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THE PURSUIT OF WITCHES AND THE SEXUAL DISCOURSE OF THE SABBAT

Abstract: During the European Witch Craze (c.1450-1650) tales of the "witches' sabbat" circulated across the continent. These tales included lurid details of sex and debauchery conducted between women and demons, supported by numerous confessions given by accused women. However, historians have long noted that there is no evidence that any such "sabbat" ever occurred. This paper argues that the idea of the "witch" was a category of person created by a European clerical elite convinced that Satan was active in the world, and tales of the sabbat were generated by these same elites in order to spread awareness of what many viewed as a real and present danger. This concept was one part of a hegemonic discourse that many found useful for its explanatory power and its anxiety reduction benefits.

Key words: witch, witchcraft, witches' sabbat, *Malleus malifacarum,* hegemonic discourse, inquisitors, inquisition.

The historical analysis of witchcraft during the late medieval and early modern periods is a project that has garnered the attention of generations of scholars spilling great volumes of ink in attempts to understand "who the witches were," as Richard A. Horsley has done, why the witch craze erupted in fifteenth-century Europe, as has been Michael Bailey's approach, and a variety of other questions (Horsley 1979; Bailey 2003). Despite the erudition brought to bear, though, there are still numerous poorly understood aspects of the phenomenon, perhaps none more so than the tales of the witches' sabbat. According to the primary source accounts this was a ritual that in many ways functioned as a distorted mirror image of the Catholic Mass and scholars such as Margaret Murray once accepted these stories as demonstrative of a "witch cult" (Murray 1921) with members spread across the European continent. However, deeper historical research uncovered a serious flaw in this argument: there is no evidence that anything like a witches' sabbat ever actually occurred in premodern Europe. Therefore, this study tackles the problem of witchcraft and the witches' sabbat by asking the following question: if there were not thou-

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sands of witches holding orgiastic sabbats across the continent, why was the story so widespread? As we shall see, getting to the heart of this question can reveal much about the witch craze in general. I will demonstrate why this is true in the following pages, as I argue that the category of "witch" was one created and promulgated by a clerical elite responding to genuine fears present at all levels of European society; furthermore, tales of the witches' sabbat existed primarily as a means of spreading awareness of what premodern Europeans viewed as a very serious problem.

In order to understand why people believed the things they did about witches, however, we need to consider these beliefs within their historical context, and that context certainly looks bleak enough to modern eyes. As detailed by William Chester Jordan, beginning in 1315 a long period of expansive growth began to come to an end in Western Europe (Jordan 1997). Global climate patterns shifted leading to longer colder winters, and once the winters were over, rain began to fall and continued to fall at rates greatly exceeding those of previous periods as late as 1322 in some parts of Northern and Western Europe. The shorter growing season meant a decrease in the food supply; a problem exacerbated by soil depletion caused by over cultivation of marginal lands, which itself occurred due to a need to feed Europe's expanding population. As if that were not bad enough, the rains destroyed many crops in the field while encouraging the growth of parasitical fungi that made much of what was left inedible. Furthermore, the poor weather contributed to the development of diseases in cattle and horse – some of which, such as anthrax, could be passed on to humans – further reducing both the food supply as well as the supply of draft animals necessary to plow, harvest, and transport grains. The result of all these things in combination was the loss of roughly one third of the population of Europe to starvation and hunger-related illnesses.

Additionally, children growing up in the conditions described above led to a generation of adults maturing in the aftermath of the famine whose immune systems were compromised by the food insecurity they had experienced as children (Jordan 1997, 182-188). This meant that when the Black Death first appeared in Italy in 1347 it found a rapid foothold among people biologically ill-equipped to fight off this new illness. The population had hardly recovered from the earlier demographic collapse, and by 1351 from one quarter to one third of those living in Europe had succumbed to this illness (Benictdow 2004). Additionally, the disease weakened kinship bonds as all too often family members abandoned even close relatives who manifested symptoms of the disease. Finally, at a time when some at least feared the world might be ending (Lerner 1981) and the people's need for spiritual support was at its peak, the clergy died in even great numbers than the general population as many dedicated priests and friars remained in close contact with those who were ill and dying due to their efforts to provide comfort – or at least the solace of last

rites. Though the worst effects of this disease were felt during the period between 1347 and 1351, recurrent outbreaks would ravage European populations until 1666.

As if famine and plague were not enough, English armies ravaged France in the long-running on again, off again conflict known to history as the Hundred Years War (Curry 1993). Beginning in 1337 and not ending until 1453, English forces periodically pillaged French cities, towns, and villages killing thousands at all levels of society while disrupting the lives of many thousand others. In sum, during the last years of Middle Ages the traditional Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse – famine, plague, war, and of course death – all stalked the European landscape. The magnitude of these recurring calamities drove the sometimes desperate nature of efforts to cope with the situation as well as strenuous efforts to explain why such things happened. As we shall see, one major issue that a successful explanation had to contend with was the philosophical problem of evil. After all, the vast majority of the population was Catholic and in the face of combined disasters leaving tens of millions dead even the most devoted Christian could begin to wonder how a loving and God could allow such evil to walk the land.

When it came to coping, many turned to magic. Since before the days of the Roman Empire people at all levels of society had believed that elements of the natural world were possessed of hidden, that is occult, properties capable of a broad range of useful effects when handled properly (Kieckhefer 2000). Therefore, by the fourteenth century every village had at least one wise woman (Gaskill 2008, et al.) as they were known who promised to alleviate or heal a range of illnesses through the use of spells that were often passed down from generation to generation. In all likelihood, these spells would have remained closely guarded secrets, as many of these women – and there were reasons why these people were almost always women, as I will explain momentarily – were in effect professionals, relied on their ability to heal their neighbors' ailments for a livelihood. Their professional services were in great demand even before the Black Death began to fell people of all ages across Europe, for few peasants would have had the wherewithal to avail themselves of the services of a physician. But a wise woman, who would provide her services in exchange for goods or services, was within their reach. Furthermore, many of the remedies these healers provided were demonstrably effective. For example, an individual afflicted by aches and pains might receive a tea with ingredients gathered under a full moon and blended while the wise woman uttered an incantation to draw out the hidden powers of these ingredients – which might include willow bark, a natural source of acetyl salicylic acid, known by its more common name of aspirin (Sharma 1993). One need not believe in the effectiveness of the healing incantation applied in order to understand how such a remedy could ease pain.

Modern researchers examining the recipes used by premodern herbalists have remarked upon the effectiveness of many of the remedies, but we should not discount the importance of the spells and incantations applied either. In an age when the best explanation that could be supplied by university-trained physicians for the Black Death was that it was the result of an unfortunate conjunction of Saturn with the house of Aquarius (Reiner 1985) – as described by the medical faculty of the University of Paris – much of the effectiveness of medical treatments came about due to the faith of the populace in the knowledge of the medical provider, whether that provider was a physician or a wise woman (French 2003). Such faith not only would have allowed many people who received treatments from these people to feel better thanks to the well-documented placebo effect, but it also would have led to a reduction of the anxiety of the patient and his or her family. The importance of anxiety reduction mechanisms as a component of the success of magical practices has been documented by scholars such as the anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski (Malinowski 1984), and in a world where so much was not only beyond the control of people at all levels of society, but indeed well beyond their understanding, we should not devalue the importance of beliefs that seemed to provide a mechanism of both explanation and control.

In any case, no matter who might provide the care, there were definite limits to the abilities of premodern medical providers. Almost half of all children died before the age of ten (Orme 2001, 113) even in the best of times and premodern people were just as prone to blame the person who had cared for their child as modern people are to blame their pediatrician when a child dies. During a period of a pandemic that was often fatal in short order, as was the case with the Black Death, patient mortality would have been common, and wise women were far more vulnerable to suspicion than university-trained physicians in cities. Typically women took on these roles because they had outlived their husbands (not uncommon if a woman survived childbirth), had no male family member to support or protect them in the intensely patriarchal society of premodern Europe, and were unable to support themselves in an agrarian economy due to the declining health and strength that is a normal part of old age (Campbell 1986, 41-43). Such women would often be seen as repositories of secret lore allowing them to make a living for themselves as wise women, but they would also exist on the fringes of society, marginalized by the same esoteric knowledge that made them valuable to the community. This vulnerable condition was most dangerous in times of societal stress, when people looked for an explanation for disasters affecting the community. At such times people who believed a woman could heal through the use of magic might also begin to wonder whether or not she might be able to cause harm by use of these spells.

However, fears at the level of the peasantry rarely translated into action against these marginalized women in the absence of official support and san-

ctioning. Unfortunately for the women scattered across Europe who acted as local healers, forces beyond their ken or power were brewing that would come to put many such people at risk, for the clerical elite were not immune to fears generated by the multitude of recurrent disasters that affected Europe beginning in the fourteenth century. Furthermore, in 1307 the papacy succumbed to the pressure of the French monarchy and moved from Rome to Avignon, where it would remain until 1377. To make matters far, far worse, in 1379 the papacy would endure the worst schism of its history as first two men – one in Avignon and one in Rome – claimed the papal see, then from 1409 a third "pope" would arise to confuse the issue further. This problem would not be resolved fully until 1417, and the result of the Avignon papacy and the Great Schism was a dramatic decline in the prestige of the papacy as well as a sharp rise in apocalyptic thought, as detailed by Laura Ackerman Smoller (Smoller "Knowing the Time" 1998).

During this superheated environment of fear and suspicion even level-headed scholars such as the fourteenth-century theologian John of Paris began to speculate on the apocalyptic implications of these events Smoller "The Alfonsine Tables" 1998). With many learned men writing about the end of the world or even making precise predictions about the date of the expected event, as Arnold of Villanova did around 1300,[2] it is small wonder that theologians ascribed ever greater agency and power to Satan, accelerating a trend that owed its origins to the thirteenth-century writings of men such as Thomas Aquinas (d. 1274) who had speculated on the powers and characteristics of demons (Kieckhefer 1987). Therefore, far from the inept and bumbling figure of Satan who appeared in the morality plays of the early to high middle ages, by the opening years of the fifteenth century the clerical elite again portrayed Satan as the fifth-century theologian Augustine had; Satan was seen as the Great Devourer, active in the world and tempting humans on a regular basis in his efforts to gather a force of devoted followers who were active in the world (Kors and Peters 2001, 7-11).

This clerical view of Satan as active and directly involved in the world would prove tremendously important, especially to the 110,000 or so whom inquisitors prosecuted – 75% of whom were women – and the 60,000 or so whom these same agents of the church remanded to the secular authorities for execution between 1450 and 1650 (Levack 1995, 24-25). Such figures, even spread out over a two-hundred year period, appear frankly unbelievable to modern eyes and seem readily to suggest that the late medieval and early modern church was an instrument of brutality and oppression. Yet such a view of the situation is based on our modernist perceptions rather than the premodern vi-

[2] Smoller, "Knowing the Time," 2. Arnold predicted that the world would end in 1378.

ew that assumed Satan to be active in the world, just waiting to be ensnare and destroy the unsuspecting. For such people living in a time of uncertainty, fear, and intermittent calamities, those willing to challenge the power of Satan (the obvious source of evil in the world, so far as premodern Europeans would have been concerned) may well have been seen as heroes. In other words, the same discourse of fear that drove the medieval clerical elite to search out and prosecute supposed witches also drove the populace to both accept and welcome active persecution of these suspected agents of Satan.

Let us turn now to the men who pursued those seen as agents of Satan in high and late medieval Europe, the inquisitors. Rather than being a centralized police force in the service of the papacy as was once thought, these were instead men appointed on an ad-hoc basis to investigate suspected cases of heresy with no centralized governing body or set of beliefs (Peters 1989). The origin of the office of inquisitor was Pope Lucius III's promulgation of the bull *Ad abolendum* in 1184, but throughout most of the middle ages these individuals expressed little direct interest in the pursuit of those who dabbled in magic. Simply put, pursuing those who might be inclined to study and practice magic of a questionable nature was seen as beyond their purview, which was restricted to investigating and prosecuting those guilty of heresy. In fact, In 1258 Pope Alexander IV instructed inquisitors to deal with witchcraft only when manifestly connected to heresy (Hamilton 1981, 94). However, by the close of the fourteenth century a very different situation existed. In 1398 the Theology Faculty of Paris, recognized widely though not universally as a theological authority (Asztalos 1992, 437-438), pronounced that acts of sorcery involving explicit or implicit pacts with the devil entailed Christian apostasy and were therefore heretical. From this point on one could be determined a "functional" heretic for dabbling in magic that caused one to become unwittingly involved with dark forces even if the accused had never knowingly or willingly held heretical beliefs.

This shift was an important one, as it created a condition in which people who never thought of themselves as involved in heretical activities could be accused of such, even in the face of their vociferous and earnest denials. But even more important was the continuing evolution of the view of Satan's relationships with humans, with increasing stress laid on his willingness to make pacts with humans representing the most important part of this evolution. In 1437 Pope Eugenius IV described the invocation of demons as an act in which the prince of darkness has bewitched by his cunning many bought by the blood of Christ ... these ones ... sacrifice to demons, adore them ... do homage to them, and as a sign of this give them a written contract or some other sign, binding themselves to demons so that by a single word, touch, or sign, they may inflict or remove whatever evil sorcery they wish. They cure diseases, provoke bad weather, and make pacts concerning other evil things (Pope Eugenius IV 2001).

The element of the pact is what is most important here, as detailed by Michael D. Bailey in his work, *Battling Demons: Witchcraft, Heresy, and Reform in the Late Middle Ages,* for by the second quarter of the fifteenth century many members of the clerical elite had become convinced that the explanation for the troubles they saw afflicting the world was that Satan and his demons were actively involved in the world, making pacts with human minions in order to carry out dark plans (Bailey 2003). Initially popularized in Johannes Nider's *Formicarius* (*The Anthill*), published also in 1437, the notion that anyone involved in black magic must, by definition, have made a pact with Satan quickly became accepted by members of the clerical elite desperate for an explanation for the repeated waves of disaster befalling the continent that did not involve placing the blame on God (Bailey 2003, 35-45). And thanks to the concept of functional heresy already extant, a woman need not be aware that the magic to which she appealed was "black," that is involving appeals to demons, rather than natural, which involved a manipulation of the hidden (occult) forces of nature. This conceptual shift that had occurred in the waning years of the fourteenth century meant that any of the many thousands of practitioners of magic among the peasantry – primarily the wise women about whom I wrote earlier – were now susceptible to charges of having made a pact with Satan or his demons. Since any such pact would represent an act of apostasy, any person making such a pact was guilty of heresy.

What we have here is a category of person created by the clerical elite in Europe, that of the "witch,"[3] an apostate who had made a pact with Satan, which would then be imposed over the identities of those who had never thought of themselves in these terms. And the concept of the witches' sabbat developed as a useful mechanism for spreading awareness of the conspiracy of witches that many among the clerical elite firmly believed existed and was responsible for the horrible string of disasters recurring periodically across the continent. The method of imposition was multivalent, being achieved through application of three tools: written works (printed after 1450), preaching, and the active efforts of inquisitors. The inquisitors are the part of this equation

[3] The term "witch" is a product of late medieval and early modern England, being derived from the Anglo-Saxon term for one who divines or casts spells, *wicce*, or the less common, *wicca* in the feminine. In Latin documents, those accused of working magic with the aid of a demon with whom he or she has a pact, were known most commonly as a *strix* or *strega,* or by application of the term *maleficia*, that is a woman who works evil, or by a variety of other terms. See Jeffrey Burton Russell, *Witchcraft in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1972), 15-16. However, the evidence suggests that beneath this bewildering array of terms existed a singular concept, and it is that concept that most interests me here. For that reason I rely upon the use of the most common term for the category of person who worked magic through the aid of a pact with Satan: witch.

with which the reader is likely most familiar, but I will save my discussion of them and their actions for last, as in my view their activities were responsive to what were perceived as genuine and serious concerns expressed at all levels of society and were only partially responsible for reinforcing a discourse that rapidly attained hegemonic status across Europe in the fifteenth century.

Understanding the power of the hegemonic discourse in question is essential to understanding how the ideas that led to and drove the Witch Craze, the pursuit of witches by inquisitors that began in the middle of the fifteenth century and continued for the next two hundred years. Antonio Gramsci developed the concept of the hegemonic discourse in order to explain why people come to believe things and act upon those beliefs without thinking greatly (if at all) about what those ideas might be or how they might have been attained (Gramsci 2007). In sum, he argues that every society has a set of ideas that come to permeate the culture, spread through word of mouth, popular literature, formal education, and through other mechanisms that come to be seen as representing the "norm," the truths that make up the backdrop of society. Such a discourse is insidious, capturing the minds of people most effectively precisely because it is not forced upon them, but is rather presented through multiple lines of communication as being simply the way things objectively are. The result is a set of unexamined assumptions about the world that serve as a filter through which the individual understands people, events, and ideas that he or she encounters. Interestingly, these filtering concepts attain a high measure of cultural capital, to borrow a concept from Pierre Bourdieu, as they are transmitted and retransmitted as received truths (Bourdieu 1986). Therefore, the more often the concepts are repeated the more people tend to believe them. This effect is multiplied when those perceived as authorities take up and spread these concepts, adding the cultural capital granted by their prestige and credentials to that which the ideas themselves have already attained.

The role of capital in the creation of this discourse and its elevation to a hegemonic status is why written works were such an important part of the process. For one thing, the medieval view of evidence was one that was very "bookish," frequently privileging the written word over almost any other kind of evidence. This had been true throughout the centuries of the middle ages to a certain extent, but had become solidified between the eleventh and the fourteenth centuries as written records came to replace ceremonies and oaths in their dispositive force (Clanchy 1993). Therefore, by the fifteenth century written documents were seen as having an objective force of truth alien to our postmodern understanding of the discursive nature of reading and textual production.

It is this force of truth that medieval intellectuals saw reposing in written works that opened the primary avenues for the generation and spread of the concept of the witch in the fifteenth century and beyond. The idea of the witches' sabbat was a key component of the discourse about witchcraft that would spread

fears of witchcraft, leading to the deaths of tens of thousands of people "guilty" of nothing more than holding isolated places in their communities and, for many of them, dealing in occult arts misunderstood by neighbors and inquisitors alike. It is for this reason that works such as the infamous *Malleus malificarum*, or *Hammer of Witches*, alongside artistic representations of the witches' sabbat were so effective in the creation of the "witch" as a category of person in the fifteenth century. This is not to say that no one had ever been suspected of working harmful magic or becoming involved with demons before; as early as the seventh century Isidore of Seville (d.636) referred to "lamia" who came into contact with demons and stole children on their behalf (Russell 1972, 61-62; Isidore of Seville 2006, 190). However, prior to the fifteenth century there was no assumed association between the working of harmful magic and a pact with a demon making one an apostate heretic. This was a notion that developed among the clerical elite, spreading rapidly among that class and somewhat more slowly among the peasant class; the most important mechanism of this spread was the literature and associated artwork dealing with witches.

The most well known and in some ways the most important such work was the *Malleus malifacarum,* or *Hammer of Witches*[4]*,* mentioned above and hereafter referred to simply as the *Malleus.* Heinrich Kramer, a German Dominican who spent much of his life as an inquisitor and preacher specializing in attacks on witchcraft, wrote this work in 1486 as a guide to other inquisitors dedicated to the pursuit of witches.[5] Despite the highly specialized audience Kramer seems to have envisioned for the *Malleus* it clearly tapped into a need felt by a wider community, going through thirteen editions between 1487 and 1520 and sixteen more from 1576-1670, produced not only in the original Latin but also translated into French, Italian, and German (Broedel 2003, 8-9). Additionally, the work managed to appropriate an immense amount of capital through inclusion of Pope Innocent VII's famous (or infamous) "witch bull," *Summis desiderantes*, recognizing the existence of witches and the authority of inquisitors to pursue and prosecute them while ordering secular authorities to support Kramer and his college Sprenger in their inquisitorial mission, on pain of excommunication should they fail to obey (Broedel 2003, 15). The

[4] I rely upon the edition of the *Malleus maleficarum* printed in 1669 and held at the Bavarian Staatsbibliothek, shelfmark, Res/4 Dogm. 363-1/2. Ff. IX infra and X supra.

[5] Traditionally the Swiss Dominican Jacob Sprenger (d. 1494) has also been associated with this volume, but it appears most likely that while Kramer and Sprenger did work together, Kramer wrote the *Malleus* alone and associated Sprenger's name with it after the fact in order to gain greater acceptance for the work. See Hans Peter Broedel, *The "Malleus Maleficarum" and the Construction of Witchcraft: Theology and Popular Belief* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), 19.

implied message was that papal support was behind not only the two inquisitors, but the *Malleus* as well.

The importance of the *Malleus* was in its popularity, for it was this property that allowed its view of what constituted a witch and witchcraft, as well as how to deal with this perceived problem, to spread, acting as one of the mechanisms by which Europeans came to see this category of person as a real and imminent threat. This view was one in which not only were witches seen to be both real and active in the world, but indeed one in which belief in those who made pacts with Satan in order to work harm on human society existed as a necessary corollary of both the Christian faith and the teachings of St. Thomas Aquinas (d. 1274), whose *Summa theologiae* would soon be recognized by the Council of Trent (1545-1563) as an authoritative exposition of the Catholic Faith. In fact, the *Malleus* maintains that "it might be completely heretical to defend stubbornly the opposite view" from that Kramer wishes to present, that witches are not only active in the world, but also responsible for much of the world's problems, ranging from hailstorms to men who have lost track of their penis.[6]

This last point is an important one for the way in which it encouraged the spread of the message of inquisitors such as Kramer, that a vast witch conspiracy existed across Europe and threatened the very fabric of society. Some demonologists published estimates about the number of witches found across the continent numbering in the hundreds of thousands or even in the millions (Burton and Grandy 2004, 163). For these men the situation was desperate and only vigilance and quick action could save the population of Europe. Therefore, anything that would get the people to listen in order that they might recognize the threat was a worthwhile tool. And in the intensely patriarchal society of late medieval Europe few things could get the attention of those who held power – whether that power was in the household, the Church, or a kingdom – than fear that a witch might steal away a man's penis. While such concerns might sound ridiculous to us now, we must remember that late medieval European society was one in which men with money and power ate meals consisting almost entirely of meat (Scully 2005, 73), which meant high fat, high protein diets that would have led to an increased incidence of kidney stones as well as circulatory issues and blood pressure problems insuring correspondingly high rates of erectile dysfunction among men of the elite classes (Abela 2004, 157). While such a problem is not the same thing as having

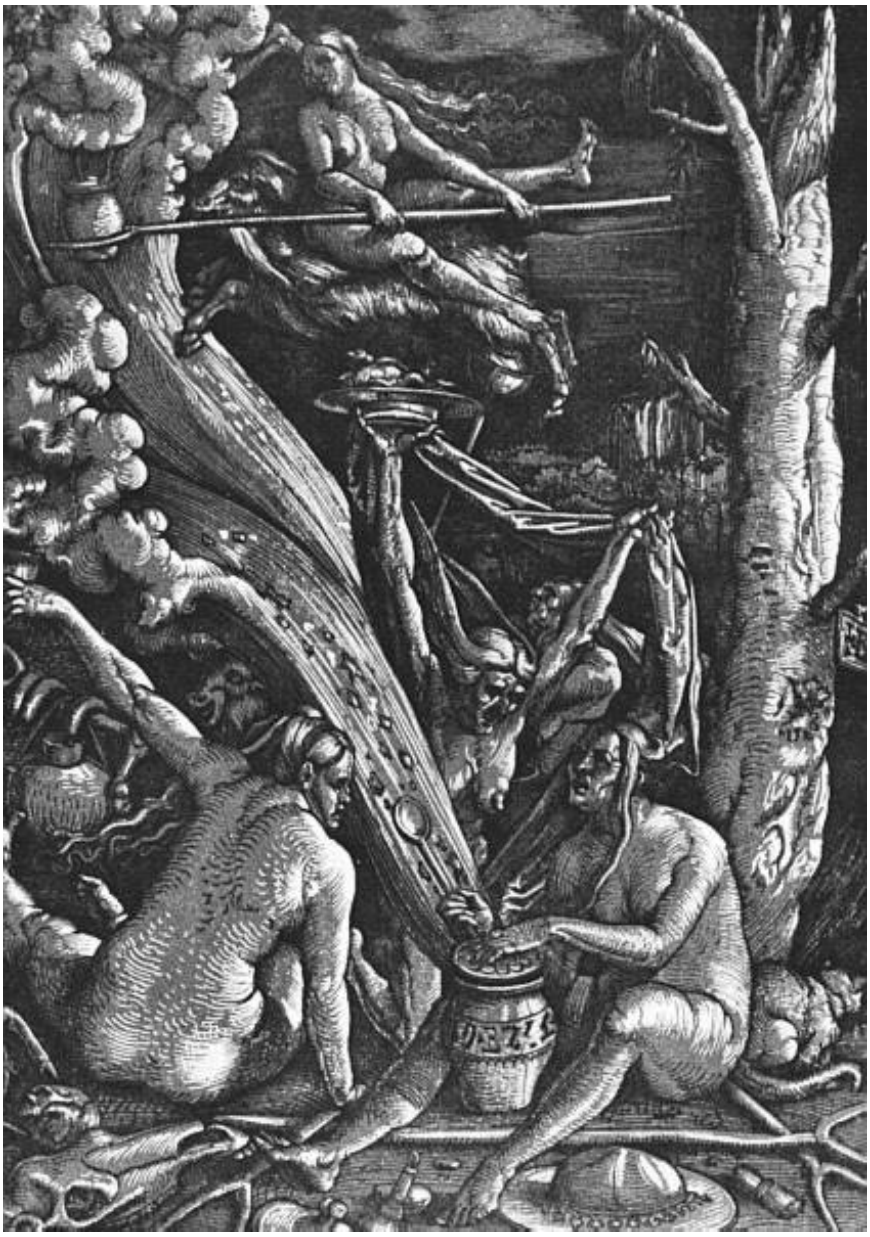
[6] See *primo question*, "utrum asserere maleficos esse fit adeo catholicum quod etiam oppositum pertinaciter defendere omnino fit hereticum,"f. VII, supra; pars I, questio IX, pars II, questio XV. Fear that witches could steal away the male member were rampant across Europe, as analyzed by Walter Stephens, *Demon Lovers: Witchcraft, Sex, and the Crisis of Belief* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 300-321.

one's penis actually disappear, the negative consequences are not so different and the men who suffered may have found some solace in the idea that a witch had caused their problem – and might be forced to provide a remedy.

In addition to such tales targeted at the male elites, clerical authors also sought to expand awareness of the supposed witch conspiracy through the use of tales of the witches' sabbat. As stated previously, these sabbats were seen as mirroring Catholic religious ceremonies in many ways, including the celebrations of the mass in reverse order as well as dark versions of the communion ceremony using the flesh and blood of infants instead of the wafers and wine. However, as I also stated above, despite persistent retellings of the events of the sabbat, there is no evidence that any such event ever occurred. So why did the stories continue to be told and retold? First of all, it was because the clerical elites who disseminated the details of the sabbat wanted to believe in it; these men saw the mass as central to their religion, and assumed that any alternative religion, which is how they viewed witchcraft, would need some central ceremony as well. Furthermore, and more importantly for the spread of the idea of the sabbat, it was inherently useful to them because it encouraged a lurid, prurient interest in witches that insured people would pay attention to the stories told by their priests and then spread these ideas to their own friends and neighbors.

What did late medieval and early modern theologians think the sabbat to be, and why did people find the concept so fascinating? The tales told about the sabbat are remarkable for their similarity, which is one reason why researchers such as Margaret Murray once accepted that there really were witches across Europe involved in such rituals. The ritual in question was one in which women – for those accused of witchcraft were almost always women – flew to a central location either in their normal human form or in the form of an animal such as a cat. Once gathered, demons would join, whereupon something that can only be described as an orgy would occur. Women had sex with other women as well as the demons who were present, and many of the stories related included lurid details about both the sexual acts that occurred as well as such things as the coldness of the penises of the demons (Stephens 2002, 13-31). Witches kissed the anuses of demons and slaughtered stolen babies before eating their flesh and drinking their blood. As anyone who has ever related tales of these sabbats to undergraduate students can attest, listeners – or readers – find the details to be both exciting and interesting, frequently going on to relate the tales to others. In other words, tales of the sabbat functioned as a remarkably effective marketing tool for late medieval clerics who wanted to insure that as many people as possible would learn about the danger that witches represented.[7]

[7] Compare to modern marketing techniques focused on erotic content, analyzed by Tom Reichert and Jacqueline Lambiase, *Sex in Consumer Culture: the Erotic Content of Media and Marketing* (Hillsdale, N.J.: L. Erlbaum Associates, 2006).



However, it was not only written tales that would spread the knowledge about the sabbat. Woodcuts frequently accompanied discussions of the sabbat

that turned this marketing effort into a multi-media campaign. Artists such as Johannes Baldung (see next page) portrayed nude witches flying to or attending sabbats and the lurid details provided insured that even those who were illiterate would become acquainted with the "danger" that was witchcraft. The choice to show these witches nude, or to discuss their nudity in narrative accounts of the sabbat, was not accidental. In an age when the clerical elite spoke out frequently and persistently against sex and the evils of the human body – especially the bodies of women which were seen to lure men into committing sinful acts – artistic representations of nude women, often engaged in sexual acts with one another, would have represented an effective way to draw attention to the larger message. Just as modern-day Madison Avenue advertisers understand, sex sells.[8]

The spread of such ideas was not confined to those who could read, or even to those who might see artistic representations such as the one above. Many preachers spoke out against the dangers of witchcraft and witches as well. Sermons were not as common in Catholic ceremonies as they are today, but at every major holy day priests used homilies in order to instruct their flock and when inquisitors came to town they relied upon such sermons as a means of announcing their presence and telling the locals why they were in the community. Therefore, sermons such as those Kramer relates, in which he warns people about witches bringing death, ruin, and impotence to their villages insured that people at all levels of society would have learned about witches.[9]

However, there is one issue relating to tales of the witches' sabbat that has created serious confusion at times, and that is the fact that many women confessed to precisely the activities related above, which I have already discounted as unsupported by evidence. But what about those confessions? And why do confessions separated by national and geographic boundaries as well as by centuries of time so often prove to be so very similar to one another? To answer these questions, we need to look briefly at the actions of inquisitors. As stated, when an inquisitor arrived in any area, he would announce his presence by giving a sermon (Behringer 1997, 73) and it is likely that everyone who was at all able to do so would be in attendance. This is because those *not* at-

[8] From http://www.dl.ket.org/webmuseum/wm/paint/auth/baldung/sabbath.jpg accessed 30 December 2010.

[9] As Montague Summers relates in the introduction to his 1948 edition of the *Malleus,* people at all levels of society heard anti-witchcraft sermons. In 1560 John Jewell preached to Queen Elizabeth I (1558-1603) in 1560, warning her that "this kind of people (I mean witches and sorcerers) within the last few years are marvelously increased within this Your Grace's realm." Montagu Summers, *The Malleus Malifacarum of Heinrich Kramer and James Sprenger*, Marc J. Driftmeyer, ed. (Ebook, 2005), 27.

tending the announced sermon would immediately be subject to the inquisitor's suspicion, which could be decidedly unhealthy (Broedel 2003). In the course of the sermon, an inquisitor would warn the people about witches in their midst who were responsible for the deaths of infants, for the illnesses of townspeople and livestock, and for weather that destroyed crops and left the people hungry, again and again warning the listeners that he already knew the identity of malefactors in their midst and encouraging them to turn themselves in and their neighbors to report them (Henningsen 2004, 52, 120, 209).[10] Such sermons would provide the vocabulary by which scared or angry people could accuse their neighbors,[11] usually those neighbors who existed on the fringes of society, such as was the case with the wise women who lived by their knowledge of occult arts. While many in the community might respect and value these women, inevitably some would not. What might have started as fear or suspicion due to the anomalous positions these women held in society could well progress to fear or loathing when crops failed, when plague came to the community, or even just if a baby died during a delivery aided by one of these women or when a family member died who had been under her care. Just as today a physician might find him or herself the subject of a law suit brought by the bereaved family members, in the late middle ages the same sort of feelings might result in accusations of witchcraft leveled against the local wise woman who had failed to deliver as expected.

Given the multiple ways in which members of a community might become upset by or suspicious of the local wise woman in their midst, it is certainly not surprising that many of these women would find themselves the targets of witchcraft allegations. Once an inquisitor heard such a claim he would proceed as he would against any other suspected heretic (Thomsett 2010, 155-158),[12] since by the fifteenth century that is precisely how he would have viewed a person involved with black magic. This means he would interview other members of the community for corroborating testimony and to learn whether or not the individual leveling an accusation of witchcraft might be doing so out of personal animosity toward the accused. As part of this investigatory phase he would also question the accused without informing him or her

[10] This volume is a veritable treasure trove of seventeenth-century sermons and inquisitorial documents relating to witchcraft.

[11] One eighteen-year old girl in seventeenth-century Arizcun became so terrified by such a sermon describing the flights of witches that she came to believe that she herself had been carried away by a witch while awaiting reconciliation from the inquisitor, despite the fact that witnesses attested to having been eating with her while this event supposedly occurred. See Henningsen, 52, 298.

[12] Thomsett outlines the procedures of inquisitors, which I rely upon for the description above.

(again, usually her) who had made the accusation or even what the specific accusation might be. One line of investigation would proceed from asking the accused if he or she had any enemies in the area, then checking with other members of the community to determine if claims of animosity could be substantiated as charges leveled by someone known to dislike the accused would be dismissed.[13] During the course of the preliminary phase of investigation it was not at all uncommon for the inquisitor to determine that there were no grounds for a case, whereupon the accused would be cleared and the case would proceed no further.

However, if it appeared that the evidence was strong enough, the inquisitor would then have the accused brought in for questioning. Under Roman law, which provided the basis for the canon law of the Church, investigators assumed the accused to be guilty. This is an important point in the creation of the idea of the witches' sabbat, for rather than asking carefully crafted questions designed to protect the rights of the accused, the inquisitor would rely on leading questions in an attempt to trick, force, or cajole an affirmation of what he already assumed to be true (Arnold 2001, 4-11, 49-60, 70, 79-85). Therefore, in the case of accusations of witchcraft, the inquisitor would ask highly leading questions such as "how frequently did you involve yourself in sexual congress with demons?" or "tell me about the methods you have used to fly by night to sabbats" (Stephens 2002, 322-342). While the accused witch might at first scoff at such questions, the inquisitor would quickly raise the stakes by showing the accused the instruments of torture that he intended to apply in order to gain a confession.

These instruments of torture were horrific, as can be seen by considering only one example, that of the pear of anguish (Lyons 2003, 133). This device was pear shaped with an internal screw-like device and a key on one end. The inquisitor would direct an underling to insert the device into the anus or vagina of the accused and turn the key, which would cause the device made of metal and wood to open slowly into three sections. The pain must have been terrible. As the inquisitor directed the device to be opened, he would continue to ask questions such as those listed above, continuing until the unfortunate person finally admitted that she had indeed had sexual intercourse with demons, agreeing that their penises were like ice and affirming other lurid details that the inquisitor supplied in the absence of open-ended, non-leading questions. Under pain of such torture it is understandable why anyone might break and say anything to get the pain to stop.

[13] In one remarkable case dealing with an individual accused of heresy, the case could not be pursued because the inquisitor discovered that every single person in the village held a strong dislike for the accused.

The important point here is that the inquisitor felt that he already knew the accused to be guilty, and already knew the details of the crimes that she had committed. He had gotten the details of these crimes from handbooks such as the *Malleus* and his questioning was designed to gain confirmation about these details. Therefore, inquisitors imposed a category of person, the witch, created by the European clerical elite on a group of people who never thought of themselves as such. These same elites developed details about what it was to be a witch, from pacts made with Satan to sex with demons. These ideas then formed the basis of inquisitorial questioning, so any "confessions," made under torture or fear of torture, tell us more about the ideas of the inquisitors than practices of European "witches."

For these reasons we should examine stories and artistic representations of the witches' sabbat for their usefulness to the inquisitors and their allies among the clerical elite, rather than as evidence of actual behavior exhibited by those accused of witchcraft. Many members of the peasant class may have been just as apt to believe these stories and the accusations as those among the clerical elite who functioned as inquisitors. Such acceptance of these stories tells us about the success of these elites in the creation of a hegemonic discourse passed down through multiple lines of communication as well as the fears of peasants in these trying times, so long as modern researchers are careful not to assume that these confessions were reflective of actual actions of those accused and all-too-frequently executed as witches.

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PROGON VEŠTICA I SEKSUALNI ČIN U VREME SABATA

Tokom evropskog lova na veštice (1450-1650) kontinentom su kružile priče o "veštičjem sabatu". Ove storije činili su zastrašujući detalji seksa i razvrata između žena i demona, o kojima su optužene žene i svedočile. Ipak, istoričari već duže vreme podsećaju da ne postoje nikakvi dokazi da se takav "sabat" ikada dogodilo. Ovaj rad razmatra ideju da je kategoriju "veštice" zapravo izmislila evropska sveštenička elita ubeđena u to da satana postoji, a priče o sabatu pričali su kako bi ukazali na ono što su mnogi videli kao stvarnu i sveprisutnu opasnost. Ovaj koncept delom je hegemonijski diskurs koji su smatrali za koristan jer je mogao da ponudi objašnjena i umanji strah.

Ključne reči: veštica, veštičarenje, sabat, *Malleusmalifacarum,* hegemonijski diskurs,inkvizitori, inkvizicija.