

Demonic Carnality:

Female Witches and Sexuality in Medieval Magic, Science, and Faith

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Research on witchcraft accusations in premodern Europe has often focused on the lurid details of sexual depravity that surfaced repeatedly in witchcraft trials throughout Europe. The proliferate gender scholarship of the 1980s and 1990s highlighted the misogynistic aspects of witchcraft narratives, arguing that accused witches were socially, economically, and sexually marginal figures who were punished for straying outside of appropriate gender norms.

However, there is a lack of scholarship contextualizing sexualized witchcraft narratives within not only the history of magic, but its sister histories of science and faith. The figure of the witch was not entirely fabricated by the Church to demonize problematic women, nor was she entirely a product of the supposed “Dark Ages” scientific ignorance. Medieval people understood witches, and their sexual transgressions, in the overlapping worlds of spirituality, science, and magic. The famous 1486 *Malleus Maleficarum* (“Hammer of Witches”) examined witches from a scientific, magical, and religious standpoint, drawing on authorities and methodology from all three disciplines in order to understand witchcraft.

Contemporary writers contextualized witchcraft within existing sexual mores. While the Middle Ages is popularly thought to have been a time when prudish saints never discussed sex, surviving texts show that sex was not a taboo topic. In fact, erotic imagination and even sexual activity could be manifestations of faith. To learned medieval people, the erotic and the spiritual were not mutually exclusive, and sexual narratives often had underlying spiritual significance.¹ Erotic descriptions of kissing or having sex with Christ were seen as spiritual metaphors for sanctity, not prurient sexual

¹ Karras, *Sexuality in Medieval Europe*, 56.

fantasies. Even sexually explicit dreams could be signs from God.² Therefore, sex could be constructive, even holy, when approached while keeping God in mind. Sex as a general category was not always problematic.

The problem with sexuality within witchcraft was not that witches had sex at all, but how and with whom they had sex. Witchcraft accusations were often peppered with accusations of adultery, fornication, and sex with Satan. Witches' supposed copulation with the Devil was not just a literal act of taboo sexual union outside of marriage, but an act of spiritual unholy union. The enduring power of this horrific act of sex with Satan can be seen in the proliferation of this narrative throughout the centuries. Accounts of heretics or witches gathering for orgies and sex with demons appeared as early as the eleventh century and continued well into the Early Modern period.³

The orgies at witches' sabbaths represented physical unchastity, but the spiritual unchastity of comingling with Satan rather than comingling with God was a far more serious offense. While some writers, like the sixteenth century Pierre de Lancre, emphasized that witches' sabbaths were literally and physically real events (not just illusions), the metaphysical aspects of these events were no less horrifying.⁴ The difference between spiritual union with Christ and spiritual union with Satan was like the difference between eroticism and carnality: "one was sublime, the other polluted."⁵

While men could freely indulge in holy eroticism, women were thought to be especially susceptible to carnality. The *Malleus Maleficarum* explicitly linked this sexual weakness to witchcraft: that "all witchcraft comes from carnal lust, which is in women

² Karras, *Sexuality in Medieval Europe*, 57.

³ Bailey, *Magic and Superstition in Europe*, 112.

⁴ Wells, "Leeches on the Body Politic," 358.

⁵ Karras, *Sexuality in Medieval Europe*, 57.

insatiable.”⁶ The *Malleus* includes an illustrative anecdote in which a woman renounced her faith solely in order to “practice diabolical filthiness” with a demon who offered to have sex with her whenever she wished.⁷ Women were believed to be so strongly carnal that they might trade their own salvation for a satanic “booty call!”⁸

However, while erotic union with Christ was invariably described in terms of effervescent sublime pleasure, medieval writers disagreed about whether copulation with the Devil was pleasurable or painful.⁹ The presence or absence of pleasure further marked divine and demonic eroticism as positive and negative respectively—women’s sexual pleasure was problematic, but it was also thought by medical authorities to be important to conception. Erotic comingling with Christ led to pleasure, which then led spiritual fruitfulness. If sex with Satan was sometimes painful or unpleasurable, that underscored the spiritual barrenness of the act.

Additionally, while sex with Christ took place within a spiritual marriage, sex with Satan was extramarital. In medieval thinking, sacramental marriage was the only acceptable context in which sex took place, and the spiritual relationship between husband and wife mirrored that of Christ to his devotees.¹⁰ As the authors of the *Malleus* wrote: “every venereal act outside wedlock is a mortal sin, and is only committed by those who are not in a state of grace.”¹¹ While nuns were brides of Christ,

⁶ Kramer and Sprenger, *Malleus Maleficarum*, Part I, Question VI, <http://www.malleusmaleficarum.org/part-i-question-vi>

⁷ Kramer and Sprenger, *Malleus Maleficarum*, Part II, Question I, Chapter I, <http://www.malleusmaleficarum.org/part-ii-question-i-chapter-i/>

⁸ “A visit made to a person for the (sole) purpose of having sexual intercourse.” Oxford English Dictionary Online, s.v. “booty, n.3,” last modified December 2012, *Oxford University Press*, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/255598>, accessed December 9, 2013.

⁹ Garrett, “Witchcraft and Sexual Knowledge,” 42.

¹⁰ Karras, *Sexuality in Medieval Europe*, 61.

¹¹ Kramer and Sprenger, *Malleus Maleficarum*, Part II, Question II, Chapter II, <http://www.malleusmaleficarum.org/part-ii-question-ii-part-ii>

their inverse counterparts, witches, were not brides of Satan. Witches cavorted with Satan sexually, but they had a non-exclusive relationship, free to seduce human men through sinister magical means and sensually rub magical liniment on one another. Even if witches could marry the demons with whom they cavorted, demons were widely supposed to be infertile—lacking a soul, demons were not truly alive and thus could not conceive or impregnate. The *Malleus Maleficarum* explicitly stated that “bodies which are assumed [by demons] cannot either beget or bear.”¹² This extramarital and unfruitful dimension added fresh horror to the repugnant sexual elements of witches’ sabbaths.

How fervently did medieval people believe in witchcraft’s sinister sexual powers? Some records show skepticism about witches and demonic possession among the growing middle class at the end of the sixteenth century, as in the case of Marthe Brossier who was accused by her supposed bewitcher of faking her possession.¹³ However, many trial records exist in which all parties seem to believe wholeheartedly in witchcraft from magical, scientific, and religious viewpoints.

From a modern standpoint, some accounts seem fabricated out of thin air, while others might be based on truth—albeit wholly non-magical truth. At least one case exists of a young girl willingly confessing to having sex with the Devil, clearly not due to psychotropic hallucinations or coercion, but because she is a child using familiar terminology to describe her experience of child abuse and sexual assault.¹⁴ Similar voluntary confessions by children and women may have followed this same pattern—fitting sexual violence into a socially accepted narrative which offered the possibility of

¹² Kramer and Sprenger, *Malleus Maleficarum*, Part I, Question III, <http://www.malleusmaleficarum.org/part-i-question-iii>

¹³ Walker and Dickerman, “A Woman Under the Influence,” 545.

¹⁴ Walker and Dickerman, “Magdeleine des Aymards,” 251.

shifting blame from the victim to a shadowy adversary.¹⁵ This framework allowed women and children to speak the unspeakable and to express their feelings of violation in a society which did not always view rape as a crime against women. In these cases, the victims of sexual violence may or may not have literally believed they were assaulted by the Devil, but the legal and ecclesiastical authorities who carefully recorded the proceedings certainly did believe the stories to be true.

Witches' sexual transgressions were not limited to committing profane sex acts; witches also prevented the completion of, or inhibited the natural consequences of, sanctioned sex acts. This sometimes extended to using contraception or providing other women with contraception, but only in certain situations. Medieval women commonly used various herbs to prevent conception and to decrease their husbands' libidos as well as some barrier methods such as diaphragm-like sponges or pebbles.¹⁶ These early contraceptives were not necessarily seen as demonic by Church authorities. Even the *Malleus Maleficarum* mentioned that women would "make use of certain things" for natural contraception "without any aid from the devil."¹⁷ Later, the *Malleus* explicitly restated that "contraceptives, such as potions, or herbs that contravene nature" were natural, not demonic, and that use of magic for contraception or abortion warranted a far harsher punishment.¹⁸ Contraception was a serious crime only when it was accomplished by magical rather than natural means.

¹⁵ Walker and Dickerman, "Magdeleine des Aymards," 258.

¹⁶ Karras, *Sexuality in Medieval Europe*, 73.

¹⁷ Kramer and Sprenger, *Malleus Maleficarum*, Part I, Question II, <http://www.malleusmaleficarum.org/question-ii/>

¹⁸ Kramer and Sprenger, *Malleus Maleficarum*, Part I, Question VIII, <http://www.malleusmaleficarum.org/part-i-question-viii/>

Although the use of natural contraceptives was not as harshly criticized as “unnatural” sexual practices such as sodomy, it was still frowned upon.¹⁹ To Church leaders, non-reproductive sex acts were inherently suspect or flat-out sinful. Furthermore, the key to the holiness of marriage lay in the ability to produce legitimate children.²⁰ Thus, witches who prevented conception in another’s marriage (through making the husband impotent or providing contraceptives or abortions) committed the double sin of both *maleficium* and preventing a godly couple from conceiving children.

However, not all non-reproductive sex acts were treated equally. Oral sex is not often mentioned in medieval texts and does not seem to have been a commonly discussed sex act.²¹ Therefore the Devil’s kiss, though perhaps a perversion of the



trope of kissing Christ on the mouth, may not have been intended to be a sexual act in and of itself. In any case, witches were strongly associated with contraceptive use and taboo intercourse, but not necessarily with oral sex or (at least for women) sodomy.

In the Later Middle Ages, witches came to be associated with broomsticks, and this association was imbued with sexual meaning. A fourteenth century manuscript of Martin le Franc’s *Champion des dames* provides one of the earliest depictions of

Fig. 1: Witches in *Champion des Dames*
(*Feminae: Medieval Women and Gender*)

¹⁹ Karras, *Sexuality in Medieval Europe*, 73.

²⁰ Karras, *Sexuality in Medieval Europe*, 72.

²¹ Karras, *Sexuality in Medieval Europe*, 84.

witches flying on broomsticks (Fig. 1).²² Even this early depiction has clear sexual overtones: the witches are smiling, gripping the phallic protrusions between their legs, their skirts raised suggestively around the shaft of the brooms. Although they wear mundane clothing, their splayed legs, exposed underskirts, and even a sliver of exposed calf all hint at hidden depths of sexual depravity. This depiction is downright demure compared to more explicit descriptions of broomsticks' sexual connotations. Some lewder treatises on witchcraft mentioned women using broomsticks to masturbate or intravaginally apply magic unguents.

The association of witches with brooms may have echoed anxiety about women having sex with one another using "instruments" such as dildos. Woman-to-woman sex practices were prominent enough in elite circles to be mentioned in penitentials by Theodore of Tarsus in the seventh century, Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth, St. Antoninus in the fourteenth, and St. Charles Borromeo in the sixteenth.²³ If no penetration occurred, the offence was considered not very serious. For example, Theodore named lighter penalties for women who "practice vice" with one another than for heterosexual or male-male couples.²⁴ But using an "instrument" was a serious offence, since penetrative sex was considered "real" sex, not just "vice." The sixteenth century Italian jurist Prospero Farinacci wrote that the death penalty applied *only* if a woman used a sex object to penetrate another woman.²⁵ Clearly, the use of brooms as a sexual instrument would be a grave sin and crime even without the Satanic implications accompanying the sex act.

²² Bailey, *Magic and Superstition in Europe*, 137.

²³ Brown, "Lesbian Sexuality," 68.

²⁴ Karras, *Sexuality in Medieval Europe*, 110.

²⁵ Brown, "Lesbian Sexuality," 73.

Broom-riding may have also reflected the fear that witches had the power to literally emasculate men by making their penises disappear. Witches could cause men's genitals to simply vanish (or at least create a completely convincing illusion that the genitals had vanished). The *Malleus* devoted an entire chapter to the question of vanishing penises, with much discussion of whether the removal was real or illusory, but no doubt whatsoever that the man affected would be grievously harmed and distressed.²⁶

This malicious vanishing of penises was accompanied by the common supposition that witches could cause even men with intact genitalia to be impotent. Men who were not literally castrated could be rendered sexually helpless by witches, unable to penetrate women even with their organs intact. Guibert of Nogent in the eleventh century told a story of a jealous stepmother casting a spell on her stepson to prevent him from consummating his marriage for a full seven years!²⁷ The *Malleus* said that witches could make a man impotent even if he could achieve an erection, and that this "sign of witchcraft" was often accompanied by causing the man's wife to become barren or miscarry.²⁸ This emphasized the seriousness of male impotence—on par with the grave problem of female infertility.

Another common image of the witch includes the application of magical ointment to gain the power to fly. The sexual implications of witches rubbing ointment on one another (frequently while naked) were obvious, but this transgression was more magical than sexual. Sensual rubbing might have been titillating to male jurists, but it was not

²⁶ Kramer and Sprenger, *Malleus Maleficarum*, Part I, Question IX, <http://www.malleusmaleficarum.org/part-i-question-ix/>

²⁷ Karras, *Sexuality in Medieval Europe*, 72.

²⁸ Kramer and Sprenger, *Malleus Maleficarum*, Part I, Question VIII, <http://www.malleusmaleficarum.org/part-i-question-viii/>

taboo for women to touch one another, especially in a medical context. Some medieval medical texts suggested that midwives manually stimulate virginal or widowed patients to ease illness brought on by lack of orgasm.²⁹ Since sexual activity between women was not a serious offense if no penetration occurred, this “softcore” sexual activity was not as important as the fact that the ointments were made by black magic with human flesh—often that of babies.

The belief that witches ate or sucked blood from babies and children in order to rejuvenate themselves spread from the *Malleus* throughout Italy and France in the fifteenth century.³⁰ The *Malleus* claimed that when witches did not eat human children themselves, they offered stolen children up to Satan to be consumed by demons.³¹ Discussion of cannibalism underscored that the Satanic sabbath was a grotesque, twisted misrepresentation of the Christian sabbath in which communion wafers and wine are transubstantiated into blood and flesh.³² Directly in opposition to this profane cannibalism stood not just the host but the emergence of relic cults centered around saints and martyrs, which accelerated at the same time as witch accusations—in the late Middle Ages.³³ While the blood of children gave witches youth and power, the blood of martyrs (and other relics) could ward witches and demons away from the pious.³⁴

A common indicator of a witch was a presence of “the Devil’s mark,” a spot on the witch’s body that the Devil had touched and rendered insensate. In England, the Devil’s mark existed in addition to “the witch’s mark,” a protuberance from the witch’s

²⁹ Karras, *Sexuality in Medieval Europe*, 112.

³⁰ Wells, “Leeches on the Body Politic,” 357.

³¹ Kramer and Sprenger, *Malleus Maleficarum*, Part I, Question XI, <http://www.malleusmaleficarum.org/part-i-question-xi/>

³² Wells, “Leeches on the Body Politic,” 358.

³³ Freeman, *Holy Bones, Holy Dust*, 205.

³⁴ Freeman, *Holy Bones, Holy Dust*, 204.

body which her familiar would suckle in a horrifying inversion of maternal nursing. Yet trial descriptions of this “witch’s mark” sometimes seem to be describing something other than a supernumerary breast. Modern viewers may read these descriptions of fleshy protrusions, usually located in the genital area, as descriptions of (perhaps enlarged) clitorises: “a little above the Fundiment . . . a thing like a Teate the bignesse of a little finger, and the length of halfe a finger, which was branched at the top like a teate, and seemed as though one had suckt it...”³⁵ This focus on accurately describing the physical characteristics of witches sprang from the scientific focus on witchcraft. Witch trials were a focal point for diverse bodies of sexual thought—“the law, Christian doctrine, reproductive practice, and sexual literature”—demonstrating the intertwining of magic, science, and faith.³⁶

While popular concepts of medieval witchcraft focus on the bizarre sexual behaviors attributed to accused witches, careful evaluation of the text shows that these anecdotes grew out of the context of premodern magic, science, and faith. In an uncertain world, scholars and everyday people alike struggled to comprehend problematic women and problematic sexuality. Some historians assert that there were no witches who practiced malevolent magic, only wrongfully accused women who were disliked by their neighbors. Others dare to speculate that orgiastic witches’ sabbaths may have really happened, or at least that witches truly believed these events really occurred due to psychological disturbance and/or hallucinogen ingestion. The truth is probably somewhere in between these two extremes.

³⁵ Goodcole, *The wonderfull discoverie of Elizabeth Sawyer*, B3v, as quoted in Garrett, “Witchcraft and Sexual Knowledge,” 53.

³⁶ Garrett, “Witchcraft and Sexual Knowledge,” 35.

Undoubtedly in the middle ages, abortions and infanticides were performed, men were unhappily impotent, and women had sex with one another. Some women most likely envisioned, dreaded, fantasized about, or actually engaged in deeply taboo sex acts such as extramarital sex, masturbation, or using “instruments” to have intercourse with other women. This real and imagined “sexual underworld” of women concerned and titillated learned medieval men, who invested huge amounts of time and thought into understanding why women might transgress their prescribed sexual roles.

In the nexus of magical, scientific, and religious thinking, the figure of the witch was born. The witch’s sexuality was an intrinsic part of her mysterious power, her repulsive depravity, and her threatening allure. From the early medieval era clear through the Enlightenment, she excited the dread and the fascination of magicians, scientists, and priests alike, and all three disciplines sought to define her, debunk her, disempower her. Even in our modern “disenchanted” times, witches and their sexual transgressions continue to trouble and excite.

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