Ambrosius de Vignate was a well-respected magistrate and legal scholar, a doctor of both canon and civil law, who lectured at Padua, Bologna, and Turin between 1452 and 1468. On several occasions he participated in the trials of accused witches: he tells us that he had heard men and women alike confess—both freely and under torture—that they belonged to the sect of witches (“secta mascorum seu maleficorum”) and that they, and others whom they implicated, had done all sorts of strange and awful things. The presiding inquisitors at these trials accepted this testimony as substantially true, and began prosecutions on this basis. Ambrosius, however, had grave doubts as to whether such bizarre crimes were plausible or even possible. In the twelfth of his twenty-one questions concerning the prosecution of heresy, he wonders:

What, therefore, do we say about women who confess that they walk at night over great distances in a moment’s time, and enter the locked rooms of others, with the assistance of their diabolic masters (as they say), with whom they speak, to whom they make payment, and with whom (as they say) they have carnal intercourse, and by whose persuasion (as they say) they deny God and the Virgin Mary, and with their feet trample the holy cross, and who, with the help of demons (as they say), kill children and kill people, and make them fall into various injuries, and who say that they do many things like these, and say that they sometimes transform themselves into the form of a mouse, and sometimes, they say, the devil transforms himself into the form of a dog, or some other animal? Are these and similar things possible, or likely, or credible?1

In this passage, Ambrosius describes the “cumulative concept of witchcraft” as he encountered it—a combination of traditional legendary motifs, demonolatrous heresy, and maleficent magic that some of his learned colleagues considered the definitive characteristics of a very real and very dangerous sect. As aspects of a coherent and supposedly quite real whole, this particular arrangement of heterogeneous elements was new to the fifteenth century, and many
people were openly skeptical. Ambrosius, for one, refused to accept the reality of the composite model of witchcraft and insisted upon treating each element individually. While men and women might indeed be guilty of working *malificium*, their transformation into animals, he believed, was impossible. Therefore, when magistrates were faced with the confessions of accused witches, he required that they distinguish carefully between testimony which was possible and probable and that which was not.

Like his counterparts in the Inquisition, Ambrosius was faced with two basic problems of belief: was witchcraft in fact real, and if so, what, precisely, was it? These two questions were intimately related: witchcraft so constituted as to be implausible either on empirical or theological grounds was more likely to be considered a delusion or an illusion than a representation of objective reality. In order for witch-beliefs to be persuasive, they first had to make sense in the context of what fifteenth-century people knew about the world. Of course, different people “knew” quite different things, and constructed their notions of witchcraft accordingly. To make sense of these diverse opinions, to understand the learned late-medieval discourse of witchcraft, we first need to comprehend the evidence and assumptions out of which categories of witchcraft were constructed, and then determine why some conceptions of witchcraft appear to have made more sense, and been more widely persuasive, than others.

**Assessing the evidence**

All learned theorists based their models of witchcraft upon data of similar kinds. First, there were their own personal and immediate experiences of witchcraft, meager though these usually were. Second, there were the narrative accounts of others — the testimony of witnesses, the confessions of witches, and tales of more general provenance — for most authors, but especially for inquisitors and magistrates, a much larger and more significant category. Finally there were authoritative Latin texts, the Bible above all, but also the narratives and pronouncements of a diverse assemblage of past authorities. Virtually all of this material came provided with its own interpretive frame; narratives about witchcraft were constructed in accordance with a prior understanding of the phenomenon, and reflected the beliefs of authors and narrators past and present. In this way, witch-theorists were exposed to idealized models of witchcraft of varying degrees of specificity, sophistication, and comprehensiveness. Variance between pre-existing interpretive models, or between models and evidentiary experience or accepted authority, was the driving force behind the late-medieval learned discourse on witchcraft.
Ambrosius de Vignate, for example, urged caution when descriptions of witchcraft contradicted the evidence; in turn, just such skepticism inspired Institoris and Sprenger to compose a rebuttal. More specifically, however, the dimensions of the category “witch” in the *Malleus* were determined by an apparent contradiction of a different sort, between notions of witchcraft authorized by learned texts, and more popular representations of witchcraft evinced by the testimony of witnesses. As Dominicans, the authors were trained to accept the authority of the text, their own sensible experience, and the testimony of reliable witnesses; any valid proposition should be verifiable by each of these means. As inquisitors, however, they found that their experience in the courtroom seemed to contradict accepted authorities. Because they had no mechanism by which to discount experiential evidence, they were faced with a contradiction between two equally valid epistemological standards in a matter of considerable importance. Since such a contradiction could not be allowed to stand, they constructed new models which could reconcile the competing demands of experience and traditional authority.3

Institoris and Sprenger worked out this problem within an intellectual framework provided by the teaching of Aquinas, and though this debt is obvious, it must not be taken for granted. Although Aquinas was the canonically accepted theologian of the Dominican Order, for the rest of Europe, and even for many Dominicans, he was not quite the dominant intellectual force of the late Middle Ages that he is sometimes thought to be.4 Quite the contrary, at most schools the most popular, vigorous, and influential intellectual trend of the fifteenth century was the nominalist, Franciscan, *via moderna*.5 In many places Aquinas still suffered from his association with the extreme Aristotelianism condemned at Paris almost two hundred years before. The *Malleus*, though, was written at the University of Cologne, the most doggedly Thomist school in Europe. There the faculty did not even bother to teach the *via moderna*, and had, in fact, banned it from the curriculum in 1425. Lambertus de Monte Domini, one of Sprenger’s most distinguished colleagues at Cologne, and the man whose name appears first on the faculty endorsement of the *Malleus*, even went so far as to lead an abortive drive to obtain beatification for Aristotle.6

This rigorously Thomist background affected Institoris and Sprenger’s interpretation of witch-beliefs in ways that went well beyond the conventional association of Aquinas with the theory of the diabolic pact. The Thomist universe was characterized by a strong sense of integration: there was no sharp separation between the natural and supernatural realms. For this reason it was possible to derive valid, albeit speculative, knowledge of the higher orders of creation from sense-experience, because, in Heiko Oberman’s words, “in Thomas’ metaphysical ontology the natural and supernatural realms are organ-
ically joined by the Being of God." In this system, the world of sensible experience was simply one rung on a hierarchy of creation that ascended at last to God, and which, in its entirety, was an expression of God. For this reason, and particularly because the chain of cause and effect relationships extended down the hierarchy of being through various mediating agents, it was possible to apprehend, at least partially, the higher realms through the observation of earthly effects.

Such an exalted view of rational knowledge was possible in turn because of a particular kind of epistemological optimism. For Aquinas, all rational knowledge was located in this realm of the sensible: to know something rationally was invariably the result of the application of reason to sensory experience. Unless one had cause to think otherwise, sensory experience had to be a reliable indicator of the actual state of the world, since it was inherently unlikely that God would have made beings who would be chronically mistaken. For this reason, one might ordinarily accept a given proposition as epistemologically valid simply because it was accepted as such by large numbers of people. In absolute terms, this rule was applied only to knowledge of first principles, propositions which were perceived as true the moment their terms were apprehended. Even for more complex propositions, though, the intellect was never mistaken in any absolute sense, but only "accidentally," due to errors in the formulation of a proposition (a faulty definition of "man," for example, would lead the intellect to erroneous conclusions about the nature of men). With due care, then, Thomist scholastics had every reason to believe that what large numbers of people believed about the world essentially reflected reality. Aquinas, for example, accepted the existence of minor demonic spirits, since

Many persons report that they have had the experience, or have heard from such as have experienced it, that Satyrs and Fauns, whom the common folk call incubi, have often presented themselves before women . . . Hence it seems folly to deny it.

This relationship between knowledge and experiential reality privileged the argument from personal observation and from personal experience, whether direct or based upon the testimony of reliable witnesses, over arguments based solely upon the dictates of authorities. Thus, Albert the Great remarked that "Every accepted proposition which is established by sense perception is better than that which contradicts the senses; and a conclusion which contradicts sense perception is not credible." The Church, however, placed an important restriction upon such arguments. As Albert explained, although in other cases the argument from authority was weak, in theology the argument from authority was pre-eminent, since, "in theology, the argument from
authority is from the inspired teaching of the Spirit of Truth." The difficulty was to find out exactly where the realm of theology began and the realm of mundane experience came to an end. Since this was by no means an easy or an obvious distinction, contradictions between authority and experience inevitably arose. Late medieval theorists were faced with a problem of this kind when they considered the problem of witches, because a long line of ecclesiastical authorities had dismissed the practices of alleged witches as largely delusional.

Institoris and Sprenger addressed this problem head on: they maintained that regardless of what authorities might seem to say, regardless of the plain sense of canons, the evidence of one's own senses, of manifest experience, had to take precedence:

Who is so stupid that he would affirm on that account that all their bewitchments and magically inspired harms are fantastic and imaginary when the contrary is apparent to everybody's senses? In this respect, the authors of the *Malleus* are nothing like the popular image of medieval scholastics, hopelessly dependent upon their authorities; they rely instead upon what they perceive as empirical evidence. What Institoris and Sprenger and other scholastic demonologists did take as a matter of faith, however, is that the universe operated according to rules, or, rather, by the natural laws of creation. Witchcraft, like the devil himself, was a part of this creation and operated only by its laws. Hence, there was nothing necessarily "supernatural" about witchcraft, and educated observers could devise a detailed, systematic, and comprehensive description of the phenomenon from a knowledge of natural law and the observation of witchcraft's material effects, even if it was not amenable to direct observation. Thomist scholastics supposed, simply, that an investigator could follow the trail of cause and effect up and down the hierarchy of being, and that theologically determined truths about the nature of creation would accurately inform his understanding of sensible, earthly events. In this way, a metaphysically higher cause could be adduced from a particular mundane effect. In the case of witchcraft, for example, reported impotence could be used as evidence for a whole range of otherwise hidden causes: the pact between the witch and the devil, diabolic powers, and the ultimate justice of divine judgments.

Thomistically oriented demonologists thus seamlessly joined the material world with higher metaphysical realms, making possible an easy move from the human to the diabolic, and, ultimately, the divine. Strangely enough, this conception of the world was remarkably compatible with that of traditional European communities. If we can visualize the former as a vertically oriented chain of being, extending upward from the material world to the supernatu-
ral, we can think of the latter as a horizontal field in which the realm of normal experience extends outward into the supranormal. For peasants and inquisitors both, spirits and magic were not so much supernatural as preternatural: they exceeded the common bounds of experience, but were not in any sense beyond nature itself. For this reason, narratives informed by a traditional understanding of the supranormal world could make sense to Institoris and Sprenger provided they were reoriented to fit their hierarchically structured conception of creation.

An example of this process appears in Institoris and Sprenger’s account of a town that was ravaged by the plague. There was a rumor that a woman recently buried “was gradually swallowing the shroud in which she had been buried, and that the plague could not cease until the entire shroud was swallowed and consumed in her stomach.” When the body was exhumed, half of the shroud was indeed found to have disappeared into the gullet of the corpse, and the horrified magistrates at once had the body decapitated, and the head thrown from the grave, at which time the plague ceased. This narrative is intensely traditional: a spirit of the dead is causing disease, which will abate only when the corpse is mutilated or destroyed. Such an interpretation, however, was completely at odds with the accepted teachings of the Church, and generations of clerics had condemned such beliefs and practices as superstitious nonsense. Institoris and Sprenger accept the story nonetheless as being essentially accurate, provided that the dead woman had been a witch, and that the plague was due to divine anger over the town’s earlier willingness to let her live and die unmolested, so that when her body was exhumed and mutilated, and her misdeeds exposed in the subsequent inquiry, God’s wrath was allayed. Although Institoris and Sprenger understand the immediate cause of the plague as the anger of a vengeful God rather than the traditional malice of a spirit, their world was as fully anthropocentric as that of traditional peasant communities: for both, just as disease could be caused by human behavior and the violation of normative social boundaries, so a cure might be effected through a ritual, communal performance. Further, as Institoris and Sprenger suggest, discrepancies between a dead person’s putative social position and hidden, rumored, behaviors could result in unwanted post-mortem activity until the “secret” was brought to light and the ambiguity was resolved. Thus, the authors were able to recast an episode grounded in a traditional understanding of the relationship between the living and the dead in ways acceptable to their own understanding of creation, while keeping the underlying structures and meanings of the story intact.

Perhaps the most striking aspect of this account, though, is Institoris and Sprenger’s willingness to accept a supernatural cause for an outbreak of the plague on the basis of a local “rumor.” This faith in the substantial accuracy of
common reports of cause and effect relationships was necessary, because if the inquisitors were not prepared to accept that particular misfortunes were caused by witchcraft, prosecutions based upon reports of *maleficium* would be impossible. Institoris and Sprenger, however, had faith not only in a deterministic model of causation that transcended all boundaries between quotidian experience and the diabolic and divine, but also in the native ability of man to recognize such relationships when they were encountered. They write that witchcraft is known by its effects, “for from the effects one arrives at knowledge of the cause.”\(^{19}\) The effects of witchcraft were so remarkable, so clearly not of the mundane material world, that they could not be caused by man alone:

> The power of corporal man cannot extend itself to the causation of works of this kind, which always has this quality, that the cause along with its natural effect is known naturally and without wonder.\(^{20}\)

The appearance of supernatural or preternatural phenomena, then, was sufficient to warrant the assumption of a supernatural or preternatural cause; in essence, Institoris and Sprenger argue that the perception of supranormal effects indicates the real presence of the preternatural or supernatural agencies. Knowledge of witches was gained through an intuitive apprehension of what was and was not within the normal bounds of human experience: if illness or misfortunes were perceived to be “wonderful” in their scope, severity, or swiftness of onslaught, the presence of *maleficium*, and consequently of witches, was all but certain.

The assumed authority of personal perceptions, eyewitness experience, and the testimony of witnesses pervades the arguments of the *Malleus*. When the authors confidently assert that witches were more often women than men, they remark that “it is not expedient to deduce arguments to the contrary, since experience itself, in addition to verbal testimonies and the witness of trustworthy men, makes such things credible.”\(^{21}\) They establish that witches have frequent sexual relations with demons, because this has “been seen or heard in personal experience or by the relations of trustworthy men.”\(^{22}\) There can also be no doubt that some witches “work marvels over the male member,” since this, too, “is established by the sight and hearing of many, and from common report itself.”\(^{23}\) In these, and many other instances, Institoris and Sprenger consistently privilege the argument from experience: the most persuasive arguments were those supported by the greatest weight of experiential evidence, either in terms of quantity or quality.

This reliance upon actual experience dictated in turn the forms which evidence had to take. Personal experience of witchcraft was not generally recorded in propositional statements of belief, but in narratives which related
the experience itself. Narratives of this kind do not normally contain explicit statements about the beliefs of the storyteller, which must be inferred by readers or auditors. When narratives circulate in fairly restricted, homogeneous communities, the underlying belief systems are easily apprehended; this is not at all the case, however, when narratives circulate more widely, and when narrator and auditor hold quite different assumptions about the nature of the world. Unlike many previous ecclesiastical commentators, who either dismissed popular narratives as fabulous or reinterpreted them beyond recognition, Institoris and Sprenger combined a trust in the substantial accuracy of such tales with an interpretive system that preserved much of their essential meaning. In this way, narrative evidence provided the basis for a conception of witchcraft that bridged traditional folk-beliefs and ecclesiastical erudition; Institoris and Sprenger created a model of witchcraft which could be expressed propositionally in scholastic style, but which rested upon their interpretation of a very large number of narrative examples. Indeed, the greater part of the evidence in the Malleus consists of their interpretations of narrative. André Schnyder counts 279 different exempla in the Malleus, most of which involve witchcraft or the devil. Yet the Malleus is not precisely a collection of exempla, because unlike traditional medieval tale collections, such as Nider’s Formicarius, it does not use narratives chiefly as illustrative moral examples, but as proofs sufficient in themselves.

For instance, Institoris and Sprenger advise that persons whose minds are turned toward love or hatred by witchcraft should fortify themselves with daily invocations of their guardian angel and frequent visits to the shrines of the saints. After two examples of the efficacy of these procedures, the authors are quite satisfied that they have supplied sufficient proof of their claims:

Wherefore it deserves to be concluded that the aforesaid remedies are most certain against a disease of this kind, and thus whosoever uses these weapons is most certain to be freed.

So much does the Malleus depend upon evidence of this kind that the logic of the inquisitors becomes at times completely indistinguishable from the logic of their stories. When they set out to prove that the regular application of sacramentals may reliably ward off the evil powers of witches, they marshal a long series of narratives as evidence. In particular they mention the mayor of Wiesenthal who fortified himself every Sunday with holy water and blessed salt. One Sunday, however, in his haste to attend a wedding, he neglected this precaution and was immediately and painfully bewitched. This coincidence proved to the mayor, and to the inquisitors, the efficacy of his customary sacramental defenses and the reality of witchcraft: the mayor’s malady was known to be witchcraft because it struck when he was not sacramentally protected;
the sacramentals were known to be an effective defense against witchcraft for exactly the same reason.

Although such an argument was not strictly logical because a syllogism cannot provide proof of its premise, Institoris and Sprenger accepted the logic of personal experience and its narratives as a fully sufficient arbiter of truth. In their minds, as in the narratives to which they appealed, the appearance of causal connections demonstrated their existence, and by accepting such narrative episodes as valid evidence in themselves, Institoris and Sprenger were able to elevate the discourse of village magic to the level of learned disputation.

In this discourse, the voice of collective opinion or common report was every bit as important as specific eyewitness accounts, and so Institoris and Sprenger were singularly sensitive to the value of rumor. Indeed, local rumors provided such a reliable indication of the presence of witchcraft that when such rumors reached the authorities, they were sufficient in themselves to warrant an investigation. Most investigations, Institoris tells us, begin in this way, without any specific accusations. His sample declaration which would formally initiate the inquisitorial process testifies to the centrality of rumor in the hunt for witches:

It often comes to the ears of such and such official or judge, of such and such a place, borne by public gossip and produced by noisy reports, that such and such a person from such and such a place has done such and such things pertaining to maleficia against the faith and the common good of the state.

When rumors coalesced around particular individuals, they could lead to specific charges. Much of the evidence Institoris assembled against Helena Scheuberin at Innsbruck amounted to very little more than rumor. The first charge against her states that she is defamed particularly regarding the death of a certain knight, Spiess by name, and this not even in Innsbruck but all over the place throughout the surrounding regions, and especially among the noble and powerful. Whether he perished by poison or witchcraft there remains some doubt. However it is generally rumored that it was from maleficium because the witch had been devoted to evil-doing from her youth.

Having a bad reputation, mala fama, was almost a requirement for real witches as far as Institoris was concerned, and provided an important link between moral delinquency and maleficent magic. A bad reputation might encompass a wide range of moral failings and social deviance, and provided the necessary ground for more sinister rumors of witchcraft to take root.

Rumors provided witch-hunters with the perfect narrative basis for their inquiries. It is often said that accusations of witchcraft came principally from
the lower ranks of society and not from the elite, and in a general sense this seems to be true; but in an environment where vague rumors of maleficia were swirling around, it may also be that concrete accusations were constructed by prosecutors through the examination of rumor-bearing informants. It is a characteristic of rumor narratives that they become more detailed, more rooted in local conditions, and more attached to specific points of reference, as they are challenged and interrogated. Further, as witnesses are required to supply increasing levels of detail, they become increasingly amenable to the guidance of the interrogator, and begin to look to the forms and subtext of the examiner’s questions to provide the bases for their answers. The availability of rumor legends, then, may have determined the extent to which an investigator was able to impose his own conception of witchcraft upon locally divergent cases. If this were the case, then the activities of the inquisitor begin to assume familiar contours: he becomes the catalyst which transforms suspicion and diverse experience into an actionable charge focused upon a single person. In modern rural France, this role is assumed by the “unwitcher” who occupies a crucial position between the bewitched victim and the alleged witch. As authorities agitate the community, and the level of anxiety rises, the amount of rumor in circulation rises as well; eventually, such “hot” legends may become reified into a set of consistent, specific accusations.

From rumors, memorates, and denunciations and confessions couched in traditional terms, Institoris and Sprenger constructed their image of witchcraft. As inquisitors and priests they were uniquely well positioned to hear an astonishing range of opinion and narrative concerning witches, and were equally obliged to make sense of it all. The witch-beliefs of the Malleus draw heavily upon traditional beliefs and previously constituted categories which Institoris and Sprenger reinterpreted in a manner consistent with a theologically Thomist view of the world. The success of this project was due less to their theological sophistication and rigorous logic (neither of which is especially evident), than to their sensitivity to the world picture of their informants. They did not simply demonize popular belief, but tried instead to reconstruct it for their own purposes. Their picture of witchcraft was successful precisely because it corresponded so closely with the ideas of the less well educated. Other demonologists treated witchcraft as a sect, worse than, but otherwise similar to, other heresies; because of their epistemological and metaphysical assumptions, however, Institoris and Sprenger understood witchcraft much more as did the common man, as part of a spectrum of human interaction with preternatural and supernatural powers. For this reason, although the model of witchcraft in the Malleus is certainly a composite, constructed from several different but interrelated idea-clusters, the fit between this model and supranormal events as they were reported was closer than the
competing models of other learned observers, and was thus more persuasive. Edwin Ardener has proposed that categories have a center of gravity, a zone most characteristic of their qualities, and that the “density gradients” of categories are related in some way to frequency of association or interaction with reality.\(^{18}\) If this is the case, Institoris and Sprenger’s vision of witchcraft was more successful than those of their competitors because its center of gravity was more closely aligned with the perceived reality of their contemporaries.\(^{39}\)

To go beyond this sort of general statement, and to try to see exactly how Institoris and Sprenger constructed their categories of “witch” and “witchcraft” is more difficult. Like all learned witch-theorists of the late Middle Ages, they worked with reference to rules, evidence, and already extant symbols and categories: first, they accepted a set of more or less rigid assumptions about the world and its creator with which any construction of witchcraft had to be consistent; second, they had evidence, principally in narrative form, about a number of identifiable individuals whose antisocial behavior or normative boundary transgressions were defined by reference to maleficia and related categories; third, to make sense of this evidence, they had available a quite nebulous cluster of symbols, beliefs, and narrative structures associated with magic and supranormal beings which could be reordered in terms of any number of new categorical constructs. This is, of course, too schematic a map of the field of late-medieval witchcraft, but nevertheless an attempt to analyze late-medieval witchcraft in terms of its constituent categories and symbols seems worthwhile.\(^{40}\) Not only is this a reasonably clear path to tread, but the late-medieval debate over witches centered upon just such problems of category ascription and definition. In the analysis that follows, we will look at five interrelated categories in turn, each of which appears repeatedly in late-medieval demonological discourse: the processions of spectral women, heresy and the diabolic cult, maleficium, superstition, and gender.

“Good women” and bad: *strigae*, *lamiae*, and the *bonae res*

Of all the beliefs out of which constructions of witchcraft were formed, the most unfamiliar to modern readers are quite probably those associated with various sorts of nocturnal female spirits. These beings inhabited the world of medieval peasants, for whom they were part of an extensive traditional lore with antecedents that reached well back into the pre-Christian past. To educated clerics of the Middle Ages, such traditions were almost as alien as they appear to the modern researcher, and so they, like us, sought out interpretations which would make sense of them, some of which were gradually assim-
ilated with notions of *maleficium* and heresy, and ultimately provided paradigms by which the larger phenomenon of witchcraft was understood.

Scattered throughout a variety of medieval sources are tantalizing hints of a widespread tradition about the fantastic nocturnal escapades of women and female spirits. According to the disapproving accounts of churchmen, some women believed that they secretly left their homes at night to attend the court of a goddess or spirit, often identified as Diana, and rode with her on lengthy processions, traveling great distances in the blink of an eye. These ideas smacked of paganism, idolatry, or worse, and are accordingly condemned in the canon *Episcopi*, first recorded in the early tenth century in the penitential of Regino, abbot of Prüm. 41 In the following century, a well-known canonist, Burchard, bishop of Worms, repeated Regino’s warnings in his confessional interrogatory, *Corrector et Medicus*:

> Have you believed or participated in that infidelity, which some wicked women, turned back after Satan, seduced by illusions and phantoms of demons, believe and confess: that with Diana, goddess of the pagans, and an innumerable multitude of women, they ride on certain beasts and traverse great distances of the earth in the silence of the dead of night, obey her commands as if she were their mistress, and on certain nights are called to her service? 42

If anyone believes such things, and, Burchard adds, “an innumerable multitude, deceived by this false opinion, believe these things to be true,” then she must do penance for two years.

Burchard, Regino, and other early-medieval ecclesiastics were all agreed that there was nothing substantial behind these tales of rustic women, and that nobody actually left their homes at night to gad about with spirits. It was rather the deceptions of the devil that were to blame: at the same time as he walked abroad at night with his fellows in the guise of Diana and her train, he sent dreams to poor ignorant women so that they would believe themselves to be traveling in the place of the demons. Nonetheless, this clerical skepticism should not be interpreted as tolerance because it was also quite clear that these beliefs were sinful, superstitious, and diabolically inspired. Insofar as these women believed themselves to go voluntarily, they participated in the demons’ designs. Thus, although the nocturnal processions of spectral women were illusory, they were also quite clearly linked to the devil, a link that could be expanded in different contexts.

Exactly what constituted this traditional belief is difficult to say, since the evidence available is scattered and contradictory, and suggests a group of more or less related components rather than a single, coherent belief-system. 43 It is remotely possible that the consistent references to Diana indicate the presence of a relict pagan cult, but it seems more likely that the perception of broadly
similar motifs in a variety of traditions provided the attractive force necessary to create an amalgam of beliefs, roughly centered around the nocturnal activities of women and female spirits.44 Certainly the variety of names by whom the leader of this host was known suggests conflation of this sort, since Herodias, Abundia, Satia, Holda, Perchta, and others, all supervised processions of night-traveling women, exactly as did Diana.

Neither is it entirely certain just what these beings and their followers were wont to do on their evening rides. Some accounts suggest simply that they rode to some gathering place where they danced and feasted, and then returned home. In the thirteenth century, however, William of Paris (d. 1249), added that Domina Abundia and her ladies were believed to enter houses at night and bring abundance and riches when they found offerings prepared for them.45 In his Corrector, Burchard mentioned a similar belief connected with the Fates or “the sisters,” who were said to come into houses at certain times of the year and bring good luck if they found food and drink waiting for them.46 Neither Burchard nor William identified these ladies with Diana and her train, but other authors made this connection explicit. In the Romance of the Rose (c. 1270), Nature remarks that since women are credulous and emotional, they are especially susceptible to illusions and phantoms:

As a result, many people in their folly think themselves sorcerers by night, wandering with Lady Abundance. And they say that in the whole world every third child born is of such disposition that three times a week he goes just as destiny leads him; that such people push into all houses; that they fear neither keys nor bars, but enter by cracks, cat-hatches, and crevices; that their souls leave their bodies and go with good ladies into strange places and through houses.47

John of Frankfurt, writing in the early fifteenth century, provides a similar, albeit more detailed, warning against the dangers of these beliefs. He advises that a Christian should most especially flee, lest he should come to believe this, what old women report at people’s births: that certain goddesses come and place a destiny of good or bad fortune upon a father’s offspring and predict a death by hanging or by the sword, or great honor, or something similar which shall definitely come about . . . And certain people say that if a boy is born with a caul, that he is one of those who traverse great distances in the space of one night, vulgarly, “die farn leude” [the wayfarers]. In short, people afflicted by this insanity give the service which ought to be God’s alone to those who are really demons, falsely believing them to be the dispensers of good things. So some even do on the five feast days of the four seasons and on the night preceding the ember days.48

Although they are scattered over several centuries, taken together these accounts suggest a reasonably consistent body of belief, closely related to the
rural European “fairy cults” described by nineteenth and twentieth-century folklorists. In its medieval form, the tradition centered upon a belief in troops of spectral women, led by some specific but variously named mistress, which visited houses at certain times of the year and brought either good fortune or ill, depending upon their reception.\[49] These beings might also determine a person’s fate at birth, and claimed a certain number of people, sometimes up to a third of humanity, as their own.\[50] Those chosen, who appear to have been mainly women, accompanied the troupings “fairies” on their rounds, paid court to their mistress, and attended their revels. According to most accounts, these women believed that they participated bodily in such activities, although some, like Jean de Meun, represent the night-travelers as entering trance-like dreams, knowing full well that they accompanied the goddess in spirit only. Like their mistress, these peripatetic female specters were known by many names – fays, fates, good women, and good sisters – but for the sake of convenience, and to avoid the anachronistic connotations of the word “fairy,” I will subsequently refer to them as the *bonae res*, the “good things,” a term used by the Dominican inquisitor, Stephen of Bourbon (d. 1261), in his description of the phenomenon.\[51]

The full range of traditions with which the *bonae res* were associated was, however, considerably more extensive than this generalized overview would suggest. Sometimes the restless dead accompanied the *bonae res* on their nightly rounds, and both Holda and Perchta were occasionally known to lead the Furious Horde.\[52] The nocturnal processions of women were also related to a set of more sinister beliefs – legends of female spirits who stole into houses to kill children and work other crimes. Such beings were often called *lamiae*, their name derived conventionally from *laniare* (to rend) and their distressing habit of tearing children into bits. In the thirteenth century, Johannes de Janua gave this etymology in his widely read *Catholicon*, and added that “old women pretend that *lamiae* enter houses through closed doors, kill infants and tear them to pieces, and afterwards restore them to life, and they have the faces of people but the bodies of beasts.”\[53] Such beings had clear literary antecedents in the classical Roman figure of the *strix*, the malevolent, bird-like, female monsters of Ovid and Apuleius, but medieval authors often associated *lamiae*, in less monstrous forms but with equally sinister intent, with the troupes of *bonae res*.\[54] William of Paris, for example, discusses *lamiae* immediately after his account of Abundia and her ladies, and explains that both are essentially beings of the same type:

You ought to understand in the same manner those other evil spirits which the vulgar call *stryges* and *lamiae* and which appear at night in houses in which there are nursing babes, which they seem to tear to pieces when snatched from their
cradles or to roast in the fire. They appear in the form of old women; however, they are neither true old women, nor is it possible that children are truly devoured.55

William states further that although these monsters appeared in the guise of old women, they were really demons who, as spirits, could not truly consume infants. They were, however, occasionally permitted to kill children to punish their parents. Demons were happy to oblige, because in so doing they inspired fear which led to superstitious idolatry – for exactly the same reason as the demon impersonating Domina Abundia provided good luck.

Several centuries earlier, Burchard had made the same connection between the monstrous lamiae and the more benign bonae res. With words identical to those he applied to the followers of the bonae res, he condemns the belief of women who think that they go out at night on murderous errands in spectral form:

Have you believed what many women, turned back to Satan, believe and affirm to be true: do you believe that in the silence of the quiet night when you have gone to bed and your husband lies on your bosom, that while you remain in bodily form you can go out by closed doors and are able to cross the spaces of the world with others deceived by the same error, and without visible weapons slay persons who have been baptized and redeemed by the blood of Christ, and cook and eat their flesh, and in place of their hearts put straw or wood or something of the sort and having eaten them make them live again and give an interval of life?56

Quite clearly, both Burchard and William of Paris interpreted belief in lamiae and similar creatures under the general rubric provided by the canon Episcopi, and with good reason. Given the devil’s well-attested power to produce nocturnal delusions and phantoms, and his desire to provoke superstitious, idolatrous belief, the canon provided a useful conceptual template through which a great many vaguely similar beliefs could be understood and condemned.

Such learned incredulity, although common, was not universal. At least a few observers found it difficult to dismiss widespread and persistent testimony as the result of diabolically inspired delusions, especially as the canon Episcopi did not seem to bear directly upon tales of lamiae and the like. Gervaise of Tilbury (d. 1235) was perhaps the most credulous of thirteenth-century writers: he declared that many women, like the women of Diana’s company, claimed that they went out at night in the company of lamiae and flew across remote parts of the world.57 Unlike the more benign night-travelers, however, they did not bring good luck when they entered houses at night; instead they oppressed sleepers, moved infants from place to place, drank human blood, and caused serious illness.58 Although Gervaise acknowledg-
edged that some claimed that “these nocturnal fancies arise from timidity and melancholy, as in the insane,” while others “assert that they have seen such imaginations in dreams so vividly that they seemed to be awake,” he could accept neither explanation because the weight of his personal experience told against it. He knew reliable women, his neighbors, who had seen these beings abroad at night; he had heard women confess that they went out at night with the lamiae and molested infants; he had seen women bearing wounds which corresponded exactly with those given to nocturnal apparitions in the form of cats by vigilant watchmen. All of which told strongly against the delusional nature of such creatures, which should accordingly be combated by pious means. The grounds for Gervaise’s credulity should be noted: he was not simply “superstitious,” but rather convinced by the weight of experiential evidence that these beings were real, an epistemological stance identical to that of later witch-hunters.

Originally, perhaps, these several different species of night-travelers, the lamiae and the bonae res, had been relatively distinct. It is also possible that both destructive strigae and more benign spirits were once logical counterparts within a more comprehensive system of belief, much as the benandanti appear to have had the malandanti as their perpetual foes. Among learned clerics, Stephen of Bourbon taught that while strigae and the bonae res were equally imaginary, they were otherwise well differentiated: strigae rode wolves at night and killed children, but the bonae res had less fierce steeds and were, at worst, petty vandals. The name “Holda” may also point to such a distinction, for it suggests those positive attributes associated with the words “kind,” or “gracious”; indeed, the medieval Holda was so well considered as to be occasionally identified with the Virgin Mary. Likewise, the common German word for witch in the Middle Ages was unholda, the good spirit’s inverted counterpart. Unfortunately, more concrete evidence for such a system is hard to find, and the evidence provided by names is ambiguous since it is also true that words such as holda or bilwis might stand equally for fairies or for malevolent witches. In any event, for most learned clerics, and probably for most common folk as well, the various spectral trains of nocturnal women had obvious similarities and were very easily conflated. John of Salisbury, writing in the mid-twelfth century, provides an early example of exactly this kind of assimilation, when he writes about those women who say that they followed “a certain woman who shines by night, or Herodias, or the mistress of the night” to assemblies and banquets. There, these women assert that

they are employed with the tasks of various kinds of service: some are handed over for punishment, some others are elevated for their renown, each as they deserve. Moreover, infants are exposed to lamiae, and some having been indis-
criminately torn to pieces are added to those already thrown into the stomach by ravenous maws; while some are tossed back by the mercy of the ruler and replaced in their cradles.62

By the fifteenth century, this failure to discriminate between different types of night-going women had become general: instead of describing the lamiae and the bonae res as different but related components of peasant belief, learned commentators constructed a single complex, containing elements drawn from both traditions. It is this conflation of strigae with the more benign followers of Diana or Abundia that informs the witch debates of the late Middle Ages. Martin of Arles provides a fairly typical fifteenth-century account of the nefarious activities of these night-flying women in his catalogue of rustic superstitions. Among these, Martin describes the Broxae, women who claimed to fly through the air at night and transform themselves into animals. He acknowledges that these are the women whose beliefs are condemned by the canon Episcopi, but he goes on to emphasize the criminal nature of their imaginary excursions. Any distinction between the bonae res and the malevolent striga is completely invisible to Martin:

Whence some little women, devoted to Satan, seduced by the illusions of the devil, believe and confess that they ride during the hours of the night with Diana, goddess of the pagans, or Venus, in company with a great multitude of women, and do other abominations, for example, tear away babes from the breasts of their mothers, carry them off and eat them, enter houses through chimneys or windows, and disturb the inhabitants in various ways, all of which happens exclusively in their imaginations.63

The common people greatly feared these women, and rang bells and lit fires at crossroads and in the fields on the night of St. John’s day, lest witches fly overhead and cause thunder and storms. This, Martin remarks, “I have seen with my own eyes.”64

The beliefs surrounding the troupes of night-traveling women thus occupy a somewhat paradoxical place in the late-medieval witch debate. As Norman Cohn recognized, elements drawn from this tradition were necessary, if the newly (re)constructed witch category was to be truly threatening. Without the ability to travel at preternatural speed, it was just not possible to envision hundreds or thousands of women assembling at night and carrying out their nefarious deeds without causing an obvious commotion.65 In addition, although both heretics and malefici could certainly be alarming, there were recognized and effective procedures for dealing with them. Assimilation with the monstrous striga and lamia of folklore, however, resulted in hosts of newly demonic witches whose terrible occult powers and ruthlessly destructive agenda required new and more energetic measures to combat them.
The contrary, however, was also true: where this assimilation was incomplete, as was the case especially in southern Europe, *maleficae* remained well differentiated from the spectral women of the night, and “witchcraft” did not become a critical problem. It was equally the case that constructions of witchcraft in which these night-travelers were too centrally placed were not convincing, both because they ran squarely counter to the always troublesome canon *Episcopi*, and because the testimony of suspect “witches” themselves strained credulity.66

These difficulties are best seen in the witch-treatises themselves. At one end of the spectrum, Alphonso de Spina tried, probably harder than anyone else, to push the traditional category distinctions of the canon *Episcopi* far enough to accommodate fully diabolized witches.67 In his opinion, the *Bruxae* or *Xorguinae* of popular superstition were demons who deceived old women in their dreams, making them think that they traveled by night, killed children, and did other evil deeds. Although these women were deceived, Alphonso makes it plain they readily participated in this evil, and would commit their crimes in reality if only they could:

The truth of the matter, however, is that when these evil persons wish to use these most wicked fictions they consecrate themselves with words and unguents to the devil, and the devil immediately receives them in his work and takes the form and the imagination of every one of them and leads them to the places which they wish, although their bodies remain insensible and covered by the shadow of the devil so that no one can see them, and when the devil sees in their imaginations that they have completed all they wish, not withdrawing from their imaginations the diabolical fancies which they see, he leads back their imaginations, joining them with their own moving bodies.68

In this account, Alphonso comes very close to endorsing the very belief he purports to condemn, since the process he describes – in which the “imaginations” of women wander about with the devil – sounds suspiciously like the actual separation of body and soul. Instead of harmless delusions created by the devil, women created their own monstrous fantasies, which Satan gave the semblance of reality. He not only transported their *figura et fantasia* to remote places, he also thoughtfully concealed their dreaming bodies while he did so, so that annoying nay-sayers could not point to the obvious evidence of snoring women to discredit their stories. But, for Alphonso, these women do no real, concrete harm; instead their crime is heresy. Thus, the women of the canon *Episcopi* who assert that they follow Diana at night are not merely superstitious; rather, they are devil-worshiping heretics who are justly consigned to the stake, since their heresy consists not only of the invocation to the devil which precedes their dreams, but also of the dreams themselves, for which
they are apparently fully liable. For example, Alphonso remarks that in Gascony and Dauphiné there are great numbers of these perverse women who say that they assemble at night in a deserted place “where there is a boar on a rock which is commonly called ‘el Boch de Biterne,’ and that they meet there with lighted candles and adore the boar, kissing him on his anus.” For this, he continues, many had been arrested by the inquisition and burned – there was even a painting commemorating the event in the house of the inquisitor of Toulouse, which Spina had personally admired.

Alphonso de Spina gave the delusions of night-traveling women their greatest practical significance. It was, in his view, no longer sufficient simply to condemn as superstitious those who believed that their dreams were real; the dreams themselves were criminal and deserved severe punishment. It is difficult to see, however, how such a model of witchcraft could be especially threatening to the populace at large, since no matter how much these heretics were responsible for their fantasies, they were still just fantasies, and not the cause of real harm. Furthermore, witchcraft so defined could neither be separated from notions about nor the persons of the women who believed that they rode with the _bonae res_, and there is no indication that medieval people in general found either particularly threatening or bothersome.

The experience of Nicholas of Cusa, the great reformer and theologian, provides a case in point. In 1457, while traveling through the French Alps, he met two old women who had been imprisoned for witchcraft and threatened with the stake. They told him that they were in the service of Domina Abundia, and went with her to revels where there was laughing, dancing, and celebrations, and where hairy wild men devoured unbaptized children. By their own admission these women were apostate Christians, since they had vowed themselves to “Richella” in return for good fortune and had promised to abstain from all Christian observances. Nicholas at once recognized that these women had been deceived by the devil in their dreams, and that, although grievous sinners, they were not _maleficae_. In the Lenten sermon in which he gives this account, he concludes that sometimes the devil deludes some old and infatuated woman, and leads her on so that she is captured and tortured as a witch, and God permits this on account of her sins, and then very great evils follow, because of the death of an innocent. Therefore beware, lest wanting so much to be rid of evil, yet more evil is garnered.

Accordingly, Nicholas arranged for these “decrepit and delirious” women to receive penances and be released. Their dreams, no matter how bizarre, did no real harm; the women were not, therefore, _maleficae_, and so their persecution was both pointless and wrong. It is true that they had made an unholy bargain with the devil, but they had been tricked into doing so, and were, in
any case, less than fully culpable by reason of their age, poverty, gross ignorance, and failing mental health.

Despite their differences, Alphonso de Spina and Nicholas of Cusa both accepted an essentially conservative and traditional view of witchcraft, in which the experiences of women who followed the *bonae res* were basically imaginary. For others, this kind of faith in ecclesiastical tradition seemed no longer possible. Alonso de Madrigal, bishop of Ávila, was one prominent churchman whose initial stance of traditional skepticism was shaken, and finally demolished, by the weight of circumstantial evidence. In his *Commentary on Genesis* (c. 1436), Alonso had remarked that in his region of Spain there were women who through certain superstitious observances and unguents believed themselves transported to sumptuous feasts in distant places. Upon investigation, however, it was determined that while these women thought they were abroad, they were really lying motionless in a stupor, completely insensible of their actual surroundings and conscious of neither words, nor heavy blows, nor even burns. Thus, their journeys were nothing but the deceits of the devil. Several years later, in his *Commentary on Matthew* (c. 1440), Alonso had completely changed his mind. He now maintained that what is said of certain women who run about through many places at night is true. For this has often been discovered and judicially punished. And some, wanting to imitate their infamous ceremonies, have incurred great distress. Nor can it be said that this happens in sleep, since not only those who have undergone this, but many others, too, have testified to this thing. Nor is there any reason that this should be doubted, though it is true that among the simple much that is false has been mixed up with some truth, because demons desire to do harm not only to morals, but also to faith.

In this passage, Alonso tries explicitly to convince his readers that his dramatic about face was justified, and that women really do fly through the air at night. Like Gervaise of Tilbury, his newfound credulity rested upon the value of testimony and personal experience, which had finally become too compelling for him to dismiss. For example, although he acknowledges that there are theological arguments to the contrary, he argues that demons have the power to carry people from place to place since “this is so manifest, that it would be imprudent to deny it, when we have met a thousand witnesses who have been made aware of this.” Rather than dismiss the unanimous verdict of so many witnesses, it was now easier for Alonso to revise the meaning of the canon itself, such that it now forbade only the belief that women rode with Diana and similar spirits, and not belief in the night ride itself.

For many other witch-theorists, such a deliberate misreading of the canon was just as unacceptable as was complete skepticism, which created a
serious problem for those more inclined to consider arguments on both sides of the issue. Around 1460, in a treatise dedicated to Francesco Sforza, the Dominican theologian Girolamo Visconti took time to ponder whether “lamias, which the vulgar call strias” go to the ludus in fact or in imagination only. As he had encountered it, witchcraft was a composite of beliefs drawn from popular traditions, maleficia, and demonic heresy, although the various parts of this whole were so poorly integrated in his mind that he never quite convinces himself, or his readers, of its objective reality. Witches go to their assemblies, or ludi, riding on broomsticks or demons in the shape of wolves; they do this for base, material motives, in order to gain money, revenge, or success in love; once there, they adore the “lady of the game” as a goddess, kill baptized infants, work black magic, and feast upon oxen which their mistress then magically restores to life. To determine how much of this is real, Visconti marshals evidence and arguments, both for and against. On one side there is the testimony of the accused witches themselves and of witnesses who have seen these women abroad, the evidence of undeniable magical harm, and the undoubted power of the devil to do marvelous things. On the other, there is the testimony of canonical authorities and numerous respected churchmen, the fact that the women can be seen sleeping even while they claim to be riding at night, and the incredible nature of their claims.

Visconti’s solution is interesting. The evidence of authority, and of the physical bodies of sleeping women, is irrefutable, and such “witches” do not really go to the ludus, rather, they, and those who think that they see them, are deceived by the devil. At the same time, because demons have the power to transport people from place to place at fantastic speeds, and because theologians are agreed that incubi and succubi are real, it is possible that women might attend these nocturnal assemblies and mingle physically with demons, “because, following logic, many things are possible, which are nonetheless false.” This is an extremely half-hearted endorsement of the canon Episcopi, but Visconti will not go further. He does not seem able to reject the validity of the canon out of hand, because his understanding of witchcraft is so firmly rooted in testimony and narratives concerning the bonae res and their followers, as his “witches” are still recognizably the same as the women condemned by the canon. Nonetheless, despite Girolamo’s reluctance to do away with the canon completely, he provides the intellectual basis for that move, for once the reality of the Sabbat was accepted as a possibility, a sufficient quantity of circumstantial evidence would establish it as fact.

The crux of the problem was the power of the devil: did he give substance to the claims of alleged night-travelers, or merely defraud their minds and senses? Confusion on this score was nothing new. Back in the thirteenth century, in another of Stephen of Bourbon’s stories, a priest was invited out
for a ride with the bonae res, and rode a wooden beam to a great feast attended by many beautiful people. When he made the sign of the cross, the glorious party vanished, and the naked priest was discovered in the wine cellar of a local lord and narrowly avoided being hanged as a thief. Stephen’s expressed purpose was to mock superstitious belief, but this same exemplum could also demonstrate the real power of the devil to transport people invisibly into locked rooms while at the same time deceiving their senses. In other words, Stephen’s narrative made exactly the same point as did Girolamo Visconti: such things are possible, even if they do not usually happen.

Around 1470 the Dominican theologian Jordanes de Bergamo took Girolamo’s argument to its logical conclusion in his Questio de Strigis. “Strigae or strigones,” he writes, are “men and women who run about at night over long distances or enter houses by the power of demons, who also are said to bewitch children.” Once again, this conception of witchcraft centers around the companies of night-traveling women, and so, like Girolamo, Jordanes must address the problem of the canon Episcopi head on. His solution is simple: where the canon specifically forbids belief, in animal transformations for example, the devil accomplishes this through illusions; in all other cases, witches may do things in reality or in their dreams, depending upon the mood of the devil. Thus, when baleful strigae suck the blood of children at night, this may be the devil acting in some woman’s stead, or it may be the woman herself, transported and otherwise abetted by Satan.

This “half-a-loaf” approach to witchcraft, in which, as Jordanes remarks, “some things pertaining to witches should be rejected from the hearts of the faithful, while some, in fact, should be firmly held,” satisfied apparently no one else. In particular the issue of maleficium proper was entirely peripheral to the subject of strigae, and for this reason his witches continued to resemble evil, heretical, fairies — the lamiae of Gervaise of Tilbury’s and Stephen of Bourbon’s exempla made real — more than they did the maleficial witches of the Malleus.

Elsewhere, definitions of witchcraft took rather different directions and the whole issue of the bonae res and the canon remained of secondary importance. North of the Alps, especially, writers were on the whole disinclined to attach the label “witch” to the woman who rode with the bonae res, and accordingly interpreted their beliefs in a more traditional manner. Nider’s Formicarius, for example, a text which would remain one of the definitive sources for information about witchcraft throughout the fifteenth century, treated the women who believed they rode with Diana traditionally. One of his teachers, Nider recalls, had told him of a woman who could not be cured of her superstitious beliefs until a Dominican persuaded her to let him, along with several others, witness her flight. When the moment came, she put a large bowl on
a table, seated herself in it, and began to apply a salve to her body while saying an evil charm. She fell at once into a deep sleep, in which she thrashed so violently that she fell from the table and hit her head. When she awoke she claimed to have been out with Venus, but the protestations of the witnesses finally convinced her of her error. Nider complements this account with other details of medieval traditional lore. He tells the well-known incident from the life of St. Germanus, in which the saint found lodging at a house where peasants had set out a feast in expectation of a visit by the Good Women of the night. Germanus stayed up to keep watch, and was not surprised when a horde of demons in the likeness of women entered the house, sat down at the table, and began to eat. Through these stories, Nider makes the point that while demons are responsible for belief in Diana, Venus, and the Good Women, those who believe in these things are not themselves demonic, merely superstitious, stupid, and rather silly. They do not kill babies, cause storms, ride on wolves or assume animal form; instead, these are all characteristics that Nider associates with heretical malefici.

Institoris and Sprenger generally concurred. In the Malleus, they argue that it is necessary to distinguish clearly between the women described in the canon Episcopi and "real witches," who committed real crimes and knowingly devoted themselves to the devil. Where, however, Nicholas of Cusa and his like could use this distinction to exculpate accused witches, for Institoris and Sprenger the canon Episcopi describes a virtually empty set: they have no personal experience of such women, and seem to feel it rather unlikely that they would ever meet them. If a woman was found who superficially resembled those discussed in the canon, she would doubtless fall within their expansive parameters of witch proper.

Nonetheless, Institoris and Sprenger incorporated many of the characteristics of the malign cousins of the less savory night spirits into their own conception of witches. Night flight, for example, was one of the definitive characteristics of both the lamiae and the bonae res, and does not seem to have been much associated with traditional representations of malefici. The Malleus, however, routinely describes witches as having the power of flight. The authors explain that when witches want to fly, they take an unguent made from the limbs of slaughtered children and smear it over a chair or some other piece of wood, at which signal an invisible devil will come and bear them away. Sometimes, Institoris and Sprenger admit, the devil actually appeared in the form of an animal to carry the witch, but he far preferred her to fly by means of the magical salve so that more children might be killed before baptism. In this way, the authors brought the witch’s infanticide — another of the lamia’s most obvious characteristics — alongside her powers of flight to form a new, logical whole. They created a fusion of the lamiae with the malefica which effectively
replaced earlier conceptions of malign female spirits while remaining fully compatible with them.

For this reason, Institoris and Sprenger can support this interpretation with narratives that closely resemble those that had been told about lamiae and their kin. They relate that in the same year that their book was begun, in the city of Speyer, a pair of women had words which escalated, more muliercularum, into an abusive quarrel.86 Since one of the women was rumored to be a witch, the other went home fearing for her newborn child and scattered blessed herbs, consecrated salt, and holy water around his cradle. Her fears were warranted, because in the middle of the night she heard her son whimpering, and when she went to comfort him, she found his cradle empty. Weeping for the loss of her son, the poor woman lit a candle, and was relieved to find the baby under a table in a corner, sniffing but unharmed. That the witch was unable to do more than this, Institoris and Sprenger attribute to the mother’s good sense and prompt deployment of sacramental defenses. It is impossible to tell whether the authors have reworked this very traditional account of the deprivations of lamiae to fit their ideas about witchcraft, or whether such stories were beginning to influence the discourse of village magic.87 In either case, the story illustrates how a clear occasion for maleficia – a mundane quarrel between two women, one with reputed malign occult powers – could evoke a much more monstrous and diabolical conception of witchcraft.

Similarly, Institoris and Sprenger incorporated the trance-like dream state of women who ride with the bonae res into their image of the witch. They had once asked a women whether witches could travel in their imaginations, through illusion, or bodily, and she had replied that both ways were possible. When they wanted to go to the assembly of witches, either a devil could transport them, or, if that were inconvenient, they could invoke the devil and go to sleep; a bluish vapor would then proceed from their mouths by which they were clearly aware of everything that was done there.88 Again, this narrative does not appear grounded in learned conventions (the mist issuing from a sleeper’s mouth is too obviously suggestive of the soul leaving the body), but in a more popular representation of the dream trance. Nonetheless, it fits Institoris and Sprenger’s purposes well, since it makes clear that it is the witch herself, more than any devil, who is responsible for her dreams. In the Malleus, when a witch dreams of the Sabbat, she does so accurately, as a valid, if still inferior, substitute for her actual presence at the event.

In this way, Institoris and Sprenger transformed the motifs of folk traditions into substantial truths about witchcraft. All that the canon Episcopi and Burchard of Worms held to be delusions, they found to be the awful truth. All evidence to the contrary was either irrelevant, because it did not apply to witches, or it was erroneous. Sometimes it was both. For example, the popular
stories of obviously slumbering women who claimed to fly at night might either refer to stupid, deluded women who were not witches, or to witches who were actually abroad at night, while demons assumed their forms in their husbands’ beds. Thus, where Alphonso de Spina’s devil made dreaming women invisible in order that his deceits might appear more real, the devil in the *Malleus* used his illusions to conceal the reality of their absence. Similarly, perceptions of the *bonae res* merely masked the real presence of demons or witches:

There was an error arising from the demons of the night or, as old women say, *die seligen* [the fairies], but who are witches or demons in the form of witches, have to consume everything so that afterwards they may give back more abundantly.

This substitution of witches for demons blurred the stark division between the diabolic fantasies of the canon and the diabolic “realities” of the *Malleus* such that fairy beliefs could be interpreted as just one more manifestation of witchcraft. Institoris and Sprenger could do this because they embraced a concept of the witch that was simultaneously concrete and diabolic, able to incorporate both dreaming old women and the devils from whom their dreams came. In this way, Institoris and Sprenger functionally legislated the superstitious women of the canon, along with their fantasies, out of existence, to be replaced in their entirety by the shockingly real presence of the witch.

Notes
4 The Dominican Order accepted St. Thomas as their definitive theologian in 1329. Hinnebusch, 2:159.
8 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, qu. 87, arts. 6 and 8.


15 Kvideland and Sehmsdorf, 9.

16 “ubi fama volabat quod quodam mulier sepulta lintheamen in quo sepulta erat succesiue deglutiret et quod pestis cessare non posset nisi ex integro lintheamen deglutendo ad ventrem consumpisset.” *Malleus*, pt. 1, qu. 15, p. 75.

17 Similar stories were told by Saxo Grammaticus and William of Newburgh; for discussion of the medieval ghost in folk and clerical traditions, see Claude Lecouteux, *Geschichte der Gespenster und Wiedergänger im Mittelalter* (Cologne: Böhlau Verlag, 1987), and Jean-Claude Schmitt, *Les Revenants* (Paris: Gallimard, 1994).

18 Women with reputations for malign occult powers were notoriously restless after death; for the best known example see the tale of the witch of Berkeley in William of Malmesbury, *De Gestis Regum Anglorum*, ed. William Stubbs (London: Longmans, Green, Reader and Dyer, 1887–89), 1:253–5.

19 “Nam ex effectibus deuenit in cognitionem cause.” *Malleus*, pt. 1, qu. 5, p. 36.

20 “[Ex quibus elicitur quod] virtus corporalis hominis ad huiusmodi opera causanda non se extendere potest que semper hoc habet ut causa cum suo effectu naturali nota sit naturaliter absque admiratione.” *Ibid*. In a fine example of the application of scholastic exclusionary categories to practical problems, Institoris and Sprenger explain that if a man could be found who did have the power to create such marvels, he could not really be called a “man” at all. Of course, if this being were not a man, he must necessarily be either a devil or an angel, since these are the only rational beings in creation. See *ibid.*, pt. 2, qu. 2, ch. 8, p. 183.


25 *Kommentar*, 351–408. Although approximately four fifths of these are drawn from literary sources, in comparison with contemporary texts using comparable numbers of
exempla, Institoris and Sprenger include an extraordinarily high number of narratives
drawn from their personal experience.

26 “Quare et merito concluditur praefata remedia contra huiusmodi morbum esse certis-
sima ita quod certissime ita liberantur quicumque his armis vtuntur. *Malleus*, pt. 2, qu. 2,
ch. 3, p. 165.


28 Similarly in the nineteenth century, J. Lecceur reported that when peasants in the Bocage
began to suspect that their misfortunes were due to witchcraft, “They worry, they mull
it over, and look at what is happening around them with distrust. The talk continues;
soon one name is mysteriously on everyone’s lips.” *Esquisses du bocage normand* (Conde-
and the Supernatural in the Nineteenth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987),
102.

29 This procedure, the *diffamatio*, was not unique to inquisitorial investigations of witch-
craft. When an inquisitor suspected the presence of heretics but denunciations were not
forthcoming, he could require persons generally acknowledged to be respectable and
trustworthy to denounce those who failed to live as good Catholics. A.S. Turberville,
190–1.

30 “Ad aures talis officialis aut iudicis talis loci pervuenit pluries fama publica referente ac
clamosa insinuacione producente quod talis de tali loco dixit vel fecit talia ad maleficia
pertinenta contra fidem ac communem utilitatem reipublicae.” *Malleus*, pt. 3, qu. 1,
p. 196.

31 “diffamata insuper plurimum super mortem cuiusdam militis Spiess et hoc nendum in
Ysbruck sed et circumquaque per vicinas terras et presertim apud nobiles et potentes.
An autem toxico vel maleficio ipsum interemit, manet sub dubio, communiter tamen
famatur, quod maleficio eo quod a iuventute maleficiis servivit.” Ammann, 39.

32 See David Gentilcore, 243–4.

33 For example Robin Briggs, *Witches and Neighbors: The Social and Cultural Context of

34 Georgina Boyce, “Belief and Disbelief: An Examination of Reactions to the Presentation
of Rumor Legends,” in Paul Smith, ed., *Perspectives on Contemporary Legend* (Sheffield:
CECTAL Conference Papers Series no. 4, 1984), 64–78; 75.

35 Gorden W. Allport and Leo Postman, *The Psychology of Rumor* (New York: Henry Holt,
1947), 52.

36 Jeanne Favret-Saada, *Deadly Words: Witchcraft in the Bocage*, trans. Catherine Cullen (Cam-
bridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 9 and passim. Modern American Satanism
“experts” offer a similar and in many ways more exact parallel. See Linda Dégh, “Satanic

37 Dégh, 360–3. See also Allport and Postman, 34 and 36.


39 See also Donald P. Spence, “The Mythic Properties of Popular Explanations,” in Joseph
de Rivera and Theodore Sarbin, eds., *Believed-In Imaginings: The Narrative Construction of

40 Neither this method nor this insight is my own, and the following discussion owes an
obvious debt especially to Norman Cohn and Joseph Hansen. See also Cohn, *Europe’s
Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), and Andreas Blauert, *Frühe Hex-


45 William of Paris, 1066.

46 Burchard of Worms, 971.


48 “[Sequitur quinto,] quod christiano permaxime fugiendum est, ne fidem adhibeat huic, quod vetule referunt in nativitatibus hominum quasdam deas venire et necessitatem geniti proli imponere fortunium aut infortunium, suspendium, occisionem gloriam aut dignitatem magicoam vel consimile prenunciare, que necessario eveniant. [Unde eciam si quis submergatur aut suspendatur, dicunt consolatione se exhortantes talis neccessario tamquam prenunciatum evenisse.] Ei quidem si puer nascitur in pellicula, dicunt ipsum esse de illis, qui magna spacia in una nocte per transeunt, vulgariter ‘die farn leude’ etc. Denique homines in hanc labuntur demencia, ut cultum soli deo debitum eisque largitores bonorum false existimant. Sic eciam quidam faciunt in quintis feriis Quatuor temporum et in nocte precedenti quarte feric Cinerum.” John of Frankfurt, *Questio, utrum potestas cohercendi demones . . .* in Hansen, *Quellen*, 76.

49 For the medieval cult of the fairies, see Gustav Henning, “‘The Ladies from the Outside’: An Archaic Pattern of the Witches’ Sabbath,” in Ankarloo and Henning, 191–215; for the European fairy cult generally, see Eva Pocs, *Fairies and Witches at the Boundary of South-Eastern and Central Europe*, Folklore Fellows Communication 243 (Helsinki: Academia Scientiarum Fennica, 1989), and Briggs, *The Vanishing People*.

50 This belief is also found in Burchard, who refers to the women concerned simply as “Fates” (*parcae*). Corrector, *Patrologia Latina* 140, 971.

51 Étienne de Bourbon, *Anecdotes historiques*, ed. A. Lecoy de la Marche (Paris: Libraire Renouard, 1877), *exempla* 368–9. Stephen uses the word to distinguish the good women of the night from the evil *strigae*.


53 Cited in Lea, *Materials*, 1:112; the etymology is from Isidore; Gregory the Great describes the *lamia* with a human face and a bestial body as a metaphor for heresy and for hypocrites (*Magna Moralia*, in Lea, 1:110–11). It is worth noting that Johannes’ contemporary, Albertus Magnus, gave a far more prosaic description of the *lamia*: “an enormous fierce animal which emerges from the forest at night and skulks into orchards where it slashes and uproots trees.” Albertus Magnus, *De Animalibus*, trans. James J. Scanlan (Binghamton: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1987), 22.112, p. 155.

55 “Idem et eodem modo sentiendum est tibi de aliis malignis spiritibus, quas vulgus stryges et lamias vocant, et apparent de nocte in domidus in quibus parvuli notiuntur, eosque de cunabulis raptos laniare, vel igne assare videntur. Apparent autem in specie vetularum videlicet, quae nec vere vetulae sunt, nec vere pueri amoravarium.” William of Paris, 1066.


57 Gervaise of Tilbury, Otia Imperialia, ed. Felix Liebrecht (Hanover: Carl Rümpler, 1856), c. 93, p. 45.

58 Ibid., c. 86, pp. 39–40.

59 Ibid., c. 93, pp. 45–46.


61 Duerr, 169, n. 29, citing the Handwörterbuch des deutschen Aberglaubens, c. 1314. The gloss on the Lex Salica gives fara or “the one who goes” for striga, which may also suggest an early association of nocturnal witches with night-traveling women.


63 “Unde quaedam mulierculae inseruentes Satane, daemonum illusionibus seductae, credunt et profligentur nocturnis horis cum Diana Paganorum Dea, vel Venere, in magna mulierum multitudine equitare, et alia nephanda agere, puta paruulos a lacte matris auellere, assare, et comedere, domus per caminos seu fenestras intrare, et habitantes variis modis inquietare, quae omnia et consimilia solum fantastice accidunt eis.” Martin of Arles, 363.

64 Ibid.

65 Cohn, Europe’s Inner Demons, 205. One must admit, though, that there is an element of circular reasoning in this argument since the notion that women assembled in vast throngs at night was surely drawn from the traditions of the bona res and company to begin with.

66 Compare the experiences of Nicholas of Cusa, below.

67 Alphonso de Spina (c. 1420–91) was a baptized Jew who became a Franciscan theologian at Salamanca, the confessor of King John II of Castile, and bishop of Orense. Compare Hansen, Quellen, 145.

68 “Veritas autem huius facti est quad quando iste male persone volunt uti his pessimis fictionibus consecrate se cum verbis et unctioribus diabolo, et statim dyabolos recipit eos in opere suo et accipit figuram carum et fantasia suavissime carum ducitique illas per...
illa loca per que desiderabant corpora vero earum remanent sine aliqua sensibilitate et cooperit illa dyabolus umbra sua ita quod nullus illa videre possit, et cum dyabolus videt in fantasiis earum quod impleuerant que volebant non amouendo ad [sic] earum fantasiis diabolicas fantasias que viderunt reducit illas imaginationes coniungens cum suis propriis motibus et corporibus." Alphonso de Spina, consid. 10.

69 "ubi est aper quidam in rupe qui vulgariter dicitur el boch de biterne et quod ibi conueniunt cum candelis accessis et adorant illum aprum osculantes eum in ano suo." Ibid.


71 Alphons Madrigal Tosatus, Commentary on Genesis, Hansen, Quellen, 109, n. 1.

72 "Quod dicitur de mulieribus, quae per noctem discurrunt per diversa loca, etiam verum est. Nam saepi hoc inventum est et iudicialiter punitum. Et aliqui volentes imitari earum nefandas caeremonias, magna incommoda incurrerunt. Nec potest dici illud per somnium accidere, cum non solum ipsi, qui passi sunt, sed etiam plures aliuiu rei testes erant. Nec est aliqua causa de his dubitandi. Verum est autem, quod apud simplices aliquibus veris multa falsa circa haec admissa sunt, quia daemones non solum in moribus, sed etiam in fide nocere cupiunt." Commentary on Matthew, qu. 47, Hansen, Quellen, 107.

73 "Et istud ita manifestum est, quod imprudentia sit, illud negare, cum mille nobis testes occurrerunt, qui sibi horum consci sunt." Hansen, Quellen, 106.

74 "Utrum lamie que uulgari nomine strie nuncupantur vere et non fantastice siue apparenter ad ludum eant." Girolamo Visconti, Lamiarum sive Striarum Opuscula (Milan: Leonardus Pachel, 1490), a ii. Visconti was a professor of logic at the University of Milan, and later Dominical Provincial of Lombardy, a position he probably held until his death in 1477. See Hansen, Quellen, 200–1.

75 Girolamo Visconti is unusual in his insistence that the devil and his allies killed only baptized infants. His conclusion, which is very typical of his thinking, is that divine justice normally allows only baptized Christians to be killed because such children are led immediately to heaven. When, on occasion, an unbaptized child is slain, then doubtless he was destined for a life of sin, in which case the limbo of children is a better alternative to hell. Visconti, b. iii.

76 "Quia secundum logicos multa sunt possibli, que tamen sunt falsa." Ibid., a viii.

77 Étienne de Bourbon, 97. The same principle lies behind a story of William of Paris, in which a man thinks that he is attending a feast in glorious castle, attended by beautiful women, but awakes to find himself in a puddle embracing mud. William of Paris, 1065.

78 Because Stephen is writing moral exempla, and not a theoretical treatise, logical contradictions trouble him little, if at all. In later stories, he states the contrary position, that women cannot magically enter locked rooms at night, and one suspects that this would be his considered opinion. Étienne de Bourbon, 368 and 369.

79 Hansen, Quellen, 195–200.

80 "Apud fere omnes per strigas sive strigones intelliguntur mulieres aut viri, qui de nocte sive domos aut per longa spatio virtute demonis discurrunt, qui etiam parvulos fascinare dicuntur.” Ibid., 196.

81 "Aliqua quidem abicienda sunt de ipsis strigis a cordibus fidelium, nonnulla vero firmer sunt tenenda." Ibid., 200.

82 Nider, Formicarius, 2.4, 71.

83 Ibid., 72.

84 Malleus, pt. 1, qu. 1, p. 10. This is also the tack chosen by Ulrich Moliit, who devotes the ninth chapter of his witch-treatise to the problem of whether women really go to the feast at night, or whether this occurs only in dreams. He cites the usual authorities
and pronounces the whole affair nothing but a delusion of the devil. As in the Formicarius, though, these beliefs are not really central to his concept of witchcraft. See Molitor, 705–8.
86 Ibid., pt. 2, qu. 1, p. 88.
87 Gervaise of Tilbury, for example, had told an almost identical story about lamiae over two hundred years earlier; see 3.86, 40. The tale can also be found in modern German folklore: see no. 89, “Watching Out for the Child,” in Jacob Grimm, The German Legends of the Brothers Grimm, ed. and trans. Donald Ward, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Institute for the Study of Human Issues, 1981), 1:99.
88 “Ex tunc quasi vapor quidam glaucus ex eius ore praecedert, unde singula que ibi agerentur per lucide consideraret.” Malleus, pt. 2, qu. 1.3, p. 105.
89 Ibid.