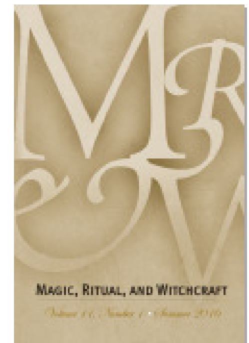
The Flying Witch: Its Resonance in the Sixteenth-Century Netherlands



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The Flying Witch
Its Resonance in the Sixteenth-Century Netherlands

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I

Only two court cases involving flying witches are known from the sixteenth-century Netherlands: one from Amsterdam and the other from Rotterdam, both during the 1560s. The first case concerned Volckgen Harmansdr.,[1] who, in 1564, was suspected of having caused the illness of a woman; it was said that during her own illness she had talked about devils and witches in her fever. Taken to the torture chamber, Volckgen was forced to admit that she had wrecked her brother's ship after a fight with him, just as she had also destroyed two other ships. She was thought to be a "*weermaecksster*" (weather witch) who had flown with her devil *Pollepel* (Ladle) to a large meeting of demons and other women high in the air above the straits of Texel. During a terrible storm she had seen a huge number of ugly and awful women and creatures who had made a hell of a noise. Some days after this confession she died in jail.[2] At this time, Amsterdam was ruled by cautious Catholic magistrates, and this trial did not result in further accusations. Although in the province of Holland 1564 was a peak year for witch trials, for Amsterdam it was also the last.[3]

With thanks to my former paranymphs Hans de Waardt and Machteld Löwensteyn for their observations and suggestions. The errors left are my own.

1. Here and below, abbreviated names follow Dutch conventions; like "Dr." or Ms." in English, these traditionally remain unexpanded in print.

2. Joke Spaans, "Toverijprocessen in Amsterdam en Haarlem, ca. 1540–1620," in *Nederland Betoverd*, ed. Marijke Gijswijt-Hofstra and Willem Frijhoff, 69–79, there 76–77(this chapter does not feature in the English edition); Hans de Waardt, *Toverij en samenleving. Holland 1500–1800* (Den Haag: Hollandse Historische Reeks, 1991), 119.

3. Hans de Waardt, "Amsterdam," in *Encyclopedia of Witchcraft: The Western Tradition*, ed. Richard Golden (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2006), 32–34.

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In the south of that province trials lasted into the 1590s. In 1566, the local sheriff accused a woman in Rotterdam, Geertgen Jansdr., of conversing with the devil, anointing her armpits and flying out of the chimney, and bewitching people and animals as well as wheat in the town of Bommel, and barley in the province of Sealand. While in the sheriff's custody, she admitted that she had been transported by the devil onto a tower in Rotterdam and presumably also to these other places. Whether she had flown there or not, it was certainly not to any kind of witches' meeting. To the magistrates, however, Geertgen said that everything she had said earlier had been spoken out of fury and it could never be proved. Hereupon the magistrates had long talks with everyone concerned, and, after also consulting some scholars, they condemned Geertgen to twenty-five years of banishment in punishment for what they described as her lies and false accusations of various honorable people.[4] Although no dossier has survived for this case, such a dossier must once have existed, since the sheriff had to present it to the magistrates to obtain permission for further investigation, including torture, which was denied. The banishment seems to have been a ploy to save the sheriff embarrassment.

In the sixteenth-century Netherlands at most two hundred women fell victim to prosecutions for witchcraft, primarily in the Northern provinces of Groningen, Holland, Utrecht and Guelders.[5] In the prosperous Flemish provinces of Flanders and Brabant the crime of witchcraft was rarely prosecuted; there the authorities mainly acted against cunning folk and only began serious persecutions of maleficent and above all apostate witches in the late sixteenth century. The estimate of two hundred prosecutions errs on the high side; it is extrapolated from known cases and the awareness of several gaps in the archival material. Since the concept of flying (transvection in demonological terms) only occurs in the two cases above, it is underrepresented, as is that of the witches' sabbat. These two things did not occur in combination: Only the Amsterdam case shows some signs of a coincidence, although there it did not lead to denunciations or to the chain-reaction trials that accounts of the sabbat sometimes inspired elsewhere in Europe.

Notwithstanding the rarity of the flying concept, the question of its sources

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4. W. Bezemer, "Een heksenproces te Rotterdam in 1566," *Oud Holland* 11 (1893): 255–56; cf. De Waardt, *Toverij en samenleving*, 218.

5. Hans de Waardt, "Witchcraft and Wealth: The Case of the Netherlands," in *The Oxford Handbook of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe and Colonial America*, ed. Brian P. Levack (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 232–48, esp. 241.

remains worth asking. Were the confessions of Volckgen only feverish rantings? Did Geertgen Jansdr., the woman in Rotterdam, merely echo the sheriff's questions or had she picked up the flying motif from a sermon, pamphlet, oral stories, or conversations about other trials? The relevant sources within the Netherlands are not plentiful. The Gouda physician Ronssaeus (of Flemish origin) recounted a mid-sixteenth-century tale about flying witches in a letter to Johan Wier. There is also a print designed by Pieter Brueghel in 1564, with flying witches in the upper part, and a painting of several decades earlier by Jacob Cornelisz. Warre (better known as Jacob Cornelisz. van Oostsanen) that portrays flying witches in the upper right hand corner. In the pages below, I will look at each of these potential sources for the flying motif in the Dutch trials of the 1560s. However, even if it were possible to prove relations between these different representations of flying witches, the question of origin also goes beyond them.

In his introduction to a volume on flying through the ages, Wolfgang Behringer has identified five discourses: traditional-mythical; religious demonic; moralistic metaphorical; literary; and scientific-technical. They existed independently but influenced each other.[6] These categories may provide an initial guideline of analysis. The trouble is that these discourses have been partly transmitted in complex combinations that need to be disentangled both from each other and from historiography as far as possible. The traditional discourse usually comes down to us in contexts already embedded in the demonic; morals were inconceivable without religion, and the literary discourse was not always as autonomous as it is considered now. (The technical discourse is of no concern here.) Moreover, previous researchers have seen flying witches where they may not have been.

In the pages below I will attempt to reconstruct different notions of flying witches in the Netherlands, their development and interrelations (or the absence thereof). I begin with a discussion of the possible and impossible traces of flying entities in the Netherlands before the occurrence of the witch trials. I will then briefly consider the concept of imported ideas and how these relate to the so-called "cumulative" concept of witchcraft; this section ends in a plea to replace the latter with more historically relevant patterns of distribution. The two means of transvection, by animals and by wooden instruments (including broomsticks), form the subject of the next section,

6. Dieter R. Bauer and Wolfgang Behringer, "Annäherung an eine menschliche Sensation: Fliegen und Schweben," in *Fliegen und Schweben*, idem (eds.) (München: dtv, 1997), 18. Cf. Wolfgang Behringer and Constance Ott-Koptschalijski, *Der Traum vom Fliegen: Zwischen Mythos und Technik* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1991)

which ranges more broadly across Europe but in the end focuses on what Dutch witchcraft theorists wrote about flying women. A description of the works of the two artists Brueghel and van Oostsanen follows, with particular reference to their possible influence on the Amsterdam and Rotterdam cases mentioned above as well as the sources of their inspiration. Although partly unknowable, the sources of inspiration once more lie outside the confines of the Netherlands. I round off my little tour with the one sixteenth-century Dutch example of an intruder story, about a man who flew to a company of witches and how he returned.

The question is, of course, whether all these different examples can be linked. In brief: some of them possibly can, while others cannot. The article thus argues, through its Dutch example, for a new approach to studying the history of the concept of witch-flight: before one can inquire into discourses or genres, let alone into meanings, one must begin with elemental questions of who thought what, when, and where: in other words, it may prove useful to attend to patterns of distribution.

II

"Varende vrouwen," a rare expression in late-medieval and early modern Dutch, has been translated by some as "flying witches" (*vliegende heksen*),[7] or more cautiously merely as "witches" (*heksen*).[8] If this translation were correct, then it could be assumed that the notion of flying women (*vrouwen*) was present in the Netherlands from an early date. However, one has to look closely at the individual texts in which this phrase occurs, as they nowhere mention *heksen* and the notion of flying remains vague at best. *Heks* was a Swiss word that only in the course of the seventeenth century gained currency in the (Northern) Netherlands.[9] I have found the expression "*varende vrouwen*" in five different Dutch language texts.

The oldest of these, the late-thirteen-century *Natuurkunde van het geheelal* (lit. The Physics of the Universe) was a treatise on the universe, written in rhymed verse by an anonymous author.[10] Here, a number of beings are

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7. L. Ph. C. van den Bergh, *Nederlandsche volksoverleveringen en godenleer* (Utrecht: Altheer, 1836), 190; *Het zal koud zijn in 't water als 't vriest*, ed. Hinke van Kampen, Herman Pleij [and others] (Den Haag: Nijhoff, 1980), 170.

8. Femke Kramer, *Mooi vies, knap lelijk. Grotesk realisme in rederijkerskluchten* (Hilversum: Verloren, 2009), 255.

9. Willem de Blécourt, *Termen van toverij. De veranderende betekenis van toverij in Noordoost -Nederland tussen de 16de en de 20ste eeuw* (Nijmegen: SUN, 1990), 119–20.

10. *De natuurkunde van het geheelal. Een 13de-eeuws middelnederlands leerdicht*, ed. Ria Jansen-Sieben (Brussel: Paleis der Academien, 1968), available in digitale bibliotheek voor de Nederlandse letteren (hereinafter dbnl), at www.dbnl.org.

mentioned. In this context one could argue in favor of translating the Dutch *varen* as "flying" as the particular passage starts with devils [*Dvuelen*] of the air; these are also called "night riders" [*nacht ridders*] a few lines later.[11] The poet then repeats that these are devils and continues:

Haghetissen, ende varende vrouwen
Godelinge [wichte][12] oec, en trouwen
Cobbooude, nickers, aluen, maren
Die hem tsmorgens openbaren.
Ende connen wel halen vier
Nacht merien heten wise hier[13]

In his fervor to be complete, the author sums up beings of all the four elements: cobolds [*cobbooude*] of the earth, *nickers* of the water; the nightmares [*maren*] who were able to fetch fire. The "*haghetissen*" are hags; the "*goedelincs*" protective spirits. To what element the "*varende vrouwen*" were deemed to belong has to remain open. Yet the "night riders," even if only spirits, are enticing as they at least represent some notion of flying beings. Flying beings of some kind come more to the fore in *Des conincx summe* (The King's Summa), a translation of 1408 from the French *la Somme le Roi*, written by a certain brother Laurent in the thirteenth century. This translation was rather free; the translator added passages whenever he found an opportunity.[14] In the discussion of vainglory, one of the seven sins, some examples are given of false beliefs that are (probably) not copied from the French original:

of vanden goeden houden of nachte meriën of onghehueren of beelwitten, daer dese oude wive of pleghen te callen, dat si selve wanen dattet waer is, datse op beseme te mote pleghen te riden te roocgate uut, of dat die witte wive of die varende vrouwen die wiven uten cramen pleghen te leyden, of alle die toveren of wijchelen of ghelove of hope daer in hebben . . .[15]

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11. *De natuurkunde van het geheelal*, 315.

12. Superscribed in original.

13. I refrain from offering an English translation of this passage because it raises so many questions of translation—especially of the many beings named in the poem. I discuss these names and the problems associated with assigning English correlates below.

14. F. P. van Oostrom, "De erfenis van 'Des coninx summe'," *Optima: cahier voor literatuur en boekwezen* 14 (1996): 119–26.

15. *Des Coninx Summe*, ed. D.C. Tinbergen (Leiden: Sijthoff, 1907), 236–37; also in the dbnl (see note 10). Untranslated here, for reasons given at note 13.

The names of the beings mentioned can be tentatively translated as "good *holden*" (*goeden houden*),[16] "night mares" (*nachte meriën*), "ghosts" (*onghe-hueren*), and "clairvoyants" (*beelwitten*). Then a most interesting line follows about old women who take it "as a reality that they ride on a broom to a meeting (*mote*) out of the smoke hole." After this the enumeration continues with the "white wights" (*witte wiven*) and the *varende vrouwen* "who use to lead women out of child birth" (might this be a euphemism for helping to procure abortion?), and "all those who bewitch or cast spells or believe or hope in that." Here, too, it is the nightmares or the *holden* who fly and not the others.

Another manifestation of the expression *varende vrouwen* can be found in the journey of Jan de Mandeville (1462) where at one point a tree is described from which no one should take the fruits, because it comes from "*het elfs ghedrochte* [an elfin monster]" or the "*varenden vrouwen.*"[17] Here the women are (again) associated with the elves. As an earlier text such as the *Walewein* (a thirteenth-century Dutch Arthurian Romance) speaks of "*elfs ghedrochte of toverie* [an elfin monster or witchcraft]" this provides some support for placing the elves and the witches in the same category; *toverie* was indeed the medieval and early modern Dutch word for witchcraft, but in the broad meaning which included both malevolent bewitching and beneficent unwitching.

The occurrence of "*varende vrouwen*" in the final two texts supports this interpretation, although both consist mainly of lists. The play *Nu Noch* is a comedy about a man who says nothing but the same two words "now still" and a priest who comes to exorcise him. In the priest's spell the "*varende vrouwen*" are listed together with the cats who dance on Wednesdays and the "*drollen*" (drôles), "*maren*" and "*neckers.*" The dancing cats are no mere fantasy; they surfaced again at a trial in Amsterdam in 1555 and at the end of the century in a number of witch trials (at 's-Hertogenbosch, Roermond, and Utrecht) and they can be understood as containing sexual allusions.[18] But again the *varende vrouwen* are just mentioned and there is no indication as to what they were supposed to do.

Finally, the *vrouwen* occur in a farcical prognostication issued in Antwerpen

16. The German *holden* (lit.: hidden; cf. Norse *huldre*) are a kind of elves and at least during the Middle Ages certainly not witches, cf. Hans Peter Broedel, *The* Malleus Maleficarum *and the Construction of Witchcraft. Theology and Popular Belief* (Manchester 2003), 106.

17. *De reis van Jan van Mandeville, naar de Middelnederlandsche handschriften en incunabelen*, N. A. Cramer, ed. (Leiden: Brill, 1908), 230; also in dbnl (see note 10).

18. Sonja Deschrijver, "Tussen heks, dief en moordenaar. 'Magie' aan de basis in 's-Hertogenbosch, 1589–1598," *Trajecta* 18 (2009): 297–319, there 306–307.

in 1561. Based on an earlier French text by Rabelais, it contains a generally rather free elaboration of the *Pantagruéline Prognostication*. In its introduction, the text lists all the sources of the forecast and mentions among others the "*varende vrouwen, vodden, fandoosen, maren*" together with fortunetellers, witches [*tooveressen*], old "*quenes,*" elves, as well as the odd werewolf and cobold. The 1980 translation is unsatisfactory as too many of these terms are turned into an anachronistic "*heks*": the "*quenen,*" (twaddling old women), the "*fandoosen*" (vaudois?), the "*vodden*" (liars) and also the *varende vrouwen*.[19]

Yet the primary meaning of the verb "*varen*" was not flight but movement from place to place. Alaric Hall cautiously translates the "*varende vrouwen*" as "wandering women,"[20] analogous with the "*varende luyden*," the wandering people or vagabonds who were never suspected of flying.[21] In the Netherlands, the *witte wieven* (white wights) constituted the closest equivalent to the elves; although they wandered around at night, they were never reported to have flown but rather were associated with "stealing" children and taking them to their underground dwellings.[22] Following the approach of Jacob Grimm's *Deutsche Mythologie*, flying witches crept into Dutch interpretations through works by mythologists like Buddingh and Van den Bergh at an early date.[23] However, the exploration of the term *varende vrouwen* in itself results in a dead end, at least if one is looking for flying witches. Out of its shadows, however, a notion of flying nightmares (or even women) does emerge,

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19. *Het zal koud zijn in 't water*, 170–71.

20. Alaric Hall, *The Meanings of Elf, and Elves, in Medieval England* (PhD Dissertation, University of Glasgow, 2005); not in the revised published edition: *Elves in Anglo-Saxon England. Matters of Belief, Health, Gender and Identity* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2007).

21. D. Th. Enklaar, *Varende Luyden: Studien over de middeleeuwse groepen van onmaatschappelijken in de Nederlanden* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1956); Herman Pleij, *Van schelmen en schavuiten: laatmiddeleeuwse vagebondteksten* (Amsterdam: Querido, 1985).

22. Documented in the early fifteenth century: W. Moll, "Bijdrage tot de kennis van het middeneeuwsch bijgeloof," *Studien en bijdragen op 't gebied der historische theologie* 2 (1872): 387–96, esp. 388, 390; cf. Cornelius Kempius, *De origine, situ et quantitate Frisiae et rebus a Frisiis olim praeclare gestis* (Cologne 1588), 341. Likewise in England the "elves were known not for flying but for dancing," Catherine Rider, *Magic and Religion in Medieval England* (London: Reaktion, 2012), 77.

23. Van den Bergh, *Nederlandsche volksoverleveringen*, 191: did not know the meaning of "*varende vrouwen,*" unless it would be witches; D. Buddingh, *Verhandeling over het Westland, ter opheldering der loo-en, woerden en hoven, benevens de natuurdienst der Friesen en Batavieren* (Leiden: Arnz, 1844), 103–10 rendered them in "witches who fly through the air." These writers may have disagreed with Jacob Grimm in places, they nevertheless followed his overall approach.

although the evidence is very slim.[24] In the five texts investigated witchcraft is only mentioned marginally. The difference with the trials in the 1560s is that the idea of flying is there superimposed on women who were accused of witchcraft.

III

The distribution of witch trials in the Netherlands from the end of the fifteenth century onward can be reasonably well followed through financial accounts. Although the nature of this type of source often renders it hard to discern many details, one of the patterns that is visible is the early-sixteenth-century movement of the trials from city to city, from Kleve to Nijmegen and Utrecht, to Amsterdam and Haarlem; in a number of cases one finds witch trials spreading as one city council consults the next or borrows experienced torturers. Trials also spread through the surrounding countryside, starting in the very south-east.[25] It seems safe to assume that the notion of the devil's pact was transmitted through these channels of consulting councils and itinerant torturers, replacing the earlier local practice of prosecuting a witch primarily for the harm caused. The few treatises found in Guelders, for instance, certainly point this way. Theodorus Martinbergus, for instance, adviser to the duke of Guelders, stressed that witches had renounced God and surrendered themselves to Satan. He also referred to the witches' nocturnal outings with Diana, showing that he still adhered to the canon *Episcopi*, rather than to the new ideas as propagated in the *Malleus maleficarum* (see below).[26] The low number of witches per case (usually just one to three accused) excludes huge sabbats; when there is more extensive information, as for instance in Utrecht, sabbats are not found in the records[27] Only in an

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24. Cf. the discussion of the Icelandic *gandreið* in Stephen A. Mitchell, *Witchcraft and Magic in the Nordic Middle Ages* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 130–36.

25. Willem de Blécourt and Hans de Waardt, "Rhein, Maas und Schelde entlang. Das Vordringen der Zaubereiverfolgungen in die Niederlande," in *Ketzer, Zauberer, Hexen. Die Anfänge der europäischen Hexenverfolgungen*, ed. Andreas Blauert (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1990), 182–216. See also my *The Cat and the Cauldron: Witchcraft in the Low Countries, 14th—20th century* (under contract with Oxford University Press), chapter 2.

26. Hans de Waardt and Willem de Blécourt, "'It is no Sin to put an Evil Person to Death'. Judicial Proceedings Concerning Witchcraft During the Reign of Duke Charles of Gelderland," in *Witchcraft in the Netherlands from the Fourteenth to the Twentieth Century*, ed. Marijke Gijswijt-Hofstra and Willem Frijhoff (Rijswijk: Universitaire Pres Rotterdam, 1991), 66–78, 74–75.

27. Janny Steenhuis, "'In een quaad gerucht van toverye'. Toverij voor de Utrechtse rechtbanken, ca. 1530–1630," in: *Nederland betoverd*, 40–56.

isolated case, as in the seigneury of Heusden in 1528, five witches were said to have danced on a nearby heath, without, however, having flown there.[28] During the trials in the province of Groningen in the 1550s, following earlier ones in neighboring Germany and reported in a chronicle, a sabbat is mentioned just once. At the same time the trials in the area west of Nijmegen do seem to have featured sabbats, at least the concept of denunciation was present.[29] There may have been night-flying creatures in the Netherlands, but there is no trace of any witches' flight before the mid-1560s.

Since constructions such as the pact with the devil, the sabbat, and of witchcraft as primarily a crime of apostasy, were all imported, it seems reasonable to presume that this was also the case with flying witches. It is even possible to conclude that in the Netherlands this concept hardly had any resonance. These findings have implications for the continued use by historians of the "cumulative concept of witchcraft" as developed by Joseph Hansen in 1900—a concept of which sabbats and flying witches were supposedly an integral part.[30] If a witchcraft historian wants to follow the historical development of witch trials and their diffusion from early-fifteenth-century Switzerland through the rest of Europe, a more refined model is needed. In the case of Germany, positioned between Switzerland and the Netherlands, Richard Kieckhefer has observed that it was "remarkably resistant" to the kind of witchcraft patterns that were displayed South of the Alps.[31] In the North notions of flying did not always fit in. What was distributed, then, was basically a new interpretation of already existing notions of bewitching and unwitching, although some new ideas of what could be prone to bewitchment may also have spread. However, even if this kind of detail can be discerned in the sources, it has not always been extracted by researchers. In trials at least, if not in demonological and visual representation, flight proved a less successful export than has often been supposed.

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28. De Waardt, *Toverij en samenleving*, 95.

29. Hans de Waardt and Willem de Blécourt, "De regels van het recht. Aantekeningen over de rol van het Gelderse Hof bij de procesvoering inzake toverij, 1543–1620," *Bijdragen en mededelingen Gelre* 80 (1989): 24–51.

30. On both the utility and the limitations of the "cumulative concept, see Brian P. Levack, "Introduction," in *The Oxford Handbook of Witchcraft*, ed. Brian Levack, 3–4; and the same author's *Witch Hunt in Early Modern Europe*, 4th ed. (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), 29–56.

31. Richard Kieckhefer, "The First Wave of Trials for Diabolical Witchcraft," in *Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe and Colonial America*, ed. Brian Levack (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 159–78; see also: Kieckhefer, "Mythologies of Witchcraft in the Fifteenth Century, *Magic,*" *Ritual and Witchcraft* 1 (2006): 79–108.

Although in general the lines representing the new witch trial could be drawn on a map of Europe in a centrifugal pattern, from Basel (the place of the Church Council, 1431–49) outward, these lines can often turn out to be geographically much less neat.[32] The initiation of witch trials depended on the communication of ideas and expertise, and several further steps were needed to turn rumors about bewitching into proof of apostasy.[33] The mid-fifteenth-century trial in *Atrecht* (Arras) in the French-speaking Netherlands, was one of the first attempts to export the concept of a new sect of witches, *vaudois*. Here the emphasis was on the sabbat and to a lesser extent on flying, but bewitchments were in short supply.[34] The term "vaudois" gained some notoriety afterward, but it hardly resulted in more persecutions of witches in the traditional sense, certainly not north of the language boundary in the Dutch-speaking areas. In a roundabout way the Arras trial may nevertheless have contributed to the events a hundred years later, described above.

IV

The European tradition featured two different ways of flying: either on animals or on wooden implements, the latter usually being smeared with an unguent. Christian theologians held that since they were not permitted by God, both methods of flying were facilitated by the Devil and called them both "transvection" due to the supposition of diabolic conveyance. Thus according to the canon *Episcopi* tradition, which favored women riding on animals:[35]

> some wicked women, perverted by the Devil, seduced by the illusions and phantasms of demons, believe and profess that, in the hours of night, they ride upon certain beasts with Diana, the goddess of pagans, and an innumerable multitude of women,

32. Cf. Michael Bailey and Edward Peters, "A Sabbat of Demonologists: Basel, 1431–1440," *The Historian* 65 (2003): 1375–1392; Martine Ostorero, "The Concept of the Witches' Sabbath in the Alpine Region (1430–1440): Text and Context," in *Witchcraft Mythologies and Persecutions*, ed. Gábor Klaniczay and Ëva Pócs (Budapest/New York 2008), 15–34.

33. See also: Hans de Waardt, "Witchcraft and Wealth: the Case of the Netherlands," in Levack, ed., *Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe*, 232–48.

34. Franck Mercier, *La Vauderie d'Arras. Une chasse aux sorcières à l'Automne du Moyen-Age* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires, 2006).

35. On the Canon passage and its reception, see especially: Werner Tschacher, "Der Flug durch die Luft zwisschen Illusionstheorie und Realitätsbeweis, *Zeitschrift der Savigny-Stiftung für Rechtsgeschichte* 85 (1999): 225–76.

and in the silence of the night traverse great spaces of earth, and obey her commands as of their lady, and are summoned to her service on certain nights.[36]

One of the places where such women resurfaced was in a sermon by the thirteenth-century preacher Jacques de Vitry, who mentioned a woman who believed she could fly on animals and go through closed doors. He locked her inside the church to show that she could not accomplish this.[37] A Dutch example occurs in the decrees of the bishop of Utrecht of 1375,[38] which indicates copying from other decrees rather than the presence of the concept among the populace. In the canon itself the kind of animal is not specified, and most of the texts derived from it also just mention *bestias*.[39] Only very occasionally one finds more details such as the woodland animals appearing in Zürich at the end of the fourteenth century,[40] or the donkeys, horses, oxen, or camels mentioned a century later by Ulrich Molitor (who was skeptical about flying anyway).[41] It would also be careless to argue that these variations signify more than the copying of the canon and the insertion of ethnographic material. The Zürich scribe, for example, may well have thought he had provided an accurate translation of *bestiae* as distinct from *pecudes*, farm animals. It is also debatable whether this tradition had much to do with flying, since, as Walter Stephens has argued, "nothing in the Canon *Episcopi* implies that women or their confessors were thinking of aerial flight." Their steeds just went very fast.[42]

As far as can be seen, the tradition of using forks, stools, or indeed broomsticks, is younger, but still predates the witch trials and is thus initially not

36. Alan Kors and Edward Peters, eds., *Witchcraft in Europe 400–1700. A Documentary History* (Philadelphia 2001), 62. I have replaced the phrase "who have given themselves back to Satan" with "perverted by the Devil." Cf. Behringer, ed., *Hexen und Hexenprozesse*, 60–61. The original phrase is *sceleratae mulieres retro post satanam conversae*.

37. Rider, *Magic and Religion in Medieval England*, 74–75.

38. S. Muller Fz., "Mandamenten van bisschop Aernt van Hoern tot handhaving der kerkelijke tucht, 1372–1375," *Archief voor de geschiedenis van het Aartsbisdom Utrecht* 17 (1889): 124–146, there, 127–132.

39. Apart from Behringer's *Hexen und Hexenprozesse in Deutschland* (München: dtv, 2000), I checked the source collection of Joseph Hansen, *Quellen und Untersuchungen zur Geschichte des Hexenwahns und der Hexenverfolgung im Mittelalter* (Bonn: Georgi, 1901). Undoubtedly I missed a few texts.

40. Behringer, *Hexen und Hexenprozesse*, 67

41. Behringer, *Hexen und Hexenprozesse*, 113.

42. Walter Stephens, *Demon Lovers: Witchcraft, Sex, and the Crisis of Belief* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 128.

about witches either. An anonymous thirteenth-century German poem includes both options; the poet marveled at the sight of a woman (*wîp*) riding on a calf (*chalp*), or even on an ordinary broom (*hûspesem*), but at any rate flying over the mountains and valleys.[43] An early-fifteenth-century poem by the Tyrolean aristocrat Hans Vintler mentions anointing a bucket, to go out above: "*salben den chübel* [*Kübel*], *das si oben aus varen* [*fahren*]."[44] A woodcut illustrating the poem about sixty years after it was written depicts four men riding on a wolf, a chamois, a pig, and a table. From today's point of view, the advantage of the wooden instruments, greased with unguent, is that the transvection can be comprehended as occurring in spirit.[45] Yet the fifteenth-century witchcraft theorists argued the other way round and instead stressed the bodily movement of the witch. These theorists did not think the witches' flight to be important because it enabled trials to exceed the boundaries of small communities.[46] Rather, in the view of Institoris, the author of the *Malleus maleficarum*, it showed a physical contact between the carrying demon and the witch.[47] This new corporality of demons was taken as a yardstick for the state of Christianity, to be applied when the crimes of witches were proven. Toward the end of the fifteenth century this redefinition of the evidence signaled a much harder stance toward what had previously been mere superstition.

The broomstick featured prominently in the literature that was produced in the context of the Council of Basel.[48] Two decades later it turned up in Arras, where the *vaudoises* were said to have been provided by the Devil with ointment and a little stick. They put the little stick between their legs and the Devil transported them to the place where they assembled.[49] With the retreat of the canon *Episcopi,* riding on animals lost popularity: as far as I can

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43. Behringer, *Hexen und Hexenprozesse*, 24–25.

44. Behringer, *Hexen und Hexenprozesse*, 28–30.

45. Cf. Edward Bever, *The Realities of Witchcraft and Popular Magic in Early Modern Europe: Culture, Cognition and Everyday Life* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2008), 124–50 on OBEs and Scopolamine dreams; this suggests active participation in flight experiences rather than the citation of narratives or ascription during a trial.

46. Behringer, *Der Traum von Fliegen*, 235–36.

47. Stephens, *Demon Lovers*, 125.

48. Martine Ostorero, Agostino Paravicini Bagliani, Kathrin Utz Tremp, eds., *L'imaginaire du sabbat. Edition critique des textes les plus anciens (1430 c.—1440 c.)* (Lausanne: Université de Lausanne, 1999), 304, 368, 504.

49. Mercier, *La Vauderie d'Arras*, 233, 241; on the latter page Mercier points to the influence of Nicolas Jacquier.

see, they were also largely restricted to the Alpine regions. Yet the new argument did not find a positive reception everywhere. During the Arras trial, theologians at the University of Louvain were unable to agree among themselves,[50] but toward the end of the century they seem to have considered the witches' flight as an illusion; people who expressed contrary views were held to be gullible. According to the Louvain theologian Johannes Beetz, aerial flights could be verified by, for example, checking whether women had been home when they were said to have been flying; or one could confront them with people they pretended to have seen, or ask them to produce objects from their journey.[51] Several decades later, Jacob van Hoogstraten, successor of Jacob Sprenger as inquisitor of the archbishoprics of Cologne, Mainz and Trier, also followed the traditional opinion on witchcraft; there is no sign of any influence of the *Malleus*.[52]

Another Dutch voice can be found in the subtle theological argument of the physician Johan Wier, who in the last edition of his successful anti-witchcraft work wrote about the devil and flying "that he not only does these things in men's minds (. . .), but also truly snatches up bodies and carries them through the air." And he asked: "Therefore since Christ is like us in all things except sin, why could not the same thing happen to human beings beset by the Demon?"[53] So far, this is the argument proponents of flight put forward. Wier, however, went on to present a long account of how demons had to be material in order to carry humans through the air; he also adapted the whole issue to fit in with his views on the devil, who in his opinion could do nothing without God's permission. Stories about flying people (Wier had just quoted Boccaccio) were "just contrived fictions."

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50. Mercier, *La Vauderie d'Arras*, 234.

51. Marcel Gielis, "Een Leuvense Heksenhamer: De leer van de theologieprofessor Johannes Beetz (° 1477) over bijgeloof en duivelspact," *Liber Amicorum Dr. J. Scheerder* (Leuven: Vereniging Historici Lovanienses, 1987), 165–87, 177; idem, "The Netherlandic Theologians' Views of Witchcraft and the Devil's Pact," in: Gijswijt-Hofstra and Frijhoff, eds., *Witchcraft in the Netherlands*, 37–52, 45

52. Marcel Gielis, "Hekserij en heksenvervolging in de leer van Jacob van Hoogstraten over toverij en duivelspact," *Taxandria* 59 (1987): 5–52; "The Netherlandic Theologians' Views," 47–48.

53. *Witches, Devils, and Doctors in the Renaissance, Johann Weyer, De praestigiis daemonum*. George Mora, ed., John Shea, transl. (Binghamton, N.Y.: Medieval & Renaissance Texts & Studies, 1991), 197, Book 3, ch. XII; *De Praestigiis daemonum* (Basel: Oporinus, 1583), col. 275. There is still need for a diplomatic edition which charts the changes Wier made in the eight successive editions of *De praestigiis*, including his two low-German versions.

God therefore does not allow demons to practice these violent mockeries upon our witches, whose decrepit age, corrupt imagination, and impaired mind serve as punishment enough; God does not act in collusion with demons.[54]

Elsewhere in his work he thus emphasized that God made it possible for demons to imprint the ''sentient soul'' with these forms.

Hence it happens that a human being sometimes thinks that he is an ass shut up in a bag, or very often a flying eagle; and sometimes he seems to be carried from place to place with Diana and her nymphs or in some other company of silly women, and to join their dances, and travel far abroad, and be present at all sorts of other madness.[55]

In the end, it was ''impossible'' that things could fly through the air; this was little more than ''false and imaginary.''[56] This view may have had some impact in the Netherlands.

V

In 1565 a print was published in Antwerp by Hieronymus Cock. It was engraved by Pieter van der Heyden and designed by Pieter Brueghel the Elder and in it flying witches occupy most of the upper edge. On the upper left witches on flying monsters, some of them naked, battle each other. In the center a naked witch holding a spindle is riding on a goat through the clouds. On the right of the print a clothed witch on a broomstick is seen disappearing into a chimney and another one emerges from it. There is only a vague indication of dying cattle on the left-hand side of the print (above the elephant). The print is entitled: ''St James, by devilish deception, is placed before the magician,'' referring to the legend of St James and the magician Hermogenes—a legend that originally bore no hint of witchcraft motifs such as flying or ritual magic.[57] The print appeared in time to have been seen by the sheriff of Rotterdam and like Geertgen Jans' case it featured a chimney and dying animals but lacked a witches' assembly. There is even a figure

54. Book 3, ch. XII, Shea transl., 200; *De praestigiis daemonum*, col. 279.

55. Book 3, ch. VIII, Shea transl., 189; *De praestigiis daemonum*, cols. 263–64.

56. Book 6, chapter XXIV, Shea transl. 548 and 555; *De praestigiis*, col. 750 and col. 760.

57. Charles Zika, *The Appearance of Witchcraft: Print and Visual Culture in Sixteenth-Century Europe* (London and New York: Routledge, 2007), 162–66; cf. Linda Hults, *The Witch as Muse: Art, Gender, and Power in Early Modern Europe* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005), 49–52.

Figure 1. Pieter van der Heyden (engraver), Pieter Brueghel (designer), De heilige Jacobus bezoekt de tovenaar Hermogenes (St Jacob visits the magician Hermogenes), print 1565. Museum Boijmans van Beuningen Rotterdam Bdh 7166 (PK)

clinging to a (broken) church tower in the print. But these similarities are not conclusive and Geertgen was accused of having anointed herself instead of a broom. At most one can conclude that the sheriff was perhaps inspired by some of the imagery on the print.

Brueghel's design certainly influenced other artists, but the main question here is about the influences on him. In the early 1560s there were no witch trials in the immediate surroundings of Antwerp, the Duchy of Brabant or the County of Flanders (these would only start there a quarter of a century later) and Brueghel had not included any daily-life concerns such as the bewitching of milk or beer or little children. Notwithstanding the multitude of demons, it is debatable whether a pact with the devil figures in this painting. Ordinary, ascribed witches were never easy to depict and Brueghel restricted himself to visual examples of ritual magic, which involved magic books, cauldrons and magic circles. On the whole, his imagery will mainly

have been derived from the pictorial and intellectual tradition. He also seems to have wanted to include as many different flying witches as possible, perhaps for the sake of discussion. Already on that account it is unlikely that the different elements of the print were derived from one source.

The exact nature of Brueghel's sources has nevertheless not yet been identified, given that he probably did not collaborate with the demonologists to transform non-witchcraft imagery into elements of the witchcraft canon. Thus his examples of witches flying through the chimney were *witches* rather than night-riders, and in the mid-sixteenth century at least, the battling women were understood as witches.[58] Only the woman on the goat in the middle of the print has a clear artistic ancestry: it was a reference to the witch flying on the goat in Hans Baldung Grien's 1510 woodcut of a group of witches.[59] Both the witch on a goat and on a broomstick were also depicted on a painting of the Witch of Endor completed in 1526 in Amsterdam by Jacob Cornelisz. van Oostsanen.[60]

In the Amsterdam of the 1520s witch trials were as rare as in Antwerp in the 1550s and 1560s;[61] they were only introduced in Amsterdam in the 1540s. And while the notion of prosecuting witches had proceeded as far as Utrecht, assemblies and flying were still alien elements. Like Brueghel a generation later, the Amsterdam artist had drawn his inspiration from farther afield. He also had to emphasize ritual magic, not just performed by the "witch" of Endor, but also by a group of four women, cooking a sausage; some of them are sitting on goats and one holds a broomstick between her legs. This painting further featured a woman carrying a tray with some kind of pudding on it while flying on a horse skull, which was drawn by two cocks. Apart from the group of witches, the skull and the sausage were references to Baldung Grien as well. While Volckgen Harmansdr. may not have

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58. They did not represent a battle between virtues and vices, for one reason because witches can hardly stand for virtues; cf. Zika, *Appearance*, 164–65. The actual source of Brueghel's fighting witches was probably Burchard of Worms' *Decretum,* see a.o.: Joseph Hansen, *Quellen und Untersuchungen zur Geschichte des Hexenwahns und der Hexenverfolgung im Mittelalter* (Bonn 1901), 40: "et ibi cum aliis pugnes, et ut vulneras alias, et tu vulnera ab eis accipias."

59. Cf. Zika, *Appearance*, 10.

60. Hans de Waardt, "Endor and Amsterdam: The Image of Witchcraft as a Weapon in the Political Arena," in *Religion, the Supernatural and Visual Culture. An album amicorum for Charles Zika*, ed. Jennifer Spinks and Dagmar Eichberger (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 126–39.

61. Cf. Margaret A. Sullivan, "The Witches of Dürer and Hans Baldung Grien," *Renaissance Quarterly* 53 (2000): 333–401, who makes a similar observation.

Figure 2. Jacob Cornelisz. van Oostsanen, Saul bij de heks van Endor (Saul with the witch of Endor), Amsterdam 1526, painting, detail of upper right hand corner. Rijksmuseum Amsterdam SK-A-668

seen this painting in 1564, her accusers probably did: underneath the two flying witches and the multitude of demons there are ships in trouble. After all, the painter had been in close contact with Pompeius Occo, whose son Sybrant later played a role in the introduction of witch trials in Amsterdam and was still part of its ruling clique in the 1560s.

In his turn Brueghel will also have been inspired by a group of illuminations of the Arras trials, possibly made in Bruges and illustrating different copies of Jean Taincture's *Invectives contre la secte de vauderie*. While these centered on the adoration of the Goat, presenting a counter image of the Lamb of God, in the sky above witches were flying on demons and on broomsticks.[62] One of the three miniatures also has a barely visible witch on a

62. Franck Mercier, "Un trompe-l'oeil maléfique: l'image du sabbat dans les manuscrits enluminés de la cour de Bourgogne (à propos du *Traité du crisme de Vauderie* de Jean Taincture, vers 1460–1470)," *Médiévales* 44 (2003): 97–116.

broomstick emerging from a chimney of a house on the right.[63] This suggests that the goat progressed from animal of worship to a transvecting animal (and had little to do with the animals of the canon *Episcopi*); after all, in both cases it was the devil who was carrying people around.

Artists' impressions of witchcraft had to present not only a visible witch, they also had to carry a deeper moral meaning, which has been deciphered even less than the pictorial tradition. Even if the language of one image seems clear, it cannot be asserted that another artist shared it completely. The flying witch of Baldung Grien, for instance, which was quoted by both Van Oostsanen and Brueghel, was itself a reference to the witch of Albrecht Dürer. Yet while this last print has recently been interpreted as a rendering of *Invidia* (Envy),[64] this interpretation cannot simply be transferred to the later ones. Brueghel, for example, drew his version of Envy without any flying witches in it.[65] Van Oostsanen's main message was about the danger of losing faith in God.[66]

VI

One of the very few intruder stories found in the early-modern Netherlands was published by the physician Balduinus Ronssaeus in one of his letters to Johan Wier. Such stories were favored by witchcraft theorists as they ostensibly provided eyewitness accounts of witches' activities like flying and sabbat attendance.[67] However in the Netherlands (or at least in Holland) Ronsseus's stance was controversial as he supported the prosecution of witches with the aid of the water test.[68] He had heard the story he used to illustrate his views from the burgomaster of Gouda, where he lived. It related the adventures of

63. Cf. Zika, *Appearance*, p. 66. The witch is easier to see on the cover of Catherine Rider's *Magic and Religion in Medieval England*.

64. Judith Venjakob, "Albrecht Dürers 'Die Hexe,' um 1500," *@KIH-eSkript. Interdisziplinäre Hexenforschung online* 4 (2012), issue 4, 46–78, in historicum.net, URL: https://www.historicum.net/purl/2y7zmf/ (visited May 18, 2015).

65. Elements from his series The Seven Deadly Sins do return in his painting *Dulle Griet* (1561). They also reappear in the 1593 print Witch's Sabbat of Trier; about the latter: Rita Voltmer, "'Hört an neu schrecklich abentheuer/ von den unholden ungeheuer'—Zur multimedialen Vermittling des Fahndungsbildes 'Hexerei' im Kontext konfessioneller Polemik," in Karl Härter, Gerhard Sälter, and Eva Wiebel, eds., *Repräsentationen von Kriminalität und öffentlicher Sicherheit. Bilder, Vorstellungen und Diskurse vom 16. bis zum 20.* Jahrhundert (Frankfurt am Main, 2010), 89–163.

66. De Waardt, "Endor and Amsterdam."

67. Willem de Blécourt, "Sabbath Stories: Towards a New History of Witches' Assemblies," in Brian Levack, ed), *The Oxford Handbook of Witchcraft*, 84–100.

68. De Waardt, *Toverij en samenleving*, 123–26, 163.

a servant whose mistress used to get up in the middle of the night and touch the beam of the hayloft. The servant copied her actions and found himself at a meeting of witches in a place about twenty kilometers away. As he promised not to tell anyone, the witches let him live and at the end of the meeting his mistress took him back on her shoulders. She dropped him when they flew over a swamp, but he survived and was found the next morning with broken thighs. He had to tell his story and the witch (*malefica*) was apprehended and executed. The servant was still alive and known by the burgomaster.[69] As a story, this account has all the right ingredients; as a historical report it rattles. Not only has no corresponding trial been found in Utrecht (where it should have taken place), but it is also highly unlikely that it was conducted on the basis of just this one story, and without apprehending any of the other attendants at the witches' meeting. On the other hand, the story not only has the typical reference to "it happened to an acquaintance of an acquaintance"; it is also internationally known as the migratory legend ML3045, "Following the Witch."[70] It seems to have made little impression on Wier, however, as he chose not include it in the later editions of his work.[71]

At about the same time, a version of this story circulated in Germany. Here, it was situated in the village of Poplitz (Anhalt) in 1568. A woman used an anointed broom, and her servant copied her with his straw fork, ultimately arriving at a meeting of witches. He was warned not to speak on the return journey, but he thought he was riding on a calf and made a remark about it, whereupon he was thrown off and became a cripple.[72] In all likelihood, both the Dutch and the German versions were indebted to an Italian one, published by Bartholomeus de Spina in 1523. It featured a charcoal

69. Balduinus Ronssaeus, "Epistolas medicinales," in *Opuscula medica* (Leiden: Maire, 1618), 190–91. The first edition appeared in 1590.

70. See, e.g., Katherine M. Briggs, *A Dictionary of British Folk-Tales in the English Language*, B (London 1971), xxxi . Cf. Alex Scobie, *Apuleius and Folklore. Towards a History of ML3045, AaTh567, 449A* (London: Folklore Society, 1983), 176–87. I disagree with Scobie where he considers this the same tale as Apuleius ass story; the first half of both may be similar, the second halves diverge.

71. Cf. Martín Del Rio, *Investigations into Magic*, P.G. Maxwell-Stuart (ed. & transl.) (Manchester 2000), 95–96, where Trajectum is translated as Maastricht instead of Utrecht; Francesco Maria Guazzo, E. Allen Ashwin (transl.), *Compendium Maleficarum* (London 1929), 46, also with Maastricht; Oostbruck = Oostbroek (near Utrecht).

72. Wolfgang Büt[t]ner, *Epitome Historiarum: Christlicher ausgelesener Historien und Geschichten, aus alten und bewehrten Scribenten* [etc.] (s.l. 1576), 115v.

burner whose wife had the habit of disappearing at night. While the man pretended to be asleep, he saw his wife anointing herself and flying out of the chimney. He followed her and ended up in a wine cellar, where he was apprehended the following morning. He told his captors what happened to him and his wife was brought before the Inquisition.[73] At the end of the sixteenth century, De Spina's book was reprinted in Germany several times. Admittedly, the passage in which the witch takes the servant on her back and drops him into a swamp (or the return journey on the calf) was missing from the Italian version and the actual circulation of the story beyond the printed versions is unknown.[74] But it may still be assumed that Ronsseus's tale was the Dutch adaption of a more widely known one, and in that sense it is another example of imported imagery.

VII

In the Netherlands as elsewhere in Europe, suspicions and ascriptions of everyday witchcraft were never much concerned with flying witches. It mattered whether witches were able to enter a house, not how they exited it. Witchcraft theorists and prosecutors worried more about what they did on the way to and during their meetings than about the families whose livestock, offspring, or produce were affected by witchcraft. The above fragments make it clear that the concept of flying was not only rare, but also understated and underdeveloped where it occurred; in Dutch writings there was no mention of objects or goats, let alone of wild animals that were ridden through the air. A very rare notion of flying nightmares or night-riders does not seem to have been integrated into the witchcraft discourse, with the exception of the Brueghel print. Flying witches in images necessarily contrasted with ordinary witchcraft, their origins generally harking back to earlier artistic depictions and demonological treatises, and their meaning reaching into more abstract moral areas. Yet their visibility may occasionally have inspired prosecution, even when the results were not always to the prosecutor's liking. Rather than being "feverish rantings," the most likely source of Volckgen Harmansdr. was the van Oostsanen painting, as the confessions of Geertgen Jansdr. mostly echoed parts of the Brueghel print.

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73. I have consulted the 1576 Rome edition of *Quaestio de strigibus*, where the story appears on p. 51 (chapter 18).

74. The tumbling of the flyer to the earth was in all likelihood based on the encounter between St Peter and Simon the Magician in the apocryphal Acts of Peter. The wine cellar episode was already reported by the thirteenth-century inquisitor Stephen de Bourbon; cf. Broedel, *The Malleus Maleficarum*, 112.

Flying witches in the sixteenth-century Netherlands are for the most part conspicuous by their absence. Alongside the two cases in which flying featured half-heartedly, the student of Dutch witchcraft has to deal with some hundred cases in which the concept does not appear at all. Although this is not the place for such an extensive treatment, one could consider the instances of the sabbat in the late sixteenth century, both in the Northern Netherlands (where the last of the trials took place in that period) and in the Southern Netherlands (where the first trials happened), neither of which exhibits flying.[75] If earlier notions about night-riders had survived they were not volunteered by interrogators or those who were interrogated. The notion of air transport was just not very popular.

The reasons for this nonoccurrence can be teased out from the few theoretical writings of Dutch provenance. There appears to be an adherence to an old way of thinking that was not swayed by theories as they were pronounced in the Arras trial or as they appeared in the *Malleus maleficarum*. When a distribution model is applied, one can conclude that the new notion of transvection was not well-received in the Netherlands and that intellectuals still adhered to the canon *Episcopi*, or more in particular to Burchard's *Decretum*. This was combined with a down-to-earth view that simply declared flying humans impossible, or at most an old-wives tale. If local magistrates were willing to investigate flying claims put forward by prosecutors (although there is no sign of it), they were probably hard pressed to find any proof. The occasional witch was prosecuted because of apostasy, only rarely because of sabbat attendance, and even more seldom because she had flown or been taken into the air. When, very occasionally, notions of flying witches did penetrate into the Netherlands, they will mostly have looked foreign and did not resonate with notions of witchcraft already present. If the different elements of the cumulative concept reached the Netherlands, they did so in different phases and certainly not everywhere at once. Flying witches are just one example of this uneven distribution in time and space.

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75. These sabbats are discussed in de Blécourt, *The Cat and the Cauldron*, chapter 4.