In this chapter, we will look at the realities of the first element in the diabolic stereotype, the idea that the Devil was an active, direct agent in the world, a palpable spiritual force, or even a distinct physical entity, that people could perceive and even interact with much like a normal person. We will start by considering where this idea came from, then look at how it connected to existing beliefs and practices in the region including Württemberg, how it evolved in the interaction between learned theories and popular culture, and finally consider what role it played in the development of popular mentalities and collective experiences during the early modern period.

Origin and diffusion of the diabolic stereotype

The diabolic stereotype originated in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries in the Alps when inquisitors and magistrates discovered what they took to be a “new form of sorcery” involving Devil worship and profanation of the Christian sacraments. It included ideas from learned traditions of scandalous allegations against heretics, lepers, and Jews and the necessity of demonic involvement in magic, but it also included popular traditions of malefic magic, animal metamorphosis, and magical flight that combined collective fears and individual experiences. In fact, recent scholarship has revealed that virtually every feature of the diabolic stereotype was rooted in such popular traditions. First of all, there is plenty of evidence that some people did practice malefic magic, and some forms of that magic, necromancy, involved the deliberate invocation of demons. Such sorcery sometimes involved appropriations or perversions of Christian rituals, and might include promises of obedience and devotion to the demon’s service. Secondly, magical practitioners, like most people, formed networks of mentors, protégés, and associates, and some forms of magic, like weather magic, were at least sometimes performed by groups. Further, popular traditions involving magical flight were widespread, and some people actually thought they
experienced them. While most of the people who did so appear to have been asleep or in a naturally induced trance, some used hallucinogenic drugs. Some of the people who thought they flew at night thought that they did so to get to babies that they could kill and eat, while others went to gatherings including both people and spirits, where they feasted and made merry. At those festivities, there was often a leader spirit to whom the others paid court, and in at least one case the leader made it clear that she ruled, if not in opposition to Christ, at least outside the bounds of Christianity. In the same case, the participants reported that they learned magic skills at the gatherings that they retained for use in their everyday roles as wise women, and similar cults also involved popular magical practitioners, although any connection between their participation in the cult and their magical powers is not made clear. The sin of the men who created the diabolic stereotype was not so much that they made up the practices they reported, but rather that they interpreted them in the most negative way possible, added in a few elements from purely literary traditions, and amalgamated them willy-nilly into a composite that distorted the individual elements as it assimilated them into an illusory whole. Consequently, whenever evidence of one element was found, the others were assumed, and torture confirmed the suspicion with fair reliability, which further solidified the stereotype. There was thus a kind of “ratchet effect” in which isolated elements that really existed were added to the composite stereotype as they were discovered in one context and their existence in other contexts later appeared to be confirmed through tortured testimony.

Even as it solidified, the stereotype diffused, slowly at first, by word of mouth and manuscript, but then faster, in print, for it came of age in the same century as the printing press. The revolutionary impact of this invention was first shown by its decisive role in spreading the Reformation, which also taught printers that division, debate, scandal, and unbridled invective sell. The Protestants thundered against the Catholics and the Catholics thundered back, with both employing rhetorical weapons ranging from subtle learned treatises to scurrilous broadsides that drew stark, simplified contrasts based on exaggeration, distortion, and flagrant lies. They conveyed an image of the world as the battleground in a monumental confrontation between good and evil in which the stakes were the salvation of humankind. The diabolic stereotype, with its flattened and diabolized message and its call for violent countermeasures, fit right in, and perhaps even took up slack in the Holy Roman Empire when confessional conflict abated after the Peace of Augsburg. In any case, the number of German works proliferated in the second half of the sixteenth century, and their places of publication appear to have shifted gradually from the south and west to the north and east, bringing the “shocking news” that the “loathsome Devil” was recruiting a “fanatical army” of “witches and fiends” who “came together in an assembly” to do their “horrible deeds and activities (see Table 3.1).