THE NIGHT BATTLES

Witchcraft & Agrarian Cults in the Sixteenth & Seventeenth Centuries

Carlo Ginzburg

Translated by John & Anne Tedeschi

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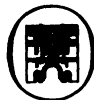

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C'est l'auberge fameuse inscrite sur le livre,
Où l'on pourra manger, et dormir, et s'asseoir.

BAUDELAIRE, *La mort des pauvres*

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FOREWORD

Some time in the late sixteenth century the attention of a perplexed Church was drawn to the prevalence of a curious practice in the region of the Friuli, where German, Italian and Slav customs meet. This was the ritual association of the 'good walkers', a body of men chosen from those born with the caul, who fell into a trance or deep sleep on certain nights of the year while their souls (sometimes in the form of small animals) left their bodies so that they could do battle, armed with stalks of fennel, against analogous companies of male witches for the fate of the season's crops. They also performed cures and other kinds of benevolent magic. Carlo Ginzburg argues that theirs was a fertility ritual once widespread throughout central Europe, but by this period perhaps flourishing mainly in marginal regions such as the Friuli (and Lithuania, whence a strictly similar institution of benevolent werewolves is recorded from the late seventeenth century), and suggests Slav or even Ural-Altaic influences, which must be left to the judgment of experts in popular religion.

However, the real interest of his extremely lucidly written book lies elsewhere. The Holy Inquisition (not unhampered both by its representatives' ignorance of the Friulian dialect and the suspicions of the Venetian Republic) did not quite know what to make of the 'good walkers'. It therefore attempted to assimilate them to the well-classified and heretical practice of witchcraft, and to press its victims to admit their participation in the diabolist sabbaths. What is more, it succeeded. A series of inquisitions and trials stretching from the 1570s to the 1640s, details of which Signor Ginzburg has extracted from a variety of archives, show the 'good walkers' gradually assimilating themselves to witches (though attempting to maintain their benevolent functions) under the pressure of the now alerted Church. It was no doubt fortunate for them that their conversion into witches came too late for serious persecution. The main effect of the Church's

intervention in traditional peasant practices appears in this instance to have been to lead to their decadence.

The story is local, but its relevance to the general study of the 'witch-cult' is obvious. For here we have not Margaret Murray's subterranean old religion hostile to Christianity but ritual practices which had long established a symbiosis with the dominant religion – the *benandanti* originally regarded themselves as champions of Christ against the devil – but which are forced into opposition (one of the accused thought their practices were similar to those of the 'Turks, Jews and Heretics') by Church policy.

Yet the interest of Carlo Ginzburg's book lies not merely in the light it throws on religion, magic and witchcraft in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, a subject much written about since 1966, but still a rather specialized one. His primary concern is to 'reconstruct the peasant mentality of the period'. Writing the history of those whose opinions are rarely documented has become an extremely popular practice in recent years. Justifiably so, since they constitute the great majority of humanity. It is Ginzburg's merit to have recognized, long before Le Roy Ladurie's *Montaillou*, that – contrary to what has often been assumed – the documents of the Inquisition allow us to catch the voices of its victims and to reconstruct their intellectual universe, public and private. It takes a highly skilled and, above all, an imaginative historian to do so. But those who have read Ginzburg's later book *The Cheese and the Worms* will not need to be told that he is both. In this early work he has written a study which will fascinate and stimulate all historians of the popular mind. Fortunately it will find many more of them to stimulate in 1983 than in the pioneer days of 1966.

E.J. Hobsbawm

TRANSLATORS' NOTE

We are very pleased to have been offered the opportunity, with *The Night Battles*, of presenting to the English reader a second work by the innovative Italian social historian, Carlo Ginzburg. Actually, the present book, which quickly became a classic in the historiography of witchcraft after it first appeared with its original Italian title *I Benandanti* in 1966, preceded by more than a decade *The Cheese and the Worms*, Ginzburg's pioneering study in popular culture. These two works represent only a small part of the best of the new social, cultural and religious history being written today by a host of distinguished Italian scholars. The agenda of future translations should be a long one.

A few words of explanation about our English version may be helpful. There are a number of seeming inconsistencies among name forms but these occurred in the original documents, written in an age before orthography had become standardized, and we simply retained them. Unless it was clear that a name was a family name (and the instances of this were few), rather than a Christian name with the addition of a place for identification, we have used the form, 'Agnabella of San Lorenzo', etc. The exception to this is for ecclesiastics whose places of origin often became a permanent name by which they were henceforth known: thus, Bernardino da Siena.

We have appropriated from the Italian the words benandante/benandanti, the singular and plural forms, to designate the members of the fertility cult who are the subject of this book. A literal translation of the word would be 'those who go well' or 'good-doers'. We have also typically used 'witch' in the broader sense for both males and females, unless the Italian text mentioned together both *strega* and *stregone* which we then rendered as 'witch' and 'warlock'.

As we noted in detail in our preface to Ginzburg's *The Cheese and the Worms*, the wording in the inquisitorial trial records was transposed by

the notary of the court from direct testimony to speech in the third person, and questions and answers were transformed into an indirect form of discourse. Nevertheless the author was obliged to put these passages within quotation marks, even though in this indirect form, because they are taken directly from the original documents.

Our translation, with the exception of one deleted paragraph (pp. 46–7) reproduces the Einaudi 1974 second edition of *I Benandanti*. In addition to Ginzburg's new preface for the English edition, only a handful of new bibliographical references have been added by the translators. No attempt has been made, otherwise, to update the apparatus. In the Index we have used full names for historical personages and writers, and initials for the first names of modern authors.

J.T.
A.C.T.

PREFACE TO THE ENGLISH EDITION

Several years after it first appeared, *I Benandanti* is being made available to English readers as *The night battles*. In the period since the book was originally published, studies on European witchcraft have proliferated, many of which have made important contributions. What was at first considered little more than a curiosity, today is a fashionably current theme of research, and new works on the subject are appearing in a steady stream. Nevertheless, all modesty aside, I believe that the present book is still of interest and perhaps more so today than fifteen years ago, capable of appealing to a wider public, and one not confined to specialists.

It was E.W. Monter who, in 1969, drew attention in very generous terms to the *I Benandanti*,[1] thereby introducing into international scholarly discussion this monograph dealing with a peripheral area (the Friuli) written in a language which today is also peripheral (Italian). In his review Monter observed that the documents which I had collected and studied furnished unexpected support for the old (and discredited) thesis of M. Murray which regarded witchcraft as a fertility cult. Elsewhere, Monter explained that what had been confirmed was only part of Murray's thesis.[2] This was an important qualification: Murray, in fact, had asserted: (a) that witchcraft had its roots in an ancient fertility cult, and (b) that the sabbat described in the witchcraft trials referred to gatherings which had actually taken place.[3] What my work really demonstrated, even if unintentionally, was simply the first point. While there is an indisputable connection between benandanti and fertility cults (in this respect, I think, we should acknowledge the 'kernel of truth' in Murray's thesis), no document allows us to conclude with certainty that the benandanti actually met on set occasions to perform the rites described in their confessions.[4] Certain scholars, to be sure, have claimed for the benandanti that 'no firmer bit of evidence has ever been presented that witchcraft

existed', (J.B. Russell) or that 'they remain to date the only authenticated witch cult in early modern Europe', (H.C. Erik Midelfort).[5] I consider this interpretation unfounded if it infers from the link between benandanti and fertility cults the physical existence of an organized sect of witches. Equally unjustified on the other hand, in my opinion, is the assurance with which N. Cohn, in a polemic with Russell (and also because of a misinterpretation of my book) concluded that 'the experiences of the benandanti . . . were all trance experiences.'[6] On the basis of the available documents, the existence or non-existence of an organized sect of witches in fifteenth- to seventeenth-century Europe seems to be indeterminate. It is a dilemma, however, which to my eyes at least has only relative importance. Those who believe the contrary (and they are still the vast majority of scholars dealing with this subject) remain unconsciously bound to the view taken by those long-ago judges, ecclesiastical or secular, who asked themselves before all else whether the accused had participated *physically* in the diabolical gatherings. Even if the sabbat had been a purely mental phenomenon (and this cannot be proved) its importance for the historian would not be diminished.

This point should be stressed because the benandanti have been discussed too often in witchcraft studies for the wrong reasons. No one has cast doubt on the unprecedented richness of the materials gathered and analysed here. But the exceptional nature of the documents has no bearing on the question of the physical reality of the witches' congregations. This has to be searched for in a totally different direction: the gap between the questions of the judges and the confessions of the accused which was gradually reduced only in the course of decades. To his credit, P. Burke has seen in the use I have made of this gap a device by which, through broader application, the student of popular culture may circumvent the limitations inherent in judicial sources.[7] In the present case it was possible to achieve an in-depth analysis (which if I am not mistaken seems to have remained a somewhat isolated effort in the study of European witchcraft) of a stratum of popular beliefs which the inquisitors could only slowly make coincide with their own preconceived ideas. The extraordinary characteristics of the group of documents collected here make possible this reconstruction from within (from the point of view of the benandanti) and demonstrates that the history of witchcraft need not be limited to the study of its repression. Popular beliefs relative to witchcraft – 'mental rubbish of peasant credulity and feminine hysteria' as Trevor-Roper scornfully defined them – are neither 'universal' (and therefore lacking specificity) nor unworthy of study.[8] Today, the emergence of

the feminist movement, the interest in popular culture and the vogue of the occult make this quite obvious. For this reason, a review of some of the difficulties which research of this type encounters may serve a useful purpose.

We can try then to extend the type of analysis adopted for the benandanti: but with what results? If the phenomenon of the benandanti had been an episode with totally anomalous characteristics, strictly circumscribed in time and space, the unusual nature of the documentation would also have to be accepted in a diminished sense. Its importance for the history of European witchcraft would be, all in all, quite negligible.

Here too it is essential to make distinctions. The process of acculturation through which diabolical witchcraft was superimposed on beliefs, such as those of the benandanti, was not a phenomenon restricted to the Friuli. There are obvious parallels with the cult of Diana in Modena which unfortunately cannot be pursued systematically because adequate sources are lacking. Consequently, the story of the benandanti sheds a great deal of light on the ways in which the image of diabolical witchcraft as envisioned by demonologists, judges and inquisitors gained ascendancy in Europe. (Beginning from what? we ask ourselves at this point. This is a question I would like to pursue in another work.)

It is difficult, however, to find analogies outside the Friuli with the complex of ideas which emerges with such a wealth of details in the accounts of the benandanti. Nevertheless, many more parallels could be added to those which are already noted in the following pages. In particular, the connection between the benandanti and shamans alluded to in the original preface, and confirmed by M. Eliade, could be developed further.[9] I intend to attempt this in the book mentioned above. In some respects, it will integrate, and in others continue, on a vaster chronological and spatial scale, the research which began with *The night battles*.

C.G.
Bologna, 1982

PREFACE TO THE ITALIAN EDITION

In this book I have studied the religious attitudes and, in a broad sense, the mentality of a peasant society – the Friulian – between the end of the sixteenth century and the first half of the seventeenth, but from an extremely limited point of view: the history of a nucleus of popular beliefs, which little by little, as a result of specific forces, became assimilated by witchcraft. It is an episode in history that has been unknown until now, but one which casts a great deal of light on the general problem of witchcraft and its persecution.

A rich variety of individual attitudes and behaviour emerges from the sources analysed. In dwelling on them, one risks plunging into an excess of the picturesque. Nevertheless, I've preferred to run this risk rather than make use at every step of such general and vague terms as 'collective mentality', or 'collective psychology'. This Friulian testimony reveals a continuous criss-crossing of trends enduring for decades and even centuries, and of individual, private, and frequently wholly unconscious, reactions. It is apparently impossible to make history from such reactions, and yet without them, the history of 'collective mentalities' becomes nothing more than a series of disembodied and abstract tendencies and forces.

The principal characteristic of this documentation is its immediacy. Except for the fact that the notaries of the Holy Office translated the testimony from Friulian into Italian, it is fair to say that the voices of these peasants reach us directly, without barriers, not by way, as usually happens, of fragmentary and indirect testimony, filtered through a different and inevitably distorting mentality.

Such a statement may seem paradoxical, and this leads to the specific interest of the research. We have become accustomed to accepting the confessions of those accused of witchcraft as the consequences of torture and of suggestive questioning by the judges, and thus denying that they possess any element of spontaneity. The

fundamental investigations of J. Hansen,[1] more precisely, have demonstrated how the image of diabolical witchcraft, with all its appendages – the pact with the devil, the sabbat, the profanation of the sacraments – was developed between the mid-thirteenth and mid-fifteenth centuries largely through the efforts of theologians and inquisitors, and gradually spread by means of treatises, sermons, depictions, throughout Europe and, eventually, even across the Atlantic.[2] This transformation, or rather, closer to the truth, superimposition of the inquisitorial schema on a pre-existent stratum of generic superstitions, occurred in a particularly dramatic form during the trials themselves, through the moulding of the confessions of the accused by means of the two devices mentioned above: torture and 'suggestive' questioning. All this, as we have said, has been documented exhaustively, but almost always at the educated level in the elaboration of doctrine. F. Byloff's attempt[3] to demonstrate, in a well-defined geographical area, the penetration into the popular mentality of diabolical witchcraft as formed by inquisitors and demonologists, achieved meagre results. The exceptional richness of the Friulian sources permits us to reconstruct this process with much greater precision and clarity. It reveals how a cult with such obviously popular characteristics as that of the benandanti gradually was transformed under inquisitorial pressure, ending up with the distinctive features of traditional witchcraft. But this discrepancy, this gap between the image underlying the interrogations of the judges and the actual testimony of the accused, permits us to reach a genuinely popular stratum of beliefs which was later deformed, and then expunged by the superimposition of the schema of the educated classes. Because of this discrepancy, which endured over several decades, the benandanti trials constitute a precious source for the reconstruction of the peasant mentality of this period.

Thus, the goal of the present research is to document and build upon the approach to the question originally developed by Hansen. What is new about this effort, even if limited in scope, is the contribution that it can make to our understanding of the significance and nature of popular witchcraft, as distinguished from the learned conceptions of inquisitorial origin. The debates of the Enlightenment (exemplified in Italy by a Tartarotti[4]) obviously, and understandably, were not interested in the confessions of the witches: what really counted was to be able to disclose the barbarity and irrationality of the persecutions. The accounts of the witches were passed over as absurd fantasies or confessions extorted by the cruelty and superstition of the judges. A first attempt at serious interpretation came with the

erudite researches of the second half of the nineteenth century, which generally viewed the witches' confessions as the results of hallucinations caused by the use of drug-containing ointments, or from pathological states, especially hysteria. But the most well-researched and best documented studies endeavoured principally – often in a more or less explicit spirit of anti-Catholic or anti-clerical polemic – to explain the events and the mechanism of the persecution.

A real interest in the beliefs of the witches, or presumed witches, themselves is not encountered (if we exclude Michelet's romantic admiration for the 'rebellious' witch[5]) until the researches of the English Egyptologist, M. Murray.[6] A follower of J. Frazer, and therefore interested in questions of magic and the mentality of 'primitives', Murray did not limit herself to underscoring the importance of the confessions of the witchcraft suspects from an ethnological or folkloristic point of view. Paradoxically overthrowing the accepted approach – which was actually more an instinctive attitude than a reasoned approach – she re-evaluated the trustworthiness of those confessions (in the positivistic sense of the *external* reliability of a source). According to Murray, the conventicles described by the accused were real, and witchcraft was a very ancient religion, a pre-Christian fertility cult, in which the judges, more or less deliberately, chose to see only a diabolical perversion. Although this thesis contained a kernel of truth, it was formulated in a wholly uncritical way;[7] moreover, the reconstruction of the general characteristics of this supposed fertility cult was based on very late trials in which the assimilation of the inquisitorial schema (sabbat, nuptials with the devil, etc.) was by now complete. And yet, despite these serious defects, Murray's 'thesis', which was rejected by anthropologists and folklorists when it first appeared, ended by prevailing. What had been lacking then, and the need persists today if I'm not mistaken, was an all-encompassing explanation of popular witchcraft: and the thesis of the English scholar, purified of its most daring affirmations, seemed plausible where it discerned in the orgies of the sabbat the deformation of an ancient fertility rite. In this mitigated form it was reformulated by W.E. Peuckert, among others.[8]

And yet it is not easy to demonstrate that popular witchcraft (as distinct from generic superstitions, such as love potions, spells, etc., which are not traceable to a precise cult) actually went back to an ancient agricultural and fertility cult. One primary objection has already been raised about Murray's work: we cannot rely uncritically on the confessions of the witches without attempting to distinguish in them between what is of inquisitorial provenance and what is of

genuinely popular origin. But this is not a fatal objection. J. Marx had already noted the existence of a cluster of beliefs which, while of unequivocally popular origin, nevertheless resembled, to some extent, the witches' sabbat pictured by theologians and inquisitors.[9] More recently, L. Weiser-Aall has placed great weight on the existence of this point of contact between popular and learned witchcraft,[10] in regard to beliefs first recorded for the tenth century, but unquestionably of much earlier origin.[11] These involve mysterious nocturnal flights, especially by women, to gatherings where there is no trace of the devil, of the profanation of sacraments or of apostasy from the faith – conventicles over which a feminine divinity presided, called, in turn, Diana, Herodias, Holda or Perchta. Does the presence of goddesses linked to vegetation, such as Perchta or Diana, mean that the beliefs underlying later diabolical witchcraft lead back to fertility cults? It is a plausible hypothesis, but one that has not yet been satisfactorily demonstrated, despite the efforts of a German scholar, A. Mayer,[12] who, in my opinion, has come closer than anyone else to formulating the question correctly. Nevertheless, even his attempt, founded as it was on thin and insufficient evidence, basically failed. Moreover, a second objection can be raised against it, and this one is not so easy to answer. Like Murray, Mayer did not explain why witches, priestesses in this presumed fertility cult, appeared from the beginning (and not only in the later manifestations of witchcraft which had been deformed by the judges) portrayed as enemies of the harvests, deliverers of hail and storms, carriers of sterility to humans and beasts alike.[13]

The present research now establishes, in an area such as the Friuli, where Germanic and Slavic traditions came together, the positive existence at a relatively late date (from *c.* 1570) of a fertility cult whose participants, the benandanti, represented themselves as defenders of harvests and the fertility of fields. On the one hand, this belief is tied to a larger complex of traditions (connected, in turn, with the myth of nocturnal gatherings over which female deities named Perchta, Holda, Diana presided) in an area that extends from Alsace to Hesse and from Bavaria to Switzerland. On the other hand, it is found in an almost identical form in the lands which once comprised Livonia (present day Latvia and Estonia). Given this geographic spread it may not be too daring to suggest that in antiquity these beliefs must once have covered much of central Europe. In the span of a century, as we shall see, the benandanti were transformed into witches and their nocturnal gatherings, intended to induce fertility, became the devil's sabbat, with the resulting storms and destruction. We can thus state for a fact that for the Friuli diabolical witchcraft grew out of the

deformation of a preceding agrarian cult. Of course, it is impossible to extend this conclusion by simple analogy to other parts of Europe; nevertheless, though limited and circumscribed, it may serve as a working hypothesis for future research. At any rate the existence of this complex of beliefs over a large, key area implies, in my opinion, a new approach to the problem of the popular origins of witchcraft.

Folklorists and historians of religion will be able to draw much larger inferences from this documentary material, while correcting my errors, filling in lacunae and making greater use of the comparative method. As we will see, I have made only very cautious use of the latter; or, to be more precise, I have availed myself of only one of the two comparative methods identified by M. Bloch: the more strictly historical one. Thus, I have not dealt with the question of the relationship which undoubtedly must exist between benandanti and shamans.[14] This sums up the basic characteristics and limitations of the present plan of research.

There are no studies of any kind on the benandanti. Investigations which have been concerned with Friulian popular traditions, either for scholarly or antiquarian reasons – by G. Marcotti, E. Fabris Bellavitis, V. Ostermann, A. Lazzarini, G. Vidossi and others – have treated the term 'benandante' as synonymous with 'witch', without perceiving the underlying historical problem.[15] This was due neither to neglect nor to faulty analysis. Rather, it was because these studies were limited (for perfectly valid reasons, such as the difficulty of access to the sources in the archive of the Curia Arcivescovile in Udine) to testimony that was oral, or at least not older than the end of the last century or beginning of the present one. In reality, the identification of 'benandante' with 'witch' constitutes, as will be seen, only the final crystallized stage in a complex, contradictory process which can be reconstructed quite precisely in its various phases.

The present work was made possible, in a sense, by a methodology that differed from the traditional one of folklore, a departure that has been deliberately accentuated in the course of the research. In fact, I have attempted to penetrate behind the apparent uniformity of these beliefs and grasp the various attitudes of the men and women who lived by them, and how they were altered under influences of several kinds, both of popular and inquisitorial provenance. The specifically folkloristic aspects of the problem have thus been strictly subordinated to an emphatically historical approach.

I have been helped by many people in the course of this study: it is impossible to thank them all. I shall mention those who directly or indirectly have facilitated my access to the sources: first of all Mon-

signor Pio Paschini (deceased); Monsignor Guglielmo Biasutti (in a very particular way) and Monsignor Garlatti, respectively librarian and chancellor of the Curia Arcivescovile in Udine; Monsignor Romeo De Maio of the Vatican Library; Father Massimiliano Peloza; Vinko Foretić, former director of the Archive of State in Dubrovnik; Angelo Tamborra, Paolo Sambin and Marino Berengo. I should also like to thank the Fondazione Luigi Einaudi which provided me with a fellowship in 1962, and Norberto Bobbio, Luigi Firpo, Aldo Garosci and Franco Venturi who followed my work in that period. The Warburg Institute in London, at the suggestion of the former and highly esteemed Gertrud Bing, gave me in the summer of 1964 the possibility of using its library, an unparalleled instrument of research: I should like to thank its director, E.H. Gombrich, for unforgettable hospitality, and O. Kurz and A.A. Barb for their advice and suggestions. Encouragement to pursue this investigation came from a meeting with the now deceased Ernesto De Martino. An early version of this work was presented and discussed as a thesis at the Scuola Normale Superiore in Pisa in the spring of 1964: I am grateful for their criticisms and suggestions to Armando Saitta, and the other examiners, Arsenio Frugoni and Cinzio Violante. Other assistance and advice is acknowledged in the course of the volume.

Delio Cantimori read the first draft of this book. For his invaluable counsel, and for everything that I have learned from him, it is a pleasure to express to him my deepest gratitude.

C.G.
Rome, 1965