dea et innumera multitudine mulierum equitare super quasdam bestias, et multa terrarum spatia intempestae noctis silentio pertransire, eiusque iussionibus velut dominae obedire, et certis noctibus ad eius servitium evocari.”

[5.](#) Russell, *History of Witchcraft*, 47.

[6.](#) Ehrman, *Forged*, 108–10.

[7.](#) North, *Heathen Gods*, 147.

[8.](#) Reaves, “Odin’s Wife,” 5.

[9.](#) Behringer, *Shaman of Oberstdorf*, 51.

[10.](#) Russell, *History of Witchcraft*, 78.

[11.](#) *Ibid.*, 80.

[12.](#) Bailey, *Historical Dictionary*, 26.

- [13.](#) Quoted in Kloss, “Herodias the Wild Huntress,” 100.
- [14.](#) Cohn, *Europe’s Inner Demons*, 168–69.
- [15.](#) Hansen, *Quellen und untersuchungen*, 40; Ginzburg, *Ecstasies*, 90.
- [16.](#) Russell, *History of Witchcraft*, 49.
- [17.](#) List, “Holda and Venusberg,” 308.
- [18.](#) Hammer, “Holle’s Cry,” 62.
- [19.](#) Bever, *Realities of Witchcraft*, 98.
- [20.](#) Behringer, *Shaman of Oberstdorf*, 96.
- [21.](#) Ibid.
- [22.](#) Ibid., 188.
- [23.](#) De Lorris and De Meun, *Romance of the Rose*, 129.
- [24.](#) Quoted in McNeill and Gamer, *Medieval Handbooks*, 339.
- [25.](#) Russell, *History of Witchcraft*, 81–82.
- [26.](#) Lea, *History of the Inquisition*, vol. 3, 384. Here, Augustine is using the masculine; however it is clear that Burchard is referring solely to women.
- [27.](#) Gervase, *Otia imperialia*, 40: “Ut autem moribus ac auribus hominum satisfaciamus constituamus”; “quod et nocte celerrimo volatu regiones transcurrunt, domus intrat, dormientes opprimunt, ingerunt somnia gravia, quibus planctus excitant”; “sanguinem humanum bibere et infants.”
- [28.](#) Quoted in Ginzburg, *Ecstasies*, 94; on the two Plinys, see Hexter and Townsend, *Oxford Handbook*, 567.
- [29.](#) De Como, *Lucerna inquisitorium haereticae*, 141: “quam ludum bone societatis appellant”; “Hae personae congregantur in certis locis pre oppida & villas certis temporibus, praecipue in nocte diem Veneris praecedente apparente eis daemone in forma humana visibili.”
- [30.](#) Russell, *History of Witchcraft*, 211.
- [31.](#) Ibid., 213.
- [32.](#) Behringer, *Shaman of Oberstdorf*, 54.
- [33.](#) Ginzburg, *Ecstasies*, 92–93.
- [34.](#) Ibid.

- [35.](#) One of the more recent retellings of this oft-cited story can be found in Bailey, *Battling Demons*, 114.
- [36.](#) Quoted in Behringer, *Shaman of Oberstdorf*, 39.
- [37.](#) Ibid., 55.
- [38.](#) Smoller, *Saint and the Chopped-up Baby*, 152.
- [39.](#) For an unparalleled history of these ancient European beliefs, see Ginzburg, *Ecstasies*.
- [40.](#) Apuleius, *Golden Ass*, 82.
- [41.](#) Levack, *Witchcraft Sourcebook*, 10.
- [42.](#) Ovid, *Fasti*.
- [43.](#) Cohn, *Europe's Inner Demons*, 162–63.
- [44.](#) Halliday, *Folk-Lore of Chios*, 40–41.
- [45.](#) Cohn, *Europe's Inner Demons*, 163.
- [46.](#) Russell, *History of Witchcraft*, 61.
- [47.](#) Behringer, *Shaman of Oberstdorf*, 96.
- [48.](#) Cohn, *Europe's Inner Demons*, 166.
- [49.](#) Russell, *History of Witchcraft*, 61.
- [50.](#) Clayton, “De Duodecim Abusiuis,” 151.
- [51.](#) Quoted in Strayer, *Ways of the World*, 459.
- [52.](#) Augustine, *City of God*, vol. 2, book 18, 237.
- [53.](#) Gervase, *Otia imperialia*, book 1, part 3, 39. “Lamias quas vulgo mascas aut in Gallica lingua strias nominant, physici dicunt, nocturnas esse imaginationes, quae ex grossitie humorum animas dormientium turbant et pondus faciunt.”
- [54.](#) Behringer, *Shaman of Oberstdorf*, 43.
- [55.](#) Lecouteux, *Witches, Werewolves, and Fairies*, 77–78.
- [56.](#) Ginzburg, *Ecstasies*, 301.
- [57.](#) Behringer, *Shaman of Oberstdorf*, 96.

CHAPTER 3. THE HERETICS' POTION

[Epigraph 1](#). Psellus, *On the Operations of Demons*, 22.

[Epigraph 2](#). Sacconi, “Concerning the Poor of Lombardy” in Peters, *Heresy and Authority*, 142.

[1](#). Cobben, *Jan Wier, Devils, Witches*, 19.

[2](#). Waller, *Dancing Plague*, 27.

[3](#). Quoted in Logan, *History of the Church*, 196.

[4](#). *Ibid.*, 202.

[5](#). Cohn, *Europe’s Inner Demons*, 1–4.

[6](#). Benko, *Pagan Rome*, 55–56.

[7](#). Quoted in Cohn, *Europe’s Inner Demons*, 6–7.

[8](#). *Ibid.*, 10–11.

[9](#). Quoted in Bainton, *Early Christianity*, 87.

[10](#). Cohn, *Europe’s Inner Demons*, 4.

[11](#). Pagels, *Gnostic Gosepls*, 104.

[12](#). Isidore of Seville, “On the heresies of the Christians,” in Peters, *Heresy and Authority*, 49.

[13](#). *Ibid.*, 50.

[14](#). *Ibid.*, 49–50.

[15](#). Ehrman, *Lost Christianities*; for differences between heretical groups, 109 ff.; for gnostics, 115 ff.

[16](#). Pagels, *Gnostic Gosepls*, 115. Even gnostic sects as early as the Valentinian Church split due to doctrinal differences.

[17](#). Audisio, *Preachers by Night*, 175.

[18](#). Quoted in *ibid.*, 120.

[19](#). *Ibid.*, 135–36.

[20](#). Robinson, “Waldensian and Albigensian Heretics,” 381–82.

[21](#). Audisio, *Preachers by Night*, 170; Behringer, “How Waldensians Became Witches,” 172.

[22](#). Audisio, *Preachers by Night*, 149.

[23](#). *Ibid.*, 176–77.

[24](#). On this later possibility, see Behringer, *Shaman of Oberstdorf*, 129.

- [25.](#) Audisio, *Preachers by Night*, 182–83.
- [26.](#) Ibid., 185.
- [27.](#) Ibid., 171–72.
- [28.](#) Quoted in Audisio, *Preachers by Night*, 183.
- [29.](#) Cohn, *Europe's Inner Demons*, 52.
- [30.](#) Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies*, book 1, chapter 13.5.
- [31.](#) Pagels, *Gnostic Gospels*, 34.
- [32.](#) Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies*, book 1, chapter 18.1.19.
- [33.](#) Ibid., book 1, 23.2; Mead, *Simon Magus*, book 2, Epiphanius, “Contra Haereses.”
- [34.](#) Mead, *Simon Magus*, book 1, Theodoretus, “Haereticarum Fabularum Compendium.”
- [35.](#) Ibid., Epiphanius, book 2.
- [36.](#) Ibid.
- [37.](#) Origen, *Contra Celsum*, book 1, 6.
- [38.](#) For a good breakdown of the drugs used for these magical purposes, see Luck, *Arcana Mundi*, 479–88.
- [39.](#) Ginzburg, *Ecstasies*, 162.
- [40.](#) Ramsey, “On Removing Idols,” 237, 358.
- [41.](#) Luck, *Arcana Mundi*, 459.
- [42.](#) Milner and Brown, *Religious Denominations*, 401.
- [43.](#) Conybeare, *Key of Truth*, 152.
- [44.](#) Cohn, *Europe's Inner Demons*, 37.
- [45.](#) Quoted in Peters, *Heresy and Authority*, 72–73.
- [46.](#) Bouquet et al., “Acts of the Council in Orléans,” in *Recueil des historiens*, 536: “. . . eloquio nitidus, consilio providus, bonis moribus comptus . . .”
- [47.](#) Ibid., 536. A recent scholar, Edward Peters (*Heresy and Authority*, 66), translates this passage “was *spreading* [*italics mine*] its vicious and deadly poison through the provinces of Gaul . . .” from the original: “jamjamque per Galliarum provincias nefandi erroris venena exitialia

propinantem.” However, the verb in question here, *propinantem*, means “to drink,” or more precisely, “to drink to one’s health,” which I take contextually to mean “in ceremony.” Peters translates *propinantem* as “to spread” (*propago*). My thanks to Boston University classicist Carl Ruck for reviewing this crucial passage with me.

- [48.](#) Ibid., 537: “. . . ab eis debriatur mortifero nequitiae haustu . . . qui dementia errore diabolico irretitus”; “pollicens omnimodis in hac re suum auxilium . . .”
- [49.](#) Ibid., 537–38: “Christum de Virgine Maria non esse natum, neque pro hominibus passum, nec vere in sepulchro posuum, nec a mortuis resurrexisse: addentes, in baptismo nullam esse scelerum ablutionem: neque Sacramentum corporis & sanguinis Christi in consecratione Sacerdotis. Sanctos Martyres atque Confessores implorare pro nihilo ducebant”; “per impositionem videlicet manuum nostrarum, ab omni peccati labe mundaberis, atque sancti Spiritus dono repleberis, qui Scripturarum omnium profunditatem ac veram dignitatem absque scrupulo te docebit. Deinde caelesti cibo pastus, interna satietate recreatus, videbis persaepe nobiscum visiones angelicas, quarum solatio sultus, cum eis quovis locorum sine mora vel difficultate, cum volueris, ire poteris; nihilque tibi deerit; quia Deus omnium tibi comes nunquam deerit, in quo sapientiae thesauri, atque divitiarum consistunt.”
- [50.](#) Ibid., 538: “. . . de cibo illo, qui caelestis dicebatur, quali arte conficiebatur . . .”; “. . . pro sanctitate & religione ejus concubitus . . .”
- [51.](#) Fichtenau, *Heretics and Scholars*, 31.
- [52.](#) Frassetto, “Heresy at Orléans,” 1, fn. 2.
- [53.](#) Stock, *Implications of Literacy*, 107–10.
- [54.](#) Karras, Kaye, and Matter, *Law and the Illicit*, 35; Fichtenau, *Heretics and Scholars*, 31; Frassetto, “Heresy at Orléans,” 4, 6.
- [55.](#) Bouquet, et al., *Recueil des historiens*, 159: “. . . et pulverem ex mortuis pueris secum deserebat; de quo si quem posset communicare, mox Manichæum faciebat . . .”
- [56.](#) Frassetto, “Heresy at Orléans,” 5–6.
- [57.](#) Quoted in Kors and Peters, *Witchcraft in Europe*, 115–16.

- [58.](#) Vieusseux, *Archivio storico*, book 2, part 1, 12–13: “Interrogatus que esset maior inter mulieres”; “Respondit quod de stercore predicti buffonis, ut dictum est, et quod fuit inculpata quod comburebat capillos suos et pillos pectinis in poculo predicto miscebat et hunc poculum faciebat in vigilia Epiphanie in sero circa ignem.”
- [59.](#) Ibid., 13: “Quem potum apportabat in una fiola, et potus ille erat turpis aspectu, et si quis satis sumpsisset inflasset multum, ita quod unus, qui multum sumpsit, fere mortuus est; et de tali potu ipse et omnes alii sumebant totiens quociens initiabant dictam sinagogam.”
- [60.](#) Miller, *Encyclopedia of Addictive Drugs*, 61.
- [61.](#) Joseph Hansen, *Quellen und untersuchungen*, 161: “. . . et applicando incentiva in cibariis, aut per superius tactos provocancia partem sensitivam”; 149: “. . . Valdenses ydolatrae.”
- [62.](#) Passavanti, *Lo Specchio della vera*, 318–20: “Così si truova [reading “trova”] ch’ e’ dimonii prendendo similitudine d’ uomini e di femmine che sono vivi, e di cavagli e di somieri, vanno si notte in ischiera per certe contrade, dove veduti dalle genti, credono che sieno quelle persone la cui similitudine mostrano: e questa in alcuno paese si chiama la tregenda. E ciò fanno i demonii per seminare questo errore, e per mettere iscandalo, e per infamare quelle tali persone la cui similitudine prendono, mostrando di fare nella tregenda alcune cose dioneste. Ben si truovano [reading “trovano”] alcune persone, e spezialmente femmine, che dicono di se medesime ch’elle vanno di notte in brigata con questa cotale tregenda, e compitano per nome molte di loro compagnia; e dicono che le donne della torma che guidano l’altre, sono Erodía che fece uccidere san Giovanni Batosta, e la Diana antica dea de’ Greci.”
- [63.](#) Mormando, *Preacher’s Demons*, 66.
- [64.](#) Orlandi, *Saint Bernardine*, 130.
- [65.](#) Ibid., 131.

CHAPTER 4. ROOTS OF BEWITCHMENT

[Epigraph 1.](#) Agrippa, *Of the Vanitie and Uncertaintie*, 127.

[Epigraph 2.](#) Paracelsus, *Hermetic and Alchemical Writings*, 157.

[1.](#) Siraisi, *Medieval and Early Renaissance Medicine*.

- [2.](#) Roberts and Wink, *Alkaloids*, 31–32; Atkinson, “Clinical Studies,” 102; Stephenson and Morss, *Medical Botany*, 86.
- [3.](#) Kraemer, Rice, Maisch, et al., *Belladonna*, 5; also Dawson, *Leechbook*, 11.
- [4.](#) Joseph Hansen, *Quellen und untersuchungen*, 228.
- [5.](#) Arsdall, Klug, and Blanz, “Mandrake Plant,” 285–307.
- [6.](#) Hort, *Theophrastus*, 259.
- [7.](#) *Ibid.*, 261.
- [8.](#) White, *Book of Beasts*, 24–27.
- [9.](#) Carter, “Myths and Mandrakes,” 144.
- [10.](#) Dioscorides, *De Materia Medica*, book 4, 624; accessed via: <http://panaceavera.com>.
- [11.](#) Ashton, “Mandrakes,” 84.
- [12.](#) Quoted in Ogden, *Magic, Witchcraft, and Ghosts*, 105. Despite Suetonius’s account, which clearly describes a hallucinogen, there is no way of knowing for certain what kind of drug was in Caligula’s drink.
- [13.](#) Wright, *Works of the Emperor Julian*, vol. 3, 137. Although several sources assert that Emperor Julian took love philters nightly, the claim is unfounded. Nevertheless, for this claim see Calmet, *Calmet’s Dictionary*, 623. The letter that Calmet cites does mention the philters, but it is only in passing.
- [14.](#) Lee, “Solanaceae II,” 279; Stol, *Birth in Babylonia*, 56.
- [15.](#) Gassen and Minol, “Die Alraune oder die Sage,” 302–07.
- [16.](#) Dioscorides, *Pharmacorum simplicium*, 238.
- [17.](#) Simoons, *Plants of Life*, 128.
- [18.](#) Adams, *Genuine Works of Hippocrates*, 77.
- [19.](#) Zilboorg and George, *History of Medical Psychology*, 71; Carter, “Myths and Mandrakes,” 1630.
- [20.](#) Simoons, *Plants of Life*, 118; Haggard, *Devils, Drugs, and Doctors*, 95–96.
- [21.](#) Lee, “The Solanaceae II,” 280.

- [22.](#) Fordham University, *Medieval Sourcebook*: “The Trial of Joan of Arc”; accessed via: www.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/joanofarc-trial.html
- [23.](#) Pollington, *Leechcraft*, 347–49.
- [24.](#) Thorndike, *History of Magic*, 490–91. For its translation into German, which Thorndike does not mention, see Atkinson, *Medical Bibliography*, 188. See also Rider, *Magic and Impotence*, 166; and Major, *History of Medicine*, vol. 2, 315.
- [25.](#) Hispanus, *Thesaurus pauperum*, accessed via [bildsuche.digitale-sammlungen .de](http://bildsuche.digitale-sammlungen.de).
- [26.](#) *Ibid.*, 16: “De Phrenesi”; “Item, Recipiantur Mandragora, Crocus, Storax & Opij pars aliqua: pulvurisataq aspergantur capis patientis.”
- [27.](#) *Ibid.*, 19–20: “De Cura Vigilitarum”; “Item, Semen Mandragorae dolore quadem qualem tollis.”
- [28.](#) *Ibid.*, 19: “Opium, semen papueris, mandragorum, semen iusquiami, an. cum Oleo violato confice: fiat unguentum quo frons inungatur.”
- [29.](#) Green, *Trotula*, 130.
- [30.](#) *Ibid.*, 133.
- [31.](#) I have consulted two editions of *Opus de venenas*: Theodor Zwinger’s Basel edition, which has no date of publication, was probably copied after 1559 when he joined the teaching staff at the University of Basel. He recounts in the introduction that Ardonyis wrote his *Opus* “ante annos plus minus centū triginta” (more or less 130 years ago), which coincides with the date given by the other edition consulted, one from 1492 on hold at the Universidade de Coimbra. The Universidade dates the original *Opus* to ca. 1430. As for Ardoynis’s birth and death year, I can find nothing.
- [32.](#) Zwinger, *Opus de venenas*, 194: “Mandragorum auctores aliqui nominant iabroch, aibrol, iabroha, ieberue, [and] ieberuan”; “Virtutis habens radicem, satis magnam & fructus, & foila.”
- [33.](#) *Ibid.*, 195: “Et vidi muliere radicem eius bibere ad impregnandum . . . qui ingreditur balneum . . . in rubedine & inflatione faciei.”
- [34.](#) *Ibid.*, 194: “Ebrietas,” “vertiginis,” “alienation,” “lathargia,” “somnus profundus.”

- [35.](#) Hispanus, *Thesaurus pauperum*, 67: “Quae venerem prohibent & extinguunt”; “Item, Opium, semen hyoscyami, and mandragora coquantur in oleo & cum cera fiat unguentum, quo ungantur & emplastrentur testiculi.”
- [36.](#) Quoted in Milis, *Pagan Middle Ages*, 112.
- [37.](#) Flanagan, *Hildegard of Bingen*, 77.
- [38.](#) *Ibid.*, 142.
- [39.](#) Quoted in Thorndike, *History of Magic*, vol. 2, 135.
- [40.](#) Agrippa, *On the vanities*, 203.
- [41.](#) Dioscorides, *De Materia Medica*, Book 4, 615; accessed via <http://panaceavera.com>.
- [42.](#) Riley and Bostock, *Natural History*, vol. 5, book 25, chapter 17; accessed via www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Plin.+Nat.+toc&redirect=true.
- [43.](#) Folkard, *Plantlore, Legends, and Lyrics*, 372.
- [44.](#) Tertias, *Sancti Isodri*, 629: “Haec herba et insana vocatur, quia ejus usus periculosus est. Denique si bibatur, vel edatur, insaniam facit, vel somni imaginem torpidam. Hanc vulgus milimindrum dicit, propter quod alienationem mentis inducis.” “Milimindrum” might have been an obscure way of saying “thousand minds,” *mille mentes*. See also Throop, *Isidore of Seville’s Etymologies*, vol. 2, book 17, chapter 9.41.
- [45.](#) McNeill and Gamer, *Medieval Handbooks of Penance*, 341.
- [46.](#) Forbes, *Early Races of Scotland*, 110. Gregory of Tours speaks of this in *History of the Franks*, book 2, chapter 9: “And the enemy appeared here and there, and sheltered by trunks of trees or standing on the abattis as if on the summit of towers, they sent as if from engines a shower of arrows poisoned by the juices of herbs, so that sure death followed even superficial wounds inflicted in places that were not mortal”; “. . . hostium rare apparuere, qui coniuncti arborum truncis vel concidibus superstantes, velut e fastigiis turrium sagittas turmentorum ritu effudere inlitas herbarum venenis, ut summe cutis neque letalibuse inflictis locis vulnera aut dubiae mortis sequerentur.”
- [47.](#) Quoted in Cockayne, *Leechdoms, wortcunning, and starcraft*, vol. 1, xviii–xix.

- [48.](#) Letcher, *Shroom*, 34.
- [49.](#) Dawson, *Leechbook or Collection of Medical Recipes*, 3, 5.
- [50.](#) *Ibid.*, 107.
- [51.](#) *Ibid.*, 213.
- [52.](#) *Ibid.*, 261–62.
- [53.](#) *Ibid.*, 295.
- [54.](#) *Ibid.*, 283.
- [55.](#) Pollington, *Leechcraft*, 201.
- [56.](#) *Ibid.*, 233.
- [57.](#) Hispanus, *Thesaurus pauperum*, 16: “Item, ocoli, nares, & labia ungentur cum Myrrha, storace & lacte papaueris, Opio, & iusquiamo decoctis in mulsa.”
- [58.](#) *Ibid.*, 16: “Iusquiami & co. vel catulus fissus per medium ventrem, vel gallus, vel pulmo porci.”
- [59.](#) *Ibid.*, 16: “Papauver album, semen iusquiami, distemperata cum ablumine oui, & lacte mulieris somnum leuiter inducit.”
- [60.](#) *Ibid.*, 16: “Folia iusuiami sub ceruicali posita, phreneticum dormire cogit.”
- [61.](#) *Ibid.*, 16: “Iusquiamum coque in vino dulci, & cum hoc unge labia, nares, & aures, & statim cum magna admiratione dormiet.”
- [62.](#) *Ibid.*, 67: “Hyoscyami succus genitalibus inunctas libidinem prorsus extinguit.”
- [63.](#) Rider, *Magic and Impotence*, 164.
- [64.](#) Canitz and Wieland, *From Arabye to Engelond*, 63.
- [65.](#) Zwinger, *Opus de venenas*, 197: “Causa ebrietatis & permistionis rationis, sunt vapores & praecipue calidi ad cerebrum eleuati”; “Causa locutionis vocibus diversis, ita ut aliquando rugiat & aliquando hinniat ut equus & aliquando vocem emittat, ut mulus vel mula.”
- [66.](#) Schenk, *Book of Poisons*, 36–37.
- [67.](#) Quoted in Wallis, *Medieval Medicine*, 214.
- [68.](#) Magnus, *De vegetabiblius*, book 6, tract 2, chapters 10, 11, 526: “Resolvit duritiem testiculorum, et confert erysipelae . . . dolori matricis

. . .”; “Folia dormire faciunt comesta, et permutant rationem.”; “. . . sed tamen aliquando ministratur.”

[69.](#) Unger, *Beer in the Middle Ages*, 144–45.

[70.](#) Quoted in Müller, “Love Potions,” 623.

[71.](#) Quoted in Cockayne, *Leechdoms, wortcunning, and starcraft*, vol. 2, 345.

[72.](#) Kieckhefer, *European Witch Trials*, 56.

[73.](#) Weyer, *Witches, Devils, and Doctors*, 227–28.

[74.](#) Roberts and Wink, *Alkaloids*, 20–21.

[75.](#) Forbes, *Early Races of Scotland*, 329–31.

[76.](#) Holzman, “Legacy of Atropos,” 242.

[77.](#) Bever, *Realities of Witchcraft*, 130.

[78.](#) Holzman, “Legacy of Atropos,” 242.

[79.](#) Pollington, *Leechcraft*, 323.

[80.](#) Dawson, *Leechbook or Collection of Medical Recipes*, 44–45.

[81.](#) *Ibid.*, 133. Here and in several others, the Latin *morel* is used for “nightshade.”

[82.](#) *Ibid.*, 185: “*morel*.”

[83.](#) *Ibid.*, 263.

[84.](#) *Ibid.*, 277.

[85.](#) *Ibid.*, 283: “*morel*.”

[86.](#) Cockayne, *Leechdoms, wortcunning, and starcraft*, vol. 2, 347–49.

[87.](#) Zwinger, *Opus de venenas*, 200: “. . . aut corticis radice eius assumptionem in notabili quantitate sunt insania, seu permistio rationis, & quasi fatuitas, ofuscation coloris, impedimentum & exicatio [reading “excitare”] lingue, singultus, & vomitus plurimus . . . angina, & spasmus . . . mortification.”

[88.](#) Hispanus, *Thesaurus pauperum*, 67.

[89.](#) Flood, “Medieval Herbal Tradition,” 62.

[90.](#) Choulant, *Macer floridus*, 107–08: “Egilopis [reading “Aegilops”]; Aegilops is an ulcer of the inner cornea] Strigni dieunt cataplasma

mederi, Istud idem dicunt capitis prodesse dolori; ignas sacer et herpeta mordax.”

- [91.](#) Lea, *History of the Inquisition*, vol. 3, 384.
- [92.](#) Woodward, *Gerard's Herbal*, 74–75.
- [93.](#) Salverte, *The Occult Sciences*, 15.
- [94.](#) Della Porta, *Natural Magick*, 197–98.
- [95.](#) Quoted in Lewin, *Phantastica*, 110–11.
- [96.](#) Rugdley, *Encyclopedia*, 76.
- [97.](#) Safford, “Synopsis,” 173–89.
- [98.](#) Šeškauskaite and Gliwa, “Some Lithuanian ethnobotanical taxa,” 2.
- [99.](#) Fortenbaugh, *Theophrastus of Eresus*, 79; Woodward, *Gerard's Herbal*, 82.
- [100.](#) Geeta and Gharai Beth, “Historical evidence,” 1230–35.
- [101.](#) Ayuba, “Toxicities and Sedative Effects,” 22–23.
- [102.](#) Quoted in Safford, “Datura of the Old World,” 551.
- [103.](#) Von Megenberg, *Buch der natur*, 396. Some of Von Megenberg's creatures resemble those outlined in Herodotus's *Histories*.
- [104.](#) Weyer, *Witches, Devils, and Doctors*, 230.
- [105.](#) Quoted in Ayuba, “Toxicities,” 24.
- [106.](#) Quoted in Safford, “Synopsis,” 540.
- [107.](#) Pollington, *Leechcraft*, 161.
- [108.](#) Zwinger, *Opus de venenas*, 193: “nuce methel Indicae.”
- [109.](#) Ibid.: “vertiginis,” “rubedo oclorum,” “ebrietas & profunditas somni & and anhelitus.”
- [110.](#) Foley, “Bean, Roots and Leaves,” 147, 179.
- [111.](#) Della Porta, *Natural Magick*, 197–98.
- [112.](#) Quoted in Duerr, *Dreamtime*, 7.
- [113.](#) Lewin, *Phantastica*, 32.
- [114.](#) Belon, *Les observations*, 14–15.
- [115.](#) Lewin, *Phantastica*, 30.

- [116.](#) Scarborough, “Opium Poppy,” 5.
- [117.](#) Riley and Bostock, *Natural History*, vol. 4, book 19, chapter 53, 196.
- [118.](#) Scarborough, “Opium Poppy,” 5–6.
- [119.](#) Dioscorides, *De Materia Medica*, book 4, 608.
- [120.](#) Davenport-Hines, *Pursuit of Oblivion*, 32.
- [121.](#) Weyer, *Witches, Devils, and Doctors*, 229.
- [122.](#) *Collection of Voyages and Travels*, 605.
- [123.](#) *Ibid.*, 797.
- [124.](#) Acosta, *Tractado de las drogas*, 415. The scans I have are corrupted in some areas and are delineated by [. . .]: “. . . y por quanto los que comen este opio, esta medio enagenados [reading ‘enajenar’], y casi priudos de juvzio [?], y razon, por falta de la imaginativa acaban este acto venereo mas tarde . . . exercita ella [. . .] obra, y exercita ella [. . .] obra, y assisuccede [reading ‘asi sucede’] por la mayor parte [. . .] el venereo acto los dos juntamente . . .”
- [125.](#) Quoted in Dormandy, *Opium*, 33.
- [126.](#) Kapoor, *Opium Poppy*, 3.
- [127.](#) Quoted in Dormandy, *Opium*, 32–33.
- [128.](#) Hispanus, *Thesaurus pauperum*, 16–18.
- [129.](#) *Ibid.*, 19–20.
- [130.](#) Dawson, *Leechbook*, 145.
- [131.](#) Zwinger, *Opus de venenas*, 185–86: “hic est venenum, seu venen osa medicina, inter venena ab auctoribus numeratur . . .”; “. . . consequentia assumptione opij, praecipue cum modico boni vini”; “. . . stuporis . . . vertigo” . . . “singultus & tenebrositas oculorū . . . submersio oculorum” . . . “causa pruritus in corpore” . . . “profunditas somni” . . . “Causa permistionis rationis . . .”
- [132.](#) Weyer, *Witches, Devils, and Doctors*, 401.
- [133.](#) Plato, *Last Days*, 182, 199.
- [134.](#) Laertius, *Lives and Opinions*, 72–73.
- [135.](#) Pliny, *Natural History*, 242.
- [136.](#) *Ibid.*, 192.

- [137.](#) Ibid., 242.
- [138.](#) Wellcome, “Anaesthetics,” 22.
- [139.](#) Goffe, “Wine of the Condemned,” 501.
- [140.](#) Quoted in Withington, *Medical History*, 209.
- [141.](#) Juvin and Desmonts, “Ancestors of Inhalational Anesthesia,” 267.
- [142.](#) Quoted in Goffe, “Wine of the Condemned,” 501: “Opium, succus morellae, hyoscyami, cicutae . . .”
- [143.](#) Pollington, *Leechcraft*, 201.
- [144.](#) Ibid., 227.
- [145.](#) Ibid., 399.
- [146.](#) Dawson, *Leechbook or Collection*, 263.
- [147.](#) Hispanus, *Thesaurus pauperum*, 16.
- [148.](#) Zwinger, *Opus de venenas*, 206: “. . . stuporis membrorum corporas . . .”; “. . . permistionis rationis . . .”
- [149.](#) Van Dongen and De Groot, “History of Ergot Alkaloids,” 109.
- [150.](#) Besides countless epidemics that probably went unreported, a small catalog of examples can be found in Sir Henry Solomon Wellcome’s *From Ergot*, 61. Some of the more notable outbreaks occurred in 857 and 944 (Aquitaine, Limousin, Angoumois, Perigord); in 957 (Paris); in 1039 (Metz); in 1089 (Lorraine); in 1129 (Paris); from 1648 to 1675 (Voigtland); from 1660 to 1674 (Aquitaine, Gattinai, Sologne); in 1702 (Freiburg); in 1709 (Bern, Lucerne, Zurich); and in 1716 (Saxony, Lusatia).
- [151.](#) Quoted in Wellcome, *From Ergot*, 34.
- [152.](#) Weyer, *Witches, Devils, and Doctors*, 227.
- [153.](#) Quoted in Ginzburg, *Ecstasies*, 304.
- [154.](#) Schiff, “Ergot,” 98.
- [155.](#) Hofmann, *LSD*, 29; for first mention of ergot, see Ginzburg, *Ecstasies*, 304.
- [156.](#) Dawson, *Leechbook or Collection*, 173, 245, 271.
- [157.](#) Ibid., 199, 245.
- [158.](#) Miller, *Encyclopedia of Addictive Drugs*, 61.

- [159.](#) Long and Maclean, *Decii Junii*, satire 1, 10: “Occurrit matrona potens, quae molle Calenum, [p]orrectura viro miscet sitiente rubetam.”
- [160.](#) Throop, *Hildegard of Bingen’s Physica*, 231.
- [161.](#) Dante, *Divine Comedy*, vol. 1: Inferno, canto 20, line 115, p. 311.
- [162.](#) Quoted in Brown, *Enquiry*, 253: “mirabilia pulvis”; “. . . bufones tenentes venenum . . . ponantur in quo vase unde non valeant exire”; “Postea accipe anfodillos recentes et eleboram album in bona quantitate extrahe inde succum cum eis quantum pones pone succum in vase illo quo sunt rane et dimitte eas bibere per ix dies . . .”; “. . . pone ipsam furno ita ut animalia comburantur combustione sufficienti”; “inde ea et tere diligenter et cum opus fuerit de pulvere [reading *pulere* as “pennyroyal” (I am working from an incomplete scan)]”; “. . . mutat ipsum . . .”; also Thorndike, *History of Magic*, vol. 2, 337.
- [163.](#) Zwinger, *Opus de venenas*, 232: “. . . et natura sputi eorum, est adhuc magis venenosa quam sit natura sanguinis eorum, & natura vaporum eorum cum aere expulso per eorum expirationem, praecipue cum irati sunt, est stupefactiva.”
- [164.](#) Joseph Hansen, *Quellen und untersuchungen*, 522: “. . . ‘divine’ und ‘sorciere’ . . .”; “. . . Macete dit aussi, que ou temps dessus dit, elle ouy dire et entendi desdites femmes, ses voisines oue se la femme qui feroit ou vouldroit faire les choses dessus dites, par elle divisées, vouloit qu’il empirast plus grandement à sondit mary, ou à celui ou ceulx pour qui et en quell entencion elle feroit ou vouldroit faire ces choses, qu’il convendroit que l’en prenist deux botereaux, et a la prise que l’en feroit d’un chascun d’iceulx, qui seroient mis separément et divisément chascun en un pot de terre neuf, convendroit que quant l’en vouldroit prendre iceulx et l’en les verroit, que par trois fois l’en appellast en son avde ledit Luciafer, deist aussi par trois fois l’euvangile saint Jehan, la paternoster et Ave Amria, et que eulx mis en icelux poz de terre . . .”
- [165.](#) Quoted in Lea, *History of the Inquisition*, vol. 3, 657: “. . . et inter alia quinque imagines cereas diversis temporibus successive fecisti et fabricasti; et quamplurima venenosa etiam immiscendo; et sanguinem bufonis terribili et horribili modo extractum . . .”
- [166.](#) Cohn, *Europe’s Inner Demons*, 132.
- [167.](#) Quoted in Benton, *Self and Society*, 217–18.

- [168.](#) Joseph Hansen, *Quellen und untersuchungen*, 53: “. . . N. fecit et figuravit duas ymagine de cera cum plumbo . . . congregates et collectis muscis, araneis, ranis et buffonibus, spolio serpentis et quibusdam rebus aliis plurimis infra ymagine repositis et inclusis cum coniurationibus et invocationibus demonum, extracto etiam sanguine de aliqua parte sui corporis et commixto cum sanguine buffonis et oblate seu dato daemonibus invocates loco sacrificii in honorem et reverentiam eorumdem . . .”
- [169.](#) Ibid., 48: “. . . item, de fatis mulieribus quas vocant ‘bona res’ que . . . vadunt de nocte”; “. . . collection herbarum flexis genibus versa facie ad orientem cum oration dominica . . .”
- [170.](#) De la Fons, “Des Sorciers,” 437–38: “. . . crapaud avec les cérémonies usitées pour le baptême des chrétiens . . .”
- [171.](#) Klose, *Darstellung der inneren*, 101: “Anna Bromm hat Georg Beckern ihr eignes Wasser zu trinken gegeben. Georg Kromern hat sie Kröten gesten [reading “gestern”] mit ihrer Mutter und mit einer andern Frauen; dafür sie einen Kaninchen Pelz genommen. Ingleichen [reading “In gleichen”] Barthelu hat sie auch ihr eigens Wasser gegeben. Ihrem Manne hat sie ihren eignen Schweis, den sie genommen, wenn sie zum Bade gegangen ist, zu trinken gegeben. Endlich hat sie bekant [reading “bekannt”]: Dass die Zeysse Magdalena zu Schebitz ihr solche Zauberei geleret habe. Sie ist Montag nach Michael, 1481 ersäuft worden.”
- [172.](#) R. Trevor Davies, *Four Centuries*, 67; Morgan, *Toads and Toadstools*, 84–87.

CHAPTER 5. VENEFICIA

[Epigraph 1.](#) Quoted in Weyer, *Witches, Devils, and Doctors*, 338.

[Epigraph 2.](#) Ibid., 279.

- [1.](#) Quoted in Fernie, *Herbal Simples*, 164.
- [2.](#) Thompson, *Chronicon Angliae*, 98: “. . . herbarum potentium succos . . .”
- [3.](#) Lea, *History of the Inquisition*, vol. 3, 463.
- [4.](#) Kieckhefer, *European Witch Trials*, 119, 121.
- [5.](#) Kieckhefer, “Avenging the Blood,” 96.
- [6.](#) Kieckhefer., *European Witch Trials*, 125.

- [7.](#) Joseph Hansen, *Quellen und untersuchungen*, 167: “per pulveres amatorios aut pocula vel houppellos amatorios . . . intoxicaciones procurant plurimas.”
- [8.](#) Kieckhefer, *European Witch Trials*, 58.
- [9.](#) Quoted in Bever, *Realities of Witchcraft*, 132.
- [10.](#) *Ibid.*, 133.
- [11.](#) Kieckhefer, *European Witch Trials*, 97.
- [12.](#) Weyer, *Witches, Devils, and Doctors*, 230–31.
- [13.](#) *Ibid.*, 408–9.
- [14.](#) Quoted in Giles, *Laughter of the Saints*, 49: “Y saca de licor una ampolleta [reading “amapola”] . . . Echo el licor; d’ enganos ordeno. Que la hizo dormir . . . Abracala a sabor y a plazer toca . . . Ora le besa el pecho, ora la boca . . .”
- [15.](#) Payne, *Decameron*, 272.
- [16.](#) *Ibid.*, 236.
- [17.](#) Quoted in Byloff, *Hexenglaube und Hexenverfolgung*, 109; also Duerr, *Dreamtime*, 137.
- [18.](#) Quoted in Bever, *Realities of Witchcraft*, 132.
- [19.](#) *Ibid.*, 130.
- [20.](#) Cohn, *Europe’s Inner Demons*, 218.
- [21.](#) Going by Lilienskiold’s records, only seventeen of the eighty-three show evidence of ergot inspired witches’ rites. See Torbjørn Alm, “The Witch Trials of Finnmark,” 406–11.
- [22.](#) Cellini, *Autobiography*, 134–35.
- [23.](#) Kieckhefer, *Forbidden Rites*, 152.
- [24.](#) Magnus, *De vegetabiblius*, 527: “Qui autem in nigromanticis student, tradunt characterem iusquiami pictum debere esse in homine, quando faciunt daemonum invocationes.”
- [25.](#) Agrippa, *Three Books*, 133.
- [26.](#) *Ibid.*, 134.
- [27.](#) Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages*, 156.
- [28.](#) *Ibid.*, 163.

- [29.](#) Psellus, *Fourteen Byzantine Rulers*, book 3, chapter 26, 81 (for Cedrenus, see fn. 41).
- [30.](#) *Popular Educator*, 89; also Wepfer, *Cicutae aquaticae historia*, 230–33.
- [31.](#) Burton, *Anatomy of Melancholy*, 255–56.
- [32.](#) Joseph Hansen, *Quellen und untersuchungen*, 228.
- [33.](#) Ward, *Secretes of the Reverent Maister*, 257.
- [34.](#) Paracelsus, *Hermetic and Alchemical Writings*, vol. 2, 158.
- [35.](#) Easlea, *Witch-hunting*, 39.

CHAPTER 6. SOPORIFIC SPELLS

- [Epigraph 1.](#) Della Porta, *Natural Magick*, 10.
- [Epigraph 2.](#) Quoted in Duerr, *Dreamtime*, 156.
- [1.](#) Ginzburg, *Ecstasies*, 297.
- [2.](#) Mormando, *Preacher's Demons*, 88–89.
- [3.](#) Orlandi, *Saint Bernardine of Siena*, 166
- [4.](#) Mormando, *Preacher's Demons*, 15.
- [5.](#) Orlandi, *Saint Bernardine of Siena*, 166.
- [6.](#) *Ibid.*, 166.
- [7.](#) Mormando, *Preacher's Demons*, 60.
- [8.](#) Orlandi, *Saint Bernardine of Siena*, 166.
- [9.](#) Russell, *Witchcraft in the Middle Ages*, 227.
- [10.](#) McNeill and Gamer, *Medieval Handbooks*, 330.
- [11.](#) Lea, *History of the Inquisition*, vol. 3, 381.
- [12.](#) Joseph Hansen, *Quellen und untersuchungen*, 43–44: “. . . augures et ydolatras.”
- [13.](#) *Ibid.*, 48: “. . . carmina verborum poma et herbas . . .”; “. . . de collection herbarum flexis genibus versa facie ad orientem cum oration dominica . . .”; “. . . de fatis mulieribus quas vocant ‘bona res’ que, ut dicunt, vadunt de nocte . . .”
- [14.](#) Quoted in Keickhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages*, 68.
- [15.](#) Pollington, *Leechcraft*, 247.

- [16.](#) Martin of Arles, *Tractatus de superstitionibus*.
- [17.](#) Knight, *Account of the Remains*, 165–66.
- [18.](#) Gentilcore, *From Bishop to Witch*, 134.
- [19.](#) Martin, *Tractatus de superstitionibus*, 9 (f. A8v): “Nec tamen negare debemus lilas herbas habere virtutem medicinalem ad fumationes faciendas contra infirmitates puerorum et etiam iumentorum; non tamen hoc prove-nit ex coilectione precise taus diei, nec ex coilectione ante soils ortum vei post solis ortum, ut quidam fatue credunt, sed ex virtute naturali earum herbarum, quam etiani eo tempore jam attingunt.”
- [20.](#) Orlandi, *Saint Bernardine of Siena*, 167.
- [21.](#) Mormando, *Preacher’s Demons*, 63.
- [22.](#) Joseph Hansen, *Quellen und untersuchungen*, 110: “Et inter cetera pueros in cunabulis iacentes maleficiis infecit, quos ex post sanando, dum converteretur in hominem, mercedem usurpavit.”
- [23.](#) Quoted in Mormando, *Preacher’s Demons*, 64.
- [24.](#) Conti, *Preachers and Confessors*, 140.
- [25.](#) Mormando, phone conversation with author, February, 23, 2012.
- [26.](#) Dehn, *Book of Abramelin*, 24.
- [27.](#) Ibid., 12.
- [28.](#) Ibid., 20–21.
- [29.](#) Ibid., 23.
- [30.](#) Barto, *Tannhäuser*, 2–3.
- [31.](#) Barber, *Holy Grail*, 9–10.
- [32.](#) Ten Brink, *Early English Literature*, 173.
- [33.](#) De Troyes, *Four Arthurian Romances*, 8.
- [34.](#) Barto, *Tannhäuser*, xix.
- [35.](#) Fontenrose, *Python*, 541.
- [36.](#) Ibid., 7.
- [37.](#) Barto, *Tannhäuser*, 10–11.
- [38.](#) Ibid., 47.
- [39.](#) Remy, “Origin of the Tannhäuser-legend,” 42.

- [40.](#) Quoted in Barto, *Tannhäuser*, 17.
- [41.](#) Nider, *Preceptorium divine legis*, book 1, chapter 11, G: “. . . an veritas aliqua subsit his quae dicuntur de Monte Veneris, ubi cum pulcherrimis feminis dicuntur quidam frui luxuria et voluptate ad placitum[?]”
- [42.](#) Piccolomini, *Opera quae extant omnia*, 531–32: “Nursia ubi praeceptus mons inge tem speluncam facit . . .”; “. . . artes ediscunt magicas . . .”
- [43.](#) Quoted in Barto, *Tannhäuser*, 19–20. In this version, Tannhäuser marries Venus (see Remy, “Origin”).
- [44.](#) Remy, “Origin of the Tannhäuser-legend,” 48.
- [45.](#) *Ibid.*, 49.
- [46.](#) Faber, *Evagatorium*, 153: “Non autem solum viridarium Venus suo consecraverat ritui, sed montem civitati superimminentem libidinis sevit plantulis et umbrosas cavernas in monte . . . Aliquas cavernas fecit ad flendum in eis Adonidem, aliquas ad luxuriandum.”
- [47.](#) Behringer, “How Waldensians Became Witches,” 102.
- [48.](#) Plantsch, *Opusculum de sagis*, book 1, p. 13: “Secudo hoc hominu damnatu genus attentat per maleficia sua, face re [reading “facere”] mutationes locales sui ipsius uP [?] aliarum rerum corporalium . . . sic enim dicitur quorum usu catulorum seu aliarua bestiarum, usu furcarum, aut baculo scobarum aut aliarua rerum equitent ad cellaria divitua & eorunde vina luxuriando ebibant, aut ad foeni, vulgo Herberg dictum, ubi choreisando [reading “scherzando”] laeta celebrent convivia . . .”
- [49.](#) Hansen, *Quellen und untersuchungen*, 437: “Die ersten tünd wider das gebot, die unholda sind, die vil unglucks tribent und salb machent und enweg farent. Als ainost aime, du saß in ain mult, du stund uff aim tisch, und wand ouch, si wölt über den Höwberg faren und hottet nun fast in der mult und fiel in des tufels namen undern tisch, das du mult uff ir lag. Sie fiel ouch gewiß nit in gotz namen. Wer solt sollichs volcks nit lachen, das also an deu wenden gant, es sind unholdan.” (Thanks to Gerhild Williams for translation from German.)
- [50.](#) Nider, *Formicarius*, book 2, chapter 4 (unpaged): “. . . feminam quandam demantatem . . .”; “. . . cum fida dignis hominibus . . .”; “Southern swath” from Bailey, *Battling Demons*, 96. Ginzburg, in *Ecstasies*, translates *vetula* as “heifer” (see pp. 185 and 198, fn. 16);

Aberdeen Bestiary (12th century), f.93r.: “[I]n the same way *vetula*, a little old woman, comes from *vetustus*, aged”; “Hinc et *vetula* quasi *vetusta*.”

[51.](#) Bailey, *Battling Demons*, 39.

[52.](#) Joseph Hansen, *Quellen und untersuchungen*, 88: “Cui pater: Sines ergo me esse presentem, cum de proximo recedes. Respondit illa: Ita placet, et me recedere videbis presentibus (si placet) testibus idoneis. Igitur ut deyrā animarum zelator convinceret . . . cum fidedignis hominibus . . .”

[53.](#) Ibid.: “. . . opere demonis . . .”; “Ubi queso es? Non cum Diana fuisti . . . nonquam de cubella recessisti? . . . Ex his igitur gestis et menditanibus verbis salutiferis animum ad sui erroris detestationem devexit.”

[54.](#) See Bailey, *Battling Demons*; Ostorero, Bagliani, Tremp, and Chène, *L’imaginaire du Sabbat*, 213–20.

[55.](#) Levack, *Witch-Hunt*, 34.

[56.](#) Bailey, *Battling Demons*, 12, 32, 91–95, 140.

[57.](#) Klaniczay, “The Process of Trance,” 206.

[58.](#) For *vetula* as being synonymous with *witch*, see Cardini, *Magia, stregoneria*, 202.

[59.](#) Bailey, *Battling Demons*, 96–97.

[60.](#) Nider, *Preceptorium*, book 1, chapter 10.

[61.](#) Ibid.: “. . . tenet in somnis deludēs . . .”; “transiturā dixit vesus dominam herodiadem vel venerem . . .”

[62.](#) Joseph Hansen, *Quellen und untersuchungen*, 93: “. . . De solidiori huius materia unguentum facimus nostris voluntatibus et artibus ac transmutationibus accomodatum”; “. . . universalem ecclesiam . . .”

[63.](#) See Ginzburg, *Ecstasies*, 94–95. The trend of associating certain folk practices with this fertility goddess was not exclusive to Nider.

[64.](#) Bailey, *Battling Demons*, 125.

[65.](#) Joseph Hansen, *Quellen und untersuchungen*, 108: “Et patet, quod iste sit sensus litterae, quia cum dicitur . . . et qui rectam fidem non habet . . . sed illius, in quem credit, id est diaboli. . . . Hoc autem est, quia credunt Dianam deam esse, et tamen Diana est diabolus.”

[66](#). Ibid., 109: “. . . ideo negandum non est, mulieres maleficas et etiam viros, factis quibusdam nefandis caeremoniis et unctionibus a dæmonibus assume et per diversa loca portari, et multos huius generis in unum locum convenire, et dæmonibus honorem quondam exhibere ac libidini et omni turpitudini vacare.”

[67](#). Ibid., 109: “. . . nam quaedam mixtiones sunt, quibus si ungantur, partes corporis, quae urendae vel secandae sunt, non erit sensus doloris. Scimus quoque, genus unctionis esse, quo tanta fit mentis alienatio et abstractio hominis a se ipso, ut per certum temporis spacium nulla sensatio inveniatur in eo . . .”; “Sunt enim mulieres quaedam, quas maleficas vocamus, quae profitentur facta quandam unctione cum certis verborum observationibus ire, quando voluerint, ad diversa loca, viros et foeminas convenire, ubi omnium voluptatum generibus, tam in cibis quam in complexibus perfruantur.”

CHAPTER 7. INCEPTION OF THE SATANIC WITCH

[Epigraph 1](#): Joseph Hansen, *Quellen und untersuchungen*, 48: “. . . item, de fatibus mulieribus quas vocant ‘bona res’ que, ut dicunt, vadunt de nocte.”

[Epigraph 2](#): De Bergerac, “Letter Against Witches,” 117.

- [1](#). Joseph Hansen, *Quellen und untersuchungen*, 92: “. . . grandis maleficus . . .”
- [2](#). Bailey, *Battling Demons*, 48.
- [3](#). Ibid., 44–45.
- [4](#). Ibid., 44.
- [5](#). D’Auvergne, *Opera Omnia*, vol. 1, chapter 27, 89: “Quare declaratum est tibi figuras, & characteres hujusmodi non ex virtute sua aliqua naturali operari mirifica illa, sed ex Daemonum pacto.”
- [6](#). Scot, *Discoverie of Witchcraft*, book 15, chapter 11, 219–20.
- [7](#). Weyer, *Witches, Devils, and Doctors*, 263.
- [8](#). Orlandi, *Saint Bernardine of Siena*, 166.
- [9](#). Joseph Hansen, *Quellen und untersuchungen*, 5: “. . . quamplures esse solo nomine christianos . . .”; “et pactum faciunt cum inferno, dæmonibus namque immolant, hos adorant, fabricant ac fabricari

procurant imagines, annulum vel speculum vel phialam vel rem quamcunque aliam magice . . .”

10. Ibid., 56–57: “. . . captum et infatuatum fuisse amore cuiusdam mulieris ad finem libidinis exercende fecisse quod fecit, an crimini detrahatur, cum furiosus et demens fecerit.”
11. Kors and Peters, *Witchcraft in Europe*, 122.
12. Quoted in Levack, *Witchcraft Sourcebook*, 48.
13. Peters, *Magician*, 135.
14. Bailey, “Benedek Láng,” 324.
15. Quoted in Levack, *Witchcraft Sourcebook*, 39.
16. Kieckhefer, *European Witch Trials*, 58.
17. Guiley, *Encyclopedia of Witches*, 38. Guiley’s passage, however, seems to have been taken almost verbatim from Buckland, *Buckland’s Complete Book of Witchcraft*, 7.
18. For an exhaustive litany of superstitions involving brooms, see Thorpe, *Northern Mythology*, 22, 151, 157, 175. Another work from the same period is Kelly, *Curiosities of Indo-European Tradition*, 225–28. Weyer, *Witches, Devils, and Doctors*, 265, also describes a local rite where a broom is dipped in water and shaken in the air.
19. Harner, *Hallucinogens and Shamanism*, 131; Rudgley, *Encyclopaedia*, 47; Harrison, *Roots of Witchcraft*, 194–96; accessed via: http://cdn.preterhuman.net/texts/religion.occult.new_age/Magick/The%20Roots%20of%20Witchcraft.pdf
20. Lea, *Materials*, vol. 1, 174.
21. Näsström, “Freyja and Frigg,” 88.
22. Paxson, *Essential Asatru*, 81.
23. Pope, *Homilies*, vol. 2, “On the False Gods,” 667–68.
24. Näsström, “Freyja and Frigg,” 88–89.
25. Russell, *Witchcraft in the Middle Ages*, 256.
26. Joseph Hansen, *Quellen und untersuchungen*, 460: “. . . ad ‘factium’ sive ad synagogam accessisti, in unam baculum ministerio dicti dyaboli equitando . . .”

- [27.](#) Ibid., 462: “. . . ad certos synagogas ad ‘factum’ de nocte et in diversis locis, ibidemque certos infantes cum sua comictiva comedit et uno baculo ministerio dicti dyaboli equictando [reading “equitando”].”
- [28.](#) Russell, *Witchcraft in the Middle Ages*, 256–68.
- [29.](#) Joseph Hansen, *Quellen und untersuchungen*, 465: “. . . quia equitabat quilibet ipsorum baculum et ibant tamquam ventus.”
- [30.](#) Ibid., 541–43: “Item illum dyabolum adorabat tanquam deum de nocte genibus flexis, deinde vertendo culum versus solis ortum, et faciebat crucem in terra et desuper expuebat ter, et ter pedem sinistrum ponebat desuper et mingebat et stercorabat, et ubicumque crucem videbat, contra eam expuebat et ter deum renegabat”; “. . . cum ipse et alii de secta in ictu oculi super stercore muli vel equi . . .”; “in die festis. Johannis Baptiste certas herbas colligebat pro medicinis . . .”; “ex basilisco, buffone, serpent, aranea vel scorpione. Item plus dixit, quod de dicto veneno dedit cuidam vocato Conrado in civitate de Monaco in Bavario et in quadam scutella”; “penas ultimi . . .”
- [31.](#) Although the title speaks of “Cathars,” a known heretical group, contextually *Gazarii* here means “witches.” Joseph Hansen, *Quellen und untersuchungen*, 119–22: “. . . omnibus pretermisissis secum ad synagogam properabit, attento quod dictus seducens unguenta ad hoc pertinentia et baculum debebat ministrare, prout facit”; “. . . in specie cati nigri, aliquando in specie hominis non tanem perfecti . . .”; “. . . dyabolus, qui tunc presidet, clamat lumine extinguendo “Mestlet, mestlet”; “. . . unguentum de predicta pinguedine puerorum mixta eum animalibus venenatissimis, ut put, cum serpentibus, bufonibus, lacertis, araneis . . .”
- [32.](#) Ibid., 118. *Sabbat* here is used anachronistically; the word used in the texts at this time is *synagogue*.
- [33.](#) Behringer, “How Waldensians Became Witches,” 163.
- [34.](#) Wadding et al., *Annales Minorum*, vol. 9, 328: “Quodque nonnulli Christiani, & perfidi Judaei infra eosdem terminos constituti, novas sectas, & prohibitos ritus . . . occulto dogmatizant”; “. . . sortilegi, divini, Daemonum invocatores, carminatores, conjuratores, superstitiosi, augures, utentes artibus nefariis & prohibitis . . .”
- [35.](#) “On provincial and synodal councils.”

- [36.](#) “Monition of the council of Florence.”
- [37.](#) Behringer, “How Waldensians Became Witches,” 167.
- [38.](#) Russell, *History of Witchcraft*, 76.
- [39.](#) Behringer, *Shaman of Oberstdorf*, 131.
- [40.](#) Kors and Peters, *Witchcraft in Europe*, 165.
- [41.](#) Behringer, “How Waldensians Became Witches,” 163.
- [42.](#) Joseph Hansen, *Quellen und untersuchungen*, 533: “. . . hexssen und der zubrern . . .” (Thanks to Kayla Wing for translation from German.)
- [43.](#) Ibid., 536; Klaniczay and Pócs, *Demons, Spirits, Witches*, vol. 3, 21–22; Elliott, *Bride of Christ*, 398; Ostorero, Bagliani, Tresp, Chène, *L’imaginaire du Sabbat*, 215.
- [44.](#) Ostorero, Bagliani, Tresp, and Chène, *L’imaginaire du Sabbat*, 457: “Ung oignement lui aporta, De diverses poisons confit, Don’t elle maint home des-fit Depuis, encores plus de cent, Et affola et contrefit Maint bel et plaisant innocent.” (Thanks to ElizabethTimpone for translation from French.)
- [45.](#) Quoted in Wright, “Chapters in the History of Sorcery and Magic,” 73: “Et que chechy? Cuide ton que je sois Vauldoise?”
- [46.](#) Ibid., 78–79.
- [47.](#) Ibid., 80.
- [48.](#) Ibid., 82.
- [49.](#) Zika, *Appearance of Witchcraft*, 61.
- [50.](#) Tinctoris, “Sermo de secta Vaudensium,” 359: “. . . pulueres ex bufonibus et mortuorum ossibus incendio resolutis conficiunt, et predicto sanguine atque menstruali commixtos illos in pastam liquidam vertunt . . . ad volatum et celerem aëris . . .” For French text, see Joseph Hansen, *Quellen und untersuchungen*, 184–88.
- [51.](#) Duerr, *Dreamtime*, 141.
- [52.](#) Bailey, *Historical Dictionary of Witchcraft*, 57–64.
- [53.](#) Behringer, “How Waldensians Became Witches,” 169.
- [54.](#) Biller, *Waldensians*, 49–50.

[55.](#) Kurze, *Quellen zur Ketzergeschichte*, 113: “ante paradisum . . . habentes a deo potestatem dimittendi peccata ita bene sicut sacerdotes . . .” Other relevant passages that mention this phenomenon, p. 208: “. . . et quod semel in anno venirent ad paradisum duo ex ipsis, et reciperent ibi a deo auctoritatem melius presbiteris dimittendi peccata, et non crediderit eos presbiteros, quia non viderit, eos celebrare missas . . .”; p. 222: “. . . et quod de septennio ad septennium venirent ante paradisum ad audiendum ibidem sapienciam ab apostolis dei . . .”; p. 230: “et quod (= heresiarche) de septennio ad septennium venirent ante paradisum ad audiendum ibidem sapienciam”; p. 341: “. . . et quod postea venissent ante paradisum et audivissent vocem domini dei dantis ipsis sapienciam et doctrinam . . .”; p. 247: “. . . et quod ante paradisum venirent et vocem domini dei audirent . . .”

[56.](#) Ibid., 208: “. . . et de secta essent in celo . . .”

[57.](#) Klaniczay, “The Process of Trance,” 217.

[58.](#) Quoted in Behringer, *Shaman of Oberstdorf*, 19.

[59.](#) Ginzburg, *Night Battles*, 17.

[60.](#) Behringer, *Shaman of Oberstdorf*, 66.

[61.](#) Joseph Hansen, *Quellen und untersuchungen*, 199: “. . . vulgares communiter tenet, immo et ipse strige fatentur . . . certa unctione inungunt baculum . . . puta sub unguibus vel in ore aut in aure vel sub capillis aut sub brachiis . . . quod totum fit virtute demonis.”

[62.](#) Behringer, *Shaman of Oberstdorf*, 23.

[63.](#) Hansen, *Quellen und untersuchungen*, 230: “Venenis igitur utuntur venefici pariter et poculis quibusdam atque unguentis, quibus humanas mentes perturbant, corpora alterant et plerumque homines interficiunt. Horam eciam venenorum virtute per noctes se dicunt ad sabbata longe remota demonum portari. Que tanem singular recte iudicanti naturali non sunt virtuti alicui talium venenorum attribuenda, sed magis fallaci astucie demonis, qui huismodi unguentorum linitionibus aut poculorum exhaustionibus ex pacto cum primis huius damnatu artis inventoribus expresse inito assistit et illa, que virtute predictorum fieri creduntur, ipse demon applicando active passivis operator, qui causa principalis est et effective, huismodi vero venena per maleficis adhibita causa sunt, sine qua non fierent ista.”

- [64.](#) Ibid., 229: “. . . mandragore cortcem cum vino mixtum ad bibendum.”
- [65.](#) Daunay, Laterrot, and Janick, “Iconography and History of Solanaceae,” 9.
- [66.](#) Joseph Hansen, *Quellen und untersuchungen*, 131. Hansen takes *Pharaildis* to mean “Herodias.” The name could also refer to Saint Pharaildis, the patron saint of Ghent, Belgium. Pharaildis also had a “miracle of the bones” story attributed to her that involved a goose; see Behringer, *Shaman of Oberstdorf*, 42.
- [67.](#) Joseph Hansen, *Quellen und untersuchungen*, 131: “. . . nemlich die un hulden . . .”; “. . . als am suntag prechen und graben si solsequium, am mentag lunariam, am erctag verbenam, am mittwochen mercurialem, am pünztag barbam Jovis, am freitag capillos Veneris, daruss machen sie dan salben mit mischung etlichs plutz von vogel, auch schmalz von tieren, das ich als nit schreib, das yeman darvon sol geergert werden.” (Thanks to Kayla Wing for translation from German.)
- [68.](#) Culpeper, *Culpeper’s Complete Herbal*, 182, 184, 251.
- [69.](#) Kramer and Sprenger, *Malleus Maleficarum*, 107.
- [70.](#) Ibid., 100.
- [71.](#) Quoted in Duerr, *Dreamtime*, 7–8.
- [72.](#) Della Mirandola, *Dialogus strix*, book 2, “De Strigibus”: “Quod nam id unguētū”; “Ex infantiū sanguine magna ex parte confectū”; “Quid ungebas”; “Partes, quibus ad sedēdum utor”; “. . . in pernitiōsis unguentis in puerorū sanguine inoxio [reading “inóxio”] . . .”; “. . . in digressu corporeo per aeris interualla.”
- [73.](#) Monter, *Witchcraft in France*, 56–57.

CHAPTER 8. LAMIARUM UNGUENTUM

[Epigraph 1:](#) Bergerac, “A Letter Against Witches,” 61.

[Epigraph 2:](#) Della Porta, *Natural Magick*, 10.

- [1.](#) Levack, *Witch-Hunt in Early Modern Europe*, 185–87.
- [2.](#) Nauert, *Agrippa*, 6.
- [3.](#) Weyer, *Witches, Devils, and Doctors*, xxxi.
- [4.](#) Agrippa, *Three Books*, xxiv–xxv.

- [5.](#) Nauert, *Agrippa*, 19.
- [6.](#) Monter, “Toads and Eucharists,” 587.
- [7.](#) Zilboorg, *Medical Man and the Witch*, 105.
- [8.](#) Nauert, *Agrippa*, 17.
- [9.](#) Agrippa, *Of the Vanitie*, xviii.
- [10.](#) Ball, *Devil’s Doctor*, 40.
- [11.](#) Thorndike, *History of Magic*, vol. 5, 127.
- [12.](#) Nauert, *Agrippa*, 3.
- [13.](#) Ball, *Devil’s Doctor*, 196.
- [14.](#) Quoted in Gravenstein, “Paracelsus,” 805.
- [15.](#) Thorndike, *History of Magic*, vol. 5, 431.
- [16.](#) Ball, *Devil’s Doctor*, 82.
- [17.](#) *Ibid.*, 84.
- [18.](#) Paracelsus, *Four Treatises*, 182–83.
- [19.](#) *Ibid.*, 169, 172, 189.
- [20.](#) Quoted in Gravenstein, “Paracelsus,” 808.
- [21.](#) Ball, *Devil’s Doctor*, 195.
- [22.](#) Laguna *Annotationes* (Lugduni, 1554), 339: “. . . vanas images; non iniucundas [reading “in iūcundas”] observari.”
- [23.](#) *Ibid.* (1570 edition), 421: “. . . una planta que en italia se dize Stramonia”; “. . . que beuida con vino una drama de la rayz del Solano acarreador de locura, representa ciertas ymaginationes vanas, empero muy agradables: lo qual [reading “cual”] se ha de entender entre sueños. Aquesta [reading “Esta”] pues deue ser (segun pienso) la virtud de aquellos unguentos con que se suelen untar las bruxas.”
- [24.](#) Friedenwald, “Andres Laguna,” 1041.
- [25.](#) Quoted in *ibid.*
- [26.](#) Cardano, *De subtilitate*, 592: “Unguentum lamiarum . . .”; “. . . constat pinguedine puerorum ut dicunt, succisque apij, aconiti, pentaphylli, solani ac fuligine”; “Sed tamen dormire creduntur dum haec vident, videt autem theatra, viridaria, coenas, ornatus, vestes, formosos iuuenes, Reges, magistratus, item daemonas, coruos, carceres, soliditudinem,

tormenta.” This latter imagery is the earliest reference to a “bummer” that I could find.

- [27.](#) Quoted in Weyer, *Witches, Devils, and Doctors*, 225.
- [28.](#) *Ibid.*, 226–27.
- [29.](#) *Ibid.*, 275.
- [30.](#) Weyer, *De Praestigiis*, 315–16: “. . . mortem, aut morbum grauem . . .”
- [31.](#) *Ibid.*: “. . . sic magis per somnum ferri videntur in diversas regiones, atque ibi multifariam affici, prout uniuscuiusque fuerit temperies, unguento adiuuante.”
- [32.](#) Weyer, *Witches, Devils, and Doctors*, 230.
- [33.](#) Zilboorg, *Medical Man*, 115; Cobben, *Jan Wier, Devils, Witches*, 45.
- [34.](#) Weyer, *Witches, Devils, and Doctors*, 230.
- [35.](#) Boguet, *Examen*, 70.
- [36.](#) Remy, *Demonolatry*, 106.
- [37.](#) *Ibid.*, 104.
- [38.](#) Guazzo, *Compendium Maleficarum*, 83.
- [39.](#) *Ibid.*, 34.
- [40.](#) *Ibid.*, 84.
- [41.](#) Eamon, *Science and the Secrets*, 202–3; Clark, *Thinking with Demons*, 237–38; Ginzburg, *Ecstasies*, 151.
- [42.](#) Della Porta, *Natural Magick*, 197–98.
- [43.](#) *Ibid.*, 198–99.
- [44.](#) *Ibid.*, 9.
- [45.](#) Weyer, *Witches, Devils, and Doctors*, 199.
- [46.](#) Bever, *Realities of Witchcraft*, 133.
- [47.](#) *Ibid.*, 134.
- [48.](#) Augustine, *City of God*, 237.
- [49.](#) Zika, *Appearance of Witchcraft*, 134–39.
- [50.](#) Kramer and Sprenger, *Malleus Maleficarum*, 63.

- [51.](#) Witekind, *Christlich bedencken*, 112: “. . . katze, hunde, wollfē, esel, verwandelt werden . . .” (Thanks to Hanne Spence for translation from German.)
- [52.](#) Midelfort, *Witch Hunting*, 57.
- [53.](#) Weyer, *Witches, Devils, and Doctors*, 343.
- [54.](#) Danken, “Curiosa aus der Teufels-Periode des Mittelalters,” 25: “. . . von einem wolffsuchtigen Weibe, das sich in Gegenwart und auf Verlangen der Richter gesalbt, in tiefen, dreistundigen Schlaf verfallen war und, zu sich gekommen, erklärte: sie sei in der Stadt gewesen und habe dort als Wolf ein Schaf und eine Kuh zerrissen . . .” (Thanks to Hanne Spence for translation from German.)
- [55.](#) Nynauld, *De la lycanthropie*, 49: “Quantaux onguens, ils peuuent estre composez de certaines choses prises d’un crapaut . . .”
- [56.](#) *Ibid.*, 24: “la morelle furieuse” [reading “furieux”] and “la morelle endormāte.”
- [57.](#) *Ibid.*, 24–25: “racine de la belladonna . . . l’Aconit . . . l’opium, l’hyoscyame, cyguë . . .”; “desquels le Diable se sert pour troubler les sens de ses esclaves”; “tröpēt [reading “tromper”] les sens par diverses figures & representations . . . qui fait voir les ombres des Enfers . . .”
- [58.](#) D’Argens, *Lettres Juives*, 192: “Ecoute, lui dit Gassendi, il faut que tu me montres la Drogue que tu prens [reading “prends”] pour aller a l’Assemblée Infernale & je veux ce soir t’y accompagner”; “Il dependra de vous, resondit le Berger & je vous y menerai, dès que Minuit aura sonné.”
- [59.](#) Gribbin, *Scientists*, 102, 115.
- [60.](#) Rudgley, *Encyclopedia*, 266; also Crowe, *Night-Side of Nature*, 128. The oldest source I could find for this claim is in 1846, in Salverte, *Occult Sciences*, 44–45.
- [61.](#) D’Argens, *Lettres Juives*, 192–93: “Gassendi à été Témoin oculaire de l’Egarement d’un de ces pretendus Magiciens.” (Thanks to Marie Phillips for translation from French.)
- [62.](#) *Ibid.*, 191: “Nous l’avons arrêté; & nous allons le remettre entre les Mains de la Justice.” (Thanks to Marie Phillips for translation from French.)

- [63.](#) Ibid.: “Monsieur, répondit le Berger, je vous avoue, que je vais tous les Jours au Sabat. C’est un de mes Amis, qui m’a donné le Beaume qu’il faut avaler; & je suis reçu Sorcier depuis près de trois Ans.” (Thanks to Marie Phillips for translation from French.)
- [64.](#) Ibid. 192: “Le Magicien sortit de sa Poche une Boîte dans laquelle il y avoit une espece d’Opiate”; “Il en prit pour lui de la Grosseur d’une Noix, il en donna autant au Philosophe Il lui dit de l’avaller [reading “avaler”], & de se coucher ensuite sous la Cheminee . . .” (Thanks to Marie Phillips for translation from French.)
- [65.](#) Ibid., 193: “A peine quelques Minutes se furent-elles écoulées, qu’il parut etourdi, & comme un Homme yvre [reading “ivre”]. Un instant apres, il s’endormit; &, pendant son Sommeil, il parla continuellement, & débita mille Extravagances. Il conversoit [reading “converse”] avec tous les Démons. Il parloit avec ses Camarades, qu’il croïoit [reading “croient”] Magiciens, ainsi que lui”; “Et bien dit-il a Gassendi vous devez être content de la Façon dont le Bouc vous a reçu. C’est un Honneur considerable, que celui d’avoir ete admis des le premier jour de votre Reception a lui baiser le Derriere.” (Thanks to Marie Phillips for translation from French.)
- [66.](#) Quoted in Harner, *Hallucinogens and Shamanism*, 139.
- [67.](#) Hanegraaff, “Will-Erich Peuckert,” 280.
- [68.](#) Harner, *Hallucinogens and Shamanism*, 139.
- [69.](#) Clifton, “If Witches No Longer Fly,” 17.

CHAPTER 9. MORNING ON BARE MOUNTAIN

[Epigraph 1.](#) Lanier, *You Are Not a Gadget*, 69.

[Epigraph 2.](#) Rudgley, *The Alchemy of Culture*, 146.

- [1.](#) Bever, *Realities of Witchcraft*, 138.
- [2.](#) Klaniczay, *Demons, Spirits, Witches*, 203; also Bailey, *Battling Demons*, 111.
- [3.](#) Levack, *Witch-Hunt*, 185.
- [4.](#) Cohn, *Europe’s Inner Demons*, 214.
- [5.](#) Ibid., 214–15.

- [6.](#) Claire Fanger, e-mail to the author, March, 20, 2014.
- [7.](#) Abraham, *Book of Abramelin*, 226.
- [8.](#) Ostorero, et al., *L'imaginaire du Sabbat*, 217: “. . . un role structurant . . .”; “d’une nouvelle conception du vol nocturne . . . en rapport avec la sorcellerie.”
- [9.](#) Russell, *History of Witchcraft*, 244.
- [10.](#) Duerr, *Dreamtime*, 138.
- [11.](#) Joseph Hansen, *Quellen und untersuchungen*, 167: “Sortlegia . . . maleficia . . . fascinaciones per pulveres amatorios aut pocula vel houppellos amatorios sibi datos a demone . . . et intoxicaciones procurant plurimas.”
- [12.](#) Quoted in Owen Davies, *Popular Magic*, 15.
- [13.](#) Kieckhefer, *European Witch Trials*, 114.
- [14.](#) Murray, *Witch-Cult*, 141.
- [15.](#) Cohn, *Europe's Inner Demons*, 154.
- [16.](#) Letcher, *Shroom*, 47.
- [17.](#) An essay in Harner's book *Hallucinogens and Shamanism*, chapter 8.
- [18.](#) Ogden, *Magic, Witchcraft, and Ghosts*, 117.
- [19.](#) Van Teijlingen, et al., *Midwifery*, 97–98.
- [20.](#) Letcher, *Shroom*, 48.

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