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## **Witchcraft and its changing representation in Eastern Gelderland, from the sixteenth to twentieth century**

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WITCHCRAFT AND ITS CHANGING  
REPRESENTATION IN EASTERN  
GELDERLAND, FROM THE SIXTEENTH TO  
TWENTIETH CENTURIES

Willem Frijhoff

Witch doctors, the topic of the preceding chapter, comprise a group of people who are instrumental in shaping a concrete image of witchcraft and sorcery in their community. They express the unarticulated or poorly conceived notions about the existence and nature of a bewitchment, as well as identify the witch responsible, and offer advice in uncertain cases and critical situations. In short, they name the phenomena and identify the persons involved. We could call them 'image-making agents,' for before they exorcise the spirits, they chart them, order the phenomena, and name the responsible parties. Thus, the experience surrounding the system of practices and beliefs that are collectively referred to as 'witchcraft,' is a complex one. Not only do the opponents of witchcraft beliefs or the victims of witchcraft phenomena play an influential role in the image-making, but in their function as cultural intermediaries witch doctors particularly do.

The witch doctor using – often unconsciously – the authority that his power to exorcise confers on him, impresses on his clients a certain positive or negative image of that which is exorcised. If an exorcist is a more or less literate cleric, which was often the case in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, then he would transmit a more or less educated view of witchcraft and diabolical intervention, without there necessarily being any conscious indoctrination. Obviously, it is no longer possible to trace this image-making process from case to case. Nevertheless, it is important to realize that the image of witchcraft, sorcerer, and witch evolved through all sorts of channels, changing over time. Not only do printed literature and judicial proceedings contribute to this image, but common witchcraft practices do as well. This chapter attempts to broadly chart these channels for a particular region over a long period of time, without attempting to be exhaustive in the research itself. It is variety that matters here, not comprehensiveness.

## The Devil: Between Scepticism and Belief

The region under consideration is the part of the province of Gelderland that lies east of the river IJssel: the former district or county of Zutphen together with a few enclaves and free manors, as well as small sections of the old Duchy of Cleves. Only a fifth of the area's 77, 000 inhabitants in 1795 lived in towns, and half of those lived in the capital city of Zutphen. In other words, it was mainly an agrarian area, and what industry there was – iron and textiles – was principally found in the populous villages. From the religious census of 1809 it appeared that the population in the rural area was more than one-third Catholic, although there were local peaks with over 90% in the border regions. The Liemers district, formerly part of Cleves, was almost entirely Catholic. Among this not insignificant but long-threatened Catholic section of the population, the influence of the clergy was undoubtedly one of the most important factors for providing continuity. It was the source of the group's social cohesion and made it possible to identify the local congregation amid those of different persuasions. This social necessity fitted in with the prevailing cultural pattern that still relied to a great extent on the magic order, particularly at crucial moments in the individual and collective experience. Thus the Catholic priest's position of authority accrued not only through his role as a rational religious group leader, embodying a rational form of belief, but also through the fact that he was required to play a part (although frequently it was an inadvertent one) in the magic world view that dominated the existence of his faithful flock. Thus the community invested its priest with a power from which he could not escape, even though he may hardly have believed in it himself, if at all. Hence there was a continual potential for fundamental misunderstanding. While the priest believed that he was performing a *religious* or moral deed through his exorcism, one that was sustained by the institution of the Church, the person at the receiving end interpreted it as a *magic* action. What one saw as liturgical, the other understood as magical. What was offered as exorcism, was construed to be disenchantment. The order of belief in the devil and that of magic only seem to overlap: they operate in completely different semantic fields. Yet it was through this overlapping that the image of the devil deeply pervaded and radically distorted the image of both male and female witch.

This was evident in the propaganda booklet *Van der verveerlicken aenstaende tyt Endechristes* (*Of the Terrible Coming Time of the Antichrist*, which was an adaptation of the *Prognosticon Multa et Mirabilia de Terribilissimo Maledicti Antichristi Aduentu Loquens* by the same author), published in 1524 in Deventer most likely by a monk from East Gelderland on orders from Charles of Egmond, Duke of Gelderland.<sup>1</sup> In reaction to the success of Luther's preaching, the author examines the spiritual situation in the areas he is familiar with for signs that could prove Luther to be the precursor of the Antichrist. One of the signs

is black magic, which will be used by the Antichrist, and that is the very sign that he sees all around him. Is there not a tremendous increase in witchcraft? An increase in the number of 'milk witches, who belong to the devil body and soul, [with which] the whole world is now full, more than there have been from the beginning of time?' They are henchmen of the Antichrist since they associate with the devil. No wonder that 'the old...milk witches' follow after the heretics: since the devil has clouded their insight into the soundness of doctrine, they are blinded by the purity of living displayed by the heretics. But they will all burn together under Beelzebub, the fourth captain of the devils. In this treatise, which was intended for a wide lay public, the amalgam of belief in the devil and witchcraft – the image of the diabolical witch – is clearly hammered in by the priest himself.

But priests could also reinforce the confusion in a subtler way. One of the oldest works on witchcraft from the Northern Netherlands is a book written in 1559, *Tooveren, wat dat voor een werc is* (*Bewitching, what kind of work that is*) by Jacob Vallick, a pastor in Groessen,<sup>2</sup> a village that was once part of Cleves, now in Gelderland. In this work, Vallick, whom we know from another source to be a well-educated and conscientious pastor, and who was himself the son of the local priest, seems to be an Erasmian cleric who no longer believes in magical thinking. In a lively dialogue he presents two women from his flock, Mechteld and Elisabeth, who wrangle over what is the most sensible way to deal with the threefold misfortune that has befallen Elisabeth: her horse is ailing, her butter will not churn, and her husband is suffering from a mysterious disease. She thinks that witchcraft is the cause and she even knows who the guilty party is; she wants to visit a nearby monastery and fetch holy water to undo the spell on her husband and livestock. But Mechteld is more sensible and advises her to consult the parish priest. This priest has as little faith in disenchantment as he does in witchcraft. The use of holy water, which indeed is within his purview, is also out of the question for him. In his opinion this is a phenomenon originating from the realm of self-delusion. He declares himself to be in accord with the physicians who place witchcraft in the realm of sickness: through melancholy and madness sick people are deluded into thinking that they are possessed or bewitched by the devil. Thus the solution does not lie in disenchantment rituals, whether approved by the Church or not, but in a change in spiritual, or psychic, attitude. Men and women who imagine themselves to be bewitched must learn to lead such pious lives that the devil no longer has the power to impose such psychoses on them. The first signs of the Catholic reformation, which was to take shape in the Council of Trent, are already apparent here. For Vallick the priest is no longer a man of ritual but a man of the Word who tries to lead his flock to a virtuous life by means of a reasonable religion.

And it is precisely there, in this period of transition between the magic and

the modern world view, that we may expect to find the confusion. While Vallick rejects witchcraft, he firmly believes in the devil – a powerful devil who is the direct adversary of God. He denies his flock the support they derived from magic ritual, but in its place depicts the figure of a powerful devil to which they can cleave. The common man, who despite the clergy's changing expostulations continues to confront the reality of his everyday life – threatened as it is on all sides by unexplained calamities – thus amalgamated the familiar, whether swaggering or malevolent but ever-capricious devil from the old, magic world view with the much more intellectual, impassive, forbidding devil of the new, rational world view. A new term emerges: *duivelbanner* (exorcist of the devil) replaces *geestenbanner* (exorcist of evil spirits). Instead of vanquishing spirits, it is now a question of banishing the devil – but not everybody understands the same thing by that 'devil.' We hear that in the answer given to a judge in 1647 by a farmer's wife, who, in response to his Vallick-style question why she does not pray to God instead of running to a witch doctor, said: 'We can get that man [the witch doctor], but we cannot get God.' For this woman God and his mighty adversary are distant, nebulous powers. Day-to-day disasters are reality, and a witch doctor is sufficient to perform the ritual that wards off such diabolical work.

### **Doctor, Priest, Minister**

Vallick's lucid booklet seems to contrast sharply with the thick volume that propelled his fellow countryman Johan Wier (1515–1588), or Weyer in the German spelling, to fame a few years later. Wier's study, *De Praestigiis Daemonum et Incantationibus ac Veneficis* (1563) (*On the Effects of Devils, Enchantments and Poisoners*) is a learned exposé that is chockfull of humanist erudition but that also draws on the author's everyday experience and that of his contemporaries.<sup>3</sup>

Even more than Vallick's, Wier's work is characterized by a new, medical view of the witchcraft phenomena that he had come in contact with during his career as physician to the Gelderland city of Arnhem starting in 1545, and as personal physician to the Duke of Cleves, Jülich, and Berg starting in 1550. In his work he endorses the verdict pronounced in 1548 by the Court of Gelderland against the sorcerer M. Jacobus Judoci de Rosa of Courtrai: his ring, in which 'it is supposed that an evil spirit is imprisoned,' was to be smashed to pieces with a hammer, his witchcraft books burned, and he himself banished from Gelderland and Zutphen.<sup>4</sup> But Wier's attitude is certainly not one of complete scepticism. He seems firmly convinced of the wicked magic of the devil, particularly when it comes to concrete cases of witchcraft or obsession that he had witnessed himself or knew from reliable sources. It is not the devil of religion

that he rejects, but the devil of magic. After all, since the devil is so powerful, he does not need magic. So for Wier, the devil is the fundamental reality, not witchcraft. And insofar as there may be phenomena without logical explanation that can neither be ascribed to God or the devil, they should be considered illusions or other aberrations of the human mind. His clinical, natural diagnosis of witchcraft belief as a psychic abnormality – that is, provided the devil himself is not clearly implicated – makes Wier critical of the qualifications of criminal justice for dealing with witchcraft. Witchcraft is really a matter for the physician. Sympathy is a more appropriate response than punishment for such sick and gullible people. The use of ordeals and other means to identify male and female witches are entirely wrong, for they are part and parcel of the magical order that Wier refutes.

There is a remarkable passage in his work that seems to indicate that Wier had personal contact with Vallick, although his portrait depicts a totally different priest from the one who emerged from the work analyzed above.

There was a pastor in a village who was very well known to me and to whom I had written to exhort him to give up his misguided ways, who ventured on the practice of medicine in which he was not qualified, and gave people to understand that he knew how to deal with witchcraft. At a certain time this same man had come to an enclosed nunnery of good reputation in a well-known Gelderland town [Arnhem] where he persuaded a young noblewoman, who was of weak health and had asked his advice, that she was bewitched. He consoled the nun and held out hope that he could help her. But then he found himself obliged to say a Mass over her stomach, which he did indeed do.<sup>5</sup>

According to the index of the German edition of Wier's work, which he himself edited, the person in question is the pastor of 'Gruessen,' meaning Vallick. A jurisdictional conflict is undoubtedly behind this episode. Wier was irritated by the priest's competition in the medical field; Vallick also emerges as the natural adviser for all sorts of illness from other examples. On first reading the priest of Groessen appears to be an exorcist who believes in witchcraft himself. But we may speculate that Wier, vexed as he was, may have taken liberties and exaggerated the situation, thereby consciously or unconsciously implying more active involvement in the magic universe than was really the case. The religious consolation scene is more in line with Vallick's (as well as Wier's) approach than the magic disenchantment ritual of the Mass – perhaps for want of better practices.

If this interpretation is correct, then Vallick and Wier are not fundamentally far apart. They share a generally sceptical view about magic. But their different societal positions and functions could explain the divergence in their everyday

methods. Wier, the representative of a profession that was in the process of disassociating itself from various types of competition that were designated as quackery, could allow himself to reject entirely any mingling of magic and medicine. Vallick, a new, more pastorally-oriented type of priest, is more inclined for pastoral reasons to be *formally* tolerant of the old ritual, now considered unchristian, while at the same time engaging in a vigorous *conceptual* refutation of its magic significance. If the obsessed nun really thinks that she will be helped by a Mass, then he will say one, but not without giving her the spiritual consolation that is manifest in his book. Wier is much more consistent: M. Jacobus de Rosa is a bamboozler, who by telling false stories about witchcraft tries to seduce people into putting their faith in the devil's help and then attempts to make money off of them. Wier rejects imagery based on the magic order and in its place proposes a new view of reality based on both technical, medical perspectives and on an enlightened faith.

At that point in time, the position of the priest was more ambiguous and would remain so for some decades. Is it merely coincidental that during the last quarter of the sixteenth century and the first quarter of the seventeenth – the crucial decades precisely when the Reformed Church was established and gained power – that the Catholic priest so clearly emerges as an exorcist? It is in this very capacity, which can be seen as part of the magic order, that he becomes the ideal antipode of and scapegoat for the new, secularized ideal of the Protestant minister. Since the minister rejects traditional ecclesiastical ritual, his verbal intervention in witchcraft affairs no longer has a magical dimension; moreover, he thereby precludes the transfer of spiritual power to his person. Thus, the few remaining Catholic priests now seem to embody a concentration of that power in their persons and sometimes incidentally derive an apologetic argument from it. This had some bearing, for instance, on the case of master Arendt Schimmelpenninck, former vicar of the church of St. Walburg in Zutphen, who was called to appear before the magistrates of that town on July 20, 1600 and who readily admitted that at the house of Evert Noordinck, sheriff of Brummen, he had 'undertaken to drive the ghost out of the aforesaid house by means of conjuration and exorcism and saying Mass day and night, and... had been thus engaged for three days.' His sentence was exile, but 10 years later a fresh charge 'on account of blessing, exorcising, baptizing, and saying Mass' came before the magistracy and as late as 1620 the Deventer church council complained to their colleagues in Zutphen 'that he [Schimmelpenninck] practiced necromancy and led many pious people astray, also in their town, and furthermore that he practiced his diabolical tricks here in this town and elsewhere.'

Even more ambiguous is the conduct of master Berndt of Südlohn in the Prince-bishopric of Münster, who in 1602 became parish priest of Lichtenvoorde, then still part of Münster, and a Catholic village. Only a year later the

classis of Zutphen demanded 'that that witch doctor, who is notorious throughout the country, and had therefore to leave the bishopric of Münster, misleads many people into superstition or strengthens their belief in it and should leave the country.' But master Berndt stayed. In the witchcraft trial that took place in 1610 in the neighboring jurisdiction of Bredevoort, it appears that farmers regularly consulted him about the sickness or death of cattle. On one such occasion he had 'replied that the neighbors got at the farmer and too often took note of him and his property, therefore [he could] not very well help this man.' Thus while the priest strictly adhered to his role as an exorcist when it came to taking action, in the people's imagination he was invested with a much broader gift of discernment. During the same trial Willem ten Oistendorp, who had been held in disrepute for witchcraft for some time and who had begged in vain to undergo the ordeal by water, was accused by Gertken up 't Goir (who herself admitted to having associated with the devil) of having danced and made music with her on Schroerman's meadow. Oistendorp immediately left for Lichtenvoorde to ask 'the Minister' for advice, 'whereupon master Beernt had answered him, that he was not guilty of it.' The priest evidently sensed the suggestion of demonological imagery in the accusation that would sidetrack the judges and refuses to affirm it. In the meantime master Berndt was increasingly inclining toward the new faith, to the point that he was even defrocked in 1614. When Lichtenvoorde came under the jurisdiction of the States General for good in 1616, Berndt traveled to Zutphen to offer minister Willem Baudartius (1565-1640) his services as Protestant minister of Lichtenvoorde. He confessed to him that he had been a sorcerer, 'namely when I said Mass, changing the wafer or host into the body of Jesus Christ, that is abominable witchcraft...I shall also gladly refrain from conjuration, blessing, and healing of man and beast and revealing the whereabouts of lost property.... Thus this Papist thought he could cleanse himself of his impurity,' Baudartius added, and naturally does not accept him.

The amalgam made here between the Catholic liturgy and the ritual of driving out spirits is not surprising, coming as it does from the pen of a Reformed minister in an area that was still largely Catholic. This confusion of images was part of the strategy of Protestantization. But the blurring of the dividing lines between the domains went further still. Baudartius' colleague, Sebastian Damman (1578-1640), who was also a minister in Zutphen, had a question put to him in May 1634 by a soldier of the garrison, who asked if he could break his marriage contract with his future bride, who had not only 'conversed' with another in the flesh, but had also 'often allowed herself to be used to drive out spirits.' Damman answered affirmatively, referring to Beza in relation to the first point, and adding the following argument: 'Driving out spirits is considered a kind of witchcraft, witchcraft (*pactum cum diabolo*) not only brings shame on the person concerned, but also on the children, causes in particular amongst



soldiers recriminations and even manslaughter.’ The magic and the demonological elements here have been fused and serve both as a legal and ethical argument. But Damman does not allow this ‘demonomagical’ image to tempt him into a witch-hunt or even a charge. His point of view is essentially that of a pastoral theologian, despite the fact that it contains shades of the old, magic imagery of witchcraft, but which he no longer considers correct.

His attitude fits in perfectly with that of his opponents, the priests schooled by the Counter-Reformation. The learned apostolic vicar (the provisional title of the archbishop of Utrecht, under Protestant rule) Philippus Rovenius (1574-1651), son of a headmaster of the famous school of Deventer and descended on his mother’s side from the Wijnhoffs, a line of Twente lawyers, included an extensive appendix on superstition in his treatise *Respublica Christiana* that was published in Antwerp in 1648.<sup>6</sup> The appendix was based almost entirely on the *Disquisitiones Magicae* (Louvain, 1599) by the Jesuit Martinus Delrio, which had made such a stir when the young Rovenius was a professor of theology in Cologne from 1600 to 1606. Rovenius clearly reveals a threefold inheritance in this work. The magical image world from his youth in the Eastern Netherlands, full of flying witches, still informs his imaginative frame of reference. Intellectually, he associates with Delrio’s rational explanations of the existence of the demons and the devil’s pact, which was influential during the time he was maturing as a scholar. But practically, he appears to be following more in Vallick’s and Wier’s footsteps than in Delrio’s: he renounces combating witchcraft by means of counter-magic using the host or holy oil, he rejects trial by ordeal, and generally urges great caution in witchcraft matters, because in his view witches are women who are suffering from a mental illness. Demonology here is no more than a remnant of a theological argumentation. It is not doctrine, but pastoral practice that determines Rovenius’ attitude.<sup>7</sup> Two generations later, demonology in fact disappeared and only the battle against superstition went on. A decree issued by the apostolic vicar Pieter Codde (1648-1710) on July 12, 1695, which was explicitly addressed to the Catholics in the rural area of the county of Zutphen, warns them ‘in cases of sickness or other afflictions [not] to have recourse to witch doctors, to superstitious practices and to other improper methods’ or to ‘driving out of spirits.’

### **Superstition, Folklore, and Popular Culture**

Thus, between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries the intellectual position of doctors, priests, and ministers undergoes a double transformation: first the domain of magic (witchcraft), which is either regarded with scepticism or is explained rationally, is differentiated from the domain of reason or faith or, better still, from the domain of reasonable faith, where a rational, dogmatic

doctrine of the devil is dominant. The primacy of reason demands that the magical universe be combated with knowledge (Wier) or with pastoral theology (Vallick, Rovenius, Damman). Secondly, demonology also loses its relevance for that (relatively) enlightened élite and only the struggle against 'superstition' remains (Codde). It was only once the bond with magic was broken and the dissociation from demonology achieved that it would become possible to completely divide what was soon to be known as 'popular belief' (superstition) from the culture of the enlightened upper class. The objectifying eye of the élite creates an entirely independent, coherent 'popular culture' that it 'discovers' as a sort of antipode to its own culture.

Among those surprised by the discovery of the apparent gulf between their own image world and the folklore of the country people, was Otto G. Heldring (1804-1876), a minister who had grown up in Zevenaar, a small town in the Liemers district. Under the pseudonym Meister Maorten Baordman, he published reminiscences of the magic universe of his youth in the Liemers district and elsewhere in the *Geldersche Volksalmanak* of 1872. But most significant was the poet Anthonie C. W. Staring (1767-1840), seigneur of the Wildenborch by Vorden, who played an active part in the small circle of early folklorists.<sup>8</sup> Staring's daily contact with the farmhands on his estate led to his growing interest in their culture, particularly in his later years. Thus in 1829, as part of the nascent mythological research, he published an interpretation of a number of stories that he had collected in his immediate area, including one about the *Duivelskolken* (Devil's Abysses) in Lochem and one from his own estate about the so-called *Schelleguurtjesbelt*, a small hill which he associated with pre-Christian underground spirits. Presumably, from his own youth he was already familiar with the figure of the *witte wieven* (female aerial spirits who were sometimes considered malignant, sometimes wise), but it was the interest of his son-in-law, Antoni Brants, who lived on a neighboring estate, that prompted him to query his farmhands about them. He set about at once rewriting in literary form the tale about the *Wittewievenkuil* (hollow of the white spirits) in Barchem that his workers disclosed to him.

According to his annotations, his Jaromir-cycle, which appeared in 1832, is based on extremely varied sources, partly from his youth (the chapbook *De Historie van Valentyn en Ourson*, for example), but also on local tales that he had recorded in his later years, such as the legend of the Devil's Abysses of Lochem. The apparition of the devil in the shape of a dog from *Jaromir te Zutphen* (a poem that relates the temptation of the monk Jaromir by the devil, who tries to make him betray his religious duties) was derived by Staring himself from 'a dog's tracks (declared suspect in earlier times)...in the red floor tiles' of the Chapter Library of the St. Walburg Church in Zutphen. Thus, devils from the local tradition and those of religious faith have been combined in a palatable blend that can no longer offend the élite and is harmless for the

people. The magic described by Staring is a distant, rationally explicable magic, couched in a cultured literary form. The great success (which was local as well) of Staring's poetical work explains how his version of the legend of the Lochem Devil's Abysses, for example, gradually changed from 'high' literature to 'low' literature, with the consequence that a century later it was considered to be an old 'folktale' around Lochem. The same applies to the episode of the devil's visit to Jaromir in the Library in Zutphen. Originally Staring's own invention, this story is now part of the still very lively local traditions. Staring acted here primarily – and undoubtedly unintentionally – as an 'agent of image-making' for witchcraft and belief in the devil. He created 'popular culture' in the fullest sense of the word.

### **The Witch of Demonology and the Witch of Legend**

To be sure, this does not mean that the image of sorcerer or witch has always been mediated by learned thought. What the foregoing does make apparent, however, is that with regard to imagery and its functions it is always important to look out for distortions and shifts that may have been caused by the influence of dominant or dissonant social and cultural groups. In studying how the image of witchcraft is shaped, special attention should be paid to the relationship of the magical universe and its agents (the sorcerer, the legendary witch) to the demonological imagery, dominated by the idea of the devil's pact and its practical implications. While elements of both images of witchcraft are found in East Gelderland, there is no way to verify the hypothesis advanced by many foreign scholars that the witch of legend has a highly original 'folk' quality, while the demonological image of the witch derives from learned thought. Let us avoid the error of reasoning from hindsight. In fact, on the basis of the relatively scanty and mostly summary sources on East Gelderland witch trials from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries,<sup>9</sup> it is possible to conclude nothing more than that the traditional 'folk' form of witchcraft remained dominant, despite the resolute attempts by Charles of Egmond, Duke of Gelderland to demonologize matters. This also applied to the image world of the judges, who well into the sixteenth century actually had little or no legal training. They did not pick out demonological elements from confessions so that with the aid of torture they could weld them into a coherent picture, as was the case at the same time in the Southern Netherlands, Germany, and France. The form remains hybrid.

This is very clear in the trial that took place in 1610 in Bredevoort. In answer to a question about the devil, the accused, Gertken up 't Goir, confessed, 'Yes, the devil had kept her under his control, had always come to her in human form and thereafter disappeared. Had promised her three stivers for every cow

she would bewitch.... She had danced on Schroerman's meadow, about once in three weeks,' while her male companions 'had drummed on a cauldron, sitting on a willow branch.' The judges ignored the suggestion of the devil's pact and the Sabbath that is presented here.

Still more obvious was the hesitation of the judges some years earlier in the last trial in East Gelderland that definitely led to a death sentence. This was in 1605 in the little town of 's-Heerenberg, in the semi-autonomous county of Bergh, which in fact at that time had a Catholic lord. Old Mechteld ten Ham, the widow of the town messenger, was rumored to have caused a boy's death by witchcraft, whereupon she had requested the ordeal by water, in order to purge herself of culpability. As soon as this became known, however, various citizens decided the time was right to bring some old grievances before the court. Mechteld was supposed to have used witchcraft to cause the death of a horse and of a girl who had just been cured of the plague, and had caused the illness of another horse (which fortunately was saved with holy water) and a cow. Two of the aggrieved also claimed that their little son Hendrick, who had died of the plague three years before, had at the time been sent to Mechteld with a message and 'had seen through the keyhole [of the front door] a gentleman with a large plume sitting at Mechteld's table, on which there was much food and specially also pig's feet and he added that when he, Hendrick, had knocked at the back and been let in, he looked round for this gentleman and did not find him nor the table with food.' Evidently, this story had been repeated frequently, for Mechteld sent a request from prison that it not be used in the indictment. Does it not seem reasonable to assume that Mechteld realized that it could lead to demonological implications over which she would have no control?

Mechteld soon lost control of the proceedings anyway, for she floated to the surface three times during the water ordeal and was thus found guilty. Under torture she first confessed that she had learned witchcraft 'in her house,' later 'that she had learnt witchcraft from the wicked enemy,' who had come to her 'in the shape of a young man' – thus associating herself with young Hendrick's story. Once released from her fetters she retracted everything, but during the night when she was again subjected to torture with a collar with sharp points, she confessed before six sworn guards that a very old woman, the widow of an innkeeper, had taught her to how to practice witchcraft: she 'had told her she would become rich, but she must forsake God; thereupon a man looking like a knight had come to her and had given her a golden coin of a guilder. She also confessed that...they had danced together on the Dam and also on the Market in Bergh.' Did such demonological representations really flourish among the local inhabitants of the little town? Or had they become known because of a rumor of a witch trial that had taken place two years before in the nearby town of Nijmegen in which the (much better qualified) judges

had indeed tried to develop a coherent demonological confession? One thing is certain: apart from popular opinion, everyone in Bergh was at a loss for what to do. The distant lawyer whom the count consulted decided on death at the stake, the reason for which remains unknown. But the bailiff and members of the court of Bergh, none of whom apparently had legal training, do not require a devil, they are satisfied with the *maleficium*. In the judgment the bailiff states only 'that she was guilty of witchcraft and had thereby harmed a man named in the records and killed some of his cattle.' Neither the devil, let alone the gentleman with the plumes, is mentioned in the verdict.

The reluctance to establish an organic link between witchcraft and belief in the devil is undoubtedly the most important reason for their rapid divergence and the different rhythms of their evolution. In the eastern parts of Gelderland, witchcraft essentially remains outside the realm of demonology, and it is perpetuated and strengthened because of this. Since jurisprudence is unable to eradicate magical practices, they are gradually withdrawn from the criminal sphere. Although both the bailiff of Bergh (in 1647) and the bailiff of Bredevoort (in 1675) forbade the water ordeal, in both cases the local inhabitants either forced them to back down or took the law into their own hands. Nevertheless, the test loses some of its authority, as shown in the case of Aaltje Brouwers from Eibergen, who in 1694 was not cleared of the suspicion of witchcraft by the water ordeal and decided to submit to a second test – this time on the scales in the weighing house of Oudewater. This decision incurred the disapproval of the classis, who barred her from the Communion service. At the request of the classis, the lord of Borculo then agreed to forbid the ordeal by water as a 'disgraceful act, dishonoring the true Reformed religion and strengthening the superstitious papacy.' In addition, in view of the prevalence of such tests in the region, the classis wanted to bring the problem up at the synod and asked that measures be taken by the state. At the same time, the classis opposed witch doctors such as Peter Spittael, who operated in Baak, near Zutphen, and claimed 'to be able to drive out the devil and perform other magical healing.' He was censured as being 'convinced of imagined devils and exorcism,' and year after year, until 1698, his case was on the agenda of the meetings of the classis.

### **Impulses toward a Denominational Reinterpretation**

The reference made by the classis of Zutphen to the 'superstitious papacy' undoubtedly belongs to the classic Protestantization strategy and is therefore essentially an element in the process of mutual stigmatization in the local community: magic views and practices are put in the same category of superstition that encompasses Catholicism. But here there is a subtle interaction between image creation and reality, although it will never be entirely clear to what

extent the two evoked and reinforced each another. Magic practices not infrequently relied on forms of Catholic ritual, made use of *sacramentalia* or were somehow analogous to it. The Catholic priest's ambiguous position with his liturgical as well as functional exorcism was discussed above. Thus witchcraft gradually came to have a somewhat denominational cast – a process visible from the early seventeenth century on.

The process by which witchcraft got a denominational value is abundantly clear in the proceedings instituted by the Court of Gelderland in 1700 against a number of inhabitants of the town of Doesburg. The complex of events that come to the fore in this trial centers on the sick wife of a Catholic wheelwright. While the pious wheelwright definitely refuses recourse to a witch doctor, he does agree to the intercession of a urine diviner. When the urine of the wheelwright's sick wife is boiled, it reveals the guilty party to be a Protestant neighbor, a rather simple soul who was already in disrepute for witchcraft. The witch was taken by Catholic friends of the wheelwright to his house so that she could heal the sick woman by her blessing. Because of the religious separation, however, this simple exorcistic act acquired an added symbolic value of a denominational nature. The group of Catholics demand a form of blessing that is specific to their group and that the Protestant witch is not capable of pronouncing: 'Thou must not bless in this way, thou must bless in the name of another. Thy God may indeed be the devil, bless her in the name of Jesus and of the five wounds of Christ.' Moreover, during the witch's trial, her husband, a shoemaker, testifies in her favor that from the age of three on his wife had possessed the gift of transmitting the message of the wandering departed and of being able to see spirits, and that her parents had in desperation sent her – a Protestant! – to a convent to try to cure her of it. In vain.

Identifying witchcraft with the experiential world of Catholics is one of the most essential characteristics of witchcraft in East Gelderland as manifest in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This is not even so much due to witchcraft's recourse to rituals – such as the revolving key on the gospel of St. John or using that gospel to drive out spirits, crossing oneself or drawing a cross, using 'Easter water' or relics – which are ambiguous, ecclesiastically speaking, and which in a situation of intensified denominational antagonism could easily be interpreted as elements of 'Catholic' imagery. But more than anything, it is due to the recourse to the Catholic priests as proven exorcists, found everywhere in the more recent legend material. These priests (in particular the regulars of the monasteries in Huissen, Harreveld, Wehl, Babberich, Vorden, and the Elterberg) not only serve both Catholics and Protestants in cases of bewitchment, but do not hesitate on occasion to use their power to prove their denomination's rectitude. The priest ceremoniously conjures up the spirit of Luther or Calvin so as to render it harmless, to the greater glory of his church. This behavior, however, degrades witchcraft to a conjuring trick, transporting it

from the magic or sacred domain to that of social antagonisms. Concurrently with those antagonisms, it would thus lose its power and validity after the Second World War, just as the image of rural culture that witchcraft had acquired during the last century led to its decline as soon as the distinction between urban and rural values and their respective lifestyles began to fade.

#### NOTES

1. Cf. H. Niebaum et al., *Der Deventer Endechrist von 1524. Ein reformationsgeschichtliches Zeugnis I* (Cologne-Vienna 1984).
2. Vallick's treatise is known to exist in a German translation, printed in Dancau (1576) and reprinted after Wier (1586), as well as a somewhat divergent, clearly Dutchified version in Vallick (1598). Up to now no copy has been found of the original text of 1559 (the date mentioned in the foreword), which was undoubtedly written in the Low German dialect of the Eastern Netherlands. Wier's reference (1563) points to the fact that this edition did indeed exist. The author of this chapter is at present preparing a reissue and analysis of Vallick's booklet. For Vallick and his relation to Wier, see: Frijhoff (1990a).
3. For Wier see: Binz (1885), Dooren (1940), and more recently, Van Nahl (1983). Béné (1979) shows Wier as a critical pupil of Erasmus. Van Nahl has selected the concrete, contemporary examples of witchcraft from Wier's work, without, however, comparing them with the historical sources. For Wier's medical views (for example, reducing the belief in werewolves to melancholy), see Zilboorg (1935), Anglo (1976), and Baxter (1977). It may seem strange that while Wier himself translated his principal work (1563), which he wrote in Latin, into High German (and which was also translated into French by someone else), it was never translated into Low German or Dutch. In 1660 his collected works were published in Amsterdam, but in Latin. It was only in 1577 that the Zutphen church warden Derck van Tyll bought the French (!) edition *Cinq livres de l'imposture et tromperie des diables* for the Chapter library of the St. Walburg Church. Since no thorough research has been carried out on Wier's reception in the Northern Netherlands, a certain amount of scepticism about his actual influence in that area seems in order.
4. Shortly after his banishment, in 1549, he turned up in Haarlem, then in Breda and Flushing, and in 1552 in Deventer.
5. Wier (1578) fol. 32v-33r; cf. Van Nahl (1983) 111-112.
6. Cf. J. Visser, *Rovenius und seine Werke* (Assen 1966).
7. On the Dutch élites renunciation of belief in magic, cf. Frijhoff (1990 b).
8. On early Dutch folklore research, see Frijhoff (1989).
9. See Chapter 4.