BECOMING A WITCH

WOMEN AND MAGIC IN EUROPE DURING THE MIDDLE AGES AND BEYOND



Edited by
Andrea Maraschi
Angelica Aurora Montanari

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WITCHERY 101. AN INTRODUCTION

ANDREA MARASCHI

This book is not about witches. First of all, because it mostly focuses on the Middle Ages. Despite common misconceptions among the general public (and sometimes even among a more learned audience), the figure of the witch as a woman who seals a pact with the Devil is not a "medieval" invention. However, the seeds of this process, perhaps together with some of its sprouts, are to be found in this period.[1]

Among medievalists, magic and gender are relatively new topics: they started to pay attention to these subjects between the 1970s and 1980s, and the field is now as lively and thriving as ever.[2] At any rate, as recently

[1] Jeffrey B. Russell, *Witchcraft in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1972); Richard Kieckhefer, *European Witch Trials: Their Foundations in Popular and Learned Culture, 1300-1500* (London: Routledge, 1976); Brian P. Levack, ed., *New Perspectives on Witchcraft, Magic and Demonology*, 6 vols. (New York: Garland, 2001); Bengt Ankarloo and Stuart Clark, eds., *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe*, 4 vols. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999-2003); Wolfgang Behringer, *Witches and Witch-Hunts: A Global History* (Cambridge: Polity, 2004); Gary F. Jensen, *The Path of the Devil: Early Modern Witch Hunts* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007); *"Non lasciar vivere la malefica". Le streghe nei trattati e nei processi (secoli XIV-XVII)*, ed. Dinora Corsi and Matteo Duni (Florence: Firenze University Press, 2008); Martine Osterero, George Modestin, and Katherine Utz Tremp, eds., *Chasses aux sorcières et démonologie: Entre discours et pratiques (XIVe-XVIIe siècles)* (Florence: SISMEL, 2010); Marina Montesano, "Preaching, Magic, and Witchcraft: A Feedback Effect?," in *From Words to Deeds: The Effectiveness of Preaching in the Late Middle Ages*, ed. Maria Giuseppina Muzzarelli (Turnhout: Brepols, 2014), 153-70; Brian P. Levack, *The Witch-Hunt in Early Modern Europe* (London-New York: Routledge, 2016); Julian Goodare, *The European Witch-Hunt* (London-New York: Routledge, 2016).

[2] For a summary of Italian scholarship in the last decades, see Eleonora Plebani, "Streghe e stregoneria nella medievistica italiana degli ultimi decenni," *Dimensioni e problemi della ricerca storica* 1 (2021): 233-62.

noted by Catherine Rider, the relationship between magic and gender has been mostly investigated with attention to fifteenth- to seventeenth-century witch trials.[3] In contrast, our knowledge of women's magic in the early and high Middle Ages is not as nuanced. As noted above, though, the *Malleus* was the result of older established stereotypes. The treatise just stressed the association between women and magic that already emerged in older sources.[4]

My idea of editing a volume on *Becoming a witch* stems from several brilliant academic works on the topic, but specifically from three of them. The first one is a well-known article by Éva Pócs, entitled "Why Witches Are Women?" (2003); the second is Hans Peter Broedel's *The* Malleus Maleficarum *and the Construction of Witchcraft* (2003); and the third is a fairly recent book by Heidi Breuer, "Crafting the Witch. Gendering Magic in Medieval and Early Modern England" (2009).[5] Clearly, all these works revolve around the gradual development of the idea of "witch," and suggest that this process concerned women in particular.

Now, witchcraft and the consequent witch hunt are extremely complex phenomena, and many scholarly works have been written about these topics. Therefore, my original intention was to dive deep into what was around, before, and beyond the figure of the "witch." Éva Pócs' article shows that understanding the relationship between accusations of witchcraft and gender is no easy task. All in all, one notes that witchcraft tended to be feminine because of social conflicts that characterised the female spheres of public and private life. However, the author correctly points out that Early Modern accusations of witchcraft were also supported by a far older mythology dating from the early Middle Ages.[6] In other terms, there could not be a Joan of Arc without the Hundred Years' War and all its political consequences. Without her choice to not become a wife. Without the pre-made figure of the female visionary prophet of late medieval France. Without women's limited agency in a

[3] Catherine Rider, "Magic and Gender," in *The Routledge History of Medieval Magic*, ed. Sophie Page and Catherine Rider (London: Routledge, 2019), 343-54, at 343.
[4] Broedel, *The* Malleus Maleficarum, 170ff.
[5] Éva Pócs, 'Why Witches Are Women?,' *Acta Ethnographica Hungarica* 48, 3-4 (2003): 367-83; Hans Peter Broedel, *The* Malleus Maleficarum *and the Construction of Witchcraft* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003); Heidi Breuer, *Crafting the Witch. Gendering Magic in Medieval and Early Modern England* (London-New York: Routledge, 2009).
[6] Pócs, 'Why Witches Are Women?,' 379.

patriarchal society. Without belief in fairies, which in turn were remnants of pre-Christian entities.[7]

And maybe there could be no stereotypical figure of the witch riding a broom without the nightly cortege of Diana, Holda, Perchta or Herodias,[8] without pagan fertility rituals which involved dancing astride poles and broomsticks,[9] or without women's expertise in herbal and hallucinogenic ointments.[10] Hans Peter Broedel's monograph on the *Malleus Maleficarum* casts light on the cultural background that led to the composition of this manual. Institoris and Sprenger took it for granted that witches were to be found among members of the weaker sex. But it is fair to note that their "own construction of witchcraft prejudiced the issue."[11] Was it about hunting witches, or rather hunting women? "In other words, is the gender bias of texts like the *Malleus* descriptive or prescriptive in nature?", the author asks.[12]

Similar questions help us realize that even though one could determine a time before the witch hunt and a time after it (the fourteenth century being a critical moment),[13] the phenomenon did not spring out of nowhere. It is deeply rooted in ancient tensions, biases, and power relations. Heidi Breuer's book is mostly interested in the gendered nature of "magic" in English literary sources from the twelfth/thirteenth century to the Early Modern period. She observes that though "magic"

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[7] Andrea Maraschi, "The Tree of the Bourlémonts. Gendered Beliefs in Fairies and Their Transmission from Old to Young Women in Joan of Arc's Domrémy," in *Cultural Exchanges: Some Cases in the Domain of Folklore, Magic, and Witchcraft*, ed. Marina Montesano (London: Routledge, 2021), 21-32.

[8] Carlo Ginzburg, *Le sabbat des sorcières* (Paris: Gallimard, 1992); Philippe Walter, *Le mythe de la chasse sauvage dans l'Europe médiévale* (Paris: Champion, 1997).

[9] Robin Skelton, *The Practice of Witchcraft Today: An Introduction to Beliefs and Rituals* (New York: Carol Publishing Group, 1995).

[10] Michael Ostling, "Witches' Herbs on Trial," *Folklore* 125 (2014): 170-201, at 180. Hallucinogenic ointments were allegedly smeared on broomsticks and then absorbed into the body when the genital area came into contact with them (as suggested in Alice Kyteller's trial of 1324).

[11] Broedel, *The* Malleus Maleficarum, 167.

[12] Ibidem.

[13] Federico, Martino "La spirale della storia. Giuristi e streghe tra Medioevo ed Età Moderna," in *Dalla magia alla stregoneria. Cambiamenti sociali e culturali e la caccia alle streghe*, ed. Alessandra Ciattini (Naples: La Città del Sole, 2017), 67-106, at 71. See also Shulamith Shahar, *The Fourth Estate. A History of Women in the Middle Ages*, trans. Chaya Galai (New York: Routledge, 1983), 289-90; Marina Montesano, *Caccia alle streghe* (Rome: Salerno, 2012), 58-60.

was associated with both men and women, one notes a gradual "villanization of feminine magic."[14] Furthermore, she remarks that the crafting of the witch contributed to the crafting of a certain type of femininity: "The representations of gender produced by culture—through language and literature, through film and art, through news-casts and advertisements, and so on—shape the notions of gender available to people within that culture."[15] This is to say that when Europe lay down the basis for the figure of the "witch," it also shaped the social perception of women. Or, at least, of those women who did not conform to a socially accepted and predetermined version of femininity. Breuer's volume represents an inspiration also because the author devotes the final chapter of the book to the "Contemporary Echoes of the Early Modern Wicked Witch." I felt that this topic was too important not to be explored in my book as well.

Piero Camporesi observes that all elder women were, to some extent, witches. [16] This implies that all women, being *vetulae*-to-be, were potentially witches-to-be. Of course, this generalization does not reflect the nuances of the past, but it holds a grain of truth. Elder women's knowledge was often deemed nonsense, their stories labelled as *fabulae aniles*.[17] At the same time, since classical antiquity mythologies promoted the idea of cannibal *striae* or *strigae* or *mascae*, who clearly posed a threat to the community.[18] This was hardly a Western phenomenon, by the way: there is evidence of similar beliefs in different cultures, as anthropologists suggest.[19] Early medieval Germanic laws mention cannibal witches since

[14] Breuer, *Crafting the Witch*, 10.

[15] Ibid., 5.

[16] Piero Camporesi, *Juice of Life: The Symbolic and Magic Significance of Blood*, trans. Robert R. Barr (New York: Continuum, 1995), 53.

[17] Jan Ziolkowski, "Old Wives' Tales: Classicism and Anti-Classicism from Apuleius to Chaucer," *Journal of Medieval Latin* 12 (2002): 90-113.

[18] Franco Cardini, *Magia, Stregoneria, Superstizioni nell'Occidente medievale* (Florence: La Nuova Italia, 1979); Laura Cherubini, *Strix: la strega nella cultura romana* (Turin: UTET, 2010); Marina Montesano, *Classical Culture and Witchcraft in Medieval and Renaissance Italy* (New York: Palgrave Macillan, 2018), 30-35. This volume has been recently translated into Italian as Maleficia. *Storie di streghe dall'Antichità al Rinascimento* (Rome: Carocci, 2023). See also Sarah Iles Johnston, "Defining the Dreadful: Remarks on the Greek Child-Killing Demon," in *Ancient magic and ritual Power*, ed. Marvin Meyer and Paul Mirecki (Leiden-New York-Köln; Brill, 1995), 361–387.

[19] E.g., Edward E. Evans-Pritchard, *Stregoneria, oracoli e magia tra gli Azande*, trans. Roberto Malighetti (Milan: R, Cortina, 2002), 13-16.

the sixth century, which attests to the belief that they were... real; or, at least, that common people believed they were real, which could lead to episodes of physical violence.[20]

Christianity played a crucial role in fabricating and shaping women's identity, thereby empowering clerical male authority.[21] In a male-dominated society, women's sexuality caused anxiety, thus it needed to be repressed. Women's nature had been unveiled since the Genesis' creation account. Eve was disobedient, gullible, and treacherous. She was responsible for the Fall. Exegetes did not take long to interpret this myth from a sexual viewpoint and to highlight women's proclivity to yield to the devil's temptation.[22] Positive examples of women existed — from the Virgin Mary and Mary Magdalene to female saints — but they represented virtuous exceptions.

During the first millennium CE, one notes a remarkable continuity in the understanding of "magic," even though late antiquity and the Carolingian era represented critical moments.[23] In this sense, the Old Testament remained a reference point for centuries in Western societies.[24] By and large, Christianity exacerbated the marginalization of magic practitioners and of whoever invoked a non-Christian supernatural, even though this process was by no means an exclusive of the Christian Church.[25] "Magic," despite its very noble origins (as

[20] Norman Cohn, *I demoni dentro. Le origini del sabba e la grande caccia alle streghe*, trans. Donatella Venturini (Milan: Unicopli, 1994).

[21] Joan Young Gregg, *Devils, Women and Jews: Reflections of the Other in Medieval Sermon Stories* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1997), 85ff.; *L'Église et les femmes dans l'Occident chrétien des origines à la fine du Moyen Age*, ed. Paulette L'Hermite-Leclercq (Turnhout: Brepols, 1997).

[22] Massimo Montanari, *Alimentazione e cultura nel medioevo* (Rome-Bari: Laterza, 2008 [1988]), 3-4.

[23] Martha Rampton, *Trafficking with Demons. Magic, Ritual, and Gender from Late Antiquity to 1000* (Ithaca-London: Columbia University Press, 2021), 1ff.; Andrea Maraschi, "A World Imbued With Sorcery? The Fight between Christian and non-Christian Powers in 4th- and 5th-Century Christendom," in *Civilizations of the Supernatural: Witchcraft, Ritual, and Religious Experience in Late Antique, Medieval, and Renaissance Traditions*, ed. Fabrizio Conti and Elizabeth Ann Pollard, Advances in the History of Magic, Witchcraft and Religion 2 (Budapest: Trivent Publishing, 2022), 519-547.

[24] Montesano, *Classical Culture*, 72-73.

[25] Owen Davies, *Magic: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 41; Fritz Graf, *Magic in the Ancient World*, trans. Franklin Philip (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1997), 21-7; Peter Brown, "Sorcery, Demons and the Rise of Christianity from Late Antiquity into the Middle Ages," in *Witchcraft Confessions*

attested by Pliny and Apuleius, among others),[26] slowly corrupted the soul of human beings. Women, in particular, seem to have been mostly associated with private performances of "magic," inside the domestic environment, but their role as wise women and village healers became quite stereotypical as well.[27] Be that as it may, the engagement in "magic" practice could hardly fit the figure of the good wife. Quite the contrary, given the links between female sexuality and contact with the devil were strengthened over time and became a fundamental trait of witches.[28]

Scholars have long shown that in the woman/witchcraft pair, it is not the former that leads to the latter. On the contrary, women ended up being persecuted as witches because specific aspects of "magic" became feminized.[29] It is fair to wonder why this happened in many different societies, and the imbalance between male and female power is definitely one of the factors at play (though not the only one).[30]

So, this book is not about witches. It is about the path to *becoming* one, the *feminization* of specific aspects of "magic," and the later projections of these ideas. The late-medieval notion of "witch" was elaborated in treatises by Jean Gerson, Johannes Nider, Alphonso de Spina, Heinrich

and Accusations, ed. Mary Douglas (London: Tavistock, 1970), 17-45; Peter Brown, *Religion and Society in the Age of Saint Augustine* (London: Faber&Faber, 1972); Maijastina Kahlos, "*Artis Heu Magicis*: The Label of Magic in Fourth-Century Conflicts and Disputes," in *Pagans and Christians in Late Antique Rome: Conflict, Competition, and Coexistence in the Fourth Century*, eds. Michele Salzman, Marianne Sághy, and Rita Lizzi Testa (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 162-77.

[26] Andrea Maraschi, Similia similibus curantur. *Cannibalismo, grafofagia, e "magia" simpatetica nel medioevo (500-1500)* (Spoleto: Cisam, 2020), 43.

[27] Michael Bailey, "From Sorcery to Witchcraft: Clerical Conceptions of Magic in the Later Middle Ages," *Speculum* 76, 4 (2001): 960-99, at 986. Medieval romance often suggests that women's medical knowledge relied on the supernatural. See Peggy McCracken, "Women and Medicine in Medieval French Narrative," *Exemplaria* 5, 2 (1993): 239-62, at 241.

[28] Louise Jackson, "Witches, Wives and Mothers: Witchcraft Persecution and Women's Confessions in Seventeenth-Century England," *Women's History Review* 4:1 (1995): 63-84, at 72.

[29] Michael Bailey, "The Feminization of Magic and the Emerging Idea of the Female Witch in the Late Middle Ages," *Essays in Medieval Studies* 19 (2002): 120-34, at 121; Christina Larner, *Witchcraft and Religion: The Politics of Popular Belief* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1984), 84-7; Stuart Clark, *Thinking with Demons: The Idea of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 110-1; Bailey, "From Sorcery to Witchcraft," 986.

[30] Julio Caro Baroja, *The World of Witches* (London 1964); Philip Mayer, "Witches," in *Witchcraft and Sorcery,* ed. Max Marwick (London: Penguin, 1970), 45-65.

Kramer, and others, but it did not arise from nothing. It shared elements with earlier features of feminine "magical" knowledge and practice, and it was fuelled by similar biases. This volume thus aims at rediscussing long-standing myths, and at problematizing superficial connections in the wake of David Harley's research on the midwife-witch figure.[31] And, necessarily, it is meant to offer new insights into the very notion of "magic" in the past.[32] "Magic" could be analysed from several different angles, but this book indirectly looks at it in search of continuities. First and foremost, continuity of needs and attitudes.[33] "The circulation of knowledge is at the very base of the cumulative concept of witchcraft," observes Marina Montesano, "and is the omnipresent fuel that subtends the initial moments of the witch-hunts around the middle of the fourteenth century."[34]

Chronology-wise, the book is structured so as to cover the conventional 1000 years of the Middle Ages. However, it also aims at offering insights into longer-term patterns concerning the notion of "witch." The intention is to further explore topics such as womanhood, femininity, "magic," marginalization, agency, empowerment, as well as social and cultural biases. Hopefully, the picture(s) emerging from this volume will contribute to keeping the debate lively and sharp.

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[31] David Harley, "Historians as Demonologists: The Myth of the Midwife-witch," *Social History of Medicine* 3, 1 (1990): 1-26.

[32] On this, see the recent *The Routledge History of Medieval Magic*, eds. Sophie Page and Catherine Rider (London-New York: Routledge, 2019). See also Maraschi, *Similia similibus curantur*, 1-35.

[33] Bronislaw Malinowski, *Magic, Science and Religion and Other Essays* (Glencoe, IL: The Free Press, 1948), 70. See also Andrea Maraschi, "Magic, Miracles, and Rituals to Fight Famine in Old Norse Literature," in *Food Culture in Medieval Scandinavia*, eds. Viktória Gyönki and Andrea Maraschi (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2022), 31-51, at 39.

[34] Marina Montesano, "Introduction," in *Folklore, Magic, and Witchcraft*, 1-17, at 9.

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RELIGIOUS CRAFTING AND SUBVERSION: WOMEN AND MAGIC IN EARLY MEDIEVAL IBERIAN SOURCES

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I. Introduction

Christianization in the Iberian Peninsula was not very different from that in the rest of the Roman West.[1] Nevertheless, this long process was considered by some to be slow and, in some ways, never complete.[2] However, the myth of a poorly Christianized Iberia has long been overturned.[3] The most accepted theory presupposes that, similar to every other region where Christianity gained hegemony (and a feature of religious conversion processes in general), mixing and exchange took

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[1] A few reference texts about Christianization in western Europe are Lewis R. Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993); Richard Fletcher, *The Barbarian Conversion: From Paganism to Christianity* (New York: Holt, 1998); Martin Carver, *The Cross Goes North: Processes of Conversion in Northern Europe AD 300–1300* (York: York Medieval Press, 2003).

[2] Manuel Sotomayor, "Penetración de la Iglesia en los Medios Rurales de la España Tardorromana y Visigoda," in *Cristianizzazione ed Organizzazione Ecclesiastica delle Campagne dell'alto Medioevo: Espansione e Resistenze-XXVII Settimane di Studio di Spoleto 1980,* Spoleto, 1981, 639-670 (Spoleto: Fondazione Centro Italiano di Studi sull'Alto Medioevo, 1981).

[3] Purificación Ubric, "The Church in the Suevic Kingdom (411–585 AD)," in *Culture and Society in Medieval Galicia*, ed. James D'Emilio (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 210-243.

place on the peninsula.[4] Syncretism[5] and hybridity[6] are terms that can be applied to the phenomenon of borrowing from multiple traditions and the adaptation of the Christian religion to local and traditional needs. Thus, when reading Christian sources that rebuked people for practising paganism and engaging in unorthodox behaviours, it is important to understand that most likely, these people were Christians who were only resorting to familiar practices because Christianity frequently could not offer valid alternatives to what it was trying to erase.

As a cultural crossroads, the Iberian region fell under the influence of Celts, Romans, Suevi, Visigoths, Jews and Muslims, which contributed to creating a vibrant cultural environment where mutual influences were frequent and numerous.[7] Thus, the magical and unorthodox practices described by ecclesiastical sources could have been related to any of these different backgrounds. However, as will be described below, ecclesiastical authorities' own imaginary expectations could also be held accountable for creating an image of magic and unorthodox practices.

In this study, all that did not align with the ecclesiastical norms dictated by the councils, treatises and other religious writings was considered unorthodox behaviour. However, it is evident that the matter of unorthodoxy was not a consensus, and writers could very frequently disagree about what was considered improper behaviour. Therefore, the rules for the right behaviour of a Christian were very often fluid and local and must be considered in their own context and not as general rules.

In this context, the ecclesiastical literature condemned, persecuted and rebuked practices that have commonly been categorized under the broad and imprecise labels of paganism and magic. In the early medieval

[4] David Frankfurther, "Beyond Magic and Superstition," in *Late Ancient Christianity: A People's History of Christianity*, ed. Virginia Burrus (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2005), 255-284.

[5] David Frankfurter, "Restoring 'Syncretism' in the History of Christianity," *Studies in Late Antiquity* 5 (2021): 128-138.

[6] Daniel Boyarin and Virginia Burrus, "Hybridity as Subversion of Orthodoxy? Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity," *Social Compass* 54 (2005): 432-441; Lilian R. G. Diniz, "Diffusione del Cristianesimo e Fenomeni di Ibridazione Culturale dalla Tarda Antichità al Medioevo in Europa Occidentale," *Adamantius. Annuario di Letteratura Cristiana Antica e di Studi Giudeoellenistici* 23 (2017): 215-225.

[7] See Norman Roth, *Jews, Visigoths and Muslims in Medieval Spain: Cooperation and Conflict* (Leiden; New York; Köln: Brill, 1994); David Nirenberg, *Neighbouring Faiths: Christianity, Islam, and Judaism in the Middle Ages and Today* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2014).

ecclesiastical literature, these condemnations were most often directed without specific reference to men and women. Indeed, as stated by Bernadette Filotas,

> when it comes to the participation of ordinary persons in magic, women tend to vanish behind the inclusive masculine words in all but approximately 6% of the texts studied. Most authors evidently did not intend to single out women as the practitioners par excellence of magic.[8]

There may be two reasons for this phenomenon. The first could be a consequence of the marginal role played by women in society at the time, resulting in their particular interests and active contributions to social, religious and cultural life being ignored by civil and religious authorities. Relatedly, ecclesiastical writers were not taking women into consideration when legislating regarding certain religious matters. Thus, if women generally had no part in religious affairs, they were naturally side-lined by religious authorities. The second reason could be that indeed, for most of the behaviour that was considered improper, there was no distinction of gender among its practitioners. These two explanations seem to demonstrate that in early medieval sources, specifically regarding Iberian documentation here, there was generally no gendered condemnation of magic.[9] However, the scarce number of sources that particularly addressed women reveals an interesting fact: the majority of the practices described and reproached were closely related to activities and duties considered to belong exclusively to the feminine realm or to be related to women's possible desires to overcome their

[8] Bernadette Filotas, *Pagan Survivals, Superstitions and Popular Cultures* (Toronto: PIMS, 2005), 220. An interesting point is also the fact that modern translations of early Christian and Jewish texts could have been responsible for obscuring women's presence in religion by attributing male terms where male presence was not necessarily the case. See Ross S. Kraemer, *Her Share of the Blessings. Women's Religions among Pagans, Jews, and Christians in the Greco-Roman World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 5-6.

[9] Some exceptions may occur, as in the sermons of bishop Caesarius of Arles, in which he clearly gendered his attacks on contraception, abortion, gossip, and healing practices, directing them at women exclusively. See Lisa Bailey, "These Are Not Men': Sex and Drink in the Sermons of Caesarius of Arles," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 15:1 (2007): 23-43, 31, note 33.

subservient position. Nevertheless, precisely because these references to women in this context are so scant, we should pay attention to them.[10]

This chapter will investigate all specific references to women as practitioners of magic and unorthodox behaviour contained in a variety of ecclesiastical sources produced and diffused in the Iberian Peninsula from the fourth to the eleventh century. The analysis will reveal that in different cultural and social contexts, women could be considered actors shaping and moulding their own religious interpretations and thus crafting their own religious conceptions. Here the term "religious crafting" is then interpreted as the individuals' agency in creating and adapting their own religious practices according to their culture and personal needs in order to overcome problems and impediments imposed by society. Indeed, it will be clear through the analysis of the sources that women were actively seeking ways to build religious practices that were, in fact, strategies to fill in a gap in official religion and legislation that often forsook their personal and family problems. Thus, these practices could be related to women's marginal role in society and their need to overcome the faults society had with their own particular needs.

However, first, we must make a methodological disclaimer. In periods when Christianity was already diffused and stabilized, the meaning of magical and pagan practices changed, and the practices were re-contextualized by their practitioners. Many practices were devoid of religious value and acquired new meanings in the Christian context. As will be discussed below, the ecclesiastical authorities had no interest (or even proper knowledge) in precisely describing practices. Most of the time, they provided stereotyped descriptions and repeated previous authors. Much has been said about the "truth" contained in the references to paganism and its "survival" in Christian contexts.[11] Ecclesiastical sources tend to decontextualize the supposed improper

[10] Based on the Nietzschean conception that rarity confers value. See Patrick Hassan, "Does Rarity Confer Value? Nietzsche on the Exceptional Individual," *Journal of Nietzsche Studies* 48 (2017): 261-285.

[11] Yitzhak Hen, "Martin of Braga's de Correctione Rusticorum and its Uses in Frankish Gaul," in *Medieval Transformations. Texts, Power and Gifts in Context*, ed. Esther Cohen and Mayke B. De Jong (Leiden: Boston and Köln, Brill, 2001), 35-49; Yitzhak Hen, "The Early Medieval West," in *The Cambridge History of Magic and Witchcraft in the West: From Antiquity to the Present*, ed. David J. Collins (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 183-206.

and unorthodox practices that they rebuke and, in this way, simply place these practices in the sphere of idolatry and demoniac influence. Thus, what is important is the need felt by ecclesiastical writers to address such behaviour as a means to promulgate rules of behaviour that ought to be followed. Hence, these texts can be seen as reflections of norms, not facts.[12] Our documentation is not committed to the provision of precise descriptions but a pastoral agenda that aimed to exhort and save.[13] For all these reasons, it is impossible to know for sure what people were actually doing. However, the repeated mention of certain practices in a variety of sources, contexts and historical periods must indicate more than a simple unconscious "copying and pasting." If ecclesiastical writers were very often devoid of specific knowledge, context or even personal interest in unorthodox practices, their frequent concern with them demonstrated that *something* was happening and that this *something* was not approved. We understand that this ecclesiastical discourse was probably a rhetorical strategy used to impose an idea of orthodoxy and correctness, but these narratives could not be completely independent of reality. These narratives represent plausible statements that needed to be relatable to the writers' audience, otherwise they risked not being credible at all. A discourse completely out of reality could not be effective. Thus, if not part of people's reality, these narratives were at least part of their imaginary.

Regarding women's participation in improper and unorthodox practices, it is worth considering descriptions that, if not always truthful reflections of reality, were at least part of the ecclesiastical imaginary of subversive female practices. The rarity of these references merits an investigation of and attempt to determine not only the reason why such behaviours were considered dangerous but also the meaning they could have to women in early medieval Iberia. Accordingly, every reference will be contextualized to understand why there was a need to condemn certain practices in that specific moment and the social, religious and political implications of these condemnations.

[12] Hen, "'Martin of Braga's De Correctione Rusticorum," 46.

[13] Eleonora Dell'Elicine, "¿Pervivencia o Reconfiguración de Saberes? Prácticas Adivinatorias, Idolatría y Producción Jurídica en el Reino Visigodo de Toledo (589-711)," *En la España Medieval* 41 (2018): 155-169, 158.

II. Agency and religious crafting in Iberian sources

In early medieval Iberian sources, women were targeted as practitioners of magic or improper religious behaviour in activities related to their everyday lives and their own personal concerns. At first, sources were deliberately vague about their activities, rather out of indifference or ignorance about what was being made. However, we see growing concern with more precise descriptions and terminology. In the early fourth century we find one of such vague accusation related, apparently, to the habit of women gathering in cemeteries by night. The Council of Elvira's Canon 35 states, "It was agreed to prohibit women from spending the night watching in the cemetery, because often, under the pretext of prayer, they secretly commit wicked actions."[14]

This council, held between 300 and 302,[15] must be placed in the context of a Christian religion still struggling to impose itself in a society where Christianity was still a minority religion, even though it was rapidly growing and gaining adepts among the social and political roman elite. The canons of this council reflect the complex dynamics of this mixed society, regulating, among other things, the marriage between Christians and pagans and the religious conundrum imposed on Christian magistrates who were supposed to perform sacrifices to comply with their public duties.[16] The council was also concerned with morality and the conduct of the faithful, trying to impose the Christian doctrine relating to everyday life and relationships with others. In this context, women were punished for killing their female slaves (c. 5),[17] for abandoning their husbands to marry other men (c.8) or, for the same purpose, abandoning their adulterous husbands (c. 9).

[14] XXXV: "Placuit prohiberi ne feminae in cimiterio peruigilent, eo quod saepe sub obtentu orationis latenter scelera committant," in *La colección canónica Hispana IV*, ed. Gonzalo Martinez Diez y Felix Rodriguez (Madrid: Monumenta Hispaniea Sacra, 1984), 253.

[15] See Manuel S. Muro, "Sobre la Fecha del Concilio," in *El Concilio de Elvira y su Tiempo*, ed. Manuel Sotomayor and José F. Urbina (Granada: Universidad de Granada, 2005), 137-168.

[16] See Ramon Teja, "'Exterae Gentes': Relations con Paganos, Judios y Herejes en los Canones de Elvira," in *El Concilio de Elvira y su Tiempo* (2005), 197-228.

[17] This canon is so specific that it probably was based in a real juridical situation contemporary to the clerics involved in the council.

This council represents the Hispanic embryo of what one day would become the Catholic Church: an earthly power gradually more conscious of its force and capacity for social cohesion in the face of a pagan empire already in decline.[18] In this context, Canon 35 is notable for its rather obscure character. It has been proposed that the canon could have been related to a Roman social taboo that aimed to prevent virtuous women from being associated with prostitutes.[19] Indeed, the council demonstrated concern with the sin of prostitution, as Canon 12 excludes women involved in prostitution from communion.[20] However, if the intent of Canon 35 was to denounce prostitution, why not specify this, as was done in Canon 12? It has also been proposed that Canon 35 was a measure to prevent excesses in the practice of the cult of martyrs, for which women were the main protagonists.[21] Could these "secret wicked actions" be related to nightly prayers by the martyr's tombs? In other councils and sources, the excesses committed by the faithful, particularly by women, regarding the cult of saints and martyrs were condemned by authorities who saw in these practices echoes of paganism.[22] According to Peter Brown, "for women in the ancient world, the cemetery areas had always been a zone of 'low gravity', where their movements and choice of company were less subject to male scrutiny and the control of the family."[23] Both cemeteries and the shrines of saints were places that offered a certain amount of liberty to women. In this context, if women

[18] José F. Ubina, "Le Concile D'Elvire et L'esprit du Paganisme," *Dialogues D'histoire Ancienne* 19 (1993): 309-318, 312.

[19] See Henar G. Franco, "La 'Cuestión Femenina' en el Primitivo Cristiano Hispano: A Propósito de los Cánones V, XXXV y LXXXI del Concilio de Elvira," *Helmantica* 44 (1993): 237-245, 243. According to Marcial, the *bustuariae*, prostitutes, often sought the protection of funerary monuments while working – Marcial, Epigrammae, I, 34; III, 93.

[20] XII: De mulieribus quae lenocinium fecerint. Mater uel parens uel quaelibet fidelis si lenocinium exercuerit, eo quod alienum uendiderit corpus, uel potius suum, placuit eam nec in finem accipire communionem. in *La colección canónica IV*, 245-6.

[21] José F. Urbina, "Mujer y Matrimonio en el Concilio de Elvira," in *El Concilio de Elvira y su Tiempo* (2005), 286. Eric Rebillard interprets this canon as a form of regulation of the worship on martyr's tombs. in *The care of the dead in Late Antiquity*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010), 144.

[22] See Richard M. Price, "Martyrdom and the Cult of Saints," in *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Studies*, ed. Susan Ashbrook Harvey and David G. Hunter. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 808-825.

[23] Peter Brown, *The cult of the saints. Its rise and function in Latin Christianity. Enlarged edition.* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2015), 44.

were seeking refuge in cemeteries and solace in the cult of saints, religious authorities were not keen to accept this subversive behaviour. Nevertheless, the imprecision of this canon allows us only to speculate.

As expected, the canons of this council are generally vague when describing paganism and magic, even considering that these practices were still present in the society of this period. For instance, in Canon 6, it is stated that "if someone kills a man by means of *maleficium*," he should be deprived of communion for life.[24] *Maleficium* and *sortilegium* were the two general categories of magical practices that became popular in ecclesiastical sources.[25] *Maleficium* can be translated as "evil practice," and the term purposely addresses a wide range of practices that, according to the judgement of religious authorities, could be considered vehicles of evil, regardless of what these practices were. *Sortilegium*, on the other hand, was frequently related to divinatory arts and was used to label fortune-tellers and soothsayers' practices as well as lot divination. *Sacrilegium* was a term that was later added to the ecclesiastical vocabulary as another broad definition of magic. The Roman definition first comprised the desecration of temples and funerary structures.[26] In the Christian context, until the fourth century, the label *sacrilegium* included practices such as magic and poisoning, but it later expanded to include the sins committed by women: prostitution and adultery.[27]

The image that was constructed based on ideals or rather imaginary practices says much about the role of women in society and how they were stigmatized and condemned. Beliefs about the magical power of women were long-standing. For example, the Natural History (28.23.77-8), [28] attested that "women – even *sine menstruis* – could secure the safety of sailors. Menstruating women can drive away hailstorms and other bad

[24] VI: Si quicumque per maleficium hominem interfecerit. Si quis uero maleficio interficiat alterum, eo quod sine idolatria perficere scelus non potuit, nec in finem impertiendam esse illi communionem. *La colección canónica IV*, 244. Interestingly, for the bishops, the problem was not the crime per se, but the fact that it was attained by means of idolatry.

[25] Sophie Page, "Medieval Magic," in *The Oxford Illustrated History of Witchcraft and Magic*, ed. Owen Davies (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 29-64, 30.

[26] Angelo Di Berardino, *Encyclopedia of Ancient Christianity* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2014), 3:456 ss.

[27] Nicole Zeddies, *Religio et Sacrilegium. Studien zur Inkriminierung von Magie, Häresie und Heidentum (4.-7. Jahrhundert)* (Frankfurt at al.: Peter Lang, 2003), 108.

[28] See Melinda Ryan, *Through the Oculi of Pliny the Elder: A Gendered Representation of Roman Women as Patients and Healers* (Sydney, Australia: Macquarie University, 2016).

weather by standing naked. Women even have the power of pesticides: when menstruating, naked women walk through cornfields, and agricultural pests fall dead."[29] On the other hand, in ecclesiastical literature, menstruating women are considered impure, and during this period, women are ostracized from religious services and instructed to practise sexual abstention.[30] This women's "condition" was considered dangerous or powerful according to different religious interpretations. However, the two are closely related, as power can always become dangerous. In Iberian sources, the one responsible for establishing this image of the dangerous sorceress is Isidore of Seville in his *Etymologies*. In them, the image that Christianity has of women who practised magic is inevitably negative and stereotyped. The sorceresses he chooses as examples are all powerful but terrible.

Isidore, who became bishop of Seville in 600, had a reputation as an influential religious and political man. He was closely linked to the Visigoth kings and was sought out as a religious authority and source of knowledge in all moral and religious matters.[31] The Etymologies, one of his most famous works, were written in approximately 620 and were retained as a rich source of knowledge regarding all aspects of life. In them, among many other subjects, Isidore compiled a list of magicians and other practitioners, and it must be seen as an ideal construct, probably more related to Isidore's encyclopaedic interest rather than to an effective relationship with reality. However, according to Klingshirn, "no taxonomy, of course, can be taken as a straightforward representation of reality, but to make any sense, it must classify what is

[29] Todd Breyfogle, "Magic, Women, and Heresy in the Late Empire: The Case of the Priscillianists," in *Ancient Magic and ritual power Ritual Power*, ed. Marvin Meyer and Paul Mirecki (Brill: Boston/Leiden, 2001), 435-454, 446.

[30] Here just one example from the Spanish Penitentiale Vigilanum 86: Mulieres in menstruo tempore non intrent <in> ecclesiam, neque conmunicent, nec sanctimoniales nec laycales. Si presumpserint, XX dies peniteant. *CCSL CLVI A* (Turnholt : Brepols, 1998), 11. See Andrew Shail and Gillian Howie, *Menstruation: A Cultural History*. (Basingstoke, Hampshire, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.).

[31] *A Companion to Isidore of Seville*, ed. Andrew Fear and Jamie Wood (Leiden: Brill, 2019) offers a compressive study of Isidore and his social, historical and religious context. See particularly in this volume Céline Martin, "Isidore of Seville's Theories and Practices of Pastoral Care and Church Organization" for an overview of Isidore's concerns on ecclesiastical orthodoxy.

at least thought to exist."[32] Thus, it could have function as a source for identifying and punishing the practitioners who were frequently condemned in the ecclesiastical councils of the time and were indeed retained to exist. In this context, it is worth noting what was part of the imaginary of female practitioners of magic at the time and afterwards served as a model and source for writers who were influenced by Isidore.[33]

Isidore's references to female magicians are scarce and heavily dependent on his sources, such as the Bible and the works of Pliny the Elder and Virgil. He first describes the Sibyls, which "in the Greek language [is how] all female seers are generally called."[34] Then, in his extensive collection of magi, there are four notable females: the first is Circe, who possesses the ability to turn men into beasts. Isidore then quotes Virgil to describe the Massylian witch, "fully qualified in the *magicae artes*."[35] The witch of Endor is identified as someone who can raise the dead and is thus a necromancer, which is also the specialty of Erichtho, Lucan's Thessalian witch.[36]

This work conditioned the biased idea that permeated ecclesiastical literature and influenced the negative association of women and magic in the medieval period.

However, the idea that women and magic were a dangerous combination was not a novelty popularized by Isidore. Even in early Christianity, women were frequently associated with heresies and iniquitous behaviour. In Iberian contexts, this can be observed in the case of the heretical doctrine of Priscillian. This doctrine first appeared in Gallaecia in northwest Hispania, in approximately the late fourth century based on the inspiration of a priest of noble upbringing who was later consecrated the Bishop of Avila. The doctrine of Priscillian enjoyed great popularity even centuries after its condemnation and extirpation, as

[32] William E. Klingshirn, "Isidore of Seville's Taxonomy of Magicians and Diviners," *Traditio* 58 (2003): 59-90, 75.
[33] As stated by James Palmer, "if one wanted to find out about paganism, the Etymologiae offered a handy guide." In James Palmer, "Defining Paganism in the Carolingian World," *Early Medieval Europe* 15 (2007): 402-425, 416.
[34] Isidore of Seville, *Etimologies*, 8.8. 181.
[35] Klingshirn, "Isidore of Seville's Taxonomy," 70.
[36] All examples from Isidore of Seville, Etimologies, 8.9, 181-2.