

European Origins

A widespread moral panic engulfed parts of Europe during the early modern period. Those accused of witchcraft were depicted as Satan worshippers intent on reducing their communities to ruin.



THE INQUISITION TRIBUNAL
The Spanish painter Francisco de Goya created this painting in the early 19th century. His earlier works included a series on witches, fantastical creatures and religious and political corruption.



SOURCE OF POWER

ON MAGIC, WITCHES,
AND WITCHCRAFT

Whether it was white, black, high, or low, premodern Europeans believed firmly in the existence of magic.

By Matthew Plunkett



In the Middle Ages, everyone knew witches were real. Male or female, they were practitioners of high or low magic. Some were midwives; others, astrologers or alchemists. To the average European before the Enlightenment, the existence of magic was a fact of life.

Part of this was that most people didn't have a modern understanding of science, which meant that belief in the supernatural dominated so many facets of life. That could mean unusual occurrences in the natural world or cases of human suffering and death. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, the witch first appears in the Books of Exodus and Deuteronomy. In those texts, the witch simply represents a being who is intent on opposing the existing power structure of society. Despite the explicit condemnation of witches in the Pentateuch, premodern Europeans largely viewed witches as a nuisance to be managed, although they distinguished between good (white) magic and malevolent (black) magic. Those seen as possessing magic that helped people (often, women and men with medical knowledge) were forgiven for consorting with forbidden knowledge—at least at first.

Magic is “a power that is activated and controlled by human beings them-

selves . . . to produce readily observable, empirical results in the world,” according to Brian P. Levack, a historian who has written extensively on witches and witchcraft. And in those days, it was viewed as unequivocally real. Individuals such as midwives who employed their powers for beneficial acts practiced “white magic.” Acts of white magic might include curing an illness or assisting crops to grow. But for every act of good existed an equivalent act of malevolence. Black magic, or *maleficia* that was “intended to bring about bodily injury, disease, death, poverty or some other misfortune,” included such terrors as the death of a child or livestock.

Class and gender played significant roles in how magic was categorized. Divination, astrology and alchemy, typically practiced by those with an educated background, are cited as examples of high magic. Magicians or witches who practiced high magic were largely drawn from the upper echelons of society and included folks such as Sir Isaac Newton (alchemy) and Galileo (astrology). Not surprisingly, these men (and they were nearly all men) were deemed useful for society and as such rarely faced persecution.

FLYING TO THE SABBATH
A common medieval belief, captured in this 18th-century painting by A.F. Saint-Auber, supposed that witches flew through the night sky to cavort with the devil at a witches' Sabbath.





Low magic, on the other hand, required no formal education. Often passed down through apprenticeships and oral traditions, low magic typically took the form of simple charms and spells. Of course, all acts of black magic were categorized as acts of low magic, clearly echoing existing biases of social stratification. Simply put, the poor and uneducated were more likely to be considered witches, while the rich and the educated were allowed to practice a “higher form” of magic undisturbed.

Gender played a key role in the European witch hunts. Although some men stood trial for witchcraft, the vast majority of victims were female. Historians estimate that across Europe, women accounted for nearly 80 percent

of those accused and convicted of witchcraft between 1450 and 1750.

A common belief in medieval Europe considered women both “morally weak and sexually charged,” says Levack. Women’s lack of moral character and unchecked lust left them more susceptible to the diabolical charms of the devil. These theological beliefs painted a dire picture among the educated elite, resulting in high numbers of women accused of witchcraft.

Among the common folk, however, it was women’s roles in society that more often led witch hunters to their doors. In premodern Europe, women bore responsibility for the preparation of meals and often served as healers and midwives within the larger

SUSPECT OF HERESY

Above: The astronomer Galileo addresses accusations of heresy before members of the Vatican in 1633, depicted in an 1847 painting. Opposite: Jean-Baptiste le Prince’s *The Necromancer*.

community. These jobs provided greater opportunity, according to the beliefs of the time, for women to employ magic to act maleficently toward others. Cooking and healing involved gathering herbs and required the skill to transform raw ingredients into something magical. If the potion failed to heal the sick, then perhaps witchcraft was to blame. A midwife's role in the mystical and misunderstood process of childbirth provided plenty of opportunity for a woman to face charges of sorcery if either the mother or the child suffered. Levack highlights the belief in witches sacrificing infants to the devil during the witch Sabbaths as another reason midwives—and their ability to procure babies—fell under suspicion.

Women's weak position in society, lacking both physical and political power, offered a final explanation. Magic gave women the means to enact revenge or punishment for perceived wrongs or injustices they could not otherwise pursue. Levack wrote that "the power to bring about harm by magical means was one of the few forms of power that were available to women in early modern Europe . . . By having her tried and executed, her neighbors were not simply picking on a helpless old woman but counteracting a form of female power that had placed them, their children and their domestic animals in considerable danger."

In a life full of danger and death, the citizens of premodern Europe often turned to magic to help remove some of the uncertainty of the world. Tragically, the ubiquity of this belief did little to protect the vulnerable in society when attitudes and fears evolved.

TOWARD THE END OF THE MIDDLE Ages, particularly as the 15th century unfolded, a shift in mindset began to take hold, moving citizens from tolerating witches and the use of magic to persecuting them. The definition of a witch began to evolve, reflecting the fears and attitudes of an increasingly Christian society. No longer was a witch solely someone who committed acts of *maleficia*. Instead, a witch was understood to be someone who both committed *maleficia*

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and had a pact with, worshipped and attended nocturnal meetings with the Devil.

According to Levack's 1997 book, *The Witch-Hunt in Early Modern Europe*, those three key convictions about witches swept through Europe and the British Isles. These preconceptions of witchcraft, which evolved over time and took centuries to fully develop, were helped along by the leadership of the Catholic church, who worried about apostates corrupting faithful congregations.



Descriptions of the Sabbath varied but had common themes: witches performed sacrifices, ate children and infants, and copulated with demons.



Witches, under this new worldview, received their power through a pact with the Devil, and in exchange they were granted the ability to perform *maleficia* toward others. They supposedly rejected their Christian faith in an initiation ceremony led by the Devil and consisting of dark, offensive rituals. In some versions, it was a baptism performed by the Devil himself, during which the devil placed a distinctive mark on the woman's body or engaged in sexual intercourse with her, or the woman paid homage with the infamous obscene kiss, when she kissed the Devil's buttocks. With the ceremony complete, the woman then received specific instructions about how to perform her dark tasks.

The average European also believed that witches, both male and female, gathered with other witches at nocturnal meetings, called Sabbaths. These meetings might draw hundreds or thousands of witches, all of whom received the power of flight by the devil in order to travel great distances for the celebrations. Descriptions of the Sabbaths varied in the telling, but a few common themes repeated: witches performed sacrifices, occasionally ate children and infants, and copulated with demons or even the Devil himself. Because of these gatherings, it became widely understood that witches could fly. Some early Germanic superstitions around *strigae*, supernatural beings that would transform at night into screech owls, also evolved into the witches' backstory.

Without widespread belief in the Sabbaths, the larger witch hunts that swept Europe might not have taken place. No longer, after all, was a witch a solitary figure. If a community discovered a witch, its members understood there to be a confederation, or coven, of witches yet to be uncovered. The local authorities would be forced to expand their search for additional witches, transforming a once-discrete trial to a wider inquiry.

As in most aspects of witchcraft, small regional variations existed on the activities that allegedly took place during these nocturnal meetings of witches. Universally, however, the Sabbaths reflected an inversion of the moral and religious norms of the culture. Cannibalistic infanticide, a nearly universal human taboo, and naked dancing



A JOURNEY IN ANIMAL FORM
Witches gather on Walpurgis Night. Christians in Germany prayed to Saint Walpurga, a German eighth-century abbess, for protection against witchcraft.





were common descriptions. Other activities sometimes reflected the specific fears of medieval Christianity, such as the heavy emphasis on the erotic (copulation with the Devil; promiscuous fornication among the participants). According to Levack, Sabbaths sometimes mocked specific aspects of the Catholic service, including “the saying of the Nicene Creed backwards while the celebrant stood on his head... the consecration of a host made of offal, turnip or some black substance, and the singing of the choir in ‘hoarse, gruff and tuneless voices.’”

THE SPREAD OF KNOWLEDGE about witches in the 15th century advanced in two different ways: public witch trials resulting in confessions, and written treatises on the subject of

witchcraft. Confessions extracted from suspected witches, often through the use of torture, would be read aloud in a public space.

But it was a technological marvel of the time, the printing press, that helped spread a number of scholarly texts to the judges and religious leaders combating the threat of witchcraft. Of all the treatises concerned with witchcraft, one stands out for its impact on codifying the threat of witches into a coherent narrative. The story of how it came to be written begins with a decree from the pen of Pope Innocent VIII in December 1484:

“It has recently come to our ears, not without great pain to us, that in some parts of upper Germany... many persons of both sexes, heedless of their

WITCH FINDERS
 One of several notorious witch finders, Konrad von Marburg, pictured center holding a cross, sends an accused witch to the torture chamber—and eventually to the stake.

own salvation and forsaking the Catholic faith, give themselves over to devils male and female, and by their incantations, charms, and conjurings . . . ruin and cause to perish the offspring of women, the foal of animals, the products of the earth.”

Pope Innocent VIII issued the above papal bull in response to a request from Heinrich Kramer and Jacobus Sprenger, two Dominican inquisitors responsible for ending witchcraft in parts of Germany. The bull authorized Kramer and Sprenger “to exercise their office of inquisition and to proceed to the correction, imprisonment and punishment” of any witch found. Armed with their divine mandate, Kramer and Sprenger renewed their efforts and together wrote *Malleus Maleficarum*. Completed in 1486, *Malleus Maleficarum*, translated as “The Hammer of Witches,” stands out in a crowded genre for what historian Elspeth Whitney described in 2005 as “its single-minded insistence that witches were the source of evil in the world.”

Described by historian John Demos as “part bible, part encyclopedia, part operational guide,” *Malleus* provided judges and inquisitors a primer on how to deal with the supernatural threat. In their text, Kramer and Sprenger drew a direct line between witches and the devil and outlined specific evil acts performed by these servants of the Devil.

Most historians believe that the bulk of *Malleus* was written by the hand of Kramer, with Sprenger brought on as a coauthor to lend an added layer of intellectual and spiritual authority. In truth, *Malleus* stemmed from Kramer’s lifetime of, in the words of historian Hans Peter Broedel, “vigorous, zealous and uncompromising war against enemies of the faith.”

By 1485, Kramer was the most experienced inquisitor in Germany, and by all accounts he was a learned scholar, having earned a prestigious doctorate of theology from Rome. He was not popular among his peers; nearly everyone who interacted with Kramer found him abrasive, arrogant and nearly impossible to work alongside. A bishop in Innsbruck, as quoted by Demos, described Kramer as “a senile old man.” The charge of senility was unfounded, despite Kramer’s advanced age when he began writing *Malleus*. His mind was sound, but one can rightly label him zealous or eccentric in his pursuit of heretics.

In his text, Kramer cited his experience prosecuting more than 200 witches in the years leading up to the publication of *Malleus*. In all likelihood, that number is vastly overstated. As Broedel points out in his 2003 work, *The*

Malleus Maleficarum provided judges and inquisitors a primer on how to deal with the supernatural threat—and drew a direct line between witches and the Devil.



Malleus Maleficarum: Theology and Popular Belief, there is scant historical evidence that Kramer took part in more than a few witch trials. Even the few trials with surviving documentary evidence show that Kramer’s inquisitions experienced significant resistance from the local secular and religious authorities. Broedel points to lack of cooperation as one of the primary factors that pushed Kramer to write *Malleus* in the first place.

In addition to furthering the view of women as “more ready to receive the influence of a disembodied spirit” and possessing “slippery tongues . . . and, since they are weak, they find an easy and secret manner of vindicating themselves by witchcraft,” the authors of *Malleus* offered up many quotations to support their misogyny. From Ecclesiastes, chapter 25: “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.” From the Roman playwright Terence: “Women are intellectually like children.” From the early fifth-century archbishop of Constantinople, St. John Chrysostom: “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 colours!”

Malleus pushed the church’s argument further by stating that the devil targeted women because they were “more carnal than a man” and “all witchcraft comes from carnal lust, which is in women insatiable.” The inherent weakness of women, a so-called by-product of the use of a bent rib in her very formation by God, left her in a position of subservience to men. According to the logic of witchcraft, this provided women with the motivation to pursue, as historian Jessica O’Leary puts it, “diabolical magic to increase their power.” Envy naturally drove women to embrace witchcraft.

MALLEUS MALEFICARUM INSTRUCTS ITS READERS on how to examine, sentence, and (eventually) execute women suspected of witchcraft. But most important, the text argues for the prosecution of witchcraft in a secular,

The blending of the folk and the theological, as well as the papal authority claimed by *Malleus's* authors, helps explain why the book grew to become the most influential witch-hunting guidebook in Europe.



not a theological, court. After all, the authors reason, the crimes of witchcraft have real consequences to persons and property and should be considered the same as any other acts of vandalism or assault and thus prosecuted by the state. The arguments laid out in *Malleus* served to accelerate this shift toward the use of secular courts in the elimination of witches—which eventually came into play during the events of 1692 in Salem Village.

EMERGING ONLY 50 YEARS AFTER GUTENBERG'S invention of the printing press, *Malleus* was the first witch-hunting treatise to reach a wide audience, and it benefited greatly from that new technology. Its functional, matter-of-fact advice on the best practices for bringing an accused witch to trial helped local inquisitors all across Europe and the British Isles prosecute and punish witches in secular courts.

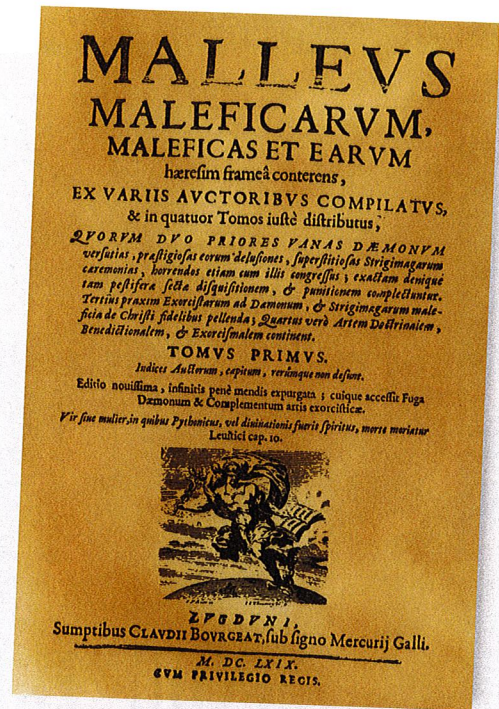
Despite the book's popularity, second only to the Bible for multiple years, historians note that the publication of *Malleus* did not coincide with a surge in witch prosecutions in Europe. In fact, despite its multiple reprintings, nearly 30 years passed before the next wave of witch hunts in Europe. However, during the intervening years, the concept of a witch as laid out in *Malleus* grew to become the widely accepted definition among the learned of Europe. Broedel argues that this was due to the alignment between the commonly accepted vision of a witch and the definition laid out by Sprenger and Kramer. This blending of the folk and the theological, as well as the papal authority claimed by Sprenger and Kramer, helps explain why *Malleus* grew to become the most influential witch-hunting guidebook in Europe.

During that time, the information and arguments laid out in *Malleus* seeped into the global consciousness, helping to standardize and normalize the torture of those accused of witchcraft and the use of secular courts to try them, and helping to inspire the witch hunters who led the inquisitions of future generations. ▲





TRIALS AND TRIBULATIONS
 Dutch painter Willem de Poorter captured this proceeding in the early 17th century. In the largest witch trial in the Netherlands, which took place in 1613, 64 people were sentenced to die.



Inside the Book

Malleus Maleficarum established familiar witch lore, but some of its more preposterous claims are still pretty wild.

After its initial publication, numerous editions of *Malleus Maleficarum* were brought out in Latin, with German, English, Italian and French translations in later centuries. As printing presses improved, copies of *Malleus Maleficarum* began featuring detailed illustrations depicting—in addition to gruesome methods for witch detection and torture—witches in action, whether cavorting with the Devil, blighting cattle, or cooking children for consumption. The images were based on the text, which describes witches using a magic ointment to fly on broomsticks (the book wasn't the first mention of that activity, but it helped codify it) or performing the *osculum infame* ("shameful kiss"), an illicit act wherein witches would commit to Satan by kissing his posterior . . . very literally. *Malleus Maleficarum* even included some cautionary tales for men about witches who filched penises to keep as living pets or to secret away in birds' nests and boxes. —Nancy Lambert