

# *The Night Battles*

*Witchcraft & Agrarian Cults in  
the Sixteenth & Seventeenth Centuries*

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On 21 March 1575, in the monastery of San Francesco di Cividale in the Friuli, there appeared before the vicar general, Monsignor Jacopo Maracco, and Fra Giulio d'Assisi of the Order of the Minor Conventuals, inquisitor in the dioceses of Aquileia and Concordia, a witness, Don Bartolomeo Sgabarizza, who was a priest in the neighbouring village of Brazzano.<sup>1</sup> He reported a strange occurrence of the week before. He had heard from a miller of Brazzano, a certain Pietro Rotaro, whose son was dying from a mysterious ailment, that in an adjacent village, Iassico, there lived a man named Paolo Gasparutto who cured bewitched people and said that 'he roamed about at night with witches and goblins'.<sup>2</sup> His curiosity aroused, the priest, Sgabarizza, had summoned the fellow. Gasparutto admitted that he had told the father of the sick child that 'this little boy had been possessed by witches, but at the time of the witchery, the vagabonds were about and they snatched him from the witches' hands, and if they had not done so he would have died.' And afterwards he had given the parent a secret charm which could cure the boy. Pressed by Sgabarizza's questioning, Gasparutto said that 'on Thursdays during the Ember Days of the year they were forced to go with these witches to many places, such as Cormons, in front of the church at Iassico, and even into the countryside about Verona,' where 'they fought, played, leaped about, and rode various animals, and did different things among themselves; and . . . the women beat the men who were with them with sorghum stalks, while the men had only bunches of fennel.'<sup>3</sup>

Disconcerted by these strange tales, the good priest immediately went to Cividale to consult with the inquisitor and the patriarch's vicar; and chancing upon Gasparutto again, conducted him to the

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monastery of San Francesco. In the presence of the father inquisitor, Gasparutto readily confirmed his account and furnished new details about the mysterious nocturnal meetings: 'when the witches, warlocks, and vagabonds return from these games all hot and tired, as they pass in front of houses, when they find clear, clean water in pails they drink it, if not they also go into the cellars and overturn all the wine'; therefore, warned Gasparutto, addressing Sgabarizza, one must always have clean water on hand in the house. And since the priest did not believe him, Gasparutto offered to include him, along with the father inquisitor, in the mysterious gatherings: there were to be two before Easter, and 'having promised, one was then obliged to go.' And he declared that there were others who attended these reunions at Brazzano, Iassico, Cormons, Gorizia, and Cividale, but their names could not be revealed, because 'he had been badly beaten by the witches for having spoken about these things.' Trying confusedly to make some sense out of Gasparutto's tales, Sgabarizza concluded that there existed, or so it appeared, witches like Gasparutto himself, 'who are good, called vagabonds and in their own words benandanti . . . who prevent evil' while other witches 'commit it'.<sup>4</sup>

A few days went by. On 7 April, the priest of Brazzano reappeared before the Holy Office and reported that he had gone to Iassico to say Mass the Monday after Easter, and that he had run into Gasparutto there. After the Mass, as was customary, the priest had gone to a feast prepared in his honour. 'During the meal,' said Sgabarizza, 'I spoke about matters appropriate to the season, that is, guarding against sin and pursuing good and holy works.' But Gasparutto, who was present in his capacity as *commissario* (he must have been well-off: elsewhere there is a possible reference to his servants<sup>5</sup>), interrupted him to describe exploits of the usual company the night before: 'They crossed several great bodies of water in a boat, and . . . at the river Iudri<sup>6</sup> one of his companions became afraid because a fierce wind had come up, and the waters were rough, and he remained behind the others . . .; and . . . they were in the countryside not far away, and they jousting and busied themselves with their usual pastimes.' The priest, his curiosity greatly aroused, had not been able to contain himself: 'I brought him home with me, and treated him kindly so as to draw other details out of him, if I could.' But this was to no avail.<sup>7</sup>

The substance of Sgabarizza's depositions was confirmed by Pietro Rotaro, father of the child treated, though in vain, by Paolo Gasparutto. When Rotaro suspected that his son had been bewitched, he had appealed to Paolo, since the latter 'is known to go about with

these witches and to be one of the benandanti'.<sup>8</sup> Also Gasparutto had talked at length with him about the nocturnal gatherings:<sup>9</sup>

'Sometimes they go out to one country region and sometimes to another, perhaps to Gradisca or even as far away as Verona, and they appear together jousting and playing games; and . . . the men and women who are the evil-doers carry and use the sorghum stalks which grow in the fields, and the men and women who are benandanti use fennel stalks; and they go now one day and now another, but always on Thursdays, and . . . when they make their great displays they go to the biggest farms, and they have days fixed for this; and when the warlocks and witches set out it is to do evil, and they must be pursued by the benandanti to thwart them, and also to stop them from entering the houses, because if they do not find clear water in the pails they go into the cellars and spoil the wine with certain things, throwing filth in the bungholes.'

At the judges' request, Rotaro added details about the way Gasparutto had said he went to these gatherings, namely, as we shall see later on, 'in spirit', and astride such animals as hares, cats, and so on. Rotaro also had heard it said that even at Cividale there was one of these 'witches', a public crier named Battista Moduco, who, talking to friends in the square, had declared that he was a benandante and that he went forth at night, 'especially Thursdays'. At his point Troiano de' Attimis, a noble of Cividale, was called to testify. He confirmed that he had learned from his brother-in-law, chatting in the piazza, that 'some of these witches were in Brazzano, and that there was one even in Cividale, not far from us.' Then Troiano had noticed Battista Moduco nearby and had asked him:<sup>10</sup>

'And you, are you one of those witches?' He told me that he is a benandante, and that at night, especially on Thursdays, he goes with the others, and they congregate in certain places to perform marriages, to dance and eat and drink; and on their way home the evil-doers go into the cellars to drink, and then urinate in the casks. If the benandanti did not go along the wine would be spilt. And he told other tall tales like these which I did not believe, and so I did not question him further.'

The vicar general, Maracco, and the inquisitor, Giulio d'Assisi, must have agreed with the scornful conclusion of the nobleman of Cividale; tall tales and nothing more. After this deposition, in fact, the interrogations set in motion by Gasparutto's revelations were halted. They were to begin again five years later, at the initiative, as we shall see, of another inquisitor.

Vague and indirect as this evidence may be, it does none the less allow us to state with assurance that there did in fact exist in the area around Cividale, in the second half of the sixteenth century, a complex of beliefs (not limited to an individual, private sphere), that were otherwise unrecorded, and were strangely blended with well-known traditions. The witches and warlocks who congregated on Thursday nights to give themselves over to 'dancing', 'games', 'marriages', and banquets, instantly evoke the image of the sabbat – the sabbat which demonologists had minutely described and codified, and that inquisitors had condemned at least from the mid-fifteenth century.<sup>11</sup> And yet there are obvious differences between the gatherings described by the benandanti and the traditional popular image of the diabolical sabbat. It appears that in the former, homage was not paid to the devil (in fact, there was no reference at all to his presence), there was no abjuration of the faith, trampling of crucifixes, or defilement of sacraments.<sup>12</sup> The essence of these gatherings was an obscure rite: witches and warlocks armed with sorghum stalks jousting and battling with benandanti armed with fennel stalks.

Who were these benandanti? On the one hand they declared that they were opposed to witches and warlocks, and their evil designs, and that they healed the victims of injurious deeds by witches; on the other, like their presumed adversaries, they attended mysterious nocturnal reunions (about which they could not utter a word under pain of being beaten) riding hares, cats, and other animals. This ambiguity was reflected even in the language. The notion of the profound difference, even real antagonism, between witches and warlocks (that is 'men and women who commit evil') and 'men and women benandanti', seems in fact to have been difficult to grasp even at the popular level. Thus, a country priest like Sgabarizza (who at first, significantly, used a rough translation for what he considered a strange word, 'vagabonds and in their language benandanti') and the miller Pietro Rotaro spoke of 'benandanti witches' – where the adjective gained meaning only when linked to a noun already firmly established. The benandanti were witches: but 'good' witches, Sgabarizza asserted, who tried to protect children or provisions in homes from the perfidy of the evil witches. Right from the start, therefore, the benandanti appear to us in the form of a contradiction which subsequently influences profoundly the course of their existence.

Five years later, on 27 June 1580, a new inquisitor, Fra Felice da Montefalco,<sup>13</sup> revived the case left unfinished by his predecessor and ordered one of the two benandanti, Paolo Gasparutto, to appear before him. Gasparutto declared that he did not know why he had been summoned. He had been going to confession and receiving communion from his parish priest annually; he had never heard it said that at Iassico 'there is anyone who is a Lutheran and leads an evil life.'<sup>14</sup> When Fra Felice asked if he knew anyone who was a witch or a benandante, Gasparutto replied in the negative. And then he suddenly exploded with laughter: 'Father, no, I really do not know . . . I am not a benandante, that is not my calling.' Then the inquisitor bombarded him with questions: had he ever tried to cure the son of Pietro Rotaro? Rotaro called me, Gasparutto replied, but I told him I knew nothing about such things and I could not help him. Had he ever spoken about benandanti with the previous inquisitor and with the priest of Iassico? At first Gasparutto denied this: later he admitted, with great mirth, that he had said he dreamed of fighting witches. But in the face of incessant questioning by the inquisitor, who reminded him of details from conversations held five years before, he repeated his denials, between peals of laughter. The friar finally asked: 'Why do you laugh so much?' Unexpectedly Gasparutto replied: 'Because these are not things to inquire about, because they are against the will of God.'<sup>15</sup> The inquisitor, more and more baffled, persisted: 'Why is it against God's will to ask about these things?' The benandante now realized that he had gone too far: 'Because you are asking about things that I know nothing about,' he replied, and resumed his denials. The questions continued: had he ever spoken of nocturnal battles with witches, had he ever invited Sgabarizza and the inquisitor to these gatherings? His eyes shut, Gasparutto obstinately insisted that he remembered none of this. After Fra Felice recalled for him his descriptions of witches and benandanti returning exhausted from their games, and how, when they did not find water in the houses, they went into cellars, 'urinating and spoiling the wine', Gasparutto exclaimed with mocking laughter, 'Oh, what a world.' But nothing could budge him from his silence and in vain did Fra Felice promise him pardon and mercy if he would only tell the truth. At this point the interrogation ceased and Gasparutto was imprisoned.

The same day the other benandante, the public crier Battista Moduco, nicknamed *Gamba Secura* was also interrogated. Born at Trivignano, he had lived in Cividale for the previous thirty years. He too declared that he had gone to confession and taken communion regularly, and that he did not know any heretics. But when he was asked about witches and benandanti, he quietly replied: 'Of witches I do not know if there are any; and of benandanti I do not know of any others besides myself.'<sup>16</sup> Fra Felice immediately inquired, 'what does this word "benandante" mean?' But Moduco seemed to have regretted his hasty reply and tried to turn the matter into a joke: 'Benandanti I call those who pay me well, I go willingly.' Nevertheless, he ended up admitting that he had told several people he was a benandante, and added: 'I cannot speak about the others because I do not want to go against divine will.' (We should note at this point that there is no evidence that Moduco and Gasparutto knew each other, or had even met.) Moduco did not hesitate to say of himself:

'I am a benandante because I go with the others to fight four times a year, that is during the Ember Days, at night; I go invisibly in spirit and the body remains behind; we go forth in the service of Christ, and the witches of the devil; we fight each other, we with bundles of fennel and they with sorghum stalks.'

It is not difficult to imagine the inquisitor's bewilderment over these benandanti who in so many ways themselves resembled the very witches against whom they acted as defenders of Christ's faith. But Moduco had not yet finished: 'And if we are the victors, that year there is abundance, but if we lose there is famine.' Later he clarified this:<sup>17</sup>

'In the fighting that we do, one time we fight over the wheat and all the other grains, another time over the livestock, and at other times over the vineyards. And so, on four occasions we fight over all the fruits of the earth and for those things won by the benandanti that year there is abundance.'

Thus, at the core of the nocturnal gatherings of the benandanti we see a fertility rite emerging that is precisely patterned on the principal events of the agricultural year.

Moduco added that he had not belonged to the company of the benandanti for more than eight years: 'One enters at the age of twenty, and is freed at forty, if he so wishes.' Members of this 'company' are all those who 'are born with the caul . . . and when they reach the age of twenty they are summoned by means of a drum the same as soldiers, and they are obliged to respond.' Fra Felice interrupted, trying to put

difficulties in the way of the benandante: 'How can it be that we know so many gentlemen who are born with the caul, and nevertheless are not vagabonds?' (We can see that the friar, almost as if to keep his distance, was trying not to use the popular term which was foreign to him.) But Moduco stood his ground: 'I am saying everybody born with the caul must go.' All this seemed incredible to the inquisitor, who insisted on knowing the truth about entry into this 'profession'; and Moduco replied simply, 'nothing else happens, except that the spirit leaves the body and goes wandering.'

The benandante's replies must have aroused serious suspicions in the mind of Fra Felice, and he asked: 'Who is it that comes to summon you, God, an angel, a man, or a devil?' 'He is a man just like us,' Moduco informed him, 'who is placed above us all and beats a drum, and calls us.' And in response to another question, he added: 'We are a great multitude, and at times we are five-thousand and more . . . some who belong to the village know one another, and others do not.' The inquisitor would not give up: 'Who placed that being above you?' 'I do not know,' said Moduco, 'but we believe that he is sent by God, because we fight for the faith of Christ.' As for the captain, 'He is head of the company until he reaches the age of forty, or until he renounces it; . . . he's from Cologne . . . , a man of twenty-eight, very tall, red-bearded, pale complexioned, of noble birth, and he has a wife'; his insignia was white, 'the flag, that is the crosspiece that he carries above him, is black.' And he added: 'Our standard bearer carries a banner of white silk stuff, gilded, with a lion,' while 'the banner of the witches is of red silk with four black devils, gilded'; and their captain has 'a black beard; he is big and tall, of the German nation': they go to do battle in various places, in the region of Azzano, near Cuniano, and sometimes 'on German soil, in certain fields near Cirghinis'.

But the inquisitor demanded still more information, and above all, the names of the other benandanti. Moduco refused: 'I would be beaten by the entire company,' and he even declined to reveal the names of the witches.<sup>18</sup> 'If you say that you fight for God, I want you to tell me the names of these witches,' Fra Felice insisted. But Moduco was stubborn. He declared that he could not accuse anyone 'whether he be friend or foe . . . because we have a life-long edict not to reveal secrets about one side or the other. . . . This commandment was made by the captains of each side, whom we are obliged to obey.' Only after another of the friar's objections ('This is just an excuse; since you assert that you are no longer one of them, you cannot be obliged to obey them: so tell me who these witches are') did Moduco finally yield and furnish two names, one of which was that of a woman who had supposedly

deprived livestock of their milk. Moduco's interrogation ended here; evidently his replies had not put him in such a bad light in the eyes of the Inquisition, since Fra Felice let him go.

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On 28 June, Paolo Gasparutto was interrogated a second time. One day's imprisonment had convinced him of the futility of persisting in his denials. He admitted entering the company of the benandanti at the age of twenty-eight, summoned by the captain of the benandanti of Verona, of having remained in it for ten years, and of having abandoned it four years previously.<sup>19</sup> 'Why,' the inquisitor asked, 'did you not tell me this yesterday?' Gasparutto replied: 'Because I was afraid of the witches, who would have attacked me in bed and killed me.' But to the friar's next question, 'The first time that you went did you know that you were going with benandanti?' he responded at length: 'Yes, father, because I had been warned first by a benandante of Vicenza, Baptista Vicentino by name . . . thirty-five years of age, tall in stature, with a round black beard, well built, a peasant.' Battista had presented himself in 'the month of December, during the Ember season of Christmas, on Thursday about the fourth hour of the night, at first sleep.' And here the motif underlying the rites of the benandanti, which we saw in Moduco's interrogation, re-emerges especially clearly: 'He told me that the captain of the benandanti was summoning me to come out and fight for the crops. And I answered him: 'I do want to come, for the sake of the crops.'''

Fra Felice interrupted: 'If you were asleep, how did you answer him and how did you hear his voice?' Gasparutto explained:

'My spirit replied to him,' and he added that it was his spirit that went forth, 'and if by chance while we are out someone should come with a light and look for a long time at the body, the spirit would never re-enter it until there was no one left around to see it that night; and if the body, seeming to be dead, should be buried, the spirit would have to wander around the world until the hour fixed for that body to die.'

The inquisitor then asked him if he had known Battista Vicentino prior to his appearance that night. 'No, father,' Gasparutto replied, unperturbed, 'but they know who is a benandante.' 'How do they know who is a benandante?' 'The captain of the benandanti knows it.'<sup>20</sup>

Here Gasparutto began to describe (with only a few slight differences from Moduco's account) the company of the benandanti to which he belonged: 'We are only six . . . we fight with viburnum branches, that is, with the staff which we carry behind the crosses in the processions of the Rogation days; and we have a banner of white silk, all gilded, and the witches have one that is yellow, with four devils on it.'<sup>21</sup> He added that they went to do battle in the country around Verona and Gradisca and, after an interruption by the inquisitor ('how do you know where you are supposed to go?'), he explained that 'during the Ember Days preceding, the benandanti and the witches challenge each other, and they name the place.' Then, to the friar, who had asked him if he had ever promised to take anyone to these 'games', he replied immediately, almost with annoyance: 'Yes, the last father inquisitor; and if he had come along, you would not be questioning me now.' Their captain was 'a person from Verona, I do not know his name, and I believe that he is a peasant of average height, a plump man with a red beard, about thirty years old'; Gasparutto did not know how he had become captain.

Gasparutto's story, like Moduco's, ended with the accusation of two witches – one from Gorizia, the other from the village of Chiana, near Capodistria. The inquisitor seemed satisfied and freed Gasparutto, ordering him to reappear within twenty days, this time not in Cividale but in Udine, at the monastery of San Francesco.

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The proceedings described above took place on 28 June. On 24 September the inquisitor ordered that Gasparutto, who had not kept the appointment at Udine, (he later tried to excuse himself, claiming that he had been ill) be brought there, and had him incarcerated. Two days later the questioning of the benandante resumed.

Thus far Moduco's and Gasparutto's accounts match almost entirely. But now a difference appeared. Gasparutto modified his confession on one key point by introducing a new element: 'I have come to think that I should tell the truth,' he declared at the beginning of the interrogation. The inquisitor restated a question which was intended to undermine the most important theological point in his confession: 'Who led you to enter the company of these benandanti?' To this Gasparutto replied unexpectedly: 'The angel of God . . . at

night, in my house, perhaps during the fourth hour of the night, at first sleep . . . an angel appeared before me, all made of gold, like those on altars, and he called me, and my spirit went out. . . . He called me by name, saying: "Paolo, I will send you forth as a benandante and you will have to fight for the crops." I answered him: "I will go, I am obedient."<sup>22</sup>

How are we to explain this change? At first glance it would seem reasonable to suppose that, faced by the prolongation of the interrogations and the renewed imprisonment, Gasparutto might try to extricate himself from the clutches of the Inquisition by placing greater weight on the Christian motivation of his 'profession'. Perhaps he thought he could do this by introducing the theme of an angel, not realizing that he was thereby aggravating his own situation. But two points should be kept in mind: the detail of the angel who participated in the meetings of the benandanti (to whom Gasparutto referred) and who will reappear, if only briefly, in two later trials of 1618–19, and 1621;<sup>23</sup> and the fact that after he was led back to prison, Gasparutto mentioned the angel to Moduco. This undercuts the hypothesis that it was a spontaneous invention he concocted for his defence. All in all, it makes sense to suppose that in his first confession Gasparutto had kept silent about the appearance of the angel precisely because he discerned its intrinsic danger.

Gasparutto had barely finished speaking about the apparition of the angel 'all made of gold' when the inquisitor broke in with an abrupt insinuation: 'What did he promise you, women, food, dancing, and what else?' Gasparutto's allusion to the angel was all that was needed to convince Fra Felice of the basically diabolical character of the benandanti's 'games' and of their identity with the sabbat. Gasparutto vehemently denied this, and defended himself by shifting the accusation to the enemy, the witches: 'He did not promise me anything, but those others do dance and leap about, and I saw them because we fought them.' Now the inquisitor turned to another key point in Gasparutto's story: 'Where did your spirit go when the angel summoned you?' 'It came out because in the body it cannot speak,' Gasparutto replied. The exchanges now came in rapid succession: 'Who told you that your spirit had to come out if it was to speak with the angel?' 'The angel himself told me.' 'How many times did you see this angel?' 'Every time that I went, because he always came with me,' and a little later he added: 'He stays in person by our banner.'<sup>24</sup>

Thus far we have had what amounts to a monologue on Gasparutto's part, interrupted only by the inquisitor's requests for clarification. As long as the benandanti's tales of their nocturnal 'games'

were merely startling facts, even though silently suspect, but at least not out of line with traditional demonological schemes, Fra Felice had maintained a passive attitude of mild astonishment and detached curiosity. But with the opening that Gasparutto had suddenly provided, the technique of the interrogation changed, becoming openly suggestive. The inquisitor now began in earnest to try and make the benandante's confessions conform to the existing model – the sabbat.

First of all he subtly endowed the figure of the angel with demonic attributes: 'When he appears before you or takes his leave, does this angel frighten you?' 'He never frightens us, but when the company breaks up, he gives a benediction,' Gasparutto stubbornly answered. 'Does not this angel ask to be adored?' 'Yes, we adore him just as we adore our Lord Jesus Christ in church.' At this point Fra Felice changed the subject: 'Does this angel conduct you where that other one is seated on that beautiful throne?' In Gasparutto's tale, needless to say, there had been no mention of devils or thrones. This time too the reply was prompt and tinged with exasperation: 'But he is not of our company, God forbid that we should get involved with that false enemy! . . . It is the witches that have the beautiful thrones.' The inquisitor persisted: 'Did you ever see witches by that beautiful throne?' And Gasparutto, gesturing with his arms, sensing that he had been caught in the inquisitor's trap: 'No sir, we did nothing but fight!' Fra Felice was implacable: 'Which is the more beautiful angel, yours or the one on the beautiful throne?' And Gasparutto, contradicting himself in his desperation: 'Didn't I tell you that I have not seen those thrones? . . . Our angel is beautiful and white; theirs is black and is the devil.'<sup>25</sup>

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By now the trial was nearing its conclusion. On the whole, the inquisitor had managed to adapt Gasparutto's testimony to his own notions and theological preconceptions: the meetings of the benandanti and of the witches were nothing but the sabbat, and the 'company' of the benandanti which falsely proclaimed that it enjoyed divine protection and fought under the guidance and aegis of an angel was diabolical. Under the pressure of the inquisitor's questioning Gasparutto's self-assurance seemed to weaken, as if the reality of his beliefs had suddenly changed and was slipping out of his grasp. A

day or two later, once more before Fra Felice, he declared: 'I believe that the apparition of that angel was really the devil tempting me, since you have told me that he can transform himself into an angel.' The same thing happened to Moduco in his interrogation of 2 October: 'Ever since I heard from that friend of mine who is in prison that an angel appeared to him, I have come to think that this is a diabolical thing, because our Lord God does not send angels to lead spirits out of bodies, but only to provide them with good inspiration.'<sup>26</sup> Were these retractions sincere? It is impossible to reply with certainty. What counts is that the events in this trial – the crisis of beliefs evidenced by the two benandanti, their incorporation, at the inquisitor's insistence, into the latter's mental and theological world – epitomised and anticipated the general evolution of the cult that was to define itself, little by little, over more than half a century.

But ancient beliefs are not so easily dispelled. Moduco had asserted that he was now convinced of the diabolical nature of his apparitions. But even though he may have been wary of expressing it, he could not help reaffirming what was for him an incontestable reality:<sup>27</sup>

'A certain invisible thing appeared to me in my sleep which had the form of a man, and I thought I was asleep but I was not, and it seemed to me that he was from Trivignano, and because I had about my neck that caul with which I was born, I thought I heard him say "you must come with me because you have something of mine"; and so I told him that if I had to go, I would, but that I did not want to depart from God; and since he said this was God's work, I went at age twenty-two, or twenty-three.'

As for the 'caul' which he had already stated was a distinctive mark of the benandanti, Moduco asserted that he had always worn it about his neck; then, after losing it, he stopped going forth at night: since 'those who have the caul and do not wear it, do not go out.'

At this point, after a little more skirmishing, Fra Felice suddenly brought the indecisive course of the trial to a halt and took it firmly in hand: 'Did you see what the witches were doing out there?' This was a device, tried successfully with Gasparutto earlier, to compel Moduco to recognize the witches' sabbats in the meetings of the benandanti. And the fact that Moduco had already asserted that witches armed with sorghum stalks fought for the devil<sup>28</sup> made this misrepresentation easier. But Moduco avoided this trap: 'No sir, except on the Ember Days when we fought against them: but they go forth also on Thursdays . . . the witches always go out on Thursdays to hurt someone, and I do not know if anyone calls them out.' And he added: 'The witches do reverence and pray to their masters who go about with great solemnity in black dress and with chains around their necks, and

who insist on being kneeled to.' The inquisitor's next question took a predictable turn: 'Do you benandanti kneel before your captain?' Moduco replied with martial pride: 'No, sir, we only pay our respects to him with our caps, like soldiers to their captain.' There was one more exchange: 'After they have knelt, do the witches play other games?' 'Sir, this I have not seen because they go hither and yon.' Then Fra Felice could no longer contain himself and exclaimed: 'How could you make yourself believe that these were God's works? Men do not have the power either to render themselves invisible or to lead the spirit away, nor are God's works carried out in secrecy.' It was an impetuous, frontal attack. And Moduco, rather than attempting a defence, offered excuses: 'That one begged me so much, saying, "dear Battista, get up," and it seemed as if I was both sleeping and not sleeping. Since he was older than me, I allowed myself to be persuaded, thinking it was proper.' But he admitted his error: 'Yes, sir, now I do believe that this was a diabolical work, after that other person told me of that angel of his.' However, he could not help insisting on the orthodox, even pious, character of the benandanti's gatherings:<sup>29</sup>

'The first time I was summoned . . . the captain took me by the hand and said "Will you be a good servant?" and I replied, "Yes". . . . He did not promise me anything, but did say that I was carrying out one of God's works, and that when I died I would go to paradise. There we did not mention Christ by name, nor the Madonna, nor any saint specifically, nor did I ever see anyone cross himself or make the sign of the cross: but in truth they did talk of God and the saints in general, saying: "May God and the saints be with us," but without naming anyone.'

Suddenly, provoked by yet another of the inquisitor's insinuations, he added: 'While waiting for the company we did not do anything, we neither ate nor drank; but on our way home, I wish I had a *scudo* for every time we drank in the wine cellars, entering through the cracks, and getting on the casks. We drank with a pipe, as did the witches; but after they had drunk, they pissed in the casks.' Irritated perhaps by such extravagant tales, the inquisitor cut the account short, and reproached the benandante for not having revealed these nocturnal diversions to his confessor. 'Dear sir,' Moduco replied with a mixture of astonishment and resentment, 'have I not told you that simply because I said a couple of things I was beaten terribly, so my sides were all black and blue and also my back and arms? And this is why I never told it to the confessor.'

The interrogations ended with the release of the two benandanti and an injunction to them to reappear whenever they might be summoned by the Holy Office. Because of a jurisdictional conflict between the patriarch's vicar and the commissioner of Cividale, pronouncement of sentence against them was delayed for over a year.<sup>30</sup> In fact, it was not until 26 November 1581 that the inquisitor conveyed to Moduco and Gasparutto the order to appear at the Church of San Francesco in Cividale '*ad audiendam sententiam*'.

In the sentences the heresies<sup>31</sup> contained in the confessions of the two men were listed in detail. Several points were singled out as being particularly worthy of censure: Moduco's statement that whoever was a benandante and fought for the faith against witches would be certain to go to paradise; the idolatry practised by Gasparutto in his adoration of the false angel; and finally, the sin of reticence of which the two became guilty by concealing their nocturnal activities from their confessors.<sup>32</sup> It is noteworthy, however, that in the sentence against Gasparutto, whose indictment was considered more serious because of his allusion to the presence of the ambiguous angel at the meetings of the benandanti, sharper language was used. Thus, it was not said, as in Moduco's case, 'You were with the benandanti,' but rather 'You were with witches whom you called benandanti'; moreover, 'diabolical arts' were explicitly mentioned. Further, a misconception was introduced into Moduco's sentence in another attempt to equate the diabolical sabbat with the meetings of the benandanti: 'You urged others to come with you . . . and to those who came you taught that they must not mention the holy name of God and of the saints, because they would then have had to remain.' According to Sgabarizza, Gasparutto instead had limited himself to saying: 'When we were there, even if we should see some wild dancing, we were to say nothing; otherwise we would have been forced to stay.'<sup>33</sup> Both were absolved from the more serious form of excommunication to which they were liable as heretics, and condemned to six months imprisonment. Moreover, prayers and penances were imposed which they were to fulfil during appointed days of the year, among which were the Ember Days, so as to obtain from God forgiveness for sins committed at these times. Soon after, the penalties were remitted, on condition that the two benandanti should remain within the city for a fortnight. That same day, after reading of the sentences, they solemnly abjured their errors 'in the presence of a great multitude'.<sup>34</sup>

As we will see, the picture that emerges from the recitals of the two benandanti would not be fundamentally modified for several decades. In a certain sense, in fact, this evidence is the richest source of information that has come down to us for this first phase of the beliefs being examined here. In this period the benandanti constituted, as we perceive from their confessions, a true and proper sect,<sup>35</sup> organized in military fashion about a leader and linked by a bond of secrecy – a relatively weak bond which the benandanti were continually breaking, either out of loquacity or naive boastfulness. The members of this sect (who were dispersed throughout the Friuli, and especially in the eastern sections) were principally united by a common element, that of having been born with the caul, in other words, wrapped in the amniotic membrane.

According to several bits of contemporary evidence, most of it emanating from the Friuli, various superstitions were attached to this object, the 'caul', or placenta: it was supposed to protect soldiers from blows, cause the enemy to withdraw, and even help lawyers to win their cases.<sup>36</sup> Certainly, it was an object endowed with magical powers. To increase these powers Masses were even celebrated over it, as we know from a superstitious practice already in vogue in the time of San Bernardino, who condemned it in one of his sermons.<sup>37</sup> Battista Moduco asserted that he had been given the caul with which he was born by his own mother, together with the warning that it should always be worn. Once, when he was in Rome, Moduco had a monk celebrate more than thirty Masses over this caul which had been baptized with him. In his turn Gasparutto confessed: 'About a year before the angel appeared to me, my mother gave me the caul in which I had been born, saying that she had it baptized with me, and had nine Masses said over it, and had it blessed with certain prayers and scriptural readings; and she told me that I was born a benandante, and that when I grew up I would go forth at night, and that I must wear it on my person, and that I would go with the benandanti to fight the witches.' Thus, a specific power was added to the general properties of the caul; that of predestining the individual born wrapped within it to the 'profession' of the benandanti; moreover, Moduco affirmed 'those who have the caul and do not wear it, do not go out.' There was a strong tradition in the folklore of many parts of Italy, including the Friuli and Istria (where it was an echo of the very belief we are examining here), that children born with the caul were condemned to become witches.<sup>38</sup> But this similarity does not tell us



how the connection between being 'born with the caul' and becoming benandanti could have evolved. We will attempt to clear up this point with the help of additional evidence.

The initiation of the benandanti took place at a specific age, corresponding approximately to the reaching of maturity (Moduco entered the 'company' at age twenty, Gasparutto at twenty-eight); as in an army, after a time, say ten or twenty years, one became freed from the obligation of marching forth at night to fight. In any case, the moment of initiation did not come without warning; in fact, it was expected, as we saw from the admonishments of Gasparutto's mother to her son. As Moduco said, when those born with the caul 'reach the age of twenty they are summoned by means of a drum the same as soldiers.' Regardless of whether this was done by an angel or a benandante, they already knew that 'they had to go.'

## 10

We have been talking of the benandanti as a sect: a very special sect, whose ceremonies, in the words of the benandanti themselves, had an almost dream-like character. But actually, the benandanti were saying something different; they never doubted the *reality* of those gatherings which they attended 'in spirit'. An identical attitude is discernible in witch trials in other parts of Italy, and elsewhere as well. We can use as an example the case of Domenica Barbarelli, a witch of Novi, prosecuted by the Modenese Inquisition in 1532. She had testified that 'she wanted to go to the games of Diana at all costs and because others knew this, she was watched so that she could not get away. She lay as if dead for about two hours, but finally, after frequent shaking by the bystanders, seemed to awake and spoke these words: "I did indeed go there in spite of you": and she reported many evil deeds which she said she had done in the games.'<sup>38</sup> Here too, the going in a dream, 'in spirit', was perceived as something real. For this reason the witch taunted the bystanders: she believed that she herself, or her spirit, had truly gone to the 'games'.

Later we will investigate the significance of this going 'in spirit' on the part of witches and benandanti. Meanwhile we should note first of all that both groups claimed that, before setting out for their meetings, they fell into states of profound prostration, or catalepsy, the causes of which have been widely discussed. Doubtless, this is a marginal

problem in the interpretation of witchcraft. Even if we could (and we cannot) determine with certainty the nature of these cataleptic states, we would still need to explain the really important element: *the meaning* of the visions claimed by both witches and benandanti. There is no doubt that the question should at least be asked.

The explanations that have been suggested are basically of two types: either it has been supposed that witches and warlocks were individuals afflicted by epilepsy, hysteria, or other mental diseases not well defined; or else the loss of consciousness accompanied by hallucinations, described by them, have been attributed to the effect of ointments containing sleep-inducing or narcotic substances. Let's begin by discussing the second of these possibilities.

It is well known that witches anointed themselves before going to the sabbat. Already in the mid-fifteenth century the Spanish theologian, Alfonso Tostado, in his commentary on *Genesis*, noted in passing that Spanish witches, after uttering certain set words, smeared themselves with ointments and then fell into a deep sleep which made them insensible even to fire and to injuries. But upon waking they declared that they had been to this or that, perhaps very distant, place, to meet their companions, feasting and philandering.<sup>39</sup> A half century later Giovanni Battista Della Porta obtained a similar result when he had an old woman reputed to be a witch anointed, recording in minute detail the ingredients of the unguent used. The experiment was repeated with conflicting results by two scholars in modern times.<sup>40</sup> It seems reasonable to suppose, nevertheless, that if not all, at least some of the confessed witches, used unguents capable of inducing states of hallucination and delirium.

It is not so easy, however, to extend this hypothesis to the benandanti. Neither Gasparutto nor Moduco ever mentioned ointments. They spoke only of deep sleeps and of lethargic states which rendered them insensible, thereby allowing the spirit to leave the body. Even in later benandanti trials we find only two references to ointments. A cowherd of Latisana, Menichino, admitted being a benandante and asserted that he went out at night in the form of smoke to fight the witches. During his trial by the Venetian Holy Office in 1591 the inquisitor asked him, in the usual insinuating manner, if 'when he went forth as smoke, as he says, did he anoint himself with any unguent or oil, or . . . did he utter any words?' At first the defendant reacted violently to this suggestion: 'No, by the saints, God, and the Gospels I did not oil myself or say any words.' But later when the interrogations were being read back to him he did admit that the benandante who had persuaded him the first time to go out at night

had told him to grease himself 'with lamp oil the evening before he was to go forth'.<sup>41</sup> This was a cautious and perhaps incomplete admission and it does not find much more solid corroboration in the testimony of a carpenter from Palmanova who denounced as a *benandante* a well-known prostitute named Menica of Cremons to the inquisitor of Aquileia: 'She herself admits that when she goes out she greases herself with oils and creams, and the body remains while the spirit departs.'<sup>42</sup> As we will see, this is second-hand and also very late evidence (the trial took place in 1626), and should probably be taken as an early sign of that association of *benandanti* with witches which was beginning to be made in this very period.<sup>43</sup> All in all, the evidence for the use of unguents by *benandanti* is really too sparse, in relation to the number of surviving trials, to allow us to use it as an explanation for their behaviour.

Let's pass now to the first-mentioned hypothesis. It is an established fact that many witches were epileptics, and that many demoniacs suffered from hysteria. Still, there seems little doubt that we are confronted with many manifestations which can not be explained on pathological grounds. First, this is so in terms of statistics, since in the face of such large numbers of 'sick' people, even the boundaries between a healthy and diseased state become vague; secondly, the so-called hallucinations, instead of being confined to an individual, private sphere, have a precise cultural basis. For example, their recurrence in a circumscribed period of the year – the Ember Days – immediately comes to mind. They are of a type befitting a specific popular religiosity or a particular aberrant mysticism. The same reasoning applies to the *benandanti*. It would seem obvious to ascribe the catalepsy and the lethargy by which they claimed to be afflicted to epileptic fits. The fact is, however, that only one *benandante* – a woman named Maria Panzona, tried by the Holy Office first at Latisana and later in Venice in 1618–19 – appeared to have suffered from the 'ugly ailment' (*bruto male*), epilepsy.<sup>44</sup> To be sure, in her case, the attacks which beset her continually, even during questioning, must have seemed at certain times – during the Ember Days – much like the *benandanti*'s ritual lethargies. The documents available to us, however, do not give sufficient information, and the nature of the *benandanti*'s catalepsy remains a mystery. In any case, whether it was induced through ointments containing drugs, epileptic fits, or specific ecstatic techniques, the puzzle of the *benandanti* and their beliefs must be resolved on the basis of the history of popular religiosity not on that of pharmacology or psychiatry.<sup>45</sup>

The loss of the senses, a condition common to both witches and *benandanti*, was understood as a separation of the spirit from the body. Margherita of San Rocco, condemned to the stake in 1571 by the mayor and elders of Lucca, declared that 'the visits to the games which I have made did not take place in person, but *in spirit, leaving the body at home*.'<sup>46</sup> And one of her companions, Polissena of San Macario (who met the same fate) testified: 'I allowed myself to be persuaded by an aunt of mine, Lena of Pescaglia, to enter into witchcraft; after her death I did nothing for about a year, and then I began to go out in this way, that is, she called me and said "let us go", and only I could hear her voice, and then I greased myself with the ointment I had brought with me . . . and was transformed into a cat, *left the body at home*, descended the stair, and went out by the door.'<sup>47</sup> These were words uttered during torture, or at least in the course of a trial heavily influenced by it.<sup>48</sup> But what counts here is not their sincerity but rather the evidence they furnish for the widespread existence of certain beliefs which, as we will see, were not shared by the judges.

This departure of the spirit from the body, which was left lifeless, was understood as an actual separation, an event fraught with perils, almost like death. To the mayor and elders of Lucca, Margherita of San Rocco declared (and this particular recurs in the confessions of her companion Polissena) that when they went to the sabbat 'if perchance we were turned over face down we would lose the spirit and the body would die';<sup>49</sup> moreover, if the spirit 'did not return before dawn at cock's crow, we would not change back into human form, and the body would stay dead and the spirit remain a cat.'<sup>50</sup> For his part, the *benandante* Gasparutto told Rotaro that 'when he [Gasparutto] went to these games his body stayed in bed and the spirit went forth, and that while he was out if someone approached the bed where the body lay and called to it, it would not answer, nor could he get it to move even if he should try for a hundred years; and . . . they wait twenty-four hours before returning, and if one should say or do something, the spirit would remain separated from the body, and after it was buried, the spirit would wander forever'.<sup>51</sup> The soul which left the body to go to the witches' conventicles or to the jousts of the *benandanti* was considered in both cases as something very real and tangible, usually an animal. In another Lucchese trial (this one dating from 1589) an old woman accused of witchcraft, Crezia of Pieve San Paolo, declared: 'Forty years or more ago, I knew a witch called Gianna, and once when she fell asleep I saw a mouse come out of her mouth; it was her spirit

and I do not know where it was going.<sup>52</sup> When Gasparutto's wife was interrogated by Fra Felice da Montefalco on 1 October 1580, she claimed not to know whether her husband was a benandante; however, she did remember that one winter night she had woken in a fright and called to Paolo for comfort: 'And even though I called him ten times and shook him, I could not manage to wake him, and he lay face up'; a little later she had found him mumbling to himself: 'These benandanti say that when their spirit leaves the body it has the appearance of a mouse, and also when it returns, and that if the body should be rolled over while it is without its spirit, it would remain dead, and its spirit could never return to it.'<sup>53</sup> Later corroboration of this belief that the soul was a 'mouse' (which was not limited to the Friuli<sup>54</sup>) was provided in a 1648 trial against a child who claimed to be a benandante: at the sabbat which he had attended (by that time the identification of benandanti with witches had been pretty well accomplished) some of those present were 'in spirit and in body, in male and female forms', while others instead were 'in the shape of mice', that is, only 'in spirit'.<sup>55</sup> The concept of the soul as something material had such deep roots among the benandanti that Menica of Cremons, denounced in 1626, declared that she went to the conventicles leaving her body behind so that she might assume another one like it.<sup>56</sup> Moreover, this belief was known even beyond the circles of witches and benandanti. In Verona, for example, early in the sixteenth century Bishop Gian Matteo Giberti had to suppress the popular custom of removing the roofs of houses of the recently deceased so that their souls might be freed and ascend to heaven.<sup>57</sup>

## 12

Not all witches asserted that they went to the sabbat 'in spirit'. A woman of Gaiato, Orsolina, nicknamed 'la Rossa', tried by the Modenese Inquisition in 1539, was asked by the judge whether she always made her way to the sabbat 'physically or in sleep'. She replied that 'there are many who go in spirit only, but some also in their bodies'; as for herself, 'she always went there physically'.<sup>58</sup> From the very first persecutions, controversy had raged, among those who debated the true nature of witchcraft, over the two alternatives – whether witches betook themselves to the sabbat 'in dreams' or 'physically'.

Obviously, this is not the place to retrace the long history of this controversy.<sup>59</sup> It will suffice to sum up the arguments of the respective positions. The advocates of the reality of the 'games' (by far the majority until the second half of the seventeenth century) found justification by evoking venerable authorities for their position, in addition to the *consensus gentium*. The utterances of witches were too alike despite differences in the physical constitution, social condition, and place of origin of the accused to be attributed to dreams or fantasies.<sup>60</sup> In other words, everything was real: the magical properties of the diabolical ointments, the transformation of the witches into animals, their nocturnal flights to perhaps very distant places, the devil's presence at the conventicles, and so forth. On the other side were those who argued that the sabbat was unreal; they judged it to be the fruit of the delirious fantasies of 'base-born old folk or ignorant and simple people, vulgar rustics', or of women, as Andrea Alciato jeered, who deserved hellebore more than the stake. They confronted their opponents with the celebrated *Canon Episcopi* (derived from a German penitential work, probably of late ninth-century origin) and maintained the impossibility of the witches' nocturnal flights on both natural and supernatural grounds.<sup>61</sup> This thesis, supported by the physician Johann Weyer whose arguments were already partially rationalistic, began gradually to predominate in the course of the seventeenth century, until little by little it prevailed uncontested, during that very period which saw the persecutions of witches come to a peak almost everywhere in Europe.

These alternatives formulated by inquisitors, jurists and theologians naturally were also those faced by the judges of the two benandanti. Should the nocturnal gatherings and the battles which they described be understood as dreams and fantasies, or as real events? There were no doubts on this score, as we have seen, among the benandanti themselves: conventicles and battles were very real, even if only their spirits participated. But the judges refused to go along with this division: in the sentences concluding the trial, Gasparutto and Moduco were condemned for having 'gone' with the benandanti, and for having dared 'to believe and affirm' that the spirit could, on these occasions, abandon the body and re-enter it at will. Similar distortions turn up, and not by chance, in many other witchcraft trials. As they sought to control, by articulating it, the painful sense of profound disorientation experienced during their lethargies, witches and benandanti alike spoke of the spirit leaving the body in the guise of a cat, a mouse, or some other animal (these were the metamorphoses discussed at such length by theologians and inquisitors). But this

experience could not be successfully conveyed, and the statements about the departure of the soul from the body were condemned.