

General Introduction



The sources translated here depict a remarkable transformation. Most people in medieval Europe broadly accepted the reality of harmful magic, or *maleficium*, as it was most commonly termed in Latin.¹ Likewise they accepted that there were certain wicked people who practiced such magic. Labeled in various ways (masculine *malefici* or feminine *maleficae* were just some of the options), these “witches” were often imagined to be terrible figures. They might injure, rob, or even kill their neighbors, and they were generally thought to be involved in some way with dark forces, for Christianity taught that almost all magic ultimately stemmed from the devil.² They were not, however, typically believed to gather together as members of organized heretical sects or as agents of a vast diabolical conspiracy that aimed to undermine all of Christian society. That idea emerged only very late in the medieval era, crystalizing in a handful of texts written within the space of a single decade (the 1430s) and clustered geographically around the arc of the western Alps.

In Lucerne, the civic chronicler Hans Fründ penned a brief report on a series of witch trials in the neighboring region of Valais that had claimed the lives of more than one hundred people over the course of about a year and a half. Claude Tholosan was also a secular official, the chief magistrate of Briançon in the French region of Dauphiné. After a decade of service in that office, and with more than one hundred trials for witchcraft under his belt, he composed a short treatise now known by its opening phrase, “So that the errors of magicians and witches

1. Although the exact meaning of this word could vary in different contexts, I generally translate *maleficium* as “witchcraft” and *maleficus* or *malefica* as “witch” throughout this volume, explaining different connotations in notes as needed.

2. See Michael D. Bailey, “Diabolic Magic,” in *The Cambridge History of Magic and Witchcraft in the West: From Antiquity to the Present*, ed. David J. Collins (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 361–92.

might be made evident to ignorant people.”³ Beyond describing the forms of witchcraft that he had encountered, his chief concern was to justify secular as opposed to ecclesiastical jurisdiction over this crime. The *Errors of the Gazarii*, on the other hand, was almost certainly written by a church inquisitor. It is a short document focusing on lurid descriptions of the diabolical horrors of witchcraft and witches’ assemblies. Its geography is uncertain, but it appears to have been connected to trials in the Aosta valley in northwestern Italy. The next source was also written by a cleric, but it is no brief report. Instead, the Dominican theologian Johannes Nider’s *Anthill* is a long moralizing treatise covering an array of topics. Its fifth book, however, specifically addresses “witches and their deceptions.” Although Nider wrote *Anthill* mainly in Vienna, most of his information about witchcraft came from western Switzerland, where he had previously served as prior of the Dominican convent in Basel. The final source presented here, *The Vauderie of Lyon*, was again written by a clergyman, most likely a Dominican inquisitor who may have had some direct contact with Nider. It describes the monstrous actions of a sect of witches around the city of Lyon in the southeastern portion of the kingdom of France.

Although each of these sources offers a slightly different perspective on the emerging notion of intensely diabolical, conspiratorial witchcraft, they nevertheless present remarkably similar depictions of certain key elements within that developing stereotype. Above all they agree that witches generally operated in groups, and that they regularly gathered together in the presence of a demonic master to forswear their faith, engage in devil worship, and commit abominable acts of fornication and cannibalism. Also at their gatherings they brewed potions and poisons needed to work their wicked arts, some of which were distilled from the boiled fat of babies they had murdered, and they received instruction from demons in how to use these noxious

3. Pierrette Paravy, “À propos de la genèse médiévale des chasses aux sorcières: Le traité de Claude Tholosan, juge Dauphinois (vers 1436),” *Mélanges de l’École Française de Rome: Moyen Age / Temps Modernes* 91 (1979): 332–79, at 333; Martine Ostorero, Agostino

Paravicini Bagliani, and Kathrin Utz Tremp, with Catherine Chêne, *L’imaginaire du sabbat: Edition critique des textes les plus anciens (1430 c.–1440 c.)* (Lausanne: Université de Lausanne, 1999), 358, 417.

concoctions. The most common term for such assemblies offered in these texts is “synagogue,” but they would eventually come to be known as witches’ sabbaths.

The idea of the sabbath was itself a noxious concoction derived from many roots. As the earlier terminology of synagogue suggests, it drew in part on anti-Jewish stereotypes common in medieval Europe. In particular, Christian fears that Jews ritually murdered Christian babies may have fed into the elements of infanticide and cannibalism that frequently figured in accounts of sabbaths.⁴ More basically, though, descriptions of these assemblies reflected stereotypes about imagined heretical gatherings that had circulated among ecclesiastical authorities since at least the eleventh century.⁵ To this mix were also added a range of beliefs widespread in European folklore about spirits, specters, and other supernatural beings that engaged in nocturnal journeys and raucous nighttime assemblies.⁶ These components came together in what, to modern sensibilities, can all too easily appear to be a nonsensical jumble. Yet there was at least some method in the seeming madness of early accounts of the witches’ sabbath, and a reason that they all focused on broadly similar points. This can best be understood by tracing certain historical developments that provide

4. See R. Po-Chia Hsia, *The Myth of Ritual Murder: Jews and Magic in Reformation Germany* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), esp. 1–13 for background. On the origin of the stereotype, see E. M. Rose, *The Murder of William of Norwich: The Origins of the Blood Libel in Medieval Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015). On witches murdering children, see Richard Kieckhefer, “Avenging the Blood of Children: Anxiety over Child Victims and the Origins of the European Witch Trials,” in *The Devil, Heresy and Witchcraft in the Middle Ages: Essays in Honor of Jeffrey B. Russell*, ed. Alberto Ferreiro (Leiden: Brill, 1998), 91–109, esp. 100–7 for sources translated here.

5. For one such diabolized assembly that supposedly took place in 1022, see Walter L. Wakefield and Austin P. Evans, *Heresies of the High Middle Ages* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969), 78–79. On the connection of witchcraft to heresy, see Jeffrey B. Russell, *Witchcraft in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1972); Kathrin Utz Tremp, *Von der Häresie zur Hexerei: “Wirkliche” und imaginäre Sekten im Spätmittelalter* (Hannover: Hahnsche Buchhandlung, 2008).

6. Famously, but problematically, see Carlo Ginzburg, *Ecstasies: Deciphering the Witches’ Sabbath*, trans. Raymond Rosenthal (New York: Penguin, 1991).

the necessary context in which to understand the idea of the sabbath as articulated across all these sources.

LEGAL AND THEOLOGICAL CONTEXT

Readers might be surprised, in a collection of texts relating to witchcraft, to find relatively little discussion of spells, charms, and actual acts of bewitchment. Most of the harmful magic supposedly performed by witches is described only briefly, at best, in these sources. People are injured or made ill through spells or poisons, both men and women (and sometimes animals) are rendered infertile and incapable of sexual reproduction, crops are damaged or stolen out of fields, lightning and hail are called down from the heavens. Such magical crimes are not what stirred these authors, however, at least not directly. What most agitated them was the idea that witches were now acting not as individual malefactors but as members of diabolically orchestrated cults. The *Errors of the Gazarii*, for example, was less concerned about weather magic per se than about how groups of witches supposedly flew to the top of certain mountain peaks to gather the ice that would rain down on their neighbors' fields as hail. Likewise, *The Vauderie of Lyon* cared less that witches could "cause sickness in both people and animals" than that they did so through "powders made through the demon's craft," which they concocted at their gatherings.

Although advanced by lay as well as clerical writers, and acted on by secular as well as ecclesiastical courts, the notion that witches functioned as agents of a diabolical conspiracy was rooted in theological concepts about the nature of demonic magic that had been developing since the thirteenth century, and in inquisitorial legal structures that had developed to root out heresies at roughly the same time. As noted already, Christian authorities had always linked most forms of magic to demonic power. Only in the twelfth and especially the thirteenth centuries, however, did scholastic theologians develop systematic arguments about the actual scope of demonic abilities. Thinkers such as William of Auvergne (d. 1249) and Thomas Aquinas (d. 1274) worked out in precise terms how demons, as spiritual beings, could directly affect the physical world. This ran counter to an older

notion that demons acted primarily through trickery and deceit, which endured into the era of the witches' sabbath mainly in debates (introduced in more detail in the next section) about whether witches really flew to their nocturnal assemblies or whether that was merely a demonic illusion. Whereas some authorities held to older ideas, by the early fifteenth century many theologians used testimony given by accused witches themselves, usually under torture or other coercion, to prove the physical reality of demonic actions.⁷

As authorities worked out how witches and other practitioners of harmful magic relied on demons to achieve real results, they also had to establish what working relationship existed between witches and demons. If a human witch was merely a vessel through which a demon wrought harm in the world, perhaps she was not really to blame for her crimes. If, however, she willingly placed herself in a demon's service in order to gain her terrible powers, offering it her devotion and worship, then she could be judged a heretic as well as a witch. This conflation occurred mainly in the fourteenth century. In 1320, Pope John XXII assembled a special papal commission to determine whether demonic magic was inherently heretical. The point was actually quite complicated since heresy was, most basically, an act of volition—a thought crime that involved holding some kind of belief fundamentally opposed to Christian doctrine. Magic, on the other hand, was an action intended to achieve supposedly tangible results. Nevertheless, John's commission determined that anyone who engaged with demons in order to perform a magical act necessarily elevated those demons to a place of honor and worship, which no faithful Christian should ever do.⁸ In 1326, John issued a proclamation excommunicating all practitioners of demonic magic from the church.⁹

7. Walter Stephens, *Demon Lovers: Witchcraft, Sex, and the Crisis of Belief* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

8. Alain Boureau, *Satan the Heretic: The Birth of Demonology in the Medieval West*, trans. Teresa Lavender Fagan (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), esp. 8–67.

9. Joseph Hansen, *Quellen und Untersuchungen zur Geschichte des Hexenwahns und der Hexenverfolgung im Mittelalter* (1901; repr., Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1963), 5–6; for an English translation, see Alan Charles Kors and Edward Peters, *Witchcraft in Europe, 400–1700: A Documentary History*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), 119–20.

Yet the issue was not so easily settled. Although John XXII himself instructed inquisitors in southern France to begin investigating cases involving demonic magic in 1320, a decade later he ordered them to stop and send all the case materials they had gathered to the papal court for review.¹⁰ Moreover, John's 1326 pronouncement does not appear to have entered into church law at this time. It only achieved real significance fifty years later, in 1376, when the Dominican inquisitor Nicolau Eimeric included it in his great manual *Directorium inquisitorum*.¹¹ The inquisitorial courts that became involved in cases of witchcraft in the early 1400s were, therefore, still in the process of establishing their jurisdiction over this crime. This was why it was so imperative for them to stress the intensely diabolical nature of the new stereotype of witchcraft entailed in the sabbath, as well as its collective nature. A heretic could operate in isolation, of course, but it was much easier to prove heresy if it supposedly manifested in collective actions, such as participation in demonic cults that required overt apostasy from the Christian faith.

The idea of witches assembling in large groups also fed into the fears of secular authorities. They could now imagine witches as constituting an organized social and perhaps even political threat as agents of the devil working to undermine the stable order of Christian society.¹² This is how witches appeared in the Swiss chronicler Hans Fründ's account about their activities in the region of Valais, where he feared that, if left unchecked, they "could have raised up a king from among them." Likewise the royal magistrate Claude Tholosan, in his explicit argument for secular jurisdiction over witchcraft, presented witches as having committed treason against the French crown.

10. Hansen, *Quellen*, 4–5, 6–7.

11. For the development of inquisitorial thought on magic and witchcraft, see Michael D. Bailey, "From Sorcery to Witchcraft: Clerical Conceptions of Magic in the Later Middle Ages," *Speculum* 76 (2001): 960–90; Derek Hill, *Inquisition in the Fourteenth Century: The Manuals of Bernard Gui and Nicholas Eymerich* (York: York Medieval Press, 2019), 176–93.

12. On witchcraft as social and political as well as theological deviance, see Richard Kieckhefer, "Witchcraft, Necromancy, and Sorcery as Heresy," in *Chasses aux sorcières et démonologie: Entre discours et pratiques (XIVe–XVIIe siècles)*, ed. Martine Ostorero, Georg Modestin, and Kathrin Utz Tremp (Florence: SISMEL, 2010), 133–53.

Church authorities in the early fifteenth century did not need to look far for a major and terrifying example of a politically disruptive heresy. After the execution of the Czech clerical reformer Jan Hus at a church council in 1415, his followers, known as Hussites, rose up in the kingdom of Bohemia. The church branded them heretics, but they were as much a political revolution as a religious movement, and for the next several decades they both defended themselves against crusading armies and launched retributive military forays deep into the surrounding German empire.¹³ Of the authors here, Johannes Nider most directly engaged with the Hussite heresy, in addition to writing about witchcraft (although it should be noted that he drew no explicit connection between them).¹⁴

This legal and theological context helps explain the extensive and often outlandish accusations made in these sources about witches' gross moral degeneracy and especially the amount of space spent alleging their desecration of sacraments and sacramental items, such as the Eucharist and the cross. The attention lavished on the presence of demons at the sabbath and on witches' physical encounters with them, above all their carnal encounters, should also be understood in this light. So too should the passages devoted to witches' supposedly explicit declarations of subservience to their demonic masters. Whether they were laymen or clerics, the authors of all these sources strove to emphasize such points, rather than just the acts of harmful magic that witches supposedly performed against their neighbors. They intended their descriptions of witches' sabbaths to paint a picture of extreme moral and social deviance in order to bolster a particular way of understanding demonic power in the world and to justify the actions that they or the institutions they served sought to take against the alleged agents of that power.

13. Howard Kaminsky, *A History of the Hussite Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967); František M. Bartoš, *The Hussite Revolution, 1424–1437*, ed. and trans. John M. Klassen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986).

14. Michael D. Bailey, *Battling Demons: Witchcraft, Heresy, and Reform in the Late Middle Ages* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003), 57–64.

This is not to say that these sources absolutely agreed on all aspects of witchcraft and the sabbath. Indeed, it is often where they disagree to some extent that they become most interesting to modern readers, for here we can see stereotypes still in the process of coalescing and ideas that were by no means fully accepted at this time being either contested or defended. In order to highlight some of their similarities as well as notable differences, let me now outline what I see as the main components of the witches' sabbath as depicted in these sources and draw some key comparisons.

ELEMENTS OF THE SABBATH

Demonic Assemblies

As I have already stressed, the most essential component of the sabbath was the idea that witches were organized into a sect that met regularly in the presence of a demon or devil¹⁵ in order to worship that creature and perform nefarious acts under its direction. All five of these sources agreed on this point. Nider's *Anthill* was the most prosaic, stating only that witches often gathered in local churches "on a Sunday before the holy water is consecrated" in order to initiate new members into the sect. Fründ's report indicated that they "gathered together at schools in secret places," but he also reported how witches confessed that "the evil spirit carried them at night from one mountain to another," and this could easily be taken to suggest that the schools themselves met on mountain tops. Claude Tholosan described how witches believed that they would "journey physically during the night, especially on Thursdays and Saturdays, with a troop of devils," and that they would assemble in "one particular place" to hold a "synagogue." He also noted that "they declare that they travel far, some on a staff anointed with children's fat . . . and some on beasts and brooms." The

15. Medieval sources switch back and forth between *demon* and *diabolus* quite freely, with *diabolus* frequently meaning merely a devil rather than the devil. Latin almost never employs

articles, so this distinction is sometimes uncertain. In discussing sources, I typically use whichever word was used in the source itself, despite this possible confusion.

Errors of the Gazarii was quite specific about how the devil provided witches with “a small box full of unguent and a staff and everything else [needed] to go to the synagogue.” *The Vauderie of Lyon* offered the most detail, describing how witches traveled at night, “some walking, some riding on a malign spirit that appears to them in some horrible form, others on a staff.” Their assemblies were “sometimes quite far away and distant” but most often took place at secluded crossroads. They were usually held on Thursday nights, beginning around sunset and lasting until the first church bells would ring at dawn.

Night Flight and Nighttime Revels

Ironically, given that all these sources agreed on the fact that witches gathered at diabolical assemblies, the point on which they most dramatically disagreed was how witches might travel to these conventicles, and whether they were actually real or merely diabolical delusions. Here the most multifaceted position came from Johannes Nider. He generally presented witches’ gatherings as local affairs that would not require any extraordinary means of locomotion. Although he never expressly denied the possibility of witches flying to a sabbath, in the second book of his *Anthill*, dealing with “revelations” rather than “witches and their deceptions,” he did present a story about a Dominican friar who disabused a foolish old woman of her belief that she sometimes flew through the night with the pagan goddess Diana. This was a direct echo of the famous canon *Episcopi* (so called for its first word, “Bishops”), a document of church law dating from the tenth century that declared such flight to be illusory.¹⁶ In the fifteenth century, *Episcopi* became a fundamental basis for skepticism on the part of church authorities about all claims that witches flew or were otherwise transported by demons to sabbaths.¹⁷ Seeming to draw on that line of thinking, Nider also briefly mentioned how two specific witches would “travel from place to place, *so they think*, through the

16. Hansen, *Quellen*, 38–39; translated in (among other places) Kors and Peters, *Witchcraft in Europe*, 60–63.

17. Martine Ostorero, *Le diable au sabbat: Littérature démonologique et sorcellerie (1440–1460)* (Florence: SISMELE, 2011), 567–720.

air" (my emphasis). These particular witches, however, were not traveling to sabbaths. Moreover, Nider included in the first chapter of the fifth book of the *Anthill* an account of apparently real, physical transportation of a human by spirit beings, namely, of a knight from the Rhineland who rode in the course of one night to Jerusalem and back with an army of the dead. So whatever skepticism Nider held about witches' flight, he did not seem to think that such modes of transportation were inherently impossible.

Hans Fründ, as noted already, described witches confessing "how the evil spirit carried them at night from one mountain to another, and how he taught them to make ointments with which they would anoint chairs and then ride on them from one village to another and from one castle to another." His account might seem, therefore, to accept flight as a reality, but it should be noted that all this was simply Fründ reporting what potentially deluded witches had themselves confessed. He also immediately followed this description of flight with an account of witches supposedly transforming into wolves. This section of his text can be read as indicating a bit more skepticism, for it stated that the witches only "thought" that they had transformed and "did not know any differently," and that they now "seemed to be wolves" both to themselves and other people. Metamorphosis and flight were often linked together in the minds of skeptics, not necessarily as impossible activities, but as far more likely a matter of diabolical deception than of real transformation or transportation.

Claude Tholosan left no doubt about his skepticism. He stated explicitly that the devil merely "deludes [witches] in dreams such that they believe [themselves] to journey physically during the night . . . with a troop of devils," or to fly on animals, brooms, or staffs. The *Errors of the Gazarii* took the opposite stance, leaving seemingly little doubt that witches had been "proven" to fly on brooms or staffs. Not only did they fly to their assemblies, but they also carried ice that they had harvested from mountaintops "through the air on stormy days, by means of a staff," in order to cause hailstorms. Since the destruction wrought by these storms was quite real, there could be no doubt about the reality of witches' flight. It should be noted, however, that the entire section about carrying ice was a later addition to the *Errors of the Gazarii*, and the subtitle stating that witches had been "proven"

to fly on brooms or staffs may have been added by someone other than the original author as well.¹⁸

The Vauderie of Lyon presented an interesting twist on these conflicting positions. It seemed to accept as a reality that witches “go out at night, following after Satan—some walking, some riding on a malign spirit that appears to them in some horrible form, others on a staff,” and that they were “borne through the air and also over great distances.” One copy of the text then went further, explaining how the devil employed “certain literate men” who had been seduced into the sect of witches in order to “secretly exhort or even to some degree publicly proclaim that these disgraceful things do not really take place either in effect or in fact.” Instead, they themselves argued, falsely, for the skeptical position that the sabbath took place “only in dreams and fantastical visions, and that it is nothing more than an imaginary delusion.” They did this so that people would then be inclined to take all the other terrible crimes committed by witches less seriously as well.

Closely related to the issue of flight to a sabbath was the matter of witches’ supposed nocturnal celebrations held in the cellars of wealthy people’s houses. Both involved witches being transported by demons. Moreover, notions of spirit beings often called the “good ones” or the “good ladies” traveling through the night and entering houses existed in European folklore long before the notion of the witches’ sabbath began to coalesce. These spirits could often be placated by offerings of food, or they might ransack the houses if no offerings were made. Such beliefs mingled with those about other kinds of night-traveling spirit troops and appear to have contributed to ideas of the sabbath in many ways.¹⁹

Of the sources presented here, only Nider failed to mention witches intruding into cellars and plundering stocks of food and drink, although he did relate a story drawn from the life of the early Christian

18. Even though it appears in the earliest known manuscript copy of the text, that copy is assumed not to be the original.

19. See Claude Lecouteaux, *Phantom Armies of the Night: The Wild Hunt and the Ghostly Processions of the*

Undead, trans. Jon E. Graham (Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions, 1999), esp. 8–23; Ronald Hutton, *The Witch: A History of Fear, from Ancient Times to the Present* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017), esp. 120–46.

saint Germanus of Auxerre, who had died a millennium earlier in the mid-fifth century. Once, while traveling through what was then Gaul, the saint found himself staying in a house where the table had been set at night with food and drink for the “good women.” He realized, however, that these women were just demons in disguise, and he commanded them to reveal their true nature to the people who had foolishly been leaving these offerings.

Regarding fifteenth-century witches, Claude Tholosan was the most explicitly skeptical about the reality of their nighttime intrusions, stating that witches only “think that they eat and drink in houses that the devils open.” The *Errors of the Gazarii* appears to have been the most credulous, stating as a matter of fact that “the devil leads them to the homes of powerful prelates, nobles, burghers, and others, in which he knows there is food and wine matching their wishes and desires, opening the cellars of the aforesaid powerful people to them around the third hour of the night and leading them in.” Fründ’s report also seems to have accepted the reality of these nighttime revels, stating that witches would “gather in the cellars of the people who had the best wine.” When asked about physical evidence for these revels—that is, whether stores of wine would be visibly reduced in a cellar into which they had supposedly intruded—the witches “answered and said yes, there was less [wine] in the casks from which they had drunk.” *The Vauderie of Lyon* then presented what might have served as a possible response to skeptical challenges along these lines, namely, that witches might sometimes confess to breaking into cellars in which stores of wine did not later appear to have been reduced in any measure. This, however, would be because, after they had had their fill of the wine, “first the demon and then all these wretched idolaters climb up on the same barrel from which they drank and one by one they urinate in it and try to fill the vessel up again with their filth.”

Entering the Devil’s Service

Wherever witches gathered, a demon would manifest at their assemblies, although it might do so in a variety of forms. Once again, Nider’s *Anthill* offered the most reticent description, saying only that a demon

would appear “visibly in the assumed likeness of a human being.” Tholosan stated that the devil “usually appears to them in the form of a human being,” but somehow translucent. That is, “his body, like glass, does not block the rays of the sun” and “he casts no shadow when facing the sun.” He could also take on the form of “many different animals,” and other sources stressed these animal forms. Fründ stated that “the evil spirit appeared to them most often in the form of a black animal, sometimes in the form of a bear, sometimes in the form of a ram or in a terrible evil form.” According to the *Errors of the Gazarii*, the “enemy appears sometimes in the form of a black cat, sometimes in the form of a human being, although imperfect somehow, or in the guise of another animal, but most commonly in the guise of a black cat.”

By far the most horrific descriptions of a presiding demon come from *The Vauderie of Lyon*. Here the creature would often appear to the assembled witches “in the form of a very repulsive man, that is, black, completely covered with hair and bristles, with horns, having a monstrous, drawn out, and twisted shape.” The text went on to describe that shape over the course of several wonderfully twisted lines. It concluded in agreement with other sources, however, noting that the devil also “is accustomed to appear in the form and likeness of some beast, but always unclean, foul, and extremely vile, such as a goat, fox, large dog, ram, wolf, cat, badger, bull, or something else of this sort.”

In whatever form he took, the presiding demon received homage, oaths, and sometimes offerings representing the witches’ subservience to him. According to Hans Fründ, not only did witches have to deny God and the church before the “evil spirit,” but “they had to pay him an annual tribute in various ways, namely, with a black sheep or lamb, [or] with a measure of oats.” Sometimes they had to offer some part of their own bodies to be collected by the demon after they had died. Claude Tholosan described an elaborate ceremony in which initiates into the witches’ sect had to deny God and the church and then drink from a vessel in which the devil had urinated. They also had to bare their naked posteriors to heaven “as an insult to God” and spit and trample on a cross that they had drawn in the dirt. They would then have to “kneel and kiss the devil” on his mouth, and they also promised him their “body and soul, along with one of their children,

most often their firstborn." Thereafter, they were compelled to "make an annual tribute to him, in the aforesaid way, on the day when they [first] subjugated themselves."

Other sources echoed many of these elements. The *Errors of the Gazarii*, for example, noted that after swearing fealty to the devil, and "as a sign of homage," a new witch would kiss the devil, not on the mouth but on the "ass or anus." The initiate would also pledge to the devil "as a sign of tribute one of the limbs of his body after death." Beyond even this, the new witch would enter into an explicit contract with the devil written in blood. According to this source, "the devil draws blood from the seduced person's left hand with a certain instrument, and with this blood writes certain things on a parchment, which he then keeps with him, and many from the sect have seen this, as they have testified." Compared to such elaborate rites, the accounts of demon worship in Nider's *Anthill* appear relatively tame. He noted only that a new witch had to "swear to this demon to deny Christianity, never to adore the Eucharist, and to trample on the cross whenever he could do so secretly." Slightly later, Nider repeated that a new witch had to "deny Christ, his faith, baptism, and the universal church," and then had to "give homage" to the demon.

Once again *The Vauderie of Lyon* provided the most extensive descriptions of how witches entered the devil's service. "They do this," it stated, "with suppliant prostration and kneeling or genuflection, with clasped and clapping hands, and by kissing that one [the demon] on some part of his body, usually his backside or posterior." One copy of the text added graphically, "they affirm that during this kiss they smell a very foul odor." Of course, witches would also "deny the Christian faith and everything pertaining to it, especially holy baptism and all the sacraments of the church," and they explicitly rejected "Christ our redeemer, and the most blessed Virgin Mary, and all the saints of God." Like Claude Tholosan and Johannes Nider, the author of *The Vauderie* described witches trampling on the cross, but in this text they also stole the Eucharist wafer from church so that they could abuse it "by trampling it irreverently with their feet, by vilely defiling it with their spit . . . [and] by pouring urine and their other unspeakable excrements on it." Rather more prosaically, they also had to "deliver without fail to the devil their master some tribute of wheat, barley, oats, rye, millet,

eggs, and other things of this sort, generally once a month or at certain times during the year.”

The most practically important oath that witches would swear upon entering the devil’s service was that they would never reveal anything about the sect of witches to any authorities. Fründ noted that “they would not go to confess to any priest what they had accomplished through their art.” The *Errors of the Gazarii* stated that a new witch had to swear “that even unto death he will not reveal the secrets of the aforesaid sect.” Claude Tholosan expanded on this, detailing that they could not “reveal anything about themselves to ministers of the church or to priests, or even to the ministers of justice.” In exchange, the devil “sometimes protects and strengthens them during interrogations, so that they do not feel the torture.” Likewise *The Vauderie of Lyon* explained that “the aforesaid heretics declare and promise to their demon and to each other that they will in no way accuse each other or in any way disclose their witchcraft in court or elsewhere.” The devil then “hardens them” so that they “remain impervious” to even the most “diligent” interrogation. Johannes Nider did not explain this mechanism outright, but he did relate one case of a captured witch who initially resisted questioning but then confessed freely. The witch himself explained “that on the other two days he was restrained by the devices of demons from being able to confess under torture.” A Mass dedicated to Mary had been celebrated on the third day of his interrogation, however, which had liberated him from the demon’s thrall.

Infanticide and Cannibalism

Perhaps the most viscerally horrific behavior described in these sources involved witches supposedly killing and eating babies at or in connection to their sabbaths. Medieval sensibilities recoiled from such grotesque acts as much as modern ones now do. Johannes Nider reported many crimes committed by witches in the Alpine territory of the city of Bern, but it was the fact that “thirteen babies had been devoured by witches within a short period of time” there that, according to him, “so harshly inflamed” public sentiment against them. Such murderous rites could occur in several ways. First, children, often the witches’ own

offspring, could be sacrificed as a tribute to the devil. The bodies of murdered babies could be boiled down into fat or grease and used in poisons or to slather on the brooms or staffs that, in some accounts, carried witches to the sabbath. Witches might also kill children, of course, simply as an evil act in its own right. Often these elements blended together in the accounts.

Hans Fründ, for example, described how witches “killed their own children and roasted and ate them, [or] boiled them and took them to their assembly and ate them,” but also how they would smear poisonous material on their hands and then secretly touch children, causing them to waste away. According to Claude Tholosan, witches would sacrifice their own children to the devil, especially their firstborn, but they would also use the boiled fat from both their own children and others whom they had killed and devoured at their gatherings to perform further witchcraft. The *Errors of the Gazarii* stated that all new witches had to pledge to the devil that they would kill as many children as they could and bring the corpses to their assemblies. There, they would roast or boil these bodies and eat them, after drawing out the fat with which they anointed the staffs on which they flew. Slightly later, the text described how witches typically committed such murders, creeping into houses at night and strangling or suffocating babies in their cradles. They would not take the bodies at that point but would wait until after they were buried, then dig them up and carry them to the sabbath.

Johannes Nider, in his *Anthill*, described an identical process. First, witches would “lie in wait for babies who have not yet been baptized . . . [or] protected with the sign of the cross and prayers.” After killing them at night in their cribs or even lying in bed with their parents, so that the babies would appear “to have been smothered or killed in another way,” the witches stole them from out of their graves, took them to their gatherings, and “boil them in a cauldron until . . . nearly all the flesh is rendered such that it can be slurped up or drunk.” But Nider also presented a more restrained account of a witch killing children, devoid of the lurid horrors of cannibalism or the sabbath. Describing the activity of one witch, who at no point was associated explicitly with any conspiratorial sect, he stated that “he killed around seven of [a certain] woman’s babies in the womb

through his witchcraft, one after the other, so that for many years she always miscarried." This witch likewise afflicted all the farm animals belonging to this woman and her husband. Here we see concern not about infanticide per se, but about witches affecting fertility and reproduction in general.

The Vauderie of Lyon touched on all these points. It recounted how witches would kill children as a sacrifice to the devil and then make an unguent from their bodies to smear on their staffs for flight. It also described how witches afflicted fertility, causing pregnant women to miscarry, or even smothering children at the moment of birth, as they were "delivering [them] from their mother's womb in the manner of midwives." The idea that midwives were often suspected of being witches has gained a great deal of traction in popular conceptions about late medieval and early modern witchcraft. This is mainly because the idea of midwife witches was championed so vigorously in the infamous *Malleus maleficarum* (*Hammer of Witches*), written by yet another Dominican inquisitor in 1486.²⁰ In fact, however, careful study has shown that midwives were typically respected members of their communities and were not accused of witchcraft at especially high rates compared to other women.²¹

Sex with the Devil and the Gender of Witches

The notion of witchcraft as a highly sexualized crime, and a starkly gendered one, was also evident in this period, although as with midwife witches, these notions reached their apogee half a century later with the *Malleus maleficarum* and its famous declaration that "everything" about witchcraft stemmed from "carnal lust, which in them [women] is insatiable."²² This idea was present in some of these earlier sources, but it was not so strongly developed. Hans Fründ, for example, did not include lust at all among the motivating factors that he felt drove

20. Heinrich Kramer, *Malleus maleficarum* 1.11, 2.1.13.

21. David Harley, "Historians as Demonologists: The Myth of the Midwife-Witch," *Social History of Medicine*

3 (1990): 1–26; Mary E. Wiesner, *Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 127–28.

22. Kramer, *Malleus* 1.6.

people to become witches. Instead he stressed greed and a desire for power to inflict harm on their enemies. Perhaps not surprisingly, then, his accounts of witches' assemblies contained no mention of orgiastic revels or sex with demons. Nider's *Anthill* also did not describe any sexual activity occurring at witches' assemblies, although he noted that witches could drive other men and women to excessive carnal desires,²³ and he related many stories of women afflicted by demons in the form of incubi.²⁴ He clearly thought that witchcraft was interwoven with carnal lust, but he nowhere explicitly stated that lust caused people to become witches.

Claude Tholosan briefly mentioned that the people most likely to be drawn into witchcraft were those "inclined to vengeance or sensual pleasure," and he explicitly included sex as an element of the sabbath. At the devil's command, the assembled witches "have carnal knowledge of each other, and they mingle with demons, sometimes even against nature." *The Vauderie of Lyon* also described orgiastic sex as a feature of the sabbath, stating that "during this dance, at a signal known to them, every man and woman lies down and mingles together in the manner of brutes or sodomites. And even the devil, as an incubus or succubus, takes whatever man or woman he wishes." Yet, although *The Vauderie* discussed the factors that drove people to become witches at some length, it did not explicitly include lust among them. Instead, it agreed with Fründ that people were driven into witchcraft by "desire for . . . riches, luxuries, and honors," as well as "vengeance against their enemies."

Among these early sources, the *Errors of the Gazarii* was most direct in its statement that people became witches partly in order to "take pleasure wantonly in the sexual act," as well as owing to greed and a desire for power. The *Errors* also described orgies at witches' assemblies similar to those described in *The Vauderie of Lyon*. At a particular point during the gathering, the "presiding devil" would give a signal, and then the witches would "join together carnally, man with woman, or man with man, and sometimes father with daughter, son with mother, brother with sister, and with the proper order of nature scarcely being observed." Still, it is notable that, in terms of "revels" and

23. *Anthill* 5.5.

24. Mainly in *Anthill* 5.9–10.

“pleasures” taking place as part of an assembly of witches, only three texts (Tholosan’s treatise, *Errors of the Gazarii*, and *The Vauderie of Lyon*) mentioned sexual orgies, whereas four (those three plus Fründ’s report) described feasting and drinking in cellars.

In terms of any explicit gendering of witchcraft, most of these early sources were quite reticent. This is somewhat surprising because general evidence from across Europe for the first several decades of the fifteenth century shows that women were being accused of witchcraft at about twice the rate as men were.²⁵ That percentage is confirmed for our region by statistics drawn from trials in Dauphiné.²⁶ Yet among the sources presented here, both Fründ’s report and the *Errors of the Gazarii* stressed in their opening lines that witches could be “both women and men” and were “of either sex.” *The Vauderie of Lyon* likewise stated that witches were “both men and women” just a few lines into its text. It did at one point refer specifically to “some women from this sect” who had confessed to having sex with demons, and at another point it mentioned “that there are women among them” (that is, in the sect of witches) who were adept at magically stealing milk from either human wet nurses or their neighbors’ cows. Yet it should be noted that both these references are found only in one slightly later copy of the text. In *So That the Errors of Magicians and Witches Might Be Made Evident to Ignorant People*, Claude Tholosan made no comment on the gender of witches at all.

Johannes Nider’s *Anthill*, on the other hand, argued at length that women were more susceptible than men to the lure of witchcraft, or at least to the temptations of demons. It was, in fact, the first authoritative source to present this argument in such a direct form, and it would profoundly influence the similar argument made fifty years later in the *Malleus maleficarum*.²⁷ Yet Nider’s discussion of gender deserves careful attention. I have included it here among the sections

25. Richard Kieckhefer, *European Witch Trials: Their Foundations in Popular and Learned Culture, 1300–1500* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 118–25.

26. Pierrette Paravy, *De la chrétienté romaine à la Réforme en Dauphiné:*

Évêques, fidèles et déviants (vers 1340–vers 1530), 2 vols. (Rome: École Française de Rome, 1993), 2:782–83, 823.

27. Compare *Anthill* 5.8 to *Malleus* 1.6.

of the *Anthill* to be translated because of its eventual influence on gendered conceptions of witchcraft. When Nider came to discuss gender, however, it was not at all clear that he was still describing the sort of witch who belonged to a conspiratorial sect and attended a sabbath.

In most of his discussions of witchcraft, Nider referred to “witches of both sexes.” He typically used male nouns and pronouns to refer to them generically (as was normal in Latin), and his specific stories focused as often on male witches as on female ones. When in *Anthill* 5.8 the “lazy student” who was his interlocutor asked whether there were “in our time some good men who are deceived by female magicians or witches,” Nider responded with three examples of women who dressed as men and sought to influence the politics of their day. The most famous of these was Joan of Arc, who revived French resistance against the invading English and turned the tide of the Hundred Years War. Nider judged her to have been in the service of demons, but he carefully called her only a female magician (*maga*) rather than a witch (*malefica*). Some of the other women he discussed in relation to this question were labeled “magicians or witches” (*magae vel maelficae*). It is in response to these specific cases, and not to the horrors of the witches’ sabbath, that the lazy student declared, “I cannot wonder enough how the fragile sex dares to rush into such audacities,” and Nider then launched into his explanation of why women were more susceptible than men to demonic temptation and more prone to wickedness.

SPREAD AND INFLUENCE

The depictions of conspiratorial witchcraft and the witches’ sabbath that appeared in these five important sources from the 1430s were by no means entirely uniform. Nevertheless, they presented a clear set of stereotypes that were in the process of coalescing. These were not the only stereotypes of witchcraft taking shape at this time. In northern Italy a somewhat different set of beliefs became predominant. In particular, they stressed an image of the witch as a vampiric monster related to deeply rooted Mediterranean folklore about night-stalking creatures like the *strix* and *lamia*, whose origins stretched back to classical mythology.²⁸ Ultimately, however, the northern stereotype would

become more widely influential, as it spread during the remainder of the fifteenth century into France, Germany, and the Low Countries.²⁹ By the early sixteenth century, it would even spread, albeit temporarily, into Italy as well.³⁰

Over subsequent centuries and across Europe, stereotypes of witchcraft were never static or stable. Demonologists continued to debate the real or illusory nature of night flight and therefore of the sabbath itself. Trial records frequently show that ordinary people, and many magistrates as well, did not care about the supposed diabolical aspects of witchcraft nearly so much as the practical harm that they believed could be done through malefic magic. Yet it is equally evident that the imagined horrors of the sabbath contributed in many contexts to the powerful fear of witchcraft that gripped Europe for several centuries, and especially to the most vicious aspects of witch-hunting. Indeed, the basic mechanism by which a hunt could expand and possibly spiral out of control—the insistence that accused witches name others who could then be hauled into court—is inconceivable without the underlying notion that witches were members of large sects, their malevolent actions orchestrated by demons or by the devil himself. This is the idea that we can see emerging so clearly in these sources, on its way to reshape one grim part of Europe’s mental landscape for the next several hundred years.

SELECTION AND SEQUENCE OF THE TEXTS

Scholars have long known about the increasingly diabolized, conspiratorial conception of witchcraft that began to emerge in the early fifteenth century.³¹ In particular, a team of scholars based at

28. On these two stereotypes, see Richard Kieckhefer, “Mythologies of Witchcraft in the Fifteenth Century,” *Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft* 1 (2006): 79–108.

29. For the “second generation” of northern demonologists active in this diffusion, see Ostorero, *Diable au sabbat*.

30. Tamar Herzig, “Bridging North and South: Inquisitorial Networks and Witchcraft Theory on the Eve of the Reformation,” *Journal of Early Modern Studies* 12 (2008): 361–82.

31. A pathbreaking study in this regard was Kieckhefer, *European Witch Trials*. My own work in this area began with Michael D. Bailey, “The Medieval

the University of Lausanne spent more than two decades carefully researching the early trials and texts that chronicled this development in western Switzerland, northwestern Italy, and southeastern France.³² Those familiar with their work will immediately recognize the debt that this volume owes to their pioneering publication, *L'imaginaire du sabbat*, in which they edited five major early sources that described witches' sabbaths.

Imaginaire also provided French translations of all those sources, four of which are reproduced here. My contribution has been to render them into English, in which they have not previously been available except in scattered form and often only in brief excerpts. I have also made one major alteration to the selection of texts in *Imaginaire*. I have dropped its excerpt from book 4 of the French courtier Martin Le Franc's long poem *The Defender of Ladies* (*Le Champion des Dames*) in favor of the anonymous treatise *The Vauderie of Lyon*. Recent research has allowed this text, long thought to have been composed around 1460, to be redated to the very end of the 1430s, and so to take its place among the earliest accounts of the witches' sabbath.³³ Written by a Dominican inquisitor in Lyon, it fits more directly with the other sources presented here, all of which were composed by clerical or lay officials who had some connection to witch-hunting in this region. *The Defender*, by contrast, emerged from the so-called *querelle des femmes*, the literary "debate over women," in the fifteenth century. Only one section of the long poem addressed witchcraft. It offers an important and in some ways unique perspective on developing stereotypes, but it also requires a different kind of analysis and invites different comparisons than the other sources translated here. Ultimately I decided that its exclusion was regrettable but warranted.³⁴

Concept of the Witches' Sabbath," *Exemplaria* 8 (1996): 419–39.

32. For an overview, see Kathrin Utz Tremp, "Witches' Brooms and Magic Ointments: Twenty Years of Witchcraft Research at the University of Lausanne (1989–2009)," *Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft* 5 (2010): 173–87.

33. See note 43 below.

34. For a full edition of the witchcraft material with commentary, see Ostorero et al., *Imaginaire*, 441–508. For an English translation, see Martin Le Franc, *The Trial of Womankind: A Rhyming Translation of Book IV of the Fifteenth-Century Le Champion des Dames*, ed. and trans. Steven Millen Taylor (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2005), 90–113.

I have arranged the sources in a manner as straightforwardly chronological as possible, although of course there is almost always some level of uncertainty when dating medieval texts. The earliest of these sabbath accounts is undoubtedly Hans Fründ's report about a series of trials in the region of Valais that began in 1428 and lasted about a year and a half. The report itself was most likely written quite soon after that, perhaps in late 1429 or 1430.³⁵ The wave of trials actually continued in Valais until 1436.³⁶ That same year was when Claude Tholosan appears to have written *So That the Errors of Magicians and Witches Might Be Made Evident to Ignorant People*, after a decade of presiding over witch trials in the region of Dauphiné.³⁷

With the *Errors of the Gazarii*, exact chronological placement becomes more complicated. The tract was long thought to date to around 1450.³⁸ Only after a second copy of the text was discovered in a manuscript that otherwise recorded actions of the ecclesiastical Council of Basel down to 1437 could the *Errors* be redated to the 1430s.³⁹ It also emerged that the first known copy was actually a later, expanded version of the text, which was itself subsequently redated to late 1438 or thereafter.⁴⁰ This creates problems situating the *Errors* in relation to Nider's *Anthill*. We know that Nider began writing that long work perhaps as early as 1436, although he did not finish it until 1438, the year in which he died. He probably wrote most of his accounts of witchcraft in 1437/38.⁴¹ One might argue, therefore, that the *Anthill* should precede the *Errors of the Gazarii*, especially since I present here the fuller, later version of the *Errors*, which was written after the *Anthill* was completed. On the other hand, the original version of the *Errors* had been circulating since early 1437, possibly before Nider even began his treatise, and definitely before he finished it.

The Vauderie of Lyon has also been subject to some dramatic redating. For a long time it was known only through a single copy contained in a manuscript that collected other outbreaks of witchcraft

35. Ostorero et al., *Imaginaire*, 26.

36. *Ibid.*, 70.

37. Paravy, "À propos de la genèse," 333; Ostorero et al., *Imaginaire*, 358, 417.

38. Hansen, *Quellen*, 118–22.

39. Paravy, "À propos de la genèse," 334–35; Ostorero et al., *Imaginaire*, 273–74.

40. Ostorero et al., *Imaginaire*, 274.

41. *Ibid.*, 107; Bailey, *Battling Demons*, 95–96, 153.

referred to as “vauderie.” It was, therefore, originally dated to around 1460, subsequent to the more famous case of *vauderie* in the northern French city of Arras in 1459/60.⁴² New manuscript discoveries have since been made, however, and in particular one copy of the text has been found that contains an addendum naming certain officials active in Lyon at the time of its composition. Their years of activity are at least approximately known, and when this information is combined with other scraps of evidence the text as a whole can now be dated most likely to the years 1439–41, allowing it to join the “first generation” of sources describing the witches’ sabbath in the 1430s.⁴³

42. Hansen, *Quellen*, 188. On witchcraft in Arras, see Andrew Colin Gow, Robert B. Desjardins, and François V. Pageau, *The Arras Witch Treatises* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2016).

43. Franck Mercier and Martine Ostorero, *L'énigme de la Vauderie de Lyon: Enquête sur l'essor de la chasse aux sorcières entre France et Empire (1430–1480)* (Florence: SISMEL, 2015), 195–97.