Across early modern Europe, thousands of those accused of witchcraft confessed to attending nocturnal assemblies where they danced, feasted, and fornicated with demons, where members of an underground cult affirmed and reaffirmed their allegiance to the devil, where would-be plots were made and spells were cast, where children were sacrificed and then consumed in anthropophagous rituals. Sometimes termed ‘nocturnal assemblies’, ‘the game’, ‘the synagogue’, or ‘the sabbat’, this would-be satanic ritual defines early modern European witchcraft, setting it apart from other belief systems involving maleficium (harmful magic). Among contemporary historians, there is now consensus that the witches’ sabbat was in no way an actual occurrence. Nevertheless, thousands of accused ‘witches’ produced these first-person narratives that sealed their fate, for documents reveal that defendants almost inevitably abandon their initial denials and confess to having attended the sabbat.

In the sixteenth century opinions on the sabbat diverged, but one can pinpoint two tendencies, which Françoise Lavocat has characterized as the realists (those who believed that the sabbat was a very real occurrence) and the illusionists (those who considered the sabbat to be a dream or hallucination, in some cases inspired by the devil). In sixteenth-century Europe, Johann Weyer was no doubt the most influential illusionist while Jean Bodin became the most virulent spokesman for the realist school.
For Bodin and other realists, the witches’ sabbat was a very real event posing the greatest threat imaginable to humanity. Although it took place in the shadows, in very dark places, it was not invisible to God who could only be angered by the proliferation of witchcraft and the laxity of judges and princes who ignored what Bodin took to be unambiguous commandments regarding magic, most notably in *Exodus* xxii.17: “Thou shalt not suffer the witch to live”, a verse quoted repeatedly in *De la Démonomanie des sorciers* (1580).

Bodin composed his treatise with the express purpose of awakening his contemporaries to what he saw as a mounting tide of Satanism. And in this endeavour, confessions from trials constituted his primary source of evidence. In the sixteenth-century science of demons, knowledge about witchcraft was drawn from the accounts of would-be participants, and the pages of the *Démonomanie* are peppered with fragments from confessions or allusions to them. A superficial survey of the treatise reveals over one hundred variations on the formula “confessed that… (*confessa que* …)”. If these confessions, mostly by unlettered women, trump traditional philosophical or historical sources in the *Démonomanie*, it is because of the nature of demonology. As Lyndal Roper observes, early modern demonology was to a large degree a science founded on the evidence of experience. Confession was valued precisely because it was believed to make witches experiences accessible—experiences horrific and strange, but true for demonologists of the realist school such as Jean Bodin, well aware that confession was the basis for both understanding and prosecuting witchcraft. For in the science of demons, confession was used as the primary method of investigation, verification, and validation. The first-person narratives furnished by the ‘witches’ themselves gave the demonologist access to the hidden world of demons and their earthly agents. Witchcraft theory emerged out of an auricular regime in which the truth had to be spoken by the witch herself, or rather “extracted from her mouth,” truth that the demonologist could hear but not see.

Demonologists intent on deciphering the sabbat relied on the confessions generated in trials for witchcraft. In early modern France, condemning a witch usually required extracting a confession—proof of guilt in capital cases such as witchcraft. The Roman-canon law required high

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