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THE RISE OF THE WITCHCRAFT DOCTRINE

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Around 1400, it is commonly accepted that individuals accomplish forms of magic, with the help of the devil, be it through invocation or pactising with him. In the first decades of the fifteenth century, this acceptance facilitates the forging of a terrifying idea: that certain individuals, while accomplishing magic, are also in a sect of sorcerers and witches. They meet in secret to adore the devil and sabotage Christian society. Their meetings result in the death of people and the destruction of harvests. Formulated in this way, this belief is the basis for the Witchcraft Doctrine. It will enable the dramatic witch hunts of the fifteenth to seventeenth centuries.

An array of documents of different natures sheds light on the emergence of this new conviction, which is to become the witches’ Sabbath. Chronicles, pamphlets, court proceedings, legislation, religious literature and literary works were all meant to inform the population of the dangers of the witches’ Sabbath, by depicting it as a loathsome crime. In the second half of the fifteenth century, the time comes for the elaboration of more ample treaties on demonology. These treaties aim at understanding the real practice of harmful magic by sorcerers and the extent of the powers and actions of demons within this context of witchcraft. They are the guidelines that will be used to determine the guilt of presumed witches.

The witches’ Sabbath and the gravity of the witches’ crimes (1440–1460)

Beginning in the 1430s, several written works appear, in different contexts, whose objectives are to describe the witches’ Sabbath. The authors designate and give shape to a new belief: some men and women form clandestine sects whose members renounce the Christian faith and swear loyalty to the devil and demons. Their allegiance is sealed by a pact; when the devil and the demons call them, the members of the sect meet in isolated places, often by flying through the air. In these places, they worship the devil and set out to accomplish his destructive craft on people, animals and harvests. They are also suspected of engaging in sexual activity with the devil, of killing small children, of eating their flesh and of making ointments and maleficent potions with it. The existence of these sects constitutes a grave menace to society. It is therefore necessary to inform the authorities and the populace and to prepare to fight off this terrible danger.
There are four new principal elements that characterize these practices of harmful magic:

1. The collective dimension: sect or secret society.
2. The bond of absolute fidelity, which ties the witch to the devil: apostasy or demon worship.
3. Act against nature: cannibalism, infanticide and deviant sexual acts.
4. The magic transport of witches through the air.¹

For the first time, some texts describe and define with precision the imaginary concept of the witches’ Sabbath. Within a decade, this concept will have taken root in a territorial space centered in the arc of the Western Alps and the region of Lyon. In the first half of the fifteenth century, regions such as the Pyrenees and Italy are also influenced by the idea of the witches’ Sabbath. The belief will spread then rapidly into other regions of Western Europe and will become part of the societal mind for several centuries.

The theologians, inquisitors and magistrates who write these texts are deeply convinced of the reality of the witches’ Sabbath and demonic sects. Through their writings, they forge and elaborate upon this concept. In fact, they seek to go against a more skeptic train of thought, which questions the reality of the acts committed by witches, seeing more the likelihood that individuals are victims of deceit, delusion, mental illness or melancholy (within the tradition of the Canon Episcopi). The “fanatics” of the Sabbath push for repression and although they are a quantitative minority in the first half of the fifteenth century, their influence strengthens considerably in certain localities and states, such as the Western Alps, Western Switzerland, Savoy, Burgundy and the North and South of France. Their influence stretches also to certain cultural milieus such as the Dominican and Franciscan inquisition and the Council of Basel.

There are six primary written works that testify to the emergence of this new conception of witchcraft.² Hans Fründ, a chronicler from Lucern, relates the first witch hunt in Valais, Switzerland, in 1428–1436. Johannes Nider, Dominican and professor at the University of Vienna, takes a look at the question in his book, Formicarius (written between 1436 and 1438). The Grand-Judge (“juge-mage”, i.e. chief magistrate) of Briançon (Dauphiné), Claude Tholosan, denounces the gravity of the witches’ crimes, as he presides over more than a hundred witch trials. Meanwhile, on the other side of the Alps, an anonymous pamphlet appears, entitled Errores Gazariorum (Errors of the Gazarii). It describes in detail the ritual of the witches’ Sabbath and is supported by strong judiciary actions. An enigmatic treaty, entitled the Vauderye de Lyonos, testifies to the difficulties faced by the Dominicans of Lyon as they try to institute witch hunts in that part of the French Kingdom. Finally, Martin le Franc, provost of Lausanne and secretary to the Duke of Savoy, Amadeus VIII (the anti-pope Felix V), composes a long poem entitled Le Champion des Dames (The Defender of Ladies), in response to the quarrel over Le Roman de la Rose. This poem is one of the earliest texts of French humanism describing the witches’ Sabbath, which Martin Le Franc associates primarily with women.

Unveiling the interest which lies in these first texts requires a detailed presentation of their content, their contexts of time and place and how they were diffused or distributed.
 Around 1430, Hans Fründ, chronicler from Lucern, describes in German a witch hunt led in Valais, in 1428. According to him, more than 200 witch burnings occurred in a mere year and a half. The confessions of the accused are stupefying. A new sect of sorcerers, numbering more than 700 members, congregate in clandestine “schools”. They meet with the “evil spirit”, who indoctrinates them against the Christian faith and coerces them into abandoning God to practice with him. In exchange, he promises them wealth and power. He shows these “heretics” how to ride through the air and how to steal from the cellars of those who have the best wine. The devil also teaches them how to transform themselves into wolves and how to become invisible using certain herbs. This enables them to perpetrate harmful magic against people, animals and harvests. Hans Fründ also tells of how these witches and sorcerers might have killed their own children to feast on them during the gatherings of their “society” (Gesellschaft). These clandestine societies would be at the forefront of overturning Christian society, ready to impose their own power and laws. According to Hans Fründ, the number of practitioners of harmful magic had greatly increased during the last nine years and they were one step away from electing their own king! The Lucernois states precisely: in his opinion, witchcraft constitutes a major danger.

We now know that Hans Fründ had invented nothing, though he might have exaggerated some points; a vast witch hunt was held between 1428 and 1436 (at least). The witch hunt is the impulse of the secular courts in Episcopal Valais as well as the ecclesiastic courts in Lower Valais, led by the duke of Savoy. A large part of what is found in Hans Fründ’s chronicle can be related directly to the confessions of the accused, whose trials were duly noted and conserved. Hans Fründ holds his information first hand: it was certainly related to him by the members of the Silenen family, who were witnesses or actors in the different judicial proceedings led against the witches in Valais.

In the fifth part of the Formicarius (The Anthill), written between 1436 and 1438, the Dominican Johannes Nider, describes events similar to those recounted by Hans Fründ; however, they take place in the diocese of Lausanne and on land owned by the city of Bern. Because Johannes Nider was prior in the convent of Basel between 1429 and 1434 and was in charge of leading religious reforms, he probably had easy access to a part of these events. He was a Dominican Observant and eminent professor of theology at the University of Vienna. In his view, harmful magic and the cannibalistic sects of witches constitute the best material needed to dispense a moral education in the light of societal reform. The Formicarius is first of all a pastoral work.

Two informers relate the events he details in his book. The first, an inquisitor from Autun, tells of how, around 1437, witches had eaten their newborn babes during a secret meeting. The second informer, a secular judge of the High-Simmental named Pierre, describes how the witches used newborn cadavers to prepare evil potions or transform themselves into animals. This ritual of initiation gives the witches instant knowledge of the secrets of their sect, as long as they had renounced to God and pledged allegiance to the devil. Also according to Pierre and related by Nider are the harmful enchantments cast by the sorcerers Scavius, Hoppo and Scaedeli. These were known to cause sterility, disease, hail and death. Their practices illustrate a popular concept of witchcraft that Nider is quick to demonize. Although he presents several elements that constitute the witches’ Sabbath, he
does not describe them fully, nor does he give a complete description of the rituals of the Sabbath. However, in these years of transition, Nider is unable to present a complete description of it.

The Dominican is not yet ready to believe everything he is told, because he knows that the devil can easily deceive women. In Book 2 of the *Formicarius*, which deals with dreams and visions, Nider relates the case of an old woman who believes she can fly and yet remains seated at her kneading-trough. For him, she is only dreaming and in a sort of trance. Night flight, then, is not a plausible part of the Sabbath and constitutes a popular belief that he openly mocks. Although skeptical about the night flight, Nider is persuaded of the existence of groups of witches that commit infanticide, eat human flesh and gather around an “evil spirit” in a sort of Sabbath.

During these same years, three works of a similar nature to those described earlier propose a systematic description of the rituals of the witches’ Sabbath. The objective of these brief treatises is to denounce the wrongdoings of witches by underlining the gravity of their crimes. Two of these works circulate under the cover of anonymity. The authors of the *Errores Gazariorum* and *Vauderye de Lyonois* are probably close to the inquisitors’ sphere in the Val d’Aoste for the first, and Lyon for the second. We will come back to this later. Claude Tholosan writes the third work. He is a lawyer and Grand Judge of Briançon (Dauphiné), at the service of the King of France. His work, *Ut magorum et maleficiorum errores . . . (So that the errors of the Magicians and Sorcerers . . .)*, written around 1436, is the fruit of his ten years of practice as a judge. He had presided over a hundred witch trials (mostly in the Haut-Dauphiné). As he relates in the first part of the work, the accused belong to a demonic sect whose rituals and practices he describes precisely. He gives details about the ceremony of renunciation (apostasy) and the homages to the devil, which are followed by sexual orgies and cannibalistic banquets. Tholosan also describes the evil spells, their composition and their effects. For example, witches are capable of making men insane and women barren. Although he considers night flight a diabolical illusion, he believes that the Sabbath and the activities of the sect are quite real and perceives them as terrible crimes. That is why he justifies repressive action against the sect. In the second part of the work, the Grand Judge also consults other jurists, namely the southern lawyer Jourdain Brice, whom he cites in his book. Finally, Tholosan concludes his book with an important legal remark, which aims at assimilating witch crimes with homicide and most importantly, with the crime of lèse-majesté. In this manner, the Grand Judge seeks to certify the supremacy of Princely Law over Church Law. Contrary to the *Errores Gazariorum* and the *Vauderye de Lyonois*, Tholosan’s work was not diffused outside the Dauphiné; it was only conserved in the *Quintus liber fachureriorum*, the fifth book of the Treasury in which Tholosan records the witch trials’ proceedings. However, the early onset and amplitude of the witch hunts held in the region of Dauphiné (1424–1445) certainly echoes far into neighboring communities, and this contributes to the spread of the idea of the witches’ Sabbath.

Because of the extent of Grand-Judge Tholosan’s work and the weight of his actions, most of the repression in Dauphiné is attributed to him. But it is important to remember the active presence of the Mendicant Friars, who work closely with secular judges and who re-ignite pastoral reform in the fourteenth–fifteenth centuries. Indeed, it is after the visit of the Dominican Predicator, Vincent Ferrier, from Cataluña, that the witch hunts start. It is the continuation of a century of
crusades against the Waldensian heretics. Tholosan makes no mention of the actual role of the Franciscan inquisitors. This is certainly a means of affirming the importance of Princely justice and of controlling the courts. In this way, the inquisitors could not act alone against the witches. So, actually, it is Princely justice that is at the forefront of the struggles against witches. This might be the ransom paid for the Integration of Dauphiné (then located in the Empire) into the Kingdom of France. At this period, this kingdom felt that it was more Christian than others, holding the divine power. This can explain Tholosan’s role as champion of royal absolutism.

There is yet another text, entitled *Errores Gazariorum* (1436–1438), which relates closely to Judge Tholosan’s vision of demonical witchcraft. In it, we learn that the devil, when he has succeeded in enlisting a new member in his sect, requires his allegiance. He/she must recruit new members, keep the existence of the sect secret, and defend the members of it. The new members must kill small children and bring them to the Sabbath; they must sterilize men and women through the use of maleficent potions. After this oath taking, new members must worship the devil by kissing his rear end and by promising to give him a part of their body at their death. Once this ritual of homage is complete, the whole sect celebrates the arrival of the new member. There are different foods to eat, mostly small children who have been roasted or boiled. Then there is dancing and when the devil turns out the light and cries *Mestlet, mestlet*, the sexual orgy begins, without regard to blood ties or gender. The members of the sect also prepare powders and ointments, using the fatty tissue of children, snakes, toads, spiders, lizards and other ingredients. This enables them to provoke, with the help of the devil, multiple spells to kill men and animals and destroy harvests.

This text is written as a sort of a manual: a succession of articles (*item*), each one describing a particular aspect of the witches’ sect, narrated in question and answer style. The anonymous author of this text relies on the witch trials that were held in the Val d’Aosta (Northern Italy), in the Duchy of Savoy: we find a mention of the trial of Jeannette Cauda (*Johanneta Cauda*), who was burned at the stake in Chambave, August 11, 1428. The *Errores* could have been written by the Franciscan Ponce Feugeyron (or someone close to him), who was a pontifical inquisitor. Its purpose was to act against the witches and demon worshippers present in the Val d’Aosta. This particular region starts its witch hunts in 1428, at least. Then, more important witch hunts are held in the 1430s, 1440s and 1460s, mostly led by Franciscan inquisitors.

Two manuscripts of *Errores* are kept with texts produced by the Council of Basel, which supports the hypothesis that Ponce Feugeyron was the author of the short treaty. It is known that he was present at the Council at different times between 1433 and 1437. The Council of Basel is a perfect place for the distribution and diffusion of literature concerning the witches’ Sabbath. One of the manuscripts of this text circulated in the diocese of Lausanne and was completed with information relative to the trials held in the region of Vevey. One mention can be directly related to the confessions of the young Aymonet Mauguet of Epesses, recorded in 1438, by the Dominican inquisitor Ulric de Torrenté. Between 1451 and 1457, a third manuscript (Rome, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Pal. Lat. 1381, f. 190r–192r) was copied by German lawyer Mathias Widmann von Kemnath (died in 1476). He was court chaplain, mathematician and astrologer for the Palatin Prince, Frederik the First, the Victorious (Friederich I., der Siegreiche,
1425–1476). This is how the Valdotan treaty spreads into the Germanic Empire. It is then translated into German by Widmann, which he inserts into his work, “Chronik Friederich der Siegreichen”.

The *Errores Gazarorum* presents a number of similarities with another pamphlet produced in the same context and known under the name of the *Vauderye de Lyonois en brief*. The *Vauderye* is written in Latin, at an unknown date, by an unknown author, and details precisely a diabolic sect known as the Waldenses (Valdesia). It describes their organization and criminal activities. The members of this sect, called “Faicturiers or Faicturières”, supposedly congregate at night in the “Synagogue”, also called the “Fait”, the “Martinet”, or the “Sabbath” as mentioned in a manuscript of Trier, (Stadtbibliothek, Ms. 613). Assembled around the devil depicted in a monstrous and abominable way, the apostates give him homage, profane Christian rites and engage in festivities of a dubious nature, such as sexual orgies.

In revealing the activities of this secret society, the *Vauderye de Lyonois en brief* does little to prove its theoretical existence, but does much to heighten the “enormity” (enormitas) of the crimes, possibly to better punish its hypothetical members. In fact, there is a direct correlation between the crimes attributed to the witches’ sect and a certain judicial activity in the region of Lyon. Recent research, supported by the discovery of new writings, allows for the substantiation that this treaty belongs to the Dominican inquisition in Lyon. It can also be stated that it was composed at the late end of the 1430s. Indeed, during the 1430s, the prior of the Dominican convent of Lyon, Thomas Girbelli, and Jean Tacot, inquisitor of the same convent, labor to install the structure and conditions necessary to begin a regional witch hunt. However, they faced opposition, notably from the Archbishop of Lyon and the Consulate of the city. Thomas Girbelli and Jean Tacot would have written the treaty in response to their antagonists, as well as to solicit political and financial support from the King and the Pope. This is clearly explained in a recently uncovered continuation of the treaty.

The story of the “vauderie de Lyon” is that of the failure of witch hunts in that region of France. Yet, it still remains as a largely distributed text by the network of Observant Dominicans. Actually, there are three copies of the manuscript remaining. In particular, the treaty was diffused in the region of Burgundy, where the case of the *Vauderie d’Arras* (c. 1460) gave it its name. Then, the treaty reached the city of Trève (Trier), at the gates of the Empire (c. 1470).

The widespread persecutions reaches Martin Le Franc, sometime in 1440: he describes trials led in the Dauphiné (mostly in Vallouise, known by him as the Valpute) and in the Piedmont (mons d’Esture, probably Stura di Demonte). He is the first to present the persecutions in a literary, humanistic work: *Le Champion des Dames* (The Defender of Ladies), which he composes between 1440 and 1442. Martin Le Franc is secretary to the anti-pope Felix V (Duke Amadeus VIII of Savoy) during the Council of Basel and will be provost to the Lausanne Chapter as early as 1443. The poem he writes constitutes an ongoing dialogue between the Defender, *Franc Vouloir*, and his different adversaries. It concerns the reputation of women, in a typical literary court quarrel that arises at the time of Jean de Meun. In the poem, the Detractor of women defends the existence of “old witches”, “vaudoises” (Waldenses) and “Faicturières”, “who fly through the air like birds”, to congregate with the devil and engage in the worst debaucheries: infant cannibalism, sexual orgies, evil
spells and the metamorphosis of the devil. The Defender refutes these superstitious tales and discredits magic flight. The ensuing dialogue gives a good idea of the divergent mentalities and sensibilities that coexists in that particular period.

Martin Le Franc gives voice to the ideas of his time through the characters of his poem and integrates into it the representations of traditional knowledge, discussions on heresy, magic and demonology as well as the popular beliefs concerning witchcraft and its practice. The Defender of the poem suggests that rather than burning witches, the Church must act upon the education of women. By educating them, they can be made aware of their weaknesses and shortcomings. His critiques also aim at shaking the papal Court, which he deems unconcerned about sending more pastors to rural regions. In the context of the Christian reform programs of the time, Martin Le Franc’s diatribe against the clergy constitutes a burning topic at the Council of Basel.

Written between Basel and the State of Savoy, the Champion des Dames is progressively distributed, mostly in the State of Burgundy. The work is dedicated to Philippe le Bon, though the latter does not give it the eulogy the poet was hoping for. One of the copies was made in 1451 in Arras and is adorned with miniature illustrations depicting two women, one on a broom and the other on a stick.

These first six texts all offer a similar view of the witches’ Sabbath, labeled “the Lausanne paradigm” by Richard Kieckhefer. Other testimonies, however, offer some variations, influenced by the cultural universe of the classic literary strige or vampire witch (strix, strega) as well as regional folklore. Such is the case of the testimonies originating from the Italian peninsula and Umbria (the “Umbrian paradigm”, according to Kieckhefer) and professed in the sermons of Bernardino of Siena (1427 and 1447). The Franciscan Observant denounces the old soothsayers who believe that they can “run with Herodiade” (in curso cum Herodia) and who metamorphose into cats or “striges” (strix, lamia), to drink the blood of children. Italian authors, basing themselves on sporadic regional witch trials, describe the witches as a combination of infanticide “striges” and “Good Ladies”, who fly with the Bountiful Lady (Abundia) or the goddess Diana. These witches do not meet in a “synagogue”, as found in the Alps, but rather take part in the “game” (ludus) of Diana. The devil has no place in this “game” and is only a character that deceives women. Lastly, incantations and spells are perceived as being the work of old women. This alternative witch mythology spreads beyond the Alps and mix occasionally with the concept of the witches’ Sabbath. Beyond that, some regions, such as the Holy Roman Empire, are at first unreceptive and limits themselves to a simpler view of sorcery: the casting of evil spells.

**Legislation**

Secular authorities were not insensitive to the current mutations of thought. They perceived the interest in persecuting witches as a means of insuring theirs as the high-justice as well as confirming their sovereignty or majesty. Thus, the political dimension of the repression is a high stake. Lay authorities can be potentially active in the arena of repression as long as maleficent crimes endanger people or property without, however, containing the “flavor of heresy”. However, there are great regional contrasts in the repression because the perception of the gravity of crimes of witchcraft is not the same everywhere.
In Cataluña, the Statutes of Aneu (County of Pallars, on the border with the County of Foix and the Valley of Aran) are revised in 1424 in light of what is considered the “enormity” of the crimes perpetrated against “God and the Valley” using harmful magic. They prescribe capital punishment by fire for those judged guilty of “going at night with bruixes” (witches) to meet the “Goat of Biterne” (probably a demonical entity), of worshipping him rather than God, of killing newborn babes, of provoking disease and of using poisons. Even though trace documents do confirm the existence of judicial repression as early as 1420, the effects of these regulations are hard to measure because of the absence of complete trial proceedings. Principally, secular courts lead the repression, although stimulated by the intense pastoral activities of the Dominicans Vincent Ferrier and Pere Cerdà. However the inquisition intervenes in the procedures mostly to incite caution and moderation. It remains skeptical about the collective dimension of the crimes as well as the Sabbath.

The principal protagonist of the early changes in perception of witch crimes is Nicolas Eymerich, inquisitor in the territories of Cataluña, Aragon, Valencia and Mallorca during the years of 1356 to 1391. His two treatises bear witness to his vision, describing how magic and enchantments are to be assimilated to heresy. They also support the intensity with which he inquires into heresy during his years as inquisitor. The most famous Catalan preacher, Vincent Ferrier (1356–1419), continued in the same vein. His sermons denounce blasphemy, the invocation of demons and soothsaying as well as any popular superstitions. He crisscrosses Western Europe and his fire and brimstone sermons echo all the way into Italy, Dauphiné, Savoy and Western Switzerland.

It is quite possible that Vincent Ferrier’s visit into the Alpine Valleys leads to the decreeing of severe regulations against spell casters and witches. It is the case in episcopal Valais in 1428. The Patriots of Valais (the Diet) become the leaders of the repression of witches, evincing the inquisitors and episcopal justice. In 1430 and 1434, other communities, such as Mörel and Rarogne, follow the Patriots’ example.

It is during that time that the Duke of Savoy Amadeus VIII issues an edict of his great legislative work, the Statuta Sabaudie (Statutes of Savoy, 1430). His ambition is to reform and reorganize his state, which extends over the Alps from the Mediterranean Sea to the shores of Lake Geneva. The first article of his decree order targets the sorcerers, magicians and demon worshippers. As he qualifies acts of sorcery and magic as heretic crimes, he extends into the judicial competence of ecclesiastical courts in that domain. Amadeus VIII feels so strongly about the dangers of witchcraft that he enjoins both the secular and the ecclesiastical justice of his duchy to initiate the pursuit and judgment of heresy and witchcraft. His strategy is political, judicial and financial. In taking the position as defender of divine and human majesty, he consolidates and defines demonic sorcery as a heresy of State.

From the moment that sorcery is rethought as heresy, secular princes seek to maintain control over the punishment of these crimes through offensive repression. Acting thus, they legitimize and affirm their sovereign power. This is precisely what the judge Tholosan achieved for the Prince of the Kingdom of France.

The papacy is slower to react than the secular princes. Papal bulls remain sober and moderate, with the exception of Alexander V, in 1409. This contrasts sharply with the proactive attitude of John XXII, in the preceding century. The bulls make neither allusion to the Sabbath, nor mention the witch’s flight through the air; nor
do they treat the devil as a dominant figure. This is the case for Eugenius IV (1437–1445), Nicolas V (1451), Calixtus III (1457), Pius II (1459) and Innocent VIII (1484). Nicolas V, though, does authorize the pursuit of witches, without qualifying them as heretics, which permits the inquisition to expand its field of action into sorcery and magical practices. The crimes tend to be qualified as lèse-majesté or enormous scandal against the Christian faith.  

Understand, convince and justify: the demonological treaties (1450–1470)

From the 1440s, texts about witchcraft not only attempt to describe the Sabbath and the atrocities committed by sorcerers and witches but aim also at understanding the reality of the interactions between demons and witches, as well as their consequences. The texts’ objectives are to give the courts an acceptable framework in which to apply the witchcraft doctrine, both legally and theologically. The tracts on demonology, as autonomous works, gain ground as early as the 1450s. The theorists of demonology are mostly intellectuals: theologians, inquisitors, even lawyers or doctors. They seek to integrate the new belief of the witches’ Sabbath into traditional Christian demonology. It is about understanding the existence and nature of demons as well as the extent of their powers over humans and the environment. The treaties written by these demonologists are works of synthesis as well as rupture: a concentration of demonological knowledge, magic, witchcraft and possession confronted with the confessions of accused witches.

Close to 30 texts are written before the appearance of the *Malleus maleficarum* (Hammer of Witches), written by Heinrich Kramer (Institoris, 1486). The renown of this last text is largely due to the growing use of the printing press and tends to overshadow earlier works, which are interesting for historians but are little known. However, the questions posited by the German Dominican do reflect the thoughts of these earlier works. Besides, the titles of these texts often include the word “hammer” (malleus) or “whip” (flagellum), indicating the aims of the author; but they can also be more soberly entitled “treaties” or opusculum (brief works), or “sermons” or “questions”, which bear witness to the intellectual designs behind them.

The tracking down of these fifteenth-century writings owe a lot to the anthology of texts compiled by Joseph Hansen in 1901, entitled *Quellen und Untersuchungen zur Geschichte des Hexenwahns und der Hexenverfolgungen im Mittelalter*. This work is essentially the base for scientific research for these fifteenth-century texts. Yet it is still necessary to prolong the study of manuscripts and written works to deepen the knowledge of who the authors were and the contexts in which the treaties were written. Thus, more complete critical editions should be published. In the last century, other works, coming from the Italian peninsula in particular, have enriched the anthology.

Generally, these texts attempt to evaluate the possibility and by extension the reality of the witches’ Sabbath and the acts committed by their protagonists. Christian faith does not permit the authors to doubt the existence of the devil and his maleficent actions, leading them to ask these questions: How can witches cause tempests, disease and sexual impotence? Can they transform others or transform themselves
into animals? Are they physically transported to their Sabbaths and are these real events? How can demons, as pure spirits, assume a physical body? How can sorcerers accomplish their vital functions (\textit{operae vitae}), such as eating, speaking and being incubus or succubus? Why does God permit these misfortunes and terrible destructive actions to take place?

To answer all of these questions, the authors employ an argumentation which attempts to be rational. They use the tools of scholastic reasoning and logic. They support their arguments with biblical texts as well as those written by the Church Fathers, such as Augustine and Gregory the Great. They cite theologians, namely Thomas Aquinas, and rely on hagiographic accounts and \textit{exempla}. These practical tracts are the fruit of the late scholasticism, slightly bastardized and twisted to the taste of certain thinkers, but they are not written by perverted or deranged consciences. Demonology must be considered a true science, and demonologists endeavor to describe the place and purpose of demons in the world and in nature.

These treatises also translate the interrogations and divergent thoughts of the demonologists. Contradictory positions can be defended: for example, it is possible for an author to state that the devil does accompany the witches to their Sabbath, while another will defend the idea that demons make the witches dream that they are going to the Sabbath. All is a matter of belief and opinion. This enables certain skepticism to remain regarding the reality of evil spells and Sabbaths. This skepticism can already be found in the earliest reactions to more fanatical positions.

The texts are most often produced in the eaves of judicial courts, as a desire to encourage witch hunting and give it a normative framework, or as a necessity to justify repressive periods. For many authors, the proof of the reality of witchcraft resides in the confessions of the accused, most often obtained through torture or the menace of torture. Treaties and trials fed off of each other in a reciprocal manner.

\textit{Jean Vinet, Nicolas Jacquier and Pierre Mamoris}

Three treaties are particularly revealing about the fabrication of the witchcraft doctrine: the \textit{Tractatus contra invocatores demonum} (Treatise Against Demon Invokers), by Jean Vinet (c. 1450–1452), the \textit{Flagellum hereticorum fascinariorum} (Scourge of Heretical Enchanters), by Nicolas Jacquier (1458), and the \textit{Flagellum maleficorum} (Scourge of Those Who Commit Evil Deeds), by Pierre Mamoris (before 1462). They are among the first texts that speak of the witchcraft doctrine in terms of Christian demonology and are all written by French authors. The Dominican Jean Vinet completes his studies in theology in Paris and teaches Pierre Lombard’s \textit{Sentences} until he is named inquisitor in Carcassonne. Nicolas Jacquier, also a Dominican inquisitor, is attached to the convent in Dijon, then Lille, all the while traveling extensively to the East and North of France, generally between Lyon and the State of Burgundy. Pierre Mamoris, a secular clerk originally from Limoges, is canon in Saintes as well as professor of theology at the University of Poitiers. Let us take a closer look at these three texts, as they are emblematic of the particular ideas on witchcraft of the middle of the fifteenth century.\textsuperscript{26}

First off, what intrigues Jean Vinet is the manner in which demons are able to fabricate a body that is manifest to man and capable of acting physically upon the world. He also questions the magic powers that can be obtained by practicing with
the devil, which he firmly condemns. And, anxious about liberating man from the grip of demons, he demonstrates the effectiveness of the sacrament of exorcism. However, the actual question of the “criminals of idolatry and allies to the demons”, as he calls the sorcerers and witches, is quite diluted in his tract and is not the object of a complete consideration.

Jean Vinet gathers most of his answers from Thomas Aquinas. He selects within the writings of the Angelic Doctor what he needs to demonstrate his point. He accentuates the physical manifestation of demons in corporibus assumptis (feigned, artificial or virtual bodies), a notion that makes demonic witchcraft more credible. Demons, with their “virtual” body, can appear to man in a sensible, visible and verbal way. In consequence, demonic apparitions are not visions produced by the imagination or through dreams in sleep (inside), but as realities (outside) to man. The stake is high because he is attempting to demonstrate the actual, physically palpable presence of demons outside the witches’ Sabbath. He thinks that the witches’ Sabbath is totally possible: demons can meet with humans and unite with them (sexually or through allegiance). Demons can transport people from one place to another (flight to the Sabbath), and demons will help sorcerers cast evil spells. The French Dominican has clearly learned the Thomist lesson on demonic pacts: magical arts are not possible without allegiance with demons. Vinet’s explanations are a refreshing re-write of what Thomas Aquinas had written two centuries earlier his position is not one of a witch hunter, but rather a scholar who seeks the limit between what is possible or impossible, and acceptable or unacceptable. However, the passage of time had greatly modified the currents of thought on witchcraft and these changes had enabled the manifest repression of witches.

Vinet’s contemporary, Nicolas Jacquier, goes much further in his tract, Flagellum hereticorum fascinariorum (1428). Convinced of the reality of the Sabbath, he virulently denounces the “new sects of heretic enchanters”. In his view, the witches’ Sabbath is a demonic anti-church to which its participants adhere willingly and consciously. It is a demonic “cult” which includes sacrilegious rites and concentrates the entire horror of witch crimes.

Similar to Jean Vinet, Jacquier never ceases to spotlight the demonic body, perceptible to human senses. As a leitmotif, he uses Thomas Aquinas’ works to remind his readers of the real and corporeal presence of demons at the Sabbath. Jacquier uses this argument of sensory perception to convince his detractors. Based on the physical experience man can have of the demon body, this latter become indubitable: the devil can really manifest himself physically because human beings can, through their external senses, touch, hear, see and even smell his fetid odors. This repertory of senses helps to establish objective proof of the reality of the Sabbath and the physical presence of the devil in an “artificial body” (corpus assumptum). In Jacquier’s opinion, sexual intercourse between demons and men or women is the manifest proof of their existence, and it is also for this reason that the revelers of the Sabbath returned from the synagogue affirming their “complete exhaustion due to the extremely violent pleasures” felt with the demons.

Nicolas Jacquier is probably the demonologist who worked the most assiduously on proving what can be called diabolic realism. That is to say, the postulation that, not only are the devil and demons real, but that physical interaction between humans and demons is possible. The Dominican inquisitor is considered an extreme
demonologist because he so firmly believes in the existence of demons: for him, the devil is a creature that belongs to a material reality and his actions have concrete and perceptible effects.

In this light, the “synagogue of the devil”, which aims at destroying Christianity, constitutes a grave danger. It is of the upmost importance to demonstrate that these sorcerers and witches are not only heretics but also the “worst of the heretics”, thus justifying the violence of the repression against them. The inquisitor Jacquier supports a severe hardening of judicial procedures to ensure that the accused have no hope of grace or pardon. They must be condemned to death, in their first charge. The Flagellum is a true plea in favor of capital punishment and organized witch hunts.

The Dominican has a double mission: to convince others of the existence of sects of witches and to convince them of the necessity of uniting against these sects. And he also says this: those that do not help fight against the sects become allies to them and their demons. This position sends him to the ranks of fanatics fighting against demonic sorcery in the fifteenth century. His project of eradicating demonic witchcraft is at the heart of his defense for Christian orthodoxy and is parallel to his lifelong battle against the Hussites, of which he writes two tracts. The whole of his work is enveloped in his preoccupations as a Dominican Observant.

The third treaty, coming from a different perspective, makes its author, Pierre Mamoris, slightly more sympathetic. His work, Flagellum maleficorum (written around 1462), gives a large range of spells and magical practices witnessed in Poitou and in the Kingdom of Bourges in the middle of the fifteenth century. According to Mamoris, these practices have multiplied since the Hundred Years War. Gathering testimonies from his peers, as well as his own experiences, he offers a sort of ethnographic harvest, with which he opens his treatise. He announces that he wants to “discover the truth” as well as persuade himself: Are the magical arts derived from demons or nature? Is the Sabbath real or is it a demonic delusion? To be persuasive, he compares and contrasts different doctrines and knowledge. He searches for the position to adopt and does not hesitate to speak of his doubts. Pierre Mamoris’ point of view changes from the beginning to the end of his treaty, finally resting upon the conviction that the misdeeds of sorcerers and witches are extremely serious. He is particularly marked by a certain trial which made a lot of noise at the time: the conviction of Guillaume Adeline in 1453 in Evreux.

Overall, Pierre Mamoris underlines the great ability demons have of deceiving humans. However, unlike Vinet and Jacquier, Mamoris relies on Bonaventure rather than Thomas Aquinas to support the illusory character of demonic manifestations. According to the theologian from Poitiers, the demon is more of a conjurer who has intimate knowledge of nature’s secrets and manipulates this knowledge to deceive men. Pierre Mamoris points out that there is nothing supernatural or miraculous about this; works of the devil are limited to a framework of nature and can be explained by natural laws, such as the optical illusion.

Pierre Mamoris, professor of theology at the University of Poitiers, was an open-minded person and his desire to understand led him to confront different experiences, vaster than those researched by the Dominican inquisitors Vinet and Jacquier.
The Vauderie d’Arras
can be considered as the judicial implementation of Nicolas Jacquier’s ideas. It is the first great witch hunt which was led in France, in the State of Burgundy, as early as 1459, a year after the publication of Jacquier’s treaty. The first of the accused, about a dozen, were condemned to the pyre, before the intervention of the Royal Counselors, who ended the hunt and overturn the sentences handed down against the “vaudois” (Waldenses) of Arras. Although the procedural paperwork was destroyed after the rehabilitation ceremony in 1491, the chronicles of Jacques Du Clerq permit the reconstitution of the facts of the Vauderie d’Arras. As demonstrated by Franck Mercier, this witch hunt was the competitive theatre between two sovereignty: the Kingdom of France and the State of Burgundy, which will finally be unable to perpetuate its reign.  

It is quite possible that Jacquier’s pamphlet in favor of capital punishment influenced the debate. As an example, there is a judicial memo, the Recollectio . . . Valdensium ydolatrarum, produced at the time of the Vauderie d’Arras, that aims at legitimizing the persecutions of the “vaudois-sorciers” of Arras. The anonymous author, who might be Jacques du Bois (judge of Arras), might have used Jacquier’s Flagellum for support, because the memo contains some of the same general reflections, especially concerning the flight of the witches to the Sabbath and the need for capital punishment against demonic witches.

It is in this context that Jean Tinctor, canon of Tournai, raised at the University of Cologne, takes up his pen to justify the repression and writes a Sermo contra sectam Valdensium (Sermon against the Waldensian sect) (1460). A few years later, he will produce a more complete version in French, entitled Traité du crime de Vauderie (Tract against the crimes of Vauderie), which was probably destined for the Court of Burgundy and a larger secular public. Jean Tinctor’s demonology explores the limits of the devil’s power: it is unable to transcend the laws of nature, incapable of creating matter or life and always subjugated by the divine power. Although he remains convinced of the reality of the crimes committed by the sorcerers, he considers that demonic dreams can be instilled upon man to test his morals and his faith. Tinctor is one of the first to conciliate two ideas, which until that time had seemed contradictory: if the accused confesses in believing the demonic illusion, he is therefore responsible for the consequences that follow the hypothetical acts. Then it is important to examine closely the conscience of the accused and their individual responsibilities. The judges should exercise caution and should investigate more in depth for possible material proof of the Sabbath.

The Sabbath between demonic illusion and reality

The question of the reality of the witches’ Sabbath is at the crossroads of two paths: the first one is related to the old canon Episcopi (eleventh century, Regino of Prüm), and considers that women are victims of demonic delusions. The canon Episcopi has been the foundation for most of the treaties on demonology in the fifteenth century. It has served as a pretext for the authors to debate the multitude of stakes surrounding the phenomena. Authors such as Jean Vinet, Nicolas Jacquier and Pierre Mamoris searched for proof of night flight and consequently, for the witches’ Sabbath. Others,
such as Juan Torquemada, or, the Italian Franciscan Observance, remained loyal to his idea that it was just an illusion, without completely forgiving those who believed in it.\textsuperscript{33} From the Milanese Dominican, Girolamo Visconti,\textsuperscript{34} to Jean Tinctor, and later still, Heinrich Kramer (Institoris), there finally seems to be a resolution concerning both ideas: either witches are able to fly through the air with the help of demons, or they merely have the illusion of flight in a dreamlike state, always inspired by the devil. In either case, the accused must be condemned.

The other path is related to certain developments in scholastic demonology. It considers the transport of humans by demons as a reality, as well as the latter’s ability to take on bodies that are perceived as real by human senses. This trick of demonologists thus creates a fault in the system, enabling the witches’ Sabbath to become a real possibility.

The junction of these two paths adds complexity to the ideas circulating about the Sabbath because they enable diverse solutions on how the relationship between men and demons can be perceived. On one hand, the realist theory (a voluntary allegiance to the devil), and on the other, the illusionist theory in which dreams and imagination are troubled by demons. It is important, however, not to consider the division between the realist theory and the illusionist theory as a distinction between guilty or innocent. The fact of simply considering the Sabbath as a demonic illusion does not exclude it from penal action, even moderately. One can be punished for a dream or a belief when one considers as real what is actually an illusion, as when a witch believes she has been to the Sabbath, when she has only been deluded by a demon. Guided by the argumentation of the jurists, the criminal intention is more important than the crime itself. Holding a thesis regarding the reality of the Sabbath is not at all necessary in the actual repression of demonic witchcraft. This thesis is in fact a “limit case” in Christian demonology that reaches its peak in the middle of the fifteenth century. Paradoxically, the debate between the theories of reality and illusion of the Sabbath is falsified by the fact that neither theory disculpates the accused. Although it is a false debate, its importance covers the entire fifteenth century and much has been written about it.

What is exciting about the treatise on demonology is that questions relative to demons are no longer intellectual speculations, but become questions with great implications, be they social, political or cultural, because they deal with repression: the witch hunts. With the Sabbath, scholarly demonology becomes a pressing social problem in the fifteenth century.

Notes
THE RISE OF THE WITCHCRAFT DOCTRINE


3 Ostorero, *L'Imaginaire du sabbat*, 23–98. Another manuscript of this report (Strasbourg, Bibliothèque nationale et universitaire, 2,935), very close to the first, has been edited by Georg Modestin, «'Von den hexen, so in Wallis verbrant wurdent'. Eine wieder entdeckte Handschrift mit dem Bericht des Chronisten Hans Fründ über eine Hexenverfolgung im Wallis (1428)», *Vallesia* 60 (2005): 399–409.


25 Hansen, Quellen. Some English translations (from the extracts of Hansen, Quellen) in The Witchcraft Sourcebook, ed. Brian P. Levack (New York: Routledge, 2004) and in Maxwell-Stuart, Witch Beliefs. Concerning other texts, for instance the sermons of Bernardino da Siena and other members of the Franciscan Observance, cf. supra note 16 (Montesano and Mormando); Fabio Troncarelli, «Grata et iocunda est aequalitas. Mariano Sozzini tra Medioevo

26 For a detailed analysis of these texts, see Ostorero, Le Diable au sabbat. Extracts in Hansen, Quellen, 124–212.


Bibliography (selection)


