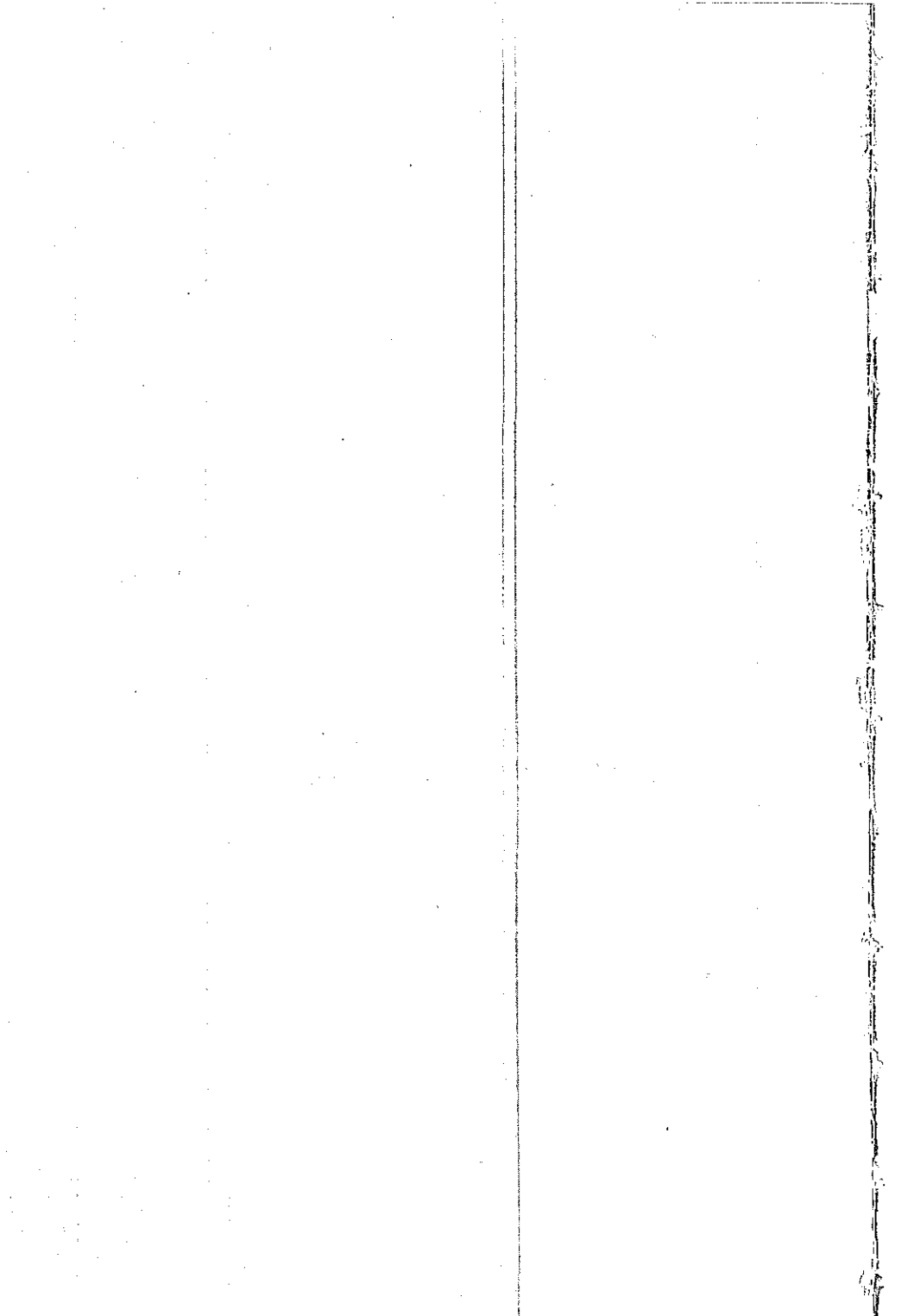


**Magic, Heresy and the
Broom Riding Midwife Witch –
The Inquisition Trial of
Isabetta Caruana**

Carmel Cassar

Offprint from
PROCEEDINGS OF HISTORY WEEK
2003

THE MALTA HISTORICAL SOCIETY
MALTA
2004



MAGIC, HERESY AND THE BROOM RIDING MIDWIFE WITCH – THE INQUISITION TRIAL OF ISABETTA CARUANA

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The Midwife Witch

In pre-industrial societies, as indeed in most modern day traditional communities, each household was expected to provide much of its own health care, a task that usually devolved on the housewife rather than the physician. In reality even in the most advanced modern societies health care is still far from being the exclusive preserve of physicians. The major difference between the past and the present is that in earlier centuries even the very concept of a medical profession was challenged. On their part physicians did try to assert monopoly rights through closed corporations and licensing but their efforts had little effect since they were usually only one among the many sources of medical expertise, which constantly tended to merge into one another. Surgeons, apothecaries, clerics, men of some learning, and local wise women, routinely offered medical advice as much as the physicians. Midwives in particular played a vital role in society at large, and even more so in small scale communities by attending at childbirth practically without any aid from the officially trained physicians, or other men of medicine, such that they often had to combine midwifery with improvised healing activities that often contained some form of practical magical techniques.

In an age when medical knowledge was greatly limited and medicine relied on a mixture of herbal lore, pilgrimages, magical formulae, prayers, and such like activities, women at childbirth had every reason to air their concern about the risks to themselves and their babies. Midwives were undoubtedly regarded as some sort of female medical specialists who learned their profession after long years of experience on the field with the aid of empirical means. In essence midwives were generally illiterate women, without any formal training, who assumed their role rather late in life. Their recognition was often based on their own mothering experience, which in turn enabled them to gain some sort of consensus among the members of the community where they

exercised their role. Nonetheless the Church authorities closely controlled their activities.¹ As they normally provided professional help in delivery, midwives were often blamed for any misfortune that befell the labouring women and were often associated with popular healing activities. In short as elderly women who provided fundamental support to women at childbirth, midwives could easily find themselves accused of the most ambiguous forms of witchcraft practices.

But the tenacious myth that midwives were witches has proved quite untenable although it frequently emerges in demonological literature mainly thanks to the influence of the writings of Heinrich Kramer and James Sprenger, authors of the *Malleus Maleficarum*. In their work Kramer and Sprenger elaborated a theory in which midwives were depicted as infant snatchers that used the captured infants for magical practices.² The book was widely cited and copied by later writers and had actually contributed to a rather distorted version of the activities of midwives in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In the 1920s Margaret Murray took up the idea of the midwife-witch, originally put forward in the *Malleus Maleficarum*, in her book *The Witch-Cult in Western Europe*³ and more specifically in her later work, *The God*

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- 1 It appears that the Malta ecclesiastical authorities were highly influential in midwifery practices at least since the sixteenth century. The church authorities normally applied restrictions aimed at controlling the activities of midwives. The Apostolic Delegate Mgr Pietro Dusina enjoined parish priests to teach midwives the proper administration of baptism in case of necessity. He also condemned procrastination in the administration of the sacrament. N(ational) L(ibrary of) M(alta) Lib(rary), vol.643, p.589. These admonitions were repeated by the Synod convoked by Bishop Cagliares in 1625 and again repeated by the Synod convoked by Bishop Cocco Palmieri in 1703. The Synod of 1703 laid down that midwives were to be examined by their parish priests at least twice a year, on the octave of Pentecoste and Christmas. *Costituciones in diocesana synodo melivetana*; Synodus diocesana Fr Cocco Palmieri, (Rome, 1709), p.26; A. Bonnici, *History of the Church in Malta*, vol. iii, (Malta, 1975), pp.19-24.
 - 2 H. Kramer and J. Sprenger, *Malleus Maleficarum. The Classic Study of Witchcraft*, trans. by M. Summers, (London, 1928), 1996 ed., p.66.
 - 3 M. Murray, *The Witch-Cult in Western Europe*, (Oxford, 1921), p.170.
 - 4 ‘... the witch or wise-woman, the sage-femme, was always called in at childbirth; many of these women were highly skilled, and it is on record that some could perform the Caesarian operation with complete success for both mother and child’. M. Murray, *The God of the Witches*. (2nd edition - London, 1952), p.145.

of the Witches.⁴ Thomas Forbes later pushed the notion of the 'midwife witch' forward in an article he published in 1962.⁵ More recently Richard Kieckhefer, in a study on late medieval witchcraft, suggested that

...many of the women prosecuted had curing as their occupation; they were beneficent magicians, practitioners of folk medicine, or perhaps midwives'.⁶

Nonetheless it is wrong to assume that midwives were accused *en masse* of witchcraft. This earlier belief appears not only to be completely unfounded but it has furthermore actually obscured the genuine relationships that existed between midwives and their clients.⁷ It is probable though that the high level of abortions and still births, caused by deplorable social conditions, increased popular suspicions of the midwife in times of great hardship.⁸

In order to understand the ways in which fantasies of witchcraft could develop around these events, it is necessary to evaluate the organisational preparations for childbirth. A. Wilson has recently put forward the notion that childbirth was essentially a female ceremony and festival for early modern women in Europe. When labour began the husband would summon to the birth not just the midwife but also a group of the woman's female relatives and friends who assembled in the expectant mother's chamber. Sporadic and often accidental information on the travails of childbirth, miscarriage and the role played by midwives are available in the Maltese archives, especially, those of the Inquisition tribunal, often in the form of witness's reports. A good example is that recalled by Mastro Mariano Curvaija who stated that when his wife had miscarried, a few years before, she was surrounded by the women of the house, and was visited by a woman called Marietta.⁹ It may

5 T. Forbes, 'Midwifery and witchcraft', in *Journal of the history of Medicine*. vol.xvii (1962), pp. 264-283. The article was later published in T. Forbes, *The Midwife and the Witch*.

6 R. Kieckhefer, *European Witch Trials: Their Foundations in Popular and learned Culture 1300-1500*, (London, 1976), p.56.

7 D. Harley, 'Historians as demonologists: the myth of the mid-wife witch', *Social History of Medicine*. vol.iii (1990), p.1.

8 L. Dresden-Coenders, 'Witches as devils' concubines: on the origin of fear of witches and protection against witchcraft', in *Saints and She-devils: Images of Women in the 15th and 16th centuries*, (London, 1987), pp.59-63.

9 A(rchives of the) I(nquisition of) M(alta) Crim(inal Proceedings), vol. 146 item 5 (case 76), fol.104v: 8 March, 1599.

have been customary for young women to bear their child at their mother's home as in the case of Mastro Nicola Attard's wife.¹⁰ As Wilson explains, the space of the birth was a collective female space; constituted by the presence of gossips and the midwife in the absence of men. Thus the mother and birthing room were separated from normal household affairs and from the outside world and it could be argued that early modern childbirth was essentially a women's affair.¹¹ However during the lying in period the wife lost control of the processes of home management to the man of the household. Nonetheless the man was only involved in peripheral activities like the preparation of food, the payment of the midwife and the choosing of godparents for the child's baptism.¹²

What role did the midwives play in all this? Midwives were frequently faced with two different notions of what was expected of them. On the one hand the midwife was associated with the wise woman who had an ability to treat disease, in which her childbirth experience was complemented by her knowledge of spells and ritual healing techniques. On the other hand, she was connected with the 'power structures' provided by the civil and ecclesiastical authorities.¹³ The latter, often represented by the local Inquisition tribunal, were certainly eager to monitor popular medical beliefs but the

10 AIM Crim., vol. 22D case 280, fol.1578v.

11 A. Wilson, 'The ceremony of childbirth and its interpretation', in V.Fildes (ed), *Women as Mothers in Pre-Industrial England*, (London, 1990), pp.68-107; F. Heal, *Hospitality in Early Modern England*, (Oxford, 1990), pp.335-337; L. Roper, *Oedipus and the Devil. Witchcraft, Sexuality and Religion in Early Modern Europe*, (London, 1994), pp.210-214.

12 God parenthood and spiritual kinship had already replaced the old Roman custom of adoption in the eight and ninth centuries. See: J. Goody, *The Development of the Family and Marriage in Europe*, (Cambridge, 1983), esp. p. 75. By the High Middle Ages god parenthood and spiritual kinship had been institutionalised by the Church. It is thus no wonder that the parish priest of Naxxar stirred a scandal, in 1577, when he declared that the priest who baptised a child did not contract spiritual kinship neither with the child itself nor with its parents. According to Don Juliano the parish priest got into the trouble of baptising a child only in order to be paid the customary fee of one carlino. In his view the priest could thus develop a carnal friendship with the child's mother. AIM Crim vol. 7A case 24, fol.140: 6 March, 1577.

13 D. Gentilcore, *Healers and Healing in Early Modern Italy. The System of the Sacred in Early Modern Terra d'Otranto*, (Manchester, 1992), p.82.

14 D. Harley, 'Historians as demonologists', p.9.

supposed authority of the *Malleus Maleficarum* did not mislead them.¹⁴ Marietta Maltese of Vittoriosa, mentioned above, was one such woman. She presented herself as a healer to Joanela Curvaija of Vittoriosa who had had a miscarriage and was feeling ill.¹⁵

The Trial of Isabetta Caruana

But occasionally midwives were rigorously investigated, such as the ‘heretically-minded’, ‘ignorant’ school dame and ‘witch’ Isabetta Caruana of Gozo. Isabetta was imprisoned and later found guilty of heretical talk and witchcraft, but there was hardly any reference to her midwifery or ‘diabolical’ activities. Isabetta, who had reputedly been seen flying on a broomstick by her neighbours, was specifically asked whether she had the habit of wandering about after sunset. Isabetta replied that since she acted as midwife she was sometimes called to help women deliver in the middle of the night.¹⁶ On such occasions, Isabetta would have to rush to her patient accompanied by those persons who had called on her. Isabetta would only return back home after having helped the woman in question to deliver the child.

On 4 May 1599 Magnifica Victoria Formosa, an inhabitant in the Gozo Castle, denounced Isabetta Caruana in front of the Holy Office. The Magnifica Victoria declared that a year before, during Lent she was visited by Isabetta Caruana, an inhabitant of Rabat, Gozo. In their conversation the two women discussed several topics including the sermons and other spiritual matters for which Isabetta participated actively. During the conversation Isabetta declared that the Virgin Mary did not bear Jesus in the normal way that women bear children but that Jesus was born from her breast. Isabetta was reported to have said in Maltese: *men chobiha guelditu*. Some of those present tried to correct Isabetta by explaining to her that the preachers insist that the Virgin Mary remained a virgin after giving birth. Isabetta replied that the preachers of her day taught differently and confirmed that in her childhood a friar preacher told her that Christ had his passion when he was only four months old, the time from Christmas day to Holy Week. Isabetta was convinced that these teachings were right and frankly added that she taught such things to young girls. Victoria Formosa poked fun at Isabetta for her beliefs and reported everything to her mother

15 AIM Crim., vol. 146 item 5 (case 76), fol.105v: 11 March, 1599.

16 ‘*Io soglio andare di qua e di là nelle case perche son mammana e servo alle donne quando parturiscono...*’ AIM Crim., vol. 147A case 83 (item 4), fols. 64–65: 2 August, 1599.

Marietta Bongiabino and her husband both of whom warned her that she was obliged to inform the Holy Office. On that same day Victoria's mother, Marietta Bongiabino, was brought to testify about the matter and confirmed all that she had learned from her daughter on Isabetta. Not happy of simply reporting her daughter's version, Marietta added how in Gozo rumours about Isabetta's wickedness were spreading like wild fire despite her pretensions of leading a good Christian life.¹⁷

But who in reality was Isabetta Caruana? Isabetta lived in the suburb of Gozo (Rabat) and appeared before the Holy Office Tribunal on 23 May 1599. She declared to have been born in Gozo where she was still living. She was the widow of Joanello Caruana and had by then reached the age of fifty or thereabouts. Isabetta could not tell why she had been made to appear before the Inquisition but pointed out that it was her wish to become a Dominican tertiary nun '*Io voglio tornare monaca della nunciata*' and explained that she had made a vow to wear the habit seven years before but could not do so because she was short of money and could not afford to buy the cloth for the habit.¹⁸

Isabetta went on to say that she normally confessed every first Sunday of the month at the Augustinian Church in Rabat Gozo adding that at Eastertide she normally confessed and communicated at the Rabat (Gozo) parish priest Don Antonio Hagius. Isabetta showed her genuine devotion to religion when she declared her interest in sermons that she attended whenever any preacher ventured to Gozo. She attended mass frequently and actively participated in processions and pilgrimages, whether the intention was to pray for rain or otherwise. Isabetta was so convinced of her pious beliefs that she had the habit of congregating many young girls whom she took with her for these religious activities. She prepared meals for them at her home, financed through the collection of alms from the homes of 'good Christians' for her girls, but she also made them fast and keep vigils. She even taught the girls basic prayers like the Hail Mary and Our Father, the Creed and the *Salve Regina*. In her deposition Isabetta explained how she instructed the girls to behave like good Christians, how to pray well, and how to be in the grace of God. Isabetta added that she had been performing her charitable activities since the Ottoman Siege of 1565 (*dal assedio*

17 AIM Crim., vol.147A case 83 (item 4), fol.48.

18 AIM Crim., vol.147A case 83 (item 4), fol.49v.

19 *Io dal assedio generale di questa isola son stata sempre solita fare così*. AIM Crim., vol.147A case 83 (item 4), fol.50 .

generale di questa isola)¹⁹ and even declared that it was thanks to her insistence that the Grand Master had introduced the custom of giving alms to seven marriageable girls in Malta and Gozo.²⁰

Isabetta then turned her attention to her time at the Benedictine nunnery of St Scholastica at Mdina - before it was transferred to Vittoriosa - adding that she had never visited the nunnery since the time of the Ottoman Siege of 1565.²¹ Amongst other she provided the Holy Office information about her youth and more precisely about life at the convent as seen through the eyes of a girl prior to Mgr Pietro Dusina's Apostolic Visit of 1574-1575. Isabetta declared that at the age of ten she was taken to the *monasterio dei vergini* (St Scholastica) where, together with other girls of her age, she stayed for four continuous years. The girls used to have frequent sermons by a friar and at the end of each sermon they used to spend a long time discussing the content of the sermon and the Christian faith. It was during these sessions that the girls came to the conclusion that Jesus Christ was born from the breasts, or the side of the Virgin Mary. Since then Isabetta had always held this belief although she could not recall whether this was taught by the friar or invented by herself. She recalled however that her late father, Bastiano Cafar, used to tell her that when Christ had his passion he was thirty or forty years of age. She could not recall the precise age.

20 The *cumulo della carità* (Charity Fund) for poor orphan girls of marriageable age was set up by the Mdina Town Council, with the blessing of the Grand Master, on 12 October 1569 when Don Antonio de Guevara was *Capitano della Verga* (major). Gian Francesco Abela published a list of 86 Mdina citizens who contributed for the foundation of the *cumulo* (fund). Besides several prominent citizens established their own bequests for girls who had to marry on specific dates at particular churches: Alfonso di Nava set up one bequest; Bartholomeo Haxixe three; Enziona Falsone one; Don Salvo Xerri one; Margherita Mompalao one; Giovanni Balzano two; Garzia Mompalao one. Gregorio Xerri instituted the *cumulo di carità* as his universal heir. G.F Abela, *Della descrizione di Malta isola nel mare siciliano ed altre notizie*, (Malta, 1647), pp. 416-420. Obviously Isabetta Caruana could only push the idea for the setting up of the *cumulo* as she was too poor to help finance its establishment. AIM Crim., vol. 147A case 83 (item 4), fol.50: 4 May, 1599 cf. C. Cassar, 'The Reformation and Sixteenth-century Malta', *Melita Historica*, vol.x, no.1 (1988), p.56. The *Cumulo* continued to function at least until the early eighteenth century. In 1705 the widow Gratia Bonavia of Rabat petitioned on behalf of her daughter, who was about to marry a sailor of the Order's navy, in the hope of receiving a dowry from the foundation. N(ational) L(ibrary of) M(alta) Univ(ersità), vol. 24 (1702-1709) n.p.: 21 September, 1705.

21 ... *dall'assedio Generale di questa Isola in qua mai ci son stata in detto monasterio...* AIM Crim., vol. 147A case 83 (item 4), fols.50v-51.

Nonetheless it never crossed her mind that her belief, or indeed her teaching, was wrong. Thus Isabetta never bothered to confess anything about her views since she had held them as the authentic truth since childhood.²²

Isabetta could however recall a few details about her classmates. There were about eight of them, two of whom were sisters, daughters of a man called Xabau, who were taken out of the nunnery as a punishment. Isabetta learned that they had been buried alive in a wall for a crime they had committed but Isabetta could not recall what it was all about. There was another girl at the nunnery, the daughter of Sandar, who by the time of the deposition was dead. However Isabetta could not recall who the others were.²³ On being asked about the nature of Christ's birth, Isabetta declared that she has always heard preachers saying that Christ was born from the Virgin Mary, who remained a Virgin. Having thought about the matter she concluded that in such circumstances Christ could not be born in the normal way but rather he must have been delivered either from the Virgin's breasts, or her side:

Io sempre ho inteso dalli Predicatori che Nostro Signore Jesu Christo nacque da Maria Vergine, e che Nostra Donna era vergine e vergine restò, argumentando io poi da questo che Nostro Signore non uscisse dal luoco naturale come nascemo noi altri, ma che uscisse dalle mammelle, o petto, o vero dal lato. ²⁴

Isabetta and the Holy Office

The Inquisition was particularly concerned with Isabetta's religious views because she did not believe that there was any harm in her beliefs and she had furthermore asserted that she taught such things to girls in order to honour Christ. Isabetta sincerely believed what she had learned, or thought to have learned, and repeated it to others because in her view it confirmed Mary's virginity before and after the birth of Christ. It thus seemed logical for Isabetta that Jesus Christ was miraculously born either

22 AIM Crim., vol. 147A case 83 (item 4), fols.51-52.

23 AIM Crim., vol.147A case 83 (item 4), fols. 50v-51.

24 AIM Crim., vol.147A case 83 (item 4), fol.50.

from the breasts or from the flanks. Isabetta's beliefs indicate that she had gained some basic education at the Mdina nunnery. The nunnery probably served as the only outlet where the daughters of the masses could receive some basic education.²⁵

Further questioning provides more details on Isabetta's character. She recalled that two or three years before her trial, she had aired her views on Mary's virginity after the birth of Jesus, with some Gozitan women. Like herself the women were attending a sermon in *lingua franca* (Italian) at the Gozo Matrix Church, which they could not understand. Isabetta, who knew Italian, felt duty bound to translate the sermon for them in Maltese but thought it was appropriate to add what she had learnt in her youth. It appears that the women were scandalised by her beliefs for she was severely reprimanded and admitted that from that time onwards she never shared any of her thoughts with the other women but rather kept them to herself.²⁶ Finally Isabetta repeated that she had never confessed her beliefs primarily because she did not classify them as sinful. Another motive was that neither the Bishop nor the Inquisitor had ever questioned her on the matter before her trial.²⁷

The first witness that came to testify about Isabetta's character was her confessor the Augustinian friar, Fra Angelo Apap. In his deposition of 4 June 1599, Fra Angelo declared that he had known Isabetta for about a decade. He said that Isabetta owned a *centimulo* (grain grinder) that she kept for a livelihood. Fra Angelo pointed out that he had been Isabetta's confessor for a long time and had always considered her as a (*donna da bene*) respectable woman.²⁸ Another witness, Mastro Mariano Machanuc declared that he had never seen Isabetta acting unethically, nor did he ever hear anything sinister about her and went on to declare that he did not like to interfere in other people's business.²⁹

25 The wise woman Imperia, wife of Giulio of Mosta, had the habit of reading on the heads of her patients from a book. It was rumoured that she had learned how to read at the *monasterio* where she had spent some time before her marriage. AIM Crim., vol. 23A case 303, fol.273: 9 November, 1604.

26 AIM Crim., vol.147A case 83 (item 4), fol.52. Isabetta understood Italian, probably because she had spent a number of years in the convent at Mdina, nevertheless she appears to have been illiterate because she signed her depositions with a cross. AIM Crim., vol.147A case 83 (item 4), fols. 49-52, 52-53v, 55-55v, 64-65v, 68v-69v, 80-80v.

27 AIM Crim., vol.147A case 83 (item 4), fol.53.

28 AIM Crim., vol.147A case 83 (item 4), fol.54 : 4 June,.

29 AIM Crim., vol.147A case 83 (item 4), fol.57: 14 June.

On the other hand another witness, Marietta Bongiabino, possibly out of fear, would not commit herself, and declared:

...In non ho havuto pratica mai con detta Isabetta ma dal vulgo, se intende qualche volta che lei e magara, e qualche volta che è roffiana e altre volte le donne dicono, come lei vede li santi e questi per parole de donne.³⁰

Evidently Marietta found it difficult to decide whether to describe Isabetta as a witch or a saint.

Other witnesses were not so kind to Isabetta. Valerio Cauchi - who in his deposition in 1599 - declared that he had been living in the Gozo Castle for about twenty years, put forward a fantastic denunciation against her. Cauchi explained that Isabetta Caruana was a reputed *magara*, and was often referred to by other women as *trista donna e magara* (wicked woman and witch). In order to confirm this hearsay, Cauchi reported that three or four years before he was looking out of his terrace into the street and saw two nude women riding, like mad, on broomsticks in the air. He identified the two women as Isabetta and her daughter Romana, a public prostitute. Cauchi was so sure of what he saw that he named several other witnesses of the event.³¹

Among the witnesses Cauchi mentioned Andreana, wife of Ambrosio Muscat of Rabat Gozo, and a neighbour of Valerio Cauchi;³² and Vincentio Xerri, an official of the Bishop's Curia, both of whom were summoned and were ready to confirm Cauchi's opinion.³³ Others like Petro Chetcuti³⁴ and Joseph Borg,³⁵ both hailing from

30 'I have never been in touch with the said Isabetta but there are rumours which imply that she is a witch, others that she is a pimp and on other occasions the women say that she has visions of saints. And all this according to women's talk'. AIM Crim., vol. 147A case 83 (item 4) fol.62: 15 June, 1599.

31 AIM Crim., vol. 147A, case 83 (item 4), fol.56: 14 June, 1599.

32 AIM Crim., vol. 147A case 83 (item 4), fols.59-60: 15 June.

33 AIM Crim., vol. 147A case 83 (item 4), fol.63: 22 June.

34 AIM Crim., vol. 147A case 83 (item 4), fols. 57-57v.:15 June.

35 AIM Crim., vol. 147A case 83 (item 4), fol.58: 15 June.

Rabat Gozo, declared that Isabetta was considered a witch but could not tell what type of witchcraft she practised. Another witness, Domenico Carceppo, testified that besides a reputation of being a witch Isabetta had also served as procuress for about fifteen years. Carceppo recalled that Isabetta worked in his farmstead together with several other men and women and she went around asking the men to make use of her services as go-between if they wanted to approach any particular woman.³⁶

Indeed Isabetta's role as go-between appears to have been the basis for the enmity that existed between her and Valerio Cauchi. During his second deposition on 15 June 1599 Cauchi revealed that his hatred for Isabetta revolved around a matter concerning his family honour. He explained that three years before, Isabetta had attempted to procure the services of his thirteen-year-old stepdaughter to the Lieutenant Governor of Gozo, the knight Fra Sansone. Cauchi managed to save his face and the knight did not pursue the matter any further, but the girl remained partly dishonoured in the eyes of the Gozo community with the result that he could not find her a suitable husband. On her part Isabetta refused to admit that she had anything to do in the matter but Cauchi never stopped blaming her of serving as a pimp for the knight.³⁷ If one takes Carceppo's deposition into consideration one may argue that there was some element of truth in Cauchi's accusation but no further evidence was brought forward against Isabetta in this regard simply because the Inquisition tribunal was rather concerned with her activities as a midwife-witch, rather than as a go-between, and thus as a suspect of heresy.

However Cauchi's perspective can be better understood within a modern anthropological framework. Fieldwork carried out between the 1950s and 1970s in remote, or peripheral areas, of the Mediterranean has shown that in small societies honour has been historically closely connected to public reputation and sexuality and is usually linked to the concept of the preservation of the kinship group. In most parts of the Mediterranean the domestic group (or family, in western terminology) was until recently considered as the basic unit of production, consumption, property holding, socialization, moral support, and mutual help. Honour among men revolves around notions of physical bravery, loyalty, and honesty while for all women honour is essentially a sexual matter. While men protect women's honour from external offenders, women must have a sense of shame if the honour of the men is to be respected. Hence the men's role is geared to claim honour while the duty of women

36 AIM Crim., vol. 147A case 83 (item 4), fols.62v-63:22 June.

37 AIM Crim., vol. 147A case 83 (item 4), fols.62v: 15 June.

is to preserve its integrity, meaning that women have to maintain honour and defend it since it was transmitted from mother to daughter. In such circumstances the honour and shame syndrome is closely linked to the individual's reaction to society.³⁸

In consequence the concept of honour played a vital role in the cultural values of Mediterranean societies irrespective whether these communities were of a Christian or Islamic denomination. Valerio Cauchi's attitude indicates that rural Malta was no exception to the rule and honour was likewise related to the values of the sexes, over the simple matter of insult and retaliation which provided the pretext for proving allegations of dominance or for coercing humiliation by denying them. It comes as no surprise that honour and shame are still the constant preoccupations in small-scale Mediterranean societies where face-to-face relations are of paramount importance.

On the day of Cauchi's second deposition the Holy Office summoned the Magnifica Victoria Formosa, the woman that had originally denounced Isabetta who repeated:

Io ho poca pratica seco ma quanto intendo della gente parte dicono che è trista e roffiana, e parte dicono che lei vede li santi e parla con san Paulo, e da parechi giorni in qua intendo che è stata, accusata nel Santo Officio per magari, e questo lo inteso in questo castello del Gozzo da diversi...³⁹

A woman like Isabetta whose visions became public knowledge was suspected of being under the influence of the devil, and sooner or later she was certain to be prosecuted. Isabetta, who had been kept prisoner at the Holy Office since May 1599, was made to re-appear before the Inquisitor on 2 August 1599. On that occasion she was asked about the lifestyle of her daughter Romana at which Isabetta retorted that they did not live together. However she went on to explain that Romana earned a living by fattening pigs at home where she even did some weaving. Isabetta confirmed that Romana had lived loosely as a prostitute for the previous seven years but could

38 A discussion of the major studies on honour in the Mediterranean is to be found in C. Cassar, *Il senso dell'onore*, (Milan, 2002).

39 I am not close to her (Isabetta) but from hearsay I can say that some people consider her a wicked procuress, and others say that she has visions of saints and converses with St Paul. It has been some days that I have learnt at the Gozo Castle, from several people, that she has been accused of magical practises by the Holy Office...AIM Crim., vol. 147A case 83 (item 4), fols. 61-61v: 15 June.

not tell whether her daughter had given it up since she had only learned of her daughter's activity from outsiders. There were times when mother and daughter lived under the same roof but when Romana began to take lovers as a way of earning a living she had the decency to move out of her mother's abode. Romana was conscious that lack of chastity in women placed the family honour in jeopardy.

Isabetta pleaded that she had been falsely accused of witchcraft and that she had no need to practice magic, as she had no daughters to support, meaning to provide with a dowry. She went on to explain that one of her daughters had married and was living an honest married life in Sicily, while Romana lived independently as a prostitute. Nonetheless Isabetta felt duty-bound to defend her daughter's integrity by stating that despite her faults Romana had good intentions. Romana did not only wish to give up her dissolute life, but she even yearned to take up the habit of a tertiary nun! However despite the apologetic defence of her daughter, Isabetta felt obliged to reprimand Romana for her illicit sexual relations and stated that she had even scolded her for this illicit activity. Isabetta further recalled that on one occasion Romana was so angry that she retaliated by hitting her mother, biting her nose. On being asked by the Inquisitor whether she had the habit of going out of doors after sunset, Isabetta explained that since she acted as midwife sometimes she was called in the middle of the night to help women give birth. Isabetta declared that on such occasions she was only accompanied by those who called her and after having helped the woman give birth she would return home.⁴⁰ Isabetta stuck to her version and would not let anyone change her account in spite of continuous pressures from the Inquisition authorities. In particular Isabetta would never admit that she had ever ridden a broomstick at night.⁴¹

On that same day Isabetta's daughter Romana was brought to witness. She declared to be aged thirty, of Gozitan origin, widow of Andrea de Manuelli and an inhabitant of Rabat Gozo. Her husband had passed away three years before but she had already been practising prostitution before then. However the year before her deposition she had given up prostitution and began to confess and receive communion. To prove her point she added that the authorities concerned could check her name in the list of communicants in Gozo.⁴² Romana further declared that she had been

40 AIM Crim., vol. 147A case 83 (item 4), fols.64v-65: 2 August.

41 AIM Crim., vol. 147A case 83 (item 4) 69: 3 August.

42 Romana was listed as a communicant in the *Status Animarum* "State of souls".

living alone in Rabat for seven years although she continued to visit her mother's house, both during daytime and night-time. The frequent visits to her mother's house were, according to Romana, a standard practice among daughters in Malta.⁴³ Nonetheless Romana insisted that she never slept at her mother's house because her brother's wife, who was an honest woman, lived there too. She admitted however that when her mother fell sick at times she was compelled to visit her mother's house even at night-time. Still even on such occasions Romana would not stay overnight since her mother and sister-in-law were honest women and she had no wish to tarnish their reputation.⁴⁴ Finally Romana was asked about the habit of going out at night riding a broomstick. The woman denied that she had ever performed such an act and declared that in her view whoever acted likewise was either insane or was possibly possessed by an evil spirit.⁴⁵

Mother and daughter went on defending themselves and each other from circulating gossip but it was to no avail. Their accusers were made to appear, once again, in front of the tribunal and asked whether they wanted to add or change anything from their version of events. None of the witnesses was ready to deny anything they said.⁴⁶ Thus on 31 August the two women were taken to the torture chamber for the *strappado*, or *corda*.⁴⁷ Their hands were tied behind their backs,

43 As in most southern European small scale societies matriarchal control of the kinship group is still very strong in modern day Malta. Consequently the bond between mothers and daughters is strengthened, rather than weakened, after the marriage of the daughter.

44 *Son solita da detto tempo in qua al spesso tanto di notte quanto di giorno praticare in casa di mia madre a ragionare, e trattare come soleno fare ragionare, e trattare come soleno fare le figlie con li madri, ma di notte mai ho dormito in casa sua perche tiene seco alla moglie di mio frate che habitano insieme, e quando successe che io son andata di notte da lei son andata per causa che si senti amalata et non sto di continuo con loro perche sonno honeste e a me tienino per trista stante che io havea fallato nel modo che ho detto de sopra.* AIM Crim., vol. 147A case 83 (item 4), fol. 66: 2 August.

45 AIM Crim., vol. 147A case 83 (item 4), 67v-68: 2 August.

46 The witnesses were heard for the second time between 6 and 10 August. Andreana, wife of Ambrosio Borg, even stated that she had done her best to divulge the news that the two women were witches in order to make them change their habit. AIM Crim., vol. 147A case 83 (item 4), fols.71-73.

47 'The most generally used kind of torture (in the early modern period) was the *strappado*, *corda*, or *cola* (in Malta it was often called *tocca non tocca*), called by jurists as the "queen

attached to a rope and they were hauled into the air. Still mother and daughter would not confess.⁴⁸

The following morning Romana was made to appear in front of the Inquisitor. After being warned to refrain from divulging any details on the trial she was sentenced to pay twenty oncie to the Holy Office.⁴⁹ On the whole Romana managed to get away with a relatively light sentence.

Her mother Isabetta was less fortunate. She was kept in prison for more than a fortnight after her daughter's release and was only informed of the decision taken on 18 September 1599. The sentence itself was read at the Tribunal room on the twenty-first day of the month on which occasion Inquisitor Hortensio accused Isabetta of witchcraft practices and worse still of having the reputation of a witch. Isabetta was furthermore accused that seven years before she was seen alone dressed up as a male, more specifically with a turban on her head. In other words Isabetta was not just being accused of having dressed up like a male – in itself a very serious accusation because it meant the reversal of social order, but rather as a Muslim man, or the antithesis of anything Christian. The sentence contained several details which Isabetta had for long refused to admit including Valerio Cauchi's assertion that she had been seen running about on a broomstick, semi-nude and with her hair undone, in the middle of the night – this accusation alone was enough to land her in great trouble. The sentence went on to explain that Isabetta had been suspected of heresy; that she had ridden with Diana or Herodiade like the sorcerers or witches; and that she had consequently venerated the devil and agreed to obey and please him in order to gain whatever she wanted. This was the gravest accusation of all! For the Inquisition tribunal making a pact with Satan, in return for favours, implied that Isabetta was a

of torments". The accused's hands were tied behind the back, attached to a rope which was thrown over a beam in the ceiling, and hauled into the air, there to hang for a period of time, then let down, then raised again. Sometimes weights were attached to the feet of the accused, therefore increasing the strain on the arm and back muscles once the process was begun'. E. Peters, *Torture*, (Oxford, 1985), p.68.

48 AIM Crim., vol. 147A case 83 (item 4), fols.73v-77v.

49 This was a large sum of money at the time. One oncia was the equivalent of 2_ scudi or 30 tari. AIM Crim., vol. 147A case 83 (item 4), fol.77v: 1 September.

witch of the worst kind. In short she was accused of worshipping Satan – a very serious offence especially when made by the Inquisitor himself!⁵⁰

Although Isabetta was imprisoned, examined several times, and forced to admit her crimes by the Inquisition tribunal she continued to deny all accusations and retorting that her envious neighbours had accused her of such crimes mainly because she did not have a husband to protect her. Isabetta was keen to admit that she went out at night in order to attend women at childbirth and comply with her duties of midwife but she continued to insist that she had not practised witchcraft despite the pressures of the Inquisition tribunal.

Inquisitor Hortensio may have personally been inclined to issue a rather aggressive sentence against Isabetta for her allegedly witchcraft activities but inquisitors were continually reminded to exercise caution before proceeding against anyone. He was thus himself constrained to follow the rules imposed on each provincial tribunal from Rome unless he wished to be severely reprimanded. As John Tedeschi puts it

It is clear that provisions for proper procedure contained in the manuals for the use of inquisitors were scrupulously enforced by Rome.⁵¹

In the sentence Isabetta was found guilty of teaching catechism wrongly to young girls, as when she said that the Virgin bore Christ from her breasts, or that Christ had his passion at the age of four months. The Inquisitor pointed out that she had been warned on several occasions for her mistakes but Isabetta continued to persist in her error. Therefore in the eyes of the Inquisitor Isabetta had sinned gravely because instead of admitting her faults she gave the impression that she was not only unaware of such teachings but went so far as to claim her ignorance of such matters. Isabetta was made to look as if she had acted consciously in contempt to the teachings of the Church and was thus rendered suspect of heresy.

Isabetta was made to admit her faults, abjure and declare that she would change her lifestyle. She was further humiliated by being forced to attend High Mass at the

50 '*...esser vehemente suspecta d'heresia cioe d'haver fatto professione di cavalcar con Diana, o, Herodiade come fanno le sortilege et magare et consequentemente d'haver adorato il demonio...* AIM Crim., vol. 147A case 83 (item 4), 78v.

51 J. Tedeschi, 'Inquisitorial law and the witch', G. Henningsen and B. Ankarloo (eds.), *Early Modern European Witchcraft. Centres and Peripheries*, (Oxford, 1990), p.85.

Matrix Church in Gozo – during which she had to remain kneeling down with a candle in hand, as a sign of repentance - on the Sunday following the publication of her sentence. Furthermore she was also given spiritual penance entailing that she had to confess six times a year for two consecutive years, and on the suggestion of her confessor, receive holy communion on Easter day, Pentecost, St John the Baptist, the Assumption of the Virgin, All Saints' Day and Christmas. Finally Isabetta was obliged to recite the rosary of the Virgin once a week for a year.⁵²

Conclusion

The trial of Isabetta Caruana seems to imply that the learned ministers of the Inquisition shared the practitioners' belief in the power of witchcraft and sorcery. This to them was 'superstition', which was not only erroneous and went against the teachings of the post-Tridentine Catholic Church, but it was also esoteric, diabolically efficacious, and thus heretical. The picture that emerges from the trial is that of a husband-less woman who was constrained to make a living and thus violate the norm of the caring, submissive female since she lead an independent life making her particularly susceptible to witchcraft accusations. Furthermore the trial gives the impression that aggression and competitiveness by women were primarily expressed in relation to other women; direct quarrels between men and women were rather less common. In our case the man who accused Isabetta of witchcraft, Valerio Cauchi, had his own axe to grind since he strongly suspected her of dishonouring his stepdaughter. However although men may have, at times, called women 'witches', witchcraft depositions suggest that it was other women who very often made such charges.

Finally one cannot ignore the environment that the protagonists of the trial experienced in their everyday life. The very restricted space within the confines of the Gozo castle indicates that privacy was non-existent and everyone was mercilessly on display. The acute lack of privacy must have contributed greatly to the circulation of rumours and public talk about particularly odd individuals who readily served as scapegoats for the inhabitants of the Gozo town and castle. The temptation for gossip and slander was too great for the small community and it explains why a midwife - like Isabetta Caruana and her accomplice and daughter Romana - were liable targets.

52 AIM Crim., vol. 147A case 83 (item 4), fol. 80-v.