



# MAGIA SEXUALIS

SEX, MAGIC, AND  
LIBERATION IN MODERN  
WESTERN ESOTERICISM

**© 2006 UC Regents  
Buy this book**

HUGH B. URBAN

University of California Press, one of the most distinguished university presses in the United States, enriches lives around the world by advancing scholarship in the humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences. Its activities are supported by the UC Press Foundation and by philanthropic contributions from individuals and institutions. For more information, visit [www.ucpress.edu](http://www.ucpress.edu).

University of California Press  
Berkeley and Los Angeles, California

University of California Press, Ltd.  
London, England

© 2006 by The Regents of the University of California

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Urban, Hugh B.

Magia sexualis : sex, magic, and liberation in modern Western esotericism / Hugh B. Urban.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN-13: 978-0-520-24776-5 (cloth : alk. paper)

ISBN-10: 0-520-24776-0 (cloth : alk. paper)

1. Sex—Western countries—Miscellanea—History. 2. Magic—Western countries—History. 3. Liberty—Miscellanea—History.  
I. Title.

BF1623.S4U73 2006

133.4'309—dc22j

2006010715

Manufactured in the United States of America

15 14 13 12 11 10 09 08 07 06  
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

This book is printed on Natures Book, which contains 50% post-consumer waste and meets the minimum requirements of ANSI/NISO Z 39.48-1992 (R 1997) (*Permanence of Paper*).<sup>Ⓜ</sup>

# 1 The Recurring Nightmare, the Elusive Secret

## *Historical and Imaginary Roots of Sex Magic in the Western Tradition*

The whole power of Magic is founded on Eros. The way Magic works is to bring things together through their inherent similarity.

MARSILIO FICINO, *De Amore*

Love is one of the great instruments of magical power, but it is categorically forbidden to the Magus, at least as an invocation or passion. Woe to the Samson of Kabbalah if he permits himself to be put asleep by Delilah! . . . Sexual love is ever an illusion, for it is the result of an imaginary mirage.

ELIPHAS LÉVI, *Transcendental Magic*

Sex, magic, and secrecy have long been intimately associated in the Western imagination. Since at least the first centuries of the Christian church, sexual licentiousness was often believed to go hand in hand with experimentation in occult arts and secret rituals. Conversely, heretical religious groups were typically accused of the most perverse sexual activities. One of the most common charges leveled against the Gnostics by the early church fathers was that of hedonism and sexual abandon in the course of their obscene rites, and this accusation of sexual license and obscene ritual would recur throughout the later Middle Ages in the church's war against various other heresies, from the Cathars in the thirteenth century to the Knights Templar in the fourteenth century to the witch trials in the fifteenth, sixteenth, and seventeenth centuries. As Robert Lerner observes, "heretics of all stripes were simply assumed to be immoralists."<sup>1</sup> Repeatedly and with remarkable consistency, a narrative emerged that linked sexual intercourse with dangerous power, and in turn linked sexual transgression with occult ritual and obscene inversion of religious practice. Even the most renowned exponents of magic, such as the nineteenth-century occultist Eliphas Lévi, quoted above, warned of the awesome power and terrible danger bound up with sexual intercourse. As David Frankfurter observes,

the fear of this unholy union of sexual license and black magic is one of the most persistent fantasies in the Western imagination over the last two thousand years.<sup>2</sup>

But how much of this association of sexuality with magic has any real historical basis, and how much is pure fiction or simply Western society's own "fantasies of the world turned upside down"?<sup>3</sup> Was there ever any widespread practice of sexual magic prior to the nineteenth century, or is the very concept of sexual magic simply a modern attempt to enact a recurring fantasy that has tantalized the Western imagination for two millennia?

The association of sex and magic is by no means a new idea in the modern comparative study of religion. Early anthropologists and historians of religions from Sir James George Frazer to Mircea Eliade compiled masses of data about various fertility cults across the globe that were believed to link sexual license and orgiastic behavior with fertility rites and agricultural ceremonies. Thus, Eliade sees the orgy as a basic and widespread form of "magico-religious" ritual aimed both to enhance the fertility of crops and to restore humankind to the primordial, unformed chaos from which all life proceeds: "The orgy sets flowing the sacred energy of life."<sup>4</sup>

[R]itual orgies . . . are attested among populations as different as the Kurds, the Tibetans, the Eskimos, the Malgaches, the Ngadju Dyaks, and the Australians. The incentives are manifold, but generally such ritual orgies are carried out in order to avert a cosmic or social crisis . . . or in order to lend magico-religious support . . . by releasing and heightening the dormant powers of sexuality. . . . [I]ndiscriminate and excessive sexual intercourse plunges the collectivity into the fabulous epoch of the beginnings.<sup>5</sup>

Other historians, such as Narendranath Bhattacharyya, have even argued that there is an archaic matriarchal substratum beneath all the religions of India, the Middle East, and most of the ancient world which is rooted in a form of sexual magic. Above all, Bhattacharyya suggests, the ancient goddess cults of Cybele, Isis, Ashtarte, and the Indian mother goddesses are rooted in "primitive sex rites based on the magical association of natural and human fertility."<sup>6</sup>

Not surprisingly, contemporary popular authors have taken this argument still further, by arguing that sex magic is in fact one of the oldest, most universal of all forms of human spirituality. "Sex magic is as old as mankind," writes popular sex magician Don Webb.<sup>7</sup> Another neo-Tantric guru, Nik Douglas, argues that sex magic and Tantra can be traced back to the Paleolithic era, when spiritual sex emerged as the original "Mother of Spiritual Belief" for all later civilization. "It was during the Paleolithic era of the Ice Age that the foundations of magic and mysticism were established, with

sex as the cornerstone. In this era, sex was undoubtedly a spiritual mystery."<sup>8</sup> This idea is really the starting point for Dan Brown's novel *The DaVinci Code*, which imagines an ancient tradition of matriarchy, goddess-worship, and sexual ritual at the basis of early Christianity itself, which was later pushed underground by the Catholic Church.

While there is not a great deal of evidence to discredit these theories of a widespread archaic substratum of goddess worship and sexual magic, there is not much to support them either. Indeed, we ought to be extremely suspicious of all such sweeping, largely ahistorical claims, which typically tell us far more about the personal, social, and political agendas of the scholars who make them than they do about other cultures or actual historical events.<sup>9</sup> What we must do instead, I think, is look critically at the data we have available to us today and interrogate both the more fantastic and the more credible narratives surrounding magic and sexuality, taking both seriously as key components in the modern imagining of *magia sexualis*.

In this chapter, I will examine both the imaginary and the historical roots of sexual magic in the West. As Norman Cohn has argued, there does seem to be a recurring fantasy of black magic and illicit sexuality that runs throughout much of Western history, from the early Christian church to the time of the witch hunts. This is the story of what Cohn calls "Europe's inner demons," or the projection of Christian Europe's own violent drives and desires onto marginalized groups such as heretics and witches. The resulting fantasy of sex and black magic is thus a kind of "return of the repressed," the return of Christianity's own denial of the body, nature, and sexuality in a monstrously distorted form.<sup>10</sup> As Charles Zika has recently suggested, however, these fantasies of magic and transgression were never *simply* a matter of repressive denial. Rather, they were also ways for medieval Europeans to explore, give expression to, and even enjoy transgressive desires: "repression is also about exploring the pleasures of desire, of seduction, of the body: the history of discipline is also a history of excess."<sup>11</sup>

To borrow a phrase from Michael Taussig, we might say that this narrative is a form of *mimesis*, or a projection of deep-seated fantasies and desires onto certain social or political "others." As Taussig suggests, mimesis is particularly at work during struggles for power between dominant and oppressed groups—for example, between colonial authorities and native peoples, between whites and blacks, or between the Nazis and Jews: "Racism is the parade ground, where the civilized rehearse this love-hate relation with their repressed sensuousity, with the nose of the Jew, their 'instinct for avarice,' the blackness of the negro, their alleged sexuality."<sup>12</sup> Yet

ironically, even as they condemn marginal groups as savage or irrational, the dominant factions often mimic that same savagery in their oppression of those groups: “The magic of mimesis lies in the transformation wrought on reality by rendering its image. . . . [S]uch mimesis occurs by a mirroring of otherness that reflects back the barbarity of their own social relations, but as imputed to the savagery they yearn to colonize.”<sup>13</sup> Very often, this mimetic projection centers specifically around sex—the intense sexual power, at once frightening and tantalizing, so frequently attributed to primitives and other races.<sup>14</sup> It is precisely this sort of mimetic projection of sexual immorality and dangerous power that we see repeated throughout Western religious history. In the persecutions of the Gnostics, the Cathars, and the witches, we see many of the same repressed sexual fantasies and desires projected through the “magic of mimesis” onto a series of marginalized others.

Yet at the same time, this association between sex and magic was not *entirely* a projection or displaced fantasy. Rather, I will argue, there is a deep current running through Western esotericism that does connect the powers of sex and magic and would so form the foundation for modern sexual magic. From ancient Greek love magic, through early Gnosticism and Hermeticism, to Jewish Kabbalah and Renaissance magic, there is a very old esoteric tradition that has linked the mysteries of sexual love with those of magical ritual. The modern practice of sex magic that emerged in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, I will argue, is in large part a complex fusion of these imaginary and historical traditions, weaving together both the fantasies of transgressive sexual rites and the actual practice of erotic magic in the Western esoteric tradition.

FANTASIES OF THE WORLD TURNED UPSIDE DOWN:  
SEXUAL LICENSE AND RELIGIOUS PERVERSION  
IN THE WESTERN IMAGINATION

The famous gesture of Adam covering his genitals with a fig leaf is, according to Augustine, not due to the simple fact that Adam was ashamed of their presence, but to the fact that his sexual organs were moving by themselves without his consent. Sex in creation is the image of man revolted against God. . . . His uncontrolled sex is exactly the same as what he himself has been toward God—a rebel.

MICHEL FOUCAULT

[T]hough it truly shames me for the disgraceful things they did . . . nevertheless I shall not recoil from saying what they did not recoil from doing, so as to arouse in my readers a shuddering horror of their scandalous behavior.

After copulating, as if the crime of their whoredom were not enough, they offer up their shame to heaven.

EPIPHANIUS, *Panarion*, describing the Phibionite Gnostic sect

Much of the inspiration for the rise of sexual magic in the nineteenth century is clearly drawn from imaginary sources. That is to say, it drew upon a long tradition of fantastic narratives about wild orgies, bizarre ritual, and obscene occultism that had little basis in reality but a lasting impact on the popular imagination for millennia. To cite but a few examples: when Aleister Crowley created his “Gnostic Mass” for the Ordo Templi Orientis—which centered around the male priest “piercing” the priestess with his “sacred lance”—he was in fact mimicking the fantastic and largely groundless accusations of sexual license that were commonly aimed at the Gnostics by the early church. He was not, in other words, re-creating an actual ritual, but enacting the dark fantasy of an inverted Eucharist that obsessed and terrified the early Christian church. Likewise, when Gerald Gardner introduced his “Great Rite” for modern witches—a rite that involved intercourse between male and female partners—he was not following any ancient or traditional ritual. Rather, he was mimicking the stereotype of witchcraft and sex that had lingered in the Western imagination for at least a thousand years. And perhaps most obviously, the modern “Black Mass” performed by the Church of Satan—celebrated on the body of a naked woman—is clearly a mockery of the dark fantasy of a Satanic Mass that has haunted the Christian imagination for centuries.

The origins of these fantastic narratives of orgiastic ritual and black magic are doubtless very old and probably predate the rise of Christianity. We can already see the seeds of this narrative in the descriptions of some of the Greek and Roman mystery religions, and above all, the cult of Bacchus/Dionysus. Although little is known about the actual content of the Dionysian mysteries—which were as diverse and varied as the many myths surrounding the god himself—they do seem to have centered at least in part around phallic worship, intoxication, and ritual excess.<sup>15</sup> But whatever their actual content, the Dionysian mysteries would soon become closely associated with sexual license, extreme violence, and often criminal activity in the Greek and Roman imaginations. Already by the fifth century BCE, as we see in Euripides’ classic tragedy *The Bacchae*, the cult of Dionysus had become

widely associated with orgiastic ritual, hedonism, and violence. Here Dionysus appears in Thebes in order to revive his cultic worship, which had fallen into ill repute. To do so, he maddens the women of the area, who are driven out into the forest where they dance wildly, wear skins of beasts, suckle wolves, and engage in the ripping apart (*sporagmos*) and consumption (*omophagia*) of the raw flesh of their animal victims.

I have sung them with frenzy, hounded them from home,  
up to the mountain where they wander, crazed of mind,  
and compelled to wear my orgies' livery  
Every woman in Thebes—but the women only—  
I drove from home, mad. . . .<sup>16</sup>

In the end, King Pentheus himself—the hard-hearted ruler of Thebes, who had denied Dionysus—becomes a sacrificial victim of the god. Compelled by his desire to see the Bacchic rites, he begs to learn of those mysteries of which “it is forbidden to tell the uninitiated,” which “are forbidden to say,” but “are worth knowing.” But he is finally discovered, then ripped limb from limb by the ecstatic Bacchae, and even beheaded by his own mother.<sup>17</sup>

However, perhaps the most remarkable example of the role of the Bacchic cult in the popular imagination is found in Livy's account in book 39 of his history of Rome. In 186 BCE, Livy recounts, the Roman senate met in order to discuss the growing fears about the secret Bacchic ceremonies spreading throughout Italy, bringing with them not only sexual immorality but also criminal activity and murder. In the end, the senate would call for the destruction of all Bacchic shrines and strict control of all Bacchic worship in Italy. The following account might be considered perhaps the *locus classicus* for fantasies of sexual transgression in religious ritual and would deeply inform the Western imagination for the next two thousand years.

The pleasures of drinking and feasting were added to the religious rites, to attract a larger number of followers. When the wine had inflamed their feelings, and night and the mingling of the sexes and of different ages had extinguished all power of moral judgment, all sorts of corruption began to be practiced, since each person had ready to hand the chance of gratifying the particular desire to which he was naturally inclined. The corruption was not confined to one kind of evil, the promiscuous violation of free men and of women; the cult was also a source of supply of false witnesses, forged documents and wills, and perjured evidence, dealing also in poisons and in wholesale murders. . . . [T]he violence was concealed because no cries for help could be heard against the shriekings, the banging of drums . . . in the scene of debauchery and bloodshed.<sup>18</sup>

Indeed, the authorities feared that this was not just some bizarre isolated cult, but a widespread, rapidly growing subversive force that was threatening the stability of Roman society: "Debauched and debauchers, frenzied devotees, bereft of their senses . . . by the hubbub and the shouting of all that goes through the night. Up to now this conspiracy has no strength, but it is gaining a vast increase in strength in that its followers grow more numerous as the days go by."<sup>19</sup>

As Eliade suggests, these fantastic narratives of sexual excess and ritual violence tell us several things. Transgression, excess, and the violation of social prohibitions are here imagined as the ultimate means of surpassing the human condition and the social order alike: "The Dionysiac ecstasy means, above all, surpassing the human condition, the discovery of total deliverance, obtaining a freedom and spontaneity inaccessible to human beings. . . . [A]mong these freedoms there also figured deliverance from prohibitions, rules and conventions of an ethical and social order."<sup>20</sup> But at the same time, they also reveal a deeper fear of political subversion, resistance, and dissent against the imperial order; as Cohn observes, these narratives of perverse erotic orgies "belonged to the stereotype of revolutionary conspiracy against the state."<sup>21</sup>

Finally, these descriptions of the horrific *bacchanalia* contain many of the elements that would later become common tropes in the attacks on heretics and witches in the Christian Middle Ages. Secrecy, midnight gatherings, pederasty, organized murders, criminal behavior in order to obtain wealth—all of these would become basic motifs in the recurring nightmare of black magic and illicit sexuality for the next two thousand years.

### *The Feast of Love: Sexual Fantasies and Accusations in the Early Church*

They said to Him: "Shall we then, as children, enter the Kingdom?"  
Jesus said to them: "When you make the two one . . . and when you make the male and the female into one and the same, so that the male shall not be male nor the female female . . . then you will enter the kingdom."

THE GOSPEL OF THOMAS

He would combat lust by the enjoyment of lust.

CLEMENT OF ALEXANDRIA (d. 215), *Stromata*, describing the heretical school of Carpocrates

Although it has roots in earlier Greek and Roman traditions, this narrative of sexual transgression would achieve its lasting status as a powerful and recurring nightmare with the triumph of Christianity. As Peter Brown,

Elaine Pagels, and others have argued, early Christians distinguished themselves from the surrounding Mediterranean society, in part, by their austerity, chastity, and sexual control. This was at once a way of asserting their self-discipline and superiority over what was seen as an immoral, corrupt world and a way of disengaging themselves from the social obligations that bound other citizens in the Roman civic order. In the words of St. Justin, "We, who used to take pleasure in immorality, now embrace chastity alone; we, who valued above everything else the acquisition of wealth and possessions, now bring what we have into common ownership and share with those in need."<sup>22</sup>

As Pagels suggests, it was in large part by their unusual discipline and control over their sexuality that Christians asserted their superiority over what they saw as a lust-driven, carnal society: "What distinguished Christians from everyone else, according to both pagan and Christian contemporaries, was their moral rigor, which impressed even pagans hostile to the movement—abstinence from the use of the sexual organs."<sup>23</sup> Sexual control was, among other things, a means of liberating themselves from the existing social and political order, along with its various rules and obligations: "sexual activity risked conception and so involved both partners . . . in the economic and social obligations of family life. The example of Jesus and his followers encouraged them instead to take the subversive path *away* from such obligations—toward freedom."<sup>24</sup>

Not surprisingly, then, the early Christians were often perceived as a deviant and subversive threat within the Roman Empire, one that held the potential to undermine the domestic and social fabric itself. Indeed, because their attitudes, beliefs, and behavior were a "denial of the values by which Graeco-Roman society lived," they could be seen as a kind of "revolutionary political conspiracy."<sup>25</sup> Thus a wide variety of fantastic narratives emerged surrounding the early Christians, associating them with all manner of anti-social activity. According to an account recorded by Minucius Felix, the Christians were said to consecrate the head of a donkey, then pay reverence to the genitals of the presiding priest; their initiation rituals involved the slaughter of a child and the consumption of his blood and burned ashes; and their central ritual was a secret drunken orgy involving the most reckless incestuous sex between men and women of all ages: "Precisely the secrecy of this evil religion proves that all these things, or practically all, are true."<sup>26</sup>

The irony of all of this is that the charge of sexual immorality would later be appropriated and used by the Christians themselves to attack other rival factions in the early church. In the first two centuries, virtually every Christian sect would be accused of sexual promiscuity not only by pagan

critics, but also by competing Christian groups. As Peter Brown concludes, “by the year 200, every Christian group had accused its own Christian rivals of bizarre sexual practices. In the time of Justin, a young man in Alexandria even petitioned the Augustal Prefect for permission to have himself castrated. Only by undergoing this drastic operation could he hope to persuade pagans that indiscriminate intercourse was not what Christian men sought in their ‘sisters.’”<sup>27</sup>

Surely the most common target of these charges of sexual immorality were groups that were considered to be deviant, unorthodox, or subversive by the mainstream church. Nowhere is this more true than in the attacks on the various groups and individuals known as Gnostics. *Gnosticism* is itself a generic term used to refer to a wide range of sects that were eventually branded as heretical and progressively stamped out by the early Christian church between roughly the first and fifth centuries. However, despite their incredible diversity, the various sects of the Manichaeans, Valentini-ans, Phibionites, and Ophites, the followers of Simon Magus, and countless others do share certain common tendencies. Perhaps the most basic of these is the emphasis on *gnosis* itself—that is, direct spiritual knowledge or “insight” as the primary means of salvation from the world of suffering and death.<sup>28</sup> According to one of the earliest and most important Gnostic texts, the *Gospel of Thomas*, this knowledge was transmitted esoterically, through “secret sayings” by Jesus, and given only to his chosen few disciples.<sup>29</sup> Highly syncretic in their cosmological imagination, the Gnostics developed an extremely rich body of mythic narratives weaving together elements of Christianity, Platonic philosophy, and Near Eastern religions in elaborate speculations about the origin, structure, and end of the universe.

The recurring theme in many of these narratives is that the human soul is a particle or spark of the divine that has become lost, fallen, or entrapped in the suffering material world; the goal of spiritual practice is therefore to free the soul from its bonds in matter, to elevate it through the hierarchy of the cosmos, and to return it to its home in the spiritual realm. According to the Valentinian text *The Gospel of Philip*, the return of the soul to its true spiritual home is described as a kind of spiritual wedding, the mystery of the “bridal chamber.” Death, *Philip* tells us, came into the world through the separation of Eve from Adam in Paradise; therefore, Christ has come to heal this division, by reuniting the divided soul with its spiritual counterpart and so give it eternal life: “If the woman had not separated from the man, she would not die with the man. His separation became the beginning of death. Because of this Christ came to repair the separation which was from the beginning and again unite the two. . . . But the

woman is united to her husband in the bridal chamber. Indeed those who have united in the bridal chamber will no longer be separated."<sup>30</sup> The result of this union is the spiritual insight into one's own divine nature. For, according to *Philip*, one always becomes what one sees; thus "You saw the spirit, you became spirit. You saw Christ, you became Christ. You saw [the Father, you] shall become the Father . . . you see yourself, and what you see you shall become."<sup>31</sup>

In contrast to the mainstream Christian churches, which had become increasingly institutionalized and hierarchical by the fourth century, the Gnostic groups often had a markedly egalitarian character. Not only did they break down institutional hierarchies of priests over laity, but many also offered new roles for women as religious authorities. According to many Gnostic texts, such as *The Thunder, Perfect Mind*, the Godhead itself transcends distinctions between male and female, containing all dualities and both sexes in one androgynous unity: "I am the first and the last. I am the honored one and the scorned one. I am the whore and the holy one. I am the wife and the virgin. I am (the mother) and the daughter. . . . I am she whose wedding is great, and I have not taken a husband. . . . I am godless and I am one whose God is great."<sup>32</sup> And this "androgynous" perspective often carried over into roles for human men and women as well. For example, the Gnostic teacher Marcion scandalized the Church fathers by appointing women on an equal basis with men as priests and bishops; similarly, the Valentinians regarded women as equal to men, revering them as prophets, healers, and priests.<sup>33</sup> Indeed, one of the most common charges leveled at the Gnostics by Church fathers like Tertullian was that they made no distinction between initiates and catechumens, allowed laymen to perform sacraments, and even gave women authority to preach: "They enter on equal terms, they listen on equal terms, they pray on equal terms. . . . And heretical women, how brazen they are! They dare to teach, to dispute, to exorcise, to promise cures, even perhaps to baptize. . . . Even members of the laity are charged with the duties of a priest."<sup>34</sup>

Contrary to the many charges of immorality leveled against them, most of the Gnostic sects generally had a highly puritanical, often extremely pessimistic attitude toward the human body and sexuality. The body, for Gnostics like Mani and Valentinus, was a prison and source of inevitable sorrow, and sexual desire was the most powerful force binding us to this corruptible world, a "sinister all-devouring flame" leading the soul to perish in the fire of the suffering material universe.<sup>35</sup> Thus *The Gospel of Philip* warns that the "sexual" imagery of the Gnostic rites should not be abused by impure or sensually minded men: "The bridal chamber is not for the beasts or for slaves or for impure women, but for free men and virgins."<sup>36</sup>

Nonetheless, the most common, consistent, and scathing attack launched against the Gnostics by the mainstream church was that of sexual immorality. As Peter Brown observes, "The accusations of sexual immorality made against almost all Gnostic teachers made plain that this was a matter of no small importance in the second-century Christian church."<sup>37</sup> One of the most infamous Gnostic teachers was Simon Magus, who was considered by his followers to be the "first god," together with his companion, Helen, the "first thought." Although Simon and Helen were widely accused of "promiscuous intercourse" and even incest, there is in fact little evidence that they or other groups actually engaged in such practices, "but always these accusations are made by outsiders with no firsthand experience of the sexual excesses they report."<sup>38</sup> Similarly, Clement of Alexandria spoke with disgust of the Gnostic Carpocratian sect, whose licentious gatherings involved "love feasts for uniting," which to Clement meant essentially gluttony and sexual dissipation.<sup>39</sup> One of the most common charges was that the Gnostics regularly gathered and consumed the male and female sexual fluids, in the belief that the semen and menstrual blood are the vessels of the soul and that by consuming these scattered seeds they could lead them to spiritual unity. According to St. Irenaeus, "the power which resides in the (female) periods and in the semen, they say, is the soul (psyche) which we collect and eat."<sup>40</sup>

As Brown observes, these fantastic narratives of sexual abandon and black magic represented a kind of inverted mirror of mainstream early Christianity itself, which reflect the sexual anxieties of the church in these formative years and so "tell us more about traditional Mediterranean fantasies of the world turned upside down than they do about the actual relations of men and women in the Christian communities."<sup>41</sup>

Probably the most elaborate and most imaginative of these accusations was that of Epiphanius, future bishop of Salamis, who described his own encounter with a deviant Gnostic sect in Egypt. After a group of lascivious women tried to seduce him, he witnessed the horrible rites of these Gnostics, who not only gorge themselves with wine and meat, but then proceed with their own horrible "love rite" (*agape*) in which they actually consume male and female sexual fluids as the body and blood of the Eucharist. Still more unspeakable acts then follow if one of the women should happen to be impregnated during these orgies:

They serve up lavish helpings of wine and meat even if they are poor. When they have had their drink and filled their veins, as it were, to bursting point, they give themselves over to passion. The husband withdraws from his wife and says to her: "Rise up, make love with your brother." The miserable

wretches then indulge in promiscuous intercourse. And, though it truly shames me for the disgraceful things they did . . . nevertheless I shall not recoil from saying what they did not recoil from doing, so as to arouse in my readers a shuddering horror of their scandalous behavior.

After copulating, as if the crime of their whoredom were not enough, they offer up their shame to heaven. The man and woman take the man's sperm in their hands and stand looking up to heaven. With this impurity in their hands, they pray . . . offering to the natural Father of the universe what is in their hands, saying "We offer you this gift, the body of Christ." And so they eat it, partaking of their own shame and saying, "This is the body of Christ, and this is the Passover." . . . Similarly with the woman's emission at her period: they collect the menstrual blood which is unclean, take it and eat it together and say "Behold the Blood of Christ. . . ." They practice the shameful act not to beget children but for mere pleasure. . . . If one of them happens to allow the sperm to penetrate the woman and make her pregnant, listen to the outrage that they dare to perform. At the right moment they extract the embryo with their fingers and take the aborted infant and crush it with pestle and mortar; when they have mixed in honey, pepper and other spices and perfumed oils to lessen their nausea, they all assemble to the feast, every member of this troop of swine and dogs, each taking a piece of the aborted child in their fingers. . . . And this they consider the perfect Passover."<sup>42</sup>

Here we find a fusion of all the dark, inverted nightmares of Christian society: sensual indulgence, intoxication, illicit sexuality, consumption of sexual fluids, and finally the cannibalization of a human fetus. These are all narrative themes we will encounter again both in the attacks on later heresies and in the ritual practice of modern sexual magic.

### *Buggers, Free Spirits, and Templars: Sexual Heresies of the Late Middle Ages*

Their furnace is the fire of concupiscence, for the cause of all heresy is either lechery, cupidity or pride.

PHILLIP THE CHANCELLOR, *In psalterium davidicum CCXXX sermones*

The masochistic orgies of the Middle Ages, the Inquisition, the chastisements and tortures, the penances, etc. of the religious betrayed their fiction. They were unsuccessful masochistic attempts to attain sexual gratification.

WILHELM REICH, *Selected Writings: An Introduction to Orgonomy*

The fears of religious heresy dangerously combined with sexual licentiousness were to recur throughout the history of Western Christianity, from the time of the Gnostics down to our own generation and our own obsessions with Satanic child abuse and devil-worshipping teenagers, but they

would reach a particularly intense new height during the high and late Middle Ages, from roughly the twelfth to the fifteenth centuries.

Thus, when a series of unorthodox movements emerged in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, beginning with the Bogomils, the Cathars, and the Heresy of the Free Spirit,<sup>43</sup> one of the most common and almost obsessively recurring charges leveled against them was that of sexual license. As Malcolm Lambert observes, the charge of sexual immorality "came to be a natural attribute of heretics in general."<sup>44</sup> And the great irony of these accusations is that again, much like the Gnostics, these groups tended on the whole to be anything but hedonistic or sexually indulgent; on the contrary, they were generally highly ascetic and even antisexual. The Bogomils, for example, were a strict ascetic group that emerged in the Balkan region during the tenth or eleventh century. Not unlike the Manichaean Gnostics, they held a strongly dualistic worldview that identified the material world and body with the forces of darkness, condemning marriage and sex as unclean relations.<sup>45</sup> Nonetheless, the Bogomils would be widely attacked as lascivious hypocrites who engaged in all manner of sexual vice, and above all homosexuality.<sup>46</sup> Indeed, our own modern English slang *bugger* (French *bougre*) is derived from the Latin *Bulgarus* used for the Bogomils, who had become notorious for their alleged practice of sodomy.

Still more powerful and controversial, however, was the closely related heresy of the Cathars (from Greek *katharos*, or "pure"), or Albigensians. Like Bogomils, the Cathars were a fundamentally dualist movement that identified evil with the material body, which was in effect largely a "source of pain and an alien imposition on true nature that are pure spirit."<sup>47</sup> Consequently, they also condemned marriage, sexual intercourse, and procreation of children, which only perpetuate existence in this suffering physical realm. Rejecting the authority of the Catholic Church as a corrupt and self-serving institution, the Cathars quickly drew a large following from a wide array of groups that had become disaffected with "the world, with its social organization (feudal society) and with its guide, the Church of Rome."<sup>48</sup> From their origins in central France in the early eleventh century, the Cathars would spread widely throughout Belgium, Spain, and Italy, attracting not only poorer classes but also artisans, burgesses, and various nobility, to become one of the most powerful heresies of the late Middle Ages.

The Cathars would soon, however, meet with fierce opposition from both the church and the political authorities. Already in 1022, thirteen Cathars were tried and condemned to be burned, and the persecutions only intensified as their numbers and influence increased. The Cathars would finally become the subjects of not only the Inquisition but an entire war, the Albi-

gensian Crusade, which would lead to their decimation by the end of the thirteenth century.<sup>49</sup>

Once again, the most common charge aimed at the Cathars was their indulgence in secret sexual vices and even Satanism. Pope Gregory IX, one of the fiercest in the fight against heresy, became persuaded that the Cathars were licentious devil worshippers. In his bull of 1233, he described in vivid detail the practices of these worshippers of Satan. The Cathars, according to this account, believed that the Lord had done evil in casting out Lucifer and that Lucifer would ultimately return to glory when the Lord had fallen from power. Thus they worshipped their dark master in elaborate ceremonies that involved a “banquet and the appearance of a black cat, whose hind quarters were kissed by most of those present,” and culminated with the “extinguishing of the lights followed by a promiscuous and sometimes homosexual orgy.”<sup>50</sup>

Perhaps the primary reason for the intense persecution of the Cathars, Bogomils, and other groups was simply that they represented a forceful and popular challenge to the existing structure of power. And, as Carol Lansing argues, the debate between the Cathars and the church centered primarily around the body and sex. For the dualist, antimaterial, and antisexual teachings of the Cathars posed a radical threat to the authority of the church and the political order alike; according to Cathar belief, human beings can become perfect and free themselves from the bonds of the material world by their own rational choice and free will, without need for external political or religious authority: “Capable of rational control, they can purify themselves of matter and again become perfect. Do they then need control by outside authorities?” Second and more important, however, the Cathars also subverted existing gender roles, marriage, and the entire structure of patriarchal authority in the household and in society: “Cathar beliefs challenged established gender roles: a teaching common to virtually all Cathar texts is the condemnation of marriage and procreation. A woman’s role as wife and mother has no value, since giving birth and nurturing children only perpetuates the evil of existence in the body. . . . [B]oth sexes could become perfects, preach, and administer the sacrament.”<sup>51</sup>

In short, the primary reason for the persecution of such groups was that they were attempting—not unlike the early Christians under the Roman Empire—to *liberate* themselves from the existing social structure by means of an alternative sexual politics. Yet ironically, as they were refracted through the lens of the dominant religious and political order, the charge brought against them was precisely that of *sexual liberation* in the sense of illicit, immoral sexual relations.

However, perhaps the most infamous group charged with the combined sins of devil worship, black magic, and licentiousness was the order of the Knights Templar. As we will see in chapter 3, many important magical orders of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, such as the *Ordo Templi Orientis* and the followers of Aleister Crowley, would claim to be continuing the tradition of the Templars. And many popular authors today identify the Templars as the original source of Western sexual magic itself. Thus popular sex magic author Donald Michael Kraig speculates that the Templars adapted their sexual secrets from the Sufis in the Arab world, who in turn had borrowed them from the Tantric traditions of India and then passed them on to the medieval alchemists and finally on to modern magicians.<sup>52</sup>

Most of this association of the Templars with sexual magic and Satanism, however, is most likely imaginary and very likely inspired more by political motivations than by factual evidence. Founded in 1118 by two French knights, the Order of Temple was conceived as a military monastic fraternity with the dual role of defending the newly established crusader kingdom of Jerusalem and protecting poor pilgrims in the Holy Land. Combining as it did religious fervor with martial prowess, the order soon became enormously popular and was showered with spiritual and material favors from ecclesiastical and lay authorities alike. Indeed, it would quickly grow into one of the most powerful and wealthy orders of the late Middle Ages, receiving temporal rewards from the rulers of virtually every European state.

By the early thirteenth century, however, the Templars had come under increasing suspicion from the church, and eventually also from the French king. In 1238 Pope Gregory IX suspected the Templars of heresy, and in 1272 a council of the church declared the order in need of reform. Finally, in 1307, King Philip de Bel launched a persecution of the order on the grounds that it was infected with sodomy, bestiality, and heresy. From 1307 to 1314 the order was interrogated by the Inquisition and finally abolished by Pope Clement himself. The reason for the intense suspicion and persecution of the order is probably twofold. On the one hand, the knights did surround their order with a significant degree of secrecy. By the mid-thirteenth century they imposed strict regulations "forbidding the brothers to make public the chapter proceedings of the order or to allow outsiders to see copies of the rule."<sup>53</sup> In particular, the ceremony of reception into the order was a highly esoteric affair, which aroused all variety of suspicion as to what sort of dark rituals or illicit acts might be taking place behind the veils of secrecy. On the other hand, probably the more important reason for the persecution of the order was simply its increasing wealth and power; exempt as they were from any form of taxation, and given exorbitant privileges in the Holy

Land, the Templars soon aroused the jealousy and finally antipathy from religious and secular factions alike.

The charges brought against the order by the Inquisition bear a striking resemblance to ones we have already encountered in the case of the Gnostics and other accused heretics: these included “strange and unheard of things, terrible to hear of . . . an abominable work, a detestable disgrace, a thing almost inhuman,” ranging from blasphemy against Christ and the church, to homosexual intercourse, to worship of an idol of a demon called Baphomet. The charges included the following:

The Templars denied Christ when they were received into the Order. . . . They spat on the Cross and defiled it.

They exchanged obscene kisses at their reception into the Order.

. . . [T]hey were made to swear that they would not leave the Order, receptions were held in secret and sodomy was encouraged. . . .

They adored a cat.

They did not believe in the Mass or other sacraments of the Church. Their priests did not speak the words of consecration in the Mass. . . .

They practiced sodomy.

They venerated an idol, a bearded male head, and said that the head had great powers.<sup>54</sup>

Already by early 1308, 134 of the 138 Templars arrested in Paris had confessed to some or all of these charges, with Grand Master James of Molay leading the way. Finally, in 1312, Pope Clement read out the bull, *Vox in excelso*, that abolished the Order of the Temple. Not only did the Templars engage in “secret and clandestine” rituals, but it was also known incontestably that “many horrible things” had been done “by very many brothers of this Order who have lapsed into the sin of wicked apostasy against the Lord Jesus Christ himself, the crime of detestable idolatry, the execrable outrage of the Sodomites.”<sup>55</sup>

Ironically, although most of these charges of sodomy and Satanism brought against the Cathars, Bogomils, and Templars were probably imaginary, and probably also politically motivated, they would reappear in a striking new form in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, with the foundation of a new Templar order—the Ordo Templi Orientis (OTO), among whose members was the Great Beast, Aleister Crowley. And the OTO would in fact make homosexual intercourse, a full-scale “Gnostic Mass,” and in Crowley’s case worship of Baphomet key parts of their esoteric practice (see below, chapter 4).

### *The Witches' Sabbath and Demon Lovers*

All witchcraft comes from carnal lust, which is in women insatiable. . . . Wherefore for the sake of fulfilling their lusts they consort even with devils . . . it is no matter for wonder that there are more women than men found infected with the heresy of witchcraft.

HEINRICH KRAMER AND JAMES SPRENGER, *Malleus Maleficarum*

It is difficult if not impossible to distinguish between the real and the imaginary elements in the witches' testimonies with regard to their secret "orgies."

MIRCEA ELIADE, *Occultism, Witchcraft, and Cultural Fashions*

Surely the most infamous, and still today most widely debated and discussed, example of the association between magic and sexuality lies in the witch trials of late medieval and early modern Europe. Between 1450 and 1750, the ancient nightmare of black magic and sexual license burst forth in its most concrete and most horrible form, as thousands of persons, most of them women, were killed because of their alleged practice of sexual magic.

A wide range of scholars have offered theories as to the specific historical, religious, and social causes of the witchcraft persecutions. According to some more romantic scholars like Margaret Murray, there was in fact an ancient, pre-Christian, goddess-centered and matriarchal religion that was later demonized by the church and branded as "witchcraft."<sup>56</sup> According to others, like Norman Cohn, the witch hunts were really a kind of imaginary scapegoating and a "return of the repressed," that is, the projection of Europe's own violent and sexual conflicts onto certain marginal groups; for others, it was in large part a result of changing gender roles, as largely male-dominated medicine rose to power and largely female-dominated midwifery and folk healing were increasingly branded as barbaric, uncivilized, pagan, and even demonic.<sup>57</sup> And others have argued it was a result of the church's own long-held suspicion of sex in all forms, which in turn led to the condemnation of any form of orgiastic or sexual-magical behavior. As Eliade suggests, "Because of the Judeo-Christian *demonization* of sexuality, any type of orgy was considered satanic and consequently a sacrilege, deserving the harshest punishment."<sup>58</sup>

But at least two things seem fairly clear: (1) the overwhelming majority of the victims were women; and (2) there was a widespread association of black magic with illicit sexuality, usually in the form of orgiastic rituals or intercourse with demons. As D. P. Walker observes, there was an apparent obsession with sex among the witch-hunters, and "the treatises on witchcraft became almost pornographic."<sup>59</sup> A remarkably consistent and probably largely imaginary narrative evolved regarding the witches and their noc-

turnal orgies, which bears a striking resemblance to the charges leveled at the Bacchae of the Greco-Roman world and the Gnostics of early Christianity:

Male and female witches met at night, generally in solitary places, in fields or on mountains . . . having anointed their bodies, they flew, arriving astride broomsticks. . . . Those who came for the first time had to renounce the Christian faith, desecrate the sacrament and offer homage to the devil. . . . There would follow banquets, dancing, sexual orgies. Before returning home, the female and male witches received evil ointments made from children's fat and other ingredients.<sup>60</sup>

Above all, sexual excess was one of the most common and damning charges leveled at accused witches. According to the classic witch-hunter's manual, the *Malleus Maleficarum* (1486), sin first came to human beings through sexual intercourse, and thus it is the primary avenue through which the devil can work: "since the first corruption of sin by which man became the slave of the devil came to us through the act of generation, therefore greater power is allowed by God to the devil in this act than in all others." And women being more inclined by their nature to "infidelity, ambition, and lust," they are inherently "more than others inclined towards witchcraft."<sup>61</sup> A particularly vivid description of the witches' Sabbath is given in an early-seventeenth-century text, Francesco Maria Guazzo's *Compendium Maleficarum*: here the witches first repudiate their baptism and take a new name from the Devil; they give their clothes, blood, and children to the Devil and beg him to inscribe their names in the book of death; and they vow to strangle a child in his honor once or twice a month. Finally, the witches dance and feast in the Devil's honor, and then "in the foulest manner they copulate with their demon lovers."<sup>62</sup>

As Walter Stephens has recently argued in *Demon Lovers*, this obsession with demonic sexuality was a result of the growing crisis of faith in early modern Europe. This crisis brought with it an increasing desire to experience the supernatural—even if a demonic form of the supernatural—in the most embodied, physical way as a means of countering the rising skepticism about the existence of the spiritual realm in a slowly disenchanted and more rationalized late medieval world. With their obsessive attention to sexual transgression and intercourse with demons, the witch-hunters and theologians could reconfirm their own faith in the unseen world: "Copulation offered valuable perspectives on the life of demons, their corporeality and the possibility of interacting meaningfully with them . . . demonic copulation served to anthropomorphize demons. Sabbatic evidence demonstrated that real human interaction was possible between witches and devils."<sup>63</sup> Thus some of the witchcraft literature is incredibly graphic in its



Figure 1. Hans Baldung Grien, “Naked Young Witch with Fiend in the Shape of a Dragon” (1575). From Walter Stephens, *Demon Lovers: Witchcraft, Sex, and the Crisis of Belief* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), p. 109.

description of the sexuality of demons and the nature of demon-witch intercourse. In Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola’s *Strix, sive de ludificatione daemonum* (1523), we find a remarkably frank dialogue between a witch (*strix*) and her questioner, Apistius,

APISTIUS: We know that demons have neither bones nor flesh. . . .  
How can they copulate?

STRIX: The parts put on by them are similar to flesh and bones,  
but bigger than those of any mortal.<sup>64</sup>

It is then explained why witches are so addicted to the act of intercourse with demons, who apparently have the ability to satisfy their desires in ways that no mortal man ever could:

APISTIUS: But I still cannot understand the meaning of all this copulation. . . . Nor can my understanding grasp the reason for so much sensual pleasure [*voluptas*].

DICASTES: Witches claim they are so overcome by it that they swear there is no pleasure like it on earth. . . . First, because those rebellious spirits put on a most pleasing face. Next, because their [virile] members are of an uncommon size. . . . [W]ith their members they fill up the most secret parts of the witches. . . . And probably they can stimulate something deep inside the witches, by means of which these women have greater pleasure than with men.<sup>65</sup>

Although these narratives probably have little grounding in reality, they are striking examples of three recurring themes that we have seen throughout this chapter: (1) the remarkably persistent association between black magic and sexuality; (2) the widespread belief that magical sex is not only different from but unimaginably better than ordinary sex; and (3) the association of sex and magic with groups and individuals who are marginal or outsiders (women, heretics, those who oppose or seek liberation from the existing social order, etc.). These are themes that inform most of the literature on sexual magic from the nineteenth century down to our own generation. As we will see in chapter 7, they also form the basis for the most elaborate Christian nightmare of all: the nightmare of the Black Mass, which began to appear in early modern Europe and was reinvented in the late twentieth century by new movements like the Church of Satan.

#### THE HISTORICAL ROOTS OF SEX MAGIC IN THE WEST: ALCHEMY, MAGIC, AND KABBALAH

And if you wish to see the reality of this mystery, then you should see the wonderful representation of the intercourse that takes place between male and female.

Coptic version of the Hermetic *Asclepius*

If we acknowledge the fact that most of the associations of sexuality and magic in the West were highly imaginative, even paranoid fantasies and that they were most often guided by political motivations, does that then mean that there is no real historical basis to the practice of modern sexual magic? The simple answer is, no, of course not: there are many techniques and practices from ancient Greece to medieval Kabbalah that clearly formed the basis for modern sexual magic. The longer and more complicated answer, however, is that although there are indeed many early antecedents and con-

tributing streams, they do not entirely explain the remarkable new flood of sexual magic in the modern era.

It is true that sexual imagery has long been used to express the ineffable nature of mystical experience or spiritual vision. We have already seen this throughout early Gnostic literature, in the mystery of the bridal chamber and the Valentinian search for divine union: For Valentinus, in his yearning to overcome "otherness," "The transcendence of all divisions, even of a division as seemingly irremovable as that between male and female, was the surest sign that the redemption offered by Christ had come to the believer."<sup>66</sup> One of the more explicit examples of this use of imagery can be found in the Coptic version of the Hermetic text *Asclepius*, which describes sexual intercourse as a "wonderful representation" of this secret spiritual mystery:

For when the semen reaches its climax, it leaps forth. In that moment the female receives the strength of the male; the male for his part receives the strength of the female, while the semen does this. Therefore the mystery of intercourse is performed in secret, in order that the two sexes might not disgrace themselves in front of many who do not experience that reality . . . if it happens in the presence of those who do not understand the reality (it is) laughable and unbelievable. And, moreover, they are holy mysteries, of both words and deeds, because not only are they not heard, but also they are not seen.<sup>67</sup>

Yet despite the very common use of sexual symbolism throughout Gnostic texts, there is little evidence (apart from the accusations of the early church) that the Gnostics engaged in any actual performance of sexual rituals, and certainly not anything resembling modern sexual magic.<sup>68</sup>

Probably the most obvious place to look for historical antecedents to modern sexual magic is in the wide array of literature on "love magic" that circulated throughout the ancient Greek world. As Christopher Faraone has shown, love magic was ubiquitous throughout the ancient world from the time of Homer down to early Christian hagiography.<sup>69</sup> And by love magic, he means two primary techniques: namely those used to induce *philia* and similar affections in men as opposed to rituals that men usually employ to throw *eros* into women. While the *philia* magic was typically used within a household or an existing relationship to increase a man's affection and esteem for his partner, the charms for *eros* were generally used to begin a new relationship by forcing the victim into the arms of the person who performs the spell: "the spell is designed explicitly to arouse the victim's sexual desire."<sup>70</sup> The spells for inducing *philia* typically involve such techniques as incantations over amulets, knotted cords, rings, love potions, or ointments,

while the spells for inducing *eros* involve more extreme measures, such as “incantations over images, tortured animals, burning materials or apples,” aimed at maddening the victims and “emboldening them to leave their homes and come to the practitioner.”<sup>71</sup>

Similar techniques of love magic would survive throughout the Christian Middle Ages in a wide range of European, Byzantine, Coptic, and other magical traditions. If we scan the history of Western magic, we find no shortage of erotic spells to attract women, spells to make women pregnant, “spells for sex and business,” and so forth.<sup>72</sup> Yet while all of this provides an interesting basis for the connection between love, sex, and magic in the Western tradition, it does not really provide the basis for sexual magic as we see it in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. For in these texts, magic is being used to generate sexual desire; modern magicians, however, would turn the operation around, that is, by using sexual desire and orgasm to bring about magical effects.

*When the Two Are Found as One:  
Sacred Sexuality in Jewish Kabbalah*

[W]hen a man cleaves to his mate and his desire is to receive her,  
he worships before the holy King and arouses another union, for the  
desire of the Holy One, blessed be He, is to cleave to the community  
of Israel.

*Zohar III, 37b*

Surely one of the most influential forces in the rise of modern sexual magic was the complex body of texts and traditions that make up Jewish Kabbalah. A rich fusion of metaphysical speculation and mythic imagination, Kabbalah grew out of Gnosticism, Neoplatonism, early Jewish mysticism, and various other elements that began to merge in the Middle Ages and came into full flower between the thirteenth and seventeenth centuries. Not unlike Gnosis, Kabbalah is a highly esoteric tradition, claiming to reveal the inner, deeper levels of meaning hidden within the Torah and transmitted in a closely guarded chain through the centuries.<sup>73</sup>

Erotic symbolism is pervasive throughout Kabbalistic literature, used in various ways as a means to describe the relationship between the Torah and her lover, the Kabbalist,<sup>74</sup> and as a means to describe the interrelations between different aspects of the divine realm itself. According to most Kabbalistic traditions, there is a series of ten divine emanations, or potencies (*sefirot*), which radiate from the divine abyss, or Godhead, in a succession of male-female pairs. Often the *sefirot* are imagined in the form of a divine

(male) body, or *anthropos*, complete with its own penis.<sup>75</sup> Much of Kabbalistic meditation and spiritual practice is aimed at rejoining the male and female aspects of the divine body that are manifest as the *sefirot*. And because human beings here on this earth are a mirror of the divine realm and the male-female *sefirot* above, physical sexual intercourse between husband and wife can also serve as a spiritual technique to rejoin the *sefirot* and so assist in the unification of the male and the female aspects of God. Ultimately, in the words of the classic thirteenth-century text the *Zohar*, this union of man and wife in turn symbolizes the union of God with his bride, the community of Israel itself:

When there is male and female, and he is sanctified in the supernal holiness, . . . when a man is in the union of male and female, and he intends to be sanctified . . . then he is complete and is called one without any blemish. Therefore a man should gladden his wife at that time, to invite her to be of one will with him. . . . When the two are found as one, then they are one in soul and body.<sup>76</sup>

These texts make it clear, however, that this union is anything but a matter of sexual license or hedonism. On the contrary, this union is imagined as the joining of the divine King and the Shekinah, and as such, the husband and wife must treat it with deepest respect, preparing themselves by strict celibacy for six days before the Sabbath:

Students of the Torah . . . make themselves “eunuchs” during the six days of the week for the Torah’s sake, and on Sabbath nights have their conjugal union, because they apprehend the supernal mystery of right moment when the Matrona [Shekinah] is united with the King.<sup>77</sup>

According to other Kabbalists, at the moment of sexual union, the mind of the husband is in fact elevated to the supernal realm and draws down the divine light and the Shekinah herself. These spiritual forces descend into the drop of semen, infusing spirit into the seed. According to one of the most influential early Kabbalistic texts, *Iggeret ha-Kodesh*,

[W]hen the husband copulates with his wife, and his thought unites with the supernal entities, that very thought draws the supernal light downward and it [the light] dwells upon the drop [of semen] upon which he directs his intention and thought. . . . [T]hat very drop is permanently linked with the brilliant light. . . . [S]ince the thought is on it [the drop] is linked to the supernal entities and it draws the brilliant light downward.<sup>78</sup>

In spite of their larger goal of *unio mystica*, none of these Kabbalistic sexual practices appears to involve any of the explicitly sexual-magical el-

ements that begin to appear in nineteenth-century Western esotericism; that is, they do not explicitly employ orgasm as a means to focus the will and bring about magical effects in the physical world. More importantly, whereas most modern forms of sexual magic center around an ideal of radical freedom and social liberation, the Kabbalistic tradition is for the most part highly conservative, even “hyper-nomian.” Nonetheless, the imagery and certain aspects of the metaphysics of the Kabbalah would indeed be a central influence (though often in a rather garbled form) throughout modern sexual magic.

Perhaps the most controversial sexual practices to emerge out of the later Kabbalistic tradition appeared in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, in the wake of the great “Jewish messiah,” Sabbatai Zevi (1626–76). The most infamous of these movements was that of Jacob Frank (born Yakov ben Judah Leib Frankovich, 1726–91), who proclaimed himself a new messiah and led a powerful spiritual movement in Poland, Austria, and Germany. Whereas most traditional forms of Kabbalah are quite conservative with respect to Jewish law, the Frankists would be accused of all manner of transgressions, particularly of sexual taboos. There is today some debate as to how much actual transgression or sexual license took place among the Frankists. Some scholars, like Gershom Scholem, have described Frank as “one of the most frightening phenomena in the whole of Jewish history: a religious leader who . . . was in all his actions a truly corrupt and degenerate individual.”<sup>79</sup> As Scholem suggests, organized religion was for Frank “only a cloak to be put on and be thrown away again on the way to the ‘sacred knowledge’ . . . where all traditional values are destroyed,” while “nihilistic religion” was the means to usher in a new messianic Judaism through “the birth pangs of a universal upheaval.”<sup>80</sup> In Frank’s words,

Christ . . . said that he had come to redeem the world from the hands of the devil, but I have come to redeem it from all the laws and customs that have ever existed. It is my task to annihilate all this so that the Good God can reveal Himself.<sup>81</sup>

More recent scholars, like Harris Lenowitz, however, argue that the antinomian element in Frank and other Jewish Messiahs was more often a matter of rumor than reality. Scholem’s own biases may have led him (and many others) to highlight the immoral, violent, and sexual nature of their teachings.<sup>82</sup> But whether Frank’s sexual transgressions were a matter of historical fact or popular fantasy, he would persist in the modern occult imagination as a figure who stood for absolute freedom and liberation from the world’s laws, including its sexual laws.

*Erotic Magic and Spiritual Manipulation in the Renaissance*

As regards all those who are dedicated to philosophy of magic, it is fully apparent that the highest bond, the most important and the most general, belongs to Eros: and that is why the Platonists called love the Great Demon, *daemon magnus*.

GIORDANO BRUNO, *Theses de Magia*

Perhaps the clearest early predecessors of modern sexual magic emerged during the Renaissance, particularly in the works of Italian philosophers and magicians like Marsilio Ficino (1433–1499) and Giordano Bruno (1548–1600). Drawing upon a wide array of philosophical, theological, and magical traditions, and particularly from Neoplatonism and Hermeticism, Ficino established the Platonic Academy in Florence around 1450. In addition to translating a number of key ancient texts, such as the *Corpus Hermeticum* and a series of Neoplatonic texts on demonology, Ficino devoted a good deal of attention to the theory of magic, in both its spiritual and demonic forms. According to Ficino, the forces of magic and eros are inextricably entwined; for both magic and eros work by the principle of attraction, the drawing together of similar things, which is the very force that holds the universe itself together:

The whole power of Magic is founded on Eros. The way Magic works is to bring things together through their inherent similarity. . . . [I]n our body, the brain, the lungs, the heart, liver and other organs interact, favor each other, intercommunicate and feel reciprocal pain. From this relationship is born Eros, which is common to them all; from this Eros is born their mutual rapprochement, wherein resides true Magic.<sup>83</sup>

Both eros and magic work through the same universal *pneuma*, or soul of the world, that flows through all parts of the universe, just as the human soul flows through all parts of the physical body. Eros is the attractive power that holds all things together, from the stars in the heavens to the blades of grass on earth, and magic is the art of understanding and manipulating the attractive relations between parts of the world, binding desired objects to the magician. Magic can work through a variety of media, from music and poetry to works of art. For example, one of the more common techniques is the use of talismans inscribed with images, usually of the stars (for example, an image of the goddess Venus for Venus, or of Apollo for the Sun). The talisman is then able to draw down the life of particular stars, “capturing astral currents pouring down from above and using them for life and health.”<sup>84</sup> Ultimately, the magician is able to know and control the various

attractive forces flowing through the cosmos, just as a lover binds and creates a magic “web” around his love: “the lover and the magician both do the same thing: they cast their ‘nets’ to capture certain objects, to attract and draw them to them.”<sup>85</sup>

If Ficino first formulated the equation “eros = magic,” then the man who would take this equation to its next logical and more practical level was controversial philosopher, master of the art of memory, and defender of Copernican theory Giordano Bruno. Building upon this belief in the erotic nature of magic, Bruno suggests that magic works primarily through the power of *phantasy*, and secondarily through sounds and images that pass through the senses; the latter then impress certain mental states of attraction or aversion upon the imagination. Once his imagination has been influenced in this way, an individual can be manipulated by the magician, to whom he is now bound by “chains” (*vincula*). The magician can thus bind the person with a variety of chains, arousing in him “hope, compassion, fear, love, hate, indignation, anger, joy, patience, disdain for life and death, for fortune.” But eros is for Bruno the “bond of bonds” (*vinculum vinculorum*), the basis of all magic and the manipulation of other beings: “all bonds are either reduced to the bond of love, depend on the bond of love or are based on the bond of love. . . . [L]ove is the foundation of all feelings.”<sup>86</sup> As D. P. Walker observes, Bruno’s system of erotic magic appears to have had grand ambitions indeed, as a complex method for the “chaining” and control of beings on a widespread scale: “Bruno . . . made a remarkable attempt to evolve a technique, explicitly based on sexual attraction for global emotional control.”<sup>87</sup>

This association between eros and magic is the occult foundation for most magical practice since the nineteenth century. And, as we will see in the following chapters, many later magicians would take this goal of “global emotional control” to even more ambitious extremes.

### *The Alchemy of Imagination: The Mystical Marriage in Renaissance Alchemy*

[W]hen the seed of the man embraces the seed of the woman, this is the first sign and the key of this whole work and art.

PARACELSUS, *Concerning the Spirits of the Planets*

After Renaissance magic and Kabbalah, probably the most important source for the modern “science” of sexual magic was the tradition of alchemy. The origins of Western alchemy can probably be traced back to Alexandria in the third century BCE. After passing into the Greco-Roman world, the alchemical art soon mixed with a variety of Neoplatonic, Gnos-

tic, and Hermetic mystical traditions. With the triumph of Christianity and the fall of the Roman Empire, the alchemical arts were lost to the Latin world for a millennium, surviving only among the Arabs. The art was not reintroduced into the West until 1182, with the revival of Greek learning in Europe and the first Latin translation from an Arab text by Robert of Chester.<sup>88</sup>

By the time of the Renaissance, alchemy had evolved into a rich and highly symbolic tradition, and in fact a spiritual art aimed not just at transformation of physical substances but at spiritual transformation and divine union. Among the most important figures in this “spiritual alchemy” was the surgeon, chemist, and pioneer of modern medicine Theophrastus Bombastus von Hohenheim (1493–1541), better known as Paracelsus (“greater than Celsus”). Drawing upon both the erotic magical ideas of Renaissance Neoplatonism and the new scientific and medical knowledge of the sixteenth century, Paracelsus saw in alchemy not simply a physical process aimed at transforming base metals (such as lead into gold) or a chemical process aimed at achieving the elixir of life (*elixir vitale*), but also a mystical process taking place within the magus himself.<sup>89</sup>

Paracelsus’s importance for modern sexual magic is at least twofold. The first is his work on alchemy, which not only revolutionized the art but also articulated it in its most influential form. Like most late medieval and Renaissance alchemists, Paracelsus describes the art using explicitly sexual imagery. Indeed, Julius Evola has described the alchemical work itself as a kind of “sex magic.”<sup>90</sup> According to Paracelsus, the Philosopher’s Stone is created through the union and transformation of sulfur and salt, here compared to the union of Sol and Luna, the cosmic male and female principles. However, in order to be truly united, they need to be joined with a third thing—namely Mercury, which unites them as spirit completes soul and body. This process is also compared to the union of man and woman, who are united by sperm in order to create a child:

There are also two matters of the Stone, Sol and Luna, formed together in a proper marriage. . . . [A]s we see that the man or the woman, without the seed of both, cannot generate, in the same way our man, Sol, and his wife, Luna, cannot conceive . . . without the seed and sperm of both. Hence the philosophers gathered that a third thing was necessary, namely, the animated seed of both. . . . Such a sperm is Mercury, which, by the conjunction of both bodies, Sol and Luna, receives their nature into self in union.

The result of this alchemical marriage is nothing less than the birth of the new spiritual being, the hermaphroditic Adam, who contains his own



Figure 2. Alchemical Androgyne from *Splendor Solis*. From Elemire Zola, *The Androgyne: Reconciliation of Male and Female* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), p. 61.

female principle within himself, just as Adam originally contained Eve within himself in Paradise:

Hence the philosophers have said that this same Mercury is composed of body, spirit and soul. . . . They even called it their Adam, who carries his own invisible Eve hidden in his body, from that moment in which they were united by the power of the Supreme God. . . . [T]he matter of the Philosopher's Stone is none other than a fiery and perfect Mercury extracted by Nature and Art; that is the . . . true hermaphroditic Adam.<sup>91</sup>

The second and no less important influence of Paracelsus on modern magic lay in his central belief in the power of the Imagination (*imaginatio*). Like Ficino and Bruno, Paracelsus believed that magic worked primarily through the imagination, which is not mere illusion or fantasy (*phantasia*) but a spiritual force that has real effects in the physical world. "Man . . . is altogether a star. Even as he imagines himself to be, such he is, and he is that also which he imagines. If he imagines fire, there results fire; if war, there ensues war . . . the imagination is in itself a complete sun."<sup>92</sup> Indeed, Paracelsus describes the imagination as a kind of "seminal power," which impresses the "seeds" of the magician's will onto external objects: "God planted the seed in all its reality and specificity deep in the imagination of man. . . . If a man has the will, the desire arises in his imagination and the desire generates the seed." Imagination is, again, closely tied to sexual desire; thus, a woman can deeply inform the nature of a fetus, bearing children "similar to her imaginations."<sup>93</sup> Conversely, a woman who is overly lustful or unchaste can project dangerous things out of her imaginations, such as incubi, succubi, and even plague.<sup>94</sup> It is through his power of imagination, moreover, that the alchemist makes the physical act of transmuting minerals into a spiritual act, through which he himself is transformed, purified, and reborn as a spiritual being: "*imaginatio* is the active power . . . of the higher man within. . . . During this work man is 'raised up in his mind.' . . . While the artifex heats the chemical substance in the furnace he himself is morally undergoing the same fiery torment and purification."<sup>95</sup>

This model of alchemy as a spiritual, but also highly "erotic" art and this view of the imagination as force of active magical power would both have a formative influence on most modern forms of sexual magic. Indeed, practices such as Randolph's *magia sexualis* would effectively combine these two ideas in a new form of "affectional alchemy."

### *Sexual and Conjugal Love in the Work of Emanuel Swedenborg and William Blake*

The love of the sex is with the natural man; but conjugal love  
with the spiritual.

EMANUEL SWEDENBORG, *The Delights of Wisdom Pertaining to  
Conjugal Love*

O holy Generation! [Image] of regeneration! . . .

Birthplace of the Lamb of God incomprehensible!

WILLIAM BLAKE, *Jerusalem*

By the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, these various streams of erotic magic, Kabbalah, and alchemy had begun to flow together and commingle

in the midst of the European Enlightenment. One of the most important forefathers of modern sexual magic—and arguably one of the most influential figures in the rise of spiritualism and new religious movements—was Swedish philosopher, politician, scientist, and mystic Emanuel Swedenborg (1688–1772). A truly remarkable individual, Swedenborg wrote widely on science, mathematics, and geology, even as he worked actively as a politician and assessor on the Board of Mines. In 1743, however, he received a divine revelation, a direct perception of the spiritual world, which allowed him to see heaven and hell and to converse with angels. This revelation was followed by a series of elaborate visions, along with a tremendous outpouring of writings on the spiritual world and the interpretation of scripture.<sup>96</sup>

A key part of Swedenborg's life and writings is the nature of love, in both its spiritual and physical expressions. As Robert Rix puts it, "At the heart of Swedenborg's conception of True Religion was a sexual theology."<sup>97</sup> Although Swedenborg never married, he seems throughout his later work to have been extremely interested in the question of sex; moreover, he did in fact keep mistresses and advocated legal brothels, and his dream journals contain a great deal of highly erotic imagery.<sup>98</sup> Yet he saw in sexual intercourse not simply a source of physical pleasure or a means of reproduction, but a divine mystery of profound metaphysical significance, and ultimately a key to spiritual union. Marsha Keith Schuchard suggests that it is possible that Swedenborg had learned something of Kabbalistic sexual techniques, and perhaps even something of Taoist or Tantric sexual techniques from soldiers and missionaries returning to Europe after traveling in the East.<sup>99</sup>

Whatever his sources, Swedenborg was particularly preoccupied with the topic of sex in his later years, when it appears throughout his journals, such as his *Journal of Dreams* (Schuchard argues that there is evidence in these journals that Swedenborg employed difficult techniques of meditation, visualization, and breath control aimed at transforming sexual energy into states of altered consciousness and mystical experience).<sup>100</sup> His most important text on the subject is his treatise on *The Delights of Wisdom Pertaining to Conjugal Love* (*Delitiae sapientiae de amore conjugiali*, 1768), which explores the relationship between physical sex and spiritual love. As Swedenborg defines it, conjugal love is the most profound spiritual union between man and woman in their innermost selves, a kind of inner wedding of male and female:

[C]onjugal love . . . is the inmost of all loves, and such that partner sees partner in mind (animus) and mind (mens), so that each partner has the other in himself or herself, that is, that the image, nay, the likeness of the husband is in the mind of the wife and the image and likeness of the wife is in the

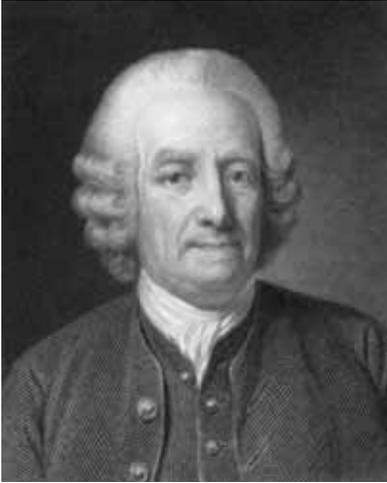


Figure 3. Emanuel Swedenborg. From George Trobridge, *Life of Emanuel Swedenborg* (New York: New-Church Press, 1928), frontispiece.

mind of the husband, so that one sees the other in himself, and they thus cohabit in their inmosts.<sup>101</sup>

And this inner, conjugal union, in turn, re-creates the primordial unity of the human being (*homo*) as a total being that contains both male and female within itself:

[L]ove is nothing else than a desire and thence an effort towards conjunction; and conjugal love to conjunction into one. For the male man and female man were so created that from two they may become as one man, or one flesh; and when they become one, then taken together they are a man (*homo*) in his fullness.<sup>102</sup>

The key point, however, is that this union is not limited purely to the spiritual or mystical plane for Swedenborg. Rather, as in the Kabbalistic tradition, physical love and actual sexual union can also serve as a ladder or stepping-stone to this higher state of conjugal love, and in turn, the spiritual power of conjugal love will then flow back and sanctify physical union:

Carnal love can be *holy* because it is the first step on the ladder to the true love of God. The “love of the Sex” may first be “corporeal,” but “as man was born to become spiritual,” it also becomes spiritual. . . . Access to the divine state of the human through “conjugal love” lies not only in the unification of minds but also “in the organs consecrated to generation.”<sup>103</sup>

Swedenborg’s views on conjugal love would have a tremendous impact on most later esoteric and occult traditions in the West from the eighteenth century onward. They would, moreover, soon be linked to ideals of social and

political liberation. Among the many authors deeply influenced by Swedenborg, for example, was British mystic and poet William Blake (1757–1827). As various scholars have argued, Blake, like Swedenborg, saw the sexual union of man and woman as a means of restoring the androgynous state of unfallen man in Paradise. “Sexual love is sacramental to Blake. . . . In the sexual union, the divine incarnation and the subsequent raising of the human to become regenerated spirit is mirrored and repeated.”<sup>104</sup>

Unlike Swedenborg, however, Blake was also quite critical of the dominant social, political, and religious institutions around him, which he saw as repressive and exploitative; he made a clear link between political and sexual repression, both of which are embodied in the oppressive system of forced marriage (the “marriage hearse,” as he dubs it): “the paradigmatic form of oppression is sexual, and marriage out of necessity is the primary form that such sexual oppression takes.”<sup>105</sup> Conversely, Blake also linked social and political liberation to sexual liberation, that is, to a total freedom of the human being in its physical as well as social aspects. As Morton Paley put it, “Blake envisions, not revolution *and* sexual freedom, but a revolution which is libidinal in nature.”<sup>106</sup> This vision of sexual freedom appears in much of Blake’s work, such as the *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* and *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, but achieves one of its clearest expressions in *America* (1793). Here Orc’s liberation of the thirteen colonies is described as a defeat of both religious tyranny and of sexual repression, and the triumph over the sexual bondage of religion becomes a kind of millennial event:

The doors of marriage are open, and the Priests in rustling scales  
Rush into reptile coverts, hiding from the fires of Orc,  
That play around the golden roofs in wreaths of fierce desire,  
Leaving the females naked and glowing with the lusts of youth  
For the female spirits of the dead pining in bonds of religion;  
Run from their fetters reddening, & in long drawn arches sitting:  
They feel the nerves of youth renew, and desires of ancient times,  
Over their pale limbs as a vine when the tender grape appears.<sup>107</sup>

As we will see throughout the following chapters, this link between sexual liberation and political liberation is one of the most recurring themes in the history of sex magic in the West.

#### CONCLUSIONS: THE GREAT SECRET AND THE GREAT AGENT

Love is one of the mythological images of the Great Secret and the Great Agent, a void and a plentitude, a shaft and a wound.

ELIPHAS LÉVI, *Transcendental Magic*



Figure 4. William Blake, "Whirlwind of Lovers," from Blake's illustrations to Dante's *Inferno*.

The battle will rage most fiercely around the question of sex.  
ALEISTER CROWLEY, *The Confessions of Aleister Crowley*

In sum, the origins of modern sexual magic flow out of two very different currents in the Western religious imagination. The first is the largely fantastic, but remarkably enduring, nightmare of sexual license and black magic that was associated with virtually every heretical group from the Bacchae down to the witches. For the most part, the charges of sexual licentiousness brought against them were the mimetic projections of the dominant order's own fantasies, fears, and desires, now deflected onto the mirror of these marginalized groups. But more importantly, these fantasies tended to center around specific fears of *social and political subversion*. Many of these groups, such as the Gnostics, Bogomils, and Cathars, *did* in fact seek some form of liberation from the existing social order through their sexual practices. Ironically, like the early Christians, these groups were usually highly ascetic, at times even antisexual. And yet they were attacked as dangerously subversive, not because of what they were actually doing—namely, challenging the dominant systems of marriage and religious authority—but instead for the imaginary crimes of sexual license and black magic. As we see in popular novels like *The DaVinci Code*, this highly imaginative narrative is still very much with us today. Brown's story once again revives the image of ancient groups of Gnostics performing secret sexual rites, even in the face of ongoing persecution from the Catholic Church. Indeed, Brown's description of the secret Gnostic rites seems to be taken directly out of Epiphanius and other early Christian accounts:

On a low, ornate altar in the center of the circle lay a man. He was naked, positioned on his back, and wearing a black mask. . . . Straddling her grandfather was a naked woman wearing a white mask, her luxuriant silver hair flowing out behind it. . . . [S]he was gyrating in rhythm to the chanting. . . . The chanting rose to a fever pitch. The circle of participants seemed almost to be singing now, the noise rising in crescendo to a frenzy. With a sudden roar, the entire room seemed to erupt in climax.<sup>108</sup>

While these sorts of accounts are largely fanciful, the second current feeding into modern sexual magic is one that can more easily be documented historically. This is a very old tradition running throughout Western esotericism, from ancient Greek magic through Gnosticism, Kabbalah, Renaissance alchemy, and early modern mystics like Swedenborg. In all of these traditions, there is a close connection between spiritual power and sexual union; but in none of them have we seen any trace of orgiastic behavior, immorality, black magic, or the explicit use of sexual intercourse as a means of achieving magical effects. Each of these traditions was in some sense seeking *liberation or freedom*—but typically a kind of spiritual freedom rather than a form of moral, social, or political freedom.

In any case, by the nineteenth century, these two currents had come increasingly to merge and blend together, forming a rich, complex, and deeply ambivalent vision of sex and magic in the Western imagination. As Eliphas Lévi concluded in his monumental study of magic, love is itself the image of the Great Secret and the Great Agent, “a shaft and a wound.” Sexual love was thus imbued with an awesome but terrifying aura of power, as a force that could be wielded by the trained magician, but one that could all too easily lead one down the dark path to moral ruin, depravity, and bondage to Satan. It is not entirely surprising, therefore, that these various, increasingly mingled beliefs and traditions would help give rise in the mid-nineteenth century to a well-developed and sophisticated system of sexual magic. But in order to understand this new form of *magia sexualis* in the modern era, we will also need to look closely at the shifting attitudes toward the body, sex, and marriage in European and American society over the last two hundred years.