

# Witch-Hunt. The Scapegoat of Modern Medicine (*Vinegar Tom*)

Sílvia FERRANDO LUQUIN

Institut del Teatre de Barcelona. Department of Theory and History of the Performing Arts,  
Barcelona (Spain)  
[ferrandols@institutdelteatre.cat](mailto:ferrandols@institutdelteatre.cat)

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE: Sílvia Ferrando, stage director, professor and actress. PhD in Performing Arts (UAB). Higher Degree in Dramatic Arts, Stage Direction and Playwriting (Institut del Teatre in Barcelona). Degree in Mathematics (UPC). Since 2007, professor, head of the speciality of Playwriting and Stage Direction (2013-2016) and currently head of the Department of Research and Innovation at the Institut del Teatre in Barcelona.

English translation, Neil CHARLTON

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## Abstract

This article explores the play *Vinegar Tom* (1976) by the English playwright Caryl Churchill (1938). The subjects under study are the figure of the Other, one of Churchill's main themes, the witch-hunt that took place in England in the 17th century and the relationship between the Catholic religion and modern medicine. In some of her plays Churchill explores the conversion of the Other into different phantasmatic realities. Specifically, here we will see how she examines one minority: the women accused of witchcraft during their trials, which involves the mechanism of the scapegoat and, in this case, an important role for the Catholic Church. We will explore the beginnings of modern medicine and its implications, then and now, for how women's bodies were conceived and their current relationship with medicine. Churchill tells the story of the Others, the minorities, the excluded and analyses the ghosts and phantasmatic realities that she detects today. She is always interested in their different origins and the article will look at this methodology and research. *Vinegar Tom* is a play about witches but without any witches. Its main topics are not evil, hysteria and possession by the devil but poverty, humiliation and prejudice, and how the women accused of witchcraft saw themselves.

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## Witch-Hunt. The Scapegoat of Modern Medicine (*Vinegar Tom*)

In a 17th century engraving under the image of Matthew Hopkins, the famous witch-hunter, there is a feline animal. Its head is like that of a bull, with two horns, and its body is elongated like a greyhound; it has a thin, sinuous and very long tail. Its name is Vinegar Tom.

*Vinegar Tom* (1976) is also a play by Caryl Churchill about witches but without witches. “I wanted to write a play about witches with no witches in it; a play not about evil, hysteria and possession by the devil but about poverty, humiliation and prejudice, and how the women accused of witchcraft saw themselves” (Churchill, 1985: 130). Churchill takes the title of this dramatic piece from the strange animal that accompanied the famous witch-hunter and made it a simple common cat, to which she attaches no importance, which lives in Joan’s house, one of the women accused of witchcraft. These women accused of witchcraft and their conversion into phantasmatic reality, as Other and the minority, are our primary object of study.

This play is the second production by the company Monstrous Regiment, formed in August 1975 with the aim of staging new plays mainly written by women to promote greater parity within the business of theatre and to examine women’s history. It is a company conceived as a group of performers from alternative theatre but also institutional, commercial and television theatre. Feminist theatre companies were a common phenomenon in the 1970s, most notably Women’s Street Theatre Company (1970), The Women’s Company (1973) and The Women’s Theatre Group (1974).

In 1976 Churchill met some members of Monstrous Regiment who were considering doing a play about witches, like her, and invited her to a rehearsal of *Scum*, the new show they were working on. The experience impressed her, as she explained: “I left the meeting exhilarated. My previous work had been completely solitary – I never discussed my ideas while I was writing or showed anyone anything earlier than a final draft. So this was a new way of working, which was one of its attractions” (Churchill, 1985: 129). This heralded a new stage in her writing that influenced her later pieces.

Although she was apprehensive at first, Churchill saw the potential in sharing ideas with a “new” human group with similar attitudes in a rehearsal room. “I felt briefly shy and daunted, wondering if I would be acceptable, then happy and stimulated by the discovery of shared ideas and the enormous energy and feeling of possibilities in the still new Company” (129). This new formula immediately bore fruit and, after a few sessions working as a team, Churchill wrote a first version of the play in three days.

*Vinegar Tom* comprises twenty-one naturalist scenes that take place in the 17th century and seven contemporary songs, sung by actors in modern dress. The songs are not part of the plot and should not be sung by any of the characters of the previous scenes. Churchill proposes a dynamic of presentation more than a performance of the sung parts, where the actors do not have to play the character when they sing (Churchill, 1985: 133). Through the songs, Churchill introduces perspective into the play when she subverts the cause-effect approach and the linearity of the story. With a classic Brechtian production technique, she modifies the process of identification of the audience who she transports to the present, removes from the historical time of the play and makes responsible for their legacy in the role of accuser. We will now look at the effects after the staging of the causes in the dramatic scenes.

The play is not set in a precise moment of history, nor is it based on particular historical events. It is set, generally, somewhere in the 17th century, at the time of the last great witch-hunt in England; and because Churchill considers that “the social upheavals, class changes, rising professionalism and great hardship among the poor were the context of the kind of witchhunt I wanted to write about” (Churchill, 1985: 130). In this way, the playwright establishes what really matters: the social context and the mechanisms that end up causing a phenomenon like the witch-hunt. The focus is on finding the reasons for this massacre and persecution to identify its scope and consequences. And she presents it in such a way that both are glimpsed.

The ambition of Jack, a tenant farmer, and his wife, Margery, aged around 40, is to expand their farm and profits, but when things start to go wrong due to their cattle’s sickness, for example, they decide to blame Joan, a poor widow and old friend and neighbour, the mother of Alice, who Jack desires. As random and surprising as it may seem at first, they see Joan as responsible for butter not setting and the animals’ sickness, even for Jack’s sexual frustrations. They believe that she and her daughter Alice are responsible for all their misfortunes, so they even accuse them of witchcraft to justify their reasoning. They do not seek any material benefit from them, they both live in quite precarious conditions and possess very little; they simply need someone to blame for their accumulated violence and their disappointments.

This is a choral piece with several other parallel plots. On the one hand, Alice’s desires to have a relationship with the unknown man, with whom she has relations in the first scene so he will take her away from there with her daughter — Alice is a single mother. Later, the attempts by Alice herself to help her friend Susan to undo her pregnancy, for which they visit Ellen, “the cunning woman”, the “crafty” or “malicious” woman who knows healing secrets and lives apart. And, finally, the figure of Betty, the landowner’s daughter, who

at the age of 16 does not want to marry the man her father has chosen and so is locked in her room and obliged to visit the doctor so he can cure her.

The climax of the play comes when Joan and Ellen are hung after being accused of witchcraft, and Alice and Susan are locked up by the witch-hunters, unleashing the anger of the former and the repentance of the latter. The plot ends with the explosion of Alice's anger over the death of her mother and the oppression of all these women with a "lament for the witches". Churchill shows how frustration causes violence, and how unsatisfied violence seeks out and always finds a victim in exchange.

There is still a final scene, outside the plot, in which the authors of *Malleus Maleficarum*, *The Hammer of Witches* appear dressed as music-hall artistes with top hat and tails and recite pieces from their book. *Malleus Maleficarum*, *The Hammer of Witches* was written in 1484 by the clergymen Kramer and Sprenger, the "beloved sons" of Pope Innocent VIII, who Churchill makes into two characters of her play. The playwright includes phrases from this text and converts them into dialogue, which produces a frightening, hilarious and disturbing effect, after the events set out earlier.

*Malleus Maleficarum* was proclaimed by Catholic and protestant witch-hunters alike as the unquestionable authority on how to carry out a witch-hunt. As described by Ehrenreich and English: "For three centuries this sadistic book lay on the bench of every judge, every witch-hunter. In a long section on judicial proceedings, the instructions make it clear how the 'hysteria' was set off: the job of initiating a witch trial was to be performed by either the Vicar (priest) or Judge of the County" (Ehrenreich and English, 2009: 36-37).

In the 1970s, like much of the female population of Great Britain and the United States, Churchill read *Witches, Midwives and Nurses* by Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English, from 1973 (Churchill, 1985: 129). The writings of Ehrenreich and English had great repercussions and changed the view of modern medicine about the female body, as summarised in the wide-ranging and lucid introduction to this book by the authors themselves, in March 2010, after almost forty years, in light of the changes and evolution brought about by its publication. Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English see how the distance of time allows them to assert the importance of the book and the great need for a text of that kind in that moment, which enabled certain issues to be aired and discussed. The book changed the conception of women's body and role in terms of the health system.

### Medicine and Women in the 1970s

*Witches, Midwives and Nurses* is a document that belongs to the second wave of feminism in the United States (Ehrenreich and English, 2009: 7). Written in a "blaze of anger and indignation," it enjoyed great notoriety and distribution. The pamphlet was an instant success as noted by the publication *Village Voice*, which considered it an "underground best-seller". It was translated into French, Spanish, German, Hebrew, Japanese and Danish, and distributed in England, which allowed Caryl Churchill to read it before 1976.

In the early 1970s, feminism became alert to the many ways that women suffered abuse and were treated unfairly by the medical system, “confined to subordinate roles as nurses and aides” (Ehrenreich and English, 2009: 8). And what was more important and subjugating, they were relegated to an objectivised and ignorant role as patients. As consumers of medical attention, women found themselves subject to treatments given insensitively, not very empathetically and even dangerously. For example, unnecessary hysterectomies, over-medicated births, inadequately tested contraceptives, involuntary sterilisations, and an almost universal condescendence dispensed by male doctors. Even today, the literature and analysis written on this subject can fill shelf after shelf in bookshops and homes of pregnant women. The book makes the authors’ opinion clear on the supposed existence of a great disconnect between women and their bodies, and the paternalistic role of male doctors, who did not recognise any kind of authority or knowledge of women about their anatomy and how their bodies worked, or themselves, which incapacitated them as autonomous beings. “We were not supposed to know anything about our own bodies or to participate in decision-making about our own care” (Ehrenreich and English, 2009: 8).

At that time, in the United States the authority about how bodies work fell to the male doctor, as reflected by the name of the column “Tell Me, Doctor” in the *Ladies’ Home Journal*, read by most mothers of that generation (Ehrenreich and English, 2009: 8). Churchill was probably satirising that column when she called one of the songs in *Vinegar Tom* “Oh, Doctor” (Churchill, 1985: 150). The song is a request to a doctor for help, asking him to explain what is happening to the singer, relegating knowledge to an outside figure. The singer only knows she is sad but does not know if she is unwell or bad. The song places a moral and biological question on the same level. From there it moves on to the dismemberment of the patient’s body by the physician. The skin and bones are removed, the heart is placed on the other side, and the brain in the vagina, the first detail that tells us the person singing is a woman. The womb is also given to another person. The body is cut before its owner is dead and it seems that nothing can be done, nor even known or seen. Yet, the patient keeps asking the doctor what is happening to her and requesting help.

The patient herself asks the doctor to diagnose what is happening to her, to her person. The person singing above all wants to see herself. She recognises the role of the viewpoint as fundamental, which at the moment is in the hands of the doctor with his metal eye, dehumanising, mechanising and instrumentalising him. The patient wants to see inside herself and so recover her head, brain and thought, her cognitive capacity, but also her eyes and mouth, to see and speak. She demands an active role as subject in the use of the viewpoint and the possibility of choice and manifestation of her own discourse. Finally, she demands the return of her own body as she can now see herself.

This call to re-appropriate women’s bodies as a usurped place and the need for recognition through their own viewpoint and the environment were fundamental during the second wave of feminism. They have also been the

basis for most feminist and queer studies of later years, although some are associated with the third wave and, consequently, post-structuralism. Seeing to know yourself and thus being able to be named and present. And above all, to be named by yourself. One only need recall the works and thought of Eve Kosovsky, Dianna Fuss or Judith Butler.

After the expropriation of the patient's body, the figure of the doctor is presented as an imposed authoritarian structure and a symbol of power that filters into the most intimate parts of her being. As we have mentioned with the use of a Brechtian production mechanism, the songs update the situation of the character of Betty and the women of *Vinegar Tom* with Churchill's contemporaneity. Through the songs, with references to the situation of the period, the play shifts from the 17th century to reflect on the current role of doctors. Since its genesis, the mechanisms used to hunt witches have impregnated contemporary structures and institutions, such as modern medicine, with its cultural values, and established parameters for the construction of the image of women's bodies and their social image and, by extension, of the whole of society, male and female.

Ehrenreich and English analyse this expropriation of bodies by medical professionals, relating it to the development of scientific medicine. "In other words, the ignorance and disempowerment of women that we confronted in the 1970s were not longstanding conditions" (Ehrenreich and English, 2009: 11), in relation with the few women who practised medicine in those years, "but were the result of a prolonged power struggle that had taken place in America in the early nineteenth century, well before the rise of scientific medicine" (11). Therefore they refer to a change that took place before, centuries back, and with profound consequences in the condition of the human being and women themselves. The origins of this change and its foundational role are explored in *Vinegar Tom*. Churchill considers that this change is associated with and a consequence of the social situation of much of the population, due to the enormous difficulties suffered in these moments by the lower and poorest levels of society to get ahead. This situation is linked to an enormous sexual repression spread throughout the social spectrum, which became a contained violence that had to find a way to express itself.

### **The Repressed: Sexuality**

Sexuality, in its different forms, is the most important theme of the play. A producer of disorder, it can attack social cohesion and create political and religious disorder. And the community launches into the repression of sexuality out of fear of the destruction of the structures it knows. Many of the primitive prohibitions are related to the repression of sexuality, like the prohibition of incest, the germ of dissolution of and threat to the family organisation.

When a sexual transgression occurs there is a violent disappearance of differences. This is its main responsibility in the destruction of cultural order; this is why it scares human beings. For example, with the practice of

incest, an isolated individual is responsible for the sacrificial crisis, which means nothing more than the loss of differences. It is therefore the destroyer of the fundamental rules, in this case of the rules of matrimony. In antiquity, rites and sacrifices were carried out to conserve order and the systems of differences. Animals were sacrificed in the place of original victims accused of sexual transgression. This is a game of substitution in which the ritual victim replaces the scapegoat. The purpose of even the most violent rites is to expel violence. This is the main theory and function of myths and rituals, and therefore of the religious as a whole.

The essential, unique, function of the rite is to avoid the return to the sacrificial crisis. In ritual thought, good and evil are no more than two aspects of the same reality. But the rite appears in order to perpetuate and consolidate difference, and so that in this way there can be good violence and bad violence (Girard, 1995). The mythological themes as a whole are no more than a way of covering up man's fear of natural phenomena, which is the only thing capable of unblocking this vicious circle. This is one of the main difficulties.

Alice, perhaps because of the miserable conditions in which she lives, is a single mother and shares a house with her poor mother, and wants to belong to the world of chaos of her own free will. The non-rules are her place of belonging. From a position of extreme necessity she decides not to comply with social rules, as a form of expression of her own individuality. These rules represent everything that she is not or does not feel, distancing her from any pleasant sensation. "Any time I'm happy someone says it's a sin" (Churchill, 1985: 136). Alice, like Ellen and Joan, wants to be left alone, to live her life, but each one of her acts is seen as an offence to the community, as an affront to the social order.

Margery, in contrast, knows she is incapable of awakening her husband's sexual desire, and does not even talk about her own. Jack does not desire his wife. He has not had sexual relations with her for three months (Churchill, 1985: 147) and desires a woman he cannot have, Alice. That frustration causes great inner violence that leads him to see her as the cause of all his ills. Jack wishes his body would respond differently, he does not accept the desire he feels and, unable to assume it as his own and recognise it, he decides that it comes from the devil, from evil, to go on safeguarding his fictitious identity. He directs his violence outwards instead of directing it to himself to avoid it destroying him.

At first, when all the misfortunes take place, Jack blames himself and his sexual impulses: "It's my sins those calves shaking and stinking and swelling up their bellies in there" (Churchill, 1985: 152). But Margery immediately consoles him by blaming Joan. Finally, he will ask Ellen for help, when he believes Alice has bewitched him, but Ellen tells him she cannot return his erections. The belief that lies behind all these social behaviours is verbalised by Kramer and Sprenger in the last scene. As they make clear themselves, the main reason that most individuals infected by witchcraft are women is that, "she is more carnal than a man" (177). Therefore, the main source of witchcraft and fear is just that: lust, sexuality. This is what must be repressed and controlled.

## The Mechanism of the Scapegoat

After her reading, Churchill quickly abandoned the “interesting” theory that considers that witchcraft existed as a surviving form of a suppressed pre-Christian religion and concentrated instead on the theory that witchcraft exists in the mind of its persecutors (Churchill, 1985: 129). Based on this thinking, she came to conceive “witches” through a new paradigm, as she herself describes, “‘witches’ were a scapegoat in times of stress like Jews and blacks” (129). She also discovered, for the first time, the enormous quantity of Christian teachings against women, which allowed her to establish connections between medieval attitudes towards witches and some attitudes continued throughout history against women in general (129), which are revealed through the songs.

The third song of *Vinegar Tom*, “Something to Burn”, clearly encapsulates a thought: when there is nothing to do, when it is impossible to overcome illness, hunger and death, beyond crying or cursing, the alternative is to find something to burn (Churchill, 1985: 154). Churchill clearly defines the mechanism of the scapegoat or the sacrificial victim in the song “Something to Burn” and the choice in that moment are the witches as a *pharmaton* for sexual repression.

As René Girard, French philosopher, historian and literary critic, notes: “All societies without exception have a tendency to decompose under the effect of their internal violence” (Girard, 1995: 46). When there is a danger of a community being destroyed due to this internal violence that grows until it becomes uncontrollable, Girard argues that the solution for surviving found by human societies has been “the spontaneous, mimetic convergence of the whole community against a single victim, the original ‘scapegoat’, against whom all hatred is unleashed without expanding catastrophically in its surroundings, without destroying the community” (46-47). This means of re-establishment escapes societies themselves, which do not recognise it as such.

Girard’s project proposes a rethinking of anthropology in terms of violence, “making this violence a new launch pad for the study of the religious” (Girard, 1995: 46), in the hope of taking forward the task of systematisation of the myths and rites. For this reason, this article focuses on violence and analyses its consequences and relationship with the sacred. We refer both to explicit violence and to contained violence that, generally, ends up finding other forms of expression and building, through these forms, new structures, myths and rites unaware of their origins and potential.

There are universal features of selecting victims, including belonging to an ethnic or religious minority, which brings about the polarisation of a majority against any component of that minority. The women accused of witchcraft were mainly those who found themselves on the margins of society. They belonged to that group of old, poor and single women and those who were quite unconventional, such as Joan, Ellen and Alice.

Churchill warns that on this occasion it is about witches, but on others it is blacks, women or Jews who are burnt. She presents a new general panorama of the human sacrifice previously comprising prisoners of war, slaves,



kids, single adolescents, cripples... society's cast-offs. Although as Girard noted (1995: 19), in some societies the king finally appears. The criterion followed is the choice of beings that do not belong or belong very little to society. In this case it is women, who are excluded from society as active and free subjects, turning them into witches given the danger that they are autonomous in their sexuality. In the case of the king it is the centre of the community, which isolates him from the rest of the components of the group and makes him an outcast. A similar situation of exteriority is experienced by the figure of the fool, who also becomes someone who can be sacrificed. (20)

It is important for the ritual victims to have no social relation with the rest of the community, hence the choice of Joan and Ellen, and the quarantining of Alice and Susan so they repent and deny their links and relation with the "witches". For the mechanism of the scapegoat to work it is fundamental for no one to feel obliged to avenge the death of their relative or friend. In this way, violence can be inflicted on an individual without being exposed to the reprisals of other individuals (Girard, 1995: 20), whether their relations or those with whom they have close ties.

The character of Ellen, "the cunning woman", the crafty and "malicious" woman, lives outside society. The space in which her little country house is located is, as Adeshiah considers, pro-feminine or "womanist", a utopia — Walker's use of the term — (Adeshiah, 2009: 61) and becomes a "counter-site, a Foucauldian heterotopia, where women come to enjoy a brief period away from patriarchal domination of their everyday lives" (61).

Joan in contrast has a daughter and a grandchild, allowing her to establish a closer link with the community, implying the existence of someone on whom she relies to avenge her in the future. Therefore it is important to spoil her image, so that no one claims to have or have had a relationship with her. This is the meaning of the tortures and manipulations received by Susan and Alice, the two characters who have most affection for the two "witches". The disappearance of these groups brings the promise of sufficient happiness. The imperative is to find something that burns, that goes up in smoke as a way of consuming problems (Churchill, 1985: 154). The important thing is not their disappearance but the action of burning; that sacrificial act where the death of the scapegoat saves the others. It is the ritual that unites the group again as complicit in a murder.

### **A Change of Paradigm: Discredit**

To enable this change a new paradigm was necessary, a broader plan that would permeate the population. First it was essential to discredit the existing authority to then replace it. Much of this authority fell to women. Throughout history, women have always played roles as healers, performed abortions, been nurses, midwives, practised pharmacy, grown herbs and known their secrets. They have also been the ones who exchange these secrets and keep them. "They were the unlicensed doctors and anatomists of Western history" (Ehrenreich and English, 2009: 25). For centuries women had been "doctors without official qualifications." They had learnt by

word of mouth, from each other, as they were excluded on many occasions from books and lectures. The ties between them were those of neighbours or mother and daughter. These are the women who were called “cunning”, “wise” or “malicious”, like Ellen; on other occasions, witches or charlatans. On multiple occasions they were censured by the authorities but respected and supported by individuals and public figures. Ehrenreich and English consider medicine as part of “our heritage as women, our history, our birth-right” (25).

As Ehrenreich and English note, the American historian Brian P. Levack, specialist in the study of the early years of the modern era in Great Britain and Europe, most of these women accused of witchcraft were, in fact, wise women who, due to the prominent place they occupied as cooks, healers and midwives, in general became a target “vulnerable to the accusation of performing white magic” (19). But the accusations were not limited to white magic, as Ehrenreich and English point out in their book: any practice related to healing or white magic became a sign of being a follower of Satan (19). Healing was considered suspicious. It was not enough to confess sins, as illnesses were only caused by God or the Devil (20).

Thus, as pointed out by John Demos, the American historian and author of the award-winning books *Entertaining Satan* and *The Unredeemed Captive: A Family Story From Early America*, cited by Ehrenreich and English, the typical profile of women tried for witchcraft in New England was that of those known for making or administering remedies, for having expert knowledge of nursing or regularly providing services as midwives, a few were even described as “women doctors” (Ehrenreich and English, 2009: 20). Once again, this description perfectly matches the character of Ellen. But on many occasions this group was limited to a third or quarter of those accused, so it is necessary to keep in mind other women without these abilities. There were women who were simply bothersome for other reasons and whose ability to cure was equated with the ability to harm, blamed for ills for which they were probably not responsible. This second group must include the character of Joan, the “cause” of the ills of Jack and Margery, and perhaps Alice, and of anyone who made trouble.

Ehrenreich and English describe a world where anything positive or negative out of the norm could become a reason to be accused of witchcraft. This is exactly the case of the protagonists of *Vinegar Tom*: they do not want to obey the rules. This is the terrible aspect described by Churchill in the behaviour of the village inhabitants in the play. As Demos notes, the effect of the persecutions was brutal and the best option was not to stand out: “Clearly, the wisest course in early modern community life — especially for a woman — was to blend in and *not* to seem too openly self-assertive. To be, or to behave, otherwise was to open oneself to suspicion of witchcraft” (Ehrenreich and English, 2009: 20). And this is clearly the case of Joan and above all of Alice, who make a virtue of their behaviour. The result was not long in coming and relegated, more slowly or quickly, not only those cunning women but all in general to an ignorant and unreliable place. Therefore, “serious complaints were likely to be dismissed as ‘psychosomatic’ and attributed to

women's assumed suggestibility" (Ehrenreich and English, 2009: 8), which positioned women and their perceptions in a vague and false place.

In *The History of Sexuality* (1978) Michel Foucault suggests that from the 18th century women's bodies were given a new meaning through modern science, via a process of *hysterisation*. This is one of the four great strategies that, in relation to sex, developed specific apparatuses of knowledge and power. These strategies did not emerge spontaneously in the 18th century but during that century became coherent and efficacious in the order of power. Therefore they were already developing in the 17th century, during the great witch-hunts we are discussing (Foucault, 2002: 123).

The hysterisation of women's body, notes Foucault, is a threefold process whereby the woman's body was, first, "analysé, qualifié et disqualifié comme corps intégralement saturé de sexualité" (137). Secondly, this body was "intégré, sous l'effet d'une pathologie qui lui serait intrinsèque, au champ des pratiques médicales" (137). And lastly, this same body "mis en communication organique avec le corps social (dont il doit assurer la fécondité réglée), l'espace familial (dont il doit être un élément substantiel et fonctionnel) et la vie des enfants (qu'il produit et qu'il doit garantir, par une responsabilité biológico-morale qui dure tout au long de l'éducation) : la Mère, avec son image en négatif qui est la « femme nerveuse », constitue la forme la plus visible de cette hystérisation" (137).

Churchill reflects this process through the figure of the doctor who treats Betty, to whose body he applies or tries to apply in the future these three lines of the process of hysterisation noted by Foucault. This is the aim and the form of marrying her to turn her into someone like her mother. The doctor identifies hysteria as women's main weakness. "Hysteron, Greek, the womb" (Churchill, 1985: 149), where an excess of blood causes an imbalance of the humours. He describes how every month, with menstruation, an excess of poisonous gases reaches the woman's brain and causes strange behaviour, completely contrary to the true sentiments of the patient. This is the reason, in his opinion, why Betty does not want to marry the man her father has chosen, but she will soon be cured. There is a hysterisation of the woman and a hypersexualisation of the feminine from the patriarchal.

Once disparaged as a gender, and their knowledge and perceptions relegated to the space of superstition, it was enough to give all those who clung to their role as healer a frightening name considered as a danger against the established order: "In Europe back to the early modern era and, inspired in part by the wonderfully iconoclastic Thomas Szasz, we looked at how female lay healers of the same era were frequently targeted as 'witches'" (Ehrenreich and English, 2009: 11), completely discrediting and stigmatising their knowledge.

### The Catholic Church

The role of the Catholic Church is extremely important in bringing about the mechanism of the sacrificial victim. As noted by Girard, the individuals manage to shrug off this violence more easily if it is not perceived as their own. Therefore, it is an external and absolute imperative, for example, of the Church

or is supported by it. If order comes from God, however terrible it is, it is much easier to bring about. “By moving the whole of the sacrifice outside the real, modern thought continues to ignore violence” (Girard, 1995: 21). Therefore, it was necessary for the burning of witches to be an absolute imperative, a question of faith in which the Catholic God would make witches his greatest enemy and demand that we free ourselves of them. In their book, *The Malleus Maleficarum*, or *Hammer of Witches*, the clergymen Kramer and Sprenger, characters who close Churchill’s play, proclaim that “no one does more harm to the Catholic Church than midwives” (Ehrenreich and English, 2009: 18).

Once the fight against witchcraft has become a question of faith, all that is needed is to systematise their extermination. Kramer and Sprenger give very detailed instructions about the forms of torture that should be used to force confessions from the accused. The mechanism provided was based on completely stripping the accused and shaving all her body hair. She was then tied with thumbscrews to a rack, where she was constantly beaten, kicked and starved. The result is obvious: confessions and terror. Churchill uses these descriptions to create the actions carried out by the character Godoy as a diligent and conscientious assistant (Churchill, 1985: 172).

Witch-hunters, representatives of the Church and even their assistant doctors, play at being God. They exercise a power that usurps the place of sacredness. They are false substitutes who create adulterated rituals. Violence loses meaning in their hands; they resort to the logic of the sacred as the only way to validate these homicides. But the acts of the witch-hunters and Godoy are increasingly grotesque, as are the descriptions of the *Malleus Maleficarum*. In Churchill’s play they are like terrible clowns, capable of inflicting physical pain. They are puppet characters, like Punch and Judy, that cause real pain.

The main device of this mechanism is to convince the community about the murder of these women. This requires great orchestration because violence needs to be unanimous to escape reciprocal violence. But do they really achieve this? Are not these women part of the community? The moment you stop believing in witchcraft and its powers, the ritual sacrifice turns into murder and violence into reciprocal violence. And this is what happens when seen through the eyes of history. Churchill, as she herself points out, creates a play about witches but without witches in it, we never doubt this. Therefore, we always see a murder, although the intention is to reproduce the mechanism of primitive societies, deifying violence, based on common violence. That is why the invasive and oppressive Church and doctors are called upon, a superior power that legitimises the entire process. But as it is a falsified process, violence remains among human beings who reveal themselves as powerless to break free of it.

### **The Confession**

Why was the confession of those women who had already been completely discredited so important? It does not seem to make sense to need their words when people have stopped believing in their truth. Their confession is only

necessary if we think that this spectacle was not for God or for them, but for the community. In the mechanism of the scapegoat, the victims' confession is fundamental; it is in the hunting of witches, as it was in the Stalinist processes as a formula for restoring unanimity (Girard, 1996: 52); and in the end that was the intention.

The victims are forced to confess by mimetic pressure. Beyond the tortures, witches — like accused politicians — are affected by the end of the performance. As human beings they inhabit a society that has certain social forms and when seeing that the world in which they live is against them, fervently believing in certain truths, they lose their strength to preserve their sanity. The vision of their reality is modified. “The witches are the stand-in of their judges, they share their beliefs about their guilt” (Girard, 1996: 52). “I was a witch and never knew it” (Churchill, 1985: 174). Susan believes she has killed her two children, unwittingly, one with the abortion and the girl with a disease of unknown provenance. She perceives herself as a weak being and decides to turn to God. She prefers to be hung because she believes that she will be saved, so she does not think she should be scared. She believes that everything is done to help her, so that she does not burn for eternity.

In one way or another, most women in *Vinegar Tom* accused of witchcraft confess guilt. Through guilt or spite, they look in their acts for something that may bring them closer to witchcraft, such as the experience of an unrestrained sexual desire in the case of Alice, the visit to the “witch” Ellen and performing an abortion in Susan's case, or Ellen practising her own medicine.

After the confessions, the sacrifice is complete; Margery thanks God with her prayer, while Ellen and Joan are hung in the hope of living in peace. Margery feels safe. She believes that God has demonstrated his power by killing the wicked women and that he has blessed good people. Margery repeats a division of the society. She establishes the system of differences, thereby committing to new rites and sacrifices. She feels that she has just fought against evil and asks for help in her daily struggle. The theme of the struggle against evil will reappear, as we shall see, on numerous occasions in Churchill's work.

### **A New Idol: Medical Science**

Perhaps the most remarkable feature of this supplanting of the sacred is its orchestration by the Church itself. In their struggle against the authority of these healing women and possessors of a knowledge that eluded them and for which they lost a part of their power, the representatives of the Church saw in doctors and science a substitute to discredit them and make them disappear. They built another power beyond God and themselves, one current to this day: modern medicine as a science.

The doctor came to be considered a shaman, a source of all knowledge and effectiveness, someone in contact with the sacred, with the forbidden. A complex network full of mysticism was created, out of reach of other mortals. With this “new” science female “superstition” was replaced, which came to be considered as a children's tale or legend, a barbarous thing from other

times. It was not a natural process but the result of a violent imposition. There had been no mistakes on the part of women who had practised as specialists in health issues until then. It is not a process due to the greater benefits provided by scientific medicine or the development of modern scientific technology. This battle took place long before these advances occurred.

The consequences were clear and wide-ranging. Health and medicine became monopolised and under the control of medical institutions and organisations. This monopoly extended both to theory and practice. The control of medicine involves deciding which individuals are going to live and which are going to die, which humans are healthy beings and which present anomalies, physical or mental; and who can procreate and who cannot. All these decisions again surreptitiously slip out of the domain of individuals to be externalised by an invisible power: the scientist. As in the case of the new control and monitoring methods that Churchill analyses in *Softcops* (1979), fruit of the overwhelming impression that the reading of Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* produces. In this work, Jeremy Bentham, the creator of the panopticon, appears as a character. The French philosopher and social theorist is one of her main sources of inspiration. In Churchill's work *Softcops* a new type of human being has already appeared. If at that time it was the caretaker, in this case, in *Vinegar Tom*, it is the male doctor, the professional in charge of female health and intimacy, also under the protection and sponsorship of the ruling classes. These new professionals carried out an important task in hunting witches, advising the witch-hunters and providing medical and "scientific" reasons for their behaviour. They were the bearers of the reason and objectivity of this process and that is how Churchill portrays it.

As Girard points out, "the only conversion admitted, in our days, has to do... with science!" And "children are taught that witches have stopped being persecuted because science has been imposed on men. Whereas the opposite is true: science has been imposed on men because, for moral and religious reasons, witches have stopped being persecuted..." (Girard, 1996: 66-67).

### Innocent Victims

On many occasions, male doctors were dangerous and less effective than those "cunning" women healers, as noted by Francis Bacon (1561-1626), a fundamental figure of empiricism and a decisive character in the development of the scientific method. Bacon believed that "empirics and old women were more happy many times in their cures than learned physicians." (Ehrenreich and English, 2009: 16) The conservative philosopher Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) also came to similar conclusions, as "he would rather have the advice or take physic from an experienced old woman that had been at many sick people's bedsides, than from the learnedst but inexperienced physician" (Ehrenreich and English, 2009: 16). Curiously, empiricism was reinforced and praised in scientific method and some recognised it in the experience of all those old women, but the discourse of the Church discredited that knowledge.

These women healers can be considered pioneers in the empirical method as they developed their knowledge from their senses and experience, instead of starting from faith or doctrine. Instead of having a religious attitude they were expeditious. It is therefore paradoxical that, while the first signs of a scientific revolution were appearing in Europe, witch-hunting took place, which caused a regression by suppressing some empirical and millenary knowledge. A regression to ignorance in which the working classes were the most affected.

Churchill creates a story where the victims are innocent and collective violence is guilty; unlike myths, where victims are guilty and communities are innocent. Oedipus is guilty of the plague. He killed Layo and the citizens of Thebes are right to expel him. But the death of those women accused of witchcraft is presented by Churchill as a clear injustice. That is why the playwright laughs at the randomness with which victims are chosen and human beings are burnt from the first scene. For example, when the man with whom Alice has just had sex says: "One of my family was burnt for a Catholic and they changed to Protestant and one burnt for that too" (Churchill, 1985: 136).

But Margery, Jack and Betty's father are horrified by the behaviour of these women. They fear that they will dismantle the world in which they live, recognise their repression, and confront their sexual desire, violence and animality. It is a society that seeks to control something that escapes human control: sexuality. They want to repress it instead of recognising and venerating it; for that reason it becomes uncontrollable and transforms into violence. They do not accept the non-form of sexuality, its potential. They fight against it in defence of order. They prioritise living in peace over their desire and instinct.

The play is perceived as a big lie, as a drama, a terrible mistake. It does not reach tragedy as there is no play of symmetries or anything inevitable. There are some victims and a non-acceptance, although the intention is to emulate the ancient sacred sacrifices. The desire is to deal with the divine but the actions are totally human. The aim is to put ritual thought into operation, repeat the founding mechanisms through unanimity with the desire to bring about order, to pacify and reconcile, but only more violence and repression will be created. That is the image of witch-hunting because there is no dialogue with the sacred at any time. Therefore, the victim can no longer be unifying, but only leave a society of guilty people. The absence of the sacred is irreplaceable. The crises can no longer be concluded nor can the cultural order have an absolute origin.

It is a clumsy attempt at a human solution, a judgment between individuals. It is the group that has killed the witches; a group in which it is impossible to differentiate one from another, even though the executioners have clearly been the hunters. The whole community has participated in the accusation, and public punishment and death has been necessary, unlike what happens in *Softcops*, where they hid so all were accomplices.

Societies are also based on prohibitions, otherwise violence would wreak havoc. It is necessary to grant violence, like sexuality, its rightful place. Repressing it is the opposite of venerating it, the opposite of accepting that we

live with it, in the same way that sexuality gives rise to life and this is also a force capable of running amok, provoking excesses and causing anarchy. Violence, like sexual desire, has a dual, ambivalent presence, so the only solution is to shift them outwards, as otherwise they would make common existence, living in society, impossible.

We have known for some time that in animal life violence possesses individual constraints. Animals of the same species never confront each other to the death; the victor forgives the vanquished. The human species lacks this protection. The individual biological mechanism is replaced by the cultural collective mechanism of the scapegoat. There is no society without religion because without religion no society would be possible (Girard, 1995: 196).

This implies that as long as there is a society there will be one religion or another, which challenges us to try to identify the religion characteristic of deconsecrated societies, what substitution games have been played or what is worshipped. As in mythical thought, violence in modern societies and its mechanism within culture is also described through differences. It continues within the same logic, the same game, in order to establish good and bad violence, and with the audacity to assume the role of those who define which is which. Defining violence is to give it the ability to distinguish which human beings should live and which should die. Basically, it is about deciding which individuals belong to the human community and, therefore, are human beings in all their rights. Churchill develops this last point, for example, in her play *The Hospital at the Time of the Revolution* (1972) in the Algerian colonial environment.

## Conclusions

Defining violence is also the responsibility assumed by the substitutes of God identified in *Vinegar Tom* and in several plays by Churchill: Pierre in *Soft-cops*, the capitalist system with the violence it exerts over those who do not possess (in *Owners* [1972], *Serious Money* [1987] or *Drunk Enough to Say I Love You* [2006], among others), the witch-hunters, the Church in *A Mouthful of Birds* (1986), 17th century medicine and 20th century colonial scientific medicine (*The Hospital at the Time of the Revolution*). Each of them tries to share out the game of violence, granting categories to their differences, even if they do not understand their true mechanism, which is the only thing capable of breaking this vicious circle. That is one of the main difficulties of the human being, managing the relationship between individuals and their own violence.

In the case of *Vinegar Tom*, we have seen the attempt to reproduce the mechanism of the scapegoat, but since there is no relationship with the sacred, the idea of sacrifice vanishes. Instead, there was an extermination backed by the Church and modern medicine, which has become its stand-in. Churchill denounces the use and manipulation of the social context and the mechanisms that caused a phenomenon such as witch-hunting, where women accused of witchcraft (as well as blacks colonised in Algeria), were not slaughtered but exterminated. The “witches” were the *pharmaton* for



sexual repression. These “cunning” and “malicious” women were exterminated in search of power and control; and the Algerian revolutionaries were dispossessed in search of riches. They were turned into bare life, that “life of *homo sacer* (sacred man), who may be killed and yet not sacrificed (Agamben, 1998: 12). *Sacri homines* are figures that are included in the legal order in the form of their exclusion. Anyone can kill them. In Agamben’s view, this figure of the sacred constitutes the first political paradigm of the West. Churchill’s plays move in that space. That is where she has given a voice to the forgotten and has allowed light into the shadows of all those beings excluded from the story of the world but present in her plays. They are the central figures of her work. The dramatisation of the *homo sacer* begins a part of its journey. In this conversion, the portrayal of the Church’s viewpoint has matched that of medicine. Which, as we have seen, based on the hysterisation of the woman noted by Foucault and the hypersexualisation of the female body from the patriarchal, has constructed those phantasmatic realities of the “woman” as Other.



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