

The truth about the Malleus Maleficarum

THE CLAIM

'Misogyny reached its highest extent in the persecution of witches. There is a strong theological background. Pope Innocent VIII in 1484 enthusiastically approved a book Malleus Maleficarum ("The Hammer of the Witches"). Thousands of innocent women were burned at the stake as a consequence of the type of thinking shown here.'¹

THE FACTS

Contrary to these claims, Malleus Maleficarum was not enthusiastically approved by Pope Innocent VIII, and was nowhere near as influential as it is described by Ian and Averil. Moreover, although the misogynist ravings of Malleus Maleficarum were particularly vile and completely unbiblical,² they were not reflective of the general attitudes towards women during this time.

AUTHORSHIP AND SUPPORT

The book claims to be the work of two Dominican priests (James Sprenger and

Heinrich Kramer), but Sprenger showed no personal interest in witchcraft, was unconnected with any witch trials, and was actively hostile to Kramer. There is evidence that the book was entirely the work of Kramer, who attached Sprenger's name to the book in order to take advantage of Sprenger's influential position in the church, and so give the work greater credibility:³

'Sprenger's role in the project is now generally doubted (Anglo 1977a; Segl 1988; Bibliotheca Lamiarum 1994:107-10).⁴

The front of the book includes a letter from Pope Innocent III, commending both Kramer and Sprenger for their work, and urging them to prosecute witches. However, the letter has been misrepresented:⁵

'But both the papal letter and the Cologne endorsement are problematic. The letter of Innocent VIII **is not an approval of the book to which it was appended**, but rather a charge to inquisitors to investigate diabolical sorcery and a warning to those who might impede them in their duty, that is, a papal letter in the by then conventional tradition established by John XXII and other popes

³ This is disputed in part by Mackay, *'Malleus Maleficarum'* (2006), but is the generally held view.

⁴ Jooy, Raudvere, Ankarloo, & Peters, *'Witchcraft and Magic In Europe'*, p. 239 (2002).

⁵ 'Reprinted with every edition of their *Malleus*, the bull seemed to bestow papal approval on their inquisitorial theories as well.', Monter, 'The Sociology of Jura Witchcraft', in, *'The Witchcraft Reader'*, p. 115 (2002).

through Eugenius IV and Nicholas V (1447-55).'⁶

There is no evidence that the Pope actually commissioned the book, or even read it.⁷ The book also contains a letter of approval from the University of Cologne, but there is evidence that this was forged, or at least contrived dishonestly,⁸ as the university in fact condemned the book for unethical legal practices and contradicting Catholic teaching on demons:

'The approval of the theological faculty of Cologne **was arranged through a complicated series of academic negotiations** - it, too, does not address the remarkable qualities of the work itself.'⁹

Scholars differ on whether the letter was a complete forgery,¹⁰ but there is agreement that even if genuine it was misrepresented.¹¹

⁶ Jooy, Raudvere, Ankarloo, & Peters, *'Witchcraft and Magic In Europe'*, p. 239 (2002).

⁷ **'there is not a shred of evidence that Innocent VIII ever saw the Malleus maleficarum** or had the faintest notion of the ideas it contained', Peters, *'The Magician, the Witch, and the Law'*, p. 173 (1978).

⁸ 'So successful was this stroke of advertising strategy that the authors hardly even needed the approval of the Cologne University theologians, but just for good measure Institoris forged a document granting their apparently unanimous approbation.', Ibid., p. 115.

⁹ Mackay, *'Malleus Maleficarum'* (2006).

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ 'It is doubtful whether either Innocent VIII or the theological faculty of Cologne **ever read the work.**'

¹ *'All One'*, p. 185 (March 2009).

² 'True enough, the two Dominicans injected so much misogynist venom into their pp. as to construe witchcraft almost exclusively as a crime of female lust.', Monter, 'The Sociology of Jura Witchcraft', in *'The Witchcraft Reader'*, p. 115 (2002).

EFFECT ON THE WITCH HUNTS

It must be recognized that Malleus Maleficarum was not as influential as earlier modern historians originally thought:¹²

'In its own day **it was never accorded the unquestioned authority that modern scholars have sometimes given it.**

Theologians and jurists respected it as one among many informative books; **its particular savage misogyny and its obsession with impotence were never fully accepted.**'¹³

'Its appearance **triggered no prosecutions in areas where there had been none earlier,** and in some cases its claims **encountered substantial scepticism** (for Italy, Paton 1992:264-306). In 1538 the Spanish Inquisition **cautioned its members not to believe everything the Malleus said, even when it presented apparently firm evidence.**'¹⁴

Modern scholars agree that the witch hunts cannot be explained simplistically as an expression of male misogyny, as women were

frequently accused of witchcraft by **other women**,¹⁵ and female midwives and 'white witches' were particularly responsible.¹⁶

Moreover, it has been pointed out that the Malleus was not written specifically against women, but actually against skeptics in the face of increasing opposition to beliefs in supernatural evil.¹⁷ This was recognized immediately when the work was first published, even by its supporters.¹⁸ In fact it is now recognized that the anti-women agenda of works on witchcraft has been greatly exaggerated.¹⁹

¹⁵ 'the theory that witch-hunting equals misogyny is embarrassed by **the predominance of women witness against the accused**', Purkis, 'The Witch In History', p. 92 (1996); Purkis provides detailed examples, and also demonstrates how some documents have been misread in a manner which attributes accusations or legal prosecution to men, when in fact the action was brought by a woman.

¹⁶ 'Men were not responsible for all accusations: **many, perhaps even most, witches were accused by women,** and most cases depend at least partly **on the evidence given by women witnesses.**', ibid., p. 8.

¹⁷ 'The work was essentially a defence of prosecutions for witchcraft **written in the face of considerable scepticism** - its arguments, especially in part III, **are clearly aimed at reluctant lay magistrates.**', Joyy, Raudvere, Ankarloo, & Peters, 'Witchcraft and Magic In Europe', p. 239 (2002)

¹⁸ 'Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola, **an early devotee of the Malleus**, described it in 1523 as a hammer **for smashing skeptics rather than women.**', Stephens, 'Demon Lovers: witchcraft, sex, and the crisis of belief', p. 35 (2002).

¹⁹ 'On the whole, however, **the literature of witchcraft conspicuously lacks any sustained concern for the gender issue;** and the only reason for the view that it

USAGE AND CRITICISM

Kramer himself was condemned by the Inquisition six years after the book was published (that Sprenger was not condemned supports the case that he was not a co-author), but despite this it gained great popularity among **secular** witch hunters and courts.

Rejected by the Catholic Church and Inquisition, it was never an accurate reflection of methods used by the Inquisition to deal with accusations of witchcraft:

'Authors **naively assumed** that the book painted **an accurate picture of how the Inquisition tried witches.**'²⁰

'Actually the Inquisition **immediately rejected the legal procedures Kramer recommended and censured the inquisitor himself** just a few years after the Malleus was published. **Secular courts, not inquisitorial ones,** resorted to the Malleus.'²¹

(Jonathan Burke, 2010)

was extreme and outspoken in its anti-feminism is the tendency for those interested in this subject **to read the relevant sections of the Malleus maleficarum and little or nothing else.**', Clark, 'Thinking with Demons: the idea of witchcraft in early modern Europe', p. 116 (1999).

²⁰ Gibbons, 'Recent Developments in the Study of the Great European Witch Hunt', *The Pomegranate* (5), (1998).

²¹ Ibid.

Joyy, Raudvere, Ankarloo, & Peters, 'Witchcraft and Magic In Europe', p. 239 (2002).

¹² '**It did not open the door** 'to almost indiscriminate prosecutions' 50 or even bring about an immediate increase in the number of trials. In fact its publication in Italy **was followed by a noticeable reduction in witchcraft cases.**', Levack, 'The Witch-Hunt In Early Modern Europe', p. 55 (2nd edition 1995).

¹³ Monter, 'The Sociology of Jura Witchcraft', in 'The Witchcraft Reader', p. 116 (2002).

¹⁴ Joyy, Raudvere, Ankarloo, & Peters, 'Witchcraft and Magic In Europe', p. 241 (2002).