

TCHEKY KARYO CHRISTINE BOISSON JEAN CARMET

SORCERESS

THE STORY AND SCRIPTING OF THE FILM
BY PAMELA BERGER

INTERVIEW IN FRENCH WITH SUZANNE SCHIFFMAN
BY MARC CHEVRIE



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THE STORY AND SCRIPTING OF THE FILM SORCERESS

Pamela Berger

The film *Sorceress* (*Le Moine et la Sorcière* in French) was inspired by a treatise written in the mid-thirteenth century by the monk Etienne of Bourbon. In the early stages of the inquisition, Etienne was charged by the pope to "inquire" into possible heretical practices. He was on this mission when he entered a village in the Dombes, an isolated region of France about twenty-five miles northeast of Lyon. While listening to the villagers' confessions, Etienne learned that a woman he called a *vetula* was using what he considered strange healing practices. He investigated and uncovered a story encompassing a belief and a ritual that had been passed down for generations. The story told of a nobleman's baby, whom a sainted figure, Guinefort, saved from certain death by snakebite. The peasants came to believe in the powers of Saint Guinefort and subsequently invoked his protection for their sick infants through a series of ritualized acts. The monk learned of the role of the *vetula*: she would lead a mother with a sick baby to the saint's burial ground and together they would perform rituals during the course of which a wolf would, on occasion, threaten the child. Demonic and dangerous as Etienne deemed this practice, it became even more horrendous to him, as a man of God, when he learned that Guinefort, the saintly figure, was not a man or a woman, but a greyhound.*

Etienne writes that eventually he learned the story behind the ritual. The peasants told him that the greyhound, long before, had belonged to a Count de Villars, whose wife had just given birth to a baby. One day when the parents were out of the house, a serpent came into the room where the cradle stood. Guinefort, who was guarding the baby, attacked and killed the serpent and threw it into a corner. The dog's mouth was bloodied and the cradle was overturned. When the count and his wife came back and saw the bloodied dog beside the overturned cradle, they assumed that Guinefort had eaten the child, and at once the father slew the animal. Only after the dog was dead did the father see the baby sleeping safely and the pieces of the serpent strewn about the room. Realizing that he had unjustly killed the dog that had saved his child, the father placed stones on the animal's grave and planted a tree next to it *in memoriam*. Etienne's text goes on to pass down a conclusion to the tale as it was enshrined in the memory of the peasants: Because of the injustice of the count's deed, his castle was destroyed and his estate became a wasteland. The peasants, knowing how the innocent Guinefort had been killed, visited the gravesite, honored the dog as a martyr, and prayed to him when they were sick.**

Etienne tells us that he viewed the peasants' practices and beliefs as seductions by the devil. He especially castigated the mothers who sought the help of the "dog saint." He called the people together, went to the burial place of the dog, and preached against the evils he had heard described. He had the dog's bones dug up and the "sacred" wood cut down. He persuaded the secular authorities to confiscate the property of anyone who went to the site to engage in those nefarious activities.

This rare glimpse into medieval peasants' beliefs and rituals forms the core of the film *Sorceress*. Though I structured the story and script around the essence of Etienne's account, I had to take many liberties as I developed the characters, their motivations, the plot line, and the ultimate resolution of the conflicts. Though inspired by Etienne's text, *Sorceress* is a distinct work, an interpretation of what might have occurred, a recreation augmented by insights from other historical sources, folklore, botany, anthropology and art history.



But the script is also a work of the imagination, a fiction created by one medievalist who tried to fashion each scene so that the whole would seem authentic to other medievalists. Not only was the dramatic narrative devised within the rubrics of medieval life and thought, but the material world of the middle ages was recreated as authentically as possible. The production designer, Bernard Vezat, was scrupulous in his recreation of a medieval ambiance as he oversaw the fashioning of props, costumes and architecture based on painting and sculpture from the period. The director, Suzanne Schiffman, could choose to have the camera set up anywhere since there was nothing in camera range that was not "medieval." She could turn the camera 360 degrees as she masterfully brought the thirteenth-century story to life.

Sorceress opens with a dramatization of the dog's martyrdom, an event that had occurred well before the lifetime of Etienne. In the film the scene takes place in the ninth century, amid costumes and props inspired by depictions in ninth-century Carolingian manuscripts. The emblem on the dog's tombstone, inscribed in blood by the peasant woman, is a variation of the triskele, an ancient Celtic sign of power, a sign evoking a still more distant past. I chose the triskele because the grove ritual, dedicated to a dog, is very likely an example of religious syncretism. From the 2nd century B.C.E. until well into the early centuries of Christianity, Celtic peoples in scattered groups occupied much of Europe, from Turkey to Spain, from Italy to Ireland. Celtic mythology and religion, as exemplified in art and in epic literature, were characterized by the worship of animals, which were seen as more fertile, more fleet, and more independent than humans. When the Romans conquered Gaul, individual Celtic gods were merged with Roman gods to whom similar powers were attributed. Eventually the Celto-Roman gods were portrayed as part animal and part human. It is possible that Guinefort, the dog-saint, was, in some manner, a "holdover" from the Celto-Roman past, and that he was a figure who, with time, was further transformed into a Christian saint.

The close-up shot of the blood-inscribed triskele dissolves into the incised triskele adorning the same rock in the filmic present of the mid-thirteenth century. The camera moves back to reveal a woman taking baby clothes from the tree next to the rock. The baby clothes are part of a grove ritual enacted later in the film. This woman, played by Christine Boisson, is the character whom Etienne eventually calls a *vetula* with the implication that she is a sorceress. As the *vetula* gathers the clothes from the tree next to the dog's gravestone, Etienne, played by Tchéky Karyo, comes into view. He is reading a breviary, oblivious to Nature, and of course, oblivious to the woman, who sees him and immediately moves behind a tree that will protect her from his view, should he glance up from his book.



Approaching the village, the monk passes through a group of women soaking and working with hemp plants that are used for making rope. Not only is this task appropriate to the season, mid-August, but working with hemp also foreshadows the importance of rope fibers later in the script, when Cecile, the young wife of the imprisoned saboteur, weaves hemp fibers into her skirt. When she visits her husband in his prison tower, he will extract the fibers and make a rope to escape. Her weaving the hemp into her skirt makes the strands of the rope invisible to the guards, intent only on groping her body as they search her. The leit motif of blindness and insight threads through the script.

Etienne heads for the dwelling of the village curé, a totally imaginary character whom I created as a rather slovenly, but endearing man in his early sixties. There was often a wide schism between an educated member of a religious order, such as Etienne, and a simple parish priest. The monk, recognizing this schism, tries to ingratiate himself with the suspicious curé. The subtext in the scene is Etienne's desire to avoid the antagonism which could be directed at him as the intruder. These are the early years of the Inquisition when Dominicans were sent out to preach and hear confession, but all the while "inquiring" (from the Latin word *inquisit*) about possible heresies. This village curé, played by Jean Carmet, is fashioned to be the protector of his flock. He also tries, however, not to displease any elements of the church or the local count, who was responsible for his support. Etienne's patronymic, which seems to mark him as a member of the nobility, makes the curé's position particularly delicate. The curé first becomes leery when Etienne says that he is in the region to uncover possible heretics.

The curé, rebuffing Etienne, remarks that "There are no heretics in my parish.... My people are as pious as they are poor." Etienne counters:

ETIENNE: No doubt you have drawn up the list of suspected heretics as the church council ordered you to do.

CURÉ: There are no names to list.

ETIENNE: And intruders? Sometimes they disguise themselves as cobblers or barbers. They would have laymen baptize and women preach. Their poison could destroy the whole church.

CURÉ: You are the first "intruder" to stop here in many months. I guard my flock from "pious wayfarers."

The curé's one-upmanship is nearly lost on Etienne, who perseveres, explaining that he has not come to threaten the flock, but only to uncover "irregularities" so the guilty may repent and be absolved.

CURÉ: Then you have always been successful getting heretics to 'repent.'

ETIENNE: Only once did I fail . . .

CURÉ: Yes?

ETIENNE: After every means of persuasion, I . . .

CURÉ: You . . .

ETIENNE: I made my recommendation

CURÉ: You . . .

ETIENNE: The heretic was destroyed.

CURÉ: Burned?

ETIENNE: By the secular authorities, of course.

At this point the curé steps back, thereby blocking from Etienne's view a portion of a wall painting illustrating part of the Gospels: the Massacre of the Innocents, when Herod ordered that all babies be killed, a theme familiar in the murals that adorned rural Romanesque churches. I hypothesized that here the villagers might have scratched a halo around the head of the dog, which is often depicted at the feet of the murderous henchmen. Clearly the curé realizes that there are secrets to keep from this intruding friar. The curé intervenes several times to try to protect or save his villagers. One such instance is later in the film when Etienne spies what a woman was embroidering on a shroud.

ETIENNE: Why was that woman embroidering a dog on the shroud?

CURÉ: A dog?

ETIENNE: Yes.

CURÉ: Why, a dog is the symbol of Saint Dominic, the founder of your order.

ETIENNE: But how would these people know that?

CURÉ: You would be surprised at what they know, friar Etienne.

As Etienne makes himself comfortable in a side chapel, the curé moves toward his housekeeper who has just entered. "That man's got the sight of a bat, whose fierce, unblinking eyes are blind," he tells her in a near-whisper. Though it is not explicit in this film, a small percentage of thirteenth-century parish priests were married, and many others had lifelong relationships with one woman. Villages were often too poor to support a priest, so a peasant woman with land to work sometimes served as the priest's only real means of support.

Creating dialogue for a screenplay set in the distant past demands the probing of unusual resources. Though Etienne's manner of speech can be somewhat intuited from his writings, we have no explicit records of how the peasants spoke, since peasants did not write. Theirs was an oral culture, mostly lost to us. We can, however, infer that their speech contained imagery inspired by their daily life and by metaphors used in fables. The figurative expressions found in folklore and passed down from generation to generation must also have influenced their speech. So I turned to orally transmitted fables and folklore to find the language through which the peasants could express themselves. As I created the characters and their motivations, I tried to cast their thoughts in the words of those fables. When I found sculpture or painting that illustrated the same fables, I hypothesized that the particular fable was commonly known and thus an authentic part of the mindset of the times. The curé's aphorism, for instance, comparing Etienne to a bat, derives from such sources, as do other fables worked into the dialogue of the film, (for instance the wolf and the lamb; the stag in the bushes). The "unblinking eyes" of the blind bat establishes the theme of the film: Etienne's passage from blindness to insight, a course wherein he learns something about himself, as well as about the peasant world into which he has stumbled.

Sermons delivered to the unlettered were another source of potential dialogue, for they also contained fables. Sometimes these sermons were written down, so they are accessible to us. They provided not only examples of imagery, but also a model for the sermon Etienne would preach in the village. In his treatise Etienne indicates that he was preaching against superstition and sorcery, but in the script, to focus the plotline, he preaches against heresy. Searching for a sermon that could work cinematically, one that contained animal imagery to amuse the crowd in the marketplace, I found such an example in the writings of the preacher Jacques de Vitry, whose work Etienne had read. It tells of a little bird and a fox with a long red tongue, a tongue that becomes a metaphor for a heretic's words. The bird hops close to the fox to admire his beautiful tongue, and suddenly it is gobbled up in one gulp.

This apposite fable allows Etienne to use such props as fox skins and caged birds, items readily present in a marketplace of a village. The actor could thus create the "business" that highlights Etienne as the showman that such a preacher must have been. In the English language version, i.e. the original version of the script, the forest woman and the peasants use short, simple words. When Etienne uses long latinate words, the peasants do not understand him. He must rephrase his sentence or clarify the meaning, for example when he explains that "divination" is "a craft of the devil."



A major challenge in making a film that takes place long ago is to determine what kinds of gestures the characters would have used. Though the gestures are not really part of scriptwriting, knowing them helped me envision how the actors would move and interact. Thus I assembled an art-historical research album containing pictures of wall paintings, statuary, and manuscripts which, among other things, showed gestures people would make in particular instances. An illustration of confession from a medieval manuscript showed how a priest and a confessant would be placed. In the film, just as in the manuscript, the person confessing kneels before Etienne with no partition to screen one from the other. The actors' gestures, too, replicate those of the figures in the illustration.

In the script, Etienne learns through the confessional about a situation that leads to the development of the subplot, a complaint about the newly-created fish ponds and their effect upon the community.* The invented character Cecile, a peasant woman, mistakenly interprets Etienne's sermon about the dangers of "beautiful-tongued" heretics by "confessing" that "the Count is the fox with the red tongue Last year he flooded the best field and made a pond for fish." To dramatize the idea of the injustice implicit in the subplot, I created the Artauds, a family whose livelihood was severely impaired by the greedy actions of a local count. In his quest for a cash crop of fish that he could sell in town, Count de Villars flooded fertile fields, thereby creating a pond and depriving the Artauds of land they had traditionally cultivated. In reaction, two Artaud men drain the ponds in an act of sabotage.

These new ponds are the ecological underpinning of both the primary and secondary plots of the film. On the one hand they have impeded the family's ability to grow sufficient food; on the other, they have altered the natural balance of the region by attracting mosquitoes and other insects common to marshlands. In the heat of August, when the film takes place, the swarms of mosquitoes attracted to the standing waters of the pond are likely to bite children, who will scratch the bites. The scratched skin becomes infected, and it is then that the mild antibiotic properties of the elderflowers, properly prepared, would have a healing effect. According to Etienne's text, the *vetula* took people to "worship" the elder tree; one could also imag-

ine that the woman used some part of the tree as a healing agent in the treatment of sick children. In fact, modern science has demonstrated that the pistil and stamen, the bark, leaves, berries, and especially the flowers of the elder tree, have therapeutic properties when gathered at the right time and prepared in the appropriate ways. So perhaps this *vetula* knew through folkloric transmission and through trial and error what modern science has learned: that the properties of plants can cure certain ailments and that ritual can induce healing. Though the root of the Latin word *vetula* seems to imply that the woman was old, the context in which Etienne uses it demonstrates that above all the people believed she sought health and effected cures. Thus Etienne's disparaging comments about her are actually precious historical relics which provide an insight into the store of knowledge that such a healing woman may have possessed. Further, one might hypothesize that a healing woman with such knowledge would know when to pick the medicinal plant and where it grew. It was at one such spot that I decided to have Etienne encounter the *vetula*.

To devise the dialogue that the *vetula* would speak when Etienne saw her first picking and then preparing her medications, I examined the elder bushes at a local botanical garden. After touching, smelling and even tasting the various parts of the tree, as well as studying its shape and form, and reviewing the traditional remedies attributed to it, I tried to imagine what the *vetula* might have known about the elder. She must have known when the leaves or bark should be gathered, how they must be prepared, and what parts are good for warts, burns, sore throats, or fever. Looking into folklore associated with the tree, I learned that the elder was known as a "Mother Tree" and that a Danish folksong is dedicated to the Elder Mother. I decided to call the *vetula* Elda, an English variant of the name by which the elder tree was known in Germanic tongues.

In addition to her knowledge of plants, I also decided to give Elda a certain power over wild animals, and so I tapped into the ancient mythic figure of the Mistress of the Beasts. The art-historical tradition sometimes shows this female hero-



ine/goddess subduing a lion or other wild animal. This mythic figure may have acquired her reputation for controlling wild animals because, on occasion, when baby animals are raised by humans, they will not attack the person who raised them. I made Elda one of these women so that in the story she could communicate with the wolf, thereby offering a kind of protection to the baby in the grove rite.

Whether he is observing the grove rite or scowling at the peasants, Etienne views the villagers' lives as dangerously tainted by the devil. Early on, the monk takes part in a Mass dedicated to Saint Christopher, but then, inexplicably from Etienne's point of view, the peasants leave the church and carry the statue into the fields. They begin to leap around it throwing what he sees as wicked serpents onto the figure of the Christian saint. From the peasants' point of view, the powers of

Saint Christopher have been bestowed upon the snakes (an example of sympathetic magic). As the snakes fall to the ground they will help the seed quicken and grow, thereby assuring a good grain crop for the coming season. Etienne is horrified as a girl tells him, "The curé says that the wicked serpents were in the Garden of Eden. These are the good ones. Saint Christopher helps them open up the earth so it can take the seed." For her and the other villagers these "serpents" will help the grain grow as high as the dancers leap. The child's words reflect a pre-Christian attitude to the serpent, when it was the companion of the Mother Goddess and of the healing gods Aesclepius and Hygeia. Etienne sees the serpent as representing evil, as it does in all Christian art and literature.

The main conflict in the film is Etienne's reaction to the power that Elda's knowledge of healing gives her. We observe her expertise in the grove where Guinefort is buried. It is there that she and the mothers undertake a ritual that was probably centuries-old even before it was conveyed to the women in the mid-thirteenth century. As Etienne tells us, women with sick children would seek out the *vetula*. It was she who taught them the ritual they should enact. Etienne's text relates exactly what the peasants told him about this rite and the *vetula*'s role in it. The nocturnal grove scene in *Sorceress* is based on Etienne's description, but the mother seeking out Elda in her hovel is added to the story so that the healing power of the elderflower-brew can be alluded to. In the darkness of the hovel we glimpse Elda giving the baby something to drink before she and the mother take him to Guinefort's grove. Once at the site Elda hangs the infant's clothes on the tree and then, with the mother, she passes the naked baby between two tree trunks. Together they call upon the spirits of the woods to take back the sick child and return a healthy one in its place. The words of the chant they intone suggest that this part of the rite is an example of the ancient superstition concerning the changeling, i.e. that a sick or abnormal child is not the parents' real offspring, but a different child that the "wood spirits," or some other supernatural force, has substituted for their own. Then the mother and the *vetula* lay the baby on straw and place candles on either side of the child's head. A wolf, reported to appear sometimes, becomes part of the scene. I hypothesized that here, Elda's powers as a Mistress of the Beasts would be revealed, that she might have known wild creatures so well that she could make sounds they would react to, or, that she might have brought up the wolf from birth and been able to control him. But to Etienne's eyes, the baby was in mortal danger. Why were mothers willing to subject their babies to such a dangerous rite, Etienne would ponder? And we, in our time, would ask ourselves the same question.

Modern research into the placebo effect has shown that healing techniques are more likely to be effective if people believe they are following culturally accepted methods. By extension, the rite in the grove, related as it was to the mothers' belief in the greyhound's healing powers, entailed a fixed series of activities that would assuage those "spirits" responsible for curing the babies. If a baby died despite the mother's having performed the long-sanctioned ritual, the mother would be exonerated of guilt. She had done what she could. So, given that particular peasant culture, Elda was helping the mothers, participating with them in a long-enshrined rite, all the while administering the "flower water" so that its healing properties could go to work.

The main theme of the film revolves around the idea that those in positions of power must learn to see in a new way. Etienne is the first to understand this lesson, and later he tries to teach it to the count. The idea for such a plot evolved from the placement of this account in Etienne's treatise, for he included these events in his section on superstitions, rather than his description of heresy. Why did Etienne ultimately judge the actions of the *vetula* as being superstitions and not heresy? At other times he had participated in judgments that resulted in the burning of heretics. From Etienne's point of view the *vetula* practiced divination; she taught the mothers to invoke the devil; she led the ritual which set up a dog as a saint. Why did he not decide that she was a heretic who should be burned? His text does not really answer the question.

It is here that, for cinematic purposes, I had to take a leap of the imagination and create a back-story. What if, in confronting the *vetula*, Etienne de Bourbon met someone who both repelled and fascinated him, a woman his age, with grace and mystery. What if, after condemning this woman to death, he was brought to the discovery of some suppressed secret of his own past that helped him see this woman, and other women of her kind, in a different light? What if he came to realize that he, in his lordly judgments of people, had been guilty of pride, one of the vices he was writing against in this treatise? These are dramatic narrative questions, and the answers that I devised, though couched the realities of the Middle Ages, were totally imaginary.

Historians and art historians always take on the role of interpreters as we analyze a text or a visual document. We work within a rubric of insights and intuitions fostered by long immersion in our respective fields. But the questions we pose are shaped by our own times, our own interests, and our own imaginations. It was in this spirit that I set out to write a screenplay based on both the peasants' understanding of the martyred dog, and the ritual as it took shape through its generational passage. However, I also sought to create a script propelled by a dramatic story, one which, given those particular texts, I believed could have happened.

The rite in the woods gave Etienne ample justification, according to church law, to condemn the *vetula*. If we envision Etienne as a reasonable man, the ritual must have struck him as terrifying, not only because it was dedicated to a dog saint, but also because it actually did put the babies in grave danger. In Etienne's view the *vetula* and the mothers who followed her came close to committing infanticide. Many modern observers would agree. I saw that the dramatic tension of the film could reside in the conflict between Etienne's justifiable fear for the babies' lives and our understanding of the desperate mothers willing to go to all ends to save their children.

In the film, however, Etienne's judgment of Elda is ultimately made on personal grounds, because of something he discovers about himself. The friar's "suppressed" past was an invention, devised for the purposes of plot. I imagined that Etienne was deeply unnerved by Elda, so he rails against her, and then condemns her to be burned. In that speech he lets slip that she, the devil-become-woman, has roused lust in his dreams. The writings of Peter the Venerable, along with figures sculpted on the mid-twelfth century capitals in the church at Vézelay and elsewhere, provide graphic

examples of this dream imagery. One of the capitals, for instance, displays a nude woman with ample breasts and wild flowing hair. She personifies luxuria or sexual profligacy. Luxuria here as elsewhere is accompanied by the devil and is presented to the eyes of a victimized monk. These kinds of writings and sculptures inspired my creation of Etienne's internal conflicts: his repulsion at the infanticidal acts committed by the forest woman, his repressed attraction to her, the interdiction against his acting on that attraction, and his ensuing desire to condemn her to death.



During their final explosive confrontation Elda reveals to Etienne the tragedy of her past when she was a victim of the custom of first-night right. This part of her past is a total invention, but consonant with the customs of medieval times, when, it has been reported, a lord could deflower a peasant girl on her wedding night. However, other parts of her life story, and particularly her acceptance of her role as a healer, were inspired by an ethnographic inquiry conducted among elders in the Dombes and reported on in the book by Jean-Claude Schmitt.* The aged people remembered a person called "la Fanchette," who was later identified at Françoise Gadin. She lived alone in a hut and gathered watercress and dandelions for food. She cast spells, but never upon those who gave her meat. She went on pilgrimages carrying small change given to her by the parents of sick children who wanted her to pray for their recovery at some sacred site. Poor and solitary, linked to sickness and health, birth and death, "la Fanchette" was the last in a long line of women healers with ties to the grove. The old people's memory of her partially inspired my creation of Elda. Gadin's burial place in the graveyard at Chatillon-sur-Charlaronne was destroyed in 1974, so there are no monuments to her. Nor is there a memorial



to any of the other healers who served at the site throughout the centuries. But the brilliant work of Jean-Claude Schmitt has brought to light traces of their lives. Like "la Fanchette," many of the other women no doubt also had a special knowledge of the healing power of plants and of what we would today call the occult. What the real Etienne de Bourbon surely never fathomed was that after he preached

against the dog saint, after he thought he had extirpated its every aspect, seven-hundred years later, a woman such as "la Fanchette" could be making pilgrimages to the grave site with the ultimate goal of healing sick children.

In *Sorceress*, a composite of the subsequent generations of women who “learned the healing ways” is the character Agnes played by Maria de Medeiros. Mysteriously attracted to Elda, Agnes intuits the connection between the dog saint, the tree, and the healing practices. In a nod to the many female painters who until recently went unrecognized, I made her an artist who was able to synthesize the whole story in one drawing shown at the end: the dog, the tree, the woman and the baby. The character, Etienne, when looking at her drawing, is able to truly see for the first time. The curé and Etienne’s servant, Simeon, realize this. Simeon, in a final use of a folkloric aphorism, compares Etienne to a proud stag who got his antlers caught in the bushes, and who was helped by the villagers to set himself free. That is an appropriate fable to use here, for the part of the treatise that contains this story is under the rubric of *Pride*. The curé playfully muses that one day Etienne might write just such a grand treatise with many parts, and parts within parts, (just as the Scholastic philosophers of the day were wont to write). “But,” Simeon says, “here he suffered.” The curé counters, “He’ll even fit that suffering into the treatise. But hidden. And when men read it, they’ll never know what really happened.”



Though we might like to think the real Etienne de Bourbon was likewise changed by what he experienced in the village in the Dombes, that is probably not the case. However, in my imagination, I purposely set the story in 1230 because, before that date, Etienne had been involved in a trial where a woman was burned. After that date, he would never again be partner to a burning.

The script for *Sorceress* was based on many documents and factual sources: Etienne's Latin text; the Romanesque friezes and capitals illustrating the animal fables that were recorded by folklorists many hundreds of years later; the elder plant with its various therapeutic properties; the ethnographic inquiry into the last remaining "healing woman". But the plot of the story as played out in the film, and especially the conflict and its resolution, are fictitious. Etienne's recollection of a trauma he had suffered and its relationship to the crime he then committed; his understanding of his own role as perpetrator of an abominable act; his attempts to abrogate the sentence to which he had condemned Elda --- those elements are dramatic inventions. However, his decision, in the film, to syncretize the memory of the faithful dog with a true Christian saint does reflect something of what commonly happened when sacred figures from the Roman or Celtic realms were too powerful to be obliterated from people's memories. In the film Etienne orders that a chapel be built at the grove, a chapel housing the statue of a Christian saint with a greyhound dog at his side. Documents contain no trace of such a chapel, though the memories of octogenarians, as well as the stratigraphy of the archaeological excavation, demon-

strate that the site was remembered as connected to special, if not sacred, rites down through the ages.

We know that, until modern times, healing, especially relating to childbirth and children, was in the hands of women. Little of that tradition was written, but it was handed down orally until modern science intruded. In the Middle Ages, however, the transmission of folk medicine from mother to daughter was firmly intact, as witnessed by Eteinne's text and by the centuries-long survival of certain elements of the healing cult. This long survival is memorialized by the final shot of *Sorceress*: Elda, hand-in-hand with Agnes, the young healing woman of the next generation, going off to Guinefort's grove. The new healing woman would pass down her knowledge of the legend well beyond the thirteenth century. We, the filmmakers in the twentieth, would re-imagine it in cinematic form.

* For an in-depth historical and ethnographic study of Etienne's account see Jean-Claude Schmitt, *The Holy Greyhound*, Cambridge, 1983. (Originally published in French as *Le saint lévrier*.) The scholarly background for many elements in this film can be found in the Schmitt book.

** For a summary of the archeological evidence concerning the site of the count's dwelling and the offerings made by the mothers of sick children see Jean-Michel Poisson, "Aux confins d'archéologie et de l'ethnographie, Recherches dans le bois de Saint-Guinefort (Ain)" in *Le patrimoine c'est d'abord les gens... Textes et images pour Jean Guibal*, collected by Jean-Claude Duclos, et al., Patrimoine en Isère. Centre alpin et rhodanien d'ethnologie, 2003, 215-220.

A note on shooting in two different languages, thus creating both a French and an English version of *Sorceress*:

The script was originally written in English, and we had it translated into French for the shoot. The main actors learned both the French translation and as well as the English original. For each scene we shot the close-ups and the medium shots first in French and then in English. The English of some of the actors was too accented to make a smooth English language version, so we had their parts re-voiced by other actors, with their lips in sync with the original actors' lips as much as possible.

ENTRETIEN AVEC SUZANNE SCHIFFMAN

sur

LE MOINE ET LA SORCIERE

Entretien réalisé par Marc Chevrier en avril 1987

Comment en êtes-vous venue, après avoir été longtemps l'assistante de François Truffaut, à vouloir passer à la réalisation ?

Il y a eu un autre projet avant celui-ci. Un scénario auquel j'ai travaillé avec Jean-Louis Comolli et qui devait être produit par La Cécilia et Martine Marignac. Le scénario était au départ destiné à Jean-Louis, mais je l'ai développé dans une direction différente et ils (Martine et Jean-Louis) ont fini par me dire : " Pourquoi ne le tournerais-tu pas toi-même ? "



Nous étions entre deux projets avec François Truffaut, alors j'ai dit : " Oui, pourquoi pas ? ". J'ai demandé l'Avance sur recettes, je ne l'ai pas eue, et le projet a été bloqué. Mais je ne me suis pas dit à ce moment-là : " Il faut absolument que je fasse un film ". J'ai toujours pensé qu'il fallait un courage formidable pour faire un film et j'étais très contente de laisser ce courage aux autres.

Avec François, je participais au scénario, j'étais sur le tournage, je suivais le montage : je me trouvais très bien sans l'angoisse et la responsabilité de celui qui a le film sur les épaules. Et puis François est mort, et c'est comme s'il y avait eu une coupure avec tout ce qui s'était passé avant. J'ai essayé de retravailler comme assistante mais j'ai compris que je ne pouvais plus travailler avec quelqu'un. Je suis resté près d'un an à me dire : " Qu'est-ce que je vais faire ? ". Je n'avais ni la force, ni le courage de me lancer dans un projet personnel.

Je crois que j'ai collaboré à deux ou trois scénarios pour des amis metteurs en scène. Puis au printemps 85, une Américaine, Pamela Berger, m'a téléphoné de Boston pour me proposer de travailler comme co-scénariste sur un projet médiéval soutenu par le N.E.H. (National Endowment for the Humanities), un énorme organisme culturel à Washington. J'ai accepté, elle est venue en France et nous nous sommes mises au travail. Plus je rentrais dans ce scénario, plus j'y trouvais mon compte, et plus je m'apercevais qu'il n'y avait qu'une personne qui prenait des décisions par rapport au film que cette histoire pouvait devenir. J'ai fini par dire à Pamela : " On n'écrit pas un scénario dans le vide, on l'écrit pour un metteur en scène, et pour l'instant, le metteur en scène, ça a l'air d'être moi ". Ce à quoi elle a répondu : " Pourquoi pas ? ", et j'ai continué à travailler pour en faire une chose qui me soit personnelle.

Est-ce que l'idée des comédiens était là dès le départ ?

Jean Carmet (le curé) dès le départ. Maria de Medeiros (la jeune muette) aussi. Il y a eu un court flottement sur Elda et Etienne de Bourbon. Sans doute parce qu'au moment où j'étais moins impliquée dans le projet, j'acceptais l'idée de comédiens

qui allaient plus dans le sens du cliché moyenâgeux. J'ai proposé le rôle d'Elda à une comédienne qui a accepté puis est revenue sur sa décision. Ce refus a été extrêmement positif pour moi puisqu'il m'a amené à prendre des décisions qui allaient plus dans le sens de mon désir.



J'ai alors proposé le rôle d'Elda à Christine Boisson et celui du moine à Tchéky Karyo. Je savais que leur donner ces rôles, c'était bon pour le film et pour eux. J'ai envie que les films servent les acteurs qui y participent.

Je me suis battue pour les avoir tous les deux, et ça aussi c'est une bonne façon de prendre possession d'un film.

Lorsque vous dites que vous avez trouvé votre compte dans ce projet, c'est par rapport à quoi ?

Parce que, plus qu'un récit historique, c'est l'histoire de rapports entre homme et femme, un rapport entre l'intelligence intuitive et l'intelligence normative qui est un peu mon propre rapport à l'intelligence. Et puis très fort, l'envie de raconter une histoire avec certains acteurs. Lorsqu'on fait un premier film très jeune, on peut le faire directement sur soi-même. Lorsqu'on le fait aussi tard que moi, on a envie de se cacher derrière une histoire, même si on s'en sert pour dire quelque chose. Il y a aussi un autre élément, peut-être parce que j'ai l'âge que j'ai, j'avais envie qu'il y ait de la bonté dans ce que je ferais, de l'espoir.

Comment avez-vous retravaillé le projet initial ?

Il a fallu élaguer le côté didactique du projet de Pamela Berger (elle est professeur d'histoire de l'art du Moyen-Âge). J'ai supprimé certains personnages, modifié d'autres, remplacé une grande mystique (très bavarde) par le jeune muette. C'était un travail d'allègement et d'humour pour ramener l'histoire à une ligne narrative plus simple tout en respectant la réalité historique. J'ai modifié la construction et simplifié la fin. Je voulais qu'il y ait une modestie dans l'histoire et, en la tirant vers la fable, je la tirais vers cette modestie. C'est aussi le sens du générique de fin, avec les acteurs qui apparaissent dans des médaillons : c'est une façon de se détacher de l'histoire, ce sont des acteurs qui jouent des rôles.

Est-ce qu'il y avait une difficulté particulière à faire parler des personnages du Moyen-Âge ?

Pas de difficultés dans la mesure où nous étions bien convaincues qu'il n'était pas question de les faire parler dans le langage du XIII^{ème} siècle, période à laquelle se situe l'anecdote historique dont Pamela Berger est partie. Il est vrai que c'était des dialogues très écrits et qu'il fallait jouer comme s'ils étaient parlés, ce qui a parfois posé des problèmes aux comédiens. Ce qui posait aussi des problèmes, c'est que je leur demandais de ne jamais basculer ni dans la comédie, ni dans une trop grande expressivité, et surtout de ne pas être plus malins que leurs personnages : respecter la cohérence du projet ne pouvait se faire qu'en conservant une certaine



forme de simplicité, de naïveté, de limpidité. Il fallait trouver un équilibre pour le jeu des acteurs : les aider à maintenir chacun leur ligne sans se laisser entraîner par le jeu de l'autre. Ainsi, ce que je demandais à Christine Boisson, c'était une ligne droite – qui était très brimante : face à Tchéky, elle avait l'impression de ne rien avoir le droit de faire. Je lui disais : " Si, tu as le droit de faire ce qui est le plus difficile : faire passer une émotion en ayant l'air de ne rien faire pour cela ". Et elle le fait admirablement bien.

Pour Féodor Atkine, qui incarne le Comte de Villars, on a travaillé dans l'optique du conte de fées : son personnage, c'est l'ogre ou Barbe Bleue, pas de nuances, et ça aussi il fallait oser le faire.

Quels étaient vos partis-pris de départ, par rapport aux problèmes de la représentation du Moyen-Âge ?

Je savais surtout ce que je ne voulais pas : pas de zoom, pas de mouvements compliqués, donc pas d'Elemak sur plancher, seulement des travellings, pas d'effets : je voulais des plans simples, comme si, pour faire croire à la fable du Moyen-Âge, il fallait tourner aussi simplement et naïvement. Je ne voulais pas m'approcher beaucoup des personnages, je sentais que c'était une chose que je ne pouvais pas faire, surtout en extérieur : il fallait que je les inscrive dans cet environnement d'arbres – d'ailleurs je voulais le moins de ciel possible, et même le critère de recherche du village était principalement celui-là, il devait être enfermé, entouré par les arbres.

Vous avez travaillé par rapport à des références picturales ou iconographiques précises ?

Pour les costumes, absolument. Pour les objets et les outils, bien sûr. Pour l'image d'ensemble du village, Bernard Vezat, le décorateur, a beaucoup travaillé à partir d'œuvres d'un graveur du XIX^{ème} siècle, Bresdin. Mais on n'est pas parti d'un peintre, on ne s'est pas dit : " On va essayer de ressembler à... ".

Le village du film a été complètement reconstruit ?

C'est un hameau de Corrèze, Meyrignac-l'église, que nous avons transformé. Il y a eu un énorme travail de réhabillage des toits, de camouflage des murs de pierres. Nous avons pris le centre du village, autour de l'église, pour en faire "notre" village. L'espace a été complètement réinventé à partir de trajets que j'indiquais au décorateur : " le moine viendra de là ; par là, on ira à l'étang ; les Artaud habiteront là... " Même si je ne la montre pas précisément dans le film, j'avais besoin de pouvoir visualiser cette topographie. J'aurais été incapable d'inventer une réalité à partir de rien. J'avais besoin de me dire : " Le château, on y va en montant par



là" ; ça me donnait un support pour créer cet univers et y faire circuler les personnages. Ensuite, le village a été entouré de barrières de bois, barricadé, avec cette idée d'enfermement sur lui-même. Quant au château, avec son donjon, c'est aussi une image naïve : un château de conte de fées.

Pour ce qui est de la musique, il y avait une question, je suppose, qui était de savoir si vous preniez une musique médiévale ou si vous faisiez composer une musique d'aujourd'hui ?

J'ai rencontré un spécialiste de musique du Moyen-Âge, Joel Cohen, qui m'a amené des éléments sur cassettes, j'ai fait aussi repiquer d'autres extraits, mais ça ne me satisfaisait pas. J'avais envie d'une musique tournée vers l'Orient. J'en ai parlé à un ami, Bernard Chaumeil, le perchman de l'ingénieur du son Pierre Gamet, qui a une discothèque fantastique. Il m'a fait écouter des choses. Je lui ai demandé d'en repiquer certaines – j'ai découvert Chemirani et le zarb, et j'ai su dans quelle direction devait aller la musique du film. On a fait un pré-mixage avec ça, que nous avons fait écouter à Michel Portal. Il a proposé de rajouter au zarb une vielle et une voix, mais toujours en pensant à l'Orient : l'Orient comme une musique qui est aujourd'hui une musique du Moyen-Âge, avec cette étrangeté qui fait qu'on a l'idée du Moyen-Âge sans y être. La musique a donc été faite à quatre : Chemirani au zarb, qui improvisait presque directement sur l'image, la vielle, un autre musicien iranien qui jouait du Kamantch, et Portal à la clarinette basse. C'est un travail de réécriture et de reconstruction à partir de éléments du pré-mixage. J'avais des doutes sur la musique de la fin, et finalement Michel m'a proposé cette espèce de ronde qui allait bien avec l'idée de fable.

Vous diriez que le film parle de quoi ? De l'intolérance ? De l'aveuglement par rapport à une foi ou à un dogme ? De la relativité de tout cela et que tout le monde a ses raisons ?

Ça parle de tolérance, ça parle d'amour, ça parle de la possibilité d'admettre l'autre. Mais pour moi, ce ne sont pas des idées, ce sont des sentiments.

Dans quelle direction avez-vous l'impression de vouloir aller maintenant ?

Le prochain film, même si je l'ai écrit avant de tourner celui-ci, a été écrit par opposition au *Moine et la sorcière* : il se passe aujourd'hui, à Paris, sans animaux, sans bébé, et c'est une comédie en forme d'enquête. Ce qui me donne la possibilité de tourner sans avoir à réinventer un monde qui n'existe pas et me donne d'autres contraintes, qui sont celles de Paris aujourd'hui. J'ai envie de parler de relations entre les gens, et surtout de couples qui n'en sont pas – de couples paradoxaux. A quoi s'ajoute l'envie de tourner avec certains comédiens que j'aime bien et que j'ai rêvé de voir ensemble sur l'écran. Ce sont des petites choses, des envies modestes, et ce que je voudrais, à travers ces envies modestes, c'est donner du plaisir aux gens qui regarderont le film.

Et en même temps, j'en reviens toujours à des choses pratiques. Pour *Le Moine et la sorcière*, au départ, il y avait cette idée de fable, et ensuite il faut se trouver des raisons de faire le film, c'est une lutte contre les éléments, contre ce dont on ne veut pas, il faut faire constamment des choix, et c'est à travers ces choix que le film prend son sens. Tout en gardant l'idée globale du film en tête, j'avais en

permanence l'impression de résoudre un problème particulier à la fois : ça peut être les difficultés d'un dialogue comme les difficultés de circulation de lumière à l'intérieur d'un lieu.

Je ne pourrais pas fonctionner sur des grands principes abstraits. Un film, ça se fait avec des gens, avec beaucoup d'argent, même lorsque le budget est relativement bas, et toutes ces responsabilités font partie d'un film et du résultat final, sur l'écran. Je suis incapable de me dire : " Si on dépasse, ou si on épuise les gens à faire douze heures de plus, ce n'est pas grave ". Il faut composer, et je ne pense pas que ce soit négatif. C'est une obligation positive de devoir composer avec les réalités économiques ou physiques des gens avec qui on travaille, avec leurs personnalité. Surmonter toutes ces contraintes, c'est se prouver à soi-même que le film avait une raison d'exister. Même si on cours de route on a des doutes abominables. Et je crois qu'on ne peut pas ne pas en avoir. C'est cela aussi qui est un moteur et qui donne envie de faire d'autres films. Des choses que je n'ai pas pu faire ou qui sont réussies mais presque comme si c'était malgré moi, et que la prochaine fois je voudrais réussir volontairement. Des pistes que je voudrais explorer, ou des armes que je n'ai pas utilisées pour obtenir telles choses et dont je sais maintenant comment je pourrais les utiliser. Tant qu'on n'a pas l'angoisse de toutes ces responsabilités, on n'apprend rien, ce n'est pas comparable. On apprend le bonheur de faire du cinéma, c'est vrai... Ce qui est vrai aussi, c'est que je suis incapable de faire autre chose. Donc il faut bien que je m'entête !



Sorceress is a suspenseful drama revolving around Etienne de Bourbon, a 13th century Dominican friar who, sent by the Pope to seek out heretics, arrives in a small French village where he discovers Elda, a strangely beautiful and mysterious forest woman. Elda is respected in the village because she performs ancient healing rituals and understands nature's secrets. As an inquisitor, Etienne sets out to investigate these rites and practices. It is the confrontation between the two, the conflict between two sets of beliefs, which forms the basis for this moving and beautiful film. *Sorceress* is a dramatization of the conflict between ancient customs and religious dogma.

COLOR, 96 MINUTES, DRAMA, NOT RATED