Clerical Conceptions of Magic and the Stereotype of the Female Witch

Matthew Alexander Moebius, author
Dr. Kimberly Rivers, History, faculty adviser

Matthew Alexander Moebius graduated from UW Oshkosh in May 2011 with a degree in history. His interest in medieval Europe as a primary field of study emerged from a longstanding interest in European folklore and mythology, and was developed under the guidance of Dr. Kimberly Rivers. His research focus in the field of medieval magic and occultism began to take shape during his work for the European History Seminar in spring 2011.

Dr. Kimberly Rivers is an associate professor and the department chair of history at UW Oshkosh. She received her Ph.D. from the University of Toronto in 1995, and her research interests are in late-medieval intellectual history, and memory and mnemonics in late-medieval preaching and religious devotion.

Abstract

Working from the foundation laid by leading historians of medieval witchcraft — most notably Richard Kieckhefer, Norman Cohn, Michael Bailey, and Hans Peter Broedel — this study examines the conceptual development of a predominantly feminine witchcraft stereotype as understood within the perceptions of the educated clerical elite. The theories of these historians, each approaching the study of witchcraft in different ways and addressing mostly separate aspects of the phenomenon, are reconciled with one another and tied together in hitherto unarticulated ways to form a single, cohesive narrative of the emergence of the idea of the exclusively female witch. The gradual evolution of clerical conceptions of magic shifted in the later Middle Ages from a masculine conception to a more gender-neutral one, opening the door to feminization. The construction of the witches' sabbat, influenced by largely feminine pagan mythological motifs, pushed the idea in the direction of a female conception. Finally, influential writings dominated by aggressively misogynistic ideology finalized the association between women and witchcraft.

In the last four decades, the historical work done on late medieval witchcraft has been extensive. This scholarship has found the general topic of witchcraft to be one of immeasurable complexity, and therefore, the general approach of historians of medieval witchcraft has been to narrow their individual studies. Historians Richard Kieckhefer and Norman Cohn have done foundational work on the conceptual development of witchcraft. Kieckhefer's early work produced detailed analyses of trial records, including inquisitorial interrogations and witness testimonies, with the ultimate goal of uncovering how witchcraft was perceived by the common populace. Cohn's study of the relationship between witchcraft mythology and ideas associated with earlier heretical groups is still heavily relied upon by current witchcraft historians. Much excellent work has also been done by recent historians, notably Michael D. Bailey and Hans Peter Broedel. Bailey's work has emphasized the role of the evolution of general conceptions of magic throughout the Middle Ages in contributing to the creation of a defined system of witchcraft mythology in the fifteenth century. Broedel's primary focus has been on the influential 1487 anti-witchcraft treatise *Malleus Maleficarum*, and on the various elements that make up the construction of witchcraft represented therein.

One of the specific aspects of witchcraft that has seen considerable attention in recent years is its relationship to gender. Both Bailey and Broedel have made admirable contributions to uncovering the historical development of a feminine witch concept. Bailey's theories of the feminization of the witchcraft concept tie in with his larger ideas on the evolution of clerical conceptions of magic. Broedel has discussed at length the influence of feminine mythological motifs taken from pagan traditions. Each present compelling ideas, but in each case the specificity of the scope of their arguments has limited the overall effectiveness of their conclusions. This study builds on the foundations laid by these historians' theories. It will draw

not only on these recent studies of witchcraft and gender, but also on the general scholarship of witchcraft mythology. Combined with clues from the primary sources, the threads of these historical arguments will be woven together into a more cumulative view of the gender associations of medieval witchcraft.

Before attempting this task, certain distinctions must be made clear. When dealing with the history of witchcraft the researcher is constantly confronted with the problem of separating perception from reality. The history of actual events as they occur in tangible space is sometimes entirely distinct from the history of the conception of those events. This study is concerned primarily with the conceptual history of witchcraft and gender as it developed within the consciousness of the educated clerical elite. The nature of the larger subject of witchcraft makes the additional separation of learned and popular conceptions necessary.

The concept of witchcraft as understood by clerical authorities evolved differently than the popular ideas of malevolent magic and sorcery and was made up of entirely different components. As such, the ways in which popular and learned concepts were connected with gender-related themes throughout the course of their respective developments were equally different. The learned conception of witchcraft had developed by the end of the fifteenth century into a mythology that predominantly favored the stereotype of the female witch. This feminization of witchcraft occurred as a result of the combined influences of the following: (1) significant changes in the clerical conceptions of magic prior to, and leading into, the fifteenth century; (2) the construction of the witches' sabbat from anti-heretical stereotypes and feminine mythological motifs; and (3) clerical misogynist attitudes. The resulting conflation of feminine associations was emphasized in — and reinforced by — the *Malleus Maleficarum*, assuring the ultimate feminization of learned witchcraft mythology.

Clerical conceptions of magic in the late Middle Ages cannot be fully understood without delving into older theological doctrine. The learned authorities of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries drew their understanding of magic from sources dating as far back as late antiquity. Most significantly, St. Augustine of Hippo's writing on the subject in the early fifth century established foundational theological doctrine regarding the magical arts. The classical magic of Augustine's time was thought to be performed through the assistance of spiritual intermediaries. As no human being was capable of producing any supernatural or preternatural effect on his own, assistance was thought to have been sought from a more capable entity. Practitioners often claimed that these intermediaries were merely benign spirits either of the elements or of the dead, or possibly even angels.[1] Augustine, however, concluded that they could be nothing other than demonic in nature. If any sorcerer or magician believed otherwise, he was the victim of demonic deception. In 425 Augustine wrote in *City of God*:

> Who does not see that all these things are fictions of deceiving demons, unless he be a wretched slave of theirs, and an alien from the grace of the true Liberator? … Rather let us abominate and avoid the deceit of such wicked spirits, and listen to sound doctrine. As to those who perform these filthy cleansings by sacrilegious rites, and see in their initiated state … certain wonderfully lovely appearances of angels or gods, this is what the apostle refers to when he speaks of "Satan transforming himself into an angel of light." For these are the delusive appearances of that spirit who longs to entangle wretched souls in the deceptive worship of many and false gods and to turn them aside from the true worship of the true God…[2].

Furthermore, in *De Doctrina Christiana*, he elaborated on the subject by drawing a comparison between this demonic pact and the worship of idols:

> Something instituted by humans is superstitious if it concerns the making and worshipping of idols, or the worshipping of the created order or part of it as if it were God, or if it involves certain kinds of consultations or contracts about meaning arranged and ratified with demons, such as the enterprises involved in the art of magic, which poets tend to mention rather than to teach.[3]

Since such practices involved supplication and sacrifice to entities that could be nothing other than demons, participation in them was tantamount to idolatry and apostasy.[4]

> So all the specialists in this kind of futile and harmful superstition, and the contracts, as it were, of an untrustworthy and treacherous partnership established by this disastrous alliance of men and devils, must be totally rejected and avoided by the Christian. "It is not," to quote the apostle, "because an idol is something, but because whatever they sacrifice they sacrifice it to devils and not to God that I do not want you to become the associates of demons." … So in all these teachings we must fear and avoid this alliance with demons, whose whole aim, in concert with their leader, the devil, is to cut off and obstruct our return to God.[5]

Augustine's stance on magic remained powerfully influential on the official Church position even at the outbreak of the witch-hunting fervor a thousand years later.

The next document of significant import came roughly around the turn of the tenth century. This text, known as the canon *Episcopi*, first appeared in its earliest known version in a canonical collection compiled sometime around 906. The text opens with a condemnation of *maleficium*, or harmful magic,[6] and an urgent warning to bishops and their clergy to push for an eradication of its practice wherever it might be encountered.[7] Of more ultimate significance, however, is its commentary on a more specific concern:

> It is not to be omitted that some wicked women, who have given themselves back to Satan and been seduced by the illusions and phantasms of demons, believe and profess that, in the hours of night, they ride upon certain beasts with Diana, the goddess of pagans, and an innumerable multitude of women, and in the silence of the night traverse great spaces of earth, and obey her commands as of their lady, and are summoned to her service on certain nights. But if they alone perished in their faithlessness, without drawing many other people with them into the destruction of infidelity. For an innumerable multitude, deceived by false opinion, believe this to be true, and so believing, wander from the right faith and return to the error of pagans when they think that there is anything of divinity or power except the one God.[8]

The condemnation made in this passage is not of magical practice in general, but of a specific set of pagan traditions. The nocturnal procession of Diana to which it refers represents a conflation of various pagan traditions of both classical and Germanic origin.[9] Significantly, it focuses its

condemnation on belief rather than direct participation.[10] Although the *Episcopi* itself addresses these pagan traditions as separate from general practice of magic, that separation was to deteriorate over time and the two ideas eventually became conflated. Thus the *Episcopi*'s pronouncement of the falsehood of the pagan nocturnal procession in time came to apply to all magical practices. Roughly a century later, the legal scholar Burchard of Worms composed his *Decretum,* which included a repetition of the *Episcopi*'s condemnation of belief in the processions of Diana. When he addressed enchantment and sorcery, he condemned not only practice, but belief in such arts.[11] Additionally, with the merging of the ideas of *maleficium* and the nocturnal processions of Diana, the learned conception of magic also saw one of its earliest significant influxes of specifically feminine imagery. Although the clerical conceptions of magic largely remained either gender-neutral or of masculine leanings for some time, the Diana mythology would eventually contribute to the feminization of the witchcraft mythology. This influence will be further discussed later.

The *Decretum* of Burchard and other similar texts indicate that the concern of clerical authorities during the eleventh century was focused more on demonic delusion and false belief than on any real threat of actual magical practice. Participation in superstitious ceremonies or rites was considered infidelity to the Church and to God, and belief in the efficacy of such rites saw even more focused condemnation than direct participation.[12] One of Burchard's admonitions reads, "Have you ever believed or participated in this perfidy, that enchanters and those who say that they can let loose tempests or to change the minds of men? If you have believed or participated in this, you shall do penance for one year on the appointed fast days."[13] Punishments of this nature — varying degrees of penance — are typical throughout Burchard's text, and are

indicative of a fairly dismissive level of concern compared to the witch burnings of the fifteenth century.

This relatively dismissive attitude toward magic persisted until the twelfth century, when European intellectuals discovered (or rediscovered) hosts of classical, Hebrew, and Arabic texts on the occult arts.[14] The magical practices described in these texts were highly learned, authoritative, and sometimes even explicitly demonic. The contents were typically instructive as well as descriptive, and the branches of magical learning they included were usually astrology, alchemy, various forms of divination, and necromancy. As such, medieval scholars were, for the first time since antiquity, provided with an avenue of esoteric study that — unlike common pagan folk traditions — presented magic in the form of a scholarly pursuit. Western Europe suddenly saw a rise in interest, as well as actual practice, of these varieties of "learned magic." This caught the attention of clerical authorities, and they began taking the threat of actual demonic magic more seriously. Of special concern was the newly widespread interest in necromancy.[15]

This diabolical practice was one of the most highly complex, ritualized, and formalistic forms of magic most clerics would likely have encountered. It was never explicitly described in terms of gender, but there were several factors that led to its informal designation as a decidedly masculine field. Its mastery was entirely reliant on the study of complicated texts, and thus was restricted to the highly educated. The level of education required, the mastery of language, and the excessive amount of disciplined study would have made it difficult for most clerics to envision female necromancers.[16] In fact, those same requirements led to the educated male clerics themselves making up the majority of practicing necromancers in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.[17] In spite of this, Bailey has argued that the understanding and concerns of clerical authorities over necromantic sorcery in this period were essential to the later

development of the learned concept of witchcraft in the fifteenth century, including its eventual association with women.[18]

The urgent sense of concern felt by clerical authorities about this pervasive demonic practice and the dangers it posed reawakened condemnation of magic in general. As the eyes of the Church were opened to the threat of these demonic rituals, they turned also to the common *maleficium* that had been so marginalized since the time of the canon *Episcopi*. Authorities began to move away from the notion that magic was nothing but a devilish illusion. They flocked back to the teachings of Augustine: magic was real, and it was *always* demonic. This view was given weighty support by prominent theologians like St. Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth century. St. Thomas wrote:

> ...if we take a miracle in the strict sense, the demons cannot work miracles, nor can any creature, but God alone: since in the strict sense a miracle is something done outside the order of the entire created nature, under which order every power of a creature is contained. But sometimes miracle may be taken in a wide sense, for whatever exceeds the human power and experience. And thus demons can work miracles, that is, things which rouse man's astonishment, by reason of their being beyond his power and outside his sphere of knowledge. … It is to be noted, however, that although these works of demons which appear marvellous to us are not real miracles, they are sometimes nevertheless something real. Thus the magicians of Pharaoh by the demons' power produced real serpents and frogs.[19]

It was in this light that theologians began to view popular magic and common folk traditions. These traditions, whether actually containing any elements of harmful magic or not, were increasingly placed by learned authorities under the umbrella of *maleficium*. If all magic was demonic in nature, then even the softly spoken incantations of the village healer who treated sick patients with ritually gathered herbs could be easily perceived as dangerous sorcery. Once this was established, however, authorities faced another problem of understanding. The archetypical necromancer was, by necessity, a scholar. He invoked demons and compelled them to perform his will, but he achieved this only through intense study and the performance of

complex formulaic rituals. How, then, could one explain the common village *maleficus* mastering control of similar demonic forces through practices that were absurdly simplistic by comparison? How could the uneducated weather-magician raise a devastating hailstorm, killing cattle and destroying crops, with none of the labors of the learned sorcerer? Where did he learn his art if not from secret occult texts? In pursuit of a solution to this problem, clerics and theological writers spent generations inventing a mythology that would fit their worldview. This mythology was not developed through a singular conscious effort, but through a slow process of altering and absorbing different ideas, and influenced by established theological doctrine, pagan mythology, and stereotypes associated with heretical sects. The finished product was to become the definitive central element of the concept of witchcraft: the witches' sabbat.[20]

The sabbat, a supposedly secret nocturnal gathering of witches where diabolical rituals were thought to be performed, provided a solution for the discrepancy in the modes of operation between necromancy and witchcraft. The functionality of the sabbat, in a way, came through exaggerating one element of the idea of necromantic sorcery to accommodate for the loss of another. When necromancers summoned demons, they were viewed by theological authorities as submitting to a pact with the summoned demon, and, by association, with the devil. This demonic pact might be implicit rather than explicit, as the necromancer might be (and often was) operating under the assumption that it was he who held the dominant position and that the demon was submitting to him. Nevertheless, whether that sorcerer knew it or not, he had been drawn into a contractual relationship with the devil. The witches' sabbat took this concept even further. For religious authorities, the central aspect of witchcraft became the complete and explicit submission of the witch to the devil. The sabbat was the secret assembly at which this ritual submission would be made. In exchange for submission (which often included certain ghastly

costs[21]), the devil would grant the witch immediate knowledge of demonic magic and the power to wield it. In this way authorities could understand how villages and countrysides could be found to contain innumerable uneducated wielders of diabolical *maleficium*. As this separation of witchcraft from educated ritual and formulae allowed for the emergence of a new figure in the common witch, the restriction of magic to the masculine gender was also lifted. In this way, the creation of the sabbat opened the door for the feminization of magic.[22]

After this door was opened, witchcraft quickly made the jump from the previous ideas of masculine magic to being a gender-neutral field. The mythology of the sabbat itself contained several elements that, when taken together, had perhaps the largest influence on the gendering of the official concept of witchcraft. This mythology was developed over a considerable period of time, and went through several varying interpretations as it absorbed influences from various sources. The final picture of the demonic assembly in its most elaborate form has been most clearly and concisely described by Broedel, who has broken the sabbat mythology into six parts:

> (1) On the appointed night, the sectaries assembled at a remote or concealed site, often flying or riding demonic animals; (2) once there, they summoned the devil in one of his many forms, and worshiped him in disgusting or humiliating ways, most characteristically by the obscene kiss; (3) at the devil's command, they renounced Christ in graphic fashion, trampling on or otherwise abusing the host; (4) they slaughtered infants or children, who were brought along for this purpose, and put their flesh to some foul and often magical use; (5) they indulged in a high-spirited revel, eating, drinking, and dancing, until the evening's festivities were concluded with an orgy (6), in which they violated as many sexual conventions as the fertile imagination of the narrator could devise.[23]

Each of these elements could appear in the sabbat mythology independently or in various combinations. They all came together in concert in the most well-defined and elaborate descriptions. This final picture of the sabbat became solidified in clerical conceptions by the middle of the fifteenth century, but each of the various individual elements began their influences in earlier stages. Each can be claimed to have contributed in its own way to the

gendering of the concept of witchcraft. As will be shown, not every element advanced a specifically female conception, but those that did proved to combine more effectively with conscious outside influences that would later intervene in favor of a predominantly feminine witchcraft mythology.

The majority of Broedel's six elements can be traced directly to the influence of clerical conceptions associated with certain heretical sects of the twelfth to fourteenth centuries. The second half of the twelfth century saw outbreaks of heresy in various parts of Europe, which drew considerable attention from the Church. Of these heretical groups, the most significant in their influence on the development of witchcraft were the Waldensians. When clerical authorities began persecution of the Waldensians, they encouraged the spread of outlandish accusations of frightening misconduct. The resulting stereotypes that became associated with this heretical group included their participation in secret nocturnal meetings, worship of the devil, and incestuous orgies.[24] These accusations were taken seriously by popes, and Gregory IX's 1233 papal bull *Vox in Rama* named the charges against the heretics and ordered their condemnation. Many of the practices alleged by Gregory perfectly fit the model that would later be applied to the witches' sabbat:

> …a black cat[25] about the size of an average dog, descends backwards, with its tail erect. First the novice, next the master, then each one of the order who are worthy and perfect, kiss the cat on its hindquarters; the imperfect, who do not estimate themselves worthy, receive grace from the master. … When this has been done, they put out the candles, and turn to the practice of the most disgusting lechery, making no distinction between those who are strangers and those who are kin. Moreover, if by chance those of the male sex exceed the number of women, surrendering to their ignominious passions, burning mutually in their desires, men engage in depravity with men. Similarly, women change their natural function, which is against nature, making this itself worthy of blame among themselves. … They even receive the body of the Lord every year at Easter from the hand of a priest, and carrying it in their mouths to their homes, they throw it into the latrine in contempt of the savior.[26]

These accusations were so effective that it became standard procedure to apply them to groups that were perceived as threatening to the Church.[27] Similar accusations employed against another heretical sect in the fourteenth century, the Fraticelli, included all of the elements of the Waldensian accusations with the addition of ritual cannibalistic infanticide.[28]

It should come as no surprise then that these same anti-heretical stereotypes were applied with equal vigor to the frightening new sect of *malefici* that was emerging in the consciousness of the clerical authorities in the fourteenth century.[29] By the early fifteenth century, these stereotypes had become thoroughly embedded in the mythology of witchcraft. This was accomplished with the aid of several pieces of extremely influential writing on the witchcraft sects, mostly from the 1430s. The most significant of these was, without a doubt, the *Formicarius* of 1438 by the Dominican theologian Johannes Nider. The *Formicarius*, along with other contemporary pieces like the *Errores Gazariorum* (of anonymous authorship) and the treatise of the lay magistrate Claude Tholosan, described in detail the demonic sabbat which had by now thoroughly absorbed the anti-heretical stereotypes.[30] These texts were also the first available for wide circulation among clerical and inquisitorial authorities, and so fueled the spread of witch-hunting fervor that was just beginning to take off.[31]

Since the heretical practices described in these stereotypes were freely associated with both genders, the witchcraft mythology that developed in the regions where these influences were strongest remained gender-neutral for a considerable time. Of all of the texts described above, only Nider's gives preference to the idea of the female witch, and even he doesn't make any insistence of exclusivity. In all of the texts, both genders participate freely (Nider merely claiming that women were perhaps more frequent participants than men).[32] Areas in which anti-heretical stereotypes played an especially important role in the development of the sabbat

(Switzerland for example) initially saw significantly more men brought to trial than women. Other cultural contexts saw entirely different paths of development. There were regions where influences of popular magic traditions and pagan mythologies contributed just as strongly to the creation of the sabbat mythology as the anti-heretical stereotypes.[33] The often predominantly feminine imagery associated with these popular traditions and mythological influences contributed significantly to the eventual creation of the idea of the female witch. In the end, these regionally variant ideas would converge into a more uniform mythology, carrying that feminine emphasis to the level of a universal stereotype.

Perhaps the most significant of these feminine mythological influences was that of Diana and her nocturnal processions. Popular belief in the legends of Diana, who supposedly led a raucous procession of women through the night, were based on a combination of similarly themed beliefs that came together to form an amalgam roughly centered around the nocturnal activities of women and female spirits.[34] The conflation of ideas that occurred in the texts following the condemnation in the canon *Episcopi* created a direct association between this piece of pagan mythology and the idea of *maleficium*. As *maleficium* became synonymous with diabolical witchcraft, it naturally followed that these associated pagan motifs would be drawn into the cumulative concept of witchcraft. The manner of its inclusion in the official witchcraft mythology was the idea of night flight. Witches were thought to rise from their beds at night and fly (a marvel achieved through any of a number of sinister magical operations) in devilish processions to the secret location of the sabbat.

Even before its absorption into the witchcraft mythology, the legends of Diana had become associated with other similar traditions of nocturnal female spirits. The ghostly female monsters known as *lamiae* or *strigae* came down from antique pagan tradition, and had, by the

beginning of the fifteenth century, already become indistinguishable from the myths of Diana and her *bonae res* to most clerics.[35] The *lamiae* were spirits, usually taking the forms of old hag-like women, who stole into houses at night to kill children. For learned clerics who had already characterized Diana's *bonae res* as demons, the ideas were similar enough to cause confusion, and learned commentators eventually created from them a single construct drawn from elements of both traditions.[36] It was this cumulative construct that was absorbed into the witchcraft mythology in the early fifteenth century. The treatises on witchcraft from the 1430s demonstrate the conflation. The secular magistrate Claude Tholosan writes: "…Further, they imagine in dreams that they travel bodily at night, most often on Thursdays and Sundays, in the company of the devil, in order to suffocate children and strike them with sickness. They then extract the fat of the dead children and devour it and go to a certain place where they hold the synagogue of the region."[37] Here the reader can see the influence of Diana legends as the witch ventures forth at night in a procession led by the devil. The witch then enters the homes of others and murders children in their sleep, as did the *lamiae*. Each serves a purpose in the greater sabbat mythology: the slaying of children is used to obtain material remains to be used in the satanic rituals, and the nocturnal procession serves as a means to facilitate those deaths and as transport to the sabbat itself. Furthermore, the inclusion of the child-slaying elements of the *lamiae* myths creates a point of compatibility with the infanticide stories of the anti-heretical stereotypes. In this way the pagan mythological influences were able to combine with the anti-heretical stereotypes in a mutually reinforcing way, which also allowed the predominately feminine imagery associated with the former to begin superseding the gender-neutrality of the latter.

Finally, perhaps the most obvious factor influencing the ultimate feminization of the official witchcraft stereotype was the prevalence of clerical misogyny. Misogynistic tendencies

in the clerical elite had a substantial role in creating the idea of the exclusively female witch. It is important, however, to understand that they were allowed to have this role largely because they were able to act on the foundation of feminizing influences already in place. Clerical misogyny had always existed, but only in the mid-fifteenth century was it able to exercise itself in the creation of the female witch-stereotype. This was possible only because of the coming together of all of the factors described above. Among the most important figures to take advantage of the opportunity was Johannes Nider.

As mentioned earlier, Nider's *Formicarius* did not insist that witches were exclusively women. However, Nider does make abundantly clear his opinion that women were more suited for the evils of witchcraft. The *Formicarius* first breaches the subject of women and witchcraft with a discussion of Joan of Arc, who had been burned in France just a few years prior. He uses Joan's case as a stepping stone to approaching the larger issue of the inherent female susceptibility to sin. His argument was, in short, that women were cursed with physical, mental, and spiritual weakness, and that these weaknesses made them more vulnerable to the temptations of the devil. To support this argument he drew on standard biblical, patristic, and scholastic sources. The credibility of these sources was largely responsible for the influential status of the work as a whole, and it also led later writers to draw inspiration from his anti-woman perspective.[38] The *Formicarius* was not the only influential text of Nider's that had something to say on the matter. His *Praeceptorium* laid out what would become the three canonical reasons for women's inclination toward superstitious practices. First, women were more credulous than men — a weakness that was, in Nider's opinion, mercilessly exploited by the devil. Second, they were of more impressionable natures, which naturally made them more sensitive to influence. Third, they had "slippery tongues," and for this reason they were more likely to spread what they

had learned of magical arts to their fellow women. He also notes that because of their physical and emotional weaknesses, they were more likely to seek revenge through occult means. This point is of special significance because it directly links women's alleged natural tendency toward superstition with *maleficium*. This informs on why Nider thought women were more prone to witchcraft. If women were naturally inclined toward superstition, it logically follows that they would be naturally inclined toward *maleficium*, and as such toward witchcraft.[39]

The connection between superstition and *maleficium* had been longstanding. Although today the word *superstition* carries implications of usually mundane eccentricity, this was not so in the late Middle Ages. Superstitious beliefs or practices were commonly listed alongside performance of harmful sorcery in medieval condemnations. The inquisitor Nicholas Eymeric, writing in 1376, called it "a vice opposed to the Christian religion or Christian worship," and declared it heretical behavior in a Christian.[40] The theology faculty of the University of Paris listed superstition alongside *maleficium* and the demonic pact in their public condemnation of all magic in 1398.[41] In light of this, it is significant to note that Nider's commentary did not initiate the association between women and superstition. Early medieval penitentials consistently singled out women as guilty of superstitious practices. With superstition being so directly associated with *maleficium*, it was no wonder that theorists like Nider found ways to use those traditions to inform their conceptions of witchcraft.[42]

As previously mentioned, the misogynistic principles of Nider and his *Formicarius* were greatly influential to later writers on witchcraft. The most significant of these writers to draw inspiration from Nider's work was also the first whose treatment of witchcraft would grow to outshine the *Formicarius* in widespread authoritative influence. This writer was Dominican inquisitor Heinrich Institoris, and his text was the notorious *Malleus Maleficarum*.[43] Written in

1487, Institoris's extensive text — the title of which translates to "The Hammer of Witches" — was designed as an in-depth inquisitorial manual. It covers topics ranging from identifying witches and methods for hunting and trying them, to the mechanical operation of their demonic magic and the variety of forms that magic could take. As an example of clerical misogyny the *Malleus* reigns supreme. Institoris rants at length on the weakness, sinfulness, and perfidy of women, devoting an entire chapter to the subject. Much like Nider, Institoris supports his position by assembling a formidable catalogue of ancient and contemporary authorities to testify to feminine weakness:[44]

> Now the wickedness of women is spoken of in *Ecclesiasticus* xxv: There is no head above the head of a serpent: and there is no wrath above the wrath of a woman. I had rather dwell with a lion and a dragon than to keep house with a wicked woman. And among much which in that place precedes and follows about a wicked women, he concludes: All wickedness is but little to the wickedness of a woman. Wherefore *S. John* Chrysostom says on the text, It is not good to marry (*S. Matthew* xix): What else is woman but a foe to friendship, an unescapable punishment, a necessary evil, a natural temptation, a desirable calamity, a domestic danger, a delectable detriment, an evil of nature, painted with fair colours![45]

He sets out what amounts to a more elaborate description of Nider's main arguments against women. Institoris, like Nider, describes women as "feebler both in mind and body," and for this reason "it is not surprising that they should come more under the spell of witchcraft."[46] Such views were no doubt common for the time, but were nowhere else so aggressively linked with witchcraft.[47] Institioris argued that all witchcraft could be traced to the same root as all characteristically female sin: carnal lust. After his laundry-list of complaints about the female character, he clearly states his answer to the question of why witches are necessarily women: "…the natural reason is that she is more carnal than a man, as is clear from her many carnal abominations."[48] And furthermore, "To conclude. All witchcraft comes from carnal lust, which is women insatiable."[49]

The primary innovation of the *Malleus* was this insistence that harmful magic belonged almost exclusively to women. Male magicians exist in Institoris's text, but they are pointedly marginalized. Broedel suggests that perhaps the simplest explanation for this insistence (beyond the obvious misogyny, which, though clearly a powerful force in Institoris's worldview, seems insufficient on its own) is to accept that it derives from his own experience as a witch-hunter.[50] It would not be unreasonable to suppose that a majority — even a large majority — of accused witches in a given area could have been women. Institoris makes precisely this claim in the *Malleus*: "As for the first question, why a greater number of witches is found in the fragile feminine sex than among men; it is indeed a fact that it were idle to contradict, since it is accredited by actual experience, apart from the verbal testimony of credible witnesses."[51] Whatever the reasoning of its author, the *Malleus* proved to be incredibly successful. Acting on the foundations of its predecessors, and on the plethora of conditions which had paved the way for the idea of an exclusively female witchcraft mythology, the "Hammer of Witches" served as the final link in the chain of influences. Its widespread acceptance as the preeminent authoritative treatise on witchcraft assured the feminization of the clerical conception of witchcraft.

By the time the *Malleus* reached widespread readership, the stereotype of the female witch was becoming well established. The development of this stereotype over the course of the preceding centuries had been long and complex, and was now reaching its fruition. Conceptions of magic, once having favored the idea of masculine practitioners, had shifted to a feminized concept. The establishment of the witches' sabbat as the definitive central element of the clerical concept of witchcraft was perhaps the strongest force in pushing the stereotype across the gender boundary. Its construction from a combination of anti-heretical stereotypes and feminine

mythological motifs created powerful imagery that could easily be interpreted as strongly accusatory towards women. Misogynist authorities like Johannes Nider and Heinrich Institoris responded in the predictable way, seizing their opportunity to promote the feminized stereotype and the persecution of women as witches.

In the second half of the fifteenth century, the rate of witchcraft trials increased greatly, often doubling figures from the first half.[52] As Europe made the transition from the Middle Ages to the early modern period, the witch-hunting craze persisted, and convicted witches were burned well into the eighteenth century. An estimated 40,000 people were executed as witches between 1450 and 1750.[53] Varying figures have been proposed for the exact percentages of male versus female convictions. It is clear that the vast majority of those executed for witchcraft were women, probably between 65 to 80 percent.[54] Direct responsibility for this cannot reasonably be placed on any one group or sector of society. Although complicated social and economic factors within rural village populations likely had the most direct influence on the nature of the accusations themselves, the clerical conceptions of witchcraft must also have greatly exacerbated the overall tendency to associate witches with women. After all, as Kieckhefer has pointed out, local Parish priests could easily serve as modes of transmission for such biases between the classes.[55] And in the end it was the clerical authorities who carried out the trials and made the convictions. As has been noted by Bailey, if clerical conceptions of magic had not developed into a pointedly feminized stereotype, it seems unlikely that the witchcraft craze would have occurred in the way that it did.[56] The ultimate irony, of course, lies in that very shift of conception. In earlier periods, clerical authorities were concerned primarily with masculine necromantic sorcery, the practice of which historical evidence has proven to have actually taken place.[57] Persecution of these male practitioners was never pursued with the same fervor that was

applied to the hunting of witches after the shift of clerical concerns. Witchcraft though, unlike necromancy, was an imaginary construct, and all evidence points toward the non-existence of any real satanic witch cult.[58] As the witch-craze broke out across Europe and the learned elite developed their feminized concept of magic, thousands of women were burned for a crime that in all likelihood never existed.

Notes

1. Various forms of divination were among the most common magical practices in the classical Greek and Roman traditions. There were countless varieties of divinatory practices, most of which were elemental. Astrological divination and astral magic drew not only upon observation of material conditions in the heavens, but also on invocation of the elemental spirits who were thought to dwell there. The spirits of the dead were similarly employed for purposes of divination in classical necromancy. See Richard Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 125-33, 152; Isidore of Seville, "Etymologies, Book VIII, Chapter 9," in *Wichcraft in Europe, 400-1700: A Documentary History*, ed. Alan Charles Kors and Edward Peters (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), 51.
2. Augustine, "Demonic Power in Early Christianity," in *The Witchcraft Sourcebook*, ed. Brian P. Levack (New York and London: Routledge, 2004), 28-29.
3. Augustine, "On Christian Teaching, Book II (395-98, 426)," in *Witchcraft in Europe, 400-1700: A Documentary History*, ed. Alan Charles Kors and Edward Peters (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), 44.
4. Hans Peter Broedel, *The Malleus Maleficarum and the Construction of Witchcraft* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2003), 123.
5. Augustine, "On Christian Teaching," 46.
6. Understanding of this terminology is essential to the entire issue of medieval magic. The primary meaning of *maleficium* had once been "evil deed," but as early as the time of Tacitus it had been used to refer to sorcery and malign magic. In the texts and treatises of the later Middle Ages, *maleficium* usually referred to harmful sorcery or its effects, or, less commonly, it was used to denote a material object in which malign magical force resided. A *maleficus*, thus, was generally a person who knowingly produced *maleficium*. The key thing to understand is that these notions were broad and ill-defined. There was no one homogenous category of specific practices that uniformly qualified; rather, *maleficium* was an amalgamation of harmful conditions that could be linked with some event, individual, or motivation that was perceived as malicious. See Broedel, 131-33, 173.
7. Regino of Prum, "A Warning to Bishops, the Canon Episcopi (ca. 906)," in *Witchcraft in Europe, 400-1700: A Documentary History*, ed. Alan Charles Kors and Edward Peters (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), 61-62.
8. Ibid., 62.
9. Jeffrey Burton Russel, "Witchcraft, European," in *Dictionary of the Middle Ages*, ed. Joseph Strayer, 12 (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1989), 660. More will be said on the specific nature of these traditions and their ultimate relevance to witchcraft mythology.
10. Here the *Episcopi* shows itself to be part of the *interpretatio Christiana*, the effort to combat pagan survivals by translating elements of pagan traditions into Christian theological terms, which would then be condemned within the Christian theological framework. The *Episcopi* labels the pagan goddess Diana and her ethereal attendants as demons and condemns those who would follow or even believe in their existence as devil-worshippers. See Richard Kieckhefer, *European Witch Trials: Their Foundations in Popular and Learned Culture, 1300-1500* (Berkely and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1976), 39.

11. Burchard of Worms, "The Correcter, sive Medicus (ca. 1008-1012)," in *Witchcraft in Europe, 400-1700: A Documentary History*, ed. Alan Charles Kors and Edward Peters (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), 64-67.
12. Michael D. Bailey, "The Feminization of Magic and the Emerging Idea of the Female Witch in the Late Middle Ages," *Essays in Medieval Studies* 19 (2002): 124-25.
13. Burchard of Worms, "The Corrector," 64.
14. Bailey, 125; The rise of scholasticism at this same time seems to have encouraged an increase in translation and absorption of Arabic texts in areas like Sicily and Spain, where European scholars were in close contact with the Islamic world. Such classical, Hebrew, and even Asian occult and magical texts had already been translated into Arabic and maintained by Islamic scholars for hundreds of years. See Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages*, 117-19.
15. On the original meaning of the term, Isidore of Seville said, "Necromancers are they by whose incantations the dead appear to revive and prophesy and answer questions. *Nekros* in Greek means dead, while *manteia* means divination." See Isidore of Seville, "Etymologies," 52. However, by the Middle Ages the meaning had substantially changed. Medieval theological writers assumed, in the tradition of Augustine, that the spirits of the dead could not really be conjured, and that the necromancers summoned demons who pretended to be spirits of the dead. As such, the term *necromancy* came, in the late medieval period, to refer to the explicit and intentional conjuring of demons. See Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages*, 152.
16. Bailey, 125-26.
17. Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages*, 152-75.
18. Bailey, 125.
19. Thomas Aquinas, "From the Summa theologiae: The Demons Tempt Man," in *Witchcraft in Europe, 400-1700: A Documentary History*, ed. Alan Charles Kors and Edward Peters (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), 101.
20. Bailey, 126-28.
21. Frightening sacrifices were demanded from the witch by the devil to secure the pact. Animal sacrifices might be made, or the witch might be forced to promise one of his or her own limbs (to be collected after death). More disturbing still were the descriptions of witches offering up the bodies and souls of their firstborn children for ritual sacrifice, the remains being subsequently used to create magical powders and unguents. See Michael D. Bailey, "The Medieval Concept of the Witches' Sabbath," *Exemplaria* 8, no. 2 (1996): 429, 430; Claude Tholosan, "Ut magorum et maleficiorum errores (1436-37)," in *Witchcraft in Europe, 400-1700: A Documentary History*, ed. Alan Charles Kors and Edward Peters (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), 164.
22. Bailey, "The Feminization of Magic," 127-28.
23. Broedel, 124.
24. In reality the Waldensians, like many religious subgroups of the Middle Ages, started simply as a community whose members chose to live in voluntary poverty in emulation of the life of Christ. The Waldensians remained, doctrinally, quite close to Catholic dogma, but rejected the hierarchy of the Roman Catholic Church. Some of the outlandish accusations may have been inspired by a corruption of actual Waldensian practice. To hide from would-be persecutors, Waldensians did hold their meetings in secret, and the accusations of orgies in

the dark may be corrupt exaggerations of their actual practice of ending these secret meetings with communal prayer in total darkness. See Norman Cohn, "The Demonization of Mediaeval Heretics," in *The Witchcraft Reader*, ed. Darren Oldridge (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 36-39, 42.

25. This black cat is meant to be the devil, or at least a demon representing the devil. The image of the devil appearing in animal-form becomes common within these clichés, both in their application to heretics and to witches. The black cat is the most common animal-form amongst these depictions.
26. Gregory IX, "Vox in Rama (1233)," in *Witchcraft in Europe, 400-1700: A Documentary History*, ed. Alan Charles Kors and Edward Peters (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), 116.
27. Cohn argues that the roots of these types of accusations can be traced back considerably further, even to the time of early Christianity. He claims that similar defamation was used in a more rudimentary way by the Romans against early Christians. He also notes, however, that it would be misleading to portray all clerical and inquisitorial authorities who participated in persecutions based on these accusations as aware of their fictional nature. If the application of these stereotypes was a conscious act of slander, it was perpetrated by a select few. Most clerics and inquisitors (and even the popes) thoroughly believed in the reality of the accusations and in the justice of the persecutions. Cohn, 37, 47, 49.
28. Ibid., 43-45.
29. The conception of witchcraft not simply as scattered occurrences but as a defined sect was a natural and essential result of the sabbat mythology itself. The nature of the demonic assemblies implied a conscious collective, and this classification allowed for easier application of anti-heretical stereotypes. Once witchcraft became a sect, it could be classified as a heretical sect.
30. See Johannes Nider, "The Formicarius (1435-38)," in *Witchcraft in Europe, 400-1700: A Documentary History*, ed. Alan Charles Kors and Edward Peters (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), 155-59; "Errores Gazariorum (1437)," in *Witchcraft in Europe, 400-1700: A Documentary History*, ed. Alan Charles Kors and Edward Peters (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), 159-62; Tholosan, 162-66.
31. For an in-depth analysis of the chronology of witch persecutions, see Kieckhefer, *European Witch Trials*, 10-26.
32. Bailey, "Concept of the Witches' Sabbath," 432-33, 439.
33. Martine Ostorero, "The Concept of the Witches' Sabbath in the Alpine Region (1430-1440): Text and Context," in *Witchcraft Mythologies and Persecutions*, ed. Gabor Klaniczay and Eva Pocs (Budapest and New York: Ceu Press, 2008), 21-22, 27.
34. The name Diana suggests a Roman origin, although much of the tradition itself seems more similar to the "Wild Hunt" of Germanic legend. Its nature as an amalgam of various traditions is evidenced by the existence of various names used in different regions, Diana merely being the most popular amongst clerical authorities. The leading goddess was also known as Hilda, Berta, Perchta, or any of several others. This goddess would ride through the night on various beasts, attended by fairy-like female spirits, and would call to sleeping women who would rise from their beds and come out to join the procession. These companies of women were often referred to as *bonae res*, because the original myths claimed

the women brought good luck upon those who left gifts for them. See Broedel, 103; Russell, 660.

35. Broedel, 107.
36. Ibid., 104-07.
37. Tholosan, 165.
38. Bailey, "The Feminization of Magic," 122.
39. Broedel, 171.
40. Nicolau Eymeric, "The Directorium Inquisitorum (1376)," in *Witchcraft in Europe, 400-1700: A Documentary History*, ed. Alan Charles Kors and Edward Peters (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), 125.
41. "The Theology Faculty of the University of Paris Condemns Sorcery (1398)," in *Witchcraft in Europe, 400-1700: A Documentary History*, ed. Alan Charles Kors and Edward Peters (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001),131.
42. Broedel, 170-71.
43. The text is formally credited to Heinrich Institoris (also known as Heinrich Kramer, Institoris being the Latinized version) and his colleague James Sprenger, and the work was to some extent a collaboration of the two. Broedel (whose historical work focuses heavily on the *Malleus*) has claimed that it seems probable that Sprenger's overall contribution was minimal. See Hans Peter 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): 144.
44. Broedel, "The Construction of Witchcraft," 176.
45. Heinrich Kramer and James Sprenger, *Malleus Maleficarum*, translated by Montague Summers (La Vergne, TN: Digireads.com Publishing, 2009), 51.
46. Ibid., 52.
47. Broedel, "The Construction of Witchcraft," 176.
48. Kramer, 53.
49. Ibid., 56.
50. Broedel, "The Construction of Witchcraft," 175.
51. Kramer, 50.
52. See Kieckhefer, *European Witch Trials*, 11.
53. The estimated numbers of witchcraft executions have fluctuated a great deal throughout the course of historical work on witchcraft, even in the last few decades. It was once thought that as many as nine million people had been executed. More recent scholarship has shown that even the more conservative figures of 100,000–200,000 have been notably exaggerated. See Russel, 658; Brian P. Levack, "Witchcraft," in *Encyclopedia of the Renaissance*, ed. Paul F. Grendler, 6 (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1999), 314; James Sharpe, *Witchcraft in Early Modern England* (London: Pearson Education, 2001), 6.
54. Russel, 664; Levack, 314.
55. Kieckhefer, *European Witch Trials*, 4.
56. Bailey, "The Feminization of Magic," 128.
57. See Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages*, 156.
58. See Cohn, 48-51.

Bibliography

Aquinas, Thomas. "From the Summa theologiae: The Demons Tempt Man." In *Witchcraft in Europe, 400-1700: A Documentary History*, edited by Alan Charles Kors and Edward Peters, 96-103. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001.

Augustine. "Demonic Power in Early Christianity." In *The Witchcraft Sourcebook*, edited by Brian P. Levack, 27-29. New York: Routledge, 2004.

-----. "On Christian Teaching, Book II (395-98, 426)." In *Witchcraft in Europe, 400-1700: A Documentary History*, edited by Alan Charles Kors and Edward Peters, 43-47. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001.

Bailey, Michael D. "The Feminization of Magic and the Emerging Idea of the Female Witch in the Late Middle Ages." *Essays in Medieval Studies* 19 (2002): 120-34.

-----. "The Medieval Concept of the Witches' Sabbath." *Exemplaria* 8, no. 2 (1996): 419-39.

Broedel, Hans Peter. *The Malleus Maleficarum and the Construction of Witchcraft*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003.

-----. "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): 135-48.

Burchard of Worms. "The Corrector, sive Medicus (ca. 1008-1012)." In *Witchcraft in Europe, 400-1700: A Documentary History*, edited by Alan Charles Kors and Edward Peters, 63-67. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001.

Cohn, Norman. "The Demonization of Mediaeval Heretics." In *The Witchcraft Reader*, edited by Darren Oldridge, 36-52. London: Routledge, 2002.

"Errores Gazariorum (1437)." In *Witchcraft in Europe, 400-1700: A Documentary History*, edited by Alan Charles Kors and Edward Peters, 159-62. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001.

Eymeric, Nicolau. "The Directorium inquisitorum (1376)." In *Witchcraft in Europe, 400-1700: A Documentary History*, edited by Alan Charles Kors and Edward Peters, 120-27. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001.

Gregory IX. "Vox in Rama (1233)." In *Witchcraft in Europe, 400-1700: A Documentary History*, edited by Alan Charles Kors and Edward Peters, 114-16. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001.

Isidore of Seville. “Etymologies, Book VIII, Chapter 9.” In *Witchcraft in Europe, 400-1700: A Documentary History*, edited by Alan Charles Kors and Edward Peters, 50-54. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001.

Kieckhefer, Richard. *European Witch Trials: Their Foundations in Popular and Learned Culture, 1300-1500*. Berkely and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1976.

-----. *Magic in the Middle Ages*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989.

Kramer, Heinrich and James Sprenger. *Malleus Maleficarum*. Translated by Montague Summers. La Vergne, TN: Digireads.com Publishing, 2009.

Levack, Brian P. “Witchcraft.” In *Encyclopedia of the Renaissance*, edited by Paul F. Grendler, 6: 312-15. New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1999.

Nider, Johannes. “The Formicarius (1435-38).” In *Witchcraft in Europe, 400-1700: A Documentary History*, edited by Alan Charles Kors and Edward Peters, 155-59. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001.

Ostorero, Martine. “The Concept of the Witches’ Sabbath in the Alpine Region (1430-1440): Text and Context.” In *Witchcraft Mythologies and Persecutions*, edited by Gabor Klaniczay and Eva Pocs, 15-34. Budapest: Ceu Press, 2008.

Regino of Prum. “A Warning to Bishops, the Canon Episcopi (ca. 906).” In *Witchcraft in Europe, 400-1700: A Documentary History*, edited by Alan Charles Kors and Edward Peters, 60-63. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001.

Russel, Jeffrey Burton. “Witchcraft, European.” In *Dictionary of the Middle Ages*, edited by Joseph Strayer, 12: 658-65. New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1989.

“The Theology Faculty of the University of Paris Condemns Sorcery (1398).” In *Witchcraft in Europe, 400-1700: A Documentary History*, edited by Alan Charles Kors and Edward Peters, 127-32. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001.

Sharpe, James. *Witchcraft in Early Modern England*. London: Pearson Education, 2001.

Tholosan, Claude. “Ut magorum et maleficiorum errores (1436-37).” In *Witchcraft in Europe, 400-1700: A Documentary History*, edited by Alan Charles Kors and Edward Peters, 162-66. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001.