**“The Lives of Herbalists and Healers in the Middle Ages”: An Author Talk, Jess Wells, 2023**

**A person sitting on stairs

Description automatically generated with low confidence**

[Text version of a video, including Author’s Notes, End Notes, Bibliography and Book Club Discussion Guide]

Hi there. Jess Wells here. I wanted to explain some of the concepts and research behind, *The Mandrake Broom: When the Witches Fought Back*, a novel that dramatizes the fight to save medical knowledge during the witch-burning times in Europe 1465 to 1540.

* While the book is set in the Middle Ages, this is certainly not the story of the first woman healer: When you look as far back as the Paleolithic[[1]](#endnote-1) era, people had a profound understanding of plants and their medicinal properties[[2]](#endnote-2) while also living in very egalitarian societies.
* In Israel they recently unearthed the skeleton of a 12,000-year-old shaman who they determined was a woman.
* While the main action in the book is set in Italy in 1465 this story really begins in the year 900 CE, or Common Era, which is more inclusive than AD with it’s Christian reference…so 900CE.
* Because of the Silk Road, between 900 and 1200 CE there was a flow of information from Asia into the Middle East and beyond. You can see these routes and imagine how much knowledge was collected as travelers made their way from China, and India through the Middle East to Italy and beyond with their silks, spices, precious metals, medicine and manuscripts.
* In fact, 900-1200 CE was considered the “Islamic Golden Age” not just in terms of the fabulous wealth that flowed through the area. As a result of this confluence of travelers, the Middle East and Persia was tremendously advanced in mathematics, science, astronomy…
* …medicine, hygiene, aesthetics, architecture, and public works like plumbing and irrigation. The Islamic world was hundreds of years ahead of the West in every way.
* And, of course, women contributed to these advancements. The Islamic world paid a very important role in both developing and preserving knowledge. When the Library of Alexandria was burned, it is said that many of the scrolls were spirited away to safety in Persia. The Golden Age ended when the West figured out a way to avoid the overland route and sail to the Far East, bypassing the Middle East and ushering in the Age of Discovery.
* The entry point into Europe for all this wealth and knowledge, then, was through Italy, which is why Salerno, Italy is where our story begins. The University of Salerno was the first medical college in Europe[[3]](#endnote-3) and it was privy to all the wisdom that had been gathered along the Silk Road.
* It was also one of the few places where women could study: Muslims wouldn’t let men provide medical attention to their wives, so they educated women to be doctors in Salerno. Jews weren’t allowed in universities anywhere else so Jewish women studied there. Christians wouldn’t educate their women on any subject at all outside of the convent, so Salerno became the one place where a woman could congregate and study, could move through a city with a book in her arm without raising suspicion. The University of Salerno was also the last to close its doors to women which didn't happen until the Napoleonic time in the 1800s.
* The women that they trained there were called Salernistas, and they were world renowned. Highly educated, competent like no others, they went all over the world treating kings and emperors, delivering babies to the Queens, disseminating their knowledge, welcomed where other women were not. This is a depiction from the time of a king on his knees begging to be attended to by the Salernistas or at the very least paying homage.
* We tend to think of knowledge as a steady uphill trajectory learning more and more all the time but in fact it's much more of a roller coaster than that. the Romans invented concrete before 150 BCE[[4]](#endnote-4) but after the fall of the Roman Empire and the withdrawal of Romans from Western Europe, that knowledge was lost, and it took them years to figure out how to make cement again. In the case of medical knowledge, at the University of Salerno, they knew how to do ocular surgery for cataracts in the 1300s. They had anesthetics. In 1098 the “Antidotorium”, was a collection of 2650 medical prescriptions from Salerno.[[5]](#endnote-5) It's quite incredible but we think of medicine in the Middle Ages as having fallen to ignorance and bloodletting.
* In the year 1000 at this remarkable university, they had a woman as a chair in the Medical College, a woman named Trota[[6]](#endnote-6). She wrote two texts, one covering both men and women called "Practical Medicine According to Trota" and both were very important but the one that was unique was on women’s health, fertility, the complications of pregnancy and delivery, and it stood as the primary text on women's health for 400 years, which I would say is testimony to both its quality and the disinterest in the medical establishment to study women’s health any further, a bias that continues to this day.
* Trota was a very radical thinker: she believed that men were as likely to be at fault for fertility problems as women; she thought it unnecessary for women to go through pain during childbirth, which would later be considered heretical by the Catholic Church who believed women should suffer for Eve’s sin. So, part of the drama of this book comes from a plan to secretly deliver the manuscripts, or Trotulas, to women in medicine throughout Europe.
* But by 1465, when the book opens, being an herbalist was a very dangerous profession. A woman in possession of medical texts, medicinal herbs, oils or ointments could be tried as a witch by the church and killed. Any obstetric tools at all were considered to be used for abortion. And the church had determined that girls as young as 10 years old could be tried as witches.
* In this very dangerous scenario, women hid their herbs in the woods far away from their dwelling. They grew them under shelves of mushrooms, or mixed in with other plants. They harvested them secretly at night, smuggled them in hidden compartments.
* There's a reason why the healer/witch in Hollywood movies lives away from town out in the forest when she is actually needed, frequently, by everyone in the village.
* The title of the book reflects this need for subterfuge: the mandrake serves as the metaphor: it’s a powerful pain killer, in my imagining it would be wrapped inside a twig broom made with willow which is the source of the milder pain killer, aspirin. So, *The Mandrake Broom* is a story of internal strength hiding within the external guise of weakness and vice versa: external power, hiding at its core a profound weakness. And we know that brooms are associated with witches. A broom like that wears out and has to be remade, which was frequently a job for old women and the poor.
* The stakes for these women were incredibly high: during the period of the witch burnings, women could actually be kidnapped off the streets by ordinary citizens (some of whom made it their profession) and delivered to the church for trial.
* The church, as your jailer, charged you a fee for your seizure, charged you for your incarceration, charged you for your trial, and if you were found by members of the church to be guilty, the Church confiscated all your remaining land and assets. There is historical evidence that as a result, successful women were targeted and we're all aware of the wealth and ostentation of the Catholic Church at that time.
* Remember that there is no separation between church and state at this time. There was no right to a trial by your peers, illegal search and seizure, none of those protections existed at the time. The accusation of witchcraft could be charged against a midwife if a woman's baby died in childbirth or was born with physical challenges, against a woman who cast “the evil eye” on her husband or neighbor.
* Women were burned at the stake in rural areas.
* In some places they were hung or …
* herded up in large numbers and sent into a labyrinth of kindling, the entire structure set ablaze. In one German city, the church killed every single woman except one. I won't detail the torture used to extract confessions, but the metal sarcophagus lined with spikes was called the Iron Maiden for a reason.
* Some maintain that 200,000 people were accused and 60,000 executed. Some think the numbers were much higher than that.[[7]](#endnote-7) But to put even that number into perspective, London at the time had only 75,000 residents.[[8]](#endnote-8) It’s estimated that 85% of those accused of witchcraft were women. The Jewish community was also targeted and made up the rest it is believed.
* Aside from the injustice, Donna Reed, videographer of “The Burning Times” asks “what did that do to our gene pool” when the best and brightest of us were systematically targeted and murdered. When I saw this movie back in the 80s I vowed that someday I would write a book about it.
* So this novel wonders, what would it look like if a group of women said, “no, you are not kidnapping us from the road. And when you try to round us up to be killed we will come to the rescue.”
* Much of this horror was driven by a book titled the *Malleus Maleficarum: the Hammer of Witches[[9]](#endnote-9)*, which was a manual for torturing and trying witches, written by two German Catholic clergymen, one of whom went insane. Most chilling, though, it was the second book after the Bible to be mass produced with Gutenberg’s movable type, which allowed it to be disseminated all through Europe like no other text had done. It was said that there wasn't a judge’s bench on the continent that didn't have a copy. It was an incredibly misogynistic text, as you can imagine, filled with vile hatred of women and some really bizarre ideas like the contention that a witch would cut off men's penises and keep them in a basket in a tree, or that the clergyman author could see monkeys dancing while women burned. So the novel wonders if the women who were delivering Trota’s medical knowledge in secret might decide to do battle against The Hammer of Witches.
* The production of *The Hammer of Witches* was a sea change for information dissemination in Europe. Prior to that books had to be copied by hand which was a very slow process. Even in that scenario of the hand copied book, it was difficult for women to get any information preserved if it had to do with women health and women's bodies because the scribes were mostly priests and always men who saw no value in and were squeamish about the information.
* At this time, Europe was in the throes of a massive power shift: so many things were being wrested away from the individual and the locale, and transferred to capital-intensive institutions, especially those that required machinery. The great ships, for example, were some of the first instances of capital investments and pooled money. And they brought in spices and foodstuffs that couldn’t be grown by a local peasant. The bow and arrow were, at times, illegal for peasants to possess, but it was always possible to make them. Find a couple of appropriate sticks and lash them together. Arrows were made with saplings, the fletches made of goose quills lashed to the shaft with deer sinew. The gun, however, had to be manufactured, so neither legal nor possible. The book was written by hand so possible. Ink was easy to make and the goose quill for writing was squawking in the yard. After the invention of the printing press, it was economically unfeasible to copy books and metal type could not be destroyed by fire the way a scriptorium could.
* You have to remember that at this time, fire was the greatest threat there was, and the greatest weapon. Most homes were made of wood and thatch, they’d go up in an instant and spread like “wildfire.” It's why bakeries were kept on the outskirts of town: to isolate a fire if it broke out. You lose the bakery but at least you have the village.
* Into this scenario comes a fear of a particular kind of witch: “the archer witch” who shot flaming arrows, supposedly enchanting men by shooting them in the ankle. She was the equivalent of a biohazard witch, or dirty bomb witch. And my book wonders: who was this archer witch?
* At this point, then, men decided that medicine was a profession that they could profit from. Controlling supply and demand generates profits, as we know. So medicine had to be removed from the philosophy of medicine that was ‘harvest what’s around you to balance yourself’. It had to be wrested away from the women and the herbalists who they had made suspect. They instituted a system to authorize medical professionals by requiring a college education and college was only for men. Women were shut out completely. And to further differentiate themselves from the herbalist, they seized on surgery as their focus. In all fairness, some of that is understandable: among early healing philosophies, the body was considered sacred and so not to be opened. Surgery did lead to a much greater understanding of the way the body worked. And we certainly insist that doctors have credentials.
* In the midst of all of this transition, though, the Black Death arrived. They called it the Great Mortality at the time. Dr. Dorsey Armstrong[[10]](#endnote-10), a professor at Purdue outlines the number of times it recurred[[11]](#endnote-11).… Fully half of the population of Europe perished in first wave. Can you imagine? Half of the population dead from something that no one had ever seen, and no one had any idea how to cure. In traditional scholarship, it was believed that this first wave of the Black Death was entirely respiratory, no black boils were seen. It was very contagious, almost always lethal, and very swift in taking you down. A phrase at the time was akin to “dancing at noon, dead by dusk.” Then half of those who survived were taken in the second wave. In Avignon, France, a small town at the time, 1,500 people died within 3 days.
* And to make matters worse, it was believed that the cat was the consort of the witch and since witches were being blamed for the Black Death, in many places all the cats were killed as well. So, there were no cats to kill the rats that were carrying the fleas of the Black Death. There are professors in universities who teach that victims of the Black Death should actually be counted among those who died as a result of the witch burnings.
* Here is the outfit for a medieval doctor trying to help the sick and dying: an almost impenetrable long leather coat, a beak filled with aromatic herbs against the stench of death and also to purify the air the way sage does; boots against fleas, gloves. This is what masking up looked like in the Middle Ages. It was very difficult to treat the Black Death. Some of the newly college-educated doctors of the time believed that wearing a broad brimmed hat against the moonlight would protect you.
* But a man named John of Burgundy came up with medicine to treat the Black Death: A tea of Burning Bush, Devil’s Bit, roses and violets. It's also true that “In some areas, women’s survival rate from the Plague was 7 times that of men.”[[12]](#endnote-12) One asks how that could be but remember that women were not generally on the sailing vessels that brought the plague in from the East, nor did they work near the docks. Perhaps they had a higher level of hygiene than men of the time and it could be suggested that they had a higher regard for herbal remedies and health in general. Perhaps think of your own family: who keeps an eye on health more closely: the man or the woman. Whatever the reason, this differential just added to suspicions against women.
* So, you can imagine that people considered their world a hellscape. This is a painting by Peter Bruegel the Elder done at about this time, showing incredibly macabre and bizarre scenes.
* The woman in the middle inspired the main character of the book. She is a virago, leading an army of women to pillage hell[[13]](#endnote-13).
* But into this hellscape steps a man named Theo Paracelsus[[14]](#endnote-14), a historical figure and to this day considered the father of modern toxicology. He was a renegade doctor: he traveled all over the world collecting medical info, travelling with gypsies or Roma, enlisted as an army surgeon, consulted with villagers, herbalists and healers, going anyplace where he could find knowledge that he hadn't yet absorbed. He was not at all a proponent of leeches and broadbrimmed hats and he wasn’t shy about telling the male medical establishment about what idiots he thought they were. His philosophy was that 'The patients are your textbook, the sickbed is your study.”[[15]](#endnote-15) As a result, he made very powerful enemies. He was a eunuch because of a childhood disease, he became addicted to laudanum and carried it in the pummel of his cane. And later in his life, he came under suspicion by the Inquisition, and it has been suggested that it was actually the medical establishment that turned him in. At the last minute, he burned all his research papers because he said that the wicca taught him everything he knew.[[16]](#endnote-16) Think of all that groundbreaking knowledge, going up in flames. This was another impetus for the book: when I read that I thought: the woman who taught him all of that must have been so pissed off. So, who was she, and how did she teach him?
* So…Healers, midwives, caretakers… to the present day…
* Meet the women at the forefront of COVID-19 vaccine development.
* Honored by the United Nations…
* …leading teams at major pharmaceutical companies,
* …8 billion people on the planet have these women to thank for the tremendously fast development of the vaccine against COVID. It has been said in more than one place that it was the cooperative nature of women that made it possible to speed the development of the vaccine.
* The Mandrake Broom is my homage to them.
* and you can see blog posts on unsung women like these…
* … and buy all of my work including audio versions of this book and others at jesswells.com. I’ll have a recording of this talk, and a text version with author’s notes, end notes and a bibliography available there as well.
* I’d love to introduce you to Jaguar Paloma and the Caketown Bar, the story of two women who establish a raucous trading post in the jungle in 1965, a story of magical realism.
* My books today are $20 each, I take credit cards, and I’m giving a code for a free copy of the audio book for every sale. Please sign up for my mailing list… and I…
* Thank you for your generous attention.

# Author Notes

Effort has been made to ensure that the events, dates, conditions, and remedies are accurate within the constraints of fiction. I’d like to honor Elisabeth Brook, *Women Healers Through History* (The Women’s Press, 1993) as well as Jeanne Achterberg, *Woman as Healer* (Shambhala Press, 1991) whose excellent volumes were invaluable in the research. Other notes:

* *The Malleus Malleficarum* was the second book, after the Bible, to be mass-produced using moveable type, according to “The Burning Times”, a very moving film directed by Donna Read and released by Direct Cinema Limited, Inc., L.A., in 1990. “The date of the first edition of the *Malleus* cannot be fixed with absolute certainty, but the likeliest year is 1486,” according to *Malleus Maleficarum* (Dover Publications, New York, 1971) from the introduction by Rev. Montague Summers prepared for the 1948 reprint. pg. Vii. Information on Kramer and Sprenger, including their sighting of monkeys during the burning, are based on fact.
* The burning in Metz was in 1488 and the mass burning in Rome was actually held in 1424, so I’m taking a bit of poetic license here with the date but not the scope. According to Kors and Peters, *Witchcraft in Europe* (Univ. of Pennsylvania Press,1972) pg. 13 “in the fifteenth century [the burnings] spread across Europe; there were mass trials and executions at Rome (1424), Heidelberg (1446), Cologne (1456), Como (1485) and Metz (1488).”
* “Between 1486-1551 sweating sickness ravaged England and crossed the channel to Europe and then disappeared” (Achterberg, op.cit pg. 78). It affected the heart and lungs, so Luccia sold lungwort out of the back door.
* In Germany women could be accused of witchcraft for owning oil, ointment, pots of vermin, or human bones. All of these, of course, were common medicaments of the time “— on any pharmacist’s shelf, in any woman’s pharmacopoeia.” Achterberg, pg. 90.
* Information on Paracelsus came from several sources, including Hall, Manly P., *The Mystical and Medical Philosophy of Paracelsus* (The Philosophical Research Society, 1964) and Susac, Andrew, *Paracelsus: Monarch of Medicine* (Doubleday 1969). According to Brook, pg. 87, Paracelsus actually burned his manuscripts in 1527 “declaring that he had learnt from the Sorceress all he knew.”
* Many of the remedies mentioned are from Mabey, Richard, *The New Age Herbalist* (Collier Books 1988) including the description of sphagnum moss which Luccia uses. “A plant of water-logged bogs, this moss can absorb huge quantities of moisture. This makes it useful both for lightening the soil in hanging baskets and for staunching bleeding. Used for this later purpose since ancient times, and in Word World I, its healing properties are thought to be due to the antibiotic action of associated micro-organisms.” Other remedies are from research in medieval and modern texts; none are imagined, including the remedy for the Plague.
* I’m honestly not sure whether I imagined and then discovered *The Archer Witch* by Molitor or the other way around but it’s an actual book: Molitor, Ulrich, “De lamiis et phitonicis mulieribus, Teutonice Vnholden vel Hexen,” not before 1489 (Library of Congress LC Control Number 48040446).
* Bruegel was born in 1525-30 approx. so would be 17 in 1544. He traveled to Italy in 1552 and painted “Mad Meg” in 1562 so it’s reasonable that he could have been inspired by Luccia as described and then painted the piece later. Roberts, Keith, Bruegel (Phaidon, 1971) pg.

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**Reader’s Guide for *The Mandrake Broom: When the Witches Fought Back***

**Discussion Questions**:

1. Luccia, the protagonist, goes through several stages in her life, almost morphing into different people. Which one was most appealing to you?
2. One of the author’s objectives was to dramatize the conditions – and the stereotypes -- surrounding the witch burnings in Europe, including the seizure of women on the road, the targeting of women with wealth, the connection between the witch burnings and the plague. How many of these were new concepts to you?
3. What did you think of Luccia’s romantic relationships? Between Jacqueline, the Bowman, and Paracelsus, which seemed to be her greatest love? Which one did you appreciate or identify with?
4. One of the key themes of the book is the interplay between visibility and invisibility. Where is this a dramatized?
5. Another key theme is the idea of external power and internal weakness and vice versa. Who personifies this theme? Where is this dramatized? How does the title The Mandrake Broom exemplify this theme?
6. Why was the invention of movable type such a watershed moment in this story? How did it change the power balance?
7. The Hammer of Witches is an actual book, written by the characters described in the story. Had you ever heard of this as a manual for persecuting witches?
8. This book is set in the period when medical knowledge was being wrested from the hands of female midwives and herbalists, given to men in newly formed universities that focused on surgery. Is the battle between herbalism and surgery still raging? Are there other parallels with modern times?
9. Luccia is astounded when she sees herself in a full-length mirror for the first time. Can you imagine what it would be like to see your entire body in an accurate mirror for the first time ever?
10. There are a number of details on how things are made or done in the Middle Ages: how arrows were made, how herbalists gathered their crop, how doctors battled the Plague. Discuss the details of medieval life that most interested you.
11. Which were your favorite characters?
12. What did you think of the ending?

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1. [One Million Years in a Day](https://www.amazon.com/Million-Years-Day-Curious-Everyday/dp/1250089441/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1481997671&sr=1-1&keywords=One+Million+Years+in+a+Day), Greg Jenner, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2015 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. <https://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/323556> [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Schola_Medica_Salernitana> [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roman_concrete> [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. *The Timetables of History*, by Bernard Grun, based upon Werner Stein’s Kulturfahrplan, (Touchstone/Simon & Shuster, Third Revised Edition, 1991) [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Trota_of_Salerno> [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. From “The Burning Times” (movie) In the film, Thea Jensen calls this period in history a "Women's Holocaust". She notes that a total number of victims is unknown but that the high number often given is nine million deaths, over a period of 300 or more years.[[1]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Burning_Times#cite_note-kapica-1) Otherwise, scholarly "high" estimates range around 100,000, with estimates around 60,000 more common.[[2]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Burning_Times#cite_note-2) The nine million figure, according to modern scholarship, originates with a 1784 article by [Gottfried Christian Voigt](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gottfried_Christian_Voigt), in which he estimates the figure of 9,442,994 executions between AD 600 and 1700 - a period of 1,100 years - unsupported by any evidence.[[3]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Burning_Times#cite_note-3)[[4]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Burning_Times#cite_note-4) <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Burning_Times> [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Historical_urban_community_sizes> [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. “When a woman thinks alone, she thinks evil … she is an imperfect animal and she will always deceive,” [wrote](http://www.sacred-texts.com/pag/mm/mm01_06a.htm) Heinrich Kramer, a German inquisitor and Catholic monk who wrote the handbook on hunting witches,”The Malleus Maleficarum” (in English, “The Witch Hammer”). <https://www.cnn.com/2018/10/31/opinions/halloween-witches-were-women-fighting-power-kerr/index.html?no-st=1541345055> [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Dorsey Armstrong is a Professor of English and Medieval Literature at Purdue University, where she is also the head of the Department of English. She received her PhD in Medieval Literature from Duke University. She is the executive editor of the academic journal *Arthuriana*, which publishes cutting-edge research on the legend of King Arthur, from its medieval origins to its modern enactments. She is a recipient of the Charles B. Murphy Outstanding Undergraduate Teaching Award, Purdue’s top undergraduate teaching honor. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. <https://www.wondrium.com/the-black-death-the-worlds-most-devastating-plague?tn=Expert_tray_Course_-1_1_28> [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Brooke, pg. 67 [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dull\_Gret

    While her female followers loot a house, Griet advances towards the mouth of Hell through a landscape populated by [Boschian](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hieronymus_Bosch) monsters (see detailed images). They represent the sins that are punished there. Griet wears male armour — a breastplate, a mailed glove and a metal cap; her military costume is parodied by the monster in a helmet beside her, who pulls up a [drawbridge](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Drawbridge). A knife hangs from her side, while in her right hand she carries a sword, which may refer to the saying: "He could go to Hell with a sword in his hand." A book of proverbs published in [Antwerp](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Antwerp) in 1568 contains a saying which is very close in spirit to Bruegel's painting:

    One woman makes a din, two women a lot of trouble, three an annual market, four a quarrel, five an army, and against six the Devil himself has no weapon.[[9]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dull_Gret)

     Cf. The Netherlandish Proverbs: An International Symposium on the Pieter Brueg(h)els, ed. by [Wolfgang Mieder](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wolfgang_Mieder). University of Vermont. 2004. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paracelsus> [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paracelsus> [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)