11-2014

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Recommended Citation

Sosolik, Emily (2014) "Flights of Fancy: The Debate over Transportations to the Witches' Sabbath in Early Modern Europe," *Armstrong Undergraduate Journal of History*: Vol. 4 : Iss. 2 , Article 1.

DOI: 10.20429/aujh.2014.040201

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.georgiasouthern.edu/aujh/vol4/iss2/1>

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Flights of Fancy:

The Debate over Transportations to the Witches' Sabbath in Early Modern Europe

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In 1595, French magistrate Nicolas Rémy commented on a particularly perplexing element of witchcraft in his *Demonolatriy: An Account of the Historical Practice of Witchcraft*: “There is much controversy and dissension among those who treat of this aspect of witchcraft, as to whether witches do in fact fly to and bodily present themselves at the notorious evil assemblies of Demons, or whether they are only possessed by some fantastic delusion, and, as happens when the empty mind is filled with dreams at night, merely imagine that they are so present.”¹ Rémy’s observation was correct. As revealed in the writings of multiple authors in early modern Europe, the question of how accused witches were transported to the sabbat spawned a heated debate that involved learned writers, theologians, jurists, philosophers, and academics. In the accused witches’ confessions of early modern Europe, many modes of transportation to the sabbat were reported, and thus each side of the debate was provided with an ample number of confessions to support their position. Yet, even though early modern authors acknowledged the reality of the confessions, they still denied certain modes of transportation and disputed the particulars of how transportations were performed. A careful examination of the works of influential authors in early modern Europe, however, reveals that at its root, the debate over how accused witches were

¹ Nicolas Rémy, *Demonolatriy: An Account of the Historical Practice of Witchcraft*, ed. Montague Summers (New York: Dover, 2008), 47.

transported to the sabbat was not an argument over which mode of transportation was more plausible or common in witches' confessions, but instead was a theological argument fueled by the Bible over which powers belonged to the devil and which belonged to God.

The idea of the witches' sabbat was popular in early modern Europe. According to early modern scholar Darren Oldridge, numerous educated Europeans accepted the reality of secret devil worship, and the witches' sabbat was an extension of this reality because it was believed that witches held secret, nightly gatherings in remote places to worship the devil.² The idea of the witches' sabbat was "largely self-perpetuating, as authors cited the work of previous experts and supplemented it with new confessions that conformed to the myth."³ It is important to note that the tradition of the witches' sabbat was not universally accepted in early modern Europe; skepticism did exist and "even some demonologists paid little attention to this aspect of the crime [of devil worship]."⁴ Nonetheless, the tradition of the witches' sabbat appeared in a multitude of works and in the confessions of accused witches from England, France, Germany, Italy, and even Spain.

One work in which the tradition of the witches' sabbat appeared was the 1600 publication *Investigations Into Magic* by the Jesuit theologian Martin Del Rio. In the book, Del Rio provides a description of what was believed to occur at a typical witches' sabbat. Del Rio begins by saying that on most occasions, "once a foul, disgusting fire had been lit, an evil spirit sits on a throne as president of the assembly," and "[h]is appearance is terrifying, almost always that of a male goat or a dog." Next, the witches "come forward to worship him in different ways," and they "offer candles made of pitch or a child's umbilical cord, and kiss him on the anal orifice as a

² Darren Oldridge, *Strange Histories: The Trial of the Pig, the Walking Dead, and Other Matters of Fact from the Medieval and Renaissance Worlds* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 105, 107.

³ Darren Oldridge, *The Devil: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 40.

⁴ Oldridge, *Strange Histories*, 107.

sign of homage.” The witches then “imitate the sacrifice of the Mass (the greatest of all their crimes), as well as purifying with water and similar Catholic ceremonies,” and once they have committed “these and similar atrocious and execrable abominations, they sit down at table and start to enjoy food supplied by the evil spirit or brought by themselves.” After this, the witches partake in ritual dances and perform sacrifices, and then “their demon-lovers copulate with them in the most repulsive fashion.” Lastly, the witches share with each other the evil works they have done since the last sabbat, and then they return home.⁵ Evidently, although the witches' sabbat had multiple components, its fundamental purpose was to allow witches to express their adoration for the devil.

A startling visual depiction of witches expressing their adoration for the devil at the witches' sabbat can be found in Hans Baldung Grien's 1510 chiaroscuro woodcut *Witches' Sabbath*. As described by art historian Jane Schuyler, a parody of the Mass is occurring in the macabre scene; the lifted chalice, the cloth draped on the central witch, and the preparation of food, in this case humans, all mock the practices performed during Mass. The witches are unclothed and in immodest postures, surrounded by demons and familiars in different forms, including goats and a white cat. As implied by the scattered human skull and bones and the brewing storm, the witches are practicing *maleficia*, or harmful magic. Finally, at the top, a witch is arriving at the sabbat, riding backward on a goat mount as if, “to indicate that she has no control over him or his direction.”⁶ Although the witch arriving in the sky played only a minor role in Baldung's chiaroscuro woodcut, the concept of the flying witch would become a central fixture in the debate over transportation to the witches' sabbat.

⁵ Martin Del Rio, *Investigations into Magic*, trans. P.G. Maxwell-Stuart (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 92, 93.

⁶ Jane Schuyler, “The ‘Malleus Maleficarum’ and Baldung's ‘Witches’ Sabbath,’” *Notes in the History of Art* 6, no. 3 (Spring 1987): 21-24.

Authors in early modern Europe who endorsed the idea of the witches' sabbat faced a unique problem: If the sabbat took place miles from accused' homes, then the accused needed a way to get there. When tried, accused witches often confessed to attending sabbats, and they usually gave their confessions "particular inflections," or details specific to the individual such as how the sabbat was held, "just by the gallows outside Augsburg," or how the devil appeared, which seemed to give their confessions more credibility.⁷ Nonetheless, no matter how credible the accused witches' confessions seemed, if it could not be determined how they reached the sabbat, their confessions about attending the sabbat were largely negated. In effect, not being able to determine how accused witches were transported to the sabbat undermined their prosecution because if "witches' flight were a fantasy, then the whole curious myth of the sabbat would be devalued."⁸ In other words, the premise of secret devil worship left authors with the problem of transportation, and a plausible explanation for how accused witches traveled to the sabbat was absolutely crucial in order for them to be prosecuted.

The difficulty of finding a plausible explanation, though, was that no single mode of transportation consistently appeared in accused witches' confessions. Instead, a variety of methods were reported. First, there were those who claimed to travel to the sabbat physically. If the sabbat was close enough, accused witches could travel on foot or horseback. Referencing witches' confessions, French jurist Henri Boguet explains in *An Examen of Witches* (1602) that "witches sometimes go on foot to the Sabbat, and this usually happens when the place of their assembly is not very distant from their homes."⁹ If the distance was too great to travel in one night, accused witches could be physically transported through the air using demonic power,

⁷ Lyndal Roper, "Witchcraft and Fantasy in Early Modern Europe," *History Workshop* 32 (Autumn, 1991): 24-25.

⁸ Linda C. Hulst, "Baldung and the Witches of Freiburg: The Evidence of Images," *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 18, no. 2 (Autumn, 1987): 253.

⁹ Henri Boguet, *An Examen of Witches*, ed. Montague Summers (New York: Dover, 2009), 45.

which was referred to as transvection. One way to induce transvection was by rubbing magical ointment or lotions on the body. In his *Compendium Maleficarum* (1608), Italian theologian Francesco Maria Guazzo reports that before accused witches go to the sabbat “they paint themselves upon some part of their bodies with an unguent made from various foul and filthy ingredients, but chiefly from murdered children.”¹⁰ The practice of using ointments to induce transvection also was discussed by French philosopher and jurist Jean Bodin in his *On the Demon-Mania of Witches* (1580). Bodin tells of a young noblewoman at Lyons in 1580 who was condemned to burn when she reportedly, “got up at night, and lighting the candle took a jar of ointment and spread it over herself, then with a few words she was transported away.”¹¹ This ointment allegedly allowed accused witches to travel as far they needed in order to reach the sabbat.

Another form of transvection involved riding an object or demon. Boguet cites numerous objects that accused witches reported to use for flight. He notes that “Françoise Secretain was carried there upon a white staff; Rollande de Vernois on a big black ram which she rode horsewise,” and “others go [to the sabbat] sometimes on a goat, sometimes on a horse, and sometimes on a broom, and generally leave their house by the chimney.”¹² Guazzo lists a cowl-staff, a broom, a reed, a cleft stick, a distaff, a shovel, an ox, a goat, and a dog as reported ways that accused witches were “carried to their feast.”¹³ Bodin states that in the 1574 trials of the witches of Valéry in Savoy, the accused admitted to, “bodily transport on just a pole without ointment,” and in the trial in Potez, the accused confessed to being transported near Logny at the

¹⁰ Francisco Maria Guazzo, *Compendium Maleficarum: A Handbook on Witchcraft*, ed. Montague Summers (San Diego: The Book Tree, 2004), 34.

¹¹ Jean Bodin, *On the Demon-Mania of Witches*, trans. Randy A. Scott (Toronto: CRRS Publications, 1995), 115.

¹² Boguet, *An Examen of Witches*, 45.

¹³ Guazzo, *Compendium Maleficarum*, 34.

Frenquis mill with “a broom or chimney-cleaners.”¹⁴ Likewise, in *Daemonologia: A Discourse on Witchcraft*, English translator Edward Fairfax speaks of how his daughter Helen was carried by familiars to a secret gathering. According to Fairfax, one day in May 1622, Helen reported being, “carried out at the back door, and so over a great quickset hedge behind the house, and so towards the barn” by demonic forces, one in the form of a black cat.¹⁵ Most certainly, claims of transvection were popular in the confessions of the accused.

Then there were those who claimed to travel to the sabbat “in spirit” while leaving their physical bodies behind. The belief of journeying “in spirit” was recorded across much of Europe, and it sometimes appeared in the confessions of those accused of witchcraft.¹⁶ According to James VI in his 1597 work *Daemonologie*, some accused witches confessed to using “this form of journeying . . . most when they are transported from one country to another,” and they claimed that their bodies would lie still “as in an ecstasy” while their spirits would be “ravished out of their bodies, and carried to such places.”¹⁷ Although not reported as frequently as transvection, the experience of traveling “in spirit” to the sabbat was reported quite often by children. In the German town of Calw in 1683, “a group of children confessed to attending sabbats while they were observed to be sleeping,” and their parents, “responded by keeping them awake at night, fearful that the Devil would return to carry off their souls.”¹⁸ In the 1720s in Augsburg, a group of detained children who were accused of practicing witchcraft were kept awake at night after they, “spoke of flying to sabbaths, of flying naked and of sabbaths full of naked people - yet the

¹⁴ Bodin, *Demon-Mania*, 117, 119.

¹⁵ Edward Fairfax, *Daemonologia: A Discourse on Witchcraft*, ed. W. Grainge (Harrogate: 1882), 114-115.

¹⁶ Oldridge, *Strange Histories*, 106.

¹⁷ James VI, *Daemonologie* (Edinburgh: 1597), 49.

¹⁸ Oldridge, *Strange Histories*, 106.

warders knew they remained in the room.”¹⁹ Thus, traveling “in spirit” appeared frequently enough to be taken seriously as a form of transportation to the sabbat.

As stated in accused witches’ confessions, when the spirit left the body during “in spirit” journeying, the body was left senseless and seemingly lifeless. Boguet describes that some accused witches, “who after having remained in their houses as dead for the space of two or three hours have confessed that they were at that time at the Sabbat in spirit, and have given an exact account of all that took place there.”²⁰ Among the examples Boguet provides from confessions is a man of the village of Unau in the district of Orgelet who witnessed his wife go “absolutely still without even breathing”, to the point where he could not wake her. When she awoke, she claimed she “had felt nothing of what her husband had done to her,” which confirmed his fears that she had been attending a sabbat.²¹ Additionally, since the physical body was left behind, the accused confessed that journeying “in spirit” came with certain risks. In 1597, alleged witch Margherita of San Rocco confessed to the mayor and elders of Lucca that when she and her companion Polissena went to the sabbat “in spirit,” if their bodies were turned over face down, they “would lose spirit and the body would die,” and if their spirits did not return before dawn at the cock’s crow, their bodies “would stay dead.”²² The abandonment of the physical body is what distinguished traveling “in spirit” from transvection, but both modes of transportation still relied on demonic power.

Moreover, the modes of transportation were not exclusive, and in confessions, the accused claimed to have utilized multiple modes of transportation. The use of more than one mode of

¹⁹ Lyndal Roper, “‘Evil Imaginings and Fantasies’: Child-Witches and the End of the Witch Craze,” *Past & Present* 167 (May, 2000): 131.

²⁰ Boguet, *An Examen of Witches*, 46-47.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 47.

²² Carlo Ginzburg, *The Night Battles: Witchcraft and Agrarian Cults in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, trans. John and Anne Tedeschi (New York: Routledge, 2011), 19.

transportation appeared in the 1539 confession of a woman from Gaiato nicknamed ‘la Rosaa’ who was tried by the Modenese Inquisition. When she “was asked by the judge whether she always made her way to the sabbat ‘physically or in sleep,’” she replied “that ‘there are many who go in spirit only, but some also in their bodies’, as for herself, ‘she always went there physically.’”²³ Other times, accused witches who previously had physically attended the sabbat later simply would dream of attending the sabbat. For instance, in 1608, la Grande Lucye of Charmes confessed that she sometimes “merely dreamed she was at the sabbat, while on other occasions she was actually present.”²⁴ Therefore, the accused were not limited to using only one form of transportation.

The reported modes of transportation certainly were varied and colorful. In fact, Spanish inquisitor Alonso de Salazar Frias, who had studied Canon Law at the Universities of Salamanca and Sigüenza, devoted an entire chapter of his 1612 report about the possible existence of a witch sect in the Basque country to “the manner in which the witches set out for, are present at, and return from, the sabbath.”²⁵ After analyzing the accused witches’ answers to a questionnaire that had been formulated by the Inquisition Council, Salazar calculated that 102 reported traveling to sabbats after falling asleep in their beds, while less than ten reported attending the sabbat before they had gone to bed and fallen asleep.²⁶ One woman claimed to attend the sabbat in the form of a housefly, another in the form of a raven, and “most of the suspected witches answered that they had got out through some chink or hole, window or chimney, while seven said that they went out through the door and down the staircases of their houses, and returned in

²³ Ginzburg, *The Night Battles*, 20.

²⁴ Robin Briggs, *The Witches of Lorraine* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 148.

²⁵ Gustav Henningsen, “The Witches’ Flying and the Spanish Inquisitors, or How to Explain (Away) to Impossible,” *Folklore* 120, no. 1 (April 2009): 60.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

the same manner.”²⁷ Salazar’s analysis confirmed that no single mode of transportation to the sabbat consistently appeared in the confessions of the accused.

Yet, despite the variety of modes of transportation to the sabbat reported in accused witches’ confessions, authors in early modern Europe vehemently defended one type of journeying over another. As previously noted, some form of transportation needed to be verified in order for the witches’ confessions of attending the sabbat and practicing secret devil worship to be valid, but enough confessions existed to support each form of transportation and to support the assertion that accused witches utilized multiple forms of transportation. The question of why authors in early modern Europe exhausted time and energy proving or disproving modes of transportation to the sabbat then remains puzzling, but the key to the answer can be found within the debate itself. When viewing the arguments of the early modern authors, the debate over how accused witches were transported to the sabbat always seemed to come back to whether the devil possessed certain powers, not whether one mode was more common in confessions than the other. Thus, the debate received attention for one main reason: It really was a theological argument with significant theological implications. When authors in early modern Europe were debating how accused witches were transported to the sabbat, they truly were debating which powers belonged to the devil and which belonged to God, and they believed that the weight of their arguments lay in proof from the Bible.

The first facet of the debate over transportation to the sabbat concerned transvection. In defense of physical transvection, numerous early modern authors cited the Bible to legitimize the possibility of demon-inspired physical flight, asserting that it was well within the devil’s power to perform transvection. Two common stories from the Bible that surfaced in these arguments included when Jesus was transported to the top of the temple and to a very high mountain by the

²⁷ Henningsen, “The Witches’ Flying,” 60.

devil in Chapter 4 of the Gospel of Matthew, and when an angel transported prophet Habakkuk by his hair from Judea to Babylon to give Daniel food in the lion's den in Chapter 14 of the Book of Daniel.²⁸ Another commonly accepted concept from the Bible used in this argument was that since demons were fallen angels, they retained the ability to fly.²⁹ Using these points as evidence, authors in early modern Europe sought to prove the reality of transvection.

One author who was convinced of the reality of transvection was Boguet. Boguet compares the devil to a mighty wind who of his own power "bears [the witches] along, just as a whirlwind uproots even the highest trees, and carried them two or three leagues away from the place where they grew."³⁰ Boguet references confessions in which accused witches admitted to travel to the sabbat by transvection: "Françoise Secretain said that, to go to the Sabbat, she places a white staff between her legs and uttered certain words, and that she was then conveyed through the air to the witches' assembly. Rollande du Vernois confessed that she went ether on a great black ram which carried her through the air so quickly that she was unconscious of the passage... Antide Colas said that the night Satan appeared to her as a gigantic man, black-bearded and clothed in black, he carried her to the Sabbat; and that at other times he used to come and take her on his back, and carried her like a cold wind, gripping her by her hair. It would take too long to write down all that other witches have said on the subject."³¹ Then, Boguet shares that despite these confessions, a fact that even more strongly inclines him "to believe in the transvection of witches is that Jesus Christ Himself was carried by the Devil to the pinnacle of the temple of Jerusalem, and then to the top of a mountain; for if this could happen to our Lord, why should it

²⁸ Schuyler, "Baldung's 'Witches' Sabbath,'" 24.

²⁹ Richard Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 197.

³⁰ Boguet, *An Examen of Witches*, 45.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 41-42.

not happen to witches?"³² Besides the transvection of Jesus, Boguet references the transportations of St. Phillip, Ezekiel, Habakkuk, Elijah, Enoch, and, most notoriously, Simon Magus, "who, in defiance of St. Peter, undertook to fly from the Capitol to the Aventine Hill, and was carried through the air with the help of Satan."³³ Therefore, Boguet was convinced of transvection mainly because the Bible asserted that the devil possessed such a power.

Other authors who were convinced of the reality of transvection because of the Bible were Bodin, James VI, Rémy, and Guazzo. Bodin believed that "Satan really transported witches in body and soul," and he too cited the story in Matthew to support his position.³⁴ He shares, "[I]t would be mocking the Gospel story to call into doubt whether the Devil transports witches from one spot to another, since it is stated in the Gospel that Satan transported Jesus Christ to the top of the temple, then unto a mountain."³⁵ James VI agreed, adding that accused witches could be carried "above the earth or above the sea swiftly to the place where they are to meet" since "Habakkuk was carried by the Angel in that form, to the den where Daniel lay" and since "the Devil will be ready to imitate God."³⁶ Rémy concurred, maintaining that if the devil could carry Jesus through the air, "why should we be so slow to believe that men, who are so often vulnerable to his attacks, especially those who voluntarily surrender themselves to his power, can at his pleasure be lifted up and borne away through the air?"³⁷ In fact, Rémy claimed that doubting the reality of transvection was blasphemous "since we are told of it so plainly in the Holy Gospel."³⁸ Guazzo even went so far as to suggest that not accepting the reality of

³² Ibid., 42.

³³ Boguet, *An Examen of Witches*, 42.

³⁴ Bodin, *Demon-Mania*, 121.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ James VI, *Daemonologie*, 46.

³⁷ Rémy, *Demonolatry*, 182.

³⁸ Ibid.

transvection was akin to sinning “in lack of true reverence to our Mother the Church.”³⁹ In essence, these authors argued that if the devil had been able to physically transport others in the Bible, including Jesus, the devil certainly could physically transport the accused to the sabbat.

Since the Bible was used to confirm the reality of transvection, anyone who wanted to refute physical transportation had to do so based on theological grounds. When English skeptic Reginald Scot sought to deny the reality of transvection, he was forced to reinterpret passages of the Bible, including the story in the Gospel of Matthew and the story in Daniel. Scot proposed that these seemingly physical transportations were nothing more than visions and provided supporting evidence from the Book of Ezekiel: “He that will say, that these words; to wit, that Christ was taken up, and can hardly be applied to a vision, let him turn to the prophesy of Ezekiel, and see the self-same words used in a vision: saving that where Christ is said to be taken up by the devil, Ezekiel is taken up, and lifted up, and carried by the spirit of God, and yet in a vision.”⁴⁰ However, this interpretation that biblical transportations were only visions and thus accused witches could not be physically transported to the sabbat placed Scot “outside mainstream early modern thought” according to Oldridge because even some skeptical authors acknowledged the possibility of transvection.⁴¹ For instance, Dutch demonologist Johann Weyer, who “denounced the prosecution of witchcraft as a tragic folly” and “claimed that most witchcraft confessions resulted from satanic delusions or mental illness,” still conceded that the devil possessed the ability to physically transport accused witches to the sabbat, citing the passage in Matthew.⁴² Therefore, the dominant reason why more early modern authors were persuaded to agree with the reality of transvection was not because it was the mode of

³⁹ Guazzo, *Compendium Maleficarum*, 39.

⁴⁰ Reginald Scot, *The Discoverie of Witchcraft* (New York: Dover, 1972), 131.

⁴¹ Oldridge, *Strange Histories*, 108.

⁴² Ibid.

transportation most frequently or convincingly cited in confessions but because the Bible legitimized the possibility of the devil carrying others in body to distant places.

A second facet of the debate over transportation to the sabbat concerned whether or not ointments could be used to induce transvection, especially when used by someone not accused of witchcraft. Although the use of ointment was cited in numerous confessions, many early modern authors still argued on theological grounds that the ointment lacked inherent powers and that it could not induce physical transvection without the permission of God. Boguet asserted that it “must not be thought that it is this ointment which causes their transvection” for “neither ointment nor words nor symbols are, of themselves, of any use to witches.”⁴³ Del Rio agreed with Boguet that the ointment lacked any power and that all reported transportation using ointment was only allowed “to punish this rash, self-indulgent curiosity.”⁴⁴ He argued that “if anyone firm in the faith and armed with charity were to anoint himself with this unguent,” no transportation would follow since “such a person refrains from entering into a pact with an evil spirit and will not have been permitted by God to enter one.”⁴⁵ Here again, the debate circled back to whether the devil possessed a certain power, in this case the power to create a substance that inherently could induce transvection, and the Bible answered “no.”

Another facet of the debate over how accused witches were transported to the sabbat concerned whether the devil could separate souls from bodies, which would be necessary for travelling to the sabbat “in spirit” only. Although “in spirit” transportation appeared in multiple confessions, many early modern authors denied the possibility because of its theological implications. When the accused confessed to traveling to the sabbat “in spirit,” they were claiming that their souls left their physical bodies behind, essentially leaving their bodies lifeless,

⁴³ Boguet, *An Examen of Witches*, 44-45.

⁴⁴ Del Rio, *Investigations into Magic*, 95.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

and then their souls returned to their bodies after the sabbat. Hence, traveling “in spirit” implied that the devil had the power to separate souls from bodies and then bring dead bodies back to life. In the Bible, the power of resurrection was reserved for God; numerous stories in the Bible tell of God’s power being able to raise the dead, including the story of Lazarus (John 11: 38-44), the story of Jairus’ daughter (Luke 8: 49-56), and the story of the ill son (1 Kings 17: 17-24), but no stories in the Bible tell of the devil’s power being able to raise the dead.⁴⁶ Those opposed to the possibility of “in spirit” transportation cited the same central theological argument rooted in the Bible: Accepting that accused witches traveled “in spirit” meant accepting that the devil could resurrect the dead, which was the greatest miracle performed by God in the Bible and could not be performed by the devil.

This theological argument appeared in a handful of works from early modern authors. The seventeenth-century English philosopher Henry More denies “in spirit” transportation in *An Antidote to Atheism* on the grounds that the devil did not possess the power to reverse death. More defined death as “a disjunction of the Soul from the body by reason of the body’s unfitness, any longer to entertain the Soul, which may be caused by extremity of diseases, by outward violence or old age.”⁴⁷ In the publication, More posits that once the soul leaves the body, such as through violence or journeying to the sabbat, “no one but God himself can thus kill and make alive.”⁴⁸ Rémy made a similar point, insisting that “the union of soul and body can only be dissolved by death, and that after its dissolution they will not be reunited until the day of the Last Judgment.”⁴⁹ James VI echoed More and Rémy, denying the possibility of traveling “in spirit” on biblical grounds, asserting that “it is certain the soul’s going out of the body, is the

⁴⁶ Oldridge, *Strange Histories*, 106-107.

⁴⁷ Henry More, *An Antidote to Atheism*, 2nd ed. (London: 1655), 385-386.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 386.

⁴⁹ Rémy, *Demonolatry*, 52.

only definition of natural death: and who are once dead, God forbid we should think that it should lie in the power of all the Devils in Hell, to restore them to their life again.”⁵⁰ Boguet also firmly believed that the devil could not separate the human soul from the body and then allow it to return: “For my part I have never been able to believe that such a thing is in any way possible; for if it is true that when the soul is separated from the body, death must necessarily follow, how can it be possible for a witch, after having been in spirit to the Sabbat, to return to life by the help of the Devil? This cannot be except by a miracle, which belongs only to God and not unto Satan, who only works by secondary and natural causes and therefore has no power to raise the dead to life.”⁵¹ In short, “in spirit” transportation was denied mainly because it was interpreted as blasphemous according to the Bible.

Nevertheless, because “in spirit” transportation did appear in confessions, early modern authors opposed to this mode of transportation needed to provide a biblically correct explanation for why some people believed they were transported in this manner. A few explanations were posed, and they all were based on the belief that although the devil did not have the power to separate souls from bodies, the devil did possess the power to deceive. One explanation was that the devil caused the accused to dream as though they had attended the sabbat “in spirit.”⁵² Boguet suggested it was probable that “Satan sends them to sleep...and reveals to them in their sleep what happens at the Sabbat so vividly that they think they have been there.”⁵³ Guazzo held the same opinion and asserted that accused witches either could be “actually present at the Sabbat” or could be “fast asleep at home, and yet think that they are at the Sabbat,” but they

⁵⁰ James VI, *Daemonologie*, 49.

⁵¹ Boguet, *An Examen of Witches*, 48-49.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 51.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

never could travel only “in spirit” and leave their bodies behind.⁵⁴ Like Boguet and Guazzo, James VI thought that accused witches who reported traveling to the sabbat “in spirit” were simply being tricked by the devil, adding that sometimes the devil gave identical dreams to several accused witches so they all believed that they had traveled to the sabbat.⁵⁵ The experience of identical dreams then would deceive the accused witches and others into believing that the similarities among their confessions proved the reality of “in spirit” transportation.

Another explanation, articulated by Guazzo, was that accused witches physically attended the sabbat while the devil created likenesses at home to trick others into thinking they were still in bed, which he claimed had been reported in judicial records.⁵⁶ To Guazzo, the most convincing evidence that supports this explanation was the biblical story of how “Michal the wife of David deceived the soldiers of her father Saul by putting an image in David’s room.”⁵⁷ If this was possible in the Bible, then “the devil can and does place a false body in the bed to deceive the husband while a witch has gone to the Sabbat.”⁵⁸ Because the devil was known for being deceptive in the Bible, such trickery easily fit into how authors like Guazzo perceived the character of the devil. Consequently, despite the fact that accused confessed to traveling “in spirit,” these authors firmly believed that the accused were being duped by the devil.

Ultimately, although accused witches confessed to attending the sabbat through transvection, magical ointments, riding on demons or objects, dreams, and traveling “in spirit” while leaving their bodies behind, many authors in early modern Europe concluded that diabolical transvection was plausible but diabolical “in spirit” transportation was not. In fact, by the late 1500s, when French and Italian judges were confronted with claims of “in spirit” transportation to the witches’

⁵⁴ Guazzo, *Compendium Maleficarum*, 37.

⁵⁵ Oldridge, *Strange Histories*, 110.

⁵⁶ Guazzo, *Compendium Maleficarum*, 33.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

sabbat, they “tended to view them as delusions.”⁵⁹ Then again, the debate over how accused witches were transported to the sabbat was not really about which mode of transportation was most commonly asserted in confessions. The debate was theological in nature, one concerned with the powers of the devil and how they translated to transporting the accused. Whether authors in early modern Europe supported transvection, denied “in spirit” traveling, or argued that accused witches merely were being deceived, they employed examples from the Bible to give credence to their position, and in the end, theological correctness took precedence over details collected from confessions. When the debate over transportation to the sabbat is viewed in this light, it becomes easier to understand that these authors were not squabbling over the particulars of witches’ confessions but were defending their conceptualizations of the devil and his powers. Indeed, they were searching for their own religious truths among the reports of mysterious, shadowy “flights of fancy.”

About the author

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⁵⁹ Oldridge, *Strange Histories*, 107.