

The Mythmaker of the Sabbat:

Pierre de Lancre's *Tableau de l'inconstance des mauvais anges et demons*

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It is the summer of 1609, and an observer watches the children of Saint-Jean-de-Luz and Ciboure play. The two seafaring communities on opposing banks of the river Nivelle were connected by a bridge, and the observer may well have stood on it. At least, he saw naked children play in the water below. Their ability to swim as the river water crashed into the Atlantic Ocean amazed him, disappearing as they did 'a hundred thousand times in these great heaps, which were white like snowflakes, and by their very whiteness were like a headband which blinded us' (46).<sup>1</sup> So rough was the sea that its movements were 'capable of drowning the strongest courage of the most constant philosopher of the world' (46). Yet, some children even dived head-down from the bridge in pursuit of some small piece of coin, only to emerge five hundred feet from where they went in. To us this scene may appear idyllic, perhaps even glistening in the summer sun, but our observer, the Bordeaux judge Pierre de Lancre (1556–1631), saw something dark and sinister stirring underneath the surface with children at the very root of an evil conspiracy.<sup>2</sup>

The witch-hunt De Lancre conducted, together with his colleague, Jean d'Espaignet (1564–c. 1637), during the summer and autumn of 1609 in the Pays de Labourd, a Basque-speaking territory on France's border with Spain, is justly ranked among the most famous and notorious of the early modern period. It was, perhaps, the only hunt in the kingdom of France

to have led to mass executions, and certainly the only one explicitly sanctioned – at least at the outset – by the central authorities.<sup>3</sup> It is unclear, however, how many women and men died. The number may be as high as eighty, and higher still if we look beyond the activities of De Lancre’s and D’Espaignet’s 1609 commission.<sup>4</sup> The traditional figure of 600 executions, used well into the 1970s, was based on a misreading that, as we shall see, can be traced back to the seventeenth century. Inquisitors on the Spanish side of the border, among them Alonso de Salazar Frías<sup>o</sup>, were facing a witchcraft panic of their own for which they also blamed De Lancre and his royal commission.<sup>5</sup> De Lancre’s sensationalist 1612 account of his experiences – one historian has described it as a work of ‘scholarly pornography’ – includes the most detailed description of the witches’ sabbat of the early modern period.<sup>6</sup> The elaborate fold-out engraving of the sabbat, included in the second 1613 edition of the *Tableau de l’inconstance des mauvais anges et démons* (Tableau of the Inconstancy of Evil Angels and Demons), remains one of the most iconic and most frequently used images of the early modern witch-hunt (See Figure 18.1). In a poem prefacing De Lancre’s *Tableau*, his colleague D’Espaignet rightly predicted, perhaps with a sign of unease, that his colleague’s pen would give the witches burned eternal life (sig. āāā2r). The testimony of children and teenagers played a central role in securing their fate.

**[[Insert Figure 18.1 here]]**

Figure 18.1. Children being flown to the sabbat / A child being offered to a demon. Fragment from Jan Ziarnko’s ‘Description et figure du sabbat des sorciers’ included in Pierre de Lancre, *Tableau de l’inconstance des mauvais anges et démons*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Paris: Nicolas Buon, 1613 [Ferguson A1-x.50]. Image by permission of University of Glasgow Library, Special Collections.

For all its renown, the witch-hunt that took place in the Pays de Labourd remains deeply misunderstood. With the original trial documents destroyed by fire, the 1612 *Tableau* furnished historians with the archetype of a witch-hunt imposed on an unfortunate territory by elites from the outside.<sup>7</sup> In its most extreme version, Pierre de Lancre was held solely responsible ‘for these crimes’, although he has also shared responsibility with King Henri IV, who had authorized the witchcraft commission.<sup>8</sup> Blame has also been shifted onto elite fears and actions.<sup>9</sup> Because this was a witch-hunt that was effectively ‘done’ to the Pays de Labourd, very little attention has been paid to the territory’s social and political geography.

Yet, De Lancre too has been misunderstood. Historians, even when they recognized that he was extremely unusual among French magistrates, attributed to him whatever mindset they expected a wicked witch-hunter to possess. Hugh Trevor-Roper, accordingly, described him as the ‘gleeful executioner of the Pays de Labourd’, while for Robert Muchembled and Jonathan Pearl he was the personification of the ‘cleric-magistrate acting as a missionary for reformed Catholicism in the French countryside.’<sup>10</sup> Such portrayals of religious bigotry or zeal bypass obvious biographical questions. How did the Bordeaux judge end up in the Basque territory? How did this experience fit in with his wider career? How did the *Tableau* fit in with his other (demonological and non-demonological) writings? Why was he so fascinated with the witches’ sabbat? And why did he take the testimony of children and teenagers so seriously?

## 1. PIERE DE LANCRE BEFORE THE PAYS DE LABOURD

Pierre de Rosteguy de Lancre was born in or near Bordeaux in 1556. His family was of Basque origin but De Lancre’s conduct in the Pays de Labourd showed no recognition of

shared roots or language; as we shall see, his *Tableau* reported on local customs in ways that at once exoticized and dehumanized the Basque inhabitants. Mid-sixteenth-century Bordeaux had seen the emergence of a new political class. Bordeaux's merchants had invested new-found wealth in both titles and political offices (which, at the time, were bought and sold as property) to establish dynasties. Étienne de Rosteguy, the son and grandson of wine merchants, bought the title of Sieur de Lancre (a fictitious place) shortly after the birth of his son Pierre. Another noble title was found for Pierre's younger brother and both obtained offices within the Bordeaux Parlement; both of their two sisters also married into the institution. Although not as old or prestigious as the parlements of Paris and Toulouse, it was the highest court of appeal for much of the south-west of France. The Bordeaux Parlement was central to the city's intellectual milieu and counted among its members a notable number of famous authors. One of De Lancre's brothers-in-law, Florimond de Raemon (c. 1540–1601), had penned famous invectives against the Protestants. De Lancre's colleague on the witchcraft commission, Jean d'Espaignet, was a noted alchemist. In 1588, De Lancre himself had married Jeanne de Mons, the daughter of yet another member of the Parlement and a relative of perhaps the most famous French author of the sixteenth century (and yet one more *parlementaire*), the essayist Michel de Montaigne (1533–1592).

Surrounded by such prominent literati, De Lancre himself made a first hesitant literary foray in 1607. His *Tableau de l'inconstance et instabilité de toutes choses* (Tableau of the Inconstancy and Instability of All Things) first appeared only with his initials on the title page. The author likened the book—in what certainly would not be his last gendered metaphor—to 'a young girl who was rather ashamed to come out into the light.'<sup>11</sup> Montaigne, like him the ennobled son and grandson of merchants, formed a particular inspiration. Inconstancy was a popular theme in the early seventeenth century, largely because of

Montaigne. The title of De Lancre's book paid homage to one of Montaigne's famous *Essays* ('Of the inconstancy of our actions', 1580), and both works appeared with the same Paris printer.<sup>12</sup> De Lancre's admiration for his relative by marriage has been an uncomfortable topic for historians and literature specialists. Montaigne, whose motto was 'Que sçay-je?' (What do I know?), was a well-known sceptic who transformed the questioning of received wisdom into a virtue, once declaring 'presumption' to be humanity's 'natural and original malady.'<sup>13</sup> This scepticism, not just of knowledge but of the *possibility* of knowledge, caused Montaigne to be critical of witchcraft persecutions: 'it is putting a very high price on one's conjectures to have a man roasted alive because of them.'<sup>14</sup>

De Lancre's scepticism in this first *Tableau* did not apply to witchcraft, a topic absent from this inaugural work. But it led the Bordeaux judge down avenues similar to Montaigne's, questioning the reliability of the senses and the mind, even noting that 'someone who does not recognize that he is ill can neither find a doctor nor accept any cure.'<sup>15</sup> One scholar went so far as to declare De Lancre Montaigne's 'spiritual son' until, in 1609, the 'witchcraft bug' of the Labourd infected him.<sup>16</sup> This was a strange inversion of the traditional blame game – as we have seen, it is usually De Lancre who is accused of harming the Pays de Labourd. There is some truth, however, to the idea that a preoccupation with witchcraft never left him after 1609. De Lancre would author two further books on the topic—the last of these, his 1627 *Du Sortilège* (On Witchcraft), was even printed in a very limited print run of 40 copies for its author's 'personal contentment.'<sup>17</sup> And yet, as the similarity in their titles suggests, De Lancre himself saw no radical break between his 1607 and 1612 *Tableau*. In fact, he styled the latter work as a case study, pointing out that 'there is nothing more inconstant and fickle than demons' (sig. 11r). Where the inconstancy of all things led Montaigne towards scepticism, for De Lancre it legitimated a form of acceptance

of all evidence, no matter how contradictory. In his 1622 *L'Incredulité et mescreance du sortilège plainement convaincue* (The Incredulity and Misbelief of Witchcraft Clearly Disproven), which he presented as a theoretical follow-up to the 1612 *Tableau*, De Lancre rhetorically asked sceptics: 'For is there anything that the Evil Spirit cannot do?'<sup>18</sup> His only – and entirely orthodox – caveat was that demons could not contravene the laws of nature. Still, this willingness to entertain the possibility of demonic interference was obviously a dangerous attitude in a judge, and in De Lancre's case, it was also self-serving in more ways than one. He would apply it successfully not only to the accused witches he interrogated in the Pays de Labourd but to the entire territory and its inhabitants as well.

## 2. THE PAYS DE LABOURD

One may get a sense from reading De Lancre's 1612 *Tableau* that the Pays de Labourd, as a border region on the sea coast, caught between the Pyrenees and the Atlantic Ocean, was on the very edge of civilisation. In reality, the territory was a veritable crossroads of cultures. The Labourd played host to some of the most seminal moments in Franco-Spanish relations: the release from Spanish captivity of King Francis I in 1526, the exchange of the princesses that marked the Franco-Spanish marriage alliance in 1615, and the marriage of Louis XIV to the Spanish Infante, Maria Theresa, in Saint-Jean-de-Luz in 1660. Yet many ordinary overland travellers to and from Spain, including the many pilgrims to Santiago de Compostela, also passed through. A twelfth-century travel guide for those making the *camino* to Santiago already warned of the lack of wine, bread, and food 'but one can find apples, cider, and milk by way of compensation.'<sup>19</sup> The evident sterility of the soil prompted Basque maritime exploration across the North Atlantic from the 1540s onwards. Cod fishing and whaling contributed greatly to the wealth of Saint-Jean-de-Luz, the main town – economic

activity which even led the Basques to trade with indigenous tribes in what are now Canada's maritime provinces.<sup>20</sup>

As already noted, historians studying the witch-hunt have tended to overlook the social and political context of the Pays de Labourd itself, but Pierre de Lancre himself never did. The Bordeaux judge linked the witch-hunt explicitly to the territory's geography. Fascinated by the Labourd's customs and especially its women, De Lancre approached the territory as an ethnographer exploring a remote and alien country. To be sure, he was no unbiased observer, even leaving aside his special receptiveness to the 'bewitching' eyes, 'beautiful' hair and 'immodest' dress of Basque womenfolk (42). (Nor was he strictly speaking an outsider, as we shall see.) To the second, 1610 edition of his *Tableau* on the inconstancy of all things, De Lancre had added an extra section to vindicate the special constancy of the French over all other nations.<sup>21</sup> Keen to demonstrate the French stiff upper lip still further, De Lancre rooted the inconstancy of the Basques in the liminal position of their homeland. With the exception of the local nobility 'raised in the French manner', the people of the Labourd had been infected by Spanish customs, especially Spanish pride, arrogance, and deceitfulness (37, 33). The sterility of the soil also caused their surrender to the sea, 'this restless element', which in turn affected their behaviour: 'they entrust all their good fortune and possessions to the waves that toss them about night and day' (31). De Lancre described them as constantly affected, in their souls and in their bodies, by a 'maritime' inconstancy, a frenzy physically expressed, beyond seafaring, in the Basque taste for abrupt and turbulent dancing, for acrobatics, for swimming and for running. As we saw at the beginning of this chapter, De Lancre was particularly struck by the frantic energy of Basque children, whom he also describes as running races that sent them hurtling into doors and windows.<sup>22</sup> As playthings of the elements and contaminated by Spanish vices, the

inhabitants were a product of their geography. Even the fact that the Labourd was a ‘land of apples’ caused its women ‘to eat only apples and drink only apple juice’, making them into earthly Eves ‘who willingly seduce the sons of Adam’ (43).

In the judge’s mind, it was the liminal status of the border region which the devil exploited. (Suspected witches did so as well, fleeing across the border with Spain or departing for fishing grounds across the Atlantic. (40–41)) With demons chased out of the New World and the Far East through the good efforts of Christian missionaries, the exotic and remote Pays de Labourd (described by De Lancre as a New World of sorts) became an ideal new home within Europe. Not only did the devil take advantage of these different jurisdictions when organizing his sabbats, he also exploited the absence of the men who were away from home on long sea journeys. These long journeys caused the men to feel indifferent towards their women – treating them like ‘half-year wives’ – and uncertain about whether their offspring were really theirs. The result was that women, abandoned by their husbands, chose another father for their children: Satan (38). The devil thus transformed the Labourd into a ‘nursery’ of witchcraft with no family left untouched by the crime (30).

What should we make of this argument? It is, of course, primarily of interest for the insight it offers into De Lancre’s mindset. He may well have provided the most fascinating analysis of failing patriarchy within the corpus of early modern demonology—fascinating especially because while it was the *men* who failed in their assigned role as providers it was their wives who became witches. The gulf that separates De Lancre as an elite male, who as a member of a royal commission quite literally embodied the French crown, from the inconstant Basque women he encountered could not be wider and yet their ‘bewitching’ qualities of seduction puts that distance (and De Lancre with it) in constant peril. In the



preface, he even worried that he might seem to ‘play the magician or witch’ for revealing too much information (sig. ē2v). As an analysis of the real social and political conditions of the territory, it is severely limiting though by no means completely worthless. The Spanish border posed a real threat to the inhabitants and recent Spanish raids seem to have destabilized the territory.<sup>23</sup> Yet, the analysis is also contradictory and problematic for De Lancre’s own argument: its geographical determinism could have excused the inhabitants from any responsibility for their crimes. De Lancre thus also put blame on Basque moral failings for good measure: ‘Although nature has provided the whole world with land for sustenance, they prefer (fickle and inconstant as they are) that of the stormy seas over that provided by that sweet and peaceful goddess [of agriculture], Ceres’ (32).

### 3. DE LANCRE’S *TABLEAU*

De Lancre’s *Tableau*, then, was not a straightforward chronological narrative of a witch-hunt (some crucial details, such as the commission’s end date on 1 November 1609, are only mentioned, as if accidentally, in passing (451)), nor was it quite like any other demonological treatise discussed in this volume. Deeply personal, it was at the same time a scholarly demonology, a travel narrative, an ethnography, and a philosophical meditation on inconstancy shaped by De Lancre’s reading of classical texts. Written as it is according to De Lancre’s interests, much of what we would like to know about the 1609 witch-hunt has been left out. We may safely guess, for instance, that much of the harm that the witches were alleged to have caused was centred on the dangers of the sea, but mundane *maleficia* did not interest De Lancre much.<sup>24</sup> It was the hidden yet flighty demonic underworld and everything that happened there that enthralled him. As Margaret McGowan observed long ago, the judge

used a ‘fevered accumulation of words’ to convey his fascination and excitement to the reader:

Dancer indecemment, festiner ordement, s’acoupler diaboliquement, sodomiser execrablement, blasfemer scandaleusement, se venger insidieusement, courir après tous desirs horribles, sales et desnaturez brutalement, tenir les crapaux, les viperes, les lezards et toute sorte de poison precieusement, aymer un bouc puant ardamment, le carresser amoureusement, s’acointer et s’acoupler avec luy horriblement et impudemment: ne sont-ce pas des traicts desreglez d’une legereté non pareille, et d’une inconstance execrable? (sig. 11v)

[To dance indecently, to feast filthily, to have sex diabolically, to sodomize atrociously, to blaspheme scandalously, to avenge themselves insidiously, to pursue all horrible, nasty and unnatural desires brutishly, to keep toads, vipers, lizards, and all sorts of poison preciousy, to love a stinking goat ardently, to caress him lovingly, to familiarize and have sex with him horribly and shamelessly: are these not the unruly traits of a fickleness without equal and an execrable inconstancy?]<sup>25</sup>

Given the richness of such baroque prose, it is no wonder that in France today the *Tableau* is principally studied within literature departments. The passage shows how the *Tableau*’s aim to instruct the reader sits alongside a desire to titillate. It also underscores the aspects of witchcraft that most appealed to De Lancre, notably the witches’ sabbat and everything that went on there. The *Tableau* offered perhaps the most detailed and explicit account of the sabbat in early modern literature, and was one of the very first printed works to describe the sabbat in such detail as a Black Mass – that is, as a systematic inversion and parody of the Catholic Mass. De Lancre also devoted an entire chapter to the ‘incestuous’ Spanish dances which were performed with ‘even more liberty and insolence’ at the sabbat (202, 203). Not only did he describe these in considerable detail, he also had the children he interrogated dance in front of them ‘in the same fashion as they dance at the sabbat, to deter them from such filth and to make them recognize how even the most modest movement was filthy, ugly

and unbecoming an honest girl' (207–8). Strikingly, the judge also relates how, as a youth, he himself had impressed an Italian visitor to Bordeaux with his own dancing moves, suggestive evidence of De Lancre's own inconstancy (204–5 ; the subject this chapter shall end with).

Given his professed prowess on the dance floor, De Lancre could have made quite the entry at the witches' sabbat, and perhaps he secretly wanted to. The *Tableau* was also presented as an eye-witness account, the very opposite of the type of book-based learning put forth by Jean Bodin<sup>o</sup> and Martin Delrio<sup>o</sup>. Yet, visual evidence of the sabbat was impossible to obtain. The sabbat was so tantalisingly within De Lancre's reach but, as the principal realm of demons, also utterly inaccessible to a Christian judge. When seventeen-year old Marie Dindarte told him that the devil had flown her to the sabbat, the judge asked her to fly away right in front of him. (Unfortunately, the young woman did not have the right ointment with her but promised to bring some back from her next trip to the sabbat. (97)) In July 1609, not long after his arrival in the region, De Lancre assembled an expedition for a failed attempt to climb to the top of a rock, where the sabbat had taken place, near the village of Hendaye. During a second, more successful effort, the party was able to discern the site where witches had kept the pot during the previous night's sabbat from the mark left by its base (139). Unable to attend the sabbat, De Lancre seems delighted to learn that a sabbat, complete with a Black Mass, was held in his own bed chamber. On 24 September 1609 around midnight, a troupe of witches entered his room and even climbed under his bed curtains with the intent of poisoning him. Try as they might, they could not harm him as they told the devil waiting by the door (142–43). The alleged episode illustrated how De Lancre as a Christian magistrate was inviolate, protected by God against demonic assault, yet it also conveys a sense of proximity and the danger of possible corruption.

#### 4. DE LANCRE'S WITCHES AND WITNESSES

De Lancre, of course, was fast asleep while these events were said to have unfolded in his bedchamber. He discovered them in the same way as he learned an almost infinite amount of other details about the sabbat: not through visual evidence, but through stories – those told by the persons he and his colleague Jean d'Espaignet interrogated. Here De Lancre's pre-occupation with inconstancy intersects with the *Tableau*'s other notable feature: his claim to offer a 'simple account of the depositions of witnesses and the confessions of accused' (sig. ē3v). Later, he would even describe the *Tableau* as the 'written record of the proceedings [*procés verbal*].'<sup>26</sup> The contrast between these two themes is noteworthy, as is the way De Lancre's own rich ornate prose is interspersed with long extracts from legal depositions, immediately identifiable by formulaic markers of indirect discourse such as 'asked if' [*interrogé si*] and 'said that' [*dict que*]. In some respects, De Lancre's *Tableau* resembles a collage, where relevant legal testimonies and confessions drawn from the archives were slotted in according to the subjects or themes that the judge was trying to develop.

The *Tableau* thus offers a striking example of the importance given to legal depositions in demonology, and of the ways witchcraft confessions helped shape early modern demonological thought. Demonologists, and perhaps especially French ones, gained much of their knowledge, as Virginia Krause observed, 'from the witch's mouth.'<sup>27</sup> However, it must be noted that the testimony in this case passed through at least three filters before it reaches us: first that of the Basque interpreter (who, according to De Lancre, felt more shame posing the judge's sexually explicit questions than the witnesses showed in answering them (216)), then that of the legal scribe, and finally De Lancre himself as he sorted through the material for his publication in the *Tableau*. Yet, those filters notwithstanding, the seemingly

raw nature of these confessions retained a strong aesthetic appeal, both for De Lancre and for his readers, as the author knew well: ‘they are so strange in and of themselves that they will not fail to please the reader, even though I leave them in their original, naive form [*en leur naïfveté*]’ (sig. ē3v).<sup>28</sup>

De Lancre’s handling of this testimony, which removed it from its original context, has caused severe misunderstanding of the witch-hunt of the Pays de Labourd, though it probably also served to obscure areas of inconsistency (if not inconstancy) from view. In his preface, the judge stated that the commission had interrogated ‘sixty or eighty notable witches and five hundred witnesses’ (sig. ē3r). It was the combination of these figures (five hundred plus eighty) that by the end of the seventeenth century was rounded up to the figure of 600 executions – a figure that remained widely accepted until the 1970s.<sup>29</sup> This confusion is easily enough understood as the ‘witnesses’ in question all possessed the devil’s mark and ‘go to the sabbat everyday’ but, being witnesses, they were evidently not punished (sig. ē3r). The lower figure of ‘sixty or eighty’ also included witches who had been banished or transported to Bordeaux for further examination after the commission ended.

The identity of these witnesses is no mystery: they were the children and teenagers that the commission interrogated. The real puzzle, perhaps De Lancre’s greatest act of inconstancy, was why these witnesses were not apparently persecuted. The format of the *Tableau*, devoted to uncovering a demonic underworld rather than describing criminal procedure, meant that De Lancre could avoid answering that question. By his own logic, they should have been executed. For De Lancre, attendance at the sabbat alone was sufficient for a death sentence (566–67). Elsewhere, he acknowledged that age was no excuse and in this harsh view, he was by no means alone.<sup>30</sup> The judge’s detailed description of the children’s

induction into the devil's service – at the age of nine – included a voluntary profession of faith and a demonic Creed (390–91; after which the children were given a speaking toad to take care of). Without a rare 'special grace from God,' no one in the devil's clutches could hope to escape (398). Yet, he seems to bestow this grace on his teenage witnesses, claiming that they were 'already on the road to salvation before our commission. Some had completely left and had not been to the sabbat for some time, others were struggling and still had one foot in' (208).

Perhaps the most straightforward solution to the puzzle was simply that they served a purpose: they testified against the 'notable witches' (mostly older women, although the commission also executed a number of priests) who had taken them to the sabbat and provided De Lancre with access to the demonic underworld in vivid detail that would otherwise have remained out of reach. He needed these teenagers as witnesses and even declared that 'two girls bearing the devil's mark who have gone through puberty should count as one good witness' (553). They offered intimate details of every aspect of the sabbat. De Lancre's star witness, sixteen-year old Jeannette d'Abadie, who had sex at the sabbat more than a hundred times, told him about 'the tremendous pleasure' she experienced just describing her sexual experiences at the sabbat, 'calling everything by their rightful name more freely and shamelessly than we ever dared to ask her, which wonderfully confirms the reality of the sabbath' (134). Marie Dindarte, whom we already met briefly, told De Lancre that the devil changed her into something else during sex so as to avoid the public embarrassment (216). Jean d'Aguerre, age unknown, claimed that the devil appeared as a goat and had his penis attached to his back side (217). According to Abadie, the devil's organ was scaled 'like a fish' (224). Fifteen-year old Marie de Marigrane claimed that it was half made of metal (225). Another girl named Margueritte, aged 16 or 17, said that it resembled

that of a mule, which led De Lancre to conclude that ‘all the female witches of the Labourd are better served by Satan than those of the Franche-Comté,’ studied by Henri Boguet (224–25).

What are we to make of this testimony? How did it come about? And what does it tell us about our judge? It is the second question that is the most vexing on every level. The role played by children within the European witch-hunt, as accused witches but especially as accusers, has rarely been addressed in the historiography.<sup>31</sup> At no other point is transcending De Lancre’s perspective – which historians must do to make sense of the witch-hunt – as difficult as it is on this issue. The answer is heavily dependent on how much agency one is willing to grant these witnesses. De Lancre’s supposed credulity can be a particularly useful cover by shifting attention away from the testimony of teenagers to De Lancre’s willingness to believe them. There is no doubt that the witnesses were mistreated. The fact that they were searched for the devil’s mark shows us as much. Yet, their fantastical testimony was based on lived experience and popular culture. At least two of the witches executed were musicians, included in the Ziarnko engraving, who had performed at weddings and festivals such as the sabbat (131; see also Figure 18.2). For De Lancre, Marie de Marigrane’s ‘shameful’ comment that the devil had sex with pretty witches from the front and ugly ones from behind had to be true—‘her youth was incapable of so sordid an invention’ (217). Yet, this could be precisely the sort of crude sexual comment in a world without much privacy that she could easily have picked up.

**[[Insert Figure 18.2 here]]**

Figure 18.2. Village Musicians Performing at the Sabbat / Nude Dancing at the Sabbat.

Fragment from Jan Ziarnko’s ‘Description et figure du sabbat des sorciers’ included in Pierre

de Lancre, *Tableau de l'inconstance des mauvais anges et démons*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Paris: Nicolas Buon, 1613 [Ferguson AI-x.50]. Image by permission of University of Glasgow Library, Special Collections.

To be sure, De Lancre formed an extraordinarily receptive audience. Beyond his sexual curiosity, his fascination and pre-occupation with inconstancy made him likely to accept almost everything that he was told. Consistency, as we have seen, was no prerequisite for credibility. If inconstancy was the devil's hallmark, variety in testimony, rather than disqualifying, provided additional *proof* of his demonic presence. The devil's penis, we might say too glibly, could come in all shapes and sizes. Unable to understand the Basque testimony first-hand, De Lancre scrutinized the bodies and faces of his witnesses for their emotions, commenting how instead of 'going red and crying' they took 'a singular pleasure' in recounting their sexual activities with the devil (216). These descriptions must be, at least in part, projection on De Lancre's part – the pleasure his witnesses supposedly took from describing the sabbat certainly seems equal to his own pleasure in writing the *Tableau*. His apology in the preface for discussing sex 'a little bit too openly' can neither masque his fascination with the Basque women he encountered nor his lurid attention to sexual detail (sig. ē4v). As a subject, the sabbat would never let De Lancre go. The preface of his 1622 *L'Incredulité* opened with the promise to describe 'the orgies and nocturnal assemblies of the magicians and witches.'<sup>32</sup> His 1627 *Du Sortilège*, printed, as we saw, for his 'personal contentment', opened with a chapter defending the discovery and publication of the 'abominations' of witches that others thought should be kept secret.

## 5. PIERRE DE LANCRE: A ROCK AND AN ANCHOR



As far as names go, there could hardly have been a more appropriate bulwark against inconstancy than ‘Pierre de Lancre’, a name which encapsulated both a rock [*pierre*] and an anchor [*l’ancree*; a spelling used in some of his writings].<sup>33</sup> His coat of arms featured three anchors – a number and figure which he claimed represented the Holy Trinity.<sup>34</sup> The image was prominently included (on the *verso* side of the title page) of his 1612 *Tableau*. The only truly constant entity, of course, was God. (The motto of his 1607 *Tableau* was taken from Malachi 3:6: ‘I am God, I do not change.’) Yet, in a symbolic way Pierre de Lancre was not far behind. Not only was ‘the anchor ... the hieroglyph of the constancy of God,’ it was also associated with St Peter [*Pierre*] ‘who represents the Church.’<sup>35</sup> By 1622, when De Lancre completed his second witchcraft treatise, he had fully become his name. Already well into his sixties he had retired to his country estate, where he invited visitors who ‘will certainly find, at the top of my Mountain, an old ANCHOR, which I am myself, ready to receive him.’<sup>36</sup>

As we have already seen, De Lancre had not always embodied constancy to such a perfect degree. Writing about inconstancy, he was worried about being infected by it in a way that mirrors his interest in witchcraft: ‘Writing about inconstancy, I can hardly avoid its taint.’<sup>37</sup> Yet, De Lancre’s inconstancy was not confined to the written word. We have explored some of the reasons for his pre-occupation with inconstancy and we have seen how it may account for his willingness to believe his witnesses. Yet, we have also noticed how his writings purposely obscured certain issues from view. From what we know so far, the traditional depiction of De Lancre as a ‘cleric-magistrate’ does not seem overly plausible, even if we accept the claim that he ‘constantly emphasized the distastefulness of the task in which he was engaged.’<sup>38</sup> Strikingly, the *Tableau* shows no concern about the spread of heresy in the Labourd. (The adjacent territory of Béarn had been officially Protestant.)

Instead, his fascination for the topic of witchcraft, in particular its sexual aspects, and his gendered use of language suggest that this was only a pious facade. The fact that De Lancre left his personal library to an illegitimate son provides further support for this.<sup>39</sup>

Sex, however, was only one form of De Lancre's inconstancy. Another aspect illustrates the difficulty of interpreting Pierre de Lancre's work and demonstrates the extent to which our knowledge of the witch-hunt of the Pays de Labourd remains incomplete. Scholars, to our knowledge, have never asked why it was Pierre de Lancre, of all people, who was nominated to serve on the witchcraft commission. The royal decree was issued in response to a petition from within the Pays de Labourd itself.<sup>40</sup> It seems improbable that the French crown would identify and select a Bordeaux judge for a time-consuming mission on its own initiative. It is much more likely that his name was put forth by the local sponsors. In 1612, De Lancre identifies the two leading noblemen of the Labourd, the Lords of Urtubie and Amou, only once in passing (141). Only in the preface of the (slightly expanded) 1613 edition are they mentioned by name.<sup>41</sup> What De Lancre never mentioned, however, was his close family relationship to one of these men. In 1598, Tristan de Gamboa d'Alzate, *Seigneur* of the village of Urtubie, had married Catherine Eyquem de Montaigne, the daughter of a Bordeaux magistrate and a cousin of De Lancre's wife.<sup>42</sup> Far from an impartial judge, De Lancre was a local partisan. If we wish to understand the witch-hunt of the Pays de Labourd, we must investigate the agency and actions of all those involved, including not only Urtubie and Amou but also De Lancre's child witnesses. Such a study may tell us a great deal about Pierre de Lancre, the mythmaker of the sabbat, in turn.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> All in-text references are to Pierre de Lancre, *Tableau de l'inconstance des mauvais anges et démons*, Paris: Nicolas Buon, 1612, p. 46. All translations are by the authors. A modern French critical (and abridged) edition was published by Nicole Jacques-Chaquin in 1982. The English translation needs to be used with care: Pierre de Lancre, *On the Inconstancy of Witches: Pierre de Lancre's Tableau de l'inconstance des mauvais anges et demons* (1612), ed. and trans. Gerhild Scholz Williams et al., Tempe, AZ: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2006.

<sup>2</sup> For Pierre de Lancre's biography, combine Armand Communay, *Le Conseiller Pierre de Lancre*, Agen: Lamy, 1890, with Jan Machielsen, 'Lancre, Pierre de (1556–1631)', in Luc Foisneau, ed., *Dictionnaire des philosophes français du XVIIe siècle*, Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2015, pp. 984–88. The latter establishes, among other things, De Lancre's year of birth.

<sup>3</sup> For a recent overview of witch-hunting in France, see William Monter, 'Witchcraft Trials in France', in Brian P. Levack, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe and Colonial America*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, pp. 218–31.

<sup>4</sup> Pierre de Lancre references the confessions of 'soixante ou quatre vingts insignes Sorcieres' and had very little incentive to understate the number: De Lancre, *Tableau* (1612), sig. ē3r. '[P]lusieurs' witches were banished rather than executed: *ibid.*, p. 382.

<sup>5</sup> On the response of Spanish Inquisition officials, see Lu Ann Homza's contribution to this volume.

<sup>6</sup> Robin Briggs, *Witches and Neighbours*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2002, p. 26, also p. 70; Michel Jeanneret, *Éros rebelle. Littérature et dissidence à l'âge classique* (Paris, Editions du Seuil, 2003): « A côté de cela, la pornographie du temps fait pâle figure » (will have to check the page number).

<sup>7</sup> The building and archives of the Bordeaux Parlement were destroyed by fire in 1710.

<sup>8</sup> Josane Charpentier, *La Sorcellerie en Pays basque*, Paris: Librairie Guénégaud, 1977, p. 27.

<sup>9</sup> Beñat Zintzo-Garmendia, *Histoire de la sorcellerie en Pays basque: Les Bûchers de l'injustice*, Toulouse: Privat, 2016, avertissements.

<sup>10</sup> Jonathan L. Pearl, *The Crime of Crimes: Demonology and Politics in France, 1560–1620*, Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1999, pp. 129–30.

<sup>11</sup> Pierre de Lancre, *Tableau de l'inconstance et instabilité de toutes choses*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Paris: widow of Abel L'Angelier, 1610, sig. a2r.

<sup>12</sup> See the entries in Jean Balsamo and Michel Simonin, *Abel L'Angelier et Françoise de Louvain, 1574–1620* Geneva: Droz, 2002. The authors describe De Lancre's first *Tableau* 'un ouvrage imité des *Essais*' (p. 360).

<sup>13</sup> Michel de Montaigne, 'Apology for Raymond Sebond', in *The Complete Works: Essays, Travel Journal, Letters*, trans. Donald M. Frame, London: Everyman Guides, p. 401.

<sup>14</sup> Montaigne, 'Of Cripples', in *The Complete Works*, p. 962.

<sup>15</sup> Pierre de Lancre, *Tableau de l'inconstance et instabilité de toutes choses*, Paris: Abel L'Angelier, p. 421.

<sup>16</sup> Henri Busson, 'Montaigne et son cousin,' *Revue d'histoire littéraire de la France*, 1960, vol. 60/4, 481–499, at 484.

<sup>17</sup> See the 12 April 1627 contract printed in Jules Delpit, 'Pierre de L'Ancre et la sorcellerie: À Propos d'une rareté bibliographique', *Bulletin du bibliophile et du bibliothécaire*, 1885, vol. 28, 81–89, which must relate to the appearance of Pierre de Lancre, *Du Sortilège*, s.l.: s.n., 1627.

<sup>18</sup> Pierre de Lancre, *L'Incredulité et mescreance du sortilège plainement convaincue*, Paris: Nicolas Buon, 1622, p. 834.

<sup>19</sup> Philippe Veyrin, *Les Basques de Labourd, de Soule et de Basse Navarre: Leur Histoire et leurs traditions*, [Grenoble]: Arthaud, 1955, p. 41.

<sup>20</sup> For a good introduction, see Brad Loewen and Claude Chapdelaine, eds, *Contact in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century: Networks among Fishers, Foragers and Farmers*, Ottawa, ON: University of Ottawa Press, 2016.

<sup>21</sup> The 1610 edition, evidently finished after his return from the Labourd, included a preface addressed to 'the French'.

<sup>22</sup> Thibaut Maus de Rolley, 'Of Oysters, Witches, Birds, and Anchors: Conceptions of Space and Travel in Pierre de Lancre,' *Renaissance Studies*, 2018, vol. 32/4, 530–46.

<sup>23</sup> This aspect will be explored in Machielsen's forthcoming book on Pierre de Lancre and Basque witch-hunt.

<sup>24</sup> One of the rare references to *maleficia* relates to the sinking of a ship: De Lancre, *Tableau* (1612), p. 95.

<sup>25</sup> Margaret M. McGowan, 'Pierre de Lancre's *Tableau de l'Inconstance des Mauvais Anges et Demons*: The Sabbat Sensationalised', in Sydney Anglo, ed., *The Damned Art: Essays in the Literature of Witchcraft*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1977, pp. 182–201, at 196.

<sup>26</sup> De Lancre, *L'Incredulité*, p. 11.

<sup>27</sup> Virginia Krause, *Witchcraft, Demonology, and Confession in Early Modern France*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015, p. 43.

<sup>28</sup> On the aesthetic appeal of these confessions, see Maus de Rolley, *Elévations: L'Écriture du voyage aérien à la Renaissance*, Geneva: Droz, 2011, pp. 486–92.

<sup>29</sup> *Factums et arrest du Parlement de Paris contre des bergers sorciers executez depuis peu dans la province de Brie*, Paris: Rebuffé, 1695, p. 64; McGowan, ‘Pierre de Lancre’s *Tableau de l’inconstance des Mauvais Anges et démons*’, p. 183 still accepted the figure. It was first challenged by Gustav Henningsen, *The Witches’ Advocate: Basque Witchcraft and the Spanish Inquisition, 1609–1614*, Reno, NV: University of Nevada Press, 1980, pp. 24–25.

<sup>30</sup> De Lancre, *L’Incredulité*, p. 41. Jean Bodin, for instance, took a similarly harsh view.

<sup>31</sup> A good starting point, however, is Lyndal Roper, “‘Evil Imaginings and Fantasies’: Child-Witches and the End of the Witch Craze’, *Past & Present*, 2000, vol. 167/1, 107–39.

<sup>32</sup> De Lancre, *L’Incredulité*, p. 9.

<sup>33</sup> This alternative spelling was used on the title page of his 1622 *L’Incredulité*.

<sup>34</sup> De Lancre, *Tableau* (1610), fol. 492v.

<sup>35</sup> De Lancre, *Tableau* (1610), fols. 492v–93r.

<sup>36</sup> De Lancre, *L’Incredulité*, p. 41. The capital letters are De Lancre’s. On De Lancre’s symbolic interpretation of his own name, and the contrast between De Lancre’s country estate of Loubens and the Pays de Labourd, see Maus de Rolley, ‘Of Oysters, Witches, Birds, and Anchors.’

<sup>37</sup> De Lancre, *Tableau* (1610), sig. a2v.

<sup>38</sup> Pearl, *The Crime of Crimes*, p. 143.

<sup>39</sup> See Jan Machielsen, ‘Lancre, Pierre de (1556–1631)’, p. 988.

<sup>40</sup> See the ‘Lettres patentes’ transcribed in Roland Villeneuve, *Le Fléau des sorciers: Histoire de la diablerie basque au XVIIe siècle*, [Paris]: Flammarion, 1983, pp. 221–22.

<sup>41</sup> Pierre de Lancre, *Tableau de l’inconstance des mauvais anges et démons*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Paris: Nicolas Buon, 1613, sig. 01r.

<sup>42</sup> See the data on Geneanet. The marriage is not mentioned in Théophile Malvezin, *Michel de Montaigne: Son Origine, sa famille*, Bordeaux: 1875.

#### FURTHER READING

Dardano Basso, Isa, *L'ancora e gli specchi: Lettura del Tableau de l'inconstance et instabilité de toutes choses di Pierre de Lancre*, Rome: Bulzoni, 1979.

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Machielsen, Jan, 'Lancre, Pierre de (1556–1631)', in Luc Foisneau, ed., *Dictionnaire des philosophes français du XVIIe siècle*, Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2015, pp. 984–88.

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