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4.

"KEEP THAT WOMAN OUT!" NOTIONS OF SPACE IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY FLEMISH WITCHCRAFT DISCOURSE

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ABSTRACT

This article considers the importance of a spatial dimension for witchcraft research, which has so far been largely neglected. In twentieth-century Europe people in certain regions still considered their world in terms of witchcraft; they attributed misfortune to bewitchments and usually blamed their neighbors. Here a part of Flemish-speaking Belgium is investigated with the help of legend texts collected in the 1960s. The witchcraft discourse that informed these texts did not just contain formulations of space; sometimes it also determined how people negotiated space. In this part of Flanders, witchcraft was embedded in Roman Catholicism; monasteries were the favored destinations of all those who considered themselves or their family members bewitched. In order to find cures for bewitchments people undertook hazardous journeys of considerable distance and found their efforts hindered by the witch they sought to counteract. The measures against evil influences that they were given were meant to consolidate the boundaries between their own (private) space and the (outside) space where witches roamed. Bewitchments were generally blamed on women. In the contemporary patriarchal social order, both public and domestic spaces were nearly always under men's control. This is why bewitchment was caused less by transgressions of male-defined boundaries than by infringements of bodily spaces such as by eying or touching somebody else's children. This suggests a different approach to female space based on notions of proximity.

Keywords: space, gender, proximity, witchcraft, discourse, Flanders

Witchcraft and space are inextricably linked, but sadly, students of historical European witchcraft have so far paid insufficient attention to the analytical concept of space. Yet to understand how powers over others were ascribed and counteracted, spatial relations are significant. This is especially the case since witchcraft accusations articulated social and spatial boundaries and drew clear boundaries between bewitched and witch. Accusations sent a message to those called witches not to enter specific spaces and not to approach potential victims. They also compelled the accusers to travel considerable distances to obtain protection against the perceived influence of the witch. Accusations are vital for an understanding of witchcraft. To see it as a "craft" is misleading, as it puts the emphasis on the actions of the witch, whereas the actions of the other parties involved, those who became convinced that they are victims of witchcraft and those who advised them, provide a much better insight into the historical events. Witchcraft thus becomes an accusation of a bewitchment, an ascription of a deed rather than the deed itself.

An accusation like this redefines relationships between people, the way they interact and thereby their mutual use of space. Moreover, the witchcraft accusation is part of a larger witchcraft discourse. It is very much a somatic discourse, as it states that the body of the witch is affecting the bodies of her victims. Witchcraft discourse tries to regulate how bodies position themselves in relation to other bodies, how they move through space. And as bodies are gendered, so is witchcraft and witchcraft space. In the area under discussion women were considered as the most dangerous witches. The notion of female space in particular deserves closer scrutiny. In the following these observations will be elaborated with the help of a rather unusual source, legend texts.

Legend collections have hardly been used to study historical witchcraft, although they provide some of the most extensive material on the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, especially concerning witchcraft in Europe.[1] In contrast with anthropological investigations of roughly the same period (but mainly in southern Europe), legend texts are reasonably accessible to other researchers.[2] They are also useful for a historical anthropologist like me who is interested in traditional, everyday, "popular" witchcraft discourse, as it has been documented from medieval times onwards. Legend texts do not investigate the kind of witchcraft that in the late twentieth century has become a religion.[3] Early modern witchcraft prosecutions were sometimes based on accusations of bewitchment, although once they had gotten out of hand and resulted in mass trials, they were mostly concerned with apostasy.[4] Traditional accusations of bewitchment, mostly without references to the devil, survived the trials.[5] From the eighteenth to the twentieth century people continued to accuse others, sometimes in the shape of cats, of various misfortunes such as having caused their own or their children's illnesses. They still ascribed to the actions of witches otherwise unexplainable illnesses that had befallen their horses, sheep, and cattle, or problems they had encountered in the production of their butter or when one of their crops had been devastated. This

1. Timothy Thangerlini, "'How Do You Know She Is a Witch?' Witches, Cunning Folk and Competition in Denmark," *Western Folklore* 59 (2000), 279-303; Willem de Blécourt, "Duivelbanners in de noordelijke Friese Wouden, 1860–1930," *Volkskundig bulletin* 14 (1988), 159-187 (with English summary). Articles based on fieldwork include: Ágnes Hesz, "The Making of a Bewitchment Narrative," *Folklore: Electronic Journal of Folklore* 37 (2007), 19-34; Mirjam Mencej, "Witchcraft in Eastern Slovenia," in *Witchcraft Mythologies and Persecutions,* ed. Gábor Klaniczay and Éva Pócs (Budapest and New York: Central European University Press, 2008), 295-314. The Danish fieldwork undertaken by Gustav Henningsen in the 1960s has never been published.

2. The term "legend" (German: *Sage*) is preferred above the wider ranging "folk-tale," which includes other genres, and because "folk" is a problematic entity.

3. See, for example, *Witchcraft and Magic: Contemporary North America*, ed. Helen A. Berger (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005).

4. The number of studies about witch trials is so vast that it has become a subfield on its own. Among the recent publications in English are: Robin Briggs, *The Witches of Lorraine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); Alison Rowlands, *Witchcraft Narratives in Germany: Rothenburg, 1561–1652* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2003); Rolf Schulte, *Man as Witch: Male Witches in Central Europe* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave, 2009); Laura Stokes, *Demons of Urban Reform: Early European Witch Trials and Criminal Justice, 1430–1530* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave, 2011).

5. Cf. *Witchcraft Continued: Popular Magic in Modern Europe*, ed. Willem de Blécourt and Owen Davies (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2004).

witchcraft discourse was shared by an increasingly limited number of people but it had certainly not disappeared.

In this contribution I want to show how witchcraft discourse defined perceptions of particular domestic spaces and how this interacted with the overarching regional religious discourse, in this instance Flemish Roman Catholicism. Space, I will argue, is (or was) never a neutral entity or an ideological vacuum. In a sense, it does not exist outside the way it is perceived. It is historically produced and culturally constructed, continuously provided with meanings, both hegemonic and contested, both systematic and fragmented. Although my source material is collected within a folklorist framework, my perspective remains that of an anthropologist looking at an array of concrete events. This may also clarify the order of my presentation. A discussion of the legend texts and their collection and categorization is followed by an initial exploration of their content insofar as it concerns issues of space. Then I step back to argue that the most relevant way to deal with witchcraft is to treat it as a discourse, a coherent system of concepts, stories, and actions. Within the selected region, this witchcraft discourse was partly incorporated in and partly juxtaposed against a Catholic discourse. Both discourses determined the ways people moved through meaningful space and both were gendered.

In the last sections of this article I expand upon the notion of gendered space in relation to local witchcraft discourse. I conclude that a male perception of space and its boundaries contrasted with female bodily proximity. Witchcraft texts help to comprehend female space in terms of a corporeal space rather than a mere section of male space; thus female space is constituted independently from male restrictions. This is complicated, however, by concepts of shape-shifting. That a witch could change her body into one of a cat was a regular characteristic within witchcraft discourse, and those who felt under the malignant influence of witchcraft often reacted by turning against cats rather than women. The body of a cat could stand in for that of a woman suspected of being a witch, which in the eyes of the bewitched both extended the witch's bodily influence and the bewitched's own range of counteractions. Once spatial boundaries were replaced by bodily boundaries, it appears that occasionally human bodies had become redundant, with cats filling this void.

I. THE SOURCES

She was from Brecht. She always placed a neighbor's child on her lap. And in the past they worked with a horse in the mill. The little child jumped straight from her lap into the mill and died instantly. The cows became ill, too. Then they knew enough. They went to the friars of Kalmthout. And on the way they stumbled over cats and dogs. That was horrible! And they had to go through everything. They couldn't get there. And when they finally arrived at the friars' they had to ask for safety pins to hold up their ripped trousers. The friars first made them take a test. They gave them a mirror and they saw the witch in it. And the friars said: "When you get back home, she will stand in her door when you pass there with the cows. You have to put the medallion under the threshold of all your doors and she will never enter again!" And everything happened exactly as they had said. Oh, how the people suffered from it. You could write books about it.[6]

6. Hervé Daras, "Onderzoek naar de sagenmotieven in het hart van de Antwerpse Kempen" (Leuven 1964), unpublished Master's thesis, Catholic University Leuven, no. 953, told by a 87-year-old peasant in Westmalle.

After the Second World War, folklorists in Flanders, the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium, started a project sampling "oral legends" among the elderly rural inhabitants.[7] Students from the University of Ghent, later mostly from the University of Leuven, were sent to particular regions to collect material; the results of their work counted toward the equivalent of a Master's thesis. This project was a kind of oral history but long before the method was systematically employed by historians. The folklorists concentrated on what were understood as "beliefs" outside official Christianity, in this case Roman Catholicism. The concept of "belief" had its own problematic history, starting in the late Middle Ages as "superstition," that is, anything not officially sanctioned by the Church. In the nineteenth century it became romanticized as "folk belief" and it was deemed to contain traces of pre-Christian thought.

The legends collected were categorized in preconceived slots, labeled after the demons of the four elements: air, fire, water, and earth. Since actual human beings could hardly be considered "demons,"[8] the system was supplemented by "legends of magic," which contained sections on witches, wizards, nightmares, and werewolves. Another category was dedicated to "legends about the devil." This system was used in the Flemish legend research because it was the only one available at the time; it had previously been used to catalogue Dutch legend material, which was in turn based on an early twentieth-century Belgian collection of legends.[9] This approach was, however, not without its methodological problems. Not only did it provide the students with ready-made pigeonholes for the collected texts, it also directed their choice of what kind of material to collect. The outcome can be called a social history only in that it yielded insights into people's interactions almost by chance and only very occasionally. It was also only an investigation into "folk religion" insofar as it neglected to ask about religious beliefs and practices. Yet it did contain some information about both relationships and religion and especially so in the witchcraft texts, since witchcraft accusations redefined personal relations and since members of the clergy were considered among the most powerful providers of countermeasures. Unfortunately, how informants experienced their (Catholic) faith and how this precisely related to either their experience of witchcraft or their telling of stories is not documented systematically. The students who roamed the Flemish countryside in search of "legends" can therefore hardly be considered unbiased or as the indigenous equivalents of field-working anthropologists. Their work is worth studying nevertheless because

7. For previous discussions of this, see Willem de Blécourt, "Bedding the Nightmare: Somatic Experience and Narrative Meaning in Dutch and Flemish Legend Texts," *Folklore* 114 (2003), 227-245; *idem*, "'I Would Have Eaten You Too': Werewolf Legends in the Flemish, Dutch and German Area," *Folklore* 118 (2007), 23-43.

8. The Dutch term is *geest*, lit. "spirit" (as in ghost); the translation "demon" follows the German rendering *Dämonen*, as used in J. R. W. Sinninghe, *Katalog der niederländischen Märchen, Ursprungssagen-, Sagen-, und Legendenvarianten* (Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia, 1943). About this project and its continuation, see Willem de Blécourt, "De volksverhalen van J. R. W. Sinninghe," *Volkskundig bulletin* 7 (1981), 162-193 (with English summary).

9. Alfons de Cock and Isidoor Teirlinck, *Brabants sagenboek* (Gent: Koninklijke Vlaamsche Academie voor taal- en letterkunde, 1909–1912). For a much earlier example of a similar categorization, see Franz Xaver von Schönwerth, *Aus der Oberpfalz: Sitten und Sagen* (Augsburg: Rieger, 1857–1859).

the sheer magnitude of their endeavors may yield some insights; even though the texts often remained superficial, occasionally they had some depth.[10]

The texts used for this essay are those collected in the 1960s by a single, young, male student, Hervé Daras, in a small area east of Antwerp, the Kempen.[11] It was a landscape of sand drifts and largely covered with heath, woodland, and natural ponds where people scraped together a paltry existence. For five weeks in July and August 1963, Daras bicycled across the area assigned to him. He knew it only from occasional holidays and initially he did not speak the local dialect very well. He contacted his informants through local schoolteachers who were known to his father, an insurance agent. Daras was often taken for a teacher himself; he would in fact become one later. He asked his informants about strange lights (will-o-the-wisps) and other curious things they could remember, wrote down what he was told, and typed everything up once he was back in his temporary home. In retrospect he regretted not having noted down his own questions and also the negative answers he received.[12] Daras's fieldwork resulted in 2,500 so-called "folk-legends," among them over 1,400 witchcraft texts. Most of these consist of only a few lines, collected from elderly men and women with rural occupations, but some contain several hundred words. As Daras recollected later, his informants considered the legends to be genuine events; five of them even cried when they relived their misfortunes.[13]

Daras criticized his fellow students for not having worked as hard as he had, but he was probably also lucky to have hit on one of the areas of Flemish-speaking Belgium where the witchcraft discourse had left some strong vestiges. His texts are organized thematically, with occasional signs of misplacement. His system suffices for a first, rough trawl through the material, but for a more penetrating analysis they would need to be rearranged, for instance according to the repertoires of the different narrators or informants. Witchcraft was not a uniform entity: different people professed different attitudes toward it and some probably revealed more of their feelings to the interrogator than others did. In an earlier investigation I conducted I found a variety of positions, anecdotal or formulaic, some stretching or undermining credibility, and some were gender-specific.[14] A different categorization, for example, according to the name of a particular witch,

10. http://www.volksverhalenbank.be (accessed August 13, 2013; this contains slightly edited versions of the original texts). Selections have appeared in a number of publications, for instance: Marcel van den Berg, *Volksverhalen uit Antwerpen* (Utrecht and Antwerp: Het Spectrum, 1981); Alfons Roeck, *Volksverhalen uit Belgisch Limburg* (Utrecht and Antwerp: Het Spectrum, 1980); and the series of five volumes by Stephaan Top, *Op verhaal komen* (Leuven: Davidsfonds, 2004–2007). Only a handful of "verhandelingen" (theses) were published in full, for example, A. M. Devynck, *Sagen weerszijden de Schreve* (Nieuwpoort: Bachten de Kupe, 1967).

11. Daras, "Onderzoek." The thesis itself is available at the university library in Leuven. Copies of his texts can also be consulted at the Meertens Institute, Amsterdam. Daras's texts are not incorporated into the online "Vlaamse volksverhalenbank."

12. Hervé Daras, "Hoe 'wetenschappelijk' was het Vlaams sagenonderzoek tussen 1953–1966?" Typescript 1974. Cf. the Dutch reaction in *Volkskundig bulletin* 2 (1976), 38-39.

13. Hervé Daras, "De macht van de geestelijken," *Neerlands volksleven* 33 (1983), 127-167.

14. Willem de Blécourt, "The Witch, her Victim, the Unwitcher and the Researcher: The Continued Existence of Traditional Witchcraft," in Willem de Blécourt, Ronald Hutton and Jean la Fontaine, *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe: The Twentieth Century* (London: Athlone, 1999), 141-219, esp. 169-171, 174-176.

may well reveal how different people thought about her; it might also yield interesting results if the collection were analyzed according to the names of the regional unwitchment specialists, who were generally members of the clergy inhabiting a number of monasteries and convents in or near the area.

II. ELEMENTS OF SPACE

Although he did not ask specifically about the role of space, Daras's own ordering of the witchcraft texts readily reveals a number of spatial issues even though they are not always immediately evident.[15] Nor are spatially defined texts always informative about bewitchments. Two sorts nevertheless stand out: first, the stories in the category about witches' meetings contain an indication of space by their very nature as do, second, those about recognizing and repelling witches.[16] As the two groups of texts largely contradict each other, witches' assemblies will on the whole not be considered here. These meetings designated a particular, nocturnal male space outside the village and had hardly any bearing on the intricacies of bewitchments, which usually occurred inside the village boundaries.[17] In all probability stories about the meetings of witches, also called cats, concern a leftover from the (seventeenth-century) witch trials: either they were imported at this time, or the notions of nocturnal meetings already existed albeit with other beings and only came to feature witches in the course of the trials period. In both options religious teaching rather than what was told at the witch trials themselves was likely to have been instrumental.[18] Only such a historical process of dissemination and transformation can explain the discrepancy between the stories about groups of anonymous witches and the stories about individual harmful witches.

When men told about assemblies of cats or other women, they boasted about encountering them while simultaneously warning about the dangers of traveling in the dark. In that sense these stories were similar to ghost stories. Sometimes even a particular building was said to be *behekst* (bewitched) when the signs pointed more to ghosts, especially when the stories concerned merely strange noises or farm animals found loose; in both cases the local priest could help. As will become clearer in the course of this article, when people had to deal with bewitchments, it was vital for them to become aware of the identity of the particular witch, if only to be able to avoid her. Narratives about men who, in the middle of the night, ended up in groups of witches never identified individual witches.

Countermeasures, including ways to recognize witches, however, were firmly situated within villages as they were designed to draw clear boundaries between

15. This is quite normal in historical research, the more so when it concerns cultural issues; sources, after all, are not produced in answer to the present-day questions of the historian. It is thus a grave mistake to put a historical interrogator, be it a folklorist or an inquisitor, on a par with a participating and observing anthropologist.

16. When texts are grouped under a specific theme, this does not mean that similar texts cannot also be found elsewhere in Daras's collection.

17. Cf. Willem de Blécourt, "De kattendans," *Volkskundig bulletin* 25 (1999), 260-271 (with English summary).

18. Cf. Willem de Blécourt, "Sabbath Stories: Towards a New History of Witches' Assemblies," in *Oxford Handbook of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe and Colonial America*, ed. Brian Levack (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 84-100.

bewitched and witch. References to the ability of parish priests to recognize witches in church belong somewhere in between the two kinds of texts. When a priest uttered a certain sentence during mass he could recognize a witch among the congregation as, so it was said, she had a beehive on her head.[19] However, there is no indication that this method was ever used to identify the perpetrator of a bewitchment, and a parish priest (as opposed to members of clerical orders) was rarely considered a particularly powerful force against witches; the bewitched preferred to travel further afield for advice. The references to recognizing witches in church were probably just anecdotes. Yet at the same time this kind of story established, or consolidated, both the sacredness of the church and the (relative) power of those officiating.

It was generally known, and not just in the Kempen, that if someone placed a foot at a right angle into the footstep of a witch it made her look back. A rare variation of this rule described her as immobilized, and someone also misremembered that a witch could not look back once somebody had placed a right foot into her right footprint. The principle remained the same. While traversing an open space a witch left something of herself behind, and somebody making her footstep into the Christian symbol of a cross by superimposing her or his own imprint thereby affected the witch even at a considerable distance (in one text thirty meters is mentioned). If the woman looked back, she was also marked as a witch.[20]

Power is the main ordering principle in Daras's collection; however, matters of space become most poignant in the texts about the influence of the witches and the power of their opponents, the unwitchers, who often belonged to a religious order. In 1982, almost twenty years after his original investigation, Daras conducted a special survey among monasteries around Antwerp about the people who came to visit them in cases of bewitchment. He divided the material in two, the first to do with the power of the clergy and the second with that of the witch. Just over 200 texts, forming a large proportion within the second category, are taken up with the "evil hand," the general characterization of the act of bewitchment,[21] which should, however, not always be taken literally. In a typical example, the story told by a seventy-one-year-old laborer illustrates both kinds of powers. It recounts how a woman often visited a new mother. When her baby fell ill the mother was advised to consult the monks in Bornem, who gave her a medallion and warned her never to give her woman visitor anything, nor to talk to her. As a result the visitor was forced to stay outside the house that previously she used to frequent.[22] The monks' medallions were to be placed in areas where the house opened to the outside world and thus functioned as a magical spatial guard. The same informant mentioned the case of his sister who was hit on the shoulder by a woman "who behaved oddly." Their father went to the Dominican monks in Lier,

19. This is explicitly stated in ten texts, see Daras, *Onderzoek*, nos. 1449, 1454, 1458, 1476, 1478, 1483, 1489, 1498, 1496, 1504, 1505, and hinted at in others. The motif itself can be found all over Catholic Europe.

20. Daras, "Onderzoek," 272-277 contains over twenty examples.

21. Cf. the notion of the "evil eye" elsewhere in Europe; see De Blécourt, "The Witch, her Victim, the Unwitcher and the Researcher," 192-197.

22. Daras, "Onderzoek," no. 876.

who simply told him that his daughter would be cured on his return.[23] A bewitchment was understood as an invasion of either personal body space or household space. To counteract it, family members of the bewitched undertook journeys to specialists, that is to say, they left the area where they lived and worked to find the most powerful person to help them. Monasteries were popular destinations in this respect: their wealth and imposing architecture contrasted starkly with the simple dwellings of the supplicants, and they were seen as hotspots of power.

In Daras's collection and those of the other Flemish student collectors in general, witchcraft space is articulated in several distinct ways, depending on the genre of the particular narrative. In mere stories (in contrast to narrated events and memories) such as anecdotes, witches could be encountered in places beyond the village boundaries where men passed in the middle of the night. Or witches could be spotted in the very center of the community, for example, when a ritual performed at the altar made them visible in church and sometimes prevented them from leaving the building. Personal experiences, on the other hand, were a different matter entirely; here witches were situated in places where they should not have been. In order to understand more fully the different texts and the bearing of witchcraft on how space was perceived, a brief foray into the nature of witchcraft accusations is vital.

III. DISCOURSES

I have come to understand witchcraft as a discourse, albeit a very special kind of discourse. In historical witchcraft studies, the term "discourse" is mostly used by Stuart Clark. In his *Thinking with Demons* it occurs eighty-eight times, including the title and all subtitles. Yet when the occurrences in the first section on language are checked it soon becomes clear that Clark considered the ramifications of "discourse" as given and did not feel the need to explain its specific contours.[24] In this respect it is more helpful to consult the introduction to the volume of essays *Languages of Witchcraft*, which Clark edited a few years after his *magnum opus*. Here he refers to the Spanish historian and anthropologist Julio Caro Baroja, who noticed, as Clark put it, "that the problem of witchcraft was ultimately a conceptual one—in effect an epistemological one. . . . His solution was to concentrate not on what witches did, but on what they were *said* to do; the reality of witchcraft was a consequence of beliefs and embodied in language."[25]

In my opinion, this sentence harbors a few avoidable traps; it should also be asked what "witches" actually did: did their actions only become "witchcraft" when seen as such by others? And the term "belief" either carries with it the supposition that it is part of a particular "system of beliefs," or that it is fundamentally

23. Daras, "Onderzoek," no. 878.

24. Stuart Clark, *Thinking with Demons: The Idea of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); for instance: "A pattern believed to be immanent in the world could best be captured by discourse patterned in the same way . . ."; "What is distinctive about the history of discourse in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries is the sheer scale on which a stylistic patterning of this sort could be brought to bear" (both 55). Cf. 36, 45, 53, 57.

25. *Languages of Witchcraft: Narrative, Ideology and Meaning in Early Modern Culture*, ed. Stuart Clark (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave, 2001), 2.

flawed because it did not conform to either science or religion, or both. Although Clark did not use the term "discourse" in this particular context, the emphasis on witchcraft as language or speech employed by others amounts to the same thing. A reference to the work of the French anthropologist Jeanne Favret-Saada is strangely absent. In the book she wrote on her 1970s fieldwork in western France she almost immediately confronts the reader not just with the discourse, but with the implications of its use by her "interlocutors":

> I was soon forced to change my plan to study the beliefs and practices of witchcraft—problematic concepts which haunt ethnographic literature—into that of acknowledging the truth of a discourse: in what way are the bewitched right when they say they are suffering? And the unwitchers when they say they *take it all* on themselves? (And what of the alleged witches, who remain obstinately silent, or claim they do not believe in spells?) What, then is at stake when such a discourse is being used?[26]

She questions the neutrality of the ethnographer and concludes: "So one cannot study witchcraft without agreeing to take part in the situations where it manifests itself, and in the discourse expressing it."[27] Since historians are usually removed from their subjects of research, the problem of participation is less urgent for them, although they do need to be aware of the different positions of "witch," "bewitched," and "unwitcher" (the specialist, the witch doctor), in the past.[28] Favret's study also underlines the point that "witchcraft" is grounded in the relationship between the accuser and the accused. It is an accusation, or at least a suspicion expressed by the accuser (be it the sufferer, a bystander, or the witch doctor), at the expense of the "witch." "Witch" is a label, not a quality. This label makes sense only within a particular system, not so much a "belief system," but something that can best be termed a "discourse," as it is primarily through language that it can be accessed. Actions undertaken by the unwitcher, the bewitched, and anybody else involved can only be properly understood from within the discourse. Outside it, such actions sooner or later become examples of "superstition" and "prejudice," even "stupidity."

Narratives are part of the discourse: people relate previous experiences when they suspect that someone or something may have been bewitched. But not every witchcraft narrative is told from within the discourse. People may have mentioned that their acquaintances, their neighbors, or their relatives had a "bewitched" child and went to see a specialist, but that did not necessarily render them participants. A woman, talking about people who had gone to the monastery in Bornem, expressed it as follows: "Come on, that is all hearsay!"[29] Journalists found it easy to publish such a story. When they added the moral that it was "regrettable" (or a term of stronger condemnation) that this could still happen in an "enlightened" age, they had clearly distanced themselves. Yet when folklorists' informants failed to do so, it did not automatically put them in the witchcraft camp. Positions were sometimes adjusted, reconsidered, or remained ambiguous. Nevertheless, once

26. Jeanne Favret-Saada, *Deadly Words: Witchcraft in the Bocage* (Cambridge and Paris: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 13.
27. *Ibid*., 20.
28. Cf. de Blécourt, "The Witch" (see note 14).
29. Daras, "Onderzoek," no. 903.

people argued from within the discourse, every tiny occurrence strengthened it, especially when it concerned the actions of the suspected witch.

Members of the regular clergy thought they were popular among those who sought protection from bewitchments because the relative isolation of the monasteries and their distances from the villages enabled their clients to remain anonymous. The friars, of course, argued from outside the witchcraft discourse and within a Catholic one. The case of the reflecting witch can illustrate this nicely. Friars, so it was said in many a text, could let a witch appear in a bucket of water or in a mirror.[30] I doubt this was more than a narrative, and it was also more typical of the behavior of a lay unwitcher. The latter would also encourage his clients to cut the water in order to harm the witch (see Illustration 1).

Although there was never a suggestion that friars resorted to this kind of incitement, nevertheless stories about how easily they could reveal a witch underlined the kind of power ascribed to them. Clergy were almost certainly not keen to be

Illustration 1. "Unwitcher shows a woman how to stab a witch's image in a bucket of water." Gaston Vuillier, "Chez les magiciens et les sorciers de la Corrèze," *Le tour du monde*: *Nouveau Journal des Voyages* V, New Series 43 (October 1899), 523.

30. Daras, "Onderzoek," for instance, nos. 2121, 2122.

compared to unwitchers. The rationalist response was that people who looked at the reflecting surface would see only themselves and were therefore their own "witch." As an article from an early twentieth-century newspaper from Antwerp phrased it:

> The veterinarian asked the woman to fetch him a bucket of water. The woman went and returned quickly with what he had requested. Whereupon the veterinarian said: now look into the bucket. The woman looked and replied: I can only see my own reflection in the water. Indeed, said the veterinarian, that is the witch who brings misfortune to your shed. You are dirty and slovenly; and she who is dirty herself is also dirty for her cows. Your cows are diseased because of your filth and because of the lack of fresh air. Keep your shed pure, clean your cows and let in the fresh air and the animals will be healthy.[31]

This was hardly an unbiased report, as it sought to discredit the few though very vocal unlicensed vets who practiced against bewitchments. At the same time, the newspaper advertised the rather new profession of certified animal practitioners. The friars, however, seem to have operated more subtly. They still offered their exorcisms and blessed objects; in a number of cases specific "witch friars" were even appointed to deal with supplicants. Daras noticed that only eight out of 160 of his texts mentioned people who were advised to look at their own actions or negligence for the cause of the bewitchment they claimed to be suffering and concluded that: "the question remains whether these critical objections or clever ways thought up by some of the clergy to direct those affected [by witchcraft] toward their own failures, would have been understood by the simple, usually illiterate Kempeners."[32]

The example of the witch's reflection in the bucket presents one of the ways in which the discourse put the witch into a specific place where she could be manipulated. Outside the discourse, there would have been nothing more than the reflection of the bewitched, but within it the reflection became the witch herself and was thus vulnerable.

IV. CATHOLIC SPACE

Where witchcraft discourse made those who participated in it perceive their world in terms of evil actions and countermeasures, this world was of course not a blank place to be inscribed with new significance. Catholicism had saturated the land in webs of meaning: Catholic discourse interacted closely with witchcraft discourse. Apart from the obvious territory of church and monastery, religion was expressed in the many chapels, the various road crossings, and in the routes that were followed during the many local religious processions that took place on different festivals; finally, religion was associated generally with all the specific places sprinkled with holy water. Placing a cross, a piece of wax, or a medallion at the entrance to a home hardly altered the Catholic landscape as a whole. Blessings had to be renewed at least annually anyway; an extra protection for the house against the influence of witches was thus merely an additional measure.

31. *Handelsblad van Antwerpen*, quoted in the *Nieuwe Gorinchemse Courant* (November 28, 1901).

32. Daras, "De macht van de geestelijken," 149.

Moreover, the Kempen was a landscape with frightening places: there was the occasional feudal castle haunted by a ghost, the woods, and the crossroads spirits (and witches) known to gather at night.

Illustration 2. "Capucin monk unwitches horse." Original drawing by Adolf van der Venne, *Die Gartenlaube* (1875), 289.

The modalities of the Catholic discourse in the Kempen were stronger than in, for instance, the neighboring Netherlands. In the Dutch collection of Catherine Kusters,[33] who worked in the Catholic part of the Netherlands on the other side of the border (but more to the east), monks are mentioned only twice. In her area the symbolic marking of space was no longer supported by blessings but was performed mainly by children. Where the objects no longer originated from powerful institutions, then it is surely religious rather than witchcraft discourse that comes out the weaker in comparison.[34] In the Kempen, on the other hand, blessed substances appeared so often in the narratives that Daras was intrigued enough to interview twenty years later those who lived in the area to get at the other side of the picture. In Belgium, time and time again sacred space was extended to provide protection against evil influences. This seems to imply that the witches themselves were deemed to be unaffected by the general Catholic power that pervaded their surroundings;[35] to keep them in check specific counteractions were needed.

33. In the 1960s, she was one of the two female collectors of Dutch folk legends. Her unpublished collection is kept at the Meertens Institute, Amsterdam. See for the Dutch collections in general: A. J. Dekker, "150 jaar Nederlands volksverhaalonderzoek," *Volkskundig bulletin* 4 (1978), 1-28.

34. For the Dutch witchcraft legends, see especially Ton Dekker, "Witches and Sorcerers in Twentieth Century Legends," in *Witchcraft in the Netherlands from the Fourteenth to the Twentieth Century*, ed. Marijke Gijswijt-Hofstra and Willem Frijhoff (Rijswijk: Rotterdam University Press, 1991), 183-195; Theo Meder, *Vertelcultuur in Waterland: De volksverhalen uit de collectie Bakker* (Amsterdam: IISG, 2001), 117-128.

35. Naturally this was denied by the occasional informant who was not confronted by this kind of reasoning. In Catholic eyes a stronger faith had dissolved a "belief" in witchcraft; see, for example, Daras, "Onderzoek," nos. 1691, 1703, 1712. That this faith had also supported witchcraft discourse was never remarked upon.

As elsewhere, people in the Kempen who suffered from bewitchments traveled to find relief. As mentioned above, rather than turning to the local priest they sought out the regular clergy, who were generally farther removed from their own village. The bewitched (or members of their family) went to the Cistercensian Abbey in Bornem to the west, the Dominicans in Lier to the south, Westmalle in the north, the Benedictines in Dendermonde (beyond Bornem), the Capuchins in Herentals in the southwest, and much closer, their brethren at the Ossenmarkt in Antwerp. There were no reports of anybody traveling farther north to the Netherlands, although the Dutch provinces adjacent to Flanders were still predominantly Catholic, they had no major monasteries. Sometime before the Second World War the monasteries in Dendermonde and Westmalle had appointed specific "witch friars."[36] But Bornem, on the other side of Antwerp, was the most popular destination for the afflicted. Speculations abound as to why: was this because of the land Bornem possessed in the Kempen, or because the abbey was conveniently remote so as to secure the anonymity of the complainants, or finally because St. Bernard (after whom the abbey was named) was the patron saint for all those suffering from illness? Or else could it have been because the monastery provided bread, water, and salt, that is to say something tangible, that people could take back home?[37] Perhaps it was all these things together, but probably most important was the superior power ascribed to this particular order.

Although a number of male lay unwitchers also operated in the area, only one of them is mentioned with some frequency: Suske Rijmenant in Vorselaar, who died in 1939; he also visited his clients.[38] He was a urologist and one of those unwitching vets who were also reported to have shown a witch in water (or to have owned his own magic mirror). He offered the occasional blessed object and told people to say prayers, but in difficult cases he sent them to a monastery anyway.

Whether ordained or lay, unwitchers were often difficult to reach. Many clients encountered misfortune on the way, or never managed to reach their destination at all. One informant described how he was "sweating, it felt like someone was pulling his coat and a heavy hand rested on his back; it was difficult to ring the bell." A woman who went carrying her young child found her offspring getting increasingly heavy until she could barely walk. Others said it took them two days and two nights to reach Bornem, a long time considering the distance was only about thirty-five kilometers, although it meant traversing Antwerp; yet others failed to find their destination.[39] Daras suggested this was because travel was so unfamiliar to most: "In their Sunday suit, with tight fitting clothes and shoes (instead of [the usual] wooden clogs) they undertook a long journey although most of them had never left their small community before." Yet sometimes it also proved difficult to reach a monastery that was nearby and familiar to them.[40] Seen from within witchcraft discourse, it was the witch who tried to prevent her victims from coun-

36. Daras, "De macht van de geestelijken," 135.

37. *Ibid*., 132.

38. Daras, "Onderzoek," 286-300. Rijmenant is mentioned in over fifty texts; Daras, "De macht van de geestelijken," 157-159.

39. Daras, "Onderzoek," nos. 911, 937, 951, 960.

40. Daras, "De macht van de geestelijken," 138.

teracting her. The space traveled was reformulated as the space wherein the witch battled with the unwitcher. Similar stories about visits to lay unwitchers were told in Protestant Frisia in the Netherlands; only there, witches would normally try to interfere on the return journey and damage the remedy.

According to Daras, it was mainly women who went to see the friars. "They preferred to go in pairs: two female friends, one of whom was familiar with the big city (in case they went to Antwerp), or a mother with her child."[41] Daras's conclusion was, however, not quite correct. Of the slightly more than sixty texts in his collection about people seeking help at a monastery and in which the gender was discernible, about two-thirds concerned men. In several other cases, it was merely said that "they" had gone to see the friars. Of the fourteen people who were reported to have gone to Bornem, twelve were men and one man went with his wife. Those women who undertook a journey generally went to a monastery close by, such as Lier or Westmalle.

For the elderly inhabitants of the Kempen the entire world was gendered. This was not just because unwitchers were primarily male or because men normally traveled farther than women. It was because gender stereotypes had remained strong in this area in all aspects of life and men and women occupied different spaces. This was most visible among religious orders where friars and nuns lived in separate institutions and were thus spatially segregated; clerical celibacy was of course not imitated generally, but the way clerics lived and worked in a clearly gendered space provided a blueprint for the lay population. As Daras noticed, male and female churchgoers usually sat separately during the service and only changed this habit during the summer when they noticed that tourists behaved differently. Men and women also almost certainly perceived their surroundings and their social roles in different ways. In 1963 when Daras conducted his research, a certain Mother Superior proclaimed at a teachers' meeting in a Kempen village that there was no need for women to study since it was quite sufficient for them to know how to peel potatoes, prepare soup, and mend trousers.[42] But above all, in the gendered society of early twentieth-century Catholic Flanders, women were seen as subordinate to their male relatives, in particular to their husbands. Female informants in legend collections are invariably referred to as "housewives;" apparently only husbands had jobs and pursued trades.

V. FEMALE SPACE AND FELINE IDENTITY

In a previous foray into the theme of witchcraft and space in the Netherlands I described the household as a space under attack by witches. This image is especially evident in the actions of unwitchers, lay and clergy alike. They used to walk around the building or land in need of protection and paid special attention to transitions and openings.[43] The Flemish material certainly supports this. Countermeasures rearticulated the boundaries between self and others.

41. *Ibid*., 140.
42. Daras, "Onderzoek," 12, 14.
43. De Blécourt, "The Witch," 205.

We experienced something ourselves, too. Our Trèske [their little daughter] became ill. She faded away. You could see her melting. We went to see Dr. Mees, certainly a good doctor! And he said: "The child is not ailing; she is as healthy as can be!" Then we send Fikse, an uncle of mine, to the friars in Turnhout. The brother went to the back [of the room or the building] to consult his books and said: "Yes, the child is very ill. I will give you three blessed items. One for above the door in the sitting room, one for inside the bedroom, and one for inside the stables." And we had to do penance and to read a lot. On the first evening there were three knocks on the window of our room. It was bright moonlight but I could not see anyone. The next evening there were two knocks and on the third evening one big knock. On the fourth evening our Trèske could join us in the reading and she had recovered a lot. Goody Plas, a woman who lived just across from us, wanted to enter our place but she called: "I am feeling odd" and she was gone. That is all true![44]

The narrator, a farmer from Vlimmeren well into his seventies, was familiar with witchcraft discourse; he also remembered an event in his youth when the brethren at the abbey of Bornem had been consulted on behalf of a cousin of his, although the general practitioner had been the first port of call. With hindsight, however, the narrator thought that the doctor knew nothing about bewitchments, so someone had to be sent to the friars instead. In the view of the visitor the friars not only acknowledged the bewitchment, although they never mentioned it explicitly, they also protected and thereby reinforced the different boundaries of the house against unwanted intruders: the main room and the stables and, to be on the safe side, they also included the bedroom (which was not necessarily a separate space). The "witch" was thus kept out of the house, and she failed in her three attempts to enter it. Inside the household, the condition of the child improved; outside, these measures harmed the witch. There are many other examples of such spatial protection: in one explicit case the friars were supposed to have said: "You need to keep that woman out, or you will lose another child within eight days." Or in another text an informant said about a woman "who had the name" (of being a witch) that she was not allowed into a house where a baby was born.[45]

Witchcraft discourse favored clear boundaries;[46] ambiguous spaces and even transitions between spaces were considered dangerous, not just in a geographical but also in a social sense. Young couples who had just set up their own household, for instance, were more vulnerable than others, especially so when the woman was new in the community (virilocality).[47] This at least was the case in Protestant Netherlands;[48] whether it also applied to Catholic Flanders cannot be directly concluded from the legend material. Only the bewitchment of small children suggests this, but it is as yet unclear whether it was reserved for a couple's first offspring. A more detailed grounding of the legends in the biographies of the narrators may reveal more conclusive evidence.[49]

44. Daras, "Onderzoek," no. 1592.

45. *Ibid*., nos. 934, 941.

46. As also indicated in the first text quoted above; for other instances of the importance of enhancing the defensive capacities of the threshold, see *ibid*., 280-284.

47. "Virilocality" is the anthropological term that indicates that after marriage a couple takes up residence in the place (dwelling, village, and so on) of the husband's relatives.

48. Willem de Blécourt, *Termen van Toverij: De veranderende betekenis van toverij in Noordoost-Nederland tussen de 16de en 20ste eeuw* (Nijmegen: SUN, 1990), 234-235; more general: de Blécourt, "The Witch," 208.

49. Achieving this will require access to the municipal registers of residence.

Whatever life stages may have been more open to the attack of witches, the counteractions, which were always the most tangible aspects of witchcraft discourse, designated particular boundaries. To all appearances, the spaces thus delineated (including those for women) were male-defined, if only because property or tenancy was always held in a man's name. Bewitchings, though, followed slightly different patterns that may have accounted for the difficulties in combating them. Another example may clarify this. As a seventy-eight-year-old farmer in St. Antonius recounted:

> My mother often told it. When we lived at the Kapellenhof. The one I am telling you about now, she was a lady from out of town. My mother was showing [her pregnancy] and that lady asked her: "Shall I tell you what you will have?" "No, no," my mother said and the lady went her way. Sometime later she was back again. Then it was so far that our Fons was born. "Oh, what a beautiful child. May I hold it?" She took Fons into her arm and she blew her breath over him. And at night he did nothing but cry. But my godmother said: "I have salt and bread from Beurmt" [the monastery]. That was a good remedy! And she told us how we should use it. The next day Fons wasn't troubled any more. A few weeks later my mother went to the Trappisten [Cistercians] herself and they said: "salt from Beurmt [Bornem] is fine. Put your wedding ring under the cot, then you can be even more at ease!" And my mother was never troubled [by witchcraft] again.[50]

Again the witch's influence was counteracted by Catholic means. A more mundane method related to the importance of corporeal boundaries. One had to slap the witch on a part of her anatomy that was situated higher than the part of the body where she had touched her victim. For example, if she had put her hand on someone's shoulder, she had to be hit on her head. This advice was of course impossible for babies to follow and it mostly referred to men who had encountered a female witch.[51] Child care was definitively a female task and the bewitchment of women and children thus affected the female domain, whereas the bewitchment of livestock was situated in the male domain. In the Kempen both men and women considered themselves as victims of witches. But even though the household was designated as a female space, it remained nevertheless defined in patriarchal terms. Genuine female space was more likely to have been produced by the way women moved through their household or the village and by the restrictions they experienced there. It also hinged on interpersonal contacts, on body language, and on bodily space. Witchcraft discourse temporarily reconstituted patterns of female space, closing off certain neighborly relations and certain forms of female space, while reverting to the immediate family on the right side of the threshold.[52]

Rather than merely transgressing defined spatial boundaries, the notion of touching shows that witchcraft was often also a matter of proximity.[53] Witches bewitched with their bodies; they transgressed bodily space and could in prin-

50. Daras, "Onderzoek," no. 880.

51. *Ibid*., nos. 1604-1615.

52. In witchcraft research the concept of "liminality" can be taken literally as referring to the magical enhancement of the threshold (lat. *limen*); cf. note 46. Temporal "liminality" in the sense of an uncertain phase between life stages is also crucial; it constitutes the moment a witch is most likely to attack; cf. note 48.

53. The classic texts are Edward T. Hall, "A System for the Notation of Proxemic Behavior," *American Anthropologist* 65 (1963), 1003-1026 and *idem*, "Proxemics," *Current Anthropology*, 9 (1968) 83-109.

ciple do this anywhere. Since bodies generally were in motion the location of contact was less important than the contact itself. In the Kempen the concept of the "evil hand" was current even though the term itself was rarely explicitly mentioned.[54] This notion was also used metaphorically for a bewitchment in general when a "witch" had not actually touched anyone physically. It could usually only be established retrospectively whether or not this was the case; only when bewitchment had been diagnosed would the physical contact be reconstructed to decide whether someone was involved who already had the reputation as a witch. The identity of the witch and her actions became relevant only after an illness was redefined in terms of witchcraft; someone without a previous reputation as a witch could then also be suspected. Witchcraft discourse exemplified the rules of proximity as it distinguished between permitted and harmful closeness. Bodies thus made space meaningful, too.

Arguing from within witchcraft discourse and therefore collapsing time and redefining events, a woman could easily arouse suspicion when she had been affectionate with a neighbor's child by taking it in her arms or sitting it on her lap or by kissing it.[55] Accusations of bewitchment indicate that proximity was part and parcel of women's experience of space.

The bewitching of people and livestock was a preserve of the female witch. Men were rarely supposed to harm other people or their animals, and men were usually thought of as displaying their specific powers such as immobilizing people, revealing unnatural strengths, or calling forth a multitude of rats or mice. Texts about these feats do not contain any spatial dimension unless they referred to the impossibility of moving after an encounter with a male witch. The witchcraft threat was female and it extended beyond the mere presence of a woman. A transgression of the rules of proximity may have led to a bewitchment, but witchcraft discourse granted witches more presence than their physical bodies would otherwise allow for. This was manifested in at least two ways: people also reacted to cats as if they were witches, and sometimes a sufferer saw the shape of a witch where nobody else could make it out.[56] The issue of cats is slightly more complicated as many of the texts refer to dancing cats, which can be better understood as metaphors than as metamorphoses; they fall under the same category as the witches who convened at crossroads. Talking cats belong there, too, especially since they tended to answer questions posed to them in a formulaic way, such as reminding a man who encountered them that they could have broken his neck.[57] More relevant to my discussion is a boy who was ill in bed and asked his aunt to chase away a cat although she could not see one.[58] So is the following text, recorded by Daras from a seventy-nine-year-old peasant:

There was a little child in our neighborhood. From the moment it lay in the cradle, a black cat sat on it. That happened every time the child lay in the cradle. And the people said: that is just like Trien's cat. They wanted to grab it, but could not. So they went to the friars of

54. Daras, "De macht van de geestelijken," 139.
55. Daras, "Onderzoek," nos .880, 898, 906, 932, 946, 965.
56. *Ibid.*, no. 925.
57. *Ibid.*, nos. 221-225.
58. *Ibid.*, no. 1280.

Dendermonde. And for five days they had to recite The Lord's Prayer five times and five Ave Marias with their arms held up in the air. Every day they had to pull the cat from their backs. And on the last day, when they were reciting again, the cat jumped on their arms. That truly happened, my friend![59]

In nearly a hundred other instances cats were shot, wounded, or otherwise maltreated whereupon the next day witches were observed with similar inflictions.[60] Texts relating this may, of course, have been just stories, although it would be careless to suppose that they were never acted out. Witches and cats not only occupied the same physical space, they also shared similar conceptual niches. In the practice of the discourse, targeting cats had the advantage that they were easier to injure; even if they could not know for sure that the cat's wound would subsequently appear on the witch, this did not necessarily stop people from trying it. The present-day observer may think these stories odd, but within witchcraft discourse people took them very seriously and behaved accordingly, sometimes with lethal consequences for the animals involved.

It remains questionable whether these cats were similar to a witch's "shape" and should be understood as the "double" or "second body" of the witch. Furthermore, it is open to debate whether such "second bodies" formed one of the main principles of a coherent system of witchcraft, as the hundreds of texts provide very little information. By the twentieth century, coherent perceptions of the "double" probably no longer existed; what counted then were the practical aspects of an encounter with a witch. The identification of cats as another manifestation of witches not only made the two synonymous, it extended the space witches could physically occupy and thus ascribed even more power to them than they were already deemed to have. In that respect it hardly mattered where a suspected witch actually had been and whom she had touched; encountering her in another shape sufficed to set a process of ostracism in motion.

VI. MULTIPLE SPACES

As I have already indicated, the situation involving witchcraft in the Catholic Netherlands on the other side of the border was slightly different. Without much influence by the regular clergy, at least the journeys undertaken to find relief and the resulting countermeasures took on another form that was less saturated by religion. This was similar to what could be found in the southeast corner of the Dutch province of Drenthe, much farther to the north and adjacent to Catholic German Münsterland.[61] In Protestant areas, without the amelioration of the Catholic countermeasures, witchcraft exchanges became much more violent.[62] Nevertheless, here also the basic spatial parameters were present: the importance of the boundaries of the house and the impact of the witch's body.

59. *Ibid.*, no. 1321.
60. *Ibid.*, nos. 241-259.
61. De Blécourt, *Termen van toverij*, 219-220.
62. Willem de Blécourt, "Boiling Chickens and Burning Cats: Witchcraft in the Western Netherlands, 1850–1925," in de Blécourt and Davies, eds., *Witchcraft Continued*, 89-106.

In the secularized and rationalized mind of most researchers, surroundings often tend to appear as just "space." This may be a mistake, since even they may have recognized particular memorable spaces, or spaces that are venerated by others because they radiate a kind of worldly or religious authority. Witchcraft spaces are probably often deemed too exotic to take into consideration, especially in a "Western" context. Yet far into the twentieth century, witchcraft was a regular feature of daily life experiences, although in some places more than others. The study of witchcraft shows its students not just the importance of the spatial dimension; accentuating particular boundaries and drawing lines across the map, it also alerts researchers to possible different approaches to women's space. The last may very well have further ramifications for a more general notion of female space; rather than understanding it as a part of male-dominated space occupied by women, female space depended more on corporeal proximity. Last, looking at witchcraft shows how space can be ruled by discourse. As discourses imply people partaking in them, a focus on witchcraft also reveals how different people can see the same space in different ways; witchcraft discourse is not necessarily shared by everyone and can occur with different emphases. It may therefore become imperative to consider both contested spaces and multiple spaces, where formerly there appeared only one.

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