

Article

The *Donna de Fora*: A Sicilian Fairy–Witch in the Early Modern Age

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Abstract: In this paper, my objective is to delve into the history of women accused of practicing witchcraft in Sicily during the early modern period. This investigation draws upon documented evidence from the Spanish Inquisition spanning from 1516 to 1782, along with archival records and the ethnographic works of nineteenth-century scholars. The focal point of my research is the enigmatic figure known as donna de fora (the ladies from outside) in the Italian context. To illuminate this subject, I employ an analysis of seventeenth-century Inquisition trial records and oral traditions documented by anthropologist Giuseppe Pitrè in the late nineteenth century. The donne de fora represent a distinctive and intriguing group as this term appears exclusively within the Inquisitorial records of Sicily. They were perceived as supernatural entities, characterized as “part witches, part fairies”. According to beliefs of the time, these women’s spirits would depart from their bodies during sleep to convene with higher-ranking fairies. Notably, the trials and the Edict of the Diocese of Girgenti (Agrigento) in 1656 document that the most significant gatherings of these figures occurred during the night of Saint John, between the 23rd and 24th of June. Through an examination of trial records, we gain insights into how these women were perceived by their contemporaries, as well as an understanding of their societal roles and the ritual practices they engaged in. Moving forward to the late nineteenth century, ethnologist Giuseppe Pitrè conducted a comprehensive study of local rituals and popular folklore, and he collected various objects and documents related to supernatural beliefs, including those associated with the donne de fora in the regions around Palermo. My research is centered on archival records containing Pitrè’s notes, unpublished drafts, and correspondence with scholars in Italy and Europe discussing this phenomenon. Based on my findings, I aim to establish a connection between Pitrè’s material discoveries and contemporary beliefs regarding donne de fora and witchcraft in Sicily.



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1. Introduction

Gender studies have always had a close relationship with the theme of witch hunts. Whereas past historiography attributed this connection to the stereotype of the witch-woman, in recent decades, this aspect has been elaborated in a more complex way, and new and interesting studies based on the gender perspective have flourished (See [Duni et al. 2020](#); [Levack 2016](#); [Duni 2008](#); [Rowlands 2013](#); [Valente 2023](#)). My research here contributes to the historiographical debate over the women’s perspective and the circulation of ideas and knowledge.

In this article, I examine the history of women who were accused of being witches in Sicily in the early modern period. The focus of my research is the complex phenomenon known in Italian as *donna de fora* (the ladies from outside), so called because at night, they appear as spirits.

Past historiography has studied this topic using the documents of the Spanish Inquisition (1516–1782) and medieval and modern treatises. But this topic can be explored and discussed further by examining diocesan archives and the late-nineteenth century works of anthropologist Giuseppe Pitrè.

The documentation used here for the study of the *donne de fora* considers the responses to this phenomenon not only of bishops and inquisitors, but of the participants in the rites. It analyzes the stories told by witnesses at the trials, which helps us understand why people turned to the *donne de fora*, why the participation of those present at the rite was important, and why the church perceived these practices as sinful.

To address these questions, I use a multidisciplinary approach that considers both ethno-anthropological studies and unpublished archival documents with the aim of systematically studying the history and the evolution of the *donne de fora* from the early modern age to the contemporary one.

Since the investigation of the ritual space of the *donne de fora* has been conducted on texts written by the inquisitors, one potential objection is how authentic the declarations of witnesses are. But we can read against the grain in search of the historic memory of different populations, each rich with precious information about the circulation of ideas and local traditions. To separate and better understand what the inquisitor said versus what the accused said, we must adapt the *paradigma indiziario* (indictory paradigm). This system, developed by Carlo Ginzburg, tries to identify and analyze those acts that fall under the “involuntary conscience”, i.e., acts that escape the attention of the inquisitor himself and are thus unfiltered, removing the scholar from the trap of the inquisitorial vision (Ginzburg 1986, p. 174). In the first part of this article, I focus on the confusion in both ancient sources and modern scholarship about the phenomenon of *donne de fora*. During trials, witnesses, accused people, and inquisitors sometimes referred to *donne de fora* as real people and sometimes as supernatural entities. Then, using new archival sources, in the second part of this paper, I focus on the *donne de fora*’s sabbath, their most significant meeting, which occurred on St. John’s Eve.

Analysis of new trial records, edicts, and Pitrè’s materials sheds new light on how these women were perceived by their contemporaries and demonstrates what their social role within society was in relation to the circulation of knowledge, as well as the ritual practices they performed. I provide a new interpretation that overcomes the confusion that the phenomenon of *donne de fora* has generated in inquisitors, witnesses, and even scholars.

2. The Fairies–Witches in Sicily: Studies, Perspectives and a New Research

The *donne de fora* (ladies from outside) was a name given to witches in some areas of Sicily between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries. It was believed that they left their homes as spirits in the night and flew to witch-like gatherings, where they met characters from myths whom inquisitors identified as “malefic” (Messana 2007, p. 107).

The first scholar to examine the *donne de fora* was ethnologist Giuseppe Pitrè in the nineteenth century. He suggested that they were “something of a fairy and something of a witch although, one cannot really distinguish which is which” (Pitrè 1889, vol. 4, p. 163). He came to this conclusion by reading scholars from the 17th century, such as Vincenzo La Mantia and Antonino Mongitore, along with manuscripts about the *Regno di Sicilia*. Knowing that the viceroy Caracciolo had ordered the destruction of the archives of the Spanish Inquisition in Palermo, Pitrè searched for other sources.¹

He unearthed the first reference to the *donne de fora* in a mid-fifteenth-century *Confessionale*, or manual for confessors, that recommended that penitents be asked if they believed in *donne de fora* who walked at night, and in werewolves.² This work was already cited in the late-sixteenth century by the Sicilian antiquarian Giulio Filoteo degli Omodei, but no later citations are known (Bonomo 1971, p. 67).

In conducting his research, which started out by considering old sources of antiquarians and—as we will see—moved to interviewing people of his time, Pitrè, perhaps deliberately, did not dwell on two elements. The first is the consolidated existence of the *donne de fora* long before the Spanish Inquisition in Sicily, which would lead us to the hypothesis, discussed later, of the long-term continuity of this belief.³ The second is the connection between the *donne de fora* and werewolves. Both details reinforce the hypothesis that, for a long time, the *donne de fora* have been seen as supernatural beings whose image

became confused over the centuries, transformed due to the inquisitors' interpretation of the *donna de fora* and criminalized by the inquisitorial persecution.

Fascinated by the magical aspect of Sicily, between 1870 and 1890, Pitrè began to move toward contemporary sources, researching a sample of 172 Sicilian municipalities to understand if, at his time, people were familiar with the *donne de fora*. He focused on the beliefs of low and medium social strata: peasants, housewives, tinsmiths, shoe shiners, washerwomen, rope makers, etc. Following a trend in ethnography and taking the work of the *Folklore Societies* as an example (Zipes 2009, pp. 1–18), one that has repeatedly re-emerged over the last two centuries, he asserted that the true beliefs of the populace, handed down from generation to generation, could be found in the “small and uneducated people”.⁴ In *Esseri soprannaturali e meravigliosi*, the fourth volume of *Usi E Costumi Credenze E Pregiudizi del Popolo Siciliano Raccolti E Descritti da Giuseppe Pitre*, he showed that the *donna de fora* were still alive in the minds of the Sicilian people.

In this section—dedicated to supernatural and wonderful beings—Pitrè describes how the Sicilian people imagined and perceived “witches”. He referred specifically to witches and not to *donna de fora*, because he believed the latter represented a separate category. By conducting research in different areas of Sicily, he made a further distinction within the category of witches. In some places, the people talked of *Stria* or *Nserra*, a witch-spirit similar to a vampire, who drank the blood of local children. *Fattucchiera* or *Magara*, instead, were humans who changed reality by following “dark practices”. The ancient popular songs, which he studied and collected, told of the prodigious capabilities of these women, for example, there is a song found in Modica that lists precisely what witches were capable of, including injecting a man with strong love using a straw or filter; converting love into hate and vice versa; and making a man an imbecile or inept at his work (Pitrè 1889, vol. 4, pp. 122–23).

Through the analysis of his data, Pitrè understood that the power of these witches was exercised via specific objects that, when pervaded by witch power, could change reality. These objects included ribbons, ropes of various colors, pins, needles, meat from some animals, and fruit (Pitrè 1889, vol. 4, p. 124).

Giuseppe Pitrè's archive, which includes letters between scholars, has not been fully studied, and it provides valuable material for the study of women and rituals in Sicily at the end of the nineteenth century, as well as the criminalization of female witches in the preceding two centuries.

One century later, Gustav Henningsen rediscovered the *donna foro* in the *Relaciones de causas* the summarized annual reports of the heresy trials from all the Spanish Empire's Inquisitions. He found 193 “ladies from outside”, and in his reconstruction of the Sicilian fairy cult, he assumes that the out-of-body experience was nothing more than collective dreaming, a sabbath gathering far removed from the devil, which he thus defined as “white”.

From reading the trials, Henningsen had the intuition that the Pitrè's phrase “part witches, part fairies” is a way to understand the fairy's transformation into a witch at the end of the fifteenth century, since there was no concept of a demonic witch in Sicily before the advent of the Inquisition (Henningsen 1990, pp. 191–215). Carlo Ginzburg identifies the night fairies that roam the woods with the *dominae nocturnae*, who followed Herodias (Diana) (Ginzburg 1989, p. 101).

Some years after Henningsen's work, Maria Sofia Messana, who studied the Inquisition in the Kingdom of Sicily, analyzed a new facet: the repression of magic on the island. Messana was able to demonstrate that the intent of the inquisitorial machine was to abrogate or subvert any trace of autonomy in supernatural practice, a tactic that was quite particular to Sicily. She also reconstructed an itinerary of the inquisitorial universe that is also a parallel path in the magical world of Sicily between the Middle Ages and the modern age. She analyzed this delicate point of passage by reading treatises on demonology.

The *donna de fora* are categorized as being malefic by demonologists of both the Middle Ages and the modern age. Sicilian demonologist Antonio Diana describes how witches and

sorcerers realized their spells through objects in the Summa Diana⁵: wax puppets, candles, pins, mirrors, holy water, and hair. Diana lists the magical tools that were used: letters, prayers to heal illnesses, wax models (to which needles were affixed to cause love or pain), hair, candles, and conjurations (Messana 2007, p. 215).

Alberto Albertini, inquisitor of Sicily and bishop of Patti, managed the drafting of the *Tractatus de agnoscendis assertionibus Catholicis et Haereticis*. According to him, it was necessary to believe the stories of *donne de fora* who claimed to ride with the goddess Diana and obey her. On certain nights, they were also allowed to fly with other souls (Messana 2007, p. 212).

Messana mainly studied the sources of the Spanish Inquisition in Sicily, the *Relaciones de causas* (summaries of trials), which were sent yearly from Palermo to Madrid.⁶ She found 77 *donne de fora* who were accused of coming into contact with the world of the afterlife and performing *magarie* (spells) of various kinds in exchange for coins. By analyzing these trials, Messana understood that most of these spells were curative practices (Messana 2007, p. 75).

To understand the work Messana carried out on the relationship between the *donne de fora* and the healing practices, we need to know an important fact. In the Sicilian magic of the 17th century—before the expansion of the concept of folk medicine—there was no difference between magic related to the *élite* and folk magic.⁷ There was fluidity and continuity between the two, and where one did not have an effect, the other would take over. The doctors of the time were inevitably conditioned by the surrounding world, which included evil spirits, fairies, witches, and supernatural influences that influenced the condition of the patient. Illness, at least for the sickly and the Church, could be the work of the Devil. But if this was the case, how would one deal with it? The doctors had an obligation to summon an exorcist to their patient's bedside and this visit had to precede any kind of treatment.

The profession of the physician was reserved for wealthy people, especially men, and was inaccessible to most of the population. The exorcist was also a man. The witches seemed to have subverted this patriarchal scheme, and in fact, as we will see, they replaced both the doctor and the exorcist as best as they could, almost as if these figures were the same.

How do the healing practices of these women accused of being *donne de fora* and therefore witches fit into this context? Messana saw important notions of Sicilian folk medicine of the early modern age in her studies of trials of some *donne de fora*. Perhaps the most emblematic case is that of Delia Digno.

A *donna de fora* was tried in 1630 by the Spanish Holy Office, named Delia Digno, and her story helps us understand how normal therapeutic exorcism was in early modern Sicily, where religious and magical practices were perceived as inseparable. Delia's informer was the mother of a "possessed young woman" (as some members of the Church called her). The girl needed to be exorcised, but by whom? The mother of the possessed woman appealed to both a Capuchin monk and a *donna de fora*, suggesting that she recognized equal authority in the healing of the spirit and the body and in the priest and the witch. The sorceress seemed to be the most effective. She immediately understood the problem and faced it "at night in spirit". But such an act could not be hidden from the *Sant'Uffizio* and the Capuchin monasteries, and despite having requested her, the girl's mother later reported Delia and her daughter to the Court. The two young women were dragged to the dungeons, tortured, and then acquitted for lack of evidence. It is likely the neighbors questioned this procedure. In the end, the inquisitors did not consider her acts demonic, likely because they did not consider the girl to be possessed (Messana 2007, pp. 388–89).

From her study of the *relaciones de causas*, Messana elaborates three interpretative models of the *donne de fora*. In the first model, the inquisitors believed that the *donne de fora* were simply like the Spanish *brujas* (witches), and that, since they were in league with the devil, they therefore committed crimes. In the second model, the witches accused of being *donne de fora* told the inquisitors that they lived between dreams and reality. In the

third, the witness spoke about spells that they had witnessed the *donne de fora* carrying out ([Messana 2007](#), p. 557). As is evident, these versions are not mutually exclusive.

The studies of Maria Sofia Messana, Carlo Ginzburg, and Gustav Henningsen have shown that the reconstruction of specific micro-stories is possible through two important processes: first, the analysis of the data available (trial summaries, treatises on demonology); and second, the study of myths and legends and the scrutiny of the relevant climate and popular culture. In the early modern age up through the contemporary period, inhabitants of the Kingdom of Sicily agreed when there were entities who were sometimes real, i.e., a woman accused of being a witch, and sometimes, instead, supernatural. These magical beings lived in urban agglomerations, not mysterious and secret groves, and possessed qualities regarded as magical. They could fly at night with their spirit toward strategic points of the city or the countryside to celebrate their sabbaths, which involved rich banquets and festive dances. The *donne de fora* were at the heart of legends, myths, beliefs, and inquisitorial trials.

As we have said, these studies were conducted using summaries of the Spanish trials, and we might thus infer that the information was limited and less accurate than that contained in the complete trials.

In wondering what other sources could have information about the *donne de fora*, I began thinking about the competent courts for *magariam* crimes. Crimes considered minor witchcraft could come under the jurisdiction of the bishopric without creating a conflict with the Spanish Court. In Sicily, two Inquisitions coexisted, the Episcopal (for moral, sexual, magical, and jurisdictional crimes) and the Spanish equivalent ([La Motta 2019](#)). It should be noted, however, that the Episcopal Inquisition was not formalized as it was based on the accusatory model, descending from Roman law, and not an inquisitorial system like the Spanish Court in Palermo. It is likely that the ancient privilege granted by Pope Urban II in 1098 in the Apostolic Legacy depended on the extent and power of the county of Monreale in the Kingdom of Sicily. In fact, the settlement of the Spanish Inquisition in Sicily was very peculiar, with some bishops allowed to become Inquisitor Generals, with full spiritual and civic powers ([Renda 2003](#), p. 310).

This complex situation made me wonder whether previous studies had dedicated enough attention to the diocesan archives; research in the diocesan archive of Monreale has confirmed that they did not. I have found records of five new trials against the *donne de fora*. These are the first full trials ever discovered, because, as mentioned, the others (*Relaciones de causas*) are summaries.

At present, my research has focused on the five trials of Diana La Viscusa, another female exorcist accused of *maleficia*. The detailed trial records tell the story of the exorcism and the objects she used, including references to therapeutic exorcism practices (Archivio Diocesano Monreale, Fondo Carte processuali sciolte n. 30, 1639).

On 14 December 1638, Ioannis Barrali was summoned to Court. To pre-empt the reason for his summons, he confessed that he had turned to a *donna de fora*, Diana La Viscusa, because during the Santa Rosalia celebrations, his wife Francesca had begun acting strangely and complaining of a severe pain in her heart and head. When events like this took place in the Cassaro neighborhood where they lived in Palermo, it was customary to tie the person to a chair and beat her up until she behaved normally again. Ioannis did not want this to happen to his wife, so he decided to take her to Monreale to a well-known healer, Diana.

Diana looked over the woman and touched her stomach. Then, she started beating an egg that she poured into a chamber pot. From the images created by the egg poured in the vase, Diana understood that the woman had been affected by a *magaria* (spell); Diana then told Ioannis that she could remove the spell for a fee of 6 tarì,⁸ plus the purchase of wine and certain *ogliora* (oils) that had to be mixed with water and herbs in a pot and then cooked to release the fumes, so that the woman could breathe.

Since Diana was strongly convinced that the spell resided in their home, she asked the couple to take her there to conclude the rite and permanently remove the spell. Arriving in

the home of Ioannis and Francesca, Diana paused at the door before entering, as if held back by a negative energy. She immediately began sprinkling the door with holy water; when she began digging a hole at the door's entrance, "a black thing that smelled like carrion came to light".⁹ She told Ioannis that it was a spell performed against his wife, that five devils and six spirits were involved, and that "it was a rotten cat's head with quicksilver inside and pee".¹⁰ This demonic fetish had to be purified first and then destroyed.¹¹

Diana decided to destroy the spell with "certa palma e certi rami d'oliva benedetta. La testa di lu gattu a contattu cu lu fuoco cominciau ad emettere certi fischi come chi ci haveva stato qualche persona che aveva fischiato, che detto testimonio et detti predominati restarono tutti scantati e meravigliati" (a certain palm and certain branches of blessed olive. The cat's head, in contact with fire, began emitting certain whistles as if there were someone who had whistled, so that all who witnessed and all those present were frightened and amazed).¹²

As an exorcist, Diana fought the demons with the palm and the olive tree branches, invoking St. Peter, St. Paul, and St. James of Galicia. During the rite, the inhabitants of the house had to hold a rope in their hands so as not to be afraid of the demons.

During the rite, Francesca began to cry, "Jesus, I feel my heart being torn"¹³ and say that she felt her guts being torn apart. At the end of the rite, "certain black things, as if they were goat's hooves and a woman's hair with pins in it"¹⁴ were expelled from her vagina.

For each object expelled from Francesca's body, the people who attended the rite had to recite "Mercy, Lord" in chorus. The objects that Francesca expelled—women's hair, pins, and presumably goat hooves—were elements that I have often seen in accounts of the creation of bewitchment. Afterward, she immediately felt better, and everything seemed to be back to normal. Diana had healed Francesca from the spell.¹⁵

Diana was condemned by the Court as a *donna de fora* and incarcerated in the prison called The Hospital of Santa Caterina in the city of Monreale (this detail is important: the place of the women's prison is rarely given, for example, there are no details of the women's prison in Palermo).¹⁶ But the story did not end there. Diana's fame carried on while she was in prison; her cellmates turned to the inquisitor and testified against her because they were afraid of her. There are few sources on the life of the prisoners, especially those imprisoned for crimes of *magariam*. In this case, Caterina la Carbonara, Diana's cellmate, received sad news from Rome; her friend Bartholomeo had died. Caterina told Diana, who asked her if she wanted to know if Bartholomeo was really dead, since Diana herself was not at all convinced; Caterina accepted.

Diana then began a rite, using a sacred Catholic object, a rosary, to reveal the truth.¹⁷ She divided the rosary into three parts and began invoking the saints to whom she was particularly devoted for her rites: "for St. Peter, for St. Paul, and St. James of Galizia, if he is dead the rosary beads must stand still, if he is alive the rosary beads must move".¹⁸

This had to be interpreted carefully because it would be incontrovertible proof of Bartholomeo's state, alive or dead. Diana took a small container and poured some starch and urine into it. After a while, she added some pins. She started cooking everything over the fire, whispering words only she could hear. This rite, which we can consider divination, revealed to Diana that Bartholomeo was actually still alive. This news was later confirmed by a witness in Rome.

After this incident, the inquisitors condemned Diana again for continuing to serve the 'Evil One' in prison (Archivio Diocesano di Monreale—A.D.M., busta n. 30, 1639). Diana was a fearless *donna de fora*, a healer who practiced her profession whether in or out of prison, and who, in her own way, fought against unjust inquisitorial repression. Nowadays in Monreale, there is a street dedicated to Diana La Viscusa.

Water, salt, candles, incense, herbs, and prayers were the healing tools that exorcists both within and outside the Church used to evoke supernatural forces to heal someone. These ritual schemes had been assimilated as customary (Messana 2007, p. 216), which explains why the rituals of *the donne de fora* were not understood as witchcraft by those who attended them.

This trial is perhaps one of the most detailed of the recorded trials. It is 31 pages long and provides important information that lets us formulate a crucial hypothesis. It gives the complete description of the urban spaces where the rite takes place (first Monreale, then Palermo). More importantly, it lets us see the choral function within the magical practice carried out by the *donna de fora*. Diana, as we have seen, asked the people attending the ritual to carry out two things: they magnified its strength by chanting, and they joined together to protect one another against the demons.¹⁹ In this way, almost unwittingly, passive viewers transformed themselves into active participants, making the ritual a group action. This collective intentionality—which I describe through the metaphor of chorus—is, I suggest, a critical piece that has been missing from previous interpretations of the *donne de I.* I believe that scholars have failed to capture this point because they had only the *relaciones de causas*—the trial summaries—at their disposal. Maria Sofia Messana’s three models constitute, I believe, an attempt to capture the group-action aspect that is more easily seen by reading the original trials. The reasons scholars have failed in capturing this collective intentionality relates to the lack of clarity of the observers themselves and the inquisitors. Those who testified (witnesses, accused persons, etc.) mentioned the rites and the name of the person who performed it and told the story from their point of view; the inquisitors did not understand this kaleidoscopic record, and thus misunderstood the role of the *donna de fora*. Taking a clear and single point of view was essential for inquisitors because they had to find one that was guilty and establish a crime. The inquisitorial reaction to this group action was to demonize it.

3. The *donna de fora*’s Sabbath and the Sources

What about the *donna de fora*’s sabbath? From the episcopal and the Spanish trials, it is clear that the nocturnal meetings of the *donna de fora* frequently took place in the city. The witnesses, like the voiceover of a theatrical show, reported what the alleged witches told them: night flights, happy banquets, dances, and travels to enchanted places ([Geremia 2020](#)). The preferred day for this type of Sabbath is Saturday, a fact I deduce from several sources: oral tradition, namely the testimonies of witnesses in trials and written sources.

For example, I have found a proclamation issued by the Diocese of Agrigento for the city of Cammarata: “si committino multi peccati contro le religioni cristiana et specialmente di magari et superstizioni come è la notti de lo sabbato ad venienti la dominica andari per la terra gettando cuchia a certi lochi maledicendo et imprecando subto certi paroli como lo abuso et etiam con soni et cansumi si raccomanda a residenti e forestieri di stare calmi pena frusta e per ogni maledizione si pagano 4 onze, di cui 3 ai poveri, 1 parte ai testimoni che denunceranno tale magherie” (Archivio Diocesano di Agrigento, Registro 1566–1567, c. 144).

“Many sins are committed against the Christian religion and especially witches and superstitions in the night between Saturday and Sunday, they roam the earth throwing curses in certain places, cursing and cursing with the use and abuse of certain words and also with sounds and songs—residents and foreigners are recommended to stay calm under the pain of the whip—and for each curse they pay four ounces, of which three go to the poor and a part to the witnesses who denounce such witchcraft”.

In this announcement, residents of the city of Cammarata and foreigners are warned not to commit the crime of “magic and superstition” and told which behavior to condemn. This ban was likely issued because Saturday night was known as the witches’ sabbath. We do not find the wording *donna de fora* expressly because they were called this only within Palermo’s territories. In other places, they were simply called *magare, patroneddri di casa, and donni di locu*.

According to a popular legend, on Saturday nights in Palermo, the *donna de fora* gathered in the *Cortile delle sette fate* (courtyard of the seven fairies), which still exists today, located in the historic center of Palermo in the *Ballarò* district ([Geremia 2020](#)). The square is characterized by a tower in which, according to tradition, seven beautiful women lived; at

night, these women chose someone to take with them to extraordinary places or wonderful banquets. The enchantment ended with the coming of daylight, when the beautiful girls disappeared, leaving the memory of the prodigies behind them ([Pitrè 1889](#), p. 163).

The main meeting of the *donne de fora* took place annually on St. John's Eve (on 24 June), which has always had a particular significance in European popular culture ([Messana 2007](#), pp. 354–55).

In the oral tradition of Sicily, the Great Fairy of Messina summons the *donne de fora*. This precise reference is found both in the oral tradition and the written sources of the Spanish and Episcopal Inquisition.

Why exactly the night of St. John though? Is the reference casual, or is it a matter of beliefs already known to the population prior to the Inquisition?

The cult of St. John clearly replaced the pagan feast of the summer solstice, in which virgin maidens replaced the vestal priestesses. The Church decided to celebrate the day of the birth of St. John the Baptist, Christ's forerunner, on this date, which is odd, because all the other saints are celebrated on their death day, the so-called *dies natalis* when one is born into eternal life ([Messana 2007](#), p. 350).

This night is also associated with the cult of Bacchus-Dionysus, the god Pan, Fauno, and the satyrs. The feast of St. John was preceded by a night of spells and enchantments in which dreams merged with reality, as described by Shakespeare in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. In the popular imagination, waters and herbs would acquire supernatural powers and animals would talk in their stables. Throughout Europe, there were stories of witches and demons flying to their annual meeting on this night.

As Christianity began to replace and overlap pagan holidays, it meets a complex and layered range of ritual practices related to divination, healing, and curing love sickness.

In Sicily, there seems to be strong evidence linking the night of St. John with the witches—*donne de fora*. The inquisitor of Sicily Luis de Páramo wrote that St. John was venerated in Sicily with the title of *caravit*, but that he did not know why. The historian Messana supposed that the name derived from the Sicilian dialect *cabrito*, which means kid. This hypothesis seems to be supported by the Sicilian iconography that shows St. John represented like a kid next to Christ.

If the cult of St. John turned into the night of the *donne de fora*, as can be seen from the trials, it may be because the Christian cult took possession of earlier cults ([Messana 2007](#), p. 351).

When I began investigating the diocesan archives of Monreale and Agrigento in search of the *donne de fora* and their sabbath, I discovered some interesting clues related to the witches' sabbath, which seems to be connected to the night of St. John. A trial from the Monreale archive provides important information both on the appearance of the *donne de fora* and the night of St. John.

Witnesses and accused people told how all the *donne de fora* awaited St. John's night to reunite and celebrate with great banquets. The case of Gracia la Chiaczisa (from Sciacca) is emblematic: she was summoned to the Court of Monreale (the episcopal Inquisition), following complaints from her neighbors. A witness recounted that on the evening of St. John's Eve she was at home, and Gracia told her to leave the house for a long time because the *donne de fora* would sit by her bedside all night; for that same reason, the roosters did not stop crowing.

The witness failed to grasp Gracia's reference and asked her who exactly these *donne de fora* were; the alleged witch tried to describe them: "They look like people in front and empty on the back like the tiles of the roofs, they come in during the night and fly and they are aware of all the things of the earth, of who is good and who is bad and what we do and what we say, I always go with them"²⁰ (Archivio Diocesano di Monreale. Fondo carte processuali sciolte. Serie 1, busta 29, 1619).

Traveling in the company of these women, whether related in a witness' statement or as a confession of a person under trial, was the most serious indication of having committed the crime of being a witch.

This is one of the few sources we have available that describes these “women” as supernatural entities. It is firmly stated that these “witches” could take on human features or, at other times, just be spirits.

The witch in question is accused by the inquisitor of being a *donna de fora*. In this brief but significant deposition, we can begin to understand Pitrè’s description of these women, a good two centuries later, as sometimes witches as real people, and at other times as spirit entities. The ambivalent status of this woman is fully recognized by inquisitors, demonologists, and local communities. That which might seem like a contradiction, is, according to an accurate interpretation of the oral and written sources I have collected, a peculiarity consolidated over the centuries, likely because magic was deeply rooted in Sicilian society as a collective intention long before the Catholic religion.

This collective intention that is expressed in ritual practices is directly linked to the confusion I mentioned earlier in the trial of Diana La Viscusa.

In Gracia’s case, this confusion seems to be attenuated by the concordance of the testimony and the accused in defining the *donne de fora* as supernatural entities. It is the inquisitor who persists and convinces himself that in any case, there must be a real culprit and therefore an alleged witch. But with all the procedural elements and the complete trial available, it now seems possible to overcome this confusion.

The reference to St. John’s Eve as a night entirely dedicated to the wandering of the *donne de fora* as an exceptional and long-awaited event is also of great interest. Further testimonies of the magical-religious aspect of St. John’s night can be found in an Edict of the Diocese of Agrigento that was written to be posted on the door of the cathedral: “poiché nonostante i divieti delle Costituzioni Sinodali riguardo alle superstizioni e magaria, perdura l’abitudine dell’andare le vergini la notte della vigilia della natività di S. Giovanni Battista sotto le pene sinodali disposte e ignorantia legit non excusat, il Vescovo ordina che in questa notte di vigilia di S. Giovanni non possano ne debiano le vergini uscire per qualsivoglia colore sotto pena dei padri e di quelle che li conducono fuori dalle case la pena di once 4 e che le porte della Chiesa di S. Giovanni si trovano serrate al tocco delle due hore di notte ed aprirle fatto il giorno pena la scomunica. Affigge: Rocco Butera erario alla cattedrale e a s. Giovanni, 23 giugno 1656” (Archivio Diocesano di Agrigento. Registro 1548–1550. C. 369, 507 v.).

“Since despite the prohibitions of the Synodal Constitutions regarding superstitions and *magaria*, the habits of virgins continue during the night of the eve of the nativity of St. John the Baptist under the synodal penalties arranged and *ignorantia legit non excusat*, the Bishop orders that on this night of St. John’s eve virgins cannot go out for any reason under pain of the fathers and those who lead them out of the houses will pay the penalty of 4 ounces. In addition, the doors of the Church of St. John are locked at the peal of two o’clock at night, under penalty of excommunication. Affixes Rocco Butera the exchequer to the cathedral and to S. John, June 23rd, 1656”.

The edict posted by order of the Bishop clearly refers to young virgin women being prevented from going out on the eve of St. John’s night and penalizes their fathers if they are found to have gone out. Virgins could easily be “prey” for the *donna de fora*, who would have led them astray and dragged them to their annual gathering with the Great Fairy of Messina (Morgana). The presence in the magical ceremonies of virgin maidens, like the ancient Vestal Priestesses, the rites connected to the Spring Equinox and the Calends of May, and those traditions merging into the magical cult of San Giovanni could confirm the thesis of the long continuity of beliefs.

In the classical age, orgiastic rites and bacchanals were a widespread religious practice; it is possible that residues of ancient religious practices, not converted by Christianity into local cults, have remained in folklore, have been handed down orally, and have merged into the narratives of the *donne de fora*. These ceremonies pay homage to Diana, Herodias, the Savia Sibilla, Morgana, and all pagan divinities who remain alive in these magical rituals and are proof of the continuity of belief in the occult world; the presence of the Sibyl

is more crucial than others as she appears in the itineraries of fantastic medieval journeys in the Hereafter as both a Fairy and Queen of a wonderful world. One thing is certain, the cult of *donne de fora* is still strongly rooted in the island of Sicily.

4. Conclusions

This essay has presented the Sicilian case of the *donne de fora* through historiographic analysis and new archival research to provide an interpretation of newly discovered original trials of the bishopric of Monreale. These complete trial records allow us to eliminate the interpretative mediation caused by looking only at the *relaciones de causas*—the summaries of trials studied by past scholarship. Looking at the phenomena of the *donne de fora* through the episcopal trials reveals the complex confusion about them that arose in past centuries.

My hypothesis is that past scholars have been overwhelmed by the inquisitors' confusion. Having heard confused and confusing testimony in which the *donne de fora* were sometimes described as real witches and sometimes supernatural beings, the inquisitors were conflicted about what the situation was; they overcame this conflict by focusing on their obligation to find and punish a real culprit.

The Episcopal and Spanish court records let us extrapolate information concerning the traditions, customs, beliefs, and medical knowledge of Sicilian society. New comparisons are necessary to extend the investigation not only about the content of trials, but also the general functioning of the two courts.

The analysis of new and unpublished archival sources helps us understand how the gender issue relating to alleged witches was addressed in the modern age in the South both from the religious point of view (inquisitors) and the folkloristic one relating to the sphere of superstitions.

Furthermore, the *donne de fora* highlight the problems that arise around the circulation and diffusion of ideas in Southern Italy in the early modern period in relation to the Church's strict institutional control. In most cases—as the sources on the *donne de fora* show us—the healing practices practiced by women were repressed by the Church because they were reserved for men (e.g., exorcisms or the treatment of some diseases).

Studying *donne de fora* naturally connects to questions about the role of women. As we have seen, this type of analysis must include not only written sources (demonological treatises and trials), but also the oral tradition.

The oral tradition preserves and transmits over time notions, concepts, and ideas that would have otherwise been lost because of their classification by the ruling class as diabolical acts. An example of this is found in the prayers handed down from mother to daughter to cure ailments or make wishes come true. Even if the practitioners saw the saints as protagonists—as in Delia's trial—these prayers were considered heretical because they subverted the natural order of things [Fantini \(1996\)](#).

Reconstructing the circulation of ideas in the female world in Southern Italy is thus made more difficult because while the oral tradition helps us reconstruct what the Church tried to annihilate, we have only remnants of written sources that we must read “against the grain”. Analyzing the oral tradition of the *donne de fora* together with demonological treatises, manuals, summaries of Spanish trials, anthropological investigations, and episcopal sources allows us to trace a chronological and thematic thread that starts from the Middle Ages and reaches to the present day and to know the stories of those people who for a long time have had no voice.

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Notes

- ¹ After the request of the viceroy Domenico Caracciolo, Ferdinand IV of Naples, who considered the Holy Office an anachronism, decreed its suppression on 16 March 1782. The abolition was justified by the need to restore justice, which should be public and founded on the law of the kingdom. Arrangements were made for his assets and income to be confiscated by the Crown, while its few ministers and officers were integrated into the royal service. In reality, the royal dispatch sanctioned a decision that had been taken four days earlier by the viceroy, which closed and sealed the offices of the court in its Palermo seat in the Palazzo Steri. In the opinion of the Enlightenment, this was the end of a story of infamy and as such Caracciolo wanted to give her the seal of atonement and purification, erasing the testimonies of shame: on 27 June 1783 he was ordered to burn the archives of the Inquisition, turning an important piece of the Sicilian historical memory into ashes". ([Rodríguez 2010](#), pp. 1422–23).
- ² For further information, see [Branciforti \(1973\)](#).
- ³ The Spanish Inquisition in Sicily was established on 24 March 1486 by Innocent VIII. The district court of the Spanish Inquisition of Sicily only began in 1500, because the Court received a lot of opposition. See [La Motta \(2015\)](#).
- ⁴ In the introduction of *Usi E Costumi Credenze E Pregiuidizi del Popolo Siciliano Raccolti E Descritti de Giuseppe Pitrè*, Pitrè writes that "in order to meet the needs of the young science of Folklore it is necessary to let small and uneducated people speak, since they are the only repository of the traditions, customs, legends and prejudices of Sicily" p. X Introduction.
- ⁵ "facente brevia cum caracters, seu litteris ignotis, vel recitantes quasdam orazione pro sanandis infernis, fabricantes immagine cerea set puncturis eas cruciando ad amorem vel infirmitatem inducendam, vel maleficia faciendo capillis, ferramentis, clavis, lapibus etc. ab ore maleficiorum evometis. Item aspicientes speculum aut phialam cum candela, et aqua benedicta, et dicentes aliqua verba pro inveniendis furtis, vel ad scienda secreta" cit. ([Diana 1646](#), p. 475, c. 69).
- ⁶ The practice of *relaciones de causas* was introduced in the mid-16th century. The reports indicated only age, sex, origin, main witness, date of hearing, accusation, sentence.
- ⁷ The study of folk medicine in Italy, its genesis and development, has been concentrated in the last two centuries, marking a long nineteenth-century focus that declined rapidly at the end of the twentieth century. In this period, the expression "folk medicine" designated not only a field of study, but also an analytical and interpretative category that at times aspired to be configured as an autonomous discipline, before yielding to a definitive critical-cultural disarticulation ([Pizza 2012](#), p. 15). Today, speaking of folk medicine also means imposing a completely ethnocentric vision that is not adequate to micro-history. A great scholar of "folk medicine" such as Giuseppe Pitrè could today be challenged by the positivist approach of contemporary anthropologists, but this would be counterproductive since it would prevent the collection of data and stories he left behind for future analysis; see [Mannella \(2021](#), pp. 49–66).
- ⁸ A type of coin from the Kingdom of Sicily and Kingdom of Naples. See L. Travaini, *The Fineness of Sicilian Taris, and of Those of Amalfi and Salerno (11th to 13th Centuries)*, in *Metallurgy in Numismatics*, IV, a cura di A. Oddy-M. Cowell, London 1998.
- ⁹ "Venne alla luce una cosa nera che puzzava di carogna". Archivio Diocesano di Monreale, Fondo carte processuali sciolte busta n. 30, 1639, I capo d'accusa.
- ¹⁰ "era una testa di gatta con dentro argento vivo e pipì nera", *ibid.*
- ¹¹ busta n. 30, 1639, I capo d'accusa.
- ¹² See note 11 above.
- ¹³ "Gesù mi sento il cuore lacerato". *ibid.*
- ¹⁴ "certe cose nere, come se fossero zoccoli di capra e capelli di donna con spilli dentro", *ibid.*
- ¹⁵ See note 11 above.
- ¹⁶ *ibid.*, II capo d'accusa.
- ¹⁷ For objects used by "witches" and considered evidence in the trial, see ([Dall'Olio 2012](#), pp. 31–39; [Masini 1665](#)).
- ¹⁸ "per San Pietro, per San Paolo e San Giacomo di Galizia se è morto il rosario deve stare fermo, se è vivo il rosario deve muoversi" Ibidem, II capo d'accusa.
- ¹⁹ Guido Dall'Olio (in conversation) suggested that this practice may have mimicked canonical exorcism rituals performed by members of the Catholic clergy. Girolamo Menghi in *Flagellum daemonum. Exorcismos terribilis potentissimo et efficace* argued that as many people as possible should be admitted to exorcisms. The Servite Paolo Maria Cardi criticized these practices as a source of abuse and "superstition" because the devils seek exposure. See [Cardi \(1733](#), p. 254). I thank Guido Dall'Olio for both this idea and the references. It seems that the people present at this ritual were indeed also involved in ritual practices. This topic could be an input for future research.
- ²⁰ "Parinu genti davanti e darrari canala vacanti, trasinu di notti e volano e sannu tutti li cosi di la, cu è buono e cu è tintu, chi si dici e chi si fa, vaiu sempre cu iddri".

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