

Critique of *Malleus Maleficarum* by Heinrich Kramer, its negative influence on the culture of XV-XVII century Europe, based on the 1928 translation by Montague Summers.

The *Malleus Maleficarum* is a 15th-century manuscript known for its deep connection to both the Inquisition and Witch trials across the globe. Authorised for use by the Pope himself, the manuscript was quickly distributed among the ranks of the inquisitors and made an impact amongst the clergy, making devastating ripples across the lands and causing undue deaths of countless innocent people whose only mistake was to have views that did not align with the clergy's agenda, or simply wronged their neighbours who in turn reported them for the sign of witchcraft.

The treatise discussed various subjects, and blamed witches for many issues common to people throughout the world, such as illness, plague, lack of sexual prowess, deformation of the foetus or even miscarriage. Among these, the document provided ways of dealing with the witches, as well as discussed Divine Permission for the act of witchcraft itself.¹

Malleus Maleficarum, known as the 'Hammer of Witches', became a tool for scapegoat hunting for the misfortunes that befell people during the time of its publication. It is divided into multiple questions, each one discussing the reasoning behind the hatred towards witches and the majority of the questions being disparaging towards women, the credibility of their words and the validity of their actions. The *Malleus* specifically notes women as being extraordinarily susceptible to the influence of the Devil by saying the following 'and this is more apt to be the case with women than with men, for they are more timid and liable to imagine extraordinary things.'² albeit Montgomery's version may be full of flourish and, as a book written in the 20th century, more respectful to women, the *Malleus* itself is not, and this is reflected in the Polish translation from the 1614 by Stanisław Żąbkowica, a secretary to Prince Ostroski, the Castellan of Cracov, whose words may be translated as follows: 'Women oftentimes fantasise about laying with the Devil. Such a state is a result of a melancholic way of being (as described by Wilhelm) and of being a woman.'³ which shows the political and ideological tendencies spread through the world between the 15th and 17th centuries. Such an atrocious attitude was not helped by the attitude of the Church at all, even fuelled by it, as the *Malleus Maleficarum* was their response to the 'growing plague of witches' feared by Pope Innocent VIII.⁴ His fear later turned into actions during the rule of Pope Paul III, who released his *Laetare Ierusalem* ("Rejoice Jerusalem"), which called forth the Council of Trent as a direct response to the reformation. It was also this Council that reformed the Inquisition. It is worth mentioning that *Laetare Ierusalem* did not have the status of *ex-cathedra*, as this was only introduced centuries later during the rule of Pius IX. The process of torture, and in turn, the *Malleus Maleficarum*, was in direct opposition to morals and even Christianity itself. In 886, Pope Nicholas I wrote to Prince Boris of Bulgaria that

A Confession must be spontaneous, not extracted by force. Will you not be ashamed if no proof emerges from the torture? Do you not recognize how iniquitous your procedure is? If the victim who has not the strength to resist confesses himself guilty, without being so, who is then the criminal - if not the one who has forced him to make a lying confession?⁵

1 Montague Summers (N.A: Forgotten Books, 2010) <<https://www.scribd.com/read/356901867/Malleus-Maleficarum>> p.175.

2 p.381

3 Henryk Kraemer, Jacob Sprenger, *Młot Na Czarownice*, (Wrocław: Wydawnictwo "Fox" s.c., 2000), p.136.

4 Henryk Kraemer, Jacob Sprenger, *Młot Na Czarownice*, p. 9.

5 Brian Innes, *The History Of Torture*, (London, Amber Books Ltd, 2012)

<<https://www.scribd.com/read/440090354/The-History-of-Torture>> [Accessed 18 August 2023] p.30.

Heinrich Kramer and Jacob Sprenger were two Dominican Inquisitors, professors of Theology who, in large, wrote the Bull for Pope Innocent VII and included it as a prelude to their publication of *The Malleus*, divided into three parts. The *Hammer of Witches* was described as the most sinister of all works on demonology written throughout history.⁶ This is partially due to the third part of the treatise, which deals with the methods and ways of *interrogating* the witches through torture as well as deception. Sadly, the zealous Christians believed that the confessions would only be true if forced, disregarding freely made confessions. This, of course, once again, is a direct contradiction of Pope Nicolas I's words which deemed forced confession unreliable and oftentimes misleading. This was nothing more than a case of abuse of power and creating a fertile ground to justify Inquisitor's darker desires to abuse their power and relish in torture and pain, they may have caused.

The basis for targeting people was, of course, various reports and inquisitions and the reasoning behind the connection they drew between the evil Devil and his actions on Earth were humans, as Hans Peter Broedel states in *The Malleus Maleficarum And The Construction Of Witchcraft*,

While God was represented in the various manifestations of the Trinity, and had as well an array of angels and saints, to say nothing of the Church, the devil had only a multitude of demons to carry out his will on earth. Because all demons were perceived as beings of essentially the same type, not obviously distinguished from their master, the mere existence of minor demons could potentially lead to Satan's trivialization. To reconcile the apparent ubiquity of demonic power with a transcendent principle of evil, some clerics began to insist upon the necessity for human mediation of the diabolic side of the supernatural.⁷

Another person who influenced and partially wrote *the Malleus* was Henry Institoris, a bright, although advanced in age, Dominican.⁸ Amongst his most notable traits, apart from his childishness,⁹ was the zeal to fight an 'uncompromising war against the enemies of the faith, whomever he might perceive them to be.'¹⁰ Broedel states that 'Heretics and witches had this much in common with the emperor and reforming clergy: all were the objects of Institoris' righteous wrath. This aggressive zeal for the faith, combined with his considerable personal ambition, secured rapid advancement for Institoris within the Order.'¹¹ This creates a chain of events starting with an ambition of an overzealous monk to eradicate all perceived enemies of his faith, which fuelled his ascension and popularity, to ultimately being the cause of hundreds of thousands of deaths over the centuries.

As listed above, *The Malleus* was a sinister work of zealots who aimed to achieve their goal of religious supremacy and wished to eradicate anyone who would oppose them by all means necessary and taking into account the in-depth knowledge of tortures that were listed in *The Malleus*, it is almost certain that these clergymen were anything but pious monks. Broedel, in his book, makes a point to track the origin of *The Malleus* to Institoris and the development it underwent, skillfully criticising its contents. A criticism that not many would disagree with nowadays.

⁶ Brian Innes, *The History Of Torture*, p.116.

⁷ Hans Peter Broedel, *The Malleus Maleficarum And The Construction Of Witchcraft*, (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2003), p.52.

⁸ Hans Peter Broedel, *The Malleus Maleficarum*, p.11

⁹ Ibid., p.11

¹⁰ Ibid., p.11

¹¹ Ibid., p.11

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