

Pieter Bruegel and Carlo Ginzburg: The Debatable Land of Renaissance Dreams

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ABSTRACT. Pieter Bruegel the Elder's pictures of witches and dreams are discussed in relation to Carlo Ginzburg's studies of the *benandanti* (do-gooders, good walkers) and the mythology of the witches' Sabbath. The shared context for these is dream-culture as a "debatable land" – a socially contested territory. The visions of the *benandanti* were based on traditional structures of dreaming and carnivalesque imagery; Bruegel's innovative visual rhetoric for this material demonstrates how these traditions about fantasy and the spirit world could decompose, condense and undergo category-shifts under the pressure of religious and cultural reformation; in the case of night-walking, effectively nocturnalisation and demonization. Ginzburg's account of these changes can be updated to consider them as part of a wider redefinition of dream-culture, carried out through the reconfiguration of composite motifs in existing traditions and templates for representing dreams and the folk imaginary in the Renaissance.

KEYWORDS: Pieter Bruegel the Elder, dreams, nightmares, witches, witches' Sabbath, carnival, *benandanti*, Carlo Ginzburg

My Lords there is a gronde called the Debatable gronde, lyeing betwene the [two] realme[s] wherein there is no strife for the boundes of the same...from the sonne rising to the sonne setting, [but] it is and always has bene at the likkes of the Wardenis, lieutenants and subjects of ayther realme, to brenne, destroye, waiste, take and drive away all suche...as there shal be founde, so wilfully kept under cover of night. (Lord Dacre, English Warden of the Marches, letter to the Scots Privy Council, 6th July 1517; cf. Pease 1913: 58-9)

Zou ar be cum neutral men, lyik to the ridars that dueillis on the debatabil landis... (Robert Wedderburn, The Complaynt of Scotland 1872 [1549])

The Reformation signalled a great rearrangement of otherworldly beliefs, involving orthodox and folk views on dreams (Gell 1974: 17-26; Le Goff 1988: Part 5; Muchembled 1993: 140-2). Urgent political, religious, and magico-scientific concerns impelled warring rulers, scholars, merchants and priests to scrutinise anew what the folk said, thought and believed about the world. The dream-culture of the West thus comes into view in the sixteenth century as a debatable land, an arena of cultural struggle for the hearts and minds of the people. This essay examines representations of dream-imagery and rhetoric – from folk-culture, visual art and trial records – which both document aspects of such struggles, and reveal how they were carried out; for conflicts in dream-discourse, as we will see, make visible the complex structure of its constituent parts.

The most famous proponents of Renaissance dream-culture – and almost its only peasants – were the *benandanti* ("good walkers" or "do-gooders"), Friulian villagers with a tradition of shared seasonal visions about fighting witches during sleep. Their *mythos* has connections with other Europe-wide traditions about night-riding – such as the Sicilian *donne di fuori* (Sicilian dialect: *donni di fori* = Ladies from Outside; Henningsen 1993; 2009), the Scottish *seely wights* (*celly vichtys* = blessed ones; Goodare 2012), the Hungarian *tündéres* (fairy magicians; Pócs 2009) – and the ability of the spirit to leave the body during sleep, to visit otherworldly destinations and magical beings. The *benandanti* came to the attention of the religious authorities between 1580 and 1630¹; catalysing the assimilation of their belief-system into the powerful ruling narrative of the witches' Sabbath. They came to our attention in 1966, through Carlo Ginzburg's ground-breaking study, *Night Battles* (1985 [1966]; hereafter *NB*). Among other things, their trial records provide important data about a dream-culture (Schmitt 1999: 274-5; Milne 2006: 66-7), caught in the act of decomposing and hardening into new shapes.

Ginzburg's book points out that the clerical and civil inquisitors were not the only group to have trouble comprehending the accounts of the *benandanti*. As interest rose in witchcraft, jobbing artists given the task of producing woodcuts to illustrate refurbished old texts about legendary night-travellers made no attempt to depict these activities directly, despite detailed descriptions in the accompanying texts. Instead, in these printed editions, we see printers repeatedly choosing standard Classical and carnivalesque imagery (figs. 1a-d), recycling stock woodcuts they



Figure 1a. Anon., "Furious Horde" illustration, woodcut, in Geiler von Kaisersburg, *Die Emeis*, Strasbourg 1516: f. xxxvii r. (photograph: British Library).

Figure 1b. Anon., Bacchus with Silenus, woodcut, in *Publii Virgillii Maronis Opera*, Strasbourg 1502: f. lxi r. Bodleian Library.

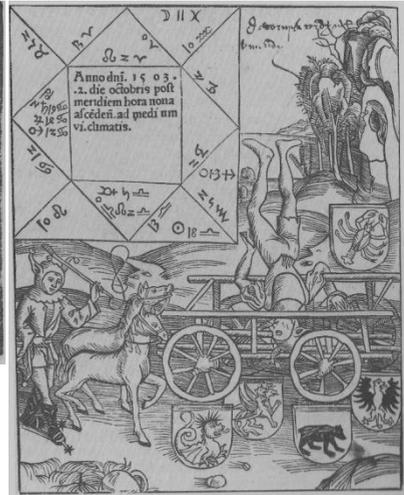
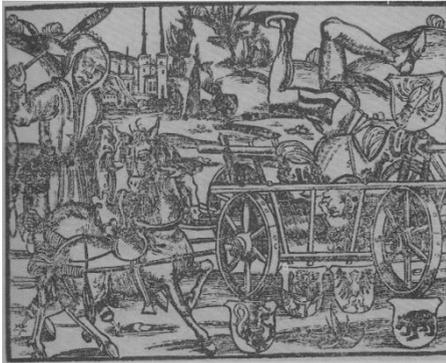


Figure 1c. Anon., "Furious Horde" / Procession of Dead illustration, woodcut, in Geiler von Kaisersburg, *Die Emeis*, Strasbourg 1517: f. xxxvii r. Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris.

Figure 1d. Anon., Upside-down fools, woodcut, in Sebastian Brant, *Sultifera navis*, Basel 1497: f. cxlv r. British Library.

had to hand. The question of how to represent night-riders visually evidently presented some difficulty. These difficulties were solved, after

a fashion, some twenty years before the benandanti enter the historical record, and about 800 miles to the north. From c. 1560, the Flemish artist Pieter Bruegel the Elder (c. 1529-69) pioneered the representation of folk culture in fine art². While most of his peers wanted folk culture repressed, reformed or put to new ends (cf. Burke 1978; Scribner 1981; Muchembled 1993)³, Bruegel was professionally interested in how it worked as a semiotic system: how folk images, practices and beliefs are structured and what happens to these structures if their components are taken apart. Bruegel's approach was deconstructive: he derived comic, surreal and uncanny effects from folkloric imagery (Milne 2013: Ch. 1-4). In one strange masterpiece in particular, his *Dulle Griet* (c. 1562; fig. 2), Bruegel painted a martial giant female peasant, veiled as if in trance, sleep-walking before the gates of hell, attended by a crowd of carnivalesque women and monsters, inside a phantasmagoric landscape (Milne 2013: Ch. 2). Bruegel's sources here include nursery stories, proverbial imagery and carnival customs, but he cast the whole scene in recognisably dream-like terms, using stylistic conventions originating in Humanist mythography, itself deeply preoccupied with dreams and nightmares. Bruegel's folkloric material was also experiencing the pressures of religious and cultural reform; and his art is a type of literate scrutiny, locating certain elements of folk culture firmly in the world of dreams.

Taken together, these three cases illuminate a web of beliefs connecting dreams, carnivals, witches and popular psychology: a rough map of the debatable land. Inquisitors, printers and artists were interested in broadly similar areas of dream-culture for different reasons. They faced both the standard issues of translation between oral and literate cultures, and more specialised problems arising from the clash of folk and orthodox belief systems. However, the "puzzles" which result in each case are puzzling in analogous ways. In the benandanti testimonies, woodcut illustrations and in Bruegel's art, certain elements are emphasised and others skewed or repressed in translation from one frame of reference to another. It is important to note that Ginzburg's group of "witches" – whose media are solely oral – express *variations* on their folk *mythos*. The benandanti move the stress from one element to another, inconsistent and dream-like, in the course of their testimony.

Through the process of interrogation, the inquisitors worked to remove this variability. The woodcut illustrators replace it with an



Figure 2. Pieter Bruegel, *Dulle Griet*, c. 1562, Oil on wood, 117 x 162 cm. Musée Mayer van den Bergh, Antwerp (photograph © 2006. Austrian Archive / SCALA, Florence).

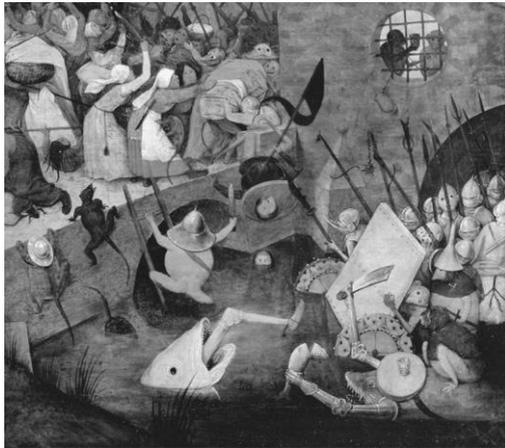


Figure 2a. Pieter Bruegel, *Dulle Griet*, detail: Griet and women overcoming devils.

Figure 2b. Pieter Bruegel, *Dulle Griet*, detail: woman pulls breeches from a bending male.



Figure 2c. Pieter Bruegel, *Dulle Griet*, detail: naked figures in background landscape.

orthodox iconography. Bruegel's *Griet*, however, addresses the issue of variability directly. The painting renders its elusive subject matter in a manner that is deconstructive as well as constructive, and thus provides us, despite the distances in time and space, with the tools to unpack the other groups of evidence. So let us start with the discourses of dream-culture as Bruegel shaped them in this picture.

BRUEGEL'S SUBJECTS

The *Dulle Griet* was produced – undoubtedly for a private home – in Antwerp around 1563⁴. As a young man, Bruegel travelled and worked in Italy (c. 1552-4), settling in Antwerp and Brussels in the 1550s and 60s. Bruegel's cosmopolitan cities of printers and scholars were directly engaged in the quarrels of the Reformation; his known patrons were merchants and high government officials (Gibson 2006: 73-6)⁵. A greater contrast could not be imagined with the rural backwater of the Friulian villagers.

In this *milieu*, Bruegel engineered a change in representational practice, decisively turning the focus of Western art away from the depiction of gods and saints. His position in the mainstream canon rests on the two new genres he defined: landscape and peasant life (both foundational for the *Griet*). Previous generations constructed landscapes effectively by "cutting and pasting" stock parts – for mountains, trees, rivers etc. – using templates from pattern books. Bruegel devised a different jigsaw: interlocking irregular parallelograms set along a horizontal axis, so that the resulting pattern generates illusory space (cf. fig. 3)⁶. His renowned series of *Seasons* (1565; *Hunters in the Snow*;

appropriate subjects for monumental art. These concerns are plainly related: the earth itself, as a living, co-extensive body, the folk who live and work on the land, and their (apparently) age-old seasonal pursuits and pastimes.

Bruegel innovated, in other words, by breaking his subjects down into component parts, then altering their scale and relations to each other. This deconstructive approach was essential to Bruegel's interest in dream-culture. He revived and reinvented the oneiric imagery developed by Jerome (Hieronymous) Bosch, using it to illuminate earthy psychological folk metaphor and idiom. He conceived a series of *Vices* as dreamscapes – another visual predecessor for the *Griet – Luxuria*, for instance, with a swarm of monstrous manikins, some of whom enact a charivari procession (fig. 4), the folk punishment for an unequal marriage. Ethnography, landscape and the world of the folk imagination converged in the *theatrum mundi* paintings: *The Battle between Carnival & Lent* (fig. 5; 1559), *Netherlandish Proverbs* (1559; Staatliche Museum, Gemäldegalerie, Berlin), and *Children's Games* (1560; Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna). *Fall of the Rebel Angels* (1562; Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts, Brussels) turns Boschian imagery into a tongue-in-cheek visual riddle: the rebel angels (wingless, insectoid and egg-laying) are formal mutations of good angels (sexless winged humans) (Milne 2013: Ch 1). Contemporary with this, came his *Griet* (fig. 2): a fully dreamlike *theatrum mundi* picture; a folkloric subject, set in a panoramic landscape, visualised through the oneiric Boschian register and presented in monumental form.

THE BENANDANTI

Bruegel's capacity to perceive folk culture as in some sense surreal brings us to Ginzburg's work on the situation of otherworldly folkloric beliefs at the end of the 16C. These are set out mainly in *Night Battles* (1985 [1966]), and in his later *Ecstasies* (1990 [1989]; hereafter *Ecst.*)⁷. In *Night Battles*, a group of peasants, living in Friulian villages, share a collective fantasy. Those born with the caul (that is, with a piece of the amniotic sac over their eyes) are gifted with a kind of second sight. As adults, they can meet in their dreams, to "go forth at night" in spirit, to battle witches in the skies above their fields. They fight with fennel



Figure 5. Pieter Bruegel, *The Battle Between Carnival and Lent*, 1559. Oil on panel, 118 x 164.5 cm. Kunsthistorisches Museum Wien oder KHM, Vienna. Inv GG 1016.

stalks (or iron rods, for scraping out ovens); the witches fight with sticks of sorghum (a cereal crop). These people called themselves the *benandanti*. Though witches and *benandanti* could be male or female, the male *benandanti* saw themselves as a kind of militia. They said they engaged in these nocturnal excursions four times a year, during the Ember Days, at the changes of the seasons (equivalent to the old Rogation ceremonies; Mershman 1909) for the good of the harvest. Their evidence was not consistent on this point; some seemed actually to "go forth" more often than this, for various purposes. First noted by the authorities in 1570, the peculiar beliefs of the *benandanti* were largely ignored, on and off, for almost fifty years, by a series of baffled local inquisitors. Eventually some of them were caught up in the tide of witch-hunting fever rising over Europe, and brought to trial for heresy in the 1620s. From the records of their various interrogations and trials, Ginzburg reconstructed their stories.

Subsequent scrutiny of Early Modern records revealed many other night-walking groups and individuals sharing key *topoi* with the

benandanti, almost always brought to light through witchcraft prosecutions. This evidence is often fragmentary (e.g. the seely wights); it may concern individual as opposed to collective dream experiences (the "Shaman" of Obersdorf acted alone, albeit clearly drawing on communal traditions – cf. Behringer 1998; cf. Thies the werewolf – De Blécourt 2007a), or involve nocturnal carnivalesque behaviour rather than dreams and the supernatural (e.g. the Guernsey "werewolves"; Ogier 1998)⁸. But in general the imagery of carnivals and dreams is the link here to Bruegel's art, at the opposite end of Germanic Europe, and a decade or so earlier.

CARNIVAL AND THE CARNIVALESQUE

The most straightforward shared context for painter and night-walker is Carnival itself – the most visible of the seasonal festivals – with its feasting, sports, reversals and masquerade. In medieval Europe, this rite of passage was often represented as an allegorical battle between Old Man Winter and Lady Summer or Spring (NB: 24-5); Ginzburg saw this as a foundational myth for the benandante scenario. Bruegel put a version at the centre of his *Carnival and Lent* (fig. 5)⁹; his Prince Carnival is a fat butcher, jousting with Lady Lent, a scrawny old woman (cf. fig. 12c)¹⁰. The skyline changes from Winter to Spring; bare trees at left, green budding trees at right. In the town square, small groups enact a calendar of secular and religious festivals. These spiral around two small peasants in the centre (Everyman and his wife?), who head into the picture plane, following a fool with a dark lantern. The painting has a cartographic quality which has led many viewers to see it as a kind of document.

But the *Carnival and Lent* is not a record of the traditional seasonal calendar. By Bruegel's day, Carnival in the towns had been long since taken over by urban professionals¹¹; in the countryside, Imperial Catholic forces and Protestant agitators tried to rein in traditional public media of feasts and games. We must "give the common man something better [to think about] than Eilenspiegel's tricks and suchlike knavery", remarked the Humanist Cornelis van Ghistele (Gibson 1981: 430; Weevers, 67-87; Eringa, 25-50, 69-73). Bruegel represents an imaginary Carnival, of amateurish innocence, with handmade costumes and foods, interweaving

Christian and profane festivities¹². His *personae* of Carnival and Lent inhabit an idealised harmonic space between pub and church. The benandante vision is similarly syncretic: they fight for Jesus, against witches; they enact a pagan struggle for the harvest; they also partake in carnivalesque revels.

Excess of any kind was central to real-life festivals¹³. The inn sign of the Blue Boat in Bruegel's picture obliquely refers to a prominent aspect of late medieval carnivals: the rampaging societies of young men, liveried or in motley, who often organised the celebrations¹⁴. Bruegel's *Battle* is, by contrast, a muted and ordered place. But in two later designs, he transposed the hell-raising aspects of Carnival to a supernatural and dreamlike context, taking the legend of St James and the magician Hermogenes (1565; figs. 6a and 6b) as a pretext to explore carnivalesque commotion. Thus, heaps of unruly demons drink and perform acrobatics and fairground tricks in *The Fall of the Magician* (fig. 6a; cf. Milne 2013: Ch.2).

There is an interesting classificatory divide between the serious heart of a formalised allegorical battle (the narrative or legible part of Carnival), and its attendant frivolous privileges (the apparently marginal or non-legible practice of revelry). Carnival (and lesser carnivals throughout the year, such as St John's Eve in colder climates) often centres on a simple drama or story – a struggle between Winter and Summer, the crowning of a May Queen or Carnival King – which the participants themselves point to as the *raison d'être* of the event. But it is also characterised by the exercise of license. License is presented as less important, but was of course quite as central to the experience and meaning of any kind of Carnival as any core narrative; indeed, on its own, it could constitute a kind of ritual enactment. Calvinist authorities in Jersey railed against those who "run by night '*en resnerie*' [i.e. in harness or livery], masked and with cudgels...from which issue an infinity of debauchery and scandals, and also those who dance in public" (Ogier 1998:55). In the Channel Islands, *vouarouverie* (werewolfery), referred to young men on the rampage, sometimes dressed in horse skins; in the Netherlands similarly it carried a connotation of sexual deviancy (cf. De Blécourt 2007c). The Livonian werewolf, Thies of Kaltenbrun – whose trial is cited by Ginzburg as a parallel to those of the benandanti (NB: 29-31) – interrogated in 1691, told the judges that he



Figure 6a. Pieter van der Heyden, after Pieter Bruegel, *The Fall of the Magician*, 1565. Engraving, 22.2 x 28.8 cm. © Trustees of the British Museum, BM 1866,0407.11.

Figure 6b. Pieter van der Heyden, after Pieter Bruegel, *St. James and the Magician Hermogenes*, 1565. Engraving, 22.2 x 29 cm. © Trustees of the British Museum, BM 1851,1213.90.

Figure 6c. Pieter van der Heyden, after Pieter Bruegel, *St. James and the Magician Hermogenes*, detail: witches mounted on monsters and broomsticks.



Figure 6d. Anon., Two witches from 'Le Champion des Dames' by Martin le Franc (1410-61), Vellum, French 1451. Ms Fr 12476 fol.105v, Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris.

"could pass on his ability by toasting someone... breathing three times into the jug, and saying 'you will become like me.' If the other person took the jug, the ability to become a werewolf would pass to him" (De Blécourt 2007a: 50).

The accounts of the *benandanti* follow this pattern of narrative-plus-license when, in progressive interrogations, they supplement their core story of seasonal struggles against witches for the crops, with tales of swoops on local cellars and revelry on the way back from the battle in the air. Other types of folk night-traveller do the same. In his sleep, the Alpine horse-wrangler Chonrad Stoeckhlin of Oberstdorf (1549-87) joined the *joyous society* of the *Nachtschar* (night phantoms), at whose feasts there were *dancing and wonderful music* (Behringer 1998: 35-8, 41-2). So strong is this motif of the party that Henningsen (1991/2; 2009) suggests we call these dream-gatherings *white Sabbaths*.

It is clear that the revelry imagery naturally borrows its forms from the daylight culture, and most visibly from Carnival. Women's carnivals – in Northern Europe, *Women's Thursday*, or *Old Woman's Shrovetide* –

Vrowkens-Avond (Brussels, January 19th), *Vrowkens zaterdag* (Bruges, Saturday before Mardi Gras) – are described (by male commentators) entirely in terms of revelry and masquerade (Milne 1996: 207-30; 2013: Ch. 2). These occasions were often the fête of the local midwives' guild, whose mandate, of course, was to bring souls successfully from one world to the next (cf. Greilsammer 1991: 285-323). In the Palatinate, midwives were believed to "fetch the children's souls from a cave, the 'devil's kitchen,' home of the 'evil woman'" (Duerr 1985 [1978]: 23, 192-3). Women in general acted as domestic psychopomps, presiding over birth and death, waking and sleeping. Women *benandanti* were accused of sighting processions of the dead and mediating with ghosts (NB: II).

Male carnival practices – traditional or urban, sober or drunken – show signs of age-set structuring. Age-set systems are still visible and elaborate in African societies (e.g. Evans-Pritchard 1969 [1940]: Ch. VI); late medieval European society bore traces of this kind of organisation (Davis 1975: 107-14). By analogy with the Masai, Lyle (1997: 63-71) relates such systems to wider cosmological structures with Indo-European roots. The association of Carnival as a rite of passage with age-set organisation is clear (cf. van Gennep 1960 [1908]: VI). Such groups kept unmarried young men out of trouble, harnessing their energies to useful or harmless employments such as archery or art, regulating their "license" to a few occasions. Diverse types of such fraternities developed in the bigger towns, among which were elite carnival societies such as the Netherlandish Company of the Blue Boat (Enklaar 1933; Minnaert 1943: 9), referred to in Bruegel's inn-sign (fig. 5)¹⁵.

Among the male *benandanti* too, age-set formulae framed their activities: it was when they came of age that those born with a caul over the face were "called" at night to join the fights, as the *benandante* Moduco testified:

One enters at the age of twenty and is freed at forty, if he wishes.... [at] the age of twenty they are summoned by means of a drum the same as soldiers, and they are obliged to respond.
(NB: 6)

However, the fact that the arena of this seasonal drama was not day but night shaped the ways in which the experience could be conceptualised.

The benandanti were forbidden to discuss their activities, on pain of receiving a beating from their fellows *during the night* (physically or in a dream; NB: 66, 68, 85, 87-8, 91, etc). Remembering separately, and interrogated separately, individuals had to fill in the details of the experience from their own memories and imaginations. Each then told the "same" story with a mass of contradictory details and a sense of shifting visuality. In 1575, the benandante Gasparutto produced this account:

[we] fought, played, leaped about, and rode different animals... the women beat the men who were with them with sorghum stalks, while the men had only bunches of fennel... [that night] they crossed several great bodies of water in a boat, and... one of the companions became afraid because a fierce wind had come up, and the waters were rough, and he remained behind the others... [and] they were in the countryside not far away, and they jostled, and busied themselves with their usual pastimes (NB: 1-2)

(N.B. the significance of *women beating their men* is an oddity we shall return to).

Five years later, Moduco added his own details: the gatherings involved "a great multitude, at times five thousand and more... some who belong to the village know each other and others do, however not". Their captain, he said, was a married man from Cologne, aged about twenty-eight, "very tall, red-bearded, pale complexioned, of noble birth." Moduco described the various flags carried by each side: the banner of the benandanti was white silk, gilded, with a lion, that of the witches, "red silk with four black devils, gilded". Gasparutto, questioned again the day after Moduco, stated that their captain was from Verona, a plump peasant of average height, with a red beard. According to him, the "company" numbered six, their banner was white and gilded; that of the witches, yellow, with four devils on it (NB: 8-9). Describing the leader, Gasparo says, "I do not know him, but when we are all together, we hear people say, 'This is the captain,' and almost in a dream we see a man larger than the others" (NB: 84). Judging by these accounts, male benandante experience expressed itself in terms of recognisable forms of

male adolescent activities: sports, jousts, battles, flags, captains and regiments.

The similarities of these accounts, as Ginzburg recognised, are striking; but the differences are interesting too. The characteristics of the banners, and of the captain, shift around: the flag is either red or yellow; the captain is from Cologne or Verona, tall or middling, fat or thin, noble or peasant. What the travellers saw when they got there varied, as did their numbering and description of activities. Some spoke of a great field, others of crossing a wide river, or fighting in front of local churches or countryside. The central activity might be described as jousting, or beating each other with sticks: "We fought, we pulled each other's hair, we punched each other, we threw each other to the ground and fought with fennel stalks" (Menichino, NB: 75). Revelry at the gathering – eating; dancing; and the making of "marriages" – appears in some accounts. Revelry afterwards was more consistently described:

[we] congregate in certain places to perform marriages, to dance and eat and drink; and on their way home the evil-doers go into the cellars to drink, and then urinate in the casks. If the benandanti did not go along, the wine would be spilt.

on our way home, I wish I had a scudo for every time we drank in the wine cellars, entering through the cracks and getting on the casks. We drank with a pipe, as did the witches; but after they had drunk, they pissed in the casks. (Moduco; NB: 2, 13)

when the warlocks and witches set out it is to do evil and they must be pursued by the benandanti to thwart them, and also to stop them from entering the houses, because if they do not find clear water in the pails they go into the cellar and spoil the wine with certain things, throwing filth in the bungholes. (Gasparutto; NB: 2)

This germ of the party – especially the "making of marriages" – was, of course, what the inquisitors seized on as analogous to the Sabbath; thirty years later this element had swollen to fill the whole account (NB: IV).

This kind of play had recognisable tropes and structures, like the frolics among the wine-casks. According to Olaus Magnus (the exiled

Catholic bishop of Uppsala), writing in 1555, Baltic werewolves also, "go into beer cellars, and there they drink out some tuns of beer... When finished, they piled the empty barrels on top of each other in the middle of the cellar" (De Blécourt 2007a: 61). Scottish witches similarly repeat the same trope; thus Isobel Gowdie:

q[uhe]n we goe to any hous we tak meat and drink, and we fill
 wp the barrellis w[i]th ovr oven pish again
 [when we go to any house we take meat and drink and fill up the
 barrels with our own piss]
 (1662; Goodare 2012: 210; cf. on fairy feasting Pócs 2009: 383-4; on the motif of
 barrels-cellar/caves, Ostorero 2008: 20-1)

In a festival context, this could be a game played by members of a drinking club; in a household tale, it could be an action (typically performed at night) by a Puck, changeling, or goblin.

Detail varies in the "main" story, and remains more consistent in the home-coming revelry. Though he does not directly say so, Ginzburg in 1966 evidently felt that such variations could be accounted for either through the kind of discrepancies to be expected in any eye-witness narratives of the same phenomena, or by assuming that the institution was in breakdown. While these may indeed be contributory factors, the shifting imagery of the central narrative, combined with the relative fixity of its entrances and exits, deserves more attention in its own right. This structure is a constant stylistic marker, characteristic in many ways of the prevailing constitution of dream narratives. It resembles, for instance, a more dispersed arrangement of the elements of the traditional nightmare: an encounter during sleep with a demon who has a chaotic or flexible "interior" (a shape-shifting body), and fixed extremities or points of attack (teeth and claws) (Milne 2008: 177-83)¹⁶.

The converse of this, a structural inversion of the same elements, concerns people whose birth during liminal time means that they themselves become active monstrous attackers:

in the Dutch provinces of Frisia and Groningen, one of seven sons would become a werewolf, whereas one of seven girls would become a nightmare. In northern Germany, children born during the week of the feast of St Gallus (mid-October, equivalent to the

start of winter), or during other liminal periods like Twelfth Night or St John's Day, would either become nightmares if they were girls, or werewolves if they were boys.

(De Blécourt 2007c: 35)

In Slavic and Germanic cultures, such *mora* creatures derived their power of night-travelling from being born with a caul (Pócs 1999: 31-6)¹⁷.

THE BENANDANTI AND DREAMS

Consider the first of these fixed points in the benandante narrative: the method of travel. Here motifs familiar from folk tradition enter the picture. All witnesses asserted that the spirit left the body sleeping. In 1591, the benandante Menichino said that he went out at night in the form of smoke. Chonrad Stoeckhlin had no choice about going with *die Nachtschar*; his body stayed wherever it was when his spirit took off, mainly at night, and, if he left it lying on its side, sometimes he could only re-enter with great pain (Behringer 1998: 22-3). Moduco mentioned travelling "on the backs of animals"; several women spoke of the spirit leaving in the form of an animal (NB: 17). According to Gaspurutto's wife Maria, testifying in October 1580, "These benandanti say that when they leave their bodies their spirit resembles a little mouse." Crezia of Pieve San Paolo, interrogated in 1589, described "a witch called Gianna. One day she fell asleep and I saw a rat come out of her mouth. It was her spirit leaving for I know not where" (cf. Lecouteux, 2003: 91). This means of astral locomotion seems to start in European folklore with the famous story of King Guntram (Paul the Deacon, *History of the Lombards* 3.34), where the king's soul in the form of a "small animal" leaves his sleeping body:

It slithered to the tiny stream flowing nearby [and] wanted to cross. The king's companion... drew his sword from its sheath and laid it across the brook. The little animal then crossed the water on the sword and crawled into a hole in the hillside and fell asleep. After a bit, it returned, ran across the sword-bridge and back into the king's mouth. The king woke, and said to his

companion: "I must tell thee my dream and the wondrous vision I had. I saw a wide, wide river, and across it an iron bridge. I crossed the bridge and entered a cave in the side of a towering mountain. Inside, there were unheard of treasures, and the hoards of our ancestors." (*German Legends of the Brothers Grimm* 1981: 58)

The benandanti also speak of crossing water (naming the rivers Iudri, Cormor and Isonzo (NB: 2, 96, 129, 130); the Livonian werewolves (according to Thies) go "to the end of the sea" (De Blécourt 2007a: 49; cf. NB: 29). The change of scale (as we will see, a classic oneiric marker), the journey over water and the treasure all make their way into the *Griet*.

Bremmer (1983: 133-4) gives Danish and Dutch versions of this "wandering soul" story. The Danish one is set "in the haytime", when a group of people share an afternoon sleep; it includes the change of scale and treasure motifs. The Dutch one starts with a young couple courting in the evening (i.e. probably at midsummer). The "wandering soul" and "revels in cellars" are thus standard topoi – liminal in different ways – attached as prologue and epilogue, or entrance and exit, to the more mobile central benandanti dream-story (cf. Behringer 1998: 146-51, on *bricolage* and the recombination of "mythical fragments" in Stoecklin's visions).

How exactly could the collective dream-experience of the benandanti be inculcated? What social and psychological mechanisms maintained and supported the tradition? This is not a question much addressed in *Night Battles*¹⁸. Ginzburg, even in 1966, thought that he was looking at the remnants of a prehistoric cult; at one point he speaks of the benandanti as being "prisoners of their own myth" (NB: 83). The main thrust of his book is to show that this "cult" enters the historical record and is assimilated into the stronger narrative of the Sabbath, under pressure from the Inquisition and clerical authorities. Leaving aside for a moment the tricky nomenclature of "cult", there are aspects of the benandante scenario which become clearer if we think about them in relation to dreamculture.

Consider the testimony on initiation. Like much else in folk cultural transmission, the ground is laid in infancy. When an infant is born with the caul, the women of the family publicise the fact. Some preserve the caul as a talisman. Whether they do this or not, the child's potential for

visionary experience is publically established. Later on, as the child comes of age, an uncle or older man tells the candidate to expect the summons: "One of my uncles, Olivo della Nota, who is dead now, told me that I was born with the caul, but even though I never had one I went as in a dream into the woods, over meadows and fields to pasture animals, and into briar patches" (Menichino; NB: 75). A child called Tin is born with the caul, and the women of his family keep it. He testifies that Gasparo told him: "Tin, I have been calling you, and you have not come; and if you do not come this first time, you will never be able to again." Others commented, "Perhaps... it is only because he is still a boy that he is not yet gone out." (NB: 83). The future benandante is thus prepared by friends and relatives to expect the dream at puberty.

Further acculturation is accomplished through other means. The cowherd Menichino described the circumstances of his induction into the group, around 1580, by one Tamburlino, as the two walk together, "in single file, on the way to Tisanotta [a neighbouring village] where we were going to have some fun, and it was winter, on the road at night after supper. He added, he had talked about these things with many people, discussing them like that at night, walking single file, as was customary" (NB: 76-7). Does he mean that it was customary to discuss things of this kind, when walking in this way, or merely that it was customary to walk in this way at night? The paths between villages, of course, were probably so narrow as to make single file natural. But it is interesting that such conversations happened in such a context – at night, in the middle of nowhere, listening to a faceless voice from behind or in front – and that the topic of nocturnal spirit-walking would be deemed suitable for this situation. Menichino continues:

I went on these three days because others told me to... the first one to tell me to go was Giambattista Tamburlino... he informed me that he and I were benandanti, and that I had to go with him. And when I replied that I would not go, he said "when you have to come, you will come." And to this I declared, "You will not be able to make me". And he, in turn, insisted "You will have to come anyway, one goes as though in a smoky haze, we do not go physically," and said that we had to go and fight for the faith, even though I kept saying I did not want to go. And a year after these conversations I dreamed that I was in Josaphat's field [*Joel*

3.2, the field of Judgment - LM], and the first time was the eve of St Matthias, during the Ember days; and I was afraid, and it felt as if I was in a field, wide, large and beautiful: and it had a scent, that is it emitted a good odour, and then there appeared to be flowers and roses in abundance (NB: 75)

The benandante visionary capacity thus seems to be inculcated culturally and unconsciously on so many levels that the subject ends up experiencing it even against his conscious wishes. In this sense, the scenario is what the Navajo would call a "strong dream" (Morgan 1932: 390-406; D'Andrade 1961: 296-332); that is, a memorable dream with true mythic content. The Christian elements of the benandanti scenario – the saint's days, the Old Testament location – may be more important than they seem in stabilising the vision.

Ekirch's research on early modern sleeping patterns identified a lost category of experience relevant to the timing and construction of benandanti visions:

Until the modern era, up to an hour or more of quiet wakefulness midway through the night interrupted the rest of most Western Europeans... Families rose from their beds [even] to visit close neighbors. Remaining abed, many persons also made love, prayed, and, most important, reflected on the dreams that typically preceded waking from their "first sleep." Not only were these visions unusually vivid, but their images would have intruded far less on conscious thought had sleepers not stirred until dawn... segmented slumber afforded the unconscious an expanded avenue to the waking world that has remained closed for most of the Industrial Age. (Ekirch 2001: 344)

According to the neurological studies of Wehr (1996: 319-40), "The intervening period [of] wakefulness possessed an endocrinology all its own [resembling] an altered state of consciousness not unlike meditation" (cf. Ekirch 2006: 304, n. 17). Ekirch comments, "the habit of awakening... allowed many to absorb fresh visions before returning to unconsciousness... their impact intensified by elevated levels of the hormone prolactin... there also would have been ample time for a dream to 'acquire its structure' from the initial 'chaos of disjointed images'"

(Ekirch 2006: 322). And indeed Gasparutto explicitly says that he received his summons to the fight about the fourth hour of the night, at first sleep [*primo sonno*] (NB: 8, 156). This timing suggests that the ability to go forth was further boosted by the altered brain chemistry of this sleeping pattern.

The benandante vision may also be a kind of "lucid dreaming". This somewhat misleading term has been adopted to describe the condition wherein the dreamer subjectively feels that he or she can control the content of the dream (Domhoff 1985: 88-9; Green and McCreery 1994: Ch.1). In fact, as Domhoff (1985: 93) notes, reviewing the experimental evidence, it has proved difficult to get people to dream to order:

These principles [for controlling dream-content – L.M.] work only when they are imbedded [*sic*] in a group context and advocated by social authorities who are in some way... trusted leaders or role models for those learning the principles.

Such conditions are indeed present in benandante acculturation. It helps also if we cease to think of the dream as happening actually during sleep, and recognise that it is constructed retroactively, as one wakes up, as a kind of virtual memory (Milne 2008: 198-9). If lucid dreaming is what is meant by this facility, people can indeed be trained to control the assemblage of dream content at this point (e.g. Green and McCreery 1994: 95-105), and it becomes much clearer how cultural expectations, motifs, imagery could be incorporated into the resulting dream-memory, according to local templates.

DREAMS AND DREAM IMAGERY IN THE RENAISSANCE

This brings us to the phenomena of dreaming and how these were conceptualised in the 16C, up to the point of the *Griet*'s composition and the benandanti interrogations. As I have discussed elsewhere (Milne 2013: Ch. 1), throughout the Middle Ages, meaningful dreams were thought of as originating from outside the dreamer, and ranked by the status of their occult source. So the purest and most trustworthy dreams came from God. Lower dreams of physical origin (*somnium naturale*) emanated from inside the dreamer, due to anxiety or illness, and

signified an excess of one of the humours (Milne 2007: Ch 1). In this class, we find the *phantasma* (nightmare), defined by Macrobius in his *Commentarii in Somnium Scipionis* (1952 [c. 400-30]: I.3):

[The dreamer – L.M.] seems to see crowding in on him strangely moving or swimming forms, distorted in appearance and out of all natural proportions in size, or he may experience the rushing in of tumultuously whirling kaleidoscopically changing things, either delightful or disturbing¹⁹.

These details appear in the folk narratives seen so far. The change of scale occurs in the mouse-soul dream stories, and in some benandante accounts (recall how Gasparo can identify the captain because he is huge, much larger than the others). The "tumultuously whirling" and "strangely moving or swimming forms" fit the different modes of transport to the field; also the commotion and the "delightful or disturbing things" when they get there. Menichino cannot quite see the flowers of the field of Jesophat, or his companions; he senses them:

I did not see the roses, because there was a sort of cloud and mist, I could only smell these flowers... I had the impression there were many of us together as though in a haze but we did not know one another, and it felt as if we moved through the air like smoke and that we crossed over water like smoke; and the entrance to the field seemed to be open, and I did not know anyone within, because there no-one knows anyone else. (NB: 75)

The vagueness here might be accounted for by differences in personality; Menichino may simply have had a less vivid – or less visual – imagination than, say, Gasparutto, and so be less skilled at construing his memory of the dream. Also, as he says, he doesn't have his caul (NB: 75). The things he is clearest about are the fact that there was fighting, and that he was afraid.

Dreams involving fear – nightmares – were also regarded as a symptom of mental disturbance (disease), or demonic attack. The form of the attack-dream – by an incubus or *mara* – is relevant here. The ingredients of the traditional nightmare were: a violent supernatural

attack, imagery of penetration, intense fear or emotional arousal (Milne 2008: 177-83, 195-9). This constellation appears, rearranged, in the benandanti dream-narratives: fear at the start, fighting in the middle, and commotion (revelry/arousal/"marriages") at the end. The references to being beaten if one speaks also evoke this pattern; as Gasparutto explained: he feared the witches, who would have attacked me in bed (NB: 8). And the benandanti eat garlic and fennel because they repel witches (NB: 24); more commonly, these smelly plants deter nightmares (Milne 2008: 178-9).

In Early Modern medical discourse, the phantasma, as a type of somnium naturale, was caused by an imbalance of humours. Depending on which humour was in surfeit, stereotyped visions of one kind or another could be expected. The early seventeenth-century poet Francis Hubert (in a long poem about the biblical dreamer, Joseph) repeats what everybody knows when he writes, "sanguine constitutions / will dreame of masks, playes, revels, melody" (*Egypt's Favourite. The History of Joseph...* Hubert 1631, cf Ekirch 2006: 312). This fits the carnivalesque aspect of night-walkers' visions quite well. However, it was surfeits of black bile rather than blood that Renaissance doctors credited as having the most significant impact on dreams. "When it is all said", wrote Thomas Nashe, "melancholy is the mother of dreams, and of all terrors of the night" (1904-10 [1594]: 11). As a physical cause of diseased visions, melancholia acquired an influential repertoire of imagery (Klibansky et al. 1964; Milne 2013: Ch.1). Stock illustrations for melancholic visions²⁰ were transmitted, on the Classical authority of Galen and others, into the 18C (Bundy 1927: 183-472; Durling 1961: 230-86; Jackson 1969: 365-84; Siegel 1971: 10-20):

The principal signs of melancholia in the blood are: fear without cause... dread... a kind of apprehension on account of things which are or are not... some... imagine themselves being crowned kings, or transformed into wolves, or into demons, or birds...(Avicenna 1969 [1546]: 3.18)

Excessive black choler causes dreams in which appear terrible monsters, apparitions, incubi and such (Villanova 1524: 14; Curry 1960: 222-3)

generation. Thus in 1649, the herdsman Michele testified that he arrived on a goat to bring Bastiano Menos, not to fight, but to dance:

I asked him in the pasture if he wanted to come with me and the witches to the dance; he said yes, he would come... I said to him, "I shall come to call you at night, don't be afraid, we shall go together." And so I did: the following Thursday I mounted my goat and went to find Bastiano who was in bed; I called him by name...: "Bastiano, do you want to come with me to the dance of the witches?" And he replied, "Yes, I do." I had another goat with me, and Bastiano mounted it and together we rode off to the dance of the witches in Santa Catarina's field beyond the Cormor. (NB: 131-2)

Questioned separately, Menos said Michele was riding a cock and himself a hare (NB: 131); another case of dream-like blurring in the details. The two men evidently discussed the forthcoming ride over many conversations out in the pasture, alone and isolated with their animals.

As an artist, Bruegel could hardly have escaped knowing that melancholy was both the reigning humour of inspiration, and the physical cause of stereotyped surreal fantasies. We see this knowledge informing the *Dulle Griet*; a notably black, wet and fiery picture. By this time, everyone also knew what nightmares looked like, thanks to the enormous popularity of Boschian imagery. Designed to convey the atmosphere of places and events at the edges of time, this imagery was linked to dream fantasy in many areas of Humanist thinking (Milne 2013; Ch. 1): Lucretius (recently rediscovered; see e.g. Greenblatt 2011: Introduction) talks about the hybrid composition of dream creatures; Pico della Mirandola took Proteus as emblematic of the inner human landscape. This interest in dreams produced both a general rhetoric and an aesthetic. The rhetoric comes from the Neo-Platonic writers' habit of regarding animal-human metamorphosis, and the forms of hybrid gods, as visual riddles (or rebuses) to be unfolded through the rhetorical techniques of *explicatio* and *complicatio*. The image of Venus, for instance, could be unfolded to produce the Three Graces (Wind 1968: 204-14). The methodology of "unfolding" more clearly "infolded" hybrid images, such as a siren, or mermaid, results in an infinitely expandable

sequence of linked images (see e.g. Milne 2006: 70-2). This helps explain, among other things, the drive towards visual proliferation in Boschian imagery. The aesthetic derives from Synesius of Cyrene, whose *De insomniis* Ficino translated in 1489. Synesius praises:

visions in which these things which are united in nature are separated, and things separated in nature are united... It is no mean achievement to pass on to another something of a strange nature that has stirred in one's own soul, for [by] this phantasy things which are expelled from the order of being, and things which never in any possible way existed, are brought instead into being - nay, even things which have not a nature capable of existence... (1930 [c. 373-414]: 355)

This marked a sea-change in attitudes to dream-imagery. A century after Ficino, we sense that the benandanti are in accord with their times, in this if in nothing else, when they describe the wonder of their dream-visions: the brightly coloured banners, the fields filled with the smell of roses.

Sixteenth-century people, then, whatever their own views about witches or melancholics, had a varied repertoire for visualising dream-imagery, and a rationale for its exploration. The Macrobian dictum of "kaleidoscopically changing things, distorted and out of all natural proportions in size", was commonly used to represent oneiric matters (hence, for instance, the huge cat among Cranach's choice of animal-steeds; fig. 8b; cf. fig. 12b)²¹. This resonated with folkloric rhetorics for representing the relationship between dream and reality as a dimensional shift – as in the tales of the mouse, the river and the treasure. So in fine art, in folklore, and in benandanti testimonies, we find the motif of humans riding animals normally too small to be used as steeds, such as hares or cats (NB: 3, 69, 80, 87, 89, 92, 101-2, 106, 131-2).

SEEING THE DEAD IN THE NIGHT

Protestants openly cast doubt on the efficacy and authority of the rituals which provided access to the dead. In outbreaks of mass iconoclasm, for instance, in Antwerp in 1566, images and relics of the saints – conduits

of occult power – were singled out and destroyed as non-efficacious (Crew 1978; Eire 1979, 1989; Milne 2013: Ch. 5); a visible symptom of widespread destabilisation of the occult cosmos. It became harder to say for certain where exactly the dead might have their being (cf. Rothkrug 2006; Milne 2013: Ch. 5). This wider common context connects Bruegel's *Griet* to the visions of the benandanti.

The dead, Ginzburg reminds us, featured largely in these visions (NB: 33-68). Why? If the benandanti were supposed to be concerned with fighting witches four times a year, why did sightings of traditional Processions of the Dead crop up in their testimony? If the benandanti "saw" these processions as part of the scenery of the otherworld, this implies that the dead were conceived of as patrolling the same ambiguous territory seen in dreams. We infer that a person born with the caul could in theory see any aspect of the invisible world, whether or not she or he participated in the (largely male) collective fantasy of the battle. The testimonies of women accused of being benandanti (evidently less likely to regard themselves as organised in terms of a militia), are peppered with references to seeing the dead – often recently deceased neighbours – in procession. In many cases it was the fact that bereaved neighbours were approaching these women for news about the dead that first set the Inquisitors on their trail. Ginzburg (Ecst.: II.1; II.4) eventually concluded that the Procession of the Dead was a key element in the wider benandanti mythos, a genuine pre-Christian survival. However, sticking with the Renaissance evidence for the moment, sightings of the dead do seem to multiply in the trial records over the course of thirty years. Though Friuli was far from the epicentres of Reformation, we can perhaps discern here some acceleration in the blurring of boundaries between different territories of the twilight world.

The clergy, the doctors and the peasantry agreed on certain aspects of dream experience. Everyone, for instance, accepted the idea that heaven and hell could be visited in dreams; a copious literature describes such journeys (Milne 2013: Ch 2; Bremmer 1983: 28; cf. Palmer & Speckenbach 1990; Kruger 1992). The well-known vision of the peasant Thurkill, experienced in Essex in 1206, anticipates in microcosm the trajectory of benandanti narratives (imitators of Bosch were especially keen on this story; cf. Unverfehrt 1980: 221ff). The layman, Thurkill, falls into a coma, and when he awakes, tells the Abbot and his men about his visit to hell. They write it down, and so tailor the vision to the

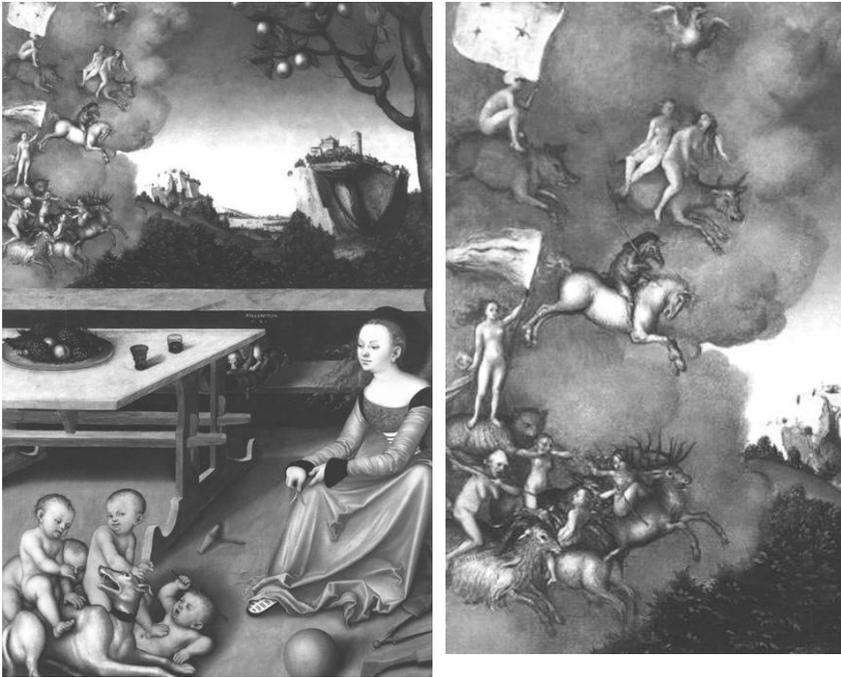


Figure 8a. Lucas Cranach, *Allegory of Melancholy*, 1528. Oil on wood, 113 x 72 cm. National Gallery of Scotland.

Figure 8b. Lucas Cranach, *Allegory of Melancholy*, detail: night-riders on animal-steeds.

orthodoxy of previous versions (Schmidt 1978a: 50-64; 1978b). In folk accounts, however, the place where dreams happened was part of a wider spirit world, co-extensive with this one, where two great landmarks, heaven and hell, were easily accessible for saints, witches, nightwalkers, and other favoured mortals. "How did you reach hell?" the judges asked Thies [the Livonian werewolf – L.M.]. 'Where was it located?' 'The werewolves went on foot...' he replied. Hell, it transpired, was 'at the end of the sea,' that is to say, in a swamp near Lemburg." (De Blécourt 2007a: 49).

For people to share a mental cultural theatre of this kind, there must be substantial unconscious as well as conscious agreement on its reality (cf. Le Goff 1985; Milne 2013: Ch. 5). Once the framework of Catholic penitential ritual – the transportation system for getting people and information in and out of Heaven and Purgatory – began to dissolve, the

dreamworld was no longer clearly under the rule of God and his saints, and the status of its other visitors, the night travellers, was up for review²². Of course, seen as an effect of Reformation, such consequences were not intentional; no one wanted to get rid of the other world entirely. But equally we might argue that changes in dream-culture propelled the Reformation, rather than the other way round. Recall that folk-culture was the home of the largest class of non-occult dreams (somnia naturale). As "personal" types of dream grew in importance, occult causes of dreams became harder to identify securely, and this affected conceptions of the nightmare, where physical and occult causes were both implicated. At the same time, substantial efforts towards cultural reform— a conscious war on manners, beliefs and behaviour – worked to demonise otherworldly excursions, along with carnivalesque misrule, in the minds of sixteenth-century people (cf. Burke 1978: 207-43)²³. Pócs (2009: 383) speaks of the Sabbath casting a "witchy hue" over the fairy world. One way of doing this was to relocate aspects of folk-culture from day to night. Any motif cast in a nocturnal light immediately began to look more sinister and threatening (cf. Muchembled 1993; Ogier 1998).

It is a sign of the times that both the battles and the gambols of the benandanti took place in sleep, while the arena of the Sabbath was unquestionably the night. Henningsen (2009: 70) suggests we should think in terms of "two dream complexes – the nightmare of the black sabbath and the delights of the white Sabbath – coexisting in several regions of Europe"; and we may note that emotional commotion (fear or joy) lie at the heart of both. Girolamo Cardano – magician, doctor and dream-specialist – argued that the Sabbath itself originated in women's carnivals: "Without a doubt these things took their start from the old orgies where the women behaved in a wild and senseless manner in public. When this was forbidden by law, they gathered in secret. When this was also forbidden, they assembled only in thought." (Cardano 1559). Long after the witch-craze was over, folkloric complexes that had been redefined more or less exclusively in nocturnal terms were well on the way to being understood as internal and psychological.

THE QUESTION OF CULT

Ginzburg focussed initially on the historical situation of the benandanti and their inquisitors, and attended to the effects on an individual's beliefs of repeated inquisition by hostile minds, filled with a different cosmological view. His later research changed the *mise-en-scène* from the 16C to Eurasian world history. Ginzburg had already opened some deep time vistas on benandante beliefs in *Night Battles*. He cited, for example, the warning in Regino of Prüm's *De ecclesiasticis disciplinis* (aka the *Canon Episcopi*) (2001 [c. 906]: 62), regarding:

wicked women... seduced by the illusions and phantasms of demons [who] believe [that] in the hours of the night, they ride upon certain beasts with Diana [and] an innumerable multitude of women, and in the silence of the dead of night traverse great spaces of the earth... summoned to her service on certain nights.²⁴

Emphasising these are false beliefs, Regino explicitly compared them to dreams:

Who is there that is not led out of himself in dreams and nocturnal visions and sees much when sleeping that he has never seen waking? Who is so stupid and foolish as to think that all these things which are only done in spirit happen to the body?²⁵

The description of night-riders, however, was taken up through later centuries by people interested in asserting that witches could indeed do such things; such as Johannes Nider (1481), Heinrich Kramer and Jakob Sprenger (1928 [1486]: 2.1.iii); it is in this context that William Hay, lecturing at Aberdeen in the 1530s, mentions his own local seely wights²⁶. It seems also to inform the decision of a fifteenth-century illuminator to label his drawing of women riding brooms and sticks (fig. 6d) as *Vaudosi* (i.e. Waldensian heretics; Behringer 2005: 161-5).

These key elements – rods, fighting, nightmare and terror – were strongly linked in the popular imagination. Consider for instance, this Old English Journey Charm (*Ic me on þisse gyrde beluce..*):

I lock unto me this stave and entrust
[myself] in God's protection;
Against the stab of the pains, against the blow of the pains,
Against the terror of the grim ones,
Against the great horror that is hateful to everyone,
And against all loath [things] that fare in upon the land.
I sing a victory chant, I bear a victory-stave...
May the mare [night-mare] not mar me...
Or ever be fearful against my life...
(mid-11C, Corpus Christi College MS 41, 350-53; Hill 2012: 145-58)

How exactly we are to envisage the action of "locking" with regard to "gyrd" (rod or stave) is a matter of some debate. Hill thinks that gyrd here carries a Christian apotropaic sense (i.e. the symbolic power of the stave = God's protection; cf. Latin *uirga*; Hill 2012: 153-4), so the meaning would be metaphoric: "I gird myself". However, whether the speaker locks hand or spirit, subsequent lines build on the visual imagery of stave and blows, thus concretising a variety of magical and psychological referents (cf. Milne 2013: Ch. 3). In a similar way, we can understand the significance of the staff for the benandanti, who do not, after all, literally take fennel stalks or kitchen rods into their dream-battles. Rather, their dream-culture furnishes them with imaginary weapons of appropriate visual shape, narrative sense and symbolic meaning. As a dream-weapon, the rod thus condenses several levels, so to speak, of gyrd: Christ's protection, the form of a stick, and the stick's typical activities (journey, fight, attack).

Ginzburg addressed the questions of the age and geographical distribution of benandante-like beliefs in *Ecstasies* (1989), subtitled *Deciphering the Witches' Sabbath* (see also his short summary, Ginzburg 1993). The book argues for the distribution across great ranges of time and space of a set of interconnected motifs and types of ritual play, most of which are present in – or hinted at – in Regino's text and its descendants. Ginzburg tries to marshall this evidence to support two main points. He wants to show that folk-culture keeps alive iconic patterns of the type he thinks of as "fragments" of an old religion – an agrarian cult with an ecstatic or shamanic component – constituting a "shamanic substratum" from one end of "Celtic" Europe to the other (cf. Klaniczay 1990; Pócs 1999). It is this substratum, he thinks, which

eventually surfaces in the benandanti trials, and which also contributes the nucleus for the full-blown scenario of the witches' Sabbath. This thesis has been criticised on several grounds: for taking data from too widely disparate times and places; for building too much on too few pieces of evidence (Muchembled 1993: 140-2; De Blécourt 2007a: 52-67, 2007b; Monter 2006: 222-6), and for starting a search for European shamanism based on Eliade's misconstrual of the term as involving "archaic techniques of ecstasy" (cf. Kehoe 1996: 377-92; Hutton 2006: 209-13; Goodare 2012: 210-13). To this we might add efforts to query the validity of ethnic characterisations (such as "Celtic") in antiquity and folk culture (e.g. James 1999)²⁷. The current consensus is rather that we should envisage a wide spectrum of occult specialists – healers, diviners, blessers – among whom we find the benandanti, the seely wights, the *donne di fuori*, some kinds of werewolf, the Alpine "shaman" etc. (e.g. De Blécourt 2007a: 52-67).

Ginzburg posits that his group of motifs were once all combined more closely together, through myth and ritual, across a particular swathe of Old Europe, in the pre-Classical era. Evidently some of the many possible combinations and recombinations he examines, from Classical antiquity on, do indeed delineate persistent cults of "Diana" in her many aspects (Ecst.: 89-121). Different kinds of problems arise with this thesis. How useful is it to consider the internal structural congruence of groups of constituent materials over a millennium in terms of "cult"? Ginzburg recognises that the recurring use of "Diana" for the night-riders' leader, from Regino on, is probably an *interpretatio romana* on the part of classically educated clerics writing these accounts. In the cases of two women tried in the diocese of Milan, the late 14C interrogators substituted the name of Diana or put it into the mouths of the accused, who themselves called her *Madona Oriente* (Ecst.: 91-2). In these (fragmentary) Italian trial records, the accused women speak rather of the "Game of Diana" or "Society of Oriente" (e.g. Ecst.: 91-6, 102-3). In Sicily, one had to be born into the *donne di fuori*. Members claimed to have *sangre dulce* [sweet blood] which obliged them to "rush out in spirit" [*in espíritu*] three nights a week to participate in the nocturnal doings of the Company (Henningsen 1993: 195-215)²⁸. Does the persistence of such constellations, through many changes of context, in itself constitute a cult? And how might shamanistic traditions have

been maintained over centuries, in largely illiterate populations, and against the grain of an official religion²⁹?

As a frame for interpreting variable material, a focus on origins is problematic, because it judges any manifestations of the chosen set of motifs in terms of distance from a putative starting point. Drawn into positing lost originals, we are forced to view any evidence – from any era – as fragmentary and somehow lacking in authenticity and wholeness³⁰. Since all Eurasian cultures ultimately descend from the same post-Classical populations, the search for an "ur-shamanism" – the putative "origin" for the forms of a benandante-style folk religion – cannot stop with the ancients; it stretches back through the traumas of agriculture, to the cultures of the cave-artists and beyond. To see the motifs as jigsaw pieces of a lost religion is to undervalue their independent significance; it is equally likely (though just as undemonstrable) that they pre-date any formal religion on record.

In any case, ritual forms regularly outlive their contexts and are put to new purposes. Merrifield (1987: 1-21) distinguishes among:

religion (belief in supernatural or spiritual beings), *magic* (practices intended to control occult forces), and *ritual* (prescribed or customary behaviour that may be religious, magical or social in intent)...

He comments:

Something of all three functions may be found in a single act of ritual, or the act may remain the same while one function is increasingly dominated by another, which may eventually survive alone... some ritual acts are remarkably tenacious, and may continue to be performed in much the same way for quite new purposes.

In this sense, folk culture is and always has been a massive palimpsest, within which the oldest forms must always have appeared fragmentary, as if part of a lost mystery. One might speculate that enigmatic, tightly woven forms – such as the Procession of the Dead – were treated as keystones in emerging organised religions, and outlasted these religions, precisely because they already carried a heavy load of *manna*, or, to put

in another way, they were deeply infolded. The adaptability as well as the conservatism of such constellations is important. To survive, they have to be incarnated through living people, whose conscious memories of how things are done and what they mean are maximally four generations thick. For specialists in modern radically oral societies, far from being something that lasts for millennia, "cult" is a flexible and adaptable phenomenon: an affiliation of customs, stories, scenarios rituals and imagery, capable of drastic readjustment over quite short periods of time (cf. Goody 2010: 41-57). Witchcraft beliefs in particular are demonstrably fluid and can change very rapidly (Monter 1972: 450). However, we should bear in mind that none of our ethnographic data, even the earliest evidence, in fact comes from purely oral societies; ideas and images constantly percolate in and out from the literate world. Siberian shamanism, for example, was evidently syncretic well before the 16C (Hutton 2001: 19-22).

CLASS DIFFERENTIALS

It is time to consider some other factors governing the divergence – and convergence – of folk and elite constellations of the same materials. The movement against folk culture, like the witch craze generally, was complexly intertwined with misogyny (see e.g. Bailey 2002; De Blécourt 2000; Muchembled 1993; Harley 1990). In Bruegel's parents' time, for instance, the term "old wives' tales" – used in all the main language groups as a synonym for folk knowledge – took on its modern (derogatory) connotation of nonsense and impossibility (Jeay and Garay 2006: 11-19)³¹. This in turn was part of a wider set of class antagonisms and differentials. Ginzburg speaks of the "disgusted contempt" of the inquisitors for the "crazy populace"; an example of the "age-old tradition of satire against the 'villain' [as] thieving, dirty, cunning, cheating, [and] superstitious" (NB: 90). On the other side, we have what Scott (1990: 416) calls "the ordinary weapons of relatively powerless groups: footdragging, dissimulation, false compliance, pilfering, feigned ignorance, slander, arson, sabotage etc.". Some of these we can recognise in the attitudes of the benandanti, who (understandably) try to stymie the proceedings by saying what they think the inquisitors want them to say, pleading ignorance, or simply not showing up. Ginzburg attends to the

patent explosive annoyance of the priests and lawyers, faced with this incaltrance, who often suspect they are being led down the garden-path, and say so.

Some literate people in this period collected folk sayings and customs in an antiquarian spirit; some studied folk magic in order to learn from it (Thomas 1971: 178-211), but the most common elite attitudes to peasant culture were derogatory: from ironic dismissal to reforming zeal to furious exasperation (Milne 2013: Ch. 3). Though he believed in devils and spirits, Bruegel's contemporary, the Swiss clergyman, Loys Lavater (1527-86), thought the folk staged and abused otherworldly imagery:

It is a common custome in many places.. that at a certain time of the yeare, one with a nette or visarde on his face maketh children afrayde, to the ende that ever after they shoulde labour and be obedient to their Parents, afterward they tel them that those which they saw, were Bugs, Witches, and Haggess.

Beating children, he argued, is preferable to telling them "they shal be deuoured of Bugges, Hags of the night, and such lyke monsters" (1929 [1572]: 21). This deceptive or theatrical connotation of a *nette or visarde* may explain why Bruegel's Griet figure wears a veil.

Folk beliefs were thus increasingly seen as nonsensical or fantastic – or indeed as dream-like. A fourteenth-century clerical parody recommends mixing:

the bile and entrails of a magnet, the lungs of a piece of marble...
blood from sand [then] drink it in one breath; and know that if
you do this you will find yourself, [if] not lost, healthy... which
was tried one candleless night, in a dream; and we know not by
whom... in the month of August, Christmas Day, in the morning
of nones, three hours after twilight, by a lusty, merry fellow...
(Muchebled 1985: 156-7)

We see this tendency especially in attitudes to peasant women's culture. Thus old wives' tales acquire their canonical comic form in the hugely popular and much translated *Distaff Gospels* (1510; from the late 15C *Les Évangiles des Quenouilles*), wherein the male misogynist narrator transcribes the gossipy discourse of ugly old women with shady pasts (as

procuress, healer, midwife, priest's concubine, heretic etc) (Jeay and Garay 2006: 16-7). In true subaltern fashion (cf. Spivak 1988: 271-313), the inquisitor's attitude to the villain is replicated in the attitude of both to the villain's wife. Among the female benandanti, we find Florida Basili commenting "I am not afraid of anything [now] except my husband" (NB: 64). Disdain for "gossiping women" is prominent (NB: 80) among all the Friulian informants. Female benandanti were more likely to be seen as mad – "We think she's crazy" (NB: 65) – and at the same time to incur more severe penalties than the men; thus Maria Panzona in 1619 was sentenced to public abjuration, three years imprisonment and perpetual exile (NB: 99-108; Nardon 1999: 138; Monter 2006: 226). So, the standard rhetorical stance of the educated was to speak of folk beliefs as either nonsensical or incomprehensible; at the same time, women's beliefs were increasingly regarded as even less rational and therefore more dangerous. Folk and elite accounts thus collude most visibly in sixteenth-century thinking about female witches.

WITCHES AND WOMEN'S DREAMS

Bruegel's *Dulle Griet* (fig. 2) thus engages a long tradition of male fascination with the female imagination, stretching from Regino to the present day; it studies, as through a glass darkly, the state of male nightmares about women. The diversity of Bruegel's images of witches itself testifies to the fast-moving nature of attitudes to witchcraft. His *Witch of Mallegem* (1559; fig. 9) presents a relatively harmless version of a witch, in a proverbial village of fools, healing the gullible by removing stones of folly from their heads. He adds a few oneiric signs of lunacy (a giant broken egg, dribbling stones) in the background. Six years later, *St. James and the Magician Hermogenes* (1565; fig. 6b) depicts more up-to-date witches, in the background of a hallucinatory contest between good and bad magic. A transformation in three moves is staged like a film strip in and around the shack at the right: below a woman riding a broomstick disappears into the fumes of a cauldron, her head cut off by the roof; above, her top half emerges from the chimney into a swirl of smoke; this smoke curls into a flourish to present her final version, now naked, mounted on a goat, hoisting the broomstick like a weapon. She heads towards the swirls from another cauldron, to joust an



Figure. 9. Pieter van der Heyden, after Pieter Bruegel, *The Witch of Malleghem*, 1559. Engraving, 35.5 x 48 cm. © Trustees of the British Museum, BM 1924,0714.28.

opposite troupe of witches, riding to battle on hybrid monsters (fig. 6c). Between these extremes, in the early 1560s, we find the *Griet*, which places village witchery in the fashionable context of nightmares and madness, invoking the perception of female peasant culture as unreal and backwards (in every sense).

We have one near-contemporary description of the picture, from Karel Van Mander: "a Dulle Griet, who robs in front of hell, wears a vacant stare and is [cruel, or] strangely and weirdly dressed" (Van Mander 1936 [1604]: 155)³². She is a proverbial virago, who can "rob in front of hell"; that is, ferocious enough to fear neither hell nor the devil, and connected to the spirit world metaphorically or in reality. As an invention, she draws on a complex skein of traditions about various formidable Margarets (Grauls 1957: 6-15, 22-3, 35-8): peasant women who proverbially fight devils (Gibson 1977: 104-5); St. Griet (Margaret of Antioch), patron of midwives and their festivals, who grabs Beelzebub by the hair (Drewer 1993: 11-15), or hits him with a hammer (fig. 10a; Lafontaine-Dosogne 1962: 252), and bursts from a dragon's belly (fig. 10b; Albert 1988: 19-31)³³ – hence her association with midwives; and also the Wife-Who-Wears-the-Trousers, shown beating her husband (figs. 11a & b), and her more specific daughter-motif, the *Battle of the Breeches*, a World-Upside-Down *topos* in art from the 13C on, appearing on misericords, in popular prints (cf. fig. 11c; Gibson 1977: 104-5), and in comic drama, achieving its apotheosis in Shakespeare's *Taming of the Shrew* (1595)³⁴.

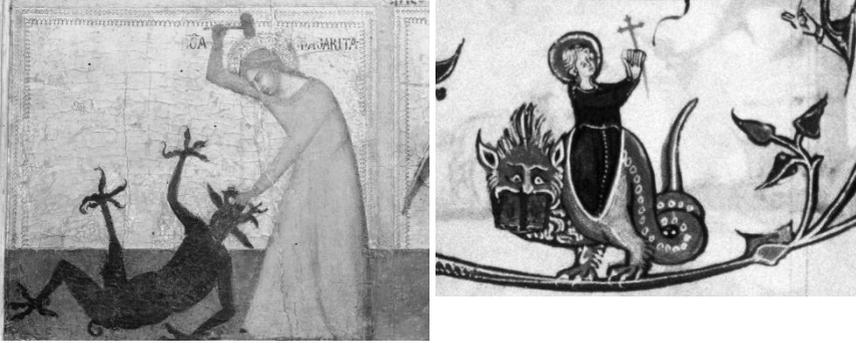


Figure 10a. "Barna Da Siena", *The Mystic Marriage of St Catherine*, c. 1340. Detail: predella: St Margaret hitting the devil with a hammer. Tempera on wood. MFA Boston. 15.1145.

Figure 10b. Anon., St. Margaret emerges from dragon, Joffroy d'Aspremont Psalter, Parchment. French, late 13C. MS Douce 118. fol. 023r, Bodleian Library.

Bruegel mixes up these ideas, gives them monumental form, and sets them in a nocturnal melancholic landscape, made eerie with out-of-scale objects. This is a *Dulle* (stupid) Griet: the veil over her eyes marks her as deluded and beset by visions (recall Lavater's strictures about dressing up as a bogey "with a nette or visarde on his face. Her sword and armour characterises her as a cross-dresser, another carnivalesque marker of the Topsy-Turvy World³⁵. This semi-comic giant virago, like a nursery version of Diana, or Frau Holla, is followed by an army of small women. They enact versions of the key proverb, "she could tie the devil to a pillow" (Dundes and Stibbe 1981; Milne 2013: Ch. 2, 3), referring to women beating devils, "looting before hell", and behaving immoderately. The devils flee before Griet and the women, and the hellmouth itself bears an expression of consternation. This is the satirical folk hell of mystery plays, dream-poems and ballads. We are outside the gates of hell, in the spirit-lands where the peasants do their dreaming.

Is there enough evidence for Griet to be read as a kind of night-walker? It would be more accurate to say that Bruegel's concept as a whole – the dream-landscape, the hellmouth, the attributes and actions of Griet and her women – draws on the same complex of imagery which informed the experiences and institutions of night-walking. In the Netherlands as elsewhere, children born with the caul see "spirits,

nightmares, and such monstrosities," according to an anonymous Dutch poet (c. 1600; Roodenburg 1985: 520). A 14C Ghent poem lists together "fence demons, travelling women, spirit children, hobgoblins, elves and mares" (Hansen 1963 [1901]: 636). The village witch was a *hagazussa*; a creature of both worlds, one who sits on the boundary, the "hag, the fence or hedge which passed behind the gardens" (Duerr 1985 [1978]: 46)³⁶. Her vision-work might include night-travelling, fortune-telling, relaying information about the dead, locating treasure or lost property. We find trance techniques for the latter in Brabant and other Flemish and northern French provinces³⁷. The *tündéres* also see treasures, or can lead people to them by "waving a red key", which suggests dowsing (Pócs 2009: 388); as does Griet's locket (fig. 2a), dangling from her breastplate (i.e. not worn as a necklace). We read of women during the Ember days – the times of the benandante battles – falling into swoons "insensible to pricks or scoldings. When they revived, they... declared that they had been in heaven, hell or purgatory, and spoke of stolen or hidden objects" (NB: 8, n. 32, 43ff)³⁸.

Griet's frying pan and sword make her, among other things, a variant of a constellation that has recurred in all the contexts we have looked at: benandanti testimony, virago and witch imagery, carnival and dream representations. This constellation is basically: woman armed with household tool, engaged in supernatural combat. Several late medieval variants existed of the woman-plus-domestic tool-plus-demon; comic, nonsensical or fantastic in tone, and sometimes all at once. A woman saws the head off a small devil (Corbeil; fig. 12a); a housewife with distaff rides a giant cat (Winchester; fig. 12b; Wright 1968 [1865]: 120, 124-31); a couple joust with broomstick and flail, she mounted on a goose, he on a pig (Bristol; fig. 12c). Even as this topos mutated towards more sinister forms, still Cranach's night-riders hold rods and a pitchfork (fig. 8b), while in the early "Vaudois" illuminations, the women ride both broom and stick (fig. 6d). The women flanking Griet use hooked rods to fight their devils (fig. 2a); their iron rods and staves for scraping out ovens (NB 29: 92, 103, 109 n. 6) were among the weapons used by the benandanti (alongside the more evidently archaic fennel stalks).

One variant came to eclipse the others: woman-broomstick-demonic familiar. The relation of woman to devil changed its import; she moves from fighting it, to overpowering it, to being in league with it. At the same time, this composite (woman-devil-tool) merged with another



Figure 11a. Anon., *Wife beating husband with a distaff*, Luttrell Psalter. Vellum. English 14C. British Library Add.42130, f.60.

Figure 11b. Anon., *Woman armed with washing beetle beating a man*. 14C. St Mary the Virgin, Tewkesbury Abbey, misericord n11.2.



Figure 11c. Anon., Netherlandish, *The Battle of the Breeches*, 1555. Woodcut with stencilled watercolour. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

Figure 11d. Attributed to Israel van Meckenem the Younger, *Battle of the Breeches with Demon*, early 16C. Engraving. © Trustees of the British Museum.



topos about uppity women: the *Battle of the Breeches*. Recall that odd detail in Gasparutto's account: "the women beat the men who were with them with sorghum stalks, while the men had only bunches of fennel"(NB: 1). Now these attacking women could conceivably be the witches on the opposite side of the combat: the enemies of the (male)



Figure 12a. Anon., *Housewife, demon and saw*, stall carving at Corbeil. After Wright 1865.

Figure 12b. Anon., *Housewife with distaff rides giant cat*, Winchester. After Wright 1865.



Figure 12c. Anon., *Couple jousting, woman on goose with broomstick, man on pig with rod*, 16C Bristol Cathedral.

benandanti. Elsewhere, the sorghum stalks are described as the weapons of these witches. But then why does Gasparutto specify that the victims are the men who were with them; that is, the women's own companions? In either case, this is a telling indicator that, on some level, the imagery of the battle of the sexes could elide itself into the benandanti dream-accounts.

The original Battles were broadly comic, with no otherworldly

overtones. The wives overcoming demons, or hitting husbands, in misericords and MS illumination are similarly funny; Reversed World personae, like Chaucer's Wife of Bath. But in the 16C, we start finding more sinister versions; for instance, in this print attributed to Van Meckenem (fig. 11d; early 16C; Maeterlinck 1907: 198-9), the woman threatens the husband with a broomstick, egged on by a devil; the breeches lie in a corner, and the scene takes place in deep shadow. Here the virago-breeches and housewife-tool-demon motifs are condensed together, nocturnalised and psychologised.

Bruegel treats this constellation to a penetrating exercise in *complicatio et explicatio* in the lower right corner of the *Griet* (fig. 2b). On the bridge, a small woman pulls breeches from a bending male; an ineffectual devil clings to her apron between her legs. The old, homely devil of the pillow-proverb is here the pivot for a linked chain of visual transformations cascading into the dark water below. From the woman "unbreeching" the man, through progressive stages of male decapitation and dismemberment, to the patently castratory leg-eating and sausage-chopping fish, the first term metamorphoses into the last in a circle looping from bridge to water.

There are precedents in 16C culture for this kind of rhetoric. Since antiquity, dream-imagery was seen as a kind of puzzle, in need of decoding (cf. Milne 2011: 95-5). Freud himself conceived of the dream as a type of rebus:

The dream-content is, as it were, presented in hieroglyphics, whose symbols must be translated, one by one, into the language of the dream-thoughts... a dream is a picture-puzzle (rebus)... As such, of course, it appears nonsensical... (1900: VI.381-419)

All ranks of Bruegel's society relished the nonsense-form of the rebus³⁹. An Antwerp street protest used a rebus to satirise Henry VIII of England as "abused by diabolic illusions" (Wegg 1916: 126, 272). Some clue as to the form of Henry's illusions, presumably linked to his marital difficulties, is supplied by the *Malleus Maleficarum*, which describes "Remedies... for those who by Prestigitory Art have lost their Virile Members or have seemingly been transformed into the shapes of Beasts" (Kramer and Sprenger 1928 [1486]: II.2.4). Bruegel's castrating fish-

monster is a rebus of this kind: an explicatio of the complicatio of the *virago-breeches-devil* constellation.

This riddling movement works on many levels. In a sense, the whole painting is a vast explicatio of the imagery embedded in "tying a devil to a pillow". This central proverb is treated like a rebus or visual riddle, unfolded to yield the idea of a combat in sleep. The pillow is a metonym for bed; the domain of woman on a number of levels: a liminal place of birth, death, sex, and, of course, dreams. Applied to this plainly psychological material, Bruegel's use of complicatio et explicatio anticipates the Freudian dream-processes of condensation and displacement (cf. Milne 2013: Introduction). The arc of figuration progressively unfolds (orunmasks) the castratory fear driving the changes in the rebellious woman topoi; at the same time it displaces and concentrates this kernel of fear in progressively more extreme surreal imagery. The explicatio is itself a form of complicatio.

UNEASY LAUGHTER

The oddity of tone – comic, uncanny and frightening – in Bruegel's *Griet* is linked to a moment of clashing cultures, marked by a kind of fearful laughter. Ginzburg's documents show us the benandanti, the churchmen and the local community grappling with such paradoxes. In several cases, one of the first responses of a benandante, when questioned about his or her supernatural activities, was to go into gales of inexplicable laughter:

Gasparutto... in the face of incessant questioning by the inquisitor, who reminded him of details from conversations he had held five years before... repeated his denials between peals of laughter. The friar finally asked: *Why do you laugh so much?* Unexpectedly, Gasparutto replied: *Because these are not things to inquire about, because they are against the will of God.* (NB: 5)

It is as though such laughter was the involuntary response to the experience of having what had been previously thought of as two quite separate sets of ideas, forcibly brought together in the questions and assumptions of the inquisitor. The peasantry had never been asked to

think about the faculty of nightwalking in this way. The benandanti assumed that they battled in the name of Christ. They had not previously concerned themselves about the orthodoxy of their visions.

This incommensurability of narratives and experiences was perceived by both sides in terms of bafflement, puzzlement, a pervading sense of the absurdity of having the "wrong" things put together, and a sense that there remained "more to be said". The effect of tantalising mystery, in semiotic and psychoanalytic terms, is generated when parts from recognisably distinct classificatory groups are brought together (see e.g. Milne 2006: 78-82). Faced with a condensed, or infolded, or surreal image – such as any one of Bruegel's hybrid creations in isolation – the viewer seeks a third term to explain why these incongruous parts have been brought together. Finding this link missing, we assume not simply that it is hidden, but that it has *been* hidden, by someone or something (in fact, of course, by the author of the rebus, the artist), and hence experience a sense of hidden agency, and an uncanny effect. In some sense, the inquisitors were also seeking a hidden agency that would make sense for them of the benandante accounts: the presence of Satan.

The *Griet's* peculiar style of *complicatio et explicatio* is thus a response to a wider crisis of competing representations in the folk perceptual world, evident both in the Friulian data, and in the cultural transformations pulling constellations such as the woman-tool-demon into the framework of the Sabbath. Useful here is the poet Giorgos Seferis's definition of style as "the difficulty which a person encounters in trying to express something" (Stewart 1991: 122). Bruegel's *Griet* is essentially a success with (and for) its style: an expert's recognition that potential affinities exist among Humanist visual rhetorics, carnivalesque reversals, and moves of rearrangement and re-emphasis within folkloric constellations; affinities which are primarily matters of representation. This becomes clear in comparison with other, less skilled, 16C efforts at visualising this material, which foundered precisely on difficulties of style and expression.

Ginzburg discusses illustrations for two editions of Geiler von Kaisersberg's collected Strasbourg sermons, *Die Emeis* (NB: 8, n. 32, 43ff). Geiler dealt with several beliefs which appear in the benandanti testimony and elsewhere: he repeats the tales of women night-travellers who visit hell and purgatory, looking for treasure and lost objects during

the Ember days, leaving the body asleep, and the Furious Horde or Procession of the Dead.

The people given the task of illustrating this unusual subject for the 1516 edition had, as Ginzburg points out, "no iconographic tradition to fall back on" (NB: 46). It was standard practice to pirate illustrations from other people's books, and this solution was adopted here. The image chosen was an illustration from an edition of Virgil (NB: 46): Bacchus in a Triumphal cart, being pulled through a wood, accompanied by Silenus and a satyr playing the bagpipes. The printer of *De Emeis* removed the figure of Virgil from the edge of the image but otherwise changed nothing. He left in, for example, the bagpiper and the labels which identify Bacchus and Silenus (compare figs. 1a & b). Ginzburg thinks this demonstrates that Geiler's material was effectively incommensurable with any available image: so the Bacchus image is a genuinely incongruous and inappropriate choice, of interest because its employment marks a failure of the imagination; ultimately a failure to conceptualise. He presents this as evidence of the strong difficulty in visualising benandanti-style beliefs at all (within the relatively literate world of the printers).

However, the illustration looks less arbitrary, considered against the background outlined here, of how the literate classes thought about peasant dreaming, visions and revelry. To select this image as an "illustration" was the action of a mind used to thinking about visual relationships with text in terms of allegorical personifications, rather than mimesis. But the choice of the Bacchus cart may not in fact have been so wide of the mark. It was intended, after all, to accompany a sermon which described beliefs about sightings of the Procession of the Dead, in order to assert the lack of truth in them. Since the Bacchus cart and bag-piper allude in general terms to drunken revelry, it was a reasonable choice to represent the "meaningless" visions of the benandanti.

Those in charge of producing the next edition, a year later, must still have been dissatisfied with this relation between text and image, because this was one of the illustrations they changed. The replacement for Bacchus's cart was another pastiche, this time based on a picture from the Latin version of Brant's *Ship of Fools* (Basel 1497; fig. 1d). Two figures in motley - one standing with two animals, pushing a cart the wrong way round; the other upside-down in the cart - were clipped from

the original illustration and superimposed on a generic landscape background (fig. 1c). Ginzburg comments:

Obviously, Brant's wagon-load of fools seemed more suitable than a group of Bacchus's followers to express the aura of mystery and terror surrounding the myth of the Furious Horde... The substitution tells us something about the difficulty of attempting to translate into visual imagery a popular belief which... lacked points of reference in the world of the educated classes. (NB: 46-7)

In fact, the two images tell us more still about the kind of mental difficulties involved here. The people publishing Geiler were used to dealing with ready-made images; they were skilled in pirating and adapting this repertoire to suit the needs of any text. Neither Bacchus nor the upside-down fool worked particularly well as an *illustration* of the *content* of the folk-idea; but they did succeed in connoting, as it were, the outer edges, or context, of such visions: their outward "containers" of drunkenness and carnivalesque license. The second effort simply replaced the coded language of stock Classical forms with more modern shorthands for fools and madness. In other words, these anonymous illustrators were groping mentally in the same direction as Bruegel, reaching towards *Ships of Fools*, carnivalesque revelry, and the *World-Turned-Upside-Down*. This implies a recognition of some connection between the visions described in the text and the carnivalesque imagery.

Compared to the sophistication of Bruegel's approach, the anonymous illustrators of Geiler could not more closely approximate the visual demands of their subject, because they could not deconstruct their available repertoire of received images sufficiently well. Similarly, the priests, who heard at first hand the testimonies of the benandanti, could not understand accounts which "lacked points of reference in the world of the educated classes" (NB: 47). Their response, like that of the printers, was to substitute a ready-made constellation from their own world; this did indeed have "points of reference" to the original, but suppressed elements which clashed. Bruegel, by contrast, was peculiarly skilled at breaking apart old combinations of forms and putting them together in new ways. His agenda was neither to erase the forms of folk-culture with a Classical equivalent, nor to impose on them a Satanic

reading (at least, not in any simple sense). Unlike Geiler's printers, and the Friulian inquisitors, his interest in the forms and meanings of dream-culture was ethnographic and aesthetic. He could come closer to illustrating the themes and thought processes of this culture, while still casting the central action in terms of nonsense and commotion.

These forays into Renaissance representation raise the question of endpoints, or limits, in the decomposition and recomposition of hybrid or composite constellations characteristic to dream-culture and dream-imagery. Thinking about how *complicatio et explicatio* work in Humanist creative mythology, Wind (1968: 206) reasoned that:

when *complication* reaches its height [and] opposites become indistinguishable, all multiplicity vanishes... It follows that all mystical images... retain a certain [potential for] articulation... [they] belong to an intermediate state, which invites further *complication* above, and further *explication* below.

They are never final in the sense of a literal statement... Rather they keep the mind in continued suspense by presenting the paradox of an *inherent transcendence*; they persistently hint at more than they say.

This fits both the *Dulle Griet* and the benandante experience in different ways. The benandanti found that no amount of *explication* would satisfy the inquisitors, who carried on their interrogations precisely until "multiplicity vanished"; to be replaced with their own stock narrative of the Sabbath. The witchy imagery of the *Griet* presents a further kind of unfolding, the results complicated again and again, but retaining always a composite nature, and so working as emblems of liminality. The difficulty of terminating this chain of signification may explain why Bruegel shifts ground, so to speak, abandoning his rebus-chains for the much bleaker scenes in the deep background of the picture: the frieze of naked figures scrabbling in the dirt of a deserted rocky landscape (fig. 2c). The viewer's eye moves from the carnivalesque centre, to a far horizon where a qualitative different kind of dream logic resides, no longer clothed in the direct Synesian appeal to intelligence and imagination implicit in Boschian fantasy. Here is another example of what happens when "complication reaches its height", and "all

multiplicity vanishes" into the "absolutely unfamiliar".

CONCLUSIONS

Sixteenth-century dream-culture, I suggest, can be regarded as an "infolded" mass, undergoing "explication" in various directions. We have considered three cases of this. The night-walking dream-scenario is a constellation enabled by folk acculturation and sleep practices, enfolding carnivals and age-set practices, belief in the caul, the wandering soul, and a structure similar to the nightmare, with fixed portals bracketing a central struggle or commotion. It thus has a "proto-aesthetic" character; it is "partially connected" (cf. Milne 2008: 200-1; Gell 1999: 206) to folk art forms such as story-telling and the visual culture of Carnival. The Sabbath scenario we have explored primarily through the case-study of the "woman and the broomstick"; a minor topos, appearing also in night-walker accounts, caught in act of merging with the virago-wife and thus generating a more demonic kind of witch. This in turn is an example of a wider cultural push to nocturnalise – and hence demonise – aspects of carnivalesque popular culture – also underpinning the solutions the printers found to the problem of how to illustrate Geiler. Then there is an aesthetic deconstruction of similar source-materials, from the point of view of someone who treats all this as fully imaginary, in Bruegel's painting.

The study of dream-cultures opened by Ginzburg's researches supplies crucial perspectives for understanding both the cultural grounding of these representations and their capacity for rapid evolution. The evidence can be interpreted more satisfactorily if we set aside the parallels between night-walkers and shamanism (cf. Goodare 2012: 212-3). Shamanic traditions, however loosely defined, presuppose apprenticeship for practitioners; mechanisms for such training seem to be exactly what is lacking in Early Modern Europe. But no one requires any special training to dream. The benandanti were inculcated into their dream-culture in the same way anyone might be, through acculturation starting in infancy, supported by age-set structures, enhanced by peer pressure and the special qualities of first sleep.

Ginzburg was correct – as were the inquisitors – to see a family resemblance between benandante beliefs and the Sabbath. In each case,

we find the same set of complex mythemes – night-flights, sensory commotion, carnivalesque revelry etc. – enfolded and contextualised differently. The key point is to recognise that, while the constituent elements themselves may be relatively fixed, the constellations in which they appear are open to constant re-emphasis, re-positioning and re-tailoring⁴⁰. Thus we find elements of the benandante vision elsewhere in folk-culture (the militia-age-set structure and revelry motifs in Carnival) while the overall scenario (fixed points of exit and entry, commotion and kaleidoscopic imagery in the middle) resembles that of the archaic nightmare.

Dream-culture changes, in relation to other aspects of folk culture, as users adapt inherited constellations of motifs, altering their meaning through shifts of emphasis and arrangement, and thus steer apparently conservative institutions (Carnival, witchcraft, nightmares or night-battles) in particular directions. Most of the time, each successive rejigging conserves the parent-constellation *in toto*, as a source of potential energy – to be unfolded or infolded – for use in later contexts. There do seem to be limiting cases, as Wind noted, where over-folding or -infolding results in a loss of multiplicity, and individual topoi lose their character as permutable constellations. Thus, in the debatable lands of Renaissance dreams, witch and broomstick fuse inextricably together, the benandante vision dissipates and loses cohesion, and Dulle Griet wanders in delusion.

But we may not yet be done with the imagery of night-walkers; I give the last word to a dreamer of the 21C:

My mother sees shadow people or *walkers of the night*. They put you in a state of mind [in] which there is no time to think or breath[e] they hover above you like hawks over dead prey they have no face but you can see their outline. When you wake up from this state you could be scared – don't be – they are the keepers of the earth. ("Terra": 2002)

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This essay is dedicated, with great affection and respect, to Emily Lyle, on the occasion of her 80th birthday.

Notes

- 1 Monter (2006: 224): "Eighty-five people were denounced to the Holy Office as benandanti in inquisitorial sources... few of them were tried and only a handful received formal sentences, beginning with two men in 1581 and ending with two more men in 1698–1705; between them came six men and six women from 1585 to 1662. In the 17C, the introduction of the witches' Sabbath into Friulian popular culture produced a large number of mostly-female defendants charged with diabolical witchcraft (110 women against 20 men); meanwhile, during the period 1611–70, men were overwhelmingly accused as benandanti (48 against 4 women).
- 2 Milne 2007; 2013 on Bruegel's art and folklorical sources. Milne 2013, a revised and expanded edition, is in press at time of writing, subsequently cited by chapter numbers as pagination for the new edition is not confirmed. Much relevant data not cited here for reasons of space can be found there: Introduction for Bruegel's career, oeuvre and scholarly literature; Ch. 1 for history of dream theory and Neo-Platonism; Ch. 2 for the *Dulle Griet*; Ch. 3 for proverbs; Ch. 4 for Carnival and the carnivalesque; Ch. 5 for beliefs about the dead. The present essay is part of a project on the history of dreams and nightmares, and so is related to an ongoing series of articles for *Cosmos* (Milne 2006; 2008; 2011). In the interests of clarity, some essential references on the history of dream-theory necessarily reappear here (notably Macrobius and Synesius). Note also that here I use *Carnival* to mean the institution of Carnival in the wider sense; *carnival* / *carnivals* to refer to traditional calendrical feasts and fêtes which are strongly carnivalesque in character, though they may not take place at Shrovetide; Sabbath is capitalised throughout for the same reason.
- 3 On sixteenth-century educated interest in folk thought, Thomas writes: "The intellectual magician..was stimulated by the activities of the cunning man into a search for the occult influences which he believed must have underlain them. The period saw a serious attempt to study long-established folk procedures with a view to discovering the principles on which they rested..." (1971: 229; cf. also 178-211). Burke

- (1978) coined the term *The Triumph of Lent* to describe elite efforts to take over and remake folk culture in this period; Scribner (1998) provides copious visual evidence for the co-option of folk imagery by Protestant artists, printers and scholars; see Klaniczay 2012 [2010] for a historiographical summary of the term "popular" culture in our period.
- 4 Two short studies set out early ideas about this very complex painting (Milne 1996: 207-29; 1997-8: 21-30; some materials on witches are reproduced in the present essay. For a detailed account of key aspects of the *Griet* imagery not discussed here (especially the *Dukatenschiesser* and the hellmouth) see Milne 2013: Ch. 2.
 - 5 On Antwerp as a centre of printers and scholars, Voet 1969; on their relations with artists, Veldman 1977.
 - 6 This typically Bruegelian procedure is analogous to the ruling Mannerist aesthetic: choosing the "most beautiful" parts and combining them into an idealised whole.
 - 7 For later work on the benandanti see Monter 2006: 222-6; Nardon 1999: 139-68, summarized in Golden 2006/1: 108-9. For criticism of Ginzburg's thesis on shamanic survivals, see De Blécourt 2007a; 2007b and articles in the special issue of *Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft* 1(2), especially Hutton 2006 and Monter 2006.
 - 8 Trial summaries and some inquisitorial correspondence survive for the *donne di fuori* (Henningsen 2009: 63); material on the seely wights – who may have both fairy and human members – is fascinating but so far slender (Goodare 2012); for the extensive literature on Slavic and Hungarian fairy witches see e.g. Klaniczay 1990: 129-50; Pócs 1999, 2009; Čiča 2002. The *donne di fuori* represent one of the best-attested parallels to the benandanti; organised in regional companies, each centred on a supernatural hybrid, they meet in spirit several nights in the week; membership is orchestrated through kinship. Goodare (2012) gives a useful account of the differences between the two, arguing that his seely wights are more like the *donne*. However, they do not fight in their dreams, and the complexities of their evidence requires more detailed discussion than we have space for here; I hope to consider them at more length in the longer work of which this is a part.
 - 9 For details see Milne 2013: Ch. 4; also Stridbeck 1956: 98, Gaignebet 1972: 313-45. Carroll (1987: 289-314) discusses other carnival (*Kermess*) scenes by Bruegel.
 - 10 Their confrontation alludes to *Plenty v. Famine*, as well as the collision between profane and Christian festive time.

- 11 The City and Guilds celebrated Carnival with elaborate floats and parades, with drama contests, banquets, masked balls, and tournaments (Williams and Jacquot 1957); on the involvement of the artists' guild, Veldman (1977), *passim*, Gibson (1981: 430-3), Milne (2012: Ch. 4). Ginzburg himself revisited the *benandanti* in the course of an fascinating essay on Freud and his famous patient, the Wolfman (1986; trans. 1989); but I limit the discussion here to the boundaries of the late Renaissance.
- 12 On whether the genre of festive peasants scenes is celebratory or satirical see Carroll 1987: 301-2; Moxey 1989: 35-66. My summary: "a derogatory attitude to drinking peasants could co-exist quite easily in the sixteenth-century mind with a reliance on the same peasants to uphold customary freedoms... in Shakespeare, low-life characters are held up to ridicule yet display their yeoman mettle on the battlefield" (Milne 2013: Ch. 4).
- 13 Bruegel included such things as comic cameos in his other crowded festival pictures, the *Kermess* prints; Milne 2013: Ch 4.
- 14 Duerr (1985 [1978]: 233, n. 30-2; 234-6, n. 33-7; especially 236, n. 38): "the fools' associations had roots of this nature. St. Lieven's Guild, which had considerable political influence in Ghent, organised nightly processions during the height of the Middle Ages, where its members, the *woestards*, plundered and robbed." Cf. Stumpfl 1936: 343, 394. On the Blue Boat guilds, Enklaar 1933; Minnaert 1943: 9.
- 15 Clubs might have a religious component (doubling as a confraternity), and were often attached to craft or militia guilds such as the *rederijkers*, the amateur acting clubs of the Netherlandish Guilds, including Bruegel's own guild, St. Luke's (Moxey 1977: 149-50). On *rederijker* plays and festivals: Weevers 1960: 67-72, 102-19; on carnival dramas in general, Chambers 1963 [1903]: I, 380-3; Hoffmann von Fallersteben 1968: VI; Milne 2013: Ch. 4.
- 16 The converse of this, a structural inversion of the same elements, concerns people whose birth during liminal time means that they themselves become the active monstrous attacker (De Blécourt 2007c: 35); for an example of this configuration in modern dream-culture, see Milne 2008: 182-3.
- 17 Isabella de Moerloose (b. Ghent c. 1660/1-d. after 1712), for example, was born with a caul; suspected as a child of being possessed, she was prosecuted for publishing unorthodox views about spirits in her autobiography (1695), and finally incarcerated as insane (Roodenburg 1985: 520).

- 18 Henningsen at least discusses the issue of collective dreams at the end of his essay (2009: 71-2), pointing out that traces of what he calls an "archaic mentality" persist among modern women who experience night-travelling in late 20C Sicily.
- 19 There were 26 separate editions of the *Commentary*, printed between 1472 and 1565; for its history and interpretation, Milne 2013: Ch. 1.
- 20 For instance the belief that one has become an earthenware jar; in the *Griet*, Bruegel twists this old saw about earthenware jars, so the jar becomes a sign of this drunken world: jars form the eyebrows of the hellmouth; an outsize jar looms dreamlike in the landscape at top left; jars dangle from bits of wall like inn-signs; monkeys toast each other in the oculus at bottom right.
- 21 Bosch also dealt with dream matter which was folkloric in the benandanti sense; as in his *complicatio et explicatio* of the motif of the Fountain of Life, in his *Garden of Earthly Delights* (Prado), where the pink and blue mountains of the Creation evolve, reading from left to right, exploding into life across the centre panel (Milne 2013: Ch. 1).
- 22 Belief in hell weakened noticeably in the generation after Bruegel (cf. Walker 1964), who himself clearly felt free to employ hell imagery satirically (Milne 2013: Ch. 2).
- 23 Cf. Foucault (1978 [1976]: I.12), on reading Western cultural history in terms of discourses of power: "I would like to... search... for instances of discursive production (which also administer silences...), of the production of power (which sometimes have the function of prohibiting), of the propagation of knowledge (which often cause mistaken beliefs or systematic misconceptions to circulate)."
- 24 Regino of Prüm, *De synodalibus causis et disciplinis ecclesiasticis*, II.365, in Hansen (1963 [1901]: 38): *Illud etiam non omitendum, quod quaedam sceleratae mulieres retro post Satanam conversae daemonum illusionibus et phantasmatis seductae, credunt se et profitentur nocturnis horis cum Diana paganorum dea et innumera multitudine mulierum equitare super quasdam bestias, et multa terrarum spatia intempestae noctis silentio pertransire, eiusque iussionibus velut dominae obedire, et certis noctibus ad eius servitium evocari.*
- 25 Ibid, Hansen (1963 [1901]: 39): *Quis enim non in somniis et nocturnis visionibus extra se educitur, et multa videt dormiendo, quae nunquam viderat vigilando? Quis vero tam stultus et hebes sit, qui haec omnia, quae in solo spiritu fiunt, etiam in corpore accidere arbitretur...?*
- 26 Kramer was probably the sole author of the *Malleus* (cf. Hansen 1963 [1901]: 404-7).

- 27 An opinion shared e.g. by Hutton, who comments, "the Greeks and Romans are just Celts who have learned to build cities" (2010; p.c).
- 28 See n. 8 above.
- 29 Ginzburg was, of course, highly conscious of the methodological and historiographical challenges he confronted; among many passages discussing these, see e.g. *Ecst.*: 8-24; 95-6.
- 30 Bharati (1976: 2) clarifies the issue: "the origin of religion cannot be studied, not because some theories may be false, but because all theories may be correct... [for] a statement to be scientific (as opposed to poetical, metaphysical, etc.) [it] has to be FALSIFIABLE IN THEORY. Because no theories of the origin of religion, or shamanism, or any of the many fundamental themes of religious behaviour are falsifiable in theory, they are not scientific... the origin of any specific, localized theme of religious behaviour... can and should [be studied] if valid evidence, falsifiable in theory and practice, can be adduced (archaeological, linguistic, and other empirical evidence supplying the data for verification-falsification)."
- 31 On compendia of popular magic and superstitions, Van Gennep 1935: v. 2; Van Heurck and Boekenooogen 1930; selections in Van Heurck 1931: 118-20.
- 32 *Een dulle Griet, die een roof voor de Helle doet, die seer verbijstert siet, en vree[m]t op zijn schots toghemaect is*; Marijnissen and Seidel (1984: 55-6, n. 10) give the text; Grauls (1957: 48) and de Coö (1966: 31) discuss the variant readings *vreemt* and *vreet* in the 1604 and 1618 editions (cf. Milne 2013: Ch. 2.).
- 33 On other saints and their dragons (though not, alas, Margaret) see Le Goff 1988: 159-88.
- 34 Cf. Van Mander (1969 [1604]: 233v): *een dulle Griet, die een roof voor de Helle doet, die seer verbijstert siet, en vreemt op zijn schots toghemaect is...* The phrase, "She could plunder in front of hell and return unscathed", appears in a proverb collection published at Kampen in 1551 (Gibson 1977: 102-8). In 1561, rederijkers referred in a farce to *Griet die den roof haelt voorde helle* (Griet who fetches the loot from hell) as the sort of woman only a fool would send to market (Marijnissen and Seidel 1984: 56, n. 9). On early comedies in general, see Chambers (1963 [1903]) and Hoffman von Fallersleben 1968 [1838] as in n. 15 above; many farces deal with the theme of the domineering wife and the hen-pecked husband.
- 35 As Davis (1975: 124-51) explains, men might cross-dress as women to avail themselves of the protection of carnivalesque license, while making political protests; cross-dressed women were treated less

- lightly; thus, for example, in 1619, Jersey's Royal Court convicted Katherine wife of Estienne le Saulteur of "having worn male attire, namely trunk hose, and [so] disguised to have been en resnerie by night, is condemned to be punished today in the [town's] public stocks, and Sunday next in the stocks of the parish of Saint Pierre, the trunk hose beside her" (Ogier 1998: 56). Breeches were used in Antwerp in the 1550s to "cover" condemned women, thus symbolically cross-dressing them (Milne 2013: Ch. 2; Wegg 1916: 316-7).
- 36 The image of the fence as an occult boundary is used in the proverb *Hij smit zijn kap over de haag* (which appears in Bruegel's *Netherlandish Proverbs*): "He throws his cowl over the hedge", about quitting a religious order (Dundes and Stibbe 1981: 39).
- 37 Trance techniques imply dowsing (Van Gennepe 1935: 2.598, 690-4). On popular books *plein de conjurations ... pour decouvrir des trésors*, Van Heurck 1931: 140-1. Treasure-seeking is a popular motif in peasant comic dream-anecdotes (Milne 2013: Ch.2).
- 38 Geiler von Kaisersberg, *Die Emeis...* (1516: ff. XLIIv-XLIIr; see our figs. 1a & b), and Johannes Nider, *Praeceptorium divinae legis* (2012 [1481]: I.x & xi) were reprinted together at Rome in 1559; often excerpted in seventeenth-century witchcraft manuals.
- 39 The popularity of the rebus is in itself a large subject, worthy of further study from the point of view of changing *mentalités*, encompassing the theatre, popular speech, art, literature, paremiologies, encyclopedias, hermetic and didactic works. Emblem books, for instance, such as Paradin's *Devises Héroïques* (1561), were at the height of their popularity in the second half of the century. See e.g. Ong 1976: 91-126; Milne 2013: Ch. 3.
- 40 Lévi-Strauss (1977: 210-11) defines mythemes as the irreducible "gross constituent units" of mythological narrative, always found as "bundles of relations". Muchembled (1985: 80) discusses how the meaning of folkloric material changes with context: "In other regions the general signs of good and bad fortune differ from or even contradict the examples we have chosen here, and relatively seldom are animals and things connected with one quality alone, diabolical or beneficent ... Signs did not have fixed meanings in peasant thought because the forces that they helped to interpret were themselves not fixed. Every detail was important to interpretation: time, place, and circumstances coloured positively or negatively what seems to us to be the same phenomenon."

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