CHAPTER THREE

LOCKE AND THE LAPLAND WITCHES

It was by no means clear to natural philosophers of the seventeenth century where the line lay between the natural and the supernatural. Vast areas of the natural world such as biology, medicine and even chemistry remained mysterious to them. Locke, Newton and Boyle all engaged in alchemical experiments. From the perspective of the twenty-first century their efforts may seem to have been at odds with their professed aims as natural philosophers. If Newton was prepared to spend more time at his alchemy than he did developing a theory of gravity then it might seem that the scientific revolution owed more to mysticism and irrationalism than it did to observation and investigation, and more to Neo-Platonism than to classical atomistic theories. Francis Yates1 and Betty Jo Teeter Dobbs2 have argued along these lines. But the distinction which Dobbs and Yates make between mysticism and rationalism, or between the natural and supernatural is an anachronistic one which presupposes a world view more characteristic of the nineteenth or twentieth centuries than the seventeenth. Seen from the perspective of the seventeenth century the alchemical project falls into place within the intellectual framework of natural philosophy. It was an attempt to harness a still unknown natural process and produce an element by artificial means. The project was not fundamentally irrational in conception given the limitations of technological and scientific knowledge of the time. Turning to medicine, we find that practitioners, Locke among them,3 were ready to employ magic. Today we would call this mysticism, but to doctors who knew nothing about the causes of disease it might seem a necessary and reasonable expedient. In some cases it might even have a placebo effect on the patient and produce the impression of a cure. In this instance,

observation and experiment would seem to offer empirical evidence to back up a faulty methodology. It was an unavoidable weakness of the philosophical outlook and the scientific knowledge of the time.

If magic could be believed to work medical cures then it was also considered possible to use it to do harm. The Royal College of Physicians accepted that witchcraft could be a cause of illness.\(^4\) Witchcraft trials are often thought of as medieval, but were, in fact, a rare phenomenon in Europe before 1300. They seemed about to die out in early sixteenth century Europe only to reach panic proportions by the late 1600s.\(^5\) In England there was a rise in witchcraft prosecution during the mid-seventeenth,\(^6\) that is to say, in Locke’s life time. The witch trial is, overwhelmingly, an early modern phenomenon.

The now classic European image of the witch and witchcraft was built up in the course of these sixteenth and seventeenth century trials. Claims that witches held a sabbat and made a pact with the devil only emerged in Europe during the sixteenth century. England, where the Inquisition was never established, remained distinctive in the official attitude toward witchcraft and the suggestion that the devil was actively involved was slow to emerge.\(^7\) Not until 1604 was, what was by then, the European conception of witchcraft that included making a pact with the devil and holding sabbats encoded in English law.\(^8\) There was no mention of the devil in most of the prosecutions for witchcraft in Essex, one of the English regions most intensely affected by hysteria about witches. The devil did not find his way into English court rooms until the 1640s.

Across the Atlantic, the Salem witch trials took place in 1692. The fear of witches continued well into the eighteenth century. The last legal European witch-burning took place in Switzerland in 1782. By the eighteenth century witch trials had become rare in England, although unofficial lynching of supposed witches continued.\(^9\) Alice Molland was

\(^4\) Thomas, (1971), 640.
\(^8\) Thomas, (1971), 526.
\(^9\) Ibid. 550.