

Heinrich Ludwig Fischer, *The Book of Superstition, Abuse, and False Delusions* (1790)

Abstract

In his *Buch vom Aberglauben*, published in a number of editions in the 1790s, Heinrich Ludwig Fischer sought to show the folly of believing in witchcraft and magic. An enlightened Lutheran schoolmaster, he ridiculed popular superstitions and magical beliefs, but his work also shows an interest in folklore as he relates “quaint” rural beliefs and customs for his literate audience.

Source

Walpurgis Night

Who has not heard of the extravagant festivities that the witches celebrate in the infamous Walpurgis Night on the notorious Blockberg? It is hardly necessary to say how they travel there and the nature of how they enjoy themselves there; for who has not heard of it? A broomstick, a distaff, an oven fork,^[1] a black billy-goat, on which they sit, takes them through the narrow ravine, high up through the air, like a flash to that place where Satan is waiting for them. According to the ridiculous fantasy of the superstitious, he is sitting there in an elevated place, as the witches and devils dance around him in a circle, some of them having morphed into the form of animals. The music is similarly provided by devilish animals. And when the feast has been relished, and Beelzebub has received tribute and been reassured of the loyalty of his admirers, the army of demons departs in the same manner as they arrived. It all must happen in the midnight hour between eleven and twelve o'clock.

When people or livestock fall ill with ailments that one cannot heal straight away, simple people suspect immediately that witches have caused it. Cunning tricksters then use this for their own gain, claiming that they can drive away the witchcraft: to this end they often give the sick person herbs or perform all sorts of other pranks that often do more harm than good. And if there is a natural recovery, then suddenly that means he or she is responsible, and one calls him or her a sorcerer or a witch. They enjoy this, even if they do not want to be publicly acknowledged as such, for they can charge others a pretty penny for their skills, live well from it, and laugh about the ignorance of the others. This ridiculous belief in witchcraft comes from the heathen and the Jews, and it is based on pure deception and deceit. There are, in fact, certain herbs which can drug a person and put one into a deep sleep. Then one dreams so vividly that one believes it all happened in real life. A long time ago, there were tricksters who knew of such herbs. If they somehow made a plan and wanted to take money from the others, they prattled on about how one could get rich with sorcery and even achieve whatever other goals one might desire. And if the other expressed interest, they explained to them how to go about it: that one had to sign oneself over to the devil with one's own blood, that one had to be rebaptized and have a new sponsor; and that after this every witch would have a spirit as her groom, and every sorcerer a spirit as his bride; and that on Walpurgis, the entire witches' guild would celebrate a bountiful feast with music and dancing at the Blocksberg, and other such ridiculous stuff. And they presumably named the one or the other who was already involved. And when Walpurgis evening came, they said that one had to prepare oneself for it, gave the person such herbs that caused them to dream so vividly, smeared a salve on them in various places, and tried however they could to stimulate the imagination to convince them of the whole thing. Because the women were most susceptible to such deceptions and easier to convince and lead astray, they were more often sought out for this [deceit]. Such a woman then dreamed in the night about that which had so filled her soul, as is typical of our dreams. And then she fancies that she is riding on a broom

or oven fork through the air and dancing at the Blocksberg, where the devil appears as a billy-goat. And when she wakes up, she believes it all to have truly happened, tells the one or other trusted friend about everything that [supposedly] happened, especially if she thinks herself to have seen the other person at the devil's wedding, and gives her some of the witches' salve. And the other, even if she knew nothing of it before, either does not dare to set things right and give notice of her ignorance, or she wishes to take part in the feast herself. And so, when the expected night comes around again, she, too, smeared herself with the salve and believed and dreamed as the former. This needed to happen only once, and the thing was settled, and thus sometimes most of the women in a village were considered witches; maybe they even believed it themselves without knowing at all what had actually happened. They gave themselves over to these supposedly secret arts; nothing was thus more certain than that they were witches and traveled to the Blocksberg on Walpurgis Night. And this belief spread from house to house, from one place to another, on and on. The pope, the bishops, and other clergymen who heard of it finally came to believe themselves that it was true, and they forbade witches and sorcerers by pain of death, and encouraged the secular authorities, as well, to punish them and to burn those who were held to be witches. And so when an unfortunate person came to be suspected of witchcraft, she was tormented in the torture chamber until she said: Yes, she was one. And then she was tortured further, until she had named those acquaintances who were with her at the devil's banquet. So the poor tortured woman, gripped by fear, named those which she had thus far suspected. These were arrested and tortured until they were senseless from the pain and confessed their guilt to be relieved from the torment. And then they were all taken to be burned at the stake. It also happened that someone told the judges what they wanted to hear about the what and how without being tortured, and this reinforced the judges' belief that it was all true. Thus it happened long ago that thousands of innocent people were tortured and lost their lives on account of a sorcery of which they knew nothing.

Or did the saga of the annual witches' dance at the Blocksberg perhaps originate as follows? The shepherds in the area in former times are thought to have spent the day before Walpurgis in revelry, often frolicking and dancing until late in the night. Because one could see their lights and jumping movements on the mountain from far away, but had no explanation for them, people came up with all sorts of stories, including some with the curious suggestion that it was something supernatural, witches, and with them the devil, and so forth; and this was passed on from mouth to mouth.

I was once on the Blocksberg myself. I was shown the witches' altar and the devil's pulpit, two large mounds of stone made of large stone slabs and partially of long pieces, put together with no order, which a single person could hardly have moved on one's own. They have a sort of shape that might, when approached with great expectations and imagination, be considered somewhat more ordered. The uncanny appearance of the stones inspired the ignorant to believe and explain that the devil had rolled them together thus, and the others spread this story, just as one is generally inclined to ascribe to the poor black-horned creature whatever appears inscrutable to stupid eyes. I looked for that infamous place where the witches are supposed to dance on Walpurgis Night, but found no place where they could do so without tripping over stones. The highest peak of the Brocken, which one can walk around in about half an hour, is marked with a stone (presumably the stone where the devilish billy-goat sits when the witches dance around him), and around it there is grass and moss growing, but not in the rest of the space. This is attributed to the annual meeting of the devil and his admirers; but it would certainly be covered in the same plants as the rest of the mountain if not for the fact that those who accompany travelers to the top have cleaned it. This is what gives it its unusual appearance; this feeds the curiosity of strangers to see the spot, and one expects better pay. Another case of greed for profits sustaining superstition? As certainly and clearly unfounded as the impressions from Walpurgis Night are, measures have been invented to protect oneself from the associated dangers. One must, say the superstitious, draw three crosses on all the doors on Walpurgis Night, and anywhere else one has something in safekeeping, and fire guns over the fields so that the witches can take nothing from them or do any damage. If the devil and witches—if it were possible for there to be witches—had the power to do

damage, they would not turn away even if one painted crosses on the entire house, all the doors, and oneself. We always have so many crosses on ourselves, and make this gesture in nearly all our activities, that we would not need to draw them in chalk, if they do not help us in the other forms or something were there which would ensure our safety. Nearly all our clothing is made of threads which crisscross over each other. The woodcutter[’s movements] trace the shape of a cross, and so on. And again, if witches could exist who could travel to the Blocksberg, their path would hardly pass through all the houses and chambers? And should the witches high up in the air be afraid of the gunfire? Besides, according to the opinions of the superstitious, the witches travel at fast speeds. How should they have the time to despoil the fields or steal things? One such person claims that to see the witches, one must lie down stark naked and flat on one’s back at a crossroads on Walpurgis Night. But who has ever tried that out and seen anything?

NOTES

[1] An implement with a long handle and forked end for moving pots or bread in a hot oven.

Source: Heinrich Ludwig Fischer, *Das Buch vom Aberglauben, Mißbrauch und falschen Wahn: Ein nöthiger Beytrag zum Unterricht-, Noth- und Hülfsbüchlein*. Oberdeutschland, [Leipzig] : Im Verlag des Unterricht-, Noth- und Hülfsbüchlein, 1790, p. 135–41. Available online at: <https://mdz-nbn-resolving.de/details:bsb10133174>

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