CHAPTER 5

SABBATH STORIES: TOWARDS A NEW HISTORY OF WITCHES’ ASSEMBLIES

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The witches’ sabbath (also spelled ‘sabbat’)

1 is generally regarded as the cultural precondition of most large witch-hunts. If the notion of an individual act of bewitchment came to imply an individual pact with the devil and thus a token of apostasy, a congregation of witches hinted at something far worse: an organized but clandestine sect aiming to overthrow Christendom. At least this was the view of early modern demonologists. On the whole witchcraft historians concur and refer to witchcraft as a ‘super crime’, a gigantic conspiracy against the Christian community by a ‘plague of witches’.

2 In early modern European practice the idea of the sabbath led prosecuting authorities to extend the search for witches from the suspect in custody to a much larger group of accomplices. The usual method was to ask the suspect under torture who else had participated in the sabbath or, as it was sometimes called, ‘the dance’. The success of a judicial investigation could be measured by the number of named accomplices.

At the outset it is useful to discern two kinds of witches’ sabbaths: that of historians and that of the historical actors. The two are, of course, not completely unrelated, and ultimately the picture painted by historians should represent the contemporary concept fairly accurately. So far, the complexity of the subject has prevented this. Ever since Joseph Hansen referred to the ‘cumulative concept’ of witchcraft, its sabbath core was combined with bewitchments (maleficia from the theorists’ perspective), the pact with

1 Some historians prefer the originally French sabbat to distinguish between the meeting of witches and the day of worship (‘sabbath’) in Christian and Jewish religions.

2 Walter Rummel and Rita Voltmer, Hexen und Hexenverfolgung in der Frühen Neuzeit (Darmstadt, 2008), 18; P. G. Maxwell-Stuart, Witchcraft: A History (Stroud, 2004), 73.
the devil, and the witch’s flight; this whole edifice was thought to have been current throughout Europe from the late Middle Ages to the eighteenth century. Yet it took decades, possibly centuries, to develop: different elements occurred in different forms and some were conspicuously absent at times. When, for instance, the witches’ mode of transport to the gathering was incorporated, it obviously mattered whether they flew or walked, since the former enabled a much larger attendance. Flight was the aspect most heatedly discussed and doubted. Another element, the witch’s metamorphosis into an animal ‘was never fully integrated’ into the larger picture; it was not essential for securing a conviction and related more to the individual rather than the collective image of the witch. As a way of thinking about witchcraft, the ‘cumulative concept’ thus carries its own limitations, especially when it obscures local developments.

The sabbath itself was never a unified, coherent construct either. When presented in general terms it easily verged on the extreme in the writings of demonologists and historians alike. Thus Carlo Ginzburg started his book on the ‘roots’ of the sabbath with the following description:

Male and female witches met at night, generally in solitary places, in fields or on mountains. Sometimes, having anointed their bodies, they flew, arriving astride poles or broomsticks; sometimes they arrived on the back of animals, or transformed into animals themselves. Those who came for the first time had to renounce the Christian faith, desecrate the sacrament and offer homage to the devil, who was present in human or (most often) animal or semi-animal form. There would follow banquets, dancing, sexual orgies. Before returning home the female and male witches received evil ointments made from children’s fat and other ingredients.

Although this summary appears to contain all the major elements of the sabbath, it is in fact a late twentieth-century construction. The element of cannibalism is missing, and it includes shapeshifting, which, although extremely rare in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century sabbath descriptions, suited Ginzburg’s theory. The gender of the participants was not always simply ‘male and female’; the markedly different numbers of men and women prosecuted in specific times and places depended ultimately on trial dynamics. The testimony of individual witches, moreover, often introduced details of activities at the sabbath that did not conform to either Ginzburg’s or any other general description of these assemblies. Judicial questionnaires were used in a procedural system that included torture, but they imposed only a certain measure of uniformity on the witches’ answers. Demonological compilations were abstracts by their very nature, and were rarely concerned with the validity of generalizations. This is clearly shown by Jan Ziarnko’s 1613 illustration of the sabbath, which was included in Pierre de Lancre’s early seventeenth-century defence of witchcraft prosecution in the Labourd. This engraving depicts twelve different scenes of activities at the sabbath, conveniently numbered for reference to the text beneath. Among them are a court scene, with the

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enthroned devil in the shape of a goat, two scenes with dancing witches, child witches herding toads, a number of flying witches on brooms and a goat, and witches preparing poisons for their bewitchments.

The sabbath may represent the opposite of the Christian state, 'hell on earth', and a 'parody of court'. In that way it may be read as a 'demonic rule of misrule', but even the principle of inversion, so eloquently evoked by Stuart Clark, cannot be taken as completely accurate, for in some regions descriptions of the sabbath reflected rather than subverted social relations. The historian Robin Briggs thus prefers the expression 'partial inversion'.\(^5\) A black mass figured in the famous case (1609–11) of the French priest Louis Gaufridy, together with 'devil worship, sexual orgies, the feeding of the Host to dogs and the eating of young children';\(^6\) its appearance in other trial records, however, was inversely proportional to its renown. In Lorraine, it quite possibly only surfaced in a rare trial record because a twelve-year-old boy was asked leading questions. It is also sharply contrasted with what is to be found in the average witch trial, where the sabbath was much more subdued, that is, reduced to a 'dance', with less stress on devil worship. The historical concept of the sabbath was fragmented and subject to diversity as well as change. Can it then be maintained that there were enough similar features to deduce a common origin and argue that its dissemination occurred mainly through learned channels?

A challenge of the commonplace opinions of the witches' sabbath would ideally be predicated on a careful reading of actual trial records. But, as an overview like this can only be based on secondary material, its conclusions must remain tentative. Furthermore, detailed descriptions of sabbaths, as well as analyses of the ways they were produced, are not as abundant as might be expected from the huge number of early modern witch trials. One of the paradoxes of historical witchcraft studies is that the sabbath—the presumed attendance at which was the most prominent charge against witches—has hardly been pursued as a proper topic of historical research. One reason for this is the focus on social and political history, another, the problematic nature of the major forays into the origins of the sabbath, and yet another the sheer quantity of trial records.

### 5.1 Approaches

The historiography of the sabbath shows a disturbing preoccupation with a search for 'reality' in several forms. A focus on historical roots, whether as a form of matriarchy,
paganistic rite, or shamanistic journey, has to remain hypothetical and does not concern itself with its many manifestations in the trial records of the early modern period. Neither is the opposite approach, a stress on early modern daily life experience very helpful to explain the sabbath’s more fantastical features. Certainly, an ‘obsession among historians for accentuating the few heretical, diabolical or lewd elements of a testimony’ tends to obscure ‘the more numerous ordinary details’, but the latter are fairly well known and it is debatable whether they contributed to the diffusion of the sabbath concept. Likewise, it is dubious whether the mundane gatherings described in sabbath testimonies can be interpreted as having been ‘imbued with or involved rites with magico-religious significance themselves’. After all, most of these ‘normal’ descriptions seem to refer to ordinary feasts or weddings rather than carnivals or other semi-religious rites within the annual cycle.

To reduce the sabbath to delirium, dreams, or the product of hallucinogens ultimately amounts to abandoning history altogether. Even when specific ‘cultural’ translations of such experiences are considered, they still fail to take sufficient account of the interplay between local knowledge and theological interpretation, which sometimes defined sabbath accounts as illusions of the devil in the first place. Several authors have wondered whether other ‘facts’ lurked behind descriptions of the sabbath, especially the sexual encounters that were one of their most prominent features. These theories have remained speculative. In her study of the Gaufroyd case, Sarah Ferber remarked that the medical model ‘always seems to default to the female victim in the search for pathology’ while the exorcists, and, one could add, the prosecutors, are left off the hook. The search for an underlying ‘reality’ has usually served to obscure the main event in its different contemporary guises.

Some of this discussion was already conducted at the time when opponents of witch trials characterized the sabbath as ‘illusion’ or ‘fantasy’. Opinions of both advocates and opponents oscillated between accepting the sabbath as a dream or reality, while a number of demonologists even managed to take both positions. Walter Stephens observed that their engagement with the activities of demons was ‘entwined with the reality of Christian faith’, and proof of the devil was logically strengthening it. While the early modern discussion centred on the capacity of the devil to fool the human senses, the present-day view primarily reflects historians’ unease assessing the less factual aspects of the past—hence, one may argue, the explanations of witchcraft and, more specifically, witch trials, in terms of social tensions, political power, economic

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8 Jonathan Durrant, Witchcraft, Gender and Society in Early Modern Germany (Leiden, 2007), 146.
hardship, or even unfavourable weather conditions. Earlier attempts to interpretate sabbath accounts as references to fertility cults, too, are exemplary of the desire to reduce what dechristianized academics consider fantastic to something more familiar and malleable.

A different approach considers the sabbath as a story; from the comfortable distance of the twenty-first century, it is argued that it is the historical presence (‘reality’) of the story that is at stake, rather than its interpretation as a reference to social ritual or individual experience. When demonologists took short stories that were adapted to fit a hegemonical witchcraft discourse as independent corroboration of actual meetings, then these stories’ reference to some other ‘reality’ can be bracketed. At the beginning of the seventeenth century the Burgundian judge Henry Boguet remarked, for instance:

There have even been cases of persons who were not witches, but have, following the example of and at the instigation of witches, rubbed themselves with a certain ointment, and of farmers, who have been transported to as much as a hundred or two hundred leagues from their homes, so that they have had great difficulty in finding their way back again.\(^{12}\)

This type of story is known among folklorists as ‘Following the Witch’,\(^{13}\) and one of its main characteristics is the gendered role division: a man tries to re-enact a witch’s movements and finds himself in a gathering of women from which he then has to escape. It is part of a larger complex that can be labelled as intruder legends. Reading such contemporary evidence for the reality of the sabbath primarily as a story has the advantage of avoiding the historical pitfall of substituting theory for proof. It is probably also more historically accurate to deal with the concept of the sabbath on a narrative level, especially within a Christian context where stories, *exempla*, formed the basic tenets of people’s worldview. One of the main questions to be asked is: whose story is it? The answer has to be situated in time and space. Once the stories started to function as legitimation of prosecutions, their direct source mattered much more than where they had originated.

Lyndal Roper, who in the late 1980s helped to bring the analysis of trial accounts back on the agenda, asserted that ‘the tales of witches’ doings were never the creation of demonologists alone. Information about what witches’ confessed... constantly fed back into works of demonology’, through ‘a process of dialogue’. The authorities, according to Roper, ‘translated the amorphous fears of the peasants into an organized, exhaustive questionnaire for suspected witches that omitted no element of the witchcraft fantasy’. In her view, ‘interrogators knew when a confession was simply a result of torture or its fear’, which they would continue until a ‘consistent’ confession emerged. With a reference to the cultural significance of pain, Roper thus argues away the ‘stereotyped products’ (including the sabbath) in the mind of the interrogators, their

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leading questions’, and ultimately the power relations within the torture chamber. She more or less turned the prosecutor into an early modern version of the modern analyst. Although her basic assumption about the origin of the demonological tales appears reasonable, the rest of her approach is hard to follow. The word ‘dialogue’ obscures the very unequal power relation between suspect and interrogator, and the answers elicited under torture are more accurately understood as desperate responses to counter both the threat of torture and torture itself. The exchange between interrogator and suspect is much better characterized as a ‘tragic misunderstanding’. Roper also ignores existing stories, such as those about witches’ flight, which, because they were already circulating outside the prison, had very little to do with a perspective obtained while experiencing pain, as she suggests.\textsuperscript{14} Briggs has observed that sabbaths were only mentioned in the confessions of witches and were virtually absent in the depositions of witnesses, but Roper prefers to dwell on what she perceives as the symbolic significance of sabbaths and encounters with demons rather than the concepts themselves.

It is well-nigh impossible to escape the model of superimposed sabbath stories and search for the suspects’ underlying fears and feelings. The effort nevertheless forces witchcraft historians to take seriously what only a generation earlier had been dismissed as the ramblings of mad witch-hunters. The frame story of the sabbath was provided by demonologists, who, when they also acted as judges, enriched it with details elicited from their suspects. Local authorities may nevertheless have used it for their own purposes—such as to strengthen their secular or religious power—as the most atrocious witch trials occurred in places where there was no sharp division between the two. Witchcraft theory worked as a discourse in the Foucauldian sense as it absorbed everything in its orbit and remained firmly in the hands of the powerful. Witchcraft accusations and witchcraft prosecution were at times also driven by ‘popular’ witchcraft discourse, which contained no mention of demons or sabbaths, and focused on the harm done by witches. So far witchcraft studies have not yet given the interplay between the two the attention it deserves.

The struggle to make sense of sabbath stories concentrates on the issue of coherence, which has a considerable history. When, in the late seventeenth century, the Massachusetts minister Cotton Mather described the Blàkulla case (see below), he stressed that the ‘declarations’ of the different participants ‘all agreed…with what other Witches, in other places had confessed’. In his view this made the case more convincing; he was not interested in how these similarities arose.\textsuperscript{15} However, the construction of an all-encompassing picture of the sabbath could still be a frustrating undertaking, as De Lancer discovered. He emphasized the ‘inconstancy’ of demons and witches, that is, the variability in what one could know about them. From the start the intellectual


\textsuperscript{15} Cotton Mather, The Wonders of the Invisible World (London, 1862), 168.
sabbath story was compartmentalized, broken up into its constitutive elements, such as
devil worship, dancing, cannibalism, and flight. Later historians who showed any
interest in the sabbath pursued a similar investigation by, for example, listing all the
different names of the devil or the various places where the witches met. This meant
that the different elements in the sabbath stories were decontextualized, and potential
links between them were lost.

Approaching the sabbath as a series of stories would mean looking at individual
narrative events, be it an interrogation in the torture chamber or the reading of a
demonological book, or in whatever other circumstance the sabbath had became a
conversation topic. It would imply taking account of the power relations between the
participants and the ways each particular story was produced and constructed. The
combining of elements from separate events, beyond what had already been established
at the time, would obfuscate rather than reveal the historical construct. Better to ask
questions about the dissemination of particular sabbath stories; providing answers to
them is another matter.

5.2 Early Instances

A number of different strands contributed to the notion of the witches’ sabbath.
Witchcraft itself had always been an individual crime, often ascribed to women and,
on an everyday-life level, devoid of any association with the devil. The spells and rituals
of male magicians, on the other hand, explicitly involved the assistance of demons.
None operated in groups. First, demonologists constructed a concept of witchcraft by
conflating and demonizing magical practices. The notion of witches’ assemblies
evolved from the merging of the prosecution of genuine groups of heretics with stories
of the so-called ‘good people’; certainly the latter provided the intrusion narratives.

Early reports of witches’ meetings venerating the devil have turned out to be
falsifications.Only the 1324 Irish case of Dame Alice Kytele contains some elements
of the later stereotype, but it was primarily a heresy trial. It is more rewarding to
search for predecessors of the witches’ sabbath in literary sources. The late thirteenth-
century Roman de la Rose, among other texts, makes mention of the ‘estries’ (lamia,
eves; sometimes erroneously translated as ‘witches’ or ‘sorcerers’) who roam around
with Lady Abundance (Abonde, Abondia, Obonde) and the bones dames (good
women), and who penetrate into people’s houses through the smallest of openings.

16 Compare the first edition of Alan C. Kors and Edward M. Peters, eds, Witchcraft in Europe, 1100–
(1232) on pp. 48–9 of the first edition are also omitted.

17 Anne Neary, ‘The Origins and Character of the Kilkenny Witchcraft Case of 1324’, Proceedings of
the Royal Irish Academy, 83C (1983), 333–50; L. S. Davidson and J. O. Ward, eds, The Sorcery Trial of Alice
Not only was the *Roman* hugely popular, but its imagery was echoed in a number of other works. That is hardly proof of its earlier dissemination, however, notwithstanding a reference to ‘roaming women’ in the tenth-century canon *Episcopi*.

It remains uncertain whether these figures should be understood to be spirits or humans, ritualistic or imaginary, fairies, deities, or demons, or some combination of these. The imagery of the ‘good women’ did, however, provide several characteristics that facilitated their merging with later witchcraft concepts, such as their gender, nightly forays, and second bodies. In all likelihood, the imagery also pertained to the notion of flying, the more so when the ‘women’ were reported to go out as spirits. The image of the ‘good women’ as a group was eventually incorporated into that of the witches. In the late thirteenth century the two were still separate: in the equally popular *Legenda Aurea*, for example, St Germain encountered a dish set for the ‘good women’; they turned out to be neighbours in spirit form, an early variant of the intruder legend. But when in 1418–19 a German (Alsation) version of the *Aurea* was written, the spirits were turned into demons. St Germain was also said to have performed the bone miracle on a calf, a feat that likewise occurred at the meetings of the ‘good women’ around 1400.

At the close of the fourteenth century, Lombardy inquisitors arrested two women who had joined the ‘good people’ of the society of Oriente, with whom they roamed through houses. ‘Her [Oriente’s] followers sometimes slaughtered oxen and ate their meat; then they gathered the bones and put them inside the skin of the dead animals. Oriente would then strike the skin with the pommel of her wand, and the oxen were instantly revived; but they were no longer capable of working.’ Through this affiliation the two women were able to function as cunning women, and conveyed stories like this to their clients to support their authority. In their search for truth, a number of theologians, Dominicans and Franciscans in particular, took these stories for histories. They then proceeded not only to declare their interpretation of the stories as final, but also forced it onto the people in their care. One of the women confessed that she had made a pact with a spirit named Lucifello, who had taken her to the ‘games’. In early 1428, during the trial of another cunning woman, Matteuccia di Francesco of Umbrian Todi, a similar transition occurred. Prompted by the Franciscan Bernardino di Siena, she finally confessed to have been taken by the demon Lucibello to the gathering of witches at the walnut tree of Benevento, where Lucifer held court.

Scholars differ as to how this case fits precisely into the general development of the sabbath concept. Richard Kieckhefer, who initially categorized it as one of the first

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examples of what he called ‘diabolism’, later qualified his opinion by assigning it to a marginal position in terms of imagery, compared with the central fifteenth-century Italian witchcraft ‘mythology’, which he now situated in Perugia. This ‘Umbrian paradigm’ consisted of a sharing of regional concepts by inquisitors and populace alike, and remained unaffected by sabbath interpretations. Kieckhefer also deemed the trials in which ladies like Oriente and Abunda figured as ‘only incidentally connected with the mainstream of early witch trials’. The popular/elite dichotomy that played a major part in his earlier work has turned into a more intricate model of different local cultures and international derivations. But such subtlety does not have to replace a fundamental difference between theological and inquisitorial interpretations on the one hand, and local or regional concepts on the other. It can leave both the notion and the motion of superimposed ‘elite’ interpretations untouched. A more complex model does, however, alert the student to matters of communication.

A convincing case has been made for considering the mixture of trials and treatises in the western Alps shortly before and during the years of the Council of Basel (1431–49) as the site where all the different popular and theological approaches converged to produce sabbath imagery dominant enough to extend its influence over the rest of Europe. Initially it was the Vaudois or Waldensian version of the sabbath, as it was elaborated in the Errores Gazariorum (The Errors of the Waldensians), that was exported. Satan presided in some animal form, initiates kissed him, and they were given magic potions made from the exhumed bodies of children, which they also consumed. Witches also flew to their meetings on anointed brooms and participated in orgies. The image of these gatherings was very similar to those of heretics, but was augmented with bewitchments such as the magical raising of storms and hail. Later, Johannes Nider’s Formicarius had more of an impact. He treated the flight as an illusion and did not discuss orgies.

One of the strengths of the Council of Basel was that it produced different emphases by different authors. Lay authors such as Hans Fründ and Claude Tholosan were particularly interested in the political dimension; the Dominican Nider sought to convey moral lessons, and the Franciscan Ponce Feugeyron, who may have been the author of the Errores, specialized in writing against heretical ideas. In his Le champion des dames Martin Le Franc referred only briefly to witches’ assemblies, in an effort to amuse his readers. The exact relationship between the collective concept of the ‘good

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women’ or the ‘society of the game’, of which several more examples occurred just before the Swiss trials in northern Italy and the adjacent Austrian Alp, is unclear. Witches’ meetings as recorded in the context of the Council of Basel await further research, but an exchange of ideas and information between inquisitors no doubt played a role.\footnote{Niklaus Schatzmann, *Verdorrende Bäume und Brote wie Kuhfladen: Hexenprozesse in der Leventina 1431-1459 und die Anfänge der Hexenverfolgung auf der Alpensüdseite* (Zurich, 2003), 245–8.}

None of these early fifteenth-century examples used the word ‘sabbath’. Instead authors wrote about the witches’ *societas*, or *consilium*, or *ludum*. In the *Errores* the term *synagoga* was applied. Sabbat, then spelled without an ‘h’, only made its appearance in the mid-fifteenth century in France; it occurred in a 1446 trial, and the term subsequently surfaced in the work of theorists such as Jacquier (writing in 1458) and Mamorii (1462).\footnote{Michael D. Bailey, *Magic and Superstition in Europe* (Lanham, MD, 2007), 335.} It became the main word for the witches’ gathering in the works of the late sixteenth-century French demonologists, including Bodin, Remy, and Boguet.

There was also little in the directives emerging from the Council of Basel that referred to meetings with a mysterious female entity. Apart from her replacement by the devil, the main reason for this absence was that the ‘good people’ belonged to the canon *Episcopi* tradition, which declared them to be illusory, a position demonologists were not always eager to refute. But they kept copying texts in which the *ludus bonae societas* figured, as well as the story of the visits to the tree of Benevento, which later found a place in literary texts. In a parallel development, the ‘good people’ kept being mentioned in the occasional trial against cunning folk.\footnote{Behringer, *Shaman of Oberstdorf*, ch. 9.}

### 5.3 Intrusion Stories

Sketches of late sixteenth- and seventeenth-century sabbaths are usually based on regional research into trial records. As a result, they vary in more ways than the time and locality of the assemblies. Many French sabbath accounts are linked to cases of demonic possession while demons disguised as monks appear in a Portuguese example, and toads are typical in the Basque Labourd. Within the German-speaking jurisdictions alone, four different, albeit general, forms of sabbath have been indicated. According to the cultural historian Richard van Dülmen, the role of the devil increased in subsequent sabbath descriptions. Although still marginal in relation to bewitchments, mid-sixteenth-century sabbath imagery, he argued, involved more women than in the fifteenth century; they apparently received their ointment from the devil, who participated at their feast and flew along with them when they were causing harm. At the beginning of the seventeenth century the demonic pact and sexual relations with the devil had become more prominent, and the sabbath sometimes featured a wedding
between witches and their demons. The end of the century finally saw the devil enthroned at the centre of a satanic ritual, complete with a black mass and sexual orgies.27 Van Dülmen’s assessment, however, was based on selected trial accounts, and he represented specific verdicts as paradigmatic texts. Moreover, he largely ignored specific details, such as diabolic baptism, the presence of a musician, a military display, or the presiding of a queen (next to the devil). His choices can therefore be questioned and his conclusions adjusted: instead of a single development there may have been several more or less simultaneous ones. As none of the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century accounts replicated the earlier ones very closely, some sort of change in the imagery must surely have occurred. But more or less coherent narratives only emerged in judicial verdicts, so more attention needs to be paid to their production.

At an earlier stage of a trial there were questions, many questions. In the section about the witches’ dance, a list from Sachse-Coburg of 1629 includes questions about length, frequency, and place; whether they ate or drank first, what they ate, how it tasted, how they danced, with whom, in what order, how the light was, who the musicians were. Only after about twenty such questions did interrogators ask whether the witches worshipped the devil. They were then instructed to find out who else was present at the gathering and whether the suspect would recognize them. An enquiry regarding how the witch had arrived at the dance and whether she had flown through the air followed almost as an afterthought.28 In different jurisdictions the questions and their sequence were probably different, and only the preparatory phase of the interrogation was recorded. In practice there were repetitions, pauses, and renewed sessions, even interlocutory verdicts, which show how answers were coerced, adjusted, and denied. To quote a small but telling example in 1627, Blankenheim:

Question: How had she arrived at the dance place?
Answer: The evil one had brought her there on a white goat.
[A after she had been admonished diligently and threatened with strict questions]:
On what did the evil one carry her?
Answer: On a black billy goat.29

The witch was not allowed to diverge from previous accounts, and her devil could not be white and female. It also needs to be kept in mind that notes of an interrogation and final reports did not have to correspond. A verdict was arrived at the end of a lengthy process that was completely controlled by the interrogators; while a suspect was there to fill in the blanks, it remains doubtful how much she (or he) could add where particular concepts such as the sabbath were concerned. A single ‘narrative event’ was in itself so complex that the excavation of what it meant for the suspect requires an

28 Wolfgang Behringer, ed., Hexen und Hexenprozesse in Deutschland (Munich, 2000), 250.
extremely intricate analysis that has, so far, not been attempted. More straightforward sources for the study of witchcraft in an everyday context do exist, including slander trials and depositions of witnesses in trials against cunning folk. As far as it is known, these hardly contain any accounts of sabbaths or other meetings of witches, and one can only agree with Briggs that notions of the sabbath primarily circulated among the educated, that is, anybody who read demonological tracts, judicial directives, and the resulting trial accounts. To those involved in popular witchcraft discourse the notion of the sabbath may have been familiar, but it remained an external concept.

Demonologists habitually illustrated their arguments with cases. These were either taken from the existing literature or from their own interrogations. Intrusion stories were especially plentiful in the literature, since these narratives stressed the fact that it was not only witches who attended sabbath meetings. These narratives, moreover, were frequently copied. Thus, to give another example, Francesco Guazzo quoted the *Tractatus de hereticis et sortilegiius* (1536) by Paolo Grillando, which contains the story about a husband who asked his wife to take him to the sabbath:

> The husband was taken to the place of the sabbath and saw the games and dances and everything else and finally sat down with the rest at the tables to eat, but finding the food insipid, he asked for salt and, although there was none on the table, kept asking again and again for it, but was not given any until after much importunity and long waiting. Then he said: 'Praise be to God, for at last the salt has come!' As soon as he had uttered these words the demons immediately departed, and all the rest vanished, and the lights were put out and he remained there alone and naked.

It turned out that the man was in Benevento, a hundred miles from his home, and he had to beg his way back. In another example, taken from a treatise by the judge and demonologist Nicolas Rémy, a man came upon six dancing women and a 'man like a black bull' who was watching them. When he went on his way, they followed him. One of the women would later declare that the man had tried to steal a golden cup from the table. Both these stories circulated widely. The latter story also appeared in Fischart's translation of Bodin, where the cup was described as silver. Yet another type of story was about a man who invited a little cat to his fire, whereupon a multitude of cats emerged and started to dance, while repeating the man's words to their sister.

As a separate study into the demonologists’ use of *fabulatessen* has yet to be undertaken, these examples need to suffice. They cast a special light on the character of demonological tracts—which is often presumed to be elite—but I would argue that a possible popular origin needs to be distinguished from their later intellectual use. As examples the stories also acquired a life of their own, which did not necessarily reflect the earlier

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31 Jean Bodin, *Vom außgelassen wütigen Teuffelsheer*, tr. Johann Fischart (Strasburg, 1591), Bk. III, ch. 4.
32 ‘At the Witches’ Sabbath’ has been assigned type number ML 3050 and ’Drinking Cup Stolen from the Fairies’ ML 6045. The cat story has remained numberless so far, cf. Christiansen, *Migratory Legends*.  

repertoire of their public. Intruder stories provided demonologists with an outsider dimension. While this strengthened their own argument, it gave critics the ammunition to ridicule and denounce them as the ravings of melancholic women. The presence of a detached observer prevented intruder stories from figuring in confessions, unless the third person was turned into a first.

5.4 Ways of Dissemination

In 1630 nine-year-old Stine Teipel from Obernkirchen in Sauerland told the court that, after some ointment had been applied under her arm, she had flown to a meeting place of witches, several of whom she had recognized. She had also been on a mountain where the devil had provided everyone with beautiful clothes, as well as beer and wine in barrels of gold. In her mind the sabbath was a sort of dressing-up party in which the villagers acquired higher status and partook in a splendid meal. Belonging herself to one of the poorest families of cotters, the feast represented a kind of Schlaraffenland (Land of Cockayne). The dance had lasted two hours, and her partner had had a ‘thing’ on his body, which he had put in her private parts, but it had not given her any pleasure. Revealing who she had seen at the dance gave her the power over life and death over her fellow villagers. According to witnesses, she had been telling these stories for a year and a half, ever since witch trials had been started in the region. In her case, the authorities seem to have reacted sceptically, but the significance of her statements does not just lie in the people she denounced or in their outcome (she was executed), but in the fact that she must have heard a description of the sabbath, which made her realize its potential as an instrument of power. In that way she resembled many other children at the time of the witchcraft prosecutions. According to Wolfgang Behringer, the number of trials that involved children increased towards the end of the prosecutions, but some also occurred in the sixteenth century, which sent a message to prosecutors that their judicial procedures were failing. Furthermore, although the diabolical aspects of witchcraft did not have a lasting effect on local witchcraft discourses, the largely unsolicited testimonies of children did show that they were mediated and received. How had these youngsters heard the stories?

Particular cases of witchcraft became widely known when they were deemed sensational enough to be written up and distributed in the form of pamphlets. The main account of the Gaufridy case in 1611, for instance, was not only published separately but

33 Alfred Bruns, ed., Hexen: Gerichtsbarkeit im kurkölnischen Sauerland (Schmallenberg, 1984), 26–8; see also the analysis of Rainer Decker in the same volume, 91–118.
was also included in the *Histoires tragiques*, which in the course of the seventeenth century was reprinted a number of times. Translations of the pamphlet appeared in England as well as in the Netherlands. The horrific events they described were not only re-enacted in subsequent French cases, but served as fodder in the propaganda war against Catholicism, and as admonitory example of how not to proceed. In general, the sabbath concept was mediated through a variety of oral and visual conduits, and the different images that emerged through this process informed each other. Apart from the treatises by demonologists, descriptions of witches’ gatherings appeared in sermons, such as David Meder’s *Hexenpredigten* (Sermons on Witches), which was reprinted three times during the seventeenth century, and was excerpted in a number of works meant for education and entertainment. More specifically, sabbaths became the subject of pamphlets, often illustrated—including *Wahrhafftige und glaubwürdige Zeitung* (1582) and *Unholden Zeitung* (1590)—all of which insisted on the reliability of their reports. The *Wonderfull Discoverie of Witches in the Countie of Lancaster* (1612) was one of the rare instances of an English sabbath account. Furthermore, besides the printed mass-market material, which sometimes included elaborate sabbath images, individual paintings on the theme had come to constitute a special artistic subgenre by the end of the sixteenth century. And, of course, people talked.

Demonologies were the most influential vehicles for disseminating information about the witches’ sabbath. They not only informed particular laws and legal decisions, but they were also the major source for painters, preachers, and teachers. The judicial confessions of witches had less of an impact, except when they were included in pamphlets or demonologies. The various media through which information about the sabbath was transmitted appealed to different audiences. In their turn, specific readers selected particular aspects. Lawyers were especially interested in the demonologists’ arguments, whereas artists attempted to paint as comprehensive a picture as possible. Preachers, in their turn, found the stories most suitable for their needs. Their individual impact is hard to determine, but it may be possible to draw some preliminary conclusions and, rather than take the complex web of communications for granted, attempt to bring it into sharper focus. Many a confession, for instance, was made public—but would the detailed descriptions of sabbaths stay fresh in people’s minds and be reiterated by some of them at the next prosecution? Would it not be more accurate to assume that it was the names of the convicted that were primarily remembered? After all, the available full sabbath accounts were habitually filtered, edited, and adapted to local circumstances. Children prioritized intruder stories but told their own version in the first person, with themselves as the protagonists. Given

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39 This especially applied to painters from the Northern and Southern Netherlands, starting with Bartholomaeus Spranger.
their usual subordinate position this often created a special abduction variant. Since they would not have read the demonologies, they were probably inspired by sermons and other religious teaching.\

The Swedish Blákulla trials of 1668–75 (so named after the mythical meeting place, which is essentially the same word as the German Blocksberg), were also driven by children. In Lutheran Sweden the sabbath concept had been hampered by legal restrictions and only evolved in the course of the seventeenth century. Only when a sufficient number of children started to tell stories about their abduction, and were taken seriously by local authorities, could a regional version of a mass trial emerge. In all likelihood, here too the imagery derived from ecclesiastical sources, as the children couched their stories in the vocabulary of religious services, which included weddings and blasphemous baptisms. In their narratives the devil preached and the Bible was used as toilet paper. Typically, the children were also protected by angels.\

5.5 Religious Context

It is as illuminating to consider what was not transmitted in the diffusion of sabbath concepts as what was conveyed. The image of the sabbath had reached its apotheosis at about 1600, and centred on devil worship, the black mass, and the most repulsive methods of copulation. This, however, means that all those later instances with less developed imagery stand out and are in need of separate explanation. For the time being it appears that prosecuting Protestants were much more hesitant about subscribing to the full picture than witch-hunting Catholics. Protestant sabbaths were ‘naturally less elaborate’, and Protestant demonologists were more often troubled by the concept of flight than their Catholic counterparts. The former classified the meetings as imaginary more often than not. In some Protestant jurisdictions prosecutors were instructed not to pay attention to the devil’s pact and dances. Instead of a possible conspiracy of witches, the stress was laid on the maintenance of Christian discipline and order: dancing, excessive eating and drinking, as well as sexual transgressions were emphasized more than the witch’s relationship with the devil.

43 Clark, Thinking with Demons, 86.
In those Protestant countries where severe prosecutions did occasionally occur, the
sabbath barely played a role. In England it remained something of an anomaly; there is
no trace of it in the mid-seventeenth-century East Anglian witch-hunt. In Scotland,
where fairy lore was at hand to be integrated into the popular witchcraft discourse, the
witches' gatherings only made it into trial accounts in the late sixteenth century, and
not as often as would be expected from the large number of Scottish cases.\textsuperscript{45} In Sweden
it only came to the fore relatively late and under specific circumstances. In late
seventeenth-century Massachusetts, where reports of Swedish sabbaths were circulat-
ing, sabbaths did not figure at all in witchcraft prosecutions.

The possible correlation between religion and a weakened sabbath concept only
reflects a fragment of a complex process. There were also Catholic regions that show a
similarly muted sabbath, with attendance remaining in single figures.\textsuperscript{46} Even in some of
the German prince-bishoprics where all legal caution had been set aside, mere participa-
tion at a dance could offer a sufficient ideological support for executions. While this
would indicate that large-scale witch-hunting was perfectly possible without a fully
developed notion of the witches' sabbath, it also demands more precise research into
the relation between possible reasons for such prosecutions and its underlying stories.

Sabbath imagery provided a frame story where various fragments could be inserted,
such as flight, apostasy, fasting, dancing, copulating, and whatever else caught the
fancy of the prosecutors. This flexibility may make it expedient to consider several
variants of the narrative with different elements and different combinations of ele-
ments, as well as, possibly, different patterns of sabbath dissemination. In turn,
the sabbath story was itself embedded in larger religious narratives, as it had been
since its construction in the early fifteenth century. Religious changes, therefore, were
reflected in sabbath stories, as in all probability was the degree of orthodoxy in the
communities where such stories arose. It was also balanced by judicial, medical, and
political considerations. This, however, is a history still waiting to be written, but when
it finally is, it will probably not be necessary to indulge in new forms of speculation.

\textbf{Further Reading}

Ahrendt-Schulte, Ingrid, 'Die Zauberschen und ihr Trommelschläger: Geschlechtspezifische
Zuschreibungsmuster in lippischen Hexenprozessen', in Dieter R. Bauer, Sönke Lorenz,
and Jürgen Michael Schmidt, eds, \textit{Geschlecht, Magie und Hexenverfolgung} (Bielefeld, 2002),

419–39.

\textsuperscript{45} Lauren Martin and Joyce Miller, 'Some Findings from the Survey of Scottish Witchcraft', in Julian
Goodare, Lauren Marten, and Joyce Miller, eds, \textit{Witchcraft and Belief in Early Modern Scotland}
(Basingstoke, 2008), 63–4; Brian P. Levack, \textit{Witch-Hunting in Scotland: Law, Politics and Religion}

\textsuperscript{46} Briggs, \textit{Witches of Lorraine}, 122.
Mormando, Franco, The Preacher’s Demons: Bernardino of Siena and the Social Underworld of Early Renaissance Italy (Chicago, 1999).
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