

Johannes Nider, *Formicarius* (1435-1438)

[*Introductory note:* Johannes Nider (1380/85-1438) was born in southern Swabia and entered the Dominican Order shortly after 1402. After studying at the universities of Vienna and Cologne, he attended the Council of Constance in 1415-18 and was prior of the Dominican convent at Nuremberg in 1426/7-29. Extremely supportive of the reforming wing of the order, as well as a supporter of church reform broadly conceived, Nider became prior of the convent at Basel from 1429 to 1436 and served in several diplomatic capacities in the service of the Council of Basel from 1431 to 1434. Probably in 1435 he returned to the University of Vienna as professor of theology and was elected dean of the theological faculty in 1436. He died in Vienna in 1438.

Nider had written a number of works of theology earlier, and he wrote his best-known work, the long treatise on theology and moral and ecclesiological reform, the *Formicarius* (The Ant-Colony; the title is based on Proverbs 6: 6 and holds up the disciplined ant colony as a model for human society, with each book connecting a feature of human life to some real or imagined feature of the ant community), as the best recent scholar, Michael Bailey, estimates, between 1435 and 1438.

The work takes the form of a dialogue between a theologian and a doubter, *Piger* (“the sluggard”), and its format is highly anecdotal. The first two books deal with good works and revelations, the third with falsities and wicked acts, and the fourth with the deeds of virtuous people. The fifth book deals with the nature and practice of witchcraft under the general heading of works of evildoers and deceivers. But Nider does not simply reinterpret earlier theological and inquisitorial models. He cites his informants: the Bernese patrician Peter von Greyerz, who had worked as judge in the Simme Valley between 1392 and 1407; a monk at Vienna named Benedict, who had earlier been active in the peripheral world of sleight-of-hand tricks, court entertainments, and, as Nider says, necromancy; and an inquisitor from Autun. Whether or not Nider reinterprets their earlier accounts of events from the end of the fourteenth century to accord with the new assumptions about witchcraft that characterized Nider’s 1430s—that is, into something that his informants had not intended—is a matter of debate. But Nider’s stories gained great credibility from the specificity of their sources and the records of them that could be checked.

The beginning of the fifth book links the different colors of ants to the color symbolism of vices and virtues. “Piger” asks the Theologian about *malefici et superstitiosi*. The Theologian responds that demons find it easy to deceive humans, trapped as they are in sense-perceptions, confined in the prison of the body, and possessing a tendency to melancholia. The first chapter then goes on to discuss visions of warfare and apparitions of ghosts. Throughout the work the Theologian responds with a few citations of traditional authorities, but the bulk of the responses consists of stories, skillfully chosen and told. The second chapter deals with demonic invasions of domestic households. The third chapter turns to sorcery and witchcraft, citing Isidore of Seville and first discussing erotic magic and its causes.]

I will relate to you some examples, which I have learned in part from the teachers of our faculty, in part from the experience of a certain upright secular judge, worthy of all faith, who from the torture and confessions of witches and from his experiences in public and private life has learned many things of this sort—a man with whom I have often discussed this subject broadly and deeply to wit, Peter, a citizen of Bern, in the diocese of Lausanne, who has burned many witches of both sexes, and has driven others out of the territory of Bern. I have also conferred with one Benedict, a monk of the Benedictine order, who, although now a very devout cleric in a reformed monastery in Vienna, was, a decade ago while still in the world, a necromancer, juggler, buffoon, and strolling player, well known as an expert among the secular nobility. I have likewise heard certain of the following things from the inquisitor of heretical depravity at Autun, who was a devoted reformer of our order in the convent at Lyons, and has convicted many of witchcraft in the diocese of Autun.

There are, or there very recently were (as both the same inquisitor and Lord Peter have told me, and as is well known among the public) in the territory of Bern, a great many witches of both sexes who greatly hated human nature and assumed the likenesses of various kinds of beasts, especially those kinds that devour children. In the town of Boltingen in the diocese of Lausanne there lived a man named Stadelin, a great witch, who was arrested by the same Lord Peter [of Greyerz], the judge of the district. Stadelin had entered a house where a man and wife lived and by his witchcraft killed seven successive infants in her womb. In the same household he killed the fetuses of sheep, so that for seven years no sheep was born to them. When he was asked how this was done, he said that he placed a certain kind of lizard under the threshold of the house and if he removed it fecundity would be restored to them. When anyone

tried to look for the serpent and did not find it, this was because it had been reduced to a powder, and the powder was sprinkled on the earth beneath the threshold, and when it was removed, in the same year fertility was restored to all the animals of the household. These confessions were drawn from him by torture and were not spontaneously given. And he was sent to the fire by the same judge.

The same inquisitor told me that in the duchy of Lausanne certain witches even devoured their own children. The witches gathered in a certain place, and when their deeds were done they saw the demon visibly appear in the form of a man. The disciples then had to deny Christianity, promise never to adore the Eucharist, and to trample the crucifix underfoot.

It was also known in the community. The judge Peter told me that in Bernese territory thirteen infants were devoured by witches in a very short time. Public justice grew harsh toward these parricides. When Peter asked a captured witch how they devoured these infants, she answered that the method is this: with unbaptized infants, or even with infants already baptized if they are not protected by the sign of the cross and by prayers, we kill by our ceremonies in their cradles, or when they are lying in bed beside their parents, so that they are thought to have been crushed [overlain by their parents] or to have died some other natural way. We then remove them secretly from their graves and cook them in a cauldron until their flesh, cooked and separated from the bones, is made into a powerful liquid. From the solids of this material we make a certain unguent that is useful for our desires, arts, and transformations. From the liquids we fill a container, and from this, with a few additional ceremonies, anyone who drinks immediately becomes a member and master of our sect.

The same procedure was more clearly described by another young man, arrested and burned as a witch, although, as I believe, truly, penitent, who had earlier, together with his wife, a witch invincible to persuasion, escaped the clutches of the aforesaid judge, Peter. The aforesaid youth, being again indicted at Bern, with his wife, and placed in a different prison from hers, declared: "If I can obtain absolution for my sins, I will freely lay bare all I know about witchcraft, for I see that I have death to expect." And when he had been assured by the scholars that, if he should truly repent, he would certainly be able to gain absolution for his sins, then he gladly offered himself to death, and disclosed the methods of the primeval infection.

The ceremony, he said, of my seduction was as follows: First, on a Sunday before the holy water is consecrated, the future disciple with his masters must go into the church, and there in their presence must renounce Christ and his faith, baptism, and the church universal. Then he must do homage to the *magisterulus*, that is, to the little master (for so, and not otherwise, they call the devil). Afterward he drinks from the aforesaid flask; and, this done, he forthwith feels himself to conceive and hold within himself an image of our art and the chief rites of this sect. After this fashion was I seduced; and my wife also, whom I believe of so great pertinacity that she will endure the flames rather than confess the least whit of truth, but, alas, we are both guilty. What the young man had said was found in all respects the truth. For, after confession, the young man was seen to die in great contrition. His wife, however, though convicted by the testimony of witnesses, would not confess the truth even under the torture or in death; but, when the fire was prepared for her by the executioner, she uttered in most evil words a curse upon him, and so was burned.

[Piger then asks whether witchcraft should be driven out. The Theologian responds that the ancients thought not, but that today it should. Chapter 4 deals with necromancy, the raising of the dead, duly noting the case of the witch of Endor and the necessity of a pact with the devil, and recounting stories told him by the Benedictine monk who had himself been a necromancer. Nider then tells the history of witchcraft in the Simme Valley, also obtained from Peter von Greyerz].

The person who began this witchcraft was a man called Scavius [the scabby man], who publicly used to glory in his art, saying that whenever he wished he could transform himself into a mouse and thereby escape from the hands of his enemies. And he had done this often. But divine justice wished to put an end to his wickedness. When he was sitting by the window at an inn looking carefully around him, but having no suspicion of immediate danger, his enemies broke through the window and transfixed him with swords and spears so that he died miserably.

This man left behind a disciple named Hoppo, who made Stadelin into a master of witchcraft. These two knew how, whenever it pleased them, to take the manure, grains, and fruits or whatever they wanted from the field of a neighbor, seen by no one, and move them to their own field. They could cause immense hailstorms and poison winds with lightning, cause sterility in humans and animals, injure their neighbors in body and property, drive horses mad when their wealthy riders mounted them, and travel through air wherever they wished to go....When judge Peter sent his servants to capture the said Stadelin, their hands were struck by a great tremor and a terrible odor assailed them so that they gave up hope of capturing him. But the judge told them to lay hands on the wretched man because he would lose all his powers when once touched by the hand of justice. And they were then able to take him....The judge asked Stadelin how he was able to cause hailstorms and tempests. The criminal answered that he stood in a field saying certain words and begged the most powerful of all demons to send him a lesser demon to strike whatever Stadelin wished. When the demon arrived, he obeyed, and immediately the storms began, not always in the place designated by Stadelin, but where God permitted this to happen.

The judge asked Stadelin whether or not the storms contrived by him and the demon could be averted in any way. Stadelin answered that they could by saying these words: "I order you, hailstorms and winds, by the three divine nails of Christ, which wounded Him in hands and feet, and by the four evangelists, Saints Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, that you turn into falling rain."

[The remaining eight chapters deal with erotic magic and ligatures (chap. 51, its cures (chap. 6), and related matters (chap. 7). In chapter 8 Nider tells the story of Joan of Arc, at least as he heard and understood it. Nider says that he heard the story from a certain Brother Nicholas, a licentiate in theology, who was a delegate from the University of Paris to the Council of Basel. Joan, he says, was determined by the most learned men to have had a malignant spirit and was burned at the stake by public justice. Chapter 8 continues to discuss both wicked and good women. Chapter 9 deals with *incubi* and *succubi*, a discussion continued in chapter 10. Chapter 11 deals with demonic possession, and the last chapter deals with demon-inspired insanity and its cures.]