

LIS 402
Folklore in Popular Media
Commercial Product: Fastnacht Schnapps (fool-witch)

The Fool-witch in the Schnapps

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In my hand I hold a memory from when I was a child in Germany. It is a four-inch tall bottle of Schnapps (Figure 1), a strange place indeed to house a childhood recollection. The bottle, made of clear glass and sealed by a blue aluminium cap, contains transparent brown brandy. However, the most striking feature about this bottle is its label (Figure 2): an old woman with a hunched back, big nose, wide grin and conspiring wink. She leans on a walking stick, carries a leather pouch and offers a shot glass in a toast. Asters and daisies grow about her feet; young black spruce grow behind her. A crow sits on her shoulders, offsetting the orange full moon and few clouds in the twilight sky.

The woman, of course, is a witch. The label prominently says so, though it spells witch incorrectly. I remember this witch and a hundred more like her, marching one warm afternoon down a German street with their traditional, home-made white blouses, brown skirts, red headkerchiefs and hand-carved wooden masks covering their faces (Figure 3). Most carried hazel brooms with twig wisps; some carried whips. Between them rolled horse-drawn wagons with wooden cages beneath that could fit a couple dozen spectators pulled from the crowd and a dozen in gallows on top. We had noisemakers and clay badges (Figure 4) to protect us from the grasping witches. I remember quite vividly one reaching for me. It took my parents to shoo her away, for my noisemaker and badge were not doing the trick. For a seven-year-old child quite aware of the stories of Hansel and Gretel and himself in the land where these stories were set, this Witch Parade was an awesome and scary experience.

But more was yet to come. Five nights later, my family joined another march through the streets to a wide meadow. The marchers were common people with no costumes, but they carried a giant straw witch over their heads. They hung the witch from a pole over a large mound of sticks and with torches set the mound on fire (cf. [Offenburger Hexenzunft 1998a](#)). That was my first and only witch burning. Ironically that night I was also given my first fortune cookie. Fireworks lit the sky.

What a memory I hold in my hand from Fastnacht, the climax festival of Karnival in the Black Forest region of Germany.



Figure 1.
Bottle of
Schnapps
(actual size:
4×1.5×0.75 in)



Figure 2. Label *.



Figure 3. Fool-witches and fool-witch
masks (Alemannische Narrenring
2003, Offenburger Hexenzunft
1998b).

* The label reads:

‘7 Taler’ = street address of the brewery that made the Schnapps (Taler = a small hamlet)
Hex (pronounced ‘heks’) = Witch, but it should be spelled ‘Hexe’ (pronounced ‘heh-kser’)
Weinbrennerei = wine distillery, Edelobstbrennerei = noble fruit (elderberry) distillery
Hans W. Peter = the brewer, Achern = a town, Schwarzwald = Black Forest
Deutsches erzeugnis = German product
3% Volumen Prozent = volume percent, 3% alcohol content

This bottle of Schnapps is full of elements of sorcery and fire folklore. The Black Forest is famous for its Schnapps and refined brandies, particularly its kirsch, or wild cherry brandy, with 45% alcohol content (Schwarzwald Tourismus, date unknown, a). Local folk humour relates the effects of kirsch, which burns the tongue, delights elderly ladies and scares off children. The Black Forest is also famous for its nomadic glassworks (Schwarzwald Tourismus, date unknown, b), which uses wood and quartz sand from the Black Forest to create glass objects. The people of the Black Forest believed glass had magical and medicinal properties due to its transparency and its tendency to glint. They also believed it provided symbolic links to loved ones far away, including those who died, and they cremated their dead and kept the ashes in glass urns. Since the glassworks were remote and nomadic, an air of sorcery was assigned to glass-making. Glass

coloring was an enigma and believed to be the work of drugs, precious stone powder, gold and dragon's blood. Glass-makers protected their formulae and the craft was inherited, reinforcing the mystery and awe surrounding glass objects. Further, the scoured and scorched remains of abandoned glass-camps contributed to the belief in dragons. The glass-makers moved, leaving scraped and burnt land, after consuming readily available resources in an area. Around 850 AD, they also moved as soon as they were discovered by Church authorities. The Catholic Church banned glass-making because its reputation of using magic competed with the Church's claim on all things conventionally incomprehensible. However, local monasteries, wanting alcoholic drinking vessels for liqueurs and Schnapps, broke the ban, eventually opening the door once again to the industry.



Figure 4. My clay witch-ward (circa 1975).

The most prominent folklore element is the witch on the Schnapps's label. Much pre-Christian Black Forest folklore deals with wicked women, weather-witches, herb-witches and cattle-witches, who do evil throughout the Black Forest (Schwarzwald Tourismus, date unknown, c). The Black Forest is the perfect setting (Figure 5) for such lore: its pine forest, clearings, valleys, mountain lakes, monasteries, castles and ruins invite tales and fire imaginations of deeds done by fantastic good and evil beings.

In later years, the Roman Catholic Church changed the significance of these tales. The Church used these stories to condemn people and extort confessions through torture during the Inquisition witch trials (McCabe 2004). The basis for the Inquisition (Figure 6) was to slander and vilify rival religions, the most prominent of which, dating from Roman times, was Gnostic-Manichaeism-Dionysiac. This religion was based on ancient Babylonian, Assyrian and Persian

beliefs that there were two supreme principles – light and goodness, and darkness and evil – as well as evil spirits or devils all over the earth which caused all the evils of humanity. From these beliefs and those of Romans came harpies, vampires, devils and witches. The Church endorsed these beliefs, even incorporating some of them into Christianity, in order to gain power (McCabe 2004, Starr 2003), then used these very beliefs to condemn people (McCabe 2004). As need required, the Church changed the definition of witchcraft and witch so the Inquisition could continue to stomp out any opposition to or doubt in Christianity (Salem Witch Museum 2003). Magic, the practice of rival religions, was pagan which was collusion with the devil. The devil actually referred to leaders of the rival religions, but the Church encouraged the belief that the devil was one of the evil spirits of Manichaeism. During the time of the Inquisition science had not yet made much headway in explaining much of nature and illness (Lovell and Rice 2003), so the common way to explain the world was magic, which the Church condemned because it claimed jurisdiction over all supernatural forces (Luesebrink 2004). It did not help that people were tortured to make false, legal confessions, that some confessed in order to defy Christianity, that some were condemned for questioning the Church and the Inquisition, that there *was* a rival religion which the Church could not stomp out (Holiday Spot, date unknown, Schwertfeger, date unknown), or that in fact some people used “magic” and superstition to intimidate and exert power over others (Ryan 1998). Even today witch trials are reported around the world (Salem Witch Museum 2003, Powell 2002). The witch trials, witch hangings and witch burnings changed the stories of most Black Forest folklore concerning evil women.



Figure 5. The Black Forest (Schwarzwald Tourismus, unknown, c).



Figure 6. Inquisition (Wendell 2009).

The witch parade and witch burning which I experienced as a child also came from this background. However, Fastnacht has a broader meaning. It is the last day of Carnival, a period of mockery and indulgence, where all the inhibitions and temptations of life are let loose prior to the strict Lent season (Gaquin 2008, Macdonald 1998). Internationally, Carnival is celebrated between Twelfth Night or Epiphany, on January 6, and midnight Fastnacht, the seventh Tuesday before Easter (Gaquin 2008, Offenburger Hexenzunft 1998c).

Fastnacht means “Fasting Eve” or “Fasting Night.” It precedes Ash Wednesday, which begins Lent, the season of Easter Fasting. Fastnacht is internationally referred to as Shrove Tuesday (Verband Oberrheinischer Narrenzünfte, date unknown) or Mardi Gras, “Fat Tuesday.” Shrove in turn refers to the Sacrament of Penance (Merriam-Webster 1974), and so the name of the Fastnacht festival is in itself a form of parody, for those who recognize it ask for Penance on Fastnacht for the indulgences they enjoyed during Carnival. Yet Fastnacht is also the day of intense last-minute indulgences and mockery and the day when the sins of Winter and Carnival, the witches, are marched out.

The Black Forest region celebrates the oldest and most traditional Fastnacht in Germany (Tourismus Marketing, date unknown), pre-dated only in Austria and some parts of Switzerland (Sudwestrundfunk 2004). It is an ancient pre-Christian Teutonic tradition designed to expel Winter (Sudwestrundfunk 2004) and exorcise evil spirits feared in the period between seasons, particularly Winter and Spring (Russ 1982). People dress up as witches, demons and animals and make as much noise as possible, for only then are they a match against the supernatural. There are parades, processions, floats, masquerade balls, witty speeches, rousing songs, drinking, costumes, false faces (wooden masks) and plenty of rollicking (Tourismus Marketing, date unknown). During Fastnacht, and indeed Karnival, social roles and rules are reversed (Robinson 2003). Peasants and slaves become kings and masters, men become women, children toll roads and everyone must obey every whim of the temporary kings. The incorporation of Fastnacht into Christian Carnival was natural.

On Funkensonntag, “Spark Sunday,” the first Sunday following Ash Wednesday, bonfires are lit, wooden wheels or disks are set on fire and giant straw witches are burned to put a final end to pagan Fastnacht and to begin Christian Lent (Robinson 2003, Russ 1982, Verband Oberrheinischer Narrenzünfte, date unknown). So one of the first acts of Lent and last acts of Karnival is a recreation of Inquisition witch burnings.

The fool-witch of Shrove Tuesday dates back to the beginning of Christian Carnival, some 180 years (Russ 1982), though she was not originally a witch nor a fool. She used to be a harmless, negligent woman, who hung a cloth over her face and wandered the streets (Sudwestrundfunk 2004, Offenburger Hexenzunft 1998c). She was transformed into the fool-witch, a parody of the witch fashioned by Christianity to justify the Inquisition, about 80 years ago. This was a political statement from the National Socialists who favoured heathen, Germanic and humanistic beliefs over Christianity (Sudwestrundfunk 2004). The figure of the old witch fit perfectly into Shrove Tuesday for it exposed and mocked one of Christianity’s biggest embarrassments. The Offenburger Hexenzunft (Open Castle Witch Guild) was the first to use wooden masks and the associated dress and brooms in the 1930’s. (My witch-ward, Figure 4, celebrates the fortieth anniversary of these original witch costumes.) Today, there are 250 different witch figures, seventy-five percent of which originated since 1980. The broom was once used to shame adulterers, frauds and the like by forcing these offenders to carry a broom in public (Offenburger Hexenzunft 1998c). Now fool-witches use the broom to entertain and amuse spectators by engaging in nonsense with it (cf. [Offenburger Hexenzunft 1998a](#)).

So what does it all mean? And why is it on my Schnapps?

It is surprising that the bottle of Schnapps that I cradle in my adult’s hand and child’s memory should hold such broad and deep historical, mythical and folkloric significance. From subtle glasswork and kirsh elements, to the vivid explicit witch offering a shot glass, to an even deeper and ironic play on the words *Hexe* (witch) and *Hex* (jinx), this small, innocuous bottle teases the observer with hints, allusions, agendas and secrets. Who would guess that dragons and witch burnings, political unrest and missionary subterfuge hide plainly on the surface of this Schnapps? Who would guess why someone would incorporate all this lore into this bottle, a bottle of brandy?

And the brandy, the Schnapps, of course, is the answer. The folklore behind Black Forest Schnapps, Black Forest glass-making and the fool-witch all combine to suggest a secret, magical, uninhibited, “burning” experience. This explains the witch’s wink, toast and grin. The bottle and its label tease the observer. They suggest magic or being swept away, a Fastnacht-like experience

if the customer drinks the Schnapps. The folklore elements are used to attract potential customers to the bottle. They are a brewer's sales tool.

The tool is three-pronged. The weakest prong is the glassware and kirsch elements of the bottle. The middle prong is the witch - or more correctly fool-witch - element. And the strongest prong is the pun *Hex* scrolled prominently across the label.

Few people would likely notice or understand the glassware and kirsch elements of the bottle. They are not explicit. Those who notice and recognize these elements catch the full spectrum of folkloric significance and connections characterizing this product that the fool-witch merely hints at. The Schnapps brewers do not need them to recognize and experience the full significance of these elements though. The focus is on the witch, and the pun.

The message on the bottle label is spelled out. The picture is unmistakably that of a witch and the word *Hex*, though misspelled, says witch explicitly. On the other hand, no explicit mention of a fool-witch is made. The brewers assume the customer will recognize and be familiar with the Fastnacht fool. The fool-witch, to those who recognize the witch as such, suggests a fool, something the Schnapps in the bottle is likely to make the customer. This suggestion and humour are the jam-breaker sales tool, made more explicitly by the posture of the fool-witch on the label. That offer of the shot glass, wink of her eye and mischievous grin direct the customer to partake of similar behavior. In addition, the misspelling of the word *Hexe* as *Hex* on the label tightens the draw of the label. Most Germans and most people who know English would recognize that hex means jinx or curse, whereas hexe might not be recognized in English and just mean witch in German. Jinx has a conspiring tone to it on the label. It is almost a mischievous dare, a parody of the fool-witch, and yet another form of humour and another sales tool on the label.

Allusive humour is another facet of this sales pitch. In a similar example, I have a change wallet that looks like a pair of German men's folkshorts and has a buttoned front flap. The face of the flap asks what is inside. It is just a flap, but inside on the wallet skin is written "nothing." I also have a German beer mug which has a couple kissing under an overhang. The man hangs his hand outside of the overhang, while another man on top of the overhang relieves himself. The first man comments that it is raining outside while continuing to kiss the woman. I will leave you to interpret the humour in these examples.

The brewers assume the customer will recognize and be familiar with the Fastnacht fool, but they do not rely on this familiarity. The product still has a chance to sell because of the *Hex* and the witch, even though the fool-witch is a local culture figure. The picture of a witch on a Schnapps bottle implies volumes about what the customer can expect from this beverage. A witch's hex can be very disorientating, so too can this bottle of Schnapps.

The fool-witch's exact meaning on the label might not be recognized by people outside the German culture, particularly those who know nothing about Karnival and Fastnacht. One needs to understand Fastnacht in order to catch the humour and promise of inhibition behind the label. On the other hand, the witch in one form or another is a world-wide folklore figure (Starr 2003, Anonymous, date unknown), so the suggestion by a winking witch of a magical or even medicinal experience is likely to be understood universally so long as the European witch pictured is recognized as a witch. Likely not all cultures would recognize the European witch immediately, but once recognized, the suggestion of the label is likely to be understood.

Of course, then there is the question of evil witches and poison! Want some Schnapps? Want some Fastnacht memories?

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