

# In Search of the English Sabbat: Popular Conceptions of Witches' Meetings in Early Modern England

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## *Abstract*

This article explores the evidence for belief in the witches' sabbat in early modern England. England is generally thought of as a country where the concept of the sabbat did not exist, and it was certainly largely absent from elite thinking on witchcraft, as displayed in the witchcraft statutes of 1563 and 1604 and Elizabethan and Jacobean demonological writings. But evidence entering the historical record mainly via depositions taken by justices of the peace suggests that there was a widespread popular belief in the sabbat or in parallel forms of witches' meetings, evidence that the concept of the sabbat existed in popular culture. In this, the English evidence seems to support Carlo Ginzburg's model of the sabbat being essentially a popular construction in its origins. The article also examines a play based on one of the historical incidents analysed, Richard Brome and Thomas Heywood's *The Late Lancashire Witches* (1634), and uses it as a starting point for a brief discussion of witchcraft motifs in contemporary drama, notably Shakespeare's *Macbeth*.

*Keywords:* Popular Beliefs, Witchcraft, Witches' Sabbat.

## 1. *Anne Armstrong's Depositions*

In 1673 Anne Armstrong, from Birchen Nook near Stocksfield in Northumberland, gave a remarkable series of depositions to local justices of the peace.<sup>1</sup> We know very little about Anne. She was servant in nearby Burytree House, and the documentation suggests that she was young, probably a teenager. What we do know is that in what seems to have been her only appearance in the historical record, she provided the Northumberland justices with a highly personalised and extremely elaborate account of the witches' sabbat which was apparently rooted very firmly in popular culture.

In her first deposition, dated 5 February 1673, Armstrong, after some preliminaries, told how the previous August she had met 'an old man with ragged clothes', who warned her that she was going to be bridled like a horse and ridden to a meeting where various strange things would happen, and where she should on no account eat any of the food which might be offered to her. At this Armstrong fell into a trance, and after recovering from it was troubled by other trances over the following days. Then, shortly before Christ-

mas, a woman called Anne Forster, with whom she had previously bargained about eggs, came to her and put a bridle on her, at which Armstrong's head assumed the shape of a horse's. After this, she recounted, Forster 'ridd upon this inform[er] cross-legg'd until she came to the rest of her companions at Ridinge Mill Brigend where they usually mett'. The assembly 'stood all upon a bare spott of ground', and Armstrong sang to them 'whilst they danced in severall shapes first of a haire then in their owne and then in a catt and sometimes in a mouse and severall other shapes'. They also ate at a table, presided over by what Armstrong dubbed 'their Protector', a title with obvious resonances a mere fifteen years after the death of Oliver Cromwell, 'which they called their God sitting at ye head of the table in a gold chair'. A rope hung over him, and by pulling on it those assembled received 'severall kindes of meate and drinke'. Such meetings, Armstrong reported, took place over 'six or seven nights in a row' (TNA [The National Archives], ASSI 45/10/3/34).

Armstrong, perhaps in response to questions posed by the justices, added further details in her later statements. She described Anne Baites going to the meetings 'riding upon wooden dishes and egg shells', and when she arrived changing into various shapes, 'letting the devil (who she called her protect[or]) see how many shapes she could turn herself into' (TNA, ASSI 45/10/3/35). On another occasion, Armstrong recounted, the devil put a stone on the ground, and the witches gathered around it and said the Lord's Prayer backwards (TNA, ASSI 45/10/3/38). Yet, despite such embellishments, the basic elements of her description of the sabbat stayed the same as in her initial deposition. She repeated them in her fullest account, apparently given to the Northumberland justices assembled at Quarter Sessions on 9 April 1673 (TNA, ASSI 45/10/3/36). In particular, she described a meeting of 10 February that year, whither she 'was ridden upon by an enchanted bridle by Michael Aynsley & Marg[ar]et his wife'. The enchanted bridle was taken off when they came to the meeting place, where Armstrong again sang while those present danced in the shape of hares, cats, bees, or in their own shapes. Then each told the devil of the harm he or she had done, '& those that did the most evill he made most of'. Her description of another meeting, held on 3 April, contained an elaborate account of the food the witches pulled down from a rope strung across the 'balkes' of a house. 'Every person had their swings in ye said rope', Armstrong recounted, 'and did get sev[er]all dishes of provision upon their severall swings according as they did desire'. The food was plentiful but simple: a capon boiled in plum broth, cheese, butter, flour, currants, mutton, wine, sack and ale. Armstrong also told how the witches gathered in 'coveys' each of thirteen people, each covey being presided over by a devil. She named about thirty of those who were present.<sup>2</sup>

A number of those thus named were questioned by the justices, and at least two of them imprisoned. Among them, as was frequently the case in parallel continental cases, were people with an established reputation as

witches. One of those singled out by Armstrong was Isabel Thompson, and a man named Mark Humble deposed to the justices how he had suspected her of bewitching him some seven or eight years previous, 'she being form[er]ly suspected of witchcraft' (TNA, ASSI 45/10/3/40). Margaret Teadle, afflicted by a strange illness for a period of six months, told how she was 'advised to get blood of one Isabell Thompson and Thomasine Watts [another of those identified by Armstrong as a sabbat-attender] which accordingly she did, and since that time she has beene much better and now able to goe abroad' (TNA, ASSI 45/10/3/40). Armstrong, indeed, was acquiring a reputation as a witch-finder. George Tayler and John Marsh deposed how they came to her after hearing about her tales of the sabbat, and how her description of witches reporting the acts of *maleficium* to the devil had helped them both define the misfortunes which they and their neighbours had been experiencing as attributable to witchcraft and identify the authors of these misfortunes (TNA, ASSI 45/10/3/53-34). Armstrong herself told how she had come into Allendale 'by ye parishioners for ye discovery of witches', and how Isabel Johnson, 'being under suspicion', was brought to her and made to breathe on her. At this Armstrong fell into a swoon for three quarters of an hour, 'and after her recovery said if there were any witches in England, Isabell Johnson was one' (TNA, ASSI 45/10/3/47). So far as we know, none of those named by Anne as being present at the sabbat or questioned in the wake of her statements were formally prosecuted.<sup>3</sup> But, in less propitious circumstances, stories of the sabbat like Anne Armstrong's might have generated a mass witch-hunt.<sup>4</sup>

## 2. *The Sabbat: an UnEnglish Phenomenon?*

The witches' sabbat is surely among the most remarkable phenomena encountered by the historian of the European witch-hunts. Despite local variations, the main elements of the sabbat remained fairly constant, and have been summarised neatly by Carlo Ginzburg:

Male and female witches met at night, generally in solitary places, in fields or in mountains. Sometimes, having anointed their bodies, they flew, arriving astride poles or broom sticks; sometimes they arrived on the backs of animals, or transformed into animals themselves. Those who came for the first time had to renounce the Christian faith, desecrate the sacrament and offer homage to the devil, who was present in human or (most often) in animal or semi-animal form. There would follow banquets, dancing, sexual orgies. Before returning home the female and male witches received evil ointments made from children's fat and other ingredients. (1990, 1)

The origins of this remarkable cultural construct are subject to various interpretations. Current thinking, however, suggests that it emerged more or less fully formed in trials in northern Italy around 1400. Its reality was accepted by a number of fifteenth-century commentators,<sup>5</sup> although, remarkably, it did

not feature in the *Malleus Maleficarum* (1487; see the comments of Broedel 2003, 129-131).

The concept of the sabbat seems to have gained growing acceptance among demonologists in the years following 1500, and subsequently received full treatment in the classic demonological works published later in the sixteenth century,<sup>6</sup> with demonological writing on the sabbat reaching its apogee in 1612 with the publication of a massive work by the French judge Pierre de Lancre. De Lancre had headed a witch-hunt in the Pays de Labord, a Basque-speaking area in the extreme south-west of France, in the course of which, he claimed, he had been responsible for the execution of 600 witches (modern estimates suggest a much lower total). What makes de Lancre's work distinctive, however, is the centrality he awarded to the sabbat, and the lengthy descriptions he gave of what happened there, based on the confessions of those suspected witches he had interrogated, with special emphasis on the sexual promiscuity they described (de Lancre 1612).<sup>7</sup> It was no doubt this type of prurience which led Robin Briggs to refer to accounts of the sabbat as 'a kind of scholarly pornography' (1996, 32). But as de Lancre's activities demonstrate, this 'scholarly pornography' might all too easily lead to the concrete obscenity of a major witch hunt.

In some regions the idea of the sabbat did not take hold, and there is a consensus that England was one of these. Cecil L'Estrange Ewen, an important pioneer student of English witchcraft, declared that in England 'little or nothing of the black mass is to be traced, and there is remarkably limited enterprise in the way of *al fresco* conventions' (1933, 57). Another major pioneer of English witchcraft studies, G.L. Kittredge, was adamant that '“covens” and devil priests and Satanic orgies are, for England, out of the question' (1929, 275). When the scholarly study of English witchcraft was revived in the early 1970s, much the same interpretation prevailed. Alan Macfarlane, in his deservedly influential study of that heavily witchcrafted county, Essex, stated that witches there 'were not believed to fly, did not meet for “sabbats” or orgies, dance and feast, indulge in sexual perversions, like some of their continental counterparts' (1970, 6). Keith Thomas was equally insistent that the sabbat was almost unknown to 'the general run of English accusations' and that the 'scattered allegations' of witches' meetings 'seem to have been literally picnics by comparison with their continental counterparts' (1971, 445). The apparent absence of a developed concept of the sabbat in England helped reinforce the idea, current from at least Wallace Notestein's study of 1911, that witchcraft in England, in contrast to what was normally described as 'continental' witchcraft, was a relatively low-key, non-demonic affair.

This conventional wisdom about the near-absence of the sabbat in England seems, at a first glance, accurate. Certainly, the sabbat does not figure in the three statutes passed against witchcraft, in 1542, 1563, and 1604, none of this legislation mentioning the sabbat (33 Henry VIII, cap. 8; 5 Eliz. I,

cap. 16; 1 James I, cap. 12). English demonological works likewise paid little attention to the phenomenon, especially at the point where educated beliefs about witchcraft were at their formative stage. The Elizabethan and early Stuart periods witnessed the emergence of a distinctly English demonological style: the first, and most technically accomplished, work in this genre was Henry Holland's *A Treatise against Witchcraft* of 1590, the last was Richard Bernard's *Guide to Grand Jury Men* of 1627, and the most important, at least on the basis of its author's reputation, was William Perkin's *Discourse of the damned Art of Witchcraft* published posthumously in 1608. These three works, all written by Church of England ministers of Puritan leanings, make scant mention of the sabbat. Holland does devote a paragraph to the phenomenon, but it is unsensational and not in any way prurient, stressing the sabbat's role in organising witches to perform evil acts (sig. F1). Bernard, who was familiar with and cited the works of such continental demonologists as Bodin and Del Rio, mentions witches' meetings very briefly in terms of an inversion of Christian beliefs (261). Perkins does not mention the sabbat at all.<sup>8</sup>

This lack of attention to the sabbat in English demonological writings probably owed much to their authors being Protestant. Delineating the different emphases which Protestant and Catholic writers brought to their analyses of witchcraft is a complex matter, but there are indications that Protestant demonologists, and possibly Protestant magistrates, were relatively unconcerned about the sabbat (here I follow Clark 1990). There were three main reasons for this. Firstly, Protestants were less likely than Catholics to be affronted by a phenomenon which had its origins in a supposed inversion of the Catholic mass. Secondly, there was no scriptural basis for the sabbat. And, thirdly, the principal thrust of mainstream Protestant writing on witchcraft was concerned with the evangelising objective of correcting vulgar errors about witchcraft rather than elaborating a view of the demonic sect of witches: thus the sabbat could be interpreted as a popular superstition or satanic delusion, as could that other much contested issue, the witches' flight to the sabbat. Certainly, the two works on witchcraft by continental Protestant theologians most cited by Elizabethan demonologists, those authored by the Dane Niels Hemmingsen (1575) and the Geneva-based Huguenot Lambert Daneau (1575), did not afford the sabbat a central importance.<sup>9</sup>

English Protestant aversion to the Catholic model of the sabbat was demonstrated in 1612 in one of the very few instances when an English assize court was confronted with anything like the phenomenon. In that year, famously, a number of witches were tried, and ten of them executed, at Lancaster. In the midst of these trials of what have become known as the Pendle Witches came a separate set of accusations, levelled by fourteen-year-old Grace Sowerbutts, who alleged that three women were bewitching her. Sowerbutts' evidence contained features which were unusual for an English trial: the alleged witches sucked blood from a live child, and, after it subsequently died,

they exhumed its body, boiled it in a pot, ate some of it, and used the residual fat as an ointment to assist them in shape-changing. The girl also recounted how the witches regularly met 'foure black things, going upright, and yet not like men in the face', with whom they ate strange food, danced, and after the dancing had sexual intercourse. But, as the presiding judge, Sir Edward Bromley, rapidly made clear, Grace had been schooled in matters of witchcraft by a Jesuit priest named variously as Thompson or Southworth (Potts 1613, sigs K3-M4).<sup>10</sup> The charges against the three women were dropped, and Grace's tale of their eating, dancing, and having sexual relations with four black demons was dismissed by the tract describing the trials as 'more proper for a legend of lies, then the evidence of a witness upon oath, before a reverend and learned judge', and was ascribed to the Jesuit's influence (Potts 1613, sigs K3-M4). Thus even during an assize which led to more executions for witchcraft than England had hitherto experienced after one court sitting, the judge was perfectly happy to dismiss this striking account of what looks very like a sabbat as popish mummery.

This lack of concern about the sabbat among scholarly writers and judges makes Anne Armstrong's depositions all the more remarkable. There are, of course, tremendous difficulties in using any type of court record as evidence of popular mentalities.<sup>11</sup> Armstrong's statements as they made the transition from her verbal account to the written record would have been mediated by the justices of the peace and the justices' clerks, while her sex and (if our presumption about her being young is correct) her age would have been factors in how she framed her story for adult, male authority. The impression, nevertheless, is that her depositions turn on a concept of the sabbat which, although many of the elements common across Europe were present, was rooted firmly in popular culture. The obscene kiss and sexual promiscuity which so worried learned demonologists were absent, but there is feasting (albeit on normal food rather than the flesh of new born children), dancing, the inversion of religious ceremony by saying the Lord's prayer backwards, the presence of the devil in a gold chair, the reporting to the devil by the witches of acts of *maleficium* and, above all, the enchanted ride to the sabbat and shape-changing, yet all of it apparently owing more to popular beliefs than learned constructs. If nothing else, Anne Armstrong's descriptions of the sabbat encourage us to dig more deeply into English sources in search of further evidence of popular conceptions of witches' meetings.

### 3. *Imagining Witches' Meetings in Seventeenth-Century England*

Two well known episodes have been interpreted as providing evidence for the sabbat in England, both of which collapse on close inspection. The first of these was the witch-hunt of 1612 in Lancashire, which involved a meeting of witches in the Malkin tower, residence of Elizabeth Sowthernes, alias

Old Demdike, one of those executed. Nine-year-old Jennet Device, despite her age a key prosecution witness, told how she attended a meeting there on Good Friday 1612 where about twenty people, all but two of them women, and some of whom she recognised, came together and 'had to their dinners beefe, bacon and roasted mutton' (Potts 1613, sig. I3v).<sup>12</sup> Weaving her and other testimonies together, we find, apart from the feasting, nothing of the classic sabbat. If such a meeting did take place in reality, one suspects its main objective was to allow those who knew that they were suspected as witches to discuss how best to defend themselves. Although described by Thomas Potts, author of the tract on the 1612 trials, as 'a speciall meeting ... of all the most dangerous, wicked and damnable witches in the country farre and neere' (Potts 1613, sig. C2v),<sup>13</sup> this was seemingly a very tame affair.

The other incident where it has been claimed the sabbat appeared in England was the mass witch-hunt which spread across eastern England in 1645-1647, associated with the witch-finder Matthew Hopkins.<sup>14</sup> Defending his conduct in 1647, Hopkins claimed that the seven or eight witches who first attracted his attention at Manningtree in Essex in the winter of 1644-1645 met 'with divers adjacent witches of other towns' every sixth Friday, where they 'had their severall solemne sacrifices there offered to the devil' (Hopkins 1647, 2). This is an interesting statement, but there is little evidence of concern over witches' meetings in the subsequent trials. Anne Leech told how she and two other women met in the house of Elizabeth Clark, the first Essex suspect, 'where there was a book read, wherein she thinks there was no goodnesse' (H.F. 1645, 9). Rebecca West, another of the Essex suspects, gave Hopkins an account of a meeting in Elizabeth Clark's house, where a book figured prominently, and where the devil was present, albeit (in line with English lore about familiars) in the shape of a dog and other animals (14). More promisingly, John Stearne, Hopkins's associate, in his own defence of witch-hunting, mentioned meetings of witches 'as at Burton Old, where they met above fourscore at a time; and at Tilbrooke bushes at Bedfordshire ... where they met above twenty at one time' (1648, 11), but nothing like a full-blown sabbat is recorded.

There is, moreover, little evidence of ideas of the sabbat entering popular consciousness through the actions of officialdom. One exception came in 1665, when a Somerset justice of the peace, Robert Hunt, previously involved in a witchcraft case in 1658, again found himself investigating witchcraft. These new investigations turned on the bewitching of a thirteen-year-old girl named Elizabeth Hill (Glanvill 1681, Part 2, 127-147). A woman called Elizabeth Style was suspected of bewitching her, and eventually confessed to Hunt. She told how she met the devil ten years previously and entered into a pact with him, and how more recently she and three other women had met the devil on a nearby common. One of the other women, Alice Duke, had brought a wax image of Elizabeth Hill. The devil took the image, and, in a parody of

Christian baptism, held it in his arms, and anointed it with oil: as Style put it, 'he was the Godfather, and this examinant and Anne Bishop Godmothers'. They stuck thorns in the wax image, after which 'they had wine, cakes and roast meat (brought by the man in black) which they did eat and drink. They danced and made merry, and were bodily there, in their clothes' (137-138).

Questioned further, Style elaborated her account of the sabbat. She told how the witches flew to their meetings after anointing themselves with oil, that the devil greeted them on arrival, and that proceedings were illuminated by 'wax candles like torches'. At the meetings they ate and danced while 'the man in black, sometimes playes on a pipe or cittern', and plotted acts of *maleficium* (139-141). Many of the details Style gave were obviously founded on local folklore, but equally other elements of her description of the sabbat were framed in response to questions posed by a justice of the peace with an interest in, and some knowledge of, witchcraft. She was found guilty at the Taunton assizes, but died in prison before execution.<sup>15</sup>

Although this case does demonstrate how learned concepts of the sabbat might have entered popular consciousness, there were few justices like Robert Hunt, and hence accounts of the interplay between learned demonological theory and popular ideas of witches' meetings are rare.<sup>16</sup> And in any case popular thinking seemed perfectly capable of envisaging meetings with the devil, although these were sometimes far removed from the sabbat proper. One such was recorded in an unusually detailed description of the bewitchment of two of his daughters commencing in 1621 written by a Yorkshire gentleman named Edward Fairfax (Grainge, ed., 1882). Fairfax's narrative contains detailed accounts of the visions his daughters claimed to see while in their witchcraft-induced trances. On Thursday 10 April 1622 one of the witches' familiar spirits apparently told the girls in a vision how 'all the witches had a feast at Timble Gill; their meat was roasted at midnight. At the upper end of the table sat their master, viz., the devil, and the lower end Dibb's wife, who provided for the feast, who was the cook' (Grainge, ed., 107-108).<sup>17</sup> Other passing references can be found to witches eating or drinking in the devil's company. In 1645 a local witch-panic, resulting in several executions, occurred at Faversham in Kent. Joan Cariden alias Argoll, one of those executed, told how another suspected witch, goodwife Hott, had told her recently of 'a great meeting at Godwife Pantery's house', where 'the Divell sat at the upper end of the table' (Anonymous 1645, 3). A very similar reference comes from a pamphlet of 1650 dealing with the bewitchment of three children in Northumberland. One of the suspects, Margaret White, confessed that she and some other witches were together 'in the Divel's company' in the house of her sister Jane, 'where they did eate and drinke together (as by her conceived) and made merry' (Moore 1650, 24).

Such references, although suggestive of a growing acceptance that witches might meet the devil almost on a social basis, are far removed from the sabbat

as envisaged by Anne Armstrong, let alone by Pierre de Lancre, yet evidence of more elaborate ideas about the sabbat on a popular level does exist. Gossip about witches among servant girls and other young women from Lymptone attracted the attention of the Devon justices in 1638. One of those involved, Jane Moxie, apparently knew a lot about witchcraft, and the girls' gossiping probably attracted official attention because Moxie opined that a local woman was a witch. But she also had a clear notion of the sabbat. As one of those involved, Eleanour Forde put it:

About halfe a yeere since Jane Moxie the daughter of Robert Moxie shoulde saie in the house of John Adams in Lympton that those that woulde be witches when they did receive the communion must drinck the wyne and keepe the breade and carrye w[i]th them and give it to the next bodye that they mett w[i]th and that should be a toade, and after that they should be witches. And that everye Mydsomer Eve those that woulde be witches must meet the divell upon a hill and then the divell did licke them and that the place was blacke and the next Midsummer Eve the divell woulde meet them again and licke them as before.<sup>18</sup> (Devon Record Office, Exeter, Quarter Sessions Rolls, Bapt 1638, 57)

The examining justice, Sir Thomas Prideaux, did not question Moxie further, so we have no idea of what else she thought witches did at the sabbat, or, indeed, how she thought they got there. She did, however, have a distinct notion of witches' meetings apparently based firmly on popular culture, although the giving of communion bread to a toad provides an echo of that desecration of the host which was central to Catholic accounts of the sabbat.

But for a model of the sabbat to set beside Anne Armstrong's we must return to Lancashire. A major witch-hunt was almost initiated there in 1633-1634 by an eleven-year-old boy named Edmund Robinson. The hunt was averted when worried assize judges contacted Westminster seeking guidance as the accusations mounted, possibly involving as many as sixty suspects, some twenty of whom were convicted but held without sentence. Central government stepped in removing Robinson, his father and several of the suspected witches to London for further investigation.<sup>19</sup> Robinson, giving his initial evidence in February 1634, deposed how on the previous All Saints' Day he came across two greyhounds and tried to hunt with them. They refused to hunt, whereupon he tied them to a bush and beat them, at which one of them turned into 'one Dickinson wife, a neighbour'. She put a bridle on him, which changed him into a horse, and rode him to a witches' meeting on Pendle Hill. There witches were roasting meat, and he was offered food and drink, which he refused after the first taste, '& said it was naughtie'. He then came upon the witches, in a striking parallel to Anne Armstrong's account of the sabbat, pulling on ropes and bringing down roasted meat, butter and hot milk. Robinson named several of the people he had seen at the meeting, and also recounted how he had met with and fought the devil in the shape

of a boy with a cloven foot. Later, however, while held in London, he was to retract his statement. He told how he was worried about being chided by his mother because he was late getting the cows home, and had made up the story to avoid punishment (TNA, State papers Domestic, SP 16/271, f. 119).

The examinations of several of the supposed witches survive, among them that of Margaret Johnson, a widow, taken at Padiham on 9 March 1634. She told how about eight years previously she met the devil in the shape of a man clad in black, made a pact with him, and had sexual intercourse with him. She deposed that the was not at the All Saints' Day meeting described by Robinson,

But saith that shee was at a second meetinge the Sunday after All S[ain]ts Day at the place aforesaid [i.e. Harestones in Pendle Forest] where ther was at that time between 30 and 40 witches who did all ride to the said meetinge. And th'end of the said meetinge was to consult for the killing and hurting of man & beasts, and that there was one devill or spirit that was more greate & grand devil than the rest ... And further saith that the devil can raise foule wether and stormes, and soe hee did at their meeting.

She went on to depose that witches and their spirits routinely had sexual intercourse at these meetings, and, in an echo of Thomas Potts' account of the 1612 trials, that witches had an annual meeting on Good Friday (British Library Add MS 36674, f. 196). Further connections with the 1612 trials were provided by young Edmund Robinson. Asked where his ideas about witchcraft and the sabbat had come from, he replied that 'the tale is false and feigned, and has no trueth att all in itt, but onely as he has heard tales and reportes made by women ... so he framed the tale out of his owne invention'. The reference to 'tales and reportes' gives us, like the gossip among young women which got Joan Moxie into trouble in 1638, the presence of witchcraft as a source of interest in the oral culture of the period: but it is noteworthy that among those 'tales and reportes' to which Robinson alluded was the story of the witches' meeting at the 'Mocking' [i.e. Malkin] tower (TNA, SP 16/271, f. 119). There was clearly a rich local tradition of witch beliefs upon which Robinson could frame his account of the sabbat: one suspects that it must have been much the same for Anne Armstrong and Jane Moxie.

#### 4. *Popular Culture, The Late Lancashire Witches, and Macbeth*

Interpreting the witches' sabbat has become a much more complex, if potentially much more rewarding, exercise since the publication, in 1990, of Carlo Ginzburg's *Ecstasies*. This is a large, rich, and complex book, and summarising it without doing it injustice is difficult. Briefly, following leads originating from his earlier researches on the Friulian *benandanti* (Ginzburg 1983), Ginzburg argues that the concept of the sabbat which emerged in late medieval and early modern Europe originated in a pan-Eurasian belief in the spirit flight

of shamans. Connecting with earlier work by Mircea Eliade, Ginzburg proposed a universalist interpretation of the witches' sabbat which, despite local variations, maintained certain core elements: 'the presence of variants or of re-elaborations tied to specific cultural contexts', he wrote, 'does not contradict the hypothesis of a common pattern: the ecstatic journey to the realm of the dead', ecstatic journeys which were essentially 'similar to those of the Siberian shamans' magical flight and animal metamorphosis' (1990, 212, 257).<sup>20</sup> This interpretation does indicate the possibility of analysing the sabbat at a deeper level, although it has not, of course, gone uncontested (e.g. by Hutton 2001, 144-146, and Behringer 1998, 138-139). But Ginzburg also emphasised another point. Before he wrote, the major interpretation of the development of the concept of the sabbat, that of Norman Cohn (1975), argued that it was largely a construct of the educated elite, of theologians and inquisitors. This interpretation was shared by later scholars such as Robert Muchembled (1990), and earlier ones like G.L. Kittredge (1929, 243). Ginzburg, conversely, argues that the origins of the sabbat as a cultural phenomenon lay in popular beliefs, and stresses the importance of 'the folkloric roots of the sabbath' (1990, 11).

Let us now return to the fullest account we have of an English sabbat, that provided by Anne Armstrong. We shall leave her candidacy for shamanistic status for another occasion, and turn rather to the question of what light her depositions throw on the second of these issues raised by Ginzburg, the folkloric roots of the sabbat. Armstrong's account comes to us, we must remember, as depositions given to justices of the peace, and hence, had been subjected to mediation and modification. Conversely, one feels that with these depositions we are encountering something which is rooted firmly in popular culture. Although her accounts of the sabbat became more elaborate, they did not incorporate elements derived from learned demonology along the lines, say, of the Somerset witches examined by justice Robert Hunt in 1665. The Northumberland justices to whom Armstrong deposed may simply have had no demonological framework at hand, or, if they had, may not have wished to apply it.<sup>21</sup> Nationally, the activities of Matthew Hopkins in the 1640s had formed a connection in the mind of the post-Restoration elite between witch-hunting and the religious enthusiasm which had, it was hoped, been put back in its bottle by the Restoration. Locally, Newcastle had in 1650 experienced a severe witch-hunt fostered by the town's Puritan ruling elite, so the justices examining Armstrong would have had their own reasons for associating witch-hunting with the unfortunate circumstances of the Interregnum.<sup>22</sup> Armstrong's statements, we must repeat, await detailed analysis; yet at present they seem to have been based on a popular belief system little touched by learned demonology, and much the same can be said of the depositions made during the Lancashire scare of 1633-1634. Arising as they did in an area which in 1612 had experienced England's most severe witch trial to date, we may safely surmise that these 'tales and reportes' re-

ferred to by Edmund Robinson contained a powerful and developing set of beliefs about witchcraft. As Ginzburg put it, records of this type 'manifestly contradict the thesis, still common today, according to which the sabbath was an image elaborated exclusively or almost exclusively by the persecutors' (1990, 7). Indeed, recent research into other European cultures has suggested that, to varying extents, local beliefs modified or even supplanted official or demonological models of the sabbat.<sup>23</sup>

If learned constructs of the sabbat are to be discounted as an influence on Anne Armstrong, we must nevertheless consider, given Northumberland's status as a border county, the possible influence of Scottish beliefs on her ideas about the sabbat. Famously, the North Berwick trials, which initiated large-scale witch-hunting in Scotland, had the sabbat at their core; James VI discussed the phenomenon in his *Daemonologie* (1597), albeit mainly in terms of religious inversion, and witches' meetings were regularly referred to in later Scottish trials (Anonymous 1591; Stuart 1597, 35-37; Levack 2008, 66). Conversely, what is probably the most detailed regional study of the witch-hunts in Scotland reveals surprisingly little evidence of the Sabbat, and indeed shows that the clergy investigating witches who allegedly met in the West Kirk, Culross, in 1675 apparently lacked the conceptual framework needed to turn this proto-sabbat into a full-scale example of the phenomenon (MacDonald 2002, 180-182). Indeed, it appears that the Scottish witches' assembly, like the sabbats in so many other parts of Europe, was essentially rooted in popular culture (Larner 1981, 135). This conclusion is complicated by the case of Isabel Gowdie, tried at Auldearn in 1662, whose depositions tell of a system of supernatural beliefs much more complex than those outlined by Anne Armstrong, this episode having recently formed the subject-matter of a monograph by Emma Wilby (2010). Yet Auldearn is in northern Scotland, not far from Inverness, nearly as far from Birchen Nook as is London, and it seems unlikely that verbal accounts of Gowdie's confessions would have travelled so far. Moreover, it should be noted that perhaps the most accomplished historian of witchcraft in north-eastern England has played down Scottish influences there (Rushton 1983, 28).

We have paid considerable attention to Anne Armstrong's construction of the sabbat, deservedly so on account of its richness. But her story was to be lost for nearly two centuries, gathering dust among the Northern Circuit Assize depositions until discovered by a Victorian antiquary and then rediscovered by modern scholars investigating early modern witchcraft beliefs. Conversely, the vision of the sabbat conjured up in the Lancashire scare of 1633-1634 reached a wider contemporary audience by being incorporated into a play, Richard Brome and Thomas Heywood's *The Witches of Lancashire* (1634, later retitled *The Late Lancashire Witches*).<sup>24</sup> Heywood and Brome wrote, and the play was performed by the King's Men at the Globe Theatre in August 1634, when Robinson and his father and four of the women convicted as witches

were under examination in London. The play's authors, anxious to exploit the topicality of its theme, clearly had access to a number of the depositions relating to the case, notably those of young Edmund Robinson, Margaret Johnson and Mary Spencer, another of the accused witches sent down to London. There are witchcraft elements in the play which are absent from surviving documentation dealing with the Lancashire witch-scare: normal patriarchal relations in a household are inverted by witchcraft; a wedding feast is disrupted through the malevolence of the witches; and the newly married husband is rendered impotent, and his wife thus rendered extremely annoyed, by something very like the ligature, a device unfamiliar in English witchcraft. But much is clearly based on the depositions. One of the witches, Meg Johnson, calls her imp Mamilion at various points; an unnamed boy encounters greyhounds which turn into women, is subsequently taken to and escapes from the sabbat, and also fights the devil in the shape of a boy with a cloven foot; and the witches pull on ropes to get food and drink, in the play stolen from the wedding feast by witchcraft.

With Brome and Heywood's play we thus have a rare example of documentation from an English witchcraft case helping to form the basis of a dramatic work, and thus of a transmission from a view of witchcraft rooted in popular culture to elite culture. Even more unusually, a letter survives which gives a description of the play and its impact. On 16 August 1634 the civil servant and former MP Nathaniel Tomkyns wrote a letter to his friend Sir Robert Phelips, at that time staying at Montacute House in Somerset, which ended with an account of the *Witches of Lancashire*. The play, he reported, was a great hit, and had played for three days to a 'great concourse of people ... a greater appearance of fine folke gentlemen and gentlewomen than I thought had bin in town in the vacation [i.e. outside the law terms]'. Tomkyns continued:

The subject was of the slights and passages done or supposed to be done by these witches sent from thence hither and other witches and their familiars; of their nightly meetings in severall places; their banqueting with all sorts of meat and drinke conveyed to them upon by their familiars upon the pulling of a cord; the walking of pailles of milk by themselves ... the transforming of men and woemen into severall creatures and especially of horses by putting an enchanted bridle into their mouths; their posting to and from places farre distant in an incredible short time.

Tomkyns felt that the play did not have 'any poetically genius, or art, or language, or judgement to state or tenet of witches', but that since it was full of 'odd passages and fopperies to provoke laughter, and is mixed with divers songs and dances, it passeth for a merrie and excellent new play' (cited in Berry 1984, 212-213).<sup>25</sup> But this 'merrie and excellent new play', so warmly received, provides a rare example of seeing how a view of witchcraft and above all of the sabbat based firmly on popular culture could be readapted into an entertainment for 'fine folk gentlemen and gentlewomen'. We are

reminded that the interaction between elite and popular culture was not a one-way process.

In a collection of articles themed around Shakespeare and popular culture, Brome and Heywood's play, and its use of a contemporary witchcraft case and contemporary documentation leads us to consider that most famous early modern depiction of witches on stage, that provided by Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. This depiction is, of course, far from unproblematic. Interpretations of the role of the witches ranges from seeing them as representing supernatural forces trying to control the destiny of Macbeth, and hence of Scotland to, as Diane Purkiss would have us believe, 'nothing more and nothing less than *Macbeth's* missing comic sub-plot' (1996, 214). Stage or cinematic productions have been equally varied in their portrayal of the weird sisters, with them appearing in 1.1 of *Macbeth* as schoolgirls desecrating a graveyard in Geoffrey Wright's 2006 film set in modern Australia and as military nurses killing their patient and ripping his heart from his corpse in the 2010 telefilm version of Rupert Goold's production of the play. And also, their function varies at different parts of the play, from prophesying in 1.2 to apparently providing something of a diversion by singing and dancing in 2.5, this last adding a further complication, the problem of subsequent interpolations in *Macbeth* and, in particular, the relation of that scene to certain passages of Middleton's *The Witch* (1616?). The witches of *Macbeth* are obviously more problematic than their Lancashire cousins whose story was dramatised three decades later.

What is less contentious is the range of sources Shakespeare drew on. The idea of the weird sisters, or as most modern observers would have it, witches, as well as the problem of how to label them, comes from Holinshed's *Chronicles*. There they are described as

three women in strange and wild apparel, resembling creatures of the elder world ... afterwards the common opinion was, that these women were either the weird sisters, that is (as you would say) the goddesses of destinie, or else were nymphs or feiries, indued with knowledge of prophesie by their necromaticall science. (cited in Rosenberg 1978, 2)

These weird sisters, renamed the Tres Sybillae, were to greet James VI and I when he visited Oxford in August 1605, a year before that commonly accepted for the first performance of *Macbeth*, with suitably re-written prophecies in Latin (cited in Rosenberg 1978, 2).<sup>26</sup> It is also probable that Shakespeare had read *Newes from Scotland* (1591), that propaganda tract telling how the threat of witchcraft to Protestant divine right monarchy had, with God's assistance, been overturned, and James VI's *Daemonologie*. If he has read this latter work, he would have been informed that witches had the power, thanks to the devil, to foretell 'things to come' (cited in Rosenberg 1978, 2). There are also strong indications that he was familiar with Reginald Scot's *Discoverie of Witchcraft*

(1584), a source that was certainly drawn on for Middleton's *The Witch* (Purkiss 1996, 218). Hecate, of course, demonstrates Shakespeare's familiarity with classical myth, while the notion of the cauldron, widely disseminated in both legend and learned writing on witchcraft, can also be traced back to classical writings, with Medea rejuvenating Jason's father Aeson, after draining his blood, with a liquid she had boiled in a cauldron concocted from ingredients on a par with those used by the witches in *Macbeth* (Zika 2006). Shakespeare has witches reporting their misdeeds to Hecate in much the same way as witches at the sabbat, both in Anne Armstrong's version of that phenomenon and those of learned demonologists, were supposed to have done to the devil. And those misdeeds introduce an incident of *maleficium* which was triggered by a refusal of charity very like those which, as Macfarlane alerted us, underlay village-level witchcraft accusations. But the misbehaviour reported by the witches contains no elaborated portrayal of village-level witchcraft. In 1.3 the Second Witch, asked by the First witch what she has been up to, replies simply 'killing swine' (1.3.2). The First Witch, describing an incident which fits the village tensions/charity refused model, tells how she is angered when a sailor's wife refuses her chestnuts, but what she plans to do in revenge is not to exercise *maleficium* against the woman's cattle or children, but rather to sail in a sieve to Aleppo (1.3. 4-10), the port to which the woman's husband had sailed, a wreak vengeance on him there, something which takes us away from normal village witchcraft narratives but rather takes us to Agnes Sampson's confessions as related in *Newes from Scotland* (Anonymous 1591, sig. C1).

What we are left with, then, is a sense of the eclecticism which consideration of the possible sources of the witchcraft scenes in *Macbeth* arouses. This has been commented on with some forcefulness by Diane Purkiss, who notes that the play's witches are 'an awkwardly compressed mass of diverse stories', and accuses Shakespeare of 'unblushingly strip-mining both popular culture and every learned text he can lay his hands on for the sake of creating an arresting stage event' (Purkiss 1996, 207). Continuing on her theme, she claims that 'the play encourages slippage between definitions of the witch which made sense in village society and definitions of the witch which made sense to European demonologists and their followers and definitions of the witch which made sense to humanist scholars' (Purkiss 1996, 207-208). As we have shown, one of the main functions of the sabbat, the reporting of evil done, was present in the play, with Hecate filling the role of the devil, while in a sense the whole notion of witches meeting to plan evil, clearly present in 1.1, is central to the weird sisters' characters' input to the play. Thus in a sense we have some of the elements of the sabbat. But we have nothing like the fully developed concept of the sabbat as developed by learned demonologists: the worshipping of the devil and the obscene kiss; the desecration of the host or other elements of Christian ritual; promiscuous sexual intercourse; feeding on the flesh of newborn children or other prescribed foods; and the

presence of hundreds, perhaps thousands of witches – all those elements which distinguished, absolutely or by degree, the sabbat of the demonologist from what we can reconstruct of popular concepts of the phenomenon.

But what *Macbeth* demonstrates is that Shakespeare, like any playwright in his period, had a range of sources from which to construct his stage versions of witches, and drew on them as the mood took him. This variety of models of witchcraft is amply demonstrated by other dramatic works of the period. With *The Witch of Edmonton* (1621), authored by a team consisting of William Rowley, Thomas Dekker and John Ford, like *The Late Lancashire Witches*, we have a play based on a contemporary case, in this instance already described in a pamphlet (Goodcole 1621). With John Marston's *Sophonisba* (1606) we have witchcraft elements which are derived mainly from classical literature, and with Ben Jonson's *Masque of Queens* (performed at Whitehall in 1609) we have an elaborate model of witchcraft which relied very heavily on classical sources and recent continental works of demonology, with the sources being in this case listed by the erudite playwright. Shakespeare, of course, draws on beliefs about the supernatural in a large number of his plays, and it is unfortunate that considerations of space dictate that I must limit my discussion to some brief thoughts on *Macbeth*. But, as I have stated, the witches there clearly owe little to a developed consideration of popular conceptions of witchcraft, although, of course, here as elsewhere the relationship between 'popular' and 'elite' culture remains uncertain. What we can safely say is that comparing the popular conceptions of the sabbat which we have considered in this article with the witches of *Macbeth* reminds us that Shakespeare's relationship with the popular culture of early modern England, as evidenced in his dramatic works, remains a problematic one.<sup>27</sup>

Much of that popular culture still awaits reconstruction, and in particular we await a fuller investigation of some of the motifs found in Margaret Johnson's and, in particular, Anne Armstrong's depositions: popular attitudes to trance states, food in popular culture, the traditions of shape-shifting and night-riding. Yet for this last at least we have some wider evidence, sometimes appearing in unexpected places. Thus an anti-Quaker pamphlet of 1659 has Mary Phillips, a woman who had abjured Quakerism, suffering a strange fate. As she slept with her husband, she was 'being bewitched and enchanted out of the room where she lay, and transformed into the perfect shape of a mare', and then ridden to a village near Cambridge where Quaker meetings had been held, but which was now the location of a witches' sabbat. She accused two Quakers, a man and a woman, of bewitching her, and they were arrested and subsequently tried for witchcraft (Anonymous 1659a, 4).<sup>28</sup> The trial resulted in their acquittal, the judge, interestingly, telling Philips that her experience 'was a meer dream, and a phantasie', and the authors of the pamphlet taking a standard Protestant theological position on the impossibility of shape-changing (Anonymous 1659a, 4). What is evident, however, is

that Mary Phillips believed that being changed into a horse and being ridden to the sabbat was a standard way of getting there, and that there was an expectation that the readers of the pamphlet would find this narrative device familiar and convincing.

For further, and final, demonstration of how the sabbat and the notion of being ridden to it were embedded in popular culture, let us turn to a case which occurred in 1736, ironically a few months after the English and Scottish witchcraft acts had been repealed. On 5 November of that year a dispute broke out in the main street of Baildon, an isolated West Yorkshire parish near the Lancashire border, between members of the Goldsbrough and Hartley families, leading to various of the Hartleys being bound over to keep the peace. According to one witness, Sarah Brook, Mary Hartley claimed that Bridget Goldsbrough had entered her house in the shape of two grey cats, and that Margaret Goldsbrough came into the house in her own shape, 'and said yt the said Margaret had with her a black saddle and bridle, and that Margaret offered to put a bridle upon her sone John Hartley & would needs ride him to some hill, & swore damn them they were all witches'. Margaret Goldsbrough gave her own version in these words:

This examinant saith the 5<sup>th</sup> instant came to her father's house one Mary Hartley of Baildon to pretend to sell beesoms, & upon that began to say to Bridget this examinants' mother, I wou'd have you let my barn [i.e. bairn] alone, he works hard for a living, and cannot bear to be disturbed at night. Upon that this examinants' mother said What do you mean? The said Mary replied, You know well enough, you know where you were last night, and then begun of saying that both she & her mother were witches, & was riding of her sone to Pendle Hill the night before and that Margaret brought a saddle & bridle & wou'd have put the bridle into his mouth but the bits were too large.<sup>29</sup> (West Yorkshire Record Office, Wakefield, Quarter Sessions Rolls, QS1/76/2/File 3)

Again, that motif of being bridled and ridden to a witches meeting, and how fascinating that that meeting should be held on Pendle Hill, clearly well established in local witch-lore as a place where witches met a century and a quarter after the famous trials of 1612. Whatever its status in official demonological theory, it is clear that the idea of the witches' sabbat was firmly established in early modern English popular culture.

<sup>1</sup> The National Archives (TNA), London, Clerks of Assize Records, Northern Circuit Depositions, ASSI 45/10/3/34, 36, 40, 43-54. Most of these materials are reproduced in Raine, ed. 1861, 191-201. Armstrong's statements are discussed and contextualised in two analyses of witchcraft in the north east: Rushton 1983 and Bath 2008.

<sup>2</sup> Rushton 1983, 14 suggests at least thirty-one, and notes their geographical distribution beyond the Tyne Valley near Corbridge, where Armstrong located the sabbats she attended.

<sup>3</sup>No relevant evidence was found in the Northern Circuit Indictment Files for 1673 and 1674 (TNA, ASSI 44/21, 22); Ewen 1933, 404 notes an indictment against Isabel Thompson for bewitching Margaret Teasdale in TNA, ASSI 44/21, but this could not be traced. A set of depositions for 1673 survive concerning witchcraft accusations at Morpeth which are almost certainly related to Armstrong's statements (TNA, ASSI 45/10/3/125-127).

<sup>4</sup>This is confirmed by the fact that at around the same time as Anne Armstrong's descriptions of the sabbat were being recorded, Sweden was experiencing its only large scale witch-hunt, which was initiated by children and young people telling stories of being taken to what was an initially folkloric version of the sabbat (Ankarloo 1990).

<sup>5</sup>A number of relevant texts are gathered together in Ostorero, Bagliani and Tresp, eds, 1999; for an important collection of essays on the sabbat see Jacques-Chaquin and Pr  aud, eds, 1993.

<sup>6</sup>For the development of the concept of the sabbat between the fifteenth and late sixteenth centuries, see Clark 1997, 139-140.

<sup>7</sup>For a discussion of de Lancre's treatise, see McGowan 1977.

<sup>8</sup>Perkins did, however, accept Satan's ability to transport witches, although he suggested that most witches claiming to be thus transported were deluded (1608, 21, 49, 194-196).

<sup>9</sup>Daneau 1575 discusses the sabbat briefly and unsensationally in chapter 4 of his work, where he devotes considerably more attention to the problem of transvection; Hemmingsen simply dismisses the sabbat and flight to it as 'diabolorum illusio' (1575, sig. K4).

<sup>10</sup>The events of 1612 are contextualised in Poole, ed., 2002 and by Baratta in this volume (185-208).

<sup>11</sup>Yet it is difficult not to concur with a pioneer scholar of this type of documentation that depositions and similar witness evidence bring the historian closer to popular mentalities than any other form of record (Kieckhefer 1976, 28). For a discussion of witchcraft narratives in English official documentation, which includes a brief analysis of Anne Armstrong's depositions, see Rushton 2001.

<sup>12</sup>Jennet Preston was subsequently to give evidence against a number of those whom she named as having been present at the Malkin Tower meeting.

<sup>13</sup>For background to this episode, see Lumby 1995, chapter 10, 'The Meeting at the Malkin Tower'.

<sup>14</sup>Gaskill 2005 is a major study of the Hopkins trials. For a slightly earlier assessment of their importance see Sharpe 1996. That the notion that the sabbat figured prominently in the Hopkins trials has gained wide currency is demonstrated in Ginzburg's comment that the 1645 Essex trials were 'rich in descriptions of the Sabbath' (1990, 3).

<sup>15</sup>This case and Hunt's activities more generally receive detailed analysis in Barry 2012, 58-102.

<sup>16</sup>For a pioneering investigation of the relationship between elite and popular concepts of witchcraft more generally, see Holmes 1984.

<sup>17</sup>Timble is about three miles from Fewston, the Fairfax family home.

<sup>18</sup>It is interesting to note that a pamphlet describing the Scottish North Berwick trials of 1590-91, probably written for English consumption, informed its readers that the witches received their devil's mark when the devil 'dooth lick them with his tung in some privy part of their body before he dooth receive them to be his servants' (Anonymous 1591, sig. A2v).

<sup>19</sup>For a brief account of this incident, see Findlay 2002. John Webster, who was in 1634 the minister of the Yorkshire parish of Kildwick, over forty years later gave a vivid description of Robinson's witch-finding activities when the boy and 'the two very unlikely persons that did conduct him' came to the parish, which is about twenty miles from Pendle. Webster stated that seventeen persons were convicted at the Lancashire assizes, all of them reprieved by the presiding judge who was unhappy with the evidence (Webster 1677, 382-383).

<sup>20</sup>Eliade 1964 is the most relevant of his works; see also Eliade 1975.

<sup>21</sup>Certainly there was no mention of the sabbat in the standard justice's handbook of the period, whose various editions after that of 1630 included detailed instructions on how to investigate witchcraft (Dalton 1630, 338-339).

<sup>22</sup> Although differing in emphasis, this conclusion is broadly in accord with Rushton 1983, 16-19, which also provides an analysis of the justices involved in Armstrong's case; for the witch-hunt in Newcastle, see Gardiner 1655, 107-110.

<sup>23</sup> E.g. Henningsen 1990; Rowlands 2003, 97-98; Roper 2004, 108-109; Klaniczay 1990, 252; Briggs 2007, 137.

<sup>24</sup> Two important essays on the play are Berry 1984 and Findlay 2002.

<sup>25</sup> The reference to pails walking by themselves relates to the deposition of one of the suspected witches who were in London, Mary Spencer, who was alleged to be able to make pails move by magic: TNA, State Papers Domestic, SP 16/269, f. 77.

<sup>26</sup> The performance was masterminded by Dr. Matthew Gwinn of St. John's college.

<sup>27</sup> Aspects of this relationship are discussed in the various contributions to Gillespie and Rhodes, eds, 2006.

<sup>28</sup> A refutation appeared in the shape of Anonymous 1659b. I am grateful to Brian Capp for bringing these two pamphlets to my attention. They are discussed and contextualised in Elmer 1996.

<sup>29</sup> Interestingly, a case was recorded at Baildon in 1658 in which an Abraham Hartley, aged sixteen, was allegedly bewitched by a woman named Mary Armitage (TNA, ASSI 45/5/5/1).

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