

I

Myths of the Perfect Witch

A Witch Confesses

In July 1596 the *prévôt* (the local administrator and law enforcement officer) of the small Lorraine town of Charmes reported the arrest of Barbe, wife of Jean Mallebarbe. This old woman of about sixty had fled Charmes some months earlier after being called witch in public, just as legal proceedings were being started against her. She evidently hoped that feelings would have calmed down in her absence, particularly since the old *prévôt* who had been very hostile to her had just died. When she found this was not the case, Barbe plainly wanted to get the inevitable over as quickly as possible – she even tried in vain to hang herself in prison, then asked to be put to death without being tortured. Few of the thousands of people executed as witches can have been more eager to please, or to confirm the beliefs of their persecutors. Her original confession had been simple and to a degree self-exculpatory. She and her husband of some twenty-seven years had always been day-labourers; more recently they had been forced to sell some small plots of land and, being left with only a house and garden, were increasingly dependent on charity (the husband was said to be old and crippled). Six months earlier Barbe, angry after a beating from her husband, had been seduced by ‘master Percy’, as the Devil was often named in Lorraine, who promised her ‘money in abundance’. The Devil gave her two sacks of powder, but she threw these in a stream, and had done no one any harm. The judges were unimpressed, for they knew there were plenty of witnesses who thought they had suffered very real harm at her hands. They threatened Barbe with torture, beginning a process which over the next two weeks (ending with a session when she was lightly racked) would see her story become steadily more elaborate. Although to our eyes this was a parody of justice, with relentless pressure applied to a defenceless old woman, it was

also, in its way, a negotiation. The questions indicated the kind of answers required, but the details were supplied by the accused, drawing on a common stock of stereotypes.

Barbe's culpability grew, until she was admitting to at least twenty years in the Devil's service. Early admissions to killing the cows of men against whom she had grievances, and a horse at each of three houses where she was refused alms, did not satisfy the court. The accused was pressed to admit that she had harmed people, responding with a story about how she had killed her neighbour Claudon Basle, with whom she had quarrelled, and who had called her an 'old bigot and witch'. Barbe's revenge was to throw powder down her neck, inflicting an illness which killed Claudon 18 months later; Barbe asserted that she had not wished to cure the sick woman, who in any case had never asked that she should heal her. The imminent prospect of torture drew out a new series of confessions to crimes against those who had offended her. Some had been given lingering illnesses, so that their limbs were twisted and they became permanently crippled, while others were killed. Among these was a servant she met in the woods with a cart and horses; after he refused her some bread she heard the crows by the track calling to her 'kill him, and break the necks of his horses', advice she duly followed. She had been changed into the form of a cat by her master, so that she could try to strangle the wife of Claude Hullon, after he had accused her of causing a fog on the lake. When she found she did not have the power to carry out this plan she still terrified the victim by speaking to her, then attacking her in her cat-form. After Laurent Rouille called her 'old witch' and accused her of stealing wood from his barn she wanted to kill him too, but a wind had come in her ear telling her she had no power over him, so she had to be content with killing an ox and two cows. The torture produced a final batch of admissions of using her powder to kill men, women and children after she was refused alms. Barbe knew she must name accomplices she had seen at the sabbat, where witches met, so identified three other women, two of whom were quickly arrested and tried after she maintained her accusations against them to the last.

Like many other witches, Barbe claimed she had simply been unable to escape the clutches of the Devil once she took the fatal decision to enter his service. On the other hand, in the imaginary world she constructed to offer some kind of explanation for her supposed misdeeds, she was not completely subservient to him. When the *receveur* of Charmes, meeting her by chance on the road, called her an old witch, Percy urged her to avenge herself – but she remembered that he was often charitable to her and would not harm him despite beatings from her angry master. She suffered similar attacks at the sabbat, when she resisted plans to harm the crops,

because of the prospect of dearth and hardship for the poor. When one male witch (recently executed nearby) wanted to cause a hail-storm, she accused him of hoping to raise the price of the grain he had in store, only to be kicked in the backside by Percy and propelled an incredible distance. Asked if the Devil spoke to them gently, she replied 'ho, what gentleness, seeing that when he commanded us to cause harm and we did not want to obey his wishes, he would beat us thoroughly'. With no more than the minimum of suggestion from her judges, whose questions are carefully recorded, Barbe was able to produce an extensive confession that included just about every stereotypical feature of general beliefs about witches. Unlike most other accused, she had not heard the specific charges against her because she had started to confess before the witnesses had been summoned. Her widespread anger and malevolence was something she either recalled or invented without specific prompting. Witnesses only entered the proceedings at the final stage, to confirm some of the quarrels and deaths she had already reported.¹

'La Mallebarbe' cannot be regarded as 'typical', any more than any other individual witch. As we shall see, many different types of people were accused, while the charges might vary widely. Nevertheless, her pathetic story of deprivation, insults and resentment was a familiar one across most of Europe during the hard decades of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. These, rather than grand theories about diabolical conspiracies, were the common currency of witchcraft as it was actually experienced and punished. They were stories anyone could tell, drawing on a great reservoir of shared beliefs and fantasies, endlessly recycled as part of everyday experience. Those who accused their neighbours could easily become suspects in their own turn, caught up in the same remorseless machinery of local conflicts and rumours. Even when reading the actual documents, it can be hard to believe that such trials really happened, that real people, flesh, blood and bone, were subjected to appalling cruelties in order to convict them of an impossible crime. If torture was barely used in this case it was only because the accused was already so frightened that she confessed without direct coercion. On 6 August 1596 Barbe was bound to the stake at Charmes, allowed to feel the fire, then strangled before her body was burned to ashes. The two other old women with whom she used to go begging and whom she had denounced as accomplices, Claudon la Romaine and Chesnon la Triffatte, followed her to the stake on 3 September of the same year. The sceptical English gentleman Reginald Scot had written angrily a decade earlier, with reference to a scabrous passage in the early witch-hunting manual the *Malleus Maleficarum*, 'These are no jests, for they be written by

them that were and are judges upon the lives and deaths of those persons'.² Elsewhere he had asked 'whether the evidence be not frivolous, and whether the proofs brought against them [the witches] be not incredible, consisting of guesses, presumptions, and impossibilities contrary to reason, scripture, and nature'.³ Indeed they were, but we have to go beyond indignation and horror to understand why just about everyone believed in witches and their power and why, within their own thought systems, it was neither irrational nor absurd for them to do so.

The Witch-figure

Modern ideas of the witch have been simplified to the point of caricature. It is easy to depict a witch with a few strokes of the pen or a crude silhouette; the least talented mime needs no more than a hat. A fascinating collection of descriptions from modern Newfoundland includes the following quite typical portrait of the witch as

a creature with long, straight hair, a very sharp nose, and long slender fingers. She has a big mouth with pointed teeth. She dresses in black. Her dress is black and she wears a pointed black felt hat on her head. A witch usually sails through the air on a long broom and is always accompanied by a fierce-looking cat.⁴

The crude woodcuts which accompanied early witchcraft pamphlets are very similar, although contemporaries would have seen nothing odd about the dress or the hat, which were the normal attire of older women. In 1584 Reginald Scot described the Kentish suspects he knew as 'women which be commonly old, lame, blear-eyed, pale, foul, and full of wrinkles'; they were also 'lean and deformed, showing melancholy in their faces to the horror of all that see them'.⁵ One of the Pendle Forest witches tried at Lancaster in 1612, Anne Whittle alias Chattox, 'was a very old, withered, spent and decrepit creature, her sight almost gone... Her lips ever chattering and walking: but no man knew what'.⁶ Around 1600, therefore, this image was already in existence in most essentials; a few decades later, in 1646, another critic of the persecution, the Hertfordshire minister John Gaule, deplored the fact that during the current witch-hunt in the eastern counties

Every old woman with a wrinkled face, a furred brow, a hairy lip, a gobber tooth, a squint eye, a squeaking voice, or a scolding tongue, having a rugged coat on her back, a skull-cap on her head, a spindle in her hand, and a dog or cat by her side, is not only suspected but pronounced for a witch.⁷

This familiar portrait is nevertheless highly misleading as a guide to the people persecutors thought they had to deal with. It was the small group of sceptical writers on witchcraft, notably Johann Weyer and Scot, who picked on the fact that many of the accused were pathetic old women whom their neighbours found obnoxious. Their aim was to ridicule the extravagant claims made for this secret resistance movement recruited by the Devil, whose chief accomplishment was apparently to kill a few cows and impede the making of butter or beer. There is good reason to think that this line of argument proved very effective among their educated contemporaries but believers in witchcraft saw the matter differently.

Those writers who pleaded for greater severity were usually careful to avoid any suggestion that witches could be typecast in such a facile manner. It took a very naive demonologist like Nicolas Remy in Lorraine to describe his enemies as a 'vile rabble' composed primarily of beggars.⁸ In any case he also noticed the claims, often found in the trials he used, that there were many rich people at the sabbats.⁹ The typical approach was to stress the seriousness of the diabolical fifth column, the secrecy with which it operated and its closeness to the centres of political and social power. Even those such as Jean Bodin, who asserted (quite wrongly) that almost all witches were women, still made much of the minority of powerful male figures among them. The Catholic zealots of the Holy League, who sought to overthrow King Henri III of France, circulated pamphlets claiming to have found evidence that he was a witch himself. It was easier to argue that the Devil was successful up to the highest level because a number of early trials had been political set-ups directed at powerful individuals. The demonologists, who openly plagiarized one another, made repeated reference to these cases. Fantasies about satanic conspiracies on a national or international scale could gather around the occasional elite victim, like Louis Gaufridy (a priest from Aix-en-Provence burned in 1611). Two years later the exorcists who had 'unmasked' him had moved on to extract tales from possessed nuns in the Spanish Netherlands who described how Gaufridy presided as prince at great sabbats.¹⁰

Early pictures of witches convey the same message. Old hags are usually present among them, but they mix with nubile young women, men and children. Witchcraft was neither gender nor age specific for these artists, any more than it was confined to one social class. In reality members of the elite were rarely brought to trial, outside such exceptional pandemics as afflicted the German prince-bishoprics of Bamberg, Trier, and Würzburg. Nevertheless, there were enough scattered cases and, no doubt, more extensive rumours, to keep the notion of hidden satanists in high places alive well into the seventeenth century. A high proportion of those concerned were

men, with clerics prominent among them. The exceptional rarity of men among those accused in England, coupled with misogynistic statements by various demonologists, has encouraged an uncritical belief that nearly all the accused were women. In many parts of Europe men comprised 20 or 25 per cent of those charged; in some, including large areas of France, they actually formed a majority. There does seem to have been a widespread conviction that women were specially vulnerable to the wiles of the Devil, so that most confessing witches said they were more numerous at the sabbat; however, a fair number insisted there was parity of the sexes, or even a preponderance of men.

For persecutors and general populace alike then, the stereotype of the old woman as witch had no more than a marginal purchase on their minds. Some old women who found themselves accused complained of their special vulnerability, and where statistics are available they bear this out to an extent, in that older women and widows are heavily over-represented among the sample. One of these, Marion le Masson, gave another woman some money to buy medicine from the apothecary, then said 'poor old women, like herself, no longer dared to provide remedies, since when they did so for an illness, immediately people said they were evil people, so there was no need for her to reveal what she had told her'.¹¹ Despite this poignant evidence, the statistics need careful handling; we have to remember that many of those who came to court had been suspected for ten, fifteen or twenty years. Therefore their reputations very often went back to middle life or earlier, while relatively few first attracted suspicion as elderly crones. This is not a conclusive argument, for we have no way of telling how widespread or intense such suspicions were; the high level of defamation cases suggests that potentially dangerous accusations may have flown about pretty thickly in village society. One must also allow for a degree of retrospective reinterpretation by witnesses who had an obvious interest in exaggerating past events. In numerous cases, however, suspects confirmed such claims at a stage when they were still asserting their innocence, sometimes giving a specific explanation for the start of their problems. Colatte Bertrand knew that when Claudon Jean Remy had lost some honey fifteen years earlier, he had been to the *devin* at Orbey to find the thief, whereupon she was named, with the additional claim that she was a witch. Remy had told others, but when she and her husband wanted to take him to court no one would testify to this.¹² In general my impression is that alleged lengths of reputation are more accurate than not, although it is hard to see how this could be proven.

The popular image of the witch was that of a person motivated by ill-will and spite who lacked the proper sense of neighbourhood

and community. Suspects were often alleged to have shown themselves resentful in their dealings with others and unwilling to accept delays or excuses in small matters. There seems little doubt that some of them were notoriously quarrelsome, although it is less clear whether this carried any *necessary* imputation of witchcraft. Indeed, to some extent such behaviour must have been as much the result as the cause of reputations, for there could hardly have been a more effective way of damaging communal or personal relationships than calling a neighbour a witch. There is a strong impression when studying larger groups of trials that such personal characteristics were commonly brought into play to reinforce suspicions which began for other reasons. Those who conciliated others were liable to find themselves described, like Marguitta Laurent, as ‘fine and crafty, careful not to quarrel with people or threaten them’, while a failure to react was readily interpreted as betraying vengefulness.¹³ A particularly damaging charge was that the accused had talked of concealing anger until the moment for revenge had come. Jehenne la Moictresse was alleged to have told another woman that she should imitate her practice of giving no sign when angry, while Mengeotte Lausson claimed that when she had been angered she remembered it seven years later, without giving any sign. Mengeon Clement Thiriat told Helenne Thomas as they were carting hay, ‘that she did not yet know what it was to live in the world, and it was necessary to put on the best and finest appearances with those one hated the most’.¹⁴ The commonest of all remarks attributed to witches were those on the lines of ‘you will repent’ or ‘you had better watch out’, much of whose meaning depended on the context in which they were made. In many cases it was also said that the accused had taken no notice or pretended not to hear, when called a witch in public. In theory the proper response was to seek damages for slander, but suspects must have been very reluctant to embitter relationships further by such action.

Popular descriptions of witches do not therefore give any very certain guide to the reasons why they were identified; they are simply too flexible and circumstantial. Close analysis of the trials reveals why this was bound to be the case. There was no single or dominant reason why individuals fell under suspicion, while reputations were built up piecemeal over time and could incorporate very disparate elements. In consequence, supposed witches were a very heterogeneous group, even in the broadest terms. They were more often poor than rich, old rather than young and female rather than male, but there were quite numerous exceptions to all these tendencies. At any one time a particular community probably had a small group of strong suspects, with a much looser periphery of marginal ones; the latter were probably only known to individual families or

close neighbours, and were not yet the subject of general village gossip. The multiple ways in which these processes worked will form the subject of future chapters. These will also explore the many ambiguities of the position. For other members of the community, the witch appears to have alternated between being a terrifying enemy who could bring ruin or death and a pathetic figure to be despised and insulted.

One very powerful link did unite many of the accused; that of family and heredity. The idea that a 'race' was either sound or tainted was much employed, both in self-defence and in accusations. To be the child of a convicted or reputed witch was inherently dangerous; in one pathetic case in Lorraine a young couple were both accused, and it emerged that they had decided to marry after attending the execution at the stake of their respective parents, 'so that they would have nothing to reproach one another with'.¹⁵ There are signs that as persecution became established in some areas this element was progressively strengthened, with a growing proportion of victims having such antecedents. How far this was just a natural statistical outcome of the situation is harder to determine; here we still lack good comparative information for different regions. The possibility remains open that in areas of endemic persecution this tended to concentrate increasingly on a self-defining group of 'witchcraft families'. It is also unclear how far the popular ideas on the subject implied some kind of congenital weakness, as opposed to the notion that parents might deliberately initiate their children as witches. Judges certainly showed considerable interest in the latter possibility, but it is less obvious in the testimony of witnesses. Confessing second-generation witches, who quite often blamed their parents for their initial seduction, are probably best seen as trying to displace responsibility rather than as expressing general beliefs.

The Diabolical Pact

Everyone seems to have known how the Devil carried out his seductions. Once witches decided to confess they told similar stories, with very little prompting, which rarely changed much over time. The Devil normally appeared unbidden to someone who was in a receptive psychological state. This might involve anger against relatives or neighbours, despair caused by poverty or hunger, or anxiety at being called a witch. He offered consoling words, a gift of money and assurances that his followers would not want for anything. He might also promise that they would have power to avenge their wrongs, often providing a powder with which such revenge could

be effected. Once the prospective recruit agreed to renounce God and take the Devil for master, the latter gave symbolic force to the change of allegiance. This normally meant touching the new witch to impose the mark, leaving either a visible blemish on the skin or an insensible place. At the same time the chrism given at baptism was supposedly removed. With women the Devil then took possession of them sexually, an experience they often described in vivid terms as a virtual rape, made more unpleasant by the glacial coldness of his penis. Any remaining illusions were shattered when the money turned out to be leaves or horse-dung, at which point the witches knew they had been cheated. Men occasionally produced their own version of the sexual element, with the Devil taking female form, but this got the symbolism so obviously wrong that it never became general.

Individual confessions often left out parts of this scenario, partly because judges do not seem to have pressed the accused very hard on details, but it is usually visible as a whole beneath briefer accounts. It formed the first stage in a narrative of apostasy from both community and Christian church, which continued with attendance at the witches' sabbat and malicious action against crops, animals and people. Once the witch had been lured into this disastrous error there was thought to be no way back. A handful of the accused claimed they had made some attempt to reintegrate themselves within the church, but all had apparently found this impossible. Catherine Charpentier tried to take advantage of the special terms available to penitents during the Jubilee of 1602 by confessing her apostasy to a friar at St Nicolas. He made her promise to abandon the Devil, then absolved her, after which she felt the Devil leave her. She was also to carry holy bread and candle wax with her, then make a full confession to her own *curé* the following Easter, with three-monthly confessions thereafter. Unfortunately, although at the outset she was determined to comply, 'once she was at home and the time arrived to make her confession to the *curé*, the shame of revealing herself to him, together with her fear that he would expose and defame her, overcame her to such an extent that she did not say a word to the *curé*'. The Devil saw his opportunity, duly appearing to reclaim her allegiance.¹⁶ There is a contrast here with the folktales in which the Devil was often deceived or outwitted; the difference is of course that the witches' narratives had to conform to the logic of their own situation. That logic also produced a strange internal imbalance, for the stories were at once psychologically acute and preposterous. The state of mind which rendered the witch vulnerable was highly convincing, conveying just that condition of being overwhelmed by emotion which leads people to foolish and passionate actions. On the other hand, the Devil's mendacity was so

blatant, and his identity so obvious, that it was hard to see how anyone could fail to spot the trap.

Many accounts of the pact are patently about the witch, with the Devil as a conventional villain acting a predetermined part. When Catherine la Rondelatte was being interrogated in 1608 she suddenly began to confess, saying:

I am a witch. Ten years ago last St Laurence's day I was coming back from visiting my sister Barbon at Magnieres, walking alone through the woods all dreaming and thoughtful that I had been so long a childless widow, and that my relatives discouraged me from remarrying, which I would have liked to do. When I arrived at the place of the round oak in the middle of the woods I was astonished and very frightened by the sight of a great black man who appeared to me. At first he said to me 'Poor woman, you are very thoughtful', and although I quickly recommended myself to St Nicolas he then suddenly threw me down, had intercourse with me, and at the same time pinched me roughly on the forehead. After this he said 'You are mine. Have no regret; I will make you a lady and give you great wealth.'

I knew in the same hour it was the evil spirit, but could not retract because he had instantly made me renounce God, chrism, and baptism, promising to serve him. He gave me a stick, saying that if I bore hatred to anyone, I could avenge myself by touching them or their animals with the stick, then disappeared, saying I would soon see him again, and his name was Percy.

The widow's loneliness is vividly conveyed here, in comparison with the almost perfunctory depiction of the Devil.¹⁷ A similar picture emerges from the account given by Françoise Charier:

At a time when some executions were already taking place locally, she was extremely angry and miserable because her husband did her much harm, while she saw herself reduced to poverty; desolated as she was by this situation, one day behind their house she was overcome by several evil thoughts which blew into her ears, and at that moment she saw a man of middling size dressed in black climb down from a tree...

Although she twice resisted his 'honeyed words', the third time she yielded. The Devil's money turned out to be grass and leaves, while after using the powder a few times she felt such regret at being 'so miserably abused and deceived, as well as fearing to be discovered by the villagers, especially her husband', that she threw all the powders in the fire.¹⁸ Whereas most Lorraine witches served devils called Persin or Napnel, the crippled beggar-woman Mengeotte Gascon was approached by a man in black who said his name was Pensée de Femme. A devil who embodied women's secret thoughts

in his very name was a superb expression of the inner logic of the situation; he told Mengeotte:

that he gave her power over all those who did her harm, and towards whom she bore any hatred, so that by striking them with her hand she could make them die or sicken as she wished, while she could heal them if she wished, that she should have no worry about this, giving her some powder to use if she wished or the power simply to touch them with her hand.¹⁹

The power to hurt and (sometimes) to heal was the part of the offer which was invariably represented as genuine, as distinct from the deceitful promises of riches. It was possible for the basic premises of the conventional story to be challenged, as when Nicolas Claudon made a very rash entry into the conversation at the mill of Chastay. When he was on trial several years later there were two witnesses to this, one of whom deposed:

it happened that talk turned to the *devineresse* of the village of Bouray who had been executed for the crime of witchcraft, and how one day she had received money from the Devil, which when she got home turned out to be leaves or horse-dung, to which the accused replied that it was just as good money as any other, and that the officers were too shrewd to say in the record that it was good, otherwise everyone would want to be a witch.²⁰

An aberrant case of this kind does reveal something of the elaborate cultural interchanges which must constantly have taken place. It is mistaken to think of simple oppositions between popular and learned culture, which are really no more than abstractions invented by historians to describe a much more complex reality. Judges, clerics and peasants shared much of their cultural experience, while their ideas were always interacting. The diabolical pact was a very ancient story that all concerned were readily able to manipulate. The narratives combined elements of folklore and official demonology, which were fitted around social and psychological determinants. The Devil stood for the temptation to reject the normal constraints and obligations which regulated personal relations. In a society where communal norms were so coercive and privacy so elusive, the related stresses must have been peculiarly intense. The fantasy of the pact brought together an inner drama experienced by individuals with the judges' requirements for clear-cut offences. As the ultimate treason against God and man it could be held to justify an automatic death sentence, even the bending of normal rules of procedure. For the theorists of witchcraft the pact led into elaborate questions about the relevance and force of the mutual contract

involved. This was one of the points at which they tended to tie themselves in logical knots over where responsibility ultimately lay, providing a good opportunity for sceptical critics, but these disputes between experts had little resonance at popular level.

It has often been said that England constitutes the great exception, the land without the diabolical pact. It is certainly true that in English law it was only the Jacobean Witchcraft Act of 1604 that made the pact itself a capital offence, and that in practice the harm done to others was almost always the main charge. Until the 1604 Act, first offenders who had not caused the deaths of persons were only liable to a year's imprisonment, implying that there was nothing irredeemable about their offence. There does therefore seem to have been a difference in elite views as between England and Europe, although it would be dangerous to make too much of this. Most Continental trials were also primarily concerned with *maleficium*, fear of which provided their main driving force. English witchcraft narratives, however, are much closer to the standard pattern in their form, despite striking peculiarities of detail. The animal familiars or imps which appear in almost every well-documented case quite clearly performed the role of the Devil. The witch made an effective compact with them; she usually allowed them to suck her blood and was supposed to have special teats for this purpose. These last took the place of the diabolical mark, becoming the object of regular searches by special juries of local midwives and matrons.

In one of the very first English trials the nature and functions of the familiar emerge with great clarity. Elizabeth Francis of Hatfield Peverel admitted in 1566 that her grandmother had

counselled her to renounce God and His word, and to give of her blood to Satan (as she termed it) which she delivered [to] her in the likeness of a white spotted cat, and taught her to feed the said car with bread and milk, and she did so. Also she taught her to call it by the name of Satan, and to keep it in a basket.

When this mother Eve had given her the cat Satan, then this Elizabeth desired first of the said cat (calling it Satan) that she might be rich, and have goods, and he promised her she should, asking her what she would have, and she said 'Sheep' (for this cat spoke to her, as she confessed, in a strange hollow voice, but such as she understood by use) and this cat forthwith brought sheep into her pasture to the number of 18, black and white, which continued with her a time, but in the end did all wear away, she knew not how.

Item: when she had gotten these sheep, she desired to have one Andrew Byles to her husband, which was a man of some wealth, and the cat did promise that she should, but he said she must first consent that this Andrew should abuse her, and so she did.

And after, when this Andrew had thus abused her, he would not marry her, wherefore she willed Satan to waste his goods, which he forthwith did; and yet not being contented with this, she willed him to touch his body, which he forthwith did, whereof he died.

Item: that every time he did anything for her, she said that he required a drop of blood, which she gave him by pricking herself, sometime in one place and then in another, and where she pricked herself there remained a red spot which was still to be seen.²¹

It would hardly be possible to make the devilish nature of the familiar more explicit than by calling it Satan, while the blood gives vivid expression to the idea of an implicit pact. If the cat could not plausibly have sexual intercourse with the witch, he could incite her to fornication with others. Just like the Continental devils, most importantly of all, the cat was the container or cipher for the witch's own desires and anger.

Elizabeth Francis was seduced by her grandmother rather than directly by her familiar, but another confession from the same pamphlet has Joan Waterhouse asking her mother's familiar, Satan, to harm another girl. She offered him a red cock, to which he replied 'No, but thou shalt give me thy body and soul'.²² At another Chelmsford trial two decades later, Joan Prentice of Sible Hedingham reported how the Devil appeared to her 'in the shape and proportion of a dunnish coloured ferret, having fiery eyes', and said, 'Joan Prentice, give me thy soul'. He eventually settled for some of her blood, after which he would come when called, suck blood from her cheek, and perform 'any mischief she willed' against her neighbours.²³ Thus, far from going against the central stereotype the English cases show how an independent folkloric tradition could be moulded into the same patterns. Gradually the idea of personal appearances by the Devil in the form of a man was blended into it, beginning with the Lancashire witches of 1612. Elizabeth Southern told how she had been approached by 'a spirit or devil in the shape of a boy' who said 'that if she would give him her soul, she should have anything that she would request'. The spirit, called Tibb, also took the forms of a brown dog and a cat at different times, while the devil who appeared to Anne Whittle in the form of a man was accompanied by 'a thing in the likeness of a spotted bitch'.²⁴ This kind of shapeshifting was also quite common, for both devils and witches, in Continental trials. Cats and dogs were often seen as diabolical by neighbours elsewhere in Europe, although the idea of suckling them does not appear; some Continental witches were accused of keeping toads as familiars. In certain respects the English familiars, always found about the witch's house, were a more pervasive satanic influence than the human manifestations of the Devil, who were much less omnipresent.

Such variations around standard themes could be illustrated at much greater length. They demonstrate how readily witchcraft beliefs could incorporate a disparate collection of folkloric elements and demonological theories, with the trials themselves and the books and pamphlets to which they gave rise helping to generate or modify the content over time. In essence, however, the message of the stories did not change significantly over time and space. Their themes evoked a mythical world, in which the tensions of personal and communal life were personified in the Devil and his agents. It was therefore entirely natural that these narratives should revolve around a common structural core. Although we can never hope to reconstruct the precise ways in which individual or local versions combined the different elements, it is not clear this information would be much help in any case. Specific origins are less important than the process itself, whose outlines are perfectly clear. Apart from a few extreme sceptics, the great majority of people believed that there was a diabolical anti-world in which normal polarities were reversed and of which human beings had only very partial glimpses. Suspects were thus free to elaborate their accounts in the fashion already described; the trials were the crucible in which a range of new alloys could be forged.

The Witches' Sabbat

In many accounts the pact was followed by the sabbat; either immediately after the seduction or within a few days, the Devil would lead the new witch to a meeting with others. This too was a notably malleable set of ideas, which formed part of the same narrative and overlapped with other elements in it. In the peculiarly highly coloured version of the sabbat described by Basque witches, called the *aquejarre*, the themes of heredity and the pact were incorporated into the witches' meetings. Here the accused regularly explained that they had been taken along by their parents when they were children, paid homage to the Devil and worked their way up from the status of novices to become senior witches. When the witches themselves were so active in recruiting, the Devil could evidently be spared the task of going around tempting individuals to join his forces. It is impossible to determine how far these confessions sprang from an exceptionally rich local folklore and how far they were generated by a very active group of clerical and lay persecutors. Certainly the witchcraft panic in both French and Spanish Navarre in 1609-11 produced some of the most sensational testimony about the sabbat, whose influence has been remarkably durable. The French judge Pierre de Lancre was largely responsible for this,

for he wrote the statements up in a suitably lurid fashion. In a famous purple passage he described the purposes of those attending the sabbat as being

to dance indecently, to banquet filthily, to couple diabolically, to sodomize execrably, to blaspheme scandalously, to pursue brutally every horrible, dirty and unnatural desire, to hold as precious toads, vipers, lizards and all sorts of poisons; to love a vile-smelling goat, to caress him lovingly, to press against and copulate with him horribly and shamelessly.²⁵

The idea of secret meetings where orgies take place and evil is planned must be one of the oldest and most basic human fantasies. Charges of nocturnal conspiracy, black magic, child murder, orgiastic sexuality and perverted ritual were nothing new in Europe when they were applied to witches. They had been used against early Christians and then against heretics, Jews and lepers. In the fourteenth century they were made against popes, bishops and the great Crusading order of the Knights Templar. The stereotype is obvious; it consisted of inverting all the positive values of society, adding a lot of lurid detail (often borrowed from earlier allegations), then throwing the resulting bucket of filth over the selected victims. A kind of scholarly pornography was generated, while the use of torture secured the required confessions. It was also in the fourteenth century that humble people started to be convicted for witchcraft, at first in very small numbers; initially they were simply charged with causing harm to their neighbours by occult means, with no mention of devil-worship. This was quickly added to, however, drawing on a range of popular beliefs about nocturnal activities, mostly ascribed to women. Some were negative; stories of cannibalistic women who flew by night, killing and eating children in particular. Others were positive, concerning various forms of guardian spirits who were dangerous if not treated with respect, but essentially acted as protectors of people, animals and crops. The stories of the sabbat represented a fusion between the persecuting stereotypes elaborated by clerics and judges and the various older folkloric traditions of the peasantry.

This fusion can be dated, apparently with great precision, to around 1428–9, in the Valais region of southern Switzerland and in northern Italy. A Lucerne chronicler, writing a few years later, gave a classic description of the witches' sabbat in his account of the Swiss trials, while the case of Matteuccia Francisci at Todi in 1428 includes an actual confession in what was to become the standard form.²⁶ From then on a growing number of witches confessed, usually under torture, that they had attended the sabbat and many

named others they had seen there. This date is probably misleading, however. Two trials from different places in the same year are really an embarrassment to the historian, for they suggest the stereotype was already quite well established in the Alpine regions. We know from a work by the Dominican John Nider, written between 1435 and 1437, that around the turn of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries the Bernese *bailli* in the Haut-Simmenthal and the inquisitor of Evian were trying numerous witches, some of whom admitted having been at ceremonies where they did homage to the Devil and used the bodies of murdered children for magical purposes. Some elements of the classic sabbat are missing, but it sounds very much as if the notions were taking shape.²⁷ Around the same time we have some clear evidence of clerical concern about widespread deviations in both the western and the eastern Alps. In one instance a papal Bull of 1409 links together Jews fleeing persecution, Waldensian heretics and witchcraft practices, and instructs an inquisitor to deal with them.²⁸ Here we do seem to have precisely the combination of factors needed to produce the final lethal mixture that was clearly operating twenty years later.

There is a serious problem with evidence, for trial records are rare for this early period and accounts at second hand can never be fully trusted. In addition, as we ought to know from modern experience, documents purporting to record interrogations need to be treated with great caution. Judges did not necessarily record when they used torture, or the leading questions which were part of their normal technique. This makes it impossible to reconstruct the precise operations involved at this crucial stage, so the evolution of the full-blown sabbat myth seems likely to remain hidden from us to some degree. On the other hand, there is a sharp discontinuity in surviving records around the pivotal period of the first third of the fifteenth century; after this, references to the sabbat become quite commonplace in Alpine trials and start cropping up elsewhere. There were trials involving twenty-five to thirty people at Metz in 1456 and Arras in 1459 where detailed stories were extracted under torture.²⁹ Like the pact, the sabbat evidently represented a fusion of learned and popular ideas mediated through inquisitors, secular judges and the accused themselves. A conspiracy theory of this kind offered the potential for large-scale witch-hunting; it might even be thought to demand urgent action by the authorities. Historians have often assumed that it was the elaborated myth of the sabbat which underlay the great persecution, which was fundamentally a search for these secret devil-worshippers. This is a natural inference, but it would seem to be a half-truth at best.

Once the mechanism was in place, it could have been expected to generate a steadily increasing flow of cases. The belief in witchcraft

was plainly widespread in Europe, leaving the way open for persecution to feed on itself. Each witch who came to trial might be tortured, then denounce several others seen at the sabbat, in a kind of infernal, elaborate domino effect. Although there does seem to have been a small peak of trials in the 1480s, it was not until the late sixteenth century that denunciations came to function widely in this way. In fact it looks as if the idea of the sabbat was slow to spread from its Alpine origins. The great early witch-hunter's manual of 1486, the *Malleus Maleficarum*, hardly mentions the sabbat; although the authors are evidently quite well aware of the idea that witches meet in assemblies, the rigid scholastic format of the work somehow prevents them putting any emphasis on this. When Bodin wrote his *Démonomanie des sorciers* in 1580 he felt it necessary to offer extensive proofs that witches really were transported to the sabbat, while commenting angrily on the way some judges and others ridiculed the whole notion.³⁰ It can in fact be argued that the idea of the sabbat discouraged the elites from taking witchcraft seriously, because it was thought too implausible and too much tainted by popular credulity. In other words, for the better part of a century the destructive potential of the belief in groups of night witches failed to operate as might have been expected. Furthermore, even in the peak decades of persecution the role of the sabbat remains very ambiguous.

When trials did multiply, notably from the 1580s, there were numerous areas of Europe where the full-blown version of the sabbat was very slow to emerge from the trials or indeed never did so. Around this time the early critics of witch-hunting, such as Weyer and Scot, were already raising the question of whether such confessions did not merely demonstrate that their makers must be deluded. This was simply a more vigorous expression of long-standing uncertainties, for, in what may well have been the first formal discussion of the new crime of diabolical witchcraft, John Nider seemed to imply that the sabbat was some kind of diabolical illusion. Some later advocates of persecution would follow him on this specific point, which can also be found in such classic early texts as the ninth-century canon *Episcopi*. Even at the level of illiterate peasants making such confessions, the question of reality and illusion sometimes came to the fore. Barbe la Grosse Gorge gave a positive answer when asked if she had been to the sabbat but said she had seen no one there because 'all that one can say about it is no more than dreams and illusions'.³¹ Mingling the worlds of reality and dreams in this way gave witchcraft ideas great flexibility, yet at the same time exposed them to attack. Another idea shared by intellectuals and ordinary suspects was that some kind of substitution took place when the witch went to the sabbat; either their body stayed

behind in bed, or a diabolical illusion took its place. Evasive reasoning of this kind, all too common, was really a sign of weakness faced with the implausibilities of the standard myth. In Spanish Navarre the sceptical Inquisitor Alonso de Salazar y Frias was quick to point out that if this were the case it was impossible to prove either innocence or guilt. Accusations based on sightings at the *aquelarre* might be based on personal malice or deception by the Devil, and were inherently untrustworthy. As he put it:

Let us suppose that one was willing to give credence to all this, and to believe that the Devil is able to make persons present when they are not, and make others invisible when they pass before people who would certainly recognize them, with the result that nobody can be sure that he or she who is present is any more real than he or she who is with the witches; then surely one could conceive another explanation far more readily: the Devil only deludes those 'invisible' ones, or those who think that they have been absent, without this ever happening, in order that the deceived person should speak in good faith and find acceptance for these and similar lies, and consequently also be believed when he says that he has seen other people at his *aquelarre* whom he subsequently denounces. Thus immediately and without any effort the Devil leaves the village in an uproar [and] those unjustly incriminated exposed to condemnation.³²

This was an extreme case, for such critical rationalism was largely confined to experienced and sophisticated judges. Salazar's two fellow Inquisitors in the local tribunal at Logroño were outraged by his views, but he had the backing of the Grand Inquisitor himself, and the central authority of the Spanish Inquisition, the *Suprema*, had adopted his position. Although earlier Inquisitors in the Alps and the Rhineland may have helped to create the myth of the sabbat, the highly professional courts of the Spanish and Italian Inquisitions were among the earliest to reject it. The elite judges of the *parlement* of Paris, a prestigious court whose appellate jurisdiction covered half of France, also adopted a highly nuanced position, based on similar doubts about the quality and reliability of the evidence. Bodin was quite right, from his point of view, to grumble about this, as was de Lancre in his complaints about his colleagues in Bordeaux. In the 1580s an ex-councillor in the same *parlement* of Bordeaux, Michel de Montaigne, had remarked, 'it is putting a very high price on one's conjectures to have a man roasted alive because of them'. In an obvious sidewipe at Bodin he had begun this section of his superb essay 'On Cripples' with the comment 'The witches of my neighbourhood are in mortal danger every time some new author comes along and attests to the reality of their visions.'³³ The danger was real, but far better controlled by a kind of mitigated

elite scepticism than he feared. By an irony which would have delighted Montaigne, the extravagant claims made for the sabbat probably did more to discredit and limit the great persecution than they did to forward it, at least from the beginning of the seventeenth century. There is another side to the picture, however. For over a century, widely divergent views on the sabbat apparently coexisted in Europe, and some of the most violent witch-hunts were built around these excited fantasies. This was the case in numerous German cities and principalities, as it was in the belated Swedish pandemic around 1670. The fact that only a small fraction of Europe was ever seriously affected does not detract from the horror of these events, which have done much to fix the stereotype of the witch-hunt for later generations.

Among the elites the sabbat often demonstrated a remarkable capacity for polarizing opinion. In the Spanish Netherlands during the years 1613–15 a violent controversy raged about allegations made by groups of nuns supposedly possessed by the Devil. A sceptical party led by local clerics and backed by the papal Nuncio confronted other clerics and at least one powerful member of the ruling Council. The matter went as far as the Pope himself, who supported the sceptics, a decision which produced a bitter complaint from one of the opposing party that ‘in Rome they know nothing about this business of witchcraft.’³⁴ These cases belong to a rather special group, in which ‘possessed’ members of female religious houses levelled charges against male priests. This was turning the tables with a vengeance and one may reasonably suspect that this inversion of the sexual and ecclesiastical hierarchy had something to do with the strong negative reactions of many observers. This cannot be a general explanation, however, because some possession cases did not follow this model. Many involved accusations by adolescents or children, who were sometimes detected counterfeiting their symptoms; others had an obvious religious or political motivation. It was not surprising that they became discredited, doing much to damage the wider fantasies of satanic conspiracies in the process.

The complex relationships between the sabbat myth and persecution are not the whole of the story. What was the meaning of these notions for ordinary people? Carlo Ginzburg has suggested that there was a distinct set of folk beliefs, going back far into the past, which can be detected beneath the Inquisitorial veneer. He argues that the Sabbat brought together various popular myths about a journey to the land of the dead and back and was associated with the idea that those recently dead were hostile and dangerous to the living.³⁵ This ingenious interpretation has not found much support among other historians; in any case it does not seem to be very

helpful in relation to the situation during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Whatever the origins of the belief-system, by this time it had developed an internal logic which related it to a nexus of ideas about witchcraft rather than those about dead ancestors. Although the way in which rather different traditions were appropriated is a valid topic for study and speculation, this is largely incidental to an understanding of the symbolic function of the sabbat as a diabolical festival.

The view of the sabbat proposed by Margaret Murray in *The Witch-Cult in Western Europe* (1921) and then repeated in her *Encyclopaedia Britannica* article on witchcraft remains enormously influential, although conclusive refutations have been appearing ever since that time.³⁶ Murray argued that witches were really adherents of an underground pagan religion, who worshipped a two-faced, horned god, identifiable with Janus or Dianus, at sabbats which were traditional fertility rites. Apart from the banal point that certain pagan traditions had survived into Christian Europe, this is complete nonsense, based on systematic misrepresentation of the source material. Murray deleted all the fantastic elements of flying, shape-changing and so forth to give the impression that the underlying reality was one of cosy local meetings that could be easily explained in rational terms. She also used fanciful combinations of the numbers given in some trials to claim that witches were organized in covens of thirteen, aided by the natural tendency of confessing witches to use a dozen as a round number. There is no good evidence that a single coven existed or that witches ever participated in a sabbat of any kind. The natural conclusion from the documentary sources is that the whole myth of the sabbat was a fabrication from beginning to end. Falsification of the sources is perhaps the ultimate historical crime, but theories of this kind are also intellectually very weak. The fundamental defect of the Murrayite approach is its desperate literal-mindedness, which includes a refusal to accept that fantasy is a genuine experience. Any attempt to explain the stories in purely 'realistic' terms can only lead to a gross distortion of their meanings and a complete misunderstanding of the way they were produced.

Like other myths of its type, the sabbat worked on the basic principle of inversion; it presented a mirror image of the Christian world in which people actually lived. Familiar practices and relationships remained quite recognizable, but in distorted or parodic forms.³⁷ This at least seems to be true wherever one looks. It is difficult to write with any certainty about the many variations in detail found over time and space because most historians have been curiously uninterested in such matters. They have generally been content to cite examples of typical confessions, without attempting

much in the way of analysis or comparison. As a result, my attempt to penetrate beneath the surface has to be built around the one large body of data readily available to me, the manuscript records of some 300 confessions from the duchy of Lorraine. This was an independent state, sandwiched uneasily between France and the Holy Roman Empire, that saw a high level of small-scale persecution, very largely rural. There are some peculiarities in the Lorraine material, as one might expect, but these can be fairly easily recognized and do not really affect its validity as an example of how the sabbat was integrated into the wider phenomenon of witchcraft.

The Sabbat in Lorraine

Almost all Lorraine witches admitted they had been to the sabbat, once they had decided to confess. This was the third and last part of the classic disclosure, following the pact and the *maléfices*. Once they had decided to confess, few made any difficulty on this point; they were much more likely to deny *maleficium* or claim they could not identify accomplices. Their implicit attitude is that expressed by Jacotte Colin, who told the *prévôt* of Arches ‘I’ll readily speak your wine’ – meaning she would say what he wanted.³⁸ On the other hand, few of them said much about the sabbat; the detailed descriptions come from a small minority of cases, less than 10 per cent of the whole. In these rare instances the accused were clearly doing more than respond to prompting by the judges; their accounts have too individual a character to be explained in that way. This does not mean that there is anything really aberrant about the longer statements in terms of their content. I do not think any reader would doubt that we are in the presence of a coherent body of folklore, with certain local variations. The most striking differences are found on the linguistic frontier, which makes very good sense. The main reason why there are so few elaborate accounts is simply that the judges, less salacious or inquisitive than legend would suppose, did not ask for them. Questions about the sabbat were usually brief and formal; only if the accused was loquacious were they pursued with any determination. Even in these cases the judges rarely did much to guide the answers. The only detail on which they insisted with any determination was in obtaining the names of the others who had been seen there.

Scattered trials in Lorraine date back to the 1450s, but full trial documents are only available much later. Two early confessions from 1553 and 1561 include brief accounts of the sabbat that show that the beliefs were already quite familiar before the major persecution began – here as elsewhere trials were rare until the 1580s.

When Marguerite Valtrin was asked what she did after her master Pantoufle took her to the sabbat, she replied 'some danced, others played and did marvellous things, and when they left their masters gave them power to kill people and animals, inciting them to do this'.³⁹ La Grosse Alison described how she had killed a small child, whose corpse she later dug up from the grave and took to be eaten at the next sabbat.⁴⁰ This is in fact a most unusual element in Lorraine confessions, which normally just describe a banquet at which the meat was unpleasant and unsalted. When the flesh was identified it was most commonly said to be that of small birds. Over nearly a century the accounts do not change in any obvious way; there is no sign of any evolution in popular beliefs about the sabbat. Petty deviations from the norm were themselves normal, but unlike genetic mutations did not generate distinct new strains.

The norm itself is very clear. Witches went to the sabbat under orders, often carried by their master or on a broom, even when it was so close that these methods of transport were gratuitous. Sometimes they returned on foot, which emphasized how the outward journey by air was a detail intended to stress the abnormality of the whole affair. Symbolically it expressed the extraordinary character and difficulty of transfer between the normal world and another opposed anti-world. Night flying could also explain large meetings of witches coming from long distances, but such big gatherings were rare events which appeared in few confessions. In a parody of a village festival the witches danced back to back, consumed horrible food and made hail, frosts or caterpillars which damaged their own crops. Sexuality and cannibalism were only mentioned in a handful of cases. This was an anti-fertility rite conducted on the familiar principle of inversion. Many accounts had the participants concealing their identity by wearing masks, aided by the fact it was night. A more obsessive secrecy was suggested by Claudon Bregeat, who explained;

there were only some musicians who played the flute on some wooden sticks like whistles, while nobody said a word, and the tunes and songs were unknown to her. At the centre of the dance there was someone who kept watch on the dancers, and as soon as they saw anyone looking at the others they pushed them, by which means they were prevented from getting a look at others, or turning to the side, so that there was no way of recognizing one another for this reason, as well as the darkness and the fact that everyone had masks of sailcloth or linen, even headdresses or hats pulled down low over their faces...⁴¹

Nearly all the standard features of the sabbat could be reinverted – in the odd aberrant confession the witches even enjoyed a good

meal or went by day. These symbolic constituents were apparently not very firmly grasped by a significant minority of those who confessed. Although the idea that witches held secret meetings was well established in popular folklore, the formal structures of inversion seem to have been rather insecurely attached to this central theme.

The really constant element in the confessions is harming the crops, occasionally omitted but never reversed. Just as the main purpose of most communal Christian rites was to protect the crops and encourage fertility, so the diabolical festivals sought to destroy them. This fundamental inversion was never misunderstood. That this was the primary meaning of the sabbat is emphasized by the numerous accounts of disputes between rich and poor witches over such plans. Catherine Charpentier claimed that the rich 'who said that they still had enough grain in store, wished and suggested that they should make hail and destroy the grain and the other fruits of the earth. As for her, she had never wished to agree, because of her fear of being in want, knowing as she did the poverty of her husband, also, she had several times been beaten by her said master Persin, who supported the wishes of the others.'⁴² This is a very common theme recounted by the witches, one which plainly expressed the basic social divisions of the local community. High prices meant desperate times for the poor but profits for those with a surplus of grain to sell, who were also likely to take advantage to increase their land holdings. Here inversion normally stopped in the fantasies, for only in a few cases did the rich not get their way at the sabbat as they did in the real world. Occasionally the poor won the argument; more often they managed to sabotage the hail-making in some way – perhaps by upsetting the pot being used – at the price of a beating from the Devil.

In fact the sabbat was hierarchical in a depressingly conventional fashion. If there were several devils present they had their ranks, while the rich (or occasionally the young) witches took precedence over the majority who were old and poor. Jean Caillerey grumbled that

there was a devil there, whose name he did not know, assisted by several other devils, who commanded all the others. He saw easily that his own master Houbelot was only the servant of the others, while for his own part because he was poor he was always at the rear, and only got the left-overs.⁴³

For her part, Didielle Simmonel voiced what sounds like a proto-feminist complaint:

She said further that each year at the general sabbat their master Persin chose one among them as mayor and another as dean, who

commanded the other witches for the whole year, these being obliged to obey them...adding that at these sabbats these officers were always seated closest to their master Persin, and made reports to him on those who had not been willing to obey.

To make the hail, they beat water with small white batons which their master Persin gave them, then a cloud full of hail suddenly rose in the air, and was guided by the said officers, who rose in the air first, followed by the other male witches. Meanwhile she and the other women remained on the spot, and did the cooking while they waited for the men to return for the banquet.⁴⁴

In the accounts of such officers being chosen they were almost always men who were also named as leading witches by others. Here was another area where normal hierarchies – this time those of gender – were transferred to the sabbat without being inverted.

How were ideas about the sabbat maintained and spread? We can never know with certainty, but their persistence into recent folklore is suggestive. There are many references to the *veillées* – winter evening meetings for spinning, storytelling and flirtation – in the trials; none mention the telling of witchcraft stories explicitly, but all the more recent evidence suggests they are a staple of such gatherings. That the notion was in common parlance is plain from evidence given in the trials themselves, quite apart from the confessions. A year before her arrest, Jeanne le Schrempf talked of how ‘the witches of Guermange had said that when they were at the sabbat the rich drank from silver cups and the poor from glasses, that there was one of them who arrived at the lake of Lindre in a carriage, whose master always went in front, having a horsetail for a beard.’⁴⁵ A witness against Mongeatte de la Woeuvre had been told stories by the daughter of the accused about how witches killed babies in their cradles when their mothers were not looking, then dug up the bodies to make powder.⁴⁶ Anything odd which happened in connection with a storm would be remembered for future use. Jacquotte Tixerand blamed her reputation on such an incident, for ‘the people had a bad opinion of her on one occasion, when she returned from the spring with her daughter without having been wetted, at the time of the great hailstorm which spoiled all the crops at Amance about three years earlier, but they did her great wrong.’⁴⁷ Those who happened to get caught in a mountain storm and were seen coming back drenched might also give rise to talk behind their backs, as in the case of Jehenne Stablo, when the boys ‘started to say among themselves it was certain she was coming back from the sabbat.’⁴⁸ There is abundant evidence in the trials of such talk among children and adolescents, either in social gatherings or while they were keeping the animals, while a very large number of the elaborated stories (in proportion to their numbers among the accused) came from these

young people. Apart from those who made such confessions, there are a significant number of other cases where children made themselves seem important or perhaps took their revenge with tales about the sabbat, only to send one or both of their parents to the stake.

Ideas about the sabbat were also perpetuated through the trials themselves. It was routine practice to read out the confessions of the accused at their execution, itself a well-attended public event. When Mengeatte des Woirelz retracted her confessions to escape with banishment, she combined this element with a vivid picture of the pressures she had felt. She explained in connection with her statements about the sabbat that

tired of being in prison, and of the pain of the torture, joined with the fear of the evil reputation she had been falsely given in the town, she had chosen to die rather than live in such anguish. She had reckoned that in saying what she did to us, copying the confession of a woman executed at Creny, and the suspicions held by various witnesses used against her, we would have enough reason to put her to death.

When the judges objected that this amounted to 'self-murder', she replied 'that the desire for death had led her to do this.'⁴⁹ In a similar fashion, Barbelline Chaperey said

that she had confessed more than she had committed or done, but this was because she was under torture, and that she had not reckoned there would be so many people hostile to her, after thinking about which, she had been led to make such confessions.

Although she persisted in some essential confessions, she withdrew what she had said about the sabbat, saying 'she had learned this from the trials of other witches who had already confessed.'⁵⁰

As already suggested, there was some awareness of possible confusion between dreams and reality. Jean de Socourt claimed 'it is all abuse and trickery, and most commonly when they think they are there they do not budge from their beds'.⁵¹ The judges themselves asked Jeanne Martin if witches were really present at the sabbat in their real form, or if it is only in dreams or imagination'. She did not take the opportunity to exculpate herself, beyond saying she sometimes went in the form of a cat.⁵² I think any modern reader must be struck by the extraordinarily dream-like quality of the longer stories told by some of the accused and wonder how far their authors constructed these fantasies around a dream-life whose basis lay in local folklore and local events. In the sphere of fantasy this may have allowed the downtrodden to express their resentments through a fantasy life in which they acquired a degree of power over the oppressive society in which they lived. Nicolas Raimbault

was a poor herdsman who was sometimes reduced to stealing grain or wood, but when he went to the sabbat,

there were many others dancing to the sound of an oboe, so he did the same, choosing a young woman or girl whom he took to dance with the others, and because she was attractive she was the only one he danced with on that occasion; then they had a banquet with a great feast, but there was only boiled meat and some wine he did not find very good. Among his accomplices some were more qualified than the others, the great – who seemed to him to be gentlemen – being more cherished and favoured than the small, and as they banqueted some proposed to make hail to spoil the wheat, the others to cause insects and flies to attack the vegetables. But the poor opposed this, especially the proposal to destroy the wheat, preferring that it should be the oats. Nevertheless the rich were the masters, so that after they had beaten the water of a spring, and the stream next to it, with sticks which were in small sections, a great mist came up with a cloud and hail which did some damage to the wheat beyond Leintrey; and when one of the accomplices did not beat the water as much as the others their masters struck them like a sergeant in the army.

On another occasion he was taken to a place where

there were a few people, more men than women, who were beating the water in the spring, and finding his stick, which was larger than before and of red wood, all ready, he beat the water with them. But immediately his accomplices went up in the air on horseback, since the cloud was already made and starting to drop its contents, which caused some hail which fell slightly on the wheat at Autrepierre and Amenoncourt, but the greater part fell on the hilltops, and when he saw his accomplices going up in the air he was so astonished he said Jesus Maria, for which reason he found himself alone and obliged to return home on foot.

He was taken to yet another sabbat when his master found him cutting wood, then had him mount behind him on his horse to go to the woods, where this time they found more women than men:

A great whirlwind came up, and his master cried out to him to touch inside it, which taught him to do as the others did, that is to say to pull up the oaks (as it seemed to them), and he admitted that when he pushed an oak it fell down, and his master made his horse jump over the top of the oaks which he levelled to the ground, as it also seemed to him, and all this was done for the purpose of destroying the acorn crop...⁵³

Only a handful of the accused managed to invent anything as exciting as this (and one wonders if Raimbault was a village storyteller).

The theme of the illusion which vanished at the name of Jesus was a familiar one, however, which appeared in other confessions. The dispute between poor and rich is also a routine feature, in this case with the poor wanting to spoil the oats because these were primarily food for animals, especially horses, so their loss would mainly affect the rich.

It is a psychoanalytic commonplace that fantasies of omnipotence never satisfy. Certainly the sabbat appears as a deeply unsatisfactory experience for nearly all participants from their own accounts – Raimbault is not really typical here, although there were plenty of negative features even in his story. It is characteristic that this should be least apparent in the case of some of the children; in Lorraine four of them made long confessions that suggest that for them dreams and fantasies could be a form of comfort. The Devil they met may have been harsh and terrifying, but he also offered excitement and adventure. The experience was more like attending a blackly comic horror movie than being part of the grim punitive world commonly evoked by the adults, even when Demenge Masson described how his friend Pierron hid in order to escape the duty of kissing the Devil's backside. As so often, the Devil involved did not seem particularly quick-witted to be so easily deceived. The infernal kiss apart, he seems to have set out to give the two boys an adventure as they rode in the air with him on his black horse to the sabbat, where he found the two prettiest girls to dance with them. The food was tasteless, as usual, and Persin himself was far from pretty:

he had two middling sized horns, and his face was completely black, except for his lips which were paler; his eyes were enormous and frightening, entirely black with no whites, while his nose was hideous, big and hooked, with three points sticking out a long way at its end. Looking lower he saw that he had hairy legs, like a horse, as were his feet, except that they were divided in the middle, saying that nothing about him was more hideous than his nose.

The stuff of nightmares indeed, and the story seems to have left everyone perplexed. The case was referred to the duke himself, who kept delaying a decision, then died, so that it had to be reconsidered by his successor. The boy was only ten when he made his confession and had originally left home at the age of seven or eight to look for work after his father was killed in a quarrying accident. He spent nearly two years lodged with the local *prévôt*, who made a complaint about the danger to his own family. Finally the new duke sent him back to his mother, with orders to the local *curé* to teach him some sound religion.⁵⁴

There are only two cases from Lorraine which include descriptions of a formal black mass, with a parodic elevation of the host using a turnip or a piece of wood. They come from the same group of trials from a remote valley in the extreme south of the duchy, so may represent a distinct local tradition. The trials began with a voluntary confession by Chretienne Parmentier, an illegitimate young woman of twenty-three, who was reported to have already been telling stories about her own witchcraft as a child. She poured out a long tale about an exciting night-life, during which she had ridden to the sabbat on a broom treated with special grease and enjoyed a good meal. On other occasions she helped make hail, but she also said sometimes she only went in her dreams and found herself in bed when she woke. Her ingenuous story that her devil Taupin wanted to marry her and raise children with her sounds like an attempt to compensate in fantasy for her difficult situation in reality; she had tried to win a young man who rejected her. Chretienne was evidently only too ready to confess and bring about her own death, which may be seen as an example of the tendency for the disadvantaged to put themselves in positions where they are liable to be destroyed. Her confession bridges the worlds of the child and the adult.⁵⁵ Chretienne's stories may well have influenced those told by the twelve-year-old Jean Colombain from the same village and group of trials. It is hardly surprising that after her apparently unprompted confession of a parodic Mass at the sabbat he should have been asked about this specifically six weeks later. Jean was another seriously disadvantaged child; his mouth was deformed after a babyhood accident, so that another boy had to interpret his speech. It is easy to understand why, according to the witnesses, the girls did not want to kiss him and why he resorted to threats, mixed with claims of supernatural experiences and powers. He told a story about going to an iron house that was the location for the feasting and dancing that seemed entirely on fire, yet gave off no heat. After telling of the diabolic mass with its parodic rituals, he produced a bizarre account of the use of the powder, usually envisaged as a deadly poison; he said the witches ate it and then showed it to wild boar that became unable to run away and were easily captured. His stories led to the trial and execution of his mother, although he himself was spared.⁵⁶

The only rivals to these children for extended and imaginative descriptions of nocturnal activity are a group of witches from the German-speaking region to the east of the duchy. Although there is a considerable overlap, several elements in their stories make it clear that the linguistic divide between French and German speakers was also to be found in folklore. Here it becomes difficult to distinguish between the sabbat and acts of *maleficium*, for small groups of

witches seemed to gather regularly with their master to conduct night-time raids on their enemies. They used a liquid poison to kill animals or sometimes humans, which required several pairs of hands to administer it successfully. This poison was fabricated by the witches themselves from the burned bodies of stillborn children, whose fingers were kept as candles which never consumed themselves. The myth of these 'thieves' candles', never mentioned in the French-speaking areas, was a widespread German folk belief also found in Bavarian trials.⁵⁷ Even the original seduction by the Devil seemed to be assimilated to this vision of a frenetic night-life, in which the sabbat was the occasion for feasting, dancing and marriages between young girls and demons, but some of its other elements were carried on separately. The witches met in small groups to make hail and carry out other crimes. It may be going too far to suggest that there is a curious Gothic quality to these confessions, but they are certainly different – and the general style is common to the dozen or so surviving cases from the region.⁵⁸ It is curious to note that a similar notion of how to harm enemies appears in the even more lurid accounts of the Basque *aquelarre*, where the Devil and other witches went to the victim's house by night in order to pour powder down his or her throat.⁵⁹

Few of this group tried to escape from identifying accomplices with the usual claim they had been masked, nor could they very well deny their active participation, although it was in some sense under compulsion. Elsewhere, witches commonly went to some pains to present themselves as marginal and despised figures even at the sabbat. Few were more abject than Barbon Moicrier, who claimed the others called her 'la criarde' ('the blubber') because she would not join in. She alleged that the one accomplice she could identify, la Belle Agnes, 'was one of the most forward there, in status and in the dance, and even that once when she was crying the said Belle Agnes gave her a kick as she was dancing'.⁶⁰ It was always someone else who had taken the lead, unless one counts the rather ambiguous claim made by Marion le Masson, a woman of higher status whose husband had been mayor of St Dié, that among her accomplices,

there were many who wanted to cause the loss of the grain crops, but she opposed this and said that it would cause great damage and be a great hardship for the poor, arguing that it would be much better to make a storm and wind to cause damage to the belltower at St Dié. This was agreed, and after beating the water of the spring in that place a great cloud and storm came up, which severely damaged the said tower, and when they had thus beaten the water they all found themselves back at home.⁶¹

Even here there is a claim to have attenuated the harm done to her neighbours in practical terms. In theory the sabbat might have provided the opportunity to plan a whole range of malicious acts. In Lorraine the Devil showed very little imagination in this direction, rarely taking the opportunity to address his servants. When he did, according to Claudon la Romaine, 'all his preaching amounted to nothing more than that they should do harm under threat of being well beaten'.⁶² Often he seems to have imposed silence, perhaps because, as some witches claimed, his deformity prevented him from speaking clearly. Colas François did suggest an exceptional attempt to convince, when his master Navel called them together to tell them 'how it was much finer in his hell than in paradise, and that they would be very happy to be in hell with him'.⁶³ More typical was the mixture of apology and derision reported by Chesnon la Triffatte when, in the face of protests about putrid meat, Lucifer 'seeing some fastidious ones who did not want to eat such offal said that they ought to be very content, and that they were the best and most delicate meats he had been able to find'.⁶⁴ In just one case there is the hint of a serious discussion of practical politics. According to Marion Arnoulx, a leading witch named Jean Gelyat warned that the local mayor 'had undertaken, if he was allowed to proceed, to have all the witches of their group arrested'; there was some talk of taking measures against him, but this practical effort at self-defence came to no clear resolution, nor was it followed by action.⁶⁵ In other words, the confessing witch simply lost the thread of her own story, whose logic was not being examined too closely in any case.

Such details are really decorative and should not obscure the fact that like so much else in the concept of witchcraft, the sabbat was primarily concerned with power. Such visions were of course fundamentally deceptive. They could only be fulfilled in negative terms, through the destruction of the basic assets of rural society, the reverse of bringing any improvement to the lives of participants. A curious logic is evident, whereby the Devil needs the witches in order to produce corporeal effects and so uses a mixture of false promises, threats and compulsion to obtain their presence at his disgusting ceremonies. The betrayal which begins with the seduction and the pact is completed at the sabbat, where nothing is quite what it seems. The food, instead of being merely repellent might be entirely illusory, as for Hellenix Hottin, who reported that Persin 'had promised to give her a meal, but did no such thing, and those who had already eaten said that when they left they were dying of hunger'.⁶⁶ The basis for virtual enslavement to this deplorable master was never really explained, except as a result of the witches' own pathetic gullibility and the pact they made. As for the proceedings at the

sabbat, these appear to prefigure Hell itself, in which respect at least we may fairly see the sabbat as the gateway to the land of the dead. For those who made the confessions death loomed in a very real sense, although many seem to have felt that by making a clean breast of their sinful relations with the lord of the underworld they ensured ending up in the other place. Fortunately the historian is not called upon to decide whether this amounted to more than the exchange of one fantasy for another.

What the Lorraine example also shows is how the stereotype was adapted to local conditions and to a particular pattern of persecution. In a rural society, where local judges and officials were very close to popular traditions, this seems to have been accomplished without great difficulty. It seems highly probable that many of those who made brief confessions could have elaborated them easily enough if pressed, and indeed there are instances of this in the trials. From the examples given it should be evident how a mixture of realistic and fantastic detail, rooted in local folklore, could be developed in this way. The evidence also suggests powerfully that this folkloric material was often mediated through personal fantasy and dreams to relate to the personal conflicts of individuals. The mechanism of denunciations did contribute to some small local witch-hunts, although almost none claimed more than a handful of victims. Those who came to trial in this way always turned out to be men and women who already had a reputation for witchcraft among their neighbours; it is possible that where accusations were not followed up, as was often the case, it was because such evil fame did not attach to those concerned. Once a reputation had been established it might keep circulating. A curious case is that of Mathieu Blaise, an elderly and prosperous peasant from the large village of Ste Marguerite. He was brought to trial in 1592 after a denunciation but most of the witnesses testified for him rather than against him; as there was no serious evidence at all, he was released without even being interrogated. For the next decade local witches continually named him among their accomplices, often as one of the leaders at the sabbat, without any sign that further action was taken; he almost certainly died in his bed, like many other suspects.⁶⁷

The people of Lorraine reduced the sabbat to a rather drab inverted reflection of their own hard but humdrum lives. Witches skulked away from their tiresome master and short-changed him on their obligations, as peasants commonly did with their real masters. Many of them told versions of a curious story, according to which they made an annual offering – usually a chicken thrown out into the garden – in order to be spared the tiresome and laborious duty of attendance at the sabbat. Like any feudal overlord the Devil

evidently accepted the principle of commutation. Although the witches might emphasize how he had forced them to harm others, the Devil rarely appeared as very astute or terrifying. The occasional vivid splash of colour in an individual confession did nothing to launch panic or frenzied witch-hunting. The naming of accomplices followed rather than led the labelling processes whereby a category of suspects was created. It facilitated persecution to some extent, since perhaps a quarter of trials were actually initiated in this way, but it would be rash to assume that most of those concerned would not have ended up in the same predicament by other means. The belief itself certainly endured long after the trials were a distant memory; in the late nineteenth century the folklorist Sauvé found the inhabitants of the Vosges still enthusiastically whiling away the long winter nights with stories about witchcraft and the sabbat, the latter reached by a magical flight after rubbing ointment on one's body. The Devil retained his conventional horns, claws and tail, and if he was better left unnamed this did not imply any great respect for his intelligence, since he seemed more often a buffoon than the cosmic embodiment of evil.⁶⁸

The Sabbat in Europe

If the sabbat myth appeared in some form virtually everywhere witches were detected, it was still very far from presenting a uniform pattern. The apparent coherence and normality of the Lorraine case must not mislead us here. This was an unusually stable and fully realized fusion of different traditions, which more often fluctuated violently over time and space. One version of this can be seen in the intense witch-hunts, among them that in the Basque country fortunately cut short by Salazar, where local beliefs seem to have displayed an astonishing capacity to ramify and develop. It was mostly in German cities that the juridical, political and social peculiarities of virtually independent urban communities interacted to generate terrifying outbreaks of persecution. The cities involved had populations of only a few thousand, and functioned as market, legal and clerical centres for the surrounding countryside. Surviving examples suggest a rather claustrophobic environment, with narrow houses packed tightly within the medieval walls to make an ideal setting for a satanic thriller. Small Catholic cities ruled by bishops also had abnormally large clerical populations, and would have been filled with the sounds and symbols of belief, yet also with petty rivalries and jealousies. While the dramatic episodes that took place against such a background only made up a relatively small proportion of known European trials, they have inevitably

dominated most later thinking about witchcraft. The unrestrained use of torture to extract confessions and denunciations horrified many contemporary observers. In fact these persecutions turned out to be self-limiting, for they created such social instability and general fear that finally the ruling groups brought them to an end. It should be added that major cities and centres of government were never involved; the places concerned were always relative backwaters, where small groups of zealots could have disproportionate influence. The most spectacular cases of all were in some prince-bishoprics – Trier in the 1590s, Bamberg and Würzburg around 1628–31, Cologne in the 1630s – but Protestant towns were also affected. There are striking similarities with earlier persecutions of Jews on charges of the ritual murder of children and both types of outbreak brought efforts by the Emperor and his jurists to enforce higher judicial standards.

These intense persecutions were necessarily built around the sabbat, for it was only through the identification of numerous accomplices that the panic could spread as it did. It is also noticeable that as accusations spread to clerics and other members of the elites the confessions became more elaborate, with much emphasis on complex diabolical rituals at the sabbat. The poor might go on brooms or pitchforks, but the rich allegedly travelled in silver coaches or other luxury conveyances. A particularly unpleasant feature of these outbreaks was the way in which children became involved in large numbers as both accusers and victims. This had also been true in the Basque country and was to be a major factor in the Swedish witch-hunt of 1668–76. In this last instance the confessions made much of the legend of Blåkulla (the blue mountain), a Swedish equivalent of the German peak known as the Brocken, which shared the reputation of the latter as a meeting place for witches. The children elaborated this into stories of a great hall where devils and angels alternated amidst a series of bizarre and often playful inversions, intermixed with devil-worship and scenes of punishment. Here the meshing together of demonology and local tradition is particularly obvious, alongside the fertile qualities and danger of juvenile fantasy. The children were grouped together in special houses, supposedly for their protection from the witches, and this encouraged them further in their role as mouthpieces for local opinion. Although there was considerable elite scepticism from the start, the local clergy and community leaders took up the hunt with enthusiasm; the persecution was only stopped after it spread to Stockholm. Only at this point did the government itself come to appreciate the dangers properly. Under hostile questioning the whole great edifice of fantasy collapsed as the children admitted their stories were lies from beginning to end. Over the previous years they had brought

terror and panic to large areas of northern Sweden. Yet because there were dissenting voices and there was no systematic use of torture, less than 15 per cent of those accused were put to death, with the total number of executions being around 200.⁶⁹

In Sweden it was only during this late outbreak that ideas of the sabbat contributed much to witchcraft persecution. There were many other regions in Europe where the sabbat played a marginal role at best, appearing in small minorities of trials in other parts of Scandinavia or in Aragon and Hungary, for example. It is no surprise to find that it made only fleeting appearances in connection with Dutch witchcraft, while its absence from most English cases is often noted. In this context England seems much less exceptional than was once thought, and indeed the sabbat did creep gradually on to the English scene albeit in a rather tame and homely form. It surfaced hesitantly in the Lancashire trials of 1612 and 1634; these were unusually large group trials for England, and particularly good evidence has survived from the first, when nineteen persons were tried and most of them convicted and hanged. In 1634 an even larger group was tried, with seventeen known convictions, but intervention by king and council first stopped the executions, then finally exposed the main accuser, a boy named Edmund Robinson, as a fraud. There is an obvious natural association between these group trials and stories about secret meetings of the accused, and after this there are a few, more scattered references to witches' meetings in English trials. The sabbat as such hardly featured at all, however, in by far the biggest English witch-hunt, that conducted by Matthew Hopkins and John Stearne in East Anglia in 1645-7. Poor record survival complicates the task of reconstructing this famous affair, which probably claimed between 120 and 200 victims. Hopkins and Stearne are obscure figures; all we really know of the former is that he was the son of a local minister and that he died from consumption in 1647 (rather than being executed as a witch himself, as a tenacious legend would have it). Even less information is available about Stearne, while the Puritanism of the two men has often been exaggerated.

The witch-finders used sleep deprivation and other forms of coercion to extract confessions, including much testimony about pacts with the Devil and the keeping of familiars. Hopkins himself alleged his local witches met in an attempt to compass his death, but evidence for such assemblies is absent from the testimonies. It is far from clear that this made much difference to the proceedings, for Hopkins and Stearne seem to have brought existing suspicions about *maleficium* to a head in a fashion very similar to the Swedish children. This was true in the case of John Lowes, vicar of Brandeston in Suffolk, who had a long history of disputes with his parishioners,

including cases in the Star Chamber. He was evidently a violent and litigious man, given to imprudent verbal sallies against his neighbours. In 1615 he had attempted to protect a woman who was convicted and executed as a witch, hiding her in his own house and threatening the constable. He himself had been tried for witchcraft at Bury St Edmunds later that same year, but was acquitted. Hopkins and Stearne used their typical methods on him, according to the lord of the manor, who recorded:

I have heard it from them that watched with him that they kept him awake several Nights together and ran him backwards and forwards about the Room, until he [was] out of Breath. Then they rested him a little, and then ran him again; and thus they did for several Days and Nights together, till he was weary of his life, and was scarce sensible of what he said or did. They swam him at Framlingham, but that was no true Rule to try him by; for they put in honest People at the same time, and they swam as well as he.⁷⁰

It was hardly surprising that a man in his seventies broke down under such treatment; here as elsewhere one must assume that the absence of the sabbat from Lowes' rambling confessions indicated that Hopkins and Stearne were not interested in extracting material of this kind. They and their clients were still primarily concerned with *maleficium*, alongside the pact and the familiars which gave the witch the power to operate it, so that the alleged diabolism never became detached from the everyday reality of witchcraft belief, as it did in some of the German witch-hunts.

In north-western Europe the sabbat appears to have enjoyed greatest prominence in Denmark and Scotland, where there is a rather odd relationship. Danish witches often confessed to meetings with the Devil in their local churches and this has been plausibly linked with the wall-paintings in the churches, where scenes of temptation were commonplace.⁷¹ When King James VI of Scotland married Anne of Denmark in 1590 the storms which troubled the return voyage were ascribed to witchcraft in both countries. In Scotland around a hundred individuals, supposedly led by the Earl of Bothwell, were accused of high treason through meetings with the Devil in the kirk at North Berwick. This bizarre affair took the sabbat into Scottish witchcraft trials, where it subsequently cropped up in numerous confessions. Like those in Lorraine, however, Scottish witches were rather well behaved and in fact inversion played rather a limited role in most stories. In a society where almost all forms of spontaneous festivity were banned, the idea of disorderly gatherings was perhaps sufficient evidence of depravity on its own. In the coastal villages where many trials took place it was the sinking of ships, rather than the spoiling of crops, which

exemplified the treason to the community.⁷² There is another similarity to the Lorraine case in the way denunciations operated, for they seem to have concentrated on other local suspects with existing reputations.

Such links between different countries crop up in various contexts. The account of the Swedish trials in Glanvill's *Sadducismus Triumphatus* evidently influenced the New England clergyman Cotton Mather, and may have had some indirect bearing on events in Salem Village. The behaviour of the possessed girls during this famous episode has obvious parallels with that of the children in Sweden, although there is no sign of direct imitation. The sudden appearance of the sabbat in New England in 1692 remains mysterious; the children's stories have too much in common with European accounts not to have some literary or folkloric source whose exact nature is now impossible to recover. In comparison with their counterparts in the Old World, the authorities in the New came out remarkably well. Not only did they bring the trials to a close much more quickly and with a modest number of executions, they also sponsored public penitence for the wrongs committed, for which several of those involved left public or private apologies on record. Whereas the Swedes executed four of the accusers, including a boy of thirteen, in Massachusetts the girls were left to wrestle with their own consciences. Another who engaged in painful self-examination was Cotton Mather, much troubled by his failure to intervene earlier and stop the persecution yet still fascinated by what he called 'the wonders of the invisible world'. For men like Mather, the Devil's anti-world remained a vital part of their cosmology, even when they saw how easily the great enemy could lead them astray.

In a very different context, the Inquisitors in the extreme north-east of Italy were confronted by a strange nocturnal world in the beliefs of the *benendanti* of Friuli, peasants with a peculiar folklore of their own. These belonged to at least one widespread belief-system, for they were allegedly marked out by an accident of birth, having been covered by the caul (or amniotic membrane) at the moment of delivery. Various similar chances – birth at a particular time or at a particular place in the family – were supposed to confer special powers of insight or healing elsewhere in Europe. In Friuli the *benendanti* went out in dreams to fight the witches and ensure the fertility of the crops; some of them also claimed the power to identify witches and treat their victims. The Inquisitors tried with some success to assimilate these local traditions to orthodox demonology, turning the dream meetings of the anti-witch cult into versions of the sabbat. However by the time they had achieved this, around 1650, the sceptical attitudes of both the Roman authorities and the Venetian secular administration averted the danger of

an ensuing persecution. While male *benendanti* allegedly fought witches, women seem to have been more concerned to make contact with the souls of those recently dead, bringing back reports of their condition and their needs. There are hints of similar beliefs elsewhere, but nothing remotely as complex or systematic as this strange corpus of folklore. If most scholars have seen the *benendanti* as an exceptional local case rather than the tip of a submerged iceberg, this must of necessity remain a matter of opinion. Where there is certainly no problem is in linking them to the role of the sabbat as an anti-fertility rite, for their stories exemplify this in a particularly vivid fashion.⁷³

We must also suppose that a wide range of local folklore was caught up in the judicial machinery, through whose distorting lens it is preserved. The complex process of interaction suggested in this chapter provides a general model within which these beliefs can to some extent be reintegrated; it seems unlikely we shall ever be able to reconstruct them fully. What we do not need is any pseudo-empirical explanation, whether in the form of Murray's pagan covens or the early drug cults imagined by some others. It was often claimed in the course of trials that witches smeared themselves or the objects on which they flew with ointments, while there was quite widespread knowledge of various medical plants, including some hallucinogens. Dream experience is likely to have played a significant part in validating personal stories; it is even possible that some of it was drug-induced, perhaps by fungi with psychotropic qualities. When one looks in detail at the stories about ointments however, it becomes plain that the ingredients were usually magical in a quite different sense, for they only acquired their virtue by being placed in a symbolic system, through preparation at particular times and so forth. Powerful magical qualities were frequently accorded to human grease, simply because it carried such a charge of the forbidden. Wherever there is clear evidence about the alleged ointments they turn out to be harmless substances, identified or even deliberately manufactured to support confessions.⁷⁴ It is hardly credible in any case that drugs could have produced specific visions of goats sitting on thrones or of perverted rituals; at most they could be linked to general sensations like that of flying through the air. To give them more importance requires us to homogenize the confessions in disregard of the endless local variations. This would be to repeat the error of demonologists like the Jesuit Martin Del Rio, whose enormous compendium on magic and witchcraft argued that the similarity of the confessions showed the sabbat was no illusion.⁷⁵ As a notorious library-bound pedant, he was predictably confusing scholarly syncretism with reality, for the confessions were anything but uniform when taken one by one.

While confessions were normally extracted under thumbscrews, rack, strappado or other refinements of the torturer's art, a certain proportion of the accused made 'free' confessions, which in some cases did not reflect even the implicit threat of torture. This led such a sceptical observer as Thomas Hobbes to remark that 'though he could not rationally believe there were witches, yet he could not be fully satisfied to believe there were none, by reason that they would themselves confess it, if strictly examined.'⁷⁶ Such confessions no longer seem as puzzling as they once did; some recent cases of alleged satanic abuse have provided yet more evidence of the way individuals placed under extreme stress will manufacture preposterous stories, apparently coming, at least for a while, to believe that they must be true. They mingle themes from their cultural milieu with elements derived from dream and fantasy, to generate self-incriminating narratives which have their own psychological significance (discussed more fully in a later chapter). Those witches who made a clean breast of such imaginary turpitudes were engaging in a form of self-purification, just as they should have done when they confessed to the priest, if they were Catholics. In the face of a terrifying situation, which saw them excluded and vilified by their own community, the confession represented an appeal for forgiveness and reintegration. The judges frequently emphasized the importance of a complete account, including all separate acts of witchcraft, as the condition for being received back into the church and rendered eligible for salvation. In practice they were very careless about enforcing this, but such exhortations produced statements such as that made by Claudatte Jean, who

prayed for the honour of God that she should be put to death as soon as possible for the salvation of her soul, and wished that there might be no more witches in the world, but that she might be the last, so that the fruits of the earth might be more abundant than they had been, because so much and so long as there were witches it would be a great evil for the poor people. She then prayed she might have a good confessor to secure the salvation of her soul, and begged all those she had offended to pardon her.⁷⁷

As we have seen, however, others were better aware of the fictitious nature of their accounts, to the extent that they could explain how they had concocted them. We should also remember such terrible stories as that of mayor Junius of Bamberg, who wrote to his daughter explaining how the executioner – either very sly or unusually merciful – begged him to confess, rather than oblige him to inflict endless torment. These German witch-hunts were very different in some respects; since the accusations were spread by denunciations made under torture, the arbitrary nature of the process was far

clearer to the accused and they were rarely suspected until the last moment. Those with long-standing village reputations were more likely to make a 'sincere' confession, as part of a psychological *folie à deux* with their interrogator, although one may wonder how long they continued to believe in it. A fair number of the Lorraine witches withdrew their confessions when interrogated again without torture; the inevitable penalty was to be tortured again. Only two are known to have resisted this second test.

The detailed accounts of the pact and the sabbat evidently reflect the everyday cultural and social concerns of their tellers, however fanciful the imaginary packaging may appear. They also reaffirm the creativity and significance of human fantasy, through which the juxtaposition of real and imaginary worlds took place. For their neighbours and the judges it was the witches who bridged the gap between the worlds, with the sabbats as the ultimate anti-world, hovering uneasily between diabolical illusion and some kind of perverted reality. Stories that the Devil incited those present to do wrong, then distributed the necessary powders or other poisons, sought to link the secret nocturnal meetings back to the *maleficium* the witches operated in the ordinary sphere of village life. The weakness or absence of this element in most accounts of the sabbat suggests how imperfectly this element was ever integrated into popular thinking. One must add examples, such as that of England, which demonstrate how persecution and witch beliefs could function perfectly well without the sabbat at all. It is not a case of there being a 'classic' type of European witchcraft built around the pact and the sabbat, with a few deviant types in peripheral regions; the picture is much more varied and the sabbat was only the central basis for persecution in a small number of extreme cases. What this complex superstructure does do is to give us enormously helpful insights into the minds of those concerned. Only so long as it is placed firmly in the mind, and allowed its full range of local variants, will its great symbolic richness help rather than hinder our understanding.