The Witch and the Hysteric: The Monstrous Medieval in Benjamin Christensen's Häxan

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In a letter dated January 17, 1897, addressed to William Fleiss, Sigmund Freud suggests a medieval genealogy for his (eventually controversial) studies of hysteria [*hysterie-Urgeschichte*]:

What would you say, by the way, if I told you that all of my brand-new prehistory of hysteria is already known and was published a hundred times over, though several centuries ago? Do you remember that I always said that the medieval theory of possession held by the ecclesiastical courts was identical with our theory of a foreign body and the splitting of consciousness? But why did the devil who took possession of the poor things invariably abuse them sexually and in a loathsome manner? Why are their confessions under torture so like the communications made by my patients in psychic treatment? Sometime soon I must delve into the literature on this subject.24

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The literature to which Freud alludes is the infamous 15th-century manual for witch hunters, \textit{Malleus Maleficarum}. By the very next week, Freud would attest more explicitly to his interest in it.

Acclaimed by some as the most influential European handbook for early modern witch hunters, the \textit{Malleus Maleficarum} (1486) to which Freud obliquely refers in his letter to Fleiss, is itself controversial as a source for information on European witch trials of the early modern period. But before considering Christensen’s immediate context—a context that included the influence of the \textit{Malleus} on the history of psychoanalysis and psychiatry—we need to attend to the complexities of Kramer’s own monstrous figures. The importance and influence of this lurid handbook for recognizing, interrogating, and punishing witches has yet to be settled. Select local studies from the period offer little evidence of the juridical use of the infamous manual, leading some historians to insist that its influence in the implementation of the inquisition has been much exaggerated. What we know of the publishing history, however, would seem to suggest the opposite. Sydney Anglo, for example, points out that the \textit{Malleus} “was reissued more frequently than any other major witch-hunting manual; it was long the most commonly cited; and it remained one of the works which the opponents of persecution sought especially to refute.”\textsuperscript{25} Nor is this the only source of textual controversy. The manual’s authorship has also been the subject of debate, with some arguing that Jacob

Sprenger’s supposed endorsement of the project is a forgery devised by Kramer to encourage the approval of the faculty of Theology at the University of Cologne—support necessary for the publication of the manuscript.26

The indeterminate nature of the book’s history is fitting since epistemological issues are central to the witch craze itself. Histories of witchcraft in medieval and early modern Europe seek to undermine such trans-historical associations in favor of the specificity and diversity of Europe’s particular cases; yet such studies, as we shall see, also regularly suggest the ways that the female witch converges on mixed or hybrid categories, and on the seam joining insides to outsides. Even within the confines of Europe, practice varied as to both time and place. In the premodern period, worries over *maleficia* emerged within a broader discourse about the discernment of spirits, a concern engaged equally on the sides of saints or sinners. Premodern hagiography persistently questioned the influence of spirits as a problem of interpretation, emphasizing the difficulty in discerning the true nature of visions. Claims of divine visitation were notoriously slippery: not only might such claims be false, but visions themselves could result from the promptings of evil spirits masquerading as good. In the medieval tradition, such issues engaged insides and outsides. How might we assess the nature and effect of external forces on interior holiness? As Nancy Caciola puts it, “medieval discussions of how to discern spirits always pulse back and forth between the two poles of interior and

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exterior.” Such concerns will continue in Catholic hagiographic writings into the early modern period (as, for instance, in the works of Teresa of Avila or John of the Cross). The saint or mystic might be said, in this larger context, to serve as an historical Doppelgänger to the witch.

Early Modern debates over *maleficia* took up some of the problems of spiritual discernment in the context of doctrinal difference and reformist critique. Yet early modern belief in *maleficia* also inherited features of earlier debates about popular or folk religious practice. During the Middle Ages, questions of supernaturalism proceeded from metaphysical views (inherited from Aristotle) concerning the power of invisible spirits in the basic working of the universe. Scholastic writers offered a variety of responses to such questions, particularly insofar as they converged on pastoral questions related to popular religious practice. While it was not the case, so Euan Cameron argues, that “the medieval Church was complacent about popular belief,” the scholastic authorities disagreed widely as to specifics “beyond the obvious and usually quite unhelpful fact that the vast majority of clergy vehemently disapproved of . . . demonic magic.”

In his informative history of European supernaturalism in the Middle Ages and Renaissance, Cameron documents the various ways that scholastic metaphysics came, gradually, to oppose traditional folk beliefs. The Early Modern period, he stresses, witnessed a gradual tightening of focus about these matters as such disagreements became opportunities for religious polemic and reformist critique.

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The result was a pitched polemical debate aimed at doctrinal matters but tracking a circuit of claims about demonic influence. Enter Kramer’s *Malleus*. Designed in tripartite form, the *Malleus* provides, in part one, a series of authorities in support of the existence of the devil and witchcraft; in part two, an encyclopedia of witchcraft methods and ways to combat the same; and, in part three, confessional and interrogatory techniques (including torture) designed to produce self-incriminating testimony as verification of a truth otherwise improvable. Inquisitors like the Dominican Kramer were concerned to prove as “fact” the stories that witches had engaged in sexual congress and marriages with actual devils.29 Testimonies from

29 On this point see Stephens, “Witches Who Steal Penises.” Stephens describes the Witch hunts as “a war on reality that produced a massacre of women” (517), making clear the epistemological anxieties for religion as a root cause; yet his unwillingness to consider the epistemological problem raised by fantasy leads to some blindness in his analysis. The following is exemplary: “Whatever Kramer says, his real purpose for torturing the woman into [her] confession, (assuming the story is not pure mythomania) was to reassure himself that the Eucharist could do something other than just lie there like any other lump of bread. His rhetoric of crime and outrage runs counter to a logic of sacramentality and hope” (514). Here Stephens’s parenthetic remark itself raises the very issues that preoccupied Freud and that seem to beg for more nuanced psychoanalytic attention. Furthermore, this has consequences for his reading of the meaning of the clerical choice of the female victim: “Witchcraft theorists were misogynists, but the witch-hunt was not a war on women; it was a war on reality that produced a massacre of women, along with a sizable massacre of men and children. . . . the fundamental anxiety of witchcraft theory had never been the impotence of men or the power of women, but the possibility that God himself might be impotent, indifferent, or illusory” (517). Reading this in a larger history of epistemology and gender (like that which we attempt in this chapbook) can make legible the logic of links between a “war on women” with “a war on reality.” Chal-
the women themselves were not, he would write, “phantasies” or “fancies.” The circular logic of the *Malleus* has been noted many times before: testimony could be falsified; protestations of innocence were likely read as signs of guilt.30

Kramer hunted witches not, so Walter Stephens argues, because he was a “true believer but rather because he was incapable of belief.”31 Stephens reads the Inquisitor’s project as the result of a profound anxiety surrounding doctrinal controversies at the time of the Reformation. Kramer’s response to such doubts resulted in a text marked less by irrationality than by a “hyperactivity” of reason: Kramer’s argument is, as Stephens puts it, “an extreme refinement of rationality and logic”; and “Kramer’s monsters,” he opines, “are not produced by the sleep or dreaming of reason, . . . but rather by its insomnia and hyperactivity.”32 The *Malleus* was, in this way, an extension of high scholasticism, “one of the last and most oblique strategies that Catholicism, and scholasticism in particular, attempted for explaining away [the] dissonance” between empiricism and sacramental efficacy.33 Stephens makes Kramer’s logic

[30] Some, like Anglo, contrast the uses of authority and evidence here to a later scientific method. “What constituted a conclusive argument in the period between the fifteenth and late seventeenth centuries? . . . It was something very different from what scholars now regard as a valid argument: that is the deliberate attempt at objectivity; inductive reasoning; the evaluation of evidence rather than its mere accumulation; conscious skepticism of received authorities; and above all else, the process of constantly testing hypotheses by controlled experiment” (Anglo, “Evident Authority and Authoritative Evidence,” 3).


clear: “The inquisitorial mind fears nothing more than an autonomous human imagination, for if devils do not control the vagaries of imagination, then they may actually be vagaries of the imagination.”

Unfettered imagination, that is, may be even more worrisome than demonic influence.

Yet the possibility that the supposed witches were victims of fantasy or delusion will persist in response to Kramer’s work, constituting one of the main critiques leveled against his text. Those critical of the Catholic inquisitors argued that the devil himself prompted the gullibility of Catholic priests, influencing inquisitors to believe testimony that could not possibly be true. According to men like Jacob Weyer—author of the first, though arguably the most flawed, attempt at a systematic refutation of the Malleus—the victim’s confessions of unnatural things could just as equally offer proof of delusion, or be motivated by ill will, confusion, duress, or illness rather more than demonic visitation. Regarding the possibility of false testimony by the accused, he writes:

We must ascertain whether the troubles and calamities which the [Witches] claim to have brought upon others are really such or whether they are caused naturally. And if it is discovered that some persons have been injured or that they have suffered disease or loss of property in such a way that the ills now seem to have been brought about by these other parties who have confessed to them, there must be a thorough investigation to find by what means, materials, or instruments the crimes have been perpetrated, and to decide whether those means, materials, or instruments are suitable for producing such effects. . . . Just as one cannot rely upon the confes-

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sion of a melancholic person or a mentally incompetent person, so, too, punishment should not rashly be inflicted on the basis of a confession by these women, unless from the known circumstances, and from clear demonstration. . . . The proofs must be clearer than the noonday sun, especially in the so-called criminal action—this is the commendable view of the legal experts—because in this matter of maleficium many things are said confusedly (as a result of ill will), or under the stress of disease or the loss of property. The statements betray a lack of faith, because the persons who make them do not entrust themselves wholeheartedly to God’s just wishes.35

In contrast to Kramer’s emphasis upon the confusion caused by witches (“they could bring the whole world to utter confusion”),36 Weyer reads the testimony against witches as itself confused, likely originating in a wide range of causes, including relatively common human frailties or aggressions, the product of a variety of “stresses,” whether internal (disease) or external (loss of property). Weyer distinguishes maleficia from the host of things with which it might be confused: ill will, disease, stress, all here distinct from demonic possession, yet all equally betray “a lack of faith.” Yet in a move that will later prove important for the history of psychiatry, Weyer also explicitly links accused witches to the “melancholic . . . or mentally incompetent

36 “quia sic perimere possent totum mundum”: Kramer, question 1 (1). Quotations from the Malleus are taken from Mackay’s 2009 Cambridge edition, The Hammer of Witches (see full citation in note 4).
person,” arguing that it is their accusers, not the witches themselves, who are guilty of confusion and a “lack of faith.”

Considered as a response to the *Malleus*, Weyer’s *Demonum* stakes a claim on the theological question of how devils work in the world. And just as Stephens reads a “hyperactivity of logic” in Kramer’s anxious work, Christopher Baxter emphasizes Weyer’s writings as religious polemic, a “curious mixture of tolerance and intolerance, perceptiveness and credulity.”

Baxter emphasizes the paradoxical nature of Weyer’s own achievement: more important than Weyer “the humanitarian physician, concerned with the objective nature of melancholia” is Weyer “the Lutheran practitioner, incensed by Catholic idolatry.” This had a significant downside. “Weyer’s disastrous mistake,” Baxter later asserts, “is to discuss magic and witchcraft in the context of religious polemic. Conversely, his most significant achievement is perhaps his incautious discussion of religion in terms of magic and witchcraft: Christianity and diabolic magic are comparable, complementary forces.”

Taken together, Kramer and Weyer track the early modern theological debate on *maleficia* occurring on the conti-

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37 Christopher Baxter, “Unsystematic Psychopathology,” in *The Damned Art*, ed. Anglo, 63 [53–75].
38 Baxter, “Unsystematic Psychopathology,” 61–62. Weyer's project distinguishes weak women used by the devil from superstitious male magicians (a category that implicitly includes Catholic priests, the main targets of Weyer’s attack) who actively, and more nefariously, use the devil. Baxter argues that Weyer failed “by evoking the counterblast of two intellectually outstanding writers, not just his fellow Lutheran Erastus, but also Jean Bodin, a man who had just acquired a European reputation for his political masterpiece, the *Republique*. Indeed, Bodin’s *Demonomanie* largely adopts Weyer’s theory of magic” (71).
nent. It is important to remember at this point that far from constituting a debate between “rational science” and “superstitious religiosity,” the various positions on maleficia are largely theological in nature (with the Malleus closely identified with Roman Catholicism, and Weyer’s work with Lutheranism). Weyer’s critique emphasizes Kramer’s “superstition” in a polemic leveled not against religion as such, but against the sacramental theology (and clerical features) of Roman Catholicism. And even as a “defense of witches,” Weyer’s project “badly misfired,” “evoking the counterblast of intellectually outstanding writers” (including Jean Bodin) ready to refute it.40 The debate would continue for some time.

Weyer’s critique of the Malleus—both his polemics and his link of Catholicism with superstition and magic—will cast a very long shadow outside of any doctrinal register. The contrast between Weyer and Kramer’s accounts of witchcraft would become, for some, the prehistory of the contrast between modern secular science and medieval religious superstition. Medical historian Gregory Zilboorg, for example, will cast Weyer as “father” to the modern psychiatric profession. In a series of important lectures given at Johns Hopkins in 1935, Zilboorg praises Weyer’s “scientific skepticism” as a sign of Renaissance renewal and the advent of humanism, judging Weyer to inaugurate the rationalist “factual” approach productive for the science of psychology: “Through a factual approach Weyer seeks not only to undermine the authority of the devil but to prepare a sufficient foundation for a rational physiological psy-

40 Baxter, “Unsystematic Psychopathology,” 71. Baxter concludes that Weyer’s most “disastrous mistake,” is nonetheless linked to his “most significant achievement”: while “discuss[ing] magic and witchcraft in the context of religious polemic” makes his text liable for easy refutation, “his incautious discussion of religion in terms of magic and witchcraft” also meant that “Christianity and diabolic magic emerge as comparable, complementary forces.”
chology and psychopathology.”

On the one hand, it is this aspect of Weyer’s work that grounds its importance to Jean-Martin Charcot and his students, researchers on hysteria at the Hospital of Salpêtrière in late nineteenth-century Paris. Freud was a student of Charcot’s and this may well account for his decision to include Weyer’s treatise among his 1906 list of the 10 “most significant” books ever written. On the other hand, to see the triumph of “modern science” over “medieval religion” in this history requires a determined refusal to acknowledge either the “hyperactivity of reason” in Kramer’s work, or doctrinal polemic in Weyer’s.

The epistemological consequences of the debate between Kramer and Weyer will be important to Charcot and to Freud, and the role of gender is crucial in each case: at issue is whether women’s testimony of their dalliance with the devil ought to be given credence as real or imagined. Yet even this history does not proceed in a straight line for, as we shall see, Freud’s interest in Weyer will also be read as keyed to a “superstition” rendered “medieval.” The tendentious opposition between religious superstition and scientific knowledge will feature prominently in various historical narratives on the topic, including the one that drives Christensen’s Häxan. Indeed, this influential association explains in part that film’s fixation on witchcraft as an insistently medieval phenomenon, a fixation that seems especially strange considering the extensive historical bibliography that Christensen apparently consulted. The “medieval” emerges, in the light of this paradox, as a category deployed for something other than historical accuracy. Yet before turning to Christensen’s film, we still need to probe the epistemological problems raised by the testi-

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mony of the witch. These are the problems that Freud engaged; and these are the problems that Christensen’s medievalism attempts, though not entirely successfully, to put to rest.