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Women or Witches?
Why Women Were the Target of the *Malleus maleficarum*

The fifteenth century saw various human advancements in a variety of fields, including the technological upgrade to documentation that was the printing press; however, despite advances and developments in many aspects of society, women remained under a cloud of misogyny. There is no doubt that women suffered without similar rights to men, yet not until the witch hunts that became prevalent during this age did they become targets of mass hysteria and violence due to indiscriminate accusations of witchcraft. Condemnation fell on many innocent people, and witches became the focal point of clerical demonologists who sought to study the manner in which the devil worked through women to interfere with God's creation. One such demonologist was Heinrich Kramer, a German-born clergyman of the Catholic church and an inquisitor, who wrote a manual for the discovery, interrogation, prosecution, and eventual execution of witches in Europe, called the *Malleus maleficarum* (*The Hammer of Witches*).¹ In the opening passage of the manual, Kramer declares women to be the sole operators of witchcraft, exclaiming, "What else is woman but a foe to friendship, an inescapable punishment, a necessary evil, a natural temptation, a desirable calamity, a domestic danger, a delectable detriment, an evil of nature, painted with fair colors!"² This misogynistic rant opens a sexist tirade within the manual that proclaims witches to be the female, devil-worshipping enemies of

¹ Heinrich Institoris (Kramer) and Jakob Sprenger, *The Hammer of Witches: A Complete Translation of the Malleus maleficarum*, trans. Christopher Mackay (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

² Kramer, 162.

Christianity. Is this what drove the inquisition to execute over 45,000 people on charges of witchcraft in early modern Europe?³ Why were women targeted in the pages of the *Malleus maleficarum* as blasphemers? To answer these questions we must investigate why Kramer thought women to be the likely targets for demons, and what possibly could have been the reason that those of the female sex were condemned before their male counterparts.

As historians we can view the occurrence of female condemnation through several lenses. The first and most often asserted is that early modern Europe was a time of great repression for women, who suffered under a religiously backed patriarchy within a strong misogynistic culture. On the pages of the *Malleus maleficarum* there are passages that reveal violent, stereotypical beliefs concerning women that were rather unoriginal for a time ripe with misogyny.⁴ These beliefs centered around women's perceived inner malice, attitudes, and willingness to lie and deceive those around them.⁵ More accusations leveled against women were concerned with their intellectual capacity, which was said to be childlike and feeble compared to the prowess of men, whose job it was to protect and control their women.⁶ The pejorative characterization of women based on their gender was established on beliefs which portrayed women as men's lesser partners who were more susceptible to evil. The 'war on women,' as it has been called, is seen as an obvious reason for condemning females as likely servants of the devil and wielders of magic. Gender does play an important role in the condemnation of witches, most of whom were female during this period, but further support was drawn from the Bible itself.

³ Morgan L. Stringer, "A War on Women? The *Malleus maleficarum* and the Witch Hunts in Early Modern Europe," (Unpublished Thesis, University of Mississippi, 2015).

⁴ Hans Broedel, "To Preserve the Manly Form from so Vile a Crime: Ecclesiastical Anti-Sodomitic Rhetoric and the Gendering of Witchcraft in the *Malleus maleficarum*," *Essays in Medieval Studies* 19 (2002): 137.

⁵ Kramer, 44.

⁶ Broedel, 135-136.

Long before the inquisition's efforts to stem witchcraft, the Bible was written in a language that espoused patriarchal claims to rule over the land and the household.⁷ Interpretation of the Bible by more fiercely misogynistic inquisitors and clergymen, such as Kramer, fostered the sexist beliefs that women were inferior to men and, therefore, susceptible to the devil's agents and temptations. The Church played a major role in condemning women as the primary practitioners of witchcraft, and their sexuality set them apart from men in the eyes of the pious demonologists like Heinrich Kramer. Sexual impurity and deviance were high risks for women who were left to their own devices. A woman without a man was not capable of survival, and was not capable of maintaining the purity needed to be a proper Christian.⁸ Within the pages of the *Malleus maleficarum*, bigoted stereotypes fill the pages with the misogynistic beliefs which came to be associated with cultural concerns about evil. In the opening pages of the manual on the proper prosecution of witches, Kramer writes that "When a woman thinks alone, she thinks evil. Wherefore in many vituperations that we read against women, the word woman is used to mean the Just of the flesh."⁹ Clearly women are blindly attributed with many distasteful and nonsensical characteristics as society, or perhaps especially the Church, associated lecherous behavior with those of the female sex, whose needs must be guided by men, lest their minds be free to wander towards evil. Further, clerics and demonologists of the age were quick to point to passages from the Bible that describe the creation of women from a bent rib, which alone provided them with sufficient evidence of women's impurity and their warped nature.¹⁰ Also described alongside this damning piece of scripture in the *Malleus maleficarum* was the fact that Jesus, God's son, was incarnated in the form of a man, demonstrating that the male gender was

⁷ Stringer, 46.

⁸ Stringer, 56.

⁹ Kramer.

¹⁰ Broedel, 137-138.

clearly the most pure and desirable form of life.¹¹ Kramer and Sprenger drew their misogynistic conclusions about women from the interpretation of these and other Bible passages, and reasoned that women were far more susceptible to magic and demonic control than men were. The churchmen drew inferences from the Bible which led them to condemn mostly women of the crime of conspiring with the devil and the use of magic. Religion can be further held to account for the prosecution of female witches during a period when religious organizations held sway over the masses, backed patriarchal rule, and played an important role in the everyday lives of citizens who intolerantly policed their own piety, fearing God's wrath (and accusations of heresy).

Other speculations as to why women were targeted as witches can be traced to theories involved with religious sacraments and the affirmation of faith. In his article "Witches Who Steal Penises: Impotence and Illusion in the *Malleus maleficarum*," Walter Stephens asserts that many clergymen and demonologists believed that impotence among married couples challenged the sanctity of the sacrament of marriage proposed in the Bible. If impotence was not the work of the devil conspiring with female witches to deface God's sacraments, then it would mean that the Bible was wrong in its proclamations concerning the blessing of marriage as being consecrated by the Lord.¹² Combining this concern with an already misogynistic culture, Kramer may have targeted women within the *Malleus maleficarum* in order to bolster Catholic teachings by the existence and interference of the devil and his ability to influence women into subverting God's sacraments, including the sacrament of marriage.¹³ By affirming the existence of the devil and his ability to enter the living world through demonic hosts, Kramer could then interpret

¹¹ Broedel, 136.

¹² Walter Stephens, "Witches Who Steal Penises: Impotence and Illusion in *Malleus maleficarum*," *The Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 28, no. 1 (1998): 501.

¹³ Stephens, 505.

impotence as direct demonic intervention, rather than a failure by God or the Bible to uphold the sacraments. As a deeply devout Catholic, according to Stephens, Kramer needed the witches to exist to rectify his own beliefs as a Christian, and that may have led him to condemn witches so ferociously in the *Malleus maleficarum*.

Although misogyny played a vital role in the prosecution of witches, ideas concerning female sexual predation of men through the powers of the devil may have been the product of mental stress, disorders, and the physiological dysfunctions which can accompany them. In his article, “The *Malleus maleficarum* and its Psychopathology of Sex,” O. Somasundaram points out that the mental fatigue and stress that were plaguing the public, along with fear, may have led to the targeting of women for demonic practices.¹⁴ Demonologists like Kramer could only see the impotence of wedded couples and disasters as works of the devil. This means that mental diseases, the prevailing psychopathology of the populace, exemplified graphically by individuals with psychological disorders, were overlooked by the clergy, and cases of disaster or disorder were attributed to the devil and his henchmen (or women).¹⁵ Women were targeted during a time of fear when they were afforded few opportunities for independence and were blamed for sexual malcontent among the people or impotence within a marriage. Many different mental illnesses and fatigue or mental stress ran rampant during the age of the witch hunts, and they were not properly treated, instead being diagnosed as the product of witchcraft. This includes the claims of the disappearance of penises, which were said to become invisible to men who were afflicted by witches, according to Kramer in the *Malleus maleficarum*.¹⁶ Physical and mental deficiencies or disorders, such as erectile dysfunction or fading sexual drive, were attributed to the actions of

¹⁴ O. Somasundaram, “The *Malleus maleficarum* and its Psychopathology of Sex,” *Indian Journal of Psychiatry* 27, no. 2 (1985): 124.

¹⁵ Somasundaram, 124-125.

¹⁶ Somasundaram, 123, 125.

witches practicing black magic, who became easy targets for demonologists to suggest as the culprits of male impotence.¹⁷ Somasundaram hypothesizes that women were accused of being the cause of many different plagues during this time, as they were seen to be the sexual carriers of the devil's semen, which would then affect their male partners and cause impotence, or the "disappearance" of their penises.

There is a vast array of varying hypotheses as to why women were specifically targeted by the culture and the inquisition as wielders of witchcraft and demonic worship; however, it is clear that women seemed to be suffering far before the witch hunts due to misogyny deeply lodged in European culture. Perhaps it was ingrained misogyny that was the root of the witch hunts, but a number of other reasons, including religious fervor, can be named as possible instigators of violence against women and witch accusations. A number of arguments lie within the realm of theology and church-backed theories concerning marital sacraments, sexual impotence, and the interpretation of the Bible. All of these factors contributed to the witch hunts of early modern Europe. It is clear that the *Malleus maleficarum* played a large role in the perpetuation of these baseless claims against women.

¹⁷ Somasundaram, 124.

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