

Ritual Rebellion and Social Inversion in Alpine Austria:  
Rethinking the “Perchtenlauf” in its Relationship to the Carnavalesque

by

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## ABSTRACT

The "Perchtenlauf," a multi-faceted procession of masked participants found in the eastern Alps, has been the subject of considerable discourse and often debate within European ethnology since the mid-19th century. While often viewed from a mythological perspective and characterized as a relic of pre-Christian cult practices, only recently have scholars begun to examine its connection with Carnival. Research of this kind calls for an in-depth analysis of the "Perchtenlauf" that is informed by Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesque, an aesthetic of festive merriment and the release from social restrictions which is embodied by Carnival traditions. A carnivalesque reading of the "Perchtenlauf" reveals a tradition pregnant with playful ambivalence, celebrations of the lower body, and the inversion of social hierarchies. Past interpretations of the "Perchtenlauf" have often described its alleged supernatural function of driving away the harmful forces of winter, however its carnivalesque elements have definite social functions involving the enjoyment of certain liberties not sanctioned under other circumstances. The current study solidifies the relationship between the "Perchtenlauf" and Carnival using ethnographic, historical, and etymological evidence in an attempt to reframe the discourse on the tradition's form and function in terms of carnivalesque performance.

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## CHAPTER 1

### PRELIMINARY REMARKS AND REVIEW OF LITERATURE

One of the most commonly cited descriptions of the “Perchtenlauf,” and one of the earliest that goes into ethnographic detail, was composed in 1800 by Friedrich von Spaur in an account of his experiences traveling to the Pinzgau region of Salzburg:

Am folgenden Tage ließ ich mir von den Purschen das Berchtenlaufen und andere hier übliche Spiele und Künste noch zeigen. Zu jenem gehört eine Gesellschaft von 20 oder 30 verummten Burschen. Einige waren als Teufel, andere mit Kühgesichtern und wieder andere als Narren mit ziemlich köstspieligem Prunke maskirt. Alle hatten Kühglocken und große mit Stacheln versehene Stöcke, mehrere außerordentlich lange und wie Böller knallende Peitschen. Jetzt sind zwar diese, meistens im Karneval umherziehenden Maskeraden, des damit verbundenen Unfuges wegen, verboten; doch lassen die Berchten öfters sich noch sehen und ihre Ankunft vorher verkündigen. Die Lichter müssen dann in den Häusern ausgelöscht werden, um die Fenster ganz zu erhalten und niemand darf sich vor ihnen auf dem Wege blicken lassen, der nicht unangenehmen Begegnungen sich aussetzen will. Sie tanzen, springen und singen vor dem Häusern der Beamten und ihrer Schönen, und man läßt sie ungestört umherziehen, wenn sie die Grenzen der Ordnung und Sittlichkeit nicht allzuauffallend überschreiten. (243-44)

The primary distribution area of these practices is the Austrian state of Salzburg, particularly the regions of Pongau and Pinzgau, although it is also found in neighboring areas such as Tyrol and the Berchtesgaden region of Bavaria. Referred to variously as the

“Perchtenlauf”/“Berchtenlaufen”/“Perchtenlaufen,” (“race” or “run” of the “Perchten”), or “Perchtenumzug”/“Perchtenzug” (procession of the “Perchten”), the differing temporal and regional manifestations of the “Perchtenlauf” (this term will be used from hereon for the sake of clarity and consistency) are as varied as its names. Common to all variants of the “Perchtenlauf,” however, is the appearance of costumed men and boys known as “Perchten” (alternately, “Berchten”) who parade noisily from house to house and village to village, traveling in some cases upwards of 17 kilometers in a single day.<sup>1</sup> Their procession is punctuated by pauses, usually in front of a residence, in which the “Perchten” perform a dance or other theatrics in exchange for food and drink. The “Perchtenlauf” may be held on various dates between December 5th (Schuhladen, “Berchtesgadener” 10) and Shrove Tuesday (Bächtold-Stäubli 5: 1786; Fischer 109, among others), although it most commonly coincides with the observance of Epiphany on January 6th and the preceding evening. Recent developments in “Perchtenlauf” traditions stray from these conventions in multiple ways which demand undivided research attention. These will therefore be only briefly noted in the concluding section, while the bulk of the discussion is confined to the “Perchtenlauf” as it comes to the fore in the historical record from the 17th to the early 20th century.

Since the 19th Century, interpretations of the “Perchtenlauf” have overwhelmingly categorized the procession as the relic of a pre-Christian ritual, whose

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<sup>1</sup> The “Gasteiner Perchtenzug” for example takes place over a two-day period, the participants covering a stretch of 13 kilometers on the first day and 17 on the second (Hutter and Hörmann 14).

purpose was to repel the malevolent spirits and the harsh natural elements of winter.<sup>2</sup> Andree-Eysn, for example, whose excellent ethnographic descriptions of these processions are consulted extensively below, wrote of the “Perchtenlauf” in 1910: “Man geht gegen die bösen Geister angriffsweise vor, sucht sie zu verjagen, indem man sich selbst ein schreckliches Fratzens Gesicht vorlegt und so dem Dämon entgegentritt” (“Perchten” 180). Utzinger asserted similarly in 1922 that the participants were attendants of a “Frau Perchta,” spouse of the harvest deity “Wodan,” whose masks demonstrated both good and evil forces to be honored and combated respectively, in order to bring about a prosperous New Year (13-14). This claim can be traced back to Grimm’s highly influential *Deutsche Mythologie* published in 1844, in which the author wrote: “im salzburgischen gebirg wird noch bis auf heute der fürchterlichen *Perchtel* (i.e. “Frau Perchta”) zu ehren das sogenannte *Perchtenlaufen*... gehalten” (256). The linguistic similarity between “Frau Perchta” and the “Perchtenlauf” most likely played a key role in the formation of this hypothesis. As will be demonstrated below however, the relationship between these two terms is that they both stem from an Old High German word for Epiphany, “giperahta naht.” This relationship is therefore indirect and implies no direct connection between the mythical figure and the processions.

Further, mythological readings of the “Perchtenlauf” are not documented earlier than the middle of the 19th century (Schuladen, “Diskussion” 66). Earlier interpretations such as those from Kürsinger (164) in 1841 and Hübner (398) in 1796 categorize the “Perchtenlauf” as a form of popular merriment. Similarly, in 1818, an anonymous

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<sup>2</sup> Rumpf, who challenges this claim, summarizes in detail the interpretive literature on the “Perchtenlauf” (*Perchten* 151-57).

government official in Salzburg described the “Perchtenlauf” as a “volkstümliche Belustigung und Maskerade verbunden mit Tanz und gymnastischen Uebung [sic], sie gehört zu den Faßnachtsunterhaltungen” (qtd. in Schuhladen, “Berchtesgadener” 13). While a resemblance to later descriptions in the assessment of the “Perchtenlauf” as ancient should not be overlooked, it is important that a mythological reading of the practice is nowhere to be found. Instead it is viewed in these analyses as a popular form of entertainment and placed in connection with Carnival.

Recent studies by Kammerhofer-Aggermann (which will be described in further detail below) demonstrate historical links between the “Perchtenlauf” and Venetian Carnival processions. This relationship calls for a new analytical approach to the “Perchtenlauf,” one that will provide fresh insights to a tradition that has been interpreted primarily in a mythological context since it first became the object of ethnographic inquiry in the 19th century. Rather than focus on the possible pre-Christian origins of the “Perchtenlauf” (evidence for which remains inconclusive) and its potential mythological meanings, the current study focuses on the significance of the practice in regard to its social functions which parallel the “ritual rebellion” and temporary social inversion present in Carnival traditions. More than merely resembling Carnival in form and function, however, it is often overlooked that the “Perchtenlauf,” in regions where it was practiced, historically marked the beginning of the Carnival season.

This connection calls for an interpretation of the “Perchtenlauf” in light of the carnivalesque, an aesthetic exemplified by Carnival traditions, which give license to certain social behaviors preceding the Lenten period. In addition to the temporary suspension of social restrictions, the carnivalesque encompasses the reversal of



hierarchies and festive merriment fueled by food, drink, and sex. The implications of such a perspective will therefore not only be of significance to discourse on the “Perchtenlauf,” they will also provide researchers of Carnival traditions with a regional case study in the Austrian Alps. This perspective will be of further relevance to those interested in the carnivalesque as an aesthetic found in other traditions as well as in the arts.

Broader significance can be found in the analytical framework proposed by Geertz in which rituals and traditions are viewed as texts, or stories that cultures “tell themselves about themselves” (448). In this sense, when viewed as a narrative, the “Perchtenlauf” conveys unique information about alpine Austrian culture, which by way of comparison may prove to be a useful tool for cultural theory in general. In other words, an examination of the carnivalesque in a midwinter tradition practiced in the mountains of western Austria can serve as a point of reference for how the carnivalesque manifests itself in other places and under different circumstances.

Lastly, a functional analysis of the “Perchtenlauf” in the context of its relationship to Carnival will be of interest to ritual studies scholars who since the 1980s have tended to disfavor symbolic interpretations of ritual practices, viewing them instead as embodied performances (Schieffelin 194). Within this framework, theorists such as Rappaport maintain that the performance of ritual has some effect beyond mere communication: that participants, at least, believe they are “doing something” (429). On the other hand, Staal argues radically that rituals have no meaning outside of the performance of the ritual itself (3). He elaborates: “The important thing is what you do, not what you think, believe or

say” (4). Correspondingly, the “Perchtenlauf” is regarded in the following pages not as the symbolic repulsion of winter, but rather as a performance of freedom from social restraint. A question that will be addressed but that will perhaps remain unanswered is, if the “Perchtenlauf” is a “ritual of rebellion,” what, if anything, this rebellion accomplishes.

## CHAPTER 2

### A CARNIVALESQUE READING OF THE “PERCHTENLAUF”

Along the footpaths and old roads of Salzburg’s periphery one will notice, as Andree-Eysn describes, stone crosses, often chipped and weathered, sometimes tilted earthward, descending year by year deeper into the ground (“Steinkreuze” 65). Varying in stature from knee-high to some one and a half meters, they share a general lack of inscription, bearing at most a year or a few lines rendered indecipherable by the erosion of centuries. Upon inquiry, the locals will attribute such a cross to a victim of murder or plague, or, of particular interest here, they will say the grave belongs to a “Bercht.” One of these headstones for example, which lies in the Rauris valley and bears the sole inscription “1553,” is according to oral tradition the final resting place of a “Bercht... Denn wer im Berchtenanzug, mit der Teufelsmaske stirbt, wird nicht in geweihter Erde begraben (76). While this theme will play a more significant role in the discussion to follow, it suffices here to note that this stone cross, which lies next to a footpath in the Rauris valley, is possibly the oldest relic of the “Perchtenlauf.”

#### **Early Records of the “Perchtenlauf”**

The earliest written reference to the “Perchtenlauf,” however, is a decree from the magistrate of Berchtesgaden from the seventh of January, 1601, citing incidents on the night preceding Epiphany (January 6th) and announcing that participation in the

“Perchtenlauffen” would henceforth be punished with fines (Rumpf, *Perchten* 132).<sup>3</sup>

Documents such as these are typical for references to the “Perchtenlauf” from the 18th century and earlier, which are found almost exclusively in financial or legal records with limited ethnographic value (Kammerhofer-Aggermann, “Bräuche” 42). These records are useful nonetheless, in part, because they demonstrate that lawmakers repeatedly (and unsuccessfully) attempted to abolish the “Perchtenlauf” and similar masked processions via legal means.

For example, the court of Berchtesgaden outlawed the “Perchtenlauf” in 1601 and, in 1645, sentenced 16 transgressors of this edict to 100 Reichstaler in fines and eight days in prison as well as a mandate to attend confession and receive communion (Schuhladen, “Salzburg” 24). The office of Salzburg’s Archbishop Firmian released a court order on the 12th of February 1730 forbidding that “zu Heil. Dreikönigen und Fastnachtszeit die Junge Bursch in Unterschidlichen [sic] Narren Kleidern und

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<sup>3</sup> Timm (306) and Rumpf (*Perchten* 131) attribute the earliest records of the “Perchtenlauf” to a series of entries in an accounting book of the Diessen/Ammersee market from 1582, 1586, and 1600, which recorded gratuities given to those that “die Pecht gejagt [haben].” While these records are dated to Epiphany (January 6th), Christmas, and the first “Quatember” (a Catholic fast period occurring four times annually) respectively, high days often associated with “Perchten” traditions (Rumpf, *Perchten* 132), they provide no evidence for what was meant by “chasing the Pecht,” nor any concrete connection to the “Perchtenlauf.” There is however a linguistic similarity to the “Perchtenjagen” (Rumpf, *Perchten* 111; Waschnitius 162), a tradition that distinguishes itself from the “Perchtenlauf,” as will be demonstrated in the following chapter.

Schellwerckh<sup>4</sup> verstölter umbzulauffen pflegen” (Adrian 57). In 1789 the regional court of Reichenhall issued a fine to three unmarried farm servants because on the evening of Epiphany they appeared as “vermummte Pertten“ (Rumpf, *Perchten* 133). These documents therefore demonstrate not only that the rural population of Salzburg and neighboring regions didn’t readily allow legal authorities to stand between them and their traditions, but they also establish a firm connection between the “Perchtenlauf” and the 6th of January dating back to at least 1601 (“Masken” 158).

Kammerhofer-Aggermann also documents an established curfew of 10:00 in the evening and a ban on cross-dressing issued by the court of Werfen on January 24th, 1680 (“Masken”165). While this particular decree does not mention the “Perchtenlauf” specifically, it could have been targeted at several figures (discussed in detail below) portrayed by young men dressed as women who, at least in the 19th century, played roles of varying importance in the tradition. Similar legislation from the 17th and 18th centuries was targeted specifically at Carnival processions. The regional government of Werfen for example issued a decree in 1664 forbidding the masked celebrations of Carnival in public (165). Decrees criminalizing Carnival celebrations were issued on a yearly basis up until 1758 with the following legislation issued by the court of Werfen that effectively banned all public forms of masked merriment: “Nit allein im Advent alle Weynacht-Spill, und in der Fasten alle Passions Comaedien, sondern auch alle andere in denen Würths-

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<sup>4</sup> Both Andree-Eysn (163) and Waschnitius (37) describe the “Perchten” as wearing shells.

Häusern vorzustellende Comaediatische Exhibitiones, welche spatten abends anfangen, und sich erst NachtZeits endigen, in dass künftige abzuschaffen...” (180).

These decrees demonstrate furthermore that those in power made little distinction between Carnival and midwinter traditions such as the “Perchtenlauf.” But why were lawmaking bodies so intent to put an end to these practices? Kammerhofer-Aggermann argues the “Perchtenlauf” was a form of amusement for rural populations: “Die Umzüge brachten Gelegenheit zu Raufhändeln, zur Anbahnung von Liebschaften, zu sexuellen Begegnungen und alkoholischen Exzessen (“Bräuche” 42). Therefore the ruling class saw these processions as a threat to social order and public decency (42). In support of this hypothesis is a 1668 court record from Lienz in which a man complained of being beaten by a masked participant of the “Perchtenlauf” (Schuhladen, “Salzburg” 25). Further, the justification given in the 1730 Salzburg decree against masked processions on Epiphany and Carnival was “damit die Schranken christlicher Zucht und Ehrbarkeit nicht überschritten werden” (Rumpf, *Perchten* 132). Correspondingly, Schuhladen references accounts of clergymen from the 19th Century, who complain of noise, fighting, dancing and “polizei und religionswidrigen Excesse” associated with the “Perchtenlauf” (“Salzburg” 26).<sup>5</sup> A chaplain from Lienz wrote of the “Perchtenlauf” in 1838 for example: “möge immer dieser Wahn zum Spielen der Perchtl einigen Beweggrund liefern, wird die vorherrschende Absicht des Spiels immer Belustigung [sein]” (29).

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<sup>5</sup> Schuhladen notes the lack of any mention of pagan or superstitious elements in their lamentation of these practices (“Berchtesgadener” 26).

In summary, early records of the “Perchtenlauf” place the tradition in temporal connection with the 6th of January, or Epiphany, while its function (or dysfunction from the perspective of the clergy) was similar to that of Carnival. As Kammerhofer-Aggermann notes, that the majority of these decrees were issued in January serves as evidence that Epiphany (January 6th) marked the beginning of the Carnival season at this time and that the “Perchtenlauf” was a part of these seasonal festivities (“Masken” 170). While this perspective will be discussed further below it is sufficient here to note that those in power saw both Carnival traditions and the “Perchtenlauf” as forms of rowdy merriment that threatened the social order and that therefore had to be suppressed. Biased by this perspective, however, these records are unreliable and, further, they lack detailed descriptions of the tradition. Not until the late 19th and early 20th centuries did thorough ethnographic descriptions of the “Perchtenlauf” appear. These provide a clearer picture of the tradition.

### **Ethnographic Accounts of the “Schiachperchtenlauf”**

While modern enactments of the “Perchtenlauf” divide costumed participants into the categories of “Schönperchten” (beautiful “Perchten”) and “schiache Perchten” (ugly “Perchten”),<sup>6</sup> Andree-Eysn’s “Die Perchten im Salzburgischen,” an ethnographic work published in 1908, documents two separate rituals: the “Schönperchtenlauf” and the “Schiachperchtenlauf” (161-62). Participants in the latter were some 50 - 60 young men

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<sup>6</sup> For accounts of the modern “Perchtenlauf” see for example Hutter and Hörmann.

wearing shells attached to their leather belts and simple masks of cloth with holes cut out for the eyes and mouth (163). She adds:

Zwölf Burschen aber, die eigentlichen Perchten, waren in schwarze Schaffelle gehüllt, hatten zu Hauben genähte Dachsfelle auf dem Kopfe (die Perchtenhaube) und holzgeschnitzte Masken mit groben menschlichen Gesichtzügen, langen Zähnen, Hörnern oder solche von fabelhaften Tieren mit Schnäbeln und Borsten oder beweglichen Kiefern vor dem Gesichte. (163)

At the head of the procession was a man banging a powerful drum referred to as “der Bumms” (163). Next came a group bearing lanterns and resin torches on long poles as well as two fools, “Lapp” and “Lappin,” the latter being a man dressed as a woman. Armed with an obviously phallic sausage-like apparatus fashioned from old rags stuffed with sheep’s wool, the fool assailed “alle weiblichen Personen, die er kannte, wenn sie neugierig aus der Tür traten oder das Fenster öffneten” (163). Still others created a din of wailing cow horns, cracking whips, and ringing bells. Andree-Eysn summarizes: “Kurz unter vielstimmigem Höllenlärm zog die vermummte Schar der ‘Schiachen’ Perchten trotz schlechter Wege und Dunkelheit mit Hilfe der Bergstöcke springend rasch durch das nachtschlafende Tal” (“Perchten” 163). The procession came to a stop in front of farmhouses where the “Perchten” gave a clamorous and acrobatic performance, readily accepting gifts of liquor, bread, cheese, and pastries from the residents, but declining monetary gratuities.



Adrian offers a similar account from the Pongau region of Salzburg (56). The participants, 80 - 100 in number, “verwandeln sich durch Schwärzen des Gesichtes, lange, wallende Bärte in ‘Schiache’ Perchten und suchen sich durch Vermummung möglichst unkenntlich zu machen. Jauchzend und lärmend treiben sie sich dann von Gehöft zu Gehöft bis gegen Mitternacht herum.” An encounter between two such groups from different villages would erupt in a violent, sometimes deadly scuffle, casualties of which were buried secretly and hastily on location. Andree-Eysn explains that a Christian burial was denied anyone killed wearing a “Perchten” mask citing another case in which this might come to pass: “[wenn] sich zwischen die Schar der verummten Perchten ein nicht zu ihnen gehöriger, aber mit ihnen gleichartig verummter Bursche einmischte” (“Perchten” 163-64). Believing him to be an incarnation of the devil, the “Perchten” would, according to Andree-Eysn, beat the unfortunate fellow to death. Superstitions aside, such brutality certainly served a purpose, as a stranger could not be trusted to keep the names of the other participants safe from authorities - the punishment just for participating in the procession could be hefty fines, jail time, or even conscription into military service (Fischer 116). It stands to reason then that these casualties were buried quickly and quietly, as the “Perchten” certainly had no intentions of facing murder charges.

Andree-Eysn identifies a decree issued by the court of Zell am See and Mittersill in 1848 as the last ordinance against the “Perchtenlauf,” this one specifically citing the deadly battles between “schiachen Perchten” as reason for the prohibition (“Perchten”

162). While Schuhladen claims he could find no record of this decree, arguing that such legislations were not drafted later than 1818 (“Berchtesgadener” 13), it is clear that the “Schiachperchtenlauf,” as described by Andree-Eysn fell out of practice sometime in the course of the 19th century. The “Schönperchtenlauf” on the other hand, lives on in the state of Salzburg. This tradition, which seems to have arisen as a less violent and legal alternative, preserves nonetheless many aspects of the “Schiachperchtenlauf.”

### **Ethnographic Accounts of the “Schönperchtenlauf”**

In *Salzburger Volkspiele, Aufzüge und Tänze*, Adrian described the 1892 “Perchtenumzug” in St. Johann, which is located in the Pongau region of Salzburg (52). Participants in the procession, which he described as one of the largest of its kind, were some 120 farmers and peasants while merchants and townsfolk, along with visitors from neighboring regions, made up the audience. Roughly one-sixth of these were costumed as “schöne Perchten,” while the rest fell under the category of “wilde Perchten.” The most distinguished figures in the procession, a subcategory of the “schöne Perchten,” were the “Tafelperchten,” so called for their huge, iconic, panel-shaped headdresses, measuring up to three meters in height and weighing 40-50 kilograms (Andree-Eysn, “Perchten” 166). Adrian describes the “Perchtenkappe” at length:

Sie besteht aus einer hohen Kopfbedeckung von scharlachrotem Sammt, aus der ein nahezu zwei Mannshöhen messendes Holzgestell emporragt, welches aus zwei quadratförmigen Brettern besteht, welche, jedes auf eine der Ecken gestellt, übereinander angebracht sind. Eine rückwärts durchlaufende Eisenstange sichert

die Verbindung und dient, passend hergerichtet, in ihrem unteren Teile als das auf den Achseln des Perchtenläufers ruhendes [sic] Traggestell der Perchtenkappe. Die Vorderseite der beiden Bretter ist mit scharlachrotem Tuch überzogen und mit allerlei Silber- und Goldschmuck, welcher auf jedem der Teile symmetrisch um den in der Mitte befestigten Spiegel gruppiert ist, aufs reichste verziert. (53)

Pocket watches, coins, silver and gold chains and brightly colored artificial flowers, which adorned the headdresses, displayed the wealth of its bearer. Indeed, only those farmers with money were able to afford the headdresses required of the “Schönperchten” (53).

Contrary to the cacophonous march of the “Schiachperchtenlauf,” the “Schönperchtenlauf” held pace with the music making of an accompanying band (54). The well-known clown figure “Hanswurst” led the procession. His legs were stuffed into the body of an artificial horse, whose hindquarters dragged behind him.<sup>7</sup> Swinging a cow’s tail filled with sand, the fool cleared a path through the crowd of onlookers. Following “Hanswurst” were the “Schönperchten,” led by the “Vorpercht,” who wore the most beautiful and richly decorated headdress of them all. A young man in woman’s clothes, referred to as a “G’sellin,” attended each of the “Schönperchten.”

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<sup>7</sup> Creatures with both human and animal anatomy are examples of the grotesque body (Bakhtin 345). The grotesque combines the positive and negative into a single image (308). In this case, “Hanswurst” is neither man nor beast but an ambivalent combination of the two who has transgressed the limits of both. The significance of such ambivalent imagery will factor into the discussion below.

Next in procession came the “schiachen Perchten,” who correspond in behavior and appearance to the figures in the “Schiachperchtenlauf.” As Adrian describes: “Ernst und feierlich ziehen die Schönperchten, lärmend und johlend die schiachen Perchten durch den Ort” (55). By means of shouts, howls, and whistles as well as large bells that they carried, the “schiachen Perchten” stirred the winter air into a dissonant fury. As in the “Schiachperchtenlauf,” these figures wore frightening masks resembling fanged animals or devils. Gone however were the simple cloth masks described by Andree-Eysn. In their stead were a variety of characters including soldiers, farmers, gypsies, and fools, as well as a “schiache” counterpart to the “Tafelperchten,” whose headdress was adorned with rags, dead animals such as birds and mice, and other unpleasant things. The “schiachen Perchten” were equipped with various weaponry, especially sticks, poles, and scissors measuring several meters, which they employed against the head coverings of spectators (54-55).

Where space allowed, the participants stopped the procession, allowing the “Schönperchten” and their cross-dressing attendants to dance within a circle of onlookers (55). The excessively heavy “Tafelkappen,” the headdress of the “Schönperchten,” restricted this dance (which was accompanied by the instrumentation of musicians) to slow, turning movements. The “schiachen Perchten,” in contrast, jumped and danced erratically, heckling the onlookers. As the dance came to an end, the fool, “Hanswurst,” led the participants to the next stop where they would repeat the ritual. In this manner the “Schönperchtenlauf” continued, often for an entire day.

Andree-Eysn provides a similar account of the 1902 entourage of the “schönen Perchten” in the Gasteinertal,<sup>8</sup> which took place the first Sunday following Epiphany (“Perchten” 169). The headdresses of the Gasteiner “Schönperchten” contrast with the panel-shaped “Tafelkappen” of other Pongau locations in that they are not rectangular but instead resemble towers that rise into a pointed tip (166). Aside from this and a few other details, the procession is much the same as that described by Adrian. Analogous to the “Hanswurst” in the St. Johann procession, Andree-Eysn describes “Lustigmacher,” clown figures wearing pointed caps and carrying familiar sausage-like devices made of canvas, with which they struck female members of the audience (“Perchten” 169). A third fool tossed a canvas doll resembling a small child to female onlookers. The “Wickelkind,” as the puppet was called, was attached to a line by means of which it could be drawn back and readied for a new target. Resembling the “Schiachperchtenlauf,” the procession stopped in front of notable citizens’ houses, where the “Schönperchten” and “G’sellinnen” performed their ponderous dance (Andree-Eysn, “Perchten” 169). Donations from the landlord were sometimes monetary, but more often liquid in form (“Perchten” 170).

### **The “Perchtenlauf” and the Carnavalesque**

While the “Schönperchtenlauf” and the “Schiachperchtenlauf” show clear distinctions between each other, both traditions call for carnivalesque interpretations. As Bakhtin describes, the carnivalesque encompasses a range of qualities so called because,

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<sup>8</sup> Like St. Johann, Bad Gastein is found in the Pongau region of Salzburg.

while they were once integral to medieval folk culture throughout Europe, they now manifest themselves primarily (but not exclusively) in Carnival traditions (218). These include a temporary disruption of the social order through the inversion of hierarchies and the suspension of restrictive laws and codes of conduct (10). The carnivalesque is deeply rooted in calendrical cycles and the ambivalence of time “which kills and gives birth” at once (82). Therefore dualities such as death and rebirth, creation and destruction, rich and poor, male and female and praise and abuse are combined into one image or act. Food and drink figure prominently into the carnivalesque not only because they involve man taking the outside world into his body (281), but also because they lead to the creative acts of defecation and urination. As Bakhtin writes: “the living body returns to the earth its excrement, which fertilizes the earth as does the body of the dead” (175). Descent into the earth results in the springing forth of new life and the lower body, encompassing the stomach and genitals, corresponds to the earth as both “bodily grave” and site of reproduction (21). It is therefore a central and ambivalent image of the carnivalesque.

As illustrated above, the basic form of each manifestation of the “Perchtenlauf” is the same: a group of costumed men who parade from house to house in midwinter – usually on Epiphany, or the night before – where they perform a brief dance in return for a gift of food, drink, or occasionally money. In this sense, the ritual bears a close resemblance to the socially invasive wassailing traditions of the English-speaking world, which Nissenbaum describes as follows:

At other times of the year it was the poor who owed goods, labor, and deference to the rich. But on this occasion [Christmas] the tables were turned – literally. The poor – most often bands of boys and young men – claimed the right to march to the houses of the well-to-do, enter their halls, and receive gifts of food, drink, and sometimes money as well. (9)

Wassailers usually requested these gifts in the form of song (Nissenbaum 9), which is analogous to the dance performances of the “Perchten.” While records of the “Perchtenlauf” do not explicitly demonstrate that the participants targeted homesteads of the well-to-do for their bountiful and obligatory gifts, Andree-Eysn does mention that the “Schönperchten” often stopped to dance “vor einem Honorationshause” (“Perchten” 169) and that the “Schiachperchten” singled out for their performances “Gehöfte, die sie besonders aufzeichnen wollten” (“Perchten” 163). While she does not comment on their motivations, it seems probable that they chose those residences likely to lavish them with the most sumptuous rewards. Whether or not this was the case, it remains that the “Perchten” desired primarily food and drink, not money, as compensation for their theatrics. This is because the goal was not financial gain, but carnivalesque merriment.

For similar reasons, the fool plays a leading role in both manifestations of the “Perchtenlauf.” The word fool derives from “folly,” the opposite of wisdom (Bakhtin 260). Under the guise of folly, the medieval fool or court jester was allowed to speak his mind to the king, although he was normally a representative of the lowest social stratum (often having some physical abnormality). Furthermore, his words, veiled in the absurd,

often contained biting criticism and pointed commentary. As the German proverb relates, “nur Narren und Kinder sagen die Wahrheit.” Like the child who names the nakedness of the emperor in Hans Christian Andersen’s story, the fool is theoretically unfettered by social constraints that would bind his critical tongue. He is therefore an ambivalent embodiment of both wisdom and folly; he is a commoner, yet he engages in intimate and often disrespectful discourse with the king in an entertaining manner. The fine line prescribed to the fool between the harmless jest for which he earns his position in the court, and more scathing criticism that could cost him his life, further entrenches him in ambivalence.

At the head of the train of “Schönperchten” the fool, “Hanswurst,” clears a path through the assembled onlookers. Similarly, the fool “Lapp”<sup>9</sup> and his cross-dressing companion “Lappin” are positioned at the front of the parading “schiachen Perchten,” preceded only by a drummer and torch-bearers (Andree-Eysn, “Perchten” 163). Both processions are thus framed by the fool’s ability to degrade imagery to the realm of the lower body and to invert social hierarchies. To these ends, he swings an arm-length canvas sausage at female onlookers, an obvious sexual metaphor which has a striking parallel in the Roman “Lupercalia” (Andree-Eysn, “Perchten” 182-83). Each blow from this weapon is not only a physical manifestation of downward movement, but also a symbolic

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<sup>9</sup> Lapp also appears in the “Schönperchtenlauf” in Zell am See in the Pinzgau region of Salzburg.

According to Hutter and Hörmann he represents a dimwitted peasant who, like the fool to the king, takes certain liberties from respectful discourse with his master (80).



degradation from the upper body, associated with higher thought and spirituality, to the lower bodily domain of food and sex.<sup>10</sup> A similar theme emerges in Andree-Eysn's account of the Gasteiner "Perchtenlauf." By tossing canvas dolls resembling infants to female spectators, the fools make overt references to reproduction, and by extension, sex. Corresponding to Bakhtin's analysis of Carnival forms, emphasis on the regenerative lower body is not only an anatomical analogy to the temporary regeneration of the social order achieved through the suspension of hierarchies and restrictions during these festivals (10), but also a means to this end. As a common, universal point of reference, the image of the body serves as a leveling mechanism that erases all distinctions in social status (Bakhtin 19).

Much like the characters with the oversized scissors in Adrian's account of the procession in St. Johann, Andree-Eysn describes a figure known as the "Schneider" or "tailor," in the Gasteiner "Schönperchtenlauf." This fellow was equipped with:

eine sich verlängernde und verkürzende hölzerne Schere, sogenannte Streckschere.... Eine solche besteht aus sechs bis zehn Paaren sich kreuzender hölzerner Leisten, die in der Mitte und an den Enden durch Holznieten verbunden sind und sich durch einen einfachen Handruck leicht ausdehnen oder zusammenziehen lassen. ("Perchten" 168)

The tailor used this device, which could also be interpreted as a phallic symbol, to

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<sup>10</sup> Bakhtin discusses in further detail the metaphor of topographical downward movement embedded in carnivalesque violence (370).

remove the hats of audience members for example, or to undo the apron strings of female bystanders (168). His work therefore complements that of the fools mentioned above by symbolically assaulting the upper body (and by extension the higher thought and spirituality) of the spectators and simultaneously promoting the sensuality of the lower body.

Equally if not more important, however, is that the actions of the tailor and the fools incite laughter. Originating in the stomach, laughter is, like defecation, ejaculation and childbirth, an essentially productive bodily function.<sup>11</sup> It is a spontaneous and chaotic outburst, antonymous with restriction and authority (Sanders 146). An essential element of Carnival, laughter can be merry and festive as well as derisive (Bakhtin 12). In the ambivalent atmosphere created by laughter, praise and abuse become one (Bakhtin 166). Therefore by heckling female onlookers, the fools of the “Perchtenlauf” are in fact displaying their affections. This corresponds to Andree-Eysn’s observation that the fools would not throw the canvas infants to foreign or substandard women (“Perchten” 169).

Bächtold-Stäubli reports of a similar prank, in which the “Perchten” would shoot ash and soot in the faces of audience members with an air rifle (5: 1787). Both Rumpf (*Perchten* 110-11) and Fischer (109) cite similar examples of bands of men wearing masks and shells, and thus resembling the “Perchten” who in the days preceding Lent romped through the villages, greeting those who crossed their paths with a sack full of ash to the

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<sup>11</sup> As Sanders notes, it is one of the last bodily functions that we gain control of in the developmental process (25).

face. Both the target of these attacks and the weapons used are of significance: the blows, directed of course at the upper body, invert and degrade the rite of anointing one's forehead with ash to mark the beginning of Lent. Conversely, with their ash-filled sacks and air rifles, the "Perchten" clobber their victim into the regenerative lower bodily proceedings of the "Perchtenlauf."

An additional layer of symbolism is uncovered when considering the association of ash with cremation and, correspondingly, death. This imagery plays a role in the Ash Wednesday tradition in so far as the ashen cross on the forehead serves as both a recognition of mortality and a symbol of repentance to God (Kalas 26). In the mischievous assault of the "Perchten" however, the use of ash as a weapon both celebrates and symbolically threatens death. The gesture has its parallel in the Roman Fire Festival, which is part of the Italian Carnival tradition. Bakhtin describes this custom as a procession of candle bearers who repeatedly attempt to blow out the flames of their neighbors, proclaiming death to those whose candles are extinguished (248). Just as in the playful attacks of the "Perchtenlauf," threats of death become cries of joy. The ambivalence of these practices renders both real and symbolic violence an act of kindness or even affection; a blow of ash to the face is both a symbolic death and an invitation to new life.

Cross-dressing also played a role in both manifestations of the "Perchtenlauf." As mentioned above, the "Schiachperchtenlauf" featured a female fool portrayed by a man, "Lappin," just as the attendants of the "Tafelperchten" in the "Schönperchtenlauf," were

men in women's clothing known as "G'sellinnen." According to Bakhtin, "one of the indispensable elements of the folk festival was travesty, that is, the renewal of clothes and the social image" (81). In the Feast of Fools for example, a folk ritual that degraded the official Christmas deliberations of the Church, a choirboy or lower clergy member would lead a procession of cross-dressing mischief makers through the cathedral (Sanders 158). By transgressing social codes of dress and physical appearance, cross-dressing creates a temporary space free from gendered restrictions. Female clothing, in this case, is then "renewed" on a male body just as the image of maleness is renewed in female dress.<sup>12</sup>

Bakhtin explains that while the woman in traditional Christianity was the embodiment of sin, in popular Renaissance tradition she was associated, not in a negative way, with the reproductive lower body (240). She was therefore an ambivalent figure who degraded and destroyed but also gave birth. As men don women's clothing, an additional layer of ambivalence emerges. The "G'sellin" in the "Schönperchtenlauf" and "Lappin" in the "Schiachperchtenlauf" are, as women, both creators and destroyers. They are however not truly women but rather men in women's clothing. Thus eluding categorizations of gender, their bodies extend beyond the boundaries of male and female.

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<sup>12</sup> The results of this renewal are somewhat ambiguous. While it could lead to an expansion of the boundaries of appropriate dress for men and women, because the transgression of these boundaries occurs within their own dualistic framework (i.e. man as defined by a given set of cultural constructs becomes woman as defined by the binary of these constructs and vice versa), it may also serve to reinforce existing gender roles.

## **Violence and Inversion in the “Schiachperchtenlauf”**

A key difference between the “Schönperchtenlauf” and the “Schiachperchtenlauf” is the above-mentioned violence that was sparked when two groups of “schiachen Perchten” crossed paths. Leopold Schmidt finds a parallel to these brawls in a 1650 account from Tyrol of a group of masked men who rode from the city of Hall to nearby Schwaz for a Carnival celebration (*Perchten* 19). On their return journey, the riders were stopped by a second group of costumed men, who blocked their passage, threatening them with clubs and other weapons, and forcing their retreat. That is, the incident was a violent conflict between participants in a masked procession, similar to those between “schiachen Perchten.” What could have been the motivations for these territorial melees?

Both the “Perchtenlauf” and Carnival processions being opportunities for intimate encounters with the opposite sex, it’s possible that these skirmishes were sparked by sexual competition. This hypothesis seems especially likely in the case of the “Perchten,” who would travel from village to village to perform their raucous theater. It seems likely that these masked lads prowling through the night hoped to catch the eyes of young women in the villages they visited. It therefore would have been in their interest to prevent a rival group of “Perchten” from visiting the same village and perhaps putting on a more eye-catching performance. Failing that, such attacks were at the very least a show of force, possibly causing members of rival groups to think twice before the next time they donned a “Perchten” mask and therefore potentially cutting down on competition.

Whether or not sexual competition indeed played a role in these conflicts, it is likely that these brawls eventually became routine – merely a part of the ritual whose original purpose, no longer relevant due to social and historical developments, was long forgotten. For the sake of the current discussion, however, it suffices to demonstrate the connection between violence and Carnival.

Stallybrass and White note that historical examples of violent outbursts coinciding with Carnival celebrations are numerous and, as it happens, not coincidental at all (14). They argue that disruptions in the political and social order can push an otherwise routine festival to volatility, citing a 1580 Carnival celebration in Romans, France that erupted in armed conflict and resulted in a massacre. Violence, especially in its spontaneous and unsanctioned forms, is an effective (if not perfect) opposite of social order;<sup>13</sup> when the social order is ritually suspended, violence naturally arises. As Bakhtin notes, in an analysis of violent imagery in Rabelais' carnivalesque novel *Gargantua and Pantagruel*: “the one who is thrashed or slaughtered is decorated. The beating itself has a gay character; it is introduced and concluded with laughter” (203).

The violence in the “Perchtenlauf” too, like the pranks of its clowns, who both ridicule and praise their female targets, is charged with ambivalence. As Bakhtin asserts, death in the context of Carnival is always coupled with images of birth and renewal (409).

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<sup>13</sup> As Juergensmeyer notes on one form of violence, warfare, “...the etymology of the modern English term *war* is the Old English word *werra* (or *guerra* in Old French), which means “confusion,” “discord,” or “strife” and in verb form implies the bringing into a state of confusion or discord (162).

In the case of the fallen “Perchten,” this surfaces in the shades of sexuality in the “Perchtenlauf” (demonstrated primarily by the antics of the fools) and in the temporary transformation of the social order during these processions which overstep the boundaries of social conventions and legal restrictions. That those killed in brawls between groups of “schiachen Perchten” were denied a Christian burial, as mentioned above, signifies that this was violence of a distinct character belonging to a ritual practice of its own.

Gluckman’s analysis of “Rituals of Rebellion in South-East Africa,” provides a useful parallel. One such ritual, found among certain Bantu populations, involves the king of a particular polity going naked before his people as they volley him with songs of hateful derision and eventually drive him into a cave, subsequently begging him to reemerge (123-24). Partaking in the first-fruits of the harvest was forbidden prior to the performance of this ceremony: to do so was seen as a transgression of the king’s authority (119). The result was that no one had a legal right to reap their harvest before anyone else, in spite of variability in the ripening of crops from family to family (132). The ritual therefore portrays a political system that not only counters the erraticism and unpredictability of nature, but one that also perseveres in the face of political instability (133). Further, it strengthens the social order by channeling resentment against those who break the harvest taboo, thus preventing actual conflict and potential violence (133).<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> An additional example of the channeling of violence through ritual is found in the film *Trobriand Cricket* which demonstrates how the Trobriand Islanders, facing colonization at the hand of the British, transformed their penchant for warfare into a culturally acceptable model: cricket. Changing the game’s

According to Gluckman then, social and political rebellion, when ritualized, actually serves to reinforce existing social structures.<sup>15</sup> Balandier seconds Gluckman's claim, summarizing that "the supreme ruse of power is to allow itself to be contested *ritually* in order to consolidate itself effectively" (41). In their discussion of Carnival however, Stallybrass and White argue that while such rituals of rebellion may exist in harmony with the social order for extended periods, a shift in social and political conditions may activate their dormant potential for subversion (14). These rituals find their personification in the court jesters of the Middle Ages mentioned above, who walked the line between playful jabs at the king and more biting criticism that may have cost them their heads.

The "Schiachperchtenlauf" fell on the wrong side of the line between ritualized and real rebellion and therefore became the target of criminalization efforts by political and religious officials. The tradition was not only seen as a threat because it often erupted in violence, but also because its participants did not readily submit to the law. Experts at evasion, they threw obstacles in the paths of their pursuers and pole-vaulted over fences to escape arrest. As Kammerhofer-Aggermann describes: "die Perchtenläufer kannten die Gegend, sie waren schnell, sie liefen meist nach der Arbeit, abends" ("Gasteiner Perchten" 2). In spite of the best efforts to snuff it out, the "Perchten" continued to practice their standard rules to fit their needs, the Trobriand Islanders incorporated the able-bodied men from entire villages onto a single team and thus, through the medium of cricket, staged mock battles with other villages that had all the body painting and chanting of traditional warfare, but without the bloodshed.

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<sup>15</sup> Brightman comes to a similar conclusion in a study of the role of clown figures in Maidu rituals.



tradition over a century after it was first outlawed, thereby undermining the authority of these laws and increasing their threat to the social order.

According to Kammerhofer-Aggermann greater historical forces in the 17th and 18th centuries played a role in the prohibitive legislation targeted at the “Perchtenlauf”:

Salzburg war damals immer wieder als Durchzugsland auch in die Kriege der Nachbarländer verwickelt und das katholische Land wehrte sich gegen die Verbreitung des protestantischen Glaubens. Die Erzbischöfe als Landesherren sahen in den Bräuchen die Möglichkeit für die Zusammenrottungen der Bevölkerung, für Aufstände gegen den strengen Regenten, für die Verbreitung der evangelischen Religion und nicht zuletzt für „*Unsittlichkeit*“ der lebens- und liebeslustigen jungen Menschen. (“Gasteiner Perchten” 2)

Whether the “Schiachperchtenlauf” was a relic of an earlier social order that proved incompatible with its replacement or if it developed in opposition to an existing social order is a question whose answer will require a more precise historical inquiry.

Whatever the motivation, however, it is clear that the “Schiachperchtenlauf” eventually succumbed to the efforts of Church and State to destroy it and the “Schönperchtenlauf” arose from its ashes. The presence of the “Tafelperchten” with their cumbersome and weighty headdresses not only necessarily slowed down the pace of the procession but also provided an aesthetic and behavioral counter to the rowdiness of the “schiachen Perchten,” preventing the escalation of violence. The “Schönperchtenlauf” therefore proved better adapted to a society in which open combat between bands of young men

was deemed unacceptable.

### **The “Perchtenlauf” and Carnival**

In an analysis of 17th-century-decrees against masked midwinter carnival processions Kammerhofer-Aggermann notes the frequent use of the Italian word “Maschera” in these pieces of legislation, which refers to a procession of masked celebrants (“Masken” 167-68). This vocabulary, which was signified as foreign because it appeared in Latin as opposed to Gothic script, came from the Italian comedy (168). The Italian influence on the “Perchtenlauf” originated in Venice whose Carnival traditions made their way north, impacting especially those regions crosscut with mountain passes such as Tyrol and Salzburg’s Pongau and Pinzgau (157). Direct influence from Venice made its way to Salzburg primarily via the nobility (170), while the immigration of peasants from Tyrol had an indirect but nonetheless powerful impact. Following the “Emigrationsedikt” of 1731, which forced Protestant inhabitants to emigrate from the polity, Salzburg suffered a twenty percent decrease in population (“Gasteiner Perchten” 4). It was primarily Tyrolese, Catholics from the Unterinntal region, who move into the abandoned farmhouses and, in so doing, imported their Venetian influenced Carnival tradition.

Describing the Venetian Carnival, which by the 17th century consisted of “set masquerades,” Molmenti explains: “patricians and citizens joined together in bands, and donning the most fantastic and sumptuous attire would thread through the city to the sound of song and dance” (145). Various performances were carried out by an array of

masked characters, many of which have their parallels in the “Perchtenlauf.” Examples include fools with sausage-like bludgeoning devices (Kammerhofer-Aggermann, “Bräuche” 40) and quacks offering cures to all diseases (in the Venetian Carnival: Molmenti 147; in the “Perchtenlauf”: Andree-Eysn, “Perchten” 168). Further, Leopold Schmidt notes a similarity and probable relationship between the masks of the Venetian Carnival and those of the “Perchtenlauf” (*Perchten* 12).

A further connection is the association of the “Perchtenlauf” with Epiphany (January 6th), which according to Kammerhofer-Aggermann has marked both the last of the Christmas holidays and the beginning of the Carnival season since the Middle Ages (“Gasteiner Perchten” 2). Leopold Schmidt also comments on the multiple layers of this feast day which represents simultaneously an additional New Year’s celebration, the end of the Christmas holidays and the beginning of Carnival (*Volksglaube* 33). This is echoed by Bächtold-Stäubli, according to whom Epiphany both ends the Twelve Days of Christmas and commences the Carnival season (6: 1480).

Carnival is of course the antithesis of Lent. As Sanders explains:

Carnival abhors dietary restrictions of any kind and taboos of all sorts. On the other hand, Lent loves to impose the rigors of abstinence, enforcing a specific time to refrain not just from meat and eggs, but also from sex, play-going, and all other forms of recreation. (162)

While opposites, the existence of one is dependent on the other. The function of Carnival has commonly been conceived as a means of “letting off steam,” or purging

oneself of certain behaviors, especially those deemed antisocial, in anticipation of a period in which they will be met with heightened restrictions (151). As Bakhtin notes however, Carnival was once but one of many European festivals of “folk merriment,” that shared an ambivalent and inversive character (218). Other carnivalesque celebrations corresponded, like Carnival itself, to Christian observances such as the Twelve Days of Christmas, Pentecost, and St. John’s Day (Sanders 152). Epiphany, or “Perchtentag,” as both the first day of Carnival and the last of the Twelve Days of Christmas plays a significant role in the Christian calendrical cycle of feasting and fasting. While traditionally a Christian feast, the Twelve Days of Christmas in Austria and Bavaria are associated with various traditional dietary restrictions, generally taking the form of prescribed dishes to be consumed on a particular day.

Bächtold-Stäubli refers to Epiphany as the end of the “gefährlichen Zwölften” (6: 1480), the period encompassing December 25th to January 6th (5: 594), and therefore corresponding to the Twelve Days of Christmas. This period makes up the roughly twelve-day discrepancy<sup>16</sup> between the lunar calendar traditionally favored by the Indo-Europeans and the solar calendar which was later adopted through Babylonian influence

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<sup>16</sup> Timm notes that the solar year consists of 365 1/4 days while the lunar year encompasses 354 1/3 (251-52). The overlap is therefore closer to eleven days than it is to twelve. Nevertheless, the Celts, the Babylonians, the Indians, and the Chinese all chose a period of twelve days, instead of the more accurate eleven, to make up for the discrepancy. She speculates therefore that this “extra” twelve days corresponds to the twelve months of the year - in a sense a year of its own not governed by the same natural laws and measurements of time as the regular year.

(5: 594). As a period of transition into the coming year as well as a sort of extra season existing outside the scope of the lunar calendar, the “Zwölften” have long been associated with worry and a lowered sense of security (Timm 252). It is perhaps out of this fear that a tradition emerged of burning incense and various herbs in house and stall on the evenings before St. Thomas’s Day (December 21st), Christmas, New Year’s, and Epiphany. On these evenings, referred to for this very tradition as “Rauchnächte,” or “smoke nights,” it is also customary to say prayers with the intention of driving away witches and evil spirits (Bächtold-Stäubli 7: 530). As a period viewed in general as a time of danger, its culmination, the eve of Epiphany, was especially treacherous (Timm 249). The “Zwölften” in general, and in particular its final “Rauchnacht,” the evening of January 5th, are associated with the figure “Frau Perchta,” who is said to deal out severe punishments to those who transgress certain behavioral restrictions during this period.<sup>17</sup>

For example, in the Reifgau region children are warned that if they do not fast on Christmas Eve, “Frau Perchta” will come and cut open their bellies (Rumpf, *Perchten* 41). Similarly, Grimm reports that the traditional meal in Saalfeld (Thuringia)<sup>18</sup> on the last day of the year consisted of herring and dumplings (*Mythologie* 251). If someone were to consume other foods on this day, “Perchta” would reportedly slit open their belly, removing the remains of the illicit meal and replacing them with hedge trimmings. In

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<sup>17</sup> Despite a linguistic similarity, further connections between “Frau Perchta” and the “Perchtenlauf” are disputed (Schuhladen, “Diskussion” 66). This will be discussed in detail in the following chapter.

<sup>18</sup> Timm plots the distribution area of the figure “Frau Perchta,” whose northern extent includes eastern Franconia and the southeastern corner of Thuringia (111).

Traunstein on the other hand, this punishment could be avoided by sufficiently filling one's stomach with cake, which would cause "Frau Perchta's" knife to harmlessly slide off (Rumpf, *Perchten* 43). While the specific rules of feasting and fasting during this period vary from region to region, these accounts show clearly that the "Zwölften" were a period in which what was eaten and when was very important. Food sacrifices to the frightening figure "Frau Perchta," who enforced these rules, arranged on often elaborately set tables, marked the end of the "Zwölften" and the liberation from these restrictions via the beginning of the Carnival season (Bächtold-Stäubli 1480). Just as priests were allowed to tell jokes at the pulpit during Easter celebrations of medieval Europe, officially breaking the restrictive period of Lent (Bakhtin 78), the "Perchtenlauf" on Epiphany (January 6th) embodied festive merriment concluding the restrictive period of the "Zwölften."

In short, the scheduling of the "Perchtenlauf" following a period of heightened restrictions suggests a similar function to the "letting off of steam" attributed to Carnival celebrations preceding Lent. Abrahams, however, in his study of Christmas and Carnival festivities on the Caribbean island of St. Vincent, challenges this conception on the grounds that the performance of otherwise antisocial and/or forbidden behaviors during Carnival does not prevent their occurrence during the rest of the year (288). He argues that these ritual performances are enactments of social polarities, which through their dramatization, serve to relieve tensions between dichotomous groups (288-89). This

analysis provides a useful perspective on the “Schönperchtenlauf,” which like other Carnival processions, has a distinctly dramatic character.

### **Topographical Polarities in the “Schönperchtenlauf”**

According to Kammerhofer-Aggerman, “[die Gasteiner Perchtenumzüge] stellten einst einen Zerrspiegel der gesellschaftlichen Hierarchie dar” (“Gasteiner Perchten” 3). Representing the nobility were the “Tafelperchten” with their elaborate headdresses, who contrasted with the ignoble and brutish “schiachen Perchten” representing the fringes of society. The “Perchtenkappen” or “Tafelkappen,” towering two to three meters above the rest of the procession, gave their bearers a distinct quality of importance and superiority. The caps also served as an elongation of the upper body. Dominated by their heads, the “Tafelperchten” embodied the upper stratum of the material bodily and its association with the intellectual and the spiritual, a topographical superiority that extends to the economic and social spheres. Further, these tremendously heavy head ornaments forced those wearing them into a “langsames, würdevolles Schreiten” (Hutter 143). Contrasting with the haphazard movements and hijinks of the “schiachen Perchten,” this dignified gait adds to the pious, superior character of the “Tafelperchten.”

The high status of the “Tafelperchten,” or “Kappenträger,” is also reflected outside of the symbolic realm. The members of the modern organization of the Gasteiner Perchten are assigned varying roles in the performance of the “Perchtenlauf” based on seniority, the role of “Kappenträger” ranking at the top of this hierarchy (Mühlberger). This seems to hold true for the historical “Schönperchtenlauf” as well, considering

Adrian's comment on the St. Johann procession of 1892 that the high cost of their headdresses ensured that only rich farmers could be "Kappenträger" (53).

Antithetical to the "Tafelperchten" are the monstrous, often bestial "schiachen Perchten," whose wooden masks are equipped with ram's horns, gaping eyes, partially open mouths filled with frightful teeth or fangs, and sometimes a protruding dog-like tongue (Rumpf, *Perchten* 238; 245). Playing the leading role in the physical act of consumption, the "gaping mouth," according to Bakhtin, "is, of course, related to the lower stratum; it is the open gate leading downward into the bodily underworld" (325). The "schiachen Perchten" therefore personify the most quintessential acts of the feast, eating and drinking. More than simply gifts awarded the "Perchten" for their performances, food and drink result in the productive bodily act of excretion, which returns to the earth that which was taken from it in the form of food (see Bakhtin 148; 161-62). Further, the predatory fangs and murderous grimaces of the "Perchten" masks emphasize the destructive aspect of consumption, which ambivalently provides one creature with nourishment through the death of another.

Despite their monstrous masks and their fur coats and leggings, the "schiachen Perchten" retain some of the humanity of the men who portray them. They walk on two legs, leaving their hands free to carry various devices such as sticks and noisemakers (Adrian 55). Additionally, the facial structures of the masks are often *humanoid*, if not human. Neither man nor beast, the "schiachen Perchten" resemble the "wilde[n] Männer," or wild men, who according to folk belief roamed the remote mountains and valleys of the



eastern Alps (Bächtold-Stäubli 9: 968). These hairy, red-eyed creatures with tusked faces (971) were said to kidnap and devour the civilized (974). They were nonetheless valued for their ability to give good agricultural advice, such as when to sow and harvest (972). The “wilde[n] Männer” thus embodied the notion of savage – human-like, but not quite human, representing perhaps an earlier phase in human evolution that was closer to nature and further from civilization. For the inhabitants of alpine villages far from urban centers of cultivation and learning, these figures embodied the threat of wildness that lay just beyond the poorly defined and poorly defended frontiers of civility.<sup>19</sup>

Similarly, the “schiachen Perchten” represent the wild and untamed elements of human nature. The large mouths and teeth of their masks emphasize the basic bodily need of physical consumption, which assigns to the figures the egotistical drives for self-preservation and self-gratification. They are therefore personifications of the lower body and its topographical equivalent, the socially marginal. Far from being condemned, the physical and social lowness of the “schiachen Perchten” is celebrated because it serves as a necessary counterweight to the both physically and metaphorically top-heavy “Tafelperchten.”

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<sup>19</sup> The “Wildemannspiel,” performed in Tyrol the final Thursday preceding Lent (Bächtold-Stäubli, 9: 978), arose perhaps out of this very anxiety. The tradition called for a group of young girls to enter the forest in search of the “wilde[n] Mann,” a character played by a man wearing a suit of moss. After tying him up, the girls would bring him back to the village. This deed, which seems to have symbolized the taming of their uncivilized inner nature, earned the girls a shower of gifts from the villagers.

Somewhere between human and animal, the “schiachen Perchten” occupy a liminal space similar to the grotesque bodies of the “G’sellinnen,” which are neither male nor female. Also creating a sense of liminality are the fools with their sexually charged heckling of audience members which levels all in attendance to the same bodily plane. Participants in rites of passage achieve a similar liminal status, which Turner likens to “being reduced or ground down to a uniform condition to be fashioned anew and endowed with additional powers to enable them to cope with their new station in life” (95).<sup>20</sup> Emerging from these rituals is what Turner refers to as “communitas,” or sort of temporarily restored primordial unity that has long since been eradicated in everyday life by the divisions of social structure (96). For Turner, society cannot function without the dialectic between structure and the anti-structure of “communitas” (129), just as a wheel cannot spin without the emptiness at its center (127).

The “Schiachperchtenlauf” too exhibits liminality in cross-dressing and in the human-animal hybrids, the “schiachen Perchten.” Further contributing to a sense of “communitas,” was the uniformity of the simple cloth masks worn by the majority of the participants. However, while the “Schönperchtenlauf” serves as a stage on which the polarities of high and low are played out dramatically, thereby relieving social tensions,

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<sup>20</sup> While not a rite of passage, the “Perchtenlauf,” occurring primarily on January 6th and always in the period between Advent and Fat Tuesday, could be interpreted as what Bell refers to as a “calendrical rite.” She explains: “just as rites of passage give order and definition to the biocultural life cycle, so calendrical rites give socially meaningful definitions to the passage of time, creating an ever-renewing cycle of days, months, and years (102).

anti-structure is brought about in the “Schiachperchtenlauf” via the actual (as opposed to symbolic) rejection of legal restrictions. Bearing a strong resemblance to British and American wassailing traditions, it gave young men license to rove the countryside at night, eat, drink, and engage each other in fisticuffs. In short, it represented release from constraints in its purest form. Additionally, by transforming themselves into “schiache Perchten,” farmers and unskilled laborers temporarily transcended their humble social status and became figures of great importance who were both respected and feared. This social inversion was strengthened by the fact that, at least for a time, even the letter of the law could not subdue them: they were kings of the night.

The emergence of the “Tafelkappen” sometime during the course of 18th century, with the first illustrations of them appearing in 1892 (Rumpf, *Perchten* 126), suggests that the “Schiachperchtenlauf” had by this time fallen out of practice. These headdresses, due to their bulkiness and weight, would not have developed as part of an illicit procession and, further, the “Schönperchtenlauf” would likely not have been legally permitted if groups of rowdy “schiachen Perchten” were still romping through the streets once a year. Andree-Eysn claims that the term “Schönperchtenlauf” (“Lauf” meaning race, or run), misrepresents the pace and character of this procession and was therefore likely carried over from the “Schiachperchtenlauf” whose participants were not burdened with 50 kilogram “Tafelkappen” (“Perchten” 169-70).<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> In this sense “Lauf” would seem an appropriate term for the “Schiachperchtenlauf,” whose participants were often forced, quite literally, to run from agents of the law. Whether this factored into the etymology of

The primary feature that distinguishes the “Schönperchtenlauf” from the “Schiachperchtenlauf” is therefore legality, which not only enabled the emergence of the “Tafelkappen,” but also allowed the processions to take place during the day while the “Schiachen” were confined to the cover of darkness. The absence of the term “Schiachperchtenlauf” in the descriptions of von Spaur and Hübner at the turn of the 19th century as well as all earlier records of the “Perchtenlauf” suggests that the modifier “Schiach-” became necessary to distinguish the procession from a newly developed tradition. Therefore, while the rebellion in the original form of the procession was real, albeit temporary, rebellion in the “Schönperchtenlauf” became, out of a legal necessity, dramatized. Although the renegade “schiachen Perchten” reappear in the younger procession, they serve as characterizations of their former selves, whose boisterous antics defy the noble sophistication and propriety of the “Tafelperchten.”

### **Summary**

In spite of their distinctions, both the “Schönperchtenlauf” and “Schiachperchtenlauf” fall under the category of “carnavalesque” due to their topographically inversive properties and their emphasis on regeneration and renewal, especially in connection with the material body. The traditions not only contain elements derived from the Venetian Carnival, their association with the festival of Epiphany, which once marked the beginning of the Carnival season, solidifies their role as pre-Lenten

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the term however remains to be seen. It should also be noted that the verb “laufen” could refer to the act of walking as well as running.

celebrations. Without discounting the mythological interpretations of the “Perchtenlauf” as a ritual meant to dispel winter and make way for spring, it seems clear that one function of the procession was a release from social constraints. The “Schönperchtenlauf” is an example of “ritual rebellion” in that it serves as a ritually controlled environment for the performance of social frustrations and dissent that in effect strengthens the social order. It is the living descendent of the “Schiachperchtenlauf” which, because its violent tendencies were perceived as a social threat, eventually fell victim to legal efforts to eradicate it.

Unresolved remains the question of whether the “Schiachperchtenlauf” actually carried the potential for social change, as Stallybrass and White hold to be true for all Carnival celebrations, or if it was in fact no more insurrectionary than is standard hooliganism. This uncertainty recalls the disagreement among ritual studies theorists regarding the meaning of ritual performance: do rituals have some effect, whether real or perceived, or are they performed for their own sake, with no outside meaning? In the context of the “Perchtenlauf,” is its annual performance meant to repel the forces of winter, as countless mythological interpretations have claimed and/or to strengthen society through the release of behaviors deemed inappropriate outside of feasting periods as the current study would seem to suggest? Or is it held every year for its own sake, its nuances and their interpretations on the part of the participants themselves merely an intellectual exercise with no real significance? A sufficient answer will most certainly call for further inquiry, however a potential starting point which will be revisited in the

concluding section might involve adopting a new perspective regarding the motivation of the participants.

## CHAPTER 3

### OTHER “PERCHTEN” TRADITIONS AND THEIR RELATIONSHIP TO THE “PERCHTENLAUF”

In the foreword to her book *Perchten: Populäre Glaubensgestalten zwischen Mythos und Katechese* Rumpf writes:

Es bedarf noch einer eigenen Untersuchung, weshalb die Teilnehmer der Perchtenumzüge ausschließlich Männer sind und auch die weiblichen Figuren von Männern dargestellt werden. Selbst die Gesellin als Begleiterin der Kappenpercht ist ein junger Mann in Frauentracht. *Denn der Name des Umzuges wird ja von der „Frau Percht“ hergeleitet* [emphasis added]; in der Steiermark werden die umgehenden Berchten noch von Frauen oder Mädchen dargestellt. Hier könnten die Feministen mit der Frauenforschung ein Thema aufgreifen, dessen Lösung sicher keine leichte Aufgabe sein dürfte. (7)

The problem described seems to arise from an attempt to equate two traditions as close cousins that are in fact only distantly related - a confusion that is most certainly linguistic in nature. That the “Perchtenlauf” and the “Perchteln gehen” of Styria share the root “Percht” signifies nothing more than that they are both traditions associated with Twelfth Night and Epiphany, January 5th and 6<sup>th</sup> respectively. Mannhardt attributes the names “Perchteln/Perchten,” the participants in the “Perchtenlaufen,” to “Perchtenabend,” or Twelfth Night (542), not to “Frau Percht” as Rumpf implies above. Similarly, Andree-Eysn (“Perchten” 157) and Schuhladen (“Diskussion” 66) call attention

to the lack of evidence, which would connect the “Perchtenlauf” with the figure “Frau Perchta.” The Styrian “Perchten” traditions on the other hand, bear a clear connection to this figure.

For this reason, the term “Perchtenbräuche,” used collectively to refer to essentially any traditions whose name contains the root “Percht,” is misleading. In the following analysis of these various traditions, it becomes clear that the “Perchtenlauf” and a regional variant thereof, the “Trestertanz,” stand out as carnivalesque traditions. This quality differentiates them from other “Perchtenbräuche,” providing insight on Rumpf’s question regarding the gender of participants.

### **Acrobatics and the Carnavalesque: “Trestertanz” and “Perchtenlauf”**

The primary descriptions of the “Perchtenlauf” in the previous chapter came from the Pongau region of Salzburg. The neighboring Pinzgau region is home to a distinct “Perchten” tradition, the “Trestertanz.” While sometimes also referred to as the “Perchtenlauf” or otherwise the “Perchtentanz” (Proding 550), for sake of clarity the name “Trestertanz” is used here exclusively. The “Trestertanz” is similar to the “Schönperchtenlauf” in that it involves masked participants, divided into “schöne” and “schiache Perchten” (Wolfram, “Pinzgauer” 5). These, according to Kürsinger, “ziehen von Pfarre zu Pfarre, begrüßen die bessern [sic] Häuser, wo ihnen die Mühe des Tanzes mit Brantwein und Brod gelohnt wird” (166).

The costumes of the “schiachen Perchten” also resemble those in the “Schönperchtenlauf” (Wolfram, “Pinzgauer” 7), although the costume and dance of the



“schönen Perchten,” or “Tresterer,” is quite unique. Wolfram, in his “Pinzgauer Trestertanz,” describes the most striking component of their costume, the headdresses, as a straw hat adorned with cock’s feathers, from whose brims hang some 25 brightly colored bands past the shoulders, thus covering the faces of the dancer (3). Their faces were further disguised by a false nose and beard (4). The “Tresterer” wear red and white jackets and knee-length short pants as well as leather belts with a row of shells attached (3-4). Their wrists and ankles are also adorned with shells, which rattle against one another to the rhythm of the dancer’s movements. The steps of the “Trestertanz,” described at length by Wolfram (9), are quite intricate and rapidly executed, demanding a tremendous amount of skill and dexterity (7). Important here is that they are not uniform and the “Vorpercht” in particular, that is, the leading and most skilled dancer, enjoys a great deal of liberty in the execution of his steps. Also in the dancers’ repertoire were tremendous vertical leaps. Wolfram reports oddly of shoe-marks on the ceilings of houses, supposedly evidence of the jumping abilities of the “Tresterer,” although he does not venture to explain how such extreme heights were reached (6).

Hutter and Hörmann describe the performance of the “Trestertanz” as follows: first the “schiachen Perchten” and various other figures storm into the room (76). “Hanswurst,” wielding a leather sausage-shaped apparatus (similar to those of his counterparts in the Pongau tradition) strikes the floor and clears a space for the “Tresterer.” The “Vorpercht” enters, dancing and leaping solo before six to eight other “Tresterer” join in, forming a circle and dancing with stamping foot movements. Wolfram

explains that at the beginning of the performance the “Trestertanz” has no musical accompaniment (7), while later on the participants dance to the tune of a violin or clarinet (5). The entire production can last up to six hours (11).

The “Trestertanz” contains many of the same carnivalesque elements as the “Perchtenlauf” in the neighboring Pongau region of Salzburg. The performers receive rewards of food and alcoholic beverages from “the better houses,” as Kürsinger put it, implying the socially inverse act of the rich giving to the poor (or at least, as is more likely in this case, the well-to-do giving to young farmhands). The fool, “Hanswurst,” plays a significant role in the performance, initiating the dance through the sexually metaphoric blows to the ground with a large, artificial sausage. The “Tresterer,” clad in white and executing skilled dance moves, represent the topographically high, to whom the beastlike “schiachen Perchten” with their barbarous behavior serve as antithesis. Further, the period in which the “Trestertanz” takes place, namely from Epiphany to Fat Tuesday (Rumpf, *Perchten* 103), corresponds to the Carnival season.

A major element present in the Pongau “Perchtenlauf” that is not found in the Pinzgau variant is cross-dressing. One carnivalesque element emphasized in the “Trestertanz,” however, that plays a more minor role in the “Perchtenlauf” of the Pongau region, is bodily liberation through acrobatics. While cross-dressing renews the bodily image through the transgression of gendered clothing norms, acrobatics provide a use for the body that is linked with festive merriment. In contrast with its regular application towards work, acrobatics push the body to the extent of its capabilities in a unique and

playful manner. This is demonstrated by von Spaur's account of a Pinzgau

“Perchtenlauf” from 1800:

Manche der verummten Pursche benutzen ihren langen Stock zu allerley Sprüngen mit einer bey den größten Künstlern gewiß selten zu bemerkenden Kraft und Behendigkeit. Einer der Bursche berührte mit seinen Fußsohlen die Decke des Zimmers. Andere sechs machten einen Kreis im Hofe, auf ihre Schultern stellten sich vier rüstige, auf diese drey etwas geringere Bursche [sic], die ihre Köpfe zusammen steckten und oben auf diesem pyramidalischen Gipfel stand einer ihrer Waghälfte mit den Füßen gen Himmel, balancierte und stürzte sich endlich mit einem Salto mortale auf die Erde. (244-45)

This description parallels Andree-Eysn's account of the “Schiachperchtenlauf,” in which the participants pole-vaulted with long sticks and “herumsprangen und lärmten” in front of houses (“Perchten” 163).<sup>22</sup> As both von Spaur and Andree-Eysn's accounts are from the Pinzgau, they represent a tendency towards acrobatics in the region that possibly had an influence on the development of the “Trestertanz,” in which this form of bodily liberation plays a leading role.

The common interpretations that the dance steps of the “Tresterer” portray the threshing of grain, the sausage-shaped device of “Hanswurst” representing a threshing flail,<sup>23</sup> or that the vertical jumps of the “Tresterer” are meant to facilitate the growth of corn crops (in Rumpf, *Perchten* 149), provide only a limited understanding of the tradition. The obviously phallic sausage of “Hanswurst” begs for a carnivalesque

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<sup>22</sup> Such acrobatics are absent in the “Schönperchtenlauf.”

<sup>23</sup> This interpretation is presented but ultimately rejected by Wolfram (“Pinzgauer” 12-15).

interpretation of his blows, charged with a downward motion towards the earth, the lower body's topographical corollary. Initiating the performance in this way, "Hanswurst" frames the "Trestertanz" in the context of the bodily freedom enjoyed during the Carnival season. The improvised leaps and dance steps of the "Tresterer" are both celebrations and exertions of this very freedom. They transform the bodies of the dancers from machines of economic productivity into agents of ludic expression. It is important to note however, that these interpretations are not mutually exclusive but complementary: the vitality and virility of the "Tresterer" embodies the (hoped for) fertility of the fields and corresponding bountiful harvests.

### **The "Perchteln gehen" of Styria and "Frau Perchta"**

Haiding's "Berchtenbräuche im steirischen Ennsbereich" provides a wealth of ethnographic data of the "Perchteln gehen" in the Enns valley which neighbors the Pongau region of Salzburg on its westward end and runs eastward, paralleling the not too distant border with the state of Upper Austria until it terminates in the northeastern arm of the Ennstaler Alps (325). He describes a tradition, occurring primarily on the evening before Epiphany, in which young girls or women<sup>24</sup> with their long hair hanging over their faces<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> According to Haiding: "in zunehmendem Maße scheinen schon seit längerer Zeit auch Burschen mitgetan zu haben," these young men being the exception to the rule (328). This conclusion is influenced by statements from witnesses such as the following comment by a man in Bad Aussee: "Als Perigl'n gehn halbwüchsige Burschen, ein Mäd'l muß schon ein Büffel sein, wenn es mitgeht, denn meist ist es ländlich-schändlich, zum Schluß wird gerauft" (328). In contrast, Haiding writes that, "eine überlieferungsvertraute Frau aus Donnersbach war erstaunt, als sie hörte, daß vor kurzer Zeit in einem anderen Orte Männer als Perchtl gingen und zu viel Schnaps tranken" (328). This newer manifestation of the tradition not familiar to

go from house to house to check for untidy conditions or, less commonly, flax that had not been spun<sup>26</sup> (328-30). Armed with brooms, mops, washrags, and other cleaning supplies, these “Perchteln” would correct the housekeeping errors of the resident women (330). Haiding explains further:

Mit dem Besen kehrt eine Perchtl nicht nur sorgfältig alle Winkel aus. Wenn sie merkt, dass die Hausfrau oder die Hausdirn nicht gut gefegt hat, streut sie Asche auf den Boden. Auch scherzhalber und manchmal boshafter Weise kehren die Perchteln Asche aus dem Herde, mit ihrem „ruaßigen Hadern“ fahren sie unversehens den Hausleuten über das Gesicht oder verschmutzen sie beim Abwischen die Bänke. (330)

He adds that the “Perchteln” sometimes carry chains, clubs, sticks, or a “Buckelkorb,” which refers to a large basket worn on the back, out of which hang the feet of a large doll, giving the appearance of a captured child (330). In low voices the “Perchteln” would sometimes vocalize the threat implied by these devices to onlooking children.

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the elderly witness, which seems to consist of men in women’s clothing consuming alcohol and getting into fights, bears a striking resemblance to the “Perchtenlauf” and therefore suggests influence from the Salzburg tradition.

<sup>25</sup> Alternatively, as Haiding reports: “Alte Trachtenstücke dienen hie und da als Perchtengewand” (328).

<sup>26</sup> As Haiding notes, “In Mitterndorf gingen die Perchteln vor nicht allzu langer Zeit noch nachsehen, ob kein unversponnener Flachs auf den Spinnrocken sei. Heute steht fast durchwegs die Aufgabe im Vordergrund, nach Sauberkeit zu sehen” (330).

As mentioned in the previous chapter, “Frau Perchta” plays a central role in various threats intended to enforce certain behaviors during the Twelve Days of Christmas, or the “Zwölften.” These prescribed behaviors encompass obedience on the part of children and tidiness on the part of women. For example, in upper Styria “Perchtel” is said to cut open the belly of anyone who did not cleanly sweep their house on Christmas Eve and fill the cavity, fittingly, with floor sweepings (Waschnitius 20). Correspondingly, the Styrian girls dressed as “Perchteln”<sup>27</sup> sweep out the houses and in jest (or in threat) make a mess of it as they go. Just as the “Perchteln,” often carry bludgeoning devices, in Franconia “Frau Perchta” is said to hit naughty children with a whip or a rod (Rumpf, *Perchten* 39).

The large basket of the “Perchteln,” conveyed as a device for whisking away unruly children, also seems to be a reference to “Frau Perchta.” A woodcut in the Germanisches Nationalmuseum in Nuremberg portrays the “Butzen-Bercht” as an old woman in rags with a basket full of distressed children on her back (Rumpf, *Perchten* 218). An accompanying rhyme, written from the perspective of the title character conveys her disciplinary intentions: those who misbehave, refrain from saying their prayers and going to school, or who are simply lazy, will be beaten, set on fire, disemboweled, and locked into filthy rooms. The lovely little poem concludes: “Drumb

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<sup>27</sup> “Perchteln” is a plural form of the word “Perchtel,” one of the many variations of names for “Frau Perchta.”

seyd gehorsamd / still / gesellt euch zu den Frommen / Daß ihr nicht dörfft in Korb der Butzen-Berchte kommen.”

Given these parallels, it seems clear that the “Perchteln” take on this disciplinary role of “Frau Perchta,” serving as fleshy corroborations of her threats. Further, the work of the “Perchteln” corresponds to a shift in “Frau Perchta’s” threatening area of influence over time. John B. Smith argues that while the wrath of “Perchta” was originally provoked by breaches in feasting and fasting proscriptions, she later became a controller of neatness and efficiency among spinners (178). This seems to have coincided with the proliferation of the newly invented spinning wheel in the middle of the sixteenth century, which created in turn a new domestic priority for women (J.B. Smith 175; Rumpf, *Perchten* 49). Later, with the rise of consumer culture, spinning no longer had its place in the household and “Frau Perchta’s” role changed once again. According to Smith, “as the importance of spinning waned, her influence extended to embrace work of all kinds, and the work ethic and acceptable behavior in general” (178). Therefore the “Perchteln” of Styria (who Haiding described in 1965 based on ethnographic data compiled largely from interviews with elderly witnesses), as representatives of “Frau Perchta,” exert their influence over cleanliness and obedience on the part of children – areas that are well within the scope of relevance in the modern world.

### **The “Perchtentisch”**

“Frau Perchta” is however not merely a threatening figure, but one who receives the honor of food sacrifices which are placed on dining tables in her name the evening

before Epiphany. While these “Perchtentische” may be set to avoid Perchta’s punishment or simply to appease this powerful and unpredictable figure (Bächtold-Stäubli 6: 1481), it is also said that if a portion of the food sacrifice is missing the following morning, this means good luck or an abundant harvest in the coming year (Rumpf, *Perchten* 51-53). For example, it is a Styrian tradition to place a bowl of sweet milk and several spoons on the table for “Perchtlgoba”<sup>28</sup> on “Perchtennacht,” the evening preceding Epiphany (Waschnitius 18). “Perchtlgoba” and her flock of children’s souls, a company often associated with “Frau Perchta,” are said to partake in a few drops of this simple meal, thereby blessing the home (18). Haiding reports that in the Styrian village of Donnersbach, a portion of the milk that follows the evening meal on “Perchtennacht” is left for “Frau Perchta” (336). Bächtold-Stäubli recorded offerings of nuts, cheese, and beer served in mugs that would be made inexhaustible after “Perchta” had drunk from them (6: 1480).

Höfler argues that the Styrian “Perchteln,” who often appear in groups of three, have their origins in the three “Schicksalsfrauen” to whom the Germanic tribes dedicated

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<sup>28</sup> Waschnitius sees no clear explanation for this name but suggests a possible dissimilation from the Slovenian “Pehtra-baba” (22). A connection with “Gömanacht” or “Gömacht,” (see Rumpf “Perchta” 112; 114) which Waschnitius explains is a Tyrolese term for Epiphany (i.e. “Gebnacht”) (31), is also likely. Schmeller records “der Gob” and “das Göble” for “die Gabe” in Vorarlberg (862), which leaves only bilabial assimilation to account for the emergence of “Gömacht.”



similar food offerings (“Dreikönigstages” 261-63).<sup>29</sup> The “Schichsalsfrauen,” or “Norns,” were, according to Simek, deities with origins in Norse mythology that decided the fates of men (306). Another parallel, posits Meyer, is the “Tabula fortunae, den Schicksalstisch, den die Römer nach orientalischem Vorbild in diesen Tagen des Jahrs [i.e. the dawning of the new year] mit Speisen ausrüsteten” (328). The similarity is also recognized by Höfler who adds that the Salzburg practice of decking the Christmas Eve or Epiphany table with a special covering and a candle meant to burn through the night mirrors the aesthetic of the “Tabula fortunae,” which served as a house altar for protective spirits (*Weihnachtsgebäcke* 10). Whatever the origins may be, it is clear that the tradition of the “Perchtentisch” is a food offering to a figure seen as having supernatural powers<sup>30</sup> that could both benefit and harm the household.

Just as the “Perchteln” take on “Frau Perchta’s” threatening and disciplinary role, they also sometimes mime the figure’s acceptance of the above-mentioned food offerings. Haiding reports having witnessed in Wörschach the “Perchteln” drinking the milk that had been set out in a bowl, adding however that in most places this was reserved for the “wirklich[e]’Percht” (326). The costumed girls are therefore no embodiments of “Frau Perchta.” That a distinction is made between them and the mythical figure bearing the namesake of “Perchtentag” demonstrates however that these girls *portray* “Frau Perchta.”

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<sup>29</sup> He argues further that these three deities were widely replaced by the three Magi of the Christian tradition (263). The latter are portrayed in neighboring regions on Epiphany by so-called *Sternsinger*, who go from house to house singing songs and receiving money in return (described in Adrian 83).

<sup>30</sup> For a discussion of the potential divinity of “Frau Perchta” and related figures see Timm (232).

## **“Frau Perchta” and the “Perchtenlauf”**

In *Maske, Mystik, Brauch: Perchten im Land Salzburg*, a book published in 1992 that provides an overview of contemporary “Perchten” traditions in the state of Salzburg, authors Hutter and Hörmann describe practices very similar to the “Perchteln gehen” of Styria. In the Lungau region, which lies to the southeast of the Pongau (the main distribution area of the “Perchtenlauf”), women dress up as “Perchtl,” enter the houses on the evening preceding Epiphany to sweep them clean and intimidate the residents with various weapons and large baskets out of which hang the feet of a large doll (100). This practice differs from the Styrian tradition mainly in that its participants consist exclusively of “big and strong women” who wear witch-like masks (100), rather than girls who cover their faces with their long hair. In Rauris, which lies in the Pinzgau region just west of the Pongau, the “Schnabelperchten” undertake the ritual house cleaning and intimidation of January 5th. The custom closely resembles those in the Lungau and in Styria, except that the participants cover their faces with massive, moveable beaks,<sup>31</sup> constructed from wooden frames and pieces of cloth (84).

That these practices occur in the Pongau and the Pinzgau, the epicenter of the “Perchtenlauf,” calls attention to a plurality of traditions, which, while related through their mutual connection to Epiphany, differ considerably in form and function. That is, the Styrian “Perchteln” and their counterparts in the Rauris valley and in the Lungau are

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<sup>31</sup> The Schnabelpercht’s beak potentially derives from a characterization of the long nose of “Frau Perchta” (see Timm 316).

participants in a ritual of discipline and control, while the “Perchtenlauf” is an organized celebration of release from these very restraints. The festive nature of the “Perchtenlauf” and its emphasis on the lower body is all but absent from the Styrian tradition. While there is an element of playfulness in the way the “Perchteln” mischievously dirty the houses they enter while feigning to clean them, the ritual is dominated by a quiet solemnity as witnessed by their infrequent and whispered speech. Their procession, which consists of no more than three participants whose role is to intimidate women and children into behaving in a socially approved manner, contrasts strongly with the pompous and grandiose “Perchtenlauf,” its elaborate masks and headdresses, its horns and drums.

Furthermore, “Frau Perchta” is, with one exception, absent from the “Perchtenlauf.” This figure does appear as one of the many “Schiachperchten” in the modern “Gasteiner Perchtenzug” as do “Schnabelperchten”<sup>32</sup> and witch-like figures with brooms or large baskets who resemble the “Perchtl” of the Lungau tradition (Hutter and Hörmann 16).<sup>33</sup> Among the score of various other figures that make up the

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<sup>32</sup> “Schnabelperchten” also appear in the Altenmarkter Perchtenzug (Hutter and Hörmann 20).

<sup>33</sup> Hutter and Hörmann do not mention the appearance of “Frau Perchta” in any of the other “Perchtenläufe” they describe, nor is this figure mentioned in Andree-Eysn’s 1902 account of the Gasteiner “Perchtenlauf.” In fact, the latter author felt the need to clarify, “ob zwischen den maskentragenden Perchten von heute und der alten mythischen Berchta ein unmittelbarer Zusammenhang besteht, vermag ich trotz der Gleichheit des Namens nicht zu sagen, da mir ein eingehende Untersuchung darüber nicht bekannt geworden [sic]” (“Perchten” 157). It therefore seems that “Frau Perchta’s” emergence in the Gasteiner

“Schiachperchten,” who along with the upwards of twenty “Schönperchten” comprise the procession, these figures do not play a prominent role in the Gasteiner “Perchtenzug.” On the contrary, removed from the context of quiet and menacing house visits, they become simulacra whose original meaning is obscured by that of the grand procession in which they are absorbed. Even Rumpf, who views the name “Perchtenumzug” as a derivative of “Frau Perchta,” concludes that:

Man kann von dieser Frauengestalt zu den von Männern dargestellten schönen und schiachen Perchten nur schwer eine sinnvolle Verbindung herstellen. Dies gelingt schon eher bei den Rauriser Schnabelperchten und den einzeln auftretenden Umgangs- und Sagengestalten im Burgenland, in Kärnten und in der Steiermark.  
*(Perchten 184)*

These witch-like figures in the “Perchtenlauf” seem to function as reminders of the behavioral restrictions personified by “Frau Perchta,” restrictions which the procession nullifies.

### **The Gendered Performance of “Perchten” Traditions**

Logically, the faces of women and girls hide behind the masks of the Lungauer “Perchtl” and the overhanging hair of the Styrian “Perchteln” who portray the female figure “Frau Perchta.”<sup>34</sup> While similar figures appear in the “Perchtenlauf,” the lack of any

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Perchtenlauf developed sometime after Andree-Eysn conducted her research. This phenomenon will be revisited below.

<sup>34</sup> The Schnabelperchten of Rauris are however portrayed by young men (Hutter and Hörmann 84).

mention of them in earlier accounts of this tradition suggests that they are late additions to the procession. Therefore, an already existing tradition of exclusively male participation would have ensured that men would fill these new roles. Both Adrian's and Andree-Eysn's accounts of the "Perchtenlauf" at the turn of the 20th century do however mention female figures portrayed by men, albeit not the "Perchteln" but rather the fairly prominent "G'sellinnen," or attendants of the "Kappenträger," as well as "Lappin," the female fool. What then necessitated that men fill these roles as well?

It is possible that the "G'sellinnen" and "Lappin" were also later additions to an already exclusively male practice. Von Spaur does not mention any female figures in his 1800 description of the "Berchtenlaufen" (244), nor does Lorenz Hübner who, describing the same practice four years previously, reports only that the "Berchten... tanzen bey hellem Tage mit den possierlichsten Masken" (399). Neither of these descriptions goes into much detail, however. While the magistrates of Werfen issued a ban on cross-dressing as far back as 1680 (Kammerhofer-Aggermann, "Masken" 165), it is unclear whether this was directed at the "Perchtenlauf" or other carnival processions.

Rumpf, perhaps inadvertently, forwards an interesting hypothesis to her own question regarding gender in "Perchten" traditions in reasoning that the Salzburger "Perchtenlauf" was (and is) an opportunity for the exclusively male participants to attract the attention of female spectators (*Perchten* 181). This calls attention to the distinct theatrical character of these processions, exemplified by the dances of the "Kappenträger" and "G'sellinnen," the antics of the fools, the acrobatic leaps described

by von Spaur in his 1800 account, and most of all, by the above-mentioned spectators, often numbering in the hundreds.<sup>35</sup> Becker, describing the state of the tradition in the early 1990s, calls attention to the fact that these spectators, ever growing in number, have to pay to attend a “Perchtenzug” (115). This, along with the script-like avoidance of spontaneity in the processions which are carried out by official organizations (that is, no longer simply community members but highly specialized committees), leads him to equate the tradition with “Volksschauspiel” or folk theater (115).

The presence of spectators is a key difference between the “Perchtenlauf,” and the “Perchteln gehen” of Styria. In a discussion of performance in ritual, Rappaport writes: “dramas have audiences, rituals have congregations. An audience watches a drama, a congregation participates in a ritual” (429). The audience members of the “Perchtenlauf” participate in the procession solely as spectators and, especially in earlier manifestations of the tradition, by awarding the performers with food and drink. Their role, while a key part of the tradition, mirrors that of an audience member’s at a theatrical performance. It is logical that the performers in the “Perchtenlauf” would be men, as women did not perform on the public stage in the German-speaking world until the middle of the 17th century (Michael 39; Gregor, *Weltgeschichte* 387-88). As written records of the “Perchtenlauf” date back to 1601 (Schuhladen, “Berchtesgadener” 4), the procession was very much grounded in an all-male tradition of the performing arts.

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<sup>35</sup> Hübner reported that the processions in the Pinzgau region could have between 100 - 300 participants (399).

The “Perchteln gehen” of Styria (along with its analogues in the neighboring Lungau region and Rauris) on the other hand, do not exhibit as sharp a distinction between participants and spectators. The pompous display and raucous din of the “Perchtenlauf” demands an audience, whereas the “Perchteln” quietly go about their business sweeping the interior of houses, either not acknowledging the residents or issuing verbal threats to onlooking children. Their nonchalant manner obscures the fact that they are performers. As Schechner explains, referring to the semantics of “acting” in colloquial use: “we say someone is not acting when they are doing what they ordinarily would do were there no audience” (97). While the “Perchteln” feign “ordinary” (i.e. not performed) behavior, the inhabitants of the houses they visit participate in their non-acting by granting them access to their homes and not interfering as they clean, sweep, and threaten the children. In this way, an unspoken agreement exists between the adult residents of the home and the costumed visitors, in which neither party acknowledges that it is all an act. Unaware of this conspiracy is the true audience of the entire drama: the children, whose ignorance of the performance playing out before them makes the threat of punishment at the hand of the performers seem all the more real.<sup>36</sup>

It is important to note however, that the threats of the “Perchteln” are not directed exclusively at the children, but extend to the women of the household as well. By allowing the “Perchteln” to inspect and ritualistically disapprove of their housekeeping,

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<sup>36</sup> John B. Smith comes to a similar conclusion, reasoning that these types of threatening figures are likely to have a greater impact on younger children who are less inclined to question their authenticity (181-82).

they position themselves adjacent to the children in the structure of the performance, that is, subject to intimidation at the hand of the performers. While aware that it is “just an act” they are reminded of the time when they too feared being whisked away by one of the “Perchteln.” It is a symbolic submission to the discipline of a greater authority, through which their sense of duty to the household is renewed. Their participation in the performance is therefore essential to the effectivity of the ritual in promoting obedience and industriousness in the home.

The “Perchteln gehen” of Styria therefore differs not only structurally from the “Perchtenlauf,” but functionally as well. While the “Perchtenlauf” is a celebration of release from social constraints, the house visits of the “Perchteln” in Styria serve to enforce these very restraints. This corresponds to Turner’s dialectical model mentioned above: the social structure enforced by the “Perchteln” is disrupted by the anti-structure of the “Perchtenlauf.” Cross-dressing therefore plays a functional role in the “Perchtenlauf,” in that it inverts the constraints of gendered norms. Such an inversion would be out of place in the “Perchteln gehen” tradition, which seeks not to temporarily invert but rather to clearly demarcate and solidify the role of women in the household. Contrarily, it is fitting that women and girls portray the female figure “Frau Perchta” in their policing of domestic duties, as they represent a social structure in which these duties are reserved for females.



## **Masculinity in the “Perchtenlauf”**

Hübner, in his 1796 account of the “Berchtenlaufen,” mentions that the “Berchten” were “[bewaffnet] mit allen Arten von Gewehren” (399). Without clarifying this statement, Hübner describes in further detail a seemingly closely related practice, the “Kühetreiben,” which consisted of some fifty young men wearing masks resembling cows’ heads marching through the village on the evening of St. John’s Day (June 24th) under the clamor of bells, drums, flutes, and cracking whips (398). He relates that, “die übrigen waren mit großen Bergstöcken, Zaunstöcken und Pistolen auf jeden Fall bewaffnet” (398) and, further, that an attempt to arrest participants or otherwise hinder the (illegal) procession “würde ganz gewiß das Signal zu einem blutigen Gefechte seyn” (399). This description recalls Andree-Eysn’s account of the violent disputes between bands of “schiachen Perchten,” a parallel Hübner also notes in stating that, “mit den Berchten verhält es sich auf einer ähnlichen Weise” (399).

As discussed in the previous chapter, the “Perchtenlauf” was forbidden dating back to the early 17th century (Rumpf, *Perchten* 132). Nevertheless the practice lived on. Participants were repeatedly caught and punished and lawmakers continued to produce new legislation criminalizing their exploits. The risk of dangerous encounters with law enforcers was therefore inherent to the “Perchtenlauf,” as was the possibility of a melee with “Perchten” from another village. It is possible that the defiance of the “Perchten” was motivated solely by a desire to maintain a tradition, which, because of its excessive tendencies, was threatened by the authorities of Church and State. However it seems

likely that the participants in these processions at least to some degree embraced the repressive challenge, conceding daylight for the cover of night, but arming themselves at the same time, scoffing at the intimidation of the law. Fischer describes a legal record from 1750 in which farmhands from Unken were cited for participating in a “Perchtenlaufen” in which they escaped the initial arrest of a state official by laying long sticks or poles across the path during pursuit (112). He explains that the text is not completely clear, interpreting nonetheless that the pursuer “möglicherweise beritten [war], das Pferd oder er selber und seine Schergen sollten (in der Dunkelheit) in der Aufregung der Verfolgung darüber stolpern, ausgleiten, hinfallen, Hals und Bein brechen” (112).

In light of such accounts it becomes clear that the “Perchtenlauf” was an opportunity for young men,<sup>37</sup> primarily from rural areas but also laborers from the city (Shuhladen, “Berchtesgadener” 12), to engage in rowdy, often violent behavior. Participation in the tradition provided an outlet from the demands of working life and a platform for male-male competition, chest thumping, and troublemaking, if not outright hooliganism. To say that women were excluded from the practice is misleading because it belonged, as far back as one can interpret from textual evidence, to the male sphere. There was no question of women’s participation in the “Perchtenlauf,” just as there was no question as to men’s participation in spinning. Gender divisions structured life in rural

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<sup>37</sup> In an analysis of (primary legal) records of the “Perchtenlauf” in Salzburg in the 18th century, Fischer concludes that the participants were mostly young, single farm or mine workers (110). Shuhladen cites an example of a 50-year-old man prosecuted for his participation in a “Perchtenlauf” as an exception to the rule (“Berchtesgadener” 12).

Austria just as the influence of these divisions (in spite the flexibility of gender roles and identities gained over the past two centuries) is still felt today. While the “Schönperchtenlauf” which emerged in the 19th century did not retain the dangerous and violent nature of its predecessor, it was grounded in the same male-centric tradition and, correspondingly, its participants were men.

### **The “Perchtenjagen”**

A third tradition, the “Perchtenjagen,” warrants additional discussion because it features a mimetic portrayal of the figure “Frau Perchta” like the “Perchteln gehen” of Styria, however it contrasts with the Styrian ritual in that the participants who portray this figure are men. The “Perchtenjagen” has two distinct variations. The first, described by Julius Schmidt took place in the border region between Carinthia and Slovenia, where on the evening of January fifth:

die Vertreibung der Perchta [stattfindet]. Da sie Peitschenknallen und Hundgebell, wie allgemein versichert wird, nicht vertragen kann, so ziehen die Burschen in Oberkrain, im Gail-, Canal-, und Rosenthal unter Peitschenknallen, Läuten der Kuhglocken und Hämmern auf Blechkessel durch das Dorf...” (420)

This was undertaken to ensure the well being of the livestock, which assumedly would otherwise be left vulnerable to the unpredictable violence of “Frau Perchta” (see Bächtold-Stäubli 6: 1481). The male villagers of Jesenice held a similar chase on the 6th of January, except here “ein mit Weiberkleidern angethaner Bursche” portrayed the pursued

“Pechtra-Baba”<sup>38</sup> (J. Schmidt 421). In the areas through which the cacophonous chase passed, the herds were reportedly spared from attacks by bears.

While these noisy processions of young men may seem to resemble the “Perchtenlauf,” they share none of its carnivalesque character. Absent are solicitations of food and drink in celebration of the appetites of the lower body, as are the corresponding sexually charged antics of a clown figure. Schmidt does not describe these traditions as illicit, nor do Waschnitius (28-29) and Rumpf (*Perchten* 111), who also describe these practices, provide any evidence of their criminalization. They therefore contain neither the rebellion of the “Schiachperchtenlauf,” nor the dramatization of dualities in social status characteristic of the “Schönperchtenlauf.” Cross-dressing too, is absent from these traditions, *except in the one variation* in the Slovenian village of Jesenice. The exception, however, seems to prove the rule. Lacking elements of the carnivalesque, these processions are primarily apotropaic in nature: they symbolize the driving off of harmful forces that would threaten domesticated animals.

Livestock, especially cattle, were essential to the economic livelihood of this region. Even at the time of publication of a British study in 1920, Carniola, the Slovenian province bordered by Carinthia to the northwest and Styria to the northeast, was “from an industrial point of view... still very backward.” (Great Britain 38). As in Carinthia (44), Carniola’s agricultural lands were divided amongst small farmers (35). Further, in 1910 there were an estimated 253,835 heads of cattle in the province – more than twice as

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<sup>38</sup> The word “Baba” refers to an old woman (J. Schmidt 414).

many as there were pigs which, aside from poultry, were the second most important species in the realm of food production (32). The protection of herds from illness and attacks from predators was therefore an understandable concern to the Carniolan or Carinthian peasant – one that, due to the unpredictable, often unassailable forces of nature, was not entirely within his control.

According to Jonathan Z. Smith, rituals often serve as a means of navigating this discrepancy between collective desires or cultural ideals and the harsh realities of life (473). The religious historian provides an example from Arctic bear cults that prescribe a hunting etiquette out of respect for the animal, which for practical purposes is in fact impossible to follow (479). This hunting code requires for instance that the bear be killed in frontal hand-to-hand combat and that it offer itself freely to the hunter (478). The incongruity is compensated for in a practice involving the raising of a bear cub, feeding it generously and otherwise honoring it as a sacred being, and then ritually killing it (480). For Smith, this tradition is a performance of the cultural ideal of a bear hunt, which can only be achieved in the controlled environment of ritual (481).

The “Perchtenjagen” in the Austrian-Slovenian border region has a similar function: the cattle herders ritually drive off “Pechtra-Baba” (whether or not she is mimetically portrayed), who personifies the various natural forces that threaten their herds. Practical action falls short of ensuring the cattle’s safety; ritual action therefore becomes necessary. Because cattle herders were traditionally men accustomed to the rugged life in the mountains required of their profession (see Franziszi 25), it was they

who took up the responsibility of ritually ensuring the safety of their herds. To this end they marched through the countryside on the evening preceding Epiphany, cracking whips and banging on pots and pans. As described by Julius Schmidt above, this practice was distributed throughout the region, although the appearance of “Pechtra-Baba” in the ritual is recorded only in the village of Jesenice. It is therefore possible that this was a later development that provided a physical embodiment of the dangerous elements of nature that could be physically driven from the area. Arising from a male tradition, it was natural that this role too, would be filled by a man. That this requires cross-dressing is of little significance, as it is not present in similar rituals with the same function outside of Jesenice.

The second variation of the “Perchtenjagen,” which is found in Upper Carinthia (closer to Carinthia’s northern border with Salzburg than it is to Slovenia which lies to the south), very much resembles the Styrian “Perchteln gehen” in that it involves masked participants dressed as “Frau Perchta” who go from house to house with the intention of frightening the residents. Here, as in Jesenice and in contrast to the Steiermark, “Frau Perchta” is portrayed by men. Vernaleken describes this tradition as follows:

Im Möllthale in Oberkärnten ist es Sitte, daß am Vorabende des Sylvester- und heiligen Dreikönigs-Tages mehrere Mannspersonen, welche sich mit fürchterlichen Larven und mit alten zerrissenen Weibskleidern oder mit rauhen, zottigen und umgekehrten schwarzen Pelzen vermunnen, durch mehrere Dörfer von Haus zu Haus ziehen. In Häusern und überall – wo sie Einlaß finden, machen sie einen

furchtbaren Lärm, hüpfen und springen wie Böcke von einer Bank auf die andere, schreien, knurren, poltern und brüllen wie wilde Thiere, verfolgen die Leute, namentlich erwachsene junge Mädchen, jagen ihnen auf diese Art Furcht und Schrecken ein, und nehmen Glocken, Ketten und Pfannen, womit sie auf dem Wege und in Häusern ein grauenerregendes Getöse machen. (349-50)

He adds that they ask the children if they have behaved, rewarding those who have and threatening to beat the others or carry them off in a sack. Describing the same Mölltal tradition, Weinhold reports of only one “Perchtel” who, in addition to terrorizing the residents, collected food donations with the ultimatum “Kinder oder Speck, derweil geh ich nit Weg” (20).

The form of the Upper Carinthian “Perchtenjagen” thus displays a clear parallel to the house visits of the Styrian “Perchteln.” Also similar is the function of both traditions, namely the enforcement of approved behaviors. Unlike in Styria, the “Perchtenjagen” of Upper Carinthia, perhaps as a result of its geographic proximity to Salzburg, bears some resemblance to the “Perchtenlauf.” Most obvious is the solicitation of food offerings, which is one of several features of the “Perchtenlauf” that contribute to a carnivalesque celebration of the lower body. That young women receive special attention from the masked participants in the “Perchtenjagen,” as Vernaleken describes, recalls the “Schiachperchtenlauf,” in which the “Perchten” hoped to attract female attention in the villages through which they passed. Naturally, the presence of cross-dressing provides an additional similarity.

While these qualities may add a certain carnivalesque character to the “Perchtenjagen” of Upper Carinthia, the primary function of the tradition remains social control, not the temporary release from such restraints as in the “Perchtenlauf.” Still in need of explanation then is why men portray “Frau Perchta” in these traditions, but not in Styria. The example of a strikingly similar but clearly genetically unrelated tradition sheds some light on this question.

The monstrous figure Soyoko and her band of fearsome ogres aid Hopi parents in northern Arizona with the disciplining of their children (James 343). Soyoko resembles “Frau Perchta” in that she wears a large burden basket for the purpose of carrying off the naughty children that she “smells out” (343-44). She and her band of ogres are said to visit the village once a year in search of food and the children are advised to catch rabbits and grind large quantities of corn, both to show their industriousness and to satiate the appetites of the coming monsters. When the fateful day arrives, impersonators of Soyoko and her cadre go from door to door, demanding food and enumerating the misdeeds of the child residents of the home, information that had been supplied to the performers by the children’s parents. They scoff at the offerings prepared for them as paltry and attempt to take the children in their stead, the parents eventually “saving” their young ones from this fate by appeasing the ogres with additional food offerings.

While the literature does not suggest that the children in Upper Carinthia go to great lengths, as the Hopi children do, to produce the offerings for their masked visitors, it is well documented, as referenced above, that the threat of “Frau Perchta” is used to promote industriousness and good behavior. Additionally, the Upper Carinthian impersonators of “Frau Perchta” solicit food offerings in a threatening fashion: they will



not leave until they receive either children or bacon. Unlike the celebratory solicitations of food and drink in the “Perchtenlauf,” of primary significance in the “Perchtenjagen” is the threat, not the food.

### **The Abject and the Uncanny in “Perchten” Traditions**

Both the Upper Carinthian “Perchtenjagen” and the Hopi tradition can be understood in terms of Julia Kristeva’s analysis of the abject, or a physical repulsion induced by that which transgresses physical and moral boundaries, causing (trans)formations of identity (2-4). Tied to the superego (2), the abject demarcates culturally recognized boundaries between right and wrong; the feeling of abjection results from encounters with the taboo (17). It is for this reason that abjection is, according to Kristeva, what separated primitive man from beast, the latter symbolizing “sex and murder” (13). But the abject operates first on the individual level, forming from the child a new individual, wrenched by disgust from his mother’s breast (3), but domesticated from egotistical desires by fear (6).

By bellowing, jumping through the house like billy goats, and chasing the young women, the masked participants in the “Perchtenjagen” of Upper Carinthia embody the violent, hypersexual animalism that abjection has banished from civilized society. As cross-dressers, they represent “the in-between, the ambiguous, the composite,” which Kristeva lists as additional characteristics of the abject (4). Their transgression of the gender boundary is not playful and regenerative as it is in the “Perchtenlauf,” but represents on the contrary the horrifying elusiveness of a shape shifter that balks at

definition with murderous guile. Whereas ambivalence manifests itself in the carnivalesque through movement along opposite poles such as life and death or praise and abuse, the abject confronts with a static ambivalence that resides in the cracks between male/female, moral/immoral, life/death. It is “the traitor, the liar, the criminal with a good conscience, the shameless rapist, the killer who claims he is a savior” (Kristeva 4). Because it evades definition in this way, encounters with the abject force one to either reject it as foe or accept it as friend, thereby renegotiating the frontiers of one’s social and moral identity.

The portrayers of “Frau Perchta” summon the abject by transforming what should be a sanctuary for the child, the home, into an arena of terror<sup>39</sup> and thereby violently confronting them with the decision to either behave or be eaten alive by a ferocious monster. The performance provokes a physical response in children, not just of fear but also of repulsion: the body’s attempt to repel the threatening force from the household, which in turn informs the superego’s demarcation of the behaviors scrutinized by the invaders of the home as unacceptable.

While the “Percheln gehen” of Styria also features threatening figures in the home, it should be recalled that the women and girls who portray “Frau Perchta” in these rituals do so calmly and quietly and that when they do receive food offerings, these take the

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<sup>39</sup> Kristeva elucidates this concept with the following example: “In the dark halls of the museum that is now what remains of Auschwitz, I see a heap of children’s shoes, or something like that, something I have already seen elsewhere, under a Christmas tree, for instance, dolls I believe. The abjection of Nazi crime reaches its apex when death, which, in any case, kills me, interferes with what, in my living universe, is supposed to save me from death: childhood, science, among other things.” (4)

form of bowls of milk set out on the table by the residents of the household, without solicitation. This offering of “Perchtenmilch” is not only significant in that it resembles very much a sacrifice to a deity, but also because it reflects the importance of femininity in these rituals which, while they encompass the disciplining of children (the primary purpose of the Upper Carinthian “Perchtenjagen”), are entwined with the domestic duties of women, particularly spinning and housekeeping.

These household visits are therefore best described not as abject, but as “unheimlich” or uncanny. While technically the antonym of “heimlich,” the relationship between the two words, due to the complexities of meaning contained in both, is in practice much more nuanced (Freud 132). As Freud cites, “heimlich” means “zum Hause gehörig, nicht fremd, vertraut, zahm, traut” and “traulich, anheimelnd etc.” (126). An additional meaning of “heimlich” is, “versteckt, verborgen gehalten, so dass man Andre [sic] nicht davon oder darum wissen lassen, es ihnen verbergen will,” although in some instances this meaning can be attributed to its conventional antonym “unheimlich” (129). In another sense, “unheimlich” is everything “was im Geheimnis, im Verborgenen ... bleiben sollte and hervorgetreten ist” (132). “Unheimlich” therefore comes to be associated with an uneasy fear or eeriness (131).

The entire spectrum of meanings is significant in relation to the “Perchteln gehen” of Styria. “Heimlich” of course applies to the homes the “Perchteln” visit, which are not only the familiar and trusted sanctuaries of the inhabitants but also the means by which they conceal their household habits. These are of course uncovered by the “Perchteln”

who inspect the homes for cleanliness and imply by their ritual sweeping and cleaning that a habitual untidiness has been revealed. The “Perchteln” themselves are “unheimlich” in the sense that they are outsiders, not only of the household but also as witnessed by the eerie silence or incomprehensible mutterings and their long hair which hangs over their faces. On the other hand they do belong to the house in the context of the ritual which recurs every year. They are therefore also “heimlich,” a description that applies in the additional sense that they are secretive, as witnessed by their veiled identities.

Freud attempted to synthesize this interplay of meanings into a cohesive aesthetic of “das Unheimliche” or “the uncanny” and concluded that it is characterized by the unsettling re-emergence of once familiar but repressed archetypes and worldviews, specifically those associated with animism, or the conception that the world and everything in it is empowered with a magical agency. This includes for example the motifs of recurrence and duplication, as exemplified by the “Doppelgänger” or double (141-45). The “Perchtel” can be interpreted as a double of the homemaker and mother, who takes over the duties of the latter every year on the sixth of January.<sup>40</sup> She is therefore in this sense familiar, but she is also literally strange in that her identity is unknown (her face is concealed). This mysteriousness is intensified by the threat of taking misbehaving children away with her in a large basket, that is, to remove them from their environment of safety and familiarity to await some unknown fate. Further, the “Perchtel” herself is

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<sup>40</sup> This temporal reoccurrence of the same eerie event parallels Freud’s description of the uncanny sensation that arises when one unintentionally and repeatedly returns to the same place (144).

reduplicated, appearing sometimes in pairs or, more often, in groups of three. As the multiple “Perchteln” are made to look identical or varying only in the color of their dress (e.g. one black and one white or three wearing red, black, and white respectively), they become strangely familiar to one another, but their strangeness in respect to the concealment of identity and otherness to the household becomes correspondingly multiplied.

The “Perchteln” of the Styrian tradition are therefore not the abject hybrids of Upper Carinthia but a more subtle combination of strangeness and familiarity that can be described as “unheimlich.” Eerie doubles of the mother and homemaker, they are, by necessity, portrayed by women and girls. Cross-dressing lends itself on the other hand to the Upper Carinthian tradition which forces the child to shed infantile behaviors and move towards individuation through confrontation with the abject. As Kristeva puts it, “Essentially different from “uncanniness” [i.e. “das Unheimliche”], more violent, too, abjection is elaborated through a failure to recognize its kin; nothing is familiar, not even the shadow of a memory” (5). The familiar, motherly character of the Styrian “Perchteln” is completely absent in the Upper Carinthian tradition. Here “Frau Perchta” is portrayed as a ferocious but ambivalent monster that is neither male nor female, human nor animal, friend nor foe (it is concerned with the behavior of the children but at the same time wants to eat them). In short, it is unlike anything the child has ever seen or experienced. For the first time, mother and father are no longer viable sources of protection and the child can ensure his or her safety only through proper behavior.

The “Perchteln gehen” differentiates itself from this tradition in that its primary focus is on controlling household duties. Past instances of the “Perchteln” checking for flax that had not been spun (Haiding 330), suggests a shift in focus towards cleanliness and the disciplining of children as spinning lost relevance over time. The bowls of milk set out for the “Perchteln” demonstrates that these figures are honored, possibly as personifications of a collective female authority over house and home. Their soft and strange mutterings, the long hair draped over their faces, their unannounced appearance and wordless departure – all evoke fear, but not the violent repulsion of the abject. The “Perchteln” are much too familiar for that. They remind one of a mother or sister, or perhaps an acquaintance from the village. Such thoughts conjure a queer uneasiness, even for those who know they really are just girls from the village. This sense of the uncanny is perhaps especially strong in those whose rationality fails to distract the mind from otherworldly explanations.

Within this context it seems that when the “Perchteln” threaten children directly, it would reinforce their respect for the authority of the mother who the frightening visitors so eerily represent. In this case the result would be the same as that of the Upper Carinthian “Perchtenjagen,” namely behavioral control. Both therefore remain distinct from the “Perchtenlauf” which not only celebrates the release from such restraints, but also demonstrates no clear connection to “Frau Perchta.” Similarities between the “Perchtenjagen” and the “Perchtenlauf” such as the solicitation of food and the heckling of young women as well as the proximity of their distribution areas implies a mixing of

traditions. However these likenesses in form do not affect the divergent function of the two traditions. Therefore while cross-dressing in the “Perchtenlauf” has a carnivalesque character, it is part of an aesthetic of the abject in the Upper Carinthian “Perchtenjagen.”

### **Summary**

The use of collective terms such as “Perchtenbrauch” generates confusion in that it lumps functionally divergent practices into a single linguistic category, often out of an assumed connection to “Frau Perchta.” Rumpf’s question regarding the gender of participants in these various traditions is an example of this perplexity which can only be transcended by examining these practices individually with consideration to their unique character and function. Even the traditions that do have a connection to “Frau Perchta” display a great deal of variation in these areas. More variant still is the “Perchtenlauf,” which evidence strongly suggests has no known connection to this figure. It is therefore not “Frau Perchta,” but rather their connection to Epiphany, or “Perchtentag,” by which these traditions are bound.

## CHAPTER 4

### ETYMOLOGY OF THE “PERCHTENLAUF”

The word “-lauf” in “Perchtenlauf” is of minor significance. As Andree-Eysn suggests, it likely refers to the tempo of these processions, which at least in its early manifestations, involved masked participants running and jumping with the help of long poles from village to village and house to house (“Perchten” 170). However various other terms such as “Perchtemzug” and sometimes “Perchtentanz” refer to the same or similar practices. “Perchtenlauf” is used here as a collective term for the sake of clarity and because it is one of the most commonly and earliest used terms.<sup>41</sup> Of considerably more interest, is the origin of the first component of this compound, “Percht.”

#### **Percht(a)**

As mentioned above, the “Perchtenlauf” is often associated with the figure “Frau Perchta.” Grimm’s assertion that this figure has her origins in a Germanic goddess (*Mythologie* 259) to whom the “Perchtenlauf” was dedicated (256) has enjoyed considerable influence up to the present. In opposition to this claim is Schmeller’s comparably influential view that “Frau Perchta” is the personification of the Christian festival of Epiphany, the night of Christ’s manifestation on Earth celebrated on the sixth of January (269). Mannhardt supports this theory, listing several similar personifications of calendar days including the uncannily similar figure “Befana,” an Italian personification

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<sup>41</sup> The first definite record of this practice refers to it as the “Percht-Lauffen” (Schuhladen, “Berchtesgadener” 4).



of Epiphany, and noting that “Frau Perchta’s” mythical role as a protector of deceased children’s souls bears a relationship to the Massacre of the Innocents which followed the visit of the Magi associated with the Epiphany tradition (2: 185). Höfler’s note that in the 5th century Epiphany was also observed as “Unschuldige[r] Kindertag” would support this hypothesis (“Gebäcke” 257).

Grimm acknowledges this possibility, maintaining however that “Frau Perchta,” who was allegedly referred to as “Perahta,” the “luminous,” or “radiant” in Old High German (*Mythologie* 250) was a divinity already associated with midwinter, and who the Christians later connected with Epiphany, the “glistening night,” or “giperahta naht” (*Mythologie* 259). E.H. Meyer echoes this position, admitting the possibility that the word “Perchta” or “Berchta” has its origins in “giper(c)hta na(c)ht,” arguing however that the myth of this figure predates the name (425). The word “giperahtanaht” or “giperahta naht” can be traced as far back as the middle of the 10th century, where it is listed in two separate Viennese glosses and translated as “theophania” (Rumpf, *Perchten* 61). A gloss from the Mondsee monastery dating between the years 900 and 1200 also lists “giperchtenaht” as “theophania” (Prodinger 559). According to Prodinger, the “glistening night” refers to the celebration of Christ’s birth, which was moved to the 24th of December in the 4th century, January 5th and 6th again rising to prominence in the 12th century in commemoration of the visit of the Magi (559).

Timm suggests that the term “giperahta naht,” the Christian festival of Epiphany, has its origins in a pre-Christian expression, likely connected to a figure of worship whose

present manifestation is “Frau Perchta.” Citing Kranzmayer, Prodinge asserts correspondingly that the name “Percht” can be traced linguistically back to the 8th century (558). Timm goes so far as to suggest a linguistic and mythological origin in the Celtic goddess “Brixta,” a name that outdates the first records of a “giperahta naht” by almost an entire millennium (318).

Rumpf argues against a pre-Christian origin of “Percht,” noting that the earliest forms of the word are first documented as calendar terms for one of the highest feasts in the Christian year (*Perchten* 69-70). Citing a catechetical treatise from Oberaltaich in the 13th century in which a “Domina Perchta” appears as an embodiment of sinful behavior, Rumpf further rejects the theory that this figure was a personification of Epiphany as the text makes no mention of this Christian holy day (*Perchten* 70-76). On the contrary, Timm points out the lamentation in the Oberaltaich treatise of children “singing to ‘Domina Perchta’ instead of reciting the ‘Ave Maria,’” reasoning that these children must have been referring to an existing figure, one that the Church felt the need to demonize (43). Whether or not “giperahta naht” can be traced back to a pre-Christian deity, it is clear that by the 13th century its derivative “paerchtentag” made no reference to such a figure: it was simply a term for the calendar day of January 6th, the festival of Epiphany (Rumpf, *Perchten* 62-63). Even Timm admits that a pagan origin of the term would have

no more significance than does the common use of “Ostern” or “Easter” instead of the Aramaic “Pascha” (53).<sup>42</sup>

Mogk provides an alternative etymology, attributing the origin of the name “Perchta” to the Old High German verb “pergan,” just as the name for the similar figure “Holda” derives, in his opinion, from “helan” (51). That both verbs mean “to cover” or “to veil” is for Prodinger significant, as such an etymology would link the figure “Perchta” with the masked participants of the “Perchtenlauf” (560). Waschnitius argues however that similar constructions from strong verbs such as “pergan” are uncommon and that, further, Mogk’s hypothesis is based on the assumption that the mythical “Perchta” was the leader of a plurality of similar figures, a conception that is not supported by the literature (148). Mogk’s rejection of the “giperahta naht” etymology on the grounds that “in den alten Kalendern dieser Tag nicht unter jenem Namen erscheint” (51) is countered by Kauffmann, who questions this vague source (which Mogk does not cite), while pointing out that the Old High German term for Epiphany is indeed old, dating back to the 10th century (253).

### **The “Perchtenlauf”**

While the potential etymology of the word “Percht” has inspired much debate, considerably less attention has been directed towards its relationship to the term

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<sup>42</sup> Both the English and German words for this Christian holy day are attributed to “Austrô” or “Eostre,” an Old Germanic spring goddess associated with the rising sun and, correspondingly, the seasonal lengthening of the days (Mogk 145-46).

“Perchtenlauf.” Weinhold (22-23), Utzinger (13), and Gregor (*Geschichte* 28) accept Grimm’s claim that the “Perchtenlauf” was held in honor of the goddess “Perchta.” Referring to the “Perchtentanz”<sup>43</sup> in Weißenbach (Tyrol), Reiterer describes the “Perchten” as representations of a “häßliche weibliche Gottheit der Heidenzeit” (106). Höfler, referencing accounts of “Frau Perchta” as a protectorate of children’s souls, sees the “Perchtenlauf” as a portrayal of the procession of souls that she is said to lead on the evening preceding Epiphany (“Gebäcke” 260), a possibility that Waschnitius also acknowledges (162). Hörmann cautiously suggests that the name of the Old Germanic goddess “Perachta” lives on in the “Perchtenlaufen” (16). Timm asserts that in spite of the variations in “Perchten” traditions (which she lumps into the category “Perchtenlauf”), they are all, “irgendwie mit der Percht assoziiert” (307). Andree-Eysn (“Perchten” 162) and especially Rumpf (*Perchten* 7) express, on the other hand, a higher degree of resignation in attributing the name “Perchtenlauf” to “Frau Perchta” and question the possibility of any further relationship between the two.

Mannhardt stands out in his assertion that the name of the “Perchtenlaufen” and that of its participants, the “Perchten,” derives from “Perchtenabend,” the evening preceding Epiphany on which this practice often takes place (1: 542). Such an etymology, if demonstrated conclusively, would call for a critical reevaluation of the alleged relationship between “Frau Perchta” and the “Perchtenlauf,” a conception that can be traced back to the first publication of Grimm’s *Deutsche Mythologie* in 1844. Further, a

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<sup>43</sup> This is an alternate name for the “Trestertanz,” described above.

direct etymological link between the “Perchtenlauf” and Epiphany would weaken the foundations of those theories in which the origins of this practice are linked with pre-Christian traditions. Mannhardt’s hypothesis finds support in the early records of the “Perchtenlauf” as well as in the traditions and etymology of two distinct feast days celebrated outside of its distribution area: “Bergnacht” of Nürnberg and “Berchtoldstag” of northern Switzerland.

### **Early Reference to the “Perchtenlauf”**

As the earliest records of the “Perchtenlauf” are discussed in detail above, a brief summary suffices here. In 1601 and again in 1642 the court of Berchtesgaden issued decrees forbidding the “Perchtenlauf” on the evening preceding Epiphany (Schuhladen, “Berchtesgadener” 4-5).<sup>44</sup> Similar legal records from 1721 and 1756 document the “Perchtenlauf” on Epiphany or the evening prior in various locales in the state of Salzburg (Fischer 108). A decree from 1730 criminalizes the “junge porsch d(a)z Umblauffen bey Tag und Nacht in Narrn Klayd(er)n und allerhand geschällwerckh” on Epiphany and during the Carnival season in Gastein (qtd. in Fischer 108). Fischer also lists a decree from 1777 outlawing the “Perchten” processions in Hüttschlag “in Monat Jen(n)er.” Additionally, the court of Reichenhall (in the Berchtesgaden region) fined three farm hands in 1789 for their participation in a “Perchtenlauf” on the evening preceding

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<sup>44</sup> The legislation from 1601 referred to the practice as both “Percht-lauffen” and “Perchtlauffen,” while in 1642 it was called “pert lauffen.”

Epiphany (Rumpf, *Perchten* 133). These records therefore demonstrate a strong correlation between the “Perchtenlauf” with the festival of Epiphany.

While the 17th century documents from Berchtesgaden label the “Perchtenlauf” as sinful and godless witchcraft, Schuhladen attributes such accusations to the witch-hunts that raged in Bavaria and neighboring regions at the time, not to any actual cult practices or beliefs (“Berchtesgadener” 4-5). He cites a witch burning from Carinthia in 1662 in which “die alte Percht!” was named in the proceeding as “der oberste Teufel,” to demonstrate that “Perchta” was at this time no figure of worship,<sup>45</sup> but rather a personification of evil (5). That “die alte Percht!” was not mentioned in the legislations against the “Perchtenlauf,” just twenty and sixty-one years prior respectively, strongly suggests the lack of a connection with any such figure, goddess or devil. While suspicions of witchcraft in the “Perchtenlauf” correspond with the wave of witch trials in the first half of the 17th century (5), in later documents “kultische Funktionen oder Aberglaubenspraktiken sind nirgends, auch in den Vorwürfen der Pfarrherren nicht, erkennbar” (12).

### **“Bergnacht”**

Until 1616 when the practice was formally forbidden, it was customary in Nuremberg for boys and girls to go from house to house on “Bergnacht,” repeatedly striking the doors with hammers and mallets (Weineck 22). According to Siebenkees, such mischief was not only carried out on “Bergnacht,” or “Oberstnacht,” but also on

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<sup>45</sup> Rumpf of course argues that she never was (*Perchten* 76; 176).

“Obersttag,”<sup>46</sup> the sixth of January (380-81).<sup>47</sup> He adds that after knocking on a door in this manner, the children would quickly run away, so as not to be recognized (380). Legal actions seems to have been called for due to an incident on January 6th, 1616, in which a waiter clubbed and seriously injured a young girl passing by in the night, whom he had accused of banging on his tavern’s door (381).

At first glance, the name “Bergnacht” may seem to substantiate Mogk’s hypothesis that “Perchta” comes from “pergan,” meaning “to cover” or “veil.” Listed by the Grimms as “perkan” or “bergan,” this Old High German verb gave birth to the New High German “bergen” (*Wörterbuch* 1507). The latter means both to secure (as in its participial form “geborgen,” meaning “secure” or “contained”), and hidden (*Wörterbuch* 1507). Additionally, Schmeller points to its more commonly used derivative “verbergen” (to disguise, obscure, mask), as well as a children’s hiding game he lists as “Wégbèrglæs” (273). On the other hand, the youthful participants in the “Bergnacht” tradition were not described as wearing masks. In fact, that they ran away after knocking on doors in order to protect their identities seems to indicate the contrary. Therefore the glosses of “pergan” which encompass veiling, covering, and protecting seem of little relevance to this practice.

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<sup>46</sup> According to Höfer, “Obersttag ist selber genennet worden, weil es das erste und vornehmste Fest im neuen Jahre ist” (349).

<sup>47</sup> Arnold Meyer also documents “Bergnacht” as a reference to the evening preceding Epiphany, although he does not specify the geographical area in which this term was used (95).

More likely is a derivation from “Perchtennacht.” As in the Upper German variant “Berchtennacht,” the initial [p] is softened to a [b], as is the [t] following the velar fricative. This parallels the pronunciation of “sagt” in Würzburg (where, as in Nuremberg, an East Franconian dialect is spoken) as [sexd] (Franke 80). The word “Berg” itself is pronounced [berix] in Bamberg (80), some 60 kilometers to the north of Nuremberg, a pronunciation that bears a close resemblance to the Old High German “giperahtha.” Further, the “Bergnacht” tradition shows no connection to “Frau Perchta.” It is much more a celebration of Epiphany as the beginning of the Carnival season and the accompanying release from social restrictions, allowing the performance of otherwise unacceptable activities. Like the “Perchtenlauf,” the “Bergnacht” tradition strayed too far from the safety of ritualized rebellion and therefore became a victim of criminalization.

### **“Berchtoldstag”**

A second parallel tradition of the “Perchtenlauf” is the celebration of “Berchtoldstag” or “Berchtelistag” in northern Switzerland, which encompasses feasting, public dance, and various festivities (*Schweizerisches Idiotikon* 12: 962-63). “Berchtoldstag” is celebrated in Zürich on January 2nd, while in Frauenfeld it falls on the third Monday in January and in the Canton of Lucerne on the Sunday following Epiphany (Hoffmann-Krayer 118). According to the *Schweizerisches Idiotikon*, “Berchtoldstag” falls on January 2nd, although it was originally celebrated on the 6th of January, Epiphany (12: 962).



Hoffmann-Krayer notes a traditional masked procession in the countryside outside of Zürich on this day, whose participants crack whips and blow on pigs' bladders (119-20). He adds that in Tegerfelden, a "Berchteligesellschaft" would go from house to house performing a dance and receiving in return mugs of wine (120). In some such processions, clown figures would heckle the onlookers, blackening their faces and cheeks with rusty pans (*Schweizerisches Idiotikon* 12: 966). In Zürich itself children marched through the streets banging pots and pans and receiving copper coins as well as tastes of sweet wine from the guild houses (Vernaleken 346).

Feasting, public merriment, the antics of fools, noisy processions awarded with alcoholic gifts – all are carnivalesque elements also found in the "Perchtenlauf." Nor were the "Berchtoldstag" celebrations spared from criminalization. A mandate from the city of Zürich in 1527 reads: "Es soll ouch trummen und pffifen uf die gemeldeten dry tag, das nüw jar, den bärchtelt[ag] und die äschenmittwuchen, abgestellt sin und di nit weder mit umbziehen, tanzen oder in ander weg gebrucht werden" (qtd. in *Schweizerisches Idiotikon* 12: 966). Similarly, in 1493 the city of Schaffhausen proclaimed: "[Es soll in Zukunft] niemand mehr den andern in den brunnen werfen,<sup>48</sup> noch an der äschrigen Mitwochen oder an dem Berchtentag(!) uff die (Trink-)Stuben zuo gan nöthingen" (qtd. in Thurn 94).

Although officially the beginning of Lent, historically Carnival festivities were extended to

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<sup>48</sup> The "Brunnentauch" is also documented as an activity of the "Perchtenlauf" (Schuhladen, "Berchtesgadener" 15). The festive dunking of a person into a well is a clear case of carnivalesque symbolism: it is an ambivalent, metaphoric murder through forced descent into the earthly womb so that the victim may be reborn in the spirit of the feast.

Ash Wednesday (*Schweizerisches Idiotikon* 15: 245). Thus in the 15th century “Bercholdstag” was not only referred to as “Berchtentag,” that is, the same name for Epiphany; it was also connected with Carnival, both temporally and in its similarities in form and function.

Grimm attributed “Berchtoldstag” to a mythical figure “Berchtold,” a male manifestation of “Frau Perchta” and leader of the “wütende[n] Heer,” therefore resembling “Wodan” (*Mythologie* 884). Runge also confidently asserts that the Swiss holiday has its origins in “Berchtold” and therefore “Berchta” (33). While Waschnitius points out that the mythical figure “Frau Perchta” is unknown in Switzerland (70), Grimm (*Mythologie* 257-58) and Runge (12) find this figure reflected in Bertha of Burgundy, a heroic queen who in legends and folk tales took on properties of the mythological “Perchta” (Runge 33). While January 2nd in Switzerland is sometimes referred to as “St Berchten Tag” in dedication of this partially historic, partially mythological queen, this is likely due to the linguistic similarity between her name and the name for Epiphany “ze der berhten naht”<sup>49</sup> (*Schweizerisches Idiotikon* 4: 1538).

Rumpf sees the association of both “Berchtoldstag” and Queen Bertha with “Frau Perchta” as false and traces it back to Grimm’s *Deutsche Mythologie* (*Perchten* 13;

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<sup>49</sup> The linguistic similarity between the historical queen Bertha and the mythical “Perchta” is less coincidental than it may seem. Both names derive from “bërht,” a generally elevated term meaning “bright” or “shining” that in Old English was used to describe angels, the Heavenly Father, and Jesus (Timm 53). Further, there are multiple historical and mythological Berthas who do not necessarily have any connection to “Perchta” (Rumpf, “Legends” 191).

“Legends” 191-93). She observes that such interpretations are completely absent from the 16th, 17th, and 18th century literature on the subject, in which the etymology of “Berchtoldstag” is often attributed to the Roman god Bacchus (13). For example, in a sermon held in 1520 regarding Sebastian Brant’s *Narrenschiff*, Geiler von Kaysersberg is quoted as saying, “da must man *bechten* (emphasis added), wurst samlen, von Baccho kumpt das her” (qtd. in Rumpf, *Perchten* 13). The *Dictionarium latinogermanicum*, published in 1536, translates “bechten” as “Bacchari” and “Berchtentag” as “Bacchanalia” (194). “Bechten” (alternatively “bechteln,” “berchteln”) is listed in the *Schweizerisches Idiotikon* as “den Bërchteli(s)-Tag feiern” and “verallg., an gewissen Tagen, nam. Markttagen, zu Neujahr, auch Ostern, in einem Privathaus zssitzen [sic] und sich bei Essen und Trinken gütlich tun” (1538). Similarly, Hoffmann-Krayer translates “berchteln” as a verb meaning “sich gütlich tu[n], schlemm[en],” which derives from “Berchtentag,” a feast celebrated on January 2nd as far back as the 14th century (118). Rumpf claims on the other hand that the date of “Berchtoldstag” was moved from January 6th to the 2nd following the Reformation (*Perchten* 13).

## **Conclusion**

Whether the word “Percht” derived from “giperahta naht,” or if the Old High German name for Epiphany came from a Germanic goddess remains unclear. However, the “Perchtenlauf,” as demonstrated by its early records, as well as the parallel traditions of “Bergnacht” in Nuremberg and “Berchtoldstag” in Switzerland, lack any clear connection to the figure “Frau Perchta.” These traditions are bound instead by their

connection to Epiphany. Further, they all bear the carnivalesque character of merriment and release from restraint that would be expected of traditions held on what was historically the first day of the Carnival season. “Bergnacht” and especially “Berchtoldstag” which, as mentioned above, was documented in the 16th century as “Berchtentag,” bear such a strong linguistic resemblance to “Perhnahten,” documented as early as the 12th century (Rumpf, *Perchten* 61) and “perhtag”/“paerhten tag,” from the end of the 13th to the beginning of the 14th centuries (Rumpf, *Perchten* 62-63), that alternative derivations (e.g. from “Bacchus”) seem far-fetched.

That the use of these terms was, as Rumpf maintains, a strictly calendrical reference to Epiphany with no connection to any mythological figure by the name of “Perchta,” demands a clearer demonstration of a relationship between this figure, the “Perchtenlauf,” “Bergnacht,” and “Berchtoldstag” if such theories are to be accepted. Thus far, explanations attempting to demonstrate such a relationship have been unsatisfactory. In reference to the “Bergnacht” traditions for example, Weineck wrote, “in alledem ist ohne Zweifel mit Grimm und Weinhold ein Rest heiliger Umzüge und Tänze zu sehen. Wem sie gegolten habe, zeigt schon der Name” (22). Similar hasty assumptions are found in the work of the Grimms:

Bechten oder bechteln hiesz es im Elsass und in der nördlichen Schweiz, also unter Alemannen, am schlusz oder zu beginn des jahrs einen fröhlichen umzug durch das land, und festgelage halten, die noch auf das heidenthum zurückgehen. Da nun der

feiertag selbst den namen Bechtelistag und auch Berchtelistag, Berchtlistag führt,  
so ist dabei natürlich an die göttliche frau Berchta zu denken... (*Wörterbuch* 1214)

While Runge's explanations of the alleged mythological connections between "Frau Perchta" and "Berchtoldstag" are considerably less terse, his conclusions too seem somewhat stretched. He sees for example in "Bartholomäus" a weather deity akin to "Wuoton" (23-24). In Swabia, "Berchtold" is said to lead the "wilde[n] Jagd" which in Pomerania begins on August 24th, "Bartholomäus-Tag" (22). Therefore "Bartholomäus," "Berchtold," and "Perchta" are all different manifestations of the same deity, namely "Wuotan." Runge explains that during the "Zwölften" there are various superstitions regarding weather and wine, such as for example, "Wenn es um Weihnacht feucht ist und naß – so giebt es leere Speicher und Faß. Weihnachten klar – gutes Weinjahr" (25). Because these weather-controlling deities exert in this manner their influence on the wine harvest, "so erklären sich die Weinspenden und Weinmahle an den Berchtolds-Tagen in der Schweiz" (26-27).

Perhaps Runge is correct, but wine has a much more immediate function as a facilitator of festive merriment. It is for the same reason the participants in the "Perchtenlauf" are rewarded with alcoholic beverages for their household visits. Such spirits were not just symbolic of the Carnival season; their consumption was a physical affirmation of it, as the alcohol was forbidden during Lent and other periods of fast. Further, processions such as these in which participants solicit alms from house to house have a specific connection to Epiphany, which as records as far back as the 13th century

demonstrate, has traditionally been a day of donation to the poor (Rumpf, *Perchten* 63). According to Nissenbaum these traditions are modeled on the biblical visit of the Magi, kings who lavished the destitute infant Jesus with gifts on this day (8). Schmeller suspects that the term “Gebnacht,” which is sometimes used in reference to Epiphany, is derived from similar house-to-house solicitations of alms (867).

Therefore direct connections between “Frau Perchta” and “Berchtoldstag,” as well as “Bergnacht” and the “Perchtenlauf,” remain unsubstantiated. Because of their linguistic and functional similarities, it is more likely that these three traditions have in common an etymology derived from the Old High German word for Epiphany, namely “giperahtanaht.” Because Epiphany was historically the first feast of the Carnival season, an etymology tracing it back to this holiday underscores the need for a carnivalesque interpretation of the “Perchtenlauf.”

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUDING REMARKS

Because of its structural, temporal, and historical connections with Carnival, a carnivalesque aesthetic serves as a useful framework for interpreting the “Perchtenlauf,” as it provides insights to the social functions of the Alpine tradition. These encompass the temporary release from social restrictions and celebrations of the lower body, which would be inappropriate in other contexts. The social hierarchy also plays a key role in the “Perchtenlauf,” which temporarily bestowed young peasants and laborers with power and respect that was otherwise foreign to men of their status. Further, because it was forbidden, the very existence of the “Perchtenlauf” challenged and undermined legal authority. Early manifestations of the “Perchtenlauf” however, due to harsh punishments for those caught participating, were eventually replaced by a more contained, and in the eyes of the authorities less threatening procession, the “Schönperchtenlauf.” Carnavalesque elements remained, although they took on a more dramatic and representational character.

The carnivalesque manifests itself in the “Perchtenlauf” independent of any mythological interpretations dealing with the expulsion of winter and/or “Frau Perchta.” While Rumpf views this figure as the namegiver of the “Perchtenlauf,” she emphasizes the lack of evidence that would point to a pre-Christian origin of this practice. She sees in “Frau Perchta” a purely catechetical figure resembling “Frau Welt,” a personification of sinful behavior (*Perchten* 74-76). Through the catechetical imagery of the Middle Ages

that employed disease, especially festering sores, to represent sin (“Luxuria” 114), Rumpf draws a connection between “Frau Perchta” and medieval traditions in which the infirm, primarily lepers, would go from house to house seeking alms on fast days (*Perchten* 178). It is in these rites, she argues, that the “Perchtenlauf” has its origins (176).

Timm challenges this claim, arguing that boisterous begging processions that were clearly not held by lepers can be traced back to the beginning of the 14th century (309). She adds that midwinter processions involving young men dressed up both as women and as animals soliciting alms from house to house dating back to Late Antiquity suggest a pre-Christian origin of the “Perchtenlauf” (308-09). Despite the formidable challenge that proving such a hypothesis would present, Timm upholds Grimm’s claim that “Frau Perchta” derives from a Germanic deity (325) that is at least in some way connected to the “Perchtenlauf” (307).

As Schuhladen points out, however, interpretations of the “Perchtenlauf” as a relic of Germanic cult practices and beliefs are first documented in the 19th century (“Berchtesgadener” 15). According to Kammerhofer-Aggermann, these interpretations “entsprach[en] dem historischen Denken jener Zeit, das die Bedürfnisse und Sehnsüchte seiner Gegenwart aus dem ‘fortwirkenden Urquell’ einer mythischen Zeit unverbildeter naiver Seelen stillen wollte” (“Bräuche” 40). She relates that the National Socialists latched onto these interpretations, claiming that they played a role in obscuring the connection between the “Perchtenlauf” and Carnival (“Bräuche” 44; “Masken” 158).



Schuhladen argues that these mythological interpretations, which have their origins in the pontifications of educated outsiders, eventually worked their way back into the tradition (“Berchtesgadener” 20). This perspective can explain the rhetoric of modern “Perchten” groups such as the Linzer Perchten, whose homepage proclaims: “Zum Vertreiben von dämonischen Mächten waren ebenso dämonische Masken erforderlich -

SCHIACHPERCHTEN. So ist das Perchtenlaufen das Denkmal einer längst verschwundenen Naturreligion, deren Wurzeln bis zurück in die Steinzeit reichen.”

Hasty assumptions as to the meaning and origins of the word “Percht,” as well as the use of the collective term “Perchtenbräuche” for all traditions whose name contains this term, seem to have played a role in the development and diffusion of such mythological interpretations. While many so-called “Perchtenbräuche” such as the “Perchtenjagen” and the styrian “Perchteln gehen” have a clear connection to “Frau Perchta,” the “Perchtenlauf” does not. That the word “Percht” most likely derives from the Old High German “giperahta naht,” a reference to the Christian festival of Epiphany, frees the “Perchtenlauf” from any necessary connection to the figure. The uniting feature of the “Perchtenbräuche” is not “Frau Perchta” but rather a connection to Epiphany. This realization is significant because it calls for an emphasis on the relationship between these traditions and this date specifically, as well as their role within the Christian calendrical cycle. While there are many facets to Epiphany, one is that it was historically the commencement of Carnival, which peasants and laborers in the Pinzgau and Pongau, in Berchtesgaden and in Tyrol, celebrated with the “Perchtenlauf.”

During a conference on “Perchtenbräuche” in 1992, journalist and author Willi Sauberer commented on Schuhladen’s critique of mythological interpretations of the “Perchtenlauf”:

Vielleicht habe ich Sie, Herr Dr. Schuhladen, falsch verstanden. Aber wenn ich Sie richtig verstanden habe - so jetzt mein sehr subjektiver Eindruck - so war Ihr Referat wirklich perfekte Desillusion. Man könnte, wenn man es überspitzt formuliert, vielleicht sogar sagen: es ist sinnlos daß wir überhaupt hier sitzen. Denn alle Interpretationen, die bisher in den Perchtenlauf von vielen hineingegeben wurden - von Abwehr des Winters bis Glückssymbolik, bis Fruchtbarkeit usw. - das stimmt eigentlich nicht. Soweit wir historisch nachweisen können, ist das über Jahrhunderte eine Volksbelustigung gewesen, die Freude der Menschen an der Maskerade war im besten Falle ein Heischebrauch oder ein Rügebrauch - MEHR war das alles also nie. (qtd. in Schuhladen, “Diskussion” 65)

In response, Schuhladen admits that a general lack of data prevents a complete understanding of these traditions, whose early forms cannot be fully reconstructed (“Diskussion” 65). He maintains however that mythological interpretations, which are not supported by concrete evidence, were grafted onto the “Perchtenlauf” in the middle of the 19th century (65-66). Additionally, Sauberer employs a flawed logic in reasoning that accepting the “Perchtenlauf” as (merely) folk merriment while rejecting all previous interpretations would render a conference on the subject pointless. Is the purpose of academic discourse on any subject not to correct misconceptions and gain new insights?

The opposite of his claim seems more valid: if all previous interpretations of the “Perchtenlauf” are to be accepted, there is no sense in further discussing the tradition.

A carnivalesque reading of the “Perchtenlauf” however, demonstrates that the practice was not just a form of amusement, but rather a complex tradition celebrating the temporary death of social restrictions and a liberatory rebirth in the Carnival season. This informed an aesthetic of the reversal and ambivalent combination of polarities as well as a celebration of the regenerative lower body. The participants in the “Perchtenlauf” animate and embody these themes in a myriad of ways including cross-dressing, the topographical duality of the “schönen” and “schiachen Perchten,” liberation of the body through acrobatics, the sexually charged antics of clown figures, and the subversion of legal authority.

Regarding the social function of these activities, one could view them as a release valve which “lets off steam,” or allows the populace to exorcise certain behaviors deemed unacceptable during other times of year, particularly during Lent. Abrahams, in an analysis of Carnival traditions, challenges this view on the grounds that the seasonal license to certain behaviors does not prevent them from occurring at other times (288). He argues that the function of these traditions is rather to provide an appropriate setting for otherwise undesirable but also unavoidable behaviors (289). A third perspective is found in Gluckman’s paradigm of “ritual rebellion,” in which society recuperates subversive and otherwise socially disruptive tendencies in ritualized contexts of its own design (132-33).

These theories, particularly the latter two, provide useful in understanding the social functions of the “Perchtenlauf.” Viewed from a historical perspective, the repeated

decrees forbidding the practice suggest a “ritual of rebellion” in which the “Perchten” would illegally assemble every year, or every few years, to challenge the law with however no real revolutionary intentions. Eventually equilibrium was reached with the development of the “Schönperchtenlauf,” which was not perceived as a threat to the social order and was therefore legally sanctioned. This tradition fits well with Abrahams’ analysis in that it allowed for antisocial behavior in the roles of the fools and the “Schiachperchten,” which contrasted with the caricatured piety of the “Schönperchten.”

It can be assumed that none of the participants shared these analyses and they certainly did not think of them in the midst of a “Perchtenlauf.” While not fully accepting Staal’s thesis on the “Meaninglessness of Ritual,” there is at least some truth in his claim that “there are no symbolic meanings going through [the participants’] minds when they are engaged in performing a ritual” because they are focused on the performance itself (3). Comparing ritual to dance, Staal quotes Isadora Duncan as having said: “If I could tell you what it meant there would be no point in dancing it” (4).

Staal’s contention that ritual is “primarily activity” (4), does not detract from its importance or significance as Sauberer’s comments on the interpretation of the “Perchtenlauf” as a form of entertainment would suggest. On the contrary, merriment and amusement are essential elements of human culture and recognizing traditions like the “Perchtenlauf” as such allows one to understand and appreciate them more fully. Graeber criticizes the scientific tendency to seek out rational explanations for all phenomena, arguing that activity for its own sake can be categorized as play, which is found in some form among all animal species. This holds true for the “Perchenlauf,” which has existed for at least four hundred years, having survived countless attempts to eradicate it, and still

exists today. Its survival could be rationalized with mythological or functional interpretations, both however would fall short of the simple explanation that participants in the “Perchtenlauf” have persevered because the tradition brings them enjoyment. Such a perspective would inform an analysis of the carnivalesque in the “Perchtenlauf” not in terms of its potential social functions, but rather as a performative expression of joy embedded in cultural narratives. In other words, the specific ways the carnivalesque manifests itself in the “Perchtenlauf” is an expression of an organized form of play grounded in the folk culture of the Austrian Alps. An examination of how this tradition differs aesthetically from similar Carnival traditions elsewhere and from other masked processions throughout Europe<sup>50</sup> would likely reveal cultural distinctions and similarities that would be of broad ethnological interest.

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<sup>50</sup> Some of which are mentioned in Zinnburg 99-100.

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