

THE WORLD, THE FLESH AND THE DEVIL

Robert W. Thurston looks at
the politics of demonology
and rethinks attitudes
to witches and
women between
1400 and 1700.

All wickedness is but little to the wickedness of a woman ... [She is] an evil of nature ... [Women] are more credulous; and since the chief aim of the devil is to corrupt faith, therefore he rather attacks them ... Women ... are intellectually like children ... [A woman] always deceives.

AS THE DOMINICAN monk Heinrich Kramer (c.1430-c.1505) sat down to write about witches in early 1486, he must have felt desperate. He had recently been sentenced to prison for theft, blocked by other clerics as he tried to convict women of witchcraft, and scorned and threatened by a bishop. Kramer (known as *Institoris* in some sources) needed to recoup the respect appropriate to a papal inquisitor, his position in 'Upper Germany', a swathe of present day Germany, France and Austria.

This was the inauspicious background to the creation of the *Malleus Maleficarum* ('Hammer of Witches').

First printed in 1486, the *Malleus* is often considered to be the pivotal work for the study of both the witch hunts, which lasted roughly from the 1420s to the 1690s, and the era's commentaries on women.

The book owes much of its fame

to late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century scholars who were certain that superstition and fanaticism produced the hunts, while the Enlightenment's breakthrough to reason ended them. In 1878 the President of Cornell University, Andrew Dickson White, showed an early edition of the *Malleus* to 'his shuddering class', saying that it had 'caused more suffering than any other [work] written by human pen'. The narrator of Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* (2004) echoes this claim:

The Catholic Inquisition published the book that arguably could be called the most blood-soaked publication in human history. *Malleus maleficarum* – or *The Witches' Hammer* – indoctrinated the world to 'the dangers of freethinking women' and instructed the clergy how to locate, torture, and destroy them. ... During

three hundred years of witch hunts, the Church burned at the stake an astounding five million women.

Not astounding but absurd – the old guesses of up to nine million victims have been revised downwards: recent estimates suggest 30-40,000 executions. Nor did 'the Inquisition' itself publish the *Malleus*. Germany, particularly along the Rhine, was the worst killing ground. France was a distant second, while England and even Scotland lagged far behind. Italy, Spain, and Portugal contributed relatively few victims to the pyres.

For all that estimates of the death toll have fallen recently, it still appears that females typically comprised about 75 per cent of the victims. However, commentators on witchcraft between 1400 and 1700 divide sharply on three key points: whether or not women are intrinsically wicked; whether demons could perform real actions or simply create illusions; and whether witchcraft was truly practised. These divisions go far to explain why the witch-hunts were so erratic.

The reasons for the high proportion of female victims must be sought in more mundane factors than the demonologists advanced:

the tasks that women performed, giving birth, suckling babies, preparing food, caring for children, and washing the dead, were just the ones that contemporaries suspected could provide opportunities and substances for evil acts.

The story of the *Malleus* and its author open the way to rethinking demonology in general. In the last decade studies of European demonology have focused more on widespread anxiety about heresy than on obsessions with women. When Kramer's work is seen in the context of the wider politico-religious struggles of the era, the *Malleus* appears less an assault on women than an attempt to use them – or stock images of them – to make points about correct belief.

Kramer had been arrested in 1482 for allegedly stealing silverware and money in the course of his inquisitorial duties. The Inquisition had arisen in the late twelfth century as the Church focused on combating heresy. Managed by the papacy and the Dominican and Franciscan Orders in its early phases, the Inquisition later developed various 'Holy Offices', for example in Portugal and Rome. Kramer, operating under the Pope and his own Dominican Order, was responsible in Upper Germany for investigating, arresting, and ordering the torture of suspected heretics, which by now included witches.

Before Kramer could actually be gaoled, the Archbishop of Craynensis (Albania) issued a call for a new Church council. Kramer seized this moment to write a strong defence of papal authority in opposition to conciliarism, the movement which argued that councils possessed higher authority than the Pope. Pope Sixtus IV, recognizing that Kramer's pen could be an important force on his side, dropped all charges against the monk and returned him to his inquisitorial post.

But Sixtus died in 1484, to be replaced by Innocent VIII. At this juncture Kramer, possibly supported by his inquisitorial partner Jakob Sprenger, complained to the new pontiff that ecclesiastical officials were hampering their efforts to combat heresy. Innocent responded by issuing the Bull *Summis desiderantes affectibus* ('Desiring with supreme ardour') in 1484, in which he enjoined all secular and Church authorities in Upper Germany to aid the two inquisitors.

Armed with this Bull, Kramer arrested some fifty women on the charge of witchcraft and put several on trial in Brixen, east of Innsbruck. He denied his prisoners legal counsel and had them tortured immediately, both gross violations of inquisitorial rules. His actions provoked strong opposition from officials appointed by the Bishop of Brixen,

Georg Golser. These clerics finally agreed to try the women, but the case led to Kramer's downfall. When he questioned a defendant about her sexual practices and moral standing in her community, the judges found

his query irrelevant and overruled him. The trial was quickly ended and the women released, as episcopal members of the court decided that Kramer had abused his position.

Golser wrote to a priest named Nikolaus criticizing Kramer for his 'completely childish' behaviour, a result of 'his advanced age' (he was about fifty-five). Kramer 'still wants perhaps to mix in women's affairs', the bishop continued, but 'I am not letting him do that, as formerly he erred almost completely in his trial'. Instead he advised him to return to his monastery in Innsbruck. But in the autumn of 1485, Golser informed Kramer that he had now become unwelcome in Innsbruck, warning him that a popular uprising against his witchcraft cases might develop. No such revolt occurred, but after a second threatening letter from Golser in early 1486, Kramer departed for Salzburg.

He then set to work on the *Malleus*, perhaps in the hope that a new book could salvage his standing. Hastily written by Kramer alone, and with glaring lapses in presentation of the argument and grammar, the text was printed late in the year. Sprenger's name became attached to the work in a later reprinting, which may have been a ploy by Kramer to give his book more scholarly weight.

While the *Malleus* offered little new on the theory of witchcraft, it did argue vehemently that witches existed, that women were particularly drawn to witchcraft and sex with demons, and that with demons' help, witches performed evil deeds. The book also presented sensational stories. For example, Kramer reported that in a certain city beset by plague, a dead 'woman was gradually eating the shroud in which she had been buried'. The pestilence would continue until she consumed the entire cloth. When the body was exhumed, half the shroud had been eaten. Aghast, an official cut the head from the corpse and threw it out of the grave; 'at once the plague ceased'.

After the *Malleus* appeared, Kramer continued his dubious or outright criminal behaviour. He implied that the book had direct papal approval by inserting Innocent VIII's Bull as the preface to an edition printed in 1487. But Innocent had merely written a standard direc-

tive reaffirming the authority of his inquisitors. The Bull repeats the conventional wisdom of the day on the sexual depravity of heretics, but not witches – it does not mention nocturnal flight and refers to the sabbat only indirectly. It did not single out women as Satan's whores.

Nevertheless, the *Malleus* has retained a leading role in studies of the witch persecutions because of its vitriolic condemnation of women. The most important reason for the Devil's appeal to females, Kramer argued, is that a woman is 'more carnal than a man, as is clear from her many carnal abominations'. The Dominican obsessively reiterated this point, concluding that 'all witchcraft comes from carnal lust, which is in women insatiable'. He did mention 'chaste and honest women', but the remark paled beside his overall misogyny. Clearly he feared women, as shown by the many references to impotence caused by witches and even to their removal of penises.

Kramer's career after 1486 demonstrates that by no means

everyone agreed with him on witchcraft. He undermined his own cause by having a forgery endorsing his book inserted among letters from the theology faculty at the University of Cologne, which had offered only limited support for his ideas. Kramer then bribed a notary to label all the letters as true documents. The letters, along with the papal Bull of 1484, were bound with the *Malleus* in some reprintings, in an attempt to give it maximum authority. When this forgery became known, Kramer's reputation plummeted, and his ex-partner Sprenger opened prosecution against him for the forgery.

Kramer then moved on to the Mosel district, where he angered his superiors by approving a local community's effort to create counter-magic against dark forces by erecting a large crucifix. The Church could not openly approve such quasi-pagan measures.

Kramer's behaviour in Brixen had so discredited the concept of diabolical witchcraft that no further witch trials took place there. In 1490, the Dominican Order condemned him for excesses in his work. Although in

1491 the Nuremberg city council requested Kramer's assistance in witch trials and he obliged by writing a treatise denouncing laxity in the pursuit of witches, the city aldermen refused to publish it, perhaps because they had finally been informed about his past. He moved yet again, this time to Bohemia,

where he died in about 1505.

While the *Malleus* represents an extreme strain in late fifteenth-century male attitudes toward women, it does not support the notion that misogyny was the pre-eminent factor behind the witch hunts. To begin with, the extent of the book's influence is far from clear. While some later works on witches drew heavily on the *Malleus*, its publication history was erratic. It appeared in two waves, (sixteen editions were published between 1486 and 1520, and about the same number between 1574 and 1621) but none in the intervening fifty years, a crucial period in the rise of the witch trials. In 1526 the Spanish Inquisition denounced the *Malleus* as worthless. Nor were there further editions during another great round of hunts between 1620 and 1665.

The book's appeal is often explained in terms of its completeness in guiding witch-hunters, down to how to lead the witch into a courtroom (backwards). Yet, especially in view of the sensationalist qualities of the *Malleus*, it cannot be assumed that readers always accepted Kramer's arguments.

Sigismund, Count of Tyrol, had been so disturbed by Kramer's conduct at the Brixen trial in 1484 that

he commissioned the jurist Ulrich Molitor to clarify the issues. Molitor's *De lamiis [or laniis] et phitonicis mulieribus* ('On Female Witches and Fortune-tellers', 1489) reached the traditional conclusion that while demons exist they can only create illusions, and cannot interact physically with humans. While Molitor agreed that women were more likely than men to enlist in Satan's service

and should be tried for making a pact with him, he explained female attraction to demons by referring to specific circumstances such as poverty, hatred or other unspecified temptations, rather than to general female characteristics such as lust or defective character.

A stronger counter-attack against Kramer, Johann Weyer's *De praestigiis daemonum* ('On Demonic Illusions' or 'On Witchcraft'), appeared in numerous editions beginning in 1563. Weyer too maintained that Satan could only produce illusions; violent phenomena such as sudden illnesses or hailstorms had natural, not diabolic, causes. Evidence obtained under torture was worthless, and old women's voluntary confessions of witchcraft resulted from 'melancholy'.

Reading Kramer's work within the

broad context of demonology makes it clear that the genre's primary goal was to defend the reality of demons and humans' physical interaction with them. This argument underscored the need for mainstream Christianity to engage in a sharper struggle against evil. The *Malleus* begins, 'Question the First. Whether the belief that there are such beings as witches is so essential a part of the Catholic faith that obstinately to maintain the opposite opinion manifestly savours of heresy'. No wonder Kramer argued for the existence of witches.

He sought a vivid means of supporting the notion that Satan could easily recruit some humans. Sex sells, and emphasizing purported female sexual transgressions was for Kramer a way of drawing on existing negative stereotypes to make demonic activity more plausible. Since women were traditionally considered the weaker sex and the Devil was definitely male, demonic copulation had to be overwhelmingly with females. Thus *incubi*, or demons who insert a sexual member into a human body, appear about nine times as often in demonological works as *succubi*, which are sexually receptive creatures.

In this and other respects, Kramer borrowed heavily from earlier works on witchcraft, especially Johann Nider's *Formicarius* ('The Ant Heap', 1435-37). The *Malleus* cites Nider at least fifty times. Though Nider had never been a witch-hunter, he was deeply concerned with heresy, particularly with the Hussite movement. A negotiator with the Hussites at the Council of Basel in 1433, he wavered

between seeking their return to the fold and urging their destruction.

Nider noted that both sexes could be witches but argued that women's sexual 'weakness' often led them into the Devil's arms. Yet in contrast to Kramer, he was unwilling to break completely with the old doctrine that insisted Satan produced illusions, not acts, on Earth: two of the five books in *Formicarius* are concerned with 'false visions' and dreams.

Nider considered that demons posed a grave problem for true Christianity, because they allied with opponents of reform within the Church. He quoted St Paul in 1 Corinthians 11:19: 'For there must

be also heresies among you, that they which are approved may be made manifest among you.' Heretics of all sorts were useful to the Church by demonstrating what *not* to believe and how *not* to act – and this included their reported copulation with demons. As this argument unfolds in *Formicarius* amid discussion of such topics as the importance of growing

rye, it becomes clear that Nider's anxiety about wanton women is a small part of his larger concerns.

Although most witch-hunts occurred in German-speaking lands, the most developed demonology arose, surprisingly, in France during the mid- to late sixteenth century. Yet the many French treatises on demons by no means sparked large-scale witch persecutions. Indeed, trials in Francophone regions occurred mostly in eastern borderlands not then under the crown, especially

Franche Comté and Lorraine. Normandy, long an integral part of the realm, did witness numerous cases, but there male witches far outnumbered females.

Lambert Daneau (1564), Jean Bodin (1580), Henri Boguet (1602), Martin Del Rio (1603 and 1611), and Pierre de Lancre (1612) were the leading French experts on witchcraft. Some of these men did think women were especially drawn to Satan. But, paralleling new work on Nider, historians such as Michael Bailey have seen these writers as preoccupied above all with political-cum-religious battles. Except for the Protestant Daneau, who fled to

Geneva to write, the French authors were all zealous Catholics, writing in the wake of the Council of Trent (1545-63), which had adopted a host of new policies to strengthen the Church in the face of the Protestant challenge. They produced copious propaganda directed at the enemies of Tridentine reform: Catholic *politiques* (compromisers) as well as Protestants. How best to smear these opponents and solidify one's own ranks? Simple: by linking these enemies of the true faith to Satan.

The French demonologists directed particular fire at the Paris *parlement*, an appeals court whose jurisdiction covered a large part of the kingdom. The *parlement*, dominated

for most of this period by religious moderates, was stubbornly sceptical toward the evidence for witchcraft accepted in lower tribunals. Unlike them, the Paris court used torture half-heartedly at best; of 185 appellants the court had tortured, only one confessed. The tribunal did not use physical duress in any witchcraft case after 1593. In 1624, the *parlement* required an automatic appeal to it from lower courts for all witch trials; by the 1640s the Parisian magistrates rejected witchcraft accusations altogether and even ordered that lower-court judges who tortured prisoners accused of the crime be punished themselves. The witch-

hunters charged that these developments suggested the *parlement* had succumbed to diabolical influence.

Like Kramer, the French demonologists insisted that demons were real, flew about the earth and had intercourse with humans. Again like Kramer, they identified females as the likely candidates for diabolical connections. Yet they did not exhibit misogyny anything like Kramer's; most were rather even-handed about the sex of witches. In maligning all women, the *Malleus* occupied a special, perhaps unique, niche within demonology.

Since the existence of witches

would confirm the earthly activities of demons, the concern to find them was, at root, related to a fear of atheism. More than a few observers argued that, if there were no witches, then the Devil might not be real either, which could mean that even God might be an unnecessary concept. Giordano da Bergamo may have been the first to say publicly that a belief in witchcraft was essential to true Christian faith. He wrote in 1470, well ahead of Kramer, and possibly he provided a stimulus for the Dominican's arguments.

The dread of atheism and its connection to discussions of witches appeared especially strongly in England. Clergyman Joseph Glanvill fulminated in 1668 against those who thought witches not real but merely 'creatures of melancholy and superstition'. To him, this was a notion fostered by 'ignorance and design'. And even though Meric Casaubon's *Of*

Credulity and Incredulity, published in the same year, was sceptical regarding evidence of witchcraft, the author still believed in witches, or said he did, because to doubt was a step toward atheism. The Platonist Henry More evinced a similar concern. But as the belief that God intervened continually in the daily round of the natural world gave way in the late seventeenth century to the idea that he was the divine watchmaker, it became less important to believe that evil forces daily stalked good Christians.

The politics of belief in witches must also be seen against the background of a literary and theological debate on women known as the *querelle des femmes*, which ran from the late Middle Ages into the eighteenth century. This centred at first on the *Roman de la Rose*, a rambling

poem begun by Guillaume de Lorris and completed by Jean de Meun around 1278. The poem is an allegory of courtly and carnal love but also a guide to manners, clothing, and the conquest of friends and lovers. Along the way, several characters deliver scathing attacks on women. Jealous Husband offers the worst tirade; he complains that a married woman reveals 'her evil nature'. His own wife is an 'evil bitch'. Husband defies anyone who says, 'I am overconfident in my attacks on all women'. Husband is sure that, 'All women get themselves laid', for the wish of each one 'is always to do it'.

A century later, Christine de Pizan replied to the misogyny she saw in the *Rose*, in her poem *The God of Love's Letter* (1399) and particularly in *The Book of the City of Ladies* (1404-05). She sparked a debate that dominated literary Paris in 1400-02, from which some twenty related treatises, letters, and sermons survive. Prominent men arranged themselves on both sides; one of de Pizan's foremost supporters was Jean Gerson, provost of the University of Paris.

The new demonology followed closely upon the *Rose* debate and in key respects was closely intertwined with it. Thus Nider's *Formicarius* of 1435-37 and Martin Le Franc's *Le champion des Dames* (1440-42) contributed to a new stereotype of the witch as female, sexually assertive, and eager to be in league with Satan. But neither book is essentially misogynistic. Le Franc's main character is Defender (of women), who refers to the 'valiant Christine'. Le Franc describes how evil persons greet the Devil as their leader, proceed to have sex with him or each other, and receive lethal powders from him. For all that, Defender maintains that women are essentially good and easily wins the debate.

Gianfresco Pico's *Strix, sive de ludificatione daemonum* ('Strix or The Deceptions of Demons', 1523), features a character who until the last page is sceptical that demons recruit humans. And in *De venificis* (1564), translated in 1575 into English as *A Dialogue of Witches*, Lambert Daneau's Theophilus also succeeds only after much talk in convincing his friend Anthony of the reality of witchcraft. These works do not insist that women are generally vile.

Alfonso de Spina, writing in 1458-

60, qualified the issue of gender and demons by indicating that only old women became Satan's lovers. In 1584, Reginald Scot's influential *Discoverie of Witchcraft* all but denied the existence of demons on earth. Scot attacked the *Malleus* on logical grounds and was almost completely unconcerned with what women might or might not do. Other important voices directly defended women; Signor Magnifico in Baldesar Castiglione's *The Book of the Courtier* (1528) praises women and forgoes any mention of witchcraft.

The thorough-going misogynistic sentiments of the *Malleus* were largely discarded. While James VI of Scotland insisted in *Daemonologie* (1597), that there were twenty female witches for every male, the only reason he

cited for the disproportion was women's greater frailty. After assuming the English throne in 1603, he refused to promote hunts and even stopped them on occasion.

Even as the witch-hunts intensified, powerful arguments continued to refute the idea that females were naturally evil. In the doleful story of the witch persecutions, misogyny by no means triumphed completely. Europeans could choose among competing views of the nature of women and their purported attraction to Satan. Political and religious questions often hovered just behind those debates.

FOR FURTHER READING

Richard Golden, (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Witchcraft: The Western Tradition* (ABC-CLIO, 2006); Michael Bailey, *Battling Demons: Witchcraft, Heresy, and Reform in the Late Middle Ages* (Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003); Stuart Clark, *Thinking with Demons: the Idea of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe* (Oxford University Press, 1997); Dylan Elliot, *Fallen Bodies: Pollution, Sexuality, and Demonology in the Middle Ages* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999); Jonathan L. Pearl, *The Crime of Crimes: Demonology and Politics in France, 1560-1620* (Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1999); Eric Wilson, 'Institoris at Innsbruck: Heinrich Institoris, the Summis Desiderantes and the Brixen Witch-Trial of 1485', in Bob Scribner and Trevor Johnson, eds. *Popular Religion in Germany and Central Europe, 1400-1800* (St Martin's Press, 1996).

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