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# FEDERICI'S WITCHES: OLD MALE MYTHS IN NEW FEMINIST GARB?

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“[H]ow to account for the execution of hundreds of thousands of ‘witches’ at the beginning of the modern era, and how to explain why the rise of capitalism was coeval with a war against women[?]”

—Silvia Federici<sup>1</sup>

## WITCH HUNTS: A WAR ON WOMEN?

Historians of witchcraft and gender are aware: Between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries, approximately fifty to sixty thousand people in Europe were executed as witches, caught up either in small witch trials or in massive witch hunts. Women, of all ages and of every status or class, were affected in greater numbers than men: across Europe, women made up approximately 75–80 percent of those executed as witches.<sup>2</sup> The reason why more women than men were suspected of being witches remains highly controversial. Modern witchcraft research has dismissed all conspiracy theories about a war orchestrated by the state and the church to eradicate wise women, healers, midwives, deviant and unruly women, or those females who rebelled against social and religious norms.<sup>3</sup> Anyone of any gender who (supposedly) violated

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1. Silvia Federici *Caliban and the Witch* (New York: Autonomedia, 2004), 14.

2. These bare figures conceal major differences, as the proportion of female victims varied greatly both in terms of time and space: in certain areas, men outnumbered women, and one should remember that overall, approximately every fourth so-called witch was a man.

3. See Alison Rowlands, “Witchcraft and Gender in Early Modern Europe,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe and Colonial America*, ed. Brian P. Levack (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 449–67; Raisa Maria Toivo, “Witchcraft and Gender,” in *The Routledge History of Witchcraft*, ed. Johannes Dillinger

the patriarchal order could easily be labeled as the Devil's minion and thus as a follower of Lucifer, the greatest and original rebel against the divine order. True, rigid gender roles and misogynistic assumptions about female inferiority were embedded in every discourse and practice of the early modern period in Europe, witch trials very much included. No serious historian, of any gender, will ever deny these connections. However, the witchcraft trials of the late medieval and early modern periods were neither a "holocaust of women" with the millions of victims such a term implies, nor a multitude of macho murders of women, what today would be called a "femicide."

#### FROM NEGATIVE TO POSITIVE: A FEMINIST ICON IS BORN

"Witch," the ultimate discrediting label, marginalized thousands of people as archenemies of the Godly order of nature, the Godly state, and the God-given patriarchal order of the family. During trial procedures, innocent women (and men) were forced to take on this new, false, identity. Hardly anyone wanted willingly to be called a "witch." The stereotype of the old, ugly woman, living at the margins of a community, serving the community with magico-religious healing practices, who out of self-defense called herself a witch is just that, a stereotype.<sup>4</sup> Such a "village witch" is as much the byproduct of scholarly labeling and re-interpretation as is the feminist icon of the witch as a rebel. The few healers (female and male) and midwives who were juridically accused of forbidden magic only assumed the identity of a diabolic witch in court, after a long, agonizing struggle that destroyed their self-identity.<sup>5</sup> The rare self-accusations of witchcraft outside the torture chamber can be attributed to social pressure, severe physical or psychological disorders, or a hidden desire to kill oneself, to commit a "suicide by court."

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(London, Routledge, 2020), 219–32; Philippa Carter, "Work, Gender and Witchcraft in Early Modern England," *Gender & History* (2023): 1–18; Amanda L. Capern, ed., *The Routledge History of Women in Early Modern Europe* (London, Routledge, 2020); Teresa A. Meade and Merry E. Wiesner-Hanks, ed., *A Companion to Gender History* (Oxford, Blackwell, 2004).

4. For example: Merry Wiesner-Hanks, "Gender," in *Encyclopedia of Witchcraft. The Western Paradigm*, ed. Richard M. Golden (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2006), 407–11.

5. On the importance of remembering the role of torture in forming the confessions of accused witches, see especially Rita Voltmer, "The Witch in the Courtroom: Torture and the Representation of Emotion," in *Emotions in the History of Witchcraft*, ed. L. Kounine and M. Ostling, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 97–116.

However, during the first (nineteenth century), second (twentieth century) and third (postcolonial) waves of the women's movement, the term "witch" underwent a complete reinterpretation from a highly negative to a most positive role model.<sup>6</sup> This metamorphosis was made possible by clichés, misinterpretations, errors, and the invention of traditions. "The witch" mutated into a purely female figure, an icon. It is particularly noteworthy that this image of the witch was also linked to a conspiracy myth. Feminists no longer saw the witch as the *agent* of a *demonic* conspiracy but stylized her as the *victim* of a *male* conspiracy of global dimension. Representatives of spiritual feminism, ecofeminism, goddess feminism, or neo-Marxist feminism drew on the large pool of supposed knowledge about the "true" nature of the witch that had been compiled over the decades of the nineteenth century. These narratives had created the witch as an anti-patriarchal, anti-church, and anti-state symbol of revolution and liberation, of self-determination, of pride in being a woman, of embodying the more sensitive, wiser sex that controlled fertility, reproduction, nature, and thus the survival of humanity. According to these discourses, millions of women had been exploited, violated, tortured, and killed during centuries of male domination because their powers in magic and nature were feared.

The most fruitful research in the field of gender and witchcraft, which is conducted with good arguments and in-depth reading of sources, is rarely or superficially received in these circles. In the wake of the #MeToo movement, and together with the third wave of the women's movement in the Global South, the "witch" as feminist icon and as fighting figure has gained new prominence, and public attention. In a historiographical perspective, these narratives belong to the arsenal of so-called *Gebrauchsgeschichte* or "useful history,"<sup>7</sup> that is the political use of historical narratives, myths, and even fake news to legitimize one's own (collective or individual) ideology or interests, without regard for the historical consistency or for the accuracy of the narratives deployed.

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6. Rita Voltmer, "'Tremate, tremate, le streghe son tornate!' Zur Wirkmacht des Hexen-Narrativs in den europäischen Frauenbewegungen," in *Erinnern, vergessen, umdeuten? Europäische Frauenbewegungen im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert*, ed. Angelika Schaser et al. (Frankfurt am Main: Campus Verlag, 2019), 70–94; Laurel Zwissler, "'In Memoriam Maleficarum': Feminist and Pagan Mobilizations of the Burning Times," in Kounine and Ostling, *Emotions*, 249–68; Katharine Hodgkin, "Gender, mind and body: Feminism and psychoanalysis," in *Palgrave Advances in Witchcraft Historiography*, ed. Jonathan Barry and Owen Davies (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 182–202.

7. See Guy Marchal, *Schweizer Gebrauchsgeschichte. Geschichtsbilder, Mythenbildung und nationale Identität* (Basel: Schwabe Verlag, 2006).

CALIBAN AND THE WITCH OR THE  
CONSPIRACY OF CAPITALISM

Silvia Federici is one such purveyor of *Gebrauchsgeschichte*, one such source for narratives of the witch that underpin a certain political position in a quasi-historical fashion. Nevertheless, Federici cannot be denied a high degree of seriousness. Ongoing witch hunts in African countries or elsewhere in the world have motivated her, as she reveals in numerous interviews,<sup>8</sup> to repeatedly draw the connection between neoliberal capitalism and witch-hunting. Her disgust at the commercialization of the topic of witches and witch trials is on record,<sup>9</sup> nor should the inspiration she has provided to young feminist readers, especially in Latin America, be overlooked.

Since 1984, Federici has constructed and doggedly maintained a theory of the development of capitalism as a system based on the oppression of proletarian men and women, the degrading of female bodies to the status of child-bearing factories, the trade in enslaved people, and the subjugation of Atlantic and African indigenous cultures. Her Autonomist Marxist feminist approach introduced the category of gender into debates about the origins of capitalism, because according to Federici theorists from Karl Marx through Michel Foucault had neglected the historical role of women in this development, especially their work in reproduction and caregiving. As a feminist activist, Federici is still involved in many projects to achieve and regain women's rights or in the fight against unpaid female care work. Her sympathies lie with the Occupy movement; and she advocates a model of the commons, i.e. of collective property organized by a community, in which decisions and profits are shared equally. In Federici's *Gebrauchsgeschichte* the resources of the commons can circumvent the patriarchal impact of the state, and finally of capitalism itself. She conjures up a vision of the medieval past in which women's rights remained virtually intact, in which peasant women lived peacefully with their male partners, in which both genders together enjoyed reproduction (sexual lives in common) and production (cultivation of the commons). This retrospective utopia, in Federici's telling, was destroyed by capitalism, a system that achieved its ends through a double enclosure: of the productive commons and of the reproductive female body.

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8. Interview with Silvia Federici in *Die Wochenzeitung* 41 (October 12, 2023), <https://www.woz.ch/2341/silvia-federici/die-nacht-zu-einem-gefaehrlichen-ort-zu-machen-war-im-interesse-der-maechtigen>, accessed October 8, 2025.

9. Silvia Federici, *Witches, Witch-Hunting, and Women* (New York: PM Press, 2018), 6.

According to Federici's bricolage, the so-called great witch hunt of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries constituted an international, Europe-wide conspiracy of state and church, a genocide with hundreds of thousands of female victims, orchestrated to destroy female liberty, female knowledge about nature, abortion, and birth control, female magic, and free female sexuality.<sup>10</sup> The hidden agenda of this male scheme was to repopulate Europe, and thus, to reduce women's bodies to childbearing and child-rearing vessels dedicated to filling the ranks of workers and soldiers. The suppression of women (figured as "the witch") was one side of the coin in this process of capitalist domination; the suppression of the world proletariat, colonization, and the trade in enslaved people—symbolized, for Federici, in the figure of Caliban—was the other.<sup>11</sup>

However, Federici's invented history rests on shaky ground, as some established facts of the witch persecutions<sup>12</sup> make clear:

- After the sixteenth-century population growth, and despite famines, plagues, and catastrophic wars (e.g., the Thirty-Years War), there was no general demographic crisis in early modern Europe, and thus no general pressure to repopulate.
- In the same period, there were no enclosures in Germany, the heartland of witch-hunting. Only in a few regions of continental Europe did lords try, with little success, to enclose common land (e.g., in Castile or Flanders).<sup>13</sup> An analysis based on the English enclosures of this period is invalid for areas with no enclosure movement.
- Even in England, recent research on the English Fens also shows that hardly any direct connection can be established between enclosure and

10. Federici, *Caliban and the Witch*, 163, 169, 220; Silvia Federici, "Il Caccia alla Streghe, in Silvia Federici and Leopoldina Fortunati, *Il grande Calibano. Storia del corpo sociale ribelle nella prima fase del capitale* (Milano, Franco Angeli, 1984), 62–101, 69.

11. Caliban as a postcolonial role model is not Federici's invention: see for example the play *Une Tempête* by Aimé Césaire (1969); on Shakespeare's Caliban, son of the witch Sycorax and (probably) the Devil, see Marion Gibson and Jo Ann Esra, *Shakespeare's Demonology: A Dictionary* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 34–35.

12. The list below is based primarily on Rita Voltmer, "Witch Trials," in *The Oxford Illustrated History of Witchcraft and Magic*, ed. Owen Davies (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 97–133.

13. Tom Scott, *The Early Reformation in Germany: Between Secular Impact and Radical Vision* (London: Routledge, 2016), 91; Tom Scott, "The Agrarian West," in *The Oxford Handbook of Early Modern European History 1350–1750*, vol. I: Peoples and Places, ed. Hamish Scott (Oxford: University Press, 2015), 1: 398–427, here 401, 403, 411, and 422.

drainage, the resistance it provoked, and the witch trials that took place there later.<sup>14</sup>

- There is no connection between peasant uprisings and witch hunts. The two phenomena do not occur at the same time in the same place, nor is it possible to establish a plausible connection between earlier uprisings and later witch trials.
- Witch-hunting was not a top-down tool, forced by a so-called “state” upon the peasantry. In many European territories (for example in the politically fragmented Holy Roman Empire, in the duchies of Lorraine and Luxembourg, and the Iberian and Italian peninsulas) village people and townsfolk alike engaged eagerly in witch-hunting.
- For example, in the Rhine-Meuse-area, some village communities created committees to more effectively organize the witch hunt. It was they who searched for suspects in the community; it was they who gathered the evidence necessary to bring suspects to trial; it was they who traveled from one execution site to another to hear the confessions and draw up lists of new suspects; it was they who paid notaries to obtain written copies of witchcraft accusations and indictments; it was they who brought so-called witches to court, and it was they who assisted the court as guards and in the torture chamber. These exclusively male agents of witch-hunting were involved at all levels in the selection, exclusion, and extermination of their accused neighbors.
- Midwives and female healers were neither the usual suspects nor the usual victims of the witch trials.
- As a method of resolving everyday conflicts, it was mainly women who defamed their female counterparts as alleged witches, spread rumors to this effect, and acted as witnesses for the prosecution.
- The multitude of high courts trying alleged witches was often the judicial arm of the very small, very numerous ecclesiastical or secular lordships scattered across the European continent; they therefore could hardly form themselves into a universal conspiracy.
- Indeed, the hotspots of witch persecutions were to be found in small jurisdictional units all over Europe. For comparison: in the territory of the Imperial abbey of St. Maximin near Trier in ten years (1586–1596) about four hundred people were burnt as presumed witches (20 percent of the adult population). This is a higher number than the total death-toll of alleged witches in the (much larger) kingdom of England during

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14. See Tabitha Stanmore, “Witchcraft, Politics and Resistance in the Seventeenth-Century Fens,” *Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft* (special issue, forthcoming).

the entire early modern period. Thus, the mass killing of people as witches is a clear indicator of *failed* statehood, rather than of a modernizing state's increased intervention into the lives of village and town folk in general, or of women in particular.

- The well-known economic, religious, social, and political crisis of the fifteenth to the seventeenth century forms the indispensable background of witch-hunting, as Federici acknowledges. But some important causes of that crisis that don't fit her ideological model—for example the Little Ice Age—go unmentioned in her work.

But why are the myths about the European witch hunts still to be found in Federici's writing, long after they have been debunked by historians of the period; and why do so many feminists still believe in these myths today? In the following, I can only sketch the manner in which Federici's conspiracy myth was fashioned. After a very short examination of her working method, her feminist myths are traced down through history.

#### THE IMPACT OF REPETITION: FOUR DECADES OF *CALIBAN*

In its full standalone form, *Caliban and the Witch* was first published in 2004;<sup>15</sup> however, this was not the book's original year of birth. In 1967, Federici moved to the United States as a "natural rebel."<sup>16</sup> From the mid-1970s, together with the Italian feminist Leopoldina Fortunati, she worked on a research project on "women in the 'transition' from feudalism to capitalism."<sup>17</sup> The two women published their arguments in 1984 as *Il Grande Calibano*, to which Federici contributed two independent essays: "Il Grande Calibano. La lotta contro il corpo ribelle" [The Great Caliban. The Fight against the Rebellious Body] and "Il caccia alla streghe" [The witch-hunt].<sup>18</sup> This first version of *Caliban and the Witch* shows the influence of Margaret Murray (the infamous English Egyptologist and feminist who promulgated the theory of an underground Pagan witch-cult in her writings from the 1920s and 1930s),

15. Federici, *Caliban and the Witch*; see also the reprint edition, describing the original as a "cult classic": *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation* (London: Penguin Books, 2021).

16. "When in 1967 I came to the US I was already a natural rebel." Rachel Andrews, interview with Silvia Federici, *The White Review* (January 2022), <https://www.thewhitereview.org/feature/interview-with-silvia-federici/>. Accessed October 8, 2025.

17. Federici, *Caliban*, Preface (n.p.).

18. Federici and Fortunati, *Il grande Calibano*, 35–61; 62–101.

Mary Daly (the American co-founder of feminist theology and goddess theology), and Jules Michelet (the French historian whose Romantic vision of the witch hunts imbued the hunts with a political meaning, since he had connected it with the peasants' insurrection against feudalism).<sup>19</sup> Federici did not lack knowledge of recent research in witchcraft: she briefly discusses or gives reference inter alia to the work from the 1970s or early 1980s of Norman Cohn, Carlo Ginzburg, Henry Kamen, Robert Mandrou, H. C. Erik Midelfort, Russel Hope Robbins, Hugh Trevor-Roper, Keith Thomas, and Alan MacFarlane. She also referred to the German literary scholar and feminist Silvia Bovenschen,<sup>20</sup> but otherwise neglected German work on gender, feminism, or witchcraft.

In 1988, Federici published a slightly updated, but abridged version of her essay on the "great witch hunt," in English.<sup>21</sup> Finally, in 2004, twenty years after her original collaborative volume with Fortunati, she expanded her contributions to that volume in the English book *Caliban and the Witch*.<sup>22</sup> Federici commented that she had highly been influenced by the icons of the second-wave women's movement, citing, in this expanded volume, even more of those works which had shaped the feminist figure of "the witch" in the last decades of the twentieth century. We find here again Margaret Murray and Mary Daly, together with Deidre English and Barbara Ehrenreich (who promulgated the myth that the witch hunts targeted female healers and midwives, discussed in more detail below). Federici admitted in this new version that Starhawk, the American ecofeminist and practitioner of Reclaiming Witchcraft, and the German sociologist Maria Mies (author of *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale*, 1986) had already "placed the witch-hunt in the context of primitive accumulation, reaching conclusions very similar

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19. Federici, "Il Caccia alla Streghe," 74–76 (on Murray), 62–64, 95 (on Daly, often miswritten as Daley), 64, 71 (on Michelet).

20. Silvia Bovenschen, "The Contemporary Witch, the Historical Witch and the Witch Myth: The Witch, Subject of the Appropriation of Nature and Object of the Domination of Nature," *New German Critique* 15 (1978): 82–119; Federici, "Il Caccia alla Streghe," 64. – Bovenschen's article in German first appeared in *Aus der Zeit der Verzweiflung. Zur Genese und Aktualität des Hexenbildes* (1971), edited and co-authored inter alia by Sigrid Brauner. The title is a tribute to Jules Michelet's *La Sorcière. Des temps du désespoir*.

21. Silvia Federici, "The Great Witch Hunt," *The Main Scholar* 1 (1988): 31–52.

22. See also Silvia Federici, "The Great Caliban: The Struggle Against the Rebel Body," *The Commoner* 3 (January 2002); <https://thecommoner.org/back-issues/issue-03-january-2002/>. Accessed October 8, 2025.

to those presented in this volume.”<sup>23</sup> Jules Michelet is no longer mentioned, though his unacknowledged influence remains. Instead, Alan MacFarlane, Alfred Soman and Bill Monter are praised as male historians who have avoided “this tendency to blame the victims.”<sup>24</sup> We do not find, however, any serious engagement with the burgeoning scholarship on historical witchcraft from the same intervening two decades, including the feminist historians of witchcraft (e.g. Carol Karlsen, Louise Jackson, and Elizabeth Reis, to name only authors readily available in English).<sup>25</sup> On the contrary, Federici still claimed in the fifth edition of the German translation of *Caliban and the Witch* (2018), citing again the 1972 dissertation by H. C. Erik Midelfort in support, that the witch hunts remain one of the least researched episodes in European history.<sup>26</sup> As *Caliban and the Witch* has been translated into at least seven languages in the past twenty years, Federici’s apparatus of literature in witchcraft research has remained virtually unchanged. The same has to be said about her following books (e.g. *Witches, Witch-Hunting, and Women*, 2018), which present old and new essays on the same topic, with the same arguments, unaffected by forty years of new scholarship, including a great deal of feminist scholarship. To deconstruct Federici’s arguments, we must go back into the nineteenth century, where the myths of the witch as a healer and a rebel were born—myths that inspired Murray, Daly, Ehrenreich, English, and Bovenschen, and finally, Federici herself and her own acolytes.

#### ANTI-FEMINIST MALE FANTASIES OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

Two main perspectives, still both influential today, established themselves in the late seventeenth century, when enlightened Protestants started to consider the witch hunts as a historical phenomenon.<sup>27</sup> A “rationalist” camp understood witchcraft to be a fanatical fantasy: one should find the origins

23. Federici, *Caliban and the Witch*, 201, 206–9.

24. *Ibid.*, 164.

25. The 2004 edition already cited Sigrid Brauner (96, 98, 179), but just one title apiece by Lyndal Roper and Alison Rowlands (incorrectly spelled Rowland) decorate the bibliography. For a very brief overview of late-twentieth-century feminist historiography of the witch trials, see Ostling’s Introduction to the present Discussion Forum.

26. Silvia Federici, *Caliban und die Hexe. Frauen, der Körper und die ursprüngliche Akkumulation*, trans. Max Henninger (Vienna/Berlin, mandelbaum kritik & utopie, 2018), 205.

27. See Bill Monter, “The Historiography of European Witchcraft: Progress and Prospects,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 2 (1972): 435–51.

of the witch hunt in the fears and phobias of churchmen, not in the (non-existent) magical practices of the alleged witches. A “materialist” camp—in which we should include Federici—accepted the reality of witchcraft practice. This materialist camp can in turn be divided into two groups: first, those who like Montague Summers believed the historical witch to be a social danger, who had to be eradicated forcefully, since she still threatened society; second, those who believed the historical witch to be a positive female figure, an archaic priestess or an antipatriarchal rebel, persecuted by state and church alike. The German Jacob Grimm and the French Jules Michelet—both friends—belonged to this camp.

In Grimm’s search for evidence of a true German pre-Christian past, and thus for the reconstruction of a patriotic history, he thought he had discovered unmistakable evidence that the so-called witches had actually been wise women, priestesses of a Germanic-pagan folk religion. Due to their greater empathy, imagination, and closeness to nature, the women’s main field of activity was medicine and fortune-telling. Their favorite place remained the deep German forest. Together with his comments on the gods and goddesses of Nordic mythology, however, Grimm’s remarks leave no doubt that he idealized these Germanic women in the religious sphere, simultaneously excluding them from the spheres of social and political action. His “witch” fitted well into the polarity of nineteenth-century gender concepts.<sup>28</sup> With the rapid adoption of Grimm’s ideas in encyclopedias and handbooks, his essentially antifeminist interpretation of the witch gained wide attention and reception.

Influenced by his friend Grimm, in *La Sorcière* (1862) the French national historian Jules Michelet reconfigured the Germanic wise woman into a healing rebel, who recruited herself from the ranks of the oppressed serfs living in misery. This witch participated in the class struggle against Christian medieval feudalism. She surrendered herself to Satan, because he could open the last stronghold of freedom, the secrets of nature. As a doctor, wise woman, midwife, and helper of the common people, the witch spoke with animals, trees, and the clouds, distributed contraceptives and performed abortions. Michelet had thus invented the midwife-witch, an exalted figure who, however, spoke only with his own voice and according to his own fantasies about womanhood. *La Sorcière* must be seen in the context of his other works dedicated to femininity. In *Lamour* (1859) and *La Femme* (1860) in particular,

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28. Felix Wiedemann, *Rassenmutter und Rebellin. Hexenbilder in Romantik, völkischer Bewegung. Neuheidentum und Feminismus* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2007), 60–70.

Michelet fashioned himself as the knight who defended the woman, who was on the one hand seen a physically and mentally weak and ailing creature. For their own good, women had to stay away from the male sphere of business, labor, and industry. On the other hand, Michelet's woman was the guardian of nature, religion, morality, love, and the household. Due to her biologically determined weakness, this woman remained incapable of existing without male assistance, let alone pursuing regular paid work. She could only find true fulfillment as a wife and a mother. Michelet's message in *La Sorcière* followed the same pattern, since healing and comforting were female vocations of care. He had written these books for men alone, and—according to himself—only men should read them. The radically anticlerical republican Michelet, thus, positioned himself fiercely against early women's movements in France; his books triggered hot debates and a second *Querelle des femmes*.<sup>29</sup>

Michelet's fantasies about "the witch" as a rebel made a particular impression on the American feminist, theosophist, and spiritualist Matilda Joslyn Gage, who in 1893 published *Women, Church and State*, a radically anticlerical feminist manifesto. Gage is considered to have been the first to express a clearly feminist interpretation of the witch hunts. She claimed that the Christian churches, Catholic as well as Protestant, had cruelly persecuted wise women, midwives, female physicians, and seers as witches, the last representatives of a prehistoric matriarchy. Gage was also the first to link the false figure of the alleged nine million victims to the witch narrative, calling the persecutions a "holocaust [sic] of women."<sup>30</sup>

The English Egyptologist Margaret Murray must also be considered a feminist of the first hour.<sup>31</sup> She added a new element to the witch narrative by reformulating Michelet's ideas in a more radical way. She invented an ancient but still living fertility cult, in whose existence she deeply believed (or wanted to believe). She prepared the way to make the fantasies of the medieval and early modern demonologists acceptable for spiritualists and occultists such as Gerald B. Gardner, the founder of the Wicca movement.

29. Claire Goldberg Moses, *French Feminism in the Nineteenth Century* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1984), 158-69; Wiedemann, *Rassenmutter*, 76-84.

30. Matilda Joslyn Gage, *Woman, Church and State: A Historical Account of the Status of Woman through the Christian Ages with Reminiscences of the Matriarchate* (New York: The Truth Seeker Company, 1893), 237; Zwissler, "Memoriam Maleficarum," 257.

31. Kathleen L. Sheppard, *The Life of Margaret Alice Murray: A Woman's Work in Archaeology* (Plymouth: Lexington Books, 2013).

As a sacred text of sorts for some feminists and neopagans, *La sorcière* inspired what Michel Meurger has called “thèses michelettistes.”<sup>32</sup> During the 1960s and 1970s, activists of the Second Women’s Movement used the figure of the witch to establish tradition, identity, and legacy with clear (sometimes unacknowledged, sometimes explicit) connection to the ideas of Jules Michelet and Jacob Grimm. Writers and activists of this renewed feminism—including Marguerite Duras in France and the already-mentioned Starhawk and Mary Daly in the United States—elevated the witch to a symbolic figure of political resistance and rebellion against the patriarchal-bourgeois establishment. They reimagined the “witch” as a victim figure of patriarchal violence, who because of her ancient wisdom was humiliated, subjugated, and fought for centuries by the Christian churches and the state.<sup>33</sup> Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English added an influential twist to these narratives in their book *Witches, Midwives and Nurses: A History of Women Healers* (1972), with the claim that the learned medical profession had exterminated midwives, female healers, and doctors for the poor by persecuting them as so-called witches. Daly, Starhawk, and English and Ehrenreich also promulgated Gage’s hyperbolic numbers, speaking of a persecution of women that claimed millions of victims.

As noted above, Federici’s theories had relied on the fantasies of Murray, Daly, and Ehrenreich and English already in their first formulation in 1984. In the 1980s, Federici’s approach was excusable, because witchcraft research was still in its infancy. However, during the years to come, Federici did not distance herself from these misconceptions, since otherwise her entire theory about the connection between witch-hunting, patriarchy, enclosure, and capitalism would have collapsed. To disguise her flippant use of sources and secondary literature, Federici filled her footnotes and bibliography with references to classics of witchcraft research such as the works of William C. Monter, or Brian Levack, and with references to out-of-date scholarship from the 1970s. These references obscured the fact that her version of the conspiracy myths of the witch hunt—as a Europe-wide, orchestrated campaign against hundreds of thousands of marginalized

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32. Michel Meurger, “Plantes à illusion: l’interprétation pharmacologique du sabbat,” in *Le sabbat des sorciers en Europe (Xve-XVIIIe siècles)*, ed. Nicole Jacques-Chaquin and Maxime Préaud (Grenoble: Jérôme Millon, 1993), 369–82, here 372–74.

33. This narrative sometimes included a troubling racial element, building on Grimm’s vision of the pagan Germanic witch-priestess. The American feminist Elisabeth Gould Davis fantasized in her book *The First Sex* (1971) about a superior blue-eyed, fair- and red-haired mother race, which had founded all human culture.

women to destroy the secret knowledge of birth control, to suppress popular culture, to enclose, exploit, and dispossess nature-bound proletarian women—in fact derives, with little modification from “dead white men” such as Grimm and Michelet, and breathes their spirit. Thus, ironically, the antifeminist, indeed explicitly misogynist Michelet has become the godfather of the feminist icon of “the witch.”

#### RECEPTION

Federici’s ongoing mission is to bring back the allegedly lost memory of the early modern witch hunts, and to give a voice to the women slain in those hunts. It is remarkable that only a few professional historians have discussed her arguments about the origins of the witch hunts.<sup>34</sup> However, a growing chorus of both Marxists and feminists have judged Federici’s theories very critically. Some have claimed that her attitude toward academic historians combines a surprising ignorance with a very violent arrogance, refusing to read the relevant source material.<sup>35</sup> In the prominent German leftwing journal *taz*, Rosemarie Nünning has called Federici’s book an anticapitalist romance that ignores or devalues recent historical research.<sup>36</sup> In her lengthy rebuttal of Federici’s theses, Jaqueline Katharina Singh (member of *Revolution*, a communist youth organization) goes in a similar direction: according to Singh, Federici romanticises the preindustrial, precapitalist household and family form with its already existing gender polarity, which banished women to the household, care work, and childbearing. Finally, the exclusion of women from production should never be seen as positive in any era of human history, because it was precisely this division of labor that prevented women from becoming independent. Singh’s criticism of Federici culminates in a

34. See the interview with Claudia Opitz-Belakhal (University of Basel), *Das Lamm* (January 12, 2024): <https://daslamm.ch/die-hexenverfolgungen-waren-kein-systematischer-krieg-gegen-die-frauen/>. Accessed October 8, 2025. Marion Gibson, in her *Witchcraft: A History in Thirteen Trials* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2023), 264, thinks that English, Ehrenreich, and Federici “overstate arguments, but their insights are interesting.”

35. A groundbreaking, close, and critical reading of Federici’s *Caliban and the Witch* has been done by Yann Kindo and Christophe Darmangeat, both members of *Le Club de Mediapart*; <https://blogs.mediapart.fr/yann-kindo/blog/101217/caliban-et-la-sorciere-ou-l-histoire-au-bucher-12-0>, accessed October 8, 2025; <https://www.lahuttedesclasses.net/2017/12/caliban-et-la-sorciere-silvia-federici.html>, accessed October 8, 2025.

36. Rosemarie Nünning, “Romantischer Antikapitalismus,” *taz. Die tageszeitung* (21. 01. 2020), <https://taz.de/Romantischer-Antikapitalismus/!5658086/>. Accessed October 8, 2025.

scathing judgment: “Her historical analysis is therefore ultimately not an extension or correction, but a petty-bourgeois populist rejection of Marxism.”<sup>37</sup> These critics have not hindered the success of Federici’s books. Together with Claudia Opitz-Belakhal<sup>38</sup> one may suspect that Federici’s readers are mostly white middle-class women, who thus find themselves included in the collective category “woman” persecuted by the male protagonists of capitalism, and thereby absolved from any collaboration, collusion, or privilege derived from witch hunts, imperial expansion, colonization, the dispossession of Indigenous peoples, or the exploitation of nature. Federici herself is delighted with the success of *Caliban and the Witch*, commenting, for example, that its reception in Argentina has inspired women in that country to recover forbidden knowledge about herbs, plants, physical powers.<sup>39</sup> This fight is symbolized by the saying: “Somos las nietas de todas las brujas que no pudiste quemar,” “We are the granddaughters of the witches you could not burn.”<sup>40</sup> Federici thus continues to position herself as an advocate of a biologicistic-deterministic image of gender, in which the supposedly mentally superior woman remains connected to special emotions, sensualities, and natural forces and passes these characteristics on to her daughters and her granddaughters. It’s just a pity that the insufficient German translation of 2015 (probably unintentionally) turns the original meaning into a satirical one: “We are the daughters-in-law of the witches you couldn’t burn” [Wir sind die Schwiegertöchter der Hexen, die ihr nicht verbrennen konntet].<sup>41</sup>

#### CONCLUSION

The nineteenth-century image of the witch was a male-created, clearly misogynistic cliché that “celebrated” women while pushing them into an out-of-the-way corner of public life, confined to the affective, sensual, and emotional; this was also a cliché that later nationalist ideologues like the German Nazis liked to deploy in their cults of the mother. It remains hard to believe that in using the feminist icon of a rebel-witch, representatives of

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37. Jaqueline Katharina Singh, “Hexenjagd. Silvia Federici auf der Suche nach Antworten. Kritik an Silvia Federici,” *Fight! Revolutionäre Frauenzeitung* 10 (March 2022), <https://arbeiterinnenmacht.de/2022/03/11/hexenjagd-silvia-federici-auf-der-suche-nach-antworten/>; accessed October 8, 2025.

38. My thanks go to my colleague and friend Claudia, who made her as-yet unpublished work on Federici available to me.

39. Federici, *Caliban und die Hexe*, 14.

40. On the origins and career of this phrase, see Michael Ostling’s Introduction to the present Discussion Forum.

41. Federici, *Caliban und die Hexe*, 14.

spiritual feminism, goddess and eco-feminism, proponents of prehistoric matriarchy, neopagan groups, the so-called “new witches” of social media and WitchTok, and even the Marxist Federici with her focus on female reproductive and care work all keep alive the antifeminist fantasies of so-called dead white men. Nevertheless, already in the 1970s, political feminists expressed great reluctance against such mystification of the “witch,” against her being recoded into a spiritualized, goddess-like “wise woman” withdrawn into nature, into the herb gardens and the deep forests. In 1977, French radical political feminists published a sharp reply in the first issue of *Questions Féministes*, where they accused the spiritual-esoteric branch of the women’s movement of following male-connoted role models, retreating into the very niche that men had prepared for them, as a prison and a trap.<sup>42</sup> In 1990, the German historian and feminist Dagmar Unverhau also criticized the myth of womanhood shaped by spiritual feminism. She pointed out that its propagandists were following the arguments of demonologists such as Heinrich Kramer, albeit under positive auspices. In this context, Alice Schwarzer has spoken of a biologicistic argumentation, of a relapse into the old/new mania of femininity.<sup>43</sup> Even Silvia Bovenschen, who was well acquainted with the myths about witchcraft and matriarchy, had warned against an almost cynical analogy between present-day feminist activists and the historical victims of witch hunts.<sup>44</sup> In one of her recent interviews, Federici also clearly expresses her distaste for the deployment of “the witch” by some feminists: “I appreciate the tradition of the oppressed adopting the terms of the oppressors. But I worry that what it meant for women to be called a witch is being lost in this celebration. There were women who would rather be tortured to death than ‘admit’ to being a witch.”<sup>45</sup>

The misuse of historical narratives about the “witch” and the historical witch hunts for commercial, political, or ideological motives must be unmasked. Firstly, the conspiracy myths advanced by Federici obscure the unpleasant fact that it was not the faceless apparatus of the state and its obedient male agents, but was rather specific named men (and women) who as stakeholders, collaborators, and spectators were responsible for the

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42. “Variations sur des thèmes communs. Une revue théorique féministe radicale,” *Questions Féministes* 1 (1977): 3–19.

43. Dagmar Unverhau, “Frauenbewegung und historische Hexenverfolgung,” in *Ketzer, Zauberer, Hexen. Die Anfänge der europäischen Hexenverfolgungen*, ed. Andreas Blauert (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1990), 241–83, here 252–54, 261.

44. Bovenschen, “The Witch,” 87.

45. Silvia Federici, interview in *WOZ. Die Wochenzeitung* 41 (October 12, 2023).

marginalization, persecution, and extermination of the historical “witch” (women and men alike). Their biographies are to be found in the sources. Secondly, the use of fake history about the witch trials is abusing again and again those women and men who had actually been slandered, tortured, and killed as alleged witches. Perhaps there should be more awareness and care in labeling others and oneself with the term “witch”—a term that in early modern times brought death to thousands of people, a term that still brings mortal danger today, mostly to women in the Global South.