Revisiting the Sabbat, or: The Dance of the Cats

Today I will tell you stories and confront you with a bit of folklore.

One night in May a boy from Wiedensahl [near Hannover in Germany] hid behind the hearth and observed how his mistress anointed the broom. With the words: `Over hedge and fence!' she rode out of the door. The boy copied everything, only he had not listened precisely enough. He said: `Through hedge and fence!' and thus he arrived very dishevelled at the Blocksberg, where he crept into a bush. The witches danced and drank. The boy secretly put a wineglas with a golden base into his pocket. The bride of his cousin is also there. She is slaughtered and eaten. The boy takes away a rib, which is missing afterwards, when they collect the bones. `Then it has to be done without it', it was said and the girl was brought to life again without the missing rib. For the return journey everyone was given an animal to ride on. The boy also joined. `Boy, boy,' said his mistress, `how will you get back home again? Sit on what is left standing; but you must not speak a word.' It was a yearling calf he got. On the way it jumped across a broad stream in a single jump. `That was some jump for a yearling calf!' cried the boy. At this very moment he found himself lying on the earth. His beautiful glass was now only an old horse hoof, and he had to march for six weeks, before he returned home.[1]

Twenty years ago, Carlo Ginzburg published a book, *Storia Notturna*, somewhat questionably translated into English as *Ecstacies*, in which he traced the motif of the "bone miracle" back to a pre-Christian shamanistic European culture. He missed the German example I just read out and the question is whether this would have provided him with another arrow on his bough. There are, in fact several hundreds of sabbat stories which in one way or another provide details which Ginzburg would have found interesting. Those of you who know my work, will be aware that I have severely criticised Ginzburg's.[2] Conceptions of the witches' sabbat were different throughout Europe, they had thus different backgrounds and histories and if there is a common underlying trace, it has to do with fairy lore, rather than with shamanism. The bone miracle, by the way, was widely distributed as a saints legend,[3] and by the time it ended up in late fifteenth-century north-Italian sabbat descriptions, it was more likely to have arrived from those legends than from anything even vaguely shamanistic. My article in *Witchcraft Historiographies* was historiographical, which in my view includes a critical mode of operation, if only by showing the connection between the author's theoretical

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1 . Lutz Mackensen, *Niedersächsische Sagen*, II: *Hannover-Oldenburg* (Leipzig 1925), 127-128, no. 163.

2 . Willem de Blécourt, `The Return of the Sabbat: Mental Archaeologies, Conjectural Histories or Political Mythologies', in: Jonathan Barry & Owen Davies (eds), *Witchcraft Historiographies* (Basingstoke 2007), 125-145.

3 . Tubach, *Index exemplorum*

assumptions, selection of material and results. In other words, historiography has to engage with academic paradigms in the Kuhnian sense. Within that frame, there was little space for me to suggest a more constructive approach. I will do so now by considering narrative sources which historians, and especially witchcraft historians, habitually overlook.[4]

Engaging with Ginzburg's thesis once more has not just become pertinent in the light of new evidence, he also still attracts adherents. To give you a brief reminder: he discerned two clusters. One, women travelling in the train of a female leader or participating in one of her assemblies. She was known by the name of Diana or Herodias. Locally she was called Habundia, Richella, Satia, Oriente, or simply the `mistress of the games'. Ginzburg's other cluster, fertility battles, is of little concern here, as it is irrelevant within a western European context. In his recent book Ed Bever wrote in the introduction to his sabbat chapter: `Magical flight and festive assemblies including both people and spirits were just part of a larger set of beliefs and experiences that made up an alternative "fairy" or spirit world thought in large parts of Europe to exist parallel to the ordinary world of everyday experience'.[5] This leads him to subscribe to shamanism.

Given that the production of sabbat confessions consisted of leading questions and usually some form of torture, sabbat concepts automatically have a multiple origin. The questions of the magistrates may have derived from demonological works - and even there it is hard to pinpoint a unilinear development - the answers were more often than not taken from the life experiences of those who were questioned. As Jonathan Durrant observed on the basis of his Eichstätt files:

Descriptions of feasting at the nocturnal gatherings were in fact much more orderly than one would expect from demonological tracts, pictorial representations and an obsession among historians for accentuating the few heritical, diabolical or lewd elements of a testimony almost to the exclusion of the more numerous ordinary details.[6]

Bever acknowledges the inclusion of `weddings, baptisms, and a wide range of seasonal holidays' in the sabbat confessions, but then goes on to first ascribe a `magico-religious significance' to them and next to imbue them with `activities and beliefs whose relationship to Christian orthodoxy was questionable at best'. Moreover, according to Bever: `In popular culture, belief in some peoples' magical ability to fly, either in spirit or body, unassisted or on

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4 . Cf. Sigrid Brauner, *Fearless Wives and Frightened Shrews: The Construction of the Witch in Early Modern Germany* (Amherst 1995), who started to look at stories but whose selection is questionable.

5 . Ed Bever, *The Realities of Witchcraft and Popular Magic in Early Modern Eurpe. Culture, Cognition , and Everyday Life* (Basingstoke 2008), p. 94. Citing Fichtenau, *Living in the Tenth Century* (1991), p. 318. tr.

6 . *Witchcraft, Gender and Society in Early Modern Germany* (Leiden/Boston 2007), p. 146.

an animal, was extremely widespread'.[7] One can question such conclusions on historiographical consistency alone; for Americans Europe's cultural diversity is often baffling and a presumed cultural unity is distorts the picture considerably. Uncritical use of existing literature is also not very helpful.[8]

Here I will consider one of the alternative pieces of underlying sabbat imagery, namely Dutch and German stories, or, as they are called `migratory legends' about convening women and especially cats, and, what is crucial, the male intrusion into these meetings. This particular sabbat imagery is characterized by gender dynamics: the man is caught in the anthropological tension between observation and participation. I will present my thoughts about the meaning of this later on.

This talk forms an intersection of several parts of my ongoing research, into the history of Dutch witchcraft and into shapeshifting. The last is linked to the Witch and Body project (which unfortunately did not make it to this conference). Rather than a section of a project about the sabbat, which it very well could be, within my current interests, it belongs to a series of examples of what I call `The Animal Gender'. As such this is a first, preliminary presentation, which will hopefully provoke some discussion.

When stories are used as a historical source, as with forms of art or indeed material objects, the question always is: as source of what? When it concerns so-called `folklore material', is it, for instance, reasonable to assume that it is connected somehow to some kind of `national character' (whatever such may be)? Or do the the stories grant access to the unwritten thoughts of the lower classes? To the otherwise hidden musings of women? The several theories that have been offered over the last quarter of a century more often than not lack knowledge about the very material that should support them. They also show an unwillingness to engage in source criticism and this applies to the rare historian (Darnton) as well as to the less rare literary scholars.

Stories are an integral part of everyday life. People told them, listened to them, people them (or forgot bits and pieces, as it may be). Stories were not autonomous but they did possess a presence of their own. When the aim of historical research is to understand how past people lived and how they thought, it disregards stories at its peril. The major obstacle is interpretation. Like seventeenth-century Dutch genre paintings, to mention just one example, stories cannot be read as a direct reflection of a historical reality. Admittedly, they were used as such by the demonologists who published them - familiar as they were with the value of the parable in the New Testament, or with Saints' legends. On the other hand, precisely this practice of taking stories as evidence was part of a much wider development to look at the world afresh, beyond the given frames. For some academics it may be anathema to accuse

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7 . *The Realities of Witchccraft and Popular Magic*, p. 95.

8 . Bever's sources: Wilson, *Magical Universe*, 129; Lecouteux, *WWF*, 51, 58, 60, 79.

past actors and authors of making mistakes. Stating that the demonologists' `truths' were `lies', that is that they were mere stories instead of unquestionable evidence, however, also amounts to acknowledging that `untruths' were a historical category. The sixteenth-century debate about witchcraft included the counter-example of the witch who was observed (also by men) of falling asleep, instead of flying off to some meeting place.

The bulk of folklore material has been collected during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The story I opened this talk with was actually written down in the early twentieth century. And it is somewhat careless, not to say anachronistic, to simply project stories back into earlier centuries without any further substantiation. Continuity is certainly not out of the question, but it cannot always be presumed (and it depends on matters of genre). At least a story's history needs to be examined. In the case of legends (*Sagen* in German), initially sources were mostly printed anyhow. The brothers Grimm, who were among the scholars who initiated the study of legends were employed as librarians at the time. They did not undertake any field work; the few `oral' stories they incorporated in their publications were sent to them by friends. The list of sources of their *Deutsche Sagen* contains sixteenth- and seventeenth-century publications, such as those by Johannes Prätorius, or Luther's *Tischreden*, Remy's *Daemonolatria* (in the late seventeenth-century translation), and other works. There is thus a direct textual link between the nineteenth-century legends and the stories used by sixteenth-century demonologists. Since the Grimms provided the blue print for later legend collections, at least some of the nineteenth-century `oral' legends thanked their existence to these earlier publications.

Because folklore has its basis in modern times, and because its paradigm was developed then, it makes sense to start there, if only to obtain some kind of perspective. It also provides the student with a clear notion of geography; dealing with tens of stories within a certain area at least conveys more stable roots than in the case of the one or two earlier examples. Again the problem is whether the geographical distribution is a recent, nineteenth-century phenomenon or indicative of an earlier presence. Legends are characterized by multiple existence and by variation. In case of a `story type' (roughly a collection of similar stories), it always concerns a certain number of texts - whether or not derived from oral narratives. But it is necessary to proceed beyond the folklorists' concepts of `types' and `motives' (the latter are the building blocks of stories; the bone miracle, for instance, is a story, but as in above example also motif within a story). Stories, especially legends, tend to be clustered.

In the case at hand now, it concerns a specific sub-genre, `migratory legends', stories with an international distribution containing similar elements as `belief legends' about ghosts, fairies, werewolves, fairies, or indeed witches', but in contrast to these latter legends they do not refer directly to an experience and should be be seen more as a comment on an event, or a warning. More specifically, the cluster of sabbat stories under discussion, contains the following `types':

1. Following the Witch (ML 3045). A man sees a witch or witches leave, imitates them but makes a mistake in the formula. Instead of over hedges and bushes he goes through them. This type contains the well-known wine cellar motif, especially in the formula which states that the witches go, for instance, `to Cologne, to the wine cellar'.[9]

2. The Gifts of the Little People (ATU 503). `A hunchbacked man takes part in a dance of the witches or people from below the earth (elves, fairies, dwarfs). He sings their song or adds a missing rhyme or more weekdays. As a reward they remove his hump, or give him gold. A greedy neighbour (hunchbacked person) wants to get the same reward, but he ruins the song or is unfriendly. The little people add the hump of the other man to his own, or give him coals instead of gold.' Although `some motifs appear in the 17th century in Ireland and Italy', I will not deal with this here further.

3. The Drinking Cup Stolen from the Fairies (ML 6045). As above: a man is given a drink at a meeting and remains behind with the cup. The ladies ask for it later and beg him not to reveal their identity. Or the man is left with all sort of strange objects, such as a broomstick, a horse's leg, or a shoe, after he has pronounced a blessing at a meeting of witches. The Grimms published a version of this story in 1818, which they had copied from a late sixteenth-century chronicle. It concerned count Otto of Oldenburg who had found himself alone at the hunt and was offered a drink by a mysterious lady from a mountain, `with beautiful clothes and hairs parted on her shoulders' (in other words: loose). The count became suspicious, refused, but kept the cup.[10]

The common element in all these narratives, and the reason I categorize them as one cluster, is the male intrusion.

A mid-sixteenth-century Dutch variant of the Following the Witch legend was written down by the Gouda physician Balduinus Ronsseus, related to him by the local mayor:

In the hamlet of Oostbroek, close to Utrecht, there lived a widow. She had a servant living with her for odd jobs, depending on the circumstances. He had often noticed through the grid that in the middle of the night as soon as the servants had gone to sleep, his mistress went to a certain place and with oustreched hands grasped a beam of the hay loft next to the stables. Curious as servants usually are and wondering what this could mean, he decided, without his mistress knowing it, to do the same and take his chance. When his mistress had gone to the usual place and had diappeared, as it turned out, he followed, looked at the spot and touched the loft according to the widow's example. Immediately he was transported through the air to the town of Wijck in a hidden and subterranean cave, where he found a gathering of witches,

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[9] . Cf. Jozef van Haver, *Nederlandse incantatieliteratuur. Een gecommentarieerd compendium van Nederlandse bezweringsformules* (Gent 1964), 381-385.

[10] . *Deutsche Sagen* (1818), pp. 317-319, no. 541; no. 547 in the final edition.

who conferred about their evil plans among each other.
His mistress, like the rest of the company astonished, by the unexpected appearance of the servant, asked him by which cunning and how he had come here so soon. He told them what happened. She wanted to get angry with him, but the others calmed her down and took the servant in their midst in a friendly way, under the condition that he would remain utterly silent about what he was going to see and hear. He happily obliged.
When the time had come to part, she suggested to kill the intruder, but the others were more lenient and persuaded her to take him home on her shoulders, which she did. Faster than the wind, they flew through the air. When they had gone a considerable distance, they noticed a deep swamp covered in reeds. The evil witch, who did not trust the young man, suddenly threw him off her shoulders, thinking that he would certainly break his neck or drown. But God, who is merciful, made him fall into the thick of the reeds so that he survived.
At the break of day the poor sod, who was moaning terribly, was found with broken thighs by passers-by and had to tell them what happened to him. When the rumour of this reached the Utrecht sheriff Johan of Culemborch, he soon had the witch put into prison and in chains. She made a full confession, hoping for a milder verdict, but was sentenced to the pyre by common vote.

This story figured as an example of the existence of flying witches. Delrio quoted it in book 2 of his *Disquitionum magicarum*.[11] Yet in the trial practice of the time it hardly reverberated. During the first half of the sixteenth century a number of witch trials were conducted in Utrecht, both by the municipal and the provincial courts, but the accusation of flying was absent there, as well as the notion of a meeting. The last concept only gained some currency at the end of the sixteenth century (at the very last witch trials) and flying witches remained rare within the Dutch trial context. As an variant of the `Following the Witch' migratory legend, however, it ties in with a number of stories about men misquoting rhymes and visiting wine cellars.[12] These were found all over Europe. In 1523 Bartolomeo Spina reported just such a story about a man who was found drunk in a nobleman's wine cellar. He had merely imitated his wife when she flew off to the sabbat. This time the man was left behind.[13]

A typically Dutch and German range of intrusion stories figure not merely witches but dancing cats.

In early november 1655 the night watchman of Katwijk [west of Leiden] declared that he had heard many human voices singing the song of the good Bastian at the graveyard. When he went looking, he noticed behind the church on a little knol a big crowd of black cats dancing

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[11] . Peter Maxwell-Stuart, *Investigations into Magic*, pp. 95-96, mistakingly situated `not far from Maastricht'; the later reference to Utrecht is correct, but Culemborch was not its `major'. Quoted more often, f.i. Praetorius, *Blockes-Berges*, p. 207.

[12] . Cf. *Storia*, - part 2, ch. 1, § 1. (also my note 50, ref. to Gábor).

[13] . Rossel Hope Robbins, *Encyclopedia*, p. 484.

on their hind legs in a circle, while holding one another. In the middle of the circle sat an animal, with the size of a large dog. When he had come closer the watchman set his dog on the cats. They stopped singing and dancing and remained sitting still. The dog did not dare to approach the cats further and went back to his boss. He again set his dog on them, which made it run to the cats once more. Immediately six or eight left the circle and one or two jumped at the dog but failed to hold on. Thereupon the watchman hit one of the cats six or seven times with his pike, whereupon it stayed down and cried or moaned like a human. Thereafter the man went away and left the cats in the churchyard with the big animal still in their midst. An hour later he arrived at the mill of Katwijk where he saw a multitude of cats sitting on the wings and the cap of the mill. In front of the house he called the time and when he wanted to go to the village, the cats cried at him: `Murderer, murderer!'
At about St. James, between twelve and one, the same watchman had and at the east side of the same churchyard, seen twelve of thirteen cats sitting still and when he had come closer he had seen a cat on the wall of the church yard, which he hit with his pike and also pinched several times with the sharp side, in order to kill it. But he noticed that the blade did not penetrate the body and yielded like a bladder. When he returned, the cat had disappeared.

This story was reported in November 1655 to the local sheriff and aldermen who declared that the night watchman had always been known as an honest man and was no `debauchant', someone who would exaggerate his narratives. He was, moreover, a member of the reformed church. Why he would have given the deposition remains slightly unclear; had it concerned a slander suit against him, names should have been registered. But the story also circulated in pamphlet form which may suggest that some people wanted to use it to restart witch trials. At the time there are several other attempts to do so, but they did not meet with any success.[14]

In contrast to flying witches, dancing cats were a regular feature of Dutch sabbat imagery. They turned up in trials in both the middle and the end of the sixteenth century (the two `peak' periods in the history of Dutch witch trials), in Amsterdam, Roermond, Utrecht and Den Bosch. But since the trial accounts only referred to the story, its crucial element went missing: the man who comes upon the dancing cats, or who meets the cats at the mill.

In the early-modern (and medieval) view, the mill constituted the counterpoint to the church.[15] Both were visible from afar, and both had a symbolic function concerning the transitional stages in the life of the villagers - the mill's wings could be used as a sign language. Mills, however, were not only often situated outside the village, they also operated during the night and the miller did not always have close ties to the village community. Millers were considered as dishonest and would routinely steal their customers' grain and flour. Their wives passed for indecent: sixteenth-century songs joked about the men who brought their seeds to the mill for the miller's wife to grind. There are even indications that

[14] . Cf. Hans de Waardt, *Toverij en samenleving*

[15] . Martina Switalski, *Landmüller und Industrialisierung* (Augsburg 2005).

some mills also functioned as brothels.

The seventeenth-century German writer Johannes Prätorius gave an example of a story about a farmhand who invited a cat to his fire, whereupon a whole flock appeared who began to dance, singing the lines the farmhand had said to them. Versions were still recorded in the nineteenth- and twentieth-century Netherlands, especially in the Catholic province of Noord-Brabant. Prätorius, however, went on to explain that the traces of the dance were still visible in the fields, in his case made by the Spirit- or Soul dance. In the Netherlands these were also reported later to have been made by the dancing cats. According to Prätorius these traces were made by those who lived `in the pleasure and lust of the flesh and gave free rein to all the evil, sinful desire'.

In the Dutch language, the word `cat' does not just refer to the domesticated animal, but can also denote a difficult young girl, as in the saying: `she is a cat that cannot be touched without gloves'. A `cat' also stood for a prostitute, and this makes all the stories about men finding themselves among dancing cats, much more comprehensible. It also explains why these stories continued to circulate in the nineteenth century, since they referred not so much to witches as to erotic fantasies, or warnings as it may have been. To quote from a modern Dutch version: `People drank and there were nice women. And they had to dance with the girls'.[16] Perhaps it is possible to label this as a `fertility rite'.

The journey to the wine cellar, or to the Blocksberg, or to an undisclosed `cave' may not immediately reveal erotic elements (although sexual intercourse was a regular ingredient of sabbat stories), within the context of the cluster of male intrusion stories it tends to move in that direction.

Of course trial dynamics produced sabbat stories, but the distribution of the sabbat concept also has to be taken into account. To summarize two findings that by themselves could easily take up separate papers: Witch trials, that is to say, the notion that the activities of witches constituted an act of apostasy and should be punished by secular courts, can be seen to spread in waves through early modern Europe, with the Swiss Alps as a starting point. This notion reached the Netherlands in several stages. Sabbat concepts were introduced separately. And they, together with the notion of a conspiracy of witches, mainly came into play when it concerned contested jurisdictions.

These developments provided plenty of opportunity to insert all kinds of local traditions into the descriptions and confessions and dancing cats lend themselves very well to this because they were women (about 97% of the people caught up in the witch trials of the Northern Netherlands were women), because they were seemingly shapeshifters, and because of their immoral behaviour (`outside patriarchy', as I have once called it). Without doubt, the story of the dancing cats was originally comprehensible for both narrators and their public as a

[16] . Willem de Blécourt, `De kattendans', *Volkskundig bulletin* 25 (1999), 260-271.

reference to the danger a man faced when caught up in the company of women. As was the case with the Mountain of Venus in which Tannhäuser wandered, the well-informed listener will have been aware of the sexual connotations. Demonologists were certainly not known for their subtle understanding of such narratives and their decision to take them literally ignored their gist, changed their meaning, and took all the fun out of them.