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Imagining the Witches' Sabbath

Ethan Doyle White

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Cambridge Elements

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edited by
William Pooley
University of Bristol

IMAGINING THE WITCHES' SABBATH

Visions of Darkness since 1900

Ethan Doyle White
University of Copenhagen

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Abstract: Of all the dark visions to haunt the cultural imagination, few have proven so pervasive as the witches' sabbath or sabbat – an idea born in the fifteenth century. The sabbath, however, did not remain there, and this Element explores some of the ways in which the witches' sabbath has been reimagined since 1900. It considers how early twentieth-century scholars, most notably Margaret Murray and Montague Summers, took it as evidence of a real witches' religion, and how later historians like Carlo Ginzburg drew upon it in their search for ancient shamanisms. It examines how occultists such as Gerald Gardner, Austin Osman Spare, and Andrew Chumbley integrated sabbaths as key elements of their own new religions. Finally, it outlines the role of the sabbath in literature, film, and television, where it has continued to terrify and titillate. This Element thus expands upon an oft-overlooked area in the cultural history of witchcraft.

Keywords: witchcraft, occultism, supernatural literature, witches' sabbath, witches' sabbat

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Introduction

Time and again, the human imagination has brought forth visions of darkness. Certain features recur in these phantasmagoria: nocturnal conclaves, naked flesh, incest, cannibalism. Back in the second century, many Romans feared that the secretive Christians gathered to devour infants, engage in indiscriminate sexual orgies, and worship their priests' genitals.[1] Among the twentieth-century Hopi of Arizona, a common belief held that the *popwaqt* – malevolent characters who prolonged their own lives by killing their kin – assembled nocturnally to rape the recently deceased and perform other malicious acts.[2] In the 1980s and 1990s, many people across the Western world were shocked by allegations about powerful Satanic groups committed to the ritualised abuse and murder of children.[3]

However, of the many imagined dark cabals that litter our history, perhaps none remains so culturally entrenched as that of the European witches' sabbath. Arising principally within the Western Alpine region around the 1420s and 1430s, the notion of the witches' sabbath or sabbat integrated older fears of *maleficium* – the idea that certain individuals might bewitch, curse, or hex others – with that of the Satanist, the figure who openly venerated the Devil. In doing so it created a new stereotype, one that came to cast its shadow over the ensuing early modern era.[4] While the European witch trials have long since passed, largely fading out in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, it is apparent that the witches' sabbath as an idea still has the power to fascinate. We see scholars continue to debate its origins, its symbolism, and its transformations. We find writers and filmmakers use it as an image to horrify or titillate their audiences. We even encounter people announcing that they themselves travel to the witches' sabbath, either as a physical religious celebration or an etheric spirit convocation. Six hundred years on from its creation, the witches' sabbath still haunts our collective imagination.

* * *

Although historical accounts of the sabbath reveal much variation, reflecting a concept in flux, certain traits were nevertheless recurrent. There was the notion that the witches gathered together in the presence of a demonic entity, sometimes the Devil himself, and that there they bade

[1] Cohn, *Europe's Inner Demons*, 1–3.
[2] Geertz, 'Hopi Indian Witchcraft,' 375.
[3] For a good summary on the Satanic Panic, see Introvigne, *Satanism*, 372–461.
[4] On the sabbath's origins, see Bailey, 'Medieval Concept of the Witches' Sabbath;' Ostorero, 'Concept of the Witches' Sabbath.'

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him homage. Often, this took debased forms; thus, we find the idea of the *osculum infame*, in which the witches would kiss the Devil's buttocks or anus, or else his mouth. The witches would repudiate Christianity, sometimes desecrating a Eucharistic host or spitting and trampling on a cross. Then there would be infanticide, with witches killing either their own children or those stolen from local communities, sometimes as sacrifices to the Devil. This infanticide could lead to cannibalism, the devouring of these infant bodies, their corpses otherwise boiled into a fat or grease that could be used to make poisons or, in some renditions, to rub onto the staffs or brooms that the witches would ride to their conclave. Finally, there was the sexual orgy, with assembled witches engaging in indiscriminate sexual acts, including forms of incestuous and same-sex behaviour that would have appalled most Christians.[5] In this way, the witches' sabbath fundamentally inverted the norms and values of early modern Christendom.[6]

Historians have demonstrated that the new stereotype of the witches' sabbath owed much to older notions that had long circulated the European imagination. Accusations about secretive societies engaged in the likes of infanticide and incestuous orgies had, as noted earlier, been recorded by Roman writers whose works exerted ongoing influence over later European readers. Throughout the Middle Ages, accusations of such practices were repeatedly levelled against new Christian movements whom the Catholic Church declared heretical – groups like the Knights Templar, the Cathars, and the Waldensians. Similar medieval fears were directed at Jews, most famously in the Blood Libel that arose in twelfth-century England. Indeed, antisemitism's influence on the emergence of early modern fears of witchery is clear in early sources that refer to witches' gatherings as 'synagogues'. The label of 'sabbat', probably also betraying a reference to Judaic practice, subsequently emerged later in fifteenth-century France before gaining traction among sixteenth-century French demonologists.[7]

While the witches' sabbath stereotype clearly borrowed from the annals of medieval religious intolerance, additional influence likely came from supernatural lore that was widely dispersed across Europe. In particular, the notion of the witches' nocturnal flight to the sabbath may

[5] Translations of these fifteenth-century sources, with useful contextualisation, are available in Bailey, *Origins of the Witches' Sabbath*.
[6] On the sabbath as an inversion of norms, see Clark, 'Inversion.'
[7] Kieckhefer, *European Witch Trials*, 17; Blécourt, 'Sabbath Stories', 93.

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have drawn on an idea well entrenched in popular belief, that of women whose spirits departed their sleeping bodies to assemble with some supernatural, albeit usually female, entity.[8] Such stories would have been known to people across the social spectrum and probably helped colour emerging perceptions of the witches' gathering. This could take different forms in different places, with a range of regional traditions regarding witches and their supernatural exploits being evident across fifteenth-century Europe.[9]

The notion of the witches' sabbath begins to appear amid the trials of accused witches in Valais, Switzerland, between 1428 and 1436, but soon spreads from this West Alpine home, initially filtering out through ecclesiastical networks. An important role was probably played by the Council of Basel, which brought Catholics from across Europe to this region between 1431 and 1449, but better documented was the impact of demonological writings like Johannes Nider's *Formicarius* (written 1437–1438).[10] Given that the milieus in which these materials circulated were mostly literate, it has been argued that the witches' sabbath was, at least in the fifteenth century, a largely elite notion – a conspiracy theory of the learned classes, not an idea with widespread permeation of the broader population.[11]

For the better part of the next three centuries, fears of the witches' sabbath spread throughout Europe and thence to the European colonies in the Americas. Literate investigators and judges repeatedly brought notions of the witches' assembly with them when encountering accusations of *maleficium*; even when accusers made little or no reference to any diabolical sabbath, learned investigators often imposed these notions onto the trial proceedings. In many cases, accused witches – often terrified and tortured – ultimately confessed to such gatherings, sometimes borrowing from their own knowledge of supernatural lore to flesh out their accounts.[12] These confessions were, in turn, taken as evidence for the reality of the sabbaths.

[8] On spectral nocturnal processions, see Hutton, 'Wild Hunt' and Hutton, *The Witch*, 120–46.
[9] On this fifteenth-century variation, see Kieckhefer, 'Mythologies of Witchcraft' and the Catalan case explored by Castell Granados, 'Wine Vat Witches'.
[10] On the Council of Basel's role, see Bailey and Peters, 'Sabbat of Demonologists.'
[11] See, for instance, Kieckhefer, *European Witch Trials*, 31; Blécourt, 'Sabbath Stories,' 95. Other historians have argued for permeation into broader folklore, for instance, Briggs, *Witches and Neighbours*, 39–40.
[12] Accused Scottish witches probably claimed that their sabbaths occurred on the quarter days because these dates were already associated with the supernatural in Scottish folklore; see Paterson, 'Witches' Sabbath in Scotland', 383.

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There was nevertheless regional variation in the popularity of this conspiracy theory. In some areas, as in England, Denmark, and Russia, the notion of the sabbath remained comparatively scarce and rarely, if ever, found itself being invoked amid the trials, which retained the traditional focus on *maleficium*. Elsewhere, it remains plausible that demonological publications, clerical sermons, and confessions helped the witches' sabbath filter out of literate culture and into oral transmission, thus exerting a broader impact on community folklore. It is further probable that in some places, the witches' sabbath interacted with existing folk narratives about supernatural gatherings, allowing complicated new syncretisations to arise amid the accusations, interrogations, and trials. Untangling these complexities and the ways that supernatural narratives played out in particular places and times is one of the great challenges facing historians of early modern witchcraft.

* * *

Since the 1960s, scholarly advances have provided us with ever deeper understandings of how ideas about the witches' sabbath developed and spread. At the same time, as recently as 2013, the historical anthropologist Willem de Blécourt could note that the sabbath itself has 'hardly been pursued as a proper topic of historical research'.[13] For many historians, perhaps, the intangible world of the sabbath, an illusory space existing in the minds of persecutors, is simply too daunting a realm to explore. If the early modern sabbath itself has not been subject to much focused academic attention, the situation is even sparser when it comes to the cultural legacy of the witches' sabbath narrative. While the era of intensified European witch hunting was essentially over by the close of the eighteenth century, fear of *maleficium* remained in many places, as did knowledge of the witches' sabbath – traces of which continued to filter through folklore, literature, and the arts.

In the hope of promoting scholarly conversations on the topic, this Element devotes its attentions to the perceptions and portrayals of the witches' sabbath in the period from 1900 to 2025. It does so in a tripartite and thematic fashion, splitting its considerations over three sections. First, it considers interpretations of the witches' sabbath produced by scholars in this period, especially the so-called 'romantics' who believed

[13] Blécourt, 'Sabbath Stories', 86. Since Blécourt published, a few focused examinations of the sabbath have appeared, notably Sharpe, 'In Search of the English Sabbat' and Larsen, 'Darkest Forests'.

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in literal gatherings of early modern witches and the subsequent trend amongst those who, from the 1960s onwards, sought the sabbath's origins in putative shamanic beliefs. Second, it deals with the world of esotericism and especially that of modern religious witchcraft: the broad milieu of individuals who, since the early twentieth century, have come to call themselves 'witches' and their new religious practices 'witchcraft'. Third, it examines the place of the sabbath in fictional productions, including written presentations in novels and short stories as well as on-screen ideas in film and television.

While each section thus pursues the core theme in its own fashion, one factor that should become abundantly apparent is the ongoing synergy between these different areas. In particular, this Element makes clear how the ideas of scholars have profoundly influenced both the efforts of modern religious witches and other occultists as well as the fictional products of those writing literature, television series, and films. This is, of course, not an especially novel point to make – scholars like Diane Purkiss and Ronald Hutton were making it quite clear in the 1990s[14] – however this Element does offer another case study in how these interactions have played out. In doing so, it is hoped that *Imagining the Witches' Sabbath* contributes to ongoing discussions regarding the complicated, yet fascinating, cultural history of witchery.

1 The Scholars' Sabbath

By the close of the nineteenth century, intellectual interpretations of early modern witchcraft were split into two broad frameworks. On the one hand was what the historian E. William Monter has called the 'rationalist' approach. Its advocates perceived witchcraft beliefs principally as the product of delusion, further arguing that these ideas were exploited by those, especially clerical elites, who served to gain from them. On the other hand were what Monter called the 'romantic' scholars. They maintained that there really had been a witchcraft religion in early modern Europe and that it was this which was persecuted as a hated rival to Christianity.[15]

In regarding witchery as mere delusion, scholars of the rationalist approach naturally took the view that the witches' sabbath was an imaginative work of fiction. Among the earliest advocates of this position had

[14] Purkiss, *Witch in History*; Hutton, *Triumph of the Moon*.

[15] Monter, 'Historiography of European Witchcraft', 440. This division has been echoed by later scholars Fudge, 'Traditions', 490 and Tuczay, 'Nineteenth Century', 60.

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been Joseph Hansen (1863–1943), an archivist at Cologne, and Henry Charles Lea (1825–1909), a Philadelphia publisher who amassed a substantial archive of pertinent materials. Their contributions were highly influential, helping to ensure that the rationalist approach became, in the words of later historian Christa Tuczay, 'the orthodoxy in witchcraft studies'.[16] Advocates of the rationalist perspective remained active throughout the first two-thirds of the twentieth century, during which time they continued to reiterate the non-existence of the sabbath and present it as a fabrication of the inquisitors. In his 1929 book *Witchcraft in Old and New England*, for instance, the American historian George Lyman Kittredge (1860–1941) declared that the 'idea of a Sabbath of Witches was neither ancient nor of popular origin', but was a 'mere transference' from prejudices about the Cathars already present 'in the inquisitorial mind'.[17]

Over coming decades, similar ideas were evoked in publications marketed to a broader readership. In 1959, the English-born but United States based Rossell Hope Robbins (1912–1990) issued *The Encyclopedia of Witchcraft and Demonology*, an accessible synthesis promoting the rationalist interpretation. Here, Robbins presented early modern fears of a witches' conspiracy, and with it the sabbath, as 'an intellectual aberration, devised by inquisitors' and which 'an indifferent public' had to be 'ruthlessly lashed into believing'.[18] Almost a decade later, another English historian, H. R. Trevor-Roper (1914–2003), again recapitulated a rationalist approach to what he called the 'witch-craze', maintaining that its 'new mythology' was built from 'the curiosities and credulities of Alpine peasants' and promoted directly from Rome.[19] Such writings ensured that rationalist interpretations of early modern witchcraft were widely accessible both to historians and to the general public throughout the early-to-mid twentieth century.

* * *

While the rationalists saw the witches' sabbath as little more than the product of superstition and fantasy, for the romantics it proved so much more. From their perspective, accounts of the sabbath testified to the existence of an early modern witches' religion, one that was sufficiently

[16] Tuczay, 'Nineteenth Century', 57.
[17] Kittredge, *Witchcraft in Old and New England*, 246.
[18] Hope Robbins, *Encyclopedia of Witchcraft*, 9. On Robbins' views regarding the sabbath's origin, see pages 414–15.
[19] Trevor-Roper, *European Witch-Craze*, 25.

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organised to have communal gatherings for the ritual adoration of their deity. Where the romantics differed amongst themselves, however, was in the precise nature of this religion, and accordingly of the sabbaths that were key to it. For some, it was undeniably Satanic, associated with all the demonic monstrosities that early modern people had feared, while others thought it a pre-Christian survival.

In its original iteration, the romantic interpretation actually straddled both perspectives; in 1828 the German scholar Karl Ernst Jarcke (1801–1852) had argued that the witches' cult had begun as a pre-Christian religion that over time developed into a form of Satanism. This general perspective would be echoed, albeit in altered form, by fellow German Franz Josef Mone (1796–1871) in 1839 and then, in far greater depth, by the Frenchman Jules Michelet (1798–1874) in his 1862 book *La Sorcière*.[20] Putative evidence that this witchcraft religion still survived, at least in Italy, even emerged in the form of *Aradia or the Gospel of the Witches*, published by American folklorist Charles Godfrey Leland (1824–1903) in 1899. Blurring the boundaries of Satanism and pre-Christian religion by outlining a theology centred on Lucifer and Diana, *Aradia* is now generally recognised as the late nineteenth-century creation of either Leland or his principle informant.[21]

Having developed in the nineteenth century, the romantic perspective only reached its cultural apogee – at least in the Anglophone world – in the first half of the twentieth. The author responsible was an Indian-born British scholar known predominantly as an Egyptologist, Margaret Murray (1863–1963), who turned towards early modern witchery when the First World War prevented her return to Egypt. Her ideas on the subject appeared in articles from the 1910s before being expounded in greater depth in her 1921 book *The Witch-Cult in Western Europe*. She was subsequently invited to produce the entry on witchcraft for the 1929 edition of *Encyclopaedia Britannica* and the following decade brought out a book targeting a wider readership, *The God of the Witches*, consolidating her reputation as a witchcraft specialist. While reviews of her work by rationalist scholars were often highly critical, these critiques were predominantly restricted to niche publications and so failed to undermine Murray's credibility among a broader reading public.[22]

[20] This perspective's origins are discussed in Cohn, *Europe's Inner Demons*, 103–07.
[21] For a good summary of *Aradia*, see Hutton, *Triumph*, revised edition, 147–54.
[22] On the warmer reception her work received in British society at large, see Hutton, *Triumph*, revised edition, 207.

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Following the approach of earlier romantic scholars – writers that she rarely, if ever, acknowledged – Murray took the view that the early modern witches had been followers of a surviving pre-Christian religion. She argued for the centrality of a horned deity to this witch-cult, tracing his worship back into the Palaeolithic, although further suggested that a mother goddess might also have formed part of the religion's theology at a distant point in prehistory.[23] As it existed in the early modern period, Murray surmised, the witches' tradition represented 'an organized religion', one that she varyingly called 'Ritual Witchcraft' and 'the Dianic cult'.[24] Rather than stressing the variation apparent from early modern accounts, she instead leaned towards a more uniform interpretation, for instance claiming that 'the cult appears to have been the same throughout Western Europe'.[25]

This emphasis on uniformity had important repercussions for Murray's interpretation of the sabbath. Murray maintained that the witches' meetings took two forms: the 'Esbats', which were only for initiates and typically focused on the practical task of spell-casting, and the 'Sabbaths', the latter representing 'the General Meeting of all the members of the religion'.[26] Esbats, she thought, took place weekly although had 'no fixed day or hour'.[27] The sabbaths, by contrast, occurred on specific dates; the most important were May Eve and November Eve, with lesser celebrations falling on 'the cross-quarter days' of 'Candlemas' (2 February) and 'Lammas' (1 August).[28] She further suggested that the witches had also absorbed 'the festivals of the solstitial invaders, Beltane at midsummer and Yule at winter', as well as Easter, but that 'the equinoxes were never observed in Britain'.[29] Murray acknowledged that the main fourfold system was actually supported by claims from only a single trial, that of Issobell Smyth at Forfar in Scotland from 1661, but maintained that the individual appearance of these dates in other British trial accounts was enough to prove this broader calendrical system.[30] In this we see

[23] Murray, *Witch-Cult*, 13.
[24] Murray, *Witch-Cult*, 10–12.
[25] Murray, *Witch-Cult*, 5.
[26] Murray, *Witch-Cult*, 97, 112. Here Murray acknowledged that she took the term 'Esbat' from just a single source; it seems that at that point she was using it as her own etic label for the witches' lesser meetings, rather than claiming the witches themselves did so. By *The God of the Witches*, however, she was employing 'Esbat' with no such qualification, see Murray, *God*, 69–70, 77.
[27] Murray, *Witch-Cult*, 121, 190; reiterated in Murray, *God*, 77.
[28] Murray, *Witch-Cult*, 12–13, 109; Murray, *God*, 79.
[29] Murray, *Witch-Cult*, 109.
[30] Murray, *Witch-Cult*, 109–10.

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Murray's tendency to take evidence from only a single source before treating it as symptomatic of the witch-cult writ large.[31]

For Murray, the sabbaths were a largely nocturnal affair, 'beginning about midnight and lasting till early dawn or cockcrow'.[32] She thought that they were 'originally held on a fixed site', most commonly a standing stone, although in *The God of the Witches* added that 'in England any open field or moor could be used, while in Scotland it was a moor or the sea-shore'.[33] Among those in attendance would be the Devil – not an actual supernatural presence, but 'a human being, generally a man, occasionally a woman', who represented the horned god and who was usually identified by a head covering or a distinctive shoe.[34] Once at the sabbath, attendees would pay homage to this Devil, 'who sat or stood in a convenient place', and they would renew their vows of obedience to him, kiss part of his body, and 'sometimes' turn widdershins. This accomplished, the witches described whatever spell-casting they had engaged in since the last sabbath, after which the Devil oversaw any new admissions or marriages; 'This ended the business part of the meeting.' This would be followed by what Murray euphemistically called 'the "obscene" fertility rites'.[35] It seems here that she meant sex rites, something she thought was 'one of the chief features' of 'fertility cults' like Ritual Witchcraft.[36] Sex between female witches and the Devil, Murray argued, often took place with the aid of an artificial phallus, because one man alone was 'unable to satisfy all the calls upon him'. This was also, she thought, why various interrogated witches reported the Devil's penis to be cold.[37]

The sex rites over, the sabbath ended with feasting and dancing, the latter often accompanied by 'a hymn of praise' directed to the witches' god.[38] The dances, Murray surmised, were largely 'intended to promote fertility', with the choice of dance style 'varying apparently according to the form of fertility required, whether of crops, animals, or human beings'.[39] While Murray was of the opinion that animal sacrifice did form part of Ritual Witchcraft, she declared that 'it [did] not occur at

[31] A tendency highlighted by Simpson, 'Margaret Murray', 91–92; Oates and Wood, *Coven of Scholars*, 13; and Hutton, *Triumph*, revised, 203.
[32] Murray, *Witch-Cult*, 111–12.
[33] Murray, *Witch-Cult*, 106–09; Murray, *God*, 80.
[34] Murray, *Witch-Cult*, 31–32, 42.
[35] Murray, *Witch-Cult*, 124.
[36] Murray, *Witch-Cult*, 175.
[37] Murray, *Witch-Cult*, 177–78.
[38] Murray, *Witch-Cult*, 112, 124, 137.
[39] Murray, *Witch-Cult*, 130.

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the Great Assembly, for there the sacrifice was of the God himself'.[40] The latter sacrifice, Murray believed, was by fire and took place sporadically, although she was 'uncertain whether the interval of time […] was one, seven, or nine years'; she later felt more confident in asserting that it did typically occur every seven or nine years.[41] She acknowledged that the actual evidence for such a practice was very limited, consisting only of accounts from France and Belgium in which 'a goat was substituted for the human victim', but insisted on such sacrifices because it integrated her witches' religion into the argument, presented by Scottish anthropologist James Frazer (1854–1941), that prehistoric religions revolved around a god sacrificed for communal fertility.[42]

There can be little doubt that Murray's overall presentation of the witches' sabbath, replete with its unashamed sex and immolated god, was one that would have unsettled many readers in early twentieth-century Britain. Despite this, it is intriguing that Murray cast this celebration in a somewhat positive light. In her words, Ritual Witchcraft was 'a joyous religion' whose practitioners saw their 'earthly Sabbath' as 'the true Paradise, where there was more pleasure than [they] could express'.[43] Reflecting a broader tendency in her work, by the time of *The God of the Witches* she was offering an even more affirmatory appraisal, declaring that the 'feasting and general jollity so characteristic of the Great Sabbaths is curiously reminiscent of the modern method of keeping Christmas'.[44]

While Murray profoundly influenced popular understandings of early modern witchcraft, she was not the only British scholar advocating a romantic perspective at the time. In many ways, her efforts were paralleled by Montague Summers (1880–1948), an English convert to Roman Catholicism who similarly produced several books on witchery from the 1920s through to the 1940s. Like Murray, Summers fully believed that there had been a witches' religion in early modern Europe, but he nevertheless differed from her assessment that this tradition had been a surviving pre-Christian faith.[45] Indeed, reflecting a rather poor view of Murray, he declared her 'imaginative thesis' to be 'radically and wholly erroneous'.[46] Sniping at Murray's self-presentation as

[40] Murray, *Witch-Cult*, 154.
[41] Murray, *Witch-Cult*, 159; Murray, *God*, 123.
[42] Murray, *Witch-Cult*, 159; Murray, *God*, 123.
[43] Murray, *Witch-Cult*, 15.
[44] Murray, *God*, 117.
[45] Murray and Summers' work is, for instance, compared in Wood, 'Reality of Witch Cults'.
[46] Summers, *History*, 32.

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an anthropologist – *The Witch-Cult in Western Europe* was subtitled *A Study in Anthropology* – Summers expressed his opinion that 'anthropology alone offers no explanation of Witchcraft. Only the trained theologian can adequately treat the subject'.[47] He thus aligned himself with certain early modern demonologists, adopting the definition of a sorcerer from the French jurist and author, Jean Bodin (c. 1529–1596).[48]

Although Summers acknowledged that elements of pre-Christian religion might have fed into early modern witchery, he noted that this was true of much in Christian Europe and need not indicate the specific survival of 'pagan cult'.[49] Instead, Summers took the view that the witchcraft religion was unambiguously Satanic, much as the people of early modern Europe had feared, and that it even enjoyed the active involvement of supernatural evil. He believed that it had emerged during the eleventh century under the heavy influence of Gnosticism, which for him was a dangerous heresy.[50] This interpretation of witchery as a genuine Satanic religion obviously had considerable repercussions for Summers' understanding of the witches' sabbath.

Summers devoted a section to the sabbath in his 1926 work, *The History of Witchcraft and Demonology*. In contrast to Murray's comparative emphasis on the uniformity of sabbath customs, Summers pointed to the evidence for their considerable variation. He even suggested that 'the name Sabbat may be held to cover every kind' of witches' gathering, as opposed to it being the term for a specific type of event.[51] As well as being an inevitable feature of the witches' geographical and cultural dispersal, Summers also interpreted this sabbath variation in theological terms, suggesting that 'the liturgy of darkness is of its essence opposed to the comely worship of God' – where God seeks uniformity and order, therefore, the Devil favours heterogeneity and chaos.[52] Summers proceeded to note a distinction in the scale of these gatherings, referring to both 'Grand Sabbats' and 'lesser Sabbats', although gave little attention to this division.[53]

Again in contrast to Murray, Summers thought that sabbaths need not take place on specific dates, illustrating this variation with examples from across the early modern record. He noted that May Eve – in German,

[47] Summers, *History*, 45.
[48] Summers, *History*, 1.
[49] Summers, *History*, 40, 43.
[50] Summers, *History*, 29.
[51] Summers, *History*, 111.
[52] Summers, *History*, 110.
[53] Summers, *History*, 113.

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Die Walpurgisnacht – was a popular choice across Western Europe, and that 23 June was also common, but went on to highlight broader regional variation; New England witches selected Christmas Day, while those of Lancashire favoured Good Friday, for instance.[54] The locations of such rites, Summers also noted, could be variable; 'a field near a village, a wood, a tor, a valley, an open waste beneath some blasted oak, a cemetery, a ruined building, some solitary chapel or semi-deserted church, sometimes a house belonging to one of the initiates'.[55] Where Summers saw greater uniformity was in the timing of these rites, for like Murray he argued that they typically commenced at midnight and proceeded through to cockcrow.[56]

There were other points where Summers again agreed with Murray. Like her, he acknowledged that the figure appearing as the Devil was often a man, one whom he thought had sex with women in attendance, sometimes with the aid of an artificial phallus.[57] He similarly echoed her view that the witches occasionally attended their revels while masked.[58] Where he departed most noticeably from Murray was in believing that demons really could manifest at these sabbaths; 'there are many striking cases in the records and trials which are to be explained in no other way'.[59] He similarly suggested that some witches may have genuinely levitated while astride broomsticks, although he believed that most references to brooms pertained to sabbath dances and ceremonies involving said items.[60] Whereas Murray's *Witch-Cult in Western Europe* had included an appendix from A. J. Clark in which it was suggested that certain witches' salves might 'produce the sensation of flying', Summers followed the Burgundian demonologist Henry Boguet (1550–1619) in dismissing any mind-altering qualities to these unguents.[61]

Like Murray, Summers followed the early modern accounts in relating that feasting was an important part of the sabbath, but framed this in an explicitly negative way, describing 'the most beastly gluttony and drunkenness'.[62] Further emphasising the repugnant nature of the sabbath, he

[54] Summers, *History*, 111–13.
[55] Summers, *History*, 113–14.
[56] Summers, *History*, 116–17.
[57] Summers, *History*, 7, 98.
[58] Summers, *History*, 7, 136. Murray claimed this of witches broadly (*Witch-Cult*, 231) although focused on the masking of the figure representing the Devil (*Witch-Cult*, 61–63).
[59] Summers, *History*, 8, see also 145.
[60] Summers, *History*, 4–6, 122–27.
[61] A. J. Clark in Murray, *Witch-Cult*, 280; Murray repeated Clark's suggestions in *God*, 91–92; Summers, *History*, 6, 121–22.
[62] Summers, *History*, 143–45.

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claimed that the sacrifice of animals and sometimes children to demonic forces might also take place.[63] Finally, Summers argued, the sabbath climaxed with 'that appalling blasphemy and abominable impiety by which the most Holy Sacrifice of the Altar was mocked and burlesqued' – the black mass.[64] To perform this act, which often entailed the desecration of a Eucharistic host in an inverted version of the Catholic mass, the Satanic congregation required 'some apostate or renegade priest' who had abandoned Christ for Satan.[65] In this, Summers underscored his view that the witches' sabbath was part of a religion that accepted the basic tenets of Catholicism, but simply set itself against them; this obviously contrasted with Murray's belief that the sabbath essentially represented a rite far older than Christianity itself.

Summers' ideas had little impact on historical scholarship.[66] He himself held no academic post, while his open references to the involvement of demons surely distanced him further from advocates of the rationalist approach. His obvious learning and erudition nevertheless would have impressed many readers and his books remained some of the most accessible studies on early modern witchery during the first half of the century. Summers, like Murray, enjoyed a broader social influence – including among many readers interested in the occult.[67] This is, for instance, evident in the ostensibly non-fiction writing of Rollo Ahmed (c. 1898–1958), a British Guianese esotericist who, after moving to England, produced the 1936 book *The Black Art*.[68] Much as Summers had argued that Satanism had been informed by Middle Eastern Gnosticism, Ahmed presented the witchcraft of late medieval and early modern Europe as a tradition informed by 'theories and practices of Oriental magic' brought into Christendom by returning Crusaders.[69] He declared that, at the sabbath, 'people of every grade of society' gathered to 'give themselves up to debauchery and cruelty'. His rhetoric here was sensationalistic, recounting 'rude altars on which lay the mangled figure of the human sacrifice, bathed in its own blood'.[70] Like Summers

[63] Summers, *History*, 158, 160.
[64] Summers, *History*, 143, 145–46.
[65] Summers, *History*, 147.
[66] A point noted by Fudge, 'Traditions', 494.
[67] His influence on gothic horror and more threatening British portrayals of the occult has been noted by Wood, 'Reality of Witch Cults', 82 and Doherty, 'From Decadent Diabolist', 2.
[68] On Ahmed see Josiffe, 'British Voodoo'.
[69] Ahmed, *Black Art*, 71.
[70] Ahmed, *Black Art*, 73, 80.

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before him, Ahmed had no influence on the mainstream historiography of witchcraft; however his work – which was aimed at a general, rather than a scholarly, readership – surely contributed to broader public perceptions of witchery and, with it, the witches' sabbath.

The last hurrahs for the romantic perspective, at least within Anglophone academia, came from North America, namely in the work of the Canadian Elliot Rose and the American Jeffrey Burton Russell (1934–2023). Distancing themselves from the Murrayite interpretation, both leaned closer to Summers in believing that a form of Satanism lay behind the early modern witch trials. In his 1962 book *A Razor for a Goat*, Rose suggested that a Satanic witch-cult had been fashioned largely in the thirteenth century by Goliards, wandering clerics known for their involvement in minstrelsy. In Rose's view, these Satanic Goliards established a standardised tradition – one involving communal sabbaths – that gradually spread across Western Europe.[71] A less fixed origin for Satanic witchery was given in Russell's *Witchcraft in the Middle Ages* from 1972; here the witches' cult became the product of the gradual integration of Christian heresies into an older strata of folk tradition. Neither historian devoted considerable attention to what the witches' sabbaths actually entailed, but both made suggestions in that direction. Rose lamented that 'on the whole, the stories about the Sabbat come to us with poor credentials', but he nonetheless thought that certain elements of these accounts, like their descriptions of 'flying ointments, or round dances widdershins, or devil's marks', could not be explained away as 'scare-stories borrowed from anti-Cathar propaganda' and thus represented genuine aspects of sabbath celebrations.[72] Russell, meanwhile, dismissed Murray's proposal regarding artificial phalli and suggested that the Devil's icy penis was 'more likely an invention of the Inquisitorial imagination'.[73]

By the mid-1970s, the romantic interpretation was effectively dead so far as academic scholarship was concerned; however, it continued to enjoy an afterlife beyond the ivory towers. While its influence among new religious communities is addressed in the following section, at this juncture we should also note that the romantic perspective, particularly as developed by Murray, exerted an impact among second-wave feminists during the 1970s.[74] The American socialist feminists Barbara Ehrenreich

[71] Rose, *Razor for a Goat*, 167, 174.
[72] Rose, *Razor for a Goat*, 34, 173.
[73] Russell, *Witchcraft*, 250–51.
[74] On second-wave feminist interpretations of the witch trials, see Purkiss, *Witch in History*, 7–29.

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(1941–2022) and Deirdre English (b. 1948), for instance, published a short 1973 book in which they related how 'some writers speculate that the [witch] meetings were occasions for pagan religious worship. Undoubtedly the meetings were also occasions for trading herbal lore and passing on the news'.[75] This rather benign interpretation of the sabbath chimed with Ehrenreich and English's broader argument that those accused of witchcraft were women healers persecuted by the rising male medical establishment. Although this perspective would also have little impact on historical scholarship, it undoubtedly shaped the perceptions of many feminists for generations to come.

* * *

In the world of witchcraft historiography, the 1960s inaugurated a period of major change. By the start of the 1970s, Monter would hail 'a genuine renaissance in witchcraft scholarship', while by the 2000s, historian Thomas Fudge could write of how the topic had been 'revolutionized' over the preceding four decades.[76] This change was principally brought about by more historians delving into the original trial records, often producing micro-studies examining particular incidents and localities in-depth, but was also marked by a growing willingness to draw on social-scientific theory and anthropological comparisons to gain a better understanding of what had really been going on.[77]

It is in this context that the romantic scholars' argument for the reality of an early modern witchcraft religion, and with it the witches' sabbath, basically collapsed. Over several decades, scholars pointed repeatedly to the underlying issues with Murray's interpretation.[78] Fewer, if any, felt it necessary to tackle Summers in quite the same manner.[79] However, it was less the active demolition of these scholars' work that swept their ideas from consideration. Rather, the new body of scholarship brought forth ever more information on the early modern witch trials, thereby exposing the lack of any widespread witches' religion in this period to begin with. Instead, scholars increasingly began to explore the fifteenth-century emergence of the sabbath stereotype. In 1975, the English historian

[75] Ehrenreich and English, *Witches, Midwives, and Nurses*, 12.
[76] Monter, 'Historiography', 440; Fudge, 'Traditions', 491.
[77] Monter, 'Historiography', 444–45.
[78] Rose, *Razor*, 56, 67–78; Thomas, *Religion and the Decline*, 436, 514–17; Cohn, *Europe's Inner Demons*, 110–15; Simpson, 'Margaret Murray'.
[79] Even fellow romantics were critical; Rose dismissed Summers' 'outright credulity' and 'no trace of critical sense' (Rose, *Razor for a Goat*, 10, 12), while Russell called Summers' work 'erratic and unreliable' (Russell, *Witchcraft*, 30).

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Norman Cohn (1915–2007) highlighted that early modern conspiracy theories regarding infanticide, cannibalism, and incest repeated tropes that had been circulating in Europe since at least the second century – directed originally at Christians themselves.[80] The following year, the American Richard Kieckhefer (b. 1946) argued that the notion of the diabolical sabbath was essentially an elite, literate construction with little permeation of the broader population, at least in the context of the fifteenth century.[81]

Reflecting the standard view of this new witchcraft historiography was Welsh historian Keith Thomas (b. 1933) and his 1971 comment that witches' sabbaths were 'almost certainly non-existent'.[82] While this perspective echoed that of the earlier rationalists, the post-1960s historians generally departed from the rationalist view that the witch-hunts were principally an elite, top-down process imposed on unwilling populations. Instead, they proved far more open to the cultural complexities from which anti-witch persecutions arose, including the agency of poorer people in initiating accusations and in popular folklore's role in shaping understandings of witchery. Cohn, for instance, suggested that 'certain standardized trance or dream experiences amongst the peasantry' had contributed more to the witches' sabbath than was 'commonly supposed'.[83] This perspective opened up space for a side current within modern witchcraft historiography, one that placed particular focus on the impact of early modern folk traditions involving visionary experiences – experiences that scholars operating in this current repeatedly labelled 'shamanic' or 'shamanistic'.

This is an interpretative outlook which one might label 'Ginzburgian' after its most notable exponent, the Italian historian Carlo Ginzburg (b. 1939). In the early 1960s, Ginzburg discovered Inquisition records in the Archepiscopal Archives of Udine pertaining to a series of events that took place in Friuli, northeast Italy, during the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. This material revealed the existence of a folk tradition revolving around individuals known as the *benandanti*. These *benandanti* believed that, at night, their spirits departed their sleeping bodies and proceeded to battle malevolent entities seeking to damage the community's crops, vineyards, and livestock. It was evident from the surviving records that various

[80] Cohn, *Europe's Inner Demons*.
[81] Kieckhefer, *European Witch Trials*, especially chapter 3.
[82] Thomas, *Religion and the Decline*, 516. A few of these historians have considered the possibility of rare ostension; Kieckhefer acknowledged that 'occasional eccentrics' may have drawn on clerical accounts to create their own 'anti-authoritarian, devil-worshipping assemblies'. If this ever happened, however, he noted that it is 'not demonstrable'. See Kieckhefer, *European Witch Trials*, 41–42.
[83] Cohn, *Europe's Inner Demons*, xii.

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inquisitors were perplexed by this popular belief; they suspected that the *benandanti* might actually be witches whose nocturnal assignations were of a more diabolical nature. That is to say, these inquisitors sought to reinterpret the *benandanti*'s belief as evidence for the witches' sabbath and subsequently convince various *benandanti* themselves that this Satanic interpretation was the truth.

In addition to bringing this fascinating phenomenon to historians' attention, Ginzburg proffered his own interpretations of the early modern evidence. He proposed, for instance, that the *benandanti*'s battles – which by the sixteenth century existed only as visions – had previously taken place in physical reality, part of a 'fertility rite' in which 'two groups of youths' squared up to each other 'to stimulate their own reproductive capacity, and by analogy, the fertility of the fields'.[84] This supposition, as other historians later noted, lacked any supporting evidence, but nonetheless it did little to dampen enthusiasm for Ginzburg's discovery.[85] Monter called Ginzburg's 1966 book, *I benandanti*, a 'brilliant monograph' which had 'implications of major importance for the study of European beliefs about witchcraft'.[86]

It took seventeen years for *I benandanti* to appear in an English translation, and in that time there was inevitably some speculation, especially among those unable to read Italian, that he had actually discovered supporting evidence for Murray's theories about witchcraft as a pre-Christian religion. In his foreword to the English publication, titled *The Night Battles*, Ginzburg was keen to explain that this was not the case; he maintained that Murray's work was 'discredited', even if he accepted that there was a 'kernel of truth' in her thesis, namely that 'witchcraft had its roots in an ancient fertility cult'.[87] This, however, was itself a contentious point, one that his own work had failed to conclusively demonstrate.

The thematic commonality between Murray's and Ginzburg's work arose because both were ultimately operating from a far larger and older perspective within European scholarship, one varyingly called the 'doctrine of survivals' or 'pagan survivals'. Prevalent throughout the nineteenth century, when it reached its most visible articulation in the work of English anthropologist Edward Tylor (1832–1917), this doctrine of survivals maintained that beliefs and customs could survive, preserved, in later stages of societal development. In the context of European culture,

[84] Ginzburg, *Night Battles*, 24.
[85] See, for instance, the critique in Cohn, *Europe's Inner Demons*, 223.
[86] Monter, 'Historiography', 443.
[87] Ginzburg, *Night Battles*, xiii.

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this inevitably meant that folklore recorded in late medieval, early modern, or even modern contexts could be interpreted as survivals of pre-Christian religion. Ginzburg's approach, as late as it was, was actually a fairly standard utilisation of this framework, whereas Murray had been far more atypical in the extent to which she stretched this interpretation.

For present purposes, another significant feature of Ginzburg's work was the way in which he drew parallels between the folk traditions of early modern Europe and the broader concept of shamanism. In *The Night Battles*, Ginzburg suggested that there was 'a real, not an analogical connection between benandanti and shamans', although he chose not to dwell on this point.[88] These simple beginnings, however, set the stage from which a broader conceptual interrelationship would develop. During the eighteenth century, the term 'shaman' had been absorbed into Europe from the Tungus languages of North Asia, and since that time, it had been widely applied to a range of ritual specialists found in small-scale societies that modern Europeans generally considered primitive, especially in Asia and the Americas. By the twentieth century, various scholars were attempting to theorise 'shamanism' as a meaningful label for a specific type of religious activity, the most notable of whom was the influential Romanian historian of religion Mircea Eliade (1907–1986).

For Eliade, shamanism was a 'technique of ecstasy', and while he saw it existing in various parts of the world, he nevertheless regarded the ritual visionary practices of North and Central Asia as a sort of prototype against which other examples might be compared.[89] Eliade's outlook was influenced by his early commitment to Traditionalism, an esoteric current maintaining the importance of a perennial, primordial 'Tradition' underlying many of the world's religions.[90] This perennialist perspective was so integral to Eliade's outlook that the anthropologist Alice Kehoe later suggested that his work on shamanism represented 'theology, not ethnography'.[91] Eliade's major study on the topic, *Le Chamanisme et les techniques archaïques de l'extase*, had appeared in 1951 and thence in English translation in 1964 – too early to take account of Ginzburg's discovery – but Eliade nevertheless displayed a subsequent interest in the *benandanti*. In a 1975 article, he drew attention to Ginzburg's work before highlighting parallels with Romanian folk traditions, all of which he

[88] Ginzburg, *Night Battles*, 32; see also xxi.
[89] Eliade, *Shamanism*, 4.
[90] On Eliade's Traditionalism, see Sedgwick, *Traditionalism*, 55–59.
[91] Kehoe, *Shamans and Religion*, 45.

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thought testified to the broader European dissemination of 'a pre-Christian scenario founded on oneiric voyages and ecstatic ritual combat'.[92]

While Eliade had not explicitly identified these European folk practices with shamanism, Ginzburg himself increasingly shifted in that direction over coming decades. In his 1989 book *Storia notturna: Una decifrazione del Sabba*, published in English a year later as *Ecstasies: Deciphering the Witches' Sabbath*, Ginzburg presented an enquiry into what he called 'the folkloric roots of the Sabbath'.[93] Critiquing Kieckhefer's view that the witches' sabbath emerged as a predominantly elite, literate notion, Ginzburg proposed that the themes of night flying and animal metamorphoses – which were recurring parts of the early modern sabbath stereotype – instead derived from deep in European lore.[94] Significantly, however, in many ways the witches' sabbath was just a MacGuffin for Ginzburg, for in *Ecstasies* he gave very little attention to the manner in which these putatively folkloric ideas were actually integrated into the sabbath imagery.

Instead, Ginzburg used the Alpine formation of the sabbath as a springboard through which to discuss various folk traditions from different parts of Europe: accounts of people going in spirit to meet with a female leader; of individuals whose spirits travelled to do battle with their enemies; and traditions involving masked youths, often dressed in animal skins. He then drew comparisons between these traditions and those of 'the Eurasian shamans' (i.e., those of the Sámi and of the North Asian peoples), believing that the resemblances between the two were 'striking'.[95] Ginzburg further proposed that these similarities were not coincidental, but were the result of historical influence; specifically, he thought that nomadic Scythians had brought shamanic ideas from Central Asia into Central Europe around the fourth century BCE, where they had been absorbed by Celtic-speaking peoples and, in turn, spread to other areas of the continent.[96]

On the whole, Ginzburg's thesis in *Ecstasies* had comparatively little relevance for the study of early modern witchcraft *per se*. Indeed, his broad-ranging perspective invited scepticism from many colleagues working in that area.[97] As noted a few years later by English historian

[92] Eliade, 'Some Observations', 159.
[93] Ginzburg, *Ecstasies*, 11.
[94] Ginzburg, *Ecstasies*, 6, 23, 136.
[95] Ginzburg, *Ecstasies*, 172.
[96] Ginzburg, *Ecstasies*, 210–13.
[97] For a very well-referenced exploration of the scholarly response to *Ecstasies*, see Ermacora, 'Invariant Cultural Forms' and, with a focus on Ginzburg's influence on historians of the early modern period, Hutton, 'Carlo Ginzburg'.

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Robin Briggs (b. 1942), Ginzburg's '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'.[98] Certain scholars, like the American John Martin (b. 1951) and Englishman Ronald Hutton (b. 1953), praised Ginzburg's efforts but nevertheless took issue with his arguments.[99] Others, like the French Robert Muchembled (b. 1944) and Dutch Willem de Blécourt (b. 1951), showed greater willingness to highlight Ginzburg's methodological flaws.[100] Blécourt further cast doubt on the utility of the term 'shamanism' for analysing customs from early modern Europe – a point later echoed by scholars like Norway's Mathias Nygaard.[101]

While concerns such as these reflect the dominant response to Ginzburg's work among historians of early modern witchery, there has also been a current of scholarship, primarily from continental Europe, that has followed along the interpretive and rhetorical paths that Ginzburg laid down. This is not to say that they have all accepted Ginzburg's arguments *in toto*, but that they have nevertheless been interested in utilising similar language and highlighting similar themes. Drawing on Ginzburg's work on the *benandanti*, in the 1980s the Hungarian Gábor Klaniczay (b. 1950) argued that an ancient form of shamanism underlay many of the Central European folk traditions that got caught up in early modern witchcraft accusations, including those of the Hungarian *táltos*.[102] Klaniczay's compatriot Éva Pócs (b. 1936) evoked similar ideas, although thought that ritual specialists like the *táltos* were better labelled 'shamanistic' rather than 'shamans' per se.[103] Drawing on similar discourses, the Dane Gustav Henningsen (1934–2023) proposed a 'complex of shamanistic beliefs' existing throughout the Mediterranean and Eastern Europe,[104] while in the 1990s the German Wolfgang Behringer (b. 1956) suggested that Allgäuer visionary-cum-accused witch Chonrad Stoeckhlin met Eliade's definition of 'shaman'.[105]

[98] Briggs, *Witches and Neighbours*, 37.
[99] Martin, 'Journeys to the World', 620; Hutton, *Queens of the Wild*, 215.
[100] Muchembled, 'Satanic Myths', 141; Blécourt, 'Return of the Sabbat'.
[101] Nygaard, 'On the So-Called Shamanistic Substratum'.
[102] Klaniczay, 'Shamanistic Elements'; and also Klaniczay, 'Hungary'.
[103] Pócs, *Between the Living*, 15.
[104] Initially published in German, later translated as Henningsen, 'Ladies from Outside', 207.
[105] Behringer, *Shaman of Oberstdorf*, 142. Although Behringer was open to using the term 'shaman', he expressed caution about many of Ginzburg's ideas and emphasised Stoeckhlin's beliefs as a product of sixteenth-century Alpine culture, rather than as a representation of pre-Christian survival.

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Finally, in the 2000s the Briton Emma Wilby (b. 1963) argued that early modern notions of the witches' familiar spirit originated in a pre-Christian 'shamanistic' religion.[106]

Of particular pertinence to present purposes is the fact that these scholars repeatedly turned, albeit usually briefly, to the witches' sabbath. Generally, they followed Ginzburg's lead in insisting that there was a folkloric strata undergirding the notion of the sabbath, at least in certain regions. Klaniczay, for instance, thought that 'the detailed imagery of the sabbath already existed' in Hungary before 'vague learned influences arrived' from the west – an idea echoed and expanded upon by Pócs.[107] Henningsen similarly noted how a Sicilian visionary tradition involving gatherings of female supernatural beings, the *donni de fuora*, suggested that 'all the ingredients' integrated into the sabbath stereotype already existed in Southern European folk culture.[108] Over in Britain, Wilby proposed that that island's accounts of the sabbath may have 'originated in folk beliefs about travel with the fairies, or into fairyland', while also suggesting that they might have arisen from real-world events in with 'people came together and ritualistically employed […] overt invocatory techniques in order to attain trance states' that would facilitate communication with familiar spirits.[109]

Like Ginzburg before them, some of these scholars faced criticism from other historians working on early modern Europe, meaning that their interpretative frameworks and terminological choices must be treated with caution. Indeed, in 2018 Pócs veered back from her earlier enthusiasm for 'shamanism' as a descriptor of the *táltos*, perhaps reflecting a growing scholarly unease with the term's utility for early modern Europe.[110] Regardless of such concerns, it is nevertheless the case that these scholars have made important contributions to understanding the complexity of popular beliefs in early modern Europe, with clear repercussions for the localised adaptation of witches' sabbath imagery.[111]

* * *

[106] Wilby, *Cunning Folk*, 5, 125.
[107] Klaniczay, 'Hungary', 249; Pócs, *Between the Living*, 73–105.
[108] Henningsen, 'Ladies from Outside', 206–07.
[109] Wilby, *Cunning Folk*, 85, 177.
[110] Pócs, 'Hungarian *Táltos*'.
[111] Klaniczay believed that he and his Ginzburgian colleagues 'considerably enriched' understandings of 'the mythology of the witches' sabbath', see Klaniczay, 'Shamanism and Witchcraft', 220. This article appeared as part of a special 'forum' on shamanism and witchcraft.

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We have seen here how scholarly interpretations of early modern witchery – and thus of the witches' sabbath – have been far from uniform and instead have undergone significant shifts since 1900. From the nineteenth century, scholarship on the subject inherited the competing perspectives of the rationalists and the romantics, the latter interpretation arguably reaching its apogee in the first half of the twentieth century. The 1960s and 1970s saw a marked transformation within witchcraft historiography, one characterised by increasingly detailed study of the early modern evidence, and with it Richard Kieckhefer's argument that the witches' sabbath was a largely elite construction of the fifteenth century. The arguments of Carlo Ginzburg and those following in his wake contested this, emphasising the idea that folkloric beliefs about the supernatural underlay much of the sabbath stereotype. Both perspectives, perhaps, were too entrenched in their respective positions. Certainly, as the British historian Darren Oldridge could note at the start of the twenty-first century, 'the majority of historians occupy ground somewhere in between', remaining open to both popular and elite influences over the idea of the diabolical sabbath.[112]

2 The Sabbath Reborn

During the early modern period, and in the immediate centuries that followed, it is certainly possible that a few, isolated individuals might have considered themselves witches. Perhaps they hexed those they disliked, or felt some allegiance to Satan and his minions. If they existed, we unfortunately know very little of these individuals, their private thoughts, and their secretive actions. In this period, openly declaring oneself to be a witch would have been disastrous, inviting ostracism and persecution if not death. As a result, it is unlikely that these individuals would have readily gathered in like-minded groups, forming real-world witches' covens. In turn, that makes it unlikely that many, perhaps even any, individuals assembled for rituals that they understood as witches' sabbaths from the fifteenth through to the early nineteenth century.

As the later nineteenth and twentieth centuries came around, so new opportunities appeared. It was not that fear of malevolent witchery suddenly evaporated, for we have plenty of evidence for such concerns permeating Europe and North America during the first half of the twentieth century, and in some places even later.[113] However, there surely had

[112] Oldridge, 'General Introduction', 3.
[113] For instance, Favret-Saada, *Deadly Words*; Davies, *America Bewitched*; Waters, *Cursed Britain*.

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been a decline in the pervasiveness of such beliefs, in the hold that they exerted over more educated and more powerful sectors of the population, and in the extremity of the responses that accused witches might face. It became increasingly possible for small groups to begin drawing on the imagery and language of diabolist witchcraft without serious fear of violent retribution. An example of this is the Order of Horsemen, a British fraternity for men working with horses and whose initiation ceremony, at least by the nineteenth century, reportedly involved shaking the Devil's hand – in reality a bullock's hoof.[114]

These socio-cultural changes gradually opened up greater space for the witch in Western societies. As fewer and fewer people believed in the efficacy of curses, the broader social fear of the witch declined; this, in turn, enabled people to actively reclaim the identity of the witch for their own uses.[115] The result was the emergence of what I term 'modern religious witchcraft', a varied array of new religious movements whose practitioners embraced the label of the 'witch' and identified their ritual activities as 'witchcraft'.[116] These groups certainly had their differences – some adopted modern Paganism, others forms of Satanism, and in certain cases even African diasporic traditions – but all turned to the same set of rhetorical associations. With it, the sabbath was able to be reborn, now a creation not just of early modern conspiracy theorists, but a real-world, tangible practice by people who truly believed that they were able to attend such gatherings.

* * *

In insisting that the witches' sabbath had been nothing but a figment of the inquisitorial imagination, the historians of the rationalist perspective offered comparatively little for aspiring new religious witches to work with. By contrast, the work of the romantic scholars proved far more promising. The likes of Jules Michelet, Margaret Murray, and Montague Summers had argued that witches' sabbaths had really occurred in centuries past and, on occasion, had even suggested that such ceremonies might still take place in the present.[117] It is perhaps inevitable that

[114] Discussed in Hutton, *Triumph*, revised, 63–64.

[115] As Ronald Hutton has noted in public talks, one is only safe to publicly declare oneself a witch within a society that has largely ceased to believe in the power of malevolent witchery.

[116] I use this term in Doyle White, *New Witches*.

[117] Murray believed that while her witch-cult had died out in England, its practice survived in France and Italy, see Murray, 'Witchcraft', 686–87; Summers thought that 'Satanists today' still perform 'abominable rites', see Summers, *History*, 87, a point reiterated at 151.

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some enterprising readers were thus tempted to recreate such rites for themselves. Certainly, it is not impossible that in and around the *fin de siècle* some sabbath rituals were carried out by small groups, acting clandestinely, who left no trace in the historical record. Currently, the earliest known modern witchcraft group documented in Britain was formed by Oxford University students during the 1920s. According to surviving accounts, they performed an 'Esbath' – almost certainly a borrowing from Murray's term 'Esbat' – during which they burned a doll and ate some fruit.[118] Their choice of terminology and activity suggests that, although interested in communal witchery, these students were not prepared or capable of putting on a larger ritual replete with the more contentious connotations of the sabbath.

Another group that may have coalesced in this period is that which is commonly called the 'New Forest coven'.[119] According to the testimony of the English occultist Gerald Gardner (1884–1964), who claimed to have been initiated into the group in 1939, this coven met around the Dorset-Hampshire borders and had an overlapping membership with the Rosicrucian Order Crotona Fellowship, an esoteric organisation headquartered in nearby Christchurch. Gardner would provide little detail as to the nature of the group's rituals, nor would he mention them performing a sabbath; instead, he recounted a collective act of spell-casting to deter a German invasion.[120] Confusingly, the jury remains out when it comes to the New Forest coven's existence. Given Gardner's propensity for falsehoods, scholars like Aidan Kelly and Chas Clifton have argued that the group may never have existed, but was simply a later invention of Gardner's to bolster his claims to a witchcraft lineage.[121] Conversely, Gardner's biographer Philip Heselton has constructed a compelling (if circumstantial) case that the coven did exist, identifying several individuals who may have been among its members.[122]

What is certain is that, after the Second World War, Gardner relocated to London and formed his own witchcraft group, the Bricket Wood coven, based out of a Hertfordshire naturist camp. It was through this group that he developed his own tradition, now known as Gardnerian Wicca, which in turn provided the blueprint for the broader Wiccan religion. Although Gardner presented Wicca as the survival of an ancient

[118] Discussed in Wheeler, 'Esbat Among the Quads'.
[119] There is no evidence the group called themselves this.
[120] Bracelin, *Gerald Gardner*, 165–67.
[121] Kelly, *Crafting the Art*, xviii–xix; Clifton, *Her Hidden Children*, 14–15.
[122] Most recently in Heselton, *In Search of the New Forest Coven*.

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pre-Christian tradition inherited via the New Forest coven, it was nevertheless clearly a modern Pagan religion relying on rituals he had largely devised himself. The development of these ceremonies can be traced through his written texts, from an early scrapbook titled 'Ye Bok of ye Art Magical' through to various recensions of his 'Book of Shadows'. Gardner's Wicca was duotheistic, revolving around a horned god and lunar goddess, deities honoured in group rituals performed skyclad (i.e., naked), and which also incorporated spell-casting, often for the purposes of healing. Gardner wrote publicly about his tradition and was keen to promote it, making media appearances and encouraging the initiation of new recruits, who in turn established their own covens across Britain and thence in North America during the 1950s and 1960s.[123]

Gardner's writings, both in his ritual texts and books for public consumption, provide us with a fairly clear idea of how he visualised the witches' sabbath. Significantly, they suggest that his perspective shifted over time; in his medievalist novel *High Magic's Aid* (1949), for instance, he referred to 'sabbaths', but by the time of his non-fiction works *Witchcraft Today* (1954) and *The Meaning of Witchcraft* (1959) he had instead opted for the term 'sabbats'. Murray had used the term 'Sabbath', whereas Summers had preferred 'Sabbat', although it is unlikely that Gardner, despite adopting Summers' spelling, wished to associate his vision of witchery with Summers' diabolist imaginings. Instead, it may be that Gardner – or perhaps someone close to him, like his high priestess Doreen Valiente (1922–1999) – felt that the term 'Sabbath' bore too many associations with Jewish and Christian religion, and thus the alternative spelling would be more appropriate for their avowedly Pagan tradition. Indeed, both Gardner and Valiente sought to distinguish the etymology of the 'sabbath' from its probable Jewish origins, instead positing an origin in 'Sabazius', which they took to be a name of the god Dionysus.[124] Whatever Gardner's reasoning, it is apparent that his shift towards the spelling of 'sabbat' would have major implications, for it is under this name that the witches' gathering has typically been known among Wiccans ever since.

Gardner followed Murray in applying the term 'sabbath/sabbat' to particular seasonal gatherings, as opposed to adopting Summers' view

[123] On Gardner's life and the development of Wicca, see Hutton, *Triumph*, revised, 213–60 and Heselton, *Witchfather*.

[124] Gardner, *Witchcraft Today*, 147; Valiente, *ABC of Witchcraft*, 294. This notion was already circulating the occult milieu; it had been suggested, for instance, in Lévi, *Dogme et Rituel: Tome Second*, 220, although he dismissed it as unlikely.

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that these could be generic labels for any witches' assembly. More specifically, Gardner also followed Murray in identifying the sabbats as taking place on 'the divisions of the ancient Gaelic year', namely 'May eve, August eve, November eve (Hallowe'en) and February eve'.[125] At the same time, Gardner was prepared to make alterations to Murray's calendrical system. Whereas Murray had suggested that in recorded centuries the witches' religion had centred on a male god, with any worship of a goddess having fallen away at some distant period, Gardner presented his tradition as an unambiguously duotheistic one, and this is something that impacted his framing of the sabbats. As he explained, 'the two summer festivals [are] in honour of the goddess, wherein she takes precedence, and the two winter ones [are] those wherein the god takes precedence'. Accordingly, he added, 'in summer the main prayers are to the goddess, while in winter it is chiefly the god who is prayed to'.[126]

In constructing his image of the witches' sabbat, Gardner was highly selective, picking elements of the early modern accounts that suited his interests while omitting others. Aspects that would have been truly contentious and potentially even criminal in mid-twentieth-century Britain were discarded. Thus, Gardner's sabbats lacked incest, infanticide, and cannibalism.[127] The *osculum infame* was similarly rejected; 'Witches do not kiss the Devil's posterior, first because they never kiss anyone's posterior and, secondly, because the Devil is never there for anyone to kiss. I cannot make it any clearer than that, can I?'[128] At the same time, Gardner repurposed other elements of the early modern stereotype. His Wiccan sabbats did find a prominent place for dancing, which he described as being 'the necessary preliminary to the climax of the sabbat, the producing of power'.[129] As he put it, 'the dances are intoxicating, and this intoxication is the condition for producing what [the witches] call magic'.[130] Gardner thus followed the early modern idea of the sabbath involving both dancing and spell-casting, but offered an innovative interpretation by integrating the two, arguing that the dancing was a means of establishing the altered state of consciousness necessary for his Wiccans to

[125] Gardner, *Witchcraft Today*, 130. He reiterates these dates at Gardner, *Meaning of Witchcraft*, 19, 82.
[126] Gardner, *Witchcraft Today*, 130.
[127] Gardner suggested that claims of infanticide arose from witches taking their 'babies to the Sabbat', where they could 'present them in dedication to the Old Gods', see *Meaning of Witchcraft*, 14.
[128] Gardner, *Witchcraft Today*, 112.
[129] Gardner, *Witchcraft Today*, 111.
[130] Gardner, *Witchcraft Today*, 115.

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produce the etheric 'power' required for working 'magic'. Feasting was also adopted, which Gardner referred to as the ceremony of the 'cakes and wine'.[131] One of Gardner's coven members later noted that the group's sabbat feasts were of a bigger scale than the 'cakes and wine' rituals at lesser ceremonies, and that during these celebrations the meals were 'often shared with non-initiated friends' who had been invited along.[132]

In general, Gardner sought to present his sabbats in as innocuous a manner as possible; when appearing on a 1957 television programme, he insisted that his witches' gatherings were merely an opportunity for 'a little dinner and a dance', dismissing any suggestion of sexual orgies as 'nonsense'.[133] Although technically true, Gardner's choice of wording suggested that he was avoiding public discussion of a more contentious issue, that of the sexualised Great Rite. As the interviewer was surely aware, one of the recurring features of the early modern witches' sabbath was its display of taboo sexuality, namely orgies in which all manner of sexualities deemed perverse to the early modern imagination appear. Although Gardner would have shared the view that many of these sexualities were depraved – he took a negative view of male homosexuality[134] – he nevertheless saw (hetero)sex as bearing important spiritual significance.

Drawing on Murray's belief that the witch-cult had been fertility oriented, Gardner incorporated a heterosexual sex ritual known as the Great Rite into his ceremonies. From the earliest instructions for his sabbats, included as the final part of 'Ye Bok of Ye Art Magical', Gardner repeatedly referred to the feast being followed by this Great Rite, either 'in token, or truly'.[135] When performed in a literal manner, the Rite incorporated vaginal sex between a man and a woman, conducted in private, as a means of raising etheric energies for the purpose of spell-casting; when performed 'in token', it instead involved the symbolic penetration of a chalice by a ritual blade.[136] In practice, the Great Rite performed at Gardner's sabbats was performed only in token, although on other occasions it was potentially undertaken in its more explicit form.[137]

[131] Gardner, *Witchcraft Today*, 110.
[132] Lamond, *Fifty Years*, 15–16.
[133] 'Witchcraft,' *Out of Step*, ITV, first broadcast 4 December 1957.
[134] Bourne, *Dancing with Witches*, 38–39.
[135] Printed in Kelly, *Inventing Witchcraft*, 133–36.
[136] An outline is provided by Farrar and Farrar, *Eight Sabbats*, 51–54. For more on the Great Rite, see Urban, *Magia Sexualis*, 172–78.
[137] Valiente, *Rebirth of Witchcraft*, 59, who stresses that the literal performance of the Great Rite was always 'in private by those who wished to make use of it'.

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The four cross-quarter sabbats were not the only gatherings of Gardner's Wiccans. Again following Murray, Gardner adopted the term 'Esbat' to describe the coven's 'minor meetings', adding that these should be 'held at or near the full moon'.[138] In his final book, *The Meaning of Witchcraft*, he also stipulated that among his witches, 'the equinoxes and solstices are celebrated also, thus making the Eight Ritual Occasions'.[139] Importantly, however, at this point he did not explicitly refer to these additional celebrations as 'sabbats', perhaps suggesting that he saw them as something distinct. It appears that the growing prominence of the equinoxes and solstices within the nascent Gardnerian community came not from Gardner himself but from the impetus of his followers. One member of the Bricket Wood coven, Frederic Lamond (1931–2020), later noted that while Gardner was staying on the Isle of Man in 1958, the Hertfordshire group began celebrating the solstices and equinoxes with feasts, much like the existing sabbats; as Lamond wrote, 'Gerald did not object when he heard of it'.[140] Functionally at least, the equinoxes and solstices were being treated in the same manner as the sabbats. Perhaps unsurprisingly, it would not take long for the term 'sabbat' to migrate onto these celebrations too.

As a result, the idea of eight sabbats – as opposed to four – emerged and spread quickly throughout the burgeoning Wiccan movement. Although Valiente had broken from Gardner's coven in 1957, and thus was not involved in the group's embrace of the solstices and equinoxes, she was clearly thinking along similar lines; in a 1962 book, she referred to 'Hallowe'en, Candlemas, May Eve, and Lammas' as the 'Great' or 'Greater Sabbats', accompanied by the equinoxes and solstices as 'Lesser Sabbats'.[141] Her words would be repeated, almost verbatim, by the journalist Justine Glass in her 1965 book on witchery, giving them greater exposure.[142] By 1970, Paul Huson (b. 1942), an Englishman who

[138] Gardner, *Meaning of Witchcraft*, 19.

[139] Gardner, *Meaning of Witchcraft*, 19. Hutton, 'Modern Pagan Festivals', 259, comments that *Witchcraft Today* mentions the solstices as witches' festivals too (at *Witchcraft Today*, 130), however, there may be some ambiguity here. Gardner refers to 'the festivals corresponding to midwinter and midsummer', but from the context I believe he was probably (if confusingly) referring to Hallowe'en and Beltane, not the solstices. Lending support to this is the fact that Murray had already referred to Beltane as 'midsummer' (*Witch-Cult*, 109).

[140] Lamond, *Fifty Years*, 16–17. This was confirmed, and discussed, by Hutton, 'Modern Pagan Festivals', 259.

[141] Valiente, *Where Witchcraft Lives*, 85–86; also in Valiente, *ABC of Witchcraft*, xv, 293, and Valiente, *Witchcraft for Tomorrow*, 47.

[142] Glass, *Witchcraft*, 98.

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had devised his own system of modern religious witchcraft, was able to refer to 'the eight Sabbats', of which 'Beltane and Halloween are the more important'.[143] A decade later, the eightfold system appeared fully entrenched as the norm in the title of *Eight Sabbats for Witches*, a 1981 book by the English Wiccans Stewart (1916–2000) and Janet Farrar (b. 1950). Here, they provided additional information on the cultural background to these festivals and proposed further rituals for Wiccan readers, noting that the established outlines of the sabbats, as included in the Book of Shadows, 'are very sketchy indeed'.[144]

The expansion of Murray's fourfold system into an eightfold one was not the only calendrical change to occur in the early decades of the Wiccan movement. Another can be seen in the shift in language. Gardner had favoured English-language terms for his sabbats; in *Witchcraft Today* he predominantly called them by the name of the month that each precedes, but by *The Meaning of Witchcraft* he was utilising the more evocative names of Candlemass, Lammas, and Halloween.[145] There had nevertheless been a recognition that these dates had been significant for Gaelic-speaking communities and thus bore corresponding Gaelic names. Gardner wrote that the witches' 'four great festivals' corresponded to 'the four fire festivals of Samhaim or Samhuin (November 1), Brigid (February 1), Bealteine or Beltene (May 1), and Lugnasadh (August 1)'.[146] Similarly, Valiente – who favoured 'Imbolc or Oimelc' over 'Brigid' – commented that these were the 'Druidic names' for such celebrations, assuming a connection between the Gaelic languages and the Iron Age druids.[147] Valiente also adopted the evocative title of 'the Wheel of the Year' for this set, and in doing so was soon to be followed by other writers active in the modern witchcraft milieu.[148] This particular term was possibly borrowed from the poet-cum-writer Robert Graves (1895–1985), whose 1948 book *The White Goddess* had been a noted influence on various forms of modern religious witchcraft.[149] By the close of the twentieth century, the framing of an eightfold system of 'sabbats', described as the 'Wheel of the Year' and each labeled with a name borrowed from Gaelic or another of the Celtic languages, would be commonplace in Wicca.

[143] Huson, *Mastering Witchcraft*, 35–36.
[144] Farrar and Farrar, *Eight Sabbats*, 15.
[145] Gardner, *Meaning of Witchcraft*, 19. 'May Eve' remained without an evocative name.
[146] Gardner, *Witchcraft Today*, 130.
[147] Valiente, *ABC of Witchcraft*, 293.
[148] Valiente, *Where Witchcraft Lives*, 86; also in Glass, *Witchcraft*, 98.
[149] Graves, *White Goddess*, 186. Graves, however, placed little stress on the term and did not capitalise it as Wiccans would.

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Meanwhile, from the 1960s onwards, Wicca exported the Gardnerian eightfold sabbat system into other forms of modern Paganism and related esoteric currents, especially in Britain. The Order of Bards, Ovates, and Druids (OBOD), established by Gardner's friend Ross Nichols (1902–1975) in 1964, for instance, adopted this eightfold calendrical system into its presentation of Druidry.[150] Indeed, it has even been suggested that Gardner was happy with the Gardnerian adoption of the solstices and equinoxes because it brought his Wicca into closer communion with Nichols' ideas.[151] Henceforth, the eightfold sabbat system became a common feature of other Druidic groups and of further Pagan traditions inspired by the Wiccan model.[152] Being promoted both among Wiccans and Druids, the eightfold system came to be, as historian Ronald Hutton has noted, 'commonly regarded as having been the general festive cycle of north-western Europe in pre-Christian times'.[153] What had started as a 1950s attempt to reinterpret the witches' sabbath had broadened considerably, a result of continual processes of de-diabolisation and Paganisation.

While Wicca came to dominate broader public perceptions of modern religious witchcraft, from at least the 1960s various smaller, rival traditions also sprang up. Their adherents were often keen to differentiate themselves from Gardner, and in part due to this often migrated towards the label of 'traditional witchcraft' – a term suggesting origins that predated Gardner's Wicca even if, in practice, their emergence largely postdated it.[154] One of the tactics these groups adopted in trying to distinguish themselves from Gardnerian-derived systems was to alter the standard eightfold image of the sabbats. Thus, in 1990, Evan John Jones (1936–2003), the second Magister (i.e., leader) of a group called the Clan of Tubal Cain, referred to just four 'Sabbats' a year.[155] A few years later, the Australian-based Rhiannon Ryall, while promoting (highly dubious) claims to have been raised amongst a communal witchcraft tradition in England's West Country, presented a system of 'five festivals' incorporating the solstices, 'Beltane', 'Samhain', and 'Lady Day' (25 March).[156]

[150] Hutton, 'Modern Pagan Festivals', 259.
[151] Lamond, *Fifty Years*, 16–17.
[152] For instance, their practice among Irish Druids is observed by Butler, 'Neo-Pagan Ritual Year'.
[153] Hutton, 'Modern Pagan Festivals', 259–60.
[154] On this phenomenon, see Doyle White, 'Creation of "Traditional Witchcraft".'
[155] Jones with Valiente, *Witchcraft*, 19.
[156] Ryall, *West Country Wicca*, 3. On the unreliability of Ryall's account, see Hutton, *Triumph*, revised, 310.

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Elsewhere, Gemma Gary, who established the Ros an Bucca group in Cornwall around the start of the twenty-first century, began to promote a sixfold system: the solstices, Candlemas, May's Eve, 'Guldize Night' (a harvest festival) and 'Allantide' (31 October), referring to the latter four as the 'Furry Nights' or 'Troyl Nights'.[157]

While Britain was central to the emergence of modern religious witchcraft during the 1950s and 1960s, significant developments were also occurring in the United States. It was in San Francisco in 1966 that an occultist named Anton LaVey (1930–1997) established his Church of Satan, an organisation at the forefront of a religion now commonly termed LaVeyan Satanism. LaVey's tradition was formally atheistic, presenting Satan largely as a symbol of humanity's intrinsic animal nature, meanwhile rejecting Christianity as a religion of hypocrisy and herd mentality. While this approach is quite distinct from the theological stance taken by Wicca, like its British predecessor, LaVeyan Satanism similarly drew heavily both upon established traditions of ceremonial magic and also traditional European notions about witchery; for LaVey, female Satanists were 'witches', their male counterparts being 'warlocks'.[158]

LaVey did not follow Gardner in framing his religious celebrations as 'sabbaths', although it is quite possible that other observers regarded his meetings as such. In Ira Levin's popular 1967 novel *Rosemary's Baby*, which undoubtedly drew influence from LaVey's newly founded Church, one character refers to Satanists' meetings as '*Sabbaths* or *esbats* or whatever-they-are!'[159] The notion of the witches' sabbath did not, however, go totally unused by LaVey. The so-called 'Black Pope' was keen on publicity and, to that end, organised a 'Topless Witches' Sabbath' at a San Francisco nightclub in 1967.[160] Greater LaVeyan use of the sabbath seems to have been made in the wake of LaVey's death, although even here, it never became central. Peter Gilmore (b. 1958), who succeeded LaVey as the Church's high priest, for instance declared – in his introduction to a reissue of LaVey's *The Satanic Bible* – that Walpurgisnacht, the date on which LaVey reportedly founded his Church, was 'May Eve – the traditional Witches' Sabbath'.[161] Further emphasising this link, a Los Angeles event to mark the fifty-ninth anniversary of the Church's

[157] Gary, *Traditional Witchcraft*, 147. On Ros an Bucca, see Semmens, 'Bucca Redivivus'.
[158] LaVey, *Satanic Bible*, 111–12.
[159] Levin, *Rosemary's Baby*, 165.
[160] Introvigne, *Satanism*, 310.
[161] Gilmore in LaVey, *Satanic Bible*, 13.

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foundation, held in 2025, was marketed as a Witches' Sabbath.[162] We have here the continued use of the term 'witches' sabbath' in reference to real-world, in-person events.

* * *

As highlighted in the previous section, during the late 1960s and 1970s witchcraft historiography underwent a major shift that largely rendered the romantic perspectives of Michelet, Murray, and Summers wholly untenable. By 1980 it was no longer viable, at least among historians of early modern Europe, to claim that there had been a genuine religion of witches, gathering together to celebrate sabbats, at the heart of the witch hunts. As we have seen, however, the 1980s then saw the fuller emergence of a new historiographical trend emphasising the idea that the sabbath stereotype, and many of the folk traditions that got caught up in witchcraft accusations, reflected a 'shamanistic' substratum to European popular belief.

One point raised by these Ginzburgian scholars was the widespread existence, throughout medieval and early modern Europe, of a belief that when a person lay sleeping, their spirit could depart their body and meet with other spirit journeyers and supernatural entities. The most famous evidence for this was the canon *Episcopi*, a document from *circa* 900 which criticises those who believe that women's spirits can exit their bodies to join with nocturnal cavalcades. Ideas about spirits leaving the sleeping body persisted into more modern centuries, when they came to be described in new language, especially that of the 'subtle body' and the 'astral'.[163] Indeed, as the historians Bernd-Christian Otto and Dirk Johannsen have noted, concepts of 'astral projection' and the 'astral plane' became 'crucial elements' in the discourse of many esotericists during the late nineteenth century.[164] An important part of this development was the French 'father of occultism' Éliphas Lévi (1810–1875), who devised his concept of the 'lumière astrala' – the 'astral light' – which could be controlled by the magician's imagination. Lévi's ideas were adapted by Theosophy, a religion that emerged in the 1870s, where they took the form of the 'astral plane'. This terminology subsequently had a profound influence on many esoteric currents, including the likes of Wicca.[165]

Of further significance to present concerns, Lévi had actually integrated the witches' sabbath into his ideas regarding the astral light. In his

[162] 'Sharon LaVey's Witches' Sabbath.'
[163] On the subtle body, see Cox, *Subtle Body*.
[164] Otto and Johannsen, 'Introduction', 13.
[165] For instance, Valiente, *ABC of Witchcraft*, 18–20.

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two-volume *Dogme et Rituel de la Haute Magie* (1854–1856), he maintained that historic accounts of the sabbath reflected three separate phenomena: misunderstandings of the private assemblies of spiritual adepts, the genuine gatherings of nefarious sorcerers, and an imagined space full of fantastical unpleasantries.[166] As Lévi explained, these latter sabbaths were experienced in a dreaming state rather than in physical reality, but nevertheless actually existed in the astral light, which formed a repository of the forms imagined by humanity throughout the ages. Sabbath imagery present in the astral light, he argued, could then enter the imagination of individuals already predisposed to such a diabolist outlook.[167] Often, he added, these visions were induced by the use of narcotics, which he identified as the witches' unguents discussed by early modern demonologists.[168]

Lévi's work, both in the original French and in its 1896 translation by Arthur Edward Waite (1857–1942), profoundly influenced Anglophone occultism. His concept of the astral was, for instance, very much evident in the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, the preeminent occultist organisation of late Victorian Britain. Those practicing the Golden Dawn system underwent meditative exercises in which they saw themselves astral travelling to realms associated with different planets or the various sephiroth on the Kabbalistic Tree of Life. As well as appearing in practical occultism, notions of the astral realm also manifested in literature.[169] In some instances, literary references to the astral came to be associated with witchery; a good example can be seen in *Darker Than You Think*, a 1940s novel by American writer Jack Williamson (1908–2006).[170] Here, witches are an ancient species, distinct from *Homo sapiens*, who during the last Ice Age learned to leave their sleeping bodies and venture out in etheric forms 'as wolves or bears or tigers'.[171] Although Williamson's novel does not explicitly link witches' etheric journeys to the sabbath, it is nonetheless apparent that the juxtaposition of witchcraft with astral journeying might open up the idea of an astral sabbath, particularly among more esoterically inclined readers.[172]

166 Lévi, *Dogme et Rituel: Tome Second*, 215.
167 Lévi, *Dogme et Rituel: Tome Premiere*, 72–75, 188–89, 264, 289.
168 Lévi, *Dogme et Rituel: Tome Second*, 215.
169 Otto and Johannsen, 'Introduction', 14.
170 Williamson's story was first published in 1940, in the magazine *Unknown*, and reprinted as a novel in 1948.
171 Williamson, *Darker Than You Think*, 221–22.
172 One occultist keen on the novel was the American Jack Parsons (1914–1952), see Carter, *Sex and Rockets*, 57–60. Parsons was interested in both witchcraft and astral travelling, although I have seen no evidence that he sought to astral travel to the sabbath. On Parsons and witchcraft, see Hedenborg White, 'Eyes of Goats', 179–86.

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Given this context, and particularly the influence of Lévi's writings, it is unsurprising that certain twentieth-century British occultists began exploring the idea that the witches' sabbath was a place to which one could astral travel. Perhaps the first to do so was also the most famous, Aleister Crowley (1875–1947), who recorded a sabbath visit while living at his Abbey of Thelema in Cefalu, Sicily. Specifically, Crowley's diaries record that, on both the first and second of May 1920 (i.e., around Walpurgisnacht), he experienced dreams of attending 'the Sabbath'. Although he gave little detail of these experiences, his description of being 'on the astral at the Sabbath' implies that he did not regard these as ordinary dreams, and indeed may have deliberately sought to go to the witches' gathering.[173] Witchcraft itself was of no great interest to Crowley, playing little role in his religion of Thelema, but it seems plausible that he discussed his travels to the astral sabbath with some of his correspondents and followers within the British occult milieu.[174]

Certainly, we know that the idea of the witches' astral gathering would gain far greater attention from the collaboration of two occultists who each knew Crowley in their youth, the London artist Austin Osman Spare (1886–1956) and Crowley's own personal secretary, Kenneth Grant (1924–2011). From surviving material, it seems that Spare began to display a growing interest in witchery from 1949, at which point it was encouraged by the close friendship that he and Grant had developed.[175] Much of what we know about Spare's understanding of the sabbath comes from Grant's records and recollections, in addition to a short text that the two collaborated on over the course of 1950 and 1951, *The Witches' Sabbath*.[176] This material reveals how Spare, like Crowley, recounted attending the sabbath in his dreams, although the precise nature of these oneiric journeys eludes us.[177] These experiences evidently inspired Spare's art, spawning a series of sabbath images that incorporate cavorting and intertwined female nudes.[178]

[173] Crowley, *Magical Record*, 114–15.

[174] Crowley suggested that Leah Hirsig imagine herself as a medieval witch; see Hedenborg White and Bogdan, *Magical Diaries of Leah Hirsig*, 35–36. I thank Hedenborg White for bringing this point to my attention.

[175] Baker, *Austin Osman Spare*, 238.

[176] Its progress can be traced in the letters and diary entries printed in Grant and Grant, *Zos Speaks!*, 62, 66–68, 73, 76. *The Witches' Sabbath* book itself would only be published in 1992, by Fulgur, and later integrated into 'The Zoëtic Grimoire of Zos' for publication in *Zos Speaks!*

[177] Grant and Grant, *Zos Speaks!*, 52, 121.

[178] Grant and Grant, *Zos Speaks!*, 48, 52, 60. Examples of these artworks appear at 227, 240, 256, and 264.

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Given that sexual activity played an important role in Spare's ritual system, it is not surprising that it also occupied a major place in his conceptualisation of the witches' sabbath. As he described it in his essay on the topic, at the sabbath, 'sex is used as the medium and the technique of a magical act'.[179] More specifically, he followed the early modern demonologists in imagining this sex in orgiastic terms; 'the Sabbath becomes a deliberate sex orgy for the purpose of exteriorisation, to give reality to autistic wishful thinking by transference'.[180] He further maintained that the witches in attendance at the sabbath, and whom the attendee might copulate with, were 'usually old, usually grotesque [… and about] as sexually attractive as a corpse' – leading Grant, in one letter, to ponder how a man could maintain an erection when confronted with 'a haggard whore-witch of fantastic ugliness'. For Spare, however, such 'perversion' was necessary to overcome 'moral prejudice or conformity' and achieve personal 'transmutation', thus ensuring that the magician's will was accomplished through the sexual act.[181] Whether he saw this act occurring exclusively on an astral level, or whether he accompanied it with physical masturbation, remains ambiguous.

Although Spare echoed Gardner in maintaining an important place for sex at the witches' sabbath, it is apparent that Spare's perception of the gathering was wholly at odds with that of his Wiccan counterpart. It is thus intriguing to note that, at Grant's introduction, Spare and Gardner met to discuss their divergent opinions in September 1954. For Grant, the clash of the two elderly magicians proved 'screamingly funny'. He noted that the duo had 'a fierce argument as to who had been to the Witches' Sabbath, what the Witches' Sabbath actually was, and so on'.[182] Spare evidently thought that Gardner's claims regarding the witches' sabbath as a physical gathering was nonsense; he subsequently wrote to Grant, telling him that Gardner cannot have 'attended a real Sabbath'.[183] The *real* Sabbath, Spare maintained, occurred on an astral level.

After Spare's death, Grant went on to gain increased prominence within the British occult scene thanks largely to his publications. These works outlined ideas that were important to Typhonian Thelema, a new tradition that combined Crowleyan religion with Grant's own innovations, and which was practiced through his Typhonian OTO, later renamed the Typhonian

[179] Spare, 'Witches' Sabbath', 153.
[180] Spare, 'Witches' Sabbath', 154.
[181] Spare, 'Witches' Sabbath', 154; Grant and Grant, *Zos Speaks!*, 68.
[182] Grant and Grant, *Zos Speaks!*, 95.
[183] Grant and Grant, *Zos Speaks!*, 97.

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Order. Reflecting the interest he had earlier pursued alongside Spare, Grant devoted one of his earliest publications, 'Vinum Sabbati', to the topic of the witches' sabbath; although first published as one of his *Carfax Monographs* in 1961, it only gained a wider readership when republished in a collected volume in 1989.[184] The essay's title, 'Vinum Sabbati', betrays the influence of Welsh weird fiction author Arthur Machen (1863–1947) – who we will return to in the following section – and thus highlights the way in which Grant integrated literary notions into his occultism.

For Grant, the sabbath was an archaic rite that could be found in ancient Egypt, where it was performed in honour of 'Set, or Sut-Typhon', a name that later became 'Satan'.[185] Typhon was a major theological figure in Grant's Typhonian Thelema, a putative African goddess borrowed from the late Victorian writings of English author Gerald Massey (1828–1907).[186] In its ancient Egyptian form, Grant suggested, the sabbath reflected a balance between female, lunar energies and their male, solar counterparts. It was later, with the establishment of Christian hegemony and the subsequent unbalancing of these energies, that the sabbath degenerated into 'the medieval mockery' which is recognisable today.[187] Grant nevertheless thought that the sabbath's original symbolism could still be unearthed; the horned goat, for example, suggested 'the virile solar force of male magical energy'.[188] Although some of Grant's writing suggests that the sabbath may once have constituted a physical gathering, he also followed Crowley and Spare in claiming that it occurred largely on an astral plane. 'Most medieval Sabbatic symbolism', he stated, 'has reference to the astral plane where the transformations so frequently described in the literature of witchcraft were actually enacted'.[189]

As framed by Grant, there were two particularly significant elements to the sabbath. The first was the production of the *vinum sabbati* – the wine of the sabbath – as 'a fusion of solar and lunar energies'.[190] The historian Manon Hedenborg White has noted that for Grant this probably meant 'menstrual blood, or a combination of the latter with semen', reflecting his broader belief in the spiritual importance of female vaginal secretions.[191]

[184] The context of this publication is discussed in Nilsson, 'Kenneth Grant', 174–81.
[185] Grant, 'Vinum Sabbati', 35.
[186] For Massey's influence on Grant, see Giudice, 'From Central Africa'.
[187] Grant, 'Vinum Sabbati', 37.
[188] Grant, 'Vinum Sabbati', 35–36.
[189] Grant, 'Vinum Sabbati', 36.
[190] Grant, 'Vinum Sabbati', 36.
[191] Hedenborg White, 'Eyes of Goats', 187. On Grant's views of this issue, see also Hedenborg White, *Eloquent Blood*, 157–93.

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The second important aspect of Grant's sabbath was its focus on 'atavistic resurgence', a term he borrowed from Spare, meaning 'a primal urge toward union with the divine by returning to the common source of all'. Grant suggested that this was indicated by the sabbath's recurrent emphasis on inversion: the nocturnal gathering, the backwards recitation of 'words of power', or the 'back-to-back dance'. This was conducted, he claimed, to attain 'the required atavism or energy for purposes of transformation, healing, initiation, construction or destruction'.[192] The notion of the sabbath as a return to a primordial source became, as we will note, a recurring element in perceptions of the witches' astral gathering during the 1990s.

Grant's writings influenced a wide range of occultists in the latter part of the twentieth century, not only introducing them to his own ideas, but also to those of Spare, who would arguably have fallen into obscurity were it not for Grant's efforts. As the scholar Christopher J. Miles has noted, among the esotericists who took an interest in Spare's work were those, like the Australia-based writer Nevill Drury (1947–2013), who wanted to 'link certain aspects of the practice of twentieth-century magic with the cluster of concepts surrounding the word 'shamanism''.[193] In Western esoteric circles, this popularisation of 'shamanism', and the self-identity of the 'shaman', arose largely thanks to certain developments in the United States during the late 1960s and 1970s. The result was a new religious milieu that is now varyingly referred to as 'neo-shamanism', 'modern Western shamanism' or 'trans-cultural shamanism'.[194] Key to this were Westerners who embraced the label of 'shaman' – then largely an othering term used for the ritual specialists of small-scale societies – and reinvested it with positive connotations. These modern shamanic practices centred largely on visionary journeys to imaginal otherworlds, often in the hope of achieving personal growth and spiritual development. This notion of the visionary journey had obvious parallels with existing occultist approaches to astral travel, including Spare's and Grant's understanding of the witches' sabbath.

The dominant figure in this modern shamanic milieu was Michael Harner (1929–2018), an American anthropologist who left academia to develop Core Shamanism, a new religious tradition formalised through his Center for Shamanic Studies founded in 1983. Harner clearly had some

[192] Grant, 'Vinum Sabbati', 37.
[193] Miles, 'Journey into the Neither-Neither', 55.
[194] Three terms found, for instance, in Wallis, *Shamans/Neo-Shamans*, 1; Stuckrad, 'Reenchanting Nature'; and Puca, *Italian Witchcraft*, 3.

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interest in witchcraft – there are unproven claims that he was an associate of LaVey's back in the 1960s[195] – and in 1973 he contributed a chapter on European witchery to his edited scholarly volume on *Hallucinogens and Shamanism*. Here, Harner professed his full support for the notion that certain early modern Europeans were rubbing hallucinogenic ointments into their skin, thus inducing visions of the sabbath or of lycanthropic transformation. As we have seen with Lévi, this was not a new idea, and Harner cited older writers who promoted this claim, but he added to it his own comparisons with the use of hallucinogens by the 'classical shamans' who so fascinated him. Picking up Murray's division between 'Sabbats' and 'Esbats', he suggested that Europe's witches needed two distinct types of gathering because the 'solanaceous hallucinogens' that they were using at the 'Sabbats' were 'so powerful that it is essentially impossible for the user to control his mind and body sufficiently to perform ritual activity at the same time'. Such ritual activities, Harner surmised, had to be left for the more practical 'Esbat'.[196] Thus, for Harner, the 'Sabbat' was a literal in-person gathering, much as the Murrayites maintained, but at the same time involved a strong visionary component enabled by hallucinogenic substances.[197]

Harner was not the only anthropologist interested in the role of drugs in European witchcraft, or in potential comparisons with shamanism; the German Hans Peter Duerr (b. 1943) built on these ideas in his 1978 book *Traumzeit*, subsequently translated as *Dreamtime* in 1985.[198] Harner, meanwhile, drifted from academia while reiterating links between European witchcraft and shamanism to a broader audience. His influential 1980 book, *The Way of the Shaman*, states that those persecuted as witches in early modern Europe were actually just 'healing shamans'[199] – an idea perhaps owing something to the notions of feminist writers in the preceding decade.

Harner's work reveals that an interest in witchcraft had long been present in modern religious shamanism, even if it never took centre stage. It is thus unsurprising that, by the 1990s, there was an increasing integration of the ideas of latter-day shamans and witches. Among the most visible examples of this was a book published by Llewellyn, one of the

[195] Dyrendal et al., *Invention of Satanism*, 53.
[196] Harner, 'Role of Hallucinogenic Plants', 146–47.
[197] On the history of claims surrounding witches' ointments and their alleged hallucinogenic properties, see Ostling, 'Babyfat and Belladonna'.
[198] Duerr, *Dreamtime*.
[199] Harner, *Way of the Shaman*, 55.

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largest American esoteric publishing houses, in 1996. This was *North Star Road*, a work subsequently republished two years later under the more fitting title of *Witchcraft and the Shamanic Journey*. Its Californian author, Kenneth Johnson (b. 1952), was a professional astrologer who had already co-authored several books on astrology and 'the Celtic Tradition' and who would soon follow *North Star Road* with works on Mayan and Slavic spiritual traditions. As issued by Llewellyn, all were targeted at a broad readership involved in New Age and related esoteric subcultures.

North Star Road reflected Johnson's clear debt to Mircea Eliade, following the latter in defining shamanism as a 'technique of ecstasy' while further characterising it as a 'spiritual practice that runs like an undercurrent through many of the world's religious traditions'.[200] Johnson similarly took profound influence from Carlo Ginzburg, echoing the Italian historian's belief that a shamanistic substratum informed early modern beliefs about witchery.[201] However, in contrast to Ginzburg's argument about Scythians transmitting shamanic ideas into Europe, Johnson posited that shamanism had already permeated Europe's prehistoric religions and from that archaic basis informed the popular mentalities of the medieval and early modern periods. Thus, he maintained that those persecuted as witches were 'primarily shamans – village shamans, if you will – who still remembered and practiced spiritual techniques of incredible antiquity'.[202] This, of course, is language echoing the earlier statements of Harner.

These European shamans' practices, Johnson claimed, involved 'spirit journeys' that were 'astral rather than physical (i.e. they were shamanic journeys to the Otherworld)', and which were sometimes assisted by the use of mind-altering substances.[203] The medieval shamans also had their own theology, with Johnson alleging their widespread recognition of a paired set of deities, the 'Old Bone Goddess' and her consort, who was both horned 'Lord of the Animals and King of the Otherworld' – a duotheistic framework betraying potential Wiccan influence.[204] While Johnson believed that this shamanism coexisted in a syncretic relationship with Christianity throughout the Middle Ages, he argued that the

[200] Johnson, *Witchcraft*, xx.
[201] Johnson, *Witchcraft*, xi.
[202] Johnson, *Witchcraft*, 190.
[203] Johnson, *Witchcraft*, 104–05, 131, 190.
[204] Johnson, *Witchcraft*, 58, 77, 192. For Gardner, for instance, the Wiccan male divinity was not merely the horned god but also the overseer of the afterlife, see *Witchcraft Today*, 32 and *Meaning of Witchcraft*, 26.

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Catholic Church began to demonise the shamans' otherworld journeys into the diabolical sabbath following the formation of a shamanic sect, 'the last desperate Ghost Dance of European shamanism', in the Western Alps around the 1370s.[205]

While based in the US, Johnson was evidently aware of esoteric developments in Britain, for one of those he thanked for reading his book was the British witch Nigel Aldcroft Jackson (b. 1963).[206] During the 1990s, Jackson issued several paperbacks through the small esoteric press Capall Bann which swiftly gained influence within the traditional witchcraft milieu. In these works, *Call of the Horned Piper* (1994) and *Masks of Misrule* (1996), Jackson outlined a religion of 'Wicce-craeft' or 'Traditional Weika' that purportedly stretched far back into prehistory.[207] He had evidently read various academic studies of early modern witchcraft yet used these selectively, picking only those elements which supported his religious ideas while seeking to reconcile the work of scholars who disagreed with one another. Jackson, for instance, endorsed Murray's ideas, claiming that she 'proved very clearly that [early modern witchcraft…] was an ancient religion', although he also outlined a theology centred on a goddess and a horned god, which was far more reminiscent of Gardner's Wicca than Murray's god-centred witch-cult. Jackson furthermore sought to open space for Ginzburg's notions by relating that Murray had underestimated the 'visionary and shamanic nature' of this witchcraft religion.[208] He subsequently cited Ginzburg's *Ecstasies*, alongside Duerr's *Dreamtime*, as 'indispensable' studies upon which he had 'relied considerably'.[209] This further underscores the impact that such academic contributions were having within certain occult subcultures during the 1990s.

Jackson stressed the links between shamanism and witchery by framing his witchcraft religion as having arisen from 'a shamanic priesthood' of the Proto-Indo-European peoples.[210] He subsequently emphasised the role of visionary journeys as key to this tradition, claiming that 'At the innermost heart of the Weikan Mysteries lies a Dreaming-Cult whose solitary votaries fly forth by night on the pinions of trance, sending forth the fetch along the secret pathway that leads to the midnight

[205] Johnson, *Witchcraft*, 210, 222, 227.
[206] Johnson, *Witchcraft*, ix.
[207] This former term appears at Jackson, *Call*, 2; the latter at Jackson, *Masks*, 99.
[208] Jackson, *Call*, 7.
[209] Jackson, *Call*, 8.
[210] Jackson, *Call*, 3–4.

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conclave of the Hexentanz, the primaeval vision of the Otherworld Sabbat.'[211] Here we see Jackson's conceptualisation of the witches' sabbath as a place existing in an 'Otherworld', to which solitary witches can travel while in a dream state. Much as Harner and Duerr had argued for the witches' use of hallucinogenic salves, so Jackson maintained that this oneiric flight is facilitated by the *unguentum sabbati*, a 'dream-inducing ointment' that allows 'the fetch' (i.e., spirit form) to 'temporarily separate from the material body'.[212]

Jackson further outlined what occurred at the sabbath, describing it as a space to 'honour the Black Goat and Our Lady of Elfland' (essentially a horned god and goddess), following which these deities would lead the celebrants in 'an explosion of orgiastic sensuality' that generated 'erotomagical ecstasy'.[213] Unlike Spare, it seems that for Jackson, the purpose of these etheric orgies was less to facilitate a specific magical rite and instead was an act of ritual inversion to establish a state of 'primaeval unity' – an idea likely to have come from Grant's writings.[214] This notion of returning to an atavistic, primordial status held clear appeal for Jackson, and in later years led him to abandon traditional witchcraft in favour of the esoteric current of Traditionalism.[215] While there was thus an almost cosmic purpose to the sabbath, for Jackson this gathering also held practical benefits, for the witch would return to their sleeping body 'enriched with the lore of the ancestors and divine inspirational gifts'.[216]

Similar ideas were expressed by one of Jackson's associates, the Essex magician Andrew Chumbley (1967–2004), who in the early 1990s developed his own occult order, the Cultus Sabbati or Cult of the Sabbat, through which he espoused a tradition known as the Sabbatic Craft.[217] As the Cultus' name suggests, the witches' sabbath occupied an important place in its practices; in Chumbley's words, the Sabbatic Craft represented 'a corpus of magical practices which self-consciously utilise the imagery and mythos of the "Witches' Sabbath" as a cipher of ritual, teaching and gnosis'.[218] Although his Cultus remained small, Chumbley gained greater influence through his writings, which included essays discussing magical practice as well as a series of grimoires – the first of

[211] Jackson, *Masks*, 70.
[212] Jackson, *Masks*, 74.
[213] Jackson, *Call*, 31; Jackson, *Masks*, 88.
[214] Jackson, *Masks*, 71, 88.
[215] Jackson, 'From a Co-Author'.
[216] Jackson, *Call*, 31.
[217] See Doyle White, 'Navigating the Crooked Path'.
[218] Chumbley, *Opuscula Magica Vol. I*, 132.

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which, *Azoëtia* (1992), outlined rituals designed to assist readers in their journey to the 'High Sabbat of the Ages'.[219]

Chumbley stated that he travelled to the witches' sabbath through his dreams, relating that this gathering could be reached 'at the Crossroads of waking, sleeping and mundane dreaming', in a 'state of True Dreaming' that was 'beyond the reach' of most people.[220] Despite emphasising that the sabbath could be entered in this hypnagogic state, Chumbley maintained that these revels were no mere product of his sleeping brain. Rather, he declared that the sabbath was 'an objective spiritual realm that initiates can travel to', 'a reality through and beyond all Imagination!'[221] While seeing it as a place that truly existed, Chumbley nevertheless presented the sabbath as a space outside of ordinary linear time, referring to its 'timelessness' and its 'atemporal' and 'transcendental' nature.[222] As part of this, he also framed it as a location in which practitioners could 'attain congress with the Arcanum of Primordial Being', experiencing 'the Great Return' and encountering 'the source of initiatory power'.[223] As with Jackson's sabbath, here again we see ideas similar to those espoused by Grant.

Where Chumbley's discussion of the sabbath differed in emphasis from Jackson's was in its description of the events that occurred there. As we have seen, Jackson described the sabbath as a place for giving homage to a horned god and goddess, a theological framework somewhat reminiscent of Wicca. Conversely, Chumbley's writings on the sabbath place little emphasis on any presiding deities and instead characterise these eldritch assemblies as an 'astral or dream convocation of magical ritualists' souls, animal selves, and a vast array of spirits, faeries and otherworldly beings'.[224] Through encounters such as these, Chumbley related, he was able to learn from the shades of long-dead magicians as well as 'the spirits of well, hill and valley'.[225] In this sense, attendance at the witches' sabbath could be an educational opportunity.

Reflecting the perception of witches as a spiritual elite, something found more widely across modern religious witchcraft, Chumbley suggested that attending the sabbath was reserved for a comparative few.[226]

[219] Chumbley, *Azoëtia*, 3.
[220] Chumbley, *Opuscula Magica Vol. I*, 25; Chumbley, *Opuscula Magica Vol. II*, 98.
[221] Chumbley, 'Magic of History', 19; Chumbley, *Opuscula Magica Vol. I*, 89–90.
[222] Chumbley, 'Magic of History', 19; *Opuscula Magica Vol. I*, 133.
[223] Chumbley, *Opuscula Magica Vol. I*, 89–90.
[224] Chumbley, *Opuscula Magica Vol. II*, 98.
[225] Chumbley, 'Magic of History', 20.
[226] This elitism is discussed at Doyle White, *New Witches*, 51–54.

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In his view, spirits would only invite the 'true aspirant' who possessed 'sufficient magical ability' to the 'Dreaming-sabbat'.[227] While this meant that solitary magicians unconnected to existing groups might still travel to the witches' conclave, Chumbley added that members of particular esoteric lineages had an advantage in that they will inherit 'the requisite lore and spirit-patronage' to assist their oneiric journey.[228] He himself claimed to possess at least two such lineages, although the reliability of these claims has been queried and remains an open historical question.[229] While the role of an intermediary spirit was thus acknowledged as an important part of travelling to the sabbath, Chumbley also outlined more practical techniques for doing so, including forms of 'sexual magic and narco-aesthetic induction'.[230] The use of these latter, mind-altering substances was something that Chumbley discussed on several occasions, linking them to early modern notions of the witches' salve.[231]

In the late 1990s, Chumbley enrolled at London's School of Oriental and African Studies, first as an undergraduate and subsequently as a PhD student. Both his undergraduate dissertation and his doctoral research – which was left unfinished at the time of his death – focused on the role of oneiric practices in religious contexts, highlighting Chumbley's keen interest in the spiritual role of dreaming.[232] Given these academic leanings, it is unsurprising that Chumbley echoed Johnson and Jackson in paying attention to the Ginzburgian turn within witchcraft historiography, citing the work of not only Ginzburg but also Gustav Henningsen and Éva Pócs in his writings.[233] Indeed, in analysing Chumbley's approach to the sabbath, the scholar Jimmy Elwing plausibly suggested that Ginzburg's ideas were potentially 'a great influence' on Chumbley.[234] It is presumably significant, in this context, that Ginzburg's *Ecstasies* appeared in English translation in 1990, only a year before Chumbley established his Cultus Sabbati.

Academic writings were not the only influence on Chumbley's ideas about the witches' sabbath, for he highlighted that the 'dream-shamanism' discussed by the likes of Ginzburg and Henningsen bore similarities

[227] Chumbley, *Opuscula Magica Vol. I*, 89.
[228] Chumbley, *Opuscula Magica Vol. I*, 133.
[229] Doyle White, 'Navigating the Crooked Path', 199–202.
[230] Chumbley, *Opuscula Magica Vol. I*, 88.
[231] For instance, Chumbley, *Opuscula Magica Vol. I*, 106–09; in *Azoëtia*, 272 they are called 'the Devil's ointment' and 'the Devil's Salve'.
[232] Doyle White, 'Navigating the Crooked Path', 211.
[233] Chumbley, 'Magic of History', 19; Chumbley, *Opuscula Magica Vol. II*, 37.
[234] Elwing, 'Where the Three Roads Meet', 256–57.

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with the notions espoused by Spare.[235] Chumbley was clearly aware of Spare's *The Witches' Sabbath*, making reference to its 1992 publication by Fulgur.[236] He may also have learned more of Spare's perspective from the correspondence with Grant that he struck up around the same time; these were sufficient to result in joint magical operations between his Cultus and Grant's Typhonian OTO during the 1990s.[237] The young Essex magician was clearly sympathetic to Spare, declaring him 'an initiate of the Sabbath' and characterising Spare's view of 'the Witch-Cult' as being 'much more sophisticated' than Gardner's.[238] Chumbley subsequently sought to align his perspective with that of Spare, describing both his own *Azoëtia* and Spare's *The Witches' Sabbath* as part of the same 'Sabbatic current'.[239] From the internal view of the Cultus' practitioners, these similarities could be regarded not only as evidence that both men independently visited the witches' sabbath but also that both inherited 'secret wisdom from genuine Old Craft sources'.[240] From a historical perspective, they may also highlight a transmission of influence from Spare's writings down to subsequent generations of magicians.

The writings of Jackson and Chumbley gained wide influence among traditional witches during the 1990s and 2000s, and evidently did much to promote the notion of oneiric journeying to the witches' sabbath. One increasingly began to see other individuals active in this milieu echo similar ideas about the sabbath, sometimes framing their experiences not as 'astral travelling' but as 'hedge riding' – a much more evocatively folkloresque term.[241] Reflecting the broadly decentralised nature of this milieu, however, many traditional witches evidently adapted these ideas according to their own predilections and experiences. Rather than

[235] Chumbley, 'Origins and Rationales', 208–09.
[236] Chumbley, *Opuscula Magica Vol. II*, 35.
[237] Doyle White, 'Navigating the Crooked Path', 207–08.
[238] Chumbley, *Opuscula Magica Vol. I*, 27.
[239] Chumbley, *Opuscula Magica Vol. II*, 41.
[240] The latter view is articulated by Howard, *By Moonlight*, 62–63. This is not the place to interrogate the validity of such allegations, but note the previously mentioned references to Chumbley's claims to possessing lineages from older British occult traditions. The claims regarding Spare's potential involvement with earlier forms of witchcraft rest on his purported early friendship with a fortune teller, Mrs Paterson, as described by Grant, who claimed that she was part of a South Welsh witches' coven. Later commentators have generally been sceptical about Grant's claims here, as in Cantu, 'Brief Evolution'; Miles, 'Journey into the Neither-Neither', 70–72; and Baker, *Austin Osman Spare*, 11–12, 239–40.
[241] For related accounts of the sabbath, see Artisson, *Witching Way*, 173 and Frisvold, *Craft of the Untamed*, 77–85. Examples where the term 'hedge rider' is used include Pearson, *Treading the Mill*, 119 and Vries, *Hedge-Rider*.

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presenting the sabbath as a unitary, primordial space, for instance, the Australian Lee Morgan noted that 'there are many types and tribes of preternatural beings that may invite humans to meetings, and though we can use the term "sabbat" to cover all of these occurrences […] not every "witch" is necessarily taken to the same type of meeting'.[242] Like other traditional witches, Morgan repeatedly drew comparisons between traditional witchcraft and forms of shamanism, further acknowledging his own experiences with Harner's Core Shamanism.[243] This reminds us that modern religious shamanism's growing popularisation from the 1970s onwards may well have primed many occultists in ways that made them more receptive to the witches' dream sabbath as it was promoted by Chumbley and Jackson during the 1990s.

Eventually, the traditional witchcraft milieu birthed books focusing directly on the theme of the oneiric sabbath. One of these came from the pen of Michael Howard (1948–2015), an Anglo-Irish writer who was himself an initiate of the Cultus Sabbati. In his work *By Moonlight and Spirit Flight* – first published by the Cultus in 2013 – Howard described various historical aspects of the sabbath, outlined his group's view of the subject, and pointed readers to many of the aforementioned authors, from Ginzburg, Henningsen, and Pócs through to Grant, Jackson, and Chumbley. Larger publishing outfits also took notice. In 2022 Llewellyn brought out *The Witches' Sabbath* by Minnesota-based writer Kelden, who acknowledged the debt that he and many other traditional witches owed to the likes of Spare, Grant, and Chumbley.[244] Exemplifying the increasingly simplified and instructional nature of much traditional witchcraft literature, Kelden outlined how his reader could enter the requisite trance states for their own sabbath journeys. Further reflecting something of this new zeitgeist, in 2023 Johnson's *Witchcraft and the Shamanic Journey* was again republished, this time with contributions from two popular writers associated with the traditional witchcraft milieu, Robin Artisson and Nicholaj de Mattos Frisvold.

Finally, early twenty-first-century Britain also brought forth another approach to the astral sabbath: that expressed by writer and publisher Peter Grey. Grey did not publicly align with the 'traditional witchcraft' moniker, instead espousing an avowedly animist and militantly environmentalist perspective to which he devoted his 2013 book *Apocalyptic Witchcraft*.

[242] Morgan, *Deed Without a Name*, 122.
[243] Noted in the blurb of Morgan, *Deed Without a Name*.
[244] Kelden, *Witches' Sabbath*, 50.

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Like others before him, Grey emphasised the role of hallucinogens, drew connections between the witches' sabbath and shamanic journeying, and made reference to the likes of Ginzburg and Emma Wilby; however, he also critiqued those modern witches who relied on Ginzburg for sanitising presentations of the sabbath. Instead, Grey explained, he hoped to engage with 'the sabbat […] not in the redacted variant of Gardner or Ginzburg, or the oblique personal misprision of Kenneth Grant or Austin Osman Spare, but in the grand panorama of the height of the witch panic'. He thus suggested that, at the astral sabbath, modern witches should 'feast on children, maim, murder, fuck and frolic'.[245] Although not taking his vision of the sabbath in an explicitly Satanic direction, he nevertheless re-emphasised some of the early modern stereotype's more contentious aspects, such as its cannibalistic infanticide, as part of a broader assault on the political and cultural mainstream. *Apocalyptic Witchcraft* was widely read, and it is thus likely that Grey's ideas on the sabbath found a broader influence among modern religious witches.

* * *

The history of modern religious witchcraft provides us with two competing visions of the witches' sabbath: on the one hand, an in-person gathering of witches, and on the other a visionary assembly to which the practitioner can travel through astral flight. Both ideas draw, in their own ways, on the source material left behind by the early modern period. Intriguingly, this modern split somewhat mirrors a division that existed among early modern demonologists, one in which Catholic writers tended to a belief that the witches' sabbaths was a literal conclave, while their Protestant counterparts were more likely to regard it as a mental illusion.[246] Thus, we find evidence that today, as in the early modern era, the witches' sabbath can be a multivalent symbol open to a range of interpretations.

3 Literary Sabbaths, Cinematic Sabbaths

At a Stockholm cinema in September 1922, audiences sat down to a veritable feast of diabolical imagery previously unimagined in the world of film. On the screen, an elderly woman of the fifteenth century – Maria the Weaver – faces unendurable tortures. Exhausted and terrified, she tells the persecuting clerics that not only has she given birth to Satan's monstrous

[245] Grey, *Apocalyptic Witchcraft*, 82–83, 85.
[246] A religious division noted by Blécourt, 'Sabbath Stories', 98.

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brood, but that she has also been smeared with the witches' ointment, a lotion allowing her to fly by broomstick to Blåkulla mountain.

As the screen transitions from a red to a blue filter, viewers see Maria and her fellow witches touch down in a twilight forest. One demon plays a trumpet-like instrument; another bangs a drum. Celebrants dance in a circle, flanked by trident-bearing devils. A magician's circle is set up, within which can be seen a skull and cross-bones, an hourglass, and an open book. A topless young woman, sitting astride a broom, has ointment rubbed into her; a skeletal horse parades past. Soon the Devil himself appears, an infant in one hand. He pours water on one worshipper, presumably in Satanic baptism, before the witches are invited to stamp upon a crucifix. One elderly sorceress, Karna, cooks up a meal of toads and unbaptised babies. The demons cuddle and kiss with the women; another churns butter in a startling display of euphemistic masturbation. Finally, the Devil bends over, and each witch gives him the *osculum infame*.

Although juxtaposed alongside memorable images of potion making and torture, the witches' sabbath remains the most distinctive scene in *Häxan*, an essay film by Danish director Benjamin Christensen (1879–1959). *Häxan* was filmed in Copenhagen, but bears a Swedish title as it was the product of Swedish money; indeed, at a cost of between 1.5 and 2 million kroner, it was the most expensive silent film ever made in Scandinavia.[247] While in many ways it bears the distinct mark of Christensen as auteur, various other influences are nevertheless discernable. Christensen noted that he became interested in witchery after obtaining copies of the *Malleus Maleficarum* and Jules Michelet's *La Sorcière*.[248] It is, however, notable that Christensen chose not to repeat Michelet's argument that the witches' sabbaths were gatherings of a real religion; instead he leant far more into the rationalist belief that such claims were delusions rooted in torture and fear.

Where Christensen likely took greater inspiration from Michelet's book was in its illustrations. Specifically, the images produced for the 1911 edition by the artist Martin Van Maele (1863–1926) bear striking similarities with those in Christensen's film, making a direct iconographical influence almost certain. In one scene of Christensen's sabbath, a goat-headed devil opens its robes to reveal a doorway within; although the latter element is perhaps unique to *Häxan*, this goat-headed visage and its large, dark-cloaked body are almost identical to a portrayal in

[247] Stevenson, *Witchcraft Through the Ages*, 26.
[248] Stevenson, *Witchcraft Through the Ages*, 17.

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one of Van Maele's depictions. Elsewhere, parallels can clearly be seen in the visual appearance of some of the pointy-eared, lascivious demons, the way in which these demons cuddle with the women, the appearance of a clergyman and his crozier, and the draining of a baby's blood into a bowl.[249] It is evident that Christensen drew more heavily on Van Maele's early twentieth-century imaginings than on any early modern illustrations he may also have examined.

Christensen seemed to revel in sabbath imagery, enjoying the taboo-breaking ideas he was able to play with – in large part due to the framing of the film as an educational experience. While images like that of the dead infant will be fairly horrific for many viewers, it is nevertheless clear that Christensen deliberately injected humour into his sabbath. Nowhere is this clearer than in the *osculum infame* scene, in which the clerics listening to Maria's account burst into laughter, presumably inviting the film's audiences to do the same. Other images, like that of a demon masturbating with a butter churn, are surely also intended as farcical. Although the idea of laughing at the apparent ludicrousness of witch accusations is one that would recur in popular culture (for instance, in *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* [1975]), the specific use of the sabbath as a subject of humour is rare and makes *Häxan* all the more unusual, even a century after it was made.

On release, *Häxan* divided opinion among Scandinavian audiences, with various critics claiming its imagery was far too strong for general release. In Anglophone countries, it seems to have only been shown years later, in a heavily cut form, although would also be re-released in a shortened recension in 1968. Tracing the film's influence over broader public perceptions, and subsequent on-screen portrayals, of the witches' sabbath is therefore difficult, but (as will be pointed out) there are instances where it almost certainly informed later efforts.

* * *

Häxan was probably unique among silent films in portraying a witches' sabbath.[250] Where witches appear in other motion pictures from this period, they are more commonly solitary figures, often in fairy tale settings.[251] Sabbaths, nevertheless, manifested in other early twentieth-century

[249] I am not aware of anyone having drawn this comparison before; if they have, I apologise for overlooking them.

[250] Certainly, I do not believe that there is an earlier on-screen depiction of the sabbath from Britain or the United States.

[251] See, for instance, Greene, *Bell, Book and Camera*, 13–35 and Doyle White, *Pale Hecate's Offerings*.

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cultural productions, as in a Folie Bergère review from 1925, but where they recurred most in these decades was undoubtedly in literature.[252] There had, of course, been an established pedigree of literary sabbaths stemming from the nineteenth century: the short stories 'Young Goodman Brown' (1835) by American author Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804–1864) and 'The Witches' Sabbath' (1894) by Briton James Platt (1861–1910), for instance, set their sabbaths in centuries past.[253] The portrayal of historic witches' gatherings continued into the twentieth century, as with 'The Witches' Sabbath' by English poet Edward Harry William Meyerstein (1889–1952), a work that opened his 1917 poetry collection of the same title. Here, a Maytime sabbath sees the demon Asmodeus appear in the form of a goat and demand the sacrifice of a boy. Various witches are in attendance, one of whom – reflecting antisemitism's longstanding influence over sabbath stereotypes – is simply called 'a Jew'.[254]

Another noted early twentieth-century sabbath appeared in *Witch Wood*, a 1927 novel by successful Scottish author John Buchan (1875–1940). Set in the 1640s, Buchan's novel revolves around David Sempill, a Church of Scotland minister recently moved to the parish of Woodilee. There, Sempill is horrified to discover a witches' ritual in the local woods, taking place on 'the night of Rood-Mass'; the coven assemble about a stone Roman altar, upon which has been placed food and drink. The witches engage in a 'slow and curiously arranged' dance, proceeding widdershins, with 'the women half-naked, but the men with strange headpieces like animals'.[255] Later in the narrative, Sempill spies on 'another Sabbath, and it fa's on the Lammas Eve'.[256] This Lammas sabbath begins with the sound of pipes; a piper 'with his hound mask' sits by the altar, the dancing witches proceeding 'widdershins around him'. 'The hound-faced leader' then stands and sacrifices a cockerel on the altar as the coven members kneel before him. This leader subsequently reads names from a book, at which the congregants respond with 'uncouth gutturals'. Repeated mention is made of Abiron, presumably the name of the group's deity. Music is again played and a dance ensues, 'the very heart of

[252] There is a photograph, taken in 1925, titled 'Le Sabbat et La Herse Infernale', which comes from Un Soir de Folie at the Folies Bergère, Paris.

[253] Some nineteenth-century novelists interested in witchcraft nevertheless chose not to portray the sabbath. A good example is Walter Scott, as noted by Tuczay, 'Nineteenth Century,' 53. On nineteenth-century literary portrayals of witchcraft, see Hutton, 'Witches and Cunning Folk'.

[254] Meyerstein, *Witches' Sabbath*, 7–40.

[255] Buchan, *Witch Wood*, 86–89.

[256] Buchan, *Witch Wood*, 123.

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bestial lust', in which each of the dancers 'kissed some part of the leader's body, nozzling him like dogs on the roadside'.[257]

As highlighted by both the name Abiron and the positioning of witches' sabbaths on Roodmass and Lammas, Buchan was influenced by Margaret Murray's work, especially *The Witch-Cult in Western Europe*. The historian Marion Gibson has even noted that 'Buchan's reading of Murray can be followed page-by-page' in *Witch Wood*.[258] The Scotsman's sabbath is thus a literary reimagining of Murray's scholarly efforts and illustrative of the clear synergy between scholarship and literature. In doing so, it also provides a tick list of features that would become common in fictional portrayals of the sabbath: a single, domineering leader, animal sacrifice, seemingly meaningless words or chanting, dancing, and some form of sexual activity.

While *Witch Wood* situated its sabbath in the early modern period, the 1920s was also marked by the growing portrayal of witches' covens in present-day Britain. One of the most significant appears in *Lolly Willowes*, a novel of 1926 by the Englishwoman Sylvia Townsend Warner (1893–1978). The titular Laura Willowes is a middle-aged spinster who, dissatisfied with London life, moves to a village in the Chilterns. There, a neighbour invites her to the 'the Witches' Sabbath', a gathering of 'witches and warlocks' held in 'a large field' after dark, with the assembled celebrants dancing to sounds 'resembling music'. Far from being sinister, the atmosphere bears 'the air of disconnected jollity which reminded Laura of a Primrose League gala and fête'.[259] In contrast to Buchan's Scottish sabbath, here 'there was no Master of Ceremonies', the event seemingly being an egalitarian and relaxed affair.[260]

With Townsend Warner's sabbath, we are presented with a strange juxtaposition of the utterly prosaic and the ostensibly unearthly. On the one hand, entry is permitted by an officious man wearing a 'large rosette like a steward's', illumination comes from 'a row of candles in the ditch', and 'paper garlands' decorate the trees. On the other, it seems that something genuinely supernatural is going on; the droning sound to which the celebrants dance issues from 'the dancers themselves, and hung […] above their heads'.[261] Dancing seems to be the central focus, for little else happens. A young man invites Willowes to dance, 'his arm respectfully

[257] Buchan, *Witch Wood*, 134–35.
[258] Gibson, *Rediscovering Renaissance Witchcraft*, 50.
[259] Townsend Warner, *Lolly Willowes*, 124.
[260] Townsend Warner, *Lolly Willowes*, 128.
[261] Townsend Warner, *Lolly Willowes*, 124, 127–28.

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round her waist', but as the dancing drags on, her mood becomes one of 'listlessness and boredom'; she only begins to enjoy herself more when dancing with a young woman, Emily.[262] Finally, a 'lean, lithe' young man bearing a mask appears, 'mincing like a girl', and is recognised by the witches as Satan – even if, Willowes later realises on meeting the real Devil, this youth is just 'an imposter'.[263]

In her novel, Townsend Warner gives us a rather anodyne sabbath. There is one reference to young Emily being 'half-naked', but no suggestion of orgiastic sex.[264] The only obvious suggestion of sexualities that would evoke social disapproval is the underlying hints at homosexuality; not only is the young man impersonating Satan described in a distinctly effeminate manner but also, as the literature scholar Jane Garrity has noted, Willowes's pleasure in dancing with Emily is suggestive of same-sex attraction, especially in light of Townsend Warner's own relationships with women.[265] In this sense, Willowes's Chilterns sabbath becomes a potential space for the open expression of gay identity and desire, something not permitted in mainstream 1920s Britain. The sabbath, here, becomes a site of liberation.

Gibson highlighted that Townsend Warner was informed by various sources, among them Murray's *Witch-Cult in Western Europe* as well as older texts like *Macbeth*, but it seems that the novelist was less interested in replicating her source material than in devising her own vision of the sabbath.[266] Indeed, much as the early modern sabbath was an inversion of social norms and values, so Townsend Warner inverts the sabbath once again, transforming its subversive extremity into a tedious image of conformity. How this would have been absorbed by many of its 1920s readers is unclear, but *Lolly Willowes* was a commercial success in Britain and the United States, a fact that may have encouraged other novelists to incorporate latter-day witches' covens into their narratives.

The 1920s and 1930s also brought forth what has come to be known as the 'Golden Age' of British detective fiction. As the literature scholar Jem Bloomfield has noted, witchcraft was 'an ongoing concern' in this body of material, further suggesting that this allows us to talk about 'the "witchy" detective novel'.[267] Unsurprisingly, notions of modern-day witches'

[262] Townsend Warner, *Lolly Willowes*, 126–27.
[263] Townsend Warner, *Lolly Willowes*, 131–32, 136.
[264] Townsend Warner, *Lolly Willowes*, 129.
[265] Garrity, *Step-Daughters of England*, 150–52.
[266] Gibson, *Rediscovering Renaissance Witchcraft*, 51.
[267] Bloomfield, *Witchcraft and Paganism*, 1.

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sabbaths make appearances in this Golden Age literature, although rarely in a concerted and detailed manner. One of the earliest examples comes from *The Wintringham Mystery* by Anthony Berkeley (1893–1971), first serialised in 1926. Here, visitors gathered at a country house decide to entertain themselves with 'a jolly good Witches' Sabbath in the drawing-room'. When it actually comes down to it, however, this sabbath constitutes little more than standing in the dark, one man reading 'gibberish' from a book.[268] There is nothing suggestive of early modern sabbath imagery; rather, the underlying influence appears to be the parlour room séances popularised by Spiritualism.

A fuller sabbath-style rite appears in *The Secret of High Eldersham*, a novel of 1930 by Cecil Street (1884–1964; writing under the pseudonym of Miles Burton). Here, a murder in rural East Anglia leads to the discovery of a witches' coven formed recently as a cover for drug smuggling. In their first appearance, the coven of thirteen 'cloaked and hooded figures' meet in a churchyard, each carrying an altar candle, before proceeding around one of the graves 'feverishly in a satanic dance'.[269] Later, an amateur sleuth spies the coven assembling by a stone altar on an island grove. A young woman is brought forth for initiation; a vein on her arm is cut, and the blood collected in a bowl. The assembled witches drink this blood, before breaking out 'into a mad formless dance' and 'clasping one another at random'. Getting to business, the leader calls on his followers to stand, at which he offers 'a kind of diabolical litany' and inserts a needle into a wax doll.[270]

As with the aforementioned works by Buchan and Townsend Warner, Street's novel engages clearly with Murray's ideas, but in this case, it does so in a far more explicit manner. As one character states, those wishing to learn more about witchery should consult 'the excellent work of Miss Margaret Murray'.[271] *The Secret of High Eldersham* thus invites the reader to consider how Murray's writings might be used in constructing a new witchcraft religion, replete with witches' sabbaths. As folklorist Paul Cowdell has noted, Street's creation of a (fictitious) witches' coven 'from a putative residual memory of the original old practices' was essentially the same approach taken by Gerald Gardner in his development of Gardnerian Wicca two decades later.[272] In this sense, Wicca's formation can be seen as an example of life imitating art.

[268] Berkeley, *Wintringham Mystery*, 31, 44.
[269] Burton, *Secret of High Eldersham*, 167–69.
[270] Burton, *Secret of High Eldersham*, 191–95.
[271] Burton, *Secret of High Eldersham*, 80.
[272] Cowdell, 'Folklore as MacGuffin', 200.

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Notions of the witches' sabbath being revived in twentieth-century England were also employed by Agatha Christie (1890–1976), the most successful of the Golden Age authors, in her 1939 novel, *Murder is Easy*. Here, the investigating protagonist Luke Fitzwilliam arrives in the village of Wychwood-under-Ashe – 'one of the last places where they had a Witches' Sabbath' – posing as a folklorist interested in witchery.[273] This historical connection has been retained in the collective memory of the villagers, who continue to refer to one field as the Witches' Meadow, a place where 'tradition had it […] the witches had held revelry on Walpurgis Night and Hallowe'en'.[274] These historic and folkloric associations have rendered the village an attractive space for modern occultists; the antiques dealer Mr Ellsworthy, who had moved to the area two years prior, gathers friends for a nocturnal Midsummer ritual at the Witches' Meadow. The rite is never explicitly described, but features the sacrifice of a white cockerel, a trope echoing Buchan and which would recur again in many British fictional portrayals of witchcraft.[275]

As with *The Wintringham Mystery*, again we lack a modern sabbath that fully embraces the diabolical stereotype and instead seems informed principally by more recent esoteric traditions. Christie here was probably influenced by the cultural fascination for 'black magic' in early twentieth-century Britain, something not only evident in fictional characters like M. R. James' Karswell and W. Somerset Maugham's Oliver Haddo, but also in the considerable, and often lurid, press speculation that had surrounded Aleister Crowley throughout the 1920s.[276] Further suggesting a Crowleyan influence is the portrayal of Ellsworthy as a distinctly effeminate character, something that may have alluded to Crowley's bisexuality but which also, as Bloomfield has observed, linked the character in with the broader decadent and aesthetic movements of the late nineteenth century.[277] Here we also see a connection to the effeminacy of the young man taking on the role of Satan in *Lolly Willowes*, suggesting a larger cultural association between Satanism and witchery on the one hand and male effeminacy and homosexuality on the other. This was not only evident in British literature of the 1920s and 1930s but also had an older pedigree, found for instance in the 1891 decadent novel *Là-bas* by Frenchman

[273] Christie, *Murder is Easy*, 26.
[274] Christie, *Murder is Easy*, 95.
[275] Christie, *Murder is Easy*, 91, 108, 158–59, 222.
[276] This cultural fascination is considered in Freeman, 'Black Magic'.
[277] Bloomfield, *Witchcraft and Paganism*, 17.

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Joris-Karl Huysmans (1848–1907), in which sexual relations between males are presented as part of the Satanic black mass.[278]

In addition to detective fiction and action thrillers, there was another area of early twentieth-century Anglophone literature that repeatedly turned its attention to witches' sabbaths – that now often called 'weird fiction'. The witches' sabbath was rarely, if ever, given centre stage in this body of literature, but nevertheless makes its appearance in various narratives, where it contributes to the broader aura of an uncanny or supernatural presence. In his 1895 novel, *The Three Imposters*, the Welsh writer Arthur Machen characterised the witches' sabbath as an ancient and terrible practice, one involving 'the wine of the Sabbath, the *Vinum Sabbati*', prepared from a white powder.[279] Getting closer to an actual portrayal of this ceremony is 'Ancient Sorceries', a tale of 1908 by English author Algernon Blackwood (1869–1951), in which an isolated town in northern France is inhabited by people who, at night, transform into cats. Towards the climax of the story, these cat-people anoint themselves with a salve and fly off to worship the Devil through 'the old, old Dance of the Sorcerers at the Witches' Sabbath'.[280]

Clearly inspired by Blackwood's story was 'The Witches' Sabbath', a two-part tale by American writer Stephen Bagby (1890–1969), published in *Weird Tales* magazine in 1928. Here, the setting shifts to the French Pyrenees, where a Satanic sabbath is planned for May Eve; its practitioners are members of the Vaudois (i.e., the Waldensians) and their festivity attracts infernal pilgrims from across Europe. Taking place in a cathedral, this sabbath sees its participants shapeshift into animals and involves the attempted sacrifice of a maiden before Satan himself.[281] Another, more famous American author of weird fiction, H. P. Lovecraft (1890–1937), similarly referenced the sabbath in his short stories 'The Dreams in the Witch House' (first published in 1933) and 'The Very Old Folk' (written in 1927; posthumously published in 1968). The former, for example, establishes that the sabbath is to take place on May Eve, 'when hell's blackest evil roamed the earth and all the slaves of Satan gathered for nameless rites and deeds'.[282] Although rarely presenting the sabbath in much detail, it is significant that the weird fiction of this period typically portrays it in a

[278] Huysmans, *The Damned*, 228.
[279] Machen, 'Three Imposters', 175.
[280] Blackwood, 'Ancient Sorceries', 121.
[281] Bagby, 'Witches' Sabbath'; the sabbath itself is described at pages 240–41.
[282] Lovecraft, 'Dreams in the Witch House', 92.

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diabolist, Satanic mould, rather than following Murray's interpretation of witchery as a pre-Christian tradition.[283]

While the writers of weird and detective fiction sometimes alluded to the hellish debauchery of the witches' sabbath, none really evoked the early modern horrors explored by *Häxan*. Sexualities widely deemed perverse had been hinted at, but nothing sexually explicit had appeared; there had been the suggestion of bird sacrifice, but no devouring of babies. Breaking through into a more overtly diabolical portrayal would, however, be Englishman Dennis Wheatley (1897–1977), who began his literary career producing thrillers largely devoid of supernaturalism. He subsequently decided to try something new by introducing occult themes into *The Devil Rides Out*, a story serialised in 1934 before being reissued in book form. This proved sufficiently successful that he returned to occult tropes repeatedly over his career, allowing his biographer to suggest that by the late 1960s he had come to be seen as 'Britain's occult uncle'.[284]

The Devil Rides Out pits the Duke de Richleau, an urbane aristocratic esotericist, against the infernal machinations of malevolent magician Mocata – a character likely based, at least in part, on Crowley.[285] The diabolism of Mocata and his followers is presented as a syncretic combination of elements drawn from both ceremonial magic and witchery. Wheatley describes the group as Satanists, although rather than framing Satan in a Christian theological system, he instead positions this figure amidst the 'vast numbers of Earthbound spirits, Elementals, and Evil Intelligences of the Outer Circle floating in our midst'.[286] Mocata oversees a 'Grand Sabbat' on 30th April, 'May Day Eve' or 'Walpurgis-Nacht', a date when even 'warring factions' of 'Satanists' gather together.[287] This grand gathering occurs in a 'desolate and remote' location between the hamlets of Imber and Tilshead on Wiltshire's Salisbury Plain. Those overseeing the ritual wear dark clothing and animal masks; 'one had a huge cat mask over his head and […] a furry cloak, the tail of which dangled behind him on the ground; another wore the headdress of a repellent toad […] Mocata […] now had webbed wings sprouting from his shoulders which gave him the appearance of a giant bat'.[288] Incense burners emit a scent which, notes de

[283] This is despite an awareness of Murray on the part of weird fiction writers like Lovecraft; see Card, 'Witches and Aliens'.
[284] Baker, *Devil is a Gentleman*, 11.
[285] A point recognised, for instance, by Freeman, 'Black Magic', 106–07.
[286] Wheatley, *Devil Rides Out*, 59–60.
[287] Wheatley, *Devil Rides Out*, 63, 77.
[288] Wheatley, *Devil Rides Out*, 119.

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Richelieu, can 'drug the brain and excite the senses to an animal fury of lust and eroticism'.[289]

Atop a 'pile of ancient stones' that form 'a rugged, natural throne', a giant, four-horned goat manifests – the Duke identifies this as 'the Goat of Mendes' – and the Satanists pay it homage through the *osculum-infame*.[290] The Goat then smashes a crucifix, one half being further trampled by the assembled witches. This is followed by their gluttonous and messy feast, the celebrants throwing 'themselves back into a state of bestiality' as they gorge themselves. Mocata and his closest followers eat separately, at their own table; although more dainty in their etiquette, the Duke believes that theirs is a cannibal meal, potentially provided by a 'stillborn baby or perhaps some unfortunate child that they have stolen and murdered'.[291] Anti-Christian blasphemy appears again as communion wafers, stolen from a church, are broken into a 'great silver chalice' and poured upon the floor, where the witches again stamp upon them. From there, they disrobe and in their nude state dance anticlockwise around a cauldron, still wearing their masks; several provide a musical accompaniment, 'a harsh, discordant jumble of notes and broken chords'. Once exhausted, the celebrants fall to the ground, having evidently amused the Goat, who 'clacked its monstrous cloven hoofs together and gave a weird laughing neigh in a mockery of applause'.[292] At this point, the Duke decides to attack in an attempt to rescue a friend trapped amongst the Satanists; he notes that the next stages of the sabbath would be the initiation of neophytes and then 'the foulest orgy, with every perversion which the human mind is capable of conceiving'.[293]

Wheatley's sabbath returns to certain elements already seen in literary portrayals, such as the notion of masked revellers, but at the same time indicates a willingness to go further than many of his predecessors. Here we have unambiguous references to the kissing of the Devil's anus, of cannibalism and (possibly) infanticide, and to an orgy replete with sexual perversions – which, coming from the pen of the conservative Wheatley, probably denoted not only incest but also same-sex relations. While this portrayal draws heavily on early modern European imagery and is located within a very English landscape, it is also significant that Wheatley seeks comparisons with rites from elsewhere in the world. As the

[289] Wheatley, *Devil Rides Out*, 120.
[290] Wheatley, *Devil Rides Out*, 117, 119–20. Éliphas Lévi's ultimate influence is especially apparent here.
[291] Wheatley, *Devil Rides Out*, 121–23.
[292] Wheatley, *Devil Rides Out*, 124–26.
[293] Wheatley, *Devil Rides Out*, 126.

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Duke comments while spying on the sabbath, 'We might almost be witnessing some heathen ceremony in an African jungle!'[294] Here we see the evocation of Africa as a symbol of primitivism and savagery, something evident elsewhere in Wheatley's works; the historian Ronald Hutton even observed that, 'to Wheatley, black magic and black people went naturally together'.[295] Wheatley's direct comparison between European witchcraft and African traditional religions highlights how both occupied a similar conceptual space in the modern Western imagination; a point one can see elsewhere, albeit in a non-fiction context, in Montague Summers' work.[296] This would not prove the last time that such an association was invoked in the portrayal of the witches' sabbath.

The Devil Rides Out proved popular and became a major influence over broader British perceptions of sinister occultism. As the historian Bernard Doherty has noted, Wheatley 'contributed arguably more than any other Anglophone writer to the popular image of Satanism, particularly as it crystallized in the international "Satanic Panics" of the 1980s and 1990s'.[297] The novel's influence can certainly be seen in later fictional treatments of the occult, including those depicting witches' sabbaths. A good example is *The Devil's Own*, a novel of 1960 by the English writer Norah Lofts (1904–1983, under the nom-de-plume of Peter Curtis) and which revolves around a coven in a quaint English village. Lofts's novel makes clear the debauched nature of the group's rites – they assemble naked inside a church at Halloween, their minds altered by the vapours emitted from some smouldering bowl. Gluttony and lust intermingle; the witches 'ripped at the meat with their hands, crammed it into their mouths, laughed, talked, kissed one another with full mouths, with grease-gleaming lips'. A sexual orgy commences, although is not described in detail; instead, 'to call it bestial was to insult every animal in creation, for this was deliberate obscenity'.[298] Lofts's comment, cut off before it can finish – 'What aphrodisiac can make men …' – suggests same-sex relations at a time when these were still criminalised in Britain.[299]

Eventually, these witches dress before prostrating themselves at the arrival of their leader, the local notable Isabel Thorby, who brings with

[294] Wheatley, *Devil Rides Out*, 119.
[295] Hutton, *Triumph*, revised, 273.
[296] Summers (*History*, 163) claimed that 'almost every detail of the old witch-trials can be exactly paralleled in Africa to-day'.
[297] Doherty, 'Black Magicians', 30.
[298] Curtis, *The Witches*, 303–06.
[299] Curtis, *The Witches*, 306.

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her a drugged, naked virgin girl. Thorby lays the latter down on the church altar, placing a Communion chalice and wafer on the girl's prone body, a 'solemn parody' of Christian ritual. One by one, the witches come before Thorby and are given unguent, which they rub on their own bodies and those of their fellows, before assembling in a circle, 'moving round and chanting' in a widdershins direction. In an apparent departure from the usual sabbath rite, Thorby feels a sense of resistance to their activities emanating from the baptismal font, at which the witches gather around it, spitting into it and, it is implied, either urinating or defecating into it.[300] The entire setup, although not outright framed as Satanic, is clearly diabolical and incorporates aspects that invert Christian symbolism.

* * *

Wheatley's reference to his witches' sabbath taking place by 'a pile of ancient stones' in Salisbury Plain – a location famous as the home of Stonehenge – is worthy of further consideration. Found in various parts of Ireland, Britain, and Brittany, stone circles were a recurring architectural phenomenon of the Late Neolithic and Early Bronze Ages, and while their exact purpose eludes archaeologists, there is nothing to suggest that they had anything to do with witchery. By the early twentieth century, however, it was clear that a conceptual overlap had arisen between these two phenomena in the British cultural imagination. The connecting notion was surely pre-Christian religion, because not only were these circles typically regarded as part of some prehistoric religious tradition, but witchery itself was increasingly imagined as an ancient cult predating Christianity's arrival. More broadly, there was probably a sense that both witchcraft and stone circles were associated with antiquity, and with a general sense of the supernatural, the mysterious, and (at least in some perceptions) the barbarous and malevolent.

While Wheatley's novel was perhaps the most prominent publication of its era to connect witches' sabbaths with the prehistoric megaliths, it was far from being the only one. In Crowley's poem, 'The Augur', first published in 1909, there are references to an 'unconsecrated Sabbath' in a 'circle of unholy stones'.[301] Similarly, in Stuart Strauss's short story 'The Shadow on the Moor', first published in 1928, one character recounts dreams of being pulled into a stone circle in which 'queer bloated things danced with witches, and a monstrous hairy being without eyes performed

[300] Curtis, *The Witches*, 307–12.
[301] Crowley, *Clouds Without Water*, 13.

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strange rites'.[302] Associations of witchery and stone rings persevered throughout the decades; the 1957 film *Night of the Demon* overlays a narration about witchcraft atop images of Stonehenge, while the BBC's 1983 adaptation of *Macbeth* features its three witches sitting atop a megalithic dolmen inside a stone circle.

In addition to stone circles, it was apparent that in the early twentieth century witchery was increasingly associated with other forms of ancient architecture too. This was, of course, evident in the aforementioned *Witch Wood*, where the witches meet around a stone altar bearing an inscription to Jupiter.[303] In a similar vein, the strange rural religionists of 'Bind Your Hair', a 1964 short story by Englishman Robert Aickman (1914–1981), gather for revels around 'a hewn block of stone'[304] – although not explicitly called witches, their portrayal draws on related notions of secretive and sinister communities. These associations likely had an older pedigree; the French illustrator Émile Bayard (1837–1891) portrayed the Devil atop a stone dolmen in 'La danse du Sabbat', an illustration published in 1870, while Summers subsequently noted that witches sometimes met at 'ancient cromlechs and granite dolmens'.[305] These conceptual associations gained greater popularisation through one of Britain's most influential fantasy writers, C. S. Lewis (1898–1963), who drew upon them in his 1950 novel *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*. Here, Lewis portrays the White Witch overseeing a sacrificial rite on 'the Stone Table' atop a hill. There, she is surrounded by 'Ogres with monstrous teeth, and wolves, and bull-headed men; spirits of evil trees and poisonous plants […] Cruels and Hags and Incubuses, Wraiths, Horrors, Efreets, Sprites, Orknies, Wooses, and Ettins'.[306] Lewis does not refer to this gathering as a witches' sabbath, but clearly his imagery derives, at least in part, from visions of early modern diabolism.

* * *

In her study of horror cinema, Tanya Krzywinska claimed that the sabbath has been 'central to the representation of witchcraft' in film.[307] This is an unusual statement, for, if examined numerically, the witches' sabbath actually becomes notable for its comparative scarcity in witch-themed

[302] Strauss, 'Shadow on the Moor', 183.
[303] Buchan, *Witch Wood*, 86.
[304] Aickman, *Dark Entries*, 226–27.
[305] An image published in Christian, *Histoire De La Magie*, inset after page 392; Summers, *History*, 114.
[306] Lewis, *Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, 136, 138.
[307] Krzywinska, *Skin for Dancing In*, 87.

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cinematic productions. Moreover, it is evident that there is a strong division according to genre, for where the witches' sabbath does appear, it is generally in horror films that employ witches as sinister characters to frighten the audience. Conversely, the sabbath virtually never appears in productions favouring a positive portrayal of witchery, especially in instances like *The Worst Witch*, *Hocus Pocus*, and *Harry Potter*, where the intended audience consists largely of children.

During the early years of cinema, it was the fairy tale witch that proved most pervasive, recurring in both silent films and early animations. Witchery also began to appear in horror films from the first half of the century, as in a picture like *Cat People* (1942), but there was little in the way of witches' sabbaths – other than the startling anomaly of *Häxan*. On this front, things began to change in the late 1950s and 1960s. In the United States, perhaps the earliest cinematic sabbath was in the 1957 release *The Undead*. Framed through a contemporary past life regression, the film's narrative shifts into the European Middle Ages and it is here that the witches' sabbath is encountered, undoubtedly fuelling the common misconception of the sabbath as a medieval, rather than an early modern, phenomenon. This Satanic sabbath occurs in a ruined churchyard and begins at midnight; after a fire is lit, Satan appears and bids three black-haired women to appear, who subsequently burst into an energetic dance before fading back into the ground. Desperate people – a leper and a poor man – come forth and sign the Devil's book, soon finding that they now bear Satan's mark on their hand.

The Undead's use of slightly eroticised dance as a means of denoting debauchery is something that recurred repeatedly in American cinematic sabbaths throughout the 1960s. Scantily clad women dancing around headstones are one of the main activities at the witch meetings in *House of the Black Death* (1965), while another witch dances atop a tomb at the 'great Sabbat of Candlemass' in *The Witchmaker* (1968). In these examples, female dancing is used to suggest sexual impropriety without portraying anything that would have been prohibited by the Hays Code, the American regulatory system of the time. Signs of change were nevertheless on the horizon, especially in the growth of soft-core pornography. Perhaps taking advantage of the Hays Code's abolition in 1968, that year saw the release of *The Satanist*, in which various sex scenes build up to a sabbath in which a topless belly dancer performs for her coven. This is followed by the 'rites of Priapus', whereby each male witch takes a turn wearing a ram's head mask representing Satan and couples with a woman on the altar; the other coven members, meanwhile, engage

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in heavy petting on the floor.[308] These attempts at titillation represent an early forerunner of the highly sexualised sabbaths that appeared on-screen throughout the 1970s.

In Britain, meanwhile, filmmakers interested in witchery during the late 1950s and 1960s turned repeatedly to existing literary treatments. Thus, Lovecraft's 'The Dreams in the Witch-House' provided a vague basis for 1968's *Curse of the Crimson Altar*, while the Hammer company adapted Lofts's *The Devil's Own* into their 1966 picture *The Witches* and then Wheatley's *The Devil Rides Out* into a 1968 film of the same title. These pictures all feature witches' sabbaths in some capacity, although treat them somewhat differently. *Curse of the Crimson Altar* is perhaps most unusual in that its sabbaths are exposed as dreams that have been deliberately induced through hypnosis. One nevertheless finds the same emphasis on sexual titillation that was prevalent in American productions; the opening sabbath scene features a semi-naked woman, dressed in leather, whipping a wholly naked woman chained to a table. Lavinia, the green-skinned witch in charge of proceedings, demands that a man being brought before her sign her book. A cockerel is, once again, sacrificed, while a semi-naked man in a horned helmet, a black goat, and a priest help complete the ensemble.

The sabbaths of Hammer's *The Witches* and *The Devil Rides Out* are more fruitfully considered alongside each other, for both represent direct adaptations of earlier novels that offered comparatively extreme notions of the sabbath as a space of debauchery and anti-Christian blasphemy. Lofts's novel had portrayed a sabbath in a Christian church replete with nudity and sex, all factors unlikely to pass the British censors of the mid-1960s. Thus, for Hammer's adaptation, the setting shifted to an abandoned crypt or cavern – a setting also favoured for witches' meetings in earlier British productions like *Witchcraft* (1964). Far from being naked, the witches wear torn and tatty clothes and squeeze citrus juices over their bodies; for a brief second two men are shown rubbing juice over each other in a manner likely hinting at homosexuality. Music is produced through (cheetah-skin) drums and the banging together of bones, evoking an aesthetic of foreign primitivism and racial otherness. The congregants devour a brown gloopy substance with relish before dancing on the spot and writhing around on the floor, the men grabbing at the women. Finally, a young woman is brought forth to be killed – part of a ritual for

[308] The integration of Priapus suggests the influence of Knight, *Discourse on the Worship of Priapus*.

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the priestess to absorb her youth, rather than as a sacrifice to a deity – but at no point is she naked or placed upon the altar, as in Lofts's novel.

A similar softening of the source material was evident in Hammer's version of *The Devil Rides Out*. Here, the May Eve sabbath still takes place outdoors, but with the celebrants clad in robes: white for the majority but purple for Mocata and other senior ritualists. Mocata begins the ritual with the declaration of 'Eko Eko Adonai, Eko Babylon, Eko Osiris', terms not present in Wheatley's novel and which were informed by Wiccan ritual phraseology. Mocata lights a fire before a white goat is brought forth and placed on the altar for the magician to slit its throat, something not seen explicitly but indicated by the crowd's awed reaction. Soon, the revels begin, with the witches drinking, flailing around and carousing in a manner suggestive of ecstatic dance. Various men and women pair up, but are not seen kissing, let alone being sexual. A black man, and another of probable West or South Asian heritage, are positioned prominently near the front of the crowd; this may allude to Wheatley's statement that Mocata's followers included 'a grave-faced Chinaman', 'a Eurasian', 'a red-faced Teuton' and a 'fleshy Indian', but it may also reflect the filmmakers' desire to associate debauched witchery with racial otherness.[309] Further suggesting this connection is the background drumbeat akin to that found in *The Witches*. As with the novel, the sabbath culminates with the physical manifestation of a horned beast; Mocata calls it Baphomet, while the Duke de Richelieu, observing from his hiding spot, terms it 'the Goat of Mendes – the Devil himself'. Initiates are then brought forth to commit themselves to the beast, but proceedings are disrupted by the Duke's attack.

Hammer's *The Devil Rides Out* played an important role in shaping broader perceptions of occultism and presumably the witches' sabbath itself. On this count, however, it is interesting that its portrayal is considerably tamer than that of Wheatley's original novel, illustrating the fact that, in this period, it was readers rather than cinema-goers who were accessing the more extreme renditions of the witches' conclave.

* * *

By the 1970s, the regulations surrounding on-screen productions underwent further liberalisation in many Western countries. Horror cinema took clear advantage, making increased use not only of blood and gore

[309] Wheatley, *Devil Rides Out*, 20–21. On Wheatley's linking of Satanism to non-British foreigners, see Doherty, 'Black Magicians', 37–38.

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but also of nudity and sex. As one of the most sinister stereotypes from the storehouse of European culture, the witches' sabbath was an obvious setting through which such imagery could be employed. As a result, from the 1970s on, productions portraying the sabbath increasingly featured not only human sacrifice but also full-frontal female nudity, a choice undoubtedly reflecting a target audience of heterosexual males.

Also of relevance to these new portrayals was the growing public awareness of modern religious witchcraft, most notably Wicca but also the Church of Satan. As noted earlier, Wiccan phraseology had already been integrated into Hammer's *The Devil Rides Out*, but as the 1970s wore on, film productions increasingly borrowed further elements from these occult new religions. Fuelling this influence were not only the publications and newspaper appearances of modern religious witches but also a new raft of documentary films created in collaboration with some of the more media-hungry practitioners. The prominent English Wiccan Alex Sanders (1926–1988), for instance, starred in both *Legend of the Witches* (1970) and *Secret Rites* (1971), as well as several documentaries for British television, while the Church of Satan's founder Anton LaVey took a starring role in the documentary *Satanis: The Devil's Mass* (1970). Both Sanders and LaVey also appeared, independently, in the sensationalistic Italian production *Angeli bianchi … angeli neri*, subsequently released as *Witchcraft '70* in North America and *The Satanists* in the UK. These productions helped provide visual cues from which those making fiction-based productions could draw.

In some instances, we find fictional portrayals clearly informed by modern religious witchcraft. In the American film *Simon, King of the Witches* (1971), the story's titular magus attends the ritual of a coven led by a priestess who calls her followers 'the Wicca'. Although the ceremony is not explicitly referred to as a sabbath or sabbat, the inclusion of a real-life goat as a representative of the witches' god is nevertheless suggestive. The coven's female members swiftly de-robe while another naked young woman lies on an altar, two skulls in her hands, in a position suggestive of the black mass. Rather than being intended as a sinister scenario, however, the set-up is comedic, especially as the prone woman declares: 'don't touch me, I'm a religious object'. Another example of the witches' sabbath – here referred to as 'the grand sabbat' – appears in the American production *Blood Orgy of the She-Devils* (1973). Once again, we have a female-led coven meeting indoors, the high priestess of which uses Wiccan phraseology. Scantily clad young women dance in a manner reminiscent of American horrors from the previous decade, but in a more

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sinister twist culminate their dance by impaling spears into a restrained man, a sacrifice to their deity. Perhaps reflecting anxieties surrounding second-wave feminism, these two films both depict covens under the leadership of a priestess, something also evident in other roughly contemporaneous productions from the United States (*The Satanist* [1968], *Blood Sabbath* [1972]; *Daughters of Satan* [1972]) but also Europe (*Cry of the Banshee* [1970], *Blood on Satan's Claw* [1971], *El monte de las brujas* [1972], *La Papesse* [1975]).

Elsewhere, covens were led by men, as was typical of earlier twentieth-century renditions. An example can be found in the American picture *Race with the Devil* (1975), where a witches' gathering in rural Texas – never explicitly referred to as a sabbath but surely intended as one – plays a prominent role in the narrative. Here, a chanting group of dark-robed witches process around a nocturnal bonfire. Their leader, a middle-aged man in a horned mask, wears an ankh pendant and draws a circle around them with his ceremonial sword, one of various allusions to real-world occultism. Three young women swiftly disrobe and proceed to stroke him; nothing explicitly sexual is shown, but one of the observers describes it as 'an orgy'. A fourth woman, a young blonde, also disrobes before being swiftly dispatched with a knife to the heart. This use of sex and violence is brief and not especially gratuitous, perhaps because of a desire for a less restrictive age rating, but is reflective of a growing willingness to utilise full-frontal female nudity in the context of a witches' sabbath.

While the sabbaths of *Blood Orgy of the She-Devils* and *Race with the Devil* remained comparatively chaste, the 1970s saw other filmmakers frame their witches' gatherings as opportunities for explicit sexual activity. This had already been prefigured in the 1968 American soft-core movie *The Satanist*, but by the early 1970s became especially evident in European productions. In the British picture *Virgin Witch*, filmed in 1970 but only released in 1972, a coven of modern religious witches gather for their Lammas sabbath at a house in the pointedly named Wychwold.[310] The film's somewhat sympathetic portrayal of the coven is highly indebted to Wicca – the priest is even named Gerald, an allusion to Gerald Gardner – but also ramps up the portrayal of sex in ways that many real Wiccans would have found uncomfortable. The group's Lammas ceremony, for instance, involves the high priest taking a young woman's virginity while the rest of the naked coven dance around them. A second sabbath, held the next day, sees a similar set-up followed by the

[310] The film's history is discussed in Hamilton, *'X'-Cert 2*, 18, 23.

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witches sexually cavorting in the woods. Here, it is evident that nudity and sex are used for the purposes of the audience's titillation, but likely also allude to broader social suspicions that modern religious witchcraft was more-or-less a front for sexual promiscuity.

Another filmmaker interested in witchery's potential for on-screen sex was the Frenchman Mario Mercier (b. 1945), creator of both *La goulve* (1972) and *La Papesse* (1975), low-budget exploitation pictures later distributed to Anglophone audiences as *Erotic Witchcraft* and *A Woman Possessed* respectively. In *La Papesse*, we encounter a modern witches' group in rural France, one dressed in brightly coloured robes and assembling in a secluded outdoor space under the leadership of their domineering priestess. A young woman is forcibly initiated; she is pushed into an open grave, has a black cockerel sacrificed above her (dedicated to 'Shibboleth and Hainam, great protectors of the Sabbat'), and is subsequently raped. Later, the coven dance frenetically to a drum beat – several women are fully naked, all but one of the men still in robes – before grabbing at food and drink and pairing off into heterosexual couplings. While *La Papesse* and *Virgin Witch* portrayed sabbath sex in a simulated, softcore manner, a more explicitly pornographic approach followed in the 1977 American production *The Devil Inside Her*. Here, the Devil, a naked man in elaborate, glam rock-style make-up, seduces several women in the woods and ultimately oversees 'the witches' sabbat' – effectively a hardcore sexual orgy at which he receives the *osculum infame* before disappearing at the appearance of cross-wielding Christians.

While the sabbath sex in these productions was predominantly heterosexual, it is also significant that several also drew on the lesbian themes that were a recurrent trope of 1970s horror. In *Virgin Witch*, for example, the coven's high priestess exhibits a clear sexual interest in the young female arrivals, a scenario paralleling the sapphic proclivities of the high priestess in *The Satanist*, but in both productions this lesbian theme is generally kept out of the sabbath itself. Also notable is the fact that explicit portrayals of sexual activity between men remain strictly off-limits in these productions, despite the hints of such activity in Hammer's *The Witches* and the use of gay male characters in *Simon, King of the Witches*. In turn, this perhaps reflects that while earlier productions saw the witches' sabbath as a space of debauchery that was to be reviled by their audience, by the 1970s, the increasing focus was on imagery that would stimulate the intended heterosexual male viewer. We can thus see how, over the course of two decades, there was a clear shift from the sabbath as a scene of horror to one of sexual arousal.

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While most of the cinematic sabbaths discussed here are presented as modern occurrences, in one film of the period – the Italian horror *L'anticristo* (*The Antichrist*, 1974) – we instead find flashbacks of an early modern sabbath that invites clear comparisons with that in *Häxan*. One of a string of films devoted to demonic possession in the wake of *The Exorcist* (1973), *L'anticristo* revolves around a sexually frustrated young woman, Ippolita, who begins to experience memories of her namesake ancestress, a woman who joined the Devil worshippers and was subsequently burned as a witch.

The modern Ippolita's subsequent possession is facilitated by a visceral dream in which she sees herself in the role of her predecessor, arriving at the early modern sabbath and there receiving initiation.[311] The *mise en scène* is that of a darkened, unearthly woodland; nude revellers copulate among the ferns, while chanting can be heard in the background. Ippolita finds herself naked and brought to the centre, where black-robed figures lift her up and place her upon a stone altar. A man, wearing a horned animalistic mask, tells her that she is to become a daughter of Satan. He feeds her the head of a frog and blood from a chalice, a blasphemous inversion of the Eucharist. The diabolist scenario continues when a goat is brought forth and its tail lifted to expose the anus; the scene cuts to the modern Ippolita, lying in bed and tonguing vigorously, a symbolic *osculum infame*. Finally, back at the early modern sabbath, the Devil-man mounts her; simultaneously the modern Ippolita, in her bed, spreads her legs to let the invisible Beast in. Her initial cries suggest pain, but give way to moans of pleasure. The intention here is surely for the imagery to appear both horrifying and simultaneously titillating for its audience.

With *L'anticristo*, we have a return to the early modern notion of the sabbath as a space of sexual initiation, a topic broached in a contemporary context by *Virgin Witch* and *La Papesse* but rarely, if ever, framed on-screen in an early modern one. The particular influence of *Häxan* seems evident here, not only in the almost ethereal, blue-lit forest setting where the sabbath occurs but also in the particular inclusion of slaughtered toads, something rare elsewhere in cinematic productions. The fact that this becomes a dreamscape sabbath for the modern Ippolita is also interesting, prefiguring as it does the embrace of dream sabbaths among modern religious witches in the 1990s. It potentially even suggests

[311] The idea of integrating scenes from both the early modern past and the present ties in with later productions like *La visione del sabba* (1988), a film which – despite its title – makes only passing reference to the sabbath.

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the influence of Carlo Ginzburg, whose arguments about the dreaming *benandanti* had been published in Italy back in 1966.

* * *

While the witches' sabbath played a prominent role in twentieth-century visions of diabolism, it is noteworthy that its pre-eminence in this area was rivalled by the black mass. These two concepts have long exhibited some overlap – inverted versions of Christian ceremony do appear in certain early modern sabbath accounts – however by the late nineteenth century, *la messe noire* had also established itself as a trope that could exist independently of witchcraft. Nowhere was this more apparent than in Huysman's *La-bas*, a novel that, as noted by historian Ruben van Luijk, exerted a 'decisive influence on the subsequent history' of black mass imagery.[312]

In the twentieth century, we find various examples in which the witches' sabbath and black mass exist alongside each other. Wheatley's *The Devil Rides Out*, for instance, sees Mocata follow on from his Wiltshire sabbath with plans for 'a full Black Mass, including the sacrifice of a baptised child'.[313] Other writings conflate the two ceremonies; Bagby's 'The Witches' Sabbath' relates how a French king once watched 'the May Eve [sabbath] orgies, and received Black Mass for his especial benefit', while Lofts's account of an English sabbath features a bastardised Eucharistic ceremony involving a naked girl on the altar.[314] Similar overlaps appear in later cinematic productions; 'the black sabbat' in American picture *The Satanist* (1968) incorporates a naked woman lying upon the altar for the 'black mass'. Twentieth-century popular culture thus reveals a recurring notion of the black mass as one ceremonial element of the broader witches' sabbath.

At the same time, we also find portrayals of Satanic ritualism lacking any association with witchcraft. Naked women on altars, for instance, appear in Quebec-based horror *The Pyx* (1973) and Spanish production *Escalofrío* (1978), while Italian giallo *Il coltello di ghiaccio* (*Knife of Ice*, 1972) finds an investigator interpreting a black wafer, black candles, and an upturned cross as evidence for a black mass.[315] A different approach

[312] Luijk, 'Brief History', 279.
[313] Wheatley, *Devil Rides Out*, 267.
[314] Bagby, 'Witches' Sabbath', 239.
[315] This black mass is blamed on a British Satanist, part of a recurring trope in Italian cinema that links Britain with witchcraft and Satanism. In *Maciste all'inferno* (1962; *The Witch's Curse*), witchcraft is portrayed in early modern Scotland, while *Tutti i colori del buio* (1972; *All the Colors of the Dark*) features a diabolist ceremony, referred to as a 'sabbat' but without overt links to witchery, in an English neo-gothic mansion.

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appears in the French film *Mais ne nous délivrez pas du mal* (*Don't Deliver Us from Evil*, 1971), in which two schoolgirls commit themselves to Satan in a diabolist confirmation ceremony of their own devising. These four pictures were produced in regions with substantial Catholic populations, inviting the possibility that the black mass, or related forms of inverted Christian ritual, might have been considered more apt for Catholic audiences than the witches' sabbath.[316] Whether this is true or not, such portrayals nevertheless testify that filmmakers interested in diabolism did have access to tropes other than the sabbath, highlighting that there was a broader ecosystem of sinister imagery to draw upon.

* * *

The latter part of the 1970s saw a marked decline in witch-themed horror productions. In some cases, this was attributable to economic issues; the substantial decline of Britain's film industry, reflected in the de facto collapse of Hammer as a film-making concern, is a good example of this. More broadly, the decreasing popularity of on-screen witchery might indicate that many Anglophone horror producers had moved onto new tropes when it came to the malevolent supernatural. While we see fewer witches' covens, instead we find a growing interest in demonic possession and haunting (e.g., *The Exorcist* [1973], *Abby* [1974], *The Amityville Horror* [1979]), in portals to hellish realms (e.g., *Ghostbusters* [1984], *Hellraiser* [1987], *The Gate* [1987]), and in African diasporic religions (e.g., *Angel Heart* [1987], *The Believers* [1987], *The Serpent and the Rainbow* [1988]).

Accordingly, on-screen portrayals of the witches' sabbath were increasingly rare by the 1990s and 2000s. At this point, horror cinema saw a shift towards the portrayal of the witch as a monster, a largely solitary creature preying on human victims. Nowhere was this more apparent than in runaway American hit *The Blair Witch Project* (1999) and its many imitations, both in the United States and abroad. This theme of witch-as-monster left comparatively little space for the notion of witches' communal ceremonies and thus for the sabbath itself.[317] At the same time, American popular culture also saw a major trend for the portrayal of witches as benevolent, attractive young women who employed

[316] Potentially undermining this is the appearance of Satanic ritualism without witchcraft in British films *Dracula A.D. 1972* (1972) and *The Satanic Rites of Dracula* (1973) and the American production *The Devil's Rain* (1975).

[317] Even the low-budget American horror shlock *The Witch's Sabbath* (2005), despite its title, features no actual sabbath.

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witchcraft as a means of fighting evil and dealing with everyday problems (e.g., *Practical Magic* [1998], *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* [1997–2003] and *Charmed* [1998–2006]). While these narratives certainly had space for communal activities, the sabbath's transgressive associations no doubt left it an uneasy fit for such productions.

It was in the 2010s that a renewed interest in early modern witchery helped reinvigorate on-screen portrayals of the witches' sabbath. One example was the American series *Salem* (2014–2017), a sensationalistic reimagining of the Massachusetts trials of 1692–1693. Here we find certain elements common to earlier fictional portrayals; a dove is sacrificed, while three figures wear animal masks. More novel, however, is the way in which other witches participate in the sabbath. Rather than gathering together physically, most of the coven travel to the conclave in spirit – rubbing unguent into their bodies before falling asleep in their homes. Their spirits then manifest at the sabbath as part of a writhing mass of black tar encircled in flames. Once again reflecting scholarship's influence over artistic productions, the series' creator, Adam Simon (b. 1962), cited the work of historian Emma Wilby as inspiration, and while *Salem*'s portrayal does not represent a direct representation of Wilby's ideas, it does acknowledge the importance that she and other Ginzburgian scholars placed on dream travelling to the sabbath.[318]

Similarly drawing on early modern witchery, albeit to greater critical success, was the 2015 film *The Witch*, directed by the American Robert Eggers (b. 1983). Set in New England during the 1630s, *The Witch* sees a family of Puritan English settlers besieged by unseen forces from the adjacent woods; their baby goes missing, only for the viewer to learn that it has been abducted by an old witch, murdered, and mashed into an unguent to assist the sorceress in her nocturnal flight. We have here a reference back to early modern demonologists like Johannes Nider (c. 1380–1438), allowing the film to engage directly with some of the least pleasant aspects of the sabbath in a manner not broached since *Häxan*. Rather than uncritically demonising the sabbath, however, Eggers' film ends by considering its value as a liberatory space; his protagonist, the teenage Thomasin, signs Satan's book and is led, naked, into the woods to join her fellow witches. The closing scene sees these nude women, undulating and chanting around a fire, before levitating into the air: evidence of their Satanic power, perhaps, but also, as Thomasin laughs, of their personal freedom from the confines of Puritan society.

[318] Greene, *Bell, Book, and Camera*, 203.

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The imagery here seems to draw largely on early modern visual depictions of the witches' sabbath, in particular the woodcuts of the German artists Albrecht Dürer (1471–1528) and Hans Baldung (c. 1484–1545), which focus on naked middle-aged women, sometimes in the process of levitation. In contrast to the horror films of the 1970s, the nudity in Eggers' sabbath does not appear intended for a sexualised gaze; the camera does not dwell on female breasts, as *The Satanist* does, for instance. Indeed, much of the scholarly discourse around the film has focused on its potentially feminist messaging.[319] In this, its reception has chimed with the growing interest in witchery within fourth-wave feminism from the mid-2010s onwards. This is an intersecting tendency also reflected in various novels of this period, some of which similarly feature accounts of the early modern sabbath.[320]

* * *

Over the course of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, creative portrayals of the witches' sabbath have served the purposes of different poets, novelists, filmmakers, and television writers. Most often, the sabbath has been chosen with the intent of frightening the audience, of presenting them with scenes that they might find shocking or upsetting – which was arguably the central function of the original fifteenth-century stereotype to begin with. A second recurring trait, particularly evident in films from the 1970s, clearly revolves around arousal, especially for heterosexual male audiences, and is sometimes juxtaposed directly alongside horror. In a few cases, there have, however, been more unusual utilisations of the sabbath. One finds humour injected into the sabbath of *Häxan*, something that helps to underscore the remarkable, *sui generis* nature of Christensen's production. Similarly, the peculiar tedium evoked in the sabbath of Townsend Warner's *Lolly Willowes* is also innovative and has rarely, if ever, been seen elsewhere. Such examples testify, once again, to the multivalency of the sabbath.

Conclusion

As this Element has hopefully demonstrated, the witches' sabbath is a versatile trope, one which can convey liberation or abjection, ecstasy or terror. We have seen how it has intrigued scholars, with some embracing

[319] For an example challenging the characterisation of *The Witch* as a feminist portrayal, see Buckley, 'Witches, "Bitches"'.

[320] A dream of a horrific sabbath, for instance, appears in Blakemore, *Manningtree Witches*, 98–100.

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it as evidence of an early modern witches' cult while others see in it a bastardised memory of ancient shamanisms. We have considered how occultists have used it as the template for their new religions, whether constructing their own communal gatherings or envisioning astral realms beyond normal space and time. Finally, we have also looked at how fiction writers have drawn upon it to shock or excite their audiences, finding in the sabbath a ready space for the portrayal of sex and horror.

One theme that this study has highlighted is the pivotal role of scholarship in influencing other areas of cultural production. Just as Margaret Murray's ideas provided the groundwork for Cecil Street's fictive East Anglian coven and then Gerald Gardner's Wicca, so Carlo Ginzburg's emphasis on a shamanic basis of the sabbath inspired Andrew Chumbley and the broader direction of many a traditional witch. In turn, we should also be open to the way in which esoteric traditions have fed into the interpretations of scholars. Traditionalism's influence on Mircea Eliade, and upon his conceptualisation of shamanism, has already been widely noted. One must further wonder, however, to what extent the popularisation of modern religious shamanism, and with it the growing Western cultural interest in the shaman, informed the direction of Ginzburg's research as he was writing *Ecstasies*? Similarly, how might the growing popularisation of traditional witchcraft, and with it the idea of an astral sabbath, have informed the researches of Emma Wilby throughout the 1990s and 2000s?[321] Historians, like other scholars, can be reticent to acknowledge their religious commitments, fearing prejudice and a potential loss of credibility in the eyes of their peers; however, we should be attentive to the ways in which spiritual currents can inform their interests and thus contribute to the ongoing synergy between different facets of society. Scholarship is never produced in a vacuum.

This has been a short book and its examination of pertinent material has, by necessity, been brief. Focus has been placed on English language, and often British, material, especially with regard to occult and literary treatments of the sabbath. It has also been thematically restricted to the realms of scholarship, esotericism, and fiction, but there are undoubtedly other angles for scholars to profitably pursue. One might consider

[321] Wilby clearly had some awareness of modern esoteric subcultures in Britain, mentioning them in Wilby, *Cunning Folk*, 4. To my knowledge, Wilby has never spoken publicly about her religious affiliations or practices (nor should she be expected to, I would add), although some historians have interpreted her work as having been informed by esoteric ideas; Waters described Wilby's interpretations of animal familiars as coming 'from a Modern Pagan perspective', see Waters, *Cursed Britain*, 272.

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visual portrayals of the sabbath, as for example with Arthur Rackham's charming illustration of the 1920s. Similarly, explorations of the sabbath in music could prove fruitful – one only needs to recall the English metal band Black Sabbath to realise the potential significance of this trope for rock music, for instance. Also of import is the fact that this study has confined itself to the period since 1900, but there is surely much to be done on the portrayal of the witches' sabbath in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *Faust* and Robert Burn's 'Tam o' Shanter' remind us. These factors considered, I hope that this Element will prove a clarion call for other scholars to further research the cultural legacy of the witches' sabbath and the many ways in which people have been intrigued, scared, and titillated by these visions of darkness.

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