

AN ANTHOLOGY
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THE MALLEUS MALEFICARUM

The *Malleus Maleficarum* (*The Hammer of Witches*) became the authoritative handbook describing the activities of witches and how to convict them. It was written by two Dominican Inquisitors, Heinrich Kramer and James Sprenger. The misogyny of this text is hysterical in tone and its authors are fixated on sexuality. Its publication in 1486 helped to accelerate the killing of so-called witches in three ways: (1) by increasing the number of people who could be accused of witchcraft, (2) by increasing the geographical area of the persecution to include most of Europe, and (3) by focusing attention especially on women. As the following excerpt from Part I, Question 6 shows, the text specifies that women are more prone to witchcraft than men for a variety of reasons: women are more credulous than men, more impressionable, less intelligent, more carnal, etc.; they are also weaker and seek vengeance. Note the blame placed on Eve and the saving influence of Mary.

The third reason is that they have slippery tongues, and are unable to conceal from their fellow-women those things which by evil arts they know; and, since they are weak, they find an easy and secret manner of vindicating themselves by witchcraft. See *Ecclesiasticus* as quoted above: I had rather dwell with a lion and a dragon than to keep house with a wicked woman. All wickedness is but little to the wickedness of a woman. And to this may be added that, as they are very impressionable, they act accordingly.

There are also others who bring forward yet other reasons, of which preachers should be very careful how they make use. For it is true that in the Old Testament the Scriptures have much that is evil to say about women, and this because of the first temptress, Eve, and her imitators; yet afterwards in the New Testament we find a change of name, as from Eva to Ave (as S. Jerome says), and the whole sin of Eve taken away by the benediction of MARY. Therefore preachers should always say as much praise of them as possible.

But because in these times this perfidy is more often found in women than in men, as we learn by actual experience, if anyone is curious as to the reason, we may add to what has already been said the following: that since they are feebler both in mind and body, it is not surprising that they should come more under the spell of witchcraft.

For as regards intellect, or the understanding of spiritual things, they seem to be of a different nature from men; a fact which is vouched for by the logic of the authorities, backed by various examples from the Scriptures. Terence says: Women are intellectually like children. And Lactantius (*Institutiones*, III): No woman understood philosophy except Temeste. And *Proverbs* xi, as it were describing a woman, says: As a jewel of gold in a swine's snout, so is a fair woman which is without discretion.

But the natural reason is that she is more carnal than a man, as is clear from her many carnal abominations. And it should be noted that there was a defect in the formation of the first woman, since she was formed from a bent rib, that is, a rib of the breast, which is bent as it were in a contrary direction to a man. And since through this defect she is an imperfect animal, she always deceives. For Cato says: When a woman weeps she weaves snares. And again: When a woman weeps, she labours to deceive a man. And this is shown by Samson's wife, who coaxed him to tell her the riddle he had propounded to the Philistines, and told them the answer, and so deceived him. And it is clear in the case of the first woman that she had little faith; for when the serpent asked why they did not eat of every tree in Paradise, she answered: Of every tree, etc.—lest perchance we die. Thereby she showed that she doubted, and had little faith in the word of God. And all this is indicated by the etymology of the word; for *Femina* comes from *Fe* and *Minus*, since she is ever weaker to hold and preserve the faith. And this as regards faith is of her very nature; although both by grace and nature faith never failed in the Blessed Virgin, even at the time of Christ's Passion, when it failed in all men.

Therefore a wicked woman is by her nature quicker to waver in her faith, and consequently quicker to abjure the faith, which is the root of witchcraft.

[From *The Malleus Maleficarum* of Heinrich Kramer and James Sprenger, p. 44.]

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To conclude. All witchcraft comes from carnal lust, which is in women insatiable. See *Proverbs* xxx: There are three things that are never satisfied, yea, a fourth thing which says not, It is enough; that is, the mouth of the womb. Wherefore for the sake of fulfilling their

lusts they consort even with devils. More such reasons could be brought forward, but to the understanding it is sufficiently clear that it is no matter for wonder that there are more women than men found infected with the heresy of witchcraft. And in consequence of this, it is better called the heresy of witches than of wizards, since the name is taken from the more powerful party. And blessed be the Highest Who has so far preserved the male sex from so great a crime: for since He was willing to be born and to suffer for us, therefore He has granted to men this privilege.

*What sort of Women are found to be above
all Others Superstitious and Witches.*

As to our second inquiry, what sort of women more than others are found to be superstitious and infected with witchcraft; it must be said, as was shown in the preceding inquiry, that three general vices appear to have special dominion over wicked women, namely, infidelity, ambition, and lust. Therefore they

are more than others inclined towards witchcraft, who more than others are given to these vices. Again, since of these three vices the last chiefly predominates, women being insatiable, etc., it follows that those among ambitious women are more deeply infected who are more hot to satisfy their filthy lusts; and such are adulteresses, fornicatrices, and the concubines of the Great.

Now there are, as it is said in the Papal Bull, seven methods by which they infect with witchcraft the venereal act and the conception of the womb: First, by inclining the minds of men to inordinate passion; second, by obstructing their generative force; third, by removing the members accommodated to that act; fourth, by changing men into beasts by their magic art; fifth, by destroying the generative force in women; sixth, by procuring abortion; seventh, by offering children to devils, besides other animals and fruits of the earth with which they work much harm.

[From *The Malleus Maleficarum* of Heinrich Kramer and James Sprenger, p. 47.]

The *Malleus Maleficarum* served to put a large number of women into immediate jeopardy by stating that the activities of midwives can reveal signs of witchcraft (Part I, Question 11). At this time in history the great majority of births were attended by midwives, women familiar with childbirth and herbal cures. In other words these women were healers. They were also the confidants of women who wanted to have children and those who did not want children, so they had some knowledge of birth control and abortion. They were experts in sexual matters in a society dominated by a celibate clergy, a clergy that had confounded sexuality with devil worship. Once the *Malleus Maleficarum* made the association of midwives with witchcraft these women could be brought before the Inquisition for questioning. Few were found innocent.

Thus begun, the witch burning craze continued into the eighteenth century. No certain figures exist for the exact number of people who were killed but some scholars put it as high as four million. Significantly, 85 percent of those killed were women, varying in age from young children to old women. Certainly some of these women were witches or thought they were, but by far the larger number were victims of false accusations based on an excessive misogyny sanctioned by Christianity.

QUESTION XI

That Witches who are Midwives in Various Ways Kill the Child Conceived in the Womb, and Procure an Abortion; or if they do not this Offer New-born Children to Devils.

Here is set forth the truth concerning four horrible crimes which devils commit against infants, both in the mother's womb and afterwards. And since the devils do these things through the medium of women, and not men, this form of homicide is associated

rather with women than with men. And the following are the methods by which it is done.

The Canonists treat more fully than the Theologians of the obstructions due to witchcraft; and they say that it is witchcraft, not only when anyone is unable to perform the carnal act, of which we have spoken above; but also when a woman is prevented from conceiving, or is made to miscarry after she has conceived. A third and fourth method of witchcraft is when they have failed to procure an abortion, and then either devour the child or offer it to a devil.

There is no doubt concerning the first two methods, since, without the help of devils, a man can by natural means, such as herbs, savin for example, or other emmenagogues, procure that a woman cannot generate or conceive, as has been mentioned above. But with the other two methods it is different; for they are effected by witches. And there is no need to bring forward the arguments, since very evident instances and examples will more readily show the truth of this matter.

The former of these two abominations is the fact that certain witches, against the instinct of human nature, and indeed against the nature of all beasts, with the possible exception of wolves, are in the habit of devouring and eating infant children. And concerning this, the Inquisitor of Como, who has been mentioned before, has told us the following: that he was summoned by the inhabitants of the County of Barby to hold an inquisition, because a certain man had missed his child from its cradle, and finding a

congress of women in the night-time, swore that he saw them kill his child and drink its blood and devour it. Also, in one single year, which is the year now last passed, he says that forty-one witches were burned, certain others taking flight to the Lord Archduke of Austria, Sigismund. For confirmation of this there are certain writings of John Nider in his *Formicarius*, of whom, as of those events which he recounts, the memory is still fresh in men's minds; wherefore it is apparent that such things are not incredible. We must add that in all these matters witch midwives cause yet greater injuries, as penitent witches have often told to us and to others, saying: No one does more harm to the Catholic Faith than midwives. For when they do not kill children, then, as if for some other purpose, they take them out of the room and, raising them up in the air, offer them to devils.

[From *The Malleus Maleficarum* of Heinrich Kramer and James Sprenger, p. 66.]

JOAN OF ARC

Joan's short life (1412?-1431) offers a dramatic example of the religious and political issues of her day. At the time of her first visions, when she was about thirteen years old, France was engaged in both a civil war and a war with England. Through her visions and voices Joan came to believe that she was called by God to drive the English out of France and she set out to do so. Though initially successful in her military exploits Joan was eventually captured by the British who turned her over to an ecclesiastical court to try her as a heretic and a witch. Since Joan had grown up in a peasant family with stronger ties to the folk religion of her region of France than to the orthodox church that would judge her, she was particularly vulnerable. This complicated religious background came out during her trial when she admitted she may have danced with other young girls at a 'fairies' tree' which was located near a spring believed to heal sickness. Unknowingly Joan was probably referring to ancient Celtic practices that survived among their French descendants. In their minds, Joan and her neighbors were just doing what they had done for generations but, for the church, these were pagan practices. This is brought out in the excerpts when she is questioned about her Godmother who was said to have seen fairies.

Joan was accused of three crimes. The first involved her "voices," voices she said came from St. Catherine and St. Margaret but which her inquisitors thought were coming from evil spirits. Essentially Joan was convicted of witchcraft because she listened to these voices, in other words she consorted with the 'familiar' spirits associated with witches, the fairies of the Celtic Tradition. Secondly, she refused to submit to the authority of the church saying her voices had a higher authority. Her third crime was that she, a woman, dressed as a man. The transcript of her trial contains frequent references to the issues of her attire and demands that she return to women's clothes. Joan's clothes were a constant reminder to the inquisitors that she was not conforming to their ideas of proper behavior for a woman. The issue for Joan was that she refused to wear women's clothes while she continued to be held in a military prison with male guards constantly in her cell.