

witchcraft AND medicine

(1484 - 1793)

Early Woodcut (Unidentified).
Demon is Driven From Possessed Patient After Exorcism.



An Assembly of Witches
Johannes Geiler von Keisersperg, *Die Ermeis* . . . , Strasbourg, 1517

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by

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Belief in witchcraft goes far back into prehistoric times. It continues today, not only among primitive peoples, but also in many civilized nations. Witches' covens, Satanism, black magic – these are among the concepts recognized by numerous people both here and abroad.

When early Christians incorporated the Old Testament in their doctrines, they inherited with it the belief in witches manifested in such passages as “Thou shalt suffer no witch to live” (Exodus xii, 18) and “Rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft” (I Samuel 15:23). The account of the witch of Endor (I Samuel 28:7-25) is familiar to most industrious Sunday School pupils. While some scholars argue that the original Hebrew terms should not be translated as “witch” or “witchcraft,” those were the words officially accepted and thus interpreted by the Church.

The procedures and organization of witch trials were based on the Church's trials for heresy by the Inquisition, a tribunal established by Pope Lucius III in 1184 for the repression of all kinds of breaches of orthodoxy. The dividing line between heresy and witchcraft was not at first very clear. Every heresy was diabolical, and anyone convicted of practicing magic was a heretic.

The original attitude of early Christians to witchcraft resembled provisions of Roman law – witches were not punished unless they harmed

someone. With the exception of St. Augustine, Church authorities opposed the belief in witchcraft. Their opinions were expressed especially in the so-called *Canon episcopi* (Council of Ancyra, 9th cent.). However, in the 13th century, witchcraft became a *crimen magiae* and witch trials started sporadically.

The gradual hardening of the Church's attitude toward witchcraft through the 12th to 15th centuries did not meet with universal approval. Among the physicians who opposed it were Arnoldus de Villanova (1235-1315?), a professor at the University of Montpellier, and Pietro d'Abano (1250-1316), who taught medicine in Paris and, later, at the University of Padua. The chief obstacle to witch hunts, however, was the *Canon episcopi*, which was incorporated in 1284 in the *Decretales Gregorii IX* and thus became a part of canon law.

In 1458 Nicolas Jacquier (Jaquierus), an inquisitor, completed his *Flagellum haereticorum fascinatorum* (not printed until 1581), in which he rejected the application of the *Canon episcopi* in witch trials. His rejection was based on the argument that contemporary witchcraft was a new phenomenon, and that witches comprised a new sect – witch-heretics – who made pacts with the Devil, celebrated sabbats (assemblies of witches to worship the Devil), and flew by night.

MALLEVS MALEFICARVM, MALEFICAS ET EARVM

hærefim francâ conterens,
EX VARIIS AVCTORIBVS COMPILATVS,
& in quatuor Tomos iustè distributus,

QVORVM DVO PRIORES VANAS DEMONVM
versutias, prestigiosas eorum delusiones, supersticiosas Strigimagarum
ceremonias, horrendos etiam cum illis congressus, exaltam denique
tam pestifera scèla disquisitionem, & punitionem complectuntur.
Tertius praxim Exorcistarum ad Damonum, & Strigimagarum male-
ficiâ de Christi fidelibus pellendâ; Quartus verò Artem Destruentem,
Benedictionalem, & Exorcismalem continens.

TOMVS PRIMVS.

Indices Auctorum, capitum, verimque non desunt.

Editio nouissima, infinitis penè mendis expurgata; cuique accessit Fuga
Dæmonum & Complementum artis exorcisticæ.

Vir sine muliere, in quibus Pythonicus, vel diuinationis fuerit spiritus, morte meretur
Leuitici cap. 10.



Sumptibus CLAVDII BOYRGÉAT, sub signo Mercurij Galli.

M. DC. LXIX.
CVM PRIVILEGIO REGIS.

Title page of the *Malleus Maleficarum* . . . , Lyons 1669

Pope Paul II, in 1468, declared witchcraft a “crimen exceptum,” thus giving ecclesiastical as well as secular courts complete freedom in dealing with witches. It was the bull of Pope Innocent VIII, called *Summis desiderantes*, however, which in 1484 inaugurated three centuries of monstrous torture for hundreds of thousands of victims.

“Documentation” for the theory of witchcraft appeared three years after the *Summis desiderantes*, when the infamous *Malleus maleficarum* [Hammer of Witches] was published by two Dominican monks, Jakob Sprenger and Heinrich Kraemer (Institoris), although not without some opposition. The University of Cologne refused to endorse it and the authors were obliged to forge the mandatory approval. But the *Malleus* remained the recognized authority on witch hunting for three hundred years (the 29th edition was published in 1669), setting forth definitions of witchcraft and legal actions to be taken against the accused.

Among the “crimes” purportedly committed by witches were: participation in sabbats; metamorphosis into animals; pacts and sexual

intercourse with the Devil; inflicting illness or death on their enemies, or damaging their property; eating human flesh; murdering children; raising storms; and preparing diabolical potions and philters. Hundreds of other misdeeds were named in the confessions extracted from the victims of unbearable torture. Witchcraft itself was treason against God, since it required that the witch sign a pact with the Devil. Even the so-called “good” witches were punished with death; wholly ignored or forgotten were the provisions of old Roman law and the *Constitutio criminalis Carolina* which required that the accused have actually caused harm before punishment could be applied.

Most witches’ trials were conducted by secular authorities, especially in England, France, and Germany, but ecclesiastical courts acted in some cases, as in Italy or in German states governed by bishops. Both, however, approved the use of torture to ascertain the “truth,” ignoring the famous opinion in Justinian’s *Digests* that “there are arguments for and against the use of torture. Torture, however, when used, is untrustworthy, perilous, and deceptive.”



Wood engraving from Joost Damhouder, *Enchiridion* . . . , Rotterdam, 1554

It is almost impossible to conceive the horror of the tortures to which accused persons were subjected. The rack, mutilation, the press, submersion in water (if the victim sank, he or she was innocent!), and fire were only a few of the means of suffering used to evoke confessions. If the accused later revoked his confession, he was tortured again until he confessed with finality.

The vast increase in the number of witchcraft trials was attributable, not merely to a sudden rise of credulity or growing zeal among the religious, but more to the use of torture. Torture evoked a huge number of accusations of innocent people, accusations inspired as often by malice as by honest belief on the part of the accusers. In some countries, especially Germany, villages were depopulated by the witchcraft mania, and commerce nearly collapsed in some cities.

Physicians were involved in witches' trials in many ways. Often, they were called upon to diagnose the malady of a "bewitched" or "possessed" person. If they were able to identify the illness, their opinion

was usually (but not always) respected, and the case against the presumed witch was accordingly dropped.

Belief in possession has been fairly common throughout the history of religion. Tales abound of people into whose body, it was believed, another being or creature had entered, causing hysteria, convulsions, and aberrant behavior. The victim was said to develop the physiognomy, personality, even the voice of the possessing demon. Once the physician had adjudged a victim to be not suffering from any recognizable malady, the case passed into the hands of the Church, whose exorcists were responsible for any subsequent "treatment" of the possessed.

When a witch was arraigned, a physician was supposed to examine both her physical and mental condition and determine her fitness to undergo the requisite torture. (Since there were relatively few physicians, these examinations were generally conducted by barbers or barber-surgeons, unless a given case was of unusual importance.) Physicians or barber-surgeons were also required to tend the



Rite of exorcism. Woodcut from Pierre Boaistuau, Histoires prodigieuses et memorables . . . , Paris, 1598.

accused (though not excessively) during torture, and, in general, to serve as a sort of medical advisor to the court.

Examination of the accused, in accord with contemporary demonology, included a search for the so-called "devil's stigmata." These were insensitive marks on the skin, such as red spots, ulcers, or depressions, which were considered proof of having had sexual relations with the Devil.

The clergy and lawyers are usually blamed for the fact that the witch craze reached such enormous proportions and unbelievable cruelty, but other educated and intelligent people, including physicians, are also to be condemned for their cooperation, or, at least, their silence. The climate of opinion at that period, however, did not encourage outspoken criticism or opposition.

The focal point of the attack on witchcraft was the Church's doctrine about the existence of the Devil and his power over human beings. No Christian, whether Catholic or Protestant, could attack this concept without falling into heresy. There was one partial exception: Balthasar Bekker (1634-1698), a Dutch minister, who declared in his *The Enchanted World* in 1691 that "the Devil has been locked in Hell and can not interfere in human affairs." This "revolutionary" view was little known outside his own country, and no one is known to have repeated it until the end of the witchcraft trials.

Thus, during those centuries, the defense of witchcraft, like that of any heresy, was practically impossible. Anyone attempting it ran the grave risk of being himself accused of heresy. Philosophers, lawyers, physicians, could express their doubts only in very guarded terms. Furthermore, the number of physicians with an academic background was very small compared to the number of priests and lawyers. Most of them were, like other academicians, religious men who believed as they had been taught. It was also the easiest way of life. Even such renowned men of medicine as Jean Fernel (1497-1558), Ambroise Paré (1510-1590), and Felix Platter (1536-1614) believed firmly in witchcraft and in the need to eradicate it. Since "litera scripta manet" in their published works, we have no reason to doubt their sincerity.

The number of known trials for witchcraft is in the thousands, although many others were probably not recorded. Among the most famous — or notorious: Val-Camonica, near Brescia, Italy, 1518; Chelmsford, England, 1566, 1579 and 1589; Northampton, England, 1612; Bamberg, Germany,

1628; Loudon, France, 1634; and Salem, Massachusetts, 1692. The last known trial for witchcraft — by then already illegal — took place in Poland in 1793.

There were occasional protests uttered by courageous physicians while the slaughter raged. Among these physician-critics were the Italian, Antonio Ferrari, called Galateo (1444-1517), the great French physician and philosopher, Symphorien Champier (1471-1539), Agostino Nifo (ca. 1473-1545), the renowned Paracelsus (1493-1541), and — the greatest opponent of witchcraft trials among them — Johann Weyer (ca. 1516-1588).



Seventeenth-century woodcut. Father Urbain Grandier being burned at the stake, Loudon, 1634.

Weyer, personal physician to William, Duke of Cleves, was the author of *De prestigiis daemonum et incantationibus* (1563), a work which struck one of the first serious blows against the belief in witchcraft, encouraged skepticism, and aroused the fury of the witch hunters. It served to rally many writers, philosophers, and theologians to the ranks of the doubters; among the physicians who supported Weyer's views were Johann Ewich (1525-1588),



Paracelsus (1493-1541)



Johann Weyer (1515-1588)

Hermann Neuwaldt (d. 1611), and Martin Biermann (fl. 1588-1594).

Yet the witch-hunting storm continued to rage for two more centuries. Its force was maintained and even enhanced by the publication of such texts as the *Compendium maleficarum* in 1609 by Francesco-Maria Guazzo (Guaccius) (1609-1626) and the *Discovery of Witches* in 1647 by Matthew Hopkins, a lawyer and self-appointed witch hunter of England. King James of Scotland (and later of England) added fuel with his *Daemonologie*, published in 1597.

Still the number of doubting Thomases among physicians grew. There were the French surgeon, Pierre Pigray (1532-1613), the Englishman, John Cotta (1575?-1650) and William Harvey (1578-1657), and Urban Hjärne (1641-1724) of Sweden. Another Englishman, preacher and sometime-physician, John Webster (1610-1682), wrote *The Displaying of Supposed Witchcraft* (1677).

While the witchcraft trials were a reversion to barbaric brutality, a sort of brake to human progress, yet they contributed in certain ways to the store of medical knowledge, however little or unwittingly. The most important area was that of psychopathology, or mental disorders. Johann Weyer,

who separated medical psychology from witchcraft, believed that melancholy (insanity) caused many delusions and hysterical "imaginings," and that "magicians" and "diabolists" were actually the victims of hysteria or hypochondriasis. Admittedly, these were not new ideas. In 1460, a Dominican monk and professor of logic at the University of Milan, Girolamo Visconti, regretfully admitted in his book on witchcraft that "many men of learning and authority think that these [witches'] illusions arise from a melancholic humor, depriving women of reason and free will . . ."

It is reasonable to assume that physicians were exposed to many special kinds of wounds and morbid conditions in the course of the trials. Various tortures produced injuries and states perhaps not seen even by military surgeons. Treatment of burns was necessitated by the ordeals by fire (usually candles or hot irons); and the ordeal by water required at least an attempt at reviving the presumably innocent victim.

Physicians were often responsible for treating persons "bewitched." One of the first books describing the treatment of illnesses caused by witchcraft was Giovanni Battista Codronchi's *De morbis veneficis ac veneficiis libri quatuor*, published in 1595. Codronchi devoted a part of his work to the

description of illnesses caused by witchcraft. Then, in a relatively progressive manner (one of his daughters was also "bewitched"), he tried to explain and understand them and recommend their treatment.

There are records of the examination by physicians and pharmacists of so-called witches' ointments and philters. They contained many extracts from hallucinogenic and poisonous herbs and



Frontispiece engraving from Mathew Hopkins, *Discovery of Witches...*, London, 1647



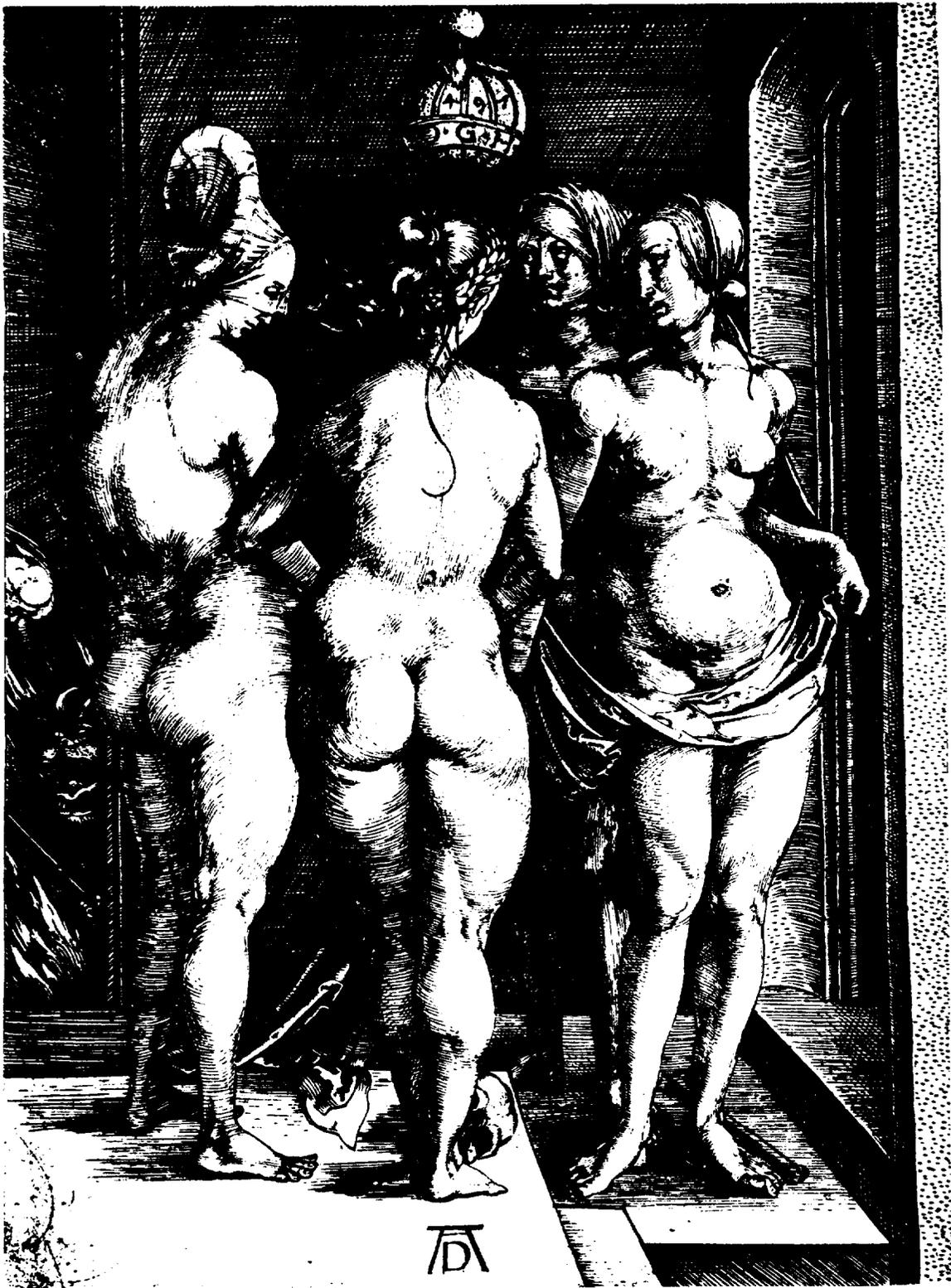
Mandrake, "Mandragora mas" (Leonhart Fuchs, *De Historia Stirpium*, Basle . . . , 1542).

plants, like aconite, belladonna, poison hemlock, henbane, wormwood, and mandrake root. Most of them were known to physicians, but some of their

effects were either unknown or not well understood. "Witches' experiences," wrote Weyer, "are delirious dreams induced by drugs." Elsewhere he wrote that witches' dreams were caused by the somniferous drugs in their ointments, and added to his list of familiar European substances such Oriental drugs as opium and hashish.

Historians are still not entirely certain why the witch hunts and subsequent trials reached such vast proportions after the publication of the *Malleus*. Some have suggested that the Church only then considered itself strong enough to eradicate once and for all the pagan rites and beliefs which lingered in many places, sometimes even threatening Christian faith and doctrine. A more recent theory is that social pressure caused the persecutions — pressure evoked by the presence of "foreign" elements in the social body (cf. the harassment of "heretics" such as the Waldensians, Huguenots, and Jews). H. R. Trevor-Roper states that "without the consent of the people social persecution cannot be conceived" and "without the tribunes of the people (who detected the social pressure) it cannot be organized." Perhaps the authors of the *Malleus* were such tribunes.

It can be said with confidence that a physician, Johann Weyer, was a leader in the forces against the belief in witchcraft and witches' trials; his *De prestigiis* . . . appeared only 79 years after the *Malleus*, and was the most courageously outspoken testimony of its time. To support Weyer's views, even through the next centuries, required a willingness to risk, not only one's career, but even one's life in the contemporary atmosphere of superstition and fierce religious intolerance.



The four witches. Albrecht Dürer (1471-1528).

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