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*The Malleus Maleficarum and the Construction of Witchcraft:  
Theology and Popular Belief* (review)

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witchcraft scholarship). Thus, this book is really a useful survey of historical European witchcraft and witch-hunting, with an extension of that history into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, along with a comparison to colonial and postcolonial Africa. That, in itself, is no small accomplishment. Nor is Behringer's point about the need to think about and study witchcraft in far broader terms than has typically been the case any less valuable because he has not presented us with a study as broad as could possibly be imagined or hoped for. What remains to be seen is whether Behringer's call will serve to open doors to comparative scholarship and interpretation that have largely remained shut for the past forty years.

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HANS PETER BROEDEL. *The Malleus Maleficarum and the Construction of Witchcraft: Theology and Popular Belief*. Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2003. Pp. 209.

There is perhaps no historical text more associated in the popular imagination with the horrors of the European witch hunts than the infamous *Malleus maleficarum*, commonly ascribed to the Dominicans Heinrich Kramer (Institoris) and Jacob Sprenger (in fact much evidence points to Kramer as the sole author). Proclaimed to be *the* great witch-hunting manual of the late-medieval and early-modern period, the *Malleus* has been held by some as a definitive statement of authoritative conceptions of witchcraft. In fact, scholars of the fifteenth, sixteenth, and seventeenth centuries have long recognized that the *Malleus* was in many respects an idiosyncratic work, that its influence was far from pervasive, and that its authority was far from absolute. A major goal of Hans Peter Broedel's study is to modify what may indeed now be an overly developed tendency to argue against the importance of the *Malleus* and its centrality in the construction of witchcraft. He does not return to any simplistic notion of completely pervasive influence, nor does he claim the *Malleus* is representative of the all currents of European thought on witchcraft. Rather, by exploring the work's uniqueness, he seeks to uncover what made it for several centuries such a compelling statement of the idea of witchcraft.

Few works as well known as the *Malleus* have been the subject of as little focused study. Although the work is mentioned in virtually every account of European witchcraft, this is the first scholarly book in English, and one of

only a few in any language, devoted entirely to the treatise. Those expecting a straightforward overview of all aspects of the *Malleus*' composition, context, circulation, and impact will be disappointed, however. Broedel has a specific and quite focused argument, indicated in his subtitle. His main analytical point is that the *Malleus*, more than any other contemporary treatise on witchcraft, effectively fused theological concerns about demonic magic with popular conceptions of harmful magic (*maleficium*) widely held in European society. If anything, according to Broedel, the *Malleus* leaned toward the side of popular conceptions at the expense of theological ones. This is what made the work such an enduring success. Scholars broadly recognize that the particular image of diabolical witchcraft that formed in Europe in the fifteenth century was the result of a fusion of common conceptions of *maleficium* and more elite, learned concerns about diabolism entailed in such magic. The *Malleus*, according to Broedel, represents one of the most effective integrations of those two aspects of the construction of witchcraft.

Broedel begins with the authorship of the treatise. Both Kramer and Sprenger were Dominicans (although he recognizes the arguments for Kramer's sole authorship, Broedel continually refers to both men throughout). As such, they were members of a religious order dedicated to preaching and pastoral care of souls. Also in their roles as inquisitors, Dominicans were necessarily exposed to popular beliefs. Throughout his book, Broedel argues repeatedly that because of these essentially Dominican tendencies of its author(s), the *Malleus* became a far more practical work rather than a purely theoretical one. In its accounts, authorities could see notions of harmful magic similar to what they would encounter in the testimonies of ordinary laypeople brought before them for questioning. Thus, the *Malleus* proved more useful than other more purely abstract accounts of witchcraft.

One vexing problem for authorities bent on prosecuting witches was the degree to which theological insistence on the demonic nature of *maleficium* could actually reduce human culpability. If demons both tempted humans to will evil upon their neighbors and then carried out evil actions on their behalf, the culpability of human spell-casters could appear quite small. Many medieval authorities debated this point. The *Malleus* very clearly laid blame on the human actor. Broedel argues this was because it more fully accepted popular conceptions of witchcraft than did other works. While common people were not ignorant of the church's teachings that *maleficium* operated via demonic power, they were naturally less concerned with abstract demonology and more inclined to locate the source of evil directly in some human being. By accepting this approach, the *Malleus* made prosecution of witches

less problematic for the authorities who relied on its guidance, and so again proved a highly useful tool.

Broedel pursues similar arguments through other points, concluding with the *Malleus*' famous concentration on the gender of witches and the essentially gendered nature of witchcraft. The *Malleus* provides philosophical, physiological, and theological reasons for the particular proclivity of women for witchcraft, namely their inferior mental and spiritual capacities and their greater susceptibility to demonic temptation. Yet Broedel locates the root of its attitude toward women primarily in its greater acceptance of popular notions that women were more inclined to witchcraft than were men. More theoretical demonologies often ignored the issue of witches' gender. In accusations brought by common people in courts, however, the accused were usually female.

It would be churlish to fault Broedel for pursuing a particular line of analysis and writing a focused study. Yet the absence of any more general or technical analysis of the *Malleus*, while not undermining his arguments, leaves them open to question. For example, on the particularly "Dominican" character of the *Malleus*, there is no doubt that Dominicans were, through both preaching and inquisition, very much exposed to popular beliefs. But they were also engaged in shaping those beliefs, not just passively observing them. Moreover, other authorities, both clerics and lay judges, would have had similar exposure to popular beliefs, and several also authored witchcraft treatises. Broedel does compare the *Malleus* to other treatises at many points, but to my mind what is called for to buttress his central arguments is a thorough and systematic comparison of the *Malleus* to one or more other treatises of differing authorship.

As already noted, Broedel does not advance a simplistic notion of the influence or authority of the *Malleus*. His lines of analysis do keep circling back, however, to the conclusion that the work's particular fusion of theological and popular concerns made it uniquely useful to subsequent authorities. Yet how widely used was the *Malleus*? We know how often it was reprinted, but how often did it stand open on prosecutors' desks? This is an enormously vexing question, and perhaps an impossible one to answer, but any study whose central argument rests on an assumption of the *Malleus*' broad and enduring utility must try. Broedel also regards the *Malleus* as more unique than I do. I agree with him that the work is terribly idiosyncratic, but so were most witchcraft treatises. They all to some degree incorporated specific local conceptions as well as general theoretical ones. On any number of particular points I grew uncomfortable with Broedel's tendency to categorize

the *Malleus* as uniquely unique, its depictions of witchcraft seemingly set against some sort of otherwise universally accepted standard.

This is not to say that I find Broedel's analysis to be wrong. I agree with many of his points. Yet even where I agree, I would like to see more extensive and systematic comparisons of the *Malleus'* approach to that of other treatises. Thus, while this is the first scholarly book in English devoted to the *Malleus*, I hope it will not be the last. In making the *Malleus* the focus of sustained attention, Broedel has begun to address a serious gap in the study of European witchcraft. More work remains to be done.

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P. G. MAXWELL-STUART. *Witch Hunters: Professional Prickers, Unwitchers & Witch Finders of the Renaissance*. Stroud, Gloucestershire: Tempus, 2003. Pp. 157.

The problem with witchcraft in early modern Europe was that although almost everyone agreed it was real, there was much uncertainty and disagreement about its definition and demonstration. It was especially unclear how to prove individual guilt, and most convictions relied on the persuasiveness of witness testimony derived from circumstantial evidence and the sheer strength of conviction. Thus, most legal tribunals, eager to pass judgment with a clear conscience, valued the expert opinion of theorists and investigators.

This is the starting point for P. G. Maxwell-Stuart's compendium of case studies, six in all, which explores the problem of identifying witches. The book really needs a more substantial introduction; it only has a flimsy preface. Students and general readers (at whom this book must in part be aimed) would have benefited from a guided tour of contemporary debates and difficulties, likewise a potted history of the witch trials to hold the more persistent myths at bay. Witchcraft was an unstable concept, and its fragile reality at law depended on the strength of ties between the conceptual and the empirical. When it actually came to burning people, even a robust consensus could disintegrate.

The intellectual foundations of witchcraft combined reason based on ancient wisdom with contemporary experience. In one of the most influential treatises of its time, *Investigations into Magic*, Jesuit polymath Martín Del Río shaped a mass of ideas and accounts into a comprehensive reference work for theologians, jurists, and physicians, published in three volumes between 1599 and 1600. Del Río was a sponge for stories about the occult and not afraid of fieldwork either; sometimes curiosity drew him dangerously close to com-