INVITED TO THE DEVIL'S FEAST: BANQUETS FROM WITCHCRAFT SCENES IN EARLY MODERN ART

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Abstract: *This paper is partially based on a chapter from a PhD dissertation titled* Magie et magiciennes dans l'art de la première modernité. Sabbat, nigromancie et culture de la magie *(Magic and sorceresses in early modern art. Sabbath, nigromancy, and the culture(s) of magic). The successful completion and defense of this thesis took place in 2024, under the supervision of Professor Philippe Morel, Université Paris 1 Panthéon Sorbonne. This dissertation's primary objective was to examine a substantial yet undervalued corpus of early modern paintings, engravings, and drawings depicting magical practices, both high and low, in the Northern Realms and Italy from the late 15th to the 17th century. This paper will build on this foundation by exploring the connections between early modern demonological discourse and witchcraft iconography, specifically in relation to the theme of sabbath feasting. Banquets are a key motif in early modern magic scenes that still need to be highlighted and studied further. This project aims to delve deeper into the subject, focusing on the social aspect of the sabbath as depicted in artworks such as Jan Ziarnko's frontispiece for the* Tableau de l'inconstance des mauvais anges et démons *by Pierre de Lancre from 1613.*

Keywords: *witchcraft iconography; devil worship; banquets; Blocksberg; Michael Herr.*

Resumo: *Este artigo baseia-se, em parte, num capítulo da tese de doutoramento concluída e defendida com êxito em 2024, sob a orientação do Professor Philippe Morel, na Université Paris 1 Panthéon Sorbonne. Um dos objetivos da tese foi estudar um extenso e pouco valorizado* corpus *de pinturas, gravuras e desenhos da Idade Moderna, que giram em torno da representação da magia, produzidos nos Reinos do Norte e na Itália entre o final do século XV e o século XVII. Parte-se dessa premissa para explorar as relações entre o discurso demonológico do início da Idade Moderna e a iconografia da feitiçaria, focando-se especificamente no tema do banquete do sabá. Os banquetes são um motivo central nas cenas de magia desse período que ainda necessita de maior destaque e estudo. Este projeto tem como objetivo aprofundar o assunto, concentrando-se na dimensão social do Sabá conforme é retratado em obras de arte, como o frontispício de Jan Ziarnko para o* Tableau de l'inconstance des mauvais anges et démons *(1613), de Pierre de Lancre.*

Palavras-chave: *iconografia de bruxaria; adoração ao demónio; banquetes; Blocksberg; Michael Herr.*

Food, wine, and banquets are topics that can easily be found throughout the medieval and early modern conceptualizations of magic. Marvelous, enchanted banquets are also a recurring motif in accounts of ceremonial magic. According to these accounts, mages would summon feasts for their guests, thanks to demonic servants. They capture the performative, festive, and almost worldly nature of these rituals. In this context,

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we are referring to authentic and documented practices of magic, as examined by scholars such as Richard Kieckhefer and Jean-Patrice Boudet (Kieckhefer 1997, pp. 208-212; Boudet 2006, pp. 137-138). For instance, the sixth *experimentum* of the *Codex Latinus Monacensis 849*, a 15th century book of magic preserved in the Bayerische Staatsbibliothek of Munich, details the process of conjuring a magical feast:

> *When you want them* [the spirits] *to come to you, in secret or openly, or in whatever place, gaze at the above-written circles and figures in the book, and in a quiet voice read the names found in them. When you have read them once while thus gazing, read this conjuration once: «Oymelor, Demefin, Lamair, Masair, Simofor, Rodobail, Tentetos, Lotobor, Memoir, Tamafin, Zeugaber, Tatomofon, Faubair, Belutabel, Rimasor and Sirama, I ask, conjure and adjure you by the true majesty of God to make your subordinates come here and bring dishes, first of all so-and-so and so-and-so, and make a grand banquet, with games, singing, music-making and dancing, and in general all those things that can gladden the hearts of those standing about* [cf. Ps. 103:15 Vulg.]». *When you have read this* [conjuration] *once, splendid pages will come and prepare beautiful tables. When these are set up, you will hear trumpets, harps and an untold multitude of songs. When you call out loudly, «Bring water», it will be brought forth at once. Likewise, «Bring forth the meal», and at once it will be brought. And there will be butlers and stewards serving excellently, and handsome pages, and players providing countless entertainments. And you can have a thousand types of dish brought, if it pleases you, and those who eat them will find them uncommonly delicious. You must know that no matter how much they eat, they will be all the more hungry, because they will seem like dishes but they will not exist, so that if a famished person were to gorge himself, believing them to be real, he would no doubt die just as if he ate nothing* (Kieckhefer 1997, pp. 208-212).

An intriguing connection between these practices and the fascination for magical, sometimes demonic and hellish feasts, can also be found in Giorgio Vasari's biography of Giovan Francesco Rustici. Established in 1512 in Florence, La Compagnia della Cazzuola — or the Brotherhood of the Trowel — was famous for its extravagant and themed banquets. One such banquet was led by Matteo da Panzano and took inspiration from an infernal feast organized by the god Pluto in honor of his new bride Proserpina (Morel 2008, pp. 284-304). The guests were invited to enter a room adorned with depictions of the damned. A giant serpent was mounted on the wall, serving as a gateway to the room. Within, a devil oversaw the banquet:

> *The viands of that infernal supper were all animals vile and most hideous in appearance; but nevertheless within, under the loathly covering and the shape of the pastry, were most delicate meats of many kinds. The skin, I say, on the outer side, made it appear as if they were serpents, grass-snakes, lizards large and small, tarantulas, toads, frogs, scorpions, bats, and other suchlike animals; but within all were composed of the choicest viands. And these were placed on the tables before every man with a shovel, under the direction of the Devil, who was in the middle, while a companion poured out exquisite wines from a horn of glass, ugly and monstrous in shape, into glazed crucibles, which served as drinking-glasses. These first viands finished, which formed a sort of relish, dead men's bones were set all the way down the table in place of fruits and sweetmeats, as if the supper, which was scarcely begun, were finished; which reliquary fruits were of sugar* (Vasari 1981-1989 [1550], book 8, p. 396; Merieux 2010, pp. 11-12).

This story is sprinkled with the recurring use of macabre and witty devices that play with the guests' senses. The atmosphere oscillates between revulsion and terror, eventually giving way to a sophisticated appreciation of each dish. Such morbid playfulness can be found throughout the Renaissance, such as the Orti Oricellari, a garden acquired by Bianca Capello, the wife of Francesco I de' Medici, where Florence's intellectual elite frequently gathered. During one of these soirees, a *negromante* (a mage) would greet guests under the cover of the night and would perform for them, transforming the gardens into a liminal realm, a place between pleasure and terror, paradise and hell (Battisti 1962, pp. 133-134; Bartoli and Contorni 1991, pp. 21-24; Brunon 2001, pp. 287-288)[1].

Parallel to the joyous notion of a magical banquet, one can find an increasingly varied and enriched conceptualization of the sabbath throughout the early modern period, as reflected in both texts and visual art. The sabbath is a fiction born from the distortion of various magical practices and beliefs. It is essential to distinguish it from the cultural reality of magic that we have just described. During the 14th and 15th centuries, there was a drastic shift in the perception of magic. Practitioners of both popular and scholarly magic came under suspicion of heresy and of allying themselves with demons to acquire knowledge and power. This development led to the emergence of a theoretical discourse aimed at demonstrating the existence of a dangerous community of devil worshippers. According to theoreticians such as Jean Nider who wrote the *Formicarius* in 1438, followers of the devil would assemble (typically at night and in a clandestine location) to cast spells and hatch sinister plots

[1] The recounts of this event can be found in *l'Avvenimento ridicoloso in materia di spiriti succeduto nel giardino della Signora Bianca Cappello*, from a series of short stories by a Venetian imitator of Boccaccio named Celio Malespini.

(Klaniczay 2007 [2003], pp. 10-13). They would summon storms to decimate crops and livestock, brew potions to bewitch and kill, and sign pacts with demons while blaspheming Christianity. They would also dance, feast, and enjoy all kinds of worldly pleasures at these gatherings. Each gathering was said to involve various forms of devil worship. The sabbath was portrayed as a manifestation of hell on earth, and as an inversion of Christian society and of the heavenly court. Treatises on demonology also describe banquets where food and drink are abundant, along with other carnal pleasures. In a Western world beset by armed and religious conflicts, as well as a devastating climate, the allure of the sabbath seems almost irresistible (Kieckhefer 1976, p. 6; Ginzburg 1989, p. 7; Stephens 2002, pp. 9, 197-206).

The sabbath celebration provides an ideal field for studying the staging of the table during this period, thanks to the many feasts and banquets depicted in early modern witchcraft imagery. Numerous scenes produced between the end of the 15th century and the first half of the 17th century show witches and demons sharing meals, drinking, and even embracing at a table. The way the table is depicted captures how the sabbath, as theorized by demonologists, parodies and inverts Christian society with its rules and sacraments. The artworks that will be analyzed in this essay adhere to this theoretical framework. One central inquiry that we will attempt to resolve is how, in visual art from the witch trials period, the banquet functions as a crystallizing motif through which a demonic reality is evoked. We will demonstrate how feasts are portrayed in scenes of witchcraft as sinful and overindulgent events that facilitate the worship of the Devil, serving as a prelude to carnal pleasures. How they oscillate between alluring and revolting images of the sabbath, warning against the dangers of selling one's soul to the Devil. Finally, how they allow for a physical, visual representation of an event that is purely fictional and experienced only through secondary accounts, thereby contributing to its conceptualization during the witch trials period.

SOCIAL GATHERINGS AND SUSPICIOUS DISHES

At its core, the myth of the sabbath is centered around excess and decadence. The *Malleus Maleficarum* (The Hammer of Witches), first published in 1486, links bacchanals, carnivals and witch gatherings to the theme of debauchery and the absence of rules. Its authors claim that witches use local Christian celebrations such as fairs and festivals to recruit new members. The festive atmosphere of these celebrations would foster links between different members of the sabbath, both newcomers and experienced practitioners. This would facilitate the transmission of sinister knowledge.

> *Just as bad Christians already imitate these bacchanals — though they have transferred their debaucheries to carnival time, when they parade with masks, jokes, and other «superstitions» — so too now do witches, through these inventions of the devil, practicing their malefica for their own gain around the New Year (during worship services), around Saint Andrew's Day, and around Christ's Nativity* (Institoris and Sprenger 2017 [1486], pp. 280-281).

The social aspect of the sabbath mentioned in this literature is already visible in the earliest scenes of witchcraft. In the 1489 Johann Zainer's edition of the *De lamiis et pythonicis mulieribus* (On witches and female oracles) written by Ulrich Molitor appears an illustration depicting several witches gathered around a table, conversing and eating (Fig. 1). However, if one were to ignore the demonological context, this woodcut could easily be misinterpreted as a typical meal shared by three women, all of varying ages, gathered around a meat-based dish (Molitor 1495, fl. 18r). The one on the left bears features of an old woman, the youngest is seated in the middle, while the woman to the right is explicitly middle-aged. Without access to the original text, one would hardly identify this scene as a lesson of witchcraft, set against the backdrop of a leafy tree. One must remember that the *De lamiis* was commissioned by Archduke Sigmund of Austria following several investigations into supposed witchcraft-related incidents on his land. It is as a response to the discussion in the *Malleus Maleficarum*, which insists that witches pose a threat to society, detailing the powers that devils grant them and advocating for their prosecution. On the contrary, Ulrich Molitor maintains throughout his text that witchcraft practices are based on illusions, putting into perspective the highly misogynistic discourse in the *Malleus Maleficarum*. Jane Davidson has argued that the absence in this woodcut of any reference to the usual unappealing diet associated with witches can be interpreted as a reflection of the author's critical views on devil worship: «While it was generally agreed that sabbat meals were comprised of rotten bones, corpses of unbaptised babies, poisonous herbs and the like, these were not shown here. This may be [due] to the fact that Ulrich taught that witches did not attend sabbats in actuality. These celebrations were merely illusions of the Devil» (Davidson 1987, p. 16; Kwan 2012, pp. 493-527; Warfield 2013, pp. 207-208). Indeed this scene lacks any reference to magical practices. It rather resembles a gathering rooted in popular religious cults and feminine social practices, including the revival of pagan deities such as Ceres, Diana, and Venus (Zika 2003, pp. 257-258)[2].

[2] On the resurgence of religious practices regarding pagan deities, see Wind 1992 [1968], pp. 15-18, 179.



Fig. 1
Witches around a table in Ulrich Molitor, ca. 1489. *De lamiis et pythonicis mulieribus*, ed. Johann Zainer, woodcut, Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, p. 60
© Bayerische Staatsbibliothek München, Res/4 H.g.hum. 16 n, p. 60, urn:nbn:de:bvb:12-bsb00033852-2

However, as Charles Zika points out in his work *Exorcising our demons*, this portrayal of a gathering of women in the *De lamiis* transforms into a surreal setting for all manners of excess in subsequent illustrations. In a woodcut printed by Jakob Cammerlander in 1545 within a German translation of the *De lamiis* (Fig. 2), we can observe the evolution of the sabbath into a fictitious realm inhabited by witches and demons, gathered around a feast. Once again, at first glance this image appears to be nothing more than an ordinary gathering of men and women around a table laden with food. However, upon closer inspection, one will notice that beneath the table the legs of the male guests end with raptor claws and webbed feet. By concealing the demonic nature of these men, the etcher alludes to numerous tales of demons who disguise themselves to seduce their victims at popular festivals and turn them into witches. On September 20, 1587, a midwife named Walpurga Haussmännin was executed in Dillingen for allegedly causing the deaths of forty-one children, and two pregnant women while they were giving birth. After she became a widow, Walpurga began a romantic relationship with an employee named Hans Schlumperger. However, during a night of passion, she discovered that her lover was not human, but a demon in disguise. She noticed that one of his feet was hooved and one of his hands was

«made of wood». According to her confession, Hans then became Walpurga's demonic partner and helped her commit numerous heinous acts. The woodcut in the *De lamiis* follows a similar narrative to this account, but it also subtly reveals the true nature of this celebration by incorporating zoomorphic limbs. Thanks to the intimate gestures of the couples — one devil is touching his lover's chest for instance — it also explicitly refers to the sexual union between women and demons. Despite the text's attempt to adopt a more skeptical stance on the alliance between men and demons, Charles Zika highlights how its illustrations often express an exact opposite view of witches, contradicting Ulrich Molitor's efforts (Monter, ed., 1969, pp. 75-81; Stephens 2002, pp. 13-17; Warfield 2013, pp. 124, 208).



Fig. 2
Witches and demons around a table in Ulrich Molitor, 1545. *Hexen Meysterey*, ed. Jakob Cammerlander, woodcut, Strasbourg, Herzog August Bibliothek Wolfenbüttel
© Herzog August Bibliothek Wolfenbüttel: 190.14 Quod. (5)

Upon examining the culinary offerings depicted in the *De lamiis* illustrations, one is struck by the uncannily humanlike appearance of the meat dishes. This introduces the themes of magical infanticide and anthropophagy. However, as Abaigéal Warfield previously noted, the noticeable absence of bread on the tables in most sabbath banquet scenes is particularly striking. On this subject, Reinhard Lutz, a preacher from Sélestat in Alsace, reported in a pamphlet from 1571 the confessions of four witches who described their experience of the sabbath. The last of them, named Barbel, described the main activities of the sabbath, stating that they «dance, eat, drink, and live well without bread». Since bread commonly symbolizes the sacraments and the body of Christ, it should be excluded from the sabbath table[3].

Subsequently, and throughout the early modern period, exchanges between witches and demons become one of the most prominent elements in depictions of witchcraft banquets, especially in etchings illustrating treatises from the first half of

[3] «Haben sie getanzt/gessen vnnd getruncken/vnd ohn Brot/wol gelebt», Reinhard Lutz, Warhafftige Zeittung/Von Gottlosen hexen/Auch ketzerischen vnd Teuffels Weibern/die zu Schlettstadt/deß h. Römischen Reichstadt in Elsaβ/ auf den XXII. Herbstmonat deß, 1570. Jahrs/von wegen ihrer schändtlichen Teuffelsverpflichtung/rc. sindt verbrennt worden (S.l., 1571)». The pamphlet in question is later published in 1586 in Frankfurt as part of the *Theatrum de Veneficis* (Warfield 2013, p. 219).



Fig. 3
Jan Ziarnko, *The Witches' Sabbath*, frontispiece for Pierre de Lancre, 1613. *Tableau de l'inconstance*, etching, Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France
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the seventeenth century. In these artworks, witches are often seated in pairs. They are assigned a *paramour*, which is a demon somewhere between a sexual partner and a familiar with whom they are supposedly consummating their pact with the devil, as described in Walpurga's confession[4]. This aspect is featured in the frontispiece of Pierre de Lancre's *Tableau de l'inconstance des mauvais anges et démons*, first published in 1612 and designed by Jan Ziarnko (Fig. 3).

Here, witches and demons circle a table covered in human remains, with numerous details from an engraving by Jacques de Gheyn II scattered throughout the artwork. While De Gheyn offers a clearly skeptical and satirical perspective on witchcraft superstitions throughout his work, Jan Ziarnko uses the same motifs to promote and illustrate them (Swan 2005, pp. 123-132). One detail to keep in mind is that each group in Pierre de Lancre's frontispiece is accompanied by a short caption. These highlight the purpose of the image as an educational tool teaching about the dangers of devil worship. The table is described as follow:

[4] On similar interactions between women and the devil, see Stephens 2002, p. 16. On comparison points between the angelic and the demonic court, see Baschet 1996, pp. 190-194.

Here are the guests of the assembly, each with a demon beside her: And at this feast, no other meat is served than carrion, the flesh of hanged men, the hearts of unbaptized children, and other unclean animals, all of which are forbidden in Christian commerce and usage, all of it tasteless and without salt[5].

The text emphasizes the cannibalistic nature of the meal consumed by the guests, as well as its lack of any taste. Such a meal is not meant to be enjoyable in any way, but rather underscores the relationship between its female participants and the demons next to them. A later caption also emphasizes the nature of the meat, being either unnourishing, extremely unappetizing, or even illusory[6]. The demons then lead the witches sitting beside them to dance beneath a «cursed tree». The table itself is plain and unadorned, resembling a simple square surface flanked by benches and stones. The only visible tableware is two serving plates, one of which holds a human leg. No individual dishes or cutlery are in sight, as witches and demons hold femurs and other meaty parts in their hands. Clearly, table etiquette is not a concern at the sabbat.

A comparable table arrangement can be seen in one of the woodcuts from the *Compendium Maleficarum*, a treatise by Francesco Maria Guazzo, first published in 1608 (Fig. 4).



Fig. 4
Witches and demons at a banquet in Francesco Maria Guazzo, 1626. *Compendium maleficarum*, woodcut, Milan, 2nd ed., Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, p. 53
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[5] «Voilà les Convives de l'assemblee, ayant chacune un Demon pres d'elle: Et en ce festin, ne se sert autre viande, que charoigne, chair de pendus, cœurs d'enfans non baptisez, & autres animaux immondes, du tout hors du commerce et usage des Chretiens, le tout incipide & sans sel». Pierre de Lancre, 1613. *Tableau de l'inconstance des mauvais anges et démons*. Paris: Nicolas Buon, frontispiece, D.

[6] «ou fugitives, ou illusoires, ou tres pernicieuses & abominables». Pierre de Lancre, 1613. *Tableau de l'inconstance des mauvais anges et démons*. Paris: Nicolas Buon, frontispiece, F.

Divided over three tables, each couple is served by demonic attendants, using an iconography that is reminiscent of medieval and early modern depictions of the heavenly court and of celestial feasts (Houdard 1992, pp. 21-22). According to Guazzo, sabbath banquets were inherently unappetizing and unenjoyable (Cardano 1557, book 25, chap. 80; Wier and Erastus 1579, pp. 203-204; Bonomo 1985, pp. 364-377)[7]. The dishes served were illusions that couldn't satisfy the guests' hunger, or even consisted of a pile of revolting victuals, «all infected, in appearance or odor, so much so that they could easily nauseate even the hungriest stomach». The wine served by demons is described as equally revolting, being «black as old, stale blood, served to revelers in a repulsive sort of drinking horn». Here we find a crystallization of the concept of a deceitful sabbath, that mocks witches with illusory gifts. On the contrary, the engraver of the *Compendium Maleficarum* chooses to emphasize the social aspect of the sabbath, with each guest engaging in conversation with their neighbor. Despite this, not one of the attendees directly lay their hands on one of the plates. Instead, most of them are preoccupied with caressing their neighbor and readying themselves for more carnal pleasures (Guazzo 2012 [1608], Book I, chap. XII, p. 37).

Drinking on the Blocksberg

Upon further inspection of our collection of witchcraft scenes, alcohol consumption appears to be significantly more prevalent at the sabbath. In this regard, the engraving by Matthäus Merian the Elder, based on a design by Michael Herr, stands as a towering example of a gathering of witches engaged in overindulgent feasting (Fig. 5).

Michael Herr was a German painter and draughtsman who after a trip to Italy settled in Nuremberg around 1620. He is particularly well known for making numerous preparatory drawings for engravings that illustrated Protestant religious tracts, including the *Sacra emblemata,* published in Nuremberg in 1624. In 1626, this ambitious design centered around the sabbath was made after one of his drawings. It was published along with a German caption and a Latin text written by the Protestant theologian Johann Ludwig Gottfried (Trendelenburg 1925; Riether 1991, pp. 38-40; Gatenbröcker 1996, pp. 463-465; Breazeale 2010, pp. 134-135; De Nile 2023, pp.144-145)[8]. The author describes the etching as a «terrifying black

[7] This understanding of the sabbath is far from being universally accepted during the period of the witch trials. We find throughout the Renaissance multiple sources developing a hallucinatory and fictitious interpretation of the sabbath, where witches are merely women victims of illusions caused by the consumption of hallucinogenic substances or humoral dysregulation. This point of view is discussed in Gerolamo Cardano's *De rerum varietate* and Jean Wier's *Pseudmonarchia Daemonum*, two important sources for the understanding of witchcraft skepticism during the sixteenth century.

[8] We can assume that the text in German was also written by Gottfried although his initials do not appear there. The etching was later added in 1638 to the Frankfurt edition of the *Die Kunstreiche Tafel de Ceves Thebanus*, before becoming a frontispiece for the *Blockes-Berges Verrichtung* of Johannes Praetorius.



Fig. 5
Matthaeus Merian, after Michael Herr, 1626.
Sabbath on the Blocksberg,
etching,
19.7 x 31.5 cm,
Nuremberg,
G. Nationalmuseum,
inv. no. HB802
© Germanisches Nationalmuseum

theater» where demons gather at nightfall. He also talks about a frightening world, trying to turn myth and fiction into reality. Like the previous woodcut in the *De lamiis*, this artwork showcases a use of pictures to perpetuate the conceptualization of witchcraft and spread demonological beliefs[9]. The etching by Jan Ziarnko is immediately striking for the presence of recurring elements, such as the flying witches above the central cauldron. Here, hundreds of witches and devils dance around a hill to the sound of violins and bagpipes. The hill where this gathering is held is identified as Mount Brocken or the Blocksberg, a notorious peak in the Harz Mountain range and a famous meeting place for witches. Such dances echo the ritualistic and celebratory dances performed on mountainous hills in ancient popular practices, which were appropriated by theoreticians of the sabbath during the early modern period. This can also be compared to the dance of the servants of Dionysos in Delphi who gathered every two years in November to dance on Mount Parnassus in honor of their god (Scholz-Williams 2006; Roper 2006, pp. 135-139; Nicklas 2020, pp. 211-223)[10].

[9] «Ist doch kein Fabel noch Gedicht/Sondern ein warhafftig Geschicht». Johann Ludwig Gottfried, 1626, text extracted from the artwork. The author speaks of what happens at the sabbath as observable and factual truth, describing witches flying through the air on pitchforks or on the back of goats: «Ettlich auff Gabeln in der Lufft/Fahrn über hohe Berg vnd klufft/Andre werden vom Bock verzuckt/An diesen schnöden Ort verruckt».

[10] In 1668, the Saxon polygraph Johann Praetorius published a treatise dedicated to the Blocksberg and titled *Blockes-Berges Verrichtung*, with an illustration explicitly inspired by Michael Herr's design.



Fig. 6
Matthaeus Merian, after Michael Herr, *Sabbath on the Blocksberg*, detail
© Germanisches Nationalmuseum

On the left corner of the foreground in Michael Herrs's design (Fig. 6), several witches lie on the ground drinking to their hearts' content, while various devils take advantage of them.

On the right side, a school of witches is devoted to the study of grimoires and the preparation of various spells. Recurring details include a witch holding a glass flask with a trapped spirit, while another, naked with a pearl necklace, is seen mixing ingredients in a jar with a book of magic in front of her. These details are inspired by numerous witchcraft scenes made by Pieter Bruegel the Elder and Hans Baldung Grien, which spread throughout the northern realms starting from the early 16th century. Their iconography was further perpetuated throughout the 17th century thanks to artists such as Jacques de Gheyn II (Brinkmann and Berthold 2007, pp. 130-139; Holger, ed., 2019, p. 330; Owens 2020, pp.1-6; De Nile 2023, pp. 120-126). Each side of Michael Herr's design, therefore, presents a different, contrasting vision of the sabbath. The left side of the engraving shows that heresy is enacted through physical union with devils and facilitated by feasts and alcohol, while the right side highlights the sharing of forbidden heretical knowledge as a less carnal, more scholarly form of heresy, and initiation into the sabbath.

This opposition between carnal heresy and scholarly erudition is further explored in the background of the image. On the right, a sorcerer is surrounded by demons while standing in a magic circle, a geometrical figure often associated with learned erudite magic (Kieckhefer 2014, pp. 159-162). On the left, a multitude of dancers form a monumental chain around the hill. Within this chain, demons and witches are already paired up, turning the dance into a prelude for the upcoming debauchery, visually represented in the foreground of the engraving. They embrace, jump into the air and spin about in what seems like utter chaos, barely restrained by the structure of the chain. In the foreground, several women are lying on the grass. One has her face buried in a tankard, while another is being approached by a demon that wraps his legs around her waist and licks her cheek, making a very explicit reference to their carnal union (Fig. 6). However, throughout this scene of debauchery, only

the witches seem to be enjoying themselves and feasting. During the early modern period, both texts and artwork depict a discourse that asserts that devils incite vices and contribute to their enactment. However, they rarely partake in them themselves, instead feeding on the impending despair and damnation of the witches (Institoris and Sprenger 2017 [1486], p. 131; Chomarat 1988, pp. 131-132).

Previously depicted banquets on the sabbath often included numerous elements that suggested the sinister nature of the guests and the meals they shared. However, they generally adhered to a certain structure, with the table acting as a central point of reference, assigning each figure to a specific seat in the sabbath world. On the contrary, Michael Herr removes the table altogether, thereby eliminating any notion of social order. His association between dance, wine, and sexual pleasure echoes Rubens's *Kermesses* (Fig. 7), which offers an especially riotous, drunken, and sexually charged interpretation of popular, rural celebrations.



Fig. 7. Pierre Paul Rubens, ca. 1635-1638. *La Kermesse, ou la fête de village*, oil on wood, 149 x 261 cm, Paris, musée du Louvre, inv. no. 1797
© GrandPalaisRmn (musée du Louvre)/Franck Raux

The dancers' hands are frequently placed on their partner's genitals or buttocks, while in the foreground couples embrace on the dirt itself as in Michael Herr's sabbath. Adriaen Brouwer, whose etchings are found in the personal collection of Rubens and Jacques de Gheyn III, features in one of his village feasts scenes a kiss and the embrace of a drunken woman that closely resembles the behavior of our demon on the foreground (Laneyrie-Dagen 2017, pp. 285-291; De Nile 2023, p. 145; Morel and



Fig. 8
Frontispiece from Johannes Praetorius, 1668. *Blockes-Berges Verrichtung, Oder Ausführlicher Geographischer Bericht, von den* [!] *hohen preislich alt- und berühmtes-Berge*, ed. Arnst Scheibe, Leipzig
Copy from Dresden, Die Sächsische Landesbibliothek

Menegaldo 2024, pp. 220-228)[11]. However, while Rubens's festive scenes may offer a relatively positive and non-moralistic perspective on such dances, Michael Herr's witch reminds us more of a demonological counterpart of the drunken women as painted by Jan Havicksz Steen (Slive 2014 [1995], p. 189)[12]. Witchcraft scenes undoubtedly take after depictions of village fairs and wedding scenes that were widely available on the German art market from the late 16th to the first half of the 17th century. And as displayed in Rubens's *Kermesses*, one key element in such scenes is music. Taking after Michael Herr's design, the frontispiece for Johannes Praetorius's treatise *Blockes--Berges Verrichtung* also depicts a chain of dancers wrapped around the hill, with a bagpipe player perched on a barrel at the top (Fig. 8).

At the heart of the chain, one finds the customary portrayal of the *osculum infame*, a kiss on the anus of a monstrous goat, symbolizing a pact with the Devil and

[11] Tania De Nile also provided an early example of a previous witchcraft scene with a similar demonic couple.
[12] The *Drunken couple* by Jan Havicksz Steen, from the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, is a good example of this iconography (inv. no. SK-C-232). On the wall is painted a hanged pamphlet depicting an owl next to a candle, which is a common symbol for idiocy. The drunkenness of the couple here is associated with the blind idiocy of the owl, unable to see correctly during the day. This association is also found in English and Netherlandish proverbs describing a drunk as such: «Zoo beschonken alse en uil» (To be drunk like an owl).



Fig. 9
Anonymous, after Pieter van der Borcht, 1600. *The Kermess of Saint Sebastian*, acquaforte, 22.3 x 30.3 cm, Paris, Galerie Sarah Sauvin
© Galerie Sarah Sauvin

an act of apostasy. Published in 1668, this treatise on geography describes a journey to the Harz mountains, including a stop at the ruins of Reinstein castle and Mount Brocken, during the summer of 1653. Michael Herr's artwork also features a bagpipe player seated on a barrel at the top of the composition. This image may have been inspired by the *Kermesse of Saint Sebastian* after Pieter van der Borcht, published by Jan Baptist Vrients (Fig. 9).

A German pamphlet from 1594 highlights the crucial role of music and dancing in witchcraft iconography, particularly during processions and ritualistic celebrations of the Devil. It mentions a musician who supposedly attended a gathering of witches, receiving three coins from each witch as payment for his performance (Vézilier--Dussart and Boucquey 2019, pp. 150-151; *Erschreckliche Erzelung/Unnd bekentnis der zeuberer vnd zeuberin* 1594; Warfield 2013, p. 232).

Furthermore, Michael Herr's artwork depicts the drunkenness of the witch as a reflection of her dissolute behavior and her vulnerability to vice and excess. In doing so, it also portrays a physical disturbance of her body and of the humors that govern it. It was believed that witches were particularly prone to an overabundance of black bile, which could lead to melancholy, whether caused by the Devil or used as a means for him to tempt and torment people. The *Malleus Maleficarum* asserts that «in modern times, the wickedness (of witchcraft) was found more often among women than among men». It goes on to describe the vices that women allegedly succumb to the most: infidelity, ambition, and lust. The authors argue that these vices are particularly prevalent among witches, who are portrayed as women betraying their husbands at the sabbath and engaging in sexual acts with both men and demons to fulfil their desires (Institoris and Sprenger 2017 [1486], p. 166; Herzig 2016,

pp. 20-22). The witches' actions in this engraving reflect the alleged weaknesses of a woman's physiology, believed to be more susceptible to sin and demonic allurement than that of a man. This perspective was prevalent in the profoundly misogynistic demonological texts of this era. The drunk witch on the foreground embodies the concept of excessive indulgence, representing a disruption in the humors that could be attributed to both wine and the devil. We find a similar perspective in the works of Hans Baldung Grien, who utilized the theorization of the witch's sexual desires to create numerous highly erotic etchings (Brinkmann and Berthold 2007, pp. 19-21, 36). These artworks were intended for the refined and successful circle of Strasbourg's social elite, a group that Grien counted as part of. This clientele was well versed in the medical and theological concepts surrounding female desire, sexual pleasure, and the potential risks associated with its fulfilment. Here, the body of the witch is corrupted by toxic, menstrual, and humoral vapors emanating from its various orifices. It is both an object of attraction and repulsion (Owens 2020, pp. 34-41). In Michael Herr's witchcraft scene, the carcass of a rooster, an animal known for its lustfulness and fertility, as indicated in Pietro Valeriano *Hieroglyphics*, is near the tankard. This suggests to the viewer that the union between demons and women cannot bear fruit. Finally, above the couple, a witch is knocked from her broom, mid-air, with her empty tankard about to crash to the ground along with her. This highlights the reason for the accident and the inevitable fate of witches[13].

Michael Herr's design for the banquet is striking: the table is no longer the focal point. Instead, the only table we find is devoid of dishes and used for spellcasting. The acts of feasting and drinking are now dispersed throughout the entire scene, further breaking down any sense of decorum, order and hierarchy. Rather than a table, the focus of this scene is a cauldron, an essential component of sabbath imagery. Its smoke divides the composition into two distinct parts. One area is devoted to a disorderly anti-banquet on the left, where the only guideline is to heed the music and follow the demonic leader at the head of the chain. In contrast, the right section focuses on the study of sorcery, incorporating elements from learned magic practices, as evidenced by the recurring use of grimoires and the presence of a conjuring circle in the background.

Ultimately, early modern theoreticians used the sabbath myth to justify and support complex theological discussions on the relationship between humans, demons, and the divine. Nothing reinforces a religious belief better than using those who oppose it as a warning of the risks they pose to society. Consequently, sabbath scenes of feasts and banquets, when directly connected to theological discussions on the matter, often function

[13] On the rooster's symbolism, see VALERIANO, Giovan Pietro, 1615. *Les hiéroglyphiques de Jan Pierre Valerian, vulgairement nommé Pierius.* Trad. J. Montlyard. Lyon: P. Frellon, chap. XVII, p. 299. The theoretician Henry Boguet also describes dances as an introduction into the sexually charged section of the sabbath: «les danses finies, […] viennent à s'accoupler: le fils n'espargne par la mère, ny le frere la sœur, ny le père la fille». Boguet 1603 [1602], pp. 50-51.

as artistic and visual interpretations of sermons that denounce and ostracize popular celebrations. The image functions as tangible evidence, similar to other engravings created during the 16th and 17th centuries in Germany. Known as *Zeitungen* in German, these prints were analogous to modern-day newspapers and were disseminated broadly to a widely diverse audience, not exclusively to the intellectual elite. The systematic reuse of generic details in these artworks, while reaffirming the importance of interconnections between the most famous illustrations of the sabbath, strengthens the development of a demonological discourse. Here, text and images work in tandem as a reflection of a world that is presented as real, but otherwise unobservable and using common, easily identifiable *topoi* for sin and excess. Walter Stephens emphasized in his book *Demon Lovers* that «pictorial arts were as important as philosophical speculation for reinforcing the sense of demonic reality […] They conditioned the spectator, including the illiterate one, to imagine — that is to visualize — corporeal interaction with demons as real» (Stephens 2002, pp. 106-108)[14]. However, it is crucial to also acknowledge the artistic merit of this *corpus*, as in Michael Herr's design. To create these nightmarish landscapes, artists draw inspiration from numerous sources, manipulating contrasts, shadows, and a form of visual overload with hundreds of characters contributing to the fiction of the sabbath. These intricately detailed prints almost serve as a form of *ekphrasis* of the sabbath, reenacting a fictitious event while complementing and expanding upon the theoretical discussion of its potential dangers. Our attention is directed from one element to another, leading us to the Devil's table, adorned with highly suspicious dishes that would make anyone hesitant to join him for a meal.

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